



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
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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 Fuel 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