



Children, Education and Safeguarding Committee 30th November 2020

Title	Covid 19 Winter Grant Scheme
Report of	Chairman of the Children, Education and Safeguarding Committee
Wards	All
Status	Public
Urgent	Yes
Key	No
Enclosures	Appendix A – Covid 19 winter grant scheme policy
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Summary

On 8 November 2020 the government announced a £170 million COVID Winter Grant Scheme, the objective of which is 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.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) will provide funding to local authorities, which will administer the scheme and provide direct assistance to vulnerable households and families with children particularly affected by the pandemic. The DWP have subsequently issued guidance about the scheme, which states that local authorities have flexibility to develop a local delivery approach that best fits the scheme's objective. Local authorities should develop a 'local eligibility framework and approach' to enable them to distribute grant funding that best supports vulnerable families and individuals.

Barnet has been allocated £986,960. This report sets out the key information from the DWP guidance about the principles that local authorities need to consider when designing their scheme. It provides an overview of the 'Barnet eligibility framework and approach', which is provided at Appendix A, and recommends that the Children, Education and Safeguarding Committee approves the document.

Officers Recommendations

That the Children, Education and Safeguarding Committee agree the following:

- 1. Approve the policy at Appendix A, the COVID Winter Grant Scheme Local Eligibility Framework and Approach.**
- 2. That the Executive Director – Children’ Services has delegated authority to administer the policy and to make amendments to it as required.**

1. WHY THIS REPORT IS NEEDED

- 1.1 The DWP Guidance about the COVID Winter Grant Scheme states that local authorities have flexibility to develop a local delivery approach that best fits the scheme’s objective. Local authorities, which will administer the scheme, should develop a ‘local eligibility framework and approach’ to enable them to distribute grant funding that best supports vulnerable families and individuals. This report is needed to get approval to the Barnet COVID Winter Grant Scheme eligibility framework and approach so that Barnet can distribute it to organisations that will be identifying those that are eligible for the scheme. The report is urgent because delivery of the scheme will commence in December and there will not be another Children, Education and Safeguarding Committee before then.

2. STRATEGIC CONTEXT

Covid 19 Winter Grant Scheme

- 2.1 On 8 November 2020 the government announced a significant package of extra targeted financial support for those in need over the winter period. The £170 million COVID Winter Grant Scheme sees new funding issued to local authorities to support those most in need across England with the cost of food, energy (heating, cooking, lighting), water bills (including sewerage) and other essentials.
- 2.2 The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) will provide funding to local authorities, which will administer the scheme and provide direct assistance to vulnerable households and families with children particularly affected by the pandemic. This will include some families who normally have access to Free School Meals during term time. The London Borough of Barnet has been allocated £986,960 to cover the period from early December 2020 until the end of March 2021. On 19th November the DWP issued draft guidance to local authorities setting out further details about the Scheme.
- 2.3 The objective of the COVID Winter Grant Scheme, as set out in the guidance, is 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.
- 2.4 Local authorities have flexibility to develop a local delivery approach that best fits the scheme’s objective. When administering this scheme, local authorities are encouraged to adopt the following principles:
 - use discretion on how to identify and support those most in need

- 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.
- work together with other local services, such as social and care workers to help identify and support households within the scope of the scheme.

2.5 When deciding how to help people, local authorities should consider the following

- how they plan to provide support to vulnerable households, in other words, paying into bank accounts, use of cash and vouchers
- any risks associated with these payment methods

2.6 Authorities should develop a 'local eligibility framework and approach' to enable them to distribute grant funding that best supports vulnerable families and individuals. The focus is on the provision of food, energy, water and/or associated financial support to vulnerable households with children. A proportion of funding (up to 20%) is also available for vulnerable households without children (including individuals) so that no vulnerable household is excluded.

2.7 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. There is no requirement for local authorities to undertake a means test or conduct a benefit check.

2.8 Local 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, or need support with provision for cooking, lighting, heating and/or water (including sewerage), or require other essential supplies.

2.9 80% of the grant is ring-fenced to support families with children, and up to 20% of the grant to support other vulnerable households or individuals who meet the eligibility criteria. At least 80% of the total funding will be ring-fenced to provide support with food, energy and water bills (including sewerage), with up to 20% on other items.

