

Brighton & Hove City Council

Policy & Resources Committee

Agenda Item 144

Subject: Cost of Living Update including the Household Support Fund 2023/24

Date of meeting: 16 March 2023

Report of: Chief Finance Officer

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Ward(s) affected: All

For general release

1 Purpose of the report and policy context

- 1.1 This report follows on from the report to Policy & Resources Committee in October 2022, which updated the council's work coordinating the city's response to rises in the cost of living. It focused in particular on the expected local impacts on households in relation to food, energy and fuel, welfare benefits, housing and homelessness.
- 1.2 Aside from energy caps and discounts, the government's key response is the Household Support Fund, which will cover the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024. The value of HSF for 2023/24 has been announced nationally at £1 billion and the allocation for Brighton & Hove will be £4.280m.
- 1.3 The proposed allocations for HSF 2023/24 provide for a similar delivery plan to previous 6 month allocations of Household Support Fund but scaled up to a 12-month period. This will continue to utilise the excellent partnerships that have been built with third sector organisations to ensure that the funding is widely accessible to residents in crisis, regardless of their need, protected characteristic, or who they choose to turn to for support. The report seeks necessary delegations to officers to make adjustments to allocations where there is evidence of changing need throughout the 12-month period.
- 1.4 Alongside HSF, the council will continue to provide a wide range of welfare advice services as well as financial hardship support. This includes Council Tax Reduction discounts, other discretionary funds, support to CVS advice services, and community grant support. A key focus will be on continuing to develop advice and support to improve energy efficiency. The report also provides an update on the key areas of work that have been undertaken across the city in response to the Cost of Living crisis.
- 1.5 These update reports to Policy & Resources Committee – this is the third in the series – attempt to pull together in one place the latest reference information and updates for residents, partners and other interested parties and therefore contain a lot of information, data and updates regarding the impact and responses to the cost of living crisis in the city.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 That the Policy & Resources Committee notes the update on key areas of work across the city in response to the rising cost of living set out in Appendix 1.
- 2.2 That the Policy & Resources Committee notes the outcome of the council's lobbying of central government for increased measures to prevent homelessness caused by the cost of living crisis and an increase to the National Living Wage (Appendix 2).
- 2.3 That the Policy & Resources Committee notes the report in Appendix 3 from the Institute for Employment Studies, analysing the impact of areas and groups most at risk from the rising cost of living in the Brighton Greater Area.
- 2.4 That the Policy & Resources Committee notes the outcomes of the Cost of Living Summit, a summary of which can be found in Appendix 4.
- 2.5 That the Policy & Resources Committee notes the information leaflet sent to all households in the city in November, detailing the additional support available this winter through the government's Household Support Fund, plus information on how to access help and support with energy, money advice, food and health and wellbeing support, which can be found in Appendix 5.
- 2.6 That the Policy & Resources Committee approves the proposed indicative allocation of the Household Support Fund for 2023/24 as set out at 4.13 noting the associated Equality Impact Assessment at Appendix 6.
- 2.7 That the Policy & Resources Committee delegates adjustments to allocations to the Chief Finance Officer, within the bounds of the council's rules for virement, where there is evidence of changing need throughout the 12-month period, to ensure that all of the fund is utilised.
- 2.8 That the Policy & Resources committee approves the proposed distribution of any excess funding emanating from the government's new Council Tax Support scheme, after the £25 discount to each household eligible for Council Tax Reduction has been administered, as set out in paragraph 4.20 of the report.

3 Context and background information

Cost of Living Crisis

- 3.1 As reported to 6 October Policy & Resources Committee, the council, in collaboration with the local Community & Voluntary Sector (CVS) has put in place a number of working groups to ensure a coordinated response to the rising cost of living. The groups include:
 - Cost of Living Officer Group (Leads)
 - Welfare Support & Financial Assistance Group
 - Fuel Poverty & Affordable Warmth Steering Group
 - Food Cell
 - Mental Health and Debt Steering Group
- 3.2 These groups ensure that data and knowledge are shared, using data analysis software such as the 'Low Income Family Tracker' (LIFT), so that support can be effectively prioritised and aligned to optimise the use of the

limited resources and funding available. This has enabled provision of a joined-up range of advice and financial support focused on identified households and individuals in need, both through the council's Welfare Support teams and its Community Hub, and through partner and associate CVS organisations. This is provided via existing council resources and programmes, and with emergency resources provided by government, mainly through the Household Support Fund.

- 3.3 The Household Support Fund 2023/24 (HSF) should enable continuation of additional emergency support for the next year from April 2023. However, there are concerns that this response will not be sufficient to outweigh growing food and fuel poverty across the city, or prevent additional homelessness, and can do nothing to support small businesses, whose failures could further compound financial hardship through job losses.
- 3.4 The report below considers these matters and provides brief updates on key topic areas together with proposed actions. The support and responses needed from government are also discussed.

Lobbying and Cost of Living Summit update

- 3.5 At P&R committee on 6 October, it was agreed that the council would lobby government for urgent and sustained support throughout the cost of living crisis for both residents and local businesses. A total of 17 lobbying actions were agreed. It was also agreed that the council would hold a Cost of Living Summit to bring together key institutions in the city. The Policy, Partnership & Scrutiny team is leading the council's lobbying response to the cost of living crisis and organised the recent Cost of Living Summit.
- 3.6 Noting the importance of central government hearing directly from local government on how the crisis is impacting people and businesses in localities across the country, the PPS team worked with colleagues across the council to deliver the lobbying actions. Lead officers compiled letters to government that were signed by the Leader of the Council, on behalf of Brighton & Hove City Council, supported by a [news story on the call for more support for small businesses](#). The letters referenced the measures outlined in the government's Autumn Statement and advised where measures had not gone far enough.
- 3.7 On 23 January a response was received from Kevin Hollinrake MP, Minister for Enterprise, Markets and Small Business within the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy. On 21 February a response was received from Felicity Buchan MP, Minister for Housing and Homelessness, Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities. Both responses can be found at Appendix 2.
- 3.8 The council is also supporting the following campaigns:
 - The national #BusinessSOS campaign raising awareness of the impacts on small and medium-sized enterprises;
 - The ['Warm This Winter'](#) campaign calling on government to provide emergency support, help to upgrade homes and access to cheap energy to lessen reliance on gas and oil;
 - The ['Free School Meals for All'](#) open letter to the Prime Minister.

- The Children’s Society’s open letter to the Chancellor to invest in and strengthen the Household Support Fund [Sign letter to the Chancellor | The Children's Society \(childrenssociety.org.uk\)](#)
 - Guide dogs open letter to the Chancellor regarding the Cost of Living and families with a vision impaired child ([Guide Dogs open letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer](#)).
- 3.9 In response to the P&R Committee resolution requiring the council to work with regional public and private sector partners in the Greater Brighton Economic Board (GBEB) to assess the impact of the cost of living to support local SME businesses through sharing intelligence and offering mutual support, GBEB commissioned the Institute of Employment Studies (IES) to look at the impact of the cost of living crisis and wider economic outlook on the Greater Brighton Economy. The report was presented to GBEB on 7 February and is included as Appendix 3 to this report.
- 3.10 More broadly, officers continue to be involved in a range of working groups involving DWP, NHS and Community & Voluntary Sector partners to coordinate and align approaches across the city and ensure that support is reaching those who need it most.
- 3.11 The Cost of Living Summit took place on the morning of Tuesday 24 January. Information packs, containing the latest data, were shared with partners in advance. The summit, which was very well attended, aimed to bring partners together to gain a shared understanding of the challenges and to explore ideas for responding collectively.
- 3.12 Attendees heard from Gavin Stewart of the Brighton & Hove Economic Partnership and Brighton Business Improvement District on the impact on local businesses, as well as receiving an update on the impact on food and energy from Vic Borrill of the Brighton & Hove Food Partnership and Kayla Ente of Brighton & Hove Energy Services Co-operative.
- 3.13 There are high levels of motivation to work collectively across the city. Participant turn-out, energy and engagement at the Summit was high, with partners keen to collaborate. A summary of the summit can be found at Appendix 4.

