



<b>REPORT TITLE:</b>	<b>Winter Fuel Support – Response to Council Resolution</b>
<b>REPORT OF:</b>	<b>Councillor J Newport, Leader of the Council</b>

### **REPORT SUMMARY**

On 17 September 2024, the Council resolved in summary to:

- Write to the Chancellor of the Exchequer calling for the policy on linking Winter Fuel Payments to Pension Credit receipt to be immediately paused and introduce a new threshold to determine eligibility for Winter Fuel Payments
- Commence a significant awareness campaign to maximise uptake of Pension Credit
- Conduct an urgent review with a report on the assessment of the Governments support to pensioners of Rochford should the Government not change their approach with a report to full council with recommendations on how this council can support those pensioners who remain in fuel poverty
- Sign the ‘Save the Winter Fuel Payment for Struggling Pensioners’ petition.

Further details of the activities resulting from the above resolution are detailed later in this report including information regarding those impacted and the support offered by other local authorities.

The report proposes action which the Council could take to support those persons impacted by the loss of the Winter Fuel Allowance and other residents of the district that may be impacted by fuel poverty through the creation and operation of the Council’s own Winter Support Fund to provide support to eligible pensioners in the district.

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**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- R1** - That Full Council notes the content of the report in response to the recent resolution of Council regarding the Winter Fuel Allowance
  
- R2** - That the Council approves a £50k transitional support fund for a discretionary payment scheme for pensioners as outlined in the report, and delegates authority to the Strategic Director / Deputy Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader of the Council to agree any matters of detail and progress accordingly.

**SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

**1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 1.1 **R1** The recommendation responds to the recent resolution of Council.
- 1.2 **R2** The Council will endeavour to actively engage with local community groups and partners to direct individuals in need, to the Housing Support Fund, Essential Living Fund, and other relevant benefits and support services such as Food banks and energy efficiency advice but in addition to existing service delivery support and signposting, this would provide financial support to pensioners on a discretionary basis and support transition from the withdrawal of the Winter Fuel Allowance earlier in the year.

**2.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

- 2.1 The Government has recently approved a change to the eligibility criteria for the (up to) £400 annual Winter Fuel Payment, which was previously provided on a universal basis. Starting from Winter 2024, only those in receipt of Pension Credit or other qualifying means-tested benefits will be eligible for this fund. Applications for Pension Credit to enable receipt of the Winter Fuel Payment this year is 20<sup>th</sup> December 2024. This change means that pensioners with low incomes who are just above the threshold to qualify for Pension Credit or other benefits will narrowly miss out. Additionally, those with unavoidably high energy needs due to disability or illness, or pensioners who are eligible for Pension Credit but do not currently receive it, will also be excluded.
- 2.2 The Government has indicated that pensioners can still benefit from other schemes, including the Cold Weather Payment (£25) and one-off payments from the Warm Home Discount (£150). However, both of these payments also have specific eligibility criteria that must be met in order to receive the funds.
- 2.3 On 17 September 2024, Council debated a motion on the issue and resolved to:

- *Instruct the Leader of the Council to write to the Chancellor of the Exchequer calling for the policy on linking Winter Fuel Payments to Pension Credit receipt to be immediately paused and introduce a new threshold to determine eligibility for Winter Fuel Payments. Council further requests the Leader of the Council to write to all MPs covering Rochford asking them to give their formal support to halting the changes to the Winter Fuel Payment eligibility.*
- *Urgently commence a significant awareness campaign to maximise uptake of pension credits. This will include use of council noticeboards, social media, promotion in local press and also targeted letters to those who may be eligible.*
- *If the Government does not change the as required by this council on the request of the Leader with immediate effect, then this council will conduct an urgent review with a report on the assessment of the Governments support to pensioners of Rochford District to full council with recommendations on how this council can support those pensioners who remain in fuel poverty.*
- *To commit to signing the ‘Save the Winter Fuel Payment for Struggling Pensioners’ petition being run by Age UK and write to all Members offering them the opportunity to sign the petition themselves.*

### **3.0 Council-Led local awareness campaign**

- 3.1 The Communications Team is actively promoting the uptake of Pension Credit across the District through various channels, including resident newsletters, social media, and posters in prominent locations such as the Community Connect Van. Information has also been disseminated to community partners.
- 3.3 The ongoing promotion of the importance of those who are eligible for Pension Credit and other benefits which would entitle them to continue to receive the Winter Fuel to make sure they take advantage of, and are supported to do so, as well as promotion and raising awareness of the Essential Living Fund, a Government Fund administered by Upper Tier Local Authorities remains a priority. The County Council’s Fund is applicable to Rochford residents. A key element of this is the Household Support Fund which is being administered by Southend Council. Applications are prioritised based on their potential to have a substantial and immediate impact on resolving or improving the applicants’ circumstances, in line with the primary objectives of the fund. Applicants can apply through the Southend-on-Sea City Council’s website: <https://www.southend.gov.uk/extra-financial-help/essential-living-fund/4>
- 3.4 Residents can be supported through the online application process by requesting a call back service by calling 0300 7900124
- 3.4 Rochford residents can find out more about Pension Credit and other support via the following:
- Pension Credit: <https://www.rochford.gov.uk/pension-credit>

- Other support: <https://www.rochford.gov.uk/financial-help-and-money-advice> - covering Discretionary Housing Payments, Exceptional Hardship Payments, Citizen's Advice Fuel Voucher Scheme, Anglian Water support, and Help for Households
- 3.5 The Revenues and Benefits Team notify residents of their potential entitlements upon receipt of their benefit applications and when informed of benefit entitlements from other bodies, such as Pension Credit from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).
- 3.6 The Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) who the Council provides funding in support of, are also playing a key role in providing advice, support and signposting to residents and can offer winter fuel vouchers.
- 3.6 The Council's website will be reviewed to ensure that all relevant information is up-to-date, accurate, and easily accessible. This may include the development of the existing cost of living page to better serve residents' needs: <https://www.rochford.gov.uk/cost-of-living>

**4.0 Identifying the number impacted in Rochford District**

	<b>Census 2021</b> pensioners (65 and above) residing in the District	<b>Policy in Practice</b> pensioners in the District who may be entitled to pension credit but have not yet claimed	<b>Local Council Tax Support Scheme</b> claimants in the District	<b>DWP</b> Pensioners contacted with an Invitation to Claim
<b>Rochford</b>	20,002	849	1,695	85

- 4.1 The Census 2021 reported that there are 20,002 pensioners (65 and above) residing in the Rochford District.
- 4.2 A recent report by Policy in Practice indicated that there are 849 pensioners in the Rochford District who may be entitled to Pension Credit and, consequently, the Winter Fuel Allowance but have not yet claimed. There would be a cost to obtain further details which may be obtained if this is considered value for money to support outreach activities. A meeting with Policy in Practice has been arranged.
- 4.3 The DWP identified 85 potentially eligible residents in the district and sent letters directly, providing information on applying for Pension Credit. A request was made to the DWP for information on these 85 residents; however, the DWP prefers councils to continue their role as a signposting service while they lead on direct contact with the identified households.
- 4.4 Currently, there are 1,695 households with one or more pensioners receiving Local Council Tax Support in the Rochford District.
- 4.5 However, the data above does not align and does not provide an accurate picture, making it difficult to ascertain the extent to which households are:

- Impacted by the change in the Winter Fuel Payment eligibility.
- Eligible for Pension Credit and/or other means tested benefits.
- In need of further financial or other support.

4.6 The data also cannot identify those who have not interacted with any agency for financial support.

## **5.0 Campaign Activity**

5.1 Rochford Council signed the 'Save the Winter Fuel Payment for Struggling Pensioners' petition on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2024. This was confirmed to Members in an email which also included a link to the petition offering the opportunity to also sign the petition.

## **6.0 Activities being carried out by Local Authorities and others**

6.1 Several promotional campaigns are currently underway to target individuals eligible for Pension Credit but not yet receiving it. These campaigns include direct contact from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and efforts by Essex County Council, focusing on pensioners who are no longer receiving the Winter Fuel Allowance. These initiatives aim to ensure that eligible individuals are informed about available financial support. Additionally, there is promotion of support for households that do not typically qualify for benefit-related assistance but are still experiencing financial difficulties.

6.2 In October 2024, the DWP launched an awareness campaign and issued an 'invitation to claim' to the 120,000 UK pensioner households that claim housing benefit but have not applied for Pension Credit. The deadline for pensioners to apply for Pension Credit and still receive this year's Winter Fuel Allowance, if eligible, is 20 December 2024.

6.3 Research has been undertaken to establish how other Essex based local authorities are responding to changes in the eligibility criteria for the Winter Fuel Payment.

6.4 Essex residents who are vulnerable and/or cannot pay for essentials costs can seek additional support from either Essex County Council, Thurrock or Southend as appropriate, through the Household Support Fund, which is funding provided by Government to help with costs such as energy, groceries, bills, and other essential items. A resident does not need to be in receipt of benefits to access this fund and those who are in receipt of benefits will not have their benefits affected if they receive a payment from the fund. The fund is provided by the DWP and distributed by councils across England. Residents can seek access to this fund via various access points, including the Essential Living Fund, community supermarkets and local voluntary organisations.

6.5 A total of £421 million has been allocated to the Household Support Fund nationally for the period 1 October 2024 to 31 March 2025. Of this, Essex County Council (ECC) have received £9.4 million for distribution across Essex.

ECC have agreed the allocation of £9.4million which will be distributed<sup>1</sup> in various ways including:

- £4.5 million for the Essential Living Fund to help with emergency crisis situations
- £2.8 million for winter vouchers for families in receipt of free school meals
- £1 million targeted to support low-income pensioners with core costs over the winter months via the Essential Living Fund
- £250,000 allocated to the Essex Association of Local Councils for foodbanks.
- £50,000 distributed across local Essex Citizens Advice offices to provide direct financial support to households experiencing financial hardship.
- £50,000 allocated to Essex Citizens Advice for training frontline workers, including library staff, district council staff, and voluntary sector staff.
- £10,000 retained by Essex Libraries to support the delivery of “Winter Warm Welcome” schemes, providing food, drink, and essential items to ensure vulnerable residents have a safe, warm place to go.

6.6 It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which these will be accessed by, and benefit residents in the district as it is dependant on those that apply.

6.7 A summary of the key initiatives and activity being provided by other local authorities are listed below:

- [Basildon Council](#) has introduced the Warm Home Guarantee to support pensioners during the winter months. The council has allocated £100,000 to help 1,000 pensioner households with their energy bills - each eligible household can receive a one-time grant of £100. The Council is also providing community advice and outreach.
- [Castle Point Council](#) has increased its existing Exceptional Hardship Fund by £50,000 to assist elderly residents who are in receipt of the state pension but are not eligible for the Winter Fuel Payment. Eligible individuals can receive £100, while couples can receive £200.
- Colchester Council’s Financial Equality and Wellbeing team is actively encouraging residents of pensionable age to apply for Pension Credit, a vital benefit that could significantly boost their income.
- Uttlesford Council is working with Citizens Advice and Age UK to promote Pension Credit uptake, ensuring more residents qualify for the Winter Fuel Payment and have set up a cost-of-living crisis for the 2023/2024 and 2024/2025 financial years to support residents who may be struggling to pay their Council Tax liability.

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<sup>1</sup> [Document.ashx](#)

- Southend-on-Sea City Council was allocated £1.4m by the DWP and has specifically allocated £250,000 to the Household Support Fund, whilst actively promoting Pension Credit uptake.
- [Thurrock Council](#) was allocated £1.2m by the DWP and has specifically allocated £100,000 to a pensioners winter support fund. It has also launched the Thurrock Cares Campaign which includes advice and help for residents on Pension Credit and other benefits and is working with community and voluntary services to ensure support reaches those in need.
- Tendring Council have held drop-in events where people can find out more about financial support available. They are also promoting partner events and support, including Peabody.
- Braintree Council, Brentwood Council, Epping Forest Council, Harlow Council have all committed to:
  - Promoting awareness of the criteria change and available support.
  - Urging the Chancellor of the Exchequer to review the means-testing decision for the Winter Fuel Payment.
  - Supporting Age UK's 'Save the Winter Fuel Payment for Struggling Pensioners' petition.
  - Encouraging local efforts to promote Pension Credit uptake through Council services and partnerships with local charities and community organisations to ensure all eligible pensioners receive their entitlements.
  - Brentwood is also looking at support it can provide to foodbanks.
- Chelmsford and Maldon have support pages available, but we are still researching their specific activity.

Having regard to all the above and having considered how Rochford Council could most effectively support its residents that need it over the winter period, the report proposes -

1. An ongoing communications campaign to ensure the Council is actively reaching out to residents to make them aware of the support available and how the Council can assist, with continued advice and support through the Council's Revenues and Benefits Service, Citizens Advice Bureau and other relevant partners. This will include information on the Council's website for residents to obtain information, and be signposted to sources of support available, supported by communications messages, and production of leaflets highlighting the key signpost options and contact details.
2. The creation of a £50K Transitional Winter Support Fund Fund to support pensioners who may not have been able to access any funding, or only limited support and are still suffering from fuel poverty and difficulties during the winter period. Details of the proposed fund and its operation are set out below which seeks to balance a relative ease in accessing funding, whilst ensuring that reasonable checks are undertaken and to mitigate any risks -



- Applications to be made on line preferably. The Council would be able to complete the on line form for customers if they attend reception on the revenues and benefits drop in day. Paper forms can be made available if absolutely necessary
- Successful applicants will receive a one off payment of £100
- Only one payment per household
- Applications will be open until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025 or until the fund is exhausted. Grants will be distributed on a first come first serve basis.

**Eligibility Criteria:**

**Age** – must be a pensioner (state pension age or above)

**Income** - not eligible for pension credit or other means tested benefits which would qualify for the Winter Fuel Allowance but have a household income of between £219 and £400 if single or £332 and £550 if a pensioner couple

**Capital** – must have capital of less than £10,000

**Residency** – must live in the RDC district and not have a second home

**Energy bill** – must be responsible for their own heating/energy bills for the current/upcoming winter period

**Evidence required:**

- Proof of age - e.g. state issued ID
- Bank statements – showing address, to confirm bank account details to pay the award into)
- Most recent heating/energy bill or receipt for pre-payment meters

**7.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

7.1 As referred to in the report, there is a range of advice and support available for residents as well as funding for eligible residents. The Council has the option of relying on these to support residents and not providing its own funding. There is also the option to make changes to the proposed grant scheme.

**8.0 RELEVANT RISKS**

8.1 The data from different sources (Census 2021, Policy in Practice, DWP) do not align, which could lead to inaccuracies in identifying and supporting those in need. This misalignment makes it challenging to ascertain the true number of households impacted by the changes in Winter Fuel Payment eligibility, those eligible for Pension Credit, and those requiring further support.



- 8.2 The data cannot identify individuals who have not interacted with any agency for financial support. This means that some eligible residents might not be reached, leaving them without the necessary assistance.
- 8.3 The effectiveness of the promotional campaigns and engagement activities depends on the availability and efficient allocation of resources. Insufficient resources could hinder the success of these initiatives.

## **9.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION**

- 9.1 A key proposal of this report is a campaign of engagement with residents who may benefit from support and assistance.

## **10.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

**Name & Title: David Dickinson – Resources & Section 151 Officer**

**Tel & Email: 01277 312500 / [david.dickinson@brentwood.rochford.gov.uk](mailto:david.dickinson@brentwood.rochford.gov.uk)**

- 10.1 The Councils Revenues and Benefits Team will be utilised as well as other existing council resources.
- 10.2 The £50k fund is to be a one-off fund to support the transition for those who were relying on the Winter Fuel Allowance this year but will not receive it. It is to be funded from anticipated underspends in the current financial year as identified by the S151 Officer. As referred to in the report, Basildon Council are operating a similar fund to that referred to above and it is understood that they have made around 150 awards of funding to date, at a total cost of circa £15k

## **11.0 LEGAL/GOVERNANCE IMPLICATIONS**

**Name & Title: Claire Mayhew, Corporate Manager, Legal and Governance**

**Tel & Email 01277 312500 / [Claire.mayhew@brentwood.rochford.gov.uk](mailto:Claire.mayhew@brentwood.rochford.gov.uk)**

Section 137 of the Local Government Act 1972 gives the councils the power to award grants for the benefit their residents.

## **12.0 EQUALITY & HEALTH IMPLICATIONS**

**Name & Title: Kim Anderson, Corporate Manager - Communities, Leisure and Health**

**Tel & Email 01277 312500 [kim.anderson@brentwood.gov.uk](mailto:kim.anderson@brentwood.gov.uk)**

The report seeks support the health and well-being of residents impacted by the withdrawal of the Winter Fuel Allowance. The council will seek to ensure as part of providing community advise and support that this is available and accessible to all residents and that a wide range of groups are engaged.

