

Developing a sustainable and equitable public health response to the cost-of-living crisis: A thinking guide

Drafted on behalf of the FPH Sustainable Development Special Interest Group

The cost-of-living crisis and climate change are inextricably linked public health crises. Some of the links between these crises can be broken down as follows:

- Firstly, climate change is a key driver of the cost-of-living crisis, intensifying related problems such as food shortages.
- Secondly, the UK's failure to act on climate change over recent years, and ongoing reliance on an extractive, growth-based economic model, has made this crisis more severe. Decisions such as failures to invest in new onshore wind energy and insulate more homes, have left the UK particularly vulnerable to energy market fluctuations.
- Thirdly, there is the risk that short-termism in responding to the cost-of-living-crisis (such as the licensing of new oil and gas projects) undermines our response to climate change, driving up emissions, worsening local air pollution, and increasing poverty and inequalities in the long term.

It is essential that public health professionals advocate for more holistic cost of living responses that are situated within a systems-based sustainability and equity framework, otherwise we risk further exacerbating climate change, harming health and widening inequalities.

Members of the FPH Sustainable Development SIG have developed a conceptual framework to aid this process (see appendix 1). In this document we offer tools and prompts to support sustainable and equitable public health responses to the current challenges we face. The mapping tool and checklists provide a framework for implementing a systems thinking approach which ensures equity and sustainable considerations in developing public health responses, which can be worked through step-by-step to consider all relevant factors.

Mapping tool: What actions do we need to take *now* to support our local area to thrive within planetary boundaries in the short, medium and long-term?

Need		Short-term / crisis response	Medium term impact (think about primary & secondary prevention)	Long term impact (think about health creation & primary prevention)
Identify need/s	Enabling people in our local area to meet their needs and thrive	Use the social minimums checklist to review activities for impact here		
	Increasing equity between people in our local area	Use the equity checklist to review activities for impact here		
	Thriving within planetary boundaries	Use the sustainability checklist to review activities for impact here		

Based on and inspired by the City Portrait from: <https://doughnuteconomics.org/tools/76>.

Mapping tool step 1: You can use this tool to help map out your activities in response to need and consider how to increase positive impacts and reduce negative ones.

1. Note down the activities that form your response to the cost-of-living crisis.
2. Consider how they contribute to the three domains over the three time horizons shown in the grid. You can use [the 3 checklists](#) below to ensure you've covered the main issues.
3. Consider how activities could be adapted to reinforce positive impacts, extend impacts across more goals, or help to reduce negative impacts.

Using systems thinking tools

A systems thinking approach can support us to think through the interconnections within a complex system. Complex systems generally do not work in a linear cause-and-effect way and are by their nature difficult to predict. The aim is to think through and anticipate potential feedback loops, creating interventions that will steward the system effectively and favour positive outcomes. Consider the following to support a systems approach:

- Have you worked collaboratively with wider partners to develop a shared understanding of the problem, including the scope and boundaries of the relevant system?
- Consider mapping the system with partners, exploring pathways to change and potential feedback loops. This mapping process can be iterative - consider revisiting it based on the observations and data you collect as you implement activities.
- The above should support you in communicating your understanding of the system. Be open about the data sets/evidence used and be willing to revise models as new data emerges.
- Understanding your boundaries of influence can be useful. What's under your direct control, what can you influence, and what's beyond your influence but nonetheless important?
- Identify system factors that promote (enablers) or hinder (inhibitors) achieving your desired outcomes, and use your shared/co-produced systems map to identify points of leverage that allow you to achieve the most change at lowest cost and risk. Tools to support the above and more can be found [here](#).

Mapping tool step 2: Building on systems thinking

Once you have completed step 1 and considered the equity and sustainability dimensions of your proposed interventions and activities, you might want to use the following prompts and approaches to build on your systems thinking approach

1. Consider unintended consequences and interactions between your activities.
2. As well as working through the table from left-to-right and then downwards, you may find it helpful to review backwards (i.e. up and left) across the table to consider how activities in each section might give rise to unintended consequences in others.
3. Are there any adaptations you can take to mitigate against unintended harms?
4. Are there any activities that might have a beneficial amplifying effect? How can you maximise these?
5. Are there any activities which have a negative amplifying effect? If yes, identify ways to interrupt or stop these.
6. Note the above will be an iterative process, and you will want to return to your mapping tool as new data becomes available and/or you observe the impact of your activities

For a worked example of the mapping tool, see appendix 3

Social minimums checklist

How will the action / decision impact on:

- Health and wellbeing of the population, and the conditions needed for good health
- Access to safe, warm, and comfortable housing
- Energy resources / use and energy poverty
- Sufficient and equitable access to healthy food
- Education and employment opportunities
- Financial wellbeing (including through good jobs) and protecting people from the impacts of poverty and financial hardship
- Socioeconomic equality
- Affordable transport
- Community networks and cohesion

Equity checklist

How will/could the action / decision (or failing to act) impact on people differently based on their characteristics*, such as:

- Place of residence and housing type
- Race/ethnicity/culture/language
- Occupation; gender/sex; religion; educational level
- Socioeconomic status/poverty
- Social capital and social exclusion
- Personal characteristics associated with discrimination (e.g. age, disability)
- Personal relationships (e.g. disabled parents, school exclusion, looked after children)
- Time-dependent situations (e.g. leaving hospital, respite care, other temporary disadvantages)

And on [inclusion health groups](#), including:

- Vulnerable migrants
- People experiencing homelessness
- People with drug and/or alcohol dependence
- Sex workers
- Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities
- People in contact with the justice system
- Victims of modern slavery

*List based on the Cochrane Equity Group's [PROGRESS-PLUS framework](#)

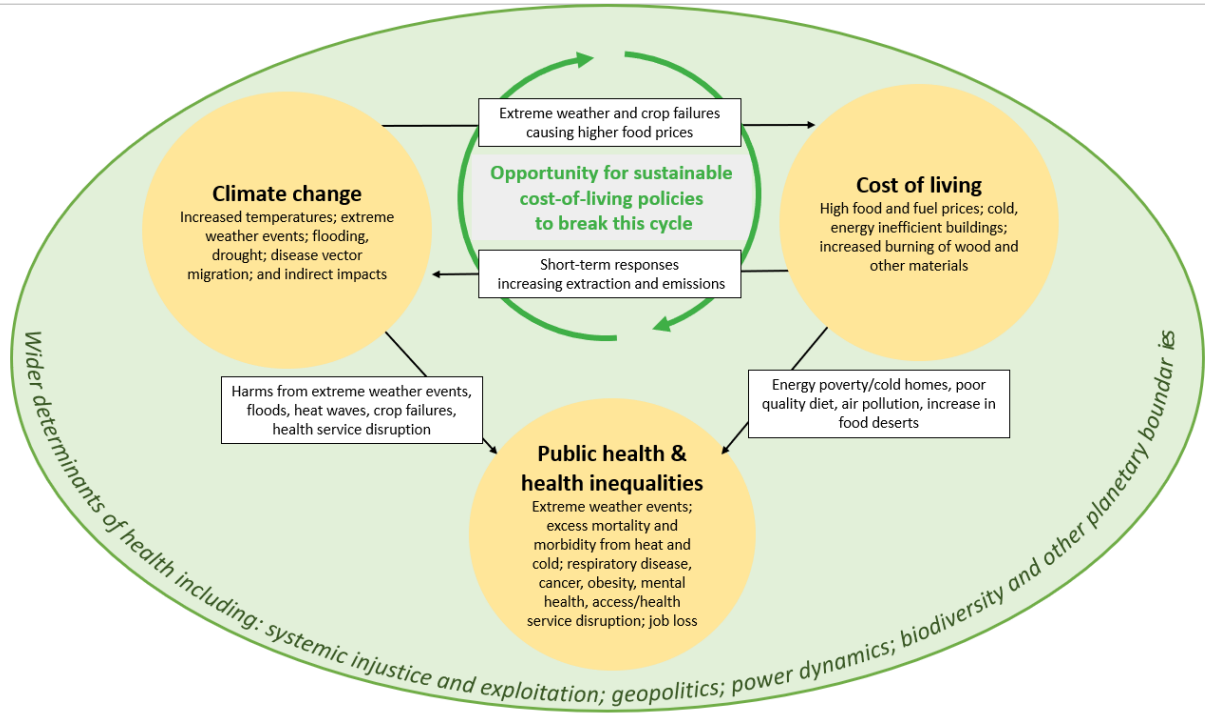
Sustainability checklist*

How will or could the action / decision (or failing to act) impact on:

