

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting

Cabinet – 18 November 2024

Report Title

Household Support Fund Update

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?

Yes

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report

Jo Brown, Assistant Chief Executive

Report Author(s)

Fiona Boden, Head of Policy, Performance and Intelligence

Fiona.Boden@rotherham.gov.uk

Ward(s) Affected

Borough-Wide

Report Summary

The Household Support Fund (HSF) has been extended by Government from October 2024 to March 2025, with £421m of funding available in England. Consistent with previous awards, the Council has been awarded £2.489m for the Borough for this time period.

Given the need in communities to commence support for the most vulnerable residents and the timing of the grant award and receipt of the associated grant conditions, a delegated officer decision was taken to allocate this funding on 11th October 2024. This report provides a summary of the allocations of the £2.489m of funding made. Any variations arising through spend are proposed to be managed through adjusting the allocation made towards the Energy Crisis Support Scheme.

Recommendations

That Cabinet:

1. Note the provisional allocations of the Household Support Fund Grant of £2.489m have been made as follows:
 - a. £1.028m for food vouchers to children eligible for free school meals for school holidays up to and including Easter 2025.
 - b. £1.156m to support applications from households for assistance with energy costs, through the Council's Energy Crisis Support Scheme.

- c. £150k towards the costs of the Council's Local Council Tax Support Top Up Scheme.
 - d. £45k to support care leavers, being young people leaving foster or local authority care and living independently in their own accommodation who are responsible for paying their own utility bills, providing additional financial support through the cost-of-living increases.
 - e. £60k to local voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations to support vulnerable households over Christmas / New Year through a supplement to the Crisis Support service level agreement.
 - f. £50k to provide parcels of household items to be distributed through VCS community support including food banks, social supermarkets, and the Open Arms programme drop-in sessions.
2. Delegate authority to the Assistant Chief Executive in consultation with the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Neighbourhood Working, to determine revised and final allocations for the Household Support Grant, to include provision for other eligible actions within the use of Household Support Fund should it not be possible to achieve full spend of the grant through the approved options.

List of Appendices Included

- Appendix 1 Equality screening
- Appendix 2 Climate impact assessment

Background Papers

[Officer Decision - 11 October 2024 - Household Support Fund \(October - March 2024/25\) - Rotherham Council](#)

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel
None

Council Approval Required
No

Exempt from the Press and Public
No

Household Support Fund October 2024 – March 2025

1. Background

- 1.1 In the first six months of 2024-25, Rotherham Council received £2.489m from the Household Support Fund (HSF). Used to support our most vulnerable residents in the borough, this included:
- £1.586m in food vouchers for children eligible to receive free school meals during the spring bank, summer and autumn half term holidays.
 - £500,000 to provide Council Tax Support and £160,000 to provide housing support.
 - £181,000 in energy grants through the energy crisis support scheme.
 - £36,672 in support for care leavers through food vouchers and support with energy costs.
 - £25,000 to provide essential household items for residents, which were distributed through VCS community support including food banks and social supermarkets, and as part of the Open Arms programme drop-in sessions.
- 1.2 The HSF which was first introduced in 2021/22, has now been extended to the end of March 2025 following a government announcement made in September.
- 1.3 The grant has been made available to County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England to support those most in need and struggling with the cost of living. Consistent with previous allocations from the fund, Rotherham has been awarded £2.489m for the final six months of 2024/25, which is consistent with what it has previously received.
- 1.4 Given the need to get support to vulnerable residents as soon as possible, including launching the energy scheme and putting in place the necessary arrangements for support over the Christmas period via the VCS sector, an officer decision, in consultation with the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Neighbourhood Working, was taken on 11th October 2024. This report updates on this decision and the allocation of the fund.

2. Key Issues

- 2.1 Household Support Fund was made available by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to county councils and unitary authorities in England to support those most in need. Local authorities were given discretion about exactly how this funding was used within the scope set out in guidance.
- 2.2 For the period October 2024 – March 2025, HSF guidance makes specific provisions for use of the fund. These are:
- Energy and water.
 - Food, whether in kind or through vouchers or cash.
 - Essentials linked to energy and water – household goods.
 - Wider essentials not linked to energy and water including meeting bills.

- Advice services supplementary to other provision.
- Housing costs taking account of the risk of homelessness and other local factors.

