

TRAFFORD COUNCIL

Report to: Corporate Director for Finance and Systems in consultation with Executive Member for Finance and Investment
Date: 05/10/2020
Report for: Decision
Report of: Head of Exchequer Services

Report Title

Test and Trace Support Payments – Discretionary Scheme

Summary

As part of its response to COVID-19, the government have announced the introduction from 28 September 2020 of a Test and Trace Support Payment of £500 for individuals who have been told to self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace, are unable to work from home and will lose income as a result. Local Authorities have been advised that they should have arrangements in place to administer these payments by no later than 12 October 2020. In addition they have also been advised to have a scheme to manage discretionary payments in place in the same timeframe.

This report proposes a Trafford Test and Trace Discretionary Payments scheme that meets the government guidance and aligns to GM schemes.

Recommendation(s)

That:-

1. the Council adopts the proposed Test and Trace Discretionary Payment scheme as detailed in the report;
2. the matter is considered urgent and should not therefore be subject to call in

Contact person for access to background papers and further information:

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Background Papers: Briefing and Q&A for Local Authorities on changes to Self-Isolation and Test and Trace Support Payments: Implementation Guide for Local Authorities.

Relationship to Corporate Priorities | Improving health and wellbeing of residents.

	Targeted Support
Financial	£15m nationally is being made available for the discretionary scheme based on the COVID-19 Relative Need Formula (RNF). Trafford's allocation is £53,535.20
Legal Implications:	Legislation came in to force on 28 September 2020 that allows local authorities to agree a discretionary policy.
Equality/Diversity Implications	The measure is expected to have a positive impact on the individuals who receive payments under the scheme and for wider society generally. It is not anticipated that there will be impacts on any particular protected characteristic group.
Sustainability Implications	None
Resource Implications e.g. Staffing / ICT / Assets	Additional resources have been put in place to deliver the scheme.
Risk Management Implications	None
Health & Wellbeing Implications	This will have a positive impact
Health and Safety Implications	Individuals who qualify for payments will be incentivised to observe their period of self-isolation. This observance will in turn support the government's efforts to reduce the infection rates for the communities where they live and work.

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Following the introduction of a Test and Trace Support Payment scheme pilot in Oldham, Blackburn with Darwen and Pendle at the beginning of September 2020, the government announced its intention to roll this out nationally from 28 September 2020 to 31 January 2021.
- 1.2 The scheme remains largely the same as in the pilots, though the payment amount has been increased to £500 and local authorities will also be able to make discretionary payment of the same amount in exceptional circumstances to an individual who meets the main qualifying criteria but is not in receipt of a qualifying benefit.
- 1.3 The Council therefore needs to set its criteria for the Trafford Test and Trace Support Discretionary Payment scheme.

2.0 Test and Trace Payments Overview

- 2.1 Between the 28 September 2020 and 31 January 2021, individuals who are told to self-isolate on or after 28 September 2020 will be entitled to a Test and Trace Support Payment of £500 if they meet the following criteria:
 - Have been told to stay at home and self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace, either because they have tested positive for coronavirus or have recently been in close contact with someone who has tested positive
 - Are employed or self-employed
 - Are unable to work from home and will lose income as a result
 - Are currently receiving Universal Credit, Working Tax Credit, income-based Employment and Support Allowance, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Income Support, Housing Benefit and/or Pension Credit
- 2.2 The payment is designed to support people on low incomes, if they will lose income as a result of self-isolating, and to encourage them to get tested if they have symptoms.
- 2.3 The guidance sets out the operational procedures on how local authorities are expected to receive and determine applications and therefore Officers are already working on operating the national scheme.
- 2.4 The guidance, however, also refers to local authorities being able to make a discretionary payment, and therefore the Council needs to set its own criteria around eligibility, in line with the funding guidance, where an individual is not in receipt of a qualifying benefit.

