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# Annual Report for the Social Fund

2020/21



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## Preface

The Social Fund is a regulated scheme made up of Sure Start Maternity Grants, Funeral Expenses Payments, Cold Weather Payments and Winter Fuel Payments, and a discretionary scheme of Budgeting Loans.

These payments provide vital financial support for people in need by helping people and families on low incomes with certain one-off or occasional expenses as well as providing a source of affordable credit for the financially excluded.

In 2020/21, the Social Fund continued to help people on low incomes through both the regulated and discretionary schemes.

Over 50,000 Budgeting Loans were awarded totalling £26.018 million.

A total of 2,384 maternity grants were awarded, totalling £1.185 million to families to help meet the costs associated with a new baby. Awards amounting to £3.288 million were granted under the Funeral Payment scheme. In addition, the Fund also provided assistance with fuel costs, with Winter Fuel Payments contributing to heating costs to 284,592 pensioners totalling £50.68 million.



**Deirdre Hargey**  
**MLA Minister for Communities**

# 1. Introduction

- 1.1 This is the thirty third annual report on the operation of the Social Fund, and it is laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly in accordance with section 146(5) and (6) of the Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992.
- 1.2 There are two categories of Social Fund: the regulated scheme made up of Maternity Grants, Funeral Expenses Payments, Cold Weather Payments and Winter Fuel Payments; and the discretionary scheme comprised of Budgeting Loans that are intended to respond flexibly to meet exceptional and intermittent needs.

## Source of data for this report

- 1.3 The figures in this report, unless stated otherwise, are taken from the Department's Social Fund Policy, Budget and Management Information System and from scans of the Social Fund Computer System<sup>1</sup>. Together these data sources record details of every individual application, subsequent payment decision and any outstanding repayment record and also provide useful comparative data for various purposes such as average awards, what needs they cover and how various client groups are using the Social Fund. These comparisons are shown in the annexes to this report.
- 1.4 The figures in this report, unless otherwise stated, do not include clerical cases that have not yet been built onto the Social Fund Computer System.

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<sup>1</sup> There is also a statutory requirement to produce a Social Fund White Paper Account. Current arrangements are that this is laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly separately.

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## 2. The Regulated Social Fund

### Sure Start Maternity Grants

- 2.1 The Sure Start Maternity Grant is a payment of £500 to provide important help for families with the costs of a new baby (or babies in the event of a multiple birth) if there are no other children under 16 in the claimant's family. The grant is available to recipients, and partners of recipients, of a qualifying benefit or tax credit. For claims in 2020/21 these are: Income Support; income-related Employment and Support Allowance; income-based Jobseeker's Allowance; Pension Credit; Child Tax Credit (at a rate higher than the family element); or Working Tax Credit (which includes a disability or a severe disability element) and Universal Credit. It is also possible to qualify if in receipt of a Support for Mortgage Interest Loan.
- 2.2 Sure Start Maternity Grants are also available for the additional children of subsequent multiple births. This recognises that help is needed with the costs for all but one of the additional children of a subsequent multiple birth. An example, would be where the birth of twins follows a previous single birth, a SSMG can now be paid to help with costs of the additional child. In some instances other children can be disregarded if the claimant has a formal or informal caring arrangement for them before the birth of their first child.

- 2.3 In 2020/21, 2,384 awards were made worth £1.185 million. Sure Start Maternity Grant statistics are in Annexes 1, 2 and 7.

