Review of the Scottish Welfare Fund: Main Report

EQUALITY AND WELFARE

Review of the Scottish Welfare Fund: final report

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Acknowledgements

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Executive summary

This report presents findings from a review of the Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF, or 'the Fund'), led by a team of independent researchers from Ipsos. The review, which was conducted in 2022, involved:

- **A review of existing evidence** on the SWF and **analogous schemes** elsewhere in the UK
- **Analysis of routine quantitative monitoring data**, collected by local authorities and collated by the Scottish Government as well as secondary data sources (official statistics and survey data)
- **Data from all 32 local authorities**, based on completion of a proforma and follow-up interview with SWF managers
- **Qualitative in-depth interviews** with:
  - **46 applicants** to the Fund
  - **19 members of local authority SWF delivery teams** (drawn from six case study areas)
  - **16 external local stakeholders**, from organisations that support or work with applicants (again drawn from six case study areas).

The review has also been supported by an Advisory Group, comprising the Scottish Government and key stakeholders from local authorities, COSLA, Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO), Scottish Prisons Service (SPS), and the third sector.

The overarching aim of the review was to provide as clear and robust a picture as possible of the effectiveness of the SWF in meeting its aim of supporting people on low incomes who require help due to crisis or to live independently, and to identify issues which either improve or hinder the Fund in meeting this purpose.

This summary sets out the key themes emerging from the review and suggests key questions flowing from these themes that will need to be addressed in order to ensure the Fund is able to meet need effectively and sustainably in the future. While the review provides extensive evidence to inform the answers, they are deliberately posed as questions rather than recommendations. This is because the answers – particularly where the questions relate to overall purpose and funding levels – will need to be considered in the round as part of the policy development process by the Scottish Government in conjunction with key stakeholders.

Purpose under pressure

The stated purpose of the SWF is to address one-off need; it is not intended to assist with ongoing need or increasing household debt. However, recent years have seen substantial increases in repeat applications and awards for Crisis Grants in particular.

While local authority managers were clear on the intended purpose of the Fund, as a 'safety net' for those on low incomes to provide one-off help when in crisis or in need to help to move to or stay in a settled home, there was less certainty about whether it was now meeting those aims in the light of these large increases in repeat applications. A recurrent view was that the volume of repeat applications means that the SWF is no longer operating as a short-term safety net. The current context of rising prices and diminishing value of core UK-wide benefits was seen as creating a situation in which determining whether someone was in 'crisis' was more challenging, with more people running out of money for essentials on a regular basis.

There was no consensus among local authorities over how to address this. On the one hand, it was suggested that eligibility should be expanded and funding increased to allow the fund to help more of those struggling as a result of cost of living and other pressures. On the other, there was a strong view that the Fund cannot and should not act as a 'sticking plaster' for issues with the wider benefit system. Both groups, however, agreed that the Fund was coming under considerable pressure to extend beyond the original definition of 'crisis', and that local authorities need a clearer steer from the Scottish Government on this issue.

> **Is there a need for the Scottish Government to revisit or re-state the purpose of the Fund, in the light of changed external circumstances?**

Matching up future need, demand and funding

Establishing a precise estimate of underlying need for the Fund is difficult, as there is no alternative measure that perfectly reflects the eligibility criteria for the SWF. However, analysis of foodbank use, measures of household destitution, evidence from other research, and the views of applicants, local authorities and external stakeholders all point to increasing financial pressures on households. This increase in need was already believed to have impacted demand on the Fund, with a strong expectation that both need and demand would continue to rise.

Applications for Crisis Grants were already increasing pre-pandemic. As of June 2022, applications remained at a historically high level – they had not fallen back to pre-Covid levels of demand. Demand for Community Care Grants fell during the early stages of the pandemic (reflecting restrictions on evictions and house moves). However, demand subsequently rebounded and as of mid-2022 continued to exceed pre-pandemic levels.

While changes to the wider UK welfare system were identified as the root cause of increased food poverty and destitution, the Scottish Welfare Fund is identified as providing a desperately needed and vital safety net. There was strong concern among applicants, local authorities and external stakeholders that the need and demand for the Fund was likely to continue to rise over autumn/winter 2022/23, as the impact of the cost of living crisis and higher energy bills made themselves felt on household finances.

Increased demand was already impacting on budgets pre-pandemic; expenditure on the SWF in 2019/20 was 108% of the allocated budget. While spending as a proportion of allocated budget fell in 2020/21, this reflected a large additional injection of funding from the Scottish Government in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2021/22, overall spending versus budget had increased again, to 115%.

Since the inception of the Fund, there have been wide variations in levels of over- and underspending between different local authorities in Scotland. In 2021/22, 18 out of 32 local authorities overspent, with five overspending by 50% or more, but six spent 70% or less of their allocated budget. There is no consistent pattern as to which local authorities over- or under-spend on budget. However, with notable exceptions, rural local authorities have been more likely to underspend, while those with higher than expected levels of demand (based on proxy indicators of need) are more likely to overspend. There was also some evidence of a relationship between over or under-spend and having lower or higher than expected application rates, though this relationship was not consistent across all areas.

However, interviews with local authorities indicated that these historic patterns may now be breaking down – a majority of the areas identified as previously underspending in the analysis of monitoring data stated that they were predicting to overspend on their SWF budgets this year. Two thirds of local authorities stated that the current level of Scottish Government funding for the SWF in their area was 'a lot less than is required to meet local need', with half of the rest stating that it was 'a little less than needed'.

There was also a strong consensus that the amount allocated for administration of the SWF was inadequate and needed to be very substantially increased for local authorities to continue to administer the Fund in line with the guidance and current target decision times – a recurrent view was that the administrative budget would need to at least double in size to cover costs.

Overall, local authorities were very concerned about future funding for the SWF. There was a belief that, to date, they had been able to manage with a combination of previous years' under-spends, top-up funding from councils themselves, and, more recently, additional Covid-related top-up funding. However, finances were now coming under severe strain. Among the two-thirds of areas that did top up their SWF fund locally, there was concern about whether their councils would be able to continue to do so in the light of significant pressures on council budgets.

> **In light of increased and increasing need and demand, what level of Funding (including administrative funding) is required for long-term sustainable delivery?**

Achieving consistency with discretion

Another key tension apparent across the data collected for the review is around whether and how far it is possible to deliver a discretionary fund like the SWF in a

manner that is perceived as fair and consistent across different areas. The guidance on delivery allows for "extensive discretion" over how the scheme is delivered across local authorities. The evidence shows that different areas do take varying approaches to the operation of the Fund with respect to:

- **Promotion of the Fund** - both the amount (for example, whether it was promoted on an ongoing basis) and nature of promotion (whether it was promoted directly to potential applicants, or only via partners) varied between areas

- **Application options and support** – although all areas reported offering at least three application channels (as required by the guidance), there appeared to be different emphasis given to different application channels between areas

- **Communicating decisions** – including whether teams phoned applicants as standard, in addition to notifying them in writing, and the level of detail included in written decision letters

- **Further support offered** – including whether this focused primarily on unsuccessful applicants or repeat applicants, and the extent to which it involved active referrals as well as signposting.

Assessing whether these differences reflect appropriate local discretion or whether they may have implications for fairness of process and outcome for applicants is challenging. For example, analysis of monitoring data showed wide variation in the level of referrals recorded by different areas, but as those areas making fewer referrals includes some locations with higher levels of successful awards, lower referrals may be associated with a lower perceived need for alternative assistance. It is also unclear the extent to which these differences in reported referrals reflect differences in recording practices rather than actual variations in referral levels.

However, there was some evidence of differences between areas in assessment and/or recording practices which seem unlikely to reflect different priority levels (i.e. differences in threshhold for priority need at which awards are being granted)[1] or local needs. This includes:

- **variations in the level of applications rejected as 'incomplete'** (combined with evidence of variation in the approach to following up on missing information with applicants)

- **differences in the information local authorities require from applicants** to support decision-making, and

- **perceived differences in local interpretations of specific terms in the guidance**, including 'exceptional circumstances' or 'exceptional pressure'.

Moreover, a key finding from the analysis of monitoring data is that local authority is the most important predictor of whether or not applicants are granted either Crisis

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[1] The SWF Guidance allows local authorities to vary the priority level at which grants are awarded in order to stay within the allocated budget. This means that, over the course of a year, a local authority might decide to raise the priority threshold from medium to high, so that only those assessed as being at high level of need are awarded SWF grants, in order to avoid overspending their SWF budget. See Scottish Welfare Fund: statutory guidance – March 2021

Grants or Community Care Grants even after other factors (such as their reasons for applying, their personal characteristics, mode of application, etc.) are taken into account.

Local authority managers acknowledged that discretion could result in differences of opinion about grant decisions. They also commented that it did feel unfair that where people live and the time of year they apply might determine the support they would receive (both of which were confirmed by the analysis of monitoring data). However, in general, a degree of local authority discretion in the implementation of the SWF was viewed as necessary, both in order to respond to local need and because the Fund is a cash-limited scheme.

Neither the existing evidence nor interviews with local authority managers and external stakeholders indicated a particular desire for a more centralised model of delivery to ensure greater consistency. Greater centralisation was viewed as risking losing the benefits of local links and partnerships, both in tailoring promotion and delivery to local needs and in linking people to appropriate wider support. The review of analogous schemes elsewhere in the UK also found that more centralised schemes, such as those operating in Northern Ireland and Wales, experience many similar challenges around improving awareness, clarity around eligibility criteria, and the need to communicate decisions more clearly.

However, while there was no evidence of a strong desire for greater centralisation, it was suggested that the Scottish Government could do more to ensure consistency across areas – both by reviewing and clarifying the guidance, and by increasing funding to reduce discrepancies between local authorities in terms of priority levels (that is, to avoid some local authorities having to restrict grants to those assessed at the highest level of priority need in order to manage their available budget).

> **What actions are needed to enhance the delivery of the Fund to improve consistency between and within local authorities, without losing the benefits of local delivery?**

Improving applicants' experiences

Another element of consistency is in how applicants experience the Fund. Interviews with applicants and external stakeholders provided many examples of good practice by local authority SWF teams in terms of communication with and support for applicants and the organisations who work with them. However, they also identified more negative views, and highlighted the need for improvements to ensure that all applicants to the Fund have a consistently more positive experience. Particular issues that may need to be addressed include:

- **Promotion to potential applicants** – to ensure that those who are eligible to apply do find out about the Fund, particularly where they have limited past

experience of seeking state support (such as those in work or newly redundant). Older people were also believed to be under-represented among applicants.

- **Communication with applicants** – interviews with applicants indicated a need to improve clarity, consistency and tone of communications with applicants. As noted above, although there were examples of positive perceptions of communications with SWF teams, where applicants reported more negative experiences (for example, feeling they were being disbelieved or talked down to), this could have a significant impact in terms of future willingness to apply. Confusion about eligibility criteria and a lack of clarity around the reasons for rejection were also identified as reasons for deciding not to apply in future or not to request a review.

- **Application forms** – Applicants and external stakeholders both suggested that the application forms local authorities use for the Fund needed considerable improvement to shorten and simplify, reduce repetition, and remove questions that could be perceived as intrusive.

- **Accessibility of application routes** – Although all areas stated that they offered at least three application routes, as noted above there were variations in the emphasis given to different routes. Applicants were not always aware of all the application options open to them, and there was concern among applicants and external stakeholders that the scheme was not sufficiently accessible to those without internet access or without a smartphone.

- **Timescales for decision-making** – applicants and external stakeholders wanted to see shorter turnarounds for decisions for both types of grant and for delivery of Community Care Grant goods. Local authorities indicated that decision-making timescales were strongly linked with administrative funding (which, as discussed above, was viewed as too low).

> **How can local authorities learn from applicants, stakeholders and each other to improve applicants' experiences throughout the application process (and beyond)?**

Ongoing data collection, audit and review

The quality and range of data on the SWF collected by local authorities and collated by the Scottish Government far exceeds that available publicly for analogous schemes elsewhere in the UK. However, there are known gaps and issues in this data that could be improved in the future, particularly relating to missing data and the collection of data on equalities characteristics of applicants. Improving the collection and analysis of this data would help further improve understanding of whether there are groups of people in need that may be missing out on support available from the Fund.

Interpreting findings on Tier 1 review would also be helped by improved recording practices, particularly around the reasons for Tier 1 review. However, the evidence that was available indicates that there may be scope for improving the contribution the review process makes to improving practice across Scotland. In particular, local authorities that were more likely to change their decisions at Tier 1 review had fewer decisions changed at Tier 2. This may indicate that encouraging a robust, self-critical approach to Tier 1 review results in fewer decisions being overturned by the SPSO. Raising applicants' awareness and perceptions of review might also help improve the contribution of review to improving practice – interviews with applicants indicated variable awareness of review rights, alongside some scepticism about the value of the process.

Finally, a key challenge for this review has been how to interpret the implications of variations in data between local authorities for consistency of practice. As discretion is built into the Fund, some variation between areas is to be expected. Moreover, the patterns of local variations uncovered by the analysis were often complex – there was no clear pattern as to which areas underspend, have lower success rates, or have more decisions changed at review, for example. Taken together, the qualitative and quantitative data in this report indicates that a wide range of factors are likely to be impacting on outcomes across local authorities, and that these factors are likely to interact with each other, and with budget and demand, in different ways in different areas. At the same time, the review highlights that patterns of demand and spending across local authorities are continuing to shift.

With all this in mind, both suggestions from stakeholders and the experience of the research team in conducting this review suggest that there may be merit in considering the types of ongoing monitoring, review and audit that could best help further understanding of local variations and support local and national improvements in the future. This could include monitoring of the relationships between different indicators at local authority level, which in turn could potentially inform a programme of audit to support learning and improvement.

> **How can the operation of the Fund be strengthened on an ongoing basis by improvements to routine data collection, audit and review?**

1. Introduction and methods

About the Scottish Welfare Fund

The Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF, or 'the Fund') was introduced in 2013[2] as a national, grant-based scheme, administered by local authorities based on Scottish Government guidance.[3] Its introduction followed the abolition of the UK Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) administered Discretionary Social Fund, which left Scotland (and the rest of the UK) without a central scheme for emergency welfare assistance. The aim of the SWF, as set out in the statutory guidance, is **"to provide a safety net to people on low incomes"** through the provision of grants.

There are two types of SWF grant people may apply for – a **Crisis Grant**, which is provided where an individual is facing a disaster or emergency, and a **Community Care Grant**, which is provided when the applicant needs help to establish or maintain a settled home (for example, to move out of, or avoid homelessness). Both grants are "intended to meet **occasional or short-term needs** and not to provide an alternative source of regular income". Crisis grants must be made in cash or cash equivalent, unless the local authority considers it would be an advantage to the applicant to provide the grant in another way. Community Care Grants can be fulfilled in cash or cash equivalent, or in kind – typically by the provision of goods and furnishings.

The guidance also sets out that it is a **"budget-limited scheme"** – funding is provided annually by the Scottish Government and may be topped up by individual local authorities, but local authorities are expected to manage the Fund within this budget. This may involve changing the 'priority-level' applications must meet during the year, to ensure that funding does not run out. In addition, while guidance on administering the Fund is set centrally, by the Scottish Government, this guidance also allows local authorities "**extensive discretion** over how the scheme is delivered in their area, from taking and processing applications to fulfilment of grants". These features distinguish the SWF, as a discretionary fund, from benefits that are paid on a strict entitlement basis.

Applicants have the **right to review** the decision on their application. Initial, 'First Tier' reviews are conducted by the local authority. If the applicant is not satisfied with the outcome, they can request a further, independent 'Second Tier' review of the decision by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO).

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[2] Initially on an interim basis and, from 2015, on a statutory basis via The Welfare Funds (Scotland) Act 2015 and The Welfare Funds (Scotland) Regulations 2016

[3] Scottish Welfare Fund: statutory guidance – March 2021

Since its launch in 2013, the SWF has helped more than 470,000 households with awards totalling more than £341 million. A third of households were families with children, while just over half were single people.[4]

The logic model, below, shows key elements of how the Fund is intended to operate, and the short, medium and long-term outcomes it may contribute to.

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[4] Scottish Welfare Fund Statistics: Annual Update 2021-22

Figure 1 – Scottish Welfare Fund logic model[5]

INPUTS	OUTPUTS		OUTCOMES / IMPACTS	
	Activities	**Participation/reach**	**Short-term**	**Medium-long term**
Scottish Government Funding + LA funding to augment awards budget	Fair and consistent assessment of applications across LAs	CCG: Individuals who need help to maintain or establish a settled home, including:	CG: Meets immediate financial need and averts crisis	CG: Reduced incidence of repeat crisis
Local Authority staff team - time + training	Decisions in line with statutory timelines, clearly documented, and appropriately communicated to applicants	• Prison leavers • Homeless people • Those facing exceptional pressure.	CG: able to manage crisis in flexible way (as cash grant)	CG: Reduction in expenditure on Crisis Grants as result of intervention to prevent recurrent crisis
Publicity / advertising of the SWF, including up to date and accessible info			CCG: Helps recipient move into / stay in settled home	CCG: Remain in settled home / reduce homelessness / inappropriate placement in care setting
Referrals from local partners		CG: Individuals/ households in crisis (without alternative means)	CCG: families able to support family members on home leave from prison	CCG: Reduce ongoing costs (e.g. by providing insulating curtains)
Support and advocacy for applicants	Fair, accessible and timely review process			
Robust assessment and appeals process		All areas of Scotland	BOTH: Recipients benefit from further help/support they been linked with through SWF	BOTH: Applicants access support for ongoing needs
Scottish Government statutory guidance on administration of the Fund	CG: Timely provision of cash or cash equivalent grants	Not applied to SWF within last 28 days (unless relevant change of circs).		BOTH: Maximise access to routine benefits/services entitled to
SWF practitioners' forum			BOTH: reduces stress	BOTH: Greater sense of financial control / ability to deal with crisis/change
Clear eligibility criteria	CCG: good quality, appropriate goods provided in a timely manner		BOTH: reduce need to use expensive forms of credit	
Clear and accessible application process, via at least 3 channels (e.g. online, phone, F2F, paper-based applications for those in prison)			BOTH: Reduction in reoffending (short or longer term)	BOTH: improvements to mental health/confidence
IT systems for applications/decision-making	Appropriate onwards signposting and active referrals			BOTH: reduce need for additional intervention – e.g. foodbank use, social work, other charitable support
Data and performance monitoring tools				BOTH: more people become aware of SWF and how to access support in a crisis.
Suppliers to provide/deliver CCG goods				

Assumptions: People who need the SWF hear about it and are confident and able (physically and mentally) to apply; applicants know what they need and are able to ask for this; budget/value of awards is sufficient to meet need; payments are used as intended; shared expectations on the purpose and model; councils are able to predict future need	**Risks/external factors**: Cost of living increases (including impact on cost of items provided through CCG); pandemic impacts; specific local disaster (e.g. floods); policy/funding of the wider benefit system (UK and Scottish); adequacy of other systems (e.g. housing, community care; transition support); administration of SISGs impacting on CG/CCG processing; climate change

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[5] This model was developed following both review of the guidance and discussion with the Review Advisory Group.

Aims of the review

In March 2021, the Scottish Government promised a full review of the Fund in the first year of the new Parliament.[6] The overarching aim of the review was to provide as clear and robust a picture as possible of the effectiveness of the SWF in meeting its aim of supporting people on low incomes who require support due to crisis or to live independently, and to identify issues which either improve or hinder the Fund in meeting this purpose. A number of key themes and questions were agreed for the review, to ensure it addresses this aim:

- **Purpose of the fund** – What are people's understandings and views of the purpose of the SWF?

- **Evidence of underlying need** - What is the level and nature of underlying need for the SWF?

- **Factors shaping demand on the Fund** - What are the key factors impacting on levels of demand?

- **Delivery model** - How does the current SWF delivery model compare with alternatives?

- **Awareness and promotion** - (How) do potential applicants who might need it become aware of the SWF? Is it promoted appropriately?

- **Funding** - Are levels of funding for the SWF appropriate?

- **Experiences and outcomes** - What impacts does applying for / receiving grants through the SWF have on applicants / recipients?

- **Assessment and review** - How fair and consistent is SWF decision-making across Scotland?

- **Impacts of Covid-19** - What impacts has Covid had on the SWF?

A full list of more detailed subsidiary questions that helped guide the review are included in Annex A.

Summary of methods

The review involved multiple methods and sources of data and was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 comprised:

- **A review of existing literature and evidence** on the SWF and comparable funds in the rest of the UK

- **Analysis of both published and unpublished quantitative data** on the Fund, based primarily on data collected by local authorities and collated by the Scottish Government, in addition to data on Second Tier reviews provided by the SPSO, national statistics and survey data, and data provided by the Scottish Government to the Scottish Prison Service on prison release, homeless

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[6] Social Renewal Advisory Board: our response - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

presentations by people who were previously in prison and applications for Community Care Grants where the applicant had left prison.

- **Data collection from all 32 local authorities on the operation of the Fund** in their area, collected via proforma and follow-up interview, with a Senior Manager or Managers responsible for the fund locally. The **SPSO** were also interviewed as part of Phase 1 fieldwork.

Phase 2 involved **in-depth qualitative interviews** focusing primarily on **six case study** local authority areas. Case study areas were selected to include a mix of local authorities with higher and lower levels of applications and variations in other elements of Fund operation (for example, levels of cases going to review), as well as a mix of urban and rural areas. Three main groups of people were interviewed at Phase 2:

- **Applicants** to the Fund – 46 people took part in one-to-one interviews, including:
  - o 31 people who had applied for Crisis Grants, including 20 who had been unsuccessful or partially successful (who only received part of what they had requested) and 25 repeat Crisis Grant applicants
  - o 27 Community Care Grant applications, including 10 unsuccessful or partially successful applicants and 9 repeat Community Care Grant applicants.

- **Local authority staff** – 19 members of staff, drawn from the teams responsible for day-to-day processing and decision-making on SWF applications, took part in small group interviews (one for each case study area)

- **Local external stakeholders** – 16 local stakeholders, drawn from a range of organisations that support or work with applicants, were interviewed from across the six case study areas to provide an external perspective on the operation of the Fund. Organisations included: prisons, advice agencies, housing or homelessness support organisations, domestic abuse support, and food banks.

The review has also been supported by an Advisory Group, comprising the Scottish Government and key stakeholders from local authorities, COSLA, Scottish Prison Service, SPSO and the third sector, who have provided critical comment and advice at key stages.

The key elements and phasing of research for the review are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 – Key elements and phasing of SWF review
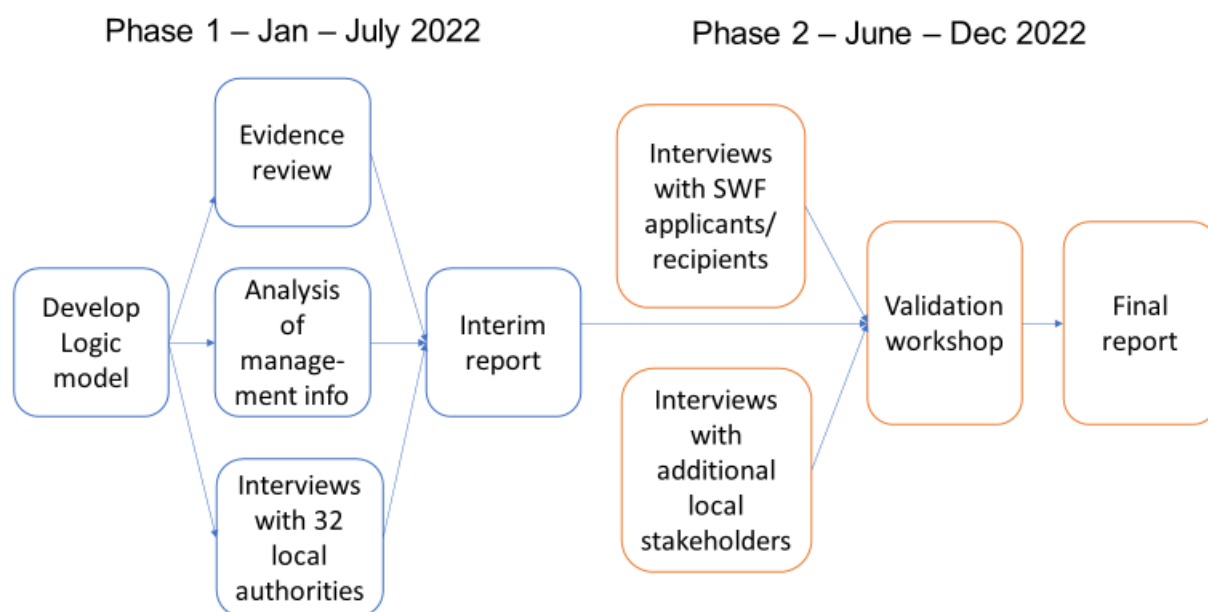
Challenges and limitations

The aim of the review was to provide as robust a picture of the operation and impact of the Fund as possible. However, as with any research, there were some challenges and some limitations to the data which are important to highlight.

Interpreting local and Scotland-wide evidence

As discussed at the start, the SWF is a Scotland-wide scheme but is delivered by local authorities. The purpose of this review was to look at how the scheme is operating across Scotland to identify issues and learning for its future. To do so, and to address the research questions set out earlier, it necessarily had to look at differences between local authorities. However, it is not intended to provide robust analysis at individual local authority-level. As such, individual local authorities are not identified by name in this main report, either in reporting the qualitative or quantitative data.

A separate Data Analysis Appendix, which presents the full quantitative analysis of management data undertaken for this review does include more explicit comparisons of findings for different local authorities, some of which is already in the public domain as part of the Scottish Government's SWF statistics series. It would not be feasible to present all this data here. This quantitative analysis of local authority variations identifies various patterns which are drawn out in this report and which individual local authorities, the Scottish Government and others may wish to explore further. However, caution should be applied in drawing definitive conclusions about individual local authorities, since a robust analysis of the findings for any individual area would require further reflection and contextualisation. This level of individual local authority analysis was beyond the scope and purpose of this report.

Limitations to existing evidence on the SWF and analogous schemes

The evidence review drew on a large body of policy papers, guidance and research which varied in quality: some studies lacked detail on research methods, for example, or covered a small number of local authorities. Much of the existing evidence was based on position papers or research by third sector organisations or campaigning groups and, as such, reflects their particular positions on the Fund and on wider policies. This variability in the robustness and independence of existing evidence referred to in the review should be borne in mind.

There was also a relative dearth of evidence on the operation and impact of analogous schemes elsewhere in the UK, which limited the scope for learning from the operation and impacts of these schemes.

Known issues in the quantitative management data

The quality and range of data on the SWF collected by local authorities and collated by the Scottish Government far exceeds that available publicly for analogous schemes elsewhere in the UK. However, there were nonetheless some known gaps and issues in this management data. These are discussed in more detail in the [Data Analysis Appendix](#) that accompanies this main report,[7] but include:

- Large amounts of missing data for some indicators (such as income and ethnicity)
- Some significant errors in reporting detailed in the Data Analysis Appendix (affecting Glasgow and Edinburgh in particular). [8]

The data also includes somewhat limited data on different equalities characteristics – as well as missing data on ethnicity, there is no data on sexual orientation, or marital status for example. At the time of writing, the Scottish Government was conducting an equalities review of much of its data collection and the authors understand that there are ongoing discussions around how to improve the ability of the SWF dataset to answer questions about the experiences of different equality groups.

