

TITLE	Covid Winter Grant Scheme Supplementary Estimate
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	The Executive on Thursday, 25 March 2021
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 seeks a Supplementary Estimate of up to £100,000 to continue to support vulnerable families and individuals who are struggling to meet the costs of food and utilities over the Winter months due to the Covid pandemic, supplementing the funds provided through the DWP Covid Winter Grant. The DWP Grant allocated to WBC is £281K. The supplementary estimate, if fully spent, will bring total spend on supporting families and individuals over the Winter months to £381K.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Executive:

- 1) approves a Supplementary Estimate of up to £100,000 to allow vulnerable families and individuals who are struggling with the cost of food and utilities to continue to be supported once the Covid Winter Grant funds of £281K are exhausted;
- 2) note that this will bring total spend on supporting families and individuals most in need in the Borough to £381K and will allow families and individuals to receive support up to the closing date of the scheme on 16th April 2021.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The DWP Covid Winter Grant Fund programme has, since 14th December 2020, provided support to vulnerable families and individuals in Wokingham who have struggled to meet the costs of food, fuel and associated items over the Winter months during a time of heightened stress and uncertainty due to the Covid pandemic.

An original grant of £208,703 was provided to Wokingham Borough Council with a scheduled programme end date of 31st March. The DWP has recently extended the end date to 16th April, providing an additional grant fund of £72,555, giving a combined fund of £281,258.

At the writing of this report, the £281K grant was forecast to be fully spent during week beginning 15th March. Applications for support are still being received and assessed, and there is a risk of families and individuals being left in unmet need. Based on current forecasts, it is estimated that up to an additional £100K will be needed to meet demand up to the close of the grant on 16th April, bringing total spend to £381K.

It is therefore recommended that a supplementary estimate of up to £100K is approved to continue to ensure that the most vulnerable residents in the Borough, who are struggling due to the pandemic, receive the support they need during this most difficult time, demonstrating the commitment of the Council to care and support residents through the most difficult Winter months.

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 was originally intended to cover the period 1st December 2020 to 31st March 2021.

£208,703 was originally allocated to Wokingham Borough Council.

In late February 2021, following the announcement of the Government's Covid-19 Response Roadmap, the Covid Winter Grant Scheme was extended to 16th April 2021, and an additional fund of £72,555 was allocated to Wokingham from a national £55m top-up fund.

The total fund allocated to Wokingham Borough Council is £281K.

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

- At least 80% of the total funding is 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 is 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. Nor is it intended to be used for the provision of general advice on managing debt and/or financial hardship.

At a meeting of the Executive on 2nd December 2020 it was agreed that the grant would be distributed as follows:

1. Each of the 2,166 children and young people in receipt of means-tested free school meals to receive 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) to 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 to be 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).

At the same meeting, the Leader of the Council demonstrated the commitment of the Council to ensure that families and individuals receive the support they need through the most difficult Winter months of the Covid pandemic, stating that "should it be necessary, we will find more funding, via a properly accounted supplementary estimate, to support those most in need".

BUSINESS CASE

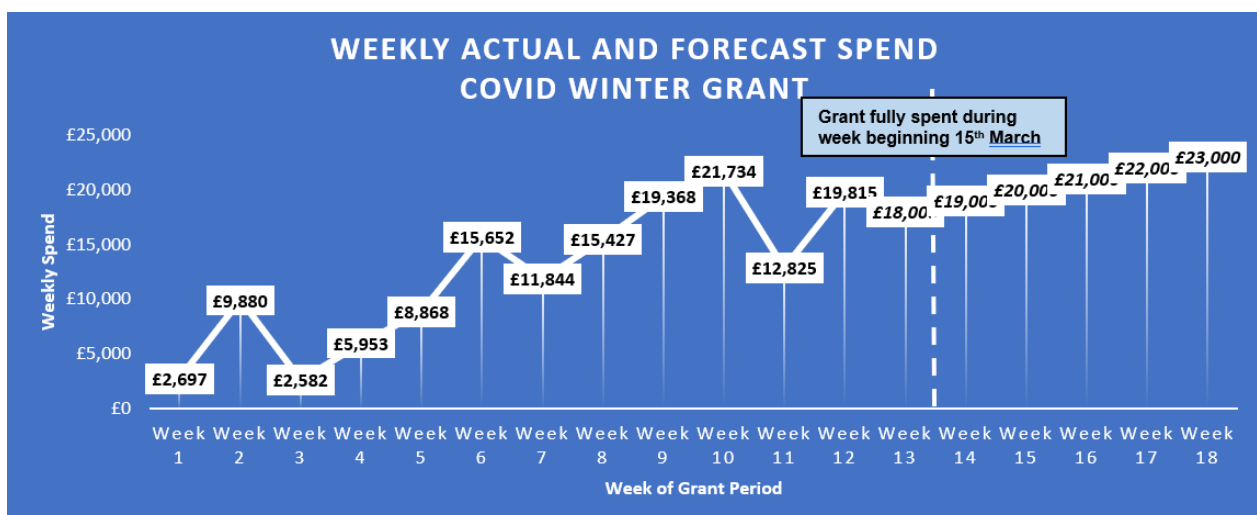
To date:

- Approximately 2200 children and young people have received FSM Vouchers to cover the Christmas 2020 and February half term 2021 holidays (£15 per child per holiday week)
- 75 Care Leavers have received support with the cost of food and groceries
- 287 families and individuals have been supported to meet the cost of food and utilities.

The chart below shows actual and forecast weekly spend through the element of the grant support where clients apply to and are assessed by the Citizens Advice One Front Door. Payments (mainly in the form of food and utility vouchers) are then processed by the WBC Covid Winter Grant team.

It is forecast that the grant will be fully exhausted during week beginning 15th March 2021.

Based on demand trends and existing applications being processed, it is estimated that up to an additional £100K will be needed to support families and individuals in need through to the 16th April grant closing date, bringing total spend to £381K.



It is therefore requested that a Supplementary Estimate of up to £100K is approved to supplement the £281K grant funds bringing total spend to £381K so that families in need can continue to be supported until the 16th April, demonstrating the Council's commitment to proactively supporting and caring for vulnerable families who are struggling as a result of the pandemic.

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)	£50K	No (£50K)	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£50K	No (£50K)	Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)			

Other Financial Information

None

Stakeholder Considerations and Consultation

This funding will support continuation of an existing scheme. No additional consultation is necessary.

Public Sector Equality Duty

Provision of support to those eligible for means tested Free School Meals has provided 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 has been 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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