

Reducing harm from cold weather

Local government's new public health role



Public Health has become the responsibility of local government. This briefing for councillors and officers explains the challenges facing councils and the opportunities they have to help to reduce harm to health from cold weather through effective, year round cold weather planning.

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Introduction

The effects of cold weather on the health

Although winter weather and snow can be fun for some, these weather conditions are also associated with an increase in illness and injuries. Cold weather increases the risk of heart attacks, strokes, lung illnesses, flu and other diseases. People slip and fall in the snow or ice, sometimes suffering serious injuries. Some groups, such as older people, very young children, and people with serious medical conditions are particularly vulnerable to the effects of cold weather.

In 2011/12 there were 22,960 more deaths in England between the months of December 2011 to March 2012 than were observed during the non-winter months. Excess deaths are not just deaths of those who would have died anyway in the next few weeks or months due to illness or old age. There is strong evidence that some of these winter deaths are indeed 'extra' and are related to cold temperatures and living in cold homes as well as infectious diseases such as influenza. In the recent past, the rate of winter deaths in England was twice the rate observed in some northern European countries, such as Finland.

Although there are several factors contributing to winter illness and death, in many cases simple preventative action could avoid many of the deaths, illnesses and injuries associated with the cold. Many of these measures need to be planned and undertaken in advance of cold weather.

Why plan for cold weather?

The Cold Weather Plan for England (CWP) aims to prevent avoidable harm to health, by alerting people to the negative health effects of cold weather, and enabling them to prepare and respond appropriately. The CWP also aims to reduce pressure on the health and social care system during winter through improved anticipatory actions with vulnerable people.

The plan sets out a series of actions to be taken by local authorities, the NHS, social care and other agencies throughout the year, to prepare for and respond to winter, so as to protect the vulnerable. It also encourages local communities to support the most vulnerable in their area, such as checking on them during severe weather and offering other support.

It is clear that whilst actions taken by health and social care sector during cold weather may relieve part of the health burden, the CWP is only part of a wider response required to tackle excess winter deaths (EWDs) and there is a strong argument for a multi-agency approach to reducing the wider determinants of winter deaths and disease such as socioeconomic inequalities, fuel poverty and housing energy efficiency.

This is not something that can be tackled in the winter alone and requires a long-term strategic approach by health and wellbeing boards, directors of public health and commissioners to assess needs and to commission, plan and implement interventions.

The Public Health Outcomes Framework (PHOF) sets out desired outcomes and indicators to help local authorities and their partners understand how well public health is being improved and protected. There are two indicators within the framework that are directly related to this plan: fuel poverty

and EWDs. However, action to reduce the harm from cold can be linked to many more outcome framework indicators connected to the wider determinants of health, such as poverty, educational achievement and social connectedness.

Figure 1: PHOF indicators linked to action to reduce harm from cold weather

Outcome 1) Increased healthy life expectancy			
Outcome 2) Reduced differences in life expectancy and healthy life expectancy between communities			
1. Improving the wider determinants of health 1.1 Children in poverty 1.2 pupil absence 1.9 Sickness absence rate 1.17 Fuel poverty 1.18 Social isolation	2. Health improvement 2.1 Diet 2.23 Self reported well-being 2.24 Falls/injuries in over 65's	3. Health Protection 3.3 Population vaccination coverage 3.6 Public Sector Organisations with Sustainable Development Managements Plans 3.7 Public health incident plans	4. Reducing Premature Mortality 4.3 Preventable Mortality 4.4 <75 Cardiovascular mortality 4.7 <75 Respiratory mortality 4.8 Mortality from communicable disease 4.11 Emergency readmissions 4.13 Health-related quality of life for older people 4.14 Hip fractures in older people 4.15 Excess winter deaths

Local government's new role

Councils have had a long-standing role in reducing harm from cold weather, particularly through the provision of social care to vulnerable individuals, housing assessment and provision, and road gritting.

However, upper tier and unitary authorities have also become responsible for population health outcomes, under the terms of the Health and Social Care Act 2012. They have a duty to ensure that plans are in place to protect the health of their populations including preparation for cold weather, snow and ice. This is backed by a ring-fenced public health grant and a specialist public health team, led by the director of public health and supported by Public Health England.

Chief executives of local authorities and councillors, especially those with portfolio responsibility for health, have important strategic overview and scrutiny functions, as well as community engagement and decision-making roles.

Each top tier and unitary authority also has a health and wellbeing board which will have strategic influence over commissioning decisions across health, social care and public health.

Co-ordinated multi-agency long term planning and commissioning for cold weather is essential to:

- protect people and infrastructure from the effects of cold weather and thus reduce excess winter illness and death and the burden on health and social care;
- support improved building design and increased energy efficiency which can improve and protect health, reduce carbon emissions, and generate jobs in the local community;
- tackle fuel poverty; including energy efficiency interventions in the home, minimising energy costs, and maximising household income.

Core planning elements

Strategic planning and commissioning:

- Co-ordinated and multiagency planning and commissioning throughout the year, to protect people and infrastructure

Alert system (advance warning and advice):

- a Cold Weather Alert system, which operates from 1 Nov – 31 March based on Met Office forecasts and triggers levels of response from the NHS, local government and the public health system and communicate risks to the public (illustrative actions for local authorities in figure 2)

Preparedness and action:

- planning and response to risks of cold weather, snow and ice including action to reduce exposure to low indoor temperatures, care for vulnerable groups, preparedness of the health and social care system and business continuity

Communicating with the public:

- a local cold weather health information plan including public health messages and resources such as the Keep Warm, Keep Well booklet

Working with service providers:

- supporting provider organisations and their staff to reduce cold-related harm, and raising awareness of toolkits, best practice and referral mechanisms for winter warmth initiatives

Engaging the community:

- engaging community and voluntary sector organisations, which may offer significant assistance in identifying and supporting particularly vulnerable or marginalised individuals

Monitoring/evaluation:

- monitoring of health impact and evaluation of response

Figure 2: Action Table: Commissioners of health and social care (all settings) and local authorities

Level 0	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
<p>Long-term planning All Year</p> <p>Work with partner agencies to ensure that Cold Weather Planning features within wider winter resilience planning.</p> <p>Work with partners to ensure a strategic approach to the reduction of EWDs and fuel poverty is taken across the local health and social care economy</p> <p>Work with partner agencies to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • develop a shared understanding of EWDs and what partners can do to reduce them. • identify those most at risk from seasonal variations • improve winter resilience of those at risk 	<p>Winter preparedness and action 1 November – 31 March</p> <p>Communicate public health media messages (see Executive summary).</p> <p>Consider the revisions to the 2013 CWP and ensure that the changes are understood across the system. Work with partner agencies to co-ordinate locally appropriate cold weather plans.</p> <p>Ensure key partners, including all managers of care, residential and nursing homes are aware of the alert system and can access advice.</p> <p>Review the distribution of the alerts across the system and ensure staff are aware of winter plans and advice</p>	<p>Severe winter weather is forecast - Alert and readiness Mean temperatures of 2°C and/or widespread ice and heavy snow is predicted with 60% confidence</p> <p>Continue to communicate public health messages</p> <p>Communicate alerts to staff and make sure that they can take appropriate actions</p> <p>Ensure partners, including all managers of care, residential & nursing homes are aware of the alerts and can access advice.</p> <p>Support local community organisations to activate community emergency plans</p> <p>Activate business continuity arrangements and emergency plans as required</p>	<p>Severe weather action Mean temperatures of 2°C and/or widespread ice and heavy snow</p> <p>Continue to communicate public health messages</p> <p>Communicate alerts to staff and make sure that winter plans are in operation</p> <p>Ensure key partners are undertaking action in response to alerts</p> <p>Support local community organisations to mobilise community emergency plans</p> <p>Ensure continuity arrangements are working with provider organisations</p>	<p>Major Incident – Emergency response</p> <p>Central Government will declare a Level 4 alert in the event of severe or prolonged cold weather affecting sectors other than health.</p> <p>Response likely to involve:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • develop a shared understanding of EWDs and what partners can do to reduce them. • National Government Departments • Executive Agencies • Public Sector, including health sector • Voluntary Sector

Level 0	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
<p>• ensure a local, joined-up Programme is in place to support improved housing, heating and insulation, including uptake of energy efficient, low carbon solutions</p> <p>• achieve a reduction in carbon emissions and assess the implications of climate change</p> <p>Consider how your winter plans can help to reduce health inequalities, target high risk groups and address the wider determinants of health</p> <p>Ensure that organisations and staff are prompted to signpost vulnerable clients onwards (eg for energy efficiency measures, benefits or related advice)</p> <p>Work with partners and staff on risk reduction awareness (e.g. flu vaccination for staff in Sept/Oct), information and education</p> <p>Engage with local CVS organisations for planning and implementation of all stages of the plan.</p>	<p>Ensure that local organisations and professionals are taking appropriate actions in light of the cold weather alerts in accordance with local and national CWP.</p> <p>Ensure that organisations and staff are prompted to signpost vulnerable clients onwards (eg for energy efficiency measures, benefits or related advice)</p> <p>Liaise with providers of emergency shelter for homeless people to agree plans for severe weather and ensure capacity to scale up provision.</p> <p>Support communities to help those at risk. Support the development of Community Emergency Plans</p> <p>Identify which local health, social care and voluntary sector organisations are most vulnerable to the effects of winter weather. Agree plans for winter surge in demand for services. Make sure emergency contacts are up to date.</p>	<p>Consider how to make best use of available capacity, for example by using community beds for at risk patients who do not need an acute bed and enabling access to step- down care and reablement</p> <p>Work with partner agencies (eg transport) to ensure road / pavement gritting preparations are in place to allow access to critical services and pedestrian hotspots.</p>	<p>Work with partner agencies (eg transport) to ensure road / pavement gritting arrangements are in effect to allow access to critical services and pedestrian hotspots</p>	<p>All level 3 responsibilities must be maintained during a level 4 incident</p> <p>Implementation of national emergency response arrangements by central Government</p>

Is there a role for council scrutiny?

Some councils have carried out scrutiny reviews focussing on preparedness for winter pressures on health services (such as accident and emergency services) and road gritting during freezing conditions. Whilst these are important topics, falling levels of family incomes, rising levels of fuel poverty and isolation of older people and means that the effects of cold weather can be hidden.

Council scrutiny can play an important role bringing together public agencies and civil society organisations to establish the extent to which these issues are prevalent in local areas and to ask questions about planning for better outcomes from services.

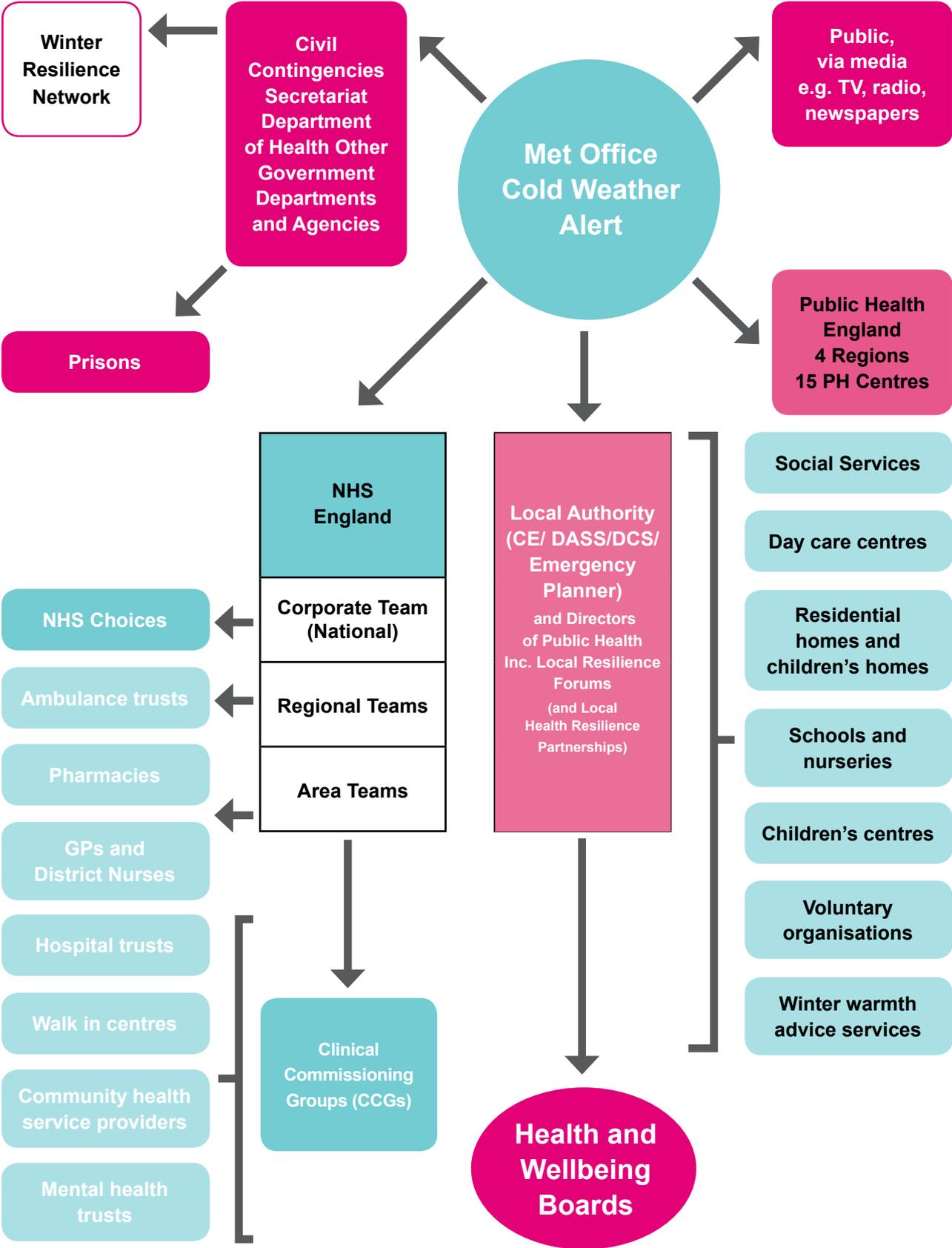


Five key messages for councils

In light of the guidance and good practice recommendations made in the Cold Weather Plan 2013, there are five key messages for all areas:

1. All local authorities, NHS commissioners and their partner organisations should consider the Cold Weather Plan 2013 and satisfy themselves that the suggested actions and the Cold Weather Alert service are understood across their locality. Local cold weather and winter plans should be reviewed in light of this plan.
2. NHS and local authority commissioners should review or audit the distribution of the Cold Weather Alerts across the local health and social care systems to satisfy themselves that the alerts reach those that need to take appropriate actions, immediately after issue. Figure 3 is an illustrative diagram showing a cascade of a Cold Weather Alert message. Local areas need to adapt these to their particular situations and ensure themselves that the cascades are working appropriately.
3. Local authority commissioners should assure themselves that organisations and key stakeholders are taking appropriate actions in light of the Cold Weather Alert messages. The actions identified in figure 2 are based on the best evidence and practice available, but are illustrative. It is for local areas to amend and adapt this guidance and to clarify procedures for staff and organisations in a way which is appropriate for the local situation. As ever, it is for professionals to use their judgement in any individual situation to ensure that they are doing the best they can for their patient or client.
4. The community and voluntary sector can help reduce vulnerability and to support the planning and response to cold weather, particularly through identifying and engaging vulnerable people. NHS and local authority commissioners and providers, should take opportunities for closer partnership working with these groups.
5. Reducing excess winter illness and death is not something that can be tackled in the winter alone. It requires a long-term strategic approach by health and wellbeing boards, directors of public health and commissioners to assess needs and the commission, plan and implement interventions. Action to reduce cold-related harm should be considered core business by health and wellbeing boards and included in Joint Strategic Needs Assessments (JSNAs) and Joint Health \ and Wellbeing Strategies (JHWSs).

