



## POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 10 November 2021

REPORT TITLE:	HOUSEHOLD SUPPORT FUND
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR OF NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

### REPORT SUMMARY

This report outlines indicative allocations and spend of a further extension to the government's COVID Local Support Grant, now the Household Support Fund (£3,049,345.09), which is available to support those most in need with the cost of food, energy (heating, cooking, lighting), water bills (including sewerage), housing support and other essentials.

Due to the absence of any lead-in time before the Grant was effective and given the urgent nature of the spend, the proposals have been implemented in the interim and retrospective ratification is sought from the Committee. This approach has been critical to ensure that help is available forthwith to those most in need, that organisations have sufficient lead-in time to deliver projects and ensure full spend of the Grant.

This matter affects all Wards within the Borough.

### RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1) That the Policy and Resources Committee gives retrospective ratification to the indicative allocations and spend of the Household Support Fund as outlined below:

	Indicative allocations (£)
Wirral Household Support Fund - small grants programme	600,000
Wirral Family Cook Off project (Jan-Mar 2022)	300,000
Early Years food & essentials hampers (school holidays)	134,400
School Emergency Food Pantries	310,000
School winter coats and winter uniforms	80,000
Financial support with school meal food debt	100,000
Wirral Emergency Financial Support with Welfare Needs Scheme	500,000
Financial support with fuel (Fuelbank Foundation)	100,000
Financial support with fuel (direct debit customers)	100,000
Financial support with energy (fuel) and water bills debt	200,000
Crisis support with emergency heating (Energy Projects Plus)	30,000

Crisis support with white goods (North Birkenhead Development Trust/St Vincent de Paul Society)	45,000
Risk reduction items (Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service)	20,000
Housing Support Costs	40,000
Contingency	337,477.09
Admin (5%)	152,468
	<b>£3,049,345.09</b>

2) That this decision is urgent and therefore not subject to review.

## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

### 1.0 REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION

- 1.1 The Grant will help the Council continue its intensive work, in partnership with local agencies, groups and organisations, to support those most vulnerable throughout the coronavirus pandemic.

### 2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 The option to reject the Grant extension has been discounted, as this would mean that funding available to the Council is not utilised to support vulnerable households.
- 2.2 Different financial allocations to the various projects would not have reflected actual capacity to deliver.

### 3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 This report is further to the Officer Decision taken on 24 November 2020 for the allocation of the £1,224,616.93 COVID Winter Grant Scheme to Wirral by the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP). This Grant covered the period 1 December 2020 – 31 March 2021. The Decision is set out here:  
<http://democracy.wirral.gov.uk/ieDecisionDetails.aspx?ID=4778>
- 3.2 A further Officer Decision was taken on 16 March 2021 regarding an extension to the Grant (£425,734), taking the end date of the Grant to 16 April 2021. The Decision is set out here:  
<http://democracy.wirral.gov.uk/ieDecisionDetails.aspx?ID=4824>
- 3.3 Management Information (MI) submitted to the DWP showed full spend of the Grant, with 59,788 awards to vulnerable households in Wirral recorded. Awards included food hampers, meals, bespoke food shopping, supermarket vouchers, fuel vouchers, essential supplies, white goods, essential furniture, warm clothing, emergency heating, emergency boiler repairs/replacements and help with utility debt.
- 3.4 On 14 April 2021, the DWP provided details of a further extension to the Grant; renamed the COVID Local Support Grant with a further £40m of national support for the period 17 April 2021 to 20 June 2021. A further Officer Decision was taken on 20 April 2021 regarding Wirral's allocation of £288,145. The Decision is set out here:  
<https://democracy.wirral.gov.uk/ieDecisionDetails.aspx?ID=4847>
- 3.5 On 21 June 2021, the DWP provided details of a further extension to the Grant; the COVID Local Support No. 2 Grant with a further £160m of national support for the period 21 June 2021 to 30 September 2021. £1.152m (£1,152,580.64) was made available to Wirral. The same terms and conditions applied as with previous iterations of the Grant. A further Officer Decision was taken on 8 July 2021 regarding Wirral's allocation. The Decision is set out here:  
<https://democracy.wirral.gov.uk/ieDecisionDetails.aspx?Id=4880>.

- 3.6 Management Information recently submitted to the DWP showed full spend of the Grant, with 44,091 awards to vulnerable households in Wirral recorded for the period 17 April – 30 September 2021. Awards included food hampers, meals, supermarket vouchers, fuel vouchers, essential supplies, white goods, essential furniture, warm clothing, emergency temporary heating, emergency boiler repairs/replacements, school emergency pantries and financial help with utility and school meal debt.
- 3.7 On 6 October 2021 the DWP provided details of a further extension to the Grant; the Household Support Fund, with a further £500m of national support for the period 6 October 2021 to 31 March 2022. £3.049m (£3,049,345.09) is to be made available to Wirral. Similar terms and conditions apply as with previous iterations of the Grant; however, this funding can be extended to include housing support costs in exceptional circumstances and household bills that are not related to food and energy. The ratio of spend between families with children, and families without children/individuals, has also changed – reducing from at least 80% - to now at least 50% of the spend (excluding administration costs) requiring to be spent on families with children; this means that more vulnerable individuals can be supported than with previous versions of the grant.
- 3.8 An interim MI return for the period 6 October 2021 – 31 December 2021 must be submitted to the DWP by no later than 21 January 2022. A final MI return for the whole grant period (6 October 2021 – 31 March 2022) must be submitted to the DWP by no later than 22 April 2022. A final grant payment will be made to the Council when the information in the final return has been verified
- 3.9 There are a number of changes in benefits and an increase in living costs that will impact on residents in Wirral; affecting their ability to pay for fuel, food and basic necessities and will increase demand for partners' services. The changes to benefits include the removal of the temporary COVID uplift payment on Universal Credit; it is estimated that 31,452 households in Wirral are affected. In addition, those in receipt of working tax credit have lost an existing easement, which has allowed them to work less than 16 hours since the pandemic. Families who have over two children who applied for benefits during the pandemic were not subject to the benefits cap (getting benefit up to entitlement of a maximum allowance for 2 children); this has now ended. This is compounded by furlough schemes ending on 1 October 2021; affecting 5,300 people in Wirral. Changes to National Insurance contributions will also see further loss of income, with predicted increases in the cost of essentials such as fuel, energy, water and food.

#### **4.0 PROPOSED INDICATIVE SPEND**

- 4.1 The following items of spend have been proposed. These figures are indicative and may vary as the various elements are progressed and demand for each established.
- 4.2 **Wirral Household Support Fund – small grants programme (£600,000)**
- 4.2.1 A further small grants programme will enable community-based food and welfare support providers to ensure food and essential supplies are available to those most in need over the winter months. The Fund was launched on Monday 1 November 2021. Bids have been invited for a maximum of £20,000 per project by no later than noon on Thursday 11 November 2021. Groups will be permitted to add

administration costs of no more than £500 which will form part of the administration costs set aside for the whole Grant (in line with the Grant conditions).

4.2.2 Groups engaged within the Humanitarian Cell have been given advance notice of the Fund in order that they can be prepared to bid. It is being administered by the Constituency Teams in Neighbourhood Services and successful applications will be awarded funding week commencing 15 November 2021. Groups/organisations will have until 31 March 2022 to spend the funding and will be subject to the established audit requirements (submission of receipts, etc.), which is consistent with the monitoring of previous small grants programmes.

### **4.3 Great Wirral Family Cook Off project - January-March 2022 (£300,000)**

4.3.1 The first Great Wirral Family Cook Off project was co-ordinated by Neo Community on behalf of the Council, utilising part of the COVID Local Support Grant (No. 2). This saw the delivery of cook-at-home ingredients, step-by-step menu cards and interactive marketing across Wirral. 17,385 hampers were delivered, containing 86,925 meals, to over 5,000 households in July to September 2021 (inclusive). The project was very well received and in addition to providing much needed support with food to families, created an opportunity to learn new skills for the future and spend time together as a family.

4.3.2 The project will again be co-ordinated by Neo Community on behalf of the Council, in partnership with Can Cook (Well Fed Services Ltd.), providing one hamper a month in January, February and March 2022 to families who opt-in. Provision is made within the budget for up to 4,000 families to be supported.

4.3.3 The breakdown of anticipated costs for this project is outlined below.

Food meal hampers (anticipated maximum 4,000)	£300,000
Administration costs (Project management and logistics by Neo Community)	£10,000
Administration costs (marketing costs)	£10,000

4.3.4 The administration costs form part of the administration costs set aside for the whole Grant (in line with the Grant conditions).

