

To: Executive  
23 April 2024

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**Household Support Fund Phase Five / Financial Hardship Action Plan**  
**Assistant Director: Communities and Policy**  
**Assistant Director: Early Help and Communities**

**1 Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 To recommend the distribution of the fifth phase of the Household Support Fund to low-income residents. Proposals have been developed through the Officer Financial Hardship group and endorsed by the Member Welfare Advisory Panel.
- 1.2 To provide an update on the final outcomes of the Financial Hardship Action Plan, as the plan period has ended, and activity embedded to business as usual.

**2 Recommendations**

**2.1 To distribute the Household Support Fund (phase five) through:**

- 2.1.1 Purchasing supermarket vouchers, or for opted schools to make equivalent arrangements, for children qualifying for Free School Meals in Bracknell Forest primary and secondary schools. Households will receive a £15 voucher per child per week of the holidays.**
- 2.1.2 Enhancing the Local Welfare Scheme provision, to expand the support available via applications from households in need of emergency help, where assistance cannot be accessed elsewhere.**
- 2.1.3 The provision of application-based grants to voluntary, community, and faith sector organisations to build capacity and extend the reach of support to residents.**
- 2.1.4 Extending the incentivised debt support offer, where identified at-risk households with a housing benefit overpayment, or council tax arrears, are offered up to £1,000 to reduce their debt alongside attending a debt management session.**
- 2.1.5 Additional discretionary payment to reduce the Council Tax liability to £0 for six months for those that receive 80% reduction in Council Tax due to being on the highest rate of disability benefit.**
- 2.1.6 Should any funding remain unspent toward the end of the grant period, supermarket vouchers may be provided to properties identified in fuel poverty, particularly those who are in receipt of disability and/or carer benefits and/or EPC below E.**

**2.2 To note the outcomes of the financial hardship action plan and the longer-term support available through business-as-usual services.**

### **3 Reasons for Recommendations**

- 3.1 The Household Support Fund (HSF) is provided by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), but local authorities must determine how it is spent within the scope of the guidance issued. The local authority is required by the DWP to create a local eligibility framework to disburse the funding.
- 3.2 Recommendations have been established based on learning from how the previous phases of the funding have used and continued assessment of local need.

### **4 Alternative Options Considered**

- 4.1 The Financial Hardship Officers' Group and Members Welfare Advisory Panel have considered a range of options for spending the HSF. It was concluded that the other options would not be as effective as those recommended in terms of efficiently disbursing funds to those most in need, whilst keeping within the guidelines set out by DWP. The proposals follow the previously agreed mechanism in distributing preceding tranches of funding, accounting for the learning from these.

### **5 Supporting Information**

#### Household Support Fund (HSF)

- 5.1 The Household Support Fund has had four previous iterations, providing funding to local authorities since October 2021. Through these grants, over £2.5 million has been provided to Bracknell Forest Council. The grant, provided by the DWP, must be used according to the conditions of grant which have previously specified a focus on essential living costs, mainly related to food and energy.
- 5.2 Throughout the grant periods, the council has focused the use of the funding on directly supporting low-income residents, initiatives over recent years have included:
- Supermarket vouchers to pupils eligible for free school meals during holiday periods.
  - Grants to VCFS organisations to extend the reach of support related to food and energy costs.
  - Supermarket vouchers to low-income households who 'just miss out' on the national Cost of Living payments.
  - Targeted support to groups such as those in fuel poverty.
- 5.3 The current grant period was set to end on 31 March 2024. The council campaigned locally and nationally to have the funding extended, in recognition of the significant support it has provided in the community and the continued economic challenges. On 6 March 2024, the chancellor announced a further six months of HSF grant. The late notice prior to 1 April has meant that it has not been possible to agree the use of the funding prior to 1 April.
- 5.4 The guidance on the fifth phase was shared with councils on 26 March 2024. This has required extremely rapid organisation of resources and preparation of policy. Bracknell Forest Council will receive £555,468.03. The specific conditions of grant are highly similar to the previous phase of the household support fund. The funding must be used to meet immediate needs and help those who are struggling to afford household essentials including energy and water bills, food, and wider essentials.

