

Energy and Disability:

Making home retrofit better for
Disabled people and caregivers

Plain English version

September 2025

Centre for Sustainable Energy

St James Court, St James Parade, Bristol BS1 3LH

www.cse.org.uk

Charity 298740 | Company 02219673

Energy and Disability: Making home retrofit better for Disabled people and caregivers

(**Retrofit** is when changes are made to a home around how it uses energy. It can make energy cheaper and houses warmer in winter.)

This report is written in **Plain English** to make it **accessible** for more people. Where there are words or terms that some people might not know we have explained them in the **jargon buster** at the end of the document. Words that are in the **jargon buster** are in the document in bold. For some terms we have also explained them in brackets when we first use them.

This report has been created by the Centre for Sustainable Energy, as part of Bristol's Community Climate Action Project, which puts community leadership at the heart of citywide and local action on climate and inequality. This project is coordinated by Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership and supported by the National Lottery's Climate Action Fund.

Summary

This report talks about the problems Disabled people and **caregivers** experience when making changes to their home to save energy. These barriers include:

- a) Lack of access to money to make the changes,
- b) Lack of trust,
- c) Too much information being given,
- d) Difficulties around communications,
- e) Disabled people being told to get technology that will not work for their needs,
- f) The **access needs** of Disabled people not being considered,
- g) Workers not having good enough knowledge about how to work with Disabled people,
- h) The work being difficult for Disabled people to be around because it is noisy or messy,
- i) People not being given **accessible** information about how to use the new technologies.

The report then goes on to talk about some ways of solving these problems. These include:

- a) Support for people to get money to do the work,
- b) Building trust,
- c) Giving information in a way that people need and when they need it,
- d) Meeting the communication needs of the person with **accessible formats**,
- e) Giving Disabled people advice on what technology to get based on their **access needs** and how they use energy in their house,
- f) Making plans on how to meet the **access needs** for every customer who needs this. Also, having a person whose role is to make sure **access needs** are being met,
- g) Giving disability training to people doing the work,
- h) Being clear what the work will look like so people can find ways of managing the noise and mess,
- i) Giving people **accessible** support on how to use the new technology.

As part of the same project two **checklists** have also been made: 1. One for Disabled people and **caregivers** who want to have this work done, 2. one for people who do the work when they are working with Disabled people and **caregivers**.

Introduction

Lowering how much energy homes use, and supporting homes to use renewable energy, is very important for looking after the planet. This work is called **retrofit**. All houses will need to take part in these changes. For this to be successful this work needs to be **accessible** and make good changes for people living in the homes.

Disabled people are twice as likely to experience poverty compared to non-disabled people. This is because of barriers to work. **Caregivers** also experience lots of poverty due to having fewer hours to work. (**Caregivers** are people who care for someone without being paid.) So Disabled people and **caregivers** can benefit a lot from the changes to their homes that save money. This would also be good for their physical and mental health as it means they can afford to use the energy they need instead of holding back because of being worried about money.

Our research also found that Disabled people want to **retrofit** their homes but struggle to because of lots of barriers. This report is written to better understand

the needs of Disabled people around energy changes in their homes and to suggest how this work can be done in a more **accessible** way.

The **research** was carried out from 2024 to 2025. It was funded by the 'National Lottery's Climate Action Fund' and done by the charity 'Centre for Sustainable Energy'. It was done as part of the 'Community Climate Action Project'. This project is organised by the charity 'Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership' (BCNP).

How the research was done

This **research** worked with **Disabled People's Organisations**, a **caregiver** organisation, Disabled people and **caregivers** to get their thoughts and ideas. Some people had already had **retrofit** work done, some people were in the process of having it done and some people were thinking about having it done. Ideas and feedback were gathered through two workshops, one to one interviews and through a survey. The research also talked to people who work on **retrofit**.

The project started by making a summary of the **research** that already existed on disability and energy.

Barriers

Disabled people and **caregivers** experience lots of different barriers that mean they can be left out of changes to energy. These barriers are summarised below.

Before Installation

Many Disabled people do not have much money but also use more energy. This can be because they are at home more, need to heat their house more, or need energy to run **assistive equipment**. For example, electric wheelchairs or freezers to keep medicine in.

The biggest barrier to **retrofit** is money. There are some **grants** to help make changes but these are often **inaccessible** for Disabled people. Forms are too complicated, and it takes too long to hear back. There was also a lot of confusion about whether people can apply to have the work done if they did not own the house.

Disabled people do not have good awareness of the changes they can make. More should be done to get this information out to the places where Disabled people can

find it. Disabled people also often worried that they couldn't trust information or they might be scammed. So advice needs to be given in a way people trust.

Priority Services Registers are a service people can sign up to with energy and water companies to let them know they will need support if the service is cut off. These companies will not share data and information with each other. This is difficult because Disabled people have to sign up to the **Priority Services Register** with every company they use.

Information is also often **inaccessible**. Lots of people experience 'information overload' that makes them confused. (**Information overload** is when too much information is given so it is hard to follow.) This was shared with us by **neurodivergent** people and people with mental health issues in particular.

Other problems with communication include:

- **Advisors** not understanding the needs of Disabled people,
- People speaking too fast and not giving time to repeat or ask questions,
- No written communication given,
- **Inaccessible** ways of talking used by people doing the **installation**,
- Information being given to people in **formats** they cannot use. For example, someone who needs letters being sent emails. Or being sent letters without big enough print. Or a Deaf person not being given information in **British Sign Language**,
- Information about communication needs not being passed on to other people doing the work,
- **Inaccessible** websites.

Grant organisations and the people who plan and carry out **retrofit** were the worst at communicating.

Disabled people can also be given different advice from different people. This is very confusing. Or they might not hear back from people they had contacted for advice. Many people in our research said they had to do lots of chasing of companies through the whole process.

Disabled people's needs were often not thought about when planning the work. Decisions about what changes to make to the houses were often driven by companies wanting to make money rather than by what would be good for the

Disabled person and the planet. This could lead to Disabled people being given technologies that did not work for them.

Heat pumps and **solar panels** were often given to people they weren't right for. (**Heat pumps** are a technology that takes heat from the ground or air outside a house to warm the inside of a house. **Solar panels** are a technology that gets energy from the sun that can be used to power things.) Before someone agrees to get a **heat pump** they must be given an idea of how much it will cost them to run so they can understand if it will work for them and keep them warm enough.

These barriers are an extra problem given many Disabled people cannot do the basic **retrofit** work that non-disabled people can. For example, many people could seal up gaps in windows themselves but this is hard to do for many Disabled people.

During Installation

When **installation** happens it can be loud and messy and get in the way of people's everyday routine. Often electricity or water will need to be turned off for a couple of hours or even days. This can be very difficult for Disabled people who rely on water or power for their health or **mobility** needs. The work can also create extra risks. For example, the possibility of tripping over wires. Leaving the house while work is done can be needed but many Disabled people may struggle to find or pay for somewhere to stay while the work is happening.

It can be very tiring or worrying to have strangers in the house. One person said they were worried whether their wife who has dementia would be able to cope with strangers in the house.

Trust, safety and respect were big issues during the **installation**. One person **visually impaired person** shared that a worker had come into her home then left without telling her. She was left worrying if they were who they had said they were. Some Disabled people also experience disrespect and bad treatment by workers. For example, one person had seen a wheelchair user being picked up and moved to one side by a worker. The people doing the work need good disability awareness or they can easily treat Disabled people poorly.

Caregivers might struggle with needing to be in the house when work is done if they would usually be out of the house at that time.

These things can be very difficult for some Disabled people and **caregivers**. If Disabled people aren't made aware of these difficulties this can leave Disabled

people in difficult situations. A **neurodivergent** person who had big changes to her home said that the process was “a nightmare”. She had not been told how noisy and messy the process would be and so hadn’t been able to know beforehand that she would need to leave the house in order to not be **overwhelmed**.

Even when these issues had been communicated beforehand problems could come from unexpected changes to the plan. Workers could turn up late, on the wrong date or without the right tools. This could make big problems. For example, the parent and **caregiver** of a young autistic child that said her son struggles with noise but she hadn’t been able to take him out of the house because the workers arrived unexpectedly.

After Installation

After the technology is put in people need to be shown how to use it correctly. This often wasn’t done in a way that meets the needs of Disabled people or not done at all. This was particularly difficult for people with **cognitive impairments**.

After **installation** Disabled people can be distrustful of the support offered. Some people feel that it is just the company trying to get more money out of them. This can lead to them not getting important information about how to use the new technology well. **Inaccessible** manuals and technologies screens can also make problems. For example, some technologies are controlled using **apps** that are **inaccessible** for **visually impaired people**. (An **app** is a programme that can be used on a phone.)

Many people also missed out on good advice on **smart tariffs**. (**Smart tariffs** are offers given by energy companies that mean energy is cheaper to use at specific times.) When they did not get this advice it might mean that they weren’t saving the money that the new technology was supposed to give them. This is particularly important in **social housing** where Disabled people often do not know if they can apply for **smart tariffs**.

Overall

Disabled people experienced the whole process as taking too long. Lack of communications and having to chase workers was frustrating and tiring.

The current process does not do enough to meet the needs of Disabled people. Some advice organisations give support after **installation** on the use of things like

heat pumps and **smart energy** advice. A few organisations are focussed on giving Disabled people energy advice. For example, 'Scope's Disability Energy Support' and water advice service and the charity Ideal4All.

Government schemes do not think about Disabled people as an audience. And **eligibility** does not think about disability benefits. (**Eligibility** are the rules for who can apply to use the scheme.) There is not enough data about how many Disabled people and **caregivers** use government funded schemes.

Though there are lots of problems it is worth getting **retrofit** right for Disabled people and **caregivers**. Half of the Disabled people who had the work done said they were happy or very happy with it. Some people talked about how their house was now warmer and cost less to heat. But a quarter of people were unhappy because of the barriers we have covered. We need changes to how work is done so that it is easier for all Disabled people and they are happier with the results.

Recommendations

We have used everything people told us to come up with a list of recommendations. Some of these ideas come from Disabled people or the people who do the **installation**. Some ideas we came up with by thinking about how to fix the barriers that Disabled people told us about.

1. Recommendations for energy advice organisations and people who work on retrofit

Overall

- a) Work in a way that meets the needs of the **caregiver** or Disabled customer. This will need workers to be flexible. Give information only when it is needed and can be taken in by the customer. Do not do it just to meet **quotas**. (**Quotas** are numbers that members of staff have to reach. For example, they might have to tell 100 people a particular thing.) Workers should focus on being with the customer from start to finish.
- b) Ask about the needs of the Disabled people and **caregivers** early in the process. Turn this into an '**accessibility** plan'. This plan should include their communication needs, **access needs** and anything about their situation that is important to know for the work. Share the person's needs with all workers who

will be in contact with them. Though make sure to get the customer's agreement to do this first.

- c) Train people working on advice and **retrofit** on Disabled people's communication and **access needs**. Have guides for working with people specific **impairments** that people can read when needed. This training should be designed and run by a **Disabled People's Organisation**.
- d) Have someone with a good understanding of disability as a single **point of contact** for Disabled people and **caregivers**. (**Point of contact** is someone who can be reached out to in order to ask any questions the person has.) It is best if this person has **lived experience** of disability.
- e) Offer support with forms and applying for money. This should include going through the form to explain it and complete it with the person if needed.
- f) Work with local services to raise awareness of schemes people can use to get **retrofit**. For example, you could work with health services, organisations that give advice on welfare benefits, community centres, **Disabled People's Organisations** and **caregivers'** organisations.

Initial engagement

- a) Talk to people before they sign up to **retrofit**. Share places where people can get advice that can be trusted. Share the positives of getting the work done. For example, cheaper energy, comfort and helping the planet.
- b) When people are getting the money for the changes by using **grants**, people should be encouraged to think about the change being made 'as if it were their money'. This will make them ask more questions and feel they can push to get a good service. Make sure people know what having the work done will look like and how the new technologies will change how they use energy. For example, **heat pumps** mean people need to heat their house in a completely different way. This is particularly the case for someone who normally only puts the heating on in a few rooms twice a day.
- c) Create and support **accessible** communication during the process. There should be **accessible** content, **formats** and delivery. For example, get the Communications team of the company to make **accessible** letters and guides. Make sure people can also use **Easy Read** and **Plain English**, **British Sign Language interpretation** and **Video Relay Service** if they need it. Avoid the

use of jargon and complicated language. The term '**retrofit**' is jargon that should be avoided. Guides should be **co-designed** with **Disabled People's Organisations**. (**Co-design** means being made together with ordinary people.)

- d) Let people know how long it is likely to be before they will next hear from you so people they know how long they will be waiting.
- e) Organise visits that are **accessible** for Disabled people and **caregivers** to local homes or community buildings that use energy that is good for the planet. This means they can learn from neighbours about their experience of **retrofit** and new technologies.
- f) Explain what noise, mess and difficulties for people's daily routine might be made. Explain when these things might happen. Include whether or not electricity or water will need to be turned off and for how long. How noisy it will be. And how many people will need to go into the house and when.
- g) Work out what support the person needs around the work and offer money to make this happen. For example, repairs, clearing lofts and moving furniture.

When thinking about what households can have the work

- a) Make it clear what **retrofit** is available and what kinds of people can get it done. For example, sometimes people renting in a home can get money for **retrofit** to happen if their landlord agrees.
- b) Make it clear who has **eligibility** and how these decisions are made. These decisions can be made using personal views or based on money reasons rather than who needs the work. Honest and clear conversations about this would help build trust.

Planning and buying

- a) Think about how the Disabled person or **caregiver's** communication and **access needs** might impact the process. Think about how you might need to be flexible, about what things might be difficult and how people might need to be out of the house or have breaks from the work.
- b) Plan around the needs of the individual Disabled people or **caregiver**.
- c) Let people know how much a **heat pump** will cost to run for a year based on the person's needs and how they need to heat their house. This will help the

person decide if they can afford to run a **heat pump** and if it will be comfortable for them.

Installation

- a) Have a disability expert or someone with **lived experience** of disability as the **accessibility** lead. This will make sure the **installation** meets the needs of the Disabled person or **caregiver**. This expert should check in with the customer on the **accessibility** of the work. They can be a single **point of contact** for any questions or worries.
- b) Give a phone number for a contact other than the person doing the work so the Disabled person can speak to someone else if they are having problems with them.
- c) If the project does not have an **accessibility** lead, then the person doing the work needs to speak to the Disabled person or their **caregiver** about the process and their **access needs**. It is important that workers do not make assumptions about the customer's needs. Assumptions are often wrong even if the worker has a good understanding of disability.
- d) Try to use only one company to do the work for the whole process. This avoids extra stress, time and unfinished projects.

Support after installation

- a) Give **accessible** instructions on how to use the new technologies. What is **accessible** depends on the **access needs** of each customer. These instructions should be **co-designed** with a **Disabled People's Organisation**. Make sure that both the Disabled person and **caregiver** are shown how to use the technology. The people doing this must be aware of the communication needs of the Disabled person. Give guidance that customers can return to. For example, written instructions with pictures or videos.
- b) Give extra support for people who need it. For example, more support over the phone.
- c) Offer advice on **smart tariffs**. Build trust by making it clear that you are not trying to sell anything.

- d) Get feedback from Disabled people and **caregivers** on how well their **access needs** were met. Include this feedback reports on how well companies and workers are doing.

2. Recommendations for Government, companies and people ordering the work

- a) Have a ten-year plan to make sure there is money and people to do the work that is needed to make the changes that are needed for the planet. This will look after the planet, make new jobs and give houses more control of their energy bills.
- b) Make a training or certificate for people working on **retrofit** on how to communicate and act during home visits with Disabled people. This should be **co-designed** with a **Disabled People's Organisation**. The current recommendations the Government has are not enough.
- c) Make rules that companies doing the work should use. These should say what standards Disabled customers should expect, how their safety should be met and how problems should be sorted out.
- d) Add extra money to **grants** that can only be used by households with Disabled people. This can pay for extra support to meet the needs of Disabled people. This will encourage more companies to take these jobs as they are not worried about extra costs.
- e) Make **retrofit** more possible for Disabled people by making the process more flexible. This includes a better way to understand the needs of the customer and more support after the new technology has been put in.
- f) Check companies that do **retrofit** to make sure that they are working to a good standard. Make sure that companies that aren't doing well enough get more training and keep checking that they are doing better.
- g) Get data from government schemes on how often they are being used by Disabled people.

3. Recommendations for housing providers

(Housing providers are companies that rent out affordable housing.)

