

From: **Roger Gough, Leader of the Council**
John Betts, Acting Corporate Director for Finance

To: **Cabinet, Thursday 11th July 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 looks ahead to the future of the work beyond the initial delivery timeline, and how the principle of supporting people to improve their long term financial resilience can be continued.

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 Since October 2021, the government has provided support for vulnerable households across the country to help with household bills and essentials. This support is called the Household Support Fund and is in the 5th round of delivery which is scheduled to end at the end of September 2024.

1.4 In September 2022, a paper was prepared for the Kent Council Leaders on the cost-of-living crisis and an urgent multi-agency summit was held to discuss coordinated activity in Kent and Medway to facilitate a response. In response to this the multi-agency Financial Hardship Task & Finish Group was reinvigorated, and set out a new focus and priorities for Kent and Medway in tackling financial hardship.

These priorities help to shape the projects undertaken by the Financial Hardship Programme.

1.5 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.

1.6 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.

1.7 The impact of the work has been recognised by the Department of Work and Pensions, the Local Government Association and others. The team are frequently asked to speak at events and share best practice on behalf of Kent County Council, and regularly meet with other Local Authorities to share information on delivery.

1.8 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.

1.9 This report provides an update on the work undertaken by the Financial Hardship Programme, including the delivery of the Household Support Fund. With the election this month, a new administration will likely implement new policies regarding welfare and support for individuals in hardship. The work and direction of the Financial Hardship Programme will therefore need to adapt to any new policies as they are announced, including any successor to the Household Support Fund.

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. This fund has continued to be provided in rounds, and is now referred to as the Household Support Fund (HSF).

2.2 The fund aims to support vulnerable households and families with children, where alternative sources of assistance may be unavailable. It helps those struggling to afford food, utility bills, water and offers debt and benefit advice. Grant determination differed for the last round with the introduction of debt advice now being available as an opportunity to improve the financial resilience of people living in Kent with money worries.

2.3 The fund recently concluded its fourth round of delivery on 31st March 2024. Unlike previous rounds, Round 4 spanned a 12-month period and received increased

funding of £22 million to reflect this. Delivery across all schemes resulted in a total of **188,042** awards receiving support during HSF4 grant period.

2.4 The below lists initiatives that were rolled out and implemented during the last round of Household Support Fund:

- **Food and Energy Public Facing Application Scheme:** This initiative provided food and energy vouchers. (c) **19,000** people supported.
- **Free School Meal Food/Energy Voucher Holiday Support:** Free school meal eligible families were able to access support during the school holidays. (c) **64,000** eligible children supported.
- **Allocation to District and Borough Councils:** Recognizing the size and scale of Kent and the diversity of need within local communities, unlike many counties, Kent County Council allocated 20% of its HSF allocation for Districts to target support for local need using their expertise. (c) **99,000** households supported.
- **Winter Support Scheme:** Administered by the Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC) this scheme reached **6,000** households across the county.
- **Debt Advice Collaboration:** KALC collaborated with us to expand debt advice services, particularly for communities facing digital exclusion with an additional **23** kiosks introduced to help people contact Citizen's Advice Bureau.
- **Warm Home Essentials:** The scheme focused on sustainable measures to improve home insulation and reduce energy bills for residents with the provision of carpets and curtains/blinds. (c) **357** households supported. Not only did the support enhance people's home insulation and reduce energy bills but this also had a positive impact on their mental health. Following the scheme's success the delivery team have been nominated for a Kent Housing Group Innovation Award.
- **Focused Debt Advice:** People were able to access debt advice with the opportunity to also benefit from an energy card to help with energy bills. This supported more than **900** people.
- **Engagement Events:** Attendance at local events to engage with members of the public and raise awareness of financial support that is available across the wider Financial Hardship Programme.

2.5 The Department of Work and Pensions praised the efforts of the Kent HSF delivery team, describing their approach as "comprehensive and inclusive." The report further commended Kent's well-defined plan and the establishment of a fantastic support network across a large area for Kent residents. "As the fifth iteration of the Household Support Fund (HSF) approaches, Kents success is evident".

2.6 Further praise was provided by the DWP when the team were invited to present nationally to other local authorities and provide an overview of the public facing application scheme.

2.7 Delivery of all HSF schemes maximises any opportunities to collaborate or network with other projects that are being delivered to support people in financial hardship across the wider Financial Hardship Programme, such as Healthy Start and Digital inclusion.

2.8 Round 4 of HSF ended at the end of March 2024, with the government announcing Round 5 on 6 March, to begin on 1 April 2024. Notably, this round removes the previous restriction of energy support, and is for a 6 month period.

2.9 The below table provides an overview of the planned activity of support that is now underway in Round 5:

Free School Meal eligible households with targeted food support
Free School Meal eligible households with targeted additional one-off food support
Allocate 20% of the funds to District and Borough Councils to target support based on local need
Public and professional available county wide application scheme to support with food and energy
Professional county wide referral Warm Home Essential Scheme which supported with carpeting and curtains
Debt advice (including collaborating with KALC and Citizen Advice)
Funding for items that can improve energy efficiency - delivered through district and borough partners

3. Residential

3.1 The Residential Workstream funded by the Helping Hands Scheme aims to improve the financial resilience of Kent residents by providing wrap around financial support to maximise income and improve an individual's financial situation. This workstream complements the delivery of HSF through partnership working with organisations such as utility companies and District and Borough Councils.

3.2 **Kent Money Advice Hub (MAH):** In partnership with trusted money and debt specialists Citizen Advice North West Kent, the MAH leverages cutting-edge technology to provide advice via phone, video calls, text, and kiosks. Its objectives include reducing triage times, ensuring high-quality standardised debt advice, and offering an all-inclusive service. Strategically placed within the Kent community, these kiosks (including soundproof booths) now number around 37, with ongoing plans for further expansion. To date, the scheme has written off over £57,000 of debt from residents. provides countywide support. It leverages sophisticated technology to increase capacity and accessibility for high-quality free money/debt advice.

3.3 **Money and Mental Health Service:** Part-funded by the Helping Hands Scheme, this flagship service aims to reduce the risk to individuals with mental health issues due to problematic debt. It establishes a dedicated referral pathway for clinicians, services, and individuals to access this specialist support.

3.4 The **Debt Relief Order (DRO)** pilot project provided a one-off payment of £90 per person to help people afford a Debt Relief Order (DRO) which can clear existing debt on everything from council tax to energy bills and rent. This was a collaborative project with KCC working with Citizens Advice and Wave Community Bank. One person who received the payment said "their mental health had significantly improved as a result of the DRO" because she was no longer being chased constantly for payments. Since piloting the scheme, the Government has acknowledged that the

admin fee could be a barrier to people dealing with debt and has therefore abolished the fee. A total of 66 people applied for this support.

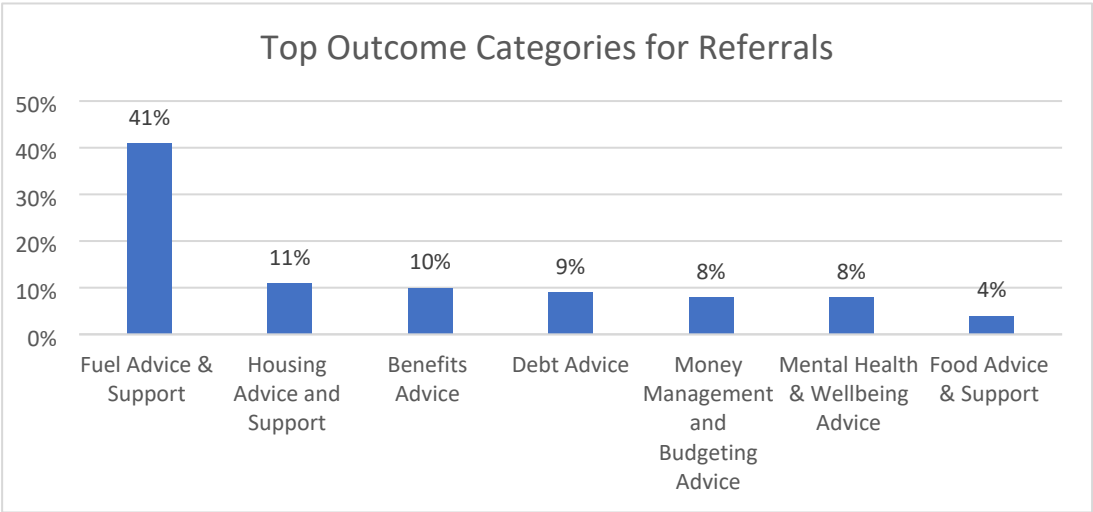
3.5 The **Under Written Loans** pilot project is being developed to provide eligible applicants with an interest free loan to pay off high interest debt. This will allow the applicant to clear debt much quicker and break out of the cycle of high interest debt. It is anticipated that the project will benefit at least 300 households.

