

Report To : EXECUTIVE CABINET

Date : 16 December 2020

Reporting Officers: Cllr Brenda Warrington – Executive Leader
Sarah Dobson – Assistant Director Policy, Performance and Communications (Governance and Pensions)

Subject : COVID WINTER GRANT

Report Summary : The report sets out proposals for spending the ‘Covid Winter Grant’ before the 31 March 2021 to support families who are struggling to access food and warmth. The Council is committed to ensuring that all of the available Winter Covid Grant goes to effectively supporting our most vulnerable families and households to access food and warmth during a challenging time. This proposal enables us to target those who are likely to experience difficulty accessing food and warmth.

Recommendations :

- (i) The Covid Winter grant be spent on supporting vulnerable families and individuals as set out at **appendix 1**.
- (ii) A voucher scheme for children eligible for free school meals is established. This scheme will enable children eligible for Free School Meals to receive a £20 a week food voucher for the Christmas Break and £15 voucher for February half term.
- (iii) Any families who are not eligible for Free School Meals but are in need of support to contact the Early Help Access Point for help, support and advice.
- (iv) That this voucher scheme is extended out to Care Leavers for the Christmas period (to a value of £40).
- (v) That this scheme is further extended to low income sixth form and college students (to a value of £20). Administration of grants to students via the colleges will be formalised by letter to the colleges reflecting any appropriate conditions in relation to the administration of the grants on behalf of the Council
- (vi) That an amount of money is invested in welfare rights to provide food vouchers to those who are in financial need (£120,000 to fund 1,200 vouchers to a value of £30 per household)
- (vii) That remaining funds are directed to organisation’s working directly with the community to provide food and support with utility bills. Where grants made to third party organisations, this will be done by letter containing appropriate conditions) for grant funding up to £10k.
- (viii) As an element of the scheme is discretionary there is a risk that demand in December may limit the pot in February, enough funding will be retained to pay vouchers to the Free School Meals, college and Care Leavers cohort in February, all other committed funding will require a separate decision in January.
- (ix) To agree arrangements with the following supermarkets to distribute vouchers, Tesco, Sainsbury’s, Morrisons’ and Asda, subject to written terms and conditions attached to the purchase order.

**Finance Implications:
(Authorised by Section 151
Officer)**

The Government has made available a grant of £894,614.60 under the COVID Winter Grant Scheme.

The terms of the grant are that it should be used to support vulnerable families who are struggling to access food and warmth. Under the terms of the scheme, the grant is permitted to be used to provide free school meals over the Christmas and February half term holidays to those children who are currently eligible for Free School Meals. Further additional support can be provided to other vulnerable individuals under the terms of the grant.

The Tameside Council proposal is to use the majority of the grant to fund the issuing of supermarket vouchers via the schools prior to the end of term to those children currently in receipt of free school meals. The December cost of this will be £0.524m and the February Half Term cost will be £0.196m.

In addition there will be support to children at college, care leavers, welfare rights and community organisations of £0.174m

Half of the grant will be paid in December, after which further payments will be made following the submission of a statement of grant usage and progress report and management information return in February 2021 and April 2021.

The procurement of the vouchers will be through a direct award to an appropriate supermarket with proximity to the school which the eligible child attends. An exemption from procurement regulations will therefore be required for transparency purposes.

**Legal Comments:
(Authorised by Borough
Solicitor)**

The Covid Winter Grant Scheme is intended to support most vulnerable and be run by councils in England. The funding is ring-fenced, with at least 80% earmarked to support with food and bills, and will cover the period to the end of March 2021. Local Authorities will receive the funding at the beginning of December 2020. It is intended to enable councils to directly help the hardest-hit families and individuals, as well as provide food for children who need it over the holidays. It has been provided to Local councils on the basis they *'understand which groups need support, and are best placed to ensure appropriate holiday support is provided – which is why they will distribute the funds, rather than schools, who will continue providing meals for disadvantaged children during term-time.'* Moreover, by giving to Councils it can easily be recovered if not spend or targeted properly. There is a balance to be achieved by coming up with a perfect scheme which may risk losing the funding as too late or complex as against a simple expedient scheme that runs the risk of there being insufficient funding or some duplication of payment as individuals meet the criteria in more than one category. This risk is mitigated by the use of food vouchers with low values.

