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**Decision Session- Executive Member for  
Finance & Performance**

**14 February 2022**

Report of the Director Customer & Communities

**Financial Inclusion/Welfare Benefits Update Report**

**Summary**

1. This report presents the Executive Member for Finance & Performance in consultation with the Executive Member for Housing & Safer Neighbourhoods with the following matters:
  - To consider and approve the renewed Service Level Agreement with the Welfare Benefits Unit for the next three financial years;
  - To receive an update on the Financial Inclusion Steering Group (FISG) 2022/23 grant scheme;
  - To consider and approve the funding of a Community Involvement Officer to deliver actions relating to food poverty priorities in the city including priorities set down in the Right to Food Motion approved at Full Council in October 2021;
  - To approve an amendment to the Executive decision made on 30 September 2021 for digital inclusion funding for a year, to extend this for 18 months at no extra cost.

**Recommendations**

2. The Executive Member for Finance & Performance is asked to:
  - i) approve the Service Level Agreement for the Welfare Benefits Unit at Annex A for a period of 3 years 2022 to 2025 at a cost of £22,700 per year (see paragraphs 3-6);
  - ii) note the criteria and progress of the 2022/23 FISG grant scheme including the approvals of awards at the next Executive Member Decision Session for Finance & Performance on 16 March 2022 (see paragraphs 7-12);
  - iii) approve £39k funding for a Community Involvement Officer role to deliver actions relating to food poverty priorities in the city. This will

be funded from the existing York Financial Assistance Scheme Emergency Fund for one year (see paragraphs 13-17 and 26 ); and

- iv) approve the use of funding previously agreed by Executive on 30 September for a 100% Digital York Project Co-ordinator, over an 18 month period rather than a year (see paragraph 18 and 19).

Reason: To ensure councillors, residents and stakeholder groups are aware of the ongoing financial inclusion activity across the city and use of associated funding and approvals.

### **Welfare Benefits Unit Service Level Agreement**

- 3. The Welfare Benefits Unit (WBU) provides a specialist welfare benefits advice service to advisers and others who work with members of the public. The team of experienced advisers provide independent support through their advice line, publications, training and consultancy. WBU support is critical in supporting the council's response to welfare benefits changes.
- 4. The service level agreement proposed is contained at Annex B to this report. The funding element is for the council to pay £22,700 per annum for three years to March 2025. There is no proposed change to the amount of funding which will be derived from existing budget allocations.
- 5. The agreement contains some very minor amendments from the current version essentially around changes in staffing resources and operations.
- 6. The council also has contributed in the current financial year £13,900 to the WBU '*Advice Extra*' project as part of the Financial Inclusion Steering Group grant funding scheme as reported in the Financial Inclusion/Welfare Benefit Update Report to this Decision Session on 13 December 2021. This provides key enhancements to the WBU service, providing responsive follow-up, in-depth support and building knowledge of the benefit system.

### **The Financial Inclusion Steering Group (FISG) Grant Scheme Update**

- 7. The Council's Financial Inclusion Steering Group (FISG) is responsible for overseeing the delivery of financial inclusion initiatives and also has strategic oversight of the council's DHP, YFAS and CTS schemes. Membership has expanded over the last 18 months<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Now includes: Welfare Benefits Unit, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York CVS, Explore York, Citizens Advice York, the York Food Justice Alliance, Community First Credit Union and a number of CYC directorate representatives. The Executive Members for Housing & Safer Neighbourhoods, for Finance & Performance and for Adult Social Care & Health are members of the group. There is a standing invitation to a representative of the Parish Councils.

8. The group's purpose is:

*'To ensure that local people have the knowledge of and access to appropriate services, allowing them to make more informed choices to achieve and maintain financial stability'.*

9. Grants are awarded to local organisations to deliver projects that meet the group's objectives. It currently has an agreed base budget of £100k per financial year for approved schemes. Delivery of the schemes is regularly monitored.

10. The bidding round for funding projects for 2021/22 was completed in March 2021 and grants totalling £113,276 to fund seven projects were awarded. Funds included an amount carried forward from previous years.

