

LOCAL SUPPORT AND PREVENTION FUND

Shropshire Council's policy with regard to the
administration of the Local Support and Prevention Fund

POLICY

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Background

In October 2010 the Government published the White Paper 'Universal Credit: welfare that works'. This paper detailed the Government's proposals for wide-ranging welfare reform. Included within the proposals was the reform of the Discretionary Social Fund. This was administered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) until March 2013 and was transferred to local authorities to administer as 'Local Welfare Provision' from April 2013.

The Government considered that the service would be better delivered locally using local discretion because local communities would be able to better identify and meet the needs of the most vulnerable. It also identified that localising the service would make it possible to improve the quality of decision making and to integrate with locally designed programmes that can provide complementary avenues of assistance.

The elements of the Discretionary Social Fund that have been replaced with local provision are:

- Community Care Grants
- Crisis Loans

Crisis Loans were repayable interest free loans awarded to meet immediate needs such as general living expenses or items needed following a disaster. Community Care Grants (CCG's) were non-repayable grants to enable vulnerable customers to live in the community.

The purpose of the new Localised Support Scheme was to replace elements of the Social Fund that are no longer administered by the DWP, specifically Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans. The stated intention was that that the old scheme administered by the DWP should not simply be replicated. The scheme in Shropshire is administered by the Welfare Reform and Support Team.

Shropshire's replacement scheme is called the Local Support and Prevention Fund. All awards made whether "prevention" payments (which align broadly to the old Crisis Loans) or "Support" payments (broadly aligned to the old Community Care Grants) are non-repayable and may be made up of awards in kind such as food parcels, furniture or fuel credits, with cash payments being a last resort only in emergencies. The fund is administered within Shropshire Council by the Welfare Reform and Support Team.

The scheme is still targeted on helping vulnerable people to meet their immediate short term needs in the event of a crisis and also on supporting vulnerable people to live independently in the community. Appropriate decision making skills and guidance ensure that we make consistent decisions of high quality, targeting limited funds where they are needed most, and within agreed service levels including rapidity of response.

Guidance ensures that each customer is treated fairly and equitably and that full consideration is given to their circumstances and the scheme will offer challenge where appropriate to use alternative avenues of help and funding where this is practicable and reasonable. The Welfare Reform and Support Team work in partnership with voluntary and community sector providers to ensure best value is obtained in using the fund.

Discretionary decision making means we can consider the wider aspects of an application with consideration given to the nature, extent and urgency of the need in every case. In addition to receiving applications from customers and their representatives, the scheme endeavours to use intelligence-led proactive measures working alongside key partners to identify and target support to those most in need.

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Policy

1. Introduction

The DWP allocated specific funds to local authorities in 2013/14 and 2014/15 for the administration of Local Welfare Provision. At the time of writing this policy, the DWP are reviewing how the scheme will be funded in future years.

To administer the scheme, Shropshire Council works closely with our partner organisations (particularly Housing Associations and support workers) in order to utilise a range of solutions and alternatives available in order to ensure that the fund is used to help Shropshire's most vulnerable citizens, often at very critical moments in their lives.

- The 2013/2014 allocation of funds to Shropshire Council was £467,992
- The 2014/2015 allocation of funds to Shropshire Council is £459,740

2. Policy Aims

The policy sets out how Shropshire Council will deliver Local Welfare Provision via its Local Support and Prevention Fund.

There are two key policy aims:

- To provide quick and effective support to people who require help to meet an immediate short term need
- To assist people to establish themselves or maintain their independence in the community

This policy also aims to not just provide the immediate support required above but to increase self-reliance and resilience by taking preventative action to reduce costly crisis interventions and future dependency on the scheme. The team will achieve this by signposting people to the following, as required (this list is not exhaustive):

- budgeting and financial advice
- a variety of support services who can assist them with other personal difficulties
- Community Mental Health support
- Community Substance Misuse support
- Citizens Advice Shropshire

By looking at the background to each application and by offering applicants the chance to seek assistance with underlying difficulties, we align the objectives of this policy with those of the Discretionary Housing Payments Policy and the corporate priorities shown below.

