

## **SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**REPORT TO:** Cabinet

**DATE:** 15 November 2021

**SUBJECT:** Household Support Fund

**CHIEF OFFICER:** Steven Mair, Director of Finance (s151 Officer)

**CONTACT OFFICER:** Akram Rizvi

**WARD(S):** All Wards

**PORTFOLIO:** Cllr Swindlehurst: Leader of the Council and Cllr Hulme: Children's Services, Lifelong Learning & Skills

**KEY DECISION:** Yes

**EXEMPT:** No

**DECISION SUBJECT TO CALL IN:** Yes

**APPENDICES:** The following appendices accompany this report:

a. Appendix A: Slough Borough Council Household Support Fund Policy

### **1 Summary and Recommendations**

- 1.1. On 30 September 2021, the Department for Work and Pensions ("DWP") announced £500m of new funding for authorities across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to distribute to vulnerable households over winter. This is known as the Household Support Fund ("the grant").
- 1.2. This grant is to be administered between 06 October 2021 and 31 March 2022 and the DWP have given wide discretion to local authorities in this regard. This report sets out the Council's proposed policy to identify and prioritise its share of the grant towards vulnerable households in Slough.

### **2 Recommendations:**

- 1.3. Members are asked to note in respect of the scheme:
  - a. That the Council's share of the Household Support Fund is £1,177,691.53.
  - b. That the Section 151 Officer will certify and submit Management Information returns to the DWP in December 2021 and March 2022 in order for the Council to receive its allocated share of the grant funding.
  - c. That the funding is accessible to residents and households in Slough from 06 October 2021 to 31 March 2022.
- 1.4. Members are asked to agree the following:
  - d. approve the policy at Appendix A

- e. delegate authority to the Executive Director of Corporate Operations, in consultation with the Leader, to review and make minor changes to the policy.

Reason for Recommendations

- 1.5. These recommendations for Cabinet’s approval are required to enable the Council to distribute funding to residents and households in Slough in accordance DWP’s guidance.

**3 Report**

Scheme Summary and Obligations

- 1.6. On 30 September 2021, in recognition of the financial hardships facing families following the Covid-19 pandemic and over the winter period, the DWP announced £500m of new funding for the Household Support Fund (HSF). Broadly, this funding is to help households who may otherwise struggle to buy food or pay for essential utility bills or other basic living costs.
- 1.7. A share of the HSF will be allocated local authorities under Section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003 to support families within Slough in need between 06 October 2021 and 31 March 2022. The Council’s share of this funding is £1,177,691.53.
- 1.8. Whilst the DWP have given local authorities wide discretion on how to use the funding allocated to them, there are certain conditions and principles that must be complied with as set out in the DWP Guidance - Household Support Fund: – Guidance for County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England (the Guidance).
- 1.9. The Council’s allocation must be spent or fully committed by 31 March 2022, any underspend as at this date will be not permitted to be carried forward for future use.  
  
**Note:** this also means that any vouchers e.g. food vouchers issued by the Council to residents or households in the borough would have to redeemed by this date or shortly thereafter by end of April 2022.
- 1.10. The Council is required to complete two Management Information (MI) submissions to the DWP. These will need to be certified by the S151 Officer for submission in order for the Council’s allocation of funding to be paid by DWP, failure to complete these returns will delay this payment to the Council. The deadlines for the MI returns are:

**Table 1: Management Information Return Deadlines**

MI return	Reporting period		Deadline
Interim MI return	From: 06 October 2021	To: 31 December 2021	21 January 2022
Final MI return	From: 06 October 2021	To: 31 March 2022	22 April 2022

Administration Costs

- 1.11. The DWP guidance permits the Council to fund reasonable administrative costs incurred in the implementation of this scheme from its share of total grant allocation. These could include:

**Table 2: Administration Costs**

Category of Cost	Comment
<b>Staff</b>	Additional time or resources to plan, administer and maintain scheme e.g:  1) Revenues, Benefits and Charges (RBC) staff to plan for and administer individual payments of residents and households  2) Customer Services to manage resident requests or referrals from Members and third-parties to RBC.
<b>IT</b>	Small, essential changes to IT systems to:  1) Identify eligible recipients and distribute grant payments.  2) Creating online or paper forms which can be readily logged  3) Facilitate MI returns and other records for audit trail.
<b>Communications</b>	Costs incurred to promote the HSF scheme to ensure eligible Slough residents and households are aware of this assistance and can apply for funding in an efficient manner.

1.12. It is unclear at this stage how much could be incurred in administration costs due to uncertainty on the volume of requests for funding that could be received.

1.13. Therefore, it is proposed to provisionally hold £0.043m (c4%) out of the Council's total grant allocation of £1.178m for possible administration costs. The S151 Officer will review this after the submission of the first MI return in January 2022 and determine whether any of this £0.043m should be released into the overall funding to make available to residents.

#### Slough Borough Council Policy

1.14. The table below summarises the proposed allocation of available funding:

**Table 3: Proposed Allocation of Available HSF**

Ref	Distribution Category	Available Funding (£)
A	Households with Children	£588,845.77
B	Other Households or Residents	£546,100.00
C	Provisional Administration Costs	£42,745.77
	<b>Total Allocation to Slough Borough Council</b>	<b>£1,177,691.53</b>

#### Funding for Households with Children

##### Targeted Support

1.15. Appendix A sets out the proposed Household Support Fund Policy. This includes separate funding for households with children and without children to meet the fundamental principle of the Grant to allocate at least 50% of available funding as financial support to households with children. For Slough Borough Council this would mean distributing £0.589m to such households.

