

NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES CABINET MEMBER

COVID-19 WINTER GRANT SCHEME

1. OBJECT AND KEY POINTS IN THIS REPORT

- 1.1 This report sets out proposals for the local implementation of the government's recently announced COVID Winter Grant Scheme.
- 1.2 The object of the report is to seek approval for the proposed approach.
- 1.3 Urgent approval is requested due to the requirement set out in government guidance, published on 20 November 2020, to begin administering the scheme in early December 2020.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 On Sunday 8 November 2020, the government announced the introduction of the £170 million COVID Winter Grant Scheme - a package of extra targeted financial support for those in need over the winter period. The funding allocation for North Lincolnshire is £532,566, which is due to be released in the first week of December 2020 and will run until the end of March 2021.
- 2.2 Government guidance issued by the DWP states that 'the objective of the COVID Winter Grant Scheme is to provide support to vulnerable households and families with children particularly affected by the pandemic throughout the winter period where alternative sources of assistance may be unavailable'. The clear focus of the Scheme is to help those in most need with the cost of food, energy, water bills (including sewerage) and other essentials.
- 2.3 This Scheme is part of a wider winter support package for families and children, including:
 - expansion of the Department for Education's (DfE's) Holiday Activities and Food programme, across England next year. This investment of up to £220 million will be delivered through grants to local authorities to ensure provision of the scheme for Easter, summer and Christmas in 2021.
 - increasing the value of the Department for Health and Social Care's Healthy Start vouchers from £3.10 to £4.25 from April 2021.
 - DEFRA will provide further funding for local charities through well-established networks to provide immediate support to front-line food aid charities, including food banks, who are supporting those most vulnerable due to the economic impacts of COVID-19.
- 2.4 Considerable flexibilities have been given to Local Authorities in determining their own local eligibility framework and approach, with the ability to deliver the scheme through vouchers or grants, or other mechanisms. The main requirements are that at least 80% must be spent

on families with children, with up to 20% for households without children, which includes care leavers and under 25's with Special Educational Needs and/or Disability (SEND). The guidance supports Local Authorities in working with other local organisations to deliver the Scheme, and to use local knowledge and data to identify and prioritise support for specific vulnerable groups.

2.5 Following initial scoping activity and informal consultation across the council, with schools and with the local voluntary sector, proposals to deliver the Scheme in North Lincolnshire have been developed as follows:

2.6 Local Eligibility Framework and Approach

a) Free School Meal (FSM) Scheme

2.6.1 Although there is no requirement to fund FSM over school holidays, doing so is in line with the policy intent behind the Scheme, and reflects the focus given to 'holiday hunger' and the impact of COVID 19 on poorer families in the national press and across social media. There is recent precedent in North Lincolnshire for funding FSM during holiday periods, and an established system for the purchase and distribution of vouchers to eligible families. Informal consultation has taken place with a number of schools who have expressed support for taking the same approach over the Christmas break.

2.6.2 Alongside this group, it is proposed that families with children eligible for 2-year old funding are also issued food vouchers at the same rate, to increase coverage for all children 2-16 with equal eligibility.

b) Welfare Assistance Support

2.6.3 It is proposed that this element of the scheme builds on the processes developed in July to deliver the Defra emergency assistance grant scheme, which is administered under a commissioned contract by North Lincolnshire CAB. Bringing the two schemes together would provide a range of benefits including:

- Utilising the existing emergency assistance grant application process and data capture systems already deployed will enable rapid roll-out. The systems are tested which will harness business process efficiencies through the creation of a streamlined single application process for residents
- Drawing on CAB's considerable expertise and trusted reputation in providing advice and guidance for residents and the opportunity to 'make every contact count' supporting our outcomes of safe, well, prosperous, and connected. This could include for example providing applicants with help with debt and money worries together with broader needs such as information about skills, training, or employment.
- Enabling CAB to work with their extensive collaborative network of voluntary and community organisations in North Lincolnshire to access partner capacity for delivery

2.7 Taking a targeted approach

2.7.1 There will be equality of opportunity to apply for grants within the Scheme, however the experience of similar schemes suggests that a targeted approach will be needed to ensure those who are most in need find out about and are enabled to apply for grants. To this end, the Scheme will be promoted across relevant teams, services, schools, and agencies, including the voluntary sector, with specific communications going directly to a small number of highest priority groups.

2.7.2 For example, to maximise applications from families with infants aged 0 – 2 who may need support with food and bills, information about the Scheme will be sent to the parents of all children in this age range. Health visitors, nursery nurses, and children’s centre staff will then specifically target families known to be experiencing, or at risk of experiencing hardship.

2.7.3 This approach will be taken for all of the vulnerable groups listed below, who have been identified following consultation across council service areas. These are:

- Care leavers and young parents receiving additional support
- New or recent universal credit applicants
- Families with babies eligible for healthy start vouchers
- 16-18 year-olds eligible for FSM, or eligible for a college bursary
- Home educated children who would normally be entitled to FSM
- Families and adults with no recourse to public funds
- Those receiving council tax support who are struggling to keep up payments (have paid 50% or less of debt)
- Vulnerable adults identified by adult social care services
- Young people up to the age of 25 with special educational needs or a disability (SEND)

2.8 Eligibility Criteria

2.8.1 The following criteria must be met before welfare assistance grants are made:

- The applicant must be a resident of North Lincolnshire and consent to appropriate identity checks.
- The applicant must be experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, food and/or fuel poverty due to a change in circumstances related to, directly or indirectly, the impact of the pandemic.
- The applicant must not have any other means to meet their need for food and/or energy (including water/sewerage bills).
- The applicant must be willing to accept food or fuel vouchers if the grant is awarded, unless exceptional circumstances apply.

