

REPORT TITLE	COVID Local Support Grant – extension No.2 (21 June – 30 September 2021)
REPORT OF	Nicola Butterworth (Director of Neighbourhood Services)

REPORT SUMMARY

This report outlines proposed indicative spend of a further extension to the government's COVID Local Support Grant (£1,152,580.64), which is available to support those most in need with the cost of food, energy (heating, cooking, lighting), water bills (including sewerage) and other essentials.

Under the Special Urgency provisions in the Council's Constitution (Part 4, Section 2, paragraph 13 (e)) the Mayor has agreed that the decision can be taken immediately, having not appeared on the Council's Forward Plan of key decisions.

Under the Urgency provision of the Constitution, Part 4 – Decision Review, Paragraph 9, the Chief Executive has agreed to this decision as a matter of urgency and that it not be subject to call-in, as any delay could seriously prejudice the Council's or public interest.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) That the Director of Neighbourhood Services agrees the indicative local allocation of the COVID Local Support Grant (extension no. 2) as outlined below:

Item	Proposed indicative spend
Supplement the Holiday Activities Fund (HAF)	£200,000
Food & resilience for families in need of additional support (summer holidays)	£300,000
COVID Local Support Summer Fund – small grants programme	£300,000
Welcome Back to School Food Support Packs	£123,750
Financial support with energy (fuel) and water bills debt	£125,000
Crisis support with emergency call-outs and boiler repairs/replacements	£20,000
Crisis support with white goods	£17,000
Contingency	£9,200.64
Administration costs (5%)	£57,630
	£1,152,580.64

- 2) A progress report on outcomes achieved will be provided through the relevant Committee following conclusion of the Grant.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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 extension has been discounted, as this would mean that funding available to the Council is not utilised to support vulnerable households.
- 2.2 Different financial allocations to the various projects would not have reflected actual capacity to deliver.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 This report is further to the Officer Decision taken on 24 November 2020 for the allocation of the £1,224,616.93 COVID Winter Grant Scheme to Wirral by the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP). This Grant covered the period 1 December 2020 – 31 March 2021. The Decision is set out here: <http://democracy.wirral.gov.uk/ieDecisionDetails.aspx?ID=4778>
- 3.2 A further Officer Decision was taken on 16 March 2021 regarding an extension to the Grant (£425,734), taking the end date of the Grant to 16 April 2021. The Decision is set out here: <http://democracy.wirral.gov.uk/ieDecisionDetails.aspx?ID=4824>
- 3.3 Management Information (MI) submitted to the DWP showed full spend of the Grant, with 59,788 awards to vulnerable households in Wirral recorded. Awards included food hampers, meals, bespoke food shopping, supermarket vouchers, fuel vouchers, essential supplies, white goods, essential furniture, warm clothing, emergency heating, emergency boiler repairs/replacements and help with utility debt.
- 3.4 On 14 April 2021, the DWP provided details of a further extension to the Grant; renamed the COVID Local Support Grant with a further £40m of national support for the period 17 April 2021 to 20 June 2021. A further Officer Decision was taken on 20 April 2021 regarding Wirral's allocation of £288,145. The Decision is set out here: <https://democracy.wirral.gov.uk/ieDecisionDetails.aspx?ID=4847>
- 3.5 On 21 June 2021, the DWP provided details of a further extension to the Grant; the COVID Local Support No. 2 Grant with a further £160m of national support for the period 21 June 2021 to 30 September 2021. £1.152m (£1,152,580.64) is to be made available to Wirral. The same terms and conditions apply as with previous iterations of the Grant.

3.6 An MI return for the period 17 April – 20 June 2021 is currently being drafted, due for submission to the DWP no later than 9 July 2021; this will now become an interim return. This will show full spend of the Grant allocated for the period (although any underspends could now be carried forward to the new grant period). A final MI return for the full period (21 June – 30 September 2021) is due 22 October 2021. The DWP has indicated that the Grant will not be extended further after this period.

4.0 PROPOSED INDICATIVE SPEND

4.1 The following items of spend are proposed. These figures are indicative and may vary as the various elements are progressed and demand for each established.

4.2 Supplement the Holiday Activities Fund (HAF) (£200,000)

The Holiday Activities Fund is funded by the Department for Education; Wirral has partnered with Edsential for the delivery of this programme. The programme is focused upon providing enriching activities and food to children through face-to-face delivery. Whilst there is no requirement for the COVID Local Support No.2 Grant to supplement HAF, this is an option discussed at national level.

