



Chartered  
Institute of  
Housing

# COST OF LIVING CRISIS

**A spotlight on rural communities**

The Chartered Institute of Housing's seventh cost of living briefing

**March 2023**

## Welcome to issue no.7.

The cost of living crisis continues to place huge pressures on people across the UK. Britain's inflation jumped to 10.4 per cent in February, up from 10.1 per cent in January. As with previous briefings, we look at what this means in practice, with a focus on rural areas.

This Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) briefing is the seventh in a series as we address the question: "what is the impact of the cost of living crisis on social housing tenants - and how should the sector respond?"

### Topics in this edition:

- ▶ [Latest evidence on the crisis](#)
- ▶ [A look at what the Budget means](#)
- ▶ [Spotlight on rural communities](#)
- ▶ [How social housing providers are supporting](#)
- ▶ [What is CIH calling for?](#)
- ▶ [Useful resources](#)

For previous copies of our briefings see [www.cih.org/policy/cost-of-living-crisis-briefings](http://www.cih.org/policy/cost-of-living-crisis-briefings).

For any feedback on our briefings or suggestions for future topics please email [policyandpractice@cih.org](mailto:policyandpractice@cih.org).

# Latest evidence on the crisis

## INFLATION

The [Consumer Prices Index](#) including owner occupiers' housing costs (CPIH) rose by 9.2 per cent in the twelve months to February 2023, up from 8.8 per cent to January and back to December levels. The largest upward contributions to the inflation rate came from housing and household services (mainly electricity, gas, and other fuels), and food and non-alcoholic drinks.

Latest [data from Citizens Advice](#) shows that January was the highest month on record for the number of people turning to them who could not afford to top up their prepayment energy meter, and therefore were unable to do the basics like turning on their fridge or heating their hob.

Food inflation hits new high as increasing numbers turn to food banks

**Food inflation in February hit a record high of 17.1 per cent.**

Kantar Worldpanel reported that the increase over the past 12 months meant that families faced a potential £811 annual rise in the cost of their regular shopping basket.

New research by the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN), published in [The Guardian](#), found that almost 90 per cent of food banks surveyed reported increased demand in December 2022 and January 2023 compared with a year earlier. The Trussell Trust, which has more than 1,300 food banks in the UK, expects this winter will have been its busiest ever. Between April and September 2022 alone it distributed 1.3 million emergency food parcels - a third more than the same period in 2021 and over 50 per cent more than pre-pandemic.

Cost of living increases were given as the biggest problem for people needing to use a foodbank, followed by inadequate wages and waiting times for initial universal credit payments. A third of independent food banks said benefit sanctions and deductions were a driving factor.

More than 80 per cent of IFAN food banks reported supporting a significant number of people for the first time, while many said demand was growing among pensioners and families with babies.

## The numbers in fuel poverty increase

[English fuel poverty data for 2021 and 2022](#) released in February shows increasing numbers of the population living in fuel poverty. The data highlights the levels of fuel poverty in England under two calculations:

- ▶ The number of households who are required to spend more than 10 per cent of their income (after housing costs) on their energy which has increased from 4.93 million (20.5 per cent) households in 2021 to 7.39 million (30.3 per cent) in 2022.
- ▶ The number who have a low income AND live in homes with poor energy efficiency. This number has also increased from 3.16 million (13.1 per cent) in 2020 and 2021 to 3.26 million (13.4 per cent) in 2022.

[National Energy Action](#) calculate that this data shows the Government will miss its fuel poverty target, which is to improve as many fuel poor homes as is reasonably practicable to a minimum energy efficiency rating of Band C by 2030, by 300 years.

The latest findings from Which?'s [Consumer Insight tracker](#) found an

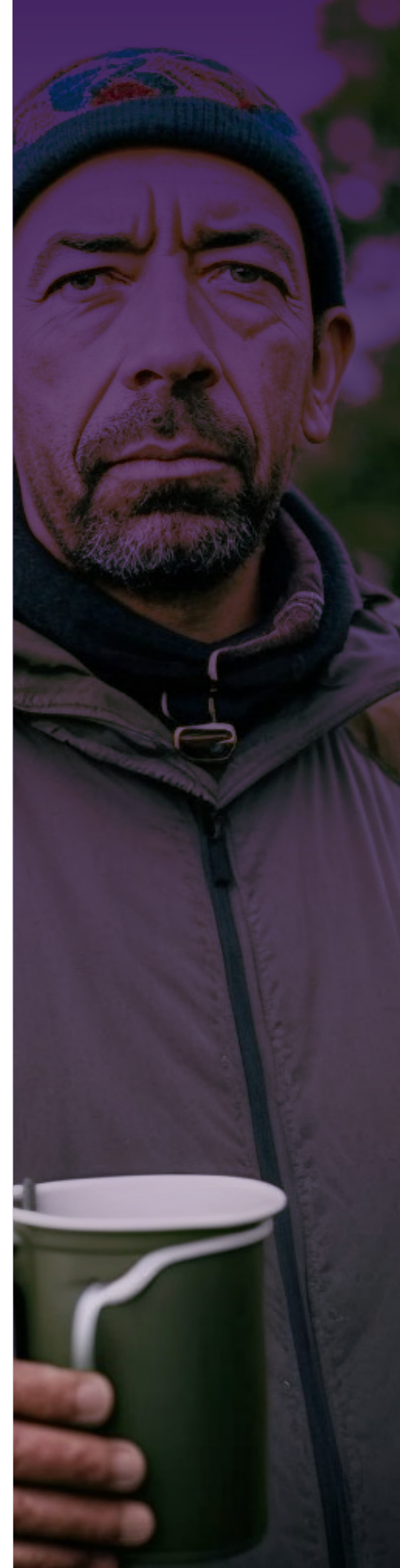
increasing number of households are going without food and sitting in cold homes as rising inflation and high energy bills put pressure on incomes.

The latest [ONS survey on public opinions and social trends](#) also found that nine in ten reported their cost of living had increased compared to a year ago. Around half of adults remained worried or very worried about keeping their homes warm this winter, and just under half who pay energy bills said they found it difficult to afford them. The rising cost of living continued to be attributed by the ONS's survey respondents to the price of food shopping, rises in gas or electricity bills, and the price of fuel. 56 per cent of respondents said this was leading them to cut back on the use of gas and electricity in their home.

[38 Degrees](#) has published a new [cost of living datamap](#), which maps regional and constituency figures on the percentage of people who could not afford to turn the heating on when cold in the past month - an average of 35 per cent nationally. It also shows the numbers of people reporting to be struggling with food and housing costs. (You can filter by issue area and look at the data regionally or by constituency.)

“Over 3.2 million households in England are in fuel poverty according to Government data released today but the **worst of the energy crisis is not represented** – people being forced to self-disconnect, struggling with ice on the inside of their windows and living with damp and cold.”

