

Cost Of Living Crisis

Report - March 2023



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About us

Healthwatch Walsall is your local health and social care champion. From Blakenall to Willenhall North and everywhere in between, we make sure National Health Service (NHS) leaders and other decision makers hear your voice and use your feedback to improve care.

- We Monitor
- We Analyse
- We Investigate
- We Challenge

How we help you

If you've recently visited your doctor, or local hospital, or used any health and care services in Walsall we want to hear from you.

Whether you've had a good or bad experience, we can use your feedback to improve services for everyone and we have the power to make NHS leaders and other care providers listen to what you have to say.

We're independent and impartial and anything you say is confidential. Our service is free, simple to use and can make a real difference to people in Walsall and beyond.

Summary

Healthwatch Walsall is a member of the Self-Neglect/Hoarding Sub-Group and during discussions, it became apparent that the 'Cost Of Living Crisis' would be impacting on people and those who are considered vulnerable groups within the Borough.

Healthwatch Walsall were interested in how the 'Cost of Living Crisis' would affect service users and their families and what, if any, cutbacks they would need to make and how they would be coping with the increased cost of living especially around health, wellbeing and mental health.

We decided to undertake a survey to learn the views of Walsall citizens on how their lives would be impacted and what decisions they would be making with regard to their own healthcare, mental health and any social care aspects they might be concerned about.

92 people participated.

People were encouraged to take part online and in person across Walsall.

We found that people had made cutbacks during the crisis, but still sought further advice or support especially around; reducing heating and lighting costs, how to keep warm, how to stay well in winter, making sure they got the right help and money that they were entitled to and reducing food costs by cooking cheaper meals

A number of findings and recommendations appear later in this report.

Introduction

We had concerns that the current 'Cost of Living Crisis' is affecting people and that they have made decisions or be forced to make cutbacks that would affect their health and wellbeing. We wanted to know if this was the case. Where? and how?

This report seeks to highlight the issues and concerns that Walsall people have during this crisis. To uncover what measures they have already taken, who the crisis affects and what those impacts may be on those people or groups.

The expert below is taken from Public Health England website. Their data shows that Walsall people already have significant health and wellbeing issues.

'The health of people in Walsall is varied compared with the England average. Walsall is one of the 20% most deprived districts/unitary authorities in England and about 25.8% (15,070) children live in low-income families. Life expectancy for both men and women are lower than the England average.'

Methodology

A short survey was made available online and in paper copy form. People could also telephone into Healthwatch Walsall if they wished to be asked the questions and their responses noted. (This was to ensure the people who may have impairments or do not access the internet could take part).

92 members of the public took part in the survey which ran from the 7 November 2022 to 1 March 2023.

Whilst we acknowledge that this is a small sample, it still reflects the views of those that took part.

Demographics summary

Here is a short breakdown of characteristics of the majority of participants.

- 22 of participants were between 55 to 64 years of age
- 63 were Female
- 46 were Married
- 34 were Employed
- 66 were White British/English/Scottish /Welsh/ Northern Irish
- 22 said they cared for themselves
- 53 considered they had a disability
- 54 identified they had long term condition

Findings

Keeping warm and well is a key concern whilst reducing or balancing energy costs. Most of the people have already made significant adjustments to their energy usage, buying habits, lifestyle and social life. Some impact to their health and wellbeing has already been felt.

People wanted to ensure they could access the help and money/support they were entitled to and this extended to accessing correct benefits, understanding energy

charges and accessing any financial assistance or advice. A number of people need help with form filling.

Top responses when asked what advice matters they wished to access. (Note this was a multi choice question, so people were able to select more than one advice point)

1. How to keep warm (43) 51%
2. How to stay well this winter (40) 47%
3. Making sure you get the right help and money that you are entitled to (35) 41%
4. Reducing your food costs by cooking cheaper meals (33) 39%
5. Support that's available in the community (30) 35%
6. Help that is available with paying bills (29) 34%

Almost two thirds of people have bought less food or cheaper food and toiletries.

