



St. Helens
Council

Discretionary Welfare Assistance Scheme

Introduction

The Council is committed to providing support to vulnerable residents who require help to establish or maintain a home independently in the community or require emergency assistance following an unexpected event. Assistance will be provided in the form of foodbank vouchers, fuel vouchers, furniture (new and refurbished) and electrical items to assist people in need. Cash payments will be avoided wherever possible.

In addition, the Council will provide support to residents who are in receipt of a low income who have experienced an emergency or disaster, e.g. becoming homeless due to fire or flood.

The Council, where appropriate, will signpost applicants to other support and welfare advice services, this may include:

- the Department for Work and Pensions who may provide an interest-free payment or loan, for example:
 - a benefit advance - for new benefit applicants or existing claims where there is a significant change of circumstance;
 - a budgeting loan – to help pay for essential items; or
 - a hardship payment - if you have received a benefit sanction.
- social workers or support workers who are already working with the applicant and will be able to assess their needs and make referrals on their behalf: or
- Citizens Advice who will be able to provide budgeting or debt management advice, in addition to signposting people to other help that is available.

Eligibility Criteria

- 1 **Residency:** Applicants must be resident within the borough of St Helens. If moving from outside the area, they must have previously had strong ties to the borough or be placed here by a recognised agency.
- 2 **Age:** Applicants must be at least 16 years of age.
- 3 **Income:** Applicants must be on a low income and in all cases other than extreme disaster (e.g. homelessness due to fire or flood etc.) must be in receipt of one of the following benefits:
 - Income Support;
 - Income based Jobseeker's Allowance;
 - Income related Employment and Support Allowance;
 - Guaranteed Pension Credit; or
 - Universal Credit (where the award includes earnings, the net earnings must not exceed the threshold eligibility for free school meals)
- 4 **Access to other funding:** The applicant should have explored and will be expected to have applied for other available sources of funding before seeking additional assistance under this scheme.
- 5 **Savings / loans:** The level of savings held by the applicant, or their partner, and the availability of alternative finance, via affordable loans, will be considered as part of the assessment process.

- 6 Foodbank Vouchers:** the applicant will preferably be receiving on-going support and have been identified as needing emergency assistance. Foodbank vouchers will be limited to 3 per client within a six months period, however this is discretionary depending on the circumstances and whether the client is still in crisis.
- 7 Fuel Vouchers:** The issue of domestic fuel vouchers will generally be a one-off award but up to 3 vouchers within a 12 months period can be awarded in exceptional circumstances. The applicant must be the named person responsible for the utility account and have a prepayment meter fitted by their current energy supplier. Fuel voucher assistant will not be given to those who pay for energy monthly, quarterly by cash, cheque or monthly direct debit.

Vouchers for the purchase of gas and or electricity will be awarded as follows dependant on the claimant's circumstances. The amounts below are considered sufficient to provide 3 to 5 days of energy.

Family Dynamics	Gas Only	Electric Only Issue		Gas with Meter Debt	Electric with Meter Debt
Single or Couple	£11.00	£10.00		£14.00	£13.00
Single/Couple with 1 or 2 children	£13.00	£12.00		£16.00	£14.00
Large Family/ Disability	£16.00	£13.00		£19.00	£16.00

8 Reason for application:

Independent living -

- Leaving residential or institutional accommodation;
- Resettled as part of a planned move following a prolonged unsettled period in their life;
- Requiring support to stay in the community and not enter residential care;
- Looking after others who are ill, disabled or leaving care;
- Families who are facing exceptional pressure due to family breakdown or illness.

Disaster – including those who require re-housing due to a disaster or emergency.

Crisis – have been identified as needing emergency assistance including delays in receiving Social Security benefits, unexpected expenditure or unanticipated circumstances

School clothing – The Council's discretionary school clothing allowance scheme has now been withdrawn. Applications for school clothing will only be considered in exceptional circumstances and after all alternative options have been exhausted including the use of second-hand or uniform recycle schemes. Assistance will not be given where a replacement is required due to: a minor mishap; damage: where they no longer fit or for the start of a new school term.

Other – other reasons where there is a significant risk to the health and safety of the applicant or their family and there is no other means of support in the short-term.

- 9 Supporting information:** Applicants must be able to provide adequate information to support their claim.
- 10 Previous claims:** The number of previous claims made by the applicant will be considered as part of the assessment process. It is expected that a maximum of one claim per financial year will be considered.

11 Exclusions: Residents who have 'no recourse to public funds' status will be excluded from this scheme.

Note: The scheme does not provide carpets, curtains, flooring, travel or clothing (except school clothing).

12 Awards: The Council will wherever possible provide goods and services. Cash payments will be avoided. The value of goods provided will depend on the applicant's individual circumstances.

Application Process

Applications must be in writing via the Council's on-line application form, which can be found at www.sthelens.gov.uk/welfareassistance. Residents who do not have access to the internet or require help with the completion of the form should visit: Wesley House, Corporation Street, St Helens; a local library; contact their support worker; housing provider; or Citizens Advice for assistance.

Applications from those seeking support following disaster and are homeless should be made via Housing Options.

Applications due to crisis where there is a serious risk to health and safety should normally be made via a social worker, support worker, Citizens Advice or other approved advice agency who will firstly assess need and in appropriate cases signpost applicants to other services. Where applicants do not have a support worker they should provide sufficient evidence to support their claim.

Assessment Process

The Council will consider all applications on a case-by-case basis considering the above eligibility criteria and the Council's available budget.

Applications in respect of independent living will be considered within 28 days of receiving all supporting information. This should include evidence of what steps the applicant has already taken to secure other funding arrangements, or what provision has already been made to accommodate their move to independent living, before applying for additional assistance from this scheme.

Applications due to disaster or crisis will only be considered following a referral from an advice agency, social worker or support worker. These applications will be prioritised and support will be provided as soon as practicable depending on the specific nature of the need. In the case of crisis, applications will be considered within two working days of providing all supporting information.

In assessing the application, the Council may request any information or evidence that it deems reasonable to help determine whether an award should be made.

The budget provision is strictly cash limited, as such, expenditure will be profiled throughout the year based on need.

Appeals

If an applicant is not satisfied with the decision they can request, in writing, within 28 days for the decision to be reviewed. If they are still not satisfied with the decision after the review has taken place they retain the right to make a complaint under the Council's Corporate Complaints Procedure.

Data Protection

Information collected during the application process will be used to assess an applicant's claim. Information contained on the claim will be cross-matched with other data held by the Council for verification purposes.

In assessing a claim, it may be appropriate to make referrals within the Council or to external agencies, with the applicant's permission, to provide advice or support.

The Council may also share data for cross checking purposes with both internal and external organisations for the prevention and detection of fraud.

More information in relation to data protection including an applicant's rights can be found at: <https://www.sthelens.gov.uk/dataprotection>

Fraud

The Council takes the threat of fraud seriously. An applicant who tries to fraudulently claim by falsely declaring their true circumstances, providing a false statement or evidence in support of their claim, may have committed an offence under the Fraud Act 2006. All allegations of fraud will be investigated. Criminal proceedings or other sanctions may be applied in appropriate circumstances.

Review of this Policy

In view of the new arrangements it is proposed to review this policy annually to ensure that it is appropriate and meets the needs of residents and the Council.

Prepared: February 2019

Approved: 25 February 2019

Admin Decision: CORP000514