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## SNP 'can't guarantee' winter fuel payment as Reeves wields axe

- Nationalists have dropped their promise to give all pensioners a new winter fuel payment following Chancellor's cuts announcement
- Charities say they are already receiving calls from distraught pensioners

By TOM GORDON DEPUTY SCOTTISH POLITICAL EDITOR

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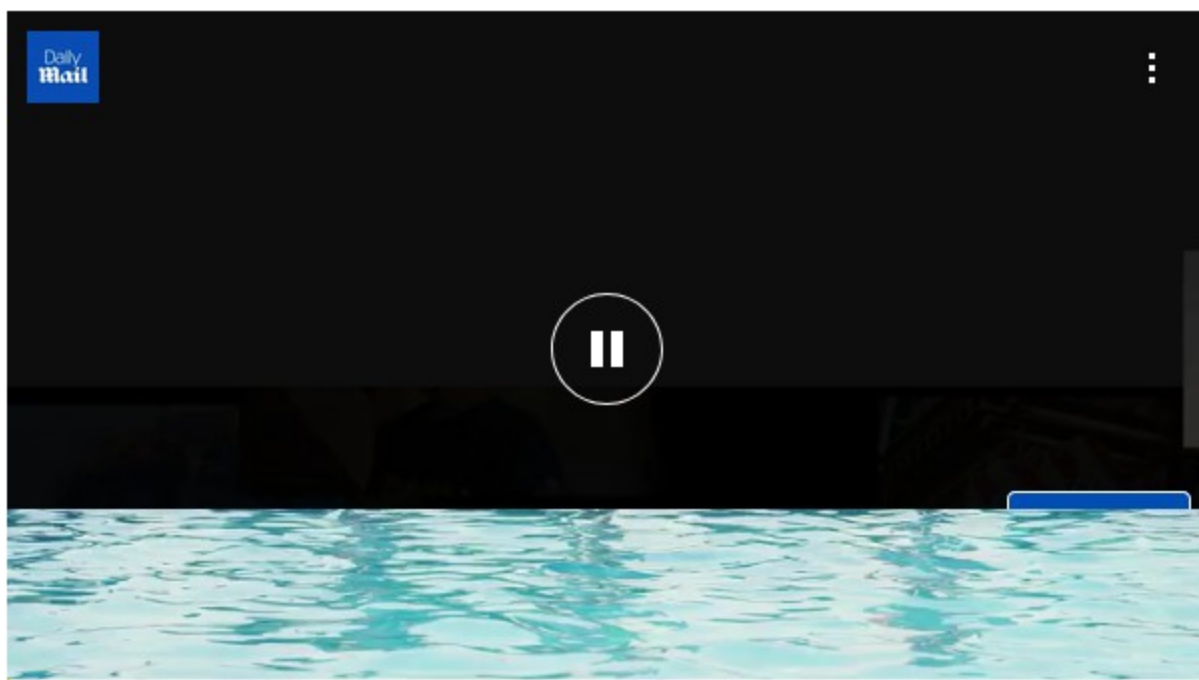


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SNP ministers have dropped their promise to give all Scots pensioners a new devolved winter fuel payment after **Rachel Reeves** slashed the UK version.

The Scottish Government is due to replace the Winter Fuel Payment with its own universal Pension Age Winter Heating Payment (PAWHP) within months.

Ministers said the 'like-for-like' swap this winter would give 1million Scots between £100 and £300 depending on age and insisted the benefit would not be means tested.



But the pledge is now under review after the Chancellor axed the Winter Fuel Payment for 10million pensioners UK-wide, cutting up to £160million from Holyrood's budget.

SNP Public Finance Minister Ivan McKee said he wanted the PAWHP to be universal 'but we need to look at the numbers very, very closely'.





**Chancellor Rachel Reeves is cutting the Winter Fuel Payment for 10 million pensioners**

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Ms Reeves is limiting winter fuel payment to the poorest 1.5 million pensioners on pension credit to save £1.5billion and help plug a £22 billion black hole in public finances.

Age Scotland called on the Chancellor to rethink her decision and urged the SNP Government to make PAWHP a 'universal benefit' if she did not.

Mr McKee told BBC Radio Scotland that Holyrood would lose most of the £180million grant it had expected to get from Westminster to pay for the devolved scheme.

'We only got told about this 90 minutes before it was announced, which is really concerning given Labour's grand talk about resetting the relationship with the Scottish Government.' Asked if his Government might mitigate the UK cuts to maintain a universal benefit, Mr McKee said: 'Who knows? We need to look at the

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data very, very closely.

'We think there will be at least £100 million... that we'll need to find from somewhere else if we want to continue to pay that winter fuel payment, which we absolutely want to do.' The Scottish Government later said it would lose 'up to £160 million'.

Age Scotland chief executive Katherine Crawford said the charity was already getting calls from 'distressed' older people.

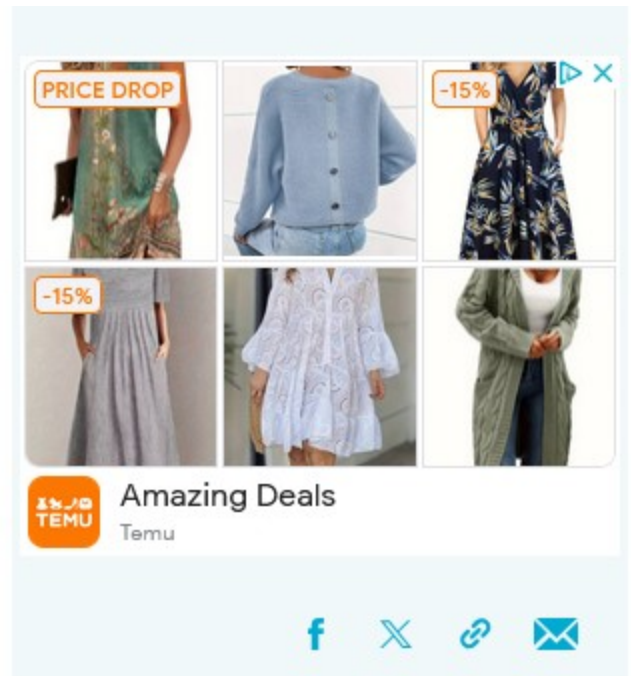
She said: 'The winter fuel payment is due to be devolved to the Scottish Government and our hope is that it will be restored as a universal benefit.'

'Scotland does generally experience worse weather than other parts of the UK and more than half of those who receive it use it as an important part of winter budgeting.'

'Keeping or reinstating the winter fuel payment will also ensure that money is going to those who need it most, when they need it most.'

Former Tory pensions minister Baroness Ros Altmann told the BBC she was 'shocked' the chancellor had chosen 'to take money away from some of the poorest people in this country'.

Ms Reeves said she had to 'fix the mess left by the previous government', accusing the Tories of covering up their 'deeply irresponsible' overspending.





**SNP Public Finance minister Ivan McKee said he was unsure where the Scottish Government would find the cash to continue the scheme north of the border**



'They were not decisions I wanted to make, they were not decisions I expected to make, but when confronted with a £22billion black hole, I had to act,' she said.

The Scottish Government's own advisers on poverty opposed a universal PAWHP.

The Poverty and Inequality Commission warned it was 'extraordinarily poorly targeted' and would represent 'inefficient spend' on reducing poverty across society.

It said help 'should be targeted, not universal' to have the most impact.

Scottish Secretary Ian Murray said SNP claims that Labour knew before the election that immediate spending cuts would be needed were 'completely and utterly wrong'.

He said: 'This is a £22billion in-year overspend by the previous government that they hid from the Office for Budget Responsibility.'

He said the SNP Government only got 90 minutes' notice because of 'market sensitivities' in the Chancellor's statement, adding: 'There's no wholesale cuts here.' Scottish Conservative MSP Miles Briggs denied the Tory administration had left financial problems behind and predicted Labour would hike taxes in the October 30 budget.

'That was something they weren't willing to say before the election,' he said.