Communications Campaigns

Information and advice for residents.

As part of the Comms campaign agreed at the October P&R meeting, to promote awareness of available advice and support for those in need and to re-promote charitable giving toward the Cost of Living crisis from those who are able and willing to help, the council sent out a 4 page leaflet to all households in the city detailing the additional support available this winter through the government’s Household Support Fund, plus information on how to access help and support with energy, money advice, food, and health and wellbeing support. It was delivered week commencing 28 November. A copy of the leaflet is attached for your reference at Appendix 5.

The council have also set up a new section on the council website at www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/cost-living-support with detailed information on advice and support available to help any residents struggling this winter.

It includes advice and information on:

- [Emergency help and money advice](#)
Information on claiming benefits and emergency help to pay for food, energy and other essentials, and where to get advice to manage your money.
- [Help with energy bills](#)
Information on support available for energy bills and advice about keeping your home warm and saving energy.
- [Help with food, meals and shopping](#)
Information on free school meals, free food vouchers and free or low cost food, and how to donate food and volunteer to help those struggling to afford food.
- [Health and wellbeing support](#)
Information on mental health support, free physical activities, support to help people stop smoking, manage weight and look after their wellbeing.

Up to the 19th February, there have been over 23,000 visits to our cost of living webpages. The Warm Welcome directory and Help with Energy Bills continue to be the most viewed pages outside the Cost of Living section landing page.

Warm welcome directory

- 3.14 The council has worked with community partners to set up an online 'Warm Welcome Directory' with information on free indoor activities and places residents can go to keep warm across the city this winter. There are now 51 participating places which includes council buildings and Community Voluntary Sector. In the last month we have seen an increase in faith organisations joining the directory. The council is offering each participating place a small grant of £350 to help towards the running costs. The directory is linked to from the main BHCC webpage and is available at www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/warm-welcome.

Just Giving Campaign

- 3.15 Since May 2022, the city council has collaborated with Brighton & Hove Citizen Advice and Brighton & Hove Food Partnership to help set up a cost of living appeal – aiming to raise money to help people in poverty in Brighton & Hove with food and fuel costs through vouchers, food parcels, and low energy items like electric blankets and slow cookers to enable people to maintain their health. The Just Giving campaign has raised more than £74,000 so far and is currently being distributed - [Brighton & Hove Cost of Living Crisis Appeal JustGiving page](#).

4 Household Support Fund 2023/24

- 4.1 The Household Support Fund has been provided to Local Authorities by the government for 18 months now, in 3 separate allocations up to 31 March 2023. The first tranche was focused on recovery from the pandemic, but later tranches have shifted focus to support the cost of living. The purpose of the fund is to provide support to households in need, with food, fuel and other essential items. Local Authorities are each responsible for determining how the fund will be used in their area within the bounds of published government guidance for the fund.

