



Action for Warm Homes



*Gweithredu dros Gartrefi Cynnes
Action for Warm Homes*



*Action for Warm Homes
Northern Ireland*

Fuel Poverty Awareness Day and launch of Warm and Safe Homes Campaign

27 November 2020

In any normal winter millions of people struggle to stay warm at home. Rising energy costs, low incomes and energy inefficient homes converge to leave them in desperate situations where they can no longer afford to heat their homes, feed their families and pay their rent. Those affected cope as best they can – by cutting back on essentials, rationing energy use, and taking respite in other warm places. But even then it isn't always enough. 12,000 people die on average in the UK each year because of health conditions caused or worsened by living in a cold home, and fuel poverty is a known risk factor for suicide.

This is not a normal winter. Covid-19 is combining with cold homes to accelerate and multiply these issues. The doors of warm sanctuaries, such as libraries, cafes and the homes of loved ones, are shut. People are compelled to spend more time in homes that they can't afford to heat, causing some of the very health issues that will put them most at risk. Beyond the direct overlap between acute respiratory conditions and cold homes, the virus can thrive in unhygienic conditions when people are forced to use cold water to wash themselves or their clothes, or have the whole family crowd into the only heated space in the house. The strain on mental health is unimaginable.

Cold homes are preventable, and policy interventions to make fuel poor homes easier and cheaper to heat are on the horizon, but these will offer little respite for those struggling now.

National Energy Action (NEA) is the national charity with a vision to end the suffering caused by cold homes. This Fuel Poverty Awareness Day we are launching our Warm and Safe Homes Campaign, and urging three actions which will make a difference to people in fuel poverty this winter.

1 Ensuring enough money for essentials

The current universal credit uplift, which is offering a lifeline to millions by providing extra money for living essentials, must be maintained and strengthened.

2 Bringing forward Breathing Space and new actions to clear debt

Halting enforcement action, providing flexibility on repayment plans and introducing new ways to help people with utility debts will help reduce the additional stress caused by falling into household debt and have a positive economic impact.

3 A proactive, coordinated and targeted response from frontline agencies

Those most in need are not necessarily aware of or able to access the support that is available, particularly if they are digitally excluded, English is not their preferred language or they have other communication needs. National and local government, energy suppliers, network operators, health agencies and other frontline organisations need to proactively identify and assist these customers and clients.

Get Involved

Our campaign will launch on Fuel Poverty Awareness Day (27 November) and continue through the winter. You can support us by:

- **Writing to your local Member of Parliament (UK), Member of the Senedd (Wales), or Member of the Legislative Assembly (NI)** to ask them to support the campaign and share details of any work you may be undertaking locally to help people in fuel poverty. A template letter is included in our resource pack
- **Committing to supporting people in fuel poverty this winter** and sharing this commitment and any action taken on our social media channels. Resources to help you do this are available at www.nea.org.uk/advice
- **Sharing a video or other message of support** with us on our social media channels
- Using **#FuelPovertyAwarenessDay** and **#WarmSafeHomes** so we can share your posts more widely, and help demonstrate the work that is being done to support vulnerable energy customers this winter

Our twitter handles are @NEA_UKCharity, @NEA_Cymru and @NEA_NIreland. You can also find us on Facebook and LinkedIn as National Energy Action and National Energy Action NI.

Background briefing and additional information

Fuel poverty and Covid-19 – the impacts

During the first wave of Covid-19 NEA put out a call for evidence to organisations supporting people in fuel poverty, to understand how Covid-19 had impacted on vulnerable and low-income households. We received 73 responses representing covering the breadth of the UK.

We found that the impact has been unparalleled, both for fuel poor households and those that support them.

The five main impacts on fuel poor households were:

- An increase in energy use, due to more people spending more time at home
- A reduction in income, as many jobs were either lost or placed on furlough
- Increased affordability issues and therefore debt, leading to energy rationing
- Reductions in smart meter and energy efficiency installations
- Difficulties in accessing support, especially where households were digitally excluded or spoke English as an additional language

95% of respondents to our call for evidence said there was a moderate or high risk of more households cutting back on their energy use due to being forced to spend more time at home during lockdown; and three quarters said they were concerned that there is a high risk of the increased building up of fuel debt this winter, as a direct result of the pandemic.

The Fuel Poverty Monitor, which featured the research, also noted that the usual strategies which people often employ to get them through winter may not be available. In particular, people may often take to public spaces or the homes of friends and family to try and stay warm. With many public buildings closing, and various restrictions on mixing with other households, this is no longer an option.

[The full document is available here.](#)

Covid-19 and debt

As the crisis deepens and people are furloughed or made redundant, millions are facing their first winter on a reduced income. Householders who had previously managed their finances are now finding themselves struggling to meet basic living expenses like food and energy.

