

REPORT TITLE	COVID Winter Grant Scheme
REPORT OF	Caroline Laing (Constituency Manager) T/Food & Welfare Support Lead

REPORT SUMMARY

This report outlines proposed indicative spend of the government's COVID Winter Grant Scheme allocation to Wirral (£1,224,616.93).

RECOMMENDATION

That the Director of Neighbourhood Services agrees the indicative local allocation of the above grant as outlined below:

Item	Proposed spend
a) Food & activities holiday provision for school and nursery age children (grants to Neo Community and multiple community-based food providers)	£385,790
b) Financial Support with Welfare Needs scheme	£80,000
c) Financial support with crisis energy (fuel) costs (grant to Fuelbank Foundation)	£100,000
d) Financial support with energy (fuel) and water bills debt	£200,000
e) Crisis support with emergency call-outs (heating)	£30,000
f) Emergency (temporary) heating (grant to Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service £15,400)	£17,325
g) Winter Warmer Packs (grant to Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service)	£20,000
h) Crisis support with essential white goods (grants to community-based providers)	£30,000
i) COVID Winter Fund - Small Grants Programme (grants to multiple community-based food providers)	£250,000
j) Emergency support	£30,000
k) Administration costs (5%)	£61,231
Contingency	£20,270.93
Total	£1,224,616.93

1.0 REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION

- 1.1 The Grant will help the Council continue its intensive work, in partnership with local agencies, groups and organisations, to support those most vulnerable throughout the coronavirus pandemic.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 The option to reject the Grant has been discounted.
- 2.2 Through the Council's Humanitarian Cell, created in response to COVID-19, agencies and third sector partners have been engaged in determining both emergency and sustainable approaches to food and other poverty, the impacts of which on households have been compounded by the pandemic. Members of the Humanitarian Cell's Food Sub-Group were consulted and helped shape the proposed spend that is recommended within this report.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 On 8 November 2020 the government's Department for Work & Pensions announced a significant package of extra targeted financial support for those in need over the winter period. This included:
- £170m COVID Winter Grant Scheme to support children, families and the most vulnerable over winter.
 - Holiday Activities and Food programme to be expanded, covering Easter, Summer and Christmas in 2021.
 - Healthy Start payments set to rise from £3.10 to £4.25 a week from April 2021.
- The Government has also pledged additional funding of £16m for food distribution charities, with conversations with FareShare and others ongoing as to how this is allocated.
- 3.2 Wirral's indicative allocation of the Winter Grant Scheme (subject to Treasury sign-off) is £1,224,616.93; this covers the period 1 December 2020 – 31 March 2021, with an expected go-live date of 1 December 2020. Payments will be made in instalments, with 50% paid in early December 2020. A further 25% will follow in February 2021 (subject to satisfactory return of data and the remainder in April/May 2021 which will be adjusted based on spend (i.e. not all of the allocation will be paid if it has not been spent).
- 3.3 The Grant requires that at least 80% of the total funding is ring-fenced to support families with children, with up to 20% of the total funding to other types of households, including individuals and families without children. Furthermore, at least 80% of the total funding must be ring-fenced to provide support with food, energy and water bills (including sewerage), with up to 20% on other essential items. Whilst the grant may be used to replace Free School Meal provision over the school holidays it is not exclusively for that purpose. Councils have the flexibility to determine the best way to administer the grant within their respective areas.
- 3.4 MI reporting is required in two tranches – February 2021 (covering the period December 2020 & January 2021) and April 2021 (covering the period February 2021 & March 2021). The amount spent on administering the scheme and support

provided will be published and further guidance will follow as to reasonable administration costs which the Council can set aside from the Grant. It has been indicated that the data required to be captured will also include:

- Amount spent on support for (each) food, energy, water, 'other';
- Amount paid to families with children, amount paid to families without children, amount paid to individuals;
- Amount paid to third parties and who;
- Amounts provided for each type of support – i.e. vouchers, cash, bank account, etc.

- 3.5 The Grant was discussed by the Humanitarian Cell's Food Sub-Group on 17 November 2020. The areas of funding outlined below have been developed and agreed in principle with partners. The proposals were made on the basis of direction provided by the DWP with local authorities during a 90-minute call. Since this, draft written guidance has now been received and a further call will take place with the DWP on 24 November 2020, following which final guidance will be published. The proposals will be reviewed to ensure continued consistency with the criteria.