Figure 3: Typical cascade of cold weather alerts



Key questions to ask

- What are our current levels of excess winter deaths and/or fuel poverty and how do they compare with similar local authorities/ England average? Are there particular populations/areas within your locality where there are high levels of excess winter deaths and/or fuel poverty and what is being done to support them?
- Does the JSNA and JHWS include excess winter deaths and/or fuel poverty? Are excess winter deaths and/or fuel poverty considered commissioning priorities?
- Is there a local, multiagency cold weather plan in place and has it been reviewed recently in light of the changes to the health and social care system? Are all those who need to receive cold weather alerts receiving them and do they know what to do in response?
- Are services focused on prevention and long term planning and interventions, rather than only focussing on reactive action once a cold snap arrives?
- What measures are in place to ensure the most vulnerable are identified and targeted for interventions? Have you thought about how to engage vulnerable groups who may not be known to statutory services?
- Is there an explicit approach to data sharing between agencies? Does this enable vulnerable people in cold housing to be able to access support, whilst respecting information governance requirements?
- Are messages about the impact of cold weather and cold homes simple and inclusive? This is likely to increase the uptake of interventions; especially with those who do not identify themselves as being vulnerable to cold.
- Is there a good structure in place to achieve oversight, monitoring and co-ordination of services to reduce the impact of cold weather, across the health, social care and public health systems?
- Have you defined what success looks like in your local area? Are there arrangements in place to provide regular reports about progress? Is this being fed back to the health and wellbeing board?

Tools and resources

The Cold Weather Plan builds on existing programmes and public health measures to protect individuals and communities over the winter period.

The key elements include:

- **Annual seasonal influenza (flu) vaccination programme** <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/public-health-england/series/annual-flu-programme>
This aims to protect people from the harmful effects of flu and is offered, free of charge, to certain at-risk groups. The national NHS staff seasonal flu vaccination campaign website can be found at: <http://www.nhsemployers.org/HealthyWorkplaces/StaffFluVaccination/Pages/seasonal-flu-campaign.aspx> and @NHSFlufighter
- **Pneumococcal vaccination programme** which aims to protect those people most at risk from pneumococcal disease which can cause meningitis, septicaemia and pneumonia.
- **Stop norovirus spreading this winter – leaflet.** This downloadable poster for health professionals contains information about norovirus, how it's transmitted and advice how to prevent spreading the disease. http://www.hpa.org.uk/webw/HPAweb&HPAwebStandard/HPAweb_C/1317140036483
- **Keep Warm Keep Well** This provides advice on staying warm over the winter and checking on neighbours and relatives who may be vulnerable during cold weather, in order to reduce illness and deaths. Materials will continue to be available online to help

local organisations communicate with the public. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keep-warm-keep-well-leaflet> gives advice on staying healthy in cold weather

- **NHS Choices** (www.nhs.uk/winterhealth). The main NHS website provides reliable advice and guidance throughout the year on how to keep fit and well. It includes information on topics such as: keeping warm; the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning; the importance of eating well; and the symptoms of flu. The site also offers symptom checkers and details of all local health services.
- **NHS winter pressures reporting and winter resilience programmes.** These are plans made locally and nationally over the winter to help the NHS and local agencies to manage the demands placed on essential services so they can continue to operate smoothly through severe winter weather.
NHS England will, each week, post on their website information for service professionals and users about the current volume of activity in response to the winter pressures, including regular data on A&E and ambulance activity. <http://www.england.nhs.uk/2013/11/15/winter-hlth-chk/>
- **Winter Health Watch** – this is PHE's webpage for information on winter health surveillance including syndromic, influenza, norovirus and mortality surveillance reports <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/public-health-england/series/winter-health-watch>

