

Policy & Resources Scrutiny Committee – 16th October 2014

Public Questions

Question from Mr Davies to the Executive Councillor for Community Development

Question

“Cuts in Local Welfare Assistance Fund

I am concerned about the current decision by central govt to cut this fund (as described in this October issue's Local Govt First p.2). As a Street pastor, and working closely with HARP, I would like to ask the Executive Councillor and officers how this will affect the homeless and vulnerable people on Southend streets.

I am working with HARP, Street Pastors and Night Shelters this year to compile an accurate register of who is sleeping rough and what can be done before the vulnerable person becomes a permanent statistic and it becomes endemic problem.”

Answer

From April 2013, the Government through the Department for Works and Pensions transferred the responsibility and funding for crisis loans and financial support to Local Authorities to assist with local welfare provision.

As part of the 2014/15 Local Government settlement the Government announced that this funding, which is worth around half a million pounds in funding to the Council would cease after two years and end on 31st March 2015.

The Council has used the funding to create the Essential Living Fund, which has helped hundreds of residents with food packages, white goods, emergency funding, etc and is continuing to diversify its support in this area to many vulnerable people.

The Council has along with all other Councils in the country and the Local Government Association made representations about this withdrawal of essential funding for Councils but with no positive response to date.

Separately the Council is in the process of reviewing the fund and the administrative support to consider what it can do on the basis of the funding being withdrawn. This is being done in conjunction with Essex and Thurrock for whom we are the administrative lead for the Fund.

If not replaced, I believe the withdrawal of this funding will have an extremely serious effect on the welfare of the most vulnerable people in the town.

Both last year in opposition and this year in administration I have asked senior officers of the council to explore all options to maintain this support in some form. However, we must all appreciate the difficulty of this task, given the scale of budget cuts we are expecting. I would urge any members who have influence with government to join us in asking them to reconsider this damaging cut to make sure we can adequately support our poorest and most vulnerable residents.