

Co-operative & Communities and Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committee

Comments on the Local Crisis Assistance and Local Resettlement Assistance Policy for Policy Review

The Co-operative & Communities and Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committee held a joint meeting on 11th March 2013 to review the Local Assistance and Local Resettlement Assistance Policy and made a number of comments they would like considered at Policy Review. At the time of the meeting, there was clearly still a lot of work going on to develop, enhance and add further safeguards to the Policy so Members were aware that it was work in progress and some of the suggestions made below may already have been considered by the time the Policy is presented at Policy Review.

Comments

- Members agreed overwhelmingly that the Policy is an excellent piece of work. They appreciated the diligence that had gone into thinking through the potential issues and eventualities to find appropriate and creative solutions, especially within a very short timescale.
- There was wholehearted support for the “no cash payments” approach. Members felt strongly that all staff (from the front line at First Point to decision makers) must stick to this line to deter and avoid abuse of the system.

Response: Staff working in First Point and Decision Makers will receive training and it will be made clear that the message they need to deliver will be that there are no cash payments. This message will be replicated in the information that is circulated to other interested parties including other Council Officers and partner organisations. The application form will also make it clear that there are no cash payments.

- Members heard in detail about the various forms of assistance and the involvement of the Crisis Network, community recycling schemes etc. which was welcomed, as was the additional detail about safeguards around the voucher scheme.
- The fact that access to local intelligence was limited and that there are a lot of “unknowns” in terms of predicting the demand and types of assistance was understood, and Members were happy to hear that the scheme would be monitored initially on a weekly basis and that the Policy would be reviewed after a number of months. Scrutiny would like to be involved when the Policy is reviewed.

Response: We would welcome scrutiny’s views when the policy is reviewed.

- Members were told that a briefing and relevant links would be sent to all Members, and it was suggested that this must emphasise that Members must refer enquiries to the relevant officers to apply the Policy and that Members must make it clear to residents that they cannot influence decisions.

Response: When the briefing note is circulated we will ask that members refer enquiries to the relevant officers and that they will not be able to influence decisions.

- It is important that the assistance does not duplicate any other forms of assistance already provided. Members were assured that work had been done to identify other funds within the Council that could cover emergencies and crises, and none had been identified except possibly S17 for children at risk, but this would be double-checked with regard to contingencies for people affected by flooding.

Response: We will regularly check to ensure that the assistance via this policy does not duplicate any support that a statutory body is obliged to provide. We will also work with other Council Services who have discretionary funds to ensure there is no duplication and that the funds are spent in the most efficient manner. We will explore what assistance the Council provides to victims of flooding.

- It was suggested that the exclusion from the scheme of people on bail pending a court hearing should be reconsidered as they may be in genuine crisis.

Response: This has now been removed.

- The section on assistance for people to set up a home as part of a resettlement programme following a period without a settled way of life should be expanded to clarify that if help is provided to someone in temporary accommodation, the person would be expected to take the goods provided with them when they move into more permanent accommodation, and that this should be tracked.

Response: This section has been expanded to include the sentence in bold below. In most instances where someone is part of a resettlement programme and is either in Council temporary accommodation or that provided by a charity / community enterprise or social sector landlord the organisation supporting the applicant will assist the applicant in moving to new accommodation with their belongings. In instances where items are left behind where possible they are re-used or recycled.

*If the requested item(s) / service(s) are for the purpose of setting up a new home, the home need not be permanent. For instance, applicants may satisfy requirement if they are moving into assured short hold tenancies, temporary accommodation or a refuge that will eventually lead to a settled way of life. **In such instances there will be an expectation that the applicant will take any items granted with them when they move into more permanent accommodation.***

- Members suggested on the issue of clothes, that an agreement with an appropriate retailer should be explored whereby the Council is invoiced for clothes.

Response: As the scheme develops we will review the demand for clothing and explore the opportunity to either have an agreement with an appropriate retailer or charity outlet.

- The Policy states that depending on the applicant's circumstances, assistance may be granted to "their partner or immediate family member acting as an appointee" and Members wanted to see proper safeguards around the validation of appointees so the scheme is not open to abuse by non legitimate "appointees" of vulnerable people.

Response: The goods or services in the vast majority of cases will be delivered directly to the person in need and not to any appointee so hopefully this will reduce the opportunity for abuse of the scheme. Also we are hoping that most of the applications for vulnerable people will be made by a trusted professional such as a Social or Support Worker. Where an appointee makes an application we will check available records to

ensure they have appropriate authority and where it is suspected that the application is from a non legitimate appointee advice will be sought from appropriate professional such as a Social Worker.

- Members were concerned about the risk of deeming “rent in advance” to be an essential expenditure. The Assistant Director explained that discussions were on-going to look at whether the Bond scheme could be used to underwrite rent and depending on the outcome, “rent in advance” may be removed from the Policy as an essential expenditure. This was welcomed by members.

Response: We are hoping that changes to the bond scheme will negate the need to pay rent in advance or deposits. However in exceptional circumstances where the bond scheme is unable to assist we will still need provision to be able to pay rent in advance or deposits. It is hoped with the fact that interest free budgeting loans from the Department for Work and Pensions are available to people on certain benefits (who meet prescribed criteria) to help towards rent in advance / deposits and changes to the bond scheme the number of instances when this policy is used to pay rent in advance / deposits will be low.

- Members were concerned about people in crisis using loan sharks or pay-day lenders and the risks around this and welcomed the fact that discussions were happening with Fairshare about linking people into the credit union.

We are very grateful to the Co-operative & Communities Scrutiny and Budget & Finance Committees for taking the time to look at this policy so thoroughly and for the valuable comments they have made. A number of changes have been made to the policy and as a result of the feedback. Acknowledgement to the feedback has been given within the Cabinet Report.

Angie Astley, Assistant Director – Customers & People Services

18th March 2013