



Report Title	Government COVID Local Support Grant and Extension 2021
Dates between which decision will be taken	Earliest date: 9 December 2021 Latest date: 23 December 2021
Cabinet Member	Cllr Stephen Davies - Cabinet Member for Children's Safeguarding and Early Years
Key Decision	Yes
Purpose of Report	<p>To ratify the decisions taken by Executive Director of Children's Services to engage the service provider known as Auriga Service Ltd to allocate and distribute the following grants for the purpose of supporting vulnerable families by providing them with welfare support through (a) free school meal food vouchers and (b) emergency support to vulnerable children and families in the form of essential items (food vouchers, fuel vouchers, white goods):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. A Government Covid Local Support Grant of £354,747 for the purpose of providing such support during the period 17th April 2021 to 20th June 2021; and2. A Government Extension of Support - COVID Local Support Grant of £1,418,987.91 for the purpose of providing such support during the period 21st June 2021 to 30th September 2021. <p>To ratify the decision taken by Executive Director of Children's Services to provide a £70,000 grant to each of Gloucestershire's six District Councils (£420,000 in total funded through the Local COVID Support Grant Extension) in order to develop local support for vulnerable families and individuals who have been adversely impacted by the pandemic, and are experiencing, or at risk of experiencing poverty.</p>

<p>Recommendations</p>	<p>That the Lead Cabinet Member for Children’s Safeguarding and Early Years ratifies the following decisions by the Executive Director of Children’s Services:</p> <p>Covid Local Support Grant</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A decision by the Executive Director of Children’s Services to award to the company known as Auriga Service Ltd, without further competition, a contract for the supply and distribution of (a) free school meals and (b) emergency support to vulnerable children and families in the form of essential items (food vouchers, fuel vouchers, white goods) during the period 17th April 2021 to 20th June 2021 on grounds that, for reasons of extreme urgency brought about by unforeseeable events, the time limits for completing a regulated procurement procedure could not be complied with (the notification of grant award was received by DWP The Department for Work and Pensions announced an allocation on 14th April and the services needed to be operational by 17th April) <p>Covid Local Support Grant Extension</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. A decision to award a further direct contract award to the company known as Auriga Service Ltd, without further competition, a contract for the supply and distribution of for the same services as per recommendation 1, during the period from 21st June 2021 to 30th September 2021 on grounds that, for reasons of extreme urgency brought about by unforeseeable events, the time limits for completing a regulated procurement procedure could not be complied with (the notification of grant award was received by DWP The Department for Work and Pensions announced an allocation on 21st June instructing Councils to make immediate preparations to administer the grant, meaning that services needed to be operational the same day (21st June) <p>Grants to District Councils</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. A decision to provide a £70,000 grant to each of Gloucestershire’s six District Councils (£420,000 in total funded through the Local COVID Support Grant Extension) in order to develop local support for vulnerable families and individuals who have been adversely impacted by the pandemic, and are experiencing, or at risk of experiencing poverty.
<p>Reasons for recommendations</p>	<p>On 14th April 2021 the Department for Work and Pensions announced a further funding allocation, to Gloucestershire County Council, of £354,747, to provide assistance to vulnerable families with children and other vulnerable households, particularly affected by the pandemic during the period 17th April to 20th June 2021 and made it a condition of such funding that the council</p>

should start making immediate preparations to administer such funding.

On 21st June 2021 the Department for Work and Pensions announced a further funding allocation, to Gloucestershire County Council, of £1,418,987.91, to provide assistance to vulnerable families with children and other vulnerable households, particularly affected by the pandemic during the period 21st June to 30th September 2021 and made it a condition of such funding that the council should start making immediate preparations to administer such funding.

Due to the limited time available between DWP notification of the two grant awards (on 14th April 2021 and the 21st June 2021) and the requirement for immediate implementation of distribution of support, it would have been impossible for the council procure, mobilise and implement an alternative solution within the time available. Accordingly, given the need to proceed at pace, it was necessary to utilise existing provision to delivery this support. The implementation period necessary for delivering emergency support was shorter than if the council had procured a new contract for the supply of essential and emergency support (food vouchers, fuel vouchers and white goods) by way of a competitive procurement process. Note that other providers do not provide fuel vouchers and only provide store vouchers for white goods (provision which the Council does not want to implement at present).

It was therefore necessary to award to Auriga Service Ltd (a company that has operated the Council's Welfare Contract since 2016 and assisted the council with the distribution of the Summer Emergency Assistance Grant and Covid Winter Grant Scheme during 2020/2021) given that they already had in place the resources and systems necessary to delivery support at short notice and with no disruption to vulnerable service users.

Prior to the contract award and extension described above, the council gave authority to enter into a 6+1 month direct contract award to Auriga Service Ltd commencing 01/04/2021 that was approved by Lead Cabinet Member for Children and Families on 26th April 2021 as part of Winter Grant extension, until 31st October 2021, under Regulation 32(2)(c) of the Public Contract Regulations 2015. The said award was justified on grounds that, for reasons of extreme urgency brought about by unforeseeable events, the time limits for completing a regulated procurement procedure could not be complied with. This report proposes extending that arrangement for extension funding announced on 20th June 2021.

Although the council had considered using a Crown Commercial Services framework agreement for purchasing and distributing food vouchers, this was not progressed due to significant amendments to the standard framework contract, with significant elements in the provider's favour, including service delivery risks that were not acceptable to the Council.

Resource Implications

The recommendations set out above are covered in their entirety by the following:

1. Gloucestershire County Council was allocated £354,747 (by way of COVID Local Support Grant) to cover period of 17th April 2021 to 20th June 2021; and further allocated £1,418,987.91 (by way of a COVID Local Support Grant Extension) to cover the period 21st June 2021 to 30th September 2021 in order to provide targeted financial support for those in need in Gloucestershire providing them with (a) free school meals and (b) emergency support to vulnerable children and families in the form of essential items (food vouchers, fuel vouchers, white goods). This additional support has meant that we have been able to replace using earmarked/approved GCC funding (as per COVID Winter Grant paper) with Central Government grants. These grants will be allocated as follows:

- (a) Covid Local Support Grant of £354,747 to cover period of 17th April 2021 to 20th June 2021. The following costs were paid from the grant:

£354,747 emergency COVID/welfare provision to Auriga Service Ltd (existing provider) in consideration of it providing Free school meal voucher and emergency welfare support during the period 17th April – 20th June 2021.

- (b) Covid Local Support Grant Extension of £1,418,987.91 covering the period 21st June 2021 to 30th September 2021. The said funding has been allocated on the following basis:

- £60,000 is the estimated value of emergency Covid/welfare provision services provided by Auriga Service Ltd (existing provider).
- £420,000, in the form of a grant, was divided equally between the County's six District Councils (£70,000 per district) to support vulnerable children and families in their communities.
- £395,000 allocated to the purchase of Summer holiday vouchers (including cover for children with dietary requirements, children under 5 & children between 16-17yrs where we cannot offer Holidays Activity and Food funding.
- £544,000 to procure free school meals (including meals for children with disabilities) in the period 23/09/21 – 30/09/21].

Note the total spend through Auriga Services Ltd for recommendation b) will be up to £1.2m. The administration costs are very low (circa 1%) with almost all the support going directly to vulnerable families.

<p>Background Documents</p>	<p>Previous decisions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ICM Decision (29/05/2020) COVID-19 Emergency Assistance Fund for Food and Essential Supplies. https://glostext.gloucestershire.gov.uk/documents/s62986/ICM%20Report%20-%20Covid%2019%20Emergency%20Assistance%20Fund%202020%20FINAL.pdf • ICM Decision (15/04/2021): Free School Meals – Holiday Provision 2021/22 • ICM Decision (26/04/2021): COVID Winter Grant Scheme – 2020/21 • Cabinet Decision (23/06/21): Holiday Activities and Food Programme 2021 - 2022 (HAF) (plus see p.4/5 of the meeting notes for details of COMF element that was agreed by Cabinet on the day) <p>COVID Local Support Grant guidance 17th April until 20th June 2021 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-winter-grant-scheme/covid-local-support-grant-3-guidance-17-april-2021-to-20-june-2021</p> <p>Extension of Support - COVID Local Support Grant (CLSG) (21 June 2021 to 31 October 2021) https://www.cypnow.co.uk/news/article/covid-local-support-grant-key-facts-on-extra-160m-fund-for-struggling-families</p> <p>Gloucestershire criteria and survey for Covid support grants https://haveyoursaygloucestershire.uk.engagementhq.com/emergency-assistance-grant</p>
<p>Statutory Authority</p>	<p>The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) provided funding to County Councils and Unitary Authorities, under section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003 to administer the scheme and provide direct assistance to vulnerable households and families with children particularly affected by the pandemic.</p>
<p>Divisional Councillor(s)</p>	<p>ALL</p>

Officer	<p>Any representations should be sent to:</p> <p>Name: Chris Spencer, Executive Director of Children’s Services Tel. no: 01452 583578 Email: Chris.Spencer@gloucestershire.gov.uk</p> <p>By 5pm on Wednesday 8 December 2021</p>
Timeline	<p>These decisions were necessary to ensure provision was in place by 17th April 2021.</p>

Background & Scope:

1. A £170 million COVID Winter Grant Scheme was made available by the Department for Work and Pensions in December 2020 (as new funding issued to County Councils and Unitary Authorities (including Metropolitan Councils and London Boroughs)) to support those most in need across England with the cost of food, energy and water bills and other associated costs.
2. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) provided funding to County Councils and Unitary Authorities, under section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003, to administer the scheme and provide direct assistance to vulnerable households and families with children particularly affected by the pandemic. This included some families who normally have access to free school meals during term time. County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England have the ability to deliver the scheme through vouchers or grants, for example.
3. The Department for Work and Pensions stipulated that:
 - At least 80% of both the COVID Local Support Grant and COVID Local Support Grant Extension must 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 both the COVID Local Support Grant and COVID Local Support Grant must be ring-fenced to provide support with food, energy and water bills (including sewerage), with up to 20% on other items.
4. There have been a number of schemes which have provided support packages for families and children, including:
 - Significant expansion of the Department for Education’s (DfE’s) Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) 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. It will build on our existing programme, which supported around 50,000 children across 17 LAs and will ensure provision for Easter (already taken place), summer and Christmas in 2021.
 - 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 providing 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.
5. On 14th April 2021 The Department for Work and Pensions allocated £40 million to a national COVID Support Grant for vulnerable families to cover period of 17th April 2021 until 20th June 2021
 6. On 20th June 2021 the Department for Work and Pensions have further allocated £160 million to a national COVID Local Support Grant Extension for vulnerable families to cover period from 21st June 2021 until 30th September 2021.
 7. Within the above COVID Local Support Grant, Gloucestershire County Council was allocated £354,747 of COVID Local Support Grant to cover period from 17th April 2021 to 20th June 2021. A further allocation of £1,418,987.91 by way of a COVID Local Support Grant Extension was made to cover period from 21st June 2021 to 30th September 2021. Both grants were provided for the purpose of providing welfare support through (a) free school meal food vouchers and (b) emergency support to vulnerable children and families in the form of essential items (food vouchers, fuel vouchers, white goods).
 8. Under the terms of the national COVID Support Grant and the COVID Local Support Grant Extension, County Councils and Unitary Authorities were required by the Department for Work and Pensions to be ready to:
 - a. Allocate and spend (including committed spend) their allocation of £40 million starting no later than 21st June 2021 ; and
 - b. Allocate and spend (including committed spend) their allocation of £160 million no later than 30th September 2021 (extended from 20th June once notified of extension).

with a view to providing further needed support to vulnerable children, young people, working age adults, older people and their families during the period 17th April 2021 to 30th September 2021.

