

**REPORT TO:** Executive Board

**DATE:** 15<sup>th</sup> April 2021

**REPORTING OFFICER:** Strategic Director – Enterprise, Community & Resources

**PORTFOLIO:** Resources

**SUBJECT:** Covid19 Exceptional Hardship Scheme

**WARDS:** Borough Wide

## **1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

1.1 To recommend to introduction of a Covid19 Exceptional Hardship Scheme, in order to assist residents who suffer hardship due to having to self-isolate but do not meet the criteria for other forms of Covid19 financial support.

**2.0 RECOMMENDED: That the establishment of a Covid19 Exceptional Hardship Scheme, as outlined in the report, be approved.**

## **3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

### **Background**

3.1 As part of its response to the Covid19 pandemic since March 2020, in order to support residents the Council has provided a range of financial and non-financial support measures. The Appendix contains an extract from the Council's Local Outbreak Management Plan (LOMP) regarding Contact Tracing and Self isolation. The last paragraph contains a link to the Self-isolation pages on the Council's website setting out the support available for those self-isolating.

### **Shielded Individuals Hub**

3.2 A Shielded Individuals Hub has been operated to assist residents with the following areas:

- Essential supplies such as arranging supermarket slots, use of a food bank, and using the Discretionary Support Scheme to deliver food parcels.
- Medication support through contact with pharmacies and arranging delivery.

- Other support that includes using existing Council services such as; Adult Social Care, Health Improvement Team, Discretionary Support Scheme, and Welfare Rights.
- Use of Halton & St Helens VCA to provide alternative arrangements such as providing volunteers.

### **Self-isolation Support Scheme**

- 3.3 As part of the Government's response to the pandemic, people who test positive for Covid19 or have been in contact with someone who has tested positive, are required to self-isolate. From 28<sup>th</sup> September 2020 a Self-isolation Support payment of £500 was made available to people who are working but are unable to work from home, and will therefore lose pay during their self-isolation period.
- 3.4 There are two Self-isolation Support schemes available. Firstly the national scheme where the person must be receiving a means tested benefit, meets the conditions of being required by NHS Test & Trace to self-isolate, are employed but unable to work from home and will lose income as a result.
- 3.5 The second scheme is a discretionary one, which has the same national conditions apart from there is no requirement to be on a means tested benefit. Halton has added two local conditions that a person must have property costs being rent or a mortgage, and the person must be on a low income, which is aligned with the Government's Benefit Cap amounts: <https://www.gov.uk/benefit-cap/benefit-cap-amounts>. The income amounts are: for a couple £384/week, single parent + child £384/week, and a single adult £257/week.
- 3.6 There may be circumstances where a person is told to self-isolate who does not qualify for a Self-isolation payment, and has particular requirements they need help with which cannot be met from existing resources.

### **Other Areas of Financial Support**

- 3.7 The Council also provides a number of other forms of financial support to residents, for example Discretionary Housing Payments, the Discretionary Support Scheme, and the Welfare Rights & Money Advice Service.

### **Covid19 Exceptional Hardship Scheme**

- 3.8 The proposal is to introduce a Covid19 Exceptional Hardship Scheme, in order to assist residents who suffer hardship due to having to self-isolate but they do not meet the criteria for other forms of Covid19 or other financial support.

- 3.9 Prior to applying this scheme, consideration would first be given to whether alternative options are available. Therefore, this scheme would only be considered in exceptional circumstances, where it is appropriate and fair to make an exceptional hardship award.

#### Statement of Objectives

- 3.10 An award under this scheme would be made in response to exceptional circumstances that threaten a resident's physical and/or emotional and mental well-being whilst self-isolating.
- 3.10 Each application must be supported by a range of information requested from the applicant, which may include some personal information, and this will be made clear to the applicant at the start of the process.
- 3.11 All applications will be considered on a case-by-case basis and on their individual merits.

#### Application Process

- 3.12 The features of the Council's Covid19 Exceptional Hardship Policy are that:
- It is discretionary;
  - An applicant does not have a statutory right to payment;
  - The operation of the scheme is for the Council to determine;
  - The Council may choose to vary the way in which funds are allocated according to needs;
  - Other than the normal appeal against the application of discretionary function by Judicial Review, there is no right to a statutory appeal of any application decision. In the interest of fairness the Council will operate an internal review procedure for appeals in a non-discriminatory way.