The fund cannot be used to provide mortgage support, though homeowners could still qualify for the other elements of the fund.

2.3 Conditions also set out that:

- There must be a clear rationale or documented policy/framework outlining the approach, including how eligibility is defined and how households access the fund.
- The fund is intended to cover a wide range of low-income households in need, including families with children of all ages, pensioners, unpaid carers, care leavers and disabled people, larger families, single-person households, and those struggling with one-off financial shocks or unforeseen events.
- Support is not restricted only to vulnerable households in receipt of benefits.
- At least part of the scheme must operate on an application basis.

2.4 Following the experience of previous allocations of this fund, the Council will support a wide range of low-income households and is not limited to those in receipt of benefits. There is flexibility within the fund to identify which vulnerable households are most in need of support and apply discretion when identifying eligibility.

3. Options considered and recommended proposal

3.1 Options were assessed to meet the criteria of the grant funding stream, aligned with the other actions being taken by the Council to support people in need. They were also considered in relation to the previous experience of 'what works' in distributing these funds. All the different strands are eligible spend under the previous HSF grant guidance. Specific groups of people identified in the guidance as priority households can be targeted through the applications for support options.

3.2 Food vouchers for school holidays - £1.028m

3.2.1 Continuing to provide vouchers to children eligible for free school meals to cover school holidays, will carry forward support to low-income families in a manner that has proved effective. Assuming use of HSF will cover the Easter holidays in April 2025, this approach would fund five weeks of school holidays from Christmas / New Year onwards. The October 2024 half term is already funded from the first half year HSF grant.

3.2.2 The allocation provides for a growing number of children in receipt of free school meals with the numbers having already increased from 12,955 at Easter 2024 to 13,273 at summer 2024. To accommodate the potential for further growth in demand, an assumption of 13,713 free school meal children has been used to calculate the allocation for October to March 2025. Based on vouchers continuing to be £15 per child per week, this would amount to £1.028m and qualify as pro-active support.

3.3 **Energy support - £1.156m**

3.3.1 The Council's energy scheme was extended into 2024/25 using funding carried over from 2023/24 (Covid Recovery Fund). This was supplemented again using HSF from the April – September 2024 allocation, utilising £174k for energy support. This was open to all households facing hardship, providing grants of £250 each.

3.3.2 Taking account of allocations to other elements of the programme, this would provide £1.156m for energy support, providing up to 4,622 grants at £250 each. These one-off grants would be open to all households, including pensioners. This qualifies as open application-based support.

3.4 **Council Tax Support Top Up - £150k**

3.4.1 The Council has already applied a top-up to Council Tax Support for 2024/25. Many households receiving support will already have been awarded this top up for the full year.

3.4.2 A contribution from the HSF of £150k has therefore been agreed to support the costs of this top up for the second six months of 2024/25. It is projected that around 15,000 households will benefit from the Council Tax Support Top-Up Scheme.

3.5 **Support for care leavers - £45k**

3.5.1 The allocations of HSF for April – September 2024 included a £45k provision to CYPS to continue to support young people leaving care with cost-of-living pressures. This has been extended to cover October 2024 – March 2025 at the same level of funding. This would qualify as pro-active support.

3.6 **VCS support to vulnerable families over Christmas / New Year - £60k**

3.6.1 HSF, and the Covid Winter Grant before it, has enabled local VCS organisations to provide additional support to vulnerable families that they work with, over the last four years. This primarily involved the provision of food hampers over Christmas and New Year. Small grants to organisations were administered by VAR. During Christmas and New Year 2023/24, owing to increased demand an allocation of £55k was provided. This enabled more than 500 Christmas Hampers to be distributed.

3.6.2 It is recommended that £60k is provided for 2024/25 given increases in demand seen in the previous two years. Consistent with how this has been

administered in previously, this is being facilitated through a supplement to the Crisis Support Service Level Agreement (SLA).

3.7 Wider household essentials support - £50k

- 3.7.1 Building on the support provided from HSF between July and September 2024, this allocation will continue to provide parcels of household items (cleaning / personal hygiene etc) to vulnerable households. These would be distributed through VCS community support including food banks and social supermarkets, and as part of the Open Arms programme drop-in sessions.
- 3.7.2 An allocation of £50k is included on the basis of £25 value for each parcel, this would provide support to 2,000 households. It would be facilitated again through a supplement to the Crisis Support SLA. This would qualify as third-party organisations spend.