### Funeral Expenses Payments

- 2.4 The Funeral Expenses Payment (FEP) scheme continues to provide help towards a simple, respectful, low-cost funeral. Payments are made to a person responsible for funeral costs who is in receipt of (or whose partner is in receipt of) a qualifying benefit or tax credit. In 2020/21 the qualifying benefits and tax credits are the same as for the Sure Start Maternity Grant (see paragraph 2.1 above), but with the addition of Housing Benefit. Any payments made by the Department for Communities towards funeral costs are recoverable from the estate of the deceased if there are sufficient funds.
- 2.5 In 2020/21, 2,495 awards were made worth £3.288 million.
- 2.6 The Bereavement Service has continued to provide a means of claiming a Funeral Expenses Payment by telephone for people in receipt of income-related benefits, reporting the death of a relative or friend. Funeral Expenses Payment claims may also be made by completing and submitting the written Funeral Expenses Payment claim form.
- 2.7 Funeral Expenses Payment statistics are in Annexes 1, 2 and 7.

## Cold Weather Payments

2.8 Cold Weather Payments provide help with additional costs of heating during periods of severe weather. The scheme runs from 1 November to 31 March each year. Every residential postcode in Northern Ireland is linked to one of the weather stations used

in the scheme. A payment of £25 is made when the average temperature has been recorded as, or is forecast to be, 0°C or below over seven consecutive days at the weather station linked to the person’s postcode.

2.9 In 2020/21, eligible recipients of a Cold Weather Payment were:

Benefit in Payment	Qualifying Conditions for a Cold Weather Payment
Pension Credit	Entitled to Cold Weather Payment (CWP).
Income Support (IS)	Entitled to a CWP if they receive a disability premium, a severe disability premium, any one of the pensioner premiums, a child disability premium within IS or Child Tax Credit (CTC) or they have a child under 5 years.
Income based Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA(IB))	Entitled to a CWP if they receive a disability premium, a severe disability premium, any one of the pensioner premiums, a child disability premium within JSA (IB) or CTC or they have child under 5 years.
Income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA(IR))	Entitled to a CWP if they receive the support component, the work-related activity component, a severe or enhanced disability premium, pensioner premium, or have a child who is disabled for whom they receive a disability premium within CTC or have a child under 5 years.
Universal Credit Qualifying conditions	Entitled to a CWP under Universal Credit if they are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>not employed or self-employed; AND</li> <li>they, or their partner, receive a limited capability for work element (with or without a work-related activity element); or</li> <li>they receive the disabled child element within their assessment; or</li> <li>have a child under 5 years. Universal credit recipients who are employed or self-employed will only be eligible for CWPs if they have a disabled child or eligible young person in the family.</li> </ul>

2.10 In 2020/21, there were 31,327 Cold Weather Payment awards.

2.11 Cold Weather Payment statistics are in Annex 1.

## Winter Fuel Payments

2.12 Winter Fuel Payments help older people to meet heating costs. They are tax free and do not affect entitlement to social security benefits.

2.13 In total 284, 592 people benefited from a Winter Fuel Payment in 2020/21. The total spent in 2020/2021 on Winter Fuel Payments was £50.68 million.

2.14 Households with someone who had reached State Pension age for women and aged up to 79 received £200 and households with someone aged 80 or over received £300.

2.15 Most people who had reached the State Pension age for women and who were normally living in Northern Ireland were eligible for the Winter Fuel Payment. People do not receive a payment if during the qualifying week they:

- were in prison
- were in hospital receiving free treatment for more than 52 weeks
- needed permission to enter the UK and do not qualify for help from the Department
- have been living in a care home for the previous twelve weeks or more and receive Pension Credit, income related Jobseeker's Allowance or income-related Employment and Support Allowance.

2.16 The qualifying age for Winter Fuel Payments for men and women is increasing in line with the overall increase in State Pension Age.

2.17 Winter Fuel Payments are paid to people residing in the majority of European Economic Area countries or Switzerland as long as they have a genuine and sufficient link with the UK. The qualifying week for winter 2020/21 payments was the week beginning 16 September 2020.

2.18 The countries where Winter Fuel Payments are no longer payable are Cyprus, Greece, France, Gibraltar, Malta, Portugal and Spain.

2.19 The majority of payments were made automatically before Christmas 2020 without the need to claim. However, newly eligible people needed to make a claim if they were not receiving a social security benefit (or receiving only Housing Benefit or Child Benefit) during the qualifying week.

