

**Decision Report – Lead Member Executive
Decision**

Forward Plan Reference: FP/23/05/02

Decision Date – 23/5/2023

Key Decision – yes



Household Support Fund 2023-24

Executive Member(s): Deputy Leader of the Council and Lead Member for Resources and Performance

Lead Officer: Louise Palmer, Strategic Commissioner

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Summary / Background

1. On the 6th October 2021 the Department of Work & Pensions (DWP) wrote to Local Authorities to announce the Household Support Fund grant (HSF) to support those most in need with the cost of living. The sum allocated to Somerset was £3,820,415.56 to help with the cost of food, energy bills and other essentials between 6th October 2021 and 31st March 2022.
2. The first programme was extended for a further two rounds. Since the beginning of the programme, the Household Support Fund has been successfully distributed in Somerset, with the current round of funding due to end on March 31st 2023.
3. The DWP have extended this grant for twelve months from April 1st 2023 to March 31st 2024. The total grant for Somerset is £7,640,831, to be distributed throughout the year. The grant will be paid to the local authority in arrears of expenditure, based on data returns submitted in June and October 2022.
4. DWP guidance gives boundaries on the type of support which can be offered through this scheme:

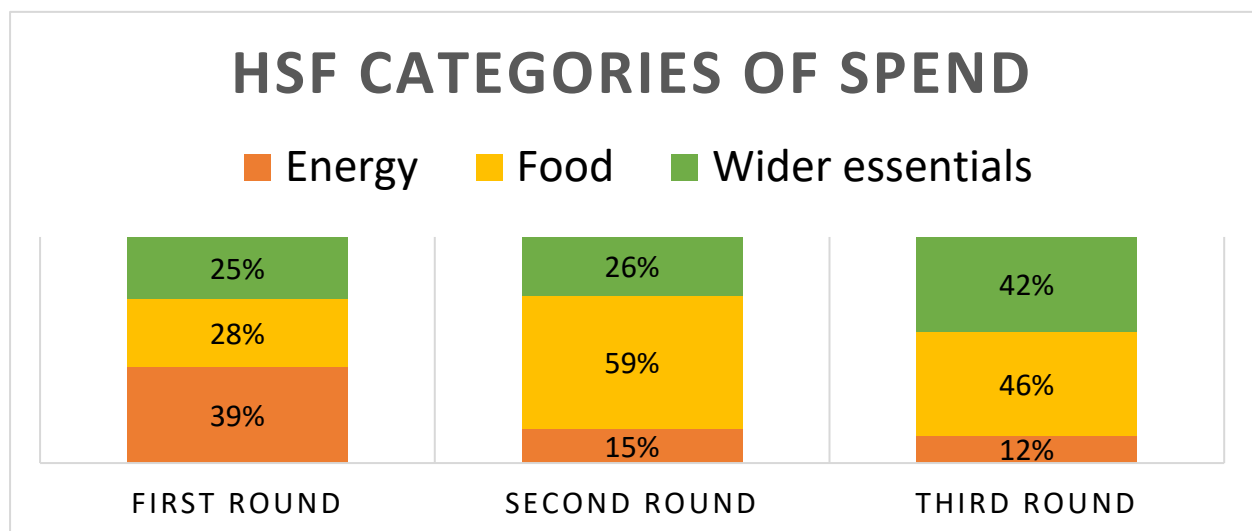
- An application-based service for the public is required.
- The fund should primarily be used to support energy bills.
- The fund can also be used for support with food, and essentials such as white goods, clothing and essential transport-related costs. There is no prescriptive definition of essentials.
- Advice services, including debt and benefit advice, can be funded. Guidance is clear that ‘we would not expect a large portion of funding to be spent on advice services’ and this must be linked to the essential funding listed above.

5. Financial advice and guidance has not previously been eligible for funding under this scheme.

6. Commissioners and finance officers will ensure compliance with scheme guidance, legal requirements, Somerset Council financial management requirements and contract standing orders.

