Dying in Poverty: Briefing for Local Government

Summary

- The last months, weeks and days of life should be a time to focus on what really matters: making memories with family and friends and living well for as long as one can. But too often financial pressures add further worry and strain to an already difficult time.
- Research published by Marie Curie in November 2026 highlights the significant scale of poverty at the end of life. The main findings were:
    - In 2025, **93,000 people died in poverty**, equating to **more than one in seven people** facing poverty at the end of life.
    - On average, over the past three years, one person has died in poverty every five minutes and fuel poverty every four minutes.
    - Poverty also affects some groups more than others, including working-age people and minoritised ethnic groups, and there are significant geographical variations in the proportion of people dying in poverty.
    - Working-age people are at a much greater risk of dying in poverty: Someone of working age is almost twice as likely to die in poverty (28%) than someone of pension age (15%). A working-age couple managing a terminal illness can receive over £500 a month less in benefits than a pension-age couple.
    - Energy costs can increase dramatically for someone living with a terminal illness. Over 141,000 people died in fuel poverty in 2025 alone, struggling to heat their homes or run vital medical equipment.
- Whilst much of the action needed to address poverty at the end of life sits at a UK Government level through changes to the social security system, local authorities also have powers to improve the financial situation of people dying in poverty.
- **31 councils across England have implemented a 100% council tax exemption policy to financially support terminally ill people in the last 12 months of life.**

Marie Curie is encouraging councils to:

1. Review their **council tax support schemes** to ensure that households including someone living with a terminal illness are adequately supported.
2. Ensure that this group are prioritised for other discretionary support schemes, including the **Crisis and Resilience Fund**.
3. Ensure their council provides sufficient information to people with a terminal illness to enable them to access benefits they are entitled to under the **Special Rules for End of Life.**

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The impact of terminal illness on financial security

Terminal illness can cause a significant reduction to a household's income, for example, if the person living with a terminal illness or another household member needs to reduce or stop working due to ill-health or caring responsibilities.

At the same time, it can also have significant impacts on expenditure, with costs like energy, transport and childcare often increasing dramatically. After a terminal diagnosis many people incur unavoidable additional costs from day-to-day needs. They may also need to find money for home adaptations or special medical equipment. People living with a terminal illness often have energy bills that are thousands of pounds higher than the average household, due to the extra heating and other utilities they may need to manage their symptoms.

Energy costs in particular are one of the biggest costs that can increase when someone is at the end of their life. Being unable to afford energy causes financial stress and the discomfort of living in a cold or dark home, but it can also directly affect health outcomes, including causing or worsening respiratory problems, mental health outcomes, and increasing the risk of heart attack.

The combination of loss of income and higher costs that often accompany a terminal illness increases the risk of poverty for people at the end of their life, even for families who were previously financially comfortable. **When the cost of living increases, the cost of dying does, too.**

Who dies in poverty?

Across every demographic breakdown – age, ethnicity, sex or geographic location – people in the last year of life are at higher risk of poverty than the people not in their last year of life.

One especially stark dividing line is age. A key reason for this is that financial support and benefits for working-age people are paid at a significantly lower rate than pension-age benefits like the State Pension. This means that people of working age are less protected in the event of being diagnosed with a terminal illness.

There are also alarming differences between other demographic groups. People from minoritised ethnic groups are more likely to die in poverty: 14% of white people died in poverty, compared to 36% of Black people, 28% of Asian people and 32% of people another ethnicity.

And there are stark differences between local authorities and regions, with people in some regions almost twice as likely to die in poverty as in others. 20% of people who die in London die in poverty, and the figure is 18% for those in Yorkshire and The Humber – the highest rates of any region. At the other end of the spectrum, 11% of people who died in the Southwest did so in poverty, the area with the lowest rate of deaths in poverty. We hold data for each local authority area – get in touch at local@mariecurie.org.uk for your local statistics.

Council Tax Exemptions

While most levers to address poverty at the end of life sit at a national Government level, there are actions that councils can take to improve the financial situation of people dying in poverty. Council Tax Support provides a reduction in someone's council tax bill depending on their

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income. Since 2013, local authorities in England have had the discretion to set their own rates of Council Tax Support for working-age people. Yet, most councils have reduced the support available, increasing the amount that low-income residents are required to contribute towards council tax. For low-income residents who are faced with a terminal diagnosis, this lack of local support could be what pushes them into financial hardship in their last 12 months of life.

This is why we are calling for all councils across England to review their Council Tax support scheme to better support and protect low-income households where someone is living with a terminal illness. As of November 2026, 31 councils have already implemented exemption policies, with many more actively considering how they can best support terminally ill people. There are a number of approaches councils are taking to implement these policies, each one demonstrating compassionate local governance and the possibility of practical and relatively low-cost policy change.

Policy into practice: Council Tax Exemptions for terminally ill residents

We are pleased that **31 Local Authorities across England** have amended their Discretionary Council Tax Policies to ensure terminally ill residents receive a full council tax exemption, with more committed to introduce a scheme in 2027.

Under these schemes, households qualify for the support if anyone in the household is likely to die in the next 12 months, upon receipt of an SR1 form signed by a clinician. The Council Tax Support will then cover the full council tax for the property.

Some councils are supporting all households with a terminal illness diagnosis, whereas others are targeting their support at households on a low income.

In July 2025, Manchester City Council introduced a change to their Discretionary Council Tax Policy which explicitly includes support for people who have been diagnosed with a terminal illness. On receipt of an SR1 form, the Council will make up the difference of any shortfall in CTS so that in any situation where a household member qualifies, the household will have nothing to pay.

Key features

- **Identification and eligibility:** most councils have chosen to use the SR1 form to inform their approach, which is a form that gives terminally ill people a fast track to certain benefits under the DWP's Special Rules for End of Life. The form must be signed by a clinician, confirming that a person is likely to die within the next 12 months.
- **Short-term support, long-lasting impact:** it should also be noted that supporting this cohort would represent a time limited cost for the period that somebody is expected to be in their final months of life, rather than an ongoing, permanent cost. Yet, enhanced financial security in the final 12 months of life has a lasting impact on patients and families.
- **Estimated benefit:** drawing on the number of people claiming Attendance Allowance and Personal Independence Payments under the Special Rules for End of Life, we have collated estimates by local authority area of the number of people that could benefit from this change. You can contact us at local@mariecurie.org.uk to request these figures.

"The last thing you need to worry about is money and bills"

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Manchester City Council was the first to introduce an exemption policy for terminally ill people in June 2025. Council Leader Cllr Bev Craig, said they wanted to do "all we can to ease the burden at the end of someone's life".

"The moment you or your family member gets the devastating news of terminal illness is heart-breaking. The last thing you need to worry about is money and bills, but we know for too many people it takes up too much time and stress.

"When someone is facing terminal illness, everything changes – emotionally, practically and financially"

North Lincolnshire Council introduced an exemption policy for terminally ill people in April 2026. Cabinet Member Cllr Richard Hannigan said: "This will make a real difference to people at the most difficult point in their lives. We know that when someone is facing terminal illness, everything changes – emotionally, practically and financially.

"By removing council tax at that moment, we're giving people space to focus on their care, their family and the time that matters most, without that added pressure."

Supporter Story: Audrey was forced to declare herself bankrupt when her husband Eddie was in the last year of his life

For many households where someone has a terminal illness, a council tax exemption could be the difference between security and poverty at the end of life.

Audrey from Houghton-le-Spring knows first-hand the distress of this situation, as she declared herself bankrupt while caring for her terminally ill husband, Eddie.

> ***It would have been great to have been council tax exempt when Eddie was first diagnosed.***
>
> *It would have been one less bill to worry about. That money could have been spent on other bills like heating, lighting, food or equipment to make Eddie's daily living easier.*
>
> *You shouldn't have to worry about money or bills when you are dying. This support could go a long way to help with other unseen costs when you have a palliative diagnosis.*



Crisis and Resilience Fund and other discretionary support

Local authorities should also prioritise people living with a terminal illness for support through their Crisis and Resilience Fund schemes. The Crisis and Resilience Fund is a new, multi-year fund, which is designed to enable councils to provide a more stable, longer-term approach to supporting those most in need in their local area.

