

Our voices ■ Our choices

Disabled People, Poverty, and the Cost of Living Crisis

Version 1, published 22/11/2022: Please note that because of the changing nature of the cost of living crisis, we intend to publish further versions of this briefing to reflect the experiences of disabled people and the evidence for effective policy recommendations. Future briefings may develop particular ideas and policy proposals in more depth.

Background

Inclusion Scotland is a 'Disabled People's Organisation' (DPO) – led by disabled people ourselves. Inclusion Scotland works to achieve positive changes to policy and practice, so that we disabled people are fully included throughout all Scottish society as equal citizens.

We are an independent, non-party political, representative organisation of disabled people across Scotland with a network of over 50 Disabled Peoples' Organisation (DPO) members, and partner organisations. We reach thousands of disabled people across Scotland, many of whom experience profound exclusion and intersectional barriers to participation in society.

Introduction

- 1.1. Disabled people are already much more likely to be living in poverty in Scotland and are caught in the middle of the current cost of living crisis. They are facing this on top of the extra costs many already experience from simply living as disabled people, and are at significant risk of financial hardship, fuel poverty, food insecurity and destitution.
- 1.2. Households living on an income of less than 60% of median income after housing costs have been deducted are living in "relative poverty". 13.4 million people in the UK (one million in Scotland) live in relative poverty.¹
- 1.3. These statistics do not take account of the extra costs associated with disability. Once these have been factored in 28% of all those living in poverty in the UK are disabled people. Another 20% of those in poverty live in households containing a disabled person. Nearly half (48%) of all the people living in poverty in the UK are disabled or live with a disabled person.²

¹ [CPAG Measuring Poverty & Scottish Government Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2017-20](#)

² [Disability Rights UK highlighting JRF research finding - 2020](#)

- 1.4. Prior to the pandemic 24% (one in four) of Scots children were living in relative poverty. Over four in ten (42%) of all the Scots children living in poverty live in a household with a disabled adult or child.³
- 1.5. The following issues are key drivers of poverty for disabled people in Scotland:
- **Benefit cuts/inadequate benefits:** Two thirds of people who use foodbanks have problems with their benefits. Pre-covid UK research found half of households using foodbanks included a disabled person.⁴ Reliance on foodbanks increased during the pandemic and is staying high due to the cost of living crisis.
 - **Low Pay:** On average a disabled worker working 35 hours a week earns nearly £4,000 less a year than a non-disabled worker.⁵
 - **High costs:** In 2018 Scope found that **Scots disabled people spent on average £632 a month on disability-related expenses** (e.g., taxis, increased use of heating, special equipment, care costs, etc.).⁶ One in five disabled adults face additional costs of over £1,000 a month. These are the highest excess costs in the UK. Having one disabled child costs an average family an extra £528 per month. For almost a quarter of families with disabled children the extra costs amount to over £1,000 a month.
 - **Social care support costs:** Many disabled people spend a substantial proportion of their own income securing the personal and social care support that allows them to be included in society and participate as full and equal citizens.
 - **High energy costs:** Energy costs are disproportionately high for disabled people who may need to keep their homes warmer in order to manage pain and mobility as well as higher electricity costs to run vital health equipment and assistive technology – for example to power ventilators or charge power wheelchairs.
 - **Digital exclusion:** Many disabled people face barriers in using the internet including the prohibitive costs of assistive technology, high broadband costs, and lack of training and confidence with digital devices. This prevents some disabled people from accessing support online, being able to ‘shop around’ for deals and better utility tariffs, and they may even struggle to access some digital social security platforms including the Universal Credit online journal.⁷
- 1.6. There is growing evidence that the Covid-19 crisis has pushed more families that include a disabled person into poverty. Disabled people are more likely to say their finances have been negatively impacted and are worried about accumulating more debt.

³ 2017-20 data from [Scottish Government Tackling child poverty priority families overview](#) & [Scottish Government Poverty Statistics \(all 3 year average data\)](#)

⁴ Trussell Trust (2017), Financial insecurity, food insecurity, and disability: The profile of people receiving emergency food assistance from The Trussell Trust Foodbank.

⁵ TUC (2020) Disability pay and employment gaps

⁶ Scope 2018 The disability price tag technical report.

