Millions suffer plunge in living standards as cost of living surges in UK

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Millions of people in Britain are cutting back on meals and being forced to switch off the heating due to soaring prices.

A survey of 2,000 people published this week by the *Which?* consumer rights and advice organisation revealed that one in seven people 15 percent are skipping meals as prices rise. This is a substantial increase from the one in eight (12 percent) skipping meals recorded just three months ago.

As well as people skipping meals, almost 10 percent prioritised meals for other family members above themselves.

UK household energy bills began to shoot up at the end of 2021, even before the war in Ukraine forced them to record levels. According to House of Commons research published in January, "Average bills were £760 in 2021 compared to £450 in 2020, a 36% real increase."

Energy bills have continued to rise. Despite a unit of electricity currently being capped for households at 34p and unit of gas for 10.3p, the average annual bill for a home is around £2,500 a year. This is just an average and for those with extra energy requirement, it can be much larger.

Last month energy regulator, Ofgem, announced that its energy cap—the amount utility suppliers can charge for average dual fuel—is to fall for three months from April 1 to £3,280, from its current £4,279.

The government's energy discount scheme is due to be slashed at that point, meaning that the actual price paid by an average household will still rise by 20 percent from £2,100 a year in April to £3,000. But even if the government, as mooted, continues some support, energy prices will remain huge at around £2,500 for all but the most vulnerable—with nearly 7 million (6.7 million) people struggling to afford them. Were the government to pull its discount scheme entirely, the numbers struggling to pay bills from April would surge to 8.4 million.

Which? found that heating costs are intolerable. More than seven in ten people (72 percent) are putting their heating on less, almost four in ten (39 percent) are using less hot water and a fifth of people (19 percent) have cooked fewer meals. An 85-year-old man told *Which?*: "The house is cold due to the cost of heating, so I am continually wearing layer upon layer of clothes. Saving money on heating allows more money for food."

Which? also found an estimated 2.3 million households missed or defaulted on a vital payment such as their mortgage, rent, credit card, or bill payment in the last month.

There is no evidence of any respite in the continual decline in living standards, with the government's CPI inflation measure still in double digits at 10.1 percent and the more accurate RPI rate even higher at 13.4 percent.

A survey conducted by the Office for National Statistics from February 8 to 19 found that 92 percent of adults in Britain reported an increase in their cost of living in January-February 2023, from the situation a year ago. Even compared with one month previous, 67 percent of respondents reported a cost of living increase. Giving reasons for the rise in their cost of living, 95 percent said it was due to price of food shopping; 79 percent their gas or electricity bills; and for 45 percent the price of fuel.

According to *Which?*, nearly two-thirds of people (59 percent), or 16.5 million households, have made at least one financial adjustment in the last month. These include cutting back on essential items, dipping into savings, or selling possessions to cover essential

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spending.

Shoppers are hit with a higher rate of inflation at supermarkets (15.9 precent) in January. However, the price of value items on the shelves supermarkets' most basic ranges is much higher still, at 21.6 percent. Which? Found, "Among the most alarming items soaring in price include muesli, which went from £1.20 to £2.25 at Sainsbury's (up 87.5%), tins of sliced carrots went from 20p to 33p (up 63%) at Tesco, and pork sausages went from 80p to £1.27 (up 58.2%) at Asda."

The Barnardo's charity published a report this week which found that 30 percent of people were worried about losing their homes. Almost half (49 percent) were struggling to keep their home warm for their children. The survey found that 16 percent of parents said that during the winter months, their children have had to share a bed with them, their partner or a sibling, due to the household not being able to afford to replace bedding. Almost a quarter of the 1,000 adults surveyed found it difficult to put food on the table for their families.

Millions of people were horrified at the death in December 2020 of two-year-old Awaab Ishak as the result of "prolonged exposure" to mould spores in his family's rented flat. Awaab was initially hospitalised with flu-like symptoms and difficulty breathing. He was readmitted to urgent care two days after being discharged, suffering respiratory failure, and died of cardiac arrest.

Despite widespread public anger over the death, well over a million children continue to live in cold, damp or mouldy homes. A study issued last month by Citizens Advice found that 1.6 million children in England live in such accommodation in rented homes in the private sector. Thirty percent of renters cannot heat their home to a comfortable temperature, increasing to 45 percent of disabled tenants. The survey of 2,000 renters in the private sector, taken in January, found 2.7 million households had poor living conditions, compounded by high energy bills and a lack of insulation.

Foodbank use is normal for millions of people after more than a decade of austerity in which wages have fallen far behind inflation. Overall grocery price inflation has reached 17.1 percent, adding a crippling £811 to households annual bills.

Britain's largest food bank network, The Trussell Trust, now operates more than 1,300 of them and distributed 1.3 million emergency food parcels between April and September last year alone. This was an increase of a third over the same period in 2021 and over 50 percent up on the number of parcels given out in the same period prior to the pandemic.

The Independent Food Aid Network reported last month that almost 90 percent of food banks surveyed saw increased demand in December 2022 and January 2023.

Research commissioned by Quaker Oats cereal company and carried out by One Poll found that 19 percent of 2,000 UK adults had "benefitted from the use of a foodbank or free food at donation points to feed themselves and their family". Many people are taking other desperate measures to get their hands on food with the survey finding that 15 percent had asked friends or family for food and 19 percent of people surveyed had taken second jobs to try to keep afloat. Nearly a third of parents (31 percent) had skipped breakfast to ensure their children got a meal.

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