#### Eligibility Criteria

- 3.13 There are no pre-set criteria for an award made under the Council's Covid19 Exceptional Hardship Scheme. Each application will therefore be considered on its own individual merits.
- 3.14 In deciding whether to award a Covid19 Exceptional Hardship payment, the applicant's particular circumstances will be considered. The applicant will be asked to provide supporting evidence to substantiate their claim. This may include, but is not limited to:
- Income and expenditure statements;

- Any sources of credit such as debit cards, credit cards, store cards, overdraft and loan arrangements;
  - Any financial assistance which is likely to be available to the applicant from other sources.
- 3.15 Decisions regarding eligibility for an award will be made by the Operational Director - Finance. Awards will be made either in monetary form or whatever means is deemed appropriate, and will be processed quickly to enable an applicant to continue to self-isolate.
- 3.16 The Council will notify the applicant in writing of the outcome within five working days of the date the decision is made. Where the request for an award is unsuccessful or is not met in full, the Council will explain the reasons why the decision was made.

#### The Right to Appeal

- 3.17 Covid19 Exceptional Hardship scheme is a discretionary scheme and therefore not subject to a statutory appeals process. Appeals will therefore be decided by the Council.
- 3.18 An applicant who requires further explanation of a decision must request this in writing within 20 days of notification of the decision.
- 3.19 An applicant who disagrees with a decision may appeal within 20 days of the original decision by writing to the Operational Director - Finance. Where possible, the Council will initially try to resolve the matter by explaining the reasons for the decision to the applicant in writing.
- 3.20 A further appeal can be made to the Strategic Director – Enterprise, Community & Resources. If it is decided to reject the appeal, the reasons for the decision will be provided to the applicant in writing within 20 working days.

#### Fraud

- 3.21 The Council is committed to prevent fraud. Any applicant who tries to fraudulently claim a Covid19 Exceptional Hardship award might have committed an offence under the Fraud Act 2006. If the Council suspects that fraud may have occurred, the matter will be investigated as appropriate and this could lead to criminal proceedings.

### **4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 The Council has been administering the Self-isolation Support Scheme since 28<sup>th</sup> September 2020 as part of the Government's response to the pandemic to support residents to self-isolate. In addition it has delivered other finance related support as set out above.

- 4.2 The Covid19 Exceptional Hardship Scheme will provide an additional layer of support for residents in exceptional circumstances that are not provided for by existing support arrangements.

## **5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 The Council has been allocated a further tranche of un-ringfenced Covid19 grant funding for 2021/22. The cost of payments relating to the Covid19 Exceptional Hardship Scheme will be met from this grant funding. However, it is anticipated that relatively few awards will be required under the Scheme and the amounts of each award will be modest.

## **6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES**

The creation of a Covid19 Exceptional Hardship Scheme will support the Council in its objective of providing assistance to Halton residents to allow them to self-isolate.

### **6.1 Children and Young People in Halton**

None identified.

### **6.2 Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton**

None identified.

### **6.3 A Healthy Halton**

Awards made under the Covid19 Exceptional Hardship Scheme will support the person asked to self-isolate, and also protect other people in the community.

### **6.4 A Safer Halton**

None identified.

### **6.5 Halton's Urban Renewal**

None identified.

## **7.0 RISK ANALYSIS**

- 7.1 The Covid19 Exceptional Hardship Scheme is being put in place to provide support for residents in exceptional circumstances. There are no significant risks associated with implementing this scheme.

## **8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

- 8.1 The current proposal does not impact upon any equality and diversity issues, and the Covid19 Exceptional Hardship scheme only serves to enhance the Council's offer to Halton residents affected by Covid19. An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed and published in accordance with the Public Sector Equality Duty.

**9.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

Document	Place of Inspection	Contact Officer
MHCLG Guidance for Council's on practical support for self-isolation (9/3/21)	Enterprise, Community & Resources	Ed Dawson

## Appendix

*Below is an extract from the Council's refreshed Local Outbreak Management Plan (LOMP) regarding Contact Tracing and Self isolation. The last paragraph contains a link to the Self-isolation pages on the Council website*

### 2.4 Contact Tracing

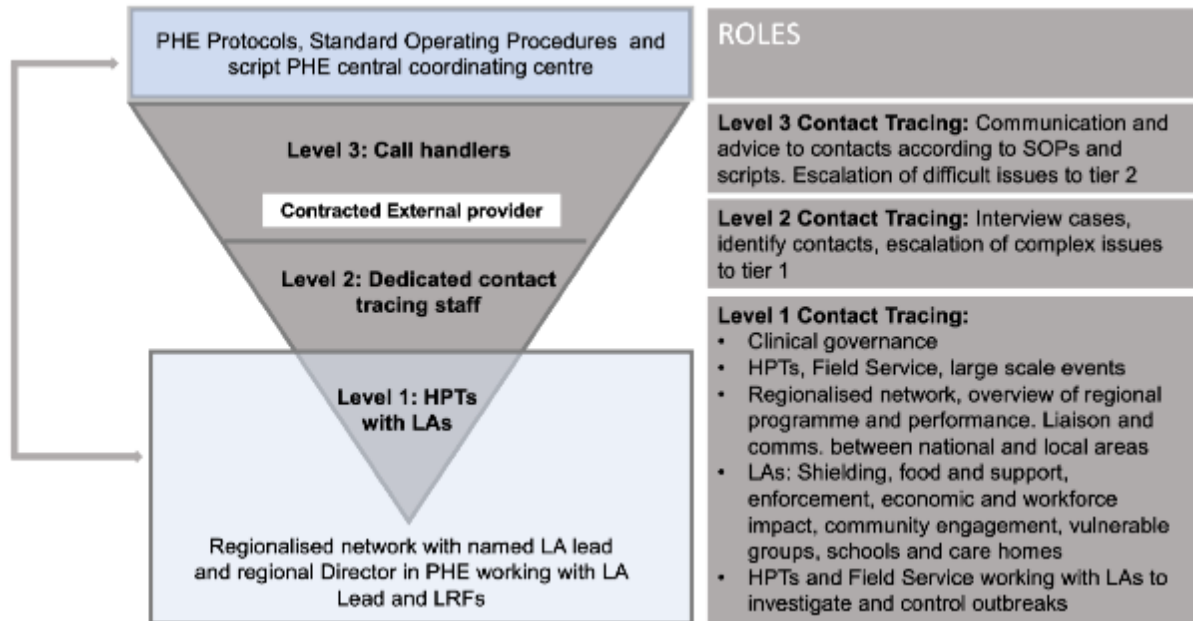
Contact tracing is one of the ways we protect the public from infectious diseases. If a person tests positive for COVID-19, we speak to them in order to identify anyone who has had close contact during the time they were considered to be infectious and then attempt to find these people as soon as possible. Once we have made contact we can then give them the advice they need to self-isolate and protect others. If they are in groups considered to be a higher risk, we make sure that we follow up with them to see how they are. If they become unwell we are then able to assess them quickly and take appropriate action. Presently contact tracing is carried out both by the national NHS Test and Trace Service and by the local Public Health Team.

The NHS Test and Trace Service will input and host information on both LFT and PCR (lab-confirmed) cases and contacts onto the national data system (CTAS) which is an invitation only system that is accessed through two routes: automatically by cases and contacts through text message or email invitation or by the phone-based contact tracing team.

CTAS receives details of all positive cases of COVID-19 via NHS Digital. Cases will be categorised into automatic follow-up (have provided email details/can use web-based tool) or phone follow-up. Cases following the automated pathway upload details of contacts into CTAS which are then followed up either automatically or by phone.

**NHS Test and Trace** is a National Service, and the role of the local authority is to support that service using our detailed knowledge of local communities and settings. The Local Authority has established the **Halton Outbreak Support Team (HOST)** team to support local people and a primary role for the authority is to offer support to vulnerable residents who have been asked to self-isolate, and also additional support to help with the management of complex sites and situations (for example schools and care homes). This is not a new role for the local authority, and Public Health teams routinely work with the Health Protection Team in PHE to support additional actions around outbreaks of other infectious disease within these settings.

Currently, the national system is broken down into the following levels:



Currently Tier 1 of the contact tracing service is subcategorised into:

- **Tier 1a** – this is the national co-ordinating function and will lead on quality assurance, data science, guidelines and protocols and clinical governance.
- **Tier 1b** - Health Protection Teams (HPT) and PHE Field Service Teams (FST) who will manage complex outbreaks and situations in conjunction with local authority Public Health support.

