
Discretionary Assistance Fund

Overview

The Discretionary Assistance Fund (DAF) is a Wales-wide scheme that was established in April 2013 following the devolution of discretionary elements of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Social Fund to the Welsh Government. The devolved fund replaces Crisis Loans and Community Care Grants which stopped at the end of March that year.

In England the 'non-ring fenced' funds were transferred to local authorities for them to set up their own local welfare assistance schemes. The Scottish Government have set up the Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF) which is a national scheme delivered through local authorities. They are currently in the process of putting the SWF on a permanent legal footing via the Welfare Funds (Scotland) Bill.

The Welsh DAF provides grants in the form of Emergency Assistance Payments (EAPs) - to help in an emergency or when there is an immediate threat to health or wellbeing - and Individual Assistance Payments (IAPs) - to help people to remain, or begin, living independently in the community¹.

Last year Citizens Advice Cymru undertook an ad hoc survey to find out more about the experiences of both users and advisers in accessing DAF during its first year of operation². This briefing highlights some of the findings of that research, along with the findings of a more recent review into client experiences among Citizens Advice bureaux advisers.

Our research found views and experiences of accessing the fund were mixed and there were a number of areas where people felt it could be improved, such as the need for better advertising, simplifying certain elements of the application process, and rethinking the way DWP budgeting loans are pushed as an alternative to DAF. However our findings also confirm the great value the majority of advisers and users place on having a Wales-wide emergency support system such as this. Critically the research shows the potential detrimental impact on people's health and well-being of either being refused support or not having a fund at all.

Citizens Advice Cymru believes it is vital that the DAF, or a similar scheme, continues to be available beyond March 2016. We recognise that there have been on-going improvements to the scheme over the course of the first two years, including since our original survey was conducted, and lessons have been learnt and acted upon. However we also believe as we enter the third year of the scheme it provides an ideal opportunity for the Welsh Government to make further improvements in the short to medium term. **In addition we believe that consideration should be given to putting a longer term arrangement in place for a more permanent scheme of financial support for people in Wales who find themselves in crisis situations or particular hardship and have nowhere else to go.**

¹ People do not have to be on any benefits to be eligible for an EAP but for an IAP they must be on certain benefits, or, if they are due to leave an institution or care home within six weeks, they must be likely to get one of those benefits on leaving

² The survey took the form of self-completion questionnaires and ran from 20 February to 21 March 2014. A total of 120 advisers from a range of organisations responded to the adviser survey including Citizens Advice bureaux, other third sector organisations and housing associations. A total of 124 people also completed the user questionnaire although only 43 per cent of them (53 respondents) had actually applied for a payment from the DAF.

Key research findings

Key issues highlighted during our research included:

- The lack of publicity/awareness of the fund was consistently raised by advisers and potential users. The overwhelming view is that the fund needs to be better promoted;
- There is general support for having a grant/voucher based system although some people believe there should be more flexibility built into the scheme;
- A number of advisers believe pushing DWP budgeting loans as an alternative to the DAF is inappropriate for many of their clients;
- It was felt the application process, particularly on-line, could be simplified. Currently people find it confusing and overly complicated. Participants also believed the content of decision letters could be improved.
- Phone applications appear to be preferred by users, however views on customer service, particularly amongst advisers, are mixed. Positive experiences appear to be dependent on individual agents as opposed to a consistent strategic approach by the provider;
- The speed of the process was praised by some, particularly when compared to the previous DWP Community Care Grants;
- Most users who had been unsuccessful did not challenge the decision, reasons included they didn't think it was worth it or weren't aware they could. Likewise, a relatively low number of advisers have helped many clients with an appeal.

In some cases there are likely to be justifiable reasons for refusal/part-awards but the potential detrimental impact on people's health and well-being of either being refused support or, not having a fund at all, is clear.

"I'm unsure of how we will cope now, we have had 2 vouchers from the food bank and our gas and electric are running out and I don't know what we are going to do." (unsuccessful EAP applicant)

"I could not have afforded the items [without the fund] and can't bear to think how the family as a whole would of managed" (beneficiary of fund)

"We were sleeping on the floor, cooking on camping stove, walking on bare floors and washing clothes in the bath" (unsuccessful IAP applicant)

"I would not have been able to feed my 3 month old baby, heat the house or have had electric. I also would not have had any nappies for my son." (beneficiary of fund)

There have been on-going improvements to the scheme over the course of the first two years, including since our original survey was conducted, and lessons have been learnt and acted upon.

However Citizens Advice Cymru believe as we enter the third year of the scheme it provides an ideal opportunity for the Welsh Government to consider more longer term arrangements for emergency financial support in Wales, as well as the opportunity to make further improvements in the short to medium term.

This includes rethinking the way the fund is promoted to ensure more people in need are aware of the support available; improving guidance/information for both scheme partners and other agencies who work with potentially eligible clients, particularly with regards to appealing decisions; ensuring links are in place to direct people in crisis to additional support (regardless of the outcome of their application), and building more discretion into the system.

Recommendations

Citizens Advice Cymru believes it is vital that the Discretionary Assistance Fund, or a similar scheme, continues to be available beyond March 2016.

In light of our research findings we have made a series of recommendations:

Future of the scheme:

Welsh Government should:

- consider putting a longer term arrangement in place for a more permanent scheme of financial support for people in Wales who find themselves in crisis situations or particular hardship and have nowhere else to go;
- ensure that both advisers and potential users are fully consulted during the development of any future scheme in Wales that may be in place beyond March 2016.

Welsh Government and the Scheme Managers should:

Promotion:

- reconsider the existing partner-focussed approach as the main mechanism for both raising awareness of the fund and supporting applications;
- develop additional avenues for raising awareness of the fund, such as the use of promotional materials in buildings where potential clients are likely to visit (including Citizens Advice Bureaux, job centres and local authority/housing association 'drop-in' offices) and the use of e-learning tools for frontline advisers;
- build on the current training programme being undertaken with local authorities in Wales by ensuring information/guidance regarding DAF is built into *in-house* training of frontline staff in all agencies/organisations in Wales who work with potentially eligible clients but are not formal partners, including Jobcentre Plus;
- ensure better information is provided to external agencies/organisations about what it means to be a partner of the scheme to allay potential concerns around impartiality;

- ensure all partners, potentially eligible clients and other agencies who work with such clients, are aware of their ability to appeal a decision when an application has either been unsuccessful or when only a part-award has been given.

Application process:

- ensure people in crisis who apply for a Discretionary Assistance Fund grant are directed to the range of additional support that may be available to them (regardless of the outcome of their application), including independent debt, money and benefits advice;
- ensure more discretion is built into the system on what items/expenses can be claimed when a potential client is obviously in an emergency or very vulnerable situation;
- review the approach to DWP budgeting loans recognising that taking out such a loan will not be appropriate for many eligible clients;
- ensure appropriate quality controls are in place for all customer service agents to ensure consistency and effectiveness in the advice provided, including promoting a greater understanding of user circumstances amongst frontline staff.

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