

	<b>Cabinet</b> 28 May 2024
	<b>Report from the Corporate Director,  Partnerships, Housing and  Residents Services</b>
	<b>Lead Member – Cabinet Member for  Resident Services &amp; Culture  (Councillor Fleur Donnelly-  Jackson)</b>
<b>Household Support Fund extension (from 1 April 2024 until  30 September 2024)</b>	
<b>Wards Affected:</b>	All
<b>Key or Non-Key Decision:</b>	Key
<b>Open or Part/Fully Exempt:</b> <small>(If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)</small>	Open
<b>List of Appendices:</b>	Three Appendix 1: Launch letter for the Household Support Fund extension including allocations and grant determination criteria. Appendix 2: Household Support Fund Grant determination letter Appendix 3: Household Support Fund guidance
<b>Background Papers:</b>	None
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## 1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1. This report seeks approval for the allocation and the distribution of the Household Support Fund extension funding, which runs from 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024.

## 2.0 Recommendation(s)

That Cabinet:

- 2.1 Notes that Brent's allocation for the Household Support Fund (HSF) for the period 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024 is £2,781,222.28.
- 2.2 Approves the proposed approach for allocating and distributing the HSF as set out in paragraphs 3.10 to 4.14 of this report.
- 2.3 Approves the proposed approach whereby the Corporate Director, Partnerships, Housing and Residents Services in consultation with the Lead Member for Customers, Communities & Culture will exercise authority to establish and modify detailed eligibility criteria regarding the Household Support Fund grant scheme as may be necessary to enable appropriate allocation of funding in accordance with Recommendation 2.2 above.
- 2.4 Approves the proposed approach whereby the Corporate Director, Partnerships, Housing and Residents Services in consultation with the Lead Member for Customers, Communities & Culture has the authority to amend the Council's eligibility criteria during the lifetime of this Household Support Fund extension period if necessary for the reasons detailed in paragraph 3.6, subject to the parameters set by the Department for Work and Pensions in its Determination and Guidance.

### **3.0 Background**

#### **3.1 Cabinet Member Foreword**

- 3.1.1 In the Spring Budget the Government announced it is providing an additional £500 million to enable the extension of the Household Support Fund. This means that Local Authorities in England have received £421 million to support those in need locally through the Household Support Fund. The funding is available to Local Authorities in England from 1 April 2024 and will run until 30 September 2024.
- 3.1.2 In Brent, the Household Support Fund will continue to help our most vulnerable households. The funding provided to the local authority will cover the period of 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024. Brent's allocation for the Household Support Fund (HSF) for this period is £2,781,222.28.
- 3.1.3 Councils need to make part of the funding available to residents on an application basis. In Brent this will continue to be available through our vital Resident Support Fund. In addition to this, funding will be available in the form of vouchers for children in receipt of Free School Meals, an allocation of funding to support the work of the Credit Union, and finally supporting community projects with additional funding (details to be found in paragraph 4).

#### **3.2 Detail**

- 3.2.1 On 26 March 2024, the DWP confirmed that a further allocation of Household Support Fund (HSF) for £2,781,222.28. This grant will run from the 1 April 2024 – 30 September 2024. The Council cannot carry over the HSF grant fund provided by the DWP beyond 30 September 2024.
- 3.2.2 The HSF is being extended from 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024, with £421 million available to Local Authorities in England for that period.
- 3.2.3 The aim is to support those most in need to help with rising living costs by providing extra funds to alleviate food poverty and to support them with their energy, water bills and other essentials.
- 3.2.4 There is no limit or proportionality of which groups the Fund should support. The guidance emphasises on supporting households with food, energy bills and wider support.
- 3.2.5 Local Authorities have been given flexibility to identify those at need and have been asked to use the data and information at their disposal in order to do this. There must be a clear rationale or documented policy/framework outlining our approach including how we are defining eligibility and how households access the scheme. Furthermore, Authorities have access to DWP's Searchlight portal and can use information relating to Universal Credit claims to aid the identification of households at need. The eligibility criteria are outlined in Section 4 of this report as part of the proposed approach for Brent.
- 3.2.6 Local Authorities are also encouraged to work with partners such as voluntary organisations to ensure that the needs of vulnerable families are being met.
- 3.2.7 The funds must be used or committed to by 30 September 2024. The DWP has advised that the scheme can be delivered through a variety of routes such as providing vouchers, bank transfers, making direct provision of food or issuing grants to third parties.
- 3.2.8 In accordance the DWP provide guidance 202425, the scheme should be used to primarily fund food provision and direct assistance with energy bills. The Council has discretion to assess what is reasonable to assist those in genuine need. Examples of other eligible spends include:

Essentials linked to energy and water (including sanitary products, warm clothing, soap, blankets, boiler service/repair, purchase of equipment including fridges, freezers, ovens, etc.), in recognition that a range of costs may arise which directly affect a household's ability to afford or access food, energy and water.

- Wider essentials (including, but not limited to, support with other bills including broadband or phone bills and clothing).
- Housing costs where existing housing discretionary schemes do not meet this exceptional need. Importantly, the fund should not be used to provide housing support on an ongoing basis or to support unsustainable

tenancies. The Fund cannot be used to provide mortgage support, though homeowners could still qualify for the other elements of the Fund.

3.2.9 There is no requirement for the Council to undertake a means test or conduct benefit checks unless this specifically forms part of the Authority's local eligibility criteria.

3.2.10 Authorities can also provide support to an individual regardless of their immigration status, if there is a genuine care need that does not arise solely from destitution e.g., health problems.

3.2.11 £421m has been made available to County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England to support those most in need with the cost of essentials via the Household Support Fund. This funding covers the period 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024 inclusive. There is no indication currently from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) if the funding for local authorities will continue beyond September 2024. The Brent Resident Support Fund, in its current form, will continue until March 31, 2025, however without the DWP HSF funding element.

#### **4.0 Proposed approach for Brent.**

4.1 Since October 2021, the HSF grant has supported 35,837 households in Brent with £13.7m of support funding.

4.2 The majority of the spend consisted of proactive support given to households with children on FSM during holidays, disabled households, Housing Benefits only households. Reactive support was provided through the application process via the Council's own Resident Support Fund.

4.3 It is proposed that 6500 Disabled households will be allocated £25 to support with household costs, such as food and fuel. This will be paid directly to them through vouchers, as previously. The total allocation for this cohort is £162,500.

4.4 It is proposed that the Council provides support to families who receive free school meals during half term and six weeks summer holiday. It is proposed £15 per child per week for a total of seven weeks. The total cost for 10,476 children would be £1,100,000.

4.5 It is proposed the HSF fund will also be utilised to support the Council's 440 care leavers with £50.00 vouchers to support them with additional costs in household bills which would be £22,000.

The Council will use the same mechanisms used for the previous allocation of the HSF to distribute the funds:

- The Edenred platform for children in receipt of benefits related free school meals and other vulnerable families identified by the schools.
- Vouchers to Care leavers and Disabled households.

## **Resident Support Fund proposal**

- 4.6 It is proposed that £1,206,722.28 of the grant will be allocated to the Council's Resident Support Fund for residents to proactively apply for support with food, energy and water, or wider essentials e.g., white goods. Existing mechanisms and eligibility criteria will be utilised to distribute the funds.
- 4.7 The RSF applications will be made by customers directly or through support from Brent Community Hubs, Family Well-Being Centres and any third-party organisations. Criteria has been amended with Cabinet on 5 February 2024. The maximum award is now £500 with one application per rolling 12 months.

## **Credit Union Support proposal**

- 4.8 £200,000 of the grant will be allocated to the Credit Union to support households with multiple debts with interest free loans provided they meet the affordability criteria.
- 4.9 Since August 2020 to 31 March 2024, 306 households have been supported with £1,104,700 financial support with interest free loan. Of this £390,535 has been repaid in instalments by households. Only two households have defaulted payments.

## **Supporting Community Projects**

- 4.10 It is proposed £40,000 be allocated to support the Community Well-being Project-Sufra to support residents with a holistic approach with health, wellbeing, maximisation of welfare support and support with budgeting and debt.
- 4.11 It is proposed £50,000 be allocated to support Advice For Renters to support residents with rent arrears, sustainment of tenancies and debt.
- 4.12 Table 1 provides a breakdown of the proposed spend for each of the proposals outlined in paragraphs 4.1 to 4.11.

**Table 1**

<b>Description of Spend</b>	<b>Grant allocation £</b>
<b>Families with Children -10,476 children</b>	£ 1,100,000
<b>Care Leavers- 440 care leavers</b>	£22,000

<b>Disabled households – one off payment to pensioner housing benefit households-6500 households</b>	£162,500
<b>Credit Union</b>	£200,000
<b>All households – top up the Resident Support Fund and provide ongoing reactive support through the application process</b>	£1,206,722.28
<b>Community Projects-Sufra and Advice for Renters</b>	£90,000.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>£2,781,222.28</b>

4.13 This report refocuses our approach towards addressing key community needs through strategic funding and partnerships, ensuring impactful and sustainable support for our residents.

4.14 In addition, we are proposing that the Household Support Fund is utilised to support residents with reactive support due to high demand. Any allocation not spent in the table, is reallocated to elements of the Resident Support Fund (RSF) under DWP’s guidance for supporting residents with the cost of living.

## **5.0 Stakeholder and ward member consultation and engagement**

5.1 It is not considered in the circumstances and timescale that non-statutory public consultation is a viable or reasonable option for the Council in taking the decisions which are the subject of this report, on account of the very short period which the government has given local authorities regarding the extension of the Household Support Fund grant scheme even if at other times it would have considered consultation with the public and / or stakeholders affected by the decision.

## **6.0 Financial Considerations**

6.1 The Council’s indicative allocation from the fund is £2,781,222.28, which has to be used between 1 April and 30 September 2024. The aim of this funding is to give vulnerable households peace of mind this spring and summer by providing extra funds to alleviate food poverty and to support them with their energy, water bills and other essentials.

6.2 The planned spend shown in Table 1 at paragraph 5 above is within the grant allocation, so there is no risk to the Council. It is a requirement of the grant conditions to submit regular claims of any costs incurred which will be reimbursed provided they are within the permitted spend in the guidance. Any

unspent funds from this allocation will not be claimed, so there will be no requirement to refund any monies to the DWP.

## **7.0 Legal Considerations**

- 7.1 The funding provided under the HSF is required to be distributed by 30 September 2024 to support those most in need with the cost of food, energy, water bills and other essentials. The HSF funding must only be used to provide support as defined within the grant conditions as set out by the Department for Work and Pensions. Officers have set out a proposed approach in section 4 of the report and will seek authority from the Corporate Director, Partnerships, Housing and Residents Services in consultation with the Lead Member for Customers, Communities & Culture establish such detailed criteria as may be necessary to enable appropriate allocation of funding.
- 7.2 The new allocation of HSF funding runs from the 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024 and funds must be used or committed by 30 September 2024. Given the value of the HSF allocation to Brent (in the sum of £2,781,222.28) for 2024, decisions by the Corporate Director, Partnerships, Housing and Residents Services regarding its distribution and the establishment of eligibility criteria for its distribution will be classed as a key decision.
- 7.3 Officers will need to have regard to the Subsidy Control regime in relation to any arrangements entered into for the distribution of the HSF.

## **8.0 Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Considerations**

- 8.1 The public sector equality duty, as set out in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, requires the Council, when exercising its functions, to have “due regard” to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited under the Act, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who have a “protected characteristic” and those who do not share that protected characteristic. The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.
- 8.2 Having due regard involves the need to enquire into whether and how a proposed decision disproportionately affects people with a protected characteristic and the need to consider taking steps to meet the needs of persons who share a protected characteristic that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it. This includes removing or minimising disadvantages suffered by persons who share a protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic.
- 8.3 There is a requirement to consider how the Household Support Fund impacts those with characteristics protected under the Equality Act 2010. There is no prescribed manner in which the Council must exercise its public sector equality duty but having an adequate evidence base for its decision is necessary.
- 8.4 Due to the urgency of the situation, formal assessments have not been

undertaken in respect of the decisions which are the subject of this report. Such formal assessments are not a requirement of the duty. An underlying purpose of the recommended decisions is to have regard to the protection of those with protected characteristics e.g., children eligible for free school meals and families with pre-school children eligible for benefits. The proposed approach for allocating and distributing the funding recommended for adoption, however, seeks to provide funding to a wide range of vulnerable households. In the circumstances, Officers do not consider that there are any adverse equalities impacts but Officers will keep the equalities impact of the decisions under review.

## **9.0 Climate Change and Environmental Considerations**

9.1 No impact on the Council's environmental objectives and climate emergency strategy.

## **10.0 Human Resources/Property Considerations (if appropriate)**

10.1 It is not considered at this time that there are any Human Resources Implications arising from decisions which are the subject of this report.

## **11.0 Communication Considerations**

11.1 It is proposed that the website and communication with internal and external stakeholders will be developed to the refreshed allocation of HSF funds.

**Report sign off:**

**Peter Gadsdon**

*Corporate Director, Partnerships, Housing and Resident Services*