



GREENWORK↗

The Retrofit Conversation Gap

Why communication is retrofit's missing skill, and how the sector can build it

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Contents

Executive summary

Introduction

Methodology

The cost of the conversation gap

The resident journey: where communication
succeeds and fails

The six skills that matter most

Why current training isn't working, and what does

Recommendations

Conclusion

Endnotes

Executive summary

Retrofit only works if the resident on the other side of the door agrees to it. In 2024, the Hampshire Chronicle reported that almost half of Winchester City Council's tenants approached about home energy upgrades turned them down. [1] That is not a story about heat pumps, insulation or funding rules. It is a story about trust, and about whether the person delivering the message could earn it.

Across conversations with housing and retrofit leaders, one theme returned again and again: communication is not incidental to retrofit delivery. It is one of its core requirements, on a par with compliance or workmanship, and currently the one the sector trains for least.

Many residents approach retrofit already carrying scepticism. The organisations that overcome that starting trust deficit are the ones that consistently put the resident's perspective first, asking not "what does the programme need to tell this household?" but "what does this household need to hear, in terms that mean something to their daily life?" Retrofit, as a word, rarely lands with residents. Comfort, lower bills and a warmer home do.

This report sets out what our research found: where communication breaks down in resident conversations, why it happens, what good practice looks like when organisations get it right, and what needs to change to close the skills gap. It argues for a specific shift in how the sector thinks about the problem: communication is not a fixed personality trait that some people have and others don't. It is a set of learnable, practisable skills, and organisations that treat it that way get measurably better outcomes.

Executive summary

Our research points to six skills that matter most in retrofit conversations. They are the framework this report uses throughout: first to explain where and why communication succeeds and fails at each stage of the resident journey, then as the model the sector should train and assess against:

Empathy and active listening

Treating the resident as a person navigating disruption to their home, not a job on a checklist, and genuinely listening for their concerns before responding to them.

De-escalation and conflict resolution

Staying calm and factual when frustration rises, stopping one bad experience in a close-knit community from spreading into wider mistrust.

Delivering bad news gently

Proactively calling with a delay or cancellation rather than avoiding the conversation, because avoidance is what turns an inconvenience into a complaint.

Language and explanation skills

Dropping technical jargon in favour of plain English that explains the “why” and the benefit for the resident, not just the “what”.

Adaptability and inclusivity

Recognising that no household is average, and adjusting the approach for literacy, neurodivergence, language or personal circumstance.

Managing expectations

Setting realistic, honest boundaries on timelines, disruption and benefits from the very first conversation, so trust isn't spent on promises the programme can't keep.

Introduction

Greenworkx is building the workforce for a resilient future. We help employers train, certify and upskill the talent essential to power the energy transition, on our mission to power 10 million people in green jobs in 10 years.

We set out to do this research because a pattern kept surfacing: retrofit programmes with strong technical delivery were losing residents at the point of conversation. The UK government's Warm Homes Plan commits £15 billion of public investment to upgrading up to 5 million homes and lifting up to a million families out of fuel poverty by 2030. [2] Meeting that ambition depends on residents saying yes and staying engaged through what can be a genuinely disruptive, months-long process.

This report has four objectives:

- To quantify the cost of poor resident communication in retrofit
- To identify where and why communication breaks down across the resident journey, from survey to post-installation
- To define the specific communication skills retrofit teams need as a practical framework, evolving the conversation past the generic "soft skills" label that leaves training under-specified
- To set out what training that genuinely builds these skills looks like, based on what is and isn't working across the sector today

Throughout this report, "we" and "our" refers to Greenworkx as the author. The individuals quoted contributed their own expertise and experience as sector practitioners; they are not co-authors of this report, and their organisations have not commissioned or funded it.

Methodology

This report draws on two sources of primary research. First, one-to-one interviews with retrofit delivery leaders across the sector. Second, our 'Retrofit Conversation Gap' sector event, which included a live survey of attendees and group discussions.

External statistics are drawn from published sources and cited throughout, with full references in the bibliography.

