

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb i ymgynghoriad y [Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb a Chyfiawnder Cymdeithasol](#) ar [Tlodi Tanwydd yng Nghymru](#)

This response was submitted to the [Equality and Social Justice Committee](#) consultation on [Fuel Poverty in Wales](#)

FP06

Ymateb gan: Iechyd Cyhoeddus Cymru | Response from: Public Health Wales



Public Health Wales NHS Trust

Submission to the Equality and Social Justice Committee follow-up inquiry into fuel poverty and the Warm Homes Programme

Nb: Welsh language version to follow shortly.

Summary

- Living in a cold home (below 18°C) has significant public health implications, as shown by the evidence in this response.
 - Spending less on heating homes creates cold and damp conditions and can compound existing poor quality or poorly insulated housing. This can be bad for health, increasing the risk of heart and lung conditions, or infectious respiratory illnesses such as influenza (flu).
 - Particularly at risk are older people, the very young and those who have underlying health conditions.
- The current picture of fuel poverty in Wales should be based on up-to date data and evidence which reflect changes to housing energy efficiency, disposable income and the cost of energy on health, well-being and equity in Wales. Public Health Wales would welcome the further collection of data on fuel poverty and population groups at risk. Further, that the impacts of fuel poverty on physical and mental health and on health inequalities are duly considered and that a preventative approach is taken.
- In November 2024, Public Health Wales will publish the '*Cold Homes in Wales: Is the satisfactory heating regime appropriate for health and well-being?*' report, which was commissioned by Welsh Government as part of its Tackling Fuel Poverty 2021 to 2035 plan to assess the appropriateness of the satisfactory heating regime to keep people comfortable and safe.
 - The report provides evidence-informed recommendations on the satisfactory heating regime and seeks to inform the approach to tackling fuel poverty in Wales to help protect and promote health, well-being and equity. The findings of this report will be used in our oral evidence.

Introduction

Public Health Wales NHS Trust is the national public health organisation for Wales. We work to protect and improve health and well-being and reduce health inequalities for the people of Wales. We are pleased to respond to the Equality and Social Justice Committee follow-up inquiry regarding fuel poverty and the Warm Homes Programme. This response provides evidence from the Public Health Wales *Housing Warmth and Health and Well-being in Wales* programme that was undertaken in conjunction with Bangor University, including the recent publication of a '[Keeping warm at home during winter in Wales](#)' report and a systematic review on '[Cold homes and their association with health and well-being](#)'.

Housing and financial security and well-being, which enable individuals and families to adequately heat their homes, are wider determinants of health. With rising energy and food costs, for example, more people are experiencing fuel poverty and having to choose between feeding their families and keeping the lights and heating on. The stress and anxiety that comes with these decisions takes a toll on mental health. Poorer mental health can also lead to poorer physical health, and can increase health harming behaviours, such as smoking, alcohol consumption and low physical activity levels (Roberts et al., 2022¹).

A systematic review from Public Health Wales and Bangor University found that indoor temperatures below 18°C are associated with negative effects on health (Janssen et al., 2023²). Spending less on heating homes creates cold and damp conditions and can compound existing poor quality or poorly insulated housing. This can be bad for health, increasing the risk of heart and lung conditions, or infectious respiratory illnesses such as influenza (Roberts et al., 2022).

Public Health Wales is therefore responding to this enquiry to provide further evidence highlighting these health impacts in relation to fuel poverty. Public Health Wales believes that any future policy and action addressing fuel poverty should place

¹ Roberts M, Petchey L, Challenger A, Azam S, Masters R, Peden J. *Cost of living crisis in Wales: A public health lens*. Cardiff: Public Health Wales. 2022. Available from: [Cost of living crisis in Wales: A public health lens - World Health Organization Collaborating Centre On Investment for Health and Well-being \(phwwhocc.co.uk\)](#).

² Janssen H, Ford K, Gascoyne B, Hill R, Roberts M, Bellis MA, et al. Cold indoor temperatures and their association with health and well-being: a systematic literature review. *Public Health*. 2023;1;224:185–94. doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2023.09.006

focus on maximising opportunities to protect health and well-being among current and future populations in Wales.

Response to the terms of reference of the inquiry

The purpose of this paper is to respond to the terms of reference for the inquiry from a public health perspective, using evidence drawn from the Public Health Wales *Housing Warmth and Health and Well-being in Wales* programme. Our responses are set out below.

