

**Report for: Cabinet**

---

<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	25 May 2023
<b>Subject:</b>	Household Support Fund (fourth iteration – April 2023 to March 2024)
<b>Key Decision:</b>	Yes - level of expenditure and affects every ward of the Borough
<b>Responsible Officer:</b>	Alex Dewsnap - Director of Corporate Resources and Transformation
<b>Portfolio Holder:</b>	Councillor Stephen Greek - Portfolio Holder for Performance, Communications and Customer Experience
<b>Exempt:</b>	No
<b>Decision subject to Call-in:</b>	Yes
<b>Wards affected:</b>	All
<b>Enclosures:</b>	Appendix 1: Household Support Fund 4 Policy Document Appendix 2: Equality Impact Assessment Appendix 3: Household Support Fund 4 Delivery Plan

## Section 1 – Summary and Recommendations

The fourth iteration of the Government's Household Support Fund (HSF) is made available to Local Authorities in England, covering the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 inclusive.

The purpose of the Household Support Fund is to provide crisis support to vulnerable households in most need of support to help with significantly rising living costs. Harrow Council has been allocated a grant of £2,953,414, which must be spent by 31 March 2024.

This report sets out how Harrow Council intends to spend the Household Support Fund by 31 March 2024.

### Recommendations:

Cabinet is requested to:

1. Approve the allocation of the fourth extension of the Household Support Fund as set out in this report;
2. Approve the purchase of select codes vouchers from Blackhawk Network to a value of £578,000 for the low-income proactive awards and £62,000 for the application-based scheme (total £640,000);
3. Approve the transfer of approx. £1,612,000 to schools for them to provide free school meals (FSM) vouchers for approximately 6,500-7,000 households with children during the school holidays.
4. Approve the transfer of approx. £440,000 to Help Harrow to provide food aid across the borough.
5. Approve the policy for the application-based scheme and the proposed administering process by Citizens Advice Harrow;
6. Approve that the Council's Hardship Fund be redirected to the Household Support Fund application-based scheme for 2023/24 and;
7. Delegate to the Director of Corporate Resources and Transformation following consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Performance, Communications and Customer Experience to make technical scheme amendments to ensure the scheme meets the criteria set by the Government and the Council and remains within the indicative grant level, including decisions on individual expenditure areas that exceed the £500,000 threshold, if required.
8. Delegate to the Director of Corporate Resources and Transformation following consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Performance, Communications and Customer Experience to best determine the expenditure of any underspend, to be repurposed in the following areas:
  - a. to top up the application-based scheme; or
  - b. to provide winter warmth packs or other resources to Warm Hubs in Harrow; or

- c. to rent arrears, or:
- d. to any area of eligible spend where extra resources are needed at that time.

### **Reason (for recommendations):**

The recommendations in this report meet the essential criteria for the grant as set out by the Department of Work and Pensions. The Council has considered where best to target the funding and the proposals provide a balance of support, mindful that the funding is not spread too thinly.

The proposal for the eligible spend covers the following:

- Free school meals (FSM) vouchers, which have previously been found to provide effective support to vulnerable households with children.
- Vouchers for households in receipt of housing benefit who miss out on the Government cost of living payment, and care leavers moving to independent accommodation.
- HelpHarrow and the Community Hub – this partnership with the Voluntary and Community Sector has shown to be effective in providing essential food assistance and other support quickly and effectively to any vulnerable household in the borough.
- Advice services – through the Conversation Café model, targeting support for unpaid carers.
- An application-based scheme to be run within the Voluntary and Community Sector, which targets households who are not eligible for Government support but have presented with financial hardship and in need of emergency financial support.

## **Section 2 – Report**

Harrow Council is committed to its vision of restoring pride in Harrow. The three Council priorities are:

- A council that puts residents first
- A borough that is clean and safe
- A place where those in need are supported

As included in the Corporate Plan, agreed by Council in February 2023, delivery of the Household Support Fund (fourth iteration) in Harrow helps the Council meet its corporate priority of 'A place where those in need are supported' and the flagship action "to help with the cost-of-living crisis, we will deliver another year of free school meals during school holidays (subject to Household Support Fund 4 Guidance)".

