

Parliamentary Briefing: Fuel Poverty

Fuel poverty is a major issue for people served by foodbanks in The Trussell Trust Network across the UK. Over 90% of foodbanks in The Trussell Trust network see people referred to them who are experiencing fuel poverty. Fuel poverty can lead to severely detrimental effects on people's mental and physical health, and also affects people's ability to afford food.

Foodbanks are providing a wide variety of emergency interventions to provide immediate help for people experiencing fuel poverty, while also looking at ways to address fuel poverty in the long-term. Locally, foodbanks have been developing local, innovative solutions that are often run in conjunction with other local agencies including charities, energy companies and local authorities. e.g. providing fuel vouchers, warm clothes and hot water bottles, redistributing donated Winter Fuel Allowance funds, supporting communications with energy suppliers, providing signposting and advice, and , creating oil purchasing cooperatives.

Nationally, The Trussell Trust has developed initiatives to address fuel poverty in the short- and longer-term, most notably the Fuel Bank®, developed and delivered in partnership with npower, which distributes top-up vouchers to eligible foodbank users on pre-payment meters.

Key stats

- Over 85% of foodbanks in the Trussell Trust Network felt that people referred to them for emergency food needed support with paying fuel bills.
- Fuel poverty was a significant concern for over 4 in 5 foodbanks in the Trussell Trust network, who that felt that being involved in a fuel poverty alleviation project would be beneficial.
- Over 1 in 4 foodbanks in the network already has a fuel poverty alleviation initiative.
- 3 out of 5 foodbanks identified some sort of support being provided by their local authority. However the vast majority of this was in the form of crisis support but this was not always easy to access or available long-term.

Background

It is widely acknowledged that the key factors that can contribute to fuel poverty are:

- Household income
- Cost of energy
- The energy efficiency of the property (and therefore, the energy required to heat and power the home)

The first and second are factors that are seen by foodbanks. Several foodbanks have reported anecdotally that people were referred to them without the facilities and/or fuel to cook the food that the foodbank was providing. There is only limited local support available for areas that are 'off-grid' where foodbanks have reported providing coal, wood, gas and oil on an ad hoc basis.

Since the inception of the More Than Food programme in 2014 The Trussell Trust has begun to explore ways to identify and support people served by foodbanks that are 'fuel poor' through projects like Energy Bank¹ and Fuel Bank®².

The largest study on foodbank use to date, by researchers at the University of Oxford,³ identified that financial and material deprivation amongst people referred to foodbanks was leading to fuel poverty. Researchers also identified that that users were suffering from health conditions associated with poor housing conditions and fuel poverty, or had health conditions which would necessitate higher energy costs, such as disabilities or respiratory conditions⁴:

- 28% had experienced a recent rise in expenses related to housing, such as heating, utilities or rent
- Half of households surveyed had gone without heating for more than four days in a given month and/or had been unable to afford appropriate clothes for the weather, over the last 12 months.
- More than half of households were classed as having a disability.
- 75% experienced ill health in their household and 1/3 were affected by mental health.

The report identified also that the biggest proportion of people being referred to foodbanks were parents with dependent children and data from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy suggests the highest prevalence of fuel poverty is seen for lone parents with dependent children (23.6%).⁵

Key recommendations

- 'Data matching' between public authorities and energy companies, as proposed in the Government's latest BEIS consultation on fuel poverty measures.
- Maintaining safeguard tariffs or 'price caps' per unit of energy.
- Simplifying access to Warm Home Discounts to help vulnerable groups who may be disengaged.
- A standardised or comparable measure of fuel poverty across the U.K.
- More targeted financial support for people facing fuel poverty to avoid 'self-disconnection'.
- Increased statutory provision of energy efficiency measures to fuel poor households.
- Increased coordination, and improved accessibility, of energy and debt advice from local authorities and Jobcentres for vulnerable or hard to reach groups.
- Review of impact of Fuel Poverty and Health Booster Fund.

¹ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/more-than-food/tackling-fuel-poverty/energy-signposting/>

² <https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/more-than-food/tackling-fuel-poverty/fuel-bank/>

³ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/research-advocacy/oxford-university-report/>

⁴ https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/07/OU_Report_final_01_08_online2.pdf

⁵ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/639118/Fuel_Poverty_Statistics_Report_2017_revised_August.pdf

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