



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: MONDAY, 12 MARCH 2018 at 5:30 pm

P R E S E N T :

Councillor Cank (Chair)
Councillor Alfonso (Vice Chair)

Councillor Aqbany
Councillor Byrne

Councillor Dawood
Councillor Hunter

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72. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Halford, Tim Draper (Development Officer, Housing) and James Rattenberry (Principal Policy Officer, Finance).

73. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members were asked to declare any interests they might have in the business to be discussed.

There were no declarations of interest.

74. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

Agreed:

That the minutes of the Housing Scrutiny Commission meeting held on 15 January 2018 be confirmed as a correct record.

Thanks were extended to Robert Webster – Gas and Heating Services Manager, Housing who ensured constituents' heating issues were dealt with quickly during the recent extreme freezing conditions.

75. PETITIONS

The Monitoring Officer reported that no petitions had been received.

76. QUESTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS OR STATEMENTS OF CASE

The Monitoring Officer reported that no questions, representations or statements of case had been received.

77. DISCRETIONARY POLICY REVIEW 2017/18

The Director of Finance submitted a report to Members of the Housing Scrutiny Commission in order to outline the Council's Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP), Council Tax Discretionary Relief (CTDR) and Community Support Grant (CSG) policies and to present key amendments intended to further focus intervention funding on the prevention of homelessness and managing short term financial crises.

Alison Musgrove, Service Manager Revenues & Customer Service Support, Finance introduced the report and referred to; the reduced benefit cap from January 2017, key priorities for the discretionary policies in 2018/19 and Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP).

Following questions and comments from the Committee, the following points were made:

- In response to a point in the report encouraging tenants to downsize, and a query about the availability of properties, it was noted that the majority of tenants needed to downsize to one bedroom properties of which the Council had the most available stock. If tenants did not choose to downsize they would have to pay the extra costs for the rent.
- Newly under-occupied or Benefit Capped households who claimed a DHP would now receive a 13 week transition award (rather than the previous 26 weeks) to encourage them to engage with the team, seek support and consider other options.
- All existing claims would finish on 31 March 2018. Tenants would then be required to re-apply; at that point it would be determined whether the tenant would meet the conditions in the policy.
- It was noted that conditions of the new policy would affect the number of people who would re-apply and figures were requested. The Service Manager Revenues & Customer Service Support, Finance agreed for figures to be provided to the Commission as soon as reasonably possible by the Principal Policy Officer, Finance.
- The Chair noted concerns regarding; children living in overcrowded accommodation and tenants applying for payday loans.

Following the meeting, the Principal Policy Officer, Finance provided additional information which has been attached at the end of these minutes.

Agreed:

- 1) To provide Members of the Housing Commission with figures on the impact of these new conditions in regard to the number of people who would apply.
- 2) That the report be endorsed.

78. GOSCOTE HOUSE

The Director of Housing submitted a report to update Members of the Housing Scrutiny Commission on the long-term future of Goscote House.

Simon Nicholls, Head of Service, Housing presented the report and noted that Goscote House would now be decommissioned, demolished and redeveloped. Further information was provided regarding the reasons for the decision, some of which included the increased costs to refurbish, the construction type having no guaranteed lifespan and consideration of the Southwark tower blocks of the same type.

The following queries were noted by Members of the Commission and the Head of Service provided responses:

- In regards to whether it had been considered to offer the tower to Housing Associations (HA's), it was suggested that HA's were not looking to expand their tower block accommodations. However, the question had not yet been posed to them. Chris Burgin, the Director of Housing provided financial details of how much investment would be required and the buildings worth afterwards. These figures gave indications that registered providers most likely would not be interested.
- Assistant City Mayor for Housing Councillor Connelly noted that it would be a risk to invest money into the building with no guarantees. In order to make a return, the building would have to be there for 20+ years. It was also noted that the safety of tenants was first priority.
- The Director of Housing noted that following demolition, there were no current intentions for the site. Proposals would be drafted and suggested to the City Mayor. The full political process and consideration would be followed.
- Goscote House raised further concerns as it had the same design as other properties which showed significant cracking in Southwark, London.
- It was noted that of the 70 secure tenancies in Goscote House and 35 tenants living there temporarily whilst their flats in Maxfield House were being refurbished, 35 would go back to Maxfield House upon completion of works and the other 70 tenants would be found suitable accommodation. However, nothing could be done until Maxfield House developments were complete.
- The Head of Service, Housing noted that the authority was looking at

identifying sites across the city for development and also had a number of schemes in place.

