



**Belfast City Council Officer Group on  
Older People**

**Evaluation Report on the Fuel Stamps  
Saving Scheme Pilot**

**April 2009**



**Councillor Diane Dodds, Chair of the All Party Reference Group on Older People, launches the Fuel Savings stamp scheme pilot at the Grove Well Being Centre in January 2009.**



## **Executive Summary**

Belfast City Council's All-Party Reference Group on Older People has identified fuel poverty as a major problem for many people, including older residents. The Group therefore suggested that the Council should deliver a savings stamp scheme to help people who were in, or were close to, fuel poverty to better manage their fuel costs.

Some other district councils already operate similar schemes very successfully however it was felt that, in the case of Belfast, the Council should first test the option by delivering a pilot in a fuel poor area of the city. This would then provide the Council with the opportunity to decide whether or not to roll it out across the rest of the city. This approach was endorsed by the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee on 24th October 2008 who also recommended that a review should be taken of the pilot scheme after the winter period.

The scheme was duly designed and run by a small team under the direction of the Officer Working Group on Older People. It was partially supported on the ground by NEA NI and was delivered in an area of North Belfast where NEA was already active in managing a fuel poverty project.

The project started on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2009. It involved 14 retailers and other outlets, including the Grove Well Being Centre. Cards and stamps were issued to the participating outlets and they were asked to sell the stamps and then lodge the income in a Council Bank account. Users of the scheme were then able to use the stamps as payment, or part payment, for their domestic fuel oil when they purchased from one of the 14 participating oil companies. The Council in turn reimbursed the oil companies on receipt of the stamps.

Detailed security procedures, reconciliation forms, claims forms, receipt books and guidance notes were drafted. Management, oversight and direction of the scheme was provided by the project management team who kept close control of the operational and administrative issues. From January to March 2009 stamps worth £5,845 were sold to the public.

An evaluation of the scheme included surveys of customers, retailers and oil companies as well as NEA NI and Council staff involved in the scheme. There was a very positive reaction from the users and the partner organisation and it was also generally welcomed by the retailers, other outlets and the oil companies. Operational costs (not including officer time) up to the end of March 2009 amounted to £6,785.26.

The positive reaction to the pilot would suggest that a savings stamp scheme would be beneficial to those who are struggling to meet their fuel costs and the Council now has the experience, skills and procedures to deliver it city wide. Such a scheme however could not be delivered by the Council without a significant increase in resources being directed to it.

## **Introduction**

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. Fuel poverty is therefore determined by income, energy efficiency and fuel costs.

The Executive, through the Investing for Health Strategy and the Department for Social Development (DSD), through its Fuel Poverty Strategy, have set challenging targets for the reduction and elimination of fuel poverty. There is now an acceptance however that meeting these targets will prove to be very difficult and that fuel poverty is going to be a reality for many people for the foreseeable future.

Continuing efforts are being made however to deliver on the Government's objectives and much good work has been done in seeking to reduce fuel poverty or to minimise its impact. The Government's Warm Homes Scheme, funded by DSD, is designed to improve domestic energy efficiency and reduce energy consumption in eligible private housing. Since its launch in 2001 it has provided energy efficiency measures to over 60,000 homes.

The continuing impact, however, of the economic downturn on household income and the fluctuation in oil prices suggests that fuel poverty will continue to be a major problem for many people.

Although there has been a significant drop in fuel costs over the last year this is effectively a readjustment following unsustainable price rises last year. The 2006 House Condition Survey identified 34% of Northern Ireland households in fuel poverty with Belfast at 38%. It is also reasonable to assume however that overall price rises since 2006 will have increased this figure to well over 40%.

In addition, the problems associated with high fuel costs are often exacerbated by disproportionate pricing of fuel oil by small retail outlets such as garages. It is almost exclusively lower income people who are affected by this, with older people, in particular, most at risk. So, although district councils do not have a specific *vires* for addressing fuel poverty, this should not prevent them endeavouring to assist those who are affected.

In 2008 the DSD's Fuel Poverty Advisory Group put forward recommendations for addressing fuel poverty in which it recognised the benefit of fuel stamp savings schemes. The Minister has subsequently tasked the NI Energy Agency (NIEA) with examining existing fuel stamps savings schemes across Northern Ireland many of which are managed or supported by district councils.

## **Background to the Fuel Stamps Pilot**

In 2008 the officer group facilitating the Council's All-Party Reference Group on older people carried out a review of front line services for older people and sought to identify gaps or opportunities to develop and improve services. This process resulted in an action plan which included a preliminary study into the feasibility of the Council operating a Fuel Stamps scheme across the city to help older people, in particular, to better manage their fuel costs.

The principle of such a scheme is a relatively simple procedure whereby members of the public are given a card, on request, and they can buy stamps, at £5 each, which they then place 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 would be facilitated principally by participating retail outlets but, when provided by a district council, it can also be supplemented by Council staff located in public buildings, such as leisure centres.

A report was duly tabled at the Officer Group Meeting on 4<sup>th</sup> June 2008 which suggested that, before embarking on a city wide scheme, the Council should test the option by delivering a pilot project in a fuel poor area of the city. This was agreed by the Group and two members were tasked with taking forward the initiative.

## **Working with Others**

The proposed pilot was brought to the attention of the North and West Belfast Community of Interest on Fuel Poverty in July 2008 by the BCC representative on the group. There was universal support from the Community of Interest (COI) for a pilot and the Chief Executive of NEA NI, who also sits on the COI, agreed to work with the Council in providing some tangible support on the ground.

NEA NI currently manage a fuel poverty project in North Belfast, Northern Exposure, and their field worker undertook to assess the potential level of interest there would be in their project area and assist in identifying possible retail and other outlets. NEA also agreed to assist in distributing information to raise awareness and to work with the Council to help deliver the pilot if it received Council approval.

