

south
seeds



BEYOND THE METER

A toolkit to help vulnerable citizens take
control of their home energy supply

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MAKING IT WORK DURING THE PANDEMIC

How South Seeds adjusted its energy advice service, so residents could still access support.

When the pandemic came to the UK, everyone was told to work from home and stop mixing, so we had to suspend our face-to-face energy saving service. Sadly from the start of lockdown we had to close the office to the public. Restrictions meant that energy officers were unable to meet with residents or visit their homes.

To continue helping residents with energy issues we put a notice on the door of our office clearly inviting residents to call the mobile telephone numbers of the energy officers. Residents continued to come to our office looking for support when they had an energy problem, the notice gave them the connection to our energy officers. The notice on our high street office door started to attract attention, word spread that the telephone numbers for the energy officers were on the door.

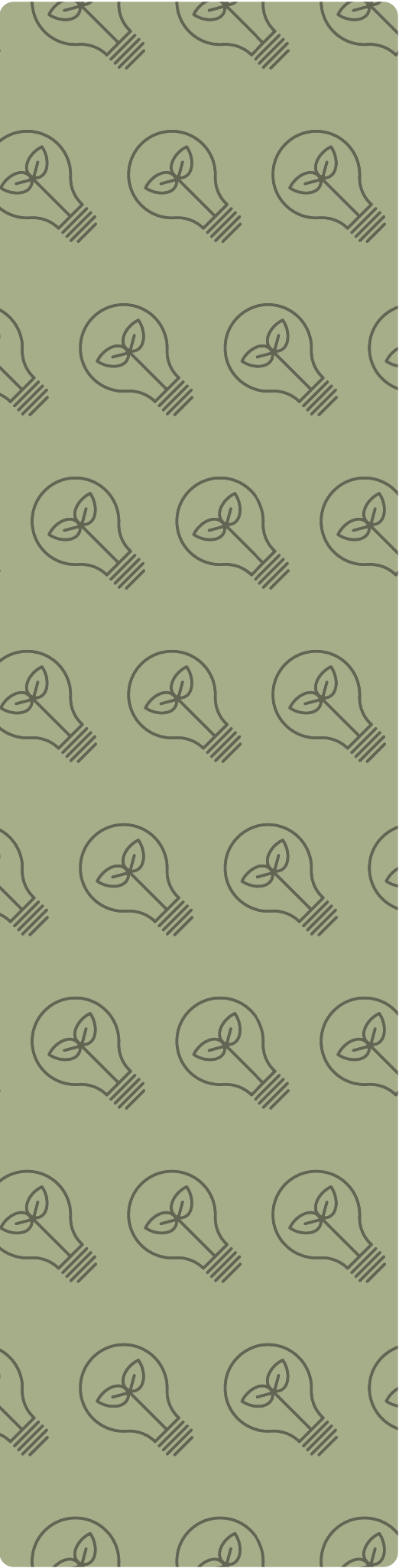
Energy officers have adapted to solving cases over the phone. Once the officers have established the client’s issues, further information such as letters or meter readings may be required. These can be sent via WhatsApp or email easily to the energy officer. We have figured out how we can use our phone system to have a three way conversation, so we can support the client while they are talking to their energy provider, support worker or friend who is translating.

Over the course of a year we have made a number of further changes to ensure residents can reach us. Our office telephone number now has the option to put the caller through directly to an energy officer. We have programmed our phone system so that if the caller presses the designated button, the phone call will be put through to the mobile of the energy officer who is working that day.

We sent out a postcard with details of our service to all previous clients in the last year. This allowed us to be sure that any clients we were working with would know how to access us, plus it gave clients who knew of someone who needed our support a piece of paper with our details to pass on.

We also applied to give out emergency energy payments to clients impacted by the pandemic. Although we were not able to advertise this, the news spread that we were able to give out vouchers for prepayment metres and we were able to reach residents who needed help. We were able to let key local stakeholders like the housing associations know about the emergency energy payments and encourage them to make referrals.

At South Seeds we are preparing to see clients again face-to-face. We have built a sneeze screen in front of the waiting area of the office and installed a buzzer, so the officer door can be opened from behind the screen.



BEYOND THE METER

We all use energy at home. But how many of us truly understand how the system works, or how it affects people’s daily lives?

The UK’s rapidly changing energy-supply system can be very difficult to navigate, especially for vulnerable consumers. But it doesn’t have to be that way. South Seeds has spent nine years helping local residents get the most from their home energy supply, and their bills, whatever their personal circumstances.

South Seeds’ consumer-centred approach has been developed in partnership with our client base, incorporating lived experience to create practical solutions tailored to each home, while untangling the variations in energy providers’ services and the impacts they can have. At the most basic level this can make the difference between people having to choose whether to heat their homes or buy food.

South Seeds’ strategies empower residents to understand their rights and options, and take control of their home energy issues, and this toolkit aims to empower other groups and individuals to do the same. Our person-centred approach can be easily adopted by any organisation working with people who have issues with energy at home, including social registered landlords, community groups, local authorities, the NHS – and the energy providers themselves.

For more information on South Seeds visit www.southseeds.org



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CONTEXT

In the UK many consumers will choose an energy supplier, use energy when required, pay their monthly bills or top up their meter ... and forget about the issue.

For vulnerable consumers, such as elderly people, people on benefits or low/insecure incomes, recent immigrants, or those living with physical or mental disability – or a combination of the above – energy in the home can be a much more worrying conundrum. UK energy companies have traditionally focused on creating a distribution network – the pipes and wires to safely deliver electricity and gas to our properties – then supplying the energy, and collecting payment.

Very few people working in energy or developing policy have focused ‘beyond the meter’ in people’s homes – how the energy is used, and how it can be paid for. Energy providers encourage customers who have energy issues at home to telephone their call centre. Call centre operators attempt to solve incoming problems with a limited set of tools: scripted questions, compromised databases and the possibility of calling out an engineer.

But the energy world is changing – with more suppliers, tariffs, smart meters, and new ways for consumers to interact with the system, such as community energy-generation projects or home-generated power fed back into the grid.

