

Overview & Scrutiny Committee feedback for Cabinet

Discretionary Funding Policy - Energy Council Tax Rebate

The committee noted that the report had been brought to Overview and Scrutiny to enable the committee to

- Consider the proposed eligibility criteria of the Discretionary Scheme
- Agree to waiver call-in for the policy, subject to there being no fundamental changes recommended after consideration

The Committee noted that the Energy Bills scheme had two elements and this report would focus on the Discretionary scheme, for which, the Council had been awarded £152,850

The Committee noted that the proposed eligibility for this support would prioritise relieving hardship for:

- Properties with council tax band E-H where:
 - A disabled band reduction had been awarded
 - Council Tax Support is paid
 - A Carer disregard is applied
 - A Severely Mentally Impaired (SMI) disregard is applied
- Anyone paying energy bills but not Council Tax bills where they receive a low income benefit
- People in supported/emergency accommodation
- Income related benefit recipients living in Houses of Multiple Occupancy

The Committee commented that the eligibility criteria appeared to be complex and may be difficult to administer. The Committee also asked how potential recipients (especially those without web access) would find out about the scheme

The officer agreed that the scheme was relatively complex and confirmed that the Council's communications team was working to increase knowledge of the scheme. A leaflet had been included with every council tax bill and paper applications would be available for those without web access

The Committee welcomed the scheme as a serious attempt to focus on those that were hard to reach, and consideration needed to be made to how this would be achieved in practice e.g through every Town & Parish Clerks. CAB and other charitable trusts

The officer confirmed that work to contact all of these groups was already underway.

The Committee commented that those without a bank account would find it difficult to receive payment

The officer confirmed that it was possible for recipients to be sent a barcode that could be taken to a Post Office for cash payment.

The Committee queried if it was possible to reduce the eligibility for E-H Council Tax households and include/increase A-D Council Tax households.

The officer confirmed that the Council could choose to extend eligibility to A-D households to provide an addition to the mandatory £150 council tax rebate and £200 autumn electricity bill discount

The Committee commented that as the Discretionary Scheme closes at the end of November and that it was important that eligible households needed to be identified as quickly as possible, and asked if the number of Direct Debit payers had been identified.

The officer confirmed that 67% of Council households pay their Council Tax by Direct Debit. Those eligible for Mandatory Scheme payments had already been identified and work would begin to identify those eligible for Discretionary Scheme payments will begin once the eligibility criteria had been agreed.

The Committee noted that there was an initial risk that insufficient funding would be available, but projection modelling now indicated there may a small surplus.

The Committee commented that the online application process for providing local retailers with grants had been complex and those that made errors with their applications had missed out on payments

The officer confirmed that the application process for the Discretionary Scheme is significantly easier than the previous application process.

The Committee commented that, should there be a surplus, consideration should be given to providing additional support for heating to eligible groups

The officer confirmed that, should there be a surplus, an options report will be brought back to agree how this should be utilised.