



**Officer Key Decision by the
Corporate Director, Partnerships,
Housing and Residents Services**

10 October 2024

**Report from the Corporate Director,
Partnerships, Housing and
Residents Services**

**Lead Member for Resident Support
& Culture**

**Household Support Fund extension from 1 October 2024
until 31 March 2025**

Wards Affected:	All
Key or Non-Key Decision:	Key
Open or Part/Fully Exempt: (If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)	Open
List of Appendices:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Launch letter for the Household Support Fund extension including allocations and grant determination criteria. 2. Household Support Fund Grant determination letter 3. Household Support Fund guidance
Background Papers:	None
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1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1. This report seeks to outline the allocation and the distribution of the Household Support Fund extension, which runs from 1 October 2024 to 31 March 2025.

2.0 Recommendation(s)

That the Corporate Director Partnerships, Housing and Residents Services, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Resident Support and Culture:

- 2.1 Notes that Brent's allocation for the Household Support Fund (HSF) for the period 1 October 2024 to 31 March 2025 is £2,781,222.28.
- 2.2 Approves the proposed approach for allocating and distributing the HSF as set out in paragraphs 4.0 to 4.19 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 Resident Support & Culture agrees the detailed eligibility criteria for the allocation of the Household Support Fund and to undertake any subsequent modification as necessary.
- 2.4 Approves the proposed approach whereby the Corporate Director, Partnerships, Housing and Residents Services in consultation with the Lead Member for Resident Support & Culture engage third party organisations and establish the criteria for the allocation of funding by those organisations and agree any subsequent modification.
- 2.5 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 Detail

Contribution to Borough Plan Priorities & Strategic Context

- 3.1 The extension of the Household Support Fund touches upon the strategic aims outlined in Brent's Borough Plan for 2023-2027.

In particular, the Household Support Fund extension directly contributes to strategic priority one *Prosperity and Stability in Brent*. It is proposed that a proportion of this funding will be allocated to the Council's Resident Support Fund which provides financial assistance to residents experiencing financial difficulties. This clearly aligns with the desired outcome of strategic priority one, to tackle financial inequality and ease the pressure of the rising cost of living.

Furthermore, through providing financial assistance to residents who need it most, the Household Support Fund supports the desired outcomes of strategic priority three *Thriving Communities*. Residents are supported in overcoming financial barriers that might prevent them from engaging in the community and can be more empowered to be actively involved in their local communities. Additionally, it is proposed that the Household Support Fund is used to support community projects such as the Alperton Employment and Skills project and the Community Well-being Project-Sufra. This will assist in working towards the desired outcomes of 'enabling our communities' and

achieving 'a representative workforce', whilst ensuring that residents' lived experiences are considered, and their voices are heard.

The extension of funding also aligns with strategic priority five *A Healthier Brent* as well as touching on the Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy: Tackling Health Inequalities 2022-2027. By easing the financial pressures faced by vulnerable residents, the Household Support fund can help to reduce the stress and anxiety caused by experiencing financial hardships. This contributes to the strategic priorities by supporting residents with their mental health and wellbeing. In addition, poverty and financial difficulties are factors that contribute to health inequalities in Brent. The support available through the HSF can assist with tackling health inequalities and support in improving health outcomes for those who need it most.

Background

- 3.2 The HSF has been extended from 1 October 2024 to 31 March 2025, with £421 million available to Local Authorities in England for that period.
- 3.3 On 24 September 2024, the DWP confirmed a further allocation of the Household Support Fund (HSF) to Brent for £2,781,222.28. This grant will run from the 1 October 2024 – 31 March 2025. The Council cannot carry over the HSF grant fund provided by the DWP beyond 31 March 2025.
- 3.4 The aim is to support those most in need of 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.
- 3.5 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.
- 3.6 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.
- 3.7 Local Authorities are also encouraged to work with partners such as voluntary organisations to ensure that the needs of vulnerable families are being met.
- 3.8 The funds must be used or committed to by 31 March 2025. 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.
- 3.9 In accordance with the DWP guidance 2024/25, 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 within the parameters of the guidance. 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.

3.10 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 however the objective of the HSF is to provide crisis support to the most vulnerable households with the cost of essentials.

3.11 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.

4.0 Proposed approach for Brent.

4.1 Since October 2021, the HSF grant has supported 51,367 households in Brent with £17.5m of support funding.

4.2 The majority of the spend consisted of proactive support given to households with children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) during holidays, Housing Benefits single customers, disabled residents, pensioners and care leavers. Reactive support was provided through the application process via the Council's own Resident Support Fund.

4.3 It is proposed that the Council provides support for households with children on FSM which will continue to be provided during school holidays. This will cover the same 7-week period as before, which includes 1 week in October 2024, two weeks over Christmas, one week in February half term and two weeks during Easter holidays. The total cost for 10,476 children would be £1,100,000.

4.4 It is proposed the HSF 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 FSMs and other vulnerable families identified by the schools.

- Vouchers to Care leavers and Disabled households.

Resident Support Fund proposal

- 4.5 It is proposed that £808,342.28 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.
- 4.6 It is proposed that a separate provision of £200,000 is made through the Resident Support Fund (RSF) to assist pensioners with winter fuel costs. This funding will help mitigate the increased burden of energy bills during colder months, ensuring pensioners can maintain warm and safe homes.
- 4.7 Additionally, funding will be allocated to assist with covering pest control fees for eligible households as part of the overall support package.
- 4.8 It is proposed that funding will be allocated to the Well and Warm Scheme. This is due to pressures caused by changes to winter fuel eligibility coupled with the expected harsh winter. This will support vulnerable residents to keep their homes warm particularly during the winter period and will contribute to the support offered to pensioners.
- 4.9 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.

Credit Union Support proposal

- 4.10 £200,000 of the grant will be allocated to the Credit Union to support households with multiple debts with interest free loans, on the basis that they meet the affordability criteria. Since August 2020 to 31 March 2024, 414 households have been supported with £1,104,700 financial support with interest free loans. Of this, £557,144 has been repaid in instalments by households. We have had fifteen households default on repayments.

Supporting Community Projects

- 4.11 It is proposed £50,000 be allocated to support the Community Well-being Project-Sufra to support residents with a holistic approach including health, and wellbeing support, maximisation of welfare support and support with budgeting and debt.
- 4.12 It is proposed £50,000 be allocated to support Citizens Advice to support residents with debt advice.
- 4.13 It is proposed to use HSF funding for the annual operational charge for New Millennium Centre. This is proposed for six months using £287,571 to support vulnerable families through a holistic approach to homelessness, debt and welfare advice. Additionally, £48,509 of staffing costs are proposed to be added for the operational service manager for eight months.

4.14 It is proposed that £10,000 of fund is allocated to Alperton Employment and Skills to enhance employment chances for residents.

4.15 It is proposed £5000 is allocated for food support initiatives.

4.16 Table 1 provides a breakdown of the proposed spend for each of the proposals outlined in paragraphs 4.0 to 4.16

Table 1

Description of Spend	Grant allocation £
Families with Children -10,476 children	£ 1,100,000
Care Leavers- 440 care leavers	£22,000
Credit Union	£200,000
All households – top up the Resident Support Fund and provide ongoing reactive support through the application process.	£808,342.28
Pensioner Households for support related to heating, gas and electric including the Well and Warm Scheme.	£200,000
Community Projects- New Millennium Centre Project, Suфра Community Wellbeing, Citizens Advice, Alperton Employment and skills and food support initiatives	£450,880
Total	£2,781,222.28

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

4.18 In addition, we are proposing that the Household Support Fund is utilised to support residents with reactive support due to high demand. Any allocation detailed in Table 1 that is not spent, 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 The Cabinet Member for Resident Support and Culture has been consulted.

6.0 Financial Considerations

6.1 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.

7.0 Legal Considerations

7.1 The allocation of HSF to the Council is subject to the terms and limitations placed in the guidance at Appendix 3 although the guide states that the Council is able to use its discretion on how to identify and support those most in need, taking into account a wide range of information.

7.2 The Council has powers to administer and distribute grant funding and implement the proposals to provide grants under HSF pursuant to the general power of competence as set out in section 1 of the Localism Act 2011.

7.3 In relation to section 4.11-4.16 above, it is noted that the Guide states that “If delivering application-based support through Third Party Organisations, the Council remains accountable for the eligibility criteria of these partners and must work with them to establish these. The Council must make sure that this support is clearly advertised and is inclusive and accessible.

7.4 Given the value of the HSF allocation to Brent from 1 October 2024 to 31 March 2025, the decision by the Corporate Director, Partnerships, Housing and Residents Services to agree and establish a policy to include detailed eligibility criteria for the allocation of the HSF will itself be classed as a key decision.

7.5 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 The recommendations in this report have no impact on the Council's environmental objectives and climate emergency strategy.

10.0 Human Resources/Property Considerations

- 10.1 The administration of the Council's HSF scheme will be met within existing resources in the Council's Resident Services Department.

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*