Links to Corporate Plan:

Supporting low income households, particularly low income families with children links to all of the priorities within the Corporate Plan which are impacted upon by Covid.

Policy Implications : The proposed spending framework fits with the Council's key policies around supporting the most vulnerable in our communities.

Risk Management : There is a risk that if the spending framework proposed is not rolled out effectively MHCLG will claw back some or all of the grant funding.

Access to Information : The background papers relating to this report can be inspected by contacting Sarah Threlfall.



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1.0 INTRODUCTION

COVID Winter Grant Scheme

- 1.1 On Sunday 8 November 2020, the government announced a significant package of extra targeted financial support for those in need over the winter period.
- 1.2 The £170 million COVID Winter Grant Scheme, which will be made available at the beginning of December, will see new funding to County Councils and Unitary Authorities (including Metropolitan Councils and London Boroughs), to support those most in need across England with the cost of food, energy and water bills and other associated costs.
- 1.3 The Winter Grant Scheme will enable us to provide support to families with children, other vulnerable households and individuals from early December 2020 and covers the period until the end of March 2021.

2.0 ALLOCATED FUNDING FOR TAMESIDE

- 2.1 Tameside has been allocated **£894,614.60** Funding will be ring fenced and cover period until end of March 2021, and will be paid as follows:
 - 50% of funding will be made at the beginning of December
 - 25% of funding made following Management Information to DWP return due mid-February covering December and January's expenditure
 - 25% final funding payment made and adjusted after final Management Information to DWP return due April covering February and March's expenditure.
- 2.2 COVID Winter Grant Scheme payments will be made to Tameside into the same bank account as Housing Benefit Subsidy payments.

3.0 MANAGEMENT INFORMATION (Management Information to DWP) RETURN

- 3.1 There will be a requirement to provide DWP with Management Information to DWP to help them understand which groups have benefited from grants, the administrative costs and payment assurance.
- 3.2 The DWP released further guidance on the 19 November setting out in more detail what Local Authorities are expected to provide.
- 3.3 Authorities are required to make two management information returns. There is an interim return that covers the months of December 2020 and January 2021 and a final return that covers the full period of the scheme from December 2020 to 31 March 2021.
- 3.4 A further assurance document will have to be completed and returned by the 8 December setting out details of our plans to distribute funding.

| Reporting period | | Deadline for return |
|------------------|------------|---------------------|
| 01/12/2020 | 31/01/2021 | 14/02/2021 |
| 01/12/2020 | 31/03/2021 | 21/04/2021 |

- 3.5 It should be noted that the latest guidance also states that the second of the three payments (25% of funding allocation) is dependent on the Management Information to DWP return for December to end of January 2021. Where Authorities have spent less than 20% of their overall allocation during December and January, the second payment will be withheld and the remaining balance paid as the final payment at the end of the scheme in April/May 2021.

3.6 The above must be considered in line with the proposed scheme to avoid funding being potentially withheld until April 2021.

4.0 ELIGIBILITY FRAMEWORK

4.1 It is for each individual LA to determine eligibility in their area and target support within the scope of the following conditions:

- 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.
- Where an eligible child lives on his or her own, they are a household that includes a child covered in the 80% allocation for households with children.
- Vulnerable households which include a person aged 19 to 25 with special educational needs and disability (SEND) and/or care leavers in accordance with the Children and Families Act 2014 may still be eligible for grant support however that support falls within the 20% allocation to households without children.

5.0 CATEGORIES OF SPEND

5.1 The eligibility criteria sets out separate categories of spend:

- One relates to household composition
- One relates to the type of support being provided, in other words, food, energy, water and other.

5.2 LAs will be asked to report and manage spend in relation to both these areas. For example, if a £100 award is made to a family with children for food, you would allocate £100 to the 'family and children' pot and £100 to the 'food' pot.

6.0 CONSIDERATIONS FOR TAMESIDE'S SCHEME

6.1 Given the short amount of time to have a scheme in place and the Management Information to DWP requirements by the DWP careful consideration has been given to what is put into place keeping any schemes as clear and simple as possible for both administration and spend.

6.2 The DWP have made it clear that the grant funding is not intended to replace the Free School Meals scheme during the holidays.

