

Bath and North East Somerset Council Welfare Support Scheme

The scheme is discretionary and customers do not have a statutory right to an award.

The Council will only make awards within the cash limited amount allocated by specific grant and any additional amount which may be agreed within its financial Budget setting process

Appropriate Financial and Internal Audit controls and checks will be carried out to ensure that the Scheme is operated fairly and equitably

Principles of the Scheme

- To enable targeted and emergency support to our most vulnerable members of the Community within a cash limited fund.
- To operate a non-cash award scheme.
- To aim to exclude abuse and fraud from the system in order to direct support to where it is needed and where it is most appropriate.
- To make every effort to identify the wide range of discretionary support available to customers in an attempt to improve the targeting of appropriate support across the Council and its partners in the future.
- To help to develop appropriate gateways to Welfare Support for customers over time and within a changing environment.

The scheme has four strands;

- **Living Expenses**
- **Discretionary Support**
- **Items**
- **Monetary Advice**

Living Expenses

Living expenses, consisting of short term assistance to relieve pressure, may be paid as a result of a sudden emergency or disaster

Example: where someone no longer has access to funds to meet their day to day living expenses, because they have been the victim of a burglary. Assistance would be considered to help until they were due to receive their next form of income.

Discretionary Support

Assistance may be provided to vulnerable customers who have been detrimentally affected by changes to Council Tax Support and, in particular, the Under Occupancy legislation. Example: a person who is in short term crisis may be assisted by to meet Council Tax or Rent payments, instead of being given a cash payment. .

Items

This replaces Community Care Grants. Assistance may be given to people in a similar manner to the existing scheme, by helping them to establish and maintain their place in our community and by helping to relieve families under exceptional pressure.

There are differences between the Community Care e Grants Scheme and this scheme. The main differences relate to the examination of applications for assistance and the forms in which assistance is provided

We will forge partnerships and look to tie together the varying resources already in place with the Council and the area in general.

Where a more suitable scheme is identified we will refer and assist with access to that scheme. We will aim to meet our communities' needs.

Monetary Advice

There may be circumstances where we are not able to help or, the assistance we have given, may not be a long term solution. In these cases we will offer support and signposting.

This support and signposting may take many forms utilising the support of a range of partners.

Examples: maximising benefit take up, setting up Credit Union or simple bank account; referrals to CAB and other partners based in our One Stop Shop to lower debts or fuel costs; tying in with the discretionary assistance where we may look at payment plans for Council Tax or rent.

Our aim is to deliver services to our Customers in the most appropriate way, treating them as individuals and working with the right agencies to provide targeted support.

Access to the Scheme

Access is by a telephone interview or by referral from either another Council service or Agency partner.

The initial contact will be used to triage applicants as quickly as possible. Where more details are required to process a claim we will call customers at allocated appointment times. We will investigate circumstances, request and inspect evidence.

Decisions for the most urgent living expenses applications will be given on the same day. Those for household items may require examination and exploration and in those cases a decision will be given within a few days.

For other advice we will refer Customers to our One Stop Shop and Advice Agencies as appropriate.

If a visit is required we may arrange for this to take place.

Proposed Criteria

These are based mainly upon existing practices but in order to manage within cash limited funds and within a potentially increasing demand the criteria have been identified and defined to ensure that support is targeted towards the most vulnerable groups and is aligned to similar criteria used for Council Tax Support exemptions.

Monetary Advice and Discretionary Support will be considered on a case by case basis. Many of may arise as a result of an application for Living Expenses.

Applications for Items;

When determining applications for Items the primary objectives will be to:

- help people to establish themselves in the community
 - help people to remain in the community
 - help with the care of a prisoner or young offender on release on temporary licence
 - ease exceptional pressures on families
 - help people setting up home as a part of a resettlement programme
 - assist with certain travelling expenses
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- Applications may be made by those in receipt of a 'passport benefit', its Universal Credit Equivalent or have an income equal to or less than the amount the government says they need to live on - their 'applicable amount'.
 - Initial applications from those under 18 will only be accepted via referral. If applications are made without 3rd party involvement, we will, where appropriate, refer the customer to relevant third parties to ensure they are receiving all the support available to them.

- Initial applications from those claiming to be homeless will only be accepted via referral. A homeless person should be in a support system and if not we will ensure support is made available.
- When information is sought from a 3rd party via referral or otherwise a decision on an application will be put on hold for a period of up to a month after which if the information sought has not been provided the application will only be granted in exceptional circumstances
- Awards will not be made where assistance is available through another source; for example for funeral or maternity expenses.

Limitations are put on the client groups set out above as existing support is available for them, both within the Council and via 3rd parties such as charitable groups and the Department for Work & Pensions.

Applications for Living Expenses:

Applications may be made by those who are unable to meet their immediate short term needs either in an emergency in relation to some expenses or, as a consequence of a disaster.

Expenses eligible to be considered, whether the need arises from an emergency or a disaster, are:

- living expenses
 - rent in advance payable to secure fresh accommodation where the landlord is not a local authority
 - charges for board and lodging accommodation and residential charges for hostels
 - emergency travel expenses where the applicant is stranded away from home or;
 - the cost of repaying emergency credit on a pre-payment meter so the supply of fuel can be restored.
- Awards will be limited to vulnerable customers:
 - those with children under 5 and in receipt of a 'Passport Benefit'
 - those in receipt of the Support Component of Employment Support Allowance
 - those in receipt of Pension Credit
 - Those in receipt of the Care Component of Disability Living Allowance or its Personal Independence Payment equivalent.
 - those who qualify for the Severe Disability Premium

People who do not fall into the categories listed above may apply for assistance from the Scheme by way of Monetary Advice or Discretionary Support

Delivery

Awards under the Scheme will be delivered by the most appropriate method

For living expenses we will seek to arrange partnerships with a wide range of providers in order to issue payments in kind, for example voucher schemes for local supermarkets. For items we will again issue vouchers but wherever possible we will provide actual delivered, warranty protected goods. This will help to best meet needs and also, i deliver value for money through negotiated partnerships with local and national providers, and will also help to reduce abuse.

When an application has been assessed and approved, the mechanisms for help will be fluid. An applicant with short term needs may be given assistance with bills, for example, direct payment of Council tax and/or rent to relieve pressure rather than money towards living expenses.

An applicant subject to Under Occupancy costs may be given assistance with removal costs to help them move into smaller accommodation and therefore cutting out this new cost totally

The administration of this scheme will be combined with the application process for Discretionary Housing Payments and the same principles to identify the most appropriate decisions will be used

These support mechanisms should be seen as a short term answer to a temporary situation, there cannot be consistent call by the same individuals on this cash limited fund and we will operate a policy of allowing a maximum of three awards per individual in a financial year.

Long Term Aims

The scheme will need to be organic, adapting to trends, identifying resources we can encompass whilst building and modifying relationships as we go.

We are taking a long term view by doing the hard work now to setup a scheme which we can keep under tight control, which we can manage and adapt to changing circumstances.

The current financial climate and the proposed welfare reforms with Universal Credit on the horizon present an uncertain future for many. People will need assistance to understand and access all the varying support available to them. We will be the focal point of this support.

We are already in the early stages of a Universal Credit Pilot; we already have good partnerships within the One Stop Shop. The Welfare Support scheme can look to incorporate and build on what we already have in place, taking it the next step forward, being at the forefront in assisting our community, making positive changes in challenging times.

As set out in the second recommendation of this report we aim to co-ordinate research across the Council and with partners in order to streamline access to a variety of discretionary funds which target vulnerable people, with a view to creating a single gateway and common assessment process for handling and escalating such cases.