In October 2020, Citizens Advice estimated “6 million UK adults have fallen behind on at least one household bill during the pandemic, including: 3.4 million on mobile phone or broadband, 3 million on water bills, 2.8 million on energy, 2.8 million on council tax, and 1.2 million on rent”, an estimated total of £1.6 billion in household arrears.¹

In November, The Resolution Foundation released research looking at how low incomes, spending and saving had changed during both the lockdown (April to June) and re-opening (July to September) periods. It found that “*there is evidence that serious financial stress is building ... half (54 per cent) of adults from families in the lowest income quintile had borrowed in recent months to cover everyday costs such as housing and food*’ and ‘*almost one-in-three adults that has had a persistently low income through the pandemic say they cannot afford basic items such as fresh fruit and vegetables every day, or to turn on the heating when required*”.²

We explore these issues in greater detail in [Surviving the Wilderness – a landscape of personal debt in the UK](#).

Health, cold homes and C19

In November 2020 Public Health England stated: “*Exposure to cold temperatures has a range of physiological effects, including increased blood pressure and risk of clotting, suppression of the immune system, diminished capacity of the lungs to fight off infection and narrowing of airways.*”³ It noted that these impacts can occur at even relatively mild temperatures, and can cause or exacerbate a range of serious health conditions such as heart attack, stroke, and respiratory disease. Some of these are conditions which also place people at greater risk of dying from Covid-19.

There are also strong associations between self-reported ill health, fuel poverty (including fuel debt) and cold homes. This is likely to be exacerbated by other stressors relating to Covid-19. Fuel poverty is a known risk factor for suicide.

In any ‘normal’ year, around 12,000 people die because they live in a cold home⁴. Those who are treated for cold-related illnesses are often discharged back into cold homes, leading to a vicious cycle of readmission. Annually it is estimated to cost the NHS £1.4bn - £2bn per year in England⁵ and £95m in Wales⁶ and £40m in Northern Ireland.⁷

The long-term solution is to improve standards of heating and insulation in new and existing homes. However, for today and this winter, millions will need help and support. Earlier in the year NEA was joined by more than 120 health professionals, elected officials, housing and energy sector professionals and others in writing to the Prime Minister to highlight that a second wave of Covid-19 during a cold spell this winter could be catastrophic for individuals and families, and could overwhelm our health and social care services.⁸

Fuel poverty in the UK

Fuel poverty is the term used to refer to a situation where a household can't afford to heat their home to the temperature needed to stay warm and healthy. The exact definition and measurement varies across the UK. Low incomes and rising energy prices contribute to fuel poverty. So too do inadequate heating, insulation and ventilation. It's a situation which tends to see the poorest people, living in the least energy-efficient homes, having to pay the most for their energy.

Because of the differences in how fuel poverty is defined and measured it is difficult to gain an accurate picture of the total level of fuel poverty in the UK. The chart below however shows the latest official figures available.

UK Nation	Estimated number of households in fuel poverty (2018 data)	% of households in fuel poverty
England ⁹	2,400,000	10.3%
Scotland ¹⁰	619,000	25%
Wales ¹¹	155,000	12%
Northern Ireland ¹²	160,000	22%

Other sources of information

The House of Commons Library has produced a concise briefing on fuel poverty which is available at <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8730/CBP-8730.pdf>

Endnotes

- <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/Global/CitizensAdvice/Debt%20and%20Money%20Publications/Lockdown%20debts.pdf>
- <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/caught-in-a-covid-trap/>
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-matters-cold-weather-and-covid-19/health-matters-cold-weather-and-covid-19>
- Excess winter mortality statistics record the 'additional' deaths that occur in December to March) compared to the preceding August – November and following April – July. Of these the World Health Organisation estimates that 30% are due to cold housing https://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/142077/e95004.pdf3rd
- <https://www.bre.co.uk/filelibrary/pdf/87741-Cost-of-Poor-Housing-Briefing-Paper-v3.pdf>
- <https://phw.nhs.wales/news/poor-housing-costs-health-service-95m-per-year-new-report/>
- <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Research/HCS-2016-Additional-Reports/The-cost-of-poor-housing-in-Northern-Ireland-2016.aspx>
- <https://www.nea.org.uk/news/6281/>
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/fuel-poverty-statistics>
- https://www.eas.org.uk/en/statistics-and-trends_50441/
- <https://gov.wales/fuel-poverty-estimates-wales-2018>
- <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/getmedia/1f9e55a1-66c2-46b7-bf92-9ee192ce355f/estimates-of-fuel-poverty-northern-ireland-2017-and-2018-revised.pdf.aspx?ext=.pdf>