

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting

Cabinet – 16 May 2022

Report Title

Household Support Fund

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

Yes

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report

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Ward(s) Affected

Borough-Wide

Report Summary

The Household Support Fund (HSF), first introduced in 2021/22 is being extended by the Government through 2022/23. The grant is being made available to County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England to support those most in need and struggling with the cost of living. The Government announced in the Spring Statement an allocation of £1 billion for the fund, however, that includes the half year already passed from September 2021 to March 2022. The Council has been allocated £2,489,029.87 for the six months from April until September 2022. All funding must be spent or committed by the end of September. This includes provision to fund food vouchers for the October half term school holidays. No indication has been provided about any further funding beyond then.

The purpose of the grant is to provide support to households, particularly those including children and pensioners, who would otherwise struggle to buy food or pay essential utility bills or meet other essential living costs or housing costs (in exceptional cases of genuine emergency) to help them with significantly rising living costs. The conditions have changed since the 2021/22 allocation to now include at least 33.3% to be allocated to households with someone over state pension age.

Following the practice established under COVID Winter Grant and Local Support Grant and the first round of Household Support Fund, an urgent decision has been taken to enable provision of vouchers to children eligible for free school meals during the June half term holiday. This report makes recommendations for allocation of the remainder of the fund.

Recommendations

1. Make provisional allocations of the Household Support Grant of £2,489,029.87 as follows:
 - a) £1,421,400 for food vouchers to children eligible for free school meals for school holidays through to October half term 2022, including May/June 2022 half term approved by delegated action.
 - c) £250,000 to enable applications from pensioner households for assistance with cost of living increase hardship, to be provided alongside the Council's Covid Recovery Fund supporting households with increasing energy costs.
 - d) The remaining £817,629.87 to be held in reserve, to allow the Council to assess progress with the above schemes and make further allocations in accordance with the grant conditions.
2. A further report be presented to Cabinet in June to assess progress made and make allocations from the reserve fund.

List of Appendices Included

Appendix 1 Equality Screening (Form A)
Appendix 2 Carbon Impact Assessment

Background Papers

Department for Work and Pensions, Household Support Fund Grant Determination 2022 No 31

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel

None

Council Approval Required

No

Exempt from the Press and Public

No

Household Support Fund

1. Background

- 1.1 The Household Support Fund (HSF), first introduced in 2021/22 is being extended by the Government through 2022/23. The grant is being made available to County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England to support those most in need and struggling with the cost of living. The Government announced in the Spring Statement an allocation £1 billion for the fund, however, that includes the half year already passed from September 2021 to March 2022. The Council has been allocated £2,489,029.87 for the six months from April until September 2022. All funding must be spent or committed by the end of September. This includes provision to fund food vouchers for the October half term school holidays. No indication has been provided about any further funding beyond then.
- 1.2 The purpose of the grant is to provide support to households, particularly those including children and pensioners, who would otherwise struggle to buy food or pay essential utility bills or meet other essential living costs or housing costs (in exceptional cases of genuine emergency) to help them with significantly rising living costs. The conditions have changed since the 2021/22 allocation to now include at least 33.3% (c£829,679) to be allocated to households with someone over state pension age.
- 1.3 Building on the experience to date through use of COVID Winter Grant, Local Support Grant and Household Support Fund, an officer delegated decision has been taken to provide food vouchers to children eligible for free school meals covering the May/ June 2022 half term holidays. This enables has allocated £177,675 for this purpose, subject to actual eligible numbers.

2. Key Issues

- 2.1 Household Support Fund was 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 covered the period October 2021 to the end of March 2022. Local Authorities were given discretion about exactly how this funding was used within the scope set out in guidance. The expectation was that it should primarily be used to support households in the most need with food, energy and water bills. It could 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 could additionally be used to support housing costs where existing housing support schemes do not meet this exceptional need.
- 2.2 For the period October 2021 to March 2022, including the Easter school holidays in April 2022, the Council received £2,489,029.87, which was used to fund:
 - Food vouchers to children eligible for free school meals for school holidays.

- Reduction of Council Tax liability for working age households eligible for Council Tax Support.
- Support to local VCS organisations to support vulnerable households over Christmas / New year.
- Grants available to meet eligible need for households not passported through other means (food vouchers / Council Tax Support).

2.3 As part of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Spring Statement, he announced that Household Support Fund would be extended into 2022/23. This has resulted in a further £500 million being allocated.

In announcing the grant available for 2022/23, the Department for Work and Pensions have set out revised conditions.

The revised grant conditions set out that:

- At least 33.33% of the grant is allocated to support households that include:
 - a person who will be under the age of 19 as at 30th September 2022, or
 - a person aged 19 or over in respect of whom a child-related benefit is paid or free school meals are provided during the Grant Period.
- At least 33.33% of the grant is allocated to support households that include a person who has reached state pension age by 30th September 2022.
- Up to 33.33% of the grant is used to assist other households.
- Authorities are to ensure that the grant is primarily allocated to support with the costs of food, energy (for heating, lighting and cooking), water (for household purposes, including sewerage) and other essential living needs in accordance with the Scheme guidance.
- In exceptional circumstances of genuine emergency, the Authority may allocate grant funds to support with housing costs as set out in the Scheme guidance.
- Eligible spend does not include:
 - Advice services including debt advice.
 - Mortgage costs.

2.4 Building on experienced gained

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

- 2.4.2 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.
- 2.4.3 The provision of food vouchers to children eligible for free school meals to cover school holidays, provides directly targeted support to low-income households. This has been achieved through working in partnership with schools who have issued the vouchers.
- 2.4.4 Working in partnership with VCS partners through the Food in Crisis Partnership, a successful programme of additional help for vulnerable families has been delivered through support by local organisations over Christmas / New Year and Easter periods.
- 2.4.5 Household Support Fund has also been used in 2021/22 to provide additional Council Tax Support to over 16,700 households in Rotherham, reducing the Council Tax liability for 8,135 households to nil.
- 2.4.6 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. However, not all need is met through passporting, requiring other means to access support being available. Since the start of 2022, support has been available to households struggling with living costs but not receiving passported support.

2.5 Other support being provided by the Council

- 2.5.1 In 2022/23, the Council is using its Covid Recovery Fund to support households struggling with energy and housing costs. £800k has been allocated to support this as follows:
- £500k Cash grant scheme to provide support for households with the rising cost of energy bills. The support will provide up to £250, as a one-off grant, where possible paid directly to the energy provider. Households will not be entitled to multiple payments. The support will also be available to those who currently pay their bills through pre-payment meters, where the Council is assured that they are unable to pre-pay for their energy.
 - £300k additional funding to top up the Councils Discretionary Housing Payments fund in addition to the allocation from government for 2022/23 for providing Discretionary Housing Payments.
- 2.5.2 The Council has also resolved to fund a “Local Council Tax Support Top Up Scheme 2022/23 to 2023/24” funded by £2.8 million Local Council Tax Support Grant.
- 2.5.3 In recognition that many residents will be facing rising household costs, the Council is providing further Local Council Tax Support Top Up across the financial years 2022/23 and 2023/24. The scheme will provide an expected additional award of £112.65 council tax support to working age claimants on

the Council's local council tax support scheme for 2022/23. Based on current caseloads this is expected to provide additional support to approximately 14,500 households. Where a claimant has a bill of £112.65 or less, then the bill will be reduced to zero. This replicates the approach taken in 2020/21.

3. Options considered and recommended proposal

- 3.1 The options have been assessed to meet the criteria of the grant funding streams aligned with the other actions being taken by the Council to support people in need.
- 3.2 The provision of vouchers valued at £15 per week to children eligible for free school meals follows on from practice and experience gained to date from earlier funding streams. To commence provision of support covering the May/June half term school holiday, an officer delegated decision by the Assistant Chief Executive is required ahead of the Cabinet meeting in order to provide food vouchers in time for the school holidays. This uses an assessed number of 11,845 benefiting requiring the allocation of £177,675, subject to final eligible numbers. The estimated requirement to cover the summer and October half term school holidays would be £1,243,725, providing a total for food vouchers to be allocated of £1,421,400.
- 3.3 The remaining £1,067,629.87 would be primarily targeted to support for pensioners in order to meet the grant conditions.
- 3.4 The Household Support Fund would provide additional support and flexibility to directly assist households struggling with unaffordable increases in energy bills. The Council has recently made provision at Cabinet on 28th March 2022 through its Covid Recovery Fund of up to £500,000 available to households facing unaffordable energy bills, providing grants to households of up to £250 each. It is proposed to further supplement this with an additional allocation of £250,000 from the Household Support Fund.
- 3.5 This allocation will enable further small grants of up to £150 per household to households of pensionable age facing difficulties with household costs other than energy bills at the current time. Eligibility for these grants will not affect eligibility for the £250 energy bill payments. In addition, the allocation will allow provision for awareness raising, using means specifically targeted at pensioner households.
- 3.6 Depending on the level of demand, it is possible that this additional allocation will reduce pressure on the £500,000 Covid Recovery Fund energy bills scheme, allowing some of that funding to be repurposed at a later stage. By combining the two funding sources, this approach will provide a single application process covering energy bills plus other costs facing pensioners in hardship. The process is proposed to be managed by the Council's Financial Inclusion Team, linking to established support services and accessible through the Council's website.

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

- 6.1 A grant of £2,489,029.87 has been provided by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The proposed spend is in accordance with the grant conditions, though progress on spend will need to be tightly monitored to ensure that the ratios of grant spend to households with children and pensioners are adhered to.
- 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 or committed before 30th September 2022. This includes provision to fund food vouchers for the October half term school holidays
- 6.3 There are no direct procurement implications arising from the recommendations detailed in the report. If there is a need to procure goods and services in the delivery of this support, this must be undertaken in line with both the Council's own Financial and Procurement Procedure Rules (FPPR's) and the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 (as amended).

7. Legal Advice and Implications

- 7.1 The recommended proposals are in accordance with the conditions of use of the grant. Further, the scheme is consistent with relevant public law principles, in particular it is lawful, fair and rational.
- 7.2 The Council can support this type of 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). Further Local authorities' have the ability to act in this area under powers contained in other legislation, for example, section 2 of the Local Government Act 2000 enables local authorities to provide financial assistance to any individual.

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 33.3% of households supported 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.

9.3 The allocation of funding to support living costs of care leavers at a time of cost of living increases will provide protection for vulnerable young people.

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 organisation will be engaged in making referrals to support provided under the grant.

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 grant within the terms of the grant conditions.

14. Accountable Officers

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Approvals obtained on behalf of Statutory Officers: -

	Named Officer	Date
Chief Executive	Sharon Kemp	29/04/22
Strategic Director of Finance & Customer Services (S.151 Officer)	Judith Badger	29/04/22
Head of Legal Services (Monitoring Officer)	Bal Nahal	29/04/22

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