

Communities Scrutiny Panel

DATE	5 th September 2024
REPORT OF	Helen Isaacs, Assistant Chief Executive
SUBJECT	Household Support Fund 5 / Exit Strategy
STATUS	Open

CONTRIBUTION TO OUR AIMS

The Household Support Fund (HSF) is a government grant aimed at supporting low-income households with the rising cost of living by providing support for the cost of energy, food, essentials linked to energy and water, wider essentials and the provision of supplementary advice services linked to practical support.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In March 2024, it was announced that an extension of 6 months would be given to the Household Support Fund. It was due to end on the 31st March 2024 and has been extended to the 30th September 2024. This report outlines how the Council has used the grant of £1.56m in line with the eligibility guidance from the Department for Work and Pensions.

During 2023 and 2024 there have been reports to Council regarding food and our approach to food banks and other food providers. There is an element of overlap with HSF, as part of the funding has gone to food bank and similar providers. Grant allocations have been timed for September to enable providers who generally see a reduced demand over the summer, to have some resource for the autumn.

An exit strategy was requested to reflect the imminent ending of HSF support.

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION

This report addresses actions taken to date, continuing support available to households which help defray food costs and suggested actions which need to be considered in the light of other national developments in addressing poverty and local development in seeking to address health inequalities including food and resources.

1. BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

- 1.1 The government awarded all Local Authorities an amount of funding to be used to support low-income households for the first six months of the 2024/25 financial year. The allocation to the Council was £1,559,664.65 for food, utilities, essentials linked to energy and water, wider essentials and the provision of supplementary advice services linked to practical support. The Department for Work and Pensions provided supporting guidance and we

developed a delivery framework (see appendix 1), based on that guidance taking in to account the needs of our community and lessons learned from previous iterations of the funding.

- 1.2 Our proposed approach to using the fund was as follows:
 - Vouchers for families in receipt of free school meals to support them with food costs during the 2024 summer school holiday.
 - Targeted grants to trusted frontline Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations to help them support households working with them who are facing financial hardship.
 - The continuation of a grant application process, set up in an earlier tranche of HSF allocation, which allows trusted referral agencies and frontline public sector services such as social workers to enable households in need of support to receive a grant.
 - Direct grants to specific groups including e.g. people with caring responsibilities, disabilities, care leavers and older people.
- 1.3 Three years of DWP Household Support Funding, totaling £9.6m, has undoubtedly helped support thousands of households across North East Lincolnshire, who have experienced hardship due to cost-of-living pressures. They have been well received by the community and the VCS. However, the end of September could be viewed as a potential “cliff edge”, in that public expectations may be that support will continue and may prompt resident queries and requests for assistance which the Council does not have the finances or capacity to provide. This may be particularly acute at Christmas when vouchers for free school children will not be provided.
- 1.4 Previous tranches of the Household Support Fund show the difference this and similar schemes have made to many households and individuals in North East Lincolnshire. An evaluation report for HSF 4 is attached at appendix 2. This demonstrates the breadth of the work undertaken by the Council and a wide range of partners.
- 1.5 **National context** – The Household Support Fund was a DWP programme initiated by the last Government in the post covid period to help alleviate substantial cost of living pressures. The political and economic context has changed, and the Government elected in July have yet to set out their position on the specific issue. The King’s speech in July has, however, indicated a range of measures aimed at alleviating costs and improve the wellbeing of households:
 - The Employment Rights Bill - The Bill will deliver its Plan to Make Work Pay that includes banning exploitative zero-hour contracts: removing the Statutory Sick Pay lower earnings limit to make it available to all workers as well as the waiting period: establishing a Fair Pay Agreement in the adult social care sector and, following review, assess how and to what extent such agreements could benefit other sectors.
 - Children’s Wellbeing Bill – will require free breakfast clubs in every primary school; introducing legislation to limit the number of branded items of

uniform and PE kits that a school can require to bring down costs for parents and remove barriers from children accessing sport and other school activities.

- Renters Rights Bill – will end the section 21 “no fault” evictions and a host of other measures intended to give renters greater security rights and protections.
- The Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 will be implemented so that leaseholders can benefit from more rights, power and protections over their homes.

While all these and other measures can't be brought in all at once, taken together they do represent a very different context which together with the government's commitment to address child poverty may in the longer term negate the need for temporary funding such as HSF.

The Local Government Association (LGA) have called for the HSF to be extended for at least six months to avoid the impending cliff-edge in support to vulnerable families. In their survey of councils, nearly 60 per cent said they would not be able to provide any additional funding for local welfare assistance if the fund came to an end in September. The LGA are seeking an extension to enable councils to plan ahead and retain the staff and those voluntary partners that deliver vital support in our communities. In the longer-term, they want to see a transition to a preventative and sustainable approach, to help prevent people from falling into poverty and hardship in the first place.

Further announcements are expected in the Chancellor October statement.

1.6 Our working age profile/trends:

- Of people aged 16 to 64 years living, 73.5% were employed in the year ending December 2023. Up from December 2022 - 71.7% but still below the Yorkshire and Humber average – 74.6%.
- Around 2,400 (3.1%) people aged 16 and over were unemployed in the year ending December 2023. Down from December 2022 - 3.7%. Below the Yorkshire and Humber average of 3.4%.
- Around 21,800 people (22.9%) of the population aged 16 to 64 years were "economically inactive" in the year ending December 2023. A reduction on the December 2022 figure of 24,300 people (25.9%). People are classed as "economically inactive" if they are not in employment but don't meet the criteria for being "unemployed".

1.7 Continuing local support /activity-

- 1.7.1 Council tax support and Discretionary Housing Payments continue to be administered by the Council. Promotion of energy efficiency measures, grants and advice is provided by Equans and will continue. While universal winter fuel payments have been removed, the DWP have confirmed it will be paid to certain benefit claimants.

- 1.7.2 Current debt and other advice services, principally provided by Citizens Advice (CA) which receives funding from the Council, will continue along with a host of other local organisations, many of whom have successfully secured external funding. Although inflation is falling, the cost of living continues to present significant issues to many. At the end of June demand for CA debt and benefit advice continued to be high with higher than the national average numbers of clients with council tax arrears and people in need of complex debt assessments. There are also high levels of demand for Person Independence Payments (PIP) advice.
- 1.7.3 Our local credit union is thriving, supporting over 850 members with loans and savings. They focus strongly on outreach and are well connected into community groups/hubs.
- 1.7.4 There will be continued support and promotion of our local offer including through the household newsletter which goes to all NEL residents.
- 1.7.5 The later life partnership (Age UK/ friendship at home and Care Link) have been funded for 2024/25 to promote benefit uptake (in particular attendance/ carers allowances and pension credit). This builds on exceptional work in the preceding two years, which has resulted in over £1.5m of new/additional benefits being claimed. The council will be supporting the drive for pension credit take up by writing to residents and publicising how to claim to all households during September and October.
- 1.7.6 The Holiday Activity and Food programme continues to provide support to families with children over the holiday periods and is funded to the end of March 2025. It is primarily for school aged children from reception to year 11 (inclusive) who receive benefits related free school meals.
- 1.7.7 Many partnership forums and individual organisations across NEL continue to provide help with housing energy and food related cost pressures, including the financial inclusion group, a multi-agency forum chaired by the Council.
- 1.7.8 In respect of food: the Northern Lincolnshire food partnership launched in September. Public health will build on a needs assessment and foodbank survey undertaken earlier this year, to inform Public Health's approach to accessible, good affordable food. Food being one of the eight areas of focus to improve the health and wellbeing of the residents of North East Lincolnshire. A number of groups funded by HSF to deliver cookery courses have secured other funding to continue this work, recognising the benefits of this sort of intervention in helping people make more healthy choices and develop skills to enable them to eat more cost effectively (see evaluation report comments).

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that scrutiny:

1. Notes a) the high-level delivery plan set out in Appendix 1 as previously reported to Cabinet and b) the evaluation report from HSF 4, as set out at Appendix 2.

2. Notes the letter sent by the Portfolio Holder Safer and Stronger Communities (Appendix 3) which makes representations to Government pressing the need for continued funding to alleviate household hardship.
3. Recommends to Cabinet actions to be agreed by the panel following consideration of this report, which may include the following proposed next steps:
 - 1) Take stock after the Chancellor's statement and the Council's financial settlement, as there may be further decisions that impact on household finances.
 - 2) Continue to promote and inform residents of the range of advice and support available to them.
 - 3) Continue to work with the VCS to identify opportunities to alleviate cost of living pressures.
 - 4) Receive, in due course, public health plans to address the wider determinants of health in North East Lincolnshire.
 - 5) Continue to support food bank and other food providers, as part of the VCS, to reduce demand and dependency on emergency food, promoting growing, healthy eating, budgeting and skills to improve access to and the quality of food in NEL.

The panel is asked to consider these and any other recommendations having regard to the wider context.

2. RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The ending of Household Support Funding does represent a challenge for some households experiencing hardship in the forthcoming months, particularly given known energy cost increases. The HSF was however introduced as an interim measure and the short-term nature of the funding has not been the most efficient means of investing in longer term measures which can assist individuals. There are opportunities through drive for growth, skills, increased income and benefit changes to address some of the underpinning contributory factors affecting household incomes.

3. REPUTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS CONSIDERATIONS

Details of the Household Support Fund is promoted on the Council's website as part of the financial support advice and guidance page. [Financial support, advice and guidance | NELC \(nelincs.gov.uk\)](https://nelincs.gov.uk/financial-support-advice-and-guidance) Information is shared with a wide range of Council partners and cascaded to the public via a number of channels including the all household newsletter, a version of which will be going out in the autumn to include all available local support and information.

4. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

There are no additional financial resource implications arising from this report at this time.

5. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IMPLICATIONS

There are likely to be enquiries from schools and parents regarding food voucher provision in the run up to Christmas. In the absence of any central government funding for this purpose then there will not be any voucher provision. Communications will be prepared to go to schools and parents with children on free school meals in the autumn term. It should be noted that Holiday Activity and Food provision will be running over Christmas and will be widely promoted.

6. CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no implications in respect of the elimination of waste, supporting and developing the green economy and infrastructure, or contributing to low carbon.

7. MONITORING COMMENTS

In the opinion of the author this report does not contain any recommended changes to policy or resources (People, Finance or physical assets). As a result, no monitoring comments have been sought from the Council's Monitoring Officer, Section 151 Officer or strategic workforce lead.

8. WARD IMPLICATIONS

Residents from all wards will have benefitted from previous rounds of HSF funding.

9. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None.

10. CONTACT OFFICER(S)

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HELEN ISAACS
ASSISTANT CHIEF EXECUTIVE

