

# Benefit Checks

## Advice and outcomes among Northern Ireland residents

Christine Liddell, Chris Morris  
Dayna McCreadie



# Acknowledgments

This report was commissioned by Bryson Energy. It is an independent evaluation, and the views expressed are those of the first and second authors.



Design & Print by the University of Ulster, Coleraine, 2012.



# Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>8</b>
1.1 Rationale.....	8
1.2 Policy Context.....	9
1.3 The Northern Ireland Policy Context .....	10
1.4 The Geography and Demography of Benefits Uptake: .....	
Northern Ireland in UK Context .....	12
1.5 Benefit Checks in Northern Ireland .....	13
1.6 Impacts of Receiving previously unclaimed Benefit/s .....	
- Effects on Households and Local Economies .....	14
1.7 Impacts of Receiving previously unclaimed Benefit/s .....	
- Cost Benefit Analyses.....	16
1.8 Target Groups for Benefit Uptake Campaigns .....	17
1.9 Bryson Energy .....	17
<b>2. Methods</b> .....	<b>19</b>
2.1 Preamble .....	19
2.2 Procedure .....	20
2.3 Qualitative Analysis: Case Studies.....	25
<b>3. Results</b> .....	<b>26</b>
3.1 The Follow-Up Sample (Unweighted Data) .....	26
3.2 Weighted Population Outcomes.....	26
3.3 Clients Who Received an Increase in Income of More than .....	
£5,000 per annum .....	41
3.4 Estimating the Costs and Benefits of the Bryson Energy .....	
Benefit Check Programme .....	41
<b>4. Discussion</b> .....	<b>46</b>
4.1 General Results.....	46
4.2 Follow Through with a Claim .....	47
4.3 Clients Who Were Waiting on a Decision .....	52
4.4 Who Was Successful and Who Was Not? .....	53
4.5 Clients Who Received an Increase in Income of More than .....	
£5,000 per annum .....	53

4.6 Case Studies .....	54
4.7 Cost-Effectiveness of the Programme .....	55
4.8 Impacts on Fuel Poverty.....	57
4.9 Impacts on Staff.....	58
4.10 Post Follow-Up .....	59
4.11 Summary and Conclusions .....	59
<b>5. Recommendations .....</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>6. References .....</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>7. Appendices.....</b>	<b>66</b>
Appendix 1 - Telephone Survey .....	66
Appendix 2 - Postal Survey.....	68
Appendix 3 - Sample Structure and Weighting.....	70



# Executive Summary

It has long been known that a significant proportion of benefits go unclaimed in the UK, and programmes to increase uptake have been systematically supported since the Acheson Report was published in 1998. In an economic climate of increasing austerity, there is greater than usual need to ensure that those who are entitled to financial support are claiming it in full, since people with little or no alternative source of income are particularly vulnerable to rises in the cost of living. Whilst reports have suggested a reluctance among many (especially the most vulnerable) to claim benefits, any interest in applying for unclaimed benefits has – until quite recently - been made more difficult by the lack of reputable and trusted systems of help. It is becoming increasingly evident that many more claimants will consider applying for the benefits they are entitled to if they are given expert advice and support.

Between July 2009 and June 2010, Bryson Energy in Northern Ireland undertook benefit entitlement checks with all clients who contacted Bryson Energy about Warm Homes (the region's main Fuel Poverty Strategy scheme). This evaluation calculates weighted estimates for the population of checks, based on a follow up undertaken with 390 clients. Results indicated that:

- 5,686 benefit checks were undertaken.
- 2,692 were thought likely to be eligible for unclaimed benefit (47%).
- 1,077 applied (40% of those thought likely to be eligible).
- 603 were successful (56% of applicants).

Increased income for successful applicants averaged £2,448 in the first year (£47 per week). The baseline cost of the Bryson Energy programme was £86,427. This averaged a cost of £143 per successful client. Since the average weekly gain per successful client was £47, the cost of the scheme was recoverable in three weeks. This baseline cost incorporates savings that were made as a consequence of the project being carried out in a large and well-structured organisation, which offered several efficiencies of scale and team-working. Without these, costs were estimated to be £104,000, or £172 per successful client, recoverable in 4 weeks.

Case Studies indicated the extent to which increased income had changed the everyday circumstances of those whose claims had been successful. Additional income was often used to offset heating costs, and in conjunction with the heating and insulation measures which Bryson Energy had simultaneously arranged for many of the clients, respondents perceived significant impacts on their thermal comfort. Many respondents in the case study group were carers or else in ill health themselves. This made it more likely that they would be required to spend long periods of time at home. For many therefore, the joint impacts of better energy efficiency and increased income were likely to have been significant for mental wellbeing.



Looking ahead to the future of programmes such as these, it is vital that strategies are developed which increase the likelihood that clients will follow through with a claim once a positive benefit check has been carried out. At present, this study estimates that 40% do so. The study highlights strategies for further development in this regard. For example, groups that are particularly likely to need support include lone parents and people over the age of 75. Efforts are underway at Bryson Energy to evaluate these and other new strategies.

The success of the Bryson Energy scheme supports a recent recommendation in the Fuel Poverty Advisory Group's Eighth Annual Report (2009), namely that 5% of unclaimed benefits should be allocated to services which have a proven track record of maximising uptake. The returns from this programme indicate that:

- A total of more than £1.47M was recovered in unclaimed benefits for clients in the first year.
- £17 was returned in increased income to clients for every £1 spent on undertaking 5,686 checks. This was a substantially better return than had been recorded by other local programmes (£14).
- The conversion rate (11%) was also higher than that reported in other local programmes (7%).
- The average gain per client who made a successful claim was £2,448.
- In terms of tackling fuel poverty, £2,448 per annum would cover the full cost of heating the average home in Northern Ireland and leave a significant sum left over for other purchases.
- The report ends with 13 recommendations for future work in this area.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 RATIONALE

*“Advice services can bridge the gap between peoples’ lack of specialist knowledge and...the potential gains in financial, health and social well-being that can derive from successful claims”*

*(Wiggan & Talbot, 2006).*

In the UK, individuals are entitled to different benefits at different times of life, with entitlement often determined by age, personal circumstance (such as income and illness), and people’s access to money and equity. Broadly speaking, the UK benefits system is designed to offer financial assistance to

- people on low incomes;
- people with health or disability problems and their carers;
- and the parents of children (Moffatt, Noble & Exley, 2010).

It has long been known that a significant proportion of benefits go unclaimed in the UK, although uptake rates are higher than in many other parts of the industrialised world. For example, in 2002, estimates suggested that take-up of income-related benefits in the UK was around 80%, but somewhat lower in the rest of Europe (40%-80%); rates are even lower in the USA (Adams et al., 2006). However, rates of uptake vary depending on the type of benefit. For example, in Northern Ireland, uptake of Lone Pensioner Allowance is high (77%) whilst Rates Relief is much lower (42%) (NIAO, 2011).

In an economic climate of increasing austerity, there is greater than usual need to ensure that those who are entitled to financial support are claiming it in full, since people with little or no alternative source of income are particularly vulnerable to rises in the cost of living. In addition, estimates indicate that every 10% increase in take up of income related to benefits and tax credits would allow 40,000 children in the UK to be removed from below the official poverty borderline (CPU, 2009).

The importance of ensuring that the gaps between rich and poor are kept under constant review, with support given to efforts that can reduce the gap, is best illustrated in publications such as the acclaimed *The Spirit Level* (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Life expectancy, stress, health and wellbeing, and the regeneration of communities are all known to be strongly associated with the extent to which a society is equitable and gives priority to protecting its most vulnerable citizens.

In the past, much has been made of the apparent reluctance of some claimants to apply for benefits to which they might be entitled. Speculation about reasons for this reluctance centre on pride, an aversion to accepting charity, a desire for independence, and a belief that others may be more worthy (see for e.g. NEA, 2005). Other studies have reported that rural residents are more reluctant to claim benefit than urban residents, speculating that rural people feel more stigma and also less anonymity when claiming (Shucksmith, 2001). Others attribute low uptake to poor levels of knowledge, particularly among older people (see Moffatt & Glasgow, 2009).

These may have been cogent reasons for low benefit uptake in the past. However, there is more recent evidence of a high demand for information about benefits, and for more assistance with making a benefit claim. For example, the Citizens Advice Bureau in Northern Ireland recently wrote to 25,000 people about Benefit Uptake, and 10,000 (40%) responded (CAB, 2010). A previous study in England reported a 42% uptake from a similar scheme (DWP, 2006).

A substantial interest in applying for unclaimed benefits may have been present all along but – until quite recently – this would have been thwarted by the lack of reputable and trusted systems of help. It is becoming increasingly evident that many more claimants will consider applying for benefits they are entitled to provided they have access to expert advice and support.

## 1.2 POLICY CONTEXT

Maximising the uptake of income-related benefits is part of the UK Government's strategy for reducing poverty. Concerns about the lack of benefit uptake have been expressed for many years (e.g. Corden, 1995). For example, about 15 years ago, the Independent Enquiry into Inequalities in Health Report recommended improvement in welfare benefit take-up as a means of assisting people on low incomes (Acheson, 1998). Since then, strategies which increase take-up have become more comprehensively funded by government. The UK Treasury and the Government's Social Exclusion Unit currently acknowledge the essential role these strategies play in reducing inequality (Moffatt, Noble & Exley, 2010). However, more recent welfare reforms have sometimes made benefit take-up more, rather than less difficult for people, and these impediments remain untackled.

For example, Dean (2000) argues that successive UK governments have shifted welfare from a right of citizens to a consumer commodity. To navigate through this shift, those claiming

benefit were required to become “*competent consumers who could get the best out of the system*”. Moffatt and Higgs (2007) note that some citizens (especially older people) may have found themselves unable to operate as consumers in this context, and for them assistance in making benefit claims is particularly valuable. They conclude:

*“...while the conflict between charity and welfare has been a constant feature of social policy directed at older people for many decades, the present circumstances make it more acute for those being asked to operate within a new paradigm for which they are unprepared.”*

These sentiments were not new, having been written about some 15 years earlier by Higgs (1995):

*“The ability to exercise choice depends on there being an active consumer who is able to make informed and real decisions. Frailty and dependency are not ideal circumstances from which to exercise consumer sovereignty. Power imbalances and real physical limitations are just 2 impediments”.*

### **1.3 THE NORTHERN IRELAND POLICY CONTEXT**

As a devolved administration, Northern Ireland delivers a UK-based benefits system from local Departments such as Finance and Personnel, Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and Social Development. In 2005/6 increasing benefit uptake became one of the Northern Ireland Executive’s Public Service Agreements. This will prioritise “*combating poverty...by increasing benefit uptake through targeting vulnerable groups*”. Furthermore, the government’s Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy for Northern Ireland intends that older people should have sufficient income to meet their needs, and sets out to ensure that by 2020 all older people will be able to live in financial security. A 2005 consultation issued by the Department for Social Development Northern Ireland (DSDNI) sought comments on a new strategy supporting the delivery of voluntary services. It proposed reorganising advice services in a manner which would yield Local Area Hubs backed up by specialist services operating at regional level.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office has undertaken two audits of benefit uptake in Northern Ireland. The 2003 audit recommended further monitoring of “*the effectiveness of the telephone as the main means of providing information and advice*”. It also recommended that data be more systematically gathered on the extent to which benefit checks were likely to enhance income, with a view to “*targeting take-up activity through the use of advanced data analysis techniques*”. As part of that monitoring and data collection exercise, several agencies were commissioned to provide benefits advice to callers who contacted various Advice Lines (e.g. Citizen’s Advice and Age NI). In Bryson Energy’s case, callers comprised people who rang their Warm Homes Advice Line.

Later on, Bryson Energy decided to follow a sample of these up in order to more fully assess impacts. The follow-up was undertaken in order to assess the cost-effectiveness of the benefit entitlement programme, and as a means of informing future best practice.

The present study is based on the results of Bryson Energy's follow-up exercise. It aims to inform the twin themes of *effectiveness* and *targeting* that the 2003 Audit referred to.

At a broader level, Great Britain launched a pilot scheme in November 2010 to explore the advantages and disadvantages of paying Pension Credit automatically for a 3-month period. Following evaluation of the scheme, Northern Ireland will consider the results in terms of local implementation (NIAO, 2011).

In this joint context of:

a) policy priority for benefit uptake in NI

**and**

b) experimentation with new approaches at GB level

it is vital that more is understood about the local context of benefit uptake in Northern Ireland. The present study may be able to contribute to this.

## 1.4 THE GEOGRAPHY AND DEMOGRAPHY OF BENEFITS UPTAKE: NORTHERN IRELAND IN UK CONTEXT

Studies indicate a broad regional similarity between NI, Wales and Scotland in terms of reliance on and uptake of benefits. For example, for child benefit, child tax credit and working tax credit, the 3 regions of the UK have caseload take-up rates of 79%, 78%, and 83% respectively (HMRC, 2011). As indicated on Table 1, the percentage of income which households in NI derive from benefit is also broadly similar to that of other regions.

**TABLE 1:** Percentage of benefit units by country (2008-9). *Source: FRS, 2010*

Percentage of benefit units					
State support received	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	UK
On any income related benefit	18	21	20	21	19
On any non-income related benefit	57	62	56	59	57
All in receipt of benefit	60	66	59	62	60
All in receipt of Tax Credits	14	16	14	17	14
All not in receipt of state support	40	34	41	37	40

In addition, average incomes in Northern Ireland are now broadly the same as in England, and higher than in Scotland and Wales, although this parity with England is recent (see Table 2).

**TABLE 2:** Median disposable weekly household income (£) by country. *Sources: FES, EFS, LCS*

YEAR	England	Wales	Scotland	NI
1968	24.03	21.61	23.51	22.32
1973	38.79	33.47	37.50	31.02
1978	81.09	72.17	82.90	56.76
1983	137.82	120.34	115.33	103.58
1988	201.24	174.17	161.91	176.56
1993	239.73	215.01	233.16	211.81
1998-99	298.98	263.32	247.08	224.46
2003-04	385.02	340.88	349.22	339.10
2008	450.93	362.88	400.94	435.99
<b>% Change 1968-2008</b>	<b>+1776.5</b>	<b>+1579.2</b>	<b>+1605.4</b>	<b>+1853.3</b>

The cost of living, too, is broadly similar across the 4 regions of the UK, with one exception. Northern Ireland residents pay considerably more for home heating; this is largely attributable to a heavy reliance on oil-fired heating systems in the region. At the last House Condition Survey, more than three-quarters of homes in Northern Ireland relied on oil for their domestic heating (NIHCS, 2009). Table 3 compares the expenditure on heating for homes in Northern Ireland and the other three regions.

**TABLE 3:** Regional average fuel expenditure as a proportion of income 2007-2009. *Source: EFS 2011*

	Average annual expenditure on electricity, gas and other fuels	Annual fuel bill as a percentage of disposable income
England	£ 972.40	3.30%
Wales	£1,060.80	4.20%
Scotland	£1,040.00	3.80%
<b>N. Ireland</b>	<b>£1,336.40</b>	<b>4.90%</b>

According to 2009 estimates, the financial burden of heating and lighting a home in Northern Ireland is largely responsible for 44% of homes in the region being in fuel poverty, compared with 33% in Scotland and 18% in England (DECC, 2010).