There were actions that people have taken around their health or safety:

- 17% of people have stopped going to the dentist
- 12% of people have stopped buying medication or prescriptions
- 11% use candles instead of electricity
- 11% use food banks
- 11% borrow money to pay bills

Particular concerns were noted around health matters as people have reduced clinical help/attendance and cut back on getting their medication or prescriptions. This may impact people short term and long-term health or may generate new conditions or increase existing ones. This may in turn involve accessing medical services not previous needed.

4 people identified as being hungry.

4 people identified as not being warm or having enough warm clothing or bedding.

15 people identified that their home was cold but not damp so was not affecting their health.

7 people identified that their home was cold but not damp and was affecting their health.

Concerns remain around the increasing cost of living and there are more concerns around the future. This leads to a feeling of anxiety and uncertainty for many, particularly those with existing or long-term conditions.

We were told people had feelings such as:

- Worsening anxiety or other mental health states/conditions
- Having to dramatically alter lifestyles to ensure bills are paid
- Being able to afford healthy food, if not it may affect existing health

- conditions such as diabetes

These may in turn lead to additional conditions especially around mental health along with general health and exercise. Social isolation may increase particularly for those who live on their own or already seldomly interact with others.

A small number of people received formal care from the Walsall Local Authority or another care provider. Over half of the people did not receive any formal care/assistance but received some form of 'informal care' from other family members, relatives, or friends. The majority of people further told us they would turn to family, relatives, or friends in the future for help.

Other access points/organisations of support were identified. The Citizen Advice Bureau (C.A.B.) was the clear top choice for people to go to. Others were identified as; Community/Voluntary Organisations, GP, Walsall Council, Nurse(s), Library staff, Foodbank, Google, Facebook, Rethink, Age Concern, The Church and neighbours.

We asked if an online directory would be of use? 49 people who answered this question answered YES. 26 answered NO.

Those that seemed to be most affected are married couples and single people. People who are employed or retired. Those who care for themselves or children or other adults. Whilst the majority did not identify as having a disability the majority did have some form of long-term condition(s).

Questions and responses are available in the appendix section

Conclusions

Whilst people have made considerable adjustments to their spending, reduced their power and heating usage as well adjusted their lifestyles, there are still concerns and needs for further advice and guidance.

There are some concerns around medical or mental health conditions worsening due to the cutbacks people have already made and may have to make in the future. Cutbacks to purchasing medication may accelerate conditions that may require next level medical intervention or access to additional services in the future.

Other non-medical situations such as housing was another concern either by worsening living conditions or the potential for "losing a roof over their head".

The continuing stress of managing and coping with the 'Cost of Living Crisis' is affecting people's health/wellbeing, mental health and lives generally.

For many people it is about ensuring they can pay their bills even though this may affect them or their family in different ways. This issue is causing a level of anxiety which may lead to mental health concerns.

As with COVID19, many effects of the 'Cost of Living Crisis' may not yet be apparent and may emerge in different ways over time. This may have knock-on effects to medical and non-medical agencies as growing numbers of people may need to access them in time.

An online directory of support would be useful for many. There are already a number of websites that offer advice and support. However, some people who may not have access to the internet should be able access the same directory/help. The question is how?