October half-term Holiday Hunger Scheme

2.10 When developing Barnet's 'local eligibility framework and approach', one of the considerations has been building on the learning from the Holiday Hunger Scheme, which was delivered during October half-term, from 26th to 30th October. £50,000 of funding was made available for the scheme from the Local Authority Emergency Assistance Grant for Food and Essential Supplies. The Scheme was delivered in partnership between the Young Barnet Foundation (YBF) and the council and was put together at short notice.

- 2.11 The criteria were for the scheme were kept simple in that it was children and families which were identified by schools or voluntary sector organisations running holiday activities, as being at risk of holiday hunger. This meant that the funding was targeted by those that knew the needs of the families they work with and who were most likely to be at risk of holiday hunger.
- 2.12 The scheme was delivered through schools and through voluntary, community and faith sector (VCFS) organisations which applied online on the Young Barnet Foundation's Space 2 Grow website. Once approved they were able to provide assistance to those that they identified as being at risk of Holiday Hunger and were then able to submit claims and be paid through the website.
- 2.13 The approved organisations provided assistance to children and families by either providing lunch as part of the activity they were offering, or providing food parcels, or giving out supermarket vouchers. In total 2,253 meals were given out to families at a cost of £6,759. The learning from the low take up has led to a change the approach for the new scheme. A longer lead in time will enable significantly more organisations to be authorised, including for younger children through early years and health providers, and there will be an increase in using vouchers.
- 2.14 The Local Authority Emergency Assistance Grant for Food and Essential Supplies funding was also used for the Essential Supplies Hub to provide supplies and infrastructure for local food banks to provide assistance to children and families that were at risk of holiday hunger.

Barnet's local eligibility framework and approach

- 2.15 The proposed 'Barnet local eligibility framework and approach' can be found at Appendix A. It takes account of the DWP guidance on the COVID Winter Grant Scheme and the learning from the October Holiday Hunger Programme. It sets out the local authority's expectations for processing financial assistance applications; all staff from any organisation making use of this fund must be aware of and comply with these expectations.
- 2.16 The document sets out the definition of a child for the purposes of the scheme, which is:
- under the age of 19 as at 31 March 2021; or
 - 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
 - Where an eligible child is living on his or her own, they should be treated as a 'household'
- 2.17 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. Vulnerable households which include a person aged 19 to 25 with special educational needs and

disability (SEND) and/or care leavers in accordance with the Children and Families Act 2014 may still be eligible for grant support however that support falls within the 20% allocation to households without children.

2.18 The document sets out the eligibility criteria for the scheme in Barnet, which are:

- Children that are in receipt of benefits-related Free School Meals where their household income has been negatively impacted by Covid 19, such as through furlough or reduced employment.
- Children who access Free Two year old Education Entitlement where their household income has been negatively impacted by Covid 19, such as through furlough or reduced employment.
- Children who are home educated with parents where their household income has been negatively impacted by Covid 19, such as through furlough or reduced employment.
- Any child identified by an agency (school, nursery, health professional) as being in genuine need to promote their physical and emotional well-being as related to the grant such as warm clothes, footwear, blankets.
- Families with No Recourse to Public Funds, where children are also in receipt of either benefits-related Free School Meals or access Free Two year old Education Entitlement.
- Any adult identified by Adult Social Care and their partners as being in genuine need to promote their physical and emotional health as related to the grant such as warm clothes, footwear, blankets.
- The recipient meets the criteria for funding available within the grant conditions under both elements set out within allowable expenditure below.
- Those who are in receipt of other financial assistance such as other grants, foodbank or crisis loans can be supported by this fund where their household income has been negatively impacted by Covid 19, such as through furlough or reduced employment.
- And in all of the above cases, that the individual is a resident in Barnet (whether they go to a Barnet school is not relevant).

2.19 There are two elements of expenditure that are allowed:

- at least 80% of the total funding is 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.