Developing and funding the pilot however remained the sole responsibility of the Council. This necessitated a one Council approach to the project which, in turn, generated a requirement to engage with others across the Council and to seek support and assistance for the various elements of the project.

This proved to be relatively successful and those who were approached to help out invariably went out of their way to assist.

The Health and Environmental Services Department's Business Manager provided the necessary advice and made available administrative support to ensure that the financial management of the pilot met the necessary requirements.

The need to produce stamps, leaflets, posters and cards necessitated close liaison with the Health and Environmental Service's lead communicator and the Reprographics Department regarding designs and the necessary artwork.

A significant number of other Councils currently operate fuel stamps schemes and there was ongoing liaison with them to help inform the development of the project. In particular, the experiences of Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Councils provided useful learning points and helped to avoid some potential problems. Also, the contacts now established with these other Councils will be beneficial if it is decided to roll the project out to the rest of the city.

The ongoing liaison with NEA NI confirmed that there was significant support on the ground from members of the public for a scheme. In addition, Credit Unions and the St Vincent de Paul charity, who operate a scheme in Lurgan, were identified as very supportive. A letter was also received by the Council from the Greater Shankill Senior Citizens Forum expressing support for the scheme.

In liaison with NEA NI a pilot area was identified in and around the wards of Ardoyne, Crumlin, Shankill, New Lodge, Duncairn and Waterworks.

### **Council Approval**

Support for the scheme was agreed by the All Party Reference Group on Older People at their meeting on 13<sup>th</sup> October 2008.

The Head of Environmental Health then brought a report to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee on 24<sup>th</sup> October 2008. The report recommended that,

***“...the 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”.***

The Committee adopted the recommendation and noted that a review of the pilot scheme would be undertaken after the winter period.

Committee approval was ratified by the Council on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2008.

### **Delivery of the Pilot project.**

Following committee approval letters were sent to 44 oil suppliers seeking expressions of interest in support of the scheme. As a result of this 14 suppliers subsequently agreed to sign up. The support and participation of oil companies was essential to the delivery of the pilot, not only because they supply the oil but also because the more of them that participate then the greater the choice for the user.

Using stamps as a means of providing credit for fuel costs brings with it significant security issues. The potential for fraud is considerable and, as such, there was a need

to ensure that appropriate precautions and protections had been built in to the process to minimise the possibility of someone fraudulently reproducing the stamps. Staff therefore met with the PSNI Crime Prevention Officer regarding security issues. It was also agreed that local PSNI stations would be informed of the scheme. A procurement process was then agreed with the Business Manager, including a detailed specification setting out the clear levels of security that would be required.

Following a successful quotation exercise with recognised “secure” printers an order for 20,000 stamps was made with R.W.Pierce.

Under the direction of the Business Manager detailed security procedures, reconciliation forms, claims forms, receipt books and guidance notes were drafted. These were then presented to and agreed by Internal Audit

Potential liability concerns were raised with the Legal Services Department but they confirmed that the Council had no liability for an oil supplier accepting fraudulent stamps or a loss of card or stamps by a member of the public.

An internal Advice Sheet was drafted and awareness raising sessions were carried out for those operational and administrative staff most likely to have direct contact with residents of domestic dwellings in the pilot area.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> January 2009 the stamps and cards were delivered to the participating outlets and the pilot was commenced on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2009.

The Council issued 11 retailers with a total of 21 books of savings stamps to be sold to the general public. All of the stamps have a unique serial number and built in security measures to deter fraudulent claims. During the following few weeks 3 more retailers joined the scheme and further books were issued.

The retailers were asked if they wished to lodge the stamp sales directly into the Council’s bank account, using lodgement books to be provided, or by sending cheques to the department. A total of 8 indicated a preference to lodge money using the books provided and 6 by issuing cheques. Reconciliation forms were also given to assist with the record of sales.

Directorate staff held meetings with Financial Services to discuss the method of receiving, recording and balancing the monies paid into and out of the special bank account set up to deal with the savings scheme.

As Directorate staff have no access to the bank account, Financial Services agreed to fax a daily copy of the bank statement detailing the transactions made. Directorate staff then completed a journal to transfer income from the bank account to the General Ledger account.

When claims for payment were made by Oil Suppliers, a journal was completed to debit the General Ledger account and credit the bank account.



Detailed records have now been set up by Directorate to record:

- Procedural guidelines for retailers, oil companies and staff.
- All outgoing books of stamps.
- Bank Lodgement books issued.
- Stamp Cards issued.
- Stamp Serial numbers sold.
- Stamp Serial numbers redeemed.
- Payments made to Oil Suppliers.

Regular reports are provided showing income from sales and payments in respect of claims.

Below is an itemised list of the value of stamps sold from the outlets between January and March 2009.

<b>Retailer/Outlet</b>	<b>Number of Stamps Sold between January and March 2009</b>
Court Credit Union, Shankill Road	£1965
Newington Credit Union, Antrim Road	£285
Loughside Credit Union, North Queen Street	£650
Spar, Crumlin Road	£585
Kellys, New Lodge Road	£180
Duncairn Post Office, Antrim Road	£175
Spar, Cavehill Road	£340
Clifton Street Service Station	£40
Sineads, Antrim Road	£245
Spar, Ardoyne Road	£205
Grove Wellbeing Centre, York Road	£20
Mc Iwaines, Ligoniel Road	£185
Hills, Antrim Street	£470
Spar, Whitewell Road	£500
<b>Total</b>	<b>£5845</b>

### **Project Management Team**

At the beginning of January 2009 a pilot review team was established to provide oversight and direction to the project. The team also had the task of managing the evaluation of the project. The team was made up of the following members:-

- John Corkey, Environmental Health Manager (Public Health)
- Jacqueline O'Brien, Senior Environmental Health Officer
- David Weston, Business Support Assistant
- Lisa Rodham, Environmental Health Officer
- Astrid Burnett, Business Support Assistant

The team met fortnightly and retained a close overview of both the operational and administrative activities of the project.

