


REPORT TO EMERGENCY COMMITTEE

24 November 2020

Subject:	Covid Winter Grant Scheme
Director:	Lesley Hagger, Executive Director of Children's Services
Contribution towards Vision 2030:	
Contact Officer:	Karen Emms, Divisional Manager, Adults and Community Services

DECISION RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Committee:

1. Approves the Covid-19 Winter Grant Scheme; and
2. Authorises the Chief Executive in consultation with the Deputy Leader of the Council, relevant Scrutiny Chairperson(s)/Vice Chairperson(s) and relevant Director(s), to amend the Covid-19 Winter Grant Scheme and process as necessary to give effect to any Government guidance that is issued in relation to the Scheme and its application and operation.

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 Councils will be given new funding to ensure vulnerable households do not go hungry or without essential items over the winter period. The Covid Winter Grant Scheme will enable local authorities to provide support to families with children, and other vulnerable households and individuals from early December 2020 and covers the period until the end of March 2021.
- 1.2 The funding allocation to Sandwell is £1,404,606.44.
- 1.3 Preparations for the policy framework and allocation mechanism for this funding has started, but the official guidance will not be made available until 26th November 2020. This report sets out the activities to date and presents options for allocation, but the final detail cannot be determined without full understanding of the national guidance and its implications. It is therefore recommended that the Emergency Committee authorises the Chief Executive in consultation with the Deputy Leader of the Council, relevant Scrutiny Chairperson(s)/Vice Chairperson(s) and relevant Director(s), to amend the Covid-19 Winter Grant Scheme and process as necessary to give effect to any Government guidance that is issued in relation to the Scheme and its application and operation.

2. IMPLICATIONS FOR VISION 2030

- 2.1 The availability of the Covid Winter Grant Scheme enables the Council to fulfil the following ambitions set out in Vision 2030:

Ambition 1

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.

Ambition 2

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.

Ambition 4

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.

Ambition 5

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.

3. BACKGROUND AND MAIN CONSIDERATIONS

3.1 On 8th November 2020 the government announced a package of financial support for those in need as follows:

- £170m Covid Winter Grant Scheme to support children, families and the most vulnerable over winter;
- Holiday Activities and Food programme to be expanded, covering Easter, Summer and Christmas in 2021;
- Healthy Start payments set to rise from £3.10 to £4.25 a week from April 2021;
- £16m for food distribution charities including foodbanks.

3.2 The Covid Winter Grant Scheme will enable 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 the end of March 2021.

3.3 The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) will provide funding to County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England, under section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003, to administer the Winter Grant Scheme and provide direct assistance to vulnerable households and families with children particularly affected by the pandemic. This will include some families who normally have access to Free School Meals during term time.

3.3 Funding has been allocated according to the population of each authority, weighted by a function of the English Index of Multiple Deprivation.

3.4 Councils were informed that they will determine eligibility in their area but should target their support within the scope of the conditions set out below:

- at least 80% of the total funding will be ring-fenced to support families with children, with up to 20% of the total funding to other types of households, including individuals;
- at least 80% of the total funding will be ring-fenced to provide support with food, energy and water bills (including sewerage), with up to 20% on other items.

3.5 Councils were asked to be ready to deliver this scheme by early December 2020 and to make immediate preparations to administer the grant. There is flexibility in administering the funding within the confines of the Scheme, which may include cash payments, the provision of food vouchers, or funding through third party organisations.

- 3.6 Funding will be distributed 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 data returns require separate categories of expenditure to be recorded: one relates to household composition and one relates to the type of support being provided (ie food, energy, water, other). Management information is also required for the identification of administrative costs and payment assurance.
- 3.7 The government guidance for this Scheme is due to be published on 26th November 2020. The Department for Work and Pensions also plans to hold a meeting with councils after that date to clarify and outstanding questions or queries. The guidance, and the information from that meeting will then need to be tested against Sandwell's draft proposals either to ensure that they meet the criteria, or to make relevant amendments prior to publishing our policy and operating the Scheme.

4. THE CURRENT POSITION

- 4.1 Councils already offer local welfare assistance and have experience of putting in place local support arrangements and in assessing individual needs. The Sandwell Local Welfare policy 2020/21 is attached at Appendix 1 and forms a good starting point for the identification of eligible recipients.
- 4.2 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 considers:
- 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.

4.3 Funding is limited which means the Covid Winter Grant scheme is subject to change and can only be provided while funds are available and so regular oversight is important. Strategic governance will be via the multi-agency Covid Vulnerable People's Cell which is an executive level forum and meets weekly; the Operational Group will report to this Cell. Reports on the allocation of funding and other data will be made to the Cabinet as part of the Council's financial reporting arrangements.

