

Minute of Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel, 8 October 2015

26. LOCAL WELFARE ASSISTANCE FUND

The Panel considered a report on the operation of the Local Welfare Assistance Fund - LWAF - since it was set up in 2013. In particular the report referred to the funding arrangements for the scheme, with a view to clarifying the provision for 2016-17.

The Head of Strategic Housing and Customer, and the Customer Contact Centre Manager explained that the main purpose of the LWAF was to support vulnerable members of the community in times of emergency or extreme hardship, with a focus on signposting to other agencies for further support. It was noted that the policy surrounding eligibility criteria had been developed to be flexible with some discretion. The policy had been reviewed in 2014 -15 to refine some of the items provided and now included clothing vouchers and food baskets ordered online and delivered direct. Currently the scheme included an allocation for rent in advance payments.

Members were reminded that the Community Panel had established a Task and Finish Group to consider the LWAF, in particular the type of support provided and the options for future funding. The Group had recommended that funding be allocated for the scheme on a decreasing basis. The current budget provision for 2016-17 was £250,000. The Group also recommended the use of early intervention from debt management advisors. This had led to the introduction of mandatory money management advice appointments prior to a second award being considered. Further details of this role were included at Appendix A of the report.

The Head of Strategic Housing and Customer, and the Customer Contact Centre Manager responded to questions and the following issues were highlighted:

- The successful role of the money management advisors. They also provided personal budget support for universal credit, with this element funded by the Department for Work and Pensions.
- Whether foodbanks could be used instead of food baskets to free up resource for other provision in the scheme? There had been some issues on accessing foodbanks when the LWAF was first set up. The current arrangement was based on the model used by Kent County Council in partnership with Asda. Officers could approach foodbanks again to discuss options.
- Whether information on healthy meals could be included in the money management advice? This could be done, although it was noted that the food baskets were specifically designed to provide a healthy balanced diet with fresh and tinned food.

- The cost of administering the scheme was approximately £60,000. This cost related to staff directly responsible for delivering the service, but did not include the initial customer service contact which was an additional cost absorbed by the service area.

The Panel noted that as funding decreased there would be a need to reprioritise resources; this may mean making adjustments to where particular resources were targeted.

The Acting Executive Director, Finance, reported that any further funding from Central Government was unlikely. He explained that the budget forecast for 2016-17 provided for the proposed £250,000 fund allocation. Panel members acknowledged the value of the LWF in supporting vulnerable members of the community, and agreed that the provision of £250,000 should be retained for 2016-17. It was appreciated that the situation would need to be revisited in respect of 2017-18. Members also talked about the potential for voluntary and charitable organisations to deliver the service, as this would save on the cost of administering the scheme, and agreed that this should be looked at in more detail.

DECISION MADE:

Recommend to Cabinet

- A That the Local Welfare Assistance Fund continues to be administered through the Council's Customer Contact Centre with the resources of £250,000 prioritised within the budget setting process for 2016-17 to be retained, and an allocation for subsequent years kept under review.
- B That Officers be asked to explore alternative ways of administering the Fund through the voluntary and charitable sectors in order to prepare for future years when funding has yet to be determined.
- C That the Rent in Advance contribution from the Fund continues, and is allocated from within the £250k for 2016-17.