Adam Scorer,  
Chief Executive,  
National Energy Action



# HOUSING

## Housing costs increase

The Resolution Foundation's latest [Housing Outlook](#) finds that housing cost pressures are greater now than during the pandemic.

[Data from the ONS](#) showed that private rental prices in the UK increased by 4.4 per cent in the year to January 2023, the largest increase since the data series began (figure 1). Social rents have also experienced their largest rise in a decade over the past year, with most housing providers uprating rents by the maximum possible 4.1 per cent. Homeowners have not been immune, with mortgage rates also [on the rise](#) as the Bank of England continues to [increase interest rates](#). Drawing on their recent YouGov survey of 10,470 adults in the UK, the Resolution Foundation found that more people reported falling behind or struggling with housing costs in November 2022 than during the second major lockdown of the pandemic.

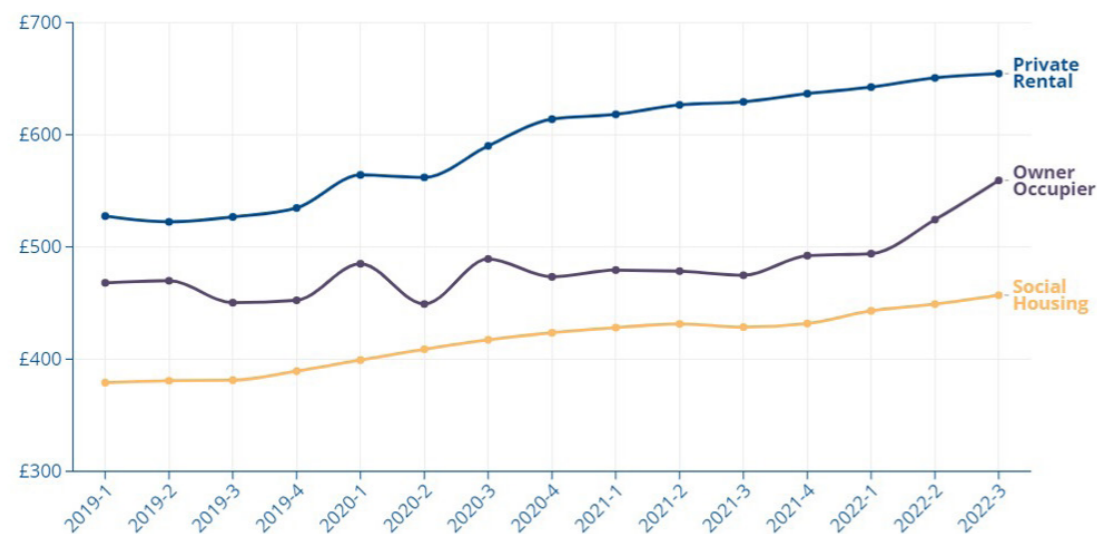
Figure 1: UK annual private rental price, percent change



(Office for National Statistics, '[Index of private housing rental prices, UK: January 2023](#)', 15)

[Citizens Advice data](#) has captured the proportion of rent that their debt clients spend on housing costs, by tenure. This shows that private renters pay on average 43 per cent more than those who live in social housing.

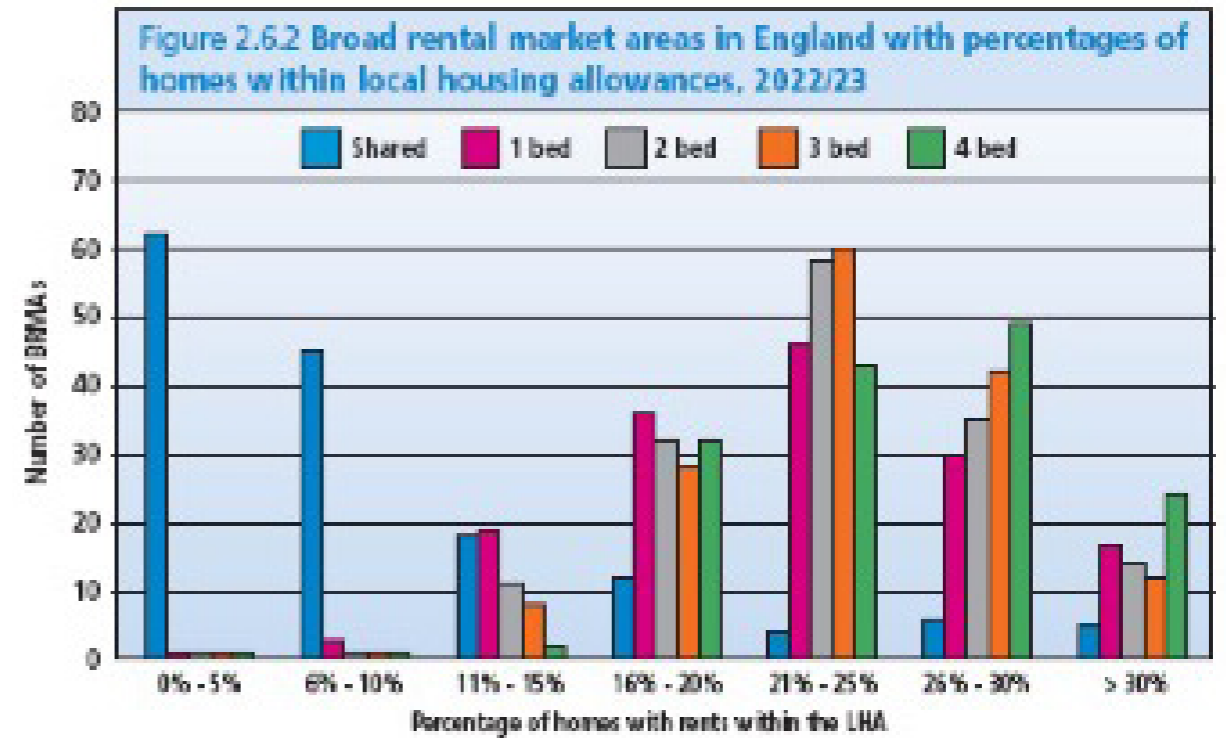
Private renters paying 43% more on rent than those in social housing. Mean Monthly rent cost (£) by housing tenure among debt clients.



## Calls for housing benefit to be unfrozen

Local Housing Allowance (LHA), which provides support for those renting in the private rented sector, remains frozen at 2020 rates, capping the support available to renters, and adding to cost of living pressures for private renters across the country. Many charities, including CIH, have called for LHA to be reset to cover at least the 30th percentile of local rents, so tenants who receive LHA have access to the bottom 30 per cent of the market. This benefit must then continue to reflect the real cost of renting in future years.

