

REPORT TITLE: The next phase of ‘Levelling Up Our Communities’

Cabinet Date	20 th September 2023
Cabinet Member	Cllr Mark Hawthorne Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Public Health and Communities
Key Decision	Yes
Purpose of Report	To seek approval for further investment of £1,479,954 into projects and activities that will support communities to ‘level up’ in Gloucestershire. These projects and activities will include targeted interventions to address broader levelling up issues which are not necessarily geographically based.
Recommendations	That the Cabinet delegates authority to the Director of Public Health in consultation with the Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Public Health and Communities to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Allocate £949,954 from the Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF) to fund targeted interventions (described in Appendix A of this report) whose purpose shall be to address broader levelling up issues which are not necessarily geographically based such as, but not exclusive to, digital inclusion, cost of living, online harms and community transport. 2. Allocate a top up of £530,000 from the Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF) to the Build Back Better Councillor Scheme for the purposes of levelling up as part of the council’s ambition to ‘level up’ Gloucestershire communities (giving an additional £10,000 to each County Councillor to spend in their division).
Reasons for Recommendations	To build on the council’s ambition to ‘level up’ its communities and take action to reduce health and wider inequalities by developing and implementing targeted interventions which address broader levelling up issues that are not necessarily geographically based, such as but not exclusive to, digital inclusion, cost of living and online harms. These interventions build on national and local policy and examples of good practice. By investing in targeted interventions to create health equity in Gloucestershire, we are

	<p>working towards everyone getting an equal opportunity for a healthier and happier life.</p> <p>To top up the Build Back Better Councillor Scheme, a light touch community initiative grant programme that is accessible to all voluntary and community groups, to help communities 'level up'. Evidence from the analyses of the Build Back Better Councillor Scheme shows that investment into community-based initiatives can benefit those that need it most. This scheme is compliant with accounting instructions and governance requirements.</p>
<p>Resource Implications</p>	<p>This Cabinet paper seeks approval to allocate £1,479,954 from the Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF). This funding had originally been allocated in part to other projects (which have underspent or found alternative funding sources for their work) and a reserve allocation that was held back for the purposes of any outbreak response and for storage of PPE and testing materials, which is now no longer required since rates of Covid-19 have reduced in the UK.</p> <p>It is proposed that £949,954 from such sum is allocated on the basis described in Recommendation 1 above; on targeted interventions to address broader levelling up and health inequalities issues which are not necessarily geographically based.</p> <p>It is further proposed that £530,000 from such sum is allocated on the basis described in Recommendation 2 above; to top up the Build Back Better Councillor Scheme (giving an additional £10,000 to each County Councillor to spend in their division).</p>
<p>Background Documents</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>UK Government White Paper (2022) - Levelling Up In the United Kingdom</u> • <u>Gloucestershire County Council Strategy 2022-26 - Building Back Better in Gloucestershire</u> • <u>Levelling Up Our Communities Conference (19.5.23)</u> • <u>Officer Decision (6.10.22) – Levelling Up Together Grant Scheme</u> • <u>Officer Decision (15.3.23) - The Levelling Up Together Grant Scheme – Allocation of Grant Awards</u> • <u>Levelling Up Together Grant Scheme GCC Webpages</u> • <u>Cabinet Decision (27.1.21) Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF)</u> • <u>Cabinet Decision (21.07.21) - Elected Member Community Grant Scheme Build Back Better - Councillor Scheme</u> • <u>Build Back Better Councillor Scheme GCC Webpages</u> • <u>Director of Public Health Annual Report 2023 – No Person is an Island: Social Connections in Gloucestershire</u> • <u>Digital Divides Report</u> • <u>Cost of Living: Vulnerable Households Analysis Report (2022)</u>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support Hub GCC Webpages • Online Harms White Paper (2020) • Online Safety Bill (2023)
Statutory Authority	Gloucestershire County Council
Divisional Councillor(s)	All
Officer	Name: Diana Billingham Telephone: 01452 328609 Email: Diana.Billingham@gloucestershire.gov.uk
Timeline	September 2023: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finalise the development of, and start to, rollout the targeted interventions to address broader levelling up issues which are not necessarily geographically based. • Allocate the 'levelling up' top up to the Build Back Better Councillor Scheme with ongoing communications and guidance for all Councillors. January 2024: Review and analyse distribution of grants allocations to ensure there are no barriers to accessing grants and improve communications and engagement accordingly.

