

From: Zena Cooke, Corporate Director Finance

To: Roger Gough, Leader

Subject: **COVID Winter Grant Scheme extension**
Decision number: 21/00038

Key Decision: *Affects more than 2 Electoral Divisions and involves expenditure of over £1m*

Classification: Unrestricted

Past Pathway of Paper: None

Future Pathway of Paper: **Leader Decision**

Electoral Division: All

Summary: Advises that the Government has provided an additional £1.5m for the COVID Winter Grant Scheme, and has extended the date by which resources must be spent to 16th April 2021.

Recommendations: The Leader of the Council is asked to:

- 1) Accept the additional £1.5m COVID Winter Grant for use in line with the guidance published by Department of Work and Pensions and relevant terms and conditions
- 2) Approve use of the full £1.5m to support the provision of vouchers to families with children in receipt of benefits-related Free School Meals during the Easter 2021 school holidays
- 3) Delegate authority to the Corporate Director for Finance to, in consultation with the Leader to take any other actions needed to ensure that the £1.5m is spent in full by 16 April 2021.
- 4) Delegate authority to the Corporate Director of Finance to take other necessary actions, including but not limited to entering into contracts or other legal agreements, as required to implement this decision.

1. Introduction

1.1 Urgent Decision **20/00110** was taken in November to accept the £4.5m Government's Covid Winter Grant and allocate it as follows:

- £2.5m on providing vouchers during the Christmas and February school holidays to families with children in receipt of benefits-related Free School meals, and other low income families as set out in paragraph
- £900k to be allocated to Districts, on the same funding formula used by DWP, to target vulnerable households in their areas

- £800k to be used by KCC services to distribute to families in financial hardship
- £500k to be earmarked for low income families who need help with food and utilities bills

The grant had to be spent between early December 2020 and 31 March 2021.

1.2 On 2 March 2021, the County Council received a communication from the Department of Works & Pensions to say that it was extending the period in which the Grant should be spent from 31 March to 16 April, and was awarding KCC a further £1.5m. The Department has asked us to let it know by 15th March how we intend to spend this further £1.5m.

2. COVID Winter Grant Scheme

2.1 The purpose of the original grant was “to give vulnerable households peace of mind in the run up to Christmas and over the Winter months during the pandemic by helping those who need it to have food on the table and other essentials, so every child will be warm and well-fed this winter.”

2.2 It has proved challenging to identify and get the resources to those most in need in the time period required by the grant and all partners have worked very hard collectively and individually to achieve this. Whilst we have discretion to determine how to allocate this second tranche of funding, the arguments in favour of using it to provide supermarket vouchers for those families entitled to benefits-related free school meals are very strong:

- After providing such vouchers in the October, Christmas and February holidays, there is an expectation amongst schools and families that similar support will be offered in the Easter holidays. Although the Government’s Holiday Activities Fund has now been announced, this is only expected to provide meals to those children and young people entitled to FSMs who attend an activity, which under the grant conditions is expected to cover four days during Easter. Due to Covid-19 it is recognised by the Department for Education that it will not be possible to commission significant amount of activities and support in time for Easter.
- It takes time to organise and implement schemes, and whilst we are confident of delivering the first tranche of Winter Grant in full, the logistics of getting resources to the right people at the right time takes planning and organisation, and there is insufficient time to do this by the beginning of April.

2.3 The cost of providing supermarket vouchers during the February half term was around £675k so it is estimated that the costs of covering the Easter holidays will be £1.35m, and if there are resources left over they will be used in line with the grant conditions.

Monitoring impact, and adjusting allocations

2.4 The monitoring of this expenditure will be undertaken as set out in the decision report for the first tranche of Winter Grant Fund. It should also be noted that the final 25% of grant funding is still to be paid in arrears based on evidence of spend via the

monitoring returns. Monitoring and compliance checks will be applied to all areas of spend.

Eligibility

2.5 The fundamental eligibility requirement is current financial hardship. For the supermarket vouchers to families, the eligibility will be:

- children in receipt of benefits-related free school meals
- low income families whose children currently do not have a school place
- low income families whose children are home-educated
- low income families whose children are under five, but are known to the council via Early Help, Free for Two, or via Health Visitors.

Options considered but rejected

- The option of turning down the grant was not given serious consideration, as there are many Kent families in need who will benefit from receiving this support.
- We considered using the money to extend the other elements of Winter Fund (KSAS, fuel poverty, extension of the projects being run by the Districts & Boroughs) but it would not be possible to spend £1.5m on these in the first two weeks in April, and if we spend the money on supermarket vouchers for benefits-entitled free school meals that is estimated to take up virtually the full £1.5m.

3. Financial Implications

3.1 The decision is to accept the £1.5m second tranche of Covid Winter Grant in full, and there should be no direct impact on the council's budget. The risk of costs exceeding the £1.5m are now very small, given the experience of providing these vouchers over the previous school holidays.

4. Legal Implications

4.1 Funding must be used in accordance with the guidance set by government, and the terms and conditions of the grant. KCC will apply appropriate legal mechanisms as part of issuing or deploying any grant monies to ensure any partners or third parties in receipt of grant funding remain compliant.

5. Equality Implications

5.1 There are clear eligibility criteria for benefits-entitled free school meals, which reduces the risk of arbitrary decisions and subjectivity, and efforts will continue to be made to ensure that those who are entitled to this support are made aware of that entitlement and encouraged to take it up.

6. Governance

- 6.1 By approving the acceptance of the grant and the recommended deployment of the funds, the Leader of the Council confirms that the responsibility and accountability for management of the funds will sit with Kent County Council.
- 6.2 The delegations put in place confirm that authority for ongoing management of the grant funding will be vested in the Corporate Director of Finance, in accordance with the agreed funding framework, spend areas and eligibility criteria. This delegation includes reviewing the spend arrangements and approving changes not in line with the original decision after consultation with the Leader and Corporate Directors for CYPE and Adult Social Care.
- 6.3 All spend will be monitored as part of compliance checks to ensure adherence to the DWP terms and conditions associated with the grant.

7. Recommendations

7.1 The Leader of the Council is asked to:

- 1) Accept the additional £1.5m COVID Winter Grant for use in line with the guidance published by Department of Work and Pensions and relevant terms and conditions
- 2) Approve use of the full £1.5m to support the provision of vouchers to families with children in receipt of benefits-related Free School Meals during the Easter 2021 school holidays
- 3) Delegate authority to the Corporate Director for Finance to, in consultation with the Leader to take any other actions needed to ensure that the £1.5m is spent in full by 16 April 2021.
- 4) Delegate authority to the Corporate Director of Finance to take other necessary actions, including but not limited to entering into contracts or other legal agreements, as required to implement this decision.

8. Background Documents

COVID Winter Grant Scheme Extension Letter issued by Department for Work & Pensions

COVID Winter Grant Scheme: - Guidance for County Councils and Unitary Authorities (issued by Department for Work & Pensions)

COVID Winter Grant Scheme monitoring form

9. Report Author

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