

# **LCC Household Support Fund 2021/22**

## **1. What is the Household Support Fund (HSF)?**

1.1 This is a national scheme administered by the Council to support Leicester residents most in need with food, energy (including heating, cooking and lighting) and water bills. It can also be used to support households with essential costs related to those items (cookers, fridge freezers, microwaves and washing machines) and with wider essential costs (warm clothing, bedding and blankets). 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 Scheme).

1.2 The Scheme is part of a wider support package for families and children including the Holiday Activities & Food Programme (HAF Programme), and will run from 6<sup>th</sup> October 2021 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022, subject to budgetary restrictions outlined below in section 3. Referrals and applications will be accepted from 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2021 to 14<sup>th</sup> March 2022 subject to any suspensions as notified on the council's website to allow the Council to manage application demand so that it is able to ensure it has sufficient capacity to undertake timely processing of applications received.

1.3 This document (the Policy) sets out the local eligibility framework and the Council's approach in administering the Scheme. The Policy is subject to change and should any amendments or additions be made; the updated Policy will be republished. Any referrals received the day following any published amendments will be assessed in accordance with that updated Policy.

## **2. What is the aim of the Scheme?**

2.1 The aim of the Scheme is to support those most in need this winter during the final stages of economic recovery. This covers a wide range of vulnerable households including those with children of all ages and those without children.

2.2 The Policy, in line with the guidance published by the DWP, seeks to make grant awards for all residents in respect of whom a valid referral or application is made during the operation of the Scheme and the full eligibility criteria outlined in section 4.1 below is satisfied, subject to the conditions contained within the Policy.

### **3. What are the main features of the Scheme?**

3.1 Grant awards will be made from a limited budget allocation from Central Government of **£3,429,353.16** ("Funding"), though the budget will also be utilised to cover the cost of administering the Scheme, meaning funding for distribution will be reduced accordingly. The Council will not be able to make further awards once the Government grant may allocate from time to time have been spent.

3.2 The Government grant conditions ("Conditions") require that at least 50% of the Funding will be ring-fenced to support households with children, with the remainder (being no more than 50% of the Funding) being distributable to other households genuinely in need of support this winter.

3.3 The Conditions set out the following categories of eligible expenditure:

- Food;
- Energy for the purpose of domestic heating, cooking or lighting, including portable gas cylinders;
- Water bills including for drinking, washing, cooking, and sanitary purposes and sewerage;
- Essentials linked to energy and water;
- Wider essentials not linked to energy and water;
- Housing Costs subject to 3.4 to 3.8 below.

3.4 The Fund can only be used to support Housing Costs in exceptional cases of genuine emergency where existing housing support schemes do not meet this exceptional need. 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 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).

3.5 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 the Authority. However, the Fund should not be used to provide housing support on an ongoing basis or to support unsustainable tenancies.

3.6 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.

3.7 The Fund cannot be used to provide mortgage support, though homeowners could still qualify for the other elements of the Fund (such as food, energy, 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.

3.8 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.

3.9 Subject to meeting the eligibility as contained in this Policy, successful claimants will receive a grant award. The nature of the grant to be given is at the discretion of the Council. Consideration will be given to the referral request and available information regarding the household's circumstances. Where a claimant is successful the following awards may be made:

- Up to three awards of food for a period of up to four weeks each – a new application can only be considered after any earlier award period has elapsed;

- For all other award types, a single award covering the grant period - repeat referrals and claims will not be accepted.
- Only one claimant in each household will be considered to be eligible for the Scheme.

3.10 Referrals and applications from claimants will be accepted from 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2021 until 14<sup>th</sup> March 2022. Grant awards will take the form of vouchers, credit or item delivery in respect of one or more items of the award as detailed below, the form of which will be at the discretion of the Council taking into account the claimant's circumstances and the resources at the Council's disposal.

3.11 Applications from claimants may be made online through the Council's websites in respect of:

- Food,
- Current utilities bills (gas, electricity, water/sewerage)

3.12 Referrals from Council departments and Citizens Advice Leicestershire may be made online in respect of:

- Food;
- Utilities bills, either current or historic where a debt is due (gas, electricity, water),
- Water/sewerage,
- White goods: one of a microwave, cooker, fridge freezer, or a washing machine to households without this,
- Warm clothing (coats);
- Bedding

3.13 Eligibility is assessed as per household, taking into account household composition. A household is defined as the lead claimant, their partner, spouse or civil partner if they have one, and any dependent children. Where energy costs are required, the lead claimant should wherever possible be the individual named on the

bill. A dependent child must be aged under 16, or aged 16-19 years old and they are not married, nor in a Civil Partnership, nor living with a partner; and living with parents; and in full-time non-advanced education or on a Government training scheme.

3.14 All grant awards must be distributed by no later than 14<sup>th</sup> March 2022. Applications submitted after this date will not be considered. Any awards made prior to this date which have resulted in the issue of any e-vouchers will continue to be valid for use up to the 8<sup>th</sup> April 2022, after which they will expire.

