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Discretionary support scheme policy

Last Modified February 28, 2024



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1 Introduction

1.1 The Welfare Reform Act 2012 abolished the discretionary Social Fund and introduced payments on account to replace Crisis Loan alignment payments and eventually Budgeting Loans. This paved the way for delivery of new local services to replace Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans for general living expenses. These elements of the Social Fund are replaced with discretionary local provision, administered by upper-tier or unitary local authorities from April 2013

1.2 The government has stated that it believes the service is better delivered locally and this will empower local communities to better identify and meet the needs of the most vulnerable. Through localising the service, access to other means of assistance may be improved

1.3 The elements of the discretionary social fund replaced with local provision with effect from April 2013 are:

- Crisis loans
- Community care grants

1.4 Other elements of the social fund such as maternity and funeral grants and alignment loans will remain the responsibility of DWP.

1.5 DWP policy stated that crisis loans were to meet immediate needs such as general living expenses or items needed following a disaster and entitlement was not dependent upon receipt of a benefit. Community Care Grants (CCG’s) were non-repayable grants to enable vulnerable people to live in the community and were conditional upon receipt of an income related benefit.

1.6 This document sets out Blackpool Council’s discretionary support scheme.

2. Discretionary support policy

2.1 The purpose of the Discretionary Support Scheme is to provide a local solution to replace those elements of the Social Fund no longer be administered by the DWP: specifically, community care grants and crisis loans. The scheme will be administered by revenues, benefits and Customer First service although all services will be able to refer clients into the scheme.

2.2 The scheme will assist vulnerable people 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 will meet the particular needs of Blackpool's most vulnerable residents and will be developed and administered in accordance with public sector equality and child poverty duties.

2.4 The scheme will ensure that there is high quality, consistent decision making including appropriate timescales and out of hours (i.e. evening and weekend) provision.

2.5 The scheme will treat each applicant fairly and equitably with full consideration given to their circumstances.

2.6 The scheme will not cover those who have sufficient income, savings or access to suitable credit; the scheme is not available to people who have no access to public funds as a condition of their immigration status.

2.7 The scheme will use alternative funding where appropriate e.g. Section 17 of the Children's Act 1989, Leaving Care Grants. This will help to protect the remaining funds for people who are in need.

2.8 The scheme will not cover needs which are more appropriately addressed by other discretionary funds or benefits. Specifically, it will not meet needs that should be addressed by Council Tax Reduction schemes, Discretionary Housing Payments or DWP provision.

2.9 Consideration will be given to the nature, extent and urgency of the need in every individual case.

2.10 Cash payments will be avoided where possible.

2.11 The scheme will endeavour to use proactive measures to identify and target support to those most in need and the council will engage with partner organisations in order to identify gaps in provision.

2.12 The council will work with other agencies including not for profit organisations to agree a referral process which makes effective use of relevant available local services and funding provision.

2.13 The scheme will provide holistic support, taking into account alternative local provision including Discretionary Housing Payments, Disability Related Expenditure allowances within social care charging policy, Council Tax Reduction and Disabled Facilities Grant. The scheme will actively seek partnership arrangements with local organisations that can provide assistance such as food banks and furniture re-cycling centres. It will work with local businesses to procure goods and services which provide an accessible, value for money service

2.14 The scheme will ensure that support is sustainable. People 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 or government agency for support such as budget, debt advice or income maximisation. Different support services will be encouraged to work together to deliver an approach that would prevent repeat applications.

3 Discretionary support scheme

3.1 The scheme will issue awards for two types of need: to people who require short term **emergency support** and to people who require **community care support** to establish or maintain a home independently in the community.

3.2 Groups most likely to require support may include (this list is not exhaustive):

- Families under exceptional pressure
- Homeless people or rough sleepers
- Older people at risk of harm
- People fleeing domestic abuse
- Young people leaving care in exceptional circumstances where the leaving care grant is insufficient
- People moving out of institutional or residential care
- Ex-offenders leaving prison or detention centres
- Chronically or terminally ill people
- People with learning disabilities
- People with mental health issues
- People who have been impacted by the COVID 19 pandemic, or where a need has been identified via other support schemes

3.3 Emergency support

Applications for awards of emergency support in a crisis may include people who:

- Have no essential food
- Need essential goods associated with infants/children

- Have no provision for heat or light
- Require help with emergency travel costs
- Have suffered a major upheaval or disaster
- Have been impacted financially by the COVID 19 pandemic

3.4 Awards could be to help with the provision of:

- Food
- Baby essentials such as nappies and baby milk
- Energy costs for heat or light
- Travel

3.5 There will normally be a limit on applications for emergency support to a maximum of one in any twelve month rolling period, although exceptions will apply

3.6 Community care support

Assistance to establish or maintain a new home in the community may be considered for people who (this list is not exhaustive):

- Have been in long term care
- Have left prison
- Have fled domestic violence
- Move to supported accommodation / independent living

3.6 Awards could be to help with the provision of:

- Beds
- Bedding
- Provision of heating appliances
- Some essential domestic appliances/cookware
- Essential domestic furniture
- Redecoration following a disaster or due to related health needs

3.7 Awards would not normally be given for:

- A television or satellite cost or repair
- Cookers, washers and other major appliances
- Installation of a telephone or telephone line
- Housing costs or arrears of rent
- Costs normally met by state support or benefits including Universal Credit
- Debts
- Motor vehicle expenses
- TV Licence
- Costs associated with care provision
- Shortfalls in Council Tax support awards or reductions in housing benefit including those associated with the social sector size criteria

3.8 These scenarios are not exhaustive and applications will be dealt with on an individual basis, identifying additional circumstances where support could be considered.

4 Eligibility

4.1 People who may be eligible for the scheme for emergency support are those:

- Aged 16+
- With a local connection. *(See explanation below)* There may be exceptions for example, where there is an emergency under the Civil Contingency Act
- Where this is the only way of preventing risk to health or safety i.e. the applicant has demonstrated that they are without immediate resource to meet the basic needs of themselves and / or their
- Have not exceeded the limit of one award in a 12 month rolling There may be exceptions, for example where a significant change of circumstances has taken place such as domestic violence cases.
- Who are not excluded from this scheme e.g.:
 - Residents in care facilities or foster care
 - Members of a religious order where they are being maintained
 - Prisoners released on temporary licence
 - Living at home as a dependant

4.2 People who may be eligible for the scheme for community care support are those:

- Aged 16+
- Satisfy one of the following:
 - Require support to remain in the community
 - Require support to become established in the community
 - Require help to ease exceptional family pressure
- Receive a qualifying means tested benefit:
 - Income Support
 - Income Based Jobseekers Allowance
 - Pension Credit
 - Income Related Employment and Support Allowance
 - Universal Credit
- Have not exceeded the limit of an award for a particular item in a 12 month rolling period. There may be exceptions, for example where a significant change of circumstances has taken place such as domestic violence cases
- Who are not excluded from this scheme e.g.:
 - Residents in care facilities
 - Members of a religious order where they are being maintained
 - Prisoners released on temporary licence
 - Individuals who have no recourse to public funds

Explanation of local connection:

- Local connection is where a person has lived in Blackpool for at least six of the last twelve months, or lived in Blackpool for at least three of the last five years, or have close or immediate family e.g. mother, father, brother, sister, adult son or daughter who live in Blackpool and have lived in Blackpool for more than five years, or have permanent employment in Blackpool.

4.3 Under new data sharing powers those administering the scheme will have access to DWP data in relation to income. The authority will consider available data on income and savings to determine if a person is eligible for an award.

4.4 Where the person has available savings or income that is adequate to meet the needs identified, the application may be refused.