4.4 A draft policy and process document is attached at Appendix 2. At this stage this can only be an indicative document and will need to be refined and concluded once the national guidance becomes available, however, the principles for Sandwell's approach to the Scheme are contained within the draft document.

5. CONSULTATION (CUSTOMERS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS)

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

6. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

6.1 There is no alternative to a scheme/policy. The Council needs to have a framework and mechanism in place in order to administer the scheme in accordance with the obligations and requirements of Government.

6.2 The alternative to delegating authority for final decision-making on the policy and process for the allocation of the Covid Winter Grant Scheme would delay the delivery of the Scheme and mean that local residents could not be offered support from early December 2020.

7. STRATEGIC RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

7.1 The allocation of funding to Sandwell is £1,404,606.44. Appropriate financial procedures and other relevant mechanisms will be put in place to ensure compliance with financial regulations, including the combating of fraud.

7.2 An Operational Group, led by a senior officer, has been established.

8. LEGAL AND GOVERNANCE CONSIDERATIONS

- 8.1 Robust reporting procedures will be established in order to make data and other management information returns to the Department for Work and Pensions.
- 8.2 The Operational Group will be accountable to the Vulnerable People Cell, and the Strategic Incident Management Team. Reports on the allocation of funding and other data will be made to the Cabinet as part of the Council's financial reporting arrangements.

9. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 9.1 A formal Equality Impact Assessment is not required, however, the policy for the allocation of funding will reflect the requirements of the Public Sector Equality Duty.

10. DATA PROTECTION IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 10.1 Appropriate GDPR compliance will be in place for the proactive actions required to allocate the Covid Winter Grant Scheme. For the reactive activities, appropriate identity checks will take place, enabling confirmation that recipients of the Covid Winter Grant Scheme are genuine, in accordance with the current Local Welfare Policy 2020/21.

11. CRIME AND DISORDER AND RISK ASSESSMENT

- 11.1 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.
- 11.2 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.

12. SUSTAINABILITY OF PROPOSALS

- 12.1 The Covid Winter Grant Scheme is intended to ensure that vulnerable people receive support during the winter period. The funding allocation is for the period 1st December 2020 to 31st March 2021.

13. HEALTH AND WELLBEING IMPLICATIONS (INCLUDING SOCIAL VALUE)

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.

14. IMPACT ON ANY COUNCIL MANAGED PROPERTY OR LAND

The report has no direct implication on Council managed property or land.

15. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

16. APPENDICES

Appendix 1	Sandwell Local Welfare Policy 2020/21
Appendix 2	Draft Sandwell Policy for the Winter Grant Scheme



Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council Local Welfare Provision (LWP) Policy

2020/21



Meeting Ambition 10



POLICY STATEMENT

The Local Welfare Provision (LWP) scheme will seek to assist vulnerable people in meeting their needs for subsistence or financial support where they are unable to meet their immediate short term needs or where they require assistance to maintain their independence within the community. This will be aligned to the Council's key principles of tackling inequality and reducing poverty.

1. INTRODUCTION

Local Welfare Provision

LWP will enable the Local Authority to provide assistance / support to vulnerable people in hardship situations. The overall intention is to use LWP to complement the existing support that the Council and its partners give to residents. When making a decision on assistance, consideration will be given to the following priorities:

- To support vulnerable young people in the transition to adult life
- Safeguard Sandwell residents in their homes
- Help those who are trying to help themselves
- Keep families together
- Help provide stability to children
- Support the vulnerable in the local community
- Prevent homelessness for those at risk of losing their home
- Help customers through personal crisis and difficult events
- Support people affected by domestic violence

2. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Considerations for an award

- The scheme is purely discretionary; a resident does not have a statutory right to an award
- The process will be based on referrals and awards and will be dependent upon a needs and eligibility based assessment, rather than an external application process
- Awards will be made by way of pre paid cards or goods. Generally no cash awards will be made

The LWP will consist of 2 key aspects of support:

Planned Support

Intended to help vulnerable people over the age of 18 (young adults aged between 16 and 18 may also be considered where they are unable to receive assistance through Section 17), live as independent a life as possible in the community. This form of support can be considered where the applicant is in receipt of benefit and is moving into independent living.

Planned support is also available to people if they are leaving accommodation in which they received significant and substantial care and supervision and they expect to be discharged within 6 weeks. Examples of such accommodation:

- hospital or other medical establishment
- care home
- hostel
- staff intensive sheltered housing
- local authority care
- Prison or detention centre

Unless there are exceptional circumstances such as someone who lives at home and receives support from their family or family members are unable to assist due to the demands of their own financial, health or general circumstances, applications from single people living with other family members will not be awarded as they are likely to have access to assistance from other family members.

Responsive / Emergency Support

To meet a need that has arisen as a consequence of an emergency, disaster, exceptional circumstances or a pressing need that is strikingly different from the pressures generally associated with managing a low income and is the only way of preventing or mitigating serious risk to health or safety to the claimant or a member of their immediate family, which can not be met by another source.

