

NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE CABINET MEMBERS

HOUSEHOLD SUPPORT FUND

1. OBJECT AND KEY POINTS IN THIS REPORT

- 1.1 This report sets out proposals for the local delivery of the recently announced Department of Work and Pensions Household Support Fund, for individuals, families and households who need help with food, warmth, and other essential items.
- 1.2 The proposed model seeks to align delivery of the scheme with the council plan, taking a targeted approach to identifying and enabling the most vulnerable households. Central to the proposals is an ambition to make 'every contact count' as an opportunity to provide information, advice and guidance that enables independence.
- 1.3 An urgent decision is requested to ensure that residents can access the benefits of the North Lincolnshire scheme as soon as possible.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 The council recognises the different ways that COVID-19 has impacted upon individuals, families and households. Working alongside partners and the community the council has ensured that a strong offer of support has been provided to the most vulnerable people in North Lincolnshire, including those in employment on low incomes.
- 2.2 During the period of the pandemic, part of this offer of support has included help with food and household bills, funded through a number of government schemes including the Defra Emergency Support Grant, COVID-19 Winter Grant and subsequent Local Support Grant. This has included the direct provision of food vouchers to families with the lowest incomes and children entitled to Free School Meals (FSM), alongside a welfare assistance scheme open to any household experiencing acute hardship.
- 2.3 On 6 October 2021 the government announced the launch of a new £421 million Household Support Fund to support those most in need this winter during the final stages of economic recovery, covering the period 6

October to 31 March 2022. Local authorities have been given discretion to use the funding flexibly, with the expectation that it is primarily used to support households in the most immediate need with food, energy, water and other essential household bills. In exceptional cases of genuine emergency it can additionally be used to support housing costs where existing housing support schemes do not meet this exceptional need.

- 2.4 The fund is wider than previous schemes and includes both families with children as well as individuals of all ages including people who are in work and experiencing hardship.
- 2.5 The funding allocation for North Lincolnshire is £1,323,892.77. At least 50% of the fund must be reserved for families with children.

3. **OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION**

- 3.1 Proposals for a local delivery model have been developed building on learning from the implementation of previous similar government schemes.
- 3.2 The model consists of 3 core elements as follows:

a) Welfare Assistance Grants

A third sector organisation will be commissioned to deliver a welfare assistance grant scheme, open to all North Lincolnshire households who meet the eligibility criteria to apply directly for this focussed short-term support. Grants will be made following a brief assessment process and will be offered alongside the provision of information and signposting, aimed at enabling residents to self-help and access any additional support or community activity / service as required. £500,000 will be provisionally allocated to this element of the scheme, which will help approximately 7,500 households with food, energy vouchers, or other essential household items. The level of assistance for food and household bills will be restricted to no more than 2 weeks per customer

Communications promoting the scheme will be targeted via relevant professional areas such as the DWP Job Centre, schools and settings, adult social care and community safety teams, and across local networks including the voluntary and town and parish council sectors.

b) Food Voucher Scheme

Approximately £600,000 of the local grant will be allocated to the direct provision of food vouchers for low-income families with children (approximately 6,000). Data will be used to identify eligible families, and as with previous iterations of the scheme the local approach will also scope in families with children outside of the free school meals cohort and also care leavers with immediate support needs.

The approach being proposed for the delivery of this element differs from previous grant schemes. Vouchers will be allocated in 2 batches, the first being a winter grant and the second being a spring grant. At this point, it is proposed that each child will be offered 2 x £40 vouchers i.e. £40 per batch.

In order to maximise opportunities for enabling independence, alongside the vouchers families will be given information about local and online sources of help and support such as debt management and welfare rights, employment advice, and healthy eating/lifestyles. In addition, information will be given about local activities including those funded through the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme over Christmas and Easter.

c) Housing related support costs

A small portion of the grant will be allocated for the provision of specific housing related support in compliance with the terms of the government guidance. It is anticipated that the value of claims under this element will be low. Assessments and awards for housing related needs will be made by the council's local taxation and benefits team and will include appropriate sign-posting to self-help support.

3.3 An overview summary of the local delivery model is attached at Appendix A.

3.4 Eligibility Criteria

A proportionate approach will be taken to the assessment of eligibility ensuring that the policy intent of the support fund is complied with and fraud risks are minimised, as outlined below. Eligibility considerations will include:

- understanding the circumstances of the individual or family and their vulnerability
- how they have been impacted by Covid
- the essential and immediate nature of the need identified
- alternative support options that have been considered

3.5 Fraud Prevention

As with any welfare payment to vulnerable recipients there is a risk of fraud. To help mitigate this risk suitable checks to verify the identity of applicants and their eligibility will be made. Wherever possible and appropriate vouchers will be used instead of cash to mitigate the risk of the money being spent on items outside of the policy intent. The council also has access to data held in national DWP systems and local systems to verify vulnerability and eligibility as necessary.

4. ANALYSIS OF OPTIONS

Option 1: Approve the local delivery model as outlined.

Option 2: Modify or reject the local delivery model

4.1 Option 1 will enable the timely delivery of the Household Support Fund to vulnerable residents in North Lincolnshire via a proven delivery model and in line with the government's policy intent.

5. FINANCIAL AND OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (e.g. LEGAL, HR, PROPERTY, IT, COMMUNICATIONS etc.)

5.1 The proposals above each make full use of the £1,323,892.77 Household Support Fund. The conditions of the grant allow for basic administration costs to be claimed. Unspent funding must be returned to the government at the end of the grant claim period. The local impact of the scheme will be monitored by government through periodic data returns.

6. OTHER RELEVANT IMPLICATIONS (e.g. CRIME AND DISORDER, EQUALITIES, COUNCIL PLAN, ENVIRONMENTAL, RISK etc.)

6.1 Given the specific requirements to use the fund to provide support with food and bills, the proposals in this report seek to align our local delivery against the principles and priorities set out in the Council Plan. They are aimed at the most vulnerable and seek to enable and promote equality of opportunity and self-responsibility. The model also helps to prepare families for a return to 'normal' when supplementary support from government schemes will no longer be available.

7. OUTCOMES OF INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT (IF APPLICABLE)

7.1 No adverse impacts have been identified.

8. OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION AND CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS DECLARED

8.1 None

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 This report recommends the approval of the local model for the delivery of the Household Support Fund in North Lincolnshire as outlined in section 3 above.

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Date: 9 November 2021

Background Papers used in the preparation of this report
DWP Grant Letter and supporting National Guidance

APPENDIX A

Household Support Grant - Local eligibility framework and approach summary