2.20 The Department for Work and Pensions administers and manages Winter Fuel Payments in relation to eligible customers in Northern Ireland.



## 3. The Discretionary Social Fund

### Budgeting Loans

- 3.1 Budgeting Loans are interest free loans which are repayable from benefit awards. They help people, who have been in receipt of a qualifying benefit for at least six months, with intermittent expenses for which it is difficult to budget for. The qualifying benefits are: Income Support; income-related Employment and Support Allowance; income-based Jobseeker's Allowance; and Pension Credit.
- 3.2 In 2020/21, a total of 50,625 awards were made, worth £26.018 million.
- 3.3 There is a single Budgeting Loans allocation, which is controlled and managed centrally to ensure that all Budgeting Loan applicants in the same circumstances are treated in a similar way wherever they live. From April 2013, this budget has been funded solely from recoveries without any additional Annually Managed Expenditure allocations.
- 3.4 The Budgeting Loan scheme will remain in place for applicants in receipt of existing income-related benefits until they migrate to Universal Credit (at which point they may be eligible for a Budgeting Advance. A Budgeting Advance is not an award from the Social Fund).
- 3.5 Claimants that migrate from Universal Credit to Pension Credit will once again qualify for a Budgeting Loan.
- 3.6 Budgeting Loan statistics are in Annexes 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6.



## 4. General Administration

- 4.1 In 2020/21, Budgeting Loans, Budgeting Loan Reviews and Sure Start Maternity Grants were delivered by the centralised Social Fund Team in Lisburn Jobs and Benefits Office. Funeral Expenses Payments are delivered by the Department for Communities' Bereavement Service.
- 4.2 The normal method of applying for Funeral Expenses Payments, Sure Start Maternity Grants and Budgeting Loans is in writing (the appropriate application forms can be downloaded or requested by post). The Bereavement Service, however, takes Funeral Expenses Payment claims over the telephone when a potential Funeral Expenses Payment recipient prefers this to making a written claim.

### Reviews

- 4.3 A regulated Social Fund applicant who is dissatisfied with the initial decision on their application may apply to have the decision reviewed

under a mandatory reconsideration within 14 days of the original decision. Applicants who remain dissatisfied are able to appeal the decision.

- 4.4 A reviewing officer within the Department for Communities carries out the first review and the outcome is notified to the applicant. In 2020/21, 163 applications (does not include Funeral payments) for first review were dealt with.
- 4.5 Applicants who remained dissatisfied were able to ask for a further review by the Independent Case Examiner (ICE).

### Clearance Standards

- 4.6 Clearance times for the operational delivery of the Social Fund are monitored against a comprehensive set of clearance standards. The table below shows clearance against: The Average Actual Clearance Times (AACT) standard (column 2).

Average Actual Clearance Times (AACT) (working days)	AACT Standard	Achieved in 2020/21
Budgeting Loans	10	5.9
Local Review of above loans	5	1
Funeral Payments	20	14
Sure Start Maternity Grants	5	4.3

Data sourced from the Social Fund Computer System (SFCS). The AACT achieved figures have been rounded.

## 5. Financial Management

### Background

- 5.1 Payments from the regulated Social Fund are entitlement based and not paid from a cash-limited budget. Regulations prescribe the circumstances and amounts that are payable.
- 5.2 Cash-limited budgets are allocated for the Budgeting Loans, Funeral Expenses and Sure Start Maternity Grants.
- 5.4 In 2020/21 the Debt Management registered 35,524 Social Fund loan referrals.

### 2020/21 Discretionary Social Fund Budget

- 5.5 £32.557 million (£31.801 million from Budgeting Loans, £0.756 million from Crisis Loans) was recovered through the repayment of loans.

### Recoveries

- 5.3 The Department for Communities' Debt Management manages the recovery of Social Fund loans from the majority of people who are no longer in receipt of benefit.
- 5.6 £108,000 of Funeral Expenses Payments was recovered from estates.
- 5.7 Details of recoveries are given in Annex 1 and 6.

