

# Fuel Poverty: Cold Hard Facts

What is it? How can we help? How can it stop?



**citizens  
advice**

**Gateshead**

## Foreword

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In England, in the 21st century, we should all be able to stay warm at home, the fact that many of us can't evokes a feeling of moral outrage deep within me. Rising energy costs, low incomes, energy-inefficient homes and the Covid-19 pandemic combine to create a perfect storm, with more people than ever before struggling to meet the basic needs of their families, having to choose to heat their home, feed their children or pay their rent.

National Energy Action for Warm Homes describes the impact cold homes can have, causing or worsening *"a range of serious health conditions such as heart attacks, strokes, bronchitis, and asthma. Each year around 10,000 people die as a result of living in a cold home"*.

Yes, you read that right 10,000 people die of the cold, a cruel and unnecessary waste of human life.

*And we know fuel poverty can*

*also have a significant impact on mental health and is a known risk factor for suicide. Cold homes are also preventing our children from thriving ....."*

Never has this been more real than it is today, the pandemic has thrown families and communities into disarray, increasing demand for energy advice, social welfare advice more generally and of course food parcels for those who cannot afford to eat. Households with pre-payment meters have been particularly hard hit, with many facing unthinkable choices and the most awful stress and anxiety as they struggle to balance the demands of family life and the increased pressures of a pandemic.

I want to say loud and clear that fuel poverty is not inevitable. Advice and financial support to help struggling households can make a world of difference, especially when combined with improvements to the heating and insulation of their properties to make them easier and cheaper to heat, as well as reducing carbon emissions - a policy priority for Gateshead who declared a Climate Emergency recently.

There's no doubt good quality advice and information can help people living in vulnerable circumstances to navigate the complexities of the energy market, and additional protections can be put in place to make sure they aren't unfairly disadvantaged by policies and practices but it's a minefield and often frontline professionals are unsure what to do and where to go for help.

There so much we can all do to help and our aim in sharing this with you is to make it as easy as possible for you to know what to do, when and how. And of course don't forget you can always refer your clients with energy issues to Citizens Advice using our web referral form - [www.citizensadvicegateshead.org.uk/contact-us](http://www.citizensadvicegateshead.org.uk/contact-us). The form is very easy to use, it's on the landing page of our website and I promise you it will take you less than a minute to complete.

Fuel poverty is not inevitable. Advice and financial support to help struggling households can make the world of difference, I hope this guidance helps you, if you find you need more from us then email us at [advice@citizensadvicegateshead.org.uk](mailto:advice@citizensadvicegateshead.org.uk)

## Fuel poverty

Energy is an essential service, and everyone should be confident they can adequately heat their home and protect their health. At Citizens Advice Gateshead we strive to be there for people who find themselves in need of support. This booklet has been created to provide an overview of what fuel poverty is, and what someone who finds themselves either in or at risk of being in fuel poverty can do to get support.

As you will see in this booklet there are many different routes to support and advice with fuel poverty, which can be overwhelming. It is important to remember that people chose the one that feels right for them and their circumstances.

## What is fuel poverty?

By the official definition, someone lives in fuel poverty if they spend 10% or more of their disposable household income on their energy costs. Disposable income, as defined by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) is the amount of money that individuals and families have available for spending or saving after direct taxes (such as Income Tax and Council Tax) have been accounted for. It includes earnings from employment, private pensions and investments, as well as cash benefits provided by the state

The Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC) added to this definition in their report 'Fuel Poverty: A framework for future action', stating that a household is said to be in fuel poverty if:

They have required fuel costs that are above average (the national median level), and were they to spend that amount they would be left with a residual income below the official poverty line.

*Note the DECC was subsequently replaced with The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy*

## Key fuel poverty factors

The key factors that can contribute to fuel poverty are:

- ☑ The energy efficiency of the property (and therefore, the energy required to heat and power the home). Typically, any home with an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) rating of lower than C is performing poorly.
- ☑ The cost of energy.
- ☑ Low household income.

## Number of households in fuel poverty is rising

The number of households experiencing fuel poverty is rising at the moment for several reasons:

- ☑ The cost of energy keeps increasing, which means we need to spend more of our income on paying these bills.

Many of us live in draughty homes, from which lots of heat escapes, and rely on heating systems that are old and inefficient. As we do not have much money to spare, it is difficult to make our homes more energy efficient, which would reduce our bills.

- ☑ The general cost of living is rising and this is also putting pressure on our finances so we have less money to go around.

Fuel poverty can affect you regardless of how you pay for

your electricity and gas. Whether you are on a prepayment meter, where you pay for your electricity or gas before you use it, or on a tariff with your supplier where you pay by direct debit.

