

## **CABINET**

### **30 MARCH 2023**

## **HOUSEHOLD SUPPORT FUND**

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### **Relevant Cabinet Member**

Councillor Marcus Hart

### **Relevant Chief Officer**

Strategic Director of People

### **Recommendation**

- 1. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities recommends that Cabinet:**
  - a) Endorses the approach to the use of the Household Support Fund (HSF) in 2023/24 as outlined in paragraph 12; and**
  - b) Delegates the implementation of the delivery of the Household Support Fund including the allocation of any extension to the grant within the terms applicable to it, to the Strategic Director of People in consultation with the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities and in liaison with the Chief Finance Officer.**

### **Background**

2. Government have released funding to support residents in Worcestershire since 2020, initially through the Winter Grant and Local Support Grant, and subsequently through the Household Support Fund which is now on round four of this specific funding.
3. Since October 2021, Worcestershire has been awarded £3.95m of funding every six months from Household Support Fund schemes to provide support for residents in need of help with food, fuel and other essential household costs.
4. In the Autumn Statement 2022, the Chancellor confirmed that the Household Support Fund would be extended for a further 12 months starting in April 2023, and this equates to just under £7.9 million for Worcestershire to use to support residents until 31 March 2024. Confirmation and guidance from the Department of Work and Pensions was received in February 2023.
5. This paper summarises how the previous HSF funding allocations were used and sets out a proposed use of the additional grant between now and the end of March 2024 that will ensure it is targeted to vulnerable residents in need of support and in line with the Government grant conditions.

## **Previous Household Support Fund allocations - 06 October 2021 to 31 March 2023**

6. Funding received during this period totalled £11.85 million across three different HSF schemes. The initial grant could be used from 6 October 2021 onwards, in line with the Government grant conditions, initially to ensure children and families received extra support during the winter period and ensuring vulnerable households did not go hungry or without essential items. Over subsequent iterations of the fund the criteria has been amended.

7. Government specified parameters for use of these funds over the previous three schemes has included;

- a) HSF 1 – ringfence a minimum of 50% of the grant on households with children with a focus on food
- b) HSF 2 – ringfence a minimum of a third of the grant on households with children and a further third for pensioners with a general support around food and energy and wider linked essentials
- c) HSF 3 – no funding ringfenced to specific cohorts but a larger focus on energy costs

8. Throughout the period from October 2021 to the end of December 2022, 174,755 interventions were given to households, with over £5.36million spent directly on households with children. This support included the food vouchers for children in receipt of free school meals during school holidays and a countywide scheme through Act on Energy to support people with fuel vouchers and top up payments, debt, heating repairs and heating system replacements. In addition, funding was allocated to district councils to provide local support routes via a range of routes including council welfare assistance schemes or with local voluntary sector partners including Citizens Advice, and local foodbanks for example. All those organisations in receipt of HSF, including District councils, have to spend resource in line with the grant conditions and provide data required for the government monitoring. Multiple interventions were available per household and funding was allocated against the grant criteria and the percentage of direct spend (October 2021 to December 2022) is outlined below:

- Food – 49%
- Energy and Water – 33%
- Essentials linked to energy and water - 6%
- Wider essentials – 9%
- Non- statutory housing costs – 2%

## **Household Support Fund 4 – 01 April 2023 to 31 March 2024**

9. In the government Autumn Statement of 2022, the Chancellor confirmed that the Household Support Fund would be extended for a 12-month period for the first time. This equates to just under £7.9m for Worcestershire to use to support residents between 01 April 2023 and 31 March 2024.

10. The new fund from April 2023 is intended to provide assistance to vulnerable households in most need of support to help with the increase in living costs linked to energy and food. Whilst the general purpose of the fund is the same as that provided

previously, there is a stronger focus on energy and supporting those vulnerable groups that may be facing additional costs such as; families on low incomes with children of all ages, pensioners, disabled people, carers and care leavers.