2.9 Decision Making

2.9.1 The decision maker for standard applications under the welfare assistance scheme will be the CAB, with applications for exceptional requests being considered by a weekly panel including officers from the council. Because every personal circumstance is different, decision making will involve a degree of subjectivity however a range of measures will be established to reduce the risk of fraud. These are detailed in section 6.

3. OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

3.1 A range of options for the local delivery of the COVID Winter Grant Scheme have been considered by colleagues across council service areas, giving consideration to the views of schools and local voluntary sector organisations. The proposals for consideration are summarised as follows:

- a) Free School Meal Scheme
 - Provision of food vouchers at a value of £15 per week, for children aged 5-16 who are eligible for free school meals, and for younger children eligible for 2 year funding.
- b) Welfare Assistance Support
 - Commissioning CAB to administrate a grant application process.

4. ANALYSIS OF OPTIONS

4.1 The proposed eligibility framework and approach have been developed for the reasons set out in this report. The key benefits of the proposals are as follows:

- The Scheme can be set up and implemented quickly, therefore maximising the support to families and households in need in the run up to Christmas
- Using existing systems and tested mechanisms involves less risk, and provide efficiencies
- Using existing systems will enable robust management oversight of applications, decision making and spend, promoting effective assurance and financial management.
- Commissioning the CAB to deliver the scheme is in line with the Council Plan and helps to connect applicants with advice, guidance and the wider community offer.
- Making a direct contribution of food vouchers to children eligible to free school meals and 2 year funding provides immediate support to a large proportion of families with low income.
- Targeting other key vulnerable groups, but being responsive to families from a wide range of backgrounds who may experience acute need, creates an equitable and transparent system and maximises opportunities to grant the funding to those most in need.

5. FINANCIAL AND OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (e.g. LEGAL, HR, PROPERTY, IT, COMMUNICATIONS etc.)

5.1 The provision covered by the Scheme is not a statutory duty therefore once the funding has been spent, or the timeframe lapses, there is no requirement for the Council to continue offering the grants.

5.2 The administrative costs for implementing the Scheme will be taken from the grant total, in line with guidance. This will include the associated IT, legal, communications costs etc.

5.3 The grant allocation for the Scheme is £532,566 and is intended for the period 1 December 2020 to 31 March 2021. It is estimated that the FSM element of the local scheme will utilise approximately £280k of the fund. Providing vouchers at £15 per child per week, for 5657 children (FSM) and 550 (2-year funding), will cost £93,105 per week. For 3 weeks this adds up to £279,315.

6. OTHER RELEVANT IMPLICATIONS (e.g. CRIME AND DISORDER, EQUALITIES, COUNCIL PLAN, ENVIRONMENTAL, RISK etc.)

6.1 The Council communications team are represented on the project delivery group and Head of Service steering group, will ensure appropriate communications in line with the strategy that will be kept under regular review.

6.2 If the grant funding is spent before the time period lapses, there is a risk of a gap in support for households needing urgent help before the end of March. Weekly management oversight of the Scheme, in terms of applications and spend, will help promote application rates and responsive communications to help manage demand effectively. Commissioning the CAB will help ensure that people experiencing hardship will continue to be offered ongoing advice and guidance about the sources of support available to them.

6.3 The systems and processes in place with the CAB have already been subject to information governance oversight therefore risks relating to data are low.

6.4 A range of measures will be taken to mitigate the risk of fraud.

Key elements of this system are as follows:

- Standard grants will all be in the form of vouchers or fuel tokens to reduce the likelihood of use outside of the scope of the Scheme. Exceptional requests will be decided by a panel, and if cash payments are made additional identity and eligibility checks may be made including a home visit
- Before any grants are made, identity checks are made using existing databases and professional contacts. The initial assessment process undertaken by the CAB provides a further opportunity to check identity and evaluate need against the criteria.
- Targeted communication with partner agencies will help to ensure that the application process is promoted to groups in need who are already known to services.
- The safe storage and transfer of personal information both within the council and also at the CAB will be a requirement of the contract and subject to Information Governance oversight.
- Internal activities will follow robust systems of internal control, as required in the financial manual. This will include authorisation of spend, ordering controls, safe keeping of such as vouchers and records of distributions.

7. OUTCOMES OF INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT (IF APPLICABLE)

7.1 An IIA has been completed, which did not identify any negative impacts.

8. OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION AND CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS DECLARED

8.1 No formal consultations are required, however the proposals in this report have been developed in conjunction with representatives from a range of council service areas, following informal consultation with representatives from the local voluntary sector and local schools.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 Approve the COVID Winter Grant Scheme local eligibility framework and approach set out in this report.

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Background Papers used in the preparation of this report – COVID Winter Grant Scheme Guidance