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By email: nuria.zolle@nea.org.uk

10 December 2009

Dear Nuria,

Thank you for your email dated 3 November to the Rt Hon Ed Miliband on behalf of the Welsh Fuel Poverty Charter Steering Group Coalition about Wales' first fuel poverty charter. I am replying as the Minister responsible for the relevant policy areas

The Government is committed to tackling fuel poverty. The aim of the UK Government and the Devolved Administrations, remains the eradication of fuel poverty in vulnerable households, as far as reasonably practicable by 2010, with the overall aim that no household in the UK should live in fuel poverty by 2016 (2018 in Wales). This is laid out in the 2001 UK Fuel Poverty Strategy.

It is a particularly challenging time for all of us committed to cutting fuel poverty. As you may be aware, the Government recently published data on the number of actual households in fuel poverty in 2007. This report confirmed that within the UK in 2007, there were 4 million households in fuel poverty – around 2 million more than 2004 when figures were at their lowest – and half a million more than 2006. 3.25 million of these are vulnerable households an increase of around half a million more since 2006. Despite these challenging figures, which have been caused largely by rising fuel prices and the current global economic climate, it remains the aim of Government to eradicate fuel poverty.

The charter requests that the UK government engages in meaningful consultation with the Welsh Assembly Government in the implementation of existing schemes and programmes and the development of future strategies or innovations. I am happy to confirm that this is something that already happens. For example, I have recently chaired an inter-ministerial meeting with my counterparts from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland as well as colleagues from Treasury and the Department of Work & Pensions to bring together current thinking and strategies for tackling fuel poverty both within each of the devolved administrations and across the United Kingdom and learn from best practice. Officials in the Department of Energy and Climate Change have also engaged with their counterparts in Wales in relation to the Social Price Support clauses in the Energy Bill that was announced in the Queen's speech.

I would like to assure you of my, and Government's, willingness to maintain a full and open engagement with the Welsh Assembly Government on these important matters.

Winter Fuel Payments aim to help tackle fuel poverty by increasing the incomes of older people who represent the largest percentage of fuel poor households. We know that over half of all fuel-poor households have at least one person aged 60 or over. Winter Fuel Payments make an important contribution towards tackling fuel poverty, and in 2007 (the most recent figures we possess) were responsible for taking around 200,000 households out of fuel poverty in the United Kingdom

As you are aware, fuel poverty is a complex issue and low income is only one factor which may contribute towards a household being in fuel poverty. The Winter Fuel Payment aims to provide reassurance to older people that they can afford to keep warm in the winter months when heating bills are higher. Older people are particularly vulnerable to the effects of cold weather in the winter months and the greatest increase in deaths each winter is amongst the elderly. Although the Winter Fuel Payment is a universal benefit the majority of people receiving the payment need and appreciate the financial assistance. Targeting or means-testing Winter Fuel Payments would be administratively complex in contrast to the current system which is easy to administer.

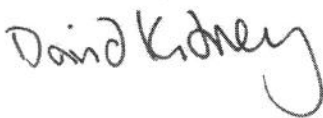
The Government recognises the importance of increasing benefit take-up for vulnerable groups. In reference to children, the Government established a taskforce who issued their report "Taking Up the Challenge" on 12 June. It set out the steps that local services should take to improve the take up of benefits and tax-credits. It included advice and a range of good practical examples. Taking Up the Challenge can be downloaded from:
<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/download/?id=6089>

We have also simplified the claim process to make it easier for pensioners to claim their benefits. Claims for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit made over the phone with Pension Credit on 0800 99 1234, can now be forwarded directly to the local authority without the need for a signed claim form. And we continue to look at ways of making further improvements.

The Pension, Disability and Carers Service will continue to promote take-up of benefits by those entitled. It will continue to press forward with data matching to identify eligible non-recipients, home visits for vulnerable customers, targeted local marketing and media campaigns, a simple claim process and ever closer working with partner organisations. The Pensioners, Disability and Carer's Service conduct around 13,000 home visits a week for vulnerable customers to ensure they are receiving all benefits and services they're entitled to.

As part of the HEES package clients are offered the opportunity to complete a Benefit Entitlement Check (BEC) to ascertain whether they are eligible to claim a benefit not currently being received. We continue to work closely with our colleagues in the Welsh Assembly Government to ensure that the Welsh perspective is taken into account in discussions on UK-wide issues such as encouraging the maximising the uptake of benefits.
I hope this is helpful. Please feel free to keep in touch in the future.

Yours sincerely,



DAVID KIDNEY