

From: The Minister

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By E-mail

Dear community sector colleague,

I am writing to update you on the action I am taking to help mitigate the potential impact of Covid-19 on the people and communities that we support.

You will be aware that the situation is fast-moving and evolving – it is therefore necessary that we respond with equal pace.

I have made plans to ensure that every area of my Department has contingency arrangements in place in the event that reasonable and worst case planning assumptions are realised. The key business continuity priorities, for the Department and our Arm's Length Bodies have been identified as:

- provision of social security benefits and child maintenance services
- provision of social housing and essential repairs
- payment of grants and flexibility in our approach to supporting community and voluntary groups delivering essential services on the ground
- prompt payments to suppliers for goods and services

I have brought forward urgent changes to benefit rules to help those affected by Covid-19, including amendments to Statutory Sick Pay, Employment and Support Allowance and Universal Credit. These changes mean that there will be no delay in access to sickness related benefits.

My primary objective is to ensure that people are protected and that important community services will continue to be delivered. I am working with partners across the Executive and its agencies to discuss ongoing risk levels and to feed into emerging advice and planning. We will continue to rely on the advice from the Public Health Agency (PHA) at <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/news/covid-19-coronavirus>

I recognise the vital role that you play in supporting many of those in our community who need help now more than ever. In recognition of this, and given the extraordinary circumstances that we find ourselves in, I have authorised the following additional steps to ensure that we are ready to face the challenges presented by Covid-19 together:

Grant funding flexibilities to include:

- an upfront payment of grant funding for three months (to be reviewed as necessary), to allow for, amongst other things, the continuation of salary contributions in circumstances where employees are required to self-isolate;
- temporary suspension of targets and funding conditions which are directly impacted by your response to the Executive's published advice and guidance for employers;
- temporary suspension of grant monitoring arrangements such as vouching, and the need to secure prior approval for reprofiling of previously agreed budget; these to be recommenced at a later stage with a reasonable and proportionate approach based on risk.

Sponsor teams will be in touch very quickly to let you know how these flexibilities will work.

Covid-19 Community Support Fund

Given the emerging and predicted health, social and economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, there are likely to be disproportionate impacts on a number of vulnerable groups. Those who are socially and rurally isolated, those with health conditions and disabilities, carers and older people are likely to be among those most impacted.

To address these anticipated needs, I will introduce a COVID 19 Community Support Fund; this fund could provide the following categories of support:

Financial: low income and at risk due to financial stress

Food: access to food (whether due to cost or availability)

Connectivity: those living alone or in rural and border areas that are likely to experience greater challenges in accessing services.

This will be an extraordinary fund to be delivered through the established Community Support Programme infrastructure in which local government distributes funding on our behalf. My officials are working with delivery partners in NICVA, Health and Social Care, Public Health Agency and Local Government to ensure that the proposed Fund takes account of emerging need, including by working with groups at the grass roots.

I am extremely grateful for your support as we face these challenging times – it is vital that together we work to support those in our community who will need it most in the weeks ahead.



PD

DEIRDRE HARGEY
MINISTER FOR COMMUNITIES