CIH's own analysis for the 2023 UK Housing Review highlights the impact of the government's decision not to raise local housing allowances (LHA) to reflect the true cost of renting.



source: Author calculations from Valuation Office Agency data.\*

## Homelessness on the rise

Data from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on homelessness numbers in England (the [rough sleeping snapshot](#) for autumn 2022, and [statutory homelessness data](#) covering July-September 2022) show that homelessness is on the rise.

The annual rough sleeping statistics for England found an estimated 3,069 people to be sleeping rough on any given night in Autumn 2022, up by a quarter (26 per cent) on the previous year. This is the first time the government has reported an increase in rough sleeping

since 2017. New official data on statutory homelessness in England also shows worrying trends in other forms of homelessness: 99,270 households were staying in temporary accommodation at the end of September 2022; this includes over 125,000 children. There continues to be a high number of people facing homelessness because of a no-fault eviction notice: 6,170 households, an increase of 34 per cent on the previous year. (The government has committed to abolish no fault evictions through the forthcoming Renters Reform bill).

*"The devastating impact of the cost-of-living crisis, rising rents and low wages has once again been laid bare as thousands more renters are faced with eviction and the very real threat of being left with nowhere to go."*  
Crisis

## BENEFITS

### Calls for a minimum income standard

The [Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#) (JRF) and [Trussell Trust](#) have called for a change in the law to fix the UK's "failing" welfare system after research revealed that basic benefits given to low-income households are at least £140 a month below the real cost of food, energy and everyday basics.

The charities have calculated the weekly cost of a basic existence to be £120 for a single adult and £200 for a couple, based on a basket of goods and services including food, energy, travel, mobile phone and internet use, as well as smaller items such as toothpaste.

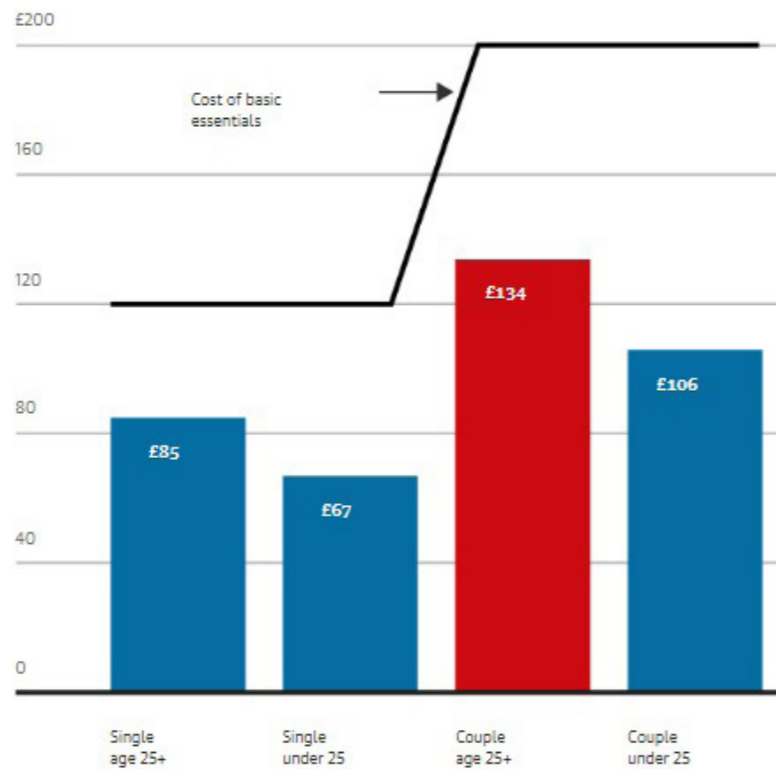
By comparison, even after April's 10.1 per cent benefits uprating, the universal credit standard allowance - the portion of the monthly benefit payment intended to cover basic living costs - will be £85 a week for a single adult aged over 25 (£35 less than the charities' estimates) and £134 a week for a couple (a £66 gap).

The charities say inadequate benefits are the main driver of the explosion in destitution and food bank use in recent months and urge the government to formally bring universal credit rates into line with minimum living costs.

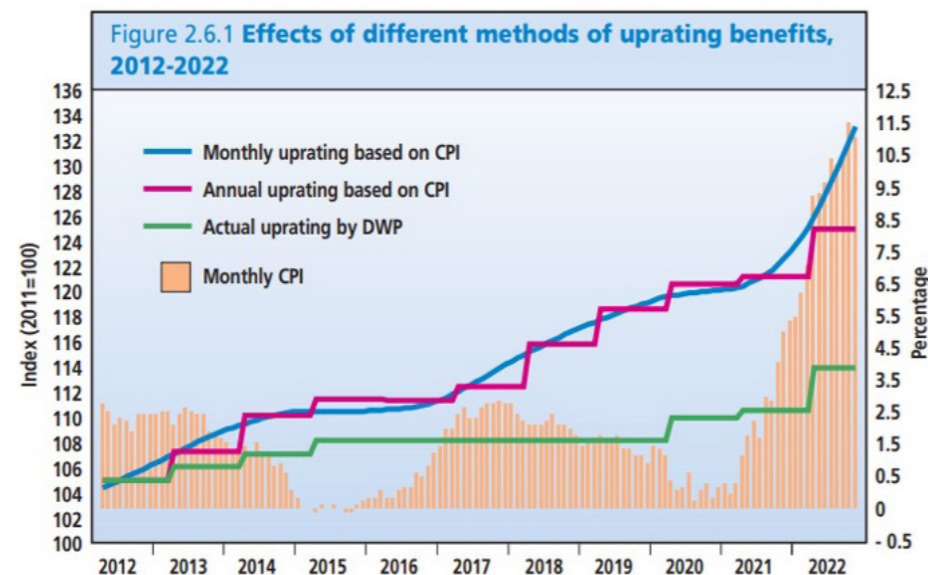
*"People have cut and cut, but you cannot budget if your budget isn't enough."*  
Trussell Trust

### The 2023 standard allowance will fall at least £66 short per week for an adult couple ...

Universal Credit's standard allowance compared to cost of basic essentials, £ per week in 2023/24



CIH's own [analysis](#) for the 2023 UK Housing Review highlights the growing inadequacy of social security benefits.



Source: Author calculations based on DWP and ONS source material.

## AN UNEQUAL CRISIS

As highlighted in [previous briefings](#), the cost of living crisis does not impact people equally.

Age UK recently revealed the [impact of pre payment meters on older people](#) amid concerns that forced installations are leading to vulnerable older people 'self-disconnecting'.

A recent [research report](#) from the charity Barnardos showed that nearly one in three parents (30 per cent) are worried about being made homeless, and almost half (49 per cent) worry about keeping their home warm for their children.