The cost of the conversation gap

Retrofit's most expensive failures often aren't technical. They happen before a measure is ever installed, or long after the installer has left, when poor communication causes residents to refuse work, lose confidence in the programme or misunderstand how to use the technologies in their homes.

Communication is therefore not simply a customer service issue. It is an operational capability that influences programme delivery, resident satisfaction and commercial performance.

"Without good communication, we get nowhere. We won't even get through the front door."

GEMMA VOADEN, SENIOR MANAGER NET ZERO, TOGETHER HOUSING

Every difficult conversation that is avoided, every period of unexplained silence, and every piece of jargon that goes unchallenged has consequences elsewhere in the programme. Those consequences rarely appear on a project plan under the heading "communication", but they show up in delayed installations, repeat visits, complaints, lower resident satisfaction, increased administrative workload and, ultimately, reduced confidence in future retrofit programmes.

Start with refusal. In 2024, the Hampshire Chronicle reported that almost half of Winchester City Council tenants approached about home energy upgrades declined them. [1] Every refusal represents more than a missed opportunity to improve a home. It also means time spent identifying eligible properties, arranging surveys, coordinating appointments and preparing works that ultimately do not proceed. By contrast, organisations that complement written communications with face-to-face engagement (for example, taking a working heat pump to community events where residents can see it, hear it and ask questions) report heat pump acceptance rates above 90%. [5] The difference between those outcomes is not primarily about technology. Giving residents enough confidence and understanding to say yes appears to be a significant contributor.

The cost of the conversation gap

Together Housing's own experience illustrates the same point. Early in its retrofit programme, the organisation tried inviting residents to drop-in sessions at community centres, publicised through mailed letters. Uptake was minimal. Moving to an immersive, on-site presence, with a dedicated site office residents could walk past and into, changed that almost immediately. The lesson wasn't about the venue. It was about how much more a physical, visible presence does for engagement than a letter asking someone to come somewhere else.

The impact continues throughout delivery. A resident who is not informed about a delayed appointment may take a day's annual leave unnecessarily, generating frustration that becomes a complaint. A vulnerability identified during a property survey that is not passed between teams can result in inappropriate interactions during installation. A resident who is never properly shown how to operate their new heating system may report faults that are simply normal system behaviour, creating avoidable call-backs and additional support costs.

Interviewees consistently described communication as one of the strongest predictors of overall resident experience, regardless of the technical outcome. At CCS, Customer Experience Manager Olivia Muscat explained that "communication is always mentioned" in resident feedback. Even where installations encounter genuine problems, proactive and honest communication often preserves trust. Conversely, technically successful projects can still generate dissatisfaction if residents feel uninformed or ignored.

These effects extend beyond individual projects. Poor communication weakens trust in future programmes, making subsequent engagement more difficult. Residents share experiences with neighbours, family members and local communities, meaning one poorly managed conversation can influence many future decisions. For organisations delivering publicly funded retrofit at scale, maintaining confidence in the programme is therefore not simply a reputational issue but an important factor in sustaining delivery over time.

That dynamic works in both directions. Gemma Voaden notes that as a programme scales across a wider area, if residents have good experiences, engagement can actually get easier as word of mouth travels across the community.

Taken together, these findings point to a sector-wide gap: communication influences resident engagement, operational efficiency, programme outcomes and long-term trust, yet it is rarely treated with the same rigour as technical competence or compliance.

At our Retrofit Conversation Gap event, we asked delivery organisations how confident they were that their frontline teams could handle difficult resident conversations when they come up. The average score was just 2.8 out of 5.

This suggests the capability is under-developed across the sector rather than the exception. The barriers holding organisations back were structural rather than a lack of will: no proven training approach to build from, not enough time or resource to prioritise it, and limited visibility into where the real capability gaps sit.

Part of that visibility problem is what gets measured in the first place. Many organisations currently judge communication success by outcomes, such as access or acceptance rates, rather than assessing the underlying communication skills that drive them. That's a reasonable proxy, but it doesn't show whether it's due to a communication problem and which specific skill needs developing to change the result next time.

