

West Lothian Council braces for more demands for winter fuel grants

West Lothian Council is bracing itself for a surge in pleas for help from pensioners after the government's decision to cut the Winter Fuel Payment.

The once universal £200- £300 payment will now be means tested and campaigners say many who rely on the money to meet higher fuel bills will face difficulties.

The council runs its own grant programme to meet winter fuel costs and will launch it next month. While the grant is much lower it still offers a lifeline for those in the most dire of circumstances – giving out more than £8,000 last year.

The council's Advice Shop service also helped more than 1,000 pensioners secure benefits they had not been claiming.

At a recent meeting of the full council an acrimonious debate on a motion critical of the Westminster Government's decision to restrict the Winter Fuel Allowance eventually ended with a rare unanimous cross- party composite motion requesting the Chancellor, Rachel Reeves, reverse the decision.

The motion also backed an advertising campaign to encourage pensioners: "to ensure the maximum uptake of Pension Credit is made by West Lothian pensioners, and support is available when applying for such credit. In addition, Council instructs

officers to encourage pensioners on low income to seek a Benefit Check.”

Winter Fuel Payments were devolved to the Scottish Government ahead of the national decision to restrict the payments to those on benefits. According to the Scottish Government: “This will lead to an investment of approximately £30 million and is anticipated to assist between 110,000 to 130,000 older people in Scotland this year, dependent on Pension Credit take-up.”

To qualify now pensioners must be in receipt of benefits including Pension Credit, Universal Credit, income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), income-based Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA), Income Support, Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit.

A West Lothian Council spokesperson told the Local Democracy Reporting Service: “We do not know how many West Lothian pensioners will be affected by the recent changes to the Winter Fuel Payments.

“However, there are likely to be pensioners living locally who will no longer receive the payment, and we would encourage anyone struggling to contact the council’s Advice Shop for support.

“Over the last financial year 2023/24, The Advice Shop has assisted 1,360 customers over state pension age with financial gains totalling £8.7 million.

“Our dedicated Pension Income Maximisation Team will be carrying out proactive targeted work out to ensure those over state pension age are in receipt of their full entitlement.

“We will also be launching our WLC Fuel Grant programme in November this year, which is a payment of up to £100 to households on low incomes experiencing fuel poverty, subject to resources being available.

“In the last financial year, we assisted 85 customers over pension age with a Fuel Grant with payments totalling £8,500 and we anticipate a higher demand this year.”

To contact the Advice Shop visit <https://www.westlothian.gov.uk/adviceshop> or call 01506 283 000.

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter