

**END
FURNITURE
POVERTY**



Local welfare and
furniture provision:
the limits of cash-first

Local welfare and furniture provision

Cash-first is increasingly considered the best way to provide local crisis support. And for good reason: current research shows a strong preference amongst recipients for cash as opposed to in-kind support, such as food parcels or vouchers^{1,2,3}. The APPG on Ending the Need for Food Banks concluded that cash-first approaches are superior because they are more dignified and effective than food-based support⁴.

However, this is not necessarily the case when considering the provision of essential appliances and furniture items. When supporting people to access these items, provision of the items themselves is generally more effective and dignified than cash. By supplying items themselves, local authorities can make financial savings, ensure households get what they need, and offer customer service that is tailored to the needs of vulnerable service users.

As charities advocate for a move towards cash-first, it is important that the provision of furniture and appliances is considered as a distinct type of support, with unique challenges that do not apply to other crisis interventions.

The need for furniture provision

There are significant levels of need for furniture and appliance provision. Our research, *The Extent of Furniture Poverty (2023)*, revealed that over 6m people in the UK are living without at least one essential item because they cannot afford it, and over 1m people are living without three or more items⁵.

Access to essential furniture items is vital because it confers a range of benefits on the user, that are necessary to attain a decent standard of living. Living without essential items has negative impacts upon your physical and mental health, and your financial and social wellbeing. For a fuller discussion of the challenges of living without essential items, and the benefits living with them confers, see *The Extent of Furniture Poverty (2023)*.

Crisis Support in England

The primary form of local crisis support in England is Local Welfare Assistance (LWA), provided through local authorities. Though support can be obtained through voluntary and community sector organisations, grant-giving charities, and emergency funds such as the Household Support Fund (HSF), LWA schemes are still best-placed to offer this type of support. Unfortunately, not all councils offer LWA, with 37 now having closed their schemes⁶.

Help with furniture and white goods is a well-established function of crisis support. Essential items were provided nationally through the Discretionary Social Fund (DSF) which ran from 1988-2013. Since 2013, the majority of English councils have continued to provide furniture and white goods to households in crisis. Of the 116 local authorities who have an LWA scheme, only two did not offer any support with furniture and appliances in 2022/23. However, there is significant variability in what is provided. For example, in 2022/23 the highest spend per capita on furniture and white goods was £5.55, yet the lowest was £0.03.

1. The Trussell Trust (2022) [Cash-first approaches to supporting people facing financial hardship locally: a literature review](#).