As retrofit programmes continue to scale, closing this conversation gap is not simply about improving customer experience; it is about improving delivery performance.

The resident journey: where communication succeeds and fails

There's no such thing as an average household or standard resident conversation. Residents face diverse, sometimes volatile life circumstances, and their experience of a retrofit programme is therefore rarely standardised. Two further demographic realities make a single, one-size-fits-all script an especially poor tool here. Around one in six adults in England have very poor literacy skills, [3] an estimated 15–20% of the UK population are neurodivergent, [4] and many households experience digital exclusion, disability or changing personal circumstances. Communication approaches that assume every resident can engage with lengthy letters, technical terminology or digital portals inevitably leave some households behind.

What follows traces resident conversations through each stage of a typical retrofit journey: the starting point and survey, through the wait, explanation of measures and during installation, and after the team has left. It shows where communication consistently breaks down, and what good looks like.

The survey and the first promises

The first conversation a resident has about retrofit often sets the tone for everything that follows.

However, organisations approaching residents about home upgrades are often starting from a public trust deficit built through scams, consultation fatigue and previous experiences of public programmes that failed to deliver on expectations. Good communication cannot erase that history, but it can prevent organisations from reinforcing it.

The language used from the outset can create unnecessary barriers. Even the word “retrofit” itself is programme language, not resident language. Language and explanation skills are key here: organisations that frame conversations around warmer homes, improved comfort and lower energy bills consistently see better access and cooperation than those leading with technical terminology or programme language. Residents don't experience a heat pump installation in terms of carbon savings or EPC ratings; they experience it in terms of comfort, cost and, sometimes, health. Communication that speaks in those human terms lands.

The resident journey: where communication succeeds and fails

The first conversation is also where some of the most damaging promises get made. Schedulers or surveyors, keen to give a household good news, will sometimes suggest a resident is in line for measures like solar panels or new windows because their neighbour's got it. When the resident is later offered loft insulation instead, a throwaway comment from months earlier becomes a formal complaint.

That sense of unfairness doesn't only arise from broken promises. It also surfaces once work is complete, when residents compare notes with neighbours who received different measures. One respondent to a Together Housing resident survey was blunt about the disparity: "I'm extremely aggrieved that nearby homes have solar panels and batteries, making their bills a quarter of what ours are. This feels unfair." [6] Whether or not the eligibility criteria behind that difference were ever explained, the resident experienced it as arbitrary, and arbitrary is where trust breaks down fastest.

Within social housing in particular, resident communication is affected by broader mindset and perception challenges. In the able-to-pay market, the person paying for the work is the resident, so service quality is largely self-enforcing. But in social housing, the resident isn't a paying customer; this can quietly curdle into the assumption that the work is a given, and something for the resident to be grateful for rather than something to genuinely consent to. Stereotypes and misconceptions about social housing residents can also affect if and how people communicate with them.

James Bishenden feels strongly about how teams should treat social housing residents. A resident's home doesn't stop being a customer's home just because someone else is footing the bill, and treating someone with less care because the work is "free" is a mindset the sector needs to actively unlearn. For James, closing the gap starts with reversing the sector's usual instinct: the customer relationship should come first, and the technical task second, not the other way around.

Gemma Voaden identifies the same mindset from a different angle. She notes that tenant liaison officers can end up feeling they have to "sell" something that should already be wanted by the resident, a warmer home, lower bills. Approached that way, the resident becomes someone to be persuaded rather than someone whose perspective is genuinely being sought. The alternative isn't a better pitch. It's asking how the proposed measures will actually benefit this specific resident, and taking the time to understand what concerns they have about them, before assuming the offer speaks for itself.

Gemma Voaden takes that alternative a step further, using residents themselves as messengers from the outset. She is a strong advocate for resident champions: tenants willing to share honest, peer-to-peer explanations of what retrofit actually involves and why it's worth saying yes to. That kind of endorsement is inherently more persuasive than anything delivered from an official source, precisely because it doesn't come from the organisation asking for the buy-in in the first place.

