

Household Support Fund 1 April 2024 onwards

Background

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is providing Leicestershire County Council with £3.6m Household Support Fund. The fund runs from 1 April 2024 – 30 September 2024. The intentions of the scheme are to provide extra support to those most in need who would otherwise struggle with energy bills, food and water bills.

The fund is primarily be used to support households in the most need with food, energy, and water bills. 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. The fund is being awarded to Upper Tier Authorities who are encouraged to coordinate with Districts and partner organisations where appropriate.

Families with children – definition:

- For the purposes of reporting of this fund a child is defined as being 19 or under on date of application or a person aged 19 or over in respect of whom a child-related benefit (for example, Child Benefit) is paid or free school meals are provided.
- Where an eligible child lives on his or her own, they are a household that includes a child covered in the third allocation for households with children.
- Households which include a person aged 19 to 25 with special educational needs and disability (SEND) and/or care leavers may still be eligible for support however that support falls within the third allocation to households without children.

Pensioners – definition

- For the purposes of reporting of this fund, a household with a pensioner is defined as any household containing any person: who has reached state pension age by date of application.

Awards will be based on the following framework:

Eligible spend includes:

Food - The Fund should primarily be used to provide support with food whether in kind or through vouchers or cash.

Energy and water - The Fund should also primarily be used to 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 - The Fund can be used to provide support with essentials linked to energy and water (including sanitary products, warm clothing, soap, blankets, boiler service/repair, purchase of equipment including fridges, freezers, ovens, etc.), in recognition that a range of costs may arise which directly affect a household's ability to afford or access food, energy and water.

Wider essentials - The Fund can be used to support with wider essential needs not linked to energy and water should Authorities consider this appropriate in their area. These may include, but are not limited to, support with other bills including broadband or phone bills, clothing, and essential transport-related costs such as repairing a car, buying a bicycle or paying for fuel. This list is not exhaustive.

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. 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. In addition, 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 cannot be used to provide mortgage support, though 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.
- 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.

It is expected that the focus of support should be on food and bills and that support for housing costs should only be given in exceptional cases of genuine emergency.

Eligible spend does not include:

- Mortgage costs.

Any funds unspent or committed by 30 September 2024 will need to be returned and cannot be carried forward.

Data returns are required to ensure that locally authorities are directing the fund to meet the stated policy aims.

Every attempt will be made to spread the funding out over the duration of its availability, but the Council reserve the right to close the scheme early if all the funding has been allocated. Similarly,

this policy is subject to change and amendments may be made to the criteria or value of awards issued to best distribute support to as many as possible.

Any revisions to the policy will be updated. The Council will not be able to make further awards once the fund has been spent.

Vouchers will be provided to the parents/carers of all pupils who are eligible for FSM. These will be distributed through schools and there are restrictions that mean the vouchers cannot be used to purchase controlled products such as alcohol and tobacco.

Vouchers to the value of £15.00 per child per week, will be issued to eligible pupils in Leicestershire Schools and FE Colleges over the May, October and February half terms. Vouchers to the value of £90.00 will be issued for the Summer holidays. Vouchers to the value of £40.00 will be issued for the Christmas holidays. Vouchers to the value of £30.00 will be issued for Easter holidays. The vouchers or in-kind support for Leicestershire pupils who attend schools in other areas will be provided by the Local Authority in which the establishment is located. Reciprocal arrangements with Leicester City Council will ensure the provision of an equivalent support for Leicestershire pupils who attend non-Leicestershire establishments. Food vouchers for families with pupils eligible for Free School meals in Independent School Provision will be provided to the parents/carers of all pupils who are eligible for FSM.

Food vouchers for families with children aged 0-5

Eligible pre-school aged children attending early years provision at a childminder, pre-school or day nursery may be entitled to the vouchers if they usually attend sessions before and after lunch.

Vouchers to the value of £15.00 per child per week, will be issued to children attending early years provision at a childminder, pre-school, or day nursery if they reside in Leicestershire and are accessing their 2-year-old Free Early Education (FEEE) or Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) over the over the May, October and February half terms. Vouchers to the value of £90.00 will be issued for the Summer holidays. Vouchers to the value of £40.00 will be issued for the Christmas holidays. Vouchers to the value of £30.00 will be issued for Easter holidays.

Additional support available via the Household Support Fund

Leicestershire County Council recognises that all households may potentially be suffering hardship and seeks to provide support from the Household Support Fund to any household that meets its criteria. Families that have received FSM vouchers may also require support with food, fuel or other utility costs.

Applications must meet the following eligibility criteria:

1. The applicant must be a resident of Leicestershire over 16 years old
2. A family/household with or without children who are experiencing financial hardship, which means that they are struggling to feed their family, to heat their home, or with other household/utility costs etc
3. Had their and/or their children's identity verified by the professional submitting the application, for example, by using a form of photo ID (confirming the lead claimant's identity) e.g., driving licence, passport, birth certificate, marriage certificate.

4. Had their pensionable age verified by the professional submitting the application, for example by using a form of photo ID (confirming the lead claimant's identity) e.g., driving licence, passport, birth certificate.
5. Had their proof of address verified by the professional (confirming their residence) e.g., benefits letter, bank statement, utility bill, Council Tax bill. If homeless confirmation that they are currently homeless in Leicestershire (from a professional)
6. Eligibility confirmed by the suitable professional making the application. Evidence of financial hardship could include but is not limited to: difficulties and/or arrears due to inflationary energy costs, those who have been made redundant and have not yet received universal credit, or other loss of household income.

What support is available?

Food vouchers - The following funds are available for food vouchers:

- Households with children: £20 per adult per week, £15 per child per week.
- Single households £25 per week.
- Multiple adult households £20 per adult per week

These vouchers may also be used for the purchase of toiletries and sanitary products. Funds will be paid for two weeks. There will be three funding cycles, opening in May, October and January. If funding is used up prior to the end of a funding cycle, the cycle will close until the next one is due to open. One application is permitted in each funding cycle.

Fuel vouchers - The following funds for fuel costs are available:

Prepayment meter credit – emergency top-up for households with minimal or no credit at risk of self-disconnection due to financial hardship.

Vouchers with the value of £98 (family) or £56 (single person) issued per application. There will be three funding cycles, opening in May, October and January. If funding is used up prior to the end of a funding cycle, the cycle will close until the next one is due to open. One application is permitted in each funding cycle.

Energy arrears – financial support if family at risk of self-disconnection due to financial hardship via redeemable cash vouchers to pay off a proportion of energy arrears to reduce cost of repayment plan payments and therefore relieve financial hardship. Cash vouchers up to the value of £200 can be awarded.

Heating fuel purchases – financial support via redeemable cash vouchers for household to purchase delivered fuels (LPG/bottle gas, heating oil, solid fuel) where there is financial hardship and risk of underheating and excess cold.

Residents may be directed to consider setting up pay monthly options where possible for items that otherwise require bulk purchases e.g., heating oil. One £300 voucher per household can be awarded per annum where fuel is delivered in bulk (e.g. heating oil, solid fuel). One £100 voucher for fuel where it is not delivered in bulk (e.g. bottle gas) can be awarded in each funding cycle.

Which departments and agencies can make a referral?

The Council will accept referrals received from the following trusted partners and departments on the Household Support fund referral form:

- Registered charities and voluntary organisations
- Schools / Education settings
- Food banks
- Care organisations
- Children's Services
- Adult Social Care
- Housing
- Revenues and Customer Support
- Public Health
- Care and NHS professionals including nurses and GPs. Referrals received from other parties, including counselling and wellbeing professionals, will also be welcomed
- Districts and Borough councils

This list is not exhaustive.

The Multi Agency Travellers Unit, hosted by the County Council, will be the point of contact for members of the travelling community, eligibility will be the same as outlined above for the food and fuel vouchers.

How will the household receive their award?

Food vouchers will be provided by phone app, e voucher or printed voucher. Fuel payments may be made by voucher for meter top ups, to pay off energy arrears, or payments for directly delivered fuel purchases. Delivery of the award will be dependent on individual circumstances.

Vouchers issued for food and fuel through the referral scheme, or free school meal scheme will be cancelled three months after issue, if they have not been claimed and converted into supermarket or energy vouchers. Once converted, the expiry dates of supermarket and energy vouchers vary according to the supplier chosen.

General Terms of the Scheme

The referring organisation must verify the lead claimant's identity, age and address (confirming their residence). If it is subsequently identified that a payment under the scheme has been awarded because of false or fraudulent information, including the claiming of duplicate awards, the Council reserves the right to withdraw the award and recover the resulting sum due. The Council also reserves the right to report suspected fraud.

The Council will provide a written notice of its decision to the referrer, by email. It is the responsibility of the referring party to inform the referred household of the outcome.

The decision notice will set out:

- a summary of the factors considered in reaching the decision.
- provide details of how to request a review or obtain more information about the decision.

- provide details of how the award (if any) will be made.

A lead claimant who is refused an award under the Scheme or is awarded less support than requested may ask the Council to review the decision, provided the request is made in writing to within one month of their referral organisation being notified of the decision. The review will be conducted by an officer, who was not involved in the original decision, and who is of an appropriate grade. There is no statutory right appeal against a decision not to award, or against the value or composition of any fund. Complaints regarding the administration of the scheme should be made using the Council's complaints service.

The only further recourse for referred households is through judicial review. The Council will ensure that all applications are validated by proof of identity, and for bank accounts where it is necessary to do so. If a false statement is provided or false evidence provided in support of the application, an offence may have been committed under the Fraud Act 2006.

Leicestershire County Council has a zero-tolerance approach to fraud and financial irregularity. All suspicions of fraud relating to this scheme will be referred to Leicestershire Police. In addition to any criminal action, the Council will seek to recover all fraud losses.

The online form is accessible in relation to many forms of disability, including compatibility with read-to-user technology. Decision awards and notifications will also follow in this format.

Finance and Monitoring

The Council will operate the scheme under Government guidelines. Fund awards are limited by government and cannot be increased.

The Council will undertake monitoring of the number and amount of awards in relation to the available relevant budget. The purpose is to ensure the awards budget has sufficient funds to meet demand throughout the period of the scheme. The Council will also monitor cases where a referral has been refused to ensure decisions are being made fairly and consistently.

The Council is subject to the general equality duty. This means that steps will be taken to monitor implementation of this policy to ensure no one is subject to disproportionate adverse treatment because they had a protected characteristic.

The general equality duty requires that the Council has due regard to the need to:

- Remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic
- Take steps to meet the needs of persons who share relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it

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