Shropshire Council's policy will contribute to the following corporate priorities and outcomes:

PRIORITIES	
Growing	Help to manage our environment (in a way that helps Shropshire to thrive)
Protecting	Strive to keep people from harm (in a way that doesn't compromise their choices)
Helping	Help people, communities and businesses to help themselves (in a way that helps them to make the most of the choices available to them)

OUTCOMES	
Your Money	Feel financially secure and to believe in a positive future for myself and my family
Your Health	Live a long, enjoyable and healthy life
Your Life	Feel valued as an individual and to live my life, with my choices respected and with as few compromises as possible
Your Environment	Live in an attractive, vibrant and safe environment, in a place that is right for me
Your Council	Feel confident that the council is doing the right things with my money and that my needs are at the centre of any decisions taken about my life

(Shropshire Council Business Plan and Financial Strategy 2014-2017)

The policy will contribute to these outcomes by providing help to the most vulnerable residents that will enable them, as part of a wider programme of support, to maintain themselves in the community. We will deliver this within the limits of the available funding.

3. Policy objectives

The LSPF policy will be administered as part of a wider scheme of help and support which includes Discretionary Housing Payments and will contribute to common aims, namely:

- alleviating poverty
- encouraging and sustaining people in employment
- tenancy sustainment and homelessness prevention
- safeguarding residents in their own homes
- helping those who are trying to help themselves

- keeping families together
- helping to provide stability to children
- preventing homelessness for those at risk of losing their home
- supporting domestic violence victims who are trying to move to a place of safety
- supporting the vulnerable or the elderly in the local community
- helping claimants through personal crisis and difficult events
- supporting young people in the transition to adult life, or
- promoting good educational outcomes for children and young people
- supporting the work of foster carers
- supporting disabled people to remain in adapted properties
- supporting care leavers

To illustrate:

We may use an LSPF award to assist a person feeling domestic violence to move to alternative accommodation by providing them with essential items of furniture, white goods and assisting them with fuel and food.

We may help a person to remain in new employment by helping them with transport costs to their new place of employment until they are first paid. This will usually be done in partnership with Transport Solutions.

We may help someone who needs to be moved from temporary to permanent accommodation with essential food, fuel and furniture so that they can form a stable home in the community.

4. Basic Eligibility

To be eligible for a support or prevention payment the person must be:

- Aged 16 or over and
- Not be a person subject to immigration control and
- On a low income and without access to sufficient funds to meet their immediate needs or
- Leaving care or
- Require support to stay in the community or
- Have demonstrated they are without immediate resource to meet the basic needs of themselves and / or their dependents.

All requests will be considered on an individual basis with due account given to the vulnerability and personal circumstances of each customer. An individual's personal circumstances, the amount requested and the importance of the need within the circumstances will form the basis for the prioritisation of awards.

People who are **ineligible** for support are as follows:

- People subject to immigration control or who have no recourse to public funds
- Prisoners and people lawfully detained, including those released on temporary licence (but not those released on parole or on bail pending a court hearing)
- Members of a religious order who are fully maintained by the order
- Full-time students under 19 and in full-time education (unless they are getting Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance or income-related Employment and Support Allowance).
- People in a hospital or care home
- People who live outside Shropshire unless they need removal costs to move into Shropshire

5. Targeted Support

Applications will be accepted from those deemed eligible as listed above however the scheme will seek to identify and prioritise those in most urgent need. It will target those within the community who have been identified as the most vulnerable and in need of urgent financial assistance or support. The scheme will consider paying awards under two types of need to those customers who require immediate support and to customers who require assistance to establish or maintain a home in the community.

Customers most likely to require this form of assistance may include (this list is not exhaustive):

- Families under exceptional pressure
- Homeless people or rough sleepers
- Vulnerable older people
- People fleeing domestic violence
- Young people leaving care
- People moving out of institutional or residential care
- Ex-offenders leaving prison or detention centres
- Chronically or terminally ill people
- People with alcohol or drug issues
- People with learning difficulties.

