

Charities and council gear up for winter as figures show poverty rising

Extra funding has been given to a West Lothian food charity amidst warnings that a growing number of pensioners and children face poverty.

An extra £100,000 has been awarded to the Food Network to support its work through the winter.

Councillors were told the charity is braced for a surge in demand due to elderly residents losing out on winter fuel payments.

The same meeting of the council's executive heard that almost a quarter of local children face the coming winter living in poverty.

Nahid Hanif, head of the council's anti-poverty service, told councillors that staff were getting out into communities to give early advice and develop partnerships with local groups who can help.

Child poverty in West Lothian stands at 24.6 per cent against the national figure of 24 per cent.

The introduction of The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 prompted the Scottish Government to set ambitious targets to reduce child poverty.

Ms Hanif said: "Looking at all 32 local authorities, only three have met the interim targets of reducing children in relative poverty across Scotland. The proportion of children in poverty has remained high both locally and nationally with around one in four children living in poverty."

The only positive note in otherwise gloomy statistics was detail from a Fraser of Allander Institute report which showed that the Scottish Child Payment of £25 per child was starting to have an effect in cutting the number of applications to food banks.

Ms Hanif told the meeting that food bank usage had seen a slight drop but added: "Despite seeing decreases in food bank usage for some groups, there is no evidence of a decrease across all households with young children, or for priority households with older children."

The funding to the Food Network charity will support those on low incomes, people in rural areas and disadvantaged groups who are experiencing food poverty and insecurity.

The organisation and its member groups provide a range of low-cost food across the county.

Ms Hanif said in her report that an additional £100,000 has been committed to the charity, from West Lothian's allocation under the government's Shared Prosperity Funding.

The majority of those being supported by the charity are working age people, around half of whom are unemployed or on benefits. But the charity said that there was a growing demand for help from people aged in their sixties.

SNP group depute leader Councillor Pauline Stafford welcomed the news that the Scottish Child Payment was having an effect. She called for support to increase the payment from £25 to £30 and urged MPs to spend less time on photo opportunities at food banks and more time lobbying for an increase.

She told the meeting: "It's a very good report, but I wish we didn't have to have it."

By Stuart Sommerville Local Democracy Reporter