

REPORT TO: Corporate Policy and Performance Board

DATE: 23rd January 2024

REPORTING OFFICER: Operational Director – Finance

PORTFOLIO: Corporate Services

SUBJECT: Progress Updates regarding the Household Support Fund 2023/24, Discretionary Housing Payments, Universal Credit, and the Local Scheme for War Pensions.

WARD(S): Borough-wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 To provide updates regarding delivery of the Government's Household Support Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, Universal Credit, and the Housing Benefit Local Scheme for War Pensions.

2.0 RECOMMENDED That:

- (i) The latest position regarding the Household Support Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments and Universal Credit as outlined in the report, be noted;**
- (ii) The revision to the Household Support Fund spending plan be noted;**
- (iii) The Executive Board be recommended to approve the continuation of the local scheme, that all of a war disablement pension or war widows' pension is disregarded for the purposes of calculating housing benefit.**

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Household Support Fund

3.1 The current Household Support Fund covers the period 1st April 2023 – 31st March 2024. A report was presented to the Board on 7th November 2023 detailing spend up to 30th September 2023. This report provides an update setting out spend up to the end of December 2023.

3.2 Since the last report the following areas have seen a significant increase in Household Support Fund expenditure:

- Vulnerable pensioners, those entitled to Housing Benefit or Council Tax Reduction, have been awarded a payment of £120. This payment was made in November 2023, and 4,117 pensioners received this award representing a total value of £494,040.

- The Discretionary Support Scheme has paid out £125,087, which covers emergency support and community support.
- Expenditure on free school meal vouchers for the school holidays is now £710,000 which represents the summer half term, summer holidays, and the autumn half term.
- Public Health have spent £40,000 up to the end of December 2023 helping vulnerable residents.
- Halton Citizens Advice Bureau have increased their spend to £55,000.

The Appendix details the full Household Support Fund spending position at the end of December 2023.

- 3.3 When the Household Support Fund spending plan for 2023/24 was approved by Executive Board on 20th April 2023, the recommendations provided the Operational Director – Finance with delegated authority to amend the spending plan in consultation with the Leader. As part of the process of monitoring grant spending by Council departments and voluntary sector partners during 2023/24, the Public Health team now anticipate that they will only be able to spend £80,000 of the £100,000 which had been allocated to them. The Divisional Manager – Benefits, who is co-ordinating the Household Support Fund, has checked with colleagues at Halton Citizens Advice Bureau who are confident they can spend the extra £20,000 on top of the £80,000 they had already been allocated, by providing additional support and advice to residents, which meets the grant criteria. The Household Support Fund spending plan has therefore been revised as detailed above by the Operational Director – Finance in consultation with Leader.
- 3.4 In the Chancellor’s Autumn Statement no indication was provided regarding the future of the Household Support Fund after 31st March 2024. The latest information from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on 7th December 2023 stated that no decision has yet been taken about the future of the Fund.

Discretionary Housing Payments

- 3.5 In 2022/23 total grant funding of £279,321 was received for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP). Actual expenditure totalled £279,281 representing 828 awards and giving an underspend of £40. This compares with 2021/22 where 1,144 awards were made with total expenditure of £394,071.
- 3.6 The reduction in the number of awards and total expenditure in 2022/23 compared to the previous year has been caused by central government decreasing the DHP grant funding by £114,778. The appendix provides further details of DHP spend in 2022/23 and a comparison with previous years.

Universal Credit

- 3.7 On 27th July 2016, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commenced the roll-out of Universal Credit (UC) Full Service in Halton. This meant that all new working age claimants must now claim UC, and all claims must be made on-line. According to the DWP as at 9th November 2023 there were 16,332 Halton residents claiming UC. Section 3 in the appendix provides details of the UC caseload in Halton since March 2020.
- 3.8 On 4th December 2023 the DWP informed all councils that during 2024/25 all working age households receiving housing benefit will be migrated to Universal Credit. The DWP will inform councils by March 2024 of the details of the national roll out plan, and the volumes of housing benefit customers involved for individual local authorities. Halton has approximately 2,000 working age housing benefit claimants who will be impacted by this move to UC during 2024/25.

