

Urgent Decision Taken on Behalf of Cabinet

Report to the Leader of the County Council and Cabinet Member for Education & Skills

Report submitted by: Director of Strategy and Performance

Part I

Electoral Division affected:
(All Divisions);

Household Support Fund (06 October 2021 to 31 March 2022)

Contact for further information:

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Executive Summary

The purpose of the Household Support Fund is to provide support to upper tier local authorities, in England, for expenditure lawfully incurred or to be incurred by them in accordance with the conditions of the Fund to provide support to 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. At least 50% of the total funding must be spent on families with children.

Reason for Urgency

This decision is urgent and cannot await the next meeting of Cabinet on 4 November 2021. The reason for this is that under the terms of the Fund, allocation should begin immediately as a response to persons in need of support. This decision is therefore being taken on behalf of Cabinet by the Leader of the County Council and the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills.

This is deemed to be a Key Decision and the provisions of Standing Order C21 have been complied with. Compliance with Standing Orders C19 and C20 was impractical as the grant allocation has only recently been announced.

Recommendation

The Leader of the County Council and Cabinet Member for Education and Skills are asked to:

- i. Approve the principles of the funding options for the allocation of the Household Support Fund according to the criteria and process set out in the report.

- ii. Authorise the Director of Strategy and Performance, in consultation with the Leader of the County Council and the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, to approve the final detail of the scheme, including any other alternative options for the allocation of the grant in line with the principles set out and emerging government guidance.

This decision should be implemented immediately for the purposes of Standing Order C29 as any delay could adversely affect the execution of the County Council's responsibilities. The reason for this is that the allocation of the grant should be implemented without delay for the reasons set out in the report.

Background and Advice

The purpose of the Household Support Fund is to provide support to upper tier local authorities in England for expenditure lawfully incurred or to be incurred by them, in accordance with the fund guidance.

At the moment, the funding allocation is still provisional, as is the detailed guidance, although the department for Work and Pensions have provided provisional advice, which indicates that:

- The Lancashire allocation is £9,678,235.22
- The funding covers the period 6 October 2021 to 31 March 2022 inclusive. Funds should be spent or committed before 31 March 2022 and cannot be held over for future usage.
- The objective of the Fund is to provide support to vulnerable households in most need of support this winter as the economy recovers. 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 wider essential costs.
- At least 50% of the funding is for vulnerable households with children. The remainder of the funding is available for vulnerable households without children (including individuals).
- The guidance is clear that the fund can be used to provide food/vouchers for free school meals recipients over holiday periods.
- In exceptional cases of genuine emergency, it can also be used to support housing costs – this is strictly defined and does not include mortgage support.
- Delivery can be through a variety of routes including providing vouchers to households, making direct provision of food, or issuing grants to third parties.
- Rather than focus on one specific vulnerable group, we are advised to identify and provide support to a broad cross section of vulnerable households.
- In delivering proposals the council has a responsibility to take account of and manage the risk of fraud.
- The council can claim reasonable administration costs.
- Government have set strict reporting arrangements that need to be complied with.

Proposed approach for Lancashire County Council

Options for the use of the fund will be developed and subject to appropriate decision making as options progress. The approach will include engagement with District Councils and, where appropriate, the voluntary sector.

In line with previous decisions regarding the former Covid Winter Grant and Covid Support Grant, it is proposed that an immediate use of the fund should be to provide food or vouchers to be allocated to children eligible for free school meals and families with pre-school children eligible for benefits for the October Half Term holidays. This approach is broadly in line with a number of other local authorities. It is proposed that each family could receive a £15 food voucher per eligible child. Decisions regarding other school holidays will be taken having regard to other funding options identified.

Use of an online platform is the proposed approach for primary, secondary and special schools. Edenred facilitated the Department for Education government scheme for free school meals, covering 93% of the UK during the first covid lockdown, and we have used them for previous school holiday periods under different funding regimes, so most schools and parents will already be familiar with the process to purchase and redeem vouchers. Edenred are also part of the Government's framework of providers.

Colleges and Further Education

Lancashire Colleges have their own umbrella organisation, which will enable us to work with our further education providers across the county, to ensure that young people eligible for free school meal support are able to access support using the same approach as our schools.

Next steps

This urgent decision is required for approval of the spending of this grant funding and the development of the proposals and assurances outlined. Following agreement of the approach, the relevant project team will be established.

Consultations

District council officers are being consulted to ascertain their views on the implementation of the scheme and further suggested funding options to meet the needs of families and individuals in line with the fund requirements.

Implications:

This item has the following implications, as indicated:

This is a benefit scheme and the money must be spent by 31 March 2022 as any surplus must be returned.

Risk management

Good communications about entitlement and how this will be managed will be essential.

Reporting back to the government on the money spent must be accurate to avoid any clawback or audit problems with the scheme.

Eligibility, e.g. number of children entitled to free school meals may change as the implementation progresses. This is likely to be an increase not a decrease according to current trends so tracking the rate of spending will be essential.

Financial Implications

The county council has been granted £9.678m to be used up until March 2022 to support households. It is anticipated that the proposal to fund vouchers during October half term will cost c.£590k.

List of Background Papers

Paper	Date	Contact/Tel
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None

Reason for inclusion in Part II, if appropriate

N/A

Urgent Decision Taken on behalf of Cabinet: Declarations

Leader of the County Council

Household Support Fund (06 October 2021 to 31 March 2022)

Original recommendation, as set out in the report, approved without amendment. Yes/No *

Original recommendation amended and decision as follows: Yes/No *

I have a pecuniary/non-pecuniary interest in this matter. Yes/No *

If an interest is declared please give details below:

.....
Leader of the County Council

15 October 2021

Chief Officer

I certify that this is an appropriate and accurate record within the terms of Standing Order C30(2) and (3) of the decision taken by the Cabinet Member.

.....
Craig Alker

15 October 2021

*Delete as appropriate

This decision is to be taken by more than one Cabinet Member and all relevant Cabinet Members must be in agreement with the decision

Urgent Decision Taken on behalf of Cabinet: Declarations

Cabinet Member for Education & Skills

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