

26th July 2021

Agenda Item: 14

REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, COMMISSIONING AND RESOURCES

COVID WINTER GRANT SCHEME AND COVID LOCAL SUPPORT GRANT FINAL REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to share with Committee the progress of two Covid related grant schemes for children, families and vulnerable adults who have experienced financial hardship because of the Covid-19 pandemic.
2. The report also asks the Committee to endorse the funding proposals and budget for the Covid Local Support Grant Scheme Part 2 extension which will provide supermarket vouchers to eligible children and young people during the summer holidays.

Information

Background

3. In November 2020, the Department for Work and Pensions announced a package of extra targeted financial support for those in need over the winter period ending on 31st March 2021. Funding from the DWP has been issued to county councils and unitary authorities to support those most in need across England with the cost of food, energy and water bills and other associated costs. Nottinghamshire County Council's allocation was £2,316,008.
4. On 22nd February 2021, the Department for Work and Pensions announced an extension of the Covid Winter Grant to cover the Easter holidays. The scheme was extended to 16th April 2021 and Nottinghamshire was awarded a further £805,153.
5. On 14th April 2021, the Department for Work and Pensions announced that a new scheme was due to be launched on Monday 19th April 2021 called the 'Covid Local Support Grant' which would end on 21st June 2021 in line with the country's Covid roadmap for that period. Nottinghamshire was allocated £544,943 (Covid Local Support Grant - Part 1).
6. On 23rd June 2021, the Department for Work and Pensions announced a further extension to the Covid Local Support Programme to cover the school summer holidays. This allocation must be spent by 30th September 2021. Nottinghamshire was awarded a further £2,179,772.40 (Covid Local Support Grant - Part 2).

7. All grant schemes had the same grant conditions. The local authorities were able to determine eligibility in their area and target their support within the scope of the conditions set out below:
 - at least 80% of the total funding will be ring-fenced to support families with children, with up to 20% of the total funding to other types of households, including individuals
 - at least 80% of the total funding will be ring-fenced to provide support with food, energy, and water bills (including sewerage), with up to 20% on other items.

Eligibility Criteria

8. A Steering Group of Council officers was established to oversee both schemes, reporting to the Children and Young People's Committee. There was also active and regular engagement with the Local Resilience Forum Humanitarian Assistance Group. In consultation, the following eligibility criteria were agreed:
 - there are children/young people within the household who are eligible for Free School Meals due to low household income (eligible for vouchers during the school holidays)
 - there are children within the household who are eligible for a funded 2-year-old childcare place or the Early Years Pupil Premium (eligible for vouchers during the school holidays)
 - the household is in receipt of or has made an application for Universal Credit or other Income Related Employment or Support Allowance (ESA), Income or Jobseekers Allowance income based
 - the household has no recourse to public funds
 - there is considerable in-work poverty (which may be temporary)
 - the household has been assessed by a professional as in urgent need as they do not have the means for essential food, energy, or water.
9. Households had to meet at least one of the eligibility criteria above. These criteria enabled the Council to include households not currently in receipt of Department for Work and Pensions welfare benefits and those not claiming benefits but struggling financially because of Covid, although the vast majority of requests were made because households were in receipt of or had made an application to Universal Credit, as evidenced in **Appendices 1 and 2**.
10. There was an expectation from both schemes that local professionals would assess the needs of the household, check eligibility and make a request for financial support on their behalf. Both schemes were promoted on the Council's website, however the scheme was advertised to local organisations and services rather than residents.
11. Assessments and requests were made by a range of partner agencies and internal teams, including Children and Family services within the Council, District Councils, domestic abuse charities, Benefits/Welfare Rights teams, Citizens Advice Bureau, Job Centre Plus, and many more. The majority of requests came from schools, early years providers, Children's Centre Service workers, Family Service Workers, and Social Workers, as can be seen in **Appendices 1 and 2**.

Value of Vouchers

12. Eligible households would be able to claim up to three vouchers between January and the end of the Covid Winter Grant Scheme on 22nd April 2021; the Covid Local Support Grant used similar principles and allowed households to access one voucher in May and a second in June 2021.
13. The value of the voucher varied depending on the size of the household:
 - a household with one person £30
 - household with two people £60
 - household with three or more people £90
14. The value of the vouchers for Free School Meals were £15 per week for an eligible child of school age, and £10 per week for an eligible preschool child (this was later increased to £15 in May half-term in line with councils across the East Midlands).

Supporting Households with Children

15. **Free School Meals** - both schemes were used to provide food to those families where children are in receipt of Free School Meals due to the low income of the household. Vouchers were provided across the Christmas, Easter, February, and May half-term breaks. This included school aged pupils, those in sixth forms and Further Education Colleges and alternative education providers. Vouchers were distributed through these educational establishments.
16. **Children in Early Years settings** - households with 2-year olds from low income households and 3 and 4 year olds eligible for Early Years Pupil Premium received supermarket vouchers or food parcels through their early years setting for Christmas, Easter, February and May half-term breaks.
17. **Support for families during term-time** - both Covid Grant Scheme budgets were not specifically intended to provide Free School Meals (FSM) support during the holidays however most local authorities and all neighbouring councils used allocations for FSM. In Nottinghamshire, a decision was made to support families during term time and with local partners we agreed a process to support families and vulnerable adults based on an assessment of need by a professional.
18. The Council did not accept referrals directly from parents, carers and young people unless they were first time expectant parents or families with children under the age of 5; these families were contacted by a Children's Centre Service Manager, were assessed over the phone and invited to engage with the Children's Centre Service who support families with money management skills and work readiness.
19. Families were also given recipe cards to help them to cook healthy meals on a budget, including a half-term meal planner based on £15 per week per child. All recipes are available on the Council's website, which also includes links to schemes such as Healthy Start Vouchers, Credit Unions, 'Money Sorted' etc. Parents from low income groups were also invited to join the new Food on Your Doorstep (FOOD) Clubs being hosted in District Council and Children's Centre buildings. Further information about FOOD clubs and how we have

supported families to increase their skills and knowledge regarding diet and nutrition will be included in a further report to Committee in November 2021.



Supporting Vulnerable Adults and Households with no Children

20. In Nottinghamshire in line with Guidance from the Department for Work and Pensions and discussions with the Local Resilience Forum Humanitarian Assistance Group, it was agreed that District and Borough Councils would be allocated funding to support households with no children (up to 20% of the budget allocation).
21. District and Borough Councils used their allocation through a mixture of funds for food parcels, meals or vouchers, and contributions to food banks, food clubs, social eating networks etc. In most cases District and Borough Councils used the same allocations i.e. £30 for a single person household, however some councils (Rushcliffe in particular) used funds to provide hot meals which meant that their funding reached a lot more residents. The breakdown of how District and Borough Councils used their allocation is included in **Appendix 3**.
22. District Councils accepted self-referrals, and residents could access support by contacting the [Nottinghamshire Coronavirus Community Support Hub](#), where they were assessed and signposted to the appropriate team within the District Council or funded food bank.
23. District Councils were later asked to include children and families through their budget allocations as they all predicted an underspend in February 2021. This was in part due to other funding streams and support provided nationally to food banks, reducing demand on the Covid Winter Grant Scheme.
24. When the Covid Winter Grant Scheme ended, this element of the scheme was not provided through the new Covid Local Grant Scheme because most of the budget was allocated for Free School Meal vouchers for May half-term. However, Nottinghamshire County Council

continued to provide supermarket vouchers to the following groups as they were defined as 'vulnerable adults' by the Department for Work and Pensions:

- Care Leavers aged 19-25
- first time expectant parents
- young people with an Education Health & Care Plan aged 19-25.

