

Liverpool Citizens Support Service

Reviewing, learning and amending the scheme to ensure effective support for residents in crisis

“The Liverpool Citizens Support Scheme (LCSS) provides a vital lifeline to vulnerable people and those in our community facing an unforeseen crisis. The help it gives with basic living costs and the essentials of setting up home can make a huge difference. We have worked hard to ensure that the service is quick, flexible to meet a range of needs and helps customers access a range of other support where needed.”

Mayor of Liverpool, Joe Anderson

Summary of the scheme

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- Applications made by phone to Liverpool Direct contact centre via a free phone number or landline or online through approved partner organisations. Plans to open online applications to the public in December 2014.
- Available to anyone over 16 and resident in, or moving into, Liverpool.
- Home Needs awards – mainly for furniture, white goods and household items are normally provided by Liverpool Furniture Resource Centre.
- Urgent Needs awards – mainly for food, fuel or clothing. Vouchers normally sent by email and SMS to be exchanged for cash at PayPoint outlets. They can be also collected at a Council One Stop Shop or sent to an advice agency.
- The scheme is integrated into the Council’s Benefits Service which enables the team to assess the application for other local authority benefit entitlements, discretionary housing payments and, if appropriate, to provide specialist benefits advice and advocacy. It also helps with checking the applicant is a tenant when assessing a ‘Home Needs’ award.

Key facts and figures

- Year one (2013-14)
 - 16,218 applications and 8,992 awards made – an average 66 per cent approval rate across the year.
 - 6,758 Urgent Needs awards – 99 per cent approved within two day target.
 - 2,234 Home Needs awards – 99 per cent approved within 10 day target.
 - 40 per cent of the 2013/14 budget was spent on claimant awards. The monthly percentage increased from under 10 per cent in April 2013 to over 91 per cent in March 2014 as awareness of the scheme, application numbers and approval rates all increased.

Making welfare work locally

- Some of the underspend was used to introduce the freephone number and to support related initiatives, such as benefits maximisation services and to top up the discretionary housing payments budget.
- Year two (2014-15) to date
 - 5,300 awards had been made including around 1,900 Home Needs awards and 3,900 Urgent Needs awards.

Why Liverpool's approach stood out

The scheme was designed to be flexible and appropriate changes were made during the year as lessons were learned. When it was clear that awards were low and the budget would be underspent, they both increased targeted promotion and used underspent money to provide related support.

Project strengths

Learning lessons and making improvements

“This is a scheme where we are continually learning. Making decisions on discretionary awards, based on a cash-limited pot, has been a new experience for many staff members. We have had an increasingly productive dialogue with stakeholders as the scheme has become established and we have made numerous refinements to our policy and processes.”

Martin Jungnitz, Head of Revenues and Benefits

They were aware that the social fund had peaks and troughs in demand across the year and set tight criteria to ensure that the fund did not run out in the first half of the year. Initially the scheme saw some customers referred by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) where benefit advances could have been paid and there was some confusion about where sanctions were applied. Following feedback from the CAB and other groups, action was taken to ensure the scheme was always sufficiently flexible to support people subject to sanctions. Help was also extended to include people moving into work or moving house or at risk of eviction because of rent or mortgage arrears. They also reviewed and varied award levels to take account of household size and specific needs of children.

“We know that we need to keep the scheme fluid and under review. We know that no two sets of circumstances are the same. We know it's vital that we support customers in urgent need of support and help setting up home and have learned to respond flexibly.”

Joanne Hayes, Benefits Maximisation and Take-up Manager

They also improved access to the scheme by making changes to their telephony service. They provided a freephone number and created a routing system to separate calls from new and existing claimants. They were also able to prioritise calls from people using phone boxes and introduced an online claim form for approved partners.

Making welfare work locally

Their website includes a link to a PayPoint locator to help people find their nearest outlets to cash their 'Urgent Need' awards. To address some initial problems with refusals of cash from shops, they worked closely with PayPoint to educate retailers and support customers.

Targeted awareness raising and take-up work

There is general information about the scheme on the council's [website](#) but they focus their promotion on specific groups for whom it is most likely to be relevant. For example, they provide training and information to groups working with vulnerable people, such as hospitals, advice centres, children's centres and hostels. They have held workshops and surgeries at cultural and community centres. They hold quarterly customer forums where all their local community and voluntary sector groups are invited. This is both an opportunity to promote the scheme and ask for feedback. They deliver leaflets about the overall scheme to people benefiting from the furniture awards.

They identified older people as under-represented in applications to the scheme and therefore held a stand at a 'winter survival' event promoting the scheme alongside the council's Attendance Allowance take-up campaign. They work closely with the Council's team that assesses people for social care and direct payments. When assessing social care needs, they proactively identify needs such as a broken washing machine or the fact that someone with dementia is no longer safe to use a gas cooker and would benefit from a microwave.

Future plans

The scheme now provides help with flooring for people with children following feedback from social services and children's centres that there are children with developmental delay because the floor in their homes is not safe.

They will continue to promote the scheme to under-represented groups such as pensioners.

They also plan to undertake more research around the causes of repeat applications to ensure that the scheme not only meets short term needs but also makes appropriate referrals to services that can address underlying needs, such as other council departments, local Age UK or the CAB.

As with other councils, Liverpool is carefully considering how it could fund provision next year and is awaiting the outcome of the Government's consultation.

A case study taken from their annual report illustrates how, based within the local authority, staff were able to provide a holistic service for their vulnerable residents.

Mr H is a young single male with Type 1 diabetes, who is in receipt of ESA of £57 a week. His mother had just passed away suddenly and he found himself caring for his

Making welfare work locally

two younger siblings, both of whom were in full time education. He applied for child benefit and child tax credits to be put into his name and they stopped. He was advised that it would be at least three weeks before he would be receive any monies. Mr H and his two siblings only had £57 a week to pay for all their household costs including food.

Mr H had a support worker who helped him to apply for an Urgent Needs award. The LCSS officer was able to verify his circumstances and agreed an immediate payment of £276 to assist the family until their benefits came through. The payment was issued to him via PayPoint SMS the same day.

The LCSS officer was also able to help him with his housing by processing his housing benefit claim including a backdated payment. The rent was just about the Local Housing Allowance rate for his area so they also processed a discretionary housing payment to cover the shortfall until the end of the financial year.

The benefit maximisation team had helped Mr H to apply to the DWP for a funeral payment but despite the funeral being modest it left him with a £1000 shortfall. They liaised with the LCSS team on his behalf and they decided to use their discretion to pay the balance direct to the funeral director.