

TRAFFORD COUNCIL

Report to: Executive
Date: 18 March 2024
Report for: Decision
Report of: Executive Member for Finance, Change and Governance and the Director of Finance and Systems

Report Title

Trafford Assist Scheme – Proposal on a Redistribution of the Funding to the Trafford Community Hubs

Summary

Trafford Council has had a Local Welfare Assistance policy (Trafford Assist Scheme) in place since April 2013 to help residents in short-term acute financial difficulties.

The scheme has evolved over the years in its operational delivery and now is a cash first scheme.

The pandemic, followed by the cost of living crisis, has meant that the demand for the scheme has reached very high levels and the costs have significantly exceeded the Trafford Assist budget. The additional costs have been met through extra government funding in previous years; the current scheme being the Household Support Fund, but that is due to end 30 September 2024.

The ending of the annual funding means that the Council must review the purpose of the Trafford Assist scheme to contain costs within the annual budget of £218k. Priority being to return it to its pre-pandemic and original scope of being an emergency short term needs scheme mainly for food and fuel.

A public consultation has taken place and comments have been considered. It is recommended that the Trafford Assist budget of £218k plus an additional amount to cover administrative costs be re-distributed to the Trafford Community Hubs who are best placed to make decisions on the most effective way to spend resources in their communities.

Decisions on the allocation of the funds from the 6-month extension to the Household Support Fund will be taken separately, but most of the funding is expected to cover the cost of continuing the school holidays support.

Recommendation(s)

That the Executive approves the proposal to replace the Trafford Assist scheme with a re-distribution of the funding to the Trafford Community Hubs from 1 April 2024.

Contact person for access to background papers and further information:

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Background Papers: [Trafford Assist Policy](#), [Household Support Fund Trafford](#)

Relationship to Policy Framework/Corporate Priorities	The Council's Trafford Assist scheme and the Trafford Community Hubs promote the Council's corporate priority of supporting people out of poverty, ensuring that vulnerable households on a low income requiring emergency assistance are supported
Relationship to GM Policy or Strategy Framework	The Council's schemes are aligned to meet the Council's corporate priorities, which in turn are aligned to GM Policy and Strategy Framework where required.
Financial	The Trafford Assist Scheme core budget for awards is already funded by the Council at £218k in 2023/24.
Legal Implications:	There is no legal requirement for the Council to have a local welfare assistance scheme
Equality/Diversity Implications	An Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) has been carried out alongside the public consultation and there are no groups adversely
Sustainability Implications	If the level of need continues to increase, the Council will need to review if the best outcomes are being met with the budget available
Resource Implications e.g. Staffing / ICT / Assets	A redistribution of the funding to the Community Hubs will include an amount to support administration costs
Carbon Reduction	None
Risk Management Implications	None
Health & Wellbeing Implications	The Council could have decided to stop providing this discretionary scheme with the financial constraints it faces, but it understands the impact that would have on the health and well-being of its residents
Health and Safety Implications	None

1.0 Background

1.1 Trafford Council has had a Local Welfare Assistance policy (Trafford Assist (TA)) in place since the function moved from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in April 2013. In the first two years, ring-fenced funding was provided but that ceased. Since then the core budget for awards has always been in line with the original ring-fenced funding.

1.2 The priority of the TA policy has always been to help residents in short-term acute financial difficulties and the award depends on the applicant's individual circumstances (but is linked to means tested benefits). The scheme has been designed to help Trafford residents:

- Meet immediate short-term needs in an emergency or because of a disaster.
- Return to or remain in the community and help them to live independently in their own home.
- Meet essential travelling expenses (e.g. to attend a funeral of a close relative).

1.3 In recent years and supplementing the TA budget of £218k, the Council has operated a Household Support Fund (HSF) with funding from the Department for Work and Pensions to support the most vulnerable households in need with food, energy and utility bills as well as

with wider costs. The current scheme was expected to end on 31 March 2024; the Government clearly stating in the Autumn Statement that there would be no further funding and therefore the main reason the Council has had to consult on a revised TA scheme.

- 1.4 The Council was pleased to hear the announcement in the Spring budget on 6 March 2024 that there would be an extension to the HSF, after months of campaigning, but disappointed it is only for 6 months. It is expected that most of the HSF funding in 2024/25 will need to be allocated to the continuation of the School Holiday Support (Free School Meal/Low Income Families £15 per child per week) during the 6-month extension. It is therefore necessary for the Council to proceed with a proposal around a 1 April 2024 and beyond TA scheme that can be operated within the available budget.

2.0 Introduction

- 2.1 There have been several changes to the way in which the TA scheme operates over the past decade, for example, originally food parcels were provided at library collection points with second-hand furniture being provided by a local social enterprise. This moved to a supermarket voucher and newly purchased furniture via a procured contract. Since 2021, following an Executive decision, it has operated largely as a cash-first scheme using an automatic online form (which checks eligibility to a DWP means tested benefit and/or Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Support), except for the furniture which has remained as newly purchased via a contracted provider.
- 2.2 The number of applicants applying, and being awarded, has significantly increased since the pandemic but this has been financially supported by several government grants, the latest being the Household Support Fund (HSF). The table at Appendix A shows how the TA scheme has evolved. Based on current demand levels this will mean that the available TA funding of £218k will fall significantly short in being able to cover the cost of the current scheme if this were to operate in 2024/25.
- 2.3 The current projected overspend on the TA budget in 2023/24 is c£800k and is being financed, in part, by utilising available HSF grant. With the current position being that HSF will only be extended for a further 6 months, a decision needs to be made as to what, if any, TA scheme will be delivered in 2024-25.

