

Agenda Item	5
Report No	CIA/24/15

Inverness Common Good Fund Scheme for Winter Payments 2015/16

Joint Report by Director of Finance and Inverness City Area Manager

Summary

This report follows on from the effective revision of the Winter Payment Scheme for 2014/15 and proposes to maintain the similar arrangements for the Winter Payment Scheme for 2015/16.

1. Background

- 1.1 The Winter Payments Scheme (the scheme) is designed to help those members of the community most in need of financial support during the coldest months of the year when extra fuel is needed. At this time of welfare reform, there is still an increasing demand for this help.
- 1.2 In the last 2 years members agreed to the following amendments being made:
- The scheme to include all people over 90 years of age without any other qualification criteria required;
 - The scheme to include people that received a Scottish Welfare Fund Crisis Grant payment between December 2013 and February 2014 inclusive; and
 - The scheme be extended to include those with children under the age of 5 years that also receive Income Support, Income based Job Seekers Allowance, Income based Employment and Support Allowance, or Pension Credit (Guarantee Credit).

2. Scheme for Winter 2014/2015

- 2.1 For Winter 2014/2015 the scheme made payment to those that qualified for Pension Credit Guarantee without the requirement to have a disability benefit. The scheme also paid out to those in receipt of one of the following benefits listed below:
- Pension Credit Savings Credit
 - Income Support
 - Income Based Job Seekers Allowance
 - Income Based Employment and Support Allowance /Incapacity Benefit
- 2.2 In addition to the above, a resident in the property must have been entitled to one of the following:

- Attendance allowance
- Disability living allowance (middle or high rate care component)
- Personal Independence Payment (daily living component – standard or enhanced rate)
- Armed Forces Independence Payment
- War Pension

- 2.3 The scheme is also available to people over 90 years of age and those that received a Scottish Welfare Fund Crisis Grant between December 2014 and February 2015 inclusive. To alleviate hardship on the most vulnerable, the scheme was extended to those people with children under the age of 5 years who also receive Income Support, Income based Job Seekers Allowance, Income based Employment and Support Allowance, or Pension Credit (Guarantee Credit).
- 2.4 Applicants also had to confirm that there were no people in the household in receipt of a wage at the time of the application or in the previous 6 months. If anyone in the household had capital in excess of £6,000, the applicant did not qualify for a payment.
- 2.5 In winter 2014/2015 1,045 households received payments totalling £82,555. Residents in Inverness City totalled 813 whereas 232 residents in landward areas benefitted from these payments. Work continues to improve the information management arrangements for statistical purposes.
- 2.6 For the first time, administration of the scheme, including verification, was undertaken by the Finance Service's Operations Team based within the Revenues and Business Support Section. This change in approach delivered efficiencies as the team were able to draw on their extensive experience of administering housing benefit, council tax reduction and the Scottish Welfare Fund. The Operations Team will therefore administer the scheme for 2015/16 and each year thereafter.
- 2.7 The role of the Customer Income Maximisation Team is to maximise entitlements for customers. Set out below are examples where the Council have assisted customers gain financially, and materially so on occasions, demonstrating the importance of such services to our customers.
- 2.8 A 71 year old client was helped by the Customer Income Maximisation Team to claim Attendance Allowance of £54.45 per week and Pension Credit Savings Credit /Pension Credit Guaranteed Credit totalling £69.20 with a Severe Disablement Premium of £61.19. Overall the client's income increased by £184.75 per week or £9,607.00 per year. As a result the client received full Housing Benefit /Council Tax Reduction of £4,242.92 per year. Added to the above annual figure this client gained £13,849.92 within the financial year.
- 2.9 A 57 year old client was assisted in applying for Employment and Support Allowance and Disability Living Allowance (review). Both reviews were successful which equated to the client's income increasing by £272.52 per week or £14,171.04 annually. As a result of this success the client also

qualified for the full Council Tax Reduction of £678.42. In total this client gained £14,849.44 within the financial year

- 2.10 A 58 year old client was assisted to claim Universal Credit and received an award of £314.67 personal allowance plus, £258.52 housing element monthly. This provided the client with a gain of £7,451.47 annually.