Citizens Advice have shared [evidence](#) which suggests that the cost of living crisis is a 'racial crisis'. They are seeing disproportionately more racially minoritised people come to them in need of food bank referrals and debt support.

In this report we take a look at how the cost of living crisis is impacting people in rural communities.

# Spring Budget - did it help with the cost of living?

## Context

The backdrop for the budget was two years of high inflation. While the Office of Budget Responsibility (OBR) forecast for 2.9 per cent by the end of the year is more positive than expected, it does not mean that prices will fall. The last two years saw the biggest rise in prices since 1979-81.

## Welfare

The [budget](#) included a wide range of measures designed to support people to work more, including:

- Abolishing the work capability assessment (WCA) and changing eligibility for the health top-up in universal credit, which will be passported via the personal independence payment
- Publishing a [Health and Disability White Paper](#), to support people claiming benefits who are long-term sick and disabled
- Launching a new “universal support” programme to match people who want to work with existing job vacancies, and support people to enter and stay in work
- Supporting people with long-term health conditions to access the services they need and feel supported to return to or remain in work

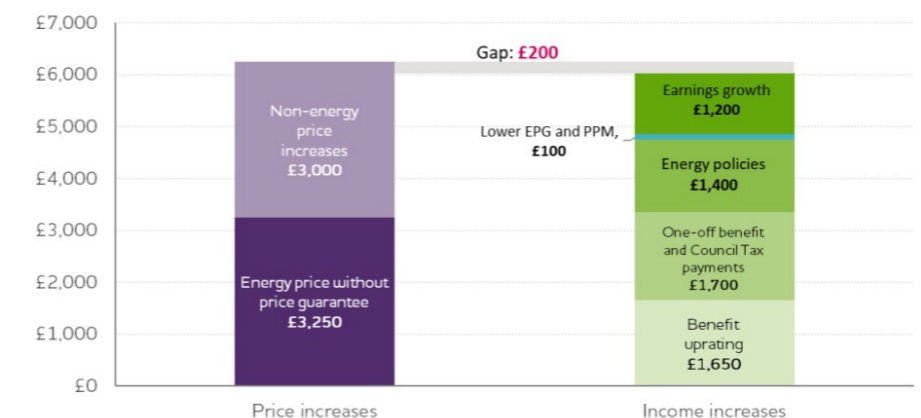
- Supporting work search and preparation for carers of children aged one to 12 claiming universal credit and creating a new pilot to integrate employment and health support for people with health conditions
- Increasing the administrative earnings threshold, which decides how much support and work coach time claimants receive based on their earnings
- Launching a new ‘Returnerships’ apprenticeship for people over 50, to provide skills and support to move back into work
- Announcements on childcare with a planned expansion of ‘free’ childcare hours in early years.

For more detail see [Spring Budget 2023 factsheet - Labour Market Measures - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

In its assessment of the budget the [Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#) concluded that while action in some areas is promising – particularly in relation to childcare funding – in its totality it has “failed to adequately address the challenges facing households, particularly those on low incomes”. It concludes:

- For households on low incomes in receipt of universal credit, government support almost balances expected increased costs from April 2023, but because of insufficient support in the previous year, a gap remains.

**Figure 1: Over the past two years, prices and incomes have increased broadly in line with each other for low-income households in receipt of income-related benefits**  
Average increase in prices and household income in 2022-23 and 2023-24, low-income households in receipt of income-related benefits, UK

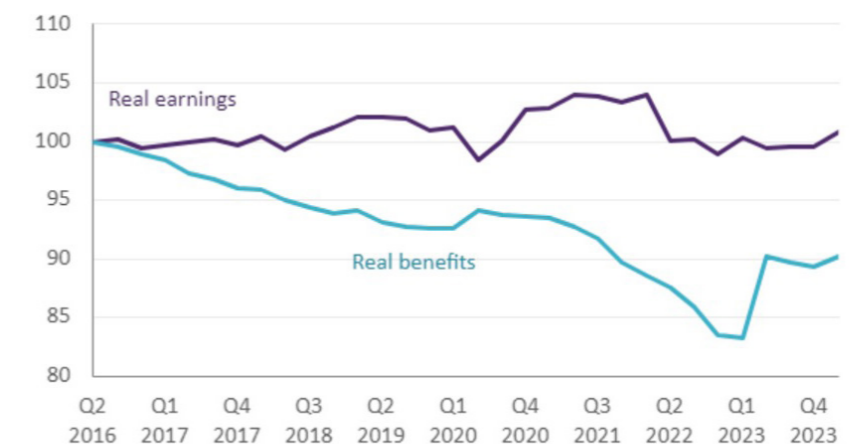


Source: JRF analysis based on the ONS 2019/20 Living Costs and Food Survey, Ofgem's energy cap models, Budget 2023 announcements, and Cornwall Insight's price cap forecast, 27 February 2023.

- However, our social security system is still inadequate. This is a long-running problem, which has worsened in recent years, with the gap between real earnings and real benefits continuing to grow since 2016.

**Figure 2: While real earnings have flat-lined since 2016, benefits have fallen by 10% relative to inflation**

Real earnings and benefits, indexed to Q2 2016, UK

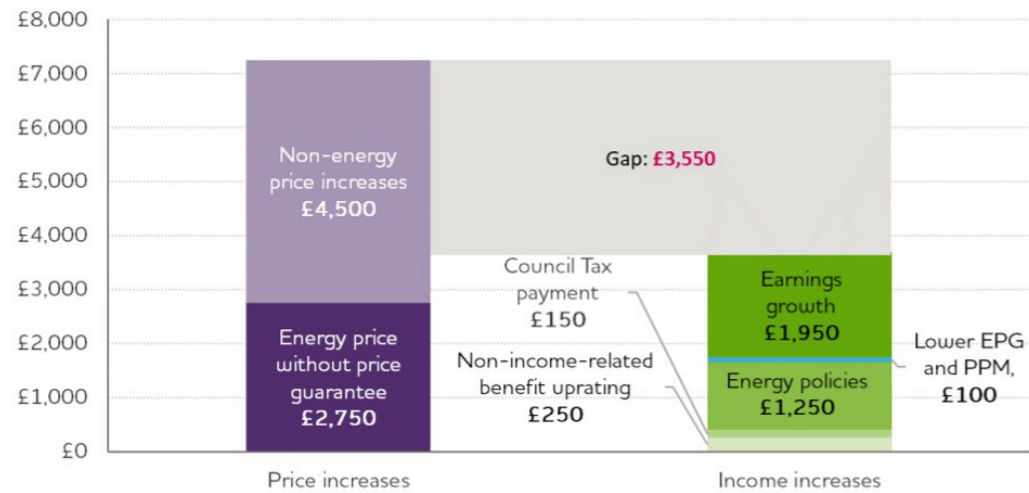


Source: JRF analysis of OBR's Economic and Fiscal Outlook, Budget 2023. Notes: adjusted by CPI.

