

CABINET

Individual Cabinet Member Decision: COVID-19 Financial Support Budget

Report of Jo Wilkinson, Head of Housing

PURPOSE OF REPORT			
To seek approval for the use of a previously earmarked element of the HRA budget for 2020/21 to be re-purposed in support of tenants as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic			
Key Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>	Non-Key Decision	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Referral from Cabinet Member
Date of notice of forthcoming key decision	n/a		
This report is public.			

RECOMMENDATIONS OF JO WILKINSON, HEAD OF HOUSING

That the repurposing of the HRA budget line as outlined in this report be approved by Cllr Jackson in order that Council Tenants may benefit from financial support during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 No Council Housing tenant should be forced out of their home or find themselves in a position in which they must choose between rent, heating, or feeding themselves or their families, as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic. It is the intention of Council Housing to provide financial support to tenants and help protect those affected by COVID-19.
- 1.2 At the beginning of the COVID-19 'lockdown' all council tenants were written to and advised that during this period Lancaster City Council would be taking no legal action against tenants in relation to rent arrears. The Income Management Team are focussed on providing support, advice, and practical assistance (with welfare benefit claims, for example).

2.0 Proposal Details

- 2.1 It is intended that the Housing Service provide financial support through the reallocation of the 'Neighbourhood Project Fund'; a £50,000 annual fund originally designed to provide community projects in targeted areas in the district and approved as a growth item by Cabinet in February 2020.

- 2.2 With no immediate indication of how long the impact of COVID-19 will be felt for, it has been proposed that a support fund for tenants would be a better use of this budget in the current climate.
- 2.3 Tenants in need of financial support will be identified through their conversations/correspondence with the Income Management, Estate Management, Sheltered Scheme Managers and Household Intervention teams within Council Housing, who will use their discretion to judge the tenant's suitability for financial support.
- 2.4 Through work with the Tenant Engagement Officer, the wider Housing Team, and the Community Connectors, where local community groups can facilitate specific COVID-19 support projects consideration will be given to provide one-off funding.
- 2.5 It is expected that financial support will take the form of (but may not be limited to):
- Credited Rent Weeks
 - Top ups to Electric and Gas meters (where appropriate and where access to Utility company support has been exhausted)
 - Food Parcels (where appropriate, and where access to a food bank is not appropriate or available)
 - Support with wifi access to help people get / remain on line (where appropriate)
 - Financial support (as part of the recovery process) to individuals; for example assistance with school uniform/resources, job interview clothing, etc.
 - Financial contributions to community groups delivering COVID-19 related support projects
 - Financial support for mental health and wellbeing activities in the community - activities in sheltered housing schemes, for example
- 2.6 Where individual tenants are the recipients of assistance it is anticipated that those whose income and/or employment has been adversely affected by COVID-19 will be the beneficiaries, however support requirements will be judged on a case by case basis.
- 2.7 Spending of the fund will be reviewed weekly by the Service Support Manager and presented to the senior management group within the housing service.

3.0 Details of Consultation

- 3.1 Wider consultation has not been undertaken. This is an urgent budget requirement in a time of unprecedented challenge to council tenants across the district.

4.0 Options and Options Analysis [including risk assessment]

	Option 1: That the £50k financial support budget be approved as set out	Option 2: The £50k financial support budget is not approved
Advantages	The fund would allow council housing to provide additional financial support to council tenants during the COVID-19 pandemic and into the recovery phase	£50k saving within the HRA
Disadvantages	The original growth item earmarked for community projects will not be delivered in 20/21 (in light of COVID-19, this project work currently appears undeliverable regardless of budget decisions)	Financial support not provided to tenants impacted by COVID-19
Risks	None identified	Tenant's experiencing financial hardship unable to pay rent/utilities etc.

5.0 Officer Preferred Option (and comments)

- 5.1 Option 1: that the £50k budget through repurposing of earlier growth item be approved

6.0 Conclusion

- 6.1 Through use of a flexible £50k budget, officers will be able to deliver practical and much needed financial assistance to council tenants during the unprecedented conditions of the COVID-19 Pandemic.
- 6.2 Spend of this budget would be monitored closely to ensure the best possible outcomes for tenants, with a summary report evidenced at its conclusion.
- 6.3 While this small fund will have a minimal impact across the district as a whole, when considered alongside the Housing Service's stated commitment to taking no legal action against tenants for rent arrears during the COVID-19 Pandemic, it will help foster some resilience and practical assistance for a limited number of tenants and families unable to access support through other avenues.

RELATIONSHIP TO POLICY FRAMEWORK

This decision links to the priorities being delivered on as part of the pandemic response: continuing to deliver our most vital services, supporting our local businesses, and supporting our most vulnerable residents – with a particular focus on vulnerable residents both during, and in recovery from the pandemic and lockdown.

CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT

(including Health & Safety, Equality & Diversity, Human Rights, Community Safety, Human Resources, Sustainability and Rural Proofing)

Due to urgency of the current situation a full impact assessment has not been carried out. The impact of the use of the proposed financial support budget will be closely monitored to ensure negative impacts across any groups with protected characteristics is minimised, and mitigated where appropriate.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Pursuant to s11A of Housing Act 1985 a local housing authority may provide in connection with the provision of housing accommodation by them such 'welfare services' for its tenants as accords with the needs of those persons. The definition of 'welfare services' is very broad, but excludes repair, maintenance, supervision or management of houses or other property.

There are restrictions on the use of the HRA (popularly known as "ring-fencing"). If a local authority wishes to provide financial assistance in connection with housing, they may require the consent of the Secretary of State (see <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/housing-revenue-account>).

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Council 26th February 2020, minute 136(3) refers, approved a growth item £50,000 per annum to support specific project work within the Housing Revenue Account. To date in this financial year no costs have been incurred and the full £50,000 is available to support this temporary change in direction for one year only, resulting in the delayed start of its intended purpose until 1st April 2021.

OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS, such as Human Resources, Information Services, Property, Open Spaces:

None.

SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS

I have reviewed the issue raised within the Legal Implications section of this report can find no requirement to seek Secretary of State consent either within s11A Housing Act 1985, or the examples provided within section 8 of the website given above.

The only consideration of the provision of financial assistance appears to be within s24 of Local Government Act 1988 which empowers a local housing authority to provide any person with financial assistance for the purposes of, or in connection with, "*the acquisition, construction, conversion, rehabilitation, improvement, maintenance or management of any property which is or is intended to be privately let as housing accommodation*". I do not believe this to be applicable to the proposal outlined in the report

Other examples provided on the website for consent address disposal or appropriate land or dwellings within the HRA. Again, I do not believe these to be applicable to the proposal outlined in the report. In the absence of evidence requiring the Council to obtain direct consent I am satisfied that it is not required in this instance.

The use of virements to realign, or refocus existing funds from one expenditure head to another is permitted subject to the limits set out in the Council's Medium Term Financial

Strategy. As value exceeds that currently allowable for Senior Officers, approval is sought in accordance with the Council's Budget & Policy Framework.

MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The Monitoring Officer has been consulted and has no comments to add

BACKGROUND PAPERS

n/a

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