



How can policy protect fuel poor households from rising energy prices?

Caitlin Robinson and Neil Simcock

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Key takeaways

1. Current energy bill rebate payments and energy price cap freeze are insufficient to support households already struggling to pay substantially higher bills.
2. In the short term, capping prices at or below April 2022 levels, with additional support for the most vulnerable, would be a better way to minimise the crisis this winter.
3. Policies should be funded by progressive means so that unnecessary burden is not placed on consumers for generations to come.
4. A range of more ambitious policies, including a social tariff and an allowance of free energy for every household, warrant further investigation.
5. Insulating homes, expanding the uptake of heat pump technologies, and increasing renewable electricity generation can reduce bills in the longer term.

1. Summary

Households across Great Britain (GB) are experiencing unprecedented rises in their energy bills, with warnings of a 'public health emergency' over fears households will not be able to heat their homes this winter (Bouzarovski, 2022) (1).

A wide range of ideas have been proposed to attempt to shield households from rising energy prices. How politicians choose to respond will have big implications for people's ability to afford essentials and pay their bills. The sheer scale of price rises means that only substantial and ambitious action will be enough, but well-designed policies can help avoid a humanitarian crisis and save lives.

In this briefing, we summarise the current policy response. We then evaluate a wide range of alternative strategies that could be more effective - including recent proposals (a social tariff; Universal Basic Energy; energy market reform and nationalisation; energy advice services) and long-term solutions (energy efficiency; low-carbon heating; renewable energy).

2. Current responses to the energy price cap increase

In response to unprecedented rises in global wholesale energy costs, in early 2022 Ofgem raised the energy price cap by 54% for households on a standard tariff paying by direct debit. As of 1st April 2022, this equates to an average bill of £1,971 per year for approximately 22 million consumers (Energy Saving Trust, 2022) (2), with prepayment meter customers paying even more. From October 2022 the price cap will rise again – with the cap previously announced at £3,549 for a typical energy user but following government intervention now capped at £2,500.

Since the April price cap was implemented, the End Fuel Poverty Coalition (2022) estimates that 6.32 million UK households (26.7%) are now in fuel poverty, meaning they cannot afford to use sufficient levels of energy to meet basic needs such as heating, lighting, and cooking. The impacts of the energy price increase are made worse by rising inflation affecting the prices of other goods and services (UK Parliament, 2022).

(1) The briefing focuses on Great Britain as Northern Ireland (NI) has a distinctive energy regulatory landscape and is outside the jurisdiction of Ofgem, the GB energy regulator. However, NI faces distinctive and acute challenges when it comes to the rise in energy prices and fuel poverty (National Energy Action Northern Ireland 2022).

(2) Based on a figure of 12,000kWh for a household's annual energy use.

To support households, several forms of government funding have been announced during 2022 (Figure 1). Initially, this involved various financial payments to households, including both universal support and measures targeted towards demographics considered most vulnerable to fuel poverty. Devolved nations introduced additional policies, including the extension of Scotland’s flagship Warmer Homes programme to include those in the 60-75 years age range (Scottish Government, 2022).

Many argued that these initial measures did not provide sufficient support (Energy Saving Trust, 2022; Welsh Government, 2022), especially following further substantial bill increases later in 2022. In response, the prime minister Liz Truss has announced additional action in the winter of 2022/23. The main announcement is that the unit cost of domestic energy will be capped for two years. An average annual energy bill will now be £2,500, rather than the £3,549 it was scheduled to be prior to the government intervention, funded largely by additional government borrowing.

In principle, a policy solution involving the capping of energy prices does have several benefits. Such a measure is relatively simple to implement. Because it applies universally to all households, it ensures that everyone in need of support receives help. And, because it addresses the unit cost of energy directly, it accounts for differing energy needs and consumption levels. The main problem with the policy is that the level of the price cap is too high - it still means that the cost of energy has doubled since October 2021, with increasing hardship and fuel poverty inevitably following. Capping prices also raises questions of fairness because it aids people, including the very rich, who do not need help. The sheer cost of the policy also means that it is unsustainable longer-term (Stirling and Caddick, 2022).

Other political parties have also proposed temporary price caps but at lower levels than the current government proposals. As a short-term measure, this would be a viable proposition and preferable to current policy.

Furthermore, any price cap should be funded via progressive taxation. A windfall tax on oil and gas producers, who have made record profits due to increases in wholesale prices, is one option. Another possibility is to increase taxes on wealthier or high-income households.

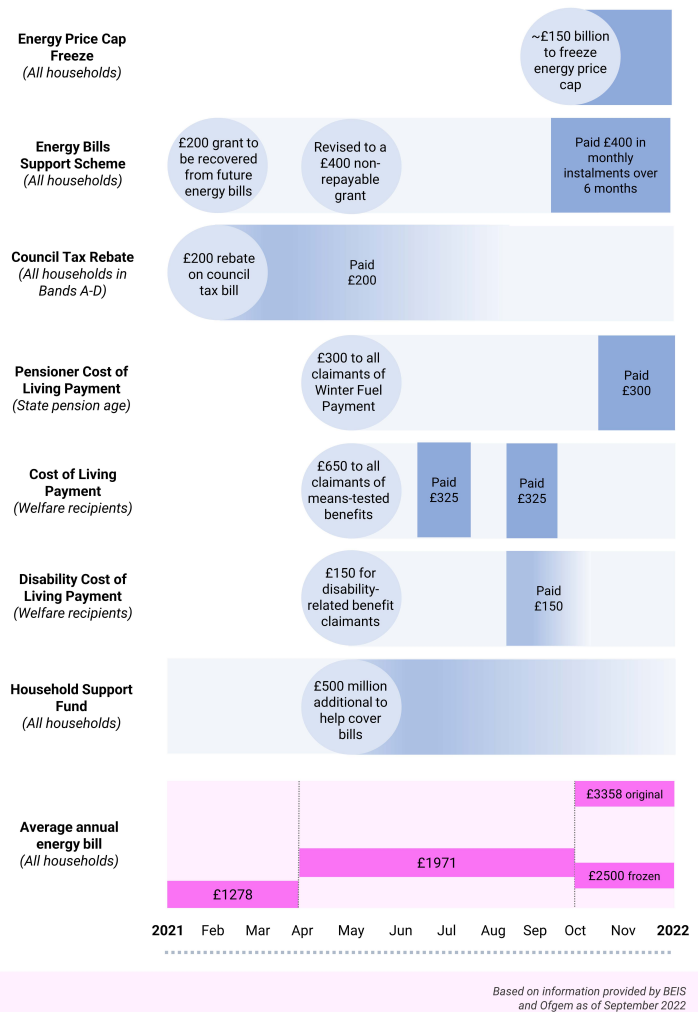


Figure 1: Summary of policies announced in Great Britain to support households during 2022.

3. Alternatives

Proposals to deal with the energy crisis are not limited to the main political parties. Here we summarise several prominent suggestions from civil society, charities, think-tanks, and academia.

A new social tariff

A number of organisations, including National Energy Action (NEA), Fair By Design (FBD), the Trade Unions Congress (TUC), and the Resolution Foundation, have argued for the introduction of a “social tariff” in the domestic energy market. This would offer energy at a discounted price to eligible customers.

Social tariffs have existed in the UK in the past, but on a voluntary basis among energy suppliers leading to uneven levels of support. Any new social tariff would need to be mandatory and consistent across all suppliers.

A social tariff could be a long-term solution to high energy prices. Like the proposal to freeze the cap, by addressing the cost of energy directly it would account for differing energy needs but would be more closely targeted at lower-income households, thus arguably being more progressive whilst also reducing costs to the state (Brewer et al., 2022).

However, there are difficult questions about who is entitled to support (Simcock, 2022). Means testing has been proposed to define eligibility (NEA and FBD, 2022). Yet, this would exclude many low- and middle-income households in need. As such, the Resolution Foundation suggested extending the criteria to include households in which no adult earns more than £40,000 annually (Brewer et al., 2022). Implementation would be complex and challenging, involving a new means-testing system to enable those not in receipt of benefits to apply and receive support. Given the low take-up rates of other benefit systems where applications are required, this would inevitably mean some would not receive support. Administrative complexity would make it unviable for implementation in winter 2022/23.

