

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting

Cabinet – 10 December 2020

Report Title

COVID Winter Grant

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?

Yes

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report

Sharon Kemp, Chief Executive

Report Author(s)

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Ward(s) Affected

Borough-Wide or Name of Ward
Name of Ward

Report Summary

As part of a range of interventions to support people impacted by the COVID emergency the Government has announced a £170 million COVID Winter Grant Scheme, administered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Rotherham has been granted £1,007,395.16.

The funding is for use from December 2020 to the end of March 2021. It is designed to meet immediate needs and help those who are struggling to afford food and utility bills (heating, cooking, lighting) and water for household purposes (including drinking, washing, cooking, central heating, sewerage and sanitary purposes), or other related essentials.

This report provides details of the grant and makes recommendations on its allocation and use.

Recommendations

1. That Cabinet agrees provisional allocations of the grant subject to final adjustments for the purposes of:
 - a) Holiday Programme & Food - £492,395.16
 - b) Struggling with utility costs / debt - £285,000
 - c) Christmas food - £30,000
 - d) Help with school uniforms - £200,000

List of Appendices Included

Equality Analysis - Appendix 1

Background Papers

COVID Winter Grant Scheme – Guidance for County Councils and Unitary Authorities (DWP)

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel

No

Council Approval Required

No

Exempt from the Press and Public

No

Insert report title here COVID Winter Grant

1.	Background
1.1	As part of a range of interventions to support people impacted by the COVID emergency the Government has announced a £170 million COVID Winter Grant Scheme, administered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).
1.2	The funding is for use from December 2020 to the end of March 2021. It is designed to meet immediate needs and help those who are struggling to afford food and utility bills (heating, cooking, lighting) and water for household purposes (including drinking, washing, cooking, central heating, sewerage and sanitary purposes), or other related essentials.
1.3	Part of the Government's aim is to give vulnerable households peace of mind in the run up to Christmas and over the Winter months during the pandemic by helping those who need it to have food on the table and other essentials, so every child will be warm and well-fed this winter.
1.4	Rotherham has been granted £1,007,395.16. The grant is paid under S. 31 of the Local Government Act 2003 (c. 26) as Local Welfare Provision (LWP) but is subject to conditions of use and reporting requirements to DWP.
1.5	The Council should develop a 'local eligibility framework and approach' to enable distribution of the grant funding in a way that best supports vulnerable families and individuals. This should be approved in time to commence of use of the grant in December.
1.6	This report sets out the councils proposed use of the grant in Rotherham including the provision of vouchers in lieu of free school meals (FSMs) for the Christmas / New Year and February half term holidays. It is expected that the holiday food vouchers will use up to 50% of the grant, leaving the remainder for use in the provision of other eligible support.
2.	Key Issues
2.1	The COVID Winter Grant has been provided for use in the current financial year to provide support to vulnerable households and families with children particularly affected by the pandemic throughout the winter period where alternative sources of assistance may be unavailable.
2.2	In Rotherham, its use will sit alongside other COVID related responses including tackling hardship, working across the Council and VCS partners. It will complement the support being provided through the Local Authority Emergency Assistance Grant for Food and Essential Supplies, additional Local Council Tax Support for families of working age, other Government funding to support vulnerable people and ongoing regular support to residents provided through Crisis Support and Advice Services service level agreements (SLAs) between the Council and VCS organisations.

	<p>If agreed, the recommendations in this paper will ensure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All eligible children in the borough will receive vouchers to the value of free school meals for the Christmas and February half term holidays • Additional support for the Rotherham Food in Crisis Partnership Christmas appeal, which is expected to provide food for 300 families requiring support this Christmas • Extending eligibility for support with the purchase of school uniforms to more families facing financial difficulties • £250,000 is committed to support households in financial need who are facing unexpected or unaffordable bills, to prevent them from falling into financial crisis, subject to engagement and support from the Council's Advocacy and Appeals service or partners.
2.3	<u>Grant conditions</u>
	The grant is being provided under S. 31 of the Local Government Act 2003 (c. 26) as Local Welfare Provision (LWP) but is subject to conditions of use and reporting requirements to DWP.
2.4	<p>The use of the grant is subject to establishing frameworks applying the following conditions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least 80% of the total funding will be ring-fenced to support households with children, with up to 20% of the total funding to other households experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, poverty during the pandemic. This may include households not currently in receipt of DWP welfare benefits. • At least 80% of the total funding will be 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. • It is important that Authorities develop overall policies appropriate for their areas, and proportionate procedures, for the allocation of the grant monies by reference to the above criteria.
2.5	Proposals have developed as extensions to existing provision where possible, avoiding set-up costs and time lag. They also align to crisis support provision and other hardship support as part of the response to the COVID

