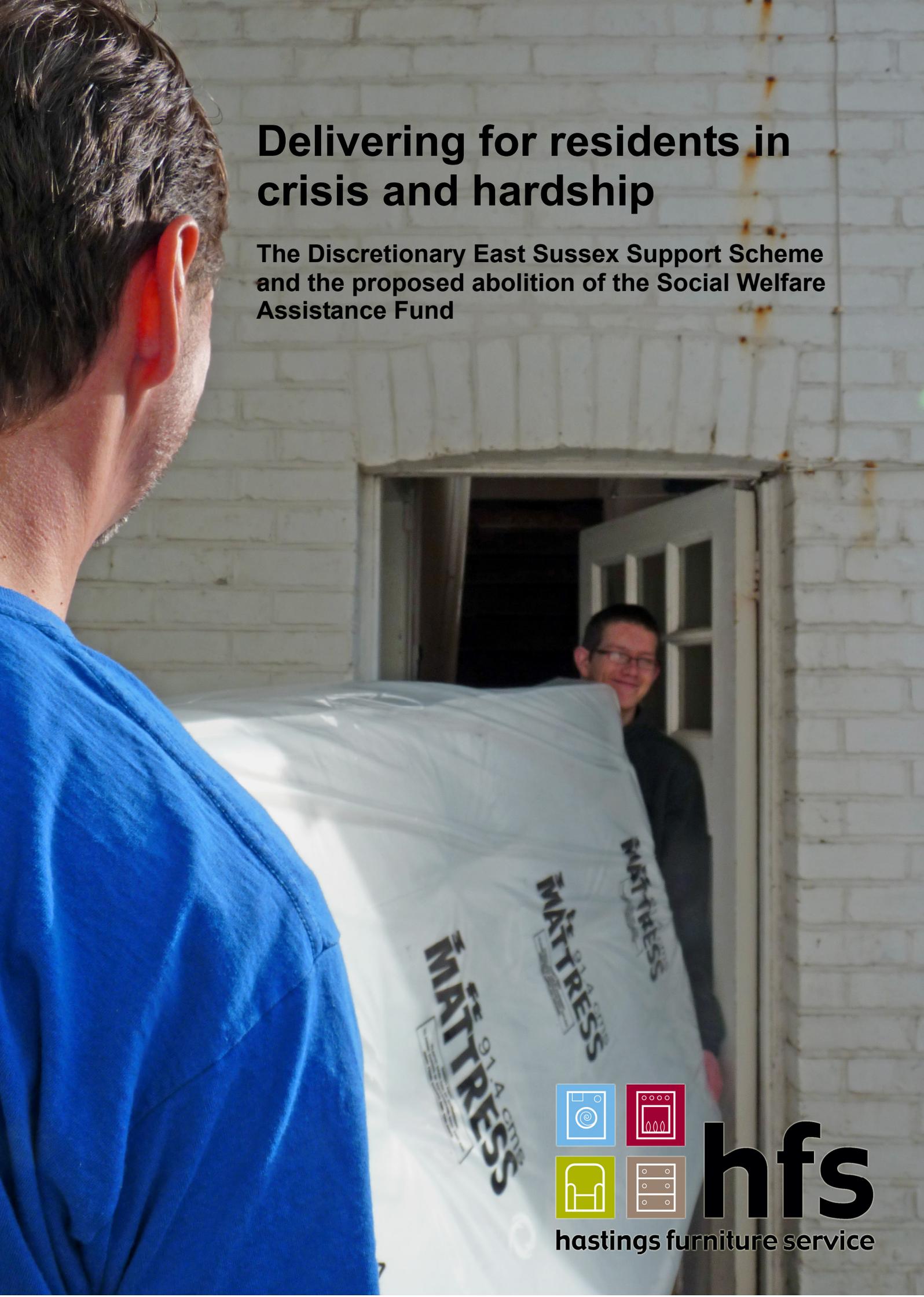


Delivering for residents in crisis and hardship

The Discretionary East Sussex Support Scheme and the proposed abolition of the Social Welfare Assistance Fund



hfs

hastings furniture service

Local welfare assistance schemes and the Social Fund

In April 2013, central government devolved £347 million from the previous system of Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans (1) to local Councils to enable the poorest individuals and households to establish or maintain independent life in the community.

