
Written Ministerial Statement

The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Cold Weather Payments

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

I wish to inform Assembly Members of financial help being provided to individuals and families on low income in the form of Cold Weather Payments as a result of the recent and continuing severe period of cold weather.

A Cold Weather Payment period is triggered in our social security system when information supplied by the Met Office from its Aldergrove, Ballykelly, Castleterg, Katesbridge and Enniskillen weather stations is, or is forecast to be, zero degrees centigrade or below over seven consecutive days from November to March. Each weather station covers a range of Post Code areas within Northern Ireland. Three Cold Weather periods have been triggered for weeks ending 24 December 2009, 4 January 2010 and 11 January 2010 and these applied to all 5 of the weather station areas throughout Northern Ireland on each of these occasions.

To qualify for a Cold Weather payment a person must be receiving State Pension Credit, Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance (Income based) or Employment and Support Allowance (Income related) for one day in the period of cold weather and have one of the following:

- a relevant pensioner or disability premium
- Child Tax Credit that includes a disability or severe disability element
- a child under five years old
- an applicable amount of Employment and Support Allowance that includes either the support component or the work-related activity component.

These payments are arranged automatically by the Social Security Agency and there is no need for qualifying customers to make a claim.

Each 7 day cold weather period attracts a payment of £25 for qualifying recipients and approximately

166,000 customers have benefitted from these payments amounting to £75 each in total to date. Payments for the first two weeks of cold weather have already been issued and the third payment is expected to be received by customers by 13 January 2010.

In total, payments authorised so far amount to approximately £12.5m, which have been targeted at the most vulnerable households in Northern Ireland, should make an important contribution to wellbeing during this excessively cold spell.

The situation continues to be kept under active review and further payments will be made should the continuing inclement weather trigger further cold weather periods, according to the measurement methodology at any or all of the relevant forecasting stations.

