



Reading
Borough Council
Working better with you

DECISION BOOK

Issue: 620 Date: 7 JANUARY 2021

Decisions set out in the book have been made under delegated powers by the Chief Executive, Executive Directors or the Chief Finance Officer and Monitoring Officer, in consultation either with the relevant committee or Lead Councillor.

The Decision Book process has been altered to suspend the current Councillors' call-in arrangements within the 10-day period after its publication and replace it with the ability during that period for three Councillors to request a retrospective review of the decision in writing to the Head of Legal and Democratic Services.

The decision book can be accessed on the Council's website - <https://democracy.reading.gov.uk/mgListOfficerDecisions.aspx?bcr=1&BAM=0>

The officer reports accompanying the decisions are attached.

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DECISION BOOK - ISSUE 620 - 7 JANUARY 2021

1. COVID WINTER GRANT SCHEME

<u>DECISION</u>	<u>LEAD</u> <u>COUNCILLOR(S)</u>	<u>WARDS</u> <u>AFFECTED</u>	<u>PAGE</u> <u>NO.</u>
1. COVID WINTER GRANT SCHEME	COUNCILLOR BROCK	BOROUGHWIDE	1

This report sets out the decision to implement a Covid Winter Grant Scheme.

It is the decision of the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader of the Council that a Covid Winter Grant Scheme in respect of residents meeting the following criteria is introduced:

Phase 1 Summary, further information in Section 5.3 of this report:

- (a) A targeted food voucher scheme for families with school age children eligible for Pupil Premium Free School Meals during the school Christmas holidays 2020;
- (b) Additional grant support to local community organisations to support other vulnerable families with food.

Phase 2 and 3 Summary, further information in Section 5.3 of this report:

- (a) Food and fuel support for families with school age children eligible for Pupil Premium Free School Meals during the school holidays up to 31 March 2021;
- (b) Support for additional vulnerable families as emerging in the data or identified by the One Reading Community Hub.

A contingency fund will support other emerging unmet needs as identified in the guidance up to 31 March 2021.

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF RESOURCES

LEAD COUNCILLOR:	COUNCILLOR BROCK - LEADER OF THE COUNCIL		
DATE:	7 JANUARY 2021		
TITLE:	COVID WINTER GRANT SCHEME		
SERVICE:	FINANCE	WARDS:	BOROUGHWIDE
AUTHOR:	SAMANTHA WILLS	TEL:	0118 937 2711
JOB TITLE:	REVENUES & BENEFITS MANAGER	E-MAIL:	samantha.wills@reading.gov.uk

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report sets out the decision to implement a Covid Winter Grant Scheme.
- 1.2 In response to the Coronavirus, COVID-19 pandemic, the Government announced that a £170 million COVID Winter Grant Scheme will be made available in early December 2020 to support those most in need across England with the cost of food, energy (heating, cooking, lighting), water bills (including sewerage) and other essentials.
- 1.3 The 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 this winter.
- 1.4 The scheme starts on 01 December 2020, and local authorities are expected to have arrangements in place to administer the scheme by early December. The scheme will last until 31 March 2021.
- 1.5 The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) will provide funding to County Councils and Unitary Authorities (including Metropolitan Councils and London Boroughs), under section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003, who will administer the scheme and provide assistance to vulnerable families with children and other vulnerable households, particularly affected by the pandemic. County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England have a statutory duty for childcare and have the ability to deliver the scheme through a variety of routes including issuing grants to third parties, providing vouchers to households or making direct provision of food, for example.
- 1.6 The £170 million for the scheme is a fixed four-month envelope that will not be topped up. Reading's share of the £170 million is £464,497.68
- 1.7 The Government have set some broad national criteria for the funds but are allowing local authorities to determine their own local award schemes.

- 1.8 This report sets out the national guidance and proposed offer to Reading residents, taking into consideration demand, economic need and consistency with our neighbouring authorities
- 1.9 An Equality Impact Assessment for these proposals has been carried out and is set out in Appendix One.

Appendix 1 - Equality Impact Assessment

2. DECISION

- 2.1 It is the decision of the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader of the Council that a Covid Winter Grant Scheme in respect of residents meeting the following criteria is introduced:

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3. POLICY CONTEXT

NATIONAL GUIDANCE AND CRITERIA

- 3.1 The guidance sets out the required collaboration between Department of Work and Pensions, Authorities, including their delivery partners, such as District Councils and charitable organisations, etc., to successfully meet the policy intentions within the agreed framework. It also provides any constraints that need to be worked within and the distribution of funding and reporting arrangements.
- 3.2 Authorities have the local ties and knowledge, making them best placed to identify and help those children, families and individuals most in need. It is important to stress that this covers a wide range of vulnerable households including children of pre-school age too.
- 3.3 On 19 November draft guidance was issued to Local Authorities, and although discretion has been given to produce a local scheme, there are requirements on the allocation of funding as defined by a framework at 3.5 in relation to the types

of person that can receive support from this fund and they type of support the money can be used for.