- 4.2 A further allocation has been provided to Local Authorities for 2023/24, although this time covering the whole year. The government requires Local Authorities to spend all of the allocation by the end of the period and no funding can be carried over. The current HSF finishes at the end of March 2023, and the HSF 2023/24 will run from 1 April 2023 through to 31 March 2024. As each HSF allocation is a separate fund with new guidance, the HSF for 2023/24 will require approval of a new local allocation of the funds.
- 4.3 Previous allocations of this funding have required an element of ringfencing in the way in which the grants are distributed, focusing on particular demographics, such as families with children, or pensioners. The guidance for HSF 2023/24 has now been published without any ringfenced areas for the funding to take into account, although the guidance does make reference to considerations around sustainable energy solutions. It has requested additional reporting requirements around how many households with disabled occupants have been supported and for the first time allows for the funding of advice services. This change could provide a strategic opportunity to build on the temporary intervention of HSF awards with more sustainable, longer-term solutions to financial crisis. The amended guidance was received at short notice, but a modest allocation has been set aside to develop an appropriate linked advice function. The guidance requires there to be a link between HSF awards and advice so officers will consider the most effective and practical way of achieving this.
- 4.4 Publicity of the previous HSF, along with the corresponding increase in need has resulted in a stark increase in requests to the scheme. The definition of crisis, by default, has expanded accordingly in order to acknowledge the fact that so many people in the city, and nationwide, now find themselves in this position. Food banks and other third sector partners are reporting a lot of return demand, as well as households being pushed on to other services.
- 4.5 We know that where temporary monetary support is linked in with advice, there is a positive impact in terms of financial sustainability for those households. This has been demonstrated through previous successful schemes such as:
- Warmth for Wellbeing - linking grants with advice;
 - The LDSF 3-3-3 scheme (dormant under HSF funding) linked a sequence of 3 sets of vouchers with advice, with the aim of lifting people out of crisis for longer;
 - The Lift Up programme at Money Advice Plus, helping Just About Managing households (low income, but not in receipt of out of work benefits) with HSF grants and linked financial advice. The advice part of this scheme had to be separately funded but has produced some worthwhile outcomes for households being able to stabilise their finances and either move into work or maintain their employment status.
- 4.6 Feedback from CVS throughout our HSF delivery partnership, and from the Advice Matters and Moneyworks partnerships' [Community Needs Assessment](#), has been that whilst the HSF is crucial to the city during cost of living crisis, the demand for advice has remained very high and the citywide advice infrastructure has at times been beyond capacity, with some services temporarily closing to new referrals. In Brighton and Hove, each previous allocation of HSF money has been distributed across a broad range of

services, initiatives and community organisations with a priority of providing food and fuel support. The fund has provided for Free School Meals in the school holidays, and it has also enabled the Local Discretionary Social Fund to scale up the level of crisis support provided to households in the city. It has added funds to the Warmth for Wellbeing programme, and it has supported the Brighton & Hove Food Partnership. It has also distributed funds to a wide range of community organisations.

- 4.7 The Brighton and Hove Food Partnership has been central to the planning, coordination and delivery of funding from HSF to meet food poverty needs in the city. The council's role as an initial stakeholder in the development of the BHFP has been highlighted as an example of good council practice in addressing the challenges brought about by the Cost of Living crisis. [Brighton & Hove City Council's case study](#) can be found on the Local Government Association website, highlighting the benefits of partnership working with community organisations. Our collaborative work through HSF has further built upon these existing strong relationships with third sector partners.
- 4.8 The overall approach to the scheme over the three previous periods has been to maximise the ways in which households can access support. Residents can approach the council directly for help from the Local Discretionary Social Fund or Community Hub, or they might instead access support through their community group, or via a food bank. Free School Meals provide a blanket of voucher support during school holidays. Additionally, the HSF has supported sustainability schemes such as Warmth for Wellbeing, providing fuel grants as a complement to advice (which itself is not funded by HSF).
- 4.9 Gathering feedback and examples of good practice in delivering HSF funds is key to the planning and delivery of HSF. A survey will be carried out with community organisations who have helped to deliver the funds previously and our partners throughout the Community and Voluntary Sector (CVS). This will ensure that there is a thorough understanding of need in the community and that the policy design has been effective in reaching out into the community, fully utilising diverse and accessible pathways for all.
- 4.10 HSF guidelines, unusually, did not ringfence the funding to those in receipt of means-tested benefits or set an income threshold. This enabled us to build on a new scheme that delivered support to households often referred to as Just About Managing (or JAMs). These households would not be in receipt of a means-tested benefit and would often be working on a low income, yet still struggling to afford their basic, essential needs. Working in partnership with the advice sector and delivered through Money Advice Plus, HSF was able to fund the ['Lift-Up'](#) scheme, which linked crisis grant payments with ongoing debt advice and financial capability coaching. There is a general theme of supporting households to stay in work, increase their hours or move into work, although the scheme is not limited by this criteria. The Lift-Up scheme has encouraged households who have traditionally not sought help from the Local Authority to come forward, receive help and link into advice services. This is a new demographic of people struggling, whose needs are often varied and unusual, stretching our accepted definitions what is traditionally considered crisis support. However, it is clear to see the ongoing financial sustainability benefits of these one-off awards, which assist people into or maintain employment status. Examples of grants awarded include:

- Paying upfront childcare or travel costs for the first month of employment until they receive their first salary payment in arrears.
- Helping to pay one month's mortgage repayment for a person unable to work through serious ill health. Or helping to pay for food and utility costs for those unable to work temporarily through ill health.
- Upfront costs of medical assessments, or licencing requirements needed to move into work.
- And even funding a set of knives, necessary to enable a young person to accept a job as a chef.