The diversification of the energy market has made it difficult to know how providers will react to customers, especially those in vulnerable circumstances. Large energy companies which have been operating in the market for some time, for example, have tried-and-tested mechanisms to grant emergency credit, while other providers may have a narrower understanding of ‘an emergency’. At the call centre level, experience and understanding of consumers in vulnerable situations by operators can differ wildly. Many recent entrants to the energy provider market have less of a track record of identifying or working with consumers in vulnerable situations. And this can cause major difficulties for consumers.

Many consumers are confused by the science behind how energy is used in the home and the level of customer service they should expect from an energy provider. There is evidence and widespread recognition that this is harder for consumers in vulnerable situations. While the industry has started to talk about vulnerable consumers, there seems to be little understanding by policymakers or industry experts of what that means in practical terms. Alongside elderly people or those living with physical disabilities, for example, many of us can

find ourselves in vulnerable situations when our circumstances change without warning, as the growth of the ‘gig economy’ or the coronavirus outbreak have amply demonstrated.

The role of consumers is largely passive within the energy system. Building a system around people has been challenging for an industry driven by engineers who are not experts in how people live their lives. The growth in new technology is now driving the demand side of the energy market, requiring the consumer to get involved by selling generated power back to the grid or using less energy at peak demand. This, coupled with climate emergency campaigns urging energy consumers to use their purchasing power to push for lower-carbon models, has added new pressure to engage with their energy use and that of wider society.

Consumers in vulnerable situations – whether financial, emotional or with compromised health or learning issues, who already struggle to engage with their provider and control of energy at home – are bound to be further disadvantaged.

Policymakers and industry have collaborated to modify service delivery, often with low-income consumers in mind, through, for example, price caps, half-hourly tariffs and new generations of smart meters, yet rarely follow up with research to find out how these changes affect people in vulnerable situations beyond the meter. Once consumers understand how energy is used in their home and control it, they can better manage their energy bills and make decisions about their role in the energy market.

“The challenge for organisations working directly with energy consumers is how to empower those paying the bill to control their energy at home, rather than simply solve the problem presented”.

Vulnerability is not a static state; we can all be vulnerable at various points in our lives. This simple truth is often overlooked by decision makers and people who design service delivery. Low income and vulnerability often go hand in hand. These consumers need to make tough decisions about their energy use, with unclear information.

South Seeds is a community-led registered charity operating in the south central area of Glasgow. While we set out with the broad aim to support residents to lead more sustainable lives, by evolving our service to meet local needs we have managed to reach out across the area and in particular engage with residents in vulnerable situations, many of whom are also suffering financial hardship.

Our toolkit sets out how South Seeds’ approach has engaged vulnerable consumers and successfully delivered strategies that help them manage energy in their home despite their vulnerability, and we hope other organisations can try to replicate this service.

A REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON ENERGY AND PEOPLE IN VULNERABLE SITUATIONS

The mixed messages that come from different energy providers and groups have led to people experiencing fear and confusion when faced with energy bill problems. This finding is central to qualitative research (Atterson et al, 2018) carried out by Energy Action Scotland with Keith Baker and Fraser Stewart, looking at the issues, advice and support provided for electric heating customers in Scotland. Their findings also highlighted the benefits of local communities which had a clear feeling of trustworthiness; that having an energy issue dealt with in the community resulted in a reduction in stress.

Another key finding was the concern that trying to get help from someone over the phone was difficult, due to them not being able to see the individual circumstances of the person seeking help. Examples included the adviser not being able to recognise specific heating and hot water systems, not understanding specific tariffs, dealing with unknown meter types, clear signs of dampness, or residents having to rely on blankets to keep warm, among other issues.

The research included workshops which found that many of the telephone energy audits often get things wrong, such that a person may initially appear to qualify for support but on subsequent contact they discover that they don’t. This often adds inconvenience, stress and disappointment, and could be



avoided if community-based organisations are able to visit people in their own homes. Other research (Citizens Advice Scotland, 2017) details the number of projects delivering face-to-face and in-home energy advice (158 in Scotland in 2017), and reported that face-to-face advice was particularly useful for consumers who were unable to leave their homes, were hard of hearing, who were in a vulnerable situation, had mental health problems and people who do not have English as their first language.

This research reported that one of the key challenges faced by energy-advice agencies was securing long-term funding. It also noted there was a piecemeal approach to monitoring and evaluation across Scotland and recommended that organisations delivering face-to-face advice share best practice with other delivery organisations. There is a lack of best practice being shared in Scotland and we hope that this toolkit starts to address that issue.

An earlier study (Reeves, 2016) noted a lack of empirical research into local fuel poverty support schemes but found that community organisations were potentially ideally placed to support these schemes, despite the lack of evidence in this area. We intend that our toolkit evidences some of this good practice and its positive impacts.

METHODOLOGY

To create this toolkit we commissioned an external researcher to survey 18 clients, over three days in February 2020, on what they thought of our service and discover what impact it had had on their lives. We also conducted a street survey, to check what people thought of South Seeds and what our brand meant to residents. Finally, to capture what goes on beyond the meter at home, our energy officer shared insights gained from working in more than 500 homes, conducting 300 energy audits and regularly assisting clients in vulnerable situations. These sources are the foundation for some of the elements of this toolkit.

To continue building towards a Scotland-wide best practice knowledge base we would value other organisations' reflections on this toolkit's value and usability. The toolkit starts by outlining the different elements that make up South Seeds' service and goes on to share the conclusions from our research. The evolution of how we developed our approach and delivery is explained and the tools which we use are outlined in each section.



SOUTH SEEDS' ENERGY PROJECT

Over the last nine years South Seeds has run an award-winning service helping residents solve issues with their energy at home. Residents continue to come to our door to find solutions to their energy problems and we are able to bring at least £60,000 in energy payments back in to the community each year. Over time, by building up an experienced staff team, we have been able to connect residents with practical solutions they can use themselves and demonstrate how problems can be solved, so residents are empowered to engage with their energy providers directly and take ownership of their own energy issues. We have worked hard to ensure South Seeds' service is local, fair and person-centred.

