

Household Support Fund (HSF2): Devon's approach

Context

Devon County Council (DCC) has been awarded funding of £5,064,876.12 by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for a second Household Support Fund (HSF2) for the period 1st April 2022 to 30th September 2022. The HSF2 must be spent or committed before 30 September 2022 and cannot be held over for future usage. As HSF2 is a finite fund, once the money has been spent the fund will close (this may therefore be earlier than 30/09/22). The HSF2 covers the DCC administrative area of Devon.

The fund is designed to provide rapid short-term financial support to address economic vulnerability and financial hardship. It should be used to support households who are struggling to meet their food, energy, water and other essential living needs. It can also be used to support households with essential costs related to those items and with wider essential costs. In exceptional cases of genuine emergency, it can additionally be used to support housing costs where existing housing support schemes do not meet this exceptional need.

DWP guidance stipulates two targets that must be met in order for Devon to receive the full funding allocation:

At least 33% of the fund must be used to support households which have children / young people within them.

At least 33% of the fund must be used to support households which contain people of State Pensionable Age within them.

The remainder of the funding (up to 33%) may be used for other vulnerable households who are struggling to meet their food, energy, water, and other essential needs.

Initial Deployment of Household Support Funds

As DWP payment to Devon will be in arrears and subject to submitting timely management information (MI) returns, as well as meeting the two DWP specific targets (outlined above), Devon must have robust policy and process in place to meet the DWP targets before considering further deployment of the HSF.

DCC has worked with district/city councils and other partners to identify eligible households experiencing financial hardship. The approach to deploy an initial portion of the HSF, in order to meet the DWP targets, is on the following basis:

- **Free School Meal (FSM) Holiday Food Vouchers:**

Funding the free school meals holiday voucher scheme to ensure families of children, eligible for free school meals during term time, are also able to purchase food over the holidays to replace the meals a child would have received during a school day. Families of children that are currently in receipt of free school meals are eligible for a supermarket voucher to the value of £15 per child per week of the school holidays (7 weeks in total for this HSF period) to help pay for groceries over the break. The vouchers will automatically be distributed to eligible families before the May Half-Term (1 week) and the summer holidays (6 weeks).

- **Team Devon District / City Council Household Support Offer for Households of People of State Pensionable Age:**

People of pensionable age are less likely to seek help and support, and so Team Devon will make direct contact with those struggling financially; using Council Tax Reduction data already held within Team Devon. Direct contact will be made with those eligible households in receipt of Council Tax Reduction, outlining a one-off support payment. Those eligible may contact the respective district/city council to decline the offer, if they so wish.

With approximately 20,000 people in this cohort, this action ensures the DWP target set for supporting households containing people of state pensionable age is met. Implementation is aimed for mid-summer, to enable Team Devon district/city councils sufficient time to implement resources and infrastructure required to conduct the task, but also to capture deployment within the initial MI return due to DWP.

- **Citizens Advice Devon (CA Devon) Energy Relief Scheme (pre-payment meters)**

CA Devon will manage an Energy Relief Scheme for those using pre-payment meters and who are struggling to meet their energy needs. Such meters are often used by those struggling to meet their energy needs and those on the lowest incomes; often resulting in them paying more for their energy requirements. A mixture of households will be helped in this way.

- **Support for Black, Asian, and other ethnically diverse peoples**

Respective support groups will operate small grant schemes, reaching out and providing help and support to those struggling financially; but which local authorities have traditionally found harder to reach and connect with.

Communication

Communication will be released on the above deployment of this portion of the HSF allocation for Devon. Where appropriate, further direct, timely and specific communication to the individual households concerned will then follow nearer to the actual implementation of the above initiatives.

Ongoing Review

Following review of the above actions, and the subsequent confirmation of the funds being dispersed in the way described, and assuming HSF funds still remain available, a further deployment of the HSF allocation will then be considered on the following lines:

Team Devon District / City Council General Hardship Fund

All district/city councils will be provided with a further funding allocation, based on the universal credit uptake in their respective areas, enabling each of them to provide direct financial help and assistance to other households who they have identified as eligible against their criteria and who are vulnerable and struggling financially to secure food, water, energy, essential and exceptional (e.g., rent arrears) provisions. Each district/city council will use appropriate and accessible datasets; that they already hold and which are compliant with data protection requirements, to proactively identify vulnerable and in need households; making contact with them and offering 'one-off' financial assistance.

CA Devon Energy Relief Scheme (pre-payment meters) - Scheme Extension

If remaining HSF funding allows, a further allocation to CA Devon will be made in order to extend the initial scheme. The scheme will close once the funding has been dispersed.

District / City Council General Hardship Fund: Local Policy Agreement

The remainder of this document outlines the Team Devon agreed policy and approach to administrating this fund to ensure a degree of consistency in relation to delivery across Devon district and city councils.

- **Team Devon District / City Council General Household Hardship Fund**

All district/city councils will be provided with a further funding allocation, based on the universal credit uptake in their respective areas, enabling each of them to provide direct financial help and assistance to other households who they identify as eligible against their criteria and who are vulnerable and struggling financially to secure food, water, energy, essential and exceptional (e.g., rent arrears) provisions. Each district/city council will use appropriate and accessible datasets; that they already hold and which are compliant with data protection requirements, to proactively identify vulnerable and in need households; making contact with them and offering 'one-off' financial assistance. In addition, and at the discretion of the district/city council, an open application process may be operated.

As this is a finite fund, once the money has been spent the fund will close. The closing date may therefore be earlier than 30/09/22; the date the HSF2 funding period ends officially.

Those eligible for support may contact the respective district/city council to decline any financial offer, if they so wish. On receipt of such a notification the respective council will take steps to ensure the eligible household does not receive a support payment.

1. Types of assistance that can be provided

This scheme is designed to help ease financial pressure on households with low incomes and to support those most in need this summer whilst the economy recovers. The scheme offers a one-off financial support payment to assist with meeting basic living needs including:

- **Food** – this could be through a variety of methods including bank transfer, vouchers, cash or a food parcel (dependant on local arrangements)
- **Energy and water bills**- support with energy bills for any form of fuel that is used for the purpose of domestic heating, cooking or lighting, including oil or portable gas cylinders. It can also be used to support with water bills including for drinking, washing, cooking, and sanitary purposes and sewerage.
- **Essentials linked to energy and water** - including sanitary products, warm clothing, soap, blankets, boiler service/repair, purchase of equipment including fridges, freezers, ovens, etc.
- **Wider essentials** – support with essential household items which may include, but are not limited to, support with other essential monthly expenditure which cannot be deferred including broadband or phone bills, clothing, and essential transport-related costs such as repairing a car, buying a bicycle or paying for fuel.

- **Housing costs** - in exceptional cases of genuine emergency where existing housing support schemes do not meet this exceptional need, the Fund can be used to support housing costs with the following caveats:

- Where eligible, ongoing housing support for rent must be provided through the housing cost element of Universal Credit (UC) and Housing Benefit (HB) rather than the Household Support Fund.
- Eligibility for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) must first be considered before emergency housing support is offered through the Household Support Fund. The Authority must also first consider whether the claimant is at statutory risk of homelessness and therefore owed a duty of support through the Homelessness Prevention Grant (HPG).
- In exceptional cases of genuine emergency, households in receipt of HB, UC, or DHPs can still receive housing cost support through the Household Support Fund if it is deemed necessary by their Authority. However, the Fund should not be used to provide housing support on an ongoing basis or to support unsustainable tenancies.
- Individuals in receipt of some other form of housing support could still qualify for the other elements of the Household Support Fund, such as food, energy, water, essentials linked to energy and water and wider essentials.
- The Fund can exceptionally and in genuine emergency be used to provide support for historic rent arrears built up prior to an existing benefit claim for households already in receipt of Universal Credit and Housing Benefit. This is because these arrears are excluded from the criteria for Discretionary Housing Payments. However, support with rent arrears is not the primary intent of the fund and should not be the focus of spend.

2. Eligibility

Prospective eligible households must:

1. Contain at least one member who is over the age of 16; and
2. Live in a Devon district/city council area (as their main residence); and
3. Be without sufficient resources to meet the immediate short-term needs of themselves or dependents.
4. Be identified from existing data sets or via an application process (if the latter is offered by the district/city council), as meeting the respective eligibility criteria

3. Process

The agreed eligibility criteria and process will be defined clearly on the district/city council's website. Districts may contact a potential household recipient to proactively offer direct financial assistance; basing such contact on local data and intelligence indicating that the household may be struggling to meet their basic living needs. Where an open application process is being operated by the district/city council, only one application per household will be allowed. An application can be made by a household member or their appointee, carer, advocate or a third party acting on the household's behalf.

Direct referrals from trusted third party partners will be encouraged to avoid unnecessary duplication.

4. Maximum award level

- There is no maximum award level as it is a discretionary fund determined on a case-by-case basis according to need. Some districts may have a 2-step process in place (decision and sign off) involving a front-line assessor and manager; where an award is over an agreed amount.
- Awards are made in a variety of methods (including cash via BACS payment, pre-paid cards, vouchers) depending on existing local arrangements/processes.

Eligible spend does not include:

- Mortgage support - however homeowners could still qualify for the other elements of the Fund (such as food, energy, water, essentials linked to energy and water and wider essentials). Where a homeowner is having difficulty with their mortgage payments, they should contact their lender as soon as possible to discuss their circumstances as lenders will have a set procedure to assist.
- Advice services such as debt advice.

5. Repeat Awards

Support will be provided from the fund once only. In exceptional circumstances repeat awards will be considered on merit. In such cases, further work and referrals to other agencies will be discussed with the recipient and may be conditional on having further financial support (e.g. such as being referred to Citizens Advice).

6. Fraud

District/city council will pose questions or seek evidence to establish the facts before making a decision to make an award to a household. Failure by the prospective recipient to disclose a material fact or to make a false application or provide false information will be treated as a fraudulent act. Where fraud has been detected the recipient/applicant will be refused any further assistance and where appropriate, the district/city council may prosecute them.

7. Award Process

Where an open application process is being operated by the district/city council, each case will be assessed. Further information may be requested to enable an accurate assessment.

As part of the assessment, relevant information and data will be taken into account such as:

- The prospective recipient's financial circumstances and those of their household members
- The prospective recipient's access to other forms of financial support
- The circumstances and reasons associated with the case
- Preventative measures taken by the prospective recipient and their household members
- The potential impact of making or not making the award
- The budgetary situation of the fund

A declaration will be signed by the recipient which will allow the Council to share information with third parties to help prevent fraud. Records will be kept on each case received for the duration of the scheme.

8. Data

(Suggested text follows but local subsidiarity will apply, with local circumstances published by the district/city council on its website)

- The types of information required to determine eligibility may vary between district/city councils according to local processes – but any request for supporting evidence will be reasonable and proportionate according to the merits of the case.
- For the purposes of this scheme district/city councils will only collect data relevant to a household's application.
- Data will be held on the relevant district/city council's digital platform and will be protected using up-to-date technical and organisational security measures
- Data will be used to
 - Determine eligibility for the Household Support Fund
 - Make contact about decisions or updates related to the prospective recipient and/or application
 - Issue the Household Support Fund payment to a nominated Bank or Building Society account where appropriate
- Data may be shared with both internal and external organisations for the purposes of validating any applications. Information will be cross matched with other data held by the council and third-party agencies e.g. Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) for verification purposes.
- Data may be shared within the organisation to support efforts to redirect an applicant to other support that may be available.

- Data may also be shared within the organisation or with other Government agencies in order to prevent and/or detect potentially fraudulent activity. Subject to a legal gateway, information may also be shared for the prevention of fraud and criminal activity with (list not exhaustive):
 - The police
 - Immigration service, absconder services and/or UK Border Agency
 - Health and social care organisations
 - Other local authorities and public agencies
- Personal data will not be kept longer than necessary (according to each Districts retention schedule)

9. Monitoring and Reporting

District/city councils are required to complete the standard Management Information (MI) reporting template provided by DWP to record the amount provided or paid to vulnerable households under the remit of this grant scheme. DCC will make one MI return on behalf of Devon in accordance with the specified dates set out by the DWP. Guidance around monitoring and reporting spend will be agreed with district/city councils in a separate document.

10. Funding model

Allocations of funds to DCC from DWP is on a payment in arrears basis; on the condition that accurate management information is submitted according to the timetable (outlined below) and specific cohort support targets are met.

MI return	Reporting period		Deadline
Interim MI return	From: 01/02/22	To: 30/06/22	Deadline: Monday 10/07/22
Final MI return	From: 01/04/22	To: 30/09/22	Deadline: Monday 11/10/22

In turn, DCC will make staged payments to district/city councils, in arrears, via a standard grant agreement once payment has been received from DWP. The Fund will be monitored on a monthly basis.

11. Ongoing Policy Review

The second Household Support Fund has been established to respond rapidly to economic vulnerability and financial hardship this summer. It is therefore not possible to accurately forecast spend. The funding available will be subject to ongoing monthly, to inform any potential changes to support that might be needed for the remainder of the funding period.

The HSF2 is due to run until 30th September 2022 but once all funds have been dispersed, the fund will be closed. In order to maximise the support we can provide to all our residents we will always redirect residents to other forms of support where we feel this is more appropriate to support their needs.