Recommendations/possible steps

- Information relating to local community support such as foodbanks, warm places, advice and information opportunities be provided.
- Use of public spaces e.g. Saddlers Centre could be used as an information/hardship hub where people could visit to obtain advice around their 'cost of living' concerns.
- People with access to digital technology could consider using comparison websites to see if there any providers with reduced pricing, energy costs.
- People could directly contact local Community Associations to identify any community support such as: foodbanks and debt advice.
- Healthy cooking classes may be rolled out across the Borough if not already in place.
- Budgeting training could also be rolled out.
- Citizens Advice Bureau offer a range of advice and information and should be considered as a prominent contact for advice
- Whilst asking friends for advice may be considered, people should access the professional(s), current and up to date organisations for current and valid information such as CAB, Walsall Council, Local Community Associations.
- People could seek medical or mental health intervention support when needed at the earliest possible point from their G.P, Rethink etc.
- People could access social prescribers based in Walsall for advice such as healthy lifestyle/exercise programmes available in the Borough.
- People could investigate community allotments or cooking programmes held in Walsall to assist in providing fresh and nourishing ingredients/meals. This may also offer opportunities to exercise and socialise.
- Opportunities for warm spaces if not already in place could be made at Local Authority venues such as libraries and leisure centres

- There are existing 'Cost of Living Crisis' information access points online nationally and locally via the Government and Walsall Council website. These should continue to be available.
- Local community hubs could play a part in accessing an online directory by involving local homes or offering a 'walk-in' option for support if not already in place.

Acknowledgments

Healthwatch Walsall would like to thank the participants of the survey and those organisations that distributed it via their networks.

Appendix 1

Whilst there were 92 people/participants who took part in the survey, not all answered every question.

Q1. I understand how my feedback will be used and consent to take part in the survey.

90 people answered Yes

2 people did not return an answer but still took part in the questionnaire.

Q2. Would you like advice on? (please tick as many that apply)

Reducing your Heating & Lighting costs (51) 60%

How to keep warm (43) 51%

How to stay well this winter (40) 47%

Making sure you get the right help and money that you are entitled to (35) 41%

Reducing your food costs by cooking cheaper meals (33) 39%

Support that's available in the community (30) 35%

Help that is available with paying bills (29) 34%

Helping families with young children (16) 19%

Help with housing issues (16) 19%

Public transport (15) 18%

Where to get free warm clothing (15) 18%

Food banks (13) 15%

Q3. If you have stated 'Anything else' to Q2 please explain further

- Help with form filling LPOA Claimant form for looking after others
- I would like advice on gas supplier and standing charges.
- Benefits help - filling out forms and potentially tribunal help and attendance

4. Do you consider that... (please tick all that apply). The responses are as below after

- You are hungry = 4
- Do not have enough warm clothing or enough warm bedding = 4
- Have a young child or baby that sleeps in a cold room = 1
- Have to stay outdoors for long periods, this may be because you are homeless or can't stay in a house during the day = 2

- Your home is cold or damp, but not currently affecting your health and wellbeing = 15
- Your home is cold and damp and affecting your health and wellbeing = 7
- Other please list below = 3
- Not applicable = 8

Q5. If you have stated 'Other' to Q4 please explain further

- Heating costs due to disability
- My home is not as warm as I would have it as I have switched down my thermostat
- I am a volunteer work with people in similar situation. Stan Ball Centre has been a lifeline

Q7. If you have stated 'Other' to Q6 please explain further

No one added any additional comment

Q.8 Thinking about the winter, what are the main things you are worried or concerned about? For example, this could be about getting into debt, anxiety, existing health condition worsening or anything else.

- Not being able to pay debts back and have enough to live on
- Staying sufficiently warm
- Anxiety and existing health conditions
- Health conditions worsening
- Having to dramatically alter lifestyle to ensure bills are paid.
- Being able to afford healthy food and if I can't, worried it will affect my health because I am diabetic
- Reducing my outdoor walking due to winter weather, paying the bills and mortgage

Q9. Do you currently receive formal support such as a home carer from Walsall Council or another domiciliary care provider? We call this formal care. Or does a member of the family, a neighbour or friend help you? We call this informal care.

