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## **COVID-19 RESPONSE – UPDATE ON PROPOSALS TO FURTHER SUPPORT INDIVIDUALS FACING FINANCIAL HARDSHIP**

**Report by Director - Resilient Communities**

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### **EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

**16 NOVEMBER 2021**

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#### **1 SUMMARY AND PURPOSE**

- 1.1 This report presents an update in relation to the allocation of the Scottish Government “Addressing future need to support individuals at financial risk 2020/21” Fund. It also provides further proposals to provide wider financial support to those individuals who require additional help.**
- 1.2 A previous paper, approved by Elected Members on 9 February 2021, detailed £20m of funding announced by Scottish Government to be made available to Local Authorities to support those in financial hardship, of which £330k was available to Scottish Borders Council for Food and Financial Insecurity. Further funding announced by Scottish Government has meant that a further allocation of £330k is now available, giving a total of £660k.
- 1.3 At that meeting in February, Executive Committee approved a set of recommendations in relation to the Financial Insecurity Fund, and delegated the Director of Resilient Communities to award funding as per the areas detailed within Appendix A.
- 1.4 The funding to both foodbanks/FareShare providers and Eildon Housing provided much needed assistance in the provision of white goods, transport and top up of food packs for those specifically who were self-isolating. Hardship payments of £75 have been made to individuals totalling over £99k.
- 1.5 This paper is seeking approval for £100k in relation to the extension of the Warm and Well scheme, £26k for a Scottish Child Payment Bridging Payment, £117k to enhance the Clothing Grants Scheme, £121k to create an Inclusion Fund and £45k for a range of existing third sector networks, Community Planning Partners (including Registered Social Landlords) and any other groups or other organisations.
- 1.6 A Financial Insecurity Group made up of relevant Officers and led by the Director - Resilient Communities, have continued to meet on a regular basis

to discuss the funding. The proposed allocation of the next phase of funding is presented at Sections 5 and 6, which as previous, is based on the Scottish Government guidance, main objectives and the expected outcomes of the fund.

- 1.7 The allocation of funding is in line with other Local Authorities, and reflects the need to maximise the opportunities to disperse this funding in a timely, direct and efficient manner across each of our five locality areas of the Scottish Borders.
- 1.7 All claims, monitoring and evaluation will be in accordance with the guidance and requirements of the Fund.

## **2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **2.1 I recommend that the Executive Committee:**

- (a) Notes the funding that has been awarded to date as per Appendix A, and the available balances.**
- (b) Delegates authority to the Director - Resilient Communities to allocate funding as per the details below:**
  - i. Agree the proposals as detailed in Section 5 in relation to the extension of the Warm & Well Borders Scheme.**
  - ii. Agrees the proposals as detailed in Section 5 in relation to Scottish Child Payments Bridging Payments, enhancing the Clothing Grants Scheme and the creation of an Inclusion Grant Scheme.**
  - iii. Allocate funding to a range of existing third sector networks, Community Planning Partners (including Registered Social Landlords) and any other partnerships, networks, resilience groups or other organisations who are already working with vulnerable individuals, to assist with essentials in accordance with the guidance, based on the principles of digital, fuel and food poverty and other items deemed as emergency essentials;**
- (c) Delegate authority to Director of Finance & Corporate Governance to reflect in the budget any further funding which may be allocated to support households over the Winter of 2021-22 in line with the Scottish Government's stated policy intent;**
- (d) Agrees that all claims, financial monitoring and evaluation will be undertaken in accordance with the guidance and requirements of the Fund by officers delegated by the Director of Resilient Communities.**

### **3 BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 A previous paper, approved by Elected Members in February 2021, detailed £20m funding announced by Scottish Government to be made available to Local Authorities to support those in financial hardship. Scottish Borders Council was allocated £330k of this fund for Supporting Individuals at Financial Risk.
- 3.2 Further funding will provide Scottish Borders Council with an additional allocation of £330k, providing that any evidence of spend is in accordance with the Fund's criteria and guidance. The Grant Offer Letter and relevant guidance sets out principles, criteria and timescales for claims and spend.
- 3.3 The main objectives and expected outcomes to be achieved from the Fund are set out below:
  - i. Provision of cash-based support to tackle food insecurity, or alternate provision where this is more appropriate or is the preference of individuals themselves, including for households whose children are registered for Free School Meals;
  - ii. Supplementing local budgets for the Scottish Welfare Fund to ensure demand is met in full;
  - iii. Providing support to meet fuel costs, for example, through existing schemes such as fuel cards or a locally targeted fuel grant;
  - iv. Further boosting local funding for Discretionary Housing Payments as needed;
  - v. Other activities and services, as necessary, to support individuals to overcome financial crisis and support wellbeing.