Awards or immediate financial assistance may include customers who:

- Have no essential food
- Need essential goods associated with infants/children
- Have no heating or cannot meet other household fuel costs for pre-payment meters

- Require help with emergency travel costs
- Have suffered a major upheaval or disaster (events of great or sudden misfortune, such as major flooding, gas explosion, chemical leak or house fire, but not minor mishaps or damage)
- Require suitable clothing for job interviews or work
- Require help towards essential medical related costs (where not provided by the NHS or another body)
- Require assistance to cover living expenses until they receive their first payment of benefit or salary, where this is not met by other benefits.

Assistance to establish or maintain a new home in the community may be considered for customers who, for example (this list is not exhaustive):

- Have been in long term care
- Have left prison
- Have fled domestic violence
- Move to supported accommodation/independent living
- Need essential repairs to heating systems or modes of travel

6. What can awards be used for?

Awards could be to help with the provision of:

- Living expenses (gas, electricity, heating oil, food)
- Beds
- Bedding
- White goods
- Provision of heating appliances
- Essential domestic appliances/cookware
- Essential domestic furniture (including white goods)
- Clothing for expectant mothers and babies
- Travel expenses (including emergency transport costs)
- Deposits or rent in advance for new accommodation
- Replacing household items including clothing

Awards would not normally be given for:

- A television or satellite cost or repair
- Installation of a telephone or telephone line

- Housing costs or arrears of rent
- Costs normally met by state support or benefits including Universal Credit
- Debts, including those to a government department
- Motor vehicle expenses
- TV license
- Maternity expenses
- Cold Weather Payments
- Winter Fuel Payments
- Housing costs, repairs or improvements
- Where the customer has access to sufficient income or savings
- Costs associated with care provision
- Educational or training needs (such as school uniforms)
- Court or legal fines, fees, expenses etc
- Removal or storage on compulsory purchase
- Domestic assistance or respite care
- Medical, surgical, optical, oral or dental items
- Work-related expenses
- Investments
- Mobility needs
- Holidays
- Car expenses
- Fuel (petrol or diesel costs) that are unrelated to travel to and from work

The scheme will seek to provide holistic support, taking into account alternative local provision including Discretionary Housing Payments, Disability Related Expenditure allowances within social care charging policy, Council Tax Support and Disabled Facilities Grant.

7. Detailed Eligibility: Support Payments

Support Payments are intended to help with expenses so that people can live in the community and families can stay together. Support Payments are discretionary, thus allowing us to take into account the applicant's circumstances and the background to the application. Support Payments do not have to be repaid.

Someone can apply for a support payment if:

- they are getting Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) or Pension Credit or
- they will be leaving institutional or residential care in the next six weeks and are likely to receive Income Support, income-based JSA, income-related ESA or Pension Credit when they leave or

- they are without immediate resource to meet the basic needs of themselves and / or their dependents.

We will look at any capital held by applicants when deciding award requests and we will consider whether they are able to purchase the items themselves.

Given its specific purpose, a support payment will only be considered in particular circumstances.

- A payment may be awarded if it will assist an applicant or a family member included in their benefit award to establish themselves back in the community following a stay in institutional or residential care.
- A payment may be awarded in order to help an applicant stay in the community rather than go into institutional or residential care.
- A payment may be made to ease exceptional pressures on a family.
- A payment may be made to help provide for a prisoner or young offender whilst they are on home leave.
- A payment may be made to help someone set up home as part of a planned resettlement program following an unsettled period, for example being homeless.
- A payment may be made to promote community care by helping a member of the family with travel expenses, including the cost of overnight accommodation, as long as the travel is within the United Kingdom. The travel must be necessary to:-
 - visit someone who is ill
 - attend a relative's funeral
 - ease a domestic crisis
 - visit a child who is living with their other parent while waiting for a court decision
 - move to suitable accommodation

Some expenses are always excluded from Support Payments. Any expense outside the United Kingdom cannot be included. Other ineligible expenses include any item or service that a government department or Council has a statutory duty to provide.

The discretionary nature of decision making within the scheme will allow for broad interpretation as required with a wide range of circumstances being considered in any such applications.

