



PERSONAL FINANCE



So sorry... too late

Dave Cheshire's last wish was for his wife to be saved from hardship. So when a pension 'lifeboat' failed to pay out, she told her dying husband that it had – the truth was too hard to bear. Bureaucrats say they are sorry. But STILL this brave woman is forced to wait ...



Picture: GEORGE HAWORTH

By Jeff Prestridge

Today, as she has done every Sunday for the past five months, Marlene Cheshire will visit her husband's memorial. She will replace the flowers and clean the black memorial stone, quietly remembering the man she was married to for 40 years and who died from prostate cancer in July. He was 62.

'He was my teenage sweetheart and the only love of my life,' she recalls. Dave Cheshire's epitaph poignantly expresses how much Marlene and her daughter Claire, 33, mourn him: 'Forever in our thoughts. Never forgotten. We miss you.'

As she makes the short journey to the cemetery from her home in Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire, 61-year-old Marlene will drive past the industrial site where Dave spent more than 30 years of his working life. His last job was as a press operator.

The site was home to shelving company Dexion until the firm went into administration in May 2003. The factory has been demolished and replaced by industrial buildings yet to be occupied.

'I find it quite ironic that I am reminded of Dexion every time I go and say hello to Dave,' says Marlene.

There is a hint of anger in her words. For Marlene has not only lost her husband, she has been left to fend for herself financially and fight for the works pension Dave contributed to and which she thought was secure and hers by right. She feels betrayed.

'Some days I just stand in the middle of my living room and scream for five minutes and let all the frustration out of my system,' she says.

Her financial problems stem from the collapse of Dexion, which triggered the automatic winding-up of the Dexion Group Pension and Assurance Scheme.

The pension fund does not have suffi-



Betrayed: Marlene Cheshire, one of 80,000 victims of pension scheme wind-ups, is fighting for the works pension of her late husband Dave. Inset: On his 50th birthday, with daughter Claire

cient assets to meet the promises made to all 2,100 members. The result is that the pension of about £10,000 a year that Dave should have started to receive when he turned 62 in October last year has never been paid.

And it was the same with the £50,000 death benefit Marlene should have received soon after his death.

The only spot of good news is that the pension scheme sent Marlene a cheque for £591.50 for four months of 'widow's pension arrears'.

Yet this money, described as a 'special interim' payment, is less than half her proper entitlement.

In May last year, the Government promised people such as Marlene and other victims of pension scheme wind-ups that they would receive financial help through the Financial Assistance Scheme. The scheme is administered by the Department for Work and Pensions.

Yet the FAS, armed with £20 million of taxpayers' money for each of the

next 20 years, has yet to make a single top-up payment to any of the 80,000-plus victims of pension scheme wind-ups.

This is despite a promise made to a few 'urgent' victims, including Marlene, that they would receive priority payments.

The money was supposed to ensure an annual pension equal to 60 per cent of what they would have received had their schemes not failed.

'It's a scandal,' says Ros Altmann, a pensions expert and a governor at the London School of Economics.

'The FAS has merely compounded these injustices. It is proving difficult for pension scheme trustees to register and there are so many exclusions that it seems almost as if the FAS is deliberately designed to pay out as slowly as possible.'

Marlene has just received a letter from Mike Le Brun, head of policy at the FAS, telling her that 'it is looking very unlikely that we will be in a position to make any payments to you by the end of December as we had hoped'.

He adds: 'I am extremely sorry and appreciate that this is a significant disappointment.'

The continued delays, argues the FAS, are a result of the mountain of information it is demanding from trustees of pension scheme wind-ups. First, it must

ensure that failed schemes qualify for help. Then it requires trustees to provide details of individual members eligible for the first wave of payments. These are the terminally ill, widows such as Marlene and anyone over 65.

Only after this information has been received and checked by the FAS will payments be made. The FAS also needs to obtain individuals' bank details. A DWP spokesman said that the FAS was 'confident of making some payments before the end of the year'.

But if any are made, Marlene will not be among those receiving them.

Le Brun refused to comment further on her case.

Not that she will give up without a fight. Last week, buoyed by receiving her interim payment, she was among pension scheme wind-up victims who met Work and Pensions Secretary John Hutton to press him for action. A day later she was back in London to meet Conservative MPs.

'A day before Dave died, when he was in hospital, I told him a lie, one of the few lies I ever told him,' says Marlene.

'I said that I had managed to salvage his pension, that we'd got our money at long last. I did it because Dave was such an honest, hard-working man and I wanted him to meet his maker at peace with the world.'

'Do I regret the lie? No, but when I get back the pension my Dave worked for during the best years of his life, I'll pay his memorial a special visit and tell him the truth.'

'When I get the pension, I'll pay a special visit to tell him the truth'