## **Operational Issues**

Initially, before the scheme was launched, there were difficulties in getting some retail premises on board. Although some premises had previously been identified by NEA as wishing to participate subsequently they decided not to join up. For every retailer that did join up there was at least one that had a change of mind.

It was also difficult to ensure coverage of the whole of the pilot area. Even when locations were identified that were not adequately covered, it was often difficult to persuade some retailers to join the scheme. The main problem related to the amount of paper work that the scheme created and the fact that the retailer made no financial profit. Several shops were interested initially but subsequently declined to join.

Getting some of the retailers to complete the paperwork accurately has been a continuing problem. They have been requested to keep a record of all the serial numbers of the stamps sold but, despite this, some continue to make mistakes in their reconciliation forms.

The main problems relate to the amount of money lodged which often does not correspond with the number of stamps sold. Also, some retailers have recorded the same serial numbers twice or have missed out numbers completely. One retailer included hand written details on a post-it note along with the cheque rather than the appropriate reconciliation form.

The problems are exacerbated by the fact that the stamps are numbered consecutively from the back of the book rather than the front. This was brought to the attention of the printers who have acknowledged that it was an error on their part and they have agreed to ensure that it is rectified in any future batches. Also, some retailers are careless in how they store and audit their stamps.

Mistakes, such as those described, create significant administrative problems for the Council and are very time consuming to rectify. They also make it difficult to audit the stamps that have been sold. Some retailers who, despite having been explained the recording system, continue to make the same mistakes.

Resourcing of the project has been difficult and has relied on the commitment and dedication of a handful of individual officers to take control of the operational work on the ground and the internal administrative processes. The pilot has demonstrated the importance of having a staff member available to maintain contact with the retailers and other outlets and also to have someone dedicated to manage the finance.

## **Evaluation**

The review team set a high priority on the evaluation of the pilot. The team recognised that it was going to be difficult to deliver the pilot, monitor it, review it, draw conclusions and produce an evaluation report for consideration by Council Members within such a tight time frame. It was therefore with this caveat that the team developed an action plan for evaluation.

It was agreed that there needed to be surveys of customers, retailers and oil suppliers as well as the views of those Council employees who had been instrumental in delivering the pilot. The partner organisation, NEA NI, were also asked for their views.

The team drew on the experience of Antrim Borough Council who had carried out their own evaluation of their scheme. They liaised with the officers involved and subsequently drew up survey forms for the pilot to target the various groups involved.

### **Feedback from Administrative Staff**

Administrative staff suggested that, at the end of the pilot period, it would be prudent to engage with Financial Services, Internal Audit and Business Improvement and possibly ISB to review the effectiveness of the systems and procedures, including:

- The computerised method of recording 20,000 stamp serial numbers.
- The range/scope of information to be recorded.
- Internal staffing arrangements to deal with the scheme should it be rolled out across the city.
- The methodology of recording sales income.
- The methodology of recording claims paid.
- The discrepancies on the reconciliation forms and how they should be dealt with.

Staff also expressed concern regarding the resourcing of a citywide roll out of the scheme, particularly in the early phase, when staff would be trying to engage and meet with retailers and oil suppliers and when they would also be seeking to promote the scheme.

### **Customer Survey**

Identifying and surveying customers was problematic as only a few cards had been submitted for redemption by users of the scheme. All redeemed card holders however were sent a survey form but the only practical option for surveying the other users was to leave customer survey forms and stamp addressed envelopes with the retailers. They were then asked to distribute these to anyone who came in to purchase fuel stamps and request that they be returned accordingly.

In addition, it was extremely difficult to determine how many people were using the scheme but it was estimated that, at the time of the survey, it may have been around 500. The survey however only resulted in 11 customer responses. This low response rate however was mitigated to a certain extent by the overall consistency of responses from users.

### Overall rating of the fuel stamps scheme

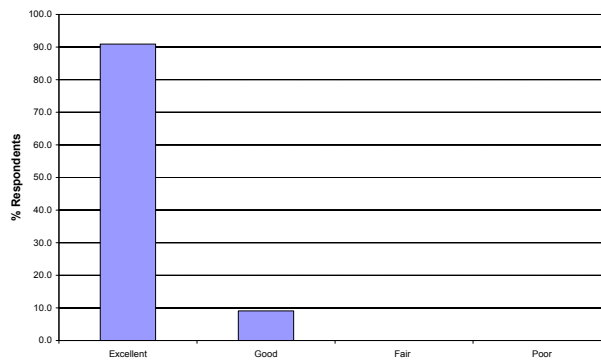


Figure 1

Figure 1 demonstrates that, of the 11 responses received, 10 people rated the scheme excellent and 1 good. This was also reflective of the views of NEA NI who stated that the feedback to their field worker from her steering group had been excellent.

### How did you become aware of the scheme

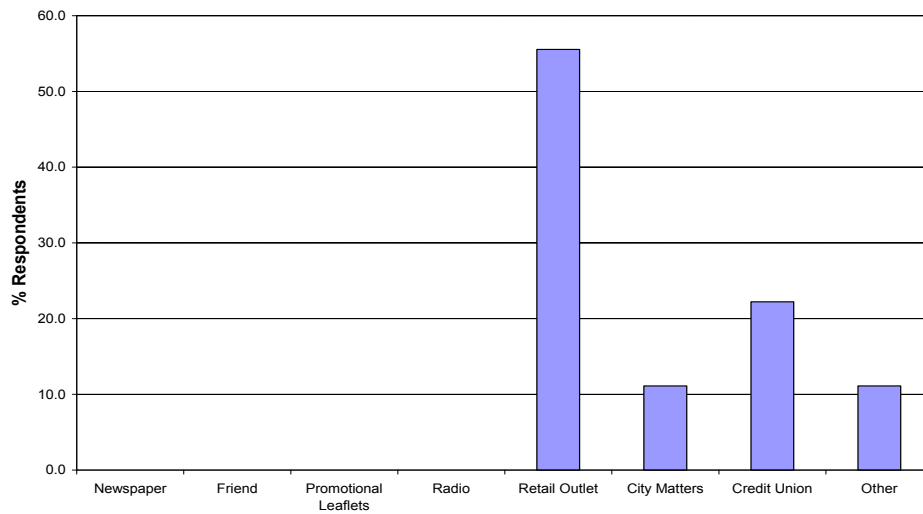


Figure 2

Despite distributing a significant number of leaflets the users appeared to find out about the scheme principally through the retail outlets and Credit Unions. This would suggest that there may need to be a greater focus on methods of communication if a city wide scheme is to be effectively promoted.

### Could more be done to promote the scheme

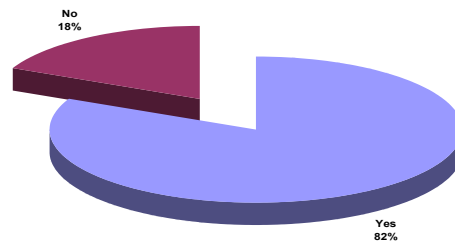


Figure 3

Clearly the majority of respondents felt that enough had been done to promote the scheme however this may simply reflect the positive experience of the users. They were however asked to suggest how the scheme could be better promoted and there were a range of suggestions. These included TV and radio advertising, local newspapers, leaflet drops and larger posters. NEA NI were of the view that, although the scheme was excellent, many retailers felt they could have sold more stamps if the promotional material had been available earlier. They were also of the view that targeting of the promotional material could be improved.

### Is a £5 stamp a sufficient amount to purchase?

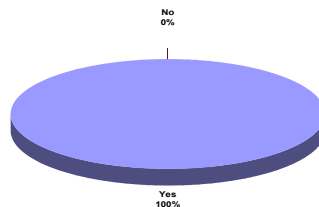


Figure 4

Figure 4 clearly demonstrates the universal support from the users for a £5 stamp. Increasing the amount may be counter productive as it may deter low income people from using the scheme. As the project was originally conceived to facilitate older people it is unlikely that an increase would advance the objectives of the scheme.

### Has the scheme improved your rating of Belfast City Council?

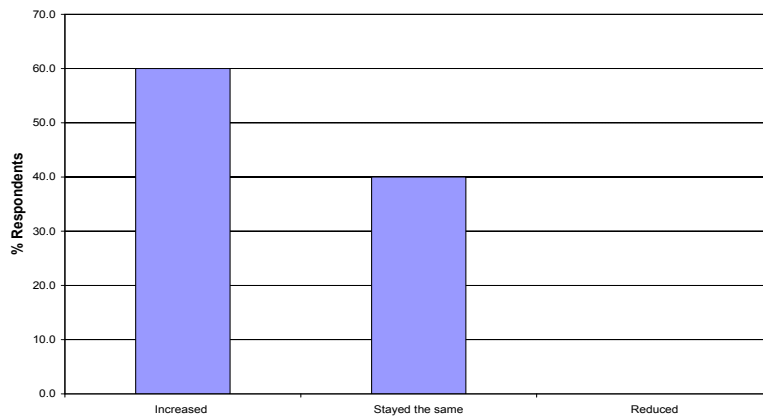


Figure 5

The scheme is ultimately about the Council recognising a need and using an imaginative approach to try and help people to better manage their fuel costs. This should have raised the profile of the Council in the pilot area and Figure 5 clearly demonstrates that it has helped to improve the rating of the Council amongst the users.

### Could we improve the scheme?

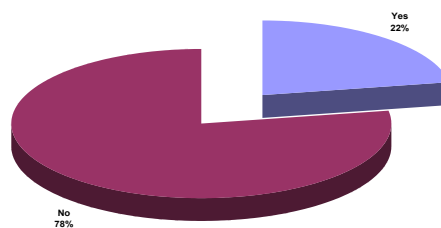


Figure 6

The majority of the respondents clearly felt that the scheme met their needs and required no further improvement. The users were however asked what steps could be taken to improve the scheme and the suggestions included making more outlets available and involving more oil suppliers. NEA NI also felt that if there was better promotion, more retailers involved and additional oil suppliers the scheme would be improved.

### Age Range of users

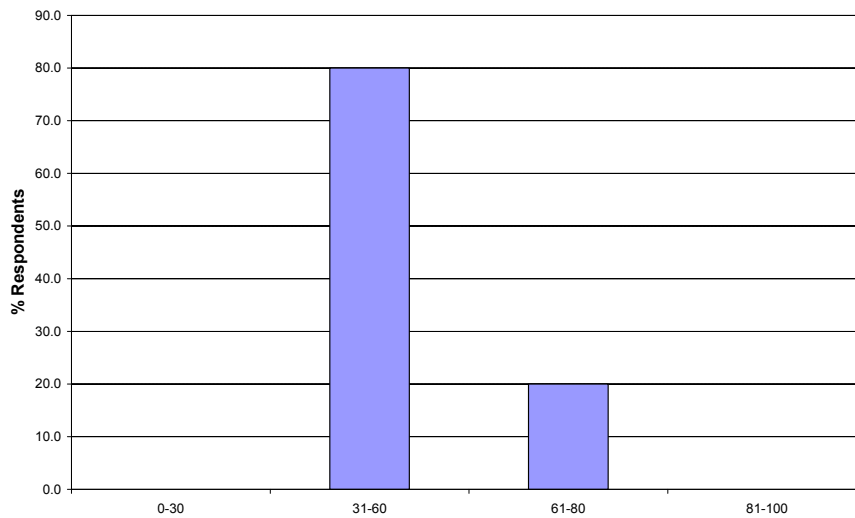


Figure 7

The scheme was originally suggested as a means to assist older people in particular to budget their fuel costs. The results suggest that a number of older people are using it but that a significant number of people aged between 31 and 60 are also making use of it. Older people may be more reluctant to complete and submit survey forms so it is possible that Figure 7 doesn't provide a true reflection of the age range. It is important however that, at a time of significant financial instability, younger people are also able to benefit from the scheme.