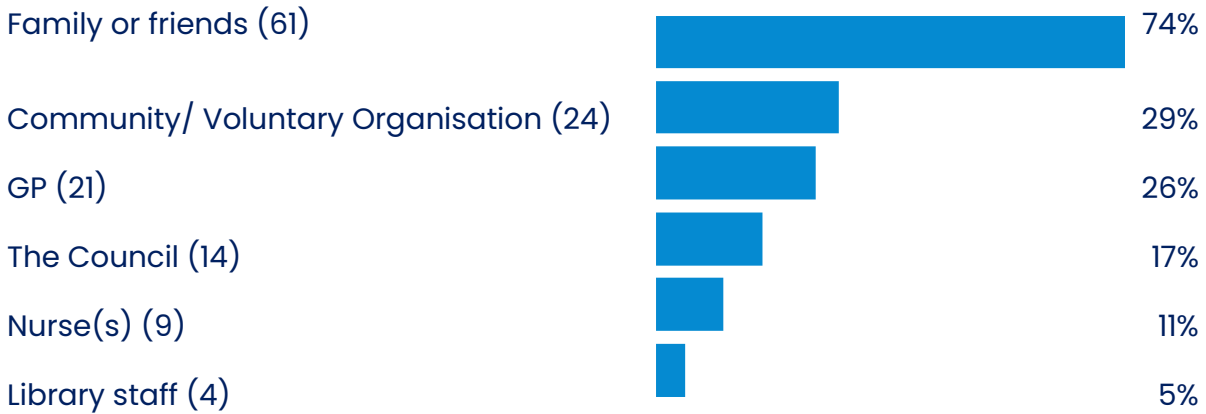


Q10. If you have answered Yes to Q9, please tell us what support this is and from where?

If you have answered No or you feel you need support, tell us what you need?

- Moral support from a partner
- I am an unpaid carer to my older relative
- Family members

Q11. Thinking about if you needed help or advice this winter who would you ask (Tick all those that apply)



Q12. Anywhere else you would go to?

- Walsall Society for the Blind and Healthwatch
- Citizens Advice Bureau was mentioned 9 times in total
- Friends
- Check website or Google
- Foodbank

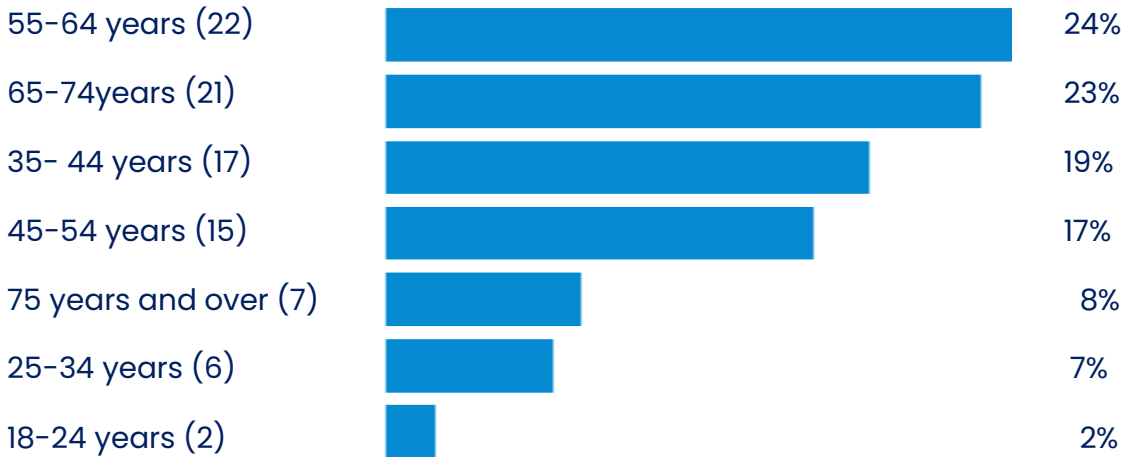
Q13. Would an online directory help?



Demographics

Below are the results of the demographics which have been put into response descending weighting order.

