

Covid-19 Local Support Grant – Summer Holiday Support – Procurement of Voucher Scheme

To: Children and Young People Committee

Meeting Date: 14th September 2021

From: Executive Director: People and Communities

Electoral division(s): All

Key decision: No

Forward Plan ref: n/a

Outcome: The Children and Young People Committee are being asked to note the procurement process for the LA Covid-19 Support Grant. The grants aimed to support vulnerable families with food during the summer holidays.

Recommendation: It is recommended that the Children and Young People Committee:

- a) Note the decision made under emergency powers by the Chief Executive of Cambridgeshire County Council to undertake the allocation of supermarket vouchers via Wonde for the summer holiday period.
- b) Endorse the model of support outlined in section 2 to mainstream the Covid support for vulnerable families from October 2021 half term onwards.

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1. Background

- 1.1 On the 21st June 2021, the Department for Work and Pensions wrote to all Local Authorities to outline an extension to the Covid Local Support Grant for the period from the 21st June to the 30th September. A further £1.374m of grant funding was made available to Cambridgeshire. Throughout the pandemic, the council has made available to vulnerable families an offer of supermarket vouchers and wider support with food, clothing etc using this grant. The council has no direct mechanism for allocating vouchers to parents and had previously worked with an external organisation to allocate this funding.
- 1.2 A paper was brought to the Children and Young People (CYP) Committee on 29 June 2021 which outlined how the council would use this money to allocate to vulnerable families. The approach was also outlined and agreed in Strategy and Resources Committee on the 6 July 2021. At the time of publication of these reports we did not have in place the procurement approach to allocate these vouchers.

| | £'000 |
|---|---------|
| Funding | |
| DWP Grant Received | 1,374 |
| Additional Council Funding (agreed by CYP Committee and S&R Committee in June / July) | 537 |
| | |
| Proposed allocation | |
| Estimated cost of Providing Voucher Scheme | (1,611) |
| Wider Family / Community Support | (300) |

- 1.3 This paper seeks to provide Members with an overview of the final allocation of vouchers and our procurement approach. Owing to the timescales to ensure vouchers could be allocated in time for the start of the holidays, urgency procedures were followed under Part 4.4(a) (The Procedure for Taking Urgent Decisions) of the County Council constitution.
- 1.4 We expect this to be the final grant received from government. The paper also outlines our proposed support for vulnerable families moving forward and how it will be mainstreamed within the existing council and partners structures.

2. Main Issues

Procurement of Summer Holiday Vouchers

- 2.1 Owing to the timescales involved, it was necessary to seek a contract exemption to provide supermarket vouchers in time for the first voucher to be distributed on the 23 July 2021.
- 2.2 In December 2020, we engaged with three suppliers who can distribute vouchers through their system once data from schools has been provided and uploaded into their system. A number of providers offer this service and do not charge an administrative fee. We have also reviewed a new Crown Procurement Framework RM6255 Voucher Scheme, this framework is designed to be used for Voucher Schemes, but due the short notice of the

grant and urgent nature of the issuing of the funds to enable the conditions of the grant to be satisfied it was not possible to use the framework.

2.3 We were also concerned about the risk for any potential disruption in timescales by setting up a new supplier. As a result, we decided to proceed with our existing provider called Wonde (operating as EVouchers) for the following reasons -

- Wonde has successfully been used by all our schools, considerably reducing the administrative burden on them to lawfully collate their eligible pupil data and provide it to us to then distribute free school meals (FSM) vouchers.
- Wonde have an effective system that allows us to make payments to families who are not accessing schools (in early years settings) through securely uploading data into their system. This will ensure accuracy and a timely response to ensure the vouchers are with families in the rounds to date.
- The need to share substantial amounts of personal data creates GDPR issues but with Wonde already being able to access the majority of this data, in a secure manner, again, the burden to install protective security measures to supply the data to the council is substantially reduced. The system they operate integrates with schools' management information systems which means less data handling for the Council.

2.4 We have reached this decision as this substantially reduces the administrative burden and associated cost on both the Local Authority and our schools, which means more resources can be allocated for families (there is provision in the Grant to charge administrative costs but we are fully committed in our funding).

2.5 As part of the discussion we undertook with Wonde, vouchers will be bought at less than face value – we will be paying 99p in the £1 for the vouchers covering 7 supermarkets. Parents will be able to choose what supermarket they would like.

2.6 Following the agreement by the Chief Executive (and publishing of the decision on 14 July 2021), £1.54m of vouchers have been allocated (at the time of writing this report) as follows -

- 32725 vouchers of £42 to families with eligible pupils in schools
- 4050 vouchers of £42 to families with eligible children attending early years settings
- 250 vouchers for £42 to families with eligible pupils not on a school roll or in an independent school.

Mainstreaming the Covid-19 Local Support

1.7 In addition to the direct voucher scheme, the Winter Grant Scheme provided us with an opportunity in Cambridgeshire to reach those who needed support with food, fuel, or other essential supplies through the winter months. It also simultaneously presented an opportunity to link individuals and families with longer term support who otherwise may not have known about or felt confident enough to seek it.

1.8 The approach to delivering this in Cambridgeshire has been one of partnership working with public sector, voluntary sector partners and communities, recognising that those who live and work locally are often best placed to identify those in need of support. The Grant enabled an increased investment into our universal preventative services to support

households facing financial hardship. A Direct Award scheme was also set up to give community groups and other public sector partners the ability to provide immediate support with food, fuel, or other essential supplies to those in their community who are experiencing financial hardship, whilst also linking them to longer term support. This hybrid model of delivery has enabled us to reach those who we may not otherwise have reached, through local networks.

- 1.9 This way of working reflects the Think Communities principles of person-centred, place-based and system working to support individuals and families. We have also seen the benefit of the 'hub' model of working, which at times has included proactive contact to families and individuals (not waiting for them to find/come to us) and helping families and individuals navigate the system to access the support they need, be it debt advice, housing problems or support to self-isolate due to COVID-19. It also recognises the importance of addressing and alleviating the presenting 'symptoms' of poverty (i.e., that people have food on the table, can heat their homes and can access other essential supplies) in order to effectively engage more preventative forms of support and opportunities that may increase social mobility.
- 1.10 When the grant was first announced, the County Hub had to work quickly with Education colleagues and partners from across the system to establish a process that would ensure the funds would reach those most in need. However, as we consider what a longer-term model might look like, it presents an opportunity to build on the recommendations of the interim Winter Support Evaluation and how the system is responding to the pandemic. A few key recommendations from the evaluation include:
- Retaining a trusted platform established by the COVID-19 County Hub as an open door and an easily accessible point of contact and resource for residents struggling to address/manage the issues they're facing
 - Recognising and working to better understand and support the cohort of people identified as newly experiencing economic hardship
 - Further strengthening links between schools, early years settings and our communities to increase local knowledge of support
- 1.11 Similar approaches have been taken in other local authorities such as Gateshead who are testing an approach to enabling people to thrive by working with people holistically rather than treating each interaction as a transaction to resolve the immediate presenting need. This enables residents to get an early intervention before their needs escalate.¹
- 1.12 As part of our local pandemic response, various work/research projects have highlighted the projected demand that we will see as a result of increased hardship. Already through this grant funding we have been introduced to many households that have previously not asked for help and therefore this model of delivery presents an opportunity to tackle any challenges early, prevent and reduce any escalated demand and enable people to thrive.
- 1.13 Whilst the school meal vouchers met a clear need successfully, with the learning from the hub since March 2020 we identified that needs presenting, often as a result of the

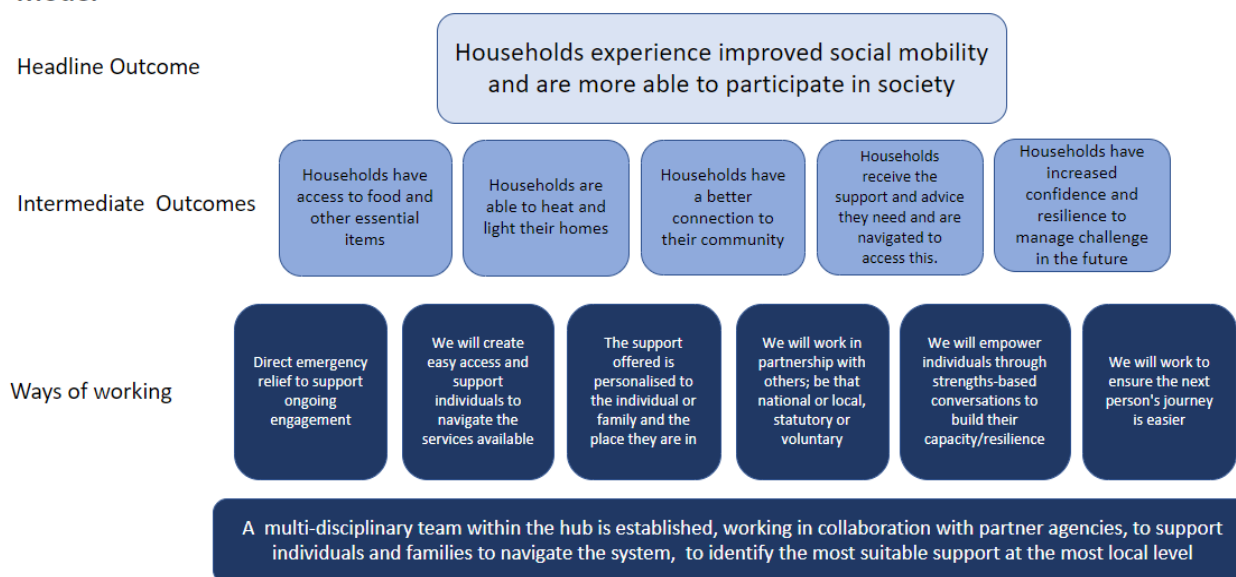
¹ [\(41\) Bespoke Public Services - Learning from Gateshead's Prototypes - YouTube](#)

pandemic, are complex. For this reason, a range of support options, tailored to people and place was required.

Proposal for Ongoing Support to Vulnerable Families

1.14 Below is a high-level overview of the model of delivery and an indication of the outcomes that would be achieved:

Model



2.15 The key elements of this model include:

- The County Hub acting as a central point providing personalised navigation support for families that are struggling to navigate the early intervention/preventative system, and to enable them to access local community-based support – this element of the model has begun already, being implemented with Wisbech Foodbank and Fenland District Council as a pilot. One of the Fenland community connectors is regularly working out of Wisbech Foodbank and linking families into Fenland District Council and the County Hub as appropriate. The County Hub is staffed and funded until April 2022, at which point we will transition to a model where mainstreamed Think Communities officers fulfil the Hub's function
- A direct award scheme that is accessible to key partners across the system (specifically at a local/community level), that enables emergency food/fuel/cash awards to be made for households in need to further enable and encourage their engagement. This approach is currently funded until at least the October half-term, but, as part of the Think Communities investment being considered, there is a £400k budget to enable core activities to be delivered from which a recurring allocation into an ongoing direct award scheme can be made

- Investment into existing infrastructure to manage the projected demand. The scale of the projected demand is difficult to quantify at this point while many of the pandemic's economic support schemes are still in place and while the pace of the economic recovery is still unknown. Anecdotally food support organisations locally have seen increased demand throughout the pandemic and looking back to the 2007/2008 economic crisis, we saw increases in unemployment each year for the following six. We are anticipating a particular spike in demand following the end of September, as far as we currently know, due to a number of factors:
 - the furlough scheme is due to end
 - the energy price cap is due to increase by an average £150 per household per year
 - the temporary £20 increase in Universal Credit payments is due to end
 - financial and other support for those required to self-isolate is due to end

2.16 Whilst, through the grant, we have the foundations in place across the system to implement this way of working, there are still several things that will need to happen to ensure the model is embedded effectively as a longer-term solution. Some of these we have started developing as part of the work with Fenland District Council and Wisbech Foodbank; others will need to wait until we expand the service more widely. Identified workstreams to develop the service are included below:

- Building buy-in and understanding across the system – whilst it is a recognised gap currently, it is important that engagement takes place across the system to ensure partners and communities understand this offer in the context of what else is available
- Re-establishing the longer-term relationships of the hub network
- Exploring how this can be operationalised across each district/local area including what existing teams/organisations can support
- Identifying/establishing routes to access the service
- Developing a process to identify the cohort that will be supported through this model e.g., data matching versus referrals
- Building the resource within the hub to be able to manage the demand
- Delivering training to enable hub staff to provide the navigation role to the system
- Further building the tools/basket of opportunities for the hub to use with residents (a summary of many of those services is attached in appendix 1)
- Reviewing existing infrastructure/services to ensure they're accessible to and able to respond to this new and increased demand – e.g., access points/how well they're known/public perception
- Maintaining investment into the current universal system e.g., CAB/CLAS etc. This is core funded activity, and a new procurement exercise will soon launch to extend the provision further
- Continuing a funded direct award scheme to ensure financial support reaches people in need quickly
- Introducing systems to enable effective case management
- Establishing effective data sharing arrangements that will apply beyond the current emergency arrangements

