

To: **Executive Member for Council Strategy and Community Cohesion**
7 December 2020

COVID Winter Grant – Bracknell Forest Eligibility Framework and Approach
Assistant Director for Chief Executive’s Office

1 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To propose an eligibility framework and approach for delivering the Government’s COVID Winter Grant Scheme. It establishes the routes for awarding funding and the eligibility criteria.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 **To approve the proposed local arrangements for distribution of the Winter Grant Scheme set out in this report, to commence after the decision, from the 7 December 2020.**
- 2.2 **To delegate further changes to the eligibility criteria and changes to the spending of the funding between the different categories to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader of the Council.**

3 Reasons for Recommendations

- 3.1 The government has announced a specific support package 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. Local authorities have been allocated a fund, based on population size and deprivation, to distribute to families in financial hardship. Bracknell Forest Council has been allocated £221,214.27.
- 3.2 Local authorities are responsible and have been given significant discretion for setting up the support and determining eligibility. The main restrictions are that at least 80% of the fund must be distributed to families with children, and at least 80% must be provided for food costs and essential heating and utility bills. Any funding not spent by the 31st March 2021 must be returned to the Department for Work and Pensions. Local authorities are required to launch their schemes on 1st December or as soon as possible after that date.

4 Alternative Options Considered

- 4.1 No alternative options considered as local authorities are expected to disburse this funding following Government guidance.

5 Supporting Information

- 5.1 There are three main routes through which the Winter Grant Scheme will be allocated. The scheme will be available from 8 December 2020 to 31 March 2021. Funding will be allocated and provided as per table 1 below. Funding must be awarded by 31 March 2021 and therefore applications will close on Wednesday 24 March at 11.59pm.

- 5.2 There may be variation between these estimates and the needs arising, therefore it is recommended that the Chief Executive is delegated responsibility for adjusting the specific spending for each category as required, in consultation with the Leader of the Council and relevant Executive Members.

Route		Funding Estimate
1	Supermarket vouchers or food parcels for children eligible for free school meals (or equivalent for under 5s) during the Christmas holiday and February half term holiday through their schools, early years providers or health visiting teams	£144,000
2	Utility bill support and help with other essential needs for households through extending the Housing and Welfare team crisis fund	£41,000 ¹
3	Food support during term time through foodbanks and supermarket vouchers as required, in addition to existing foodbank support	£20,000 ²
Administration costs		
	Programme administration, reviewing applications and coordinating payments (short term, 16 weeks full time post)	£14,000
	Communications materials	£2,000
Total		£221,000

Table 1. Routes for seeking support through Winter Grant Scheme

- 5.3 For route one, parents of FSM eligible pupils attending a Bracknell Forest school will be issued a voucher from the school to be redeemed at a supermarket of the parent's choice for the value of £20 per child, per week. This will be provided for the two weeks over the Christmas period and one week over the February half term. Some schools have opted instead to provide direct food parcels, or similar arrangement, therefore equivalent funding will be issued directly to the school to arrange this provision. Families with children under five will also be identified through early years providers and health visiting services and issued the vouchers for these holidays. Under-fives eligibility will be determined primarily through the early years pupil premium and those eligible for 2 year old funding as well as through Health Visitors.
- 5.4 For route two, eligible residents will receive a standard contribution of £49 towards utility bills. This will be paid directly towards the costs of each of their gas and/or electricity bills. For residents with meter key cards, this will be provided through a PayPoint top up and for residents with regular billing, a direct transfer will be made to their utility company. These will be issued through the Welfare and Housing team and can be awarded multiple times to the same family, if repeat applications are made and considered appropriate.
- 5.5 Residents may also require wider support beyond the standardised financial support described above. Provision of clothing, blankets, white goods etc. are also within the remit of this grant, although it is not the primary focus. Therefore, this support will also be provided through route two, through Welfare and Housing and following

¹ It is unknown what the uptake of this scheme will be as there will be proactive communications to promote it. Estimate is based on 840 payments of £49. (This represents a 15-20% uptake from those receiving council tax reduction support)

² There are similar unknowns for how much additional demand would be generated by the proactive communications. The estimate represents approximately 1300 food parcels/vouchers.

further assessment of the application. This support may be provided through issue of items directly, ordering items through suppliers or bank transfers.

