

TITLE	Covid Winter Grant Scheme Report
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	The Executive on Wednesday 2 December 2020
WARD	None specific;
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Children's Services - Carol Cammiss
LEAD MEMBER	Executive Member for Children's Services - UllaKarin Clark

PURPOSE OF REPORT (INC STRATEGIC OUTCOMES)

This report provides details of the £170m Covid Winter Grant Scheme announced by the government on 8th November 2020, of which Wokingham Borough Council has been allocated £208,703.

The Executive is asked to agree to the proposed approach and channels for fund distribution to ensure that support reaches those in need without delay.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Executive:

- 1) approves 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;
- 2) approves 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;
- 3) approves 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;
- 4) approves that authority is 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).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report outlines the intent of the £170m Covid Winter Grant Scheme and makes proposals for distribution of grant funds in Wokingham to families and individuals most in need.

The amount allocated to Wokingham Borough Council is £208,703

The grant covers the period 1st December 2020 to 31st March 2021, and in order to ensure that processes are in place to distribute funds without delay, the Executive is asked to urgently approve three proposals for use of the funds.

This is an urgent decision as set out in paragraph 6.3.35 of the Council Constitution and therefore call-in provisions will not apply for this decision. The reason for the urgency is that any delay in the distribution of Government funds would seriously prejudice the public's interest. The Mayor has given his consent to the urgency provision and the matter will be reported to the next available meeting of the Council, together with the reasons for urgency.

BACKGROUND

On 8th November 2020, the government announced a £170m Covid Winter Grant Scheme to be made available to County Councils and Unitary Authorities across England to support those most in need with the cost of food, energy, water bills and other associated costs over the winter months.

The grant covers the period 1st December 2020 to 31st March 2021.

£208,703 has been allocated to Wokingham Borough Council.

Authorities have been delegated authority to distribute the grant due to their access to local intelligence about those in most need. However, awards must be based on the following framework:

- At least 80% of the total funding will be ring-fenced to support households with children, with up to 20% of the total funding to support other households experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, poverty due to the pandemic. This may include households not currently in receipt of Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) welfare benefits.
- At least 80% of the total funding will be ring-fenced to provide support with food, energy and water bills for household purposes (including drinking, washing, cooking, central heating, and sanitary purposes) and sewerage, or other essentials. Within this condition there is flexibility about the proportion of support allocated to food and to bills.
- Up to 20% of the total funding can be used to provide support with other essentials clearly linked to the scheme conditions (including sanitary products, warm clothing, soap, blankets, boiler service/repair, purchase of equipment including fridges, freezers, ovens etc.), in recognition that a range of costs may arise which directly affect a household's ability to afford or access food, energy and water.
- The scheme is not intended to cover payment of rent or other housing costs because these are not directly related to food or utility bills and other benefits and support is available to cover these costs. Not is it intended to be used for the provision of general advice on managing debt and/or financial hardship.

For Wokingham, it is therefore proposed that:

1. Each of the 2,166 children and young people in receipt of means-tested free school meals receives food vouchers during the Christmas and February half term holidays to ensure that families have access to sufficient food during breaks from school. The food vouchers would be issued in the amount of £15 per child per holiday week. Total cost approximately £100,000.
2. Children who have left care (Care Leavers) receive funds to ensure that they have adequate access to food and utilities over the winter months. Total cost approximately £5,000.
3. The remaining funds are distributed via referral of families and individuals in need through the Community Response Front Door operated by the Citizen's Advice Bureau. (Total funds available approximately £104,000).

Note that the cost of administration of the grant will be met by existing resource in the council so that the grant is distributed in full to those who need support.

BUSINESS CASE

The £170m Covid Winter Grant Scheme aims to relieve pressure on families and individuals by supporting access to sufficient food and utilities over the coming difficult Winter months at a time of increasing hardship due to the impact of the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions.

Wokingham Borough Council has been allocated £208,703 from the fund to distribute to those most in need.

Support for Children in Receipt of Free School Meals

Families whose children are in receipt of means-tested Free School Meals are amongst the most vulnerable in Wokingham, particularly at a time of national crisis.

Families in receipt of the following benefits are eligible to apply for free school meals:

- Income Support
- income-based Jobseeker's Allowance
- income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- the guaranteed element of Pension Credit
- Child Tax Credit
- Working Tax Credit run-on
- Universal Credit - if application is on or after 1 April 2018 household income must be less than £7,400 a year (after tax and not including any benefits)

It is proposed that part of the grant fund is used to support children in receipt of free school meals.

