

## Manchester City Council Report for Resolution

**Report to:** Executive – 9 December 2020

**Subject:** Children’s COVID Winter Grant

**Report of:** The Strategic Director of Children and Education Services

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### Summary

Manchester has been allocated £2.581m as a COVID winter grant. A minimum of 80% of this grant must be spent on families with children. The grant covers the period from 1 December to 31 March 2021. This paper outlines proposals for this grant funding with the majority being used to support food provision for c43,000 children and young people over the Christmas holidays and February half term holiday.

### Recommendations

Executive are asked to:

1. Note the contents of this report and the urgent time frame to provide food provision to Manchester children.
2. To agree that the allocation of the grant would support the following priorities:
  - £1.9m to be allocated to provide supermarket vouchers to be distributed through schools and settings for children and young people eligible for benefit related free school meals and other children in identified groups.
  - Up to £150k to be allocated as a grant to Colleges in Manchester to enable them to develop a scheme for young people who were previously on FSM.
  - £24.5k to be allocated for to support care leavers with food.
  - £264k to be allocated to Early Years/Early Help service to support children and families experiencing poverty.
  - £132k to be allocated to Food Response team for adult only households.
3. To delegate the administration and final allocation of the funds to the Deputy Chief Executive and City Treasurer in consultation with the Director of Children's Services.
4. Note that the decisions proposed in this report have not been on the register of key decisions for 28 days or more and that therefore the special urgency exemption is being relied upon with the consent of the Chair of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee.

5. Note that the City Solicitor has advised that the decisions proposed in this report are urgent.
6. Note that the Chair of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee has agreed that the decisions proposed in this report are reasonable in all the circumstances and to them being treated as a matter of urgency.
7. Having considered the advice of the City Solicitor that the decisions are urgent, because any delay likely to be caused by the call-in process would seriously prejudice the interests of the residents of Manchester, and therefore are not subject to call-in.

<b>Manchester Strategy outcomes</b>	<b>Summary of the contribution to the strategy</b>
A thriving and sustainable city: supporting a diverse and distinctive economy that creates jobs and opportunities	Ensuring that families and adults can access provision to meet basic needs will help to keep people in work and support them to access work opportunities.
A highly skilled city: world class and home grown talent sustaining the city's economic success	Children and young people will learn and thrive when their basic needs are met – the allocation of this grant will ensure that children and young people are not hungry over the holiday period.
A progressive and equitable city: making a positive contribution by unlocking the potential of our communities	Ensuring the basic needs of children living in low income families are met through support for food over school holidays
A liveable and low carbon city: a destination of choice to live, visit, work	
A connected city: world class infrastructure and connectivity to drive growth	

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 On 8<sup>th</sup> November the government announced that they were making £170m available to Local Authorities as part of a COVID winter grant. The objective of this grant is to provide support to vulnerable households and families with children affected by the pandemic throughout winter period and where alternative assistance is not available. Local Authorities have the flexibility to develop a local approach that best fits this objective. Items covered by this grant include food, energy, water, and other financial support. The grant covers the period from December to end of March 2021.
- 1.2 This grant funding would cover provision of food for children who normally would have access to a free school meal (FSM) during term time during the school holidays including Christmas and February half term in 2021. However, there is no expectation that this should include all children who access FSM and the scheme provides flexibility for Local Authorities to use discretion to identify and support those most in need.
- 1.3 Manchester has now been notified that our grant allocation is £2.581m. At least 80% of a local authority's spend on the grant must be on families with children including pre-school and children up to and including age 19 (on 31st March 2021) - £2,065m of Manchester's grant. Up to 20%, £0.516m can be used on residents without children and this includes young people who are care leavers and those with special educational needs.
- 1.4 This grant is not restricting on how it is provided, and it is up to Local Authorities to determine what works. Local Authorities can proactively identify households who would benefit or request applications for this grant or a combination of both.
- 1.5 In addition to this grant, the government have also announced:
- Expansion of the DFE's Holiday activity and food programme with an addition £200m of grants to Local Authorities to provide for Easter, summer, and Christmas holidays in 2021.
  - Increasing the value of DHSC Healthy Start vouchers for pregnant women and children under 4 from £3.10 to £4.25 from April 2021.