The fourth iteration of the Government's Household Support Fund is currently live:

- Household Support Fund – 1 October 2021 to 31 March 2022

- Household Support Fund (extension, second iteration) – 1 April 2022 to 30 September 2022
- Household Support Fund (extension, third iteration) – 1 October 2022 to 31 March 2023
- Household Support Fund (extension, fourth iteration) – 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024

For the first time, this iteration of the Fund will run for a 12-month period.

The guidance for the fourth iteration of the Household Support Fund (HSF4) and allocations for local authorities was announced on 20 February.

This provided that the Household Support 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. This includes the Cost-of-Living Payments and the energy support being provided for 2023/24<sup>1</sup>.

For the Cost-of-Living payments this may include, but is not limited to:

- people who are entitled to but not claiming qualifying benefits
- people who are claiming Housing Benefit (HB) only and;
- people who begin a claim or return to payment of a benefit after the relevant qualifying date.

The guidance states that there may be groups who are vulnerable to rising prices even though they are supported through these schemes, for example large families or single-income families. Household Support Fund (HSF) is intended to cover a wide range of low-income households in need including:

- families with children of all ages
- pensioners
- unpaid carers
- care leavers and
- disabled people

Previous iterations of the HSF in Harrow have targeted each of the above cohorts, with the exception of unpaid carers, and therefore for HSF4 the proposal is to address help to unpaid carers especially through the funding allocation for the Conversation Café model.

Types of support funded through HSF can include energy and water; food; essentials linked to energy/water; wider essentials; advice services and limited housing costs where the focus is on mitigating rising living costs on household bills.

Councils are able to deliver HSF4 through various ways including vouchers, cash, food/goods provision, grants to third parties. The Council's HSF provision

---

<sup>1</sup> Detailed eligibility requirements can be found at:

[Cost of Living Payment - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk) and [Energy Price Guarantee - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

must include an application scheme so that residents have the opportunity to come forward for support. This needs to run throughout the HSF4 period, for the majority of it or at intervals throughout the year.

There must be a clear rationale/framework outlining the council's approach including how the council is defining eligibility and how households can access HSF4, a strong rationale for targeting cohorts using a wide range of data and sources. Local priorities may change over the year so councils can revisit their delivery plan with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Councils are able to claim reasonable admin costs associated to managing the Fund and these can include staff, advertising, web, print, small IT changes. The delegations that are in the recommendations of this report will give flexibility if these local priorities change over the course of the year.

The delivery plan for HSF4, as attached, is due to DWP by 17 May 2023 and must be signed off by the Section 151 officer and relevant Portfolio Holder, which in this case is Councillor Stephen Greek, Portfolio Holder for Performance, Communications and Customer Experience.

## **Options considered**

The recommendations seek to maximise the impact of this funding for households most in need in the Borough.

Expenditure of the Household Support Fund has been modelled applying different allocations to the categories where funding can be allocated. The recommended option strikes a balance between reaching as many low-income households in the Borough as possible whilst also targeting funding to cohorts identified as most in need of support. Learning from delivery of the previous three iterations of the Household Support Fund, as well as from other councils around London, has informed the recommended options. For example, focusing funding to vulnerable families and residents through Free School Meals in holiday time has proven to reach widely across Harrow communities; the use of vouchers has allowed the council to target support to specific cohorts; and the recent review of council support for food aid across the borough has demonstrated that there is a growing need to address food insecurity while the cost of living continues to rise.

Set out below is the recommended split of funding across different streams. The value of spending for each may alter depending on caseloads at the point data is extracted through the period the scheme is running.

The intention is to ensure all funding is spent by 31 March 2024 with the allocations as illustrated below. As the funding horizon is for 12 months in this iteration of the Household Support Fund (previous iterations were each for 6-month periods), this provides the opportunity to strategically plan resource allocation. However, it is recognised that the picture of need may change across the borough over 12 months and therefore the delivery of funding needs to be flexible and have scope to change. DWP will accommodate changes to the delivery plan throughout the year to reflect this and the delegations in the recommendations support this as well.

# Household Support Fund 4: Proposed Funding Framework



Total Grant: £2,953,414					
1. Free School Meals	2. Low income households – proactive voucher awards	3. Application based scheme – households who missed out on Government support	4. Help Harrow – universal food offer	5. Advice services	6. Admin
£1,612,267	£578,000	£62,000	£440,000	£25,000	£236,000
Vouchers issued to approx. 6,500-7,000 children for each school holiday up to Easter 2024	Vouchers issued to approx. 1,450-1,590 households, over two rounds (each round £100 for care leavers, £200 for Housing Benefit cohort)	£200 awards to approx. 310 households, throughout the year	Approx. 45,000 food parcels to 9,000 households, throughout the year	Build on the Conversation Café approach to target unpaid carers – numbers depend on no. of and location of events, 25-30% of visitors are unpaid carers	Council voucher admin costs, programme management and publicity and promotion of HSF

*More details on each of these elements is set out below.*

## Free School Meals (FSM) Vouchers

We intend to continue to use this Government grant to provide free school meals (FSM) vouchers to eligible households with children during the school holidays from May 2023 through to Easter 2024 (inclusive). In line with the previous iteration of HSF, the value of the vouchers will be £3.50/day and will include a top up of £10 for the Christmas period.

Free school meals (FSM) vouchers have proved to be incredibly effective in identifying those families in most need, helping to ensure that children continue to have access to a meal during the holidays. By providing families with vouchers we help to reduce the need to have to choose between heating and eating and free up other household income to allocate towards fuel bills. There is currently no other viable alternative to identify as many households as possible in need of support. Schools already have voucher systems set up for those parents with children on free school meals, making the Council's schools funding a very efficient and effective way of giving financial support to families whose children qualify for free school meals.

There will be no overlap with the Mayor of London's free school meals funding provision for the 2023/24 academic year, as this initiative funds universal FSM for all primary aged children during term time only.

## Low-income Households

In accordance with the DWP guidance to target an array of vulnerable groups and to exercise local discretion, using data and advice from council services as

well as experience from previous iterations of the HSF, the following groups have been identified as being most in need in Harrow because they have missed out on Government cost of living payments or are deemed to be particularly vulnerable. They are also groups we can proactively identify as a council and have contact information for so we can proactively target these groups with the issuing of a voucher or direct support:

- Approximately 1,300-1,440 households on housing benefit only as this group is not eligible for the means-tested Cost of Living Payments unless of pension age or eligible for a Disability Cost of Living Payment.
- Around 150 care leavers moving to independent accommodation who would not have been eligible for any government support due to the qualifying dates.

### Blackhawk Voucher Scheme

The issuing of the voucher codes will be administered by the Blackhawk Network company, which has previously successfully been used by the council in HSF1 and HSF3.

The select codes were chosen in lieu of energy cards as they do not cover prepaid meters and therefore risk some households in need not being able to use the voucher.

The select codes aim to free up money that would otherwise have been used on food and other essential items like winter clothes, blankets and energy efficient cooking methods, for households to cover utility bills and other expenses. Select codes are also universally applicable in a variety of outlets including all major supermarkets and major retailers like Argos, the Range and Wilko, providing recipients with greater choice. They are straightforward and quick to administer and have an 1.28% discount rate. They are covered by the Crown Commercial Framework so there is no requirement for new terms and conditions as additional clauses can be added to the existing account to reflect the new requirements.

The voucher codes will have a value of £200 for the Housing Benefit cohort and will be valid for 3 months – they will be sent out by post by the council. We will follow this up with reminder letters after the first 4 weeks to maximise the redemption rate. Care leavers will receive their codes (for the value of £100) by email, as email addresses are held for them. This allows for several reminders to be sent to them. The target redemption rate for the Blackhawk voucher scheme is 80%, based on previous schemes as part of the same Government grant.

Blackhawk provide a free helpline for people needing help to redeem voucher codes, so the reliance on Access Harrow to field queries is alleviated.

Any underspend on unredeemed vouchers will be recycled into the application-based scheme, to funding for the Conversation Café or Warm Hubs in Winter 2023/24, or to rent arrears.

### Application-Based Scheme

The DWP guidance stipulates that again this iteration of the Household Support Fund includes an application-based scheme so that residents have the opportunity to come forward for support. The proposed application scheme for Harrow will be aimed at households who are struggling with the rising cost of living but are not eligible for Government support (Cost of Living payments). Due to the budget available, the amount awarded will be lower than the Government payments. The criteria have been set in accordance with the government guidance referenced above, the ability to be able to identify and validate eligibility in the most cost-efficient way and to enable a meaningful amount to be awarded.

