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Snowed under: the links between fuel poverty, cold homes, and Covid-19 [National Energy Action]



Action for Warm Homes



Snowed under: the links between fuel poverty, cold homes, and Covid-19

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In any normal winter, millions of people struggle to stay warm at home. This winter, the devastating combination of rising energy costs, low incomes, and energy inefficient housing is likely to lead to even more situations where households can no longer afford to heat their homes, feed their families, and pay their rent. I write this article as we move towards the end of a second period of national lockdown in England, and following months of tiered restrictions that have, in different ways, forced more people to spend more time at home.

For those in fuel poverty, this has meant increased energy usage at a time when incomes have been slashed by furlough or redundancy, often resulting in an increase in the building up of problem debt [1] It now seems likely that forms of Covid-19 restrictions are likely to remain in place until Easter 2021, with the ‘work from home if you can’ message already extended to this date.

The 27th of November is an appropriate time to reflect on the intersection of fuel poverty, cold homes, and Covid-19 for two reasons. Firstly, it marks this year’s Fuel Poverty Awareness Day, which is organised and coordinated by National Energy Action (NEA) [2]. Secondly, it marks the release of the Excess Winter Deaths statistics

for the winter of 2019/20, which are produced by the Office for National Statistics . To give some context, Public Health England have consistently recognised that households experiencing fuel poverty are particularly vulnerable to cold weather, and have recently suggested that fuel poverty, increased energy use at home, and reduced access to warm public spaces can all amplify an individual’s exposure to cold temperatures and Covid-19 [3].

“ *this winter, new groups of people and households may also be drawn into fuel poverty for the first time”*

Public Health England have also noted that, this winter, new groups of people and households may also be drawn into fuel poverty for the first time as their incomes reduce and their fuel costs go up, but may also be unaware of the support that is currently available to help them with their fuel costs and keeping warm at home [4]. All of this is likely to intersect with the increase in cold related ill-health that we see each winter, particularly those related to cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, as well as the strain in mental health that fuel poverty is known to be associated with [5]. Each year, we know that this contributes to needless health and social care costs, queues at GPs

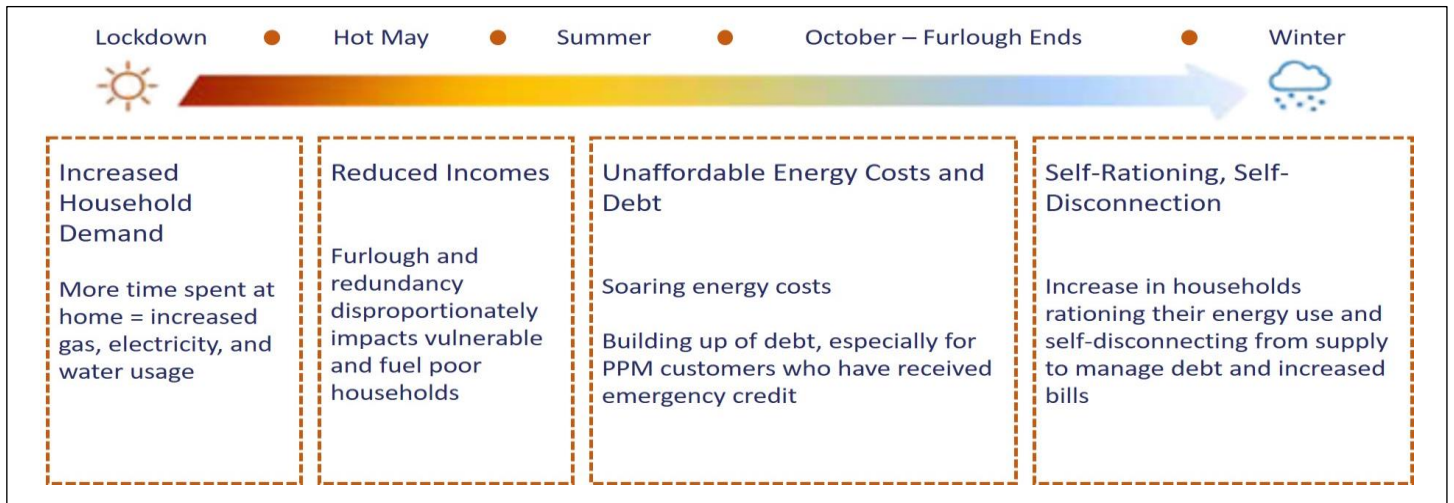
and A&E, as well as delaying the discharge of patients from hospital [6].

During the first wave of Covid-19, NEA released a call for evidence to organisations supporting people in fuel poverty to try and understand how Covid-19 was impacting on both vulnerable households, and on those organisation’s capacity to continue to support vulnerable households through the crisis. We received 73 responses from energy suppliers, distribution networks, local authorities, charities, installers, and other organisations covering the breadth of the UK. The research found the following five main impacts on fuel poor households, and the full findings of our CfE were published in our Annual UK Fuel Poverty Monitor at the beginning of September this year [7].