South Seeds' services benefit people from all walks of life but we have been particularly successful at attracting residents in vulnerable situations. We recognise that everyone is vulnerable at certain points in life, when circumstances at home or work change, or our well-being can take a knock for whatever reason. On average we work with 150 drop-ins a month, in addition to booked appointments. Our only criterion is that residents live within the area stipulated by

our funder. We are able to refer residents outside that area to Home Energy Scotland or share relevant factsheets we have produced (see appendix 5, applicable to much of Glasgow's housing stock).

South Seeds' service covers a densely populated area of just over one mile square. The 35,000 residents are from a range of backgrounds and we make no assumptions about their understanding of energy in the home. We are equipped to advise on all aspects of energy – from getting the best energy deal and installing energy-efficiency measures to the possibilities for renewable energy generation, or suggestions on flexible-demand use. Some clients would like big bills investigated, others seek explanations for a cold or damp

“South Seeds' employees are trained to make no assumptions about clients' understanding of how energy works in the home”.

room or solutions to drying clothes inside. We take the client's question as the starting point. We are able to give advice on the spot, book an appointment with one of our advisers or visit the client's home for an energy audit. We have helped more than 5,000 residents, delivered over 1,000 home energy audits and we ran a home energy handyman service for four years.

Energy advice has to take into account people's lives and opportunities. Having a warmer, more affordable home can be about changing the client's tenure, installing a new heating system or getting a benefits check to maximise residents' incomes. Alternatively, it can be about spending less time at home by getting outside more and/or getting back into work. We have an up-to-date knowledge of other support available to residents on Glasgow's southside and we are able to signpost or make referrals, to give our clients more options. Similarly, we receive referrals from a range of organisations in the area, because we have taken the time to let others know what we do and how residents can benefit.

Many national energy-saving campaigns focus on turning down the thermostat while at home. This is only an option if you have a thermostat and your heating is able to heat the home to the thermostat setting. As soon as you enter a home or speak to a client, it often becomes clear very quickly that advice about thermostats may not be as relevant as options for reducing the use of plug-in electric heaters or how to ask a landlord for improvements to windows. By working with clients face-to-face we are able to impart relevant advice which can be put into action and achieve positive outcomes.

Over our nine years of operation we have been asking clients to give us meter readings so we can ensure their bills are accurate. When we are in clients' homes we show them how to take a meter reading. If we are looking at bills in the office and we need a meter reading we can sometimes visit their home to get one in less than 20 minutes. Meter readings are best taken using a camera on a smartphone, which can be WhatsApped or emailed to the energy officer so that the picture of the reading has a date.

We have managed to instil this behaviour in the community, and we now find that residents come to us with meter readings. Many people hear of us by word of mouth and having been advised to “go to South Seeds with your meter readings”. This has empowered residents to track what they use more closely.

We track all the payments we secure for clients – from the Warm Home Discount and payouts for no shows by engineers to rectifying billing errors. By adding up every payment we can show the savings we have brought in to the community. Energy officers are encouraged to claim as many energy payments as possible for clients, knowing their efforts are all tallied and often shared through local media stories at the end of the year.

The external researcher, who interviewed clients in early 2020, discovered some distinct facets to the approach taken by South Seeds, and it was often a combination of these which were essential to making our approach successful. These included:

- South Seeds' deep knowledge of the energy consumer market, which clients struggled to find elsewhere or to access within the energy sector, as well as our wider awareness of the requirements and opportunities within social security systems in order to resolve issues such as income maximisation, debt and arrears;
- A welcoming, nonjudgmental and empowering environment that provided a safe space for people to discuss their energy problems in the context of their wider vulnerable situations;
- The capacity to provide the time necessary to pinpoint and resolve often complex energy and wider household issues, using a very flexible approach including appointments, home visits and advocacy; and
- Geographic proximity and ready access were essential in helping to deliver South Seeds' services.



HOW TO MAKE IT EASIER FOR PEOPLE IN VULNERABLE SITUATIONS TO ENGAGE WITH ENERGY

ACTIONS

1. LOCATING AND SETTING UP AN ENERGY SERVICE
2. STAFFING AN ENERGY SERVICE
3. WORKING WITH PEOPLE IN VULNERABLE SITUATIONS
4. DATA PROTECTION
5. SEEKING THE OPINION OF OTHERS

ACTION 1: LOCATING AND SETTING UP AN ENERGY SERVICE

When South Seeds started we were based in an office we were able to rent cheaply from a local organisation. At the time it didn't seem to matter to us that we were off the main thoroughfare, we were set and available to help people. Residents found us and used us, mainly through referrals and word of mouth. The office was small and we needed to find a larger space. It wasn't until we moved to a larger corner unit on the high street that we truly realised the benefit of footfall. We were also able to define our brand through the look of the shop. We modified our booking system to accommodate the walk-ins from the high street: if people dropped in and couldn't be seen immediately, they were happy to come back in 20 minutes to an hour.

The high street is a busy place and our A-board has been our best tool in attracting attention. We are able to change the message at the drop of a hat. Our messaging is an opportunity to connect with people: it can demonstrate our friendly approach, the services we offer, or plant a suggestion in the mind of the reader which they might act on later.

Being visible on the high street put us at the heart of the community – near housing association tenants, people renting privately and owner occupiers. We learned that making assumptions about tenure and circumstances is detrimental to delivering good service.

Our street survey told us we have a high level of recognition locally, with more than two thirds of participants having some knowledge of South Seeds. We still have work to do to engage everyone who uses the street and it is useful for us to keep that in mind. We regularly think about how we can refresh our message on the A-board and in the windows.



POINTS FOR LEARNING

- A location on the high street of the community being served improves footfall and recognition
- Location is very important and adds to the community feeling of being a trusted organisation
- Marketing tools such as the use of an A-board are very useful for directing people to our services



TOOLS USED:

A community sounding board

To ensure the management of the service puts the community first we created a community-led organisation using the SCIO model available from OSCR, so delivery of the service could be shaped by the community. All trustees live in the area. Progress on all work, including the energy advice service, is taken to board meetings for discussion.

Consultation

To find out what the community's problems were with energy at home we conducted face-to-face consultations with residents: street surveys (3 -5 open questions to start conversations; the first questions being always: "Are you local?") and stalls at events to engage residents and find out what they already know about energy at home and if they have solutions themselves.

