

Individual Decision



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The attached report will be taken as Individual Portfolio Member Decision on:

Thursday, 14th December, 2023

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Proposed Amendment to the Household Support Fund 2023/24

Committee considering report:	Individual Executive Member Decisions
Date of Committee:	14 December 2023
Portfolio Member:	Councillor Denise Gaines
Report Author:	Sean Murphy
Forward Plan Ref:	ID4473

1 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 The Council has received the sum of £1,389,699 from Central Government in respect of the Household Support Fund (HSF) grant for 2023/24. The purpose of the Fund is to provide crisis support to vulnerable households most in need of support to help with the rise in living costs.
- 1.2 ID4356 agreed the allocation of the fund in compliance with the guidance issued by the Department of Work and Pensions. ID 4463 increased the allocation to the shared 'cost of living appeal with Greenham Trust from £50K to £70K.
- 1.3 A review has now taken place and this report sets out proposals for further adjustments to the original allocations.

2 Recommendation

- 2.1 To **APPROVE** the adjustments to the allocation set out at 6.1 and proposals to extend the remit of the joint 'cost of living' grant fund as proposed in 6.2.

3 Implications and Impact Assessment

Implication	Commentary
Financial:	<p>The Council has been awarded Household Support Funds amounting to £1,389,699 for the 2023/24 financial year. The funding is a ring-fenced grant to provide support and assistance as set out in this report.</p> <p>This report sets out a range of proposals to amend the scheme agreed under the terms of ID4356.</p>

	<p>The scheme is 100% grant funded and reasonable administration costs of up to 10% may be claimed to deliver this scheme.</p> <p>All funds should be spent or committed before 31 March 2024 and cannot be carried forward.</p> <p>The Government communications on this scheme are that it is an <i>extension</i> to the HSF and so there is no guarantee of this funding continuing beyond the 31st March 2024.</p>
<p>Human Resource:</p>	<p>There has been a lead officer seconded to the Housing Service to administer and oversee the distribution of the fund.</p>
<p>Legal:</p>	<p>The Council has discretion on the use of the HSF providing that the proposals are in accordance with the grant determination and the Guidance provided by the Department for Work and Pensions ('DWP').</p> <p>See: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/household-support-fund-guidance-for-local-councils/1-april-2023-to-31-march-2024-household-support-fund-guidance-for-county-councils-and-unitary-authorities-in-england#introduction</p> <p>The Guidance requires that local authorities in receipt of an HSF allocation are required to notify DWP how the funds are to be utilised. Should this recommendation be approved that notification will require updating.</p>
<p>Risk Management:</p>	<p>It is a risk that the fund will not all be committed in 2023/24 using the criteria set out and will need to be returned to Government. However, based on the previous year's scheme the risk is considered low. All expenditure proposals set out in this report will be subject to monitoring to ensure that monies are being spent accordance with this decision and the terms of the scheme.</p>
<p>Property:</p>	<p>None</p>
<p>Policy:</p>	<p>This report sets out the Council's proposals for use of the HSF in West Berkshire.</p>

	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Commentary
Equalities Impact:				
A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?	X			See Appendix A
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?	X			See Appendix A
Environmental Impact:	X			Funding to purchase white goods and other energy saving initiatives will assist with reducing energy use longer term for applicants.
Health Impact:	X			Providing free school meals as a means of supporting challenging child poverty is recognised as having a significant impact on children’s health during their formative years.
ICT Impact:		X		The HSF has been facilitated by ICT in the past and will continue to be a largely online application process.
Digital Services Impact:		X		HSF has been a primarily online process to date. Enabling the delivery of the fund through charitable agencies will help direct funding to those experiencing digital exclusion.

Council Strategy Priorities:	X			<p>The distribution of the HSF positively enhances the following Council Priorities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure our vulnerable children and adults achieve better outcomes • Support everyone to reach their full potential <p>This will be achieved through the targeted delivery of additional financial support to vulnerable households who are struggling during the Cost of Living crisis.</p>
Core Business:		X		<p>Contributes to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure our vulnerable children and adults achieve better outcomes • Support everyone to reach their full potential
Data Impact:		X		<p>Bank statements, utility bills and bank account details will be collected.</p> <p>All data will be collected for the purpose of administering this grant only.</p> <p>It will have no impact on the rights of the data subjects.</p> <p>Appendix B attached</p>
Consultation and Engagement:	Corporate Board, Operations Board, Housing Colleagues and Health and Wellbeing Board have been consulted.			

4 Executive Summary

- 4.1 West Berkshire Council has been awarded **£1,389,699** to meet the stated aims of the Household Support Fund of supporting the vulnerable or those that cannot pay for essentials.
- 4.2 By way of background, the guidance states that the *“The expectation is that The Fund should be used to support households in the most need; particularly those who may not be eligible for the other support government has recently made available but who are nevertheless in need and who require crisis support.”*

- 4.3 The funding is designed to meet the “*immediate needs and help those who are struggling to afford energy and water bills, food, and other related essentials. Authorities can also use the funding to support households who are struggling to afford wider essentials including housing costs where existing housing support does not meet this need.*”
- 4.4 The West Berkshire scheme approved via ID4356 is designed to deliver for the following target groups:
- Free School Meals;
 - Pensioners;
 - Disabled applicants or their carers;
 - Main element.
- 4.5 With less than four months to run on the current scheme a review has taken place with a view to adjustments to the main element of the scheme.

5 Supporting Information

Introduction

- 5.1 The Household Support Fund aims to provide crisis support to vulnerable households most in need of support to receive financial support to help with significantly rising living costs.
- 5.2 It was announced that West Berkshire would receive an allocation of £1,389,689 for 2023/24.
- 5.3 On the 2nd May 2023 it was determined by an Individual Member Decision that the allocation would be as follows:

Support	Proposal	Costs
Free School Meal Vouchers	7 weeks support per annum at £3 per day per child. Estimated support c4,000 children	£420,000
Pensioners	Targeted funding in partnership with registered providers or other identified charities	£40,000
Main element	Family claim – Max £300 Single person claim – Max £150 per claim	£740,729

Main element	Set aside funding for distribution through local charities and match funded projects	Up to £50,000
Admin	Max eligible 10%	£138,970
Total		£1,389,699

Current Spend

- 5.4 As of 20/11/2023 the number of applications for 2023/24 stands at 1662 of which 1038 have been approved and 516 rejected. The total spend at this time against the main allocation is circa £250K. This is expected to increase over the winter months.
- 5.5 Many requests made to the fund are for relatively small amounts for emergency situations such as emergency food supplies or energy top-ups. Commonly these range from £30 to £50. Distributing this type of funding quickly is difficult for the Council using current payment mechanisms. Going forward one option is that we hold stocks of food and energy vouchers for immediate distribution where the eligibility criteria are met.

Working with the Voluntary Sector

- 5.5 West Berkshire Council has a close and effective working relationship with the Voluntary Sector. A feature has included an allocation of funds to a match funded appeal with Greenham Trust. In respect of the cost-of-living the original allocation to this fund was £50K and this was increased to £70K as a result of a further Individual Decision (ID4463).
- 5.6 Regular meetings are taking place with the voluntary sector and in particular those organisations most associated with assisting those who are facing financial pressures made worse by the current range factors that make up the so-called 'cost-of-living' squeeze. These include high inflation / food inflation, energy costs and fuel costs.
- 5.7 The most recent meeting of West Berkshire Council, other local funders and Greenham Trust took place on the 23rd November 2023. Presentations were received from West Berkshire Foodbank, The Community Resource Project and Newbury Soup Kitchen. The following is a summary of the matters raised:
- Significant increases in demand across all sectors –The Community Resource Project (Furniture Project) highlighted a significant increase in the demand for replacement appliances, mattresses etc.
 - Increase in very specific demand caused by the number of people in emergency accommodation. The foodbank reported a pressure in supplying self-heating food packs or those that can be cooked in a kettle.
 - Increasing numbers of complex mental health issues being identified requiring significant support.