### Gender of Users

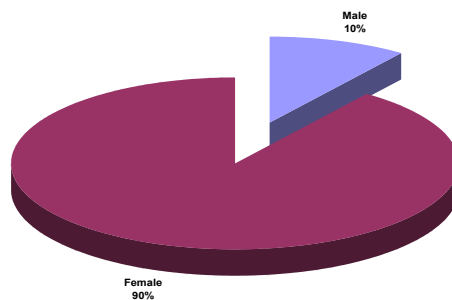


Figure 8

The gender split presumably reflects the increased likelihood of women taking responsibility for managing the domestic budget. They are more likely to be in the retail outlets and may simply include the purchase of stamps with their shopping list. This type of information may also assist in identification of the target audience in any future promotional exercise.

## Retailer Survey

There were 14 retailers and other outlets who participated in the pilot. All were sent a survey form and 7 (50%) replied.

### Overall Rating of Scheme

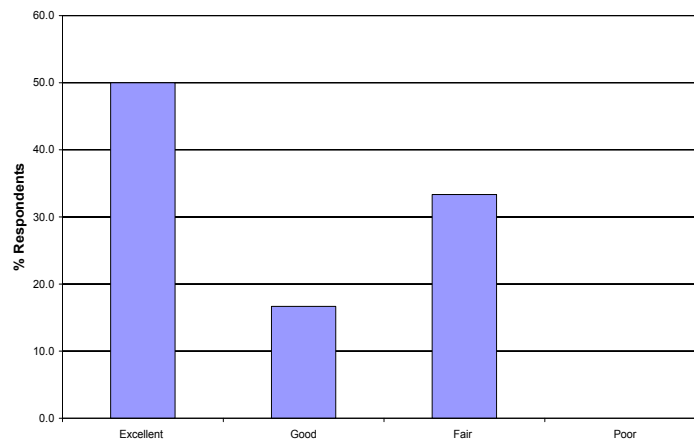


Figure 9

You will note from Figure 9 that almost 70% felt that the scheme was either excellent or good. No-one considered it to be poor. Bearing in mind that there is no direct financial benefit to these outlets this demonstrates a very positive response from the retailers.

### Has the scheme increased your rating of the Council?

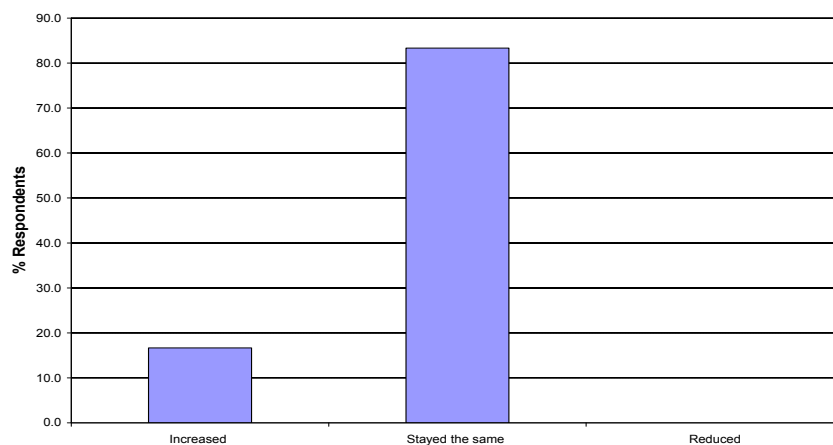


Figure 10

The outlets were generally neutral when it came to indicating whether or not they felt it had increased their rating of the Council with over 80% of the view that it remained unchanged. No-one however suggested that their rating of the Council had decreased.



### Impact upon retailer's business

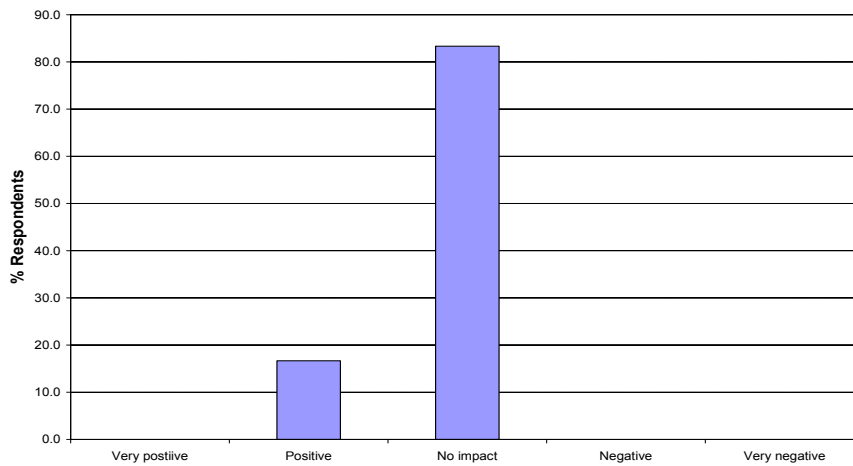


Figure 11

Clearly there is no direct financial benefit to retailers in supporting the scheme. It has however the potential to increase their footfall and promote their profile. Whilst over 80% indicated that it had no impact on their business there was no-one who considered it to have a negative impact.