Forms of Support

- Planned / responsive support will be the direct provision of furniture and goods subject to meeting the eligibility criteria and the need assessment.

The following items may be provided:

- Second hand furniture
- White goods
- Emergency Support will be provided :
 - Food Bank Vouchers
 - Pre-payment cards for fuel and travel

3. PROCESS FOR SERVICES

Eligibility

Consideration will be given when the person or family has a reasonable need for an item or items to support or sustain independent living, subject to the availability of the items and the budget has sufficient resources to meet the need.

In cases where DWP or other Government departments have a primary responsibility to residents, The Local Authority will first advocate for residents to secure entitlements.

Individuals may receive support if they are age 18 and over and in receipt of:

- Income Support
- Income based Jobseekers Allowance; or
- Income related Employment and Support Allowance
- Pension Credit Guaranteed
- Contribution based Job Seekers Allowance*
- Contribution based Employment and Support Allowance*
- Universal Credit (means tested maximum award rate/where the award does not include an earnings disregard)

**Claims will only be considered under these circumstances where the claimant and/or their partner has no dependants*

Exclusions

Local Welfare Provision will not be awarded for any items that a government department or Council service has a statutory responsibility to provide.

The following people are excluded for support in all circumstances:

- Prisoners and people lawfully detained, including those released on temporary licence (but not those released on parole or on bail pending a court hearing)
- Members of a religious order who are fully maintained by the order

The following people are excluded from support except in very limited

circumstances:

- Full-time students can only receive support for expenses arising out of a disaster.
- Someone who is a 'person from abroad' (i.e. who fails or would fail the habitual residence test for the purpose of Income Support, Pension Credit, Income-based Job Seekers Allowance or Income Related Employment Support Allowance, Universal Credit) they can only receive support for expenses arising out of a disaster.
- Customers who are subject to the Benefit Cap. As it deemed that they have an income in excess of more than £20K.

Benefit Sanctions

People subject to certain disallowances or sanctions to their Job Seekers Allowance, Employment Support Allowance, Income Support, Pension Credit or Universal Credit or equivalent welfare benefits will not normally be eligible for support.

However because of the nature of benefit sanctions each case will be considered on its own merits and where it is clear that failing to provide support would present significant risk to the claimant or, their immediate family or dependant which cannot be met by another source then support may be provided.

Universal Credit – Waiting period

People who have made a claim for Universal Credit (UC) and are waiting for their first payment will not normally be eligible for support through LWP.

However because of the actual time taken for the first payment of UC to be made there may be circumstances where support through LWP is required. Each request will be considered on its own merits and where it is clear that support cannot be obtained from any other source (such as payments in advance from the Department for Work and Pensions, savings or lieu of notice pay) and failing to provide support would present significant risk to the claimant or their immediate family, support through LWP will be considered.

How to request Support

Referrals can be made via the online claim form on www.sandwell.gov.uk. Sufficient information will need to be submitted to the LWP Central Unit to enable an assessment of eligibility and need.

Decision making process

Decision making for any request for support will be processed and resources coordinated via a central coordinating function that sits within the Revenue and Benefits service area.

- Once all relevant data has been collected and the eligibility been satisfied the central function officer will contact the resident with a decision. If successful, awards will be provided in line with the resident's needs

- The Council will contact both successful and unsuccessful residents with the reasons for the decision and details of the appeals process and any other options available i.e. advice and information on other services and support available.
- If the information is incomplete or further supporting evidence is required, the team will call relevant services or the resident for the necessary information. Once all relevant data has been collected the central unit officer will contact the resident with a decision. If successful, awards will be provided in line with the applicants needs.
- Local Authority may request any reasonable evidence in support of an application. Such requests may be requested by phone/in person or in writing.
- Sandwell Council reserves the right to verify any information or evidence provided by the resident in appropriate circumstances.
- If the resident is unable to or does not provide the required evidence, Sandwell Council will still consider the request and will take into account any other available information.

Value of Awards

Each case will be assessed on individual circumstances. The value of the items provided will be at the discretion of the Local Authority but will be based on standard prices for items including the cost of delivery and installation where appropriate.

Awards will be limited to 2 per 12 month period.

Capital Limits

In order to retain consistency in the approach taken in the administration of Local Welfare Provision, there will not be a capital limit for awards made.

Outcome

Once all information to support a request has been received, The referral will be processed within 14 working days.

The LWP Central Unit will provide written notification of an award of support to the individual, the Officer representing the individual and the supplier of goods.

Written notification will include details of:

- The support to be provided
- How, when and where the award can be accessed

To avoid unnecessary delay, residents may be asked for alternative contacts methods such as email or telephone to speed up the outcome confirmation.