4.0 PROPOSED ALLOCATION OF THE COVID WINTER GRANT SCHEME

- 4.1 The following items of spend are proposed. These figures are indicative and may vary slightly as the various elements are progressed.

a) Food & activities holiday provision for school and nursery age children (£385,790)

A proposal for a project co-ordinated by Neo Community (Feeding Birkenhead), in partnership with Wirral's community feeding groups to provide food (and activities) for Free School Meal eligible children and their families over the school holidays was agreed by the Policy & Resources Committee on 11 November 2020. Following the government's recent announcement of the expansion of the Holidays Activities and Food programme from Easter 2021 and together with the extra funding provided through this Grant, the proposal has subsequently been revised to reflect the shorter operation period (i.e. Christmas 2020 & February half-term 2021), but extended to include breakfast provision for each and every child and enhanced lunch (main meal equivalent, greater quantity and quality of food). The revised costings are set out in Appendix 1; this is based upon an anticipated 56% take up from the Free School Meal cohort. The total cost of the provision is £453,380.

Through the recent discussion with the Food Sub-Group, an extension of this project is further proposed to provide similar support for children of nursery school age. There is a cohort size of 2,000, this is calculated from the number of children eligible for 2-year funding and Early Years Pupil Premium. Reflecting on learning related to Free School Meal eligible children, provision will be made to support 56% of the nursery age cohort. A similar approach to that above will also be adopted with clusters formed between local community feeding groups and nurseries & Council Children's Centres. This is a new area of work and as such it is anticipated that the number of nurseries engaged will increase in February half-term. The total cost of the provision is £78,060.

The overall cost of the project (school age and nursery age) is £531,140. The administration and activities element will be funded through Tranche 4 funding (i.e.

£145,350), the remainder **£385,790** through this grant. Payment to community-based food providers (i.e. £501,140 - the total less the administration cost of £30,000) will be paid directly by the Council through grants.

A governance board consisting of representatives from Wirral Council (Children's Services, Humanitarian Cell), Community Action Wirral, Wirral Development Trust (Fed Up Wallasey), Esdential, Feeding Birkenhead and Neo Community is in place ready to oversee the project. Neo Community will provide the project management - overall co-ordination; grant management; publicity; school, nursery and Children's Centre engagement and directly deliver where gaps are identified.

b) Financial Support with Welfare Needs (£80,000)

This will support the continuation of the provision administered through the Humanitarian Cell of emergency financial support with (specialist) food and other essential items (former Local Welfare Assistance scheme). Financial awards for specialist food from Monday 14 December to Friday 1 January 2021 will be increased to the amounts awarded during the operation of the Emergency Food Hub to cater for the festive break. In addition, financial awards for clothing, which currently excludes help with school uniforms, will be extended to expressly include support with school shoes for the winter period for those in financial crisis.

c) Financial support with crisis energy (fuel) costs - partnership with the Fuelbank Foundation (£100,000)

Fuel poverty, compounded by the impacts of COVID-19, is an increasing concern for local partners. Since 1 August 2020, over 225 crisis awards for fuel (utilities) for people in financial need have been issued through the Council's temporary Financial Support with Welfare Needs scheme. Each £15 award is intended as a one-off, providing only very short-term help. Award is primarily via Allpay (pre-payment) card. There is a complication to the current approach in that the top-up process for British Gas customers is incompatible with Allpay and in such circumstances local charity Involve Northwest has been supporting with British Gas customers (i.e. attending their home and take their fuel card/s for top up at a local outlet). This is a temporary arrangement and not sustainable in the longer-term.

There is also evidence from ongoing analysis that there has been potential misuse of some awards for fuel. It is not possible to interrogate the nature of spend (i.e. what items were bought), but the location of spend (i.e. named retailers) highlights that some has not been spend on utilities. It is not possible to restrict the Allpay cards sufficiently to ensure that only fuel can be bought.

Discussions have been ongoing with registered national charity, Fuelbank Foundation. The Foundation has a 'supplier-agnostic' model, which means that help is targeted where it is needed most and if help is needed it is provided, regardless of who the energy supplier is. Working with referral partners, it can provide meaningful energy advice and timely delivery of cash to the meter to provide the greatest impact in terms of tackling fuel poverty. It provides a greater value award (£49 during the winter months) which is deemed more effective in buying time for local agencies to address the underlying causes of the fuel poverty. The organisation has a 1.6 times referral rate, which means that due to this larger award

and associated advice and support, most people are referred only once or twice at most.