Research

At the start it was important to let people know how well we knew the area. We began by publishing our research into the southside's housing stock and its energy efficiency – the [Energy Snapshot report](#). We hired local architects to survey the area and take pictures for us with a thermal camera.

Simple office systems

We found we worked best as a team when we used a paper-and-pencil appointments booking system. We used a generic weekly planner which was pinned to the office notice board. We printed off a new sheet (A3 size) for each week and displayed up to three weeks ahead. Once a week was over, the sheet was archived in a file.

ACTION 2: STAFFING AN ENERGY SERVICE

It is the staff who make a service successful, so good recruitment practices are vital. We have always worked hard to attract as many applications from as many people as possible, and we have done this by not asking for particular formal qualifications as essential requirements. We have learned that it is better to put someone with people skills through the Energy Awareness City and Guilds training than hiring someone with professional qualifications who may not have experience of working with the public. We have found that those who have worked with the general public before, in shops and coffee shops, bring great experience and insight to working with vulnerable people.

A job interview is an opportunity to ask candidates to bring in and explain their latest energy bill to ascertain their capacity to share the connection of how energy is used in the home and then paid for. While seeking to discover a candidate's approach to working with people, an interview is also an ideal time to establish if applicants are able to empathise with clients, and if they are able to offer confidence-building advice or whether they fall back on assumptions about people without checking for evidence.

Training is an important part of working at South Seeds. Staff members are encouraged to access a wide range of training opportunities by attending events, seminars, fora and conferences organised by other bodies within the energy and poverty sectors. Staff are encouraged to build up their own networks of contacts, read emerging consumer research, and relevant newsletters and journals to build up their knowledge of energy.

South Seeds' senior energy officer says the qualities they need to do their job well are:

"Having knowledge about energy but also having a curious mind and willingness to learn. Flexibility is really important as everything changes in the energy sector and nothing is static. An ability to engage with all types of clients, and having a person-centred approach is vital as it is really important to try to understand the complex problems the clients face.

As many of the clients are not aware of what their issue is, the energy officer needs to be able to investigate and try to unpick a problem. Many of the clients are unable to explain or understand their own issues, perhaps due to mental health issues, a language or culture barrier, or being new to an area and its systems.

An energy officer needs to have patience and the ability to listen. It is also important that they are able to set professional boundaries and to enable clients to understand what services the organisation can and cannot provide so there are no false expectations. The energy officer needs

to recognise that everyone has different needs but has the ability to bring everything to the same level, and to be able to offer the same level of support to each client."

POINTS FOR LEARNING

- People skills such as empathising, caring and building up confidence are valued over traditional university degrees
- Interviews are useful opportunities to learn how people approach vulnerable consumers
- Accessing a wide range of training opportunities supports staff development
- Staff make no assumptions about people's understanding of energy in the home

TOOLS USED:

Open recruitment

A robust recruitment policy needs defined stages. These include: a job description published with an interview date, an interview panel of three (including one trustee) to score set questions. A contract is awarded after references are sought and disclosure seen. Recruitment is an opportunity to find 'can do' people who have solved their own problems and managed their own bills well, rather than selecting people on the basis of qualifications. See appendix 1 and 2.

Develop a team

Weekly staff meetings set the direction and measure progress against targets. Actions from each meeting are written up and pinned on the office notice board, so progress can be scored out as the week passes.

Network

Participation in external meetings, events and consultations on energy policy and related matters such as privately and social rented housing gives us an opportunity to reflect on practice and feed in to policy. Joining organisations such as Energy Action Scotland is a good place to start.

Communicate

There is no place for assumptions in a face-to-face service. When the person is in front of you, you are in a position to ask all the questions you need to extract the information required to find a solution. Similarly there is no need for jargon when speaking to the public. Explaining solutions in a common-sense fashion empowers clients to understand and take action.

ACTION 3: WORKING WITH PEOPLE IN VULNERABLE SITUATIONS

People in vulnerable situations are already suffering some kind of stress. At South Seeds we do everything we can to alleviate the stress and anxiety of having to deal with an energy issue. This means having good systems in place, giving clients appointments at times which suit them and progressing emergency appointments as early as possible.

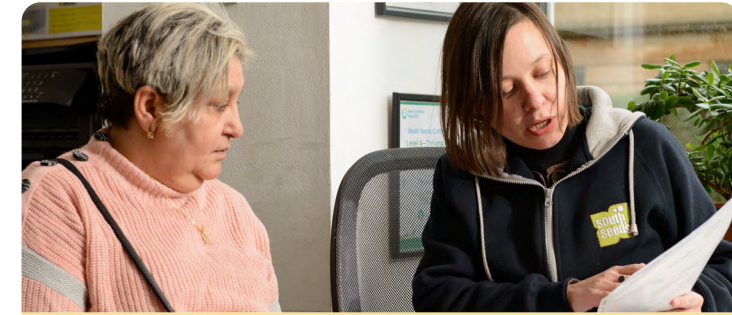
The research carried out with our clients showed that there is no typical client. While no two cases are the same, the commonality was the relational way we engaged with clients whatever their background or circumstances. Our focus is overcoming barriers to the experiences of our clients as energy consumers trying to resolve energy problems for themselves. These barriers may include language, literacy, the impact of mental health conditions, or the difficulty in getting acknowledgment of the problem or an effective resolution.

Over time, together with staff and the board of trustees, South Seeds formulated a policy for working with people in vulnerable situations (appendix 3). Essentially, this sets out how we seek to protect our clients while they are accessing our service



POINTS FOR LEARNING

- Recognise that people using the service are in a stressed state
- Have effective and reliable administrative systems in place
- Treating everybody to the same level of service is key
- Be aware of the barriers faced by consumers in vulnerable circumstances and try to overcome these (this will be explained further in the Challenges and Opportunities section)
- Put together a policy for working with people in vulnerable situations



TOOLS USED:

Understand vulnerability

To work with people in vulnerable circumstances staff need to understand vulnerability and take on the responsibility of protecting clients from abuse. This is something we ask about at interview and those who work at South Seeds will grow their understanding as they work with clients over time. Staff are asked to contribute to and follow South Seeds' Vulnerable People Policy (Appendix 3).