- Chris Burgin, The Director of Housing informed the commission that the City Mayor had agreed for Leicester City Council to set up a housing company, which would deliver a new affordable housing supply, develop new Council housing and new houses for sale. The first phase would be to deliver 50 additional units at its nearest convenience.

Agreed:

- 1) That the Assistant City Mayor for Housing Councillor Connelly agreed to bring plans/ a report back to the Housing Scrutiny Commission regarding the timescale of the Goscote House demolition and future plans for the site.
- 2) That the report be noted and agreed.

79. VOIDS PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Director of Housing submitted a report to provide the Division's performance on the completion of void repairs to council properties for the third quarter of 2017/18.

Simon Nicholls, Head of Service, Housing presented the report and noted the 2017/18 Voids performance against the target, the impacts on void performance and progress/ future work areas.

Following questions and comments from the Committee, the subsequent points were made:

- Sheltered housing was thought not to be popular due to the current configuration, as part of the future works officers would be looking at reconfiguring the layout. It was noted that alternative uses of sheltered accommodation schemes were being looked at.
- Chris Burgin, Director of Housing noted that demand for sheltered housing units, quality product and low demand areas was being looked at and also what that stock should be used for.
- Lettings information, refusal rates and location were also being looked into and a report would be put together based on those facts.
- The Head of Service, Housing noted that sheltered units in relation to young people from the Y would be considered as part of the process when preparing the final report.
- In the next report Members encouraged a report summary table for void performance against targets for 2018/19 and also requested details of recoverable costs.

Agreed:

- 1) That the report be noted.

During this item, Councillor Hunter departed the meeting and the meeting reconvened with Councillors Cank, Alfonso, Aqbany, Byrne and Dawood present.

80. RESPONSIVE HOUSING REPAIRS PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Director of Housing submitted a report, which was presented by Ian Craig, Head of Service, Housing who provided an update on the divisions' performance on the completion of responsive repairs to council properties, a final update about the implementation of service changes and an update on the responsive and planned repairs improvement project in addition to the next steps.

In response to questions, members were advised as follows:

- January 2018 had a total of 825 jobs which remained outstanding and out of category due to multiple issues including with tenants not being present at the property for the job to be carried out. The ongoing focus was to reduce what was outstanding.
- Some Members had concerns regarding constituents complaining about not being able to get a response when calling the advertised repairs phone number. Chris Burgin, the Director of Housing responded and spoke about the severe weather recently that had impacted services in this area and also spoke about the extension of online services for rent and repairs and how this would help improve access options and reduce traffic for the call centre.
- Training for staff – since the service changes in 2016, staff had been receiving additional training to ensure they were most effective at their roles.
- Different types of IT devices were looked at for managing the repairs process when the use of tablets were implemented, part of the process was to ensure that the roll out was fit for purpose, from a business perspective.
- Chris Burgin, the Director of Housing noted the recent gas situation where 1700 jobs were reported and resolved very quickly. It was now planned for works to be done on condensing pipes. It was noted that the Housing team had looked at a low cost solution to avoid pipes from freezing. This new device solution would be placed inside the property under the boiler part of the condensing pipe and could be drained should the pipe freeze. With guidance, it would allow intervention by tenants.

AGREED:

- 1) That the report be noted.

81. DISTRICT PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Director of Housing submitted a report to give an overview of district management.

Suki Supria, Head of Service for Districts presented the report and provided an update of tenancy management now in comparison to several years ago. Information on tenancy management roles, priorities, challenges, service actions and key events were highlighted.

During the ensuing discussion a number of queries were raised and responses given, which included the following:

- The Local Authority had faced challenges in regard to rubbish collections. An action plan was now in place in conjunction with Biffa and the management team, in addition to working with the parking enforcement team, reconfiguring car parking spaces and introducing collapsible bollards. More improvements were planned for the coming years.
- Chris Burgin, Director of Housing noted that changing attitudes towards rubbish collections was also important. Housing staff had been implementing some improvements already but were also looking at the market to see how further improvements could be made. Support from Members of the Commission on this matter would also be welcomed.
- The Head of Service for Districts agreed to provide figures following a query in regard to the number of Estate Wardens employed by the council and the number employed via agencies. It was also noted that the Neighbourhood Improvement Scheme would fill vacancies with employed staff rather than using agency workers.

Agreed:

- 1) That the report be noted.

At the end of this item, Councillors Byrne and Alfonso departed from the meeting. The meeting then reconvened with Councillors Cank, Aqbany, and Dawood present.

82. ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR PERFORMANCE

The Director of Housing submitted a report to provide an update on the current performance of Housing Services in managing and dealing with reports of Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) on Council housing estates.

Suki Supria, Head of Service for Districts presented the report and informed the commission of the various ways reports of ASB could be reported to the Council, the number of ASB cases reported in the financial year 2016-2017 and the number of ASB cases reported from April 2017-December 2017. ASB within housing was currently managed by the Crime Reduction Anti-Social

Behaviour Unit (CRASBU) and Tenancy Management depending on the severity of the case.

In response to Members queries, the Head of Service noted that there were many mechanisms in place to deal with matters and this was based around an escalation process, taking a tenant to court was always a last option.

Agreed:

- 1) That the report be noted.

83. INCOME MANAGEMENT TEAM VISIT

The Chair, Councillor Cank provided an update on the visit that Members of the Commission had taken to the Income Management Team.

The visit was noted to have been:

- Very informative,
- The Income Management Team were hardworking and seemed prepared for the upcoming changes,
- Members felt reassured.

84. TENANTS' AND LEASEHOLDERS' FORUM ACTION AND DECISION LOG

The Tenants' and Leaseholders' Forum Action and Decision Log was noted.

85. WORK PROGRAMME

The work programme was noted.

86. CLOSE OF MEETING

The Chair declared the meeting closed at 7.45pm.