Jordan Shelley, Head of Business Partnerships at CCS, points to a more structural version of the same pattern, one he sees playing out across the sector rather than in any single organisation. Work typically arrives as a list of jobs from the landlord, and the pressure to move through them quickly and efficiently can crowd out the fact that there's a resident behind each one. Reversing that default takes a deliberate structural choice, not just individual good intentions.

A surveyor who demonstrates empathy and active listening to understand what a resident actually needs, is able to answer standard questions clearly, commits to finding out any answers they don't have, and is honest about what can and can't be promised to manage expectations, sets up every later conversation to succeed. Whereas a scheduler or surveyor who overpromises or makes an answer up to smooth an awkward moment sets up a complaint that won't land until months later, in someone else's conversation.

The gap: waiting between survey and installation

Residents often have to wait months between survey and installation. A paused project and scaffolding left up for months with no explanation can become a communication void that residents fill with their own, usually worse, assumptions.

If they have questions, they might not know who to go to. Residents will hear from the local authority or housing association one day, then a delivery partner or an installer turn up on their doorstep the next day; different letterheads, different phone numbers and different vans, for what the resident experiences as one single programme. That confusion isn't just inconvenient: a resident who can't tell who they're dealing with has no reliable way to judge whether a scheme, or the person on their doorstep, is legitimate at all.

When they call someone to ask what's happening, they're often told "it's not us, it's the retrofit team", who point at the contractor. Nobody owns it, and the resident is left confused and frustrated.

By contrast, the organisations who keep residents engaged through this gap do it with small, proactive gestures that demonstrate empathy while managing expectations: a newsletter, an honest estimate of timescales, or simply a message confirming nothing has changed yet. None of it requires new technology. It requires someone deciding that silence is a choice, and choosing not to make it.

One leader we spoke to argues that the fix has to be structural, not just behavioural:

“Residents need to be able to have that one place to call and find out what’s going on, rather than being sent from one person to another.”

SUSTAINABILITY LEAD, MAJOR HOUSING ASSOCIATION

Installation day: schedules, setbacks and scepticism

A single retrofit journey can involve five to ten different people interacting with the resident: surveyor, designer, coordinator, scheduler, multiple trades, and a resident liaison officer. Strong internal communication and alignment is therefore crucial to ensure consistent messaging and prevent information being lost between teams; a vulnerability a surveyor spots on day one needs to reach the installer before they visit months later.

Good internal communication has to start even earlier than the resident-facing team. Gemma Voaden points out that other stakeholders (including maintenance teams, DNOs and energy suppliers) need to be aligned on the installation and maintenance of measures and new technologies before anyone speaks to a resident about them.

This is also why trust in a retrofit programme is never built solely by the people with the resident liaison job title. Every tradesperson who steps into a resident’s home shapes whether that resident trusts the next stage of the programme, and residents are often quicker to trust other team members rather than RLOs who may be perceived as reciting a script.

But people working in retrofit are typically hired and assessed for their ability to complete a technical or administrative task: survey a property, schedule an appointment, install a measure. This can mean people are in customer-facing roles without having a customer service skillset. Without that foundation, people can’t build the confidence to handle a difficult conversation, because they were never taught how. Booking an appointment and de-escalating a frustrated resident require entirely different skills.

That gap becomes visible whenever a conversation needs to move from a technical list to a plain-English explanation. The same technical scripts repeat across the sector: a resident is told that they're getting solar, an air source heat pump, some door undercuts and some ventilation, with no explanation of what any of it means or why it has been chosen for their home. Residents often have preconceptions about particular measures or technologies based on what they've heard elsewhere; left unaddressed, that scepticism turns into pushback, or outright refusal. Jordan Shelley emphasises that these conversations need to focus on helping residents "feel comfortable", and take the time to explain why the measures are specifically suitable for the resident's home, without defaulting to technical or transactional language.

