



Report to Cabinet

Date:	9 May 2023
Title:	Cost of Living Support for Buckinghamshire Residents
Cabinet Member(s):	Steve Bowles – Cabinet Member for Communities
Contact officer:	Matt Everitt – Service Director, Business Intelligence and Community Support
Ward(s) affected:	None specific
Recommendations:	To note the range of support provided by the Council for individuals experiencing hardship across the county To approve the arrangements for deploying the new Household Support Fund allocation
Reason for decision:	The Government announced final allocations for the Household Support Fund on 20 th February 2023. This report sets out proposals for use of the funding to provide support for Buckinghamshire residents between April 2023 and March 2024 inline with Government guidance.

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. We have developed and delivered a range of initiatives this year to support residents and staff in regard to these cost of living pressures; and have committed to ensuring the continuation of our Helping Hand service to provide support to residents who need it most.

- 1.2 We are pleased to receive confirmation of the fourth tranche of Household Support Fund grant allocation for the period from April 2023 to March 2024, which will be used to continue to provide essential support to residents during the year.
- 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 Previous allocations of the Household Support Fund were awarded for a 6-month period only. For the period 1st October 2022 to 31st March 2023, 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 outlines the support we have provided, and continue to provide, to support residents with cost-of-living pressures. This paper also details how the previous Household Support Fund allocation was used and sets out a proposed use of the new allocation between 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024, ensuring that 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/ieDecisionDetails.aspx?ID=865>



**helping
hand**

Helping Hand 2022/2023

Applications and support provided
1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023



11,390
Total applications



17,146
Total provisions



4,758
Individuals
receiving provisions

Provisions

1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023

17,146
Total provisions



5,040
Referrals



1,538
White goods



990
Essential goods



9,144
Food and fuel



434
Grants

Community Support - School Holiday Vouchers 2022/2023

School Holidays



May Half-Term
13,000



Feb Half-Term
14,139



Summer Holiday
13,650



Easter Holiday
14,500



October Half-Term
13,700



Christmas Holiday
13,950

Total Vouchers Delivered
82,939

2. Cost of Living Initiatives

2.1 Buckinghamshire Council has continued to make further provision to assist both residents and employees who are in need, developed through close partnership working, particularly with the voluntary and community sector.

2.2 Key initiatives have included:

2.2.1 Development of a comprehensive support package for Buckinghamshire Council employees including a dedicated section on the intranet, webinars delivered by Citizens Advice on Debt and Money Management, an Employee Hardship fund for employees who are facing significant challenges, additional support payments to all staff, the launch of an office pantry scheme and development of a cost-of-living staff network.

2.2.2 The relaunch of the Food Champions Network – inviting residents to assist with generating donations for food support organisations.

2.2.3 The launch of Welcoming Spaces where people can come together in a warm, safe and supportive environment. These have been delivered in collaboration with local partner organisations, to provide safe and inclusive spaces for residents to access, free of charge, to stay warm, enjoy a little company and make use of facilities available including Wi-Fi. Initially launched in our Council and Community Libraries there are now over 50 listed on the Bucks Online Directory.

2.2.4 The provision of Warm Boxes, providing key items to enable residents to keep warm and distributed through our county libraries and other key sites.

2.2.5 The Christmas Giving appeal - organising food bank collection points in council offices and encouraging donations in supermarkets.

2.2.6 Developing an Energy Doctor scheme to support eligible households with smaller energy efficiency measure such as draught-proofing and energy saving lightbulbs.

2.3 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:

<https://www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/cost-of-living/>

2.4 In partnership with Heart of Bucks, we established a Crisis Fund to raise money to help Buckinghamshire residents in need. Whilst appreciating that the ongoing rising costs are impacting everyone, we also know the incredible generosity that exists in Buckinghamshire and during the cost-of-living crisis many of our residents have wanted to help or offer financial assistance. With Heart of Bucks, for those in a position to do so, we invited people to donate what they could into this fund so the money can be best channelled to get support to the people in our communities who need it most.