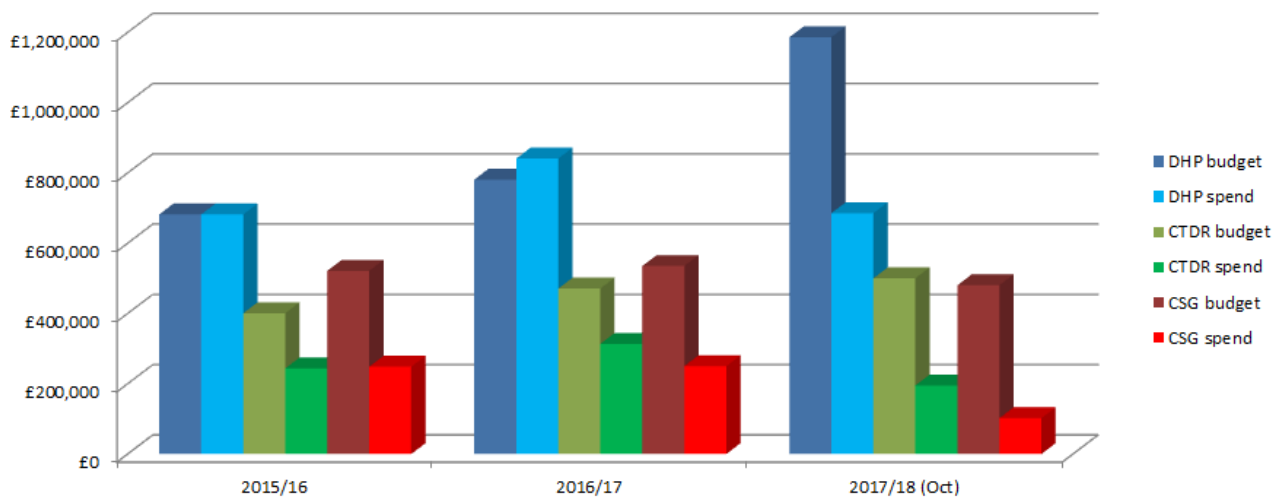


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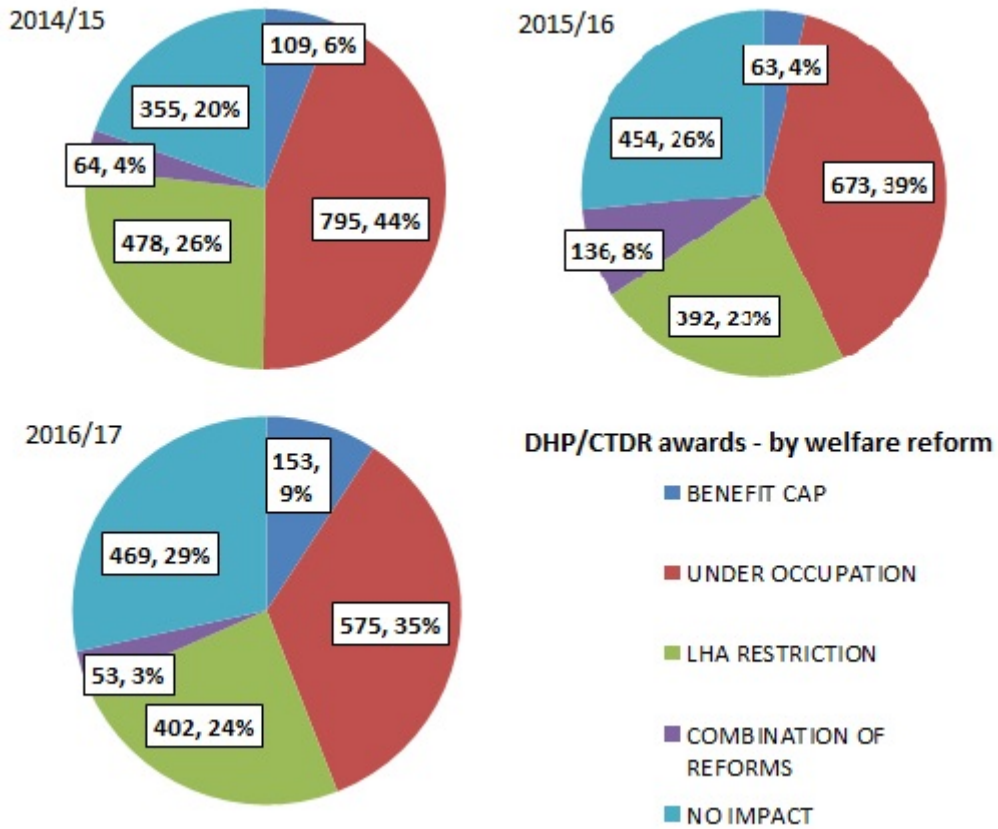
Appendix 2b:
Discretionary Policy & Welfare Reform
Statistical Analysis

Discretionary Expenditure 2015/16 to date

Financial year	Discretionary Housing Payments		Council Tax Discretionary Relief		Community Support Grants	
	DHP budget	DHP spend	CTDR budget	CTDR spend	CSG budget	CSG spend
2015/16	£681,863	£681,828	£400,545	£243,516	£521,171	£248,316
2016/17	£780,900	£840,895	£470,696	£313,240	£535,000	£250,103
2017/18 (Oct)	£1,186,024	£685,457	£500,000	£194,946	£480,000	£102,000



