

## **Report to Cabinet Member for Community Support, Fire and Rescue**

**November 2021**

### **COVID19 Winter Grant Scheme, Household Support Fund**

#### **Report by Director of Communities**

**Electoral division(s): All**

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#### **Summary**

The government announced on 6 October 2021 that a new Household Support Fund (HSF) grant of £500m would be made available to County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England to support those most in need this winter.

The County Council's share of the grant amounts to £4,870,362.11 which covers the period from 06 October 2021 until the 31 March 2022 inclusive.

At least fifty percent of the total funding must be spent on families with children. In terms of the type of support, the expectation is that the Household Support Fund 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.

The report explains how the funds will be administered.

#### **Recommendations**

The Cabinet Member for Community Support, Fire and Rescue is asked to approve;

- (1) the allocations from the Household Support Fund and arrangements for distribution and support set out in Section 2 of the report to include a review at the end of December 2021;
- (2) that West Sussex County Council works in line with government guidance and applies the agreed criteria to support residents experiencing hardship in partnership with District and Boroughs;
- (3) that the council widens the range of organisations providing support via the Household Support Fund if significant sums remain available at the end of December 2021 due to low demand; and
- (4) the Director of Communities, in consultation with the Director of Finance and Support Services, is authorised to rebalance the allocation according to greatest

need in the event that the funds allocated under school voucher schemes prove insufficient and otherwise to administer the allocations following the review in January 2022.

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## **Proposal**

### **1 Background and context**

- 1.1 At the beginning of October 2021, the Government announced that a new Household Support Fund (HSF) grant will be made available to County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England to support those most in need this winter. This new grant will run from 06 October 2021 to 31 March 2022 and totals £500m.
- 1.2 The County Council will administer the scheme and will receive £4,870,362.11 from The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for assistance to vulnerable families with children and other households particularly affected by the pandemic and financial pressures arising during the winter months.
- 1.3 The Household Support Fund follows other Government grant allocations received by the County Council from schemes similarly designed to address financial hardship during the pandemic. The accompanying guidance indicates that is a new grant and must be strictly utilised with the 2021/22 financial year.
- 1.4 The accompanying guidance sets out the required collaboration between DWP, Local Authorities and their delivery partners to successfully meet the policy intentions within the agreed framework. It also provides the constraints that need to be worked within and the reporting arrangements.
- 1.5 Given the purpose and aims of the grant, this proposal has been worked up in conjunction with District and Borough colleagues and draws upon experience of community impact and identified areas of priority need related to the effects of the pandemic, economic recovery and financial pressures experienced during the winter months.
- 1.6 The guidance encourages the local authority to work closely with District Councils and other local partners to identify a broad range of vulnerable households across their local area.
- 1.7 Support is available from October 2021 and authorities should aim to have arrangements in place as quickly as possible to support vulnerable households throughout the grant period.
- 1.8 The County Council has the flexibility within the scheme to identify which persons and households are in most need of support and apply their own discretion when identifying eligibility.
- 1.9 There is a requirement to provide DWP with Management Information to help understand which groups have benefited from grants, the administrative costs and payment assurance.

### **2 Proposal details**

- 2.1 Proposals have been developed to ensure compliance with the requirements and guidance which indicates that at least fifty percent of the total funding must be

spent on families with children. In terms of the type of support, the expectation is that the HSF 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.

- 2.2 Supermarket vouchers totalling £1,360,000 will be purchased for distribution via schools. This allocation will provide a voucher with £20 value for each Free School Meal (FSM) eligible child to cover the one week October and February Half Term holidays and for two weeks of the Christmas holiday. This approach mirrors that taken during school holiday periods in 2020/21 using previous Covid-19 grant funding allocations. Calculations have included an assumption of growth in the FSM eligible cohort so as to protect the budget allocation.
- 2.3 The remaining grant will be will set against costs resulting from addressing individual, family and household circumstances against the following categories of need as set out in the guidance.
  - a. Support for Food
  - b. Support for Energy and Water (e.g., electricity bill payment, gas bill payment, oil bill payment, refillable gas canister payment, fuel voucher, water bill payment)
  - c. Support for Essentials linked to Energy and Water (e.g., white goods; cooker, fridge, freezer, washing machine, tumble dryer, plug in heater, Microwave, Slow cooker, Clothing, Bedding, Home furnishing relating to retaining heat)
  - d. Support for Wider Essentials (e.g., Phone credit, phone bills, broadband, Transport costs including public transport)
  - e. Support for housing costs (e.g., support with rent payment and arrears where no alternative is possible following a Housing Officer's professional assessment of need)
- 2.4 Support can be accessed via two distinct channels
  - a. County Council Community Hub, either by telephone on 0330 22 27980 or using the online request form via the website. The Community Hub is available seven days a week, Monday to Friday 8.00am-8.00pm and weekends and bank holidays 9.00am-5.00pm
  - b. District and Borough Councils either via the Housing Department or Revenue & Benefits Teams
- 2.5 Support will be delivered in a number of ways as part of a comprehensive offer and will be tailored to meet the specific circumstances. Cash payments will not be made direct to individuals but depending on the category of need identified support may be delivered via a voucher (e.g., for supermarket or high street store), direct provision of items, payment to supplier (e.g., utility bill payment) or purchase direct from vendor for delivery to customer (e.g., white goods).

- 2.6 Anyone is able to make contact to discuss their individual, family or household circumstances but the following criteria will be used to assess and prioritise use of these funds
- a. Statutory sick pay claimant (no other benefits)
  - b. New applicant for Universal Credit
  - c. Awaiting payment/delay in start of statutory benefit (e.g. State Pension)
  - d. Move to Temporary Accommodation (including a Refuge)
  - e. Bereavement (restricting access to funds)
  - f. Professional referral following assessment of need (if the request falls out of the above criteria)
  - g. Individuals with no recourse to public funds but has a genuine care need that does not arise solely from destitution, for example if:
    - i. there are community care needs
    - ii. they have serious health problems
    - iii. there is a risk to a child's wellbeing
- 2.7 The relevant details will be maintained by both the Community Hub Team and where appropriate District and Boroughs, to evidence the grant is spent in line with the guidance ensuring due diligence is undertaken to manage the risk of misuse.
- 2.8 Details of the fund, who is eligible and how it can be accessed will be communicated widely with key stakeholders and direct to the public (e.g. via school newsletters). The communications approach will be multi-channelled and targeted at key groups identified as needing support as well as the wider population.
- 2.9 Printed material will be made available through a variety of channels to reach those people who do not use digital means.
- 2.10 The County Council in conjunction with District and Boroughs will use key networks to distribute assets and messaging, in particular schools, colleges, universities and early years settings as well as housing providers, businesses, partners and the community and voluntary sector.

### **3 Other options considered (and reasons for not proposing)**

- 3.1 Other options for use of funding were considered when consulting with partners, such as a more direct distribution or an allocation to each District and Borough. It was agreed that the proposals outlined above offer the best arrangement to ensure that the support is made available swiftly, provides countywide access and focused on those most in need as identified within the criteria set out in 2.1

- 3.2 The provision of cash payments was considered but this significantly increases the administration process, risk of fraud and diminishes the ability to provide the Management Information return on spend data as required by the DWP.
- 3.3 In supporting Free School Meal eligible children during the forthcoming school holidays a number of options were considered but not progressed. These included;
- a) Opening school kitchens – not feasible to ask circa 700 term-time only staff to cancel leave at short notice to work over the Christmas period.
- b) Food parcels – little confidence that supply chains are robust enough and provider would be able to meet the demand. Additionally, dietary requirements would likely be unmet.

#### **4 Consultation, engagement and advice**

- 4.1 West Sussex Districts and Boroughs, Headteachers and Health and Social Care colleagues were among those consulted to discuss the arrangements and allocations of the Household Support Fund to West Sussex residents and to identify key contacts within their organisation to facilitate referrals.