Allocating a proportion of the funding to local government was generally welcomed by local authorities and third sector organisations as they felt they had a better understanding of need and local conditions in their own areas.

In East Sussex, the Local Welfare Assistance scheme is known as DESSS: the Discretionary East Sussex Support Scheme.

Local authorities, the Local Government Association (2) and charities are shocked that this year's Local Government Finance Settlement revealed that Government funding would not be renewed in 2015.

With overall funding for local government cut by more than 40% since 2010, it will not be possible for local authorities to meet the cost of local welfare assistance schemes and the impact on children and those with long term sickness or disability could be disastrous.

This briefing note aims to:

- demonstrate the value and impact of the local East Sussex scheme
- put forward points for consideration in relation to the future of the scheme.

Discretionary East Sussex Support Scheme (DESSS)

East Sussex County Council has used its share of the local welfare assistance budget to set up DESSS to help East Sussex residents in crisis and temporary financial hardship (3).

ESCC contracted local charities and social enterprises to provide the goods and services in their area, obtaining additional social value from the investment by spending the funds with organisations that provide a wider range of services and opportunities for people with low incomes, including training and paid work opportunities.

The ethos of these organisations is also key to the success of the East Sussex scheme. It's clear that the charities have put thought and care into choosing items to provide (for example, ensuring all electrical goods supplied are rated energy efficient so that clients can afford to run them), and provide efficient, speedy and friendly delivery.

1. A community care grant was a payment from the social fund for people on certain benefits to help meet costs which would enable them to remain in the community. Like all payments from the social fund, the amount of money available to help people was limited, so a case had to be made for payment. Not everyone who applied was helped. Community care grants were often used to help people remain in their homes or to help with the costs of setting up a home.

2. See LGA announcement 24 February 2014 www.local.gov.uk#sthash.5D87FC4I.dpuf

3. <http://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/community/benefits/desss>



HFS and Furniture Now worked together to source reliable suppliers and maintain a stock of equipment so that deliveries can be provided swiftly for those in need. Essential household appliances provided by DESSS include cookers, fridges, micro-waves, mini-ovens, washing machines, kettles and toasters.

The East Sussex scheme stipulates that

- The need cannot be met any other way
- There is a significant risk to a person's health and safety (eg homelessness or other emergency including lack of food or warmth)

The scheme aims to:

- Meet the most fundamental needs of hunger and warmth in an emergency or crisis and on a short term basis.
- Provide assistance to people to set up home or be able to continue to live in the community.

DESSS provides assistance either through an in-kind provision or through referral to a support service. It does not provide cash or loans, but instead liaises with a range of organisations to provide:

- essential food
- essential goods associated with infants/ children
- heating or electricity
- emergency travel costs
- help in the case of major upheaval or disaster
- alternative clothes if no others than the ones they are wearing are available

People leaving residential care, long term hospital, prison or resettling after being a victim of domestic violence may be considered for help with:

- Beds / bedding
- Provision of heating appliances
- Essential domestic appliances/cookware
- Essential domestic furniture
- Assistance with moving home may be provided where a person or family has to move due to circumstances beyond their control or some unexpected circumstances.

Circumstances not covered by DESSS

DWP has retained some support schemes, which can prove confusing for people in crisis. It is not known how long these alternatives will remain in place as central government plans further to reduce the welfare benefits budget.

ESCC has put a policy and procedure in place for the local administration of the fund. DESSS does not, for example, cover people whose benefits have been withdrawn under sanction by the Job Centre, excluding many with no income for food or fuel from applying.



Refuge Manager:

DESSS is very much needed by services like ourselves. Without it I don't know how we would obtain the items needed for the families we support.

Our clients have fled their homes as a result of domestic violence, so they literally have nothing to furnish their homes after they leave refuges.

HFS has delivered for our families with great success. Our clients often cry tears of joy when they realise that the DESSS will give them the basic items they need to move into their new home.



Impact of DESSS in first 6 months

In the first 6 months of the scheme, from April to September 2013, 536 claims were awarded in full or in part(4).

A total of £82,900 was spent to alleviate the crises in which destitute people and families found themselves. This is approx 15% less than the budget set aside for that period, but with winter approaching and the scheme being so new, it was prudent not to spend the full allocation for the period in case of emergencies caused by adverse weather.



