

The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
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29 June 2020

Dear Prime Minister

Many of us represent organisations or are individuals who are at the forefront of the current Covid-19 crisis. We believe urgent action is needed to improve health outcomes and support the most vulnerable people who are at most risk of needless death and cold related morbidity this winter. We are therefore writing to call on you to follow through with your welcome proposals in your manifesto and Queens Speech to invest in warmer and healthier homes¹.

You know from your own experience the critical importance of beating this virus and of a living environment which gives people that are ill the best possible chance of recovery. Whilst the current crisis has so far taken place in the warmer months, millions of people across the country will be dreading this coming winter. The health implications of cold temperatures on respiratory conditions² and on frail and elderly households are well known. These impacts are also intergenerational³, with children twice as likely to suffer from asthma or bronchitis if they inhabit cold and damp housing⁴.

During the colder months many people will continue to stay at home for longer periods. Alongside the psychological stress and social isolation caused by the virus, too many will have to choose between heating their home adequately and falling into debt or rationing their energy use and living in cold damp homes that are dangerous to their health and can shorten their lives. This can lead to a vicious cycle of hospital admission, discharge and readmission. Even before the current crisis, the economic burden of this 'carousel of morbidity' cost the NHS between £1.4 and £2.0 billion every year⁵. A second Covid-19 wave during a cold spell this winter could be catastrophic for individuals, families and overwhelm our health and social care services.

1. The Conservative manifesto and Queens Speech committed to investing an £9.2 billion in the energy efficiency of homes, schools and hospitals; £3.8 billion over ten years for a Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund, £2.5 billion over five years to 2025 for Home Upgrade Grants for support deep renovation for low income households living in highly inefficient homes and £2.9 billion over five years to 2025 for a Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme. This amounts to an additional investment, over and above current policies, of £2.9 billion over the next two years.

2. Public Health England (PHE), 2015. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) have also produced related guidelines on reducing the risk of the impact of cold homes which has been supported by many independent health institutions.

3. Age-specific mortality rate per 100,000 people, Number of deaths registered each month in England and Wales, including deaths involving the coronavirus (COVID-19), by age, sex and region, ONS.

4. Friends of the Earth and Marmot, 2011

5. BRE (2015) The cost of poor housing to the NHS. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.bre.co.uk/filelibrary/pdf/87741-Cost-of-Poor-Housing-Briefing-Paper-v3.pdf> [Accessed: 21 June 2019].

A key preventable factor is the UK's building stock which remains notoriously inefficient and hard to heat. Millions face this winter in properties which are dangerous or unfit for colder seasons. Poor housing leads to sharp rises in energy use.⁶ A recent independent analysis suggests that, if a second lockdown was re-imposed during winter months, families in cold, leaky homes would face heating bills elevated on average to £124 per month, compared with £76 per month for those in well-insulated homes – a difference of £49 (£48.7) per month⁷.

Despite welcome proposals in your manifesto and Queens Speech to help improve this situation, recent Government statistics highlight energy efficiency delivery has dropped dramatically since 2012⁸ and one in ten households in England live in fuel poverty, meaning they live below the poverty line but also have much higher bills due to poor levels of energy efficiency⁹. As lockdown begins to ease and you consider our economic recovery plan, you can address those preventable factors that aggravate respiratory illnesses and create or exacerbate other serious health conditions. By kick-starting a nationwide home and public sector energy efficiency retrofitting programme - starting with fuel poor households and social housing - you can directly save lives.

Such a programme will put people back to work¹⁰, address regional variances in economic deprivation and provide a major stimulus to the economy¹¹. These actions would also help to provide active referrals to many existing health and housing schemes¹², reduce poor air quality which also damages respiratory health and reduce carbon emissions to make a direct contribution to meeting the UK Government's goal of becoming net zero.

The recurrent crisis of early death and ill health caused by cold homes will not abate by itself. We call upon you to take actions that will prevent such a crisis, stimulate the economy and build back better.

6. Emissions from homes and public buildings rose sharply by 2.5m tonnes or 4% in 2018 as a result of the Siberian weather system 'the Beast from the East' equivalent of a small country's like Albania's annual emissions.

7. Lockdown in Leaky Homes, The Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit, 22 May 2020.

8. Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee Energy efficiency: building towards net zero Twenty-First Report of Session 2017–19 Report, together with formal minutes relating to the report Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed 9 July 2019, page 23.

9. Annual fuel poverty statistics report for 2020 (with 2018 data), Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 30 April 2020

10. According to Bank of England forecasts, unemployment is likely to increase by an additional 1.79m people by the end of 2020.

11. Rebuilding for resilience, Energy efficiency's offer for a net zero compatible stimulus and recovery, Energy Efficiency Infrastructure Group (EEIG), June 2020

12. NEA have catalogued health and housing schemes which deliver energy efficiency improvements through LA's and the health sector which have had success in addressing and/or stabilising related health conditions, see: <https://www.nea.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Catalogue-of-Health-Related-Fuel-Poverty-Schemes-2019.pdf>.

SIGNED BY

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Ruth Arnold, GP, Poole
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Elected officials

Peter Taylor, Elected Mayor of Watford
Cllr Denise Jeffery, Leader of Wakefield Council and Chair of Cabinet
Cllr Jonathan Slater, Lewisham Council Cabinet Member for the Community Sector
Cllr Paulette Lappin, Sefton Council
Cllr Mulherin, Leeds City Council
Cllr Jeanie Bell, Cabinet Member for Community Safety, St Helens Borough Council

Housing and energy sector

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Tracy Harrison, Chief Executive, Northern Housing Consortium

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Jim Watson, Professor of Energy Policy Research Director, UCL Institute of Sustainable Resources

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Jim Lynch, Commercial Director, Northern Gas Heating Limited

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Guy Pulham, CEO, UK & Ireland Fuel Distributors Association

Rachel Jones, Chief Executive, Act on Energy and Chair of West Midlands Association of Local Energy Officers

Ian Henderson, Managing Director, Boiler Plan UK

Dr. Simone Lowthe-Thomas, Severn Wye Energy Agency

Jonathan Cosson, Director, Cyfarwyddwr, Warm Wales Cymru Gynnes CBC

Matthew Cole, Chair of Trustees, Fuel Bank Foundation

Emily Thompson, Director of Climate Change & Fuel Poverty, Groundwork in the North

Simon Kilshaw, Green Doctor Manager, Groundwork North, East & West Yorkshire

Stuart Dawks, CEO, PECT

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Paul Stapleton, Managing Director, NIE Networks

Tom Bell, Head of Social Strategy, Northern Gas Networks

Anton Humphrey, Retrofit Works

Mark Randall, Managing Director, Aran Services

Fiona Price, Melin Homes

Phil Hurley, Managing Director, NIBE Energy

Dr Mark Fishpool, Director, Middlesbrough Environment City

Local Citizen Advice organisations

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Abl Conway, CEO, Citizens Advice Northumberland

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