3.6 **Sleep Well Kent:** The recently launched **Sleep Well Kent** pilot project is providing beds for children with the goal of helping families in hardship, supporting improved longer term health outcomes and improving educational attainment. Social Workers and Social Work Assistants are able to refer into the scheme and 27 referrals have been made to date.

4. Referrals

4.1 ReferKent is an online referral platform that facilitates the referral of residents directly to different organisations, putting the emphasis on organisations to connect people to services, rather than on the individuals to seek those contacts themselves. Before ReferKent, people often fell through the cracks in the system and missed out on receiving support that would make a difference in stopping them declining further into hardship. This project ensures people get help and support quickly, provides resilience to the system ensuring people are not missed, and avoids the need for more costly services further down the line. 289 organisations and teams are onboard with 1382 users actively able to use the system.

4.2 The table below shows the range of categories that can be referred to through ReferKent and the % of referrals being made to that outcome:



4.3 Alongside the ReferKent platform, different engagement activities have been set up to showcase organisations using the platform. Each month ReferKent hosts 'Spotlight Sessions' where professionals across Kent can find out about a service and how to refer to it. These sessions are well attended and as a direct result of a spotlight session on the BCC Children in Need Emergency Essential, an extra 182 referrals were made to their scheme from Kent professionals.

4.4 Partnership working with the Money and Pension Service has allowed for the promotion of a Money Guiders Programme. 180 people have enrolled on the course to date and 84 have completed. Those completed have earned a digital City and Guilds badge. The programme aims to support professionals to feel more confident in giving money guidance in the non-regulated space and recognising when money guidance needs to be given in the regulated space.

5. Digital Inclusion and Capability

5.1 The Digital Inclusion workstream (Digital Kent), aims to enhance digital inclusion and capabilities in Kent. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Digital Kent service has positively impacted over 15,600 residents (as of 24/06/24) through various projects and initiatives, with most projects being in close collaboration with district partners and local organisations. The service operates based on four principles: tailored, empowered, cohesive, and holistic.

5.2 The work has had a variety of positive impacts, including increased employment rates, higher average annual income, improved online access to government services, and ensuring that residents are supported to access NHS online services.

5.3 Over the past two years, Digital Kent projects have become finalists at three national awards, categories including Net Zero Award, Digital Skills Award and The Barrier Removal Award.

5.4 Digital Kent's engagement-focused projects, including a partnership with the NHS, has positively impacted over 8,000 residents in the community. These interactions aim to enhance health, education, and employment outcomes for residents. Key projects include digital hubs, of which we have 44 across Kent and Medway, digital workshops, with the most popular being health app training sessions and community sessions where the team collaborate with over 20 local organisations across Kent. All engagement projects are supported by a network of volunteer digital champions, who have alone logged over 1,313 interventions.

