

Heat or Eat: Food and Austerity in Rural England

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Executive Summary

This research project explores the theme of food and austerity through the lens of one of the most high profile, yet under-evidenced, phenomena in the current era of austerity: the decision to ‘heat or eat’. With support from National Energy Action and the Trussell Trust foodbank Network and focusing on experiences in Cornwall, England, this project scrutinises the ‘heat or eat’ dilemma in a rural context, investigating the legitimacy and complexity of such claims, and critically assessing existing and potential policy responses.

Research Aims and Objectives

Aim 1: to assess whether the heat or eat dilemma discussed within policy debates is part of the lived experience of rural poverty in the current era of austerity. Specific objectives of this are to:

- determine whether low income rural householders have ever had to make choices between food and heating;
- understand how food and heating costs are prioritised in household budgeting decisions;
- ascertain whether the concept of heating or eating reflects lived experiences.

Aim 2: to critically assess existing rural community-based and (local and national) policy support, and to identify the most appropriate policy responses for addressing the root causes of these experiences. Specific objectives are to:

- identify key rural areas with both high levels of fuel poverty and uptake of food banks where a more strategic response may be required;
- come to a better understanding of how community stakeholders are responding to these experiences locally and what the most effective policy responses do/should look like.

Methodology

In meeting these aims the project involved two main phases of research:

Phase 1: Desk based research:

- A literature and evidence review
- A secondary analysis of the Family Resources Survey (FRS) and Living Costs and Food Survey (LCFS)
- GIS mapping of fuel poverty data and Trussell Trust Foodbank Network data

Phase 2: Primary research using qualitative interview methods which involved:

- Face-to-face interviews with 11 householders sampled through Trussell Trust foodbank projects in Cornwall
- Telephone interviews with 9 stakeholders, defined as providers of food and fuel poverty related services in Cornwall

Key Findings

- I. This project has found clear evidence of a relationship between food and fuel expenditure and/or consumption. Our research suggests that there is a ‘heat or eat’ dilemma but there are nuances to this which make it hard to distinguish this as a discrete and standalone dilemma, notably that:
 - a. Some people are in desperate circumstances where they cannot afford sufficient food or fuel.
 - b. There is nothing in the (albeit limited) literature which indicates that one is entirely sacrificed for another or that price spikes in one commodity might affect spending on the other.
 - c. All interviewees described their home as not being warm enough
 - d. Almost all interviewees described substantial deficiencies in their diet as a result of cost.
 - e. The qualitative analysis also found that householders tended to prioritise energy uses such as lighting, cooking and hot water above heating, suggesting a far more complex set of decisions being made than simply ‘heat or eat’.
- II. Being behind on fuel bills and fuel payment method appear to be particularly important factors in relation to people being able to afford enough food. Those interviewees on pre-payment meters (PPMs) described a ‘top up or eat’ situation, with cases of self-disconnection being reported.
- III. Structural drivers of food and fuel poverty and the ‘heat or eat’ dilemma are key, particularly challenges resulting from rurality (increased costs and distances and being ‘off the energy grids’), (low and insecure) income and (inadequate, low quality, rented) housing.
- IV. There appears to be a lot of activity in the case study area designed to help people in food and fuel poverty. However, it was impossible from this pilot study to gauge the extent to which it reaches people. Furthermore, this provision is not on the whole focused on root causes or structural drivers.
- V. The evidence base on the ‘heat or eat’ dilemma is highly limited and key questions remain about: the exact nature of the concept of ‘heat or eat’; the best methodological approach for measuring and understanding it; and the need for greater understanding about the impact of energy billing periods on food security.

Summary Findings

- 1. Is the heat or eat dilemma part of the lived experience of rural poverty in the current era of austerity?**

Key findings from the literature review, quantitative and qualitative analysis are outlined below. The findings are explored in terms of the relationship between food and fuel consumption and/or expenditure (which is actually what much existing research considers), whether there is evidence of a heat or eat dilemma, and key drivers of this. In summary, our empirical analysis revealed a desperate situation where some households were regularly unable to afford sufficient energy or food. Whether this can or should be presented as a 'heat or eat' dilemma requires more detailed investigation and discussion around its true reflection of these experiences and its utility in furthering effective policy responses.

The relationship between food and fuel consumption and/or expenditure

- The literature review, quantitative and qualitative data all point to a relationship between food and fuel consumption and/or expenditure, largely due to the relative elasticity of these commodities compared to other household costs.
- There is nothing to suggest in the existing literature or our data that one commodity is being entirely sacrificed for the other.
- Our quantitative analysis shows that more households that are unable to afford a protein based meal every two days are likely to report experiences of not being warm enough, damp housing conditions, being unable to afford to keep their home warm, and energy debt. Regression analysis indicates that the odds of being unable to afford to eat a protein based meal every two days are increased where a household has energy debt (especially gas) and are unable to keep their home sufficiently warm.
- The literature review and qualitative data highlighted a decrease in both the amount and quality of food consumed amongst households that were faced with increased energy costs (as a result of both cold periods and price rises), however, our qualitative data suggested decreases in energy use as well.
- Our qualitative data suggests that the relationship between food and fuel expenditure and consumption is highly nuanced, and affected by factors such as household composition, income, welfare sanctions, housing, and living in a rural area.

