

Report to Cabinet Member for Fire & Rescue and Communities

December 2020

COVID Winter Grant Scheme

Report by Director of Communities

Electoral division(s): ALL

Summary

A £170 million COVID Winter Grant Scheme has been announced by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to support those most in need across England with the cost of food, utilities and other essentials.

The County Council's share of the grant is £1,989,591.80 which is to cover the period from 1st December 2020 until the 31st March 2021.

At least 80% of the total funding must be ring-fenced to support households with children, with up to 20% of the total funding to other households experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, poverty during the winter period of the pandemic.

The report explains how the funds will be administered.

Recommendations

The Cabinet Member for Fire and Rescue and Communities is asked to approve that;

- (1) the allocations from the COVID Winter Grant Scheme and arrangements for distribution and support set out in Section 2 of the report to include a review at the end of January 2021; and
 - (2) that the Director of Communities, in consultation with the Director of Finance and Support Services, is authorised to rebalance the allocation according to greatest need in the event that the funds allocated under 4.6 prove insufficient, and otherwise to administer the allocated fund following the review of January 2021.
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Proposal

1 Background and context

- 1.1 On Sunday 8 November 2020, the Government announced that a £170 million COVID Winter Grant Scheme would be made available in early December 2020 to support those most in need across England with the cost of food, energy (heating, cooking, lighting), water bills (including sewerage) and other essentials.
- 1.2 The County Council will administer the scheme and will receive £1,989,591.80 from The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for assistance to vulnerable families with children and other households particularly affected by the pandemic.
- 1.3 The accompanying guidance sets out the required collaboration between DWP, Local Authorities and their delivery partners to successfully meet the policy intentions within the agreed framework. It also provides the constraints that need to be worked within and the reporting arrangements.
- 1.4 Given the purpose and aims of the grant, it is proposed that an early decision be taken for use of the allocated funds by reference to the County Council's experience of community impact and identified areas of priority need related to the effects of the pandemic.
- 1.5 The guidance states the local authority should adopt the following principles when administering the scheme:
 - a. use discretion on how to identify and support those most in need
 - b. use the funding from December 2020 up to the end of March 2021 to meet immediate needs and help those who are struggling to afford food and utility bills
 - c. work together with local authorities and partners to help identify and support households within the scope of the scheme.
- 1.6 The County Council has the flexibility within the scheme to identify which persons and households are in most need of support and apply their own discretion when identifying eligibility.
- 1.7 There is a requirement to provide DWP with Management Information to help understand which groups have benefited from grants, the administrative costs and payment assurance.

2 Proposal details

- 2.1 Proposals have been developed to ensure compliance with the requirements and guidance;
 - a. at least 80% of the total funding will be ring-fenced to support households with children, with up to 20% of the total funding to other households experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, poverty during the pandemic. This may include households not currently in receipt of DWP welfare benefits.
 - b. at least 80% of the total funding will be ring-fenced to provide support with food, energy and water bills for household purposes. Within this

condition there is flexibility about the proportion of support allocated to food and to bills.

- c. up to 20% of the total funding can be used to provide support with other essentials clearly linked to the scheme conditions in recognition that a range of costs may arise which directly affect a household's ability to afford or access food, energy and water.