The eligibility criteria for the application-based scheme is that the applicant:

- Is a Harrow resident
- Has not received a cost-of-living payment from the Government since 1 April 2023
- Must be liable for energy/fuel costs in which the property in which they live
- Need support with meeting their day to day living expenses including food and utility bills, as evidenced by 3-months of bank statements
- Has not received an award from the Household Support Fund application scheme in the last 6 months
- Is willing to comply with any reasonable conditions concerning the payment award, including for example, receiving support from advice agencies

The amount available will be used to issue up to 310 £200 awards through select codes (Blackhawk vouchers). The application-based scheme will be administered by Citizens Advice Harrow within the Voluntary and Community Sector as previous experience has proven that this is more successful in reach. The previous HSF was administered through the council, was resource intensive and had lower uptake than when it was moved to within the VCS. Citizens Advice Harrow is able to provide more holistic support in that it can provide/signpost to longer-term solutions around hardship and debt advice.

The scheme will accept applications over three rounds throughout the year until March 2024. The application scheme will close as soon as there is a risk of funds running out, pending the re-allocation of any unspent funding from other parts of the scheme. Expenditure and uptake of the application-based scheme will be regularly monitored by the Policy Team within the council. As the scheme progresses, there is scope to repurpose unspent funds to the application scheme.

To avoid duplication and confusion over schemes, residents wanting to access the council's Hardship Fund will be redirected to the Household Support Fund application scheme in 2023/24, while funds remain. Should the funds in the application-based scheme run out, the council will re-open the Hardship Fund in-year.

The Council will also develop a Communications and Engagement Plan, working with voluntary and community groups to raise awareness of the application-based scheme, ensure those who are eligible apply and ensuring that relevant teams and organisations have the necessary information to signpost residents to available support.



Key planned activities include:

- Communications and outreach planning and coordination through the Council's Communications Team.
- Sending reminder letters to those issued with vouchers and not yet redeemed.
- Continuously monitoring uptake and redemption rates to coordinate and target content outputs.
- Ensuring Access Harrow and front-line services (housing, children's front door, adult social care) are aware and have sufficient information about the application scheme and its criteria to signpost service users.
- Working with Voluntary and Community Sector organisations (Citizens Advice, Harrow Association of Disabled, Harrow Carers, the Information & Advice Network) to promote the application-based scheme.
- Combining Household Support Fund mailshots with other information and advice and signposting to other support available.
- Using the communications and publicity toolkit provided by DWP to promote the Household Support Fund, through the council's Cost of Living webpage.

### Community Hub and HelpHarrow

It is proposed that Household Support Fund is used to fund the Community Hub for the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024. This will enable the continuation of crucial food provision to households in need in the borough. Addressing food security continues to be one of the key priority areas within the DWP guidance on the Household Support Fund.

The Community Hub in Harrow was set up as a partnership between the council and Voluntary and Community Sector groups, initially in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to co-ordinate, source and deliver emergency food supplies to vulnerable residents. The central management of the food supplies and deliveries was co-ordinated by London's Community Kitchen, operating out of the Bridge with residents able to request support directly or via a referral through the HelpHarrow online portal. After Covid services were stepped down, the Community Hub evolved and adapted its offer to be able to continue supporting any resident finding themselves in need as a result of financial hardship and the cost of living.

Under the Household Support Fund, introduced in October 2021, with its already established model in place around food support, the HSF was used to continue funding the Community Hub.

With confirmation that HSF funding would continue for at least another 12 months (this fourth iteration, to March 2024), the council reviewed the support it provides to the Community Hub in the context of plans for its future sustainability and ensuring best use of HSF in support of food security going forwards.

The review drew in national, regional and local sources of data on food insecurity and also regional discussions on addressing food insecurity to identify the best strategic approach to emergency food aid pan-London. The review used intelligence and insight from local food aid providers and users, through food bank and warm hub data and online surveys, as well as feedback through Harrow's Cost of Living Summit in January 2023 and the council-commissioned Residents' Survey (January to March 2023) findings on cost of living pressures on residents.

The evidence has shown that the need for food aid in the borough and addressing food insecurity remains. The demand for food support has grown over the past year and given the rising cost of food, is likely to continue.

The council has supported food aid in the borough through drawing down on the Household Support Fund, through providing free school meals during holiday periods (food vouchers), vouchers to low-income households to offset rising grocery costs, as well as providing funding and in-kind support to food banks and warm hubs.