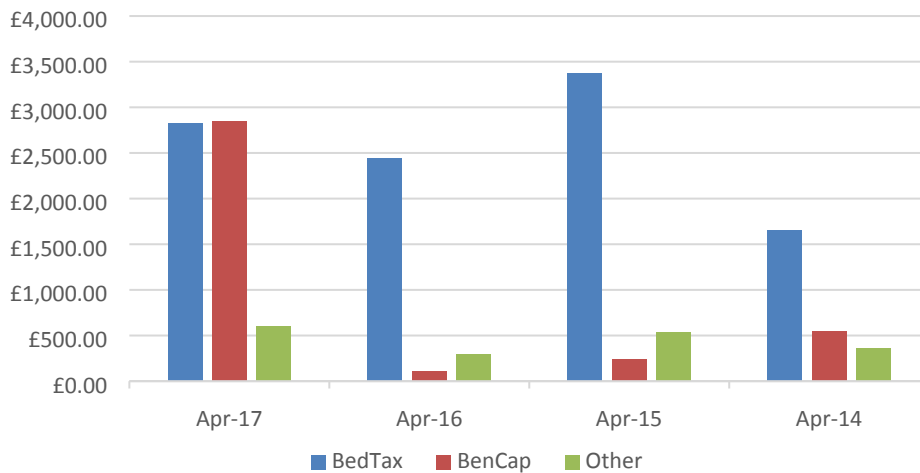
Financial year	DHP national budget	(Projected) LCC DHP budget
2015/16	£125m	£681,863
2016/17	£150m	£780,900
2016/18	£185m	£1,186,024
2018/19	£170m	(£1,089,860)
2019/20	£155m	(£993,696)
2020/21	£140m	(£897,532)



LA DHP expenditure by welfare reform

	LA DHP wkly	Underocc	BenCap	Other
Apr-17	£6,279.32	£2,828.51	£2,848.28	£602.53
Apr-16	£2,840.56	£2,443.66	£105.46	£291.44
Apr-15	£4,153.99	£3,376.24	£242.85	£534.90
Apr-14	£2,548.00	£1,648.02	£542.97	£357.01

Weekly LA DHP spend by welfare reform



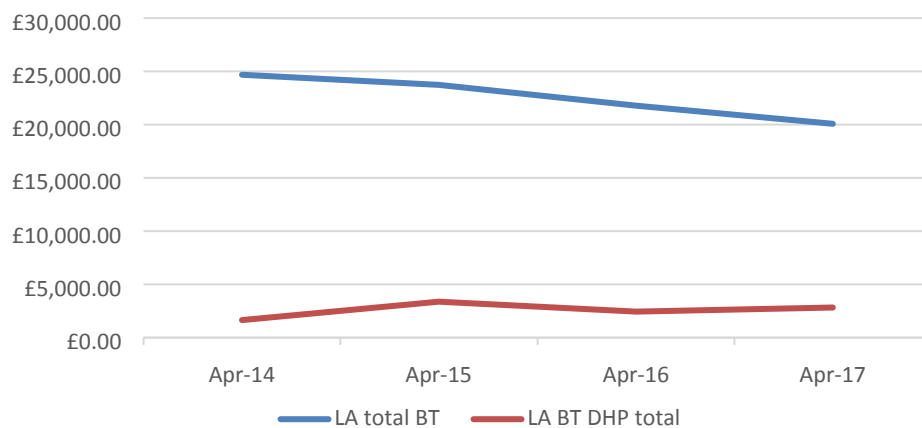
- Weekly DHP expenditure on LA cases has more than doubled between 2016 and 2017, from £2.8k to £6.2k per week.
- DHP expenditure on LA bedroom tax cases peaked in 2015, but again increased by 16% from 2016 to 2017.
- The lowered benefit cap has had a significant effect and now accounts for more spend for LA claims than the bedroom tax.
- Spend for claimants not affected by welfare reforms has also doubled.

