



The Cost-of-Living Crisis is a Health Crisis: A Call to Action from the Faculty of Public Health in Scotland

Right now, in parts of Scotland, people are already dying years earlier than they should. The current cost-of-living crisis is going to make this much worse.

To create a society where everybody can thrive and be healthy, evidence shows we need all of the right building blocks in place: adequate income and resources, stable jobs, good pay, quality housing, good education, and a sense of community and connectedness. At present, all these building blocks are under threat.

With the cost of living increasing so rapidly due to inflation and spiralling energy costs, many more people in our communities will be pushed into poverty. They will not have enough income to adequately heat their homes, access hot water, use appliances for cooking and cleaning, or buy basic food and resources for daily living. Living in cold, damp homes can result in respiratory problems and other health issues. Inadequate nutrition will also lead to a range of health issues, and impact children's ability to concentrate at school. Constantly worrying about having enough money can also lead to chronic stress, anxiety, and depression.

Those most likely to be affected by this crisis are also those who have been left most vulnerable following the covid pandemic and a decade of austerity-related cuts to welfare benefits and public services. This includes a generation of children and young people, whose health and wellbeing may be permanently impacted by this prolonged stress and difficulty during a crucial time for their development. There are also significant concerns about the resilience of the public institutions and services which connect communities and provide emergency assistance, which are themselves under threat from rising prices and inflation.

The Committee of the Faculty of Public Health in Scotland calls for urgent action from the UK and Scottish Governments to mitigate the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis and reduce health inequalities.

Calls for immediate action

- Governments have a responsibility to ensure everyone has a sufficient income for good health, especially in times of crisis. This should be targeted through multiple policy channels:
 - Introduction of a requirement for employers to provide the Real Living Wage, uprated to account for inflation
 - Meaningful engagement with trade unions and worker representatives to ensure all salaries meet rising living costs

- At minimum, meeting the previous guarantee of uprating existing benefits to match the level of inflation - ideally, these should be increased further to prevent individuals and families from falling below the poverty line
- In Scotland, there should be full use of devolved social security powers to mitigate the effects of economic shocks and inflation
- Households must be protected from rising energy costs and fuel poverty. We support Government intervention to keep the price of household fuel bills affordable, with a focus on ensuring targeted protection of the most vulnerable e.g., young children, the elderly, those on pre-payment meters. There must also be an immediate commitment to longer-term action on home insulation and energy efficiency (see below).
- Expansion of universal free school meals for all primary school age children should be immediately progressed to mitigate the acute risk of food poverty
- Provision of comprehensive financial support must be available for all services in the private, public or third sector which support people and build community health and wellbeing
- We call for an urgent formal Health Impact Assessment to be conducted on the cost-of-living crisis in Scotland, led by Public Health Scotland
- All policy options being considered or introduced to address the cost-of-living crisis **must** be scrutinised for their health impacts
- Any policy approach should also adhere to existing goals on environmental sustainability to avoid worsening the climate crisis (which poses the greatest current threat to global health)

Calls for longer-term action

- There should be a recognition that health for everyone in Scotland is a basic human right, and therefore Governments should strongly commit to a Health in All Policies approach
- Economic policies should be aimed at reducing inequalities to promote health and wellbeing, recognising the health benefits of a more progressive tax system for Scotland as a whole
- Every person in Scotland should be guaranteed a minimum level of personal income that gives them the best chance of a long and healthy life
- Any adverse impacts of UK welfare reforms on the health of the Scottish population should be mitigated through devolved social security policies, with an emphasis on reducing stigma and protecting children from experiencing poverty
- There should be a refocus of the energy market to reduce reliance on gas and oil and increase use of renewables, as well as a systematic programme of home insulation and housing energy efficiency improvements
- Marketing of health harming products such as tobacco, alcohol, gambling, and foods high in fat, sugar, and salt should be restricted, as these encourage overconsumption with financial and health costs to families

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