

North Yorkshire Councillor report September 2023

Thousands of households to receive supermarket vouchers

Households in North Yorkshire struggling amid the cost of living crisis will be able to claim supermarket vouchers to help pay for food and other essentials over the winter months.

The fourth phase of the Household Support Fund is being rolled out to just under 22,500 people across the county who are eligible. It will provide a one-off payment in supermarket e-vouchers to ease the pressure of global inflation.

People who will receive the Household Support Fund payments are:

- Residents who received housing benefit on, or between, January 26, 2023, and February 25, 2023, but did not qualify for the cost of living payment made in April and May 2023 for people on low income benefits or tax credits. They will receive a single e-voucher for £450.
- Residents who were getting the maximum discount to pay their council tax bill through the means-tested Council Tax Reduction Scheme, as of August 14, 2023. They will receive a single e-voucher for £110.

The scheme was initially set up by the Department for Work and Pensions to help people meet the cost of energy bills, food and other essentials as the country recovered from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Tens of thousands of households in North Yorkshire have already benefited from the first three rounds of the fund, which has provided vouchers to those most in need as well as access to other support.

Eighteen grants have also been awarded to providers of free or low-cost food across the county, to ensure local food access support is available in communities over the winter.

The national criteria has been updated for the fourth phase of the scheme to help those who missed out on other cost of living support from the Government. However, residents receiving just a partial reduction in their council tax do not qualify for the Household Support Fund scheme.

Eligible households will receive a letter from North Yorkshire Council this month (September) containing an individual code. This code allows them to download a supermarket e-voucher quickly and easily through the online portal, with the option of a printed version.

The process has been designed to be user-friendly and the vast majority of people redeem their vouchers without any assistance, but residents who need support can get help over the phone or on email from the council's customer service centre team. Face-to-face help is also on hand at eight council offices across the county as well as all North Yorkshire libraries. Details of these local venues and contact details for the council's customer service centre are included in the letters.

Customer service teams at a number of council offices across the county along with staff and volunteers at 42 libraries in North Yorkshire will be on hand to support people who feel less confident in accessing their vouchers online.

The latest round of the Household Support Fund has also been used to supplement other schemes which will help residents with their household costs. This includes support for food banks and other schemes providing free food across the county.

A further £400,000 has been invested in the North Yorkshire local assistance fund, which provides emergency support with food and utilities and a support scheme managed by North Yorkshire Citizens Advice and Law Centre, which helps people struggling to pay their energy bills, has received £500,000.

More information and answers to questions can be found at www.northyorks.gov.uk/HouseholdSupportFund online.

Ambitious plan includes building new council homes

An ambitious new strategy to deliver thousands of homes that meet the needs of communities across North Yorkshire is being developed.

The draft North Yorkshire Housing Strategy provides a framework for housing policies and projects to be undertaken by the unitary council over the next five years.

It includes proposals to tackle homelessness, meet the needs of the ageing population, increase the supply of affordable and available housing and improve the energy efficiency of housing, which would reduce fuel poverty.

It aims to deliver at least 12,685 new homes – of which 4,000 properties will be affordable – over the next five years. And a council housing growth plan will be drawn up to include increasing the authority's existing stock of 8,500 homes.

The draft housing strategy follows three key themes – our people, our places and our homes – which look to focus on the following areas:

Preventing and tackling homelessness.

- Meeting the needs of the ageing population.
- Meeting supported housing needs and the needs of specific groups.
- Growing the supply of affordable and available housing.
- Addressing the rural housing crisis.
- Supporting communities through neighbourhood renewal and regeneration.
- Decarbonising homes.
- Ensuring that new housing supply contributes to the council's net zero ambitions.
- Addressing stock condition issues.
- Ensuring that council stock remains of a decent standard and continues to improve.

At the upcoming executive meeting (Wednesday, September 13), North Yorkshire Council's executive member for housing, Cllr Simon Myers will be asked to approve that the draft strategy goes out for consultation with partners, members, key partners, stakeholders, registered providers, government agencies, tenants and residents, and other key council services.

That consultation will run for around two months starting next month (October), and more details will be posted on northyorks.gov.uk when it is launched.

Schools and Reinforced Autoclave Aerated Concrete

In June 2023 ministers launched an inquiry into the use of Reinforced Autoclave Aerated Concrete (RAAC) in public buildings to investigate how many thousands of government buildings were constructed with it. As has been reported in the national and local media, ministers have now ordered schools to immediately shut buildings made with aerated concrete until safety work is undertaken. Initially 104 schools in England have been contacted.

RAAC is less durable than reinforced concrete and deteriorates over time, so is susceptible to sudden failure. It has a life expectancy of little more than 30 years which means that buildings constructed from the 1950s to 1990s that have not been checked by structural engineers are at risk of collapse.

The situation in North Yorkshire

88 North Yorkshire LA Maintained schools had initial surveys completed, of these 14 also had follow up intrusive surveys. After the DfE guidance changed earlier this year, 15 additional schools were identified as requiring surveys. Of these 13 were

complete and two still to be surveyed by the end of the week starting Monday 4th September.

On all the North Yorkshire LA maintained school sites surveyed to date no RAAC has been found.

North Yorkshire has one school – Scalby School (an academy) in Scarborough that has been asked to close the buildings affected. The school is required to make suitable arrangements to continue the education of their 1000 pupils until safety work can be carried out. The DfE Capital Project Director is visiting the Scalby school site with surveyors this morning.

We are working closely with the Coast and Vale Learning Trust who oversees Scalby School, to ensure they can deliver education with minimal disruption. We will continue to monitor the situation and work closely with the Trust and the Department of Education.

It is perhaps worth noting this is the same issue that threatened the future of Airedale Hospital, a situation that has now thankfully been scheduled for resolution with an extensive redevelopment having secured a place on the Governments New Hospital Programme.

Yorkshire Water liaison - S&RACC

Following mounting pressure on water utility companies both nationally and locally and numerous calls for response from both individual Councillors and the Leadership of NYC, a representative from Yorkshire Water made the first of a series of visits to the six Area Constituency Committees across North Yorkshire, attending the Skipton & Ripon ACC.

While this was long overdue it was a welcome first step towards building bridges between the company and the communities it serves. We now look forward to holding them to their commitment to not only engage but resolve the issues raised by our communities and make good on the long term investment commitments they outlined to improve their service and the quality of our watercourses across the county.

