

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE EXECUTIVE
HELD ON 2 DECEMBER 2020 FROM 7.00 PM TO 7.50 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: John Halsall (Chairman), John Kaiser, Parry Batth, UllaKarin Clark, Pauline Jorgensen and Wayne Smith

Other Councillors Present

Andy Croy
Richard Dolinski
Pauline Helliard-Symons
Graham Howe
Abdul Loyes
Barrie Patman
Alison Swaddle

53. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Councillors Charlotte Haitham Taylor, Charles Margetts, Stuart Munro and Gregor Murray.

Councillor Richard Dolinski, Deputy Executive Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Services attended the meeting on behalf of Councillor Margetts. In accordance with legislation Councillor Dolinski could take part in any discussions but was not entitled to vote.

54. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received.

55. STATEMENT FROM THE LEADER OF COUNCIL

This is possibly the last time we will meet as an Executive this year. I want to briefly take the opportunity to set out a clear commitment to everybody that we, Wokingham Borough Council, will not allow any of our residents go hungry or cold during this Covid-blighted winter.

The two initiatives that will be discussed tonight are important in this: they will make sure we target support to children, families, individuals and businesses most in need. We are, however, prepared to go further, indeed, as far as is necessary, to make good on that commitment. Therefore, I can also state tonight that, should it be necessary, we will find more funding, via a properly accounted supplementary estimate, to support those most in need.

We are not starting this from scratch, but the impact of Covid-19 has made this an even more important issue for us. In the interests of brevity, I will not repeat all the ways in which we are tackling poverty and the impact of poverty in the Borough. Some examples will suffice:

- Our various green energy and insulation schemes have brought direct savings of up to 25% on fuel bills and helped alleviate fuel poverty for more the 500 households;
- Our local welfare provision scheme provides emergency help to people in financial crisis;

- Our Council Tax Reduction Scheme helps people on low incomes. I am delighted to say, following a recent consultation, we are working on plans to extend this following due decision-making progress.

Together with the initiatives to be discussed tonight, we will be launching a Kick-Start programme, which will help young people move from Universal Credit to secure jobs, and a digital inclusion project to collect unused IT equipment and recycle it for those people currently unable to access digital technology.

I would briefly update on our ongoing progress on another important issue for us which is equalities.

In recent months we have signed the Race at Work Charter as a commitment to advance equality and tackle racism in the workplace. We have also identified an external facilitator to work with us and the Borough's BME Forum, in order to help us and the Forum resolve issues to find a consensus for the Borough's future. We are using the findings from the Tackling Racism Matter survey to draft clear objectives that will go back to the public and stakeholders for discussion before they are agreed.

We will be bringing in the New Year to the Executive and Council the next steps in bringing forward a Poverty Strategy and a revised Equalities Policy.

In all of these vital efforts, we are working with the voluntary sector organisations in a genuine and strengthening partnership that brings mutual benefit to all. We gain from the expertise and community connections the voluntary sector brings and they gain from the financial and other support a local authority can provide. We are also working in close partnership with the health institutions, the CCG, the NHS and GPs and with the blue light institutions, the police, the fire service and the ambulance service. It is a win-win arrangement that is bringing tangible benefits to residents, which we will continue to develop.

Just a last point on a topical note, there are no Arcadia or Debenhams shops in Wokingham Borough; I am sure you will be pleased to hear.

56. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

In accordance with the agreed procedure the Chairman invited members of the public to submit questions to the appropriate Members.

56.1 Daniel Hinton had asked the Executive Member for Finance and Housing the following question but as he was unable to attend the meeting the following written response was provided:

Question

With the end of lockdown will these grants being offered help to get businesses going again?

Answer

There are a number of grants and schemes available nationally and regionally to support business and at Wokingham we are currently administering two grant schemes aimed at supporting businesses hit by the recent four week lockdown restrictions.

The first is a mandatory grant aimed at companies who have been forced to close and who are registered for business rates. In the past two weeks we have paid out more than £529,000 of grants to local businesses.