Combating that scepticism at source is part of the job, not a separate workstream. Gemma Voaden counters media-driven myths about heat pumps directly, using real performance data and successful local case studies rather than reassurance alone. She also points out this resistance isn't new: residents pushed back just as hard when gas boilers first replaced coal fires, "I'm not going away from coal, what are you talking about?" was a genuine objection once. Normalising a new technology has always taken time and familiarity, not just a good explanation on the day.

A common failure alongside this is an unavoidable logistics problem, such as an engineer's van breaking down or a sickness absence, that simply isn't communicated to the resident who has often taken a day of annual leave or rearranged plans to wait for the appointment. Avoiding the call can feel like the easier option in the moment, but it undeniably causes more problems in the long run.

Where organisations get this right, the pattern is consistent: proactive honesty, even when the news is bad. James Bishenden described a team member who had to call a resident to cancel an appointment that had already fallen through twice before. She dreaded the call. She made it anyway, delivering the bad news immediately and honestly. The resident was initially angry, then recognised it wasn't the caller's fault, and ended up praising the team for the update rather than being left waiting.

"One thing we're never going to get complaints about is poor communication. We might get complaints about not turning up or cancelling appointments, but one thing they can't say is that we didn't tell them."

JAMES BISHENDEN, ADMIN PROJECT MANAGER, CCS

At Equans, Tony Doyle described the same instinct applied at a company level. When a window delivery was delayed, the team's response wasn't to deflect to the supplier; taking responsibility and apologising earned more trust from residents than blaming a subcontractor would have. Separately, when misinformation spread through a particular sheltered housing scheme, a Resident Liaison Officer visited every single resident on the scheme to deliver exactly the same message. Consistency, repeated in person, is what shut the rumour down.

"If people feel they're being communicated with, and are given honest and truthful answers, that's all they're looking for."

TONY DOYLE, HEAD OF CUSTOMER CARE – PEOPLE & COMMUNITIES SOUTH, EQUANS

Lead contractors frequently subcontract retrofit work two or three times over, and residents can end up dealing with on-site workers several steps removed from the housing association whose name is on the letterhead. When something goes wrong at that distance, whether that's a communication issue or the standard of the work itself, the resident doesn't experience it as a subcontractor problem. They experience it as their housing association letting them down, because that's the relationship, and the brand, they actually have.

All of this, staying consistent, staying honest, is hard enough to hold across one scheme. One Sustainability Lead we spoke to at a major housing association cautions that it gets harder still at scale. Moving from a small, localised project, some 50 homes across three streets with one contractor, to hundreds of installations a month across a wider area doesn't just multiply the number of conversations happening. It multiplies the number of ways things can slip: a message that drifts, a difficult conversation avoided, an issue nobody quite owns. Holding the line on all of it takes deliberately built infrastructure rather than something that simply carries over from a smaller pilot.

Post-installation: the aftercare gap

Completing the physical installation is only half the job. How a project is closed out shapes a resident's entire perception of the programme, especially given many retrofit measures fundamentally change how a home operates, requiring residents to alter daily habits they may have had for decades. Get aftercare wrong, and the consequences are concrete: formal complaints, costly call-backs, and residents who never see the savings the programme promised. Get it right, and residents who genuinely understand their new home often become, in effect, community promoters who bring their neighbours along with them.

Much of the aftercare challenge comes from residents unlearning decades of living with old appliances and systems, and encountering behaviour in new systems that seems broken if left unexplained.

A structured close-out conversation should happen before leaving the property, covering what was installed, how to live with it, what wasn't installed, and exactly who to contact if something goes wrong. Providing accessible visual guides at this point, i.e. physical fact sheets with diagrams and photographs, can give residents something to refer back to and provides an example of more adaptable and inclusive communications. Tony Doyle explains that the RLO role is crucial at this point, to explain things slowly, give reassurance, answer the questions that residents might worry are "foolish", and patiently revisit the same households until the new habits are embedded.

