

Cost of Living Crisis: The impact of fuel poverty on health in Broxbourne

Families are being squeezed from all sides by a cost of living crisis: high inflation, low benefit levels, and food price increases.

Along with national trends, the cost of energy has increased. Consequently, fuel poverty in Broxbourne has increased over the last year. Utilities and communications issues (which include energy) at Citizens Advice Broxbourne were 6 times higher in the month of February 2022, than the February of 2021 (Citizens Advice Broxbourne, 2022).

This data is very concerning and aligns with the concerns of Citizens Advice nationally. Millions of people across the country are already behind on bills and are struggling to get ahead of the energy price increases in April.

Many Broxbourne residents will be in or are already facing fuel poverty.

What is fuel poverty?

Fuel poverty is generally defined as simply not being able to keep your home warm.

There is a more official definition: a household is said to be fuel poor if it has above-average energy costs, and if paying those costs would push it below the poverty line as far as its remaining income was concerned (MoneySuperMarket, 2020).

In England, the government introduced a new definition of fuel poverty in 2021. This is the 'Low Income Low Energy Efficiency' (LILEE) definition of fuel poverty. A household is fuel poor if:

- They have required fuel costs that are above average (national median level, which using most recent data from 2020 stands at £1,223 of households in each quadrant of the Low-Income Low Energy Efficiency Matrix (GOV.UK, 2020))
- By spending that amount, they would be left with a residual income below the official poverty line (if the household income is 60% below the median household income after housing costs for that year (Trust for London, n.d)).

Why everybody needs a warm home: the health implications

Fuel poverty is of increasing importance in our local community and nationally due to the presence of COVID-19 and its effect on mental wellbeing.

Public Health England states that there is “clear evidence on the links between cold temperatures and respiratory problems. Resistance to respiratory infections is lowered by cool temperatures and can increase the risk of respiratory illness.” (PHE, 2014).

In addition, damp and mould are associated with a 30-50 per cent increase in respiratory problems (End of Fuel Poverty, 2016).

Warm homes enable immune systems to better fight off viruses, improve the likelihood of people with viruses only suffering ‘mild’ symptoms and help improve the recovery process (End Fuel Poverty, 2016).

Mental Health is also adversely affected by cold temperatures. A bedroom temperature of 21 degrees is associated with a 50% reduction in anxiety and depression compared with temperatures of 15 degrees (Gilbertson and Green, 2008).

Tackling fuel poverty can help dampen two of the key long-term COVID symptoms, lung and mental health issues.

Reducing preventable ill health arising from cold homes is vital in protecting the community, NHS, and care services.

Whilst there are steps that can be taken to increase efficiency in properties at low cost, these gains are not sufficient for those living in fuel poverty.

Our recommendations to policymakers

Citizens Advice suggests that the government:

1.) Support people on the lowest incomes through a grant in April, targeted using the existing benefits system.

2.) Increase benefits by the Bank of England forecast inflation rate of 6% for April, rather than the planned September rate of 3.1%. This is a cost neutral solution which would help ensure benefit levels reflect the current cost of living.

3.) Recognise the crisis will stretch through to next winter and invest in targeted non-repayable support for people on the lowest incomes. Analysts predict the price cap could rise again by a predicted £400 in October, effectively wiping out the increase of

October's energy rebate. Government should put in place a further grant for those who need it most (Citizens Advice, 2022).

Citizens Advice Broxbourne also suggests that the government should consider going further by making the one off repayable £200 discount on energy bills, non-repayable to those on low incomes.

We can help all Broxbourne residents

If you are worried about your bills and are struggling to keep warm. First, you're not alone and there is tailored support available for you.

- What you can get will depend on your circumstances, but there are options available for reducing your energy costs and improving the energy efficiency of your home
- You can seek tailored support by reaching us on 0808 278 7915.

Your experiences are important to us

Our research would not be possible without the contribution of everyone.

If you have your own experiences on energy that you would like to share, or a suggestion on what we should research next please send an email to Researcher and Campaigner, Matthew Morris at morris.m@citizensadvicebroxbourne.org.

Sources

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