The review found that the current mechanisms for council-funded food aid, predominantly through HelpHarrow and its partnership with London's Community Kitchen (LCK), is effective and established. It has supported almost 12,000 residents in the last three months. The reach is wide into different communities and geographical spread. It also demonstrates strong relationships across the VCS. In various hub and spoke models of food aid across the borough, it is HelpHarrow and LCK that are at the hub, coordinating and supporting efforts.

The operational reach of HelpHarrow and LCK goes well beyond emergency food distribution. It is also supporting wider agendas around food security and food education, for example the Plant to Plate work with Public Health, the development of an urban farm, and training schemes for people with learning disabilities which can result in work placements with the Hilton hospitality group. This will enable the council to make progress on its flagship actions around addressing the rising cost of living, as well as supporting skills and employment opportunities for the most vulnerable.

It is important that food aid continues to be universally accessible to all parts of Harrow communities. It is recognised that with food support by referral it is easier to collect data on users and that open access to food markets for example may need to demonstrate anonymity by nature. Any provision funded through the Household Support Fund requires quarterly monitoring information to be submitted, so that the council can ensure the support provided is being delivered to those who need it and for returns to DWP, as part of the grant conditions.

The 12-month funding horizon of HSF4 will allow a better level of certainty and allow for better planning. Following the review, HelpHarrow has been asked to use this period to build a sustainability plan on the assumption that council support will be limited going forward, and that HSF funding will not be available year-on-year.

During the previous iteration of the Household Support Fund (iteration 3, October 2022 to March 2023), HelpHarrow distributed 20,726 food parcels and supported 5,047 households in Harrow. Almost half of these households included children, 18% pensioners and 15% with disabled persons. These are in line with DWP category definitions and information required for quarterly monitoring returns to DWP. The top three reasons given for requesting food support are hardship; health concerns; and unemployment.

Additional to food support, the last iteration of the Household Support Fund provided £5,000 to fund around 300 winter warmth packs to be distributed through HelpHarrow and the network of around 40 Warm Hubs in the borough. This complemented the provision of winter warmth packs provided through Public Health monies.

### Administrative Costs

The DWP permits local authorities to use a reasonable amount of the Household Support Fund to pay for administration of the scheme.

Given the amount of grant available for distribution and the timeframe of this iteration of the Household Support Fund, there will be greater demands on programme management/oversight. The DWP guidance also includes greater requirements of councils to provide publicity and communications around the support available. The council will use £236k of the grant on voucher admin costs (proactive support to low-income households), programme management and publicity and promotion of the Household Support Fund. Where possible, the council will use existing capacity within the organisation to support any administrative activity, so the allocation of the grant to administration costs can be minimised.

### **Ward Councillors' comments**

Not applicable.

### **Performance Issues**

Performance will be tracked through:

- Monthly monitoring reports provided by Blackhawk on voucher redemption rates;
- Free school meal voucher usage through schools;
- Help Harrow monitoring information, for example:
  - Number of requests for support
  - Number of deliveries
  - Household composition of households supported
  - Demographic information e.g. age, ethnicity, postcode area
  - Reason for requesting support; and
- Other information gathered for quarterly MI returns to the Department for Work and Pensions.

### **Environmental Implications**

There are none.

## Data Protection Implications

A data protection impact assessment for administering the Household Support Fund has previously been completed and our systems are already data compliant. Therefore, there are not considered to be any key data protection risks.

The previous iteration of HSF(3) asked Citizens Advice Harrow to administer the latter stages of the application based scheme. So, the supporting application forms and requirements have been checked for data protection implications and reference to each organisation's privacy policy made on the application form.

## Risk Management Implications

Risks included on corporate or directorate risk register? **No**

Separate risk register in place? **No**

The relevant risks contained in the register are attached/summarised below.