### **4.4 Early Years food & essential hampers (school holidays) (£134,400)**

4.4.1 Targeted support through the provision of food & essentials hampers will be provided to families eligible for 2 Year Funding/Early Years Pupil Premium (pre-cursors to eligibility for Free School Meals when a child starts primary school). Hampers will be provided in nursery/school holidays, namely Christmas 2021 and February half-term 2022. This early intervention and help in an acute situation, should reduce the likelihood for more specialist and expensive interventions. Based on previous similar projects funded through this Grant, it is anticipated that 60% of the 1,921 cohort (i.e., 1,280 children) will opt-in for support. The project is being co-ordinated from Seacombe Children's Centre across the borough.

#### **4.5 Emergency School Food Pantries (£310,000)**

- 4.5.1 Through the COVID Local Support Grant, schools were invited to opt-in for the provision of Welcome Back to School Food Support Packs (£1,650 per school) for an end of summer pantry to help families in need with ambient food. The co-ordination of the initiative, including the purchase and distribution of food to schools (end of August and mid-September 2021), was project managed by Neo Community, who has strengthened their relationship with many schools across the borough through delivery of projects through this Grant. The project saw 45 schools across all four Constituencies engage.
- 4.5.2 Further funding will enable the success of the project to be built upon to develop a larger more sustainable support model across the borough. Remaining schools will be invited to opt-in, with funding set aside for an anticipated 34 primary schools, 12 secondary schools and 1 Further Education College. Food and essentials will be delivered to each in November (£2,500 value per school), January 2022 (£2,000 value per school) and early March 2022 (£2,000 value per school).
- 4.5.3 The breakdown of anticipated costs for this project is outlined below. The logistical and resource requirements for the project are significant and reflected in the administration costs.

Food supplies (anticipated maximum 47 schools)	£310,000
Administration costs (Project management and logistics by Neo Community)	£19,672

#### **4.6 School winter coats and winter uniforms (£80,000)**

- 4.6.1 Arrangements are being put in place for schools to order much needed winter coats and winter uniforms for children they identify from vulnerable households over the winter months. This is the first time this support has been made available through this series of grants and should provide much welcomed help for families struggling with multiple bills over the winter.

#### **4.7 Financial support with school meal debt (£100,000)**

- 4.7.1 During execution of the COVID Local Support Grant (No. 2) a pressing need with accumulating debt for school meals was identified. Following communication with primary schools, debt amounting to just over £35,000 was identified by 43 primary schools and cleared to help vulnerable families. Further funding will enable debt to be cleared for any remaining primary schools and secondary schools with vulnerable families who need this financial support, enabling them to head into the winter months not burdened by this debt. This will include the cancellation of any debt recovery processes that have been commenced by the Council where appropriate.

#### **4.8 Wirral (Temporary) Financial Support with Welfare Needs Scheme (£600,000)**

- 4.8.1 The Council's Financial Support with Welfare Needs Scheme temporarily replaced its Local Welfare Assistance scheme in September 2021; this was in response to the pandemic to ensure a simpler and quicker application process for households in need of emergency financial support. An allocation from this Fund has enabled both

the continuation of this scheme for the remainder of the financial year and its expansion in scope.

4.8.2 As noted in 3.7 above, the criteria for the Household Support Fund have been extended by the DWP to no longer require support with household bills and essential items to be tied to food or energy (heating, lighting, water, etc.). Items such as car repairs, telephone bills, broadband bills and travel are explicitly included, but it is a matter for each Local Authority to set their own parameters based on need within their respective area. The support through the existing Financial Support Scheme has been extended to include **emergency** support with wider household bills and costs, subject to a strict criterion to ensure that funding is available throughout the whole period to help those in most need. Additional safeguards have been put in place (as with a number of other methods of support through both this scheme and the previous Grants) to minimise the risk of misuse, such as direct payments to suppliers. Awards with a single item value of £1,000 or more are authorised for clearance by the Assistant Director for Neighbourhoods, Safety and Transport.

#### **4.9 Financial support with energy costs (Fuelbank Foundation) (£100,000)**

4.9.1 Work with registered national charity, Fuelbank Foundation commenced in December 2020 utilising the COVID Winter Grant Scheme funding. This saw a borough-wide partnership between the Council, Citizens Advice Wirral, Involve Northwest, Energy Projects Plus, through the Foundation, to support vulnerable residents with energy vouchers (for gas/electric) throughout the winter months. From 1 April 2021 to 30 October 2021, Fuelbank Foundation has used its charitable funds to support this partnership, funding all awards for help with fuel by the four partners outlined throughout this period.

4.9.2 A further grant to the Foundation (of which only a small administration fee per transaction is levied) will ensure that continued help with energy costs is available to residents in need throughout the winter.

