

# **Pensioners wrongly charged for boiler repairs brand treatment by council as 'disgusting'**

**Edinburgh pensioners who have seen their heating costs go through the roof and were wrongly charged for boiler repairs say their treatment by the council has been "disgusting".**

Homeowners at Gorgie's Westfield Court, who receive their bills through the local authority as property factor, have reported eye-watering increases of more than 200 per cent over the last year which they blamed on an inefficient heating system installed when the high-rise was built in the 1950s.

And last week it was revealed council failures meant costs for some occupants had been incorrectly calculated – and 60 flat owners were wrongly charged over £12,000 for temporary equipment in the block's boiler room despite being told previously they wouldn't have to pay for this.

Local councillor Ross McKenzie said residents were also not informed about a 2021 survey which contained "crucial information" about the building's condition, including about the presence of asbestos, which was "never successfully acted on".

Speaking at the housing committee on Tuesday, August 27, he

said: "We're talking about pensioners on very low incomes who have never been in debt in their lives and they can't sleep at night at the thought of the debt they are storing up and with anxiety about what's coming through the door next.

"The performance of the heating system has declined and there have been major question marks over the standard of repairs and the value the council and owners are getting from contractors."

Diane Baxter, representing Westfield Court's residents group, said: "We are extremely worried about the size of the communal heating and maintenance bills. These bills are of varying amounts depending on the rateable value of each flat.

"I myself live in a studio flat, my annual bill was £635 – this year it was £2,000. I only have three radiators which are off from March to October. I live on pension credit and cannot afford £166 a month considering I still have electricity, council tax, insurance as well as living expenses."

"The heating system is 70 years old and now and not fit for purpose. It's not efficient at all – these bills are extortionate. For three radiators, £166 a month is disgusting.

"I just can't afford it."

Hot water cylinders "do need replaced," a 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.

Fellow resident Marianne Porter, who has lived at Westfield Court for over 60 years, added: "My bill rose from £1,100 a year to £3,300. I find it totally unacceptable and I want to know what's being done."

The council attributed most of the increases experienced to the widespread hike in energy prices across the country, but

promised a full refund to anyone who had been overcharged.

Housing committee convener Jane Meagher admitted there had been a “decades-long fiasco” with regards to the heating system at Westfield Court and a “long-standing lack of paying attention to the needs of this particular block”.

She said: “I’m glad we’re in a position to be able to examine the causes of all of that and do something to rectify them and make a difference.”

Councillors did not back subsidising energy bills for those affected, however agreed to explore introducing a “price cap” for communal heating blocks such as Westfield Court.

It was also agreed officers would “revisit options for the payment of energy bills for 2024-2025 with residents, including setting up payment plans to spread the costs over multiple years”.

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter