

Forward Plan reference number: FP/071/05/21

Report title: Allocation of Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF): 2021/22 Spending Programme	
Report to: Cabinet	
Report author: Councillor John Spence, Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health	
Date: 8 June 2021	For: Decision
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County Divisions affected: All Essex	

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The Council has received additional Contain Outbreak Management Funding from the Department of Health and Social Care to help further contain and respond to the Covid-19 pandemic in Essex. This report asks Cabinet to agree how that one-off funding will be spent.
- 1.2 The funding enables the Council to support some of the most vulnerable people and communities in Essex, for example, through the citizens advice bureau, support for young people and adults on low income; and further support for community hubs for those isolating and needing support. The report also lays out a series of support measures for businesses as they adapt to new operating models as a result of COVID, including additional support targeted at Early Years providers. Finally, the report seeks approval to invest in a wide range of interventions at a community level, from support to grassroots clubs and community buildings, to supporting businesses in Essex through a £5m extension to the business adaptation grant scheme.
- 1.3 All of the recommendations have been developed after careful consideration of how the previous funding streams, totalling £27.5m, have been allocated and the conditions which are attached to the funding. The goal has been to identify remaining risks and opportunities and to analyse how impact can be maximised from the remaining spend of £15.6m, given the need that all funds are disbursed during 2021/22.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Agree that £13.3m of the Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF) will be used to fund the following public health coronavirus response activities in Essex:
 - 2.1.1 Increasing the maximum Business Adaptation Grant that businesses can apply for from £1,500 to £5,000 and allocating £5m to be made available to District,

Borough and City Councils for this purpose, to be paid in stages to each authority to enable them to meet demand in their area.

- 2.1.2 Agree that £2.5m will be used to fund measures to reduce the risk of spreading the virus in places in Essex open to the public with high levels of tourism and visitor numbers. £925,000 of this will be used to fund measures in Essex County Council's Country Parks, Essex Outdoors Centres and Cressing Temple Barns. £1.575m will be allocated to a grant scheme which will be open to applications from District, Borough and City Councils.
- 2.1.3 Allocate £1.08m to be divided equally between the twelve District, City and Borough Councils in Essex to fund an additional 12 months of direct support to local communities via the community hubs they have established.
- 2.1.4 Grant £680,000 to Citizen Advice Bureaux in Essex to meet continued increased demand due to Covid-19.
- 2.1.5 Allocate £550,000 to the Essex Association of Local Councils (EALC) to deliver, on the Council's behalf, a grant scheme for grassroots clubs to assist with Covid-19 remobilisation costs.
- 2.1.6 Agree that £508,000 will be used by the Council's Early Years team to provide a one-off payment to early years settings in the County to assist with PPE costs. A payment of £200 will go to childminders and out-of-school providers, and £500 to pre-schools and day nurseries.
- 2.1.7 Allocate £25,000 to the Chelmsford Citizens Advice Bureau to host an Armed Forces Covenant Liaison Officer.
- 2.1.8 Agree that £500,000 will be used by ECC to make bottles of hand sanitiser and face coverings freely available to young people and adults with low income.
- 2.1.9 Agree that £50,000 will be used to deliver a targeted Covid-19 communications campaign for gypsy and traveller communities.
- 2.1.10 Agree that £100,000 will be used to fund Essex Coronavirus Action (ECA), a digital community campaign model supporting Covid safety compliance, for an additional 12 months.
- 2.1.11 Agree that £200,000 will be used to purchase devices for adults with learning disabilities, autism, carers and older people, and £100,000 will be used to facilitate implementation and the upskilling of isolated residents to help them become digitally connected.
- 2.1.12 Agree that £500,000 will be used to fund Covid-19 communications and campaigns.
- 2.1.13 Allocate £1.5m to the Rural Community Council of Essex to administer a grants scheme to support community buildings, such as village halls, community centres, and faith buildings with the costs of being Covid compliant.

- 2.2 Agree that £2.3m of the COMF grant will not be allocated at this stage but will be retained for responding to a potential third wave or unanticipated Covid response needs in the 2021/22 financial year and subject to a separate decision at the relevant time.
- 2.3 Agree that the Executive Director, Place and Public Health in consultation with the Section 151 Officer is authorised to:
 - 2.3.1 agree the criteria for and approve applications for funding pursuant to paragraph 2.1 above; and
 - 2.3.2 approve the terms of agreements under which funding is paid.
- 2.4 Agree that the Section 151 Officer in consultation with the Director, Wellbeing Public Health and Communities and the Executive Director, Place and Public Health is authorised between now and the end of November 2021 to reallocate the funding referred to in paragraph 2.1 between different heads of funding set out in paragraph 2.1 to respond to demand and priority need.

3. Summary of issue

- 3.1 As the Covid-19 pandemic continues, the Department for Health and Social Care has made further funding available to Local Authorities through its Contain Outbreak Management Fund to support the ongoing public health response to coronavirus.
- 3.2 Including this additional funding, the Council has received a total of £43.1m in COMF funding over two financial years. All of this funding is 'restricted', that is subject to grant conditions that restrict the purpose of application and must be spent by 31 March 2022. To date, the Council has already allocated £27.5m of this funding on Covid response activities that have supported residents to stay safe during the Coronavirus pandemic. There is £15.6m left to be allocated. The Council reports on a monthly basis to government (the Department of Health and Social Care) on progress and basis of our spending plans.
- 3.3 The grant conditions say that all the application of the funding must be agreed by the Director of Public Health and used to support public health activities that directly relate to the Covid-19 response, contributing to breaking the chain of transmission and protecting our most vulnerable residents, such as:
 - Testing and tracing
 - Non-financial support for self-isolation
 - Support to particular groups
 - Communications and engagement
 - Compliance and enforcement
- 3.4 Building on evaluation and feedback from existing interventions, and in line with the above criteria, a wide-reaching spending plan has been developed to respond to areas of need in the County. This spending plan will help to support

the local economy and protect vulnerable people as the national lockdown restrictions ease and efforts to contain the virus continue. The proposals are all time limited and will not generate ongoing sustainability issues, recognising the COMF funding is one off. It is proposed that £13.3m of the COMF grant is allocated to the organisations as set out below:

- 3.4.1 £5m will be allocated to District Councils to extend and expand the existing Business Adaptation Grant (BAG) schemes that were launched in November 2020 and extended in February 2021 (forward plan reference FP/964/01/21). The scope of the scheme will be widened to include funding for further digital adaptation, ventilation equipment, and Covid risk assessments to enable businesses to ensure their operations are Covid-secure in the longer-term and resilient to future waves of the virus. The maximum funding value that can be awarded to each business will increase from £1,500 to £5,000.
- 3.4.2 £2.5m will be used to fund measures that encourage or enable compliance with Covid-19 safe guidance in public spaces in the county that experience high tourism and visitor footfall. After step 4 on the Government's roadmap (anticipated to be from 21 June 2021), most restrictions on social contact with friends and family will be lifted. It will, therefore, become all the more important to encourage and enable social distancing in public spaces to limit the risk of transmission. £925,000 of this funding will be used for measures in Essex County Council's Country Parks, Essex Outdoors and Cressing Temple Barns, and £1.575m will be used to run a grant scheme open to applications from District, Borough and City Councils to fund measures in tourist and visitor hot spots.
- 3.4.3 £1.08m will be divided equally between the twelve District, City and Borough Councils in Essex to fund an additional 12 months of direct support to local communities via the community hubs they have established. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, the Local Community Hubs have provided the first point of contact for residents without access to support from family and friends. This support has enabled residents to self-isolate as required and provided first-line support to residents in need. This funding will enable them to continue to offer this service for a further 12 months.
- 3.4.4 £680,000 will be allocated to Citizen Advice Bureaux (CABs) in Essex to enable them to continue to meet increased levels of demand as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and continue to provide advice to vulnerable residents in relation to Covid-19, helping them to stay safe and access the right support. £580,000 of the funding will be divided equally between the nine CABs, and an additional £100,000 will be allocated to Chelmsford CAB to cover legal work covering all of Essex.
- 3.4.5 £550,000 will be allocated to the Essex Association of Local Councils (EALC) to deliver, on the Council's behalf, a grant scheme for grassroots clubs to assist with the costs of remobilising and operating in a Covid-safe way. The types of costs covered by the grants will include but not be limited to items such as hand sanitiser dispensers, signage, increased cleaning, and increased venue hire costs to comply with social distancing.

- 3.4.6 £508,000 will be used by the Council's Early Years team to provide a one-off payment to early years settings in the county to assist with PPE costs so they can continue to operate in a Covid-secure way. The payment amount will be determined by the type of early years setting; a payment of £200 will go to childminders and out-of-school providers, and £500 to pre-schools and day nurseries. Early years settings have not received funding for PPE directly from central government.
- 3.4.7 £25,000 will be used to fund an Armed Forces Covenant Liaison Officer to support the work of the Essex Civilian Military Partnership Board (CMPB) in engaging with this often harder to reach cohort and providing Covid-19 related information, advice, and guidance. The post will be hosted by Chelmsford Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB).
- 3.4.8 £500,000 will be used to make bottles of hand sanitiser and face coverings freely available to young people and adults with low income. ECC's Procurement team will source the goods for distribution to appropriate locations for them to be given to residents who need them.
- 3.4.9 £50,000 will be used to deliver a targeted Covid-19 communications strategy for gypsy and traveller communities, to encourage vaccination take-up, and testing and positive behaviour around key health messaging of hands, face, space.
- 3.4.10 £100,000 will be used to fund Essex Coronavirus Action (ECA) - a digital community campaign model supporting Covid safety compliance, which the Council's Communities team manages, for an additional twelve months. ECA has an average monthly page reach of three to five million and is established as a trusted community resource and source of Covid-19 guidance for local residents. This will be spent on community management staff time, advertising, and digital assets production.
- 3.4.11 £200,000 will be used to give devices to adults with learning disabilities, autism, carers and mental health issues to enable them to get online and use technology to access services, shop online, pay bills, use online banking and stay connected with social activities, whilst limiting face to face contact. In addition, £100,000 will be used to facilitate implementation, including supporting volunteers to help isolated residents with getting connected online, data and additional equipment costs. Covid safety measures continue to drive a shift to digital channels and online service delivery. This funding will support residents with the digital upskilling required to access services and advice remotely.
- 3.4.12 £500,000 will be used by the Council's Communications and Marketing team to enable delivery of a cross section of activity dealing with Covid-19 related events. Activities will range from direct marketing 'information' activities, targeted campaigns to encourage positive behaviours, through to communications supporting economic recovery, wellbeing and encouraging the take-up of grants for self-isolating individuals.

- 3.4.13 £1.5m will be allocated to the Rural Community Council of Essex to administer a grants scheme to support community buildings, such as village halls, community centres, and faith buildings, with the costs of being Covid compliant. The grants will be used to cover the costs of items such as signage, physical adaptations to ensure social distancing, hygiene measures, ventilation, and enhanced cleaning. The grant values will be determined by set grant criteria and the costs of the measures applied for; the framework for the grant process and criteria will be agreed as set out in paragraph 2.3. The maximum grant value that will be awarded to a site is £15,000.

All funding must be spent by 31 March 2022.

- 3.5 The government has indicated there will be no further COMF funding so flexibility is needed should there be a further wave. It is proposed that £2.3m of the funding is held back for this purpose. A plan will be developed with the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health, with review and release points, to ensure the contingency fund is spent in line with the grant conditions, in full by 31 March 2022. Any such spend shall be subject to a decision at the relevant time.

4. Options

4.1 Option 1 – Do nothing (not recommended)

This option would not enable us to distribute the funding from the Department of Health and Social Care and would mean that our residents would not benefit from the central government funding. The funding must be spent by 31st March 2022; any unspent funds will need to be returned to central government.

4.2 Option 2 – recommended option

Allocate the funding as set out in 3.4 above (recommended).

This option will enable the Council to spend the grant in accordance with the grant conditions, helping to contain the Covid-19 virus and support residents through the pandemic.

5. Issues for consideration

5.1 Financial implications

- 5.1.1 The Council has received an additional retrospective COMF grant for 2020/21 for the period of 17 February to 31 March, bringing the total COMF funding received in 2020/21 to £35.6m. Unallocated monies from 2020/21 will be carried over into 2021/22 as allowed within the grant conditions.

- 5.1.2 For the 2021/22 financial year, the DHSC has confirmed the Council will receive an additional £7.4m of funding. Central Government has indicated there will be no further COMF funding beyond this. For the first time, Districts will also be

directly awarded a smaller amount of COMF money on a per capita basis in 2021/22.

5.1.3 The total confirmed COMF funding for both 2020/21 and 2021/22 combined equates to £43.1m. All of this is subject to strict grant conditions and must be spent by the end of the 2021/22 financial year.

5.1.4 A total of £27.5m worth of commitments have been approved to date, which leaves £15.6m of funds remaining to be allocated in this financial year.

5.1.5 Where required, ECC will enter into, or revise existing agreements/ contracts, which will set out the conditions within which the funding is to be spent, along with reporting expectations. Should DHSC decide suppression measures are no longer required, any unspent funding will need to be returned to ECC.

5.1.6 Where appropriate, each allocation will be made with a supporting Service Level Agreement or contract variation which will include the following:

- Spending allocations will need to be spent by the date agreed under 2.3 above and within the agreed timeframes. Any unspent funding will need to be returned to ECC within 28 days of the date funding is to be spent by.
- Agreed timelines for mobilisation to ensure that funding is prioritised for immediate response.
- Agreed reporting on progress and outcomes

5.1.7 Any unspent funding will be reallocated to other activities which meet COMF criteria and be subject to relevant governance requirements.

5.2 Legal implications

5.2.1 Proper internal controls are required to make sure that the money is spent on the intended purposes.

5.2.2 The grant application process and criteria should be clear and transparent.

5.2.3 All grants must be monitored to ensure that they do not constitute a prohibited subsidy and are in compliance with the subsidy control rules. In particular money paid to businesses must be spent to remedy harm caused by the pandemic.

5.2.4 The COMF money is paid to ECC on strict terms and conditions and it will be necessary to ensure that all funding paid complies with those terms and conditions and is paid subject to legal agreements requiring spend on the activities.

6. Equality and Diversity implications

- 6.1 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.
- 6.2 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).
- 6.3 The equality impact assessment indicates that the proposals in this report will not have a disproportionately adverse impact on any people with a particular characteristic.

7. List of appendices

- 7.1 Equality Impact Assessment

8. List of Background papers

None.