

CABINET

Date of Meeting	Tuesday, 12 th July 2022
Report Subject	Adoption of Discretionary Cost of Living Support Scheme and Policy Framework
Cabinet Member	Cabinet Member for Governance and Corporate Services including Health and Safety and Human Resources
Report Author	Chief Officer (Governance)
Type of Report	Operational

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Welsh Government recently announced a 'Cost of Living Support Scheme' (COLSS) which provides grants to households to help with the rising cost of energy bills. The package of measures includes £6.99m within the main scheme to provide £150 grants to circa. 46,670 qualifying households in Council Tax Bands A to D along with those households in Council Tax Bands A to I that receive Council Tax Reduction.

In addition to the £6.99m, £1.15m is available to the Council to provide discretionary assistance and to support other households it considers to also be in most need of financial support or who might also be excluded from help within the main scheme.

This report sets out the proposed discretionary scheme criteria to provide some support to households who are currently not eligible for a grant within the main scheme as well as providing targeted 'top-up' grants of £125 to households whose children are in receipt of Free School Meals.

A small part of the Discretionary Funding is also earmarked to supporting wider anti-poverty measures and to help the Council meet one of its key well-being objectives (*Protecting people from poverty by supporting them to meet their basic needs*) by supporting the ongoing development of the "Well Fed" food hub to allow all residents to access fresh meals at affordable prices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	That Cabinet approve the Discretionary Policy Framework and funding distribution as set out in the report.
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REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING THE COST OF LIVING SUPPORT DISCRETIONARY SCHEME
1.01	<p>Welsh Government recently announced a package of measures to help residents with the rising energy and living costs. The package includes £6.99m to provide a cost-of-living payment to eligible households in Flintshire falling within the remit of the main scheme funding of £6.99m and £1.15m to provide discretionary assistance and to support other households it considers to also be in most need of financial support and who might also be excluded from help within the main scheme.</p>
1.02	<p>The purpose of this report is to now consider the adoption of the Discretionary element of the scheme. The report sets out the proposed discretionary scheme criteria to provide support to certain households who are currently not eligible for the £150 grant within the main scheme as well as providing targeted 'top-up' grants to households whose children are in receipt of Free School Meals.</p> <p>A small part of the Discretionary Funding is also recommended to support wider anti-poverty measures and to help the Council meet one of its key well-being objectives (<i>Protecting people from poverty by supporting them to meet their basic needs</i>) by supporting the ongoing development of the "Well Fed" food hub to allow all residents to access fresh meals at affordable prices.</p>
1.03	<p>For the main scheme, households occupying properties in Council Tax Bands A to D, along with those households who receive Council Tax Reduction (CTRS) in Council Tax Bands A to I, are eligible to a £150 payment if they meet the following criteria :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Liable for, and living in that property as their sole and main residence on 15th February 2022• Responsible for paying the associated utility bills for that property on 15th February
1.04	<p>Extensive work has already been undertaken to implement the main scheme and 42,023 individual payments of £150 have already been made to eligible households. This equates to a total funding distribution of £6.3m and a take-up rate of 90% for eligible households. The main scheme remains open for applications up to 30th September 2022 and where we do not hold the bank account details to carry out an automated payment, we continue to promote applications and encourage eligible residents to apply.</p>

1.05	<p>With the focus on now adopting a local Discretionary Scheme, local authorities also have complete autonomy to target the £1.15m funds to best support residents considered to be in need of assistance with their living costs. This support may take the form of a payment to a household not already covered in the main scheme, a top-up payment to existing households or it may also cover the cost of essential services to households, especially those linked to anti-poverty initiatives.</p>
1.06	<p>To support the development of a local Discretionary scheme, Welsh Government have also provided a short guidance document to provide local authorities with relevant information and policy ideas to enable them to design and deliver a Discretionary scheme.</p>
1.07	<p>The Discretionary scheme criteria that is set out in this report incorporates many of the suggested inclusions for the scheme, principally around making £150 awards to households in Bands A to D who are liable, but exempt, from Council Tax. These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Care Leavers (referred to as Class X exemptions) – 27 eligible households • Severe Mental Impairments (referred to as Class U) – 223 eligible households • All student households (referred to as Class N) – 175 eligible households
1.08	<p>To ensure the discretionary funds are also fairly distributed to those who are generally considered to be in most need of help, other categories that are recommended for a £125 support payment within the criteria of the Flintshire Discretionary scheme are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Properties in the higher bands (E to I) which are occupied by single occupants - 4,077 households • Properties in the higher bands (E to I) where a banding reduction is awarded because the property has been adapted to meet the needs of a disabled resident – 142 eligible households <p>Targeting support to households in Bands E to I where the household consists of only one resident is designed to support those who rely on one household income and who typically may be elderly and living alone.</p> <p>The Council Tax system also provides for a statutory banding reduction for householders in cases where an eligible person who is disabled resides in a property which is their sole and main residence and in which there are adaptations to meet the needs of the qualifying resident. Providing support to these households who pay Council Tax in Bands E to I is designed to support households who often have complex medical needs and who have adapted their homes. Such households can typically have high energy bills too in order to meet the needs of the disabled resident.</p>
1.09	<p>As part of the Councils commitment to protecting vulnerable families from poverty by supporting them to meet their basic needs, there is also opportunity and flexibility within the Discretionary Scheme to provide a 'top-up' payment to households who may have already qualified for the</p>

	<p>basic £150 payment but whose children are in receipt of Free School Meals.</p> <p>To target additional support to the well-being objective set by the Council of reducing and ending child poverty, we know that some children and families struggle with household budgets and to access adequate food, clothing, shelter and education to lead a healthy and active life.</p> <p>There is strong evidence that living in poverty has a major impact of levels of educational achievement and life outcomes, especially at time of a cost-of-living crisis. Although many families may be struggling with the rising costs of living, many of the most vulnerable families, particularly those who rely on free school meals, are considered to be less able to absorb the rising fuel and food costs.</p> <p>FSM's are also recognised as the most widely-used indicator of families with children who live in relative poverty in Wales.</p> <p>The proposed policy framework will therefore also provide a single and further payment of £125 to householders whose children are registered for, and in receipt of, FSM's as at 15th February 2022 (being the qualifying date for COLS).</p> <p>The £125 payment will therefore be determined as a 'top-up' payment for those households who have already benefited from a £150 payment in the main scheme. Households whose children are in receipt of FSM's but who not eligible for a £150 payment within the main scheme, as a result of not being liable to pay Council Tax, will be entitled to a maximum payment of £125.</p> <p>3,115 households in Flintshire who have children registered for FSM's will be eligible for the proposed £125 payment/'top-up' payment.</p>
1.10	<p>A small part of the Discretionary Funding, equating to £150k, is also recommended for allocation to supporting the Councils key objectives of tackling wider anti-poverty and to help the Council meet one of its key well-being commitments of tackling food poverty (as defined by the Council Plan 2021-23). Funding of £150k is earmarked to supporting the ongoing development of the "Well Fed" food hub to allow all residents to access fresh meals at affordable prices. "Well Fed" is a partnership between Flintshire County Council, Clwyd Alyn Housing Association and Can Cook.</p> <p>The additional funding will specifically enable the social partnership to grow a regional Meals on Wheels service, able to reach all parts of Flintshire, especially the rural communities. This ring fenced funding of £150k from the COLS scheme will establish delivery of nutritional meals through local community hub partnerships and will ensure the Council continues its support for this vital partnership, especially at a time when food poverty is becoming an increasing issue for many households.</p>