Repeat applications and minimum awards:

A person cannot receive a support payment if they have applied for the same item or service within the previous 12 months unless circumstances have changed.

Applications to the Support Payment fund are limited to 2 in any 12 month period.

8. Detailed Eligibility: Prevention Payments

Prevention payments are available to anyone aged 16 or over where they do not have the resources to meet the immediate short-term needs for themselves or their family. Applicants do not have to be in receipt of any benefits, but they must not have money available which could be used to meet the need.

A person cannot get a prevention payment if:-

- they are in a care home or in hospital, unless they are going to be discharged within the next two weeks
- they are a prisoner being held in prison
- they are a member of a religious order which meets all accommodation and living costs
- they are under 19 and in full-time education (unless they are getting Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance or income-related Employment and Support Allowance).

Some other groups of people can only get a prevention payment in exceptional circumstances, for example some students, people on strike and people who have been disallowed other benefits. Immigration status will also affect entitlement.

A prevention payment can be paid for certain expenses that have come about as the result of an emergency or disaster. In an emergency, a customer can only receive a prevention payment for:

- living expenses
- rent in advance for new accommodation
- charges for board and lodging accommodation and hostels, but not deposits
- travel expenses when stranded away from home
- repaying emergency credit on a pre-payment fuel meter.

In the case of a disaster such as a fire or a flood, as well as the expenses already mentioned, a person may also be able to receive a prevention payment to meet other expenses, like replacing household items and clothing.

Rent in advance may only be met by way of a prevention payment if the applicant has been awarded a support payment to establish themselves in the community upon leaving residential or institutional care, or because they need to pay rent to avoid risk to the family following an emergency or disaster.

Repeat applications and minimum awards:

A prevention payment cannot be awarded if the customer has applied for the same item or service within the previous 12 months unless circumstances have changed.

There is no minimum amount which can be awarded. The maximum amount that may be awarded will be decided taking into account the need itself, the applicant's circumstances and the availability of alternative sources of help.

Where an award is made in respect of living expenses, the amount awarded will be decided taking into account the members of the household and the length of time the award is to cover.

Applications to the Prevention Payment fund are limited to 3 in any 12 month period.

9. The Application Process: All Applications

Making an application for LSPF:

The application process will be clear, transparent and accessible, allowing customers to request support through a number of access channels.

In order to be considered for an award of LSPF, an application must be made to the Council using one of the following methods:

- Telephone application
- Hard copy application

The council also has a downloadable application form on its website on the following web page:

<http://www.shropshire.gov.uk/benefits/the-local-support-and-prevention-fund/>

The application and the process will be flexible to avoid undue delays and reflect that some awards require more detailed information. Turnaround times will be structured to ensure rapid high quality decision making. Applications for emergency assistance will be prioritised with service levels in place for agreed timescales for the decision making, payment of awards and a review process.

An application can be accepted from the person who requires the assistance or from someone acting on behalf of the person concerned where it appears reasonable to do so in the circumstances. It is anticipated that referrals will be made from local authority support services including other areas of the Benefits Service (including social care charges, education awards, Council Tax support and Housing Benefit) Housing Options, Adult and Children's Services, customer access channels and other appropriate outside agencies such as the Probation Service, housing associations and advice organisations.

Supporting Evidence Requirements:

Customers will be asked to provide supporting evidence in certain situations in order to support fully informed and fair decision making.

Situation	Evidence Required
Disaster (such as house fire, flood, gas explosion, chemical leak)	Fire Service or police report or incident number
Burglary	Police report or incident number
Lost or stolen money/wallets/purses/bags	Police report or incident number
Disability	Medical practitioner or support worker letter
Leaving Prison	Probation service letter/email
Leaving Care	Social services letter/email
Drug or alcohol issues	Medical practitioner or support worker letter
Suitable clothing for job interviews	Interview invitation letter
Carpeting, heating oil or removal costs	2-3 quotations

Corroborative supporting information may be sought from third parties such as housing providers or support workers where this is felt reasonable in order to confirm that alternative solutions have been considered. Failure to provide supporting evidence without good reason may lead to the application being unsuccessful.