2. CPAG (2020), [The Cost of Learning in Lockdown: Family Experiences of School Closures](#)

3. Legendary Community Club (2022), [Cash first: the LCC Pilot](#)

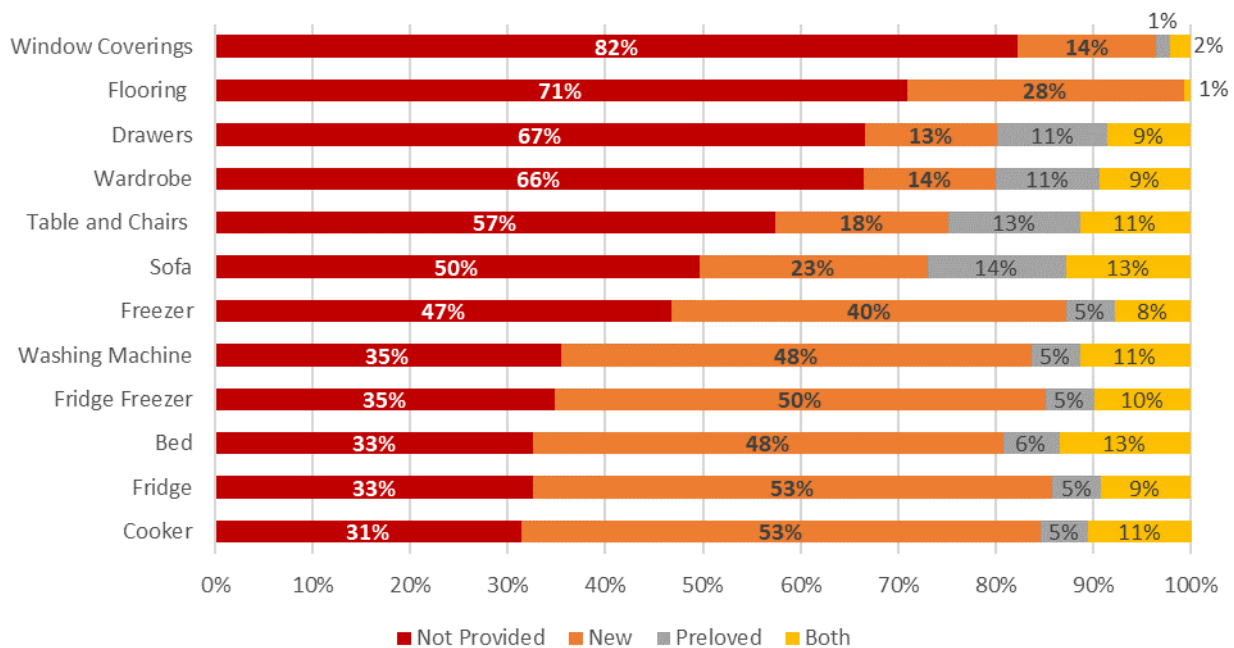
4. APPG on Ending the Need for Food Banks (2022) [Cash or food? Exploring Effective Responses to destitution](#)

5. End Furniture Poverty (2023) [The Extent of Furniture Poverty](#)

6. End Furniture Poverty (2023) [On the Cliff Edge: Crisis Support 2022/23](#)

While all of EFP’s essential furniture items⁷ have been provided by at least one LWA scheme, the discussion here relates primarily to those items that are provided most widely: appliances (cooker, washing machine, fridge, freezer) and beds. Our research shows that these items are each provided by around two thirds of all English local authorities, unlike the other items which are provided much more haphazardly across the country⁸.

Figure 1: Percentage of all English local authorities providing essential furniture items through LWA



⁷ The Essential Items are: Cooker, Fridge, Freezer, Washing Machine, Bed, Sofa, Clothing Storage, Table and Chairs, Window Coverings, Flooring. We are currently updating the list, and removing a television.

⁸ End Furniture Poverty (2023) [On the Cliff Edge: Crisis Support 2022/23](#)

What are the options for local authorities?

There are many different ways for a local authority to support its residents to access furniture and white goods through LWA, and the details will vary in each local authority. But primarily, they can do one of three things:

1. Give the recipient cash to go and buy the item for themselves.
2. Give the recipient a voucher to buy items. This can be a voucher for a specific furniture supplier if required.
3. Provide recipients furniture directly. This can be done by negotiating a contract with a furniture supplier to deliver items to recipients when instructed by the council. The supplier could be a private retailer or a local furniture charity depending on the needs of the area, and the suppliers that are able to fulfil the terms of the contract.

What are authorities currently doing?

Figure 2: Percentage of local authorities using different delivery methods for furniture, 2022/23

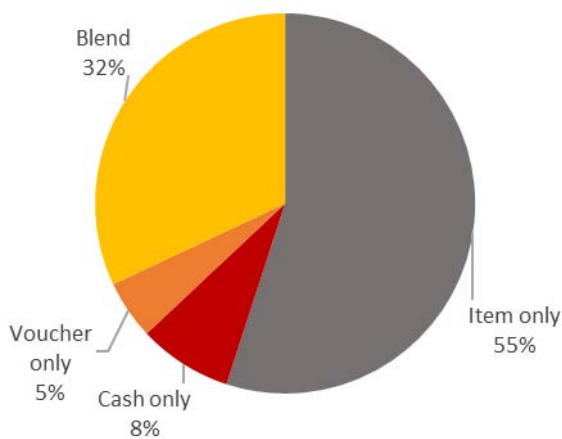
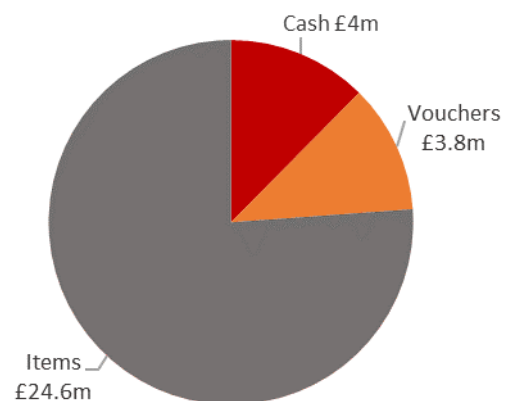


