

## Cabinet – 19 July 2023

### Proposal for Household Support Fund 2023/24 and Revised Local Welfare Provision Policy

**Portfolio:** Councillor Ali, Customer Engagement

**Related portfolios:** Councillor Perry, Resilient Communities

**Service:** Customer Engagement

**Wards:** All

**Key decision:** Yes

**Forward plan:** Yes

#### 1. Aim

The aim of this report is to gain approval for accepting the latest award of Household Support Fund (HSF) from central government and distribution of these funds in accordance with an updated Walsall Local Welfare Provision Scheme (Appendix A). It also seeks delegated authority for the Director of Customer Engagement, in consultation with the relevant portfolio-holders, to make minor amendments to the Walsall Local Welfare Provision Scheme. Finally, it seeks delegated authority, for the Director of Customer Engagement, in consultation with relevant portfolio-holders, to enter into grant or contractual agreements with third-party providers, where it is necessary to help distribute assistance in accordance with the Walsall Local Welfare Provision Scheme.

#### 2. Summary

- 2.1 Walsall Council have recently been awarded £5.6m in the latest allocation of the Household Support Fund to cover the period from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024.
- 2.2 According to government guidance, the aim of the Household Support Fund (HSF), is to provide help with essential costs to anyone who is vulnerable, or unable to afford things such as energy, water or food.
- 2.3 Whilst the government expects Walsall Council to develop a policy around the way to distribute the HSF they have issued [guidance](#) about their expectations around how HSF should be distributed and administered. Following consultation with residents and partners, the previous Walsall Crisis Support Policy (WCSP) and application process has been updated, to ensure it now meets the new requirements in the HSF guidance, and in particular, the government's ambition

to provide more crisis support to a wider cohort of recipients who are experiencing hardship due to the cost of living crisis. Combining the funding streams, and the WSCP application process, aims to reduce duplication, helping to ensure that more residents experiencing financial pressure can access assistance, particularly where they might otherwise be excluded from applying for other benefits or financial support.

### **3. Recommendations**

That Cabinet:

- 3.1 Approve the Director of Customer Engagement to accept the Household Support Funding award from the central government, and any future rounds of funding, and to oversee distribution of funds in accordance with the Walsall Local Welfare Provision Scheme.
- 3.2 Approve the Walsall Local Welfare Provision Scheme as set out at Appendix A which will replace the Walsall Councils Crisis Support policy.
- 3.3 That delegated authority be given to the Director of Customer Engagement in consultation with the Deputy Leader (Resilient Communities) and the Portfolio Holder for Customer to make minor amendments to the Walsall Local Welfare Provision Scheme, to take account of changes to market conditions, funding arrangements, updated government guidance, future consultation or outputs from relevant Equality Impact Assessments.
- 3.4 That delegated authority be given to the Director of Customer Engagement in consultation with the Deputy Leader (Resilient Communities) and the Portfolio Holder for Customer and the procurement team, to enter into agreements with the third-party providers, where their services are necessary to support the timely distribution of essential crisis support in accordance with the updated Walsall Local Welfare Provision Scheme (attached as Appendix A)

### **4. Report detail - know**

#### ***Context***

- 4.1 In response to the hardship experienced by many UK residents during and following the Covid-19 pandemic, the government provided several emergency support schemes which were administered by the Council. These schemes included Winter Grants and Local Support Grants totalling £2.6million (which was distributed directly to residents through direct payments from the Council and support from Voluntary and Community Sector partners).
- 4.2 From October 2021, the Council received funding under a new government funding scheme called Household Support Fund (HSF). HSF aims to provide help with essential costs to anyone who is vulnerable, or unable to afford things such as energy, water or food due to the rising costs of living. Since October 2021 to March 2023, the Council have received just over £8million in funding

via the three prior HSF funding rounds, enabling the Council to support residents across circa 61,000 interventions providing vulnerable households with essential help such as food vouchers, white goods, financial assistance with rent payments to prevent homelessness and direct financial assistance to residents eligible for Council Tax Reduction who are of a pensionable age or who have dependent children. HSF also allowed us to provide funding to Community Partner Organisations to help reach residents who are in some cases most disproportionately impacted by the cost-of-living-crisis.

- 4.3 Whilst there were three previous rounds of HSF funding, the Council had no clarity about whether funding would continue until recently. Positively, the fourth round of HSF is for a 12-month period and equates to £5.6million for the period of 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024. HSF has allowed the Customer Engagement Team to review local Crisis Support arrangements and develop a new Walsall Local Welfare Provision Scheme that takes account of the learning gained, and feedback from customer lived experience during previous iterations of HSF and other discretionary schemes. The funding has also allowed the Council to increase assistance available to residents in need through local food banks, and partner organisations, as well as by offering help through ‘match-funding’ contributions to help residents to be able to afford replacement boilers, with the aim of reducing heating costs long term and improving local living standards. In addition, the Council has used the HSF to increase the assistance being offered via the current Walsall Crisis Support Scheme and Discretionary Housing Payments Scheme.
- 4.4 Officers have taken account of the latest HSF government guidance, and in particular the new requirement for an element of open application for residents, the need to target those who may not be eligible for other government support and allow the funding of advice services. In response, the WCSP and application process has been amended to help utilise the fund to best serve Walsall residents and meet the new government guidelines. The positive features about earlier iterations of the various support schemes have also been incorporated into the new Walsall Local Welfare Provision Scheme.
- 4.5 The table below sets the proposed commitments which the £5.6m Household Support Fund will be used to fund. These proposals are in line with government grant conditions and have been modelled around current understanding of local needs across different categories. It has also been informed by recent consultation and local intelligence from previous delivery of support schemes. The detailed policy and criteria for awarding assistance to local people is included within the Walsall Local Welfare Provision Scheme (attached as Appendix A).

