

EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE

A meeting of the Executive Member for Finance and Governance was held on Thursday 20 April 2023.

PRESENT: Councillors , S Walker

PRESENT BY INVITATION: Councillors

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

OFFICERS: M Barker, S Blood and J Savage

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE:

22/8

HOUSING SUPPORT FUND

The Director of Finance submitted a report the purpose of which was to provide an overview of the scheme as outlined in the delivery plan at Appendix A of the report which requires Executive member approval and Section 151 Officer approval for the financial year April 23 to March 24, based on Central Government guidance dated 27 February 2023. The delivery plan must be communicated to the DWP by 17 May 2023.

The report outlined that on 17 November 2022 in the Autumn Statement the Chancellor announced, as part of a number of measures to provide help with global inflationary challenges and the significantly rising cost of living, that the Household Support Fund (HSF) would be extended to April 2023 to March 2024.

Individual local authorities were expected to adopt a local scheme and determine how the funding provided is to be distributed. The amount provided to Middlesbrough is £3,307,230.00. Guidance provided states that Local Authorities must make sure that the mandatory element of application-based support delivered through the scheme is clearly advertised to residents and is available throughout the majority of the fund period and the scheme must be published on the Council's website.

The value of individual awards would to be determined by Local Authorities in accordance with the parameters set out in the guidance. A number of the suggested initiatives are based on previous household support schemes that have worked successfully and which have been endorsed by groups such as financial inclusive groups and other partnering organisations and will follow a similar criteria.

OPTIONS

Other potential decision(s) and why these have not been recommended

Should the Council choose not to implement Central Government intentions, this would leave the Council open to criticism both by Central Government and the residents of the town, given the express expectation that Councils would use the funding available to support the residents of the town in meeting the cost-of-living increase.

ORDERED

That the Executive Member for Finance and Governance approves the delivery plan required by the Department for Work and Pensions and as detailed and subject to Central Government Guidance.

Schemes would be implemented generally in accordance with the qualifying criteria applied in the most recent household support scheme. Where the criteria do not exist, or minor adjustments are required to ensure efficient operation then decision making is delegated to the Head of Resident and Business Support.

REASONS

The decision were supported by the following reasons:

The Council was required to adopt a scheme to allow Middlesbrough residents to benefit from the funding provided to minimise the consequences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis.

The attached delivery plan (as outlined in the report) describes how the funds will be distributed. The scheme was designed to support households with children, pensioners, disabled and other households who may be experiencing financial difficulties brought about by the cost-of living increase.

Subject to approval awards will be made on the follow basis – as outlined in the report. Should any funds remain these would be allocated to council tax accounts based on a qualifying criteria which will be determined subject to remaining funds.

The scheme has been designed to provide support throughout the year. Payments would be tapered over the course of the year to reduce household dependencies as Central Government have not suggested that support will continue beyond March 2024.

The plan would be subject to review periodically to allow alterations to be made should the scheme requirements need to change to keep pace with the cost-of-living crisis. Suitable controls would be put in place to minimise the risk of fraud such as bank account checks. Local Authorities have access to a range of data sources and checks will be carried out against this data to verify identity of recipients. Where fraud is identified appropriate actions will be taken to address this via the council's fraud solution.

The decision will come into force with immediate effect and is not subject to scrutiny call-in procedures.