

From: **Roger Gough, Leader of the Council**  
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To: **Cabinet,**  
**Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> November 2024**

Subject: **Financial Hardship Programme**

Classification: **Unrestricted**

**Summary:** This report provides a high-level overview of the support provided in response to the ongoing financial pressures, focussing in particular on the work being funded by the Helping Hands Scheme, and the delivery of the Department of Work and Pensions Household Support Fund. This report will also outline the work delivered through these schemes to support the uptake of Pension Credit in the county.

**Recommendation(s):**

Cabinet is asked to comment on, and note, the report.

## **1. Introduction**

1.1 The Helping Hands Scheme was created in February 2021 by the Kent County Council Leader using £10m of the Covid Emergency Grant to support projects aimed at helping people experiencing, or at risk of, financial hardship, and to achieve sustainable longer term outcomes for people with what would otherwise be short term, one-off funding. The scheme has four key areas: Residential, Digital Inclusion and Capabilities, Crowdfunding and Business.

1.2 From the priorities of the Helping Hands scheme, the Financial Hardship Programme was established, initially working to deliver Residential and Digital Inclusion and Capabilities focused projects. More recently, the Financial Hardship Programme has also been working on a new phase of projects delivered under the Business workstream.

1.3 The Programme works closely in partnership with many organisations including District and Borough Councils, the voluntary sector, Kent Police, Kent Fire and Rescue Service, as well as other teams within KCC. Its unique and trusted position working across the local Kent public sector has enabled the Programme to achieve many positive impacts for Kent.

1.4 Some key impacts that have been achieved to date are: over 180,000 awards of support issued through the Household Support Fund, written off over £57,000 of debt for residents, supported people into employment, helped upskill people into better jobs with higher income, diverted over 32,000kg from landfill, set up the largest

Digital Champions Network in the country and been shortlisted for 7 awards. The programme has recently finalised an impact report to showcase the significant impact delivered through the programme and Helping Hands Scheme to date.

1.5 The work of the Programme was scheduled to complete at the end of March 2025. As a result of efficient financial management and a focus on attracting significant additional income, the initial investment from the Helping Hands Scheme has been able to operate beyond the initial timeline and is now able to continue past March 2025 without any further investment required by Kent County Council.

1.6 This report provides an update on the work undertaken by the Financial Hardship Programme, including the recently launched impact report, delivery of the Household Support Fund and specific support related to Pension Credit.

## **2. Household Support Fund**

2.1 On 30 September 2021, the Government announced that vulnerable households across the country would be able to access a new £500 million support fund to help them with essentials over the winter. The Household Support Fund (HSF) was distributed by Upper Tier councils in England to directly help those who needed it most.

2.2 The fund aims to support vulnerable households and families with children, where alternative sources of assistance may be unavailable. It should be used to meet immediate needs and help those who are struggling to afford food and utility bills and water for household purposes, as well as debt and benefit advice.

2.3 Following the Government's decision in September 2024 to provide a 6 month extension, the fund has now entered its sixth round of delivery, running until the end of March 2025. More recently, it was announced in the Chancellor's budget that the Government will provide £1 billion in 2025-26, to extend both the Household Support Fund (HSF) in England, and Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) in England and Wales.

2.4 Kent County Council's previous rounds of funding have been allocated to provide targeted support to Free School Meal eligible households, as well as delivering a publicly available scheme to support with food and energy bills and other county-wide initiatives. In the last round of the county-wide voucher scheme, 10,000 households were supported with a £100 award value for food and/or energy vouchers.

2.5 In previous rounds, 20% of KCC's allocation has been distributed to District and Borough Councils to deliver local initiatives in line with the scheme. In the most recent return from districts, over 55,000 awards were provided to approximately 46,000 households through this local delivery. The support has included initiatives to help with food, energy and water, housing, advice services, as well as wider essentials households in need could benefit from. This approach has been commended by DWP and LGA and will be continued in round six, enabling local projects and schemes to be delivered through district and borough councils.

2.6 In the previous round of funding, other county-wide schemes have been delivered through KCC including the Winter Support Scheme, administered through the Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC), which gave parish, town and local councils the opportunity to apply for funding for new or existing initiatives helping people in financial hardship as a result of the cost-of-living crisis. In addition, a second round of the Warm Home Essentials Scheme was launched, providing carpeting and curtains to households in need.

2.7 In the sixth round of funding KCC will continue to deliver a county-wide scheme, as well as providing direct support to Free School Meal eligible households. As in previous rounds, 20% of funds will be provided to District and Borough councils to deliver local initiatives. There will also be targeted support delivered to those just missing out on pension credit, as outlined in section three of this report.

### **3. Pension Credit**

3.1 In July 2024 the Chancellor announced that people not eligible for Pension Credit or other means-tested entitlements will no longer receive a winter fuel payment worth between £100 and £300 every year. The announcement could potentially affect up to one million households across England who have been eligible to receive the payment up until now. It is estimated that around 18,000 households across Kent are eligible for Pension Credit but not applying, this results in each of these households potentially missing out on an estimated £186 per month.

