

Agenda Item	12
Report No	CIA/9/19

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: City of Inverness Area Committee

Date: 21 February 2019

Report Title: Inverness Common Good Fund : Discretionary Scheme for Winter Payments 2018/19 Interim Update

Report By: Joint Report by Depute Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Resources and Inverness City Area Manager

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 This report provides an interim update on the Inverness Winter Payments Scheme for 2018/19 which closes on 28 February 2019 and seeks Members approval to allocate an annual sum from the Inverness Common Good Fund in respect of the costs of administering the scheme.

Recommendations

- 2.**
- 2.1 Members are invited to:
- i. Note the fairly significant increase in take-up of the scheme to date;
 - ii. Support the ongoing measures that are being taken to ensure the scheme continues to be both effective and efficient;
 - iii. Agree an annual recharge from 2019/20 in respect of the administrative overhead currently being absorbed by the Highland Council's Revenues & Customer Services section (as per the Budget Setting Report for 2019/20 on today's agenda).

3. Scheme for Winter 2018/19

- 3.1 The Scheme for winter 2018/19 is still open to receive applications and is due to close on 28 February 2019. For each eligible household, the scheme provides for a one-off £82 payment as a contribution towards fuel bills.
- 3.2 At the time of writing, 1,244 households had received payments totalling £102,008 against a budget of £132,000.
- 3.3 Table 1 below provides comparative data between January 2018 and January 2019. While this snapshot illustrates sizeable increases in both the number of successful applications and the total amount awarded, it should be noted that the work to enable payment to be made to those who pre-qualified for an award this year was initiated and completed earlier than in previous years to support entitlements being paid as soon as practicable to support customers.

3.4

Table 1	Jan 18	Jan 19	Increase	% change
Number of applications paid	785	1,244	459	+58.47%
Total Amount paid (payment amount increased from £81 to £82 this year)	£63,585.00	£102,008.00	£38,423.00	+60.43%

- 3.5 The pre-qualifying category enables automatic awards to be made for 2018/19 **without** the need for applications from residents who had received payments in the 2017/18 scheme and whose circumstances continued to meet the 2018/19 eligibility criteria. This approach provides advantages for the elderly and the most vulnerable members in the community who have had no significant change to their circumstances while also supporting the planning process and resourcing required for scheme administration.
- 3.6 The majority of payments made to those that pre-qualified for the scheme were made by 28 November 2018 and totalled £89,216.00 for 1,088 applicants.

4. Effectiveness and Efficiencies

- 4.1 On an annual basis, following scheme closure, a review is undertaken to identify whether any policy and/or administration changes are necessary to ensure the ongoing effectiveness and efficiency of this scheme. This includes but is not limited to reviewing the budget and overall policy, taking steps to ensure the ongoing efficiency of the administrative processes, raising awareness of the scheme and the eligibility criteria, and being proactive in order to maximise take-up. During the period that the scheme is operating, take-up is monitored and when appropriate, further steps are taken to maximise take-up from the elderly and other vulnerable residents.
- 4.2 For the purposes of the current year's scheme the following steps have been taken to alleviate hardship for the most vulnerable and to ensure the administrative processes are both effective and efficient.

1. A face to face briefing was delivered to the Customer Services team in Inverness Service Point on 31 October 2018 to raise awareness about the

