

Forward Plan Reference: Not applicable

Report title: Allocation of the Covid Local Support Grant	
Report to: Councillor Louise McKinlay– Cabinet Member for Children and Families	
Report author: Helen Lincoln, Executive Director for Children and Families	
Date: 26 April 2021	For: Decision
Enquiries to: Andrew Page, Head of Finance Children and Families; email andrew.page@essex.gov.uk	
County Divisions affected: All Essex	

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The Department for Work and Pensions have extended Covid grant support for vulnerable families. The Council has received an additional £903,071 of Covid Local Support Grant which has the same eligibility criteria as the previous Covid Winter Grant Scheme. This report asks the Cabinet Member to agree how that money should be spent.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Agree that the £903,071 Covid Local Support Grant funding from the Department for Work and Pensions will be used for supporting those Essex residents most in need with the cost of food, energy, water bills and other essentials as detailed at 3.2.
- 2.2 Agree to increase the value of the contract to Wonde Limited for the issuing of vouchers by £600,000.
- 2.3 Agree that the Cabinet Member for Children and Families in consultation with the S151 Officer will keep the allocation and spend plan under review and adjust as and when demand progresses.

3. Summary of issue

- 3.1 On Wednesday 14 April 2021, the government announced with the Covid Winter Support grant finishing on 16 April 2021, that it will extend support to vulnerable families with the Covid Local Support Grant until 20 June 2021. A further £40m has been provided of extra targeted financial support nationally for those in need during the pandemic.
- 3.2 Of this, the Council has been allocated £903,071 by the Department for Work and Pensions, who have applied the same grant conditions of the original funding of the COVID Winter Grant and is analysed below:

- Allocate £600,000 to extend the provision of food vouchers to those eligible for free school meals with a value of £15 per person per week for the May 2021 half term school holidays.
- Allocate £303,071 to continue to deliver a series of programmes focusing on holiday hunger, care leavers, targeted family support and childcare delivered through locally trusted community organisations and foodbanks to support children and their families. Funding to be distributed by both the Head of Active Essex and Head of Strategic Commissioning for Children and Families. Administration costs are also included in this value.

This new funding is now available to spend until 20 June 2021

- 3.4 As stated in the previous decision (FP/023/03/21), the provision of support to families entitled to free school meals and those experiencing poverty within such a short deadline is logistically very challenging. It is therefore proposed to increase the existing award to Wonde, who have successfully delivered a voucher scheme with schools for Christmas 2020, February 2021 half term and Easter 2021 school holidays. The contract with Wonde provides that 100% of the value of the money paid by ECC is passed to consumers as vouchers. ECC only makes payment to Wonde as required.

4 Reason for Using Urgency Powers

- 4.1 We received notification of extension to the scheme on 14 April 2020¹, where funding up to 20 June follows the government COVID roadmap, whereby no earlier than 21 June, the government hopes to be in a position to remove all legal limits on social contact. It is imperative that we are able to act with urgency to get funding to the most vulnerable families with children and other households including individuals.

5 Options

5.1 Do Nothing

This option would not enable us to distribute the funding from Department of Work and Pensions and would mean that our residents would not benefit from central government funding.

5.2 Increase the original award with Wonde and make the allocations as set out in 3.2 above – Recommended Option

Given the timing of the announcement in extending the grant to 20 June 2021 and the successful delivery of the voucher scheme at Christmas 2020, February 2021 half term and Easter 2021 school holidays, Wonde is the recommended option to provide support for those in need. Wonde are able to deliver vouchers via email or SMS to the families within the timeline required at no charge to the Council. These vouchers can be used at the large chains of

supermarkets. This option has been recommended as it is the most efficient way of distributing the vouchers and would not have an administrative impact on schools. With Wonde having supplied vouchers to schools since December 2020, processes are well established.

6 Financial implications

- 6.1 The Department for Work and Pensions have announced that they have extended Covid grant support for vulnerable families until 20 June 2021. The Covid Local Support Grant has the same eligibility criteria as to the previous Covid Winter Grant Scheme, which finished on 16 April 2021, with support to those most in need across England with the cost of food, energy (heating, cooking, lighting), water bills (including sewerage) and other essentials.
- 6.3 As per section 31 of the Local Government act, the grant will be paid subject to specific conditions being met and will span the period 17th April 2021 to 20 June 2021. At least 80% of the funding must be prioritised for families with children, with up to 20% for other types of households, including individuals.
- 6.4 The updated spending analysis has been set out in point 3.2 and all of the £903,071 funding will be allocated to the Children and Families portfolio.
- 6.5 It is proposed that the voucher scheme increases the contract value by £600,000 to £3.840m through a direct award to Wonde using the Crown Commercial Service (CCS) Framework (RM6255) Voucher Schemes. Wonde passes 100% of the value of the money paid by ECC to consumers as vouchers and is at no cost to the authority. Wonde enables Essex Schools to quickly distribute vouchers to parents and ECC only makes payment as required. The Procurement Policy Note (PPN01/20) allows for direct award.
- 6.6 The Cabinet Member for Children and Families and S151 Officer will keep the allocation and spend plan under review and adjust as and when demand progresses.

7. Legal implications

- 7.1 It is lawful to work in this way but the Council will need a written contract with Wonde in order to safeguard personal data.
- 7.2 The value of the contract is very low given that the full spend will be distributed to families on a low income. On that basis the value is below the threshold in the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 and is not required to be tendered. Even if it were to be above the threshold, the requirement to spend quickly would be likely to be lawful under regulation 38.

8. Equality and Diversity implications

- 8.1 The Public Sector Equality Duty applies to the Council when it makes decisions. The duty requires us to have regard to the need to:
- (a) Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other behaviour prohibited by the Act. In summary, the Act makes discrimination etc. on the grounds of a protected characteristic unlawful
 - (b) Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
 - (c) Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not including tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.
- 8.2 The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, gender, and sexual orientation. The Act states that 'marriage and civil partnership' is not a relevant protected characteristic for (b) or (c) although it is relevant for (a).
- 8.3 As with any grants programme it would be sensible to ensure that there is some monitoring and criteria to ensure that grants are targeted at need and do not disproportionately benefit particular groups in a way which cannot be justified. It is understood that no equality impact assessment has been undertaken as a result of the need to spend this money quickly.

9. List of appendices

None

10. List of Background papers

None

I approve the above recommendations set out above for the reasons set out in the report.	Date
Councillor Louise McKinlay - Cabinet Member for Children and Families	28 April 2021

In consultation with:

Role	Date
Cabinet Member for Finance	
Councillor Chris Whitbread	29 April 2021
Executive Director for Finance and Technology (S151 Officer)	
Stephanie Mitchener on behalf of Nicole Wood	27 April 2021
Director, Legal and Assurance (Monitoring Officer)	

Allocation of additional Covid Winter Grant Scheme

Paul Turner	26 April 2021
Executive Director for Children and Families Helen Lincoln	27 April 2021

Exemption from call in

I agree that it is in the best interests of the Council for this decision to be implemented urgently and therefore this decision is not subject to call in (paragraph 20.15(xix) of the constitution applies).

Councillor Mike Mackrory – Chairman of the Corporate Policy and Scrutiny Committee

Date: 30 April 2021