**13.0 ENVIRONMENT & CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS**

**Name & Title: Henry Muss, Sustainability & Climate Officer**

**Tel & Email 01277 312500 [henry.muss@brentwood.gov.uk](mailto:henry.muss@brentwood.gov.uk)**

There are no direct implications arising from this report.

**REPORT AUTHOR:**

**Name: Paul Burkinshaw**

**Title: Strategic Director / Deputy Chief Executive**

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**APPENDICES**

Appendix 1 – Letter sent to Chancellor of the Exchequer on 27 September 2024

**BACKGROUND PAPERS**

None

**SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)**

<b>Council Meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>
<b>Council</b>	<b>17/09/2024</b>



**Councillor James Newport (Liberal Democrat Group)**  
**Leader, Rochford District Council**  
**Representing Downhall and Rawreth**  
**Email: [cllrjames.newport@rochford.gov.uk](mailto:cllrjames.newport@rochford.gov.uk)**

Chancellor of the Exchequer  
11 Downing Street  
London  
SW1A 2AB

27 September 2024

Dear Chancellor of the Exchequer,

### **Winter Fuel Allowance Payments**

At Rochford District Council's Full Council meeting held on 17th September 2024, I along with all Members expressed our deep concern at the Government restricting eligibility for Winter Fuel Payments to those in receipt of Pension Credits and other benefits.

The Government's change in policy will result in the number of pensioners eligible for Winter Fuel Payments falling from 11.4 million to only 1.5 million across England and Wales, resulting in approximately 10 million pensioners being negatively impacted. In Rochford district alone the number of pensioners affected by the change in eligibility criteria is 17,729. This means 92.5% of pensioners currently eligible for a Winter Fuel Payment will not receive the payment this winter or onwards.

Restricting eligibility to only those in receipt of Pension Credit or other qualifying means-tested benefit means a large number of pensioners on low incomes who are only just above the threshold to qualify for Pension Credit or other benefits, will narrowly miss out. This will cause undue hardship on many of our residents and further to those on lower or middle incomes who have little to no time to adjust their spending to try to offset this loss.

It should also be noted that the eligibility criteria does not take account of those pensioners who may have high energy usage due to illness or disability and to which the Winter Fuel Payment is vital.

**Rochford District Council**  
**Council Offices, South Street,**  
**Rochford, Essex. SS4 1BW.**

**Website: [www.rochford.gov.uk](http://www.rochford.gov.uk)**

It is Rochford District Council's view that Government has set the threshold at which pensioners do not qualify for Winter Fuel Payments far too low. Only those receiving a pension of less than £218.15 a week (or £332.95 a week for couples) are eligible for pension credits. This is significantly lower than the living wage.

The proposed change to Winter Fuel Payments will contribute to an escalation in fuel poverty in England and Wales with pensioners unable to afford to keep their homes adequately heated over the winter months. Furthermore, it should be noted that the Energy Price Cap is due to rise by 10% in October 2024, which combined with the removal of Winter Fuel Payments will push thousands of local pensioners into fuel poverty. It means many pensioners will be taking the difficult decision to either heat their homes at the expense of other living essentials such as buying food or living in cold and damp properties and suffering the negative consequences to their health and mental wellbeing.

Rochford District Council is also concerned by the low take up of Pension Credit, with only 63% of those eligible nationwide receiving the benefit – and over 880,000 pensioners not doing so. As a Council we recognise the role we have to play in increasing awareness of benefits, such as Pension Credit, to ensure people are aware of the support they are entitled to. We have committed to raise greater awareness amongst our residents and a local campaign will commence shortly to maximise uptake of pension credits.

As Leader of Rochford District Council, I respectfully request the Government immediately pause its policy linking Winter Fuel Payments to Pension Credit receipt and that a new threshold be identified to determine eligibility for Winter Fuel Payments be introduced.

Finally, please note that I shall be sending a copy of this letter to our Members of Parliament asking them to give their support and the Council has also signed Age UK's Winter Fuel Petition.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Newport', written in a cursive style.

Councillor James Newport  
Leader, Rochford District Council