



## Report to Leader

<b>Date:</b>	11 April 2022
<b>Reference number:</b>	L03.22
<b>Title:</b>	<b>Helping Hand Energy Bill Rebate</b>
<b>Relevant councillor(s):</b>	Martin Tett, Leader
<b>Author:</b>	Clive Jones Head of Service, Revenues and Benefits
<b>Contact officer:</b>	David Skinner, Service Director – Service Finance
<b>Ward(s) affected:</b>	<b>All</b>
<b>Recommendations:</b>	<b>To approve the Council Tax Energy rebate discretionary scheme proposals as set out in Section 2 with the full scheme set out in Appendix B.</b>
<b>Reason for decision:</b>	<b>To align with Government announcements Buckinghamshire Council is creating:</b>  <b>1. a Discretionary Council Tax Energy Bill Rebate scheme for the granting of discretionary Council Tax payments;</b>

### **1. Executive Summary**

- 1.1 This report details Buckinghamshire's Helping Hand Energy Bill Rebate discretionary scheme proposals.
- 1.2 The Council has been allocated £1,211,400 by HM Treasury in discretionary funding for the provision of discretionary assistance to support residents from rising energy costs.
- 1.3 That 3,600 households in Council tax Bands E-H in receipt of relevant benefits as set out in qualifying criteria (c) and (f), are in receipt of a disabled band reduction or receipt of a class U council tax exemption will receive a payment of £150 under the discretionary scheme.

- 1.4 That all residents in receipt of relevant benefits as set out in qualifying criteria (c) and (f) will receive an additional £25 taking their payments to £175. This is estimated at c25,000 households.
- 1.5 Appendix B is the Helping Hand Energy Bill Rebate discretionary scheme being proposed for approval.
- 1.6 A-D households will receive a mandatory £150 Council Tax rebate from April and details of that can be found in Appendix A.

## **2. Content of report**

### **2.1 Eligibility**

The Helping Hand Energy Bill Rebate will be allocated to those residents most in financial need based on the following criteria:

- a) It is someone's sole or main residence; and
- b) is not a local authority, a corporate body or other body such as a housing association, the government or governmental body; and
- c) £150 will be awarded to bands E-H households that meet a) and b) criteria above and are on any relevant benefit (Income Support, Job Seekers Allowance Income Based, Employment Support Allowance Income Related, Working Tax Credit, Universal Credit, Housing Benefit or Council Tax Reduction). This is circa 2,600 households. On this basis c£390k of the £1.2m received would be allocated to this group.
- d) £150 will be awarded to other band E-H households that meet a) and b) criteria above (circa 500) where there is a disabled band reduction applied and not already in receipt of an award. On this basis c£75k of the £1.2m received would be allocated to this group.
- e) £150 to any band E-H households that meet a) and b) criteria above where there is a class U exemption (Severe Mental Impairment) (circa 500) and not already in receipt of an award. On this basis c£75k of the £1.2m received would be allocated to this group.
- f) A "Helping Hand" top up of £25 to all households that meet a) and b) criteria above on any relevant benefit (Income Support, Job Seekers Allowance Income Based, Employment Support Allowance Income Related, Working Tax Credit, Universal Credit, Housing Benefit or Council Tax Reduction) irrespective of band. This is targeting the most financially vulnerable on benefits with an additional £25 (c25,000 households). On this basis c£625k of the £1.2m received would be allocated to this group.
- g) Top up funding will be awarded on a first come first served basis and when the allocation has all been awarded the scheme will be closed.

- h) A property that meets all the criteria but has a nil council tax liability as a result of local council tax support, will be eligible.
- i) A property that has no permanent resident and is someone's second home will not be eligible.
- j) An unoccupied property (for the purposes of calculating council tax) will not be eligible.

2.2 A full discretionary scheme is attached for adoption as Appendix B

2.3 Numbers

- a) Buckinghamshire has been allocated £1,211,400 in discretionary funding. Using the criteria above the model indicates 3,600 payments (criteria c-e above) of £150 = £540k and 25,000 payments (criteria f) of £25= £625k. Total proposed allocation of circa £1.165m. This leaves contingency for the model tolerances.

2.4 Process and Timeline

- a) The intention is to use the same process for capturing valid bank details as the non-DD in Appendix A.
- b) Applicants will be able to request a credit on their account if they so wish.
- c) Allocations from the discretionary fund should be spent by 30 November 2022. Any remaining funding will be required to be repaid to government.
- d) The discretionary scheme will be approved by the Leader of the Council before any discretionary allocations are made.
- e) The current discretionary activity is depicted in the table below:

<b>Period</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Resources</b>
1 April- 31 May 22	Discretionary fund agreed by Leader of the Council	Democratic Services / Helping Hand / Housing / Revenues and Benefits
1 May – 31 May 22	Communication of scheme to residents and implementation of discretionary portal to capture details	Revenues and Benefits
1 June – 30 Nov 22	Payment of discretionary funding	Revenues and Benefits

### **3. Other options considered**

- 3.1 This is a direct instruction from Government and while the Council Tax Energy rebates are local discretionary policies, these changes are expected to be actioned.

### **4. Legal and financial implications**

- 4.1 The government will fully reimburse local authorities for the discretionary payments, using a grant under section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003.
- 4.2 The government have confirmed that funding for implementation and administration will be covered through the New Burdens principle but have not yet released allocations to individual authorities.
- 4.3 The equalities implications have been considered and the eligibility criteria and their application are to be applied objectively and, as such, no equalities implications for those with protected characteristics are considered to arise.

### **5. Communication, engagement & further consultation**

- 5.1 The Council Tax team are aware of the vast majority of eligible recipients; communications is required to help ensure any not known to the team have the opportunity to apply. Every household in the county received a leaflet alongside their annual council tax bills, informing them about the scheme. Further communication will include a letter inviting non-direct debit eligible council tax payers to complete an online application form for both the mandatory and the discretionary Helping Hand Council Tax energy payments. Additional proactive communications will include social media, the Leader's newsletter, press release, internal comms, via Helping Hand/Financial Insecurity Partnership, Community Boards, and partner organisations such as BBF and parish councils.
- 5.2 Proposed key messages:
- a) Buckinghamshire Council is providing a one-off discretionary payment of £150 for those not in bands A to D who meet the qualifying criteria, and an additional top-up payment of £25 to households in any bands who are receiving specific benefits.
  - b) This is to help eligible residents in these times of rising food and energy costs.
  - c) Recipients are free to spend this payment how they think best suits their household circumstances.
  - d) Point people to the webpage for eligibility criteria and how to apply.

- e) Anyone who doesn't currently pay their council tax via direct debit is encouraged to set one up to receive their payment quicker.

## **6. Next steps and review**

- 6.1 Systems are being modified to enable the payments to be made and recorded and we are waiting for detailed reporting guidance from central government.

## **7. Background papers**

- 7.1 Mandatory Scheme briefing Note – Appendix A.
- 7.2 Discretionary Council Tax Energy Rebate Scheme – Appendix B