### **4. SPEND TO DATE**

- 4.1 Awards of £38k have been made to foodbanks, FareShare and other food providers across each area of the Borders to support them with white goods, electrical equipment, transport and food top ups as required.
- 4.2 A payment of £38k was also made to Eildon Housing in support of creating a FareShare depot/hub, staffing and transport. This was initially situated in Galashiels, but has now moved to a bespoke unit in Selkirk. Deliveries from the FareShare warehouse in Leith are stored, sorted and then distributed to FareShare partners with weekly deliveries across the Borders, and has provided continuity to the FareShare network.
- 4.3 An emergency payment of £75.00 has been made to families (approximately 1328 families/2246 children) that qualify for Free School Meals across the Scottish Borders.

### **5. FURTHER PROPOSALS**

- 5.1 The Financial Insecurity Group, led by the Director – Resilient Communities, have continued to consider the issues and impacts from the ongoing pandemic, and using a range of established networks, have identified a range of high level actions that they believe can be delivered in

the timescales and which align with the main aims and objectives of the Fund.

- 5.2 Whilst there are a number of existing support mechanisms to support those suffering financial hardship, this funding is intended to enable Local Authorities to provide additional support being deployed to specific areas, based on immediate need and local insight.
- 5.3 In reference to the main objectives and outcomes of the Fund, it is the Financial Insecurity Group's opinion that the next allocation of this funding should be undertaken in the following way.
- 5.4 **Extend the Warm and Well Borders Scheme** for a further 12 months as detailed at Appendix B:
- I. Warm and Well Borders Scheme - to provide additional funding of £60k to support this scheme for a further 12 months. To date, this scheme has proved very successful in terms of providing much needed support and unlocking considerable benefits and energy efficiency measures.
  - II. Provide additional funding support of £40k to this combined fund would allow a significant number of households access to improvements to their property and quality of life, moving them out of the influence of fuel poverty.
  - III. 3 case studies detailed at Appendix C, provide valuable feedback and demonstrate the effectiveness of the Scheme to date – giving insight into how individuals can be supported out of poverty, both in the immediate support provided and the improvement of circumstances in relation to longer term outcomes.
  - IV. To bring this funding award into line with participatory budgeting and evaluate the effectiveness of the approaches adopted, feedback will be actively sought from those being supported on how the assistance is working and how they can/should be supported in the longer term.
- 5.6 **Scottish Child Payment Bridging Payment** (£26k). To provide a payment equivalent to the Scottish Child Payment bridging payment for payments for parents who have dependent children and meet the means tested eligibility requirements of the award but are ineligible for the payment from Scottish Government. For example, this could assist approx. 91 home schooled children who are not in receipt of free school meals
- 5.7 **Clothing Grant** for all parents who receive Council Tax Reduction (£117k). To provide payment to all parents who have dependent children who are educated in the Scottish Borders and receive Council Tax Reduction as at 1 October 2021 but have not received a clothing grant

already in 2021/22. Estimates are that approx. 780 children would be eligible for payments of £120 for primary school and £150 for secondary school children.

5.8 **An Inclusion Fund** (£121k) is established to give help and assistance which is not available within other forms of support to:

- Mitigate hardship
- Relieve exceptional pressure
- Promote inclusion
- Provide opportunities which ultimately will reduce poverty, increase disposable income or offer longer term solutions

- I. Access to the fund will be through from referrals from various Council services such as Scottish Welfare Fund, Homelessness or Community Care Assessors (Finance) and external partners such as Citizens Advice Bureau and registered social landlords.
- II. The dispersement of the fund and decision making will be delegated to an officer within the Customer Advice & Support Service, and records will be kept on the potential impact of the changes and savings which can be made. Up to £5,000 to be decided by one officer and any awards over that level by at least two officers.
- III. Linked to the Inclusion Fund and Tenancy Support Grant, we will consider financial support to Council Tax payers. This will include maximising benefit, budgeting advice and support to maintain payment arrangements and may include conditional write off of older debt in keeping with the Council's policies and bad debt provisions.

5.9 **Support via Third Sector and other Organisations:** Delegate authority to the Director of Resilient Communities to provide funding for vulnerable households via key organisations. These may include third sector organisations, Resilient Communities Groups, Community Planning Partners (including Registered Social Landlords), and any other existing and established partnerships or networks across the Scottish Borders where financial support is required to enable those organisations to provide assistance around digital, fuel and food poverty, and any other items that are deemed emergency essentials.

5.10 This support to third sector and other organisations has been invaluable in awarding smaller amounts of funding efficiently and effectively. Purchases of cookers, fridge freezers and other white goods and electrical items have been made within days rather than weeks, and has enabled continuity of service for foodbank and FareShare organisations. It has also enabled the direct provision of supermarket cards to assist individuals with immediate requirements and with dignity in doing so.

5.11 In summary, the above proposals will aim to address the poverty that is being experienced across a number of different circumstances across the Scottish Borders in respect of emergency assistance, and giving

communities the opportunity to influence services in relation to longer term support in order to improve income, reduce costs and poverty.

- 5.12 With the unprecedented increases to energy costs and the ongoing uncertainty in the energy market, aligned with the ongoing covid-19 impacts, furlough ending, benefits being cut, and combined with other winter pressures, it is expected that poverty and in particular fuel poverty will impact more people across the region.
- 5.13 This will require further long term poverty interventions to be developed as feedback from end users is gathered in a bottom up approach in order to provide appropriate support to those most in need within our communities and provide sustainable pathways out of poverty.
- 5.14 Scottish Government and CoSLA have recently circulated a report of activities, trends and learning from the funding that has been provided during 2020-21, and this will be reflected on to ensure that officers continue to follow best practice and learn from others across Scotland. This report will also be useful in relation to developing future funding proposals and maximising funding opportunities. [Local action to tackle food insecurity: summary of activities, trends and learning - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/resources/consultation-papers/circular-letters/2021/01/20210120-local-action-to-tackle-food-insecurity-summary-of-activities-trends-and-learning-gov-scot/)

## 5 IMPLICATIONS

### 6.1 Financial

A previous paper, approved by Elected Members in February 2021, detailed £20m funding announced by Scottish Government to be made available to Local Authorities to support those in financial hardship. Further funding has provided a further £330k allocation to this fund which gives a total of £660k.

This paper is seeking approval for £100k in relation to the extension of the Warm and Well Scheme, £26k for Scottish Child Payments Bridging Payments, £117k to enhance the School Clothing Grant Scheme, £121k to establish an Isolation Grant Scheme and £45k to provide further support to third sector organisations and other organisations who have existing support networks.

Where possible the distribution and allocation of funding will be distributed through a Participatory Budgeting approach. As part of the CoSLA commitment to participatory budgeting, local authorities have a target for 2021/22 that 1% of the total revenue budgets excluding Council Tax will be distributed using this approach.

### 6.2 Risk and Mitigations

If we do not action these proposals in accordance with the timescales of the Fund we will be unable to claim the Scottish Borders Council share

of funding which will result in the extent of hardship being greater for communities within the Scottish Borders, and there will be a further impact on those who are at financial hardship risk as the continuing effects of the pandemic are known.

### 6.3 **Integrated Impact Assessment**

This funding will go towards addressing some of the inequality and hardship as a result of the pandemic over the winter and longer term period.

### 6.4 **Acting Sustainably**

It is anticipated that as a result of this funding there will be a positive effect on the following community outcomes:

- a) Include under-represented or excluded groups
- b) Improve community quality of life
- c) Improve community capacity
- d) Take into account equal opportunities

### 6.5 **Carbon Management**

There will be no impact on the Council's carbon footprint as a result of the recommendations in this report.

### 6.6 **Rural Proofing**

This fund will aim to address some of the particular challenges in relation to rural issues

### 6.7 **Changes to Scheme of Administration or Scheme of Delegation**

No changes are required to either the Scheme of Administration or the Scheme of Delegation as a result of the proposals in this report.

## **7 CONSULTATION**

- 7.1 The Chief Financial Officer, the Monitoring Officer/Chief Legal Officer, the Chief Officer Audit and Risk, the Service Director Human Resources, the Clerk to the Council and Corporate Communications have been consulted and any comments received have been incorporated into the final report.

### **Approved by**

**Jenni Craig**  
**Director - Resilient Communities**

**Signature .....**

### **Author(s)**

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Jenni Craig	Director - Resilient Communities
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### **Background Papers:**

Appendix A – Funding awarded to date, Appendix b – Fuel Poverty Proposal, Appendix C – Fuel Poverty Case Studies. [Local action to tackle food insecurity: summary of activities, trends and learning - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/resources/consultations-petitions/Publications/2021/02/Local-action-to-tackle-food-insecurity-summary-of-activities-trends-and-learning-gov.scot.pdf)

**Previous Minute Reference:** Executive Committee 09 02 2021

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