

## **Corporate Policy Committee**

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<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	07 September 2021
<b>Report Title:</b>	Consultation on the Emergency Assistance Scheme
<b>Report of:</b>	Alex Thompson, Director of Finance and Customer Services
<b>Report Reference No:</b>	CP/18/21-22
<b>Ward(s) Affected:</b>	All

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### **1. Executive Summary**

- 1.1.** This report is to seek approval from the Committee on proposals to consult on the Emergency Assistance Scheme for 2022/23. The Scheme provides a safety net for people in crisis. It is a non-cash scheme and provides help such as rent deposits, essential furniture and some white goods (recycled where possible), and emergency food for applicants on low incomes. The Committee will receive feedback from the consultation process prior to making any potential amendments to the scheme.
- 1.2.** The consultation will seek views on the effectiveness of the scheme and any amendments required whilst remaining affordable and sustainable within the Council's financial strategy.

### **2. Recommendations**

- 2.1.** To agree to a formal consultation on the Emergency Assistance Scheme for 2022/23
- 2.2.** To delegate final design of the consultation material to the Director of Finance and Customer Services in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Committee.

### **3. Reasons for Recommendations**

- 3.1.** It is over four years since the last review of the Emergency Assistance scheme was undertaken following a public consultation.

- 3.2.** In response to the COVID pandemic the Council has expanded the support provided to those in emergency situations. The Emergency Assistance Scheme needs to be reviewed in light of this package of support to ensure the Council provides a cohesive and consistent customer journey for those facing an emergency.

#### **4. Other Options Considered**

- 4.1.** The scheme could remain unchanged, without any requirement for consultation.
- 4.2.** The scheme is not a statutory service so could end. However, this would be detrimental to those residents most in need, failing to provide support as a safety net. By providing help and support early it reduces the risk of the need for more costlier support for those whose lives are broken by poverty.

#### **5. Background**

- 5.1.** Following the Welfare Reform Act 2012 discretionary Social Fund Crisis Loans and Community Care Grants administered by DWP were abolished and funding was transferred to local authorities to provide local support.
- 5.2.** Cheshire East established the Emergency Assistance scheme in April 2013 to support vulnerable people facing immediate hardship, following a crisis or disaster, to prevent homelessness, and to keep families together and safeguard vulnerable people.
- 5.3.** The scheme provides rent deposits, furniture and white goods (recycled where possible) and emergency food (through local food banks where possible). Unlike the former crisis loans and community care grants administered by the DWP, it does not provide cash.
- 5.4.** On 8 November 2016 the 'Local Welfare Safety Net' was approved following a review by the Welfare reform working group with two of the following key recommendations:
- Undertake a review of the Emergency Assistance scheme
  - Establish a small team of Key Workers within the Benefits service to take a more proactive approach to engage with people at risk of crisis when they apply for financial support, linking the retention of the financial support to continued engagement. The team would also undertake a review of the support available to ensure that commissioned and community-based support is comprehensive, relevant and providing value for money.
- 5.5.** The consultation was completed in 2017 and the criteria for the Emergency Assistance scheme was revised:
- Claims will be considered from those living in Cheshire East or moving to the borough as they have a connection to the area

- Applicants must be considered vulnerable but this will be determined on a case by case basis.
- They must be in receipt of state benefits or are eligible to receive them or on a low wage and unable to get help from friends or family
- Applicants are expected to work with the team to find ways to resolve the problems that have caused the need for Emergency Assistance help
- Support will help:
  - In emergencies with essential items or food
  - Keep or retain a home such as rent deposits, furniture and white goods
- Applicants can normally get Emergency Assistance support for a maximum of 1 emergency and 1 urgent housing situation in any 12-month period but may be more frequent in exceptional circumstances
- Further advice and signposting will be provided to all those applying regardless of whether the application is allowed.