The scheme I am seeking Executive approval for tonight is to offer grants to those businesses who have been impacted by the last four week's restrictions but who risked falling through the net because they didn't fit the criteria for other schemes. In particular we hope to be able to help support any of our market traders who have been unable to trade as well as those small businesses whose income relies on trade with businesses who themselves have had to close.

By offering grants of £1,500 per business we hope to go some way towards covering any loss of income ahead of, what we all hope, is a busy trading period for them from now through to Christmas.

However this is just one part of a longer term support package we hope to be able to put in place using the £3.4m we have allocated through the Additional Restrictions Grant fund. The money needs to cover all our business support activity through to the end of March 2022 and over the next few months I look forward to bringing a range of new grant and support packages back for approval.

I can assure you that any future scheme or initiative will be developed in partnership with our business community to make sure the money has the biggest possible impact on our hardworking local companies and individuals.

56.2 Philip Cunnington asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question

There have been concerns about mental health during the Covid emergency, will these Government Winter Payments help residents in this respect?

Answer

The Department for Work and Pensions has specified that the Covid Winter Grant Scheme funds should be used to provide ring-fenced support with the costs of food, energy and related items. It is not a grant intended to directly address mental and emotional health concerns resulting from the Covid emergency, although the support is designed to relieve financial pressures and associated stress and hardship experienced by families and individuals.

I am delighted to announce that we have concluded an arrangement with Oxfordshire Mind who will provide for our residents a new service in the near future for mental health.

56.3 Annette Medhurst asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question

Wokingham Foodbank provides support for households across the Borough that are unable to afford to buy food and other essentials, and where appropriate heating and lighting. So far this year the Foodbank has received just over 250 referrals from departments at Wokingham Borough Council including Children's Services, community engagement and local welfare provision. The Covid Winter Grant Scheme Report states that approximately £100,000 will be distributed to families and individuals in need to provide support with food, water and utilities. How will WBC ensure that this scheme is

fully understood and accessible to its front line staff working with vulnerable households across the Borough such that they refer into this scheme rather than the Foodbank?

Answer

We want to be sure Annette, and I thank you for your question, that we reach the families and individuals most in need during this difficult time.

The Borough will ensure that a comprehensive communication campaign is rolled out across the Borough and internally within the Council to ensure that families, individuals and their representatives understand the purpose of the Covid Winter Grant Scheme, who might benefit from support from the scheme, and how to apply for support through the scheme.

It is proposed that any individual or family will be eligible to apply for support, or a representative, who may be a front-line worker at the Council, a charitable or voluntary organisation, a partner organisation, or a member of the public can apply on their behalf.

We are very keen to work with our partners from the charity and voluntary sector to identify families who are in need and signpost them to the scheme for support or assist them in their applications.

Supplementary Question

From the point where a struggling family for example talk to their social worker how long will it take for the household to actually receive support from this scheme?

Supplementary Answer

I think that is a very difficult question because it depends on the complexity of their need. We, as you know, have adopted a One Front Door Scheme so the need would be referenced through there and then fed out to the various departments. We are very, very, keen to ensure that we meet every need in terms of both home, heat and food.

56.4 Claire Revie sked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question

At Share Wokingham we distribute food to households that have been hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic. While most people come to us at Norreys Church we occasionally need to deliver food to support self-isolating households. How will the Local Authority help families eligible for support from the Covid Winter Grant Scheme but unable to physically get out to the shops to buy food with the vouchers that have been issued?

Answer

For those families who are unable to physically get out to the shops to use food and grocery vouchers provided, there will be an option for families to email or provide the vouchers to a representative who can use the vouchers on their behalf and deliver food and groceries safely to their door.

56.5 Emma Cantrell had asked the Leader of the Council the following question but as she was unable to attend the meeting the following written response was provided:

Question

First Days is a local charity that works to reduce the impact of poverty on families in the Wokingham area and beyond. Many of the families we support are very anxious and struggling with additional costs at this time of year, particularly fuel to heat their homes. There are a high number of domestic energy suppliers in the UK and how support is offered to families might vary according to the company that supplies their gas or electricity as well as whether they have a pre-payment meter or pay by direct debit. How will this scheme be rolled out and how will we, as a local anti-poverty charity, refer our families into it for support?