3. Scheme Review for Winter 2015/2016

- 3.1 The objectives for 2015/2016 remain the same as in previous years which are to:

- Provide help to alleviate any hardship by those people most at risk within the community;
- Establish a payment level within the resources available, whilst still remaining meaningful to claimants;
- Ensure that the scheme will be sustainable for future years without the need to liquidate Fund assets;
- Recognise the impact of welfare reform and the changing costs of living expenses, including energy bills.

- 3.2 It is proposed to retain the Scheme for Winter Payments for 2015/2016 as described in paragraph 2 including the amendments to target people over 90 years of age and those that received a Scottish Welfare Fund Crisis Grant between December 2015 and February 2016 inclusive, plus families with a child under the age of 5 years in receipt of qualifying benefits.

- 3.3 These proposals will retain the objective to help the most vulnerable people in the community.

- 3.4 It is important to stress that officers will continue to promote Home Energy Scotland and to encourage applicants to seek valuable advice on energy efficiency.

- 3.5 It is proposed that the £79 payment rate remain unchanged for the 2015/16 period. This is to reflect the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and changes in fuel prices, calculated as follows:

- The Consumer Price Index (CPI) was unchanged in the year to March 2015, that is a 12 month rate of 0.0%, the same rate as in the year to February 2015ⁱ; and
- home energy prices have decreased by an average rate of 0.6% for electricity and 4.2% for gas (to quarter 4 2014/15)

4. Blythswood Care Food Hamper Scheme

- 4.1 Regular reports to the Council's Resources Committee have shown a 34% increase in the demand for Highland Foodbanks managed by Blythswood

Care. In view of this, it is proposed that £20,000 be donated from the Common Good Fund to the Blythswood Food Hamper Scheme in Inverness City for 2015/16.

5. Publicity

- 5.1 It is proposed to continue the successful approach adopted in previous years to promote the Scheme. This included a public notice in the Inverness Courier, a news release on Moray Firth Radio, promotion via a prominent space on the Highland Council website, messaging via social media and the use of posters at various locations. The Customer Income Maximisation will adopt the same strategy used in prior years to identify and contact customers that potentially meet the Scheme's qualifying criteria.

6. Climate Change and Disability Implications

- 6.1 This policy will have positive climate change impacts and for those people with a disability.

7. Legal Implications

- 7.1 Support for the recommendations below will mean that the Council will be in full compliance with all its legal obligations as it will be putting a Scheme in place that is financially sustainable and meets all audit standards.

8. Resource Implications

- 8.1 There is a provision of £85k for the 2015/16 which will be drawn from the Common Good Fund. It is expected that the budget will accommodate anticipated demand.

9. Rural Implications

- 9.1 By being inclusive of both the City and Landward Areas, the Scheme will help address the particular need of rural communities with regard to home heating and energy efficiency.

Recommendations

Members are invited to agree the following recommendations for the 2015/16 Winter Payment Scheme.

1. That criteria utilised for the 2014/15 scheme as set out in paragraphs 2.1 to 2.4 shall be used as the basis for the 2015/16 scheme.
2. The scheme be made available to residents in the City of Inverness and the Landward areas of the seven City Wards.
3. A single tier payment of £79 be made to those applicants that satisfy the eligibility criteria for the 2015/16 scheme.
4. An award of £20,000 to Blythswood Care, for the residents of Inverness City,

in principle with power to confirm the award being delagated to the Inverness City and Area Manager in consultation with the Inverness Common Good Fund Grants Sub-committee

Designations: Director of Finance Inverness City Area Manager

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Background Papers:

ⁱ Office for National Statistics