2.4.1 This Crisis Fund has raised more than £182,000 in donations, which is being 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 Throughout 2022 the HAF programme enabled over 5,001 individual children and young people across the county to enjoy over 17,500 holiday activity club sessions and hot meals during the school holidays. The range of activities on offer throughout 2022 increased with the inclusion of 'added value' providers who offered one off activities such as mobile farms, roller discos and beatbox workshops. This, alongside the inclusion of family events, take home activity packs and HAF activity booklets, strengthened the offer in Buckinghamshire. With over 5,500 holiday activity club sessions planned for Easter 2023, the number of children accessing HAF is expected to grow during the 23/24 financial year with additional organisations getting involved and offering an increasing number of holiday sessions.

2.5.2 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. Across 2022, 496 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 delivered through DWP in 2022 to residents on means tested benefits. This support was extended in the Autumn 2022 statement with an announcement that further payments would be made of £300 in Spring 23, £300 in Autumn 23 and a £299 payment made in Spring 2024.

2.6.2 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.

2.6.3 The Energy Bills Support Scheme, which provided all households with £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.

2.6.4 In early 2023, a scheme was introduced to ensure those off-grid (who were eligible) also received this support. In addition, the Alternative Fuels Payment scheme was introduced for households who used alternative fuels for heating. The Energy Price guarantee scheme has also been extended from April 2023 to April 2024.

2.6.5 Pensioner households received an extra £300 in 2022 to help cover the rising cost of energy over the winter, and this was paid to all pensioner households

who receive the Winter Fuel Payment on top of any other one-off support a pensioner household is entitled to. In the 2022 Autumn statement it was announced that this would be repeated in the Winter of 2023.

2.6.6 People who are in receipt of particular disability benefits received a one-off payment of £150 in September, which was exempt from tax and did not count towards the benefit cap nor will it have impacted on existing benefit awards. This scheme was extended in the 2022 Autumn statement with a further payment being made in summer 2023.

3. Household Support Fund 1st October 2022 to 31st March 2023

3.1 Funding allocated 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. Authorities had flexibility within the fund to identify which vulnerable households were in most need of support and apply their own discretion when identifying eligibility, ensuring that residents who were not receiving other means of Government support had access to this fund.

3.3 Authorities were required to operate an application-based service for support to ensure those in need had a route to emergency support.

3.4 Within the parameters set out in 3.2, 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.

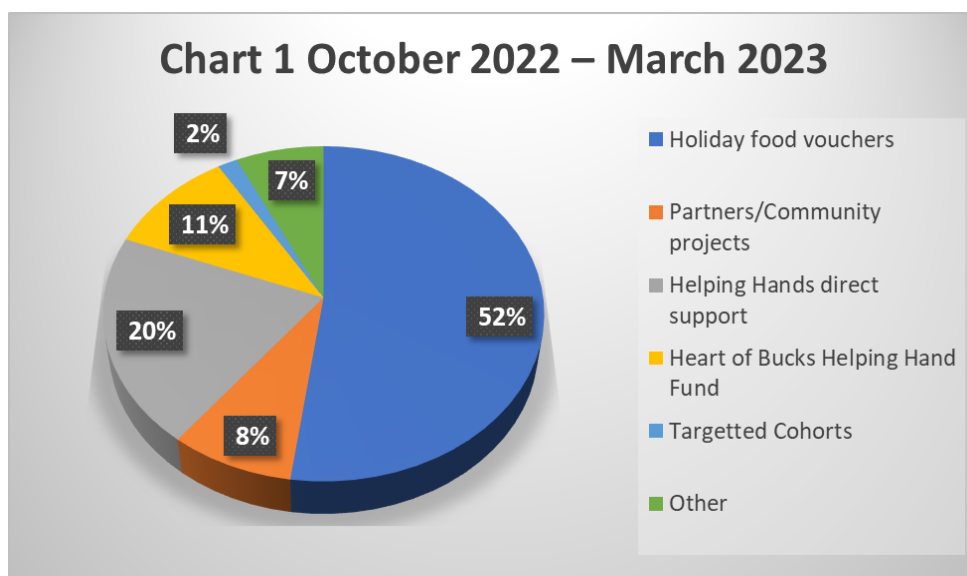
3.4.3 Other household essentials – this may include those linked to energy and water, for example sanitary products, boiler repair or servicing, warm clothing, purchase of fridge/freezers; or for wider essentials, for example broadband costs, phone costs, clothing, transport-related costs such as car repairs.

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 have been built up prior to receipt of other benefits.

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.

