

GREEN

DOCTOR

SURVEY

2023



GREEN
DOCTOR™

HEADLINE FINDINGS



94% of Green Doctors had experienced an increase in demand for the service, and the remaining **6%** felt that there had been no change from the previous year.



94% reported supporting households that did not use their central heating at all, nearly **85%** had experienced people cutting back on food or only eating cold meals, and over **70%** had worked with clients that did not pay their water bill in order to prioritise their energy bill or council tax.



64% had seen a change in the demographics or circumstances of those attempting to access the service. **25%** observed more working people in need, and **10%** highlighted an increase in the number of elderly people, families, and those who may have previously been considered 'affluent'.



Almost **90%** felt that current government support was insufficient, often due to inconsistencies in the payments or a necessity to use financial support to cover existing debts. **30%** believed that more financial aid should be made available, and around **20%** suggested that eligibility criteria for support schemes should be adapted to reflect the increasing need of working families or owner-occupiers.

INTRODUCTION

Energy bills are unaffordable for many households across the UK, with National Energy Action estimating that 6.3 million households in the UK are experiencing fuel poverty (defined as spending 10% of household income to achieve a satisfactory level of heating).¹ For many people this is pushing them into a desperate situation of choosing between 'heating and eating' and accumulating overwhelming amounts of debt. While there are groups with particular vulnerabilities, such as older or disabled people, there is an ever-expanding pool of those at-risk, including working and young families.

Groundwork's Green Doctor service offers free, impartial advice that saves energy, reduces bills, and assists people to live more comfortably in warmer homes. Green Doctors provide households with an extensive range of measures and support that can reduce heat loss, damp and mould, improve water efficiency and save money. Additionally, Green Doctors signpost individuals living with other difficulties, such as poor mental health, to local specialist services and liaise with energy companies about hardship support and boiler repairs. The success of the Green Doctor model is grounded in the workforce's in-depth local knowledge, an ability to build relationships with (often vulnerable) individuals, and their capability to ensure that available public and private funding is directed to where it is most needed. Throughout autumn 2023, Groundwork surveyed its Green Doctors to understand their changing role, the evolving needs of their clients, and any additional funding, resources, or policy changes that would support their work. This report sets out the findings from that survey and identifies the policy and funding measures we think are necessary to respond.



¹ Fuel Poverty Explainer | National Energy Action

FUEL POVERTY IN THE UK

In England, households are counted as living in fuel poverty by the UK Government if they are living in a property with a fuel poverty energy efficiency rating (FPEER) of band D or below, or a household where residual income falls below the poverty line when spending the required amount to heat their home.² The main living room in a home should be heated to 21°C, and other rooms should not fall below 18°C. This is higher if there are ill or vulnerable people living in the property. By this measure, 13.4% of English households are in 'fuel poverty',³ however certain groups are more at-risk than others. This includes those on pre-payment meters (30.6%), young person households such as students (28.8%), large households (27%), lone parents (26.5%), and private renters (25%).⁴ It is estimated that there are 1m households that are in 'extreme' fuel poverty, where 20% of income is spent on energy.⁵ 42% of households that spend more than 10% of their income on energy have at least one person over 65, compared to only 25% of those not in fuel poverty.⁶ The calculation varies in other parts of the UK. In Wales and Northern Ireland, a household is counted as fuel poor if at least 10% of their net income, pre-housing costs, is spent on heating the home.⁷ Households in Scotland must also satisfy a second criteria to be classed as living in fuel poverty, where their remaining net income following fuel, housing, and childcare costs and any benefits received cannot sufficiently sustain an acceptable standard of living.⁸

Sustained high energy costs have spilled over into unmanageable debts for households, with the Bank of England predicting that many households will now be depleted of any savings due to the sustained high cost of energy and living.⁹ Energy debt has reached its highest level, at a staggering £2.9bn,¹⁰ and Citizens Advice have experienced their busiest year ever, with the average energy debt now a third higher than in 2019.¹¹ There are currently 8,927 'Energy Crisis Hotspots' in England and Wales, where incomes are below, yet energy bills are above, the national average. 50% of households that are in debt are living on 'negative budgets' where their outgoing spending on essentials such as energy is regularly more than what's coming in.¹² 46% of those in debt live with a mental health condition, and 86% report that their mental health problems were made worse by debts.¹³

² Fuel Poverty Methodology Handbook (Low Income Low Energy Efficiency) | DEFRA

³ Annual Fuel Poverty Statistics in England, 2023 | DEFRA

⁴ Who is most at risk of fuel poverty? | ODI

⁵ Who's impacted by fuel poverty in 2023? | Friends of the Earth

⁶ Ibid at 5.

⁷ How fuel poverty is measured in the UK: March 2023 | ONS

⁸ Ibid at 7.

⁹ Money and Credit – May 2023 | Bank of England

¹⁰ Energy regulator sets out proposals to help ensure customers at risk of getting into debt are better supported | Ofgem

¹¹ Winter warning: The urgent case for energy bill support this winter | Citizens Advice

¹² Households are living on empty – can social tariffs reduce the pressure? | Citizens Advice

¹³ Money and Mental Health: The Facts | Money and Mental Health

Living in a cold home has huge physical, mental, and developmental implications. It has been linked to respiratory conditions, dementia, and hypothermia and can prevent recovery from certain injuries.¹⁴ Children that live in cold homes face a variety of challenges such as health problems¹⁵ and low educational attainment.¹⁶ Studies from around the world have exposed the relationship between fuel poverty and poor mental health, and advocate for governments to view alleviating fuel poverty as a public health intervention.¹⁷ The longer a person spends living in a cold home, the larger their risk of experiencing anxiety, depression or isolation, with adolescents, adults, and older people in cold homes all more at-risk of developing multiple mental health issues.¹⁸ Scope highlight that disabled people are disproportionately at risk of being in fuel poverty, and are commonly skipping meals and cutting back the number of showers they take to get by. They face additional burdens as their food and energy costs are likely to be higher due to necessary adaptations paired with an inability to increase their income through taking on more or any employment.¹⁹ It must also not be forgotten that there are households who are not connected to the main energy supplies may be completely cut off from lighting and heating if they cannot afford fuel or to top-up.²⁰ Often, there are additional, intersecting vulnerabilities to consider, such as ethnicity, where individuals are already more at-risk of living in relative poverty.²¹

16% (around 8.3m) of adults in the UK live in cold, damp homes. Alarmingly, 1.7m are those most vulnerable to the negative impact of residing in such spaces, including the over-75s and households with individuals that live with pre-existing conditions or that are under the age of 6.²² The extent of this issue is unsurprising, given that the UK has the least well-insulated housing stock in Europe.²³

4.4m homes do not have cavity wall insulation, and a further 4.8m live without loft insulation. Sub-par housing conditions such as this leave at least 15.3m households paying an 'inefficiency penalty' due to living in a dwelling rated below EPC D. In fuel poverty hotspots, such as Birmingham and Bradford, the proportion of well-insulated homes is only around one third, and one fifth lack very basic insulation.²⁴ Moreover, 58% of privately rented homes in England have damp, mould or excessive cold in their household. Damp and mould can lead to illness, especially within the airways and lungs, with official data highlighting that cases of hypothermia have surged by 36% during the crisis.²⁵ While this can affect anyone, those with pre-existing medical conditions, weakened immune systems, living with mental health issues, children, and older people are all more at-risk. It is estimated that NHS spending on treating illnesses associated with living in a cold or damp home has topped £1.4bn, and £39m could be saved per year if issues with damp were rectified.^{26 27 28}

¹⁴ Fuel Poverty, Cold Homes, and Health Inequalities | Institute of Health Equity

¹⁵ Fuel poverty is intimately linked to poor health | BMJ

¹⁶ Child Poverty, Coronavirus & Christmas | The Childhood Trust

¹⁷ The effect of energy poverty on mental health, cardiovascular disease and respiratory health: a longitudinal analysis | The Lancet

¹⁸ The Health Impacts of Cold Homes and Fuel Poverty | Marmot Review Team

¹⁹ Living with a disability: the continuing crisis | We are Citizens Advice

²⁰ The cold, dark truth about winter 2023/24 | Fuel Bank Foundation

²¹ The Cost of Living Crisis in the UK: All In It Together? | UCL

²² Millions spending winter in cold damp homes | End Fuel Poverty Coalition

²³ Fairer, warmer, cheaper | Social Market Foundation

²⁴ Who's impacted by fuel poverty in 2023? | Friends of the Earth

²⁵ Hypothermia cases in England surge during energy bills crisis | End Fuel Poverty Coalition

²⁶ UK Damp and Mould Statistics 2023 | Homebrite

²⁷ Understanding and addressing the health risks of damp and mould in the home | DLUHC

²⁸ Health Inequalities: Cold or damp homes | House of Commons Library

GROUNDWORK'S GREEN DOCTORS

Groundwork's Green Doctors supported over 35,000 households in England and Wales last year. They are trained energy advisors with particular expertise in engaging vulnerable people at risk of fuel poverty and social isolation. Such groups include older people, those living with disabilities or health conditions, lone parents, and the long-term unemployed. They offer advice and guidance on how to increase energy efficiency within the home, facilitate sustainable behaviour change, and install energy-saving 'warm home' measures. This holistic offer of energy support results in reduced energy usage, more comfortable homes, and financial savings.

Green Doctors identify their customers through skillful partnership working with local stakeholders, such as Housing Associations, social care organisations, VCSEs, and other Groundwork community-based projects and outreach. They also work with these services to provide wrap-around support to vulnerable households, and make onward referrals for specialist support with benefits, debt, home safety, and food poverty.

Groundwork delivers the Green Doctor programme as part of its charitable mission to tackle hardship while achieving a just transition to net zero. We fundraise nationally and locally to enable us to deliver this service in areas of greatest need. This includes vital support from our strategic partner, the Cadent Foundation, who have enabled us to support 10,000 vulnerable households over the last three years.



SURVEY OVERVIEW

Groundwork developed a survey of 17 questions to answer three research questions, using a mixture of both fixed-response and free-text answers.

1. How has the role of Green Doctors developed in the past 12 months?

2. What are the challenges and needs of their clients?

3. What additional funding, resources, or policy changes are needed to support Green Doctors and their customers?

The survey was created and shared using an online platform, with participant recruitment occurring via snowballing. Emails and Microsoft Teams messages were sent periodically to practitioners who were asked to circulate with their wider team. All Green Doctor practitioners that have been active in the last 12 months were eligible to take part. 53 participants responded from 11 out of 14 Groundwork Trusts. The data was collected throughout October and November 2023, and synthesised to produce both descriptive statistics and thematically analysed results.



RESULTS

CHANGES IN DEMAND

There were no Green Doctors that had experienced a decrease in demand for their service. 94% had seen an increase and the remaining 6% felt there had been no change from the previous year. There was little change in the percentage of respondents who had experienced an increase when compared with the 2022 survey; a potential signifier that the energy 'crisis' has not been an isolated time of intense difficulty and is, in fact, an enduring period of hardship for many. The information collected on waiting lists also exemplifies the sustained demand for services such as Green Doctor, as staff remain faced with an unclearable backlog of cases. Up from just over 60% in 2022, 71% of Green Doctors stated that their service was operating a waiting list, with nearly 20% having over 50 people waiting for a visit. Two participants reported that their service had 600 or more people waiting to see a Green Doctor. This huge increase in demand was often driven by new groups attempting to access the service. 64% of respondents had seen a change in the demography of those in need. 25% observed more working people, and 10% highlighted that there had been an increase in demand from old people, young families, and those who "may otherwise be seen as comfortable". There was great similarity reported in experiences of the "working poor" who were struggling to "make ends meet", such as earning "just a little too much" to be eligible for government support schemes or benefits or using food banks for the first time.





I have found that more people who are working are contacting us need[ing] support [such as] civil servants, teachers, and council workers”

(Green Doctor, Groundwork North Wales)



[Increased] energy use [can come from] breathing equipment, motorized chairs, stairlifts, bathing/skin conditions, children with Autism who are light or temperature sensitive”

(Green Doctor, Groundwork North East & Cumbria)

The rising demand for the Green Doctor service is situated against a backdrop of high inflation, high interest rates, and an ongoing cost of living crisis that has significantly impacted many. 98% of Green Doctors believed that the effects of the energy crisis have been worsened due to other increases in the cost of living, making them feel like “double or even triple” the impact. Almost a quarter had worked with households that were now unable to afford food or had been forced to eat an unhealthy diet to get by. They reported that around 10% of their customers had also struggled with their rent, mortgages, or other inflation-related cost increases such as “rising [car] insurance and fuel costs” that had led to “several people [getting] rid of their car as they can’t afford [the costs]”. “Cuts in transport for rural communities” were highlighted, leaving people facing greater isolation or difficulties accessing employment opportunities.



CHANGES IN ROLE

While providing advice on fuel or energy debt has always been a feature of the Green Doctor role, it was felt by over a third of respondents that giving holistic debt advice or making referrals to debt management organisations was becoming the predominant focus of their appointments with clients. One respondent reported how it was now not uncommon to “come across someone with £2000 of debt”. Respondents to Groundwork’s 2022 Green Doctor survey reported supporting households with debt at a much lower level and instead described spending more time on behaviour change. The massive need for debt support indicates that, even when reducing usage to a minimal level, energy costs remain unaffordable. The knock-on effects of mounting monetary pressure, which show no sign of abating, has adapted the role of Green Doctors in other ways. Around a third of Green Doctors felt an acute rise in their workload, particularly with clients who have increasingly complex cases, requiring more referrals to other organisations. 43% of respondents described that their work has had to become more collaborative in order to reach vulnerable people, share the load, or to get advice on how to support their customers. 40% reported that they had made referrals for debt relief, and 15% had made referrals to mental health support. It was, however, highlighted that more partnership working was not a silver bullet, as every organisation has “extensive waiting lists [meaning that clients face a] vicious cycle”.



[There are an] increased number of residents with chaotic lives and mental health conditions, resulting in more emotional support”

(Green Doctor, Groundwork North East & Cumbria)

Other changes to previous ways of working include there no longer being any benefit to spending time changing clients’ energy provider, as a lack of market competition has resulted in few savings to be found. Instead, more time was going to resolving issues with energy providers. In particular, customers have been highly distressed by receiving incorrect and often wildly unrealistic bills.

IMPACT ON CLIENTS & BEHAVIOUR

All Green Doctors had witnessed their clients making detrimental changes to their behaviour in an effort to keep costs down. Nearly 95% had supported customers who were avoiding using their central heating entirely, 79% had been in properties where customers were only heating one room, 60% had experienced people staying out all day in places like doctors waiting rooms or libraries to keep warm, and almost 60% had seen households going to bed early to avoid putting the heating on.



[I'm seeing] more elderly people that are sitting in their outdoor coats to keep warm"

(Green Doctor, Groundwork Yorkshire)

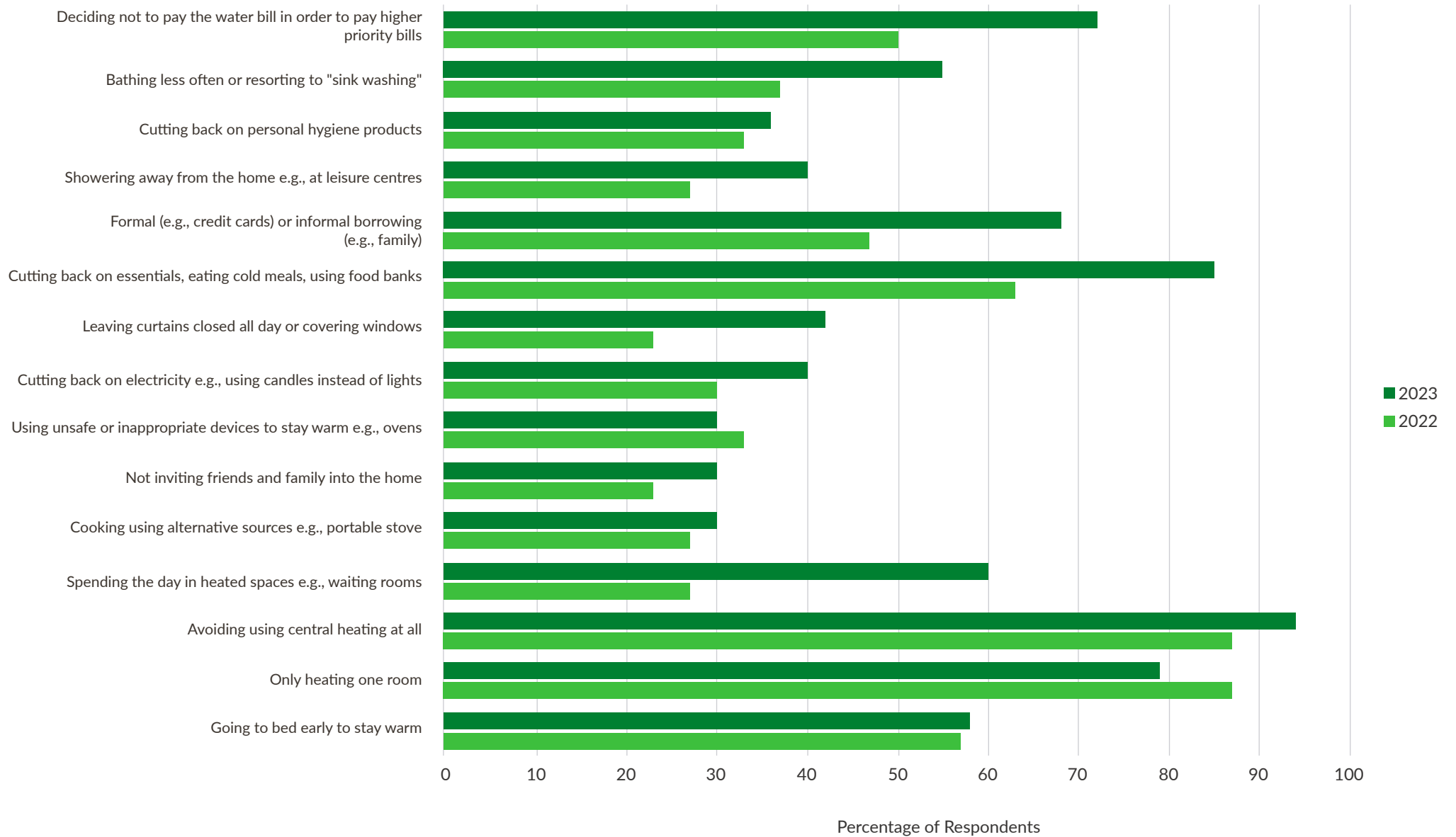


It's starting to become not just 'I have to choose between heating and eating' – they can't do either"

(Green Doctor, Groundwork Cheshire, Lancashire & Merseyside)



Responses to "What strategies have you seen households using to cope with sustained high energy bills?"



Cutting back on spending or borrowing money have also become fundamental survival strategies. It is “increasingly difficult to afford the weekly shop, even at [the cheaper supermarkets]” for many, with 85% of Green Doctors visiting households that have had to cut back on essential items, rely on food banks, or only eat cold meals. Moreover, 55% had seen customers not using the bath or shower in place of energy-saving ‘sink washes’. 10% reported that some clients were ‘self-disconnecting’ by not topping-up their pre-payment meters to prevent spending, even though they would still incur more debt due to the standing charge. Most Green Doctors spoke of clients who were incurring additional debts to survive. 67% said they had worked with people that had to borrow money from formal and informal channels and over 70% of Green Doctors had observed households that were not paying the water bill in order to pay their energy bill or council tax.



Despite many households spending months living in cold homes, cutting back on essentials, or going without to get by, according to Green Doctors “there is no obvious end in sight [for those] struggling with debt and bills”. This bleak reality has had significant impacts on clients’ health, evidenced by 96% of Green Doctors either agreeing or strongly agreeing that the crisis has had a direct impact on the health and wellbeing of the households they work with. Green Doctors highlighted various reasons, such as worries about the impact of living in a cold home or their ability to heat their home (38%), increased anxiety (26%) and depression (19%), and distress concerning debts (22%) or food (17%). Other, less common, impacts on wellbeing included increases in physical illness, hopelessness, and suicidal thoughts. There was a 16% increase on the percentage of respondents that agreed or strongly agreed with the statement in 2022. This may be due to the situation worsening for many in 2023 or the consequence of continuously struggling with the crisis for two years. It is reasonable to infer that both may be true. The data suggests that last year, households were already using the bare minimum to get by, so it is unsurprising that they are struggling to cope with a situation where their living standards continue to decrease, and debts continue to soar, despite any measures that they have taken.

EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORT

98% of Green Doctors reported that their customers were in receipt of government support that exists to prevent households experiencing acute financial hardship. While 15% acknowledged that some help was better than none, almost 90% believed that the help on offer was insufficient. 30% called for more direct financial aid, and 17% wanted the eligibility criteria of support schemes adapting to reflect the growing needs of previously secure households, like those who are in work or owner-occupiers.

While the Energy Price Guarantee has been posited as a source of relief for households over winter, over 60% (similar to the 2022 figure) felt that the change would have either a negative or no impact on the lives of their clients as “it still doesn’t negate the [loss of the] £400 [Energy Bills Support Scheme] everyone received last Autumn and Winter”. Given that the schemes of support are highly changeable 77% of respondents highlighted that households were still unable to plan ahead, despite being in receipt of help. It was regularly noted that monetary payments were used to pay other debts rather than the intended energy expense.



The financial support often acts as a sticking plaster. It may help relieve financial pressure in the short term but certainly not the long term. This is evidenced by the number of 'repeat customers' we experience. Once that financial support has been expended, the customers find themselves back to square one. It's a cycle. Some people become very dependent on financial support as well, e.g. fuel vouchers.”