Answer

It is proposed that there is provision through this scheme for any individual or family to apply for support, or for a representative, who may be a front-line worker at the Council, a charitable or voluntary organisation, a partner organisation, or a member of the public, to apply on their behalf. This will be via a referral into the Citizens' Advice Wokingham Covid One Front Door who will act as triage for the application, providing a recommendation to the Council for support. The Council will then arrange distribution of funds.

Funds can be distributed in a variety of ways to best meet the needs of the beneficiary. This will include vouchers, payment cards credited with a specific amount, payments into bank accounts, or in exceptional circumstances, cash. Each applicant will be assessed according to their need and funds provided in a way designed to address their specific circumstances.

57. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

In accordance with the agreed procedure the Chairman invited Members to submit questions to the appropriate Members

57.1 Alison Swaddle asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question

Councillor Halsall, can we have confidence that the Winter Grant payments will be distributed before Christmas?

Answer

The Covid Winter Grant Scheme provides £208,703 to Wokingham Borough Council to support families and individuals who are struggling to meet the cost of food and energy bills between 1st December 2020 and 31st March 2021.

It is proposed that the grant will be distributed in three ways:

1. food vouchers to be provided to the families of the 2,166 children and young people in Wokingham in receipt of a means-tested Free School Meals to cover the Christmas holidays 2020 and February half term 2021 (£15 per child per holiday week). The total cost of this will be approximately £100,000.

We are working closely with schools to ensure that the vouchers covering the Christmas holidays are distributed before the end of this term. We have a plan in place to achieve this and we have systems and support in place which will be ready for schools to use shortly after the Executive Meeting tonight. Schools have been fully briefed about our plan.

The remainder of the vouchers will be distributed shortly before the beginning of the February half term holiday.

2. Support to be provided to up to 100 Care Leavers with the costs of food and/or energy and the total cost of that will be around £5,000.

We are working closely with our leaving care team to ensure that support is provided at a time over the winter months which best meets the needs of Care Leavers. We are ready to provide support as advised by our specialist teams.

3. Support to be provided to families and individuals in need who do not fall into the above two categories. Front-line services who are already in contact with the families and individuals in need will be able to refer them for support via the existing Covid Community Response One Front Door operated by Wokingham Citizens' Advice Bureau. The Citizens' Advice Bureau will assess families and individuals for this and other support and forward details of families in need to the Council who will provide support from the grant funds. We will monitor carefully the demand from families and individuals for support, and should need exceed the funds available, a further paper detailing need and proposed response will be considered by the Executive.

Supplementary Question

It is about Edenred, who I understand are the proposed supplier for the distribution of the free school meal vouchers. They were commissioned by the Government to deliver the scheme earlier on in the pandemic and at that time, as I think we are all fully aware, there were very well-publicised problems and delays. Are you confident that this isn't going to be repeated?

Supplementary Answer

We are assured that all the issues experienced early in the roll out of the scheme have now been addressed. We are now also setting up a helpline for school staff, who will be processing the distribution of vouchers via the Edenred portal, so that emerging problems can be dealt with quickly. No schools have expressed concerns about using Edenred this time round.

57.2 Abdul Loyes asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question

Will the Covid Winter Grant Scheme ensure that no child in the Borough will go hungry this winter?

Answer

We are committed to ensuring that no child goes hungry over the winter months. The Covid Winter Grant Scheme as I said provides £208,703 to Wokingham Borough Council to support families and individuals who are struggling to meet the cost of food and energy bills between 1st December 2020 and 31st March 2021.

It is proposed that the grant is distributed in three ways:

1. Food vouchers to be provided to the families of the 2,166 children and young people in Wokingham in receipt of means-tested Free School Meals to cover the

Christmas holidays 2020 and February half term 2021 (that is £15 per child per holiday week). The total cost of this will be approximately £100,000.

