Task and Finish Group Briefing Note to Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Report Subject	**Local Welfare Assistance Fund**
Meeting date	18 September 2014
Task and Finish Group Members	Councillors Rae Stollard, Pat Oakley, Michael Weinhonig
Cabinet Portfolio	Councillor John Beesley, Leader of the Council & Resources
Corporate Lead	Liz Wilkinson, Executive Director - Finance
Service Director	Maria O'Reilly, Customer
Status	Public
Classification Key Decision Impacts on Key Policy Framework	For decision Yes No
Task and Finish Lead Officer	Maria O'Reilly ☎ 01202 454953 ✉ maria.oreilly@bournemouth.gov.uk
Executive summary	The Task and Finish Group have assessed the impact upon the community and the council following the introduction of the Local Welfare Assistance Fund which was setup to support those in crisis within the local community.
Recommendation(s)	The Panel is asked to recommend to Cabinet that the Local Welfare Assistance Fund continues to be administered through the Council's Contact Centre and resources of £450k are prioritised within the budget setting process for 2015/16, a further £250k is allocated for 2016-17 and an allocation for subsequent years is kept under review. The Panel also recommends to Cabinet to continue the Rent in Advance contribution from the Fund as this reduces the cost of those requiring bed and breakfast accommodation and enables effective management of the Council's statutory homelessness duties. Funds to be allocated from within the £450k proposed and remain at their current level for 2015-16 of £150k which will be reviewed for 2016-17

	and beyond. In addition, the Panel recommends to Cabinet a reduction in the number of awards to spread the reduced funds to support as many local residents as possible, and introduce a compulsory attendance at debt management sessions for second award applicants. The costs of which will be allocated from within the £450k proposed Fund.
Reasons for recommendations	To be assured that the Council is providing the necessary level of discretionary support and the fund is equally accessible for all members of the community.

Background detail

1 From 1 April 2013, under the provisions of the Welfare Reform Act 2012, central government abolished two elements of the discretionary Social Fund — Crisis Loans and Community Care Grants.

2 Responsibility for providing this type of emergency hardship support was passed from Department of Work and Pensions – DWP - to local authorities, which have established their own local welfare support schemes.

3 The Council received notification that central government grant would be £495k; the same level of funding as previously administered by the DWP. The funding is not ring-fenced and local authorities have discretion to distribute it as they see fit.

4 In January 2013, Cabinet approved the Local Welfare Assistance Scheme and approved funds for 2013-14 of £495k (central government grant) together with a further allocation of £250k from Council reserves to support residents with a local connection. The same level of funding was received in 2014-15.

5 The Scheme provides support for the most vulnerable members of the community following a disaster, emergency or during a period of financial difficulty, together with support and signposting to other relevant agencies.

6 A set of eligibility criteria was developed with input from key stakeholders in particular from Adult Social Care and Strategic Housing. This criteria requires applicants to be resident in Bournemouth or have a local connection and is based on the Council's Housing Allocation Policy, be on a low income, in crisis or in need of immediate support. The policy surrounding eligibility

was designed to be flexible with some discretion and would be refined once further information on applicants had been analysed.

7 The Scheme is administered through the Council Contact Centre. In 2013-14 the Team handled 9,600 applications. Additional staff were recruited on a short term basis, funded by the Welfare Admin Grant of 105k for 2013/14 and 95k in 2014/15. The Grant has also funded the purchase and maintenance of the ICT solution and marketing materials. A series of training sessions were held for staff before implementation to ensure they were able to answer customer's queries effectively. It was anticipated that the majority of residents would claim online using either their own computers or through access from the many locations around the borough that provide free internet access e.g. libraries, but could also telephone to make an application or visit the Customer Contact Centre in St Stephens Road to speak to an advisor in person.

8 In 2013-14 a range of suppliers provided supported to the Council including:

- Dorset Reclaim - selected to provide white goods, bed frames and mattresses
- Bournemouth Foodbank in Charminster and the Community Foodbank in Kinson - selected to provide store cupboard food items.
- Family Fund - selected to provide the means of giving cash for fresh food items, utility top ups, nappies through the PayPoint scheme and pre-paid cards for clothing and bedding.

9 In 2014-15 the team have refined the provision for some items and are now offering clothing vouchers and fresh food which is ordered online and delivered direct.

10 In addition to applications for Welfare Assistance, a separate allocation for Rent in Advance payments have been made from the Fund. An allocation of £12k per month is administered by the Contact Centre on behalf of the Strategic Housing Team designed to ensure support for individuals and families accessing rented accommodation where otherwise the cost of bed and breakfast would have to be met by the Council.

11 The Community Overview & Scrutiny Panel set up a Task and Finish Group to assess the impact upon the community and the Council of the introduction of the Local Welfare Assistance Fund and add value to how the community accesses the fund. The Task and Finish Group comprised Councillors Pat Oakley (joint Lead), Rae Stollard (joint Lead) and Michael Weinhonig.

Summary of Task and Finish Group Findings

12 The Task and Finish Group carried out overview, scrutiny and challenge through a series of meetings:

a) An initial briefing on 7 May 2014 to understand the background and approach taken to-date.

b) 11 June 2014 - to discuss information requests relating to financial position, eligibility, types of support and DWP relations.

c) 7th, 15th, 21st August 2014 – to review and challenge information provided and discuss options for future provision.

d) 3rd September 2014 – to agree final report and recommendations to be presented to Overview & Scrutiny Community Panel on 18 September 2014.

13 The Task and Finish Group were assured that the Council is providing the necessary level of discretionary support and that it is equally accessible for all members of the community.

14 A regular policy review meeting is conducted by officers to monitor spend, repeat applications and make refinements to the Scheme. Task and Finish Group challenged the need for the number of repeat applications (currently up to four within 12 months) and consider a reduction to two awards would spread next years, potentially reduced fund, further in 2015-16. This will be progressed by officers.

15 In circumstances where claims are made because of a review of benefits by DWP (where the benefits are stopped), the Council should challenge DWP for a reimbursement of the claim. This challenge will be progressed by officers.

16 The Task and Finish Group have not identified gaps in the provision, but do recommend early intervention from debt management advisors. With any claim, but in particular second claims, further support should be mandatory before being eligible for a second (or subsequent) award.

17 The Task and Finish Group suggest an ongoing tracking of the Scheme to monitor spend, provision and benefits for both customers and council. A six monthly report should be presented to Community Overview & Scrutiny Panel.

18 The Task and Finish Group recommend further funding is made available for awards and for administration purposes as to not do so would impact on other budgets of the Council such as Housing, Adults and Childrens.

Appendices

Medium Term Financial Plan report to Cabinet, 19 February 2013, and full Council, 26 February 2013 - establishing the scheme and fund