

Report to: Cabinet



Date of Meeting 30 October 2024

Document classification: Part A Public Document

Exemption applied: None

Review date for release N/A

Household Support Fund 6 (HSF6)

Report summary:

This report provides details on the proposed policy of the Household Support Fund 6 and funding available to support low-income households for the period 01 October 2024 to 31 March 2025.

Is the proposed decision in accordance with:

Budget Yes No

Policy Framework Yes No

Recommendation:

1. That Cabinet agree to the proposed policy for the Household Support Fund for the period 01 October 2024 to 31 March 2025.
2. That Cabinet agree for delegated authority to be given to the Assistant Director for Revenues, Benefits, Customer Services in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Finance and the Portfolio Holder for Sustainable Homes and Communities when deciding the cohort and amount of funding to be allocated through targeted support, together with an equalities impact assessment.
3. That Cabinet agree for delegated authority to be given to the Assistant Director for Revenues, Benefits, Customer Services and Fraud and Compliance in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Finance and the Portfolio Holder for Sustainable Homes and Communities, in the event subsequent changes need to be made to the policy including providing additional groups and/or funding amount to receive a targeted payment. Any required changes will be based on funding available and will consider available data from our social resilience dashboard, and any other relevant factors at the time a decision needs to be made. Any changes will include a new Equalities Impact Assessment being carried out.

Reason for recommendation:

The recommendations allow for the Council to progress at pace in order to put in place a policy in order to ensure we can start providing support to our residents under the open application scheme whilst we await funding levels and model our data to best understand the cohorts and levels of funding for targeted support.

Officer: Libby Jarrett, Assistant Director for Revenues, Benefits, Customer Access and Fraud and Compliance.

Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

- Climate Action and Emergency Response
 Coast, Country and Environment

- Council and Corporate Co-ordination
- Communications and Democracy
- Economy
- Finance and Assets
- Strategic Planning
- Sustainable Homes and Communities
- Culture, Leisure, Sport and Tourism

Equalities impact High Impact

An initial [equalities impact assessment](#) has been carried to support this policy. A further impact assessment will be undertaken as part of determining the targeted groups which will be included in the report to the Portfolio Holders as part of recommendation 2 and 3.

Climate change Low Impact

Risk: Low Risk; The Financial Resilience Team continue to work with partners including Private Sector Housing and Exeter community Energy to ensure that residents receiving awards from the Household Support Fund have a referral for energy advice and energy efficiency measures. This includes accessing other funds that can help the resident with energy saving measures.

Links to background information [1 October 2024 to 31 March 2025: Household Support Fund guidance for county councils and unitary authorities in England - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

[The draft policy for HSF6](#)

Link to [Council Plan](#)

Priorities (check which apply)

- A supported and engaged community
- Carbon neutrality and ecological recovery
- Resilient economy that supports local business
- Financially secure and improving quality of services

1. Background

- 1.1 On 2 September 2024 the government announced a further round of funding for the Household Support Fund, to cover the period 1 October 2024 to 31 March 2025.
- 1.2 £421million has been made available to County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England to support those most in need with the cost of essentials.
- 1.3 This will be the sixth round of funding made available to help low-income families since 1 October 2021, and as with previous schemes the funding must be used in line with the Department for Works and Pensions (DWP) guidance.
- 1.4 All prior Household Support Funds have been delivered under a Devon Wide Framework agreed by Devon County Council (DCC) and the other Devon district and city councils. The framework will continue for this sixth round of funding to ensure all councils are delivering the funding in the same way. The framework continues to allow slight variances in delivery of the scheme ensuring that local needs can continue to be met.
- 1.5 The previous schemes have all had slightly different approaches including direct applications and targeted schemes. For targeted schemes different cohorts and awards have been made based on the local need of residents.

1.6 DWP guidance encourages Authorities to adopt the following principles.

- Meeting the immediate needs and helping those who are struggling to afford households essentials, including energy and water bills, food, and wider essentials.
- Use discretion on how to identify and support those most in need, taking into account a wide range of information.
- Working together with third parties including, where necessary and appropriate other local services. This may include local charities and community groups.

1.7 The DWP also encourage that support is not focussed on one specific vulnerable group if targeted support is to be made and stress that the fund is intended to cover a wide range of low income households in need, including families with children of all ages, pensioners, unpaid carers, care leavers and disabled people, larger families, single-person households and those struggling with one off financial shocks or unforeseen events.

1.8 The guidance does however highlight that those households with disabled residents present may be facing extra challenges to meet their additional needs, due to having higher energy costs from running equipment, aids or adaptations or higher heating, water or transport costs, and authorities are strongly considered to explore ways to support this cohort.

1.9 The guidance also suggests authorities should consider care leavers and those with caring responsibilities.

1.10 As with previous funds help with Housing costs may be considered after all other avenues of funding have been explored such as the Homeless Prevention Fund and Discretionary Housing Payments. However, the fund can not be used to provide housing support on an ongoing basis or to support unsustainable tenancies.

2. Devon County Council's approach on allocation for HSF6

2.1 DCC has been awarded funding of £5,064,876 for the funding period 1 October 2024 to 31 March 2025. This is the same amount as per 1 April to 30 September 2024.

2.2 Funding must be spent or committed by the 31 March 2025 and cannot be carried over for future use. Funds should also be made available for the whole of the period.

2.3 As the fund is finite it will close once also funding has been used. This may mean the fund will close earlier than 31 March 2025.