In Gateshead, 9,985 households were deemed to be fuel poor in 2019. This is no surprise, as around 32,700 people living in Gateshead reside in some of the most deprived areas in England.

Fuel poverty contributes towards excess winter mortality. Most of these excess deaths occur amongst the over 75's where respiratory diseases are the single largest cause of death. Being unable to heat your home adequately and infection with seasonal influenza were the two single main causes of excess winter mortality in the past. Now, this is only going to get worse due to the additional danger from Covid-19. Gateshead has an ageing population, with 19.6% of its 202,000 residents aged 65 or over. It is estimated that this proportion will increase to 32% by 2024. Empowering people to keep warm safe homes in winter is now more important than ever.

## What can people do if they live in fuel poverty?

For someone who is living in fuel poverty, their supplier is likely the best-equipped to help someone, and we would encourage people to get in touch with their supplier to explain the situation and seek support directly. However, if they have already tried this and are dissatisfied with what was said, or if they feel like they would benefit from some independent advice and information, this flow-chart can help guide them to the best solution.

Even if you have received a court warrant or have been threatened with disconnection, our Extra Help Unit may be able to assist you, so get in touch as soon as possible.

We have also produced a client-oriented version of this booklet which can help guide them too.

You can find this on our website [citizensadvicegateshead.org.uk](http://citizensadvicegateshead.org.uk)

**Are you confident finding information online and/or doing things yourself?**

NO

YES

Contacting your supplier is a good place to start. These websites are also a great source of advice on energy issues:

[citizensadvice.org.uk/energy](http://citizensadvice.org.uk/energy)

For information on how to go about addressing all kinds of energy issues

[energysavingtrust.org.uk](http://energysavingtrust.org.uk)  
[simpleenergyadvice.org.uk](http://simpleenergyadvice.org.uk)

To find out about Government grants and support available to improve your home's energy efficiency

**Do you feel your issue could be addressed by a simple phone call?**

YES

NO

**Call the Citizens Advice Consumer Helpline on 0808 223 1133.**  
Our energy advice specialists can help to guide you through various issues including:

Understanding tariffs, bills and fuel options

Understanding how to switch energy suppliers, including how to make price comparisons to identify savings

Providing advice on energy efficiency measures and identifying grants that are available to you

Support with complaints or customer service issues with an energy company

Advice on whether you are eligible for Warm Home Discount and Priority Service Register

**Citizens Advice Gateshead can give you an Energy Advice appointment to guide you through multiple complex energy issues, or if you are in crisis**

You can access Citizens Advice Gateshead's energy advice by calling 0191 478 5100, sending an email to

[advice@citizensadvicegateshead.org.uk](mailto:advice@citizensadvicegateshead.org.uk)

or by dropping into our office located on Swan Street, Gateshead, to arrange an appointment. This route may be best for you if:

- You have multiple complex energy issues
- You need advice on benefit entitlement and/or assistance in claiming benefits. This includes checks for eligibility and applications for Warm Home Discount, rebates available from energy suppliers and the Priority Services Register
- You need advice on dealing with and reducing fuel debt, including accessing financial support to pay off fuel debts through charitable grants and ongoing payment plans
- You are in energy crisis and cannot heat or power your home

## What agencies and companies can, and should, do

### Citizens Advice Gateshead

[www.citizensadvicegateshead.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvicegateshead.org.uk)  
0191 478 5100

In the past year we helped 745 local people with energy issues, from advising on simple queries such as understanding energy bills, how to go about switching suppliers, up to more complex issues like fuel debts, supply disconnections and making a complaint. Citizens Advice Gateshead also delivers part of the national consumer helpline, which has specialist energy advisers who in the past year helped over 47,000 people with energy queries over the phone.

At Citizens Advice Gateshead we have two dedicated advice and support programmes available to people vulnerable to fuel poverty living in various circumstances.

- ☑ Those spending >10% of net monthly income on utilities
- ☑ Those on low incomes
- ☑ Those in receipt of DLA/PIP, JSA, ESA or Universal Credit
- ☑ Those with a disability/long term sickness
- ☑ Those of pensionable age
- ☑ Those with dependent children

The Energy Advice Programme provides one-to-one advice to clients in or at risk of fuel poverty. People within the groups below are often at risk of fuel poverty.

The Energy Advice Programme overlaps with our second

programme, The Energy Redress Scheme, which offers targeted support to vulnerable consumers in Gateshead including

- ☑ people aged 65 and over who have a long-term health condition that may be exacerbated by living in a cold home.
- ☑ people who have had a stroke
- ☑ people with dementia
- ☑ people with respiratory disease
- ☑ people who have mental ill health
- ☑ people who are vulnerable to fuel poverty because of their household composition
- ☑ people who are in fuel debt or at risk of fuel debt due to having other debts or a low income.