- 2.2 To support access to food, it is proposed that £925,000 be used to purchase supermarket vouchers for direct allocation to vulnerable children and families via two distinct distribution models.
- 2.3 Supermarket vouchers totalling £675,000 will be allocated via schools to Free School Meal eligible children to provide support during the two weeks of the Christmas Holiday and the one-week February Half Term. Each Free School Meal eligible child will receive the equivalent of £15.00 per week in vouchers for each of the three weeks. This approach mirrors that taken earlier this year by the Department of Education during the school Summer Holiday.
- 2.4 The remaining vouchers totalling £250,000 will be held and administered by the Community Hub. This approach will expand the existing partnership arrangements and provide access to supermarket vouchers to benefit vulnerable households across West Sussex. This will include support to families with children and individuals already known to the County Council and partners (e.g. Care Leavers, families working with Early Help etc)
- 2.5 To meet the fund criteria in respect of assistance with utility costs including energy, heating and water it is proposed that £500,000 is allocated for this activity countywide. This will be distributed to eligible residents via a number of established organisations including Citizens Advice, Age UK, Horsham Matters and a partnership arrangement with Southern Water to assist vulnerable residents in rural areas.
- 2.6 An allocation of £350,000 will be made to facilitate access to food and other assistance across West Sussex via community-based support organisations. This targeted assistance is intended to reach those most vulnerable including individuals and families who are homeless or insecurely housed, care leavers, those financially vulnerable, isolated and lonely and without a network of support. Organisations will draw down funds based on data returns demonstrating demand up to an agreed allocation for the four-month fund duration.
- 2.7 In recognition of the locally based community support offered during the Covid-19 pandemic a Winter Support Fund will be established to further this neighbourhood activity or cover costs incurred by small voluntary community organisations, mutual aid groups, Town & Parish Councils etc. This fund initially allocated £100,000 will be administered by the Sussex Community Foundation. East Sussex County Council will run a complementary scheme using the same administrative organisation to provide consistency, reduce overheads and support cross border applicants.
- 2.8 The remaining funds totalling £114,591.80 will remain unallocated until submission of the interim reporting statement to DWP at the end of January 2021 to allow flexibility for any additional allocations based on actual spend evidencing demand.

- 2.9 Data returns from all organisations involved in the distribution of funding via vouchers or direct support will be required to demonstrate compliance with the Framework criteria and to enable better understanding of the extend of vulnerability and demand across West Sussex.
- 2.10 The relevant details will be maintained to evidence the grant is spent in line with the guidance ensuring due diligence is undertaken to manage the risk of misuse.
- 2.11 Details of the fund, who is eligible and how it can be accessed will be communicated widely with key stakeholders and direct to the public (e.g. via school newsletters). The communications approach will be multi-channelled and targeted at key groups identified as needing support as well as the wider population.
- 2.12 A key part of the approach will be to use community and faith leaders as well as health, social care and education professionals to reach those experiencing hardship in particular within traditionally hard to reach groups. This is underpinned by the approach to work with community based organisations who provide hardship assistance in respect of food, household items and utilities payments to ensure that individuals already accessing such support benefit.
- 2.13 Geotargeted social media advertising will be used which has proved successful through the wider COVID campaign, particularly in reaching those groups who do not traditionally engage with the county council. Printed material will be made available through a variety of channels to reach those people who do not use digital means.
- 2.14 The County Council will use networks to distribute assets and messaging; in particular schools, colleges, universities and early years settings as well as businesses, District and Borough partners and the community and voluntary sector.

3 Other options considered (and reasons for not proposing)

- 3.1 Other options for use of funding were considered when consulting with partners, such as a more direct distribution or an allocation to each District and Borough. It was agreed that the proposals outlined above offer the best arrangement to ensure that the support is made available swiftly, provides countywide access and focused on those most in need as identified within the criteria set out in 2.1
- 3.2 The provision of cash payments was considered but this significantly increases the administration process, risk of fraud and diminishes the ability to provide the Management Information return on spend data as required by the DWP.
- 3.3 In supporting Free School Meal eligible children during the forthcoming school holidays a number of options were considered but not progressed. These included;
- a) Opening school kitchens – not feasible to ask circa 700 term-time only staff to cancel leave at short notice to work over the Christmas period.
 - b) Food parcels – little confidence that supply chains are robust enough and provider would be able to meet the demand. Additionally, dietary requirements would likely be unmet

4 Consultation, engagement and advice

- 4.1 West Sussex Districts and Boroughs, Headteachers and Health and Social Care colleagues were among those consulted to discuss the arrangements and allocations of the Winter Grant Scheme to West Sussex residents and to identify key contacts within their organisation to facilitate referrals.