## 1.5 BENEFIT CHECKS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Benefit checks are currently provided for clients through a range of agencies in Northern Ireland, including Citizens' Advice, Advice NI, A2B, and Age NI. More recently, they have also been offered routinely to clients who contact agencies such as Bryson Energy with enquiries about subsidised home heating and insulation schemes such as Warm Homes (Northern Ireland's primary government programme for tackling fuel poverty).

The present study follows up 390 of Bryson Energy's clients to estimate;

- how many are advised of potential income from unclaimed benefit.
- how many follow through by making a claim.
- how many receive additional income.

The study is one of several to investigate the effectiveness of benefit checks in the UK, although one of few to actively follow clients up.

## 1.6 IMPACTS OF RECEIVING PREVIOUSLY UNCLAIMED BENEFIT/S – EFFECTS ON HOUSEHOLDS AND LOCAL ECONOMIES

Adams et al. (2006) note that there is a substantial “grey literature” on the impacts of receiving previously unclaimed benefit, and conclude that “*The majority of studies were...not published in peer reviewed journals, and were of limited scientific quality*”. In other words, evidence is patchy, often anecdotal, and rarely based on rigorous methodologies.

Table 4 summarises the results of those Scottish and English studies which based their estimates of impact on the follow-up of a sample of clients (10% or more). From this it is evident that there is wide variation in impacts. For example 30% of Warm Front clients in 2007/8 were successful in making a claim, compared with 82% for the Scottish Central Heating Programme in 2002/3.

Average amounts successfully claimed also vary widely, from £554 per annum in the aforementioned 2002/3 Scottish Central Heating Programme to £1,850 in Warm Front 2009/10. Other studies (not tabled) confirm this. For example, among people with disabilities, the impacts of disability benefit uptake meant that clients received amounts between £936 and £5,928 per annum (Berthoud, 2009). It is possible that claimants whose eligibility is based at least in part on health grounds will have larger returns, as Berthoud’s study suggests. This is supported by the last study cited on Table 4, which was exclusively carried out in Health Centres, and where the average return was £2,860 (White et al., 2005).

However, even smaller amounts can make a substantial difference to household circumstances, particularly for people who are on the lowest incomes. For example, in Berthoud’s 2009 sample, the average increase in annual income was 25%, which probably equates to ten times the increase that working households can presently expect from even the most generous annual salary increments.

Broadly speaking, there has been a trend of increasingly positive impacts on income maximisation over time, which emerges from both the Scottish and the English studies. Benefit checks have become more effective in generating income for clients.

Little is known about how the extra income generated by benefit checks is spent (Berthoud, 2009). However what studies do exist suggest that funds may be most often directed toward extra spending on fuel, food, recreation and transport (Wiggin & Talbot, 2006). Heating and food expenditure tend to be most frequently mentioned in follow-up studies (e.g. Craig, 2004; Dayson et al., 2009). For example, a study by Age Concern (2004) reported that



27% of recipients worried less about making ends meet after receiving extra income from benefits previously unclaimed, including paying for energy and food. A further 14% felt it had enabled them to manage their debts more effectively, and 9% reported increased engagement with relatives and friends after receiving an additional income from benefit/s claimed. Changes in lifestyle such as these are likely to yield improvements in the quality of life, living standards, and social inclusion of those who apply and are successful. Studies of impacts on health and well-being indicate more measurable effects on mental health than physical health (Adams et al., 2006; Moffatt, Noble & Exley, 2010; Wiggan & Talbot, 2006).

The local economy probably also gains from residents taking up additional benefits to which they are entitled, since additional income is often spent purchasing local services (Sacks, 2002; Wiggan & Talbot, 2006). Ambrose and Stone (2003) – working on data from the Brighton and Hove area - estimate an additional return of 70p to the overall locale for every £1 a householder receives in additional benefit. Returns to a local economy are particularly likely when beneficiaries live in rural areas, and/or are unable to travel into more central shopping areas easily.

**TABLE 4:** Benefits Uptake Schemes and their relative impacts – data based on actual follow-up studies\*

Location	Scheme	Responded to contact	Successful claims as % of responders	Increase in income p.a. at follow-up	Source
Scotland	Central Heating Programme 2001/2	64%	48%	£1,182	SECHP 2010
Scotland	Central Heating Programme 2002/3	33%	82%	£554	SEHCP 2010
Scotland	Central Heating Programme 2003/4	91%	48%	£1,364	SEHCP 2010
England	Warm Front 2004	Not published	25%	£1,000	NEA 2005
England	Warm Front 2006/7	Not published	39%	£1,379	UKFPS 2007
England	Warm Front 2007/8	Not published	30%	£1,478	UKFPS 2008
England	Warm Front 2008/9	Not published	42%	£1,616	Eaga
England	Warm Front 2009/10	Not published	Not published	£1,850	Eaga
Stockton, England	Stockton Warm Zone	Not published	Not published	£1,740	NEA 2005
Newcastle Upon Tyne	Randomised controlled trial in health centres	32%	40%	£2,860	White et al. 2005

\* Estimated from follow-up of at least 10% of clients who were advised.

## 1.7 IMPACTS OF RECEIVING PREVIOUSLY UNCLAIMED BENEFIT/S – COST-BENEFIT ANALYSES

Until quite recently, few cost-benefit analyses based their estimates on the benefits clients *actually* received, relying instead on the amount which advisers estimated their clients were entitled to. Two elements of over-estimation are inherently built into this approach - clients who decide not to apply, and clients whose claims are either rejected or are only partly successful. For this reason, most of the earliest cost-benefit analyses may have over-estimated their impacts. By following clients up, more can be understood about the real returns.

Cost-benefit analyses are also constrained by the fact that most studies (Adams et al. 2006 estimate this to be 69% of all studies) fail to report the size of the population eligible to receive advice. If for example, 100 clients who receive a benefit check are found to be eligible from 1,000 checks, the costs and benefits are somewhat different from a scenario in which the same number of 100 clients are gleaned from only 300 checks. Studies also report a substantial number of claimants at follow-up who are awaiting a response about their claim. Since at least some of these are likely to be successful in the fullness of time, their contribution to the income gained from participation in the advice programme has to be either estimated or ignored. All of these make comparison across studies somewhat unreliable.

Cost-benefit analysis of more *general welfare rights* services have estimated returns of between £44 in the £1 to £85 in the £1 (RNIB and CAB respectively, in Wiggan & Talbot, 2006). For *benefits-specific advice* in Northern Ireland, when delivered by agencies such as Citizens Advice or Age NI, the returns are estimated at around £14 in the £1 (NIAO, 2011).

A classic indicator of efficacy in benefit uptake schemes is the *conversion rate*. This is expressed as follows:

*(number of successful applicants whose income is improved/total number of checks that are carried out) \* 100*

When benefit checks were first introduced in Great Britain, they were accompanied by a mass media campaign and yielded a conversion rate of 15% (NIAO, 2011).

In Northern Ireland, a conversion rate of 7% was estimated recently, based on checks carried out between 2005 and 2010 (NIAO, 2011).

## 1.8 TARGETED GROUPS FOR BENEFIT UPTAKE CAMPAIGNS

Benefit check agencies have given special attention to pensioners. This is attributable to many factors, including the gap in claims that are made for State Pension Credit, and the alleged disproportionate reluctance of pensioners to claim benefits to which they are entitled. Authors such as Moffatt and Higgs (2007) argue that recent moves to a welfare system that is means-tested and therefore available to only some is uncomfortable for an older generation who grew up under a system of “abstract universalism” (p. 449), in which welfare was available to all in the UK, and without question. For pensioners in particular, the benefit entitlement profile is also particularly complex, with 23 different types of benefit being available (Moffatt, Noble & Exley, 2010). Another vital reason for a focus on pensioners is that studies have shown that pensioners are relatively unlikely to move out of poverty once in poverty, except through a rise in benefits; this is largely attributable to benefits often being their sole source of income (Moffatt & Glasgow, 2009).

Philip et al. (2003) point out that the difficulties faced by rural pensioners may be particularly acute, given higher costs for transport, social participation, heating (as a result of being off-grid and relying on oil, electricity or LPG), and food costs. For heating alone in Northern Ireland, oil-fired central heating is currently estimated to cost 44% more for an average home than gas-fired central heating (Liddell, Morris, McKenzie & Rae, 2011).

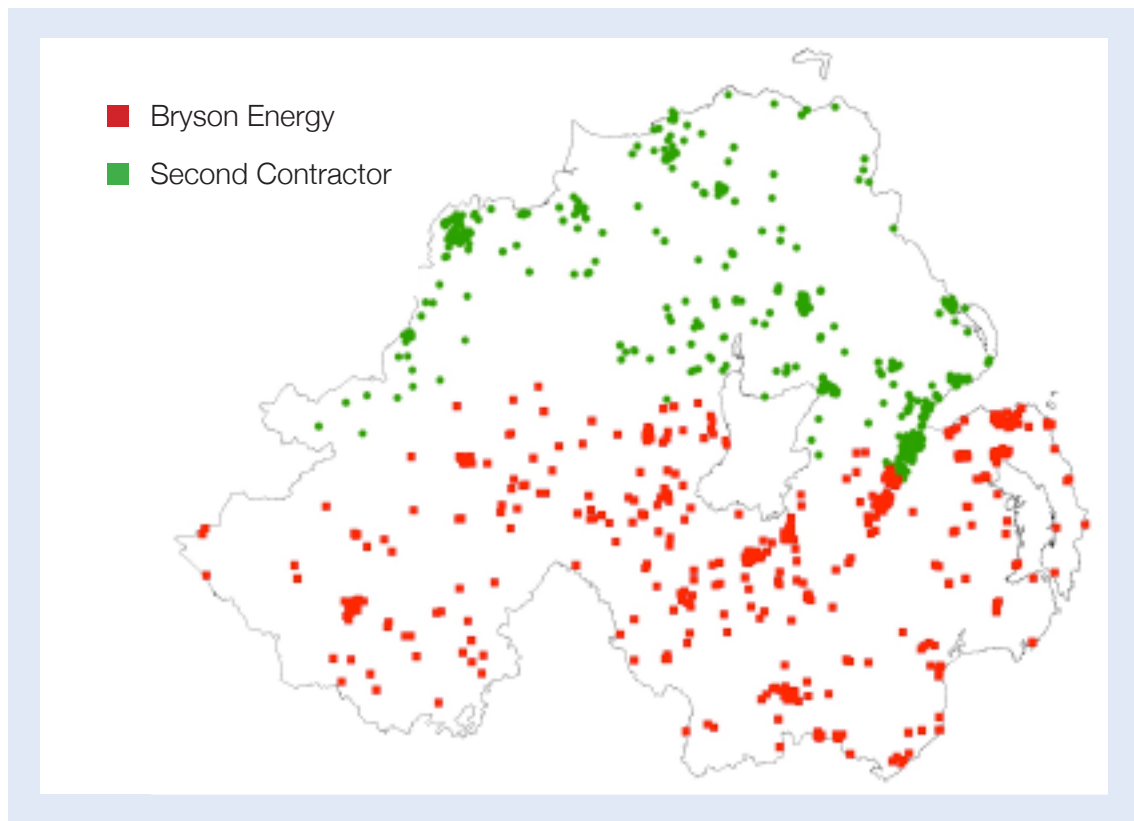
## 1.9 BRYSON ENERGY

The benefit uptake programme on which this study is based was undertaken by Bryson Energy between July 2009 and June 2010. Bryson Energy is an Energy Agency and is part of the Bryson Charitable Group. It provides support, advice and advocacy for a wide demographic in Northern Ireland, working with customers that have a diversity of needs, attitudes, behaviours, and eligibility for services. The Agency is one of more than 380 energy agencies across Europe which support evidence-based energy efficiency strategies, and provide information and guidance to customers seeking advice about making their homes or workplaces more affordably warm and sustainable. Other key services include project management, micro-generation consultancy, and working with schools and young people. Bryson Energy is one of the largest and most successful European energy agencies with over 60 staff and an annual turnover of circa £8M. During 2010 over 82,500 households (11% of all households in Northern Ireland) were assisted in improving domestic energy efficiency through advice and assistance delivered by the agency.

More recently, Bryson Energy has become a lead agency in the installation of energy saving measures such as heating and insulation. Since July 2009, Bryson Charitable Group has been responsible (together with a second organisation) for the delivery of Northern Ireland’s Warm Homes scheme. This is the Department For Social Development Northern Ireland’s

(DSDNI) flagship scheme for tackling fuel poverty. Figure 1 illustrates the areas of Northern Ireland which Bryson Energy serves in the Warm Homes Scheme.

**FIGURE 1:** Areas of Northern Ireland where Bryson Energy installs heating and insulation measures on behalf of Warm Homes. *Source: DSDNI, 2011*



Following the NIAO (2003) recommendation that benefit checks be included in the Warm Homes application process, Bryson Energy (who had been awarded part of the Warm Homes contract) offered checks to all applicants that contacted their Warm Homes Advice Line. Consequently, all callers who enquired about making application to Warm Homes after July have been offered a benefit check as part of the package of customer service.

# 2 Methods

*“While benefit entitlement checks now form an important element of fuel poverty programmes at the national level, the main providers of energy efficiency and income maximisation advice at the local level have historically worked in isolation of each other. There are good practice examples of more integrated approaches. However, these tend to be the exception, rather than the rule.” (CSE, 2006).*

## 2.1 PREAMBLE

The aim of Warm Homes is to assist owner-occupied households and private tenants who are likely to be experiencing fuel poverty, by providing subsidised heating and insulation packages for customers who are eligible. The aim is to make domestic energy needs more affordable for these customers. Since fuel poverty is caused by a combination of high energy costs and low income, Warm Homes more recently began to offer a two-pronged approach to intervention. This was in accordance with NIAO (2003) recommendations that income and energy efficiency be jointly addressed in fuel poverty initiatives. The dual services were:

- Free or subsidised energy efficiency services such as heating, cavity and loft insulation, and energy efficiency advice, which enables households to live in more energy efficient homes.
- A benefit entitlement check which could ensure that households are living on the maximum possible income given their welfare rights, personal and financial circumstances.

For the latter, applicants to Warm Homes are asked to complete a benefit check with a Bryson Energy adviser, from which any unclaimed benefits to which they were entitled can be applied for. This check is referred to as a Benefit Maximisation Check (**BMC**).

In addition to boosting income, the benefit entitlement can in many cases mean that a client who was not previously eligible for Warm Homes (because they were not in receipt of a particular benefit which guarantees eligibility), becomes eligible for the first time, and can go on to apply for free or subsidised heating and insulation. These particular benefits are known as passport benefits, and the check is referred to as a Benefit Entitlement Check (**BEC**). In England and Wales, data from the 2009/10 financial year indicate that 56% of checks were of this nature (Eaga, 2010); of these 31% then became eligible for Warm Homes as a result of receiving a passport benefit; this indicates the importance of BEC's for combating financial exclusion and widening participation in Warm Homes.

Hence these 2 benefit checks (**BMC and BEC**) maximise income and make energy more affordable by;

- increasing the number of customers eligible for the Warm Homes scheme.
- ensuring (where possible) that all eligible customers (whether they succeed in receiving Warm Homes or not) are living with the maximum possible income.

## 2.2 PROCEDURE

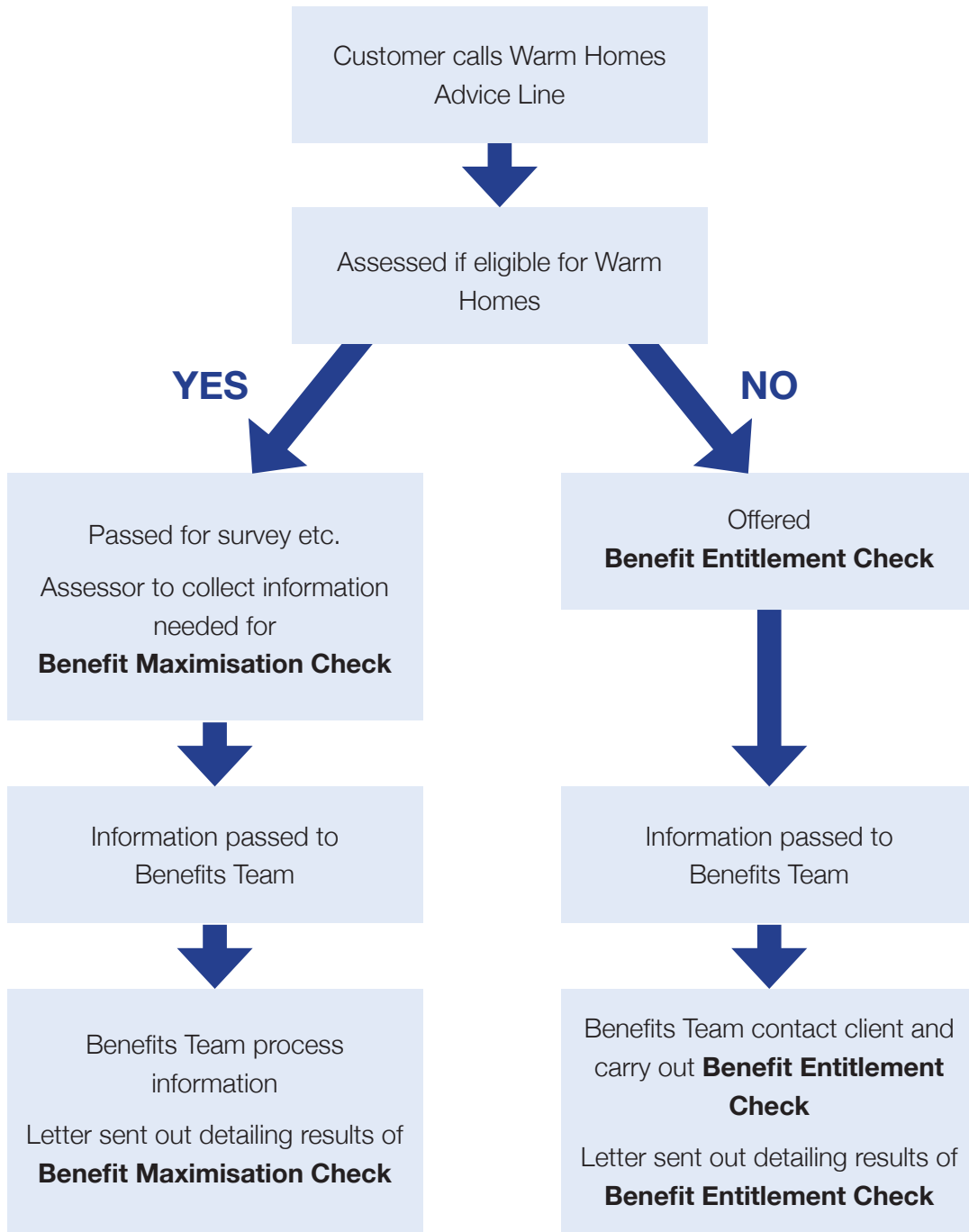
### 2.2.1 Time 1: The benefit checks

Figure 2 illustrates the benefits check protocol followed by the Bryson Energy team. All of the benefit checks that were carried out by the team as part of Warm Homes were completed by fully qualified staff, with experience of welfare rights advice.

Figure 3 comprises a Consort diagram detailing the calls made to the Warm Homes Advice Line between July 2009 and June 2010. The Advice Line received 27,340 calls. Of these 7,790 concerned applications to the Warm Homes scheme.

In total, 15% (n = 1,132) were not currently eligible to apply for Warm Homes, although for about half of these (n = 479) this was (at least in part) because the caller was not in receipt of a passport benefit. For these clients, a BEC was carried out; 54% (n = 260) were thought likely to qualify for the passport benefit and were advised to apply for it, and sometimes for other benefits too.

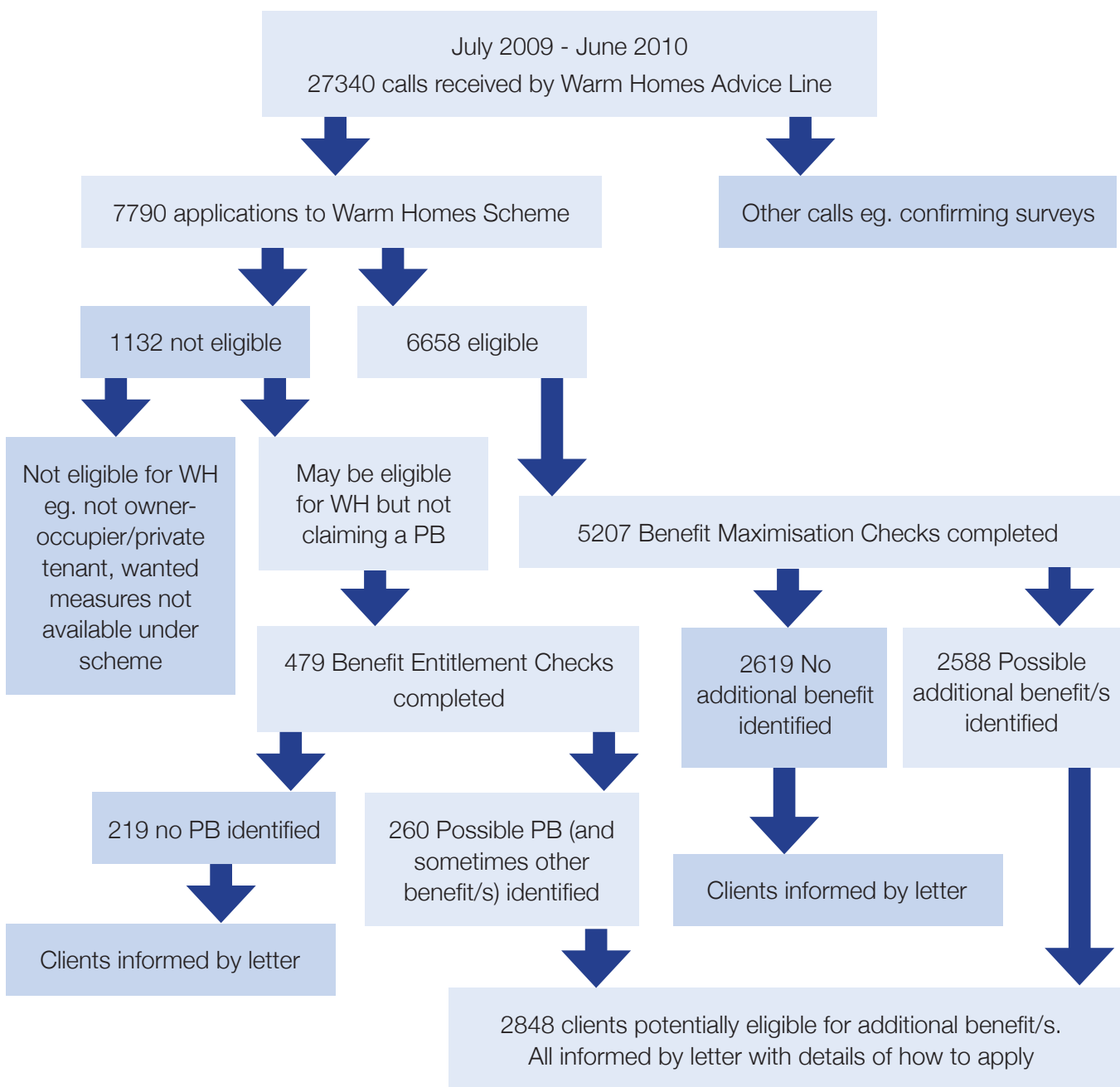
**FIGURE 2:** Bryson Energy benefits check protocol



Of those who were already eligible to apply for Warm Homes (n = 6,658), 5,207 BMC's were carried out, and 50% of these checks (n = 2,588) identified possible benefits which clients were advised to apply for.

In total, 50% of all clients who received a benefit check were advised that they might be eligible for additional benefit income (2,848 clients).

**FIGURE 3:** Population of Advice Line callers and benefit checks completed (WH = Warm Homes; PB = Passport Benefit)

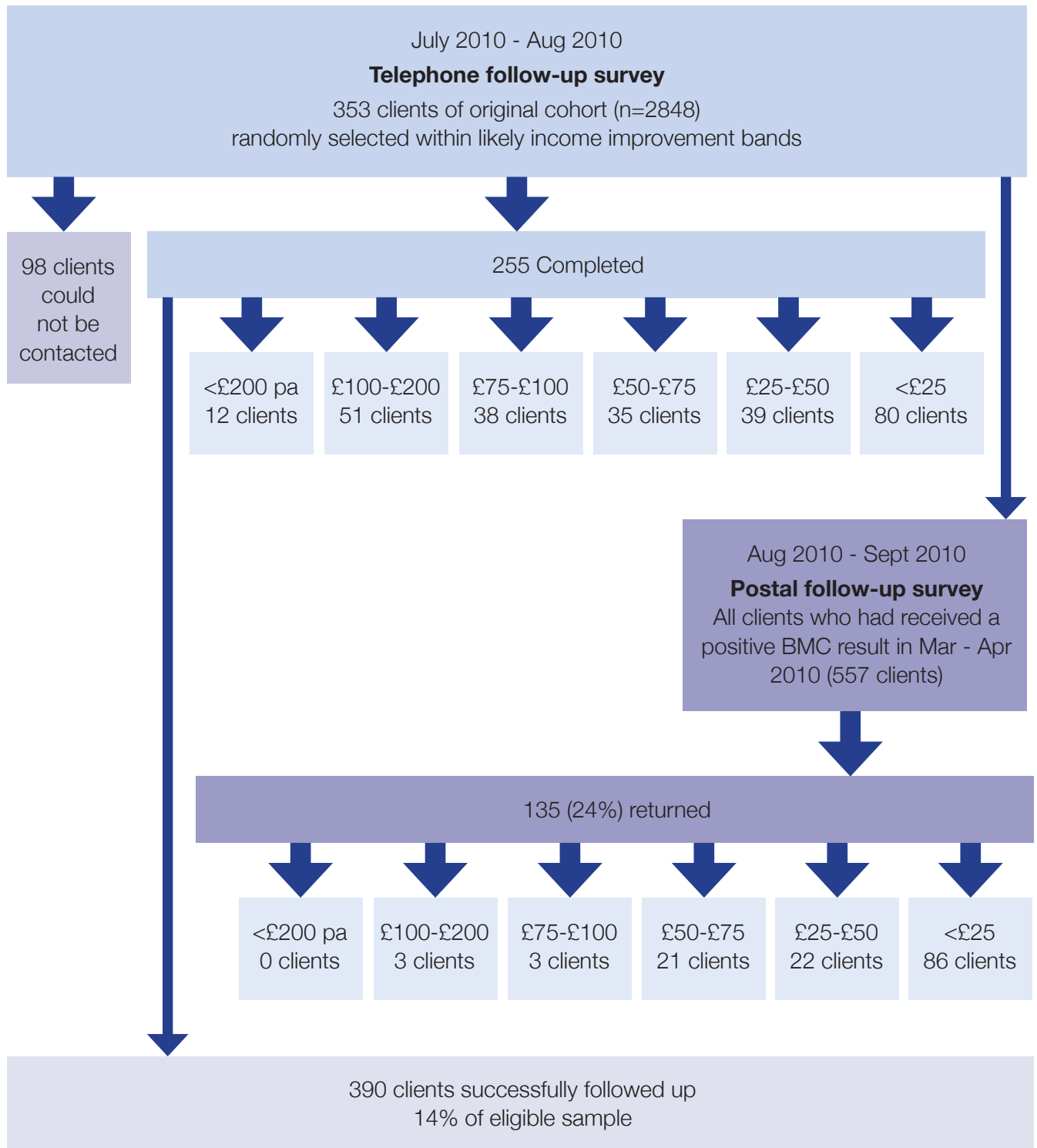




## 2.2.2 Time 2: Follow-up of a sample of clients who had received a benefit check

In July-September 2010, attempts were made to follow-up some of these clients either by telephone or postal survey. Figure 4 comprises a Consort diagram of the follow-up procedure.

**FIGURE 4:** Sample of clients followed up



### July-August 2010 Telephone Survey

A copy of the Telephone Survey is contained in Appendix 1. Attempts were made to reach 390 clients by telephone, of whom 255 completed the telephone survey.

### August-September 2010 Postal Survey

The remainder of follow-up clients were surveyed by post (n = 557), with 135 completed postal surveys being returned (24%). A copy of the Postal Survey is contained in Appendix 2.

In total, 14% of all those who were deemed likely to be eligible for unclaimed benefits at TIME 1 completed the follow-up survey at TIME 2. Of these 9% completed a telephone survey and 5% a postal survey.

### Telephone and Postal Surveys – client selection for follow-up

Contacts for follow-up were not randomly selected from the original 2,848 customers who had been given a positive benefit check, since some selection by income increase was made for telephone survey clients. Hence, for the telephone survey a large proportion of clients who were thought to be entitled to the highest amounts were followed up (63%); the lowest proportion of follow-ups were made with clients entitled to amounts of £25 or less (11%). Table 5 provides details of sample selection by “estimated extra income band”.

**TABLE 5:** Sample recruitment by income bands

Weekly estimated extra income band	Number within 2,848 client database	Number followed up	% followed up
> £200	19	12	163%
£100 - £200	154	54	35%
£75 - £100	163	41	25%
£50 - £75	337	56	17%
£25 - £50	500	61	12%
£0 - £25	1,529	166	11%
£0*	146	Ignored	Ignored
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,848</b>	<b>390</b>	<b>14%</b>

\* £0 will have been recommended in some cases, where it was not possible to estimate an amount. For example, a client in receipt of Income Support would be entitled to assistance with mortgage interest costs, but these costs were unknown at time of benefit check.

By choosing to follow up clients in “income-increase” bands, Bryson Energy was able to ensure that all levels of income improvement could be sampled. However, when purposive sampling of this kind is deployed, it is essential that results are converted from their raw state to weighted data that applies an appropriate weighting based on the skew imposed by purposive sampling. Appendix 3 contains details of how the raw data were weighted.

## **2.3 QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS: CASE STUDIES**

10 cases studies were carried out. All case studies were undertaken over the telephone. Whilst Bryson Energy was aware of a client’s personal details at the time of the survey, the University requested a random selection of client contact numbers from Bryson, and carried out case studies anonymously. A simple protocol of questions was asked of each client, with room left in between the questions for clients and the researcher to explore any areas of relevance. The questions were as follows:

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
2. How did you first come into contact with the people who talked to you about Warm Homes?
3. Do you recall that they advised you that you might be eligible for some benefits that you had not been claiming? You then went on to apply for these. How quickly did you decide to apply for the benefits they advised you about? Did you need time to think about it first?
4. Did you discuss applying with anyone else before you went ahead?
5. When you got stuck in, and made the application, how easy did you find it?
6. Did anyone help you in making the application?
7. Did it take a long time before you heard anything?
8. Were there any parts of the process, from start to finish, that annoyed or upset you?
9. How long is it since you got your first payment through?
10. Have these payments made any difference to you?

# 3 Results

## 3.1 THE FOLLOW-UP SAMPLE (UNWEIGHTED DATA)

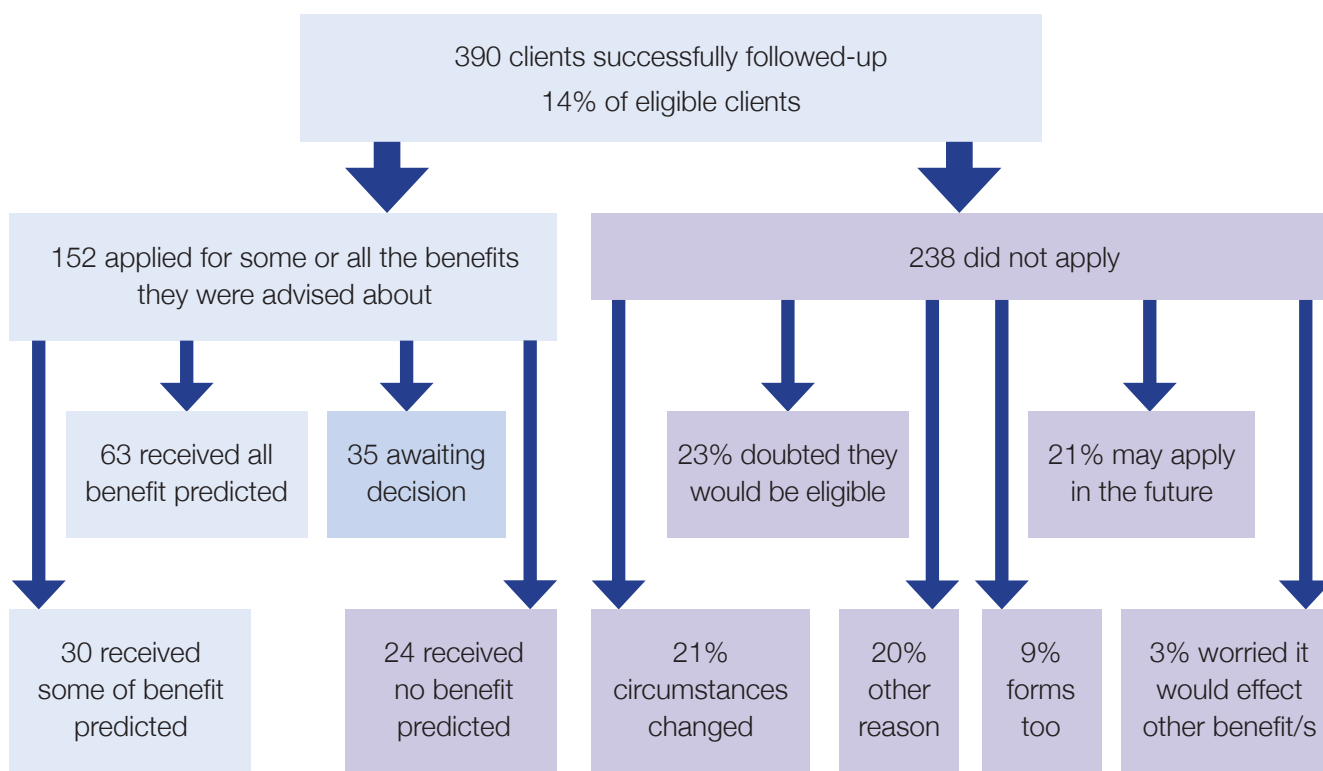
In total, 390 clients responded to the survey which represented 14% of the clients who had received a positive benefits check. Figure 5 provides details of the outcomes from follow up. The majority of clients who had been advised of a possible claim did not follow through with a claim. The most common reason given for choosing not to follow through was that people doubted they would be eligible (23% of those who did not follow through).

## 3.2 WEIGHTED POPULATION OUTCOMES

As detailed in the Methods Section, the follow-up used purposive sampling so that clients from all income-increase bands could be contacted about the outcome of their benefit check. To avoid biased estimates of the impacts of the intervention raw data have been weighted (see Appendix 3). **From here on, tables and percentages are based on the appropriately weighted data, unless otherwise stated.**

For clients who applied for a benefit following their check, Table 6 provides details of their demography. Lone parents were few, comprising only 7% of the achieved sample. As a whole, parents contacted the Advice Line significantly less than did pensioners: parents comprised 25% of the sample, compared with pensioners who made up more than half of the sample (57%).

**FIGURE 5:** Results from the follow-up survey sample



**TABLE 6:** Demography of the clients who responded (sample-weighted)

Client characteristic	%
Gender (% male)	43%
Urban	48%
High: low deprivation (%)	47 : 53
Household type	
Lone Pensioners	24%
Other Pensioners	33%
Lone Parent	7%
Other Parent	18%
Other household type	18%

### 3.2.1 Types of benefits clients applied for

Table 7 provides details of the types of benefits clients applied for and the estimated outcomes based on the weighted sample. The most common benefit identified as being under-claimed was Rates Relief (1,488 clients advised to apply), followed by Pension Credit (891 clients advised to apply). Both also had relatively high rates of clients following through with a claim (20%).

By contrast, Income Support was frequently recommended (279 clients) but seldom followed through (8%). This could be a consequence of missing information at the time of the benefit check. For example, a client may be contributing a part of their income support to repaying a Social Fund interest-free loan. This was not always disclosed, nor indeed checked with clients on a routine basis.

Benefits such as Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and Attendance Allowance were more seldom advised on. This is because DLA and Attendance Allowance are more difficult to identify as likely benefits being unclaimed – they require more in-depth and sensitive discussion with clients than is possible through the benefit check process followed by Bryson Energy for Warm Homes.

**TABLE 7:** Estimate of types of benefit for which clients applied and % success (sample-weighted)

Type of benefit client advised they might be eligible for	Thought to be eligible	Applied	% Successful of applied
Rates Relief *	1,488	20%	61%
Pension Credit	891	20%	48%
Income Support	279	8%	50%
Child Tax Credit	272	17%	65%
Housing Benefit	223	9%	76%
Working Tax Credit	186	17%	45%
Carers' Allowance	72	6%	50%
Jobseekers Allowance	31	5%	80%
Employment and Support Allowance	10	60%	100%
Attendance Allowance	10	40%	25%
Disability Living Allowance	4	75%	0%

\* Rates relief refers to all types of assistance towards rates that a person may have been entitled to claim, including Housing Benefit for Rates, Lone Pensioner Allowance, Disabled Persons Allowance, and Rates Relief. This is the case throughout the report.

Taken as a whole, these results suggest that a more focused programme which targets the more commonly unclaimed benefits, especially those for which there is a high likelihood of follow through, might be even more cost-effective. Even among these benefits, uptake rates approximate 50%, leaving considerable scope for improvement in participation.

### **3.2.2 What distinguished clients who followed through with an application from those who did not?**

Table 8 gives demographic details of those clients with a positive benefit check who had followed through with an application. A binary logistic regression was used to test for statistically significant differences, and the results of this are contained on Table 9. Deprivation indicators were derived using postcodes of clients, which were then mapped onto the NISRA multiple deprivation indicator (NISRA, 2010). This allocates a score from 1 to 890 to output areas, from most to least deprived.

Taken together these 2 tables indicate that men and women were equally likely to apply for additional benefit following a positive benefit check, as were urban and rural residents. Household type made no difference to the likelihood of following through with an application i.e. lone pensioners, pensioner couples, lone parents, and dual-parents were all equally as likely to have applied. People residing in high-deprivation areas were equally as likely to apply as were people from better resourced areas. For age, however, a significant effect was found. Younger callers were more likely to follow through by making an application for an unclaimed benefit.

**TABLE 8:** Clients with a positive benefit check who applied (sample-weighted)

<b>Demographic variable</b>	<b>% of this group who applied, following a positive benefit check</b>
<b>AGE</b>	
Under 40 years old	36%
40-49	48%
50-59 years	40%
60-69 years	39%
70-79 years	41%
80 years+	29%
<b>LOCATION</b>	
Urban	41%
Rural	38%
High deprivation	40%
Low deprivation	38%
<b>GENDER</b>	
Male	38%
Female	41%
<b>HOUSEHOLD TYPE</b>	
Lone pensioner	41%
Other pensioner	40%
Lone parent	31%
Other parent	50%



**TABLE 9:** Binary logistic regression predicting who did and did not apply for benefits they were likely to be eligible for (sample-weighted)

Model Summary	-2 Log likelihood	Cox & Snell R Square	Nagelkerke R Square			
	486.764	.028	.038			
Variables in the Equation						
	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
<b>Age</b>	<b>-.028</b>	<b>.012</b>	<b>5.002</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>.025*</b>	<b>.973</b>
Male	-.257	.232	1.231	1	.267	.773
Urban	.088	.218	.163	1	.687	1.092
Deprivation	.072	.118	.154	1	.556	1.043
Lone Pensioner	.278	.397	.491	1	.483	1.321
Other Pensioner	.176	.356	.245	1	.620	1.193
Lone Parent	-.777	.553	1.973	1	.160	.460

\*  $p <= 0.05$

The age effect is illustrated in Figure 6. From this it is evident that that between 36% and 48% of clients under 80 years old claimed, but only 29% of clients 80+ years.

# Case Studies

Mr and Mrs T from Newry own their own home, and had loft insulation installed as part of Warm Homes. They had a Benefit Maximisation Check carried out as part of the scheme. This BMC recommended that in addition to their state pensions, they would be entitled to claim £74.86 of Pension Credit and full Housing Benefit for their rates, worth £520 per year. They made their claim and are now delighted to have been awarded these two benefits. They are now better off by £4,413 per year.

Mrs M is a widow and lives alone in a semi-detached house. She is 70 years old. Her husband died 5 years ago, but her family of four children and her neighbours of many years have been very kind and helpful to her since that time. She has frequent problems with arthritis, blood pressure and diabetes. All of Mrs M's neighbours had had some sort of home heating work completed on their homes and had informed Mrs M of the project. She was the last in her street to apply, and was concerned that funds may have run out. However, she did receive loft insulation.

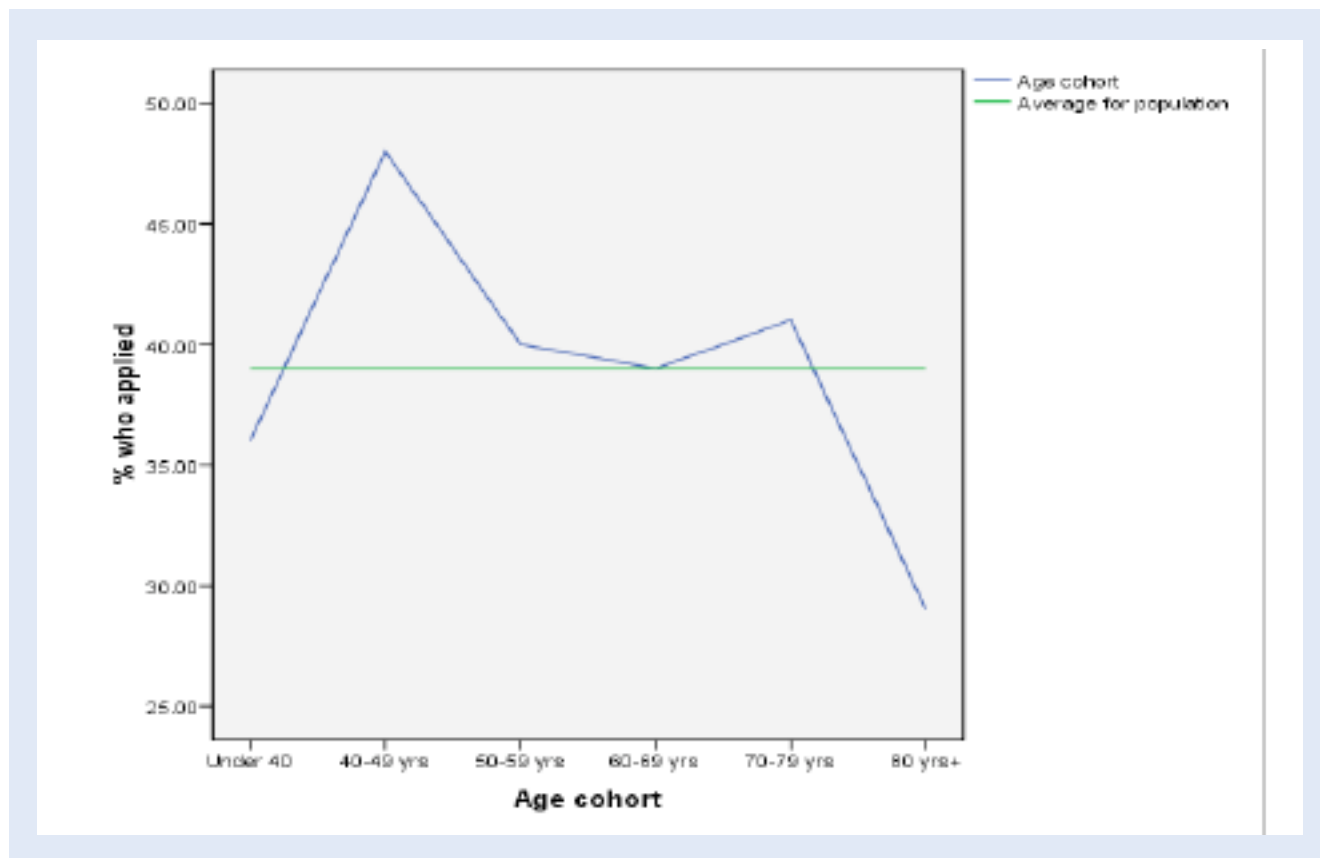
She was also advised by Bryson Energy to apply for pension credit; she talked this over with her family and neighbours, who all advised her to go ahead with application. "When they came out, they had taken all my details and sent the right forms that I needed, so I applied straight away". The forms were completed with the help of a neighbour. Mrs M received pension credit as well as a rate rebate around the same time.

# Case Studies

Mr and Mrs H from Newtownhamilton had loft and cavity wall insulation installed through Warm Homes. At the time the survey was completed, they explained to the Assessor that they had a range of health problems. When the Benefit Maximisation Check was carried out, the Benefits Advice Officer recommended that they could make a claim for Attendance Allowance. Mr H has since been awarded Attendance Allowance, worth £47.80 per week. Bryson also recommended applying for help with rates and they have now been awarded £16.20 Housing Benefit covering the full cost of their rates. They are now better off by £3,328 per year.

