



Healthy Homes

Compassionate Conversations: Affordable Warmth and Energy



COST OF LIVING
SUPPORT



City of
Doncaster
Council



Introduction

Affordable warmth is a key preventative factor for promoting health amongst our most at risk communities. A warm, safe home can help maintain independence and avoid unnecessary reliance on health and social care services.

It has long been understood that certain people, such as the very young, the oldest and people with a long-term disability or illness, are particularly at risk of poor health from cold homes (Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy, 2015). In addition to the health impacts of a cold home, fuel poverty affects the financial wellbeing of households and reduces available income, impacting on health and wellbeing.

The toolkit is aimed at professionals working with households, specifically those likely to have conversations around poverty and/or energy usage in the home. Colleagues across Team Doncaster could benefit from the content in this toolkit; from housing officers, healthcare, public health, enforcement and regulation, Environmental Health, social care to housing providers and associations.

This toolkit provides professionals with useful information relating to several aspects around the topic of Affordable Warmth and Fuel Poverty, through a compassionate approach.

It is intended as an information source that can be used prior to, or during, home visits or when speaking to households.

Contents

Section One: Compassion

- What is Compassion and why is it important?
- Speaking with Compassion
- Conversation Starters
- Compassionate Swaps

Section Two: Self-Compassion

- What is Self-Compassion?
- Practicing Self-Compassion

Section Three: Cold Homes and Health

- Defining Fuel Poverty
- Physical and Mental Health Impacts of a Cold Home
- Spotting the Signs of a Cold Home

Section Four: Making Every Contact Compassionate and Count

- MECC (Making Every Contact Count)
- Fuel Poverty Checklist (MECC)



Section One: Compassion

What is Compassion and why is it important?

Compassion can be defined as feeling and showing empathy for the hardship of others and wanting to help them.

It recognises that people's lives are complicated with many factors influencing health and wellbeing; many of which are outside of a person's direct control. Through compassionate conversations, we recognise that people's lives are complicated, whilst working hard to make their lives fairer.

There can be stigma associated with struggling to heat a home, people may be worried about paying their bills, finances, and looking after themselves and their families. This can impact their ability to look for and access support. They may be scared to talk to their supplier about setting up a payment plan or enrolling on the priority services register. They may struggle to trust professionals enough to confide in them or be embarrassed about asking for help.

Negative emotions can impact a person's mental and physical health and wellbeing by:

- Triggering self-destructive or risk-taking behaviours
- Causing people to withdraw or exclude themselves from support networks
- Preventing people from asking for or accessing support available and delaying the receipt of support that could help them keep warm and well this winter.

Winter is a challenging time for many households. When having conversations with people who might be struggling to heat their home, it is more important than ever that we are compassionate.



Section One: Compassion

Speaking with Compassion

When discussing affordable warmth, there are some principles to keep in mind to be able to have a Compassionate Conversation:

Build self-worth and self-esteem in individuals

- If someone uses self-critical language or is overly negative towards themselves, challenge it.
- It is not their fault that they are struggling with rising costs. The blame must be shifted away from the person.
- Share advice on self-compassion practices.
- Signpost to further emotional and mental wellbeing support where appropriate.

Speak with compassion

- Simply acknowledging and validating their feelings can be helpful.
- Households struggling with affordable warmth face challenging winters. For many, it will feel frustrating and unfair.
- Do not place blame on the individual
- Advice on budgeting tips can be helpful if given compassionately so the person doesn't feel it's their fault.
- Remember people cannot budget their way out of poverty, and even the most financially literate people will still be impacted by increased energy costs.

Incorporate supportive measures that help households navigate their situations

- Support households to take steps to increase their income by signposting them to relevant financial support, and use a benefits calculator to check they are receiving all available support.
- Signpost households to available grants, and assist them with the applications if they need additional help.
- Encourage households to speak to their supplier as soon as possible. This may be intimidating or worrying for people, so be prepared to contact the supplier on their behalf. Be honest and clear with the supplier, so they can get the right support to the person as quickly as possible.
- Signpost residents to assistance schemes from their supplier, such as affordable payment plans or enrolling them on the Priority Services Register.
- Where possible, build people's confidence to take control of their situation and empower them to access support themselves. Remember that some may need additional time or support to gain the confidence for this.

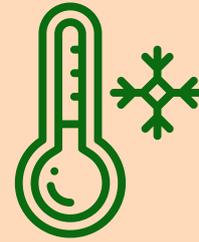


Section One: Compassion

Conversation Starters

Raising the topic of affordable warmth can be challenging as it is a sensitive subject for some people. Consider the following conversation starters that help you to discuss affordable warmth:

Talking about the weather, especially if it is cold outside, can be a helpful opportunity for someone to start to discuss why it might be cold inside the property.