### Has the scheme benefited your customers?

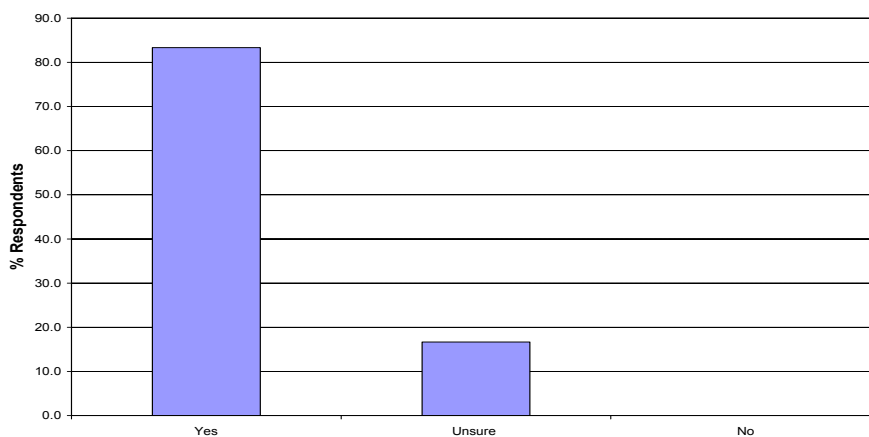
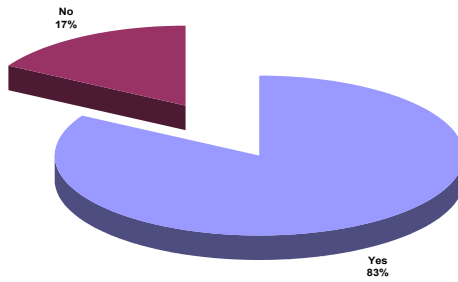


Figure 12

Although the retailers didn't feel that the scheme was of particular benefit to their business there was a clear majority, over 80%, who were of the view that it directly benefited their customers.

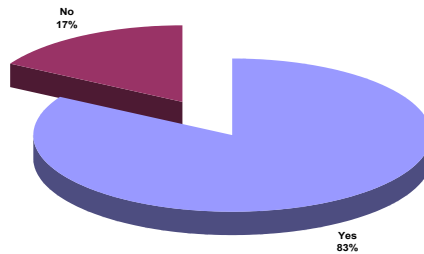
### Could more be done to promote the scheme?



**Figure 13**

The majority of retailers felt that more could be done to promote the scheme. It was suggested that there should be more local advertising, that the posters should be larger and that there should be more oil companies involved.

### Are there steps that can be taken to improve the scheme?



**Figure 14**

## Oil Supplier Survey

There were 14 oil suppliers who participated in the pilot. All were sent a survey form and 7 (50%) replied.

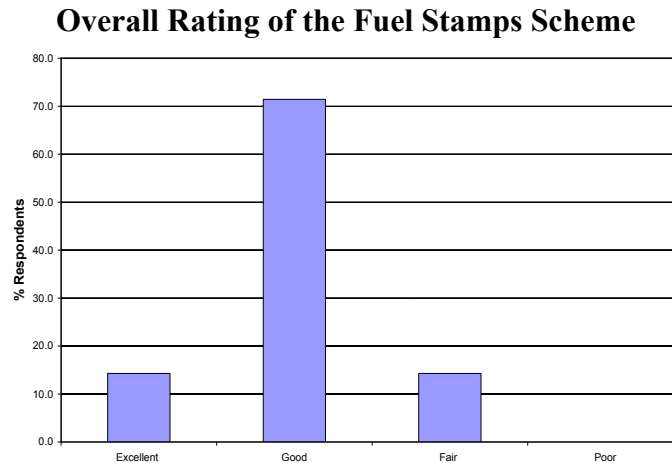


Figure 15

Over 85% of respondents considered the scheme to be excellent or good although a number indicated that, at the time of survey, they had very limited opportunity to appreciate the full benefits in the short term as it is essentially a medium term saving scheme.

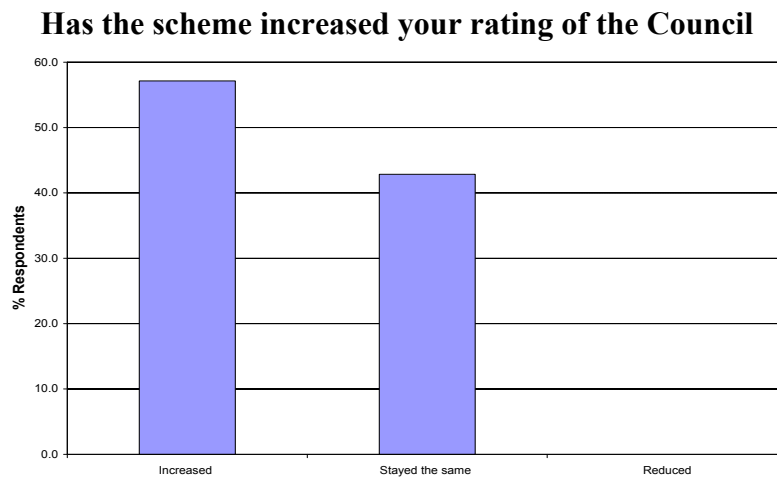


Figure 16

The rating of the Council was perceived to have increased by over half the respondents with no-one suggesting that it had decreased.

