

HOUSEHOLD SUPPORT FUND – EALING POLICY

1. Introduction

Household Support Fund has been made available to the Councils in England to support those most in need to help with significantly rising living costs. This funding covers the period 01 October 2022 to 31 March 2023 inclusive. The Council has discretion on exactly how this funding is used within the scope set out in the DWP guidance. The expectation is that it should primarily be used to support households in the most need particularly those who may not be eligible for the Government's Cost of Living Support and also for those who despite the support find themselves vulnerable to the rising prices. Energy bills may be of particular concern to low-income households during the period of the scheme and Local Authorities should especially consider how they can support households with the cost of energy. 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.

Ealing allocation under the scheme is £2,658,804.97.

2. Objectives and principles of the scheme

2.1 The objective of the Household Support Fund is to provide support to vulnerable households in most need of support to help with significantly rising living costs.

2.2 Funds should be spent or committed before 31 March 2023 and cannot be held over for future usage.

2.3 When administering this scheme, The Council has followed principles laid out in DWP guidance as below:

- use discretion on how to identify and support those most in need, taking into account a wide range of information;
- use the funding from 1 October 2022 to 31 March 2023 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;
- in exceptional cases of genuine emergency, the funding can additionally be used to support housing costs where existing housing support schemes do not meet this exceptional need, subject to the provisions at paragraph 30 below.
- this includes payments made, or committed to, by the Authority or any person acting on behalf of the Authority, from 1 October 2022 to 31 March 2023.
- work together with third parties, including where necessary and appropriate other local services. This may include social workers, housing and family

support services, and may incorporate intelligence and data from wider children's social care systems to help identify and support individuals, families and households within the scope of The Fund.

2.4 The following guidelines have been issued by DWP on how the funding should be used:

- The Council must operate an application-based service for support to ensure those in need have a route to emergency support which is clearly advertised to residents.
- The Council can also proactively identify households who will benefit from support. Where this is the case, the Council should consider how they can ensure that they are focusing on those in the most need to prevent escalation of problems. There is no requirement for the Council to undertake a means test or conduct a benefit check unless this specifically forms part of the council's local eligibility criteria.
- However, in relation to housing costs, the Council must establish whether other forms of support are available to the household, such as Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs).

3. Eligible spend under HSF:

Eligible spend includes:

- Energy and water. The Fund should 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.
- Food. The Fund should also primarily be used to provide support with food whether in kind or through vouchers or cash.
- 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 energy , food and water.

- Wider essentials. The Fund can be used to support with wider essential needs not linked to energy and water should the Council 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 DHPs must first be considered before emergency housing support is offered through the Household Support Fund. The Council 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 Council. 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 energy, food, 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 DHPs. However, support with rent arrears is not the primary intent of the fund and should not be the focus of spend.

4. Individuals with No Recourse to Public Funds

4.1 The Council can provide a basic safety net support to an individual, regardless of their immigration status, if there is a genuine care need that does not arise solely from destitution, for example if:

- there are community care needs
- they have serious health problems
- there is a risk to a child's wellbeing

4.2 The Council must use their judgement to decide what legal powers and funding can be used to support individuals who are ineligible for public funds or statutory housing assistance.

5. Legislation

This policy is developed in line with DWP guidance noting that as per their guidance. The Household Support Fund is being classified as Local Welfare Provision (LWP) and local authorities (LAs) who have signed and returned the relevant section (Annex C) of the DWP/LA Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) have legal permission to access DWP's Searchlight portal. This portal provides information on individual citizen's entitlement to (and confirms receipt of) DWP welfare benefits. Therefore, this data can be used to help Authorities identify those families and individuals to whom to target this support.

6. Qualifying criteria and awards

6.1 The Council has flexibility to deliver the support in a variety of different ways, including direct cash payments, vouchers, giving meals to those in need or boosting funding for organisations already doing so.

6.2 Council also has the flexibility to identify which vulnerable households are in most need of support and apply their own discretion when identifying eligibility.

6.3 The Council must operate an application-based service for support to ensure those in need have a route to emergency support which is clearly advertised to residents. This requirement will be fulfilled by the Council's local welfare assistance with expanded eligibility criteria.

6.4 In order to maximise the grant for support payments to residents of Ealing and to keep the administration of the grant to minimum, the Council will administer the grant in the following way:

6.5 Support for families eligible for FSMs where eligibility is based on low income (excludes universal support).

The Council will automatically issue awards to parents of children eligible to free school meals where their eligibility is based on low income excludes universal infant free school meals, which are not income related.

The supermarket vouchers will be issued in October 22, December 22, February 23 and March 23. The value of the vouchers issued in October 22, February 23 and March will be £15 per week per child.

The value of the vouchers issued in December 22 will be £20 per week per child.

The Council will use the Free School Meals database to identify those who are eligible.

The Council will then automatically issue supermarket vouchers to families identified as entitled to free school meals to cover period of school holidays to support families with food during the periods when children do not receive school meals.

The vouchers will be distributed electronically by Hawk Incentives Limited. Where this is not possible, The Council will issue vouchers via other means necessary, i.e. text or letter.

London wide agreement has been reached that each borough will support the children attending the schools in the borough. This is to ensure that all children eligible for free school meals are being supported.

6.6 Support for families with children under the age of 5:

The Council will use its Council Tax Reduction and Housing Benefit data to identify households with children under 5 and will issue supermarket vouchers to the value of:

- £15 per household in October 22
- £40 per household in December 22
- £15 per household in February 23
- £30 per household in March 23

The vouchers will be distributed electronically by Hawk Incentives Limited. Where this is not possible, The Council will issue vouchers via other means necessary, i.e. text or letter.

6.7 Support for care leavers

The Council will support its care leavers and will automatically issue supermarket vouchers to the value the value of:

- £15 per household in October 22
- £40 per household in December 22
- £15 per household in February 23
- £30 per household in March 23

3.1.1 Support for households in receipt of Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Reduction who are not in receipt of DWP benefits and thus not entitled to DWP cost of living payments.

The Council will issue a one-off payment to households in receipt of Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax reduction and therefore those who have not been entitled to the Cost-of-Living Payments for those on means tested DWP benefits or Tax Credits;

The Council will use their Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction data sets to identify households who have not been eligible for the above payments.

The awards will be issued in supermarket vouchers.

The value of the one-off award will be £170 per identified household.

6.8 Support for other vulnerable households with or without children, households who do not qualify for automatic vouchers and those who need additional support with other essential items.

6.8.1 Local Welfare Assistance (LWA) will provide support to other vulnerable households in the borough and will support for families with food, utilities and other essentials including sanitary products, warm clothing, soap, blankets, boiler/service repair; purchase of equipment including fridges, freezers, ovens, etc. This includes households whose rent includes ineligible services related to these items.

There will be two routes for Local Welfare Assistance awards:

Route 1:

Individual customers will be required to make an application for local welfare assistance and the application and LWA eligibility criteria will be expanded until 31 March 2023 to take into account eligibility criteria of the Household Support Grant.

Route 2:

Referral from another Council Service, in particular, Social Care or Housing where the department identified an individual's genuine need for support with food, utilities and other essentials.

6.8.2 Maximum award of LWA will be capped at £400 per household unless exceptional circumstances warrant a higher award.

6.8.3 Boiler service and repairs under LWA: Where a customer makes an application for a boiler/service repairs, two quotes will be required before the final decision on the award is made. The payments for boiler/service repairs will be capped at maximum of £1,500. Alternatively, the team may refer the case to a handyman scheme under Healthy Homes initiative and if the boiler cannot be repaired, the Healthy Homes may assist the customer in getting a boiler replaced under their scheme.

If the property is rented, it is generally the responsibility of the landlord to carry out boiler repairs and replacements, therefore awards towards boiler repairs will only be considered for owner occupiers.

6.8.4 Housing Costs under LWA: these will only be paid in cases of exceptional emergency where existing housing costs schemes do not meet this exceptional need (eligibility for HB, UC, DHP and Homelessness Prevention Grant needs to be considered in the first instance) and the applicant is at high risk of eviction. Help with housing cost will be provided under the Household Support fund as follows:

- Where an application for LWA has been made for housing costs and the emergency need cannot be covered through any other fund
- Though a referral process directly from the team administering DHP where DHP cannot be awarded but the individual is at risk of eviction
- Through a referral process from another Council department, ie. Housing, Social Services or other

6.9 Support provided via voluntary sector

The Council will also provide funding to voluntary sector to support individuals who with eligible items under the Household Support Grant, provided the support does not duplicate the form of support provided by the Council.

Voluntary sector organisations will be responsible for setting out their own eligibility criteria based on the needs of the communities they support.

7. Identification of cases and application process

The Council will identify families eligible for support from its own data and according to eligibility criteria set out in point 6 of the policy.

Residents will also be able to make further application to local welfare assistance for other essential items in line with Local Welfare Assistance policy.

Where possible, other services will be identifying individuals and households with genuine need of support under the Household Support Grant.

8. Evidence/verification

Where possible, the Council will issue payments automatically and no further evidence or verification will be required under the scheme as the identity and other information would have been verified for free school meals and benefit purposes.

The Council will undertake verification of Local Welfare Assistance applications in accordance with existing verification processes for LWA scheme.

9. Decisions

Vouchers will be issued to those identified as eligible through council records.

Vouchers will be distributed electronically. In cases where vouchers cannot be issued electronically, the Council will issue the voucher via post.

Cash via Post Office payments will be issued to those eligible as decided by the Council.

Local Welfare Assistance payments will be issued under the agreed LWA eligibility criteria and timescales.

Notifications of awards will be issued either via email or where an email address is not available, customers will be notified via letter.

10. Backdating requests

There will be no backdating of entitlement to Household Support Fund scheme and only those who meet the eligibility criteria at the time of issuing payments will be issued with awards.

11. Fraud

As the Council is identifying eligible customers from its own records, the risk of fraud is low.

Local Welfare Assistance applicants will have the information verified under the current LWA process.

Blackhawk Network will provide the Council with reports on the codes redeemed which can then be verified against the records of codes issued.

12. Publicity

The Council will make every effort to publicise the scheme through the Council website, schools, social media and other available channels.

13. Appeals

There is no statutory right of appeal to the automatic awards made to recipients identified by the Council as requiring additional support.

Any award will be at the absolute discretion of the Chief Finance Officer, in accordance with the award criteria, and his decision will be final.

Those who make an application for support through Local Welfare Assistance have a right to ask for the decision to be reviewed under the current LWA policy.

14. Funding

Ealing Council's allocation for Household Support Fund is £2,658,804.97. There is no separate grant towards administration costs and some of the grant can be used towards administering the scheme as long as the cost is 'reasonable'. The administration costs can include: staff costs, advertising and publicity, web page design, printing applications and small IT changes to facilitate MI production.

Any unspent funds will have to be paid back to DWP.

15. Management Information Returns

The Council is required to make one Statement of Grant Usage and management information (MI) return. The deadline for completing this return is shown in the table below.

MI return	Reporting period	Deadline
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Interim MI return	From: 1 October 2022	To: 31 December 2022	Deadline: 25 January 2023
Final MI return	From: 1 October 2022	To: 31 March 2023	Deadline: 28 April 2023

Completed MI returns should be sent to lawelfare.pdt@dwp.gov.uk

Authorities should use the standard MI reporting template provided, which incorporates the Statement of Grant Usage.

The submissions need to be signed off by Chief Finance Officer.