

REPORT OF THE LEAD CABINET MEMBER FOR RESOURCES

The Lead Cabinet Member for Resources, Councillor Elkin, met on 6 May 2014.

Attendance: Councillor Elkin (Lead Cabinet Member for Resources)

Also present: Councillors Birch and Keeley

1. Notice of Motion: Local Welfare Assistance Fund

1.1 Until April 2013, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) administered the Social Fund, including Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans, as well as other schemes. The DWP abolished Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans and gave to each county council and unitary authority the power to set up a scheme in their place, with initial funding for two years. There was, however, no statutory duty on authorities to run a scheme.

1.2 The following Notice of Motion has been submitted by Councillor Birch:

This Council is dismayed by the Government's decision to remove funding from the Local Welfare Assistance Fund from next financial year. It agrees with the view of the chair of the LGA that this fund provides "crucial support to people facing personal crises in their lives." The Council further recognises that it could now be put in the unenviable position of carrying through a reduction in the discretionary support to East Sussex residents facing serious hardship or trying to maintain the current level of support in a climate of already serious budgetary pressures. It therefore requests the Leader of the Council to write to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government asking that the decision to remove funding nationally be reconsidered and to ask local East Sussex MPs to support this call.

1.3 In line with the Council's practice, the matter has been referred by the Chairman to the Lead Member for Resources for consideration to provide information to the County Council and help inform debate.

1.4 The Discretionary East Sussex Support Scheme (DESSS) was set up from April 2013. It provides support to East Sussex residents who face emergency situations or need help to live independently in the community. No cash payments are made by the scheme, but goods and services are provided. This includes food, gas and electricity vouchers, baby items, essential furniture and white goods, clothing and emergency travel. Through partnership working with Borough and District Councils in East Sussex, help is also provided with rent in advance and rent deposits for people with no other options. The scheme works with partners to ensure that the process of applying for and receiving the items is as simple and responsive for residents facing difficult situations. The partners include Citizens Advice Bureaux, Borough and District Councils, children's centres, advice agencies, housing associations, Care for the Carers, food banks, furniture re-use charities.

1.5 During 2013/14, the scheme provided assistance to over 1400 households. The scheme is important in supporting local people and reducing demand for more costly interventions for the County Council and Borough and District Councils. In particular it prevents individuals and families reaching situations and enables residents to achieve independence from statutory assistance. The scheme therefore supports the County Council to meet one of its priority outcome to build individual and community resilience.

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1.6 Although the formal evaluation has not yet been completed initial feedback from clients, partners and council staff all indicates that the scheme is very successful. The Local Government Association and the County Council Network have made representations to Government to rethink its decision to cease funding for local welfare assistance to avoid short terms problems for individuals and families escalating.

1.7 East Sussex County Council received £1,202,184 for 2013/14 and will receive £1,184,695 for 2014/15 to support the local welfare assistance scheme set up in East Sussex. In the Autumn Statement the Chancellor stated that the 2015/16 Local Government Financial Settlement when issued would not allocate funding for this scheme. We have not received any direct correspondence stating that the funds have been withdrawn. Without this funding, local authorities would have to divert money from other existing sources if it wished to keep an East Sussex scheme running. The implications of the withdrawal of funding will be considered, with partners, through the current Reconciling Policy Performance Resources process.

1.8 The Local Welfare Assistance Fund supports the DESSS to provide crisis support and community grants which is an important element of the support the County Council provides to local residents. The responsibility providing this support was transferred to the County Council from the DWP and the funding for this will be withdrawn from 2015/16.

1.9 The Lead Member for Resources recommends the County Council to support the amendment to the Notice of Motion, as set out below. The amendment strengthens the Notice of Motion by reinforcing that the fund provides not only a safety net at times of crisis but also a vital resource which enables vulnerable people to leave institutional care. It is also proposed to welcome the offer of a wide range of local public and voluntary and community sector partners to lobby jointly on the issue.

1.10 The amended Notice of Motion to read:

This Council is dismayed by the Government's decision to remove funding from the Local Welfare Assistance Fund from next financial year. It agrees with the view of the chair of the LGA that this fund provides "crucial support to people facing personal crises in their lives" and also highlights that the fund also provides a vital resource which enables vulnerable people to leave institutional care. The Council further recognises that it could now be put in the unenviable position of carrying through a reduction in the discretionary support to East Sussex residents facing serious hardship or trying to maintain the current level of support in a climate of already serious budgetary pressures. It therefore requests the Leader of the Council to write to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government asking that the decision to remove funding nationally be reconsidered, to work with local partners to promote this demand including asking local East Sussex MPs to support this call.

1.11 The Lead Cabinet Member **recommends** the County Council to –

✧ (1) note the contents of the report in relation to Councillor Birch's motion; and

(2) agree to the amended Notice of Motion as set out in paragraph 1.10 above

6 May 2014

DAVID ELKIN
Lead Cabinet Member for
Resources