

Notice of KEY Executive Decision

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| Subject Heading: | Household Support Fund 4 2023 |
| Decision Maker: | Councillor Ray Morgan, Leader of the Council |
| Cabinet Member: | Councillor Chris Wilkins |
| SLT Lead: | Dave McNamara |
| Report Author and contact details: | Chris Henry Chris.henry@havering.gov.uk |
| Policy context: | To give vulnerable households such as those including children, pensioners and care leavers who would otherwise struggle with energy bills, food or other essential living costs, financial support from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024. |
| Financial summary: | A ring-fenced government grant of £3,296,302 has been made available for the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 to support local expenditure including administrative costs of the Housing Support Fund 4 2023. |
| Reason decision is Key | Expenditure (including anticipated income) of £500,000 or more. Significant effect on two or more Wards. |
| Date notice given of intended decision: | 10 March 2023 |

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| Relevant OSC: | Overview and Scrutiny Board |
| Is it an urgent decision? | No |
| Is this decision exempt from being called-in? | No |

The subject matter of this report deals with the following Council Objectives

People - Things that matter for residents

Part A – Report seeking decision

DETAIL OF THE DECISION REQUESTED AND RECOMMENDED ACTION

On 20 February 2023 the government launched the Household Support Fund (HSF 4) to further extend previous scheme from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024. The HSF 4 continues to support those households most in need due to the rising cost of living.

Havering has been allocated £3,296,302 to be distributed from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024.

The recommendations below have been made with due regard to Government guidance, the Council's Cost of Living Strategy and Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 to support vulnerable and low income individuals and families.

Recommendations

1. That £1,020,000 is made available to help support vulnerable and low income households under the Emergency Assistance Scheme.
2. To approve the Emergency Assistance Scheme policy as attached at Appendix D.
3. That £1,111,300 is allocated from the HSF 4 grant to pay for meals in the school holidays for up to 9,000 families eligible for welfare benefit related free school meals between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024 providing £15 per child per week.
4. That £510,000 HSF 4 grant is allocated to 5,100 pension age Council Tax payers in receipt of Council Tax Support by way of a £100 credit to their Council Tax accounts which can be transferred to the taxpayer's bank account.
5. That £225,000 from the HSF 4 grant is made available to provide 300 Care leavers with £750 each to help with their fuel and food bills during 2023-24.
6. That £80,000 is allocated from the HSF 4 grant to support the provision of Children's accommodation.
7. That £80,000 is made available to support the vulnerable families and children coming from Afghanistan and other refugees.
8. That £270,002 is assigned to Children's Services, Exchequer & Transactional Services, Policy, Performance & Community and the Disability Association Barking and Dagenham as outlined below for the set-up, administrative and software costs related to the HSF 4 grant activities.

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AUTHORITY UNDER WHICH DECISION IS MADE

Part 3.2 of the Council's Constitution [Executive Functions]

The Leader of the Council is responsible for arranging for the exercise of all executive functions and may exercise any executive functions personally, provided notice is given to the Proper Officer.

In this instance, to exercise the Corporate functions of Cabinet [Part 3.2.2]

Finance

(a) To take decisions on all matters relating to the Council's finances including but not exclusively:

(i) budgetary control

(ii) establishing long and short term capital and revenue programmes for all areas of service and allocations of both capital and revenue expenditure to other services

(iii) financial planning

STATEMENT OF THE REASONS FOR THE DECISION

1.0 Introduction

1.1 In the Autumn Statement on 17 November 2022, Government announced that the Household Support Fund would be extended from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024. Details of the launch are contained in the letter dated 20 February 2023 which is attached at Appendix A Household Support Fund (2023-24).

1.2 Government has provided guidance on how to spend the HSF 4 grant which is similar to previous years. A summary of the guidance is provided in this report. Appendix B Household Support Fund (2023-24) Guidance, contains the full version of the guidance.

1.3 £3,296,302 has been allocated to Havering to fund scheme expenditure and the cost of administration. Funding details for England are attached at Appendix C Household Support Fund (2023-24) Grant Determination.

2.0 HSF 4 Summary of Government Guidance and Grant Conditions

2.1 Government guidance remains similar to previous HSF funding schemes in that councils are expected to use the grant to continue to support vulnerable households in most need who would otherwise struggle with energy bills, food, water bills and other essential costs. HSF4 should also be used to support households who may not be eligible for other support government has recently made available but who are nevertheless in need and who require crisis support.

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- 2.2 The HSF 4 should support low income households including large families, single-income families, families with children of all ages, pensioners, unpaid carers, care leavers and disabled people.
- 2.3 Additionally, HSF 4 can be used to support housing costs where existing housing support schemes do not meet this need.
- 2.4 When administering this scheme, councils are encouraged to adopt the following principles:
- Use discretion on how to identify and support those most in need.
 - Use the funding to meet immediate needs and help those who are struggling to afford energy, food and water bills, and other related essentials. Funding can also be used to support households who are struggling to afford wider essentials.
 - In exceptional cases of genuine emergency, the funding can additionally be used to support housing costs where existing housing support schemes including homelessness prevention grants do not meet this exceptional need. HSF 4 cannot provide mortgage support.
 - Work together where necessary and appropriate with other local services, such as social and care workers to help identify and support households within the scope of the scheme.
- 2.5 It is mandatory for Authorities to make public their plans for The Fund, including how and when they intend to deliver the application-based portion of their scheme. This should be through a website page dedicated to the Fund headed with 'Household Support Fund' on their Authority website.
- 2.6 With regard to communications, Government have now made it mandatory for Authorities to reference that the grant is funded by the DWP/Government in any publicity material, including online channels and media releases. There should be a dedicated website that links to the Government's [Cost of Living Hub](#) should be included, as well as a specific reference that the grant is funded by the Department for Work and Pensions or the UK Government.
- 2.7 While the primary intention of the HSF 4 is to provide crisis support, Government advise councils can use the fund for complementary advice services which should not be a significant portion of the fund.
- 2.8 Eligible spend includes the following items:
- Energy and water.
 - Food.
 - Essentials linked to energy and water. For example, period products, warm clothing, soap, blankets, the repair or purchase of equipment such as fridges, freezers, ovens, slow cookers, in recognition that a range of costs may arise which directly affect a household's ability to afford or access energy, food and water.

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- Wider essentials. These may include, but are not limited to, support with other bills including broadband or phone bills, clothing, and essential transport-related costs such as repairing a car, buying a bicycle, or paying for fuel.
- Housing costs. In exceptional cases of genuine emergency, where existing housing support schemes do not meet this exceptional need, the Fund can be used to support housing costs.
- Reasonable administrative costs. This includes staff, IT, web page design, advertising and print costs.

2.9 Councils may grant payments directly on to council tax accounts where the vulnerable household has a council tax liability and where it will directly help that household with immediate cost pressures. Council Tax accounts can be used as a means of distributing the grant particularly to people of pension age.

2.10 Councils can also provide a basic safety net to individuals with no recourse to public funds.

2.11 Authorities are required to complete a delivery plan to outline their intentions and send it to the DWP by 17 May 2023.

2.12 There must be an application-based service for support to ensure those in need have a route to emergency support.

2.13 Authorities can use the DWP system Searchlight, to verify welfare benefits.

2.14 Councils must also manage the risk of fraud and consider household income and rent liability to ensure support is going to those in genuine need. Where possible, any payments made into a bank account should be in the same name of the person that is eligible for that payment.

2.16 Payment of the HSF 4 to Authorities will be paid in arrears after the interim Management Information (MI) returns in July and October 2023 and January 2024 and the final MI return at the end of the HSF 4 period in April 2024 after the DWP has verified the MI. If an Authority feels that the payment arrangements will create significant cash flow problems, they can notify the DWP with supporting evidence. Three interim returns and a final MI return will be required and grant payments will be made in respect of the periods 1 April 2023 to 30 June 2023, 1 April 2023 to 30 September 2023, 1 April 2023 to 31 December 2023 and 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024.

3.0 Proposals to spend the HSF 4 Grant

3.1 Havering has developed a local delivery framework and approach which is flexible and ensures the conditions and principles of the Housing Support Fund 4 guidance are met.

3.2 Officers have used their local knowledge of residents to maximise assistance to those most in need across the borough. It is anticipated that these proposals for expenditure will assist 63% of low income households with children, 15%

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pensioner households and 14% of working age adults struggling with the cost of living.

3.3 The proposals for expenditure of the HSF 4 grant are set out below.

3.4 Havering Emergency Assistance Scheme £1,020,000

3.5 Havering's Emergency Assistance Scheme (EAS) is an application based scheme providing emergency support to low income households through cash (BACS) payments for food, essential items, repairs and utility bills. Furniture and essential white goods are also available under the scheme.

3.6 The scheme's underlying principles align with the HSF 4 guidance and is available to working age and pension age families and individuals who require emergency financial assistance as well as disabled people. In 2022/23 up to ten payments of £100 each per year was made available to households for emergency support and to help with the increasing cost of living.

3.7 This scheme is well established, popular and particularly effective with just under 12,000 successful applications costing just over £1.3 million between 1 April 2022 and 20 March 2023. 1,158 successful applications have been made by residents with disabilities. More than 90% of awards are from households on Universal Credit and other Welfare Benefits. The scheme effectively targets the lowest income households in the borough.

3.8 In processing claims for emergency assistance, evidence of income is always required and welfare benefits are verified through the Council's and DWP's computer systems.