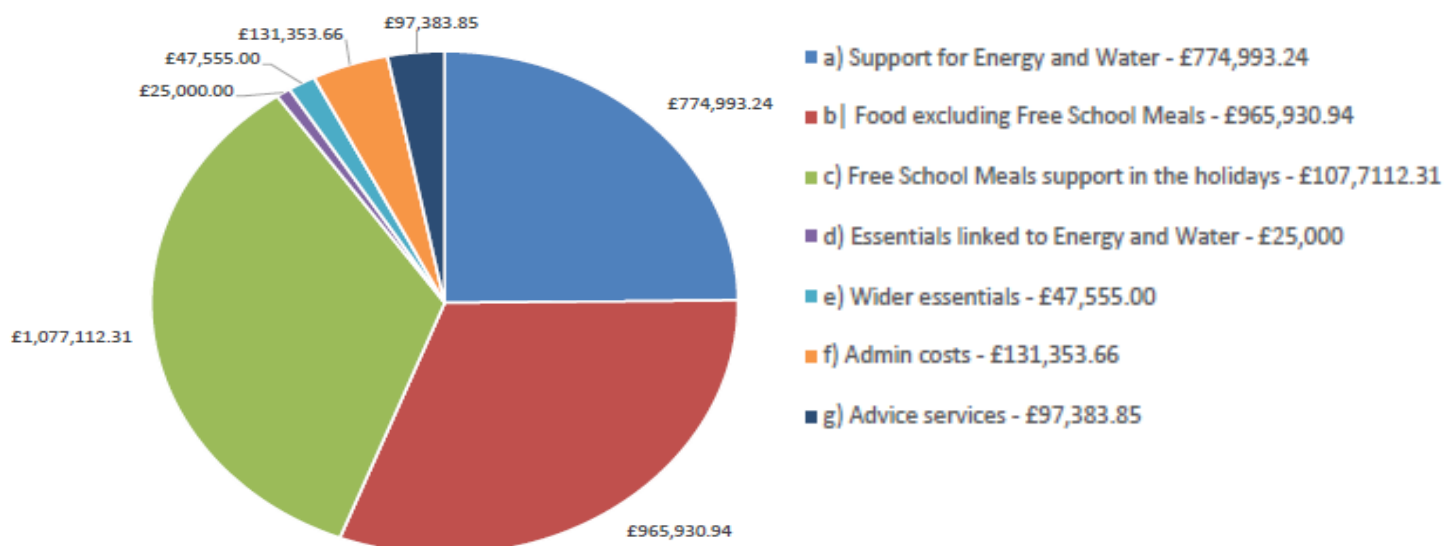
Appendix 1

Area of funding	Planned activities March – September 2024	Indicative spend
Administration costs (inc. staffing)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Project Co-ordination (NELC)• 1 Debt Advisors (VCS)• Marketing and VCS administration costs• Allpay	£120,000
Children's FSM vouchers for summer	We will provide £15 per week per child eligible for Free School Meals for the six-week summer school holiday period.	£700,000
Direct payments Children/older people/ people with disabilities/carers	Wider support for essentials for children and young people and foster carers.	£310,000
Application by referral	We will continue with our current referral process so that front line service delivery organisations in the public and voluntary sector can refer households in need for support with utility bills and, in exceptional circumstances, for housing costs. To include provision for emergency white goods.	£150,000
Specific grants to VCS organisations	To include energy support and wider essentials.	£200,000
Community cooking programme	Building on the success of earlier activity, community organisations will be supported to provide courses to promote cooking skills and healthy affordable food.	£30,000
Foodbank support	We will support local food providers to continue to provide emergency food and wider household essentials for those in need	£50,000
TOTAL:		£1.56m

Appendix 2

Household Support Fund April 2023 – March 2024 Evaluation/Closing Report

- Extension to Household Support Fund announced by Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) on 17 November 2022.
- Fourth iteration of fund to cover April 2023 to March 2024 to provide help to households with the “significantly rising cost of living”.
- Fund primarily to help with:
 - Food.
 - Domestic energy and water.
 - Essentials linked to energy and water, including warm clothing, blankets, boiler service/repair, purchase of equipment including white goods.
 - Wider essential needs including support with other bills, clothing and essential transport costs.
 - Emergency household repairs such as boiler breakdowns or burst pipes.
- £3,119,329.00 was allocated to North East Lincolnshire Council to administer on behalf of the DWP.



The full fund was allocated and spent across the borough. The breakdown shown is based on DWP guidelines for spending.

Allocation details: Application based support

- 1,207 payments of £200 - £250 to those in need, based on evidence provided of household income and outgoings
- A panel of NELC officers assessed applications taken by our referral partners:
 - Centre4
 - Lincolnshire Housing Partnership (for LHP residents)
 - Foresight
 - Oasis (for households with children that attend Oasis schools)
 - Carers Support Centre (for registered carers)
 - Navigo (for Navigo service users)
 - Creating Positive Opportunity (CPO)

- 93 applicants received help to buy ovens, fridges and other white goods referred to Empower, with average of around £240 spent per applicant.

Allocation details: Support with food and essentials

- Market Voucher scheme – 4,698 £5 vouchers spent on fresh food at the market, supporting residents and local traders – the speech bubbles show some of the feedback received on the scheme.
- Supermarket vouchers issued twice to support over 8,000 children who receive Free School Meals, to help cover the school holiday periods during Summer and Christmas 2023.
- £46,000 allocated to Food Banks to help families and individuals in need.
- £40,000 allocated to social housing providers to help residents with essential needs.

"I suffer with my mental health and was worried how I was going to afford Christmas. This food voucher is an amazing help. Thanks again!"

East Marsh Family Hub:
"Mothers are delighted with the Market Voucher Scheme, one parent said, "I'll be going to the market on my way home to treat us all to strawberries."

"Oh, you have saved my life".

"It's a shame this is coming to an end, I can't tell you how much these vouchers have helped me."

"I've eaten more fruit with this extra £5.00 each week."

"This food voucher will mean a lot to the family."

Allocation details: Support with utilities

- Proactive support direct to targeted groups £1,471,605. Cash payments via the Post Office.
 - Care Leavers: 85 - £250 payment - £21,250
 - Households receiving housing benefit: 2,398 - £100 payment – £239,800
 - Severely Mentally Impaired households: 232 - £200 payment - £46,400
 - Working families with low income: 440 - £200 payment - £88,000
 - Pensioner households receiving CTS: 5,251 - £200 – payment - £1,050,200
 - Refugee integration service – payment of £25,955 made to support with energy costs over the winter months.
- £67,750 allocated to partner organisations for provision of hardship food vouchers and energy. CARE and Foresight issued fuel vouchers to those struggling with the rising cost of utilities with 1,244 vouchers issued.
- National Energy Action's 'Action for Warm Homes' scheme, delivered a tailored

programme of activity and energy advice to vulnerable and fuel poor residents: 118 attendees at community events, provided with advice around energy bills, fuel debt and energy efficiency in the home including expectant parents and / or families with children under 5.