2. Support to be provided to up to 100 Care Leavers with the costs of food and/or energy bills. Total cost of about £5,000.
3. Support to be provided to families and individuals in need who do not fall into the above two categories. Front-line services who are already in contact with families and individuals in need will be able to refer them for support via the existing Covid Community Response One Front Door operated by Wokingham Citizens' Advice Bureau. The Citizens' Advice Bureau will assess the families and individuals for this and other support and forward details of families in need to the Council who will provide support from the grant funds. We will monitor carefully the demand from families and individuals for support, and should need exceed the funds available a further paper detailing need and proposed response will be considered by an emergency Executive.

Supplementary Question

A family or individual may experience several periods of need throughout the winter months. How can we ensure that families and individuals receive help when they need it?

Supplementary Answer

A family or individual will be able to apply for support, or have an application submitted on their behalf, as many times as is necessary over the period of the grant.

57.3 Barrie Patman asked the Executive Member for Finance and Housing the following question:

Question

What are the arrangements for Phase 2 of the Additional Restrictions Grant – Discretionary Grants Scheme?

Answer

Our current focus is obviously on supporting businesses who have been impacted by the last four weeks of the lockdown restrictions. We have already paid out over half a million pounds of mandatory business grants and are already encouraging businesses to submit applications for Phase 1 of our Discretionary Grants Scheme that I hope the Executive will approve tonight.

In the meantime we will continue to work with the local businesses to offer support and advice where appropriate including signposting to other potential sources of financial support available through central Government and other agencies.

Wokingham Borough has been awarded £3.4m of Additional Restrictions Grant to support companies over the next 16 months and we want to make sure we listen to businesses so that we target the money where and when it is needed most. We have growing relationships with the business community on an individual basis as well as through business organisations and our own Covid Business Taskforce; all of whom are feeding into the economic response and recovery plans.

With Wokingham moving into Tier 2, after the lockdown, we are already looking at extending the current Discretionary Scheme to cover businesses who will continue to be impacted as a result of the additional restrictions that the higher tier means.

With Councillor Munro I have already asked Officers to develop options for additional grant or other support schemes to be launched in the new year aiming to support businesses through what is always a challenging time even without the additional impact of Covid.

57.4 Graham Howe asked the Executive Member for Finance and Housing the following question:

Question

Whilst the grants in the report are designated for businesses, many are run by families who have a great dependency on these distributions to survive. Can you assure us that those that are vulnerable, as a consequence of shortfalls in business or indeed any other families, will not suffer homelessness within the Borough of Wokingham?

Answer

I think everybody knows that I take homelessness very seriously and I can confirm that at Wokingham Borough we have a strong record of working with households and landlords to sustain tenancies and avoid homelessness. All households who approach the Council will receive individual advice and assistance and where required a homeless application will be taken and we will support them in line with our statutory duties.

Unfortunately, there will almost certainly be cases of homelessness as a result of the economic impact of Covid but I can assure you the team will continue to do everything in their power to try and prevent these incidences and where they are unable to do so we will support the affected households.

I can also advise that Wokingham Borough Council has been successful in bidding for £1.1m of homelessness funding in the financial year, along with a Homelessness Grant of £448k. These funds will help some of the most vulnerable in the Borough. £160k over 3 years for Housing First delivery. There is immediate support of £204k, Next Steps Capital funding which is £675k, and rough sleepers the initial payment which is £91k on top of the Homelessness Grant which is £448k.

Wokingham Borough Council has been successful implementing the “all in policy” for rough sleepers since March, when we were requested by Government to accommodate all rough sleepers and we will continue to do so through the winter months and beyond.

Since the start of March Wokingham Borough Council has placed 64 households into temporary accommodation in response to the pandemic, 21 (34%) have been moved into settled accommodation.

We have been successful in our bid to fund the roll out of Housing First in the Borough. With a capital contribution of £675k from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government we will be purchasing five homes via our local housing company for the vulnerable rough sleepers. We also have received £150k in revenue funding from the Government to provide intensive in-reach support for our Housing First cohort over the next 3 years.

57.5 Pauline Helliar-Symons asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question

Can you ensure that all families in need will be catered for by the support provided by the Covid Winter Grant Scheme?

Answer

The Covid Winter Grant Scheme provides £208,703 to Wokingham Borough Council to support families and individuals who are struggling to meet the cost of food and energy bills between 1st December 2020 and 31st March 2021.