LA Under-occupancy DHP expenditure

	LA total BT	LA BT DHP total	% DHP support
Apr-17	£20,077.33	£2,828.51	14.09%
Apr-16	£21,778.73	£2,443.66	11.22%
Apr-15	£23,731.04	£3,376.24	14.23%
Apr-14	£24,680.91	£1,648.02	6.68%

	LA BT cases	LA BT DHPs
Apr-17	1458	171
Apr-16	1585	166
Apr-15	1771	245
Apr-14	1850	119

Weekly LA underoccupancy reduction in HB versus DHP support



The number of properties and HB losses from under-occupancy have decreased steadily 2014 to date. However, DHP volumes and expenditure in this area have increased, are now level with the previous peak of 14% of under-occupancy rent shortfalls.

Bedroom tax households have previously typically been supported for a 52 week period, although of 172 live LA DHP under-occupancy claims:

- 49 have been supported for one to two years; (26.9%);
- 28 have been supported for two to three years (16.4%);
- 8 have been supported for over three years (4.6%).

We estimate that those we are legally required to support for a long-term or indefinite period, for example due to disability/property adaptation, to be between 5 and 10%.

LA underoccupancy cases – demographic analysis

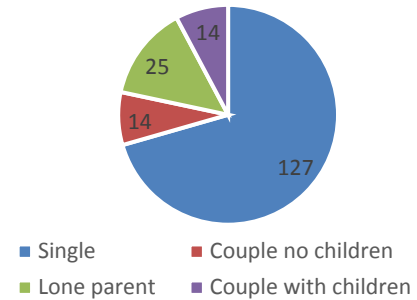
Household makeup	Number	% of caseload
Single	127	74.27%
Couple no children	14	8.19%
Lone parent	25	14.62%
Couple with children	14	8.19%

29 of the households listed as single also have at least one other non-dependent adult resident.

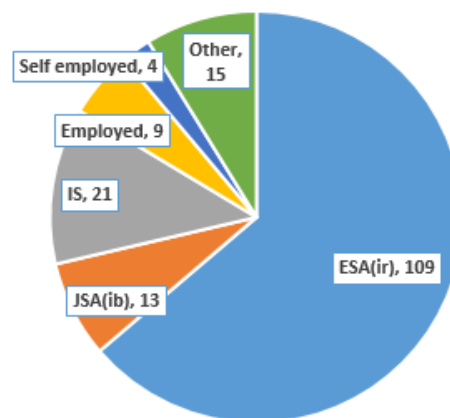
Gender	Number	% of caseload
Male	58	33.92%
Female	113	66.08%

Primary income	Number	% of caseload
ESA(ir)	109	63.74%
JSA(ib)	13	7.60%
IS	21	12.28%
Other	28	16.37%

