

FIFE'S FUEL POVERTY COVID-19 RECOVERY PLAN

HEALTHY HEATING PARTNERSHIP

2021-22



COSY KINGDOM





INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic and the first national lockdown in March 2020, the demand for services which assist people with their energy bills have increased significantly. Fuel poverty services in Fife have assisted 9918 households which is over 7000 more people receiving energy advice and fuel top ups than in 2019-20. The increased demand combined with tight lockdown restrictions have forced all organisations to redesign their service delivery. Staff and volunteers have shown exceptional resilience and flexibility over the last 12 months which has resulted in a smooth transition to alternative ways of working. Fife Council and the Fife Healthy Heating Partnership have been preparing their Fuel Poverty Strategy and aimed to publish this in 2020 alongside the Scottish Government Fuel Poverty Strategy.

The Covid-19 pandemic led to a delay in the publication of the Scottish Government strategy and therefore the Fife Healthy Heating Partnership made the decision to delay their strategy, however the Partnership recognises the immediate need for action to assist households who have been hard hit by the financial impacts of the pandemic and have prepared this “Fuel Poverty Covid-19 Recovery Plan”.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the key objectives of the Healthy Heating Partnership in Fife over the next 12 months, in response to and recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic.

HEALTHY HEATING PARTNERSHIP

The Healthy Heating and Poverty Partnership was formed in recognition of the close connection between households experiencing fuel poverty and wider poverty issues. The Partnership meets every quarter to discuss poverty and fuel poverty reduction efforts in Fife, identify gaps and propose innovative ways of working. The members of the Partnership include, Fife Council, Cosy Kingdom, Home Energy Scotland, Citizens Advice and Rights Fife (CARF), National Health Service, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and Registered Social Landlords.

For the purpose of the Fuel Poverty Covid-19 Recovery Plan, Fife Council, Cosy Kingdom and Home Energy Scotland formed the core working group as fuel poverty service providers. The Healthy Heating Partnership and other agencies contributed significantly towards the wider working group, enabling the production of a comprehensive Recovery Plan.

KEY OBJECTIVES

The focus in the next 12 months will continue to be supporting households who are struggling to heat their home, or afford their energy bills, however the provision of this has changed from pre-pandemic work. Energy advice has traditionally been the driving force behind supporting households that are in fuel poverty, with crisis support forming a small part of the work carried out. Over the last 12 months, with a huge increase in demand for fuel poverty support services, the priority has shifted to immediate assistance. This predominately has resulted in services providing financial support to households, in addition to the energy advice which could help them reduce their energy bills.

With 2021 beginning in another national lockdown, service provision has continued to be stretched to its limits even more so in the first 2 months when the temperature dropped extremely low.

The key objectives of 2021-22 are to:

- Identify crisis action required for households over the next 12 months
- Increase referrals through partner agencies
- Agree development priorities as a Partnership
- Seek to manage funding and expectations
- Consider long term recovery plans which will contribute to the Fife Fuel Poverty Strategy

PHASES OF RECOVERY

The following phases of recovery are indicative of the measures set out by the Scottish Government, with explanations of how each phase looks in practice. These phases will shape the recovery of fuel poverty service provision.

This breakdown is consistent with the phases of recovery outlined in other Fife Council, Housing Services recovery documents but applies similar principles to the phases of recovery that partner organisations are working towards.

Status	What does this look like?
RED Phase 1 Emergency response	No home visits with tenants and residents. Prioritise workload Focus on areas of need
AMBER Phase 2	Social distancing continues Continue with resilience, with time taken to review areas of good practice. Essential home visits can take place under strict social distancing and PPE regulations.
Principles which may remain regardless of SG Phase	Social Distancing continues Continuation of telephone advice. This can reduce time spent in customers' homes. Webinars and awareness sessions can continue
GREEN SG - Stage 4	No restrictions, business as usual. Home energy advice visits/handyman service can be carried out. Public engagement can begin, (events etc) Look at lessons learnt – review and prepare Continue with identified areas where good practice has been recognised.

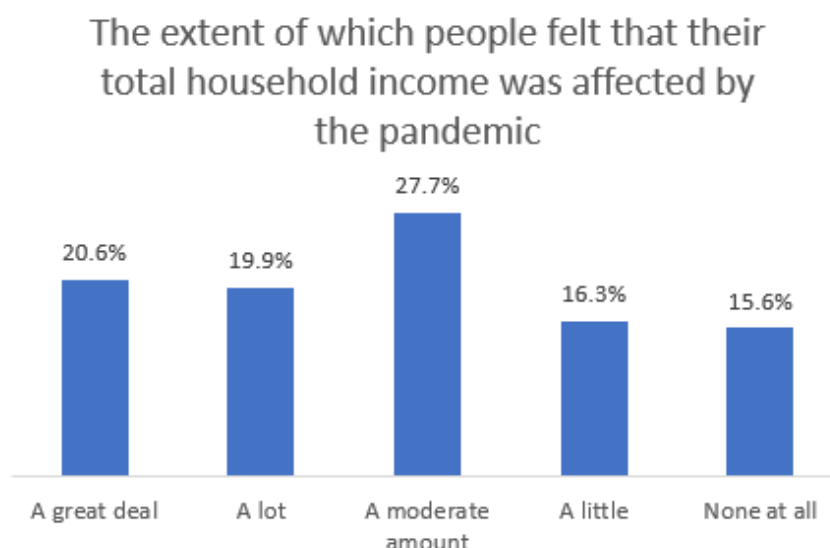
HOUSEHOLD SURVEY RESULTS

Fife Council published an online survey between January and March 2021 to gather insight into the financial impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on households in Fife.

The key themes to emerge from the survey results were:

- There is a correlation between income levels and those financially impacted by the pandemic
- People felt their household costs increased through the “Stay at Home” periods, particularly the second lockdown (December 2020 to April 2021)
- Childcare costs were an added expense for many families during the pandemic (paying for childcare, unable to work because no childcare)
- There was a financial impact of ill-health during the pandemic

The results also showed that the majority of households felt that their income was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in one way or another (see chart below).



The full survey results can be found on page 9 (Appendix 1).

2021-22 PRIORITIES

The Healthy Heating Partnership outlined their individual organisations main priorities over the next 12 months as we progress from Phase 1 (red) to Phase 4 (green). Where similar priorities have been identified, these proposed actions have been collated and this has helped to form a Fife wide action plan for fuel poverty service provision in 2021-22.

	YOU SAID...	WE'RE GOING TO...
PRIORITIES	There needs to be a focus on health impacts of fuel poverty	Engage with NHS and work together to highlight the health impacts by producing leaflets and more accessible information
	Private Housing Sector needs to be considered	Continue Private Rented Sector work and consider project potentials for owner occupiers
	Work closer with families	Plan projects and training opportunities for education and social work services
	Data should be shared with relevant partners to identify priority groups/areas	Continue to meet with partners regularly to look at ongoing workstreams and the possibility of targeting areas/specific groups through mapping exercise
	Partnership roles should be clarified	Refine the partnership structure and create terms of reference
	What support is available for those cut off from their supply?	Work closely as a partnership and with suppliers to reduce the number of households being cut off from their energy supply and providing additional support to those who are during this time
TRAINING	Training opportunities need to be advertised	Utilise various platforms for advertising training/awareness sessions across the partnership. Work with Poverty Awareness Training Group to advertise all training opportunities.
	We need more energy champions	Prioritise training for staff, volunteers and community activists with the aim of creating 'energy champions'.

PROMOTIONAL	Promotional materials for staff should be accessible	Provide staff awareness sessions and E-learning modules. Highlight online information, webpages and leaflets that can be provided to services.
	Online marketing should be accessible and relevant	Ensure all of our websites and social media remain up to date
	Materials need to be collective, a "one stop shop" for all energy advice in Fife	Work with partners to produce collaborative materials such as leaflets and continue to update the website with collective information
	Online videos are a useful source of information for people	Promote current YouTube videos of partners on a social media and the heating advice webpage and develop other useful resources
	Switching should continue to be promoted in addition to crisis intervention work	Continue to promote switching suppliers as a way of reducing household energy bills and providing advice and support to make this process easier for households

2021-22 AND BEYOND

While the priority for 2021-22 will undoubtedly be the continuation of crisis support and the transition from the current crisis to post-crisis work, we need to ensure that our short-term plans support our longer-term objectives which is to reduce fuel poverty in Fife. There is an expectation that the number of households in fuel poverty and extreme fuel poverty as reported in the Scottish Housing Condition Survey will increase as a direct impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the initial goal for fuel poverty service providers in Fife will unfortunately be seeing a return of fuel poverty in Fife to pre-pandemic levels, which pushes original targets back quite significantly.

To meet the government targets of 5% of households in fuel poverty and 1% in extreme fuel poverty by 2040, fuel poverty in Fife would have had to decrease by at least 1% every year and extreme fuel poverty by a minimum of 0.5% each year from the 2019 Scottish Housing Condition Survey (SHCS) figures.

The 2021 SHCS showed that in Fife 41,000 (24%) households are in fuel

poverty, and 19,000 (11%) are in extreme fuel poverty, which remains unchanged. We anticipate that the 2023 SHCS figures will show an increase in both fuel poverty and extreme fuel poverty in Fife given that the figures reported on are 2-4 years behind the date of publication. This is likely to create difficulties in terms of meeting the Scottish Government targets by 2040.

The Interim Local Housing Strategy 2020-22 is due to be reviewed in 2021 with the next Local Housing Strategy lasting from 2022-27. During this review period, partners will consider the impacts of the pandemic on their working practice and this will shape the indicators for the 5-year plan.

The development of the Fife Fuel Poverty Strategy will also be a priority for fuel poverty service provision post-pandemic. The strategy was started in 2019 with the intentions of being published in 2020 alongside the Scottish Government Fuel Poverty Strategy, however both papers are currently on hold. The group hopes to continue the strategy development in 2022-23, dependent on the timescales set by the Scottish Government.

All priorities will be reviewed with partners regularly and review updates will be available through the Healthy Heating Quarterly Updates issued by the Fuel Poverty Team, Fife Council.

CONCLUSION

Fuel Poverty provision should continue to be a priority over the next 12 months as households continue to feel the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite early indications that vaccines are reducing the likelihood of severe illness, there is currently not enough evidence to suggest that the vaccine has long-lasting effects or highly reduces the rate of transmission, which means we are likely to be managing the impact of this pandemic for some time.

Our goal is to continue to support households in fuel poverty, increase the number of referrals by partner agencies and get back to pre-pandemic levels of fuel poverty in Fife which we can then seek to reduce as part of a long-term strategy.

Appendix 1

HOUSEHOLD SURVEY RESULTS

To gather information around the extent that households in Fife have been financially impacted, Fife Council published an online survey which partner organisations across Fife shared on their social media platforms. The survey consisted of 9 questions and gathered 141 responses.

Of the 141 respondents:

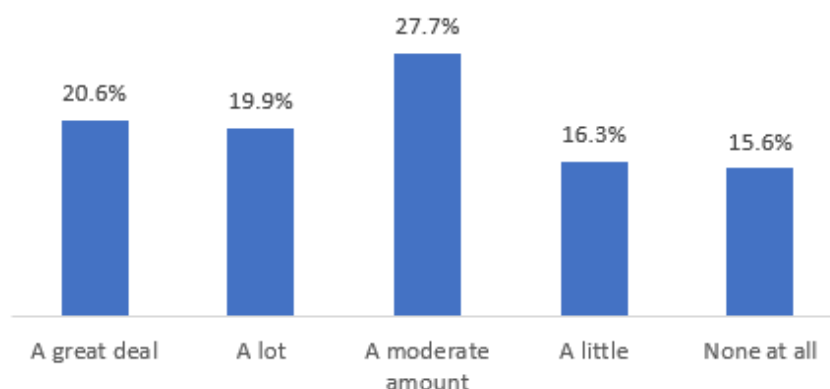
- 45.39% were social housing tenants
- 36.17% were owner-occupiers
- 17.02% were private sector tenants
- 1.42% were living with friends or family

The participants were asked to describe their household demographic:

- 35.46% said a couple with children
- 29.79% said single parent family
- 17.02% said couple, no children
- 16.31% said single person household
- 1.42% said cohabitation (living with a roommate, friends/family etc.)

The results show that the majority of households (84.5%) have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of their financial stability to some extent (Figure 1). Most, but not all, reported a negative impact on their income.

Figure 1 The extent of which people felt that their total household income was affected by the pandemic



Throughout this section of the document, we refer to direct and indirect impacts on household income. Direct impacts refer to policies put in place to support the government's "Stay at Home" message which directly affected how households recover income. For example, job loss, furlough or reduced working hours. Indirect impacts refer to the additional expenses households incurred as a result of the "Stay at Home" message.

There is also reference to the terms "before" and "after" the pandemic, although at the time of publication (April 2021) Covid-19 is still prevalent and phase 1 (red) restrictions are being lifted slowly. The term "after" refers to the current position of the household in comparison to their pre-pandemic practice.

The key themes to emerge from the survey results were:

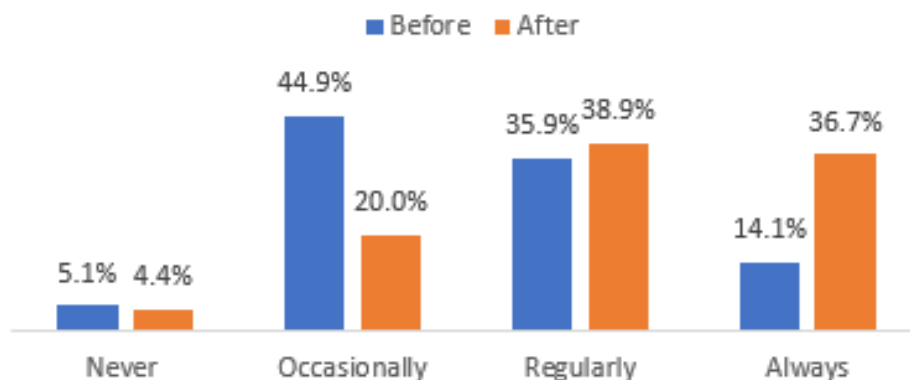
1. There is a correlation between income levels and those financially impacted by the pandemic
2. People felt their household costs increased through the "Stay at Home" periods, particularly the second lockdown (December 2020 to April 2021)
3. Childcare costs were an added expense for many families during the pandemic (paying for childcare, unable to work because no childcare)
4. There was a financial impact of ill-health during the pandemic

Correlation between income and financial impact of the pandemic

Participants were asked to describe their income based on subjectivity and not based on income brackets of any kind. The options were "low", "satisfactory" and "high".

The consultation results show that households on low incomes have been the hardest hit financially by the Covid-19 Pandemic with an increase in the number of people stating that they struggle "regularly" or "always", in comparison to before the pandemic (Figure 2).