Help with Energy and Water Bills

25. All Grant Schemes included options to provide households with support to pay for utility bills (with the exception of housing costs). Department for Work and Pensions guidance for the Covid Winter Grant Scheme has stated *"The definition of energy includes any form of fuel that is used for the purpose of domestic heating, cooking, and lighting, including oil and portable gas cylinders. There is no prescriptive definition of other essentials although these should be related to food, heating, lighting, cooking, water, and sewerage needs"*.
26. The Covid Winter Grant Scheme enabled the Council to award a grant to the Nottingham Energy Partnership¹ (NEP) who are already a commissioned provider of the Council. This arrangement was not extended for the Covid Local Support Grant.
27. Nottingham Energy Partnership was commissioned to provide vouchers for households who require assistance to pay for their utility bills – namely energy/fuel vouchers and water bill payments (but not rent or other housing costs). Referrals to the scheme were made by professionals who had already assessed the needs of the household. The Nottingham Energy Partnership also accepted a small number of self-referrals, and referrals from the Coronavirus Community Support Hub.
28. Nottingham Energy Partnership provided a maximum of two fuel payments at £49 each and up to £80 water bill payments. No household would receive more than £188.
29. Initially £95,142 was allocated, however demand was much greater than anticipated so they were awarded a second grant of £134,828 which also enabled them to recruit additional staff members to deal with queries, assessments, and payments.
30. Both Gedling and Broxtowe Borough Councils also provided additional funds to Nottingham Energy Partnership to meet the demands from their local residents. A new Fuel Bank Foundation was due to be launched in Mansfield, so the District Council allocated £5,000 to the Foundation to provide support to 11 vulnerable adults and households with no children (the value of support provided was approximately £500 per household).
31. Nottingham Energy Partnership spent £222,809 on vouchers for households with £127,829 spent on fuel payments and £94,981 on water payments. 4,615 awards were made with 64% of awards provided to households with children. The maximum limit for a voucher was £188 per household. The breakdown of the budget and data is available in **Appendix 4**.

¹ [Nottingham Energy Partnership \(nottenergy.com\)](http://nottenergy.com)

Provision of Free School Meals during School Holidays

32. Both grant schemes were used to provide supermarket vouchers or food parcels for children and young people during the school holidays starting from the Christmas holidays, February half-term, Easter holidays and May half-term. Funding for school aged children in October 2020 half-term was funded by the Council rather than this scheme. The following groups were eligible for this element of both grant schemes:
- children and young people eligible for Free School Meals (in schools, Further Education Colleges, and alternative education providers)
 - young people aged 19-25 with an Education, Health and Care Plan who are eligible for Free School Meals (in schools, Further Education Colleges, and alternative education providers)
 - 2-year olds claiming funded childcare
 - 3- and 4-year olds claiming Early Years Pupil Premium.
33. Data held centrally was matched with data from educational settings to confirm the number of eligible children and young people in each establishment. Funding was then allocated to each setting asking them to purchase supermarket vouchers or food parcels during Christmas 2020. This process was then adapted from February half-term as some educational settings returned funding to the Council. From February 2021, all educational settings apart from schools were instead asked to submit requests for Free School Meal vouchers, these requests were matched with central data and vouchers were purchased by the Council and sent to settings to pass to parents/carers and young people.
34. Schools already had access to vouchers schemes in place which enabled them to provide support during October half-term; they were then enabled during the second national lockdown to provide vouchers for eligible children being educated at home through a voucher platform called EdenRed which was procured by Government. No similar systems were in place for early years settings, Further Education colleges and alternative education settings so the Council had to procure a voucher platform to enable the distribution of vouchers. This took some time to progress, so the Voucher Platform used 'Huggg' which could not begin until 18th January 2021.
35. Overall, 103,291 vouchers were provided to eligible children and young people to provide food during the school holidays. This equates to approximately 27,500 children and young people. Further data is included in **Appendix 5**.
36. Both Covid Grant Schemes evidenced an increase in the number of Free School Meal claims since the start of the national lockdown restrictions. Nottinghamshire School Census data has identified that the number of children claiming Free School Meals in April 2020 was 19,783 compared with 23,649 in April 2021, showing a 19.5% increase. It is however unclear if these families were eligible for Free School Meals prior to the pandemic and chose not to claim previously. There was, however, no increase in the number of children eligible for income related funded childcare places over the same period.