Issues relating to the timeframe covered

All the data included in this review was collected and analysed at a particular point in time. However, as chapter 2 makes clear, the context in which the Fund is operating is rapidly shifting – particularly with regard to the unfolding cost of living crisis, but also with respect to other issues, such the ongoing managed migration of those on legacy benefits to Universal Credit. This is particularly an issue for the quantitative data – the most recent annual statistics only cover the period up to March 2022 (although quarterly data has been presented up to June 2022), so that more recent issues and challenges – some of which have been raised in qualitative interviews for this review – may not yet be apparent in the quantitative data.

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[7] See Review of the Scottish Welfare Fund: Data Analysis Appendix

[8] See also explanation of these issues in [Scottish Welfare Fund Statistics: Annual Update: 2020/21](#)

The qualitative data was also collected at specific points in time (May to June 2022 for interviews with local authority managers, and July to September 2022 for interviews with applicants, local authority delivery teams and external local stakeholders), and may not reflect more recent issues and challenges.

Moreover, much of the quantitative analysis for the review was undertaken in the first half of 2022, at which point the Annual Update for 2021/22 was not available. This report does include more recent figures, from the Scottish Government's 2021/22 SWF annual statistics, but the more complex multivariate analysis drawn on in this report is based on the data comparable to the annual report data available at the time of analysis.

The impact of Covid-19

Analysis of the quantitative data in particular also required some decisions about which timeframes analysis should focus on in light of significant changes to the Fund during the Covid-19 pandemic. Data for 2020/21 in particular reflected both a very large one-off additional injection of funding (the £57.5 million allocated to the Fund in 2020/21 included a £22 million Covid-19 allocation[9]) and relaxation of rules about the maximum number of applications allowed in a 12 month period, alongside the fact that SWF teams were also tasked with delivering Covid Self-Isolation Support Grants (SISGs). Given this, 2020/21 is likely to be a very atypical year in terms of the funding and operation of the SWF.

In the light of this, the quantitative analysis of management data carried out for the review focused on:

- **Overall trends over time (at Scotland-level) from 2013/14 up to 2020/21 or 2021/22** where available. There is a particular focus on **comparisons between 2020/21 and 2019/20** data to show experiences and approaches pre-Covid and during the first year of the pandemic.
- **Comparisons between local authorities, taking 2019/20 as the benchmark** for this, so that figures are not skewed by differences resulting from the pandemic.

The impacts of Covid were also apparent in the qualitative interviews. These are drawn out as appropriate throughout the report, and summarised in chapter 9.

The profile of applicants interviewed

Recruiting applicants to the review was challenging. Each case study local authority was asked to support the review by contacting a random sample of applicants and asking them to 'opt in' if they were willing to be interviewed. However, this process took longer than expected and required local authorities to contact a far higher number of applicants than originally envisioned. The review team also worked with local stakeholders to try and identify additional applicants, but relatively few opted in through this route. Among those who did contact the research team to opt in

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[9] Scottish Welfare Fund Statistics: Annual update 2020/21

within the interviewing period, not everyone went on to take part in an interview, due to drop-outs, non-response and broken appointments.

In order to boost the number of applicants included in the review, the Scottish Government wrote out to the Social Security Experience Panel (a panel of people involved in consultation to inform devolved benefit design and delivery) to ask anyone with experience of the SWF to contact the research team if they were interested in participating. Overall, 42 of the 46 applicants interviewed were from the six case study areas (4-9 per area), and four were recruited from outwith the case study areas, via the Social Security Experience Panel.

Overall, the applicants interviewed were diverse in terms of experiences of SWF (applicants that had different levels of success of the two grants) and a number of personal characteristics, including:

- **Gender** – the sample included 28 women and 18 men
- **Age** – the review heard from people aged 16 to 66, including 12 aged under 35, 25 aged 35-54, and 9 aged 55 or older
- **Household type** – the sample was skewed towards single adult households (28/46 interviewees), which is perhaps unsurprising given that overall 53% of households receiving SWF grants were single person households.[10] However, it also included 12 single parents and five from couple households with children.
- **Disability** – 35 of 46 participants had a disability or long-term condition.

The sample also included people with a diverse range of other experiences that might be associated with being more vulnerable at some point in their lives, including: severe mental health issues; domestic abuse; homelessness; addiction issues; being a prison leaver; and care experience.

However, the sample was less diverse in terms of ethnicity – there were only two interviewees who did not identify as white, and none who spoke English as an Additional Language (EAL). In addition, only four participants were working at the time of their interview (although others had been working recently – with their application to the Fund often associated with loss of employment). The lack of diversity in terms of ethnicity is a particular weakness of the sample, given that ethnicity is also often missing from the management data. In taking forward the findings, consideration could be given to working with organisations that support people on low incomes from particular ethnic backgrounds to identify any missing issues that may be more likely to occur for their clients.

The range of perspectives included

The review includes a wide range of perspectives, from applicants, local authorities and the third sector. At the same time, there are many stakeholders for the Fund and it is possible that there are additional views on the current and future operation of the Fund that are not captured here. One group in particular that the review did not hear from directly was those who have not applied to the Fund, in spite of being

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[10] Scottish Welfare Fund statistics annual update 2021-22

eligible to do so. However, some insight into the reasons why people do not apply was gathered both from local stakeholders working with those groups, and from applicants themselves, some of whom had opted not to apply to the Fund in the past, in spite of likely being eligible to do so.

Report structure

The remainder of this report is structured largely around the overarching themes and research questions, set out above:

- Chapter 2 discusses findings on the purpose of the Fund – whether it is still delivering its original stated purpose, and how professionals and applicants understand the purpose and eligibility criteria for the scheme – as well as views on the current delivery model.

- Chapter 3 explores various possible estimates of underlying need for the Fund, and what these and other data tell us about the changing levels of need and demand for the Fund. It examines the factors that shape need and demand for the Fund and considers whether there are any groups that are in need of the support the Fund offers who currently miss out on this.

- Chapter 4 assesses evidence on patterns of spending on the Fund over time and perceptions of the adequacy of current and future funding levels.

- Chapter 5 reviews approaches and perspectives on promotion of the Fund and how potential applicants become aware of it.

- Chapter 6 examines experiences of applying to the Fund, including differences in mode of application and waiting times for decisions.

- Chapter 7 explores outcomes from applications in detail, drawing on all the various data sources to review differences in outcomes over time, between different groups of applicants, and between local authorities. It considers the impacts of both successful and unsuccessful applications from the perspective of applicants, including experiences of onward signposting and referrals.

- Chapter 8 focuses on application assessment and review processes. It looks at what the available evidence indicates about consistency in decision-making, and explores patterns and outcomes from cases where the applicants requested the decision be reviewed.

- Chapter 9 draws together findings on the impacts of Covid-19 on the operation of the SWF.

- Chapter 10 summarises suggestions for improvement to the SWF, drawing on interviews with local authorities, external stakeholders and applicants.

Each chapter begins with a boxed summary of key points. Copies of the proforma used to gather information from local authorities and the topic guides used to structure interviews are provided in annexes attached to this report, while the detailed quantitative analysis of management data is provided in a separately published Data Analysis Appendix.

Report conventions

This report draws on findings from various data sources, as discussed above. The report is structured thematically, rather than by method. More detailed figures and tables to support the overarching findings from the quantitative analysis of management data can be found in a separate [Data Analysis Appendix](#).

Where findings are based on qualitative data, the report avoids the use of quantifying language (including terms such as 'most' or 'a few') as far as possible, since the purpose of qualitative data is to identify the range of views and experiences on an issue, rather than to estimate prevalence.

As discussed above, in order to preserve confidentiality of participants in the review, local authorities are not named in this report – quotes from local authorities are identified only by a random number (for managers) or letter (for delivery staff). Similarly, quotes from applicants and external local stakeholders interviewed for the review are identified only by number and brief details relevant to understanding their perspective (for example, the type of organisation or, for applicants, whether they are a repeat applicant).

2. Fund purpose and delivery model

Key points

- The stated purpose of the SWF is to address one-off need: it is not intended to assist with ongoing or increasing household debt. However, recent years have seen substantial increases in repeat applications and awards for Crisis Grants.

- Local authority managers were clear on the intended purpose of the Fund, but less certain whether it was now meeting those aims in the light of large increases in repeat applications. There was a perception that applicants no longer view grants as 'one-off' and that defining a 'crisis' had become more difficult when people were repeatedly running out of money for essentials.

- There was agreement among local authorities that the Fund is coming under considerable pressure to extend beyond the original definition of 'crisis', and that local authorities need a clearer steer from the Scottish Government on this issue.

- There was considerable uncertainty among applicants and wider local stakeholders over exact eligibility criteria for the Fund. This lack of clarity had deterred people from either re-applying or requesting a review following an unsuccessful application.

- The review highlighted potential tensions between providing a fair and consistent service across Scotland and allowing for appropriate local discretion.

- Success rates do vary by local authority, even after other factors are taken into account – indicating that the local authority you apply in does impact on your chances of success.

- However, with some exceptions, there was relatively little evidence of an appetite to move to a more centralised system. The benefits of local links and partnerships in meeting people's needs and linking them to wider support were emphasised by both local authorities and other local stakeholders.

- Suggestions for increasing consistency within the current devolved model included: enhancing centralised support for decision-makers (while keeping decision-making local); more regular updates to SWF guidance; centralisation of some administrative functions; and increasing budgets to reduce discrepancy between local authorities in terms of priority levels.

As described in chapter 1, the central aim of the SWF, as set out in the statutory guidance, is "to provide a safety net to people on low incomes". The guidance clearly states that the Fund is "intended to meet occasional or short term needs and not to provide an alternative source of regular income." A key aim of the review was to explore the extent to which, in practice, the Fund is still aligned with this purpose.

The design of the Fund aims to deliver these aims via a centrally funded but locally delivered "budget limited scheme". Local authorities receive funding from the Scottish Government and central guidance on how to implement it, but this guidance explicitly allows for "extensive discretion over how the scheme is delivered in their area, from taking and processing applications to fulfilment of grants." The review also explored views on this delivery model and whether it is still fit for purpose.

This chapter explores the extent to which there is a shared understanding of the purpose of the Fund among key stakeholders (particularly local authority staff and applicants to the Fund). It examines the evidence on whether the Fund is still delivering on its original aims and views on whether these aims are still appropriate. Finally, it explores views of the delivery model and how it compares with alternatives, such as a more centralised model based on strict rules of entitlement.

Purpose of the Fund

Delivering on its stated purpose?

The Scottish Welfare Fund operates in a challenging context with Scottish Government analysis estimating a £3.7 billion reduction in benefit spending in Scotland between 2010 and by 2020/21[11][12]. As early as the interim review of the SWF, published in 2014, the impact of UK Government welfare reform on poverty was becoming evident[13].

The stated purpose of the SWF is to address one-off need: it is not intended to assist with ongoing or increasing household debt. The SWF guidance also states that ultimately, the scheme is aiming over time to "seek a real terms reduction in expenditure on Crisis Grants as a result of successful intervention preventing crisis reoccurring, thereby increasing funds available for preventative spend on Community Care Grants."[14]

However, data on the level of repeat applications and awards from the Fund clearly indicates that this purpose has come under significant pressure in recent years.

- **Repeat applications for Crisis Grants have increased substantially** – from 56% in 2014/15, to 71% in 2020/21, and 80% in 2021/22[15]

- **Repeat awards for Crisis Grants have also increased**, from 49% in 2014/15, to 62% in 2020/21, and 68% in 2021/22[16]

This suggests that in the majority of cases that Crisis Grant awards have not been able to meet needs in a sustainable way. The high level of repeat applications and

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[11] [Welfare reform: annual report 2019](#)

[12] [Welfare Reform: annual report 2018](#)

[13] [Review of the Scottish Welfare Fund Interim Scheme](#)

[14] [Scottish Welfare Fund: statutory guidance – March 2021 - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)](#)

[15] See Data Analysis Appendix, Figure 49.

[16] See Data Analysis Appendix, Figure 48.

awards also indicates that the core purpose of one-off or occasional provision for exceptional needs is being stretched in a way not intended.

Community Care Grant repeat applications have also increased, although at a lower rate than Crisis Grants – 23% of Community Care Grant applications were from repeat applicants in 2014/15, a figure that remained similar until 2018/19, but had increased to 26% in 2019/20, 28% in 2020/21 and 30% in 2021/22.[17] The level of repeat awards have not increased significantly over this period, however (15% in 2014/15, and 16% in 2021/22).

Professional understandings and views of purpose

There was a clear understanding across local authority managers interviewed for the review of the intended purpose of the Fund, which was closely aligned with the framing of the aims in the statutory guidance. There were recurrent references to the Fund as a "safety net" for those on low incomes, to help them when they are in crisis or need help to move to or stay in a settled home. Crisis Grants were seen as short-term and intended as occasional rather than as supplements to regular expenditure or income. However, although intended as a short-term or one-off intervention, by linking applicants with wider services the Fund was also viewed as having the potential to contribute to longer-term impacts on people's circumstances. Community Care Grants were seen as having a more explicitly preventive element in helping ensure people do not need to go into care or become homeless, thereby also reducing pressures on other services.

However, although local authority managers were generally clear on the intended purpose of the Fund, they were less certain about whether it was now meeting those aims, particularly in relation to the stated aims for Crisis Grants. A recurrent view was that the SWF is no longer operating as a short-term safety net because of the volume of repeat applications for Crisis Grants (as reported above). There was a perception across stakeholders interviewed for this Review – including applicants themselves – that applicants no longer necessarily view Crisis Grants as 'one-off', and that some think they are entitled to three per year.[18]

Among local authority and other professional stakeholders, there was also a recognition that defining a 'crisis' had become increasingly difficult, in a context in which some people's benefit levels are not meeting their costs of living, so they were repeatedly running out of money for essentials. However, there was no consensus among local authority or wider stakeholders on the solution to these pressures. One view was that these pressures mean that the aims of the SWF should be revisited, alongside, potentially, relaxing rules about the maximum number of applications per year and increasing overall funding so that the Fund can help more people more often and/or provide grants at a level that reduces the need for repeat applications. On the other hand, there was a strong view from others that

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[17] See Data Analysis Appendix, Figure 48.

[18] The SWF Guidance states: "The Regulations specify that the number of awards that any person can receive should normally be limited to three in any rolling 12 month period across all local authorities … The start date of a rolling 12 month period is measured from the date of decision." Scottish Welfare Fund: statutory guidance – March 2021 - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

the Fund cannot act as a "sticking plaster" for issues with the wider benefits system, and that the original aims should not be expanded since the Fund is resource-limited and is not designed to solve underlying problems that create the need for Crisis Grants (drivers of need and demand are discussed in more detail in chapter 3).

> "I think they are still the right aims for the Fund, but I don't think the Fund meets those aims … I personally feel people are just applying a lot of the time because we are in the sad state where people's income just isn't enough to live off. Even that additional £20 Universal Credit payment was a great top-up for people and once that's removed, it is a challenge for people to be able to buy food, heat their homes. These are not one-off; these are not out of the norm bills. These are planned bills that they know are coming but customers just don't have enough money to allow them to live in a comfortable environment. And do I think it should fall to a discretionary fund to pick that up? Absolutely not."

(Local authority manager 25)

Both groups, however, were in agreement that the Fund is coming under considerable pressure to extend beyond the original definition of 'crisis', and that local authorities need a clearer steer from the Scottish Government on this issue.

> "If the government want the Scottish Welfare Fund to be the first port of call, that's fine but give us the money to help people to get to a point where they don't need to come back to us every month."

(Local authority manager 14)

The evidence review also indicates an ongoing tension between the stated purpose of providing 'one-off' assistance to those in financial need and the belief of some third sector organisations that the Fund ought to deliver more in order to make a bigger contribution to addressing hardship. CPAG[19] and Menu for Change[20] noted in their 2018 submission to the Social Security Committee's Call for Evidence on the Scottish Welfare Fund that the changes to the benefits system, and Universal Credit (UC) in particular, left people in financial difficulties for extended episodes so crisis grants were sometimes awarded more than once. These papers argue that, to meet these needs, the SWF would need to be able to provide larger grants for longer, and so would need an increase to the Fund's overall budget.

At the same time, recent research by IPPR for Save the Children and the Trussell Trust[21] also noted that Crisis Grants' share of SWF spending had increased

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[19] CPAG in Scotland response to the Social Security Committee's Call for Evidence on the Scottish Welfare Fund 9th May 2018

[20] The Scottish Welfare Fund: opportunities and challenges Evidence from A Menu for Change: Cash, Rights, Food

[21] Tackling Child Poverty and Destitution: Next Steps for the Scottish Child Payment and the Scottish Welfare Fund

throughout the life of the Fund. SWF data indicates that Crisis Grant applications were 66% of all SWF applications in 2013/14, but had increased to 75% of the total by 2021/22. Expenditure levels have grown by 47% for Community Care Grants since the start of the Fund (from £22,886,051 in 2013/14 to £33,738,407 in 2021/22) but expenditure on Crisis Grants has grown by 250% (from £5,823,531 to £20,371,095).

Although as expenditure figures above show, Community Care Grant expenditure overall is still far higher than Crisis Grant expenditure, these trends have led to concern among some third sector organisations of a shift in the Fund's focus away from help building and retaining a home which might disadvantage some groups.[22] Homeless Action Scotland have called for a 'sea change' in how the Fund is considered, and want it to be seen as preventative spending, supporting people to sustain tenancies and reducing potential costs elsewhere.[23]

Applicants' understanding of purpose and eligibility criteria

Applicants interviewed for the review generally understood the Fund to be aimed at helping people on "low incomes" or "on benefits". However, beyond this, there was considerable uncertainty among applicants over exactly what made someone eligible or ineligible for a grant:

> "I don't know how it works, truthfully, 'cos nobody's really ever explained to me how you fit the criteria and how you don't fit the criteria, or why they'd say no, or they've only X amount."

> (Applicant 43, unsuccessful for Crisis and Community Care Grants)

Similar views were expressed by wider local stakeholders, working for organisations that support people to apply to the Fund:

> "There doesn't seem to be any rhyme nor reason. All you get back is that you don't fit the criteria and I often think 'well, what the heck is the criteria?'"

> (External local stakeholder 1, Housing / homelessness charity)

There were examples among applicant interviewees where this lack of clarity had deterred people from either re-applying or from requesting a review following an unsuccessful application, as they were unsure whether there was any point in doing so if they were not, in fact, eligible. It was suggested that the eligibility criteria could be more clearly communicated:

> "It gives certain categories of what you can apply under, but don't know if it applies to you, they could expand a bit on this, was never clear"

> (Applicant 20, successful Community Care Grant applicant)

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[22] Inclusion Scotland Written Evidence Scottish Welfare Fund
[23] Homeless Action Scotland Scottish Welfare Fund evidence (May 2018)

Delivery model

The scheme that preceded the SWF, the Social Fund, was administered centrally by the DWP prior to its abolition in 2012. The rationale for devolved provision of the SWF, introduced by the Scottish Government in 2013 when the Social Fund was abolished, was for local discretion, informed by community-based knowledge, linking into local advice and support services.

Both the existing evidence on the SWF and interviews with local authority managers highlight some of the potential tensions between providing a fair and consistent service across Scotland and allowing for appropriate local discretion.

Homeless Action Scotland[24] were of the view that the right level of local discretion was written into the guidance, but was not always encouraged due to budget concerns (though it was not clear exactly how or who within local authorities might fail to encourage discretion). CPAG noted[25] that in some cases the use of discretion at the local authority level meant that an application could meet all of the eligibility criteria (income, savings, personal circumstances etc.) but still not be successful. CPAG and IPPR have both raised concerns that local discretion results in significant variation in application success rates and award levels between local authorities.[26]

Analysis for this Review confirms that success rates do vary significantly by local authority. Taking all other variables for which data was available (such as whether the applicant is disabled or not, tenure, benefit receipt, other vulnerabilities, etc.) into account, local authority was the factor most strongly associated with an application being successful or not, for both Crisis and Community Care Grants. In other words, the local authority you apply for an SWF grant in does affect your chances of being successful.[27]

It is important to note that differences in success rates between local authorities do not in themselves imply inappropriate application of local discretion – as the Fund is cash-limited, they may reflect differences in demand across local authorities, meaning that some local authorities have to operate at a higher priority level than others when determining eligibility for grants in order to stay within budget. Local authorities themselves acknowledged that the cash-limited nature of the Fund does introduce potential inconsistencies between areas:

> "The downfall of the current model is the inconsistency; you'd get a different result applying in [smaller more rural local authority] ...they need to reconsider

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[24] Homeless Action Scotland Scottish Welfare Fund (May 2018)

[25] CPAG in Scotland response to the Social Security Committee's Call for Evidence on the Scottish Welfare Fund 9th May 2018

[26] Tackling Child Poverty and Destitution: Next Steps for the Scottish Child Payment and the Scottish Welfare Fund

[27] For more detail of this analysis, see Review of the Scottish Welfare Fund: Data Analysis Appendix chapter 5.

how the grant is distributed... I'm all for localism, but the current system is broken, it's not fair, it's not clear it's equitable."

(Local Authority manager 24)

However, review of data on success rates alongside patterns of expenditure suggests that differences in success rates between local authorities are not entirely explained by differences in pressure on budgets (this point is explored in more detail in chapter 7).

In spite of concerns about decisions potentially being driven by budgets rather than need, and local discretion leading to variation in success or award rates, the evidence review and interviews with local authorities and wider stakeholders indicate relatively little appetite to move to a more centralised system. There are some exceptions to this among the third sector – for example, CPAG have asked for consideration of the national delivery of the Scottish Welfare Fund to provide consistency, possibly through Social Security Scotland. However, in general the evidence review and interviews found strong support for the benefits of local delivery.

Local authority interviewees emphasised the importance of local links and partnerships, both with the third sector and other departments within the council. These were seen as key to both facilitating awareness of grants among those most likely to need them and being able to link people to appropriate wider support. Local knowledge was seen as fundamental to meeting local need:

"Each authority knows the demographics of their community; they know perhaps where the help is needed most"

(Local Authority manager, 11)

External local stakeholders also commented that the arrangements some organisations have in place with local authorities to fast-track applicants where the organisation identifies an urgent need (for example, relating to a need to expedite furniture for a vulnerable applicants moving into new accommodation) might not be possible with a more centralised scheme.

It is also worth noting that feedback on analogous schemes in Northern Ireland[28] and Wales[29], which do operate via centralised provision, highlight very similar issues the quality, consistency and clarity of decision-making to concerns raised about the SWF. Centralised provision appears to be no guarantee of consistent decision-making.

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[28] Discretionary Support Scheme Independent Review (NI Government)
[29] Evaluation of the Discretionary Assistance Fund | GOV.WALES

Although the review found relatively little appetite for shifting away from local delivery, there was a desire to look at ways of increasing consistency within the current model. Suggestions included:

- **Enhanced centralised support for decision-makers** – while local authorities were supportive of the principle of local decision-making, it was suggested that having a centralised support team that could provide a sounding board for decision-makers when faced with more difficult decisions might enhance consistency and help support local teams:

  > "I think it would help them knowing they had someone there. Quite often I hear 'what are we going to do with this one?'"

  (Local Authority Manager 28)

  It is worth noting in this context that the SPSO does already offer an 0800 number and email address that local authorities can contact with SWF queries – they report currently receiving up to 10 queries a month. These comments suggest that it may be helpful to ensure awareness of this option across SWF teams.

  There was also a perception among local authority teams that there were more opportunities for sharing of practice and learning between local authorities in the past, and that the Scottish Government and / or the SPSO could look at facilitating more of this. Again, the SPSO noted that they were able to provide more training pre-pandemic and that, subject to resources, they would hope to expand training for local authorities again in the future.

  A related suggestion was that consistency of decision-making in line with the guidance might be better assessed and supported via an audit of a random sample of decisions across local authorities. Conducting such an audit was outwith the scope of this review, but a programme of more regular audit might be something the Scottish Government and its partners (including the SPSO) could consider as part of monitoring and supporting delivery in the future – Chapter 10 discusses this point in more detail.

- **More regular updates to SWF guidance** – Scottish Government guidance outlines how local authorities should deliver the Fund. This guidance is reviewed biennially (the most recent updated guidance was published in March 2021). It was suggested that this guidance should be updated more regularly, to enable it to be more responsive to emerging issues. One example was the interpretation of 'exceptional need' during pandemic lockdown – the SPSO and some local authority managers felt this had been interpreted differently by different local authorities (a point discussed further in chapter 9), and that additional guidance on this issue might have helped to reduce discrepancies arising from this. There was also a desire for stakeholders – including local authorities and the SPSO – to be more involved updates to the guidance.

- **Centralisation of some administrative functions** – a related option raised in interviews with local authority managers was that it might be possible to centralise some elements – for example, establishing a national application

database to facilitate detection of possible cross-local authority fraud[30] – while retaining local decision-making and links.

- Finally, there was a view among local authority managers that **budgets should be increased in order to reduce discrepancy between local authorities in terms of priority-levels**. Funding levels are discussed in more detail in chapter 4.

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[30] This was viewed as something that might potentially sometimes happen, but which local authorities would not currently be able to detect.

3. Need and demand for the Fund

Key points

- Establishing a precise estimate of underlying need for the Fund is difficult, as there is no alternative measure that perfectly reflects the eligibility criteria for the SWF. However, analysis of foodbank use, measures of household destitution, evidence from other research, and the views of applicants, local authorities and external stakeholders all point to increasing financial pressures on households. This increase in need was already believed to have impacted demand on the Fund, with a strong expectation that both need and demand would continue to rise.

- Applications for Crisis Grants were already increasing pre-pandemic. As of June 2022, applications remained at a historically high level – they had not fallen back to pre-Covid levels of demand.

- Demand for Community Care Grants fell during the early stages of the pandemic (reflecting restrictions on house moves). However, demand subsequently rebounded and as of mid-2022 continued to exceed pre-pandemic levels.

- There was strong concern among applicants, local authorities and external stakeholders that the need and demand for the Fund was likely to continue to rise over Autumn/winter 2022/23, as the impact of the cost of living crisis and higher energy bills made themselves felt on household finances.

- Key factors shaping levels of need and demand for the Fund include:

  o the wider economic and social context, particularly UK Government welfare reform and inflation and energy price rises

  o the Covid-19 pandemic, which created short-term increases in demand but was also believed to have had potential longer-term impacts in terms of raising expectations about repeat awards

  o seasonal factors – with peaks either side of Christmas, and around school holiday periods

  o differences between local authorities – analysis indicates that levels of applications vary between local authorities, even after expected differences based on population size, children in low-income households, and benefit claimants are accounted for.

- Demand is also shaped by people's willingness or ability to apply to the Fund, which in turn is influenced by: feelings of perceived stigma, anxiety or pride; confusion about eligibility criteria; past experiences with SWF staff; the perceived difficulty of the application form or process; support available to help people apply; cost barriers (including lack of a phone or internet access); language barriers; and lack of awareness.

- Groups who are eligible for the Fund but were considered less likely to apply included: older people; people who are not on benefits and/or those in work

> on low incomes; those who are new to the benefit system; and those who are digitally excluded.
>
> - Groups who were considered in need but are currently ineligible to apply to the Fund include: asylum seekers; those just above the income threshold for grants; repeat applicants; and those in need of Community Care Grant items classed as low or medium priority when the scheme is operating at a high priority level.