There are currently 2,166 children and young people in receipt of means-tested free school meals in Wokingham. Under the scheme, the family of each child would receive vouchers - which can only be used for food and groceries - in the amount of £15 per child per holiday week, covering the 2 weeks of the Christmas holiday and the week of February half term. Vouchers would be distributed via schools, and each voucher can be used in 10 local supermarkets offering families choice and access to their nearest food outlet. The total cost of this would be approximately £100,000.

Support for Care Leavers

Care Leavers in Wokingham are transitioning to adulthood under the most difficult national circumstances experienced in recent times. Young people have been particularly impacted, and for Care Leavers, who already face additional challenges, this additional uncertainty can be devastating. Care leavers are being supported by our services to ensure that their physical and emotional health is safeguarded, and funds from this grant, alongside other services, will help support our Care Leavers to meet the costs of food, utility bills and other needs within the scope of the grant over the challenging winter months. It is proposed support to the value of £50-£55 per Care Leaver is provided in the form of food vouchers, fuel vouchers, or provision of food or other items according to the need of each individual young person. There are currently 92 Care Leavers. The total cost of this support would be approximately £5,000.

Supporting other Families and Individuals

We recognise that there are other families and individuals in the Borough who will be facing hardship but who do not fit into the above groups. It is important that we ensure that families facing difficult circumstances are able to benefit from grant funds.

Our proposed approach is to work with frontline staff at the council, in our partners, and in the voluntary sector, who have direct knowledge of those who may need additional support, to promote referral of those families and individuals to us so that they can benefit from the grant. We will also encourage families and individuals to self-refer. Referrals will be channeled through our successful and effective partnership with the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) who already have the infrastructure in place to process referrals through the Community Response Front Door. The funds available through this route will be approximately £104,000.

It is proposed that the CAB carries out an assessment of the need of each family or individual referred, and makes recommendations to the Council for support provision, which will then be met as need is presented through food or fuel vouchers, or provision of food or other items within the scope of the grant according to need. The exact amount of grant to be allocated and the means of allocation will be determined by a council panel of senior officers, chaired by the Director of Children's Services, who will consider each recommendation and allocate funds. The detailed process will be finalised in consultation with the CAB by the end of November. If we discover that need is greater than the grant, we will report this to Executive for further decisions to be made.

Once the process is finalised, there will be an extensive marketing and communications campaign to ensure that all stakeholders and residents are aware of the grant availability and how to refer a family or individual or themselves for support.

Risks Associated with the Decision and Timescales

There is a risk, if the decision is delayed, that families and individuals in need will not receive the support they urgently need.

Due to the nature of the rapidly developing situation due to Covid-19 restrictions and the resultant uncertainty and hardship for families and individuals, the government is clear that local authorities need to be in a position to be able to begin rolling out support under this scheme as early as possible in December 2020.

Expected Outcomes

Once approval to distribute the funds as proposed is in place, work will begin immediately to establish processes to ensure that those who are in need receive support as quickly as possible, resulting in significant reduction of hardship for families and others struggling during the winter months of the Covid crisis.

The information gathered through this scheme will give the council rich intelligence about the levels of need in the Borough which will support our response to poverty.

The scheme will also enable the council to signpost families in need to other available resources in the Borough.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	£208,703	Yes	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£Nil	Yes	
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£Nil	Yes	

Other Financial Information

Receipt of the funding by the Council requires that the eligibility framework set out above is met, and that reporting back to central government is fulfilled. Should the recommendations in this report not be agreed, then alternative delivery options would need to be agreed as a matter of urgency to ensure funds are available to passport on to those most vulnerable in our community within the necessary timeline.

If further funds are required due to need exceeding the grant amount, a further report will be submitted to Executive for decision.

Stakeholder Considerations and Consultation

There will be consultation with INVOLVE, the CAB and council officers via Microsoft Teams meetings between 25th November and 1st December to determine the details of the process for ensuring that the fund is used to support those who are not in receipt of Free School Meals or are Care Leavers in a fair and equitable way.

Public Sector Equality Duty

Provision of support to those eligible for means tested Free School Meals provides assurance of equality of access in accordance with pre-determined criteria. Similarly, Care Leavers are known to be a vulnerable group in need of support due to their specific circumstances. The process for distribution of the remainder of the fund will be subject to an Equalities Assessment to ensure that support is accessible to all who need it.

Climate Emergency – *This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030*

This decision will have no impact on the climate emergency project. It is an emergency winter hardship fund provided specifically to support families and individuals who are struggling to make ends meet due to the Covid-19 crisis.

List of Background Papers

None

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