11. As with projects funded in 2020/21 all providers have been able to continue to deliver high levels of support to residents by developing alternative methods of working in the face of Covid-19 constraints. All partners are working collaboratively and innovatively to continue to support vulnerable residents in the city. Further details were reported to this Executive Member Decision Session on 13<sup>th</sup> December 2021.

#### Funding of projects for 2022/23

12. Bids for the next round of funding were invited in mid-January and will have closed on 11 February 2022. Selection will be by a panel of senior CYC officers and a representative of the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust who will assess the bids against set criteria. The selected bids will be brought to the next Decision Session on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2022 for approval to allow the successful schemes to start in April 2022. It is expected that funding for these schemes may be supplemented in the 2022/23 budget setting process enabling awards totalling up to £150,000. Final available funding will be confirmed at Full Council to be held on 17 February 2022, before the panel meets.

#### **Funding to deliver food projects in York**

13. On 21 October 2021 and within the context of a pandemic in which access to food had been identified as a critical challenge for many York residents, families and communities, full Council approved a motion supporting York Residents' Right to Food. This included actions around

setting up a food network, understanding the level of informal food bank use in the city, and using the Community Hub strategy to establish further opportunities to provide further sources of nutritional food provision and activity where need is identified.

14. This had been already been identified as an area of focus by the council's Financial Inclusion Steering Group (FISG) to include in its developing thinking around a new strategy and as such membership of the group was extended to members of the Food Justice Alliance last year. Further to this the Community Hubs strategy and support is focussed around financial inclusion, food provision and nutrition as a way to improve health and to bring people together to address social isolation. Many initiatives to address food poverty during the pandemic have been funded by the government, or by the council or have been organised by volunteer groups across the city to supplement the formal work of the hubs, and charitable organisations such as the York Food Bank.
15. It is recognised through the work of those involved in communities, FISG and officers across a number of services in the council (including Public Health and Climate Change) that improved planning, co-ordination and support as well as a true understanding of food insufficiency and solutions across the city are much needed. This is critical given the imminent ending of much of the covid financial support for food and the rapidly increasing costs of living. The outcomes hoped for from this work will be evident in terms of improved co-ordination of available resources, improved access to food where needed, improved health, reduced isolation and reduction in food waste.
16. It is for these reasons councillors are asked to support the funding of a Community Involvement Officer within the Communities Team structure who will focus on community development work addressing food poverty and meeting the priorities as set down in the council motion especially supporting the establishment of a food network. It is recommended that the funding is provided from the existing 2021/22 Emergency York Financial Assistance Fund to supplement other schemes funded in September 2021 by Executive to address the longer term impacts of the pandemic. The total cost will be £39k for one year.
17. Bringing this resource in now and learning from similar schemes in place in other cities, and working alongside for example Joseph Rowntree Foundation, it is hoped that rapid progress will be made in this area which will be critical at a time when covid funding streams are due to end and ahead of next winter which will be even more difficult for many families. This person will also work alongside a proposed Holiday Activities & Food (HAF) Community Involvement Officer project role

(funded by HAF) and will support the scrutiny work on School Holiday Hunger.

### **Amendment to previous decision**

18. At Executive on 30 September 2021 Members approved the following:

*That approval be given to fund the following schemes for one year from existing YFAS emergency funds as outlined in paragraphs 34-39 and 41 of the report:*

- *Early Support Fund, at an additional cost of £20k;*
- *Early intervention for residents in debt, at a cost of £35k;*
- **100% Digital York Project Co-ordinator, at a cost of £23,220.**

19. Explore York have identified that the funding can be best used to fund a part-time role over 18 months rather than a year. The Executive Member is asked to approve this change as this will create a benefit to the 100% Digital York partnership over a longer period of time at no extra cost.

### **Consultation**

20. The FISG grant scheme is developed in consultation with Executive members sitting on FISG and those with Financial Inclusion portfolio responsibility.