Distribution of Funds

7. There have been three 6-month rounds of funding so far, each providing £3.8m for Somerset residents



8. The last two rounds, totalling £7.6m in 22/23 have been spent through four main distribution routes:

1. A public and professional-access website where applications for funding can be made against agreed criteria through the Auriga portal. Front-line workers in Somerset Council and partner VCSE organisations such as the Village Agents, Health Visitors and	£3.3m
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Social Workers can apply for funding on behalf of vulnerable people and families, and individuals can apply themselves.	
2. Free school Meal vouchers in each school holiday period, administered by schools.	£2.3m
3. Voluntary sector and statutory worker support to reach under-represented communities, including funding distributed through the Somerset Community Foundation and SASP providing weekend warm spaces with activities for families and teenagers.	£850k
4. Targeted funding to every Somerset resident in receipt of Pension Credit.	£1.2m

9. It will be important to be flexible in response to need throughout the year. Ongoing discussions with partners will highlight emerging areas of need and different ways of responding. Specific decisions on allocation of funding will be brought to the Children, Young People and Families Board for governance.

Recommendations

10. The Deputy Leader of the Council and Lead Member for Resources and Performance endorses the approach in consultation with the Lead Member for Children, Families and Education and the Lead Member for Adult Social Care, and authorises:
- a) Somerset Council to accept the HSF grant of £7,640,831 to be used in line with the published guidance to meet the needs of vulnerable households in Somerset
 - b) To agree an allocation of the grant to an online portal, allowing people to apply for funding themselves, or for professionals to apply on their behalf
 - c) To agree an allocation of the grant to ensure under-represented communities are able to access funding
 - d) To agree an allocation of the grant to fund support to children and families in receipt of Free School Meals during the holiday periods
 - e) To agree an allocation of the grant for financial advice and guidance in line with the guidance detailed above
 - f) To agree an allocation of the grant for targeted funding to Somerset residents in receipt of Pension Credit
 - g) To agree the oversight of spending decisions to be delegated to the Children, Young People and Families Board

Reasons for recommendations

11. It is nationally and locally recognised that many households will be challenged in the coming year as the cost of living continues to be high.
12. To ensure as many vulnerable households as possible are identified, engaged and supported, it is important that a range of delivery routes and arrangements are in place. This requires a partnership of agencies and organisations working within a framework which provides clarity on eligibility, the range of support provision available, a maximum claim level and data reporting requirements.
13. Across Somerset many public and voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector organisations have contact with and provide support for vulnerable households which may need, and be eligible for, additional support via the HSF scheme. Arrangements will be developed to make good use of existing engagements and touch points, and to utilise data and local intelligence to proactively identify households to which support should be offered.
14. Wherever possible, HSF will be delivered via existing mechanisms and organisations which have the tools and expertise, such as schools, health visitors and social workers. Support provided via HSF will be aligned with – and possibly delivered alongside – established assistance schemes to ensure households can be engaged in solving their longer-term challenges.

Other options considered

15. Within the delivery options outlined in this document, consideration was given to focus funding purely online, which is allowable under the Government's guidance. This option was not taken, as it would limit the potential recipients to those who had internet access, and those who were computer literate.

Links to Council Plan and Medium-Term Financial Strategy

16. The proposal links with the Council Plan by:
 - Supporting the Education for Life Strategy, Connect Somerset and the Early Help Strategy
 - Supporting the Somerset Council Business Plan's four priorities

- A greener, more sustainable Somerset – the majority of this work is online and/or using local support
- A healthy and caring Somerset – this work demonstrates care and provides support for health, by ensuring the most vulnerable in our society have the essentials they need.
- A fairer, ambitious Somerset – by ensuring people have access to essentials such as food and fuel
- A flourishing and resilient Somerset