3.0 Proposed TA 2024-25 Scheme – Public Consultation

- 3.1 The Council will be unable to replicate the current scheme due to the financial restraints already detailed above.
- 3.2 Understanding how best to distribute the core budget is a difficult task. Based on the current volume of applications (see Appendix A) an equal division of the funding would equate to a c£20-£40 award once a year, including furniture awards. The administration costs would significantly exceed the actual award costs and therefore does not seem to be the best use of the limited resources available.
- 3.3 None of the decisions are easy to make and the Council are continuing to raise their concerns about the significant impact the unfair funding for Trafford residents has on the most vulnerable members of the community at a time when cost of living is at crisis level. But on weighing up the difficult options, it is recommended that the option of redistributing the funding to the Trafford Community Hubs, who also provide a broader range of services,

including welfare rights advice and support with debt advice, would make the best use of the limited resources available.

- 3.4 A public consultation has taken place between 19 February and 7 March 2024 proposing the removal of the TA Policy and redistributing the budget to the Trafford Community Hubs which are already established and operating successfully across the borough. The public consultation also asked for suggestions of if there are other ways in which the budget could be used to maximise impact and outcomes.
- 3.6 There were 61 responses to the public consultation. In the main, although there are of course concerns around the lack of sufficient funding, the proposal to redistribute the Trafford Assist awards budget to the Hubs received overall a majority of support as the best way to utilise the available financial resources.
- 3.7 However, what was consistently highlighted as a concern was any proposal to remove the emergency furniture offer. Whilst it was accepted that there are alternatives available it was made clear that for emergency furniture for households in emergency situations such as fleeing domestic violence, there was very limited alternatives available that are free.
- 3.8 In direct response to that feedback, it is proposed the Hubs are not restricted to purchasing food and fuel only but allow an agreed split of the funding to be able to provide furniture in emergency situations.
- 3.9 It is also proposed to provide additional funding of £10k to HOST to provide emergency food vouchers and furniture in direct response to feedback received from representatives from HOST around the impact fully removing a furniture offer would have on the residents they support. This demand will be closely monitored during the year.
- 3.10 Further feedback received raised concerns as to the accessibility of the Hubs for those unable to attend in person. The Hubs already offer services within their communities and the Council will work closely with the Hubs to ensure that there is a consistent offer across the borough.
- 3.11 The operational aspects of the Hubs was also raised, both in relation to the allocation of funding, consistency of a 'Trafford' offer – 'not a postcode lottery' and how to ensure that professional services working with residents have a clear referral route in to the Hubs. The Council will ensure there is a smooth transition and will continue to work closely with the Hubs to constantly review the services being provided with the funding allocation. The Hubs are already subject to stringent and detailed data and financial returns requirements on a quarterly basis and therefore the Council will be able to identify and raise any concerns at the earliest opportunity.
- 3.11 Based on the above, it is recommended therefore that the Executive approve the proposals to replace the Trafford Assist scheme with a re-distribution of the funding to the Trafford Community Hubs from 1 April 2024 for food, fuel and wider essentials including furniture, with the additional of a budget to HOST for statutory emergency re-housing furniture applications.

4.0 Other Options

4.1 The Council could have considered keeping the existing TA scheme in place albeit with a much reduced fund, but believe having a scheme that is administered within community settings will allow financial support to be allocated in a more targeted way. The Council could have also considered no longer funding a local welfare assistance scheme as it is a discretionary scheme, but that would not support the Council's corporate policy of supporting people out of poverty.

5.0 Reasons for Recommendations

5.1 The Executive is asked to approve the proposals to replace the Trafford Assist scheme with a re-distribution of the funding to the Trafford Community Hubs and HOST - as detailed in this report - in order to deliver the most cost-effective scheme within the budget available.

Key Decision: Yes

If Key Decision, has 28-day notice been given? Yes

Finance Officer Clearance GB

Legal Officer Clearance EM

DIRECTOR'S SIGNATURE



(*electronic*)..... ..

To confirm that the Financial and Legal Implications have been considered and the Executive Member has cleared the report.

Appendix A – Trafford Assist (TA) Demand Pre and Post Pandemic

Financial Year	Number of Awards (Food and Fuel)	Comments
2019-20	2,764	Pre-Covid
2020-21	6,178	Food Banks Closed in Trafford – TA take-up campaigns began DEFRA Funding
2021-22	9,300 (Increase to 3 awards)	Cash-First Scheme introduced with automated online application process Increase from 2 to 3 awards, funded by HSF Free School Meal eligible families invited to claim Fuel support
2022-23	14,932 (Increase to 4 awards)	Continuation of the above plus increase from 3 to 4 awards, funded by HSF
2023-24 (up to 30 November)	8,216 (Forecast at c10,000 by 31 March 2024)	Reduced back to 2 awards Increased awards to £100 due to the reduction in overall awards plus to align to the HSF direct awards Estimated year end cost c£1m which is c£800k over budget