



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Name and date of Committee	CABINET – 25 MAY 2022
Report Number	AGENDA ITEM 7
Subject	DISCRETIONARY FUNDING POLICY – ENERGY COUNCIL TAX REBATE
Wards affected	All
Accountable member	TBC
Accountable officer	Mandy Fathers – Business Manager for Operations and Enabling Email: mandy.fathers@publicagroup.uk
Summary/Purpose	The Government has announced a package of support known as the Energy Bills rebate. There are two elements to the support. One being a mandatory scheme and the second being a discretionary scheme. The purpose of this report is to formally agree the criteria for the discretionary scheme and approve the Policy
Annexes	Annex A – Discretionary Funding Policy
Recommendation(s)	It is recommended that the Cabinet: <i>a) Approve the eligibility criteria, as set out in Annex A; and,</i> <i>b) Delegate the distribution of surplus funds to the Chief Finance Officer in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Finance as details in para 2.9 of this report</i>
Corporate priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Delivering excellent modern services whilst ensuring the financial sustainability of the Council.
Key Decision	NO
Exempt	NO
Consultees/ Consultation	Chief Executive,, Monitoring Officer, Interim Head of Legal Services, Finance Business Partner, Group Manager, Director of Finance (Publica)

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 The Government has announced a package of support known as the Energy Bills Rebate to help households with rising energy bills. This includes:

- A £200 discount on energy bills this autumn for domestic electricity customers
- A £150 non-repayable rebate for households in council tax bands A to D, known as the Council Tax Rebate
- A discretionary funding for billing authorities to support households who are in need, but not eligible for the Council Tax Rebate, known as the Discretionary Funding

1.2 This report and the Policy attached as Annex A is specifically to cover the Discretionary Funding scheme.

2. MAIN POINTS

2.1 The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) have given Councils discretion to determine locally how best to distribute funding to support those suffering financial hardship as a result of the rising cost of living. This could include households living in property Bands E to H that are income related benefits or those where the energy bill payers are not liable for council tax.

2.2 The Council has been awarded discretionary funding of £131,400 and must adopt and approve its Policy setting out the eligibility criteria for its Discretionary Fund.

2.3 The Policy attached as Annex A sets out the eligibility criteria and will prioritise the following households:

- Council Tax bands in Bands E to H where a disabled band reduction is awarded
- Properties in Bands E to H where:
 - i. Council Tax Support is paid
 - ii. A Carer disregard is applied
 - iii. A Severely Mentally Impaired (SMI) disregard is applied
- Anyone else who pays the energy bills in respect of a property which is their primary residence and are not the Council Tax Payer and are on a low income or income related benefits. (There must also be no payment made for the property under the main scheme).
- People who are in supported/emergency accommodation. The property must be their primary residence and they must be paying or contributing to energy bills.
- People that are in receipt of low income or income related benefits who reside in houses of multiple occupation (HMO's) and other properties where the landlord, property own or employer is the Council Taxpayer. The property must be the primary residence of the person being paid and they must be paying or contributing to energy bills. (There must be no payment made for the property under the main scheme).
- Properties where a review, proposal or appeal pre-dating the Government's announcement on 3 February 2022 is successful after 1 April 2022. The change is

effective on or before 1 April 2022 and as a result, a household would have been eligible for the rebate.

- 2.4 For those in the eligible groups that pay their Council Tax by direct debit, awards will be applied automatically and payments made by BAC's. Notification letters will be sent to individuals confirming the award.
- 2.5 Those identified as eligible who do not pay their Council Tax by direct debit will receive written communication from the Council inviting them to make a claim through the Council's online application. For those individuals who are not able to access the Council's website, paper application forms will be available on request.
- 2.6 There will be a group of individuals where the Council does not have the ability to identify their eligibility, such as those who are the energy bill payer, but not the Council Tax payer. In such instances, the Council will ensure it publishes its scheme and communicates it through the various media platforms as well as communicating with its stakeholders who would also be able to promote and signpost those eligible. Applications for such individuals will be made online through the Council's website.
- 2.7 There will be a four-week application window. The proposed timetable is therefore:
 - 1) During week commencing 30 May announce the scheme and that the application window will be open Monday 6 June for those who are eligible and do not pay their Council Tax by direct debit
 - 2) Monday 6 June: Application window opens
 - 3) Sunday 3 July: Application window closes
- 2.8 The assessment and payment of these awards will start as soon as applications are received and bank details verified. Due to the complexities of bank verification via the Government's 'Spotlight' processing system it is difficult to establish a processing end date for this scheme, but officers will aim to complete this initial stage by Friday 23 July 2022.
- 2.9 Following the completion of this initial process the Council will be in a position to consider how it would like to distribute any surplus funding from this scheme. It is therefore proposed, that the delegation for this be given to the Deputy Chief Executive in consultation with the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 DLUHC will be allocating funding to Local Councils to cover the scheme. The allocation for West Oxfordshire District Council is £152,850.

6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 There are no specific legal implications associated with these recommendations.

7. RISK ASSESSMENT

- 7.1** There is a risk of fraud within the scheme. However, to mitigate this the Councils Corporate Fraud and Enforcement Unit are involved in the process design and have undertaken a risk review.
- 7.2** The Council will also be utilising Government software to verify bank details to assist in fraud detection.
- 7.3** There is a risk that due to the limited funding allocation, the Council does not have sufficient funding to cover those proposed eligible groups within its Policy. Financial modelling against projected case volumes has been undertaken that indicates that sufficient funding is available. Once all applications have been verified, a decision will be taken to allocate the full amount of funding available.

8. EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 8.1** To ensure compliance with the Equality Act 2010 an Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out which concludes there is no negative impact on any of the protected characteristics.

9. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1** None.

10. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 10.1** There is discretion within this scheme, so Cabinet could decide to support households not referred to within this draft Policy.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 11.1** None