Background

1. The UK Government's Levelling Up White Paper (2022) focused on challenging and changing geographical inequality in the UK, through investment and new infrastructure to allow 'everyone the opportunity to flourish'. The White Paper outlined twelve missions which are long-term, quantifiable missions across a range of policy areas from housing to crime to health. Health inequalities are at the core of these missions, and many of them refer to 'closing the gap' and reducing health inequalities.
2. The strategy is owned nationally by the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. To date, there have been two national bidding rounds for Levelling Up funding. There has so far been no local generic allocation from central government to Councils.
3. Gloucestershire County Council's Building Back Better in Gloucestershire Strategy 2022-26 outlines several cross-service commitments as part of its ambitions. One priority area is entitled 'Levelling Up Our Communities' and details seven commitments.
4. The Council Strategy commits to reducing health (and wider) inequalities and improving life expectancy (relevant to missions 7 & 8) as articulated in the Levelling

Up Our Communities section. This was further informed by a Council Motion passed in September 2021.

5. During the height of Covid-19 pandemic, funding was made available to Local Authorities to both manage outbreaks and address community resilience and health inequalities. This Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF) was delegated by Cabinet to the Director of Public Health to agree a spending plan in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Public Health and Communities and the Deputy Chief Executive and Executive Director of Corporate Resources.
6. In response to the Council Motion and Strategy, a “Levelling Up Our Communities in Gloucestershire” conference was held on 19th May 2022. It was announced by the Leader of the County Council that an investment of £1,500,000 of the Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF) funding would be made available to support the 12 most deprived Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in the top 10% most deprived nationally (according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019), as the purpose of the COMF funding is to support communities to be more resilient and reduce inequalities.
7. To allocate this investment, “Levelling Up Together”; a targeted, flexible and light-touch grant scheme opened to applications in Autumn 2022. Groups and organisations working in the most deprived areas of Gloucestershire (according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2019), were eligible to apply. The scheme was highly competitive and received 127 applications. In total, 52 Levelling Up Together grants have been awarded, totalling £1,458,712.50. An initial report on these projects will be available in October 2023.
8. To further build on the Council’s efforts to ‘level up’, this report seeks approval to permit investment in additional ‘levelling up’ projects and activities. The investment will be made available by utilising the remaining funding within the Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF). This funding, totalling £1,479,954, had originally been allocated in part to other projects (which have underspent or found alternative funding sources for their work) and a reserve allocation that was held back for the purposes of any outbreak response and for storage of PPE and testing materials, which is now no longer required since rates of Covid-19 have reduced in the UK.
9. Our second phase recognises that as the County continues to recover from Covid 19, the impacts of the pandemic are still being felt by many of our residents. We know that the phase one geographical investment we made was important to recognise areas that have been historically underserved and support them to ‘level up’. However, national and/or local research and evidence have emphasised some key areas that are currently exacerbating inequalities. After careful consultation and research, these themes (outlined below) have been identified and selected for further investment. Addressing these issues is important in ensuring that we learn the lessons of the pandemic and tackle the ongoing significant barriers to wellbeing that can cause harm across the county, regardless of where people live.
10. The second phase will cover:

- **Theme 1: Digital Inclusion** - as demonstrated in recent reports including the Director of Public Health Annual Report (2022) and the local Digital Divides Report, society is changing rapidly, with digital connections playing an ever-increasing role in our lives. The pandemic hastened a change in the way we live, work, and interact with each other and we are moving rapidly towards a more digital society. For some people, this has left them feeling excluded, and the pandemic has exacerbated social isolation and loneliness for some. The gap in society between people who have full access to digital technologies and those who do not is called the 'digital divide'. There is also an acknowledged under-investment in cyber security to protect the safety of individuals and organisations which may not have the resources necessary to protect themselves and their systems. Digital solutions are no doubt an essential part of our future, but we need continued focus to address barriers and ensure that some of our most vulnerable residents are not left behind. We aim to create a lasting legacy of digital inclusion in the county through this work, joining up existing schemes and building on the recommendations of the Digital Divides report.
- **Theme 2: Cost of Living** - the rising costs of fuel, food housing costs and other essentials are having a disproportionate impact on families with low incomes and those already impacted by health inequalities. It puts higher numbers of households at greater risk of both immediate hardships, and a longer-term lack of opportunities, impacting on the overall health and wellbeing of Gloucestershire residents. Whilst this can be concentrated in traditionally underserved areas where job opportunities or transport links may be fewer, we know that there are also people experiencing these challenges living within small areas of the more affluent parts of the county (pg. 8, Cost of Living: Vulnerable Households Analysis Report, 2022). There have been a range of offers and support made available to address this issue (via Gloucestershire County Council's Support Hub) but there continues to be a need for support.
- **Theme 3: Online Harms** and vulnerable young people – as demonstrated in recent reports such as the Online Harms White Paper (2020), the internet can be used to spread illegal or harmful content, undermine civil discourse, and abuse or bully other people. Local research also highlights that partners across the system are concerned about these emerging issues. This goes deeper than just internet safety, with increasing evidence for the threats of radicalisation, abusive behaviours, incitement, and self-harm. Grooming for child criminal exploitation can occur entirely online and digital technology also plays a role in 'county lines' and the increasing ease in which young people can buy drugs via social media channels (using slang terms to bypass safety filters). We know that the more risk factors young people have, the more vulnerable they are, and the more likely they are to be exploited. Children and young people are particularly at risk partly as popular and emerging social media platforms allow users to access a range of features including location maps, direct messaging, and self-deleting content. This makes it increasingly difficult for parents, carers, and educators to monitor what and who children and young people are engaging with online. It is important to recognise this issue and identify ways to support young people to understand and recognise these issues and find safe and supportive solutions.

