

EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT-STAGE 1

Stage 1 Equality Impact Assessment – Initial Screening

Assessor(s) Name(s):	Ian Lloyd
Directorate:	Resources
Date of Completion:	January 2013

Name of Policy/Strategy/Service/Function Proposal

Introduction of the pilot Local Assistance Scheme with effect from 1st April 2013

The Aims, Objectives and Expected Outcomes:

The Social Fund scheme administered by the Department for Works and Pensions will be abolished from 31 March 2013. The abolition includes discretionary elements such as Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans for general living expenses. As part of the abolition process DWP will be transferring funding to local authorities to use as they see fit to meet local needs, delivered through a Local Assistance Scheme (LAS), from 1 April 2013.

The funding made available by Government for providing the new discretionary scheme will be reduced nationally and cash limited. The aim of the new discretionary local assistance scheme is to provide an appropriate and responsive program of Local Assistance provision to Island residents who are in genuine hardship (which cannot be met through other means), and they are able to access the support that they need, financial or otherwise, quickly and effectively. The service developed will be one of last resort and is not intended to become part of a regular package of assistance provided to Island residents. The support will be delivered from within the total of the annually available resources of £344,000.

The support Island residents receive on the Isle of Wight is to be determined by the Council. In determining the Local Assistance Scheme the Council will need to consider the affordability, in overall budget terms, of the support it should give to claimants to meet a specific and genuine hardship. To achieve this, the Council intends to establish a Local Assistance Scheme pilot of twelve months to refine the scheme and consider alternative ways of delivering the service from 1 April 2014.

The Government will provide funding towards a Local Assistance Scheme provision for two years, at which point the financial funding arrangements are due to be reviewed as part of a further spending review.

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In order to fully or partly meet any potential funding gap between the previous level of Social Fund awards made to Island residents and the new funding grant of £344,000 per annum, the Council has to consider that there is only a limited amount of money available for payments and items under LAS, so awards will need to be managed if the funds overall limit has been reached.

As the scheme being developed is discretionary there is no requirement to duplicate the previous Social Fund scheme provisions. A Local Assistance Scheme can be designed around what the Council considers as they see fit to meet local needs and provide a provision for genuine hardship.

Whilst there has been some limited data provided around the nationally administered scheme from DWP, this is not sufficient to enable the Council to understand the likely demand of delivering a new Local Assistance Scheme provision or the root causes of seeking assistance.

The Government's equality impact assessment identified that the majority of crisis loans decisions were made in relation to applications from single males (58%) with 38% in respect of single females and 8% for couples. However the success rates were similar with 76% of single males and single females making a successful application and 74% of couples. In terms of Community Care Grant decisions made in relation to applications show a higher proportion of single females applied at 49% with 36% relating to single males and 15% for couples. The success rates were highest for couples at 53% with single females at 49% and single males at 42%.

In terms of age, the highest proportion of decisions on crisis loan applications were made for customers aged 18 to 24. Those aged 35 to 59 had the highest success rate at 79% with over 65 year olds having the lowest success rates, particularly those aged 80 and over. Community Care Grant decisions show a higher proportion for those aged 18 to 45 but a higher success rate for those over 50 which increases with age.

The aim of the first year pilot LAS scheme will be to understand likely demand that will be placed upon it and to seek to support those cases where genuine hardship is evidenced by providing support for priority cases.

With the tight timescale for agreement and implementation of a scheme in the first year, the preferred options of the LAS scheme will be a pilot to measure the effectiveness of the scheme for meeting genuine hardship that seeks to focus on the key service principles that is; Responsive, Enabling and Collaborative.

The qualifying criteria of the LAS scheme considered on their own merit being recommended is therefore:-

- Support for Island residents who have an established link over an appreciable period on the Island. For example, 12 months.
- Not consider an application from a person from abroad in line with Social Security benefit administration rules.
- Support vulnerable young people and children where there is neglect and domestic violence, to help families and carers to provide a safe and supportive environment for them.