5 Finance

- 5.1 The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) will provide the funding to the County Council under section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003, who will administer the scheme.
- 5.2 This COVID Winter Grant Scheme is ring-fenced and any unspent funding will need to be repaid to DWP. Funding will be received by the County Council via a three-stage payment approach, with 50% allocation at the start of the scheme in early December 2021, 25% at the end of February 2021 and a final payment of 25% following the end of the scheme in April/May 2021. This will enable DWP to adjust the amount of the final payment based on the Management Information returns.
- 5.3 A requirement to complete Management Information returns will be part of each delivery partner agreement to ensure that funds are drawn down based on demand and that funding allocations are spent within the time restriction.
- 5.4 Procurement of supermarket vouchers to a total of £925,000 will be spent across two suppliers. There is not a charge to the Council to set-up or administer the scheme so the spend therefore represents the cost of vouchers issued only.
- 5.5 Suppliers have been selected according to experience of delivering voucher schemes directly in schools. Contract terms do not exceed 12 months.
- 5.6 Where the funding allocations indicated below are to be distributed to voluntary and community organisations, or under grant award conditions, the drawdown of funds will be based on submission of individual data returns to evidence eligible demand within the DWP Framework criteria. Funds have been allocated to the following types of support;

	£
Supermarket Vouchers via Schools	675,000
Supermarket Vouchers via Community Hub	250,000
Utility Costs	500,000
Food/Household items via Community Organisations	350,000
Winter Support Fund	100,000
Total	1,875,000

- 5.7 The remaining grant of £114,591.80 will remain unallocated until submission of the interim reporting statement to DWP at the end of January 2021 to allow flexibility for any additional allocations based on demand evidenced through actual spend.
- 5.8 In the event that the original allocations as set out above to Voluntary and Community Sector organisations proves insufficient to meet demand over the period, consideration will be given to topping up from any unallocated portion of

the remaining grant. This will be agreed by the Director of Communities in consultation with the Director of Finance and Support Services.

- 5.9 The detail of the support given to residents will be reported to DWP as required.
- 5.10 There is no financial impact on the County Council. The totality of Covid-19 related grants and their allocation will be reported to the County Council at the February meeting by reference to its impact upon the County Council's budget for 2020/21.

6 Risk implications and mitigations

- 6.1 There is a potential risk that individuals who are not in need will request support. The criteria outlined in 2.1 should mitigate the risk by clarifying the scheme parameters.
- 6.2 There is a potential risk that individuals will seek financial support for hardship from multiple sources. Household circumstances will be considered on an individual basis prior to providing individual support to minimise duplication however families receiving other forms of assistance are not excluded from receiving support through this grant.
- 6.3 Allocation through larger and established community agencies and to individuals already known by the County Council and identified as in need should reduce the risk of multiple payments. This will be further supported by the requirement to collect Management Information as per the DWP Framework.
- 6.4 The suppliers have been selected according to experience of delivering voucher schemes directly to schools. Strong communications with the schools and parents and access to online FAQs/tutorials will help support a positive user experience.

7 Policy alignment and compliance

- 7.1 The proposals are critical to the achievement of the County Council's objectives of ensuring we can support vulnerable households and families with children particularly affected by the pandemic throughout the winter period where alternative sources of assistance may be unavailable.
- 7.2 The Suppliers have met the financial and technical requirements required under the Councils Standing Orders for Procurement and Contracts.

Equality and Human Rights Assessment

- 7.3 The process will ensure that those who are charged with the distribution of support from a direct allocation of funds are reminded of the need to consider the public sector equality duty and the responsibilities it contains.

Social Value and Sustainability Assessment

- 7.4 The creation of a voucher distribution scheme represents a swift and effective way of distribution funds to eligible families. The recipient is able to choose a voucher for use in a supermarket that is local to them.

Both voucher schemes offer the ability to print vouchers (for example at the school office) which means that recipients will not be at a disadvantage because

they do not have access to technology to receive the e-voucher (i.e. a smart phone or email address). This procurement route does not incur an administration cost for the County Council

- 7.5 There is no additional procurement, beyond that referenced above, for which the social value policy would be engaged but local community and charitable groups will be engaged in the distribution.

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Appendices None

Background papers None