



Changes to the Discretionary Support Scheme

Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) Final Report July - September 2023

Contents

1. Background	3
2. Data Collection and Consultation	4
3. Conclusion	6
4. Monitoring	6
Annex A Consultation Responses and Department Comments	8
Annex B Monitorina Data	14

1. Background

The Department for Communities has concluded a public consultation on its draft Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) relating to changes introduced to the Discretionary Support Scheme from 3 July 2023. Discretionary Support provides financial assistance to people who find themselves in an extreme, exceptional or crisis situation, have a total annual income below a set threshold and who meet specific eligibility criteria.

The 2023-24 Budget for Northern Ireland announced by the Secretary of State on 27 April 2023 left the Department facing a very constrained financial position.

The Department launched an EQIA on its 2023-24 Budget Settlement on 10 May 2023 which outlined the potential for a reduction in the circumstances when a Discretionary Support Grant would be considered and the impact this could have on vulnerable people in Section 75 groups.

Following this the Department concluded that implementation of action to reduce Discretionary Support Grant expenditure to live within the Department's available Budget, whilst undesirable, was necessary.

The draft EQIA on Changes to the Discretionary Support Scheme issued for consultation on 3 July 2023 and ran for a 12-week period, ending on 25 September 2023 with initial responses requested by 11 August 2023 to inform a planned review of the proposals and inform the final decisions to be taken. Initial responses were originally requested by 31 July 2023 but this date was extended due to requests from interested parties. This final report has been produced to highlight the comments received during the consultation period and to outline the Department's response.

The Department would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who participated in the consultation.

2. Data Collection and Consultation

The following sources of information were relied upon during the EQIA:

- Analysis by the Department's Professional Services Unit around the Section 75 group characteristics of those people receiving a Discretionary Support grant in 2021-22 and 2022-23.
- Forecasting on the impact of the 2023-24 Budget on the Department and the potential availability of funding for the Discretionary Support grant budget.
- Initial responses to the Budget 2023-24 EQIA.

A full public consultation was launched on 3 July 2023 and closed on 25 September 2023. All those individuals, organisations and elected representatives recorded in the Department's consultation list received a letter or email notification informing them of the consultation arrangements. The consultation document was made available on the Department's website, promoted on social media and the documents were also available in alternative formats on request. Responses could also be made via the online Citzenspace Survey hosted at EQIA on changes to the Discretionary Support Scheme - NI Direct - Citizen Space.

A full copy of the draft EQIA issued for consultation can be found on the Department's website: Consultation on changes to the Discretionary Support Scheme | Department for Communities (communities-ni.gov.uk)

The consultation document contained four main questions:

- 1. Are there any data, needs or issues in relation to any of the Section 75 equality categories that have not been identified in Section 3 of the EQIA consultation document? If so, what are they and can you provide details?
- 2. Are there any adverse impacts in relation to any of the Section 75 equality groups that have not been identified in Section 4 of the EQIA Consultation document? If so, what are they?
- Please state what action you think could be taken to reduce or eliminate any adverse impacts in the allocation of the Department's Discretionary Support grant budget.
- 4. Are there any other comments you would like to make in regard to this proforma or the consultation process generally?

Responses received

There were 20 responses received via email from the following individuals and organisations:

Advice NI

Cliff Edge Coalition NI

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council

Homeless Connect

Housing Rights

Jim Shannon MP

Law Centre NI

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council

Northern Ireland Commissioner for

Children & Young People

Northern Ireland Federation of

Housing Associations

Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group

Office of the Commissioner for

Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse

Participation and the Practice of Rights

Sinn Féin

The Trussell Trust

University of Ulster School of Law

Women's Platform

Women's Policy Group NI

Women's Regional Consortium

There were also 12 responses to the online Citzenspace Survey. As not all respondents to the Citzenspace Survey provided details of who they were or were representing, a list of respondents is not included.

Equality Impact Assessment Responses and Key Findings

All the consultation responses and feedback received have been analysed with the key issues being summarised and presented, together with the Department's response in the table at **Annex A**.

The data gathered for the EQIA was for all nine equality categories and key findings showed that there would be an impact from the proposed policy changes across the Section 75 groups with the potential for a greater impression, for example, on females, those people aged under 50, those people who were single and those people with a physical or mental health condition.

Responses from the consultation again highlighted the adverse impact of the policy changes to Discretionary Support across the Section 75 groups especially at a time when budget reductions were being introduced across a variety of Government schemes. There was a great deal of concern voiced around the effect of the changes to Discretionary Support on poverty levels in society at a time when people were experiencing difficulty with cost of living expenses.

