

Work and Pensions Committee Local Welfare Safety Net Inquiry Response November 2015

Inquiry Overview

The Committee invites evidence on discretionary welfare, housing and Council Tax assistance schemes, including issues of sufficiency; accessibility; allocation criteria and appeals; and how local policies are drawn up and monitored.

The Committee is particularly interested in the interaction between the national benefits system and these locally-run schemes, and variations between different areas, both in terms of the type and level of support available and the eligibility criteria applied by different local authorities.

The Committee is considering the extent to which local discretion and variations in provision represent "localism in action" or in fact create a "postcode lottery", and is seeking to highlight good practice; identify where gaps in provision might exist; and suggest remedies.

1. **Family Action's** work is wide-ranging and includes help for parents-to-be, the provision of Children's Centres in local communities, intensive family support, emotional health and wellbeing services, financial grants programmes and training and consultancy. Specific knowledge and expertise gained from our Open Doors Grants Programme informs our evidence to the inquiry regarding the sufficiency and accessibility of Local Welfare Schemes.
2. **The Open Doors Programme** is funded by the LankellyChase Foundation and administered by Family Action. It provides cash grants delivered alongside intensive support to recipients from a number of partner organisations. This support is provided through a variety of programmes including parenting support, substance misuse services and support for victims of domestic abuse. The cash grant is intended to support users of these programmes to sustain the progress they have achieved. All applicants to the programme must be experiencing at least two areas of Severe and Multiple Disadvantage in addition to living in poverty. The SMD areas are: domestic abuse; frequent contact with the criminal justice system (but not in prison); homelessness or at 'imminent' risk of being made homeless; serious mental health problems; sexual exploitation and substance misuse. For more information about the Open Doors Grants Programme: ['Opening Doors Changing Lives, Interim Findings 2015'](#). We are publishing a second report on the Open Doors Programme in January 2016, with an event to celebrate the Programme in the House of Lords on 11th February 2016.
3. **Issues of Sufficiency and Accessibility**
Partner organisations from the Open Doors Programme have commented anecdotally that Local Authority grant processes are problematic - for example one council rejects grant applications without giving feedback, despite the application appearing to meet the criteria given. Staff suggest that it is harder and harder to

access support, with many programmes tightening their eligibility criteria and asking for a lot of evidence:

‘The local grant processes can be traumatic for women [who have suffered domestic abuse], they ask for too much evidence, in some cases police records.’ – Partner organisation

When staff were asked what they might have done in the absence of the Open Doors Grant, staff were, in most cases, unable to identify other local support. For example, only 10% of staff from partner organisations who responded to our survey stated they would apply for Local Welfare Provision or to individual donors.

4. Another issue around accessibility is the **lack of personal contact with Local Authority grants teams**, with many grant applications and rejection notifications happening solely online. Liaising with Local Authorities has got harder; liaison roles in Local Authorities have been cut, which makes it difficult for partner organisations to follow up on the progress of the application and know when goods will be delivered. This type of process is hard enough for a partner organisation to accept, let alone those in great need.
5. In some cases **Local Welfare Schemes provide a very basic package**, defining carpets and curtains as luxury items not to be included. However, a pair of curtains in a ground floor flat can make the home feel so much safer, especially where someone has fled domestic abuse. In another example, washing machines are not available for single men, regardless of whether they are fathers, making it harder for them to reconnect or sustain contact with their children as they feel they are not able to give them basic care.
6. **Interaction Between the National Benefits System and Locally-run Schemes**
In order to access other welfare assistance, recipients have to continually evidence their need; this can be both prescriptive and distressing. If someone is a victim of domestic abuse, for example, there are a number of instances where disclosure is required. This matters because they are vulnerable, consistently question their decision to leave and are often under huge pressure to return; too often people are made to feel that they are being asked justify why they chose to put themselves in this situation.
7. **Suggested Remedies**
Research on our Open Doors Programme clearly states that **cash grants can enhance the efficacy of support** provided by the partner organisations - through improved relationships between support workers and grant recipients, increased motivation and reduced stress of recipients. It is often reported by support workers that it is hard to make progress with people they are trying to support if there are too many pressing issues in their lives. By reducing these pressures the **cash grant**

therefore acts as an enabler for further change - being part of the process of support, not a standalone event. Open Doors Grants most commonly help recipients to make a home for themselves, providing a basis for further progress with ongoing support. **Reducing financial pressures makes it easier for individuals to focus on other areas of their lives** that need addressing.

8. **The benefits of cash identified** from a survey of Open Doors Grant recipients include:
- It enables the grant to be used at separate places more easily
 - The recipient can get more with the money by being able to shop in second hand shops and markets
 - It widens the choice and flexibility of available goods - what is needed might not be available via vouchers
 - Transport issues may limit the places that a recipient can reach so cash is more convenient
 - Cash enables recipients to use local suppliers/independent shops who would not accept vouchers
 - The partner organisation may have local contacts that can source items more cheaply, but they cannot accept vouchers
 - Having cash can speed up the transaction, which is often important for those in crisis who may relapse but for this small intervention
 - Cash enables partial funding of items
 - The recipient feels trusted and 'normal'
 - The recipient has improved confidence with money and is proud of how far they have been able to make the money stretch
9. **Family Action would welcome a discussion about the success of the Open Doors Programme Model of Grant Provision.** We advocate for continued provision through Local Welfare Schemes, but think that effort needs to be made to ensure that these schemes are closely aligned with and support other statutory help in order to achieve better outcomes and value for money. We also believe that support via cash, rather than vouchers or similar, should be more commonly used by Local Welfare Schemes, for financial and emotional reasons indicated above. This again reinforces the efficacy of other support available – an 'invest to save' model.