

# Household Support Voucher Scheme Policy



The £842 million Household Support Fund (HSF) runs from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 and aims to support households most in need to help with global inflationary challenges and the significantly rising cost of living. While this is considered an extension to the previous three household support fund schemes, it is a new grant subject to its own grant conditions as set out in [Household Support Fund: guidance for local councils](#)

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is providing this funding to County Councils and Unitary Authorities (including Metropolitan Councils and London Boroughs), under section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003, to administer the scheme and provide assistance to households most in need. Upper Tier Local Authorities are encouraged to work closely with District Councils and other local partners and professionals who know their local areas best and who work directly with vulnerable households (such as Social Workers and Supporting Families advisers) to help identify and help those who need it most.

County Councils and Unitary Authorities have discretion on exactly how this funding is used within the scope set out in the accompanying grant determination and this guidance. This guidance sets out the required collaboration between the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), County Councils and Unitary Authorities, including their delivery partners (such as District Councils as well as any charitable or third-party organisations) to successfully meet the policy intent within the agreed framework. It also provides the framework that County Councils and Unitary Authorities need to work within and the arrangements for distribution of funding and reporting.

Oxfordshire County Council, as the upper tier council, will receive *£6,722,512 million* and is the accountable body.

This funding covers the period **01 April 2023 to 31 March 2024**.

## Objectives and Principles of the scheme

The objective of The Household Support Fund (The Fund) is to provide crisis support to vulnerable households in most need of support to help with significant rising living costs. From 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 the funding will be used to meet immediate needs and help those who are struggling to afford energy and water bills, food, and other related essentials. Authorities can also use the funding to support households who are struggling to afford wider essentials including housing costs where existing housing support does not meet this need.

The funding is to be spent before 31 March 2024 and cannot be carried over for future usage. All Authorities are encouraged to ensure, wherever possible, that any vouchers issued are redeemed before the end of The Fund, or shortly thereafter, or consider recycling unused vouchers. It is acceptable for vouchers that have been purchased and delivered to households before the end of The Fund to be spent shortly thereafter.

Eligible spend includes:

- Energy and water - the HSF should primarily be used to offer support with bills for any form of fuel that is used for the purpose of domestic heating, cooking or lighting. It can also be used to offer support with water bills.
- Food - the HSF should primarily be used to provide support with food, whether in kind or through vouchers or in exceptional circumstances cash.
- Essentials linked to energy and water, boiler service/repair, purchase of equipment including fridges, freezers, ovens, microwaves, slow cookers etc. This is in recognition of the fact that a range of costs may arise which directly affect a household's ability to afford or access food, energy and water.
- Wider essential needs, not linked to energy and water. These may include, but are not limited to, sanitary products, soap, blankets, 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.
- In exceptional circumstances the fund can also be used to assist with housing costs where existing housing support schemes do not meet this need. It cannot be used to assist with mortgage payments but could be used to support a family with other housing costs.

## The Oxfordshire Approach

Oxfordshire County Council, as the upper tier authority are the recipients of the Household Support Fund and have determined the allocation of the fund in consultation with the lower tier authorities. At present the allocation will include the following measures:

- £450 grant to Housing Benefit-only Recipients who will not receive the national cost of living payments.
- Education Support Grant- New discretionary fund for schools to meet immediate needs e.g., warm clothing, breakfast clubs, school trips.
- Practical support for those leaving hospital.
- Supporting families eligible for Free School Meal vouchers with £15 voucher per child per holiday starting with April Spring Holidays 3 April 2023.
- Residents Support Scheme- this is a new application / referral-based facility to provide funding, pay bills or provide goods and equipment for residents experiencing exceptional financial need and to avoid escalation.
- Ongoing delegation to City and District Councils to meet HSF compliant needs identified locally. South Oxfordshire / Vale of the White Horse District Council is expected to receive approximately £82,615 (VALE £79,815). Funds have been apportioned according to the population and deprivation indices for each area.

## Local Approach

The provision of the Resident Support Scheme by Oxfordshire County Council affords the districts the option to evaluate whether it is necessary to run application-based voucher schemes in their districts. This policy details the specific approach for local welfare arrangements being delivered by South Oxfordshire / Vale of the White Horse District using the district allocation of HSF 4. The policy aims to ensure that the Council will deliver against the objectives and principles of the HSF in the district, working collaboratively with local authority partners, community and voluntary organisations and professionals to help identify those most in need and provide relevant support.

The policy incorporates learnings from the previous grant schemes and is based on research into local authority schemes across England. It takes into account the range of Oxfordshire County Council measures, particularly the Resident Support Scheme and has been developed in discussion with previous partners advice schemes and extensive research.

The approach for allocation of vouchers has been modified to ensure that a wider range of agencies can refer residents on for help and to ensure that residents are receiving longer term support and advice. It aims to complement the help available through the Resident Support Scheme and the wider package of support that has been offered by central government. Therefore, the previous approach of an application based voucher scheme used in previous iterations of the HSF the scheme has been modified and instead will be an extension of the existing COMF funded food and fuel voucher scheme.

In addition to the local welfare arrangement further detailed below, South Oxfordshire District Council/Vale of White Horse will also provide HUGGG food vouchers to students eligible for free school meals and therefore the holiday food provision offered by Oxfordshire County Council who attend school in a neighbouring county and will otherwise not receive support. Vouchers will be sent to the school by the Community Hub with the authorisation of Oxfordshire County Council. The cost of these vouchers will be fully reimbursed by Oxfordshire County Council and will not affect the funds allocated as part of the local welfare provision. Students will receive £15 per week.

The scheme will operate as follows:

- Referral form received into the Community Hub from a trusted agency
- Referral form reviewed and assessed by Hub
- If the referral decision is yes, the hub will generate appropriate vouchers to the resident along with any further relevant and follow up contact with the resident
- Referral decision is no, then Hub will confirm with trusted agency and include alternative options for support

## Opening and closing dates

The scheme is expected to start on the 1 October 2023 and funds should be spent or committed before 31 March 2024.

## Reporting

Oxfordshire County Council will be required to make two Statements of Grant Usage and management information (MI) returns to DWP in order to ensure that allocation of funds is as specified in the government guidance.

**An interim MI return** is required by **21 July 2023** for spend for the period 1 April 2023 to 30 June 2023. The interim MI return will be used to determine eligible spend to 31 December 2023 and an interim grant payment will be made for this period when the return has been verified. **A final MI return** is required by 28 April 2024 showing total spend from 01 October 2023 to 31 March 2024. The final MI return will be used to determine total eligible spend to 31 March 2024 and a final grant payment will be made when the return has been verified.

Authorities will be required to report on the total amount provided to vulnerable households (split by household composition i.e. households with children, households with pensioners, households with a disabled person, other), administration costs and total LA spend.

## Voucher Provision

- Vouchers are to be issued based on referrals from trusted partners.
- Vouchers are not offered on an application basis.
- Voucher values - £100 voucher for a single resident, £150 voucher for a couple or £200 for a family voucher
- The voucher will be for food or fuel or related to another need as detailed in the above eligible spend list.
- Only one voucher can be issued per household in a six-month period

### Operating hours

- Provision is available during the councils normal opening hours. Monday to Thursday 8.30-5pm and Friday 8.30-4pm

## Who is eligible?

Household support voucher provision will be offered by the Hub as the result of a referral from a trusted VCS partner/ external agency.

- Only one voucher is available per household.
- The resident must be aged 16 years+
- A household for the purposes of this voucher scheme is: a one-person household, household made up of a couple without children, household made up of a couple and children, lone-parent household, and households including extended family. A definition of "family" from the Oxford Dictionary is a married, civil partnered or cohabiting couple with or without children, or a lone parent with at least one child, who lives at the same address; children may be dependent or non-dependent.
- The scheme is open to a household regardless of whether they are in receipt of benefits and whatever their employment and immigration status.
- The council will comply with the Public Sector Equality Duty and all parties involved are expected to act in accordance with the Equality Act 2010.

- ***Provision can be agreed in other exceptional circumstances this must be agreed by the Community Connector Supervisor or Community Hub Team Leader in their absence.***

## **How will a voucher be paid?**

A voucher, which the resident will be able to activate to download, for either

- A supermarket or retail voucher for a retailer most appropriate for them, or
- A fuel card; or
- A pre-payment meter top-up fuel card or
- In exceptional circumstances an ATM code for cash.
- Where the resident cannot do this electronically, the community hub will work with the referral agency to ensure the resident receives the voucher. In exceptional circumstances, the resident can be offered a cash ATM option through our voucher provider.

## **Who is not eligible?**

- Not a resident of South Oxfordshire / Vale of the White Horse District Councils area.
- Received a Household Support Voucher in the last six months.

This list is not exhaustive, and the council's decision is final.

## **Resident Support**

- The voucher will be sent with an email detailing cost of living support available as well as any specific advice and support.
- Residents will receive a follow up call the next working day to follow up and provide any further advice or support.
- Any direct referrals into the hub will be signposted to the appropriate support networks and organisations.

## **Length of the scheme**

The scheme will run until 31 March 2024 or until funds run out, whichever happens soonest.

## **Fraud**

There is no requirement for authorities to undertake a means test or conduct a benefit check unless this specifically forms part of the authority's local eligibility criteria. Officers will cross check any referrals against hub records to ensure that they do not receive the Household Support voucher twice in a six-month period.