



"You have to choose between heating or eating"

We and five Wandsworth charities have issued a stark joint warning today that many local people are unable to afford to heat their homes this winter, as freezing weather and high energy costs hit low income households hard.

At the same time, we're deeply concerned that vital Fuel Support Payments, part of Wandsworth Council's £2million Household Support Fund [announced by the Council in November 2021](#), has not been accessible to many eligible low income residents.

We've been receiving many anxious calls and requests for help from Wandsworth residents who have been told they are eligible for this vital help, but can't access it. Thousands of eligible residents received a letter earlier this month from Wandsworth Council inviting them to claim their Fuel Support Payment by phone or online, but the 0800 phone number given didn't work for the first fortnight – and many people report being unable to apply online, due to requirements like uploading utility bills that they don't have (or have the digital skills to upload), as some utility companies no longer automatically provide monthly bills.

As charities together, we're urging Wandsworth Council to urgently improve and accelerate its delivery of these desperately-needed Fuel Support Payments – including letting people know when the 0800 number is finally working, so they can try again; and simplifying the online process.

One local mother who is eligible for a Fuel Support Payment told Wandsworth Foodbank:

'We're struggling and prices are rising all the time. You have to choose between heating or eating. You just have to choose between one or the other. I'm not putting the heating on and we're trying to use this money for food. It's cold and uncomfortable. So when you receive a letter saying that you're eligible for a fuel voucher, you think, oh gosh, thanks! And then when you try to use it and you can't, you think what's the point of having this information and then you can't access it? It's only making your anxiety levels higher.'

Fuel poverty is a serious issue. Government figures reveal that 1 in 8 Wandsworth households were fuel poor in 2019, and the charities believe that this number is likely to be even higher now. Fuel poverty can severely impact people's health and wellbeing, with a 2021 government [Fuel Poverty](#) report stating that 'Cold homes can have negative impacts on both mental and physical health, potentially adding demand to the NHS and social care providers, and directly contributing towards excess winter deaths.'

With only ten weeks left to get this £2million [Household Support Fund](#) to residents before any unspent money goes back to central government on 1 April, we're urging Wandsworth Council to ensure they do whatever it takes to get this money into the pockets of local people in most need.

Mary-Ann Foxwell, CEO of Citizens Advice Wandsworth, says:

'We are advising increasing numbers of clients unable to afford the basic essentials because of increasing energy costs and the removal of the £20 per week Universal Credit uplift. At the moment more than 10% of all our clients come to us needing help with the costs of food, fuel or other essentials (up 400% from pre-pandemic levels).

'We're pleased that Wandsworth Council has recognised the impact of rising fuel costs and allocated over £800,000 from the Household Support Fund to help residents with these costs. However, just a few weeks after the introduction of the scheme, it's clear from the enquiries that we are getting that these Fuel Support payments have been inaccessible for significant numbers of our clients. We'd really like the Council to urgently re-think how the scheme works in order to ensure that this crucial support reaches those households who need it the most.'

Patrick Marples, CEO of South West London Law Centres, says:

'Rising energy prices are pushing more families into extreme poverty and unless they receive urgent help with heating costs, their situation will only get worse. We are seeing clients with complex, pressing issues to do with their housing, family, employment, or immigration status but these are being eclipsed by the fact that they're simply unable to afford to heat their homes. It is a great injustice that it is again those who are already in vulnerable situations that are most affected. The fact that Wandsworth Council has received £2million funds this winter to help, but has so far has been unable to get much of this money to those who need it most, is very frustrating. We urge them to resolve the issues as an absolute priority.'

Aaron Barbour, Director of Katherine Low Settlement, says:

'1 in 8 local households in Wandsworth experience fuel poverty, and at KLS we're seeing this getting worse as fuel costs escalate, inflation rises and the cost of living increases. We're pleased there is extra funding available through the government's Household Support Fund. However, the administration system for the Fund has simply not been working. It just needs to be easily accessible to local people. I hope these issues are fixed in the next few days, as freezing temperatures are forcing many into a desperate situation of choosing between heating or eating.'

Eglionna Treanor, CEO of Wandsworth Carers, says:

'Local carers have been expressing their concerns about rising fuel prices and worrying about how they are going to keep the people they care for warm. This is especially concerning when people are coming out of hospital or where they aren't able to move around to help keep themselves warm, for instance people who use wheelchairs or who have other mobility difficulties.'

Dan Frith, Manager of Wandsworth Foodbank says:

'Every day at the food bank we're supporting local people referred to us in extreme hardship. We're asking each person whether they can afford to heat their homes and the food we're providing – and

often the answer is no. Any further delay in getting this vital lifeline out to people is therefore very concerning. It would be such a shame if these government funds are not fully put to use in Wandsworth this winter, as they were provided specifically to help people with essentials like fuel costs – and now is the time that they are so desperately needed.'

Sophie Livingstone, CEO, Little Village says:

'At Little Village, we see the additional challenges families with young children are facing, often sleeping in the same bed for warmth, and facing increased bills because they are at home all day with small babies. It is critical that Wandsworth Council make support easily available to this most vulnerable of groups and ensure parents are able to keep their children and babies warm and safe over the coming months.'

If you want to add your voice - you can email [your local Wandsworth Councillor](#) and ask them to fix the phone line and ensure every eligible resident received their Fuel Support Payment asap.