

Appendix 'A'

Final Report of the Cabinet Working Group on the Care and Urgent Needs Support Scheme

Foreword

In April 2013 the County Council took on responsibility for providing support for people in crisis and with care needs who had previously been supported by the Department of Work and Pensions' Social Fund. The Social Fund prior to its abolition was the safety net to the safety net provided by the benefits system.

The County Council's response to these new requirements was the Care and Urgent Needs Support Scheme (CAUNSS) delivered through the County Benefits Service. In light of the Government's decision to remove the specific funding for this scheme the Leader of the County Council agreed in March 2014 to set up a Cabinet Working Group to examine the Scheme and make recommendations for the future.

This report sets out the Working Group's findings and recommendations. What was found was a scheme operated by dedicated and conscientious staff which is providing valuable assistance to people in need using a range of imaginative partnerships which assist in securing value for money.

We are grateful for the assistance provided by officers in carrying out our work, particularly Jim Dickson, the recently retired Head of Welfare Rights and also the staff involved in running the scheme for welcoming our shadowing visits.

County Councillor A Ali
Chair

Introduction

On 6th March 2014 the Leader of the County Council approved the creation of a Cabinet Working Group on the Care and Urgent Needs Support Scheme with the following terms of reference.

1. To identify whether the Care and Urgent Needs Support Scheme is meeting the objectives originally set for it.
2. In the light of experience during the first year of operation to consider whether the original objectives and policy framework remain appropriate
3. To consider whether there may be alternative options available in the deployment of resources.
4. To consider the scheme's place within an overall offer from the County Council.
5. To make recommendations in regard to these matters to the Cabinet.

The membership of the Working Group was

CC A. Ali (Chair)
CC L Beevers
CC F Craig-Wilson
CC G Dowding
CC N Hennesey
CC K Iddon

The Group met on three occasions to consider information and prepare this report, and in addition members individually "shadowed" staff handling applications under the scheme.

Background to the Care and Urgent Needs Support Scheme

As part of the Government's welfare reforms the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) closed the Discretionary Social Fund on 31 March 2013. Without creating a new statutory duty the department passed responsibility for certain activities carried out by this Fund to upper tier local authorities supported by a specific grant which was announced for two years. The responsibilities which passed to upper tier councils were:-

- Community Care Grants which provided payments enabling vulnerable people to live in the community and were conditional upon receipt of a means tested benefit.
- Crisis loans which were to meet immediate needs such as general living expenses or items needed after a disaster where entitlement was not dependent on receipt of a benefit.

The Government's view in making this change in the way it did was that there were synergies between this activity and upper tier council's social services functions. They also felt that it would be possible for local authorities to develop more tailored solutions to individual problems and also utilise more resources within the wider community to meet needs.

The County Council's response to this transfer of responsibility was to create the Care and Urgent Needs Support Scheme the details of which were approved by the Cabinet on 3 January 2013 following a consultation process which engaged a wide range of stakeholders.

The scheme is operated by the County Benefits Service, which originally formed part of the Council's Strategic Partnership arrangement and currently forms part of the Office of the Chief Executive. The key feature of the scheme are listed below and the detailed policy is at Annex 1.

- Access to support is targeted at Lancashire residents.
- Support is restricted to those areas that are not supported through other sources (ie housing costs and difficulties due to delays in DWP benefits will not normally be supported).
- Where support cannot be provided signposting to more appropriate sources of support takes place.
- Support is normally provided through means other than cash.
- Support is not normally provided on more than two occasions in a rolling 12 month period and where repeat applications occur referral is also made to other

agencies such as Money Advice to ensure the underlying causes of problems are addressed.

- Support operates within monthly cash limits.
- There is a right to review decisions made to ensure that decision makers have taken account of all relevant information in arriving at their decision.

The level of awards under the scheme was approved by the then Leader of the County Council on 11 March 2013. These levels were set for use in cases where it is not possible to deliver the necessary support through a non cash alternative.

Non cash support is provided in two ways:-

- Items such as beds, cookers etc which are provided directly to applicants through the Lancashire Community Recycling Network (a network of organisations led by Social Enterprise Lancashire Network).
- Food parcels which were originally only provided in East Lancashire but which are now provided across most of the County through arrangements with 8 voluntary organisations. Work continues to extend this provision county wide.