**5.6.** The following summarises the applications to the scheme in 2020/21:

Claims received	Claims allowed	Claims pending	Claims Refused	Appeals received	Appeals allowed
1284	686	7	591	62	21

*1 Emergency Assistance claims - 2020/21*

Breakdown on items	£
Furniture & white goods	£137,642
Emergency food	£5,855
Rent deposits	£27,105
Other (inc Removals)	£3,120
<b>Total</b>	<b>£173,722</b>

*2 Breakdown on goods/services provided 2020/21*

**5.7.** The following is a recent case study:

Single parent with 2 daughters aged 9 and 14, living in a 3 bedroomed property with social landlord. She has rent arrears and housing costs are reduced for under occupancy (only requires a 2-bedroomed). Her employment has ended due to Covid and is only in receipt of Universal Credit (UC) now. She is receiving support to manage debts and has applied for a Debt Relief order.

Requested: a cooker and washing machine as both have stopped working. The items were second hand when tenant first moved in 2 years ago.

During telephone conversation, customer was advised that the scheme normally only provides one white good and she chose a washing machine. She currently has a microwave so can make meals.

UC does not meet full rent charge as family are under occupying by 1 bedroom. We also arranged a Discretionary Housing Payment to meet the shortfall in her housing costs and rent and this allowed the customer to start making payments towards rent arrears, retaining her property.

- 5.8.** The next consultation will seek views on the eligibility criteria and the types of support allowed as detailed in 5.5.
- 5.9.** In addition, in line with the Customer Experience Strategy a wider review will be undertaken to consider the customer journey for those facing an emergency. The review will consider the range of Council services available to those in crisis and ensure that these provide a coherent package of advice and support.

## **6. Consultation and Engagement**

- 6.1.** A formal public consultation is planned to run from late September 2021 to late December 2021 to seek views on the scheme and potential changes.
- 6.2.** This will be promoted on the Council's web site and with key stakeholders and during contact with Emergency Assistance customers (telephone, email and letter).

## **7. Implications**

### **7.1. Legal**

- 7.1.1.** The scheme is discretionary and the Council determines its own policy.

### **7.2. Finance**

- 7.2.1.** The recommendations in this report will have no impact on the council's Medium Term Financial Strategy, as the budget will remain at its current level of £220k per year.

### **7.3. Policy**

- 7.3.1.** The review of the scheme supports the following strategic priority:
- An open and enabling organisation

### **7.4. Equality**

- 7.4.1.** The equality impact assessment on the Emergency Assistance Scheme will be updated following the results of the consultation and review of the scheme.

### **7.5. Human Resources**

- 7.5.1.** There are no staffing implications; the scheme will continue to be managed by the existing officers in the Benefits Section.

## **7.6. Risk Management**

- 7.6.1.** As the scheme is demand led, there is a risk that a large increase in demand will exceed the budget.
- 7.6.2.** To mitigate this, regular monitoring is undertaken and customers are requested to prioritise the support they need. Other funding schemes are explored as part of the support provided.
- 7.6.3.** The risk environment around COVID-19 remains dynamic. Risk registers have been maintained as part of the Council's response to date and the plans for recovery.

## **7.7. Rural Communities**

- 7.7.1.** There are no direct implications for rural communities

## **7.8. Children and Young People/Cared for Children**

- 7.8.1.** There are no direct implications for children and young people

## **7.9. Public Health**

- 7.9.1.** There are no direct implications for public health

## **7.10. Climate Change**

The Emergency Assistance Scheme is fully digital; applications are made on-line and supporting evidence can be uploaded or submitted via email. Where possible reconditioned or refurbished furniture and white goods are provided.

<b>Access to Information</b>	
Contact Officer:	Liz Rimmer, Benefits Manager <a href="mailto:Liz.rimmer@cheshireeast.gov.uk">Liz.rimmer@cheshireeast.gov.uk</a> 01270 371448
Appendices:	None
Background Papers:	Information on the current Emergency Assistance Scheme: <a href="https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/emergency-assistance">Emergency Assistance (cheshireeast.gov.uk)</a>