

**Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting**

Cabinet 22 November 2021

**Report Title**

Household Support Fund and Funding for Vulnerable Renters

**Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?**

Yes

**Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report**

Jo Brown, Assistant Chief Executive

**Report Author**

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**Ward(s) Affected**

Borough-Wide

**Report Summary**

The Government announced two new funding packages during October 2021 designed to help households struggling to recover from the impacts of the COVID pandemic. The two funds are the Household Support Grant of £2,489,029.87, provided by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Funding for Vulnerable Renters of £116,416, provided by the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC).

The funding must be used in the current financial year.

This report provides an overview of the funding and eligible uses, together with recommendations for delivery of support to Rotherham residents.

**Recommendations**

1. Allocate the Household Support Grant of £2,489,029.87 as follows:
  - a) £1.1m for food vouchers to children eligible for free school meals for school holidays through to Easter 2022.
  - b) £1.3m to reduce Council Tax liability for working age households eligible for Council Tax Support on 31st October 2021.

- c) £30k to support local VCS organisations to support vulnerable households over Christmas / New year as a supplement to the Crisis Support SLA.
  - d) £30,000 to be available to meet eligible need for households not passported through means.
  - e) £29,029, would be held as contingency to be used as part of active management of the grant programme.
2. Delegate authority to the Assistant Chief Executive in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion, to determine revised and final allocations for the Household Support Grant including provision to include new claimants of Council Tax Support who were not eligible on 31st October 2021; the delegation to include provision for other eligible actions within the use of Household Support Fund should it not be possible to achieve full spend of the grant through the approved options.
  3. Allocate the £116,416 new Funding for Vulnerable Renters to increase prevention activity and make payments to reduce rent arrears where there is a risk of homelessness.
  4. Delegate authority to the Acting Director of Housing in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing to agree the final scheme based on the engagement with Government.

### **List of Appendices Included**

Appendix 1 Initial Equality Screening  
Appendix 2 Carbon Impact Assessment

### **Background Papers**

Household Support Fund: – Guidance for County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England (DWP)  
Funding for Vulnerable Renters (DLUHC)

### **Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel**

N/A

### **Council Approval Required**

No

### **Exempt from the Press and Public**

No

## **Household Support Fund and Funding for Vulnerable Renters**

### **1. Background**

- 1.1 The Government announced two new funding packages during October designed to help households struggling to recover from the impacts of the COVID pandemic. The two funds are the Household Support Grant, provided by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Funding for Vulnerable Renters, provided by the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC).
- 1.2 The Household Support Fund (HSF) grant is being made available to County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England to support those most in need this winter. This grant period runs from 6th October 2021 to 31st March 2022 and totals £500m nationally. The Council has been allocated £2,489,029.87.
- 1.3 This grant funding from DWP follows on from the COVID Support Grant awarded last winter and the COVID Local Support Grant provided over the summer. There are some variances to the previous grant conditions, most notably less required emphasis on families with children.
- 1.4 At least 50% of the total funding must be spent on families with children. The scope of the grant is primarily to support households in the most need with food, energy and water bills. It can also be used to support households with essential costs related to those items and with wider essential costs. In exceptional cases of genuine emergency, it can additionally be used to support housing costs where existing housing support schemes do not meet this exceptional need.
- 1.5 Building on the experience to date through use of COVID Winter Grant and Local Support Grant, an officer delegated decision has been taken to provide food vouchers to children eligible for free school meals covering the October half term holiday. This has allocated up to £170k.
- 1.6 The Funding for Vulnerable Renters is being made available to councils with homelessness duties. £65 million will be available nationally for this funding through the winter months to support households at risk of eviction or homelessness. The fund was announced on 23rd October and runs until 31st March 2022. The fund recognises the impact the pandemic has had on households in the private rented sector with the lowest income. The Council has been allocated £116,416.

### **2. Key Issues**

- 2.1 The details of the two new funding streams, Household Support Grant, provided by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Funding for Vulnerable Renters, provided by the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) are set out below.

## 2.2 Household Support Fund

2.3 The Household Support Fund has been made available by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England to support those most in need this winter during the final stages of economic recovery. This funding covers up to the end of March 2022. Local Authorities have discretion on exactly how this funding is used within the scope set out in guidance. The expectation is that it should primarily be used to support households in the most need with food, energy and water bills. It can also be used to support households with essential costs related to those items and with wider essential costs. In exceptional cases of genuine emergency, it can additionally be used to support housing costs where existing housing support schemes do not meet this exceptional need.

2.4 Authorities have the flexibility within the scheme to identify which vulnerable households are in most need of support and apply their own discretion when identifying eligibility. Authorities can request applications for support or can proactively identify households who may benefit or can take a mixture of the two approaches. There is no requirement for Authorities to undertake a means test or conduct a benefit check unless this specifically forms part of the Authority's local eligibility criteria. However, in relation to housing costs, Authorities must establish whether other forms of support are available to the household, such as Discretionary Housing Payments. In accordance with their general legal duties, Authorities must have a clear rationale or documented policy/framework outlining their approach including how they are defining eligibility and how households access the scheme. DWP expect Authorities to review any existing approach and to have a strong rationale for their targeting so that funding is available to the households who most need it.

2.5 The eligibility criteria for use of the grant includes that at least 50% of the total funding will be ring-fenced to support households with children, with up to 50% of the total funding to other households genuinely in need of support this winter. This may include households not currently in receipt of DWP welfare benefits.

2.6 Eligible spend includes:

- Food. The Fund should primarily be used to provide support with food whether in kind or through vouchers or cash.
- Energy and water. The Fund should also primarily be used to support with energy bills for any form of fuel that is used for the purpose of domestic heating, cooking or lighting, including oil or portable gas cylinders. It can also be used to support with water bills including for drinking, washing, cooking, and sanitary purposes and sewerage.
- Essentials linked to energy and water. The Fund can be used to provide support with essentials linked to energy and water (including sanitary products, warm clothing, soap, blankets, boiler service/repair, purchase of equipment including fridges, freezers, ovens, etc).

- Wider essentials. The Fund can be used to support with wider essential needs not linked to energy and water should Authorities consider this appropriate in their area.
- Housing Costs. In exceptional cases of genuine emergency where existing housing support schemes do not meet this exceptional need, the fund can be used to support housing costs. Where eligible, ongoing housing support for rent must be provided through the housing cost element of Universal Credit (UC) and Housing Benefit (HB) rather than the Household Support Fund. In addition, eligibility for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) must first be considered before emergency housing support is offered through the Household Support Fund. The Council must also first consider whether the claimant is at statutory risk of homelessness and therefore owed a duty of support through the Homelessness Prevention Grant (HPG).
- Reasonable administrative costs. This includes reasonable costs incurred administering the scheme. These include for example:
  - Staff costs.
  - Advertising and publicity to raise awareness of the scheme.
  - Web page design.
  - Printing application forms.
  - Small IT changes, for example, to facilitate MI production.

2.7 Eligible spend does not include:

- Advice services such as debt advice.
- Mortgage costs.

2.8 Experience from delivering COVID Winter Grant and Local Support Grant and other interventions have informed the recommendations for the use of Household Support Fund.

2.9 The Council has gained considerable experience in delivering support to the most vulnerable households during the COVID pandemic, building on existing crisis support provision.

2.10 Owing to the relatively short-term nature of the support grants and the need to establish priorities and processes quickly, the Council has sought to enhance existing provision, where possible, and work through established partnership arrangements.

2.11 Crisis food provision continues to be available across Rotherham with the ongoing inclusion of non-food items. Referral processes for crisis support work well. New developments around social supermarkets are progressing that will be enhanced through the work of a new Food Sustainability Development Officer. Also, part of the crisis support package is the provision of loans by LASER Credit Union. LASER is now providing a savings and loans package around school costs including school clothing, school trips etc. The provision of food vouchers to children eligible for free school meals to cover school holidays has directly targeted support to low-income households. This has been achieved through working in partnership with schools who have issued the vouchers. Along with support for school

uniforms through the previous grant regimes, this have been a very effective way of distributing support with minimal administration.