3.4.6 As before, the fund could not be used to cover mortgage costs and could not be used to provide debt and financial advice services.

3.5 Allocated use of this funding is detailed in Chart 1:



3.6 The fund between October 2022 and March 2023 has:

- 3.6.1 Funded more than 56,200 digital food vouchers issued to, on average, 14,000 young people during October Half Term, Christmas, February Half Term and Easter Holidays. Eligible young people are those in receipt of Free School Meals/Early Years' Pupil Premium/2-year-old funded free education places.
- 3.6.2 Funded local food banks who have supported approximately 44,450 adults and children between October 2022 and March 2023.
- 3.6.3 Supported over 30 voluntary and community sector support activities ranging from cookery courses to lunch clubs benefitting over 84 adults and 299 children.
- 3.6.4 Supported over 380 Care Leavers with the provision of supermarket vouchers.
- 3.6.5 Supported 41 households, via a Heart of Bucks grant, with housing costs and arrears, without which these households would have been at serious risk of homelessness and may have required temporary accommodation.
- 3.6.6 The Helping Hand team directly delivered over £490,000 value of support to residents through purchasing essential white goods and essentials to keep them warm including clothing and other essential items.

4. Helping Hand

4.1 The Helping Hand team has led and coordinated use of these funds across Buckinghamshire for the Council, and has continued to provide an application-based service in line with the requirements set out by Government.

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 working 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 applications 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 The number of direct applications received by the Helping Hand team since 1st April 2022 and the number of services provided is detailed in the tables below:

Table 1: 1 April 2022 – 30 Sept 2022	
Total direct applications:	5,067
Total services delivered:	8,771
Unique people receiving services:	2,933

Table 2: 1 Oct 2022 – 22 Mar 2023	
Total direct applications:	5,845
Total services delivered:	8,134
Unique people receiving services:	2,792

4.9 Table 3 shows a breakdown of the type of services being delivered following direct application into the Helping Hand team:

Table 3 - Services Delivered					
1 April 2022 – 30 Sept 2022			1 Oct 2022 – 22 Mar 2023		
Service	Quantity	%	Service	Quantity	%
Referrals	2685	31%	Referrals	2218	27%
White Goods	707	8%	White Goods	790	10%
Wider Essential Goods	429	5%	Wider Essential Goods	540	7%
Food & Fuel	4715	54%	Food & Fuel	4308	53%
Grants	235	3%	Grants	278	3%
Total	8771		Total	8134	

4.10 Applications in to the Helping Hand team are often complex. An example recently was of a young man, fleeing honour based violence and domestic abuse. He fled without any ID and was placed in temporary accommodation. Had no access to a GP, no bank account, no phone and no money. Our team worked with the P3 Housing Charity to ensure benefits could be applied for. Food vouchers were issued, the team supported him to register with a GP and successfully applied for a grant to clear rent arrears and support with living costs until he received his first benefit payment.

4.11 Another example includes a father and 15-year-old son. The father is unable to read and write. The mother died a couple of years ago, the family were then evicted from their home and subsequently the family has been struggling financially after moving in to a private rented property. The father thought he was receiving additional benefits for his disability but because he can't read he hadn't realised that these had stopped last year. The Helping Hand team asked the Family Support Worker to re-apply for his Personal Independence Payment. A Heart of Bucks grant was awarded to clear his

electric and gas debt and support with living costs whilst waiting for his benefits to be re-assessed.