- a) When **heat pumps** are being put into **social housing** make sure that the needs of each person are thought about. Think about whether it will be easy and affordable for them to use **heat pumps**. Not thinking about the needs of the individual will risk people being driven further into poverty and unable to heat their homes properly. Do not think one size fits all. This will end up hurting some people.
- b) Make sure that **accessibility** features aren't taken out as part of the work. For example, do not get rid of a wet room.

Next Steps

Following the **research** we have made some guides to support Disabled people and caregivers. They are:

- a) A Disabled people and caregiver's **checklist**. This helps people understand what to ask about and check when thinking about or **retrofitting** their home.
- b) A **checklist** for the people doing this work to understand what they need to ask Disabled customers at the start of the process.

We hope these guides will be used by Disabled people, **caregivers**, **Disabled People's Organisations** and **caregiver's** organisations to support good advice and **retrofit** for Disabled people. We will also encourage people who work on **retrofit** to use the guides and share them widely.

We will look to see if we can make some training for people who work on **retrofit** about how to meet the needs of Disabled customers.

Our **research** has shown that a lot more needs to be done to include Disabled people and **caregivers** in **retrofit** work. But it also has shown that these barriers all have solutions and that Disabled people and **caregivers** have a lot to gain by being included. We hope that people will use this report to make their **retrofit** work more **accessible**.

Jargon Buster

Access needs: What a Disabled person needs to be able to use something or take part in an event. For example, they might need no steps into a building.

Accessible/Accessibility: When something is made in a way so that it is good for Disabled people.

App: A programme that can be used on a phone.

Assistive equipment: Technology that Disabled people use to meet their **access needs**. For example, a wheelchair.

British Sign Language: The language that Deaf people use to talk to each other. It uses hand gestures and expressions.

British Sign Language interpreters: Someone who helps people who use British Sign Language talk with people who do not. Lots of Deaf people use sign language.

Caregivers are people who care for someone without being paid

Checklist: A list of things to be done that a person can work through one by one.

Co-design/ed: When something designed together with ordinary people.

Cognitive impairments: When someone has difficulties with thinking. This might be with memory, learning or problem-solving.

Disabled People's Organizations: An organization that works to make things better for Disabled people and where all or most of the staff are Disabled people themselves.

Easy Read: A document that uses easy language, not many words and pictures to make something easy to understand.

Eligibility: Are the rules for who can apply to use a scheme.

Formats: The way in which information is given. For example, **Easy Read** and **British Sign Language** videos are two types of format.

Grants: Money someone can apply for to be used for a particular piece of work.

Heat pumps: Technology that takes heat from the ground or air outside a house to warm the inside of a house.

Housing providers **are companies that rent out affordable housing.**)

Inaccessible: When something does not meet the needs of Disabled people.

Information overload is when too much information is given so it is hard to follow.

Installation: When the new technology is being put into the house.

Impairment: When someone has a difference in their body or mind. When a person is treated unfairly because of this they become Disabled.

Lived experience: When someone has experienced something and what they experienced. For example, someone has lived experience of disability if they are a Disabled person or were at some point in their life.

Mobility: The ability to move around easily.

Neurodivergent: People who think or feel in ways that are different from a lot of people. For example, autistic people.

Overwhelmed: When an experience is too much for someone and they cannot cope. For example, it might be too loud or too complicated.

Plain English: Talking in a way that does not use jargon and is not very complicated so that is **accessible** to most people.

Point of contact: Someone who can be contacted to ask questions or get help.

Priority Services Registers are a service people can sign up to with energy and water companies to let them know they will need support if the service is cut off.

Smart tariffs are offers given by some energy companies that mean energy is cheaper to use at specific times.

Social housing: A flat or house is rented to a person at an affordable price.

Solar panels: Technology that gets energy from the sun that can be used to power things.

Research: When someone thinks about an issue and talks to people in order to understand it better.

Retrofit: When changes are made to a home around how it uses energy. It makes energy cheaper and houses warmer in winter.

Video Relay Service: Technology that lets people who use **British Sign Language** to talk with people who can hear over the phone.

Visually impaired person: Someone who has difficulties seeing things or is blind.

Quotas: Numbers that members of staff have to reach. For example they might have to tell 100 people a particular thing.