- eligibility criteria and the administrative processes.
2. Posters were provided for elected Members and were widely distributed to a number of outlets, including GP surgeries, dental clinics, local shops, and the third sector.
 3. Radio advertising was undertaken.
 4. Automatic awards were made to those identified as aged 90 and over. This resulted in 45 Payments totalling £3,690.
 5. Residents in receipt of Pension Credit Guarantee Credit (PCGC) have been proactively contacted to gather evidence in support of their claim (eg that no-one in the household has savings in excess of £6k, etc). To date, 476 successful applications have been paid totalling £39,032.
 6. As detailed in paragraph 3.3 above, the pre-qualifying assessments were initiated around 4-weeks earlier than in previous years. This enabled the payments to qualifying residents to be made earlier and ensured the Service Delivery Team could mainly focus on new applications when the scheme opened on 1 December.
 7. BACS continues to be promoted as the preferred payment method as this is the most secure and efficient method of payment. To date 83.6% of applicants have elected to be paid by BACS which is an increase of 4.36% when compared with 2017/18. Payment by cheque continues to be available and is used where appropriate.
 8. The Welfare Support Team continues to effectively support customers, including providing house visits, to (re)-apply for this scheme and other entitlements that may be available. Appendix 1 contains an example of support provided by the Welfare Support Team for a local resident.
 9. Promotion of Home Energy Scotland continues in order to encourage local residents to seek valuable advice on energy efficiency.

5. Administration Budget

- 5.1 As Members are aware strategic and administrative responsibility for the Scheme is undertaken within the Revenues & Customer Services section. Over time, the scheme criteria have been broadened and the numbers of applications and awards have grown year on year. For example, the total numbers of awards made in 2017/18 were 33% higher than in 2014/15.
- 5.2 Strategic overview and review of this scheme continues to be manageable within the Council's existing resources. Taken together however, the increased administrative workload of the scheme together with the budget reductions within the Revenues & Customer Services section, and the Council's overall General Revenue funding, means that it is no longer sustainable for the Highland Council to absorb the scheme's administrative overhead within existing resources. As per the Budget Report for 2019/20 on today's agenda, Members are therefore invited to approve for an annual recharge payment to be made from the Inverness Common Good Fund to The Highland Council, commencing from the 2019/20 scheme for £9,389.

6. Implications

- 6.1 **Resource** - the approved budget of £132,000 is being drawn from the Common Good Fund. Members are invited to approve an annual payment, commencing 2019/20 for £9,389, from the Inverness Common Good Fund to the Highland Council's Revenues & Customer Services section.

Legal - the type of support and recommendations set out in this policy mean full

compliance with all legal obligations as a Scheme will be in place that is financially sustainable and meets all audit standards.

Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural) – By being inclusive of both the City and Landward Areas, the scheme will help address the particular needs of urban and rural communities with regard to home heating and energy efficiency. This policy aims to mitigate some of the challenges presented by welfare reform for vulnerable customers.

Climate Change/Carbon Clever – There are no Climate Change/Carbon Clever Implications

Risk – There are no risk implications.

Gaelic – There are no Gaelic implications

Designation: Depute Chief Executive/ Director of Corporate Resources and Inverness City Area Manager

Date: 8 February 2019

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Inverness Winter Payment Scheme 2017/18

Example of support provided by the Welfare Support Team

A disabled, widowed, pensioner who lives alone in an Inverness Landward Ward phoned the Welfare Support team for support after she had spoken with Age UK for advice about heating her home in winter.

She was in receipt of State Retirement Pension with a small top-up of Pension Credit Savings Credit. The Welfare Officer carried out a benefit check and established that she may be entitled to Attendance Allowance due to her health conditions. The Welfare Officer arranged to visit her at home, due to her disability, to complete the application form. The client was then notified that her application for Attendance Allowance was successful which resulted in a weekly payment of £85.60.

The Welfare Officer secured a Severe Disability Premium as part of her Pension Credit Guarantee Credit award which led to a weekly award of £69.24 for Pension Credit Guarantee Credit and a backdated one-off payment of £769.86. This then led to a weekly award of £13.80 for Council Tax Reduction.

As a result of her new entitlement to Pension Credit Guarantee Credit the Welfare Officer then identified that she would qualify for the Inverness Winter Payments Scheme. The client's application was successful and she was awarded £82.00. The Welfare Officer also assisted her to apply for the 'Warm home discount' scheme through her electricity supplier and she received £140.00 credit to her electricity account. She is now considering applying to a scheme offering a free boiler.