The social, economic and policy context within which the Fund operates has significantly changed since the SWF was introduced in 2013. The period from 2013 to 2022 was associated with extensive change to the benefit system in the UK and Scotland. Universal Credit was rolled out by the UK Government from April 2013, replacing six existing means-tested benefits for all new claimants by early 2022 (managed migration of those previously on these 'legacy benefits' was ongoing at the time of writing). Meanwhile, following the devolution of new powers over benefits in the Scotland Act 2016, the Scottish Government began a programme of rolling out new devolved benefits and grants, delivered by Social Security Scotland. Some of these benefits (e.g. Best Start Grant, Child and Adult Disability Payments) replace existing UK benefits, while others (e.g. Scottish Child Payment, Carer's Allowance Supplement) were new Scotland-only benefits.[31]

The global Covid-19 pandemic and the national lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 had dramatic economic and social impacts, and had a number of direct and indirect impacts on the SWF, discussed in chapter 9. More recently, since late 2021, the UK has entered a period of high inflation and increasing cost-of-living, with energy and food bills both rising rapidly. Inflation rose to 10.1% (Consumer Prices Index) in September 2022, its highest level for around 40 years.[32] Energy bills increased in April 2022 by £700 a year for 'typical' dual fuel consumption paid by direct debit. A new Energy Price Guarantee, announced by the UK Government on 8 September 2022, in combination with a £400 payment to support people with their energy bills, prevented a further dramatic rise in energy bills in Autumn 2022.[33] However, this support is only in guaranteed until April 2023 and average bills remain far higher than they were a year ago.

It is against this dramatically changed – and evolving – context that the review was asked to consider the level and nature of underlying need and demand for the SWF. Need does not necessarily translate neatly into demand – there may be need that goes unmet, or factors other than need that shape demand. However, they are clearly closely linked, and as such we consider them alongside each other in this chapter. This chapter considers, first, proxy measures and indicators of underlying need for the kind of assistance provided by the Fund, drawing on both data external

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[31] See Scottish social security in six charts for a full breakdown and timeline of new devolved benefits

[32] ONS Consumer price inflation, UK: September 2022

[33] See House of Commons Library Domestic energy prices, published 17 October 2022

to the Fund and data on the level and reasons for applications to the Fund itself. Second, it considers the factors that shape the level of need and demand for the Fund. Finally, it considers whether there is evidence of unmet need for assistance of the type the Fund provides among specific groups of people.

Estimating underlying need

The review was tasked with considering proxy measures that might shed light on patterns and trends in underlying need for welfare assistance of the kind SWF provides. This is a challenging task – there are various indicators of extreme financial hardship, but none of these neatly align with the eligibility criteria for the SWF. However, these proxy indicators help to build a picture of the wider levels of need which the Fund might be expected to contribute to alleviating.

Possible proxy indicators of underlying need include:

- **Foodbank use** – in 2021/22, the Trussell Trust provided 197,037 food parcels in Scotland,[34] while the latest Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) data (covering around 17% of independent food banks in Scotland, so not comprehensive) found that a total of 17,803 people had been helped by food banks in April and May 2022. So the combined number of food bank parcels distributed in 2021/22 was clearly higher than the number of Crisis Grant awards made over the same period (176,880[35]). However, many people accessing food banks would not be eligible for Crisis Grants for a range of reasons, including their need being ongoing, rather than one-off.

- **Estimates of households in destitution** - the Destitution in the UK[36] research conducted in 2019 found that Scotland was estimated to have between 0.7% and 0.8% households in destitution, around 18,800 households (in 2019). Similarly, the Scottish Household Survey indicates that, in 2019, 1% of households in Scotland (c. 25,100 households) were in 'deep financial trouble'. The SWF assisted an average of 53,530 households a year from 2013 to 2021 – around 2% of all households. This indicates that the proportion accessing Crisis Grants is higher than estimates of destitution or 'deep financial trouble'.

As discussed, none of these indicators of financial hardship are perfectly aligned with the criteria for accessing the SWF. However, on the assumption that they provide an indication of the potential size of the group who might need financial assistance similar to that provided by the Fund, this figure may lay somewhere between the estimated number of households in destitution and the higher numbers accessing food banks.

Changing levels of need and demand

If arriving at an exact measure of underlying need for the SWF on which there is a consensus is perhaps impossible, where there is a far greater consensus across all

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[34] Trussell Trust Latest Year End Statistics

[35] Scottish Welfare Fund Statistics: annual update 2021-22

[36] Destitution in the UK 2020, JRF

the sources of data collated for this review is that there is increasing financial pressure on households across the UK, including Scotland, and that this is translating into increased demand on the Fund.

The Trussell Trust has reported a significant increase in recent food bank use compared to the period before the pandemic - in July to September 2021, 7% more emergency food parcels were distributed compared with the same period in 2019.[37] More recent data from the Trussell Trust indicates that food bank use has continued to rise sharply – they reported a 34% increase in emergency food parcels distributed between April and September 2022 compared with the same period a year earlier.[38] The Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) also reported in a letter to the Prime Minister and Chancellor in April 2022 that members were struggling to find the resources to provide adequate food parcels as the scale of demand and food and energy price increases impacted on the services they run[39]. Citizens Advice also saw a record number of people in crisis in 2022. In March 2022, the charity referred almost 25,000 people to food banks or other kinds of emergency support – up by 44 per cent on the same time the previous year[40].

SWF data clearly shows that demand for Crisis Grants has increased and is continuing to increase. Looking across the whole lifespan of the Fund, the number of applications for Crisis Grants increased by 134% from 2013/14 to 2021/22, while applications for Community Care Grants also increased by 51% over the same period.

More recently, applications for Crisis Grants had already increased substantially prior to the Covid-19 pandemic – there were 51,065 Crisis Grant applications April-June 2019, compared with 37,920 in the same period of 2016. Applications increased during the pandemic, particularly during the first lockdown period – there were 75,690 applications April-June 2020. However, as of June 2022, applications had not fallen back to their pre-Covid level – the Fund received 72,945 Crisis Grant applications April-June 2022.

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[37] Trussell Trust The true cost of living (2022).pdf

[38] Emergency food parcel distribution in Scotland: April – September 2022

[39] Food Aid Network Letter April 22

[40] The Independent 10 April 2022 - Britain's food banks 'close to breaking point' amid rapid rise in poverty, Rishi Sunak warned

Figure 3.1: SWF applications over time, quarterly figures 2013-2022
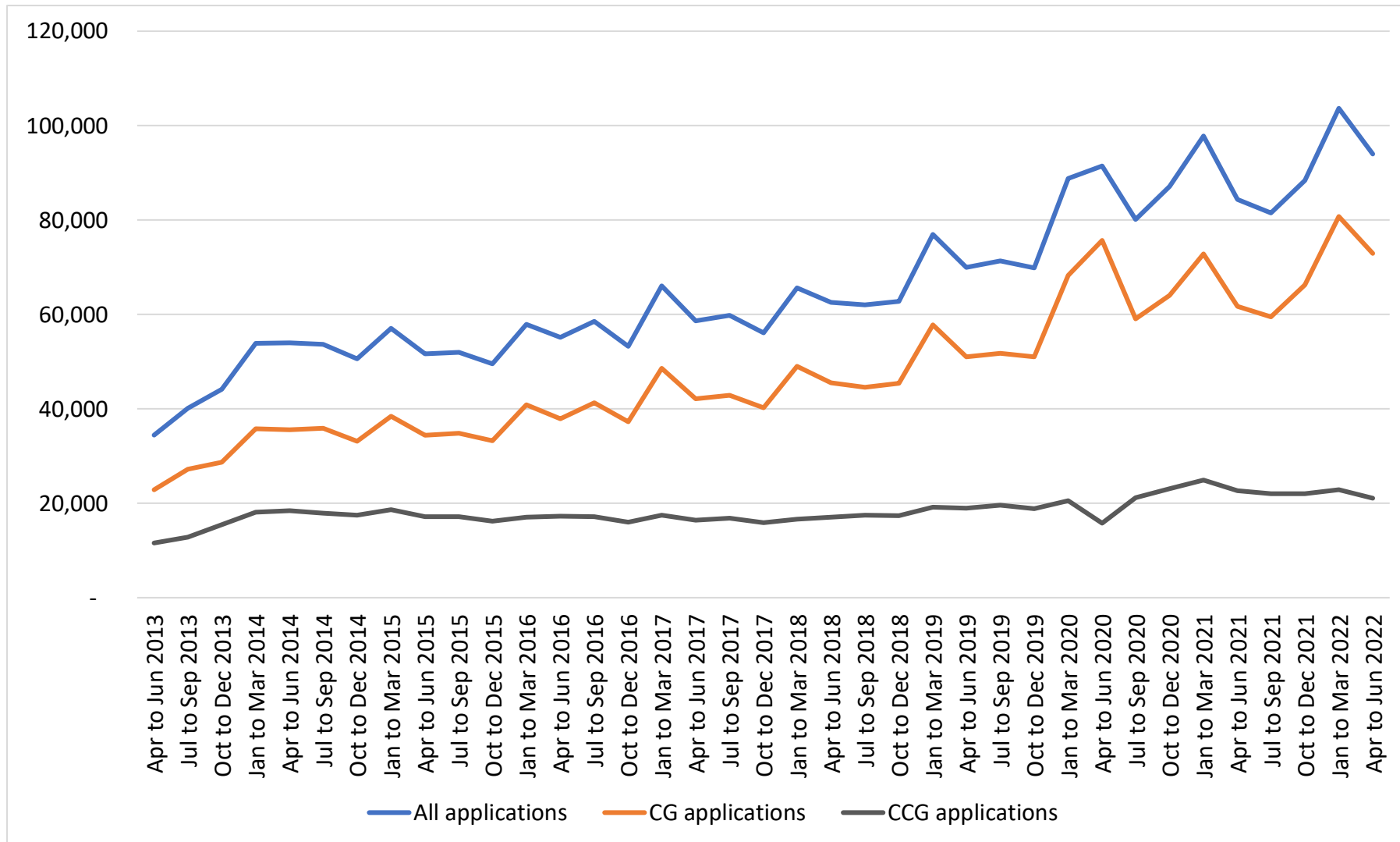
Source: SWF data to 30 June 2022 (Chart 1) Applications – 1 April 2013 to 31 June 2022

Demand for Community Care Grants has also risen, albeit less sharply. Again, applications had started to increase pre-pandemic – there were 18,930 applications April to June 2019, up from 17,240 in the same period of 2016. In contrast with Crisis Grants, demand for Community Care Grants fell in the early months of lockdown in 2020, reflecting restrictions on house moves – April-June 2020 saw 15,795 applications. However, demand subsequently rebounded, and as of mid-2022 it continued to exceed pre-pandemic levels – there were 21,050 applications April-June 2022.

Interviews with local authority managers in early 2022 and with local authority SWF decision-makers, external local stakeholders, and applicants all identified a strong concern that the need and demand for the Fund was likely to continue to rise over Autumn/winter 2022/23, as the impact of the cost of living crisis and higher energy bills made themselves felt on household finances:

> "I dread the winter – I don't know what people will do. That's going to be hard times."

(Local Authority decision-maker, Area E)

> "My meters at the moment are taking £160 a month, and I'm not on a lot of money due to paying loans back …"

(Applicant 40, repeat applicant for both grants, with varying success)

Factors shaping underlying need and demand

Wider social, economic and policy context

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, the wider context in which the Fund operates has changed very substantially since it was established in 2013. The evidence reviewed for this report highlights UK Government welfare reform as a key contributor to rising levels of financial hardship and food poverty in the UK and Scotland. For example, Menu for Change reported a 52% increase in food parcels given out in Universal Credit full service areas (where new applicants for working-age benefits must claim UC online and face a 5-week wait for their initial payment).[41]

The underlying level of UK government benefits – including the UK Government's decision to remove the £20 a week uplift to Universal Credit in October 2021 – was also identified as a factor in increased demand for Crisis Grants by local authority managers and SWF decision-makers and by external local stakeholders.

As noted above, the cost of living crisis and rising energy prices in particular were already believed to have increased demand in April/May 2022, and were expected to continue to create significant additional pressure on the Fund for the foreseeable future:

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[41] Left Behind 2018 (Trussell Trust)

"The widely reported increase in fuel costs is only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the strain on household income. The cost of the weekly shop is increasing as is every other general living expense. This will ultimately result in more vulnerable individuals and households seeking assistance from the SWF."

(Local Authority 31)

These wider, contextual factors featured strongly in applicants' own accounts of what had brought them to the Fund, particularly with respect to Crisis Grants. There were examples of more one-off crises preceding an application – such as unexpected illness or injury interrupting earnings. However, running out of money in general and, more specifically, people's Universal Credit payments running out before the end of the month also featured strongly, as did general cost of living pressures and energy bill costs.

"It's always been the same, it's always been power [i.e. their reason for applying to the SWF]. I'm very careful, I don't turn my lights on till it gets dark and I don't waste electricity. I've tried adjusting it and putting more money in, but it always seems to be the last few days before I get paid it goes out."

(Applicant 5, had been awarded maximum number of Crisis Grants each year for the last four years)

The perception that demand is now being shaped more by underlying financial pressures rather than one-off crises is also reflected in changes in the recorded reasons for applying to the Fund, with more families facing exceptional pressure applying and more people running out of money. For Community Care Grants, there has been an increase in applications due to families facing exceptional pressure (from 14% to 35% between 2013 and 2022), while the proportions applying for help to stay in the community has fallen back. For Crisis Grants, benefits/income being spent accounts for a higher proportion of reasons now than in the early days of the Fund (41% in 2022, compared with 25% in 2013/14, although it has fallen back from a peak of 50% in early 2020).

Finally, the war in Ukraine was also viewed as likely to impact on demand. Among local authority SWF managers, the increasing numbers of refugees arriving in Scotland as a result of the Ukraine war was also creating some concerns about future demand. Although this was not yet a major theme at the point interviews were conducted (April/May 2022), there were emerging questions about budget implications, who is and is not eligible, and what documentation is required to support applications from this group.

"We are anticipating both more applications, and more repeat applications, emerging from cost of living pressures, increasing numbers of asylum seekers and refugees, and in respect of COVID recovery."

(Local authority manager 5)

Covid-19 pandemic

In 2020/21, the Covid-19 pandemic and restrictions unsurprisingly had a significant impact on the level and nature of need and demand for the Fund. As discussed above, while applications have subsequently fallen back from the very high levels seen in 2020/21, they have not returned to pre-pandemic levels. Local authority managers believed that the pandemic may have had a longer-term impact on demand, particularly for Crisis Grants by creating wider awareness of the Fund (the Fund was used as a key mechanism for providing short-term assistance to those in financial crisis during the pandemic, with substantial extra funding allocated for this purpose). It was also suggested that the relaxation of the number of grants people can apply for in a year might have increased expectations among some applicants around being able to access repeat grants.

> "The main challenge is the number of repeat applications we get. It's definitely grown since March 2020. We've almost retained most of the people that came to us then, and they're just coming back numerous times."

(Local Authority 5)

Seasonal and geographic factors

Quantitative data on the Fund indicates that the level of demand – as indicated by application numbers – also varies both seasonally and between different local authorities.

In recent years, there have been peaks in applications for Crisis Grants around January and August, with smaller peaks in October and November. This pattern suggests that the fund is responding to periods of greater need – such as the winter months either side of Christmas, when debts might be higher alongside higher heating costs, as well as around school holiday periods when expenditure may be suddenly higher.

In order to allow for differences in population size and expected levels of financial hardship, the review has compared application levels with a) population size b) the total number of children in low-income households and c) the total number of Universal Credit claimants. While there is no perfect set of control variables, this gives an indication of how application numbers by local authority compare with levels that might be expected, given these characteristics. In other words, it attempts to look at how demand varies, after accounting for likely differences in levels of need.

This analysis indicates that application levels do vary between local authorities. There was no completely consistent pattern to this variation. However, some (though not all) rural local authorities appeared to receive significantly lower than expected numbers of applications for both grants, while some large urban authorities had higher than average applications per Universal Credit claimant.[42]

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[42] See further analysis in chapter 3 of the Data Analysis Appendix.

This suggests that demand varies significantly between different local authorities, even after differences in child poverty and underlying numbers of benefit claimants are taken into account. This may, in part, reflect differences in levels of awareness or promotion – discussed further in chapter 5. However, it was also suggested in interviews with local authorities that some living in rural and in particular island communities may be more reticent about seeking government help when they experience financial difficulties.

Factors influencing willingness or ability to apply to the Fund

The final set of factors identified as impacting on demand for the Fund relate to people's willingness or ability to apply. As discussed in chapter 1, the review did not interview people who had never applied to the Fund. However, interviews with applicants nonetheless identified a number of issues that impacted on how they felt about applying. In some cases, the barriers they had experienced had deterred them from applying to the Fund again when they found themselves in similar circumstances. Factors shaping willingness or ability to apply included:

- **Feelings of perceived stigma, anxiety or pride** – applicants described having to overcome their own feelings about asking for help to apply to the Fund. In some cases, this reflected general anxiety about any application process (particularly for those with underlying anxiety or mental health issues). In others, it reflected a sense of pride and embarrassment about asking for financial help.

  "Some people are so down on their luck and their mental health is really bad and a lot of people just don't think they're worthy…. They'll just say 'no, it doesn't matter'"

  (External local stakeholder 1, Housing / homelessness charity)

- **Confusion about the eligibility criteria** – as discussed in chapter 2, a lack of clarity about whether or not they were eligible was mentioned by stakeholders and applicants as a potential deterrent from applying to the Fund.

- **Past experiences with SWF staff** – the nature of applicants' interactions with SWF staff also impacted on their feelings about applying to the Fund. Applicants gave examples of both very positive and very negative views of these interactions, with reported experiences varying both between local authorities and within the same local authorities:

  "At no point did I feel anything less than respected … Can't fault them".

  (Applicant 37, successful applications for Community Care Grants)

  "It's like they're trying to poke holes in your story. They're trying to find faults ... you feel like they're looking down on you or talking down to you and you can tell that over the phone. … They're just trying to find a reason to not give you help"

  (Applicant 2, repeat applicant for Crisis Grants, mixed success)

Where applicants' experiences were more negative, however, this could have a significant impact on their future willingness to apply to the Fund for help, particularly for those who already felt reticent about applying:

> "I was on hold for 50 mins – they were like what do you want? Is there nothing else you can do? As if I had been frivolous – I really was so desperate, I've worked all my life… I would have sooner starved than asked again. There were times it was so bad [while waiting for PIP], I sold my jewellery. The experience was demeaning… I would not go back."
>
> (Applicant 26, repeat applications for Crisis Grants, mixed success)

- **Perceived difficulty of the application form or process** – although in general the application process for SWF was not viewed as overly complicated, there was a perception from both applicants, external stakeholders and some local authority interviewees that the application forms could be off-putting. They were described as repetitive (for example, asking for the same information about savings and income in multiple places) and potentially confusing (including which part of the form to fill in for those not already familiar with the two different types of grants). Some of the questions were also viewed as irrelevant (for example, asking applicants for estimates of the cost of white goods when the Council provides a specific model anyway, or who carpets in communal rooms are for) or unnecessarily intrusive (examples included questions about what people would do if they did not receive a grant).

> "I would say the actual online form, because that does stress them out a little bit when they're having to repeat their selves and 'I've just answered that, why is that asking me again?'"
>
> (External local stakeholder 11, Domestic abuse support organisation)

> "I had to choose a pigeonhole, didn't fit one so went to Citizen's Advice … (it) seems designed for support professionals, not for end users. Even the wording of things, everything is geared up for someone that is regularly filling in these forms."
>
> (Applicant 27, successful Crisis Grant applicant)

In terms of the wider process, where local authorities asked for supporting evidence, this could act as a barrier – for example, one applicant described giving up on an application because they found it too difficult to get hold of the bank statements they were asked for.

- **Support available to help people apply** – Interviews with applicants, stakeholders and local authorities indicated that where applicants do experience difficulties with the form or process, particularly where these stem from literacy or anxiety issues, the availability of support can be crucial to whether they are able to apply. In terms of support available directly from SWF teams, telephone contact appeared to be the most common way of offering support during the application process. More exceptionally, local authorities mentioned offering face-to-face support (including in-home), email support, and web chats.

External organisations also clearly play a significant role in helping people to apply – the various organisations we spoke to often completed the form either alongside or on behalf of the people they support. There were examples among the applicants we spoke to of both people who felt they would not have been able to apply without the help of an external organisation, and people who felt their application would have been stronger if this help had been available to help them know what to include and how to word it. External stakeholders noted the importance, particularly for vulnerable groups, of having this support to apply – but also noted that resource pressures were reducing the capacity of their organisations to provide this support in some cases.

- **Cost barriers** – while not considered a barrier for most applicants, external stakeholders commented that needing either a phone or the internet to apply was a barrier for a small number of people who may be particularly vulnerable and isolated. This was reflected in an applicant interview, who believed their application had been declined as a result of not being able to take a phone call to clarify the reasons for his application (he did not have a phone). A recent (unpublished at the time of writing) survey of independent food banks in Scotland also found that they thought that food bank users were aware of the Scottish Welfare Fund. However, over half said that they felt that people struggled to access the SWF due to digital exclusion, while half identified other barriers, including the lack of face-to-face provision (SWF and CAB/welfare rights advice services), the lack of a freephone number, long call waiting times, lack of credit in mobile phones or no phone at all.

- **Language barriers** – language barriers were mentioned as potential issue by a local authority manager, although they also noted that support is available to those who apply with English as an Additional Language (EAL). As discussed in chapter 1, a limitation of this review is that it did not hear from any applicants with EAL. The extent to which language is a barrier to applying and the approaches local authorities take to addressing this is something that could be explored further in future, alongside taking forward the findings from this review.

- **Lack of awareness** – there was a perception among some applicants interviewed for this review that they had only become aware of the SWF by chance, when a friend or family member mentioned it, and that lack of awareness might be a barrier to others accessing the help they need through the Fund. Findings around how local authorities promote the Fund are discussed further in chapter 5.

Are there groups in need who miss out on SWF grants?

A final dimension of need explored in the review is the extent to which there are people in need who could benefit from the Fund but do not currently do so – in other words, unmet need. There are two main categories here – those who are eligible for the Fund, but do not currently apply, and those who are in need but are not currently eligible.

With regard to the former, local authority managers, SWF decision-makers, and external stakeholders all identified similar groups who were considered less likely to apply to the fund, including:

- **Older people**
- **People who are not on benefits / the "working poor"**
- **Those who are new to the benefit system** (e.g. those recently made redundant or recently disabled)
- **Those who are digitally excluded** (reflecting the findings on barriers relating to cost and application mode, discussed above).

They also identified similar reasons why some people might be less likely to apply, including:

- **Feelings of reticence about asking for help** – this reflects the findings discussed above, around pride and stigma as a barrier. There was a perception that older people and those who are either in work or have recently been in work might be more likely to fall into this category.
- **Lack of awareness of the Fund or that they might be eligible for it** – again, this was considered more likely to be a factor with regard to older people and those new to the benefit system.
- **Low trust in the Council** – stemming either from past experiences with the SWF specifically, or with Council services more widely.

In general, professional interviewees felt that eligibility criteria for the Fund were broad and allowed them to help most people in financial crisis. However, there were some limitations to this:

- **Asylum seekers and others with No Recourse to Public Funds**[43] – those with No Recourse to Public Funds are not eligible to apply to the SWF, as UK Government rules mean this might complicate their immigration status. This was a key group who were seen as potentially in need but unable to apply to the Fund.
- **Those just above the income threshold** – local authorities and external stakeholders suggested that, particularly in the context of rising prices, income thresholds for eligibility for the Fund might need re-examining, as they were seeing more people in this category who were really struggling (including those in work).

  "We're starting to see a few more people now like I said that are just borderline … I've seen more people coming forward where their wages just aren't covering it anymore, that's starting to become an issue."

  (Local authority decision-makers, Area C)

- **Repeat applicants** – as discussed in chapter 2, the number of repeat applications to the Fund has increased significantly. Currently, the guidance

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[43] This also includes others subject to immigration control, including people who require leave to enter the UK, or whose leave is subject to the condition that they have no recourse to public funds, which might include EU nationals with no right to reside, someone who has overstayed their Visa, and people on time-limited Visas (either work or student Visas).

allows for a maximum of three grants per person per year. There were mixed views among all the groups of interviewees included in the review on whether this rule should be revised, to account for the difficulties distinguishing between one-off and ongoing financial crisis, discussed in chapter 1.

> "It's just tough, 'cos like even when you tell them you really need it and you've got nothing, they say 'sorry you can't because you've had 3'."

> (Applicant 39, Repeat applicant for both grants, mixed success)

- **Those in need of low/medium priority items** – some local authorities manage their SWF budgets by applying priority levels to items people apply for under Community Care Grants, as well as to the level of need people need to be in to qualify – so for example, some items will only be available when the local authority is approving applications at medium priority level, but not when it is restricting grants to high priority cases. It was noted that this means those who are in need of low or medium priority items may miss out. The SPSO has recommended that priority levels are not applied to items, since what is a low priority item for one person could be high priority for another, depending on the nature of their circumstances – for example, curtains might not be high priority for most people, but could be a high priority for someone fleeing domestic violence.

4.   Levels of funding

Key points

- Overall, spending on SWF by local authorities exceeded the budget allocated (including carried over underspend from previous years) in both 2019/20 (spending was 108% of budget) and 2021/22 (115% of budget).

- Although spending in 2020/21 was under the allocated budget, this reflected a very large (£22 million) additional injection of funds in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The overall spend was 31% higher compared with 2019/20.

- There have been wide variations in levels of over- and underspending between different local authorities in Scotland. In 2021/22, 18 out of 32 local authorities overspent, with five overspending by 50% or more. However, six spent 70% or less of their allocated budget.

- There is no consistent pattern as to which local authorities over- or under-spend on budget. However, with notable exceptions, rural local authorities have been more likely to underspend, while those with higher than expected levels of demand (based on proxy indicators of need) are more likely to overspend.

- Other research has suggested that funding should be reallocated between low and high-demand local authorities. However, the review found that a majority of the areas identified as historically low spending local authorities were predicting overspends this year, indicating that any such reallocation would need to be undertaken with caution.

- Local authority managers felt funding for SWF was under significant strain: two thirds stated that the current level of Scottish Government funding for SWF in their area was 'a lot less than is required to meet local need'.

- The expectation among local authority managers interviewed for this review was that demand and need for Crisis Grants would continue to increase in the foreseeable future, with associated increased pressures on budgets. Meanwhile, the cost of delivering Community Care Grants was increasing as a result of inflation, even if demand was not increasing at the same rate as for Crisis Grants.

- Administrative funding was viewed as a major issue by local authorities – councils reported needing considerably more resource to be able to consistently process applications at current levels within the statutory timeframes.

- Around two thirds of councils currently topped up Scottish Government funding for the SWF with their own resources. There was concern among local authority managers about whether they would continue to be able to do so, given other pressures on local budgets.