- Developing an outcome/impact measurement tool
- Developing an evaluation/learning framework for the service

- 2.17 The model set out takes the learning developed throughout the pandemic, and the positive features from the different ways we are supporting households who are struggling, to create a mainstreamed approach that can provide both the immediate support residents may need if they are in crisis with the medium to longer term support they need to recover from the effects of the pandemic. It will sit alongside broader recovery-related activity, as well as forming a major part of the delivery of the Joint Administration's priorities, including decentralisation, improving social mobility, and addressing inequalities.
- 2.18 The model can be delivered using existing resources, alongside the Think Communities investment being put forward as part of the budget build for 2022/23 and beyond.

3. Alignment with corporate priorities

3.1 Communities at the heart of everything we do

- The funding will support the most vulnerable families on low income to support feeding their children during the school holidays.
- The process is means tested so we are targeting funding at the areas of greatest need.
- Through working through communities, we will create a sustainable model to support vulnerable families.

3.2 A good quality of life for everyone

- The funding will support the most vulnerable families on low income to support feeding their children during the school holidays.
- The new model of support will help those most challenged families in the community.

3.3 Helping our children learn, develop and live life to the full

- The funding will support the most vulnerable families on low income to support feeding their children during the school holidays.

3.4 Cambridgeshire: a well-connected, safe, clean, green environment

- There are no significant implications for this priority.

3.5 Protecting and caring for those who need us

- The funding will support the most vulnerable families on low income to support feeding their children during the school holidays.

4. Significant Implications

4.1 Resource Implications

The resources for the voucher scheme were considered in the report of the 29th June to the CYP Committee and the 6th July at the S&R Committee. No additional funding is required to implement the new model.

4.2 Procurement/Contractual/Council Contract Procedure Rules Implications

Advice and guidance was sought throughout this process.

4.3 Statutory, Legal and Risk Implications

Appropriate council processes were followed to seek the exemption from Council procurement regulations for the voucher scheme.

4.4 Equality and Diversity Implications

Not applicable.

4.5 Engagement and Communications Implications

The scheme has been well communicated to parents and across the media. An email helpline has been operating since schools closed to ensure all eligible families are supported.

4.6 Localism and Local Member Involvement

Not applicable.

4.7 Public Health Implications

Enabling families to have sufficient, nutritious food is essential to enable the Best Start in life for children and helps to support Public Health priorities. We would be keen to explore opportunities to promote healthy food choices within the new hub model. The evaluation should consider whether the vouchers are being used as intended- i.e to purchase nutritious food for families and at ways to promote healthy eating.

4.8 Environment and Climate Change Implications on Priority Areas

Not applicable.

Have the resource implications been cleared by Finance? Yes
Name of Financial Officer: Martin Wade

Have the procurement/contractual/ Council Contract Procedure Rules implications been cleared by the LGSS Head of Procurement? Yes
Name of Officer: Henry Swan

Has the impact on statutory, legal and risk implications been cleared by the Council's Monitoring Officer or LGSS Law? Yes or No
Name of Legal Officer:

Have the equality and diversity implications been cleared by your Service Contact? Yes
Name of Officer: Jonathan Lewis

Have any engagement and communication implications been cleared by Communications? Yes
Name of Officer: Simon Cobby

Have any localism and Local Member involvement issues been cleared by your Service Contact? N/A
Name of Officer: Jonathan Lewis

Have any Public Health implications been cleared by Public Health?

Yes

Name of Officer: Raj Lakshman

If a Key decision, have any Environment and Climate Change implications been cleared by the Climate Change Officer?

N/A

Name of Officer:

5. Source documents guidance

5.1 [Report to the Children and Young People Committee 29 June 2021](#)

5.2 [Chief Executive's decision - Covid-19 local support grant - summer holiday support - procurement of voucher scheme](#)

6. Appendices

6.1 Appendix 1 - Basket of Services Information for Members in Cambridgeshire

7. Accessibility

7.1 An accessible version of this report is available on request from Denise.Revens@cambridgeshire.gov.uk