

Localised Support Scheme to replace the Social Fund: Draft Surrey Local Assistance Scheme Policy

1 Introduction

- 1.1 On 8 March 2012 the Welfare Reform Act received Royal Assent, heralding the biggest change to the welfare system for over 60 years. Included within the proposals was the abolition of the discretionary Social Fund administered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). From April 2013, discretionary local provision will be administered by top-tier or unitary local authorities.
- 1.2 The government has stated that it believes that local delivery will empower local authorities to better identify and meet the needs of residents.
- 1.3 The elements of the Discretionary Social Fund that will be replaced with local provision are:
 - Community Care Grants
 - Crisis Loans for living expenses

There are other elements of the Social Fund, such as Crisis Loan Alignments, Budgeting Loans and Maternity Grants which are not being devolved to local authorities and will remain the responsibility of the DWP.
- 1.4 The outgoing DWP policy states that Crisis Loans are to meet immediate needs such as general living expenses or items needed following a disaster and entitlement is not dependent upon receipt of a benefit. Community Care Grants (CCG's) are non-repayable grants to enable residents to live in the community and are conditional upon receipt of an income related benefit.
- 1.5 This document sets out the Council's policy for administering Surrey's new Local Assistance Scheme.

2 Purpose of the scheme

- 2.1 The purpose of the new Surrey Local Assistance scheme is to replace those elements of the Social Fund which will no longer be administered by the DWP: specifically Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans for living expenses. The scheme will be administered by the Shared Service Centre within Surrey County Council.
- 2.2 The scheme will seek to assist residents in meeting their needs for subsistence or financial support where they are unable to meet their immediate short term needs or where they require assistance to maintain their independence within the community.
- 2.3 The scheme seeks to treat all applicants fairly and equitably with full consideration given to their circumstances. The scheme will seek to signpost to alternative avenues of support or funding where possible in order to protect the remaining funds for residents in the most acute need.
- 2.4 Consideration will be given to the nature, extent and urgency of the need in every case where an application for assistance is made.
- 2.5 In accordance with equalities legislation a full Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) has taken place to ensure that the scheme does not negatively impact upon groups with protected characteristics.

3 Targeted scenarios for support

- 3.1 The scheme will consider paying awards for two types of need: to applicants who require immediate support and to applicants who require assistance to establish or maintain a home in the community.
- 3.2 Applicants who are most likely to require this form of assistance may include:
- Families under exceptional pressure
 - Single parents
 - Homeless people or rough sleepers
 - Older people
 - People fleeing domestic abuse
 - Young people leaving care
 - People moving out of institutional or residential care
 - Ex-offenders leaving prison or detention centres
 - Chronically or terminally ill people
 - People with alcohol or substance misuse problems
 - People with learning difficulties
- 3.3 This list is not exhaustive and applicants will be considered on a case by case basis.
- 3.4 It is intended that applications should be assessed on the basis of presenting need. Awards will not be refused on the grounds that the applicant's behaviour or actions have contributed to their financial hardship.
- 3.5 Awards of immediate financial assistance may be made to applicants who:
- Have no essential food
 - Need essential goods for children
 - Have no heating
 - Require help with emergency travel costs
 - Have suffered a major upheaval or disaster
- 3.6 Assistance to establish or maintain a new home in the community may be considered for applicants who:
- Have been in long term care
 - Have left prison
 - Have fled domestic abuse
 - Move to supported accommodation/independent living
 - Need essential repairs to heating systems or
 - Need essential repair to modes of travel which they are dependent on
- 3.7 These scenarios are not exhaustive and other exceptional circumstances will be considered on a case by case basis.

3.6 Awards could be to help with the provision of:

- Beds
- Bedding
- Essential white goods
- Provision of heating appliances
- Essential domestic appliances/cookware
- Essential domestic furniture
- Clothing for expectant mothers or babies
- Emergency transport costs
- Redecoration

3.7 Awards would not normally be given for:

- A television or satellite cost or repair
- Housing costs or arrears of rent
- Costs normally met by state support or benefits including Universal Credit
- Debts
- TV license
- Installation of a telephone or telephone line
- Costs associated with care provision
- Non-essential white goods and domestic appliances

3.8 The scheme will seek to provide holistic support, taking into account alternative local provision including Discretionary Housing Payments, Disability Related Expenditure allowances within social care charging policy, Council Tax Support and Disabled Facilities Grant. The scheme will actively seek partnership arrangements with local organisations that can provide assistance such as furniture re-use organisations and voluntary sector organisations.

