

# TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

## CABINET

04 August 2022

### Report of the Director of Finance & Transformation

#### Part 1- Public

#### Executive Non Key Decisions

#### 1 HOUSEHOLD SUPPORT FUND

**A report seeking approval of the Council's approach in use of the current grant of Household Support Fund for the Borough.**

#### 1.1 Background

1.1.1 Government established the Household Support Fund initially as part of the covid recovery financial package. It now forms part of the national cost of living support package to support those most in need across England with the cost of food, energy (heating, cooking, lighting), water bills (including sewerage) and other essentials.

1.1.2 In Kent, the fund has been allocated to Kent County Council. KCC decided to distribute a proportion of the fund to district councils to target support in their areas, on conditional agreement of the direction of spend meeting national and local criteria.

#### 1.2 Grant Award for Tonbridge & Malling Borough

1.2.1 The Council was granted a total of £326,896.00 in the form of two allocations:

- **Allocation A:** To support pensioners with energy bills **£262,710.00**
- **Allocation B:** To support vulnerable households in line with wider Government guidance **£64,186.00**

1.2.2 The level of allocation A was based on numbers of pensioner households receiving local council tax reduction, the means tested scheme to help households pay council tax. Allocation B was calculated using population and deprivation measures.

1.2.3 Our agreement with KCC commits us to, '*...to use Allocation A to support pension age residents with their energy bills. You are asked to use Allocation B to focus on a range of the most vulnerable households, particularly those unlikely to be known to the County Council.*'

1.2.4 The grant is to be used in the period 1 April 2022 to 30 September 2022. Unspent grant cannot be rolled over into October, beyond honouring any expenditure committed to before the end of September. KCC did not provide details of the grant awards and agreements until mid to late June 2022, building the urgency in agreeing and administering our approach, hence the need for this additional meeting.

1.2.5 The KCC Policy and Funding Framework document supplied with the grant agreement states:

*“A key principle is that KCC staff will, with our statutory and voluntary sector partners, and other organisations including utility companies, collectively identify families, households and individuals in financial hardship and target funds at them, rather than encouraging people to apply, other than via existing routes. This is because application processes are expensive to run, require effort on the part of those applying at a time when they are struggling, and a proportion of people will apply and be turned down because they don’t meet the eligibility criteria. Also, because this fund is time-limited and will only last for four months, it does not make sense to put in place significant new infrastructure to distribute the resources.”*

### **1.3 Proposed use of Grant**

1.3.1 Allocation A – Direct awards / payments of £100 to all pensioner households in receipt of local council tax reduction during the grant period. This number will be approximately 2,500 households.

1.3.2 The residual balance to be used to assist individual pensioner households in hardship through rising energy costs on referral from Council services or supporting agencies.

1.3.3 Allocation B – To be distributed on negotiation to the network of foodbanks across the Borough, having regard to those areas with highest demand.

1.3.4 Cover of reasonable costs based on the time and direct costs incurred by the Revenues & Benefits Service and supporting services in administering the fund.

1.3.5 The proposals are set out in the draft Scheme document set out at **[Annex 1]** entitled ‘Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council Household Support Fund Scheme’. As part of this report, Members are asked to approve the Scheme.

### **1.4 Resource Implications**

1.4.1 Members may be aware that this is the 3<sup>rd</sup> round of similar grant allocations, starting in September 2020. Previously we have worked with our local foodbanks, Citizens Advice and Tonbridge Baptist Church to deliver assistance with food and fuel vouchers. A further round of Household Support Funding was announced by

Government in May 2022, effective from October 2022 although details are likely to coincide with the timing of the next rise in energy price cap in September.

1.4.2 Although the Scheme is relatively simple to administer, the Revenues & Benefits Service has also been charged with the administration of the council tax energy rebate scheme (£150 payments) which is currently ongoing. There has been no announcement thus far, but it is possible that a further energy rebate scheme may also be announced. After an initial government announcement in March, I am still waiting on details of the full funding we will receive for the council tax energy rebate scheme we have been running since April. This scheme alone has stretched resources and the lack of certainty over funding has made it difficult to resource. Temporary placements have been necessary in Customer Services to handle the increase in customer enquiries. I will monitor the progress of these schemes, along with the fundamental day to day activities of the service that it is crucial we do not lose sight of, to spot any adverse impacts as might arise and assess options to address any issues as and when.

## **1.5 Legal Implications**

1.5.1 The Scheme complies with Government guidance and the agreement with KCC signed by our Chief Executive on 27 June 2022.

1.5.2 Use of data held by the Council has been approved by our Data Protection Officer in order to identify, target and pay households in line with the Scheme.

## **1.6 Financial and Value for Money Considerations**

1.6.1 Reasonable administration costs incurred in operating this scheme may be met from the grant allocations. These costs may include:

- staff costs
- advertising and publicity to raise awareness of the scheme
- web page design
- printing application forms and postage costs
- small IT changes, for example, to facilitate MI production

1.6.2 With administration costs being met from the allocations it is imperative to run a scheme as efficiently as can be to maximise the level of financial support available to households. Together with a relatively small window of time to make payments, these factors further support the rationale to make direct targeted awards to households from allocation A using existing data, rather than an open and close individual application and assessment process.

## 1.7 Risk Assessment

- 1.7.1 Low risk of adverse feedback from targeting pensioner group, no individual application process and delays in payment since the national press reported on the Government announcement in April 2022. These risks can be mitigated through accurate, up to date information available on the Council's website and an informed customer services team.
- 1.7.2 Financial exposure is limited, the budget for the Scheme, including administration, is limited to the level of grant from KCC. Payment from KCC is retrospective and reliant on the provision of agreed monitoring and management information.

## 1.8 Equality Impact Assessment

- 1.8.1 Members are reminded of the requirement, under the Public Sector Equality Duty (section 149 of the Equality Act 2010) to have due regard to (i) eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Equality Act 2010, (ii) advance equality of opportunity between people from different groups, and (iii) foster good relations between people from different groups. The decisions recommended through this paper directly impact on end users. The impact has been analysed and varies between groups of people. The results of this analysis are set out immediately below.
- 1.8.2 Allocation A is targeted to pensioner households, directed by Government and on condition in our agreement with KCC generating disparity amongst age groups. The further sub-set within the cohort is selected on income level, regardless of any other protected characteristic group.
- 1.8.3 Allocation B will be used to support any residents across the Borough. In using local foodbanks we tap into services at a community level that have been established to meet local community needs.

## 1.9 Recommendation

- 1.9.1 Members are **RECOMMENDED** to approve the Household Support Fund Policy at **Annex 1**, granting authority for the Director of Finance & Transformation to establish an effective operational scheme to disburse funds in accordance with detail in that Policy.

Background papers:

Nil

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