

Report title	Runnymede Welfare Support policies
Report author	Linda Norman, Corporate Head of Customer, Digital & Collection Services
Department	Housing Benefits
Exempt?	No

Purpose of report:

- **To resolve**

Synopsis of report:

To approve the Household Support Fund eligibility criteria and policy for tranche 6 to ensure the Council continues to provide as much support as possible to residents with the current cost of living crisis.

To introduce a Runnymede Residents Support Fund to provide emergency assistance when government funding is no longer available and approve a budget of £15,000 to fund the scheme.

Each scheme should meet the seasonal demand for fuel during the colder winter months and where possible react to changes in demand for support for the remainder of the financial year.

Recommendation(s):

The Committee approves:

- **The Household Support Fund eligibility criteria and policy for tranche 6 that ensures the Council continues to provide as much support as possible to residents with the current cost of living crisis.**
- **To approve the eligibility criteria of a Runnymede Residents Support Fund to ensure continued support for residents when Household Support Fund funding has closed or been depleted.**
- **To approve the virement of £15,000 from Members Allowances' existing budget to fund the new Runnymede Residents Support Fund**

1. Context and background of report

1.1 The Government extended the Household Support Fund (5) for vulnerable households until September 2024. This provided crucial relief to struggling residents in Runnymede who were facing difficulties with food, energy, water bills, and other essential expenses amidst the ongoing global inflationary crisis and rising cost of living.

1.2 Payment is made under Section 31 Local Government Finance Act 2003. Runnymede Borough Council has previously been allocated £125, 668 to support families who

have been adversely impacted. This grant includes money to cover the costs of set up and administering the scheme.

- 1.3 In August 2024, the Government announced a further extension to the Household Support Fund (6) to provide additional support until March 2025. Runnymede have yet to be advised of the award to deliver this scheme.
- 1.4 Pursuant to the Localism Act 2011, Runnymede has the authority to establish a discretionary relief scheme benefiting the local community.
- 1.5 The Council currently administers Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP), and Council Tax Hardship (CTH) policies specifically designed to assist residents with housing and Council Tax costs. While the Government provides annual funding for DHP administration, the Council must allocate funds from its existing budget for CTH. The DHP budget for 24/25 is approximately 148k with £30k ringfenced for council tenants. The CTH budget stands at approximately £39k. The Council has spent on average £7,700 per year for the past three years and as such, the current budget is sufficient to support individual requests.

2. Report and, where applicable, options considered and recommended

- 2.1 Given the late announcement of the Government's extension to the Household Support Fund (6), it is advisable to establish a separate, long-term scheme. This scheme could be funded through existing budgets or external sources like donations to ensure the Council's continued support for vulnerable households facing difficulties with food, energy bills, and other essential expenses, should government funding cease.
- 2.2 The Household Support Fund (6) has been reviewed to include some important amendments. Notably, the introduction of a winter warm pack, an increase in eligibility criteria from £33,000 to £38,300, and the expansion of Huggg vouchers for essential energy-efficient appliances have been included. Additionally, the Council has maintained its popular school uniform support program, ensuring that children from disadvantaged families can access necessary school supplies.
- 2.3 The Household Support Fund (6) is distributed to top-tier authorities, who subsequently determine the allocation to district councils for local administration. Surrey County Council (SCC) has not yet communicated the specific amount Runnymede will receive. It is anticipated that the grant will be lower than previous tranches as SCC prioritises its funding distribution across the county.
- 2.4 To mitigate the potential effects of government funding shortages, Runnymede is recommending the creation of a 'Residents Support Fund' policy. This fund would provide supplementary emergency assistance to vulnerable residents, including low-income families, pensioners, unpaid carers, care leavers, and individuals with disabilities who lack access to other financial aid. The fund is intended to assist those who may not qualify for existing government programs but are facing urgent financial hardship and require immediate intervention.
- 2.5 It is important to emphasize that this distinct, long-term Residents Support scheme would only be implemented upon the complete exhaustion of the relevant Household Support Fund budgets. This approach guarantees the most effective utilisation of the Council's resources, prioritising those in most need. The Residents Support Fund would closely resemble the HSF (6), ensuring consistent support; however, due to budgetary limitations, it would not encompass housing cost assistance.

2.6 To demonstrate their commitment to supporting those in need, the Co Leaders have directed the allocation of £15,000 from member allowances to fund this initiative.