The Foundation seeks that all applications are pre-assessed prior to referral through a basic online form i.e. the referring agency should be satisfied that an award is appropriate. The Foundation however is able to check whether support has been issued previously, including via another partner; it has access to wider information in this respect than the Council and therefore referral does not guarantee an award (although the referrer can 'override' this in specific cases where relevant). Referrals received before 3.30pm will be fulfilled same day with a fuel voucher being sent electronically to the individual by the Fuelbank Foundation.

The Foundation levies a small processing and administration fee to each application (£7.50); this is more than off-set for the Council by removing the time taken to pre-load Allpay cards, the cost of each physical card (£2.99), the cost and officer time to hand deliver to applicants' homes, in addition to greater fraud mitigation. Due to the Foundation's charitable status, it is able to part-match fund the Council's contribution. It is proposed that £100,000 is set aside from this Grant for fuel awards until 31 March 2021; this would enable 1,769 awards (£49, plus £7.50 transaction fee). This will fund not only referrals via the Council's Financial Support with Welfare Scheme, but also from its trusted partners - Citizens Advice Wirral, Involve Northwest and Energy Projects Plus (who will all undertake a robust assessment process prior to referral) for the period.

The Fuelbank Foundation has worked with Wirral Foodbank for five years and also has a relationship with Energy Projects Plus and Citizens Advice Wirral where it already funds emergency fuel vouchers from its charitable funds. The Foundation is keen to work with Wirral since that proposed above will allow a more holistic and joined up service to be delivered and has committed that charitable funds will be available to allow the partnership to continue beyond Wirral's £100k allocation.

It should be noted that Citizens Advice Wirral is being granted £150,000 from Tranche 4 funding to appoint advice workers focused specifically on food and fuel poverty as an extension of its 'Ask Us Wirral' service. Due to this extra capacity, as part of this initiative, awards for crisis support with fuel referred to the Fuelbank Foundation by the Council will automatically result in referral to Citizens Advice Wirral to work with the individual to tackle the underlying causes of their fuel poverty.

d) Financial support with energy (fuel) and water bills debt (£200,000)

Crisis support is needed for households with bill debt related to utilities and will worsen over winter. Citizens Advice Wirral, between 1 May 2020 and 31 October 2020, supported 586 clients with fuel debts; 75% had both utilities (water) and gas/electric debts. Support is available through energy suppliers' trust funds, however their criteria have tightened significantly and many smaller suppliers are simply unable to assist their customers, so many households have not been able to be supported as a result. United Utilities are able to support customers in a number of ways with debts, often match funding any £1 of debt repaid, and work will be undertaken to explore further opportunities with the organisation.

It is proposed that £200,000 is set aside to help individuals in debt with one or more utilities by clearing or making a contribution to their debt balance, up to a maximum

award of £500. Awards will only be fulfilled following a detailed financial assessment by partners Citizens Advice Wirral and Energy Projects Plus and as part of ongoing casework by the respective organisation and determination that reduction in the debt is a necessary element of a catalogue of steps to address the underlying causes. The award will be made directly to the utility provider to mitigate against any misuse. Both organisations will work in partnership to ensure consistency in approach.

In terms of eligibility criteria, support will only be available to families with children or vulnerable individuals (e.g. elderly couple with relevant health issues) and who have accumulated energy or water debt primarily due to the impacts of COVID (i.e. they have been made unemployed, furloughed, have reduced income and/or suffered ill health). This funding presents a unique opportunity to move beyond a temporary short-term fix and positively impact upon the respective household's affordability, with real potential to provide a medium to long-term benefit. The focus of this element will be on breaking the cycle of debt and will enable a minimum of 400 households to be helped.

e) Crisis support with emergency call-outs (heating) (£30,000)

There is no identified support in place for households in financial crisis who need emergency help due to a heating failure (i.e. boiler failure). Organisations can make referrals to Energy Projects Plus to access external funding (the ECHO boiler scheme, via Agility Eco) for a household without financial means, in circumstances where their heating boiler has failed or requires repair. A heating engineer can be booked to assess the boiler and repair if possible or return to replace it where it has failed. It is rare that temporary heating is provided in the interim leaving often vulnerable people without heat, which can often be for a number of weeks. This support is also available for home owners only and is not an emergency response service.