- **Theme 4: Access to services and community transport** – as demonstrated in local reports including the Director Public Health Annual Report 2022, some communities and groups are recognised as facing particular disadvantages in relation to transport and mobility, including older adults, those with disabilities, young people, and those in rural communities. Gloucestershire covers a large geographical area and connecting to friends, family, activities, and services can be challenging due to both cost and availability of transport. It is not just those in rural areas that may experience challenges with accessing opportunities within Gloucestershire, issues with access to, and cost of, transport can also be an issue within urban areas. The County Council aims to provide accessible and sustainable transport solutions as part of its ambition to ‘level up’ Gloucestershire communities.
11. The next phase of levelling up work will address these broader areas through an investment of £949,954 into targeted interventions. A summary of proposed activity is shared in Appendix A. Where possible, the mechanism of allocation will be via grant award to external partners, or internal transfer to the relevant internal teams best placed to oversee the delivery of the intervention. For grant awards, relevant organisations identified as being able to deliver the interventions will be approached to complete an Expression of Interest (EoI). Legal and procurement advice will be sought.
 12. In developing these interventions, consultation has been undertaken with internal colleagues and external partners with expertise in their respective themes. This Cabinet paper seeks approval to delegate authority to the Director of Public Health to finalise the details in consultation with the Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Public Health and Communities and share full details in due course. All work will be undertaken in close consultation with relevant stakeholders to ensure the joining-up of existing networks, partnerships, and workstreams. It will also build on national and local policy, and examples of good practice from other local authorities.
 13. In addition to investing into broader interventions, it is also recognised that inequalities exist within every electoral division; not just within the 12 LSOAs targeted as part of the Levelling Up Together grant scheme (the first phase of work to ‘level up’ Gloucestershire communities). It is therefore recognised that topping up the Build Back Better Councillor grant scheme, which is countywide, will give all communities the opportunity to benefit from additional investment.
 14. Approval is sought to provide all areas of the county with the opportunity to ‘level up’ by topping up the Build Back Better Councillor Scheme by £530,000, giving a further £10,000 to each Councillor to spend in their division for the purposes of levelling up. Regular communications and guidance to support Councillors (including providing example projects and connecting Councillors to community organisations) will be provided. Councillors will be kept informed of how much of their funding has been spent.

Options

15. **Option 1** – Allocate £530,000 to provide a top up to the Build Back Better Councillor Scheme, for the purposes of levelling up and allocate £949,954 to targeted interventions to address broader levelling up issues which are not necessarily geographically based. This option is recommended as it utilises appropriate funding to reduce inequalities and build community resilience across the county, in line with the Council’s ambition to ‘level up’ Gloucestershire communities.
16. **Option 2** – Cabinet do not approve the allocation of an uplift to the Build Back Better Councillor Grant Scheme for the purposes of levelling up, or the allocation of £949,954 to targeted interventions to address broader levelling up issues which are not necessarily geographically based. This option is not recommended/rejected because it would prevent and reduce opportunities to reduce health inequalities and build community resilience across the county and not further the Council’s ambition to ‘level up’ Gloucestershire communities.
17. **Option 3** – Run another grant scheme similar to the Levelling Up Together grant scheme. This option is not recommended/rejected because it would require additional, long-term capacity and take more time to facilitate. It may also duplicate with existing grant programmes potentially causing confusion.
18. **Option 4** - Commission several services to deliver levelling up projects. This option is not recommended/rejected because it would require additional, long-term capacity and significantly more time to facilitate.

