

TITLE OF REPORT: Household Support Fund October 2024 to March 2025

REPORT OF: Darren Collins, Strategic Director, Resources and Digital

Purpose of the Report

1. To seek Cabinet's approval of the Council's proposal for the distribution of the Department of Work and Pensions Household Support Fund (HSF) for the period 1st October 2024 to 31st March 2025.

Background

2. The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) Household Support Fund has been extended until 31st March 2025 providing £1,836,629 of funding.
3. The spirit of the fund remains the same, namely, to support those at risk of going cold or hungry and to help with rising living costs.
4. Various iterations of HSF have been in place since 2020. There is no guarantee that the Government will extend HSF post March 2025 and many local authorities are reviewing their approach to Local Welfare Assistance.
5. The guidance states that local authorities should keep administrative costs to a reasonable level. In previous iterations of the HSF the average administrative spend was no more than 5% of the total allocation.

Proposal

6. Based on the revised guidance from the DWP the following is proposed.

Children – estimated total cost £640,000

7. The number of children eligible for free school meals is around 8,000. It is proposed Gateshead continues to support children through the free school meals provision. This will require an estimated £360,000 to cover the Christmas break and February half term and the vouchers will be administered by the Council. Vouchers for the autumn half term were allocated from the previous HSF round 5.
8. It is proposed to provide an additional payment to each household with children in receipt of Free School Meals at Christmas at a cost of £250,000.
9. Further the proposal would be to allocate £30,000 grant to the Jewish Community Council of Gateshead (JCC) to support children in Jewish schools who do not access free school meals.

Pensioners, unpaid carers, people with disabilities, care leavers - £440,000

10. In support of on-going work to increase the take-up of Benefits it is proposed we provide a grant to Age UK Gateshead to provide advice, information and guidance at a cost of around £40,000. In return, they anticipate they will undertake 345

benefit checks and will support around 270 applicants with applications for Pension Credit, Attendance Allowance, Council Tax, Housing Benefit and Personal Independence Payments.

11. It is proposed the Council uses data from Revenues and Benefits which tells us we have 8,500 pensioners in receipt of Council Tax Support, and from this number approximately 5,000 are in council housing and in receipt of full or partial housing benefit. After a data cleanse to identify duplicates between the two data sets, we propose to provide a single payment grant per household.
12. Further, it is proposed we set aside a sum of money to target those who are “just coping” and who may not be visible to us in our data sets. We will do this by direct referrals and with the help of social care, health providers, councillors, Age UK Gateshead, Older People’s Assembly, Citizens Advice Gateshead, and others.

Support to households through existing and new projects – estimated cost £270,000

13. It is proposed to continue to provide funding to the various groups who have been supporting residents at risk of going cold or hungry.
14. These groups include but are not limited to:
 - Gateshead Foodbank, Food Co-ops, pantries and social supermarkets
 - Feeding families Christmas hamper / voucher appeal
 - Supply of baby milk and other essentials
 - Warm Welcome Network
 - Refreshments in Council Warm Welcome venues
 - Winter Warmer Box project
 - Reconnection of energy and energy grants
 - Citizens Advice Gateshead advice, information and guidance
 - 2 Way Tenancy Support, advice, information and guidance
15. It is proposed to set aside an amount of £250,000 to support these groups. As the funding is only until March 2025 it is proposed to provide single grants through the existing process administered by the Voluntary and Community Development Service. This will reduce administration and aid monitoring.
16. It is proposed we repeat the Energy Roadshow format which was well received by residents and stakeholders. The Energy Roadshows are a collaboration of VCSE, public and health providers working together to increase awareness of the support available to people, and to give practical advice, information and guidance on energy problems, energy efficiency and price comparison. The cost of this will be in the region of £5,000 for 19 roadshows running between October and January.

