



POLICY AND PERFORMANCE TRANSFORMATION AND RESOURCE COMMITTEE
1 FEBRUARY 2016

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| REPORT TITLE | LOCAL WELFARE ASSISTANCE SCHEME |
| REPORT OF | JOE BLOTT - STRATEGIC DIRECTOR OF TRANSFORMATION AND RESOURCES |

REPORT SUMMARY

This report sets out the changes to the operation of Wirral's Local Welfare Assistance scheme and associated financial position to date, following the implementation of a number of the recommendations made by Cabinet on 29 June 2015. The matter affects all wards within the Borough.

RECOMMENDATION/S

Members are asked to acknowledge the progress made and recommend to Cabinet that the actions introduced in respect of 2015/2016 are continued and that Wirral's Local Welfare Assistance Support Scheme is therefore maintained, albeit on a moderated basis during 2016/2017 utilising the projected residual funding of £414,820.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1. Cabinet's direction of 29 June 2015, that as part of its 2016/2017 work programme, Transformation and Resource, Policy and Performance Committee undertakes a review of the capacity to offer continued Welfare Assistance Support during 2016/2017.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1. The report is intended to support Members undertake the directed review of provision and the scope for continued or a similar level of provision during 2016/2017. At the point of review any other options may then be considered

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 On 10 February 2015 Cabinet agreed as part of its budget resolutions that a total of £900,000 would be released from reserve to support the continuation of the scheme for the duration of 2015/2016. The £900,000 being funded through the previous two years underspent Government Grant specifically allocated for the provision of Local Welfare Assistance. Central funding was withdrawn from 1 April 2015 with the Government recommending that local authorities should consider funding future schemes from their general fund.
- 3.2. Transformation and Resources Policy and Performance Committee agreed to form a Task and Finish Scrutiny Panel to review Wirral's scheme. Their findings and recommendations to Cabinet being detailed in their Local Welfare Assistance Scheme Scrutiny Review report of June 2015, with consideration of a revised scheme being effective from 1st August 2015.
- 3.3. Following consideration of this report, in its meeting of 29 June 2015, Cabinet set out its findings and recommendations to be actioned, or otherwise considered, by the Head of Business Processes.
- 3.4. Activity together with the present position with regard to each recommendation is detailed below. With specific regard to the feasibility of referring successful applications for support to Wirral Food Bank, Officers have detailed a small number of logistical considerations which ought to be included in any further deliberations around this option and through any residual 2016/2017 scheme, which might be funded through any unspent amount remaining of the £900,000 reserve.

3.5. Recommendation 1 – The Review Panel recommends that Wirral Council continues to administer and maintain the Local Welfare Assistance Scheme with the remaining budget available in line with the officer proposal but with consideration to:

- i. Reviewing and redefining what items constitute an essential need with a view to excluding from the scheme or reducing the circumstances in which they are provided;

Actions:

- Officers reviewed all expenditure items and on the basis of findings it was proposed that the only essential items were food and fuel for the general application group. Those applicants presenting with exceptional requirements would however need to continue to be considered on a case by case basis with regard to appropriate awards.
- Applicants with exceptional needs were determined as those referred for assistance from the Council's Housing Priority Panel and some applicants who were in the process of establishing their place and home within the community, for example, those leaving institutions, or perhaps ending a custodial sentence would, through necessity, be considered for the wider range of assistance available.

- ii. Excluding washing machines as an award provided from the scheme directly, except in exceptional circumstances, and referring these applications to Energy Projects Plus:

Action:

- Awards of washing machines dropped from 656 in 2014/15 to 15 from April – December 2015/16 with only 1 award after 1 August 2015. Referrals to Energy Projects Plus were then made for those applicants who were in need, although not necessarily assessed as having exceptional need.

- iii. Referring applications for white goods which have been assessed as not meeting the Council's criteria and where a potential fuel debt issue has been identified to Energy Projects Plus.

Action:

- All applicants who had fuel debt were signposted to Energy Project Plus .Referrals were additionally made for those applicants who were assessed as having a requirement for white goods (but where their presenting need was not necessarily exceptional).

3.6. Recommendation 2 - The Emergency Utility Credit which is available to British gas customers who have fallen into debt and are on prepayment meters should be effectively promoted by the Council. Applicants identified through The Local Welfare Assistance Scheme as being eligible should be signposted to Energy Projects Plus for an assessment and application to be made.

