

The Energy Penalty - disability and fuel poverty

Millions of people in the UK have a long-term illness or disability. Many disabled adults and families with disabled children face severe problems in affording essential energy use and are at high risk of fuel poverty. This has potentially serious implications for their health and well-being. The situation is likely to worsen because of rising energy prices and changes in the benefits system. It is vital that disabled people's energy needs are fully understood and tackled in public policy and industry practices.

This study focuses on the energy needs of disabled adults and families with disabled children. It looks at the key factors which contribute to additional costs associated with disability, including people's energy needs and income levels. The study aims to contribute to a better understanding of disabled people's energy needs and help to change policies and practices.

In addition, the study challenges how disability benefits are currently treated in measurements of fuel poverty. It also highlights how a number of benefits changes risk making it even more difficult for many disabled people to afford essential energy use.

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Method

The study was based on a literature review of research and other material from the energy sector and elsewhere. The key findings from the review were explored in interviews with a selection of organisations which work with and advise disabled people and families with disabled children. The purpose was to gain a qualitative picture of the range of people's

energy needs and difficulties faced. The recommendations were based on the findings of the literature review and the interviews.

The full report also contains a number of illustrative case studies to exemplify why additional energy can be required for disabled people's health and wellbeing.

Essential energy needs

The study explores a number of ways in which disability is associated with additional energy use. The conditions discussed include cancer, multiple sclerosis, HIV, spinal injuries, dementia, and incontinence, as well as some that are frequently overlooked such as skin conditions.

There is a plethora of conditions and impairments, such as arthritis, multiple sclerosis and spinal injuries, which can lead to reduced mobility. This is often compounded by lack of accessible or affordable transport. People with mobility difficulties often have to spend considerable periods at home, adding to heating and lighting costs. Moreover, they – and many other disabled people – may well need a high constant ambient temperature.

In addition, the effects of medical treatment can also contribute to people feeling colder, and needing to have heating on at night and/or

during the summer. For instance, people with cancer often find that the condition and/or medical treatments can make them less active and cause them to feel the cold more. Night sweats can result from treatment and cause people to feel especially cold.

Other additional energy costs which often arise in connection with disability include laundry costs because of needing to wash clothes and bed linen frequently. Cooking can also lead to higher energy costs because of dietary requirements.

The study points out that the use of essential equipment and aids frequently adds to people's energy costs. For example, people with mobility problems may need to use electric fans to maintain the right body temperature. The need to charge electric wheelchair and scooter batteries, or to power electric hoists can also boost electricity consumption.

The study also highlights some conditions, such as incontinence and skin conditions, which affect many people but are often overlooked. Those experiencing incontinence are likely to have additional bathing and clothes washing requirements, which increase energy consumption. People with chronic skin conditions may need frequent baths or showers to avoid infection, and may also have to wash clothes and bedding frequently.

Families with disabled children

Many families with disabled children face a range of additional energy needs. As well as the need for a warm home in cold weather, additional heating may be essential at night and during the summer because of the child's condition and to protect their immune system.

Extra energy costs often arise here too because of the need to wash and dry clothes and bedding frequently, for example, because of eating difficulties, skin disorders, and allergies. Separate washes may be needed if children

require specialist clothing and/or bedding. Also, some children may have to change clothes very frequently because of medical conditions or psychological needs.

Washing machines are often vital, including tumble driers. Moreover, the study points out that having a quiet washing machine may be crucial because of sensory overload for autistic children, but they are often more expensive than other types or older machines. Also dishwashers may be essential if equipment, crockery and cutlery need to be sterilised.

Carers' energy costs

The study highlights how others in the population, such as grandparents, have caring responsibilities for disabled children and are likely to face similar costs. Other carers may also be on a reduced income or have had to give up work to help care for a disabled relative. At the same time, they may well face extra energy costs because of their own health needs.

Staying active and connected

Many disabled people and those with long-term conditions are likely to have additional energy needs in order to be online and to access other communications services. These services are often vital for people's quality of life, to enable them to be in touch with others, and to have access to information, entertainment and services. For instance, for those with internet access, online shopping can be very important if people are unable to go out to shops.

Fluctuating conditions

It is also important to note that a number of conditions, such as MS, are frequently unpredictable and the effects often fluctuate. At times people may need to use significant amounts of energy, especially during periods when they may be housebound. This often makes it very difficult to manage energy consumption and budget well.

Poverty and disability

More broadly, the study sets out the wider factors which affect disabled people's ability to afford essential energy requirements. Income is clearly a key factor, and households with one or more disabled members are more likely to be in poverty or on low incomes than others. Moreover people on lower incomes are more likely to have a long-term limiting illness or disability than those in better-off households.

Many families with disabled children face similar risks of being in poverty, and the number of children with physical and sensory and/or cognitive impairments is rising.

As a result many disabled people, and families with disabled children, face severe difficulties in affording sufficient heating and other essential energy consumption to meet their needs.

The study stresses that pressures on household finances – especially the invidious 'choice' of heat or eat – pose significant risks for the health of many disabled children and disabled adults.

The extra costs of disability

As well as additional energy costs, many disabled people face a wide range of extra costs to safeguard their health and safety and to have a reasonable quality of life.

These include extra travel costs, for instance because of having to use taxis. There are numerous other costs such as home adaptations, aids and equipment, and many disabled people are also now facing extra costs to meet their social care needs. Families with one or more disabled children are also more likely to experience extra costs than other families.

Energy efficiency and housing

Poor energy efficiency of homes is another significant contributing factor to fuel poverty. The study highlights research showing that disabled people and families with disabled

children are particularly at risk of living in poor housing.

Having a warm and dry home is critically important for the health and well-being of many disabled adults and children. For instance there are increased risks of respiratory and circulatory problems, and mobility difficulties.

Poor housing can affect disabled people's immune systems especially their ability to fight infection. In addition, going back to a cold home after medical treatment can often lead to delays in recovery. Living in cold homes can also harm child development and increase infants' and children's vulnerability to respiratory problems.

Benefits, fuel poverty and disability

The study highlights concerns about the inclusion of disability-related benefits as income in the measurement of fuel poverty and in other official income statistics. This means that the prevalence of fuel poverty among disabled people is likely to be under-estimated. This approach also runs counter to the purpose of disability benefits, which is to help meet additional costs of disability. Similarly, it is logical to exclude disability-related benefits as income in other official poverty and income statistics.

The study also highlights the likely impact of major changes taking place in a number of welfare benefits, such as the replacement of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) by the Personal Independence Payment (PIP). These changes are likely to lead to reductions in the numbers of disabled people qualifying for some benefits, and also to possible reductions in the amounts received where people do qualify. These changes increase the likelihood of disabled people experiencing fuel poverty.

Conclusion

Many disabled people and families with disabled children are at significant risk of fuel poverty. Difficulties in affording essential energy needs

can result in potentially serious consequences for people's health and quality of life. Moreover, some recent and proposed benefit changes are likely to affect many disabled people adversely, including their ability to afford essential energy consumption.

Together with rising energy prices, this combination of factors is likely to lead to a rise in fuel poverty among disabled people and families with disabled children. It is vital that the extent and nature of disabled people's energy needs are afforded proper understanding and recognition in policy-making as a matter of urgency.

Recommendations

- A taskforce should be set up – including DECC, the Department of Health, the DWP and Ofgem together with disability organisations – with a clear and urgent brief to audit the ways in which current and projected policies are likely to impact on disabled people's ability to afford essential energy use. The results should be published together with a comprehensive and coherent action plan.
- The DWP should lead an examination of the adequacy or otherwise of the nature and levels of financial support for disabled people and families with disabled children which takes proper account of the various additional or extra costs arising from disability, including additional energy needs and fuel costs.
- The Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) should change its approach to measuring fuel poverty in England so that disability benefits are excluded as income. Similarly disability benefits should be excluded as income in official income and poverty statistics.

- Ofgem should publish guidance to energy suppliers and network companies to inform their understanding of the varied energy needs of disabled people and households with disabled children, and to help improve company policies and practices.

Ofgem should monitor suppliers' compliance with the guidance and be prepared to take appropriate regulatory action if suppliers fail to comply. This would be a logical step for Ofgem to take within the context of its proposed Consumer Vulnerability Strategy.

- Energy suppliers should ensure that their eligibility criteria for the broader group category within the Warm Homes Discount are sufficiently comprehensive to include disabled people and households with disabled children.
- Energy suppliers should review their policies and practices to ensure that disabled people do not face unnecessary barriers in being able to access assistance and advice about energy bills and help with energy efficiency. This should be done in a co-ordinated way which involves the trade association, Energy UK.

For more information

The full research report can be downloaded from the websites of the eaga Charitable Trust and the Centre for Consumers and Essential Services, University of Leicester: <http://www.eagacharitabletrust.org/projects> and www.le.ac.uk/la/cces.

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