

TRAFFORD COUNCIL

Report to: Executive Member for Finance, Change and Governance
Date: 11 April 2024
Report for: Decision
Report of: Director of Finance and Systems

Report Title

Trafford Assist (Emergency) Scheme and Household Support Fund Extension

Summary

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

A public consultation was undertaken in the early part of 2024 on the future operation of the Scheme, given the current levels of demand and the level of resources anticipated to be available.

On 18 March 2024, the Executive decided that the Trafford Assist budget of £218k, plus an additional amount to cover administrative costs would, from 1 April 2024, 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.

Unfortunately, following further consultation with the Community Hubs regarding the operation of the Scheme it was concluded that, at this time, they are collectively unable to deliver the Council’s Trafford Assist scheme in 2024/25.

In the interim, it is therefore necessary that the Council continues to deliver a Trafford Assist Scheme to help with emergency food and fuel and this report details proposals for this interim scheme to be delivered by the Council within the funding available, supported by the 6 month extension to the Household Support Fund. The interim scheme sets out updated award levels which will need to be constantly reviewed in response to government funding announcements.

As the Household Support Fund guidance has now been issued and links in directly with the proposal for the interim Trafford Assist scheme, this report also proposes how the Household Support Fund will be spent, with most of the funding to be used to support families with children who receive free school meals during the school holidays as well as continuing the direct award support to carers, care leavers, pensioners and households with disabled family members.

Recommendation(s)

That the Executive Member:

- Approves the proposals in the report for the revised Trafford Assist scheme;
- Approves the proposals in the report on the allocation of the Household Support Fund, including if the funding is extended from October 2024;
- Approves, based on the urgency provisions that this decision shall not be subject to the call-in process.

Contact person for access to background papers and further information:

Name: Louise Shaw

Contact Number: 07815 699615

Background Papers: [Trafford Assist Policy](#), [Household Support Fund Trafford](#), [Trafford Assist \(Local Welfare Assistance Scheme\)](#)

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| Relationship to Policy Framework/Corporate Priorities | The Council's Trafford Assist scheme promotes 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 2024/25. The Household Support Fund extension will provide additional funds up to 30 September 2024 of £1.45m. |
| 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 affected. |
| Sustainability Implications | If the level of need continues to increase and/or the Household Support Fund is not extended beyond 30 September 2024, the Council will need to review if the best outcomes are being met with the budget available. |
| Resource Implications e.g. Staffing / ICT / Assets | The staffing and software costs can be met within the existing budget. Software changes require a lead in time. |
| 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.
- 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 recently consulted on a revised TA scheme 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 Following a public consultation, Executive approved on 18 March 2024 the proposals to replace the Trafford Assist scheme from 1 April 2024 with a re-distribution of the funding to the Trafford Community Hubs. This would provide support for food, fuel and wider essentials including furniture, with the addition of a budget to the Council's Housing Option Service Trafford (HOST) for statutory emergency re-housing furniture applications.
- 2.2 Since then, the Trafford Community Hubs have advised that unfortunately they are unable collectively to deliver the Council's Trafford Assist scheme at this time as they anticipate that they will be unable to cope with the demand from the legacy scheme. The Council will continue to work closely with the Hubs to support their capacity to deliver the Trafford Assist scheme in the future.
- 2.3 On 26 March 2024, the government released its guidance and funding allocations for the extended Household Support Fund (HSF).
- 2.4 This report proposes a revised interim Trafford Assist scheme whilst discussions remain on-going with the Hubs, as well as proposals use of the HSF funding.

3.0 Proposed Household Support Fund Scheme

- 3.1 The government has announced a 6-month extension to the Household Support Fund. Trafford's funding allocation is £1.458m.
- 3.2 Guidance for the Fund is similar to last year and it is therefore proposed to utilise the HSF to support as many vulnerable groups as possible:-
 - Free School Meals Holiday Award continue at £15 per child per week for the May holidays (c£225k)
 - Free School Meals Holiday Award for the Summer holidays will remain at the £15 per child rate but for 4 weeks (c£484k)
 - Direct awards to continue to support households with disabled members, carers, care leavers and pensioners (c£350k)
 - Trafford Community Hubs continued funding at £10k per Hub (£60k)
 - Welfare Rights Information and Advice Support (£50k)
 - HOST (Emergency Furniture) (£10k)
 - Administration Costs (£80k)
 - Balance to TA Food and Fuel Awards (c£200k)
- 3.3 It is also proposed that, if the fund is extended beyond the current end date of 30 September 2024, that the scheme continues as above.

4.0 Proposed Trafford Assist (TA) Emergency Food and Fuel Scheme

- 4.1 Trafford Assist (TA) should be seen in most cases as a one-off emergency fund for financial assistance towards food and/or fuel.
- 4.2 The Council will be unable to replicate the current scheme due to the financial restraints already detailed above. Understanding how best to distribute the reduced funding is a difficult task. Based on the current volume of approximately 9,000 applications per annum, the proposal is to retain the Cash-First scheme making automated BACs payments (still offering to exchange for a voucher upon request) on the following basis:
- 1 award in a 12-month rolling period
 - £50 for households of up to 2 people
 - £100 for households of at least 3 people
- 4.3 The award value will need to be reviewed to ensure that the costs remain within the amount of funding available, and this will change as government funding schemes such as the HSF changes. The Council will ensure, however, the full TA awards budget and HSF allocation is spent, but not overspent, with a review in the Autumn and early Winter assessing spend against forecast.
- 4.4 The full eligibility criteria can be found at Appendix A.
- 4.5 Based on the above, it is recommended therefore that the Executive Member approve the proposals for the above Trafford Assist scheme with immediate effect and to be implemented as soon as is operationally practicable, which is subject to software requirement changes.

5.0 Urgency

- 5.1 The report is submitted to the Executive Member for Housing and Advice on an urgent basis given that we currently do not have an operational Trafford Assist scheme in place as the proposed scheme, agreed by the Executive in March and that was due to be implemented as of 1 April 2024 is no longer viable at this time.
- 5.2 This report should be considered as 'urgent business' and the decision exempt from the 'call-in' process for the following reason:
- The reason for this being a matter of urgency is that having call-in will delay the implementation of a local welfare assistance scheme and the Household Support Fund which gives vital support to vulnerable residents in Trafford;
 - Any delay likely to be caused by the call-in process would seriously prejudice the Council's or the public's interest;
 - An urgent decision is required to enable the Council to adopt the new scheme in time to start distributing the funds and making awards.
- 5.3 The report and urgency of the key decision have been reviewed by the Chair of the Scrutiny Committee on 11 April 2024 and the Chair has agreed that the decision should not be delayed until the next meeting of the Executive and not subject to call-in.

5.4 It is proposed therefore, that the decision contained in this report is therefore deemed to be urgent and cannot be reasonably deferred. It is also proposed that the decision, based on urgency provisions, is not subject to call-in to allow the Council to commence the operation of the revised TA scheme as soon as practicable.

6.0 Other Options

6.1 The Council could have considered not having an interim TA scheme in place whilst it continues redistribution discussions with the Trafford Community Hubs but that would not support the Council's corporate policy of supporting people out of poverty.

7.0 Reasons for Recommendations

7.1 There is an urgency to ensure that funding support can be delivered to support vulnerable households who need financial help as soon as possible.

Key Decision: Yes

If Key Decision, has 28-day notice been given? No (see 'urgency of decision')

Finance Officer Clearance GB

Legal Officer Clearance EM

DIRECTOR'S SIGNATURE



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

Appendix A – Trafford Assist (TA) Scheme

Trafford Assist should be seen in the majority of cases as one-off emergency fund for financial assistance towards food and or fuel. It is not and should not be considered as a general top up of benefit or income.

No more than one application within a 12 month period will be awarded.

Who can apply?

The eligibility criteria for the scheme are as follows:

- The applicant must have UK residency
- The applicant must live in Trafford, or be expecting to live in Trafford in the next six weeks, and can provide evidence of this from an agency
- The applicant must be 16 years or over

How to make a claim

A claim under Trafford Assist must be made online electronically using the e-form provided. Assistance will be provided to those customers who may not be comfortable or who experience difficulty with applying online.

On request the customer must supply any relevant supporting evidence.

Exchequer Services may ask for any evidence in support of an application.

If the applicant fails to provide additional evidence requested, we will refuse the customer's application.

Exchequer Services reserves the right to verify any information or evidence provided by the applicant in appropriate circumstances.

Method of payment

Trafford Assist is a cash-first scheme.

Payments will be made via BACs (Bankers Automated Clearing Service) and will take three working days to clear.

The applicant must hold a bank or building society account in their own name. Payments will not be made to a third party unless proof is provided that the third party has official authority to act, such as Appointeeship, Deputyship, Lasting Power of Attorney.

Customers without a bank account or in a safeguarding crisis where immediate assistance is required will be awarded a voucher.