

# SCOPE

**=** Equality for disabled people

**Covid-19,  
energy suppliers,  
and their disabled customers**

February 2021

## Introduction

Disabled people have been hit hardest by the current pandemic. More than 8 in 10 (83%) disabled people are worried about the impact that coronavirus is having on their life,<sup>1</sup> and a similar number of disabled people (82%) have seen their costs increase during the pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

We already know that disabled people use more energy than non-disabled people and face higher energy bills. The average UK household spends £1,214 a year on energy – however, over a quarter (27%) of households with a disabled person, roughly 4.1 million households, spend more than £1,500 a year on energy. Of these, 790,000 households spend over £2,500 a year on energy.<sup>3</sup>

Over a third of disabled adults feel that their impairment or condition has a direct impact on what they pay for energy. Disabled people with limited mobility often have to use more heating to stay warm, whilst other disabled people who use assistive technology regularly need extra electricity to charge these items.<sup>4</sup>

We have heard from many disabled people who are increasingly struggling to pay their energy bills as they are continuing to spend more time at home due to lockdowns, on top of the need to shield.

This short report provides a snapshot of the experiences of disabled people. It will look at costs and affordability, and the effect this has had on people's lives. The intent of this piece of work is not to apportion blame, but rather highlight the issues and suggest improvements.

The primary audience for this report is energy suppliers, as they have the most immediate contact with the customer. We will also be working with Ofgem and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on long-term regulatory change.



## Methodology

This report builds on our 2018 'Out in the Cold' report, along with more recent research. In August 2020 we worked with Britain Thinks to conduct in-depth interviews with disabled people on their experience of the pandemic, including energy issues. We then worked with Censuswide in November 2020 to poll 1,166 people on their utilities usage and understanding, and undertook polling with Opinium in February 2021 of 1,005 disabled people on their energy costs and usage.

## Key findings and recommendations

Our research has highlighted some key concerns regarding disabled people's energy costs and usage during the pandemic:

- 45% say their energy bills have increased since the pandemic began
- 54% say their usage has increased
- 34% say that energy costs and usage have caused them concern or worry during the pandemic
- 29% are concerned about being able to afford their energy bills in the next few months
- 86% have had no contact with their energy supplier regarding concerns about bills
- 28% say their financial situation has worsened during the pandemic.

We have found that disabled people are also having to take worrying measures to cut down on their energy costs and usage. We have found examples of disabled people forgoing meals, only staying in one room of the house, wearing extra layers, or limiting the time spent watching TV.

When support for disabled customers from suppliers is available it offers a huge benefit to the customer, but this does not happen enough. Too often disabled people feel forgotten or not understood.

**Based on our research, we recommend that energy suppliers should:**

- Proactively identify and contact their disabled customers and offer support if and when needed
- Improve how they gather information about the needs of their disabled customers
- Improve customer service to be more empathetic to disabled people's personal and financial situations
- Have a wide range of options for sources of financial support and advice to support disabled customers to pay their bills and increase awareness of these measures
- Agree exemptions or reduced charges for energy usage based on a customer's impairment or condition
- Build partnerships with disability charities, disabled people's organisations and others who can provide specialist support.

## Context

The issues raised in this report are more focused on short-term problems that suppliers need to be aware of. We also suggest some actions that suppliers can implement quickly to support their disabled customers.

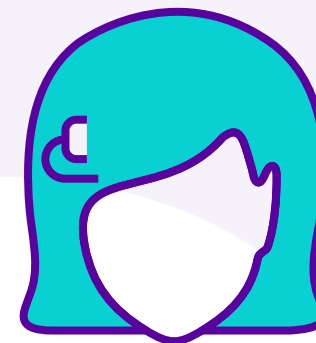
This is on top of the actions taken by Ofgem and BEIS at the start of the pandemic, in particular the agreement with suppliers in March 2020 that 'vulnerable customers' who got into debt would not go without energy.<sup>5</sup>

The situation for disabled customers sits within the context of a challenging time for energy suppliers. There has, however, also been a welcome increase in the work done by the sector during this time for their most 'vulnerable' customers, such as the new Energy UK Vulnerability Commitment.<sup>6</sup> Disconnections from credit meters for debt are at an all-time low and some suppliers have also committed to work with charities such as Scope, through the Scope Utilities Membership.<sup>7</sup>