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The DWP has released guidance for local authorities on how to allocate and distribute the Crisis and Resilience Fund. Recognising that a diagnosis of a terminal illness is a trigger for financial hardship, the guidance makes several specific references to people with a terminal illness. Schemes should be designed in line with the guidance to prioritise and support the needs of people with a terminal illness and ensure that consideration is given to:

- Medical needs which may result in higher energy bills (such as for running medical equipment, storing medication or maintaining a safe living temperature within the home) and transport (such as to hospital or hospice appointments);
- Fast-tracking applications for Crisis Payments or Housing Payments, and/or referrals to Resilience Services; and
- Minimising the need for applicants to re-claim for support within a 12-month period.

For more information on the Crisis and Resilience Fund and terminally ill people, read our full briefing here.

Policy into practice: Crisis and Resilience Fund

An initial review of a number of councils' Crisis and Resilience Fund policies suggests that, despite DWP guidance, many are not clearly communicating that people with a terminal illness are a priority group for support. Even where councils prioritise this group in practice, terminally ill people may not know it.

However, Middlesbrough Council has built specific support for terminally ill residents directly into its Crisis and Resilience Fund. Under their crisis support strand, terminally ill residents, with an SR1 form as evidence, can receive a £400 support package, help with their council tax for the financial year, and school holiday activities for their children through their HAF programme. The scheme is also broad: residents in work can apply for crisis payments too, with thresholds set so that a single person earning up to £25,000 could qualify.

Middlesbrough's approach shows how councils can put the DWP guidance into practice. Rather than treating terminal illness as one factor among many, Middlesbrough has created a dedicated route that combines a cash payment, council tax relief and family support, with an SR1 form as proof. Other councils could adopt this model in their own CRF schemes, and this could also act as a stepping stone towards a permanent council tax exemption delivered through a council's Council Tax Support or discretionary relief powers.

Special Rules for the End of Life

The Special Rules for End of Life is an important mechanism within our social security system which allows terminally ill people to quickly access social security support through a streamlined process - critical when someone's time is limited. However, this mechanism is failing to support as many terminally ill people as it should.

Research shows that one in three people who die from a terminal illness (around 120,000 each year) in England and Wales are not claiming the benefits they are entitled to under the Special Rules. Take-up rates vary significantly by diagnosis, meaning people are not receiving

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equitable support at the end of life. The evidence suggests a lack of awareness of this route to financial support amongst people facing terminal diagnoses, as well as amongst those who might be able to point them towards it.

Local authorities have a significant role to play in supporting more people to claim this support at the end of life. Through services such as adult social care, housing and welfare support, local authorities are often in contact with terminally ill residents, making them well-placed to raise awareness and signpost terminally ill people to the financial support that they are entitled to. Links with local health systems also mean that local authorities can encourage healthcare professionals, such as GPs, to identify people on palliative care registers and complete SR1 forms that unlock this pathway. This is a **cost-free way for local governments to support people to claim vital financial support at the end of life**.

Policy recommendations for local authorities:

1. Review your Council Tax Support scheme and ensure that households on a low income that include someone living with a terminal illness are adequately supported.
2. Councils should ensure households that include someone living with a terminal illness are prioritised for the Crisis and Resilience Fund and able to get this support via a fast-tracked process, as suggested in the DWP's guidance.
3. Ensure your council provides sufficient information to people diagnosed with a terminal illness – and the professionals supporting them - to enable them to access the benefits they are entitled to under the Special Rules for End of Life.

Take further action

- You could put forward a council motion on council tax exemptions supported by us.
- You could take our report and your local data on deaths in poverty to your council, or ask a question to full council, to encourage council-wide action.
- You could ask your Executive Member for Finance how they plan to include provisions for terminally ill people in their Crisis and Resilience Fund scheme.
- You could arrange a meeting with our team to discuss options for financially supporting terminally ill residents in your local area.
- You could ensure the council website clearly signposts to the benefits people with a terminal illness are entitled to under the Special Rules for End of Life.

About Marie Curie

Marie Curie is the UK's leading end of life charity. We are here for anyone with an illness they're likely to die from, and those close to them. We bring 75 years of experience and leading research to the care we give at home, in our hospices and over the phone. And we push for a better end of life for all by campaigning and sharing research to change the system.

For more information or to arrange a meeting to discuss the contents of this briefing, please contact: **local@mariecurie.org.uk**

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