

Welfare fund award pegged at last year's level

West Lothian's share of the national Scottish Welfare Fund has been kept at last year's level despite an expected growth in applications and rising costs.

A report to the council's Executive offered some comfort that the council can carry over around £500,000 from last year's emergency funding.

Evidence from last year showed that tightening the qualification for payouts from the fund did nothing to reduce the numbers qualifying.

This year West Lothian has received £1,134,538 to cover funding and £171,715 administration funding. The carry forward budget for 2025/26 will increase the programme funding starting position to approximately £1,700,000.

Local authorities have administered the Scottish Welfare Fund on behalf of the Scottish Government since April 2013. The fund consists of two grants: Crisis Grants and Community Care Grants.

Crisis Grants meet short term financial emergencies and Community Care Grants provide furniture for homes to help applicants set up or maintain their home.

In her report to the Executive, Nahid Hanif, the Anti-Poverty Service manager said: "There are currently no Crisis Grants outstanding for 2024/25 but at the time of drafting this

report there were 98 Community Care Grants still to process.

“The amount spent in 2024/25 is £1,120,274 (not including the 98 CCG cases still to be assessed). It is estimated that from the additional monies provided by SG in December 2024, a carry forward of approximately £550,000 will be realised after the residual cases are processed.”

Ms Hanif added: “It is important to note that the administration budget provided by Scottish Government does not cover the cost of running the Scottish Welfare Fund scheme”

In the last year the Scottish Government provided admin costs of £251,715 (this included a one-off £80,000 provided along with the additional funding in November). However, the actual cost to council was £471,618, with £219,903 funded from council coffers.

For a six-week period in the Autumn and Winter last year qualifications for help were reclassified from High to High Most Compelling (HMC) because of the pressure on funds. It was only after the Scottish Government stepped in in late November and pumped more money into the national fund that qualification rules were relaxed back to High.

The qualification remains as High for this year’s funding though this may have to be reviewed as the year progresses.

Ms Hanif said: “The move to HMC did not reduce the number of applicants who met the qualifying criteria to be considered for a grant. However, savings are made because the amount of financial support or household goods awarded on HMC is significantly restricted because the applicant needs to be severely vulnerable and at extreme risk of losing their tenancy, or there is a severe risk to them or their families well-being.

“In comparison, on High Priority the applicant only needs to be highly vulnerable therefore is more likely to be awarded a

slightly higher financial award or receive more household goods.”

The report added that other changes introduced last month also relax income rules for qualification, tying them to the numbers in a household, thus potentially giving more leeway in the application process.

Councillors on the Executive agreed the report with comment.

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter