

Why is government progress on fuel poverty stalling in England?

Dr [Caitlin Robinson](#) published this interesting blog in early 2019

In a recent report, the Committee on Fuel Poverty highlighted that progress on fuel poverty in England is stalling. On Fuel Poverty Awareness Day, Caitlin Robinson, Lecturer in Geography, reflects on reasons for this lack of progress and envisions a more ambitious approach to tackling fuel poverty.

- There is no typical profile of a fuel poor household, making it a complex issue for policy makers to tackle.
- Economic austerity, cuts to welfare and public services, and changes to the housing market have exposed a new subset of households to fuel poverty.
- Current flagship policies are unlikely to address many of the structural drivers of fuel poverty amongst precarious households.
- Policy makers in Westminster can look to Scotland for inspiration in designing a more ambitious and wide-reaching fuel poverty strategy.

Fuel poverty is a unique type of deprivation that arises when households are unable to sufficiently heat their home, or to access other energy services and appliances that ensure they are healthy, comfortable and well. Despite several decades of fuel poverty policy in England, a hard-hitting campaign from [National Energy Action](#) warned that a baby born today could still be living in fuel poverty by its 80th birthday, given a lack of progress towards targets to eradicate the condition. Despite fuel poverty having substantial negative outcomes, not least the 9,700 excess winter deaths attributed to cold homes each year, the government has stalled in addressing the issue. Meanwhile, using the government's own definition of fuel poverty, [the number of households in England has increased by 210,000, to a total of 2.5 million](#). But what explains this failure, and what can be done to address it?

Who is likely to experience fuel poverty?

The [drivers of fuel poverty are multidimensional](#) and there is no typical profile of a fuel poor household, making it a complex issue for policy makers to tackle. Some drivers are relatively well-established and feature in the Fuel Poverty Strategy for England. This includes a specific focus on the very old, the very young, and people living with a disability or illness

that are likely to have a greater physiological need for energy. It also includes households for which low incomes, high energy costs, energy inefficiency, a lack of access to the gas network, or the high upfront costs of installing new energy infrastructures form a barrier to wellbeing.

More recently, my research has highlighted how economic austerity, cuts to welfare and public services, and changes to the housing market have exposed a new subset of households to fuel poverty. This includes those living in the private rented sector, in which tenancy agreements and a lack of housing rights mean the property they live in is likely to be highly energy inefficient. It also includes low-income households that have been disproportionately impacted by increased costs of living, cuts to welfare and public services, and the stagnation of wages. Many of these households are energy precarious: more likely to fall into fuel poverty as a result of structural inequalities in energy, housing and labour markets. For practitioners working at the local level the diversity of fuel poor households is nothing new; however, national-scale policy has often failed to reflect this.

Current fuel poverty policies in England

Since 2000, a fuel poverty strategy for England has outlined policies concerned with affordable warmth, often targeted at groups with a greater physiological need for heat. This strategy falls within the remit of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) who are responsible for delivering energy efficiency, via the Energy Company Obligation. Alongside this, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) distributes various income support measures that contribute towards winter heating bills, namely the Winter Fuel Payment and the Warm Homes Discount Scheme.

Spending on the Winter Fuel Payment, a universal income support for older people, vastly outstrips spending on energy efficiency. Meanwhile, investment in efficiency has been slashed from a peak of £1.8 billion in 2013 to £600 million in 2018. Despite being touted as one of the main mechanisms for alleviating fuel poverty, only 10% of spending on income support reaches households classified as fuel poor. As it stands, flagship policies are unlikely to address many of the structural drivers of fuel poverty amongst precarious households.

Selected national scale fuel poverty policies

Policy	Description	Department	Spending (per annum)
Winter Fuel Payments	Annual payment each winter to all persons in receipt of state pension	DWP	£1.8 billion
Warm Homes Discount Scheme	One-off financial contribution to pay electricity bill of low-income households or recipients of pension credit	DWP	£320 million
Energy Company Obligation	Scheme obligating larger energy suppliers to help lower income households to make efficiency improvements	BEIS	£600 million

Source: Author's representation of [spending in 2018 in England](#) and [spending in 2018 in England, Wales and Scotland](#).

Reimagining fuel poverty policy

For inspiration in designing a more ambitious and wide-reaching fuel poverty strategy, policy makers in Westminster need not look far. Scotland is currently consulting on the [draft of its new Fuel Poverty Strategy](#). The underlying principle of the strategy is a commitment to social justice and equity. Despite working within the confines of budgets and thresholds set by central government the Scottish strategy is refreshing as it recognises the need for policies that address the underlying economic and social inequalities within society. In addition to considerable investment in energy efficiency, the proposed strategy includes actions to maximise incomes in the face of UK Government welfare cuts including spending of £125 million between 2018-2019 through the Scottish Welfare Fund, and a restructuring of the welfare system owing to new devolved powers. To make progress in

alleviating fuel poverty in England, a similar approach needs to be taken that explicitly addresses how low incomes, the differential impacts of welfare cuts, and housing insecurity are central to the experience of fuel poverty for many households.

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