



Reading
Borough Council
Working better with you

DECISION BOOK

Issue: 631 Date: 27 APRIL 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.

Contact:	Richard Woodford	Committee Services
Tel:		0118 937 2332
e-mail:		richard.woodford@reading.gov.uk

DECISION BOOK - ISSUE 631 - 27 APRIL 2021

1. COVID WINTER GRANT SCHEME - EXTRA FUNDING UPDATE

<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 - EXTRA FUNDING UPDATE	COUNCILLOR BROCK	BOROUGHWIDE	1

This report sets out the decision to use additional Covid Winter Grant Scheme funding of £161,481, received from the Department of Work and Pensions, as set in 2.1 (a) to (d) below, and provides an update on the Scheme.

It is the decision of the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader of the Council that the £161,481 additional Covid Winter Grant Scheme funding is used to provide the following:

- (a) A targeted fuel voucher scheme for households with vulnerable 2 year olds and care leavers - one £49 voucher per household to cover the period 1 December 2020 to 16 April 2021.
- (b) A targeted food voucher scheme for households with vulnerable 2 year olds and care leavers - two £15 vouchers per individual to cover the Easter Holidays 2021.
- (c) Funding for Citizens Advice Reading to provide support and guidance to vulnerable families and individuals in relation to fuel poverty.
- (d) Funding for food parcels/hot meals at the Easter holidays playschemes funded by the Holiday Activity Fund (HAF).

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL
REPORT BY DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

LEAD COUNCILLOR:	COUNCILLOR BROCK - LEADER OF THE COUNCIL		
DATE:	27 APRIL 2021		
TITLE:	COVID WINTER GRANT SCHEME - EXTRA FUNDING UPDATE		
SERVICE:	CORPORATE IMPROVEMENT AND CUSTOMER SERVICES	WARDS:	BOROUGHWIDE
AUTHOR:	ISABEL EDGAR-BRIANCON	TEL:	07923 272292
JOB TITLE:	ASSISTANT DIRECTOR FOR CORPORATE IMPROVEMENT AND CUSTOMER SERVICES	E-MAIL:	Isabel.edgarbriancon@reading.gov.uk

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report sets out the decision to use additional Covid Winter Grant Scheme funding of £161,481, received from the Department of Work and Pensions, as set in 2.1 (a) to (d) below, and provides an update on the Scheme.
- 1.2 The original Decision Book (issue 620, dated 7 January) was approved on 17 December. A further Decision Book was completed in February (issue 624, dated 12 March).

2.0 DECISION

- 2.1 It is the decision of the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader of the Council that the £161,481 additional Covid Winter Grant Scheme funding is used to provide the following:
- (a) A targeted fuel voucher scheme for households with vulnerable 2 year olds and care leavers - one £49 voucher per household to cover the period 1 December 2020 to 16 April 2021.
- (b) A targeted food voucher scheme for households with vulnerable 2 year olds and care leavers - two £15 vouchers per individual to cover the Easter Holidays 2021.
- (c) Funding for Citizens Advice Reading to provide support and guidance to vulnerable families and individuals in relation to fuel poverty.

(d) Funding for food parcels/hot meals at the Easter holidays playschemes funded by the Holiday Activity Fund (HAF).

3. BACKGROUND

COVID WINTER GRANT SCHEME PHASE 1 AND 2 AGREED BY RBC

3.1 A total of £464,497.68 of Winter Grants Scheme Funding was originally awarded to RBC. The funding was to provide targeted support for vulnerable children and families at risk of food or fuel (utilities) poverty over the winter months.

3.2 The Council agreed to utilise the grant as follows:

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 food banks to extend existing capacity for food support

Phase 2

- January/February 2021
- Review take up of food voucher scheme and carry forward unused vouchers to February half term holiday
- The Council will explore potential providers to implement a fuel support scheme and determine associated eligibility criteria

3.3 Brighter Futures for Children are administering the food voucher scheme on behalf of the Council. RBC are administering the fuel voucher scheme.