4.2.1 It is proposed that £200,000 is allocated to the food element of the HAF programme over the summer which is consistent within the terms of the Grant. This will release HAF funding to be utilised later in the year enabling either a greater number of children and young people to be engaged and/or enhance the programme available.

4.3 COVID Local Support Summer Fund – small grants programme (£300,000)

A further small grants programme will enable community-based food and welfare support providers to ensure food and essential supplies are available to those most in need over the summer months. The Fund will be launched on Monday 12 July 2021. Bids will be invited for a maximum of £15,000 per project. Groups will be permitted to add administration costs of no more than £500 which will form part of the administration costs set aside for the whole Grant (in line with the Grant conditions).

4.3.1 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 19 July 2021. Groups/organisations will have until 30 September 2021 to spend the funding and will be subject to the established audit requirements (submission of receipts, etc.), which is consistent with the monitoring of previous small grants programmes.

4.3.2 Despite the demand for food support from schools, local groups and organisations increasing, the number of referrals to Citizens Advice Wirral from these sources is very limited. This risks missing an opportunity to tackle the underlying issues of food poverty and potentially increasing dependency. It will therefore be a requirement of the COVID Local Support Summer Fund that recipient organisations proactively provide signposting support and referral in cases where this is not currently being provided.

4.4 **Food and resilience for vulnerable families in need of additional support during the summer holidays (£300,000)**

- 4.4.1 Building upon previous support provided through the Grant during school holidays predominately to Free School Meal eligible children and in order to mitigate the risk of dependency on temporary holiday support, a new (yet to be branded) project will run from 9 August 2021 for up to six weeks.
- 4.4.2 The project will be open to vulnerable families to opt-in, via a simple online form. Partners and support services can submit on a family's behalf with their consent. Each family will receive one or more (subject to demand) fresh healthy meals to feed up to four people, with the ingredients and recipe cards delivered directly to their home (value, £30 per hamper). In addition, one enhanced hamper of fresh meat and vegetables will be provided (value, £45) and recipients encouraged to share their recipes via social media to help other families. The total number of hampers provided will range between two and four per family depending on demand for the project.
- 4.4.3 The focus of this project is not just upon providing households in need with nutritious food at a time when many will be struggling but providing an activity for the whole family to engage in and a sustainable outcome. The project will be supported by interactive step-by-step videos produced by key workers as well as qualified local chefs. Local small food businesses will also be promoted as part of the project. There will be a follow up evaluation, with competitions linked to Wirral Food & Drink Festival 2022, along with links to budgeting support, other activities, resources and signposting.
- 4.4.4 The project will be co-ordinated by Neo Community, who has successfully co-ordinated previous holiday food provision on behalf of the Council utilising the Grant. Provision is made within the budget for up to 4,000 families to be supported.
- 4.4.5 The breakdown of anticipated costs for this project is outlined below.

Food meal hampers (anticipated maximum 4,000)	£300,000
Administration costs (Project management and logistics by Neo Community)	£5,000
Administration costs (Online application and marketing costs)	£7,000

- 4.4.6 The administration costs form part of the administration costs set aside for the whole Grant (in line with the Grant conditions).
- 4.4.7 There is the potential to explore further partnerships and sponsorship opportunities to make this an annual summer event to help build a strong network of education, advice and cooking skills.
- 4.5 **Welcome Back to School Food Support Packs (£123,750)**
Schools rely heavily on community-based food providers to help support families in need with food. A critical time for families and in turn schools, is at the start of term after the summer holidays when many families have spent household budgets on school uniforms leaving little money left for other necessities.

4.5.1 Schools will be invited to opt-in for the provision of Welcome Back to School Food Support Packs (value, £1,650 per school) for an end of summer pantry to help families in need with ambient food. The co-ordination of the initiative, including the purchase and distribution of food to schools (end of August and mid-September 2021) and administration of the MI returns, will be project managed by Neo Community who has strengthened their relationship with many schools across the borough through delivery of various projects through this Grant.

