



## Report to Cabinet

<b>Date:</b>	11 <sup>th</sup> October 2022
<b>Title:</b>	<b>Cost of Living Support for Buckinghamshire Residents</b>
<b>Cabinet Member(s):</b>	Steve Bowles – Cabinet Member for Communities
<b>Contact officer:</b>	Matt Everitt – Service Director, Service Improvement
<b>Ward(s) affected:</b>	None specific
<b>Recommendations:</b>	<b>To note the range of support provided by the Council for individuals experiencing hardship across the county;</b> <b>To approve the arrangements for deploying the new Household Support Fund allocation</b>
<b>Reason for decision:</b>	The Government announced draft allocations for the Household Support Fund on 22 September 2022. This report sets out proposals for use of the funding to provide support for Buckinghamshire residents through to the end of March 2023 in line with Government guidance

This item was submitted under the General Exception Rule under 3.52 of the Cabinet Procedure Rules of the Constitution as it has not been possible to give 28 clear days notice of the decision due to the recent government announcement.

### 1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 As a Council, we recognise the growing pressures being faced by our residents linked to the increases in the cost of living. This report summaries the wide range of support that has been developed this year, together with new initiatives which have been put in place in anticipation of growing hardship over the forthcoming winter.
- 1.2 We are pleased to receive confirmation of the third tranche of Household Support Fund allocation for the period from October 2022 to March 2023.
- 1.3 This builds on the funding we have received from Government since 2020, initially through the Winter Grant and Local Support Grant, and subsequently through the Household Support Fund.

- 1.4 For the period 1<sup>st</sup> April to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2022, Buckinghamshire was awarded £2.4m of funding from the Household Support Fund to provide support for residents in need of help with food, fuel and other essential household costs.
- 1.5 This paper summarises how the previous funding allocation was used, and sets out a proposed use of the additional fund between now and the end of March that will ensure this is targeted to residents in need of support and in line with the Government guidance.
- 1.6 Further information about usage of previous Household Support Fund allocations can be viewed in previous reports:

<https://buckinghamshire.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s42765/Government%20funding%20supporting%20Buckinghamshire%20Residents%202022-05-10%20v1.3%20-%20Cabinet.pdf>

## **2. Cost of Living Initiatives**

- 2.1 Buckinghamshire Council has made further provision to assist residents who are in need, developed through close partnership working, particularly with the voluntary and community sector.
- 2.2 Further information about the range of support available can be found on our website, which has been updated as a comprehensive source of information for people who need support with the cost of living.
  - 2.2.1 Our updated website ensures people can access information about the range of support available, including: support with food, fuel and household bills, finding a place to keep warm, obtaining essential household items, support available from Government, support for pensioners and how to contact the Helping Hand team: <https://www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/cost-of-living/>
- 2.3 The support offer we are developing includes the introduction of Buckinghamshire's Welcoming Spaces.
  - 2.3.1 The council is pledging to develop a network of Welcoming Spaces offering a variety of facilities around the county, with local partner organisations, where residents can come into safe and inclusive spaces, free of charge, to stay warm and enjoy a little company.
  - 2.3.2 The scheme has kick-started with the launch of Buckinghamshire's libraries and community libraries as the first of the Welcoming Spaces venues. Visitors will be welcome for as long as they wish during opening hours and can make use of facilities including free wifi and computer access. Library staff will also be on hand to offer information and support to visitors struggling with the effects of the cost of living crisis.
  - 2.3.3 The council is also keen to support other organisations in local communities to open up as Welcoming Spaces. Work is currently taking place with partners and local communities to develop this plan. More information will be available soon for

interested community groups and organisations with suitable venues to find out more.

- 2.3.4 We are also currently developing a Warm Box offer, to provide further practical support to residents during the winter months. Further information about Warm Boxes will be available on our website.
- 2.4 With our partners Heart of Bucks, we have established a Crisis Fund to raise money to help Buckinghamshire families in need.
  - 2.4.1 We absolutely appreciate the rising costs are impacting everyone, and we also know the incredible generosity that exists in Buckinghamshire and that in times of crisis, it drives many of our residents to want to help or offer financial assistance.
  - 2.4.2 So, with Heart of Bucks, for those in a position to do so, we have invited people to donate what they can into this fund so the money can be best channelled to get support to the people in our communities who need it most.
  - 2.4.3 The Crisis Fund has already raised more than £80,000 in donations, which will be used to support local people who are in the most need with energy, food and other essential costs.
- 2.5 The Buckinghamshire Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme is funded by the Department for Education and provides free, high-quality holiday activity clubs with a healthy hot meal for children from low-income families. The government has confirmed the continuation of the HAF programme for the next two financial years until March 2025. The programme runs in the longer school holiday periods (Easter, summer and Christmas) for children in Reception to Year 11 inclusive who receive benefits-related free school meals.
  - 2.5.1 In 2022 the HAF programme has so far enabled over 3,000 individual children and young people across the county to enjoy over 14,500 holiday activity club sessions and hot meals during the school holidays. With over 4000 holiday activity club sessions planned for Christmas 2022, these numbers will continue to grow. This growth is expected to continue into the 23/24 financial year with additional organisations getting involved; offering an increasing number of holiday sessions.
  - 2.5.2 In 2022, the Council can also offer HAF holiday club places to certain groups of children and young people who are not in receipt of benefits-related free school meals, but who could benefit from HAF provision. This means that we will be able to reach and support more vulnerable children and young people in Buckinghamshire to have a more enjoyable holiday experience. So far 325 individual children and young people in this category have benefited from HAF provision.
- 2.6 In addition to the support we are providing locally, the Government has also provided a range of support including:
  - 2.6.1 A £650 one-off Cost of Living Payment would be available for residents on means tested benefits.

- 2.6.1.1 This includes all households receiving: Universal Credit, Income-based Jobseekers Allowance, Income-related Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support, Working Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit, Pension credit.
- 2.6.1.2 This payment will be made by the Department for Work and Pensions in two lump sums. The first of these will have been delivered from July, with the second payment following in the autumn.
- 2.6.2 The Energy Bills Support Scheme has been doubled to a one-off £400, all households will receive £400 of support with their energy bills via a discount of £66 applied to their energy bills in October and November, rising to £67 each month from December through to March 2023.
- 2.6.3 Pensioner households will receive an extra £300 this year to help cover the rising cost of energy this winter, which will be paid to all pensioner households who receive the Winter Fuel Payment and will be on top of any other one-off support a pensioner household is entitled to.
- 2.6.4 People who are in receipt of particular disability benefits will have received a one-off payment of £150 in September, which is exempt from tax and will not count towards the benefit cap nor will it have any impact on existing benefit awards.

### **3. Household Support Fund 1<sup>st</sup> April – 30<sup>th</sup> September 2022**

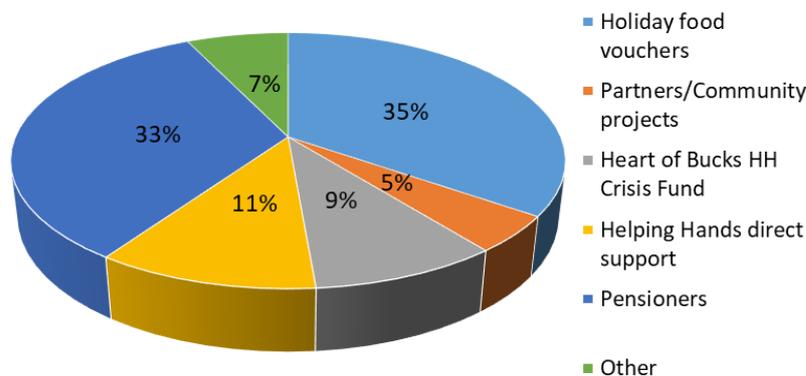
- 3.1 Funding received during this period totalled £2.4m, via the Household Support Fund.
- 3.2 This fund was intended to provide support to vulnerable households in most need of support to help with significantly rising living costs.
- 3.3 The following criteria was specified for use of this fund: at least one-third will be allocated to support families with children, at least one-third will be allocated to pensioners and up to one-third will be allocated to other vulnerable households in need of support.
- 3.4 Within the parameters set out in 3.3, the Household Support Fund could be used to cover:
  - 3.4.1 Energy bills relating to heating, cooking or lighting; and water bills
  - 3.4.2 Support with food costs either through vouchers or cash
  - 3.4.3 Other household essentials – which could 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.
  - 3.4.4 Housing costs could be covered in exceptional circumstances and where existing housing schemes did not meet this exceptional need. For example, the fund could not be used to provide mortgage support but could be used to cover

historic rent arrears that had been built up prior to receipt of other benefits. The fund could not be used to cover mortgage costs and cannot be used to provide debt and financial advice services.

