REPORT FOR: CABINET

Date of Meeting:	15 January 2014		
Subject:	Harrow Help Scheme Review		
Key Decision:	Yes		
Responsible Officer:	Tom Whiting, Corporate Director of Resources		
Portfolio Holder:	Councillor Tony Ferrari, Portfolio Holder for Finance		
Exempt:	No		
Decision subject to Call-in:	Yes		
Enclosures:	Appendix A – Draft Help Scheme Policy Appendix B – Telephone questionnaire Appendix C – Feedback from the Help Scheme Review Appendix D – London Council letter to the Secretary of State Appendix E – Equality Impact Assessment		

Section 1 – Summary and Recommendations

This report sets out the outcome of the review of the pilot Harrow Help Scheme, providing members with the proposed policy changes for the financial year 2014/15.

Recommendations:

Cabinet is requested to make the following decisions:

1. Agree to utilise the 'Local Welfare Provision' funding by operating the Emergency Relief Scheme for a second year 2014/15.

TarrowCOUNCIL LONDON

2. Agree and adopt the changes to the Help Scheme policy.

Reason: (For recommendation)

The DWP allocated funding to all Local Authorities to provide a 'Local Welfare Provision' as a result of the changes to the Social Fund included within the Welfare Reform Act 2012. Further to close partnership working with a multiagency group and public consultation Harrow Council developed the Emergency Relief Scheme which was piloted for the first year of operation to give the Council the opportunity to understand need within the borough.

The pilot Emergency Relief Scheme has now been reviewed through consultation with Emergency Relief Scheme staff, referral partners and a sample of users of the scheme. The feedback received throughout this process has helped to shape the changes to the proposed scheme for the second year of operation - 2014/15.

DWP have not confirmed the funding allocation post 2014/15 and therefore the Emergency Relief Scheme has been redesigned to continue for one year in its current form and to be sufficiently flexible to cope with changes in programme funding in future years.

Section 2 – Report

Introductory paragraph

- 2.1 As a result of changes to the Social Fund within the Welfare Reforms the Government gave all Local Authorities a pot of funding to provide a Local Welfare Provision'. The funding is not ring fenced and Local Authorities were given the autonomy to develop a provision that meets the needs of their local area.
- 2.2 In line with Harrow Council's vision these changes were taken forward by working together with a multi-agency group to design and develop the Council's Emergency Relief Scheme. The scheme was also shaped through feedback from a twelve week public consultation.
- 2.3 Whilst the DWP provided Local Authorities with data on the operation of the previous schemes run through the Social Fund, the information was not detailed. Therefore it was agreed that the Emergency Relief Scheme would be piloted over the first year of operation to help the Council to understand the need within Harrow for this provision of support. The scheme has been monitored throughout this pilot period and the outcomes of the review have influenced the proposed shape of the scheme for the year 2014/15.

2.4 The Emergency Relief Scheme sits within the overall Harrow Help Scheme. The Harrow Help Scheme provides a holistic approach to the provision of advice and support to people in Harrow making best use of resources available across the borough. The Harrow Help Scheme brings together discretionary pots of funding, including the pot of funding to deliver the 'Local Welfare Provision, ensuring funds are prioritised to maximise effectiveness and minimise spend.

Options considered

- 2.5 The government has provided the funding for the local welfare provision for a second year 2014/15. This funding is not ring fenced and therefore a decision could be made to use this funding in another way to deliver a 'Local Welfare Provision'. There is an expectation from the Government that support is provided for people in an emergency and as the scheme delivers this expectation, Officers are recommending that the Emergency Relief Scheme continues to operate over the next financial year 2014/15.
- 2.6 The scheme could continue 'as is' however feedback from both referral agencies and users has suggested that some changes are required to improve delivery of the scheme. Officers are recommending that elected members approve the changes to the policy.

Current situation

2.7 The principles of both the Harrow Help Scheme and the Emergency Relief scheme that have helped to shape delivery over the first year of operation and are listed below:

Harrow Help Scheme Principles

- The scheme will be financially sustainable
- The scheme will help to increase financial independence and decrease formal support
- The fund will be monitored to continuously shape the scheme going forward
- The scheme will put in place the single view of the customer
- The scheme doesn't duplicate provision that is delivered elsewhere in the borough.

Emergency Relief Scheme Principles

- The Emergency Relief Scheme is a discretionary service provided within the available funds
- The funding will be allocated on a monthly basis to minimise the risk of the funds not being available throughout the year

- It will be a service that meets urgent needs that cannot be met elsewhere
- An accessible service that provides short term support where there is a risk to the safety and/or health of the household to:
 - o Assist people to remain or return to the community; and/or
 - Help people who are suffering severe hardship

Access to the Help Scheme

- 2.8 The Help pages are accessible through the web and provide details of advice and support available in the borough.
- 2.9 Initially when the scheme was first developed there was an intention to develop a directory of advice and support available in the borough. As this activity started, a voluntary sector consortium within Harrow were successful in getting lottery funding to develop a similar advice portal. Further to concerns regarding duplication it was agreed that the Council should work with the consortium and feed into the development of the portal. The procurement of specialised IT has recently taken place and therefore all organisations are currently collecting the required information to inform the portal.

Access to the Emergency Relief Scheme

2.10 People have been able to access the Emergency Relief Scheme through the telephone and completion of hard copy application forms. The original intention that applications could be carried out on-line has yet to be implemented as there have been issues regarding the implementation of the IT system. The system is due to go live in January 2014 and the on-line application process should be available in February 2014.

Eligibility Criteria

- 2.11 A person applying to the Emergency Relief Scheme must meet both primary and secondary eligibility criteria to be able to access support through the scheme. The primary and secondary eligibility criteria are included on page 4 and 5 of the attached Help Scheme policy.
- 2.12 If a person is found to have an emergency need that is a risk to their health or safety, they are provided with 'in kind' support such as food vouchers, furniture, white goods, travel assistance and fuel top-ups. The table starting on page 6 of the attached policy shows the needs that will be considered for the 'in kind' support and the criteria that is being proposed to be applied in year 2014/15 and subsequent years.

Emergency Relief Scheme Data

2.13 The Emergency Relief Scheme went live on 2nd April, 2013. The following data shows the support that has been provided through the scheme to the end of October:

Table 1				
Types of award	Total number of applications to the scheme	Total number of refusals	Numbers of awards given (applicants could receive more than one type of award)	Total value of awards given
Food			207	£8,475.00
Fuel	676	372	76	£1,288.00
Furniture			80	£19,978.42
White goods			55	£17,519.65
Delivery				£127.95
Clothes			14	£865.00
Travel (Xcite funding + ERS)			5	£193.60
TOTAL			*437	£48,447.62

* The number is higher as multiple awards are given in certain cases.

Procurement of Furniture

- 2.14 Due to the projected level of spend within the scheme on furniture, a procurement exercise took place to appoint a supplier where Harrow will purchase all its used and new furniture as well as white goods. The procurement exercise is complete and there are now separate contracts set up for the provision of the following items:
 - Lot 1 Re-used furniture
 - Lot 2 Furniture (beds, chairs, tables etc.)
 - Lot 3 White goods (washing machine, fridge, cooker etc.)
 - Lot 4 Flooring (carpets, lino etc.)
- 2.15 To date there has not been any awards of re-used furniture. However now the contract is in place, and as part of the review, consideration has been given to the provision of re-used furniture to support people experiencing an emergency.

Emergency Relief Scheme Review

- 2.16 The review has involved the following activity:
 - § Data review
 - S Meetings held with the following:
 - Emergency Relief staff
 - Key referrers CAB, Housing
 - Jobcentre Plus staff

- Community Reference Group which includes membership from HAD, Harrow Mencap, Mind in Harrow, Age UK, The Harrow Law Centre, National Landlords Association, CAB, Jobcentre Plus, Harrow Association of Somalie Organisations (HASVO), and representation from internal Council services.
- S Telephone questionnaire with a sample of applicants who were both successful/unsuccessful in getting support from the scheme. The questionnaire is attached at Appendix B to this report.

Feedback

Questionnaire

- 2.17 The telephone questionnaire was carried out with a random sample of 53 applicants to the scheme. The detailed feedback to both the telephone questionnaire and face to face activity is included in the attached paper at Appendix C to this report.
- 2.18 A summary of the responses to the telephone questionnaire with users of the scheme is shown below in Table 2:

Table 2			
Review Questions	Feedback		
Was the Emergency Relief Scheme application process simple to follow?	 The majority of people agreed the application process was simple to follow. For the 19% that didn't agree their comments included the following key points: Lots of documents required and the applicant may not have all of these available Lots of questions particularly if English isn't the applicants first language Difficult if you are not very good at filling out forms 		
Council's response: § Applicants will have to continue to provide documents as verification is required. § The applicant is able to apply by telephone if they find it difficult to complete forms. Did you accept the support that was offered to you?			
Did the support you received meet your emergency need?	 Everybody who responded and received support advised that the support met their emergency need. Comments included: All grateful for the help received Feel that should be able to receive more than 1 award Worried that when money goes in Bank will be swallowed up with bank charges and will be in the same position again Had been refused help from JCP (Job Centre Plus) and without food and fuel 		
S Applicants are	able to receive more than 1 award and this was advised in the		

Table 2			
Review Questions	Feedback		
telephone con § Officers are wo	versation orking very closely with JCP to ensure, where appropriate, DWP		
	support through the Short Term Benefit Advice		
Were you	Everybody who responded advised that they were not		
signposted to any	signposted to other services.		
other services?			
Did you go to the	N/A		
signposted			
services for help?			
Did you find the	N/A		
services useful?			
Council's response:			
§ Whilst the appl	licants who responded advised that they had not been signposted		
to any other se	ervices the officers with the team have logged that over half of the		
	wed had been signposted to the following organisations as		
	the individual: DWP, CAB, HAD, Housing Services, Children's		
Services and t	he Xcite programme. As a result of this feedback the team will		
review the way	in which people are signposted to ensure the resident		
understands th	ne services they are being signposted to and how that service can		
	o improve their current financial situation.		
Was there	- Again most people stated how grateful they were to receive		
anything that	help at a time they were really in need		
could have been	 Many positive comments regarding the helpfulness of the 		
done	ERS Team		
differently/better?	 Limiting awards to 2 a year is too low 		
	- People on low income who are working also require help as		
	know somebody that is going to the Foodbank		
	- Mix-up between JSA and Job Club resulted in money being		
	stopped. Food/Fuel covered whilst didn't have any money		
	- Problems with the Allpay card in relation to top up of fuel –		
	Post Offices will not take Allpay cards and some paypoint		
	locations		
	- Some people who responded advised that the scheme		
	should not give out cash		
Council's response:			
•	feed back to the team the positive comments that have been		
•	ding their delivery of the scheme		
•			
 S The scheme will continue to be limited to 2 awards per year S The primary criteria to access the scheme will continue to only support people 			
on means tested benefit as the Council do not have the resources to be able to			
means test people on low incomes.			
S Working closely with JCP to ensure, where appropriate, DWP are providing			
support through the Short Term Benefit Advice.			
Support through the Short Term Benefit Advice. S London Councils have recently written a letter to the Secretary of State to			
request responses to the issues that are arising because a significant demand			
for all Local Welfare Provision across London has directly resulted because of			
	VP administered benefits. The letter is attached at Appendix D.		

Face to Face

- 2.19 All people contacted via face meetings were advised that feedback was requested on the process/criteria and application of the criteria/support provided from the scheme.
- 2.20 A summary of the response to the questions asked with organisations and staff through the face to face activity is shown below in Table 3

Table 3	1			
Review Questions	Feedback			
What has worked well?	The external organisations felt that the scheme was better and easier to access than the previous DWP scheme. All mentioned again that the staff were very helpful. The staff themselves welcomed the good relationship they have within the team and with Access Harrow staff and reflected how this ensured that face to face activity with applicants went smoothly.			
comments. § Feedback will	ve feedback will be provided to the team regarding the positive also be given to the Access Harrow team to thank them for their ng the successful delivery of the scheme			
What hasn't worked so well?	 The following key concerns were raised: When the scheme started it was difficult for applicants to get an award and therefore the staff from one of the external organisations were still reticent to use the scheme. Need to have a more holistic approach to how the scheme can help people rather than gatekeeping a benefits system Have been some issues with Allpay cards however it was acknowledged that they are quick at resolving problems Generally the systems and paperwork take up too much time for the award given – administration v resources Some issues regarding applicants not being able to apply after 4.00 p.m. and for staff issues regarding the processing of late afternoon applications within appropriate timescales 			
scheme from the scheme from the scheme from the scheme need for the scheme sche	s attended a team meeting to encourage signposting to the he organisation that raised concerns. has moved forward and officers are beginning to understand the upport within Harrow the team are applying the scheme more			
§ The administra	holistically The administration of the scheme will be streamlined considerably when the IT system is in place in the New Year.			
however they w	Confirmation was provided that applicants are able to apply after 4.00 p.m. however they will not necessarily receive their award the same evening however circumstances are taken into account.			
	the scheme encourages applications to be made earlier in the			

Issues/suggestions - Scheme should allow people to keep some capital to

Table	. 3	
Review Questions		Feedback
raised regarding the criteria to the scheme		 support them in emergencies Boroughs should have agreement on what happens when a person moves from one borough to the other Scheme should provide support for people who have no recourse to public funds but are working and on a low income Only giving 2 awards per year can be a problem – need clear procedures to show when we have given support over a period of time and it only counts for 1 provision Means tested benefit is fair but maybe should consider people on low income who are working and have had a disaster i.e. fire/flood and would not be able to get goods in any other way Should help non dependants having issues with benefits but
		not getting support from parents.
 not getting support from parents. Councils response: The Scheme is based on a risk to health and safety and is a last resort therefore the applicant must not have savings that can meet the need in whole or in part. Clarity regarding people moving from one borough to another will be sought from the London wide Local Welfare Provision group. The responsible borough should provide the support to the claimant however if exceptional circumstances and other borough unable to help Harrow will provide emergency food if the person meets the criteria. The criteria will not be changed to provide support for people with no access to public funds The procedures will be updated to provide clarity on numbers of provision of support Unable to means test people on low income and therefore unable to support through Emergency Relief Scheme Non dependants will be living in the household and therefore are likely to be able to access food etc. Exceptional circumstances are always considered 		
Are there any issues/ suggestions in provision of support?		There were various suggestions made in relation to the provision of further support such as coats, school uniforms, phone credit for people who are homeless to get housing, sofas, wardrobes, flooring and topping up fuel bills. There were also suggestions put forward in relation to secondary criteria used when providing goods i.e. fridges should be provided to all not only those that meet the current criteria Staff felt that the procedures should be more detailed in relation to the replacement of existing goods and helping people who have been without furniture for some time but did not know that they could apply for help.
Coun	cils response:	
s	-	pose to Councillors that the provision of support to the scheme is

- S Officers will propose to Councillors that the provision of support to the scheme is updated to include the following changes:
 - Flooring will be provided for all applicants.

Table 3	
Review Questions	Feedback
 Phone c who hav Landlord Appropricoats ar The sec The sec applicant that creat Help will bugs, rational approprise The sch 	bredit to a level of £10 will be given for single homeless people we used all their credit and cannot make the calls they need to ds to secure accommodation riate clothing is provided through the scheme and this includes and footwear rondary criteria will be updated to provide fridges to all groups rondary criteria will be updated to provide washing machines to all this with children as well as people with a disability/medical need ates the need for frequent washing or high temperature washing I be given to support people if they have pest issues i.e. bed ats etc. eme will look to provide wardrobes or chest of drawers as
Councils response:	
Schemes acros S The Council did the administrat S The team will s items	d explore the provision of loans through Credit Unions however ive costs were too high signpost people to budgeting loans where they want non-essential
the criteria (1 a	supported for a maximum of 4 weeks if their circumstances meet ward) ve been updated to provide more detail.

§ Procedures have been updated to provide more detail.

Emergency Relief Scheme Proposals for Change

Emergency Relief Scheme Principles

2.21 The revised Help Scheme Policy is attached at Appendix A.

The principles for the Emergency Relief Scheme were designed in partnership with a multi-agency group and will remain as stated in pages 3 and 4 of the Harrow Help Scheme policy.

Primary Eligibility Criteria

2.22 There are no changes to the Primary Eligibility Criteria as detailed on page 4 and 5 of the policy.

Emergency Relief Scheme – Needs and Secondary Eligibility Criteria

- 2.23 If a person has met the primary criteria they will be referred through to the Emergency Relief Scheme where their circumstances will be considered against criteria to establish whether there is a risk to the household if the need is not met. The vulnerability criteria will not change and is explained at page 5 of the policy.
- 2.24 The table on page 6 of the policy details the provision of 'in kind' support and criteria that will be applied at this stage of the process. The proposed changes are listed below:
- Support will be provided for a maximum of 4 weeks if their circumstances meet the criteria (e.g. food)
- White goods currently fridges are given to people who have a requirement for cold storage for medication and milk for children under 11 years. The proposed change will provide fridges to all qualifying applicants.
- White goods washing machines are currently given where there are people with a disability/illness that creates a need for frequent washing or high temperature washing and families with 3 or more children. The proposed change will include the provision of washing machines to all qualifying families with children in addition to the previous criteria.
- \circ $\,$ The scheme will provide additional support as follows:
 - The scheme will provide flooring for all groups
 - Phone credit to a level of £10 will be given for single homeless people who have used all their credit an cannot make the calls they need to Landlords to secure accommodation
 - $\circ~$ Help will be given to support all groups if they have pest issues i.e. bed bugs, rats etc.
 - $\circ\;$ The scheme will look to provide wardrobes or a chest of drawers for all groups

Help Scheme

2.25 All other elements of the Help Scheme Policy will remain the same as currently delivered.

Legal Implications

2.26 The council has local discretion in setting criteria for the fund, however it should take account of its public law duties when making this

decision. This includes taking account of the equality implications, results of consultation and other relevant material

2.27 Although the DWP funding transferred for this purpose is not ring fenced, there is an expectation that funds will be used for local welfare provision.