	emergency. The nature of the proposed support means that the bulk would go to families with children within the 80 / 20 provisions of the grant conditions along with eligible costs including food.
2.6	Most of the proposals work on the basis of indicative allocations at this stage as some detail will still need to be established, as set out below. This is particularly the case in relation to holiday programme & food provision and supporting families struggling with debt and utility costs. The holiday food costs will be known when the February half term uptake is known. Support for utility costs will be dependent on levels of demand and levels of support to be provided. To address these variables, active management of the grant will ensure review and final allocations being made in February 2021.
2.7	<u>Holiday Programme & Food (Inc Meals for Free School Meals pupils)</u>
2.8	This proposal builds on the support provided by the Council during the Autumn half term to provide vouchers to families where children receive free school meals during term time. The proposal provides vouchers to the value of £15 per week for each eligible child for the Christmas / New Year and February 2021 half term holidays.
2.9	It is proposed to adopt the process used for the October half term holiday and distribute funding for vouchers to schools and academies through staff in Contact Centre/Children and Young People Services, with a small number of proposed enhancements. These are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding to be passported to schools to purchase vouchers directly and this can be used at a variety of supermarkets and provide flexibility to schools to meet the needs of their cohorts. • Potentially distribute to Multi Academy Trusts (MAT) rather than individual schools in the MAT. • Providing funding for vouchers through schools in the earliest possible timescale offers the best route to making sure we get maximum coverage from the voucher scheme, any data idiosyncrasies can be reconciled in order that we provide support to all eligible families across the Christmas period. Schools can utilise embedded systems from previous voucher schemes providing access to the right type of supermarket vouchers which are accessible for their families.
2.10	£492,395.16 will be provisionally allocated for this element of the scheme, to be finalised upon out-turn figures that will only be available once final figures are known for the volume for February 2021 holidays can be determined.
2.11	<u>Struggling with utility costs / debt</u>
2.12	Utility costs and debt are a major factor for many families, especially through the Winter period. Existing debt management advice both within the Council through the Advocacy & Appeals Services (A & A) and in the VCS through Citizens Advice (CARD) have noted an increase in utility related debt and hardship problems since the beginning of the COVID emergency. The grant could be used to pay off debt and make contributions to utility costs over the

	<p>winter period. Access to the support would be part of a proper debt support package, provided to people accessing normal debt advice provision through A & A or CARD. Access to for the Community to debt and other financial hardship support provided by A & A is facilitated through the Rotherham Community Hub. Details for access to the HUB, in turn is published including on the Council's website. In each case, the debt advisor would refer into additional utility debt support and advice hosted by A & A. Support would then be provided by direct payment by the Council into the residents' utility account. This would help for people with arrears as well as those struggling to pay through pre-payment token meters with the risk of gas and electricity supplies being cut off. It is not proposed to make any allocation in relation to water bills as there are existing arrangements with Yorkshire Water to help vulnerable families / people with water utility debt. Assistance with purchase of necessary white goods, such as fridges, is already funded through the Local Authority Emergency Assistance Grant for Food and Essential Supplies, but should it be required it will be possible to top this up through the COVID Winter Grant at the discretion of officers.</p>
2.13	<p>The proposal will be taken forward using caseload information from A & A over September and October of this year, and then allowing for similar levels from CARD. It is recommended that a provisional allocation of £250,000 would address utility debt and poverty in the coming Winter and contribute to an overall improvement in well-being.</p>
2.14	<p>The final figure will be dependent on establishing a number of factors including caseload together with maximum levels of support to each family awarded. The grant will need to be managed on a first come, first served basis due to the grant being finite and time limited.</p>
2.15	<p>This support is also dependant on being able to make secure payments to utility providers to assist with families' utility payments</p>
2.16	<p>Whilst final detail is to be established, proposed operation and eligibility criteria would be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support to families will only be provided as part of a debt support / advice package being provided by A & A or CARD. • There would be no direct applications for utility support. • Utility support will provide for payments against utility arrears or a contribution to utility bills where the family is struggling to pay because of multiple debt. • There will be a maximum level of utility support available to eligible families that will be determined as part of the final scheme details. • Support will be available up to the end of March 2021.
2.17	<p>There would be the need to deploy additional staff into A & A until March 2021. This would be specifically to work on the utility debt and poverty as general debt advice is not eligible for the use of this grant. It is estimated that two members of staff would be required for this period at a cost of circa £35,000. Staff secondment may be the most appropriate means of filling these temporary posts. This would make a total allocation for "Struggling with</p>

	utility costs / debt” of £285,000.
2.18	<u>Christmas food</u>
2.19	For a number of families, struggling through the impacts of the COVID pandemic, means that having what might be regarded as a normal Christmas is going to be difficult for many vulnerable and low-income families.
2.20	Each year, the Rotherham Food in Crisis Partnership runs a Christmas appeal supported by Voluntary Action Rotherham (VAR), working with VCS foodbanks. This year, VAR are looking for cash donations because usual means of collecting support is limited by COVID restrictions. It is proposed that £30,000 is allocated from the Winter Grant to part support the programme of Christmas food for vulnerable families this year. Other contributions are being sought from the likes of the Chamber of Commerce and individuals. This would include purchasing of food and additional organisational staffing aligned to the broader Food for People in Crisis/Crisis Support Services work but with specified activity relating to the Christmas holiday period. The work would engage with partners including FareShare, overall levering additional resources to the allocation from the grant. Arrangements can be entered into quickly to ensure that the provision is in place in time for Christmas by using a supplementary schedule to the existing SLA for Crisis Provision. This is the same process used for allocation of the DEFRA Local Authority Emergency Assistance Grant for Food and Essential Supplies.
2.21	The use of the grant is on the basis of support to circa 300 families provided by fifteen participating VCS organisations. The grant would be used to purchase, parcel up and distribute food alongside provision supported through charitable donations.
2.22	The provision of funding to VCS organisations for Christmas food will be through agreement with Voluntary Action Rotherham. This will be through a supplementary schedule to the existing Crisis Support service level agreement. All conditions of the SLA will apply to the supplementary schedule in accordance with Council policy.
2.23	<u>Help with school uniforms</u>
2.24	<p>Help with school uniforms is provided by Children and Young People’s Services using Local Authority Emergency Assistance Grant for Food and Essential Supplies. This has included arrangements with local suppliers to provide the uniforms to families.</p> <p>The eligibility criteria used has been based on three targeted groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children in transition to year 7 in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM). • Children in transition to Reception eligible for Pupil Premium. • Children of asylum-seeking families. <p>There is some discretion for officers to include children within the wider</p>

	<p>families.</p> <p>There are two local suppliers, Pinders and Jonny D's, who have both been engaged as suppliers through procurement.</p> <p>There has been no application process as eligible families have been identified through the Council's database. Eligible families have been written to with details about how to access the uniforms and from which provider, with a voucher to present. There is no payment of cash and vouchers can only be redeemed at the named provider.</p>
2.25	Support has been provided at £25 each for reception children and £35 each for year seven pupils.
2.26	<p>It is proposed that school uniform support is extended to pupils of all ages who qualify either for Free School Meals or Pupil Premium using the Winter Grant. This is based on the same eligibility criteria and using the same processes as for the Local Authority Emergency Assistance Grant for Food and Essential Supplies. This will have the benefit of using a tried and tested approach that can be implemented quickly and give clothing support to families. The Council will write to eligible families to make them aware that this support is available.</p> <p>It is also proposed that the Advocacy and Appeals service is able to make the same vouchers towards school uniforms available to other families on a discretionary basis based on similar criteria as support towards utility bills as set out at 2.16 above.</p>
2.27	An initial estimate, using the same costs criteria suggests that circa £200,000 would be required for this.
3.	Options considered and recommended proposal
3.1	<p>The recommendations have been produced on assessed options to meet the Winter Grant criteria that can be mobilised quickly without the need for significant additional administration. The options recommended for allocations are:</p> <p>Holiday Programme & Food. Struggling with utility costs / debt. Christmas food. Help with school uniforms.</p>
3.2	The recommended options align to other key provision around crisis support and COVID response services.
4.	Consultation on proposal
4.1	Officers in relevant Council services along with VCS partners have been engaged in producing the recommended options