3.8 Balance of spend

- 3.8.1 It is likely that actual spend will vary from that allocated to specific uses dependant on demand. It is proposed that to ensure full spend for the year, any balancing sums be applied through the Energy Crisis Support Scheme.

4. Consultation on proposal

- 4.1 Officers in relevant Council services along with VCS partners have been engaged in developing the approach to the use of this funding allocation.

5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

- 5.1 Arrangements are being put in place to implement the range of support measure so that residents can begin to access the benefits as soon as possible.

6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

- 6.1 Whilst Rotherham's specific allocation has not yet been announced, the report assumes grant of £2.489m, being the same sum provided for April to September 2024. The proposed spend is in accordance with the previous grant conditions, though progress on spend will need to be monitored to ensure that Government requirements and timeframes are adhered to.
- 6.2 Scheme spend will be reviewed as part of management of the grant with final allocations being determined once the final cost of holiday food vouchers and demand against the other allocation is confirmed. This aims to ensure that the grant is utilised or committed before 31st March 2025. This includes provision to fund food vouchers for the Easter school holidays in 2025.
- 6.3 There are no direct procurement implications arising from the recommendations detailed in the report. Where support is being provided via third party organisations, this is being facilitated via grant agreements, which are outside the scope of procurement legislation. If there is a need to enter

into contracts for goods/services to support this delivery, this must be undertaken in line with both the Council's own Financial and Procurement Procedure Rules (FPPR's) and the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 (as amended).

7. Legal Advice and Implications

7.1 The recommended proposals are in accordance with the conditions of use of the grant. Further, the scheme is consistent with relevant public law principles, in particular it is lawful, fair and rational.

7.2 The Council can support this type of local welfare provision under the "Local authority's general power of competence", as set out in S.1 of the Localism Act 2011 (c. 20). Further Local authorities' have the ability to act in this area under powers contained in other legislation, for example, section 2 of the Local Government Act 2000 enables local authorities to provide financial assistance to any individual.

8. Human Resources Advice and Implications

8.1 There are no Human Resources implications associated with this report.

9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

9.1 The recommended use of Household Support Fund includes issuing vouchers in lieu of free school meals eligible children for school holidays through to Easter 2025 and support for care leavers.

10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

10.1 The objectives of the use of the grants and targeting towards vulnerable households including families with children will contribute to addressing economic and social inequalities. It will have a positive equalities impact.

10.2 Equalities data will be collected as part of administering the programme of support.

11. Implications for CO2 Emissions and Climate Change

11.1 There are no implications for CO2 emissions of climate change.

12. Implications for Partners

12.1. Partner organisation will be engaged in making referrals to support provided under the grant along with direct support to vulnerable households and those struggling with high cost-of-living.

13. Risks and Mitigation

13.1 Risk is primarily centred around achieving, whilst not exceeding spend of the grant.

13.2 The grant conditions have yet to be received and this paper has been predicated on the April – September 2024 conditions and could therefore change. Should changes result in any recommended actions becoming ineligible, and free grant budget would be allocated to the Energy Crisis Support Scheme. Owing to the grant allocation not being advised, the result of any change from the estimate used in the report could be addressed through Energy Crisis Support Scheme allocation. To address this, the recommendations provide for a delegated decision, that unless the final grant is substantially different from the estimate, to delegate authority to the Assistant Chief Executive in consultation with the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Neighbourhood Working, to determine revised and final allocations for the Household Support Grant. This includes provision for other eligible actions within the use of Household Support Fund should it not be possible to achieve full spend of the grant through the approved options.

14. Accountable Officers

Fiona Boden, Head of Policy Performance and Intelligence

Approvals obtained on behalf of Statutory Officers: -

	Named Officer	Date
Chief Executive	Sharon Kemp OBE	04/11/24
Strategic Director of Finance & Customer Services (S.151 Officer)	Judith Badger	17/10/24
Assistant Director of Legal Services (Monitoring Officer)	Phil Horsfield	17/10/24

Report Author: *Fiona Boden*
 Head of Policy, Performance and Intelligence
 Assistant Chief Executive’s Directorate
 Fiona.Boden@rotherham.gov.uk

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