Financial Implications

This is a report of the Corporate Director of Resources and deals with financial matters throughout.

Performance Issues

There are two elements to this service. Support relies on both "goods in lieu" awards which are dealt with within 24 hours, and the signposting of applicants to appropriate organisations who can provide further help. Regarding the former, the team is well resourced and 100% of awards to date have been dealt with within 24 hours; this performance is expected to continue. Regarding the latter, whilst the Team give advice on the telephone, Harrow is working with the Harrow Advising Together Consortium (HAT) to build an online advice Portal which will improve signposting and advice. As this aspect develops, consideration will be given to the best way of measuring performance. Applicants' perceptions of the service, which are generally favourable, have also been captured in the survey described earlier in the report and the Council has responded to the views expressed.

Environmental Impact

None

Risk Management Implications

With DWP funding allocated only for two years (2013/14 & 2014/15), there clearly is a risk that the Harrow Help Scheme, including the Harrow Emergency Scheme, will not be able to continue beyond the coming year.

Currently the scheme is under spending, mainly due to our "no cash awards policy". There is a risk that administration costs will exceed programme funding spent and this again is a risk for the long term viability of the scheme.

Although the scheme is open to all experiencing financial hardship or requiring emergency needs, there is risk that it continues to be used only by a minority of residents who previously made used of the Social Fund scheme under the DWP administration. Take up by all those who need it relies on a good communication strategy that advertises the scheme and ensures residents know how and where to apply. Whilst we have held the "Harrow Helping You Event", advertised the Emergency Relief Scheme in My Harrow magazine and distributed posters and leaflets widely, ongoing advertising is not viable both due to cost and uncertainty regarding future funding.

Equalities implications

Was an Equality Impact Assessment carried out? Yes

Pursuant to the Equality Act 2010 ("the_Act"), the council, in the exercise of its functions, has to have 'due regard' to (i) eliminating discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Act; (ii) advancing equality of opportunity between those with a relevant protected characteristic and those without; and (iii) fostering good relations between those with a relevant protected characteristic and those without. The relevant protected characteristics are age, race, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. The duty also covers marriage and civil partnership, but to a limited extent.

An Equalities Impact Assessment screening was conducted in relation to the review of the Help Scheme and can be found at Appendix E to the Cabinet Report. The Help Scheme is a mitigation put in place to support people in financial hardship.

The review of the Help Scheme has been carried out by talking to key referral organisations, staff and users. The Equality Impact Assessment screening has concluded that the proposed changes within the Help Scheme will not have an adverse impact on residents from any of the protected groups however the following actions have been put in place to avoid potential impact:

- 1. Advertise the changes to the voluntary sector and Jobcentre Plus to ensure referral agencies are aware of the changes and able to provide support to their users.
- 2. Detailed data is not known on why these groups are accessing the scheme more than others. It may be that some do not have emergency needs or these needs are met within their communities. To ensure all groups have equal access Officers will continue to work with representatives from the Community Reference Group, as stated above, to raise awareness of the scheme.
- 3. Continue to monitor the applicants for the Emergency Relief Scheme against the protected characteristics to ensure that, if appropriate, actions are put in place to ensure all are aware of the emergency provision of support.

Corporate Priorities

The Harrow Help Scheme reflects the aims of our corporate priorities to ensure a fairer Harrow.

Section 3 - Statutory Officer Clearance

Name: Dawn Calvert	X	on behalf of the Chief Financial Officer
Date: 10 December 2013		
Name: Paresh Mehta	X	on behalf of the Monitoring Officer
Date: 5 December 2013		

Section 4 – Performance Officer Clearance

Name: Martin Randall	X	on behalf of the Divisional Director
		Strategic
Date: 5 December 2013		Commissioning

Section 5 – Environmental Impact Officer Clearance



Section 6 - Contact Details and Background Papers

Contact:

Fern Silverio (Head of Service – Collections & Housing Benefits), Tel: 020-8736-6818 / email: <u>fern.silverio@harrow.gov.uk</u>

Background Papers:

Appendices, as attached to the main report

NOT APPLICABLE

Call-In Waived by the Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny Committee

[Call-in applies]