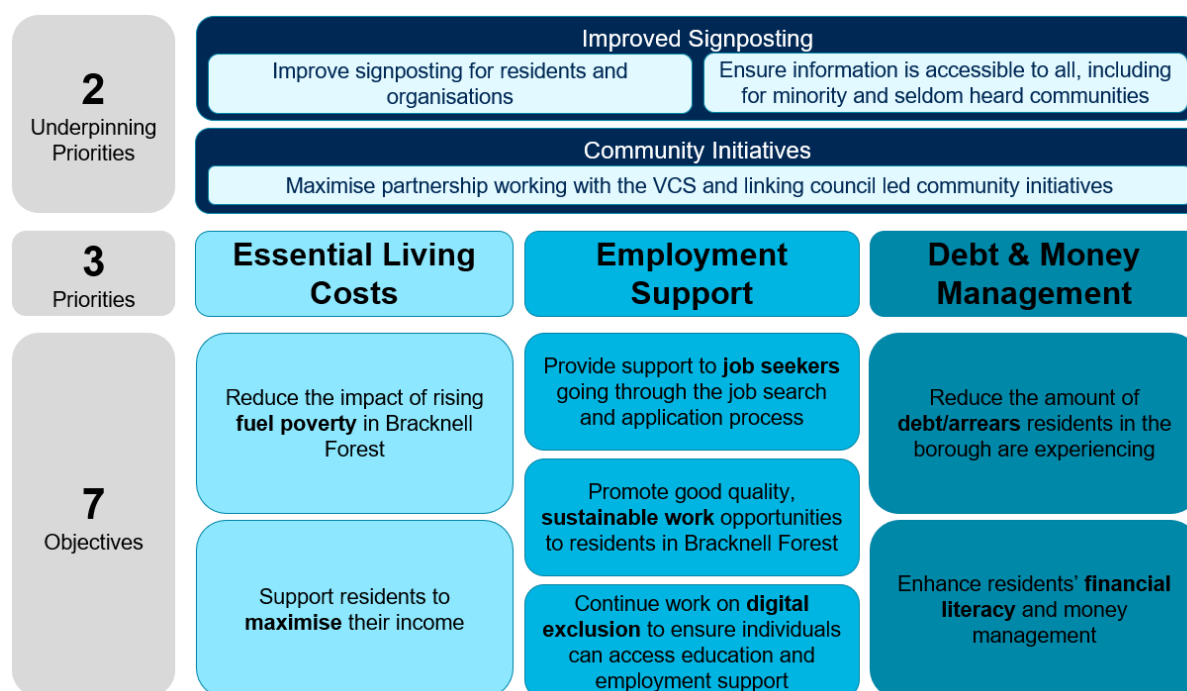
The local authority can determine the specific distribution method and must set this out in a policy/framework document. The grant must be used by 30 September 2024.

- 5.5 Taking this guidance, knowledge of local cohorts, and the assessment of existing mechanisms into account, along with discussions with the Officer Financial Hardship Group and Member Welfare Advisory Panel, the following routes for distributing the funding are recommended. These are summarised in appendix A:
  - 5.5.1 Provide supermarket vouchers, or for opted schools to make equivalent arrangements, for Free School Meals eligible pupils in Bracknell Forest primary and secondary schools. Households will receive a £15 voucher per child per week of the school holidays, from May 2024 to September 2024. Specifically, this covers the May half term and summer holiday period. This would reach approximately 2,600 children, providing a total value of support of approximately £273,000.
  - 5.5.2 Use the existing Local Welfare Scheme application process to offer extended support under the HSF. This will provide direct support for costs related to energy and food. It also means a wider cohort such as FSM equivalent under-fives in an education setting, electively home education pupils, 16+ pupils, and SEND children attending out of borough schools can apply for an equivalent voucher. This will offer around £70,000 of support.
  - 5.5.3 Extend the previous application-based grant scheme for Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector (VCFS) organisations. This would specifically offer the grant funding where organisations can demonstrate they are supporting more residents, or those from seldom heard groups, which the council may not otherwise be able to reach. The money must be used to directly support residents and within the DWP grant conditions. Organisations would be able to apply for a maximum of £15,000 to support Bracknell Forest residents through their service. This would be allocated from a total of £120,000 from the funding.
  - 5.5.4 Offer up to £1,000 to clear or reduce outstanding balances related to housing benefit or council tax. Low income households with outstanding balances will be contacted and invited to attend a money management session to support longer term financial resilience. If the outstanding balance is less than £1,000, the entire balance will be cleared. It is expected that this route will provide around £20,000 of support.
  - 5.5.5 Make a payment to reduce the Council Tax liability to £0 for six months for those that receive 80% reduction in Council Tax support due to being on the highest rate of PIP/DLA support (disability benefit). This would be paid directly to council tax accounts. This is expected to reach approximately 372 household with approximately £50,000 of financial support.
  - 5.5.6 Administration costs for delivery can also be covered by the HSF. This will be required for the essential staffing costs to deliver the application and VCFS elements (5.5.2 and 5.5.3). It may also cover printing and postage costs, if required, for example for distributing supermarket vouchers. The council will seek to keep these costs less than 12% of the grant value.
- 5.6 The Household Support Fund policy will be updated to reflect these distribution routes, and the further detail, once approved. As with previous phases, it is recommended that should amendments be required to the approach, particularly