### **Options/Analysis**

21. Recommendation 2i – the Executive Member can choose to accept, reject or amend the Welfare Benefits Unit draft SLA at Annex 1. The preferred recommendation is to accept given that this is an essential resource supporting the city's advice network in York which in turn are supporting some of the city's most vulnerable residents in financial difficulty, some of them with multi-complex needs.
22. Recommendation 2ii – there is no alternative recommendation to noting the progress of the annual FISG grant scheme. Decisions on grant approvals will be made at the next scheduled Decision Session in March.
23. Recommendation 2iii – the Executive Member can choose to accept or reject the funding and creation of a Communities Officer responsible to deliver actions relating to food poverty priorities. The preferred recommendation is to accept given that there is not an alternative resource in the council to deliver this work.

24. Recommendation 2iv – the Executive Member can choose to accept or reject the request to change the term of the funding for a 100% Digital York Project Co-ordinator. The preferred recommendation to accept is based on the feedback from Explore York in order to ensure the most meaningful and productive use of the funding. It does mean that the partnership has support and greater benefit over a longer period. This has no implication for the council, but a greater benefit for residents suffering from digital exclusion.

### **Council Plan**

25. The outcomes in this report contribute to the key Council Plan priority focussed on delivering ‘Well-paid jobs and inclusive economy’ and the related focus on financial inclusion. The associated Financial Inclusion Policy review will be progressed in 2022 as current activity continues to be prioritised around the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis in terms of meeting immediate needs for support.

### **Implications**

- 26.
- (a) **Financial** – The direct financial implications relate to the funding of the WBU SLA, FISG bids and the funding of the food post are that the sums quoted are within approved budget allocations/reserves. Any increase to the funding of the FISG grant scheme will be subject to full Council approval on 17 February 2022. The Executive Member should be aware that the current balance of the YFAS emergency fund stands at £164k does not account for any draw down that may be required at year end in the event of an in-year overspend on the YFAS scheme.
  - (b) **Human Resources (HR)** - The creation of a position of Community Involvement Officer to take forward food project work is covered in the report.
  - (c) **Equalities** – Annex B contains the Equalities Impact Assessment for this report and concludes that the recommendations will have positive impacts as the purpose is to provide support both financial and food support and solutions for some of our most vulnerable residents. Community development activities and co-production activities will ensure residents and partners are involved in generating solutions in relation to delivering the food related actions.
  - (d) **Legal** – There are no implications
  - (e) **Crime and Disorder** - There are no implications
  - (f) **Information Technology (IT)** - There are no implications

(g) **Property** - There are no implications

## **Risk Management**

27. The key risks are in relation to the ongoing impacts of the pandemic on residents suffering from deepening financial and food poverty and the recommendations in this report seek to mitigate those risks. Continuing to support voluntary and charity sector organisations to deliver financial inclusion schemes will ensure not only direct and targeted support is given to residents in need but may contribute to the ongoing viability of those organisations also. There is a risk of that none of the priorities around food and particularly in relation to delivery of the related Council Motion can be delivered without the resource identified.

### **Contact Details**

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#### **Chief Officer**

#### **Responsible for the report:**

Director of Customer & Communities

**Report Approved:** ✓

**Date:** 3/2/2022

#### **Specialist Implications Officer:**

Chief Finance Officer

#### **Wards Affected:**

✓ All

#### **Background Papers:**

Approval of grant scheme awards, 2021/22

[Agenda for Decision Session - Executive Member for Finance and Performance 15 February 2021](#)

Full Council 21 October 2021

<https://democracy.york.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=331&MId=12805&Ver=4>

#### **Annexes:**

Annex A: Draft Service Level Agreement for the Welfare Benefits Unit 2022/25

Annex B: Equalities Impact Assessment

## **List of Abbreviations**

FISG	Financial Inclusion Steering Group
HAF	Holiday Activities & Food Scheme
k	Thousand
SLA	Service Level Agreement
WBU	Welfare Benefit Unit
YFAS	York Financial Assistance Scheme