3.4 To date a total of £157k has been spent on Food Vouchers covering the Christmas holidays (2 weeks) and February Half Term (1 week). Overall take-up across the 3 weeks was approx. 80%. Based on current projections we have identified that a further £6k is likely to be required to ensure the Easter holidays (2 weeks) is fully funded.

3.5 Eligible cohorts have recently been reviewed to ensure that newly eligible families are included in the Easter Holiday scheme. Brighter Futures for Children and Reading Borough Council will confirm eligibility through school census, school data and council tax support scheme data.

3.6 Approximately 1900 Fuel Vouchers have been issued to date, totalling £100k. A further 300 eligible households have been identified to date who live in Reading but their children attend out of borough schools. It is anticipated that further households will be identified, and this cohort could be in the region of 500 in total. As a result, a further £30k was provided to our delivery partner Auriga.

3.7 Small grants totalling £16k were provided to the food banks listed below 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

4. ADDITIONAL FUNDING - PHASE 3 PROPOSALS

4.1 RBC have been awarded an additional £161,481 Winter Grants Scheme Funding from the Department for Work and Pensions. The grant conditions extend the deadline for the total spend (original £464,498, plus £161,498 = total £625,996) by two weeks to Friday 16 April.

4.2 Given the very short time available in which to make a decision the following proposals provide the greatest chance of providing support within the constraints of the grant conditions and timescale:

- **A targeted fuel voucher scheme for households with vulnerable 2 year olds and care leavers** (projected 749 individuals). For households with vulnerable 2 year olds (approx. 600) - £49 for fuel via Auriga. For care leavers (149) - £49 for fuel loaded onto their prepaid cards and supported to use on fuel by their case workers. Total = £49 x 749 = **£36,701**
- **A targeted food voucher scheme for households with vulnerable 2 year olds and care leavers** (projected 749 individuals). For households with vulnerable 2 year olds (approx. 600) - £30 for food (two £15 vouchers per individual - one per week of Easter) via EdenRed. For care leavers (149) £30 for food loaded onto their prepaid cards and supported to use on food by their case workers. Total = £30 x 749 = **£22,470**. *Note: data to be cross-checked with original fuel voucher cohort to ensure no household receives more than one voucher*
- **Funding for Citizens Advice Reading to provide fuel support and guidance to vulnerable families and individuals**. To provide emergency fuel payments and guidance/support to vulnerable families and individuals to alleviate immediate and long-term fuel poverty/crisis issues - **£55,000**
- **Funding for food parcels/hot meals for children attending the Easter holidays playschemes funded by the Holiday Activity Fund (HAF)**. £30 per week per child = **£40,300**

4.3 The following ideas were discounted for the following reasons:

- **Identify those in Council Tax arrears or those eligible for Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) and take deduction off Council Tax bills**. Data and eligibility criteria make this unachievable in the timeframe - for example: there are 8000 residents in receipt of CTRS but we can only fund approx. 600 with the 20% of funding available within the grant conditions (based on £49 each) and there is no further criteria available to identify which 600 of the 8000 should receive support. Even if we could identify a smaller cohort the Revenues and Benefits Team would have to manually adjust 600 Council Tax accounts (no facility to apply a 2nd discount on mass - all CTRS working age recipients have already received £150 reduction this year as a result of Covid and the software was not designed for a 2nd award).
- **Offer second fuel voucher to existing pupil-premium free school meals cohort**. Officers consider that providing additional funding to the Easter holiday playscheme would increase the value to parents and widen the benefit. Delivering a second fuel voucher would utilise the majority of the additional funding.

5. APPEALS

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

6. FRAUD

- 6.1 The Council will not accept deliberate manipulation and fraud - and any resident caught falsifying their records to gain support will face prosecution and any payment issued will be subject to claw back, as will any payments paid in error.
- 6.2 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.
- 6.3 The DWP advise that 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.
- 6.4 Authorities are also encouraged to ensure checks are in place to verify the identity of those eligible.

7. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

- 7.1 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.

8. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 None to note.

9. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

- 9.1 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.

10. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 10.1 A Full Equality Impact Assessment was completed for the original Decision Book report.

11. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 None to note.

12. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1 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.
- 12.2 Once funds are exhausted, there is no top up available, the scheme will end, this may be earlier than 16 April 2021 depending on demand.
- 12.3 The original RBC allocation is £464,497.68. An additional £161,498 has been awarded = total £625,996. The deadline for committing the funding has been extended by two weeks to Friday 16 April. Reasonable administration costs can be included. Funding will be released in tranches following submission of required management information.
- 12.4 To simplify the allocation of funding against the criteria outline by DWP, the Council has focused 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.
- 12.5 Current projections for the 80% / 20% spend based on overall funding for phases 1, 2 and 3 are:
- Total funding to vulnerable families for food and fuel (80% minimum). Food vouchers, fuel support, Easter holiday playscheme food = £496,498, which = 83%
 - Total funding allocated to other individual and/or family for food and fuel. VCS grants = £71,000, which = 12%
 - Remaining contingency = £28,274, which = 5%

Note: admin costs removed from overall allocation (£30,224) to calculate percentages above - see 12.10 below.

12.6 Projected calculations:

Original funding allocation - Phase 1 and 2:

Area of spend	Details	Original Budget	New Budget	Status
Food Vouchers	£15p/w per child for 5 weeks based on approx. 3800 eligible children / individuals	£260,685	£267,000	Phase 1 (Christmas holiday) complete. Phase 2 (Feb Half Term) complete Actual spend to date = £158k Phase 2 (Easter holidays) to follow. Estimated spend = £109k Total forecast spend = £267k (£6k to be funded from contingency)
BFfC Admin	Coordinate food vouchers project, generate finance/MI returns	£23,224	£23,224	Phase 1 (Christmas holiday) complete. Phase 2 (Feb Half Term) complete. Phase 2 (Easter holidays) to follow Total forecast spend = £23k

VCS Grants	To provide additional food support until March 2021 to vulnerable families and individuals	£16,000	£16,000	Grants issued. Complete Total actual spend = £16k
Fuel Support	£49/household for 2500 priority households (inc voucher admin fee)	£107,500	£130,000	In progress. 1900 vouchers issued to date. Further 300 households attending out of borough schools identified to date (more to follow) = total 2800 households £130k provided to Auriga (includes £22.5k from contingency) Actual spend per date = £100k Total forecast spend = £120k
Contingency	Respond to emerging needs 2021	£57,089	£28,274	£22.5k used for additional fuel vouchers £6k to be used for additional food vouchers Remaining funding to fund Holiday Activities during Easter / VCS
Total funding		£464,498	£464,498	

Phase 3 Proposed Additional Funding:

Area of spend	Details	Budget	Status
Food Vouchers	£15p/w per individual (vulnerable 2 year olds and care leavers) for 2 weeks (Easter) based on approx. 749 eligible individuals	£22,470	In progress
Easter holiday playscheme food	Food Parcels/Hot meals support via HAF TPO / Internal Holiday scheme (Easter holidays)	£40,310	In progress
BFfC Admin	Coordinate food vouchers project, generate finance/MI returns	£7,000	In progress
VCS Grants	To provide fuel support and guidance to vulnerable families and individuals	£55,000	In progress
Fuel Support	£49/household for approx. 749 eligible individuals / households (inc. voucher admin fee)	£36,701	In progress

Contingency		£0	
Total funding		£161,481	

12.7 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

12.8 The second of three payments (25% of funding allocation) is dependent on the management information (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.

12.9 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.

12.10 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. RBC's overall admin cost is £30,224 for BFfC to administer the food voucher project.

12.11 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.

13. BACKGROUND PAPERS

13.1 New Grant Determinations.