### Impact Upon Business ?

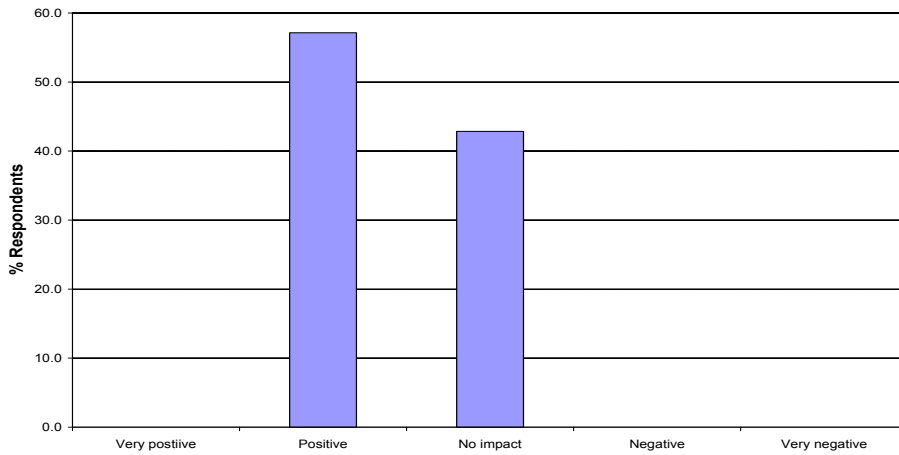


Figure 17

It is significant that over 50% of the respondent oil companies believed that the scheme had a positive impact on their business. No-one suggested that there was a negative impact.

### Has it benefited customers?

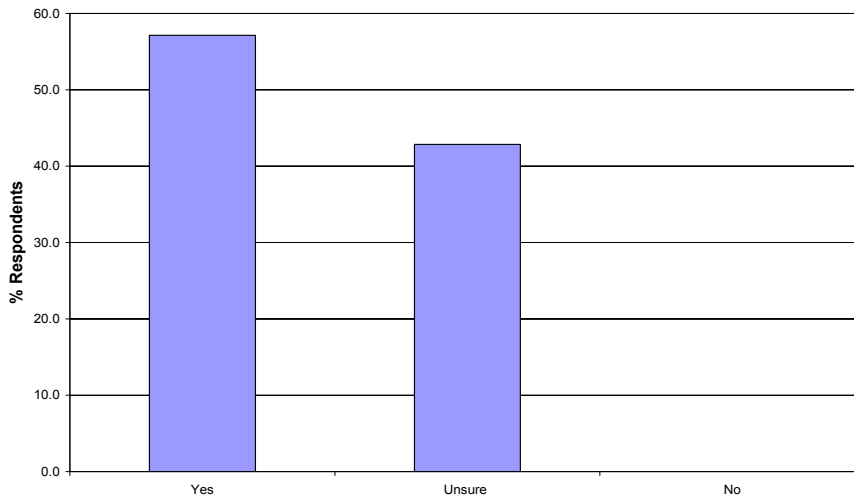
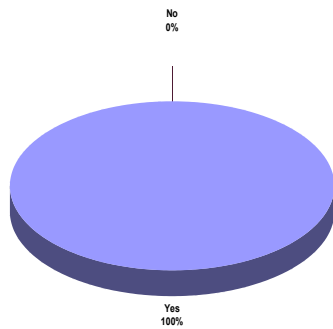


Figure 18

The majority of oil companies also appear to believe that their customers, the users of the scheme, benefited from it.

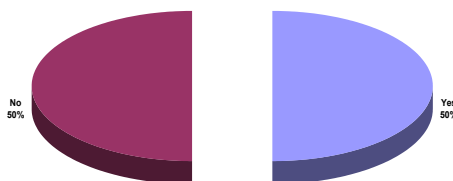
### Could more be done to promote the scheme?



**Figure 19**

There was universal agreement amongst the suppliers that more could be done to promote the scheme. Many of the suggestions reflected the views of the users and outlets such as more local advertising, more outlets and more posters. There was also a call for a city wide roll out of the scheme and a suggestion that there should be more co-ordination across the province through a regional Northern Ireland wide scheme. These views clearly reflect the experience of those organisations involved in the pilot who operate beyond the city boundary and appear to echo the ideas being floated by the Minister for Social Development.

### Steps to improve the scheme?



**Figure 20**

Although a number of the oil suppliers didn't suggest any steps to improve the scheme there were clearly a number of ideas put forward as noted in the comments associated with Figure 19.

## **Outcome of the Pilot**

The pilot exercise has received a very positive reaction from the users and the partner organisation and has generally been welcomed by the retailers, other outlets and the oil suppliers.

Clearly the pilot demonstrates that there is a need for this type of support in North Belfast and it would therefore be reasonable to assume that a city wide roll out of the scheme would also attract support throughout the greater Belfast area. It is more likely however to benefit those people living in areas that have increased levels of fuel poverty.

It is also relevant that there have been a number of contacts from Belfast residents outside the pilot area requesting the introduction of the scheme in other parts of the city.

This positive outcome would be reflective of experiences in a number of district council areas in Northern Ireland where oil stamps schemes are already operating successfully.

The pilot however has been delivered within existing budgets and resources and has relied on the energy and support of individual employees to make it work. This level of engagement would be difficult to sustain for any significant period of time and, if the scheme is to expand, then adequate resource must be a feature of its development.

## **Resources**

Despite verbal support from the North and West Belfast Community of Interest on Fuel Poverty none of the partners were able to provide financial support. Only NEA NI was able to provide tangible support on the ground through their field worker on the Fuel Poverty project, Northern Exposure. The Department for Social Development was contacted in September 2008 but they indicated that they were fully committed at that time and were unable to provide any financial support.

At its meeting of 24<sup>th</sup> October 2008 the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee accepted that administrative costs would be managed within existing budgets and that operational and administrative costs for any potential roll out of the scheme should be identified through the pilot.

Below are the itemised costs, excluding staff resources and administrative costs, up to and including the end of March 2009.

<b>Item</b>	<b>Cost</b>
20,000 Fuel Stamps (RW Pierce)	£5,436.00
Cash Box	£15.74
Binders and Folders	£68.14
Stamper Ink Pad and refill	£54.34
2,000 Fuel Stamp Cards & Posters	£570.00
Promotional Photography	£193.70
Posters	£30.00
Bwarm leaflets	£300.00
1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> Class stamps	£117.34
<b>Total (Up to end March 2009)</b>	<b>£6,785.26</b>

Clearly the largest expenditure is for the fuel stamps themselves. In addition to the in-built levels of security this initial price included the set-up costs. Future orders however would be in or around £4,020 for 20,000 stamps.