An increase in energy use, due to more people spending more time at home

Over 90% of our CfE respondents believed that there was a moderate or high risk of increased consumption of gas and electricity. Respondents explained that this



was likely not just due to increased time spent at home for adults, but because of school closures forcing children to also stay at home and parents wanting to ensure that they stay warm. Due to these restrictions, two thirds of CfE respondents thought there was a high risk of increased energy consumption by vulnerable households, and over half of CfE respondents thought there was a high risk of increased heat demand and water consumption. These findings were in line with broader research on the topic, such as a survey of 2,000 energy consumers which demonstrated almost three quarters of respondents reported increased energy use during lockdown [8].

“ almost 9 in 10 said they expected to see benefits delays have a direct impact on national and regional levels of fuel and water poverty”

A reduction in income, as many jobs were either lost or placed on furlough

7 out of 10 respondents told us they thought there was a high risk that vulnerable households will have experienced a decrease in household income as a result of the crisis. Government data

demonstrated that even when changes to Universal Credit and other benefits were accounted for, all income deciles apart from the first decile had experienced an average reduction in income as of May 2020 compared with the start of the year [9]. Our CfE respondents also told us about issues and delays with the benefits system; 80% of respondents offering income maximisation services said that they had experienced a rise in the number of clients seeking support during the first lockdown, and almost 9 in 10 said they expected to see benefits delays have a direct impact on national and regional levels of fuel and water poverty.

Increased affordability issues and therefore debt, leading to energy rationing

Respondents to our CfE returned time and time again to the ‘double whammy’ of increased energy use and reduced incomes leading to affordability issues. In turn, CfE respondents said they expected to see even higher levels of energy rationing – practices of cutting back on heating or hot water to save money – during winter than they normally do. Many respondents talked about this in the context of what is sometimes termed the ‘heat or eat’ trade off, whereby struggling families will make complex trade-offs between food and heat to manage the (un)affordability of their

household outgoings [10]. For example, many charities told us how households with prepayment meters were making a series of impossible choices throughout the entire lockdown period, which all too often culminated in self-disconnection from supply or desperate requests for emergency food and fuel vouchers.

“ ECO installs fell by more than 55% in April and May compared to March, meaning that almost 30,000 fewer measures were installed in fuel poor and vulnerable households than expected”

Reductions in smart meter/ECO installs

The initial lockdown period also witnessed a dramatic drop in the delivery of energy efficiency measures and other interventions that can help lift households out of fuel poverty. To give only two examples, the official BEIS statistics on household energy efficiency showed that ECO installs fell by more than 55% in April and May compared to March, meaning that almost 30,000 fewer measures were installed in fuel poor and vulnerable households than expected [11]. Simultaneously, smart meter installs decreased

significantly due to lockdown measures, with BEIS reporting just 135,000 installs occurring between April and June, compared to over a million in the same period in the preceding year [12]. Now, the majority of these measures and installations are back up and running in Covid-secure ways, but it remains to be seen how the delivery of these measures – including the new Green Homes Grant Local Authority Delivery scheme [13] – will be impacted by ongoing regional lockdown measures over the winter period.

Difficulties in accessing support, especially where households were digitally excluded or spoke English as an additional language

Lastly, some households found it very difficult to contact their suppliers during the first lockdown. CfE respondents reported that long call waiting times, the inconsistency of emergency triage procedures, and some suppliers' focus on signposting customers to online, email, or webchat services all had a negative impact for customers, especially those in urgent need of support. Both our CfE and subsequent research has demonstrated that these difficulties were particularly acute for households that do not speak English as a first language, and/or that are digitally excluded, either by having no access to the internet or not having the competencies and capacities to use the internet fully.

Since our Monitor was released, other research has deepened and broadened our understanding of these problems. Most notably, a report from the Northern Housing Consortium has shown that poor housing conditions became even worse during the pandemic, and that private renters have felt increasingly insecure and fearful of being evicted from their homes [14].

Ongoing research, such as the brilliant Covid Realities project [15], are documenting and archiving the continuing strain that Covid-19 is having on different vulnerable groups, including those living in fuel poverty or with cold-related vulnerabilities. As this maelstrom swirls around us, Public Health England have stated firmly that the fear of Covid-19 should not prevent us from taking action to tackle the risks associated with icy weather, cold homes, and lower temperatures this winter [16].

But in the longer-term, the likely deleterious consequences that lie at the intersection of fuel poverty, cold homes, and Covid-19 this winter must surely be a clarion call for us all to work together to end fuel poverty once and for all, and ensure that everyone can live in a warm, safe home that enhances – rather than diminishes – our health and wellbeing.

Matthew Scott, Research and Policy Officer, National Energy Action, November 2020

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