- 5.6 For route three, eligible residents will be offered a food parcel from the Crowthorne or Kerith foodbank. Multiple referrals can be made for the same family. Additional funding will be provided to both foodbanks to purchase additional food for the winter. Where a food parcel is not suitable there is the opportunity for a family to receive a supermarket voucher similar to route one, but this would be issued through the Welfare and Housing team.

Winter Grant Scheme support eligibility

- 5.7 The government guidance states that authorities have the flexibility within the scheme to identify which vulnerable households are in most need of support and should apply their own discretion when identifying eligibility. Authorities can request applications for support or can proactively identify households who may benefit, or can take a mixture of the two approaches. There is no requirement for Authorities to undertake a means test or conduct a benefit check unless this specifically forms part of the Authority's local eligibility criteria.

- 5.8 Working with services across the organisation, eligibility criteria has been developed, based on the following principles given within the scheme guidance:

- a) Funding should 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.
- b) 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.
- c) Households receiving other forms of assistance are not excluded from receiving support through this grant.

- 5.9 For the purposes of this grant the definition of a child is any person:

- d) who will be under the age of 19 as at 31 March 2021; OR
- e) a person aged 19 or over in respect of whom a child-related benefit (for example, Child Benefit) is paid or free school meals are provided; OR
- f) 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.

5.10 Eligibility for holiday food support

A family will be eligible for food support during the holidays if:

- Their child attends a school in Bracknell Forest, AND
 - Is eligible for Free School Meals during term time, OR
 - Receives the financial pupil premium

OR

- Is a resident of Bracknell Forest, AND
 - Is in receipt of age 3 or 4 pupil premium
 - Is in receipt of two-year-old childcare funding
 - Has been identified as in financial hardship through targeted health visitor support

- 5.11 Schools and Early Years providers will also be allocated a small discretionary fund to purchase holiday meal vouchers for families in exceptional circumstances of financial hardship that do not qualify for the above.
- 5.12 Eligibility for utility payments and wider food support
Households may be eligible for support with food and bills over the winter if they are experiencing financial hardship and:
- The applicant is aged 16 or over, AND
 - The applicant is liable to pay rent, bills, a mortgage or Council Tax in Bracknell Forest at the point of application, **AND MEETS ONE OF THE FOLLOWING:**
 - Made redundant since 23 March 2020 and remain unemployed
 - Self-employed and are waiting, or not eligible for Self Employed COVID Financial support
 - In receipt of Income Related Employment or Support Allowance, Universal Credit, Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance Income based
 - Be on a low income defined as below "16 hours at National Living Wage for someone age 25 and over (£139 per week)"
 - Is unable to meet essential needs, which presents a risk to physical or mental wellbeing
 - Been referred by a Foodbank
 - Been referred by a service within Bracknell Forest Council
 - Been referred by Citizens Advice Bureau after seeking debt advice
 - You may also be eligible for support on this scheme if you have been verified as Rough Sleeping or Homeless by Bracknell Forest Council
- 5.13 Applicants are not eligible for support if they have household savings or capital over £3,000 (cash, savings, investments, stocks or shares).
- 5.14 Identity checks will be conducted for all applicants requesting the £49 utility payments and/or a foodbank or supermarket voucher. If a household makes more than one application for utility and food support, or if they require broader financial assistance, then a financial assessment will be conducted. This will include the request for information regarding income and expenditure, and evidence where appropriate. When received, a financial assessment will be completed with the applicant to identify what support may be offered and may result in signposting or referrals for debt advice or to other sources of support and advice.

Applications

- 5.15 Support via routes two and three will be made following an online application form completed by the applicant or a referring professional. This should be completed on behalf of a household. An individual may be supported in completing this by family, partner organisations or by Bracknell Forest Council officers.
- 5.16 Once an application has been submitted it will be reviewed within five working days and the payment will be made, or voucher issued, within the five following working days. In emergency circumstances, residents will be advised to directly contact the Welfare and Housing team who can provide more urgent support.