Mrs G is 61 years old and lives in a bungalow with her husband and their two children, both of whom are over the age of 18. Mrs G had heard about the Warm homes scheme through a card in the post. She had seen advertisements for the same scheme in various places in her community and after speaking with her husband, they decided to apply. Mrs G noted that she did not find the application difficult in fact “it was very easy”, and as she explained only after a few short weeks later Mrs G heard word back about the scheme. Mrs G also received advice about what benefits she may have been entitled to and later found that she was eligible for the benefits she was advised about. Mrs G received Disability Living Allowance and Pension Credit, “We received the first payment some time ago now, ...it has made a big difference, the payments have helped a lot with day to day life... I am very happy with the advice and help that was provided”.

**FIGURE 6:** Percentage of clients who followed through with a claim by age cohort (sample-weighted)



Further analysis using a one-way ANOVA indicated that clients whose estimated unclaimed entitlement was larger were more likely to apply than were those with smaller potential claims ( $F(1, 92) = 4.74, p < .05$ ).

Table 10 illustrates the difference between mean and median estimates. Median estimates provide a more centralised estimate of impacts, which give greater weight to the more common rates of return. Hence, for example, the amount which Bryson Energy team members estimated for the mean return to all potentially eligible clients was £1,508, whilst the amount received by successful claimants was much higher (£2,448). This too may illustrate the extent to which clients likely to be entitled to large increases in income were more likely to apply when they received the benefit check results.

# Case Studies

Mrs B has lived alone since her husband died three years previous. She is 57 years old and lives in a detached house which has oil fired heating. At the time of the call, she was taking care of her daughter's youngest child, "I have lots of grandchildren, but he is the youngest". Mrs B heard about Warm Homes through a friend. She was advised about benefits, but it took her many months before she decided to apply for them. She doubted she would be eligible for them. "When my husband died, he died under 65 years old, and they said I wasn't entitled to certain benefits". However, she e-mailed Bryson Energy and later received a phone call from "a lovely girl" who confirmed that she was probably entitled to some benefits, and who encouraged her to apply. Mrs B received help with the application through a home visit from Bryson. This proved to be "very easy". Mrs B explained that the "lovely girl" had given Mrs B a number to contact over the phone and when she called "They took it from there". Mrs B agreed on a time for the assessor to come to her home, but due to the bad frost they had to rearrange the date. Mrs B explained that the scheme helped her source the right people and she was ultimately informed that she was entitled to pension credit. When asked if this additional payment had made any difference to life in general, Mrs B responded "Sure they have, my husband left me well off and so I was able to do things like holidays, but now I have a bit extra I can save money every week to help with oil payments". Mrs B also noted that she had enjoyed the experience of Warm Homes and the Benefit Entitlement Check, "but I will not really know until the winter if there has been much of a difference made. It seems warmer since the work has been completed, and it's given me the courage to apply for other schemes".

# Case Studies

Mr E is a 34 year old farmer, who lives at home with his wife and daughter in their two storey farm house. He explained that he had heard about the Warm Homes scheme through his mother and had also seen an article about it in a local newspaper. Mr E decided to apply for the scheme after a few weeks. Mr E explained that at this time the farming community was not doing well and the home was cold a lot of the time, so anything that could help was appreciated.

After Mr E had made his application an assessor came to the house and carried out an inspection. Bryson Energy also advised that Mrs E may have been entitled to certain benefits, given her situation. Mr and Mrs E were then advised on the application process and after a while they sent off the applications and received the benefits that they had previously been advised about. “The application was very easy and we heard back fairly quickly”.

Mrs E was entitled to Working Tax Credit, Work Allowance and Tax Credit. “This money has helped us in a big way, it has helped us get the things that we couldn’t afford otherwise, put food on the table, help pay bills, help with the mortgage. We are very pleased with all the help provided, it really has made a difference”.

**TABLE 10:** Estimated and actual amounts claimed by clients (weighted sample)

	Mean p.a.	Median p.a.
Estimated claim	£1,508	£676
Actual amount that successful claimants received	£2,448	£1,196

Clients in receipt of large amounts of unclaimed benefit are identified in most income maximization programmes, although they are a minority group. These cases (however much a minority) often skew the mean amount per client that studies estimate. For this reason, a median estimate of gain per client offers a more useful metric, since this comprises the middle score and is less influenced by a few claimants who experienced relatively dramatic changes in their income. In the case of the present study, for example, while the mean gain was £2,448, the median gain was less than half that amount (£1,196). In future studies of this kind, it is recommended that median gain replaces (or at least supplements) average gain, to counter the misleading impacts of a minority group whose claims result in large payments.

### **3.2.3 What distinguished clients who made a successful claim from those whose claim was rejected?**

Table 11 provides demographic details of the differences between those clients whose claim was accepted and those whose claim was rejected. Because of relatively small numbers in this data set, univariate statistics were used to calculate whether there were differences in success rate by

- a) gender
- b) age (under and over 65 years old)
- c) urban/rural
- d) deprivation indicator
- e) household type

From Table 11, it is evident that older and younger people are equally likely to succeed, as are men and women and rural and urban dwellers. However, lone parents are significantly less likely to be successful in making a claim than are other groups. Those in more deprived areas are as likely to succeed as those in less deprived areas.

**TABLE 11:** Demographics of clients who were successful in making a claim (sample-weighted)

Demographic variable	% of this group who applied and were successful	Univariate test results
<b>AGE</b>		
Under 65 years	59	N.S.
65 years+	65	N.S.
<b>LOCATION</b>		
Urban	60	N.S.
Rural	61	
Higher deprivation	61	N.S.
Lower deprivation	60	
<b>GENDER</b>		
Male	67	N.S.
Female	57	N.S.
<b>HOUSEHOLD TYPE</b>		
Lone pensioner	61	N.S.
Other pensioner	56	N.S.
Lone parent	20	$p < .05$
Other parent	61	N.S.

*N.S. = not significant @  $p < .05$*

Further analysis of the weekly increases in income that successful claims brought in indicated no gender difference in what applicants were awarded, and no difference based on area deprivation score. However, rural applicants received significantly more than urban applicants (£53 and £39 a week respectively), and pensioners received more than non-pensioners (£50 and £43 a week respectively).



# Case Studies

Mr S did not initially answer his home telephone, but called the University back a few minutes later and explained that he did not recognize the number. Mr S explained that he generally does not like to answer numbers that he does not recognize. Once the purpose of the call had been explained, Mr S was very enthusiastic to take part.

Mr S is 78 years old and lives with his wife, who is 70, in a two up, two down, semi detached house, which has central heating. Although Mr S described himself as a man of good health he noted that his wife is very unwell at the moment and has been admitted to hospital. Around 2-3 years ago, Mr S called NIE Energy, to discuss home heating. He did not receive any word back for a while, but then someone from Bryson Energy called him and explained that they had taken over this sector and would like to help. Bryson sent an assessor to Mr S's home and he was advised to apply for loft insulation.

Three weeks later work commenced on the home. Bryson Energy also recommended that he apply for benefits, he could not recall which, but Mr S did so straight away by telephone. He found this a very easy process. He was initially turned down, and received confirmation of rejection by letter a few weeks later. He then completed forms applying for a rate rebate. This was more difficult, and he had to clarify by phone call some sections of the application; however he found everyone to be very helpful. "Then we had a few surprises", he went on. Not very long after the forms were sent off, he received a letter informing him of a reduction in his rates payments, which was also backdated to the time of his application. In addition, he has noticed a reduction in his electricity payments after the loft insulation. "I appreciated the reductions."

# Case Studies

Mr M was very hesitant at first and wary of the phone call. He explained that he had heard stories of people taking part in schemes and later being bombarded with visits and phone calls that he thought were unnecessary. The researcher explained the purpose of the phone call and offered Mr M a letter to verify the researcher's identification and role within the project. Mr M responded good-humouredly that, as long as the questions did not involve his bank details, he would see how they got on.

Mr M is 69 years old and lives with his wife, who is very ill. He is her full-time carer. "I was a labourer my whole life and I have a problem with my knees, which tends to get worse in the cold weather but I don't want to get that knee surgery done." He explained that his friend had had a knee replacement and could now hardly walk. As Mr M is mainly at home with his wife, he felt he did not need to walk around as much anymore any way.

Mr M had heard about Warm Homes through a cousin who lives just up the road. He told Mr M that he needed loft insulation "but I told him that I couldn't afford it and he explained that I didn't need be able to afford it, that this group could help." His cousin explained the process and Mr M called up and applied. He could not recall how long it took before he received a response, his memory not being what it used to be; however, he commented that "the boys knew what they were doing!" When asked if the additional payments had made any difference, Mr M replied "Oh God, yes". Mr M explained that the extra funds were used to pay for his heating oil and for food. "As for the oil, I try to buy it in the summer because it's cheaper". At close, he noted "I hope I was of help".

### **3.3 CLIENTS WHO RECEIVED AN INCREASE IN INCOME OF MORE THAN £5,000 PER ANNUM**

Of 390 clients followed up, 27 (5% of all who were successful) received additional income in excess of £5,000. However, this number is based on the follow-up sample only, and purposive sampling meant that many more high-gain clients were sampled in the follow-up, so this is not representative of what would be expected if results were generalized to the population surveyed.

The numbers were too small for statistical analysis, although it is worth noting that no lone parent who applied for a benefit was in the high-gain group, and almost twice as many male (22%) as female (14%) clients were in the high-gain group.

### **3.4 ESTIMATING THE COSTS AND BENEFITS OF THE BRYSON ENERGY BENEFIT CHECK PROGRAMME**

Figure 7 comprises a Consort diagram of the survey results scaled up and weighted to represent the whole sample (i.e. the 5,686 clients who received a benefit check). From this it can be seen that:

- a) a weighted estimate of 2,692 clients were likely to have received a positive benefit check (47%);
- b) 1,077 of these would then have gone on to apply for unclaimed benefit (40%);
- c) 603 of these were likely to have been successful (56%).

Taking the data on Figure 7 to scale, Bryson Energy carried out 5,207 Benefit Maximisation Checks and 479 Benefit Entitlement Checks (5,686 checks in total), of which 2,692 had a weighted likelihood of being positive. Of these, 40% can be estimated as likely to have followed through with an application (1,077), and 56% of these were likely to have met with success (603 successful applicants). This equates to a conversion rate of 11% i.e. 603 positive claims out of 5,686 checks.

At an average of £2,448 per annum for each successful claim, this amounts to an estimated total of £1,476,144 increased income in the first year. This estimate ignores:

- any potential income that may have accrued from the claimants that were still awaiting a decision on their application.
- any potential income that will accrue from clients who follow through with an application after the survey period.

The estimate is, therefore, conservative.

The baseline cost of the Bryson Energy programme was £86,427. This averaged a cost of £143 per successful client. Since the average weekly gain per successful client was £47, the cost of the scheme was recoverable in three weeks. This baseline cost incorporates savings that were made as a consequence of the project being carried out in a large and well-structured organisation, which offered many efficiencies of scale and team-working. Without being able to absorb these embedded costs, a full costing was estimated at £104,000, or £172 per successful client, recoverable in 4 weeks. These costs are based on carrying out a total of 5,686 benefit checks. Smaller programmes would be likely to cost more per client.

# Case Studies

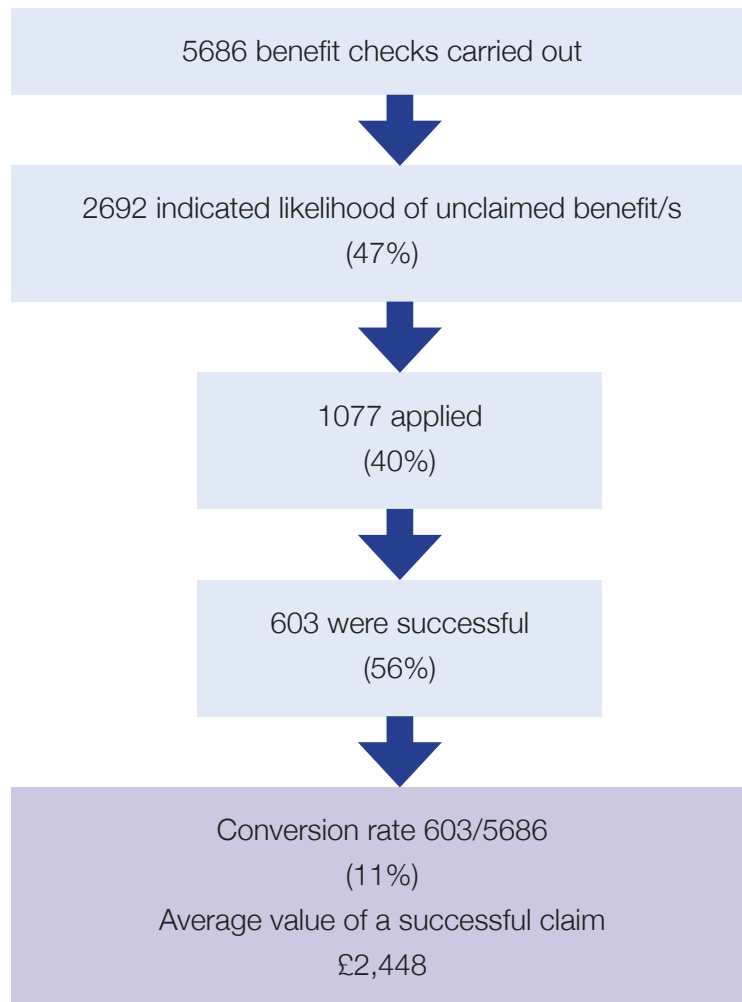
Following a Benefit Entitlement Check, Mr P was recommended to apply for Working Tax Credits, estimated to be £52.08 per week. HMRC will only accept requests for application forms from the client; they will not deal with third party requests. When Mr P contacted HMRC, it took him 20 minutes to get through and when he did he was told they could not issue an application form as his National Insurance Number was not recognised by their system. He was advised to check with the NI Helpline and call back. His NI number was confirmed as correct and he called back. After a long wait to get through, he was again advised by HMRC there was still no record of his NI number and that he could call into a local office in order to collect a form. Bryson offered to do this on his behalf, as he lived almost 20 miles away. Bryson were then advised that the office could only issue a form to the client and Mr P should make an appointment with his local office, to verify his identity and NI number. Mr P did this, and despite bringing a range of identification and confirmation from the local Jobs and Benefit Office of his NI number, the local office refused to provide him with an application form. Because of these issues, Mr P was close to giving up applying for tax credits. However, Bryson arranged to carry out a home visit with him and contacted HMRC. As Mr P was present, HMRC spoke to Bryson about the case, and the customer adviser explained that as Mr P's NI number is not recognised by their system, there is nothing more they can do. Classic case of "computer says no". Mr P was advised to contact the NI Helpline once more to see if there was any more they could do. A letter was sent confirming his National Insurance number and Bryson contacted HMRC again to see what the next steps could be. The customer adviser this time recommended putting all the details of the case in writing, along with proof of identity and NI number. This has been done, and we are awaiting their response.

# Case Studies

Mrs C is 27 years old and lives at a farmhouse with her husband. Mrs C is currently out of work and dealing with a long term illness. Mrs C heard about the Warm Homes Scheme through a local newspaper and decided to call. She explained that the Advice Line provided all the necessary details and a short while later, an assessor came to their house and took details about their home and circumstances. Mrs C discussed the benefits application process with Mr C before applying and they both completed the application together, “The application process went really quickly, we were very surprised”.