There is an identified gap for households in financial need who require access to an emergency call-out from a heating engineer/plumber (e.g. the water pipe to their boiler has burst). This gap risks households turning to unqualified or unscrupulous tradespeople, loan sharks and/or adding to existing credit card debt.

It is proposed to set aside £30,000 to provide emergency access to a qualified tradesperson for households in financial crisis. Households will be determined in need of support by Energy Projects Plus, who will access an approved list of local tradespeople to arrange an emergency call-out; this will help support local businesses. In terms of eligibility criteria, support will only be available to families with children or vulnerable individuals (e.g. elderly couple with relevant health issues) and where this is not a landlord's responsibility (exceptions will be made for absent or disengaged landlords). This funding will address the initial crisis and the existing scheme referred to above accessed to address any further repair work not resolvable during the emergency call-out. Estimating that each visit may cost in the region of £250 (emergency call-out fee, plus parts and labour) this would support circa 120 households in crisis. Energy Projects Plus is being supported with an allocation of £50,000 from Tranche 4 funding to extend its service, which will also provide the additional capacity to administer this initiative.

f) Emergency temporary heating (£17,325)

Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service (MFRS) undertakes Safe & Well visits to vulnerable households and provides temporary use oil filled radiators in cases where unsafe or inappropriate heating methods are in use. Its business intelligence indicates a clear link between fuel poverty and age vulnerability with methods of unsafe heating. MFRS is currently only able to provide this replacement heating in a very limited number of cases in the borough. An allocation of £15,400 will enable the purchase of additional radiators (£38.50 per unit) to support up to 400 households with a temporary heating solution, deployable by MFRS. Referral routes will be developed further, linking also with Age UK Wirral's Big Community Check-in campaign.

A further 50 radiators will be bought and held by Wirral Community Patrol to deploy in emergency situations (£1,925).

g) Winter Warm Packs (£20,000)

Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service (MFRS) will be running its annual winter warmth campaign, commencing mid-December 2020 until the end of March 2021. £20,000 will enable the purchase of 1,100– 1,300 winter warmth packs with products specifically for older and vulnerable people (such as scarf, gloves, socks, blanket, mug, gilet). These will be distributed across Wirral by MFRS operational crews and fire prevention staff, as well as internal and, potentially, external volunteers.

h) Crisis support with essential white goods (£30,000)

The Council's Financial Support with Welfare Needs scheme provides support with white goods for people in an emergency or disaster situation or being resettled into the community (e.g. from temporary accommodation, prison, hospital, etc.). There are many households that do not meet the criteria but are unable to afford to buy the items. Relaxation of the criteria would result in an overwhelming demand and therefore supporting existing community-based initiatives is a more appropriate short-term option. £30,000 will enable projects to provide help to vulnerable households who do not meet the threshold for Council support. Options are currently being explored, but it is anticipated that grant support will be provided to the BRIS project (St James Centre) and potentially the local St Vincent de Paul Society.

i) COVID Winter Fund - Small Grants Programme (£250,000)

This will enable community-based food and welfare support providers to ensure food and essential supplies are available to those most in need over the winter months. Due to the tight timescales, the Fund will be launched early this week commencing 23 November 2020, however no grants will be issued until the sign off process for the allocation of the DWP grant has been concluded. Bids will be invited for a maximum of £10,000 per organisation. Groups will only be permitted to include administration/infrastructure costs of no more than £250 to ensure that spend remains consistent with the eligibility criteria of the Grant.

Groups engaged within the Humanitarian Cell have been given advance notice of the Fund in order that they can be prepared to bid. It will be administered by the Constituency Teams in Neighbourhood Services and successful applications awarded funding w/c 7 December 2020. Groups/organisations will have until 31

March 2021 to spend the funding and will be subject to the usual audit requirements (submission of receipts, etc.).

j) Emergency support (£30,000)

Additional resource is being put in place to operate the Coronavirus Helpline and Council's Financial Support with Welfare Needs scheme, including Test & Trace Support Payments, during the unpaid leave period between Christmas and New Year. Provision will also be enhanced within Wirral Community Patrol to provide out-of-hours emergency crisis support with food and emergency (fuel) over the four-month period.

k) Administrative costs (£61,231)

The government has advised that any administrative costs must be 'reasonable'. They have been calculated at 5% of the total allocation.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The COVID Winter Grant Scheme allocation is £1,224,616.93.

