



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Strategic Policy and Resources Committee.
Subject:	Fuel Stamps Scheme
Date:	24 October 2008
Reporting Officer:	Suzanne Wylie, Head of Environmental Health, ext 3281
Contact Officer:	John Corkey, Environmental Health Manager (Public Health), extension 3289

Relevant Background Information

The officer group facilitating the All Party Reference Group on Older People has developed an action plan around the delivery of council services to older people. The plan is designed to facilitate a one council approach by both building on existing services and, where possible, identifying new or innovative ways of meeting the needs of older people.

One of the principal areas of concern is fuel poverty and the impact that it has on older people in particular. A household is in fuel poverty if, in order to maintain an acceptable level of temperature throughout the home, the occupants would have to spend more than 10% of their income on all household fuel use.

The 2006 House Condition Survey has reported fuel poverty in Belfast at 38.5% of households, however, recent fuel price rises are likely to have increased this figure significantly. The survey also confirms that older people, and lone older people in particular, are most likely to be in fuel poverty.

Some district councils in Northern Ireland currently operate "Fuel Stamps" schemes for domestic heating oil users. These schemes are designed to help people who are in, or are close to, fuel poverty to better manage their fuel costs. Whilst such a scheme will not reduce fuel poverty it can ensure that people who are struggling to budget for everyday living are encouraged to set money aside to help with their heating costs.

It is a relatively simple procedure whereby members of the public are given a card, on request, and they can then buy stamps (e.g. at £5 each) which they stick on the card and are able to build up credit that will be accepted by specific participating oil companies towards their fuel bills. The scheme is facilitated principally by participating retail outlets but can also be supplemented by Council staff located in public buildings, such as leisure centres.

The scheme utilises a savings method that would be very familiar to older people and therefore one they are more likely to feel comfortable with. The experience of other district councils operating similar schemes is that they are very popular.

A fuel stamps scheme operating across the Belfast City Council area would be of a significantly greater magnitude than any of the existing council schemes. In order therefore to measure its feasibility and the potential resource implications of a comprehensive scheme it would be necessary to apply a pragmatic and manageable approach in the first instance by piloting it in a defined area of the city. Currently the Council is represented on the North and West Belfast, Investing for Health, Fuel Poverty Community of Interest (COI). As part of its action plan the COI has been delivering a pilot project in North Belfast which is designed to target fuel poverty through energy efficiency programmes, grants, community development and communication. The Council has already demonstrated its support for the project with a £5,000 contribution (Health and Environmental Services Committee of 5th December 2005). The project is delivered by National Energy Agency (NEA) and its Chief Executive has confirmed that it would be keen to facilitate the Council in identifying retail outlets and distributing cards and stamps.

Key Issues

- Belfast City Council is committed to addressing issues affecting older people.
- Over 38% of households in Belfast are in fuel poverty with older people the most affected
- Rising fuel costs continue to increase the number of households affected
- Fuel stamps schemes operate successfully in a number of district councils and are very popular with the public.
- The scheme provides a savings approach that is familiar to many older people.
- Belfast City Council has been offered tangible support from NEA to roll out a pilot fuel stamps project.
- Whilst the pilot could be accommodated within existing budgets it is anticipated that additional resource would be required to operate the scheme across the city.

The vires for incurring expenditure for this pilot and any subsequent roll out would be under section 115 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972, if, in the opinion of the Committee, the expenditure would be in the interest of, and would bring direct benefit to the inhabitants of the district, with the Committee being satisfied that the direct benefits so accruing would be commensurate with the payments to be made.

Resource Implications

These are mostly associated with printing and administration costs

- 20,000 stamps - £4845 (includes set up costs)
- 1,000 cards and 1,000 flyers - £650
- Design costs £600
- Administrative costs for pilot would be met from within existing budgets
- Operational and administrative costs for roll out to be identified through the pilot and a further report brought back to Committee
- Officers are continuing to seek additional funding streams

Recommendations

It is recommended that Committee agrees to the piloting of a "Fuel Stamps" scheme by the Council, in partnership with NEA, with a view to rolling it out across the city and that it approves expenditure on this project under section 115 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972.

Key to Abbreviations

NEA – National Energy Agency