Explaining how to use new technology matters, but it isn't the only lever available. Gemma Voaden has found that some residents, particularly older residents, welcome remote monitoring of their new heating system, because it removes the pressure of managing the system themselves. That's worth building into both ends of the process: as a source of reassurance that can help convince a hesitant resident before installation, and as an ongoing form of support that reduces the burden on them afterwards. Solutions like this don't replace clear communication, but they can do some of the same reassurance work alongside it.

Because many installations happen in spring or summer, residents can go months without touching their heating. A proactive follow-up visit at the start of the heating season, before the first cold snap, catches confusion before it becomes a health or complaints issue.

These asks are echoed directly by residents themselves. In a post-installation survey of Together Housing residents who had air source heat pumps fitted, feedback included requests for "more visual information on operating the panel", "more info on day-to-day use", and "a clear, concise booklet with access to a video reference". [6] One resident put it more simply: "I need someone to show me properly how it works." Another wanted reassurance built into the process itself: "someone should come back after several months to check the system is working properly." What residents are asking for is exactly what is set out above: a proper walkthrough, plain visual guides, and a follow-up visit, not a one-off handover.

“We’re not just offering them the measures; we’re also trying to make sure the measures are suitable for them, and that they understand the benefits of having the measures completed and how to use the house in the most effective way afterwards, so they can actually see the savings on their energy bills.”

SUSTAINABILITY LEAD, MAJOR HOUSING ASSOCIATION

The six skills that matter most

Every success story above drew on the same handful of skills, and every failure was a specific, nameable gap in one of them. This section sets out what those six skills are, and where in the journey just described you can see each one in action. Together, they are the framework for what good resident communication actually requires, and the model we'd encourage the sector to train and assess against.

That doesn't mean every resident-facing role needs an identical style. A tenant liaison officer's work is heavily people-centric, built around empathy and relationship-building, while other roles exist specifically to handle deep technical questions and are, understandably, more technically minded. That's not a problem to correct. It's a reason to be precise about what "foundational" means here: not a single communication personality every role must adopt, but a baseline of these six skills that every resident-facing role, whatever its specialism, should be able to draw on.

Empathy and active listening

Empathy is about understanding the resident's perspective before trying to solve the problem. Every retrofit project asks someone to allow strangers into their home, tolerate disruption and trust unfamiliar technology, often while managing work, caring responsibilities or health conditions. Active listening helps teams uncover concerns that might otherwise remain unspoken, allowing them to respond to what actually matters to that household rather than what they assume matters. For example, a resident who appears reluctant to accept an installation may not be sceptical about retrofit at all; they may simply be worried about how the work will affect an elderly relative or child living in the home. Recognising and responding to those concerns builds trust from the outset.

De-escalation and conflict resolution

Frustration is inevitable in any complex retrofit programme. Appointments change, deliveries are delayed and unexpected issues arise during installation. The difference between a complaint and a constructive conversation often depends on how confidently frontline teams respond in the moment. Effective de-escalation means acknowledging the resident's frustration, remaining calm and focusing on practical next steps rather than becoming defensive. Several contributors described situations where honest, respectful conversations following unavoidable delays prevented complaints from escalating and, in some cases, even strengthened residents' trust in the organisation.

The six skills that matter most

Delivering bad news gently

Few people enjoy telling a resident that work has been delayed or an appointment has been cancelled, but avoiding difficult conversations almost always makes the situation worse. Residents are generally more understanding of genuine problems than they are of being left without information, particularly when they have taken time off work or rearranged their day. Delivering bad news well means communicating early, explaining the situation honestly, apologising where appropriate and setting clear expectations about what will happen next. As several interviewees observed, residents rarely complain about problems they were kept informed about; they complain when they feel ignored.

Language and explanation skills

Technical expertise only creates value if it can be translated into language residents understand. Terms such as “air source heat pump”, “MVHR” or “door undercut” may be routine for retrofit professionals, but they mean little to most households and can even trigger unnecessary concern. Strong communication means explaining not just what is being installed, but why it has been recommended and how it will improve everyday life. Explaining new technologies in layman’s terms, or how door undercuts are essential ventilation rather than unnecessary damage, helps residents understand the purpose of the work and reduces avoidable resistance.