Whether there is an accurate picture of fuel poverty in Wales today, given that data is based on the 2008 Living in Wales Survey and 2017-18 Wales Housing Conditions Survey

An accurate picture of fuel poverty in Wales today should present up-to-date estimates of energy efficiency; disposable income; and the cost of energy, and should seek to identify those population groups that are most at risk of living in fuel poverty and the associated physical and mental health harms. Fuel poverty is associated with living in a cold home, which is a risk factor for poor physical and mental health, including winter and cold related deaths.

Work undertaken by Public Health Wales and Bangor University as part of the *Housing Warmth and Health and Well-being in Wales* programme has helped to address some of these gaps by updating the evidence on the impacts of cold homes on health and well-being. The [systematic review](#) found:

- Indoor temperatures below 18°C are associated with negative effects on health. These negative effects were related to cardiovascular and respiratory health, sleep, physical performance (an important risk factor for falls and fall-related injuries) and general well-being.
- Some population groups are understood to be particularly at risk of poorer health from exposure to cold indoor temperatures, including older people, children and individuals living with disabilities or long-term health conditions, particularly cardiorespiratory disease.
- There is a gap in the research on fuel poverty and heating practices, and what this means for health and well-being.

Drawing on the identified gaps identified in the systematic review and contributing to the picture of fuel poverty in Wales, Public Health Wales and Bangor University conducted a national household survey of adults resident in Wales, from January to March 2022 – known as The Housing Warmth Survey (Wales). This survey was repeated with a sub-sample of participants from January to March 2023, to explore changes in how people stay warm at home during winter and the impacts on health and well-being.

The survey did not measure fuel poverty, but the findings provide insight into heating practices used in households in Wales over a time of increasing domestic energy costs. Survey findings published in the 2024 report [Keeping Warm at Home in Wales](#), reveal that:

- Participants reported setting their thermostats to lower temperatures in 2023, with the mean reported thermostat setting decreasing significantly³ from 19.9°C in 2022 to 19.3°C in 2023.
- The duration of heating also reduced from 10.2 hours to 9.8 hours across weekdays and 10.6 hours to 10.2 hours at weekends from 2022 to 2023 respectively, although this reduction was non-significant.
- There was a significant reduction in the proportion of participants who reported that their first response to feeling cold was to turn up the heating temperature from 17.2% in 2022 to 10.2% in 2023. Other changes in behaviours such as putting on extra clothes were non-significant.
- There was a significant increase in the proportion of participants who reported any stress or anxiety in the previous three months over the costs of heating their home (from 57.2% in 2022 to 66.5% in 2023).
- There was an increase in the proportion of participants who reported cutting the size of their meal or skipping meals in the previous three months due to heating costs (from 9.1% in 2022 to 11.3% in 2023), although this finding was non-significant. However, more recent research in Wales (winter 2023/24) found a quarter of people (24%) reported that they either cut down on the

³ A p-value less than or equal to 0.05 indicates a statistically significant result.

size of a meal or missed a meal for themselves in the three months to January 2024 (Bevan Foundation, 2024⁴).

- Nine in ten participants reported thermal comfort in their main living area, but there was a significant decrease in the proportion of participants reporting thermal comfort (from 94.0% in 2022 to 89.5% in 2023). A lack of thermal comfort is linked to poorer well-being (Huebner et al, 2023⁵).

The above findings are important because they identify a change towards lower heating temperatures in home environments in Wales and the reduction in duration of heating being used. The findings show that in 2023 compared with 2022, more people in Wales were reporting heating their homes to a lower temperature, being exposed to the dilemma of whether to 'heat' or 'eat', and feeling stress or anxiety over their heating costs.

In November 2024, Public Health Wales will publish the report '*Cold Homes in Wales: Is the satisfactory heating regime appropriate for health and well-being?*', which was commissioned by Welsh Government as part of its Tackling Fuel Poverty 2021 to 2035 plan to assess the appropriateness of the satisfactory heating regime to keep people comfortable and safe. The report will further contribute to the picture of fuel poverty in Wales by:

- Bringing together evidence from The Housing Warmth Survey (Wales), the available literature, and expert consultation and advice.
- Exploring the heating regimes used in homes in Wales during winter; who is at risk of living in colder homes (defined as homes where thermostats are set to below 18°C); and the impacts of living in colder homes on health and well-being.
- Providing a set of evidence-informed recommendations on the satisfactory heating regime which could inform the approach to tackling fuel poverty in Wales, to help protect and promote health, well-being and equity.

