

Council

26 November 2020

Report of Director of Resources

TEST AND TRACE SUPPORT PAYMENTS

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To report back on an urgent decision taken regarding Test and Trace Support Payments and to provide a progress report on the schemes.

RECOMMENDATION

1. That the decision taken by the Director of Corporate and Customer Services, in consultation with the Chair of the Governance & Resources Committee, on 9 October 2020 (using arrangements approved by the Council for urgent decisions) and set out in the report is noted.
2. That progress on the schemes is noted.

WARDS AFFECTED

All

STRATEGIC LINK

'People' is highlighted in the Corporate Plan 2020-24 as a District Council priority; the aim of the Test and Trace Support Payments is to encourage people to self-isolate, which will benefit the health of the whole community.

'Prosperity' is also highlighted in the Corporate Plan 2020-24 as a District Council priority. The Test and Trace Support payments, funded by the government, will directly support eligible individuals financially and will indirectly contribute to the economy of the Dales if spent locally.

1 BACKGROUND

1.1 The Council's Constitution allows for the Chief Executive or Director of Corporate and Customer Services to take an urgent decision where the decision cannot reasonably be deferred until it would be possible to convene a meeting of the decision making body. In terms of procedure the Chief Executive or Director of Corporate and Customer Services can take urgent decisions in consultation with:-

- the Chairman of the relevant decision making body – in this case, Cllr Bull as Chairman of G&R Committee;
- in her absence, the Vice-Chairman

Advice should be obtained on vires (i.e. do we have the competence and power to make the decision) from the Monitoring Officer and affected ward members will be given notification of urgent business decisions to be taken and the method of determination.

1.2 On 21st September 2020 the Council was informed by the Department of Health and Social

Care that local authorities were expected to put in place arrangements to process applications from individuals for a new Test and Trace Support Payment scheme for people on low incomes who are unable to work while they are self-isolating because they cannot work from home, and make these payments. Eligible applicants are entitled to a payment of £500. The scheme will last until 31 January 2021.

- 1.3 We were asked to implement these arrangements as quickly as possible and by 12 October at the latest, with eligible individuals who are notified on or after 28 September that they have to self-isolate able to make backdated claims where necessary.
- 1.4 As there was insufficient time to present a report to a relevant policy committee or full Council before the commencement date of 12 October, the urgent decision arrangements were utilised.

2 REPORT

- 2.1 Full details of the urgent decision are provided in the “Delegated / Urgent Decision Record” appended at Annex A to this report. A risk assessment is included at appendix 1 to the Decision Record. An Equalities Impact Assessment was prepared and Data Protection Impact Assessment screening was carried out as part of the decision-making process. No negative effects were identified.
- 2.2 A team that was led by the Director of Resources and included members from the transformation team, financial services, communications, business support, information governance and Arvato’s housing benefits team was established to develop a scheme that would meet the DHSS criteria. This included an online application form, with a telephone application process for those not able to apply online. The scheme was launched on 12 October, as required.
- 2.2 In line with the scheme set out in Annex 1, the processing of applications is managed by the Benefits Manager, Paul Radcliffe, and applications are determined by the specified members of the housing benefits team. The table below provides details of applications processed up to the time of writing this report:

Numbers of applications received between 2/10/20 and 11/1/20:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 101 in total including 69* failing pre-eligibility checks; • There have been 48** Discretionary Scheme applications, and • 53 Mandatory Scheme applications.
Number of paid applications:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 13 approved payments of £500;
Number of rejected applications:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18 rejected applications where evidence has been checked.
Reasons for rejected applications:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unable to verify NHS Test and Trace ID number • Self-isolation period outside of permitted dates • Unable to verify benefit details • No response to additional information request • Discretionary request, not in receipt of council tax support

*Essentially eligibility is decided in accordance with strict criteria. The software is set up to reject unsuccessful applications at the earliest stage possible.

** Any applicant unsuccessful in meeting ‘mandatory scheme’ entitlement can elect to make a ‘discretionary scheme application’.

Several applicants made multiple applications.

2.3 The experience to date has been administratively challenging but Benefits staff continue to deliver the best possible advice to applicants wishing to pursue a payment of £500:

- The NHS has actively publicised the scheme but have failed to refer to a strict eligibility entitlement criteria which has resulted in many local residents making (multiple) claims where no entitlement will exist;
- The NHS promised access to an NHS On-Line Eligibility Checker to verify the applicant's 8-digit Test and Trace code and the date of directed isolation. Despite the service going live on 2nd October, Benefits staff have only been able to use this checker from 10th November. This has frustrated both staff and customers in potentially delaying decisions on some applications;
- In the absence of the NHS On-Line Eligibility Checker, Benefits Officers have had to telephone the NHS directly, often finding that no customer data exists and there is an appreciation from the software providers that problems continue to exist. The Government will be upgrading the system shortly, and hopefully this will improve the access to vital information to decide payments;
- The NHS data is required to confirm the dates where a resident has been officially directed to self-isolate. Unfortunately, the information can often confuse dates of voluntary self-isolation, which in a small number of cases has meant that the application has been rejected. Some customers have been frustrated by these outcomes leading to telephone conversations and also a new application being made;
- Applicants who are told to self-isolate by their employer in communication with a First Tier NHS medical team do not fit the Test & Trace eligibility criteria. Nevertheless, applicants have been told by the HNS to contact the Council to get their £500 payment, which has generated unnecessary work;
- In summary, there has been clear NHS Test & Trace system and information issues, which have put additional pressures on the Benefits service processing cases where an entitlement exists. Nevertheless, in all cases where a payment has been made, we have ensured that the date of payment complies with Government expectations.

3 RISK ASSESSMENT

3.1 Legal

3.2 The Decision was taken in line with the procedure for urgent decisions under the constitution and this report is to notify members of that decision.

3.3 Financial

The main and discretionary scheme are funded by government grants of £22,000 and £13,339 respectively. Payments will be monitored to ensure that they do not exceed the funding. The Council has also received a new burdens grant of £23,274 towards the cost of administration, some of which will be passed to Arvato. The financial risk is assessed as low.

4 OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

4.1 In preparing this report, the relevance of the following factors has also been considered: prevention of crime and disorder, equalities, environmental, climate change, health, human rights, personnel and property.

5 CONTACT INFORMATION

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6 BACKGROUND PAPERS

6.1 Equalities Impact Assessment Test and Trace Payments October 2020

7 ATTACHMENTS

Annex A – Delegated/Urgent decision record for Test and Trace Support Payments scheme for Derbyshire Dales District Council.