

Policy briefing: Unpaid carers and fuel poverty in Northern Ireland

May 2023

This briefing draws on evidence from Carers NI's State of Caring survey 2022. The survey was carried out between July-September 2022 and was completed by **1,648** unpaid carers across Northern Ireland.

KEY STATS

- There are over **220,000** adults providing unpaid care to a sick or disabled family member or friend in Northern Ireland. ^[1]
- **Over 65%** of carers told our State of Caring survey they were spending a high enough proportion of their income on energy bills to be classified as fuel poor.
- **40%** met the definition of extreme fuel poverty used in Scotland.
- **More than one in 10** (11%) carers said they couldn't afford their utility bills.
- **Nearly one in 4** (23%) told our State of Caring survey that they were cutting back on essentials to cope with spiralling household bills – more than double the proportion in 2021.

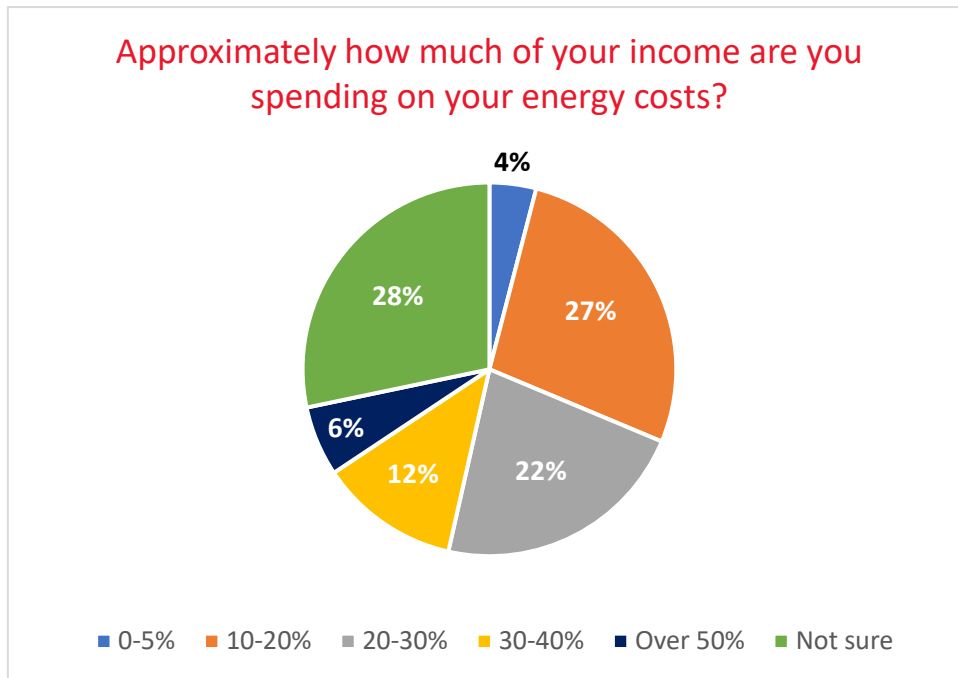
*“The cost of energy in Northern Ireland has increased so significantly over the last 12-18 months that we are still in shock and trying to readjust. We have had to cut back on pretty much everything. Travel has become almost impossible to the point that I have had to cancel appointments with specialists just because I cannot afford to go to them. **If something doesn't give soon, I am not sure we will survive.**” – unpaid carer*

HIGH ENERGY COSTS FOR UNPAID CARERS

1. Many unpaid carers in Northern Ireland faced above-average energy bills even before the cost of living crisis made them less affordable. Caring for someone with an illness or disability often means being at home for longer, using electronic medical equipment around the clock and building up higher heating bills to keep the person they're looking after warm.
2. These pre-existing financial pressures have only been compounded as energy costs have shot up so drastically, with nearly all carers (95%) telling our survey that their energy bills had increased since last year.
3. High bills are difficult to afford when around-the-clock caring leaves many carers struggling to engage in employment; and reliant on support from the social security system. Carers Allowance – the main carer benefit in Northern Ireland – is among the lowest of its kind.
4. Overall, these trends leave the majority (67%) of carers telling our survey that they were spending a high enough proportion of their income on energy bills to be classified as fuel poor; with 40% meeting the definition of extreme fuel poverty used in Scotland. ^[2]

¹ Census Northern Ireland 2021.

² Extreme fuel poverty is defined in Scotland as existing if a household is required to spend more than 20% of its income in order to maintain a satisfactory heating regime.



5. This has left 27% of carers struggling to make ends meet, with 11% unable to afford their utility bills, 16% struggling to afford food costs and the same proportion experiencing debt. Carers who are not in paid employment and relying on Carers Allowance have been affected even more, with 48% struggling to make ends meet and just 16% feeling that they can manage their monthly costs.

COPING MECHANISMS

6. Carers are deploying unsustainable and damaging practices to help them cope with spiralling living costs. Nearly one in 4 (23%) said they were cutting back on essentials like food – more than double the proportion in 2021. Small, but notable, numbers said they were using food banks (4%) and falling into housing arrears (3%).
7. Nearly a fifth (18%) of carers were using their bank account overdraft to help them cope, 31% were using their savings and 19% were using credit cards. These behaviours provide only short-term relief, leaving carers with depleted financial resources and greater debt later.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Implementation of the Carer and Young Carer Recognition payments in the independent review of welfare mitigations.
- Dedicated energy support payments for unpaid carers.
- An increase in the value of Carers Allowance payments.
- An increase to the Carers Allowance earnings threshold to the equivalent of 21 hours per week at the National Living Wage; and the introduction of a taper.
- Additional Carers Allowance payments for those who care for multiple people.

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