3.9 EAS scheme expenditure increases every year. If the EAS policy remains the same for 2023/24, it will not be possible to maintain the expenditure within budget. In view of this, it is proposed that EAS policy is amended to allow for 6 payments of £100 in 2023/24. This change will reduce expenditure to £1.02million keeping it within budget.

3.10 An amended EAS policy can be found at Appendix D The Emergency Assistance Scheme Policy 2023-24.

3.11 The Disablement Association Barking and Dagenham (DABD) and Benefit Services partner together to provide the scheme. In processing claims for emergency assistance, evidence of income is always required and welfare benefits are verified through the Council's and DWP's computer systems.

3.12 Free school holiday meals for children of eligible families £1,111,300

3.13 Officers seek to ensure that children of families on welfare benefits eligible for free school meals do not go hungry during the school holidays. Allocating funding direct to this cohort will assist reduce child poverty in the borough and free up money for families to spend on other essential items.

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3.14 It is proposed that £1,111,300 of the HSF 4 fund is used to make payments of £15 per week to up to 9,000 eligible families to help pay for meals during the 2023 school holidays including Easter 2024. This will assist relieve pressure on low income families with children struggling with the increased cost of living.

3.15 Based on previous iterations of this scheme, approximately 25% of families do not apply for the school meal payment in the holidays therefore the allocation has been reduced accordingly. In the unlikely event that every eligible family claimed the holiday meal payment, this could be funded from the Emergency Assistance Scheme reserve.

3.16 Pension Age Council Tax Payers receiving Council Tax Support £510,000

3.17 The government guidance continues to advise the HSF 4 is also intended to cover low income groups including pensioners.

3.18 It is known that older people for many reasons do not always claim what they are entitled to. These reasons can include; lack of awareness, worry about filling in long forms, disclosing personal information or feeling there is always someone worse off than they are.

3.19 With this in mind, it is proposed that pensioners on a low income receive £100 direct to their Council Tax account which can be used to reduce their Council Tax or be transferred direct to their bank account as the pension age tax payer wishes.

3.20 Officers have identified through the Council Tax Support scheme data that there are circa 5,100 pension age tax payers on low incomes.

3.21 Pensioners will be advised in writing of the £100 payment to their council tax account and will be given the option to have it paid direct to their bank account. This will ensure that low income residents of pension age receive support from the HSF 4 grant.

3.22 Havering Care Leavers £225,000

3.23 Providing Care leavers with support from the previous HSF grant continues to be successful. The council as the corporate parent was able to engage productively with this vulnerable cohort and improve their circumstances and opportunities.

3.24 £225,000 from the HSF 4 fund will provide 300 Care leavers with £750 to help with fuel, food and essential bills across the year.

3.25 Supporting Families Move from temporary Accommodation £80,000

3.26 Families moving from temporary accommodation incur extra costs settling into a new home. £80,000 can be allocated support to those vulnerable families with children helping to pay food, fuel and other essential bills. There is no other budget available to cover these unplanned extra costs.

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3.27 Supporting Afghani and other Refugees £80,000

3.28 Havering provides wraparound services to support individuals and families such as Afghani and other refugees who have been forced to leave their country to escape natural disaster, persecution or war. The wraparound service does not include financial support to the household. This £80,000 allocation will allow Adult Social Care to directly assist newly arriving refugees with financial support and advice.

3.29 Cost of Administration £270,002

3.30 The administration costs associated with the proposal above are outlined in the table below along with the scheme costs. The administrative costs make up approximately eight of the overall fund.

3.31 Table of proposed HSF 4 expenditure.

| Service | Estimated Administration Costs | Estimated Scheme Costs |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| DABD | £75,000 | £1,020,000 |
| Council Tax & Benefits | £75,002 | * |
| Care leavers | £30,000 | £225,000 |
| Transactional Services | £20,000 | ** |
| CTS Pensioners | £20,000 | £510,000 |
| Support Refugees & families | £20,000 | £160,000 |
| Holiday meals admin | £30,000 | £1,111,300 |
| Subtotal | £270,002 | £3,026,300 |
| Grand Total | | £3,296,302 |

* Council Tax & Benefits supports the Emergency Assistance scheme and CTS pensioners

** Transactional Services, with the exception of EAS support all schemes

3.32 Scheme expenditure costs will be monitored to ensure they stay within budget.

4.0 Media and Communication

4.1 A communication plan and campaigns during the year will continue to promote HSF 4 in line with Government to ensure take up is maximized. Officers will work with the Communications Team to develop messages for Living E-newsletter, Facebook and other media encourage take up.

4.2 Communications will be directed towards elderly people, disable households, homes with pre-meters and large families on welfare benefits.

4.3 Frontline staff will be made aware of the funding and can continue to make referrals on behalf of their clients to the HSF 4 schemes.