Figure 3: Amount of furniture spending that went on cash, vouchers, and the items themselves, 2022/23



In 2022/23, EFP asked every English local welfare scheme what proportion of their crisis support furniture spend went on cash, vouchers, or the items themselves.

Figure 2 shows that 55% of local welfare schemes told us they spent all of their furniture budget on providing the items themselves, and 8% told us they only provided cash⁹. Thirty-two percent of local authorities used a blend of delivery methods and 5% only used vouchers.

Figure 3 shows that of all the £32.4m spent on essential furniture items in 2022/23, £24.6m (76%) went on providing the items directly. This indicates that the local authorities using a blended approach largely provide items directly.

⁹ Percentage of schemes that (a) provided furniture and (b) answered the question on delivery method. There were 13 schemes that did not answer this question and two that did not provide any furniture at all.

When it comes to all LWA spending (including both food and furniture support), the Children’s Society found that in 2019, 66% of local authorities provided in-kind support only, 8% provided cash only, and 26% went with a blended approach¹⁰. In coming years, based on the findings of the APPG and the work of other charities, we should begin to see the proportion of local authorities using a cash-first approach for food support increase. Indeed, we would hope that since the Children’s Society collected that data in 2019, fewer local authorities are providing in-kind support only and more have moved towards cash-first for food and fuel where appropriate.

However, this should not be replicated for furniture and white goods, as for such items there are multiple benefits to provision of the item itself. Encouragingly, given the data presented in figures 2 and 3 above, it appears that local authorities currently recognise these benefits. Any local authority that is beginning to move towards cash-first should give careful consideration to them when thinking about the furniture portion of local welfare.



¹⁰ The Children’s Society (2019), [Nowhere to Turn](#)

Item Provision: The Benefits

For this briefing, EFP contacted local authorities and spoke to a leading furniture provider that works with several local authorities. We conducted in-depth interviews, but also used evidence given in email format from organisations who did not have the capacity to give a full interview.

From our conversations with local authorities and suppliers, EFP identified three primary benefits of item provision. They are:

- Financial savings
- Certainty
- Customer Service
 - Logistics
 - Wrap around support
 - Responsiveness
 - Empathy

The customer service that a furniture service can provide is the widest of these three categories, as it covers a broad range of activities. It is here where a furniture and appliance provision scheme can provide outstanding value to service-users, although different suppliers will offer differing levels of service.

Financial Savings

There can be a significant financial benefit to providing furniture and appliances, rather than cash or vouchers. Depending on the supplier, items can be sourced cheaper than would be possible for an individual using cash to pay a retailer.

Local Authority A: *“The council has a contract with [a local furniture charity] which allows the items to be sourced at a cheaper rate, especially compared to the private sector. Given the council’s scheme has a limited budget, securing these items at a cheaper rate ensures that more support can be provided to more claimants.”*

Local Authority B: *“In terms of appliances, we intend to keep awarding the appliance itself due to the buying power we have as a council in terms of negotiating the best possible price within a contract, as well as providing appliances that are as energy efficient as possible within the budget available.”*

Many such organisations also have a reuse function, meaning items can be provided even cheaper. One council told us how the supplier they work with *‘repair and repurpose second hand furniture and electrical goods but will also source new if second hand isn’t available’*. When done well, such an approach can be more sustainable and create savings.

It is vital for local authorities to provide the best possible value for their population and contracting a furniture supplier can be one way of doing so, if the council is committed to providing furniture and white goods on a large enough scale to access economies of scale.