(Green Doctor, Groundwork Cheshire, Lancashire & Merseyside)

Only around half of Green Doctors reported that their customers were aware of the policy changes that could affect them, such as the Energy Price Guarantee. 13% believed that households often struggle to understand the ever-changing landscape due to being “bewildered by what the press say”, or that the removal of support such as “the £400 [that is no longer there]” are not “publicised... and people are wondering why their direct debits have increased”. Green Doctors spend a considerable amount of time making customers aware of the help available but report that many still “avoid [the topic] because it is stressful and doesn’t help them day to day”.

CALLS TO ACTION

These findings make it clear that, despite the support being made available by government, Green Doctors are being asked to deal with an increasing number of complex and challenging cases. Addressing this rising demand effectively will require both a short- and long-term response.



1. More immediate support for households, including financial help and access to energy advice and efficiency measures

Green Doctors stress the need for more immediate support to tackle the multiple impacts of price rises, whether through direct financial support, increased availability of energy efficiency advice or provision of ‘winter warmer’ packs and items such as electric blankets. Although measures to ‘warm the person not the home’ are seen as a stopgap or sticking plaster, they have become essential at a time where “people cannot even afford the basic essentials to live a safe and secure life”.

2. Changes to scheme criteria and energy tariffs

While addressing immediate hardship is a priority, Green Doctors agree that many of the customers they support are victims of an energy system that unfairly penalises those on low incomes or doesn’t reflect the full reality of increased living costs. Reducing the standing charge would have a significant impact on poorer households who have reduced energy consumption. In addition, the results from this research signal the need to expand the offer of support to households that have been previously excluded, potentially through uprating current measures such as benefit entitlements or the Warm Homes Discount. Support that is offered should also recognise the specific needs of already vulnerable groups such as those reliant on medical equipment. Other measures highlighted by Green Doctors include a government-backed ‘help to repay scheme’, where every £1 paid by customers could be matched, or price-caps on essential items “to give households some breathing space and reduce the impact on foodbanks”. Groundwork backs the campaign for the introduction of a social tariff for low income households, similar to those offered for other essential services such as broadband.

3. A large-scale programme of home retrofit to improve home insulation

Ultimately, the solution to millions of people living in cold, damp, expensive to heat homes is to insulate and upgrade more of the UK's housing stock. While Green Doctors are obviously committed to helping people heat their homes, there was some frustration when there was “no point heating homes” as it “escapes in no time due to inefficiency”. Moreover, a lack of “effective administration and delivery” is reported as making potentially “good schemes [like] ECO4... difficult to access”. The case has been made repeatedly for a major national programme of housing retrofit, which could lead to 400,000 direct and 500,000 indirect jobs being created,²⁹ £9.3bn in societal savings and massive savings for the NHS.³⁰ Small grants for cheaper measures such as energy audits, heat pumps, smart meters, draught-proofing or loft and cavity wall insulation could also bring huge benefit. Such upgrades could reduce bills by £500 a year for the average household,³¹ and £2000 for most energy inefficient homes.³² Most commentators agree that a coordinated area-based approach would be most effective in enabling local skills development and workforce planning and in galvanising local community support.

²⁹ Train Local, Work Local, Stay Local: Retrofit, Growth and Levelling Up | IPPR

³⁰ Home advantage: Unlocking the benefits of energy efficiency | Citizens Advice

³¹ GreenGo: Unlocking an Energy Efficiency and Clean Heat Revolution | IPPR

³² Poorly insulated homes to pay £1,000 more on gas bills this winter | Energy & Climate Intelligence Unit



Until the government properly insulate the UK housing stock, any [Energy Price] cap[s are] futile”

(Green Doctor, Groundwork Yorkshire)



CONCLUSION

Groundwork's Green Doctors have a first-hand view of the challenges being faced by people across the country in managing the impact of energy price rises. Their feedback confirms that, for an increasing number of households, energy bills are simply unaffordable.

Many Green Doctor clients are being pushed into ever-worsening financial situations, where they face hunger, debt, and anxiety. While the current packages of support from the Government and energy providers are welcome, it is clear that households need more financial and practical help to protect themselves this winter, and that this need is likely to extend for a number of years. Tackling this crisis means increasing and extending existing support schemes, fixing the energy market so that those who are already vulnerable aren't further disadvantaged and investing now to improve and future-proof our housing stock. Feeling secure in our home is a basic human need, but for millions of people price rises are leading to impossible choices that diminish their physical health, chip away at their wellbeing, and stifle their ability to feel safe and happy. Changing this must be high on the priority list for this and any future government.



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