Table 1: Proposed Allocation of Household Support Fund April 2023 – March 2024

<b>Funding area</b>	<b>Provisional allocation</b>	<b>Proposed Activity</b>
Direct payment to families on CTR	£2,600,000	Make direct cash payments to families in receipt of council tax support to the level of £140 per child over 3 instalments (£10 per child for 14 weeks).
Awards to Walsall Connected/Local hubs	£400,000	Provide funding or goods to allow assistance within the communities through Walsall Connected and other voluntary and community partners.
Boiler replacement Scheme	£500,000	Funding to undertake gas boiler checks and assist with remedial works to ensure maximum energy efficiency for households in financial difficulty.
Transitional Leaving Care (Care Leavers)	£50,000	Support Walsall's care leavers to acquire white goods and to provide financial support with energy bills.
Early Help	£20,000	Support Walsall's care leavers to acquire white goods and to provide financial support with energy bills.
Discretionary Housing Payment	£400,000	Increase the assistance to support residents to meet the costs of their rent through topping up the existing Discretionary Housing Payment Scheme.
Awards via Direct Crisis Application Process	£1,000,000	Develop an open application process in line with the government guidance for HSF 4. This would ensure that groups of residents who are just above the benefit threshold also have a mechanism to request support.

Advice Services	£100,000	Increase the number of qualified debt workers who will help to process crisis applications and support customers with money management, benefit maximisation and debt related matters.
Administration	£560,000	To fund the administrative burdens associated with the HSF grant and provide the additional staff needed to oversee the proactive crisis awards and new open application process
<b>Total</b>	<b>£5,630,000</b>	

### ***Council Plan priorities***

- 4.6 Through the provision of support to vulnerable households at this time of significant rising living costs will help:
- People – by maintaining or improving their health and wellbeing.
  - Children – by supporting families to be happy, healthy and learning well.

### ***Risk management***

- 4.7 There is a risk that vulnerable households will not receive the required support if the WCSP and application process is not continued. The inclusion of a new proactive application process will allow support to be given to a wider group of the community and meet the government's guidance for the scheme.

### ***Financial implications***

- 4.8 Walsall Council was allocated funding of £5,639,920 for the latest HSF scheme. The cost of all the support provided by the scheme along with the additional administration costs will be covered by the allocation. Therefore, the proposals do not require any additional funding from Walsall Council or create additional pressures on the Council's budgets.

### ***Legal implications***

- 4.9 Central Government have given local authorities the discretion to decide how the funding is used within the scope set out in the HSF guidance. If the Council fails to satisfy the stipulated reporting requirements set by DWP, there is a risk any upfront awards made will not be reimbursed by the DWP.

### ***Procurement Implications/Social Value***

- 4.10 There may be a future requirement to procure services from third parties to help support the Walsall Local Welfare Provision Scheme. This will be carried out in accordance with the Council's Contract Rules and the Public Contracts Regulations 2015, as amended.

### ***Property implications***

- 4.11 There are no property implications.

### ***Health and wellbeing implications***

- 4.12 The aim of the Household Support Fund is to provide support to vulnerable households with rising costs so will have a positive effect on the wellbeing of Walsall's residents.

### ***Reducing Inequalities***

- 4.13 The aim of the Household Support Fund is to provide support to vulnerable households so this will assist with reducing financial inequalities. An EqIA has been created, to help ensure nobody is subject to disproportionate adverse treatment because they have a protected characteristic.

### ***Staffing implications***

- 4.14 There will be additional temporary resources required to implement the proposed scheme, but the associated costs will be covered by fund.

### ***Climate Impact***

- 4.15 There are no climate implications.

### ***Consultation***

- 4.16 Consultation meetings have been held with both internal and external partners to consider the proposals and further consultation is planned on the proposed Walsall Local Welfare Provision Scheme. In general, stakeholders were supportive of the proposals. In particular, partner organisations valued the role played by the local hubs and food banks. Specifically, the DWP (the government department who provides the funding) were keen that the Council continues to use third parties to help with the provision of support.

## **5. Decide**

- 5.1 Cabinet is requested to approve the recommendations made in section 3 of this report.

## 6. Respond

- 6.1 It is proposed that Cabinet approve acceptance of the HSF, the new Walsall Local Welfare Provision Scheme, and give delegated authority to the Director of Customer Engagement to take actions required to support residents by distributing the funding in accordance with the new policy.

## 7. Review

- 7.1 Expenditure from the Housing Support Funds is subject to the Council's budgetary monitoring process. In addition, DWP require statistical returns.

## Appendices

Appendix A - Walsall Local Welfare Provision Scheme – June 2023

## Background papers

None

## Authors

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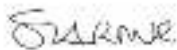
### Michael Taylor

Interim Head of Customer Engagement

### Elise Hopkins

Director of Customer Engagement

Signed:



Sally Rowe  
Executive Director Childrens and Customer  
27<sup>th</sup> June 2023

Signed:



Councillor Ali  
Portfolio holder  
6<sup>th</sup> July 2023