

Corporate Policy Committee

Date of Meeting: 3rd March 2022

Report Title: Review of the Emergency Assistance Scheme

Report of: Alex Thompson, Director of Finance and Customer Services

Report Reference No: CP/34/21-22

Ward(s) Affected: All

Corporate Plan Priorities	Open	An open and enabling organisation	x
	Fair	A council which empowers and cares about people	
	Green	A thriving and sustainable place	

1. Purpose

- 1.1. This report is to seek approval from the Committee on recommendations for changes to the Emergency Assistance Scheme for 2022/23, following a review. The recommendations focus on retaining key elements of the scheme, whilst offering several improvements.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. The Emergency Assistance 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 scheme forms part of the Council's overall approach to support people in crisis.
- 2.2. The Committee approved the review of the scheme on 7 September 2021. Consultation followed this decision, which prompted responses from members of the public and stakeholder organisations.

- 2.3. The majority of respondents agreed with the proposed changes to the scheme. Subject to approval of the recommendations the scheme will continue, with amendments being implemented from 1 April 2022.

3. Recommendations

3.1. To approve the Emergency Assistance Scheme with the following changes from 1 April 2022:-

- To allow for discretion in applying the current limit of only one Emergency Assistance award per 12 month period; enabling further support to be provided in exceptional cases.
- To provide supermarket vouchers in addition to the existing process of referrals to food banks for those in food crisis.
- To extend the Scheme to provide utility vouchers to those in fuel crisis.

And:

- To confirm that the scheme will remain non-cash based to reduce the risk of abuse.

4. Reasons for Recommendations

- 4.1. It is over four years since the last review of the Emergency Assistance scheme and the scheme needs to respond to changing demand and priorities, particularly in relation to food and fuel poverty, and to ensure it is meeting the needs of those seeking assistance, as well as the wishes of the Council taxpayers.
- 4.2. Following the feedback received (see section 6) the scheme is generally meeting needs and delivering essential support to those most vulnerable and in need so only minor changes are required.
- 4.3. As individuals can face many varied and multiple challenges, it is important that the scheme continues to be flexible and responsive, signposting to other services applicants may require, whether they receive support under the scheme or not.

5. Other Options Considered

- 5.1. The scheme could remain unchanged however it would be unable to meet changing demands particularly in relation to food and fuel poverty.
- 5.2. 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 costly support for those whose lives are broken by poverty.
- 5.3. The scheme could be merged with other crisis support services and the budget transferred. This option is not preferred as, although there is

commonality across schemes, it was felt this scheme works very well as a stand-alone option.

Option	Impact	Risk
Do nothing	Some customers will struggle to meet food and utility costs	Increase in number of vulnerable customers struggling to meet food and / or utility costs and turning to the Council for more costly support
Scheme could end	Increase in poverty	Larger number of vulnerable customers will struggle to meet food and / or utility costs and turning to the Council for more costly support without a local welfare safety net
Merge the scheme with other crisis support services	The current scheme works well and supports those at risk of crisis as a local welfare safety net to try and prevent customers presenting in crisis	The current scheme supports those at risk of crisis, if merged with Crisis schemes customers may not apply believing they must be in crisis which could result in the need for more costly support

6. Background

- 6.1. 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.
- 6.2. 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.
- 6.3. The scheme provides rent deposits, furniture, and white goods (recycled where possible) and emergency food (through local food banks where possible). However, other support considered necessary may be provided, such as help with removals. Unlike the former crisis loans and community care grants administered by the DWP, it does not provide cash.
- 6.4. A summary of the qualifying criteria for the current scheme is as follows:-

- 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.

6.5. A review of the current scheme was approved by Corporate Policy Committee on 7th September 2021. The review was undertaken, informed by a public consultation, (see section 6) to seek views on the eligibility criteria and the types of support allowed and to establish if the Scheme continued to meet the need of our most vulnerable customers.

6.6. In addition, in line with the Customer Experience Strategy a wider review is underway to consider the customer journey for those facing an emergency. The review is considering the range of Council and partner services available to those in crisis, the ease with which that support can be accessed, any duplication of effort or gaps in provision, ensuring that these provide a coherent package of advice and support.

7. Consultation and Engagement

7.1. A formal review was undertaken between 26 October 2021 and 3 January 2022 seeking views from the public on the scheme and potential changes.

