

## **The government's Covid self-isolation payment scheme is failing in Oxfordshire Figures worst for Oxford City**

**Oxfordshire KONP research shows that one in two people have been rejected for self-isolation payments across Oxfordshire councils, with even worse numbers in Oxford City (only a one in ten chance of support). And many in Oxford City and West Oxfordshire face a long wait for a decision. At a time of great uncertainty and financial need.**

Without adequate financial support for workers to self-isolate, Covid cannot be contained. Many people who have, or have been in contact with someone who has, Covid are forced to work because they cannot afford not to. Some employers pay adequate sick pay. But Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) at £95 a week (29% of average male earnings, says the TUC) is low; 2 million workers, mostly women, are excluded because they earn less than the £120 a week threshold.

So, a one-off self-isolation payment disbursed by councils for individuals excluded from SSP sounds like a good idea. It could make all the difference between staying at home, or not. Between workers being relaxed about telling their workmates they have Covid, or not. But nationally 70% of applications for the £500 government support scheme were rejected as of 6 January (latest available figures).

### **How do Oxfordshire councils compare?**

Oxon KONP wants to know how different councils in Oxfordshire have acted to implement this vital support. We made Freedom of Information Act requests to the district councils in the county. We recognise there are many differences within Oxfordshire – type of employment, relative poverty, different kinds of communities. But we were still interested to gather the data. The councils' answers (they cover October to January, table attached) provide the following information:

- The criteria that the government impose in order for a person to be entitled to the main grant are very complicated and restrictive: so some people who ought to receive the support will not (i.e. will continue work and pose a threat to themselves and others).
- Across the county there was huge variation between councils as regards the percentage of applicants for the grant rejected (87% in Oxford City, 45% in Vale of the White Horse – main plus discretionary grants). Cherwell, with roughly the same population as Oxford, made four times as many grants under the scheme.
- There was huge variation in backlogs: Oxford City said 391 awaited decision on the main grant (total applicants main and discretionary 954), West Oxfordshire said 82 of a total 287 applicants (main and discretionary) awaited a decision on a discretionary grant; Cherwell, South Oxfordshire and the Vale reported no backlog. These variations affect real people in great need.

### **Questions arising**

- What are the causes of the variations, and what will be done to put them right?
- How can such a scheme be successful when local authorities have to apply such draconian criteria?

### **Changes needed**

- Clear the backlog.
- Loosen the criteria – get the money out fast, easy to access, even if it means in the end some people have to pay it back. Better that than hold up proceedings.
- Bring more money into councils to employ people to help individuals to self-isolate.
- Stop the centralised, distant and not trusted Serco call centre 'support'.
- Increase the maximum payment in the isolation support scheme. Independent SAGE says £800. Every pound will be well spent compared with the billions wasted on private company contracts.
- Raise Statutory Sick Pay (the TUC says £330 a week) and abolish the threshold and waiting period.
- Provide additional funds to ensure employers can afford to pay sick pay and support trade unions in demanding that employers make it easier for workers to be off sick for Covid-related reasons.

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