- The gap in budgets for those on low incomes but not means-tested benefits is over £3,500 post budget.

- ▶ The proposed scrapping of the work capability assessment (WCA) is welcome but there are concerns that the reforms could lead to more disabled people not getting access to the financial support they need, and to more disabled people being subject to (a failed) conditionality regime. The support measures announced also leave those on the lowest incomes behind (non-working parent carers) and relies on benefit sanctions to encourage work rather than incentives like a second-earner work allowance.

**Figure 3: In the two years since 2021-22, prices are forecast to increase much faster than incomes for low-income households not in receipt of income-related benefits**  
Average increase in prices and household income in 2022-23 and 2023-24, low-income households not in receipt of income-related benefits, UK



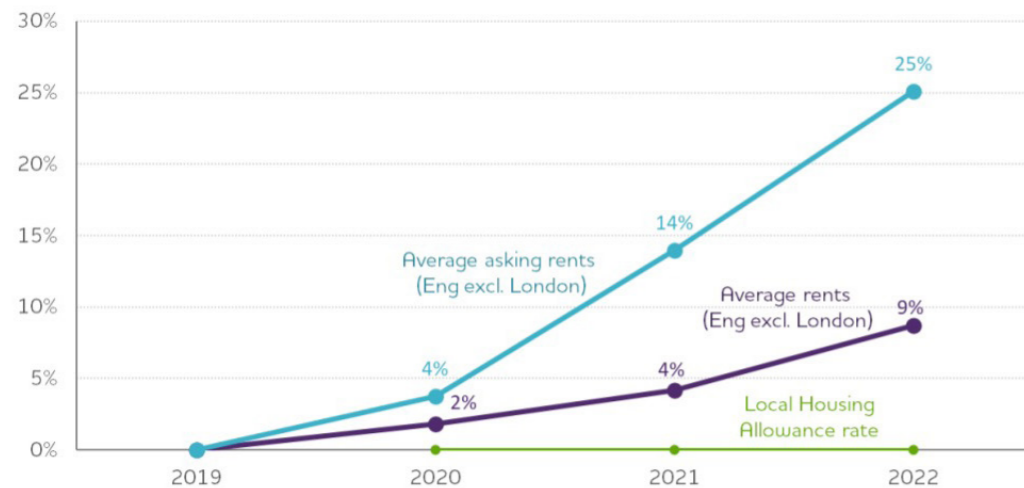
Source: JRF analysis based on the ONS 2019/20 Living Costs and Food Survey, Ofgem's energy cap models, Budget 2023

## Housing

Despite [increases in homelessness](#) and [rapidly rising rents](#), there was hardly any mention of the housing crisis, or any additional support for people struggling to keep their homes.

A huge omission in the budget was the lack of support for housing costs, which CIH and many others had been calling for. As set out above, local housing allowance (LHA) has been frozen in cash terms since April 2020, at rental price levels from September 2019, whilst average asking rents in England (excluding London) have increased by 25 per cent over the same period.

**Figure 4: Private rents, particularly asking rents, have increased substantially since 2019 while support towards housing costs for private renters through Local Housing Allowance remains frozen**  
Increase since 2019, England (excluding London)



Source: JRF analysis of RightMove Rental Price Tracker 2020 to 2022 and ONS Index of Private Housing Rental Prices 2023.

Note: Local Housing Allowance rate remains frozen based on rents as at September 2019. Average asking rents compares private rents in Q4 using RightMove data and average rents compares private rental growth in September of each year using the ONS IPHRP.

## Energy

Following pressure from over 100 organisations (including CIH) in a campaign led by Martin Lewis, the government confirmed that the [Energy Price Guarantee](#) (EPG) will remain at its current level for another three months from April.

Under the EPG, the government has been limiting energy bills for an average household to £2,500 a year. The guarantee will continue at the same level until July, by which time the price of energy is expected to have dropped. However, the extension of the EPG is still an effective price increase, due to the ending of the Energy Bills Support Scheme that provided a £400 discount to households over the winter, and there are no plans to repeat it next winter. Prepayment meter customers will pay the same rate as direct debit payers from July (but no change to those who pay quarterly by cash or cheque who will still pay more).

The budget also announced £380 million of financial support for heat network customers. Most have never been protected by Ofgem's price cap, and prior to the implementation of the EPG, they faced energy cost increases of [up to 700%](#). While heat network operators were [obliged to pass through](#) the support they received from the Energy Bill Relief Scheme, it is welcome to see that residents supplied by heat networks will receive additional support. We await further details, as well as a consultation to develop options to support domestic consumers on a non-domestic meter.

**Dear Chancellor:**  
Postpone planned April energy price hikes and keep the energy price guarantee at a typical £2,500 a year – or millions more will fall into fuel poverty.



**Martin Lewis**  
Founder,  
MoneySavingExpert.com

**110+ organisations supporting this call so far:**

**MoneySavingExpert**



# Spotlight on rural communities

The cost of living crisis has hit rural areas particularly hard. A [review](#) of the impact on rural areas for the Rural Services Network (RSN) in November 2022 revealed that rural households experienced a double energy hit - for domestic heating and for transport - affecting households in more isolated areas the hardest.

Homes in rural areas are often harder to heat, less energy efficient, and tend to be larger than urban homes. Consequently, more rural homes are EPC D and below than in urban areas, and rural homes are [more likely to be defined as fuel poor](#) under the current definition used in England. The [latest fuel poverty statistics](#) released in February 2023 show that it would take a price reduction of nearly £1,000 to take rural households out of fuel poverty, compared to £265 for urban households. In addition, a greater proportion of homes in rural areas are off the gas grid and reliant on oil or other alternative, often more expensive fuels, without the benefit of a price cap - around 14 per cent nationally. In Cornwall, an [estimated](#) 47 per cent of homes are not on mains gas. Where households are off grid, around [1 in 5 of them are in fuel poverty](#) nationally. Many rural homes are also more difficult and expensive to retrofit, meaning that energy will continue to be a significant cost for rural households, in the long term.

The government has made [additional funding](#) of £200 on top of the mainstream energy bills support scheme available for those who use alternative fuels as their main fuel, although in some cases, an application must be made to receive this.

Added to the cost of heating homes, is the cost of transport. Rural areas experience a lack of

regular public transport and higher reliance on cars to get around for work and leisure. This makes rural households vulnerable to rising prices at the pump, exacerbated by the need to travel further to access it in the first place. This [impacts](#) on employment and education opportunities, and increases social isolation. Rural households spend on average £113.90 compared to £76.20 for urban households, consuming over 12 per cent of disposable incomes. Government has recognised this impact to an extent with a rural mobility fund of £20 million for 17 rural areas to develop on demand bus services.