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- Encourage Island residents to obtain and sustain housing to avoid homelessness for them and their families, provided that other sources of funding have been exhausted.
- Support vulnerable residents in the local community.
- Help claimants with a need for emergency access to food and essential utilities.
- Help claimants with a need for essential white goods and essential items of furniture.
- Help claimants with a need for essential clothing for children or adults where there is no alternative support available, for example school uniform.
- Help claimants with travel costs in the case of an emergency where there is no other alternative support available, for example travel costs for medical appointments.
- Help claimants with other emergency funding where it is deemed appropriate to provide support for an essential need, for example fire or flood (where not covered by insurance), theft (that has been reported to the police and a crime reference number has been provided).
- Help claimants seeking assistance following natural disaster, for example flood or fire.
- Only help where the claimant has not been given more than three awards in the last 12 months.
- Only help where the claimant has not applied for the same grant in the last 28 days.
- Only help where there is not considered to be another source of support in order to obtain the assistance being requested by the claimant.

The new scheme comes into force on 1 April 2013. The results of the consultation will be considered by the Director of Resources in consultation with the Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Resources and will make recommendations to the Cabinet for the implementation of the Pilot Scheme.

Consultation on a proposed scheme will be undertaken with relevant organizations, referral agencies and key stakeholders such as CAB, Credit Unions, Food Banks and any other stakeholder with financial inclusion or related interests and through their users. The consultation will run from 4 February 2013 to 8 March 2013, allowing time for responses to be considered and included in the final report.

- This is a new council function

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Key Questions to Consider in Assessing Potential Impact	
Will the policy, strategy, service or council function proposal have a negative impact on any of the protected characteristics or other reasons that are relevant issues for the local community and/or staff?	Yes
Has previous consultation identified this issue as important or highlighted negative impact and/or we have created a “legitimate expectation” for consultation to take place? A legitimate expectation may be created when we have consulted on similar issues in the past or if we have ever given an indication that we would consult in such situations	Yes
Do different groups of people within the local community have different needs or experiences in the area this issue relates to?	Yes
Could the aims of these proposals be in conflict with the council’s general duty to pay due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and to foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not?	No
Will the proposal have a significant effect on how services or a council function/s is/are delivered?	Yes
Will the proposal have a significant effect on how other organisations operate?	Yes
Does the proposal involve a significant commitment of resources?	Yes
Does the proposal relate to an area where there are known inequalities?	Yes
<p>If you answer Yes to any of these questions, it will be necessary for you to proceed to a full Equality Impact Assessment after you have completed the rest of this initial screening form.</p> <p>If you answer No to all of these questions, please provide appropriate evidence using the table below and complete the evidence considerations box and obtain sign off from your Head of Service.</p>	

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Protected Characteristics	Positive	Negative	No impact	Reasons
Age	<input type="checkbox"/>			Whilst a greater number of working age applicants have traditionally accessed Social Fund awards the new LAS scheme is available to all irrespective of age, provided that they meet the qualifying conditions.
Disability			<input type="checkbox"/>	No specific impact
Gender Reassignment			<input type="checkbox"/>	No specific impact
Marriage & Civil Partnership			<input type="checkbox"/>	No specific impact
Pregnancy & Maternity			<input type="checkbox"/>	No specific impact
Race			<input type="checkbox"/>	No specific impact
Religion / Belief			<input type="checkbox"/>	No specific impact
Sex (male / female)			<input type="checkbox"/>	No specific impact
Sexual Orientation			<input type="checkbox"/>	No specific impact

Are there aspects of the proposal that contribute to or improve the opportunity for equality?	Yes
<p>Due to the limited grant funding available for providing this scheme there is requirement to consider awards around the merit and criteria set out. The scheme seeks to support those claimants where there is genuine hardship and to protect those claimants that are considered vulnerable or at risk irrespective of age, gender or disability.</p>	

Evidence Considered During Screening
<p>As this is a new scheme, with the abolition of Social Fund discretionary awards provided by the Department of Works and Pensions (DWP) from 31 March 2013, the Government are transferring funding to local authorities to use as they see fit to meet local needs, delivered through a Local Assistance Scheme (LAS), from 1 April 2013.</p>

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The funding of £344K should be used to assist those in greatest need. The DWP national eligibility criteria has been of some use in how to deliver the service from April 2013 but the LAS will enable the Council to gain a better understanding of the likely need that exists locally and how it can be met with the resources available by piloting a scheme for the first year to determine the discretionary support that might be required.

In order to avoid duplication an initial mapping exercise had commenced which was provided in the Delegated Decision report of 29 November 2012, to try to identify the various mechanisms of existing support available to enable reference to these and where appropriate sign post applicants to these services before allowing access to the scheme.

It has not been possible to carry out a full modelling exercise for this new scheme, as information available from the DWP is limited in the allocation of Social Fund Awards at a local level.

National impact

The Department of Works & Pensions (DWP) have undertaken analysis showing the effects nationally and also some local award data. This can be accessed using the link below;

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/social-fund-localisation-response.pdf>
<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/local-authority-staff/social-fund-reform/localisation-data/>

The evidence provided from the DWP provides some indication of the type of applications that are made under the existing Social Fund scheme and regard to this has been had when devising the draft LAS Policy.

Local impact

The impact of the changes locally is to be determined from the pilot LAS scheme. The level of funding being provided to support island residents is less than the awards total paid out by Social Fund over recent years and will therefore require careful management and strict compliance to eligibility criteria shown in the draft LAS scheme as there is no additional financial budget available towards this scheme.

The DWP have provided historical data relating to Social Fund awards on the Island as per below link:
<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/local-authority-staff/social-fund-reform/localisation-data/>

Mitigating the effects of the abolition of the Social Fund

Social Fund National Discretionary Scheme has existed for a number of years and provided assistance to those in crisis or to help vulnerable people live as independent a life as possible. The national scheme was not considered robust or tackling the deeper problems that appear to lie behind people finding themselves in crisis.

The council has opted to focus on those applications that demonstrate a genuine hardship or risk of health & safety (which cannot be met through other means) by providing support quickly and effectively whether financial or otherwise to those in greatest need, but this support is not intended to become a regular package of assistance provided to Island residents.

The Scheme seeks to ensure that no particular group is disadvantaged by any of the protected

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characteristics provided that the application complies with the genuine hardship or risk to health & safety criteria.

As part of the consideration to the effects on island residents with this new scheme, the Council must consider what support service might be provided to residents to enable them to achieve greater financial stability, where as the present Social Fund scheme is purely a transactional service that provides finance but doesn't assess a person's needs to avoid continued requests for support.

Central Government has not been prescriptive in how it expects the Council to do this as the new LAS scheme is discretionary and the £344K funding is non ring fenced. However, it is expected that a provision of support is provided to address unavoidable need and those who face the greatest difficulty managing their income. The Council has existing responsibilities including the Child Poverty Act 2010, the Disabled Person Act 1986 and the Housing Act 1996 as well as the public sector equality duty in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010.

Whilst there will be similarities from the current Social Fund Discretionary payments scheme retained within the pilot LAS scheme, a full analysis of the impact is not able to be undertaken given the lack of detailed information available from DWP around the applications received for existing awards. The purpose of the 12 month pilot LAS scheme will be to determine whether applicants faced with genuine hardship are able to obtain support and assistance to alleviate any risk to them or their family.

It is suggested that the 12 month pilot period will monitor and establish the LAS scheme requirements and best solution.

Consultation

As part of the new service design of the pilot LAS scheme, eligibility criteria is being carefully considered in order to ensure that those residents who are in most need are able to access this provision. It is proposed to consult with relevant organisations, referral agencies and key stakeholders such as CAB, other Welfare Agencies, Food Bank, and any other stakeholder with financial inclusion or related interests and through their users. As part of the consultation exercise briefing meetings will be carried out to run through the proposals.

The Consultation is due to commence on 4 February 2013 to 8 March 2013 by inviting formal written responses. The results of this will be considered by the Director of Resources in consultation with the Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Resources) for recommending to Cabinet for implementation of the Pilot LAS Scheme.

Director Sign off:	Dave Burbage
Advice sought from Legal Services	Laura Gaudion/Justin Thorne
Date	18 February 2013