

## **CABINET**

**4 APRIL 2023**

### **HOUSEHOLD SUPPORT GRANT: 2023/24 FULL YEAR ALLOCATION AND FREE SCHOOL MEALS**

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Gary Hackwell, Portfolio Holder for  
Business Management

Report from: Phil Watts, Chief Operating Officer

Author: Katey Durkin, Chief Finance Officer  
Gemma Gilley, Head of Benefits and Financial Welfare

#### **Summary**

This report sets out a proposal to use the latest round of funding allocated to the Council through the Household Support Fund for the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024.

1. Budget and policy framework
  - 1.1. Matters relating to grant funding to support Medway's population are a matter for Cabinet.
2. Background
  - 2.1. Since November 2020, the government has continued to provide financial support to vulnerable children and families via local authorities.
  - 2.2. The first scheme was announced on 8 November 2020 as the Covid Winter Grant Scheme through which Medway was allocated £908,596 for the period December 2020 to the end of March 2021. The government later (April 2021) would rename the Covid Winter Grant scheme as the Covid Local Support Grant. On 27 November 2020 using the urgency provisions, the Leader agreed the following:
    - £270,000 for weekly holiday hampers at £15 per week to be provided to Free School Meal (FSM) eligible children (then 6,000) for all school holidays in the period (two weeks in the Christmas holidays and the February half term);
    - £220,000 top up for the existing Emergency Assistance Grant scheme;
    - £143,000 for early help and social care direct support packages;

- £50,000 donation to food charities and BAME support charities;
- £100,000 to continue the discretionary winter support grant scheme; and
- £125,296 balance to cover reasonable administration costs of the Council.

2.3. Also, on 8 November 2020 the government announced that following a series of national pilots between 2018 and 2020, the Holiday Activities and Food programme (HAF) would be expanded to all authorities from 2021, to provide Free School Meal (FSM) eligible children with food and activities over the 2021 Spring, Summer, and Winter holidays. The Council's allocation for 2020/21 was £112,140 while the allocation for 2021/22 was £1,002,990. On 18 February 2021 using the urgency provisions, the Leader agreed the following:

- £75,000 to recruitment of a workforce to support the project;
- £37,500 to design and implement a single point of access website-based booking system for HAF activities; and
- £1million award of funding to holiday club providers based on 9,400 FSM eligible children at 6 weeks provision, 24 sessions per child.

2.4. On 14 April 2021 the government renamed the Winter Support Grant to the Covid Local Support Grant and announced that it would be extended to cover the period 17 April to 20 June 2021 (the end of national lockdown restrictions). Medway's allocation for this extension was £213,787. The decision to allocate this was made using officer delegations as an extension of the existing scheme with the funding being distributed as follows:

- £50,000 to local food/poverty charities;
- £50,000 to Citizens Advice Bureau Medway;
- £100,000 to provide vouchers to FSM eligible children for the May half term;
- £17,000 for administration costs.

2.5. On 21 June 2021, the government announced a second and final extension to the Covid Local Support Grant. Medway Council's allocation was £855,149.34 for the period 21 June 2021 to 30 September 2021. On 28 June 2021 using the urgency provisions, the Leader agreed that £600,000 of the allocation would be awarded to the purchasing of a weekly £10 voucher for each of the 10,000 Free School Meals (FSM) eligible children for the 6 weeks school holidays in the period of the grant.

2.6. On 30 September 2021, the government announced the Household Support Fund; a new £500 million fund to support children, families and the most vulnerable over winter. Medway's initial funding allocation of £2,262,463 for the period 6 October 2021 to 31 March 2022 inclusive. The distribution of the grant was agreed by the Leader using the urgency provisions on 21 October 2021. The funding was distributed in three elements:

- £670,000 to fund vouchers at £15 per week for the estimated 10,000 FSM eligible children for the school holidays in October, December and

February, in line with the provision agreed through the decision made in June 2021 as set out in paragraph 1.4 above;

- £150,000 to be provided in grants to charities providing food, mirroring support provided through the Winter Grant Scheme;
- £70,000 staffing/administration costs;
- The Balance of £1,372,463 to be provided to individuals making claims for support via new online form and officer referral process.

2.7. In December 2021 the government confirmed the operation of the HAF scheme for 2022/23 to make free places at holiday clubs available in the Easter, summer, and Christmas school holidays in 2022 for those eligible for FSM. Medway's allocation was £1,136,560.00.

2.8. In the Spring Statement on 23 March 2022, the Chancellor announced that the Household Support Fund would continue for the first six months of 2022/23 and that the funding was to be doubled to £1 billion. Medway Council's allocation was £2,262,463.11 however the guidance now required at least one third of the allocation to be spent on supporting households with children, one third to support pensioners and up to one third to support other households in need of support. On 26 April 2022 using urgency provisions, the Leader agreed the following:

- £1 million for an application-based grant scheme open to all residents (including families with FSM eligible children);
- £750,000 for a scheme to provide grants to pensioners identified using local and DWP provided data;
- £200,000 for grants to local food charities;
- £165,000 to provide FSM for the holidays not covered by the HAF scheme (operating as MedwayGo), the May half term.

To maximise the proportion of the grant distributed, in the final days of September an additional £101,943 was distributed to food charities with this allocation considered by Public Health colleagues to be sufficient to support their operations for the remainder of the financial year.

2.9. On 26 May 2022 the government announced that the Household Support Fund would be extended from 1 October 2022 to 31 March 2023. Medway's allocation was £2,262,463.11.

2.10. At Cabinet on 18 October 2022, it was decided to focus the funding on the existing grant application scheme which had been well subscribed and has successfully distributed the sum ring-fenced to it from the previous HSF allocation, and to continue with eligibility criteria and awards to be made as per decision ref 62/2022.

2.11. It was agreed that vouchers be provided to FSM eligible pupils for the holidays when MedwayGo is not in operation; October half term 2022, February half term 2023 and for one week at Christmas, taking account for the fact that MedwayGo will operate for one week only in the holiday. It was also proposed that FSM eligible families will be able to access vouchers at the rate of £15 for the week when MedwayGo is operational, should they not be able or choose not to send their child to that provision.

2.12. Following a review of the fund in February 2023 to ensure the full fund was utilised, delegated powers granted under decision 130/2022 have been used to ensure all funds were disbursed in accordance with the grant determination and guidance, by the end of the financial year. An Officer Executive Decision has been published to reflect this. This included funding Free School Meals Vouchers for the Easter Holidays from the tranche 3 allocation. This decision was made because the funds need to be with schools before the 1 April 2023.

### 3. Proposal for disbursing the 2023/24 grant allocation

3.1. The guidance is clear that the fund should be used to support households in the most need; particularly those who may not be eligible for the other support the government has recently made available but who are in need and who require crisis support. This people who are entitled to but not claiming qualifying benefits, people who are claiming Housing Benefit (HB) only and people who begin a claim or return to payment of a benefit after the relevant qualifying date. The guidance is also clear that there may be groups who are vulnerable to rising prices even though they are supported through these schemes, for example large families or single-income families.

3.2. The guidance says that local authorities may deliver the scheme through a variety of routes including providing vouchers or cash to households, making direct provision of food and goods, or issuing grants to third parties. At least part of the scheme is required to operate through an application basis throughout the duration of the fund, either continuously over the majority or in regular intervals throughout the scheme.

3.3. It is proposed therefore that we continue the existing grant scheme in Medway, which is considered to be working well. Some individuals have made multiple applications over the course of the scheme, so during 2023/24 if officers identify residents who may need further financial advice, a referral may be made to the Money and Pensions Service to complement the financial help given from the grant scheme. This solution is now possible because Medway Council are in partnership with the Money and Pensions Service, as part of the development of the Welfare Service as reported to Cabinet in January 2023. This is the only change proposed to the scheme in operation throughout 2022/23, and the criteria are set out at Appendix 2 to this report. Minor changes to data collection may need to be made to reflect revised management information that needs to be provided to the government. Based upon spend over the previous tranches, it is proposed that £1,600,000 will be allocated to the grant scheme for distribution to households in need.

