

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:	21 st November 2024
Decision maker:	Head of Communities
Authority for delegated decision:	Cabinet member decision on 7 November 2024 delegated operational matters in relation to the Household Support Fund to the Talk Community Lead Link: Decision - Household Support Fund 6 - Herefordshire Council
Ward:	Countywide
Consultation:	Cabinet member for finance, corporate services and planning and Director of Finance have 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 2025 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 several 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 in March 2025. Families will be identified by schools which are well placed to identify struggling households.</p> <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.</p>

	<p>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 October 2024 to 31 March 2025. 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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>Consumer prices, as measured by the Consumer Prices Index (CPI) have risen exponentially over the past three years. The Bank of England has also maintained high interest rates since the end of the pandemic, placing pressure on families.</p> <p>These increases have resulted in more households struggling with the financial strain, including those not previously eligible or support through existing government schemes.</p>
<p>Equality Considerations:</p>	<p>The Public Sector Equality Duty requires the Council to consider how it can positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations and demonstrate that it is paying ‘due regard’ in our decision making in the design of policies and in the delivery of services.</p> <p>Due to the scope of this project and its potential impact on certain protected characteristics, an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) is attached as an appendix to the cabinet report.</p> <p>In summary, this project impacts on protected characteristics as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Age - Pensioners who are just above the pension credit threshold will be eligible for support for their heating over the winter months. Working with Age UK will enable us to identify those pensioners most in need. b. Disability - Services within the council that work with disabled people in receipt of adult social care services will be asked to identify households in need of support financially to help reduce the impact of increasing energy costs. c. Pregnancy & Maternity - Parents identified by professional colleagues, who need financial support to pay for essentials related to children, for example, nappies, formula milk, clothing, or food. d. Other: Carers, care leavers, homeless, economic deprivation - Services within the council that support unpaid carers will be consulted with to consider how financial support can be offered to households most in need. <p>The EIA did not identify any negative impacts at this time. Any future negative impacts will be reviewed and mitigated accordingly.</p>
<p>Highlight any associated risks/finance/legal/equality considerations:</p>	<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:	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.
Details of any declarations of interest made:	None

Signed
Head of Communities

Date: 21/11/24