

Disabled People, Poverty and the Cost of Living Crisis

Introduction

1.1 This policy briefing makes calls for urgent action to address the disproportionate impact of the cost of living crisis on disabled people, and to conclusively address the causes of disabled people's poverty.

1.2 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.

1.3 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.

1.4 This policy briefing looks at the policy changes needed to address the worst effects of the current cost of living crisis and makes recommendations for the immediate term as well as longer-term action to tackle the entrenched nature of disabled people's poverty.

1.5 This Policy Briefing is published in conjunction with an Evidence Pack. This Evidence Pack brings together research evidence of the disproportionate impact of the cost of living crisis on disabled people. It includes disabled people's own lived experience gathered by Inclusion Scotland through our 2022 Survey and 2023 'Stacked Against Us' Conference.

1.6 This is the second edition of our briefing on this subject. The original was published in November 2022. This version contains updated policy recommendations. We will continue to issue updated briefings as the crisis continues and its impact deepens.

1.7 You can read Inclusion Scotland's (on our website) -

- Evidence pack [here](#).
- Survey Report [here](#).
- Stacked Against Us Conference Report [here](#).

Approach to Policy Change

2.1 We are concerned that the increased cost of living has become the 'new normal' and that the stories of those struggling to survive will fade from the headlines and the political agenda. Policymakers must acknowledge that this is an ongoing crisis for disabled people in Scotland, and take account of disabled people's historical over-representation in poverty statistics and the causes of this.

2.2 We are calling for the emergency response to take a **cash-first** and **rights-based** approach which puts money in disabled people's and empowers disabled people and their households to make the right choices for themselves.

2.3 Disabled people – who are the experts by experience - and their Disabled People’s Organisations must be involved in prioritising, designing and delivering change. Governments must learn from our experience and work with us to develop responses that will effectively alleviate the challenges we face. We urge Government and public authorities to do **“nothing about us without us”** and to recognise that economic and fiscal policy is “about us”.

2.4 Disabled people’s poverty is deeply entrenched and caused by structural inequalities, social attitudes, and the persistent failure of policies and services to meet disabled people’s needs. The current cost of living crisis comes after a decade of austerity that has already 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.

2.5 As such we continue to make 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 both the current crisis and its underlying causes. It is not good enough to say that these steps cannot be taken because we are in crisis mode. A strategic and preventative approach must be taken now.

The following calls for actions should be read in conjunction with the Evidence Pack (see 1.7 above).

Calls for Urgent Actions

Benefit uprating

3.1 Since the publication of the first version of this briefing, we welcome the uprating of benefits by 10.1% by both UK and Scottish Governments. This

measure will go some way to ensure that claimants' incomes keep pace with costs.

3.2 However, this change did not take place until April. This means that claimants have faced months of vastly inflated costs without their benefits rising accordingly. Nor does it reflect the increase in costs across the board. For example, food costs rose by 19.1% in the year to April 2023.¹ This has undoubtedly put a strain on household budgets.

3.3 Inclusion Scotland recommends that disabled people's benefits uprating is backdated to September 2022 when inflation hit 10.1% and that uprates take account of the true rise in cost of living.

3.4 A review should also be undertaken as to why the process of uprating faced such long delays; between decisions in the September of one year, and increased payments by April of the following year. The delay we have seen during this cycle cannot be allowed to repeat in future years.

Cost of Living Payments

4.1 The UK Government also delivered a £150 Cost of Living Payment in Autumn 2022 which will be followed by a second payment of the same amount in Summer 2023, for those claiming additional cost disability benefits.

4.2 For many, the Cost of Living Payment will not compensate for the additional pressure on household budgets created by the delay in benefit uprating (and for those who were subsequently made ineligible for the Warmer Homes Discount, this payment represents no additional support. See below).

¹ [ONS Cost of living Insights: Food \(June 2023\)](#)

4.3 The Cost of Living Payment does not take into account the differences in additional costs faced by various disabled people, including those in rural communities whose disability and location may intersect to create vastly inflated living costs.²

4.4 We therefore recommend that both Scottish and UK Governments reassess the amount available to disabled people through Cost of Living Payments and consider bringing them into line with amounts paid available to non-means-tested pensioners and those on low-income benefits.

Energy Subsidy Scheme

5.1. The increased cost of domestic energy is having a devastating impact on disabled people running life-saving medical equipment and essential independent living equipment from home.

5.2. Such equipment might be ventilators, home dialysis units or air mattresses. Some consume 3 - 4 kWh, which would cost £750 per month to run full-time at the current UK Energy Price Guarantee rate.

