

Almost a fifth of West Lothian population in fuel poverty

Almost a fifth of West Lothian households face the onset of winter in debt from paying the heating bills from last winter as fuel poverty grows.

The shocking figures were revealed in a report to councillors as officers prepare a response to a Holyrood survey.

Thousands of households now find themselves facing debts they cannot escape and bills they cannot afford as temperatures drop, with 18% of West Lothian households are in fuel poverty while 9% of households are in extreme fuel poverty.

In a report to the council's Executive Nahid Hanif, the council's Anti-Poverty Service manager said: "People find themselves locked into a cycle of debt."

The Fuel Poverty Act 2019 set targets for the significant reduction of fuel poverty -defined as spending more than 10% of household income on heating- by 2040 and called for regular reports.

The targets set within the Act are that by 2040, as far as reasonably possible, no household in Scotland is in Fuel Poverty and, in any event, no more than 5% of households are fuel poor, no more than 1% are in extreme fuel poverty.

Ms Hanif told councillors: "In 2024, the profile of West

Lothian tells us that the demographics of poverty are changing.

“Many households are not just struggling to afford heating, but also find themselves trapped in energy debt. As energy prices have substantially increased, many households in West Lothian have accumulated substantial arrears on their energy bills.”

“People in this situation often find themselves locked into a cycle of debt that can feel impossible to escape.”

The surge in energy costs appears to have derailed the Holyrood aspirations despite the best efforts of local authorities and Third Sector volunteers.

Those who try to cut heating costs are still faced with stiff bills because of standing charges.

The Act identified four drivers of fuel poverty and charged councils and volunteers with coming up with programmes to tackle them. The drivers are identified as: removing poor energy efficiency of the home; low household income; high energy prices; studying how energy is used in the home.

And while the mitigation work carried out by the council’s Anti-Poverty service and the Advice Shops has helped mitigate the issue to an extent, the report highlighted just how difficult the job is.

Through Area-Based Schemes and the Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategy, the council has made progress in improving the energy efficiency of homes, particularly for low-income and fuel-poor households. The Anti-Poverty Service works in conjunction with energy advice programs to ensure households receive energy related benefits as well as carrying out Benefit Health Checks to ensure individuals are accessing their full entitlement to other benefits.

Ms Hanif said: "These supports help improve financial resilience, a core objective of the Tackling Poverty Strategy, by ensuring families can manage their energy costs without falling further into debt.

"A significant limitation is the reliance on fossil fuels and the fact that energy policy is predominantly managed at a national level.

"West Lothian Council's ability to influence energy pricing or policies such as standing charges which disproportionately affect low-income households remains constrained.

"While energy efficiency improvements can reduce energy consumption, they do not address the fundamental issue of affordability."

In the response to the Holyrood consultation that was approved by councillors the Anti-Poverty service said: "The anxiety of not knowing whether they can keep their home warm in the winter can feel overwhelming.

"There's also a stigma around debt and poverty that can prevent people from seeking help. Many people feel embarrassed about their financial situation and may avoid contact with energy suppliers or debt support services. This isolation worsens their situation and prolongs their struggle."

Lib Dem Councillor Sally Pattle said: "It's really shocking that 18 % of the population of West Lothian are classed as being in fuel poverty. Has that been a big increase over the past two or three years since the cost-of-living crisis, or is it something which has incrementally increased and are you expecting numbers to increase further as we head into this winter?"

Ms Hanif said: "It has been a gradual increase. The removal of the winter fuel payment could bring an increase but I can't comment."

Councillor Pauline Stafford the SNP depute group leader, pointed out that the Scottish Government had already called for the introduction of a social energy tariff for those on the lowest income. "I think we should be clearer on that. That is something the government is working with energy firms at the moment."

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter