

# Delivering local welfare



How councils are meeting local  
crisis and community care needs

September 2014

Report produced for the LGA by the Centre for Economic and Social  
Inclusion

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## Contents

Executive Summary .....	3
1. Introduction.....	5
2. Setting up the schemes.....	7
3. Joining up provision and meeting underlying needs .....	10
4. Approaches to fulfilment.....	13
5. What next for Local Welfare Assistance?.....	14

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## Executive Summary

In April 2013, the Department for Work and Pensions ('DWP') abolished the Crisis Loan and Community Care Grant elements of the Social Fund and transferred the funding previously used to support these to upper tier local authorities in England. This move followed a period in which Government's expenditure on Crisis Loans and Community Care Grants had grown significantly. In an attempt to contain spending, DWP introduced a number of restrictions on eligibility and reduced the maximum level of award for Crisis Loans in 2012. However, it remained concerned that its system of cash payments was open to abuse and was failing to meet the underlying needs of applicants, some of whom applied repeatedly to the scheme for help.

Although local authorities were not placed under any statutory obligations with regard to the use of the funds, DWP indicated that it expected them to use these to meet local priorities and provide help to those in greatest need. The intention was for local authorities to deliver a 'flexible response to unavoidable need, perhaps through a mix of cash and goods and aligning with the wider range of local support local authorities already offer'.

The transfer of funding to local authorities was welcomed in principle. Local authorities provide a range of vital support to people in crisis situations or who have community care needs, and the transfer presented an opportunity to bring financial and non-financial forms of support together to better address their underlying problems and reduce the number of repeat applications.

However, DWP were unable to share details of how the Social Fund schemes had operated in 2012/13 so authorities had no real idea about the level of demand that they would face. They were also given a very short timescale for the introduction of their schemes – which also coincided with a review of Council Tax Support and the implementation of a number of other major welfare reforms.

This study examined how ten local authorities responded to the challenge of creating Local Welfare Schemes in this context and how they have managed to provide effective, joined-up, support to vulnerable groups and deliver considerable efficiencies. This has been achieved in a number of ways:

- All of the local authorities in the study have **moved away from cash payments** towards 'in-kind' support, using payment cards or vouchers to meet crisis needs and directly purchasing essential items for those with community care requirements. This has **reduced the potential for people to abuse the system**, with councils reporting that people have withdrawn applications when they were informed that there were no cash payments available;
- Local authorities have **delivered cost-effectively** by negotiating bulk purchasing deals with suppliers and in some cases use local providers, including recycling projects, to both keep the cost of items low and improve the level of service. Whilst establishing these fulfilment mechanisms was initially time consuming, the arrangements are now working well and there is evidence that these are more cost-effective than was the case for Social Fund provision.

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- Local authorities in the study also made great efforts to ensure that they are **managing demand effectively**. This initially led some to be cautious in respect of the eligibility criteria and levels of award available from their schemes, although these are still evolving in the light of experience with six of the authorities in the study either having already made changes or proposing to do so.

The targeting of provision to those in greatest need, combined with efficiencies in fulfilment has allowed authorities to **move resources into more preventative work**, and to do more to **meet the underlying needs of applicants**. For example:

- Solihull MBC identified that young people leaving local authority care were often eligible for Community Care Grants from the Social Fund so have devolved an element of the funding for Local Welfare Assistance to their Children's Services team. They have also ensured that the Community Care aspects of their scheme are closely aligned with needs identified by their homeless team to assist priority homeless cases to move from temporary into settled accommodation.
- Cumbria County Council has embarked on a review of support services and is in the process of bringing together the Local Welfare Assistance Team, Supporting People, School Uniform and School Meals, generic advocacy contracts, money and advice contracts, and the Local Area Coordination service. The review will look at improving pathways for people and create a single point of access to this support.

Local authorities provided individual case studies demonstrating how their schemes have enabled provision to become more joined-up to meet the complex needs of applicants and reduce repeat demand. This has included working with applicants to help improve money management skills and move them closer to the labour market, and is in line with DWP's stated objectives for the Local Support Services Framework for Universal Credit

Local Welfare Schemes are now at risk as the Department for Communities and Local Government has indicated that there will be no separately identified funding to support these in the financial settlement for local authorities in 2015/16.

Councils have managed the available budget effectively; reduced the potential for abuse, and created schemes which better meet the underlying needs of applicants and reduce repeat demand. This has enabled them to provide vital, timely support to some of their most vulnerable and deprived residents, many of whom have also been impacted by the consequences of the Government's wider programme of welfare reform.

It is clear from the experiences of all of the local authorities in this study that there will always be a need for some form of crisis and community care support to be made available. Whilst local authorities may be able to make further efficiencies moving forwards, for example by sharing back office and fulfilment functions with neighbouring authorities, Government needs to recognise that there is a need to continue to provide them with a specific and identifiable pot of funding to meet these types of needs in their localities on an ongoing basis. In the absence of this, the early indications are that local authorities are likely to reduce investment in preventative work, which may lead to greater social and financial costs in the longer term.

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# 1. Introduction

In April 2013, the Department for Work and Pensions ('DWP') abolished Crisis Loans and Community Care Grants and transferred the funding previously used to support these elements of the Discretionary Social Fund to upper tier local authorities in England. Authorities were not placed under any statutory obligation as regards the use of this funding. However, Government's expectation<sup>1</sup> was that they would develop 'Local Welfare Assistance' schemes 'concentrated on those facing greatest difficulty in managing their income'. The intention was for local authorities to deliver a 'flexible response to unavoidable need, perhaps through a mix of cash and goods and aligning with the wider range of local support local authorities already offer'.

The decision to transfer funding to local authorities was made in the context of a significant rise in Community Care Grant and Crisis Loan expenditure in the years leading up to 2010/11. At the end of that year total spending across Great Britain stood at £368.4 million, with 61 per cent of this amount spent on Crisis Loans. Government became concerned that spending increases were driven by a large number of repeat applications, and that, in some cases, applicants were abusing the system. In particular, there were concerns that applicants requested help to purchase essential items but then spent their award, which was made in cash, on other things. They then reapplied for more cash later: sometimes in respect of the same essential items listed on previous applications. The scheme also provided no means of addressing applicant's underlying problems to prevent financial crises from arising on a repeated basis.

Government introduced a number of measures to tackle the rise in expenditure in the following year. These included freezing the Community Care Grant budget and:

- Reducing the maximum amount of Crisis Loans for general living expenses from 75 per cent to 60 per cent of the claimant's personal allowance;
- Capping the number of Crisis Loan awards that can be made to an applicant in any rolling 12 month period to three;
- Only making Crisis Loans for the replacement of items following a disaster such as flooding, fire, or gas explosion and not, as previously, where there were other reasons to make an award on the grounds of a serious risk to health and safety.
- Refusing to allow repeat applications for either Crisis Loans or Community Care Grants if this was for the same expense as previously claimed within the past 12 months, unless there had been a change of circumstances.

As a consequence, Crisis Loan expenditure in 2011/12 fell by 41 per cent compared to the previous year, to £133.3 million. Whilst these administrative measures were successful in containing the level of spend, they did not address the underlying needs of applicants who had become reliant on the scheme and who were now unable to access the same level of financial support.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Steve Webb, Minister of State for Pensions, to local authority Chief Executives dated 6<sup>th</sup> August 2012.

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Transferring the funding to local authorities, and providing these with the freedom to design their own schemes, therefore provided an opportunity to ensure support was given to those in greatest, and genuine, need; and enable the more effective use of resources, particularly by linking financial help with other forms of support to better meet the underlying needs of applicants.

The types of need that were being met by the Social Fund prior to the transfer of funding were clearly important to local authorities. Local authorities are a major source of assistance to people in crisis situations, including, for example, to the homeless. They also have statutory responsibilities to provide services to many of the groups of people that were previously able to obtain Community Care Grants. This includes vulnerable adults and children who would otherwise be at risk of needing to be taken into institutional care. Indeed, local authority staff often supported service users to apply for these as part of their work to help them stay out of care or resettle them in the community. The transfer of funding therefore provided an opportunity to co-ordinate financial and non-financial forms of help to better meet the needs of vulnerable people and also complemented their role in providing support by way of Discretionary Housing Payments and/or payments made by virtue of powers contained in the Children Act 1989.

The transfer of funding to local authorities was therefore welcomed in principle. However, they had no real idea about the likely level of demand that they would face and whether or not the budget would be sufficient to meet this. Indeed, the amount of funding transferred to English local authorities and to the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales in April 2013 was £37 million lower than spending on Crisis Loans and Community Care Grants by DWP in 2011/12. This was equivalent to a 17 per cent reduction in funding.

This study examines the experience of ten upper tier authorities<sup>2</sup> in establishing and implementing their Local Welfare Assistance schemes. It looks at the challenges that they faced and at the measures they have taken to improve on the prior Social Fund approach. It reveals that authorities have strived hard to deliver value for money and have designed schemes which better meet the underlying needs of applicants.

However, the ongoing ability of authorities to provide direct financial assistance through the provision of Local Welfare Assistance schemes is now uncertain as the Department for Communities and Local Government ('DCLG') has indicated that there will be no separately identifiable fund for this purpose in the financial settlement for local authorities in 2015/16.

The study therefore also looks at the potential impact of this decision and has sought the views of participating authorities about their ability to maintain provision moving forwards.

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<sup>2</sup> These were Brighton and Hove, Cumbria, Devon, Lambeth, Lancashire, Leicester, Manchester, Milton Keynes, Solihull, and Warwickshire.

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## 2. Setting up the schemes

The set-up of the schemes posed a number of challenges for local authorities. These included a short, nine month, timescale for implementation; limitations with the data provided by DWP; and the fact that the amount of funding allocated to local authorities was significantly reduced compared to the previous year's expenditure on Crisis Loans and Community Care Grants. For areas with responsibilities for collection of Council Tax, the implementation timescale coincided with a major review of Council Tax Support. For two tier authorities the set-up of schemes required consultation, and often detailed negotiation concerning the allocation of funding, with District authorities. For all authorities there was a need to consider how their schemes could best contribute to their wider strategic response to welfare reform.

Despite these challenges, all of the participating local authorities in this study introduced a scheme on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013. In all cases, authorities designed their schemes to maintain a focus on meeting crisis and community care type needs. This reflected the fact that the needs that were previously met by the Social Fund are ongoing and closely related to local government priorities.

However, concerns about the adequacy of the budget to meet demand and the need to target resources on those in greatest need led all of the authorities in the study to tighten the eligibility and award criteria. This included placing further restrictions on the number of repeat awards, although, as section three reports in more detail, local authorities have made great efforts to better meet the underlying needs of applicants to reduce repeat demand.

All of the local authorities in the study have also moved away from the fulfilment of awards in cash: using payment cards or vouchers to meet crisis needs and directly purchasing essential items for those with community care requirements. There was also a move away from the provision of loans, with only three<sup>3</sup> of the authorities in our study maintaining this type of provision. As we report in section four, the fulfilment mechanisms put in place by authorities appear to be much more cost-effective than the prior Social Fund scheme of cash payments. The move to in-kind support has also reduced the potential for abuse.

Finally, concerns about being unable to cope with demand also caused authorities to adopt caution when publicising their schemes. The main emphasis was placed on informing front-line workers in the councils and other local agencies about the changes, rather than promoting the scheme directly to the public. The exception to this was the provision of information on Council websites, and in Cumbria the use of 'road-shows' in deprived areas of the county. Whilst universally accepting that more could have been done last year to promote their schemes, most authorities are now reluctant to do so because of the uncertainty about funding beyond March 2015.

Taken together, these measures appear to have been successful in ensuring that schemes have been targeted to those in greatest need and are able to cope with demand. For example, based on data from DWP for 2011/12, Cumbria County Council

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<sup>3</sup> Loan schemes were maintained in as part of Local Welfare Assistance schemes in Lambeth, Manchester, and Milton Keynes. Leicester is currently exploring the introduction of a loan scheme.



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were expecting in the region of 1,500 applications in the first year of operation. The actual volume was approximately one third of this.

The measures taken to manage demand have allowed local authorities to release elements of their funding for investment in additional provision to meet underlying needs, and in some cases increase the level of support now on offer to those who qualify for help. In this respect, it is clear that authorities are continuing to tweak their schemes in the light of experience. Six of the authorities<sup>4</sup> had either already taken steps to review their eligibility and award criteria or were planning to do so moving forwards.

***Box 1: Evolving support in response to local needs***

**Warwickshire, Brighton and Hove, and Leicester** initially refused to make awards where people were subject to a benefit sanction. They have all since reviewed their policies in this respect due to evidence of the considerable hardship that these are causing. The changes in Leicester came into effect in March 2014, and there has been a 40 per cent increase in the volume of crisis assistance provided as a result.

**Solihull** initially had a policy of restricting the number of times food parcels would be provided to just two per year. However, greater discretion is now provided and in once case an individual received six parcels due to the complex nature of their problems. Similarly, **Warwickshire County Council** has increased the number of times that food vouchers will be provided from two to three.

**Manchester** initially restricted its community care type awards for single people with no medical needs. For example, they provided for a microwave rather than a cooker, and didn't provide a fridge on the basis that applicants could go to the shops every day to get milk or perishables. However, this was changed over the course of the year and they began to make cookers and a fridge/ freezer available so that people could buy in bulk and cut costs. Over the winter period, the scheme also provided support for 'food poverty grants' to organisations. Any organisation offering food support could apply for funding from the Council and £200k was subsequently given out in grants, and in December, they started offering help worth between £30 and £49 for emergency fuel purchase.

All of the local authorities in the study also reported some difficulty ensuring that their schemes complemented continuing DWP provision. In particular, people who were entitled to receive a Short Term Budgeting Advance or Budgeting Loan from DWP were often referred by Jobcentre Plus to Local Welfare Assistance schemes instead. The number of people being sanctioned or losing entitlement to benefit has also increased over the year, with a knock on effect on applications for crisis help from local welfare schemes. Different approaches have been taken in response to these problems.

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<sup>4</sup> Changes have already been made in Brighton and Hove, Manchester, and Lambeth, and reviews are planned for Lancashire, Leicester, and Warwickshire.



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***Box 2: Working with DWP and Jobcentre Plus***

In Tiverton in **Mid Devon** the local authority has put in a 'hot line' so staff could get straight through to Jobcentre Plus to deal with issues. In **Milton Keynes** they now have a two way referral process with Jobcentre Plus in place. These approaches suggest that greater integration or even co-location of staff within Jobcentre Plus premises could be effective in preventing individuals from being passed from 'pillar to post' in order to get their needs met.

However, the experience in other areas has not been as positive. In **Devon**, the sanctioning of people with learning difficulties has required it to put in additional support, and both **Solihull** and **Lambeth** are now funding dedicated advice workers to help sanctioned claimants and assist with applications for Short Term Advances.

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### 3. Joining up provision and meeting underlying needs

The transfer of funding has provided local authorities with the opportunity to join up direct financial assistance with other forms of help and we found many examples of good practice in this respect (see box 3, below).

#### ***Box 3: Joining up financial and non-financial support***

**Solihull** identified that young people leaving local authority care were often eligible for Community Care Grants from the Social Fund so have devolved an element of the funding for Local Welfare Assistance to their Children's Services team. Social workers are now able to make payments in accordance with the needs identified in leaving care plans. They have also ensured that the Community Care aspects of their scheme are closely aligned with needs identified by their homeless team to assist priority homeless cases to move from temporary into settled accommodation. These customers are assisted at their pre-tenancy interview so a decision can be made in advance of their tenancy start date. This ensures they have the basic items they need to occupy their tenancy on the day they sign for their keys.

**Lambeth** have made funding available to support debt and welfare benefits work with people leaving Brixton prison to help aid their resettlement in the community.

**Manchester** has linked its provision with Troubled Families and Family Intervention Project and Homelessness Service and also within Adult Social Care, ensuring effective referral procedures are in place from support officers and social landlords to its welfare scheme.

**Cumbria** has embarked on a major review of support services and is currently in the process of bringing together the Local Welfare Assistance Team, Supporting People, School Uniform and School Meals, generic Advocacy contracts, money and advice contracts, and the Local Area Coordination service. The process will look at improving pathways for people and create a single point of access to this support. Work is being undertaken within the local Financial Inclusion Group to put in place a data sharing agreement with third sector agencies. This will enable the authority to obtain more detailed information concerning underlying needs and make holistic responses to these.

We were also provided with individual case studies which demonstrate the broad range of council and third sector services that are being brought together with direct help from the Local Welfare scheme and other forms of discretionary funding to meet people's underlying and longer-term needs.

#### ***Box 4: Case studies of help for individuals with complex needs***

**Solihull** report that they received a phone call from one of their area based walk in centres. The call concerned a man who could not speak English and the area office was unsure of his needs. The Local Welfare Assistance team arranged an interpreter

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and discovered that he was from Iran; had been granted leave to remain in the UK and had moved to the area with his family from Bradford. He needed help with a claim for ESA, was without food and had longer term support needs. A food parcel was provided to meet the family's immediate needs, and a referral made to provide the children with school places. In addition, a referral was made to a local charity which provides support for refugees and asylum seekers, including adult and child sessions to learn English. They will also assist the family to pay bills and provide support with further benefit applications including Housing benefit, ESA assessments, Child Tax Credits and child benefit. The progress of the family is being monitored and the Council reports that they have now settled into the area and are doing well.

**Exeter** report working with a lone parent living in temporary accommodation who had been accepted as homeless after fleeing from a violent relationship. Following the application of the Benefit Cap to her housing benefit claim in August 2013 her benefit award reduced by £60 per week. She had to meet this shortfall on her rent with no additional income. An officer met with her to discuss the effects of the Benefit Cap and the possible consequences for her accommodation. The officer discovered that she was a qualified nurse from the overseas but needed to obtain an appropriate qualification so that she could apply for work in the NHS. She could not pay for the course herself but wanted to get back to work and move off benefit. The Council provided Discretionary Housing Payments to meet the shortfall in her rent and subsequently moved her into permanent accommodation. It then awarded £400 from the Local Welfare Assistance scheme to pay for the nursing course and exam which has resulted in the applicant moving back into employment.

**Lancashire** report the case of a young man with addiction problems. He received support from the Local Welfare scheme to aid resettlement on leaving rehabilitation care. The council ensured that this was combined with other support to help move him closer to the labour market, and he is now undertaking voluntary work with the agency that made the initial referral.

In addition, it is clear that some of this work is also preparing claimants for the introduction of Universal Credit. Authorities have used the funding for Local Welfare to support investments in debt advice and budgeting support, and the expansion of access to affordable financial services products. DWP has indicated that these will form key components of the Local Support Services Framework that is being developed to support Universal Credit claimants, and investments of this nature also contribute to DWP's plans to expand the membership of credit unions.

***Box 5: Helping people to manage their money and prepare for Universal Credit***

**Lambeth Borough Council** has funded a take-up project for Post Office Card Account holders to move onto basic bank accounts. The project actively involves the main banks in providing sessions at community locations including Children's Centres.

In **Devon**, the District Councils are operating their own Local Welfare Assistance schemes in line with a framework agreement negotiated with the County Council. The

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agreement is centred on three outcomes, and the first of these - to increase self-reliance and resilience - complements the aims of DWP to prepare people for Universal Credit. All of the Districts have now put in place money advice contracts to ensure this is provided from council premises. Local Welfare Assistance teams are able to refer people easily to these co-located money advice services and following initial help with any crisis needs, any further help from the Local Welfare scheme is *conditional upon* the customer seeing a money advice worker. The Districts are now in also in the process of setting up a Community Impact Fund for not-for-profit organisations that support people to become more financially self-reliant in the future.

Finally, we also found evidence that the provision of Local Welfare Schemes is driving improvements in third sector commissioning and delivery strategies. For example, Cumbria is using information gleaned from applicants to its scheme to inform its third sector grants programme, including in respect of money management and healthy eating projects. They are also now funding a worker at the foodbank to provide more general wrap-around support. In Lambeth the experience of delivering their scheme has led to improvements in the promotion of services and created joint access arrangements. The Borough Council supports a wide range of provision, including debt and benefits advice in GP surgeries, food banks and Children's Centres as well as in the Council's customer centre. Citizens Advice have now created a new 'One Lambeth Advice' phone number and website which enables these to be promoted under a single brand and ensures people gain access to the most appropriate service to meet their needs.

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## 4. Approaches to fulfilment

The transfer of funding to local authorities has also allowed them to develop cost-effective mechanisms regarding fulfilment. Without exception, this has involved a move away from cash payments to in-kind assistance.

The move to in-kind assistance has had two main effects. Firstly, it has reduced the potential for people to abuse the system. Warwickshire County Council reports that some people withdrew their applications when they were informed that there were no cash payments available. Likewise, Solihull reports that they initially saw some people who appeared to be used to making repeat applications to the Social Fund for crisis loans, but who turned down the offer of a food parcel from the Local Welfare scheme.

Secondly, the move to in-kind fulfilment has meant that authorities have been able to negotiate bulk purchasing deals with suppliers and, for example as in Lambeth, use local providers, including recycling projects, to both keep the cost of items low and improve the level of service.

Whilst establishing fulfilment mechanisms was initially time consuming, these arrangements are now working well and there is evidence from an independent review commissioned by Devon County Council that these are more cost-effective than was the case for Social Fund provision. In Solihull, the approach to fulfilment developed for the Local Welfare Assistance scheme is now being utilised with respect to other forms of discretionary assistance, including under Section 17 of the Children Act.

However, attempts to recycle elements of the funding made available to local authorities by using loan schemes have not been as successful. More detailed work is needed to understand the reasons for this and to develop effective practice. For example, in Manchester there have been problems with the repayment of loans, with only around £6,000 repaid on a loan book of £31,000, which the City Council is underwriting. In Lambeth, similarly low levels of repayment led the Council to refocus on the provision of credit union loans on non-urgent items rather than for crisis needs. This change was made on 1<sup>st</sup> July, and the outcomes are being monitored.

Finally, it should be noted that there is the potential for local authorities to make even more efficient use of resources by co-ordinating their approaches to Local Welfare Assistance across local authority borders. This was particularly raised by Lambeth, who expressed an interest in exploring how working with neighbouring Boroughs could reduce back office costs and yield further savings in respect of fulfilment.

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## 5. What next for Local Welfare Assistance?

Despite significant challenges, the local authorities in this study have put in place schemes which are clearly meeting the immediate needs of vulnerable people in their communities and which are increasingly driving wider improvements in service design and delivery.

Although further work is needed to evaluate the majority of schemes, we were provided with details of customer feedback and independent evaluation by three of the authorities in this study which indicated that the schemes are having a positive impact:

- Cumbria County Council conducted a customer feedback exercise after six months of operation, which reported that 80 per cent of users were either satisfied or very satisfied with the service they received;
- In Brighton and Hove, customer feedback indicated that applicants were particularly happy with the 'holistic' and 'wrap around' service that they received;
- In Devon, an independent evaluation of the scheme took place in February 2014. This concluded that the scheme has led to a much more joined up approach to meet the underlying needs of applicants. This has contributed to a significant reduction in repeat crisis applications.

Moving forwards, Brighton and Hove are looking to conduct a detailed assessment of the ways in which their scheme is contributing to a reduction in costs in other service areas within the authority; and Lambeth are investigating how they could work more closely with two neighbouring boroughs in order to generate back office savings.

However, the maintenance of effective Local Welfare Assistance schemes is at risk if identifiable funding is not made available to support these beyond March 2015.

Although the demand for crisis help was lower than initially expected, local authorities have either already reviewed their schemes and re-profiled their budgets or are in the process of doing so. Where re-profiling has taken place, we have seen authorities channelling funding into preventative services and/or improving the level of support offered to successful applicants. Although the authorities in this study were at different points in their decision-making cycle and the outcomes of these may vary, it is likely that any loss of identifiable funding for Local Welfare Assistance after March 2015 will reduce the effectiveness of schemes considerably. For example:

- Lambeth indicated to us that they would no longer be able to fund preventative work;
- Lancashire pointed out that the "majority of care needs are people moving out of residential accommodation so those people would still need to be moved on and someone would have to help them. The cost would still have to be met from somewhere. So this would possibly be more expensive. It could hold people up."
- Devon stated that they will attempt to continue the community care support but cannot see how they can maintain direct financial help for people in a crisis.

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This would represent a considerable set back as the transfer of funding has provided local authorities with the opportunity to forge links between financial and other forms of support in order to better meet the needs of people in crisis and with community care needs. They have clearly targeted this provision effectively and have realised savings by reducing the demand for repeat awards, and putting in place cost effective fulfilment mechanisms.

The original concerns of Government regarding the spiralling costs of the Social Fund scheme; it's potential for abuse, and the failure of cash payments made in isolation of other forms of support to meet the underlying needs of applicants have therefore all been addressed by the local authorities in this study.

It is also clear from this study that there will always be a need for some form of crisis and community care support to be made available. Government needs to recognise that although local authorities may be able to make further efficiencies in the use of their funding moving forwards, there is a need to continue to provide them with identifiable funding to meet these types of needs in their localities on an ongoing basis.



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