Financial and Risk Implications

17. The Secretary of State has allocated funding to Somerset Council via the Household Support Fund grant programme. The grant is paid to Somerset Council on the conditions set out in the letter dated 20th February 2023 and accompanying guidance. The conditions relate to eligibility for support and the nature of the support (categories of spend) to be provided. There are audit and reporting requirements set out in the offer letter and accompanying guidance which Somerset Council is required to meet. Failure to ensure that the programme is delivered in accordance with the conditions may result in the funding being clawed back. The proposals will be funded by the grant announced by DWP on the 20th February 2023.
18. If the decision is not made or proposals are not complete and coherent there is a risk that Somerset will not receive all the funding from DWP and households will have less access to support.
19. There is no risk of overspend as the funding will be allocated via agreed proposals to support an identified cohort in line with agreed eligibility criteria to an agreed maximum expenditure. Funding is claimed from the DWP following submission of activity reports and management information.

Legal Implications

20. Proposals in this decision paper will ensure delivery of support is in line with scheme guidance and reporting requirements. Where the council appoints contractors to distribute funding on its behalf or to assist with distribution there may be procurement law implications and specific advice will be sought.

HR Implications

21. There are no HR implications associated with distributing this funding in the way recommended.

Other Implications:

Equalities Implications - See Equalities Impact Assessment for further detail.

22. Positive equalities implications

Support through this grant will be available to vulnerable households experiencing financial challenges. Families and individuals likely to be eligible for support will generally be from more disadvantaged backgrounds and are likely to experience other aspects of disadvantage.

23. Negative equalities implications

Primary concerns relate to ensuring all eligible households can access the support. Delivery via a range of mechanisms and partner organisations will address this concern.

Community Safety Implications

24. The programme is expected to have a positive impact on community safety by helping ensure reduced financial pressure in households and communities affected by a range of health and social inequalities.

Climate Change and Sustainability Implications

25. The majority of support and grant funding will be delivered by Somerset-based partner organisations and online. The scheme will therefore not have a significant environmental impact.

Health and Safety Implications

26. There are no health and safety implications associated with the grant being distributed in line with the recommendations above.

Health and Wellbeing Implications

27. Distribution of the grant and provision of food support in line with the recommendations will have a positive impact on health and wellbeing by:
- Reducing immediate economic pressure and supporting some of Somerset's most disadvantaged households.
 - Reducing risk of mental and physical ill-health in children and young people and other vulnerable groups.
 - Supporting family and community cohesion by reducing stress in already disadvantaged groups.

Social Value

28. Due consideration of social value has been applied. Delivery of the grant aid and support via a range of mechanisms and Somerset-based partner organisations will provide opportunities to link into and develop longer term solutions to poverty and disadvantage which in their turn support community coherence and resilience. Delivery of publicly funded programmes via VCSE organisations provides social value impact beyond the purely financial value of the programme.

Scrutiny comments / recommendations:

29. The proposal has not been considered by a Scrutiny Committee

Background Papers

30. Guidance and grant determination: [1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024: Household Support Fund guidance for county councils and unitary authorities in England - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

Report Sign-Off

	Officer Name	Date Completed
Legal & Governance Implications	David Clark	26/4/2023
Communications	Chris Palmer	26/4/2023
Finance & Procurement	Jason Vaughan	10/4/2023

Workforce	Chris Squire	11/4/2023
Asset Management	Oliver Woodhams	11/4/2023
Executive Director / Senior Manager	Claire Winter	10/4/2023
Strategy & Performance	Alyn Jones	25/4/2023
Executive Lead Member	Cllr Liz Leyshon, in consultation with Cllr Tessa Munt, Cllr Heather Shearer	4/5/2023
Consulted:	Councillor Name	
Opposition Spokesperson	Cllr Frances Nicholson and Cllr Sue Osborne and Cllr Mandy Chilcott	5/5/2023 5/5/2023 17/5/2023
Scrutiny Chair, Adults and Health	Cllr Gill Slocombe	5/5/2023
Scrutiny Chair, Children and Families	Cllr Leigh Redman	5/5/2023