



Response to Department for Communities
‘Changes to the Affordable Warmth Scheme’

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1. Introduction

Age Sector Platform (ASP) represents a strong unified voice for older people in Northern Ireland. It is the charity responsible for the Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament (NIPP).

Age Sector Platform has a membership of individuals and older people's groups across Northern Ireland, representing approximately 200,000 people. Launched in 2008, the organisation emerged from the Age Sector Reference Group (ASRG) which was in operation for seven years.

ASP's mission is to be a strong unified voice for older people in Northern Ireland and its vision is a society where older people's voices are heard, respected and acted upon. ASP engages with older people allowing them to make their voice heard and enables them to advocate on their own behalf. This empowers older people so they can change their lives for the better.

Age Sector Platform welcomes this opportunity to provide feedback to the Department of Communities on its proposed changes to the Affordable Warmth Scheme. Since 2011, the Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament (NIPP) has identified 'keeping warm in winter' as a top concern for older people across Northern Ireland. In 2016 the issue was ranked as the third biggest problem for older people here, with almost half (49%) selecting it as a top concern¹.

Since the establishment of the Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament in 2011, fourteen motions have been passed in relation to fuel poverty / energy. A full list of these motions can be found as an appendix to this response.

¹ [NI Pensioners Parliament Survey 2016](#)

2. General comments

Age Sector Platform commends the work of the Department for Communities in seeking to tackle the high levels of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland, and notes the innovative approach taken by the Affordable Warmth Scheme through its target centred approach. Additional resources should be made available for the scheme so that more vulnerable households can avail of these valuable energy efficiency measures, and fuel poverty levels in Northern Ireland can be noticeably reduced.

Although the target centred approach is innovative, vulnerable households located outside targeted areas must be made aware of the scheme's existence for self-referral. These households should encounter an 'open door' when contacting the scheme.

It is disappointing that the review of the Affordable Warmth Scheme carried out after the first year was not made available. A lack of clear and transparent information on scheme budgets, targets and outcomes has impeded more in-depth feedback.

In 2016, the Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament (NIPP) passed the following motion:

NIPP calls on the Department for Social Development to commission a programme of research into the cost effectiveness of publicly funded fuel poverty/energy efficiency schemes in place during the last ten years in order to establish which measures are most effective.

It is vitally important that any scheme aimed at addressing fuel poverty is as effective as it can be, and ongoing evaluation must be a central part of the Affordable Warmth Scheme going forward. The scheme must respond to feedback from both households and those involved in delivering the scheme, and importantly represent value for money.

3. Our response to the proposals

Proposal 1: The Department proposes that one installer, managing the installation of all measures to the household, becomes the preferred delivery method.

Older people availing of the Affordable Warmth Scheme should expect an efficient service and a stress-free journey from application to completion.

Age Sector Platform therefore calls for each applicant to be assigned one key contact for queries and concerns throughout the process. This person should manage the installation of all measures for the household, ensuring all work is completed efficiently and within a target timescale.

This key contact could potentially be found within an independent managing agent or Hub, and should provide assurance for the householder throughout the process and after the process, should they require follow up work or redress of any kind.

Proposal 2: The Department proposes to raise the income threshold to £23,000 for households with more than one person and reducing it to £18,000 for all single person households.

Age Sector Platform challenges the proposed reduction to the income threshold for single person households. This change would be sure to exclude many older people living alone from benefitting from the scheme, and actually conflicts with government policy in other areas where additional assistance is provided to older people living alone, such as Lone Pensioner Allowance.

For those that were previously over the income threshold, we recommend that these households should be contacted again by Councils. The algorithm should be rerun to ensure that those households in previously targeted areas that were excluded due to the original eligibility criteria should be revisited if the threshold is changed in any way.

Proposal 3: The Department proposes that Disability Living Allowance, Personal Independence Payment and Carer's Allowance are removed from the calculation of income for the Affordable Warmth Scheme.

Age Sector Platform welcomes the move to exclude benefits like Disability Living Allowance and Carer's Allowance from the calculation of income. Including these benefits in the income calculation previously would have stopped many older carers and those living with a disability from qualifying for the scheme.

If this proposal goes ahead, the Department and/or Councils should revisit those previously targeted that may now be eligible.

Proposal 4: The Department proposes the removal of age-related and disability-related eligibility criteria from the boiler replacement element of the Affordable Warmth Scheme.

Age Sector Platform supports the removal of age-related and disability-related eligibility for the boiler replacement element of the scheme. Someone aged 50 or 60 with an inefficient boiler should not be excluded simply because they haven't reached their 65th birthday.