In the first 6 months:

- Hastings Furniture Service and Furniture Now have together delivered 783 items of furniture or white goods to families in crisis or resettling.
- 379 awards were made for food and utilities. In most of the County, food assistance was provided by Foodbanks which were given grant funding towards setting up or running costs.
- Awards were also made to supply nappies and baby items, travel costs and work clothes.

In addition, further DESSS funds have been used to:

- Support 157 households with rent deposits to enable them to move into housing after a period of homelessness, institutional care or overcrowding. Awards totalling £90,347 in 6 months.
- Enable the credit union to set up a direct payment card account for people who do not have bank accounts. 60 people have already opened the accounts which cannot go overdrawn and which don't allow withdrawals by other parties.
- Provide a CAB debt advice service throughout the County, helping 362 households better manage £1,165,525 debt to date.

4. The total number of claims during that period was 846, but 310 were refused as they were not thought to meet the requirements of the scheme. The number refused because they were under sanction by JCP or should have been assisted by DWP/HMRC is not clear.

Examples

Ms D faced starting a new home for her two children with very little money, having fled from an abusive partner. She went to an HFS store to buy some second-hand beds so the children would at least have something to sleep on and staff there told her about DESSS. She called the helpline to apply and the DESSS responded quickly, sending confirmation of her award within 24 hours, which HFS was able to deliver the next day. Ms D was delighted that the scheme provided bedding for her beds and also a cooker, kitchen starter pack and fridge-freezer so she could make meals for her family.

Mrs O lives with her adult son in social housing. She is unwell and her son has mental health problems. Her ESA (Employment Support Allowance) was stopped after an Atos assessment months ago, which also led to her Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support being stopped. She was trying to live on her Disabled Living Allowance alone.

She fell behind in paying her bills, had rent and Council Tax arrears, all of which made her anxious, exacerbating her health condition and making it harder for her to cope or take action to resolve the problems.

CAB contacted her landlord and utility providers who agreed to suspend action. They helped her to appeal the ESA decision which has now been overturned, leading to the reinstatement of the benefits to which she is entitled towards her rent and Council Tax as well.

Mr C has severe mental health problems and agoraphobia. He was left without ESA payments for over a month in the Winter because his GP's certificates were lost by the DWP and, even though they had been re-found there would be a delay before his benefit was reinstated.

He had no food and no fuel to heat his home or cook with. Seaview and CAB helped him apply to DESSS and explain the urgency of his situation. He was provided with a top-up voucher for electricity and a voucher for the Foodbank.

Mr A works part-time for minimum wage and has three young children. When his washing machine broke down he reached crisis point. The prompt delivery of a new washing machine was funded by DESSS. He said: "I thought I was going to have to go to a loan shark, but I was scared I'd never get out of debt again if I did."

The case studies make for difficult reading as it is clear people have found themselves with no resources and with nowhere to turn. The crucial issue to be considered is what will become of those in similar circumstances in 2015 and beyond?



HFS and Furniture Now employ young people as Apprentices and are partners in a scheme called L-earn that offers paid part-time pre-apprenticeship opportunities for 16-19s who would otherwise be "NEET" (Not in Education, Employment or Training). The DESSS deliveries are excellent real world work experience.

What will happen after April 2015?

Will Universal Credit replace DESSS?

Central government is urgently working on Universal Credit, an IT system for welfare benefit claims. Eventually, it is hoped to include all working age welfare benefits within the same programme so that people can set out their circumstances and then get the right benefits.

Because one of the reasons that local welfare assistance schemes are needed is to help people whose welfare benefits are incorrectly assessed or very slow in being processed, central government believes that Universal Credit will displace the need for such schemes.

Unfortunately the Universal Credit project has been beset by delays and overspends, so even if it is a viable solution, it is unlikely to be fully operational for many years. It is also unlikely to provide any allowances for the large essential items needed by vulnerable people who are being resettled and re-housed.

Will local charities fill the void?

Charities such as the Lions or Hastings Area Community Trust may try to help by funding small grants for specific households in need that they are aware of, but low interest rates, the economic climate and “donor fatigue” mean they have less funding to distribute while the need is increasing. If the DESSS is abolished, the demand will increase even further.