- 2.12 Working in partnership with VCS partners through the Food in Crisis Partnership, a successful programme of additional help for vulnerable families being support by local organisations was delivered over Christmas / New Year.
- 2.13 A Government grant was also provided to reduce liability to pay Council Tax for working age households in receipt of Council Tax Support during 2020/21. This was a very effective way to deliver additional support to low-income households, freeing up money to meet other demands, without the need for any additional application process.
- 2.14 The COVID Winter Grant was also used to provide support for heat / utility costs. The approach taken with this funding was to have a mix of referrals from services with an application process on the grounds of hardship. To avoid problems of having to make cash payments, arrangements were for support to be paid directly into residents' utility accounts. This proved difficult to administer for a number of reasons including:
- Whilst the availability of support was published and applications could be submitted through the Community Hub, many of the applications received did not qualify, whilst take-up from those expected to qualify was low.
  - Enabling referrals from other services did not generate many referrals.
  - Establishing a process to receive, assess and process applications for what was a short-term intervention for relatively small payments (£80) required secondment of staff from other service provision.
  - To maximise the support for local residents and achieve full spend of the grant, a move to passporting from other benefit or COVID related eligibility was required.
  - Setting up of payments into utility accounts was disproportionately burdensome for a one-off payment.
- 2.15 Overall, passporting from other eligibility and using vouchers or reducing liability to pay has proved to be the most effective means of delivering support to people in need quickly, efficiently, and achieving 100% take-up. From experience gained from COVID Winter Grant, support requiring application processes and assessment has been less effective. However, there will be a need to provide for people to access support who would not be passported.

#### Funding for Vulnerable Renters

- 2.16 The Funding for Vulnerable Renters is being provided by DLUHC to councils in England to support low-income earners in rent arrears. This is designed to help prevent homelessness and support families get back on their feet.

- 2.17 The funding is ringfenced for use only on homelessness services. The eligibility is for the funding to be used to minimise evictions, from the private rented sector, for single people as well as families.
- 2.18 The funding cannot be used to cover temporary accommodation costs, but instead to minimise placements into temporary accommodation through resolving arrears and/or finding alternative accommodation which will avoid the landlord and tenant going through court action.
- 2.19 DLUHC Housing Advisers will communicate with the Council's Homelessness Manager about the use of this funding.

### **3. Options considered and recommended proposal**

3.1 The recommendations have been produced on assessed options to meet the criteria of the two funding streams that can be mobilised quickly without the need for significant additional administration and build on experience of delivering support through other initiatives. The options recommended for allocations are:

#### **3.2 Household Support Fund**

3.3 The grant period for eligible payments runs from 6th October 2021 to 31st March 2022. Vouchers issued by 31st March 2022 can be used shortly after the 31st March deadline. This means that food vouchers issued in March to children eligible for free school meals can be used for the Easter school holidays in April 2022.

3.4 To commence provision of support covering the October half term school holiday, an officer delegated decision was taken to provide food vouchers.

3.5 The key options and timeline will now cover the full grant spend though to March 2022.

3.6 Four principal areas for use of the grant are recommended. These are:

- Provision of vouchers to children eligible for free school means to cover Christmas / New Year, February 2022 half term and Easter 2022 school holidays. This would maintain the voucher value at £15 per week per eligible child. This is estimated to require up to £1.1m from the grant total including the October 2021 half term.
- Provision of further reduction of Council Tax Liability to working age households. £1.3m has been provisionally identified for this area of support. Initially, support of up to £100 would be provided to households in active receipt of Council Tax Support in the current financial year, as of 31st October 2021. Provision within delegations would allow for new claimants at a later date to be included as part of management of the Household Support Grant allocation. From the current caseload, at least 14,517 would be assisted through this support. The support would be provided on the basis that it improves the financial position of the lowest income households, enabling them

to better meet costs of food, utilities and other essential costs over the winter period without the need for any additional application process, ensuring 100% take up.

- The provision of £30k as supplementary provision to the Crisis Support Service Level Agreement for small grants to local organisations supporting vulnerable families over Christmas / New Year. The process would follow that run in 2020/21 and be administered by VAR.
- £30,000 to be available to meet eligible need for households not passported through means. Households could be identified through Council services or where such need is identified through the Community HUB.
- The remaining £29,029, would be held as contingency to be used as part of active management of the grant programme. This would involve reviews in January and March 2022 to ensure full spend of the grant. Authority would be delegated to the Assistant Chief Executive to determine revised and final allocations. A delegation would need to include provision for other actions, should it not be possible to achieve full spend of the grant through the approved options. This could include Council tenants who are covered by district heating, as was applied in 2020/21.

3.7 Options available include increasing or reducing the allocations to the actions available.

3.8 Assuming the continuation of food vouchers to children eligible for free school meals at the established voucher value of £15 per week, the final spend will be determined by the number of eligible children.

3.9 Changes to the other recommended allocations will increase or reduce the value or support that can be provided to eligible households or the amount available and number or value of help provided to people who are not passported. The proposed allocation for support through VCS organisations is based on the outcomes from last year but could be varied. Contingency and flexibility will enable full spend to be achieved by 31st March 2022.

