

Briefing for the Social Security Committee on the Scottish Welfare Fund

May 2018

Shelter Scotland wishes to bring to the attention of the Social Security Committee a number of operational and practical issues with the Scottish Welfare Fund, specifically Community Care Grants, which have been experienced by our clients. These difficulties have negatively impacted on our clients' ability to set up home or continue to live independently within their community.

Shelter Scotland helps over half a million people every year struggling with bad housing or homelessness through our advice, support and legal services. And we campaign to make sure that, one day, no one will have to turn to us for help.

Many of Shelter Scotland's clients have benefitted from the financial or equivalent assistance provided to them via the Scottish Welfare Fund. In the majority of cases, clients have been able to apply to the scheme and been awarded without unreasonable delay or difficulty. We are, however, aware of issues which have caused significant stress to some clients. These issues could be easily fixed or clarified by the Scottish Government and local authorities.

1) Method of application

Some local authorities are not making provision for different methods of application.

Shelter Scotland has been contacted by a number of individuals recently who were in difficulty as their local authority were only accepting applications for Community Care Grants via online forms.

Case study: A Shelter Scotland adviser contacted a local authority in April 2018 regarding a Community Care Grant for an elderly gentleman. The adviser was informed that all applications had to be made online. When the adviser enquired whether arrangements were in place for clients who are not internet users, they were told that the client should get assistance of a support worker or relative.

This runs entirely contrary to Section 4.13 of the Scottish Welfare Fund Guidance which states that local authorities must make provision for applications to be taken via three delivery channels (for example, online, on the phone and face-to-face).

In our view, it is unreasonable to expect someone to have access to the internet, as well as expect everybody to have the digital skills required to complete an online form. Households or individuals who are most likely to be [digitally excluded](#) are the same households who are also most likely to be identified as disadvantaged or excluded, and more likely to have need of the support provided by the Scottish Welfare Fund. It is clear from the guidance that local authorities must make provision for at least two methods of application, and therefore we would urge the Committee to review this practice and ensure the necessary provision is in place across Scotland.

2) Processing times

The process of applying for and being awarded a Community Care Grant can result in long delays and households having to manage without essential items.

According to The Welfare Funds (Scotland) Regulations 2016, the target processing time for a Community Care Grant is 15 working days. Even in the 94% of cases which are processed within the target time, some applicants face further waiting time for household goods to be delivered. Our experience is that this can result in significant problems for families who may have weeks without essential items (e.g. washing machines and cookers) upon moving into a new home, and therefore experience further stress and financial burden by having to use laundrettes and eating out or buying takeaway meals.

One issue is that households may be given very little notice of an offer of social housing, particularly homeless households who can be given only a day's notice that they have to move out of where they are staying and into permanent accommodation. With such short notice, households cannot plan and apply for a grant in advance of their move. Section 8.41 of the Scottish Welfare Fund Guidance states that local authorities can make an award in principle in advance of a tenancy being granted, however our experience is that this does not happen in practice and instead local authorities only accept applications once a housing offer has been made.

Financial strain at this time is compounded by the fact that a household may be liable for rent on two properties at the time of their move, but dual Housing Benefit payments are only paid when the person has moved into the new property. For many households, especially those with children, moving into a new home without essential items is extremely difficult, but not doing so means they are not eligible for the dual Housing Benefit payment to cover their rent overlap. Households should be should not be penalised for not moving into a home without adequate facilities. The ability to make a house a home in this way directly impacts on tenancy sustainment.

Case study: Leanne was pregnant and living in a fully furnished, temporary accommodation flat with her toddler when she was offered a flat just before Christmas. Unfortunately, the

application for her Community Care Grant wasn't processed before Christmas. Leanne wasn't able to move into her new, unfurnished property without the basic essential furnishings she had applied for, and thus had to stay in her furnished temporary accommodation property over Christmas until her Community Care Grant came through, meaning that she built up arrears as she was liable for rent for both her temporary accommodation and her new flat.

We would suggest that processing times for Community Care Grants should be reviewed and for there to be a clearer option for households to lodge a pre-emptive application, receive an award in principle and for the service to be able to respond flexibly around moving dates. Consideration should also be given to how the process interacts with other systems, including lettings systems.

3) Removal costs

There are difficulties with using the Scottish Welfare Fund for assistance with removal costs, despite removal costs rightly being considered a valid item for a Community Care Grant.

Our Foundations First service in Renfrewshire has found that when a Community Care Grant application is made to cover removal costs, the local authority will try to fast track the removal costs element. However, because many households are given short notice of a move, it is often not possible for them to process the application in time and therefore clients often have to source assistance from other areas. As Community Care Grants cannot cover costs already incurred, this means that the household then lose out on the removal costs element of any grant subsequently awarded.

Case study: Emma lived in a privately rented flat with her son, which she could no longer stay in. She was allocated a council property, and her support worker at Shelter Scotland completed an application for the Scottish Welfare Fund which included asking for financial assistance with moving costs. They requested that the application be fast-tracked, because she had to move out of her private rented property and into her new home within a week, but they were advised that it was a 15 working day process. The award didn't come through before Emma had to pay for her moving costs, and her application for moving costs was not accepted because she had managed to borrow money for this from family and friends. This now means that Emma is in debt, simply because her application wasn't processed in time.

We suggest that guidance should be updated so that removal costs can be paid retrospectively or that consideration is given to an alternative process for grants relating to removal costs to ensure that families are not left out of pocket by administrative delay.

4) Moving between local authority areas

Shelter Scotland advisers have helped individuals who are moving between local authority areas and are rejected from making a Scottish Welfare Fund application by the local authority they are moving from as they are leaving the area. They are then also rejected from making an application by the receiving local authority as the applicant does not have a local connection. This is despite Section 4.9 of the guidance stating that the local authority which the person is moving to should accept and consider the application. Therefore, the committee should review that practice across Scotland is in line with the guidance.

Summary

The Scottish Welfare Fund is designed to provide a safety net for people on low incomes to assist in times of crisis and to help people set up a home or continue to live independently in the community. Our experience in Shelter Scotland is that it provides a vital lifeline to many clients, however we have concerns that the discretionary nature of the scheme means that guidance is not always adhered to in practice, and in addition to administrative delays this results in barriers to households in making best use of the fund.

Lastly, we have significant concerns that the wider environment, in terms of insufficient benefits, the impact of the welfare system and rising costs, is resulting in greater reliance on the Scottish Welfare Fund. The most recent statistics support this, showing that applications for the reason of "emergency – benefit/income spent" have tripled since 2013 and that this is now the biggest reason for application by a significant margin. Whilst these root issues remain, any deliberation of the Scottish Welfare Fund must ensure that it continues to provide the vital safety net that is so desperately needed.

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