

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru | National Assembly for Wales
Y Pwyllgor Newid Hinsawdd, Amgylchedd a Materion Gwledig
Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee
Ymchwiliad i Dlodi Tanwydd | Inquiry into Fuel Poverty
FP 26

Ymateb gan : Scope

Evidence from : Scope

Summary

Scope welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Climate Change Environment and Rural Affairs Committee's inquiry into Fuel Poverty.

Life costs more for disabled people. Our research shows that disabled people face average extra costs of £583 a month. For one in five disabled people, these costs add up to over £1,000 each month.

As energy is one of these of these extra costs, disabled people are more likely to be affected by fuel poverty. While the Welsh Government does not publish specific statistics on the impact of fuel poverty on disabled people, almost two-fifths (38.6 per cent) of households in England living in fuel poverty include a disabled person.

Scope therefore believes that an effective fuel poverty strategy would need to address the particular challenges facing disabled people. While fuel poverty amongst vulnerable households in Wales has dropped significantly since the introduction of the 2010 Fuel Poverty Strategy, it is not clear whether the Welsh Government's fuel poverty measures are dealing with the specific issues that make disabled people more susceptible to the effects of fuel poverty. The revised strategy should place a greater emphasis on proactively identifying disabled people at risk of fuel poverty and addressing the specific challenges facing them.

Recommendations

While updating the Fuel Poverty Strategy for Wales, the Welsh Government should:

1. Commit to reporting the prevalence of fuel poverty amongst disabled people.
2. Introduce a specific target around the reduction of fuel poverty amongst disabled people.
3. Adapt its measure of fuel poverty so that it takes into account the impact of extra costs on disabled people's living standards.
4. Commit to ensuring that all schemes and programmes designed to alleviate fuel poverty are targeted at disabled people.
5. Commit to exploring the possibility of introducing an in-home advice service designed to help disabled people access the support they need to lift themselves out of fuel poverty.
6. Commit to working with NHS Wales to improve the identification of disabled people who are either in fuel poverty or are at risk of detriment due to poorly heated homes.
7. Introduce a 'disability principle'. This disability principle would recognise that disabled people tend to have higher energy requirements, meaning they are more likely to face unaffordable energy bills and to suffer detriment while living in poorly heated homes.

Background into disabled people's financial resilience

1. Many disabled people face additional costs related to their impairment or condition. For disabled people in the UK, these costs amount to an average of £583 a month.¹ This is on top of welfare payments designed to help meet these costs. One in five disabled people face extra costs of over £1,000 each month.²

¹ Scope (2019), The Disability Price Tag 2019, <https://www.scope.org.uk/campaigns/extra-costs>

² Scope (2019), The Disability Price Tag 2019, <https://www.scope.org.uk/campaigns/extra-costs>

2. Unsurprisingly, disabled people are disproportionately affected by poverty. In Wales, 39 per cent of disabled people are in poverty, compared to 22 per cent of non-disabled people. This poverty rate for disabled people is the highest in the UK.³
3. The National Survey for Wales has similarly found that 22 per cent of people with ‘a limiting long-standing illness, disability or infirmity’ in Wales were in material deprivation, compared to just 12 per cent of non-disabled people.⁴
4. Disabled people also tend to be less financially resilient. Research commissioned by Scope has found that disabled people in the UK have on average of £108,000 less in savings and assets than non-disabled people.⁵
5. In 2016–17, a third of people in Wales with ‘a limiting long-standing illness, disability or infirmity’ could not afford to save £10 a month for retirement or a rainy day, compared to just under a sixth of those without.⁶
6. Disabled people are also more likely to be trapped in debt. Sixteen per cent of households with a disabled person in the UK have unsecured debt totalling more than half their household income, compared to 8 per cent of households overall.⁷
7. The extra costs disabled people face fall broadly into three main categories:

³ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2018), Poverty in Wales 2018,, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/poverty-wales-2018>

⁴ Welsh Assembly (2018), National Survey for Wales, <https://gov.wales/national-survey-wales-results-viewer>

⁵ McKnight, A. (2014). Disabled people’s financial histories: uncovering the disability wealth penalty, CASE paper 181 <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/20543895.pdf>

⁶ Welsh Assembly (2018), National Survey for Wales, <https://gov.wales/national-survey-wales-results-viewer>

⁷ Scope (2013), Disabled people and financial well-being: Credit and debt, <http://www.scope.org.uk/Scope/media/Documents/Publication%20Directory/Credit-and-Debt.pdf?ext=.pdf>

- **Paying for specialised goods and services**, such as assistive technology, wheelchairs or adapted items of clothing.
- **Greater use of non–specialised goods and services**, such as energy and taxis or private hire vehicles.
- **Spending more on non–specialised goods and services**, including some financial products such as insurance.