Risks

19. The detail of the £949,954 spend will need to be determined; there is a risk that upon deciding use of these funds, the Council will be unable to secure the relevant and appropriate providers. This will be mitigated as the activities for spend are considered, with close work with the corporate procurement team and the communities where the funding is intended to make a difference, to ensure the successful use of funding.
20. There is a risk in respect of any award of grant funding that it may contravene Subsidy Control Regime requirements and, as a consequence, result in legal challenge. Accordingly, officers shall give due consideration to the council’s obligations under the Subsidy Control Act 2022 before any of the grants anticipated in this report are awarded (i.e., that are funded from the allocations described in the “Recommendations” section of this report) in order to ensure that they are Subsidy Control Regime compliant.
21. There is a risk that the Build Back Better Councillor Grant Scheme fund will not be used equitably across all electoral divisions. This will be mitigated by a robust communications plan and working actively with the voluntary and community sector networks and with Councillors to ensure funds are invested up to the maximum allocation in each area where possible.
22. There is a risk that the groups that most need support are unable to access the schemes on offer, such as the Build Back Better Councillor Scheme. To mitigate this, officers will collaborate with colleagues from the District Councils, Town and Parish

Councils and Voluntary Sector infrastructure agencies to raise awareness of the different schemes on offer and support community groups and organisations to apply.

Financial implications

23 This Cabinet paper seeks approval to allocate £1,479,954 from the Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF). This funding had originally been allocated in part to other projects (which have underspent or found alternative funding sources for their work) and a reserve allocation that was held back for the purposes of any outbreak response and for storage of PPE and testing materials, which is now no longer required since rates of Covid-19 have reduced in the UK.

- Of that amount, £949,954 will be spent on targeted interventions to address broader levelling up issues which are not all necessarily geographically based.
- The remaining £530,000 will be used to top up the Build Back Better Councillor Scheme (giving an additional £10,000 to each County Councillor)

Climate change implications

24. The Build Back Better Councillor Scheme and the targeted interventions will actively encourage green infrastructure, environmental and active travel projects which will contribute positively to reducing the carbon footprint.

Ecological implications

Has an Ecological Impact Assessment (EclA) been produced, or will one be undertaken at a later stage? No - an EclA will be undertaken at a later stage if it is deemed necessary.

Equality implications

25. To date, the Build Back Better Councillor Scheme positively impacts on under-represented groups and those disproportionately impacted by the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. The main aim of the programme is to reduce health inequalities and 'level up' opportunities. The fund will continue to be proactively promoted in a range of ways including via Councillors, officers, GCC's social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Next Door), media contacts, community groups and champions, district, town and parish councils and other public sector organisations.

26. The targeted interventions have the potential to positively impact on under-represented groups and those disproportionately impacted by the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. The main aim of these projects is to reduce health inequalities and 'level up' opportunities. Full Equalities Impact Assessments will be completed once the individual interventions are finalised, prior to commencement, and regularly reviewed. These will ensure care leavers are also given specific consideration.

Has an Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA) been completed? Yes

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

Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) implications

27. A Data Protection Impact Assessment Decision Checklist has been completed and due to no personal data being processed as part of this project, a DPIA is not a legal requirement.

Social value implications

28. The top up to the Build Back Better Councillor Scheme for the purposes of levelling up will ensure communities are enabled to act for themselves, be innovative and create the right conditions for building resilience and developing aspiration, as per the objectives of the grant programme.

29. The targeted interventions to address broader levelling up issues which are not necessarily geographically based (such as digital inclusion, cost of living and online harms) will work flexibly with communities, and community groups and organisations to find local and sustainable solutions.

Consultation feedback

30. Engagement has taken place with senior officers and the lead Cabinet Member.

Officer recommendations

31. It is recommended that Cabinet delegates authority to the Director of Public Health in consultation with the Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Public Health and Communities to implement the recommendations contained in the "Recommendations" section of this report.

Performance management/follow-up

32. A review meeting will take place every six months between the officers responsible for overseeing the scheme and the Cabinet Member for Public Health and Communities.

Feedback from County Councillors will be monitored and fed into the review.