The Scottish Welfare Fund is funded by the Scottish Government, who allocate funding for both the grants themselves and for administration costs to local authorities. Local authorities may also, if they choose, top-up the Scottish Government SWF allocation with their own funds as well as carrying forward any underspends from previous years.

The total Scottish Government budget for the Fund was £33 million a year from 2013/14 to 2019/20. It then increased to £35.5 million in 2020/21, with an additional allocation for £22 million in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Funding remained at £35.5 million for 2021/22.[44]

A key question for the review was whether levels of funding for the SWF are appropriate. This chapter examines this question, drawing on analysis of SWF data on spending over time and by local authority and how this compares with need and demand, as discussed in the previous chapter, and finally perceptions from local authority interviews and the evidence review of whether current funding levels are sufficient to meet local need for the Fund.

Patterns of spend over time

Analysis of SWF spend versus budget over the last three full financial years (2019/20, 2020/21 and 2021/22) demonstrates that that the budget was already under significant pressure pre-pandemic and that this pressure has not abated. By March 2020, across Scotland, 108% of the overall budget (including the overspend carried forward) had been spent. This fell back in 2020/21, as a result of the £22 million additional funding allocated to the Fund that year – 83% of the total £57.5 million budget was spent by March 2021, though this represented a 31% increase in expenditure compared with 2019/20. In 2021/22, the level of overspend was even higher than it had been in 2019/20 – 115% of the budget was spent by March 2022. Given the large underspend from 2020/21 carried forward into the 2021/22 budget, the overspend for 2022/23 might be predicted to be considerably higher still, in the absence of additional funding.

These Scotland-wide figures conceal wide variations in the level of over- or underspend versus budget between local authorities. In 2021/22, 18 local authorities exceeded their allocated Scottish Government budgets (including carried over underspend), including five that overspent by 50% of more. At the same time, there were a number of local authorities that significantly underspent their budget, including six that spent 70% or less of their allocated budget.

There is no completely consistent pattern as to which local authorities tend to spend more compared with their allocated budget. However, overall – but with some notable exceptions – consistent overspending tends to be more common in more urban and mixed local authorities while consistent underspending is more common in rural local authorities.

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[44] Scottish Welfare Fund statistics: update to 30 June 2022

There also appears to be a relationship between higher or lower than expected levels of demand on the Fund (as indicated by comparison of applications with the proxy measures of need, discussed in the previous chapter) and budget over- or underspend. However, again, this pattern is not completely consistent – there are areas with overspends and lower or more average application rates, for example.[45]

Moreover, interviews with local authorities for this review suggest that some of these historic patterns may be breaking down. A majority of the areas identified as previously underspending in the analysis of monitoring data stated that they were predicting to overspend on their SWF budgets this year, suggesting that past spending patterns may no longer be a completely reliable guide to current need.

Perceptions of funding levels

Current funding levels

Given the overall levels of overspend reported above, it is unsurprising that a majority of councils feel that funding for the SWF is under significant strain. In their responses to this review, two thirds (22 of 32) of local authorities stated that the current level of Scottish Government funding for the SWF in their area was 'a lot less than is required to meet local need'. Of the remaining 10 local authorities, five felt it was a 'little less than required', three that it was 'about sufficient', one that it was a little more than required and one did not answer, but when asked said funding levels were adequate with the council topping it up, but that they would be in difficulty without this.

Local authority managers were interviewed in April/May 2022. These interviews suggested that the picture of over- and underspend described above might already be partially out of date; areas that had not been consistently overspent in the past were predicting that they would overspend this year:

> "It's probably been in the last year and a half. I would say there's been a noticeable increase around that timeframe. And I would probably say the way things are looking this year, it looks likely that's going to continue … We're expecting we'll overspend that budget again this year."
>
> (Local authority manager 22)

One view among local SWF managers was that, in order to fully meet local need, the SWF would need to be funded to a level that councils could generally provide grants at low or medium priority, but that this was currently fairly rare in many areas. It was suggested that where funding for the SWF is tight, councils are forced to make stricter decisions with less discretion.

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[45] For more detailed analysis underpinning this paragraph, see chapter 4 of the Data Analysis Appendix

> "Where you might think you have a lot of discretion, you don't really because the fund is cash limited."

(Local authority 6)

Around two thirds of areas reported that the council topped up their SWF funding, covering administration costs or, in some cases, both administration and additional funding for grants. This top up funding came from a variety of sources, including both general council funds, funding from other service areas, and sometimes specific funds, like Winter Support payments.

The decision to top up the SWF locally was viewed as a political one, taken because councillors wanted to be able to support people in need without restricting grants to only the 'highest most compelling' cases. Among those areas that did not receive top-up funding from their local authority, although general lack of resources was one factor, there was also a perception that some councils did not generally have a culture of providing additional resources for non-Council initiated schemes.

> "We just live within our budget. Why should we be spending any more of the council's money when it is not a scheme coming from us?"

(Local authority 28)

Administrative funding

There was a strong consensus across local authorities that the amount of funding allocated by the Scottish Government for administration of the SWF was inadequate. Interviewees described having had to fund significantly more staff than the Scottish Government budget covered in order to be able to deliver the Fund. Around 1 in 3 provided figures (unprompted by the review team, so the figure may have been different if other local authorities had also provided this information) that indicated the administrative budget would need to at least double (sometimes more) in order to cover current administrative costs. There was a general consensus that the current Scottish Government allocation did not allow most local authorities to effectively administer the Fund to the required deadlines, with councils either topping up administration from their own resources and/or struggling to meet statutory time frames. This reflects Highland Council's response to the Scottish Parliament Social Security Committee's 2018 call for evidence on the Scottish Welfare Fund, which stated that just 60% of the administrative cost of operating the Highland Council's Scottish Welfare Fund were met by Scottish Government in 2017 (though this increased in 2018/19).[46]

Local authority managers interviewed for this review noted that increased demand on the Fund was increasing administration costs, even if the number or size of awards was not increasing at the same rate, since teams were processing more

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[46] The Highland Council: Social Security Committee 17 May 2018

applications. It was also suggested that the current administrative budget does not recognise ongoing non-staff costs, such as software and system development.

Managers suggested that additional administrative funding would enable local authorities not only to stick to the statutory timescales for decisions more consistently (see further discussion of timescales in chapter 6), but also potentially enhance their ability to provide more holistic support to applicants, such as delivering or linking with income maximisation work and working more closely with other partners (such as homelessness teams, or third sector partners). There was also a strong view among local authority managers that staff would benefit from more administrative funding: a number of areas described challenges around resilience and staff turnover in their team as a result of both increased volume of work and an associated increase in challenging cases and complaints. This view was echoed in interviews with staff responsible for day-to-day decision-making on SWF for this review, who identified high (and increased) workload as their biggest challenge in delivering the Fund effectively.

Future funding

The expectation among local authority managers interviewed for this review was that demand and need for Crisis Grants would continue to increase in the foreseeable future, with associated increased pressures on budgets. With respect to Community Care Grants, even if demand did not increase at the same level as for Crisis Grants, funding was still viewed as a challenge in the context of increasing prices for goods – a number of areas described having restricted grants to higher priority items because the cost of items had increased. The higher cost of goods in rural areas was noted to be a longer-standing challenge for fulfilling Community Care Grants in those parts of Scotland.

Local authorities were very concerned about future funding for the SWF. There was a belief among managers that, to date, they had been able to manage with a combination of previous years under-spends and additional Covid-related top up funding. However, finances were now coming under severe strain. A number of interviewees were concerned about whether their local authority would be able to continue to top up their SWF funding in the future, given other significant pressures on council budgets.

> "The underfunding of the SWF has been on Scottish Government and local authority joint meeting agendas from the beginning of the fund. The demand for the scheme has increased significantly from the initial intention but the funding has not reflected that increase. Because of ongoing local authority budget constraints from 2023/24 onwards, it is likely that the resource currently being diverted to SWF administration will need to be reviewed and brought in line with statutory funding. Local authorities have been plugging the gap from their own budgets which will longer be possible."

(Local authority manager 31)

Various third sector organisations have also recently published research making the case for increased Scottish Government funding for the SWF, particularly in the light of additional external pressures on demand (welfare reform and the cost of living crisis). Inclusion Scotland[47] cite more Crisis Grant applications, more repeat applications and more refused applications as an indicator that the Scottish Welfare Fund will in future either need to raise the threshold at which help is offered – thereby denying assistance to increasing numbers of those in desperate need – or the amount of Scottish Government funding supplied to local authorities to administer the Fund would have to increase. Homeless Action Scotland[48] have argued that the level of SWF funding is critical to tenancy sustainability and would like to see this increased. The Menu for Change report recommended the Scottish Government consult local authorities to determine the budget needed to administer the fund to a high standard, including an increase to the SWF administrative budget as well as the overall programme budget to meet increased demand.[49]

In addition to arguing for an increase to the size of the overall budget of the Fund to ensure it can better support the increasing number of low income households facing financial crisis in Scotland, IPPR suggest redistributing resources between underspending and over-spending local authorities.[50] However, as discussed above, recent pressures mean that a number of areas that have historically been within their Scottish Government budgets were now predicting overspends. Moreover, as discussed in chapter 7, the relationship between over and underspending, outcomes and need is complex, making it difficult to predict the precise consequences of any such redistribution.

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[47] [Inclusion Scotland Written Evidence Scottish Welfare Fund](#)

[48] [Homeless Action Scotland Scottish Welfare Fund (May 2018)](#)

[49] [The Scottish Welfare Fund: Strengthening the Safety Net A Study of Best Practice (A Menu for Change)](#)

[50] [Tackling Child Poverty and Destitution: Next Steps for the Scottish Child Payment and the Scottish Welfare Fund](#)

5. Awareness and promotion of the Fund

Key points

- Local authorities varied significantly in how they promoted the fund and how frequently they did so.

- Promotion to other departments or partner organisations was generally viewed as effective by local authorities. Direct promotion to potential applicants was viewed as potentially more problematic in terms of prompting ineligible applications and potentially stimulating more demand than local authorities could meet given current resources.

- Applicants became aware of the Fund through a variety of routes. Among applicants who were new to applying for support or benefits, there was a perception that they only found out about SWF by chance, through word of mouth from family and friends or online searches.

- In the context of a cost of living crisis, it was suggested that there were likely to be more applicants falling into this group, and that there might need to be more activity to raise awareness of the Fund among them.

As discussed in chapter 3, lack of awareness of the Fund was identified by applicants interviewed for this review as a potential barrier to people accessing the help they need. The most recent statutory guidance on the Fund[51] noted that feedback from the Social Security Experience Panel suggested that potential Crisis Grant applicants did not always hear about the SWF when they needed it. The guidance states that SWF teams should ensure that other services which have contact with people in crisis have up to date information about the SWF with posters or leaflets to raise awareness and clear instructions on how to apply for a grant on local authority websites.

This chapter explores evidence on how local authorities promote the Fund and how potential applicants who might need it do become aware of it in practice. It draws primarily on findings from the review of existing evidence and qualitative interviews with local authorities, applicants and external stakeholders.

How do local authorities promote the Fund?

The local authority proformas and interviews with managers for this review indicated that both the level and type of promotion of the SWF varied significantly between local authorities. Local authorities fell into three main groups:

- **Those who said they did not actively promote the Fund at all**. This was primarily attributed to the level of demand, with local authorities either saying

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[51] Scottish Welfare Fund: statutory guidance – March 2021

that they did not think they needed to promote it (since they were already receiving many applications) or that they did not have the resource to promote it.

- **Those who promoted it to other council departments, third sector organisations or other partners (such as the Scottish Prison Service)** but did not do any direct promotion to potential applicants. Managers mentioned running awareness raising events for colleagues and partners and updating partners on the Fund through existing networks and meetings. While the review was not able to identify any 'hard data' on the impact of promotion on the reach of the Fund, this type of promotion was generally viewed as effective by local authorities, with examples of perceived increases in referrals from other departments and organisations. However, there was a perception from local authority decision-makers that they perhaps did not do as much of this type of indirect promotion to partners as they used to, for a range of reasons, including time pressure and feeling awareness was high enough (in general or in the context of existing high demand).

- **Those who engaged in more direct promotion to potential applicants**, for example, through social media or local media, promoting through schools, or using leaflets, bulletins, mailings, and posters. This direct promotion was generally conducted in combination with promoting through partners. There were also examples of local authorities actively highlighting SWF grants to those applying to other schemes (such as Discretionary Housing Payments, or Self-Isolation Support Grants (SISGs)).

Even among local authorities that reported doing more promotion, there was considerable variation in the frequencies and timings of promotion, with some reporting annual campaigns, some biannual, and others seasonal.

There was some reticence among local authority decision-makers about the effectiveness of more direct promotion through social media – for example, one local authority had tried promoting via Facebook, but felt this had led to an upsurge in ineligible applications and had missed its target audience.

There was also a degree of reticence among some local authorities around how much promotion of the SWF was appropriate, given it is a cash-limited scheme with specific criteria:

> "Of course you don't want to miss people, but you don't want to raise hopes that there is something available that isn't. There is a fixed criteria. We've also got to be careful that we are able to cope with the demand we get."
>
> (Local Authority manager 6)

This reflects Hilber and MacLeod's 2019 research on the SWF, [52] in which one local authority interviewee was reported as joking, "Don't tell anyone we're out there!". None of the nine local authorities they interviewed actively advertised the SWF to the public. Most suggested they had conducted a more active publicity campaign when the fund first started in 2013, but by the time of the research the most that

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[52] The Scottish Welfare Fund: Strengthening the Safety Net A Study of Best Practice (A Menu for Change)

was done was making presentations to advice and support agencies. Again, they reported that the lack of advertising was largely due to concern about lacking resources to deal with additional demand.

How do applicants become aware of the Fund?

Applicants interviewed for the review had become aware of the Fund through a variety of routes, including:

- Word of mouth via family and friends

- Via interactions with the DWP or Job Centre

- Through advice agencies, like a Citizens Advice Bureau, who they had approached for advice about financial crisis

- Through other professionals working for public and third sector organisations they were in contact with, including social workers, housing officers, council money advice teams, mental health nurses and others, and

- Through their own research into what help might be available (typically via online search engines).

As discussed in chapter 5, there was a view among some applicants (echoed by wider stakeholders) that they had only found out about the Fund by chance – via word of mouth or 'googling' help. These applicants tended to be those who were newly in crisis or need (for example, those who had recently been made redundant or had become disabled) and had not previously needed to apply for state support or benefits.

> "That kind of thing is not well advertised because I knew nothing about it and if it wasn't for her saying, I still wouldn't have known anything about it."
>
> (Applicant 3, found out by word of mouth through family member)

In contrast, those who were more familiar with benefits and support had sometimes been aware of the SWF for years, in some cases since the DWP Social Fund scheme which preceded it. There was a perception among external stakeholders that there was a need for more general publicity of the Fund to ensure the former group do not miss out. This was particularly felt to be the case in the context of the current cost of living crisis, which they expected would lead to more people who have not needed help previously hitting financial crisis.

6. Experiences of applying: mode and waiting times

Key points

- All local authorities stated that at least three application channels were available in their area. However, there were variations in the emphasis placed on different channels between area. Face-to-face applications were not offered in all areas.

- Applicants had different preferences and needs around application mode but were not always aware of the different application options available to them.

- External stakeholders believed that application options may have become more limited since the pandemic, particularly with regard to face-to-face applications. There was concern that people who do not have a phone or internet access may struggle to apply.

- The proportion of applications made online has increased significantly since the inception of the Fund – by 2020/21, 80% of applications were made online. A number of local authorities with overall high levels of applications were receiving all or almost all of these online.

- Overall, online applications were less likely to result in a successful grant compared with applications via other modes.

- Crisis Grant decisions were more likely than Community Care Grant decisions to be made within the statutory time frame.

- There was a strong perception among local authorities that resources were the biggest factor in whether they met target time frames. When resources were stretched, target times for Community Care Grants tended to be de-prioritised to ensure that Crisis Grants (and/or SISGs in recent years) could be delivered.

- Applicants described negative financial, physical and mental health consequences of having to wait for a Community Care Grant. Similarly, for some, even relatively short waits for Crisis Grants could cause significant difficulties when they had run out of food or electricity.

- Local authorities suggested that a single performance measure for grants was not necessarily helpful, since it did not allow for prioritisation of more urgent cases – for example by fast tracking of applications to support new tenancies.

The ultimate aim of the SWF is to 'provide a safety net to people on low incomes' and in doing so to alleviate hardship. In order to assess whether it is meeting this aim, a key question is what impacts applying to the Fund are actually having on applicants in practice. What are their experiences of applying to the Fund, and how far do these indicate it is working as an effective safety net?

The next two chapters explore experiences of and outcomes from applying to the Fund, drawing on a combination of quantitative data and qualitative interviews with applicants, wider stakeholders and local authorities. This chapter focuses on the application process itself, including evidence on how different application modes and waiting times for a decision can shape applicant experiences. The following chapter focuses on the actual outcomes of applications and the impacts of receiving or being refused an award, before discussing experiences of signposting and referrals to alternative or additional support.

Mode of application

Variations in application modes promoted

The SWF statutory guidance requires local authorities to provide for applications via at least three channels (face-to-face, online, telephone, or in writing). All local authorities stated that at least three channels were available in their area. However, it was apparent from interviews with local authorities that there were variations in the emphasis placed on particular channels between areas, with face-to-face, phone and paper application options appearing less accessible or well promoted in some areas compared with others. For example, while all areas stated that they offered phone applications, there appeared to be some differences in emphasis on phone calls with applicants as part of the process. Some areas stated that they phoned all applicants to ensure they had a complete picture of their application and to check the form is completed correctly. However, another area noted that if a customer phoned to apply, they would generally be directed to apply online in the first instance (although if this was not suitable the team would ring them back and help them complete the application). Conversely, a minority of areas reported that they continued to take most applications by phone.

Face-to-face applications were not offered in all areas, while in others it was offered but was not as readily accessible as other channels, either because of staffing issues or restricted office access (because of Covid, but also reflecting the geographical dispersal of customer-facing offices in some areas). It was also suggested that paper applications were generally an exception and were often only really used for people in or leaving prison and applying to the Fund for grants on release (as they are unable to access the internet from prison to apply).

Awareness and views of different modes

These local differences in emphasis on different application modes appeared to be reflected in differences in awareness of application options among applicants. Applicants interviewed for the review included people who had applied either by phone or by internet in spite of having a definite preference for the other mode, simply because they had not been aware it was an option. Those who were not used to using the internet, had literacy issues or internet access problems tended to have a preference for applying by phone, while others felt online applications were quicker and could feel less stressful than making a phone call (especially for those with anxiety issues or who had past negative experiences applying for help).

"Somebody on the phone might be having a bad day, all they need to do is snap at you...it's easier to do it anonymously."

<div align="right">(Applicant 19)</div>

Changes in application modes over time

There was a perception among external stakeholders interviewed for the review that limited application routes may have become a bigger barrier since the Covid-19 pandemic. This was particularly thought to be an issue with regard to in-person applications, as some local authorities had yet to open up their offices to the public more widely. For the minority of applicants who did not have a phone or internet access and needed an option to apply in person and/or to be able to wait for call-backs in council offices, this could present a significant barrier to accessing the Fund. One local authority interviewed for the review had dealt with this by offering phones in their office that people could use to apply if they did not have phone or internet access, but again this was not offered across all areas.

Analysis of quantitative data on the Fund confirms that the range of application methods being used has reduced over time. In 2013/14 applications were evenly split between telephone (48%) and online applications (44%) with a small number by post (6%) and in person (3%). By 2020/21 over 80% of applications were online, with just 18% by telephone and less than 1% by post or in person.

There was also considerable variation between local authorities even pre-pandemic in the application mix: in 2019/20, almost a third of local authorities already had applicants almost exclusively applying online. These include many of the higher demand/higher pressure areas. This may suggest that local authorities who experience the highest demand may encourage online applications as a means of dealing with this. Alternatively, it might be that areas that promote online applications receive higher numbers of applications, as applying online without the need to speak to someone may be less cognitively and emotionally demanding.

Mode of application and outcome

Quantitative analysis also indicates that having a genuine choice of application modes may matter not only because different applicants have different preferences, but also because different application modes appear to be associated with different success rates. After other factors are taken into account, applications by phone, face-to-face, or in writing have a higher success rate for both types of grant than online applications.[53] Moreover, there is evidence that vulnerable applicants tend to be more likely to apply online – in 2019/20, 92% of vulnerable frail, older or immobile people applied online, as did 97% of households with children living with a disabled adult, compared with 71% of all applicants in 2019/20.

In summary, the evidence indicates the importance to applicants' experience of the Fund of being made aware of a choice of application modes, both because different applicants have different needs and preferences with respect to applying, and

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[53] See Review of the Scottish Welfare Fund: Data Analysis Appendix, chapter 5

because different modes appear to be associated with different chances of success. However, the evidence indicates that, although all local authorities offer a choice of three modes, these different modes may not being promoted equally to applicants.

Waiting times

The SWF guidance sets out target processing times for both types of grant. Local authorities are required to make a decision on Crisis Grants applications immediately after the local authority had received all information they need to make a decision, and no later than the end of the next working day following receipt of an application. Community Care Grants allow for a longer timeline, with decisions required within 15 working days after receipt of all the information required to enable a decision.

Variations in waiting times

The 2021/22 SWF annual update[54] shows that 93% of Crisis Grants were processed within the target time of the next working day. A lower proportion – 86% - of Community Care Grant applications were processed within the 15 working day target limit. Although the majority of applications are processed within the target times, this has worsened in recent years, particularly for Community Care Grants, with over 90% of Community Care Grant applications processed within target times between 2015/16 and 2018/19 but just 83% in 2019/20, with limited recovery since. Similarly, over 95% of Crisis Grants were processed within target times in 2018/19 but this high rate has not been matched since.

Analysis of differences in processing times by local authority focused on 2019/20 data, since data for 2020/21 and 2021/22 were impacted by additional pressures in some areas relating to SWF teams processing of Covid self-isolation support grants (SISGs, discussed in chapter 9). This shows that more local authorities met target times for Crisis Grants (26 or 32 made at least 95% of decisions by the end of the next working day) compared with Community Care Grants (half made at least 95% of decisions within 15 working days).

Factors impacting on waiting times

There was no clear relationship in the quantitative data between waiting times for Community Care Grants and either level of applications or spend vs budget – those not meeting target times included local authorities with higher and lower levels of applications, while local authorities with budget overspends were represented among both those who met and those who missed target times. However, three of the areas that less commonly met Crisis Grant waiting times were also three of the areas with the highest overspends in 2019/20, which may indicate a relationship between stretched resources and longer waiting times.

The perception that resources were the biggest factor in meeting target timeframes was certainly apparent in interviews with local authority managers and decision-

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[54] Scottish Welfare Fund Statistics: annual update 2021-22

makers. As discussed in chapter 4, there was a strong perception that administrative funding for SWF was insufficient to enable local authorities to meet target timings consistently, and that this was only likely to become more challenging with increased demand due to the cost of living crisis.

A recurrent theme among local authority managers and decision-makers was that where teams were stretched, target times for Community Care Grants tended to be de-prioritised, in order to ensure that Crisis Grants (and/or SISGs in more recent years) could be delivered within the statutory timelines. This is reflected in both the lower adherence to time targets for Community Care Grants, above, and in the views of some stakeholders interviewed for this review, who felt that processing times for Community Care Grants, in particular, were considerably slower than they had been historically:

> "In the 12 years I've worked with this service, the length of time for decision and then for delivery is massive compared to what it used to be."

> (External local stakeholder 1)

Impacts of waiting times for applicants

The potential negative impacts of waiting for Community Care Grants on applicants – even sometimes when these were within the 15 day target – were indicated by both external stakeholders and applicants themselves, who described financial, physical and mental health consequences of having to wait for a grant:

> "Even though I applied in the first week of November … I had to wait until the week after Christmas. It was very difficult because I had just a guest bed which was really uncomfortable. I had no electric cooker connected; I just had a microwave… I had a gold watch of sentimental value and I ended up selling it to get my cooker connected and to get some groceries. … That upset me quite a bit, especially as it was Christmas time…"

> (Applicant 24)

However, it was also noted that the impact of waiting for a grant will vary depending on people's individual circumstances – for example, a stakeholder noted that if someone is moving into a new tenancy and has no furniture, they may either be paying housing costs without being able to move in or end up living with no furniture for a period, either of which was felt likely to have a more significant impact than replacing an old or broken item in an existing property. Similarly, depending on the individuals' circumstances, replacing a broken item might be a higher or lower priority in terms of impact – for example, an applicant noted that it had been problematic for him to go two to three weeks without a fridge as he needed to keep his medication refrigerated.

Local authority managers suggested that having a single performance measure in terms of timescales was not necessarily helpful, since it did not allow local authorities to prioritise more urgent cases. Some (though not all) local authorities did already have arrangements in place to fast track or prioritise applications,

particularly for Community Care Grants, often working with housing colleagues or local third sector organisations. However, this did not seem to be an option for those applying without the support of an organisation: an applicant who had applied both independently and through a social worker commented on the fact she felt her social worker had been able to 'push' her application more than she was able to.

Analysis of quantitative data to examine who waits longer for Community Care Grant decisions also indicates that those moving into new accommodation are likely to be prioritised – people who were moving were more likely to receive decisions within the target time-frame. Groups who were **more** likely to wait more than 15 days for a decision included: online applicants compared with those applying by phone, in person or by post; third party applicants (where someone else applied on their behalf); and people without disabilities (indicating that those reporting a disability might be prioritised for a decision).

In line with the quantitative data, which shows that generally Crisis Grants were more likely to be decided within the time frames compared with Community Care Grants, there was less discussion of issues with Crisis Grant wait times among local authorities and external stakeholders. However, applicants interviewed for the review highlighted that for some, even relatively short waits (within the target time frame) could cause significant difficulties when people had or were about to run out of food or electricity and had no other means to pay for these. As one applicant put it: "if you're needing, you're needing there and then." For another, waiting two days had mean their electricity ran out and their fridge-freezer defrosted, adding to their financial difficulties as they had to throw food out.

The wait times reported by applicants also varied quite widely, for both types of grant. Both applicants and external stakeholders commented that better information on the actual likely current waiting times would help in alleviating some of the stress of applying, which could be considerable during this waiting period:

> "It was terrible. I was stressed beyond words, suffered from stress and panic attacks as it is. Knowing whether I would get it, if it would be yes or no … if you've got no one to turn to it's horrible you know."
>
> (Applicant 11, who reported waiting 3-4 days for a Crisis Grant decision)

7. Experiences of applying: outcomes

Key points

- Crisis Grant applications have always been more likely than Community Care Grant applications to result in an award. However, award success rates for both grant types fell in the years prior to the pandemic (and remained lower in 2021/22).

- Falling success rates are likely to reflect multiple factors, including budget pressures, and the changing profile of applicants, with applicants with specific vulnerabilities (who are more likely to be successful) accounting for a smaller proportion of applications in recent years.

- Pre-pandemic, there were significant differences in SWF application success rates between local authorities, even after controlling for other factors that might impact success. In other words, all other things being equal (household type, reason for applying, disability etc.), the local authority people apply for a grant in has a significant impact on their likelihood of success.

- The relationship between success rates and budget is complicated – there are local authorities with historic overspends with both high and low success rates, and areas with underspends with both high and low success rates. While budget is clearly one important factor, the evidence suggests there are likely to be other elements, beyond budgets, impacting on differences in success rates between areas.