#### **4.10 Financial support with energy costs (direct debit customers) (£100,000)**

4.10.1 Financial support with energy (gas/electricity), as outlined above, is currently only available to households on pre-payment meters. Support will be made available to vulnerable households on direct debit payments, following assessment and referral by Citizens Advice Wirral. It is anticipated that any agreed payments will be made directly to energy companies, subject to the final logistics being determined. This includes support with mains water costs.

#### **4.11 Financial support with energy and water debt (£200,000)**

4.11.1 Previous iterations of this funding have enabled the reduction/clearance of utility debts from individuals engaged with Citizens Advice Wirral and Energy Projects Plus. In many cases this has enabled households to switch energy suppliers and move to more affordable fuel tariffs; enabling them to use heating and power that was often severely rationed due to financial pressures. The positive impact of this project on physical and mental health cannot be underestimated. Debt amounts over £1,000 are authorised for clearance by the Assistant Director for Neighbourhoods, Safety and Transport.

#### **4.12 Crisis support with heating (£30,000)**

4.12.1 Energy Projects Plus (EPP) has delivered key support for households in crisis with heating through previous versions of this Grant. A number of gaps in support available through schemes such as the Emergency Centre Heating Offer (ECHO) and Connected for Warmth scheme have been identified. This is largely due to restrictions in eligibility criteria, meaning that some vulnerable households cannot be helped with fixing or replacing broken or obsolete heating. Both schemes are also likely to close or expire before the end of the financial year.

4.12.2 Supplementary funding provided through this grant will enable vulnerable households in financial crisis/without funds, including vulnerable groups as defined by Ofgem who do not currently fall within the criteria, to be supported to repair or replace heating, without using unaffordable sources of finance (e.g., loans/credit cards/overdrafts). Wherever practicable alternative funding streams will be maximised in order to spread the value of this project as wide as possible. A contribution of £3,000 is being made towards the operational and project management costs of EPP for this targeted support.

#### **4.13 Crisis support with white goods (North Birkenhead Development Trust & St Vincent de Paul Society) (£45,000)**

4.13.1 Throughout the various iterations of the Grant, community-based partners, North Birkenhead Development Trust and St Vincent de Paul Society (Wirral), have provided white goods and other essential items to vulnerable households who do not meet the threshold for Council support through its Financial Support with Welfare Needs Scheme. A further allocation of funding will see this support continue over the coming months. No other community-based providers of this support have been identified. A contribution of £3,000 per organisation is being made towards their respective operational costs.

#### **4.14 Risk reduction items (Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service) (£20,000)**

4.14.1 Funding will enable the purchase of a number of risk reduction items by Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service, related to heating etc. for installation in the homes of vulnerable households across Wirral. Neighbouring local authorities are providing the same level of grant to enable a co-ordinated approach across the Liverpool City Region.

#### **4.15 Housing Support Costs (£40,000)**

4.15.1 The Fund allows for support with housing costs, in exceptional cases of genuine emergency where existing housing support schemes do not meet this exceptional need. Where eligible, ongoing housing support for rent must be provided through the housing cost element of Universal Credit and Housing Benefit rather than the Household Support Fund. In addition, eligibility for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) must first be considered before emergency housing support is offered through the Household Support Fund. The Authority must also first consider whether the claimant is at statutory risk of homelessness and therefore owed a duty of support through the Homelessness Prevention Grant. This funding cannot be used to provide housing support on an ongoing basis or to support unsustainable tenancies,

or to provide mortgage support. The use of the Fund for this purpose is being administered through the Council's Revenues and Benefits service. Eligibility is expected to be limited based on the criteria stipulated.

#### 4.16 Contingency (£337,477.09)

4.16.1 As levels of demand can only be estimated at this time, a contingency fund has been set aside from this allocation to deal with any additional funding required for delivery of any of the projects outlined. This will also be available should any further gap in support be identified as the winter progresses, in order to provide a prompt response to need. In the latter case, any such spend will be authorised by the Assistant Director for Neighbourhoods, Safety and Transport.

### 5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The Household Support Fund allocation is £3,049,345.09. This is for the period of 6 October 2021 – 31 March 2022.

5.2 The table below outlines proposed indicative spend. Administration costs that have been noted above for those projects below marked with an asterisk (\*) are factored into the overall administration costs for the Grant.

