



**Response to London Borough of Harrow
Consultation - Voluntary and Community Sector Funding
Proposals 2016/17**

1. Introduction

Our response to this consultation focuses solely on the proposal to cut the current budget of £270,000 for the Emergency relief to £10,000, abolish any payments for white goods or furniture and for the scheme to be outsourced to the voluntary sector.

We have serious concerns at the impact it will have on vulnerable local people and are fundamentally opposed to this proposal.

2. Harrow Law Centre

Harrow Law Centre is a charity which provides free legal advice, support and representation to the local community. The law Centre was established in April 2010 by local people who saw the need for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in Harrow to have access to high quality and free legal advice. Harrow Law Centre employs 8 solicitors and specialist legal advisers providing free legal advice in most areas of social welfare including; welfare benefits, homelessness; asylum; human rights; European Law; community care; education; children's rights and public law matters.

The Law Centre has contracts with the Legal Aid Agency in housing, community care, immigration, public law and Welfare Benefits.

We provide advice to approximately 3000 local people each year and witness on a daily basis the many problems caused to local people by the variety of welfare reforms. Some local factors exacerbate the problem. Alasdair Rae of Sheffield University shows Harrow to be one of the fastest growing boroughs for deprivation. Trust for London research reveals Harrow (jointly with Bexley) to have the highest number of low paid jobs in London. The London Fuel Poverty Statistics for 2014 identifies Harrow as having one of the highest incidences for fuel poverty in London. The borough has a very low stock of social housing and therefore vulnerable people in Harrow are more reliant on private rented accommodation than people in many

other boroughs. The bedroom tax, benefit cap and the low level of council tax support means that the clients we see are often in a revolving door of homelessness and debt.

We regularly represent our clients in Courts and Tribunals and our work gives us direct experience of the impact of legislative changes on local people. We therefore are well placed to give evidence to the council on the likely impact of further cuts to the Emergency Relief Scheme.

3. The Emergency Relief Scheme budget

The Emergency Relief Scheme has been in place in Harrow since the abolition of the National Discretionary Social Fund scheme in 2013. According to the Annual Report of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the Social Fund 2011-2012 the annual Social Fund budget

Crisis Loans	£133.3 million
Community Care Grants	£141 million
Budgeting Loans	£448 million

The total of £722.3 million was distributed between 23 Regional Job Centre Areas. It really is important to consider how the budget to assist those in emergencies has been slashed. The current budget in Harrow of £270,000 is far from adequate but to reduce it to £10,000 will lead to considerable hardship locally and simply cause additional pressure on other areas of the Council budget.

Harrow Law Centre has always opposed the abolition of the discretionary Social Fund because we feared its replacement by localised systems of welfare would lead to a postcode lottery. Sadly this has proved to be the case.

The timing of this proposal comes at the worst possible time as the need is likely to increase. Universal credit is now being rolled out in Harrow. Comes at a time when there will be more need. Where a person claims universal credit there is a 6 week period when no money is paid. The person can apply for a budgeting advance but must repay the advance within 6 months. In addition the use of sanctions is increasing with people finding they are left without any benefit.

We often see clients who are removed from Employment Support Allowance because they are found fit for work by the DWP. However, when they try to sign on for Job Seekers Allowance they are told they are not fit for work and do not qualify. Sometimes they will initially be awarded job seekers allowance but their health means they are unable to comply with the job seekers agreement due to their health and are sanctioned. The Law Centre regularly sees clients who have not eaten in days, who have no electricity or gas and have been unable to buy basic items such as sanitary towels or nappies. This will get worse not better. Consequently people are likely to have more need for support from the Emergency Relief Scheme.

4. Abolition of payments for white goods and furniture

One of the largest areas of our work is housing and in particular representing families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Usually the family will be moving into unfurnished accommodation and need the basics to be able to move in.

We frequently assist our clients to secure help for beds, bedding, heaters and white goods through the Emergency Relief Scheme. Without this the families would be unable to take up their accommodation.

For example Mr and Mrs N and their 3 children had been placed in bed and breakfast accommodation by Harrow Council and remained there for 9 months. The family were offered temporary accommodation but as they had no furniture including no beds for their children they were unable to move. We assisted the family to secure help through the Emergency Relief Scheme to furnish the property.

We also assist a large number of women and children fleeing domestic abuse, some have been trafficked or were domestic slaves. Starting afresh with virtually no possessions they would normally apply to the Emergency Relief Scheme for help. If this is not available families will simply have to look to social services for support placing a further burden on their budgets. However, a further concern we have is that in our experience parents are often reluctant to contact social services for fear of their children being taken into care.

Charities that will assist in providing money for white goods or furniture are few and far between and often take months for a decision to be made.

5. Outsourcing to the Voluntary Sector

We are opposed to the Emergency Relief Scheme being outsourced to the Voluntary Sector. The suggestion appears to be that funding would be available to the same organisation that would provide generalist advice in the borough. What happens to the person who disagrees with a decision not to award a payment? Such a proposal means the person would have to seek advice from the same organisation that had determined they were ineligible.

We are concerned that no one voluntary organisation in Harrow would be able to reach out to all our diverse communities. Some organisations are not open every day. What of the person with an immediate need? Equally some voluntary organisations are geared towards a particular client group which may mean people in other groups would not think of contacting. The Social Fund as a national scheme clearly was administered by the DWP and people knew to go to the DWP for help. Similarly many in difficulty will understand they should go to the council for help. This level of recognition will not be the case with a small charity.

In our view devolving this duty to the Voluntary Sector does not necessarily mean the Local Authority no longer has responsibility for decision making and the Local

Authority may find itself open to challenge against decisions made by a third party on its behalf.

6. Conclusion

The abolition of the discretionary Social Fund remains a controversial issue. It provided a lifeline for some of the most marginalised members of society at times of acute need. At the time of its abolition the government argued that social fund decision making was too remote to target help to those most in need and that local authorities would be better placed to meet local need.

In devolving its responsibility to local authorities without a ring fenced budget and with no accountability for how the money is spent central government simply washed its hands of all responsibility for the ultimate safety net to the poor. We urge Harrow Council not to do the same and to reconsider this cut.

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