7.0 PROPOSED SCHEME

7.1 Local Authorities are taking various approaches across Greater Manchester and England in how they plan to support vulnerable households throughout the winter months.

7.2 In Tameside we have a wealth of data that identifies families who are on a low income and in receipt of Free School Meals, we also work with a number of partners and organisations which support families and individuals on low incomes.

7.3 We propose to allocate funding to the provision of food vouchers for major supermarkets to pay for food for key cohorts including, all children attending schools in Tameside who are eligible for Free School Meals, all college students eligible for Free School Meals or bursaries, all 2, 3 and 4 year olds entitled to free child care, all Care Leavers.

7.4 The amounts and costs of each of these proposals is set out in **Appendix 1**.

- 7.5 This approach allows us to deliver an enhanced offer that will reach a large number of families in a short time frame and provides targeted support in time for Christmas, and will allow us to easily report outcome requirements to the DWP.
- 7.6 Going forward the identified families will receive support for the 3 scheduled school holiday weeks to March 2021:
- Two weeks at Christmas (£20)
 - One week at February half term (£15)
- 7.7 It should be noted that not all LAs have been allocated sufficient funding to cover Free School Meals through the winter school holidays, this was raised with the DWP during the dial-in call as public expectation is high that funding is being provided to LAs for this purpose, however the DWP are clear that the funding allocation is not intended to replace the Free School Meals offer.
- 7.8 For the purposes of distribution of funding we are proposing to allocate on the basis of children attending Tameside schools. All other GM authorities agree this in principle (potentially with the exception of Wigan).

8.0 RISKS

- 8.1 A number of risks sit around the distribution of this grant, exacerbated by the timescales given to allocate the spend and the restrictions around categories of spend.
- That individuals could be eligible for more than one grant, if they meet the criteria in more than one cohort. It is felt that should this be the case, for example should a care leaver be attending college and eligible for Free School Meals at college it would be appropriate that they receive both payments reflecting the level of potential need.
 - That there may be individuals who do not fall into one of the identified cohorts but are in significant need. Should this be the case these individuals may be eligible for discretionary allocation either through identification by schools and the early help team or through welfare rights.
 - As an element of the scheme is discretionary there is a risk that demand in December may limit the pot in February, enough funding will be retained to pay vouchers to the Free School Meals, college and Care Leavers cohort in February, all other committed funding will require a separate decision in January.

9.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 As set out on the front of the report.

APPENDIX 1

Proposed Funding Allocation

| | | | Amount per individual | Number eligible | Total Cost | | |
|--|--|-----|-----------------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------|--|
| Free School Meal Vouchers for major participating supermarkets | School Aged Children attending Tameside Schools | Dec | £ | 40 | 9250 | £ 370,000 | |
| | | Feb | £ | 15 | 9250 | £ 138,750 | |
| | Under 5's eligible for free child care funding | Dec | £ | 40 | 3489 | £ 139,560 | |
| | | Feb | £ | 15 | 3489 | £ 52,335 | |
| | | | £ | 40 | | £ - | |
| | Sixth form students eligible for busaries/ FSM | Dec | £ | 40 | 355 | £ 14,200 | |
| | | Feb | £ | 15 | 355 | £ 5,325 | |
| | Tameside College students eligible for busaries/ FSM | Dec | £ | 40 | 1087 | £ 43,480 | |
| | | Feb | £ | 15 | 1087 | £ 16,305 | |
| | Care Leavers | Dec | £ | 40 | 275 | £ 11,000 | |
| | | Feb | £ | 15 | 275 | £ 4,125 | |
| Dec FSM | | | | | £ 427,680 | | |
| Feb FSM | | | | | £ 207,390 | | |
| Other | | | | | | | |
| Responsive food voucher provision | Welfare Rights Food Vouchers | Dec | £ | 30 | 1200 | £ 36,000 | |
| | | Feb | | | | £ - | |
| Funding for small/charitable organisations working in the community to provide food | Community organisations. Small grants provision | | £ | 10,000 | 6 | £ 60,000 | |
| Total Cost of Proposals | | | | Total | £ 891,080 | 894,615 | |

APPENDIX 2
GRANT DESCRIPTION AND CONDITIONS