### 2020/21 Regulated Social Fund Budget



## 6. Summary of Financial Performance

- 6.1 In 2020/21 the Social Fund provided payments of just over £27.203 million (£26.018 million Budgeting Loans & £1.185 million Sure Start Maternity Grants), with an additional £50.68 million of Winter Fuel Payments paid to 283,537 people who had reached state pension age.
- 6.2 Gross expenditure on Budgeting Loans was £26.018 million.
- 6.3 Overall during 2020/21, the Discretionary Social Fund provided help in the form of 50,625 awards. (See Annex 1)

### The 2020/2021 Discretionary Social Fund budget

- 6.4 In April 2020, a single national Budgeting Loans budget of £42.75 million was allocated, composed entirely of loan recoveries.
- 6.5 Loan recoveries during the year were £32.435 million against a forecast recovery of £52.745 million at the beginning of 2020/21. Recoveries provided 100% of the funds needed to meet gross expenditure.





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# ANNEXES

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# 7. Index to Annexes

## General

1. Northern Ireland Social Fund Summary Statistics

## The Regulated Social Fund

2. Sure Start Maternity Grants and Funeral Expenses Payments: Awards by claimant group and Awards by qualifying benefit or tax credit

## The Discretionary Social Fund

3. Budgeting Loans: gross expenditure by Applicant Group
4. Budgeting Loans: reasons for initial refusal by Applicant Group
5. Budgeting Loans Recovery and Repayment Source
6. Summary of Budgeting Loans Review applications

## Social Fund Appeals

7. Summary of Social Fund Appeals

## Client Groups and Applicant Groups

8. Client Groups and Applicant Group definitions

**ANNEX 1:****Northern Ireland Social Fund Summary Statistics**

	Regulated Social Fund			Discretionary Social Fund	
	SSMG	CWP	FEP	BL	CL
Applications received	3,955	n/a	3,154	58,150	0
Initial decisions	3,756	n/a	3,275	54,718	0
Awards	2,384	31,327	2,495	50,625	0
Awards as % of initial decisions	63.47%	n/a	76.18%	92.52%	0
Initial refusals	1,372	n/a	780	4,093	0
Gross expenditure £m	£1.185	£783,175	£3.288	£26.018	0
Recoveries £m	£0	n/a	£108,000	£32.435	£763,000
Net expenditure £m	£1.185	n/a	£3.180	£6.417	£763,000
Average award £	£497	£25	£1,318	£514	0

**KEY:****SSMG** - Sure Start Maternity Grant,**CWP** - Cold Weather Payment,**FEP** - Funeral Expenses Payment,**BL** - Budgeting Loan,**CL** - Crisis Loan,**N/A** - Not Applicable**NOTES:**

- SSMG, FEP and BL figures for Gross Expenditure, Recoveries and Net Expenditure are taken from the Social Fund Account 2020/21. Remaining SSMG, FEP and BL data sourced from the Policy, Budget and Management Information System.
- CWP figures for Gross Expenditure and Net Expenditure are taken from the Social Fund Account 2020/21.
- The figure for recoveries for Crisis Loans is taken from monthly Central Payment System (CPS) accounts.
- Average SSMG award reflects multiple births.
- There is no requirement to claim Cold Weather Payments.
- The number of discretionary awards made after review is not included in the table. However, gross expenditure does include awards made after review, reconsideration or appeal.
- For the regulated Social Fund, the method of calculating average awards is to divide gross expenditure by the number of awards (including those made after reconsideration or appeal).
- For the discretionary Social Fund, the method of calculating average awards is to divide initial gross expenditure (excluding the value of review awards) by the number of initial awards.
- The difference between applications received, initial decisions, awards and initial refusals, is due to: applications being withdrawn; applicants rejecting or not responding to loan offers; and, not decided at the time the count was made.
- Cold Weather Payment figures are taken from Departmental records.
- Figures and percentages may not sum due to rounding.



