

Oxford City Council's Discretionary Housing Payment Policy

1. Aims

- 1.1. The overarching objective of this policy is to distribute funding granted under the Discretionary Housing Payment scheme (DHP) in order to prevent homelessness. This will be achieved by providing short term relief to applicants in order to give them time to find more sustainable solutions to their financial arrangements. The policy is also intended to support people who have little scope to change their personal circumstances. Funding provided by this policy is only intended to be used to cover housing costs.
- 1.2. Demand for support through awards of DHP has increased since 2013/14 as a result of the introduction of under occupancy criteria in the social sector, the Benefit Cap, and the reduction and subsequent freezing of Local Housing Allowance rates. In addition to the overarching objective of the policy outlined in 1.1, the policy also aims to:
- alleviate child poverty and keep families together
 - support vulnerable young people in the transition to adult life, including young people leaving care; and
 - support the vulnerable in the local community
 - support the transition into work, particularly for people at risk of homelessness and those moving on from hostel accommodation

2. Determination of Applications

- 2.1. Applications for DHP awards must be made on the form shown at Appendix 1. The Welfare Reform Team will consider all applications for DHP on their individual merit.
- 2.2. DHP's can not be awarded in the following circumstances:
- To top up an award made under the Council Tax Reduction Scheme¹.
 - To contribute to the cost of ineligible service charges
 - To assist in paying for rent increases imposed as a result of incurring rent arrears
 - To assist in paying for rent costs arising from the suspension of a Housing Benefit or Universal Credit claim
 - To assist in paying for rent costs which arise from the imposition of sanctions or reductions in Housing Benefit or the Housing Cost Element of Universal Credit. These include any reduction made as a result of not complying with work related conditionality, or in arranging maintenance as directed by the Child Support Agency, or breaching a community service order.
- 2.3. It is not intended to award DHP in the following circumstances, unless to do so would strongly support the policy objectives outlined above:
- Assistance with moving costs, rent in advance, and deposits (unless moving to more affordable accommodation)
 - Shortfalls caused by a non-dependent deduction
 - Where Capital in excess of £6,000 is held for people of working age, or £10,000 for those of pensionable age
 - Where the tenancy was not affordable when it was taken on.

¹ Section 13A of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 provides for Local Authorities to make reductions in the amount of Council Tax owed by an individual.

- Where an applicant has multiple outstanding debts, and has no plans to seek professional debt advice, or to deal with the debt
- Where there is affordable and suitable available alternative accommodation.
- Where applicants are not prepared to take steps to reduce or remove their need for DHP, and/or state the period of time they require the DHP.
- Where multiple family units or households are living in one property, and another household could be expected to make additional contributions to the rent
- Where fraud has been admitted or proven in relation to claims for Housing Benefit, Universal Credit, Council Tax Benefit, Council Tax Reduction Scheme or Discretionary Housing Payments.

2.4 In deciding whether to award a DHP, consideration will be given to:

- how the award will meet the policy objectives, with priority being given to:
 - applicants who have limited scope to change their circumstances (e.g. a disabled applicant affected by the under-occupancy rules who has had adaptations made to their property)
- the shortfall between Housing Benefit and the rental liability (unless Universal Credit is in payment, in which case the award can be any amount up to the amount of the housing cost component);
- any steps taken by the applicant to reduce their rental liability;
- any steps taken by the applicant to find work, or increase their hours of work
- the financial and medical circumstances (including ill health and disabilities) of the applicant, their partner and any dependants and any other occupants of the applicant's home;
- the income and expenditure of the applicant, their partner and any dependants or other occupants of the applicant's home. (All applicants will be required to complete an Income & Expenditure Form.) Where it is felt that expenditure is inappropriate or incompatible with award of a DHP, the applicant will be referred for debt advice or financial capability support.
- any savings or capital that might be held by the applicant or their family;
- the level of indebtedness of the applicant and their family;
- the exceptional nature of the applicant and his / her family's circumstances;
- whether total DHP expenditure is within the legally permitted level of two and a half times the government's contribution the possible impact on the Council of not making such an award, e.g. the pressure on priority homeless accommodation;
- any other special circumstances brought to the attention of the Welfare Reform Team.

