

RIBBLE VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL REPORT TO POLICY AND FINANCE COMMITTEE

meeting date: TUESDAY, 23 JANUARY 2024
title: HOUSEHOLD SUPPORT FUND ROUND 4
submitted by: DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING
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1 PURPOSE

1.1 To update Committee on the Household Support Fund Round 4 (HSF4).

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 On 17th November 2022 in the Autumn Statement the Chancellor announced, as part of several measures to provide help with global inflationary challenges and the significantly rising cost of living, that the Household Support Fund (HSF) would be extended from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 with a further £842m of funding. 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. Lancashire County Council has been awarded £19,356,470 for the period 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024.

2.2 LCC allocated £240,000 to RVBC for the year 2023/24. LCC requested that 10% of our allocation is used to assist support services within our Borough and that upto 10% of the allocation can be used for administration costs. The Grant Agreement with LCC sets out that £120,000 will be received in June 2023 and £120,000 will be received in October 2023.

2.3 At Policy and Finance Committee on the 20th June 2023 the following was agreed for HSF4:

1.1.A supermarket voucher application scheme initially from 3rd July until 1st September 2023 (with additional application windows funding permitting) with the following criteria/offer:

- £200 for single households
- £300 for households with two or more adults residing.
- £500 for households with children
- A combined household income threshold of up to £50,000.
- Agreement for the applicants to have a discussion with our Debt/Cost of Living Advisor in respect of financial matters.

1.2.Targeted assistance to the following groups:

- Unpaid carers who are disregarded for Council Tax purposes.
- Care leavers
- Households who have been in receipt of a disability facility grant since 6 October 2021

1.3.Financial and debt advice provided in house by the appointed Debt/Cost of Living Advisor whilst the funding is available.

1.4.Discuss with LCC the possibility of removing criteria that anyone in receipt of the cost-of-living payment or winter fuel payment will not be eligible.

2.4 At Policy and Finance Committee on 12th September 2023 a second round of applications was approved with the same criteria as round one, to run from 2nd October until 1st December 2023. It was also agreed that successful round one applicants would not be eligible to apply again in round two.

3 SUPERMARKET VOUCHERS

- 3.1 Round two of the applications proved very popular. Extensive publicity was undertaken including printed leaflets within Castle News which led to a surge in applications. The second round of applications was closed on 17th November 2023 given the number of applications being received and the limited funding remaining (the website made it clear that the application process would run from 2nd October until 1st December or until the funding ran out).
- 3.2 Since the first round of applications opened in July 2023, and at the time the application process was closed, we had issued 639 vouchers to households equating to £180,700 in supermarket vouchers. 57 vouchers have been issued to care leavers, unpaid carers and households who received a disability facility grant equating to £16,600.
- 3.3 When the application process was closed on 17th November 331 applications had been received although they not been assessed as to whether the households were eligible. Following the assessment 269 of the applications were eligible. Based upon on the household makeup and the associated voucher amounts this equated to £71,800. The Council had £11,000 of its allocation remaining. LCC were approached for additional funding however they have distributed all their funding and as such have confirmed no more funding is available currently.
- 3.4 Following a discussion at the UKSPF Working Group on 11th December it was agreed that the scheme should continue on the previously agreed basis with vouchers issued to eligible applicants in date order of receipt. Prior to Christmas 43 vouchers were issued to eligible applicants equating to £10,900. The remaining eligible applicants were contacted either by e-mail or post to confirm that unfortunately the funding had run out although they would be prioritised for assistance in the event of more funding becoming available.
- 3.5 There are still several vouchers live on the electronic voucher system which have not yet been redeemed. The recipients have been contacted requesting that they redeem their voucher and reminding them that the vouchers do have an expiry date. If these are not redeemed by the expiration date the money is credited into the Council's account although this would be after the fund closes (meaning the funding cannot be redistributed) hence the request for those vouchers to be redeemed as soon as possible.

4 COST OF LIVING

- 4.1 LCC confirmed that 10% of our allocation should be use for debt advice and support services. A member of staff was appointed to assist our residents in this regard on a part time basis. This member of staff was employed until the end of March 2024 and with on costs would have required approximately 3% of our allocation. LCC have confirmed this acceptable in our case and the remaining allocation was redirected to providing more vouchers to households.
- 4.2 However unfortunately the member of staff left the authority on 14th January as they were offered another permanent position. The fact that the position has been vacated early results in £2,680 of the Council's £240,000 allocation becoming available (from the wage saving of the vacancy). Given the fund only runs until the end of March 2024 there is insufficient time to reappoint into a role which also, given its very limited term, would not be attractive to candidates. As such this £2,680 was distributed to the next few eligible households on the list of applicants received before the application process closed (in date order of receipt).
- 4.3 To date 748 vouchers have been issued to households in the Borough which equates to £211,100.

5 ADMINISTRATION

5.1 Committee needs to be aware that administering the numerous grants which have been announced since the pandemic started is very time and resource intensive.

5.2 The grant enables the inclusion of reasonable costs incurred administering the scheme. These include for example:

- 5.2.1 staff costs
- 5.2.2 advertising publicity to raise awareness of the scheme
- 5.2.3 web page design
- 5.2.4 printing application forms
- 5.2.5 small IT changes, for example, to facilitate MI production

5.3 A 5% administration fee was attached to the initial HSF1. A 7.5% administration fee was attached to HSF2 and HSF3 acknowledging the administrative burdens associated with this fund. This round runs for 12 months and as such a 10% administration fee will be attached noting the significant administrative burdens of administering this fund through previous rounds.

6 RECOMMENDED THAT COMMITTEE

6.1 Note the progress on the Household Support Fund with all the Council's allocation now distributed to households in the Borough.

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