3.9 The scheme will also seek to ensure that the support is sustainable. Applicants who submit repeat applications or are identified as in need of requiring another form of assistance will be referred to an appropriate local advice service for support such as debt advice or counselling services.

3.10 Other than in very exceptional circumstances, such as unforeseen disaster, repeat applications will be limited to no more than 3 in any 12 month period.

Eligibility

- 4.1 To be eligible for the scheme, applicants should meet the following criteria:
- Be aged 16 or over
and
 - Be able to prove residence in Surrey or that their 'centre of interest' is within Surrey
and
 - On a low income or means-tested benefit
and
 - requiring further resource to either:
 - meet the basic needs of themselves or their dependents
or
 - maintain or establish a home in the community
- 4.2 The Council will consider available information on income and savings to determine if a customer is eligible for an award.
- 4.3 Where the applicant has available income or savings that are adequate to meet the needs identified, the application will be refused.
- 4.4 All requests will be considered on an individual basis with due account given to the vulnerability and personal circumstances of each applicant.
- 4.5 Applications from members of the same household will be treated as repeat applications – see paragraph 5.5.

5 The Application Process

- 5.1 People who wish to make an application to the scheme will do so via their local Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB). The CABx will, where possible, look to signpost to alternative provision, thus maximising availability of Local Assistance Scheme funds for those most in need.
- 5.2 The application process will provide consistent and fair decision making by gathering appropriate data and supporting information.
- 5.3 Applicants may be asked by the CAB to provide suitable documentation to support their application such as identification, proof of their national insurance number and a recent bank statement. Where applicants fail to comply with reasonable requests to provide supporting documentation, it is likely that an award will not be made.
- 5.4 Once eligibility has been verified by the CAB, they will call the Shared Service Centre at SCC. The applicant will then be asked a number set questions by the Shared Service Centre. The Council will then assess the application before informing the applicant of the decision.
- 5.5 Repeat applications will be considered on a case by case basis and only where an applicant's circumstances have changed. There will be a limit of 3 awards per household in one financial year unless there are exceptional circumstances. People with a history of repeat applications will be referred to advice for sustainable support.

6 Methods of Payment

- 6.1 The scheme will seek to provide appropriate methods of awarding support and allow the Council to decide to whom the award should be made based upon the individual circumstances of each applicant.
- 6.2 Consideration will be given to making awards to the appropriate party which may include:
- The applicant
 - An authorised representative
 - Directly to a service or goods provider
- 6.3 Payment methods will include:
- Payments to suppliers of suitable goods or services (such as Surrey Reuse Network)
 - Pre-payment cards for goods/heating
 - Cash payments will not be made, but pre-payment cards may be issued where appropriate to enable access to cash.
- 6.4 The delivery method of providing support will be flexible in how, when and where awards will be given to reflect the individual requirements of each application.

7 Rights of Review

- 7.1 The applicant or their authorised representative will have the right to request that the decision be reviewed. In such cases, an independent person from within the Council will be appointed to undertake the review.
- 7.2 If the applicant is not satisfied with the outcome of the internal review, they will have the option to make a complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman.
- 7.3 If the applicant is unhappy with the way that their application is handled, they will be advised to follow the Council's complaint's procedure.

8 Financial Constraints and Controls

- 8.1 Central government funding to local authorities for discretionary schemes will be limited, taking into account the historic data available on past social fund payments.
- 8.2 Annual funding will normally be limited in accordance with the award received from central government, but in the event that there is a local emergency (for example flood or fire) affecting large numbers of households, the Council may wish to review available funds.
- 8.3 All financial management will be subject to monthly and quarterly monitoring. The Council will seek to manage funds to ensure that support is available for priority cases throughout the year.
- 8.4 ICT systems will be implemented which will allow the Council to record and monitor the following information:
- Payment of awards
 - Methods of payment
 - Projected allocation of funds
 - Awards made
 - Equalities data
 - Speed of awards and appeals
- 8.5 The scheme will seek to deter fraudulent claims and false statements, ensuring appropriate controls are in place and swift action is taken where required. This will maximise the limited funding available for those most in need.

This page is intentionally left blank