The cost of housing is similarly higher on average than in predominantly urban areas, meaning many households are already looking at lower levels of disposable income to cover additional costs. For those on the lower 25th percentile, rents take on average 47 per cent of earnings, compared to 43 per cent in urban areas.

As well as increasing costs, rural renters are facing a diminishing supply. Available rentals are down

61 per cent since the pandemic, as rural areas see a surge in short term lets. [Research](#) for CPRE in 2021 found that the number of short-term lets between 2015-2021 had increased by 1,000 per cent, meaning 148,000 fewer settled long-term homes were available.

**Rural homelessness increased by 115 per cent between 2017 and 2020.**

Buying is often not a solution for rural households who can often take home less pay; median earnings are about 6 per cent less than urban areas; the differential for those on the lowest 20th percentile of earnings is 12 per cent. House prices have increased on average over 10 percent in the year 2020-21 (in urban areas by 8.2 per cent). On average rural housing costs 39 per cent more than urban areas other than London, and in villages and hamlets this can increase to 55 per cent.

**Rural house prices are nearly 10 times earnings, whereas in predominantly urban areas this is 7.6.**

*“Nobody should be disadvantaged because of where they live but poor and vulnerable people in rural areas very much are...The challenges facing people in the countryside include a lack of public transport, lack of affordable food, seasonal working patterns and unreliable mobile phone coverage and internet access. If you’re receiving benefits you will be told to attend an appointment many miles away, but how are you going to get there if you don’t have a car and there are no buses or trains where you live? If you don’t attend the meeting you won’t get the benefits you rely on. So what do you do? It’s a Catch 22 situation that many people living in rural areas face.”*  
([Rural Poverty Today](#))

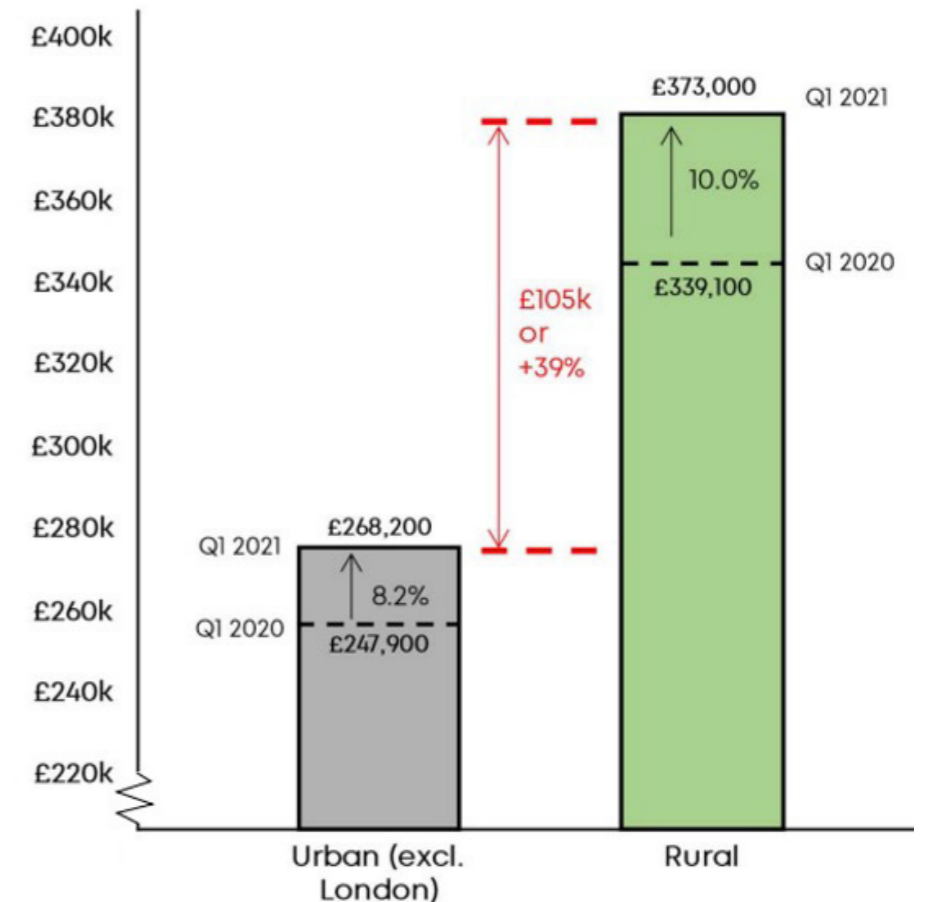
Young people are particularly hard hit by the cost of living and rural housing. A [survey](#) by CPRE in 2021 revealed that only 43 per cent anticipated staying in their rural area in the next five years. The cost of housing was the top concern for 72 per cent surveyed, and for 86 per cent it was a significant factor in their plans to leave. Lack of transport and poor digital connectivity also featured highly.

CPRE and Rural England, in 2020, [highlighted](#) that the cost of renting privately in rural areas was out of the reach of many essential workers; for example, farm workers were priced out of 86 per cent of rural areas, and care workers out of 96 per cent. They called for a scheme of £12.8 billion to deliver social and affordable housing to help local key workers, support rural economies and maintain vibrant local areas.

The capacity of rural local authorities to intervene and help local people is restricted by the level of funding received from central government, and the greater reliance these councils have on council tax (which is generally higher). In 2022-23, rural areas received on average 37 per cent less than urban areas (equivalent to approximately £105 per head of population). However, local council tax levels were on average 21 per cent higher, adding to the cost of rural living.

## Rural housing premium

Considering higher overall average sale price and greater quarterly price growth in rural areas.



Source: Rural Economic Bulletin, Defra, 2021

Kovia Consulting | Rural Cost of Living | July 2022

*“If they [government] are serious about levelling up, it’s crucial that they measure the impact within, and not just between, regions. It shouldn’t simply be about north and south, but evaluating urban and rural areas at a micro scale within regions.”*  
(Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE))

## Councils are providing support for those most affected

**Dorset council** has increased its cost of living support fund by £2 million of its own reserves. This will be available to:

- ▶ Help low income, disabled and vulnerable older people to improve the energy efficiency of their homes
- ▶ Provide extra discretionary vouchers for homes that are off grid
- ▶ Increase discretionary housing payments to prevent people becoming homeless
- ▶ Support the network of foodbanks and community pantries, and provide supermarket vouchers for those in greatest need

- ▶ Provide additional pre-school hours for young children, so that parents can work more hours.

