

Exeter City Council Household Support Fund Policy - scheme 5 (HSF 5)

Context

The Household Support Fund initiative is funded by the Department for Work and Pensions through Devon County Council. The fifth scheme runs for six months from 1 April to 30 September 2024. Guidance for HSF 5 does not contain any requirement to allocate a proportion of funds to specified groups. As part of a District Council Hardship scheme, Exeter City Council is receiving an allocation of **£316,112** from Devon County Council to support Exeter residents in most need.

The purpose of this document is to set out the objectives of the scheme and to outline the process for Exeter City Council's administration of the grant, in line with the overall purpose as detailed in the agreed shared framework for Devon. The Team Devon agreed framework and approach to administering the Household Support Fund scheme aims to ensure a degree of consistency across Devon.

Objective – The fund is designed to provide rapid short-term financial support to address economic vulnerability and financial hardship. It is to 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 Team Devon framework for deployment of the District Council Hardship Schemes states:

“Each District Council will provide an HSF 5 hardship scheme; the latter will be finalised via the respective Council’s governance and decision-making procedures; ensuring open, transparent and informed decision-making in this regard.

All district/city councils will be provided with a funding allocation based on the universal credit uptake in their respective areas, enabling each of them to either:

- *Provide direct and targeted financial help and assistance to households who they have identified via data held as eligible against their criteria and who are vulnerable and struggling financially to secure food, water, energy, essential and exceptional (e.g. rent arrears prior to being in receipt of appropriate housing benefits) provisions and / or*
- *To operate an open application based scheme.*

NB: If conducting direct and targeted support, district / city councils will use appropriate and accessible datasets, 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 particular, district/city councils will look to identify and help those who may not be eligible for the other support government has recently made available but who are nevertheless in need.”

Exeter City Council Policy

Purposes for which assistance can be provided

This scheme is designed to help ease financial pressure on households with low incomes and to support those most in need during the funding period. The scheme offers a one-off financial support payment to assist with meeting basic living needs. Where a support payment is made to a household, the grant can be used for:

- **Food**
- **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.

Eligibility

Eligible households must:

- Contain at least one member who is over the age of 16; and
- Be responsible for household bills (rent or mortgage, utilities etc); and
- Live in the Exeter City Council area (as their main residence); and

- Be without sufficient resources to meet the immediate short-term needs of themselves or dependents.

The Council will endeavour, where possible, to use the funding to provide support that has a long-term sustainable impact, for example household items which would reduce bills in the long term.

Scheme description

HSF 5 is an open application-based scheme for households in priority groups

The continued high cost of living puts pressure on the budget of many households. Government funding of the fifth Household Support Fund recognises the particular difficulty this causes for low-income households. From April 2024 some of the other schemes that were in place to support low-income households with these additional costs are no longer available. This scheme aims to provide some degree of protection to those households in most hardship during the funding period, while recognising that it is insufficient to meet all of the needs.

Entitlement

Awards under Household Support Fund 5 will only be made in line with latest DWP guidance on the operation of the Household Support Fund. "Low income" for this scheme will be household income at or below the level that would give eligibility to the relevant means tested benefit as may apply. An income that is not significantly above this level can be considered where there are exceptional circumstances that justify considering this as low income in a particular case. This could include where a customer has unavoidably high essential costs such as visiting a child receiving treatment in a hospital out of the area.

Priority groups

All low-income households may face hardship as a result of the high cost of living. However, the current scheme looks to prioritise support payments to households identified as being particularly likely to be at a financial disadvantage. The priority groups have been determined through:

- National evaluation of discretionary support schemes
- Analysis of Council Tax arrears data for Exeter City Council
- Assessment and review of previous Exeter City Council hardship schemes and predictions of likely needs during the scheme period

Priority groups for an award from HSF 5:

- Customers with benefit incomes restricted due to welfare reforms / rules including:
 - Households affected by the two child limit
 - Households subject to the overall benefit cap
 - Households with housing costs restricted by Local Housing Allowance
 - Tenants on the under 25 rate of Universal Credit
- Customers with higher expenditure than normal for their circumstances or for a temporary period, examples could include:
 - Families with dependant children housed in temporary accommodation
 - In low paid or insecure work facing high employment related costs (transport, equipment or clothing)
 - Child unable to attend school for an extended period preventing parent from working

Devon County Council have identified care experienced young people as a group particularly likely to face disadvantage. Accordingly, they will be prioritised for support under this scheme.

