

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting

Cabinet – 22 March 2021

Report Title

Update on the Council's response to COVID-19

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

Yes

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report

Jo Brown, Assistant Chief Executive

Report Author(s)

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Ward(s) Affected

Borough-Wide

Report Summary

This report provides an update on how the Council is currently responding to the COVID-19 global pandemic and seeks approval for the allocation of an additional £350,218 allocation of COVID Winter Grant in accordance with the priorities agreed by Cabinet in December 2020.

Recommendations

1. That Cabinet agrees provisional allocations of the grant subject to final adjustments for the purposes of:
 - a) School holiday food vouchers and support for uniforms - £315,000
 - b) Struggling with utility costs / debt - £35,218
2. That final allocations be apportioned across the approved uses when the final costs of food vouchers and support for uniforms is known.

3. That Cabinet note the ongoing impacts of COVID-19, including local outbreaks.
4. That Cabinet note the arrangements in place to respond to COVID-19.

List of Appendices Included

- Appendix 1 COVID-19 timeline of key announcements
- Appendix 2 Initial Equality Screening Assessment Form – Council’s response to COVID-19
- Appendix 3 Initial Equality Screening Assessment Form – COVID-19 Winter Grant

Background Papers

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel
No

Council Approval Required
No

Exempt from the Press and Public
No

Update on the Council's response to COVID-19

1. Background

- 1.1 The Council continues to work at a national, regional and local level to respond to the COVID-19 emergency and to ensure that critical services are delivered, and the most vulnerable residents supported. This includes providing practical and financial support for residents in insecure employment and who need to self-isolate. The Council's primary aims are to work with partners across the health system, the VCS and the business community to reduce the spread of infection in the borough and to support the roll out of the vaccination programme.
- 1.2 Following the identification and rapid spread of a new strain of coronavirus in the UK in December, a third national lockdown was announced on 4th January 2021. This included comparable restrictions to the first lockdown period last March, including a stay at home order, the shielding of CEV residents and the closure of schools, colleges, hospitality venues, leisure centres and outdoor sports venues.
- 1.3 On 22nd February, the Government set out a four-step roadmap to ease restrictions across England. Before proceeding to the next step, the Government will assess the position against four tests:
- The vaccine deployment programme continues successfully
 - Evidence shows vaccines are sufficiently effective in reducing hospitalisations and deaths in those vaccinated
 - Infection rates do not risk a surge in hospitalisations which would put unsustainable pressure on the NHS
 - The assessment of the risks is not fundamentally changed by new variants of concern.

There will be a minimum of five weeks between each step: four weeks for the data to reflect changes in restrictions; followed by seven days' notice of the restrictions to be eased.

- 1.4 Further detail on each step is outlined below and an overview of the key announcements throughout the pandemic and the Council's response is outlined within Appendix 1.
- 1.5 **Step One: 8th March**
- 1.6 From this date, all children and students will return to face to face education in schools and college. Additionally, wraparound childcare and other supervised children's activities can resume where they enable parents to work, seek work, attend education, seek medical care or attend a support group. Some university students on practical courses will be able to return to face to face learning.
- 1.7 The Stay at Home requirement will remain, but people can leave home for

recreation outdoors such as a coffee or a picnic with their household or support bubble, or with one person outside their household.

Step One: 29th March

- 1.8 As part of step one, there will be further limited changes from 29th March, the week in which most schools will break up for Easter. Outdoor gatherings of either 6 people or 2 households will be allowed, providing greater flexibility for families to see each other. This includes in private gardens.
- 1.9 Outdoor sports facilities, such as tennis and basketball courts, will be allowed to reopen, and people can take part in formally organised outdoor sports.
- 1.10 At this point, the Stay at Home order will end, although many lockdown restrictions will remain. For example, those who can work from home should continue to do so, and overseas travel will remain banned, aside for a small number of reasons.

1.11 Step Two: no earlier than 12th April

- 1.12 This step will see the opening of non-essential retail; personal care premises such as hairdressers and nail salons; and public buildings, including libraries and community centres. Indoor leisure facilities such as gyms will also reopen (but only for use by people on their own or in household groups); as will most outdoor attractions and settings including outdoor hospitality venues, zoos, theme parks, and drive-in cinemas. Self-contained accommodation such as campsites and holiday lets, where indoor facilities are not shared with other households, can also reopen.
- 1.13 Hospitality venues will be allowed to serve people outdoors at step two and there will be no need for customers to order a substantial meal with alcoholic drinks and no curfew, although customers must order, eat and drink while seated ('table service'). Wider social contact rules will apply in all these settings to prevent indoor mixing between different households.
- 1.14 The number of people able to attend weddings, receptions and commemorative events such as wakes will rise to 15.

1.15 Step Three: no earlier than 17th May

- 1.16 Most legal restrictions on meeting others outdoors will be lifted – although gatherings of over 30 people will remain illegal. Indoors, the rule of 6 or 2 households will apply. Advice on social distancing between friends and family, including hugging, will be updated by this stage.
- 1.17 Most businesses in all but the highest risk sectors will be able to reopen. In all sectors, COVID-Secure guidance will remain in place and businesses may not cater for groups bigger than the legal limits. Indoor hospitality will reopen - and as in step two, venues will not have to serve a substantial meal with alcoholic drinks; nor will there be a curfew. Customers will, however, have to order, eat and drink while seated.

- 1.18 Some larger performances and sporting events will be permitted, with capacity restrictions in place.
- 1.19 **Step Four: no earlier than 21st June**
- 1.20 By this step, the Government hopes to be able to remove all legal limits on social contact. This should include reopening remaining premises, such as nightclubs, and easing the restrictions on event capacity outlined in step 3.
- 1.21 The Council has responded in line with daily Government announcements and guidance. This report provides an overview of how the Council is responding to the crisis and the critical issues being addressed. This report also includes proposals relating to the allocation of an additional £350,218 allocation of COVID Winter Grant in accordance with the priorities agreed by Cabinet in December 2020.

2. Key Issues

2.1 COVID Winter Grant extension

- 2.2 At its meeting on 10th December 2020, Cabinet received a report detailing that Rotherham had been awarded grant assistance of £1,007,395.16. from the Department for Work and Pensions COVID Winter grant scheme.
- 2.3 The grant funding was designed to meet immediate needs and help those who were 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. There was a focus on families with children, which had to benefit from at least 80% of the value of the grant. The funding was required to be spent by 31st March 2021.
- 2.4 As part of the Government's COVID roadmap, announced on 22nd February 2021, the COVID Winter Grant Scheme has been extended to the 16th April, providing an additional £59.1 million across England of extra targeted financial support for those in need during the pandemic. The funding is provided under the same grant conditions as the original allocation.
- 2.5 Rotherham has been allocated an additional £350,218.
- 2.6 The decision of Cabinet in December 2020 approved the priorities for assistance and provisional allocations of the grant subject to final adjustments for the purposes of:
- Holiday Programme and Food – food vouchers for children in receipt of free school meals - £492,395.16
 - Struggling with utility costs/debt - £285,000
 - Christmas food - £30,000
 - Help with school uniforms - £200,000

- 2.7 In order to ensure that the additional grant is spent within the permitted timeframe and the benefits realised by Rotherham families, proposals have been developed to allocate the grant in accordance with the priorities previously agreed by Cabinet through extending and enhancing the established provision.
- 2.8 This involves further provision allocations of:
- £315,000 to provide food vouchers for the Easter school holidays, and support for school uniforms, to children eligible for free school meals. The food vouchers are to the value of £15 per week for each eligible child. Support for school uniforms is £20 per eligible child.
 - £35,218 to increase the funding available to support families struggling with utility costs / debt.
- 2.9 Management of final allocations will continue to balance across the approved uses to ensure full spend of the COVID winter grant once the final costs of food vouchers and support for uniforms is known.
- 2.10 **Updates on the Council's ongoing response to COVID-19 pandemic**
- 2.11 The remaining sections of this report provide an update on the Council's ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 2.12 The Rotherham 7-day infection rate (all ages) was 183.1 per 100,000 (for 7 days to 20 Feb) compared with the England rate of 118.3 per 100,000. It is principally the working age population that is driving the higher infection rate compared with the national average. This may be connected to factors relating to deprivation and the type of employment in Rotherham (i.e. there is a larger proportion of people who are not able to work from home.)
- 2.13 Work is taking place to target households within parts of the borough where deprivation and infection rates are higher. There will be four weeks of action to reduce case rates in Town Centre wards, including Rotherham West, Rotherham East, Boston Castle and Valley. This will include focussed communication and engagement, the promotion of community testing and vaccinations, targeted contact tracing and increased enforcement activity.
- 2.14 Delivery against all aspects of the Local Outbreak Control Plan continues, with more detail outlined below.
- 2.15 **Vaccination programme**
- 2.16 The vaccination programme has provided access to the vaccine to priority groups. In Rotherham, the target to vaccinate 56,000 people during the initial 8-week period was exceeded, with over 60,000 vaccinated and over 90% coverage of the first four priority groups. As at 26th February, approximately 75,000 vaccinations have been carried out. Second dose vaccinations are scheduled to begin from 9th March. Work is ongoing to target JCVI priority

group 6 and the Council is working with the CCG to identify unpaid carers and people with a learning disability to ensure full coverage.

2.17 Activity is now underway to ask those who are over 70, Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) or have previously received a shielding letter, and have not yet been offered the vaccine, to contact Roccg.vaccinebooking@nhs.net to arrange an appointment.

2.18 **Testing**

2.19 The Forge Island testing site was closed on 19th January as a precaution against flooding. A new PCR local testing site at Herringthorpe Stadium opened on 10th February to replace the Forge Island site. Additional testing sites at Midland Road old bus depot, Dinnington and Maltby continue to operate. All testing site facilities have been winter-proofed and have been included in gritting routes to ensure accessibility.

2.20 Riverside House Café was selected as the location for the roll out of the Community Testing programme using lateral flow tests (LFTs) – a new rapid testing programme for asymptomatic frontline workers. This programme commenced on 4th January. This site has now carried out over 2,500 lateral flow tests (as of 14th February.) Opening hours have been extended on a Monday and Thursday to help more people with access to tests at the centre, which led to a daily record of 134 tests being completed on Thursday 11th February.

2.21 Work continues to develop our offer with regards to satellite asymptomatic testing sites, working with a number of different settings to offer them workplace-based testing, including early years settings, transport, small manufacturing businesses as well as public services.

2.22 **Contact tracing**

2.23 The local contact tracing service has been able to successfully contact 50% of the people that come through from the national track and trace system as outstanding. This rate is proving very difficult to increase, due to poor data, duplication, and cases being too old. Work is ongoing to understand the demographic of the individuals that are not engaging with the service.

2.24 An escalation procedure is now in place to ensure that individuals are isolating if they have been uncontactable through national and local contact tracing. As at 17th February, 100% of cases have been successfully contacted through door knocking.

2.25 **Education**

2.26 Virtual sessions were held for early years leaders/school leaders on 27th January to share localised COVID-19 data to inform school risk assessments. This was supported by Rotherham Council Public Health and Public Health England and was attended by approximately 130 school and early years education leaders.