## Affordability

The impact of the pandemic on the finances of disabled people has been severe. Many disabled people have seen their costs increase, and over a quarter (28%) of disabled people say that their financial situation has worsened because of Covid-19.<sup>8</sup>

This has been keenly felt by disabled people when it comes to their energy bills, with 45% experiencing an increase in their bills since the pandemic began. Worryingly, over a third (34%) of disabled people say they are concerned about their energy costs, with rising usage (due to staying at home more) and amassing debt contributing to this.<sup>9</sup>



“ It is so expensive, and we are cold so I can't cut down anymore, prices keep going up, no matter what. We have less coming in than going out moneywise. We have to use our savings and so are not saving for retirement and I am so worried and depressed.”

- Research participant

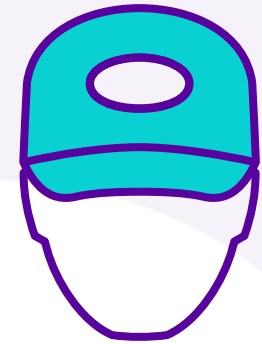
## Usage

Whilst energy consumption has increased overall for most people, disabled customers had a higher increase compared with non-disabled people.<sup>10</sup> This is due in part to the fact that disabled people are more likely to be shielding and therefore at home even more, including many who were not told to shield by the Government or NHS, but made a personal choice to do so.<sup>11</sup>

Over half (54%) of disabled people said that their energy usage has increased during the pandemic. This has forced 32%, nearly a third, to make changes as to how they use their energy, with one in five (20%) monitoring their usage more closely.

We have heard from disabled people who have reported turning their heating down during the winter months and wearing more layers, whilst others have had to cut down on food expenditure to afford their energy bills.<sup>12</sup> We recognise that whilst everyone can benefit from becoming more energy efficient, it should not be to the extent that people are having to choose between heating and eating.

However, this has not just been an issue during recent winter months. Even at the start of the pandemic when we saw warmer weather, increasing energy usage forced some disabled people to make changes, such as turning off plugs and sitting in the dark in the evening, as well as even limiting their daily TV consumption.<sup>13</sup>



“ I now frequently sit in the dark at night while I’m working because I can’t afford to also run the lights. I also don’t have the heating on and just use a hot water bottle, despite that being bad for my chronic conditions, because I can’t afford it.”

- Research participant

## Support from suppliers

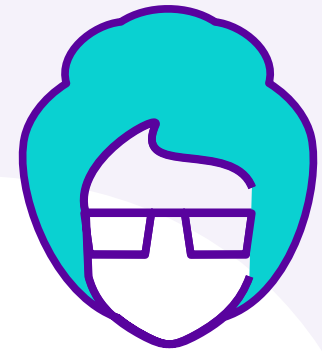
Suppliers have a duty of care to their customers, and licence conditions that require this - particularly to their 'customers in vulnerable circumstances'.<sup>14</sup> Support from suppliers has to be available to disabled customers if and when needed.

It is worrying then that the vast majority of disabled people, 86%, have had no contact with their supplier regarding concerns about their bills during the pandemic.<sup>15</sup>

Of the 14% of disabled people who have had contact with their energy supplier over their bills and usage since the pandemic began, almost half (47%) were dissatisfied with the service they received. Many reported that customer service was poor, especially the length of time it took to respond.<sup>16</sup>

Despite this, 20% of disabled people would not ask their supplier for support even if they needed it.<sup>17</sup> This can be down to a lack of trust in energy suppliers, being wary of discrimination or not being believed, and doubting that suppliers will make any difference.<sup>18</sup> Suppliers therefore need to find ways to reach these customers, who often need support the most.

Supporting disabled customers should be important to suppliers who want to retain their customers in a competitive market, as disabled people switch supplier almost as often as non-disabled customers.<sup>19</sup> Over a quarter (27%) of disabled people have considered changing their energy supplier during the pandemic, with one in 10 (11%) already having done so.<sup>20</sup>



“ I feel they are deliberately “setting me up” for debt. They have ignored repeated calls for support and recognition of my disability. They shut their phone lines down and I can’t easily do things online because of my eyesight problems. I am terrified of what my bill will eventually be. How will I pay it? Will they cut me off? It is very anxiety-making.”