- Significant increase in ‘real-time’ debt issues with many individual and families struggling with day-to-day living costs. Foodbank highlighted increase in holiday period support for those on free school meals through targeted distribution following referrals directly from schools.
- Increase in running costs for all the organisations including energy, transport wages etc. This is set to increase due to the recent living wage increase announcements.
- Specific costs are being incurred for expensive items such as baby formula and follow on formula.
- Overall, the feeling was that what the sector was seeing was a worsening and not improving situation.

5.8 Positively the Foodbank reported very high level of support through the recent harvest festival collections across church’s, schools etc. The Soup Kitchen reported no issues with food supply.

5.9 The Community Resource Project and the Foodbank reported that the biggest single source of referrals was West Berkshire Council.

5.10 Beyond these groups discussions have taken place about the programme to target assistance for pensioners.

5.11 It is a known problem that those moving into permanent accommodation often move into properties without curtains and carpets. This makes keeping properties warm and draught proof difficult and also impacts energy spend or increases issues around damp and mould etc.

5.12 One group identified in the DWP are those on housing benefit who do not receive the ‘cost-of-living’ allowance that is paid to those on universal credit. These are mainly pensioners.

6 Proposals

6.1 A fundamental review has taken place in the context of the aims of the scheme as set down by government. Following this review it is proposed that the following adjustments with new allocations / increased payments are made. If approved this funding will be drawn from the ‘main fund’ allocation set out at 5.3 above. The main fund currently has a balance of £490K. If these adjustments are agreed this will leave £227K available to be distributed directly by the Housing Service before the end of March 2024:

Scheme	Detail	Allocation
Assistance for Food and Energy	That urgent enquires to the Council for food and energy support (in and out of hours) are handled by local charities. These requests are generally for £30 or under. This service will also be used by	£30,000

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	<p>West Berkshire Council services for urgent need referrals.</p> <p>The advantage is it will be available a lot quicker than a payment arranged by WBC. It will also be available out of hours.</p>	
Essential Household Goods Scheme	<p>Additional funding to support the provision of white goods, cookers, beds, furniture, utensils and more.</p> <p>The scheme is provided by Newbury Community Resource Centre.</p> <p>The contribution will be added to the £30K additional support already provided by joint Cost of Living fund.</p>	£19,580
Support for those in Emergency Accommodation	<p>Targeted funding for working with a number of providers to support those in emergency and temporary accommodation including the provision of hot food and / or food suitable for heating in an emergency accommodation setting.</p>	£10,000
Discretionary Assistance Fund	<p>WBC work with social housing providers, Community Resource project and other providers to create a fund that allows residents to apply for assistance with respect to provision of carpets and curtains where those eligible move in and none are provided. This will also assist with reducing energy consumption.</p>	£30,000
Cost of Living Grant for Housing Benefit recipients	<p>695 residents that are in receipt of Housing Benefit only, majority are pensioners. They are not eligible for the national cost of living payment.</p> <p>Proposed to make one off winter payment of £150</p> <p>In addition, the recipients will be provided with information about the winter health campaign and advice where targeted support can be obtained including the main fund</p>	£104,250

Targeted support for Pensioners	Working with a number of charities This money will be used to provide targeted support over the winter months including subsidised hot meals, support with energy costs, boiler and other repairs, provision of microwave cookers etc.	£40,000
Support for Young Carers and those leaving care	200 children are identified as carers by the Council (with more unidentified). No national funding is available for young carers. In addition, those leaving care also face a number of challenges. This expenditure will be used to provide support in partnership with statutory and voluntary sector partners for e.g. cooking courses, clothing fund - energy vouchers	£30,000
Total		£263,580

