

8 Forward Plan Reference: FP/092/06/21

Report title: Final allocation of the Covid Local Support Grant	
Report to: Councillor Louise McKinlay – Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Community, Equality, Partnerships and Performance	
Report author: Helen Lincoln, Executive Director for Children and Families	
Date: 6 July 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 has again extended, for the final time, the Covid Local Support Grant which supports vulnerable children and households. The Council has received an additional £3.612m and has the same eligibility criteria as previous awards. This report asks the Cabinet Member to agree how that money should be spent.
- 1.2 To request approval for the arrangements of the COVID Local Support Grant Scheme for Members

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Agree that the £3.612m 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 £2.617m.
- 2.3 That the proposed arrangements for the management of the Covid Local Support Grant Scheme for Members for 2021/2022 are agreed.
- 2.4 That the guidance for the operation of the scheme, allocating a maximum of £150,000, as set out in Appendix 1, is agreed.
- 2.5 Agree that the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Community, Equality, Partnerships and Performance 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 21 June 2021, the government announced that it will extend support to vulnerable families with the Covid Local Support Grant until 30 September 2021. Government have advised that this fourth extension to the grant will be the final extension. A further £160m 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 £3.612m by the Department for Work and Pensions, who have applied the same grant conditions as previous extensions (as detailed in 6.1) and is analysed below:

- Allocate £2.617m to extend the provision of food vouchers to those eligible for free school meals for the Summer 2021 school holidays and also those within Early Years settings. This will fund vouchers of £15 per week for 4 weeks to the parents of eligible children.
- Allocate £845,283 as follows:
 - £200,000 to the Essential Living Fund, a scheme managed on behalf of the County Council by Southend Borough Council, where access to the fund is through an application process with evidence of need
 - £300,000 to deliver targeted family support and childcare delivered through locally trusted organisations
 - £160,283 to deliver a series of programmes focusing on holiday hunger and food programmes.
 - £185,000 to support those who are or who become homeless and in need of support for food and essential items such as toiletries.

Funding to be distributed by the Head of Active Essex, Head of Strategic Commissioning for Children and Families and Head of Housing Growth.

- Allocate £150,000 for a grant scheme for members using the same arrangements as per the previous grant scheme for members 2020/21 (FP/899/11/20 and FP/899/11/20/App1) as follows:
 - Under the proposed scheme, the Council will make available the sum of £2,000 for each member. Members are able to make recommendations as to how the money is to be spent. The final decision will be taken by officers under delegated powers. A scheme has been written which is attached at appendix 1.
 - The scheme has been designed to ensure that the Fund is managed properly and efficiently and that money is spent in a way which benefits those in immediate need in the local community whilst giving the widest remit for spending, consistent with safe use of public funds.

- It is proposed to require that money must be spent in a way which benefits those in greatest need within each division. There are two main ways of spending it:
 - making a grant to a registered charity, a parish council or a properly constituted community or voluntary association for the purposes of a specific service or project in the Division(s) that meet the criteria as above; or
 - allocating the money to the Essex Essential Living Fund which provides emergency funding for crisis hit families in Essex and is administered on behalf of the council by Southend on Sea Borough Council.
- Councillors can choose to either nominate individual projects to receive a grant of at least £500 or to make the funding available to the Essex Essential Living Fund or a combination of both.
- Essex County Councillors are required to submit their applications by 31 August 2021, if they do not do so the money will automatically be pooled and spent on the Essential Living Fund.
- The Essential Living Fund helps families and vulnerable people with items such as furniture, groceries, toiletries, clothing, fuel connection charges and white goods.
- It is recommended that the Fund is administered by the Essex County Council Democracy Team, using the processes identified in the guidance.

This new funding is now available to spend until 30 September 2021 and administration costs, where appropriate, will also be claimed.

- 3.4 As stated in previous decisions (FP/023/03/21, FP/062/04/21 and FP/023/03/21), the provision of support to families entitled to free school meals and early years 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, Easter 2021 and May 2021 half term 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 21 June 2020, where funding is up to 30 September. 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 30 September 2021 and the successful delivery of the voucher scheme at Christmas 2020, February 2021 half term, Easter 2021 and May 2021 half term 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. Given the late notice of this funding, 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. Government have confirmed that this is the final extension of the Covid Local Support grant.

6 Financial implications

- 6.1 The Department for Work and Pensions have announced that they have extended Covid grant support for vulnerable families until 30 September 2021. The Covid Local Support Grant has the same eligibility criteria as to the previous extension to the Covid Local Support Grant Scheme, which finished on 20 June 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 21 June 2021 to 30 September 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 £3.612m funding will be allocated to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Community, Equality, Partnerships and Performance.
- 6.5 It is proposed that the voucher scheme increases the contract value by £2.617m to £6.457m 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 For the member grant scheme, £150,000 will be available under the local grant scheme and is to be divided and allocated as £2,000 for each single member division or £4,000 for divisions served by two councillors.

6.6.1 Members are able to make recommendations as to how the money is to be spent with the final decision taken by officers of Essex County Council under delegated powers. All spend must satisfy the conditions which are attached to the grant. The minimum allocation is £500.

6.6.2 Any award of funding by way of a grant will be accompanied with a grant letter for signature by the beneficiary. This will include conditions to ensure that it is unlawful for the funding not to be spent in the way agreed within the grant award letter.

6.6.3 Grant funding will normally be paid after the expenditure is incurred unless this will prejudice the delivery of the proposal in which case ECC may agree to pay in advance. The spend profile must comply with the grant conditions where all purchases must be received or redeemed by 30 September 2021.

- 6.7 The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Community, Equality, Partnerships and Performance 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 - Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Community, Equality, Partnerships and Performance	6 July 2021

In consultation with:

Role	Date
Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources and Corporate Affairs	
Councillor Chris Whitbread	5 July 2021
Executive Director for Finance and Technology (S151 Officer)	1 July 2021
Stephanie Mitchener on behalf of Nicole Wood	
Director, Legal and Assurance (Monitoring Officer)	
Paul Turner	1 July 2021

Executive Director for Children and Families Helen Lincoln	1 July 2021
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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 Chris Pond – Chairman of the Corporate Policy and Scrutiny Committee

Date: 7 July 2021