

Corporate Policy Committee

Date of Meeting:	04 November 2021
Report Title:	Review of Test and Trace Support Payments Discretionary Scheme
Report of:	Alex Thompson, Director of Finance and Customer Services
Report Reference No:	N/A
Ward(s) Affected:	All

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. The Government launched the Test and Trace Support Payments Scheme from 28 September 2020 to provide financial support to people on low income, who are unable to work from home if told to self-isolate and will lose income as a result.
- 1.2. The scheme allows a payment of £500 for those who meet the criteria.
- 1.3. The scheme is funded by the Government and administered by the Council and is currently due to end on 31 March 2022.
- 1.4. There is funding to deliver a discretionary scheme and this report recommends a change to the policy for the discretionary payments.
- 1.5. Detail of the scheme can be found at [Test and Trace support payment \(cheshireeast.gov.uk\)](https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/test-and-trace-support-payment)

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. To change the discretionary policy to set the levels of low income to be set to the amounts used for the Benefits cap (see 3.4).

Household	Weekly income level	Annual income level
Single person	£257.69	£13,400
Lone parent	£384.62	£20,000
Couple	£384.62	£20,000

- 2.2. To allow awards to be made in exceptional circumstances if income is higher.
- 2.3. To delegate further changes to the policy, in line with national guidance, to the Director of Finance and Customer Services in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Committee to be responsive to demands and changes to guidance received with short deadlines.

3. Reasons for Recommendations

- 3.1. The scheme provides financial support for those being told to self-isolate who are unable to work from home and will lose income as a result.
- 3.2. Providing financial support ensures applicants abide by the requirement to self-isolate helping to reduce the onward spread of Covid-19, alongside the other support provided by the Council.
- 3.3. The guidance issued by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) states that the discretionary scheme is for people who:

- have been told to self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace or the NHS COVID-19 app because they have tested positive for COVID-19
- or**
- have been told to self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace or the NHS COVID-19 app because they have been identified as a close contact of someone who has tested positive, and are not exempt from self-isolation

and

- have responded to a message from NHS Test and Trace and have provided any legally required information, such as details of their close contacts
- are employed or self-employed
- are unable to work from home and will lose income as a result of self-isolating
- are not currently receiving, and are not the partner in the same household as someone who is receiving, at least one of:
 - Universal Credit
 - Working Tax Credit
 - income-based Employment and Support Allowance
 - income-based Jobseeker's Allowance
 - Income Support
 - Housing Benefit
 - Pension Credit

and

- are on a low-income, as defined by their local authority, and will face hardship as a result of self-isolating

3.4. The Council must define 'low-income' and it is recommended for fairness and transparency to set this to the levels used for the Benefits Cap. This was introduced by the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and caps the amounts of benefits which working people can be entitled to ([Benefit cap - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/benefit-cap)). The current levels for those living outside Greater London are:

- £384.62 per week (£20,000 a year) if you're in a couple
- £384.62 per week (£20,000 a year) if you're a single parent and your children live with you
- £257.69 per week (£13,400 a year) if you're a single adult

3.5. Some customers may face financial hardship where their income is above this level. In exceptional cases, they may still be deemed eligible but this is expected to be rare and on a case-by-case decision.

4. Other Options Considered

4.1. The scheme could remain unchanged but is difficult to administer applications consistently and fairly without a level being set. Customers are also uncertain when applying about the exact eligibility criteria.

4.2. A different level could be considered.

5. Background

5.1. The Government launched the scheme to provide financial support to people on low incomes who are unable to work from home if they are told to self-isolate by NHS Track and Trace and will lose income as a result.

5.2. 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.

5.3. Individuals meeting set eligibility criteria who are told to self-isolate will be entitled to a payment of £500.

5.4. The "Test and Trace Support Payment Scheme" provides a payment for those who:

- have been asked to self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace either because they've 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; and
 - are currently receiving one of the qualifying benefits, namely: Universal Credit, Working Tax Credit, income-based Employment and Support Allowance, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Income Support, Housing Benefit and/or Pension Credit.
- 5.5.** In addition councils can make discretionary payments of £500 to those who meet the eligibility criteria with the exception that they are not currently receiving one of the qualifying benefits but, who are on a **low income** and will face financial hardship as a result of not being able to work whilst self-isolating.
- 5.6.** From 8 March 2021 the scheme was also extended to allow parents or guardians of children or young people required to self-isolate. The guidance was revised from 16 August 2021 due to changes to the self-isolation rules:
- they are the parent or guardian of a young person in the same household who is self-isolating and need to take time off work to care for them
 - they are unable to work from home and will lose income
 - the young person is:
 - aged 15 or under and has been told to stay at home and self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace because they have tested positive for COVID-19; or
 - aged 25 or under with an Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plan and been told to stay at home and self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace because they have tested positive for COVID-19; or
 - aged 25 and under, is not exempt from self-isolation from 16 August, has an EHC Plan and has been notified as a close contact of someone with COVID-19 (by NHS Test and Trace or the NHS COVID-19 app); or
 - self-isolating because there was an outbreak at their education or childcare setting, and they have been sent home by their local public health team
 - the young person normally attends an education or care setting; and
 - the parent or guardian meets all the other criteria for a 'main' payment (see 5.4)

5.7. Parents or guardians can also be considered under the discretionary scheme where they are not in receipt of one of the benefits but will be facing financial hardship and on a low income.

6. Implications

6.1. Legal

6.1.1. The Council must adhere to counter-fraud and post payment verification measures referenced in the UK government guidance document, though it has been made clear that the Council will not be liable for payments which have been fraudulently claimed.

6.1.2. The Council must put in place adequate measures to record and account for payments.

6.2. Finance

6.2.1. The Council has received funding as follows:

	Funding awarded (up to 30 September 2021)	Current awards (as of 24 October 2021)
Main scheme	£649,000	£634,000
Discretionary scheme	£636,000	£502,500

6.2.2. Any discretionary funding not spent at the end of the scheme will be returned.

6.3. Policy

6.3.1. The change to the scheme supports the following strategic priority:

- An open and enabling organisation

6.4. Equality

6.4.1. The equality impact assessment will be updated to include the options being considered.

6.5. Human Resources

6.5.1. There are no staffing implications; the scheme will continue to be managed by the existing officers in the Benefits Section but the simpler criteria will ease the administration.

6.6. Risk Management

6.6.1. As the scheme is demand led, there is a risk that a large increase in demand will exceed the funding received.

6.6.2. To mitigate this, regular returns are submitted to DHSC and funding is adjusted in line with demand. Funding is received every two months based upon the returns made.

6.6.3. The Council can review the scheme and whether subsequent amendments are necessary.

6.6.4. The risk environment around COVID-19 remains dynamic. Risk registers have been maintained as part of the Council's response to date and the plans for recovery.

6.7. Rural Communities

6.7.1. There are no direct implications for rural communities

6.8. Children and Young People/Cared for Children

6.8.1. There are no direct implications for children and young people

6.9. Public Health

6.9.1. There are no direct implications for public health

6.10. Climate Change

6.10.1. The Test and Trace Support Payments Scheme is fully digital; applications are made on-line and supporting evidence can be uploaded or submitted via email. Customers unable to self-serve can make an assisted application over the telephone.

Access to Information	
Contact Officer:	Liz Rimmer, Benefits Manager Liz.rimmer@cheshireeast.gov.uk 01270 371448
Appendices:	None
Background Papers:	Information on the current Test and Trace Support Payments scheme: Test and Trace support payment (cheshireeast.gov.uk)