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OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

The Emergency Assistance, free school holidays meals and other council run schemes are now well established and operating efficiently. These schemes provide greater choice of purchase for the applicant as they are paid by BACs. For these reasons allocating funding to food banks and paying by food vouchers was considered and discarded.

Commissioning external providers to manage the schemes was also considered and rejected as the Council Services mentioned in this report have experience and knowledge of their schemes and customers and can expedite payment. The administration costs are therefore minimised ensuring the majority of expenditure is allocated directly to low income households most in need.

PRE-DECISION CONSULTATION

While there is no statutory requirement for a public consultation, there has been engagement with SLT members, Children and Adults Services, Disablement Association Barking and Dagenham, Citizens Advice, Responding to the Cost of Living Crisis Strategic Group, Policy and Regeneration and Exchequer and Transactional Services regarding this decision.

NAME AND JOB TITLE OF STAFF MEMBER ADVISING THE DECISION-MAKER

Name: Chris Henry

Designation: Head of Council Tax & Benefits

Signature:



Date: 6 April 2023

Part B - Assessment of implications and risks

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS AND RISKS

The Housing Support fund is made available to councils under section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003.

The Emergency Assistance Scheme is a discretionary scheme, which the Council has set up using section 111 of the Local Government Act 1972, which allows the Council to do anything which is calculated to facilitate or is conducive or incidental to the discharge of any of its functions. The criteria used by the Emergency Assistance Scheme fully meet the conditions set out for HSF 4 expenditure.

The recommendations within this report adhere to the guidance for the Household Support Fund 4 for families and people of pension age, as well as promoting the welfare of children in accordance with section 17 of the Children Act 1989.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS AND RISKS

The DWP ring-fenced funding of £3,296,302 has been provided to cover the period from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024. Any unspent grant must be returned to the DWP.

The amount allocated to the Emergency Assistance Scheme of £1,020,000 should be sufficient to cover the period from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 and allow for growth. The service will be monitoring expenditure closely. If expenditure should exceed the budget allocated, the emergency assistance scheme reserve can cover the shortfall.

Grant payment will be made in four instalments in arrears in July 2023, October 2023, January 2024 and April 2024 subject to successfully completed and verified management information returns.

HUMAN RESOURCES IMPLICATIONS AND RISKS (AND ACCOMMODATION IMPLICATIONS WHERE RELEVANT)

The recommendations in this report do not give rise to any identifiable HR risks or implications that would directly affect the Council's workforce.

There will be additional verification and processing work arising from the Household Support Fund for Children's Services, Exchequer and Transactional Services and other departments. Administrative funding will enable these Services to manage and organise their workloads efficiently.

EQUALITIES AND SOCIAL INCLUSION IMPLICATIONS AND RISKS

The Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 requires the Council, when exercising its functions, to have due regard to:

- (i) The need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Equality Act 2010;
- (ii) The need to advance equality of opportunity between persons who share protected characteristics and those who do not, and;
- (iii) Foster good relations between those who have protected characteristics and those who do not.

Note: 'Protected characteristics' are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnerships, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex/gender and sexual orientation.

The Council is committed to the Equalities Duty in the provision and commissioning of its services. An Equality & Health Impact Assessment is attached at Appendix E EqHIA Household Support Fund 4 2023.

In addition, the Council is also committed to improving the quality of life and wellbeing for all Havering residents in respect of socio-economics and health determinants. The recommendations for approval in this report will be essential to support the financial health of families with children and pensioners during the cost of living crisis.

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HEALTH AND WELLBEING IMPLICATIONS AND RISKS

Havering council is committed to improving the health and wellbeing of all residents including those most vulnerable. Research has shown there is a clear correlation between poverty and health. The purpose of this decision is to provide financial support to low income families with children, pensioners and vulnerable residents to ensure they are adequately fed and warm during the winter months and the cost of living crisis.

The financial support provided to vulnerable households in the borough will have a positive impact on residents' health and wellbeing.

There are no identifiable risks or negative implications to this report.

ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS AND RISKS

There are no environmental and climate change implications or risks to this report.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

APPENDICIES

Appendix A Household Support Fund (2023-24) Launch Letter
Appendix B Household Support Fund (2023-24) Guidance
Appendix C Household Support Fund (2023-24) Grant Determination
Appendix D Emergency Assistance Scheme Policy 2023-24
Appendix E EqHIA Household Support Fund 4 2023

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Part C – Record of decision

I have made this executive decision in accordance with my authority as the Leader of the Council and in compliance with the requirements of the Constitution.

Decision

Proposal agreed

Delete as applicable

Proposal NOT agreed because

Details of decision maker

Signed

Name:

Cabinet Portfolio held:

CMT Member title:

Head of Service title

Other manager title:

Date:

Lodging this notice

The signed decision notice must be delivered to Democratic Services, in the Town Hall.

For use by Committee Administration

This notice was lodged with me on _____

Signed _____