Together these programmes offer tailored advice on energy related issues such as:

- ☑ Understanding tariffs, bills, and fuel options.
- ☑ Advice, information, and support in understanding selling methods, switching energy suppliers or tariffs, including carrying out a comparison to identify any potential financial savings.
- ☑ Providing advice on energy efficiency measures, thermal efficiency measures, and identifying grants available.

☑ Providing benefit entitlement checks and/or assistance in claiming benefits. This includes checks for eligibility and applications for Warm Home Discount (WHD), rebates available from energy suppliers and the Priority Services Register.

☑ Support with complaints or customer service issues with an energy company.

☑ Advice on dealing with and reducing fuel debt, including accessing financial support to pay off fuel debts through charitable grants, and ongoing payment plans. This is aimed at giving people long-term relief from fuel poverty.

☑ Referrals for further specialist advice within our local office, for example specialist debt advice, or referrals to other organisations for additional support

The programmes can help people if they find themselves in fuel crisis, unable to heat their home. To refer someone ring 0191 478 5100 or use the referral form on our website: [www.citizensadvicegateshead.org.uk/contact-us](http://www.citizensadvicegateshead.org.uk/contact-us)

### Ofgem

[www.ofgem.gov.uk](http://www.ofgem.gov.uk)  
020 7901 7000

The Office for Gas and Electricity Markets, or Ofgem for short, is the independent National Regulatory Authority for energy. They work with government and the energy industry to protect consumers now and in the future by working to deliver a greener, fairer energy system.

For example, Ofgem is responsible for setting the energy price cap to ensure consumers pay a fair price for their gas and electricity per unit. Ofgem recently announced new

rules that will force suppliers to offer more help to pre-payment meter customers struggling to pay their energy bills this winter. From the 15th of December 2020 these new protections will mean prepayment customers can be offered a fixed amount of emergency credit to keep their homes warm. Ofgem also agreed emergency measures with suppliers at the outset of the Coronavirus pandemic, so that anyone struggling financially can get support on a case by case basis. It is important to note that this support is a credit that will have to be repaid at some point in the future.

Ofgem do not provide advice to clients but they will become involved when a supplier is acting incorrectly. In the first instance, clients should be directed to the National Consumer Service on 0808 223 1133

### The supplier

Suppliers are the ideal first point of contact if someone needs help, they may be able to offer support to those who are struggling to pay their bills, whether they are on a pre-payment meter or not

- ☑ reviewing bill payment plans, including debt repayment plans
- ☑ payment breaks or reductions in how much is paid
- ☑ giving greater time to pay
- ☑ in some cases, access to hardship funds
- ☑ emergency credit for prepayment customers

Centrica plc (British Gas)  
www.britishgas.co.uk  
0333 202 9802 (customer service)

Scottish and Southern Energy (SSE)  
www.sse.co.uk  
0345 026 2658 (customer service)

E.ON UK  
www.eonenergy.com  
0345 052 0000 (customer service)

EDF Energy  
www.edfenergy.com  
0333 200 5100 (customer service)

RWE npower  
www.npower.com  
0800 073 3000

Scottish Power  
www.scottishpower.co.uk  
0800 027 0072

Energy networks, the companies who supply energy to suppliers, have a "Priority Services Register" for people who need a little extra help, such as large print bills or more support during a power cut. Gateshead is covered by Northern Power Grid. Applying to be on the register can be done directly with the network, or through the supplier, both should ask questions about what extra help the client needs. This hierarchy allows both the network who run the electricity cables (Northern Power Grid) and energy supplier companies (British Gas, NPower, Eon etc.) to be aware they need extra help.

Suppliers in England are also bound by the Energy Company Obligation (ECO) meaning they should tell customers what support is available for them to improve the energy efficiency of their home

when asked. For example, if anyone in a household is receiving benefits and they live in a draughty home with an old and inefficient heating system, then the first place to start is by asking the energy supplier if they can help. Contact information can be found on the most recent utility bill, along with the client's account number which they will need to identify you.

Most suppliers offer the Warm Home Discount, whereby they can provide rebates to households on certain benefits. The rebate is £140 for 2020/21 and a client should contact their electricity supplier directly to see if they qualify.

**Energy Saving Trust**  
www.energysavingtrust.org.uk  
020 7222 0101

The Energy Saving Trust is a non-profit organisation, funded both by government and energy companies. Their aim is to cut emissions of carbon dioxide by promoting the sustainable and efficient use of energy.

