

Record of operational decision

Decision title:	Decision to support families with children, in need of emergency food and household essentials identified through partnership working with schools
Date of decision:	4 th June 2024
Decision maker:	Director of Resources and Assurance
Authority for delegated decision:	Cabinet member decision on 10 May 2024 delegated operational matters in relation to the Household Support Fund to the Director of Resources and Assurance Link: Household Support Fund 5 - Herefordshire Council
Ward:	Countywide
Consultation:	Cabinet member for finance, corporate services and planning has been consulted about the approach to support children and families as part of the Household Support Fund framework.
Decision made:	To enable schools to provide a voucher for food and other household essentials up to value of £50 per voucher from the Household Support Fund at total estimated cost of £50k. The vouchers would be available until the end of March 2024 and would be capped at a maximum of 2 per household totalling a maximum of £100.00 this could support a minimum of 500 families and a maximum (depending on whether each household is allocated one or two vouchers).
Reasons for decision:	<p>The number of 'children in poverty' is on the increase across the whole of the UK (according to Child Poverty Action Group). Many families in Herefordshire who are on low incomes are struggling to afford food, energy and other essential household items. This includes those working households, who are above the free school meal income threshold as well as those on low incomes just above the means tested threshold for benefits. Low-income households spend a larger proportion than average on energy and food so will be more affected by price increases.</p> <p>Providing food vouchers for households of children and young people, at the discretion of the schools, can support households to prevent escalation of problems. These include families with children of all ages, large families and single parent families.</p> <p>The approach has been tested with a number of schools and community representatives and has had a positive response. The proposal has been developed with the Strategic Finance Manager for Schools to develop procedures and guidance on how the scheme will work. The scheme was reviewed in October 2023 and appropriate adjustments made as required.</p> <p>Through this proposal, primary and secondary aged school pupils who are in households that are in the most need of support to help with significantly rising living costs will receive a food voucher that can be redeemed at supermarkets. It is anticipated that this is a one-off payment but that by exception some households may need further support and this will be capped at a maximum of two vouchers to end September 2024. Families will be identified by schools which are well placed to identify struggling households.</p>

36 Eligible schools have been determined using data based on the number of pupils that attend the school on FSM, this shows as an indicator of deprivation. All eligible schools have at least over 15% of children on FSM's and have participated in the vouchers scheme previously.

Herefordshire Council has received an allocation of £1,329,601.78 from the Department of Works and Pensions under the next phase of the Household Support Fund which will run from 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024. The expectation is that the funding should be used primarily to support households in the most need. This scheme will form part of wider offer that is being developed as part of the allocation of the Household Support Fund.

By utilising the funding from government, this will have a positive impact on low income families and child poverty by minimising the debt burden on those that struggle to pay essential bills.

In February 2023, there were 10,370 households in Herefordshire claiming Universal Credit, the highest level seen since January 2020. Of these households just over a half (5,330) had at least one child.

Consumer prices, as measured by the Consumer Prices Index (CPI) have risen exponentially over the past two years. The Bank of England has also raised interest rates to 5.25% placing further pressure on families.

These increases have resulted in more households struggling with the financial strain, including those not previously eligible or support through existing government schemes.

Equality Considerations:

Under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the 'general duty' on public authorities is set out as follows; a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act; b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it; c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it. The public sector equality duty (specific duty) requires us to consider how we can positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations, and demonstrate that we are paying 'due regard' in our decision making in the design of policies and in the delivery of services. Local authorities have discretion on exactly how the Housing Support Fund is used within the scope set out in the guidance for April 2023 to March 2024 issued by the Department of Work and Pensions and the local eligibility framework which is set out in paragraph 5 of this report. In prioritising low income households, there is likely to be a positive impact for people who are financially disadvantaged (although this is not in itself a protected characteristic within the Equality Act 2010). If there are households in urgent need due to rising living costs, they may access support through the Local Welfare Provision service of the Council. The scheme specifically targets families on low incomes with children who are eligible for free school meals. It will also aim to target disabled households, especially those that have high utility bills. The Household Support Fund will provide additional support to other financially disadvantaged households in Herefordshire, many of these households will include those who share a protected characteristic e.g. age, so by utilising the scheme this will support the council in discharging its Equality duty by supporting many of these households to access these funds through third party agencies. All agencies involved in the distribution of the funding will be made aware of their equality responsibilities in regards to the Equality

	Act.
Highlight any associated risks/finance/legal/equality considerations:	<p>The cost of the enhanced support to families with children through schools, will be funded through the Household Support Fund allocation of £1,329,601.78.</p> <p>The exact level of spend depends on the number of children and young people identified by schools, which will be closely monitored. Schools are reimbursed 4% administration costs for the processing of the food vouchers. This is estimated as £2,000.00 maximum outside of the total cost of £50,000.00</p> <p>The council recognises that the pandemic has exacerbated the inequalities in our society, and this is being further compounded by the increased cost of living. Supporting vulnerable families with vouchers to purchase food and other household items allows the council to continue to address local inequalities and prevent the escalation of problems for households.</p>
Details of any alternative options considered and rejected:	<p>Not to approve spend to support vulnerable families and prevent escalation of problems. This is not recommended. The Household Support Fund is expected to support households in most need. Funding families at the discretion of the schools will reach those households that are being hit hardest, which are disproportionately adversely affected by increased household bills.</p>
Details of any declarations of interest made:	None

Signed: Andrew Lovegrove

Date: 04/06/2024