Housing Benefit – war disablement and war bereavement pension disregard

- 3.9 The housing benefit regulations allow councils in Great Britain to run a 'local scheme' to disregard more than £10 per week of war disablement and bereavement pensions. Using this provision, the Council determined many years ago a local scheme for war pensions, whereby all of a war widow's pension or war disablement pension is disregarded for the purposes of calculating housing benefit.
- 3.10 Halton has 16 cases that fall under the local scheme and the cost to the Council is £5,750. It is proposed that the local scheme continues and that Executive Board be recommended to approve continuation of the local scheme.

4.0 POLICY AND OTHER IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 None.

5.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

5.1 Children and Young People in Halton

None identified.

5.2 Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton

None identified.

5.3 A Healthy Halton

None identified.

5.4 **A Safer Halton**

None identified.

5.5 **Halton's Urban Renewal**

The delivery of support from the Household Support Fund and Discretionary Housing Payments to the Borough's vulnerable households, has the potential to support all of the Council priorities.

6.0 **RISK ANALYSIS**

6.1 If the grant allocation from the Household Support Fund, is not fully utilised in accordance with the DWP guidance by the deadline date of 31st March 2024, any remaining grant funding will be clawed back by the DWP.

7.0 **EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

7.1 None.

8.0 **CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS**

8.1 None identified.

9.0 **LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

Document	Place of Inspection	Contact Officer
Housing Support Fund 2023/24 Allocations	DCBL Stadium Lowerhouse Lane Widnes	Paul Garnett
Discretionary Housing Payment 2023/24 Grant Allocations		

APPENDIX**Household Support Fund****Spend for the period 1st April 2023 – 31st December 2023**

Total grant allocation	£ 2,595,761
1. Vulnerable Households with children Free school meal vouchers provided for: Summer half term, Summer holidays and Autumn half term	710,000
2. Vulnerable Pensioner Households Paid £120 to 4,117 pensioners in November 2023	494,040
3. Discretionary Support Scheme Spend to date	125,087
4. Public Health Spend to date	40,000
5. Public Health – pre-school age To commence spend in January 2024	0
6. Care Leavers To commence spend in January 2024	0
7. Other vulnerable households Citizens Advice Bureau Widnes Foodbank Runcorn Foodbank Holiday Activity Food programme Affordable Warmth – Energy Projects Plus	55,000 20,000 11,126 8,709 4,100

Halton Voluntary Action	7,018
Total Expenditure	1,475,080

Discretionary Housing Payments

The table below presents an analysis of DHP expenditure for 2022/23

Purpose of DHP award	Total amount of DHP award £
Benefits cap	31,037
Under occupancy	165,079
Local Housing Allowance reform	13,564
Other (non-welfare reform)	69,601
Total	279,281

Of the 828 DHP awards made during 2022/23 603 were to Universal Credit claimants with a total value of £186,251.

The table below provides a summary of the DHP grant funding and payments since April 2019.

Year	Grant funding £	Amount spent £	No. of awards
2019/20	469,587	469,579	1,391
2020/21	527,810	527,396	1,645
2021/22	394,099	394,071	1,144
2022/23	279,321	279,281	828
2023/24	279,321	196,399*	479*

*Amount paid and number of awards at 11th December 2023.

We have continued to grant full year awards to those customers who are in properties adapted for a disability related to under occupancy provisions.

Rent in advance cases are only supported through DHP payments if the household are receiving assistance from Housing Solutions, either through statutory homeless duties or those where homeless prevention assistance has been granted.

Universal Credit (UC)

As at 9th November 2023 there were 16,332 UC claimants in Halton. The table below shows the changes in the UC caseload since March 2020.

Date	UC caseload
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Mar 2020	10,918
Dec 2020	16,502
June 2021	16,277
Dec 2021	15,445
June 2022	15,265
Dec 2022	15,541
June 2023	16,057
Nov 2023	16,332