- Analysis of other factors that impact on chances of a successful grant generally suggest that level of vulnerability is key, and that grants do appear to be targeted towards those with more recorded vulnerabilities.

- The average award level for Community Care Grants has reduced over time, while the average Crisis Grant has increased.

- Pre-pandemic, there were large variations between local authorities in the size of the average Community Care Grant award. These appear to reflect, at least in part, differences between areas in the reasons for applying for grants. However, budget also appears likely to be a factor, with historically under-spending areas making larger average awards.

- Crisis Grant award levels varied less between local authorities and there was no strong relationship with budget overspends.

- Interviews with applicants highlighted the huge impacts that receiving SWF grants can have on people, not only financially but for their physical and mental health and relationships. Conversely, when people are turned down for grants, they reported negative impacts for their physical and mental wellbeing and for their feelings about the support available to them in general.

- The impact of grants was sometimes limited by the amount provided, which was not always felt to be enough to meet the need.

- There was also a perception that the quality of Community Care Grant items sometimes limited their beneficial impacts. However, there was no consensus on whether it would be better to receive cash rather than goods.

- In general, applicants did not have a 'plan B' for how to manage if their SWF application was turned down. Alternative options were felt to be limited.

- Only a minority of applicants to either grant were reported as having been referred to another service provider for help – around a third in each case.

- There is variation in recorded levels and stated approaches to referrals and signposting between local authorities. Applicants' experiences of referrals and signposting also varied.

- Taken together, the data indicate scope to increase the use of active referrals, and to improve consistency of both referrals and their recording between local authorities.

This chapter focuses on outcomes from applying to the Fund. It examines quantitative data on how outcomes have changed over time and how they vary between local authorities and between different groups of applicants, before exploring the impact of successful and unsuccessful outcomes, drawing particularly on qualitative interviews with applicants.

Changing outcomes over time

Crisis Grant applications have always been more likely to result in an award compared with applications for Community Care Grants: in 2021/22, 66% of Crisis Grant applications resulted in an award, compared with 55% of Community Care Grant applications.[55]

Award success rates for both grant types fell in the years prior to the pandemic. In 2014/15, 66% of Community Care Grant applications resulted in an award compared with just 54% in 2019/20 (similar to the 2021/22 figure of 55%). In 2013/14, 72% of Crisis Grant applications resulted in an award, falling to 63% receiving an award in 2019/20. Crisis Grant application success rates increased during the pandemic, to 69% in 2020/21, before falling back to 66% in 2021/22 – slightly higher than 2019/20 but still lower compared with previous years.[56]

The reasons for falling success rates are likely to be multiple. Budget pressures are likely to be one factor – as discussed in chapter 4, overall spend on SWF in 2021/22 was 115% of budget, compared with 108% in 2019/20. The complex relationship between budgets and success rates is discussed further below. Analysis of the profile of people receiving awards also indicates that, compared with earlier years of the Fund, there are now more applications but proportionally fewer from people recorded as having specific vulnerabilities. As discussed below, people

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[55] Scottish Welfare Fund Statistics: annual update 2021-22

[56] For further detail of trends in awards over time, see Data Analysis Appendix, Figure 25.

classed as 'vulnerable' have higher success rates, so this shift in the profile of applicants is also likely to have contributed to a reduction in success rates.[57]

Differences in outcomes between local authorities

Analysis of differences in outcomes focused on 2019/20 data, in recognition of the fact that 2020/21 and 2021/22 data is likely to be atypical given the impacts of the pandemic on both funding and demand. There were significant variations between local authority in success rates for both Community Care and Crisis Grants. These differences between local authority were apparent even in analysis which controls for variation in other factors that might impact on success – such as the vulnerability of applicants or reason for the application. In fact, local authority was the most significant factor in predicting successful Community Care Grant and Crisis Grant applications: in other words, all other things being equal (household type, reason for applying, disability etc.), the local authority people apply for a grant in has a significant impact on their likelihood of success.

This, in turn, raises the question of the extent to which this reflects greater funding pressures in those authorities where chances of success are lower – in other words, would increasing funding increase award success rates? As discussed in chapter 4, any conclusions about future funding allocations between local authorities based on analysis of spend in recent years needs to be approached very carefully, given the finding that a number of local authorities that have previously managed to stay within budget are now predicting overspends. However, analysis of 2019/20 data indicates that the relationship between budget over- and under-spend and success rates is complicated:

- Local authorities with a higher proportion of successful outcomes had more commonly overspent their budgets. In these cases, increasing funding may be expected to result in helping these areas match local needs better.

- However, there were also some areas that had historically overspent their budget and had lower than average success rates. Where this is the case, it is less clear how increasing funding would impact – if, for example, lower success rates are due to stricter assessment approaches, additional funding might increase success rates.

- At the same time, there were also a small number of local authorities with lower than average success rates that had also historically underspent their budget (and also underspent in 2021/22). Where this is the case, it is not clear how increasing funding would impact on outcomes.

- Similarly, it is less clear how additional funding would benefit areas with high success rates but which have historically underspent their budget (although only one local authority fell into this category – they had recorded an underspend in 2021/22 but predicted an overspend in future). High success rates alongside underspent budgets could, for example, indicate a lack of awareness or promotion, or a reluctance to apply in rural areas.

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[57] Again, further detail of this analysis is provided in the Data Analysis Appendix, chapter 5.

It is also important to keep in mind that historic underspends are not necessarily an accurate guide to current need and demand. There was concern among a number of local authorities that had historic underspends (including those with underspends in the 2021/22 data) that the Scottish Government might reduce their grant based on this pattern, but a majority of those with historic underspends indicated to this review that they expected to need more than their current budget to meet local need in the current year (2022/23).

The analysis above also indicates that, while increasing budgets for areas with high over-spends and high proportions of successful outcomes areas might be expected to result in a better match between local needs and available funds, predicting the precise impact of increasing budgets across all local authorities is very difficult. The differences described above in relationships between over- and under-spending and the proportion of successful outcomes suggest that that there are likely to be other elements, beyond budgets, impacting on differences in success rates between areas.

Analysis of qualitative data on local approaches and issues, provided by local authorities to this review, does not provide a definitive answer on what drives differences in the patterns and relationships between spend and outcomes between areas. Rather, taken together, the data collated for this review, suggests that a range of factors are at play, which interact in different ways in different areas. These include: differences in approaches to promotion, differences in local cultures around accepting help, differences in the strictness or discretion around the application of rules in the guidance, and adminstrative funding. The final chapter of this report draws on stakeholder suggestions and the experience of the researchers who conducted this review to suggest possible approaches to future monitoring and audit that might help support continual improvements in practice while respecting the complexity of these relationships within different local authorities.

Other factors that impact on success

SWF management data was used to examine how individual characteristics (like applicant age, gender, disability or other vulnerability) and application characteristics (like application mode, or whether a third party made the application on someone's behalf) impact on likelihood of being awarded a grant.[58] It is important to note that this analysis is limited by the data included in the SWF management statistics. High levels of missing information means a number of potentially important variables, such as income, ethnicity, religion or immigration status – which may also be related to chances of success – could not be included in the analysis. As such, the analysis discussed below can only explain part of the variation in outcomes for different applicants – there are likely to be other factors that are not captured here. However, it is still useful in identifying a number of the key drivers of variation in outcomes.

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[58] Based on multivariate regression analysis, using SWF monitoring data from 2019/20. Again, 2019/20 data was used given that changes to funding levels and demand for the fund in 2020/21 and 2021/22 mean they may be atypical.

Community Care Grants

As discussed above, **local authority is the factor most strongly predictive of successful Community Care Grants applications**. Other factors that predict the likelihood of a **Community Care Grant application** resulting in a successful award include:

- **The reason for the application** – those getting help on leaving hospital and leaving other institutions and those needing to move in order to care for someone else were more likely to receive an award compared with those needing help to improve a home to maintain living conditions.

- **Vulnerability** is important, with those vulnerable due to homelessness, domestic abuse, mental health issues, chronic ill-health and other physical health issues more likely to receive an award than those without these vulnerabilities.

- The likelihood of a successful application also **increased with age**, although some vulnerable young people have higher than average success rates, including those leaving care and those living with other young adults.

- **Those who received help to apply** and those who had **a third party apply on their behalf** were more likely to get an award than those who applied alone.

- **Social renters** more commonly received awards than private renters or owners.

- Those in receipt of **disability benefits** – DLA or PIP – were significantly more likely to receive awards than those not in receipt of these disability-related benefits. In contrast, those on other benefits (e.g. Job Seekers' Allowance, Working Tax Credit, Universal Credit) were significantly less likely than those not in receipt of those benefits to receive an award.

- **Those waiting for benefits were more likely to receive an award**, compared with those not waiting. However, as seen above, receiving benefits was not generally associated with greater likelihood of success, except in the case of some disability benefits.

- **Those applying online were less likely to be successful than telephone applicants**, while those applying by post were more likely to be successful (possibly due to this being the main mechanism for those leaving prison to apply).

- **Waiting longer for a decision was associated with lower likelihood** of an award, as is being a repeat applicant.

- The **time of year** the application is made is also significant, with applications in November, December and January less likely to be successful (November and January are months where, as discussed in chapter 3, the level of applications tends to be higher), and applications in March (the end of the financial year) more likely to result in awards.

- **Those referred to debt advice, money advice and the men's advice line were less likely to receive an award**. This suggests that these referrals may be made instead of a grant (presumably due to lack of eligibility) while those referred to other services – **housing, social work, hospital, CAB and**

resilience support were more likely to receive an award, indicating these applicants were referred for help as well as receiving an award to help with other issues affecting tenancy sustainment, health and wellbeing.

Overall, this analysis suggests that Community Care Grants are being targeted towards vulnerable people, including homeless people, those fleeing domestic abuse, and often people with disabilities or chronic health issues. However, local authority is also significant, independent of the vulnerability characteristics of applicants.

Crisis Grants

Analysis of factors associated with successful and unsuccessful Crisis Grant applications shows considerable overlap with factors predicting Community Care Grants, including:

- **Local authority**, which as discussed is the most important predictor of success for both grant types, independently of other factors

- **Vulnerability** of applicants. Those with mental health issues, vulnerable homeless people, chronically ill people and vulnerable lone parents were more likely to receive a Crisis Grant compared to those without these vulnerabilities.

- **Award likelihood increased with age**

- **Social renters** had a greater likelihood of receiving a Crisis Grant than others, with those in institutional/ homeless settings least likely to receive an award.

- **Online applicants were again less likely than telephone applicants** to receive an award.

- Those **with a third-party applying** on their behalf had higher success rates.

- **Having a longer waiting time was associated with lower** likelihood of an award

- **Applying in March (end of financial year) was more likely to lead to an award** than applying in January (peak demand in terms of application levels)

- **Referral patterns –** Successful applicants more commonly received referrals to housing, employability and men's advice as well as an award, while unsuccessful applicants more commonly received referrals to welfare rights, food banks, social work, resilience support, advocacy and hospital, indicating that these types of referrals may be made instead of an award.

However, in contrast with Community Care Grants:

- **those receiving DLA and PIP benefits were actually less likely to receive a Crisis Grant award** (along with many other people receiving benefits, more similarly to Community Care Grants)

- **those receiving help to apply were no more likely** to receive a Crisis Grant than those applying independently

Other factors that were significantly associated with likelihood of a Crisis Grant included:

- **Reasons for applying** – having an unexpected expense, being stranded away from home without any means to get back, a fire or gas explosion and a delay in payment of benefits were all more likely to result in a Crisis Grant. Reasons less likely to result in an award were: benefit/income being spent, lost money, stolen money, breakdown of relationship within family and having nowhere to stay, as well as flooding, or 'other' disaster and travel.

- **Benefit sanctions** and **repeat applications** were both associated with a reduced likelihood of a Crisis Grant award.

- **Household type and gender** were both significant predictors of likelihood of being awarded a Crisis Grant, with single adults more likely to receive an award compared with couples and families, females less likely to get an award compared with males.

In summary, as with Community Care Grants, there is strong evidence that Crisis Grants are targeted to those who are more vulnerable. However, there is also an indication that those in receipt of benefits and others deemed ineligible are being referred elsewhere instead. As with Community Care, local authority is most significant, independent of the characteristics of applicants.

Variation in the profile of SWF grant applicants and recipients over time

As discussed above, although vulnerability is a strong predictor of receiving an award, the data suggests that, overall, people with vulnerabilities accounted for a smaller proportion of applicants by 2020/21 compared with the early years of the Fund – something which may help account for some of the reduction in success rates. The profile of applicants has also changed over time with respect to the nature of applicant vulnerability. For Community Care Grants and Crisis Grants, applications from people with mental health issues have overtaken applications from people with physical health issues and disabilities. This may reflect the more general increase in mental health issues and the correlation between financial hardship and poor mental health.

Award levels

Community Care Grants

Overall, the median award level (the point at which 50% of awards are above this amount and 50% below) for Community Care Grants has reduced over time, from £456.00 in 2013/14 to £417.74 in 2019/20. It fell further to £381.92 in 2020/21,[59] although this may reflect the impact of the pandemic – fewer people were able to move during this period, resulting in a lower requirement for larger items associated with moving home. There was also huge variation by local authority in award levels – pre-pandemic, in 2019/20, the mean award by local authority ranged from £188.13 to £1,067.92.

These differences between local authorities appear, at least in part, to reflect differences in the reasons for applying for Community Care Grants between areas

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[59] Analysis of award levels covers 2019/20 and 2020/21 only, as this bespoke analysis was conducted before the annual tables for 2021/22 were updated.

– in a number of areas with higher average awards, a higher proportion of applications were for 'planned resettlement after an unsettled way of life', and so included larger items of expenditure. Grant levels were also strongly related to type of vulnerability – the highest awards were made to those applying because of homelessness, eviction, domestic abuse, or being a young person estranged from their parents. However, budget also appears likely to be a factor - areas with higher average awards also tended to be under-spending on budgets pre-pandemic, suggesting that for these areas, award levels may be less constrained by available budget.

Crisis Grants

In contrast with Community Care Grants, the median level of Crisis Grants has increased over time – from £50 in 2013/14, to £75.24 in 2019/20 and £82.81 in 2020/21.[60] There was also variation in median award levels between local authorities, although to a lesser extent compared with Community Care Grants.

Awards were higher among households with children, which may in part explain differences between local authorities. In contrast with Community Care Grants, there was no particular relationship between award level and budget overspend – higher than average awards were spread across both over- and under-spending local authorities.

Impacts for applicants

In addition to quantitative analysis of what factors shape outcomes for applicants, a key task for the review was to understand the impact these outcomes have for applicants.

Crisis Grants

Interviews with applicants show that the impact of receiving grants through the SWF can be huge, not only financially but also for their physical and mental wellbeing and relationships with others. With respect to Crisis Grants, applicants described the Fund literally enabling them eat or heat their homes. They spoke not only about the mental relief associated with this, but also the impact on their relationships. Crisis Grants enabled people to either travel to visit others or have people in their homes (when they might not have been able to do so otherwise because of a lack of heat or light). They reduced pressure on parents and thereby lessened stress for children. And they helped people avoid straining family relationships by asking others (who they recognised were often themselves short of money) for loans. Beyond these immediate effects, applicants also spoke about the longer-term impact of feeling that there will be support available to them if they find themselves in crisis again:

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[60] Analysis of award levels covers 2019/20 and 2020/21 only, as this bespoke analysis was conducted before the annual tables for 2021/22 were updated.

"Knowing that I can receive support, that was nice … I see everything in a different way"

<div align="right">(Applicant 16)</div>

"It's a great help when you get the text to get the money. It's a relief to know that when you do get paid you don't need to pay back a debt to family… when I get paid I can manage"

<div align="right">(Applicant 46)</div>

"Immense … I could eat for the next 13 days … I just went and got the basics, that's all I needed to get through … I don't know what I would've done without it."

<div align="right">(Applicant 41)</div>

However, although applicants who had received Crisis Grants were extremely positive about the impacts these had had for them, the size of grant could limit the impact. Applicants described instances where the grant had not been sufficient to buy both food and fuel for the timeframe it was meant to cover.

When applications for Crisis Grants were not successful, applicants described equally stark negative impacts for their physical and mental wellbeing.

"It meant life was tough. … It was winter, and we couldn't put heating on, so we were cold. When it came to food it was right, we're having toast. Then we ran out of bread."

<div align="right">(Applicant 28)</div>

"[Not receiving support] It's quite upsetting really, and also [paused, as clearly upset] when you feel you've got nowhere to turn to and stuff, it is quite difficult."

<div align="right">(Applicant 21)</div>

In general, applicants stated that they did not have any 'plan B' for how they would manage if their application was not successful. When turned down, they reported:

- **Asking family and friends for a loan** – something which could be experienced as humiliating:

    "I hate asking for help, because I've always stayed on my own two feet… and to turn round and say to someone that you need help, you don't want to be doing that."

<div align="right">(Applicant 4)</div>

- **Using a food bank** – however, applicants and external stakeholders both noted that the support food banks provide, while often a lifeline, can be limited compared with a Crisis Grant. Different food banks apply different eligibility

criteria, the options are limited (which can be problematic when people are on special diets or have children who are fussy eaters), and they are not always easy to get to, especially for those living rurally.

- **Taking out high interest loans**, or
- **Simply going without**, which could have severe negative impacts:

> "I really started to get depressed. Day by day I was sinking. My mental health isn't great just now and that exacerbated any bad feelings I had."

> (Applicant 1, who described spending 9 days without electricity after a Crisis Grant application was refused)

A stakeholder also described what they saw as the longer-term impacts of being refused a Crisis Grant for people's trust in government support:

> "It's the impact on the clients, you often just see they just become despondent and that's where the loss of faith in local authority and the support that they can provide comes from, … The impact of a negative response can be so far reaching, it's not just about them not getting that 30 or 40 or 50 or whatever amount it is … but how that affects them accessing services or support or help in the future as well."

> (External local stakeholder 19, Charity)

Community Care Grants

Applicants also described major positive impacts from receiving a Community Care Grant, both for their physical environment and wellbeing and also for their mental health and how they felt about their home.

> "The amount of stress it has helped alleviate, particularly with my own mental health issues … it's a life changer."

> (Applicant 37)

> "The Grant was really important, because it made me feel I had a safe space where I could survive really, where I could comfortably live without having to worry about, like, how I'm going to cook stuff or stuff like that"

> (Applicant 36)

However, similarly to Crisis Grants, there was some discussion of the impacts being limited by grants being partial, resulting in applicants having to fall back on family and friends for items that were not granted, or just go without them until they could save up to buy or replace them.

Applicants and stakeholders also noted quality issues with some of the goods provided to fulfil Community Care Grants, particularly relating to soft furnishings (for example, small sofas or uncomfortable mattresses) and issues with the quality and fit of flooring. However, there were mixed views on whether it would be better to be given cash and choose their own items – one view among both groups was that it

was better to have it organised for them and not to have either the hassle or "the opportunity to waste any of the money" (expressed by an applicant who had substance misuse issues at the time of his Community Care Grant). In contrast, others wanted more choice. One stakeholder felt that the delivery of Community Care Grant goods was recognisable in their area, which might be experienced as stigmatising.

The impacts of being turned down for Community Care Grants depended on both what people had applied for and whether they were able to find a back-up option. At the extreme, it was suggested that not getting a Community Care Grant to support a new tenancy could mean an applicant returning to an unsafe place:

> "What do people do after that? Go back to an ex, or a property they've left?"
>
> (External local stakeholder 5, advice agency)

Applicants described getting into debt to purchase the items they needed – including borrowing from family and friends, taking out a high interest loan, or requesting a Universal Credit advance. Charities were mentioned as an alternative source of help, but as with foodbanks they were seen as limited in terms of the items they could offer (for example, only providing small items, not white goods). Other applicants had saved up until they could afford the items or in some cases, simply lived without it:

> "The lino all lifts up, it's really bad … all you can see is the plywood and the concrete … it's actually quite sharp on your feet when you catch it."
>
> (Applicant 39, who applied for a grant to replace poor quality lino previously provided through SWF and was turned down)

Onward signposting and referrals

The SWF guidance states that "signposting applicants to wider support services or actively referring, where possible, is also a critical area of best practice for local authorities." Beyond the actual grant decision itself, signposting and referrals were also important outcomes, particularly in a context where overall success rates have fallen over time, so referral to other services is arguably even more important.

According to the SWF management data, only a minority of applicants for either Community Care or Crisis Grants are reported as having been referred to another service provider for help – around a third in each case in 2020/21,[61] although referrals from both have increased over time. However, beneath the overall pattern of low referrals, some local authorities report quite high levels of referral, while others are reporting almost none.[62] It is difficult to determine the extent to which this

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[61] Bespoke analysis of referrals data was undertaken for 2020/21 before 2021/22 tables were available.

[62] See more detailed analysis in the Data Analysis Appendix, chapter 5

reflects differential rates of recording of referrals in the monitoring data, or differential rates of referrals.

All local authorities interviewed for the review discussed signposting to additional support. However, there was variation between areas in terms of:

- **Whether all applicants were signposted to additional support, or whether this focused primarily on unsuccessful applicants and/or repeat applicants**. For example, some areas said they signposted all applicants to money advice, but also highlighted other services to unsuccessful applicants (particularly foodbanks – which reflects the findings above that referral to foodbank was associated with unsuccessful applications).

- **Whether local authorities were only signposting** (i.e. pointing out or sharing contact details for other potential sources of help) **or were actively referring** (i.e. actually arranging appointments or actively putting them in touch with another service.

Applicants' accounts also suggest that experiences of onward signposting and referrals was very variable, for both successful and unsuccessful applicants. There were examples where onward signposting or referral seemed to have made a significant difference to applicants – for example, signposting them to schemes that helped with vouchers for fuel, which helped them avoid needing to apply for a Crisis Grant again. However, applicants also noted limitations to the usefulness of signposting, such as the issues with food banks discussed above, or the variability in the help that power companies will offer those struggling with bills (which was believed to depend both on who you speak to and whether you had asked for help previously).

Analysis of the monitoring data shows that some areas that were recording lower levels of referrals were areas with higher levels of successful awards. In these cases, low referrals may be due to a lower perceived need for alternative assistance. However, taken together, the quantitative and qualitative evidence indicate scope to increase the use of active referrals, and to improve consistency of both referrals and their recording between local authorities.

Local authorities also discussed the challenges of actually engaging applicants with additional support, particularly as they are not obliged to take up this support and are primarily concerned with alleviating their immediate financial crisis at the point they are in contact with the SWF team. It was also noted that it can be difficult for SWF teams to effectively identify the underlying cause of crisis. This was seen as a particular challenge for repeat applicants – there was a perception among some in SWF teams that some applicants are aware of the requirement to give different reasons for each application (since Crisis Grants are supposed to be for one-off crises), which acts as a disincentive to give an accurate picture of the underlying issues bringing them back to the Fund. Finally, administrative resourcing was seen as a barrier to local authority teams being able to provide more active signposting and referral – one local authority team that felt they had previously offered more actual referrals commented:

"because of the volume of work we've got at the moment … we tend to just do the food bank referrals and the rest of the time we just give them the contact information for the charities or people that can help them."

<div align="right">(Local Authority decision makers, Area E)</div>

8. Assessment and review processes

Key points

- Providing a definitive view on the consistency of SWF decisions across Scotland is extremely difficult, since differences between areas do not, on their own, mean that guidance is being applied inconsistently.

- There is some evidence that, at a Scotland-wide level, decision-making practice appears to have improved since the inception of the scheme, with fewer applications recorded as rejected for being 'incomplete', and fewer Crisis Grant decisions being changed at Tier 2 review.

- However, there was some evidence of differences between areas in assessment and/or recording practices which seem unlikely to reflect different priority levels or local needs. This includes:

  o variations in the level of applications rejected as 'incomplete' (combined with evidence of variation in the approach to following up on missing information with applicants)

  o differences in the information local authorities require from applicants to support decision-making, and

  o perceived differences in local interpretations of specific terms in the guidance, including 'exceptional circumstances' or 'exceptional pressure'.

- There was also evidence of variation in exactly how local authorities communicate decisions, including whether decision letters are sent in every case and how clearly the reasons for decisions (especially rejections) are communicated to applicants. There was a desire among applicants and external stakeholders to better understand the basis of SWF decisions.

- Around 5% of Community Care Grant applications and 2% of Crisis Grant applications have resulted in requests for Tier 1 review. While the proportion of decisions resulting in Tier 1 review varies between local authorities, there is no consistent pattern to this and the reasons recorded for review make interpreting these differences difficult.

- However, for Crisis Grants, local authorities that were more likely to change their decisions at Tier 1 had fewer decisions changed at Tier 2. This may indicate that where the LA has a robust, self-critical approach to Tier 1 review this results in fewer decisions being overturned by the SPSO.

- There were some differences of opinion between local authorities and the Ombudsman over interpretation of the guidance, particularly with regard to the evidence that should be required of applicants and how much information gathering local authorities can reasonably be expected to undertake before arriving at a decision. However, local authorities clearly recognised the value of external scrutiny from the SPSO.

- Awareness of review rights was very variable among applicants interviewed for this research. Among those who were aware they could request a review

> but chose not to, scepticism about the value, fear of a second rejection, timing issues, and (for partial awards) concern that the whole award might be removed were all barriers to requesting review.

Local discretion is built into the SWF. As discussed in chapter 2, both local authorities and external stakeholders have commented on the tensions that can arise in delivering a consistent service while allowing for appropriate local discretion. The main mechanism to ensure consistency in delivery of the SWF is the statutory guidance[63] which sets out the eligibility and qualifying criteria for assistance for the two schemes and limits to the number of awards. It also makes clear that local discretion should be based on the assessment of need, vulnerability, the consequences of not getting an award, and the likely impact, of the grant. Where applicants feel that a decision has not been fairly made, they are able to request a review of that decision – initially by someone else within the local authority (first tier review) and if they are not satisfied with this, by the Scottish Public Service Ombudsman (SPSO).

A key question for the review was how fair and consistent SWF decision-making is across Scotland. This chapter examines both the assessment process by which decisions are made and the review process when applicants are unhappy with those decisions. It explores whether current guidance is effectively supporting decisions, and where systems and guidance might need to be improved.

Assessment of applications

Assessing consistency in decision-making

It is important to acknowledge at the outset of this chapter that providing a definitive view on the consistency of SWF decisions across Scotland is extremely difficult. The quantitative management data can give us insights into potential differences in how the Fund is administered, via differences in reasons for rejecting applications, levels of reviews, and award size. Similarly, qualitative interviews with local authorities can help identify differences in approaches between areas, while interviews with applicants and external stakeholders can provide evidence on the perceived consistency of decision-making.

However, given that the SWF is a discretionary, not an eligibility-based Fund, differences between areas do not, on their own, mean that the guidance is being applied differently – rather, they may reflect legitimate differences in local practice aimed at better meeting local need, or differences in the priority levels applied by different areas at different points in time in order to manage budgets. These differences may be experienced or viewed as inconsistencies by applicants or other stakeholders – and may be viewed as unfair – but they do not necessarily imply that the guidance is being applied inconsistently by local authorities.