3 Amount and condition of awards

3.1 The Welfare Reform Team will decide how much to award based on all the circumstances. However, the main determining factor will be a consideration of the applicant's scope for reducing their reliance on DHP's in the future. Where this is possible, awards will usually be made for a maximum of three months. If an applicant has limited options for making changes in their circumstances awards will be made for longer periods, of up to 12 months. An award of a DHP does not guarantee a further award at a later date even if the applicant's circumstances have not changed.

3.2 . The start date of the award will normally be:

- the Monday after the Welfare Reform Team receives the written claim for a DHP; or
- the date on which entitlement to Housing Benefit or Universal Credit starts; or
- another date, where this fulfils the objectives of this policy better than the dates above.

3.3 An award of DHP will have conditionality attached to it in the majority of circumstances. Any conditionality will be linked to increasing the applicant's income, reducing their rental liability or

reducing other outgoings. Conditions will be agreed with the applicant, and support will be available to help them achieve them, either from the Council or from partner organisation(s). Examples of types of conditionality could include:

- Attending work related coaching with one of the Council's partners
- Actively looking for work, with or without the support of the Council, or one of our partners
- Registering for housing and bidding for suitable properties in each cycle
- Seeking assistance to manage debts
- Paying rent arrears
- Engaging with specialist support services

The intention of any conditionality is to assist the customer in improving their circumstances; it is not a punitive measure. However an award of DHP can be cancelled if a customer has not undertaken the agreed activity. Where employment is a reasonable outcome for someone, a condition related to moving into work will always be applied.

3.4 The maximum amount of DHP which can be awarded to Housing Benefit recipients is the difference between the weekly Housing Benefit award and the weekly eligible rent. For Universal Credit recipients the maximum DHP award is the monthly housing cost component of the UC award.

3.5 Where an application for DHP is made by a recipient of Universal Credit, the DHP award will be calculated in one of two ways. If an Alternative Payment Arrangement (APA) is in place to the applicant's landlord, the award will be the shortfall between the payment to the landlord and the applicant's rent. This amount will be converted from a monthly to a weekly amount. Where an APA is not in place, the shortfall will be determined with reference to the applicant's circumstances. In both cases this determination is subject to paragraphs 2.2 and 3.4 above.

3.6 When making a repeat application for an award, the customer must have met the conditions applied to their previous award, be able to set out what actions they have undertaken as a result of that support, and explain their next steps in order to reduce their reliance on DHP awards. Such applications will require an interview with a Council officer before an award can be made.

3.7 When an application for a DHP is declined, the applicant will still be offered support in resolving their situation, either directly from the Welfare Reform Team, from another Council department, or through a referral to one of the Council's partner organisations.

4 Administration of Payments

4.1 Where the applicant appears to be entitled to another state benefit that they are not receiving, they will be advised to make a claim, and provided with details of other agencies in the city who may be able to help with such a claim. Any DHP will be reviewed in light of the result of this claim.

4.2 The Welfare Reform Team may need to revise an award of a DHP where the applicant's circumstances have materially changed. Any revision to the award will take effect from the same day as any change to the Housing Benefit award. If a revision of an award leads to an overpayment then steps will be taken to recover this money if it is reasonable in the circumstances to do so.

4.3 A DHP will normally be made payable to the person receiving the Housing Benefit payment or Housing Cost Element of Universal Credit (HCE). Where Housing Benefit or HCE is paid to the landlord, and a DHP award is made for more than three months, the Welfare Reform team will review the claim to ensure that payment should continue to be made to the landlord.

4.4 DHP will be paid by the most appropriate means available. This will normally be by BACS transfer. The payment frequency will normally be made in line with payments of Housing Benefit.