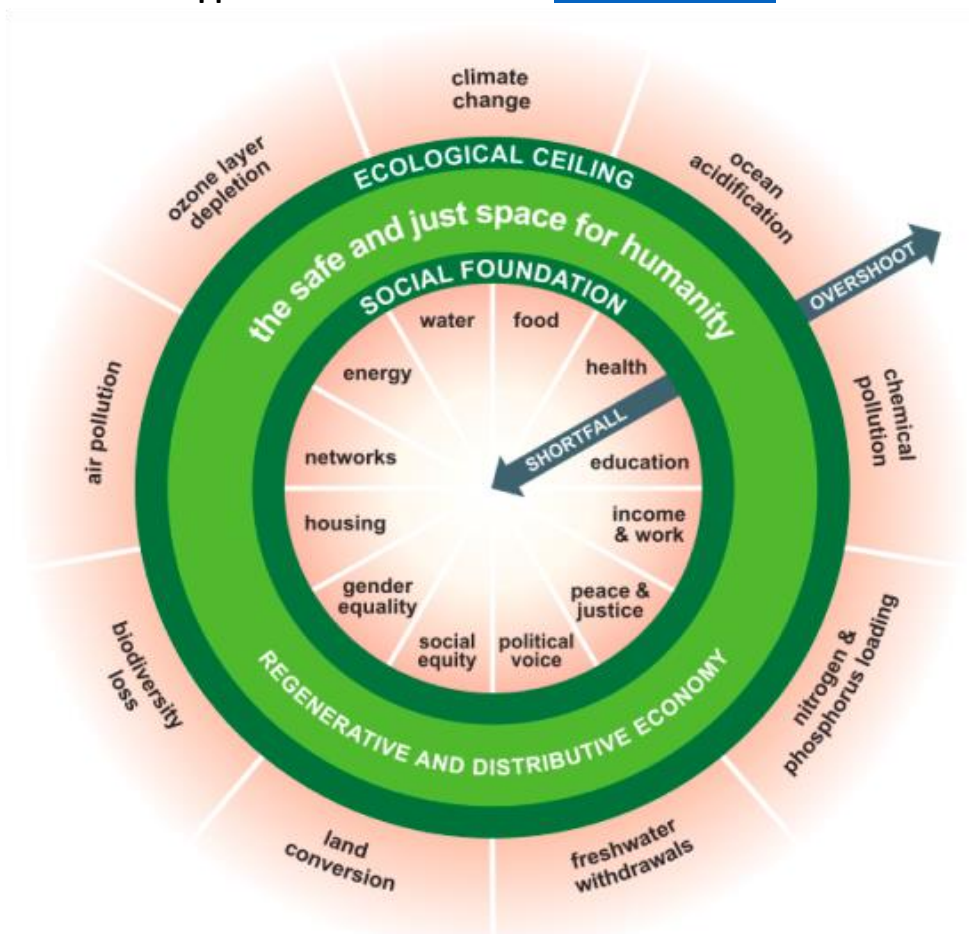
- Greenhouse gas emissions
- Biodiversity loss
- Land use change
- Air pollution
- Climate change adaptation (e.g. overheating/flood risk)
- Ocean health, water resources and freshwater extraction
- Chemical and plastic pollution
- Materials economy and waste
- Renewable energy

*Adapted from the [Cornwall Development and Decision-Making Wheel](#)

Appendix 1: Conceptual framework: Interconnections between climate change, cost of living, and health inequalities



Appendix 2: Kate Raworth's [doughnut model](#)



Appendix 3: Mapping tool: Worked Example

Need		Short-term / crisis response	Medium term impact (think about primary & secondary prevention)	Long term impact (think about health creation & primary prevention)
Fuel poverty & cold homes	Enabling people in our local area to meet their needs and thrive	Provision of (& signposting to) warm spaces & financial support	Empowering & investing in communities as a lever for change; collecting & using health evidence to make the case for investment	Transformation of housing stock to ensure warmth & <i>good ventilation</i>
	Increasing equity between people in our local area	+ Targeted provision based on vulnerable group mapping (consider density & access) + Ensuring provision is <i>appropriate for different needs of vulnerable groups (e.g. covid safety measures)</i>	+ Working with trade unions, education providers & partners to upskill disadvantaged groups for green jobs + + Highlighting health inequities with relevant stakeholders e.g. energy, business, planning etc.	+ Targeted at those in greatest fuel poverty and with the most significant health & other needs
	Thriving within planetary boundaries	+ Ensure warm space heating is through renewable energy provider wherever possible	+ Support groups to develop shared community-scale projects e.g. supporting development & financing of renewable energy and retrofit projects through (cooperative?) governance models	+ Advocacy for sustainable, well insulated & well ventilated homes for all

Mapping step 2: Worked example

Unintended consequences identified:

- Risks associated with poor ventilation including mould, damp, low oxygen levels
- Covid safety concerns with congregation in warm spaces; access and equity issues for clinically vulnerable wishing to access this provision

See *mitigation measures marked in bold italics*

+ Positive amplifying effect: Investing in supply side approaches (e.g. upskilling workers) may have amplifying effect, enabling greater capacity to deliver housing transformation projects