	<b>Indicative allocations</b>
Wirral Household Support Fund - small grants programme*	600,000
Wirral Family Cook Off project (Jan-Mar 2022)*	300,000
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Financial support with fuel (Fuelbank Foundation)*	100,000
Financial support with fuel (direct debit customers)	100,000
Financial support with energy (fuel) and water bills debt	200,000
Crisis support with emergency heating (Energy Projects Plus)*	30,000
Crisis support with white goods (North Birkenhead Development Trust/St Vincent de Paul Society)*	45,000
Risk reduction items (Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service)	20,000
Housing Support Costs	40,000
Contingency	337,477.09
Admin 5%	152,468
	<b>3,049,345.09</b>

5.3 There is no financial risk to the Council if the full Fund is not expended, as the grant payment by the Department for Work & Pensions will be based upon actual spend as detailed by Wirral's final monitoring (MI) return.

### 6.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 The spend proposed is consistent with the terms of the Grant.

6.2 Any grant funding issued will continue to require adherence to GDPR, health and safety, including social distancing and other COVID-related requirements.

## **7.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS**

7.1 Oversight of the project is continuing to be undertaken by the Temporary Lead for Food & Welfare Support (COVID-19), within the structure of the Humanitarian Cell.

## **8.0 RELEVANT RISKS**

8.1 The proposals have been considered with partners, taking into account factors such as risks, gaps in service, priorities, lead-in times and capacity.

8.2 Financial risks have been considered and measures put in place to mitigate against misuse and/or use that is inconsistent with the grant conditions.

8.3 There will be frequent dialogue with project leads to limit the likelihood of any underspend (or overspend) at conclusion of the grant period.

## **9.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION**

9.1 Through the Council's Humanitarian Cell, created in response to COVID-19, agencies and third sector partners have been engaged in determining both emergency and sustainable approaches to food and other poverty, the impacts of which on households have been compounded by the pandemic.

9.2 The proposals have been shared and discussed with the Elected Members' Holiday Activity Fund (HAF) Working Group and Group Leaders, who were supportive of the approach taken.

## **10.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

10.1 Wirral Council has a legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work, do not discriminate against anyone. An Equality Impact Assessment is a tool to help council services identify steps they can take to ensure equality for anyone who might be affected by a particular policy, decision or activity.

10.2 This report has no direct impact for equalities; however, any associated actions may need an equality impact assessment.

## **11.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS**

11.1 The production of carbon emissions has been limited wherever possible.

11.2 Smaller scale projects involving the supply of food will seek to source that locally where practical and cost-effective to do so.

11.3 The work of Energy Projects Plus in alignment with the Fund will continue to assist with greater energy efficiency and/or the reduction of carbon emissions for individual households.

## **12.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS**

12.1 The provision of funding to local organisations to procure food and essential items will in large part be spent locally, helping the local economy. The provision of financial support to households, including the clearance of accumulated debt, will also help to increase spend within the borough, impacting positively upon the local economy.

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## **APPENDICES**

None.

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

*Household Support Fund: – Guidance for County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England.*

*Officer Decision Report – COVID Local Support Grant - extension No.2 (21 June 2021 – 30 September 2021), 8 July 2021.*

*COVID Local Support Grant extension: – Guidance for County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England.*

*Officer Decision Report – COVID Local Support Grant (COVID Winter Grant Scheme – extension), 20 April 2021.*

*COVID Local Support Grant: – Guidance for County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England, Department for Work & Pensions.*

*Officer Decision Report – COVID Winter Grant Scheme, 16 March 2021.*

*Working Group Update: The Provision of Food & Activities for Children in School Holidays During the COVID 19 Pandemic, Children, Young People & Education Committee, 28 January 2021.*

*Holiday Food and Activities for School and Nursery Age Children During Holidays, Children, Young People & Education Committee, 1 December 2020.*

*Officer Decision Report – COVID Winter Grant Scheme, 24 November 2020.*

*The Provision of Food & Activities for Children in School Holidays During the Covid-19 Pandemic*, Policy & Resources Committee, 11 November 2020.

*COVID Winter Grant Scheme – Guidance for County Councils and Unitary Authorities*, Department for Work & Pensions.

### **SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)**

<b>Council Meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>
Officer Decision Report – COVID Local Support Grant – extension No.2 (21 June 2021 – 30 September 2021)	8 July 2021
Officer Decision Report – COVID Local Support Grant (COVID Winter Grant Scheme – extension)	20 April 2021
Officer Decision Report – COVID Winter Grant Scheme	16 March 2021
Children, Young People & Education Committee	28 January 2021
Children, Young People & Education Committee	1 December 2020
Officer Decision Report – COVID Winter Grant Scheme	24 November 2020
Policy & Resources Committee	11 November 2020