- **Excess Seasonal Deaths Toolkit** – this was produced by the Department of Health to help local communities take a systematic approach to reduce the risk of seasonal excess deaths in older people. <http://lpbcc.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/ref-11-seasonal-access-deaths.pdf>
 - **Excess Winter Deaths Atlas for England** - information about excess winter deaths produced by the Chief Knowledge Officer directorate at PHE, currently at: www.wmpho.org.uk/excesswinterdeathsinEnglandatlas/, pending migration to PHE website
 - **Warm Homes, Healthy People fund:** keeping people warm in winter – this is was an initiative where funds were made available for winter 2011-12 and winter 2012-13 to support local authorities and their partners in reducing death and morbidity in England due to cold housing in the coming winter. Information about individual schemes and examples of good practice are available in the two evaluation reports and on the LGA knowledge hub. <http://tinyurl.com/Cold-Weather-Publications>
<https://knowledgehub.local.gov.uk/web/warmhomeshealthypeoplesharinggoodpractice/welcome/>
 - **Get Ready for Winter Campaign** – this is an annual web-based campaign hosted by the Met Office and is a portal for government departments and their partners. The pages offer advice and links to a range of organisations to help individuals, families and communities prepare for winter. <http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/learning/get-ready-for-winter>
 - NEA, as a member of the Age Action Alliance and in conjunction with DECC and British Gas, is offering free **energy awareness sessions** across England, following successful pilot workshops aimed at training older people and practitioners working with them to become advocates for home energy efficiency. Sessions are designed to promote warm and healthy homes messages and include information on:
 - How to spot the signs of a cold home and the impact of cold homes for older people
 - How to prepare for colder weather
 - Extra help available from energy companies for older householders
 - Heating and insulation schemes including Green Deal and the Energy Company Obligation; and more.
 - For full details and more information on how to book a session, visit the NEA website <http://www.nea.org.uk/ageactionalliance>
- The **Equinox** leaflets (<http://www.equinoxcare.org.uk/climate-change>) developed by service users with help from medical staff, particularly:
- Alcohol and extreme cold weather
 - Drugs and extreme cold weather
 - Mental ill health and extreme cold weather

Examples of local authority schemes

Examples of the innovative work being done by councils across the country to help the vulnerable this winter.

Surrey County Council

Surrey County Council has enlisted 50 farmers with ploughs to support its existing highways teams and they have joined forces with the Salvation Army and the South East 4x4 club, whose 90 volunteers will use their vehicles to help the council reach vulnerable people in critical need of social care and health visits during the bad weather.

<http://www.surreycc.gov.uk/people-and-community/emergency-planning-and-community-safety/preparing-for-winter/how-our-highways-team-is-preparing-for-winter>

Chichester District Council

Vulnerable residents in Arun and Chichester can request a free home energy visit where an expert will show them how to use heating controls effectively and share tips on how to keep warm and save energy in their homes.

<http://www.chichester.gov.uk/index.cfm?articleid=21072>

Merton Council

London Borough of Merton Council has been installing free temperature sensors across many homes of their existing MASCOT Telecare customers. The sensors can detect if the temperature in a home drops below 16C (60F) which will then raise an alert on the system at a 24-hour monitoring centre, allowing operators to take the necessary action.

<http://www.merton.gov.uk/health-social-care/health/mascot.htm>

Blackburn with Darwen Council

Blackburn with Darwen Council 'Decent and Safe Homes' service provides advice on how to keep homes warm while keeping energy bills down as well as offering a free handyman service for residents aged over 60 or those getting disability living allowance. Winter squad is a voluntary led project supported by the Council under the "Your Call" campaign. Local groups of volunteers each form a winter squad in order to look after the more vulnerable in their local area and to help keep shared public areas free of ice and snow during an extended cold snap.

<http://www.blackburn.gov.uk/Pages/Winter-squad.aspx>

Lewisham Council

London Borough of Lewisham Council has a number of initiatives in place including its 'Help at Home' service to meet the acute and immediate needs of 400 of the borough's most vulnerable residents this winter. Older people, social care and health professionals and other concerned individuals will be able to refer someone directly into the service to access critical care services. The council is also working in partnership with Age UK and Lewisham Pensioners Forum on the 'End Loneliness' campaign to identify isolated older people in the community and introduce them to the support networks available.

<http://www.lewisham.gov.uk/getinvolved/environment/energyefficiency/energy-efficiency-projects/Pages/Getting-ready-for-winter.aspx>

Stockton-on-Tees Council

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council has published a leaflet sent to thousands of residents, as part of its regular magazine, about winter and council services, including how to clear pavements, drive in snow and the locations of its 300 grit bins. It's geared up to issue daily online and media bulletins about gritting works, school closures, weather forecasts and where to get salt, and will also be putting out regular tweets and Facebook updates.

<http://www.stockton.gov.uk/communitysafety/emergencyadvice/coldweatheradvice/>

There are a series of case studies from local authority schemes documented in the evaluation reports of the Warm Homes Healthy People Fund 2012-13 and 2012-13.





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