3. Conclusion

In order to sustain the Discretionary Support budget for the remainder of the 2023-24 year, the Department has concluded that the policy changes introduced from July 2023 will remain in place until 31 March 2024. It remains the Department's intention to sustain the Discretionary Support Scheme throughout the 2023-24 financial year to enable the continued provision of financial support to meet the needs of the most vulnerable.

Whilst the Department will continue to manage the budgetary pressure in the Discretionary Support Scheme within the confines of its overall 2023-24 Budget, further review may be required in 2024-25 subject to the Department's 2024-25 Budget allocation.

4. Monitoring

As the policy changes to Discretionary Support have only been implemented from 3 July 2023 there is limited statistical information available to consider their impact.

The Department has looked at Discretionary Support award decisions with regards to grant, loan and nil awards and the average grant and loan amounts - see **Annex B**. Comparisons have been taken between the months of July and August 2023 and the previous two months, May and June 2023, and the corresponding months of July and August from 2022.

As the Department holds more comprehensive data on lone parents and gender this data has been used to consider the impact on lone parents and females / males in comparison to all claims. Other Section 75 data in respect of Discretionary Support is collected through the completion of questionnaires, which are returned on a voluntary basis and have return rate of approximately 58%. This information has not been considered for this report as self-selection bias can occur when participants differ in some way from non-participants which can make the sample unrepresentative of the population of interest.

This limited statistical analysis displays the following high level conclusions –

- A decline in grant decisions that resulted in an award from July 2023;
- An increase in loan decisions that resulted in an award from July 2023;
- An increase in nil award decisions from July 2023;
- A decline in average grant amounts from July 2023; and
- An increase in average loan amounts from July 2023.

It should be noted that the percentage declines and increases for lone parents and females / males align with those across all claims and do not at this stage show any greater statistical impact. It is accepted that this is based on a limited quantitative analysis only at this point.

The decline in grant awards and average grant amounts is to be expected due to the policy changes introduced to protect the Discretionary Support budget from early depletion during the current financial year.

The Department is committed to keeping the impact of the policy changes on the relevant groups and sub-groups within the Section 75 equality categories under review. Further consideration of the data available for both quantitative and qualitative research will be carried out as the Department works to gain a clearer understanding of the impact of the policy changes on those people accessing the Discretionary Support Scheme.

If the future monitoring results show a greater adverse impact than expected, action will be taken to determine whether better outcomes for the relevant equality groups can be achieved.

Annex A

Department for Communities Draft Equality Impact Assessment Changes to the Discretionary Support Scheme **Consultation responses and Department comments** Theme **Comments** Response 1 Call For 1.1 My preferred option The Department launched an EQIA on its 2023-Additional is that the Secretary of 24 Budget Settlement on 10 May 2023 which State should be lobbied to outlined the potential for a reduction in the Funding understand that the levels circumstances when a Discretionary Support Grant would be considered and the impact this of funding will be exhausted by autumn and this is not would have on vulnerable people in Section 75 groups. Following this the Department acceptable. concluded that implementation of action to 1.2 Therefore, we believe that reduce Discretionary Support Grant expenditure the Secretary of State and to live within the Department's available Budget, those in authority have failed whilst undesirable, was necessary. to properly recognise the support needs of our most The Department's historic Baseline budget for Discretionary Support Grants totalled vulnerable people and should act to allocate increased £13.7m and is not sufficient to meet the funding to the Department demand forecast in 2023-24. To mitigate, the to strengthen as opposed Department's DS Grant Baseline Budget has to weaken the Discretionary been topped up to £20m for 2023-24. Failure to have taken such action would have put at Support scheme. risk the Department's ability to help address 1.3 We recommend that the the basic needs of people who present with Department for Communities hardship. seeks the financial resources to restore the DSF budget to The Department will continue to closely monitor the levels set by the previous the budgetary pressure within the Discretionary Minister. Support Scheme and to manage this within the confines of the overall Departmental budget.

It remains the Department's intention to sustain the Discretionary Support Scheme throughout

the 2023-24 financial year.

	Consultation responses and Department comments								
	Theme	Comments	Response						
2	Handling of the EQIA process	2.1 It is pertinent to outline a general concern about this consultation. The document outlines that "due to the significant budgetary pressures these measures will be applied from 3 July 2023 with the EQIA running concurrently" It seems evident that the Department has already decided on the course it is going to take so in this instance we question the overall purpose of running a consultation of this nature. 2.2 The consideration of mitigating measures and alternative policies is at the heart of the EQIA process. Draft EQIA does not mitigate against adverse impact identified, consider alternative policies. 2.3 Further, the timescale for responses to these EQIAs is insufficient.	The Department would have preferred to run a consultation on the changes to the Discretionary Support Scheme prior to any implementation, however, due to the significant budgetary pressures the measures were applied from 03 July 2023 and ran concurrent to the EQIA. Given levels of demand on Discretionary Support, it was essential to restrict awards to remain within the allocated budget and try to sustain the scheme to the end of the current financial year - particularly during the period of high demand expected in the winter months. Failure to do so would likely have depleted the budget by autumn. In the context of the budgetary pressure being faced, the Department's mitigating measures were aimed at ensuring the funding was sustained throughout the financial year. There were measures taken to retain full support where households were confronted with disaster or setting-up home / leaving care, custody or domestic violence scenarios. Discretionary Support loans were not impacted to the same extent as grants and grants were still available for living expenses, household items and payments for those awaiting their first payment of Universal Credit (the Universal Credit Contingency Fund). The consultation did run for 12 weeks from 3 July to 25 September 2023. Initial responses to assist with the Department's review into the changes were requested by 11 August 2023 (a period of almost 6 weeks) and while this was regrettable it was felt that due to the pressing nature of the financial situation there was a need to gather responses as early as possible during the consultation to assist the Department moving forward.						

	Consultation responses and Department Comments							
	Theme	Comments	Response					
3	Anti-Poverty	3.1 We would submit that this cut runs against the strategic shift we need to see towards preventing homelessness before it happens rather than reacting to it after the fact. It may in practice prove far more costly to fail to provide a grant or loan than to do so if it leads to destitution or homelessness. We would urge reconsideration of this proposal. 3.2 The budget for DS grants is being cut by £20 million – a near-inevitable conclusion is that this decision will inevitably drive some destitute claimants into high cost and high risk borrowing, merely in an attempt to acquire basic amenities.	The Department's historic Baseline budget for Discretionary Support Grants totalled £13.7m and is not sufficient to meet the demand forecast in 2023-24. To mitigate, the Department's DS Grant Baseline Budget was increased to £20m for 2023-24. Failure to have taken such action would have put at risk the Department's ability to help address the basic needs of people who present with hardship. The Department remains committed to tackling poverty and has taken steps to ensure funding for the scheme is sustained throughout the year. Exceptions to the changes also remain where people are confronted with, for example, disaster, domestic violence, setting-up home scenarios. Grants will still be available for living expenses, household items and payments for those awaiting their first payment of Universal Credit (the Universal Credit Contingency Fund). In addition, the full range of services will still be available for those eligible for a Discretionary Support loan (similarly to grants, a loan will now not normally be made for the same item within a period of 24 months). In light of the current financial pressures facing the Department the aim remains to provide as much support as possible for those people who are eligible for assistance from Discretionary Support.					

Consultation responses and Department comments								
	Theme	Comments	Response					
4	Robustness of Data / Gender Budgeting	4.1 There are a limited number of data sources relied upon in the draft EQIA which we believe does not allow for a comprehensive analysis of the impacts of the proposed changes to the Discretionary support scheme to be carried out.	Due to the budgetary constraints and the urgency this placed on carrying out the EQIA, the Department made use of the data that was immediately available. This did include the highly relevant information regarding analysis of the Section 75 characteristics of those people receiving a Discretionary Support grant in 2021-22 and 2022-23.					
		4.2 In Part 4 'Assessment of Impacts' in the Draft Equality Impact Assessment, there is a table listing various age groups, who were awarded DS grants in financial year 2022-23. It does not identify any number of claimants between 16-20. The age at which the table starts is 20+.	It should be noted that it is not a mandatory requirement for Discretionary Support claimants to provide Section 75 characteristics about themselves and the information is collected through completion of a questionnaire, therefore caution should be exercised when drawing any inferences on the data. This is because self-selection bias can occur when participants differ in some way from non-participants which makes the sample unrepresentative of the population of interest.					
		4.3 Not only is there an immediate need for gender budgeting in our current crisis, but the benefits would help to improve the budgetary process. Gender budgeting is good budgeting.	The EQIA also made use of forecasting around the impact of the 2023-24 Budget on the Department and the initial responses to the Department's 2023-24 Budget EQIA. The Department is aware of the many competing pressures facing people during the current cost of living crisis, and as highlighted in the EQIA, it is anticipated that the changes to the Discretionary Support Scheme are likely to have a greater impact on certain groups including females.					
			In terms of those aged between 16-20 there were 902 claimants in this category reflecting a percentage of 3.07%.					