Allocation details: Supporting our partners

Over £34,650 was allocated to providers of Warm Spaces over the winter months supporting over 7,000 attendees. 27 providers offered a warm place to visit for refreshments with some offering meals, activities and opportunities to access wider support.

Providers were:

- AFMET
- Age UK
- Centre 4
- Clee & St Francis Food Larder
- Cleethorpes Vol Action NEL (VANEL)
- Climb4
- Cornerstone Church
- Freeman St Market
- Friendship At Home
- Grimsby Town Sport & Education Trust
- Growing Healthy Minds (Canopy)
- Haverstoe Pavilion
- Health Gospel
- Holy Trinity Church
- King Baptist Church
- Learning4Life
- Oasis Hub (Nunsthorpe)
- One Church
- Rock Foundation
- Salvation Army
- St Peter's Church
- The Trin
- Veterans Charity
- We Are One
- West Marsh Community Centre
- Willows Community Church
- YMCA Humber

Community cooking classes:

With a grant of £23,000, 13 cookery workshops with up to 10 spaces were held in the community. Over 6 weeks participants received advice on low cost, balanced family friendly meals which included bulk cooking, air fryer baking, slow cooker use, youth and family cooking and how to reduce waste. Supported by the community cook, participants would make the meals and take them home to their families and provide feedback. On completing the course participants were given resources i.e. air fryers, slow cookers and cooking utensils. One group reported that their 9 candidates stated 100% improvement in confidence, energy and feeling better about themselves after the course.

Providers were:

- Learning4Life
- One Voice
- Feed the Community
- Oasis Family Hub – 2 workshops
- Faraway CIC – 2 workshops
- The Trin
- Growing Healthy Minds
- The Enrolled Freeman of Grimsby – 2 workshops
- YMCA – 2 workshops

Cookery Comments:

We received numerous comments and feedback, below is a small sample:

"All of the attendees enjoyed the sessions and have asked that they continue"

"Many of the participants had complex learning difficulties and lived in supported housing. This workshop series allowed them to try cooking supervised but more independently".

"Our participants found this a fun and engaging way of improving their cookery skills and confidence".

"Most people were surprised at how easy it was to create amazing food on a small budget. All would not have had the confidence to try on their own".

"I really enjoyed the cooking, I didn't want it to end!! It was a couple of hours that was just for me and I didn't have to think about anyone else - tea thrown in so didn't have to think about that either!!! Win win all round. I hope they do another, I'll be the first on the list. Thank you, we had a really good time."

"It's helped me to overcome my anxiety about going out again."

"I lost weight without even trying to just because I'm cooking differently."

"The group still meet up and share ideas, recipes and generally continue to socialise".

Rt Hon Rachel Reeves MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer
HM Treasury
1 Horse Guards Road
London
SW1A 2HQ

27th August 2024

Dear Chancellor,

RE: The Future of the Household Support Fund

As Portfolio Holder for Safer and Stronger Communities in North East Lincolnshire, I am writing to you to call for the Household Support Fund to be extended beyond September 2024.

The Government's provision of the Household Support Fund has been extremely welcome and continues to provide a vital safety net for residents who are struggling to afford the essentials and are facing financial crisis.

Local services are experiencing record demand for local welfare support. The support we have been able to provide to a wider range of vulnerable households and particularly to children in receipt of free school meals during school holiday periods, has been invaluable. There is deep local concern that ending the fund on the 30 September will create a potential cliff-edge in provision for our communities that this council will not be able to fill.

Notwithstanding other measures being worked on by you, a significantly reduced local welfare support offer risks more households falling through the gaps into financial crisis, potential homelessness and increasing pressure on already overstretched public services, including the NHS, social care and temporary accommodation.

As a Council we have been working hard with our partners in the voluntary and community sector to shift the focus from crisis support to prevention. However, in the short term, the need for an enhanced local welfare offer is not reducing.

I would welcome urgent confirmation that the Household Support Fund will be continued beyond September to allow us to keep residents well, prevent escalating crises and reduce pressure on wider public services.

Yours sincerely,



Cllr. Ron Shepherd
Portfolio Holder for Safer and Stronger Communities
North East Lincolnshire Council