5.5 Digital hardware projects continue to grow providing access and opportunity to residents. This includes access to devices, connectivity or providing a space for residents and businesses to donate digital devices to generate income for future digitally focussed projects. The Hardware Access Scheme provides digitally excluded residents with access to two-in-one laptops. Residents can be referred by professionals or self-refer. Eligibility criteria is assessed, and approvals or rejections are granted. Over 4,923 residents have benefited from this scheme.

5.6 The Device Recycling Scheme in Kent aims to provide a safe, secure, and environmentally friendly way for residents, businesses, charities, and other organisations to dispose of unwanted IT equipment. By refurbishing and reusing devices, the scheme minimises environmental impact. Notable achievements include generating £85,905 in income (as of 22/05/2024), and collecting 15,876 donated items from businesses, community organisations, and residents. Additionally, this project emphasises environmental metrics such as zero landfill waste, material

recovery, carbon savings, water conservation, and earth preservation, and has so far diverted over 32,000kg of material from landfill.

5.7 Qualitative feedback is regularly collected from residents to demonstrate the personal impact the projects are having on them to improve their lives. (Please see Appendix A).

6. Business – Skills and Employability

6.1 The Business Workstream has developed new projects aimed at supporting micro-businesses and addressing local skills gaps. The workstream aligns to the Local Skills Improvement Plan and Kent and Medway Economic Framework.

6.2 There have been 10 projects funded during Phase 2 of the Business Workstream. Seven projects are live currently, these cover a wide variety of sectors and skills, including: digital skills, education, STEM, Agrifood, Social Care and Tourism/Visitor Economy. The Business Workstream has recently funded two projects:

6.3 Kent Food Hub CiC

This project will result in an additional 3 new jobs, secure an improved distribution centre, a second electric van, software and other resources that will enable the project to upscale significantly and expand to provide a local food supply model in Dover, Folkestone & Hythe, Ashford, Whitstable, Canterbury and Gravesham. It will also facilitate a closer link to Produced in Kent, increasing the hubs' exposure and planned increase of over 70 Kent agrifood businesses selling their products through Kent Food Hub.

6.4 Social Care Assistive Technology Commission

The Business Workstream has part funded this project with Kent Further Education and Medway Council. The commission will work with the local authorities, colleges, social care sector and staff to identify the best approaches to upskilling the workforce, putting in place the infrastructure to support assistive technology, and assist providers in adopting the technology. This will result in a report in Parliament, to stakeholders and MPs, on best practice for adopting assistive technology, maximising the impact from sector funding and reducing the negative impact of workforce shortages.

6.5 To date, Business Workstream: Phase Two has supported the following areas:

- Provided 30 digital after school clubs for Kent Primary school children to excite them about digital opportunities and upskill primary school staff.
- Developing a platform to digitally upskill Kent residents and raise awareness of the employers and career options available in Kent. The DWP are exploring using this with their clients.
- Creating a scalable platform, piloting in Dover, to connect schools with Kent businesses to increase Kent female students' exposure to STEM businesses inc. visits, talks, work placements etc.
- A tourism sector project to increase the workforce through providing inclusive recruitment and employment training.

- Funded a visitor economy project to increase volunteering to pre-covid levels and create an employer forum with shared HR approaches, “tourism talent hub” linking to all sector vacancies and improving Further Education engagement.
- Funded projects to research and link Kent organisations, resulting in pilot activities in the agrifood sector, social care, improved collaboration and enhancing activity between existing organisations and established working groups. This includes the re-purposed and vitalised Kent and Medway Employment and Skills group, with the Housing Associations.

7. Conclusion

7.1 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.

7.2 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.

7.3 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.

8. Recommendations

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

9. Background Documents

9.1 Appendix A - Resident Feedback and Case Studies

10. Contact details

Report author: Lucy Alesbrook
Job title: Financial Hardship Programme Manager
Telephone: 03000 417963
Email address: Lucy.Alesbrook@kent.gov.uk

Relevant Director: John Betts
Job title: Interim Director of Finance
Telephone: 03000410066
Email: john.betts@kent.gov.uk