

Household Support Grant

To: Children and Young People Committee

Meeting Date: 19 October 2021

From: Wendi Ogle-Welbourn, Executive Director for People and Communities

Electoral division(s): All

Key decision: Yes

Forward Plan ref: KD2021/072

This key decision was added to the Forward Plan on 8 October 2021 under General Exception arrangements on the following grounds: Funding was announced on 7 October 2021. In order for officers to allocate vouchers in time for October half term a decision is required at the October committee meeting. To delay the decision to the Committee's November meeting would mean that families will not receive this support.

Outcome: The Children and Young People Committee is being asked to agree the process for allocating the Household Support Grant in line with the condition set by Government and officer recommendations.

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

- a) The principles of the strategy as outlined in section 2.
- b) The operation of the Direct Voucher Scheme to eligible families.
- c) Delegate authority to the Service Director for Education to manage the procurement process to ensure the first voucher allocation can take place in October half term.
- d) The proposal for the operation of the wider support to families and community who need support.

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1. Background

1.1 The Government has announced a household support fund to run from 6th October 2021 to the end of March 2022. The distribution framework of the new grant is noted below.

Awards must be based on the following:

- At least 50% of the total funding will be ring-fenced to support households with children, with up to 50% of the total funding to other households genuinely in need of support this winter. This may include households not currently in receipt of DWP welfare benefits;
- Eligible spend includes:
 - Food. The Fund should primarily be used to provide support with food whether in kind or through vouchers or cash.
 - Energy and water. The Fund should also primarily be used to support with energy bills for any form of fuel that is used for the purpose of domestic heating, cooking or lighting, including oil or portable gas cylinders. It can also be used to support with water bills including for drinking, washing, cooking, and sanitary purposes and sewerage.
 - Essentials linked to energy and water. The Fund can be used to provide support with essentials linked to energy and water (including sanitary products, warm clothing, soap, blankets, boiler service/repair, purchase of equipment including fridges, freezers, ovens, etc.), in recognition that a range of costs may arise which directly affect a household's ability to afford or access food, energy and water.
 - Wider essentials. The Fund can be used to support with wider essential needs not linked to energy and water should Authorities consider this appropriate in their area. These may include, but are not limited to, support with other bills including broadband or phone bills, clothing, and essential transport-related costs such as repairing a car, buying a bicycle or paying for fuel. This list is not exhaustive.
 - Housing Costs. In exceptional cases of genuine emergency where existing housing support schemes do not meet this exceptional need, the Fund can be used to support housing costs. Where eligible, ongoing housing support for rent must be provided through the housing cost element of Universal Credit (UC) and Housing Benefit (HB) rather than the Household Support Fund. In addition, eligibility for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) must first be considered before emergency housing support is offered through the Household Support Fund. The Authority must also first consider whether the claimant is at statutory risk of homelessness and therefore owed a duty of support through the Homelessness Prevention Grant (HPG).
 - In exceptional cases of genuine emergency, households in receipt of HB, UC, or DHPs can still receive housing cost support through the Household Support Fund if it is deemed necessary by their Authority. However, the Fund should not be used to provide housing support on an ongoing basis or to support unsustainable tenancies.

- Individuals in receipt of some other form of housing support could still qualify for the other elements of the Household Support Fund, such as food, energy, water, essentials linked to energy and water and wider essentials.
 - The Fund cannot be used to provide mortgage support, though homeowners could still qualify for the other elements of the Fund (such as food, energy, water, essentials linked to energy and water and wider essentials). Where a homeowner is having difficulty with their mortgage payments, they should contact their lender as soon as possible to discuss their circumstances as lenders will have a set procedure to assist.
 - The Fund can exceptionally and in genuine emergency be used to provide support for historic rent arrears built up prior to an existing benefit claim for households already in receipt of Universal Credit and Housing Benefit. This is because these arrears are excluded from the criteria for Discretionary Housing Payments. However, support with rent arrears is not the primary intent of the fund and should not be the focus of spend.
- Reasonable administrative costs. This includes reasonable costs incurred administering the scheme. These include for example:
 - staff costs
 - advertising and publicity to raise awareness of the scheme
 - web page design
 - printing application forms
 - small IT changes, for example, to facilitate MI production
- Eligible spend does not include:
 - Advice services such as debt advice;
 - Mortgage costs.
- It is expected that the focus of support should be on food and bills and that support for housing costs should only be given in exceptional cases of genuine emergency. Beyond this, Authorities have discretion to determine the most appropriate scheme for their area, based on their understanding of local need and with due regard to equality considerations.
- Individual awards can be whatever type and amount is deemed appropriate by Authorities for the receiving household, bearing in mind the overall spend eligibility priorities listed above and the risk of fraud and error. Awards to any given household can cover only one of the spend eligibility categories listed above or can cover several.
- Authorities should not make Household Support Fund eligibility conditional on being employed or self-employed, or directly linked to a loss of earnings from employment or self-employment. This will ensure that there is no National Insurance Contribution liability payable on any payments by either the claimant, the Authority or employer.

1.2 The purpose of this report is to consider how best to meet these requirements and support those families in the most challenging circumstances arising from the Covid-19 situation.

2. Main Issues

Proposal

- 2.1 The Winter Grant Scheme was initiated in November 2020 via a central government grant to local authorities to provide practical support to those whose lives have been impacted by COVID-19 through the winter months. From April 2021 onwards the scheme has been renamed the COVID Local Support Grant. 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.
- 2.2 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 us to provide food vouchers to those children eligible for free school meals in the school holidays, 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.
- 2.3 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) to effectively engage more preventative forms of support and opportunities that may increase social mobility.
- 2.4 The grant and its proposed allocation is shown in the table below. The following sections outline how the money will be spent.

	Cambridgeshire
Grant Received	£3,581,424.56
Proposed allocation -	
• Direct Voucher Scheme (*)	1,124,266
• Wider Support Scheme	2,457,158

(*) this is a current estimate based upon the summer voucher scheme take up

Direct Food Voucher Scheme

- 2.5 It is our intention to continue to provide the Direct voucher scheme in a similar way to the process we followed in the past 12 months.
- 2.6 The Direct Voucher Scheme offers parents a voucher for a choice of supermarkets which are sent to eligible families automatically using school data and information held by the Local Authority. Each eligible child received a £15 voucher for each week of the school holidays (£3 per day). Those eligible for the voucher will be those pupils who met the following criteria –
- Early Years Pupil Premium,
 - Children that access funded two-year-old education
 - Eligible for Free School Meals
 - Students eligible for 16+ bursary.
- 2.7 We would fund pupils on school roll, regardless of where they live. We have a reciprocal agreement with other LA's in the Easter Region to fund pupils in their setting for 4-16 education. For colleges, we would work with each of the establishments to follow similar arrangements they may operate with their eligible pupils. This may involve cash payment. We will only fund in this position those that live in Cambridgeshire. We will also seek to reach out to parents in independent schools in the County to offer them support if they meet the criteria.
- 2.8 The scheme we are proposing would fund vouchers across the following periods
- October Half term - £15 per eligible child
 - Christmas - £30 per eligible child
 - February Half Term - £15 per eligible child
- 2.9 Given the timing of the first voucher (aiming to be released on the 22nd October), we will seek an exemption from contract regulations with a view that the remaining voucher scheme goes via a compliant procurement process. There is insufficient time to undertake the full process of procurement and set up data systems to allocate in time. We will continue to use the existing voucher provider (Wonde) for this first round.

Proposals for wider support

- 2.9 We have started detailed discussions with our partners across Cambridgeshire, via our district and city council relationships and through discussion at the Community Resilience Group meeting. These discussions will help shape and target the approach we take with the remaining funding, but the core offer will closely align to our most recent delivery models:
- Funding passed to each district and city council to enable them to make direct awards to households in urgent need
 - Funding to support the work of our Local Assistance Scheme, which brings together a range of agencies with coordination provided by the Citizens' Advice Bureau
 - Investment into other agencies that can provide urgent and practical assistance when needed, including voluntary, community and faith sector organisations.
- 2.10 We also propose to engage with our County Councillors who have supported significant levels of community activity throughout the pandemic, to make sure that we harness their

local knowledge, and direct any funding, if available, to local groups that might more easily reach people in greatest need than we can.

- 2.11 Fundamental to the way this fund is spent is our ability to proactively identify people in need, and we will be developing mechanisms to analyse data from multiple sources to help with this. We will continue to operate a relatively light touch application process, especially important given that people are likely to be in immediate need and will continue to also try to encourage and enable people helped with financial or other practical support to also seek support from advice and other agencies.
- 2.12 We will also make sure our own services are aligned to the scheme, most notably our adult skills and libraries services, both of which can provide longer term connectivity and support to help people increase their learning and earnings.
- 2.13 A small proportion of the funding will need to be retained to cover our staffing costs for the wider support and voucher scheme, and this will be less than 5% of the total allocation.
- 2.14 These proposals will also be shared with the Communities, Social Mobility and Inclusion Committee for consideration of the wider community aspects of the proposal for the grant.

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 scheme is fully funded by government grant which runs from October until the end of March. No additional funding is required to implement the new model.

- 4.2 Procurement/Contractual/Council Contract Procedure Rules Implications
Previous contracts have been let in a non-compliant manner due to time scales and unpredictability, the October half term will also have to be dealt with non-compliantly. Our colleagues in PCC Procurement have agreed to work with the client (as we both are letting these contracts) to try and come up with a compliant process for Christmas vouchers and beyond
- 4.3 Statutory, Legal and Risk Implications
Appropriate council processes will be 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
Name of Legal Officer: Fiona McMillian

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:

Have any Public Health implications been cleared by Public Health?

Yes

Name of Officer: Helen Freeman

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 Details on the government announcement are here –

[Government launches £500m support for vulnerable households over winter](#)