Adaptability and inclusivity

There is no such thing as a typical resident. Communication that works well for one household may be ineffective or inaccessible for another because of literacy levels, language barriers, neurodivergence, disability or wider personal circumstances. Effective communicators adapt both what they say and how they say it, using plain English, visual materials, interpreters where appropriate or simply allowing more time for questions. This flexibility is particularly important in social housing, where residents’ needs and circumstances vary considerably. A one-size-fits-all approach may be operationally convenient, but it rarely delivers consistently good resident experiences.

That means treating unresponsive households as a priority, not a lost cause or letting them settle to the bottom of the pile by default. The residents hardest to reach are usually the ones most likely to be missed by every other part of the programme too.

Managing expectations

Trust is built as much by honest expectations as by successful delivery. Residents need to understand what will happen, when it is likely to happen, how disruptive it may be and what outcomes they should realistically expect. Over-promising on timelines, energy bill savings or installation simplicity may secure initial buy-in, but it risks disappointment later if reality falls short. Organisations that communicate openly about uncertainty, explain why plans sometimes change and avoid making guarantees they cannot control are more likely to maintain residents' confidence throughout what can be a lengthy and complex retrofit journey.

None of these skills depends on charisma or personality. Each is a specific set of observable behaviours that can be practised, assessed and improved. Treating communication as a capability rather than an innate talent is one of the most important shifts the retrofit sector can make.

Why current training isn't working, and what does

Communication training across the sector is patchy at best.

One in seven at our Retrofit Conversation Gap event told us they run no communication training at all.

That isn't a failure of intent; every leader we spoke to wants this. It's a gap in what has been available to train with.

That gap falls hardest on the people already doing the most exposed version of this work. One Sustainability Lead we spoke to describes Resident Liaison Officers and similar frontline roles often receiving minimal preparation and support, and left to "find their own feet" in a job that involves vulnerable residents, anti-social behaviour, and situations well beyond a scheduling disagreement. There is often no wider network of peers in similar roles to compare notes with, which makes an already difficult job an isolating one, and the emotional toll of the role is a real driver of burnout and attrition. Proper training and support here isn't only about improving what the resident experiences. It's about equipping people for the genuine weight of the role, rather than leaving them to absorb its hardest moments alone.

For those that do some kind of communication training, the default model across the sector is a passive one.

Only one in seven told us that their current training gave teams a chance to practise live conversations in a safe environment before facing a real one.

Foundational knowledge matters, but knowledge alone doesn't build the confidence to handle a live, unscripted conversation using the six skills above. Practice matters because knowledge and confidence are not the same thing, and only one of them can be taught from a slide. Someone can understand exactly why a heat pump needs to run continuously, and still freeze when a resident pushes back angrily on the phone, because knowing the right answer and delivering it calmly, under pressure, in real time, are different skills entirely. Rehearsal closes that gap by letting people make the mistake somewhere it costs nothing, rather than in front of a real resident.

That is the gap that practice fills.

Why current training isn't working, and what does

"You can talk at people, you can give them workshops, they can interact with each other, but they're never going to have that real experience until they pick up the phone."

OLIVIA MUSCAT, CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE MANAGER, CCS

Olivia describes a safe simulated environment, where teams can make mistakes, get coached, and adjust before ever facing a real resident, as "one of the most valuable pieces of training we could give people."

Some organisations already try to measure this, by reviewing how a real conversation with a resident actually went and using it to identify where that individual needs to develop. It's a genuinely useful diagnostic, and better than no measurement at all, but it depends on a real resident's conversation having already happened, rather than proactively catching and correcting the same gap beforehand.

Practice alone is not enough, though, if everyone receives the same generic guidance regardless of where their own gaps actually are. Measuring exactly where an individual struggles gives them the feedback they need about what skill to develop, and gives managers the evidence to coach that specific gap and create personalised training pathways.