Each application will be considered individually based on the evidence provided to support the application. We will however expect to act with consistency whilst using our discretion to provide support to the most vulnerable citizens in Shropshire.

We will ask the customer whether they have a support worker to help them and will speak to that support worker to gather further information to support the request for an award of LSPF. This will allow us to make fully informed decisions so that the decision we make a fair and reasonable decision for the customer, especially where there are mental health considerations.

Refusal to provide the necessary information for the team to make a decision will result in a refusal of award or as a withdrawal of application where there is loss of contact.

Treatment of income and expenditure:

The income of the whole household will be considered where appropriate when calculating awards. Where non-dependents make no contribution to the household, an amount equal to the weekly non-dependent deduction applied to any Housing Benefit claim will be assumed.

All incomes will be considered available including awards of Disability Living Allowance (DLA), Personal Independence Payments (PIP) and Attendance Allowance (AA) but in considering this income we will offset any direct expenditure with regard to adult care costs.

Declared expenditure will be subject to examination and where such expenditure is considered unreasonably high it will be allowed at a figure deemed reasonable in the circumstances.

Income and expenditure will be compared in accordance with the above provisions with the resulting figure determining whether the applicant possesses sufficient income to meet their needs.

Decision making:

Decisions on awards will take into account the applicant's circumstances and the need expressed. Where the applicant is found to have underlying issues that need to be addressed, the amount of time reasonably needed to do so will be taken into account. All supporting information, including that from third parties, will be used in arriving at the decision.

Where we are unable to make an award, we will explain the reasons for this in writing so that the applicant understands why. We will also provide suggestions for alternative support where these exist and will signpost applicants to various useful agencies. We will only provide an award from the LSPF scheme if there is no suitable alternative solution.

Where we can make an award, we will confirm the items we have awarded. We will also provide a list of recommended actions that the applicant must take to change their personal circumstances so they are more beneficial or to avoid them requiring further assistance from the LSPF scheme. We will expect applicants to take action on these recommendations as if they fail to act on these, they will not be able to access further awards of LSPF.

The wide variety of individual circumstances will mean a decision in one case does not constitute a precedent for others.

Where we are unable to make an award, we will explain the reasons for this in writing so that the applicant understands why. We will also provide suggestions for alternative support where these exist and will signpost applicants to various useful agencies. We will only provide an award from the LSPF scheme if there is no suitable alternative solution and if it is considered reasonable to make an award.

Where we can make an award, we will confirm the items we have awarded. When dealing with prevention awards for crisis support, awards will be conditional upon the applicant acting on a list of recommended actions that they must take to change their personal circumstances so they are more beneficial or to prevent them requiring further assistance from the LSPF scheme, especially for the same reason. We will expect them to take action on these recommendations as they will not be able to access further awards of LSPF.

Decisions will be made at the earliest opportunity and will be confirmed over the telephone (where possible) and followed up in writing. Examples of timescales are as follows:

Food, gas and electricity request made before 4.30pm	Same day
Food gas and electricity request made after 4.30	By lunchtime of the next available working day
Furniture and removal requests	Within 5 working days of the request
Carpeting, oil and boiler awards	Within 3 working days of receiving quotes
Urgent furniture and removal requests	Within 24 hours or where requests are made on a Friday, by the end of the Monday (or Tuesday in the case of a bank holiday).
All other requests	Within 3 working days

10. Support into work

The Scheme will support the government's Welfare Reform agenda by signposting people towards work opportunities. This can include:

- Signposting people towards skills-based support and training by various agencies, such as challenging expectation, culture change, confidence building, training, help with skills, work clubs, help with CVs and job applications
- Signposting people to the Benefit Options Team in order that they can provide 'better-off in work' calculations
- Signposting people towards County Training who can signpost people to apprenticeships
- Providing people with clothing and travel for interviews where this cannot be provided by Jobcentre Plus.
- Signposting people towards Wheels to Work and Transport Solutions
- Providing people with help towards fuel for transport to new employment if they have not been paid yet and this cannot be provided by another source.