3.4.5 The fund could 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.

3.5 Use of this funding is detailed in Chart 1:

**Chart 1: Household Support Fund  
April 2022 to September 2022**



	April to September 2022
Holiday food vouchers	£834,184
Partners/Community projects	£110,665
Heart of Bucks HH Crisis Fund	£222,800
Helping Hands direct support	£261,540
Pensioners	£800,000
Other	£170,000

3.6 The fund:

- 3.6.1 Funded more than 8,445 Post Office vouchers, each with a value of £90, have been delivered to Pensioners in receipt of Council Tax reduction or who have previously requested support from Helping Hand.
- 3.6.2 Funded more than 26,000 digital food vouchers issued to young people in receipt of Free School Meals/Early Years' Pupil Premium/2-year old funded free education places covering both May Half Term and Summer Holiday Periods.
- 3.6.3 Supported many VCS support activities ranging from Food Banks to Lunch clubs to Hot Meal Delivery schemes, providing support to more than 20,000 households.
- 3.6.4 In total, enabled support to be provided to over 60,000 households, including help with food, help with their energy bills, help to purchase essential white goods and essentials to keep them warm including clothing.

#### 4. Helping Hand

- 4.1 The Helping Hand team have led and coordinated use of these funds across Buckinghamshire for the Council.
- 4.2 This team works collaboratively across internal Council departments and with partners to identify, engage and assist residents who require additional support for Food,

Warmth and Household living costs. This includes with Adult Social Care and Children's Services, and referrals are received from social workers on behalf of their clients.

- 4.3 This service model has enabled the development and maintenance of excellent relationships between the Council and the voluntary and community sector, and ensured that the impact of funding provided through these grants is enhanced through further community based-support in areas of need. For example, we have provided support into community groups where we know there is the greatest need and where perhaps the community were less likely to reach out for support.
- 4.4 This approach has also resulted in better insight and intelligence to enable better understanding of our residents and communities, which can then be used to inform activity and interventions delivered by the Council, by the voluntary and community sector, and by our strategic partners including housing associations and the Department for Work and Pensions.
- 4.5 The Helping Hand delivery model accepts direct application from residents, ensuring that the right support can be provided quickly to those who are in most need.
- 4.6 The Helping Hand Team has delivered awareness raising activity within job centres, with Housing Association Welfare Teams and with the Social Prescriber Network to ensure all those who are engaging with residents are aware of what is available.
- 4.7 There are significant challenges that the service has overcome to enable successful utilisation of these funds for vulnerable residents in Buckinghamshire, including:
  - 4.7.1 Quickly scaling up the offer in line with the Government framework, developing the Helping Hand approach and ensuring visibility for residents and partners
  - 4.7.2 Managing service delivery tightly in line with the Government framework and the short-term nature and notice of the government funding
  - 4.7.3 Ensuring that residents most in need benefited from the funds, including using a broad range of data to identify these cohorts and address stigma that can be associated with asking the Council for help
  - 4.7.4 Establishing at pace appropriate systems, tools and controls for case management, voucher delivery and grant funding to the voluntary and community sector.
- 4.8 Chart 2 shows the number of new applications for support from the Helping Hand service, and indicates a general upward trend over this year to date.



## 5. Household Support Fund 1<sup>st</sup> October 2022 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023

- 5.1 The Household Support Fund is being extended, and this equates to a further £2.4m for Buckinghamshire to use to support residents between 1<sup>st</sup> October 2022 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023.
- 5.2 In line with previous allocations of the Household Support fund, the new fund is intended to provide support to vulnerable households in most need of support to help with significantly rising living costs. Whilst the general purpose of the fund is the same as that provided previously, there are changes to the criteria which offer more flexibility in how the fund is used locally.
- 5.3 Authorities have flexibility within the fund to identify which vulnerable households are in most need of support and apply their own discretion when identifying eligibility, ensuring that residents who are not receiving other means of Government support have access to this fund.
- 5.4 Authorities must operate an application-based service for support to ensure those in need have a route to emergency support.
- 5.5 Within the parameters set out in 5.3, the Household Support Fund can be used to cover:
- 5.5.1 Energy bills relating to heating, cooking or lighting; and water bills
  - 5.5.2 Support with food costs either through vouchers or cash
  - 5.5.3 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

- 5.5.4 Housing costs can be covered in exceptional circumstances and where existing housing schemes do not meet this exceptional need. For example, the fund cannot be used to provide mortgage support but can be used to cover historic rent arrears that have been built up prior to receipt of other benefits
- 5.5.5 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
- 5.5.6 As before, the fund cannot be used to cover mortgage costs and cannot be used to provide debt and financial advice services.