2.4 DCC are proposing to utilise these funds in the following way;

- Free School Meal funding as in previous schemes
- District and city councils funding
- Energy Relief scheme administered by Citizens Advice Devon
- DCC Early Help funding
- Devon Community Foundation

3. East Devon's funding allocation

3.1 East Devon has been allocated £396,753 to cover the period 1 October 2024 to 31 March 2025. This is higher than the amount we were allocated for the period 01 April to 30 September 2024 which was £284,944.

3.2 There will continue to be a 15% of the amount provided for administration costs. This will be £59,513.

4. Considerations/priorities

- 4.1 Members will be aware that the Winter Fuel Allowance for any one of pensionable age have been removed unless there is an entitlement to Pension Credit. We are aware that we have a number of residents who are entitled to Housing Benefit and/or council Tax Reduction who are not eligible for Pension Credit but nevertheless are still on a low income. Some of these residents are only marginally over the eligibility thresholds for receiving Pension Credit. Energy prices are also set to rise by 10% this winter and as a result there are likely to be a number of our residents falling into this cohort who will need some financial support. We will be carrying out detailed work on our Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction caseload to identify the households affected and exploring the possibility of a targeted award for this cohort.
- 4.2 The Benefit and Financial Resilience teams are already working on a take-up campaign to help ensure that all those who are entitled to Pension Credit but are not currently receiving it are aware of how and when they need to make an application to receive the Winter Fuel Allowance. This is being carried out in partnership with Citizens Advice East Devon and will involve community events, surgeries and communications. We are also encouraging these households to apply for Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Reduction.
- 4.3 As with previous schemes we know that there are still residents who we are not already aware of, therefore it is important for us to retain an open application process alongside any targeted support we provide. Open applications will be considered by the Financial Resilience team and follow the processes already in place, ensuring we continue working with partners and considering the wider needs and future financial resilience of the resident and their household.

5 Proposed approach/policy

- 5.1 The Devon wide framework agreed upon from previous HSF schemes will continue, with some minor amendments. These amendments take into account the updated DWP guidance. This approach has been agreed to continue because it not only allows a consistent approach to how funding is administered but also allows individual authorities to consider the needs of their districts, while continuing to ensure common ground amongst the neighbouring authorities.
- 5.2 As in previous schemes we intend to continue a two-part policy that allows for both an open application approach whilst also targeted the majority of the funding at those we know need support the most. An open application process continues to be a requirement of the DWP guidance and also ensures that we can provide support for those residents not already on our caseload.
- 5.3 For targeted support we will be providing a one-off payment. The amount to be determined will be agreed at a later stage once allocations have been granted, and data from our Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction caseload has been analysed.
- 5.4 As in previous schemes we will continue to assess the need of households where there is a carer or disabled resident present. We will also look to provide support to care leavers as this is an approach agreed upon by the other Devon authorities.
- 5.5 Residents who are targeted for a payment from the HSF6 will be issued with a letter confirming an access code to enable them to apply for their award. This process is already in place and allows us to provide the funds either by BACS or by Post Office voucher. BACS payments are dealt with by an automated process that works well for residents and reduces administration time for officers. Direct applications will continue to be paid via vouchers and payments direct to suppliers.

6 Resources

- 6.1 The Financial Resilience team supported by Benefits and Customer Services now have well established procedures and processes in place to administer this latest round of funding and allows us to provide the wider support that residents are offered.

- 6.2 Continuing to administer the funding in this way will also allow us to continue to use the processes already in place, saving time and resources in administration. This will enable us to continue to support those with the more in-depth support work required to address the underlying cause of financial hardship or poverty that some residents are experiencing.
- 6.3 The Financial Resilience team will continue to work with and identify further partners in the community to help provide residents with the wrap around support they require.

7 Summary

- 7.1 We hope to be able to provide an update at this meeting on the targeted groups to receive an award and we want to reassure Members that the funding will be administered to take account of the anti-poverty work EDDC carries out.
- 7.2 Once cohorts and amounts have been identified these will be provided to the Portfolio Holder for Finance and the Portfolio Holder for Sustainable Homes and Communities by the Assistant Director for Revenues, Benefits, Customer Services and Fraud and Compliance for agreement. An updated equalities impact assessment will be undertaken as part of determining the targeted support payments and will be included as part of the consultation to the Portfolio Holders.
- 7.3 In the event that changes need to be made to the policy we are recommending that delegated authority is given to the Assistant Director for Revenues, Benefits, Customer Services and Fraud and Compliance in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Finance and the Portfolio Holder for Sustainable Homes and Communities. This will ensure that we can continue to administer the fund and have all funding spent before the scheme is closed on 31 March 2025.
- 7.4 [The draft policy for HSF6.](#)
- 7.5 As per previous funding a report will be provided to a future Poverty Panel meeting where we will provide details of the support provided through HSF5 which covered the period 01 April to 30 September 2024. We will also be able to update Members of the cohorts and amounts of targeted awards for HSF6.
- 7.6 Going forward the Secretary of State for Works and Pensions has announced that a Child Poverty Taskforce has been set up to drive action across central government and work local councils, Mayors and Combined Authorities to deliver a 'Bold and ambitious strategy to tackle child poverty'. The link to the full letter can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-support-extended-to-help-struggling-households-with-bills-and-essential-costs-over-winter>. We will continue to update Members of the Poverty Panel on developments as they become relevant.

Financial implications:

The financial details that are known are set out in the report. The cost of the scheme is met from Government funding.

Legal implications:

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has introduced the Housing Support Fund under powers set out in S31 of the Local Government Act 2003.