4.11 Demands on the fund are increasing, although the amount given to the Local Authority has remained static since the first Household Support Fund in 2021, without any inflationary uplift or caseload recognition. Reflecting back on the previous allocations of HSF, one issue that was consistent though each round of funding was the need for additional staffing to administer the significant increase in demand experienced by those delivering the fund. Without sufficient resources, delays in processing emergency payments occur and it is not possible to deliver help in the timely manner that is required. The range of supported organisations has also increased over successive HSF allocations, partly due to the additional numbers of food banks in the city that have opened to meet the presenting need. The funding pot therefore has to stretch further.

4.12 In order to address pressures experienced in delivering the HSF, including the need for some increase in staffing and increased demands on LDSF and Discretionary Council Tax Reduction (DCTR) support, some realignment of allocations will be required for the 2023/24 HSF. This realignment recognises that formal support options, such as LDSF or CTR, remain the primary route of support for those in need but that these entail necessary processes to ensure the fair and equitable distribution of funds. However, where there is immediate need, this is where households will turn to the third sector food banks and clubs to assist them. It is therefore more efficient for the delivery of HSF and more supportive of those in need if the funds are distributed to ensure help is provided at the first door a household presents to.

4.13 The proposed allocation for 2023/24 is as follows:

Area of Support	Proposed Allocation (£)
Free School Meals vouchers - 11 weeks, continuing previous amounts (£15), including early years to 6th Form	1,485,000
Local Discretionary Social Fund (LDSF) awards	1,418,000
Community Organisations, including food banks, food stores and other essentials.	310,000
Food clubs and providers of delivered meals	125,000
Brighton & Hove Food Partnership / Impact Initiatives	55,000
Sustainable energy solutions / BHESCO	35,000
Warmth for Wellbeing, including £0.030m for staffing and extra admin	219,000

Discretionary Council Tax Reduction (to work in conjunction with the Council Tax Support Fund)	140,000
Staffing - LDSF Officer x 3 (Sc 6), LDSF admin x 2 (Scale 4b), Community Hub Officer x 1 (Sc 5)	213,000
Local Lift Up scheme (for Just About Managing households)	85,000
Carers' Centre	20,000
Family Hubs (formerly Children's Centre allocation)	70,000
Children's Services – Section 17 payments, distributed by the Social Work pods	60,000
Advice staffing	45,000
Total Allocated	4,280,000

4.14 **Free School Meals:** A central element of HSF has been to provide Free School Meals (FSM) in the school holidays for qualifying low-income families. The proposed allocation continues the support at the same weekly level as the 2022/23 year. Families who are entitled to FSM will receive a £15 voucher for each child for each week of the school holidays. The total amount over a year is £1.485m. The Easter 2023 school holiday was covered under HSF tranche 3.

4.15 **Local Discretionary Social Fund:** The allocation for Local Discretionary Social Fund (LDSF) is £1.418m and this high value reflects the enormous leap in demand for crisis support. LDSF provides food vouchers, help with fuel payments and other essential items, along with larger items such as furniture and white goods. Prior to Covid-19, the LDSF fund was allocated from the council's budget, on a one-off basis, at a rate of £0.180m per annum. However, in January 2023 alone, the team spent £0.178m, almost equivalent to an entire year's budget in pre-Covid terms. HSF has therefore been essential for covering the significant increase in demand, to the extent that in 2022/23, the projected expenditure is £1.3m. The table below illustrates the growing demands:

Month	Number of applications	Amount of awards
April 2021	140	£17,337
April 2022	393	£86,366
January 2023	598	£178,924

4.16 For 2023/24, the council does not have any available one-off resources due to the impacts of inflation and growing demands for core services and therefore the LDSF will be entirely funded by HSF.

