

Cabinet

1 October 2024

Household Support Fund: 2024/25 Allocation and Free School Meals

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Vince Maple, Leader of the Council

Report from: Phil Watts, Chief Operating Officer

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Summary

This report sets out proposals to amend the use of the Household Support Fund (HSF) for the period 1 October 2024 to 31 March 2025 to ensure the grant is disbursed in full to Medway's residents.

1. Recommendations

- 1.1. Cabinet is asked to agree the proposals set out in section 5 of this report as the Council's approach to delivering the Household Support Fund in 2024/25 and to delegate authority to the Chief Operating Officer, in consultation with the Leader and the Portfolio Holder for Business Management, to finalise and implement these proposals.
- 1.2. Cabinet is asked to agree to delegate authority to the Chief Operating Officer in consultation with the Leader and 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.
- 1.3. Cabinet is asked to agree to delegate authority to the Chief Operating Officer in consultation with the Leader to provide a delivery plan to the Department for Work and Pensions in accordance with the fund guidance.

2. Suggested reasons for decisions

- 2.1. The Household Support Fund (HSF) is fully grant funded by the Department of Work and Pensions to support vulnerable households. The HSF scheme for 2024/25 has now been renewed until 31 March 2025, however full guidance has yet to be provided. The decision to agree the proposals in this report would mean that residents will benefit from consistent support. Agreeing the

delegation requested would allow officers and Members to ensure that the support is allocated efficiently and in accordance with government guidance.

3. Budget and policy framework

- 3.1. Matters relating to grant funding to support Medway's population are a matter for Cabinet.

4. Background

- 4.1. Since November 2020, the government has continued to provide financial support to vulnerable children and families via local authorities, with this being named the HSF from 30 September 2021. Medway Council received £2,262,463 for the six months to the end of the 2021/22 financial year and has continued to receive the same sum for every six month period since though funding announcements have often been made close to the start of the period to which the funding relates.
- 4.2. Alongside the publication of the Final Local Government Finance Settlement on 6 March 2024, the Chancellor confirmed the HSF scheme would continue for the first six months of the 2024/25 financial year with the same national allocation as has been announced in respect of every six-month period to date. On 2 September 2024, the Chancellor announced that the scheme would be continuing for the remainder of the 2024/25 financial year. At the time of preparing this report, the government have not published any further guidance nor confirmed the allocations for individual local authorities, however the national funding level (£421million) is the same as the first half of 2024/25 and therefore, we assume our allocation will be £2,262,423.11.
- 4.3. For the first half of 2024/25 the fund has been used to provide vouchers to parents and carers of Free School Meal eligible pupils for the school holidays, the continuation and extension of the successful scheme providing grants to residents and covering administrative costs.

5. Proposed Household Support Fund Scheme for Medway

- 5.1. Guidance which related to the 2024/25 scheme from April to September was released by the Department for Work and Pensions on 26 March 2024. No guidance has been published as yet for the latest extension to the end of the 2024/25 financial year, however this report assumes the guidance will remain unchanged and if required, any amendments will be implemented using the delegations recommended to Cabinet.
- 5.2. Based on the guidance published for the period to the end of September 2024, when administering the fund, authorities are expected to adopt the following principles: use the funding for the specified period to meet immediate needs and help those who are struggling to afford household essentials including energy and water bills, food, and wider essentials. Authorities can also use funding to support households with housing costs where existing housing support does not meet this need, and to supplement support with signposting and advice.

- 5.3. The expectation was that the fund should be used to support households in crisis; not just those in receipt of benefits. The revised guidance highlights assistance for care leavers, carers and disabled people as suggested cohorts, these are cohorts we have previously supported. Targeted support can be carried out using the Low-Income Family Tracker and DWP data shares. 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. Authorities must operate at least part of their schemes on an application basis throughout the duration of the fund, either continuously over the majority or in regular intervals throughout the scheme.
- 5.4. To ensure the fund is distributed with the maximum reach and impact possible, the following is proposed:
- 5.5. **The continuation of support for Free School Meals eligible pupils during the school holidays between 1 October 2024 to 31 March 2025:** The numbers of children eligible for free school meals in Medway is rising with the most recent data available showing there are 12,489 eligible children in Medway. Providing every eligible child with £15 in vouchers for every school holiday in the period would cost approximately £0.93million allowing for some growth in caseload. This support would be provided in addition to any offers made by the Holidays and Food Activities Programme (HAF).
- 5.5.1. **The continuation of the successful grant scheme:** The proposed scheme is set out in full at Appendix 1 to this report. It is proposed to hold the amounts agreed in April 2024. We will continue with the new professionals referral route, through which Medway Council's relevant partners will be invited to refer individuals they are supporting directly into the grant scheme. The grant scheme will be allocated £1,182,463 for distribution to households in need. Money allocated to the grant scheme will also be used for targeted support using tools such as the Low-Income Family Tracker to help households who are in need.
- 5.5.2. The revised guidance indicated that on average authorities are spending 5% on administration so the remaining funds of £150,000 would be allocated for this purpose. This will cover staffing, communications, systems and design costs.
- 5.6. As the grant-based scheme, free school meals allocations and some administration costs are demand led and the amounts allocated to each element of the scheme may change, Cabinet are asked to delegate authority to the Chief Operating Officer in consultation with the Leader and Portfolio Holder to make minor amendments to the scheme to ensure that the grant is fully distributed by 31 March 2025 as required.

6. Risk management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
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.	CIV
Likelihood		Impact:	
A Very likely B Likely C Unlikely D Rare		I Catastrophic II Major III Moderate IV Minor	

7. Financial implications

7.1. Medway's HSF allocation is £2,262,463.11 for the period 1 October 2024 to 31 March 2025. 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. The funding will be added to the Council's revenue budget under the delegation of the Chief Operating Officer.

8. Legal implications

8.1. Under the Equality Act 2010, all public authorities must comply with the Public Sector Equality Duty. For the purposes of this grant, you should consider how any support that helps people facing severe financial hardship impacts those with characteristics protected under the Equality Act.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Proposed Grant scheme October 2024 to March 2025

Background papers

None