3.4 The Guidance indicates Local authorities have the flexibility within the scheme to identify which vulnerable households are in most need of support and 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 combination 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. In accordance with their general legal duties, Authorities must have a clear rationale or documented policy/framework outlining their approach including how they are defining eligibility and how households access the scheme.

3.5 Awards must be based on the following framework:

- 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.

3.6 The Guidance goes on to confirm that Authorities should consider the household circumstances when making a decision to spend this grant. Households may be receiving other forms of support and this should be taken into account to avoid duplicating provision where possible. However, families receiving other forms of assistance are not excluded from receiving support through this grant. For example, a household may:

- have additional wider needs in terms of food
- need support with provision for cooking, lighting, heating and/or water (including

- sewerage)
- require other essential supplies

4. SCOPE OF FUNDING

- 4.1 Authorities should use discretion on how to identify and support those most in need. They should use the funding from December 2020 up to the end of March 2021 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 includes payments made, or committed to, by the Authorities or any person acting on behalf of the Authority, from 01 December 2020 to 31 March 2021.

5. COVID WINTER GRANT SCHEME PROPOSED BY READING

- 5.1 The £170 million funding has been dispersed according to the population of each authority, weighted by a function of the English Index of Multiple Deprivation. Indicative grant allocation for Reading, subject to final approval by HM Treasury, is £464,497.68, spend will need to be managed to ensure enough funds are available for the duration of the 4-month scheme.

- 5.2 The funding provided will allow for targeted support for vulnerable children and families at risk of food or fuel (Utilities) poverty over the winter months.

- 5.3 The Council propose to utilise the grant in 3 phases:

Phase 1

- December 2020. Procurement of provider and issue of food vouchers in advance of school Christmas holidays to families eligible for free school meals
- Release of grant funding to local community groups to extend existing capacity for food support

Phase 2

- January/February 2021
- Review take up of voucher scheme and carry forward unused vouchers to February half term holiday
- Potential providers identified to implement the fuel support scheme. Eligibility criteria for the scheme to be determined, however keen to identify emerging needs in children outside FSM cohort

Phase 3

- March 2021
- Review take up of food & fuel scheme and carry forward unused vouchers to Easter school holiday (funds to be committed in March 2021) Further information to follow.

Brighter Futures for Children will administer food voucher scheme on behalf of the Council.

- 5.4 To ensure the support reaches families known to be vulnerable, the process will identify eligible recipients through existing data with the ORCH providing a safety net for any families not appearing in the data but in need of support.

5.5 The scheme will end on 31 March 2021. Eligible cohorts will be reviewed after each school holiday to ensure newly eligible families are included.

5.6 Brighter Futures for Children and Reading Borough Council will confirm eligibility through school census, school data and council tax support scheme data.

6. APPEALS

6.1 Discretionary Support Schemes are not subject to any formal statutory appeals process and therefore there are no appeal rights.

7. FRAUD

7.1 The Council will not accept deliberate manipulation and fraud - and any resident caught falsifying their records to gain a support will face prosecution and any payment issued will be subject to claw back, as will any payments paid in error.

7.2 One of the biggest risks for this scheme is impersonation fraud, where fraudsters work through a residential area and falsely claim under the names of eligible recipients. Risk has been reduced by a targeted scheme to eligible families.

7.3 To help mitigate this risk, Authorities should involve internal departments and other organisations chosen to administer this scheme to help identify vulnerable families, households and individuals. Engagement should start immediately and, ideally, no later than the end of November 2020 to provide them with the necessary and appropriate funding and any specific locally determined eligibility criteria.

7.4 Authorities wishing to work with Third Party Organisations to deliver the scheme must carry out suitable due diligence checks to ensure they are viable and able to deliver the support. So, for example, ensuring all charities are registered and taking extra caution if they are new organisations.

7.5 Authorities are also encouraged to ensure checks are in place to verify the identity of those eligible

8. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

8.1 This proposal will contribute to the following key priority set out in the Council's Corporate Plan 2018-21:

Protecting and enhancing the lives of vulnerable adults and children:

To ensure every vulnerable person is safe and can achieve their potential and aspirations. Our priorities for vulnerable adults are to promote independent living, manage the rising demand for services, and strengthen our working relationships with partners in the health, education and voluntary sectors.

9. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

9.1 None to note.

10. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

10.1 Communications appropriate to a targeted scheme will be promoted on respective websites. There will be minimal social media promotion to mitigate any potential risks of fraudulent claims.

11. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

11.1 A Full Equality Impact Assessment is set out at Appendix 1.

12. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

12.1 None to note

13. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

13.1 The cost of these payments will be met by Central Government, the COVID Winter Grant Scheme is ring-fenced and any unspent funding will need to be repaid to DWP.

13.2 Once funds are exhausted, there is no top up available, the scheme will end, this may be earlier than 31 March 2021 depending on demand.

13.3 The RBC allocation is £464,497.68. The funding ends 31st March 2021, with some flexibility about resources already committed for the Easter school holidays in April. Reasonable administration costs can be included. Funding will be released in tranches following submission of required management information.

13.4 To simplify the allocation of funding against the criteria outline by DWP, the council has focus on delivering 80% or more of the funding to vulnerable families for food and fuel only. The remaining 20% is being allocated to other individual and/or family for food and fuel also.

13.5 Small grants have been agreed to ensure additional capacity for community organisations to provide food support for families not eligible for Free School Meals. The organisations are:

- Whitley Community Development Association - £3k
- Weller - £3k
- New Beginnings - £3k
- Wycliffe - £3k
- Readifood - £4k

13.6 After removing administration costs for the scheme, as shown below a, minimum of £353,018 will be spent on food and fuel for those families eligible for Pupil Premium Free School Meals.

13.7 Projected calculations based on apx 3800 eligible children/individuals:

Food Vouchers	£15p/w per child for 5 weeks	£260,685
Fuel Support	£49/household for 2000 priority families and individuals (inc voucher admin fee)	£107,500
Contingency	Respond to emerging needs 2021	£54,000
BFfC Admin	Coordinate, generate finance /MI returns	£23,224

VCS Grants	To provide additional food support until March 2021 to vulnerable families and individuals	£16,000
	Total	£463,409

13.8 Payment of the grant from DWP to Authorities will be made in three instalments:

- First payment - 50% of the allocation at the start of the scheme (in early December 2020)
- Second payment - 25% at the end of February 2021
- Final payment - 25% following the end of the scheme in April/May 2021

13.9 The second of three payments (25% of funding allocation) is dependent on the MI 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.

13.10 If an Authority feels that the December and January spend is not representative of the likely February and March spend, the Authority can make a request to DWP to make the second payment by providing the reasons why the Authority believe spend will significantly increase in the latter months of the scheme. This request should be made with the MI return in February 2021.

13.11 The COVID Winter Grant Scheme funding allocation includes reasonable administration costs to enable Authorities to deliver the scheme. Authorities should deduct their estimated administration costs from the total allocation to determine the amount remaining. In all cases, Authorities should keep administrative costs to a reasonable level. Administration costs for each Authority will be published on www.gov.uk alongside detail of all spend related to this scheme.

13.12 Authorities are required to make two MI 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.

14. BACKGROUND PAPERS

14.1 There are none

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

For advice on this document please contact Clare Muir on 72119 or email Claire.Muir@reading.gov.uk.

Please contact the Project Management Office at pmo@reading.gov.uk for advice and/or support to complete this form from a project perspective.

Name of proposal/activity/policy to be assessed: Winter Support Grant
 Directorate: BfC
 Service:

Name: Vicky Rhodes
 Job Title: Director of Early Help - Brighter Futures for Children
 Date of assessment: 15.12.2020

Version History

Version	Reason	Author	Date	Approved By

Scope your proposal

- What is the aim of your policy or new service/what changes are you proposing?

-
- 1.1 In response to the Coronavirus, COVID-19 pandemic, the Government announced that a £170 million COVID Winter Grant Scheme will be made available in early December 2020 to support those most in need across England with the cost of food, energy (heating, cooking, lighting), water bills (including sewerage) and other essentials.
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- Who will benefit from this proposal and how?

Children eligible for pupil premium free school meals will benefit from food voucher support over the school holidays

Vulnerable families who may not meet the above, but present to the One Reading Community Hub or local organisations over the scheme period in need of food support

Priority vulnerable families identified in data or presenting for support will receive assistance with fuel/utilities bills.

-
- What outcomes does the change aim to achieve and for whom?

The scheme seeks to ensure no child goes cold or hungry over the winter months. The targeted nature of the scheme removes the need for families/professionals to make an application for support. The use of the FSM cohort ensure food vouchers are received by those assessed as requiring additional support.

Additional grant support to local VCS organisations ensures no family slips through the net over the Xmas period.