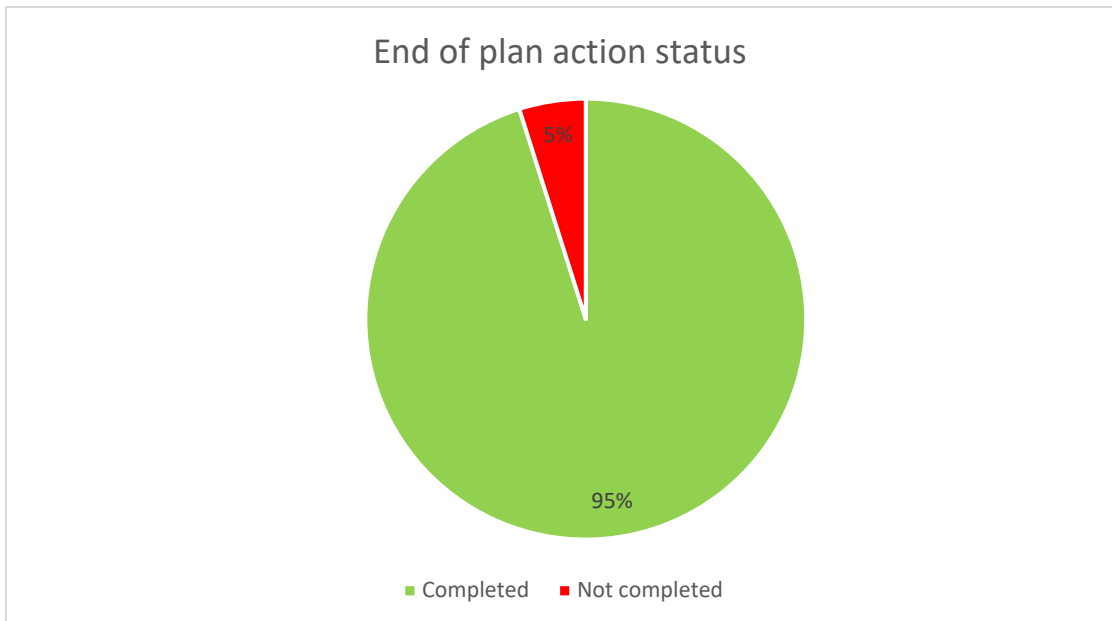
where additional funding is available through unused/returned vouchers, that the decision to amend the policy is delegated to the Chief Executive Officer.

### Financial Hardship Action Plan

- 5.7 In October 2022, and following a needs assessment, an 18-month action plan was agreed to address local financial hardship challenges proactively and strategically. The aim of developing a new plan was to enhance joint working, better understand financial hardship in the borough and develop a plan which was tailored to the specific needs of Bracknell Forest.
- 5.8 The plan set out five key areas of focus: signposting, communities initiatives, essential living costs, employment, and debt & money management. Within this, specific objectives were identified, initially with 46 actions to address these. The plan was reviewed ahead of Winter 2023, to mark the first 12 months and to ensure suitability over the winter. At this point, activity was reprioritised to areas requiring most acute support and to reflect the changing economic climate. Therefore, three further actions were added, and eight were removed.



- 5.9 Oversight for the financial hardship action plan has been led by the Member's Welfare Advisory Panel and an Officer Financial Hardship Action Plan Delivery Group. Much of this plan has been enabled through the Household Support Fund.
- 5.10 Of the remaining actions at the end of the plan (41), the majority (39) have been completed. Highlights of those completed include the development of a comprehensive online cost-of-living website, the distribution of over £175,000 to the VCFS and the development of a VCFS financial hardship forum – increasing capacity within the sector in Bracknell Forest. Targeted campaigns to identify and deliver additional income to households has unlocked significant additional income for residents. Another successful part of the plan has been increasing the uptake of free 2-year-old provision, enabling more parents to return to work. A summary of highlights is included in appendix C.



- 5.11 The two actions not completed by the end of the plan were related to the partnership agreement with the DWP and the provision of energy saving advice sessions to the public (4.1.3, 5.1.3). Whilst relationships with the DWP have strengthened during the plan period, external pressures have meant that all local authority partnership agreements are currently under review by the DWP. This currently means the work is on hold. The second action has not been delivered as expected partly due changes in resourcing and reprioritising the climate change programme. Rather than delivering sessions directly to residents for home energy improvements, the focus has change to promote wider communications, tips and advice related to energy saving. Significant growth related to the whole climate and energy saving programme will be continuing as part of the Council’s priorities.
- 5.12 With the plan period now ended and considerable progress made in supporting the community, longer term support will be integrated as part of the council’s services business as usual. There are several routes through which support will continue.
- Financial Inclusion Team – Offering accredited money and debt advice to residents, and a cash grant to those in financial hardship through the established local welfare scheme.
  - The VCFS Financial Hardship Forum will continue to meet quarterly and will hold its first face to face meetings this year as a means of increasing networking opportunities and building capacity.
  - Council Plan 2023-2027 – Several goals within the new Council Plan relate to resident financial stability, including affordable housing and employment. The action plan priorities related to community initiatives and parts of the employment support work will be continued through the Council Plan.
  - Economic Strategy 2024-2034 - This new strategy will specifically continue the work of the action plan related to employment support.
  - Housing Strategy 2023-2028 - Meeting the challenge of a cost-of-living crisis is identified as a priority within the objective of preventing and reducing homelessness. This includes the commitment to continue to offer Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) and targeted work to prevent homelessness.
  - Climate Change Strategy 2020-2024 – This is due to be reviewed later this year and will further extend activity to combine climate friendly actions with cost saving opportunities related to energy and transport.

