

# FEELING THE PINCH...

Considering the health impacts of the cost of living crisis



Welcome to the WiseGP newsletter, highlighting how research can help GP practices address top challenges...

## Stay warm, have something to eat, or get into more debt?

That's the difficult choice facing so many people this winter as the UK faces a cost of living crisis. Soaring food, fuel and mortgage costs, compounded by a decrease in real income mean that many people are being forced into poverty. These cost of living increases are widening health inequalities and damaging people's health<sup>1</sup>.

**A poll commissioned by YouGov this year found that 55% of British people felt their health had been negatively affected by the rising cost of living<sup>2</sup>.**

- 84% said this was due to the increased cost of heating their home.
- 78% said this was due to the rising cost of food.
- 46% said this was due to the increased cost of transport.



**The poorer someone is, the more likely they are to die from heart disease, lung cancer, chronic respiratory diseases and suicide<sup>3</sup>.**



## Fuel Poverty

Despite government commitments to limit energy price rises, households still face higher bills to heat their homes this winter. Elderly people are particularly vulnerable to the cold as they lose body heat faster. **People who ration their heating face a higher risk of cardiovascular disease, respiratory illness and falls<sup>4</sup>.** Consequently, NICE guidelines recommend that primary care practitioners should regularly assess the heating needs of people accessing their services<sup>4</sup>.

In 2017, to improve outcomes for people living in fuel poverty, several GP practices in Wiltshire piloted a new referral pathway to a heating support service<sup>5</sup>. A software tool flagged patients with health conditions that could be exacerbated by a cold home, prompting practitioners to enquire if they would benefit from heating support. Interested patients were referred for support by the click of a button.

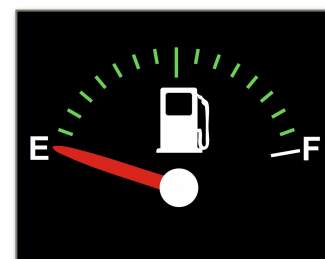
Through this quality improvement (QI) activity, the practitioners involved used evidence to inform innovative working in practice, which had a positive impact on their local communities. **Any involvement in QI activity can improve staff morale and appeal to people's motivation to provide good patient care.** This motivation could come from an improved sense of effective team working and increased sense of patient feedback being used to make informed decisions<sup>6</sup>.



Perhaps your PCN social prescribers could develop a QI project to help identify and support people facing food and fuel poverty in your community this winter...

## Transport Costs

With the rise in fuel prices we've all recently experienced, some people have struggled to access essential health care. For instance, in a recent press release by the Royal College of Physicians, a patient was mentioned who had missed lung cancer treatment as they couldn't afford to travel to their local hospital<sup>7</sup>. Financial barriers to travel can also have an impact on the mental health of our patients, though stress, isolation and loneliness. *Do you know if your social prescriber has links to any local volunteers supporting people to travel to hospital?*



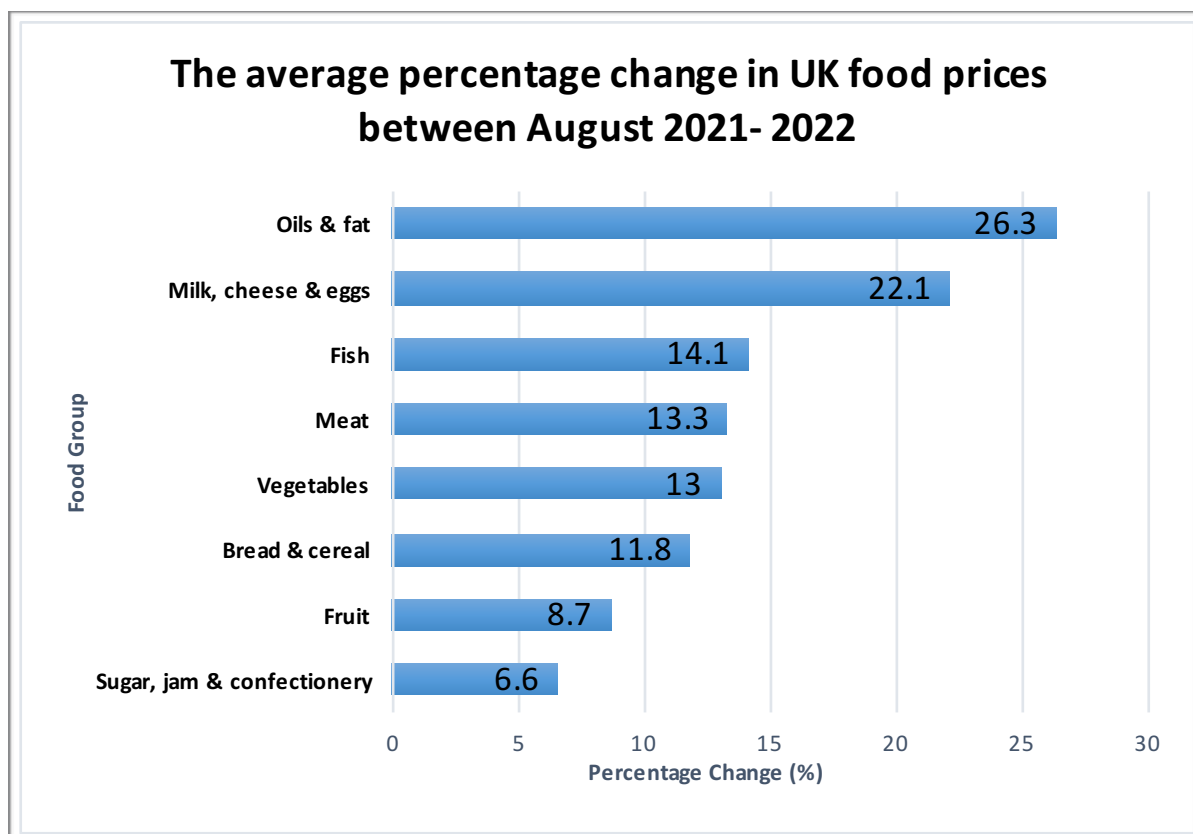
## Financial Stress



As wages fail to keep up with the cost of living, stress regarding finances is rising. A survey conducted by the office for national statistics in May 2022 found that **77% of UK adults felt somewhat or very worried about the cost of living crisis**<sup>8</sup>. Financial stress can have a negative impact on someone's quality of life, whilst also exacerbating underlying mental and physical health problems.

## Food Poverty

As highlighted in the chart below, food prices have risen significantly over the past year<sup>9</sup>. There is a risk that as fresh produce gets more expensive, people on the brink of poverty will turn to cheaper, less nutritious options, with negative health consequences.



The Trussell Trust saw a 14% rise in demand for food parcels between 2021 and 2022 compared to the previous year, with 832,000 parcels handed out for children<sup>10</sup>. In Scotland, research has found that more mothers and children in particular are turning to food banks for support<sup>11,12</sup>. Steps are being taken to reduce food waste and help people experiencing food poverty. For example, the OLIO app connects people with neighbours and local businesses so that surplus food can be shared.

Whilst food banks provide crucial support to families, they are not a long-term solution. Government action is needed to tackle the root causes of health inequalities in the UK.

## WiseGP Approach



**As we look to redesign general practice in response to the Fuller report<sup>13</sup> and introduction of Integrated Care Systems, is it time for us to call for a review of the data we collect in our daily practice, to understand the needs of our communities and make sure we are helping to address these?<sup>14</sup>**

It's clear to see the intricate links between the cost of living crisis and the health of our population. As mentioned, top down action by the government is crucial to tackle the root causes of health inequalities in the UK, but what can we do to help?



Tackling the root causes of health inequality is a societal challenge requiring action from all levels, government down. However, WiseGP recognises the opportunities for driving local change within our own communities as knowledge workers- critically creating and using knowledge-in-context to understand and drive change that matters in our communities.<sup>14</sup> By creating understanding of the whole person health and healthcare issues facing the people and communities we work with, we can actively shape the services we provide, moving 'evidence-based practice' into 'practice-based evidence driving quality whole person care'.



*This is the culture change called for in the Fuller report<sup>13</sup>. In our next newsletter we will show you how WiseGP will be helping us all be part of making that happen!*

# HIGHLIGHTS FROM WISEGP

## WiseGP Blog

Whole person healthcare defines our speciality, but the work required to support this is being undermined by the current pressures in the system, by the nature of workforce training and even by the way we talk about the soft skills of practice. Have a read of our latest blog by Prof Joanne Reeve and see if you agree it's time for us to reclaim General Practice!<sup>14</sup>



<https://www.wisegp.co.uk/post/reclaiming-general-practice>

In our November newsletter we will introduce our future vision for WiseGP and Primary Care!

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