

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL
FINANCE, INNOVATION and PROPERTY ADVISORY BOARD

06 January 2021

Report of the Director of Finance and Transformation

Part 1- Public

Matters for Information

1 TEST AND TRACE SUPPORT PAYMENTS

A report detailing the local introduction and operation of the National Government Test and Trace Support Payment Scheme.

1.1 Overview

- 1.1.1 In mid-September 2020 we were informed through Government channels that local Councils will be expected to administer Test and Trace Support Payments from 28 September. The initial set of guidance was issued by the Department of Health and Social Care on 25 September, setting out the expectation that Schemes will be up and running by 12 October with the ability to backdate payments from 28 September and providing the details of the schemes. There have been 7 revisions and updates to the guidance since the original issue.
- 1.1.2 From 28 September 2020, eligible individuals are entitled to a main scheme Test and Trace Support Payment or a discretionary scheme support payment of £500. This is to support people on low incomes who are unable to work from home if they are told to self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace and will lose income as a result.
- 1.1.3 These payments are designed to help ensure people who have tested positive for COVID-19 and their close contacts self-isolate for the required period to stop the onward spread of the virus. They are also designed to encourage individuals who are eligible for this payment to get tested if they have symptoms. This is important to help stop the transmission of COVID-19 and avoid further economic and societal restrictions.
- 1.1.4 The payment schemes coincided with a legal duty to self-isolate when instructed.
- 1.1.5 The schemes run until 31 January 2021. Councils must operate a Government funded main scheme and can operate a discretionary local scheme with limited Government funding. Payments from both schemes must be £500 for each isolation period. Payments can be made for any number of isolation periods for an individual providing they do not overlap.

1.2 Eligibility for Main Scheme Payments

Eligibility for a £500 Test and Trace Support Payment is restricted to people who:

- 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;
- have responded to messages received from NHS Test and Trace (which will have been received via a combination of email, text, letter or phone call) in which they provided their contact details and where they have tested positive, the details of their contacts. are employed or self-employed;
- are unable to work from home and will lose income as a result; and
- are currently receiving, or are the partner of someone in the same household who is 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.

1.3 Discretionary payments

1.3.1 Local authorities can make a £500 discretionary payment to individuals who:

- 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;
- have responded to messages received from NHS Test and Trace (which will have been received via a combination of email, text, letter or phone call) in which they provided their contact details and where they have tested positive, the details of their contacts.
- are employed or self-employed; and
- are unable to work from home and will lose income as a result.

1.3.2 In addition, the discretionary payment is for people:

- who are not 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; and
- who are on low incomes and will face financial hardship as a result of not being able to work while they are self-isolating.

- 1.3.3 Local authorities can introduce additional criteria to determine eligibility for discretionary payments in their area, as long as these operate in addition to, rather than instead of, the criteria set out above.
- 1.3.4 We introduced a discretionary scheme, approved under Emergency powers, making it accessible for applicants with gross earnings over £80 and below £290 per week and capital under £3000. Policies for both our main and discretionary schemes can be found on our website at: [COVID-19 Self Isolation - Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council \(tmbc.gov.uk\)](https://www.tmbc.gov.uk)
- 1.3.5 For both the Test and Trace Support Payment and discretionary payments, eligible individuals will receive their £500 payment on top of any benefits and Statutory Sick Pay. For maximum effectiveness, Government expects payments to be made within three working days of application.

1.4 Implementation

- 1.4.1 Working together with our IT Services, we swiftly developed an online application to meet the specification from the guidance. The online application was available from 12 October. The process to apply is simple, requiring a bank statement to be uploaded as ID confirmation and wage slips to verify income if necessary. Alternatively, a claim can be made by 'phone, when a member of our customer service team completes the online application on behalf of the caller. The online application can also be found at the link given above.
- 1.4.2 NHS Test and Trace provide access to the Contact Tracing and Advice Service (CTAS) desktop app for designated council officers to verify test and trace reference numbers, check isolation dates and record payments to individuals.
- 1.4.3 Government has provided specific permission to use the DWP Searchlight system to verify benefit entitlements and to link to PAYE information. This system is already used by officers in the administration of housing benefit.
- 1.4.4 Owing to the similarities and cross links to benefits processing, administration for the support payments has been placed within our benefits team.

1.5 Funding of the Schemes

- 1.5.1 The Council has received three initial payments:
- 1) £26,770.40 Set-up and administration contribution
 - 2) £27,449.65 Total discretionary fund
 - 3) £45,500 Down-payment for the main scheme
- 1.5.2 The task has been undertaken through managing existing resources within the team, with staff reprioritising existing workloads and putting in additional hours. However, since the second lockdown period, numbers have been growing to a

level requiring some temporary help, which we have just secured. The table below shows the numbers of applications each month.

October	November	December (1 st -17 th)
43	113	102

- 1.5.3 The support payment discretionary fund provided by Government was used up by early December. At that time, discretionary payments accounted for approximately half of the total number of payments made. The message from Government is that no additional discretionary funding is forthcoming, but Councils may wish to use other funding streams to keep the discretionary payment scheme open. With agreement from my colleagues, we have arranged to continue provision of discretionary support payments from our Containment Outbreak Management Fund. At a meeting in mid-December, DHSC advice was for Councils to plan for the administration of support payments until the end of March 2021 and expect a Government announcement confirming the extension of the scheme, from 31 January, prior to Christmas.

1.6 Legal Implications

- 1.6.1 Duty to provide Test and Trace Support Payments in line with legislation and guidance.

1.7 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

- 1.7.1 Funds spend monitored and reported to DHSC. Main scheme expected to be fully funded by Government.

1.8 Risk Assessment

- 1.8.1 Service provision monitored to ensure sufficient resources. Service has been risk assessed against potential fraudulent activity.

1.9 Equality Impact Assessment

- 1.9.1 There is no perceived impact on end users at this point.

1.10 Policy Considerations

- 1.10.1 Community

- 1.10.2 Customer Contact

Background papers:

None

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