- 2.20 The funding cannot be used an alternative to the support that would ordinarily be provide under the provision of Universal Credit, any other state benefit, S17 Children Act 1989 or other statutory duty. The funding cannot be used to pay off existing loans and can only be used for debt relation to energy or water costs.
- 2.21 There are two ways the grant will be distributed:
- Financial assistance distributed by authorised organisations (schools, colleges, early years providers and health visitors) to children and families. This can be provided in vouchers, payment card, BACS transfer or food parcels. This can be provided in one off or multiple payments depending upon assessed need
 - Funding provided to organisations to provide meals and holiday activities for children where eligibility criteria are met
- 2.22 The procedure for organisations to be authorised and then for payments to be made is set out in the eligibility framework and approach.
- 2.23 It is proposed that for children identified, there will be a payment of £84 per child. This equates to 4 weeks (1 for each of the months) of payments at a daily cost of £3 per day (in line with child benefit payments at £21.05 per week). Further details of the financial modelling can be found in section 6.2.
- 2.24 The document sets out information regarding Welfare/Benefit advice and requires referrers to ensure that families have the information booklet and refer/signpost to Welfare Benefits Team in early help or CAB for debt management as appropriate.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) will provide funding to local authorities, which will administer the COVID Winter Grant Scheme and provide direct assistance to vulnerable households and families with children particularly affected by the pandemic. The DWP guidance document states that local authorities should develop a 'local eligibility framework and approach' to enable them to distribute grant funding that best supports vulnerable families and individuals. The recommendation is that the Children, Education and Safeguarding Committee approve the Barnet local eligibility framework and approach, which can be found at Appendix A.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND NOT RECOMMENDED

- 4.1 The alternative is not to develop a local eligibility framework and approach. This is not recommended because there will not be clear eligibility criteria or processes by which to allocate the grant. It would also not be line with the DWP guidance document.

5. POST DECISION IMPLEMENTATION

- 5.1 If the Children, Education and Safeguarding Committee approve the Barnet eligibility framework and approach, it will be circulated to schools, colleges, early years providers and health visitors, asking them to apply through the online system to become authorised to distribute assistance.
- 5.2 Applications from organisations will be processed by the Young Barnet Foundation working with public health so that organisations are set up for the beginning of December when the scheme will be implemented.

6. IMPLICATIONS OF DECISION

6.1 Corporate Priorities and Performance

- 6.1.1 The objective of the COVID Winter Support Scheme is 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. This supports the Family Friendly vision set out in the Children and Young People's Plan and the Corporate Plan, as well as the Corporate Plan outcome that residents live healthy, happy, independent lives with the most vulnerable protected.

6.2 Resources (Finance & Value for Money, Procurement, Staffing, IT, Property, Sustainability)

- 6.2.1 The London Borough of Barnet has been allocated £986,960 for the COVID Winter Grant Scheme. The table below shows the indicative financial modelling of the grant. The COVID winter grant is to support those identified for the period December 20 to March 21 and it is proposed that for children identified, there will be a payment of £84 per child. This equates to 4 weeks (1 for each of the months) of payments at a daily cost of £3 per day (in line with child benefit payments at £21.05 per week).
- 6.2.2 It is proposed that these payments will be made in December 2020 and that food vouchers distributed via schools will be the method subject to ongoing discussions. For our estimated 6,955 children, this will lead to total costs of £584,220.00 leaving £362,740.35 to be distributed to third party organisations including food banks, vulnerable adults and other children identified outside of the schools survey. It also leaves some flexibility should further support be required during the February half term. The remaining £40,000 is an estimated administration cost but we are seeking to keep this as low as possible. Any money not spent on administration will be given as additional grants once identified.
- 6.2.3 The estimated number of children is indicative at this stage, based on a survey with schools, and we are working on getting a more accurate number for this. Once we have that number, the model below will be adjusted accordingly.

Calculation	Amount	Comment
Estimated number of children	6,955	From school survey conducted 25/11/20
Per child per week	£ 21.00	
Per child per day	£ 3.00	
4 weeks payments	£ 84.00	1 week per month- Dec-Mar
Total grant used directly for children	£ 584,220.00	59%
Remaining grant available for food banks/third party organisations/other vulnerable families/utilities/adults:	£ 362,740.35	37%
Estimated cost of grant administration	£ 40,000.00	4%

6.2.4 The intention is to keep the administration costs to a minimum in order to distribute the maximum amount of the grant possible to those who need it most. However, current estimations are that circa 5% of the grant will be required for administration and this appears to be in line with other projections provided by other councils in the pan-London working group.

