

Problem

It started with a simple challenge: what would be the most cost-effective way to keep older people from freezing over the winter if they couldn't afford to heat their home? AgeUK, Martin Lewis and others were warning back in September of a fuel poverty crisis for low income pensioners and some rough estimates suggested there could be around 1700 pensioner households in Cambridge who would suffer the 'eat or heat' dilemma.



Solution

Research suggested that electric heated overblankets were the most effective way of targeting heat, working on the 'heat the person not the room' principle. A £40-50 blanket operating at no more than 85W would cost only 2-3p per hour to run, or £10 per month even if used 12 hours a day – compared with predicted conventional heating bills of £200-400 per month.

Action

Allia rapidly organised a pilot project with the support of Cambridge Housing Society, Cambridge City Council and Cambridgeshire Local Assistance Scheme which provided 34 blankets and supermarket vouchers to offset the cost of electricity. These were well received, with the first recipient commenting 'I'm writing to thank you for the lovely heated blanket which I have been benefiting from since you gifted me with it. When the heating was being repaired it was a blessing to have the blanket that I could be cosy in. It soon warmed me up, top to toe. It is a high-quality article, and I'm very happy with it.'

But scaling the idea depended on funding and a reliable supply of blankets given the concern that people would be buying them up fast. Cambridge Network kindly agreed to support an appeal to the local business community and the NHS Integrated Care System team committed to organising delivery through GPs, social prescribers and warm hubs. Allia pitched the idea at a Cambridge Ahead meeting and within minutes several offers of support were made. The ball was rolling and a target of £25k was set which would fund around 6-700 blankets. Generous donations of £5k were secured from Arm, Alan Boswell Group and Brockton Everlast as well as grants from the council and NHS.

At this scale more storage and distribution logistics would be needed, with one hub for the south/east city established at AgeUK's centre in the St Matthew's area and a northern one at Alan Boswell Group (ABG) on Victoria Road. The latter came about because ABG (formerly S-Tech) said they often welcomed struggling members of the community to their reception area to keep warm or have a cup of tea, so it was obviously a well known supportive community location. GPs texted their more vulnerable over 70s patients with a message and code word so they or a representative could collect a blanket from one of the hubs, and each handled over 100 people across some very busy days.

As the winter went on prices did rise, but we were fortunate to locate an excellent wholesale supplier (HSD Ltd) who maintained stocks with only a few delays over the winter and continued to offer a competitive price for bulk purchases. This meant committing to orders of around 200 blankets a time, balancing confidence in funds arriving with the ability to store and distribute them. The City Council also purchased and distributed 200 blankets through their own channels.

Final result:

In total 874 blankets were distributed - a meaningful response to the challenge?

Heated Blankets: Appreciative Enquiry findings



Cambridge City Council undertook a round of appreciative enquiry throughout Spring 2023. We undertook 20 telephone interviews in order to have some in-depth, rich conversations with households who received a gifted heated blanket this Winter in order to understand the impact. Here's what we found.

'Mum uses it every day, it's made a lot of difference to her and she is very happy with it.'

'I use it and it has made a difference. Its very good in the cold.'

'My wife is enjoying the blanket a lot, it keeps her warm and is easy to wash. I don't know what will happen with the cost of living crisis but the blanket really helped as the evenings are cold.'

'It's very cosy and comfortable, very useful. When it's very cold, the heating stays off. We don't have to heat the home. We live on our own so it helps a lot.'

'Amazing blanket, it's been wonderful. Kills two birds with one stone as I don't need to heat the whole house and can stay warm.'

'It was really useful when I got Covid- I was wrapped up in it for a whole week. I've not used it much since then. A massive thank you.'

'I'm very happy. It's easy to use. Made a difference- yes, with no heating on the blanket has been a real saving.'

'The blankets are more than helpful, I love it.'

Of all the conversations or email responses, only one recipient said they didn't feel the product was safe, so they removed the electric cord and just used it as a blanket.

A survey was sent to 37 people who provided an email contact. We received a 43% response rate to our survey using Microsoft Forms.

87.5% felt the blanket had improved their health or wellbeing

93% who received a blanket had used it for its intended purpose

"Thank you" was mentioned in all responses received

We asked:

In order to contact you to offer you this gift, we worked with GP surgeries to send a text message to those eligible. Were you happy with this method of contact?

[More Details](#)

[Insights](#)

Yes, happy to receive messages ...	15
No, i prefer other forms of com...	0
I didn't receive a text message	0
Other	1



We asked: Can you tell us if it made a difference this winter:

It made a huge difference immediately. I have used it daily ever since receiving the blanket. I am now sleeping very much better and, as a result, have been feeling very much better physically and happier generally. I am really, really appreciative of the gift. I would not have thought of using such a blanket before receiving it.

This winter, at 71 years old I really felt the cold in the house... I generally keep my heating fairly low but this last year, the cold was penetrating and I couldn't get warm except in bed. But I don't really want to go to bed unless I am ready to sleep. So I decided to take up the kind offer of a heated blanket- that I would never buy for myself. I found the blanket was very useful in keeping my body warm without too much hot air from heating. I do have throws but the heated blanket was much better. It was definitely a help and I will use it again next winter.

We asked if people had suggestions of other practical things that would make a positive impact on health and wellbeing:

Low key activity in the community so I'm not sitting down so much.

Draft proofing doors/ windows, etc could help in the future

A check over of people's homes to see how energy efficient they are and to offer advice on solutions.

Thermal slippers. A pressure cooker. Choice of which product.

A humidity or damp reader . I have a Victorian old house and open my windows every morning to " clear the air" but it lets the heat out. The fresh air ventilates but when its mid winter it may be useful to know if the air I am breathing is NOT too damp and therefore I can keep the window shut for that day. For the first time last winter I had some small amount of black mould spots in places - which I treated. I have a hypothermia thermometer - very simple but it does just help to check that the temperature in the house is ok.

Lessons Learnt and Emerging Themes

Patients hugely grateful and many reported feeling improvements to health / wellbeing. Conversations at collection points indicated the simple act of gifting enabled some patients to accept other forms of help and sign-posting as well.

Important to inform patients the callers were not from their GP and did not have access to medical records - this avoided over-sharing of personal information.

Patients were interested in offers of support to improve housing conditions- being mindful of digital exclusion of those who may be elderly or frail, or unable to access services online. Think about trusted partners who can support referrals.

Use of creative ways to reach those most in need - LiFT, collaboration with health partners and GP surgeries. Do not under-estimate the time required for this to be done well. Potential for greater use of data for targetted promotions of exercise classes, referrals and community based support

This year's blanket give-away was not means tested, there are pros and cons of this approach, but may be needed if funding is stretched.

Thanks to...

Business donors for responding quickly (largest first): Alan Boswell Group, Arm, Brockton Everlast, MM Wealth, Mott Macdonald, Carter Jonas, Trinity College, CyanConnode Limited, Bidwells, Cambridge Wireless, Fresh Perspectiv, Kintell, Richard Ord Consulting Ltd, ACA Research, Thompson Marketing.

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Cambridge City Council and Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Integrated Care System demonstrated that the new flexible and creative approach to solutions really works.

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