The following key risks should be taken onto account when agreeing the recommendations in this report:

<b>Risk Description</b>	<b>Mitigations</b>	<b>RAG Status</b>
Risk of unmanageable demand for the application-based scheme. Insufficient funds available to support resulting in overspend and reputational risk in case of having to close scheme early.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Regular review of allocations against demand predicted will be carried out to ensure there is no overspend or underspend.</li><li>• The eligibility criteria is very tight and there will be regular review to monitor any potential overspend and comms activity to the public will be coordinated and expectations will be managed.</li><li>• For any underspent funds to be repurposed to alternative grant elements.</li></ul>	<b>AMBER</b>
Funding overspend or underspend particularly the  Risk of underspend on the application scheme or any other elements of the Fund	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Regular review of allocations against outcomes predicted will be carried out to ensure there is no overspend or underspend.</li></ul>	<b>AMBER</b>

<p>– resulting from too few applications.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blackhawk vouchers - relatively low element, expected redemption at least 80 %. Any unredeemed funds will be rebated and can be repurposed.</li> <li>• FSM vouchers – any left-over FSM funds will be retained to cover any FSM overspend due to an increase in the number of children receiving FSM over the course of the HSF scheme.</li> <li>• Other elements or strands of the scheme – funding is limited to the amount allocated so any increase in demand will not be met.</li> </ul>	
<p>Risk that sustaining the activity in the programme is dependent on continuing to receive the Government grant which creates a funding cliff edge if and when the Government grant comes to an end.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Council will work with partners to review the support the grant is currently funding and continue to make representations to Government regarding future funding.</li> </ul>	<p><b>AMBER</b></p>
<p>Risk of Fraud &amp; Misconduct</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We will use proven methods of delivering focused funding to vulnerable families and residents such as Free School Meals so lowering the risk of fraud or misconduct in this area</li> <li>• Databases are held by the relevant teams such as the Revenues &amp; Benefits team and recipients can be identified with necessary checks carried out.</li> <li>• Contact and liaison with the Council's Counter Fraud Team if</li> </ul>	<p><b>AMBER</b></p>

	fraud is suspected in any part of the scheme	
Risk of funding not being committed by the March 2024 deadline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most elements of the scheme are proactive issue of awards so do not need to be claimed by residents which reduces the risk of underspend.</li> <li>• Publicity will be undertaken to raise awareness, in particular with partners who are well placed to signpost low-income households to take up the vouchers.</li> <li>• Any unspent funds will be repurposed before March 2024 - to top up the application scheme, to provide resources to warm hubs, to be used towards rent arrears.</li> </ul>	<b>GREEN</b>
Full grant funding not received as a result of DWP determining that some spend was not eligible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Payment of the grant from DWP will be made in arrears on a quarterly basis after the interim MI returns in July 2023, October 2023 and January 2024, and the final MI return at the end of grant period in April 2024 after the DWP has verified the final MI.</li> <li>• The final grant payment will be dependent on DWP being satisfied of the LA's MI submission evidence eligible spend within the scheme.</li> <li>• Harrow council's approach takes full account of DWP guidance on spend to ensure its scheme is within the framework.</li> <li>• The delivery plan will be submitted to DWP in May 2023. As per DWP guidance, there is scope to change the expenditure in-year, so long as DWP are informed of any major changes.</li> </ul>	<b>GREEN</b>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Any feedback from DWP in response to MI returns or changes to delivery plan will be considered and implemented as appropriate to ensure the scheme remains compliant.</li> <li>• There is flexibility within the scheme to adapt it and local discretion can be used to make changes to the allocation of funding across the different elements.</li> </ul>	
--	--	--

## Procurement Implications

There are no procurement implications arising from the recommendations of this report.

The engagement of Blackhawk for the purchase of vouchers has no contractual value associated to it. The supplier benefits from arrangements with retailers where the vouchers are spent. The Council also receives a discount of 1.28% on the face value of the vouchers. We have for previous HSF schemes used Blackhawk whom we engaged through a Crown Commercial Services framework. We will extend this relationship further to March 2024.

The funds being circulated to Help Harrow are not subject to procurement and will be passported to the organisation for the purpose of delivering the universal food offer.

## Legal Implications

A total of £842m has been made available to Local Authorities to support those most in need with the significantly rising cost of living via the Household Support Fund (“the Fund”). The Secretary of State determines the Local Authorities to which grant is to be paid and the amount of grant to be paid.

The DWP is providing funding under section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003 and Local Authorities are responsible for setting criteria and administering the fund. The funding period covers 1 April 2023 until 31 March 2024 inclusive. Harrow Council has been allocated a grant of £2,953,414, which must be spent by 31 March 2024.

The Department for Work and Pensions (“DWP”) has issued guidance on use of the funds including eligibility criteria. The expectation is that the fund should be used to support eligible households in the most need, particularly those who may not be eligible for other support (such as Cost of Living Payments and the energy support for 2023/2024) the government has recently made available but nevertheless in need and require crisis support.