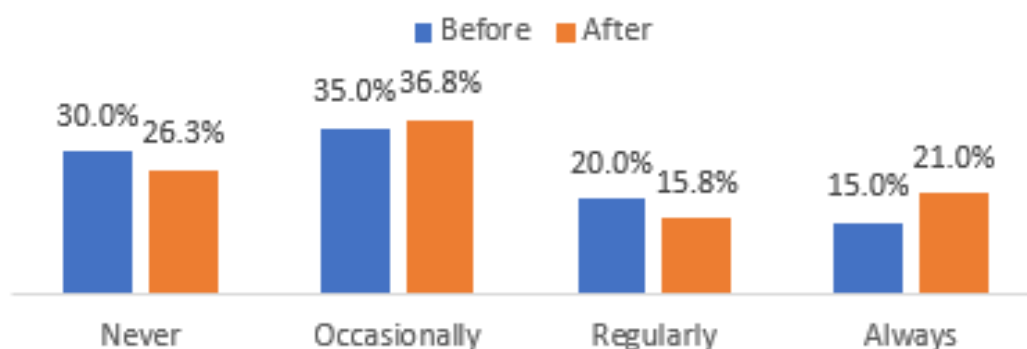
Figure 2 Households on low income - how often they are struggling financially before and after Covid-19 pandemic



The number of households stating that they “occasionally” struggled financially ‘after’ the pandemic decreased quite significantly, and there was a very small decrease in those who expressed that they “never” struggled financially after the pandemic. This could be linked to an increase in crisis support funding, or that those “never” or “occasionally” struggling are now in the “regularly” or “always” struggling categories as a result of the pandemic.

There are now more people on high incomes that said they “always struggle financially” than before the pandemic (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Households on high income - how often they are struggling financially before and after Covid-19 pandemic



There was a fall in the number of people that claim they “never” or “regularly” struggle financially. This may be explained by the financial support that businesses have received from the government, parts of the economy that have increased trade as a result of the pandemic, or that these households now fall into the “occasionally” or “always” categories.

Participants who said they were on 'satisfactory incomes' (between low and high) expressed the least amount of change in their income before and after the pandemic and reasons for this included that they were spending less money travelling to work, but more on household costs, therefore were not financially better or worse off than before the pandemic.

Participants were asked, if their household income was affected by the pandemic, what was the main cause?

72.7% of participants said that their finances were directly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic:

- 26.1% of participants were furloughed
- 20.5% of participants lost their jobs
- 17.1% of participants had their working hours reduced
- 9.1% of participants were self-employed and unable to work

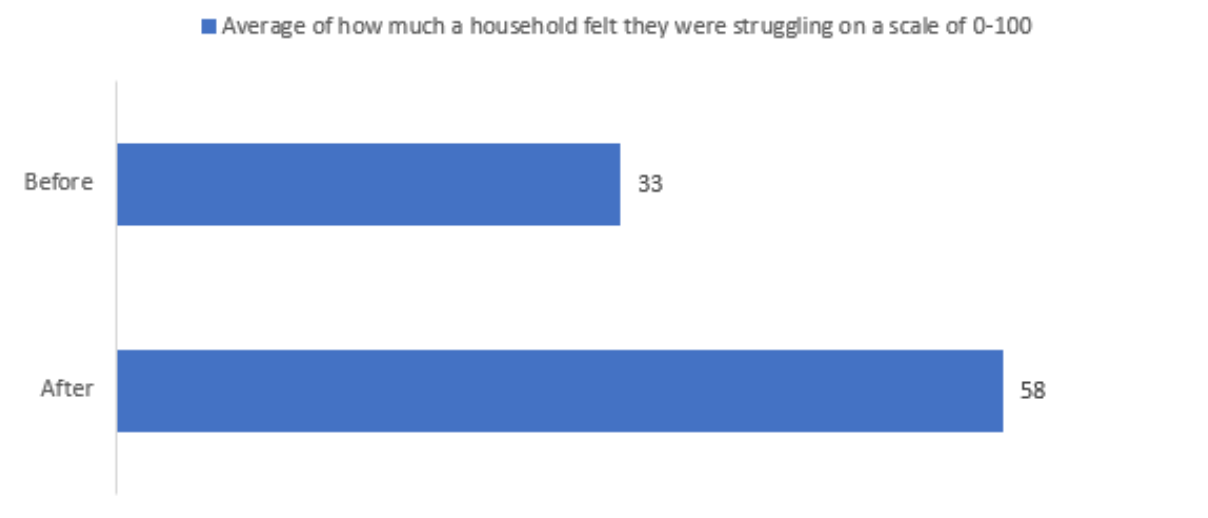
27.3% said that in direct causes of the pandemic resulted in them struggling financially. In-direct causes include:

- Increase in household expenditure as a result of living/working at home more often
- Cost of childcare as a result of school closures
- Financial impact of ill-health and shielding during the pandemic
- Fall in investments

Financial impacts were not negative for every participant. Some participants felt that they were not necessarily financially better or worse off because they were spending money differently. For example, they were spending less money travelling to work but more on electricity and food. Others were spending less money on leisure activities due to a complete lockdown. Another said, "I actually got a job due to the pandemic so better off!!".

There is a significant rise in households who have been struggling to afford to heat their homes since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic (Figure 4). Figures taken from the survey indicated that on average, before the pandemic started, around 33 households were affected, which has risen steeply to an average of 58.

Figure 4 How much households indicated they were struggling to afford to heat their homes before the pandemic compared to after the pandemic



Increase in costs incurred from “Stay at Home” message

Households indicated that they have felt the financial impact of the “Stay at Home” message as it has increased their household expenditure. Working from home and school closures were two of the main in-direct causes of financial difficulty during the pandemic according to the participants. Additionally, the second lockdown (December 2020 to April 2021) was arguably more difficult for households, who also had to balance increased energy usage as a result of staying at home and the cold winter months.

Some examples of these direct impacts that participants responded with include:

“Working from home, and home schooling. Food bill has increased drastically and so has my utility bills.”

“Having children home a lot more/eating more/using more power food etc”

“Working from home. Extra utility costs”.

“In the house always-higher fuel bills”

“Cost of heating the house all day and entertaining kids”

“Benefits stretched to the limit”

Childcare costs

Survey participants indicated that their income had been affected due to childcare costs and that this was an additional strain to the increase in household costs. Throughout the pandemic schools and nurseries have been closed, therefore having a detrimental effect on some families'

incomes. Parents have had to home-school, resulting in time being taken off work, being made unemployed or having to pay private childcare fees if classed as a keyworker.

Some examples of how this has affected some families include:

“Unable to find work due to childcare”

“Leaving college due to illness and childcare issues”

“Additional childcare fees due to schools being closed”

Financial impact of ill-health during pandemic

Participants expressed that ill-health during the pandemic impacted their finances, perhaps more so than if they had experienced ill-health pre-pandemic. Some respondents stated that they could not work for a period due to ill-health or an accident un-related to the pandemic, while others expressed that they could not work because they were advised to shield.

One survey participant detailed their experience of how the pandemic indirectly impacted their financial situation:

“I was off work with a chronic condition and was on half pay when the lockdown occurred, I was advised by my GP and occupational health that I should shield. I had hoped to get back to work within those first few weeks of lockdown, however, lockdown had an effect on getting support from various organisations and delayed my return to work and therefore increased the time I was on half pay”

While not all participants clarified whether their employer provided sick pay while they were unable to work, one respondent stated they were on Statutory Sick Pay. This decrease in income during the pandemic, with an increase in overall living costs has impacted people more heavily than ill-health may have otherwise.

It could also be argued that the pandemic will be responsible for the physical and mental ill-health of people who have struggled financially or socially throughout the last 12 months. The physical implications are particularly true for those who have struggled to keep their home heated to an adequate temperature throughout the winter to prevent respiratory and cardiovascular health problems. The impacts of this are likely to become more obvious in the coming months as GP Practices may face an incline in patients reporting issues such as breathing difficulties and poor blood circulation. Undoubtedly, the mental health impacts of the pandemic, in particular lockdown, are already being felt by practitioners and these health implications will require a collaborative approach to resolve.