- 2.27 Further sessions for school/early years leaders are arranged for March 3rd to provide a supportive forum whilst preparing for the wider opening of schools on March 8th when all students will return to education. Key updates and revisions to statutory guidance have been provided to schools. Further support across education services will be provided to support schools and early years settings ahead of reopening.
- 2.28 The Council is working with charity Laptops for Kids to help ensure that all children and young people have access to digital devices, enabling them to access the full remote learning offer.
- 2.29 Funding has been provided by the DfE, and local business AESSEAL recently donated £400,000 to Laptops for Kids to fund devices and connectivity in Rotherham. This has supported 1,412 laptops to be allocated to schools. A further 500 laptops will be purchased for Rotherham children and young people as part of a bulk purchase with other South Yorkshire local authorities. This will meet the remaining identified gap in IT access.
- 2.30 **Welfare and support**
- 2.31 During national lockdown, schools have been expected to provide meal options to eligible pupils. Following updates to guidance on 13th January, the DfE recommended the use of the national voucher scheme as an alternative to food parcels/hampers.
- 2.32 Several schools have supported their communities outside of free school meal eligibility, including food donations and wider charitable work. One example of this would be the food bank set up at Ferham Primary School, which has supported approximately 30 families (100 children) to receive weekly food hampers on top of their free school meals offer.
- 2.33 **Rotherham Community Hub**
- 2.34 Since the national lockdown began in January, the community hub has received between 70-80 support requests per week, with these numbers remaining stable. Although approximately 50% of the requests are for practical support such as help with food shopping or prescription collections, there has been an increase in the number of requests relating to financial hardship.
- 2.35 95% of support requests are picked up on the same day, with residents receiving communication from the Rotherham Community Hub team. The other 5% are out of hours referrals which are picked up on the next working day.
- 2.36 The Government has announced a new cohort of 'CEV+' residents. This equates to an additional 6,669 residents who have been included on the Shielded Persons List, contributing to a total of 18,128 residents who have been identified as being Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (approximately 7% of the local population.) All residents within this cohort are being contacted via

letter and/or text to make them aware of support available. 37.8% of this cohort are already known to other Council services, who will make contact, and the remaining residents will be contacted directly by the Rotherham Community Hub.

2.37 Response to outbreaks

2.38 Outbreaks have reduced in care homes for older people to circa eight “live” and ongoing, as of 17th February. Officers have facilitated the distribution of a range of government grants for the social care sector including the Infection Control Grant (Round 2), the Rapid Testing Fund (£741k) and Workforce Capacity Fund (£672k). These grants aim to support care homes and other social care settings to alleviate financial pressures associated with outbreak control measures.

2.39 Engagement work continues to take place within high-risk places, including targeted work in town centre neighbourhoods, BAME communities and amongst the working age population. This includes regular liaison with local community organisations.

2.40 The Council has developed a plan to respond to any request from government to conduct surge testing at scale, should any new variants of concern (such as the South African and Brazilian variants) be detected in the borough. This approach of extensive door-knocking and the offer of PCR testing kits for all residents in impacted areas is known as Operation Eagle.

2.41 Support to businesses

2.42 Support to local businesses affected by the pandemic continues. During the first national lockdown, 3,946 businesses were supported with grants through the Small Business Rates Grant Fund (SBRGF) and Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grant Fund (RHLCGF), with a total grant value of £44.6m. Through the Councils discretionary grant allocation, a further £2.5m of business grants were provided to an additional 274 businesses.

2.43 Under the new Local Restrictions Support Grant (LRSG) schemes, over 1,500 businesses have received further support so far, with a total value of £17.8m. Further support has also been provided via Sheffield City Region, through the Additional Restrictions Grant, with over 1,300 businesses supported with a total grant value of £4.6m. These grants provide support to businesses not registered for business rates so cannot access LRSG, businesses in the supply chain of those forced to close, licensed taxis and a discretionary scheme for small businesses. In total, £69.5m of business support grants have been delivered by the Council to over 5,000 businesses (not many businesses have been able to access support through multiple schemes).

3. Options considered and recommended proposal

3.1 Options considered have focussed on achieving of use of the grant within the

restricted timescale available. The only options available are to extend provision approved by Cabinet in December 2020.

3.2 The recommendations are:

1. That Cabinet agrees provisional allocations of the grant subject to final adjustments for the purposes of:
 - a) School holiday food vouchers and support for uniforms - £315,000
 - b) Struggling with utility costs / debt - £35,218
2. That final allocations be apportioned across the approved uses when the final costs of food vouchers and support for uniforms is known.
3. That Cabinet note the ongoing impacts of COVID-19, including local outbreaks.
4. That Cabinet note the arrangements in place to respond to COVID-19.

4. **Consultation on proposal**

- 4.1 Officers in relevant Council services along with VCS partners were engaged in producing the recommended options for the COVID Winter grant allocation.

5. **Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision**

- 5.1 Not applicable. This report is for information and no decision is required.

