



## Report to Leader (Communities portfolio)

**Date:** 3 November 2021

**Reference number:** CO02.21

**Title:** **Household Support Fund**

**Cabinet Member(s):** **Steve Bowles (Cabinet Member for Communities)**

**Contact officer:** Gill Harding

**Ward(s) affected:** **All**

### Recommendations:

1. **To agree the Buckinghamshire Scheme for the utilisation of the Household Fund allocation for Buckinghamshire.**
2. **To delegate to the Deputy Chief Executive in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Communities the allocation of the funds in accordance with the Scheme as outlined in the report.**

**Reason for decision:** To enable the £2.4 million grant allocation to be effectively and efficiently utilised across Buckinghamshire supporting financially vulnerable residents during the grant period Oct 6<sup>th</sup> 2021– March 31<sup>st</sup> 2022

### 1. **Executive summary**

As part of the £500m Household Support Grant Fund recently announced by government, Buckinghamshire Council has been awarded £2,399,190.54. The funds are required to be utilised to provide support to a broad cross section of vulnerable households including those who are not in receipt of benefits. Councils have discretion on how to identify and how to support those most in need.

The funding is to support households in the most need with food, energy and water bills during the Winter months. It can also be used to support households with essential costs related to those items and with wider 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 this exceptional need.

## **2. Content of report**

### **2.1 Fund Overview**

In late September Government launched the new Household Support Fund. This £500m fund is to provide support to vulnerable households with essentials (specifically food and warmth support) during the Winter months (06 October 2021 to 31 March 2022) This grant fund operates in parallel to other support schemes such as the Warm Home Discount Scheme and the Holiday Activities and Food Program. Buckinghamshire Council has been awarded £2,399,190.54 from the Household Support Fund.

### **2.2 Grant Conditions**

At least 50% of funding has to be utilised for families with children up to 19 and up to 50% of funding to support other households experiencing/at risk of poverty.

The Fund cannot be used to provide mortgage support, though homeowners could still qualify for the other elements of the fund (such as food, energy, water, essentials linked to energy and water and wider essentials rent or housing costs, and advice on debt management/financial hardship).

The fund cannot be used to support the provision of advice services such as debt advice.

Funding is payable in arrears in 2 tranches following successful verification of a Management Information return (January and April) detailing spend.

Reasonable administration costs can be funded – including staffing, publicity, web design, printing.

### **2.3 Guidance on Delivery Approach**

Councils have flexibility within the scheme to identify which vulnerable households are in most need of support and apply their own discretion when identifying eligibility.

It is expected that the focus of support should be on food and bills and that support for housing costs should only be given in exceptional cases of genuine emergency.

Councils can request applications or can proactively identify households who may benefit or can take a mixture of the two approaches.

Individual awards can be whatever type and amount is deemed appropriate by authorities for the receiving household. Awards to any given household can cover only one of the spend eligibility categories or can cover several.

There is no requirement to undertake a means test or conduct a benefit check however authorities must have a clear rationale or documented policy/framework outlining their approach including how they are defining eligibility and how households access the scheme.

Councils have flexibility to develop a local delivery approach that best fits the scheme's objective. This can involve the use of third parties to deliver this grant on their behalf.

Councils may choose to offer support to families in receipt of Free School Meals, if they consider this to be appropriate in their area.

Councils can provide cash, vouchers or pay direct into bank accounts, having regard to fraud implications.

### **3. The proposed Buckinghamshire Scheme**

#### **3.1 Principles**

The proposed scheme for Buckinghamshire is based on the following principles:

- Take a proactive approach to identifying those at risk, drawing on council data, professionals and partners insight
- Engage those who work with vulnerable people to design the offer
- Promote choice and dignity for those at risk
- Work through existing schemes/commissioned services wherever possible to avoid duplication
- Appropriate administration processes will need to be developed especially to ensure those residents who are in most need receive the appropriate level of support
- Take opportunities for joint working/match funding to maximise support for vulnerable households beyond the terms of the grant & avoid duplication.

