



Classification	Item No.
Open / Closed	

Meeting:	EMERGENCY POWERS GROUP
Meeting date:	23 November 2020
Title of report:	Welfare and Food Hardship
Report by:	Councillor Eamon O'Brien, Leader of the Council
Decision Type:	Key Decision
Ward(s) to which report relates	All

1 Executive Summary

- 1.1 In response to the Covid pandemic both the Government and the Council has taken steps to provide additional financial support to residents and businesses suffering financial hardship across the borough. In addition to this, the Government has recently announced further support for food hardship and this report sets out proposals on how the funding is to be utilised.

- 1.2 Demand for welfare support is likely to change as the Covid situation continues and there are potential trigger points such as when the furlough arrangements end. There are known vulnerable groups but new ones are emerging as the pandemic impacts even wider on our businesses and on our employment levels. Some people are therefore finding themselves in a hardship and welfare situation for the first time and considering how we provide support and the mechanisms for support needs to be taken into account.

- 1.3 Allocation of funding between the various schemes may therefore need to flex should the pattern for demand be different to that anticipated and this will be kept under review.
- 1.4 The role of community groups and our partners in welfare and food hardship needs to be considered and it is felt that some form of consultation would be beneficial in developing a final offer within the borough. This report therefore sets out an outline approach and draft criteria that will be subject to consultation with our partners and the submitted for final approval.
- 1.5 The decision is urgent to respond to the increased demand for welfare support across the borough.

2 Recommendations

2.1 Cabinet is asked to:

- **Approve the extension of the additional criteria to the welfare scheme that was agreed June and that this be continued until the end of March 2021;**
- **Approve an allocation of £140,000 to support a food poverty offer across the borough;**
- **Note the intention to work with partners to develop a fundraising opportunity to support a wider food offer to vulnerable people in the community;**
- **Approve the allocation of £89,549 to the Council's welfare scheme and that the criteria for the scheme be extended to cover those suffering financial hardship as a result of Covid self-isolation requirements and who are ineligible for the national and discretionary schemes;**
- **Note that consultation with the voluntary and community sectors be undertaken to help shape and influence the final criteria;**
- **Note the availability of new systems to support a more effective payments mechanism for some residents and that these are being introduced and can be funded from existing monies.**

3 Background

DEFRA Grant

- 3.1 The Government has announced an emergency fund of £63 million to be distributed to local authorities in England to help those who are struggling to afford food and other essentials due to COVID-19. The funding is a one-off contribution for the 2020-21 financial year and is made under Section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003.

- 3.2 The funding allocation model distributes funds to local authorities on the basis of population weighted by a proxy measure of need, the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) for the authority area. The allocation for Bury Metropolitan Borough Council under this model is £229,549.
- 3.3 The grant criteria states that Local Authorities should:
- *use discretion on how to identify and support those most in need;*
 - *use the funding to meet immediate need and help those who are struggling to afford food and essentials due to COVID-19*
 - *use the funding for existing schemes and other support which deliver the same outcomes and where the need is greatest*
 - *work together with other local authorities to provide support and ensure the funding meets its objectives*
- 3.4 When deciding how to help people, we should consider:
- *using cash or vouchers where practical - this may reduce pressure on your local partners*
 - *advising and providing information to people to help them access longer term support they might need, such as benefits - you should decide which approach is suitable in your community*

Current Offer

- 3.5 In Bury, there are a number of welfare, hardship and assistance schemes already in operation. Decisions have been made throughout recent months in order to respond to the emerging crisis and the issues that were presenting at that time amongst our most vulnerable residents. As a result, some of the existing schemes have been extended and enhanced in response to the Covid situation including the allocation of additional funding to the Council's welfare scheme.
- 3.6 An expansion of the welfare scheme criteria was also previously agreed to provide support to help eligible claimants meet costs including travel to work, purchase of white goods and set up costs relating to a new home (for those moving from temporary accommodation) and also any equipment needed to enable them to work in a more agile way and retain employment. The revised criteria for the welfare scheme was approved until the end of November and approval is sought for this to be extended for the remainder of the financial year.
- 3.7 Additional funding to the Council's hardship fund which has enabled funding allocations to foodbanks across the borough to be made have also been put in place. A summary of these is attached at Appendix A.
- 3.8 Monitoring of the various schemes is in place and suggests there is still sufficient funding available within the schemes and this has provided an opportunity to consider how best the Defra grant can be utilised. In the last

two weeks however, demand has increased significantly particularly since the launch of the self-isolation scheme and the proposed approach takes account of emerging need, the profile of which is changing as the impact of the Covid pandemic continues.

- 3.9 In developing the current offer, it has been established that there are simple technologies used by other councils (including those in GM) that would offer a more accessible and dignified offer to our residents. The way in which our residents receive support as therefore been considered and is reflected in the proposed approach.
- 3.10 The role of the voluntary and community sector in supporting vulnerable people is recognised and it is proposed that prior to the final determination of the scheme, that the views of the sector be obtained through consultation.
- 3.11 A primary focus on the Council is to support residents to be financially independent in the longer term and to reduce reliance on short term support. The Council introduced an enhanced offer with the Citizen's Advice Bureau to work alongside the community hubs and the Benefits Service to support residents in managing their finances including maximising the benefits they are entitled to. This offer also includes helping residents complete on-line applications for benefits.
- 3.12 Demand for support has increased significantly following the launch of the government's self-isolation scheme. Early analysis of data shows that there is a high percentage of claimants who are not eligible for the scheme, a significant factor being that not all are in receipt of benefits. In these cases, further work is being carried out with to look at alternative options for support including the welfare scheme which is creating additional pressure on the fund.
- 3.13 At the same time, the benefits team are also working to establish whether benefits are claimable and also whether support from the Council's offer with the Citizen's Advice Bureau. This approach maximises the entitlement for benefits and provides financial advice and support.
- 3.14 Uptake of the CAB offer has been lower than expected and has been lower than pre-Covid although this is starting to increase. Possible reasons for reduced uptake are lack of face to face meeting opportunities as a result of Covid and also the fact that debt enforcement (including eviction notices) cease during Covid. Historically these have been triggers for people seeking help. The views of the CAB, voluntary and community groups will be sought as part of the consultation to identify possible barriers and solutions that will increase the uptake of the advice.

4 DEFRA proposal

4.1 It is proposed that the Defra monies be targeted to support:

- Food poverty
- Hardship including to those who are affected by self-isolation requirements

Food Related Schemes

4.2 The Council has offered a food offer to vulnerable children over the Summer holidays and is continuing to do so over the October half term. A continuation of the food offer to cover the Christmas and February half term holidays is proposed. Various offers have been made available including Fit and Fed, and the offer will be tailored to reflect feedback and feedback from key partners.

4.3 Food vouchers are already used by the Council to support those who require crisis and welfare support. The scheme has been extended to include residents who are working but are still suffering from food hardship.

4.4 Evidence to date suggests that residents requesting support with food hardship want the choice of fresh food rather than a standard food box. In recognition of this it is proposed that the food voucher scheme be extended to provide options of:

- Vouchers that can be used at food stalls at Bury market
- Vouchers for local supermarket
- Electronic vouchers that are cashable through the Payzone system

4.5 Foodbanks across the borough have received support over recent months and this is still a feature of the existing welfare scheme. It is however recognised that foodbanks may benefit from other types of support include storage space. Engagement with foodbanks will be undertaken to establish whether there is any additional non-financial support that could be provided.

4.6 It is proposed that £140k be set aside for a food offer. The full details of the scheme will be developed in conjunction with partners.

4.7 In addition to this, the option of working with partners to establish a community funding approach will be developed. Local Councils in other parts of Greater Manchester have adopted a similar approach and this has proven to be successful so far. It is envisaged that the funds raised will support the proposed food offer and will enable further development and potential enhancements dependent upon the availability of funding.

Hardship as a result of Self-Isolation due to Covid

4.8 In recognition of the rise in infection rates and the need for some residents to self-isolate it is proposed that the remaining funding be added to the welfare scheme and that the criteria be extended to cover those who are ineligible for

the national and discretionary schemes but are suffering financial hardship as a result of self-isolation. This includes parents of school age children who may not be able to go to work should their child be in a cohort of children sent home from school due to Covid. There are likely to be other cohorts both existing and emerging as a result of Covid and the views of the voluntary and community sectors in identifying these would be useful in determining the criteria.

- 4.9 It is proposed that the remaining funding, £89,549, be made available to support the development of a discretionary scheme.

5 Systems and Processes

- 5.1 Advances in technology mean that there are new opportunities for 'paying' vouchers and making credit, i.e. for fuel, available in a more accessible way. Not only is this quick and efficient but, for some claimants, it can remove the stigma of using vouchers particularly for those residents who may have found themselves in a hardship/crisis situation for the first time. The opportunity to introduce new systems including Payzone and Paypoint are being explored and it is proposed that the costs will be met from the existing welfare funds that have been made available.

6 Consultation

- 6.1 The proposed approach is based on evidence and information collated from a number of council services that support vulnerable people and those in need of benefit advice and welfare support. It is recognised that the Voluntary and Community sectors across the borough work with the same cohort of residents and will have valuable insight that may help shape and develop the proposals further. It is proposed that a short consultation exercise be undertaken with the networks already established and that final proposals come forward for approval.

7 Recommendations:

7.1 Cabinet is asked to:

- **Approve the extension of the additional criteria to the welfare scheme that was agreed June and that this be continued until the end of March 2021;**
- **Approve an allocation of £140,000 to support a food poverty offer across the borough;**
- **Note the intention to work with partners to develop a fundraising opportunity to support a wider food offer to vulnerable people in the community;**
- **Approve the allocation of £89,549 to the Council's welfare scheme and that the criteria for the scheme be extended to cover those suffering financial hardship as a result of Covid self-isolation**

requirements and who are ineligible for the national and discretionary schemes;

- Note that consultation with the voluntary and community sectors be undertaken to help shape and influence the final criteria;
- Note the availability of new systems to support a more effective payments mechanism for some residents and that these are being introduced and can be funded from existing monies.