1.16. The Council's proposes to use the latest estimates of families with children in receipt of Free School Meals, care leavers and families with children in early years to proactively distribute £0.505m out of the available £0.589m to them. The remaining £0.084m is proposed to be held to fund claims from residents with children who approach the Council directly for support.

- 1.17. Based on the previous support of £15 per week per child offered at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is proposed for the HSF to award £15 per household per week for those households in receipt of Free School Meals. The categories of such households that are suggested to be eligible to receive this support and estimated volumes and periods are:

**Table 4: Proposed Funding for Households with Children**

Category	Estimated No of Households	Proposed Funding per Household	Provisional Allocation of Funding (£)
<b>Families with Children in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM):</b>			
Christmas 2021(2 weeks)	5000	£15 per week per household	£150,000
February 2022 Half-Term (1 week)	5000	£15 per week per household	£75,000
End of March 2022 (2 weeks)	5000	£15 per week per household	£150,000
<b>Care Leavers</b>	900	£100 per Household	£90,000
<b>Families with Early Year's Children</b>	800	£50 per Household	£40,000
<b>Contingency funding for category</b>			£83,846
<b>Total</b>			<b>£588,845.77</b>

- 1.18. In line with the guidance from DWP on the HSF, families with children who will receive HSF grants from the Council can choose how to use this e.g to pay for food, energy bills and the other household costs as described in the policy.

#### Funding for Other Households

##### Targeted Support

- 1.19. The Council estimates that there currently 9,992 households in receipt of Council Tax Support and a further 1,000 tenants in temporary accommodation within Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMO). The total available funding to households without children (and after a deduction for administrations costs) is £0.546m.
- 1.20. To support these households, it is proposed to proactively award £40 per household with discretion on how best to use funding to pay for food, energy and utility costs or to contribute toward eligible associated costs. This would be estimated to cost £0.437m.
- 1.21. This proposed approach would make the administration of this funding less burdensome. In the majority of cases, this payment would be made either to the household's Council Tax account in lieu of a cash payment or rent account (where the person lives in accommodation that is managed by the council and has utility charges included).

**Table 5: Proposed Funding for Other Households**

Category	Estimated No of Households	Proposed Funding per Household	Provisional Allocation of Funding (£)
Households Receiving Council Tax Support	9,922	£40	£396,880
Temporary accommodation tenants in Houses of Multiple Occupation	1,000	£40	40,000
Contingency Funding	2,731	£40	109,220
<b>Total</b>			<b>546,100</b>

## Communications and Partners

- 1.22. To ensure residents in the borough are aware of the potential support available to them under the HSF, the following steps will be taken:
- Specific contact details for the Council will be provided to the DWP whose call centres will share with Slough residents
  - A dedicated section on the Council's website with the relevant information on applying for funding
  - Regular internal communications to Council Officers to promote awareness of the scheme and contact details to share with residents

### **Options considered**

The DWP has given local authorities wide discretion in formulating a policy to distribute funding (within certain principles set out in the scheme guidance).

The Council has opted to design a policy that proactively identifies eligible residents and households using existing sources of information to prioritise funding toward them. This has been decided in favour of:

- a) Waiting for applications for funding which may or may not transpire and would vary in size
- b) Allocating all or large portions of funding to a third-sector partner (such as a food bank) which would present a risk to accountability and transparency on the use of this funding (that the Council is responsible for)

To ensure that other residents are not disadvantaged, a total of £0.192m has been earmarked as a contingency to fund grant awards for residents not included in the proposed prioritised groups who approach the council directly for assistance.

## **4 Implications of the Recommendation**

### 1.1. Financial implications

- 1.1.1. The financial implications are contained within this report.

### 1.2. Legal implications

- 1.2.1. The DWP has provided funding to local authorities under s.31 of the Local Government Act 2003. The DWP has issued guidance on the administration of the scheme, which has been considered in formulating the Council's policy. There are also requirements in relation to information sharing and submitting monitoring returns on use of the funds. The policy contains provisions in relation to combatting fraud to ensure that monies can be recovered and action taken if any applications are submitted on a fraudulent basis.

### 1.3. Risk management implications

- 1.3.1. The risk of not gaining approval for this proposed policy will result in the Council not being able to proceed with distributing this funding as intended by the DWP. This would be a failure of the Council's duty set out by the DWP.

1.3.2. Delays or failure to administer this grant would not only cause unnecessary hardships for eligible Slough residents and households but would also have a significant adverse reputation impact for the Council.

1.3.3. The Council's allocation is fixed and so if the Council awards more in grants than its allocation, this will be a cost borne by the Council directly.

#### 1.4. Environmental implications

1.4.1. n/a

#### 1.5. Equality implications

1.5.1. The proposed policy in this report has been drafted in line with the DWP's guidelines for the HSF which gives broad discretion to the Council

1.5.2. The Council's approach is to allocate funding for vulnerable households with children by identifying those in receipt of Free School Meals, Care leavers and families with early years children. Of the remaining HSF grant, the Council proposes to distribute funding with a fixed award to those in receipt Council Tax Support or in Temporary Accommodation housing with multiple occupants.

1.5.3. This approach therefore proactively prioritises funding to those most in need. The policy is likely to have a positive impact on the following protected groups – children and working age adults, groups who are more likely to be on low incomes.

#### **Background papers**

None.