

Fuel Poverty Campaign Parliamentary Briefing



Briefing for: **People interested in helping Macmillan's campaign to end fuel poverty among cancer patients**

Purpose: **To outline Macmillan's position on tackling fuel poverty among vulnerable cancer patients**

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The Government's commitment to cancer patients

The coalition Government has committed to protect the "poorest and most vulnerable in society". One of the Department of Energy and Climate Change's first priorities to help the poorest and most vulnerable is the Warm Home Discount consultation which will decide who should get money off their electricity bill (initially around £130 a year). The consultation was launched on 2 December 2010 and ends on 14 January 2011.

Macmillan's concerns about the Warm Home Discount proposals

Macmillan welcomes the introduction of mandatory support for 'fuel poor' energy customers. The current voluntary system does not work for cancer patients. Less than one in 10 cancer patients (7%) in fuel poverty is currently on a social tariff. The Warm Home Discount provides an ideal opportunity to help particularly vulnerable cancer patients in fuel poverty who are currently not being helped by any of the other benefits or schemes designed to assist people in fuel poverty. A recent survey of the general public found that 89% agree that cancer patients who are likely to be in fuel poverty should be supported through the new scheme.

However, we are concerned that the Government proposals will not do this for two reasons:

1. People with a terminal illness may be left out in the cold – we are particularly concerned that people with a terminal illness (those with six months to live or less) in fuel poverty will miss out unless they are given the rebate automatically. We know from our work with other benefits that people with a terminal illness frequently do not apply for financial support despite being in need. For example, we know that terminally ill cancer patients do not claim more than £90 million per year in disability benefits despite being entitled.

The Government has said that people in receipt of certain types of Pension Credit will receive the energy rebate automatically. **Macmillan wants the Government to widen this 'core group' to include people with a terminal illness.** People with a terminal illness could be identified easily because they already fill out a form called the DS1500 to claim DLA and ESA via 'special rules'.

2. The eligibility criteria are too wide meaning the most vulnerable may miss out – the proposals in the consultation document grant energy companies wide discretion about who within a 'broader group' could also be given the rebate (with Ofgem providing approval). The consultation says vulnerable households include older people, households with children and people with a disability or long-term illness. The experience of the voluntary social tariff scheme shows that a broad definition of who is eligible has resulted in confusion for customers and meant vulnerable cancer patients in fuel poverty have missed out. It seems likely that if energy companies are asked to identify vulnerable people themselves, they will seek to identify those who are easiest to reach.

Macmillan wants the Government to provide clearer guidance to Ofgem and energy companies about which groups within the broader group are most likely to be in fuel poverty and how energy companies should target help at the most vulnerable. **We think cancer**

patients undergoing treatment and those on certain benefits should be prioritised for support within the broader group.

What problems do cancer patients face?

Heidi, 37, from Cheshire, has been diagnosed with terminal breast cancer:

“My immune system is so weakened but I can’t afford to keep warm all the time. I’m always in debt and behind payments for my energy bills. It makes me panic. I have to cover myself in blankets and hot water bottles to help keep my joints warm. I wish the Government would realise that it’s not just the old who get cancer and suffer the cold.”

1. Cancer patients are struggling to pay their energy bills – Macmillan research found that among working age cancer patients (under 55s) seven out of 10 suffer a reduced household income, losing on average 50%. It is estimated that around four in 10 cancer patients of working age do not return to work after treatment. Higher utility bills are one of the major additional costs cancer patients face. One in five people with cancer turn off their heating in the winter even though they still need it on. One in four cancer patients wears outdoor clothing indoors to stay warm and reduce energy bills.

2. Cancer patients have higher heating bills – in a survey for Macmillan, 59% of respondents said they had used more fuel since being diagnosed with cancer. Of these, three quarters (75%) said this was because they felt the cold more and a similar number (73%) said it was because they spent more time at home since being diagnosed. We also know that many cancer patients are unable to keep active.

3. The cold impacts on recovery – in focus groups conducted by Macmillan in June 2009, people affected by cancer told us that feeling cold left them feeling depressed and demotivated, increased pain associated with their cancer and its treatment, and resulted in them being more accident prone. A subsequent survey of health and social care professionals found that 85% thought the cold affected cancer patients’ recovery. 92% thought the cold affected mental well-being and 77% thought the cold made pain worse.

Why doesn’t the current support system meet the needs of cancer patients?

1. Poor access to Winter Fuel Payments (WFP) – approximately one in four patients diagnosed with cancer per year are aged under 60 and therefore do not qualify for the WFP.

2. Energy companies aren’t doing enough to help cancer patients – not enough cancer patients in need receive help through voluntary schemes.

3. Energy efficiency schemes are impractical – schemes, such as CERT or Warm Front, are often inappropriate and impractical for someone undergoing active treatment or in the last few months of life. Cancer patients need immediate financial support because their incomes have dropped suddenly and dramatically.

4. Disability Living Allowance has not kept track with energy costs – and, we would argue, was never intended to pay for disabled people’s fuel bills.

How can you help Macmillan’s campaign?

The Warm Home Discount consultation ends on **14 January 2011** so there is a very limited time available to change Minister’s minds. Please write to Gregory Barker MP, Fuel Poverty Minister, at the Department of Energy and Climate Change, and ask him to make sure vulnerable cancer patients receive the new Warm Home Discount and that people with a terminal illness receive it automatically.

Further information

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