

Rother District Council

Report to: Cabinet

Date: 8 November 2021

Title: Household Support Grant

Report of: Joe Powell Head of Service, Housing and Community

Cabinet Member: Councillors Byrne and Dixon

Ward(s): All

Purpose of Report: To outline proposals for the distribution of Household Support Fund (HSF) in the Rother area and seek approval for delegated authority to finalise the eligibility for the scheme locally and the process for the distribution of the grant.

Decision Type: Key

Officer

Recommendation(s): It be **RESOLVED**: That:

- 1) the purpose of the Household Support Fund (HSF) from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) be noted; and
- 2) the approval of the final eligibility criteria and distribution process for the HSF be delegated to the Head of Service Housing and Community and Portfolio Holder for Housing and Portfolio Holder for Finance to agree the detailed criteria for the distribution of the grant.

Introduction

1. Funding of £421 million has been made available 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 covers the period 6 October 2021 to 31 March 2022 inclusive. Local Authorities have discretion on exactly how this funding is used and we have been provided with guidance to this end. The expectation is that 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 essential costs related to those items and with wider essential costs.
2. East Sussex County Council (ESCC) are intending to distribute approximately 50% of the grant themselves, in addition to directing grant awards to the voluntary and community sector within East Sussex. ESCC is liaising with the voluntary sector to invite applications and Rother District Council is coordinating with Rother Voluntary Action to ensure the distribution and award of grant payments is coordinated locally.

ADDITIONAL AGENDA ITEM

3. The five district and borough local authorities in East Sussex have been liaising together with ESCC to understand how we can support with the distribution of approximately £800,000 of HSF to local people in need. The district and boroughs in East Sussex have formed a project group that is being led by Rother and Wealden councils with the aim of refining the eligibility criteria and process for distributing the grant so that these are standardised across the county. In addition, the group will work to effectively promote the grant to local people as well as partner agencies to ensure as many vulnerable groups as possible are reached. It is hoped that up to £250,000 will be awarded to Rother District Council
4. There will be staff resource implications on the Council as it manages enquiries from the public; receives and assesses applications from residents and processes payments to individual applicants. Local authorities can use 10-12% of the grant allocation to offset the costs of administering the grant.
5. As this decision is a key decision which has not been published on the Council's forward plan of key decisions, the special urgency provisions apply (Constitution Access to Information Rule 15). It is confirmed that Councillor Osborne, as Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee has agreed that the taking of this decision cannot be reasonable deferred.

Eligibility criteria and distribution

6. The project team of district and boroughs are presently refining the eligibility criteria for the scheme; it is likely that grant will be directed at those in receipt of some welfare benefit; however, this will be kept under review as the level of demand for grant support becomes more apparent over the winter. The grants could cover a wide range of household costs including, utility costs and food vouchers. The Government did not expect the grant to meet accommodation rental costs.
7. Internally, the Housing Needs, Revenues and Benefits and Finance teams are working together to understand the implications of the assessment and distribution of the HSF on our services and how best to resource and coordinate the process.
8. The distribution of grant will use existing software to receive online applications from the public directly. The Council is also working closely with Rother Voluntary Action and wider partners to ensure those less able to access the grant applications directly are supported to do so. The Council will also be able to advise and assist those with making grant applications directly.
9. The software enables us to review when multiple applications are made so that we can monitor whether multiple applications are genuinely required. There is a risk that the grant is subject to fraudulent applications where financial hardship is engineered and we will request evidence of any debts before awards are made.

Conclusion

ADDITIONAL AGENDA ITEM

10. The HSF grant will ensure those experiencing financial hardship this winter will be able to better feed and clothe themselves as well as adequately heat their homes. While there will be resource implications on the Council in supporting the distribution of grant, the Council will want to play a lead role in continuing to manage the COVID-19 epidemic alongside its partners and the wider public.

Legal Implications

11. The distribution of HSF grant from ESCC to the Council will require a grant agreement outlining the conditions of the grant.

Financial

12. The financial implications are outlined in the main body of the report.

Environmental

13. The award of HSF will enable those experiencing financial hardship to adequately heat their homes, promoting improved health, wellbeing and resilience over the winter.

| Other Implications | Applies? | Other Implications | Applies? |
|--------------------|----------|--------------------------|----------|
| Human Rights | No | Equalities and Diversity | No |
| Crime and Disorder | No | Consultation | No |
| Environmental | Yes | Access to Information | No |
| Sustainability | No | Exempt from publication | No |
| Risk Management | No | | |

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| Report Contact Officer: | Joe Powell |
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| Appendices: | None |
| Relevant Previous Minutes: | None |
| Background Papers: | - |
| Reference Documents: | - |

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