Disabled people and fuel poverty

8. Disabled people face specific challenges in the energy industry. A third of disabled adults say their impairment or condition has a significant impact on their energy costs.⁸ Disabled people with limited mobility, for example, might have to use more heating to keep warm, whilst people using assistive technology or electrical equipment such as powered wheelchairs will need to use additional electricity to charge these items.

“Our house is a 24-hour running house, as Curtis has overnight care. Our washing machine seems to be constantly on. We have three sets of bedding per day to wash and dry. Including our own bedding, that’s 23 sets of bedding per week.”
Garry, Scope Storyteller

9. Given these higher energy costs, it is possible that disabled people in Wales are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty. This is certainly the case in England, where, under a different measure of fuel poverty, almost two–fifths (38.6 per cent) of households in England living in fuel poverty include a disabled person.⁹ These disabled people would need an average of £308 extra a year to lift them out of fuel poverty.¹⁰

⁸ Scope (2018), Out in the cold, <https://www.scope.org.uk/campaigns/extra-costs/out-in-the-cold/>

⁹ Department for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy (2019). Annual fuel poverty statistics report 2019 (2017 data) England.

¹⁰ Ibid.

10. The current availability of statistics around disabled people in Wales living in fuel poverty makes it difficult to establish whether disabled people in Wales are also disproportionately affected by fuel poverty, as is the case in England.
11. Rather than publishing statistics on fuel rates among disabled people, the Welsh Government uses the category of 'vulnerable households'. This broad category includes any household containing disabled people, elderly people or those under the age of 16.
12. In 2018, 11 per cent of 'vulnerable' households in Wales were in fuel poverty, compared to 12 per cent of all households.¹¹
13. This represents a significant reduction in fuel poverty since 2008, when 29 per cent of 'vulnerable' households in Wales were in fuel poverty, compared to 26 per cent of all households in Wales.
14. While this reduction in fuel poverty is positive, the way the statistics are currently presented mean it is difficult to know whether disabled people have benefited equally from the Welsh Government's efforts to eradicate fuel poverty.

Digital exclusion and online inaccessibility

15. Disabled people are more likely to be digitally excluded. Twenty per cent of disabled people have never accessed the internet, compared to just five per cent of all adults in the UK.
16. Disabled people who do have access to the internet may still find that they are not able to access certain online products and services. In one survey conducted on behalf of Scope, 55 per cent of disabled people in

¹¹ Welsh Government (2019), Fuel poverty estimates for Wales: 2018, <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-09/fuel-poverty-estimates-wales-2018-020.pdf>

England and Wales had experienced issues with inaccessible websites within the previous 12 months.¹²

17. This may explain why only 36 per cent of disabled people in Great Britain use price comparison sites to compare energy deals, compared to 57 per cent of non-disabled people.¹³
18. This may be because some price comparison websites are inaccessible. Using the Wave web accessibility tool, Scope found 39 errors on a single page of one well-known price comparison website.
19. Digital exclusion and online inaccessibility may also explain why only 37 per cent of disabled people manage their electricity or gas accounts online, compared to 55 per cent of non-disabled people.¹⁴
20. The barriers disabled people face while using the internet may therefore be limiting disabled people's ability to find the best deals, particularly when it comes to firms with a predominantly online presence.
21. This may be a contributing factor to the higher energy costs faced by disabled people.