**ANNEX 2:****Sure Start Maternity Grants and Funeral Payments Awards by Claimant Group**

Claimant Group	Sure Start Maternity Grants		Funeral Payments	
	Awards	% of Total Awards	Awards	% of Total Awards
Pensioners	0	0%	667	26.74%
Unemployed	10	0.40%	10	0.42%
Disabled	69	2.91%	2	0.07%
Lone Parents	5	0.22%	0	0%
Employed	0	0%	2	0.10%
Others	2,300	96.47%	1,813	72.67%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,384</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>2,495</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Sure Start Maternity Grants and Funeral Expenses Payment -Awards by Qualifying Benefit or Tax Credit**

Qualifying Benefit	Sure Start Maternity Grants		Funeral Payments	
	Awards	% of Total Awards	Awards	% of Total Awards
Income Support, Employment and Support Allowance (income related), Jobseeker's Allowance (incomebased) and Pension Credit	1,597	67%	1,841	73.77%
Child Tax Credit (at a rate higher than the family element)/ Working Tax Credit (which includes a disability or a severe disability element)	787	33%	195	7.81%
Housing Benefit	0	0	459	18.42%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,384</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>2495</b>	<b>100%</b>

**NOTES:**

1. Claimant group definitions are in Annex 9.
2. These tables include awards made after reconsideration or appeal.
3. If an award is made to a claimant who receives more than one qualifying benefit or tax credit, then the award is recorded under the qualifying benefit or tax credit which appears first in the table above.
4. Figures and percentages may not sum due to rounding.

**ANNEX 3:****Budgeting Loans – Gross expenditure by Applicant Group**

Qualifying Benefit	Sure Start Maternity Grants	Funeral Payments
	Amount £	% of Total Amount
Pensioners	£1,251,461	4.81%
Unemployed	£4,305,974	16.55%
Pensioners	£13,404,468	51.52%
Pensioners	£5,669,338	21.79%
Pensioners	£1,386,759	5.33%
Pensioners	£26,018,000	100%

**NOTES:**

1. Total Expenditure figures in this table may differ from Annex 1, as data is obtained from the Department's Social Fund Policy Budget and Management Information System (PBMIS) rather than the Social Fund Account 2020/21.
2. Applicant group definitions are in Annex 8.
3. Expenditure include awards made on review, reconsideration or appeal.
4. Figures and percentages may not sum due to rounding.

**ANNEX 4:****Budgeting Loans – Reasons for initial refusal by Applicant Group****Counts**

Type	Pensioners	Disabled	Lone Parents	Unemployed	Others	Total
Outstanding Social Fund debt	140	1844	745	498	212	3439
Not in receipt of a qualifying benefit	6	363	9	159	76	613
Not in receipt of a qualifying benefit for 26 weeks	5	9	2	18	2	36
Other	1	1	0	3	0	5
Total	152	2217	756	678	290	4093

**Percentages**

Type	Pensioners	Disabled	Lone Parents	Unemployed	Others	Total
Outstanding Social Fund debt	92.81%	83.19%	98.63%	73.49%	73.22%	84.02%
Not in receipt of a qualifying benefit	3.59%	16.36%	1.16%	23.38%	25.80%	14.98%
Not in receipt of a qualifying benefit for 26 weeks	3.17%	0.41%	0.19%	2.71%	0.90%	0.89%
Other	0.42%	0.04%	0.02%	0.42%	0.08%	0.12%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

**NOTES:**

1. Claimant group definitions are given in Annex 8.
2. The qualifying benefits are: Income Support; income-related Employment and Support Allowance income-based Jobseeker's Allowance; Pension Credit.
3. Figures and percentages may not sum due to rounding.

