

NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL

Health and Wellbeing Board

COVID-19 Winter Grant Scheme

1. OBJECT AND KEY POINTS IN THIS REPORT

- 1.1 This report provides a progress update in relation to the COVID Winter Grant Scheme.
- 1.2 The local delivery model has included the direct provision of food vouchers to vulnerable families and households over the Christmas and half-term breaks, and the implementation of a welfare assistance grant process.
- 1.3 The Scheme has seen high demand, reflecting the impact of the pandemic upon families in North Lincolnshire.
- 1.4 Funding for the Scheme has been on track to be spent by the end of March as planned.
- 1.5 In a letter received 2 March 2021 the government has announced further funding of £185,145 to cover the Easter holiday period up until 16 April 2021.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 In 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 initial funding allocation for North Lincolnshire was £532,566, which was 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 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. 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 have provided 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.

3. CURRENT POSITION

3.1 Following initial scoping activity and informal consultation across the council, with schools and with the local voluntary sector, our local arrangements to deliver the Covid Winter Grant Scheme in North Lincolnshire have been as follows:

a) School holiday food voucher scheme

3.2 Although there has been no requirement under the COVID Winter Grant Scheme to fund free school meals (FSM) over school holidays, doing so is in line with the policy intent behind the Scheme, and reflects concern about the additional hardship experienced by families both locally and nationally who may have been affected by COVID 19.

3.3 As part of our commitment to focus on the most vulnerable, our local approach to this element of the Scheme has been to extend provision beyond the age range entitled to free school meals. Following consultation and using available needs and benefits data, other groups including families with infants and pre-school children, college students, and care leavers have also been included in the offer.

3.4 The total number of supermarket vouchers distributed over Christmas and February half term as part of the Scheme was 6972. This included:

- Children eligible to FSM in schools - 5790
- Children in college eligible for a bursary - 140
- Children eligible for FSM being educated at home (EHE) - 55
- Children eligible for 2 and 3-year funding - 469
- Under 2 in low-income households - 413
- Care Leavers - 105

3.5 Vouchers have been ordered for the 2-week Easter break and plans are in place to continue our local approach for the groups set out above. This will be funded through the Covid-19 winter grant extension, announced by the government on 2 March.

b) Welfare assistance support

3.6 Administered by North Lincolnshire Citizens Advice on behalf of the council, this element of the Scheme has built on the processes and relationships developed in 2020 to deliver the Defra emergency assistance grant scheme.

3.7 The welfare assistance support scheme is accessed via an online application form for the direct provision of financial help for those that are struggling to keep warm and fed. The straightforward application process can be undertaken by a professional on behalf of a member of the public and can also be completed over the telephone via the council's or citizen's advice contact centre staff – using telephone interpretation services if required.

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 hardship 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.
- 3.8 A targeted approach has been taken to promote the welfare assistance grant aimed at the most vulnerable, and those that may normally struggle to access services. This has involved targeted communications, including letters directly to groups known to have the lowest incomes, and the targeting of schools, professional teams and networks most likely to know and come into contact with families and households without children who may be in need of help.
- 3.9 The brief initial assessment undertaken by Citizens Advice helps to identify early unmet needs and many applicants are given advice, information, and guidance, particularly in relation to debt, finances, employment and training opportunities. Close working with voluntary and community groups, and local authority children's centres, helps to enable access to other forms of support if needed to prevent escalation of need.
- 3.10 As of 12 March, there have been 1090 welfare assistance grants awarded, with a further 187 in assessment. Approximately £150,000 has been allocated, mainly in food vouchers, fuel tokens, or white goods.

4.0 ANALYSIS AND NEXT STEPS

- 4.1 In considering the impact of the Covid Winter Grant Scheme, numerous examples of family feedback have been received, providing an overwhelmingly positive view from parents and carers about the difference that the additional financial support has made, particularly over Christmas.
- 4.2 The application process for the welfare assistance element of the Scheme has provided useful insight about the needs and experiences of families over the Winter period, and the extent to which the extra pressures of coping with the pandemic has challenged people's ability to provide food and warmth. Many of the applications also reflect the resilience and fortitude of local people who 'get by' and cope with help from friends, family and universal services.
- 4.3 Learning from the delivery of the Covid Winter Grant Scheme will be considered in the planning process underway for the DfE Holiday Activities and Food programme, to ensure a transition to new arrangements that continues to prioritise the most vulnerable and highest need.
- 4.4 It is clear that the pandemic will continue to impact on family finances for some considerable time, meaning that local recovery necessitates an ongoing focus on understanding the impacts, and improving outcomes, for the most vulnerable children and families. Strategic and partnership responses moving forward need to be sustainable, community-based and enabling, in line with our current priorities and council plan.

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

- 5.1 The Covid Winter Grant Scheme will cease on 16 April 2021 at the end of the funding window. At the current rate of application all of the initial funding allocated to North Lincolnshire will be used within this time period, with plans in development to continue the voucher scheme over Easter.
- 5.2 This report is providing an update only therefore no further resource implications are considered.

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

- 6.1 The systems and processes in place to deliver the Covid Winter Grant have been subject to information governance oversight and internal audit.
- 6.2 A range of measures are being taken to mitigate the risk of fraud.

Key elements of this system are as follows:

- Standard grants are in the form of vouchers or fuel tokens to reduce the likelihood of use outside of the scope of the Scheme. Exceptional requests are considered by a panel, and if cash payments are made additional identity and eligibility checks are 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 Citizens Advice provides a further opportunity to check identity and evaluate need against the criteria.
- Targeted communication with partner agencies helps to ensure that the application process is promoted to groups in need who are already known to services.
- Internal activities follow robust systems of internal control, as required in the financial manual. This includes 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 have been 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 Note the content of this report pertaining to the delivery of the Covid Winter Grant Scheme.

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