11. Methods of Payment

The scheme provides appropriate methods of awarding support and allows the authority to decide to whom the award should be made based upon the individual circumstances of each customer.

Appropriate methods of payment may include:

- Food vouchers
- Electricity or gas vouchers

- Goods provided from local organisations including furniture schemes

The Local Support and Prevention Fund is not a cash payment scheme. Cash payments will only be considered in exceptional circumstances as a last resort where there are no other means of meeting the need. The delivery method of providing support will be flexible in how, when and where awards will be given to reflect the individual requirements of each application.

12. Monitoring Arrangements

The government has provided councils with a single budget figure for the provision of LSPF awards. The Council is required to monitor this budget throughout the year to ensure that awards are targeted to those most in need whilst ensuring the money available is sufficient to provide necessary support throughout the year. Monitoring expenditure is the responsibility of the Council's Welfare Reform and Support Team.

13. Appeals and Reconsiderations

Decisions made on applications to the Local Support and Prevention Fund do not carry the right of appeal to an independent tribunal. Where an application is unsuccessful, either wholly or in part, the applicant may request a review which will be looked at within the Welfare Reform and Support Team.

The applicant or their authorised representative will have the right to request that the decision be reviewed. This request should be made in writing, within one month of when the decision was made.

Reasons for a review of a decision could include:

- Award or repeat award refused
- Method of payment
- Amount of award
- To whom payment is awarded.

The review process will have two stages:

Stage 1 In the first instance, any request for a review will be considered by someone other than the officer who made the original decision unless new evidence is provided, when the same officer can consider the request. All requests to review a decision from an applicant or their representative to be considered and notified within one month of the date of decision.

Stage2 If the applicant is still not satisfied with the outcome of the review, they may request a further review within one month of the date of the review outcome. The process will seek to ensure that stage 2 reviews are considered by a senior officer taking into account all the information and evidence included in the review and the reasonableness of the decision made. The decision will be notified in writing.

14. Fraudulent claims

Failure to disclose a material fact or to make a false statement will be treated as a fraudulent application. Where fraud has been detected, the individual will be refused any further assistance and where appropriate, the council may prosecute.

We may recover the value of LSPF awards if we decide that the award has been made as a result of misrepresentation or failure to disclose a material fact, either fraudulently or otherwise.

15. Changes in Circumstances

A person claiming an LSPF award is required to:

- Give the council such information as it may require
- Tell the council about any changes in circumstances that may be relevant to the application.

16. Repeat Award Requests

Where a repeat award is requested, the applicant's progress against any recommendations made at the time of the original award will be considered. Individuals are expected to manage their day to day finances and take steps to budget and manage their household income. We will provide advice and guidance to people by signposting them to suitable support regarding this.

We will not consider requests:

- Where advice has been ignored or not sought as advised
- Where a previous request was unsuccessful (unless there has been a change in household circumstances)
- Where the individual has not taken steps to remedy the situation
- Where the circumstances could have been avoided or were as a result of reckless or deliberate behaviour
- Where the individual has not co-operated with the Council or other public bodies

The above list is not exhaustive and consideration will be given to repeat applications on an individual basis.

17. Recovery of LSPF Awards

Payments made under the Local Support and Prevention Fund are not normally repayable however we may recover the value of any award if we decide that the award has been made as a result of misrepresentation of, or failure to disclose, a material fact, either fraudulently or otherwise.

18. Publicity

Shropshire Council publicises the Local Support and Prevention Fund scheme by promoting it via:

- The council's website,
- The council's hubs and customer service centres
- Local Registered Social Landlords
- The council's Housing Options Team
- Citizens Advice Shropshire
- Age UK
- A4U
- Local Landlord Forums
- Elected council Members

19. Policy review

As the scheme does not replicate any existing scheme, it is highly probable that changes to this document and the practical application of the scheme will need to be made throughout the year.

The policy will remain a working document and changes will be made as appropriate to ensure the service continues to meet the stated outcomes, objectives, needs of the local community and the council.

It is likely that this policy will change after the introduction of Universal Credit.