

1.0 Use of the Special Reserve Fund for Community Grants

- 1.1 The Special Reserve was set up a number of years ago. Following an urgent delegated decision by the Chief Executive on 3 April 2020<sup>1</sup> the uses of the Reserve have been extended to include “support the response to and reduce the impact of major incidents”. This allows it to be used for discretionary spend in response to Covid-19. The reserve can be used for other purposes (including “pump priming for initiatives for shared services, changes in working practice, major contract renewals, unexpected contract variation, and other financial pressures) and could be released to support General Fund expenditure. Therefore, it is not the intention that this Reserve should be used solely to provide these grants, or indeed just for discretionary spend in relation to Covid-19. The referenced delegated decision also “noted that any discretionary spend in respect of Covid-19 will be approved by the Service Director: Resources as Budget Manager, in consultation with the Executive Member for Finance and IT”.
- 1.2 Whilst the effect of the Coronavirus outbreak has impacted greatly on the population, it is those vulnerable communities that bear the brunt of the pandemic. The Food Foundation states that the pandemic ‘has exposed the extraordinary fragility of the food system.’<sup>2</sup>and the diminished access to one of the population’s basic needs.
- 1.3 To effectively respond to this pandemic, local authorities need to demonstrate innovation and flexible approaches to support the vulnerable. The release of the Special Reserves Fund seeks to support essential services which find themselves under increased pressure owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is proposed that this funding be concentrated in supporting three<sup>3</sup> specific areas in the first instance:
- Provision of Food and Essentials
  - Mental Health support (including the loneliness caused by isolation)
  - Domestic abuse support
- 1.4 The fund will be awarded under the application process and the principles set out under paragraphs 5 and 6, for the reasons detailed below.

2.0 Food and Essential Provision

- 2.1. Before the COVID-19 global pandemic, food provision groups provided an essential service to their communities. According to the Trussell Trust, 1.6m foodbank parcels were given out between April 2018 and March 2019.
- 2.2 The current pandemic and the measures taken to deal with it have led to economic instability resulting in job losses, reduced income owing to furloughing schemes, and the drying up of work for the self-employed. Food insecurity has subsequently increased, and it has been reported nationally by *The Independent* that the number of people requiring assistance from foodbanks has risen greatly since the start of the crisis.
- 2.3 The national picture is reflected in the food provision services in North Hertfordshire. The food provision ranges from those who provide food parcels of fresh and dry food, as well as cooked food for those unable to cook themselves, to a range of disadvantaged recipients

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/northherts-cms/files/y%20Item%201b%20-%20Third%20Quarter%20Revenue%20Monitoring%202019-20.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/covid-19-latest-impact-on-food/>

<sup>3</sup> NB the Council has a number of funding arrangements for bodies such as the North Herts Centre for Voluntary Services, Citizens Advice and Minority Ethnic Forum – the Council is not seeking to use the Special Reserve to duplicate existing funding for services such as debt advice at this stage, or help for businesses – as support is being offered through customer services’ channels such as: <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/emergency-planning/coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-help-businesses>

across the district such as families with young children, lone parent families, the elderly and the homeless.

- 2.4 For example, the Best Before Café are now rescuing over 1 tonne of food each week (around double what they were averaging per week in January) and are distributing to a wide variety of recipients from foodbank clients to single parents across the district. One of their recipients, The Chestnut Tree Family Centre, has seen its referrals double and continue to rise. Similarly, Hitchin Food Rescue Hub are receiving significantly more crates of food than previously and supplying to a number of contacts in the district such as Feed Up Warm Up, and those who distribute to areas of social housing, such as Jackman's Estate, Wilbury, Westbury, Westmill and Sunnyside. Similar work is occurring across the district to support vulnerable residents.
- 2.5 In addition to these kinds of providers there is also a plethora of mutual aid groups across the district (including in rural areas) who are assisting with provision of food and other essential items.
- 2.6 Demand for Meals on Wheels delivered by Hertfordshire Independent Living Service (HILS) has soared by 500% since lockdown. In March, the number of delivery routes in the St Albans area rose from 15 to 17 and the number of referrals rose from a monthly average of 15-20 to 89. 1,800 meals are now being provided across the county per day, with over 100 volunteers helping make deliveries<sup>4</sup>.
- 2.7 Many of these provision services are now running on unsustainable models. This is due to having lost their main source of income from donations due to the shutting down of their community activities, as well as people's inability to donate at this time.
- 2.8 While some providers have found that there remains much leftover food from supermarkets, they lack the ability to store these supplies and to distribute them equitably throughout the district.
- 2.9 Many independent food provision services receive no funding from central government. They would benefit from funding which they can use to create a more sustainable running model. This would enable them to provide a key service to the most vulnerable during this pandemic and to those who will require their services beyond it.
- 3.0 Mental Health Support
- 3.1 Whilst there is evidence of strong community connection in the local responses mounted against the pandemic, there have also been negative psychological impacts on many. There are numerous reports of the current situation exacerbating a number of mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder.
- 3.2 In addition to this, evidence suggests that the lockdown has deepened and made more widespread feelings of loneliness among the population. According to mentalhealth.org.uk, a survey of UK adults taken during lockdown found that 24% had experienced feelings of loneliness, compared to 10% of people before the lockdown. The survey noted the particular effect of this on young people, with 44% saying they had felt lonely since the lockdown. The charity notes that while many of us feel lonely sometimes, long-term loneliness is associated with increased risk of mental health issues like anxiety, depression and stress. A detrimental effect on residents' mental health could reduce their overall resilience and ability to cope.
- 3.3 Local providers of mental health support have noted a 'surge of enquiries from people suffering increased anxiety, and from people whose family relationships are suffering. In