Practice-based learning and personalised feedback are both needed: one gives teams the rehearsed muscle memory to handle a live conversation across all six skills, the other makes sure the coaching that follows is aimed at what that individual actually needs to improve.

Practice-based training approaches, including Greenworkx's role-play scenarios which put frontline teams into realistic resident conversations across all six skills, can create a safe environment where mistakes cost nothing but build the confidence real calls demand. These solutions can also provide the instantaneous data and tailored feedback that shapes training plans at all levels.

Recommendations

This research suggests six priorities for organisations commissioning or delivering domestic retrofit.

1

Recognise communication as a core operational capability.

Treat resident communication with the same rigour as technical competence by defining, assessing and developing it as a measurable capability rather than a generic “soft skill”.

2

Build capability around the six communication skills identified in this report.

Use empathy and active listening, de-escalation, delivering bad news, language and explanation, adaptability and managing expectations as a shared framework for recruitment, training, coaching and performance.

3

Design communication around the resident journey, not organisational boundaries.

Ensure residents experience one coherent conversation from survey through to aftercare, with clear ownership, strong internal handovers and an obvious single point of contact throughout.

4

Prioritise communication at the moments that matter most.

Treat delays, cancellations, changing plans, handovers and post-installation support as critical opportunities to build trust rather than administrative updates.

5

Move beyond knowledge-based training to practice-based learning.

Technical knowledge alone does not prepare teams for live conversations. Build regular opportunities for realistic rehearsal, feedback and coaching into communication training.

Recommendations

6

Continuously measure and improve communication capability.

Assess communication skills consistently, identify individual development needs and use evidence to target coaching, ensuring communication capability improves alongside technical competence.

Conclusion

Retrofit doesn't fail because residents don't want warmer, cheaper-to-run homes. It fails, or stalls, or gets refused outright, when the conversation about how to get there isn't good enough to earn their trust. That is a solvable problem, and this research shows the sector already knows most of what solving it requires: proactive honesty, plain language, consistent messaging, and a genuine single point of contact. What's missing isn't insight. It's a deliberate, practised way of building the skill.

That trust has to be built before a survey ever happens, sustained through months of waiting, and protected again once the installation team has left. It's also never the responsibility of one role alone.

The retrofit sector has invested heavily in technical standards, qualifications and compliance. Achieving the scale of delivery required over the coming years will require the sector to apply the same mindset to communication: moving away from the idea that some people are simply "good with residents", and towards recognising communication as a professional capability that can be defined, measured and developed.

The organisations that treat communication as a measurable capability, built from these six specific, practisable skills rather than an innate individual talent, will be better placed to earn trust, improve programme outcomes and deliver retrofit at scale.

Endnotes

1. Hampshire Chronicle (2024). Almost half of Winchester City Council house tenants refuse upgrades. Available at: <https://www.hampshirechronicle.co.uk/news/24102325.almost-half-winchester-city-council-house-tenants-refuse-upgrades/>
2. GOV.UK (2026). Warm Homes Plan. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/warm-homes-plan/warm-homes-plan-html>
3. National Literacy Trust (2024). Adult literacy in England. Available at: <https://literacytrust.org.uk/parents-and-families/adult-literacy/>
4. Estimate of 15–20% of the UK population (approx. 13 million people) being neurodivergent, commonly cited across sector and industry sources including the City & Guilds Neurodiversity Index.
5. RISE (2024). Retrofit Resident Engagement, RISE Masterclass, presented by Charlotte Tutton, Midlands Net Zero Hub, 29 October 2024. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tq9Hen8KHMM>
6. SHAP (2026). Retrofit Success: From Technology to Trust, Engagement in Practice, Retrofit Success Lunch and Learn, featuring Gemma Voaden (Together Housing Group) and Stevie Mardy (Panasonic), including findings from a Together Housing resident survey on air source heat pumps. Available at: <https://vimeo.com/1194106020>

If you'd like to discuss the findings in this report, explore which communication capabilities could have the greatest impact for your organisation, or learn more about how Greenworkx supports teams to build these skills, we'd love to hear from you.

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