4.5.2 The breakdown of anticipated costs for this project is outlined below.

Welcome Back Packs (anticipated maximum 75 schools)	£123,500
Administration costs (Project management by Neo Community)	£3,000

4.6 **Financial support with energy (fuel) and water bills debt (£125,000)**

The COVID Winter Grant Scheme and COVID Local Support Grant have collectively funded the reduction/clearance of £179,609 utility debts from individuals engaged with Citizens Advice Wirral and Energy Projects Plus. In many cases this has enabled households to now switch energy suppliers and move to more affordable fuel tariffs; enabling them to use heating and power that was often severely rationed due to financial pressures. The positive impact of this project on physical and mental health has been demonstrable. Debt amounts over £500 will continue to be authorised for clearance by the Assistant Director for Neighbourhoods, Safety and Transport.

4.7 **Crisis support with emergency call-outs and boiler replacements (£20,000)**

Following the sudden cessation of another key external funding stream that paid for replacement boilers for households in financial hardship, this new project funded by the Grant was extended to include not just emergency repairs but also emergency boiler replacements in specific circumstances. This further funding is not anticipated until circa October 2021 and therefore a further allocation of funding through the Grant will enable this vital work by Energy Projects Plus to continue in the interim.

4.8 **Crisis support with essential white goods (£17,000)**

Throughout the various iterations of the Grant, community-based partners, North Birkenhead Development Trust and St Vincent de Paul Society (Wirral), have provided white goods and other essential items to vulnerable households who do not meet the threshold for Council support through its Financial Support with Welfare Needs Scheme. A further allocation of funding will see this support continue over the coming months.

4.9 Any projected underspend on the Grant as projects progress may be used to fund relevant awards for food, utilities and/or essential items made to vulnerable households through the Council's temporary Financial Support with Welfare Needs Scheme.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The COVID Local Support No.2 Grant allocation is £1,152,580.64. This is for the period of 21 June 2021 – 30 September 2021.

5.2 The table below outlines proposed indicative spend. Administration costs for the second, third and fourth projects are factored in to the overall administration costs for the Grant.

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5.3 There is no financial risk to the Council if the full Grant is not expended, as the Grant payment by the Department for Work & Pensions will be based upon actual spend as detailed by Wirral’s final monitoring (MI) return.

6.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

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

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

7.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

7.1 Oversight of the project will continue to be undertaken by the Temporary Lead for Food & Welfare Support (COVID-19), within the structure of the Humanitarian Cell.

8.0 RELEVANT RISKS

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

8.2 Financial risks have been considered and measures put in place to mitigate against misuse and/or use that is inconsistent with the Grant conditions.

8.3 There will be frequent dialogue with project leads to limit the likelihood of any underspend (or overspend) at conclusion of the Grant period.

9.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

9.1 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.

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.

10.2 This report has no direct impact for equalities; however, any associated actions may need an equality impact assessment.

11.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

11.1 The production of carbon emissions has been limited wherever possible.

11.2 Smaller scale projects involving the supply of food will seek to source that locally where practical and cost-effective to do so.

11.3 The work of Energy Projects Plus in alignment with the Grant (emergency call-outs) will continue to assist with greater energy efficiency and/or the reduction of carbon emissions for individual households.

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APPENDICES

None.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

COVID Local Support Grant extension: – Guidance for County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England.

Officer Decision Report – COVID Local Support Grant (COVID Winter Grant Scheme – extension), 20 April 2021.

COVID Local Support Grant: – Guidance for County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England, Department for Work & Pensions.

Officer Decision Report – COVID Winter Grant Scheme, 16 March 2021.

Working Group Update: The Provision of Food & Activities for Children in School Holidays During the COVID 19 Pandemic, Children, Young People & Education Committee, 28 January 2021.

Holiday Food and Activities for School and Nursery Age Children During Holidays, Children, Young People & Education Committee, 1 December 2020.

Officer Decision Report – COVID Winter Grant Scheme, 24 November 2020.

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 – Guidance for County Councils and Unitary Authorities, Department for Work & Pensions.

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Officer Decision Report – COVID Local Support Grant (COVID Winter Grant Scheme – extension)	20 April 2021
Officer Decision Report – COVID Winter Grant Scheme	16 March 2021
Children, Young People & Education Committee	28 January 2021
Children, Young People & Education Committee	1 December 2020
Officer Decision Report – COVID Winter Grant Scheme	24 November 2020
Policy & Resources Committee	11 November 2020