– **Research participant**

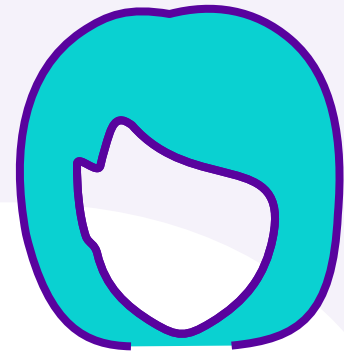
## Fears for the future

Despite winter drawing to a close, and the vaccine roll-out giving hope that the pandemic may soon be over, these issues are not going to go away. A significant number of disabled people (29%) were concerned about affording their energy over the next few months.<sup>21</sup>

The reasons for this concern were varied. In many cases the income someone receives is not enough to cover the extra costs of energy. Others mention being furloughed and a lack of work as being a contributor to this worry. We know that during the pandemic disabled people are falling out of work faster than non-disabled people.<sup>22</sup>

The Government is recommending Statutory Sick Pay or Employment Support Allowance for those in or out of work who have not been furloughed, cannot work from home and are 'Clinically Extremely Vulnerable'. When rising energy bills are added into this context, the pressure on disabled people can become insurmountable.

Although these reasons are outside of suppliers' control, support can and should still be provided.



“ I’m six months pregnant and fear that I will struggle to keep up with my bills and be cut off without heating or hot water.”  
- Research participant



## Key recommendations

As a result of our research and what we have been told about the experience of disabled people, we believe that energy suppliers should:

- **Proactively identify and contact their disabled customers and offer support if and when needed.** Our research has shown that a significant number of disabled people will not contact their supplier even when struggling. Suppliers should not therefore wait for their disabled customers to get in contact with them. The worst of the pandemic may hopefully be over, but fears for the future remain.
- **Improve how they gather information about the needs of their disabled customers.** Many disabled people surveyed felt that suppliers were not aware of nor understood their situation. Better information would ensure that suppliers can successfully identify and support disabled people who are struggling, including individuals who face additional energy costs. Suppliers need to be asking the right questions every time they interact with disabled people and using smart meter data insight to contact customers that might need support.
- **Improve customer service to be more empathetic to disabled people's personal and financial situations.** This could include checking the accessibility requirements of customers, checking what their preferred communication method is, improving waiting times, and contacting customers more often with tips and advice to help.
- **Have a wide range of options for sources of financial support and advice to support disabled customers to pay their bills and increase awareness of these.** This should include assistance with applying for the Warm Home Discount, payment plans and holidays, tariff switching, advice on how to reduce costs and manage usage more effectively, use of Fuel Direct, debt advice, and referral to a third-sector organisation.
- **Agree exemptions or reduced charges for energy usage due to a customer's impairment or condition.** For example, for those who use medical equipment, at a time when disabled people already face extra costs.
- **Build partnerships with disability charities, disabled people's organisations and others who can provide specialist support.** Given the pressure suppliers are under, they cannot be expected to provide all the types of support needed, such as income maximisation and debt advice. More trusted, specialised charities and organisations can step in here, such as our recently launched Disability Energy Support service.

## Conclusion

Even without a global pandemic, disabled people face higher energy bills. The last year has led to many disabled people facing increased costs and increased worries about how costs will be covered.

This does not have to be the case. The actions and recommendations that we are proposing would have a significant impact on disabled people as we hopefully begin to move out of the pandemic.

Whilst energy suppliers have made welcome progress in recent years, our research shows there is still much to be done. We are ready and willing to assist suppliers to improve their support for their disabled customers through the Scope Utilities Membership and our newly-launched Disability Energy Support service. Continued engagement with suppliers remains a key priority for Scope.

Suppliers are a huge part of the solution in both the short and long term, but we also recognise the need for more substantial potentially regulatory and even legislative change. As part of our work on energy, we will continue to engage with Government, Ofgem and the energy industry to make sure the additional costs disabled people face for their energy are reduced.