4.5 All requests for assistance will be considered on an individual basis with due account given to the vulnerability and personal circumstances of each customer

4.6 The amount of remaining available funding will be relevant to the prioritisation of awards and this will require that expenditure is reviewed on a monthly basis. Should this approach be necessary, priorities will be determined with due regard to public sector equality and child poverty duties.

5 The application process

5.1 The application process will be clear, transparent and accessible and will be designed to provide consistent and fair decision making by gathering appropriate data and supporting information.

5.2 The application process will be flexible to avoid undue delays and reflect that some awards require more detailed information. Applications will primarily be made via online application or telephone if this is not viable for emergency payments and via online application and referral for community care payments.

5.3 Applications made from applicants' appointees or their representatives (subject to customer consent) will be considered. It is anticipated that referrals will be made from local authority support services, such as children's and young people's services, adult services, Housing Options and other appropriate outside agencies such as the probation service, hostels and advice agencies.

5.4 A referral process will enable representatives and advocates to assist those not able to apply in person.

5.5 Applications, payments and review requests will be processed in a timely manner and applications for emergency assistance will be prioritised. The required turnaround times will be the subject to affordability of delivery.

5.6 Repeat applications will be considered only in exceptional circumstances. People with a history of repeat applications will be referred for sustainable support and advice such as budgeting or debt advice.

6 Methods of payment

6.1 The scheme will provide appropriate methods of awarding support and allow the authority to decide to whom the award should be made based upon the individual circumstances of each applicant.

6.2 Cash payments will be avoided where possible.

6.3 Consideration will be given to making awards to the appropriate party which may include:

- The applicant
- Their partner
- An appointee or authorised representative
- Directly to a service or goods provider

6.4 Appropriate methods of payment will be used which may include:

- Payments to suppliers of suitable goods or services
- Arrangement with Post Office or Pay Point outlets to credit meter cards
- Goods and services from non-profit making organisations
- Travel vouchers

6.5 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.

6.6 Loans will not form part of the standard service provision

6.7 In most cases customers will not be required to repay any amounts granted. However, the scheme will allow the option to offer an award in the form of a loan with repayment arrangements made via instalment arrangement with the corporate debt service.

6.8 The value of an award will be considered on a case by case basis.

7 Rights of review

7.1 The applicant or their authorised representative will have the right to request that the decision be reviewed.

7.2 Reasons for a review of a decision could include:

- Award or repeat award refused
- Method of payment
- Value of award
- To whom the assistance is awarded

When requesting a review of a decision, the applicant will be expected to give reasons why they feel the original decision should be reviewed and provide additional information to support the request if appropriate.

7.3 The scheme will include a structured review process. People who disagree with a decision will request a review and provide additional information or evidence to support this

7.4 The review process has two stages:

- **Stage 1:** All requests to review a decision from an applicant or their representative to be considered by a decision maker and notified within agreed service levels
- **Stage 2:** If the applicant is still not satisfied with the outcome of the review, they may request a further review within an agreed timescale of being notified of the review outcome. Stage 2 reviews will be considered by a senior manager, taking into account all the information and evidence included in the review and the reasonableness of the decision made. The decision will be notified in writing or via an appropriate format and within a fixed timescale

7.5 There is no further right of appeal, however, the applicant or their representative will retain the right to make a complaint through the council's complaints procedure.

8 Financial constraints and controls

8.1 Funding will be agreed annually and regular monitoring of the scheme will be required. In the event that there is a local emergency (for example flood or fire) affecting several households the authority may wish to review available

8.2 ICT systems will be used to provide detailed and robust management information to allow continuous monitoring and real time information in relation to:

- Payment of awards
- Methods of payment
- Projected expenditure based on current demand

- Awards made
- Equalities data
- Speed of awards and reviews

8.3 All financial management will be subject to monthly and quarterly reporting and reviews and awards will be made on the basis of available funds.

8.4 The scheme seeks to deter fraudulent claims and false statements ensuring appropriate controls are in place and swift action is taken where required. Consideration will also be given to reducing the potential for unnecessary applications within alternative support provision or neighbouring authorities.

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