4.5 Decisions regarding DHPs will be notified to the applicant within 10 working days of receiving the last piece of information required to determine the application, and will include:

- Reasons for the decision

- The start and end date of the award
- The amount of the award
- Conditions attached to the award
- The applicant's right of review
- Advice that future awards may not be made

4.6 A Senior Officer will review any DHP decision that is disputed by the applicant. If the decision is still upheld, any further dispute must be dealt with through the Council's complaints procedures and ultimately by judicial review.

4.7 Where a customer has a complaint in the way we have applied our policy, they may ask the Local Government Ombudsman to look at their case, after exhausting the Council's own complaints procedure.

5 Fraud

5.1 Oxford City Council is committed to the fight against fraud in all its forms. An applicant who tries to fraudulently claim a DHP by falsely declaring their circumstances, or providing a false statement or evidence in support of their application, may have committed an offence under section 2 of the Fraud Act 2006. Where the Welfare Reform Team suspects such a fraud may have occurred, the matter will be investigated and this may lead to the instigation of criminal proceedings.

6 Monitoring

6.1 Reports will be extracted from the DHP software on a monthly basis to ensure that expenditure is within budget and is correctly profiled to ensure no overspend at the end of the financial year. Overpayments will be reconciled on a monthly basis. A 10% check will be made of all DHP applications, whether successful or not, to ensure that decision making is consistent.

6.2 The reasons for making a DHP award will be monitored and reported based on the following list:

Benefit Cap
 LHA Reductions
 Housing Benefit reductions due to under-occupation
 Combination of reforms
 Other

This will be reported back to DWP in accordance with their requirements.

7 Communication of Policy

7.1 The Welfare Reform Team will publicise the scheme and will work with all interested parties to achieve this. A copy of this policy statement will be made available for inspection and will be posted on Oxford City Council's website.

8 Review

8.1 This policy is effective from 14 April 2016. It will be reviewed no later than 1 April 2018.

Appendix 1:

DHP Application form

Application for Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP)

Section 1: About you

To help us to process your claim quicker, please give us your current contact details.

Full Name:

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Address:

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.....Post Code:

Claim reference number: 80-

Home number: Mobile:

Email address:

Please note we may contact you regarding your claim and your appointments. We have found that contacting customers by email and text is an efficient way of getting in touch quickly with customers. If you have any preferences about the way you are contacted please let us know.

Section 2: About your circumstances

1. Why are you applying for DHP e.g. bedroom tax, local housing allowance (LHA) shortfall, benefit cap, personal circumstances?

2. Have you applied for DHP before?

Yes- please answer question 2A

No- Please answer question 2B

2A. Please tell us what are you doing to meet the conditions of your last award?

2B. Please tell us what have you tried to do to improve your current situation?

3. Are you getting help from anyone at the moment e.g. Tenancy Sustainment, Connection, Crisis, Aspire, Mind, Advice Centre, Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), Job Clubs, Social Services, etc.?

4. Is there anything else you would like us to know about when we are considering your claim e.g. risk of eviction, health, pregnancy, addiction issues.

5. When would you like your DHP to start and why? If you want DHP for past period, tell us why did you not apply before?

Section 3: About your new DHP award

6. DHPs provide short term financial help for people who are working towards improving their situation so they can afford to pay their rent without this support in the future. Which of the following options are you taking or are you prepared to take to improve your situation?

Employment/training towards work home)

Downsizing (moving to a smaller home)

Increasing working hours

Debt/money advice

Moving to cheaper accommodation

Lodger

Other (please specify below):

Section 4: About your financial situation

Please give us details of your Income and Expenditure as accurately and completely as you can. This information is needed to make a decision about your Discretionary Housing Payment. You may be asked to provide proof of the amounts declared.