2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS														
2.01	<p>The Council has received a total of £8.14m to support ‘Cost of Living’ payments. Of this, £1.15m is earmarked to fund a Discretionary Cost of Living Support Scheme. The policy framework as part of this report is designed to utilise the funding available within this scheme and to ensure that more households qualify for a grant payment of either £150 or £125. The policy also ensures that a further 7,759 households qualify for either a £150 or £125 grant/‘top-up’ grant.</p> <p>In summary, the £1.15m Discretionary Fund will be distributed as follows:</p> <p>Bands A to D</p> <table data-bbox="320 640 1358 748"> <tr> <td>Care Leavers – 27 eligible households x £150 grants</td> <td>= £4,050</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Severe Mental Impairments – 223 eligible households x £150</td> <td>= £33,450</td> </tr> <tr> <td>All student households– 175 eligible households x £150</td> <td>= £26,250</td> </tr> </table> <p>Bands E to I</p> <table data-bbox="320 860 1382 931"> <tr> <td>Single Households – 4,077 eligible households x £125</td> <td>= £509,625</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Disabled Banding Households – 142 households x £125</td> <td>= £17,750</td> </tr> </table> <p>Other distributions</p> <table data-bbox="320 1043 1382 1115"> <tr> <td>FSM Households – 3,115 eligible households x £125</td> <td>= £389,375</td> </tr> <tr> <td>‘Well Fed’ Initiative</td> <td>= £150,000</td> </tr> </table> <p>Total Funding Distribution = £1,130,500</p> <p>A small contingency reserve £19k will be retained for any households that become eligible for a grant as a result of retrospective exemption awards or banding changes.</p>	Care Leavers – 27 eligible households x £150 grants	= £4,050	Severe Mental Impairments – 223 eligible households x £150	= £33,450	All student households– 175 eligible households x £150	= £26,250	Single Households – 4,077 eligible households x £125	= £509,625	Disabled Banding Households – 142 households x £125	= £17,750	FSM Households – 3,115 eligible households x £125	= £389,375	‘Well Fed’ Initiative	= £150,000
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3.00	IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT
3.01	<p>The Council has a statutory responsibility to administer the Cost of Living Support Scheme (the main scheme) and the Discretionary Cost of Living Scheme in line with Welsh Government grant conditions.</p> <p>In developing the Discretionary side of the scheme, local authorities have complete autonomy to target funds to households it considers to be in need of assistance with their living costs. The discretionary nature of this scheme permits local authorities to also consider targeting funds that are aligned to Council priorities and which help the Council to support local communities.</p> <p>The adoption of the Discretionary scheme will ensure the Council formally approves a policy framework and that the £1.15m allocation is distributed as fairly as possible.</p>

4.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED/CARRIED OUT
4.01	None.

5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	None.

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost of Living Support Scheme, including the Discretionary Cost of Living Support – Welsh Government Grant Award – 25th March 2022 • Cost of Living Support Scheme – A guide for Welsh Authorities • Council Plan for 2021-2023 https://www.flintshire.gov.uk/en/PDFFiles/Council-Democracy/Council-Plan-2021-23-Final.pdf

7.00	CONTACT OFFICER DETAILS
7.01	<p>Contact Officer: David Barnes, Revenues Manager Telephone: 01352 703652 E-mail: david.barnes@flintshire.gov.uk</p>

8.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
8.01	<p>Council Tax Bands are set by the government's independent Valuation Office Agency (VOA), not by the Council. The bands are based on what a domestic property might have been sold for on 1st April 2003, not on today's prices. The VOA takes account of the size, age, character and locality of property and sales data form around the valuation date to arrive at the correct valuation bands.</p> <p>Free School Meals (FSM's) are available to children during term time in schools whose families are on low incomes or who receive support with their income from the government.</p> <p>Cost of Living Support Scheme (COLSS) is a Welsh Government package of measures to help people with the cost of living crisis. The package across Wales includes £152m to provide a £150 payment to eligible households and £25m to provide discretionary support for other purposes related to living costs.</p> <p>The Schemes are intended to provide immediate support as Wales recovers from the pandemic and households deal with the impact of increasing energy and other costs.</p>