Cash support is provided through the paypoint system which allows the client to access cash at a wide range of local outlets across the County. This system is now being examined for other similar applications like S17 Children Act payments enabling a reduction in cash held in council offices.

The scheme is accessed either on line or by telephone through the Council's Customer Service Centre which takes initial details and provides a triage function. To minimise costs for clients the assessment team phone individuals back in order to complete a full assessment. Arrangements are also being piloted with advice agencies that will enable them to fully complete an on line application.

The resources announced by DWP to support the scheme were for the years 2013/14 and 2014/15. The provisional local government settlement announced for 2015/16 in December 2013 includes no specific resources for the scheme. While local government bodies continue to lobby on this issue, and following legal action the government is now committed to a review, it is prudent to conduct a review of what is currently happening on the ground to examine areas for improvement.

The Working Group's Activity

The Cabinet Working Group met on three occasions in order to fulfil its brief.

- 10 April 2014 to consider the background to the scheme and identify issues and concerns for consideration.
- 18 June 2014 to consider the stakeholder feedback and consider a report produced by another County Council on the first year of operation of their scheme.
- 10 September 2014 to consider feedback from members' shadowing sessions with the assessment team in the County Benefits Service and formulate recommendations to the Cabinet.

The Working Group were impressed throughout their work by the focus of the staff involved in the running of the scheme on finding solutions for individuals.

The Working Group identified a number of issues with the scheme that might contribute to low take up.

- Access - The Working Group were concerned about access through a 0845 number and the absence of a face to face route and also a general lack of knowledge of the scheme.

As part of a wider range of changes by the council the 0845 number has now been replaced by a 0300 number which is less costly, and as indicated elsewhere staff make efforts to minimise costs for clients.

The County Council itself does not have facilities located in each community that are suitable for face to face access for this type of service, although the facility does exist for an assessment to be carried out through a home visit where there are particular special circumstances. During the process of designing the scheme the opportunity for District Council One Stop Shops to conduct assessments was considered but there was no interest in this. There is however an opportunity for advice agencies to guide individuals through the on line application. More recently work has been undertaken to pilot the concept of a "trusted intermediary", a voluntary organisation that can make decisions on the Council's behalf in relation to urgent needs applications. The initial results of this work have been positive.

In terms of knowledge of the scheme as with the previous Social Fund this largely relies on the communication across the network of advice agencies and with front line the DWP staff who signpost people to the scheme. Officers felt that the limited availability of cash support through the scheme when compared to its predecessor may have had an impact on demand, and this was a specific aspect of the design of the scheme.

- Eligibility - The Working Group noted that the scheme was specifically designed not to address failure within the mainstream benefits system. However, the Group were aware from their casework that this was a growing cause of crisis situations for families and individuals.

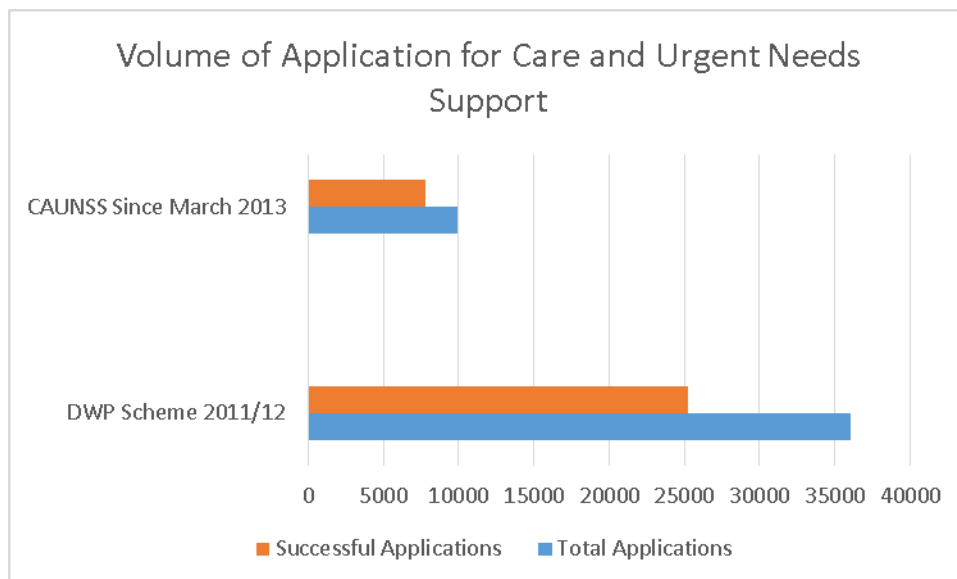
The intention of the scheme must clearly not be to replace the mainstream benefits system, which is the responsibility of national government. However, the scheme does have flexibility built into the underlying policy which allow staff to meet individual needs as illustrated in Annex 2, which provides pen pictures of a number of cases.