# How we can help

## Scope Utilities Membership

Scope and a group of utilities companies - nPower, SGN, UK Power Networks, Together Energy, Ecotricity, and Anglian Water - have come together to form the Scope Utilities Membership (SUM). Together, we want to tackle the issues and barriers that disabled people face, enabling them to access the support services they need.

For more information please contact  
[utilities@scope.org.uk](mailto:utilities@scope.org.uk)

## Disability Energy Support

Our Disability Energy Support service was created with the disability price tag in mind. Life costs around £583 more per month on average for a disabled person, with part of that cost coming from their energy bills.

This service aims to reach disabled households to improve their ability to afford and manage their energy needs. This could be through energy efficiency measures, supporting with changing tariffs, helping them access grants and benefits, and even educating households on the different support available to them, such as the Priority Services Register.

The team is made up of four expert energy advisers, delivering free telephone advice appointments to any household in which a disabled person lives across England and Wales.

For more information visit  
[scope.org.uk/disability-energy-support](https://scope.org.uk/disability-energy-support)

## Endnotes

- 1 Scope (2021). Emergency support for disabled people and their families – Policy briefing, <https://www.scope.org.uk/scope/media/files/campaigns/welfare-emergency-briefing.pdf>
- 2 Disability Benefits Consortium (2021). Pandemic Poverty: Stark choices facing disabled people on legacy benefits – Policy report, <https://disabilitybenefitsconsortium.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/pandemic-poverty-stark-choices-facing-disabled-people-on-legacy-benefits-final.pdf>
- 3 Scope (2018). Out in the Cold – Policy report, <https://www.scope.org.uk/campaigns/extra-costs/out-in-the-cold/>
- 4 Ibid
- 5 Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2020). Government agrees measures with energy industry to support vulnerable people through COVID-19 – Press release, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-agrees-measures-with-energy-industry-to-support-vulnerable-people-through-covid-19>
- 6 Energy UK (2020). The Vulnerability Commitment, <https://www.energy-uk.org.uk/our-work/retail/vulnerability-commitment.html>
- 7 Ofgem (2019). Vulnerable consumers in the energy market: 2019, [https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/system/files/docs/2019/09/vulnerable\\_consumers\\_in\\_the\\_energy\\_market\\_2019\\_final.pdf](https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/system/files/docs/2019/09/vulnerable_consumers_in_the_energy_market_2019_final.pdf)
- 8 Polling carried out by Opinium on behalf of Scope, 1,005 nationally representative disabled adults in England and Wales (February 2021)
- 9 Ibid
- 10 Polling carried out by Censuswide on behalf of Scope, 1000 people in total, 500 disabled adults, 500 non-disabled adults) and 166 responses from Scope research panellists (November 2020)
- 11 Opinium Polling for Scope (Feb 2021)
- 12 Opinium Polling for Scope (Feb 2021)
- 13 Research carried out by Britain Thinks on behalf of Scope, in-depth interviews with 32 disabled adults in England and Wales (August 2020)
- 14 Ofgem (2019). Consumer Vulnerability Strategy 2025, [https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/system/files/docs/2020/01/consumer\\_vulnerability\\_strategy\\_2025.pdf](https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/system/files/docs/2020/01/consumer_vulnerability_strategy_2025.pdf)
- 15 Opinium Polling for Scope (Feb 2021)
- 16 Ibid
- 17 Censuswide Polling for Scope (Nov 2020)
- 18 Energy UK (2019). The Commission for Customers in Vulnerable Circumstances – Policy report, <https://www.energy-uk.org.uk/our-work/commission-for-customers-in-vulnerable-circumstances.html>
- 19 Scope (2018). Out in the Cold
- 20 Opinium Polling for Scope (Feb 2021)
- 21 Opinium Polling for Scope (Feb 2021)
- 22 Scope (2021). Emergency support for disabled people and their families

For more information on the findings and recommendations of this report, contact:

**Tom Marland, Policy Manager**  
[tom.marland@scope.org.uk](mailto:tom.marland@scope.org.uk)