Value people's time

Keeping appointments, being clear and not rushing are all part of valuing people's time. Valuing time is how people build up friendships – it is the building block of trust. It is about answering the question asked, not the question you think someone might want to ask. It is about being useful. If you value people's time they will invest their time in you, and you need their time to be able to transfer enough information to empower them to control their energy at home.

Engagement

We found that people in vulnerable circumstances are not always in the right frame of mind to seek advice. In order to engage people, we gave residents a good reason to come to us. We found that if we advertised how we could help people, for example, by supporting access to £140 Warm Home Discount, information about clothes pulleys and drying clothes, or help understanding energy bills, people came to our door. The A-board on the high street was most effective and brought people in to the office which started conversations. A chatty approach such as "by the way, how do you pay for your energy at home?" which makes no assumptions, can lead very quickly to where support is needed to save energy at home and immediately reveal the vulnerable circumstances which need to be taken into account. Our street survey shows there are always people who are unsure what we do, or who don't think they have an energy issue, which is why we keep engagement fresh and make sure the 'call to action' which prompts an immediate response regularly changes.

ACTION 4: DATA PROTECTION

It is impossible to support people with energy issues at home without coming across personal data printed on bills, meter readings or that divulged by clients. We know the majority of South Seeds' clients are not aware of their rights and this includes data protection, so it is important that we are clear about how we protect and process personal data. We make it our business to be clear that we will protect the personal data of all clients.

Our approach is proportional; South Seeds only requests the data we need to deliver the services requested by clients. Unlike some services, we avoid asking for unnecessary data.

It is of course essential that South Seeds is able to comply with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) legislation while we deliver our services for the public. To do this we have a data privacy policy. We know that policies are not always read, so we actively discuss the policy with staff to make sure there is time for them to discuss data protection with clients. We let clients know they may access the data we hold on them at any time, which reminds both us and them to be mindful of data sharing.

Before clients give us data we ask them for their written consent. This is a simple form which gives us permission to keep their data for three years, and is kept with their file. All files are kept in a lockable cupboard.

A paper system has the advantage of reassuring clients that their details are not entering a computerised 'black hole'. Clients can witness what you are writing down about them and where you are noting it.



POINTS FOR LEARNING

- Clarity over how the information collected from clients using the service will be used
- Set out at the beginning what information is going to be collected from clients and stick to that. It is better to keep it as simple as possible
- Compliance with GDPR legislation is critical and a data protection policy should be developed
- A form should be created to gain written consent from clients and stored in a secure location



TOOLS USED:

Data protection

A well-thought-out data protection policy which was regularly reviewed improved our data handling (see appendix 4). South Seeds keeps up with changes to data protection policy (GDPR was introduced during our development) by participating in training courses and reflecting on how well our policy matched our delivery. Data protection is often discussed at team meetings and the policy is an evolving document, reviewed regularly by staff and the board of trustees.

Online resources

A useful and up-to-date website acts as both a communication tool and archive. South Seeds took the view that the nature of project funding may bring the whole organisation to a close one day, so all work was published on the website so it remains publically available (see appendix 5). Over time, South Seeds' website www.southseeds.org has become a useful library. Many of our resources use case studies to tell the story of problems and solutions found. We are careful to ensure those who feature in case studies have given consent and know where the case study is published.

Track achievements

Finally, we used an Excel document available to all staff through a cloud-based data storage system to log who we had worked with, the actions taken and how much money we saved residents (this can be anything from the Warm Home Discount to erroneous billing paybacks to new heating systems achieved through referrals). This allowed us to prove that, over time, we saved the community more money than was spent on staff wages to deliver the project. Plus, we can explain how much we have saved the whole community without sharing the nitty gritty of who received what.

ACTION 5: SEEKING THE OPINION OF OTHERS

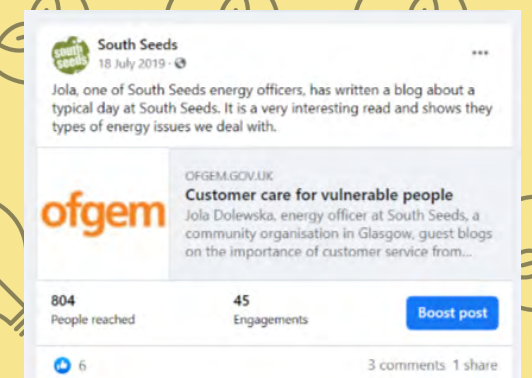
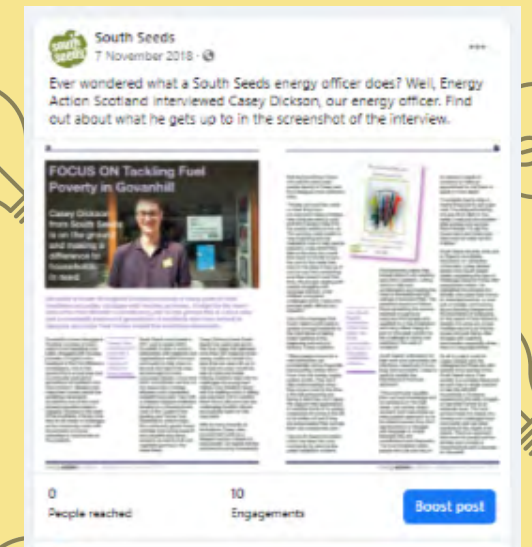
Evaluation and the views of others have helped us improve our service delivery. Evaluation comes in many forms and does not have to be a single process conducted by an external analyst. Here are some steps we have taken which have helped positively shape our service:

- When we publish information we seek views on what residents and decision makers think of that information. For example, to encourage others to read our [Energy Snapshot report](#) and share feedback we launched the report at an event at Govanhill Housing Association with local Member of the Scottish Parliament, Nicola Sturgeon. This gave other stakeholders an insight into the quality of our research and depth of understanding of local building stock, tenures and the index of multiple deprivation. This led us to discover that we were one of the few Scottish organisations to look into local housing stock in such detail and consider its impact on energy in the home.
- Over the time we gained experience of supporting residents to save energy, we shared success stories with local media and through our social media channels. This allowed residents we had yet to meet to view and comment publicly on our work. We were able to gauge the wider reaction to our work early on, learn how to present our service and, more crucially, the vulnerabilities of our clients.
- As more and more residents came to our door we knew our impact through face-to-face work was above average for the energy sector. By regularly attending energy-related conferences we could see there was a push to encourage services to move online or be delivered, for those without computer access, via call centres. By 2017 we had attracted funding and interest to pay for an academic evaluation. We gave Baker and Stewart from Glasgow Caledonian University's School of Engineering and the Built Environment access, with consent, to 20 clients to interview. They went on to publish An Evaluation of South Seeds' Energy Advocacy Services in 2018, which was peer reviewed. The evaluation pointed out the importance and effectiveness of a face-to-face service embedded in the community, and was recognised internationally.