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[63] Scottish Welfare Fund: statutory guidance – March 2021

A definitive comparison of consistency of decision-making between local authorities would arguably require a relatively large scale desk-based review of actual documented decisions. This was beyond the scope of this review, but is something that may be worth considering beyond the review, as part of strengthening the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the Fund.

However, taking these limitations into account, there is evidence from the SWF management information and the SPSO's data on second tier reviews that at a Scotland-wide level, decision-making practice appears to have improved since the inception of the scheme:

- **The amount of missing or incomplete information about applications has reduced** – the monitoring data shows a reduction in applications rejected for being 'incomplete' and a reduced use of the 'other' code as a reason for rejection over time, indicating an improvement in assessment practice and recording.

- **Fewer Crisis Grant decisions being changed by the SPSO at tier 2 review** – the proportion of Crisis Grant reviews that were upheld (i.e. the original decision was found to be incorrect) has fallen from 35% in 2017/18 to 18% in 2021/22.[64] Tier 2 review decisions are one indicator of how well initial decisions are made, so this indicates that, overall, Crisis Grant decisions appear to have become more consistent with the guidance over time. The SPSO attributes this, in part, to the higher numbers of repeat applications, which are reflected in requests for review. As repeat applications beyond the statutory maximum (three per year) have to be assessed as 'exceptional circumstances', the SPSO often assess that the eligibility criteria is not met (in line with local authorities' assessments).

At the same time, although as discussed it is important to be cautious in inferring that differences between local authorities necessarily implies inconsistency, there is some evidence of differences between areas in assessment and/or recording practice which seem unlikely to be explained by differing priority levels or local need:

- **The level of applications rejected as 'incomplete' varied considerably between areas.** Although some level of variation might be expected, this may suggest that some areas are doing more to follow-up with applicants where they have not provided enough information initially. There was evidence from the qualitative interviews with local authorities that there was variation in this regard, with some local authorities describing putting considerable effort into contacting applicants to talk through their application and 'fill in the gaps'.

- **The evidence review and qualitative data collected from local authorities identify some differences in the information required to support decision-making.** In particular, while some local authorities stated that they needed to check participant bank statements for audit purposes, others indicated that they view this as a barrier to applying and actively avoid requesting these. As

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[64] SPSO Annual Report 2021-22

discussed in chapter 3, applicant experiences support the idea that requiring bank statements can be a barrier to applying.

More exceptionally, one area mentioned using their online application system to 'screen out' ineligible applications. However, other areas were clear that they would not do this as it could exclude people who had just filled in their form poorly: "it can make people fall through the cracks." While exceptional, this example may indicate some ongoing issues around the application of 'gatekeeping' in the application process (as flagged previously by CPAG and others, who have raised concerns about 'eligibility checkers', in addition to issues with online forms requiring information that not everyone will have – such as National Insurance numbers – that can prevent people from being able to apply[65]).

- **Perceived differences in local interpretations of specific terms in the SWF guidance**. Interviews with local authority decision-makers as well as external stakeholders indicated some uncertainty over the application of particular terms in the guidance and a perception that differences in understanding were leading to some inconsistency in their application to decisions across areas. In particular, the question of what should be included under 'exceptional circumstances' or 'exceptional pressure' criteria was highlighted.

The SPSO commented that this was particularly challenging during the pandemic. On the one hand, it was suggested that some of the early pandemic messaging from the Scottish Government was interpreted differently by different councils, with some viewing the pandemic itself as constituting 'exceptional circumstances' and others linking it more specifically to individual financial circumstances. On the other, the SPSO felt that some councils had not always consistently factored in the impact of the pandemic into determining whether people were facing 'exceptional pressure'. They gave examples of a support worker being unable to attend during the pandemic, or a household being unable to use the laundrette because of pandemic restrictions, meaning that households that might not ordinarily qualify or items that might not meet the necessary priority level ought to be granted. This had led to an increase in the SPSO disagreeing on cases where they felt they did meet the exceptional circumstances criteria.

Although these pandemic-specific issues in interpreting what counts as 'exceptional' no longer apply, there remained a perception that this and other terms in the guidance could be 'tightened up' to improve consistency in decision-making.

Consistency of communication of decisions

In addition to the question of whether decisions themselves are being made consistently, the review also explored how decisions are communicated. The regulations require that all SWF applicants receive a decision in writing, unless the applicant requests otherwise. Local authority managers all stated that applicants were written to by email or letter to communicate SWF decisions (with the

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[65] The Scottish Welfare Fund: Strengthening the Safety Net A Study of Best Practice (A Menu for Change)

exception of one that said they only communicate via the applicant's preferred mode). In general, they reported including similar elements in the written decision, in line with the statutory guidance, sometimes drawing on previous feedback from the SPSO. However, there was some evidence of variation in the level of detail provided in the initial decision-letter – for example, one area stated they had streamlined their initial letter, and only include more information on the guidance and exactly why they are not eligible if the decision goes to first tier appeal. Another stated that they only advise successful applicants of the review process over the phone.

There was also some variation in whether or not local authorities also phone applicants as well as communicating decisions in writing. A number of areas said they always phoned with the outcome, both to ensure that applicants get their decision as quickly as possible and so that they can provide additional information on other support. However, this was not universally the case.

The SPSO have noted that decision letters should be sent for all applications, both for administrative fairness and because even successful applicants may not completely agree with their decision. The SPSO also indicated that there were some ongoing issues around whether decision letters consistently included enough information to help applicants understand the decision – for example, explaining *why* someone's circumstances are not classed as exceptional based on the guidance.

The views of applicants interviewed for this review also indicate room for improvement in how decisions are communicated, particularly (but not only) when the application is rejected. Although recall could be an issue (applicants did not always remember exactly how decisions were communicated), there were examples of applicants who were adamant that they had not received any written confirmation of the reasons for their application being rejected. In other cases, they said they had not received a decision in writing at all (just a phone call saying their application had been rejected). Even where applicants had received a letter or email, they were not always able to understand the reasons given – for example, being told they did not meet the criteria, but without an explanation they could understand of how or why they did not meet them.

When applicants felt they had not received an adequate reason for rejection, this could add considerably to their feelings of frustration and anger about being turned down for a grant. It could also lead to a perception that there was no robust basis for decisions:

> "It's down to their imagination and what they think, but they are trying to cut you down and give you as little as possible."
>
> (Applicant 1, who reported receiving a rejection text with no further explanation)

Where applicants were partially successful, but had received less than they requested, there was a clear desire to understand more about the basis for the calculation:

> "I said that wouldn't do. I had £29 on meter. It was an emergency. £20 is not enough to cover the bill. They just said that was all they could manage. The girl on the phone said she'd have given me more, but it's not up to her."

<div align="right">(Applicant 11)</div>

External stakeholders interviewed for the review noted that they were not always privy to the detailed reasons for decisions, which made it hard to judge consistency of decisions with any certainty. However, while some felt decision making was reasonably consistent, others described situations where they had two clients applying in what they viewed as identical circumstances but with different outcomes. There was a desire among stakeholders to better understand the basis of SWF decisions, so that they could better support and advise their clients:

> "At the moment I would say we're reluctant or hesitant to promote any local authority fund or benefits or anything like that, because like I said we don't know how the decision-making is being done … if we had some form of reassurance in the form of understanding how the decisions are made then we could better promote that by being very clear and managing those client expectations."

<div align="right">(External local stakeholder 19, Charity)</div>

Review

Tier 1 reviews

Review requests have been more common for Community Care Grants compared with Crisis Grant applications. Across the life of the Scottish Welfare Fund, 5% of Community Care Grant applications resulted in a Tier 1 review compared with 2% of Crisis grant applications. Overall, just under half of both Community Care Grant (46%) and Crisis Grant (45%) Tier 1 reviews between 2013/14 and 2020/21 resulted in the decision being changed.

The proportion of applications resulting in Tier 1 reviews and the proportion of Tier 1 reviews resulting in changed decisions have both varied significantly between local authorities for both grant types. The reasons for this are not completely clear. There was some evidence that Tier 1 reviews are more common in higher-pressure areas, with higher than expected levels of applications and higher overspends, which might be expected to lead to a higher proportion of decisions being queried. However, this was not always the case – there were some relatively lower pressure areas with relatively higher proportions of reviews. Comparison of the reasons for Tier 1 reviews is limited by the fact that a number of local authorities have coded all their Tier 1 Community Care Grant reviews as 'other reason'.

Qualitative data from local authorities indicated differences between areas in who conducts Tier 1 reviews – whether this is another decision-maker at the same level within the same team, a more senior staff member within the same team, or (more rarely) someone from a completely separate team to the SWF assessor. There is no obvious pattern, however, in terms of which any of these approaches being associated with a higher or lower level of decisions being changed at first or second tier review.

Tier 2 reviews

SPSO statistics indicate that requests for Tier 2 reviews have grown over time - In the latest year pre-Covid (2019/20) the SPSO received 1,038 Tier 2 review applications – a 29% increase on the 805 in the previous year[66]. This related to 339 Community Care Grants and 699 Crisis Grants. In 2021-22, Crisis Grant review requests increased (740), but Community Care Grant review requests (213) were down compared with 2019/20. The increase in Crisis Grant review requests was particularly apparent in Quarter 4 of 2021/22, and the SPSO comment that this appears to be linked to the cost of living crisis.[67] However, although requests for review have increased over time, it remains the case that Tier 2 reviews are only requested for a tiny fraction of all applications.

Community Care Grant reviews have more commonly resulted in a recommendation to change the original decision – around half of Community Care Grant reviews have been upheld in recent years, since 2017/18. As discussed above, Crisis Grant uphold rates have been declining in recent years.

Comparison of Tier 2 review outcomes by local authority was limited by the low overall numbers of reviews. However, for Crisis Grants, local authorities that were more likely to change their own decisions at the Tier 1 review appeared to have fewer decisions changed at Tier 2 review. This may indicate that where the LA has a robust, self-critical approach to Tier 1 review this results in fewer decisions being overturned by the SPSO.

The value of having external scrutiny of decision-making via second tier SPSO reviews was clearly recognised by local authorities:

> "With really tricky cases, we've always been really interested to know what the SPSO's thoughts are behind that. We are really keen on improving our decision making and knowing we are on the right track. We seem to be."

> (Local authority manager 14)

Managers discussed reviewing SPSO feedback with the individual decision-maker and wider team, as well as using it to inform wider training and make improvements to communication with applicants.

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[66] Scottish Welfare Fund Independent Review Statistics 2019/20

[67] SPSO Annual Report 2021-22

However, there was also a perception that the SPSO sometimes appeared to interpret the guidance differently to local authorities (in ways that local authority managers disagreed with). In particular, it was suggested that the SPSO was sometimes more 'lenient' in the evidence it required, that it had more resource or ability to gather evidence than would be feasible for local authorities (particularly within the statutory timelines), and that the SPSO did not always take appropriate account of local authorities' limited budgets and priority levels. Examples were given of the SPSO accepting the applicants word on their bank balance when the local authority would have insisted on seeing a statement, being able to access information from GPs when they did not respond to requests from the local authority, and wanting the local authority to furnish a house more fully than they had determined was feasible given the priority level the area was operating at.

The SPSO acknowledged that local authorities faced significant resourcing challenges, but noted that it was a requirement of the guidance to fill gaps in the evidence, and felt that this entails making sufficient enquiries when dealing with vulnerable applicants, who will not always present themselves in the best way. Where the Council could not reasonably have been expected to access the information that led to a decision being changed, the SPSO stated that they would record the reason as 'new information'. However, they acknowledged that assessing whether a Council could reasonably be expected to have accessed information could sometimes be 'borderline', which might be the source of some of the points of disagreement between the SPSO and local authorities. At the same time, the SPSO indicated that the most common reason for disagreeing with a local authority's decision for both types of grant in 2021/22 was not that new infomration had arisen, but that they judged there had been 'incorrect intepretation of the available information'.

There were also apparent differences of opinion between the SPSO and some local authorities around what level of information is required to support applications – for example, the SPSO states that a full month's bank statements are not required to evidence that an applicant does not have any funds available and that a screen shot of a statement covering a few days would be sufficient, while some local authorities indicated that bank statements were required by their internal audit requirements.

Applicant views of the review process

Of the 46 applicants interviewed for this report, only 4 said they had requested a review of an SWF decision. The three who had requested Tier 1 reviews only each reported very different experiences – one had their decision changed and received the full amount they originally applied for; one had the decision upheld, but was unhappy with the reasoning as they felt the reviewer had not clarified why they disagreed that their circumstances were exceptional (which was the basis for the application having been turned down); and a third said they had requested a review by email, but had heard nothing back at all, which had left them "really angry". The fourth applicant had also requested Tier 2 reviews more than once. They reported generally being very happy with this process, even though their requests were not always upheld:

"If they have done everything they were meant to do, there's not very much they can do except agree with the decision, but they will definitely do all they can to help you."

<p style="text-align:right">(Applicant 2, repeat applicant for both grants)</p>

Among other applicants, awareness of the right to request a review was very variable. Interviewees could not always recall being told this was an option – as discussed above, some acknowledged that their recollection was imperfect, or that they had thrown the letter out once they realised their application had been rejected. However, some were adamant they had not been told about the right to review, including applicants who felt they might have requested one had they known about it.

Where applicants had been aware of the right to review but had not requested one, in spite of their application being unhappy with the outcome, this reflected a combination of:

- **Scepticism about the value** – a feeling there was "no point", as it was unlikely to change the decision. Sometimes this was linked with a lack of clarity about the eligibility criteria and whether or not they had met them (as discussed in chapter 2).

- **Fear of a second rejection** – applicants described feeling "a bit defeated" by the first decision, and felt that they did not want to risk being "knocked back twice"

- **Timing issues** – with Crisis Grants in particular, there was a perception that the process took too long, and that they would have received their next benefit payment anyway by the time a decision was reached

- Among those who had received partial awards, there was a **concern that requesting review might result in the whole award being removed**:

    "I thought about it but I couldn't be bothered with the stress when I had that much else going on and I needed that money, I had nothing."

    (Applicant 4, who had been awarded under a tenth of the amount requested)

9. The impact of Covid-19 on the Fund

Key points

- Demand for Crisis Grants – both overall and level of repeat applications – increased significantly between 2019/20 and 2020/21. In contrast, demand for Community Care Grants fell initially during the first lockdown.

- There was an acceleration of the existing trend towards more online applications in 2020/21.

- Spending on the Fund increased by 31% from 2019/20 to 2020/21, although overall spending fell short of the expanded budget, which was increased by £22 million to meet additional need during the pandemic.

- Local authorities reported significant resourcing pressures on their teams, as a result of the large increase in Crisis Grant applications combined with the delivery of SISGs.

- Overall decision times did not change much between 2019/20 and 2020/21. However, it was suggested that the large increase in SISG applications later in the pandemic (in late 2021/early 2022) may have impacted negatively on Community Care Grant timings in particular – this is supported by data for the first quarter of 2022.

- Award success rates for both grant types, but particularly Crisis Grants, were higher during 2020/21 compared with 2019/20. This is likely to reflect additional funding enabling local authorities to operate at a lower priority level.

- There were mixed views and evidence on whether these impacts were purely short-term or were likely to persist longer-term:

  o As of 2021/22, application levels had not returned to pre-Covid levels. There was a perception among local authorities that the relaxation of rules around maximum grants had in itself encouraged more repeat applicants.

  o SWF teams were still reported to be under considerable pressure to deliver within timescales, associated with ongoing high demand and perceived inadequate administration funding.

  o There was a perception among some external stakeholders that the accelerated shift to online applications during the pandemic had become a longer-term shift away from offering alternative application and support routes.

- Reflecting on lessons for future emergency situations, it was suggested that any grants which – like SISGs – operate on an entitlement rather than a discretionary model should be delivered centrally rather than by adding them on to existing local, discretionary schemes.

The review of the SWF was conducted in 2022, in the aftermath of two years of Covid-19 pandemic and related restrictions, the consequences of which for individuals and society were far-reaching. As discussed previously, the direct implications for the SWF included a £22 million budget increase in 2020/21 and a temporary relaxation of the three awards per year limit. At the same time, the restrictions in place during 2020 and 2021 (including restrictions on evictions and house moves), the numbers of people on furlough or self-isolating at different points, and other interventions relating to Covid-19 (such as efforts to accommodate all rough sleepers) might be expected to have impacted on demand for the Fund in various ways.

This final chapter summarises findings on how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted on the operation and delivery of the Fund. It considers the extent to which any impacts were likely to be short-term and might be expected to dissipate as Scotland moves through the pandemic recovery phase, or whether some impacts might have longer-term implications for the Fund.

Impact on number and type of applications

Number of applications

The first year of the Covid-19 pandemic (2020/21) saw a significant increase in demand for Crisis Grants – there was a 22% increase in applications between 2019/20 and 2020/21 (up from 222,060 to 271,295) compared with a 15% increase from 2018/19 to 2019/20 (193,310).

In contrast, although Community Care Grant applications also increased (by 8% from 2019/20 to 2020/21), this was at a lower level compared with the increase from 2018/19 to 2019/20 (10%). The Covid-19 related restrictions in place during the first Covid lockdown, from April 2020, dramatically reduced the number of people being made homeless or moving house over that period. This was reflected in a significant reduction of Community Care Grant expenditure during that period, alongside a significant peak in Crisis Grant spending.

Repeat applications to the Fund also increased, particularly for Crisis Grants – from 67% of Crisis Grant applications in 2019/20 to 71% in 2020/21 (having increased more gradually, from 65% to 67% in the previous three years from 2017/18).

Reasons for applications

Analysis of changes in the reasons for applying to the Fund during 2020/21 indicated that:

- Between April and June 2020 planned re-settlement after an unsettled period dropped to just 4% of reasons for a Community Care Grant application, from 10% the previous quarter, recovering back to 10% by January to March 2021. This is likely to be due to the reduction in homeless applications over the early pandemic period, when significant efforts were made to provide accommodation for all rough sleepers, as well as impacts from restrictions on evictions and house moves.

- From January to March 2020 onwards, the number of applications for Community Care Grants to help people stay in the community fell from 36% of reasons in January to March 2020, to 29% by the same quarter of 2021.

- For Crisis Grants, there was a reduction in the proportion of applications due to 'benefits of income spent' and an increase in the proportion of 'other reasons' between January and March 2020 and the same period in 2021. This may reflect the Universal Credit uplift that applied during this period, as well as the use of 'other reasons' to cover additional financial crises occurring during the pandemic, such as reduced hours or unexpected income gaps.

Application mode

There had already been a significant shift towards online applications pre-pandemic, and there was a further 10 percentage point shift to online during 2020/21.

One view among local authorities was that the accelerated shift towards online applications during the pandemic had resulted in a weakened link between SWF teams and the community of applicants, with far fewer people coming into offices compared with pre-pandemic:

> "It [Covid-19] has impacted on our community link. People who are lost well we need to find them, and people who know where they are going, we need to help them along."

> (Local Authority manager 21)

Impacts on local authorities' capacity to deliver the Fund

Resourcing

As discussed in chapter 4, expenditure on the Fund increased considerably in 2020/21, by 31% compared with 2019/20. However, as £22 million additional funding was provided that year by the Scottish Government, overall the proportion of allocated funding spent was lower compared with pre-pandemic (83% of allocated funding was spent, compared with 108% in 2019/20).

At the same time, although overall local authorities underspent on grant funding during 2020/21, there was a strong perception from local authority managers that administrative funding and resources had come under very severe pressure as a result of the combination of large increases in Crisis Grant applications, discussed above, and the delivery of SISGs. Both managers and delivery teams reported that teams' resources were often spread very thin, resulting in staff absences as well as high staff turnover due to burnout, which in turn put more pressure on other staff.

Local authority managers described having to pull staff from other departments or other projects to work on the SWF. This in turn impacted on other work demands. It was not always clear how these resource allocations were funded, but some local authorities stated that these costs were absorbed within the council and were not covered by Scottish Government SWF funding.

A more exceptional experience, however, was that the additional funding and relaxation of some of the restrictions on SWF grants during Covid-19 meant that decision-making was easier, such that although decision-makers were dealing with more applications, this was not necessarily taking them much more time.

In spite of these resourcing challenges, local authorities spoke about the increases in funding being extremely beneficial overall, enabling the SWF to reach a far greater number of people and to make grants at a lower priority level.

Decision times

The management data indicates a very slight decrease in the proportion of Crisis Grants made within the target time between January and March 2020 and January and March 2021 (from 94% to 93%), but no change in the proportion of Community Care Grants decided within the target time (81% in both periods).

This picture conflicts somewhat with the accounts of local authority managers, who felt that the additional demand placed on teams by the volume of Crisis Grant applications and by delivery of SISGs had sometimes led to Community Care Grant timings being deprioritised over this period. However, these impacts may have been more apparent in the later period of the pandemic – local authority managers noted that SISG applications had increased significantly in the wake of the Omicron wave of Covid-19 in late 2021 to early 2022:

> "As Crisis Grants are highest priority, during peak times in the pandemic, community care processing all but stopped."

> (Local Authority manager 17)

Indeed more recent figures indicated a fall in the proportion of Community Care Grants processed within 15 days, to 77% between January and March 2022, though this figure recovered (to 87%) the following quarter.[68] Despite the increases in pressure, which managers felt had been very considerable for SWF teams, most local authorities took pride in having (largely) been able to administer Crisis Grants within the prescribed timescales during the pandemic.

Success rates and decision-making

Award success rates for both Community Care Grants and Crisis Grants, which had been reducing in the years before the pandemic, both increased from 2019/20 to 2020/21 – from 54% to 57% for Community Care Grants, and from 63% to 69% for Crisis Grants. This is likely to reflect the comment above, that local authorities were able to make decisions at a lower priority level as a result of the additional funding provided.

In terms of consistency of approaches to decisions during the pandemic, the SPSO noted some challenges around applying the 'exceptional circumstances' or 'exceptional pressure' criteria during the pandemic. On the one hand, it was suggested that some of the early pandemic messaging from the Scottish

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[68] See Scottish Welfare Fund data to June 2022

Government was interpreted differently by different councils, with some viewing the pandemic itself as constituting 'exceptional circumstances' and others linking it more specifically to individual financial circumstances. On the other, the SPSO felt that some councils had not always consistently factored in the impact of the pandemic into determining whether people were facing 'exceptional pressure'. They gave examples of a support worker being unable to attend during the pandemic, or a household being unable to use the laundrette because of pandemic restrictions, meaning that households that might not ordinarily qualify ought to be eligible or items that might not meet the necessary priority level ought to be granted.

Local authority managers noted the challenge of dealing with more frequent updates and changes to advice on the Fund during the pandemic period. This had put additional pressures on teams as they had to constantly refresh training to keep up with new guidelines.

Short or long-term impacts?

There were mixed views among local authorities on whether or not the impacts discussed above were purely short-term, or whether some might have longer-term implications for delivery of the Fund.

Application levels, expenditure and outcomes

As of 2021/22, application levels to the SWF had not returned to pre-Covid levels. Moreover, repeat Crisis Grant applications increased further – from 71% in 2020/21 to 80% of Crisis Grant applications in 2021/22. Alongside ongoing pressures around the cost of living, there was a perception among local authority managers and staff that the relaxation of the maximum number of grants that could be awarded in a year during 2020/21 may have had a longer-term impact on demand by encouraging more repeat applications.

The fact that application levels had not dropped back to pre-Covid levels, but the additional Covid-related funding was no longer available, was associated with significant overspend in 2021/22 (115%), as reported in chapter 4. A local authority delivery team highlighted that in the most recent year, a lot of people had qualified for Covid Recovery Grants, which had helped reduce pressure on Crisis Grants, but this was also now coming to an end.

Success rates for applications also fell back again in 2021/22 – from 69% to 66% for Crisis Grants (though this remained slightly higher than the 2019/20 rate of 63%), and from 57% to 55% for Community Care Grants (similar to the 54% rate in 2019/20).

SWF team resourcing and pressure

Although the pressures associated with delivering SISGs were coming to an end, the fact that application levels remained high meant that many local authorities reported their teams remained under considerable pressure to deliver SWF grants within the current timescales. As discussed in chapter 4, this was linked with a strong belief that the amount of funding for administering the Fund was inadequate.

However, the reallocation of resources from elsewhere in the Council to accommodate SISGs and increased demand was seen as having fostered greater collaboration with colleagues from other departments within the council, with ongoing benefits in terms of strengthened networks.

Application options

There was a perception among some external stakeholders that the shift towards online assessment during the pandemic had become a longer-term shift away from providing alternative application options or support to SWF applicants.

> "It's a long-term thing but sometimes it's used as an excuse…you can't phone now and I don't see why."

> (External local stakeholder 16)

Lessons for distributing emergency funding in future crises

In terms of distributing resources to support people in future national crisis situations, in general the allocation of extra funding to the SWF was seen as a logical route, since it allowed for funds to be paid out quickly and easily and there was a perception that most people in need will approach their local authority in the first instance. However, there was a strong view that this would need to be supported by additional administrative resource.

Another view was that SWF as currently configured was not a completely 'natural fit' for SISGs, since unlike Crisis Grants, they were fixed value, were available to a widened pool of 'low income' households, and were not paid out at the point of application, but when the applicant experienced a reduction in income. It was suggested by some local authority managers that additional grants like SISGs – which operate on more of an entitlement model rather than being discretionary – should be delivered centrally in the event that something similar is needed in the future.

10. Suggested improvements to the Fund

Key points

- Suggestions for improvement from applicants, external stakeholders and local authority SWF teams focused on communication and promotion, the application form and process, timescales and administrative resources, delivery, changes to the guidance, and overall funding.

- Applicants and external local stakeholders suggested more could be done to raise awareness of the Fund, particularly among those who might be new to needing state support. The clarity, consistency and tone of communications with applicants were also seen by some as in need of improvement.

- Application forms were seen as in need of simplification. Applicants and external stakeholders also wanted all local authorities to ensure the process was accessible to all, especially those with no phone or internet access.

- Applicants and external local stakeholders wanted to see shorter turnarounds for decisions. Local authorities wanted to see more administrative funding to ensure they were able to process applications within the existing timeframes. They also questioned whether the guide timeframes should be more flexible, to allow for prioritisation within grant types.

- There was no consensus on whether there should be changes to the ways in which grants are fulfilled (e.g. cash or vouchers), but applicants suggested there could be improvements to the quality of some Community Care Grant items.

- Local authorities suggested various possible changes to the SWF guidance, including:
  - Changes to the maximum number of applications – though there was no consensus on whether these should be relaxed or tightened
  - Increases to capital and income thresholds, removal of the under 25 rate, and updates to the guidance on calculating realistic awards
  - Potential reinstatement of the reference to the Fund supporting people in 'unforeseen' crisis (though concerns about this being used to 'gatekeep' were also acknowledged)
  - General improvements to ease of use and accessibility of language (with a view to making it easier for applicants as well as local authorities).

- There was no consensus over whether the level of flexibility in the guidance was appropriate – one view was that local authorities would find it easier if it was stricter, another was that it could and should not be more restrictive given the range of needs the Fund is intended to help address.

- Current funding levels for grants were seen as unsustainable in the context of increased pressures on cost of living. Many – though not all – of the other suggested improvements were strongly linked to funding levels.

- In the light of findings in this report on differences in outcomes between local authority, there may be scope in the future to support improvement within the SWF via improvements to data collection and reporting, enhancing approaches and raising awareness of Tier 1 reviews, and considering a programme of ongoing monitoring and audit.