7.2. This was promoted on the Council's web site, social media channels and with key stakeholders. Details were provided for customers during contact about Emergency Assistance during this period and emails sent to previous applicants inviting them to express their views.

7.3. A total of 171 completed response were received. The respondents covered a range of:

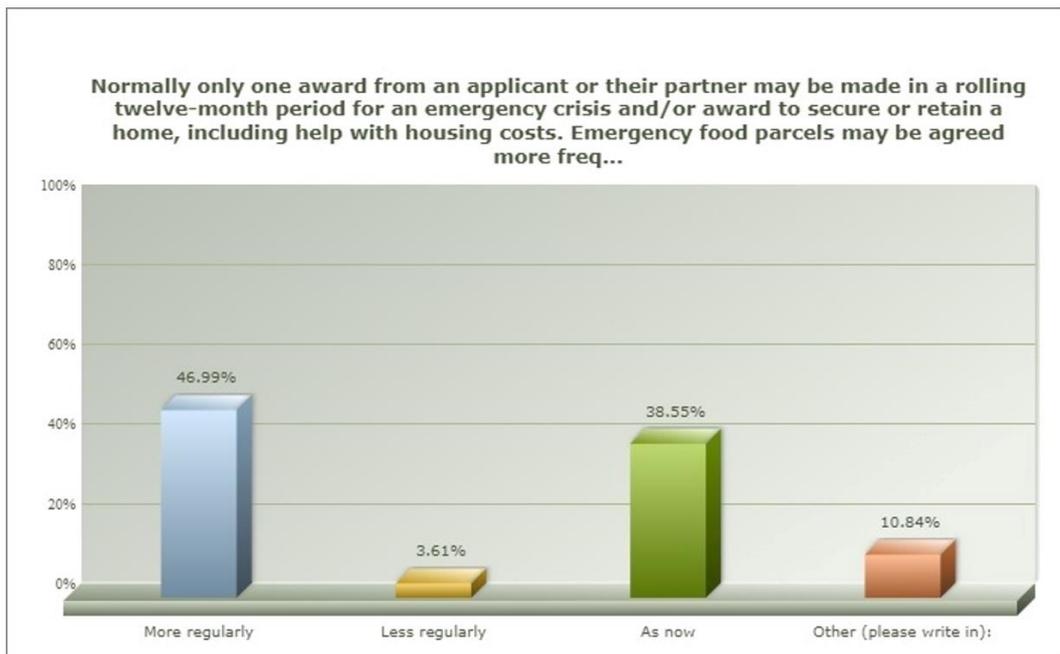
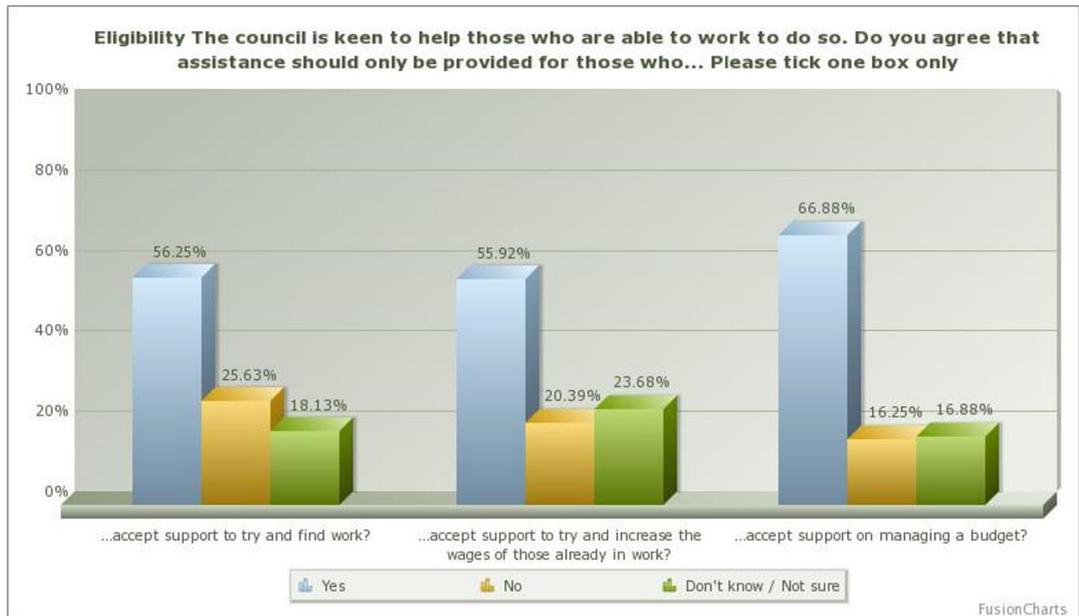
- Ages
- Gender
- Ethnic origins