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<sup>4</sup> Hertfordshire Local Economic Partnership COVID-19 Stakeholder Bulletin 29 April 2020

some cases, domestic abuse has occurred'. Appendix D provides an overview of the local work taking place.

#### 4.0 Domestic Abuse Support

4.1 For many victims of domestic abuse, the home is not a place of safety. The current lockdown has led to many victims having to spend more time there with their abuser whilst they are cut off from traditional escape routes.

4.2 According to a report by MPs there has been a surge in violence in the weeks since the lockdown was introduced, with a rise in killings, and the number of calls to the National Domestic Abuse helpline run by Refuge up 49% after three weeks. Refuge have stated that visits to the UK-wide National Domestic Abuse website for information were 150% higher than during the last week in February.

4.3 Other domestic abuse charities have also seen a huge increase in calls and online requests for help over the course of the lockdown. In London, more than 4000 arrests relating to domestic violence have been made in the six weeks up to April 19<sup>th</sup> 2020, while domestic abuse calls to the police have risen by about a third.

4.4 Those support organisations of victims of domestic violence in North Hertfordshire have seen their capacity stretched. Appendix C provides an overview of domestic abuse responses at a local level. CM to contact Martin Lawrence for any additional needs from Support organisations).

#### 5.0 Awarding Funding/Principles of Approach/ Decision

5.1. It is proposed that this funding is given out through a mixture of Grant funding arrangements (commissioning) and bidding through application.

5.2. **Larger Grants via Memorandum of Understanding:** One of the primary approaches will be via a commissioning process - Grant funding would be formalised with known providers through a Memorandum of Grant Funding. The bodies will be identified and approached by NHDC and asked to express an interest. It is the aim to predominately support and prioritise those groups that have broad coverage and effective infrastructure to provide this support (i.e. helping a range of people across the District) for the next 3-6 months. This would provide certainty of financial support to the organisation and a mechanism to monitor and evaluate activity, outputs and outcomes from established providers. Approval as per 1.1.

5.3 **Smaller Grants:** This will be via a District panel recommendation, to be arranged as soon as there are at least [3] applications nearing completion. Any awards made will adhere to the conditions of the Grant policy agreed by Cabinet on 28<sup>th</sup> January 2020. The restrictions in the Grants policy regarding organisations purchasing items for other organisations, and the restrictions regarding past funding, will be relaxed for this funding during the pandemic. The grant funding will be for 3-6 month. Approval as per 1.1. For grants covering a specific area (e.g. town or village) it would be expected that the maximum amount awarded would normally be £2k. For grants that cover a wide area (particularly the whole District) it would be expected that the maximum amount would normally be £5k. The amount allocated to these smaller grants in total would be £50k.

5.4 Applications will be reviewed robustly to ensure that a grant will support increased demand or a change in delivery model, as necessitated by the pandemic. The review will look for sound evidence to demonstrate this additional need.

5.5 *Note that Area Committee grants can still be applied for and considered in the normal manner [<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/community/grants/community-grants>], and the fund will not impact on the overall budget of Area Committees. Area Committee grants will be considered and approved by the Area Committee or the Executive Member for Community Engagement and Service Director Legal and Community in the normal way.*

## 6.0 Criteria

6.1 As was demonstrated above, the current crisis has helped create an exceptional and urgent level of need. As such, the criteria for funding should support the resilience of the district in a safe and accountable manner, but also aim to prevent unnecessary complication. The criteria to awarded is as follows:

- Provide a key service (within one of the three areas outlined above) to support those within the North Hertfordshire community who are socially or economically disadvantaged, or otherwise particularly vulnerable, during the pandemic and beyond it
- Have experienced and are able to demonstrate a stretching of resources as a result of the current pandemic
- Have relevant safeguarding policies and procedures in operation
- Be food hygiene compliant (where applicable)
- Adhere to government guidelines regarding COVID-19 (including social distancing, hygiene, and other safety measures)
- Have explored and/or sought funding, provisions, or resources from other bodies

### Background documents (to be published alongside protocol)

Grant Funding Agreement

Application form

Hertfordshire Coronavirus Domestic Abuse Response

Mental Health support across the district.