After a few weeks, Mrs C received a call from Bryson Energy who went over all the benefits that she may be entitled to. “The lady was awful nice and later sent us a written letter of everything that we had discussed. It’s nice to know that there are people out there to give you good advice and help that matters, we were absolutely delighted”.

**FIGURE 7:** Population-wide estimates of outcomes using weighted sample results



# 4 Discussion

“It is therefore important that welfare rights and other income maximization advice form a central element of fuel poverty policy, alongside the provision of energy efficiency advice, installation of energy efficiency measures and measures to reduce fuel prices.” (CSE, 2006).

## 4.1 GENERAL RESULTS

Bryson Energy’s role in carrying out benefit checks reflects best practice as recommended by the Centre For Sustainable Energy in their report to the Energy Efficiency Partnership For Homes (CSE, 2006). This advocated integrating income maximization checks into energy efficiency advice and support packages. The rationale for this was based on the fact that increased income has a profound effect on a household’s risk of experiencing fuel poverty; hence energy efficiency advisers are an appropriate medium for checks of this kind. In addition, studies suggest that older people are more comfortable undertaking a benefits check if these are completed by an agency outside the more conventional government services (e.g. DWP, 2006). In the present study, as many 60-69 year olds went on to make a claim as did 50-59 year olds. Since the study was successful in prompting a relatively large number of pensioners going on to make a claim (with the exception of those in their 70’s and ‘80’s) this may support the possibility that using a non-governmental agency like Bryson Energy enhances the likelihood that older clients will feel motivated into making an application for unclaimed benefit.

Bryson Energy carried out 5,686 benefit checks through their Warm Homes Advice Line between July 2009 and June 2010. Half of the callers were assessed as being eligible for a benefit that they were not claiming. This is higher than reported by the Warm Front teams (30%) who carry out a similar service in England (UK Fuel Poverty Strategy 2008).

Bryson Energy then successfully followed up 14% of these likely-eligible clients (n = 390), to ascertain whether:

- clients had made a claim.
- if they had applied, whether they had been successful and if so;
- how much they had been awarded.
- if not, what reasons there were for deciding against making a claim.

Adams et al., (2006) noted that most samples that were followed up in studies of this nature were small, ranging from 13 to 303 clients in the studies reviewed. In the present study the sample of 390 was high by comparison. However, the results of the present study indicate



that even larger sample sizes for follow up are likely to be needed in future studies. This is because the cohort of 390 clients yielded only 152 clients who had submitted a claim, and of those 24 received nothing, with a further 35 awaiting a decision at the time of follow-up. Information on income accrued from additional benefit was therefore only available from 93 clients.

The present evaluation is based on one of the largest follow-ups undertaken so far. However it yielded information on benefits accruing to only 93 clients. In order to more fully understand the demographic profile of successful claimants and the types of benefits likely to be claimed, follow-up samples of 3,000 clients rather than 300 would be helpful in future studies. To date, no studies of that size have been published.

The combination of survey formats catered for many more clients than would have been possible with a single format. Telephone surveys were more suitable for clients who may have had literacy, sight, or writing difficulties which (in the case of complex form-filling) have been found to be formidable among many clients (Barnard & Pettigrew, 2003). Among the more general population there is also evidence that telephone contact is preferred when benefits are being discussed. For example a DWP (2006) study indicated that 62% of clients who applied for Minimum Income Guarantee payments would not have done so had they not been able to call a helpline.

In addition clients who did not feel comfortable with addressing the issue on the telephone could be catered for through the postal survey which Bryson Energy carried out; contact of this kind is preferred by clients concerned about their anonymity (NEA, 2005). In this context, it is important to note that customers could not respond anonymously in either format, since Bryson Energy had obtained personal details at TIME 1. However, postal surveys offered clients a somewhat more anonymous form of contact than did the telephone survey.

## **4.2 FOLLOWING THROUGH WITH A CLAIM**

More than half (60%) of clients who were advised about an unclaimed benefit did not follow through with an application, which confirms that there remains work to be done in terms of assisting clients through the application process. Although now dated, a 1999 study published by DSS indicated that – among pensioners who did not claim entitlement:

- 40% were classifiable as “low resisters” (i.e. did not know they were eligible or had not been motivated to apply).

- a further 38% were “medium resisters” (i.e. had some attitudinal resistance but were persuadable).

If this were still the case, benefit uptake programmes should be aiming to stimulate claims from between half and three-quarters of clients for whom they complete a benefit check.

A range of initiatives are being explored at Bryson Energy, including direct referral partnerships for some of the more common benefits (e.g. Pension Credit and Rates Rebates); an intensive support service is also being offered to a small number of clients through home visits. Examples of successful initiatives in other schemes include warm handovers i.e. the direct transfer of clients to the relevant claims office, with the transfer beginning with a rapid re-recording of customer details such as name, address and contact number etc. The client is not, therefore, obliged to ring another number and start the process all over again. This reflects recent “*Tell Us Once*” initiatives which are being trialled in England by the Department for Work and Pensions.

There are insights from the present study which could help shape other initiatives to boost follow-through. Some 21% of clients indicated that they had not lost sight of the benefit claim, and might follow through at a later date – these clients (who are after all a substantial proportion) are perhaps the more likely group to be supported into making a claim through further contacts.

An equally common reason that Bryson Energy clients gave for not following through was that they doubted they would be eligible (23% of clients who failed to make a claim). This is somewhat lower than in other studies. For example, the Newcastle Warm Zone evaluation indicated that more than half (56%) of their clients who did not follow through with a claim doubted they would be eligible. In the DWP (2005) study it was 43%. Whether this reflects a different target group in the Bryson Energy caseload, or whether the advice of Bryson Energy is more trusted by its clientele, is unclear. However, exploring those doubts in a sensitive and structured way during the initial benefit check might prove beneficial.

A telephone protocol where calls end with examples of past clients who had doubted the check (but who had subsequently been successful), and other forms of positive messaging towards the close of the call, could be explored.

In addition, when letters of confirmation are sent to clients following the benefit check, a similar message could be conveyed - perhaps including a leaflet illustrating case studies of clients who had been doubtful at first but ultimately successful.

A further 21% of those who did not follow through indicated that their circumstances had changed, so that a successful claim seemed less likely than it had been at the time of the benefit check. In many cases, this may be because an additional source of income had been forgotten or omitted during the check. Clients can simply forget about an income, and given the vulnerable client group that Warm Homes targets, this is not unexpected. Some clients may not manage their own financial affairs, and may not always be aware of all of their incomings. Other clients may actively choose not to disclose certain information, for example, their savings or equity, especially since they are aware that the call is not being made anonymously. Neither of these are easy matters to resolve. However, in at least some cases, the “change of circumstances” might not be one that would affect eligibility. Sensitive probing of *what* these changes in circumstances are could increase the likelihood of follow through for at least some of this group. Studies have frequently found that clients are poorly informed about what constitutes a disqualifying circumstance (NEA, 2005), which further supports this. For example when probed by Bryson Energy staff, some clients reported that they had found employment and believed that this had disqualified them from the recommended benefit/s. In the telephone survey, this often led to further probing, in order to establish whether this was always the case – sometimes it was not.

Other studies indicate that a reluctance to apply for a benefit is sometimes associated with clients believing it will not be worth the effort of applying. A DWP study in 2005 found that 44% of potential Pension Credit clients viewed £5 a week as the minimum amount that would be worth claiming for, and that this rose to 67% of clients if the amount was likely to be £15. Allowing for inflation and being conservative, a minimum amount of £8 and £25 per week might be currently considered of similar value.

The current study (sample-weighted) indicates that more than three-quarters of successful claimants received more than £8, and half received more than £25. Providing information of this kind to clients at the end of a positive benefit check might encourage more to follow through with an application.

In the NEA 2005 study, 35% of clients felt that a primary reason they had not applied for a benefit was that the process was too complicated. For the Bryson Energy sample, this was only 9% which may reflect the efforts that have been made in the past few years to make the application process easier and forms simpler to complete. If so, this points to the successful translation of NIAO (2003) recommendations into practice.

As with most other studies, older clients were significantly less likely to follow through than younger clients. The average age of a client who applied was 60, compared with 64 for clients who chose not to apply. The group most likely to follow-through were younger

clients, especially those between 40 years old and retirement. Targeting directed towards this age cohort is more likely to produce positive results, and may perhaps set in place a custom of uptake among people before they enter retirement; in so doing, it could provide additional income at a crucial time i.e. when people are making longer-term provisions for their later years.

Between 36% and 48% of clients aged under 80 claimed, but only 29% among clients over 80 years old. This suggests the need to target pensioners *at the time they become pensioners*, when age is less of a significant barrier.

That being said, for clients older than 80 years almost three out of 10 still followed through with a claim, which is a notable achievement on their part.

Nevertheless, reluctance among pensioners to claim benefit remains a concern. At June 2010, 17% of the Northern Ireland population were pensioners, with more than one in five being in poverty. On average 55% of pensioner income is derived from benefits, most notably the State Pension. However, the extent to which pensioner income might be boosted through maximizing the likelihood that all benefits were being claimed has never been established, largely as a result of there being no database or combination of databases which could provide a reliable estimate of this (NIAO, 2011). The NIAO has concluded that:

*“Although producing reliable estimates of benefit uptake rates can be difficult, without such estimates... there is a lack of a firm evidence base to develop an uptake strategy. The lack of data...represent a major information deficit as it eliminates the possibility of benchmarking against the UK as a whole, and it limits the extent to which meaningful targets can be set.”*

As a result of concerns about reliability, estimates for unclaimed Pension Credit and Housing Benefit are no longer produced in Northern Ireland (NIAO, 2011), with the only reliable estimates of uptake across 6 major benefit types being for State Pension (95% uptake in 2007) and Winter Fuel Payments (90%) (NIAO, 2011). The present study is too small to provide a robust estimate in this context, but underscores the need for a more comprehensive follow-up in the future, incorporating a much larger cohort of clients who have been given a benefit check.

The impact of age on likelihood of following through with a claim supports a wide-ranging literature on the association between age and likelihood of claiming benefit. Moffatt and Higgs (2007) note that the concept of generational differences has not hitherto been much investigated in sociology, although there is increasing evidence that is becoming a major contributor to the patterns of social change in post-war Europe. They also note:

*“... views about state welfare as charity or a right are “sometime cited as an important dimension of difference between generations born and socialized in the early and latter decades of the 20th century”... The significance of the idea of charity is that it resonates with the underlying precepts of the Poor Law... and notions of fecklessness and idleness necessitating a punitive dimension to provision. Recipients would often have to abase themselves in order to get benefits. Even in the 1930’s relief was based on a demeaning means test that insisted the recipient prove they were needy. Despite high levels of poverty, many older people remained reluctant to claim Public Assistance through the 1940’s. Thane (2000, p. 359) quotes an Assistance Board investigator reporting “not only is it a public disgrace to be visited weekly by the Relieving Officer... but the relief has the visible character of charity from neighbours who are entitled to look down on the recipient. Some of the country people indeed said that they would rather die than go to the Relieving Officer””.*

Whilst the present study found no evidence of a greater reluctance to follow through among “country” or rural people, it is possible that vestiges of these attitudes still prevail in Northern Ireland. Since Bryson Energy and other fuel poverty agencies in the UK offer benefit checks as a routine for any client applying for subsidized heating and insulation, this may eventually contribute to benefit checks becoming a normal part of customer service packages, and in doing so may assist in overcoming any long-standing resistance.

The case studies reported here make clear that at least some callers viewed the offer of a benefit check by Bryson as an integral part of the service being offered by the Bryson Warm Homes team. They frequently linked the heating, insulation, and income services that they had received, referring to them as a unitary package of improvements that came about because they contacted Bryson Energy.

The importance of a trusted agency being commissioned to undertake outreach work of this nature is highlighted by a 2005 report (DWP) which compared different communication methods for encouraging uptake of Pension Credit. Clients who had heard of their likely eligibility for Pension Credit from the Pension Service were significantly more likely to follow up with an application than were clients who heard of Pension Credit through other means. Similarly, the relationship between mothers and health visitors was a significant determinant of whether they sought advice on benefit entitlement (Reading et al., 2002).

The fact that a call to the Warm Homes Advice Line opened a protocol for engaging customers in a wide-ranging, holistic and personalised sequence of customer profiling is likely to have:

- made the idea of a benefit check more acceptable to many clients
- increased the accuracy of information which clients gave, so that there is less likelihood of inaccurate reporting (Tennant et al., 2007).

Other mechanisms for encouraging take-up of benefits could target the way in which benefits are represented by government and media. Currently, sustained efforts are being made to establish safe and effective ways of sharing data across government departments in order to make it easier for clients to claim benefits. However, the fact that the introduction of legislation in this domain is presented as *“for the purposes of detecting fraud and encouraging the uptake of benefits”* (NIAO, 2011) is a combination of purposes which will give cause for concern to many who might be contemplating enquiring about unclaimed benefit. Furthermore, new initiatives aimed at providing integrated financial advice to clients are increasingly combining services linked to benefits and services linked to debt management (LCC, 2011); this too increases the likelihood that some clients will be reluctant to make contact because of stigma.

### **4.3 CLIENTS WHO WERE WAITING FOR A DECISION**

As is commonly reported in studies of this nature (see Adams et al., 2006), many people were still awaiting a decision on their benefit claim (17%); this is somewhat lower than other studies have reported e.g. a Newcastle Warm Zone project reported 27% of cases pending at follow-up (NEA, 2005). It is possible that a longer interval between check and follow up would have increased the likelihood of a more complete data-set. However, longer intervals create other drawbacks. As the case studies included in this evaluation made clear (see section 4.6) some clients found it difficult to recall the precise details of how they had gone about making a claim, who had helped them, how long it took them etc. Time had to be taken to help the case study clients recall what had happened, and how their claim had come about. Longer delays might result in less reliable information being gleaned about the success of claims (especially where multiple claims were made), and the amounts of money that had been accrued.

In addition, it may be that clients asserted they had claimed and were waiting a decision when they had not claimed at all. Given that their personal details were known to Bryson Energy at follow up, clients may have experienced some element of social pressure to report compliance. Where checks had taken some considerable time to complete, and where an additional outcome of the original call may have been free heating and insulation via Warm Homes, biased reporting due to social pressure cannot be discounted.

As a consequence, it seems advisable to treat those awaiting a decision in the same manner as those who did not apply. Whilst this leads to an unavoidable under-estimate of impact from a scheme such as this, it errs on the side of caution.



## 4.4 WHO WAS SUCCESSFUL AND WHO WAS NOT?

In total, it is estimated that a quarter of all clients who had a positive benefit check went on to make a successful claim. This was a modest success rate, when compared with some of the programmes listed on Table 4, where the range of successful claims was from 25% to 82%. Establishing why some claims were not successful appears to be worth exploring, as does the protocol that Bryson might wish to follow in supporting clients who wish to appeal such a decision.

In terms of what benefits were most likely to be claimed, the study indicated that an estimated 1,488 clients were eligible for rates relief, and a further 891 for Pension Credit. For both, the uptake was 20% of clients, with approximately half of these being successful. A report by the DFP NI (2007) indicated that almost half (49%) of pensioners were paying 10% or more of their income on rates; with all available benefit being claimed this would have fallen to 0%, so the present study is likely to have made a modest impact on this goal. Other studies (e.g. DWP, 2006) also report a stronger likelihood that clients will apply for Council-Tax-related benefits (referred to in Northern Ireland as rates-related benefits) suggesting that these have less stigma attached to them. In many people's minds; they are perceived as covering the cost of an essential item i.e. housing.

