

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

**3 December 2020**

Report of the Assistant Director, Customer & Digital Services

**Winter Grants Scheme**

**Summary**

1. This paper provides the Executive Member for Finance & Performance in consultation with the Executive Member for Housing & Safer Neighbourhoods with the Winter Grants scheme for approval.

**Recommendations**

2. The Executive Member is asked to approve:
  - a) The top slicing of the Winter Grant Government allocation in the sum of £200k for Free School Meals in respect of Christmas, February Half Term and the start of the Easter Holidays 2021.
  - b) The Winter Grant scheme Annex A to support families with or without children with Food and Utility bills through to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021.
  - c) To approve the additional spend of £3,810 for October Half Term Free School Meals as set out at Para 9.
  - d) The delegation for any future changes resulting from Government guidance in relation to this scheme to the Chief Finance Officer (s151) in consultation with the Executive Member Finance and Performance.

*Reason: To provide financial support to the city's most financially vulnerable residents through the ongoing covid-19 pandemic.*

## Background

3. On Sunday 8 November 2020, the government announced a package of extra targeted financial support for those in need over the winter period. The COVID Winter Grant Scheme will see new funding issued to councils to support those most in need across England with the cost of food, energy and water bills and other associated costs.
4. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) will provide funding to the council, who will administer the scheme and provide direct assistance to vulnerable households and families with children particularly affected by the pandemic. This will include some families who normally have access to Free School Meals (FSM) during term time. The funding allocation for York is £416,729.
5. This scheme is part of a wider Government winter support package for families and children, including:
  - planned but not yet confirmed expansion of the Department for Education's (DfE's) Holiday Activities and Food programme, which has provided healthy food and enriching activities to disadvantaged children since 2018, across England next year. This investment of up to £220 million will be delivered through grants to local authorities. Further information will follow shortly from DfE.
  - increasing the value of the Department for Health and Social Care's Healthy Start vouchers from £3.10 to £4.25 from April 2021. Healthy Start supports lower-income pregnant women and families with children under four to buy fruit, vegetables, pulses, milk and infant formula, providing an important nutritional safety net.
  - DEFRA will provide further funding for local charities through well-established networks to provide immediate support to front-line food aid charities, including food banks, who are supporting those most vulnerable due to the economic impacts of COVID-19.

## **Funding**

6. The Winter Grant funding will be provided in instalments 50% up front in early December 25% after initial management information (in February 2021) then based upon spend a final balancing payment of up to 25%. As with other grants returns will be required and the full available monies must be spent by 31<sup>st</sup> March.

## **Free School Meals**

7. Although the funding from the DWP is not specifically earmarked for free school meals (FSM) York along with many other authorities receiving the grant are looking to allocate an element of the budget for this purpose as no further similar funding is due from the DfE until April 2021 as set out above.
8. The estimated weekly cost of FSM in York is approximately £50k and the required budget through to and including the first week of the Easter holidays 2021 is up to £200k and this report recommends that this money is top sliced from the budget. This will need to be done proportionally as the first 50% payment will only be £218K and top slicing the full FSM costs up front would leave no funding for any other support to families or individuals until February 21 without using council budget. It is recommended that the £100k for the Christmas holiday FSM is top sliced from the initial payment leaving just over £100k for other support as described in our proposed schemes (see Annex A).
9. An officer decision was made on the 23<sup>rd</sup> October to support FSM during the October Half Term from the extended welfare fund. The value of the decision was £42,750 but the actual costs were £46,560. This paper asks the Executive Member to approve the additional spend of £3,810.

## **Winter Grant Schemes**

10. The DWP guidance sets out two elements to the payment where they expect support to be made available:

- 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.
11. The two elements will be provided through a single application and the scheme criteria are set out at Annex A. These criteria are in respect of the 80% funding for families with children and the 20% discretionary funding to other types of household including individuals.
  12. The support through this scheme is not dissimilar to that provided through the council's own York Financial Assistance (YFAS) scheme. It is therefore suggested that in the hierarchy of support that this scheme sits above the YFAS scheme. The rationale for this is that we need to ensure that we maximise the full funding available to the council from this scheme before 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021 and therefore each claim should be considered against the criteria of this scheme in the first instance before referral to YFAS.
  13. Access to the scheme will be through an application process this can be accessed digitally online, through support agencies who can apply on behalf of customers and over the phone directly with the council.
  14. The council is ensuring that the scheme is well communicated both internally and externally. This includes schools and partner agencies across the city including York CVS and Advice York. Local Area Coordinators and Hubs also play a vital role in getting the message out that the funding is available.

## **Fraud and Error**

15. In line with all Central Government grant schemes there is a risk of fraud, as recipients might appear to be eligible when they are not. One of the biggest risks for this scheme is impersonation fraud, where fraudsters work through a residential area and falsely claim under the names of eligible recipients.

16. The DWP are encouraging the council to mitigate this risk, by ensuring checks are in place to verify the applicant's identity. The council have access to a range of data sources and checks can be carried out against this data to verify the identity of the recipient.
17. It is for the council to decide how payments are made to recipients. However, when making this decision consideration should be given to the risks involved. Although vouchers still carry fraud risks, vouchers should be used instead of cash where possible as this helps to mitigate the risk of the money being spent by the recipient on things outside the policy intent therefore undermining the purpose of the scheme.

### **Recommendations**

18. This paper recommends that the Executive Member for Finance & Performance in consultation with the Executive Member for Housing & Safer Neighbourhoods approves the funding of FSMs through to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021 from this funding, the additional spend at October Half Term from the council's welfare fund and the Winter Grant scheme set out at Annex A.
19. Should any element of this scheme be changed by subsequent government guidance it is proposed that the Executive Member for Finance & Performance delegates the decision under this scheme to the Chief Finance Officer (s151) in consultation with the Executive Member Finance and Performance with any changes approved retrospectively in public at the next available Executive Member decision session.

### **Consultation**

20. This is a Central Government scheme and there was no consultation with City of York Council on its implementation. In terms of supporting the council's residents there has been internal consultation in respect of vulnerable children and FSM's.

### **Implications**

#### **Financial**

21. There are no direct financial implications arising from this scheme as the Government provide funding.

#### **Human Resources (HR)**

There are no HR implications.

### **Equalities**

This report will impact on all communities equally.

### **Legal**

No implications

### **Crime and Disorder, Information Technology and Property**

No implications

### **Risk Management**

22. The key risks associated with this paper are:

- There is insufficient funding to meet demand. To a certain extent this is mitigated by the councils own YFAS scheme as this is where the demand would have fallen without the Government's additional funding.
- That the scheme overspends. As in the point above additional costs would fall against the council's YFAS scheme however the scheme will be closely monitored and Government returns completed.

**Author responsible for the report:**

**Chief Officer responsible for the report:**

David Walker

Pauline Stuchfield

Head of Customer & Exchequer Services

Assistant Director Customer and Digital Services

01904 552261

01904 551706

**Report Approved**



**Date** 25/11/20

**Specialist Implications Officer(s):**

**Wards Affected:**

**All**

**For further information please contact the author of the report**

**Background Papers: None**

**Annexes**

**Annex A – Winter Grant Scheme**