

RUNNING ON EMPTY

Unpaid carers' experiences of
fuel poverty in the UK

**CARE
FULL**

Findings

Unpaid carers and disabled people are often at the sharp end of volatility in our economy. From cuts to public spending under the austerity programme, to the travails of the Covid-19 pandemic and increases in the cost of life's essentials, unpaid carers live at the intersection of the many crises that our society faces.

In light of these challenges faced by unpaid carers and in the context of global instability around fuel prices, this research, authored by Care Full and commissioned by Carers Trust, seeks to understand if and how those with caring responsibilities are able to get by.

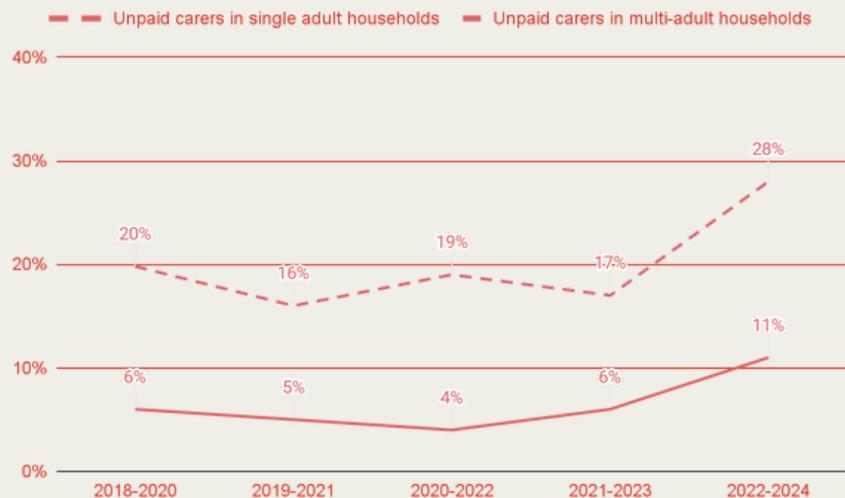
Utilising Understanding Society data and in conversation with unpaid carers across England, Scotland and Wales, we find:

- In households with a single adult, more than a quarter (28%) of unpaid carers live in fuel poverty, rising to a third (36%) in single adult households with children.
- Where there are multiple adults in the household, around one in ten unpaid carers (11%) live in fuel poverty, rising to one in seven (14%) when that care takes place within the home (significantly higher than the 9% of non-carers in households with multiple adults).
- Fuel poverty is higher among unpaid carers receiving some benefits. Around a quarter of unpaid carers in multi-adult households and in receipt of Universal Credit (22%), and one in five in receipt of Carer's Allowance (17%), are in fuel poverty. In single adult households, 49% of unpaid carers in receipt of Universal Credit are in fuel poverty.
- Amongst unpaid carers in multi-adult households, fuel poverty is also higher for those living with children (14% compared to 11% not living with children) and those caring for at least 35 hours a week (16% amongst those caring within the home compared to 13% caring for less than 35 hours).

- Fuel poverty is on the rise; amongst unpaid carers caring in the home in multi-adult households, fuel poverty almost doubled between 2021-23 and 2022-24, from 7% to 14%. Unpaid carers we spoke to talked about energy costs rising drastically across all types of fuel, with some paying up to £500 per month on energy.

Prevalence of fuel poverty amongst unpaid carers over time

Source: Understanding Society



- Unpaid carers shared the ways their caring directly increased their energy usage. Some common reasons included:
 - Washing clothes and bedding multiple times a day
 - Keeping the heating on at all times or in multiple rooms
 - Cooking multiple meals at different times of the day for different requirements
 - Using heat pads and electric blankets
 - Pressure mattresses or electric hospital beds
 - Oxygen or specialised breathing equipment

Recommendations

Our recommendations seek to address fuel poverty for everyone and identify additional support and mechanisms to ensure unpaid carers are no longer experiencing inequality due to their caring.

Given the nature of fuel poverty - a result of low incomes, high fuel costs and high fuel needs - change will only come about when actors across the system engage with meaningful action. Our recommendations speak to all these actors and identify specific and connected actions.

For energy providers

For energy providers

Low systemic impact

Update and improve the Priority Services Register (PSR)

Unpaid carers identified flaws in the PSR process, including that many were unaware of eligibility criteria and, even when the person they cared for was signed up, unpaid carers had problems dealing with energy providers on behalf of the person they cared for.

To address this providers should - as standard:

- Identify those eligible for the register.
- Improve training for staff so they can identify people and understand that carers may be dealing with bills on behalf of the person they care for.
- Add carers to the eligible groups on the PSR.

For energy providers

Medium systemic impact

Introduce a social tariff

Introduce a social tariff (a discounted rate of energy targeted to those facing higher energy costs) and ensure unpaid carers are one of the groups eligible for this, alongside disabled people, people with additional needs and those on low incomes, to help move them out of fuel poverty. The cost of the tariff should be covered from the energy provider profits. The End Fuel Poverty Coalition finds this is a popular policy with 75% of the public in support²⁷.

