

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

FINANCE, REGENERATION AND PROPERTY SCRUTINY SELECT COMMITTEE

13 June 2023

Report of the Director of Finance and Transformation

Part 1- Public

Matters for Information

1 HOUSEHOLD SUPPORT FUND 2023/24

A report outlining past, present and future administration of the Household Support Fund.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Government announced the national Household Support Fund in late summer 2021. The fund was born from earlier Emergency Assistance Grants made available to councils to support households with food and essential supplies during the pandemic. There have been three awards each of six month periods since October 2021 and a current award from 1 April 2023 for a 12 month period.

1.1.2 In Kent, funding is granted to Kent County Council. KCC disperse allocations with their Member approval to KCC services who are able to target support. With each round of allocations, districts have been awarded a share of 20% of the total KCC fund, with a distribution methodology based on local deprivation indices.

1.1.3 Government guidance and direction to spend the funds give instruction to prioritise vulnerable households with the cost of energy and help with inflationary challenges. Initial rounds of funding specified a minimum threshold of support to pension age households, to make help available through an application process and precluded the support of debt advice services.

1.2 Past Funding

1.2.1 The Council has primarily taken an enabling role in the administration of our awards with each round of funding being agreed by Members. The cost of living crisis has dual impact on charities and third party organisations whose business is supporting households; on one hand causing demand to soar while at the same time withering public donations and funding streams. To that end we have used funding to bolster support to those essential services across the Borough during a time when they would otherwise be forced to scale back or withdraw their operations. This dispersal method also means that we get funds out rapidly to those services already working in our communities and known to residents, we do not reinvent the wheel, there is minimal resource requirement on our part and we

tap into an existing network of services. The alternatives such as forming an in-house multi-faceted welfare team and opening an application based scheme are costly and would be slow to react in comparison.

- 1.2.2 The three previous rounds of Household Support Fund total over £530,000. Help has been in the form of cashable vouchers sent to low income pension age residents, availability of fuel vouchers to help with energy costs and financial support for foodbanks across the Borough.
- 1.2.3 In addition to our allocated grants, KCC make funding available through application for individual projects. Bids are put forward to KCC, assessed and determined by a panel. The Council has been successful in applying for additional awards of £110,000 to assist households in housing difficulties, £30,000 to provide warm winter coats to children in financially vulnerable homes, £5,000 to support pastoral care for schools in our most deprived wards, £10,000 to help with boiler and heating repairs and £25,000 to support West Kent Mind in the provision of much needed mental health services across the Borough.
- 1.2.4 Our total spend of Household Support Fund to date is over £710,000 and using data drawn from all of these sources, we estimate that over 3,000 households have received help through the funding so far.

1.3 Current Position

- 1.3.1 Government announced the fourth round of Household Support Fund in early 2023. Allocations have been made in a similar way to previous awards although this time there is a commitment for 12 months. KCC has continued with the tried and tested distribution method, granting us a proportion of the award amounting to £278,526. Rules have changed slightly in that the restriction to finance debt advice services has been removed and KCC require 40% of the fund to be spent by the end of September 2023.
- 1.3.2 A welfare support workshop has been recently held at the Council offices to test our delivery model and inform a way forward. There was a good representation from our partners. Feedback from the event was positive, with praise for:
- Quick response to each partner's needs
 - Profiling spends to ensure help is there when needed
 - Funding a diverse and appropriate range of services
- 1.3.3 There was also helpful feedback in how we can improve on what we do:
- Increase the length of awards to provide greater certainty for partners
 - Provide core and additional award funding where appropriate

- Target funding between long term and immediate support – fund behavioural or educational skills compared to food and fuel ‘sticking plaster’ support
- Improve communication and networking between partners

1.3.4 As explained to the group, previous grants have been limited to six months with the Council not having agreement from KCC of our awards until at least two months into that period, making awards relative short term. The current 12 month allocation will enable us to agree longer lasting awards to partners. The change in rules to allow funding for debt advice enables us to identify and target areas in the Borough for outreach surgeries, providing debt assistance and budgeting skills training.

1.3.5 A further point we identified is that funding towards fuel voucher schemes has been Tonbridge centric. Although these services are generally access by referrals from professionals anywhere in the Borough, there has been a slight bias towards the south of the Borough. Crosslight and Citizens Advice North West Kent, both Tonbridge based, operate voucher schemes. During the third round of funding we brought East Malling Centre onboard as a voucher scheme administrator which will help to even the spread.

1.4 What’s Next

1.4.1 With each round of funding we have sought Member approval for a recommended way forward and set out our policy intentions in a document. Information is currently being pulled together that will be discussed with the Cabinet Member for Finance & Housing, considering any comments from this committee meeting, and a recommended way forward will be presented to Cabinet for decision on 4 July 2023.

1.4.2 We will then look to support and develop services from our partners to best meet the needs of our residents over this financial year.

1.5 Legal Implications

1.5.1 Use of the grant must comply with guidance:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/household-support-fund-guidance-for-local-councils/1-april-2023-to-31-march-2024-household-support-fund-guidance-for-county-councils-and-unitary-authorities-in-england>

1.6 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

1.6.1 The established method of delivery has proven effective and efficient. Reasonable administration costs can be charged to the fund. These are kept to a minimal level, providing maximum support for residents.

1.7 Risk Assessment

- 1.7.1 Reputational risk and support to vulnerable households will be considered when taking decisions on spend for the latest grant.

1.8 Policy Considerations

- 1.8.1 None

Background papers:

contact: Andrew Rosevear

Nil.

Sharon Shelton
Director of Finance and Transformation