3.2 Kent County Council and partners have been working to establish mechanisms for providing support in this area. This includes general promotional work to increase awareness through the Kent Together banner, as well as targeted projects and schemes that aim to support pensioners in need.

3.3 The aim of the Pension Credit campaign is to raise awareness of Pension Credit, dispel some of the misconceptions and ask family, friends and professionals to support with the application process if a person is having trouble applying to increase uptake of the entitlement.

3.4 A variety of communication channels are being used to disseminate the key messages to residents and professionals. This has included discussing the issue at the Financial Hardship Task and Finish Group and delivering a ReferKent Spotlight Session which saw just under 300 attendees. The work has also included the development of a marketing campaign and dedicated web page which can be accessed via the following link: [Pension Credit - Kent County Council](#)

3.5 Kent County Council's Household Support Fund will also be used as a mechanism to support in this area. Funding will be made available to Citizens Advice to provide additional resourcing for supporting eligible residents in making a pension credit application. There will also be support delivered to ensure those who are digitally excluded are aware of their entitlements and how to apply for them.

3.6 In addition to supporting the uptake of Pension Credit, KCC is also looking to provide support to those that are just missing out on Pension Credit and will therefore be disproportionately affected in not receiving the Winter Fuel Payment. This support will be delivered through a voucher scheme, providing a £200 voucher to be used

towards food or energy costs. This scheme will be open for those aged 66 and over who are not claiming or eligible to claim pension credit and have a household income between £11,343.80 - £40,000 for single applicants and between £17,313.40 - £40,000 for a joint application. £1m has been allocated for this scheme from the Household Support Fund Round 6 allocation.

3.7 Many District and Borough councils are considering the use of HSF funds to support those just missing out. Some of the options being explored include working with the voluntary sector and increasing the provision of services to specific groups, as well as targeting planned fuel voucher schemes or expanding them for those who have just missed out on the winter fuel payment.

#### **4. Financial Hardship Programme Updates**

4.1 Throughout the last 3 years, there has been a comprehensive programme of activity developed and delivered to support people in hardship. This work has focussed on innovative ways to achieve long term benefits for residents, as well as supporting people who are in immediate hardship.

4.2 The programme has been collecting and evaluating data throughout the various projects and schemes delivered. An Impact Report has been produced to showcase the work to date and provide evidence of the benefits in delivering financial hardship support to residents. A copy of the report can be found in Appendix 1.

4.3 Within the report, the importance of partnership working is highlighted. Through continued strong partnership working and collaboration, projects have been tailored to best support the needs of residents, whilst ensuring efficient delivery and value for money. Some of the key partnership achievements highlighted in the report include; the district and borough council delivery of the Household Support Fund, the success of the Parish Council Grant, and the continued collaborative work of the Financial Hardship Task and Finish Group.

4.4 The report highlights some of the key achievements of the Financial Hardship Programme and partners in delivering support to residents across a variety of hardship related projects and services. These include achieving over £2,800,000 in financial outcomes for residents, such as increased benefits, written off debts and grants, through the Citizen's Advice run Kent Advice Hub, delivering over 150 beds to children in bed poverty, providing over 26,000 fuel and 22,000 food vouchers through the Household Support Fund, and providing over 5,000 devices to those experiencing digital exclusion.

4.5 The Financial Hardship Programme was established as a temporary endeavour, utilising COVID Emergency Grant to respond to the impact of the pandemic and subsequently the cost-of-living crisis.

4.6 Due to efficient financial management and a focus on attracting significant additional income, the initial investment from the Helping Hands Scheme has been able to operate beyond the initial timeline and is now able to continue past March 2025. Looking ahead, the Programme will work with partners and continue to adapt to the changing strategic and political environment, whilst maintaining the principle of supporting people to improve their long-term financial resilience.

## **5. Summary**

5.1 The Household Support Fund is a key mechanism to providing support to residents in hardship. Now in its sixth round, the fund continues to support Free School Meal eligible households, as well other county-wide initiatives. Kent County Council is continuing to allocate funds to district and borough councils for local projects. The future of HSF remains uncertain, but current efforts continue to focus on immediate needs and targeted support.

5.2 The government's announcements around Winter Fuel Payments will affect many households. The Financial Hardship Programme is actively promoting Pension Credit uptake through awareness campaigns and partnerships. Additionally, the Household Support Fund will assist in this effort by providing resources to Citizens Advice and supporting digitally excluded residents. To aid those just missing out on Pension Credit, a voucher scheme will also be offered to eligible residents.

5.3 Over the past three years, the Financial Hardship Programme has developed and delivered a range of activities to support residents in need, focusing on both immediate relief and long-term benefits. An Impact Report has been produced to showcase the programme's achievements and the importance of partnership working. Initially funded by the COVID Emergency Grant, the programme has managed its finances efficiently and attracted additional income, allowing it to extend operations beyond March 2025. Moving forward, the programme will continue to adapt to changing circumstances while supporting residents' financial resilience.

## **6. Recommendations**

6.1 Cabinet is asked to comment on, and note, the report.

## **7. Appendices**

7.1 Appendix 1 – Financial Hardship Programme Impact Report