However, there is evidence to suggest that the old, young and disabled are impacted by a cold home more than others - in terms of their health and wellbeing. Age Sector Platform therefore suggests that some form of prioritisation needs to exist so that the scheme's limited resources can be allocated in a logical manner.

An additional point must also be raised regarding maintenance of boilers installed under this element of the scheme. Older people who are eligible for boiler replacement are unlikely to be able to afford the cost of maintenance and break-down of the boiler. With 'teething issues' also to be expected the scheme must provide resources to assist with maintenance.

4. Conclusion

In 2014, the Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament conducted research into older people's expenditure on heating their homes². It found:

- On average, pensioner households spend £1,602 per year on heating costs
- Over half of all respondents (51%) said that the cost of heating their home meant they had to cut down on other essentials (e.g. food)

It is essential that older people must be assisted with the cost of heating their home, so that cold related illnesses and excess winter deaths can be reduced. In Northern Ireland, there were 640 excess winter deaths in 2015/16 – 92% were aged 65 or over³.

The Affordable Warmth Scheme is a valuable scheme through which the energy efficiency of a person's home can be improved. However, fuel poverty is driven by three key factors: energy efficiency of the home; energy costs and household income.

In the rest of the UK, pensioners on low incomes benefit from the Warm Home Discount Scheme⁴, which provides them with a direct rebate of £140 off their electricity bill. Northern Ireland has been excluded from this scheme since its introduction in 2011. Age Sector Platform strongly calls for the extension of this scheme to Northern Ireland so that the poorest pensioners in Northern Ireland can benefit from a much needed top-up to their income to help pay for their heating.

The draft Programme for Government committed to “review the effectiveness of the current Fuel Poverty Strategy and develop a new strategy which complements the Executive's other energy efficiency schemes”. Age Sector Platform supports this move, and looks forward to working with Government in developing this new strategy.

² [NIPP Heating Costs Survey May 2014](#) – 304 responses

³ [NISRA Excess Winter Mortality 2015/16](#)

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/the-warm-home-discount-scheme>

Appendix – NI Pensioners Parliament Motions on Fuel Poverty / Energy

Motion	Year
NIPP expresses its extreme dissatisfaction at the failure of both the UK Government and the NI Executive to put in place arrangements to extend parity of treatment to vulnerable NI households by including NI in the Warm Home Discount scheme. NIPP directs that it is now timely to immediately develop a revised campaigning strategy to vigorously reinforce the demand that the existing scheme be extended to include NI.	2016
NIPP calls for a 'Whole House Solution' plan to tackle fuel poverty which would include new developments and target fuel poor households on a phased basis.	2016
NIPP calls on the NI Executive to use some of the additional £136 million allocated to the block grant to provide a payment to older people on low incomes to help them with the cost of heating their home.	2014
NIPP calls on the Department for Social Development to only allow housing benefit to be paid in the private rented sector in cases where a landlord has brought the property up to an acceptable standard of energy efficiency.	2014
NIPP calls on the Department for Social Development to introduce a requirement that all new build dwellings for pensioners must be built to a standard requiring little or no expenditure on heating.	2014
NIPP calls on the Department for Social Development to commission a programme of research into the cost effectiveness of publicly funded fuel poverty/energy efficiency schemes in place during the last ten years in order to establish which measures are most effective.	2014
NIPP calls on the Northern Ireland Executive to reduce Northern Ireland's dependence on oil and exposure to high oil prices by subsidising the roll out of the domestic gas network in the ten district towns and other urban communities adjacent to the gas network, creating a framework for a regulated market in renewable heating sources in non-gas areas and regulating the heating oil industry.	2014
NIPP welcomes the development of a 'pay-as-you-go' oil scheme and hopes that this will help older people to manage the cost of heating their home and alleviate the hardship that many are currently facing.	2012
NIPP calls on the NI Executive to take steps to encourage energy suppliers in Northern Ireland to introduce the Warm Homes Discount Scheme that is available to pensioners throughout the rest of the UK.	2012
In recognising the increasing levels of fuel poverty in NI, the NIPP calls on the NI Executive to develop and implement an action plan to eradicate fuel poverty.	2012
NIPP calls for the oil industry in Northern Ireland to be regulated to help ensure that oil customers get value for money.	2011
NIPP calls on the UK Government to reverse its decision to cut the Winter Fuel Payment this year and to look at ways of linking future payments to energy prices.	2011
NIPP calls for a Northern Ireland wide oil stamp scheme to be developed to assist pensioners to save for the purchase of home heating oil.	2011
NIPP calls on the NI Assembly to bring forward plans to introduce social tariffs into the local energy market so that older people here have the same help in coping with energy prices as the rest of the UK.	2011