		Consultation responses and	Department comments
	Theme	Comments	Response
5	International Conventions / Treaties	5.1 Researchers have drawn attention to the risk that proposals to reduce the funds available to DS risk undermining the Department's ability to comply with its human rights obligations. 5.2 that cuts to the Discretionary Support budget pose a risk to rights under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) namely Article 3 (the right to protection from inhuman and degrading treatment) and Article 8 (the right to family life).	The Department remains fully aware and committed to its obligations to various international conventions, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the European Convention on Human Rights. It is in this context that the Department has endeavoured to ensure that the funding available for the Discretionary Support Scheme is sustained throughout the entire financial year so that support for the most vulnerable people can continue despite the current budgetary constraints.
6	Rural Needs / Child Rights	6.1 This EQIA should also sit alongside a RNIA that takes account of the greater impacts for those who live in rural communities. 6.2 Therefore, we recommend that the department carry out a full child rights screening to ascertain how specific risks to child's rights will be mitigated.	A Rural Needs Impact Analysis and Child Rights Impact Assessment screening were carried out by the Department alongside the EQIA process around the changes to the Discretionary Support Scheme.

Department for Communities Draft Equality Impact Assessment					
Changes to the Discretionary Support Scheme					
Consultation responses and Department comments					

	Consultation responses and Department comments									
	Theme	Comments	Response							
7	Monitor / Review	7.1 Recommends that the Department outline how robust monitoring will be achieved and that the policy measures applied are to be viewed as an emergency matter, and not the new norm for DS. 7.2 should include the arrangements that have been / are being put in place for monitoring and publishing the actual impacts of the revised policy on each of the Section 75 categories.	The Department will continue to monitor the number of claims being made to the Discretionary Support Scheme and the ongoing expenditure in an attempt to ensure that the budget will be sustained for the remainder of the year. Section 75 monitoring will also continue as the Department reviews the impact of the current changes to the Scheme on the various Section 75 groups.							
8	Guidance	8.1 It is recommended that the Department publish guidance to explain the difference between "basic needs" and "essential needs." There are a couple of examples provided in the EQIA consultation, but this is not sufficient to support a clear understanding of the difference. 8.2 There is a case to be made for public guidance to be made available that can accessibly inform claimants and their support workers on what can reasonably be expected from DS.	Assessment of need including what is essential or otherwise is subject to individual circumstances, with each case considered on its merits within the rules of the wider scheme. The core elements comprising the assistance available through the DS scheme are set out in detail in the Finance Support NIDirect campaign pages. Staff and Managers within the DS Team are available to respond to any queries from customers or their representatives on more detailed aspects of the scheme as required.							
9	Cumulative Impact of Cuts	9.1 Multiple cuts across Departments will have an impact often on the same Section 75 groups causing multiple layers of harm.	The Department is aware of the budgetary pressures facing all Departments and that a number of schemes across government have been forced to consider and implement reductions. It is with this in mind that the Department has aimed to sustain the Discretionary Support Scheme throughout the year in order to be in the position to offer a level of support to those most in need.							

Annex B

Claims and Award Decisions

All Persons

	July 22	August 22	May 23	June 23	July 23	August 23
Total Claims	8,512	10,832	10,847	11,139	10,427	11,293
Claims awarded a grant	4,198	5,312	5,235	5,419	4,354	4,495
Claims awarded a loan	2,402	3,682	3,644	3,776	4,394	4,671
Nil Awards	2,785	3,039	3,147	3,112	3,330	3,770

Award decisions include claims that were made in previous months and some people are awarded both a grant and a loan and are thus counted twice. This is the reason for the total claims made in each month not matching the total of awards in that month.

For the two months since the policy changes from 3 July 2023 –

- Grants awarded = 8,849
- Loans awarded = 9,065
- Nil awards = 7,100

For the two previous months May and June 2023 –

- Grants awarded = 10,654
- Loans awarded = 7,420
- Nil awards = 6,259

- Grants awarded = 9,510
- Loans awarded = 6,084
- Nil awards = 5,824

Lone Parents

	July 22	August 22	May 23	June 23	July 23	August 23
Total Claims	2,428	3,319	3,315	3,449	3,125	3,396
Claims awarded a grant	1,359	1,782	1,737	1,776	1,452	1,485
Claims awarded a loan	913	1,448	1,414	1,537	1,668	1,801
Nil Awards	545	659	715	684	723	836

Award decisions include claims that were made in previous months and some people are awarded both a grant and a loan and are thus counted twice. This is the reason for the total claims made in each month not matching the total of awards in that month.

