

Researchers investigate whether disabled people can afford to keep their homes warm

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Researchers at the University of York are looking at the combined effect of changes to welfare benefits and rising energy prices on people with disabilities.

Led by York's Department of Social Policy and Social Work and the Centre for Housing Policy, researchers are aiming to establish if these changes are affecting disabled people's ability to heat their homes.

The one-year project funded by the eaga [Charitable Trust](#), an independent fuel-poverty grant-giving trust based in the UK, will result in policy recommendations to alleviate any negative or unintended consequences of policy changes.

Principal Investigator Dr Carolyn Snell, from the Department of Social Policy and Social Work, said: "At present there is limited and fragmented evidence on the relationship between disability and fuel poverty – a household's ability to heat their home. This is worrying as policy is changing rapidly, disabled people tend to have higher energy needs, and are more likely to be in poverty already. These three factors together could mean that some disabled people are facing impossible choices when trying to balance energy bills and other budgeting needs."

Fuel poverty - where a household struggles to afford to keep the home warm or builds up fuel debts – is calculated based on household income. Those who need to spend more than 10 per cent of their [household income](#) to maintain a satisfactory heating system are classed as being in

fuel poverty.

Dr Snell said: "Unfortunately disabled people are often under-represented in fuel poverty statistics because of the way it is calculated. Benefits such as Disability Living Allowance are treated as ordinary income, but they are there to help with a specific impairment, which means disabled people's income is often exaggerated. We believe there may be many more disabled people in fuel poverty than the figures suggest."

The project has three stages. The first involves a statistical analysis of national data to gain a better understanding of the relationship between different types of disability and fuel poverty. The second stage is a workshop for charities representing people with disabilities when the findings of the statistical analysis will be presented. The researchers will also collect the views of charities, energy companies and government agencies about how policy changes are impacting on disabled people.

The final stage will involve interviews with households where one of its members has a disability to find out how the household balances [energy bills](#) and budgeting choices.

Co-investigator Mark Bevan, from York's Centre for Housing Policy, said: "In addition to the changes to welfare benefits, there are also changes taking place in fuel poverty policy. For example, these will mean that free grants for loft insulation or a new boiler are managed by the private sector in the future. It will be important to ensure that such initiatives are directed towards a range of different groups who will need this extra support, including [disabled people](#) of working age and families with disabled children."

Provided by University of York

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