

Report to Cabinet

24 February 2021

Subject:	Covid Winter Grant Scheme
Cabinet Member:	Cllr Wasim Ali Cabinet Member for Resources and Core Services
Director:	Lesley Hagger Executive Director of Children's Services
Key Decision:	<p>Yes</p> <p>Regulations require that 28 clear days' notice is given before a key decision is made. However, in recent weeks there has been a significant increase in the demand for the Winter Support Grant Scheme which means that the government funding that has been provided will not be sufficient to last until the end of March, as planned. An urgent decision is therefore required regarding the continuation of the Scheme.</p> <p>In accordance with the Regulations, the Chair of the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board has been informed of this matter in writing.</p>
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1. Recommendations

That the Cabinet:





- 1.1 Notes the progress of the Covid Winter Grant Scheme;
- 1.2 Notes the demand for the Scheme and authorises the continuation of the Scheme to 31st March 2021;
- 1.3 Agrees the use of the Covid Council Tax Hardship Fund Grant to cover the costs of successful applications to the Covid Winter Grant Scheme until 31st March 2021.

2 Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 Councils were given new funding to ensure that vulnerable households do not go hungry or without essential items over the winter period. The Covid Winter Grant Scheme has enabled local authorities to provide support to families with children, and other vulnerable households and individuals from early December 2020 to 31st March 2021. The funding allocation to Sandwell is £1,404,606.44.
- 2.2 In November 2020 the Emergency Committee approved the Policy for allocation of the fund in Sandwell, and authorised that the Chief Executive in consultation with the Deputy Leader of the Council, relevant Scrutiny Chairperson(s)/Vice Chairperson(s) and relevant Director(s), give effect to any Government guidance that is issued in relation to the Scheme and its application and operation.
- 2.3 The Scheme was successfully launched in Sandwell in December and a full briefing was provided to all Members on 3rd December 2020.
- 2.4 The demand for the Scheme has significantly outstripped the amount of funding available and it is recommended that the underspend on the Covid Council Tax Hardship Fund Grant be used, within the legislative discretions allowed, to enable the Winter Support Grant to be offered to residents until 31st March 2021.



3 How does this deliver objectives of the Corporate Plan?

	<p>Best start in life for children and young people Sandwell is a community where our families have high aspirations and where we pride ourselves on equality of opportunity and on our adaptability and resilience</p>
	<p>People live well and age well Sandwell is a place where we live healthy lives and live them for longer, and where those of us who are vulnerable feel respected and cared for.</p>
	<p>Quality homes in thriving neighbourhoods Our children benefit from the best start in life and a high quality education throughout their school careers with outstanding support from their teachers and families.</p>
	<p>A strong and inclusive economy Our communities are built on mutual respect and taking care of each other, supported by all the agencies that ensure we feel safe and protected in our homes and local neighbourhoods.</p>

4 Context and Key Issues

- 4.1 On 8th November 2020 the government announced a package of financial support for those in need including the £170m Covid Winter Grant Scheme to support children, families and the most vulnerable over winter. The Covid Winter Grant Scheme enables local authorities to provide support to families with children, other vulnerable households and individuals to help support the costs of food, energy, water bills and other associated items from early December 2020 until 31st March 2021.
- 4.2 Funding has been allocated according to the population of each authority, weighted by a function of the English Index of Multiple Deprivation and is distributed to local authorities in three tranches: 50% at the beginning of December 2020, and the remainder in two instalments of 25% at the end of February and end of March, each dependent on the data returns submitted to the Department of Work and Pensions. The total funding allocation to Sandwell is £1,404,606.44.



- 4.3 Councils already offer local welfare assistance and have experience of putting in place local support arrangements and in assessing individual needs and Sandwell used its Local Welfare policy as the starting point for the identification of eligible recipients.
- 4.4 Based on the information made available when the Scheme was announced, a senior lead officer was identified, an Operational Group was formed, and a project approach was established which considered:
- timeframe
 - policy development to include eligibility criteria
 - overarching financial arrangements and regulations (including fraud)
 - payment arrangements
 - customer identification (vulnerable with children, or without children)
 - GDPR and PSED
 - types of support (food, utilities, other)
 - operating model (proactive and reactive)
 - monitoring and reporting
 - communications
 - appeals and complaints systems.
- 4.5 Due to the short notice given by government to launch the Scheme, in November 2020 the Emergency Committee agreed the Policy for allocation of the fund in Sandwell, and authorised the Chief Executive in consultation with the Deputy Leader of the Council, relevant Scrutiny Chairperson(s)/Vice Chairperson(s) and relevant Director(s), give effect to any Government guidance issued in relation to the Scheme and its application and operation. It was also agreed that reports on the allocation of funding and other data will be made to the Cabinet as part of the Council's financial reporting arrangements.
- 4.7 A team to manage the Scheme, a data processing system, and a communications strategy was successfully launched in Sandwell in December and a full briefing was provided to all Members on 3rd December 2020.
- 4.8 Strategic governance is in place via the multi-agency Covid Vulnerable People's Cell which is an executive level forum and meets weekly; the



Operational Group referenced above reports to this Cell which is chaired by the Executive Director of Children's Services.