What the Energy Saving Trust can and should do is to point people in the right direction towards improving the energy efficiency of their home by offering impartial advice. If someone is looking for bespoke energy efficiency advice for their home they can ring 0800 444 202 or go to [simpleenergyadvice.org.uk/](http://simpleenergyadvice.org.uk/)

## Gateshead Council & The Gateshead Housing Company

www.gateshead.gov.uk  
0191 433 3000

www.gatesheadhousing.co.uk  
0191 433 5353

Like all local authorities in the country Gateshead Council is bound by the Home Energy Conservation Act, requiring the council to set out measures to improve local energy efficiency and reduce carbon emissions. Gateshead Council incorporated these measures into their Housing Strategy 2019-2030, aiming to improve the energy efficiency of council-managed homes.

The council expects these measures to help reduce fuel poverty in the coming years. If a client lives in a council-managed property and feels it needs to have work done to improve its energy efficiency they can reach out to the Gateshead Housing Company on 0191 433 5353.

**AgilityEco**  
www.agilityeco.co.uk/  
01372 738952

A company whose main aim is to enable energy companies and local authorities to meet their social and environmental obligations. AgilityEco manage outreach partnerships with councils across the country, including Gateshead Council. Three of their schemes which Gateshead Council promote are listed below. Each of them has their own website, but information

can also be found through Gateshead Council Energy Services Team too.

☑ LEAP – Local Energy Advice Partnership; a free-of-charge, holistic support service offered to those in fuel poverty, or vulnerable of being so. [www.applyforleap.org.uk](http://www.applyforleap.org.uk).

☑ ECHO – Emergency Central Heating Offer; a free-of-charge service to vulnerable households whose gas boiler has broken down and who need immediate assistance to stay warm and well. Call the Energy Services Team on 0191 433 3994 to start a referral, and find out more at [www.emergencyheating.org.uk](http://www.emergencyheating.org.uk).

☑ Warmer Homes; a project which provides free gas connections and first time central heating to homes within reach of the gas network. [www.warmerhomes.org.uk](http://www.warmerhomes.org.uk).

**Groundwork North East**  
www.groundwork.org.uk/hubs/north-east-and-yorkshire  
Tel 01388 662666

A local charity whose Green Doctor scheme aims to promote energy efficiency in homes. They offer telephone support and can be reached on 0113 238 0601

**AgeUK Gateshead**  
www.ageuk.org.uk/gateshead  
Tel 0191 477 3559

Age UK Gateshead (a local charity for people 50+) are offering help with fuel poverty across Gateshead and Newcastle with their E.On funded Warm Home scheme. Aiming to reduce fuel poverty

by either increasing income (via benefit checks and Warm Home Discount claims) or by reducing the amount of energy used in the first place (via energy efficiency advice, switching help, free guides and equipment such as energy efficient light bulbs, draught excluders, remote control plugs, and letter box brushes), the scheme is funded until end March 2021. To access the service telephone 0191 477 3559

## **Green Homes Grant**

[www.simpleenergyadvice.org.uk](http://www.simpleenergyadvice.org.uk)  
Tel 0800 444202

Homeowners and landlords in England can apply for a voucher towards the cost of installing energy efficient and low-carbon heating improvements to homes, which could help save up to £600 a year on energy bills.

The government will provide a voucher that covers up to two thirds of the cost of qualifying improvements to a home. The maximum value of the voucher is £5,000. A higher level of subsidy is available if the recipient are a homeowner and either they or a member of their household receives one of the qualifying benefits, covering 100% of the cost of the improvements. The maximum value of these voucher is £10,000. Landlords cannot apply for the low-income part of the scheme.

Vouchers are used to install at least one primary home insulation (solid or cavity wall insulation, insulation for the loft, flat roof or roof etc.) or low carbon heating (Air or ground source heat pumps, solar thermal

heating or biomass boilers) and can help towards the costs of other secondary measures such as draught proofing, double glazing and water tank insulation.

LEAP can help with Green Energy Grant applications for residents who don't have internet access, or who need support. Clients can reach them on 0800 060 7567 or go to their website - [www.applyforleap.org.uk](http://www.applyforleap.org.uk).

## **National Energy Action**

[www.nea.org.uk](http://www.nea.org.uk)  
Tel 0191 261 5677

NEA is a national charity whose vision is to end fuel poverty. Among their activities towards achieving this goal is providing advice and support to people struggling to heat their homes affordably through their Warm and Safe Homes project. Clients can contact them through <https://www.nea.org.uk/advice/wash-advice/> for independent advice and support for their energy issues.



[www.citizensadvicegateshead.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvicegateshead.org.uk)

[www.facebook.com/CitizensAdviceGateshead](https://www.facebook.com/CitizensAdviceGateshead)

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