

Overview of criteria and data for different sources of Council welfare support

Criteria for Assistance under Section 17 of the Children's Act

Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 (S.17) gives local authorities the power to provide financial support to families with 'children in need', and to provide accommodation where families with children have 'no recourse to public funds'.

The main eligibility criterion for Section 17, established through a formal social care assessment, is whether a child is considered to be 'in need'. The assessment is completed by a social worker and addresses all aspects of a child's life, particular where there is a risk of significant harm to a child, or if the child is disabled. The assessments result in a 'plan' to reduce the likelihood of significant harm. If the harm cannot be reduced then there is the potential for the child to become looked after. In order to keep a child within the home, Section 17 funding can be provided to support the family. This support can include the following: support to parents to enable them to develop their parenting skills; funding for a specialist assessments as part of care proceedings when there is consideration of removing the child from the care of its parents; financial support for one off items such as a cot and bedding; provision of funds to a relative or family friend to support a child/ children temporarily removed from their parents; or even rent deposits in exceptional circumstances. These types of actions are usually agreed through care proceedings at court to prevent children becoming looked after.

Families with children with no recourse to public funds can be provided with accommodation when they are considered to be destitute. Destitution can cause a child to be considered 'in need' for the purposes of Section 17 if it is likely to affect his or her development or health and well being. There is no legal definition of destitution. However, it is a high threshold (much higher than the test for welfare benefits). The test most commonly used is that there is no adequate accommodation (through general circumstances or domestic violence) or the family are unable to meet basic living needs.

Criteria for DHP

Discretionary Housing Payments are an effective tool to prevent homelessness, to safeguard people in their homes, or enable tenants to find more suitable accommodation. The criteria are that the resident should be claiming Housing Benefit (HB) or Universal Credit (UC); or has a rental liability and requires further financial assistance with housing costs. Supporting documents are required at the point at which the application is made. This will include evidence on income, outgoings and any savings. DHP seeks to help people who are: actively seeking employment - applying for jobs and attending interviews; moving towards work readiness through the gaining of employment skills; taking positive steps to reduce their overheads/outgoings; able to prove genuine hardship; and, those actively looking to downsize and move properties.

Reasons for award of DHP

DHP Reason for Award	Count	Sum of DHP Reason Amount
Baby due	3	£1,737.44
Benefit Cap	215	£307,586.82
Change of address	1	£1,500.00
Combination of Reforms	1	£255.00
Disability	10	£5,279.29
Income tapers	321	£267,867.05
Legislation change	3	£2,000.00
LHA reforms	122	£83,613.35
No Impact	68	£58,848.75
Non-dependent deduction	202	£175,949.03
other	112	£39,540.43
Reduction in housing benefit entitlement	3	£582.88
Removal costs	2	£2,337.80
Rent deposit	7	£16,835.00
Rent in advance	3	£2,800.00
Rent restrictions	86	£50,073.06
Social Size Criteria	348	£208,040.43
Grand Total	1507	£1,224,846.33

DHP and Council Tax Relief

Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) has been used in support of residents who have been in difficulty with their housing costs. In 2013/14 over 98% of the received funding was paid to claimants to support them through the Welfare reform changes. The Council is able to “top up” from its own funds up to 2.5 times the Government funding, and increase the overall DHP fund. There are proposals to look at this option as Welfare Reform continues to be a risk to households. There is also provision under S10 / 13A (1)(c) Local Government Act 2012 to reduce Council Tax liability by a discretionary hardship scheme, this further supports existing Council Tax legislation. Each case considered must be treated on its own merits, if it is assumed that there would be exceptional financial hardship.

The budget proposals for 2015/16 include a number of changes to Council Tax Collection. From April 2015 the scheme has been amended, with a minimum contribution of 25% of the Council tax charge for all residents. It was therefore recommended that a discretionary fund for exceptional hardship, **initially of £50,000** could be created. Due to the nature of a discretionary fund it is difficult to be very specific on the instances in which it could be applied but examples highlighted during the consultation meetings were for disabled residents unable to work or to assist in clearing historic debts which may have previously been covered by the backdating provisions and where the resident was meeting the ongoing payments. A policy is being developed.

Criteria for the LESS

Applications can be made to the LESS by local residents, aged 18 and over. They can be made online or via telephone provided they are supported by verification documentation. The LESS is designed for those on benefits or on an extremely low income. The criteria states that the applicant should have no savings and not be entitled to any other monies or support that would meet the presenting need. They should not be in essential or emergency need as a result of a DWP disallowance or sanction and not be subject to immigration control, and must be without sufficient resources which would cause serious risk to their own, or their family's health or safety. The applicant must require essential assistance to establish themselves, or to remain, in the community (e.g. furniture, white goods, or the applicant must require assistance with travel costs in an emergency (e.g.: illness/emergency). Repeat applications are generally disallowed.

Following the reduction from 1 April 2015 of the grant fund by £540,000 and the delivery fund by £50,000, the funding was reprofiled around the following:

- Reduced support to applicants through the CAB
- Reduced opportunities for applications through the CAB due to changes in opening hours
- More applications referred through frontline staff to the LESS with appropriate validations on identity and need.
- Increased time from application to decision, now 48 hours on average.
- The food and fuel payments have been maintained at the previous level.
- Vouchers for furniture when moving into a tenancy, whether new or recycled goods are now at a maximum of £250.
- The fund no longer supports rent deposits for single homeless people, which has caused some challenges to teams supporting these residents in particular.

Grants under the LESS

Type of Grant 2014/15	No of Applications	Spend
Furniture	820	626,706
Food and Utilities (Gas/Electricity)	2167	106,916
Others	47	16,595
Total Referrals/Advice	3034	£750,217

Referrals from the LESS for additional support

Type of Client Advice/Referrals 2014-15	Number of Clients Advised/Referred
Welfare Benefits	504
Mental Health	30
Debt Advice	453
Housing	60
Food Banks	596
Credit Union	108
Total Referrals/Advice	1751

Demographic data on applicants: 2014-15

The single largest applicant group was the White population of UK origin, representing 66% of the total applications. This is about a 10% increase on last year's 55.45% of the total applications. The census 2011 data shows this group to make up 49.46% of the population of Barking and Dagenham.

The second largest group (as with last year) are Black African and Black British of African origin who made 10.22% of all applications. This is a decrease from 13.6% applications made by this group last year. The Census data shows them to be 15.4% of the borough population.

The next largest identifiable group are Asians of Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani and Chinese origin and British Asians. This group totalled together made 3.27% of all applications. When combined in the same way from the Census statistics the grouping makes up 15.9% of the borough's population. Applications from this group are also down from last year when they made 6.30% of all applications.