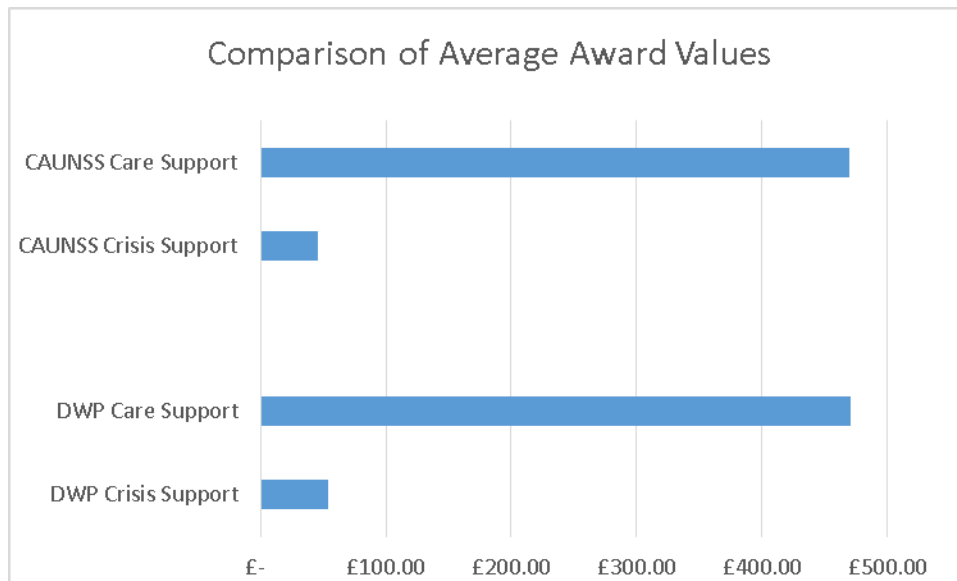
- Lack of easy access to cash- The Working Group acknowledged that the fact that the scheme only provides cash where no other alternative is available may well be supressing demand when compared to the DWP.

This was a feature specifically designed into the scheme to ensure that identified needs can be met with an appropriate response with least inconvenience for the service user. Thus in a case where a new bed is required it is simply a matter of the relevant recycling organisation making contact to arrange delivery making the whole experience much less difficult for the individual.

Members of the Working Group through their contacts with voluntary organisations raised a number of concerns that the day to day operation of the scheme which officers responded to and indicated in some cases resulted from some misunderstanding of the scheme.

The Working Group noted the following key facts based on 17 months operation of the scheme.





In broad terms this shows that applicants to the scheme, while fewer in number, are more likely to receive support than under the previous arrangements (79% successful applications compared to 70%) and that the level of support received, although different in nature has an equivalent value.

The Working Group also noted the following demographic information about the users of the scheme, again based on 17 months data.

Demographically, there are more male applicants than female, see chart.