Out of Hours Arrangements

Local Welfare Provision will not operate outside of normal office hours. Members of the community requiring assistance will be able to contact the Council through the existing out of hours services in Adult's and Children's Services.

Review / Reconsideration

A resident can ask for reconsideration if they can demonstrate there has been a factual error based on the decision made, an oversight on a significant piece of evidence or where new evidence has come to light, that was not provided with the original request form. In either circumstance, the resident must provide the relevant details.

Such requests must be made in writing to the Revenue and Benefits Service.

This review will be carried out by the Revenues and Benefits Service Appeals team. Their decision will be final with no other right of appeal.

Monitoring Arrangements

The central coordinating function sitting with the Revenue and Benefits service area will monitor the number and amount of awards in relation to planned, responsive and emergency support on a monthly basis.

The central function will also monitor cases where a request has been refused to ensure decisions are being made fairly and consistently and in line with the Council's equality duties.

4. POLICY REVIEW

The policy will be reviewed annually, or sooner if appropriate, to take account of operational adjustments and or changes to legislation.

5. EQUALITIES

This policy has been produced in line with the Council's obligation to the Public Sector Equality Duty provided by the Equality Act 2010. No adverse impact on any protected characteristic has been identified as a result of this policy.

Appendix 2

Draft Winter Covid Scheme policy and process

How to apply

The quickest way to apply is online.
(Add online tool)

Telephone: 0121 569 XXXX (lines are open from 09:00 until 17:30 Monday to Thursday and 09:00 until 17:00 on Friday)

Applications are restricted to no more than **two** awards within the **four** month period.

Please note: all applications are online or by telephone only. There is no facility to see applicants in person.

Responding to Support Requests

Eligibility

Emergency provision is available following an emergency or crisis to meet the immediate day to day expenses relating to food and utilities and some other household related items.

To be eligible for **emergency** assistance through Sandwell's Winter Grant residents must:

- Be **aged X** or over
- Have been living in Sandwell immediately before requesting assistance
- Have no other source of income or financial assistance to meet expected or unexpected outlays

You do not need to be in receipt of any benefit or entitlement.

What Types of Support

Food and Utilities

- **Food**
 - Household without Children
 - Single Adult £XX.00
 - Couple £XX.00
 - Household with Children
 - Single Adult £XX.00

- Couple £XX.00
- Per Child £XX.00
- **Fuel / Utilities**
 - Electricity £XX.00 (week)
 - Dual Fuel £XX.00 (week)

Other

- **Non-food Items**
 - Household without Children
 - Single Adult £X.00
 - Couple £XX.00
 - Household with Children
 - Single Adult £X.00
 - Couple £XX.00
 - Per Child £X.X0
- **Travel Support**
 - 3 Day Bus Pass
- **Clothing Support**
 - Household without Children
 - Single Adult £XX.00
 - Couple £XX.00
 - Household with Children
 - Single Adult £XX.00
 - Couple £XX.00
 - Per Child £XX.00

Methods of Payment

Food (need to add)

Fuel / Utilities (need to add)

Other

- **Non-food Items** (need to add)
- **Travel Support** (need to add)
- **Clothing Support** (need to add)

How Support will be delivered

Approach to Support

The Council will offer a blended approach to providing support:

- A reactive approach which will involve identified officers from the Council responding same day (before 2pm Monday to Friday) to all requests received on line or by telephone.

- A proactive approach which will involve identified officers from the Council making contact with identified vulnerable groups to establish need for support.

The Council has developed a clear process, practice guidance, recording and performance tools to ensure the delivery of a quality service.

Service Standards

Emergency provision decisions should be made on the day for applications received before 2pm (Monday to Friday).

Successful applicants should receive payment on the day if the decision was made before 2pm (Monday to Friday).

Monitoring and reporting arrangements

The Vulnerable People Cell operational board will monitor the scheme's performance on a weekly basis.

The Council will submit monitoring returns to Government as specified in the Winter Grant Scheme guidance.

Reviewing of Support

Appeals

If a customer is not happy with the decision made on their application, they can request a review of the decision stating why they think the decision is not correct. This review can be made immediately after the decision is delivered and must be made within 24 hours of the decision.

The application will be reviewed within 2 working days of the request.

Given the short timescales, a request for a review must be made verbally. Reviews will be carried out by a line manager and, in the absence of a line manager then the team manager will review.

The review decision is final.

Complaints

Dissatisfaction with a decision is not a matter for the complaints procedure and customers must be advised of their right to a review of the decision in line with the review procedure and how to make a request.

Complaints about the handling of the process of application or review will be dealt with through the Council's complaints procedure. This includes where the applicant feels the process leading to the decision was flawed or that there was poor communication or a delay. Complaints purely about the decision should be dealt with via a review.