

The Update

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The latest news and announcements from Derbyshire UNISON

Energy Support Fund

The vice chair of There for You's board, Debi Potter, explains the upcoming phase of the Energy Support Fund



Get UNISON support with your energy bills

UNISON's welfare charity, There for You, has a long history dating back to the early 1900s and through UNISON's predecessor unions. Unique among trade unions, it was created to be a source of support for those members of the union who had fallen on hard times.

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Speaking of its historic purpose, Debi Potter, vice chair of the charity's board, says: "It was about bereavement, it was about relationship breakdown, it was about serious ill health that put people into a position where they needed to ask for assistance."

After a decade of below-inflation public sector pay rises and the more recent cost of living scandal, the simple fact is that members' pay often does not stretch far enough to make ends meet.

Important information

The Energy Support Fund will open on 27 September, with grants of £200 available to support low income members with their energy costs.

Due to finite funds, we can only accept 2,000 applications. 1,000 will be released at 8.30am and 1,000 at 5pm.

In previous rounds of this fund, demand has been so high that applications open and close within hours, so if you plan to apply, it might be helpful to set a reminder.

"It is a very, very sorry state of affairs," Debi says. "Employers are not giving the pay rises that our members deserve and that they need. So members are in a position where they are fighting constantly to keep their head above water and are having to turn to us as a charity. "We've seen the level of hardship being faced by members, and have tried to react in kind, with one of the most extensive support schemes the charity has ever run."

Since October last year, as well as the annual small grants programmes, There for You has run two phases of grants from its Energy Support Fund, aimed at providing financial relief for those members who are worried about paying their energy bills.

The third phase of the fund opens on 27 September (details at the top of this article) and, once it closes, the fund will have received around 8,000 applications for the £200 grants.

Debi is quick to add that, "None of this could have happened without the generosity of UNISON branches, who have helped the charity raise over £1m over the past year."

On the support fund, she continues: "What I would say is this - do check the eligibility criteria carefully before applying. And, if you are successful in your application, please make sure you send in the right documentation as soon as you are able.

"The quicker you do, the quicker you will receive the money. It also helps the charity avoid any backlog and assist as many members as possible, as quickly as possible."

The damage has been done

Although the government has confirmed that eligible means-tested benefit claimants will receive a £300 cost of living payment from September -- though it's not clear exactly when - the disparity between inflationary pressures and the public sector pay rises which have been seen over the last year are a real cause for concern.

Debi notes: "Even with the cost of living payments and the regulator's [Ofgem's] announcement that the energy price cap will drop by an average of 7% on October 1, many people will still be worried about what's going

Energy bills

If you are worried about not being able to pay your energy bills, contact your supplier as soon as you can. Under the regulator Ofgem's rules, your supplier must help you. Often this will involve negotiating a payment plan which you can afford, though some firms have their own hardship funds.

You can find a good source of information about what to do if you are struggling to pay your bills at [Money Saving Expert](#).

to happen over autumn and into winter, as their usage increases. Costs may come down a bit, but they won't come down enough."

She highlights that, though inflation has slowed, with RPI falling to 9% in July, "The damage has already been done and prices are continuing to rise at very high rates.

"I know of people who are taking sick leave at the end of a pay month, because they actually can't afford to get to work. They can't afford to take the bus, they can't afford to get there by car, they have no option but to not go to work.

"These people love their jobs. They have worked for their organisations for years and years and have really good attendance records - they just cannot afford to get in.

"Across the board, now, people are looking elsewhere, even in roles that were previously seen to be relatively well paid. They want to work in the public sector, but they just can't afford to.

"So they move to the private sector to pick up a wage which means that they don't have to visit food banks, that they don't have to sit in the dark at home, that they don't have to go off sick at the end of the month.

"The common analogy is stacking shelves in a supermarket. Earning the same money, or more, rigid hours, less responsibility, it's probably closer to home so you can walk there and save on transport, and you even get a discount in store, so your grocery bill goes down."

How you can access support

Though many of There for You's small grants programmes do have specific eligibility criteria, Debi is keen to emphasise that, "Actually, we are there for all members in

difficulty and we have a range of services we provide.”

These include:

[A benefits checker](#)

[A budget planner](#)

[Debt advice \(UNISON debtline\)](#)

[Wellbeing breaks](#)

[Financial assistance](#)

[General advice](#)

Debi concludes: “It’s important to add that anybody who deals with the charity does so on a non-judgmental basis. We see the problems and difficulties that people have every day and we really urge anyone struggling to come forward and seek support.”

> Find out more and details of how to apply for the next phase of the Energy Support Fund.