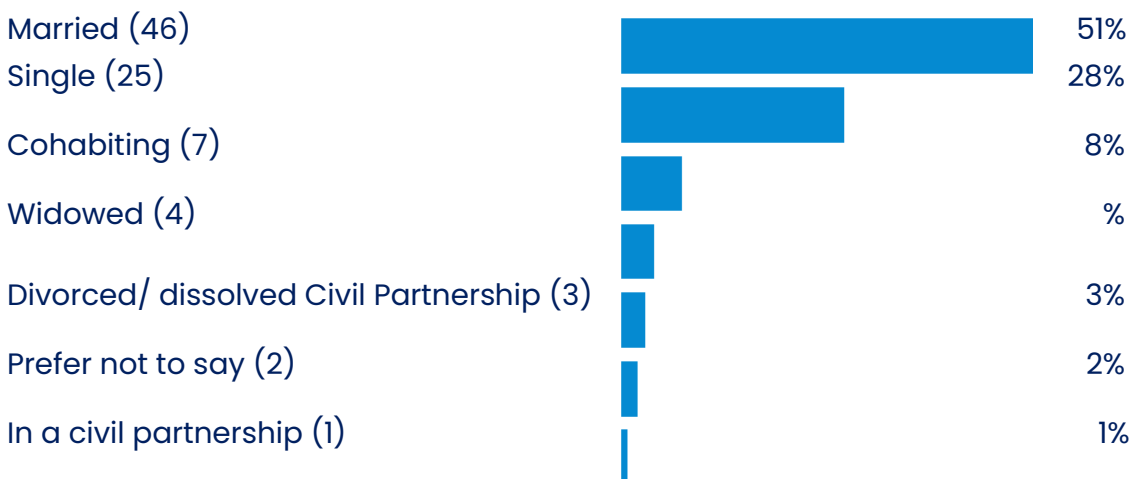
Q. What is your age group



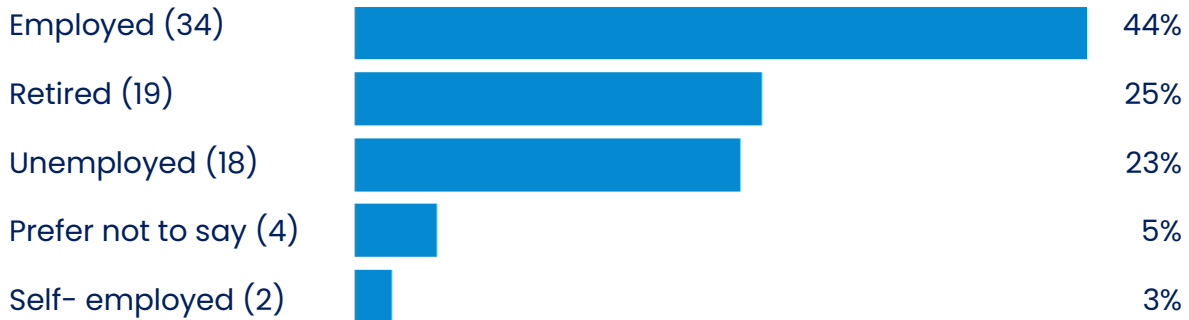
Q. What gender/ sex are you?



