

Question and Answers

What is the Surviving Winter Appeal?

Surviving Winter is a UK-wide co-ordinated campaign to encourage people to make donations to help older and vulnerable people suffering from fuel poverty this winter.

Where did the idea come from?

The campaign was inspired by people in Somerset who wanted to donate their Winter Fuel Payment from the government to support older and vulnerable people who are less fortunate than themselves.

Why is there such a need?

With soaring fuel bills and the prospect of another cold winter, older and vulnerable people are at risk. 5.4 million households are living in fuel poverty. Almost half of those living in fuel poverty are aged over 60. Energy price rises since 2009 will have pushed that number up further: it is estimated that a 10% increase in energy prices plunges a further 600-700,000 households into fuel poverty, and the recent announcements from the energy suppliers show that this autumn, gas will increase by about 20% and electricity by about 10%.

Ofgem estimated in January 2011 that the annual cost of energy for an average house was £1,032, so these forthcoming increases will cost householders more or less the £200 that pensioner households receive as their Winter Fuel Payment.

Cold weather exacerbates coronary and respiratory illnesses, illnesses associated with older people. This leads to a high number of winter-related deaths. Over the past two winters over 500 people, mainly people over 65 years old, have died as a result of the cold weather and poor housing, and it has been estimated that there are at least 33,000 Somerset pensioners in fuel poverty.

For every winter-related death there will be dozens of people suffering illness and hardship, facing a difficult choice between eating and heating, becoming isolated and withdrawn from their community leading to depression, while young children are particularly vulnerable to asthma attacks.

Where do your fuel poverty figures come from?

The NHS and grass-roots organisations which deal daily with the old and vulnerable and which community foundations fund. Deaths by category are recorded throughout the year by the Office of National Statistics; there is a notable increase in the winter months – an excess when measured against the norm – which is directly attributable to cold conditions and the inability of older, poorer people in particular to deal with them. National Energy Action pulls together statistics at both national and regional level. The Department of Energy and Climate Change produces an annual report on fuel poverty.

How will you use the funds?

All of the money raised will be used to provide support to older and vulnerable people who are suffering because of fuel poverty.

The money will support those most in need of help and make sure they can afford to stay warm, eat well and remain mobile, as well as help them in practical ways such as ensuring they can make doctor's appointments, get to the shops, and maintain an active social life.

How is the money collected?

After Somerset Community Foundation's successful pilot in 2010/11, community foundations all over the UK are making themselves available as channels through which people can donate to support people who are vulnerable and/or older and at risk because of the winter period and fuel poverty.

How do you distribute the money effectively?

We are channelling the funds to local organisations, particularly small grass roots groups on the front line. They in turn will be able to identify people that they are in contact with who need extra support in the winter, but we also are supporting the work of the groups to meet the needs of their members and clients during the winter because they often provide an essential lifeline. Where there are gaps in the local charitable network, we will work with larger organisations such as the Citizens' Advice Bureaux, Age UK and Alzheimer's Society.

Who will qualify for a grant?

Anyone over 60 who receives, or qualifies for, state benefits or is otherwise determined to be suffering financial hardship.

We appreciate that older people may be reluctant to apply or may simply not hear about the appeal. For them, we will look to recognised carers and agencies that will be able to apply on their behalf.

Why are you only asking older people to donate their WFP?

Community foundations are making themselves available as channels through which people can donate to support people who are vulnerable and/or older and at risk because of the winter period and fuel poverty. This is a clear and easy way to capture people's attention and for donors to make a contribution they feel they can afford.

Of course, we will take donations, of whatever size and from other age groups as well. We will be encouraging everyone with the means to make a donation to support the appeal and help older and vulnerable people.

Isn't this campaign going to encourage the Government to bring in means-testing?

A few people have expressed concern that the campaign could be used by government as a reason for reviewing winter fuel payments. There is no political agenda behind this campaign, and we will not allow anyone, from either left or right, to hijack it for a political agenda. It is our view that providing a channel for people, including those who receive a winter fuel payment, to help others is "policy neutral". We fully support the tax-free payment to all those over 60 but it makes sense to enable those who can afford it to 'recycle' the payment to the estimated 5.5m people in 'fuel poverty'.

How much will it cost to run the campaign?

Our aim is for every penny donated to be directed where it is needed. As far as practicable our aim is to cover administrative costs by gift aid payments which means, effectively, the Government, not our donors, meet these costs.

What will you do with any surplus funds?

In our pilot we realised that holding a surplus over would enable us to start grant-making at the start of the winter rather than late into the winter period. We are also looking at funding projects that will help increase people's income – for example benefit advice targeted at pensioners - or reduce their costs – for example energy efficiency projects - as longer term solutions to fuel poverty.

For further information please contact Justin Sargent, Chief Executive, Somerset Community Foundation on 01749 344949 or justin.sargent@somersetcf.org.uk