

Corporate Infrastructure and Regulatory Services Scrutiny Committee

Community Support During Lockdown Standing Overview Group

2:30pm, 30th November 2020
Virtual Meeting on MS Teams
Notes from the session

Membership – all Members of CIRSC Committee.

Present:

Councillors A Dewhirst (Chair), P Colthorpe (Vice-Chair), Y Atkinson, J Berry, C Slade, C Whitton, P Crabb, (R Croad).

Update on the Winter Grant Scheme By Councillor Croad

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-winter-package-to-provide-further-support-for-children-and-families>)

Just over £2 million in funding has been provided to DCC by central government. 80% of this is to be used to provide food, with the remainder being linked with Local Authority responsibilities around the COVID-19 Hardship Fund which provides Council Tax relief.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/council-tax-covid-19-hardship-fund-2020-to-2021-guidance>).

This support will take the form of vouchers, distributed by email (or by post where email is not possible) that can be used primarily in supermarkets. As a secondary measure, where supermarket food is not suitable or desirable for the recipient, the vouchers can be used at eligible food kitchens, cafes, restaurants, and so on.

Members' questions:

Q: What would be the logistics of the voucher scheme for use in restaurants, cafes etc?

A: For pragmatic reasons, the voucher scheme is designed predominately to provide food for use in supermarkets which is the favoured medium, with the alternative only being in cases where, for example, a family does not have access to cooking facilities. There are grants available for local businesses to help vulnerable people outside the remit of the voucher system.

Community Support During Lockdown Presentation by Simon Kitchen

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and the first national lockdown there have been several lessons learned. Central government's primary concern when the March lockdown was enacted was concern about the 'clinically extremely vulnerable' and providing support so their basic needs could be met; primarily in terms of delivering food parcels. The lessons learned from this centralised approach included:

- The sheer logistical scale of the process.
- Data collection issues, where failure to maintain up to date contact detail especially for the vulnerable can cause big problems.
- A tailored approach is important – the government provided standard food parcels with little variety or input leading to issues around dietary requirements and preferences.

Devon County Council pushed back at local government with the message that 'local is best' – there is far more potential for such a vital system to work efficiently – there are many companies and organisations that demonstrated during lockdown the will to help the most vulnerable – but this needs to be backed up by funding and planning.

When considering a localised system there are a number of considerations borne out by the first national lockdown:

- Co-operation and communication are important. There were instances of people getting multiple food deliveries in a week which, at a base level, is an inefficient use of resources.
- Some longer-standing, larger companies were not willing to co-operate with others in providing food for the vulnerable.
- Many organisations were providing food in a manner that, long-term, was too costly and inefficient to be sustainable. The example given was a food bank approaching the Council and asking for their £25,000 per month outgoings in COVID response to be funded by the Council, which given the number of food banks in Devon would total to approximately £15m and would not address the underlying needs of the community.

The proposed solution to the above issues would be establishing food networks with the principle that within each community a network with a single food organisation at its centre could help alleviate some of the logistical issues. The hope with this system is that, over time, these organisations would serve to 'anchor' community support within these districts and promote longer term discussions about alleviating food poverty in a sensible, efficient and sustainable way – serving the environment and supporting the local community at the same time.

Members' questions:

Q: How will the residents be informed / signposted to what support is possible and who will be the contact points for further information?

A: In terms of the food vouchers, the DCC website will provide a briefing for members and details publicly available for all parents. With reference to the 'food networks,' there will be a single point of contact in each district when this has been set up. The scheme will be announced at Full Council and further details to follow.