- 5.17 Successful applicants will be notified via email to confirm the support that will be provided and how this can be accessed. Unsuccessful applicants will be notified if they do not meet the criteria for this scheme.
- 5.18 Households in need are permitted to make multiple requests for support if their financial hardship is sustained. If more than one application for a household is submitted, additional financial evidence will be required to demonstrate the need. Repeat applications will be monitored in order to signpost to effective long term support.
- 5.19 The funding for this scheme is fixed by the government and is not expected to be extended. Therefore, the scheme may be terminated at any time prior to the end of March 2021 if the funding has been fully awarded. Signposting to alternative hardship schemes will be provided to residents in need, for example the Welfare and Housing crisis fund.

Appeals

- 5.20 Whilst there is no statutory appeal process, the Council will operate an internal review process and will accept an applicant's request for an appeal of its decision by a senior officer.
- 5.21 All such requests must be made in writing to the Council, within 3 days of the Council's decision, and should state the reasons why the applicant disagrees with the decision of the Council. New information may be submitted at this stage to support the applicant's appeal. The application will be reconsidered as soon as practicable, and the applicant informed in writing or by email of the decision.

Reviewing the policy

- 5.22 A review of the delivery of the scheme is proposed to take place at regular intervals to assess the level of applications and spend of the grant. The criteria may be amended to ensure the maximum value of the grant can be reached. It is recommended that the authorisation of amendments to the policy is delegated to Timothy Wheadon, Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader of the Council and the relevant Executive Members.
- 5.23 The distribution of the funding will also be regularly monitored to ensure that no more than 20% of the total fund is allocated to households without children, as per the government guidance.

Communications and marketing

- 5.24 The support through routes two and three will be proactively promoted to residents to encourage uptake. This will include publishing website content with details of the scheme and signposting to wider financial support. A press release for the website will be shared and the support will be promoted through Town and Country Extra and the network of Community Information Champions. Social media will also be used, including LinkedIn to target those looking for jobs.
- 5.25 Partners and internal services will be provided with an information pack to explain the details about the scheme and how vulnerable residents can access support. Professionals will be able to refer families to the scheme via the online form.

Fraud risks and due diligence

- 5.26 Third party organisations we are working with include the foodbanks, schools and a company for issuing supermarket vouchers. The foodbanks and schools are trusted partners that the council has previously worked with and provided funding to. The company issuing supermarket vouchers have provided suitable assurances of security, compliance and financial protection.
- 5.27 The eligibility criteria and funding routes are designed to minimise the risk of misuse of the funding. The primary routes of payments are through supermarket restricted vouchers, payments to suppliers or direct provisions such as food.
- 5.28 Data security has also been considered to minimise the transfer of personal data and advice sought from the councils Information Governance Officer.

6 Consultation and Other Considerations

Legal Advice

- 6.1 The Authority has a broad discretion as to how the grant should be distributed. The manner in which it is to be exercised is reflected in the report. The proposals represent a reasonable exercise of that discretion having regard to public law principles.

Financial Advice

- 6.2 As noted in the report this is a ring-fenced, time limited grant and the policy set out will enable a robust monitoring of expenditure with a clear eligibility criteria. The application of grants will be largely through trusted third-party bodies and where support is provided to individuals, it will be targeted and its use limited to support for direct payments towards utility and food costs.

Other Consultation Responses

- 6.3 These proposals have been developed in consultation with a cross-council financial hardship group. Executive members were briefed on the proposals on 01/12/20.

Equalities Impact Assessment

- 6.4 An equalities impact screening assessment has been conducted to consider the impacts on different groups within the community, this is attached as appendix A. The proposals with this report were not found to negatively impact any particular groups. Actions are in place to encourage all eligible residents to apply for the scheme, which intends to reduce inequalities arising as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Strategic Risk Management Issues

- 6.5 These proposals seek to address the increasing risk of financial hardship to residents within the borough. The risk of fraud has been considered in the development of the local scheme and mitigating measures put in place.

Background Papers

Government guidance on the grant - [COVID Winter Grant Scheme - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/announcements/covid-19-winter-grant-scheme)

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