

REPORT TO: Corporate Policy & Performance Board
DATE: 10th June 2014
REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director – Policy and Resources
SUBJECT: Discretionary Support Scheme
PORTFOLIO: Resources
WARDS: Boroughwide

1.0 **PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

1.1 To report to the Board on the delivery of the Council's Discretionary Support Scheme (DSS) following its first 12 months of operation and to consider the findings of the Topic Group who have maintained an oversight of the scheme over the past 12 months, as requested by the Executive Board.

2.0 **RECOMMENDATION**

- i) It is recommended that the Board support the conclusions and findings of the Topic Group.

3.0 **BACKGROUND**

3.1 The DSS previously administered by the Department for Work and Pensions was abolished by the Welfare Reform Act 2012. On 1st April 2013 Crisis Loans for living expenses and Community Care Grants were replaced by a new grants scheme administered by the Council. This Board played a key role in developing the scheme and was asked by the Executive Board to keep the scheme under review. This role has been performed by the Board's Topic Group.

3.2 The Topic Group met twice during the year. Once about halfway through the year to examine how the scheme was performing and once to review the first years activity. The scheme provides vital support to people where there is no other source of support, subject to the criteria set by the Council.

3.3 The Council was keen to develop a scheme that was affordable and sustainable given the significant budget reductions that have and will continue to take place in its core Government Grant.

3.4 The Council was also keen to establish a scheme that supported individuals in crisis situations and those who required support in establishing a place to live.

4.0 **TOPIC GROUP REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

4.1 The PPB Topic Group reviewed the scheme after 6 months and again after the first 12 months of operation. At each review point, the Topic Group were made aware of the feedback from partner agencies such as the CAB and Registered Social Landlords. They used this information to make recommendations around fine-tuning the scheme.

4.2 These changes were introduced at the half yearly stage having listened to feedback. They were:

- The Council's DSS would be the first port of call for individuals requiring food. Prior to this the Council was referring people to other agencies first. This was proving slow and confusing for the service user.
- The introduction of payments for fuel. Up until this point the Council was not providing fuel support. This was mainly predicated on the fact that the Executive Board, when setting the broad parameters for the scheme, had agreed not to provide cash support, in common with other local authorities. Finding a way of providing fuel support without cash payments had proved difficult. However, a solution was found and fuel payments are now being made and were so from the second half of the first year of operation.

4.3 The consequence of these two decisions was to increase expenditure over the second half of the year.

4.4 The second review by the Topic Group took place on 24th April 2014 with the benefit of the experience of a full year in operation and knowing the financial impact of the half year changes outlined above. The Topic Group considered the following information about the first year of operation:

- The scheme provided support to people in need and the Council and the staff who administer the scheme received a number of thanks and compliments from those accessing the scheme.
- The scheme operated in budget spending £118,277 out of a total grant of £649,000.
- The scheme had extended beyond simply providing a short-term solution. The Council provides a more rounded scheme than previously offered as it provides people with Money Advice and Welfare Reform advice and is therefore proactive as well as reactive trying to deal with the underlying reasons to the client's situation.

- Good liaison exists between the DSS Team and Children's Services.
- Issues have been raised by partner organisations around the signposting by the scheme to other agencies when individuals require essential "white goods". This was causing significant delays for clients and the Council was asked to see if, like food, the scheme could be the first port of call ensuring that such essential goods were provided quickly.
- Issues were also raised by partners in relation to the criteria in the scheme which says that individuals "sanctioned" by the DWP could not apply for support and are directed to other forms of support by the Team. The DWP are able to make Hardship Payments in such circumstances.

4.5 In summary:

- The scheme had met the needs of many individuals in the Borough.
- Despite the very tight timescales, the scheme was introduced on time.
- The scheme operated within budget.
- The changes made after the first 6 months have proved very helpful to clients.
- The Council's ability to provide Money Advice and Welfare Rights Advice as part of the scheme has improved the overall service.

4.6 Having considered the end of year position, the Topic Group made the following recommendations in relation to the future operation of the scheme.

1. The scheme should continue. This is a discretionary scheme that the Council could choose not to provide.
2. The unspent funds from the 2013/14 financial year to be ring-fenced and rolled forward to fund future years in order to sustain a scheme once the specific grant is subsumed into the Council's general grant in 2015/16.
3. In order to support a wider approach to budgeting advice and supporting individuals two temporary Money Advice posts be funded via the scheme.
4. The scheme to be the first port of call for people seeking assistance with white goods.

4.7 In relation to the issue of those with "sanctions" not being able to access the scheme, the Group acknowledged the difficulty this can cause but felt that the DSS Team neither had the capacity nor the

information to make judgements about the fairness of any individual sanction. Nevertheless, the Topic Group asked officers to look into some specific issues further and keep it under review as part of the continuing review of the scheme.

4.8 The Topic Group agreed to carry out a further review of the scheme in October 2104.

5.0 **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 The DSS operates within the Policy set by the Council. Delegated authority exists in order for fine-tuning of the scheme to take place following consultation with this Board.

6.0 **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

6.1 The scheme has operated within budget, providing the opportunity to sustain a scheme in future years.

7.0 **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES**

7.1 It has the potential to affect all Council priorities.

8.0 **RISK ANALYSIS**

8.1 Payments will be monitored from the scheme to ensure that these remain with budget and adhere to the set criteria.

9.0 **EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

9.1 The eligibility criteria and application process would have to ensure that no particular groups of individuals were excluded. An Equality Impact Assessment will need to take place on any amended scheme.

10.0 **LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

Document	Place of Inspection	Contact Officer
Various letters from the Department of Works & Pensions	Revenues & Benefits & Customer Services Division, Kingsway House, Widnes	Peter McCann