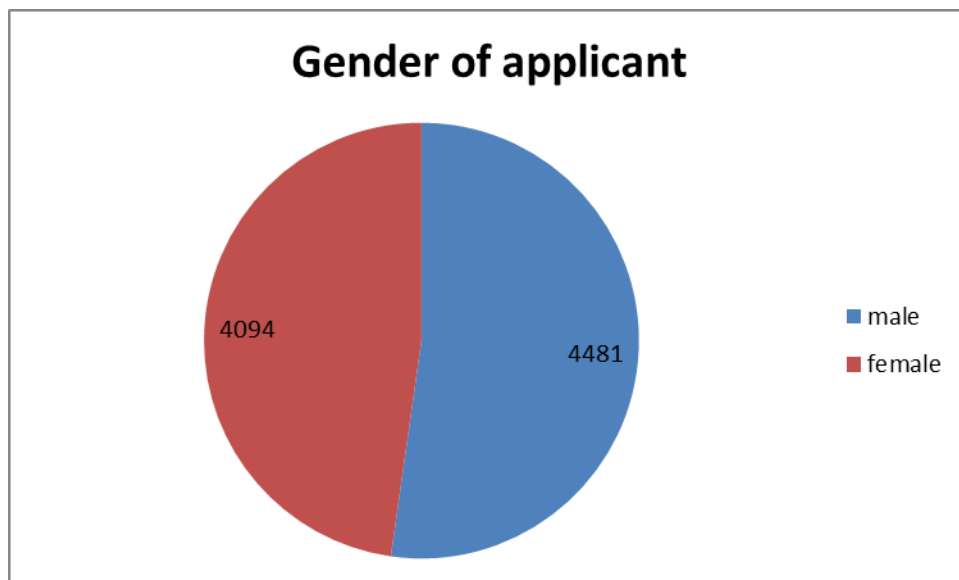


Table: CaUNSS applicant gender

Applicant household type is made up predominantly of single people, see below. This probably reflects the core priorities of the care needs scheme which is to help people re-establish themselves in the community, e.g. following homelessness.

The second biggest household type is lone parent, again probably reflecting the scope of the scheme and, for example, the assistance with essential household goods offered to families fleeing domestic violence.

Pensioners are underrepresented in the CaUNSS population. This may be because many pensioner poverty levels have reduced over the past decade and therefore, this household type has less need of a scheme of last report such as CaUNSS.