⁴ Bevan Foundation. *A snapshot of poverty in winter 2024*. Merthyr Tydfil: The Bevan Foundation. 2024. Available from: [A snapshot of poverty in winter 2024 - Bevan Foundation](#).

⁵ Huebner GM, Hanmer C, Zapata-Webborn E, Pullinger M, Mckenna J, Few J, et al. Self-reported energy use behaviour changed significantly during the cost-of-living crisis in winter 2022/23: insights from cross-sectional and longitudinal surveys in Great Britain. *Scientific Reports*. 2023;13:21683. doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-48181-7.

The *Housing Warmth and Health and Well-being in Wales* programme has been informed by modelled estimates of fuel poverty in Wales published by the Welsh Government (Welsh Government, 2022⁶). These modelled estimates have shown a significant rise in the number of people that could be living in fuel poverty; with up to an estimated 45% (614,000) in April 2022 compared to 14% (196,000) in 2021. Therefore, more people are expected to be living in cold homes (below 18°C) and experiencing the associated health impacts. Nevertheless, there are several cautions to consider for an accurate picture of fuel poverty in Wales:

- Much has changed regarding fuel poverty since the 2008 Living in Wales Survey and the 2017-18 Wales Housing Conditions Survey, which means they do not give the full picture of fuel poverty in Wales today.
- Higher costs of living, including higher energy prices, claim a greater proportion of households' disposable income and can increase rates of fuel poverty. A previous Public Health Wales publication reported that the cost of living crisis meant that more people were unable to afford the essentials, having wide-ranging negative impacts on mental and physical health (Roberts et al., 2022).
- Energy price rises are likely to hit lower income households disproportionately, given their proportionately higher spending of income on utility bills.
- A combination of inter-related factors should be taken into account including the energy efficiency of a dwelling; disposable income; and the cost of energy as these are the three key factors contributing to fuel poverty⁷. These factors change over time and thus up to date data needs to be collected.

To conclude, we would recommend further collection of data on fuel poverty and population groups at risk of experiencing fuel poverty and that data collection considers the impacts of fuel poverty on physical and mental health.

⁶ Welsh Government. *Fuel poverty modelled estimates for Wales (headline results): as at October 2021*. 2022. Available from: [Fuel poverty modelled estimates for Wales \(headline results\): as at October 2021 \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#).

⁷ ONS. *How fuel poverty is measured in the UK*. 2023. Available from: [How fuel poverty is measured in the UK - Office for National Statistics](#)

The potential impact of changes to the eligibility criteria for the Winter Fuel Payment on fuel poverty in Wales.

Public Health Wales believes that the potential impact on health and well-being should be considered, when making any changes to the eligibility criteria for the Winter Fuel Payment in Wales. This is because current evidence shows the vulnerability of older adults and low-income households. For example, although, the World Health Organization recommends a minimum indoor temperature of 18°C for general populations during cold seasons in temperate and colder climates, it states that a higher minimum temperature may be necessary for vulnerable groups, including children, the elderly and those with chronic illness⁸. This is because they are particularly vulnerable to the negative impacts on health that a cold home can have.

The Public Health Wales and Bangor University systematic review further highlights that older adults are particularly at risk of the negative impacts on health from living in a cold home (Janssen et al., 2023), and therefore any changes to eligibility criteria for the Winter Fuel Payment should consider this.

People living in the poorest parts of Wales face a complex web of challenges that lead them to die more than six years earlier than those in the least deprived areas and spend more years in poorer health (Roberts et al, 2022). A previous Public Health Wales report applying a public health lens to the cost of living crisis in Wales noted that the cost of living would push more people from just about coping to a state of struggling or crisis, but that those who were already the worst off were those who would be hardest hit, accelerating what were already increasing differences in health between those with more and less money in Wales (Roberts et al., 2022). As such, any potential impact of changes to the eligibility criteria for the Winter Fuel Payment on fuel poverty in Wales would need to consider socio-economic status, in line with the requirements of the socio-economic duty introduced as part of the Equality Act 2010, as well as any impact on health inequalities.

⁸ World Health Organization. *WHO housing and health guidelines*. World Health Organization. 2018. Available from: [WHO Housing and health guidelines](#)