This chapter summarises suggestions made by applicants, external local stakeholders and local authority SWF managers and delivery teams about potential improvements to the scheme. Given the variations in specific practice between areas, discussed in earlier chapters, it is likely that some of these suggested improvements will be more relevant to some local authorities than others. However, some are relevant at a Scotland-wide level – for example, those relating to the eligibility criteria and the guidance.

The chapter ends by drawing together findings from across the report on differences between local authorities, to make some suggestions about possible approaches to audit and review of the SWF in the longer-term.

Communication and promotion

Among the applicants interviewed for this review, suggestions for improvement focused particularly around awareness raising – of the scheme itself, the right to request a review, and the eligibility criteria and evidence required to support applications. As discussed in earlier chapters, there was a perception that applicants had only found out about the scheme by chance, particularly when they were new to needing state support with their finances. Both applicants and external local stakeholders felt there could be more promotion of the scheme, particularly to groups who might be less familiar with the system (including those in work).

In addition to awareness raising, applicants also suggested that communications around the SWF could be improved in general. As discussed, applicants were not always clear whether or not they were eligible or what information they needed to provide to demonstrate this, while awareness of the right to review was very variable, as discussed in chapter 8. Applicants suggested there could be better communication of all these elements.

As discussed, although there were examples of very positive experiences of how the SWF team communicated with them, where applicants reported more negative experiences, particularly in terms of their perceptions of how they were spoken to on the phone, this could have a major negative impact on their overall experience and willingness to apply in future. It was suggested that there might be a need for further staff training around mental health issues and how to speak to people who struggle to communicate clearly by phone.

There was also a desire among applicants for more consistent communication of what to expect during the application process – including confirmation of application

receipt and updates on the application process and likely timing (an 'application tracker' was suggested). Finally, applicants felt the reasons behind decisions could be communicated more clearly.

These suggestions around communication and promotion were all echoed in interviews with external local stakeholders. In addition, there was a desire for more communication with the third sector both in general and in relation to individual applications where they had supported clients to apply, so that they could continue to support them around the outcome.

Application form and process

As discussed in earlier chapters, there were comments from across all groups of interviewees about the application forms used for the SWF. Applicants and external stakeholders in particular felt the application forms needed considerable improvement to shorten and simplify, reduce repetition, and remove questions that could be perceived as intrusive. It was suggested (by an applicant) that bank statements should not be required, as these can be hard to get hold of and act as a barrier to applying.

Applicants and external stakeholders also commented on the need to ensure the process itself was accessible to all – especially those with no phone or internet access, who might still need to be able to apply in person. The SPSO has also highlighted access issues arising from inconsistency in whether councils have a freephone number available, noting that they regularly receive calls from applicants who cannot contact the council because of this. Stakeholders in prisons suggested it would be better if people in or leaving prison were able to apply online, though they recognised this was a wider issue rather than one that only impacts the SWF.

Suggestions about accessibility also related to the support available to applicants. One suggestion from an external local stakeholder was that support from an advocacy organisation should be built into the process. Applicants also mentioned wanting more phone and/or face-to-face contact with the SWF team, to be able to provide the full picture (as discussed, the emphasis on phone applications/follow-up varied between areas).

Timescales and administrative resources

Both applicants and external local stakeholders wanted to see shorter turnarounds for decision-making and, for Community Care Grants, delivery of grants.

As discussed in chapter 4, local authorities were strongly of the view that administrative funding needed to be substantially increased to enable them to process more decisions within the existing timeframes. This view was echoed in interviews with external local stakeholders, who also felt that more local authority SWF staff were needed in order to reduce timescales for decisions and make it easier for applicants to get through by phone.

Local authority interviewees also raised questions around whether the guide timeframes needed to be as fixed, or whether there could be more flexibility to

enable greater prioritisation, particularly between Community Care Grant applications, to help local authorities manage pressures on staff. However, given applicants' accounts of the impacts of delays, any such flexibility would need to be very carefully managed.

Delivery

As discussed in chapter 7, there was no consensus among applicants or external local stakeholders on the how much choice participants should have around how grants are fulfilled. This lack of consensus was reflected in external local stakeholders' suggestions for improvement – it was suggested that both types of grants should always be cash, that it was be better for applicants to pick Community Care Grant items from a fixed list of options, and that Crisis Grants should be given as vouchers.

Applicants also suggested that there could be improvements to the quality of some items provided through the Community Care Grant, particularly with respect to flooring and carpets and soft furnishings.

Changes to the guidance

Changes to the SWF guidance were primarily discussed in interviews with local authority managers and teams, although suggestions for improvement from applicants and external local stakeholders also sometimes related to elements of the guidance.

Overall balance between fixed rules and flexibility

Overall, the guidance was viewed very positively – it was referred to as a 'bible' for decision-makers. However, different views were expressed by local authority managers and staff on whether the level of flexibility in the guidance was appropriate or should be reduced. One view was that stricter or more specific guidance would be helpful to local authorities:

> "Generally, LAs want tight, clear guidance, partly because if people are disgruntled then we can get complaints from MSPs and MPs - where we have discretion. We would rather all LAs were doing the same thing"

> (Local authority manager 24)

However, others felt that the guidance could or should not be any more restrictive, even if this was sometimes challenging for staff, since the range of problems the Fund was set up to help was wide and discretion was necessary to enable local authorities to meet varying local needs:

> "I guess the guidelines have to be wide and varied but it doesn't do anything for the staff to have to make that decision."

> (Local authority manager 28)

As discussed in chapter 2, there were various suggestions from local authorities and external stakeholders (including the SPSO) around alternative ways of improving consistency of process between areas, including:

- Enhanced centralised support for decision-makers, including more knowledge sharing and/or joint sessions between areas

- More frequent updates to the guidance (the SPSO suggested this should be annual, and should also be more responsive to emergent issues, like cost of living increases, or clarification of what should be classed as 'exceptional circumstances' when the context changes, as it did during the pandemic)

- Centralisation of some administrative functions (specifically suggested in relation to a national database to help identify potential cross-local authority fraud), and

- Budget increase to reduce discrepancy in priority levels.

Maximum number of applications

Again, managers in different local authorities expressed opposing views on this. On the one hand, it was suggested that allowing a couple to apply to the Fund six times a year (three times each) was too much given Crisis Grants were intended to meet one-off needs. On the other, there was a view that people should be allowed to apply more often, in recognition of the fact that the cost of living crisis was creating recurrent 'crisis' situations for more people – a view that was echoed in suggestions for improvement from applicants and external local stakeholders, who suggested the maximum should be increased.

At the same time, while local authorities acknowledged that the guidance does allow for local discretion to pay more than three grants when applicants are in exceptional circumstances, one view was that the rules on this should be clearer, to avoid discrepancies in approach to repeat applications between areas.

Capital and income thresholds

Local authority managers commented that the capital thresholds set out in the guidance had not been reviewed since the Fund started in 2013. For Community Care Grants in particular, the level these were set at was viewed as too low to allow someone to furnish a home to an adequate standard. Other suggestions included aligning the income threshold with the higher threshold set for SISGs and removing the need for people to use their available overdraft before applying for a Crisis Grant, as it was viewed as counterintuitive to require someone to go into overdraft if they had no means of getting out of it again. These suggestions were often linked with a perception that there was a growing group of 'working poor', whose incomes were inadequate to cover the rising cost of living but who could not currently apply to the Fund.

It was also suggested (by local authority and external local stakeholders) that the under 25 rate of payment for grants should be removed, since goods cost the same regardless of age.

Similarly, the SPSO suggested that the guidance on calculating realistic awards needed to be updated, since the rates suggested for Crisis Grants are unlikely to meet the increased costs of gas and electricity. This was reflected in suggested improvements from applicants, who also mentioned increasing grant amounts to better match need.

'Unforeseen' crisis

Local authority managers noted that an earlier iteration of the statutory guidance had referred to Crisis Grants being for those in 'unforeseen' crisis. This was subsequently removed, as there was a perception it was associated with inappropriate 'gatekeeping' of the Fund. While local authority managers understood the reasons for this, there was nonetheless a perception that this could make the Fund challenging to navigate for decision-makers – for example, if someone runs out of money because they have spent money on something that might not be viewed as a necessary item before covering their essential expenses for the month.

Accessibility of guidance

Finally, the SPSO suggested that the guidance could be restructured to make it easier to use for decision-makers, by ensuring all the information relevant to Crisis Grants was together, and similarly for Community Care Grants. A related suggestion from a local authority manager was that the guidance could be made more customer friendly, to support communicating reasons for decisions in an easily understandable manner.

Overall funding levels

Overall funding levels for SWF grants (rather than administration) were primarily discussed by local authority managers. As discussed in chapter 4, there was a strong concern that current funding levels were unlikely to be adequate in the context of increasing pressures on cost of living, which was expected to drive up demand even in areas that had historically stayed within their budget.

Both local authority and wider stakeholders raised the issue that funding levels are likely to impact on many – though not all – of the other suggested improvements above. For example, changes to capital and income thresholds or the maximum number of applications in a 12-month period would likely increase the pool of eligible applicants, with additional funding required to meet associated increased demand. Similarly, if local authorities did more awareness raising than at present, this might increase demand, which would in turn require additional funding (to the extent that this demand was from eligible applicants).

However, some of the suggested improvements – around the clarity, consistency and tone of communication with applicants, improvements to application forms, the accessibility of guidance, and enhancing support for and sharing of learning between decision-makers – are less obviously dependent on the overall level of funding for grants (although they may add to administrative costs in some cases).

Ongoing data collection, audit and review

The quantitative analysis conducted for this review has shed light on trends and patterns in the delivery of the SWF, both over time and between local authorities. However, it has also revealed the complexities of interpreting this data, particularly when consistent patterns that might help explain differences between areas are lacking. This final section of the report reflects on this, and identifies possibilities for future data collection, audit and review that might help the Scottish Government and local authorities better understand the reasons for differences in spending and outcomes. Improving ongoing data collection, audit and review could also help to support improvement in consistency of practice, while recognising and retaining appropriate local discretion.

Improvements to data collection and recording

First, it is important to acknowledge that the quality and range of data on the SWF collected by local authorities and collated by the Scottish Government far exceeds that available publicly for analogous schemes in the UK. However, there are known gaps and issues in this data that could be improved in the future, particularly relating to missing data and the collection of data on equalities characteristics of applicants. Improving the collection and analysis of this data would help further improve understanding of whether there are groups of people in need that may be missing out on support available from the Fund.

Interpreting the findings on review – and understanding why people seek review, to support discussions about consistency of decision-making – would also be helped by improved recording practices, particularly around the reasons for Tier 1 review – as discussed in chapter 8, a number of local authorities recorded all Tier 1 reviews as 'other reason'.

Enhancing future review

The evidence that was available on review indicates that there may be scope for improving the contribution the review process makes to improving practice across Scotland. In particular, local authorities that were more likely to change their decisions at Tier 1 review had fewer decisions changed at Tier 2. This may indicate that encouraging local authorities to take a robust, self-critical approach to Tier 1 review results in fewer decisions being overturned by the SPSO.

The SPSO also noted that where findings and recommendations from Tier 2 reviews are shared at senior management level within local authorities, this can help drive improvement. However, their perception (based on a recent survey of local authorities) was that there was variation in the extent to which this happened across different areas. Improving the sharing of lessons from Tier 2 review within local authorities, including with senior management, may also therefore help drive learning and improvement in future.

Similarly, raising applicants' awareness and perceptions of review might help improve the contribution of review to improving practice – interviews with applicants indicated variable awareness of review rights, alongside some scepticism about the

value of the process. SPSO have also suggested that raising awareness of the complaints process in relation to SWF could have similar benefits.

Possible approaches to ongoing audit

Finally, a key challenge for this review has been how to interpret the implications of variations in data between local authorities for consistency of practice. As discretion is built into the Fund, some variation between areas is to be expected. Moreover, the patterns of local variations uncovered by the quantitative analysis were often complex. There were some patterns – for example, rural local authorities have historically tended to be more likely to underspend and to have lower than expected applications. However, these patterns were not completely consistent – there were many exceptions. Meanwhile, for other findings, there was no clear pattern – the relationship between spending levels and success rates, or which areas have more decisions changed at review, for example.

Taken together, the qualitative and quantitative data in this report indicates that a wide range of factors are likely to be impacting on outcomes across local authorities, including: level of Scottish Government grant budget and availability of local top-up funding; staff resources (administrative budget); promotion and awareness raising activities; local cultural issues around accepting help; differences in the emphasis placed on different application routes; differences in the evidence required to support applications; and differences in strictness in the application of rules in the guidance. However, these factors interact with each other and with budget and demand in different ways in different local authorities. A definitive answer to why some local authorities have lower application success rates than others is therefore extremely difficult.

At the same time, another key theme from interviews with local authority managers was that historic data – particularly on spending patterns – is not necessarily expected to be a reliable guide to what will happen in 2022/23, given the pressures on the Fund expected to result from the cost of living crisis.

With all these findings in mind, and drawing on both comments from stakeholders and the experience of the research team in conducting this review, there may be merit in the Scottish Government and its partners considering approaches to monitoring and audit to support understanding and improvement of the SWF in future. This could include:

- **Monitoring of the relationship between different indicators in the data at local authority level**. In other words, rather than looking at things like spend, decision outcomes and reviews separately, the Scottish Government could look at these outcomes alongside one another, so that any patterns can be identified and discussed.

- **A programme of audit, to support learning and improvement**. One option would be to audit a random sample of decisions, either across all local authorities or within randomly selected local authorities. However, given the findings discussed above, there may also be a case for a more targeted

approach to selecting local authorities for audit in order to cast further light on some of the issues identified in this report.

Analysis of the relationships between different indicators could be used to identify patterns at local authority level that raise questions – for example:

o areas where there are low success rates and large under-spends might raise questions about whether the guidance is being applied more strictly, or about how priority levels are being set

o alternatively, areas with high success rates but low levels of applications might raise questions about levels of awareness of the scheme locally

o there could also be merit in auditing high success rate, high spend, high repeat application areas, to explore the use and impact of onward referrals in avoiding repeat crisis (while recognising the limitations on avoiding this during a time of wider economic crisis).

This audit could include a systematic review of a sample of decisions – which could then be compared across audited authorities, to assess consistency of application of the guidance in decisions – alongside discussions of specific patterns in their data with local authority teams.

Any programme of audit would, of course, require resourcing. It may be something the SPSO can play a role in, given its existing role in review. The outputs could inform not only practice in the teams that are audited, but wider guidance and training on delivery of the Fund.

Annex A – Full list of research questions

The table below shows the main and subsidiary research questions that guided this review, and the sources of data that were used to examine them. As some of the subsidiary questions, in practice, cut across different overarching themes and questions, data relevant to these questions may sometimes be found in more than one chapter of this report.

Key for Data Sources

A	Review of existing evidence
B	Review of analogous schemes
C	Analysis of management information
D	Interviews with senior LA staff
E	Interviews with SWF staff
F	Interviews with external organisations
G	Interviews with applicants / recipients

	Purpose of the Fund							
1	**What are people's understandings and views of the purpose of the SWF?**	**A**	**B**	**C**	**D**	**E**	**F**	**G**
	What is the purpose of the fund understood to be by different stakeholders, and how far does this align with the purposes set out in the legislation?	✔			✔	✔	✔	✔
	How well are the eligibility criteria and purposes of the Fund understood by potential applicants?	✔				✔	✔	✔
	What views or evidence is there on whether the purpose of the fund might need to change in future?	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔	

	Evidence of underlying need							
2	**What is the level and nature of underlying need for the SWF?**	**A**	**B**	**C**	**D**	**E**	**F**	**G**
	What proxy measures are available and what do they tell us about patterns and trends in the 'underlying need' for welfare assistance?	✔	✔		✔			
	Specifically, what patterns and trends are evident in relation to the level of and reasons for applications to the Fund – and what might these tell us about underlying need?	✔		✔				
	Is there evidence of significant need or demand among groups who are currently ineligible to apply - such as those with 'No Recourse to Public Funds' – or who are eligible but do not apply for whatever reason?	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔	
3	**Factors shaping demand on the Fund** **What are the key factors impacting on levels of demand for the SWF?**	**A**	**B**	**C**	**D**	**E**	**F**	**G**
	What are applicants' main reasons for applying to the fund? (Exploring both stated reasons, and ultimate/underlying reasons/causes for the claim)	✔	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔
	What factors underpin willingness to apply – e.g. awareness of other people's successful applications; messaging that normalises or destigmatises the process, availability of other options?	✔	✔			✔	✔	✔
	What discourages people from applying?	✔	✔				✔	✔
	What kind of advice and practical help and support do people need to apply effectively?	✔	✔			✔	✔	✔
	To what extent is such support available and accessible?	✔				✔	✔	✔
	What other key enablers and barriers are there in relation to applications to the fund (including application channels)?	✔	✔			✔	✔	✔
4	**Delivery model** **How does the current SWF delivery model compare with alternatives?**	**A**	**B**	**C**	**D**	**E**	**F**	**G**
	How does the current local, discretionary delivery model compare with a more centralised benefit model, based on strict rules of entitlement and eligibility? What are the potential strengths and drawbacks of each approach?	✔	✔		✔			

5	**Awareness and promotion** **(How) do potential applicants who might need it become aware of the SWF?** **Is it promoted appropriately?**	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
	What evidence is there about levels of awareness of the Fund among potential applicants? Are there particular groups where awareness seems especially low?							
	How do individuals typically become aware of the Fund?							
	To what extent is awareness and understanding of the Fund being actively promoted by local authorities and/or others?							
	What form does such promotion take and what evidence is there of reach and effectiveness?							
	Is there any evidence of local authorities actively seeking to limit applications or access to the Fund? If so, how and for what reasons?							
6	**Funding** **Are levels of funding for the SWF appropriate?**	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
	Do local authorities have the resources to administer the Fund effectively?			✔	✔	✔	✔	
	What patterns and trends are evident in relation to decisions within statutory time limits, and how do these relate to funding levels/patterns of under/over-spend?			✔				
7	**Experiences and outcomes** **What impacts does applying for / receiving grants through the SWF have on applicants / recipients?**	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
	How do individuals experience the application (and review) process? How accessible is the process?	✔					✔	✔
	What proportion of applicants and recipients are referred on or signposted to other services?		✔					
	What other forms of help and support are accessed by unsuccessful applicants? To what extent are they connected to these through the process of applying to the Fund?					✔	✔	✔
	What difference do grants make to successful applicants? How successfully does it meet their needs?	✔					✔	✔
	In particular, what evidence is there of successful 'early intervention', reducing the need for subsequent support?	✔					✔	✔
	What proportion of grants awarded are from repeat applicants? And what might this tell us about the impact of the scheme / adequacy of awards?			✔				

8	Assessment and review How fair and consistent is SWF decision-making across Scotland?	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
	What patterns and trends are evident in relation to the outcome of applications?	✔		✔				
	Are applications being assessed appropriately and consistently?	✔		✔		✔	✔	✔
	Does the current guidance support consistent decision-making, or are there areas where the guidance could be improved?	✔						
	What are the main reasons for applications being rejected? How do these vary?	✔		✔		✔	✔	
	What are the main drivers or predictors of successful and unsuccessful applications? To what extent is this consistent with the guidance?	✔		✔		✔	✔	
	What patterns and trends are evident in relation to the level of awards?	✔		✔				
	Is the review system operating as intended?	✔		✔		✔	✔	✔
	In particular, what patterns and trends are evident in relation to Tier 1 and Tier 2 reviews and their outcomes? And what might these patterns/trends tell us about the effectiveness of both initial decision-making and the review process?	✔		✔				
9	Impacts of COVID-19 What impacts has COVID had on the SWF?	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
	What impact has COVID had on the number and type of applications received?			✔	✔	✔	✔	
	What impact has COVID had on local authorities' capacity to administer the Fund?				✔	✔	✔	
	To what extent are any COVID impacts likely to have longer-term impacts on the demand for or operation of the Fund?	✔	✔	✔	✔			

Annex B – Local authority proforma and discussion guide

Proforma

Local authority proforma

Ipsos Scotland, on behalf of the Scottish Government, is conducting a review of the Scottish Welfare Fund. As part of this review, we would like to establish a clear picture of the operation of the Fund across Scotland.

This proforma is intended to gather information about how SWF operates in your local authority. We appreciate that some of these may require you to consult colleagues or local documentation in order to answer. For most questions, you can just type your response under the question (the boxes will expand to accommodate the level of detail you want to include).

Please return the completed form to us as soon as you are able, and no later than **15th April 2022.** Your individual responses to the proforma **will not be shared with anybody outside of Ipsos Scotland**. Local authorities will be identified in any outputs only by a number (e.g. 'local authority 28').

Once we have received your completed proforma, a researcher from Ipsos will speak to you via Teams or telephone, to follow-up in more detail on some of the topics covered. We will review your answers before the interview, so that the interview can focus in more detail on key issues you are facing in your area.

For further information, please see the information sheet and FAQs you should already have received. If you have any other queries about this proforma or the interview, please email us at SWF@ipsos.com and one of the research team will get back to you.

About the SWF team in your local authority

1a. We would like to understand the structure of the team involved in delivering SWF in your local authority. For your area, please use the grid below to tell us:

a) The job titles of those immediately/directly involved in delivering SWF (i.e. processing applications/grants or setting local SWF strategy)?

b) Which departments those roles sit within?

c) How many full-time equivalent staff you have in each of those roles?

Please fill in grid

Job title / role	Department	Number of FTE staff in role

1b. In addition to the team directly involved in the processing of SWF applications/grants, please outline (briefly) below any wider input the council provides to support the delivery of SWF, and which teams are involved in this

(e.g. advertising/communicating about the Fund, supporting/encouraging applicants to apply, etc.).

Please type your response here

2. Please describe any training provided to those directly involved in processing applications. What does this training cover? How is this provided?

Please type your response here

Delivery of the SWF in your area

3. In which of the following ways are people currently able to apply to the SWF in your area?

PLEASE HIGHLIGHT ALL THOSE THAT APPLY

a. By phone
b. Online
c. In person, face-to-face (please say where)
d. By paper application

4. What types of support are provided by your local authority to those wishing to apply to the SWF? Please briefly describe, including who provides this support (e.g. the people processing applications, wider LA/other staff) and how it is provided (e.g. by phone, in person, online, etc.).

Please type your response here

5. What form do SWF grants take in your area?

PLEASE HIGHLIGHT THE TYPES OF GRANT PROVIDED THROUGH EACH OF THE TWO STREAMS:

a) Crisis Grants – cash, bank transfers, vouchers, other (please say what)

b) Community Care Grants – cash, bank transfers, vouchers, new goods, second hand goods, other (please say what)

6. How are award decisions communicated to applicants in your area? (i.e. what format does this communication take, and what information is included alongside the decision?)

Please type your response here

7. Please could you briefly outline how your local authority approaches offering SWF 'awards in principle', and any specific policies around these?

Please type your response here

8. What, if any, follow-on support is offered after the application is assessed for

a) successful applicants and

b) unsuccessful applicants?

Please describe briefly (including who provides this support – the team that process applications, wider LA staff, or others – and whether this is typically signposting, or more active referral) AND list the main places people are typically signposted or referred to in your area.

PLEASE TYPE YOUR RESPONSES UNDER EACH OF (a) AND (b) ABOVE.

9. How easy or difficult does your area find it to meet the timings set out in the statutory guidance for decisions for

a) Crisis Grants and

b) Community Care Grants?

For each, please say why your area finds this easy/difficult.

PLEASE TYPE YOUR RESPONSES UNDER EACH OF (a) AND (b) ABOVE.

10. Please briefly describe your process for dealing with First Tier SWF Review requests

Please type your response here

Demand and need for the SWF in your area

11. How have you tried to identify the likely level of need for the SWF in your local authority? What, if any, sources of data have you used to help predict need for:

a) crisis grants and

b) community care grants?

PLEASE TYPE YOUR RESPONSES UNDER EACH OF (a) AND (b) ABOVE.

12. Is there evidence of any unmet demand or need for the Fund in your local area?

IF YES – are there specific groups of people in your area among whom you are aware of unmet need/demand for the Fund? Please say which groups.

Please type your response here

Impacts of Covid-19

Please note: we will be looking at data on numbers of applications and reasons for applications pre- and post-Covid, but we are also interested in your views on how the pandemic has impacted on capacity to administer the Fund.

13. What, if any, impact has the Covid pandemic had on capacity within your local authority to administer

a) crisis grants and

b) community care grants?

(please briefly explain your answers)

Promotion of the SWF in your area

14. Over the last 3 years, has your local authority undertaken any specific activities to promote awareness or take-up of the SWF?

IF YES – Please describe what promotional activities have taken place over the last 3 years, and roughly when these activities happened (month / year if known)

Resourcing of the SWF

15. Which of the following best describes your view of the current level of Scottish Government funding for the SWF in your area (Please highlight one option – note we will follow up on reasons for your answer in the interview)

A lot more than is required to meet local need

A little more than is required to meet local need

About sufficient to meet local need

A little less than is required to meet local need

A lot less than is required to meet local need

16. Does your local authority provide additional top up funding for

a) Crisis Grants and

b) Community Care Grants?

IF YES, how much top up funding did you provide in the last year? Which budget(s) did this comes from?

17. Do you currently have sufficient resources to enable effective administration of the fund in your area? (i.e. To cover costs of supporting, assessing and delivering grants, rather than the costs of grants themselves).

Purpose and aims of the SWF

18. Do you have any specific local strategic aims for the Fund? If yes, please provide brief detail

Consent to contact additional local authority staff

Thank you for your responses. We look forward to exploring your answers in more detail in the interview.

The next phase of the review of the SWF will include interviews with front line local authority staff in selected areas. The names of any interviewees and selected local authority areas will not be shared with anyone outside of Ipsos and will not be included in the report.

Would you be happy for us to contact you about speaking to operational staff in your local authority? This would involve asking you to help identify relevant

staff and putting them in touch with us to arrange a telephone interview (Please indicate with an X in the appropriate box):

Yes

No

Thank you for completing this proforma. Please return once complete to
SWF@ipsos.com

Discussion guide

Introduction, confidentiality, and permission to record

- Introduce self and Ipsos MORI

- The Scottish Government has commissioned Ipsos MORI to undertake research to review the operation and effectiveness of the SWF, as part of its commitment to reviewing the Fund this parliamentary term.

- The review will use multiple methods to explore the operation of the Fund, including:

  o Analysis of monitoring data, returned by LAs to the SG

  o Analysis of existing literature and evidence

- o Interviews with applicants and professionals involved in delivering the Fund or supporting applicants in a number of case study local authorities

- o And the proforma and these interviews with senior staff within each local authority who, we hope, will enable us to compile a detailed picture of how the Fund operates across Scotland.

- Though we really hope that all local authorities will take part, it's still the case that your participation is voluntary – all questions are optional, you can just let me know if there are any questions you don't want to answer

- We will not share these interviews, or the identities of the individuals we speak to within local authorities, with the Scottish Government. We will only refer to local authorities by numbers – e.g. 'Local authority 3' – in any outputs from the review, so please do feel free to be open in your answers, as the learning from this will hopefully help inform improvements across Scotland.

- However, we are aware that offering concrete guarantees of confidentiality can be difficult when we're talking about professional interviewees who may be one of a small number of people in relevant roles. Given this, if you feel that anything you say is potentially identifiable, and you would rather it wasn't quoted or referred to directly, then just let me know.

- I will check at the end if you are happy to be quoted (anonymously) in the report, and if there is anything you would prefer not be included.

- Interview will probably last around 45 minutes.

- Any questions before we start?

- Request permission to record – this in case my notes are unclear and I need to go back and check anything. The recording will not be shared with anyone outside the research team and will be securely deleted after the research is complete.

- At start of recording – I just need to confirm for the record that you are giving verbal consent that you are happy to take part in this interview, and happy for the interview to be recorded for Ipsos to listen back to.

Background and info on the SWF team in their area

- Tell me about your role – and how it relates to the delivery of the SWF

- Recap and clarify any points as necessary from the proforma re.

- o where SWF sits in their local authority

- o who is involved in delivering it, and

- o the training provided.

General delivery of SWF locally

- Overall, what are the main challenges in delivering the Fund in your area? What is working well?

- Follow up on anything that is not clear in Q3-10 of the proforma, but particularly:

  - o Application options (check proforma Q3) – for any options not currently offered, probe on whether have offered this previously/why not offering at the moment. [ask whether online applications are automatically screened to remove those that are definitely not eligible]

  - o Grant options (check proforma Q5) – what are the reasons why you offer grants in these different forms? Are there particular groups/circumstances in which you are more likely to offer one form than another (e.g. cash vs voucher)? Why?

  - o Decisions (check proforma Q6) – if unclear, are decisions communicated in writing? What, if any, information about how to appeal a decision is included?

Views on guidance and reviews

- What impacts on your ability to meet the timings set out in the guidance?

- Are there any particular challenges you experience in delivering the Fund within the SG guidelines?

- How useful are the national guidelines? Is there anything that would improve them?

- How well do you feel the SWF review process works (from a local authority's perspective)?

  - o [Probe on views on 1st and 2nd Tier reviews].

- What do you do with data on the outcomes of 1st Tier reviews? And 2nd tier (SPSO) reviews? Is it used to shape training / policy / strategy?

Demand and need for SWF locally

- [Explore proforma answers Q11 and Q12 as relevant]

- Do you feel the current eligibility criteria for the SWF enables you to effectively meet needs in your local area? If not, why not?

- Probe if necessary: Are there specific groups excluded from the SWF that you feel are in significant need of the types of support it provides?

- Are you aware of any other groups that are eligible, but tend not to apply? If yes, why do you think this is? What might encourage them to apply?

Impacts of Covid-19 on the SWF

- [Explore answers on proforma Q13 further if relevant]

- With hindsight, was the SWF the best way of distributing additional support during the pandemic? What would be the best way of providing additional support in the event of a future emergency?

- Do you feel any pandemic impacts on capacity / need are likely to continue into the future? Are they short or long-term impacts? Why?

- What, if any, changes do you anticipate in the next 2 years – in the need and demand for the Fund in your area?

Promotion of the SWF locally

- [Explore answers on proforma Q14 – nature / timings of promotion if unclear].

- What are the reasons you promoted it in this way? What were you trying to achieve? (e.g. raising awareness in general? Among specific groups?)

- What, if any, evidence were you able to gather on how effective this promotion was?

  o [probe on whether they felt reached more / new potential applicants, and any specific groups?]

- IF NOT PROMOTED: What are the reasons for not undertaking any specific promotion of the Fund in your area the last 3 years?

Resourcing of the SWF

- You said you your grant allocation is [RESPONSE TO PROFORMA Q15], can you tell me more about why you said that?

- Follow up on top-up funding if provided (q16):

  - How easy or difficult was it to find budget for topping up the SWF?

  - Why did your area decide to do this?

  - What impacts – positive or negative – did providing this top up funding have in your area?

- If not provided – why did your area decide not to top-up SWF funding?

- You said you do / don't have the resource to administer the fund effectively (q17). Can you tell me more about that?

  - If insufficient – what more resource would you need to enable effective delivery (e.g. how many people/in what role?)? What difference would this make (e.g. would they be able to make decisions more quickly)?

- If known (from monitoring data) that the la underspend swf allocation – what do you think are the main reasons why your LA has not spent its full SWF allocation in recent years? Probe fully.

Views on the purpose/aims of the SWF

- I'd like now to ask you some questions about your view on the aims and purpose of the fund. I realise this might seem a bit late in the interview, but we felt it was important to cover other issues first.

- Can you describe your understanding of the current overall aims and purpose of the SWF?

- What are your views on these aims? Are they appropriate or do you feel they need changing at all? Why?

  - (if feel aims should change – probe on whether SWF is best tool for meeting suggested revised aims, or whether there are other options for meeting them?)

- At the moment, the SWF operates on a fixed budget, discretionary basis, with decisions devolved to local authorities. What are your views about this model?

  - What are its strengths/drawbacks?

  - How might it compare with a more centralised model, with decisions based on strict eligibility rules?

- [Follow up if needed on local aims Q18 – rationale / target groups / local issues seek to address]

Ending interview and final things to check

- Double-check proforma re. whether happy for us to contact them re. speaking to operational staff in phase 2, if their area is selected as case study

- Mention that also want to hear from applicants in phase 2. We are assuming that local authorities won't be able to share applicant details with us directly for GDPR reasons – but one option might be for local authorities to write to applicants on our behalf and invite them to 'opt in' to the research if they are willing to be interviewed. Is this something they think would be possible, if their local authority was selected as a case study area?

- Check whether happy to be quoted anonymously, and if we can come back to them if anything we need to check.

Annex C – Applicant topic guide

Introduction (3 mins)

- Introduce self and Ipsos

- Check in with how they are. Is now still an OK time to speak to us?

- Introduce the research:

  - The Scottish Government has asked us to carry out a review of the Scottish Welfare Fund. They particularly want to hear about the experiences of people who have applied to the fund – how you found the process and anything that you think could be improved about it.

  - We'll write a report about what we find out, from applicants, local authorities, and others who are involved with supporting people to apply to the Fund.

  - Explain that the interview will last about 45 minutes to an hour. Remind them they will get £30 to say 'thank you' for giving up time to talk to us.

- Provide reassurances of anonymity and confidentiality. Explain that no identifying information about individuals will be passed on to anyone outwith the Ipsos research team, so it will not be possible for the Scottish Government or local council to identify individuals in any reports that Ipsos produce.

  - Explain that taking part today won't have any impact one way or another on whether any applications they make to the SWF will be approved or not.

  - Remind participant that they don't have to answer any questions they don't want to answer, and that they are welcome to stop the interview at any time.

- Request permission to record interview. This in case my notes are unclear and I need to go back and check anything. The recording will not be shared with anyone outside the research team and will be securely deleted after the research is complete.

- Any questions before we start?

- At start of recording – I just need to confirm for the record that you are giving verbal consent that you are happy to take part in this interview, and happy for the interview to be recorded for Ipsos to listen back to.

About the participant (2 mins)

Firstly, it would be great if I could just confirm a few details about you
- Can you tell me how old you are?

- Which area of Scotland do you live in?

- And do you live with anyone else? If so, who?

- And are you working at the moment?

- Confirm whether have experience of applying for Community Care Grant, Crisis Grant, or both?

    o Check how often have applied for each in last 2 years

    o And when most recent application was.

Awareness and understanding of the Fund (5 mins)

- How did you first find out about the Scottish Welfare Fund? (PROBE on where / when / from who heard about it)

    o What kind of information do you remember getting about the Fund?

        ▪ What did you think about this information? Did it cover everything you needed to know? If not, what was missing?

    o Who did you think the Fund was for, when you first found out about it? (If unsure when first heard about it – who do they think it's for now?)

        ▪ Were you clear about whether or not you could apply to the Fund?

        ▪ Did you have any concerns about applying to the SWF?

    o What sort of help and support did you think you would be able to get from the Fund, when you first found out about it? (IF UNSURE WHEN FIRST HEARD ABOUT IT – what's their understanding now of what kinds of help the SWF can offer?)

        ▪ PROBE – were they aware of Crisis Grants and Community Care Grants, or just one? Were they aware that CCGs might be in the form of goods, rather than cash?

Background to their SWF application(s) (5 mins)

- Just to remind you, we won't share your answers today with anyone else in a way that could identify you – we'll only include anonymous quotes in our report.

- FOR EACH TYPE OF GRANT APPLIED FOR: Please can you tell me a little bit about how you came to apply to the Scottish Welfare Fund for a Crisis Grant / a Community Care Grant? (most recent application, if more than one)

  o What were the circumstances that led to you applying? What had happened immediately before you applied?

  o Why did you decide to apply to the SWF? What help were you looking for from them? Specifically, what did you ask for the grant to cover?

  o Had you tried any other avenues of support? What happened with these?

  o IF REPEAT APPLICATION: What about the previous time you applied? Could you tell me a bit about what had happened that led to you applying on those occasions?

    ▪ (depending on how much time have, probe for all applications in the last year, and also try and build picture of how many times they have applied in total – e.g. when did they first apply to the SWF (keeping in mind it started in 2013 but might have applied to DWP fund before then)? How many times did they apply in the last year? Roughly how many times have they applied before the last year?).

  NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: You should talk through the topics in the remainder of the topic guide (application process, decision-making, Review, impacts) for each type of grant they have received – i.e. if applied for both CG and CCG, probe on each.
  If they have applied multiple times, might be easiest to ask them to focus on the most recent application first.
  If time, you can then go back and probe on whether/how previous applications differed.

The application process (5 mins)

- How did you apply to the Fund? In person, online, by phone, in writing?

  - Were you aware of any other options for applying? Why did you decide to apply that way?

- Did you get any help or support with applying?

  - IF YES – who from? What kind of support did they give you?

  - IF NO – was there any help or support that would have been useful when you were applying?

- How easy or difficult was it to apply? Why? If difficult – what would have made it easier for you?

Decision-making (5 mins)
- After you submitted your application, what happened next?

  - Probe on whether had conversations with Local Authority, by telephone/email/in person

    - What did these discussions cover?

    - How long after submitting the application did you hear from the local authority (and in what form)?

- What was the outcome of your application?

  - Probe on whether completely/partially successful or unsuccessful

  - IF SUCCESSFUL – what form was the grant in? (cash, voucher, goods)

  - How long did the grant / goods take to arrive? Was this timing as expected? Any issues with the timing?

  - IF CCG - Would you have preferred goods or cash? [explore why]

  - IF THEY RECEIVED GOODS - were you happy with the goods? [explore why] Were you happy with the quality of the goods?

- How was this outcome communicated to you?

  - PROBE – letter, email, over the phone, combination?

  - What information were you given about the decision?

    - PROBE – reasons for decision? Right to request a review? How to request a review?

  - How easy or difficult did you find it to understand the information you were given about the outcome?

    - Why?

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- What, if anything, would have made it easier to understand?
  - How did you feel about the reasons given (especially for unsuccessful applications, but probe for both)?
    - Did you understand why your application was/was not successful?

Review (if not wholly successful) (5 mins)

- Did you request a review the decision not to award you a grant / the full amount requested?

- Why did you decide to request a reviews of the decision / not to request a review?

  IF YES, DID REQUEST A REVIEW – PROBE AROUND EXPERIENCE OF FIRST TIER REVIEW (WHERE THE LOCAL AUTHORITY REVIEWS APPLICATION) AND SECOND TIER REVIEW (WHERE ASK THE SPSO TO REVIEW IT)

- Can you talk me through what happened with your Review request?
  - Did anyone help you to request a review? Who / what help did they give you?
  - How did you ask for your decision to be reviewed? (e.g. over phone, by email, letter, etc.)
  - How easy or difficult was it for you to submit your request to review the decision? Why? What, if anything, would have made it easier?
  - What happened after you submitted your request to review the decision?
    - How long did it take to hear back?
    - What was the outcome? Was the decision upheld or changed?
    - What information were you given about the reasons for upholding / changing the decision?
    - How easy or difficult was this information to understand?
    - What did you think about the reasons given for upholding / rejecting the local authority's decision on your application?
    - Were you told you could request a further review of the decision, by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsmen?
    - Did you request the SPSO review the decisions about your application?

- IF YES – GO THROUGH QUESTIONS RE. REVIEW PROCESS AGAIN, FOR THIS SECOND REVIEW.

Impacts of the SWF (5 mins)

IF APPLICATION SUCCESSFUL:
- What difference, if any, did the SWF award make to you (and your family)?

  o Financial impacts – what did you use it for and what difference did this make to you?

  o Any non-financial impacts – did getting the award affect you in any other ways?

- IF CRISIS GRANT – how long did the additional money last you?

- IF COMMUNITY CARE GRANT – after you got the grant, were you able to move into / stay in your accommodation?

- What do you think would have happened had you not got the grant/award? Would you have been able to access help/support from anywhere else?

IF NOT SUCCESSFUL:
- What impact did your application being turned down have on you (and your family)?

  o Probe on financial impacts – how did you manage without the grant?

  o And non-financial – what other impacts did not getting the award have?

- Were you able to access any alternative help or support, after your application was turned down? (IF NECESSARY, PROMPT – any other financial support? Any non-financial help, like help from a foodbank? For CCG – did they get the items they needed in the end? Where from?)

  o IF YES – what other help did you access? What impact did this have? Was it able to address the issue that had led you to apply to the SWF?

REPEAT APPLICANTS:
- What's your understanding of how often you can apply to the SWF?

- ASK IF FEELS APPROPRIATE: What do you do / will you do when you reach maximum applications? Where else do you / would you go for help?

Overarching views of the process (5 mins)

- How did you feel you were treated by the local authority during the process of applying to the SWF? Why do you say that?

- o IF UNHAPPY WITH TREATMENT – probe on how treated at different stages – initial application, communication of decision, Review (1st tier, to LA, and 2nd tier, to SPSO)

- o And what, if anything, would have improved your experience of applying to the Fund?

- When you applied to the SWF, did the local authority suggest or put you in touch with any other sources of support or advice that might be able to help you?

  - o IF YES – what? And how? (i.e. just suggestions, or did they actively link them with other support?)

  - o When did they suggest this? (what point in the application process?)

  - o Did you follow up on these suggestions?

    - ▪ IF YES – what was the impact of that? Did it help you? Why / why not?

    - ▪ IF NO – why not? What were the issues that stopped you taking this up?

  - o Was there any (other) advice or support you think you might have found helpful?

- REPEAT APPLICANTS:

  - o What, if anything, would have helped you not need to apply to the SWF again?

Suggestions for improvement (5 mins)

- What suggestions do you have for how the SWF could be improved?

- PROBE AROUND:

  - o Raising awareness of the Fund?

  - o Making the application process easier / better?

  - o Changes to how decisions are communicated?

  - o Change to the Review process?

  - o Anything else?

Thank you and ending interview (3 mins)

- Is there anything else you would like to raise about the things we've discussed today?

- Do you have any questions about the research?

- Would you like us to let you know when the report is published? (IF YES, RECORD EMAIL ADDRESS OR CONTACT DETAILS)

As I mentioned, we're offering you £30 to thank you for your time. Would you prefer to get it as:

- A BACS transfer? (ASK FOR ACCOUNT NUMBER AND SORT CODE)

- A Love2Shop e-code? (DOUBLE CHECK WE HAVE THEIR CORRECT EMAIL)

- An Amazon e-code? (DOUBLE CHECK WE HAVE THEIR CORRECT EMAIL)

Annex D – Topic guide for local authority decision-makers (phase 2)

Introduction (3 mins)

- Introduce self and Ipsos

- Check in with how they are. Is now still an OK time to speak to us?

- Introduce the research: The Scottish Government has commissioned Ipsos MORI to undertake research to review the operation and effectiveness of the SWF.

- The review will use multiple methods to explore the operation of the Fund, including:

  o Analysis of monitoring data, returned by LAs to the SG

  o Analysis of existing literature and evidence

  o Interviews with senior staff within each local authority, who have been helping us compile a more detailed picture of how the Fund operates across Scotland.

  o Interviews with applicants

  o And interviews with professionals involved in processing applications or supporting applicants in a number of case study local authorities

- Latter part is where they come in. Their area has been selected as a case study, and their name has been passed to us as someone involved in processing applications.

- Discuss anonymity and confidentiality.

  o Case study areas will be identified by letter only in the report

  o We are not sharing the identity of case study areas with the Scottish Government, and will not share your interview with anyone else in your local authority

  o If we use quotes in the report, they will be anonymous

  o Hope they will feel able be open in your answers, as the learning from this will hopefully help inform improvements across Scotland.

  o However, we are aware that offering concrete guarantees of confidentiality can be difficult with professional interviewees who may

be one of a small number of people in relevant roles. Given this, if you feel that anything you say is potentially identifiable, and you would rather it wasn't quoted or referred to directly, then just let me know. I'll check back with you about this at the end.

- Remind participant that they don't have to answer any questions they don't want to answer, and that they are welcome to stop the interview at any time.

- Interview will probably last around 60-90 minutes.

- Request permission to record – this in case my notes are unclear and I need to go back and check anything. The recording will not be shared with anyone outside the research team and will be securely deleted after the research is complete.

- Any questions before we start?

- AT START OF RECORDING – I just need to confirm for the record that you are giving verbal consent that you are happy to take part in this interview, and happy for the interview to be recorded for Ipsos to listen back to.

About the participant and their role (2 mins)

To start off with, tell me a bit about your role
- How long have you been in post?

- Roughly how many applications do you process in a standard week?

- Do you work on both Community Care Grant and Crisis Grant applications? (IF YES, THEN REMEMBER TO PROBE ON BOTH AS APPROPRIATE IN REST OF INTERVIEW)

- How big is your team?

Processing SWF applications (15 mins)

Can you talk me through what happens when you receive an SWF application
- How does it come into you (email, post, phone?)?

- What do you do when you first receive an application?

- What, if any, additional information do you need to make a decision (beyond the application form)? How do you obtain this?

- At what points do you have contact with the applicant? (before, during, after application)

- What kinds of help / support do you or your team offer applicants? Probe re. before, during and after application.
  - Probe re. help offered directly (e.g. with information needed, or with filling in form) and sign-posting/linking to other services/help.
  - What do you think about the level of support your team provides applicants?
    - Are you able to provide the level of support you would like? If not, what are the barriers?
    - Is there learning about how you approach this that could be shared with other areas?
- How easy or difficult is it to make decisions?
  - Probe for examples of when it is easy and difficult
- What happens after an applicant gets their decision?
- Do you link applicants with further help/support?
  - Probe for successful and unsuccessful applicants
  - And on type of help/support
  - And whether signposting only, or more 'active' linking with support?
- How much do you find out about impact of successful awards?
  - Probe separately for CGs and CCGs
  - What (if any) follow-up information do you get on the impact?
- What about the impact for those who do not get awards? What, if any, further information do you get about them?

Training, guidance and review (5-10 mins)

- What, if any, training have you had for your role?
  - Probe re. initial and ongoing training
  - What does this cover?
  - How useful is it? Is there anything else you feel it would be useful to have further training / support around?
- What, if any, challenges do you experience in using the statutory guidance on the Fund?
  - Any areas that are unclear or difficult to apply? Why? What might help improve this?

- o Any challenges meeting timeframes? IF YES – what impacts on this?
- How well does the system for reviewing SWF decisions work, in your view?
    - o Probe on 1st tier (LA internal) and 2nd tier (SPSO) reviews
    - o Are you involved with first tier reviews at all? In what way? (i.e. do they review other people's decisions?)
    - o How does your team use the feedback from reviews?

Local need and demand (5-10 mins)

- How accessible do you think the Fund is to people in your area?
    - o Are those who might need it generally aware of it? How do they become aware of it?
    - o How easy or difficult do you think it is to apply? What, if anything, would make it easier?
- Do you come across many people that apply, or want to apply, for the Fund but are not eligible?
    - o IF YES – what types of people?
    - o Why are they applying? Reasons + whether CG or CCG
- Are there people experiencing pressing need, but who aren't eligible under current guidance?
    - o Who? What alternative help is available to those groups?
- Are there people who ARE eligible and in need, but who don't generally apply to the SWF?
    - o Why not? What could be done to encourage them to consider applying?
- How has demand for the Fund changed since you started working on it? Why? What are the main factors impacting demand?
    - o Probe separately re. Crisis Grants and Community Care Grants
    - o Probe re. perceived impacts of Covid-19 on demand – and whether short-term or appear to be continuing longer-term
- To what extent are you aware of receiving repeat applications for CGs?
    - o What do you think the reasons are for this?
    - o What, if anything, might help people avoid needing to make repeat applications to the Fund? Probe – changes to the Fund vs. external factors.

Challenges and improvements (5 mins)

- What are the main challenges for in delivering the Fund locally?

- IF NOT COVERED ABOVE: How has your workload changed over time? Why?
    - Probe around impact of Covid-19 – and whether temporary or longer-term

- How do you think the Fund could be improved, to better help those who need the types of support it provides?

- IF NOT RAISED, PROBE AROUND:
    - Eligibility criteria / rules?
    - Changes to how it is delivered – local delivery vs. centralised national system?
    - Raising awareness of the Fund?
    - Making the application process easier / better?
    - Changes to how decisions are communicated?
    - Changes to the Review process?
    - Changes to the guidance?
    - Changes to funding for grants?
    - Changes to staffing levels for processing applications?
    - Support for staff in handling difficult calls?
    - Anything else?

Thank you and ending interview (2 mins)

- Is there anything else you would like to raise about the things we've discussed today?

- Do you have any questions about the research?

- Are you happy to be quoted anonymously in any reports?

Annex E – Topic guide for external local stakeholders

Introduction (3 mins)

- Introduce self and Ipsos

- Check in with how they are. Is now still an OK time to speak to us?

- Introduce the research: The Scottish Government has commissioned Ipsos MORI to undertake research to review the operation and effectiveness of the SWF, as part of its commitment to reviewing the Fund this parliamentary term.

- The review will use multiple methods to explore the operation of the Fund, including:

  o Analysis of monitoring data, returned by LAs to the SG

  o Analysis of existing literature and evidence

  o Interviews with senior staff within each local authority, who have been helping us compile a more detailed picture of how the Fund operates across Scotland.

  o Interviews with applicants

  o And interviews with professionals involved in processing applications or supporting applicants in a number of case study local authorities

- Latter part is where they come in. Their area has been selected as a case study, and their name has been passed to us as someone who works with people who may apply to the Fund.

- Discuss anonymity and confidentiality.

  o Case study areas will be identified by letter only in the report

  o We are not sharing the identity of case study areas with the Scottish Government, and will not share your interview with anyone else in your local authority

  o If we use quotes in the report, they will be anonymous

  o Hope they will feel able be open in your answers, as the learning from this will hopefully help inform improvements across Scotland.

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- o However, we are aware that offering concrete guarantees of confidentiality can be difficult with professional interviewees who may be one of a small number of people in relevant roles. Given this, if you feel that anything you say is potentially identifiable, and you would rather it wasn't quoted or referred to directly, then just let me know. I'll check back with you about this at the end.

- Remind participant that they don't have to answer any questions they don't want to answer, and that they are welcome to stop the interview at any time.

- Interview will probably last around 45 minutes.

- Request permission to record – this in case my notes are unclear and I need to go back and check anything. The recording will not be shared with anyone outside the research team and will be securely deleted after the research is complete.

- Any questions before we start?

- AT START OF RECORDING – I just need to confirm for the record that you are giving verbal consent that you are happy to take part in this interview, and happy for the interview to be recorded for Ipsos to listen back to.

About the participant and their role (5 mins)

To start off with, tell me a bit about your organisation and your role
- How long have you been in post?

- How do you / your organisation typically come into contact with people who may be applying to the SWF?

- What role do you / your organisation play in relation to people applying to the Fund?

  - o Probe – can you talk me through the support you provide people, before, during and after an application to the Fund?

  - o Probe re. Crisis Grants and Community Care Grants (NB IF INVOLVED WITH BOTH, REMEMBER TO PROBE AS APPROPRIATE ON BOTH IN REST OF INTERVIEW)

- What, if any, contact do you have with the Local Authority SWF team outwith individual applications?

Perceptions of the operation of the SWF locally (15 mins)

Accessibility
- How accessible do you think the Fund is to people in your area / the people you work with?

    o Are those who might need it generally aware of it? How do they become aware of it?

    o How effectively do you think it is promoted? Why? What might improve promotion / awareness?

- How easy or difficult do you think it is to apply? What, if anything, would make it easier?

Decision-making process
- In general, are decisions being made in a timely manner for applicants?

    o IF NO – why not? What do you think the issues are?

    o What impact does this have for the applicants they work with?

- How clearly are decisions communicated to applicants?

    o IF UNCLEAR – how could this be improved?

- In general, how consistent do you feel decision-making is in your area? Why?

    o Probe on CGs and CCGs separately

    o Probe on specific issues, if feel it's inconsistent

        ▪ Do they think the issue with the statutory guidance, or the way it is applied?

        ▪ How could this be improved?

Review process
- Are applicants made aware of their rights to request a review of the decision on their application?

- How well does the system for reviewing SWF decisions work, in your view?

    o Probe separately around 1st tier (LA) and 2nd tier (SPSO) review

Impacts / follow-up after decisions
- What happens after an applicant gets their decision?

    o How much do you find out about impact of successful awards?

        ▪ Probe separately for CGs and CCGs

        ▪ What (if any) follow-up information do you get on the impact?

    o What about the impact for those who do not get awards?

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- What, if any, alternative support are they able to access?

- To what extent are you aware of people making repeat applications for CGs?

  - What do you think the reasons are for this?

  - What, if anything, might help people avoid needing to make repeat applications to the Fund? Probe – changes to the Fund vs. external factors.

Local need and demand (10 mins)

- Do you come across many people that apply, or want to apply, for the Fund but are not eligible?

  - IF YES – what types of people?

  - Why are they applying? Reasons + whether CG or CCG

- Are there people experiencing pressing need, but who aren't eligible under current guidance?

  - Who? What alternative help is available to those groups?

- Are there people who ARE eligible and in need, but who don't generally apply to the SWF?

  - Why not? What could be done to encourage them to consider applying?

- How has demand for the Fund changed since you started working in this area? Why? What are the main factors impacting demand?

  - Probe separately re. Crisis Grants and Community Care Grants

  - Probe re. perceived impacts of Covid-19 on demand – and whether short-term or appear to be continuing longer-term

Challenges and improvements (10 mins)

- How has your involvement with supporting applicants to SWF changed over time? Why?

  - Probe around impact of Covid-19 – and whether temporary or longer-term

  - What do you think about the level of support your organisation provides applicants?

    - Is your organisation best placed to do this?

- - Are you able to provide the level of support you would like? If not, what are the barriers?

- How do you think the Fund could be improved, to better help those who need the types of support it provides?

- IF NOT RAISED, PROBE AROUND:
  - Eligibility criteria / rules?
  - Changes to how it is delivered – local delivery vs. centralised national system?
  - Raising awareness of the Fund?
  - Making the application process easier / better?
  - Changes to how decisions are communicated?
  - Changes to the Review process?
  - Changes to the guidance?
  - Changes to funding for grants?
  - Changes to staffing levels for processing applications?
  - Anything else?

Thank you and ending interview (2 mins)

- Is there anything else you would like to raise about the things we've discussed today?

- Do you have any questions about the research?

- Are you happy to be quoted anonymously in any reports?

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