#### **4. Am I eligible for support?**

4.1 In order to be eligible for a grant award, a lead claimant in respect of a claimant household must meet the following criteria:

- be resident within Leicester, unless a household member is a foster carer for a child previously under the Council's care; and
- be aged sixteen years or more; and
- be on a low income<sup>1</sup>; and
- be experiencing financial hardship<sup>2</sup>. or
- be considered financially vulnerable (see Appendix 1);

4.2 In order to be eligible for a grant award, a claimant household must not consist only of persons without recourse to public funds<sup>3</sup>. The only situation in which such a household will be considered is where there is a genuine care need that does not arise solely from destitution leading to a statutory duty for the Council:

- there are community care needs, and/or;
- they have serious health problems, and/or;
- there is a risk to a child's wellbeing.

Households that meet the criteria are known to the Council's Persons from Abroad Team.

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<sup>1</sup> "low income" means you are receiving less than the full-time National Living Wage of £356.25 per week.

<sup>2</sup> "financial hardship" means that you or your household are not able to pay bills, repay debts, buy essential items or are otherwise experiencing difficulties because you have less money than usual.

<sup>3</sup> As defined by s.115 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1995.

## **5. Which departments and agencies are able to make a referral on my behalf?**

5.1 The Council will accept referrals received from the following trusted partners and departments:

- Children's Services;
- Education;
- Adult Social Care;
- Housing;
- Revenues & Customer Support;
- Citizens Advice Leicestershire

## **6. What do I need to provide with my application?**

6.1 If you are making an online application for yourself, you will need to complete the application form in full and provide in support your last two months bank, building society or post office account statements. If there are exceptional circumstances where this is not possible, you will need to explain this to us

6.2 If you are requesting support for heating or lighting through a billed supply, you will need to provide evidence less than three months old of your supply (including the bill payer's name, supply address, supplier name, account reference and the supplier's bank details) and, if you are applying for historic utilities debt, evidence of that debt.

## **7. What do I need to provide with my referral?**

7.1 If a referral is being made on your behalf we will, for all applications under the scheme, ask referral partners to provide the following mandatory information, without which the referral may be refused:

- Confirmation that identity has been verified at source<sup>4</sup>, or that sufficient information has been provided for identity to be traced by the Council<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In order to meet this obligation, we ask that your organisation has verified both a form of photo ID (confirming the lead claimant's identity) and proof of address (confirming their residence)

<sup>5</sup> As governed by the mandatory sections of the referral form outlined below.

and that the referrer is satisfied on the basis of the evidence provided to them that the criteria for eligibility is satisfied;

- The reason for the referral, i.e. which of the eligibility criteria in section 3 are met;
- Name;
- Address and postcode;
- Mobile number and email address, unless assessed as digitally excluded – our preferred and fastest award method is digital;
- Household composition;
- If requesting support for heating or lighting through a billed supply, evidence of supply within the last three months (including the bill payer's name, supply address, supplier name, account reference and the supplier's bank details) and, if applying for historic utilities debt, evidence of that debt (e.g. a recent bill).

7.2 The referral partner must also provide the following information wherever possible:

- Landline number;
- Gender;
- Ethnicity;
- Disability status.

7.3 Referral partners must declare on a relevant household's behalf that they meet all relevant eligibility criteria.

## **8. How do I apply on behalf of a household?**

8.1 Applications to the Scheme should be made using the online form on the Household Support Grant webpage, or through one of the above referral partner organisations.

## **9. How will the household receive their award?**

9.1 Grant awards will be made in the following ways:

- Food, by e-voucher redeemable at a variety of retailers;

- Gas, by e-voucher or referral to directly credit accounts;
- Electricity, by e-voucher or referral to directly credit accounts;
- District Heating, by directly crediting rent accounts;
- Water/sewerage – by referral to directly credit accounts, subject to account deficit (awards cannot be made to accounts in credit);
- Microwaves, cookers, fridge freezers and washing machines – by delivery;
- Clothing – by e-voucher redeemable at a variety of retailers
- Bedding – by e-voucher redeemable at a variety of retailers
- Rent payments – by directly crediting rent accounts or direct transfer to your landlord

## **10. How will I be notified of the decision?**

10.1 For referrals, the Council will provide a written notice of its decision to the referrer or claimant for direct applications, by email. It is the responsibility of the referring party to inform the referred household of the outcome. For direct applications, the Council will provide this notice to the claimant by email. The decision notice will set out:

- a summary of the factors considered in reaching the decision;
- details of how to request a review or obtain more information about the decision;
- details of how the award (if any) will be made.

## **11. What can I do if I want the decision to be reviewed?**

11.1 A lead claimant who is refused an award under the Scheme or is awarded less support than requested may ask the Council to review the decision within one month of the date of the decision. Such a request should be made in writing to [household-support-fund@leicester.gov.uk](mailto:household-support-fund@leicester.gov.uk).

