

PREPARING FOR COLD WEATHER AND THE COLD WEATHER PAYMENTS

Analysis by UCL Energy Institute, University of Oxford Environmental Change Institute and Cambridge Architectural Research for the End Fuel Poverty Coalition

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For many people in fuel poverty, a major worry is the possibility of really cold weather and the need for more heating.

Memories of the Beast from the East are still raw – several consecutive days of freezing weather.

The fear would be less if there was proper government support, but there isn't.

The present Cold Weather Payments are only made to eligible households AFTER there has been a week of below freezing weather. If it is only six consecutive days or less, there is no payment.

So households cannot put on the heating and know that there will be some money to help with the fuel bill. They just have to suffer from the extra cold and hope it doesn't make them ill, or worse.

New analysis by academics at UCL has found that during spells of particularly cold weather in December 2022, households in fuel poverty used significantly less energy than other households. Gas usage was 21% lower and electricity 11% lower.

Eoghan McKenna of the UCL Energy Institute said:

“We know that these fuel poor households are living in colder homes, and that they cut back on their heating in response to the rise in energy prices.”

This demonstrates that the poorest households are those least able to respond to the coldest weather and should be given some financial support.

This is confirmed by research last year from the University of Oxford and Cambridge Architectural Research which showed that households on smart prepayment meters could not stay warm when it got really cold.

They just did not have sufficient money and their fuel poverty is most severe when they need the heat the most.

Critically, those most affected were households identified as vulnerable and listed on the Priority Services Register – the sick, disabled, elderly and young. These households were those most likely to run out of money and become disconnected from their energy supply, for about an hour a day in the coldest weather.

This obviously puts them at risk of living in cold, damp homes and the health impacts this causes. If we see more older people struggling with their bills this year due to the Winter Fuel Payment cuts this is going to become much more of a problem.

Jason Palmer from Cambridge Architectural Research and UCL said:

“It is extremely worrying that households in fuel poverty are cutting energy use compared to other households when it is coldest. This puts their health, and ultimately their lives, at risk.”

That's why the existing Cold Weather Payments system is inadequate. The £25 paid retrospectively after a week is less than half the EXTRA cost of keeping warm and does not even recognize the existence of fuel poverty. Recipients include those on Pension Credit or income-related benefits. As a House of Commons Energy Committee report [concluded](#): "In its current form, the Cold Weather Payment is an outdated, old-fashioned scheme."

What we want to see is a new Extreme Weather Payment that credits the energy account of all eligible households on every day that the Met Office declares the minimum temperature will be -4 degrees Celsius or lower on the following day.

The payment is made in advance of the cold weather, on a daily basis. It should be available to all vulnerable households and the level should be set at £10 per day, to offset the extra cold and existing fuel poverty. If energy prices rise, this would need reviewing.

Dr Tina Fawcett of the Environmental Change Institute, Oxford University, said:

“This simple change, which will not be expensive, will help households stay warm when it really matters. It will ensure the Cold Weather Payment delivers the right support at the right time.”

A benefit to the Government of this approach is that it only kicks in when cold weather is forecast and helps those most at risk of the ill-effects of the conditions and who do not have the money to offset the cold with extra heating. In a mild winter, there would be few demands on the Treasury.

A modern, updated, compassionate level of support during cold weather would be a useful antidote for the Labour Government to the Winter Fuel Payment cuts.