

## Is Our State Pension Safe in the Government's Hands?



A recent petition to raise the level of the state pension, and to lower the age to sixty for both men and women, comfortably reached the level at which the UK government had to respond. This they did and without quoting them word for word (as

it went on a bit) their response seemed to praise what they regard as the generosity of the state pension offering despite the fact that the UK has one of the worst levels of pensioner poverty in the OECD.

And it gets worse! Although there have been discussions at government level for quite some time now on the sustainability of the state pension in its present form, a recent report from the Adam Smith Institute, a right wing think tank with the ear of government, stated that a quarter of all pensioners were millionaires!

While we all digest this fact and stop laughing there is a serious element to all of this because what they have done is skewed the figures using a cleverly manipulated logarithm whereby everyone's property values, the value of any assets, stocks, shares etc, any income, savings and crucially, the size of a person's pension pot, are taken into consideration and if the overall figure sits above a certain amount, (they've said £1m but we all know what governments can do), they will no longer be automatically entitled to the state pension. It is reckoned that this measure alone could save the treasury £25bn a year.

The problem with all of this is the methodology used to calculate it.

## On the Cusp: State Pension Division Amongst a Generation

Amidst all the discussion around the generosity, or otherwise, of a 10.1% cost of living increase in the basic state pension, there is one group of people who have been largely ignored – those retiring before April 2016.

While Westminster has created a narrative around the notion that pensioners will now receive more than £200 per week in their state pension (still below their own poverty level we hasten to add), this much lauded figure only applies to the new state pension - those pensioners who retired after April 2016.

Anyone eligible for state pension before this date is entitled to be paid the older basic state pension, rising from £141.85 to £156.20 from April 2023 – quite the difference! While this represents an increase of £14.35 per week, it is dwarfed by the £18.70 rise of the new state pension, rising from £185.15 to £203.85, a gap which is only set to grow wider in successive years.

Surely it is unacceptable that a person's date of birth determines their entitlement to one rate of the same benefit over another. We cannot allow the present two-tier pension system to continue. We cannot just sit back and watch older pensioners become increasingly worse off over time in comparison to their younger counterparts.

The Scottish Pensioners' Forum will be lobbying the UK government to end this anomaly once and for all to ensure that ALL older people receive respect and dignity in their older years.

Let's consider as an example hospital consultants. One of the difficulties around recruitment and retention of this group of staff revolves around their pension scheme.

According to the BMA website, a consultant could retire at 59 - being just under the lifetime allowance limit, currently sitting at just over a million pounds. Whereas, by working even a year longer they are faced with a punitive tax regime meaning that it is cheaper to retire and sit at home rather than continue working for the NHS. Are we really saying that hospital consultants are no longer entitled to receive their state pension?

Consider someone who has a private pension paying twenty thousand pounds per year. (A pipe dream for many we know!) The size of pension pot needed to deliver an income of twenty thousand a year for life at current values is around £660,000. Under those circumstances it wouldn't take a particularly big house to fall foul of this proposal, bearing in mind a half decent three-bedroom flat in London alone could well cost half a million pounds. Are we really saying that these people are no longer entitled to their state pension?

There is also the issue of creep, in which successive budgets can either freeze or lower this figure of one million pounds. What is to stop a future Chancellor ruling that, as of a certain date, anyone in receipt of any kind of pension, occupational, stakeholder or private pension will not automatically qualify to receive the state pension?

What is certainly true is that as we have a falling birth rate and an ageing population, the strain on the public purse will increase and attacks on our **universal state pension** will only gain more traction.



# Don't Raise the State Pension Age: 68 is Too Late



In our Annual Report of 2022, we highlighted our involvement in the State Pension Age Review, conducted by Baroness Neville- Rolfe, considering the metrics surrounding state pension age eligibility. Due to the findings in her report, published in late March 2023, the UK Government has taken the decision not to push ahead with a proposal to increase the state pension age to 68 **however**, it is not off the table altogether just yet. As a result of this, the Scottish Pensioners' Forum has now joined forces with Unite the Union, through their **Campaign Unite for A Worker's Economy**, and a range of other organisations including the National Pensioners' Convention, to campaign against the raising of the state pension age to 68.

A petition calling on support for the campaign can be accessed here

<https://www.megaphone.org.uk/petitions/don-t-raise-the-state-pension-age-68-is-too-late> and we would greatly value your help with this.

A planned demonstration is being organised to hand the petition in to Mel Stride MP, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, and we will keep you updated on developments through our social media channels and networks.

## SPF Energy Campaign: Ofgem



The SPF's energy campaign against fuel poverty, which we kicked off with our demonstration in August 2022, gained some traction when we recently received a response to our demands from Neil Lawrence, Ofgem's Director of Retail. Representatives from the SPF were recently invited to meet with Neil and his team at their offices in Glasgow and, moving forward, we have been asked to be involved in their Stakeholder Reference Group and have also been invited to attend Ofgem's Vulnerability Summit being held in London on 24<sup>th</sup> April. Although these

are significant developments and a line of communication between the two organisations has now been established, our campaign is still ongoing. At our meeting, we told Ofgem quite clearly that they could be doing much more to help the most vulnerable in society during this cost-of-living crisis, and we will be sure to continue to make our voices heard until change is made.

## The Case of the Missing Minister

Here at the SPF, we were gravely disappointed on hearing the announcement made by the newly elected First Minister on his new Cabinet, as well as his junior ministerial roles, and the failure to include a portfolio dedicated specifically to older people's issues. As we all know, Scotland has an ageing population and the right decision was made in 2018 to appoint a Minister to deal with the specific issues facing our older people - so what we have to ask is have things really changed so rapidly since then?

Quite the reverse as far as we are concerned! The pandemic has only served to further highlight the inequalities facing older people in both welfare and care. We took a decision to write to the First Minister congratulating him on his appointment whilst also voicing our disappointment on this glaring oversight. Our Chair Rose Jackson remarked:

"In 2019, the Fairer Scotland for Older People: a framework for action report formed part of the Programme for Government, which widely acknowledged the gross inequalities facing Scotland's older citizens."

"Representatives on OPSAF worked closely together when the pandemic hit and were confident that the stellar work carried out beforehand with the then Minister, Christina McKelvie MSP would be reinstated as a priority moving forward – but it appears to have just been largely ignored."

"If Scotland is serious about being a progressive nation, it can't be seen to be regressing on its commitment to older people – what's fair in that?!"

We are also pleased to have recently joined forces with our Older People's Strategic Action Forum colleagues, spearheaded through a campaign by our affiliates at Age Scotland, forming a collective voice to government calling for the same demands - that a Minister for Older People be reinstated as a matter of priority.



# Independence as We Age



As raised by one of our members at a recent meeting, battery powered mobility scooters can often be a lifeline for people with mobility issues who wish to maintain a degree of independence when venturing out and about. Not everyone has access to a car, or during this cost-of-living crisis can afford to run one, and so many must rely on taxis or public transport to go further afield, which as we know is also better for the environment. Despite most buses now being wheelchair accessible, not all operators allow mobility scooters on board. Lothian Buses and McGill's, for instance, do not, while Stagecoach, First and West Coast Motors do – but with conditions!



Before travelling, a user must obtain a permit certifying that they can manoeuvre the machine unaided into a wheelchair bay, and that the machine meets the right size and weight criteria - these permits are issued by the individual operator. On trains, the position is not clear.

ScotRail, for instance, allows small scooters on board, but apparently only to transport the user to a 'normal' seat, with the vehicle then parked in a wheelchair bay, from which it must be moved if the space is required by a wheelchair user, even if the scooter rider is as, or more, disabled.

**The SPF would like to know if you, or someone you know, has experience of taking a mobility scooter onto public transport. If so, please get in touch to let us know.**

## Stuck at Stations?

It was recently brought to our attention that some users of the concessionary travel card in the Strathclyde area, both older and disabled people, had experienced some difficulty when using their card to travel by train after 10PM. As most main stations now close ticket offices in the late evening, tickets have to be issued via the payment machines which only cater for debit or credit card payments meaning some have been caught short and have had to rely on station staff to let them through the barrier to travel. However, this act of kindness by staff could mean a disciplinary for them as under their employment terms and conditions, no one is allowed through the barrier without a valid ticket to travel.



**We appreciate that all local authorities apply different conditions when issuing their travel cards however please let us know of any difficulties you may have faced as a consequence of this.**

## BT Restart Controversial Digital Rollout

You may remember from Issue 57 of *Scottish Seniors* that we highlighted the digital downside of the BT Openreach programme, whereby many service users could be left without a phone connection to emergency services, or use of their emergency alarm, if power is lost. BT gave assurances that they were halting the rollout as Ofcom had intervened stating that there had to be an alternative for the most vulnerable. However, the SPF has been monitoring this situation closely and it would seem that BT now aims to restart the programme by the end of April 2023. BT states however that those reliant on health pendants, or in areas where mobile signals are poor, will not be targeted for at least a year. How noble of them!



**No-one should be forced into adopting a service that doesn't fit their needs and BT should seriously think again and stop prioritising profit over people's safety – one size doesn't fit all!**



## Companionship Comes at a Cost



During the pandemic, pet ownership increased across the UK. For many older people, a pet is a real companion and can help overcome feelings of loneliness and isolation. Since the turn of the century when vet practices no longer had to be owned by a veterinary practitioner, many, if not most, are now owned by large corporations who have been able to offer attractive prices to vets seeking to retire. These corporations are often funded by private equity funders, who, apart from the vet practices themselves, may also own animal hospitals and crematoria, as well as medicine and pet food suppliers – Mars Petfoods being a prime owner of one such concern. Cross-selling provides these corporations with a useful income stream and there is growing concern that these groups have used their corporate muscle to drive up prices.

**Have you noticed any unduly sharp rises in your vet bills lately? Is your pet taking too much from your pocket? Please let us know.**



# Out and About



In line with our outreach programme to speak to older people across Scotland on how the cost-of-living crisis is impacting them, the SPF held an outreach meeting in Falkirk Trinity Church in March. Issues discussed on the day included access to GP services, problems with self-referral to podiatry and other services, the decline of community transport across the Falkirk area and the escalating prices of energy and food leaving many older people at high risk of serious illness as a result of this. As a consequence of our meeting, Falkirk's People's Assembly asked us to

support their demonstration against local authority cuts – and we were more than happy to oblige!

We will continue to meet, and work with, local groups across Falkirk in the coming months.



## Outreach Meeting: Greenock 16th May 2023 11AM

The SPF will be holding an outreach meeting on **Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> May at 11AM at Greenock Morton Supporters' Club, 42A Regent Street, Greenock PA15 4PL**. Please come along and participate in our open discussion and tell us how the cost-of-living crisis is affecting you and your local area. Refreshments will be available on arrival.

## Annual Conference 2023

Just a reminder that the 31st Annual Conference of the Scottish Pensioners Forum will take place on **Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> June 2023 at Aberdeen Town House** and we would like to take this opportunity to thank Aberdeen City Council for their hospitality in helping to host the event.

Our annual conference is open to all SPF members, affiliated organisations and invited guests and Mercedes Villalba MSP is confirmed as one of our guest speakers.

All relevant conference paperwork has been sent to our members and must be returned to us no later than **Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2023**

We hope that you can come along and celebrate another successful year of campaigning from the SPF.



**Join the Scottish Pensioners' Forum**

**Campaigning for a better deal for older people since 1992**

[www.scottishpensioners.org.uk](http://www.scottishpensioners.org.uk)

**PLEASE NOTE OUR NEW ADDRESS:**

**Margaret Irwin Centre, 8 Landressy Street, Bridgeton, Glasgow G40 1BP Telephone 0141 337 8113**

**Also on Twitter @ScotPensForum**