It is proposed that the grant is used in three ways as I have already commented:

1. Food vouchers to be provided to the families of the 2,166 children and young people in Wokingham in receipt of means-tested Free School Meals to cover the Christmas holidays 2020 and February half term 2021 (£15 per child per holiday week). The total cost of this will be approximately £100,000.
2. Support to be provided to up to 100 Care Leavers with the costs of food and energy bills. Total cost £5,000.
3. Support to be provided to families and individuals in need who do not fall into the above two categories. Front-line services who are already in contact with families and individuals in need will be able to refer them for support via the existing Covid Community Response One Front Door operated by Wokingham Citizens' Advice Bureau. The Citizens' Advice Bureau will assess families and individuals for this and other support and forward details of families in need to the Council who will provide support from the grant funds. We will monitor carefully the demand from families and individuals for support, and should need exceed the funds available, a further paper detailing need and proposed response will be considered by the Executive.

All of that I have already said. In answer to your specific question we do have our ways of determining the families who are in need with the information we have currently got. However, if we should have missed any then Councillors or well-meaning people should refer them to the Citizens' Advice Bureau and at the end of the day should that fail refer them to me or another Councillor or Executive Member who will then ensure that nobody falls through the cracks. I think that is very important for us to summon everybody, which we can, to make sure that nobody falls through the cracks.

Supplementary Question

It is known that fraudsters have been targeting Covid-19 support funds. How will the risk of fraud be mitigated so that the funds are received by those that genuinely need them?

Supplementary Answer

Checks are being put in place to verify the identity of those eligible for the scheme. Cash will only be used in exceptional circumstances to avoid use of the funds for items or services outside the scope and intent of the grant. If fraud is suspected, the Department for Work and Pensions will be notified so that any emerging threats can be identified and shared with other authorities.

We are very conscious of the possibilities and we are doing everything we can to ensure that we are validating applications whilst not using that as an excuse for letting people down.

57.6 Andy Croy asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question

The Executive plans to give grocery and clothing vouchers to families in receipt of free school meals over the school holidays. The option to give families cash has been barely considered, but it was an option that was allowed by Government.

A moral judgement has been made on the ability of the parents to manage their cash.

How many of the parents were expected to spend cash on tobacco and alcohol?

Answer

I really do not think that is a question for us. For clarity, the vouchers to be distributed to the parents/carers of children in receipt of benefits-related free school meals can be spent on food and groceries, not clothing.

The choice of food and grocery vouchers over cash is based on the following considerations:

- A successful scheme for distribution of vouchers through schools is already in place and has been used already during the Covid pandemic, which means that we can put these arrangements in place quickly to ensure that families benefit from support without delay.
- We want to support families who may be struggling with debt to be able to ring-fence these funds for essential food and grocery items so that no child goes hungry over the Christmas and February half term breaks.
- Families have a wide choice of supermarkets and food outlets in which they can use the vouchers. 10 supermarkets and other outlets are involved in the scheme, 9 of which have a physical presence in Wokingham.
- The means of distribution of vouchers is designed to be non-stigmatising. Parents and carers exchange voucher eCodes for store eGift vouchers of their choice.

We trust that families will want support from us which can be used to benefit their children over the Christmas and half term breaks. Use of vouchers provides ring-fenced choice and protects families from feeling pressured into using cash towards settlement of debt or other liabilities.

I would add that we are operating a scheme which is consistent with our neighbours: West Berkshire, Bracknell, and the Royal Borough. But I guess importantly for you it is the scheme which is being used by Reading Borough Council.

Supplementary Question

I think it is a question for the Executive because it is the Executive which has decided to give vouchers not cash. The local geography is interesting but I am not concerned about

what goes on in other Boroughs John and I do not think you should be either. You should be concerned about what is going on in Wokingham.

You have mentioned several times the ring fencing of cash and debt but you are unable to tell me what proportion of parents cannot be trusted. Do you not think that this is simply a lack of trust and that there is a moral judgement that people are impoverished because in some way they lack moral virtue and that this decision is as a result of that?

