

Motion submitted by Councillor Gary Christy

Changes to the Winter Fuel Allowance and Protecting Pensioners from Fuel Poverty

The new Labour Government has chosen to remove the Winter Fuel Payment from pensioners, and this will have a devastating impact on vulnerable people this winter.

The Winter Fuel Payment has been a lifeline for many older people and that restricting its availability solely to those on Pension Credit risks leaving many pensioners in financial hardship.

From this autumn, those not on pension credit or other means-tested benefits will no longer receive the annual payments, worth between £100 and £300.

In Fenland the number of people eligible for Winter Fuel Payments in 2022/23 was 22,033. The estimated number of people under new plans is 2,536, meaning 19,497 people will lose this benefit. That is a loss of at least £5million in benefits to the pensioners of Fenland.

While some pensioners currently in receipt of the Winter Fuel Payment may not require it, many thousands across Fenland sit just above the cut-off for Pension Credit and will now lose their allowance.

The decision to means-test Winter Fuel Payments, especially with such short notice and without adequate compensatory measures, is deeply unfair and will disproportionately affect the health and well-being of our poorest older residents.

The government's approach fails to consider the administrative barriers and stigma that prevent eligible pensioners from claiming Pension Credit, leaving many without the support they desperately need.

Labour's policy is regressive and backward, particularly for those living in rural communities.

Labours policy will mean more pensioners will die from the cold this winter.

Council is asked to note:

1. The proposal to remove the Winter Fuel Payment (WFP) from pensioners who do not claim Pension Credit or other means tested benefits has the potential to disproportionately affect our most vulnerable residents, particularly those in rural communities.
2. The significant role that Winter Fuel Payments play in helping older residents of Fenland afford heating during the coldest months, thereby preventing 'heat or eat' dilemmas and safeguarding health.

3. The criticism from Age UK, the Countryside Alliance and other charities, highlighting the social injustice and potential health risks posed by this sudden policy change.
4. The additional strain this decision will place on vulnerable pensioners, many of whom do not claim Pension Credit despite being eligible, further exacerbating their financial hardship.
5. Rural pensioners often live in older, less energy-efficient housing, with over 70% of rural homes in the UK built before 1980. These homes are typically harder and more expensive to heat due to poor insulation and outdated heating systems.
6. That all pensioners deserve to live in warm, safe homes, and that removing support will increase the risk of cold-related illnesses and excess winter deaths among our elderly population.

Council is asked to support this motion and to resolve to:

1. Condemn the proposal to remove the Winter Fuel Payment from pensioners who do not claim Pension Credit or are on other benefits, recognising the disproportionate impact this will have on our most vulnerable residents, particularly those in rural communities.
2. Request that the Council Leader write to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, urging a review of the decision to means-test the Winter Fuel Payment and asking the government to ensure that vulnerable pensioners, particularly those who do not claim Pension Credit, are protected from fuel poverty.
3. Commits to Write to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to ask for funding for a local advertising and outreach campaign to raise awareness about Pension Credit and other benefits, targeting pensioners who may be eligible but are not currently claiming.
4. Commit the Council to signing the 'Save the Winter Fuel Payment for Struggling Pensioners' petition being run by Age UK and write to all members offering them the opportunity to sign the petition themselves.
5. Encourage local efforts to promote Pension Credit uptake through council services and partnerships with local charities and community organisations to ensure that all eligible pensioners in Fenland are supported in claiming their entitlement.

Protecting Our Most Vulnerable Pensioners from Fuel Poverty

Supplementary Information

One in five excess winter deaths are directly attributable to cold homes, and one in ten to fuel poverty. (1)

This policy unfairly affects rural communities, as:

- Rural housing is more likely to be older and less energy-efficient, with a significant proportion built before modern insulation standards were introduced.
- Over 70% of rural homes in the UK were built before 1980, compared to about 50% in urban areas. (2) Rural houses have on average 49.6% energy efficiency compared to 65.5% in city centres. (3)
- Many rural homes are not connected to mains gas network, with households often relying on more expensive off-grid heating sources like oil, wood, or canister LPG. Around 1.5 million homes in the UK rely on oil for heating, with the majority located in rural areas. (4)
- Heating oil in January 2020 was 54p per litre, it is now 66p p/l, further straining the limited financial resources of rural pensioners. (5)
- Public Health England reports a 1.5% increase in Excess winter deaths (EWDs) for every degree Celsius drop below 18°C, underscoring the critical need for adequate heating.
- Excess winter deaths (EWDs) are a significant issue, with over 30,000 EWDs recorded in the UK each year, and a higher incidence in rural areas where healthcare access is limited. (6) (7)
- Rural communities often face isolation due to poor transport links and limited access to services. This lack of connectivity can hinder pensioners from accessing alternative financial support, energy efficiency schemes, or healthcare services. (8)

1 Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) 2023 2 English Housing Survey: "Energy Efficiency of English Housing 2021 3 DLUHC English Housing Survey data on energy performance 2022 4 Citizens Advice: "Off-Gas Consumers: Information on Households without Mains Gas Heating" 2019 5 Office for National Statistics – Average heating oil price 1000 litres 6 Public Health England: "Excess Winter Mortality in England and Wales 7 National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) 8 Department for Work and Pensions (DWP): "Income-related Benefits: Estimates of Take-up 2019-2020 community.