There are requirements in relation to information sharing and submitting monitoring returns on use of the funds. The guidance contains provisions in relation to combatting fraud to ensure that monies can be recovered, and action taken if any applications are submitted on a fraudulent basis. There should be appropriate checks in place to verify the identity of those who are eligible.

Local Authorities have discretion on exactly how this funding is used within the scope set out in the grant conditions and guidance documentation provided by the DWP. The expectation is that it should primarily be used to support households in the most need particularly those including children, pensioners, disabled residents, and carers who would face acute challenges due and would otherwise struggle with energy bills, food, water bills, other essential household costs and housing costs in exceptional circumstances.

## **Financial Implications**

Harrow Council has been allocated a grant of £2,953,414, which must be spent by 31 March 2024. This funding will cover the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 inclusive. £236,000 of the grant can be applied to administering the scheme. For Harrow, this will include scheme administration and support (programme oversight and communications), mailshot and admin for the Blackhawk voucher. Where it is possible, the council will use existing capacity within the organisation to support any administrative activity, so the allocation of the grant to administration costs can be minimised.

## **Equalities implications / Public Sector Equality Duty**

Decision makers should have due regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty in making their decisions. The equalities duties are continuing duties and not duties to secure a particular outcome. Consideration of the duties should precede the decision. It is important that Cabinet has regard to the statutory grounds of the Public Sector Equality Duty, which are found at section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 and are as follows:

A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
- Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
- Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
- Having due regard to the need to advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it involves having due regard, in particular, to the need to:
  - remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic;



- take steps to meet the needs of persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it;
- Encourage persons who share a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.
- The steps involved in meeting the needs of disabled persons that are different from the needs of persons who are not disabled include, in particular, steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities.
- Having due regard to the need to foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it involves having due regard, in particular, to the need to:
  - Tackle prejudice, and
  - Promote understanding.

Compliance with the duties in this section may involve treating some persons more favourably than others; but that is not to be taken as permitting conduct that would otherwise be prohibited by or under this Act. The relevant protected characteristics are:

- Age
- Disability
- Gender reassignment
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Race
- Religion or belief
- Sex
- Sexual orientation
- Marriage and Civil partnership

An equality impact assessment (EQIA) has been undertaken for this proposal the EQIA concludes that:

- There will be a positive impact on working households with children.
- There will be a positive impact on residents in receipt of housing benefit.
- There will be a positive impact on vulnerable households.
- There will be a positive impact on Harrow residents who can take advantage of the ongoing food resource via the Community Hub.

Mitigations are set out in the Equality Impact Assessment.

An updated announcement of the extension of the Household Support Fund will be published on Harrow's website, which meets the general accessibility criteria.

## **Council Priorities**

The delivery of the Household Support Fund 4 in Harrow helps the council meet its corporate priority of 'A place where those in need are supported' and the flagship action "to help with the cost-of-living crisis, we will deliver another year

of free school meals during school holidays (subject to Household Support Fund 4 Guidance)".

### **Section 3 - Statutory Officer Clearance**

**Statutory Officer: Sharon Daniels**

Signed on behalf of the Chief Financial Officer

**Date: 03/05/23**

**Statutory Officer: Stephen Dorrian**

Signed on behalf of the Monitoring Officer

**Date: 15/05/23**

**Chief Officer: Alex Dewsnap**

Signed off by the Director of Corporate Resources and Transformation

**Date: 28/04/23**

**Head of Procurement: Nimesh Mehta**

Signed by the Head of Procurement

**Date: 04/05/23**

**Head of Internal Audit: Neale Burns**

Signed on behalf of the Head of Internal Audit

**Date: 09/05/23**

**Has the Portfolio Holder(s) been consulted? Yes**

### **Mandatory Checks**

**Ward Councillors notified: NO, as it impacts on all Wards**

**EqlA carried out: YES**

**EqlA cleared by: Yasmeen Hussein, EDI Policy Officer, 28/04/23**

### **Section 4 - Contact Details and Background**

#### **Papers**

**Contact:** Nahreen Matlib, Senior Policy Officer,  
[nahreen.matlib@harrow.gov.uk](mailto:nahreen.matlib@harrow.gov.uk) [add contact number]

**Background Papers:** None

**Call-in waived by the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny  
Committee - NO**