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**REACH says “YOU MAY BE ELIGIBLE”**

*REACH gets out & about to help struggling pensioners obtain what they are due and deserve.*

 With temperatures taking a nose dive as the new year opened up and forecasts threatening more of the same, Haverhill based, REACH Community Projects is witnessing perhaps the worst increase in cases of hardship for a long time.

While winter chills deliver financial upset to many households every year, this year the burden has been made extra heavy because of the absence, for many, of the Winter Fuel Payment (WFP) which has been a reliable lifeline for pensioners trying to make ends meet.

The cliff-edge cut off – between those on Pension Credits and those Not – has presented challenges to a great number of elderly who are borderline and who, perhaps, don’t realise it or find difficulty with the processes of government.

REACH’s CEO, Henry Wilson, commenting on the gravity of the situation, said “While it’s been several months since this change was announced, we are finding that many people are simply not used to having to apply for benefits. It may be unfamiliarity with the system, lack of digital communication ability, ill health or just frailty that has prevented those in most need from attaining what is rightfully theirs “.

But, REACH has been out and about in force helping many pensioner couples and individuals through what it takes to move back from the cliff-edge. A case in point which illustrates the predicament well is told by Helen, one of REACH’s Community Outreach Advisors.

*“I met with a couple, Irene and George, just before Christmas” Helen said “They are in their late 70s, and just about getting by, physically and financially. They suffer from the usual pains and difficulties getting around that can come with later years, unable to work (and why should they, at their age?), while also finding that their pension and savings are barely covering their essentials. Concerned about the loss of their Winter Fuel Payment, they were told by friends and family that they should apply for Pension Credit, but didn’t know how, and rightly turned to REACH.*

*“I chatted with them and checked their finances, only to discover that they fell short of being eligible for Pension Credit by just 75p. However, from speaking with them at length, I knew they would be eligible for other benefits instead, and promptly helped them to apply for Attendance Allowance, a council tax reduction, and a water rate reduction.*

*“These were all approved, and this has secured almost £500 a month for Irene and George – almost double the value of Pension Credit! For the older couple it is truly life-changing on a day-to-day basis. Irene pointed out that not only can they have the heating on without dreading the bill, but now, when they go shopping, they can just put the items in their basket without discussing each one and worrying whether they have enough pennies.”*

REACH knows that many people assume they aren’t eligible for financial support, but REACH aims to ensure no one is left too frightened to warm their home or do their weekly shop.

In addition to getting out there and helping in a practical way, REACH is campaigning for a more sympathetic and gentler approach from government. Saffron Carter is REACH’s Engagement and Advocacy Lead and said “We'd like to see the government re-evaluate the eligibility requirements on more of a sliding scale so that everyone can afford the essentials, and for them (HMG) to be more proactive in advertising the vast range of support available.“

So, the strong message from REACH to struggling pensioners at this most difficult time of the year is :-

Get in touch with REACH without delay. You may not know it but YOU MAY BE ELIGIBLE for all sorts of help.

**Ends**

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 *REACH Community Projects (registered charity 1169108) was founded in 2010 by Henry Wilson MBE, a lifelong resident of Haverhill. The charity aims to relieve and prevent financial hardship whilst tackling the causes. As well as operating a foodbank (part of the Trussell Trust national network) and providing emergency aid (help with utilities, basic bedding, and kitchenware through partnerships with other organisations), REACH works longer term with clients to help them rise above and out of their crisis. This includes offering debt and budgeting advice (REACH is part of the Community Money Advice network), signposting clients to other appropriate support (help with mental health, homelessness, legal advice etc.) and supporting clients in other ways including helping them to complete forms, apply for jobs, accompanying them to court hearings and more.*

*For further information, contact Emma Wilkins, Communications Manager, REACH Community Projects.*