**ANNEX 5:****Budgeting Loan Recovery – Average weekly repayment deductions from Income Support, Jobseeker’s Allowance and Pension Credit**

		Feb 2020	May 2020	Aug 2020	Nov 2020
Average deduction	IS	£21.55	£21.47	£22.74	£21.38
	JSA	£12.23	£11.85	£11.54	£11.98
	PC	£21.10	£19.72	£21.38	£19.30
Number of deductions	IS	12,860	11,760	840	10,320
	JSA	3,805	3,465	1,105	2,675
	PC	3,540	2,860	300	2,700

**NOTES:**

1. Data from Income Support, Jobseeker’s Allowance and Pension Credit Quarterly Statistical Enquiries.
2. UC recovery data for Budgeting Loans is not available for inclusion in the 2020/21 report.

**Repayment Source 2020/21**

	Budgeting Loans	
	Amount £	% of Total Amount
Income Support & Pension Credit	£9,179,105	28.30%
Jobseeker’s Allowance	£4,427,377.50	13.65%
Employment and Support Allowance	£17,806,815	54.90%
Incapacity Benefit	£0.00	0%
Other benefits	£379,489.50	1.17%
Cash	£642,213	1.98%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£32,435,000</b>	<b>100%</b>

**NOTES:**

1. Social Fund loans are recoverable from most Social Security benefits.
2. Figures and percentages may not sum due to rounding.
3. UC recovery data for Budgeting Loans is not available for inclusion in the 2020/21 report.

## ANNEX 6:

### Summary of budgeting loan review applications

First Reviews	Budgeting Loans
Number of applications for first review	163
Number of decisions revised at first review	107
Percentage of applications revised at first review	65.64%

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**NOTES:**

1. The number of reviewing officer decisions reviewed excludes applications for Social Fund Commissioner that were outside the Inspector's jurisdiction or withdrawn.
  2. Percentages have been calculated using non-rounded figures.
  3. Totals may not sum due to rounding.
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## ANNEX 7:

### Summary of Social Fund Appeals

Type of Payment	Number of appeals	Number heard and decided at hearing	Number decided in appellant's favour
Funeral Payments	4	4	0
Sure Start Maternity Grants	5	1	0

SOURCE: Figures are provided by the Appeals Service NI.

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**NOTES:**

1. The number of appeals is the number received by the Appeals Service NI.
  2. Number of appeals heard and decided at hearing' may not necessarily have been received in the same financial period.
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## ANNEX 8:

### Client Groups

Social Fund payments are wide ranging from payments to help with intermittent unexpected expenses (mainly to those in receipt of qualifying benefits), to payments aimed at certain groups to help with particular events. The fund does not therefore fall exclusively into any

one of the Departmental client groups of Children, Working Age and Older People, although Social Fund payments are either paid to, or benefit, all of these groups. Some statistics in this report are shown by applicant or claimant groups that fall into one or more of the wider client groups.

### Applicant Group Definitions

#### Pensioners

**Includes:**

- applicant or partner at minimum state pension age or over with Pension Credit
- applicant or partner at minimum state pension age or over in receipt of state retirement pension

Includes also where applicant is under minimum state pension age and partner is:

- minimum state pension age or over with Income Support (IS) pensioner premium
- 80 or over with IS higher pensioner premium
- minimum state pension age to 79, disabled with IS higher pensioner premium

#### Unemployed

**Includes:**

- unemployed or with training allowance

#### Disabled

**Includes:**

- in receipt of Employment and Support Allowance
- applicant or partner aged under minimum state pension age with IS disability premium
- lone parent with IS disability premium
- family with IS disability premium
- others with IS disability premium
- in receipt of other benefit for incapacity or disablement

#### Lone Parent

**Includes:**

- person who has no partner and is receiving Income Support because they are responsible for a child

#### Others

**Includes:**

- involved in a trade dispute
- in paid employment
- not known or unallocated

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**NOTES:**

It is possible that an applicant who is unemployed may receive a disability or pensioner premium. Such an applicant would be counted as unemployed.

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