

# Exeter City Council Household Support Fund scheme 4 (HSF4)

## Context

The Household Support Fund initiative is funded by the Department for Work and Pensions through Devon County Council. The fourth scheme runs to 31 March 2024. HSF4 does not contain any requirement to allocate any proportion to particular groups. Exeter City Council is receiving an allocation of £675,706 from Devon County Council to support local residents in need as part of a District Council Hardship scheme.

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.

## Team Devon framework for deployment of the District Council Hardship Schemes

*“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 provide direct and targeted financial help and assistance to households who they have identified 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. 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. This is especially the case for low-income households who are struggling with meeting the cost of their energy needs.*”

*Each district/city council 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.”*

## Exeter City Council Policy

### Types of assistance that 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
- Live in Exeter City Council area (as their main residence); and
- Be without sufficient resources to meet the immediate short-term needs of themselves or dependents.
- Be identified from existing data sets or through application and evidence supplied as meeting the respective eligibility criteria

### Project 1

Direct support to eligible households identified from Council Tax Support records

To be eligible for the one off direct financial support the household must:

1. Be in receipt of Council Tax Support from Exeter City Council on the Entitlement Date and
2. Have included in the calculation of their Council Tax Support at the Entitlement Date one or more of the Priority Characteristics detailed below

### Entitlement date

Awards that are live and in payment as at 19 July 2023 will meet the entitlement date condition. In cases where entitlement to Council Tax Support is decided after the entitlement date and before the scheme closes on 31 March 2024, an exceptional payment can be considered.

### Priority Characteristics

Council Tax Support is a means tested reduction of a household's Council Tax bill. It is based on a detailed assessment of the household's needs and income and is available to people on low income, whether they are in or out of work. Most householders will be liable for Council Tax and therefore eligible to apply for Council Tax Support. This makes Council Tax Support records a good source of data for low income households in Exeter.

Combining information about households from award data with Council Tax arrears data creates a picture of where debt levels are highest. This provides insight into the characteristics that may indicate a household is finding it harder to manage the current increased cost of living.

The characteristics below have been identified from this data as being associated with higher rates of indebtedness:

- Disabled child in household (entitled to the Disabled Child premium in the calculation of their Council Tax Support award)
- Large families (3 or more dependent children included in the calculation of their Council Tax Support award)
- Carers (entitled to the Carers Premium in the calculation of their Council Tax Support award)
- In work while entitled to Council Tax Support
- Non dependant deduction made from Council Tax Support award

Each of these priority characteristics will entitle the customer to a payment from HSF4. The amount of the support component for each priority characteristic has been informed by the average value of Council Tax arrears associated with that group.

Entitlement is based on possessing the relevant characteristic. It is not a requirement for any individual receiving a payment to also have Council Tax arrears. The arrears data has been used purely to identify the likelihood of any particular group having more difficulty managing their increased bills.

### Award Calculation

The support component values for this scheme are as set out below. Components are cumulative, so total awards will range between £100 and £650 with the highest amounts payable to households with multiple priority characteristics. A single award will be calculated and granted to eligible households based on their Council Tax Support records as at the Entitlement Date.

Priority characteristic	Component value
Disabled child	£100

Priority characteristic	Component value
Carer	£100
Non dependant deduction	£150
In work	£150
3 or more children	£100
4 or more children	£50

### Method and timing of payments

One-off direct financial support will be provided to each eligible household. Payment will be made by way of a cash voucher posted to the recipient's claim address for redemption at a Post Office branch. The amount of the support voucher will be calculated based on the Award Calculation table above.

The fourth Household Support Fund runs to March 2024. All funding under the scheme must be spent before the scheme closes on 31 March 2024. Vouchers for direct awards are expected to be sent in August 2023.

### Process

No application will be required. Data already held will be used to identify and make contact with those households eligible for a one-off support payment.

### Project 2

Application scheme for households in eligible groups

Recognising that people may have missed out on a support payment for a variety of reasons, a payment from HSF4 will be available for these households through an application process. This will include people who should have received a Cost of Living payment from Department for Work and Pensions as well as those who missed out on a direct payment from HSF4 Project 1.

Some of the reasons a payment might have been missed include:

For DWP Cost of Living Payment

- Qualifying benefit award starting after the eligibility date
- Award not in payment waiting for decision on claim or appeal
- Universal Credit nil award due to earning payment cycle (i.e. two payments in one month)
- Receiving Housing Benefit without a qualifying DWP benefit

For HSF4 Project 1

- Not liable for Council Tax (renting a room, exempt property / person etc)
- Council Tax Support not claimed in time or no decision at the Eligibility date

This list is not exhaustive and other reasons will be considered.

### Entitlement

Awards under HSF4 Project 2 will only be made to low income households in line with DWP guidance on the purpose of Household Support Fund. "Low income" for this scheme will be considered to 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.

Applicants will only be considered to have missed out on a payment under HSF4 Project 1 if their household meets one or more of the Priority Characteristics for that scheme.

Applicants will not be considered to have missed out on a DWP Cost of Living payment if they are excluded by benefit rules from claiming the relevant means tested benefit.

### Application route and timing

All applications for support through HSF4 Project 2 will be made through the dedicated online application on Exeter City Council's website. The application route will not be open before October 2023. 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 March 2024. New applications may be paused without notice to allow time for submitted claims to be assessed.

### Award calculation

There is no fixed award level for awards under Project 2. Decision makers will have regard to the circumstances giving rise to eligibility and the level of payment that has been missed out on. Award amounts will be calculated with reference to volume of applications received and budget available.

Awards will normally be made by way of 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 making a decision 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 as a result of fraudulent actions.

### Data

For the purposes of this scheme Exeter City Council will use data collected for the purpose of Council Tax Support and identify those households eligible for this Household Support financial payment (see Eligibility above).

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 DCC from DWP 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 on a monthly basis.

The Funding Agreement contains a requirement to ensure there are sufficient funds available for winter 2023. There is therefore a split in the allocation of a maximum 45% to be spent in the first 6 months to the end of September 2023 and 55% to be spent between October 2023 and the end of March 2024.

### Ongoing Policy Review

The fourth Household Support Fund has been established to respond rapidly to economic vulnerability and financial hardship through to the end of March 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 through the two projects then changes will be implemented to ensure the maximum support possible can be delivered. This could involve sending further direct awards 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](http://www.exeter.gov.uk/hsf)

The HSF4 scheme is due to run until 31 March 2024 but once all funds have been disbursed, the fund will be closed. In order to maximise the support we can provide to all our residents we will always redirect residents to other forms of support where we feel this is more appropriate to support their needs.