5.3. Being unable to run independent living equipment such as stair lifts, hoists, power wheelchairs, large monitors, additional lighting, and digital devices is a threat to disabled people's human rights to be included in society and participate as full and equal citizens.

5.4. There is currently no coherent national system in place that enables disabled people who need to use such equipment at home to claim any form of financial rebate for the additional energy costs incurred through the use of this equipment.

² [Scope \(2022\) Why disabled people are at the centre of the cost-of-living crisis](#) and [Disability Rights UK \(2022\) One-off payment not enough to end cost of living crisis](#)

5.5. We therefore recommend that the Scottish Government addresses this as a matter of urgency and establishes a national scheme to assist disabled people in meeting the energy costs they incur in running medical equipment in their homes.

5.6. The Scottish Energy Insights Co-ordination Group³ suggests this could be done in either of two ways:

“Firstly, by linking payments to equipment provided or maintained by the NHS; our understanding is that a system for this already exists, but is not used by all Health Boards in Scotland”...and,

“Secondly, by increasing Winter Heating Payments, as the majority of the 400,000 households in receipt of this payment include a disabled adult or child. Given the underlying qualifying benefits for WHP, all recipients are very likely to be in fuel poverty, meaning this benefit is well targeted.”

Fuel Poverty

6.1 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.

Winter Heating Payments

7.1 In the first version of this briefing, we called for the new Winter Heating Payments (which replaced Cold Weather Payments) to be doubled from £50 to £100. The majority of households receiving the payment (400,000 households throughout Scotland) contain a disabled adult or child and as

³ [Scottish Energy Insights Co-ordination Group Report](#) (May 2023)

energy costs have doubled, it's only logical to also double the Winter Heating Payment.

7.2

7.3 In addition, the replacement of Cold Weather Payments with Winter Heating Allowance may leave some worse off. This is particularly the case in rural areas where a claimant may have been eligible for a £25 payment for four or more cold spells this winter, compared to the flat rate of £50.

7.4 This was a missed opportunity, given what is known about disabled people's additional energy costs, for eligibility criteria to better target disabled people for support alongside pensioners and those on low incomes.

7.5 It is also concerning that Winter Heating Payments were not made until February, which is too late for many making difficult choices in the preceding winter months.

7.6 Inclusion Scotland recommends an urgent review of Winter Heating Payments and the potential inequalities caused by the new system.

Warmer Homes Discount

8.1 Eligibility for the Warmer Homes Discount – which has not increased with inflation for several years – has changed and no longer includes those claiming additional cost disability benefits.

8.2 This means that disabled people, including those struggling to keep warm for health reasons and those living in less efficient homes, are missing out on a £150 payment they were previously entitled to (equivalent to the 2022 Cost of Living Payment).

8.3 Neither the Warmer Homes Discount nor Winter Heating Payments have been designed to protect disabled people despite their vulnerability to rising energy costs.

8.4 We therefore recommend that additional costs disability benefits be reinstated as an entitlement to the Warmer Homes Discount and the scheme is urgently reviewed to ensure it is protecting disabled people facing disproportionate heating costs.

Calls for Ongoing Action

Social Security

9.1 Eligibility to disability benefits should be expanded, by, for example, scrapping the 20 metre and 50 percent rules for Adult Disability Payment.

9.2 Research must be commissioned into the current impairment-related additional costs faced by disabled people and their families.

9.3 The adequacy of all disability benefits and disability-related premiums must be reviewed.

Social Inclusion

10.1 Social care support charges must be scrapped, and accumulated arrears written off.

10.2 Availability of affordable accessible homes must be increased, with a clear definition of 'affordable'.

10.3 Digital exclusion must be tackled with programmes that provide kit, coaching, and connectivity.

10.4 The Independent Living Fund must be reopened to new applicants.

Employment

11.1 The disability employment gap must be addressed by delivering programmes that effectively tackle the barriers to employment faced by disabled people, and support employers to be fit and proper employers of disabled people.

11.2 The disability pay gap must be closed through an effective human rights-based fair work strategy.

Debt

12.1 The availability of accessible and 'disability competent' welfare rights and money advice services must be increased.

12.2 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.

For more information contact:

Maddy Kirkman

Policy and Parliamentary Officer

Inclusion Scotland

0131 370 6713

maddy@inclusionScotland.org

Email - info@inclusionscotland.org

Telephone - 0131 370 6700 (Text Relay calls welcome)

Website www.inclusionscotland.org

Twitter @InclusionScot

Facebook @InclusionScotland

Instagram @InclusionScotland