5.2 The proposed spend figures below are indicative amounts. The table also indicates (subject to receipt of the final guidance) which element of the eligibility criteria it is anticipated that the funding will be assigned to.

Item	Proposed spend	80/20 Household type*	80/20 Support type**
a) Food & activities holiday provision for school and nursery age children (grants to Neo Community and multiple community-based food providers)	£385,790	80	80
b) Financial Support with Welfare Needs scheme	£80,000	80/20	20/80
c) Financial support with crisis energy (fuel) costs (grant to Fuelbank Foundation)	£100,000	80/20	80
d) Financial support with energy (fuel) and water bills debt	£200,000	80/20	80
e) Crisis support with emergency call-outs (heating)	£30,000	80/20	80
f) Emergency (temporary) heating (grant to Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service £15,400)	£17,325	80/20	80
g) Winter Warmer Packs (grant to Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service)	£20,000	20	80
h) Crisis support with essential white goods (grants to community-based providers)	£30,000	80	20
i) COVID Winter Fund - Small Grants Programme (grants to multiple community-based food providers)	£250,000	80/20	80
j) Emergency support	£30,000	80	80
k) Administration costs (5%)	£61,231	~	~

Contingency	£20,270.93	~	~
Total	£1,224,616.93		

* Indicates if the spend is likely to fall within the 80% support to families with children or 20% support to individuals and families without children.

** Indicates if the spend is likely to fall within the 80% support with food, energy and water bills or 20% support with other essential items.

5.3 Any relevant documentation will be completed in compliance with the Procurement rules.

6.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 The spend proposed is consistent with the terms of the grant.

6.2 Any grant funding issued will require adhere to GDPR, health and safety, including social distancing and other COVID-related requirements.

6.3 Grants issued and procurement specified will be in line with the Council's Contract Procedure Rules.

7.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

7.1 Oversight of the project will be undertaken by the Temporary Lead for Food & Welfare Support (COVID-19), within the structure of the Humanitarian Cell. Administrative support with the grant programmes and wider delivery being managed within the Cell is currently being identified.

8.0 RELEVANT RISKS

8.1 Contingency has been built in to the proposal to allow for any excess demand in relation to any particular project outlined.

8.2 The proposals have been considered with partners, taking into account factors such as risks, gaps in service, priorities, lead-in times and capacity.

9.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

9.1 The proposals are the outcome of engagement with partners engaged in the Humanitarian Cell Food Sub-Group. The proposals have been agreed in principle by both the Council's Tactical Co-ordination Group and Strategic Co-ordination Group. The proposals have also been discussed with Group Leaders and shared with the Chair and respective Party Spokespeople of the Children, Young People and Education Committee as they were tasked by Policy & Resources Committee to lead on the Council's medium and long term approach to Free School Meals .

10.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 Wirral Council has a legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work, do not discriminate against anyone. An Equality Impact Assessment is a tool to help council services identify steps they can take to ensure equality for anyone who might be affected by a particular policy, decision or activity.

11.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 Delivery of some of the projects outlined will create carbon emissions, but this is necessary due to the very nature of the pandemic. Due to some families self-isolating and the need to minimise contact between households, even within a COVID-safe environment, it is not appropriate for some activities to be hosted within local community facilities, which would be the preferred method of delivery in ordinary circumstances.
- 11.2 Projects involving the supply of food will seek to source that locally where practical and cost-effective to do so.
- 11.3 The proposed partnership with the Fuelbank Foundation will see a significant reduction in the number of deliveries required by Wirral Community Patrol, reducing carbon emissions. In addition, most local support organisations have adopted their operating models to be primarily online/via telephone, rather than face-to-face; reducing carbon emissions further.
- 11.4 The work of Energy Projects Plus in alignment with the grant will assist with greater energy efficiency and/or the reduction of carbon emissions for individual households.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Holiday food & activities for school and nursery age children – costings.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

The Provision of Food & Activities for Children in School Holidays During the Covid-19 Pandemic, Policy & Resources Committee, 11 November 2020.

COVID Winter Grant Scheme – Draft Guidance for County Councils and Unitary Authorities, Department for Work & Pensions.

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Policy & Resources Committee	11 November 2020