- 6.2 In addition, it is proposed to amend the current grant application criteria for the joint 'cost of living' fund administered by Greenham trust to include increased demand for core services as well as new projects. Spend will not be permitted for core costs such as staffing, rent and energy but must be spent in accordance with the scheme criteria.
- 6.3 A round table discussion with many of the organisations likely to be party to roll out of these initiatives took place on the 1st December 2023. There was welcome support for the proposals.
- 6.3 Each allocation will be accompanied by conditions regarding spend, record keeping etc. to ensure that all spend is in accordance with scheme conditions. Monies cannot be spent on core costs but on direct distribution through new projects or increased demand. This will be regularly monitored.

7 Options for consideration

- 7.1 Options to meet the aims and objectives of the fund are constantly kept under review. The current scheme has less than 20 weeks to run and further adjustments may need to be made at short notice. At the time of writing these are considered to be the most deliverable options to meet the requirements of the scheme.

8 Conclusion

- 8.1 The outlook for many residents remains challenging. At the time of writing headline inflation had fallen to 4.6% but food inflation stood at 10.1% although there are signs

that prices stagnated in October with a monthly rise of 0.1%. Nevertheless, food and grocery prices are significantly higher than they were two years ago.

- 8.2 Energy prices have fallen from their peak last winter but are 40-60% higher than in early 2022. The price cap has been raised by 5% from January 2024 meanwhile fuel prices stand around 150p per litre for petrol and 160p per litre for diesel. A cold winter could add significantly to the impact on families and individuals struggling financially.
- 8.3 To meet these challenges the ability to get support to where it is needed in a timely manner is critical for those needed that support. The Council is not always best placed to do this and nor is it cost effective,
- 8.4 The scheme this year has shown a significant increase in the level of innovation and partnership working to build on the aims and objectives of the scheme. The proposals set out in this report build upon this approach.

9 Appendices

APPENDIX A – Equalities Impact Assessment

APPENDIX B – Data Protection Assessment

Subject to Call-In: Yes: No:

The item is due to be referred to Council for final approval	<input type="checkbox"/>
Delays in implementation could have serious financial implications for the Council	<input type="checkbox"/>
Delays in implementation could compromise the Council's position	<input type="checkbox"/>
Considered or reviewed by Scrutiny Commission or associated Committees or Task Groups within preceding six months	<input type="checkbox"/>
Item is Urgent Key Decision	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Report is to note only	<input type="checkbox"/>

Wards affected: All

Officer details:

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Job Title: Service Lead – Public Protection
Tel No: 01635 519930
E-mail: sean.murphy@westberks.gov.uk

Appendix A

Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) - Stage One

What is the proposed decision that you are asking the Executive to make:	To approve an updated Household Support Fund to replace the policy which was used to administer funds for 2022/23.
Summary of relevant legislation:	The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is providing funding to County Councils and Unitary Authorities (including Metropolitan Councils and London Boroughs), under section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003, to administer the scheme and provide assistance to households most in need. It is important to stress this covers a wide range of vulnerable households including those with children of all ages and those without children.
Does the proposed decision conflict with any of the Council's priorities for improvement? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure our vulnerable children and adults achieve better outcomes • Support everyone to reach their full potential • Support businesses to start develop and thrive in West Berkshire • Develop local infrastructure including housing to support and grow the local economy Maintain a green district • Ensure sustainable services through innovation and partnerships 	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If yes, please indicate which priority and provide an explanation
Name of Budget Holder:	Nick Caprara
Name of Service/Directorate:	Place/ Development & Regulation
Name of assessor:	Nick Caprara
Date of assessment:	18/4/23
Version and release date (if applicable):	1.0

Is this a ?		Is this policy, strategy, function or service ... ?	
Policy	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	New or proposed	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Strategy	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Already exists and is being reviewed	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
Function	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Is changing	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
Service	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>		

(1) What are the main aims, objectives and intended outcomes of the proposed decision and who is likely to benefit from it?

Aims:	To deliver Household Support Funding to vulnerable clients in the district in line with Government guidance from April 2023 to March 2024.
Objectives:	To provide financial support through delivery of Household Support Fund grant to vulnerable households.
Outcomes:	Delivery of Household Support Fund
Benefits:	Assistance for the most vulnerable households in the community.

(2) Which groups might be affected and how? Is it positively or negatively and what sources of information have been used to determine this?

(Please demonstrate consideration of all strands – Age, Disability, Gender Reassignment, Marriage and Civil Partnership, Pregnancy and Maternity, Race, Religion or Belief, Sex and Sexual Orientation)

Group Affected	What might be the effect?	Information to support this
Age	Targeted delivery to pensioners	Specific fund set aside to target delivery to support pensioners and to tackle digital exclusion. Regular reports will monitor performance
Disability	Targeted delivery reported on support being provided to disabled claimants or carers	Regular reporting will monitor performance
Gender Reassignment		
Marriage and Civil Partnership		
Pregnancy and Maternity		

Race		
Religion or Belief		
Sex		
Sexual Orientation		
Further Comments:		

(3) Result	
Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could contribute to inequality?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Please provide an explanation for your answer:	
Will the proposed decision have an adverse impact upon the lives of people, including employees and service users?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Please provide an explanation for your answer:	

If your answers to question 2 have identified potential adverse impacts and you have answered ‘yes’ to either of the sections at question 3, or you are unsure about the impact, then you should carry out a EqIA 2.

If an EqIA 2 is required, before proceeding you should discuss the scope of the Assessment with service managers in your area. You will also need to refer to the EqIA guidance and template – <http://intranet/index.aspx?articleid=32255>.

(4) Identify next steps as appropriate:	
EqIA Stage 2 required	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Owner of EqIA Stage Two:	
Timescale for EqIA Stage Two:	

Name: Nick Caprara

Date: 18/4/23

Please now forward this completed form to Pamela Voss, Equality and Diversity Officer (pamela.voss@westberks.gov.uk), for publication on the WBC website.

Appendix B

Data Protection Impact Assessment – Stage One

The General Data Protection Regulations require a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) for certain projects that have a significant impact on the rights of data subjects.

Should you require additional guidance in completing this assessment, please refer to the Information Management Officer via dp@westberks.gov.uk

Directorate:	Place
Service:	Development & Regulation
Team:	Housing
Lead Officer:	Nick Caprara
Title of Project/System:	Household Support Fund
Date of Assessment:	18/4/23

Do you need to do a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA)?

	Yes	No
<p>Will you be processing SENSITIVE or “special category” personal data?</p> <p><i>Note – sensitive personal data is described as “ data revealing racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, or trade union membership, and the processing of genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a natural person, data concerning health or data concerning a natural person’s sex life or sexual orientation”</i></p>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Will you be processing data on a large scale?</p> <p><i>Note – Large scale might apply to the number of individuals affected OR the volume of data you are processing OR both</i></p>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<p>Will your project or system have a “social media” dimension?</p> <p><i>Note – will it have an interactive element which allows users to communicate directly with one another?</i></p>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<p>Will any decisions be automated?</p> <p><i>Note – does your system or process involve circumstances where an individual’s input is “scored” or assessed without intervention/review/checking by a human being? Will there be any “profiling” of data subjects?</i></p>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

	Yes	No
Will your project/system involve CCTV or monitoring of an area accessible to the public?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Will you be using the data you collect to match or cross-reference against another existing set of data?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Will you be using any novel, or technologically advanced systems or processes?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<p>Note – this could include biometrics, “internet of things” connectivity or anything that is currently not widely utilised</p>		

If you answer “Yes” to any of the above, you will probably need to complete [Data Protection Impact Assessment - Stage Two](#). If you are unsure, please consult with the Information Management Officer before proceeding.

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