

Council accused of ‘pushing residents into fuel poverty’

Edinburgh residents are being pushed into fuel poverty by the council, it has been claimed, after the authority admitted it had likely overcharged for heating from a faulty boiler system.

Occupants at Gorgie’s Westfield Court high rise complained after seeing bills skyrocket, with some reporting theirs had more than tripled in the space of a year.

Now a review has uncovered failures which meant costs were incorrectly calculated – and the block’s 60 flat owners were wrongly charged over £12,000 for boiler repairs.

The council, which acts as property factor for the 92 flats despite being a minority owner, blamed the widespread hike in energy prices for most of the increases, but promised a full refund to anyone who had been overcharged.

Gorgie’s independent councillor Ross McKenzie said those affected had been treated “very badly” and it was now difficult for them to “have faith or trust in the council while they are being pushed into fuel poverty”.

A report detailing errors in how bills were added up has been published after Cllr McKenzie called for a review at June’s full council meeting.

It reveals there was an “issue with the rateable value that

has been applied to calculate the share per flat.” Officials said work was underway to “recalculate the share of costs that owners are liable for and any credits or refunds due will be processed urgently”.

Repairs and maintenance fees billed rose from just under £4,000 in 2022 to an eye-watering £22,662 the following year “and were largely related to additional costs in repair and maintenance of the communal heating system,” according to the report.

But £12,190 – over half of this mammoth increase – related to the cost of temporary equipment in the boiler room – despite owners previously being given assurances they would not be charged for this.

Furthermore, the council said prior to 2022 residents were being undercharged for electricity due to ‘errors’ in meter readings, and this meant when they received bills last year they were higher than expected after the issue was rectified.

The condition of Westfield Court’s heating system has also been called into question amid the concerns about instances of overcharging.

Hot water cylinders “do need replaced,” the report said, and the hot water pipe network installed when the building was constructed in 1952 is “now beyond its economic life” with pipes often leaking.

The price hikes for landlords and owner-occupiers have come despite heating and hot water costs being frozen this year for the block’s 32 remaining council-owned, due to “ongoing issues with systems providing heat and determining the appropriate charging tariff for energy use,” a report to councillors earlier this year said.

However Edinburgh Council said “other high-rise blocks have encountered similar increases to their gas costs” and

officials are not recommending councillors not to apply any subsidy to residents' bills for the current year.

Cllr McKenzie said: "I'm grateful to officers for this report and glad the issue is on the agenda now and I feel reassured that this is being taken seriously.

"However, the report elicits many more questions about the way Westfield Court has been managed in recent years.

"A review of service charges has uncovered three areas in which residents had been incorrectly charged. This makes it difficult for residents to have faith or trust in the council while they are being pushed into fuel poverty due to vastly increased charges for a heating system that the report admits is broken.

"I'll be meeting with residents and political groups this week to discuss how we respond to the report. These will be difficult conversations. The residents of Westfield Court have been treated very badly".

Housing, homelessness and fair work convener Jane Meagher said: "Westfield Court residents have told us they've seen their fuel bills drastically rise, despite reporting recurring issues with the heating system.

"I understand how difficult this must be for the residents, and they have my full sympathy.

"Whilst we've all felt the impact of an increase in utility costs, which accounts for most of the increase, we're keen to look at what can be done."

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter