

Dear Colleague,

## **Local Assistance Scheme for Somerset**

I am writing to provide you with information about the Local Assistance Scheme for Somerset, which will be operational from 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2013 to help meet needs that are currently met by the Social Fund.

You are probably aware that the Social Fund, which is operated by the DWP, is to be abolished at the end of March 2013 as part of wider changes set out within the Welfare Reform Act 2012. The Social Fund has provided Crisis Loans to people who, due to an emergency, find themselves without the means to purchase basic essentials; and Community Care Grants to help disabled people to set up their own home, or to people who are leaving institutional settings to live in the community.

The purpose of the Local Assistance Scheme is similar to the Social Fund in that it is intended for use in emergencies only and where applicants have no other form of help available to them. However, it is important to note that it does not attempt to replicate the Social Fund exactly and differs from it in some very significant ways, notably;

- Assistance will be provided 'in-kind' through the provision of services and not in the form of cash payments.
- Loans will not be offered.

The Local Assistance Scheme for Somerset can be accessed through local branches of the Citizens' Advice Bureau and West Somerset Advice Bureau on behalf of Somerset County Council. Contact details and opening times are shown on the information sheet attached to this letter.

### **Eligibility**

A person will be eligible for the scheme where they;

- Present to the advice bureau in the district of Somerset in which they are normally resident, (or that which is nearest to them) and;
- Demonstrate that they have a qualifying need (see below).

It will normally be the case that those deemed to be eligible are in receipt of, or have made a claim for, means tested welfare benefits. Applicants must give a genuine account of their circumstances and make an honest declaration that they do not have financial or other resources available to them that could be used to meet the needs they are presenting with. Appropriate supporting evidence will be requested and considered in the determination of applications.

The Local Assistance Scheme will provide emergency assistance only. Awards will normally be restricted to one per six month period. Second or subsequent applications within a six month period will be subject to greater scrutiny, as will second or subsequent applications for the provision of furniture or white goods within a twelve month period.

Retrospective applications will not be considered.

## Qualifying Needs

Qualifying needs include:

- Being without sufficient food for the members of the household and lacking any means of obtaining it.
- Being without items of furniture that are essential for the particular needs of the household and lacking any means of obtaining them.
- Being without basic equipment required for cooking or heating essential living accommodation and lacking any means of obtaining it.
- Being without fuel to cook or heat essential living accommodation and lacking any means of obtaining it.
- Being without any means of undertaking a journey that is essential and due to unforeseen circumstances.

## Services Provided

Wherever possible and practical, assistance will be provided in the form of services 'in kind' and not in the form of cash payments. Specific arrangements will vary according to circumstances in each of the districts covered by the individual advice bureau, but the general service responses are as set out in the table below:

<b>Presenting need</b>	<b>Type of service response</b>
Being without sufficient food	Referral to local food bank
Being without essential items of furniture or appliances	Referral to furniture recycling charity or second hand furniture retailer.
Being without basic equipment required for cooking or heating	Referral to white goods / electrical recycling charity or second hand retailer (a minimum warranty of six months is required). Alternatively, referral to retailer of new white goods / electricals for supply of basic products.
Being without fuel to cook or heat essential living accommodation	Local arrangements to facilitate charging of key for pre-pay electricity meter.
Being without any means of undertaking an essential journey	Local arrangements to facilitate emergency travel.

## Collecting Information and Checking Applications

It will be the role of the local advice bureau to collect relevant information from applicants and in doing so, to discuss with them how their circumstances match the eligibility criteria described above. Where it becomes apparent to the advisor and to the applicant that they have other means of assistance available to them, the applicant will be signposted appropriately. Otherwise, the bureau will complete a checklist against the criteria set out above.

The local advice bureau will inspect supporting evidence of identity, residency and material circumstances as part of their collection and checking procedures.

## Decisions and Complaints

Each advice bureau will check eligibility of clients against the criteria set out above. The outcome of this eligibility check will determine whether an award is made or not. In cases where eligibility is unclear or other factors complicate the application process the advice bureau will refer to SCC.

Any complaints regarding the Local Assistance Scheme can be made via SCC's complaints procedure.

## Data Sharing, Recording and Use

Applicants' details will be recorded on the checklists, summaries of which will be provided to SCC for future reference. The local advice bureau will explain to applicants that their personal data will be used in this way and gain their written consent to the passage, storage and use of their data.

## Frequently Asked Questions

There will inevitably be a number of practical questions in relation to the scheme and we have included some that we anticipate below, with answers. We intend to provide a FAQ sheet with answers on a regular basis as the Local Assistance Scheme becomes operational. You can submit questions to Stephen Barker at SCC (contact details are provided below).

*Q. What should I do if I think that someone has needs that may be eligible under the Local Assistance Scheme?*

**A. Provide them with a copy of the information sheet attached to this letter. And suggest that they contact the local advice bureau in their District (or which is nearest to them).**

*Q. How should I respond to questions from individuals about how the scheme can help them?*

**A. It's important not to create unrealistic expectations and some people will have experience of receiving a loan or cash payment from the Social Fund. It would be helpful to be clear with people at the earliest opportunity that assistance is most likely to be provided in the form of services 'in kind'.**

*Q. In some Districts of Somerset I can refer directly to the Food Bank. Should I continue to do this or should I send the person to their local advice bureau to apply to through the Local Assistance Scheme?*

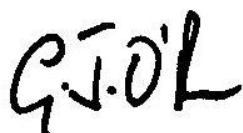
**A. If you are able to refer directly to a local food bank you should continue to do so. The local advice bureau will work in partnership with the food banks in their area to provide the resources required to meet additional demands regardless of how referrals are made.**

*Q. Do applicants have to be in receipt of, or have made a claim for, means tested benefits in order to be deemed eligible?*

**A. In most cases applicants will be in receipt of or have made a claim for means tested benefits. However, there may be some circumstances e.g. emergencies such as fire or floods that cause people who are not claiming such benefits to have qualifying needs.**

I hope that the information provided in this letter and the attached Information Sheet is helpful. Please can I ask that you circulate it widely within your organisation, particularly to front line staff who are most likely to come into direct contact with prospective applicants to the Local Assistance Scheme. If you would like further information please contact Stephen Barker at Somerset County Council in the first instance [SFBarker@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:SFBarker@somerset.gov.uk) 01823 356791.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G.O'R', written in a cursive, stylized font.

Gareth O'Rourke  
Group Manager – Adults and Health Commissioning Service.