## **6. Proposed allocation of the Household Support Fund 1<sup>st</sup> October 2022 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023**

- 6.1 Table 1 sets out the proposed allocation of the £2.4m that Buckinghamshire will receive from the new Household Support Fund.
- 6.2 These proposals are in line with Government guidance and are modelled around local understanding of need across different categories, informed by local intelligence and previous delivery of support through the Helping Hand service.
- 6.3 Funding will only be used for schemes that are free to residents.
- 6.4 In addition to the allocations listed in Table 1, approximately £170,000 will be used to cover overhead costs in line with the government guidance detailed in 5.5.5.
- 6.5 Residents may be eligible for support across multiple categories listed in Table 1. Residents may also be eligible to receive support on multiple occasions during the period.

**Table 1: Proposed Allocation of Household Support Fund 1<sup>st</sup> October 2022 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023**

Allocation	% of fund	Target group	Type of Support	Delivery mechanism
£500,000	21%	Covering all target groups	All types of support	Application-based service through the Helping Hand team
£820,000	34%	Children/young people: Free School Meals / Early Years Support / Schools / Colleges inc. Afghan/Ukraine refugees	Food Support	Digital food voucher during three school holiday periods (October, December, February) £15 per week
£300,000	13%	Covering all target groups	All types of support	Voluntary and Community organisations providing free support to residents, including Foodbanks
£250,000	10%	Covering all target groups	All types of support	Crisis Fund administered by Heart of Bucks
£360,000	15%	Targeted support for priority cohorts, including Care Leavers, Pensioners	All types of support	Digital Voucher or other appropriate support
£170,000	7%	Covering all target groups	Other costs	Administration costs, including staff costs, web page design, IT system costs and promotional activity and content to raise the profile of the scheme
£2,399,190	100%	Total grant funding allocation for Buckinghamshire		

## 7. Summary

7.1 Buckinghamshire Council is committed to ensuring that vulnerable residents who are most in need receive support via our Helping Hand service.

7.2 The support and intervention we have provided has benefitted many thousands of residents across the County and ensured that families and vulnerable people have had access to food, water, clothing, warmth and other essential items.

7.3 The proposals detailed in this paper 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, to reduce the impact of the increased cost of living crisis, poverty and financial hardship for Buckinghamshire residents.

## **8. Legal and financial implications**

- 8.1 The Secretary of State determines the authorities to which grant is to be paid and the amount of grant to be paid.
- 8.2 The Household Support Fund Grant indicative funding allocation for Buckinghamshire Council for the period 1st October 2022 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023 is £2,399,190.54. 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.
- 8.3 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.
- 8.4 Funding is paid in arrears and following completion of a data return to the Department for Work and Pensions. The amount of grant funding Buckinghamshire receives from the allocation listed in 8.2 will be in line with the evidence provided in the data return. This approach is in line with previous grants and the Helping Hand, Business Intelligence and Finance teams will work together to complete the required returns.
- 8.5 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.
- 8.6 Local Authorities have discretion on exactly how this funding is used within the scope set out in 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 and pensioners who would otherwise struggle with energy bills, food, water bills, other essential household costs and housing costs in exceptional circumstances.
- 8.7 An initial Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed and identified no negative impact from the proposals in this report. A copy of this is available on request. Criteria, eligibility and processes are all being reviewed further to ensure that they comply with equalities requirements.

## **9. Corporate implications**

9.1 This report reflects the priority for the Communities Portfolio to develop the Helping Hand programme to tackle food insecurity in local communities.

## **10. Local councillors & community boards consultation & views**

10.1 Not applicable – Portfolio Holder consulted.

## **11. Communication, engagement & further consultation**

11.1 Following this decision a communications plan will be developed to continue to promote the Helping Hand service and raise awareness of support available to residents who are most in need.

## **12. Next steps and review**

12.1 Following this decision the Helping Hand service will coordinate use of the Household Support Fund in line with the allocations set out in Table 1.

## **13. Background papers**

13.1 Not applicable.

## **14. Your questions and views (for key decisions)**

14.1 If you have any questions about the matters contained in this report please get in touch with the author of this report. If you have any views that you would like the cabinet member to consider please inform the democratic services team. This can be done by telephone [01296 382343] or email [democracy@buckinghamshire.gov.uk]