- Those with day-to-day activities limited because of a health problem or disability
- 6 responses on behalf of organisations

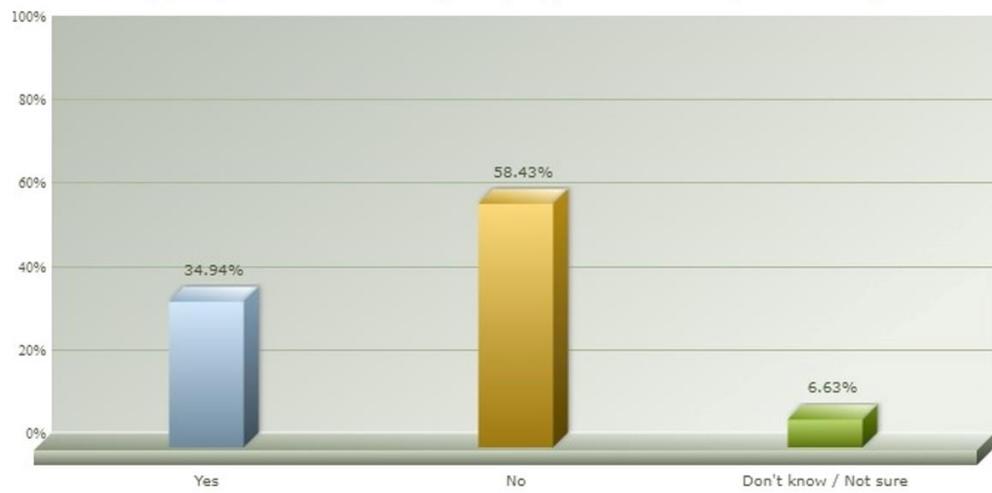
7.4. Most respondents were supportive of the key elements of the current scheme as follows:

Feedback	Responses		
Agree that assistance should only be provided for those who accept support: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to try and find work where able • to try and increase the wages of those already in work • on managing a budget 	Agree	Disagree	
	56.3%	25.6%	
	55.9%	20.4%	
	66.9%	16.3%	
Normally only one award may be made in a rolling 12-month period. Emergency food parcels may be agreed more frequently	More regularly	As now	Less regularly
	47%	38.6%	3.6%
Scheme is currently non-cash based, should cash awards be made available	Yes		No
	34.9%		58.4%
Should supermarket vouchers be issued as well as referrals to food banks	Yes		No
	76.8%		17.07%
White goods are usually limited to one of the following: Fridge Cooker Washing machine (where medical needs or dependent children) Do you feel this list should remain the same?	Yes		No
	64.4%		30.1%
Should the existing furniture classed as essential remain the same?	Yes		No
	75.2%		19.4%

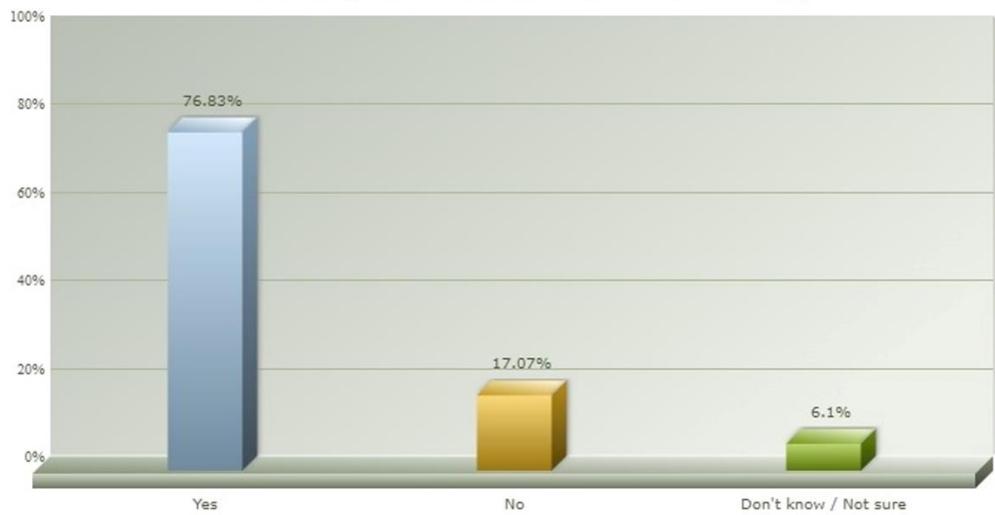
7.5. The following graphs show the responses to the key questions:

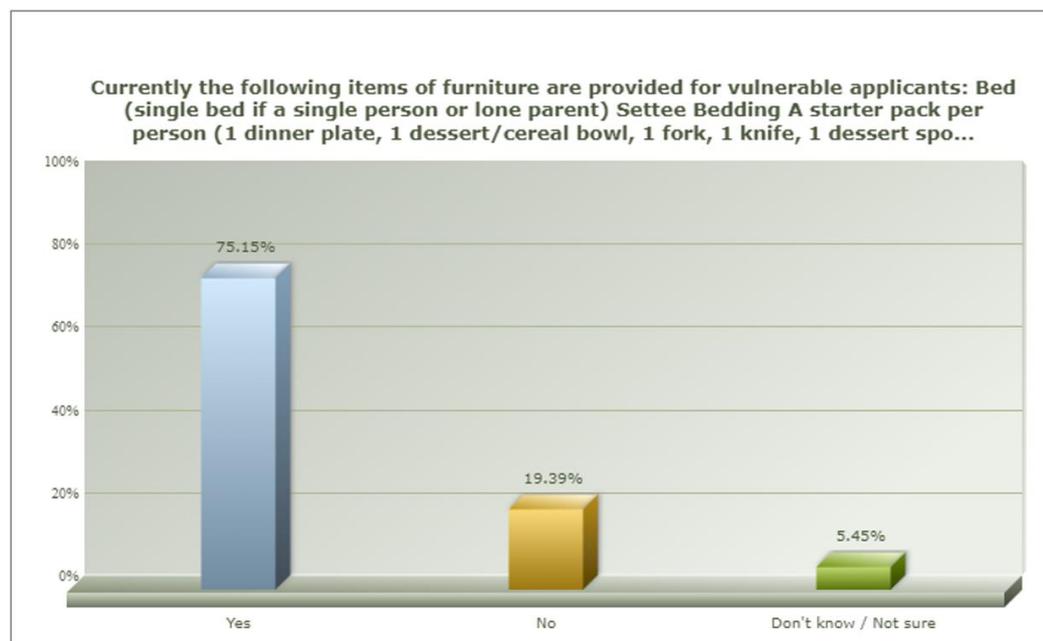
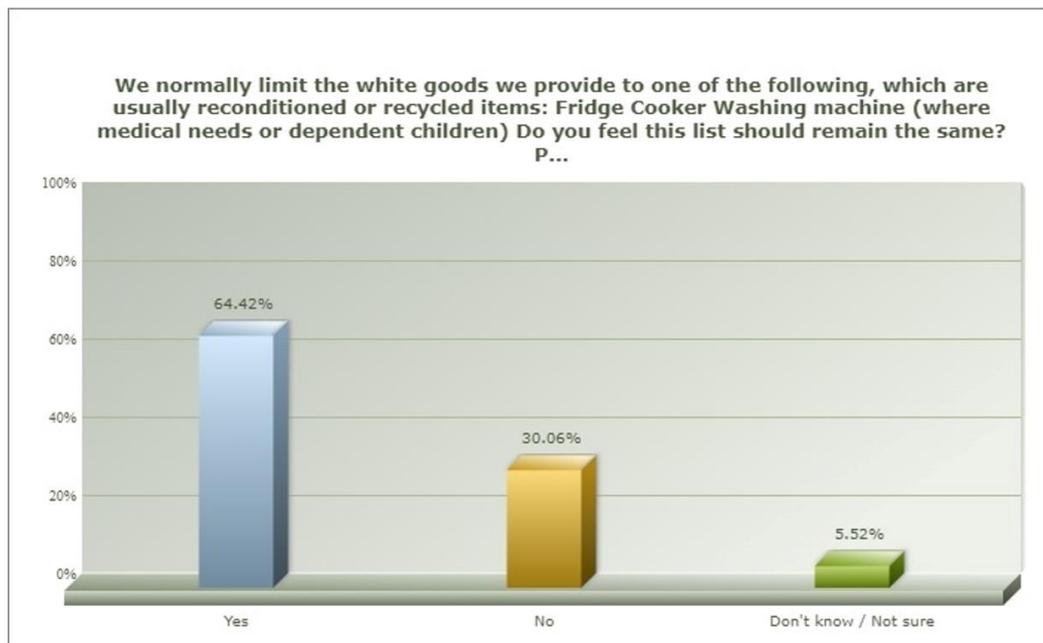