For energy providers

High systemic impact

Abolish standing charges

The removal of standing charges for those on the Priority Services Register and on low incomes to improve the affordability of energy for low-income and high usage households, including unpaid carers themselves.

For support services

For support services

Low systemic impact

Improve carers assessments

Make improvements to carers' assessments and carer support plans (and social care assessments) to include identifying fuel poverty risks and make referrals to the PSR and appropriate advice and support services.

For support services

Medium systemic impact

Commit to consistent funding

Provide consistent funding to enable quality advice and support services with embedded knowledge on financial support, including energy advice to help prevent unpaid carers from falling into fuel poverty, as well as help lift them out. Consistency and quality of advice and support services for unpaid carers are crucial to improve identification and reduce hardship amongst unpaid carers.

For support services

High systemic impact

Improve referral mechanisms

Develop an automatic referral programme by NHS providers for all people with long-term conditions, disabilities, and unpaid carers to address the social impact of health-related conditions. Referrals should connect people with local support services, both statutory and third sector. Recognising that systemic inequalities (like fuel poverty) ultimately have cost implications for individual, collective, and financial wellbeing at all levels of the system.

For government

For government

Low systemic impact

Create a universal definition of fuel poverty

Create an inclusive universal definition of fuel poverty across the UK based on a household's ability to meet their energy needs within their means. Recent reporting from the Committee on Fuel Poverty concluded that the Low Income, Low Energy Efficiency (LILEE) metric used in England should be reviewed as it no longer captures the full range of households facing unaffordable bills. This recommendation reflects the need for affordability to be identified and acted on through the use of the definition. National Energy Action has recommended this in addition to the LILEE metric, whilst in Scotland and Wales, an affordability-based metric takes precedent²⁸.

For government

Medium systemic impact

Improve Carer's Allowance

The UK and devolved Governments should commit to a wholesale review and reform of Carer's Allowance, the Carer Support Payment, and the wider social security system supporting carers, looking at:

- The purpose of Carer's Allowance and the public messaging that accompanies it
- The rate is set to meet an Essentials Guarantee across the social security system (see high-impact recommendations)
- Eligibility criteria for Carer's Allowance, including:
 - The 21-hour study rule, which currently prevents full-time students from claiming it
 - The amount of care that needs to be provided (35 hours) and that care needs to be provided to one person
 - The removal of the State Pension cut off

For government

For government

Medium systemic impact

Consider how benefits interact

Address the balancing act of social security where carer's allowance sees a deduction in Universal Credit or the benefits of the person who is cared for.

Social tariff

Introduce a requirement for energy providers to provide a social tariff. See recommendations for energy providers.

Carer inclusion

Ensure carers are included in and supported by:

- a. the incoming Crisis and Resilience Fund in England,
- b. the Carers Support Fund in Wales
- c. The Winter Heating Payment in Scotland

For government

High systemic impact

Minimum Income Guarantee

Explore a Minimum Income Guarantee for unpaid carers, which would create an accepted minimum that everyone should receive (whether in paid work or not), will improve living standards and lift millions out of poverty.

Essentials Guarantee

Commit to the JRF-led Essentials Guarantee to improve Universal Credit to meet the essential needs of households²⁹. This would not only protect people from falling into poverty but would also improve the lives of many unpaid carers, lifting them out of poverty. This should be extended to Carer's Allowance.

For government

For government

High systemic impact

Community energy

Support and invest in community-owned energy, enabling communities to build their own community wealth as well as reducing costs for those experiencing the most hardship, like unpaid carers.

End standing charges

End the use of standing charges to fund the Warm Homes Discount, instead introduce a progressive tax model to fund the Warm Homes Discount as recommended by the Resolution Foundation in their recent report³⁰.

Basic energy

Commit to testing the feasibility of a Basic Services Scheme to ensure a basic level of energy through the winter months³¹. The Energy Bills Support Scheme payments from the Government between October 2022 and March 2023 show that there is state capacity to support people to cover a basic level of energy over the winter months. Analysis shows that this had a tangible impact on fuel poverty at a time when bills were otherwise soaring. The crisis caused by the increase in energy prices has not ended; bills continue to rise. Such a policy would acknowledge fuel poverty as an economic, environmental, and public health issue. University College London's Institute of Health Equity estimates 63,000 excess winter deaths in England in 2020-21 and that 10% of these can be directly attributed to fuel poverty³².

ABOUT CARE FULL

Care Full has a vision of social and economic systems that centre care - in all its forms - by design. We understand this will require transformative change that engages with the root causes of marginalising care in our economy. Our role is to drive forward that change; building essential evidence, catalysing a movement of solidarity and shifting narratives towards a more expansive and collective understanding of care.

ABOUT CARERS TRUST

Carers Trust works to transform the lives of unpaid carers. It partners with its network of local carer organisations to provide funding and support, deliver innovative, evidence-based programmes, and raise awareness and influence policy. Carers Trust's vision is that unpaid carers are heard and valued, with access to support, advice and resources to enable them to live fulfilled lives.