Please state period as Y = yearly or Q = quarterly or M = monthly or W = weekly

Income

Income Type	Period	Amount	Income Type	Period	Amount
Wages			Industrial Injuries Benefit		
Wages (partner)			Pension Credit		
Jobseeker's Allowance			State Retirement Pension		
Income Support			Occupational Pension		
ESA			Sick Pay		
Child Tax Credit			Maternity Pay		
Child Benefit			Carer's Allowance		
Disability Living Allowance			Attendance Allowance		
Personal Independence Payment (PIP)			Student Income/ Loans		
			Savings/ Investments		
Maintenance			Armed Forces		
Working Tax Credit			Independence Payment		
Money from Non-Dependant			Universal Credit		
			Other (please specify)		
Rent from lodger					

Bills

Expenses	Period	Amount	Expense	Period	Amount
Total Rent*			Pay TV/ Internet/ Phone Package		
Council Tax (after CTRS*)					
Water Rates			Maintenance Payments		
Gas			Service Charges		
Electricity			Private Pension payments		
Coal/Wood/Other Heating			Insurance e.g. contents, life, pets		
TV Licence					
Mobile Phone 1			Other (please specify e.g. repairs)		
Mobile Phone 2					

Housekeeping					
Expenses	Period	Amount	Expense	Period	Amount
Food			Childcare		
Takeaway			Healthcare Prescriptions		
Baby Food/ Milk			Health & Beauty (please specify e.g. haircuts)		
Toiletries					
Nappies			Clothing		
Laundry/ Dry Cleaning			Disability Related Care Expenditure		
Cleaning Materials					
School Uniform			Gym Membership		
School Meals			Other (please specify)		
School Trips					

Travel					
Expenses	Period	Amount	Expense	Period	Amount
Public Transport			Disability Related Mobility Expenditure		
Petrol					
Insurance			Breakdown Cover/ MOT		
Road Tax			Other (please specify)		
Taxi					

*Total Rent- tell us what your actual rent is

*CTRS- Council Tax Reductions Scheme

Please state period as Y = yearly or Q = quarterly or M = monthly or W = weekly

Other costs					
Expenses	Period	Amount	Expense	Period	Amount
Going Out/ Entertainment			Cigarettes		
			Alcohol		
Savings			Gambling		
Pets e.g. food, vets			Holidays		
Pocket money			Meals at work		
Afterschool Clubs			Newspapers/ Magazines		
Birthdays			Subscriptions/ Charities		
Religious Holidays e.g. Christmas, Eid			Other (please specify)		

Debt			
Expenses	Period	Amount	Total amount of debt
Personal Loans e.g. family, friends			
Pay Day Loans			
Credit Cards			
Rent Arrears			
Utility Arrears e.g. gas, water, electrics			
Council Tax Arrears			
HB overpayments/ deductions			
Hire Purchase/ White Goods Loans			
Court Fines/ Bank Costs			
Maintenance Payments			
Catalogue Payments			
Student Loans			
Other (please specify)			

Section 5: Your declaration

I declare that the information I have given on this form is correct and complete.

I understand the following:

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- If I give incorrect or incomplete information, the council may take action (including court action)

against me;

- Oxford City Council is registered under the Data Protection Act 1998 for the purpose of processing personal data in the performance of its legitimate business. You can view the council's data protection policy and privacy notice at www.oxford.gov.uk/privacy
- We may share your information with and obtain information about you from other departments within Oxford City Council, other local authorities, government departments or financial organisations to ensure that the information is accurate; prevent or detect crime and fraud and protect public funds. We will not sell, share, or rent this information to others in ways different from what is disclosed in this statement.
- The council will use the information I have given to assess my claim for Discretionary Housing Payment, and I agree that the council can verify this if needed;
- I will tell the council about any changes in my circumstance that may affect my claim.

Your signature:

Date:

If you had help filling in this form or someone filled it in for you, please ask them to complete the next section.

I can confirm that I have completed this form on behalf of the claimant. The information contained within the form has been given to me by the claimant. The claimant confirms that this information is correct.

Name and relationship to you of the person who filled in the form:

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