## **2.0 PROPOSED DELIVERY OF THE COVID WINTER GRANT SCHEME**

### **2.1 Learning from previous local schemes to support Free School Meals (FSM) during holidays**

- 2.1.1 Manchester City Council has been at the forefront of the response to the coronavirus pandemic in the City. Over the October half term break, Manchester provided a cash allocation of £15 for any child who is eligible for benefit related free school meals using our Welfare Provision Scheme. The scheme was welcomed by schools and positively received. Families were asked to claim for

this through a link on the Council's website and communication about this was sent out to all schools, front line services, youth providers and voluntary sector. Approximately 28k children were eligible for this payment. To date there have been in the region of 5.8k applicants for this scheme and payments have been made for 6.6k children to a total value of £99k.

- 2.1.2 Learning from this scheme shows that when families are required to apply for this funding they do not always claim and the take up is much lower than those eligible. In addition, it is very labour intensive and costly to administer – over half term 20 staff were required to administer the scheme.
- 2.1.3 This scheme was intended to support emergency provision for the week that children were not in school as there had been ongoing debates with government about dealing with this important issue.
- 2.1.4 There is also some provision via youth services within the 'holiday hunger programme and meals are provided as part of this offer. This scheme has also made some emergency provision based on presenting need of families that they have contact with. However, this is a small part of the children in the city and could not be scaled up as a universal offer.
- 2.1.5 Finally there is also provision via the Council's Covid response hub and many families have received support over recent months although this has not been directly aligned to the school holidays.

## **2.2 Proposed approach for Christmas holidays and February half term provision of food**

- 2.2.1 Between now and March 2021, Manchester has three weeks of school holidays that are in scope for this Winter COVID grant (two weeks at Christmas and one week in Feb).
- 2.2.2 After discussions with the Executive Member for Children and Education Services and SMT members, it was determined that the first priority should be to make provision for this three-week period to ensure that families of children attending Manchester schools who normally access a benefit related free school meal and other disadvantaged families, access support to cover the cost of food. This cohort would include a wider cohort who currently cannot access FSM (under 5s and over 16s) as well as capturing other low income and vulnerable households.
- 2.2.3 The preferred option was to purchase a range of supermarket vouchers to distribute to families through schools. Although it is acknowledged that there are many benefits to making a cash payment to families, previous experience has shown that this is resource intensive to set up and more expensive to administer. In addition, by purchasing the vouchers centrally, the Council would be able to lever some additional social value from supermarkets with a strong reach across the City.

2.2.4 As a result, the Council has gone out to the main supermarkets in the City with an ask for approximately 34k food vouchers worth £15 to the value of £1.6m to cover Christmas holidays (2 weeks) and February half term (1 week).

2.2.5 Schools and settings will identify the children and young people and distribute supermarket vouchers. In addition, they will have the option of sourcing their own vouchers if they already have links with local supermarkets or shops. This approach which will enable the Council to maximise reach but which will also be less resource intensive, minimise administration costs and ensure that as much of this grant as possible goes directly to our families. Many supermarkets have also agreed an uplift in vouchers which will enable more families to benefit from this scheme without using additional grant.

2.2.6 Internal Audit are developing guidance which will assist schools to develop an auditable process for storing and distributing the vouchers. Support for the safe distribution of vouchers to schools has been agreed with Mitie as part of their social value contribution.

## **2.3 Timeline for Delivery of the Scheme**

2.3.1 Timescales are tight for this process to meet the deadline for the holiday period.

- The invitation to supermarkets has gone out and will close on 30<sup>th</sup> November.
- Decisions made by 1<sup>st</sup> December.
- Schools to request which vouchers they want and confirm eligible numbers by 4<sup>th</sup> December.
- Vouchers received and distributed to schools by 14<sup>th</sup> December
- Schools distribute between 14<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> December.

## **2.4 Children eligible for a voucher**

2.4.1 Although it has been made clear by the DWP that this is not necessarily funding for provision of FSM over school holidays, this is how it has been promoted by the media and there are therefore expectations about this from families. In addition, families who access FSM have already been through an assessment to determine eligibility and there is also clarity and understanding by all about who these children are. It therefore makes sense that children eligible for benefit related FSM are the starting point for access to provision over the school holidays. Based on October census this is approximately 32.4k children and young people. Families eligible for free school meals is 37% of the cohort and has increased by 2k since the outbreak of the pandemic. Due to the economic impact of the pandemic, it is estimated that there will be a further increase in the number of children eligible for the grant between now and the end of March and contingency has been set aside for this increase.

2.4.2 There are children who currently do not access FSM who will also be considered.

These are:

- Children of families that are classed as no recourse to public funds
- Young people in year 12/13 provision whose family meet the criteria for FSM or they accessed FSM when under 16.
- Children in vulnerable families known to the school who are outside of the scope of FSM but where it is identified through an early help assessment that they require support during the school holidays.
- Children under 5 in early years whose family meet the criteria for FSM and may be vulnerable during the closure of provision (including EY settings), this includes:
  - Any two-year old's eligible for funded Early Years places
  - Nursery and reception (non-statutory) pupils in school that the school has identified as FSM
  - Any nursery age child in a setting that was previously a funded two-year-old
  - Any under two that has involvement with a statutory service e.g., known to social care.

It is estimated that 7k children in the Early Years fall into these categories in addition to the 32.4k children in our schools.

## **2.5 Greater Manchester Agreement**

2.5.1 By using schools as the main vehicle for distribution we need a reciprocal agreement across GM that schools will provide for all of their FSM children on roll regardless of where the children/young people live. It looks as if most GM authorities will look to provide for all FSM children and distribute through schools (apart from Wigan) and all have in principle agreed to this reciprocal arrangement.

## **2.6 Colleges**

2.6.1 The above scheme does not include young people over 16 attending the 4 colleges in the City and there will need to be provision made for these young people. Three of these colleges cover a wide GM and beyond footprint and it would therefore not be appropriate or affordable to offer the same voucher scheme. It is therefore proposed that the colleges access funding to enable them to develop their own scheme which is the same for all students regardless of where they live and that the funding is based on approximately 37% of their Manchester cohort (who will have likely been eligible for FSM when under 16). This will cost approximately up to 150k and will be awarded as a grant to each college.

## **2.7 Care Leavers**

- 2.7.1 In addition, there are 544 care leavers/young people who currently reside supported accommodation and would not access support for food through colleges. It is proposed that these young people are provided with a supermarket voucher through the Leaving Care Service. It is estimated this would cost £24k to cover Christmas and half term.

## **2.8 Early Years/Early Help**

- 2.8.1 Early Years Sure Start Children's Centre have supported 5,214 families to access a food club in partnership with Food share, who have located food clubs within the children's centres. Early Years and Early help services are well placed in the locality to respond to need and will coordinate an offer for families not covered by the voucher scheme or who may have basic needs over the winter period including paying for fuel and utilities. All families who require support to alleviate hardship will have a strength-based conversation captured in an early help assessment and will link in with a range of partners and community groups to ensure families receive timely and effective support. It is estimated that £227k to support this response.

## **2.9 Food Response Team**

- 2.9.1 The team has continued to support residents in need across the City since its establishment in direct response to COVID-19 in March 2020. Over the summer the team's approach has evolved based on ongoing learning and intelligence gained through its delivery. This means that the service is continually evolving to meet residents, maximise community involvement and minimise cost to the council.
- 2.9.2 The Food response continues to support people with either a clinical or financial vulnerability. People do not need to be directly affected by COVID-19 at the time they access support.
- 2.9.3 Food response can provide residents with access to a range of food support ranging from priority supermarket slots where they choose and pay for their shopping, to access to emergency crisis food provision at no cost to the recipient.
- 2.9.4 Therefore, the food response provided is determined by the individual circumstances of each household. Resident need is determined via a follow up call from the specialist food response call handlers which allows us to facilitate a more holistic support package.
- 2.9.5 Food support is designed to be a short-term solution, put in place while a resident is referred or stepped down to a more sustainable mainstream support offer. It is important to note that if demand increases and cannot be met through VCS



(Voluntary Community Sector) supply then the Food Response team will be required to fill the unmet provision gap.

2.9.6 The rationale for the Food response approach is as follows:

- Pre-Covid many of the City's poorest residents relied on food banks and /or affordable community food provision. Covid has exacerbated the situation for those residents given the economic, as well as the health fall out from Covid, this will continue.
- The Food Response means that there is a co-ordinated approach across the City (with certain quality thresholds and ways of working), which can be scaled up and down according to need and incorporates a more rigorous assessment ensuring that households are matched to the best offer that they can afford in the short & long-term.
- The Food Response also provides access to other support to help limit a reliance on food support in the long term. This includes
  - Local Welfare Provision
  - Citizens Advice
  - Be Well
  - Digital Inclusion provision
  - Neighbourhood Teams
  - Adult Social Care

2.9.7 It is proposed that £132,488 is added to this scheme from the Winter COVID grant to support this response over the winter period including Christmas. It would be envisaged that pathways with the Local Welfare provision team would be strengthened to ensure that Food and Fuel support could be accessed in tandem where appropriate.

### **3.0 COVID WINTER GRANT CONDITIONS AND ESTIMATED SPEND**

3.1 Grant conditions are:

- At least 80% of a local authority's spend on the grant must be on families with children including pre-school and children up to and including age 19 (on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021) - **£2,065m** of Manchester's grant.
- Up to 20%, **£0.516m** can be used on residents without children and this includes young people who are care leavers and those with special educational needs.
- It is a ring-fenced grant
- Unspent grant at end of March 2021 will need to be returned to DWP

3.2 The grant is paid in instalments - proposing 50% upfront in December, then 25% end of Feb based on spending and final payment when they get the final MI end of April early May.

3.3 Table one sets out estimated spend against identified cohorts. As stated earlier in the report Free Schools Meals eligibility has increase by 2k since January census. Given the impact of the pandemic it is likely that schools will identify additional children that become eligible for free school meals between now and before the end of the scheme, March 2021. Some of this increase may be met through the uplift in vouchers provided by the supermarkets. However, the table below sets out that £310k has also been earmarked for this growth. There is also £132k yet to be allocated which together with any unused contingency will be used to support with other basic needs such as fuel and utilities where need is identified.

**Table one: Estimated Spend**

Target Groups	Cohort	£	Xmas	Spring Half Term
FSM Schools	32,461	<b>1,460,745</b>	<b>973,830</b>	<b>486,915</b>
Early Years PVI	727	<b>32,715</b>	<b>21,810</b>	<b>10,905</b>
2 Year Olds	2,475	<b>111,375</b>	<b>74,250</b>	<b>37,125</b>
Colleges	3,334	<b>150,030</b>	<b>100,020</b>	<b>50,010</b>
Potential Growth in Vulnerable Groups	6,895	<b>310,269</b>	<b>206,846</b>	<b>103,423</b>
<b>Sub-total 80% grant requirement to be spent 2-19 year old</b>		<b>2,065,134</b>	<b>1,376,756</b>	<b>688,378</b>
Leaving Care	544	<b>24,480</b>	<b>16,320</b>	<b>8,160</b>
Food Response Team		<b>132,488</b>	<b>yet to be determined</b>	
Early Years /Early Help		<b>227,315</b>	<b>yet to be determined</b>	
Contingency/Yet to be allocated		<b>132,000</b>		
<b>Sub-total 20% grant requirement</b>		<b>516,283</b>		
<b>Total</b>		<b>2,581,417</b>		

#### 4.0 CONCLUSION

Officers have worked at pace to develop a scheme which will ensure that financial support in the form of supermarket vouchers will be in place over the

Christmas break for approximately 43,000 children and young people. This covers those eligible for benefit related free school meals as well as targeted groups under 5, over 16 attending colleges in the City, children in families with no recourse to public funds, asylum seekers and refugee children and care leavers not covered by the college schemes. This is an ambitious scheme but by procuring a significant amount of vouchers centrally, the local authority has managed to secure an uplift in vouchers from supermarkets which will support the increased numbers of children who require this support. This is important within the context of the significant increase in children eligible for free school meals indicated by the October 2020 census and the expected continued increase in this cohort. To ensure that there is sufficient provision available for children and young people meeting the same criteria at February half term if demand continues to increase, there has also been a contingency set aside.

The grant also includes additional provision for the food response team over the winter period and has £132k unallocated plus any unused contingency which will be considered after the Christmas break, once the vouchers have been distributed but could be used to support other pressures for families over winter such as fuel and utility bills.