3.4. The numbers of children eligible for free school meals in Medway is rising. Most recent numbers gathered for the Easter holidays in 2023 show there are 11,712 eligible children in Medway, a significant increase over the past 18 months. It is proposed that for 2023/24, the Council commits to supporting the families in receipt of free school meals, during all school holidays in the 2023/24 financial year. This support would be provided in addition to any offers made by the Holidays and Food Activities Programme (HAF)

administered by Public Health, through which the Council delivers the MedwayGo scheme. The cost of providing every child with £15 for every school holiday would cost approximately £2,512,825 factoring in potential increases in caseload.

- 3.5. Broadly, the government recommends using 10% towards administration so the remaining funds of £412,101 have been allocated for this purpose, which will enable the Council to resource the grants scheme.
- 3.6. For 2023/24 local authorities are required to complete a delivery plan to outline their priorities, approach and how they intend to allocate their funding and to nominate a Senior Responsible Officer; for Medway this will be the Head of Benefits and Financial Welfare. Delivery plans must be signed off by the Section 151 Officer and responsible Cabinet Member, and must be sent to the Department for Work and Pensions by 17 May 2023. It is proposed that the Delivery Plan for Medway will be prepared based on the agreement of this report, and in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Business Management and the Chief Operating Officer (S151 Officer) in advance of the deadline.
- 3.7. As the grants scheme, Free School Meals allocations and some administration costs are demand led, it is proposed that delegated authority is given to the Chief Operating Officer in consultation with the Leader and Portfolio Holder to make minor amendments to the distribution to ensure that the grant is fully distributed within the year.

#### 4. Risk management

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Action to avoid or mitigate risk</b>	<b>Risk rating</b>
Expenditure is not recovered through the Grant claim process.	Expenditure made may be on activities that are not within the grant conditions, and therefore the Government does not fund these through the second and third payments.	The proposal has been designed to ensure expenditure is claimable. Arrangements will be in place to record and monitor expenditure and submit claims in due course.	D3

<b>Likelihood:</b>	<b>Impact:</b>
A Very high	1 Catastrophic (Showstopper)
B High	2 Critical
C Significant	3 Marginal
D Low	4 Negligible
E Very low	
F Almost impossible	

## 5. Financial implications

- 5.1. Medway's HSF allocation for the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 is £4,524,926. Expenditure in line with the grant determination and guidance is claimable from the government in arrears up to the allocation, as has been the case for all tranches of this funding.
- 5.2. The funding will be added to the Council's revenue budget under the delegation of the Chief Operating Officer.

## 6. Legal implications

- 6.1. The Household Support Fund grant is paid to local authorities under Section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003 and is subject to the conditions set out in the Grant Determination and the guidance published by the Department for Work and Pensions.

## 7. Recommendations

- 7.1. Cabinet is asked to agree the proposals set out in section 3 of this report as the Council's approach to delivering the Household Support Fund and to delegate authority to the Chief Operating Officer, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Business Management, to finalise and implement these proposals.
- 7.2. Cabinet is asked to agree to delegate authority to the Chief Operating Officer, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Business Management, to submit a Delivery Plan for Medway to the Department for Work and Pensions in line with the Cabinet decision on this report.
- 7.3. Cabinet is asked to agree to delegate authority to the Chief Operating Officer, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Business Management, to make minor amendments to the proposals to enable them to continue to support vulnerable households in Medway, including amending any discretionary eligibility criteria where discussions remain ongoing and where further Government advice is provided.

## 8. Suggested reasons for decisions

- 8.1. Given the lack of cost to the local taxpayer it is appropriate for the Council to introduce these measures to support our most vulnerable residents.

## Lead officer contacts

Katey Durkin, Chief Finance Officer, [katey.durkin@medway.gov.uk](mailto:katey.durkin@medway.gov.uk) 01634 332355  
Gemma Gilley, Head of Benefits and Financial Welfare,  
[gemma.gilley@medway.gov.uk](mailto:gemma.gilley@medway.gov.uk), 01634 332310

## Appendices

Appendix 1 – Grant based scheme guidance

### Background papers

[Household Support Fund guidance for county councils and unitary authorities in England: 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024](#)

[Household Support Fund Grant Determination 2023 No 31/6496: 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024](#)

[Household Support Fund management information reporting requirements: 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024](#)