### 3.10 Funding for Vulnerable Renters

3.11 To maximise the effectiveness of this funding, plans are being made to increase prevention activity, identifying tenants with arrears as early as possible, and promoting contact with the Housing service for assistance.

3.12 Housing will liaise with Adult and Children's Social Care and Partners who work with vulnerable people to encourage early contact, where private rented tenants are building up rent arrears.

3.13 An effective approach would include making payments to reduce rent arrears where there is a risk of homelessness. In this instance the Housing service would seek agreements with landlords and tenants to take a share of the financial burden for arrears wherever possible, taking into account individual circumstances. In these circumstances, the cost to a landlord of court action



and re-letting a property adds up to the equivalent of a month and a half rent (on average), so the case can be made for a landlord contribution of a month's rent towards settlement of the arrears.

3.14 Finalising the proposed interventions, in liaison with DLUHC and active management will enable full use of fund by 31st March 2022.

3.15 Delegated Authority

3.16 Achieving full use of both funding streams will require active management and flexibility over detailed use and final allocations of spend.

3.17 Oversight and management of the overall funds will rest with the Assistant Chief Executive's Directorate. This will include any delegated decisions to ensure efficient and full use of the funding, as has been the practice for managing COVID winter and local support grant.

3.18 Delegate authority to the Acting Director of Housing in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing will also be required to agree the final scheme of support for vulnerable renters, based on the engagement with Government.

**4. Consultation on proposal**

4.1 Officers in relevant Council services along with VCS partners have been engaged in producing the recommended options

**5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision**

5.1 Arrangements are in place to commence the range of support measure as soon as approval is in place.

**6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications (to be written by the relevant Head of Finance and the Head of Procurement on behalf of s151 Officer)**

6.1 Grants of £2,489,029.87 have been provided by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and £116,416 by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) for specific purposes as set out in the grant conditions. The proposed spend is in accordance with the conditions. An overview of projected spend if all options are taken forward is set out in the table below:

Holiday food vouchers	£1,100,000.00
Council Tax support	£1,300,000.00
Christmas / New Year food	£30,000.00
Households not passported	£30,000.00
Contingency	£29,029.87
Total Household Support Grant	£2,489,029.87
Preventing homelessness	£116,416
Total Vulnerable Renters Grant	£116,416

6.2 Allocations will be reviewed as part of management of the grant with final allocations being determined once the final cost of holiday food vouchers is confirmed. and demand against other allocations. This will ensure that the grant is fully spent; however, each scheme will need to be monitored closely to ensure that expenditure is maintained within budget and that the grant is utilised before 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022.

6.3 There are no direct procurement implications arising from the recommendations detailed in the report.

## **7. Legal Advice and Implications (to be written by Legal Officer on behalf of Assistant Director Legal Services)**

7.1 The recommended in in accordance with the conditions of use.

7.2 The Council can support as local welfare provision under the “Local authority’s general power of competence”, as set out in S.1 of the Localism Act 2011 (c. 20), along with statutory duties to prevent homelessness.

## **8. Human Resources Advice and Implications**

8.1 There are no Human Resources implications associated with this report.

## **9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults**

9.1 At least 50% of households support through the Household Support Fund will be families with children.

9.2 The recommended use of Household Support Fund includes issuing vouchers in lieu of free school meals eligible children for school holidays through to Easter 2022.

## **10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications**

10.1 The objectives of the use of the grants and targeting towards vulnerable households including families with children will contribute to addressing economic and social inequalities. It will have a positive equalities impact.

10.2 Equalities data will be collected as part of administering the programme of support.

## **11. Implications for CO2 Emissions and Climate Change**

11.1 There are no implications for CO2 emissions of climate change.

## **12. Implications for Partners**

12.1. Partner VCS organisations will be actively engaged in providing Christmas food.

### 13. Risks and Mitigation

- 13.1 Risk is primarily centred around achieving, whilst not exceeding spend of the grant.
- 13.2 The proposals allow for management and adjustments of allocations to meet need and ensure full use of the grants within the terms of the grant conditions.

### 14. Accountable Officers

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Approvals obtained on behalf of Statutory Officers: -

	<b>Named Officer</b>	<b>Date</b>
Chief Executive	Sharon Kemp	07/11/21
Strategic Director of Finance & Customer Services (S.151 Officer)	Judith Badger	03/11/21
Head of Legal Services (Monitoring Officer)	Bal Nahal	04/11/21

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