11. Within the parameters set out in the newly published grant conditions, the Household Support Fund can be used to cover:

- a) Energy and water costs relating to heating, cooking or lighting; and water bills.
- b) Support with food costs either through vouchers or cash or in kind.
- c) Other household essentials – this may include those linked to energy and water, for example sanitary products, boiler repair or servicing, warm clothing, purchase of fridge/freezers; or for wider essentials, for example broadband costs, phone costs, clothing, transport-related costs such as car repairs.
- d) Advice services can now be funded for the first time where it is directly linked to the other direct interventions being provided.
- e) Housing costs can be covered in exceptional circumstances and where existing housing schemes do not meet this exceptional need.
- f) The fund can also be used to cover reasonable administration costs including staff costs, web page design, IT system costs and promotional activity and content to raise the profile of the scheme.
- g) The fund cannot be used to cover mortgage costs

### **Proposed allocation of the Household Support Fund April 23 to March 24**

12. The table below sets the proposal for the use of the £7.9m Household Support Fund grant to the county council. These proposals are in line with government grant conditions and are modelled around local understanding of need across different categories, informed by local intelligence and previous delivery of the funds detailed in paragraphs 6 – 8 of this report. The majority of the activity below is a continuation of the schemes currently in operation in HSF 3. Funding will only be used for schemes that are free to eligible residents.

Table 1: Proposed Allocation of Household Support Fund April 2023 – March 2024

<b>Funding area</b>	<b>Provisional allocation</b>	<b>Activity</b>
Food	£2,644,000	Food voucher for all school holidays until the end of March 2024 for children in receipt of free school meals. Dedicated Food bank funding delegated to District Councils
Energy	£2,550,000	Extend Act on Energy scheme to support with debt, vouchers and new heating measures for eligible residents. Home visits and minor measure installations through Age UK's in the county. Energy voucher scheme (Warmth on prescription) through primary care for residents with heat affected medical conditions in each district collaborative area.

Food/Energy	£712,000	Extend pensioner, carer, person with disability scheme delivered through Worcestershire Advice Network organisations, voucher payment depending on number of criteria met. Care leavers one off winter payment. Shared lives carers one off winter payment. Small appliances fund linked to the growth and skills programme in the council.
District Councils	£1,798,278	District councils to distribution in line with grant conditions. Includes in house support and through external voluntary sector partners.
Advice services	£100,000	Extension of debt workers supporting energy debt applications alongside Act on Energy
Management costs	£94,000	
<b>Total</b>	<b>£7,898,278.38</b>	

<b>District Council Allocation (calculated using the Index of Multiple deprivation figures)</b>	<b>Amount</b>
Bromsgrove	£193,147
Malvern Hills	£265,290
Redditch	£371,928
Worcester	£337,086
Wychavon	£260,336
Wyre Forest	£370,491
<b>Total</b>	<b>£1,798,278</b>

13. District councils will be delivering local support through either direct in-house schemes or through various voluntary and community sector organisations in order to reach the most vulnerable residents in their local communities.

14. Residents may be eligible for support across multiple categories listed in table one above. Residents may also be eligible to receive support on more than one occasion during the grant period.

15. In addition to local HSF support, there are a number of national schemes available through the government which can be searched via the [cost of living government website](#).

16. Work has been undertaken with the Adult Front Door and other front-line services to equip them to be able to respond as effectively as possible to any calls from residents requesting advice and support in relation to the cost of living. This work has included; frontline training for staff, developing direct referral routes to partner organisations such as Worcestershire Advice Network, Trussell Trust foodbanks, Severn Trent Trust Fund and British Gas Energy Trust.

17. Across the council there are also other initiatives in operation such as the libraries operating as warm spaces and being registered on the national warm welcome [website](#).

18. Introductory training for frontline staff on fuel poverty has also been commissioned by the council and commenced in January, which is being delivered by a specialist energy charity, Act on Energy, to both council staff and wider community partners.

19. A dedicated cost of living [webpage](#) available directly from the new council website homepage has been created to provide signposting advice to both national and local information and frequently asked questions to support residents to navigate to where they need to be. There is also a wealth of additional resource on the site around money management, mental wellbeing, work, skills and learning and warm spaces for example.

20. Four part time debt workers have been funded by the council and hosted through the Worcestershire Advice Network with one worker aligned to each Citizen's Advice organisation to provide additional resource for those experiencing unmanageable debt and applying for support through Act on Energy. These posts started at the end of 2022 and are already working on a number of energy debt cases across the county.

21. Monthly meetings with District Council lead officers, relevant council teams and key partners such as the Worcestershire Advice Network take place to discuss the Household Support Fund and wider cost of living activity. Council officers attend district council cost of living groups as capacity allows to ensure a joined-up approach to supporting residents.