How the Welsh Government's successor to the fuel poverty strategy should differ from its 2010 strategy

Measuring the prevalence of fuel poverty amongst disabled people

22. Scope welcomes the significant reduction in fuel poverty amongst households classed as vulnerable since 2008.

¹² Scope (2018), Out in the cold, <https://www.scope.org.uk/campaigns/extra-costs/out-in-the-cold/>

¹³ Ofgem (2018) Consumer Engagement Survey 2018: Data Tables, Q165, <https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/publications-and-updates/consumer-engagement-survey-2018>

¹⁴ Ofgem (2018) Consumer Engagement Survey 2018: Data Tables, Q10, <https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/publications-and-updates/consumer-engagement-survey-2018>

23. Some evidence suggests that disabled people have benefited from some of the Welsh Government's fuel poverty measures. Research carried out jointly by the UK Energy Research Centre, the University of York and the Association for Decentralised Energy has, for example, found that Wales has made progress in targeting support at disabled people at risk of fuel poverty.¹⁵
24. However, as previously noted, the Welsh Government's use of the broad category of 'vulnerable household' means that there is no publicly available estimate of the prevalence of fuel poverty amongst disabled people in Wales.
25. As each of the groups within this category face different challenges, not every group will necessarily have benefitted equally from this reduction in fuel poverty.
26. As a result, it is difficult to evaluate the Welsh Government's progress at eradicating fuel poverty amongst disabled people in Wales.
27. To ensure that its fuel poverty measures are tackling the specific challenges faced by disabled people, it will be necessary for the Welsh Government to publish statistics on the prevalence of fuel poverty amongst disabled people in Wales

Recommendation: While updating the fuel poverty strategy for Wales, the Welsh Government should commit to reporting the prevalence of fuel poverty amongst disabled people.

Recommendation: While updating the fuel poverty strategy for Wales, the Welsh Government should introduce a specific target around the reduction of fuel poverty amongst disabled people.

¹⁵ UK Energy Research Centre (108), Justice in Energy Efficiency: a focus on fuel poor disabled people and families, <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/sites/default/files/pdf/UKERCACEpolicyguide.pdf>

28. Scope believes that the methodology for the current measure of fuel poverty should recognise the impact of extra costs on the financial resilience of disabled people.
29. As previously mentioned, Scope's research shows that disabled people an average of £583 a month in extra costs. This is the additional amount of money a disabled person would need to earn to be able to afford an equivalent standard of living to a non-disabled person.¹⁶
30. Once extra costs are factored in, a disabled person with an income above the poverty threshold may in fact have the same standard of living as a non-disabled person in poverty.
31. Scope therefore believes that a higher poverty threshold should be used when the metric is used to assess whether disabled people are in fuel poverty.
32. A similar approach was recently adopted by the Social Metric Commission. Their measure of poverty deducts inescapable costs from a family's income. These inescapable costs include childcare, housing and extra costs.¹⁷
33. While the Social Metric Commission uses the monthly value of PIP as a proxy for extra costs, Scope believes that the true figure is much higher, as our extra costs figure of £583 per month is calculated after income including welfare payments like PIP.¹⁸
34. Scope would be happy to work with the Welsh Government to develop a methodology that takes into account the impact of extra costs on disabled people.

Recommendation: While updating the fuel poverty strategy for Wales, the Welsh Government should adopt its measure of fuel poverty so that it recognises the impact of extra costs on disabled people's living standards.

¹⁶ Scope (2019), The Disability Price Tag 2019, <https://www.scope.org.uk/extra-costs/>

¹⁷ Measuring Poverty 2019 (2019), Social Metrics Commission, <https://www.socialmetrics.com/>

¹⁸ Ibid. <https://www.scope.org.uk/extra-costs/>

Identifying and addressing the needs of disabled consumers

a) Identifying disabled people in need of additional support

35. As was recognised in the 2010 Fuel Poverty Strategy, many disabled people may be missing out on the benefits and grants to which they are entitled.
36. In 2015, research carried out by the Extra Costs Commission, a year-long inquiry at Scope into the extra costs faced by disabled people, found that familiarity amongst disabled people with grants to support people with their energy bills was low. Forty per cent were unfamiliar with the Warm Home Discount, 85 per cent were unfamiliar with the Energy Companies Obligation, and more than 80 per cent of disabled people had not heard of the Priority Services Register.
37. Although it is possible that awareness has increased since 2015, these figures suggest that more could be done to ensure that every disabled person who is eligible for support receives it.
38. While the Nest helpline and website may be a helpful source of information for some disabled people, uptake of the available support could be improved through the adoption of a more proactive approach to identifying disabled people at risk of fuel poverty.
39. The Scottish Government funds Energycarers, an in-house advice service delivered by the Energy Saving Trust. Energycarers are specialist energy advisors who can provide intensive support to households with issues that make them more susceptible to fuel poverty, including people who are disabled.
40. During home visits, Energycarers support consumers in a range of ways, such as:

- Helping them to find the best energy tariff,
- Helping them to find funding for energy efficiency improvements or home repairs,
- Approaching their private landlord about energy issues.

