

Bath & North East Somerset Council

DECISION MAKER:	Cllr Richard Samuel, Cabinet Member for Resources	
DECISION DATE:	On or after 28 Apr 2021 (for single Member decision)	EXECUTIVE FORWARD PLAN REFERENCE:
		E 3274
TITLE:	Welfare Support Scheme 2021/22	
WARD:	All	
AN OPEN PUBLIC ITEM		
List of attachments to this report: Welfare Support Policy Appendix to Welfare Support Policy Appendix A		

1 THE ISSUE

- 1.1 The council must update its policy on Local Welfare Provision, known as the Welfare Support scheme, to take account of current support needs of residents and new ways of service delivery.
- 1.2 The policy must include specific details of how additional funding for Welfare and Hardship support for 2021/22 should be used, to address financial hardship which residents face due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

2 RECOMMENDATION

The Cabinet member is asked to;

- 2.1 Approve the revised Welfare Support Policy document
- 2.2 Approve the details set out in the appendix to the policy which specifically relate to how additional funding for 2021/22 should be used.

3 THE REPORT

- 3.1 The council has invested in Local Welfare Provision since 2013 through the Welfare Support scheme. The current budget for the scheme is £190,000 per year. The scheme is intended to help residents who are in crisis access support with food, essential living costs and household items.
- 3.2 The scheme is cashless and to date support has been provided through issuing physical supermarket vouchers from the council's One Stop Shops to residents who need help with food and by paying for essential living costs with a corporate purchase card and through sourcing household items direct from suppliers to be delivered to residents in their home.
- 3.3 Resident's support requirements have changed since the scheme was introduced in 2013. The rules of the scheme must be updated to reflect current needs, and service delivery should be convenient for residents and support more choice, whilst maintaining enough safeguards that support is only provided for essential needs. The scheme must also be adaptable, so that the council may react quickly to extraordinary events such as a global pandemic.
- 3.4 Different elements of support will no longer be restricted to households where there is a child under 5, receipt of income-related benefits or recent release from prison, and all elements of the scheme will be available to residents with eligibility based solely on financial hardship and reasonable needs.

Living expenses - Food.

Using physical supermarket vouchers issued from the One Stop Shops has proved very challenging during the Covid-19 pandemic as this risked increasing transmission of the virus and meant that staff and residents were more exposed than was necessary.

During December 2020 and February 2021, the Welfare Support team accessed funding from the Covid-19 Winter grant to provide supermarket vouchers to all families of children who received benefit-related free school meals. This was delivered through an electronic voucher product which gave households a choice of several supermarkets in which to spend their vouchers.

In future Officers will use electronic vouchers to provide food support for households in need. It will reduce the demand for mediated services in the One Stop Shops, and households who are unable to access electronic vouchers will still be able to approach staff for help in printing their vouchers. The process of storing and distributing vouchers will be more secure and mediated collection of vouchers can therefore be delegated to trusted partner organisations if desired.

The value of supermarket vouchers which are normally offered to residents has not been increased since 2013 and no longer reflects a reasonable level in which a person can feed themselves or their household. The weekly amounts will be increased as follows;

Household size	Existing level of support	Proposed level of support
Single Person	£30	£50
2-3 people	£50	£70
4 or more	£70	£100

Residents are not normally permitted to make more than three applications in each financial year, and instead may be offered alternative means of support through other organisations which help with food poverty.

Discretionary Support - Essential Living costs

This area of support includes helping residents with bills and other day to day living costs. This has always been an area where the council has been quite limited in its ability to provide support. It often relies on the use of a corporate purchase card and some bills and services require customer log on details to make payments, so it has sometimes been difficult for the council to help in these areas. The council has recently invested in a pre-paid debit card system (PFS) and Officers will in future issue PFS cards to residents who are in financial hardship to help in this area. This will enable Officers to help with a wider range of living costs.

Household Items.

This area of support addresses the needs of residents who lack the finances to be able to furnish their homes adequately with basic household items. This is currently delivered through purchasing items direct from suppliers and arranging for delivery to resident's homes. In future, support for household items will be met through the issue of PFS cards, to allow the resident more choice and control in how they wish to furnish their homes.

- 3.5 The Covid-19 Pandemic has had a detrimental effect on the finances of many residents through the loss of earnings and employment. It is likely that there will be more job losses in 2021/22 as a result of business closures brought about by sustained periods of lock-down. The council has recognised this risk and has allocated an additional £400,000 to support Local Welfare Provision in B&NES in 2021/22. This additional funding will be available for 2021/22 only and will be used to address the additional hardship which many households will face because of the Pandemic.
- 3.6 The areas of need identified by the Welfare Support team, St Johns Foundation and Citizens Advice are shown in appendix A to this report at figures 1-3 and include Debt, Household items, Housing Costs and Utility bills.
- 3.7 The ways in which the council will provide support from the additional £400,000 funding are detailed in the appendix to the policy and will cover the 2021/22

financial year only. This will act as a guide to officers in making decisions on individual cases and set out the spending limits and which support needs may be covered. It will enable officers to offer a broad range of support and will meet the expected increase in demand on welfare services in 2021/22. Additional areas of support that will be met include clothing, childcare costs, essential items for young children. Current levels of support covering essential living costs, including housing costs will be increased.

3.8 In order to ensure that the additional funding is disbursed to as many residents as possible, £50,000 of this additional funding will be allocated for the St Johns Foundation Crisis Fund, to be used by that organisation in the event that their own limits on awards to beneficiaries are reached in individual cases. St Johns will provide application level data on all awards made which arise from this funding to allow the council to understand the impact which this funding has had on residents.

3.9 It is clear from the report presented by the B&NES Public Health team at the full council meeting on 21st January 2021 that food poverty is a significant area of need in B&NES and during 2020/21 the Welfare Support team did not see a material change in the level of demand for help with food. This is significant because additional support mechanisms were put in place to help residents with food through the Community Wellbeing Hub, the expansion of food clubs and food pantries and the allocation of supermarket vouchers to parents of 3,800 children who receive benefit-related Free school meals during the Christmas and February half term periods. It is anticipated that any residual demand for support with food caused by the Pandemic can be met through the existing Welfare Support budget which remains unchanged in 2021/22.

4 STATUTORY CONSIDERATIONS

Assistance provided under the Welfare Support scheme, including support provided under the additional funding for 2021/22 constitutes Local Welfare Provision as defined by The Social Security (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013 (SI/2013/443). As this assistance is at the discretion of Local Authorities it is necessary to adopt a formal policy to determine decisions.

5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (FINANCE, PROPERTY, PEOPLE)

The additional £400,000 funding relating to 2021/22 will be managed through existing resources within the Welfare Support team. Although there will be additional pressures put on the team in terms of new applications for this funding, it is anticipated that there will be a reduction in administrative costs through providing support through issuing PFS cards. Demand for the service and staffing levels will be monitored carefully, and if necessary additional temporary staff may be employed to manage the workload. This would be funded from the Welfare Support team service budget.

6 RISK MANAGEMENT

A risk assessment related to the issue and recommendations has been undertaken, in compliance with the Council's decision-making risk management guidance.

7 EQUALITIES

An EIA has not been carried out as the service is accessible to all B&NES residents.

8 CLIMATE CHANGE

The adoption of electronic supermarket vouchers will mean a substantial fall in the number of customer journeys into the council's one stop shops. In 2020/21 to 16th March 1466 customer journeys had been made by residents to collect supermarket vouchers from the council's three one stop shops. It is estimated that over 90% of these journeys will not need to be made in future.

9 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

None

10 CONSULTATION

S151 Officer, Monitoring Officer, Head of Corporate Finance, St Johns Foundation, Citizens Advice Bath and North East Somerset

Contact person	Damian Peak – 01225 396613
Background papers	https://democracy.bathnes.gov.uk/documents/g5483/Public%20reports%20pack%2023rd-Feb-2021%2018.30%20Council.pdf?T=10 (paragraph 5.3.5)
Please contact the report author if you need to access this report in an alternative format	