#### **5 Finance**

- 5.1 There is no net financial impact on the County Council. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) will provide the funding to the County Council under section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003, who will administer the scheme.
- 5.2 Authorities will be required to provide two management information (MI) returns outlining their grant spend and the volume of awards:
- An interim MI return for the period 6 October 2021 to 31 December 2021 will be due 21 January 2022;
  - A final MI return for the period 6 October 2021 to 31 March 2022 will be due 22 April 2022;
- 5.3 Grant payments will be made to authorities in arrears on receipt of a fully completed and verified MI return.
- 5.4 A requirement to complete Management Information returns will be part of each delivery partner agreement to ensure that funds are drawn down based on demand and that funding allocations are spent within the time restriction. District and Boroughs will submit this weekly to ensure that the level of demand can be tracked throughout the delivery period.
- 5.5 Procurement of supermarket vouchers will be spent across two suppliers. There is not a charge to the Council to set-up or administer the scheme so the spend therefore represents the cost of vouchers issued only.
- 5.6 Suppliers have been selected according to experience of delivering voucher schemes directly in schools. Contract terms do not exceed 12 months.
- 5.7 In the event that there are significant levels of funding remaining following the December review at the end of January 2022 consideration will be made of utilising a range of Voluntary and Community Sector organisations from any

unallocated portion of the remaining grant. This will be agreed by the Director of Communities in consultation with the Director of Finance and Support Services.

5.8 The detail of the support given to residents will be reported to DWP as required.

## 6 Risk implications and mitigations

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Mitigating Action -in place or planned</b>
There is a potential risk that individuals who are not in need will request support.	The criteria outlined in 2.1 should mitigate the risk by clarifying the scheme parameters.
There is a potential risk that the fund will be a target for fraud	<p>Eligibility criteria with accompanying evidence requirements to confirm status have been agreed to prioritise the fund allocation and mitigate speculative requests.</p> <p>Management information requirements necessitate data capture for each award and data returns are double checked by staff not involved in the operational delivery.</p> <p>Only named individuals in each organisation have the ability to submit requests for support (e.g. delivery of food parcels) with management oversight.</p> <p>No cash payments are utilised. Purchase of goods or payment of bills is via corporate credit card with a second layer of approval/verification</p>
There is a potential risk that individuals will seek financial support for hardship from multiple sources.	<p>Household circumstances will be considered on an individual basis prior to providing individual support to minimise duplication however families receiving other forms of assistance are not excluded from receiving support through this grant.</p> <p>Allocation through Housing and Revenues &amp; Benefits Services within each District and Borough and to individuals already known by the County Council and identified as in need should reduce the risk of multiple payments. This will be further supported by the requirement to collect Management Information as per the DWP Framework.</p>
Where the council accepts grant funding and distributes it, it becomes liable to repay any grants that are used incorrectly or against the terms of the grant agreement.	The criteria outlined in Section 2 of this report should mitigate this risk by clarifying scheme parameters. The detail of the support given to residents will be reported to DWP as required.

## **7 Policy alignment and compliance**

- 7.1 The Suppliers have met the financial and technical requirements required under the Councils Standing Orders for Procurement and Contracts.

The proposals are critical to the achievement of the County Council's objectives of ensuring we can support vulnerable households and families with children particularly affected by the pandemic and additional economic pressures arising throughout the winter period where alternative sources of assistance may be unavailable.

### **Equality and Human Rights Assessment**

- 7.2 The process will ensure that those who are charged with the distribution of support from a direct allocation of funds are reminded of the need to consider the public sector equality duty and the responsibilities it contains.

### **Social Value and Sustainability Assessment**

- 7.3 The creation of a voucher distribution scheme represents a swift and effective way of distribution funds to eligible families. The recipient is able to choose a voucher for use in a supermarket that is local to them.
- 7.4 Both voucher schemes offer the ability to print vouchers (for example at the school office) which means that recipients will not be at a disadvantage because they do not have access to technology to receive the e-voucher (i.e., a smart phone or email address).
- 7.5 This procurement route does not incur an administration cost for the County Council
- 7.6 There is no additional procurement, beyond that referenced above, for which the social value policy would be engaged but local community and charitable groups will be engaged in the distribution.

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**Appendices** None

**Background papers** None