Remaining funding subject to administration costs around £480,000

17. The guidance states that every area must operate at least part of their scheme on an application basis in other words, people should have the opportunity to come forward to ask for support. There is some flexibility on exactly how this can be run, including operating this either continuously or at intervals during the fund period.
18. The new guidance encourages Authorities to use some of the Household Support Fund to provide support that has a long-term sustainable impact. The previous application scheme in 2023/2024 has seen multiple applications from residents and also a number of issues where larger allocations and more targeted support could

potentially have prevented the escalation of problems e.g. lack of cooking equipment, failing heating systems or large energy debts.

19. The guidance allows Local Authorities to identify vulnerable households, including taking advice or application referrals from professionals who come into contact with vulnerable households such as: social workers, keyworkers delivering early help and family support; health visitors; housing and benefit support officers. The proposal is that the Council continues to accept referrals through this route.
20. The Council must follow the DWP guidance and have a clear rationale and documented framework outlining their approach. It is proposed that the extended HSF application process is amended but continues to base allocations on the principles in the current Council's Local Discretionary payments scheme. It is proposed that the application process:
 - helps target those continually struggling and therefore awards are increased to accommodate people who are experiencing one – off financial shocks or unforeseen events. A clear process will be documented including authorisation of any payment over £500
 - Will operate for a fixed term up to March 2025 or until the funding is exhausted.
 - A more holistic support package in conjunction with Citizens Advice Gateshead is offered and provided where necessary.
 - Payments are made on a first come, first served basis based on the funding remaining
 - Payments where possible will be made by either the existing voucher system or direct award of goods and services.
 - The scheme to be promoted through the website, existing Council Communication channels and the voluntary and community sector

Recommendations

21. It is recommended that:
 - (i) Cabinet support the proposal to support residents at risk of going cold or hungry through the mechanisms above.

for the following reason(s)

- (i) Targeting the groups identified will meet our Thrive policy objectives

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Policy Context

1. Gateshead residents like many throughout the United Kingdom continue to experience cost of living rises, including increases in fuel, interest rates and escalating energy costs.
2. The driver for this work is the Thrive Policy Framework, in particular: -
 - Put people and families at the heart of everything we do
 - Tackle inequality so people have a fair chance
 - Support our communities to support themselves and each other
3. These proposals have regard to the Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Gateshead and the principle of targeting those in greatest need.

Background

4. The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) Household Support Fund has been extended until 31 March 2025, providing £1,836,629 of funding. The spirit of the fund remains the same, namely, to support those at risk of going cold or hungry.
5. The HSF can be used to support households with the cost of food and water bills, essential costs related to energy and with wider household essential costs. In exceptional cases of genuine emergency, it can additionally be used to support housing costs where existing housing support schemes do not meet exceptional circumstances
6. The expectation is that the HSF should be used to support households in the most need. This may include but is not limited to:
 - people who are entitled to, but not claiming, qualifying benefits,
 - people who are claiming Housing Benefit only,
 - people who begin a claim or return to payment of a benefit after the relevant qualifying date
7. There may, however, be groups who are vulnerable to rising prices even though they are supported through these schemes, for example large families or single-income families. 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 people with disabilities.
8. Guidance for this round of the HSF scheme has to be followed and includes the requirement that every area must operate at least part of their scheme on an application basis to ensure there is a route for emergency support i.e. residents should have the opportunity to come forward to ask for support. There is flexibility on exactly how this can be run, including through third parties rather than directly by the Local Authority. The Local Authority are expected to operate such a scheme for the majority of the fund period either continuously or in regular intervals over the course of the scheme.

Proposal

9. Based on the revised guidance from the DWP and the lessons learned from implementing previous rounds of the HSF the following is proposed.

Children – estimated total cost £640,000

10. The number of children eligible for free school meals is around 8,000. It is proposed Gateshead continues to support children through the free school meals provision. This will require an estimated £360,000 to cover the Christmas break and February half term and the vouchers will be administered by the Council. Vouchers for the autumn half term were allocated from the previous HSF round 5.
11. It is also proposed to provide an additional payment to each household with children in receipt of Free School Meals at Christmas at a cost of £250,000.
12. Further the proposal would be to allocate £30,000 grant to the Jewish Community Council of Gateshead (JCC) to support children in Jewish schools who do not access free school meals.