For Cheshire and Merseyside, Directors of public Health have invested in the provision of the Cheshire and Mersey Contact Tracing and Outbreak Support Hub (**HUB**) to coordinate much of the action required at Level 1. The HUB is a partnership between the nine Local Authorities, PHE and CHAMPS and provides additional contract tracing and outbreak management and we would like to maintain its essential role as we move into an endemic situation. We developed this Hub jointly with PHE and it brings together Public Health Consultants, call handlers, environmental health officers etc. and links into and supports our local Halton Contact Tracing and Outbreak Hub. Given the development of VOCs and the move towards Zero Hours Contact Tracing and Enhanced Contact Tracing we see resource for this Hub as crucial for surge capacity.

Each Local Authority area has also developed its own bespoke local offer in terms of additional contract tracing and consequence management.

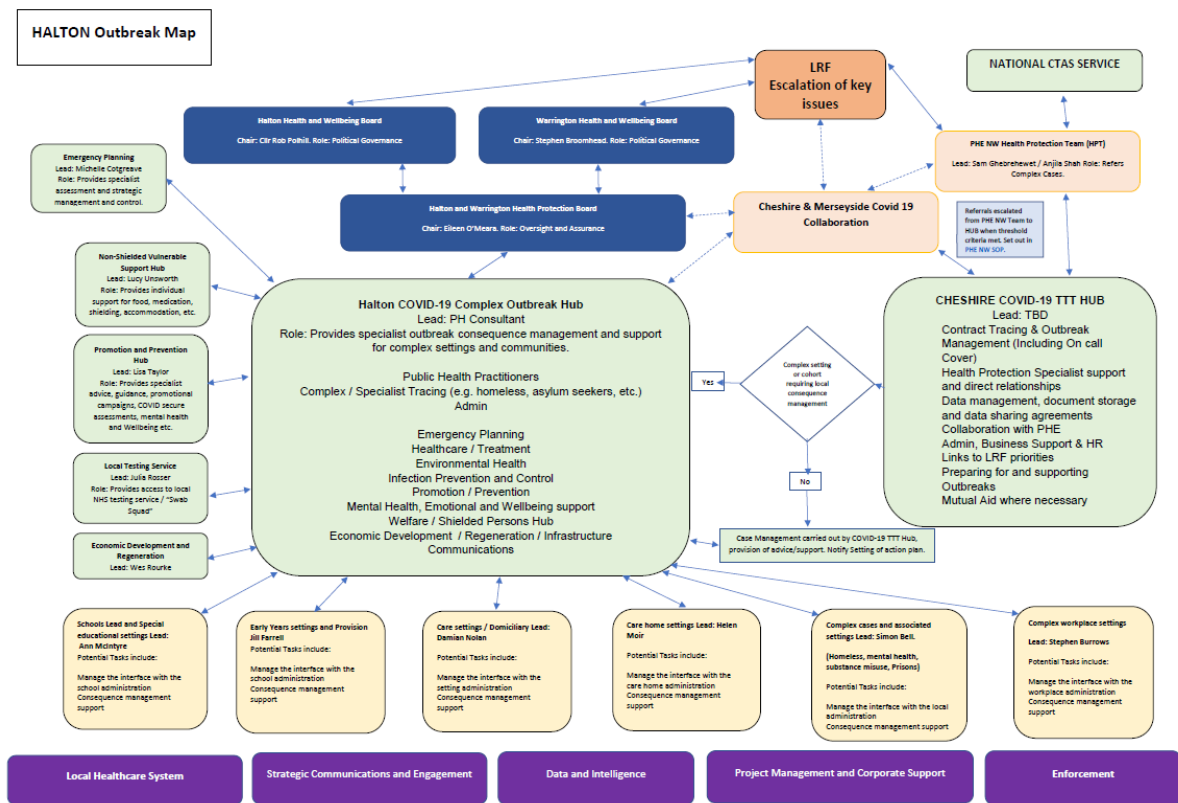
In Halton, since the early days of the pandemic, the **HOST (Halton Outbreak Support Team)** has provided an outbreak monitoring and response service. The team aims to contact all positive cases to explore isolation, identify additional contacts and any support needs, and has been instrumental in work



around contacting those “Lost to Follow Up” through the National T&T service and those harder to reach individuals and communities.

