

New Housing Benefit scheme hailed as success by DWP

A radical new way of paying Housing Benefit in nine test areas has been introduced smoothly according to a report published today. The new scheme, the most major reform of Housing Benefit since its introduction 20 years ago, pays a flat rate 'Local Housing Allowance,' varying only by the size of family and the area they live.

At present, Housing Benefit is also related to the total rent of a house or flat. Under the LHA, tenants have the chance to shop around, finding cheaper property and pocketing the difference, or trading up and making up the extra rent themselves.

Councils testing the scheme and their partner organisations are generally happy with the way the scheme has been introduced and the fact there have been few hitches, the report found. Concerns that the LHA would impact on levels of homelessness have not materialised.

The way councils are assessing vulnerability and arrears has generally worked well in all the pathfinder areas. Overall, less than one in ten claimants currently have their Housing Benefit paid to their landlord under those arrangements

Most claimants now have a bank account and overall, six out of ten claimants are using those accounts to receive Housing Benefit payments under the new scheme.

Housing Benefit Minister Chris Pond said: "The new system for Housing Benefit is working well. It will increase choice and responsibility for tenants. It will be much simpler and quicker to administer. Customers will also have greater certainty about how much help with their housing costs they would receive if they went back to work, helping them bridge the gap between being unemployed and taking a job."

There are nine Local Housing Allowance Pathfinder councils around the country and the report covers their experiences. The Pathfinders will be trialling the LHA for two years and the evaluation will inform roll-out across the country. In this region, South Norfolk District Council and Norwich City Council are involved in the second stage of this project which began in April.

Public enquiries 020 7712 2171
Website <http://www.dwp.gov.uk>

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Launch of the Care Services Improvement Partnership

The Care Services Improvement Partnership (CSIP) was launched last month. Care services describe the range of organisations that provide care for people and that seek to enable people to manage their own lives. Care services care for people as people, and so by definition strive to offer more choice, promote independence, be non-discriminatory and plan care directly with those using services.

CSIP has been set up to support improvement and development spanning services across health (including prison health), local government and social care, for children, adults and older people, including those experiencing mental distress, physical disability or learning disability.

The Partnership is made up of national initiatives, including:

- Change for Children
- Health and Social Care Change Agent Team
- Integrated Community Equipment Service
- Integrated Care Network
- The National CAMHS Support Service
- National Institute for Mental Health in England
- Health in Criminal Justice
- Valuing People Support Team.

Bringing together the initiatives the Partnership will work at national, regional and local levels to provide more effective implementation and service improvement support to care services to deliver better outcomes for individuals, families and communities.

CSIP is an evolving initiative and the website <http://www.csip.org.uk> will provide visitors with up to date news, events and information about the partnerships development. If you have any queries or feedback about our work, please email us at info@csip.org.uk

Article from NIMHE (National Institute for Mental Health in England) website



New research backs Shelter project to tackle anti-social behaviour

Independent evaluation of the innovative Shelter Inclusion Project published in April has shown that in the first two years it has had a near 100 per cent success rate for those families that have completed the project and has also helped more than 50 households accused of anti-social behaviour (ASB) to curb their actions.

A report by York University has found the project is highly successful in tackling the problem and comes as MPs examining the issue today urged a greater use of family-based intervention projects. The Home Affairs Select Committee has published a report on anti-social behaviour that backs the Government's approach but states that more could be achieved if greater importance is placed on tackling perpetrators' support needs. It also says that family based interventions are essential if the deepest-rooted ASB problems are not simply recycled from area to area.

The Shelter Inclusion Project has successfully helped clients who faced eviction because of their behaviour or were the subject of other enforcement action such as Anti-Social Behaviour Orders by identifying the root causes. Many clients signed a behaviour contract to follow a tailored programme of support that involved professional intervention on a range of issues including drug and alcohol dependency, depression and other mental illnesses as well as parenting skills. Most service users said that the project had helped them address their behaviour.

Adam Sampson, Director of Shelter, said "The success of Shelter Inclusion Project chimes with the call from the Home Affairs Select Committee that Government and local authorities could achieve more by tackling perpetrators support needs. Many of our clients suffer because of anti-social behaviour so we strongly support effective ways of tackling it but working to solve the root causes we can avoid eviction and the pointless and costly scenario of moving the problem on to another neighbourhood."