Community impact

There are no community impacts arising from this report.

Equality Impact and considerations:

24. Under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the 'general duty' on public authorities is set out as follows:

A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to -

- (a) *eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;*
- (b) *advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;*
- (c) *foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.*

25. *The public sector equality duty (specific duty) requires us to consider how we can positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations, and demonstrate that we are paying 'due regard' in our decision making in the design of policies and in the delivery of services.*

Assessment of Risk:

The following risks apply to the decision:

Risk / opportunity	Mitigation
The scheme is a national one and must be implemented as per national guidelines. If the scheme is not implemented, the council would not be complying with national guidance and eligible residents in Bury would lose out on financial	Implementation of the scheme as per the report.

support. Failure to implement the scheme may also mean that some residents that have been asked to self-isolate don't do so due to financial pressures. This could impact adversely on the R rate within the Bury area.	
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Consultation:

The Bury Food Aid network will be consulted as part of the consultation process for the final details of the schemes and of the enhanced criteria for the Council's welfare scheme.

Legal Implications:

The proposals are in line with the Council's response to the current Covid situation. They do not give rise to any legal implications, but clarity around the eligibility criteria for certain elements will be required. The risks noted in the report must be addressed and a failure to do so could lead to legal challenge, financial and reputational risk.

Financial Implications:

The proposals outlined in the report will maximise the use of the grant funding available. There is the potential that demand for support will exceed the level of funding available and the situation will need to be carefully monitored as the impact of the pandemic continues. The opportunity to further extend a food offer, in conjunction with key partners, may be possible through additional fundraising opportunities that can be created across the borough.

Report Author and Contact Details:

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Background papers:

Please include a glossary of terms, abbreviations and acronyms used in this report.

Term	Meaning
MHCLG	Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government

Briefing Note

Welfare Support in response to Covid Pandemic

Background

The Covid pandemic has placed significant pressure on individuals and businesses across the Borough. To respond to those, Bury Council has put in place some specific support for those most in need. Some of this support has been funded from grant provided by the government but for which councils were given some discretion on how it could be used and other support has been funded by reallocating existing Council funding to reflect new and emerging priorities.

This report sets out the specific funding that has been made available to individuals. In total more than £400k has been targeted to the most vulnerable individuals in the borough with support ranging from immediate crisis support to longer term financial sustainability through benefit maximisation and support for those returning to work including those identified as 'working poverty'.

Detail

The main sources of support for individuals since the Covid pandemic started includes:

- Hardship Funding
- Welfare Support
- Support for Foodbanks

Hardship Funding

Additional funding made available through a national allocation from the government was allocated as follows:

- **Crisis Payments (£50k)**

These payments are made to those residents who are facing a crisis situation and seek assistance from the council through its hardship fund. Additional funding was made available to support the increased number of requests that were being received as a result of Covid.

- **Council Tax Discretionary Fund (£50k)**

The number of claimants for the council's discretionary fund has increased however the current criteria does not enable those suffering from short term financial hardship to benefit from the fund. In recognition of the fact that some residents would be faced with short term income loss, the scheme criteria. The level of benefit is £150 which is equivalent to the government support made available to working age claimants eligible for the council tax support scheme.

- **Discretionary Housing Payments (£50k)**

This is to support the increase in demand for discretionary housing payments which is on top of the £440k DWP funding available. Local Authorities are permitted to top up the fund and no changes to the current scheme were needed.

- **Resettlement Cases (£50k)**

An increase in resettlement cases was anticipated once restrictions on evictions were lifted. In recognition of this, additional funding was added to the welfare budget to support the purchase of essential household equipment such as white goods, curtains, carpets and also temporary storage costs. This required a change in the current welfare scheme.

- **Working Poverty (£85k)**

Access to £150 one-off payments/grants was added to the scheme to support those households that are working but still experiencing poverty. The current welfare scheme does not provide support for those in this situation and the welfare scheme was extended to reflect this requirement. The scheme was also extended to include support travel costs and one-off home working set up costs for those returning to work. Of the funding made available, £35k was allocated from an underspend on members discretionary grants.

- **Citizens Advice Offer (£100k)**

A new service level agreement was agreed with the Citizen's Advice Bureau to provide support to those in financial difficulty and to also support residents in accessing and maximising all of the benefits to which they are entitled with the view of ensuring longer term financial sustainability and less reliance on short term finding.

- **Foodbanks (£22k)**

Funding of £22k has been made available to support local foodbanks across the borough. This was made from the existing hardship fund.

CONCLUSION

Significant levels of funding has been targeted to the most vulnerable individuals across the borough. Demand for support is increasing and the number of residents eligible for benefits has increased significantly and is likely to continue to do so as the Covid pandemic continues. A further spike once the furlough scheme ends is anticipated. The situation will be kept under review to sure that the schemes are able to support the demand and where this is not possible, additional measures may need to be considered.