**Cambridgeshire Local Assistance Scheme** (CLAS) offers support for individuals and families experiencing hardship or a crisis, including unexpected financial difficulties. It was established in 2017 and is open to anyone who has been resident in Cambridgeshire for at least six months, or who has fled to the area for their own safety. Applicants must have no savings and be in receipt of one of a list of means-tested benefits, and if working, earn below HMRC's low income threshold (£17,005 for 2022/23). Applications are taken via

Cambridgeshire's Citizens Advice CLAS provides advice and support in the form of income maximisation, financial capability and budgeting support, referrals to statutory services, supermarket vouchers, and recycled white goods. CLAS may also refer individuals and families to local specialist charities for support if required. A follow-up meeting will also be held, one month after the initial support provision. Since 2017, CLAS has given awards to over 5,100 households and enabled an extra £15 million income to be received through income maximisation support. The initiative has enabled £3.8 million savings to the County Council and £6.4 million savings to the wider public purse.

A new **report** from Kent and Southampton universities shows that the countryside is battling a 'hidden homelessness' crisis driven by soaring housing costs and a gaping shortfall in local authority funding.

The true scale of the crisis is likely to be far higher than the official statistics. The year-long study, which included a survey of 157 frontline support workers, service providers, NGOs, and shelters, found an overwhelming majority thought rural homelessness was a serious problem that was getting worse. Key findings include:

- ▶ 91 per cent of respondents in rural areas have seen homelessness increase in the past five years
- ▶ 83 per cent of respondents in rural areas said their job had become harder in the past five years
- ▶ 81 per cent of respondents believe that rough sleeping is experienced differently in rural areas compared to urban areas.

The study, by academics at the University of Kent and the University of Southampton, on behalf of a coalition of rural charities and housing associations, shows rural areas being paid a fraction of what they need to tackle homelessness in their communities.

Overall, rural local authorities are receiving 65 per cent less in funding per capita through the Homelessness Prevention Grant than urban areas, who are themselves chronically underfunded. The sharp discrepancy in financial aid, discovered in statistics released by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, shows urban local authorities were paid £7.15, compared to just £2.50 paid to rural local authorities when calculated on a like-for-like basis.

Interviews with more than 40 people, including people who sleep rough and outreach workers in four rural locations, paint a striking picture of isolation and resilience.

People who experience homelessness in rural areas often sleep rough in farmland or woodland, putting their life and health in jeopardy, and making them much harder for outreach workers to find and support. Real life stories shared with the researchers included people digging trenches in the snow to sleep, going several days without food, being spat on, their tents set on fire, and muggings that resulted in brain injuries and teeth being knocked out.

The study found that isolation also made the problem far worse for those facing homelessness in rural areas, where limited transport options and the absence of support placed them at greater risk. Those with physical or mental health needs were found to be most vulnerable.

## #RuralHomelessnessCounts

**86%** Of Housing and Homelessness Providers consider rural homelessness to be a **Significant** or **Acute problem**

Of respondents in rural areas have seen **homelessness increase** in the past **five years**

Of organisations in rural areas believe a lack of **funding/resources** is the **main obstacle** in addressing homelessness in their area

Of respondents believe **that rough sleeping is experienced differently** in rural compared to urban areas

**23%** of respondents think **stigma is a barrier** people experiencing homelessness face when seeking support

**24%** increase to official **rural rough sleeping** figures in just **one year**

**"UNAFFORDABLE HOUSING IN RURAL AREAS IS AT CRISIS POINT, LEAVING MANY AT RISK OF HOMELESSNESS."**



**STRATEGY:**  
All future homelessness and rough sleeping strategies consider the needs of rural communities and 'at risk' residents living in them.



**SYSTEMS:**  
Improved processes for better counting and identifying instances of rural homelessness. Dedicated investment to fund much needed rural social housing and welfare system to cover the cost of rent.



**SERVICES:**  
Delivering new homelessness support services in rural communities that address mental health and social and physical isolation.

**COUNTING THE INVISIBLE:**  
Rough sleeping counts ignore hidden rural homeless

**UNSEEN**  
+ UNSUPPORTED  
+ ISOLATED  
+ UNAFFORDABLE  
= **RURAL HOMELESSNESS CRISIS**



Tents



Outbuildings



Churches



Sofa Surfing



Vehicles



Woodlands

▶ **Rural Homelessness:**  
a growing crisis  
- not just an urban problem

▶ **Lack of Support Services:**  
government policy failing  
rural communities

▶ **Urgently Needed:**  
a new cross-government  
commitment to address the  
hidden crisis of rural homelessness

+ BETTER DATA  
+ CROSS GOVERNMENT COMMITMENT  
+ FAIRER FUNDING  
+ RURAL/URBAN PARTNERSHIPS  
= **RURAL HOMELESSNESS SOLUTIONS**

Data: September 2022 Kent University & Southampton University  
Commissioned by: English Rural, CPRE - The Countryside Charity, The National Housing Federation, Homeless Link, Hastoe HA, Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE), The Rural Services Network, Citizen Housing, Trent and Dove HA, and The Rural Housing Alliance.

www.englishrural.org.uk  
info@englishrural.org.uk  
020 7820 7930



*'This research shines a spotlight on a growing rural crisis hidden in plain sight. You see here the brutal reality beyond the insufficient official statistics. People who have no chance of affording a basic standard of living through no fault of their own. You don't tend to see people sleeping rough in rural areas - but they're there, normally hidden in agricultural buildings, outhouses, sleeping rough on farmland or condemned to an insecure life of sofa surfing. Because funding is so inadequate, many people are moving to urban centres for much needed support. It is in all our interests to fix this crisis.'*

*'Rural homelessness is a significant problem, and a lack of support and funding for affordable homes and services in these areas puts vulnerable households at a distinct disadvantage. The findings of this research should drive a step change in our approach to the issue. Local and national leaders must come together to say clearly that 'rural homelessness counts'.*

Martin Collett, chief executive of English Rural and co-chair of the research project



# How social housing providers are responding

## Orbit

[Orbit](#) customers are benefitting from a £500,000 income boost thanks to the affordable housing provider's new Welfare Advice Service.

Launched in October 2022 as part of a raft of new measures introduced by Orbit to help customers manage their finances, maximise their income and reduce the pressure of cost of living increases, the service supported 169 customers in the first three months of operation and identified £571,703 of unclaimed benefits and grants - increasing the average net income of each customer by over £3,382 per year.

Provided by [Citizens Advice South Warwickshire and Bedworth, Rugby and Nuneaton Citizens Advice Bureau \(BRANCAB\)](#), the free service available to all Orbit customers as part of its Better

Days programme, is supporting around 1,200 tenants and homeowners who need help to understand and apply for the benefits that they're eligible for as well as providing coaching about how to become more financially resilient.

