



ST HELENS
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Cabinet

10 November 2021

Report Title:	Household Support Fund
Cabinet Portfolio	Finance and Governance
Cabinet Member	Councillor Martin Bond
Exempt Report	No
Reason for Exemption	N/A
Key Decision	Yes
Public Notice issued	General Exception Notice
Wards Affected	All
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Borough priorities	Ensure children and young people have a positive start in life	
	Promote good health, independence, and care across our communities	
	Create safe and strong communities and neighbourhoods for all	
	Support a strong, thriving, inclusive and well-connected local economy	
	Create green and vibrant places that reflect our heritage and culture	
	Be a responsible Council	X

1. Summary

- 1.1 On 30 September 2021, the Government announced a new £500m Household Support Fund to provide help to residents who would otherwise struggle to buy food, pay essential utility bills or meet other essential living costs this winter.
- 1.2 The Fund will operate between 6 October 2021 and 31 March 2022 with grant funding being provided to upper-tier local authorities. St Helens Borough Council has received an indicative funding allocation of £1,779,581.
- 1.3 Local authorities are expected to develop their own local schemes and to define how residents can access the fund. The Department of Work and Pensions has issued draft guidance and has stipulated that at least 50% of support should be provided to households with children or young adults.
- 1.4 This report sets out the principles for operating the Household Support Fund within St Helens.

2. Recommendations for Decision

Cabinet is recommended to:

- i) **Approve the distribution of the grant to eligible households as outlined in section 4.5 below.**
- ii) **Approve delegation to the Chief Executive and the Executive Director of Corporate Services to amend the scheme, as required, to ensure that the grant is fully spent to support households in need.**

3. Purpose of this Report

- 3.1 This report proposes how funding received via the Household Support Fund will be allocated to help residents this winter.

4. Background /Reasons for the recommendations

- 4.1 The Department for Work and Pensions has issued draft guidance setting out the main principles for operating the Fund. Whilst the guidance is less prescriptive than previous COVID-19 support schemes, at least 50% of support must be provided to households with children or young adults.
- 4.2 The fund is primarily intended to cover food, energy (for heating, lighting and cooking) and water (for household purposes, including sewerage). It may also be used to cover items which may directly affect a household's ability to afford or access food, energy and water, including:
- Essentials linked to energy and water, e.g. warm clothing, blankets, toiletries, boiler replacements / repairs, cookers or white goods.
 - Other essential household bills, e.g. telephone or broadband, clothing or essential transport-related costs.
 - Housing costs, in exceptional circumstances. Alternative schemes such as Discretionary Housing Payments or the Homelessness Prevention Grant should be used in the first instances and the Fund cannot be used to support ongoing housing costs, unsustainable tenancies, or mortgage arrears.
- 4.3 Local authorities are free to develop their own eligibility policies. There is no requirement to undertake a means test unless the local policy requires it.
- 4.4 Payments may also be made to third party organisations to provide direct support, e.g. food banks. The scheme cannot be used to support wider advice services, such as debt advice.
- 4.5 Proposed distribution of Household Support Fund
- 4.5.1 Making a direct award to eligible households (50% - £889,000).
To reduce the administration burden on requiring an application form for every award it is proposed that direct awards will be distributed to residents based on defined eligibility. A data mapping exercise will be conducted using DWP and locally held data to determine eligible households. Priority will be given to households who have not received support under other schemes, including the Warm Homes Discount Scheme or Winter Fuel Payments.
- 4.5.2 Free school meal payments during school holidays (27.5% - £490,000)
To provide a £15 per week per pupil supermarket voucher or direct payment to families in receipt of free school meals. Due to the late notification of this grant, payment for the autumn half-term break will be made to eligible families in December 2021 with the Christmas holiday payment. A further payment will be made in February 2022 to cover the spring half-term.
- 4.5.3 Local Welfare Assistance Scheme (16.9% - £300,581)
The local welfare assistance scheme provides support to vulnerable households to establish or maintain a home independently in the community or who require emergency assistance where there is a risk to their health or safety. Assistance is provided in the form of food or fuel vouchers, furniture and electrical items. To support residents in immediate need, the eligibility criteria will be widened to help additional residents who would not normally qualify under the existing scheme. The value of fuel voucher awards will also be increased to reflect increased energy costs. An updated referral route will be provided to organisations that directly support households in need.

- 4.5.4 Administration Costs (5.6% - £100,000)
Reasonable administration costs will be funded from the grant allocation.

5. Community Impact Assessment

The Community Impact Assessment identified the following key implications

- 5.1 The Household Support Fund will provide financial support to residents who may experience financial difficulties during the winter period. It is not envisaged that the proposals will result in an adverse outcome for any group of people who share a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010.

6. Consideration of Alternatives

- 6.1 To require an application form for all payments. This would create a significant administration burden on the Authority which may prevent the funding be delivered promptly to residents. The establishment of an expanded scheme (see 4.5.3 above) to support households who would not qualify under the existing local welfare assistance scheme will provide a safety net and ensure that genuine applications will be treated promptly.
- 6.2 Allocating funding to third-party organisations that provide food, energy or wider services in accordance with the Household Support Fund's objectives. Any such funding would need to be undertaken in a fair and transparent way. It would be necessary to establish robust arrangements to collect relevant financial and management information to support the grant claim process. In view of these restrictions, it is proposed that the grant will instead be used to make direct payments to residents.

7. Conclusions

- 7.1 The report sets out the proposed use of the Household Support Fund to help residents who would otherwise struggle to buy food, pay essential utility bills or meet other essential living costs this winter.

8. Implications

8.1 Legal Implications

- 8.1.1 Grant funding for the Household Support Fund has been provided to local authorities under Section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003. This enables the Authority to make eligible expenditure in accordance with the grant conditions.

8.2 Community Impact Assessment (CIA) Implications

8.2.1 Social Value

None

8.2.2 Sustainability and Environment

None

8.2.3 Health and Wellbeing

The Household Support Fund will help residents with food, utility bills and other essential requirements and will help to mitigate risks to health and wellbeing during this period.

8.2.4 Equality and Human Rights

The Fund will support a wide range of residents. It is not envisaged that the proposals will result in an adverse outcome for any group of people who share a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010.

8.3 Customers and Resident

8.3.1 The fund will provide additional financial support to eligible households during the winter period.

8.4 Asset and Property

8.4.1 None

8.5 Staffing and Human Resource

8.5.1 There will be additional temporary staffing costs associated with administering the Household Support Fund.

8.6 Risks

8.6.1 Under or overspend of grant allocation: The report recommends that delegation is given to the Chief Executive and the Executive Director of Corporate Services to amend the funding allocation set out in section 4.5 above, as required, to ensure that the grant is fully spent to support households in need.

8.6.2 Fraud: The Council will put in place arrangements to minimise the risk of fraud including conducting eligibility checks and requiring proof of identity when redeeming certain vouchers.

8.7 Finance

8.7.1 St Helens Borough Council has received an indicative grant allocation of £1,779,581. The Household Support Fund will operate between 6 October 2021 and 31 March 2022.

8.7.2 The grant will be paid retrospectively based on the submission of two monitoring reports for the periods 6 October to 31 December 2021 and 1 January to 31 March 2022.

8.7.3 The Council will be able to claim reasonable costs associated with administering the Fund from within the above grant allocation

8.8 Policy Framework Implications

8.8.1 The recommendations within this report are in line with existing council policies to support residents in financial need.

9. **Background papers**

9.1 Household Support Fund – [Draft] Guidance for County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England, Department for Work and Pensions (06/10/2021)

10. Appendices

10.1 None