Universal Basic Energy

“Universal Basic Energy” involves restructuring energy tariffs so that every household is provided with an allowance of energy free of charge, sufficient to cover basic uses such as heating, cooking, and lighting. Energy consumption over the free allowance is charged at a progressively more expensive rate, so that high consumers pay most per unit. Although not common practice in Europe, a similar policy has been partially implemented in Spain where consumers on a very low income or supported by social services are eligible for a free energy allowance (Hesselman et al., 2021).

There are some challenges, however. The provision of free energy would need to account for different household needs. Although more affluent households usually consume more, this is not always the case (Cass et al., 2022) - some low-income households use relatively high amounts of energy due to factors beyond their control (e.g. old age, ill health, disability, household size, and poor efficiency) (Snell et al., 2015). It would be crucial for the scheme to be carefully designed so that such households do not see energy bill increases, making quick implementation potentially complex and slow.

Nationalising energy retailers

Nationalisation of energy companies is widely supported by the public (YouGov, 2022). Recently private ownership has been called into question as smaller energy suppliers have ceased trading, and energy producers post record profits at odds with the experience of struggling households (Mason, 2022).

There are various options for public ownership. Most straightforward is taking over collapsed private energy retailers, such as Bulb, and then offering consumers a publicly owned option that competes on the existing market. More ambitious is to nationalise the energy retail sector. The TUC estimates that it would cost £2.85bn to take the five big energy retail companies into public ownership (TUC, 2022).

In general, provided utilities are efficiently managed, public ownership is associated with lower residential electricity prices (Fiorio and Florio, 2013), and it would provide the government with more control over prices. This is evident in France, where the nationalised utility EDF has been restricted in the extent to which it has increased prices.

However, renationalisation of energy retailers is only a partial solution. Domestic energy prices are ultimately driven by global gas prices and the profits made by global energy producers. These problems would still exist within a nationalised system. Recent proposals by Labour to create a state-owned UK clean energy company “Great British Energy” begin to address this, moving beyond nationalisation of the energy retailers to set up a publicly owned energy group that can invest directly in the production of low carbon energy, in turn increasing national energy independence.

Reforming energy tariffs

In addition to discussions about ownership of energy companies, energy market reforms have been discussed extensively. In its current guise the energy price cap set by Ofgem simply passes the wholesale price of energy on to the consumer. In the context of rising energy prices, many (including the government) argue that the market is not fit for purpose, with a review under way (BEIS, 2022; Murphy and Cosic, 2022).

For example, wholesale energy prices are currently set by a “marginal cost basis”, so that the most expensive producer can still turn a profit (UKERC, 2022). Whilst domestic low-carbon generation is currently the cheapest form of energy, market regulations mean that its price is coupled with the high price of gas-generated electricity. It is estimated that decoupling them could reduce bills by up to £20bn a year without a change to existing market rules (UKERC, 2022).

Removing standing charges from bills that disproportionately impact low income consumers, banning suppliers from disconnecting customers who are in debt, and setting a lower price cap for people on prepayment meters are also options that need to be seriously considered.

Encouraging short-term energy savings and increasing energy advice services

In addition, commentators have argued that we should not limit energy measures to purely fiscal policies (Bouzarovski, 2022). “Short-run” energy reductions in household energy demand - those which can be made without new physical equipment, such as a change in behaviour - should be an important part of addressing the energy crisis. These can reduce national energy use by around 20% (Eyre and Oreszczyn, 2022).

Although generalised information can play a role in encouraging energy saving, individual tailored advice is most effective, especially for alleviating fuel poverty (Butler 2020). For example, a recent study in Greater Manchester (UK) found that the number of households reporting that they were unable to afford their energy bills dropped substantially following a home visit by a trained energy advisor (Bouzarovski et al., 2021).

Energy advice has featured to some extent in the policy response to recent price increases. However, in general, funding for energy advice is insufficient for the scale of the problem (Eyre and Oreszczyn, 2022).

There is a strong case for implementing a major, nationwide programme of energy advice, tailored to individual circumstances, and provided by trusted actors (e.g., local community organisations) (Warren and Foulds, 2020). It is crucial to note that energy saving, and advice can only play a partial role. Addressing the more structural factors driving fuel poverty and rising prices require deeper political action (Robinson, 2022).