Supplementary Answer

It is not for me as Leader of the Council to judge people's morals. I am neither a priest nor a philosopher and I would not do so. We are faced with a task in trying to ameliorate hunger, poverty and destitution during a period which is a period of a pandemic. So, our administrative arrangements are purely administrative in order to reach as many people as we possibly can but I would point out to you that one of the concerns in using money is if somebody has an overdraft and we put money into their bank it is not entirely clear that they will be able to use the money we put in their bank. So, I am not sure that your judgement is correct when other Boroughs similar to ours have made a judgement very similar to ours independently. But anyway, thank you for raising it.

58. COVID WINTER GRANT SCHEME REPORT

The Executive considered a report relating to proposals for the distribution of the Covid Winter Grant Scheme.

The Executive Member for Children's Services introduced the report and advised that the Department for Work and Pensions had provided a grant across all local authorities of £70m from which Wokingham Borough Council had been allocated £280,703. The first tranche (50%) had already been received to cover the period 1st December 2020 to 31st March 2021. The purpose of the grant was to help struggling families and individuals with the cost of food, utility bills and other associated items. At least 80% of the grant was ringfenced to benefit families with children and up to 20% for the benefit of individuals.

Councillor Dolinski queried whether, if there was any problem with the administration of the system, the vouchers would be backdated. In response Councillor Clark confirmed that all children in receipt of benefits-related Free School Meals would automatically receive vouchers distributed by Edinred and these would be sent to the relevant school. If need appeared later, once the schools were closed, the individual could go to the Citizens' Advice Bureau or any charity for support. The Leader of Council confirmed that if there was a problem with the administration of the grant then the Council would ensure that any problems were solved.

In response to a query about how the Council was going to ensure that anyone receiving the vouchers would not feel stigmatised Councillor Clark confirmed that the vouchers would contain an Ecode with which families could purchase gift cards which would be the same as those purchased by anyone.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the distribution of food vouchers to a total value of £100,000 to cover the Christmas 2020 and February 2021 half-term breaks to families with children in receipt of means-tested free school meals be approved;

- 2) the distribution of up to £5,000 in total to Care Leavers to ensure that they have sufficient access to food and utilities over the winter months be approved;
- 3) the distribution of the remainder of the grant through referral of families and individuals in need by voluntary sector partners (including under the umbrella of INVOLVE), other partners, and internal front-line staff into the Community Response Front Door facilitated by the Citizen's Advice Bureau be approved;
- 4) that authority be delegated to the Director of Children's Services, in consultation with the Executive Member for Children's Services, to make decisions about the process for determination of level of support provided and means of delivery of support under 2 and 3 above, in line with guidance provided by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

59. ADDITIONAL RESTRICTIONS GRANT (ARG) – DISCRETIONARY GRANTS SCHEME PHASE 1

The Executive considered a report relating to a proposed policy for Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG) – Discretionary Grants Scheme Phase 1.

During his introduction the Executive Member for Finance and Housing highlighted that Additional Restrictions Grant funding in the sum of £3.4m had been awarded to the Council, which would be administered via a phased approach until March 2022 with £400k being made available immediately to fund Phase 1 of the Discretionary Grant Scheme. This would cover businesses which had been impacted by the national lockdown restrictions which had been in force from 5 November-2 December 2020.

Councillor Kaiser advised that the remaining £3m would be used to support businesses through to March 2022, predominantly in the form of future discretionary grant schemes or phases. This discretionary scheme would supplement the mandatory scheme of £1.4m of which over £500k had already been paid out to those businesses which had been mandated to close under the national lockdown restrictions.

In response to a query from Councillor Batth, about where there was any contingency built in if more funds were required, Councillor Kaiser confirmed that unfortunately the Government had made it clear that the £3.4m was expected to last until March 2022 even if more lockdowns were imposed.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the Wokingham Borough Council's Additional Restrictions Grant - Discretionary Grants Scheme Phase 1 policy, relating to the Covid 19 pandemic as set out in Appendix 1 of the report be approved.
- 2) authority be delegated to the Deputy Chief Executive, in consultation with the Lead Member of Finance and Housing, to make minor amendments to the Policy as required for future phases.