3.0 Proposed Trafford Test and Trace Discretionary Payment Scheme Eligibility Criteria

- 3.1 The guidance is clear that individuals are still required to meet the main qualifying criteria, i.e. they are a low-income worker who is unable to work because they are self-isolating on or after 28 September 2020 as identified and advised via NHS Test and Trace.
- 3.2 It is therefore the government expectation that the vast majority of the intended recipients for this payment will be awarded through the eligibility criteria already detailed in the national scheme. However, to ensure any exceptional cases are identified, it will allow local authorities to make a discretionary payment where all other criteria, other than being in receipt of an eligible benefit is met.
- 3.3 The discretionary payment funding will be considered on a case by case basis. It should be noted however that it is a fixed sum set for all payments to be made during the four-month envelope and which will not be topped up. In Trafford's case this fixed sum amounts to £53,535.20 which when divided by the £500 lump sum payment amount equates to 107 individuals. On this basis, the scheme criteria does need to ensure that payments will only be made to cover the exceptional circumstances it is intended for.
- 3.4 The Greater Manchester Revenues and Benefits Forum has discussed and agreed basic eligibility criteria for those who would be eligible to apply for the discretionary payment to ensure a consistent approach across Greater Manchester. The key challenge in agreeing principles is due to the restricted budget available, the scale of demand locally and the costs of administration. Under this collaborative agreement, acknowledging the government's policy objective and restricted budget available to local authorities, individuals who would be eligible to apply for a £500 discretionary payment would be individuals who:
- have been told to stay home and self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace, either because they have tested positive for coronavirus or have recently been in close contact with someone who has tested positive.
 - are employed or self-employed; and
 - are unable to work from home and will lose income as a result.

In addition, the discretionary payment is for people:

- who have property related costs, e.g. rent/mortgage and are liable for Council Tax (occupied properties only) - applications may be considered from individuals who are not liable for Council Tax where a formal tenancy agreement is in place; and
 - who are not currently receiving Universal Credit, Working Tax Credit, income-related Employment and Support Allowance, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Income Support, Housing Benefit and/or Pension Credit; and
 - who are on low incomes (defined as below the Benefit Cap limit for this scheme) and will face financial hardship as a result of not being able to work while they are self-isolating.
 - who have no recourse to public funds and they meet criteria above.
- 3.5 Any applicant not eligible for the discretionary scheme will be signposted to other help and support such as the Local Welfare Provision scheme aka Trafford Assist, Community Hubs, Welfare Rights Service and debt advice agencies.

4.0 Fraud

- 4.1 The guidance is clear that local authorities will be responsible for fraud-prevention measures. Discussions are currently underway around best practices to bolster counter-fraud measures and guidance is expected to be issued in due course. This includes information on post-payment verification checks.
- 4.2 Local authorities will have the right to recover costs from people who claim the payment fraudulently. Local authorities will not be liable for any unrecoverable costs due to fraud.

5.0 The matter is urgent and requires to be considered urgently. The Chair of the Trafford Pandemic Scrutiny Committee has agreed that the matter is of such urgency that the requirement to publish prior notice of the intention to make a key decision should be waived and that the decision should not be subject to call in. Due to the need to have the arrangements in place immediately so that the scheme can be administered to those suffering hardship in the current circumstances it is not appropriate to wait until the next scheduled meeting of the Executive for the decision to be taken. The decision is therefore to be taken in accordance with the General Provisions under the Officer Scheme of Delegation set out in Part 3 of the Constitution

6.0 Other options considered – Given the limited amount of funding available and the importance of consistency across GM in decision making in relation to applications, alternative options were not considered further.

7.0 Reasons for making the decision – to ensure that the Council has an appropriate scheme for considering applications for discretionary payments in place to meet Government requirements

Recommendations - The recommendations are as set out at the start of the report.

Key Decision – Yes – notice waived with the Agreement of the Chair of the Trafford Pandemic Scrutiny Committee

Finance Officer Clearance GB
Legal Officer Clearance JLF