The funding does not enable fuel support to all the above cohort. Data will be cross referenced with RBCs Council Tax support scheme to ensure those families who need it most receive support. The fuel support is likely to be supplied via a 3rd party as opposed to BACs payments to tenants to mitigate the risk of financial support being offset by existing debt.

-
- Who are the main stakeholders and what do they want?

Families with children who attend Reading schools and other vulnerable households who require additional support to avoid additional debt/stress over the winter period. Support will ensure children are fed and utilities are not disconnected. The lead in time from receipt of the grant/DWP advice has not enabled a consultation period.

Schools. Head Teachers want to ensure support reaches families. Schools are providing email contacts for eligible families to fast track voucher support in advance of school holidays.

Local Community Groups : Want to ensure sufficient capacity and resources to reach local families who maybe experiencing hardship.

Assess whether an EqIA is Relevant

How does your proposal relate to eliminating discrimination; advancing equality of opportunity; promoting good community relations?

- Do you have evidence or reason to believe that some (racial, disability, sex, gender, sexuality, age and religious belief) groups may be affected differently than others? Make reference to the known demographic profile of the service user group, your monitoring information, research, national data/reports etc.

No The scheme includes a targeted element to ensure it reaches those most in need. School census data ensures families previously means tested are reached.

- Is there already public concern about potentially discriminatory practices/impact or could there be? Make reference to your complaints, consultation, feedback, media reports locally/nationally.

No

If the answer is Yes to any of the above, you need to do an Equality Impact Assessment.

If No you **MUST** complete this statement.

An Equality Impact Assessment is not relevant because:

The scheme is targeted, using data to evidence families who require support. Robust mechanisms in place via One Reading Community Hub and Brighter Futures for Children for any families who require support but do not meet pupil premium threshold.

X

Completing Officer

X

Lead Officer

Assess the Impact of the Proposal

Your assessment must include:

- Consultation
- Collection and Assessment of Data
- Judgement about whether the impact is negative or positive

Think about who does and doesn't use the service? Is the take up representative of the community? What do different minority groups think? (You might think your policy, project or service is accessible and addressing the needs of these groups, but asking them might give you a totally different view). Does it really meet their varied needs? Are some groups less likely to get a good service?

How do your proposals relate to other services - will your proposals have knock on effects on other services elsewhere? Are there proposals being made for other services that relate to yours and could lead to a cumulative impact?

Example: A local authority takes separate decisions to limit the eligibility criteria for community care services; increase charges for respite services; scale back its accessible housing programme; and cut concessionary travel.

Each separate decision may have a significant effect on the lives of disabled residents, and the cumulative impact of these decisions may be considerable.

This combined impact would not be apparent if decisions are considered in isolation.

Consultation

How have you consulted with or do you plan to consult with relevant groups and experts. If you haven't already completed a Consultation form do it now. The checklist helps you make sure you follow good consultation practice.

[Consultation manager form - Reading Borough Council Dash](#)

Relevant groups/experts	How were/will the views of these groups be obtained	Date when contacted

Collect and Assess your Data

Using information from Census, residents survey data, service monitoring data, satisfaction or complaints, feedback, consultation, research, your knowledge and the knowledge of people in your team, staff groups etc. describe how the proposal could impact on each group. Include both positive and negative impacts.

(Please delete relevant ticks)

- Describe how this proposal could impact on racial groups
 - Is there a negative impact? Yes / No / Not sure
-

- Describe how this proposal could impact on Sex and Gender identity (include pregnancy and maternity, marriage, gender re-assignment)
 - Is there a negative impact? Yes / No / Not sure
-

- Describe how this proposal could impact on Disability
 - Is there a negative impact? Yes / No / Not sure
-

- Describe how this proposal could impact on Sexual orientation (cover civil partnership)
 - Is there a negative impact? Yes / No / Not sure
-
-

- Describe how this proposal could impact on age
 - Is there a negative impact? Yes / No / Not sure
-
-

- Describe how this proposal could impact on Religious belief
 - Is there a negative impact? Yes / No / Not sure
-
-

Make a Decision

If the impact is negative then you must consider whether you can legally justify it. If not you must set out how you will reduce or eliminate the impact. If you are not sure what the impact will be you MUST assume that there could be a negative impact. You may have to do further consultation or test out your proposal and monitor the impact before full implementation.

(Delete numbers below which don't apply)

1. No negative impact identified - Go to sign off
2. Negative impact identified but there is a justifiable reason

You must give due regard or weight but this does not necessarily mean that the equality duty overrides other clearly conflicting statutory duties that you must comply with.

3. Negative impact identified or uncertain

What action will you take to eliminate or reduce the impact? Set out your actions and timescale

- How will you monitor for adverse impact in the future?
-
-

X

X

Completing Officer

Lead Officer