9. This report sets out a process for delivering financial packages in order to distribute the financial support that has been allocated (in point 7 above) to the council to provide food and essential supplies using the same stipulation for Winter Grant above. It also provides a summary of existing grant/funding schemes to identify where this grant could best be used to fill in gaps in current provision for children and families across Gloucestershire.

Free School Meal (FSM) Support

10. Gloucestershire is committed to making sure 'no child goes hungry' and has implemented an approach to ensure access to either a voucher or food hamper for

all families that receive FSM during the school term to support during the school holidays. However, we further expanded this to offer supermarket vouchers of choice, as well as fuel vouchers and White goods.

11. This FSM voucher scheme does not support;

- Children and Young people who fall into the eligible criteria over the summer period for FSM as they will be unable to apply until September.
- Young people leaving education at 16 or 18.
- Children and young people who attend an independent Special School for education.
- All children under the age of 5.
- All care leavers.
- All care leavers with children.
- Children and young people with a disability.
- Children and young people that need a specialised diet.
- Working age adults and older people and their families.

12. Therefore, upon notification of the perimeters of the grants the COVID-19 Emergency Assistance Fund Panel recommended that both the £354,747 COVID Local Support Grants (the “**April 2021 Grant**”) and the, £1,418,987.91 Local Support Grants Extension (the “**June 2021 Grant Extension**”) were used to support those cohorts above, who fall outside of the free school meal provision as well as families who are entitled to FSM provision during the period 17th April to 30th September 2021. Given that the conditions of the April 2021 Grant and the June 2021 Grant Extension are flexible, this could be done as part of a larger package of support or in isolation and continue to offer supermarket vouchers of choice, fuel vouchers and white goods.

13. Within guidance provided by the Department for Work and Pensions in respect of the COVID Local Support Grant and Extension (the “**Grant Scheme**”), there is scope to support Individuals with “No Recourse to Public Funds” (NRPF). The Grant Scheme can be used by councils to provide basic safety net support to an individual, regardless of their immigration status, if there is a genuine care need that does not arise solely from destitution, for example if:

- there are community care needs
- they have serious health problems
- there is a risk to a child’s wellbeing
- they lose employment or hours of employment due to Covid and are unable to access public funds

14. Those families falling outside the qualifying criteria for receiving FSM provision are nevertheless entitled to receive support (in line with grant conditions as outlined above in paragraph 3) from the April 2021 Grant and the June 2021 Grant Extension.

15. If families are receiving food vouchers for children through the FSM provision through vouchers from schools, this needed to be taken into in order to avoid

duplication. However, the government allowed families receiving other support to access additional support through the grant if for example, a family:

- had additional wider needs in terms of food
- required other essential supplies
- included individual family members that are not in receipt of these vouchers
- had seen an impact on their income due to Covid

16. Therefore, all the above groups were made eligible to receive funding from both the April 2021 Grant and the June 2021 Grant Extension as they were part of the Winter Covid Grant.

17. As part of implementing Summer Emergency Assistance Fund, Winter Grant and Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme in the districts of Gloucestershire, an effective structure is now in place. There is a great appetite for each district lead with the support of HAF Project Team within the Children and Families Hub to develop their local plan and to commission provision in their areas that fills the gaps in provision. This process has now become more efficient through the support of HAF Project Team.

Options

Option One:

18. To ratify the decision to direct award to Auriga Services Ltd up to a further £1.2m above previous approvals in the Winter Grant and Winter Grant extension papers, covering the two grants 17th April 2021 – 30th September 2021.

19. To ratify the decision to award £70k per District (£420,000 in total) from the COVID Local Support Grant Extension).

20. To determine the suitability of the Crown Commercial Service (CCS) Voucher Scheme Framework for the purposes of awarding one or more call-off contracts to provide free school meals during December 2021 holiday period, or reserve the option to use another approved and compliant procurement route if the CCS Voucher Scheme Framework is deemed not to meet the Council's requirements.

Option Two:

22. To ratify the decision to direct award to Auriga Services Ltd up to a further £1.2m above previous approvals in the Winter Grant and Winter Grant extension papers, covering the two grants 17th April 2021 – 30th September 2021.

23. To ratify the decision to award £70k per District (£420,000 in total) from the COVID Local Support Grant Extension).

24. To clawback funding previously allocated to Auriga Services Ltd (£696,000) earmarked for future 2021/22 provision and proceed at risk with the preferred provider (as per service delivery risks mentioned previously) for December 2021 free school meals holiday period.

Preferred option: Option One

25. Market due diligence was undertaken to see what routes were viable options within the time available. The option with the least service delivery risk and the ability to meet the imposed timescales set by Government was determined to be a direct award with the current provider Auriga Services Ltd. The delivery risks included the ability to agree terms with acceptable risk to the Council and the ability to mobilise and implement an appropriate solution.
26. This option will enable us to use the existing allocation mechanism through existing provision to distribute food, fuel vouchers and white goods due to limited timescale to support vulnerable families and individuals.
27. As Auriga Service Ltd currently operates the Council's Welfare Contract and assisted with the distribution of the Summer Emergency Assistance Grant and Covid Winter Grant Scheme for the council during 2020/2021, so they have the resources and systems already in place.
28. If we had not used the existing provider there would have been a direct effect on the reputational stability in the local area supporting children and their families in Gloucestershire during pandemic given that We would have seen a significant increase in service user queries/calls, which would have been unsustainable within the capacity of the resources in place. The numbers of calls specifically in relation to the Free School Meals via the provider totals between 500 – 600 calls per holiday period.
29. A retrospective contract notice will be placed on the 'Find a Tender Service' in respect of the Auriga contracts detailed in this paper as part of transparency and reporting obligations.

Risks

Do nothing

30. The risk of doing nothing is in relation to the council's reputation and ability to respond to the allocation of grant to vulnerable families in a timely and appropriate manner

Not using the grant for the purpose, it was meant

31. It is a requirement that the grant fund should only be used when all other options have been exhausted.

32. Therefore, incorporating the allocation of this funding into already established and robust application processes within the GCC's Children and Families Commissioning team ensures all applications are reviewed, with funding only being allocated when meeting the criteria and after all other options have been exhausted.

Fraudulent activity:

33. The risk of fraudulent applications or referrals to the fund is mitigated by the strict checking process overseen by the panel, as detailed in the terms of reference.

Procurement Risk

34. There is a risk in respect of any direct contract award that the award may be subject to legal challenge under the Public Contract Regulations 2015 ("PCRs"). While it is acknowledged that a direct contract award is permissible under the council's Contract Standing Orders and/or the PCRs only on very limited grounds, the direct contract award to Auriga Service Ltd described in Recommendation 1 of this report is justified under Regulation 32(2)(c) PCRs because, for reasons of extreme urgency brought about by unforeseeable events (ie, the unforeseeability of the decision by Government on [14th April 2021] to require Councils to distribute the COVID Local Support Grant fund with effect from 17th April 2021) it would not have been possible to comply with the time limits for conducting a regulated procurement process, nor would it have been possible to implement an alternative solution and then mobilise appropriate resources in the time available. Moreover, Auriga Ltd had operated the Council's Welfare Contract and assisted the council with the distribution of the Summer Emergency Assistance Grant and the Winter COVID Grant, in which case it already had in place the necessary resources and systems to provide the required services at short notice. All transparency requirements under the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 will be in Find a Tender and Contracts Finder, following the ratification of decisions, by way of this paper, are confirmed.
35. There is also a risk in respect of any contract modification that it may be subject to legal challenge under PCRs. While it is acknowledged that a direct contract award is permissible under the council's Contract Standing Orders and/or the PCRs only on very limited grounds, the direct contract awards described in recommendations 1 and 2 of this report is justified in this instance due to extreme urgency, with notification of the 2 grants received on 14th April (3 days before provision) and 21st June 2021 (after provision start date).

Financial implications

36. This decision and associated actions are funded entirely through Government Covid Grants. This has changed from the previous COVID Winter Grant funding paper, which indicated at the time that GCC would fund part of 2021/22 Free School Meal provision.
37. Gloucestershire County Council was initially allocated £354,747 of COVID Local Support Grant to cover period of 17th April to 20th June 2021. A further allocation of £1,418,987.91 - COVID Local Support Grant Extension covering the period 21st

June to 30th September 2021 to provide targeted financial support for those in need in Gloucestershire. These grants will be allocated as follows:

38. The Covid Local Support Grant of £354,747 covering the period 17th April to 20th June 2021 was utilised as follows:

- £354,747 emergency COVID/welfare provision to Auriga Service Ltd (existing provider).

39. The Covid Local Support Grant Extension of £1,418,987.91 to cover period of 21st June to 30th September 2021 will be utilised as follows::

- £60,000 The estimated value of emergency Covid/welfare provision to Auriga Service Ltd (existing provider)
- £420,000 in a form of a grant and equally divided between the County's six District Councils (£70,000 per district) to support vulnerable children and families in their communities
- £395,000 Summer holidays vouchers (in addition to what was planned of £15 per week for 2 weeks)
- £544,000 to procure October 2021 free school meals to include children with disabilities.

40. The total COVID Local Support Grant and Extension Grant Funding will be spent by 30th September 2021 as per requirement from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

Climate change implications

41. No disproportionate impact identified.

Equality implications

42. The Covid Local Support Grant and Covid Local Support Grant Extension continues to follow the inclusive qualification criteria as previously described in the Terms of Reference for the Covid-19 Emergency Assistance Fund Panel and the Winter Grant Scheme. This will continue to be monitored for equality considerations, especially for those with protected characteristics.

43. Individual Cabinet Members should read and consider the Equalities Impact Assessment in order to satisfy themselves, as decision makers, that due regard has been given.

44. This programme will be offered to families and individuals who fit the criteria for Covid Support Grants and will also provide additional support to HAF programme.

45. The provision to vulnerable children and families in the form of essential items will constitute a positive intervention with families with low income and high levels of poverty and deprivation. Covid19 lockdown/restrictions and negative economic impacts have exacerbated the inequalities existing within those families, making more evident the gaps in access to food, fuel, white goods.

46. The provision reaches out to families and individuals from underrepresented communities, from diverse backgrounds accessing support in Gloucestershire.
47. Districts will be supported centrally by the HAF Project Team and use the online tool which will streamline the processes and create a no-stigmatised offer to all families accessing the provision.
48. The eligibility for this scheme has been clearly defined (within table above) and is reviewed regularly by panels to ensure consistency in awards.
49. Support will be available to applicants when making an application – largely through existing established routes.

Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) implications

50. There is already a DPIA in place for the Winter EAG and the original welfare contract and the DPIA has been updated to reflect the Covid support grants.

Social value implications

51. Considering the urgency to put support in place, we were not able to contractually oblige social value considerations upon the provider.
52. As these grants are over 6-month period, the social value will be unchanged. However, the council would continue to work with the provider and districts to look at potential opportunities within the contract.
53. No disproportionate impact identified.

Consultation feedback

54. No consultation took place with the public as the support set out above has to be implemented within very short timescales.

Officer recommendations

55. That the Cabinet Member approves option 1 and process for delivering such financial support in order to supplement financial support that has been allocated to the council to provide food and essential supplies

Performance Management/Follow-up

56. This project will be accountable to the Assistant Director for Integrated Children and Families Commissioning and follow the daily, weekly and monthly monitoring regime.

57. Expenditure against the grant will be monitored and reported to a Strategic Steering Group that will meet quarterly to review this provision and to consider the best approaches for the commissioning of future activities.

58. Required Monitoring and Delivery plans returns will be provided in line with The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) requirements on following dates:

- 9th July 2021 – Interim Monitoring return for previous tranche of COVID Local Support Grant.
- 16th July 2021 – Delivery plans return for grant extension
- 22nd October 2021 – Final Monitoring return for original grant & grant extension

59. Robust monitoring frameworks are still in place, for the delivery of the service.

60. The contract will continue to be monitored regularly.