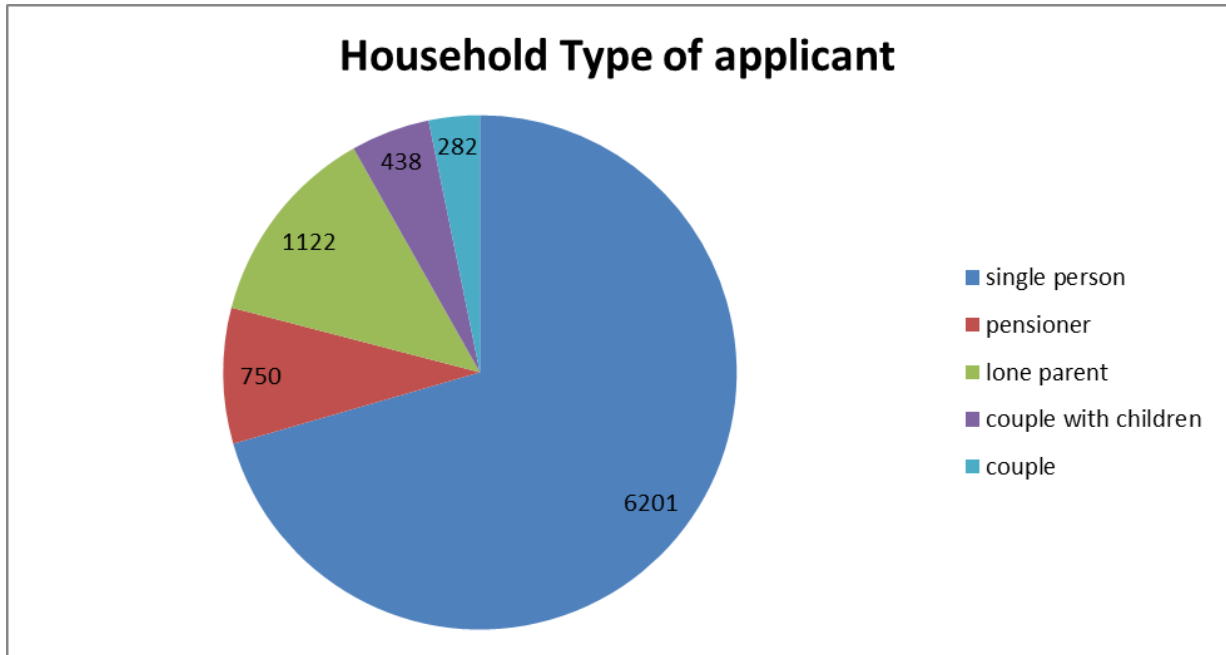
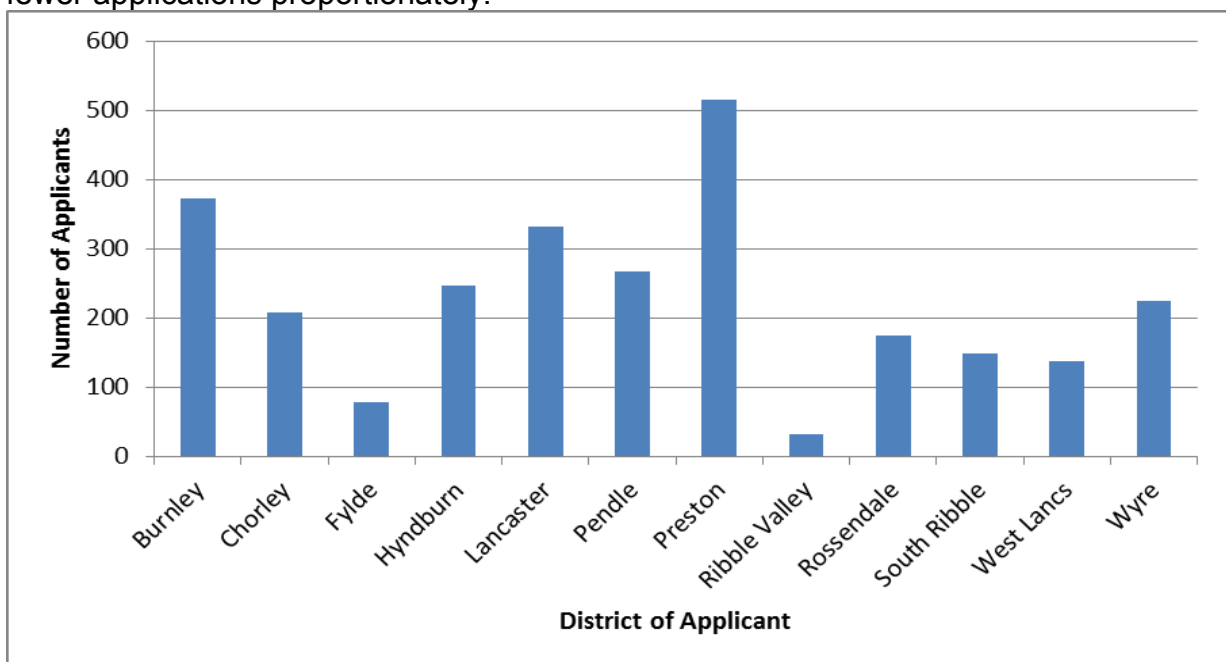


Table: CaUNSS applicant household type

By district and also proportionately, Burnley and Preston receive the highest number of applications, e.g. Preston has 11% of Lancashire's population but provides 19% of CaUNSS applications. Fylde, Ribble Valley, South Ribble and West Lancs provide fewer applications proportionately.



In broad terms the information demographic information indicates that as with the previous Social Fund there are more male users of a scheme of this sort, while the types of household applying again mirror previous experience. The geographic distribution of applications again is as would have been expected based on other socio-economic data.

The Working Group noted a range of concerns about the variable quality of provisions from central food banks, which officers were following up.

Conclusion

The Working Group concludes that the Care and Urgent Needs Support Scheme fulfils a valuable role in the spectrum of provision for people in crisis situation or with specific care needs. In addition they recognised the added value being achieved through work with both furniture recycling organisations and food banks.

Recommendations

The Working Group recommends to Cabinet:

1. That the County Council maintains budgetary provision for the Care and Urgent Needs Support Scheme following the end of the specific government grant at a level commensurate with current demand.
2. That Cabinet writes to the Department for Work and Pensions again, highlighting the importance of the Care and Urgent Needs Support Scheme with a recommendation that the DWP funds the scheme permanently.
3. That a more active approach to contract management should be taken with Food Banks in order to ensure consistent quality and that local County Councillors should be involved in this process.
4. That officers be encouraged to continue extending the use of Food Banks so that the whole of the County is covered by this type of provision.
5. That current work to pilot the use of "trusted intermediary" organisations within the decision making process be made permanent and opportunities to expand it across the County be sought.