22. The [Community Service Directory](#), also accessible on the council website, now has around 450 organisations listed and residents and front line workers can use it to search for locally based support across the county.

23. There are close operational links with Worcestershire Children First to ensure the up-to-date information is available to those that are working with children, their families and the key partner organisations.

## Summary

24. Worcestershire County Council is committed to ensuring that vulnerable residents who are most in need receive support through a balanced programme of activity.

25. The proposals detailed in this report aim to ensure that the new allocation of the Household Support Fund is utilised in a targeted and effective manner between now and the end of March 2024, to reduce the impact of the increased cost of living and financial hardship being experienced.

## Legal, Financial and HR Implications

26. The Secretary of State determines the authorities to which grant is to be paid and the amount of grant to be paid.

27. The Household Support Fund Grant indicative funding allocation for Worcestershire County Council for the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 is £7,898,578. Pursuant to section 31(3) and 31(4) of the Local Government Act 2003, the Secretary of State determines that the grant will be paid in respect of this period.

28. The grant is paid to the Authority to support eligible expenditure only, in line with guidance from the Department for Work and Pensions; and on the basis overall that the provision of grant funding remains subject to the Secretary of State's ongoing satisfaction that all grant usage by the Authority complies fully with the relevant conditions.

29. Funding is paid in arrears and following completion of a data return to the Department for Work and Pensions. The amount of grant funding Worcestershire receives from the allocation listed in point 12 will be evidenced in the quarterly data return. This approach is in line with previous grants and the Communities and Partnership team, Business Intelligence and Finance teams will work together to complete the required returns.

30. County Councils and Unitary Authorities have a statutory duty regarding children and are generally responsible for Local Welfare Assistance. The Department for Work and Pensions is providing funding to County Councils and Unitary Authorities (including Metropolitan Councils and London Boroughs), under section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003, to administer the scheme and provide assistance to households most in need.

31. Local Authorities have discretion on exactly how this funding is used within the scope set out in the grant conditions and guidance documentation provided by the Department for Work and Pensions. The expectation is that it should primarily be used to support households in the most need particularly those including children, pensioners, disabled residents and carers who would otherwise struggle with energy bills, food, water bills, other essential household costs and housing costs in exceptional circumstances.

## **Risk Implications**

32. All previous schemes have been delivered successfully and within the timeframe therefore there is a low level of risk.

33. Activity data for the countywide schemes will be monitored monthly to ensure early identification of trends and mitigation measures to address any issues in relation to delivery.

34. There is a reputational risk to the council if the scheme fails to deliver against the national criteria and the full funding allocation is unable to be claimed back from government. The mixed approach highlighted in table 1 ensures that there will be a wide reach to the scheme, engaging multiple partners to enable those in need to access support and the scheme can be successfully delivered.

## **Joint Equality, Public Health, Data Protection and Sustainability Impact Assessments**

35. Full Equality and Public Health, Data Protection and Sustainability Impact Assessments have been carried out in respect of the recommendations. This did not identify any potential negative impact for any of the Protected Groups. The potential negative impact relates to a potential increase in Greenhouse Gas emissions as a result of the financial support given to eligible residents to contribute towards heating their home. Notwithstanding the potential negative impact, the recommended course of action can be justified because this is a scheme to help vulnerable households in fuel poverty who are not able to heat their homes to a minimum standard for health and wellbeing.

36. The following mitigating action has been identified:

- Where possible, residents receiving support or third-party organisations providing white goods will be encouraged to purchase the most energy efficient models.
- Act on Energy will signpost residents receiving support through the Household Support Fund or those not eligible to Household Support Fund to other suitable energy efficiency schemes
- Physical intervention support through Act on Energy for new heating systems will consider the most energy efficient solution for the property.

37. Relevant findings will contribute to future planning for any extensions to the Household Support Fund.

## **Supporting Information**

(Available electronically)

Appendix 1 – Joint Impact Assessment

Appendix 2 – Data Protection Impact Assessment

Appendix 3 – Environmental Sustainability Impact Assessment

Appendix 4 – Equality and Public Health Impact Assessment

## **Contact Points**

Specific Contact Points for this report

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## **Background Papers**

None