

West Lothian pensioners receive targeted advice from Anti-Poverty service

Pensioners in West Lothian have been given help to ensure they qualify for the stricter winter fuel payments.

More than 100 OAPs in the county were able to claim more than £28,000 in winter fuel payments following targeted advice from the council's Anti-Poverty Service.

Councillor George Paul, chair of the Whitburn and Blackburn Local Area Committee said a report on the service's work in the last year was a "horrendous read"- but he welcomed the work that was being done.

One of the first decisions of the newly elected Labour Government was to scrap the universal £300 winter fuel payment for pensioners. This winter only those who qualified for pension credit would be eligible for cash help with their heating bills.

The Anti-Poverty service used Inbest, an agency which helps individuals and councils understand benefits entitlements and can be used to navigate the application process for benefits. It's a tool to maximize potential benefits.

A spokesperson for the council service told the committee: "The service worked in partnership with an external agency, Inbest, who were able to help identify customers entitled to

Pension Credit but not claiming.

“The Department for Work and Pensions approved the reuse of the data we held for this campaign as we were able to anonymise customer details.

The benefits team within the Anti-poverty service worked with Inbest and were able to identify 432 households who were in receipt of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction and based on their income should also be claiming Pension Credit but were not.”

The spokesperson added: “The Advice Shop’s Pensioner Income Maximisation Team made contact via telephone or letter to carry out Income Maximisation Checks and assist customers to make claims to any benefits identified.

“The engagement rate for this campaign was 55% this included those that were supported, not entitled and those that were not interested in pursuing further.

“From this targeted approach 136 customers have been supported to claim £544,299 in extra benefit outcome throughout West Lothian with 129 claims for the Winter Fuel Payment totalling £28,700 which otherwise may not have been claimed.”

The update of the year’s work also showed the wider work of the Anti-Poverty Service and Advice shops in Whitburn and Blackburn.

In total, 15% of Advice Shop customers in West Lothian came from the Whitburn and Blackburn area.

Successful outcomes secured for these customers included: Total financial gains of £2,821,608 million by maximising income from social security benefits and energy efficiency savings of £113,547 through access to financial support and advice

Support to deal with £1,123,825 of problem debt resulted in

reduction in debt repayments of £512,188

The service also issued 686 emergency food vouchers and 579 fuel vouchers for households at risk of disconnection

Councillor Paul said: "Your report is welcome but when you're reading it is also kind of frightening; the amount of poverty that's in West Lothian.

"It's horrendous reading but it's welcome that something is being done. God knows what would happen to people otherwise."

Just over 2,000 of the 14,000 plus enquiries to the service came from the Whitburn ward last year.

SNP Councillor Mary Dickson agreed with Councillor Paul. She said: "When I read this report it's just dismal. It's sad to see how many people in West Lothian actually need help like this. And it's from all areas, from cancer patients, children, clothing grants. It's really sad. Like George, I'm pleased that someone is there looking out for the people"

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter