

Public Document Pack

**Democratic Services Section
Legal and Civic Services Department
Belfast City Council
City Hall
Belfast
BT1 5GS**

19th February, 2025

MEETING OF STRATEGIC POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Dear Alderman/Councillor,

I enclose a copies of the report for the following items to be considered at the meeting to be held at 9.30 am on Friday, 21st February, 2025.

Yours faithfully,

John Walsh

Chief Executive

AGENDA:

2. Restricted Items

- (b) Housing Led Regeneration Update (Pages 1 - 22)
- (i) Fleadh Cheoil update (Pages 23 - 26)
- (k) Request from UTV to film at St George's Market (Pages 27 - 28)
- (l) Events to mark the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day (Pages 29 - 32)

4. Belfast Agenda/Strategic Issues

- (g) Draft response to Department for Communities Social Fund Winter Fuel Payment Scheme Policy Changes - Draft Equality Impact Assessment (Pages 33 - 36)

8. Operational Issues

- (d) Minutes of the Meeting of the Social Policy Working Group (Pages 37 - 40)

By virtue of paragraph(s) 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 6
of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

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Subject:	Draft response to Department for Communities Social Fund Winter Fuel Payment Scheme Policy Changes - Draft Equality Impact Assessment
Date:	21 February 2025
Reporting Officer:	John Tully, Director of City and Organisational Strategy
Contact Officer:	Kevin Heaney, Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty

Restricted Reports

Is this report restricted? Yes No

Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.

Insert number

1. Information relating to any individual
2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual
3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)
4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter
5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained
6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction
7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime

If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?

After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>	
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Sometime in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Call-in

Is the decision eligible for Call-in? Yes No

1.0	Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues
1.1	The purpose of this paper is to submit for the consideration of Committee a draft corporate response to the Department for Communities (DfC) draft Equality Impact Assessment of the proposed policy changes to the Social Fund Winter Fuel Payment Scheme.

2.0	Recommendations
2.1	<p>The Committee are asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. note the draft EQIA report on the changes to Winter Fuel Payment Scheme – CLICK LINK ii. consider the proposed approach by Council to responding as set out at para 3.8 and 3.9 iii. agree that the draft Council response be submitted to the Department for Communities
3.0	Main report
3.1	<p>The Department for Communities recently launched a consultation and draft Equality Impact Assessment report on policy changes to the Social Fund Winter Fuel Payment Scheme. The closing date for feedback is 2 March 2025. The consultation relates to the policy change which limits the annual Winter Furl Payment to pensioners in receipt of Pension Credit or other means tested benefits.</p>
3.2	<p>Previously, the Winter Fuel Payment was a non-means tested annual payment ranging from £100 to £300 paid to pensioners. Payments were made on a household basis. On 29th July 2024, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that from Winter 2024/2025 onwards, only those receiving Pension Credit or other means tested benefits would continue to receive the annual Winter Fuel Payment in England and Wales.</p>
3.3	<p>Whilst the Winter Fuel Payment Scheme is a devolved matter for Northern Ireland, on 30 August 2024, the NI Executive announced a move to restrict Winter Fuel Payments to pensioners receiving Pension Credit or other means tested benefits. The EQIA report states that not doing so would have significant financial implications with an estimated cost of £41million+ annually.</p>
	<p>Key Issues</p>
3.4	<p>Members will be aware of a separate, but related report, on the Committee’s agenda on Fuel Poverty. As highlighted in that report, many households are experiencing the perfect storm with a combination of higher energy prices, reduced incomes, and leaky, energy inefficient housing. These pressures come at a time when many household budgets are already stretched thin and there is a significant risk that many households are pushed further into fuel poverty and widening inequalities.</p>
3.5	<p>Mitigating the worst impacts of the cost-of-living crisis and tackling ever increasing poverty levels within the city has been a key priority for Elected Members, both in addressing immediate needs, including energy poverty, and offering people a route out of poverty through tailored wraparound support and advice through Social Supermarkets and other interventions. The Council would highlight the collaboration which has taken place with DfC, and the role of Council working closely with community partners to get significant funding (in excess of £3million over last three years) and support to those impacted by fuel poverty across the city.</p>

3.6	Members will also be aware of a number of Notice of Motions submitted over recent years calling for a widening of the Winter Fuel Payment Scheme by the NI Executive to help alleviate the adverse impact of escalating fuel costs as well as supporting vulnerable people to heat their homes.
3.7	The Council has also previously supported a National Energy Action (NEA) led initiative involving 140 organisations, to submit an open letter to the previous UK Government calling for targeted support for energy bills including possible social tariff for energy.
	Belfast City Council Response
3.8	It is proposed that the Council responds to the consultation highlighting the need for a whole-system approach to be brought forward to support people in poverty across the region with a focus on new innovative technologies and financial models to support this. It would also be prudent to highlight the need to ensure directly related strategies and schemes currently being consulted upon (e.g. draft Fuel Poverty Strategy) are aligned through a Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Strategy, which is being called for my multiple sectors.
3.9	It is also proposed that the Council's response highlights that we would welcome the opportunity to work closely with the Department and NICS colleagues to bring forward immediate and practical support initiatives, alongside co-designing an integrated and longer-term strategy to help alleviate all aspects of poverty being experienced across the city and wider region.
	Financial & Resource Implications
3.10	There are no financial or human resource implications arising directly from this report.
	Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment
3.11	There are no equality/ good relations or rural needs implications arising directly from this report.
4.0	Appendices – Documents Attached
	None

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Social Policy Working Group

Tuesday, 11th February, 2025

MEETING OF THE SOCIAL POLICY WORKING GROUP

HELD IN THE CONOR ROOM AND
REMOVED VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS

Members present: Councillor Doherty (Chairperson); and
Councillors F. McAteer, I. McLaughlin and R. McLaughlin.

In attendance: Ms. S. McNicholl, Deputy Chief Executive/Director of
Corporate Services;
Mr. J. Tully, Director of City and Organisational Strategy;
Ms. C. Sheridan, Director of Human Resources;
Ms. N. Bohill, Head of Commercial and Procurement
Services;
Mr. K. Heaney, Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty;
Mr. D. Logan, Senior Programme Delivery Manager;
Ms. C. Patterson, Policy and Programme Manager,
Inclusive Growth;
Ms. M. Robinson, Belfast Business Coordinator;
Ms. K. Murtagh, Enterprise and Business Growth Officer;
and
Mr. C. Mealey, Committee Services Officer.

Apologies

An apology was reported on behalf of Councillor Smyth.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 13th August, 2024 were approved by the Working
Group.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were recorded.

Actions Update

The Working Group noted the Decision and Action Tracker.

Social Value Procurement Policy (SVPP)

SVPP – Delivery Report

The Working Group was provided with an update on the delivery of social value outcomes via open tender competitions awarded in accordance with the Council's Social Value Procurement Policy (SVPP), for the reporting period 1st September – 30th November, 2024.

The Head of Commercial and Procurement Services advised the Working Group that, during the reporting period, 40 tenders had been awarded by the Commercial and Procurement Services (CPS) team and the Property and Projects Department. She highlighted that the SVPP had been applied to 25 of the tenders awarded and that the following social value organisational behaviours had been selected to be included:

- Ethical Procurement Policies – included in 5 out of the 25 tenders awarded;
- Environmental Management Systems – included in 7 out of the 25 tenders awarded; and
- HR Policies – included in 10 out of the 25 tenders awarded.

She provided a summary of the reasons why SVPP had not been applied to 15 of the tenders awarded, that included:

- 1 direct award;
- 10 awards where an external framework had been used;
- 2 awards where the value of the contract within the tender was less than £30,000; and
- 2 awards where social value was considered not viable due to short project timescales.

The Working Group was advised that the Social Value Review Team would continue to review the implementation of SVPP, including on the use of reserved contracts, social value organisational behaviours and the quality of social value offered by suppliers.

Noted.

SVPP – Applying a Minimum Contract Period

The Working Group considered a report that recommended an amendment to the SVPP that would enable flexibility in respect of applying social value scoring and weighting to tenders with a short duration contract of less than 6 months.

The Working Group was advised that, to date, the SVPP had been applied to 101 tenders. It was highlighted that the contracts with a duration period of less than 6 months had presented officers with a number of challenges in respect of the SVPP toolkit being applied, including impracticality, a negative impact on the number and quality of submissions, and difficulties in respect of suppliers delivering meaningful social value initiatives in a short period of time.

During discussion, a number of Members highlighted the success of SVPP, and the importance of social value being applied to all tenders. The Members further highlighted that, to date, there had only been a small number of projects procured by the Council that were of short duration of less than 6 months, and that further information, including feedback from suppliers in respect of the challenges, would be beneficial to help inform the Working Groups consideration of potential amendments to the SVPP.

After discussion, the Working Group agreed that a report would be brought back to a future meeting that provided further information on the challenges faced by officers and suppliers in relation to SVPP being applied to short duration contracts and that it would outline a range of options in respect of potential amendments to the SVPP and associated social value toolkit.

Belfast Business Promise

The Belfast Business Promise Programme Coordinator presented the Working Group with a progress update on the Belfast Business Promise that included:

- **Partner Update** – The Council was now working closely with Advice NI in respect of increasing Real Living Wage (RLW) employers in line with pledge one of the Belfast Promise;
- **Supporter Accreditation** – 52 organisations had achieved Supporter accreditation to date;
- **Member Accreditation** – 15 organisations had achieved Member accreditation to date with a further 5 organisations set to achieve Member accreditation in February 2025;
- **Ambassador Accreditation** – 3 organisations were set to achieve Ambassador accreditation in February 2025;
- **Pledges** – 123 pledges had been accredited to date;
- **Technical Panels** – 14 panels convened during the period of September 2024 – January 2025, with a further 3 panels scheduled for February 2025; and
- **Belfast City Council** - achieved Member accreditation in October, 2024, achieved pledge 8 accreditation in February, 2025, and on course to achieve Ambassador accreditation in June, 2025.

She provided the Working Group with a further update on the Belfast Business Promise including the recruitment of an Enterprise and Business Growth Officer, the interim evaluation and next steps. She informed the Working Group of Promise Learning Days scheduled to be held on 27th February and 1st May and invited the Members to attend.

In response to several Members questions in respect of support for organisations, the Belfast Business Promise Coordinator advised the Working Group that the Belfast

Business Promise team had worked closely with the Enterprise and Business Growth team to provide support to organisations to work towards accreditation. She highlighted that the Promise Learning Days had provided an opportunity for organisations to network and that the roll out of the Peer Support Network would further help support organisations across the business community.

Noted.

Corporate Social Responsibility - Tackling City Challenges and Maximising Social Impact: Discussion on Proposed Approach to Shape an Inclusive City

The Director of City and Organisational Strategy advised the Working Group that the purpose of a proposed approach was to align the social activity of organisations with the objectives set out in the Belfast Agenda, through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), in order to address city wide challenges, maximise social impact and shape an inclusive city.

The Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty highlighted the Belfast Business Promise and the current social value activity of organisations across the city. He explained that a CSR approach would build on and enhance this social value activity. He advised that the vision would be centred around three core themes - Our People, Our Communities and Our Planet.

He outlined to the Working Group the current landscape in respect of social value activity, city-wide challenges, and the potential options for the development of an approach.

During discussion, Members highlighted the potential benefits of the proposed CSR approach in enhancing the current social value activity across Belfast. The Members further highlighted the importance of not displacing current social value activity and the need for Belfast's anchor institutions, both in the public and private sector, to play a key role in forming a collaborative and informed approach to CSR.

The Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty outlined the next steps that included the establishment of initial engagement with organisations and anchor institutions in respect of a CSR approach, and that further updates would be brought back to the Working Group for consideration.

Date of Next Meeting

The Working Group noted that its next scheduled meeting was Tuesday, 13th May, 2025.

Chairperson