TOOLS USED:

Your work in their words

Articles in the local media, shares on social media and external evaluations are all ways to get other people to look at your work and communicate it in their words.



CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

South Seeds’ service has been entirely funded through short-term project funding. This brings a number of challenges and opportunities. It is very difficult to plan for a nine-year future through project funding. Short-term funding has encouraged us to give each project our best shot. Short-term project funding has kept us to deadlines and helped us question how the community is benefiting from our service. Every time we have re-applied for funding we have had to review and rethink the project, a process which has helped us evolve and grow.

Conversely, short-term project funding makes it challenging to retain and grow staff. However, the process of recruiting, training and managing staff brings new life to project delivery and each member of staff leaves their mark and grows the organisation’s approach to working with people. Ideally, having a member of staff with sole responsibility for searching for new funding opportunities is very useful, although this is sometimes not viable when you are a small organisation. Time is another challenge – the time it takes to apply for project funding and delivering a project in a squashed space of time. Time is also critical in keeping up with the demand generated by having a shop front on the high street.

Energy policy is often shaped by people who live with gas central heating and credit meters or who have some renewable energy technology at home. Many of the clients who came to us had often stopped using (sometimes described as ‘self-disconnected’) gas months ago and were in debt from standing charge payments or using electric plug-in heaters. To bridge the understanding between the experiences of the decision makers and clients we have often used case studies, [such as this family who started in a privately-rented home and eventually gained control of their bills by moving to social housing](#), which shows how managing energy can be connected to factors outside one’s immediate control.

Being community-led and working directly with the community is a great opportunity to tell the story of changes within that community. For example, in the area we cover it was clear that the failure of authorities to regulate or control private landlords had left private renters paying large energy bills and often trapped in situations they struggled to get out of. We were able to tell this story and show how this linked to rubbish fly-tipped by landlords.



FURTHER EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

There are a number of similar energy advice agencies, embedded in their communities, offering face-to-face energy advice in the home. A good example is Cosy Kingdom (see www.cosykingdom.org.uk) which offers free and impartial debt and energy advice to households across Fife. It is a partnership between three organisations: Greener Kirkcaldy, St Andrews Environmental Network and Citizens Advice and Rights Fife. They have energy advisers who help householders save energy, understand gas and electricity bills, switch supplier, deal with energy debt and get the benefits they are entitled to, such as the Warm Home Discount.

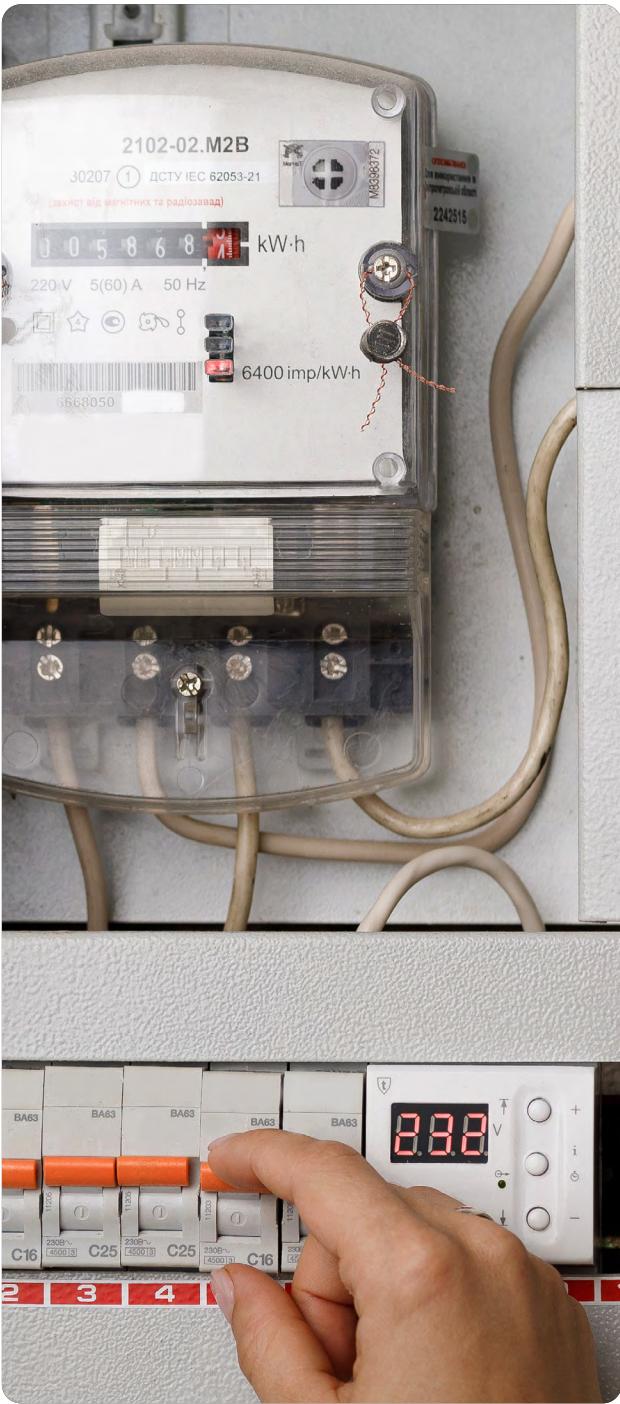
A good example in a rural area is THAW Orkney (www.thaworkney.co.uk), a charity set up in 2014 to help fuel-poor householders on Orkney. They offer services including information and advice on energy efficiency, advocacy, referrals, income maximisation and budgeting support, and helping people with debt and on low incomes. Their Social Return on Investment (SROI) findings were undertaken by an independent researcher who discovered that for every £1 invested in THAW, £5.49 of social value was developed in the local community.

CONCLUSION

South Seeds has found that making assumptions makes it impossible to effectively offer an energy service which attempts to solve any energy problems in the home. While we see similar cases, every resident’s problem is unique. Through working with residents we have developed an appreciation for the range of circumstances people find themselves in, whether that be renting privately from a landlord who fails to make improvements, owning a property with a persistent damp problem or living with electric plug-in heating. Some of our clients are dealing with multiple barriers including: mental or physical health difficulties, abuse, poverty, language barriers or discrimination. Demand for energy is driven by people and society. Over time we have realised that people need more than an initial problem solved – they need to start the journey of understanding and controlling their energy use. This involves supporting clients to understand how energy is used in their home and empowering them to control it.

In particular, working with people in vulnerable situations can illuminate the failure of the energy providers to meet the needs of their consumers. Communicating with poorly managed and inflexible call centres, automated systems or websites can exasperate anyone. For people in vulnerable situations, failing to access effective customer support is not only stressful but can compromise their ability to pay in the long term. And, most importantly, it can compromise their ability to heat their home in winter, when it most matters.

South Seeds has found that support given to consumers in vulnerable situations to gain control of their energy often has a positive impact on other areas of their lives. Our experience shows that by empowering residents to solve a problem, many will use that newly acquired confidence to tackle another.



REFERENCES

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Citizens Advice Scotland. (2017) *Facing Fuel Poverty.*

Reeves, A. (2016) *Exploring local and community capacity to reduce fuel poverty: The case of home energy advice visits in the UK.*

Baker, K., Stewart, F. (2018) *An Evaluation of South Seeds’ Energy Advocacy Services.*

APPENDICES

1. JOB DESCRIPTION AND PERSON SPECIFICATION

Energy officer – part time (3 days per week)

Job description

Project aims: To support residents of Govanhill, in particular the most vulnerable, gain control of their energy at home.

Reporting to: The project will provide impartial advice on energy efficiency, fuel bills and fuel poverty. Residents will be supported to take achievable actions following face-to-face meetings at South Seeds’ office and, where required, home visits to take meter readings or demonstrate heating controls.

Responsible for: Supporting the senior energy officer to deliver this programme. Support the South Seeds team to engage residents in all projects.

Main relationships: Residents, Govanhill Community Development Trust, energy suppliers’ complaint teams, Warmworks, Home Energy Scotland and Govanhill Housing Association welfare rights team.

Funded by: Funded via the Energy Industry Voluntary Redress Scheme, www.energyredress.org.uk

Scope of the job

- Reports to senior energy officer
- Maintain integrity of face-to-face energy advice service
- Organise and participate in community engagement opportunities
- Develop and maintain relationships with partners
- Carry out data collection for evaluation and monitoring
- Promote all South Seeds services and opportunities

Duties and key responsibilities

- Provide a nonjudgmental energy advice service for vulnerable residents. And, in doing so, support residents to understand their bills, access the Warm Home Discount, make complaints, manage energy debt and sort out key and card problems
- Promote the energy service through co-organising and delivering a programme of regular engagement opportunities such as meetings, and events for residents and stakeholders in the area
- Work with clients so they can understand how to empower themselves to solve the same problem on their own, if it arises in the future. This may include visiting their home to read the meter together, explaining a bill fully or demonstrating heating controls
- Keep up to date with the energy saving support available, the eligibility criteria of energy efficiency schemes and fuel poverty payments
- Produce factsheets and promotional material where necessary

Personal training and development

- Undertake appropriate training where necessary

Person specification

	Essential requirements	Desirable qualities
Professional / educational qualifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Appropriate/ relevant experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The possession of City and Guilds qualification in Energy Awareness
Relevant work /other experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Experience in working with the public and community organisations to achieve outcomes• Experience of working with vulnerable people	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Experience of installation of energy efficiency measures in homes• Experience of delivering a service in people’s homes
Particular skills / abilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ability to communicate effectively with members of the public, without judgment and while being aware of any cultural sensitivities• Ability to work with individuals, organisations and local government officials to secure objectives• Ability to work with minimum supervision, to prioritise effectively and to meet tight deadlines• Ability to use all components of the Microsoft Office package	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Promotional and media skills
Personal qualities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ability to foster a “can do” culture by actively seeking solutions to problems• Flexibility, enthusiasm and the ability to work as part of a small team• Ability to form productive working relationships with a wide variety of people from different organisations• Excellent verbal and written skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Self-motivation• Innovative skills• Empathy• Ability to motivate others
Any additional job-related requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Personal commitment to the principles of sustainable development• Willingness to undertake occasional evening and weekend work• Willingness to undertake an Enhanced Disclosure check or join the PVG scheme	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Familiarity with the local area

Terms and conditions

Full time hours are xx per week. Your salary will be xxxxx per annum pro rata. You will work xxx hours a week over at least three days. South Seeds offer an employer’s contribution to a personal pension scheme, of x% of annual salary. You will be entitled to xx days holiday per year (pro rata), this includes bank holidays. South Seeds encourages flexible working, and in return expects an ability to work occasional evening and weekend hours.

The contract will run for a year and may be extended. Your place of work will be the South Seeds office, on Victoria Road (Glasgow). South Seeds’ preference is that work is completed at a fixed time each week by agreement in advance.

2. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

We'll be scoring you on your answers so do give us examples from your work and experience. If you're not clear about the question please do ask and if you need a moment to think before answering please do take it. The first question is not scored.

1. Tell us about what you are currently doing.
2. This is the question we set you in advance:

Explain energy in your home, how do you pay for it, who supplies it and what exactly are you paying for.

We can only allow 5 minutes; we will give you a warning when you reach 4 minutes.

3. As you will have seen from our website, we like to make sure we share any information we come across which may help others, for example by producing factsheets, guides or writing case studies. Do you have experience of creating and sharing information to empower others to change their behaviour and, if so, how did you go about doing this?

4. Do you have any experience of delivering a face-to-face service to members of the general public and, if so, what made it a success?

5. It can be challenging communicating with newly migrated people as they may not have developed English language skills. What would your approach be to working effectively with newly migrated people?

6. What do you know about South Seeds' project area, which includes the neighbourhoods of Govanhill, Crosshill, Queen's Park, Strathbungo, East Pollokshields and Mount Florida?

7. Our energy officer visits residents' homes to take meter readings and sometimes to conduct an energy audit. Tell us what you should consider when you visit someone's home, including personal safety.

8. The application and interview process will have informed your understanding of South Seeds. Tell us what you know about South Seeds. Also, what is the biggest challenge for us?

9. So, tell us why you applied for the job?

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3. SOUTH SEEDS' VULNERABLE PEOPLE POLICY

It is the responsibility of everyone at South Seeds to ensure that any vulnerable people accessing our services are protected from all forms of abuse. Abuse is any behaviour towards a person that deliberately or unknowingly causes them harm, endangers life or violates their rights or dignity.

How we will respond to a vulnerable person who needs additional care and support or who is in a vulnerable situation:

Be patient and don't rush the conversation – it's better to have a longer conversation than cut this short and leave the person confused or agitated in any way.

Ask if the person would prefer another method of communication, eg offer to send information in the post or via email, so they have time to take in the information.

Ask the person if they need to speak with anyone else before making a decision.

Check their understanding of what they have agreed to – for example, ask them to repeat this information back to us.

All of the above will help to make sure that the person comes first and we give them time to make an informed decision, if they are capable of doing so.

If we observe or suspect any South Seeds staff member, volunteer or client is behaving towards a vulnerable adult in a manner that could cause them harm, endangers life or violates their rights or dignity, this must be reported immediately to their line manager and or the staff liaison board member.

Contact us

If you would like to speak to us about this policy or if you have any feedback please contact the general manager via telephone **0141 636 3959** or in writing to either **info@southseeds.org** or **514 Victoria Road, Glasgow G42 8BG**.

4. SOUTH SEEDS' DATA PRIVACY POLICY

Introduction

South Seeds ("we"/"us"), **514 Victoria Road, Glasgow G42 8BG** promise to respect any personal data you share with us, or that we get from other organisations and keep it safe. We aim to be clear when we collect your data and not do anything you wouldn't reasonably expect. Our communications will include information about our activities, events, publications, campaigns and information. If you no longer wish to receive such communications, please contact us on **0141 636 3959** or **info@southseeds.org**

Where we collect information about you from

We collect information in the following ways: When you give it to us DIRECTLY. You may give us your information in order to take part in our activities, communicate with us, help us support you communicate with a third party or become a member.

Third-party organisations

You may have provided permission for a company or other organization to share your data with us.

Social media

Depending on your settings or the privacy policies for social media and messaging services like Facebook, WhatsApp or Twitter, you might give us permission to access information from those accounts or services.

In addition, the type of device you're using to access our website or apps and the settings on that device may provide us with information about your device, including what type of device it is, what specific device you have, what operating system you're using, what your device settings are, and why a crash has happened. Your device manufacturer or operating system provider will have more details about what information your device makes available to us. The type and quantity of information we collect and how we use it depends on why you are providing it.

Direct communications

We include information on how to opt out when we contact you. If you don't want to hear from us, that's fine – just let us know when you provide your data or contact us on **0141 636 3959** or **info@southseeds.org**. We do not sell to or share personal details with third parties for the purposes of marketing.

Keeping your information safe and secure

We ensure that there are appropriate technical controls in place to protect your personal details. For example, our network is protected and routinely monitored.

We undertake regular reviews of who has access to information that we hold to ensure that your information is only accessible by appropriately trained staff.

We may need to disclose your details if required to the police, regulatory bodies or legal advisors.

We will only ever share your data in other circumstances if we have your explicit and informed consent.

Keeping your information up to date

We really appreciate it if you let us know if your contact details change.

Your right to know what we know about you, make changes or ask us to stop using your data

Under GDPR, you have a right to ask us to stop processing your personal data (the right to be forgotten), and if it's not necessary for the purpose you provided it to us for (eg becoming a member or registering you for an event) we will do so. Contact us on **0141 636 3959** or **info@southseeds.org** if you have any concerns.

You have a right to ask for a copy of the information we hold about you. If there are any discrepancies in the information we provide, please let us know and we will correct them.

If you have any questions please send these to **info@southseeds.org**, and for further information see the [Information Commissioner's guidance](#).

Changes to this policy

We may change this Data Privacy Policy from time to time. If we make any significant changes in the way we treat your personal information we will make this clear on our website and/or by contacting you directly.

If you have any questions, comments or suggestions, please let us know by contacting South Seeds, **514 Victoria Road, Glasgow G42 8BG** or email **info@southseeds.org**

5. SOUTH SEEDS PUBLISHED SUPPORT

Factsheets

- [Saving energy in a tenement](#)
- [What is a room thermostat](#)
- [How to draughtproof your door](#)
- [Switching your energy supplier](#)
- [Condensation](#)
- [Secondary glazing](#)
- [Draughts](#)
- [Save money with LEDs](#)
- [How to fit a chimney balloon](#)
- [How to install a pulley](#)
- [How to hang thermal curtains](#)

Videos

- [How to conduct a South Seeds home energy audit](#)
- [How to install underfloor insulation](#)

Case studies

- [Case study 1](#)
- [Case study 2](#)
- [Case study 3](#)
- [Booklet of five case studies](#)

Guides

- [Guide to pre-payment meters](#)
- [Guide to delivering home energy audits](#)
- [Improving Victorian tenement windows](#)

Reports

- [Flexible Power Community 2019](#)
- [South Seeds renewable heat report 2016](#)
- [Renewable Snapshot report 2015](#)
- [Energy Snapshot report 2013](#)

CREDITS

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Photos:

- South Seeds (Pages 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, 18, 19, 20)
- AdobeStock via sprooter design (Pages 5, 14, 20)
- Pexels Pixabay (Page 5)
- Pexels Brett Sayles (Page 15)
- sprooter design (Page 17)






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