

Motion Regarding Changes to the Winter Fuel Allowance

This Council expresses deep concern regarding the Government's decision to amend the eligibility criteria for the Winter Fuel Payment (WFP) as outlined in the Social Fund Winter Fuel Payment Regulations 2024, which were presented to Parliament on 22nd August 2024 and came into effect on 16th September 2024.

Under the new regulations, beginning in the winter of 2024/2025, households in England and Wales will only qualify for the Winter Fuel Payment if they are recipients of Pension Credit or other means-tested benefits specified by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. This change raises significant concerns, as the Government has not conducted a full impact assessment or initiated public consultation.

Age UK has estimated that 2 million pensioners who rely on this crucial support to stay warm during the winter months may be ineligible under the new criteria. Locally, in East Hertfordshire, 27,486 pensioners could lose access to this vital financial assistance, creating severe financial strain for many elderly residents and exacerbating existing health and wellbeing challenges, particularly for those just above the Pension Credit threshold.

This Council Observes:

- 1. Impact on Vulnerable Pensioners:** The removal of the Winter Fuel Payment for pensioners not receiving Pension Credit or other designated benefits is likely to disproportionately impact vulnerable elderly residents, particularly those living in rural areas where access to services and support is already limited.
- 2. Rural Housing Challenges:** Pensioners in rural areas often reside in older, less energy-efficient homes, with over 70% of rural properties in the UK built before 1980. These homes typically suffer from inadequate insulation and outdated heating systems, making them more costly and difficult to heat.
- 3. Health Impacts of Cold Weather:** Excess winter deaths (EWDs) remain a significant public health issue, with over 30,000 EWDs occurring in the UK each year, a majority of which affect older populations. Public Health England has reported a 1.5% increase in EWDs for each degree Celsius drop below 18°C, highlighting the vital need for sufficient home heating.
- 4. The Right to Warmth:** Every pensioner should have the right to live in a warm and secure home. The decision to means-test the Winter Fuel Payment risks increasing cold-related illnesses and excess winter deaths among elderly residents who may not qualify for additional support despite being just above the Pension Credit threshold.

This Council Resolves to:

1. **Oppose the Removal of Winter Fuel Payments:** Strongly oppose the Government's decision to restrict the Winter Fuel Payment to pensioners receiving Pension Credit or certain means-tested benefits, and recognise the disproportionate negative impact this policy will have on some of our most vulnerable elderly residents, particularly in rural areas.
2. **Call for a Government Review:** Instruct the Leader of the Council to write to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, urging a full review of the decision to means-test the Winter Fuel Payment. The Council will advocate for ensuring that all pensioners, especially those not receiving Pension Credit but still vulnerable to fuel poverty, continue to receive essential winter fuel support.
3. **Engage Local MPs:** Instruct the Leader of the Council to write to the four Members of Parliament representing East Hertfordshire, urging them to lobby the Government for a reversal of this decision and to ensure protections are in place for vulnerable pensioners who are at risk of fuel poverty. This action is crucial given that 27,486 local pensioners may be affected by this change.
4. **Promote Benefit Awareness:** Instruct the Leader of the Council to write to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to seek additional funding for a local outreach and awareness campaign. This campaign will aim to inform pensioners about their eligibility for Pension Credit and other related benefits, particularly targeting those who are eligible but not currently claiming. This effort is intended to ensure that no pensioner misses out on support due to lack of awareness.

In summary, this Council believes the proposed changes to the Winter Fuel Payment system will cause undue hardship to many elderly residents in East Hertfordshire and calls on the Government to reconsider this decision in the interest of public health, financial stability, and the wellbeing of our pensioners.

Motion proposed by Councillor Aubrey Holt and seconded by Councillor Angus Parsad-Wyatt