11.2 The review will be conducted by an officer who was not involved in the original decision.

11.3 There is no statutory right appeal against a decision not to award a grant, or against the value or composition of any grant. Complaints regarding the administration/service provided of the scheme should be made using the Council's complaints service at [complaints@leicester.gov.uk](mailto:complaints@leicester.gov.uk). The only further recourse for referred households is through judicial review or a complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman.

## **12. How does the Council prevent fraudulent claims for the Scheme?**

12.1 The Council will ensure that all applications are validated by proof of identity, including checking details submitted using our application form with data held by the Council, and for bank accounts where it is necessary to do so.

12.2 If you falsely declare your circumstances, provide a false statement or provide false evidence in support of your application, you may have committed an offence under the Fraud Act 2006.

12.3 Any actual, potential or perceived conflict of interest must be declared by the referring party. Failure to do so will result in the termination of referrals from the referring organisation and a referral to the Police.

12.4 Leicester City Council has a zero-tolerance approach to fraud and financial irregularity. All suspicions of fraud relating to this scheme will be referred to Leicestershire Police. In addition to any criminal action, the Council will seek to recover all fraud losses.

12.5 If it is subsequently identified that a payment under the Scheme has been awarded as a result of false or fraudulent information, including the claiming of duplicate awards, the Council reserves the right to withdraw the award and recover the resulting sum due.

## **13. Are the application form and this document accessible in other formats?**

13.1 If you would like a hard copy or large print version please contact Leicester City Council on 0116 454 1006 or via email at [SDIO@leicester.gov.uk](mailto:SDIO@leicester.gov.uk) or by post at the following free post address: Freepost RTRE-HTRJ-CSSJ, Service Improvement Team, Leicester City Council, Revenues & Benefits Department, York House, 91 Granby Street, LEICESTER, LE1 6FB.

13.2 The online form is accessible in relation to many forms of disability, including compatibility with read-to-user technology. Decision awards and notifications will also follow in this format.

13.3 Digitally excluded claimants are advised to request a referral from Citizens Advice Leicestershire by phoning 0808 2787970 9am – 4pm, Monday to Friday, or with assistance via their website at <https://citizensadviceleicestershire.org/>. Referring departments who are unable to assist digitally excluded customers are advised to seek support from [C19Support@leicester.gov.uk](mailto:C19Support@leicester.gov.uk).

## **Appendix: Background and Legislative Framework**

### **1. Finance and Monitoring**

1.1 The Council will operate the scheme under Government guidelines. Grant awards are limited by government grant and cannot be increased.

1.2 The Council will undertake monitoring of the number and amount of grant awards in relation to the available relevant budget. The purpose is to ensure the grant awards budget has sufficient funds to meet demand throughout the period of the scheme.

1.4 The Council will also monitor cases where a grant referral has been refused to ensure decisions are being made fairly and consistently. The Council is subject to the general equality duty.

1.5 This means that steps will be taken to monitor implementation of this policy to ensure no one is subject to disproportionate adverse treatment because they had a

protected characteristic. The general equality duty requires that the Council has due regard to the need to:

- Remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic
- Take steps to meet the needs of persons who share relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it
- Foster good relations.

## **2. Legislative framework & equality monitoring arrangements**

2.1 The Council may use any evidence and information supplied to it in respect of the Scheme to check the eligibility of the applicant in respect of this scheme or any other welfare benefit, discounts or exemptions in compliance with its powers and obligations under Data Protection Act 2018 and other legislation. Our data sharing and fair processing detail can be found at the following web link: <http://www.leicester.gov.uk/your-council-services/council-and-democracy/key-documents/internet-disclaimer/>

## **3. Definition of financial vulnerability to determine eligibility**

3.1 The scheme is intended to support households who are financially vulnerable, having no or limited financial resilience and would be likely to present as:

- A working or benefit household on a low income, particularly those with a recent reduction in entitlement due to legislative changes, struggling to pay the bills (e.g. due to increases in gas/electricity tariffs) and just about managing financially (also known as cliff edge households); or
- Experiencing an immediate and unforeseen financial crisis, or;
- A household with Safeguarding needs (for professional referrals only, see 4. below)

3.2. The following characteristics are considered to be strong indications of financial vulnerability:

- Leaving care child up to the age of 25
- SEND child, particularly those with a care plan under EHCP
- Ex-Armed Forces
- Troubled Families
- Statutory homelessness
- Traveller communities

#### **4. Definition of safeguarding needs (risk to health and safety)**

This crisis will be the cause of a severe risk to the health and safety of the applicant or an immediate family member/dependant(s). Examples of when your health and safety might be at severe risk include:

- no access to essential needs (food, and heating);
- imminent deterioration/deterioration in health;
- domestic or sexual abuse;
- neglect and harm;
- breakdown of the family unit;
- exceptionally poor living conditions;
- onset of, or deterioration in the health of an immediate family member;
- risk of homelessness deemed to be unintentional;
- safeguarding including corporate parenting responsibilities (adult or child)