

Report to Cabinet

22 June 2022

Subject:	COVID Recovery Fund
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Bob Piper Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources
Director:	Simone Hines Director of Finance
Key Decision:	Yes
Contact Officer:	Simone Hines Director of Finance

1 Recommendations

- 1.1 That approval be given to the use of the remaining COVID-19 funding to deliver COVID recovery related projects based on our Fairer Sandwell principles, subject to ensuring £2m of funding is retained for a COVID resilience fund in the event of further COVID restrictions.
- 1.2 That approval be given to the use of £8m of COVID funding during 2022/23 to 2024/25 to deliver the proposals set out in Appendix A.
- 1.3 That approval be given to a £1m COVID Community Fund to which the voluntary and community sector can bid for funding to deliver their own COVID recovery projects.
- 1.4 That subject to 1.3 above, delegated authority be given to the Director of Business Strategy and Change in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources to implement the COVID Community Fund scheme
- 1.5 That the Director of Finance, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources, be authorised to agree further spend proposals from the COVID Recovery earmarked reserve.



2 Background and Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 During the COVID pandemic, all Local Authorities were given additional funding from central government to mitigate the spend pressures and loss of income caused by COVID restrictions, and to support the Public Health activities needed to contain the spread of the virus.
- 2.2 There were a number of different grant funding streams, some service specific for Adult Social Care, but the two main grants were:
- Contain Outbreak Management Fund
 - S31 COVID emergency funding
- 2.3 COMF is ring-fenced for public health related activities, such as targeted testing and contact tracing, compliance and enforcement, and support for those disproportionately affected by the pandemic. The Council is expecting to have approximately £9m remaining for 2022/23 and any unspent amount by 31st March 2023 has to be repaid to government. The Council has a number of proposals for COMF spend during 2022/23 and is taking advice from the Department of Health and Social Care and the regional conveynor and a further report will be bought to Cabinet once further clarification has been received.
- 2.4 The Council received three tranches of S31 COVID emergency funding which is un-ringfenced. At the beginning of 2021/22 there was £25.7m available to spend. Original commitments against this funding during 2021/22 were £18.1m but this has reduced given the forecast underspend for 2021/22. At the time of writing the report the outturn position was still being finalised but it is anticipated that there will be approximately £22m of the funding remaining from 2022/23, of which approx. £5.1m is already committed for 2022/23. This leaves an uncommitted balance of £16.9m.
- 2.5 Whilst the funding isn't ring-fenced, the Council does have to report on how it is spent and the COVID pressures that the funding is used for. Given the improved level of COVID infection and impact nationally, it is recommended that the remaining funding is used towards a COVID Recovery Strategy to focus on services where there is either a backlog of work due to the impact of the pandemic or where residents/businesses need extra support to recover from the longer-term impact of COVID. It is also suggested that a proportion is set aside as a contingency for any further restrictions should a new variant emerge.



3 COVID Recovery Strategic Priorities

- 3.1 To ensure that the COVID funding is targeted in the right way, it is proposed that the Fairer Sandwell principles are used to guide recovery priorities. This is on the basis that the pandemic has exacerbated inequalities within Sandwell and the focus of recovery spending needs to be on redressing the balance and creating a Fairer Sandwell. The Fairer Sandwell principles are:
- Local Investment
 - Doing things with the Community
 - No one gets left behind
 - Green in everything we do
- 3.2 Leadership Team has considered urgent funding requests, either where there is a specific service backlog or demand to tackle due to COVID, or where the Council has funded COVID related projects in 2021/22 and there are benefits to continuing this work into 2022/23. Funding of £240k has been agreed under delegated authority for Domestic Abuse projects due to the significant impact the pandemic has had on the prevalence of domestic abuse in Sandwell. This will include development of dedicated DA perpetrator behaviour change intervention and parallel victim support, as well as continuing support during 2022/23 for Family Action. This is intervention work for which there is no alternative provision in Sandwell.
- 3.3 There are then further proposals which are being presented for Cabinet approval. These total £8m over three years and the budget profile for each proposal and the Fairer Sandwell principal they support is shown at Appendix 1. More information on the key proposals is given below.
- 3.4 **Digital Inclusion**
The pandemic has accelerated the growth of people doing things online, but not everyone in the community has equal digital access and/or skills. It is proposed to use £1.15m of COVID funding to tackle digital exclusion in Sandwell by appointing a Community Digital Co-ordinator to develop a strategy and action plan and fund the provision of new facilities and training to improve digital inclusion.