Provision of support Support provided by the scheme is currently non-cash based, with support only provided through goods, supplies or services. This is to ensure that the support provided is used on goods, supplies or services, and is not spent o...



Currently food referrals are made to food banks. Do you think supermarket vouchers should be provided as well? Please tick one box only





7.6. Respondents were invited to comment further, and the following summarises the responses:

Criteria

- Agree that those who are not in a position to find work are still eligible (covers a wide range of potential barriers)
- There needs to be a holistic and flexible approach
- Proof should be required for eligibility
- Some comments that there should not be any eligibility conditions

Awards

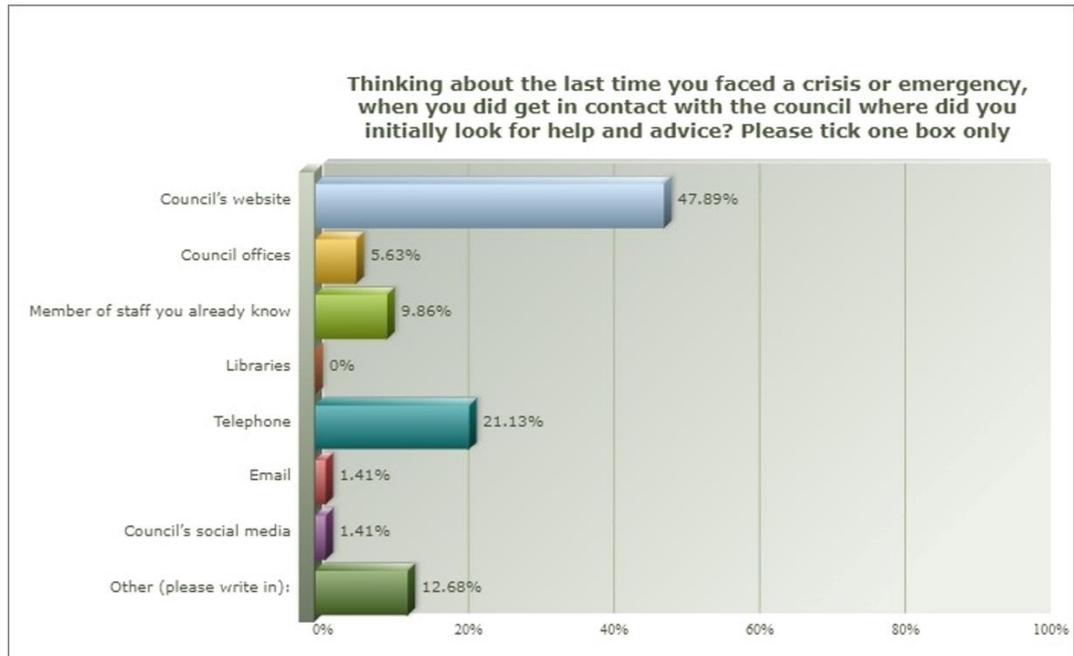
- Agree that additional awards should be made in exceptional circumstances
- Agree that foodbank referrals should be made more regularly
- Each case should be considered on its own merit
- Opposing views with regards to offering cash awards:
 - Offers dignity and choice
 - Open to abuse and could be used for non-essential items
 - Utilities and supermarket vouchers allow for more flexibility and can provide more fresh items than foodbank parcels
 - Concerns that supermarket vouchers should be restricted to food items
- Whilst majority agree that the choice of white goods is correct, washing machines should be considered for all and an option to provide more than one where there is a clear justifiable need. Should have option of microwave.
 - Washing machines & freezers help with financial pressures and more cost effective
- Agreement about recycled and reconditioned goods where possible
- Furniture generally agreed but consider double bed for adult and have flexibility
- Mixed views on requirements and size of starter packs
- Consider help with removals, flooring, clothing, phones, travel costs, rubbish removal and utility bills
- Concerns about the scheme causing reliance
- Ensure signposting to other relevant organisations