4.17 As noted above, the landscape for dealing with LDSF claims has changed dramatically because of a four-fold increase in applications over the last 2 years. Whilst it is not feasible or appropriate to quadruple the staffing provided by the fund, some increase is necessary to avoid unacceptable processing delays for people in crisis. A further impact of slow processing times is that more households turn to food banks and so the pressure is simply transferred elsewhere in the citywide welfare eco-system.

- 4.18 The government's guidance for the HSF allows for reasonable admin costs, and so in previous Household Support Funds, there were allocations for staffing. However, with the growing demand this turned out to be insufficient to cover the task effectively. In HSF 3, £0.065m was set aside for staffing, but as the six month period progressed, a further £0.049m had to be allocated from underspends elsewhere within the fund in order for the team to process all of the backlog cases. The base allocation has accordingly been increased in the 2023/24 allocation to £0.213m. This amount will pay for three Benefit Officers, two admin support officers and one Community Hub officer. While this will still present challenges in terms of covering leave and turnover of staff, this is considered to be a reasonable balance between minimising administrative costs and ensuring reasonable response times.
- 4.19 **Discretionary Council Tax Reduction:** Similarly to the LDSF, prior to 2023/24, the council allocated one-off amounts from its budget towards a Discretionary Council Tax Reduction (DCTR) fund, typically £0.200m in recent years. That amount has been supplemented by additional funding from HSF over the last 18 months. In the current financial year, £0.211m DCTR has been awarded up to the end of December 2022.
- 4.20 For 2023/24, the council does not have any available one-off resources due to the impacts of inflation and growing demands for core services and therefore, as for LDSF, the DCTR fund will be met from the Household Support Fund. However, this can be supplemented with funds from a separate central government grant that is intended to support the Council Tax Reduction scheme (see paragraph 4.20 below). The required allocation from the HSF is therefore lower and the proposal is to allocate £0.140m for the DCTR fund.
- 4.21 **Council Tax Support Fund:** Independently from HSF, the government has announced a new support scheme whereby households in receipt of Council Tax Reduction (CTR) will have an additional £25 deducted from their Council Tax bill for the year 2023/24 (or if their balance is less than £25 their bill will be reduced to zero). The government has allocated £0.492m to Brighton & Hove City Council to be distributed onto accounts automatically as part of Annual Billing. This will be done without the need for existing CTR recipients to apply. The government guidance states that any funds left over after this distribution can be used at the discretion of the Local Authority 'to establish their own local approach to helping economically vulnerable households with council tax bills'.
- 4.22 To receive an additional £25, a household must be entitled to CTR on 1 April 2023. There is currently a backlog in processing CTR cases, meaning that there could be eligible households who have not yet been awarded CTR at the time of Annual Billing. For this reason, it is not possible to project exactly how much funding is likely to be available for redistribution but it is projected to be between £0.050m and £0.075m.
- 4.23 The LA has discretion to take a local approach with the remaining fund and therefore it is recommended that:
- there is a grace period to the end of April, to allow for new cases moving in up to 30 April to be processed and awarded the extra £25;
 - On 1 May 2023 the remaining fund is re-allocated to the overall Discretionary Council Tax Reduction fund.

