

Household Support Fund (phase six) Bracknell Forest eligibility framework and approach

1. Background

- 1.1. The council has been allocated a further £555,468.03 of funding from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to help support vulnerable households facing a rise in energy bills and the cost of living. The money is available to the council from the 1 October 2024 and must be spent by 31 March 2025. Local authorities have discretion on exactly how the funding is spent within the scope set out in the guidance. Authorities can deliver the scheme through a variety of routes including, through direct provision of food, delivering vouchers and payments to households or issuing grants to third parties. The funding can cover reasonable administration costs.
- 1.2. The funding should be used to support vulnerable households most in need. The fund should primarily be used for immediate food, energy, and water related costs as well as other essential costs that are deemed to be a necessary emergency expenditure. Whilst the fund seeks to offer immediate assistance it should also seek to offer longer-term sustainable impact. The framework set out in this paper will enable distribution of the grant to best support local households.

2. Local Household Support Fund (phase six)

- 2.1. The funding will be distributed to the following groups, with full eligibility details provided in section three:
 - 2.1.1. Provide supermarket vouchers to **free school meal (FSM) eligible children** in reception to year 11 inclusive, attending a Bracknell Forest school. The vouchers will be provided automatically through the schools. Approximately 2,500 children are eligible under this criterion. A £30 voucher will be provided in December, a £15 voucher in February and a £30 voucher for Easter 2025.
 - 2.1.2. Re-open a **grant application scheme for Voluntary, Community and Faith (VCFS) organisations**. VCFS organisation will be able to apply for grant funding to directly support residents experiencing financial hardship with essential items including energy, food, and other essentials. Grants of up to £10,000 will be offered per organisation. Separate guidance is available for the grants scheme.
 - 2.1.3. Enhancing the **Local Welfare Scheme (LWS)** provision, enabling applications from households in hardship who would not otherwise automatically qualify for support. This aims to reach households who were previously just about managing and may not be qualifying for wider support. It also means a wider cohort such as FSM equivalent under-fives, electively home educated pupils, 16+ pupils, and SEND children attending out of borough schools can apply for an equivalent supermarket voucher.
 - 2.1.4. Continue to offer **sustainable debt management** advice alongside the financial offer to clear or reduce debt related to council tax or housing benefit by up to £1,500 per household.

- 2.1.5. Offer support to pension age residents, who receive an Adult social care service from Bracknell Forest Council, but do not receive the relevant benefits to qualify for the Winter fuel payment in 2024.
- 2.2. It is anticipated, based on the previous distribution of supermarket vouchers, that approximately 10% of the supermarket vouchers will be unredeemed (approximately £26,000). In this scenario, the credit is refunded and can be used to purchase further vouchers or offer alternative support. This credit will be used to further support applications through the Local Welfare Scheme, within the grant period. It may also be to used, to issue vouchers across households identified as experiencing fuel poverty.

3. Eligibility

- 3.1. Eligibility for automatic Free School Meal cohort supermarket voucher
A family will be eligible if:
- Their child attends a school in Bracknell Forest, AND
 - Is registered for Free School Meals during term time, AND
 - Is in reception to year 11 inclusive.
- 3.2. Local Welfare Scheme application route
The [Local Welfare Scheme \(LWS\)](#) already provides a route where households can apply for one off support. The usual mechanism for application remains in place, operating under the existing policy. Awards made that meet the conditions of the Household Support Fund will be funded through this grant.
- 3.3. All applicants will be assessed through the existing financial assessment process meaning that additional signposting and guidance can be offered for relevant support. Those who received previous support through the Household Support Fund initiatives, will not automatically be eligible for the Local Welfare Scheme. Equally, those who previously had not qualified may now be eligible depending on their circumstances. The assessment process considers income and assets for each individual case.
- 3.4. The additional funding provided through the Household Support Fund also means the provisions available through the LWS will be enhanced between the period of 1 October 2024 to 31 March 2025
- 3.5. A streamlined assessment route for “Family Cost of Living Payment” will also be available to the following cohorts to receive a one-off payment. A £75 payment be awarded per eligible child to cover the Christmas half term 2024, February and Easter 2025 holidays. An application must be made to access this support. A household will be eligible if they are:
- Residents of Bracknell Forest, AND
 - In receipt of qualifying benefits, AND
 - Have children who are:
 - Electively Home Educated, AND/OR
 - Aged 16-18 years in full time education, or with an EHCP up to the age of 25 years, AND/OR
 - Under five years old in an early years setting, AND/OR
 - Attending an out of borough school, AND

- Are not eligible to receive a voucher for Free School Meal eligibility through their school or education authority.
- 3.6. Qualifying benefits are those linked to the [free school meal eligibility](#):
- Income Support
 - income-based Jobseeker's Allowance
 - income-related Employment and Support Allowance
 - support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
 - the guaranteed element of Pension Credit
 - Child Tax Credit (provided you're not also entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual gross income of no more than £16,190)
 - Working Tax Credit run-on - paid for 4 weeks after you stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit
 - Universal Credit - if you apply on or after 1 April 2018 your household income must be less than £7,400 a year (after tax and not including any benefits you get)
- 3.7. The list of eligible households in 3.7 is not exhaustive of those who may receive support, other households will be considered as per the existing LWS policy.
- 3.8. All awards offered under the local welfare scheme route are limited to the available funding. Therefore, the council may close the applications at any point during the period 1 October 2024 to 31 March 2025, if the full Household Support Fund grant has been distributed.
- 3.9. Eligibility for debt management offer
A household will be eligible if they are identified using council data as:
- Have an outstanding Housing Benefit overpayment and/or unpaid Council Tax
 - Have unsustainable income compared with expenditure, meaning a households take-home-income is less than £100 more than their expected expenditure, and they do not have enough savings to meet 3 months' worth of their expected expenditure
- 3.10. Households identified using these criteria will be invited to make an appointment with a member of the financial inclusion team to discuss their finances – this appointment must be made by the householder within 10 working days of the letter date, or the offer will be withdrawn. The householder must fulfil and actively participate in the appointment to discuss their finances with the officer. If these conditions are met, then it will be the recommendation of the officer to credit the account by the full amount allowable.
- 3.11. Up to £1,500 will be offered to clear or reduce outstanding balances related to housing benefit or council tax. If the outstanding balance is less than £1,500, the entire balance will be cleared with no other monies paid to the recipient as part of this offer. Where a payment is made and there are outstanding balances for both housing benefit overpayment and council tax arrears, then housing benefit overpayment will be prioritised.
- 3.12. There is no external method of application to this route of support. This offer will be limited by the budget allocated to the scheme and once exhausted, the offer will be withdrawn. Households may only receive assistance from the debt management offer once within any 12-month period.

4. Wider support

- 4.1. Several wider government initiatives are reaching many households, including low-income families, those with disabilities and low income pension age households. The Household Support Fund is finite and cannot automatically be offered to all households and therefore the criteria for distribution are agreed at local authority level to reach as many households in need as possible. This criterion accounts for the wider support households may have already received or funds which are now not available.

5. Review and Amendments

- 5.1. Should further funding be available to distribute due to unredeemed vouchers, or low LWS application numbers, or if further changes to the policy are required, the decision is delegated to the Chief Executive.
- 5.2. The distribution of the funding will be reviewed in January 2025 to forecast the spend and adjust the policy as necessary.