All low-income households, regardless of priority group, will be able to make an application for support at some point during the scheme period. They will be asked to confirm how their individual circumstances make them particularly affected.

Application route and timing

All applications for support through Household Support Fund 5 will be made through the dedicated online application on Exeter City Council's website. The application route will open as soon as practicable after the scheme period begins. Claims will be assessed and decisions notified as quickly as possible allowing time for appropriate checks. The claim gateway will remain open until all available funds have been spent or until the end of the funding period in September 2024. New applications may be paused without notice to allow time for submitted claims to be assessed. Alternative application methods may be agreed in individual cases.

The claim gateway may be limited to households with particular priority characteristics at certain times. Where resources allow, the gateway will be extended to all eligible households. The most up to date details will always be found on the scheme webpage at www.exeter.gov.uk/hsf

Award calculation

There is no fixed award level for awards under this scheme. Decision makers will have regard to the circumstances giving rise to eligibility and the level of payment that has been given in earlier Household Support Fund schemes. Award amounts will be determined with reference to volume of applications received and budget available.

Awards will normally be made by way of posted voucher which can be cashed at a local Post Office branch or an electronic voucher which can be used in a variety of retailers either online or in person. Other methods may be agreed in individual cases.

Repeat Awards

Support will generally 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).

Fraud

Applicants may be asked questions or to provide evidence to establish the facts before a decision is made to make an award. Failure by the recipient to disclose a material fact or to make a false application or provide false information may be considered a fraudulent act. Where fraud has been detected the recipient will be refused any further assistance and may be required to repay awards made because of fraudulent actions.

Data

For the purposes of this scheme Exeter City Council will use available data sources to verify information provided in the application. This includes: Council Tax records to verify residence; Council Tax Support, Housing Benefit and DWP Benefits data records to verify household and income; previous applications to verify claim information and other discretionary support payments made.

Data will be held on Exeter 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 this HSF one-off support payment
- Make contact about decisions or updates related to that financial support payment
- Issue the voucher letter to an eligible recipient
- Where necessary to deliver the payment, names and addresses of eligible households will be shared with external organisations (including Post Office Ltd & Blackhawk Network) who are delivering awards on behalf of Exeter City Council.

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

Personal data will not be kept longer than necessary in line with data retention schedules.

Monitoring and Reporting

Exeter City Council is required to complete the standard Management Information (MI) reporting template agreed with Devon County Council to record the amount provided or paid to vulnerable households under the remit of this grant scheme.

Funding model

Allocations of funds to Devon County Council from the Department for Work & Pensions is on a payment in arrears basis; on the condition that accurate management information is submitted monthly.

In turn, DCC will make staged payments to Exeter City Council in arrears via a standard grant agreement once payment has been received from DWP. The Fund will be monitored monthly.

The scheme operates for a limited time and will end on 30 September 2024. If allocated funds are fully spent before this date, the scheme will end earlier.

Ongoing Policy Review

The fifth Household Support Fund has been established to respond rapidly to economic vulnerability and financial hardship through to the end of September 2024. The available funding will be subject to ongoing monthly review, to inform any potential changes to support that might be needed for the remainder of the funding period.

If it appears that the available funding will not be fully spent via the application process, then changes will be implemented to ensure the maximum support possible can be delivered. This could involve sending direct awards to households identified as being in

particular need or widening the eligibility conditions for the application route. Any changes made will preserve the principles of the scheme outlined in this document. Changes to the scheme will be published on our website at www.exeter.gov.uk/hsf

The Household Support Fund 5 scheme is due to run until 30 September 2024 but once all funds have been disbursed, the fund will be closed. To maximise use of the funds we will always redirect residents to other forms of support where it is felt that this is more appropriate to support their needs.

Scheme of Delegation

This policy has been agreed by the Director Finance in consultation with the Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Council Housing Development & Support Services.

Any revision of the scheme will be agreed by the Director Finance in consultation with the Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Council Housing Development & Support Services.

24 April 2024