Progress of both schemes

37. The Covid Winter Grant Scheme provided:

- a. 75,787 Free School Meal vouchers for eligible children and young people during school holidays resulting in approximately 565,025 meals for school aged children and 68,440 meals for preschool children
- b. 4,615 vouchers to support households with energy and water bills, at an average value of approximately £150 per household
- c. 9,035 supermarket vouchers to 5,584 to families who were struggling financially because of Covid during term-time
- d. vouchers, food parcels or meals to 10,850 households with no children. In addition, 193 vouchers were provided to Care Leavers and young people with Education, Health & Care Plans aged 19-25
- e. supermarket vouchers to 117 families who have recently registered to the new FOOD (Food on your Doorstep) Clubs
- f. £11,528 towards the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme during the Easter holidays so that eligible families could also access food for their children who were under the age of 5. This was topped up with £3,720 worth of vouchers for families who could not access food parcels which met their dietary requirements.

38. The Covid Local Support Grant (Part 1) provided:

- a. 27,504 Free School Meal vouchers for eligible children and young people during school holidays resulting in approximately 119,920 meals for school aged children and 17,600 meals for preschool children
- b. 1,471 supermarket vouchers to 844 to families who were struggling financially because of Covid during term-time
- c. vouchers, food parcels or meals to 15 households with no children (Care Leavers aged 19-25 and young people with an Education, Health & Care Plan aged 19-25).

39. Feedback from families and workers who accessed the scheme is included in **Appendix 6**.

Covid Local Support Grant Part 2 - Summer Extension

40. The first part of the Covid Local Support Grant ended on 21st June 2021, and an extension to the scheme was announced in the evening on 21st June. This extension will be used to provide Free School Meal vouchers to eligible children and young people. Most of the funding allocation will be used for school aged children; however, the budget also allows the Council to include eligible children in early years settings once again. There is insufficient funding to open the scheme to include requests for vouchers for families during term-time, so Part 2 of the scheme will be more restricted than the previous two schemes.

41. The budget has provided for administration costs as detailed in **paragraph 50**.

Administration and Capacity

42. Both the Covid Winter Grant and Part 1 of the Covid Local Support Grant have accessed project management capacity from the Programmes and Projects Team. This support was critical in setting up both schemes and dealing with processes and queries from stakeholders and members of the public. It is anticipated that some capacity will continue to be provided for part 2 of the Covid Local Support Grant, whilst still being overseen by a Group Manager and the established Steering Group.

43. The work was also supported by staff members within the Children and Families Department, Customer Service Centre, Coronavirus Community Support Hub, Legal and Finance. This included assessments with households, requesting vouchers, issuing vouchers and signposting households to access additional support e.g. Credit Unions. Most of this work was included in core staffing hours, but in some cases staff members were paid extra to work additional hours to meet the increasing demands of the scheme.
44. District Councils and Nottingham Energy Partnership included administrative costs within their allocations.
45. The administration time spent by schools, early years settings and other organisations distributing vouchers must be acknowledged and recognised, as they did not receive any financial support to help them deliver their elements of the Grant and their support and engagement has been critical to the success of the scheme in Nottinghamshire.

Other Options Considered

46. Due to the short timescales involved with all three schemes, no other options had been considered.

Reason for Recommendations

47. The recommendations support the conditions and purpose of the grant as set by government whilst meeting local priorities.

Statutory and Policy Implications

48. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, data protection and information governance, finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, smarter working, sustainability and the environment and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

Financial Implications

49. The initial financial allocations for the scheme were updated once demands were better understood and further clarity about the scheme was issued by the Department for Work and Pensions. A second Committee report in January proposed a new breakdown of spend for the Covid Winter Grant Scheme. The proposed allocation and actual spend for the Covid Winter Grant Scheme were as follows:

COVID WINTER GRANT £3.1m ALLOCATION AND SPEND		
	Proposed Allocation £	Actual Spend £
Free School Meals (Christmas, February half-term and Easter):		
Maintained and Academy Schools (School Age and Early Years)	1,036,000	1,703,077

