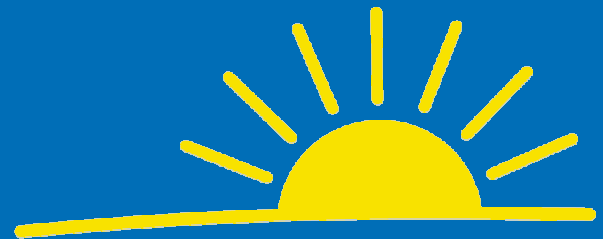


Older and colder:

The views of older people experiencing difficulties keeping warm in winter



Help the Aged

Key Facts:

- A household is defined as being in **fuel poverty** when it has to spend more than **10% of its income** on fuel to be heated to the World Health Organisation standard.
- We estimate that **50%** of the UK's **2.25 million** fuel-poor homes contain older people.
- **22% of older people** living in poverty have **gone without fuel** to make ends meet.
- 93% of the excess winter deaths are among people over 65.



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Excess winter deaths

Every winter, between 20,000 and 50,000 pensioners die as a result of the cold. These deaths are usually due to:

- **Respiratory** illnesses (like bronchitis and pneumonia);
- **Thrombotic** illnesses (like heart attacks and strokes; and
- **NOT** hypothermia, as is commonly believed.

For every degree Celsius that winter is colder than average, an **extra 8000 deaths** result.

In comparable northern European countries, like Finland or Germany, the number of excess winter deaths are proportionately much lower than in the UK.



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Fuel poverty and winter deaths

Research has firmly linked winter deaths with poor, energy-inefficient housing. In March 2004, the British Gas/Help the Aged partnership published *Older and colder: the views of older people experiencing difficulties keeping warm in winter*.

This was the first research in over a decade to:

- Investigate older people's own experiences; and
- Ask them how they would like to change their situation.



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Evidence of fuel poverty in older homes

The DTI's Energy Report 2002 shows **one in three** lonely pensioners living in **severe fuel poverty** (more than 20% of their income is spent on fuel)

An article from Sefton (2002) says that of the total number of fuel-poor households in England, **nearly half (49%)** were older households.

On the other hand, the Fuel Poverty First Annual Progress Report (DEFRA/DTI, 2003) claims that the number of households in fuel poverty has fallen since 1996 due to lower energy prices and higher incomes.



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Factors affecting fuel poverty

Low income

- some 2 million pensioners live in low income households, but almost £2 billion of benefits available to them remain unclaimed (NAO, 2002)

Energy inefficient homes

- The Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) is a government-approved method of calculating the energy efficiency of a property
- With a score of 80 or more considered energy efficient, the average UK home (i.e.: not brand new) has a rating of 40-50



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Factors affecting fuel poverty

Energy prices:

- Average prices for gas and electricity have fallen by 11% and 21% respectively between 1996 and 2002
- Prices for coal, smokeless fuels, and heating oils rose by between 1 and 8 percent during the same times
- Between 2001 and 2002, gas prices have risen by around 3.5%, although electricity prices have fallen by about 2%

Taken in isolation, these fuel price changes may have led to a slight increase in the numbers of people in fuel poverty.



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Qualitative Research

The study included a sample of 64 older owner-occupier households and private rented households on a low income (93 people in all) in England, Scotland and Wales.

We also help six focus group discussions, two in each country (46 people in all) to obtain wider perspectives on what should be done to ensure that older people in the UK live in warm homes during the winter months.



What we found

The study showed that those older people in fuel poverty are in overlapping circumstances:

- in a single person household;
- with a low household income;
- paying a high price for fuel;
- in energy inefficient property; and
- in poor health.

These have all been identified as significant contributors of fuel poverty.



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What we found

Through this research, it is clear that the Government's policies on fuel poverty **have not been designed in consultation with older people** and consequently **do not meet many of their needs**.

Idea: Under **Pension Credit**, the Government allows single pensioners to have their income topped up to £102.10 and couples up to £155.80

Reality: In 2000/01 **£1.9 billion went unclaimed** because of the complexity and inflexibility of its delivery.

***Older people are unaware and/or unable to receive the benefits they are entitled to.**



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What we found

Idea: Schemes like **Warm Front** in England provide grants for insulation and heating improvements up to £1500 to qualifying households.

Reality: The NAO evaluation of this scheme estimates that around **a third of the fuel poor might be ineligible** and up to two-thirds of those eligible are not fuel poor.

***The actions taken by the Government are not assisting those in greatest need.**



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What we found

Idea: Fuel prices have dropped significantly between 1996 and 2002.

Reality: Prices are still high. To cut back on heating bills, older people adopted several strategies, including:

- Turning off the heat or cutting back on oil;
- Wrapping up; and
- Changing payment methods or fuel suppliers.

***These methods force older households to sacrifice some aspect of comfort to keep their homes barely warm enough.**



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The Help the Aged position

Help the Aged welcomes the Government's decisive commitment to end fuel poverty for older people by 2010, and the resources already committed to tackling cold homes.

However, there is much more work to be done to tackle this vast, endemic problem that affects all communities in the UK.



The Help the Aged position

To do this, Help the Aged believes:

- The **Warm Front scheme** needs to be given the **priority** it deserves as a key investment to tackle poverty and poor health.
- The Scottish scheme **the Warm Deal**, which ensures all pensioner households have central heating and insulation regardless of income, should be adopted across the UK.
- Local authorities need to be partially responsible as key players in tackling cold homes.



Help the Aged

The Help the Aged position

To do this, Help the Aged believes:

- The Government should commission further research on excess winter deaths so that the causes can be better understood and a strategy can be put into place
- The level of public understanding in this area must be improved to empower older people to sustain good health and well-being throughout the winter months.

