

# URGENT DECISION FORM



**TO BE UPLOADED ON TO THE INTERNET BY DEMOCRATIC SERVICES**

<b>Date:</b> 23 November 2020	<b>Ref No:</b>	
<b>Type of Decision:</b>		
<b>Cabinet Decision</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Council Decision</b>
<b>Key</b>	X	<b>Non-Key</b>
<b>Subject matter:</b> Winter Grant Scheme		
<b>Reason for Urgency:</b> The grant has been made available to the Council in response to the Covid pandemic. Approval is required so that the grant can be utilised.		
<b>Freedom of Information Status</b>		
<b>Equality Impact Assessment</b>	No	
<b>Decision taken:</b> Approve the utilisation of the Winter Grant as set out in the report and note the funding made available to Bury.		
<b>Decision taken by:</b>	<b>Signature:</b>	<b>Date:</b>
Chief/Senior Officer/Cabinet Chair		
<b>After consultation with:</b>		
Cabinet Member (if a Key Decision) or Chair or Lead Member (as appropriate)		
If it is a Key Decision, the Chair of Scrutiny Committee to agree that the decision cannot be deferred		

<p>Opposition Leader or nominated spokesperson (Council Decision) or</p> <p>Leader or Majority Group Member on Overview and Scrutiny Committee (if a Key Decision) to agree that the decision cannot be deferred</p>		
<p>Leader of second largest Opposition Group (if a Key/Council Decision) to agree that the decision cannot be deferred</p>		

## **1 Introduction**

- 1.1 The government has 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. For Bury a total of £619,418 has been made available.
- 1.2 The aim of the grant 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, so every child will be warm and well-fed this winter. This report sets out the proposals for Bury in utilising the funding.

## **2 Background**

- 2.1 The objective of the COVID Winter Grant 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.
- 2.2 The grant guidance sets out the required collaboration between DWP, 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 we need to work within and the distribution of funding and reporting arrangements.
- 2.3 The guidance states '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. Targeting this money effectively will ease the burden faced by a wide range of vulnerable households across the country worrying about paying the next utility bill or the next food shop due to the pandemic'.
- 2.4 Rather than focus on one specific vulnerable group Authorities have been asked to try and use the wide range of data and sources of information at their disposal to identify and provide support to a broad cross section of vulnerable households in their area. Authorities have access to a variety of different benefit information through DWP's Searchlight portal which provides information on individual citizen's entitlement to (and confirms receipt of) DWP welfare benefits. However, support is not restricted to vulnerable households in receipt of benefits. Therefore, Authorities should try, where possible, to use other sources of information to identify vulnerable households, such as, social workers, troubled families' advisors, and utility company vulnerable household lists.

2.5 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. 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. For example, this would allow food vouchers issued before the end of the funding period to be redeemed in April 2021
- work together with District Councils including, where necessary and appropriate, other local services, such as social and care workers to help identify and support households within the scope of the scheme.

2.6 When deciding how to help people, Local Authorities are asked to consider:

- how 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

### **Working with other organisations**

2.7 Authorities are required to 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 (see the definition of a vulnerable household under paragraph 25 below) over the winter period. A proportion of funding (up to 20%) is also available for vulnerable households without children (including individuals) so that no vulnerable household is excluded.

### **Establishing eligibility**

2.8 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 mixture 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.

2.9 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.

2.10 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.

### **Funding overlap**

2.11 Authorities are asked to 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

## **3 Administering the Scheme**

3.1 The scheme will be administered by the Council's Revenues and Benefits Service and will operate in line with the government criteria. In line with expectations the scheme will be used to fund a free school meal entitlement to eligible children for the school holidays that fall within the current financial year. The service will work as part of the Council's internal Anti Poverty Strategy Group as well as the external Bury Community Support Network Group to identify the cohort of individuals. This group is a key partner and is already working with the Council on issues of food welfare.

### **Financial implications**

The cost of the proposal will be met from the grant funding that has been made available.

### **Legal implications**

The proposals are in line with the Council's ongoing response to the current Covid situation. The legal implications are referenced in the report in terms of the Council ensuring it is complying with relevant statutory, but clarity around the eligibility criteria for certain elements will be required. Legal and Data Protection Officer advice and support will be required in relation to processing personal data to enable lawful administration of scheme.

### **Associated Risks**

There are no associated risk from the proposal. Not making arrangement for the utilisation of the group would mean that support needed by the most vulnerable families in the borough would not be received.

## **Conclusion**

### **To:**

**Approve the utilisation of the Winter Grant as set out in the report and note the funding made available to Bury.**

Lisa Kitto  
Interim Director of Financial Transformation  
20 November 2020