4. The long-term solution: energy efficiency, low-carbon heating and renewable energy

Recent indications are that high energy prices are unlikely to be temporary (Cornwall Insight, 2022). Ultimately, there is a need for long-term, ambitious investment in efficiency, low-carbon heating and renewable electricity to reduce household exposure to high energy prices. To ensure that the measures discussed below are not regressive, they should be funded through general taxation, rather than energy bills (Stockton and Campbell, 2011).

The UK has some of the least efficient housing in Europe. 19 million homes have an Energy Performance Certificate rating of D or less (UK Parliament, 2022). Those in poorly insulated homes consume more energy to achieve a comfortable temperature, making them especially vulnerable to price rises. Properties with a rating of F or G could face energy bills up to £2,000 higher than those living in a property rated C (Carbon Brief, 2022a). Increasing the efficiency of the housing stock is essential to reduce reliance on imported gas, reduce bills in the medium- to long-term, and meet decarbonisation goals. Many households, particularly fuel poor households, do not have the financial means to invest in energy efficiency themselves, and so government support is essential.

Despite the benefits, insulation improvements have plummeted since 2013 (Figure 2) when the “Warm Front” efficiency scheme was replaced with the “Green Deal” and “Energy Company Obligation” (ECO).

UK home energy efficiency improvements plummeted in 2013
Number of homes receiving each measure, per year

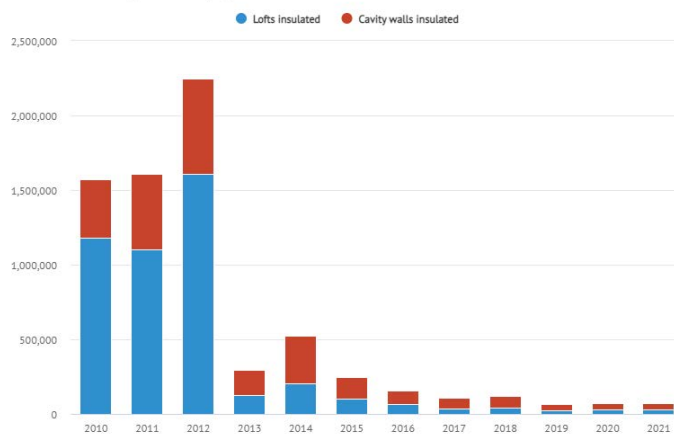


Figure 2: Energy efficiency improvements in the UK 2010 - 2021. Source: Carbon Brief (2022b)

The Green Deal was scrapped after just two years and is widely considered a major policy failure (Rosenow and Eyre, 2016). Meanwhile, ECO installed dramatically fewer measures following funding cuts in 2014 (Hannon and Brown, 2022). If efficiency improvements had been maintained at the previous rate, 9 million more homes would have been insulated over the past decade (ECIU, 2022).

The energy crisis has called into question the role of gas heating in alleviating fuel poverty, including for example, the Fuel Poor Gas Network Extension scheme that aims to help fuel poor households switch to natural gas to heat their homes (Ofgem, 2015). Instead, alongside energy efficiency, government policies to incentivise uptake of low-carbon heating - particularly heat pumps - is vital. Heat pumps are a highly efficient technology that can reduce energy usage on heating (Rosenow, et al, 2022). Because they run on electricity, rather than gas, they can also contribute to net zero goals - especially when powered by low-carbon sources. Increasing the uptake of heat pumps requires a mixture of policies, including grants for low-income households, regulation, and public information (Rosenow, et al., 2022).

Finally, to reduce reliance on volatile global energy markets, and meet climate targets, expanding renewable energy capacity is essential. It has been calculated that renewables helped the UK avoid the need to buy nearly £12.5bn of gas in 2022 (Evans, 2022a) and, at current prices, offshore and onshore wind energy can generate electricity up to nine times cheaper than gas.

Renewables represent the low-cost option moving forward. Enabling communities to fully or partially own individual projects provides further opportunities to democratise wealth, fund energy efficiency and tackle fuel poverty.

5. Conclusions

In this briefing, we have reviewed a range of options for addressing the energy price crisis in both the short- and long-term. The main strengths and weaknesses of policies are summarised in Table 1 (on page 9).

The current proposal to cap the cost of energy for two years, equivalent to a £2,500 annual energy bill for a typical user, is simply insufficient - it still represents a price increase of more than 100% in a single year and means that millions of households will be pushed into fuel poverty.