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 As indicated in the latest financial monitoring report for 2020/21 to 15th February Cabinet, the Council's current net forecast position is an underspend of £0.5m, after taking account of the emergency COVID-19 funding provided to date by Government. Further funding will be provided as continued compensation for lost income from sales and fees and charges due to the impact of COVID-19, the Council has to date submitted claims for lost income up until November 2020, with a final claim for the remainder of the year due in April 2021.
- 6.2 The financial impact of COVID-19 will need to be monitored as part of the Council's financial management arrangements and considered in the context of the Council's overall financial position. However, the Council aims to deliver a balance outturn position for 2020/21.
- 6.3 The report seeks approval for the allocation of an additional £350,218 allocation of COVID Winter Grant in accordance with the priorities agreed by Cabinet in December 2020. The proposed expenditure for the additional resource is in line with the grant conditions, although the project plan will

need to be implanted at pace to ensure full grant expenditure can be completed by the revised grant end date, 16th April 2021.

- 6.4 There are no direct procurement implications associated with this report. Procurement continue to offer support and guidance to directorates in their response to COVID-19, ensuring compliance with the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 (as amended) and the Council's own financial and procurement procedure rules.

7. Legal Advice and Implications (to be written by Legal Officer on behalf of Assistant Director Legal Services)

- 7.1 The Council's response to the COVID-19 emergency, as set out above, has been in accordance with Government guidance and relevant legislation, in particular the Coronavirus Act 2020 and the various health protection regulations introduced from the start of the pandemic. Legal services are consulted on the legal implications of any decisions made during the response by the Tactical and Gold groups and these implications are considered as part of the decision-making processes. Legal Services have supported and advised the individual Directorates and associated workstreams at each stage of the pandemic and continue to do so.

8. Human Resources Advice and Implications

- 8.1 Workforce information regarding staff absences, including those self-isolating and unable to work from home, continues to be monitored on a weekly basis to identify capacity issues. Additional tailored interventions from HR have been put in place to support recruitment activity where services have been impacted (e.g. Facilities Services). Staff resilience remains a key issue and has been monitored through the second health and wellbeing pulse survey (which closed on 18th December). Informed by these survey findings, a range of interactive health and wellbeing activities will be delivered to further support staff, including a review of provision specifically for frontline workers.

9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

- 9.1 At least 80% of the use of the COVID Winter Grant must be used to support households with children. The proposed uses of the grant will achieve that.
- 9.2 All children and families and vulnerable people are affected by the COVID-19 crisis. No services were stood down by either Children and Young People's Services or Adult Social Care during the national lockdown, and support continues to be provided to children and vulnerable adults. Further support is also available through the Rotherham Community Hub, including support for vulnerable people identified on the CEV list.

10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

- 10.1 COVID-19 impacts on the whole population, with BAME communities, those who are older, disabled people and those with pre-existing health conditions

particularly at risk. The report sets out the Council's approach to delivering critical services for the vulnerable, including those with protected characteristics.

- 10.2 The use of COVID Winter Grant was subject to equities screening when it was considered by Cabinet in December 2020. The proposed use of the additional grant allocation in accordance with the priorities previously agreed means that the original equalities screening is still relevant.

11. **Implications for Ward Priorities**

- 11.1 The COVID-19 emergency affects all residents across the borough. Ward members are working with residents to ensure that people receive the help they need.

12. **Implications for Partners**

- 12.1 The Council is working closely with partners across the public, private and voluntary and community sector on the response to COVID-19.

13. **Risks and Mitigation**

- 13.1. There are significant and serious risks associated with the COVID-19 crisis. Individual COVID-19 workstreams have undertaken risk assessments, including mitigating actions to be taken. The risks are reviewed regularly by workstream leads, as well as Gold and Tactical.
- 13.2 The management of the COVID Winter Grant in accordance with the priorities previously agreed, including provisional allocations and management across approved uses, will mitigate any potential risk in the delivery of the grant and its outcomes.

14. **Accountable Officers**

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Approvals obtained on behalf of Statutory Officers:-

	Named Officer	Date
Chief Executive	Sharon Kemp	08/03/21
Strategic Director of Finance & Customer Services (S.151 Officer)	Judith Badger	04/03/21
Head of Legal Services (Monitoring Officer)	Bal Nahal	05/03/21

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