3. Policy framework implications

3.1 These policies link to the Council's Corporate Business Plan of supporting our communities.

3.2 These policies have been developed in light of guidance issued by the Government with regards to administration and expediency.

4. Resource implications/Value for Money

4.1 The HSF (6) will be funded from SCC allocation from central government

4.2 The Runnymede Residents Support Fund will only be implemented once all government funding has been depleted and £15k funding will come from the members budget to support this initiative.

5. Legal implications

5.1 Payment of funds to deliver the Household Support Fund is made under powers granted by Section 31 Local Government Act 2003 to enable a Minister of the Crown may pay a grant to a local authority in England towards expenditure incurred or to be incurred by it. A grant under the section may be paid on such conditions as the person paying it may determine.

5.2 Under the Localism Act 2011, Runnymede has the authority to establish a discretionary relief scheme benefiting the local community

6. Equality implications

6.1 A full Equality Impact Assessment is not deemed necessary, it is anticipated that the extension of the Household Support Fund (6), the top-up of the Council Tax Hardship Fund, and the introduction of a long-term support fund (once government funding is exhausted) will have a positive impact on Runnymede's most vulnerable residents. These initiatives are designed to address the specific needs of marginalised groups, such as low-income families, pensioners, unpaid carers, care leavers, and individuals with disabilities, who may face significant financial challenges.

7. Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications

7.1 While the direct environmental implications of updating and reviewing these various support funds for vulnerable residents might not be immediately apparent, there are indirect effects that can be considered:

7.2 **Increased Energy Efficiency:** If the support funds are used to incentivize energy efficiency, such as purchasing efficient appliances, this could lead to reduced energy consumption and lower greenhouse gas emissions.

7.3 **Community Resilience:** By supporting vulnerable residents, these funds can help to build more resilient communities. Resilient communities are better equipped to adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

7.4 It's important to note that the specific environmental implications will depend on how the support funds are allocated and used. A well-designed program can have a positive impact on the environment by promoting sustainable practices and reducing the vulnerability of communities to environmental challenges.

8. Risk Implications

8.1 The funding for Household Support Fund (6) is totally reliant on funding from SCC which could lead to reduced or inconsistent support for vulnerable residents in Runnymede.

8.2 The limited budget of £15,000 for the Runnymede Residents Support fund may limit its ability to support vulnerable residents. However, this support fund policy is to ensure there is continued support for vulnerable residents should the HSF (6) no longer continue.

8.3 To mitigate these risks, the Council has developed a clear criterion for awarding support through each of the policies based on the severity of financial hardship and vulnerability.

8.4 Through the Council's Corporate Debt and Financial Inclusion Pilot, the Council has access to third party data to identify those residents in most need and by using the financial calculator, the Council can assist those residents in applying for unclaimed benefits and accessing social utility tariffs to ensure these limited funds are managed effectively.

8.5 The Council could also look to explore opportunities to increase the budgets through donations, reallocations from other Council funds, or grants and collaborate with other organisations, partner with local charities or community groups to provide additional support to residents in need.

8.6 By implementing these risk mitigation strategies, Runnymede can enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of its support funds, ensuring that vulnerable residents continue to receive the assistance they need.

9. Other implications

9.1 There are none.

10. Timetable for Implementation

10.1 1 December 2024.

11. Conclusions

11.1 Despite the Council's financial constraints, the proposed amendments to the Household Support Fund (6), and the establishment of a separate Residents Support Fund demonstrate the Council's unwavering commitment to supporting residents during the cost-of-living crisis. These initiatives will provide essential assistance to vulnerable individuals and families, ensuring that they have access to the necessary resources to weather economic challenges.

11.2 Given the limited funds available to support vulnerable residents during the winter months, it is imperative to review the existing policy before administering the next tranche of funding. This review will ensure that the policy remains responsive and

effectively supports the Borough's most vulnerable residents, adhering to the guidelines established by central government and Surrey County Council.

- 11.3 The proposed amendments will enhance transparency and clarity regarding the support available for energy costs and other essential household expenses, including eligibility criteria for individuals with savings and low-income families. By increasing the eligibility amount from £33,000 to £38,300 will ensure that low-income families are supported. These modifications will contribute to a more equitable and effective support system for those in need.

12. Background papers

- 12.1 There are none

13. Appendices

- Household Support Fund (6)
- Runnymede Residents Support Fund