

EAST RENFREWSHIRE COUNCILEDUCATION COMMITTEE12 November 2020Report by Director of EducationELIGIBILITY TO CLOTHING GRANTS**PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

1. The purpose of this report is to seek elected member approval for a School Clothing Grant policy and extension of the qualifying criteria for the Clothing Grant to include Council Tax Reduction (CTR) as an indicator of eligibility.

RECOMMENDATION

2. Elected members are asked to:
- (a) approve the School Clothing Grant policy and the inclusion of Council Tax Reduction as a qualifying criteria for payment; and
 - (b) homologate the decision of the Director of Education to include Council Tax Reduction as a criterion for School Clothing Grant.

BACKGROUND

3. School Clothing Grant provides assistance to low income families in meeting the costs of essential clothing and shoes for children attending school. It is an annual award of £100 per child in a qualifying household. In most cases, the award is paid during the summer holiday to assist families with buying clothing ahead of the new school year. In September 2018, a national minimum amount of £100 was agreed between the Scottish Government and COSLA to ensure consistency in the grant provided across the country.

4. Applications for School Clothing Grants are made online through the Council's website. Applications can be checked against existing records to determine eligibility and ensure that customers do not have to submit additional information where it is not required. In many cases where continuing eligibility can be demonstrated, the School Clothing Grant can be rolled over in to subsequent years to ensure families are able to access this annual payment without the need for reapplication.

5. Eligibility for the School Clothing Grant remains a decision for each individual local authority. There are a range of different qualifying criteria for the School Clothing Grant currently accepted within East Renfrewshire. These can include:

- Employment and Support Allowance;
- Income Support;
- Job Seekers Allowance;
- Certain amounts of Child and/or Working Tax Credits;
- Housing Benefit; Universal Credit; and
- Support for asylum seekers.

It should be noted that there are specific income requirements for the School Clothing Grant and further information on this is available from the [Council's website](#).

6. There are currently approximately 2,200 pupils across schools in East Renfrewshire in receipt of a School Clothing Grant.

REPORT

7. School Clothing Grants, in addition to Free School Meal entitlements, are currently administered by the business support team within Corporate & Community Services on behalf of the Education Department. The business support team use the existing revenues & benefits system to carry out this function. This system is being replaced later this year. When the new system has been implemented, the administration of free school meals and clothing grants will be undertaken by the Revenues and Benefits team. The current qualifying criteria and process for applying for the School Clothing Grant has developed over time through custom and practice and currently there is no existing formal policy for the administration of this important benefit.

8. A proposed policy is set out as Appendix 1 to this report. This policy document formalises the current practice and sets out a clear policy and procedure.

9. In April 2013, Council Tax Benefit (CTB) was abolished and replaced with the new Council Tax Reduction (CTR) across Scotland. While CTB had been a DWP-administered benefit, CTR is determined by individual local authorities and is a direct reduction in the Council Tax charge individual households are asked to pay. CTR continues to have many of the same qualifying criteria as the previous CTB but is instead administered locally.

10. As a DWP-administered benefit, CTB had previously been included as a qualifying criteria for School Clothing Grant, with recipients often being in receipt of other linked benefits. Given that these other benefits also awarded entitlement to the School Clothing Grant, when CTB was replaced with CTR, it was not considered necessary to also add this as a qualifying benefit. In effect, the qualifying benefits a household would require to be eligible for CTR would in themselves award an entitlement to School Clothing Grant so the duplication was not required.

11. The Council has seen a significant increase in the number of applications for CTR in recent months as a result of the financial hardship being experienced by families exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic with many families requiring additional support, often for the first time.

12. A total of 12 applications had been received for School Clothing Grant by way of CTR entitlement and had been placed on hold due to the uncertainty over the qualifying criteria. In seeking to support these families, the Director of Education agreed to award School Clothing Grant based on CTR, with the School Clothing Grant policy to be updated and formalised for consideration by elected members. In considering the policy as attached, elected members are asked to homologate the decision to include Council Tax Reduction as an additional qualifying criteria for the School Clothing Grant. This would ensure that families in receipt of CTR but who may not be in receipt of other benefits can still access this grant and brings East Renfrewshire Council in to line with many neighbouring authorities.

13. In seeking to support families and tackle the impact of poverty and the cost of the school day, this small change will ensure that all eligible families can benefit without delay.

14. The Education Department is continuing to work closely with the Revenues and Benefits team to improve access to School Clothing Grant amongst other benefits to ensure all families who are entitled to this can receive it. A new IT system is in the final stages of deployment within Revenues and Benefits and will offer enhanced opportunities to explore auto-entitlements and data matching to improve access and take up of this important additional grant for families with low income. In addition, the new system will ensure that assessments of entitlement can be improved, ensuring that only eligible applicants are approved in a timely manner.