Actions:

- All applications for Local Welfare Assistance whether the application is declined, or an award is made are sent details of a variety of sources of help, including links to the Council's own webpages and those of other organisations.
- Applicants visiting a One Stop Shop will be given appropriate advice on the options of support available which does include the opportunity to attend a personalised debt advice meeting. This is consistent with the core Local Welfare Assistance Scheme application process and broader Corporate Customer Contact/Access Strategy.
- Members may however now wish to consider whether this response ensures that those who are the most vulnerable and /or perhaps not able to navigate web based services are not disadvantaged and perhaps might, in future, be offered a direct, personalised referral service.

3.7. Recommendation 3 - Officers should explore the feasibility of referring successful applications for essential food to Wirral Food Bank, or any identified food bank that can service all of Wirral, with an appropriate donation being made from the remaining budget to help cover some operational costs. The Review Panel suggest that how this is achieved should be determined by officers to ensure that actual benefits can be identified and delivered and to ensure that the Council's Contract Procedure Rules are complied with.

Actions:

- Based on awards made during 2014/2015, Officers estimated that this proposal would result in increasing referrals to Wirral Food bank by around 9,500 annually.
- Wirral Food Bank generally allows awards of foodstuff for a three day period. This differs from the current Local Welfare Assistance Scheme which basis' it's award on individual need and can therefore, often just cover one day where circumstances dictate that this is appropriate and meets the applicants presenting need.
- In order to estimate the value of an appropriate donation from the fund to Wirral Food bank, without making any linked recommendation about its operational arrangements, a calculation was made assuming 9,500 awards would be made for a three day period. This would suggest that a donation of around £65,723.00p.a would be required.
- Investigations into the Corporate Procurement Process revealed that there are an additional two food banks operating on Wirral, although Wirral Food bank does appear to be the only service operating across the Borough.
- Following a period of investigation and review, the complexities of initiating changes in response to this specific recommendation which would be operable within the initial timeframe, covering the period 1 August 2015 to 31 March

2016, was deferred operationally with the specific intent that Members would be briefed with regard to findings and then able to more fully consider this option, perhaps making use of any residual funding , for the year 2016/2017.

- In lieu of further consideration by Members, the scheme continues to meet demand for assistance with food in the original manner and in accordance with the original scheme. In doing so it is not apparent that any related need has either not been met, or insufficiently met, although Members may of course wish to seek the view of local food bank provision.

3.8. Recommendation 4 - Publicity and communication plans should be reviewed to ensure there is take up and understanding of the scheme from all those who need it. This should include a broadcast to partner agencies to provide an update on the key aspects of the scheme from 1st August 2015.

Actions:

- The Local Welfare Assistance scheme is publicised through Wirral Council's new website, which was temporarily amended to advise of emergency provision arrangements during the Christmas period. This is consistent with the original scheme and with specific decisions made at that time around access to and operation of the scheme.
- Additional avenues for publicity are limited and whilst officers have given further consideration to the arrangements in place, any broader marketing of the scheme has to be balanced against the diminishing fund underpinning the extension of the scheme.
- Regular Liaison meetings with Local Registered Social Landlords routinely include an update on the Local Welfare Assistance scheme, other stakeholder organisations, such as the DWP and our private sector landlord group are aware of provision and any changes in scope. Customer Service Advisors, together with our Welfare Rights provision are able to offer appropriate advice and sign post those who they feel are in need to such support accordingly.
- Officers are as such able to express, with a fairly high level of confidence that those in need and, or their advocates, landlords or other representing third party stakeholders are sufficiently aware of the scheme and how it is accessed.
- In considering this matter, whilst being appropriately aware of the need to ensure the schemes accessibility, Officers have had to be mindful of any excessive demand linked to such publicity which could significantly impact on the financial capacity of the residual, or any future scheme together with the service area's staffing resource in administering it.

3.9. Recommendation 5 – Cabinet is requested to support a further review of the Local Welfare Assistance Scheme as part of the Transformation and Resources Policy and Performance committee's work programme for the 2016/17 municipal year. The objective of the review would be to identify any strategies for providing local welfare assistance once the budget set aside for local welfare assistance has been depleted.