For the two months since the policy changes from 3 July 2023 –

- Grants awarded = 2,937
- Loans awarded = 3,469
- Nil awards = 1,559

For the two previous months May and June 2023 –

- Grants awarded = 3,513
- Loans awarded = 2,951
- Nil awards = 1,399

- Grants awarded = 3,141
- Loans awarded = 2,361
- Nil awards = 1,204

Gender - Female

	July 22	August 22	May 23	June 23	July 23	August 23
Total Claims	4,900	6,399	6,391	6,628	6,103	6,687
Claims awarded a grant	2,416	3,199	3,127	3,270	2,591	2,706
Claims awarded a loan	1,505	2,284	2,290	2,407	2,782	2,977
Nil Awards	1,556	1,733	1,768	1,733	1,858	2,108

Award decisions include claims that were made in previous months and some people are awarded both a grant and a loan and are thus counted twice. This is the reason for the total claims made in each month not matching the total of awards in that month.

For the two months since the policy changes from 3 July 2023 –

- Grants awarded = 5,297
- Loans awarded = 5,759
- Nil awards = 3,966

For the two previous months May and June 2023 –

- Grants awarded = 6,397
- Loans awarded = 4,697
- Nil awards = 3,501

- Grants awarded = 5,615
- Loans awarded = 3,789
- Nil awards = 3,289

Gender - Male

	July 22	August 22	May 23	June 23	July 23	August 23
Total Claims	3,612	4,433	4,456	4,511	4,324	4,606
Claims awarded a grant	1,782	2,113	2,108	2,149	1,763	1,789
Claims awarded a loan	897	1,398	1,354	1,369	1,612	1,694
Nil Awards	1,229	1,306	1,379	1,379	1,472	1,662

Award decisions include claims that were made in previous months and some people are awarded both a grant and a loan and are thus counted twice. This is the reason for the total claims made in each month not matching the total of awards in that month.

For the two months since the policy changes from 3 July 2023 –

- Grants awarded = 3,552
- Loans awarded = 3,306
- Nil awards = 3,134

For the two previous months May and June 2023 –

- Grants awarded = 4,257
- Loans awarded = 2,723
- Nil awards = 2,758

- Grants awarded = 3,895
- Loans awarded = 2,295
- Nil awards = 2,535

Average grant and loan amounts

All Persons

	July 2022	August 2022	May 2023	June 2023	July 2023	August 2023
Ave grant amount	£646	£642	£660	£669	£562	£502
Ave loan amount	£216	£219	£235	£234	£244	£229

All figures below for average grant and loan amounts over a two-month period have been calculated by multiplying the average grant / loan amount in each month by the number of grants / loans awarded in each month and then dividing the total amount awarded over the two months by the total number of grants / loans awarded in the same period. All figures have been rounded.

For the two months since the policy changes from 3 July 2023 –

Average grant amount = £532 Average loan amount = £236

For the two previous months May and June 2023 –

Average grant amount = £665 Average loan amount = £234

For the two corresponding months from the previous year July and August 2022 –

Average grant amount = £644 Average loan amount = £218

Lone Parents

	July 2022	August 2022	May 2023	June 2023	July 2023	August 2023
Ave grant amount	£796	£741	£789	£785	£656	£587
Ave loan amount	£252	£252	£276	£284	£294	£273

For the two months since the policy changes from 3 July 2023 -

Average grant amount = £621 Average loan amount = £283

For the two previous months May and June 2023 –

Average grant amount = £787 Average loan amount = £280

For the two corresponding months from the previous year July and August 2022 –

Average grant amount = £765 Average loan amount = £252

Gender - Female

	July 2022	August 2022	May 2023	June 2023	July 2023	August 2023
Ave grant amount	£686	£684	£707	£713	£594	£525
Ave loan amount	£233	£236	£253	£258	£270	£250

For the two months since the policy changes from 3 July 2023 -

Average grant amount = £559 Average loan amount = £260

For the two previous months May and June 2023 –

Average grant amount = £710 Average loan amount = £256

For the two corresponding months from the previous year July and August 2022 –

Average grant amount = £685 Average loan amount = £235

Gender - Male

	July 2022	August 2022	May 2023	June 2023	July 2023	August 2023
Ave grant amount	£591	£579	£590	£603	£514	£467
Ave loan amount	£188	£192	£203	£191	£199	£192

For the two months since the policy changes from 3 July 2023 -

Average grant amount = £490 Average loan amount = £195

For the two previous months May and June 2023 –

Average grant amount = £597 Average loan amount = £197

For the two corresponding months from the previous year July and August 2022 –

Average grant amount = £584 Average loan amount = £190

Available in alternative formats.

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