In addition, applications to charities are dependent on vulnerable and desperate people knowing about them and how to apply. Often those most in need are least able to argue their case.

When will decisions be made?

Discussions on budget and Council priorities will be taking place from September 2014.

What is the way forward?

The way forward is for agencies in the statutory and voluntary sector, as well as politicians at all levels, to get together and discuss the means by which this work to support and stabilise most vulnerable households in our community can be continued and the level of priority it will be given in future budget discussions.



Refuge Manager:

If the DESSS was to be cut, vulnerable women and children would struggle to access essential items for their new property when they move on from the refuges.

They need basic home-making items such as beds, bedding, fridges, and cookers.

Most of our clients are not eligible for any other funding for these items, and do not have any surplus income to save towards the items, so they would literally have to move into an empty property without DESSS support.



What will happen if there is no DESSS service?

The potential abolition of DESSS leaves vulnerable adults and children in an impossible position as local authorities will not have the means to help and there will be no other recourse to emergency funds .

The main groups affected will be:

- Women fleeing domestic violence,
- People suffering from mental and physical health burdens they cannot deal with
- Those who are in work but have had a series of misfortunes they could not find the means to cushion themselves against, who might otherwise resort to loan sharks
- People who are homeless

There is evidence to show that the results are likely to be increases in:

- The number of children taken into care because their parents are not able to provide adequate home environments or food.
- The level of homelessness if rent in advance cannot be funded any longer.
- The level of long-term worklessness as people who do not have their basic needs in terms of shelter, a bed and food are unlikely to participate in work or training.
- The incidence of poor mental and physical health, suicides
- Increase in reoffending and criminal activity such as shoplifting, anti-social behaviour and vandalism.

All of the above lead to increased expenditure by other public bodies, therefore the abolition of the local welfare assistance budget is likely to cost taxpayers considerably more than any savings that might accrue.



Federation of Small Business

Chairman:

The 1066 area FSB would be extremely disappointed if funding for the East Sussex DESSS were to be withdrawn.

This funding is vital for areas like Hastings, St Leonards, Bexhill and Eastbourne that have high levels of deprivation and unemployment, helping vulnerable citizens who require urgent assistance to set up and maintain a home including the very basic necessities that we take for granted such as food, power and beds.

It is illogical to expect citizens who do not have access to these basics to function and contribute to the community in a positive way, or to participate usefully in the training and employment opportunities that our members, the many small and medium size businesses in the South East, strive to create.



Summary

- The East Sussex DESSS has been established to provide a good quality, sympathetic, well-organised service to help vulnerable local households.
- The involvement of local social enterprises and charities in the provision of goods and services is welcomed as a model of best practice that ensures a high quality of service as well as deriving additional social benefits from the DESSS investment.
- If DESSS is abolished, the initial impact will be felt by the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people in our community, including women surviving domestic violence, ex-offenders, hardworking people with low incomes and homeless people. The result is likely to be additional costs passed on to other support services.
- If DESSS support is not provided to enable individuals and households to establish or maintain themselves, the outcome can only be a larger number of unstable individuals and households, unable to participate in work or community life, provide a healthy environment for children or other dependents, which has an impact on our whole community and our economy.

We call on decision makers to maintain this vital service for local residents:

3VA

Changing Lives in Cheshire

AmicusHorizon Housing Association

Brighton Housing Trust

CAB 1066

Federation of Small Businesses

Furniture Now!

Hastings Advice and Representation Centre

Hastings & Rother Credit Union

Hastings Furniture Service

Hastings Voluntary Action

Horizons Community Learning CIC

Newhaven Community Development Centre

Refuge

Rother District CAB

Seaview Project



Federation of Small Businesses



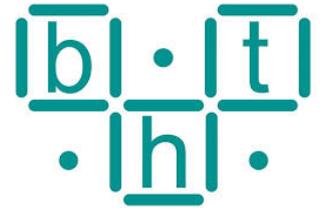
For women and children.
Against domestic violence.



Newhaven Community
Development Association



Hastings & Rother Credit Union



Supporting Voluntary Action across
Eastbourne, Lewes District and Wealden



This briefing has been prepared by Mary Denning on behalf of HFS and other organisations that are concerned about the proposed abolition of DESSS.

This document is available online: www.hfs.org.uk/desss.html

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