Utilising the national CTAS data system, the team also provides welfare calls, home visits, text messaging and posted letters to ensure local people are supported and have access to the information they need, whilst reinforcing core health protection messages and prevention advice.

The Local structure is demonstrated below:



Operationally, there has been some disconnect between the National T&T system, regional PHE and local teams, with timely information for local areas not always clear or specific as to who will / should be dealing with specific issues. The balance between national and regional is now working more efficiently however improvements can still be made. Communication with Local Authorities is required as to what is expected on a local level, which will enable local authorities to plan and adapt their local contact tracing model and consider their own resources.

The regional Cheshire and Merseyside HUB has been vital in pulling together local areas, sharing best practice and reducing the burden on local teams and we are keen that resources are continued to be made available to support this function, as well as ensuring core local teams can continue to serve in this essential function.

As we enter the next stage of the pandemic, there needs to be a clear conversation with Local Authorities as to what the future structure will look like and what will be managed by PHE and the national and regional systems. If

there is an expectation that local areas commence detailed **enhanced contact tracing** there will need to be sufficient resource and training opportunities made available for local teams to pick this up. There will also need to be clarity on how local systems can better integrate case management systems with the national data systems.

## 2.5 Support for self-isolation

It has been recognised that some individuals may need additional support in order to complete the 10 day period of self-isolation. We are aware from various studies that there is limited compliance with the requirement to self-isolate for 10 days as required for positive cases or contacts of positive cases. Self-isolation is a critical element of reducing the spread of Covid-19 including any new variants and makes a significant contribution to keeping our family, friends and community safe, enabling us all to return to normal life as soon as possible.

In Halton, the HOST (Halton Outbreak Support Team) encourages individuals that it contacts to share any problems they might have with self-isolating for the required time, where there are additional support needs identified appropriate signposting or direct support has been arranged.

It is currently a legal requirement to self-isolate following a positive test. Individuals who fail to do so may be fined. The NHS T&T team will identify people who need additional support and pass their contact information to the Local Authority and the local HOST team will also ask all cases if they require additional support.

The **Halton/DHSC motivational text pilot** is ongoing with evaluation in-built to understand the impact of localised messages to people who test positive, and a campaign has been developed locally to inform local people about the support available to self-isolate and what their obligations are. Information is available through a variety of mediums (online, print, etc.) and the role of the Councils contact centre has been essential in providing information and effective support to local people. Halton has also invested in the development of a local programme - **“Halton - 10 days, 10 ways” – Self Isolation support.**

# Self-Isolation Plan

## 10 days, 10 ways



### The objectives of the campaign are:

1. Encourage full compliance with self-isolation for those identified as positive cases or contacts of positive cases
2. Ensure anyone needing to self-isolate is aware of the full range of support that is available to them
3. Encourage people to plan for self-isolation and have necessary contingency arrangements in place

### The Key messages are:

- If you have been told to self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace or a public health official because you have tested positive for Covid-19 or you are identified as a contact of someone with Covid-19, you are required by law to stay at home for 10 days. Failing to do this could result in a fine of up to £10,000.
- There is lots of support available for anyone needing to self-isolate including help with money such as the £500 self-isolation grant, arranging volunteers to help with shopping or dog walking and to take over caring responsibilities if needed. Please check our 10 days, 10 ways self-isolation guide at [www.halton.gov.uk/selfisolation](http://www.halton.gov.uk/selfisolation) or call us on 0303 333 4300.

- Self-isolating is much easier if you have a simple plan in place – what to do if you can't get out to buy food, get medicines, go to work or to care for someone else. Having a few basic supplies, important information ready and discussing with family, friends or neighbours all helps in the event that you have to self-isolate due to Covid-19.

If local residents are identified as [clinically extremely vulnerable](#), they are advised to reduce social contact as much as possible to minimise the risk of infection and to limit all contacts, particularly with people that they do not live with. Those defined, on medical grounds, as clinically extremely vulnerable to coronavirus are people with specific serious health conditions. Access to food, medication and advice on wider support including pet care is provided on a dedicated self-isolation support webpage –[www.halton.gov.uk/selfisolation](http://www.halton.gov.uk/selfisolation)