7.7. In addition the review invited feedback on customers experience when contacting the Council in an emergency. This is part of a wider review looking at improvements to the customer experience and the information available to them. It aims to ensure the Council provides a cohesive and consistent customer journey for those facing an emergency.

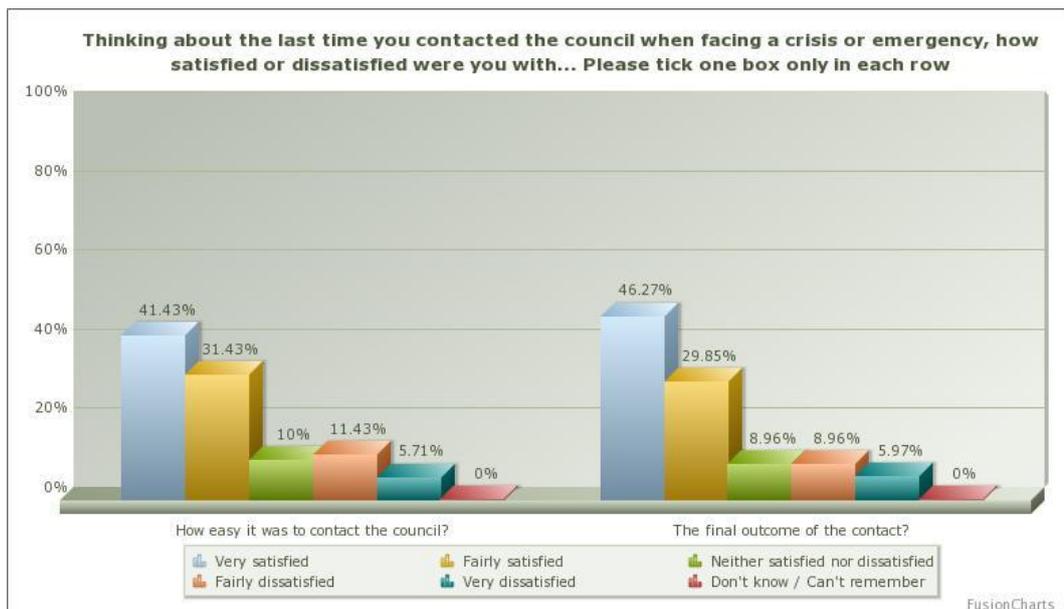
7.8. Of the responses received:

- 43.37% had contacted the Council when facing a crisis or emergency
- 59.1% of these contacted the Council directly with the remainder being referred from partner organisations

7.9. The majority of initial help and advice sought was via the web site followed by telephone contact:



7.10. There were high satisfaction levels on both the ease of contacting the Council and the final outcome.



8. Implications

8.1. Legal

The scheme is discretionary, and the Council determines its own policy. The policy should be fair and reasonable and should be applied fairly and reasonably. Any consultation undertaken as part of a review should be in accordance with good practice and with the benefit of specific advice as necessary.

8.2. Finance

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.

8.3. Policy

The review of the scheme supports the following strategic priority:

An open and enabling organisation

8.4. Equality

The equality impact assessment on the Emergency Assistance Scheme has been updated following the results of this review of the scheme.

8.5. Human Resources

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

8.6. Risk Management

As the scheme is demand led, there is a risk that a large increase in demand will exceed the budget.

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.

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.

8.7. Rural Communities

There are no direct implications for rural communities

8.8. Children and Young People/Cared for Children

There are no direct implications for children and young people

8.9. Public Health

There are no direct implications for public health

8.10. 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.

Access to Information

Contact Officer:	Liz Rimmer, Benefits Manager Liz.rimmer@cheshireeast.gov.uk 01270 371448
Appendices:	None
Background Papers:	Information on the current Emergency Assistance Scheme: Emergency Assistance (cheshireeast.gov.uk)