Chatting about what you had for breakfast or lunch that day can provide people with the opportunity to talk about their eating patterns, which may indicate if someone is not eating enough or cannot afford to eat regular hot meals.

Asking about what someone has been up to in the last week may help you to spot if they have been staying in the house, isolating themselves, or even staying in bed to keep warm.



If you have spotted any signs of a cold home, see pages 11-12 of this booklet for relevant advice.

When providing advice, consider the kind of language, tone of voice, and facial expressions or body movements you use, and how this may make someone feel.



Section One: Compassion

Compassionate Swaps		Why Swap?	Phrases to try and avoid	Phrases to use instead
Swap this	For this			
Dramatic or sensationalist language	Realistic and neutral language.	This language may create panic or anxiety that can lead to worse mental health outcomes for the individual.	How can you live like this? How have you let it get this bad? Money must be tight then. It's freezing in here.	It must feel frustrating for you. Would you feel comfortable telling me a bit more about that? How can we best help /support you?
Language that focuses on the negative.	Communicate the positive benefits to be made from making changes	Whilst it is important to educate people on risks, focusing on positive health gains from making realistic changes can be more likely to motivate.	You can't live with these conditions. If you don't sort this out, you'll end up in hospital. I don't know how you've not got seriously ill from this. I can see why you're so poorly.	I'm sure you're aware that these conditions will impact your health and wellbeing. Have you accessed support for accommodation that will be suited to your needs?
Blaming individuals - attributing the sole cause of a health outcome to individual behaviour	Acknowledge the wider environmental, social, and genetic determinants of health	Health is determined by a wide array of social, environmental, and genetic factors which should be acknowledged to avoid stigmatising individuals.	How have you not got this sorted before now? Why haven't you done anything about...? Most people manage to get this sorted/ don't have this issue	Have you tried anything to resolve the issue before? Have you found any challenges or difficulties with that? Do you need any support with?



Section Two: Self-Compassion

What is Self-Compassion?

Self-Compassion can be defined as extending kindness and care to ourselves, particularly in times of personal hardship, where we may feel inadequate or a sense of failure.

Practising self-compassion can improve both our physical and mental health and wellbeing, such as reducing levels of anxiety and improving our personal resilience.

How you can practice Self-Compassion

Here are some simple exercises to practice self-compassion:

- Gratitude journal – write down three things that you are grateful for each day
- Mindfulness– find some exercises here: self-compassion.org/category/exercises/
- Connecting with others – confide in someone you trust
- Challenge negative self-talk – speak to yourself how you would to a friend

Advice to professionals

- Having difficult conversations with households can take an emotional toll on you as a professional. It is important to recognise this.
- It is vital to prioritise and care for your own wellbeing. Carve out some dedicated time just for you.
- Be honest with yourself and take time to notice and acknowledge how you are feeling.
- Reach out to friends, family, colleagues - talk to them about how you are feeling - even grabbing a quick cuppa could make all the difference.
- Ask for help if you are feeling overwhelmed and use the support that is out there - counselling, talking therapies, occupational health, community groups etc.
- Look after yourself before looking after others - remember "you cannot pour from an empty cup".
- Be compassionate towards your colleagues, friends and family, who may be going through similar situations, and share the principles of self-compassion with them.

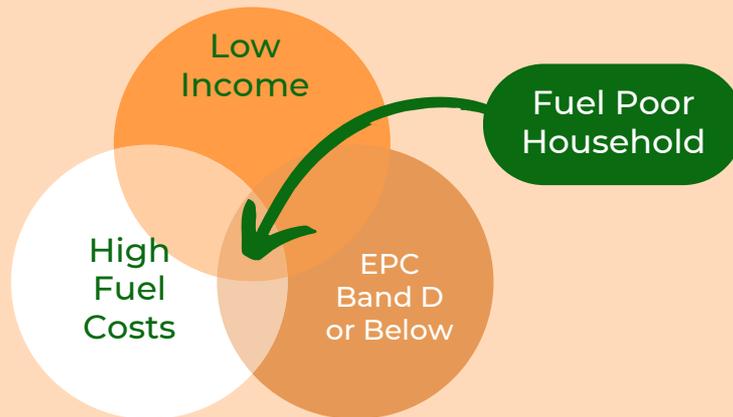


Section Three: Cold Homes and Health

Fuel Poverty and Affordable Warmth

We should all have access to a safe, warm, and dry home however we know that is not the case for many. In Doncaster, nearly 1 in 5 households are affected by fuel poverty.

The government's definition of fuel poverty is when someone on a 'lower income [lives] in a home which cannot be kept warm at a reasonable cost'. If a home's EPC (Energy Performance Certificate) is band D or below, and they have a residual income* below the poverty line, they are likely to be in fuel poverty.



Cold, damp homes can increase existing inequalities for some groups. These include:

- Low income or poorer households
- Children
- Older people (above 65 years)
- Disabled people
- People with long-term health conditions
- People with mental health conditions
- People with dementia
- Pregnant people
- Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities (due to the inequalities in accessing affordable fuel)
- Ethnic Minority communities (due to inequalities in income).

**A household is in low income if they live on less than 60% of the UK's median income. Median household disposable income for 2021 was £31,400. 60% of this is £18,840. So, if disposable income is below £12,560 and the property has EPC D or below, they are in fuel poverty (as per 2021 figures).*



Section Three: Cold Homes and Health

Effects of Cold Temperatures on our Body

Between 18 and 20 Degrees

- Physical Effects: Minimal risk to 'healthy' people.
- Health Effects: No impacts on health.

Between 16-12 Degrees

- Physical Effects: Reduced resistance to respiratory infections.
- Health Effects: Greater chance of having chest/breathing problems, or developing viruses.

Between 4 and 8 Degrees

- Physical Effects: Increased risk of death observed at population level.
- Health Effects: Significant risk of a range of health impacts such as: stroke, heart attack, respiratory disease, influenza, falls and injuries.

Below 18 Degrees

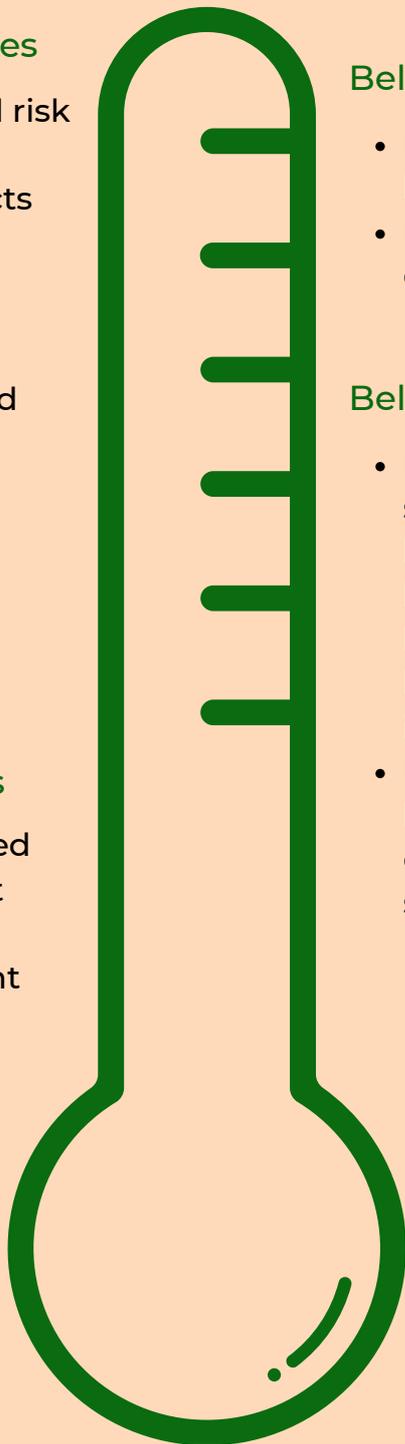
- Physical Effects: May increase blood pressure.
- Health Effects: Increased risk of cardiovascular disease.

Below 12 Degrees

- Physical Effects: If the house stays at this temperature for two hours or more, a person's core body temperature drops. Their blood pressure rises and their blood viscosity (thickness) increases.
- Health Effects: Greater risk of heart attacks and other cardiovascular diseases such as strokes.

Below 5 Degrees

- Physical Effects: A person's deep body temperature falls.
- Health Effects: Significant increase in the risk of hypothermia.



Section Three: Cold Homes and Health

Physical and Mental Impacts of a Cold Home

Physical Impacts of a cold home:

- Increased chances of circulatory conditions: high blood pressure, heart attack, stroke.
- Increased risk of cancer including: bladder, thyroid and brain cancer.
- Higher risk of falls and accidents for older people.
- Slower recovery from illness, surgery or rehabilitation from hospital.
- Worsened respiratory conditions such as bronchiolitis, asthma, and COPD.
- Increased risk of hypothermia- especially in older people and babies.
- Increased risk of viruses such as flu and covid.
- Worsened conditions such as diabetes, ulcers.
- Carbon monoxide poisoning can happen because of faulty heating or poorly ventilated homes.

Mental Health and wellbeing impacts of a cold home:

- Depression
- Lack of motivation/ energy
- Stress and anxiety
- Stigma and embarrassment
- Social isolation and loneliness
- Sleep deprivation
- Build up of markers for dementia and Alzheimer's in the brain from decreased body temperatures
- Wider social factors such as: missed school, sickness days, a difficulty to study/ work from home, lack of hot water and clean clothes may also lead to personal care avoidance.



Section Three: Cold Homes and Health

What Signs Should You Look Out For?

Signs of a Cold Home	Coping Mechanisms you may see	Suggested Advice
<p>Temperature is below 18 degrees and/ or struggling to keep warm at home</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Going to bed early, to keep warm • Using showers in workplaces or leisure centres • Wearing lots of clothes indoors • Only heating one room • Not turning the heating on at all • Spending the day out of the house, at a library, café or even A&E 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the person has a heart or lung condition, is disabled, is over 65, has a mental health condition, or if the household includes children or someone who is pregnant, recommend they heat their home to at least 18 degrees as a minimum. • Recommend they keep their bedroom at 18C all night if they can – and keep the bedroom window closed • Encourage them to heat more than just one room, especially if it is a large household • Promote having regular hot drinks and make sure they have at least 1 hot meal a day – eating regularly helps keep them warm • If they cannot afford to heat their meals, suggest suitable foodbanks, or welcome spaces they could use
<p>Condensation – wetness on the windows or windowsills</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Closing blinds or curtains to avoid the problem • Not turning heating on • Constantly wiping away condensation from windows and windowsills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try and encourage ventilation where appropriate • Keeping home at a constant temperature will help reduce condensation • Cooking – use lids for pots and pans • Encourage use of extractor fans in bathroom and kitchen
<p>Draughts – through windows, doors, and floors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaving curtains closed all day • Putting newspaper over windows • Keeping windows continuously shut 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommend drawing curtains at dusk and keep doors closed to block out draughts • Suggest draught excluders • Suggest window seals

Section Three: Cold Homes and Health

What Signs Should You Look Out For?

Signs of a Cold Home	Possible Coping Mechanisms Used	Suggested Advice
Damp or mould	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not inviting friends or family into the home • Avoiding using rooms at home where damp/ mould is present • Avoiding washing clothes as nowhere to dry it safely 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage them to ventilate and heat their home as above • Move furniture away from walls • Remove mould using detergent and a cloth • For serious problems, contact their social housing provider or Doncaster Council if in private accommodation
High energy bills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooking using alternative sources such as a barbecue or portable stove • Not turning electricity on and using candles instead of lights • Prioritising paying for energy bills over essentials such as personal items, hygiene products and food • Marking the bath to reduce the amount of water and energy used, or resorting to a 'sink wash' • Formal borrowing (credit cards or loans) or informal borrowing from friends and family 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turn their boiler flow temperature down to 55C • Support them to understand their heating system • See Energy Saving tips resource on Council's Energy Webpage • Check energy support available nationally • Check if there is extra financial support from their energy supplier • Check local support available • Check they are receiving all relevant benefits • Check to see if they could access food or hygiene banks • Check if there are any Welcoming Spaces nearby
No central heating, or heating system not working properly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using unsafe, un-serviced heating appliances • Using ovens to stay warm • Using alternative heating sources such as portable heaters or even candles • Spending more time outside of the home than usual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure they have a yearly service of their heating system by a professional • If a vulnerable person, encourage them to speak to their supplier or offer to contact them on their behalf • Speak to Doncaster Council's Sustainability Unit to see if they are eligible for a grant.



Section Four: Making Every Contact Count

Making Every Contact Compassionate and Count

Approach

Making Every Contact Count (MECC) is an approach to behaviour change that uses the millions of day-to-day interactions that organisations and people have with other people to support them in making positive changes to their physical and mental health and wellbeing.

A MECC interaction takes a matter of minutes and is not intended to add to the busy workloads of health, care and the wider workforce staff, rather it is structured to fit into and complement existing professional clinical care and social engagement approaches.

Visit the [MECC website](#) for ways to refer to different services.

Things to consider before your compassionate conversation

- Number of people living in the house
- Do young people, children or babies live there?
- Is anyone disabled?
- What type of meter are they on? How do they pay their bills?
- Number of people using one room?
- Condition of the heating system? Does it work? Has it been serviced recently?
- Have they mentioned any specific health conditions?
- Have they mentioned about debt/ finances?
- Are there any obvious hazards (fire/ electrical/ loose carpets/ damp and mould/ lots of condensation/ food storage)?

