

Warm Banks – The Guardian Newspaper Article

Libraries and museums to be 'warm havens' for people struggling with energy bills
Ministers asked for funding to cope with a rise in the number of visitors seeking shelter this winter

Britain's libraries and museums are preparing to act as warm havens for people unable to afford to heat their homes in the winter months.

Ministers are being called on to provide urgent new funding so public buildings can cope with a surge in visitors during the coldest months.

The buildings will be part of a network across the country which will provide warm shelter to help reduce excess winter deaths linked to freezing conditions.

The call for support to ensure key public buildings can keep their doors open comes as organisations across the country are being confronted with vast increases in energy bills. One care homes group told the *Observer* that its annual energy bills are rising from £1.5m a year to £7.7m.

Alistair Brown, policy manager at the Museums Association, representing the museum sector, said: "Museums will be relied upon to respond to this crisis, but many will be struggling to heat their own spaces.

"People are beginning to understand the scale of the crisis and we don't want to reduce the hours that museums are open."

Catalyst Science Discovery Centre and Museum in Widnes, Cheshire, said last week that the quote for renewing its annual gas contract had risen from £9,700 to £54,362.

Isobel Hunter, chief executive of Libraries Connected, which represents the public library sector, said: "Central government should provide councils with additional funding this winter to meet rising energy costs, which would help ensure libraries stay open as vital warm refuges for their communities."

Paul Drumm, of GLL, a charitable social enterprise that operates libraries in Greenwich in south-east London, said the borough's libraries had already spent £28,000 on new seats and other furniture to prepare for the increase in visitors during the winter months.

He said: "We are acutely aware of the huge impact that the energy crisis will have on many living within the local community. We will be promoting our libraries as designated 'warm spaces' for those who can't afford to heat their homes."

The libraries and museums will be part of a national network of warm hubs provided by local councils, community groups and charities. South Cambridgeshire district council issued a tender earlier this month for a contract to deliver "a series of warm hubs from community buildings" to support those at risk from the cold.

Meanwhile Care England, which represents 4,500 care services, said operators were facing up to 500% increases in energy costs, with some considering reducing the number of elderly people they take from hospital wards or shutting their care homes in order to survive.

“Care services across the country will have to close this winter unless the government takes immediate action. Some providers just won’t be able to go on – they will collapse,” said Professor Martin Green, chief executive of Care England. “There is no cap on energy costs for care homes and elderly care home residents do not get any rebate from the government.”

Analysis by the consultancy BoxPower shows that care homes were paying energy costs equivalent to £700 per bed every year. But this month homes are being quoted the equivalent of £4,027 per bed for those wishing to purchase energy from October. This is an increase of around 437% in energy cost per bed in a 12-month period.

Brunelcare, which provides sheltered housing to 1,400 people and runs seven care homes in Bristol and Somerset, was forced this month to sign a new annual energy contract worth £7.7m because prices were rising by £100,000 a day. The charity was paying around £1.5m a year until last year.

“We’re in an absolutely impossible situation,” said Oona Goldsworthy, the chief executive of Brunelcare. “I’ve had one of the worst weeks ever and I’ve been through Covid so I know what hard times are like. We are being completely abandoned again.”

A government spokesperson said it had made £3.7bn of additional funding available to local authorities, which they can spend on adult social care. “No national government can control the global factors pushing up the price of energy, but we will continue to support businesses, including care homes, in navigating the months ahead,” a spokesperson said.

Headteachers say they are faced with a “double whammy” of spiralling energy bills and an increased 5% pay rise for teachers. An executive headteacher in a multi-academy trust, who oversees a number of inner city secondary schools and asked not to be named, said: “I’m already at the bare bones of support staff. We won’t replace any staff as they leave.” His schools are already rolling two classes of children together to cover temporary staff gaps.

Dan Morrow, chief executive of the Dartmoor multi-academy trust in Devon, said it was now a “race to the bottom” for schools, and the effects on children “will be profound for generations”. His trust needs to find an extra £800,000 for utility bills this year, and £900,000 for pay increases.

This article was amended on 23 August 2022 to replace the main image. An earlier version was accompanied by a picture of Kingsthorpe Library in Northampton, which is closed pending the outcome of discussions about its future.

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