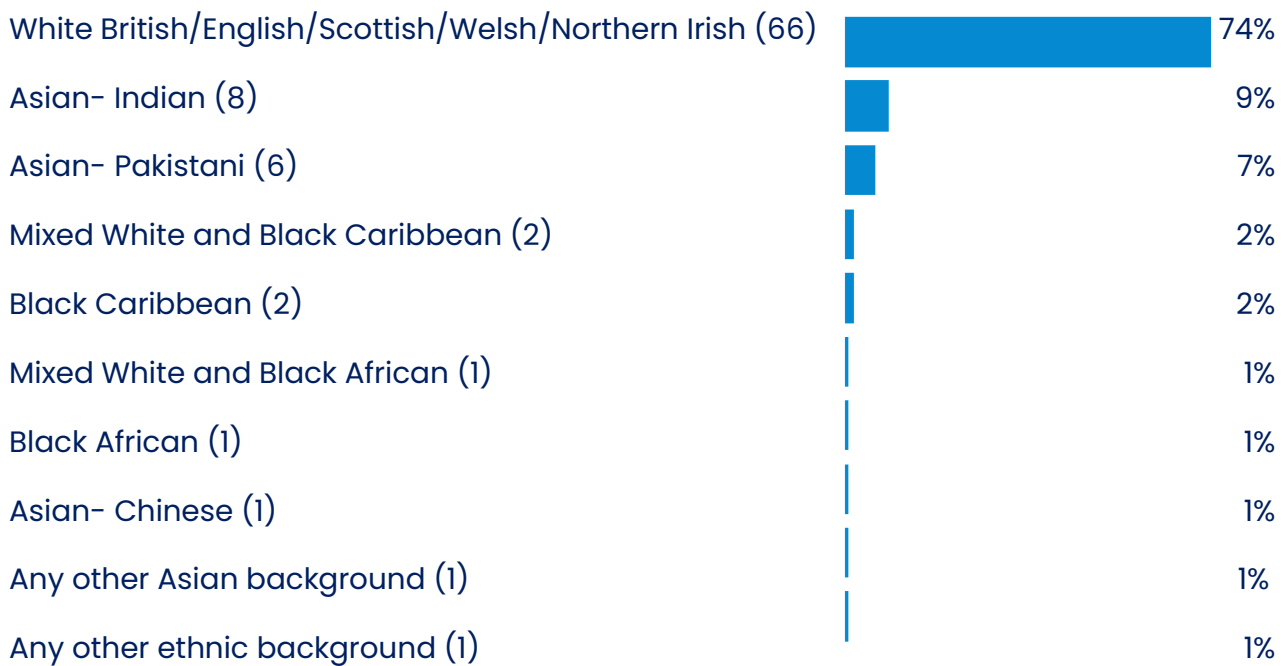
Q. What is your marital status or civil partnership status?



Q. Are you...?



Q. What is your ethnicity?



Q. Do you care for...?



Q. Do you consider yourself to have a disability?**Q. Do you have a long-term condition?****References**

Local Authority Health Profile 2019

<https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/static-reports/health-profiles/2019/e08000030.html?area-name=walsall#:~:text=Walsall%20is%20one%20of%20the,lower%20than%20the%20England%20average.>

Useful contact guide

We checked to see what was available for guidance, information, advice and support locally and nationally. We sited the following:

- Government website: <https://www.gov.uk/cost-of-living>
- Walsall Council help with cost-of-living website: <https://go.walsall.gov.uk/benefits/help-with-bills-and-debt>
- Walsall Councils 'Walsall Community Living Directory' website: <https://www.wcld.co.uk/kb5/walsall/asch/home.page>
- Age UK website: <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/money-legal/cost-of-living/>

- Citizen Advice Service website: <https://citizensadvicesandwell-walsall.org/>
- Walsall Rethink mental health support website: <https://www.rethink.org/help-in-your-area/services/community-support/walsall-sanctuary-hub/>
- Your own GP for health matters and access to Social Prescribing: <https://walsallpcn.net/services/social-prescribing-service/>
- Extra GP appointments: 01922 501999

Healthwatch Walsall

How to contact us

Offices at: Blakenall Village Centre,
79 Thames Road
Blakenall
Walsall
WS3 1LZ

Tel: 0800 470 1660

Email: info@healthwatchwalsall.co.uk

Website: www.healthwatchwalsall.co.uk

Social Media platforms

Facebook: @HealthwatchWSL

Twitter: @HWWalsall

Instagram: healthwatchwsl

YouTube, Healthwatch Walsall 2020: @HealthwatchWalsall

Snapchat: healthwatchwals