The findings are released in the housing and homelessness charity's report Shelter Inclusion Project: Two Years On. The evaluation shows that the Shelter model could be used by local authorities up and down the country.

For more information please see the website - www.shelter.org.uk

Supporting People

Supporting People hasn't been an election issue. Perhaps it should have been – after all this programme pays for vital housing support services for over a million vulnerable people, from the elderly to the homeless, those with mental health problems or a host of other kinds of problem. And there is an increasingly compelling case that the whole programme is drifting aimlessly towards the rocks.

One basic problem is money. When local authorities assumed control of the programme in April 2003 central government blanched at the bill: £1.8bn, around a billion pounds more than the Treasury had budgeted for. Most people accept that Whitehall got its original sums wrong, but there was more to it than that. The problem was that even an expensively commissioned independent review couldn't untangle the relative importance of the different reasons: cost

shunting by other welfare spending departments; new provision specifically developed in the run up to SP; opportunistic development by providers. The inability of this review to identify the causes of the problem didn't stop them bluntly concluding that legacy provision – the schemes in place in April 2003 - was giving bad Value For Money (VFM) and things needed to change and quickly. Since then we have a series of cheese paring cuts followed by a very

Homeless Link welcomes “major step forward” as Government strengthens commitment on homelessness.

Homeless Link, the umbrella body for homelessness charities, has welcomed the Government's five-year homelessness strategy published in March and its recognition that “Homelessness has no place in a sustainable community, and our aim should be to eradicate it.”

Jenny Edwards, Homeless Link chief executive said “The Government has taken a major step forward in its action plan and should be congratulated on accepting the aim of eradicating homelessness. We look forward to working with the Government and with our member organisations on the implementation of the plan and to making progress towards achieving the longer term aim.”

The ODPM launched its 5 year Homelessness Strategy and published the latest quarterly homelessness figures, the last set of figures before the election. While new acceptances of homeless households have fallen, the number of households in temporary accommodation remains above 100,000. The Government has set the goal of halving that figure by 2010.

- Homeless Link welcomed a number of key points from the strategy. These include:
- Increased funding for services to prevent and tackle homelessness
- A continued and strengthened emphasis on prevention
- The recognition of the need to co-ordinate Homelessness Strategies at a regional and sub-regional level
- Measures to end the Housing Benefit poverty trap by reforming the funding of temporary accommodation
- Measures to bring in discharge protocols for homeless people leaving hospital
- Recognition of the need to tackle homelessness among refugees and asylum seekers
- Major capital investments in hostels

e and the political radar

significant one, reducing the budget for 2005/6 to £1.72bn. Bit by bit, this issue has simply merged into the general Gershon inspired government efficiency agenda.

But all the continued kerfuffle about cash has obscured even more fundamental problems with the programme as it is currently operating. It has to be remembered that SP is administered by local authorities but replaced a plethora of previous funding systems mainly operated by national government or quangos. Some local authorities are rising to this new challenge well; others are causing Whitehall and the Audit Commission to pull their hair out in exasperation. But the basic problem with local authorities, be they good performers or bad ones, is that they are local – and neither the service users nor the legacy services necessarily are. So, as each legacy service is reviewed, a key question asked by the host council is - does this scheme serve any strategically relevant local purpose?

Protection for so called cross authority schemes was always weak and is getting weaker. Contractual restrictions on providers demanding they prioritise local people are becoming more and more common. Quite where this leaves, say, a homeless problem drinker from Hull trying to start again in a new area is becoming a matter of postcode lottery.

The significance of this comes into even sharper focus when one returns to the question of money again. For Whitehall, one of the embarrassing facts about the distribution of legacy services is that the pattern of inherited monies varies wildly between different councils. Yet different local authorities are supposed to assess local need and re-align local services to meet it. So Whitehall wants to re-distribute money between them. The problem is agreeing what constitutes 'need' and how to shift monies around without damaging financially fragile services. To providers this sounds like an ivory tower debate: if their services are full of needy people, surely this itself is evidence of need? Not so say Whitehall – these people might not be 'strategically relevant'.

