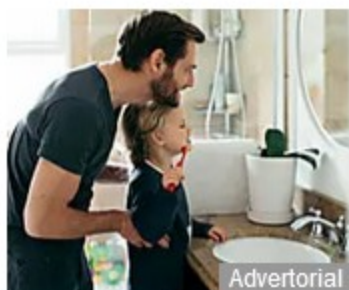




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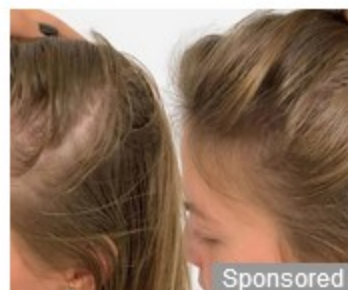


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Labour's winter fuel cash grab to put elderly's health in danger, warns ex-minister

Former Minister and older people's champion Baroness Ros Altmann backs Daily Express campaign to force a U-turn on scrapping the lifeline Winter Fuel Payment as Labour's relentless purge of OAP benefits will see snatched from millions during the coldest months of the year.

By **GILES SHELDRIK**

22:30, Tue, Aug 20, 2024



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Axing cold-weather payments will be a false economy if freezing pensioners end up in A&E this winter, a former minister has said.

Labour's relentless purge of OAP benefits means the £300 **Winter Fuel Payment** will be snatched from millions during the coldest months of the year.

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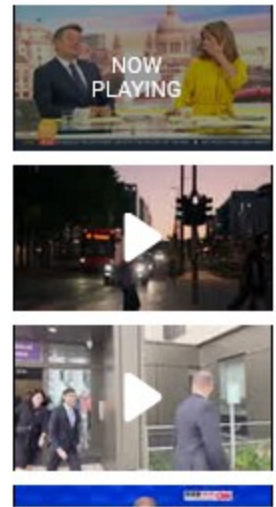
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The tax-free sum was available to everyone above **state pension** age, but will now be slashed and limited to those receiving Pension Credit or other means-tested support. Payment remains unchanged at £200 for those aged 66-79 and £300 for those over 80.

Baroness Ros Altmann, the campaigning peer and former boss of over-50s group Saga, said: "Older people need to keep their homes warm and if they don't have adequate heating, their health is at risk.



"This could actually then cost the Government more if they need to call on their GP or end up in A&E. One visit will mean a higher cost to taxpayers than the entire **Winter Fuel Payment**.



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"I have not seen any impact assessment of this surprise decision and can only imagine that it was a last-minute attempt to show sufficient cost-savings to justify other spending. But this is not the way to run social policy."



Labour wants to slash the amount paid to pensioners by axing the £300 Winter Fuel Payment (Image: Getty)



The 68-year-old former pensions minister, whose outspoken interventions have previously saved the allowance, free eye tests and free bus passes from cuts, has now thrown her weight behind this newspaper's Save Winter Fuel Payments campaign.

The number of OAPs entitled to the one-off payment will plummet from 11.4million to just 1.5million, estimates suggest.

Pensioners, many of whom are vulnerable and in poor health, have been given virtually no warning and no compensatory measures.

The surprise move by Chancellor Rachel Reeves is part of efforts to plug what Labour claims is a £22billion black hole in public finances "covered up" during the **Tories'** time in government.

The cash grab comes as pensioners prepare for a winter of discontent. **Cost-of-living** payments have stopped and the Household Support Fund, which provided help to the vulnerable or those unable to afford essentials, has closed.

Meanwhile, energy bills are about one third higher than they were three years ago and are set to rise once more. Forecasts suggest the fuel price cap will rise around 10 percent in the autumn, meaning many already struggling to survive will have no choice but to turn off their heating.

Average energy bills are likely to increase by £150 a year - which the £300 **Winter Fuel Payment** would have helped pensioners mitigate. Ofgem, the energy regulator, will reveal the new price cap on Friday.

Laura Trott, Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, said: "Instead of desperately trying to mitigate the impact of their own decisions, the Chancellor should come clean and publish the internal impact assessment so the public can truly see the damage of this policy."

About 1.4million pensioners are already receiving Pension Credit, but there are thought to be almost 900,000 households eligible for support who are yet to claim.

Experts dismissed the claim that means-testing fuel payments is fair because older people who need it the most will still be protected.



Labour's Winter Fuel Payment purge will deny 10million OAPs a cash payment (Image: Getty)



Age UK estimates at least 2million pensioners who already find paying energy bills a stretch will be “seriously hit” by the imposition of the blanket policy.

Those at risk include those on low incomes who just miss out on Pension Credit, those with high energy needs because of disability or illness, and at least 800,000 who do not receive the Pension Credit for which they are eligible.

In Scotland and Northern Ireland, where decisions about the payment are devolved, the situation remains unclear. However, it is likely the Government will no longer provide the cash to cover the cost.

Age UK charity director Caroline Abrahams said: “We believe that is the wrong policy decision because well-off older people will scarcely notice its loss, but an estimated 2million others on low and modest incomes, or who have very high energy bills through no fault of their own, will also miss out when they really depend on it to be able to pay their fuel bills.

"What worries us the most is we fear many will not be able to afford to stay adequately warm this winter as a result, potentially causing them enormous anxiety and distress, as well as undermining their physical health, especially if they are living with serious health conditions."



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Helen Morrissey, of Hargreaves Lansdown, said: "After years of sky-high heating costs, many pensioners will have relied on the **Winter Fuel Payment** and its withdrawal leaves a gap worth hundreds of pounds in the budgets of those not currently on Pension Credit.

"With the energy price cap estimated to rise by around 9 percent in the coming months, many pensioners could find themselves in an impossible position in winter without the extra support."

Mark Ashbridge, managing director of Ashbridge Partners, issued a dire warning over Labour's tax-raising agenda ahead of the Budget on October 30.

He said: "Chancellor Rachel Reeves has demonstrated that she intends to follow through on her election commitments and will perhaps be more aggressive in her approach than we first envisaged."