Actions:

- This report is intended to support further consideration of the feasibility of a 2016/2017 Local Welfare provision. The tables shown in Appendix 3 is a comparison in the number of successful awards between 2014/2015 and the present year to 31 December 2015, together with the spend profile year to date. On the basis of activity it is estimated that the remaining financial provision will be in the region of £414,820k.
- Comparisons with awards made in 2014/15 to year to date 2015/16 show both volumes of applications and awards have decreased. With the successful awards remaining very stable at 43% of all applications in both years for food and fuel.
- Awards for non- essential items have dropped from 6396 in 2014/15 to 2228 April –December 2015/16

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1. With effect from 1 April 2015 direct Government support in respect of Local Welfare Support schemes was withdrawn leaving local authorities to consider whether they wished to continue to support any future schemes through their General Fund.
- 4.2. Since 1 April 2015 Wirral has been able to support continued , albeit, revised provision, by making use of residual funding awarded by the DWP in respect of the previous two years.
- 4.3. The present and year end projected financial positions are set out above. It is expected that of the original £900,000K made available some £414,820k will remain unspent at 31 March 2015.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 There is no specific duty on local authorities as to how or if they meet this provision as government views authorities need to be able to be flexible to provide this support in a way that is suitable and appropriate to meet the needs of local communities.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: ICT, STAFFING AND ASSETS

- 6.1 Applications in respect of support through Wirral's Local Welfare Assistance Scheme continue to be administered by a small group of officers within the Housing Benefit service who also administer the Discretionary Housing Payment Scheme, Free School Meals and benefit applications specifically in respect of Hostel accommodation. The team is managed by an experienced Team Leader, in turn supported by the Benefits Operational Manager who closely monitors administration of the provision and any issues arising out of the same. These arrangements will continue through until year end , with the scope in respect of resource and skill-set then being further accessible should a decision be made to continue this provision during 2016/2017.

6.2 Issues previously reported at a practical level, with which staff have to contend do continue, albeit at a lower level. Our one stop shop staff routinely deal with customers who are upset, angry or worried and they face difficulties with customers who are struggling to meet escalating financial commitments or who are refused an LWA award. It is anticipated that this trend is likely to continue as staff contend with an increasingly difficult role as the adverse impacts of welfare reform are seen. Training to support staff is in place while we keep under review the balance of security in place to support our staff whilst not impacting on site environment.

6.3 ASSETS & IT : There are none arising out of this report.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

8.1. In undertaking the directed review it is expected that all relevant risks associated with either the withdrawal of any level of support or the provision of support which is of a different nature will be duly considered.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

9.1. Consultation and engagement took place with a variety of key partner organisation and stakeholders during the development of the original Local Welfare Assistance Scheme. A small representative group joined Officers and Members in the more recent Scrutiny Review Engagement Workshops

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

9.1. A specific Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) was undertaken as part of Wirral's scheme development and design, and is at the following link; <http://www.wirral.gov.uk/my-services/community-and-living/equality-diversity-cohesion/equality-impact-assessments/eias-2010/finance>

9.2. A national EIA for Welfare Reform can be assessed at the following link: <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/policy/welfare-reform/legislation-and-key-documents/welfare-reform-act-2012/impact-assessments-and-equality/>

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APPENDICES

1. Local Welfare Assistance Scheme Scrutiny Review Report
2. Local Welfare Assistance Scheme for 2015/16 (from 1 August 2015).
3. Comparison Tables for number of successful awards

REFERENCE MATERIAL: None

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

| Council Meeting | | Date |
|---|------------------|--------------------------|
| Cabinet | (min 8) | 29 June 2015 |
| Policy and Performance (T&R) | (min 24) | 4 February 2015 |
| Council Excellence Overview and Scrutiny | (min 36) | 14 April 2014 |
| Cabinet | (min 164) | 13 March 2014 |
| Cabinet | (min 168) | 24 January 2013 |
| Council Excellence Overview and Scrutiny | (min 42) | 27 November 2012 |
| Cabinet | (min 51) | 19 July 2012 |
| Council Excellence Overview and Scrutiny | (min 98) | 26 March 2012 |
| Council Excellence Overview and Scrutiny | (min 138) | 17 November 2011 |
| Cabinet | (min 118) | 22 September 2011 |