5.	Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision														
5.1	The supplementary schedule to the Crisis Support SLA will be completed to be ready for the Christmas food support. Arrangements will also be in place to provide vouchers for holiday food for the Christmas / New Year school holidays														
5.2	Support for utility costs will commence as soon as all details of the scheme have been completed and staff are available to implement.														
5.3	School uniform support is already operational. Arrangements will be put in place to extend.														
6.	Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications (to be written by the relevant Head of Finance and the Head of Procurement on behalf of s151 Officer)														
6.1	<p>The Grant of 1,007,395.16 has been provided by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for specific purposes as set out in the grant conditions. The proposed spend is in accordance with the conditions. An overview of projected spend if all options are taken forward is set out in the table:</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Proposal</th> <th>£</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Utility costs / Debt</td> <td>285,000.00</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Christmas food</td> <td>30,000.00</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Help with school uniforms</td> <td>200,000.00</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Holiday vouchers</td> <td>492,395.16</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Total</td> <td>1,007,395.16</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Covid Winter Grant</td> <td>1,007,395.16</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Proposal	£	Utility costs / Debt	285,000.00	Christmas food	30,000.00	Help with school uniforms	200,000.00	Holiday vouchers	492,395.16	Total	1,007,395.16	Covid Winter Grant	1,007,395.16
Proposal	£														
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Total	1,007,395.16														
Covid Winter Grant	1,007,395.16														
6.2	Allocations will be reviewed as part of management of the grant with final allocations being determined once the final cost of holiday food vouchers is confirmed. and demand against other allocations. This will ensure that the grant is fully spent, though, each scheme will need to be monitored closely to ensure expenditure is maintained within budget.														
6.3	Procurement of suppliers of school uniforms has been conducted in accordance with the Council's Finance and Procurement Rules.														
7.	Legal Advice and Implications (to be written by Legal Officer on behalf of Assistant Director Legal Services)														
7.1	The use of the Winter Grant can be treated as "Local Welfare Provision" (LWP). The Council can support LWP under the "Local authority's general power of competence", as set out in S.1 of the Localism Act 2011 (c. 20).														
7.2	The grant is provided pursuant to section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003. This section states that grants can be provided subject to conditions.														

	The conditions of the grant are set out at paragraph 2.4. One of the Conditions of the grant is that the authority develop policies appropriate to the area and procedures for allocation of the grant monies and this report sets out how that condition is complied with. Further the other proposed allocations are in accordance with the grant conditions as set out at paragraph 2.4
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8.	Human Resources Advice and Implications
8.1	There are no Human Resources implications associated with this report.
9.	Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults
9.1	At least 80% of the use of the Winter Grant must be ring-fenced to support households with children. The proposed uses of the grant will achieve that.
10.	Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications
10.1	The objectives of the use of the grant and targeting towards vulnerable families with children will contribute to addressing economic and social inequalities. It will have a positive equalities impact.
11.	Implications for Ward Priorities
11.1	The proposals are not Ward specific but will have a beneficial impact for the Council's policies seeking "Thriving Neighbourhoods".
12.	Implications for Partners
12.1	Partner VCS organisations are actively engaged in providing Christmas food. VCS advice services will also be engaged in referring people receiving debt support and advice for support with utility costs.
13.	Risks and Mitigation
13.1.	Risk is primarily centred around achieving, whilst not exceeding spend of the grant.
13.2	The proposals for a framework of support allows for provisional allocations that can be monitored and reviewed as part of an active management of the grant mitigate the risk. This approach allows for early implementation of the proposals once detailed management arrangements have been set up. The framework also allows for "up to" allocations to be provided in the first instance. These can be revisited when the final costs of school holiday time vouchers are known in February, and final allocations of the grant firmed up to ensure full spend of the grant by the end of March 2021.
13.3	The Council is required to guard against fraud. This will be achieved through the processes to access the support, including using existing data and not having open application processes. Cash will not be provided with direct

	payment to suppliers used where possible and vouchers for holiday food.
14.	Accountable Officers
	Jackie Mould, Head of Policy Performance & Improvement Chief Executive's Jackie.mould@rotherham.gov.uk
	Steve Eling Policy and Equalities Manager Chief Executive's Steve.eling@rotherham.gov.uk

Approvals obtained on behalf of Statutory Officers:-

	Named Officer	Date
Chief Executive	Sharon Kemp	Click here to enter a date.
Strategic Director of Finance & Customer Services (S.151 Officer)	Judith Badger	30/11/20
Head of Legal Services (Monitoring Officer)	Bal Nahal	30/11/20

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