Most of the remaining costs would increase significantly for a city wide scheme. In particular, it is likely that promotional costs would have to rise as this was an area highlighted in the survey as requiring improvement.

### **City Wide Scheme**

It was brought to the attention of the Council early in the process that the printing of stamps for sale would bring with it significant security issues. In essence the stamps have to be treated as if they were cash and must be subject to the same levels of security both in terms of printing, handling and storage. Robust measures have therefore been put in place however they will need to be reviewed as part of any widening of the scheme.

Central to the success of a fuel stamps scheme are the outlets where users can purchase stamps. In the initial phase of the development of the pilot it was perceived that retailers were the most appropriate locations. They were located within the community, they already handled money and were familiar with the process of financial lodgements. Also, customers were used to making purchases at these outlets.

Many of the retail outlets that were used proved to be successful however a number struggled to manage and audit their stamp allocations. This resulted in increased frequency of visits from Council staff and reminder letters.

The only Council facility used as an outlet in the pilot area was the Grove Well Being Centre. Facilities, such as this, where Council staff are already handling money, should be included as outlets for stamps.

The most successful outlets however were the Credit Unions. Court Credit Union alone sold £1,965 worth of stamps between January and March 2008. Credit Union staff generally appeared to be very keen to become involved and clearly saw the initiative as very positive.

The experience therefore of staff on the ground would suggest that, in addition to Council facilities such as leisure centres, identification of Credit Unions and engagement with them across the city may help to pave the way for developing an initial city wide spread of locations where people could purchase stamps. The scheme could then be more gradually rolled out as other outlets, including retailers, expressed an interest.

A small group of staff from the Environmental Health Service and Directorate support developed, managed and delivered the pilot. A similar scheme operating across the city however could not be accommodated without a significant increase in available staff.

Although the evaluation of the scheme did not specifically address the issue of staff resources it was clear that there were very distinct operational and administrative duties that had to be carried out. Officers needed to make initial contact with various outlets and oil suppliers and provided all the relevant advice and information as well as getting the necessary agreement. Outlets then had to be monitored to ensure that they were operating the system correctly. Also, all outlets require regular deliveries of stamps.

Where problems were discovered this increased the number of visits by Council staff. Ultimately, if retailers aren't complying with the requirements of the scheme they may have to be excluded.

The administration required for the scheme is also significant. There are procedures for the issuing of stamp books, receipt of income from outlets, payment to oil companies as well as the detailed record keeping of all stamps, retailers, oil suppliers, savings cards and lodgements.

Whilst the scheme would need to be located within a designated service and managed by a specified lead officer it was estimated that, due to the volume of operational and administrative work, a citywide scheme would require the designation of the equivalent of at least one additional full time member of staff. The initial phase of the scheme however, which would involve a significant amount of frontline operational engagement, would need additional capacity and could require an officer working exclusively full time in the field for up to six months.

The optimum staff resource however can not be accurately anticipated without an indication of the number of participating outlets and the degree to which they successfully manage the sale and distribution of the stamps.

Clearly there will be a number of risks associated with a roll out of the scheme to the rest of the city. Most of these have been identified through the pilot exercise and the evaluation and it is hoped that this experience will ensure that they can be managed effectively. Some have been set out in the table below.



<b>Risk</b>	<b>Control</b>
Potential for fraud with regard to stamps	Levels of security built in to stamps by secure printers
Failure of outlets to lodge income	Documented administrative procedures and available operational staff to visit premises
Loss of cards by users	Card is the responsibility of the user. Council has no liability
Failure to manage system due to inadequate resources	Council must provide sufficient resources and deploy adequate staff to operate and manage the scheme
Overspend of budget under s115 of the Local Government (NI) Act 1972	Internal auditing procedures. (Council may be able to deliver future savings schemes under proposed powers of wellbeing)

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of the pilot was to test the feasibility of a Fuel Stamps scheme for Belfast before agreeing to roll it out across the whole of the city. The evidence collated through the evaluation process indicates that the pilot project has been a success and, dependent on the resources available, it would appear that a city wide scheme would be appropriate.

Users of the scheme were particularly supportive of it and there was a clear view that the £5 stamp was an adequate amount to purchase. The principal area of concern, highlighted by the survey, related to the promotion of the scheme. A number of respondents suggested that there should have been more media promotion with more leaflet drops and larger posters. This may need further investigation and review for a city wide approach to ensure that the Council is promoting and targeting the scheme appropriately.

If the Council does decide to roll out the work of the pilot project across the city it may be expedient, in the first instance, to focus on Credit Unions and Council facilities as outlets for the sale of stamps. This would provide an initial spread across the whole of the Belfast City Council area whilst at the same time ensuring tight control over the scheme. Other interested outlets, including retailers, could then be brought on following expressions of interest and proper evaluation of their suitability.

A citywide scheme would not only allow the Council to help those people who are in, or are close to, fuel poverty to better manage their fuel oil costs but it would also provide a demonstration that the Council acknowledges the real problems people are experiencing during this economic downturn and that it is prepared to take a lead in helping people to manage their way through it. Also, although the scheme was initially introduced for the benefit of older people, it is available to all and the evidence so far suggests that other age groups are also keen to utilize it.

Fuel Stamp schemes are successfully running in other district council areas across Northern Ireland and their importance has been recognised by the Minister for Social Development who has commissioned a report from NIEA on existing fuel stamp schemes across the province. Although the report is not yet available it is reasonable to anticipate that the Executive will wish to build on existing schemes and improve consistency across district council schemes. It would therefore appear expedient for Belfast City Council to build on the experience of the pilot and offer this scheme across the city.

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