- 4.24 On 1 May 2023, the DCTR fund would then contain a mixture of £0.140m HSF funding, and an additional amount from Council Tax Support Fund when finalised. This combined budget will be monitored through the year and in the event of a projected underspend, funds can be diverted to areas of higher need (for example LDSF or community organisations).
- 4.25 **Community Organisations:** Another central principle of the HSF has been to partner with organisations in the voluntary sector to help us deliver the funding. For previous HSF tranches, partners in the voluntary sector have ensured that help reaches parts of the community that may not otherwise present themselves to the council for help, with the added benefit of linking that household into the wider support options that these organisations offer. The range of organisations supported also ensures that targeted support can be given to households with protected characteristics.
- 4.26 The range of supported organisations has increased over successive HSF tranches, partly due to the additional numbers of food banks in the city that have opened to meet the presenting need. To give an idea of these numbers, the HSF tranche 3 directly funded 35 community organisations, whilst the BHFP assisted approximately 30 groups with its collective funding (although there may be crossover from some organisations who used the BHFP Hub to top up on food and toiletries). Between community organisations (which includes many organisations providing food support), BHFP and food clubs/providers of prepared meals, there is an allocation of £0.490m. This exceeds the previous HSF tranche 3 offering of £0.230m (half-year) for these categories. However, it is acknowledged that with a growing emergency food sector, the funding therefore has to stretch further.
- 4.27 **Brighton and Hove Food Partnership/ Impact Initiative:** An amount of £0.055m has been allocated to the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership/ Impact Initiatives. This will pay for £0.038m of online food shopping undertaken by Impact Initiatives, emergency food vouchers issued by BHFP and purchase of food and cooking equipment. The allocation will also contribute £0.017m to the part funding of two posts (one at Impact and one at BHFP) to undertake the work. This includes answering calls from people in need, issuing vouchers and doing online shops, purchasing food and cooking equipment, making referrals to food banks and other agencies and keeping the information about food support up to date for others to use.
- 4.28 **Family Hubs:** There is a transformation programme currently underway, funded by the Department for Education, which includes the restructure of all Early Help services in the council. From 1 April 2023 Children's Centres will be part of the new Family Hub model of delivery for early help and will work with children aged 0-19 and up to 25 with SEND. Children's Centres have previously received HSF funding to enable them to support families living in food poverty with children aged 0-5 years. However, the Family Hub model will see a broader range of families coming under the scope of the new Family Hubs model.
- 4.29 Work is currently being undertaken to look at how the 2023/24 HSF allocation can be distributed through Family Hubs, with a revised eligibility criteria and process for distribution after a whole family assessment is completed. The expanded age range may mean that the monetary value or amount of vouchers that the family are given are reduced, or that vouchers are only

issued as a one-off emergency payment. These proposed new processes for distributing the funds can only be finalised once the transformation has been realised and a better understanding of the demand is gained.

5 Analysis and consideration of alternative options

- 5.1 The council has now successfully delivered 3 successive Household Support Funds, working in partnership with third sector organisations and collaboratively across the council, linking in with key services to ensure need is met in a way that minimises impact on service delivery and wider budget pressures. It is not perfect and the funding is not sufficient to meet all needs but the reach and distribution attempts to strike an equitable balance of support and access across those in need.
- 5.2 One alternative approach would be to centralise the funding and deliver the scheme through one point of access, such as the LDSF. Although the message of how to access the funds would be clear and simple, this approach would fail to understand or meet the individualised needs of some groups in the community. Some people prefer not to engage with statutory organisations, such as Local Authorities, or share information with a formal body. These people will often seek help from the charitable or voluntary sector instead and the support needs ideally should be delivered at that point of contact.
- 5.3 It is also understood that the council, in most cases, may not be able to provide ongoing support or be able to add any value to the original crisis payment. Third sector partners are likely to have more knowledge and experience in supporting a particular type of household, or someone with a protected characteristic. Lastly, having one point of application for all users of the fund would require significant staffing increases which would then take core funding away from the households in the community in need of it.
- 5.4 Regarding the Council Tax Support Fund, an alternative option was considered of continuing the automatic awards of £25 throughout the year for any new CTR case. However, that would deplete the remaining pot of discretionary money, possibly to zero. Whilst £25 will be of value to households in need, there will be greater impact in making a smaller number of more targeted higher value awards as part of the main Discretionary CTR scheme. It is important to add that DCTR can also be used to clear unrecoverable arrears from previous financial years for financially struggling households. Whilst the new Council Tax Support Fund can help to reduce the bill for households in this financial year, it will not relieve enough pressure for some households in greater need and it won't be able to reduce debt that remains from previous years.

6 Community engagement and consultation

- 6.1 The proposals have been discussed in meetings with the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership and the Welfare Support and Financial Assistance group, which includes representation from services within the council and also the voluntary sector, including Community Works and the Advice Matters / Moneyworks partnerships. There is broad recognition that more funding is needed on top of the allocation given to the Local Authority in order to meet demand. However, there is also recognition that without a solid administrative

infrastructure to support the HSF, paralysis in the system can occur, and the strain increases on the overall welfare eco-system in the city as households bounce around from one organisation to another, seeking help.