⁷ [Glasgow Disability Alliance – Connect Scotland Programme](#)

- 1.7. abrdn Financial Fairness Trust commissioned YouGov to conduct a periodic cross-sectional tracker survey on the financial situation of 1,047 UK households where someone is disabled since the start of the Coronavirus pandemic in early 2020. The latest wave of this survey – conducted in May-June 2022 showed that households with a disabled person fared worse on a range of financial wellbeing indicators:
- At all ages, disabled households are more likely to be in serious financial difficulty.
 - The rising cost of living is disproportionately impacting disabled households.
 - Debt advisers may be running out of ways to help disabled households.⁸
- 1.8. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) recently published their annual Poverty in Scotland report,⁹ polling more than 4,000 Scots in July and August of 2022. The report concludes that: *“This year’s Poverty in Scotland paints a bleak picture of a society in crisis. ... It demands action from all tiers of government to avert the worst of this crisis, and time is short.”*
- 1.9. Regarding households with a disabled member, the JRF report found that:
- 23% of families where someone is disabled are behind on at least one bill or payment and 4% are behind on three or more. Of these, two-fifths are behind on a payment to a public service.
 - 3/10 households where someone is disabled have no savings. A further 1/10 have savings of less than £250.
 - Thirteen percent have used an advice service and 9% have accessed a food bank.
 - Adults in a household where someone is disabled were more likely to report that rising costs had a negative impact on their mental health (60%) and on their physical health (42%) than adults living in households where no one is disabled.
 - More than half of people in families where someone is disabled have also reported a negative impact on their relationships with family and friends; 58% reported a negative impact on their social life; and 55% reported a negative impact on their personal life.

Energy costs for disabled people

- 2.1. It is vital to recognise that (as mentioned above) energy costs are disproportionately high for disabled people for several reasons including: needing warm and well heated homes for health and wellbeing, for example to manage pain, neurological conditions, energy impairments or mental health problems; needing to charge electrical equipment such as stairlifts and powerchairs; additional laundry because of continence issues and higher use of home appliances. A much higher proportion of disabled people are unemployed and thus at home all day at a time when others may have opportunities to reduce their energy use.

⁸ Under pressure: the financial wellbeing of UK households in June 2022 - Findings from the 6th Coronavirus Financial Impact Tracker Survey - <https://www.financialfairness.org.uk/docs?editionId=e2e69bf8-2b51-4ee1-bf44-a53df25cc775>

⁹ JRF (2022) *Poverty in Scotland*.

- 2.2. Energy costs for powering essential equipment that some disabled people need such as hoists, beds, breathing equipment, dialysis machines, powered chairs and monitors were already expensive. Now some households including a disabled person are having to make choices about using this essential equipment, heating their home, or eating properly. That households including disabled people are having to make these choices is completely unacceptable in today's society and undermines rights to life and to health.
- 2.3. Households that include a disabled person living in rural areas who use off-grid fuel, such as heating oil, gas canisters or solid fuels, are facing particular financial pressure with energy bills:
 - It is estimated that 58,000 Scottish households whose primary heating fuel was not mains gas or electricity are in fuel poverty. This is likely to have risen significantly with rising prices.
 - Research by the Fuel Bank Foundation found that heating oil increased by more than 90% between March 2021 and March 2022.
 - As the solid fuel market is unregulated, this leaves consumers exposed to higher fuel costs, with oil prices fluctuating daily. Added to this, those who use off grid fuel need to pay upfront, and normally for a fixed minimum amount to guarantee delivery, for example, for oil this is five hundred litres, which currently equates to over £500.

Experiences of the Cost of Living Crisis

- 3.1. Inclusion Scotland surveyed disabled people from 29 August 2022 until 26 September 2022 about their experiences of the cost of living crisis. The survey received 168 responses.
- 3.2. Disabled people across Scotland were 'worried sick' that they will not survive the winter. Rising energy and food costs, inadequate social security and the burden of meeting social care costs has meant many disabled people were already rationing food, how often they use oxygen concentrators and respirators and are turning off the heating - even in cases where a disabled person is unable to regulate their own body temperature.
- 3.3. Over 75% of respondents to this survey were currently going without or cutting back on essentials like food or heating, with many disabled people also cutting back on energy use essential to living with a disability. Disabled people were fearful that they will be hospitalised or will die at home this winter. They were worried they cannot afford to maintain well-heated homes necessary for their own health and wellbeing, or electricity usage for vital medical equipment such as ventilators, feeding pumps, and dialysis machines.
- 3.4. For example, we heard that some disabled people are cancelling payments for their falls alarm service. Provided by local authorities, this essential service can cost around £5 per week but for some disabled people this is no longer affordable. This represents a risk to disabled people's health and safety.
- 3.5. Disabled people talked of staying in bed all day in cold houses to try and stay warm, going without baths and showers to save money, cutting back on social care support they pay for like help to cook, wash themselves or socialise, or going without paid for

medication like pain-killing injections. Many respondents said their quality of life had already plummeted.

