

Report title	Review of Household Support Fund (Fourth Round)
Report author	Linda Norman, Corporate Head of Customer, Digital & Collection Services
Department	Housing Benefits
Exempt?	No
Exemption type	not applicable
Reasons for exemption	not applicable

Purpose of report:

- **To resolve**

Synopsis of report:

To review Q1 & Q2 of the Household Support Fund (4) and recommend some changes to the policy for the remaining tranches to ensure the Council continues to provide as much support as possible to residents with the current cost of living crisis.

The 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 approve the amendments to the policy to ensure the limited grant funding received benefits as many residents as possible during the remainder of the financial year.

1. Context and background of report

- 1.1 The Government extended the Household Support fund for vulnerable households until March 2024.
- 1.2 Vulnerable households across Runnymede are able to access the Household Support fund to help those who are struggling to afford food, energy and water bills and other essential expenditure due to the global inflationary challenges and the significantly rising cost-of-living.
- 1.3 Payment is made under Section 31 Local Government Finance Act 2003. Runnymede Borough Council has been allocated £326,504 to support families who have been adversely impacted. This grant includes money to cover the costs of set up and administering the scheme.
- 1.4 The table below identifies the grants allocated for 2023/24 year in the Four Tranches:

Tranche	Funding
May	£32,650
August	£81,626
November	£163,252
January	£48,966

- 1.5 Powers granted under the Localism Act 2011, can be used by Runnymede to set up a local scheme for the granting of discretionary relief where such relief would be of benefit to the local community.
- 1.6 In June 2023, members approved the Household Support Fund Scheme (Fourth Round) and officers have completed Tranches 1 and 2 granting £80k to 343 households.
- 1.7 Approximately £11.5k has been used for administration and software development costs so far with a further £23k spent on Huggg vouchers which will be distributed over the coming months as further applications are received.
- 1.8 £163, 252 has been allocated for Tranche 3 to meet the seasonal demand for fuel during the colder winter months and react to other changes in the cost-of-living crisis. Whilst this is a significant sum, demand for support has been high and therefore, it seems sensible to review the current scheme to ensure it remains responsive and able to help as many residents as possible within the limited grant available.

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

- 2.1 Applications for assistance with school uniforms generally has been very popular. Therefore, it seems sensible to include a specific section on eligibility for school uniforms including a maximum limit per household and that payment will be made in the form of a voucher redeemable at many retail outlets to ensure as many families as possible receive support for children's school clothing.
- 2.2 Another area that requires clarification is for those customers on pre-payment meters for energy and water and it is recommended that an additional explanation is added to advise that those on pre-payment meters will receive the amount shown as outstanding on their accounts.
- 2.3 Eligibility for support for food, energy and utility bills was open to those with savings of less than £10,000 provided they were in receipt of a qualifying benefit. In addition, there was no savings or household income limit for those requiring other support for essentials linked to
- Energy
 - Water
 - Travel
 - Wider essentials i.e., school uniforms, replacement of white goods
 - Housing costs

As such, many residents qualified for assistance as they were able to demonstrate they met the criteria laid out in the scheme. Consequently, it is recommended to reduce the savings cap to £6,000 and have a threshold for household income to below £33,000 to be eligible for support to ensure this money is targeted to those in most need.

- 2.4 Due to the complex regulations relating to those who are self-employed, they become subject to what is known as a 'minimum income floor' (MIF) calculation when assessing support for Council Tax purposes. As a consequence of this, many no longer qualify for Council Tax Support and do not qualify for other additional support within this scheme. This has affected 70 households where they have asked for short-term help with food but as they do not meet the criteria laid out in the policy, the Council has been unable to help as funds have been in high demand. It is therefore proposed to offer these households who are no longer entitled to Council Tax Support in the 2023/24 period, a grocery voucher to provide some assistance. The Benefit Team will contact those customers affected directly to ensure they receive this support.
- 2.5 A cap of £800 for support with housing costs was implemented where there was a potential risk of homelessness, and the Council had a statutory duty to support the resident. In hindsight, this amount is too low to make any real difference to the outcome for the resident and so it is recommended to increase this amount to £2000 provided all other avenues of support have been exhausted including Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) and Homelessness Prevention Grant (HPG).

3. Policy framework implications

- 3.1 This policy underpins the Council's Corporate Theme of 'Supporting Local People' This policy underpins the Council's commitment to supporting the Government's Cost of Living crisis initiative.

4 Resource implications/Value for Money (where applicable) (Have you consulted finance?)

- 4.1 The Council will receive ring-fenced funding of £326,504 to deliver this scheme paid in four tranches. The November Tranche of £163,252 The Council will receive ring-fenced funding of £326,504 to deliver this scheme paid in four tranches. The November Tranche of £163,252 is expected mid-November with a further payment due in January 24 of £48,976.

5. Legal implications (Have you consulted legal?)

- 5.1 Powers have granted under Section 1 of the Localism Act 2011 and payment is covered by Section 31 Local Government Finance Act 2003.

6. Equality implications (Have you consulted Emmanuel Alozie?)

- 6.1 By creating a local policy to support our vulnerable residents with the current cost of living, this crisis will have a positive impact on any resident with protected characteristics.
- 6.2 The Council has worked collaboratively with various trusted partner organisations, Citizens Advice, Adult Social Care Team, Ward Councillors and Runnymede Borough Council Housing and Revenues Teams to ensure as many vulnerable people as possible are aware of the scheme and have support when making applications.

7. Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications

- 7.1 Applications are made on-line through the Council's website to reduce the need for paper applications which are integrated with software systems to ensure an efficient and effective process is in place and support can be targeted as quickly as possible.

8. Other implications (where applicable)

8.1 There are none.

9. Timetable for Implementation

9.1 1 December 2023.

10. Conclusions

- 10.1 With such limited funds to support vulnerable residents during the winter months, it is prudent to review the existing policy prior to administering the next tranche of funding available to ensure it remains responsive and supports as many of the Borough's most vulnerable residents within the guidance laid down by central government and Surrey CC.
- 10.2 The amendments suggested will ensure transparency and clarity over what residents can expect with regards to support with their energy costs and other essential household expenses, including eligibility for those with savings and low-income families.
- 10.3 It will provide some small support to those who are self-employed who have previously been excluded from the scheme.
- 10.4 By increasing the cap on housing costs from £800 to £2000 where there is a statutory risk of homelessness, this may ensure a more positive outcome is achieved.

Background papers

- There are none

12. Appendices

- Household Support Fund Scheme (Fourth Round) version 2.