Is there evidence of a heat or eat dilemma?

- There is no agreement on the meaning of the phrase 'heat or eat'. The existing literature base tends to use proxy measures of food and energy consumption rather than asking householders directly, so it is impossible from this to say whether a direct, conscious trade off between commodities is being made.
- However, in the qualitative phase of our research, householders, foodbank managers and stakeholders were asked whether the heat or eat dilemma reflected lived experiences, and without exception all said that it did.
- The qualitative analysis also found that householders tended to prioritise energy uses such as lighting, cooking and hot water above heating, suggesting a far more complex set of decisions being made than simply 'heat or eat'

- Moreover, the qualitative data suggests that in many situations householders are unable to afford sufficient food or fuel. Almost all participants reported being cold over the winter period.
- The literature review, quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that it is very unlikely that there is a straight choice made between energy and food, instead, rationing of both is more likely. The qualitative findings suggested that in extreme cases the food bank became an emergency buffer as did self-disconnection in the case of PPM users.
- One clear gap in knowledge in the existing evidence base is the impact of energy payment methods on food consumption and/or expenditure. Our quantitative analysis shows that households using PPMs also have the lowest food expenditure. Yet, our qualitative analysis highlighted a more immediate ‘top up or eat’ situation, whereby householders reported having to choose between topping up a PPM or buying food. For those paying for their energy less frequently this issue did not arise, however the impact of a large quarterly bill placed a much larger (but less frequent) strain on household finances.

Drivers

- The rising, and sometimes fluctuating, cost of energy and food, and the impact of cold weather/seasonal effects were highlighted in the literature review and our qualitative analysis as factors which made household spending decisions harder.
- The qualitative analysis found that structural factors including housing condition and tenure, household composition, rurality, family structure and income all had an effect on household spending decisions.
- Our qualitative analysis also highlighted the complexities of rural energy supply, whereby some householders relied on expensive forms of heating (such as electricity due to a lack of gas mains), or bottled gas or oil. In some situations householders were required to pay for large amounts of energy in advance, a situation that in some instances led to ‘self disconnection’ from heating supply because of the expense.
- In our qualitative analysis repaying energy debt through a PPM had a harmful effect on a household’s ability to afford sufficient food or fuel.
- The literature review and qualitative findings both indicated the positive effects of fuel poverty schemes on poor households. Within the literature review it was suggested that households in receipt of fuel poverty schemes also had better nutritional outcomes. In the case of the qualitative analysis, where fuel poverty support worked efficiently it could mean the difference between access to hot water or not. On the other hand, schemes that were inefficient or poorly organised were perceived as an additional burden. Familial and social networks and effective policy support may cushion against some of the negative effects described within this report. However, ineffective policy measures are clearly having the opposite effect and contributing to these experiences, particularly social security sanctions, delays in social security payments, faulty energy efficiency measures, and schemes that do not work in a timely or straightforward manner.

2. Critical assessment of existing rural community-based and (local and national) policy support.

Within the case study area:

- The stakeholder interviews suggested that existing provision does provide positive forms of support but that the sector faces key challenges (many of which are applicable generally to the voluntary sector - short term funding, lack of co-ordinated working, root causes for example income and low paid work left unresolved).
- The gaps in provision which were identified included: the need for longer term, more secure, funding, smarter and more joined up working; and both addressing root causes and securing emergency/responsive provision.
- The household interviews indicated the negative effects of cuts to other local services and the loss of local services (such as libraries, internet facilities in the job centre) places a greater (often financial) burden on households

Within the national context:

- Delays in social security payments and social security sanctions had disastrous effects on households in this sample. Sanctions pushed households into debt, and in some cases led to more risky behaviours, such as driving uninsured. They were also harmful to children in the affected households, with households reporting having little food in the house and self disconnection from their energy supply.
- Households reported repaying energy debts through their PPM, this was usually out of their control, and had a substantial knock on effect in terms of being able to use sufficient energy or purchase other essentials including food.
The complexity of energy efficiency and fuel poverty schemes acted as a barrier for both advisors and households

Policy Recommendations

- A clearer picture of available support, and how and whether it is currently reaching those most in need is necessary.
- Responses are required which address root causes and work towards prevention of (fuel and food) poverty as well as provide immediate relief.
- There is a need for longer-term, more secure funding, joined up working, and cohesion across schemes and programmes.
- There is a need for recognition of the negative effects of social security payment delays and sanctions, and greater protection needs to be put in place to support the most vulnerable households.