41. As the scheme was only introduced in 2019, it is too early to say whether it has led to an impact on fuel poverty in Scotland. However, an evaluation of an earlier pilot of the scheme reported that ‘the pilot demonstrated that a higher level of support is valuable in encouraging reluctant groups to take up energy efficiency measures in the home’.

42. The evaluation also found that ‘one wider benefit of the HES Homecare scheme was its ability to identify people who are not supported through other means’.¹⁹

43. It is therefore possible that introducing a similar scheme in Wales could help ensure that disabled people can access the support for which they are eligible.²⁰

44. While this service would be based on Energycarers, the Welsh Government should ensure that they build and develop on this by addressing any issues identified during the pilot in Scotland.

Recommendation: While updating the fuel poverty strategy for Wales, the Welsh Government should commit to ensuring that all schemes and programmes designed to alleviate fuel poverty are targeted at disabled people.

Recommendation: While updating the fuel poverty strategy for Wales, the Welsh Government should commit to exploring the possibility of introducing an in-home advice service designed to help disabled people access the support they need to lift themselves out of fuel poverty.

¹⁹ Housing and Social Justice Directorate (2019), <https://www.gov.scot/publications/evaluation-hes-homecare-pilot/pages/10/>

²⁰ <https://www.energysavingtrust.org.uk/blog/energy-carer-support-scotland>

Home visits from primary care practitioners

45. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence's guidelines on 'excess winter deaths and illness and the health risks associated with cold homes' recommend that primary care, social care and non-health practitioners carry out annual assessments of the heating needs of those who use their services. ²¹
46. Scope believes that this approach could complement the introduction of an in-house advice service for disabled people in fuel poverty. If an assessment finds that a disabled person has high energy needs, they would be referred to the new in-house advice service.

Recommendation: While updating the fuel poverty strategy for Wales, the Welsh Government should commit to working with NHS Wales to improve the identification of disabled people who are either in fuel poverty or are at risk of detriment due to poorly heated homes.

b) Addressing the individual needs of disabled people

47. In recognising the negative health effects of living in a cold home, the 2010 Fuel Poverty highlights an issue that is disproportionately likely to affect disabled people.
48. Energy efficiency programmes, however, tend to focus on technical solutions to fuel poverty. The new strategy should instead place more of an emphasis on measures that meet the individual needs of disabled people in fuel poverty.

²¹ NICE (2015), Excess winter deaths and illness and the health risks associated with cold homes, <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng6>

49. The new fuel poverty strategy for Wales could do this through the inclusion of a specific ‘disability principle’.
50. This would be based on the ‘vulnerability principle’ in the Fuel Poverty Strategy for England. The UK Government is currently considering amending this principle so that it is clear that the Government will consider ‘the impact of our policies on the health and wellbeing of people on very low incomes, even when they live in a reasonably energy efficient home’. This would mean that they would consider the needs of low-income vulnerable households that are living in A–C rated homes ‘where they may be at risk of serious health impacts, such as if their boiler breaks and they are unable to repair it.’²²
51. The Welsh Government could use this as a basis for a ‘disability principle’. This disability principle would acknowledge the fact that disabled people tend to have higher energy requirements than non-disabled people, making them more likely to fall into fuel poverty.
52. In practice, this disability principle could mean disabled people at risk of fuel poverty would still benefit from energy efficiency measures even if they live in B or C rated homes. This would, of course, depend on an assessment of a disabled person’s individual circumstances, including the impact of a person’s condition or impairment on their heating needs.

Recommendation: While updating the fuel poverty strategy for Wales, the Welsh Government should introduce a ‘disability principle’. This disability principle would recognise that disabled people tend to have higher energy requirements, meaning they are more likely to face unaffordable energy bills and to suffer detriment while living in poorly heated homes.

We’re Scope

²² Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2019), Consultation on the fuel poverty for England, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/819606/fuel-poverty-strategy-england-consultation.pdf

We're Scope, the disability equality charity. We won't stop until we achieve a society where all disabled people enjoy equality and fairness.

We provide practical advice and emotional support to disabled people and their families whenever they need it most.

We use our collective power to change attitudes and end injustice. And we campaign relentlessly to create a fairer society.