3.5 Regeneration Pipeline

Funding of £225k to progress the West Brom and Grove Lane Masterplans to reshape neighbourhoods and support economic recovery post COVID.

3.6 Adult Social Care – backlog of Social Care Reviews

Within ASC there are currently 1,350 outstanding reviews, a situation which developed during Covid related lockdowns and which the service has been unable to address due to recruitment issues and other competing priorities. We potentially have an opportunity to work with an external partner to undertake reviews to address the backlog; indicative costs are £500 per face to face review. This issue is increasingly time sensitive given the potential impact of the social care funding reforms which are due to be implemented from October 2023, increasing demand for assessments and reviews. The requested funding is based on approximately 1,500 reviews.

3.7 Sandwell Inclusive Recovery Plan for Business

Cabinet approved the above plan in March 2022 and delivery of the actions identified within the plan are subject to securing sufficient resources. The proposal is to invest a total of £735,000 of COVID funding between financial years 22/23 & 24/25 to deliver the following:

- ‘Sandwell Home of the Start Up Programme’ (Start in Sandwell) £150K
- Membership and access to specialist support (Start in Sandwell) £120k
- Trading in new markets (Grow in Sandwell) £150K
- Sandwell’s Anchor Network (Spend in Sandwell) £315k

3.8 Sandwell Valley and Forge Farm Mill

Investment into both facilities following increased visitor demand during and post COVID.

3.9 Backlog work Grounds Maintenance and Playgrounds

Additional staffing resources and equipment costs to reduce backlog of maintenance works during COVID, partly as a result of increase use of facilities in that time.

3.10 Domestic Abuse

In addition to the urgent funding requirements outlined at para 3.2 above, there are further proposals to address the increase in domestic abuse during the pandemic.



3.11 Children’s and Education

The COVID pandemic has had a detrimental impact on children and young people in a number of ways and proposals to tackle this were approved by Cabinet to come from COVID funding in 2021/22. Some of these projects started later than anticipated and so these will be carried forward into 2022/23. There are then further proposals aimed at supporting the emotional wellbeing and mental health of young people and to deal with the increase demand for services for those with special educational needs and disabilities. These are proposed initially for 2022/23 and the longer-term demand will be reviewed later in the year.

3.12 It is also proposed that as part of our work towards co-production, the Council consults with our partners on COVID recovery priorities, engages with residents and the Voluntary Sector and establishes a £1m pot that the voluntary sector can bid for.

3.13 In addition to the above, as part of a longer-term strategy to ensure that the funding is targeted appropriately Leadership Team are identifying and unfunded priorities from the Corporate Plan and Business Plans that link to COVID recovery. Subject to the proposals in this report being approved, and maintaining a £2m minimum COVID reserve, there will be approximately £4.9m of funding remaining for further COVID recovery priorities.

4 How does this deliver objectives of the Corporate Plan?

	The Best Start in Life for Children and Young People Providing extra health and wellbeing support for children and young people impacted by the pandemic.
	A Strong and Inclusive Economy - ensuring businesses receive support to recover from the impact of COVID-19 and are able to maximise opportunities for growth.
	A Connected and Accessible Sandwell – reducing digital inclusion by supporting residents to access services online.



5 Alternative Options

- 5.1 Not to approve the proposals or to ask for amended proposals to be presented at a future Cabinet meeting.

6 Implications

Resources:	The Council is expected to have approximately £22m of COVID funding available for 2022/23 onwards. It is proposed that £2m is maintained as a COVID contingency fund in the event of any further COVID restrictions and a further £0.5m will be used for a COVID Community Fund. The balance will be used for COVID recovery projects, aligned to the Fairer Sandwell principles.
Legal and Governance:	The proposals are in line with Council policy.
Risk:	No implications
Equality:	No implications
Health and Wellbeing:	The funding can be used for projects that improve the Health and Wellbeing of Sandwell's residents.
Social Value	The funding can be used towards local investment priorities and wider social value objectives.

7 Appendices

Appendix 1 – COVID Recovery projects for approval

8 Background Papers

Not applicable

