

Health and Adult Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee

5 December 2024

Member's Item: Winter Fuel Payment and its Impact on Health and Adult Social Care

Report from: Dr Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive
Dr David Whiting, Acting Director of Public Health

Author: Jackie Brown, Assistant Director, Adult Social Care
Teresa Salami-Oru, Interim Deputy Director of Public Health
Teri Reynolds, Principal Democratic Services Officer

Summary

This report sets out a response to a Member's item raised by Councillor Tejan, in relation to national changes to the Winter Fuel Payment and how this might impact on health and adult social care in Medway.

1. Recommendations

1.1. The Committee is asked to note the comments from the Director of People/Deputy Chief Executive and the Acting Director of Public Health in response to the Member's item.

2. Budget and policy framework

2.1. Under Medway Constitution Overview and Scrutiny rules (Chapter 4, Part 5, Paragraph 9.2) Councillor Tejan has requested that an item on this matter is included on the agenda for this meeting.

3. The issue

3.1. The Councillor Tejan has requested that an item be placed on the agenda in relation to the following:

3.2. The implications of the government's decision to withdraw the winter fuel allowance, and its specific implications on health and adults social care in Medway, with details to focus as follows:

- a. Implications on withdrawal and potential for pensioners to fail to heat their homes, and what additional pressures this will bring on the NHS and care system.
 - b. Implications on withdrawal and potential for pensioners to choose heating rather than eating and the potential pressures this will bring on NHS and care system.
 - c. Implications for adult's social care and wellbeing of pensioners.
 - d. Additional cost pressures on the council if this leads to deteriorating health inequalities.
 - e. Current pressures on public health from winter and cold weather and how this will exacerbate issue.
- 3.3. The Committee can use any of its powers in dealing with this Member's item, including making recommendations to officers or the Cabinet.
4. Response from the Director of People/Deputy Chief Executive and from the Director of Public Health
- 4.1. Implications on withdrawal and potential for pensioners to fail to heat their homes, and what additional pressures this will bring on the NHS and care system.**
- 4.1.1. The cessation of the Winter Fuel Payment has potential implications for both adult social care and the NHS although it is difficult to be precise about what these implications may be and for what particular individuals.
- Health Risks: The inability to adequately heat environments occupied by human beings may exacerbate health issues, particularly for those with pre-existing conditions like arthritis, respiratory problems, and cardiovascular diseases. [Cold environments can lead to higher blood pressure and increased risk of heart attacks and strokes.](#)
 - Social Care Demand: Should health deteriorate due to inadequate heating, there may be a higher demand for health and social care services. [This may place additional pressure on the health and social care system.](#)
- 4.1.2. It should be noted that other support, such as [cold weather payments](#) and the [warm home discount](#) are unaffected by the changes to the Winter Fuel Payment.
- 4.2. Implications on withdrawal and potential for pensioners to choose heating rather than eating and the potential pressures this will bring on NHS and care system.**
- 4.2.1. Pensioners too have various expenses, two of which are heating and food, and may need to make decisions about how they prioritise their income. If pensioners face a choice between heating and eating and choose to change

or limit their diet so that they eat less healthy food, this could potentially lead to poorer health outcomes; for example, through nutrient deficiencies, digestive problems and management of blood glucose levels in people with diabetes. This may in some circumstances increase their need for NHS services if these problems become severe.

4.2.2. However, it's not possible to quantify how many people, if any, may be in this position based on currently available information. To understand what choices people make and to determine how many people's health would deteriorate to such an extent as to increase their need for NHS services would require work beyond the scope of that which the council can conduct.

4.3. Implications for adults social care and wellbeing of pensioners.

4.3.1. This change may affect the mental wellbeing of pensioners and lead to changes in behaviour which may affect quality of life:

- Mental Wellbeing: The financial and physical implications of pensioners not being able to provide adequate heating can also impact mental health. [Anxiety and depression may increase, particularly among those who are already socially isolated.](#)
- Behavioural Changes: People may resort to wearing outdoor clothes indoors or only heating one room to save on energy costs. These measures, while practical, can lead to discomfort and perhaps a lower quality of life.

4.4. Additional cost pressures on the council if this leads to deteriorating health inequalities.

4.4.1. The Winter Fuel payment will only be payable if someone is over state pension age and receiving one of the following benefits:

- Pension Credit
- Universal Credit
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)
- Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA)
- Income Support
- Child Tax Credit
- Working Tax Credit

4.4.2. People receiving care and support funded by Adult Social Care, are required to complete a financial assessment (means test) to calculate how much/if they will pay towards the cost of their care. Adult Social Care excludes the winter fuel payment from the financial assessment; therefore, in this respect there is no impact on the council financially.

- 4.4.3. Individuals receiving adult social care and support funded by the council, who also receive a disability benefit and report mobility issues, have an additional amount of money disregarded from their financial assessment to consider increased heating costs. Adult Social Care disregards £14.40 per week for those who can mobilise with aids, and £18.24 per week for those who are bedbound or require assistance/hoists to move, as a Disability Related Expenditure, this reduces the amount they pay towards the cost of their care.
- 4.4.4. However, should demand increase as mentioned in the response to question a (paragraph 4.1), and the need for additional care and support packages are required, this will have an impact on the council's budget.

4.5. Current pressures on public health from winter and cold weather and how this will exacerbate issue.

- 4.5.1. As we enter the winter season, we are seeing the usual increase in infectious respiratory conditions, such as influenza. Winter pressures on acute hospitals have been the norm for a number of years now and this year is no different, with Medway Hospital seeing an increase in the number people needing a hospital bed.
- 4.5.2. Although there are several factors contributing to winter illness and death, in many cases simple preventative action could avoid many of the deaths, illnesses and injuries associated with the cold. The Public Health Directorate has cold weather plans in place which support preventative action. Robust capacity plans are in place to support the uptake of Flu and Covid vaccination and public communications in partnership with the wider council about residents keeping well through winter (for example, the Medway Food Partnership issues grants to food charities for winter on an annual basis).
- 4.5.3. For pensioners on low-incomes, it is important to ensure that they have registered for pension credit, if they are eligible, as this would entitle them to the Winter Fuel Allowance. The financial support provided by the Council has been discussed already at the Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 24 October 2024 (as referenced in background papers below).

5. Risk management

- 5.1. There are no significant risks to the Council arising from this report.

6. Financial implications

- 6.1. In direct terms, as noted in section 4.4, the Winter Fuel Payments are excluded from assessments for adult social care, so there will be no direct financial implications for the council. The indirect effects of potential increases in need resulting from potential changes in behaviour and heating of homes cannot be determined from currently available information.

7. Legal implications

- 7.1. There are no direct legal implications for Medway Council arising from this paper.

Lead officer contact

Teri Reynolds, Principal Democratic Services Officer

E: teri.reynolds@medway.gov.uk T: (01634) 332104

Appendices

None

Background papers

A related [Member Item on winter fuel payments](#) was considered at the Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 24 October 2024.