There is no perfect solution, but temporarily capping prices to at least April 2022 levels (ideally even lower), supplemented by further targeted support for the most vulnerable, would seem on balance to be the preferable short-term option. This should be followed by more fundamental changes in spring 2023. The proposals for Universal Basic Energy and a social tariff, potentially used in combination, have several benefits in principle and the details of how these could best be implemented in practice should be further investigated. Additionally, developing a national programme of energy advice is an important complementary measure alongside structural changes. Policies should be funded by progressive means so that unnecessary burden is not placed on consumers for generations to come.

One proposal that should not be contentious is the need to invest in home insulation, low-carbon heating systems, and low-carbon electricity generation. By reducing energy consumption and reliance on imported natural gas and oil, these measures would lower bills permanently whilst meeting energy security and net zero goals. They should be a priority for any government.

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Policy	Strengths	Weaknesses
Removing environmental levies from electricity bills	- Potentially aligned with climate goals, as reducing electricity prices would incentivise the electrification of heating	- Would only marginally reduce energy bills (~£85 reduction for typical household) - Without new funding for efficiency and renewables lead to long-term higher bills
£400 energy bills discount to all households	- Universalism reduces risk of exclusion and cliff-edges that occur with targeted approaches	- Does not account for differing needs - Insufficient relative to bill increases - Some people struggle to receive discount
£650 payment to those on means-tested benefits	- Progressive providing greater support to some of those on the lowest incomes	- Does not account for differing needs - Targeting based on means-tested benefits risks excluding some in need
Freeze energy prices at the April 2022 cap for 6 months	- Universalism (see above) - Accounts for differing energy needs - Could be implemented quickly	- High financial cost - Slightly benefits richer households - Reduce incentive to reduce consumption
Cap prices at £2,500 for typical user for two years	- Same as freezing prices as the current level	- Same as freezing prices at the current level, but much more expensive. - Substantially increases energy bills
Universal Basic Energy	- Universalism (see above) - Low-income users would typically pay less for energy than higher income - Would contribute to net zero goals - Asserts energy as a basic human right	- Risks penalising people who consume high amounts of energy for reasons beyond their control (e.g. illness)
A new social tariff	- Accounts for differing energy needs - Targeted at low-income households - A viable 'long-term' measure even if wholesale prices fall in the future	- Targeting based on means-tested benefits risks excluding some in need - Targeting wider population would be administratively challenging
Energy market reform	- Changes possible within current rules - Could lower prices by competitively pricing low-carbon electricity	- Can be slow and time-intensive to implement necessary changes to energy markets
Nationalisation of energy companies	- Profits can be invested for good - Protection of employment rights	- High one-off cost to taxpayer to fund nationalisation of energy retail companies
Increasing energy advice services	- Can lead to quick bill reductions - Raises awareness of available support - Contributes to net zero goals by encouraging energy efficiency	- For most, energy savings from behaviour changes cannot offset bill increases - Fuel poor households already ration consumption
Investing in energy efficiency and low-carbon heating	- Addresses root causes of high bills - Contributes to net zero and energy security - Brings about long-term savings	- Not an immediate solution, requiring investment over several years - Requires upfront capital investment.

Table 1: Strengths and weaknesses of policy proposals to deal with high energy prices

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Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place
University of Liverpool, 1-7 Abercromby Square, Liverpool, L69 7WY

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About the authors

Caitlin Robinson is a Academic Fellow and Proleptic Lecturer in the School of Geographical Sciences at the University of Bristol. As a quantitative human geographer, Caitlin's research investigates the causes and consequences of different types of spatial inequality, with a particular interest in energy poverty and energy justice. Caitlin is currently working on a UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship project mapping ambient vulnerabilities in cities (Grant number: MR/V021672/1).

Neil Simcock is a Senior Lecturer in Geography at Liverpool John Moores University. His research centres on inequality, power and justice. He studies how people are disadvantaged or rendered vulnerable to harm, particularly in relation to energy systems and access to energy services. He receives funding from UK Research and Innovation through the Centre for Research into Energy Demand grant reference number EP/R035288/1. This work also draws on research funded by the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers), grant number SRG/09/19.

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