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| Subject: | Covid Winter Grant Extension | |
| Date of Meeting: | 18 March 2021 | |
| Report of: | Executive Director Families, Children & Learning | |
| Contact Officer: Name: | Richard Barker | Tel: 01273 290732 |
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| Ward(s) affected: | All | |

FOR GENERAL RELEASE

By reason of the special circumstances, and in accordance with section 100B(4)(b) of the 1972 Act, the Chair of the meeting has been consulted and is of the opinion that this item should be considered at the meeting as a matter of urgency for the following reason. The Council only received notification of the Department for Work and Pensions' intention to provide an additional allocation and extend the scheme's coverage to include the Easter holidays on 2 March.

Note: The special circumstances for non-compliance with Council Procedure Rule 3, Access to Information Procedure Rule 5 and Section 100B(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended), (items not considered unless the agenda is open to inspection at least five days in advance of the meeting) were that due to the timing of the DWP's notification it was not possible to reconcile the remaining funding unspent from the February half term and include the additional grant allocation to know the final amount available until the week commencing 8 March 2021. From that position the council then had to consider the most suitable proposals to recommend to committee.

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND POLICY CONTEXT

- 1.1 In early March 2021 the council was notified that the Covid Winter Grant would be extended to the 16 April 2021 to cover the school Easter holidays. An additional allocation of £300,860 is expected to be granted.
- 1.2 This report outlines proposals for how the additional grant allocation could be distributed, in line with the grant's conditions and intentions.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 That the Committee note the indicative additional allocation of Covid Winter Grant of £300,860.
- 2.2 That the Committee note the anticipated underspend of previous Covid Winter Grant allocations of approximately £90,000 in unredeemed vouchers and unrealised allocations as outlined in paragraphs 3.5 and 3.6.

2.3 That the Committee approves the proposals in this report to allocate both the underspend and the additional allocation of grant funding referred to in recommendations 2.1 & 2.2 in accordance with paragraphs 3.5 to 3.7 inclusive, by ensuring the provision of a £20 per child, per week supermarket food voucher over the Easter holidays 2021 to those families whose children are entitled to: free school meals, free childcare places for two-year olds, Early Years Pupil Premium, using the children centres' food bank or are in similar circumstances.

3. CONTEXT/ BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 At the Policy & Resources Committee on 3 December 2020 it was determined that a £25 per child per week supermarket food voucher would be issued over the Christmas and New Year holiday period. This was funded from the council's original allocation of £865,416 Covid Winter Grant.
- 3.2 At the Policy & Resources Committee on 21 January 2021 it was determined that the remaining Covid Winter Grant funding was allocated across three areas:
- Early Years;
 - schools and colleges;
 - third party organisations.
- 3.3 In early March 2021 the council was notified that the Covid Winter Grant would be extended to the 16 April 2021. An additional indicative allocation of £300,860 is expected to be granted.
- 3.4 Together with the unredeemed element of the initial allocation, which is approximately £90,000, there is a total of approximately £390,860 to allocate prior to the end of the grant period on 16 April 2021.
- 3.5 It is believed that the initial number of vouchers that would need to be issued was overestimated at the start of this process by about 3% as we relied on estimates from colleagues regarding the potential numbers of children outside of the FSM eligibility criteria such as the food bank users at children's centres and college students requiring additional support.
- 3.6 Since the scheme's introduction in December 2020 there have been examples of families making contact to say that they did not want to accept the voucher and families who would have been entitled through different routes not accepting the total amount they could claim. It is calculated that approximately 9% of vouchers have been unredeemed through the process.
- 3.7 It is proposed that the estimated £390,860 remaining Covid Winter Grant be allocated by issuing £20 supermarket vouchers per eligible child, per week. Eligibility will be as agreed at December 2020 P&R Committee, namely children eligible for: Free School Meals, free childcare places for two-year olds, Early Years Pupil Premium, using the children centres' food bank.
- 3.8 This proposal is in line with the government's conditions for the use of the grant. However, the value of the vouchers is £5 lower than the £25 agreed at P&R Committee in December 2020.

3.9 It is expected that approximately 10,000 vouchers will need to be issued for the period. If £20 vouchers were issued it is estimated that this will exceed the full funding provided by the grant by approximately £9,140. The shortfall in funding will be met from government allocated Free School Meal funding. The total amount of additional funding required will not be known until late April 2021 when the extent of unused or unredeemed vouchers will be known. If £25 vouchers were issued this would exceed the funding provided by £109,140. This shortfall is significant and there is insufficient funding from other sources to cover this amount.

4. ANALYSIS & CONSIDERATION OF ANY ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 4.1 The council could issue supermarket food vouchers to a lower value and remain within the grant's funding levels. However, this will mean that the full government grant allocation would be unlikely to be claimed and families would not receive the maximum support available.
- 4.2 One option available to the council is to consider simply increasing the funding allocation to each of those groups who received a proportion of the original £90,000 allocation. However, a consideration to be borne in mind is that the criteria and process for applications and grants was developed within the previous limits. Arriving at an equitable formula for increasing funding allocations at relatively short notice would be problematic.
- 4.3 The option described at 4.2 furthermore risks calling into question earlier decision-making, where a different outcome might have been reached in relation to parts of bids not deemed eligible within previous limits had the entire funding allocation been available at that time.

5. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & CONSULTATION

- 5.1 The timing of the additional grant allocation and the timescale by which it needs to be allocated has precluded additional community engagement.
- 5.2 Two previous reports on the Covid Winter Grant have been considered by the Policy & Resources committee. The original proposals were endorsed by the food 'cell' and this report outlines an extension of one of the main tenets of the original proposals, the allocation of supermarket food vouchers to families whose children qualify for free school meals or similar circumstances.

6. CONCLUSION

- 6.1 Due to the timing of the notification that the council would receive additional Covid Winter Grant funding and the extension of the scheme's closing date, it has been necessary to make a swift decision about how the council's allocates the additional funding and ensures it provides the maximum assistance possible to affected families by maximising the full allocation provided to the council.
- 6.2 As a result, it is proposed that an additional £20 per child, per week supermarket food voucher is issued for the Easter holidays to all those families whose children qualify for free school meals or similar circumstances. This is in line with the previous allocation and meets the requirements of the grant's conditions by

meeting immediate needs and help for those who are struggling to afford food and bills. With at least 80% of the total funding being ring-fenced to support households with children.

- 6.3 At present it is estimated that the total cost of the proposal will exceed the total grant allocation by approximately £9,140. This will be met from other funding sources if ultimately required. It is possible that the total amount will be less than this due to the rate of vouchers that remain unredeemed within the timescale they are issued.

7. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS:

Financial Implications:

- 7.1 The Department of Work & Pensions Covid Winter Grant Scheme determination provides a total allocation of funding of £1,166,276 to Brighton & Hove City Council. The grant must be fully utilised by 16 April 2021. The proposals in this report are consistent with the published grant conditions and guidance.
- 7.2 The proposals indicate a small over-allocation of £9,140 but there is sufficient flexibility within the Free School Meals funding available to the council to manage this variance. However, the experience of unredeemed vouchers to date suggests that this is unlikely to materialise.

Finance Officer Consulted: Nigel Manvell

Date: 11/03/21

Legal Implications:

- 7.3 The Council must ensure that the grant funding is allocated in accordance with the terms of the Covid Winter Grant funding agreement and that it organises the distribution of funding in accordance with that agreement and the decision of this Committee.

Lawyer Consulted: Victoria Simpson

Date: 10/3/21

Equalities Implications:

- 7.4 Previous reports on the allocation of Covid Winter Grants have been accompanied by an Equalities Impact Assessment. The proposals in this report are a continuation of a method of distribution previously used and will seek to ensure the full grant allocation is used.
- 7.5 The allocation of additional grant funding is an additional support for the council to allocate to families who may be greater affected by seasonal factors over winter. By keeping referral processes to a minimum and using a voucher scheme that provides a range of shops in a geographically diverse group of shops it is expected that families will be able to maximise the benefit of the scheme to provide themselves with food and support as required.

Sustainability Implications:

- 7.6 A range of supermarkets can be used by families to ensure that they do not need to take excessive and unnecessary journeys to use the supermarket food vouchers being issued.

Brexit Implications:

- 7.7 There are no Brexit implications as a result of this report's recommendations.

Public Health Implications:

- 7.8 The recommendations seek to ensure families can receive support to be provided with food during the winter and to provide organisations the ability to incorporate food preparation and eating together or education on constructing nutritious meals on a budget that will have future health benefits.

