

**CABINET  
7 MAY 2024**

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**HOUSEHOLD SUPPORT FUND 2024**

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**Responsible Cabinet Member -  
Councillor Riley, Stronger Communities Portfolio**

**Responsible Director -  
Ian Williams, Chief Executive**

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**SUMMARY REPORT**

**Purpose of the Report**

1. This report seeks approval for a programme of support to deliver the fourth extension of the Government funded Household Support Fund (HSF) Extension for the period 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024.

**Summary**

2. As part of a number of measures to provide help with global inflationary challenges and the significantly rising cost of living, the Household Support Fund (HSF) will be extended from 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024.
3. The current programme is being delivered effectively, meeting spend and output targets. It is therefore proposed that the programme delivered in this next round takes forward most elements in the current programme. However, it is proposed that a programme aimed at maximising household incomes is also included using the Low Income Family Tracker.
4. Authorities are required to send a delivery plan to DWP by 10 May 2024 which outlines their intentions for The Fund.

**Recommendation**

5. It is recommended that Cabinet consider and approve:-
  - (a) The proposed programme and estimated costings outlined below.
  - (b) Delegation be given to the Chief Executive, in conjunction with the Portfolio Holder Stronger Communities, to amend funding pots as necessary to ensure full utilisation of the grant within the time period.
  - (c) A submission to government is made based on the programme outlined below.

## Reasons

6. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons:

- (a) To address the criteria laid down in the guidance.
- (b) In order to secure the grant funding.

**Ian Williams**  
**Chief Executive**

## Background Papers

Guidance published on the Government website was use in the preparation of this report

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/household-support-fund-guidance-for-local-councils/1-april-2023-to-31-march-2024-household-support-fund-guidance-for-county-councils-and-unitary-authorities-in-england>

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S17 Crime and Disorder	This report does not directly address crime and disorder
Health and Wellbeing	This report proposes actions which will positively impact on health and wellbeing
Carbon Impact and Climate Change	This report does not directly address Carbon Impact and Climate Change
Diversity	This report will positively impact on all communities
Wards Affected	All
Groups Affected	All
Budget and Policy Framework	The report does not represent a change to Council's budget or policy framework.
Key Decision	This is not a key decision
Urgent Decision	This is an urgent decision as the start date of the fund is April 1 <sup>st</sup> 2024 and the Plan needs to be submitted by 10 May 2024.
Council Plan	This report supports the Council Plan by addressing the priority of Supporting the most vulnerable in the borough
Efficiency	Distribution of the funds is being realised in the most efficient way.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report proposes providing additional financial support for Care Leavers

## MAIN REPORT

### Information and Analysis

#### HSF extension guidance

7. Guidance has been published on the Government website. As part of a number of measures to provide help with global inflationary challenges and the significantly rising cost of living, the Household Support Fund (HSF) will be extended from 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024. As has been done for previous schemes, the fund will be made available to County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England to support those most in need. This will be the fourth extension to the fund since its inception in October 2021.
8. Authorities are required to send a delivery plan to DWP by 10 May 2024 which outlines their intentions for The Fund, clearly setting out their priorities and approach for use of the Fund, and to demonstrate the ways in which they intend to allocate their funding.
9. The objective of The Fund is the same as the previous extension in that it is to provide crisis support to vulnerable households in most need of support to help with significantly rising living costs.
10. The last rounds of the Fund covered a full year however this grant covers a six month period. Allocations have been published with Darlington's being £913,853.75 which is the same level pro rata as the last extension.
11. As with previous rounds of the HSF, Authorities are unable to carry forward any underspends from previous schemes.
12. When administering The Fund, Authorities are encouraged to adopt the following principles:
  - (a) Use discretion on how to identify and support those most in need, taking into account a wide range of information.
  - (b) Use the funding from 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024 to meet immediate needs and help those who are struggling to afford household essentials including energy and water bills, food, and wider essentials. Authorities can also use funding to support households with housing costs where existing housing support does not meet this need, and to supplement support with signposting and advice.
13. Authorities are required to have a clear rationale for how households in greatest need have been identified.
14. The guidance for this round of HSF is similar in terms of types of support that can be provided and vulnerable households that are eligible.
15. As in the last round, every area must operate at least part of their scheme on an application basis - in other words, residents should have the opportunity to come forward to ask for support.

16. The Fund may be used to provide supplementary advice services to award recipients, including debt and benefit advice. Authorities are reminded that the primary intention of The Fund is to provide crisis support for households, and it is not expected that a large portion of funding is spent on advice services.

#### **Update on the HSF Round 4 programme**

17. The programme for round four consisted of the following elements:

- (a) Food vouchers to families with children on free school meals
- (b) Fuel vouchers through TBBT
- (c) Support for the Food Bank
- (d) Support for Care Leavers
- (e) Support for Elderly
- (f) Support for Vulnerable Groups through the voluntary and community sector
- (g) Low Income Family Tracker

#### **Food Vouchers to families with children on free school meals (FSM's)**

18. This has been a feature of all previous rounds of HSF and a well-established process. Supermarket vouchers are provided to families through a third party provider, Wonde, who send parents e-vouchers to their phones. Schools order the vouchers for parents then invoice the Council for the cost. In the previous round 4,411 children were eligible for this support.

#### **Fuel vouchers through The Bread and Butter Thing (TBBT)**

19. This provision was part of the first Household Support Fund delivery programme. It involves providing £49 fuel vouchers through the national programme administered by a Public Benefit Entity called Auriga.

20. Costs in providing vouchers are as follows:

Voucher value	£49.00
Voucher Admin Fee (charged by Auriga)	£5.48
Processing cost (TBBT)	£4.37
Unit Price per Voucher	<b>£58.85</b>

21. The process is well tested and streamlined. Clients text 'FUEL' to a number and receive a call within 48 hours during which they are taken through application. Residents with direct debit accounts are also supported via a voucher which can be exchanged for cash at fuel top up points (typically newsagents etc). To avoid misuse TBBT introduced a number of additional steps in the application process to verify genuine need. Recipients are referred by the Council or a trusted voluntary sector organisation providing additional assurance of need. The LIFT dashboard has also been used to identify vulnerable groups

#### **Support for Food Banks**

22. There is a network of six foodbanks across Darlington. The largest is at King Centre on Whessoe Road. All food banks are seeing an increase in demand. Whilst there are

numerous reasons why people use food banks the increase in fuel costs is cited frequently as is reducing monthly budgets. There is an increase in demand from working families but also a growth in demand from the elderly.

23. The Bread and Butter Thing provide this element of the programme as they have warehousing facilities and connections in the food industry allowing them to purchase food at a discount.

### **Support for Care Leavers**

24. This has featured in all the HSF rounds supporting our care leavers which the Council acts as corporate parent to. A payment of £100 was made to the 154 care leavers.

### **Support for Elderly**

25. Age UK have been delivering a package of support which includes the following:
  - (a) Home energy checks
  - (b) Meals at home
  - (c) Lunch clubs
  - (d) Subsidised meals in their café
  - (e) Attendance at activities
  - (f) Respite Care
  - (g) Befriending
26. Age UK have alerted the most vulnerable elderly people to their services identified via the LIFT dashboard.

### **Support for Vulnerable Groups through the voluntary and community sector**

27. A collaboration of the voluntary sector has been delivering a flexible programme of support which is tailored to the specific needs of vulnerable individuals. In addition to supporting with food and fuel costs, they have also been improving people's resilience by providing energy saving and energy efficient equipment like electric blankets.

### **Uniform Exchange Scheme**

28. The Uniform Exchange Scheme, established during the pandemic has grown in use and is well supported by uniform donations. It reduces a significant cost burden parents experience in sending children to school.

### **Low Income Family Tracker (LIFT) Dashboard**

29. In line with the HSF guidance local authorities are required to target their support to those most in need. The Council has commissioned a consultancy, Policy In Practice to develop a 'Low Income Family Tracker' data dashboard. The dashboard allows the Council to proactively identify Low Income Households that are struggling, at risk or are in crisis by analysing and displaying Council and Universal Credit data.

## Performance

30. The Household Support Fund Round 4 programme has delivered well. A wide range of vulnerable groups have been supported including the elderly, people with disabilities, care leavers, struggling families and working families on low incomes. The voluntary sector has also been able to engage with residents through the town centre site 'Darlington Connect' facility.
31. The funding period has now ended. Final management information return is required by DWP on 26 April and data is in the process of being collected from third party providers. However, based on quarter three data and reviews with providers, each element of the programme will have fully utilised the contracted amount and targets set in the delivery plan will have been met.

## Proposals for the HSF extension

32. As the guidance for round five is similar to that for round four and the round four programme has delivered well, it is proposed that the round five programme includes the majority of round four elements, with the following revisions:
33. **Targeted LIFT programme.** The programme would target three types of entitlements which would generate long-term benefit for recipients as opposed to the short-term benefit of one-off support. It is proposed that the three entitlements would be:
  - a) **Pension Credits.** Estimates based on existing data indicate there are 2,305 pensioners eligible for pension credits with 390 households not claiming in Darlington to the value of £70,774 per month. Policy In Practice would undertake a mail out advising pensioners of the amount that they are eligible for and direct them to the DWP Pension Credit Helpline. Contact details of Age UK would also be provided should people feel they need support. Some finance would be provided to Age UK to accommodate this demand. Take up would be tracked through the LIFT dashboard.
  - b) **Free School meals auto enrolment.** Data the Council holds reveals that there are 1,667 children eligible for free school meals. Nationally there is an average of over 20% of those entitled not claiming. As has been implemented in other areas of the country, parents would be alerted that their children will receive free school meals providing them an opportunity to opt out within 3 weeks. Schools are then provided with the information on the eligible children. An additional benefit is that this would increase the amount of pupil premium going to Darlington schools by £1.4 million. This is largely an administrative exercise and delivered through existing arrangements with schools. The main work is on data governance but there is existing precedence to draw on from other areas.
  - c) **Financial Welfare checks for people with disabilities.** Using LIFT this would focus on those with disabilities who are struggling, at risk or in crisis. A particular group to be included will be carers who often have the least incomes. Licences for a 'Better off Calculator' would be provided for DAD.

34. Though the proposed LIFT programme would require some of the fund to be used to pay for 0.5 of an officer for project management, this essential cost would generate significantly more income for eligible households.
35. The LIFT programme is in line with the Council's core value of addressing inequality.
36. To accommodate the cost of the targeted LIFT programme, it is proposed that the fuel vouchers provided by The Bread and Butter Thing would not be continued in this HSF extension for the following reasons:
  - (a) Less fuel is used by households during the summer
  - (b) Fuel prices are coming down
  - (c) The LIFT programme will provide longer term benefit for recipient households
37. To allow for food vouchers to be made available to families with children on free school meals over the Easter holidays an officer delegation has been approved.

38. Provisional estimated costs and outputs of the programme would be as follows:

<b>Household Support Fund Round 5</b>			
<b>Option</b>	<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Estimated no of households</b>	<b>Estimated cost £</b>
Food Vouchers	Families with children on free school meals	4537	530,829.00
Fuel Vouchers through The Bread and Butter Thing	Low Income Families	0	-
Support for Food Banks	Families in food crisis	1200	50,000.00
Support for Care leavers		154	15,400.00
Support for Elderly	Welfare checks & food packages	300	50,000.00
Vulnerable families supported by Voluntary Sector	Vulnerable groups requiring additional support	1330	150,000.00
Uniform Shop	Provide good quality uniform to low income families	2000	14,000.00
<b>LIFT programme cost</b>			
	0.5 full time DBC Officer		20,000.00
Pension Credits	Advice to residents not claiming pension credits	1500	2,000.00
FSM auto enrolment	Auto enrolment of families eligible for FSM	1200	1,500.00
Financial welfare checks for residents with disabilities	Residents disabilities who are struggling, at risk or in crisis (carers)	t.b.d.	20,000.00
Administration costs	LIFT dashboard		25,000.00
	Other/contingency		35,124.00
<b>Total Programme cost</b>			<b>913,853.00</b>

### Financial Implications

39. As the delivery of the programme, including administration costs, are covered by the fund these proposals should not impact on the overall finances of the Council.

### Procurement Advice

40. The Procurement Team will be involved in writing the agreements with third sector providers of the programme above. Where appropriate, extension to existing contracts will be used.



## **Consultation**

41. Voluntary sector organisations have been consulted extensively in the development of these proposals.

## **Outcome of Consultation**

42. The recommended programme reflects the advice of the voluntary sector