

‘Cost of living crisis’? No – this is a social emergency that will define who we are

Too many people remain outside the political conversation and vulnerable to the meanest kind of policies



Lexie lives in rural north Wales. She is disabled, and her husband recently lost his job in the building trade. The heating and hot water in their council house is oil-fired, and the price of 500 litres of fuel has just gone up from £235 to £480. They have also just found out that their annual electricity costs are rising from £1,851.15 to £2,564.33. Their four sons are aged from eight to 18. They have not put their home's radiators on since last November.

I first wrote about Lexie in January. Around 10 days ago, we had another conversation. She talked about squeezing multiple meals from the cheapest of ingredients (she had somehow managed to get five dinners out of a bag of 11 frozen chicken pieces), washing with hot water boiled on the stove, and the endless financial traps that she and her family now have to try to somehow avoid.

Lexie has a mobility vehicle provided as part of her disability benefits, but the soaring cost of diesel means it has to be mostly used for the school run. Of late, her husband has been offered a few job interviews, but found that the impossible cost of travel has ruled them out: local public transport is thin on the ground, and anyway, the nearest bus stop is two miles from their house. Visits to the supermarket have to be carefully rationed, but that means buying basic goods from the local convenience store, where everything is more expensive. Lexie worries most, she says, about her youngest child, who has asthma. His coughing fits are sometimes so bad that he

vomits. “It’s because he’s cold,” she told me. “I know it is. But there’s nothing I can do. I can’t pull heat out of the air.”

The kind of want and hurt Lexie’s family are suffering may sound as if it places them on the edges of society. The truth is that there are millions of British people like them, and those numbers are increasing fast. A stark metric is the UK’s level of absolute poverty, which is defined as being a household income less than 60% of the median income level of 2010-11, adjusted for inflation - a measure that usually goes up only in times of recession. The Resolution Foundation forecasts that over the next year, the fall in real incomes means another 1.3 million people in the UK - including 500,000 children - will be pushed into this category, taking the total number to 12.5 million.

Has the scale of this social emergency sunk in yet? Last Friday was the day when the costs of some of life’s most basic elements - from gas and electricity to social housing rents - shot up, way beyond a 3.1% increase in benefits. As the cost of food continues to rise, energy bills are set to go up again in the autumn. Continuing cuts to local services, accelerated by inflation, mean that the last-ditch help so many people need - children’s social care, advice on housing and debt, and so much more - is in a more parlous state than ever. As Lexie’s experiences show, almost a third of disabled people live in poverty, an aspect of the story that gets far too little attention. Abstractions such as “the cost of living crisis” do not do enough justice to 2022’s mounting sense of dread; neither does the clichéd view of people having to choose between heating and eating, when a lot of people will soon be unable to afford either.

In the midst of yet another crisis, we are about to find out who we now are: either the mean, hard-faced country many politicians still believe in, or a society moving in a more compassionate direction.