

## **SUPPORT TO BUSINESSES, HOUSEHOLDS AND THE COMMUNITY**

### **1. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 1.1 To continue to work with our partners to identify emerging issues and explore further opportunities for joint working to support our communities and most vulnerable residents across the district.
- 1.2 To recommend the use of £20,000 from residual Council Tax Hardship fund, to work with partners and support the Community Hubs, as detailed in 5.8, and a Financial Inclusion officer, as detailed in 7.1.
- 1.3 To note the intent to establish a Task and Finish Group, to report back to the Community, Partnerships and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Panel, on the development of our strategic response to supporting our communities.

### **2. INTRODUCTION**

- 2.1 The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the support given to businesses, households and to our communities in 2022/23. The report also summarises the support being administered from 1 April 2023.
- 2.2 Since 1 April 2022, the following support has been administered:

#### **SUPPORT FOR BUSINESSES (Section 3)**

1. Retail, Hospitality and Leisure rate relief
2. COVID Additional Relief scheme

#### **SUPPORT FOR HOUSEHOLDS (Section 4)**

3. Household Support Fund – Exceptional Housing Costs and Food Voucher
4. The £150 Council Tax Energy Rebate scheme
5. The Energy Rebate Discretionary scheme
6. The Energy Bills Support Scheme Alternative Funding
7. The Alternative Fuel Payment Alternative Funding scheme

#### **SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITIES (Section 5)**

8. Support for local groups
9. Ukraine Job Fair
10. Cost of Living Support

#### **SUPPORT FROM 1 APRIL 2023 (Section 6)**

11. Retail, Hospitality and Leisure relief
12. The Council Tax Support Fund
13. Household Support Fund

- 2.3 The schemes closed at various times, as detailed in guidance, and returns and reconciliations to record payments made were submitted as required.

2.4 In the 2022/23 financial year to date the council has administered and distributed various grants, payments and funds totalling **£18,552,930**.

### **3. SUPPORT FOR BUSINESSES**

3.1 Between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023 we have administered and distributed grants and rate reliefs to support businesses, **totalling £9,349,825**. The government provided guidance on the types of businesses eligible for each of the grants and supplementary FAQ's. The grant schemes are summarised below:

#### **1. Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Rate Relief**

3.2 To support eligible businesses in the retail, hospitality, and leisure sectors during 2022/23 they were entitled to a business rates discount of 50%, subject to subsidy control and an overall cash cap of £110,000. Applications are online and to date we have awarded Retail, Hospitality and Leisure rate relief of £5,012,443 to 855 businesses.

#### **2. COVID Additional Relief Fund (CARF)**

3.3 The government provided funding of £4,356,538 to award a one-off payment to reduce chargeable amounts in respect of business rates for the 2021/22 financial year only, to support businesses affected by the pandemic that were not eligible for existing support linked to business rates, for example Expanded Retail Discount.

3.4 Local authorities were responsible for developing their own discretionary scheme.

3.5 Our scheme was available to eligible occupied businesses that were on the rating list and trading on 15 December 2021 and that were adversely impacted by the pandemic. Certain properties were excluded, for example beach huts, car parks, and communication masts.

3.6 The application was via an online form. We identified businesses as being potentially eligible for the relief and sent two letters to promote the scheme. The response was lower than expected so we looked to support eligible businesses in arrears with their business rates and undertook a further targeted mailing exercise with some businesses being contacted directly by phone and email.

3.7 Funding was distributed by the 30 September 2022 deadline, with £4,337,382 being awarded to 456 businesses. A small number of businesses have decided to return the relief after the scheme closure, and we are not permitted to redistribute this funding.

#### **Scheme administration**

3.8 The government provided guidance for both schemes, which we fully promoted.

3.9 Businesses were able to claim their grants via an eform which we developed in-house. The e-form gathered all the relevant information, including a declaration on state aid and subsidy control, and had built in security and validation checks and enabled filtering to authorise grants promptly.

3.10 We did receive contact from numerous businesses that were ineligible and undertook several reviews.

3.11 The Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) have provided additional new burdens funding for administering the schemes.

#### **4. SUPPORT FOR HOUSEHOLDS**

4.1 Between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023 we have administered and distributed various payments, grants and vouchers to support households **totalling £9,149,153**.

4.2 There was also residual funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government available to support our communities.

#### **3. Household Support Fund and Food Voucher scheme**

4.3 Funding was received from the Department of Department for Work and Pensions via Hampshire County Council, to support households.

#### **3a. Tranche 1**

4.4 This tranche covered the period to 30 September 2022 with an emphasis on utilising one-third of the funding to support pensioners, one-third to support families and one-third for other groups, which could include pensioners and families. We received funding from Hampshire County Council as follows:

- a) Household Support Fund of £45,045 for Exceptional Housing Costs.
- b) Food Voucher scheme of £431,505
- c) Scheme administration of £23,828

#### **Exceptional Housing Costs**

4.5 Our allocation of funding of £45,045 was utilised to support vulnerable households experiencing financial hardship with their housing costs.

4.6 Alternative support had to be considered before making an award, including Discretionary Housing Payments.

4.7 We worked closely with partners to promote the scheme and to seek referrals, including the voluntary sector, of households experiencing hardship. We signposted applicants to other support available, for example Food Larders or the energy vouchers scheme administered by Citizens Advice New Forest. We also worked closely with our Housing Options Team to provide support for those leaving emergency accommodation.

4.8 The total amount awarded is tabulated below:

No. of applications	No. of awards	Total awards (£)
255	197	54,350

4.9 The funding was used to support vulnerable households in a variety of ways, including with rent arrears and essential household items, with award values dependent on the household circumstances. As we had residual funding from the Food Voucher scheme we were able to transfer this to the Exceptional Housing Costs fund to support more households. We also successfully applied to Hampshire County Council for additional funding and was allocated £5,000.

### **Food Voucher scheme**

- 4.10 Funding of £431,505 was distributed from Hampshire County Council to provide food vouchers to support those in receipt of Council Tax Support. The value of the food vouchers was:
- a) £65 per person in receipt of Pension Credit
  - b) £30 per household in receipt of Council Tax Support
- 4.11 Households in receipt of Pension Credit and Council Tax Support were eligible for both vouchers, so amounts distributed were £30.00, £65.00, £95.00 and £160.00.
- 4.12 We used a Framework to procure a voucher food supplier and promptly distributed the vouchers. The vouchers were either a QR code, where households could select their own supermarket, or a paper voucher with a pre-selected supermarket, based on post code, depending on circumstances. Letters were sent with the vouchers, providing supporting information, and Officers answered phone calls and responded to emails. We also sent reminder letters to those that did not redeem their voucher to encourage redemption.
- 4.13 We issued food vouchers of £427,200 to 8,053 households. As we had residual funding we transferred this to the Exceptional Housing Costs funding, see 4.9.

### **3b. Tranche 2**

- 4.14 This period is from 1 October 2022 to 31 March 2023. We received funding from Hampshire County Council as follows:
- a) Household Support Fund of £45,000 for Exceptional Housing Costs.
  - b) Food Voucher scheme of £274,750
  - c) Scheme administration of £15,987.50

### **Exceptional Housing Costs**

- 4.15 This scheme is broadly similar to sections 4.5 to 4.9.
- 4.16 The total amount awarded to date is tabulated below:

No. of applications	No. of awards	Total awards (£)
187	99	25,141.64

- 4.17 We will continue to be proactive and work with partner organisations to signpost and identify potential households to ensure the funding is distributed in full by 31 March 2023.

### **Food Voucher scheme**

- 4.18 Funding of £274,750 was distributed from Hampshire County Council to provide food vouchers to support those in receipt of Housing Benefit or Council Tax Support. The value of the food vouchers was:
- a) £50 per household in receipt of Housing Benefit only
  - b) £30 per household in receipt of Council Tax Support
- 4.19 Scheme administration was similar to 4.10. In addition, those in emergency accommodation were contacted directly to ensure receipt of a voucher.

4.20 Food vouchers have been sent to 8,737 households and the funding of £274,750 has been fully distributed.

#### **4. The £150 Energy Rebate Scheme**

4.21 The government announced a package of support, known as the Energy Bills Rebate, to help households with rising energy bills. This included a one-off £150 non-repayable rebate for households in council tax bands A to D, known as the Council Tax Rebate.

4.22 Households were eligible if they are the council taxpayer, occupy the property as their sole and main residence and the property is in band A to D (including those with a Band E but has a disabled band reduction) as of 1 April 2022.

4.23 Only one payment was to be made per household, regardless of the number of council taxpayers or occupants.

4.24 After necessary data matching, payments were promptly made automatically to the household. All eligible households in this group were paid their £150 energy rebate in April.

4.25 Where we did not have the households bank account details, or where the council tax account and bank account details did not match, 13,688 letters were sent to provide details of the scheme and how to claim the rebate. The letters contained a unique code for security. For those residents unable to claim online, staff were available to support over 1,000 households with making their application by phone or in person at our Information Offices. Reminder letters were also sent to encourage applications.

4.26 Payments were only made after completing pre-payment checks, including the use of Spotlight (DWP system), checking for duplicate bank account details and ensuring an active council tax account.

4.27 Those households who were eligible but did not claim their rebate had the £150 credited to their council tax account to ensure everyone who was eligible received this support.

4.28 The total amount paid:

No. of eligible households	No. of payments	Total payments (£)
53,631	53,631	8,044,650

4.29 All payments were made by 30 September 2022 deadline.

#### **5. The Energy Rebate Discretionary Scheme**

4.30 The government have provided funding to Local Authorities to develop their own schemes to provide further support to energy bill payers who are suffering financial hardship as a result of the rising cost of living, including those not eligible under the terms of the mandatory scheme, or to provide targeted “top-up” payments to the most vulnerable households.

4.31 Our funding was £320,850 and our scheme supported households with a one-off rebate of £150 per household. As potential take-up was unknown, two schemes were developed.

## Scheme A

- 4.32 To be eligible for a discretionary payment, applicants must have been occupying a property as their main residence on 1 April 2022, and be in a specified group, including:
- a) those liable to pay council tax in Bands E to H and be in receipt of Council Tax Support, or exempt from council tax due to being a Care Leaver, Severely Mentally impaired, or
  - b) Households in emergency accommodation, following a placement by our Housing Team, or
  - c) where an applicant does not pay council tax directly to the Council but could provide evidence that they are responsible for paying energy bills.
- 4.33 Where a household was eligible under 4.32a and we had direct debit details matching the council tax account, payments were made automatically. For other, groups, where we were able to identify eligible households we sent a letter, signposting to an online form for applications.
- 4.34 We promoted the scheme via a targeted mailshot, the website, social media and through resident e-newsletters, and supported 761 households totalling £114,150.

## Scheme B

- 4.35 As we had residual funding we provided a “top-up” to all those households in receipt of Council Tax Support in all council tax bands by evenly distributing the funding available. The total amount awarded was £206,967 to 7,262 households, equating to £28.50 per household. Therefore, we spent £267 above our funding.
- 4.36 All payments were made by the 30 November 2022 deadline.

### **Support with energy bills**

- 4.37 The government have confirmed that most households eligible for Alternative Fuel Payment support will receive their one-off payment automatically from their electricity supplier in February, with no application needed.
- 4.38 The Government have announced two schemes to support households with their energy bills for those who are not benefiting from the energy support scheme.

### **6. Energy Bills Support Scheme Alternative Funding**

- 4.39 This scheme is to support households that do not have a direct relationship with an energy supplier. Eligible households will receive a one-off payment of £400. We have received an initial funding allocation of £1,435,200, which is estimated to be 80% of the overall funding to be allocated, meaning approximately 4,500 households are eligible.
- 4.40 To be eligible, a resident must occupy a property as their sole or main residence and be responsible for paying energy used in the property, either directly or as part of a service charge, rent or other arrangement. This may include:
- partly or wholly self-funded care home residents
  - residents of park homes

- housing association, social and private tenants, and leaseholders, supplied via a landlord with a commercial meter,
  - residents of caravans and houseboats on registered sites
  - homes off grid
  - farmers living in domestic farmhouses, or
  - tenants who pay for energy through a landlord on a commercial supply.
- 4.41 Applications will be made using an online form at GOV.UK, from 27 February 2023 to 31 May 2023, and information must be provided with the application, for example evidence of address such as a driving licence, recent utility bill, current tenancy agreement or an invoice from a care home. Once an application is submitted, expectation is that payments will be made within 30 days. There has been push back from the sector that in the run-up to the busy annual billing period, which will see this Council issue over 82,000 Council Tax bills, 7,200 Business Rate bills, and 10,000 Benefit notices, and the subsequent increased customer contact volumes thereafter, that this timeframe is unfeasible.
- 4.42 Once the application is complete and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy complete their checks, we will receive confirmation of applications via the Salesforce portal for us to undertake our checks, including residency and bank account details. Once satisfied the application is complete and eligibility criteria met, we are responsible for processing the £400 payment to the applicant, via the portal.
- 4.43 The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy issued updated guidance on 22 February 2023, along with access to the portal. We have a dedicated project group to undertake the administration of this scheme and will review the guidance, and work through the first applications as a group to ensure full understanding of the process and a consistent approach to verification and administration. We will endeavour to make payments in line with the timeframe as set out the government guidelines.
- 4.44 To date we have received 762 applications which we are processing for payment.
- 4.45 All payments must be made by 30 June 2023 with a full reconciliation exercise to be completed by 31 July 2023.

## **7. Alternative Fuel Payment Alternative Funding scheme**

- 4.46 This scheme is to support households who do not heat their homes with gas and instead use oil, solid fuel, biomass or bottled gas with a one-off payment of £200.
- 4.47 Applications will be made using an online form at GOV.UK, available from 6 March 2023 to 31 May 2023, however, we are yet to receive our funding allocation. We have received guidance from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to administer the scheme, which was updated on 10 March 2023, which we are reviewing. We will administer the scheme as per 4.43.
- 4.48 The Government will be promoting both schemes through various media channels, as will we through our residents email and social media. For those unable to apply online, there is a government helpline to support applicants to make their application by phone.

## **5. SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITIES**

- 5.1 From 1 April 2022 we have supported and distributed grants to community groups, **totalling £53,952**. We have developed a good working relationship with partners and chair a monthly meeting with representatives from the voluntary sector to share information, identify joint working, and promote support schemes and projects available to support our residents.

### **8. Supporting local groups**

- 5.2 To support local groups that support our vulnerable residents, grants totalling £1,232 were awarded. The purpose of the grant was to support groups with reopening or providing activities to vulnerable residents, including the elderly and those with mental health.
- 5.3 We have also continued to support Citizens Advice New Forest with £35,000 with their debt advisory service by funding a Debt Advisor for two years build up resilience with debt advice to support our residents.

### **9. Ukrainian Job Fair**

- 5.4 Working in partnership with Job Centre Plus we coordinated and organised a Job Fair for Ukrainian refugees in Brockenhurst. In attendance were 11 local employers, as well as organisations providing advice and information, including Citizens Advice, National Careers Service, Community First Wessex and Hampshire County Council, as well as translators. Over 60 Ukrainians attended, some with their hosts, with many securing interviews for employment.

### **10. Cost of Living**

- 5.5 Working with Citizens Advice New Forest, Community First Wessex, Trussell Trust (Food Banks), Youth and Families Matter and Southampton University a Poverty Action Steering Group was established who undertook research into the cost of living across the district. The report, which was funded by all partners, highlighted several key factors on food bank usage and its impact.
- 5.6 Funding has been secured for 3 years to employ a Local Partnership Campaign Manager who will review the contents of the report, raise awareness, and work with partners to develop and implement an action plan to support our communities. However, due to resignation, this post is currently being advertised and we will continue to work with the new postholder.

#### **10a. Community Hubs**

- 5.7 Working with the Local Partnership Manager, 5 Community Hubs have been developed in targeted locations, which coincide with the weekly Food Larders, in Calshot, New Milton, Totton, Pennington and Fordingbridge. The Hubs provide outreach advice, information and support direct to communities, and bring together representatives from organisations, including, Citizens Advice New Forest and Step Up Safe Space, as well as Officers from our Benefits and Housing Teams who regularly attend to speak to residents.
- 5.8 Existing arrangements and funding to coordinate the Hubs ends on 31 March 2023, so we are liaising with local partners at each venue to ascertain how these can be sustained from 1 April 2023. The Council is in a position to allocate residual Council Tax Hardship funding, of up to £20,000 to provide interim financial support towards

the continuation of the hubs, until a medium to long-term sustainable solution is identified.

### **10b. Cost of Living Working Group**

5.9 Within the Council an Officer group from a range of services, coordinated by Service Manager Revenue and Benefits, meet to discuss and promote support to households and businesses, both internally, and with our partners. This joined up approach has ensured information is disseminated and knowledge improved amongst customer facing teams and numerous initiatives undertaken, including:

- Creation of a dedicated webpage on support available with the Cost of Living, split into various categories, for example food, energy bills, benefits, and promote this with partner organisations as a central hub for information
- Creation of a dedicated webpage on support available for businesses with increasing costs; this is also promoted through the Business Support enews and social media.
- Communicating all the support available when speaking to residents, e.g., via our Benefits Team and Housing Teams.
- In partnership with Citizen Advice, wide distribution of a pocket-sized guide which provides details of support both nationally and locally
- Active promotion of local support including Food Banks, Food Larders, energy vouchers and related organisations, including attendance at Yarn in a Barn, to support our farming communities, and with Town and Parish's.
- Targeted communications campaign to promote and signpost to support, including using social media, resident emails, article in Hometalk, information in letters, promotional stands in Information Offices, phone messages and leaflets on various topics including energy saving advice, activities at libraries. We have also communicated support to businesses via the eNewsletter.
- In partnership with Citizens Advice, a campaign to support pensioners to claim Pension Credit, where 22 households are now receiving this additional income.
- Cost of Living article in our HR newsletter to offer individual support from a dedicated Officer to any staff affected by the Cost of Living.
- Discussions with Hampshire County Council on establishing 4 food pantries.

### **10c. Warm Spaces**

5.10 We developed and promoted a Warm Spaces grant scheme and, working with partners, distributed grant funding of £17,720 to support 22 Warm Spaces across the district which provide a welcoming, free, safe, friendly space for residents to keep warm, have a hot drink, and meet others.

## **6. SUPPORT FROM 1 APRIL 2023**

6.1 The following support is being administered from 1 April 2023.

### **11. Retail, Hospitality and Leisure rate relief**

6.2 From 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 eligible businesses in the retail, hospitality, and leisure sectors and entitled to a 75% business rate relief, subject to subsidy control and an overall cash cap of £110,000.

6.3 Where we are unable to automatically award the relief, or for new businesses becoming liable to pay business rates during 2023/24, we are developing an online

form for applications. We expect to support circa 850 businesses with £7m in rate relief.

## **12. Council Tax Support Fund**

6.4 The Government has announced £100m of additional funding for local authorities to support the most vulnerable households in England. The funding will allow councils to deliver additional support to households already receiving council tax support with their council tax bills in 2023/24. There are two schemes, and the council has received total funding of £208,018:

- The mandatory scheme
- A discretionary scheme

The mandatory scheme

6.5 This scheme reduces those receiving Council Tax Support on 1 April 2023 with an outstanding council tax liability by up to £25. The amount will be applied automatically onto the council tax account, with no need for an application. There are approximately 4,000 households eligible for this support, and the support will be included in the annual council tax bills for 2023/24, being sent in March 2023.

The discretionary scheme

6.6 After applying the mandatory scheme the government have stated that any residual funding can be used as a discretionary fund, where local authorities can determine their own approach to supporting economically vulnerable households.

6.7 Our discretionary scheme will top-up the mandatory award by £10.00 for all eligible households, and we will use any residual funding after the application of the mandatory scheme and discretionary top-up to support economically vulnerable households with their council tax bills throughout 2023/24. This will include all those households that claim and receive Council Tax Support during 2023/24 with an award of £35.00, and claimants will not need to make a separate application for the award as this will be applied automatically to their council tax account.

6.8 This support is for the period 2023/24 only and we will ensure we are proactive to fully allocate the funding to support as many economically vulnerable households as possible.

## **13. Household Support Fund**

6.9 The Government have confirmed that the Household Support Fund is being extended from 1 April 2023 and are providing £842m, of which Hampshire County Council is being allocated £14,248,254. Guidance from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) states County Councils must work with District Councils and ensure support is targeted to support those households most in need, including those in receipt of Housing Benefit only, disabled households and carers.

6.10 Hampshire County Council must submit their delivery plan to DWP by 23 May 2023, so we await confirmation from Hampshire County Council of our funding allocation, scheme design and eligibility criteria, and we have stated we are willing to be involved in their discussions. As soon as this is received we will endeavour to promptly administer the scheme(s).

## **7. SUPPORTING VULNERABLE HOUSEHOLDS**

- 7.1 Ringwood FoodBank, in partnership with Citizens Advice New Forest, are currently utilising funding from the Trussell Trust to employ a Financial Inclusion Officer to work closely with and intensively support vulnerable households, including income maximisation, for on average 12 hours per client. The project is also being extended to local schools and has been extremely successful. Discussions have taken place with New Forest Food Bank about replicating this for other areas of the district on a fixed term contract of one year. Funding will be needed and consideration as to whether we wish to contribute to this partnership.
- 7.2 There is residual funding from the Council Tax Hardship fund could be used to support this project as it will meet the aim of supporting vulnerable households.

## **8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 8.1 The report outlines the significance of the financial support administered by this Council over the last 12 months and clarifies support ongoing into 2023/24.
- 8.2 The report seeks the panel's support towards utilising £20,000 of residual Council Tax Hardship fund towards the Community Hubs as detailed through section 5, heading 10a of the report, and a Financial Inclusion Officer as detailed in section 7.1.

## **9. CRIME & DISORDER IMPLICATIONS / ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS / DATA PROTECTION IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 Where we have used, shared or processed data, this has been in accordance with the appropriate agreements and privacy notices.

## **10. EQUALITY & DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 The above support demonstrates our continued commitment to supporting vulnerable households, being proactive in identifying and supporting applicants and collaboratively working with our partners to promote schemes and initiatives.

## **11. CONCLUSION**

- 11.1 This report highlights the wide range of schemes, initiatives and scale of administration undertaken to support our businesses, households and communities during 2022/23, administered effectively and efficiently. We actively work with our partners across the district to promote the support available and we will continue to engage with them to identify and provide further initiatives and support. We will also develop a strategy for future support to our communities.

### **Further Information:**

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### **Background Information:**