FINANCE AND EFFICIENCY IMPLICATIONS

15. In the short-term, the decision to include CTR as a qualifying criteria for the School Clothing Grant will have very limited financial implications and the additional payments can be met from within the existing budgets.

16. The Education Department will continue to work with Revenues and Benefits to monitor the additional applications coming forward, the net impact of this on available budget and if necessary it will be considered as part of a future annual revenue budget process.

CONCLUSION

17. School Clothing Grants remain an important benefit to support lower income families in meeting the additional costs of essential new school clothing and shoes. While based previously on custom and practice, the development of a formalised policy will streamline practice in the administration of School Clothing Grants and provide clarity to customers on the process, practice and criteria for applying.

18. The addition of Council Tax Reduction as a qualifying criteria replaces the discontinued Council Tax Benefit scheme and ensures that we maximise the number of lower income families who can benefit from the School Clothing Grant in future.

RECOMMENDATION

19. Elected members are asked to:
- (a) approve the School Clothing Grant policy and the inclusion of Council Tax Reduction as a qualifying criteria for payment; and
 - (b) homologate the decision of the Director of Education to include Council Tax Reduction as a criterion for School Clothing Grant.

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Local Government Access to information Act 1985

School Clothing Grant Policy & Procedure Document

1. Background

- 1.1. School Clothing Grants are administered by East Renfrewshire Council to provide families with financial support in meeting the costs of essential clothes and shoes for children to attend school.
- 1.2. This document sets out the nature of and the eligibility criteria for the School Clothing Grant and the application and awarding process. This document will be used by both the Education Department and Corporate and Community Services to administer the School Clothing Grant.

2. School Clothing Grant

- 2.1. The School Clothing Grant is an annual payment made to eligible families to support with the costs of essential shoes and clothing for children to attend school. The majority of payments are made during the summer months to provide families with financial support in purchasing a new uniform for the forthcoming school year.
- 2.2. The School Clothing Grant is currently a single annual payment of £100 per child in each eligible household. Families will receive a £100 payment for each child attending school (primary and secondary). The minimum value of the grant is set nationally, agreed between the Scottish Government and COSLA, and is subject to review every two years.
- 2.3. There are no restrictions on the use of the School Clothing Grant with families being able to use the money to best suit their own needs.

3. Eligibility Criteria

- 3.1. East Renfrewshire Council is responsible for determining the eligibility criteria for the awarding of the School Clothing Grant. Any changes to the criteria can be agreed by local decision making structures subject to budget.

3.2. The current eligibility criteria are as follows:

- Employment & Support Allowance (Income Related)
- Income Support
- Job Seekers Allowance (Income Based)
- Child Tax Credit but not Working Tax Credit with a gross annual household income of less than £16,105 for 2019/20 as assessed on your 2020/21 HMRC tax credits award letter (TC602)
- Child Tax Credit and/or Working Tax Credit with a gross annual household income of less than £16,105 but above £7,330 for 2019/20 as assessed on your 2020/21 HMRC tax credits award letter (TC602)
- Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit with a gross annual household income of less than £7,330 for 2019/20 as assessed on your 2020/21 HMRC tax credits award letter (TC602)
- Support under part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- Housing Benefit
- Universal Credit (where your maximum monthly earned income from employment does not exceed £610)

- Council Tax Reduction (not single person or student discount)

3.3. The above criteria are based on the current (November 2020) criteria and will be updated annually in line with national uplifts as reflected in other benefit awards.

3.4. The Director of Education will retain the right to make discretionary awards of School Clothing Grant in extenuating circumstances.

4. Application & Awarding

4.1. Applications for the School Clothing Grant should be made through the Council's website. This will ensure that applications are dealt with as quickly as possible. Where internet access is not available, applicants can speak with Customer First to request a physical application.

4.2. Where possible, East Renfrewshire residents' eligibility will be assessed through any existing benefit awards data held by the Council. Where this is not possible and for those who are non-East Renfrewshire residents, further information is required and applicants will be asked to submit evidence to support their application.

4.3. Successful applications will receive payment directly to their bank account normally within 15 days of receipt of the application where all the correct information has been supplied.

4.4. Where an application is made for a child subject to a successful placing request, payment will be made when the details have been verified by the school.

4.5. Where a pupil reaches S5, confirmation of their continuing attendance at school will be sought prior to the award of the School Clothing Grant. These details will be verified by the school.

4.6. The School Clothing Grant is an annual award based on current circumstances and any award does not confer a continuing eligibility beyond the current year. Where entitlement to a School Clothing Grant is based on a continuing eligibility to a benefit, the annual award may be rolled in to subsequent years where evidence to support entitlement is available to the Council. For grants made based on annual income, annual applications will require to be made to ensure continuing eligibility and payment of the award. Recipients will be contacted to make an annual application should this be required to ensure payment is only awarded where an eligibility exists.