5. Household Support Fund 4 - April 2023 to March 2024

- 5.1 It has now been confirmed by Department for Work and Pensions that the Household Support Fund is being extended. The fourth tranche of the Household Support Fund will cover a 12 month period and this equates to a further £4.8m for Buckinghamshire to use to support residents between 1st April 2023 and 31st March 2024.
- 5.2 In line with previous allocations of the Household Support fund, the new fund is intended to provide crisis support to vulnerable households in most need of support to help with significantly rising living costs.
- 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. Local Authorities are expected to use the wide range of data and sources of information at their disposal, including through engagement with relevant Third Party Organisations, to identify and provide support to a broad cross section of vulnerable households to prevent escalation of problems.
- 5.4 Authorities must operate an application-based service for support to ensure those in need have a route to crisis support throughout the duration of the fund, either continuously over the majority of the fund period or in regular intervals throughout the scheme.
- 5.5 The main change to the fourth tranche of the Household Support Fund is that it may be used to provide supplementary advice services to award recipients, including debt and benefit advice, where Authorities consider this appropriate. However, it has been made clear that the primary intention of the fund is to provide crisis support for households, and its use for any advice services would need to complement this. It is clearly articulated in the guidance that there must be a connection between the funding provided for advice services and the practical support provided through this funding.
- 5.6 The guidance clearly states how Local Authorities should use their local insight and intelligence to determine the beneficiaries of the fund, and it is specifically highlighted that support to both disabled people and those with caring responsibilities should be considered given the disproportionate impact that rising costs have had on these residents.
- 5.7 There is a requirement to provide quarterly returns during the HSF4 grant period with the final return to cover the whole period due by 26 April 2024.
- 5.8 Within the parameters set out in 5.3, the fund can be used to cover:
 - 5.8.1 Energy bills relating to heating, cooking or lighting; and water bills

- 5.8.2 Support with food costs either through vouchers or cash
- 5.8.3 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
- 5.8.4 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. As before, the fund cannot be used to cover mortgage costs.
- 5.8.5 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
- 5.8.6 A change from previous funds is that this fund may be used to provide supplementary advice services to award recipients, including debt and benefit advice, where Authorities consider this appropriate however it is clearly stated that this Fund is to provide crisis support for households, and that any advice services would be to complement this practical support.

6. Proposed allocation of the Household Support Fund April 2023 – March 2024

- 6.1 Local Authorities are required to complete a delivery plan to outline their intentions for The Fund, clearly setting out their priorities and approach for use of the Fund, and to demonstrate the ways in which they intend to allocate their funding. The delivery plan will be sent to the Department for Work and Pensions by 17 May 2023.
- 6.2 Table 4 sets out the proposed allocation of the £4.8m that Buckinghamshire will receive from the new Household Support Fund.
- 6.3 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.
- 6.4 Funding will only be used for schemes that are free to residents.
- 6.5 In addition to the allocations listed in Table 4, approximately £340,000 will be used to cover overhead costs in line with the government guidance. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/household-support-fund-guidance-for-local-councils/1-april-2023-to-31-march-2024-household-support-fund-guidance-for-county-councils-and-unitary-authorities-in-england>
- 6.6 Residents may be eligible for support across multiple categories listed in Table 4, and may be eligible to receive support on multiple occasions during the period.

Table 4: Proposed Allocation of Household Support Fund April 2023 – March 2024

Indicative Allocation	% of fund	Target group	Type of Support	Delivery mechanism
£700,381	15%	Covering all target groups	All types of support	Application-based service through the Helping Hand team
£2,258,000	47%	Children/young people: Free School Meals / Early Years Support / Schools / Colleges inc. Afghan/Ukraine refugees	Food Support	Digital food voucher during school holiday periods (October, December, February, May and Easter) Up to £15 per week Summer Holiday £50 for full holiday
£400,000	8%	Covering all target groups	All types of support	Voluntary and Community organisations providing free support to residents, including Foodbanks
£500,000	10%	Covering all target groups	All types of support	Grant and/or Direct Support for Utility arrears through different schemes including Helping Hand Fund administered by Heart of Bucks.
£600,000	13%	Targeted support for priority cohorts, including Care Leavers, Pensioners, residents with disabilities, residents with caring responsibilities.	All types of support	Digital Voucher or other appropriate support
£340,000	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
£4,798,381	100%	Total grant funding allocation for Buckinghamshire		

Please note that allocations above are indicative. Actual spend will vary in line with resident need and emerging pressures during 2023/24, for example if there is a shortfall in Discretionary Housing Payment during the year this may create additional demand for financial support through the Helping Hand team.

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 April 2023 to 31st March 2024 is £4,798,381. 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.

9. Local councillors & community boards consultation & views

9.1 Not applicable – Portfolio Holder consulted.

10. Communication, engagement & further consultation

10.1 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.

11. Next steps and review

11.1 Following this decision, the Helping Hand service will coordinate use of the Household Support Fund in line with the allocations set out in Table 4.

12. Background papers

12.1 Not applicable.

13. Your questions and views (for key decisions)

13.1.1 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 email [democracy@buckinghamshire.gov.uk]