



10 MARCH 2023

PRESS STATEMENT
FROM GOVERNOR OF THE BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS
MR JOHN RANKIN CMG

The audit on Assistance Grants has now been tabled and discussed in the House of Assembly, and is now available to the public with appropriate redactions. The audit was conducted in response to Commission of Inquiry Recommendation B12, and covered Assistance Grants issued between January 2019 and May 2022.

A number of the findings in the report are deeply concerning. The funds were for the most part not governed by any financial rules or eligibility criteria and were hence not consistently distributed on the basis of need. All of the programmes were absent of documented objectives and the audit highlights that individuals “within the orbit of the political arena may have received preferential treatment in the awarding of assistance”.

Over the last three years, the Government awarded a total of \$23m in Assistance Grants across three ministries and the House of Assembly. The Premier’s Office accounted for 47% of the total awards given from these programmes, while the thirteen members of the House of Assembly awarded 39%.

The audit concludes that these Assistance Grants Programmes lacked “controls that would promote equity, transparency and accountabilities” and that the programmes were allowed to “operate unabated at the whims and pleasure of elected officials”. “The operations of these programmes, for the most part, did not serve to resolve any socio-economic deficiencies” and were “largely utilized to satisfy individual wants and desires”.

The classes of persons who applied and received assistance from these programmes included Permanent Secretaries and other senior public officers, attorneys and entrepreneurs. Some instances were found



where single applicants received in excess of \$50,000 in a single payment. In one instance a senior public officer and their immediate family members received grants totally \$217,900 over the period. The audit concludes that there is evidence of “abuse of discretionary authority by Members in awarding grants” as well as “abuse by applicants who have utilized the deficiencies to benefit themselves significantly”.

As the programmes lacked cross ministry communication and collaboration, some applicants made and received assistance from multiple programmes for the same purpose. In some cases, applicants received more funds than originally requested. The 149 page appendix to the audit report sets out the amounts received by each individual beneficiary, applicant or vendor.

The auditor found that the programmes operated by the Ministry of Communications and Works were specifically targeted towards things such as home repairs, and the programme operated by the Ministry of Education appeared to be intending to serve academic and cultural purposes. The programmes operated by the House of Assembly and Premier’s Office had no such limitations or focus and were utilised for an expansive array of purposes based on the Members’ or Ministers’ determination.

Let me assure the public that this audit in no way criticises those who were deserving of assistance and legitimately asked for support. Rather the audit exposes the lack of controls and criteria which appear to have allowed the system to be abused.

I will be forwarding the audit report on Assistance Grants to the Attorney General’s Office for the Attorney General to assess whether the Government should pursue recovery in any instances. I will also ask the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Police to assess if any offences were committed.

The wholesale review of the system of benefits and grants conducted in partnership with UNICEF has now been received and I am pleased that the Department of Social Security and Health are taking these recommendations forwards.



It should be noted that the payments considered for this Assistance Grants audit are separate from the \$16m issued in Covid-19 Assistance Grants and are separate from funding for local district infrastructure projects. I am expecting to receive an audit on Covid-19 Assistance Grants by the end of March and I will cause it to be laid in the House of Assembly within three months, in accordance with the Audit Act 2003.

I welcome the commitment to reform which was expressed in the House of Assembly. It is vital that the necessary reforms are taken forward both before and after the forthcoming General Election, ensuring that public money is properly used to have a positive impact on people who find themselves in need.