- 6.2 The council's Welfare, Revenues & Business Support (WRBS) officers will also be conducting a survey of its delivery partners regarding management of previous HSF tranches to gauge an understanding of successes, potential areas for improvements and examples of good practice. This will feed into any improvements identified for administering the fund over the 12-month period and help to inform planning for any similar schemes in the future.

7 Conclusion

- 7.1 HSF 2023/24 will provide much needed support to households across the city during the winter and beyond and this scheme is one of the key mechanisms that the council can employ to support its most vulnerable residents.

8 Financial implications

- 8.1 The Household Support Fund 2023/24 was announced on 17 November 2022 as part of the Autumn Statement. Nationally, it is set at the same value as the previous two 6-month tranches (£1 billion). The city council will receive £4.280m for the 2023/24 HSF.
- 8.2 Final guidance for the scheme is unrestricted, as for the previous HSF tranche, following widespread feedback from local authorities that restricting allocation to specific demographic groups does not enable optimum deployment of funds for those in need. The fund can therefore be allocated to any households in need, in any proportion. It can also be used to support limited administrative and technical resources and staffing, as well as advice, communication and awareness resources. It must be expended by 31 March 2024 and cannot be carried forward.

Finance officer consulted: Nigel Manvell Date consulted: 16/02/23

9 Legal implications

- 9.1 Policy & Resources Committee has delegated authority to make decisions regarding the allocation of financial and other resources addressed in this report, including the distribution of the specified funds. There are no specific legal implications arising from the recommendations in the report, with the proposed distribution of the HSF being undertaken in accordance with Government requirements.

Lawyer consulted: Elizabeth Culbert

Date consulted: 16.2.23

10 Equalities implications

- 10.1 As outlined in this report, the rise in the cost of living has negatively impacted disproportionately on some groups. The council is seeking continual feedback from its CVS partners to better understand the impacts on demographic groups with protected characteristics in Brighton & Hove and to ensure the funding is reaching those who are in greatest need. The information gleaned from this ongoing dialogue has fed into the Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

for the council's Cost of Living response and HSF delivery at Appendix 6 (to follow).

- 10.2 Through the community organisations that HSF is distributed to, the council is able to target support to those with protected characteristics who are experiencing a greater detrimental impact. The EIA helps to inform which groups require a more considered approach and which organisations should be targeted for funding distribution to alleviate this recognised hardship.

11 Sustainability implications

- 11.1 There are specific sustainability implications around fuel and energy. In particular, the council's retrofit programmes, programmes such as Warmth for Wellbeing, and the proposed support to organisations such as BHESCo and LEAP, to provide advice and support on how to save energy or improve energy efficiency, will all contribute to carbon reduction.

12 Public health implications:

- 12.1 There are specific Public Health implications around food and energy poverty. The health risks for certain groups are significantly higher from living in a cold home i.e. older people and people with disabilities and long term health conditions. Often these groups will incur a higher energy cost due to these issues and therefore not adequately heating their homes will have a disproportionate effect on health. The council's response to the Cost of Living situation, including its core budgets for local welfare assistance, working with partners and CVS organisations to provide support and advice, lobbying and recommendations to government, and local allocation and management of government support such as the Household Support Fund all contribute to minimising negative public health impacts.

Supporting Documentation

Appendices

1. Key Areas of Work – Updates and Information
2. Lobbying responses:
 - a) Letter from Felicity Buchan MP, Minister for Housing and Homelessness, Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities in response to lobbying for increased measures to prevent homelessness caused by the cost of living crisis and
 - b) Letter from Kevin Hollinrake MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, in response to lobbying for an increase to the National Living Wage
3. Institute for Employment Studies report – 'Cost of Living Impacts in Greater Brighton
4. Cost of Living Summit Outcomes
5. Information leaflet sent to all households
6. Equalities Impact Assessment (updated)