- 3.6. Many respondents told us they were going without the social care support they needed. As one respondent explained:

“As I work I don’t get fully funded care but cannot feed, transfer [from wheelchair], toilet or wash myself. Now unable to go out or attend my disability sport as heating and gas so high. I’m in more as not enough care to go out so then use more home heating and power.”

- 3.7. We also heard that disabled people could no longer afford peer support services, mental health therapies, assistance animals, physiotherapy, and exercise. Disabled people told us they are going without medication and personal hygiene items that are not available on prescription, including incontinence pads.

- 3.8. Some respondents told us how concerned they were about their children, including their disabled children.

“We won’t be able to heat the house, the children will be cold. My autistic son will be severely affected by this and we won’t be able to drive in the car to take him out of the home to visit his favourite places.”

Calls for Action

The immediate term:

- 4.1. We are calling for the emergency response to take a cash-first and rights-based approach which puts money in the pockets of those who are struggling and empowers disabled people and their households to make the right choices for them.
- 4.2. We also emphasise the need for the involvement of disabled people with lived experience of poverty and the cost of living crisis, and their organisations. Governments must learn from these experiences and develop responses that will effectively alleviate the challenges we face. We would urge Governments to do “nothing about us without us” and to recognise that economic and fiscal policy is “about us”.

4.3. Scottish Government could immediately:

- Double the new Winter Heating Payments (which replace Cold Weather Payments) from £50 to £100. The majority of households receiving the payment (400,000 households) contain a disabled adult or child and as energy costs have doubled it’s only logical to also double the Winter Heating Payment.
- Work with and increase funding to the Fuel Bank Foundation to support off-grid customers, by, for example, making emergency funds available to people who are struggling to afford fuel or who are already in debt to fuel providers.

- Consider options to fund the additional energy costs experienced by disabled people who need to use specialist equipment at home in order to protect life and avoid disabled people going into hospital or residential care. These people could be easily targeted for support by the NHS.

Steps now for the longer-term:

4.4. The briefing sets out how disabled people's poverty is deeply entrenched and caused by structural inequalities, social attitudes, and the failure of policy and services to meet disabled people's needs. The current cost of living crisis comes after a decade of austerity that has eroded the safety net for disabled people, a pandemic response that did not prioritise our human rights, and an approach to economic recovery that does not value us.

4.5. As such we are making several calls for action by the Scottish Government to deal with the long-term drivers of disabled people's poverty and would urge all decision-makers to recognise that immediate action is required on these matters in order to make progress on the underlying causes of the current crisis. It is not good enough to say that these steps cannot be taken because we are in crisis mode. A strategic and preventative approach much be taken now.

4.6. Social security

- Eligibility to disability benefits could be expanded by, for example, scrapping the twenty metre and 50% rules.
- Research must be commissioned into the current impairment-related additional costs faced by disabled people and their families.
- The adequacy of all disability benefits and disability-related premiums must be reviewed.

4.7. Social Inclusion

- Social care support charges must be scrapped, and accumulated arrears discharged.
- Availability of affordable accessible homes must be increased, with a clear definition of 'affordable'.
- Digital exclusion must be tackled with programmes that provide kit, coaching and connectivity.
- The Independent Living Fund must be reopened to new applicants.

4.8. Employment

- The disability employment gap must be tackled by delivering programmes to tackle the barriers to employment faced by disabled people and support employers to be fit and proper employers of disabled people.
- The disability pay gap must be closed through a human rights based fair work strategy.

4.9. Debt

- The availability of accessible welfare rights and money advice services must be increased.
- Collection of public sector debts including Council Tax must be halted, and arrears suspended for at least the period of the cost of living crisis, and the timeframe for writing off council tax debt must be reduced.

4.10. Fuel poverty

- Energy efficiency and insulation programmes that prioritise households including a disabled person and those with additional health-related energy costs must be invested in with options for all types of property and tenure.

4.11. UK Government must:

- Immediately uprate all benefits by current inflation levels. Waiting until April and using out-of-date rates will seriously erode the capacity of disabled claimants to keep up with essential costs including food and energy.
- Consider providing additional cost of living payments to disabled households that reflect the increasing cost of disability-related outgoings and could alleviate some of the additional pressure in the coldest months of the year. So far, the cost of living payment made available this Autumn and announced for 23/24 for disabled people was the lowest amount at only £150. This is inadequate in the face of rising costs and additional support should be made available to mitigate some of the worst fears shared by our survey participants.

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