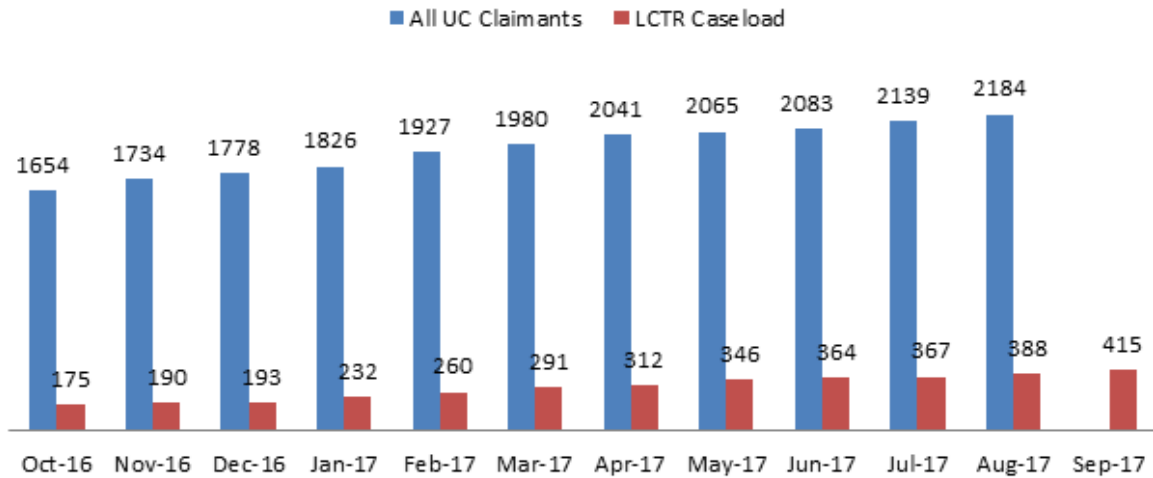
LA DHP claimants by household type



LA DHP claimants by primary income



Universal Credit Caseload in Leicester



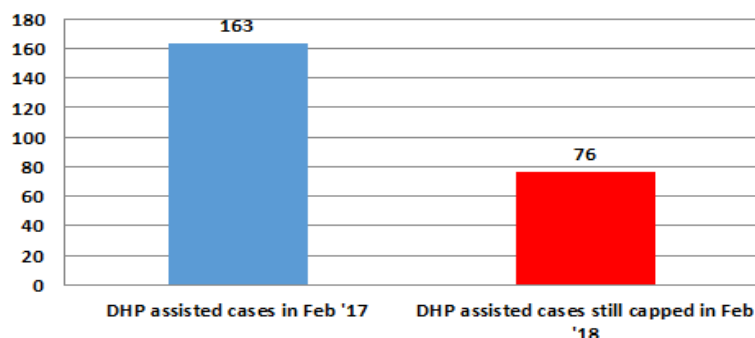
ADDENDUM – UPDATED RESEARCH INTO BENEFIT CAP HOUSEHOLDS ASSISTED BY DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENTS 2017/18

The new lowered Benefit Cap was fully implemented in Leicester by 1 February 2017. On this date, 530 households were identified as having a reduced Housing Benefit entitlement due to the Benefit Cap.

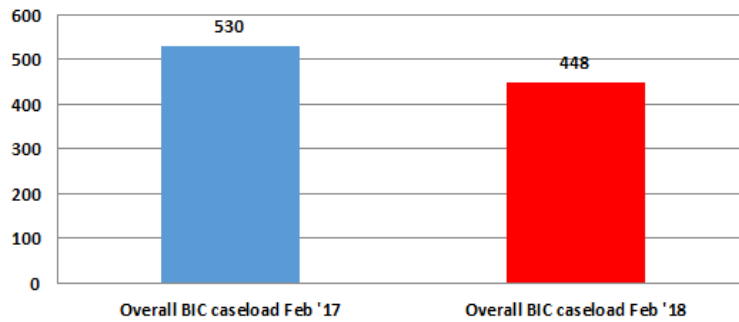
On the same date, 163 vulnerable households affected by the Benefit Cap were either already receiving a time-limited Discretionary Housing Payment award due to be extended in the new financial year, or had made a new application for Discretionary Housing Payments which was granted in the subsequent month. These cases have been tracked until 1 February 2018, during which time additional support has been offered on a tapered basis and customers have been prompted to attend specialist support through Citizens Advice LeicesterShire or another registered social welfare advice provider to address their underlying issues.

12 months after the cap was applied and support offered, more than half (87, 54%) of DHP-assisted cases are no longer affected by the Benefit Cap. By way of comparison, the total number of capped households has decreased by only 15% (from 530 to 448 households respectively).

DHP assisted Benefit Cap cases 17/18



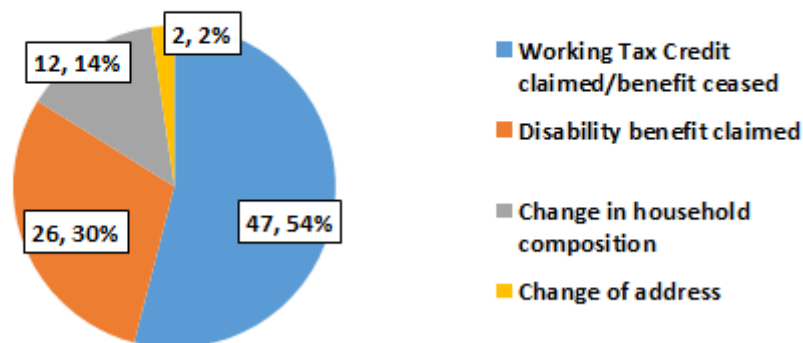
All Benefit Cap cases 17/18



Of those cases assisted with DHP payments during 2017/18 affected by the Benefit Cap whose cap levels were subsequently lifted – more than half (54%) had moved into paid employment of at least 16 hours per week, resulting in either a continuing Housing Benefit claim without the benefit cap, or income exceeding benefit thresholds and no longer requiring benefit assistance as a result.

The next most significant reason for the Benefit Cap being removed was a member of the household applying for and being granted a disability-related benefit leading to an exemption (30%), which may also in part be attributable to the guidance offered by registered social welfare advice providers.

DHP assisted Benefit Cap cases - reason for cap removal



Discretionary Policy Review 2017/18 Questions & Answers

Following discussion of the above paper in March 2018 at the City Mayor's Briefing, Housing Scrutiny Commission and Neighbourhood Services & Community Involvement Commission, the following Q&A is provided outlining the issues raised.

Q. Why is the Discretionary Housing Payment budget reducing whilst the Council Tax Discretionary Relief & Community Support Grant budgets are not?

The Discretionary Housing Payment budget is determined by a government allocated grant based on the number of households expected to be impacted by specific welfare reforms. The government expect this to reduce by 10% a year for the next three years. In Leicester however, the majority of our expenditure is still committed towards households previously affected by the 'bedroom tax' and Benefit Cap from 2013 onwards. Over 2,000 households continue to be affected by under occupancy, 10% of which are subsidised by DHPs at any one time, whilst 3,800 households with children are on the Housing Register in overcrowded properties.

The Council Tax Discretionary Relief and Community Support Grant budgets are not statutory funds are set at a level currently appropriate for demand.

Q. Is there available stock for local authority tenants to downsize?

Yes – over 80% of tenants affected by under-occupancy require a single bedroom property only, which the type most frequently available through the Housing Register and Home Swap schemes. Average waiting times for such properties are measured in weeks as opposed to months. Households affected by under-occupancy are considered to be a priority need under the current Housing Allocations Policy.

Q. When do DHP claimants need to make new applications?

Tenants are usually required to reapply at the end of the financial year, unless exceptions apply such as permanent disability that would entitlement a household to a continuous award. At the point of reapplication, it will be determined whether the tenant meets the conditions in the policy. All applications are considered on their own merits.

Q. How many under-occupied tenants currently receiving DHP support need to reapply and will be affected by the current conditions?

Approximately 120 households were receiving ongoing DHP awards for under occupancy in March 2018, and will be considered under the policy conditions outlined on reapplication. Unless applicants fall under the protected categories outlined in the report, they will in most circumstances be expected to actively seeking alternative accommodation to support their application.

Q. What is likely to be the impact on Benefit Cap claimants requiring support?

The impact is anticipated to be positive. Additional analysis on this is included in Appendix 2b – of 169 households affected by the Benefit Cap requiring DHP support in February 2017, 54% have been able to change their circumstances and are no longer affected by the Cap 12 months later. In contrast, the total number of households affected by the Cap has reduced by only 15% over the same period. Support from social welfare advice providers is also likely to be beneficial for other discretionary award claimants experiencing difficulties with debt and expenditure issues.

Q. Have the policies taken account of the risk of financial exploitation?

The policies target financially vulnerable groups, including those at risk of financial exploitation, and are reflective of wider Council policies including the Fair Debt policy. Following feedback, those at risk of financial exploitation are now explicitly recognised as an example of financial vulnerability.

Q. Do the policies provide protection to households struggling with mental health problems?

The policies are compliant with our obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act and Equalities Act, and now include mental health conditions within existing definitions of vulnerable protected groups.

Q. Do the policies provide adequate support to refugees and asylum seekers?

The policies recognise that race and ethnicity are relevant considerations in assessing discretionary awards. Both of the above groups are recognised as in need, although there are legal limitations in supporting the latter, which may be more appropriately assisted through other funds.