The study did not confirm Pension Credit as a benefit with markedly low take-up rate (as predicted by DWP in 2005). It was instead one of the benefits which contributed most of all to the benefit programme's impact.

## 4.5 CLIENTS WHO RECEIVED AN INCREASE IN INCOME OF MORE THAN £5,000 PER ANNUM

More information on the demographics of this group could provide useful guidance for targeting, since many of these clients were likely to have been removed from significant vulnerability as a result of claiming what they were entitled to. However, it is difficult to draw any conclusions about this group from the present study, and for two reasons. First, there are very few clients (n = 27) in this group; second, they were over-sampled. What is clear is that there were no lone parents in this group. In addition men were twice as likely to be in the £5,000+ group than were women.

The large-gain group, although small, contributed substantially to the mean increases in income that were returned from this study. Whilst the overall mean increase in income was £2,448 per annum, using a median estimate (which attenuates extremes) indicates a much

more modest average return (£1,196). In advertising benefit uptake programmes, it may be advisable to focus on median returns rather than mean returns, since the former will in almost all cases be a more realistic outcome that clients could anticipate. Ensuring that clients are not misled by dramatic figures is a vital element of building trust and increasing the chances of people making an application.

## 4.6 CASE STUDIES

Most of the University case studies were carried out some considerable time after clients had received additional income. Bryson Energy had contacted clients (randomly selected by the University), and asked for their consent. This helped jog memories, but some respondents were nevertheless suspicious of the call when the University made contact, believing it could be associated with sales and marketing ventures. The lag also meant that some clients could not remember the details of how they had claimed, or how much extra income the successful claim had resulted in. Nevertheless, all of the respondents were keen to help once they were reassured of the nature of the call.

Most of the case study respondents had applied very quickly after the benefit check. This supports the possibility that the majority of clients who *“had not yet applied for a benefit but thought they might”*, were probably unlikely to do so. Once underway, most also felt that the process had been an easy one, and clients who needed help were able to find it either via telephone, or through personal contact with a neighbour or relative. Some respondents mentioned the delay that they experienced between applying for a benefit and getting a response. It is possible that ensuring clients are told to expect some months of delay will set a realistic timeline and avoid annoyance, although it may also deter clients from applying in the first place. Since other respondents recalled the process as having been quick, perhaps a message saying that *“it can be quick and it can be slow, you never know”* is more appropriate.

Respondents were keen to emphasise that the increased income had made a noticeable difference to their circumstances. Two respondents mentioned the combined impacts of Warm Homes installations and the benefit check, which had led to increased income as well as lower energy bills. In addition, 2 respondents said that they used the increased income to pay for their heating oil. Given the strong association between Warm Homes and the benefit check in these respondents' minds, it could be worth reinforcing the message that any increased income from a benefit check can often fully offset the cost of heating a home (see Section 4.8). In this way, clients might be more inclined to apply for a benefit check, and seek to set some of the increased income aside for heating purposes.

A frequent theme in the case studies was ill health, and the responsibility that respondents had for looking after others – whether a spouse or a grandchild. Both of these circumstances probably required the respondents to spend more time than usual in



their homes, and for this reason increased income for home comforts may be particularly beneficial. Given the circumstances of some of these respondents, it is at least possible that the impacts of increased income have been significant in terms of mental wellbeing, and an enhanced ability to cope with the stress of ill health and the burden of caring for others. A randomised controlled trial in this area confirmed that clients experienced no improvements to physical health at follow-up, but significant improvements to their mental wellbeing (White et al., 2005). Another research study suggested that two-thirds of older people who claimed Pension Credit for the first time reported improved mental wellbeing, rising to 86% among the over 75's (in Wiggan & Talbot, 2006).

Finally, it was evident from several of the case studies that clients had difficulty remembering the details of the claims they had made. Whilst all were certain of the fact that increased income had been the overall outcome, some were at times confused about what they had applied for and what the specific gain had been. This highlights an area worth scrutiny, if studies such as the present one (and many others like it) are to produce reliable evidence. If claims processing agencies could be given the capacity to inform Bryson Energy and similar organizations of the outcomes of their referrals, through an anonymised database, this would greatly assist the accuracy of estimates related to costs and benefits.

Bryson Energy has piloted work in this field, which has indicated the difficulty of cross-matching databases held by different departments. On paper, this solution seems ideal; in practice it is fraught with difficulties that, whilst not insurmountable, still require significant commitments of time and funding by government departments. Best practice will, however, remain one in which coordinated databases at government level provide benefit checks agencies with robust follow-up data.

## **4.7 COST-EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PROGRAMME**

In a wide-ranging review of more than a dozen similar studies to this one, Adams et al. (2006) estimated that the amount of money accruing to clients post-benefit check averaged £194 across all of the clients who were given advice (i.e. those who applied and were successful, applied and failed, and did not apply at all). A similar calculation using the present data returned an average of £259 (£1,476,144/5,686). Allowing for differences related to inflation, this indicates a good rate of return. The conversion rate of the Bryson Energy programme further corroborates a good rate of return, estimated to be 11%. This is substantially higher than the conversion rate estimated from Northern Ireland's SSA Benefit Uptake Programme 2005-2010 (7%), but lower than that achieved in England (15%) at a time when income maximization campaigns were being heavily promoted through media promotions (KPMG, 2009).

Warm Front teams averaged £1,850 per client per annum from benefit checks in 2009/10. This is considerably less than £2,448 from the Bryson Energy programme which was carried

out at the same time. Warm Zones averaged an estimated £3,000 for successful claimants in England in 2008/2009, which exceeds the Bryson Energy average. (FPAG, 2009). However, there are differences in the clientele targeted by Warm Zones (WZ). Low-income and high-deprivation communities areas are more likely to be the WZ focus than would be the case for Bryson Energy's Warm Homes Advice line or England's Warm Front teams.

Social Security Agency (SSA) benefit check programmes in Northern Ireland report the largest returns to clients, averaging £3,976 per successful application (NIAO, 2011). However, the SSA conversion rate averaged a return of £14 for every £ invested. Bryson Energy's programme returned £17, which was achieved despite smaller amounts gained per client. This reflects a larger uptake of benefits among Bryson clients.

None of these estimates of cost and benefit factor in the extent to which clients may have experienced substantial quality of life impacts through increased income. Enhancements to mental wellbeing, social and community engagement, and relief from debt or the worry of debt are likely for at least some clients.

Using an agency such as Bryson Energy to undertake benefits checks as part of an integrated Warm Homes package offers significant economies of scale and efficiency. To obtain similar response rates via "cold-calling" requires initial letters, then reminder letters, and then phone calls; such an approach is both expensive to undertake and potentially harassing for some recipients.

A recent scheme in Northern Ireland obtained similar response rates to the present study (in terms of uptake) through sending out 17,000 letters and following each of these up if no response was obtained. A programme such as Bryson Energy's can make use of caller-initiated contacts to undertake the same service and has a great deal to recommend it.

The overall cost of the Bryson Energy programme was £86,427 for which;

- 5,686 benefit checks were undertaken.
- 2,692 were thought likely to be eligible for unclaimed benefit.
- 1,077 applied.
- 603 were successful (weighted estimates).

This averages a cost of £143 per successful client. Since the average weekly gain per successful client was £47, the cost of the scheme was probably recovered within three

weeks of the intervention being completed. As indicated in the results section, for every £1 invested in the programme, a return of £17 was likely in the first year of client benefit uptake.

## 4.8 IMPACTS ON FUEL POVERTY

The importance of benefit checks for tackling fuel poverty is illustrated by data from an NEA (2005) study, in which approximately two-thirds of Warm Front clients in England were not removed from fuel poverty by the provision of heating and insulation measures on their own. However, an additional boost to income significantly improved the likelihood of clients being removed from fuel poverty. Combining fuel poverty measures with income maximisation tackles both parts of the fuel poverty ratio simultaneously. While boosting the smaller aspect of the ratio (need to spend on fuel) has a larger impact on reducing the likelihood of (or severity of) fuel poverty, boosting income can have significant impacts too. Broadly speaking, provided the energy spend: income gain is in the region of 10 : 90, both will be contributing equally to driving down risk of fuel poverty (NEA, 2005).

Based on NEA's evidence that a £71 reduction in needs to spend will take people out of fuel poverty, this would have to be matched by about £700 in income gain. Allowing for inflation (the NEA study was published in 2005), and the substantial increase in heating costs, required income gain may well have doubled in the interim. Assuming so, population-based estimates from the present study indicate that at least one-third of customers who received an increase in benefit income would have exceeded this requirement.

When combined with the heating and insulation installations that often followed the contact with Warm Homes Advice Line, there is a strong likelihood that at least half those who were assisted by a combination of Warm Homes and additional income were removed from fuel poverty.

Table 12 shows the current costs of heating a home in Northern Ireland. If all of the income accruing from additional benefits were used to cover heating costs, the average successful claimant could cover heating costs in full from their additional income, and have at least £800 per annum left over.

**TABLE 12:** Cost of heating a typical Northern Ireland home using oil or gas. *Source: Sutherland Tables, 2011.*

Heating Source		April 2011
<b>Oil</b>		
Boiler		£1648
Condensing Boiler		£1347
<b>Gas</b>		
Boiler		£970
Condensing Boiler		£800

Providing people with examples of what important (and burdensome) bills a newly claimed benefit could reliably pay for could be persuasive for clients weighing up the pro's and cons of making an application.

#### 4.9 IMPACTS ON STAFF

Impacts on project staff were not investigated in the present study, but are recommended in future. A formal staff debriefing protocol could have provided important information for this evaluation, and could have comprised a structured learning process for in-service training.

Research studies suggest that staff were likely to have honed their “soft skills” such as communication and customer sensitivity, with the role of benefits adviser also being associated with increased personal job satisfaction (Adams et al., 2006). Nevertheless, staff may also report emotional drains from carrying out benefit checks, particularly during home visits. In addition, staff expressed a modicum of frustration when it emerged that fewer than half the clients they had informed of unclaimed entitlement had, in fact, followed through with a claim. These experiences highlight a particular duty of care on the part of any organisation undertaking benefit checks of this nature, and further supports the need for a more formal protocol of debriefing and in-service training.

## 4.10 POST-FOLLOW-UP

Of the 60% of clients who did not follow through with a claim, some were deemed to be particularly vulnerable and in need of additional support. Bryson Energy explored the potential of a more intensive support service, including ordering the benefit application forms (where possible) and completing the application forms through a home visit service. Ordering forms on behalf of clients proved to be difficult. Some benefit departments refused to accept requests for forms from third parties, while other departments were reluctant to do so. This limited Bryson Energy's ability to provide this service. However, given that help with rates and Pension Credit are the most common benefits that Bryson advises clients to apply for, claims for these benefits comprise a priority group for integrating into the Warm Homes Scheme going forward. As both Warm Homes and the Pension Service are governed by the Department for Social Development in Northern Ireland, this offers a unique opportunity to develop partnership-working of the kind recommended by NIAO (2003). Initial contact with Land and Property Services, who administer assistance with rates for owner occupiers, has suggested that it may be possible to develop a similar partnership. At the very least, these partnerships could alleviate difficulties with form ordering, as previously discussed.

Developing these integrated services requires additional resources. If 5,000 benefit checks are completed per year, and 50% have a positive benefit check result, there could be 2,500 clients to follow up. Initial research into the demand for a more intensive service indicates that this is likely to be needed by 5% of the client group, requiring an estimated 125 home visits. On average, the protocol for a home visit (from first contact to completing the administrative work afterwards) takes 2 hours, meaning approximately 36 staff days dedicated to this role. Nevertheless, assisting such a small proportion of particularly vulnerable clients (especially where success is likely to increase their annual income by an average of £2,448) seems worth the investment needed to develop this additional service.

## 4.11 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The Bryson Energy benefit check programme, took place between July 2009 and June 2010 and carried out 5,686 benefit checks. About half the checks identified a potential additional benefit. Of these, just over a third (40%) of clients went on to apply for additional benefit, and the majority of these (56%) were successful. In total, 22% of all those who Bryson Energy thought likely to be eligible for an additional benefit were successful in claiming it. The average (sample-weighted) increase in income was £2,448 per annum.

These returns from the programme are higher than reported in most other schemes of a similar kind. This is reflected in the (sample-weighted) conversion rate of 11%, which is considerably higher than that reported in previous schemes undertaken in Northern Ireland (which averaged 7%). In total, for every £1 spent on the Bryson Energy benefit check programme, £17 was returned to clients in the form of increased income; this too is a higher

rate of return than has been reported from similar schemes in Northern Ireland previously (£14). A total of more than £1.47M was returned to clients in the first 12 months after claims were made.

Looking forward to future work on schemes of this nature, it seems most important that mechanisms are identified which can encourage clients to make an application if they have received a positive benefit check. The group who are most likely to follow through by making a claim are those between 40 and 60 years old - targeting this group will be most likely to increase uptake rates. However, two more “resistant” groups in need of particular support and attention are clients in their late 70’s or older, and lone parents.

# 5 Recommendations

1. There is much to recommend the view expressed in FPAG's Eighth Annual Report, namely that 5% of unclaimed benefits are allocated to services which have a proven track record of maximising uptake. The returns from programmes such as these, which indicate at least £10 income returned to clients for every £1 spent on benefit checks (in the first year alone) makes investment in checks seem an imperative.
2. Agencies such as Bryson Energy, Age NI, Advice NI, Citizens Advice, and A2B have a proven expertise, a long-standing reputation for trustworthiness in local communities, and an ability to network effectively across partnerships. Investment and expansion of the programme of benefit checks is not without the necessary infrastructure and expertise. It lacks only adequate resourcing and funding.
3. Target-setting and benchmarking aimed at improving the conversion rate is recommended if future resourcing is provided for organisations that could take benefit checks to scale in Northern Ireland. This will ensure that value for money and impacts are maintained.
4. If targets are focused on maximising uptake of benefits, then focusing on clients in the mid-50 to mid-60 year old groups seems appropriate based on the results of the present study.
5. If targets are focused on helping those most vulnerable and least-served at present, then lone parents and people aged 75+ seem the most appropriate groups.
6. A more rigorous approach to studying the costs and benefits of providing benefit checks is required. Sample sizes at least as large as the present one are clearly needed. Even with a follow-up sample of 390 clients, only 93 clients end up providing data on the amount of income gained from making a claim.
7. In studies of this kind, a more accurate estimate of the costs and benefits could be achieved if a matched control group was included, for whom no benefits advice is given. Whilst ethical concerns have been raised about such a design in the past (see Adams, et al., 2006), the control group would have assisted in understanding the "business as usual" scenario, under which clients might have sought benefits advice elsewhere, or self-referred themselves to a benefits claim office.
8. More effort should be made to estimate gains to the local economy as part of the cost-benefit landscape. Only one study has been completed in this area to date.
9. Mental health and wellbeing impacts should also be more formally estimated, using the QALY-based approach that has been implemented already in Northern Ireland (Liddell, 2008) and England and Wales (Liddell, 2011). The case studies reported here indicate the extent to which increased income is spent on covering heating costs and improving people's outlook and wellbeing. Collecting data that permits an

estimate of mental health gains would significantly boost the gains per £ spent on benefit uptake programmes of this nature.

10. Clients should not be misled by banner headlines that suggest dramatic gains are likely for them. In this context, quoting median returns from benefit check (which attenuate the impact of dramatic but rare cases) is strongly recommended for future media campaigns.
11. A routine of regular staff debriefing and in-service training, is recommended for team members who carry out this service. This will contribute substantively to the knowledge base and expertise of the organisation, and will also provide guidelines for ensuring that staff are fully supported in this challenging but worthwhile role.
12. Investigation is initiated into the feasibility of claims processing agencies informing Bryson Energy (and other agencies) of the outcomes of all claims they have advised clients to submit. At present relying on people to self-report on the outcomes, especially if there are multiple claims or clients are of an advanced age, may yield inaccurate information. However, Bryson Energy has piloted work in this field, which indicated the difficulty of cross-matching databases held by different departments. On paper, this solution seems ideal; in practice it is fraught with difficulties that, whilst not insurmountable, still require significant commitments of time and funding by government departments. Best practice will, however, remain one in which coordinated databases at government level provide benefit-checks agencies with robust follow-up data.
13. The development of an additional follow-through service with vulnerable clients who are assessed as being entitled to significant amounts of income is recommended. Initial explorations of this service indicate that it may be needed by approximately 5% of clients.



# 6 References

- Acheson, D. (1998). *Independent Inquiry into the Inequalities in Health Report*. London: HMSO.
- Adams et al., (2006). A systematic review of the health, social and financial impacts of welfare rights advice delivered in healthcare settings. *Public Health*, 6, 1-28.
- Ambrose, P. & Stone, J. (2003). *Eleven Plus One: The Value of the Brighton and Hove Citizens' Advice Bureau to the local economy*. Brighton: Health and Social Policy Research Centre, University of Brighton.
- Barnard, H. and Pettigrew, N. (2003). *Delivering Benefits and Services for Black and Minority Ethnic Older People*. Research Report No. 201. Leeds: DWP
- Berthoud, R. (2009). *The Impact of Disability Benefits: A Feasibility Study*. London: DWP Working Paper Series.
- Citizens Advice Bureau (2010). *Annual Report 2009/10*. Belfast: Citizens Advice Bureau.
- Corden, A. (1995) *Changing Perspectives on Benefit Take-up*. London: HMSO.
- CPU (2009). *Take Up The Challenge*. London: Child Poverty Unit.
- Craig, G. (2004). Citizenship, Exclusion and Older People. *Journal of Social Policy*, 33, p. 95-114.
- CSE (2006). *Integrating Welfare Rights and Fuel Poverty Services*. Bristol: Centre For Sustainable Energy.
- Dayson, K. Et al., (2009). *Financial Inclusion Initiatives*. Salford: Univeristy of Salford.
- DECC (2010). *Fuel Poverty Statistics*. Retrieved June 2011 from [http://www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/statistics/fuelpov\\_stats/fuelpov\\_stats.aspx](http://www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/statistics/fuelpov_stats/fuelpov_stats.aspx)
- DSDNI (2007) *NI Benefit Take-Up Report*. Belfast : Department For Social Development Northern Ireland.
- DSS (1999). *Overcoming Barrier: Older People and Income Support*. London: Department For Social Services.
- DWP (2005). *Encouraging Take Up: Awareness of and Attitudes to Pension Credit*. London: Department for Work and Pensions.
- DWP (2006). *Understanding the Relationship Between the Barriers and Triggers to Claiming Pension Credit*. London: Department for Work and Pensions.
- Dean, H. (2000). Managing risk by controlling behaviour: social security administration and the erosion of welfare. In P. Taylor-Gooby (ed.), *Risk, Trust and Welfare*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, pp. 51-68.

Eaga (2008). *The Warm Front Scheme Annual Report*. London: Department of Energy and Climate Change.

Eaga (2009). *The Warm Front Scheme Annual Report*. London: Department of Energy and Climate Change.

Eaga (2010). *The Warm Front Scheme Annual Report*. London: Department of Energy and Climate Change.

EFS (2001-2008). *Expenditure and Food Surveys*. London: ONS.

FES (1968-2008). *Family Expenditure Surveys*. London: ONS.

FPAG (2009). *Eighth Annual Report*. London: Fuel Poverty Advisory Group.

Fruin, C. & Pitt, P. I. (2008). Welfare promotion within a district general hospital rheumatology centre: A joint project with the local Citizens Advice Bureau. *Musculoskeletal Care*, 6, 211-220.

Higgs, P. (1995). Citizenship and old age: the end of the road? *Ageing and Society*, 15, 535-550.

HMRC (2011). *Child Benefit, Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit Take-Up Rates 2007-2008*. London: HM Revenue and Customs.

KPMG (2009) *Strategic Review of SSA Benefit Uptake Activities*. Belfast: KPMG.

Liddell, C. (2008). *Estimating the Impacts of Northern Ireland's Warm Homes Programme: A Cost-Benefit Analysis*. Coleraine: University of Ulster.

Liddell, C. (2011). *The Kirklees Project: Costs and Benefits*. Coleraine: University of Ulster.

Liddell, C., Morris, C., McKenzie, SJP & Rae, G. (2011). *Defining Fuel Poverty in Northern Ireland: A Preliminary Review*. Coleraine: University of Ulster.

LCC (2001). *Improving Public Health Through Income Maximisation*. Leeds: Leeds City Council.

LCS (1968-2008). *Living Costs Surveys*. London: ONS.

Moffatt, S. & Glasgow, N. (2009). How useful is the concept of social exclusion when applied to rural older people in the United Kingdom and the United States? *Regional Studies*, 42, 1291-1303.

Moffatt, S. & Higgs, P. (2007). Charity of entitlement? Generational habitus and the welfare state among older people in North-east England. *Social Policy and Administration*, 41, 449-464.

- Moffatt, S., Noble, E. & Exley, C. (2010). "Done more for me in a fortnight than anybody done in all me life". How welfare rights advice can help people with cancer. *Health Services Research, 10*, 1-12.
- NEA (2005). *Maximising Household Income*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: National Energy Action.
- NIAO (2011). *Uptake of Benefits by Pensioners*. Belfast: Northern Ireland Audit Office.
- NISRA (2010). *Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2010*. Belfast: Northern Ireland Statistical Research Agency.
- Philip, L. et al., (2003) *Scoping Study of Older People in Rural Scotland*. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive.
- Poverty Site (2010). Retrieved June 2011 from <http://www.poverty.org.uk/66/index.shtml>
- Reading, R., Steel, S. & Reynolds, S. (2002) Citizens advice in primary care for families with young children. *Child Care, Health and Development, 28*, 39-45.
- Sacks, J. (2002). *The Money Trail: Measuring Your Impact on the Local Economy Using LM3*. London: New Economic Foundation & Countryside Agency.
- Scottish Executive (2004). *Scottish Executive's Central Heating Programme and the Warm Deal Annual Report*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.
- Shucksmith, M. (2001). *History Meets Biography: Processes of Change and Social Exclusion in Rural Areas*. Paper presented at the Exclusion Zones Conference: QUB Belfast.
- Tennant, R., Webster, S., Callanan, M., Maher, J. & O'Connor, W. (2007). *Helping Older People Engage with Benefits and Services: An Evaluation of the Partnership Fund*. London: Department for Work and Pensions. Research Report 441.
- UK Fuel Poverty Strategy 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Progress Reports, (2009 and 2010)*. London: DECC.
- Warm Zones (2009). *Annual Review 2008-2009*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Warm Zones Ltd.
- White, M. et al., (2005). *Randomised controlled trial to evaluate the health effects of welfare rights advice accessed via primary health care: a pilot study*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: University of Newcastle.
- Wiggan, J. & Talbot, C. (2006). *The Benefits of Welfare Rights Advice: A Review of the Literature*. Manchester: Manchester Business School, University of Manchester.
- Wilkinson, R. & Pickett, K. (2009). *The Spirit Level*. Middlesex: Penguin Books

# 7 Appendices

## APPENDIX 1: TELEPHONE SURVEY

### Warm Homes Benefit Entitlement Checks – Follow Up Calls (July 2010)

Explain that we are doing some follow up calls with the people that have had a benefit check completed in the past year to see if they have applied for benefits recommended and to see if there is anything the Benefits Advice Team could do to improve the advice we provide.

1. Have you applied for the additional benefits that we recommended?

#### If Yes:

2. How much were you awarded?
3. Was it the same as we recommended?
4. If not, were circumstances different than on BMC form?

You will need to enter this information into the database for each benefit:

Benefit 1	Amount 1	Same as recommended?	If not, reason why? Are circumstances different?

#### If No:

5. What would be the main reason you didn't apply?
  - a) Not motivated to do so (try and explore this further, see if fits into other category).
  - b) Not got around to it, but intends to in the future.
  - c) Not got around to it, and is unlikely to apply in the future (try and explore this further, see if fits into other category).
  - d) Didn't think they would be entitled to it.
  - e) Forms too difficult to complete.
  - f) Worried about impact on other benefit/s.
  - g) Unwell at the time.
  - h) Circumstances different now than when BMC/BEC completed.
  - i) Other (please state).
6. Is there anything that we could do to help you apply for the benefits?

**If BMC completed during April / May 2010:**

7. Would you like some assistance with applying for the benefits? Help completing forms etc?
8. If yes, double check all the figures held on the system that BMC is correct.
9. Advice we will contact the different departments to get forms sent out (if not already done), and will then contact the client within 3 weeks to arrange an appointment time (by letter).

Record answers on paper sheets, then you will need to add them to the main database on a daily basis.

## APPENDIX 2: POSTAL SURVEY

### Warm Homes Benefit Entitlement Checks

#### Customer Evaluation

Name .....

Address .....

.....

Postcode ..... Telephone number .....

1. Have you applied for the additional benefits that we recommended?

Yes

No

#### If Yes:

2. What was the extra benefit (s) we recommended?

.....

3. How much were you awarded?

.....

4. Was it the same as we recommended?

Yes

No

5. If not, were your circumstances different than what had been recorded at the time of your survey?

Yes  (*please state*)

No

If yes, please state: .....

.....

#### If No:

6. What would be the main reason you didn't apply?

a) Not motivated to do so

b) Not got around to it, but intend to in the future

c) Not got around to it, and unlikely to apply in the future

- d) Didn't think I would be entitled to it
- e) Forms too difficult to complete
- f) Worried about impact on other benefits
- g) Unwell at the time
- h) Circumstances now different to when benefit check completed
- i) Other  (please state) .....

7. Is there anything we could do to help you apply for the recommended benefits or improve our service? .....

8. If you have **not** applied for the recommended benefits, would you like any help completing the forms?

Yes  No

If yes, a member of our Benefits Advice Team will contact you shortly in order to arrange this.

**Thank you for taking the time to complete this evaluation.**

Please return it in the free post envelope provided by Friday 3rd September 2010

## APPENDIX 3: SAMPLE STRUCTURE AND WEIGHTING

1. The sampling structure applied to the client database was quite complex, and this means that care is required in analysing the results. Simple averaging of the aggregate results can be misleading.
2. Table A.1 shows the sample structure. All cases where the estimated entitlement to benefit was zero were excluded from consideration. In order to ensure that adequate numbers were obtained of those with substantial entitlement, these groups were over-sampled in the phone survey, but not the letter survey.
3. More clients were selected for survey by letter (557) than by phone (353) . The structure of the questionnaire was different in the two surveys.
4. The response rate in the phone survey (72%) was much better than that for the letter survey (24%). These rates are typical of the two methods.
5. In order to correct for the biases arising from these effects, weights were applied to cases to ensure that the known structure of benefit entitlement was derived from the aggregated samples.
6. Table A.2 shows that the mean entitlement of the phone sample group was £71 per week without weighting, compared to only £26 per week for the letter sample group. After reweighting, the respective averages were £35 and £33 per week, ie virtually identical, as would be expected from a random sample. Note that these weighted averages are for the amount that clients would have received if all clients had applied for benefits, and does not represent the totals for those who actually claimed, which averaged £47 per week.



**TABLE A.1: Sample Structure and weighting**

Sample Structure						Reweighting			
		Response			Expected	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	
Sampling	Benefit Entitlement	Not Sampled	Sampled, No response	Sampled, Response	Total	Achieved Sample Reweight	Response Rate Reweight	Combined sample Reweight	
Sampled by Phone	£0	na	0	0	0				
	£0-25	na	22	80	102	144.3	1.41	1.96	5.81
	£25-50	na	13	39	52	47.2	0.91	1.26	3.73
	£50-75	na	13	35	48	31.8	0.66	0.92	2.72
	£75-100	na	17	38	55	15.4	0.28	0.39	1.15
	£100-200	na	26	51	77	14.5	0.19	0.26	0.78
	Over £200	na	7	12	19	1.8	0.09	0.13	0.39
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>na</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>255</b>	<b>353</b>	<b>255.0</b>		<b>1.384</b>	
Sampled by letter	£0	na	0	0	0				
	£0-25	na	283	86	369	76.4	0.21	0.85	2.54
	£25-50	na	67	22	89	25.0	0.28	1.16	3.44
	£50-75	na	37	21	58	16.8	0.29	1.20	3.56
	£75-100	na	19	3	22	8.1	0.37	1.53	4.54
	£100-200	na	16	3	19	7.7	0.40	1.67	4.96
	Over £200	na	0	0	0	0.9	*	*	*
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>na</b>	<b>422</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>557</b>	<b>135.0</b>		<b>4.126</b>	
Not selected	£0	146	na	na	146	na	na	na	na
	£0-25	1058	na	na	1058	na	na	na	na
	£25-50	359	na	na	359	na	na	na	na
	£50-75	231	na	na	231	na	na	na	na
	£75-100	86	na	na	86	na	na	na	na
	£100-200	58	na	na	58	na	na	na	na
	Over £200	0	na	na	0	na	na	na	na
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1938</b>	<b>na</b>	<b>na</b>	<b>1938</b>	<b>na</b>		<b>na</b>		
ALL	£0	146	0	0	146	na	na	na	na
	£0-25	1058	305	166	1529	na	na	na	na
	£25-50	359	80	61	500	na	na	na	na
	£50-75	231	50	56	337	na	na	na	na
	£75-100	86	36	41	163	na	na	na	na
	£100-200	58	42	54	154	na	na	na	na
	Over £200	0	7	12	19	na	na	na	na
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1938</b>	<b>520</b>	<b>390</b>	<b>2848</b>	<b>na</b>		<b>na</b>		

**TABLE A.2:** Comparison of weighted and unweighted results

Sampling		Unweighted		Weighted	
		Age	Grand Total entitlement	Age	Grand Total entitlement
Not selected	Mean		27.2693		
	N		1938		
Sampled Phone	Mean	61.15	71.2961	59.91	34.5359
	N	348	353	1042	1048
Sampled letter	Mean	56.95	26.5719	57.04	32.6585
	N	554	557	1635	1644
<b>Total</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>58.57</b>	<b>32.5898</b>	<b>58.16</b>	<b>33.3893</b>
	N	902	2848	2677	2692



