

CABINET 8 FEBRUARY 2021

MEMBER QUESTIONS

1. Question from Cllr David Vasmer

I have been contacted recently by residents in my division whose homes have been flooded once again. I would be grateful if you could answer the following:

1. Will the Council provide £500 cash assistance again?

The £500 Community Recovery Grant was released by MHCLG and distributed by Shropshire Council in response to the devastating 2 weeks of significant flooding which affected the region in February 2020. Large numbers of properties in Shropshire have flooded again this year, and the Council have been providing updates on flooded property numbers to MHCLG, however the Government have not yet given the Council any indication that they will make this grant available again in response to flooding associated with Storm Christoff.

2. Will flood affected homes be able to claim a Council Tax Break?

Council tax discounts in relation to floods is dependent on the Government triggering the Flood Recovery Framework. This was triggered in February 2020 in relation to Storms Ciara and Dennis and enabled the Council to provide 100% council tax discounts for a minimum of three months to affected properties, the cost of which is picked up by the Government. Unless the Government triggers the Flood Recovery Framework there is nothing in the Council tax regulations that specifically provides council tax discounts for floods.

3. Will the Council lobby Government to change the regulations so that residents who received the Property Flood Resilience Grant (PFRG) last year can apply for it again this year?

As with the Community Recovery Grant the PFR Grant is also funded through MHCLG, managed by DEFRA and then delivered by Shropshire Council. The eligibility criteria for properties to access this funding is set by DEFRA and they are extremely rigid in how this is applied. Shropshire Council have challenged these criteria on several occasions however this has not been successful. (see below re lobbying government).

4. Will the Council lobby the Government to ensure that PFRG grant applications are speeded up? Some of last year's applications had not been agreed before they were flooded again this year.

There have been significant issues with the grant process which has affected rollout not only in Shropshire but across the entire River Severn Catchment. Guidance from DEFRA on the delivery of the scheme was delayed until late April 2020 (over 2 months after the flooding), and when this guidance was provided there were inaccuracies with the document which delayed rollout further. On receipt of the updated guidance Shropshire Council was required to establish a detailed process for distributing this funding with no additional resource provision from DEFRA. This took a significant amount of time to arrange which was further hampered by the first Covid lockdown.

In addition the national availability and huge demand for suitably qualified survey companies and PFR manufactures, along with products that meet the relevant quality assurance standards, has meant that many residents have not been able to progress their applications to a stage where they are suitable for payment by Shropshire Council. It should be noted that residents in areas of known flooding risk should not rely entirely on the PFR grant to protect their own property and should consider all options available to them to mitigate the impact. Shropshire Council are working to process applications as quickly as possible however many of the delays to date have been outside our control.

Government Lobbying: *As stated above I'm happy to lead on the lobbying of Government with the National Flood Forum and other Local Authorities however this is not possible in addition to my current workload. Additional resource needs to be made available for me to do this or I will require support from other teams within Shropshire Council to formulate a response on my behalf:*

As stated above the delivery of the PFR Grant by Shropshire Council has been extremely difficult due to the poor guidance provided by DEFRA and the limited availability of accredited PFR manufacturers available to residents. This issue has affected Councils across the entire Country and although concerns have been raised to DEFRA, no changes to either the eligibility criteria or guidance have been forthcoming. Shropshire Council will therefore work with the National Flood Form and other Local Authorities to request a full review of the current arrangements of the delivery of the PFR grant by MHCLG.

2. Question from Cllr Roger Evans

Council have received a number of grant from Government to help businesses during this Pandemic. To help and assist them to follow their guidance and to close, thus reducing the chances of them spreading this dreadful virus.

I have had a query from a business who grooms dogs They have closed as advised by government to help prevent the spread of COVID. Advice sought by the proprietor from Shropshire Council echoes that received from both Government and the professional organisation they belong to. They should only deal with animals by appointment where this is necessary for the animals welfare. The advice from Shropshire Council is that though the legislation doesn't prevent them from opening the guidance does. The business is therefore effectively closed.

I understand over 70 Local Authorities, including those local to Shropshire, have agreed similar businesses are considered as closed and are therefore paying out the appropriate grant. Those businesses are now in receipt of grant monies that government have made available.

Why and for what reason have Shropshire interpreted this differently to many others and to refuse applications similar to this; therefore taking a very different view to over 70 other authorities who are giving out grants. In effect this council is saying open and carry on, take no notice of all the advice you have been given. Continue, even though others at Shropshire Council support and endorse the advice given by others. Everyone else seems to agree this is not a priority business and therefore should close.

- *Advice was taken from Regulatory Services before any decision was made regarding the eligibility of businesses within this industry. The advice received was outlined as follows;*
- *Businesses within this industry are in a similar position to the November lockdown – that is, you are not required to be closed and can carry out your services as normal although there is of course a need and expectation that you will be doing so in a 'COVID-Secure' way in terms of carefully managed and socially distant handovers, contactless payments, thorough cleaning etc.*
- *Government have outlined businesses and venues that can remain open include animal groomers as they may continue to be used for animal welfare, rather than aesthetic purposes. This includes Animal Grooming businesses.*
- *The latest national restrictions that came into force in early January to place all of England into the Tier 4 area & controls, provide a list of the types of businesses that are required to either close or modify their activities for the time being. There is no reference in this list to Animal Grooming businesses.*

Engagement with other LA's

- *We have reached out to get advice from other authorities on how they are treating businesses within this sector.*
- *From the six responses received to date, all bar one have outlined that they are considering these businesses through ARG funds rather than LRSG. The one that could stated that they would only consider them if they cannot offer services to support welfare issues.*
- *BEIS have confirmed to one authority that Dog Groomers are essential businesses and are not mandated to close so do not qualify for the LRSG schemes so we will be paying from our ARG scheme. They have asked BEIS if they can email all Local Authorities to advise them of this.*
- *Based on the guidance provided, we have followed government legislation, which states that businesses in this sector are not mandated to close, which would therefore mean they are not be eligible for the Local Restrictions Support Grant (LRSG).*

Support through DARG

- *We have advised these businesses that those who have been impacted significantly by covid-19 restrictions can apply for grant funding support through our Discretionary Additional Restrictions Grant (DARG).*
- *In the vast majority of circumstances, based on the rateable value of these occupiers (below £15,000 RV), the funds that they could receive covering the January period, should a DARG application be successful, would be broadly the same through both LRSG and DARG grants.*
- *The eligible LRSG category would offer a £6,001 payment in January.*
- *The DARG payments would almost mirror this with a £6,000 grant available.*