### 3.2 Eligibility

Those eligible for support under the scheme will include:

- Children/young people in receipt of free school meals/pupil premium/early years support
- Vulnerable children known to the council (including Care Leavers, Children in Care, Children in Need, Children with Disabilities)
- Children/Young Adults highlighted by educational establishments as requiring additional support
- Vulnerable adults known to the council or highlighted by key partners as requiring additional support
- Families/individuals in receipt of council tax support/housing benefit
- Individuals/families affected by domestic violence
- Individuals/families resettled following custodial sentence
- Asylum seeking and refugee families
- Individuals/Families in receipt of Council Tax Support
- People in debt/experiencing financial hardship, including elderly residents

On this basis, according to current data sources, over 25,000 households could be eligible for support under the scheme.

### 2.5 Delivery Model for Buckinghamshire

Key elements of the delivery model include:

- Food vouchers via educational establishments for those children/young people in receipt of free school meals/Early Years Support for Christmas, February half term and Easter holiday periods.
- Promotion of the Council's Helping Hands offer to support vulnerable households with food/utility support, essential white goods/beds, winter clothing, coats & duvets). Residents can make direct requests to the Helping Hand team by visiting [www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/helping-hand](http://www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/helping-hand), emailing [Helpinghands@buckinghamshire.gov.uk](mailto:Helpinghands@buckinghamshire.gov.uk) or calling 01296 531151.
- Expansion of the Crisis Fund approach through Heart of Bucks to support households with energy/utility costs and broader household costs.
- Expansion of the Fuel Grant Payment Scheme operated through Citizens Advice Bucks.
- Grant support to VCSE projects which directly meet the purpose of the scheme (e.g. food support organisations, hot meal schemes).

Use of existing networks and data to identify those who require additional assistance and promote the Helping Hand scheme to them (including the social workers, health visitors, voluntary and community sector, housing associations, DWP etc).

## **4. Other options considered**

- 4.1 The options outlined above for the delivery of this grant fund have been developed utilising both the lessons learned from the Winter Grant/Local Support Grant scheme and exploring suggested approaches from a number of authorities. It provides a broad spectrum of support approaches which should ensure that those who are in most need of support, receive it.
- 4.2 Alternative approaches could include just utilising particular cohorts e.g. pupils in receipt of FSM and just utilising a voucher approach to these families. Or providing food vouchers to all those receiving Council Tax support.
- 4.3 The above approaches are not recommended as they don't provide the spectrum of support required for a range of residents who are in need and the support may be short lived.

## **5. Legal and financial implications**

- 5.1 The financial implications will be limited to the fund allocation and overheads for administering the fund can be covered from the fund allocation. It is worth highlighting though that the fund will be paid in arrears following successful completion of an MI return in January and April. Regular engagement with DWP relating to the Buckinghamshire approach should minimise any risk of not receiving the full allocation.
- 5.2 Whilst no specific legal implications arise from the report, it is good governance practice to ensure that the spending of public money is in accordance with objective, non-discriminatory criteria as proposed in this Scheme for the allocation of this Household Fund.

## **6. Corporate implications**

- 6.1 This plan will help to deliver three of the four corporate priorities for Buckinghamshire Council:
- strengthening our communities
  - protecting the vulnerable
  - increasing prosperity

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

- 7.1 Due to the challenging timeframe to develop and deliver the plan for the Household Support Fund there has been no specific consultation ahead of this report however the proposal does build on previous schemes and relevant feedback has been incorporated. The proposal also provides the flexibility to be able to respond to feedback and adapt the support provided as appropriate.

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

- 8.1 An extensive communication campaign will be undertaken to ensure that there is good awareness of the scheme amongst those groups that could be eligible for support, as well as those who have an important role in referrals, including elected members, professionals, voluntary and community sector.

## **9 Next steps and review**

- 9.1 A detailed program plan will be developed for the delivery of the Household Support Fund and will be regularly reviewed to ensure the program effectively delivers the Fund.

