

Citizens Advice Scotland

Scottish Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux
www.cas.org.uk



The Social Fund:

A briefing from Citizens Advice Scotland

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- Citizens Advice Scotland and its member bureaux form Scotland's largest independent advice network. CAB advice services are delivered using service points throughout Scotland, from the islands to city centres.
- Citizens advice bureaux in Scotland helped clients with almost 550,000 new issues in 2009/10 – almost 1,500 new issues for every day of the year. Over 270,000 clients brought new issues to a bureau over the year.
- In 2009/10, Scottish bureaux achieved a financial gain of almost £116million for clients based on funding of £14.8million (including £6.8million in core funding). This means that CAB clients were better off by £17 for each £1 of core funding given to bureaux.

The Social Fund provides an invaluable financial lifeline to support the most financially vulnerable in times of extreme hardship. In 2010/11, the 81 Citizens Advice Bureaux across Scotland dealt with a total of 560,603 new issues. The largest area of enquiry related to social security benefits, accounting for 36% - over one in three – of all new issues. Of the benefits enquiries brought to bureaux, 6% (almost 11,000 new issues) specifically concerned the Social Fund.

Cuts to the social fund have already put a strain on the lives of CAB clients. CAS believes that any measure in place to safeguard the most vulnerable should be a fund conducted on the principle of individuals first, budget second.

Social fund applications are not solely about the goods applied for – the awards have a continuing impact on a client's wider life circumstances, including physical and mental wellbeing.

A Central Scotland CAB reports of a couple with two very small children who moved from their last accommodation because of terrible trouble with neighbours. Where they were housed before there was drug dealing and very abusive people. The police were there constantly and the circumstances were affecting the wife's health. Both their doctor and health visitor advised them to get out of that neighbourhood as soon as possible. They finally got a house in a better area and moved. However, they have no carpets, bare floor boards, no curtains, the baby's cot was broken during the move and is unusable and their mattress was also soaked during the move. Their income is joint JSA CTC & CB. They applied for a Community Grant to help with these things and have been turned down.

A West of Scotland CAB reports of an older client with heart disease and mental health issues. She applied for a Community Care Grant for a cooker, washing machine and fridge as she was unable to do her washing, store fresh food or cook hot food. She was turned down for all items as they were not considered priority needs.

An East of Scotland CAB reports of a client who has been homeless for 4 years. The client has been offered a house by the Local Authority but it has no white goods, furniture, etc. The client has been refused one crisis loan and lost the appeal of the decision and is looking for CAB help to complete a second application.

In times where the benefits system is becoming more complicated and restrictive, the social fund has to be reliable and accessible to the vulnerable people who need its help. Often barriers to claiming benefits leave clients in dire financial need and so it is essential that some resource exists to provide emergency help.

The social fund is a vital safeguard for those clients who fall through the gaps of the benefits system. The more complicated the benefits system becomes, the more robust the social fund has to be to support those who cannot access the system.

A West of Scotland CAB reports of a client who has experienced a number of problems in her benefit claim. The client applied for ESA after being wheelchair bound for nearly a year due to neuropathy and a diabetes related degenerative disease. The client had an ESA tribunal last December, but was apparently told that she didn't need to attend the hearing by the tribunal although she had nothing in writing. The client was told to apply for JSA but was told at her first interview that she was not fit for work and should apply for ESA. The client did so but has been told that it would take around five weeks to process. The client is struggling for money, but was told that she couldn't apply for a Crisis Loan. The client is unsure why. The bureau are referring the client to a food bank as she has no food or money for gas or electricity.

An East of Scotland CAB reports of a client who was in employment without a formal contract of employment and was paid cash in hand. The client recently became ill and was unable to attend work. Despite following the correct procedures for reporting sickness to the employer, he appears only to have received 6 weeks full pay and 6 weeks half pay. The employer is now refusing to pay any statutory sick pay (SSP). HMRC is currently investigating the lack of SSP being paid but whilst the client awaits their decision, the DWP will pay no benefits. The client is in dire need of some financial security. The adviser contacted DWP and informed them of situation. DWP stated that they were unable to do anything due to HMRC investigation and they advised that client apply for a crisis loan.

A West of Scotland CAB reports of a client who came to CAB having not received any JSA payments for 4 weeks. The client was told today he wouldn't be getting any money for a further 2 weeks. He has no money, no food and has run out of emergency gas and electricity (key meters). He has type 1 diabetes. The situation came about because he missed an interview with the Jobcentre as he was looking after his father who was ill. He attended the Jobcentre two days later than his interview date to explain why he had missed the appointment but was just told that his claim had been closed and was told to reclaim and sent away. His father died three days later.

When clients have difficulties which are not met by the social fund, some clients seek to plug the shortfall using high interest payday lenders and hire-purchase companies. If the social fund becomes inaccessible and unreliable the worry is that high-interest lenders will become clients' first route to financial 'help' causing a spiral of debt that clients cannot find a way out of. If the social fund is well resourced, accessible and robust, this is an avoidable problem.