6.2.5 To ensure fraud risk is minimised, the intention is to use a voucher system rather than cash. Children and families eligible for the scheme will be identified through schools, health visitors, early years settings and Children's centres. This means that children's/families identities will have been checked when registering with a GP (for health Visiting Services), or will be on the school role, or for those in receipt of FEE2 will be from families who meet the government eligibility criteria and so there will have been a benefit check at the point of application. If there is any evidence of fraud it will be reported to CAFT for investigation and if a person is found to have obtained money fraudulently, they can be prosecuted and the money will be recouped.

6.2.6 Management insight reporting on this is via two returns to the DWP, an interim return on the 14/2/21 and a final one on the 21/4/21. The format of this is provided to us by the DWP and will be completed with the service and finance input prior to being signed off by the S151 officer and also the relevant LA point of contact. Internal records will be kept by the finance team embedded within the service and all spend will be allocated to a newly created cost centre for easy identification.

6.3 Social Value

6.3.1 The Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 requires people who commission public services to think about how they can also secure wider social, economic and environmental benefits.

6.3.2 The Barnet COVID Winter Grant Scheme eligibility framework and approach has been

designed with the objective of targeting the available funding to vulnerable households and families with children particularly affected by the pandemic throughout the winter period where alternative sources of assistance may be unavailable. Social value will be achieved by ensuring that the funding is targeted to families that meet the eligibility criteria.

6.4 Legal and Constitutional References

6.4.1 The Government has allocated grants to local authorities for use to support winter hardship. There is draft guidance in place which has been relied upon to draft the policy. The fund is ring-fenced for a specific purpose. It is recommended that delegated authority is given to the Executive Director – Children’s Services to make amendments to the policy to take account of published guidance.

6.5 Risk Management

6.5.1 The council has an established approach to risk management, which is set out in the Risk Management Framework.

6.5.2 As with any welfare payment to vulnerable recipients there is a risk of fraud, as recipients might appear to be eligible when they are not. The scheme has been designed to mitigate this risk by working with organisations who are best placed to identify those that are genuinely eligible for the scheme. As set out above the finance processes have also been designed to minimise the risk of fraud.

6.5.3 There is a risk that insufficient eligible families are identified, or that too many families are identified and there is insufficient funding. This risk has been mitigated by the analysis in section 6.2 of the number of children and families that are likely to be eligible for the scheme and the anticipated financial assistance that they will each received. This will be kept under review as the scheme is implemented.

6.6 Equalities and Diversity

6.6.1 The 2010 Equality Act outlines the provisions of the Public Sector Equalities Duty which requires Public Bodies to have due regard to the need to:

- eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and
- other conduct prohibited by the Equality Act 2010
- advance equality of opportunity between people from different groups
- foster good relations between people from different groups

The broad purpose of this duty is to integrate considerations of equality into day to day business and to keep them under review in decision making, the design of policies and the delivery of services.

6.6.2 The DWP has undertaken an Equality Impact Assessment on the COVID Winter Grant Scheme. The Barnet eligibility framework and approach has been designed to make it simple and clear so that people are not disadvantaged or treated unfairly by this scheme.

6.2.3 The scheme has been designed so that those that meet the eligibility criteria will be identified by organisations which work with all communities and all children and families.

6.7 Corporate Parenting

6.7.1 In line with the Children and Social Work Act 2017, the council has a duty to consider Corporate Parenting Principles in decision-making across the council. The outcomes and priorities in the refreshed Corporate Plan, Barnet 2024, reflect the council's commitment to the Corporate Parenting duty to ensure the most vulnerable are protected and the needs of children are considered in everything that the council does.

6.7.2 Care leavers will be eligible for support under this scheme but only if there is additional financial impact due to Covid 19 and other financial assistance has not been provided to address this.

6.8 Consultation and Engagement

6.8.1 Since the scheme was announced on 8th November there have been regular virtual meetings of a steering group with membership from across the council and its partners, including voluntary sector partners.

6.8.2 The DWP has hosted a virtual meeting for all local authorities to find out more about the scheme and learn how other local authorities are implementing the scheme. There have also been two meetings for all London boroughs to discuss the implementation.

7 INSIGHT

7.1 Financial modelling was undertaken as set out in section 6.2. The estimated number of children that will be eligible was based on a survey that was undertaken with schools.