4.9 The planning for the Scheme anticipated demand based on 65 successful applications daily, with an average payment of £175 for the 121 days of the Scheme from inception to 31st March 2021 (the Scheme was briefly closed over the Christmas period). However, whilst the average payment has been within projections, the numbers of approved applications has significantly outstripped the amount of funding available.

4.10 Daily reports are closely monitored, and a snapshot of the data related to payments made by 12th February 2021 is set out below:

Number of people (with a form)	4202		
Number of forms	4405		
Household type	Number of forms	Sum Total Winter Grant	Average Winter Grant
Household with Children	3314	£565,315.95	£171
Household with No Children	1091	£131,754.99	£121
Sum Total Food & Utilities	4405	£421,244.00	£96
Sum Total Other Essentials	4405	£275,826.94	£63
Sum Total Winter Grant	4405	£697,070.94	£158
Town From Contact Info Post Code	Number of forms	Sum Total Winter Grant	Average Winter Grant
Oldbury	705	£105,323	£149
Rowley Regis	647	£107,409	£166
Smethwick	873	£141,019	£162
Tipton	661	£102,605	£155
Unknown or Out Of Borough	7	£1,005	£144
Wednesbury	604	£97,700	£162
West Bromwich	908	£142,010	£156

4.11 When using the performance data for the previous 14 days from the data above and taking into account applications in the system not yet processed it is estimated that in order to continue to receive applications until 31st March 2021, a further £1,037,000 will be required.



4.12 There is currently an underspend of approximately £2m on the Covid Council Tax Hardship Fund Grant, an additional budget provided by government to local authorities to deliver relief to council tax payers in their area. Sandwell Council already has a supportive council tax reduction scheme in place for residents and so the demand on this Grant has not required its full use to date and is not projected to be allocated in full. There is discretion within this Grant to be used for related welfare purposes and the guidance is attached at Appendix A. It proposed that the underspend is used to enable the Winter Support Grant to continue to be offered until 31st March 2021.

5 Alternative Options

- 5.1 A number of alternatives were considered:
- to 'pause' applications to the Scheme whilst clearing applications in the system;
 - to review and reduce the amounts allocated per claim; and
 - to 'close' the Scheme at the end of February 2021.
- 5.2 None of the above options were considered suitable, particularly when recognizing the high numbers of positive Covid cases in the Borough and numbers of people shielding or clinically extremely vulnerable that need continue support during lockdown.

6 Implications

Resources

- 6.1 The allocation of funding to Sandwell is £1,404,606.44. Appropriate financial procedures and other relevant mechanisms have been put in place to ensure compliance with financial regulations, including the combating of fraud.
- 6.2 Access to additional funding via the Covid Council Tax Hardship Fund Grant will also be subject to appropriate financial procedures and other relevant financial mechanisms to ensure compliance with grant conditions, and financial regulations, including the combating of fraud.



Legal and Governance

- 7.1 Robust reporting procedures have been established in order to make data and other management information returns to the Department for Work and Pensions.
- 7.2 The Operational Group is accountable to the Vulnerable People Cell, and the Strategic Incident Management Team.
- 7.3 Reports on the allocation of funding and other data will be made to the Cabinet as part of the Council's financial reporting arrangements.
- 7.4 Appropriate GDPR compliance is in place for the proactive actions required to allocate the Covid Winter Grant Scheme. For the reactive activities, appropriate identity checks take place, enabling confirmation that recipients of the Covid Winter Grant Scheme are genuine, in accordance with the current Local Welfare Policy 2020/21.

Risk

- 8.1 As with any welfare payment to vulnerable recipients there is a risk of fraud, as recipients might appear to be eligible when they are not. One of the biggest risks for this Scheme is impersonation fraud, where fraudsters falsely claim under the names of eligible recipients. The Council has access to a range of data sources and checks can be carried out against this data to verify the identity of the recipient.
- 8.2 It is for the Council to decide how payments are made to recipients. However, when making this decision the risks involved must be considered. Although vouchers still carry fraud risks, vouchers will be used instead of cash where possible as this helps to mitigate the risk of the money being spent by the recipient on things outside the policy intent therefore undermining the purpose of the Scheme. Where possible, cash payments will be made into a bank account in the same name of the person that is eligible and bank account verification will take place.

Equality Impact Assessment

- 9.1 A formal Equality Impact Assessment is not required, however, the policy for the allocation of funding reflects the requirements of the Public



Sector Equality Duty. The provision of the Covid Winter Grant Scheme is not subject to consultation and is determined by the Department for Work and Pensions guidance.

Health and Wellbeing

- 10.1 The impact of Covid on the health and wellbeing of the population of Sandwell continues to be monitored. Current and projected infection and mortality rates will be impacted by the local response to, and compliance with, social distancing guidelines. The ability to support vulnerable people during the winter period through the Winter Grant Scheme will positively contribute to the health and wellbeing of the recipients.

Social Value

- 11.1 Providing financial and other support to individuals and families can ensure collective benefit to the local community.

12. Appendices

Appendix 1 - MHCLG Council Tax Hardship Fund Grant guidance

13. Background Papers

None