So now we have an incomplete redistribution formula, a small list of expectant 'winner' authorities, a larger list of councils apparently due to lose lots of money and a host of rather confused ones in between, without any clear financial horizon.

Council Chief Finance Officers are starting to ask pointed questions about the 'risk' authorities face in carrying so many contracts with providers if their future funding isn't certain. Council SP Teams are toughening their attitude to contract and procurement negotiations with providers accordingly. Talk of the happy provider/commissioner relations supposed by the Voluntary Sector Compact seems very hollow indeed to most supported housing charities and housing associations.

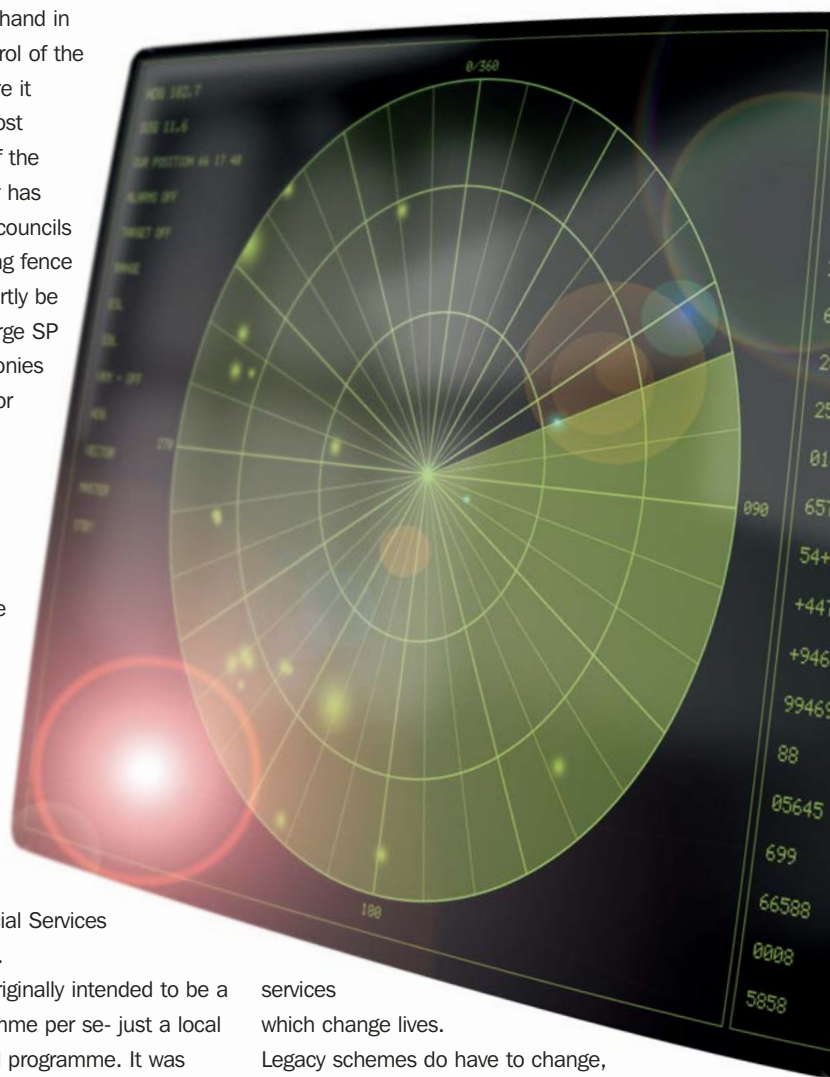
You might think that all this was a recipe for a stronger guiding hand in Whitehall to take control of the programme and ensure it delivers. Not so - almost incredibly the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has recently written to all councils suggesting that the ring fence on SP monies will shortly be removed. This will merge SP monies – including monies that pay for services for vulnerable, mobile unpopular groups with few strong local connections – with mainstream local authority grants. Some homelessness providers have exploded in anger, and a considerable number of Council SP Team members are muttering about how this means they will have to follow Social Services priorities from now on.

Yet SP was never originally intended to be a local authority programme per se - just a local authority administered programme. It was supposed to be a partnership between Housing, Social Services, Health and Probation. It was supposed to be a programme of managed change in the interests of vulnerable people, not deep financial uncertainty for councils and providers alike. Somehow, all this seems to have been forgotten.

Meanwhile, in the cruellest twist of all, a growing number of users, especially elderly people in sheltered housing, are finding themselves financially caught up in this mess.

Councils are pressing providers to reduce support charges, which they normally subsidize for people on benefit – yet provider costs continue to rise. Over 13,000 people on benefit are already paying support charges above the level of subsidy – in other words, using their own savings, pension or income support.

It doesn't have to be like this. Supporting People remains one of the most valuable social programmes in the armoury of the welfare state. It can fund



services which change lives.

Legacy schemes do have to change, and monies do have to be redistributed between different parts of the country. This can happen successfully only if central government reasserts its crucial role in a way that protects users and services for people from outside the local area.

Nigel Rogers

Nigel Rogers is Director of SITRA, the umbrella body for the supported housing sector. Article first published on the Guardian website.

Training Dates

22nd June 2005

The QAF and Involving Service Users

6th July 2005

Support Planning

15th July 2005

The Strengths Model – developing Staff and Service Users

23rd September 2005

Working with People who Self-Injure

5th October 2005

Loss and Bereavement

FOR A COPY OF OUR 2005 TRAINING BROCHURE PLEASE PHONE 01603 617299 OR EMAIL suzie@vhg-east.org

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A day in the life of...

The Big Issue Foundation was formed ten years ago. It followed the successful launch of the street paper The Big Issue. Most of us have seen the vendors selling the magazine on the streets of Britain's cities and towns. There is no need for me to explain the need for such a publication in this article. The readers of VHG's Raising the Roof will know why!

However the background and purpose of the The Big Issue Foundation may be unknown to you. The Foundation was formed as a support network for the vendors of the 'Issue' and others who are homeless or vulnerably housed. We are a small band; our jobs are to help with the problems that the homeless have to face very day:

Finding accommodation

Filling out forms

Benefit advice

Work, education and training advice and delivery

Looks simple when it's written down in black and white. Most people sign on when they lose a job and can be expected to be employed in a short time. However, if you have mental health, substance abuse or motivation problems, then we are here to help.

Motivation can be hard to induce if you've been living on the street for sometime and those times can vary from town to town, city to city. In East Anglia the problems are no less that some major inner cities. The numbers may not be quite the same but as the population grows so does the need for support.

I joined the Foundation some years ago and my role was basic skills tutor. I have specialised in basic skills for some time. However last year, when my colleague left, for pastures new, my role changed and I accepted responsibility for both teaching and supporting our clients. Combining the two roles was a challenge and I worked within the remit for the first couple of months.

Nevertheless I was frustrated about how I

could support my clients. The motivation for turning up for appointments seemed to dwindle after the first consultation. Was it me? Why was it so difficult for a client or

Jean Hartford-Davis
at The Big Issue
Norwich

student to keep their allocated appointments? Well, if Mohammed would not come to the mountain, the mountain, me, would be pro-active.

Bishopbridge House was my first point of call. I rang Anna the manager and asked if I could see her. We discussed the possibilities of the Foundation helping with motivation classes for the vulnerably housed. Bishopbridge is for short term residents; some of our vendors live there. It was decided that the Foundation, in the shape of me, could start delivering Personal Effectiveness classes. Motivation is central to all of our problems; we all recognise those days when we just do not want to get out of bed in the mornings.

As the weeks went on we discovered that having a familiar face around encouraged other residents to seek help with basic skills in one form or another. I now teach English as a second language, IT and literacy in the shape of creative writing classes a couple of mornings a week at the hostel.

This has also been an incentive for the clients to come and use our IT suite and learning facilities in Norwich. The clients of the Foundation and Bishopbridge House need more encouragement than you and me.

I look forward to my visits to the hostel and enjoy sharing good practice with my colleagues there.

The Big Issue Foundation is continuing to support the vendors and those who are homeless: for further information about the Big Issue please look at our website via www.bigissue.com