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20. The guidance states that every area must operate at least part of their scheme on an application basis in other words, people should have the opportunity to come forward to ask for support. There is some flexibility on exactly how this can be run, including operating this either continuously or at intervals during the fund period.
21. The new guidance encourages Authorities to use some of the Household Support Fund to provide support that has a long-term sustainable impact. The previous application scheme has seen multiple applications from residents and also a number of issues where larger allocations and more targeted support could potentially have prevented the escalation of problems e.g. lack of cooking equipment, failing heating systems or large energy debts.
22. The guidance allows Local Authorities to identify vulnerable households, including taking advice or application referrals from professionals who come into contact with vulnerable households such as: social workers, keyworkers delivering early help and family support; health visitors; housing and benefit support officers. The proposal is that the Council continues to accept referrals through this route.
23. The Council must follow the DWP guidance and have a clear rationale and documented framework outlining their approach. It is proposed that the extended HSF application process is amended but continues to base allocations on the principles in the current Council's Local Discretionary payments scheme. It is proposed that the application process:
 - helps target those continually struggling and therefore awards are increased to accommodate people who are experiencing one – off financial shocks or unforeseen events. A clear process will be documented including authorisation of any payment over £500
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Consultation

24. The Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council have been consulted on this report.

Alternative Options

25. In previous rounds we have relied partly, although not exclusively, on VCSE partners to distribute the funds on our behalf, but the demand for service placed an intolerable pressure on VCSE agencies and visibility of potential duplication was much restricted. If we were to take this approach again, we would need to resource the VCSE agencies – on previous occasions they worked within their existing resources. However, in smaller agencies it is likely recruitment to short term employment opportunities may be problematic in the current job market, whereas the Council is more likely to be able to resource the work from its much bigger workforce. The administration costs are also limited by the guidance and significantly reducing the possibility to properly fund other organisations.
26. We have used our learning from previous rounds to formulate these proposals. Further, enquiries with neighbouring authorities and our participation in national networking calls suggest our approach is similar to others.

Implications of Recommended Option

27. **Resources:**
- a) **Financial Implications** – All grant money must be spent, not just allocated, by the end of March 2025. Any underspend must be returned to national government, there is no provision for roll over to future programme activity. There is no indication of any further funding from Government beyond March 2025.
 - b) **Human Resources Implications** – We will need to identify and deploy employees to support this work within the administration fee of 5%.
 - c) **Property Implications** - None identified.
28. **Risk Management Implication** - Monitoring of spend is essential to ensure all funds are distributed in a timely fashion to Gateshead residents. Any under-spend needs to be returned to national government.
29. **Equality and Diversity Implications** - Using our network of partners and professional advisers within the Council, the intention is to identify people who may be vulnerable or just coping using a direct referral system. However, there will be people within these groups who may not be visible to us.
30. **Crime and Disorder Implications** – None identified
31. **Health Implications** – There are health implications for a vulnerable person living in a cold home, it increases their chance of serious illness or death. They are at higher risk of a heart attack or stroke, breathing problems, flu, depression and falls¹. Further, research has found that food insecurity is associated with increased risk of some birth defects, anaemia, lower nutrient intakes, cognitive problems, and aggression and anxiety².

¹ National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, Helping to Prevent Winter Deaths and Illnesses Associated with Cold Homes

² Health Affairs, Food Insecurity and Health Outcomes

32. **Climate Emergency and Sustainability Implications** - 9 in 10 households rely on gas boilers. Gas burned in households now equates to half of all imports – that is why any spike in gas prices immediately translates into higher heating bills for the UK.
Adequately insulating homes is a key component of managing energy prices. And yet, the charity National Energy Action has noted that between 2012 and 2019 the number of home insulation installations dropped by 95%, and at current rates it would take nearly a century to properly insulate all the current fuel-poor homes in the country.
33. **Human Rights Implications** - None identified
34. **Ward Implications** - None identified