Jo Brown, financial inclusion lead for Orbit commented: "The funds being unlocked by this new service are going to make a huge difference to our customers. We're really pleased about the level of engagement so far, but it does illustrate the point that there are a large number of people out there that don't understand the benefits and grants that are available to them, and we're committed to reaching as many customers as possible to ensure they get the support that they need."

One Orbit customer who benefited from the service commented: "I didn't know housing associations could be like this - I made one phone call and they've stepped in with all this support."

The Welfare Advice Service is open to all eligible Orbit customers five days a week both online and via telephone.

Other support measures introduced by Orbit include commissioning fuel poverty charity National Energy Action (NEA) [to provide specialist energy advice](#), a new cost of living education hub on Orbit's customer website, a furnished home pilot to help customers out of furniture poverty, and an increase in capacity to Orbit's existing mental health support Breathing Space commissioned with Mind and Aspire4u.

## Adra

Rhys, team member at Welsh social housing provider [Adra](#), supports customers to maximise their income to help them get the most money in as possible. He recently helped a customer who had lost her mother and was now living alone. She didn't claim anything to help her financially, but she had been looking after her mother, whose income was the main income in

the household. She was worried about how she was going to pay for the rent and day to day costs as the cost of living crisis worsened.

Rhys explained that she needed to apply for Universal Credit, to give her a personal income and help towards paying her rent as she is not working. He also completed a 'Discretionary Housing Payment' form to get

help additional help to address bedroom tax deductions.

The customer had a disability, so Rhys referred her to Citizens Advice to see if she was eligible to claim 'Employment and Support Allowance / PIP (Personal Independence Payment)' in order to get further help in making an application and completing the forms.

## Magenta Living

As the cost of living crisis became more apparent, [Magenta Living](#) developed a strategy to support customers with actions including a programme of neighbourhood roadshows.

The roadshows aimed to identify and support tenants and residents most in need (identified by reviewing customer and property data, including fuel poverty, EPC ratings, rent areas and IMD statistics). The aim of the events was to engage proactively with customers - having a conversation about their circumstances and inviting them to take part in a short survey. The survey consisted of questions about how concerned they were about a range of factors such as paying for food, utilities, rent and debt. Depending on customers' responses they were given a discreet referral slip and invited to Magenta's hub for the day.

The 'hub' came in various shapes and sizes (gazebo, exhibition trailer, community property) depending on location. It was staffed by members of Magenta's community regeneration team, financial inclusion, welfare benefits, teams with additional support from external partners Energy Projects Plus, Wirral Foodbank and Wirral Citizens Advice.

This team of dedicated specialists were able to provide on the spot help, advice and reassurance to people. The type of help provided included:

- Home energy assessments and fuel vouchers
- Maximising income and budgeting
- Food and food vouchers
- Support with debt.

Magenta also worked with local partners and Wirral Hygiene Bank to source a range of items and customers were encouraged to fill a bag with what they needed. The housing association has now delivered six cost of living roadshows, resulting in

800 surveys being completed and over 150 people receiving direct and practical support.

This work has only been possible with the support of Magenta colleagues and board members, who stepped out of their day to day roles and volunteered to help.

Feedback from Magenta customers speaks to the impact:

"I have started to build up arrears and I was getting worried. I would not have contacted you myself and had my head in the sand."

"Thanks a lot for arranging the fuel voucher I was surprised to get £49 which will be a real help to us."

"Thank you so much, I don't know how I would have got over the next few days before I got my money. This will help me so much."

The roadshows also provided an opportunity for colleagues from different teams and departments to work together, particularly those people who don't have a customer facing role. Magenta Living is planning to continue this project with the aim of reaching as many customers as possible over the coming months, with a particular focus in the lead up to next winter.



For further examples of how social housing providers are supporting, see [Inside Housing - Home - What are landlords doing to ease the pressure of energy prices on residents?](#)

# What is CIH calling for?

The Spring Budget introduced some measures which will help to address the impact of high energy bills but several areas remain where further action is needed. We continue to call for:

1. Restoration of local housing allowance rates to at least the 30th per centile and a return to annual uprating
2. Introduction of a social tariff for the energy market - a discounted, targeted tariff aimed at those in greatest need
3. A concerted programme to raise the energy efficiency of existing housing stock at pace and a commitment to bring forward additional funding for energy-efficiency measures in homes
4. Increased investment and grant levels to provide the number of homes at social rents we need each year
5. More investment in existing and new supported housing to meet a range of needs.

CIH is a member of the End Child Poverty Coalition and End Fuel Poverty Coalition.



# Useful resources

A summary of useful resources available:

- Government - [cost of living support](#), [energy bills support factsheet](#) and [stakeholder toolkit](#) on help for households
- [House of Commons library](#) briefings on the cost of living
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation - UK Poverty 2023 - the [essential guide to understanding poverty in the UK](#)
- [Office for National Statistics \(ONS\)](#) - the cost of living, current and upcoming work, February 2023
- [Money Saving Expert](#) - [cost of living help guide](#) and [energy price cap calculator](#)
- [Money Helper service](#) - free, confidential, and impartial help tailored to individual needs
- [Energy Saving Trust](#) - information about practical ways to save money on energy bills
- [Energy UK](#) - winter support hub information on energy bills, energy efficiency etc
- [LEAP](#) - free service helping people keep warm and reduce their energy bills
- [CPAG Fuel Rights handbook](#)
- [Citizens Advice](#) - information on grants and benefits available to help with energy bills, plus an online benefits calculator. The charity also runs a cost of living [dashboard](#) to track impact and monthly briefings; you can sign up to the next one [here](#)
- Local Government Association - [cost of living hub](#)
- [HACT](#) provide a range of resources to help social housing providers support their tenants
- [Warm Spaces map](#) - national map and directory to register a space as a 'warm bank' and direct people to support
- [National Energy Action](#) - free training for housing association staff on fuel poverty - see [here](#) for details. Also providing Winter Warmth Support Packs for vulnerable and at-risk clients (distributed to existing service users identified as needing additional support)
- [Fuel Bank Foundation](#) - provides financial support and practical advice
- [One Home](#) - provides information and advice on practical solutions to save money and reduce carbon emissions
- [Lightning Reach portal](#) - brings range of support from across sectors in one system, matching those in financial hardship with eligible funding
- [Charis Grants](#) - administrator for many funds and grants
- [Turn2us](#) - search grants that provide financial support to people who need it
- [Together through this crisis](#) is a new website from a coalition of charities and organisations to help provide support and provide a forum for people to help.



Around £19 billion of existing benefits and support is unclaimed by households every year. People can use Policy in Practice's free [Better Off Calculator](#) to ensure they are claiming all the support they are eligible for.

## Webinars

If you missed any of our previous cost of living events, you can catch up with them at [Cost of living crisis briefings - Chartered Institute of Housing \(cih.org\)](#). These are free to access for CIH members.



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