## **6 Consultation and Other Considerations**

### Legal Advice

- 6.1 This is a grant made under s 31 of the Local Government Act 2003. This is not a procurement so that the Contract Standing Orders do not apply, nor do the PCR.

However, any other relevant Standing orders would need to be followed.

The Subsidy Controls Act 2022 is now in force and regulates subsidies given by public bodies, but it is not considered that what is proposed would fall within the relevant definition.

### Financial Advice

- 6.2 The anticipated financial implications are set out in the supporting information and grant funding is available to finance the planned expenditure.

### Other Consultation Responses

- 6.3 The recommendations have been formed via consultation and development with the Officers Financial Hardship Group and Members Welfare Advisory Panel.

### Equalities Impact Assessment

- 6.4 An equality impact screening was completed as part of previous HSF phases and the original action plan development. The screening has been reviewed to include the current recommendations for the fifth phase of the HSF. This concluded that there remain no groups adversely impacted by the recommendations. The proposals seek to reduce the inequality experienced by those facing financial hardship.

### Strategic Risk Management Issues

- 6.5 There are no strategic risk management issues identified as part of these recommendations.

### Climate Change and Ecological Impacts

- 6.6 The recommendations in Section 2 above are expected to slightly increase emissions of CO2. Whilst this will not be a direct impact, reducing financial hardship is likely to increase economic activity and consumption, this in turn may generate more CO2 emissions through activity such as purchasing essential items etc. However, it is considered vital that all households can meet their basic living costs, such as food and heating.

### Health & Wellbeing Considerations

- 6.7 There is a direct link between financial hardship and health and wellbeing. These recommendations seek to reduce hardship and therefore this is anticipated to have a positive impact on residents' health and wellbeing.

### Background Papers

[Current Household Support Fund Policy](#) (phase four)

### Contact for further information

Sharon Warner, Welfare - 01344 351346  
 Sharon.warner@bracknell-forest.gov.uk

Katie Flint, Communities and Policy – 01344 352217  
 Katie.flint@bracknell-forest.gov.uk

## Appendix A - Funding estimates summary

*\*Note that the cost may be different to the value received by the community due to purchasing costs/discounts.*

Route	Initiative	Value per household	Number reached	Cost
1	FSM pupils at Bracknell Forest schools	£15 per child per week of holidays (May and Summer)	2,600 children	£273,000
			Less previous unused vouchers	-£47,000
2	Application Local Welfare Scheme route	£105-£250	~500 awards	£70,000
3	Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector	Up to £15,000	1,000+ households	£120,000
4	Incentivised household debt management support	Up to £1,000	~35 households	£20,000
5	Council tax support for those with disability benefit	Up to £283	372	£50,500
Sub-total				£486,500
Admin	Additional staff for application, assessment and funding distribution	£66,650	n/a	£66,650
	Printing and Posting costs	n/a	n/a	£350
Admin Sub-total				£67,000
<b>Total</b>				<b>£553,500</b>

## Appendix B - Equality Impact Screening

*[Attached as a separate document]*

## Appendix C – Action Plan Highlights

Developed and created a **cost-of-living website** with over **2500** unique visitors a year



Distributed **£485,000** worth of food vouchers

to households in receipt of free school meals in 2023/24



Helped to establish a Voluntary, Charity and Faith Sector Financial Hardship Forum with over 25 organisations as members



Distributed over **2,000** hard-copy guides to help with the cost-of-living and debt advice for people who can't access the internet

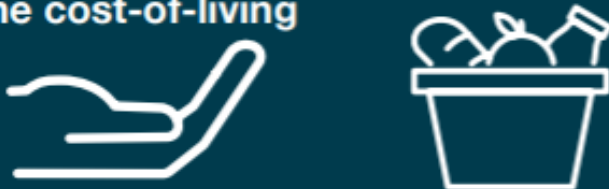


Increased income for 54 households in receipt of pension credit by a total of

**£270,000** in 2023



Given over **£140,000** in grants to the charity sector in Bracknell Forest to help with the cost-of-living



Bracknell Forest Council



# Reach Out

Supporting you with the cost-of-living