FE Colleges		47,625
Alternative Education Providers		5,067
2, 3- and 4-year olds with Funded Early Years Provision or Early Years Pupil Premium in Private, Voluntary & Independent settings	100,000	70,059
Adults and Households without children supported through the Council (including vulnerable young people aged 19-24, and expectant parents)	23,400	14,317
Nottingham Energy Partnership (for adults and families) – includes administration fee	85,000	187,999
District Council Allocations (for adults and families)	341,600	331,501
Vouchers for households with children (term-time)	500,000	537,006
Allocation to the Holidays Activities and Food (HAF) Programme		15,248
Council Administration costs and contingency	230,000	134,361
Total Allocation and Spend	£3,121,161	£3,046,260

50. Corporate Leadership Team was briefed on the Covid Local Support Grant Part 1 allocation. The proposed allocation and actual spend for the Covid Local Support Grant Part 1 were as follows:

COVID LOCAL SUPPORT GRANT (PART 1) £544,943 ALLOCATION AND SPEND		
	Proposed Allocation £	Actual Spend £
Free School Meals (May half-term)		
Maintained and Academy Schools (School Age and Early Years)	370,000	362,590
Further Education Colleges	10,000	12,435
Alternative Education Providers	2,000	1,005
2, 3- and 4-year olds with Funded Early Years Provision or Early Years Pupil Premium in Private, Voluntary & Independent settings	20,000	27,840
Adults and Households without children supported through the Council (including vulnerable young people aged 19-24, and expectant parents)	10,000	750
Vouchers for households with children (term-time)	110,000	122,310
Administration costs	22,943	18,013
Total Allocation and Spend	£544,943	£544,943

51. The Council's administration costs covered additional staffing hours to manage and deliver the schemes. The allocation through the Covid Local Support Programme (Part 2) provides sufficient funding to provide Free School Meals during the Summer holidays for early years children, school age children, those in Further Education Colleges and Alternative Education Providers at £15 per week for five weeks, with £100,000 remaining to spend on administration and some contingency. It is therefore intended that this extension is only used to pay for children eligible for Free School Meals or early years funding and not support during term-time for other families and households with no children.

52. Due to the timing of the announcement for the extension of the scheme (Part 2) and the need to allocate vouchers before the end of term, proposals and a provisional budget were considered and supported by the Steering Group. Committee is asked to endorse the proposals and following budget allocation:

COVID LOCAL SUPPORT GRANT (PART 2) £2,179,772 ALLOCATION	
Free School Meals (5x week Summer Holidays)	
Maintained and Academy Schools (School Age)	£1,853,550
Further Education Colleges	£62,175
Alternative Education Providers	£5,025
2, 3- and 4-year olds with Funded Early Years Provision or Early Years Pupil Premium in Private, Voluntary & Independent and School settings	£139,250
Administration costs and contingency	£119,772
Total Forecast	£2,179,772

RECOMMENDATIONS

That Committee:

- 1) notes and considers the progress and outcomes of two Covid related grant schemes for children, families and vulnerable adults who have experienced financial hardship because of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 2) endorses the proposals and budget allocation for the Covid Local Support Grant Scheme Part 2 extension which will provide supermarket vouchers to eligible children and young people during the summer holidays.

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Constitutional Comments (CEH 14/07/21)

53. The recommendations fall within the remit of Children and Young People's Committee under their terms of reference. Reports on this central government Covid related grant funding have been taken to the Resilience, Recovery and Renewal Committee, and subsequently Policy Committee.

Financial Comments (JG 28/06/21)

54. Covid Local Support grant allocations are contained within the overall grant funding allocation of £2.180m and will be monitored through the monthly financial monitoring process and in line with the grant conditions.

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

[Covid Winter Grant Scheme – report to Children and Young People’s Committee on 30th November 2020](#)

[Covid Winter Grant Scheme - report to Children and Young People's Committee on 18th January 2021](#)

[Covid Winter Grant Scheme Equalities Impact Assessment December 2020](#)

Electoral Divisions and Members Affected

All.

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