Certainty for the council

Providing items directly also gives local authorities a level of certainty that the money they spend is going on what it has been allocated for. Though there is little evidence for misuse of funds being a serious issue when delivering cash grants^{11,12}, it is something councils have to consider – especially in the context of providing the sums necessary to purchase white goods.

As one local authority put it, **“a cash award for an appliance would be a large amount of cash.”**

When providing upwards of £200 to a family for an appliance who may have other, more pressing concerns, there could be a risk that the money would be used for purposes other than those which it was intended for. If used to pay off debt, or provide a couple of weeks food for a family, the award would provide respite from such difficulties, but the family would still be without the appliance they need. A short-term problem may have been solved, but a longer-term one would remain.

In addition to the certainty that funds are being used for the intended item, councils also need the certainty that the item provided is of a high quality, will last, and has a warranty in case of any issues.

Customer Service

The largest reason that in-kind provision is better for furniture and appliances is the customer service that can be provided by council services and contracted providers, compared to an individual purchasing an item with cash.

A contracted provider that is instructed specifically to get items to LWA recipients can develop a specialised service. The customer service and delivery teams will be able to deal with common issues that employees otherwise would not be used to dealing with.

The furniture provider we spoke to regularly works with councils to provide furniture through LWA schemes. They may not be typical of every furniture provider that works with LWA schemes, but they do offer a good example of what can be done when a local authority and a furniture provider work together to provide a quality service.

Furniture provider: **“The customer service team, like all departments here are trained in the type of end users we work with. So we’ll speak to the end users, sometimes some of the tenants we deliver to are particularly vulnerable...our team is trained to understand that as well”**

Logistics

Firstly, a specialised service can run its logistics to benefit vulnerable clients. There are several key aspects to this, including:

- Arranging repeat deliveries, in the awareness that vulnerable individuals have complex lives and might not be home for deliveries.
- Phoning individuals several times to remind them of delivery times, and sending text messages in case English is not their first language.

11 World Bank Africa Region (2014), [Cash Transfers and Temptation: A Review of Global Evidence](#)

12 APPG on Ending the Need for Food Banks (2022) [Cash or food? Exploring Effective Responses to destitution](#)

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- Taking care of installation and packaging removal: “When we deliver furniture, we deliver it to the house where it needs to go. It’s not going to be left at the bottom of the stairs... We carry things into properties...we unpack it, we assemble items, we install items...so the theory is we go into a property and come out and the tenant is ready to use whatever we’ve just delivered.”
 - Arranging for aftercare – the organisation we spoke to will contact the manufacturer for service users when appliances break and organise for engineers to repair or replace faulty items: “We decided right at the start that we’re going to be the middleman for that sort of situation...we’re not going to ask a vulnerable tenant to ring some premium hotline number and be on hold for 15 minutes...we’re going to do all that for them...all the tenant has to do is wait for a phone call from an engineer.”

Wrap around support

In addition to specialised logistics, a furniture scheme can provide wrap around support that would be unavailable to a service user buying items with cash. For example, delivery staff can be trained to look out for signs that a service user is in a dangerous situation, and report that to other council services. Customer service call handlers can be trained in signposting users to other organisations that can support them.

Furniture Provider: “What we are trained to do is to signpost to try and get that information to people... a lot of our responsibility as an organisation is safeguarding as well.”

Responsiveness

A specialist customer service team can be more responsive to the needs of service users, too. Responsiveness can be built into their model, allowing for faster deliveries and flexibility where necessary:

Local Authority B: “We can generally make an award and an item can be installed faster than it would be if someone purchased it themselves, meaning we can provide a more responsive service to someone in crisis who might otherwise have to go longer without an essential appliance.”

Sometimes it can be vital that particular orders are prioritised, in a way that might not be possible if an individual is purchasing an item for themselves.

Furniture Provider: “We normally book these orders within five days...[if] we speak to a tenant who is living on their own, on insulin and their fridge is broken, and their medication is useless without a fridge, we use that information to kind of prioritise that even higher than some other cases”

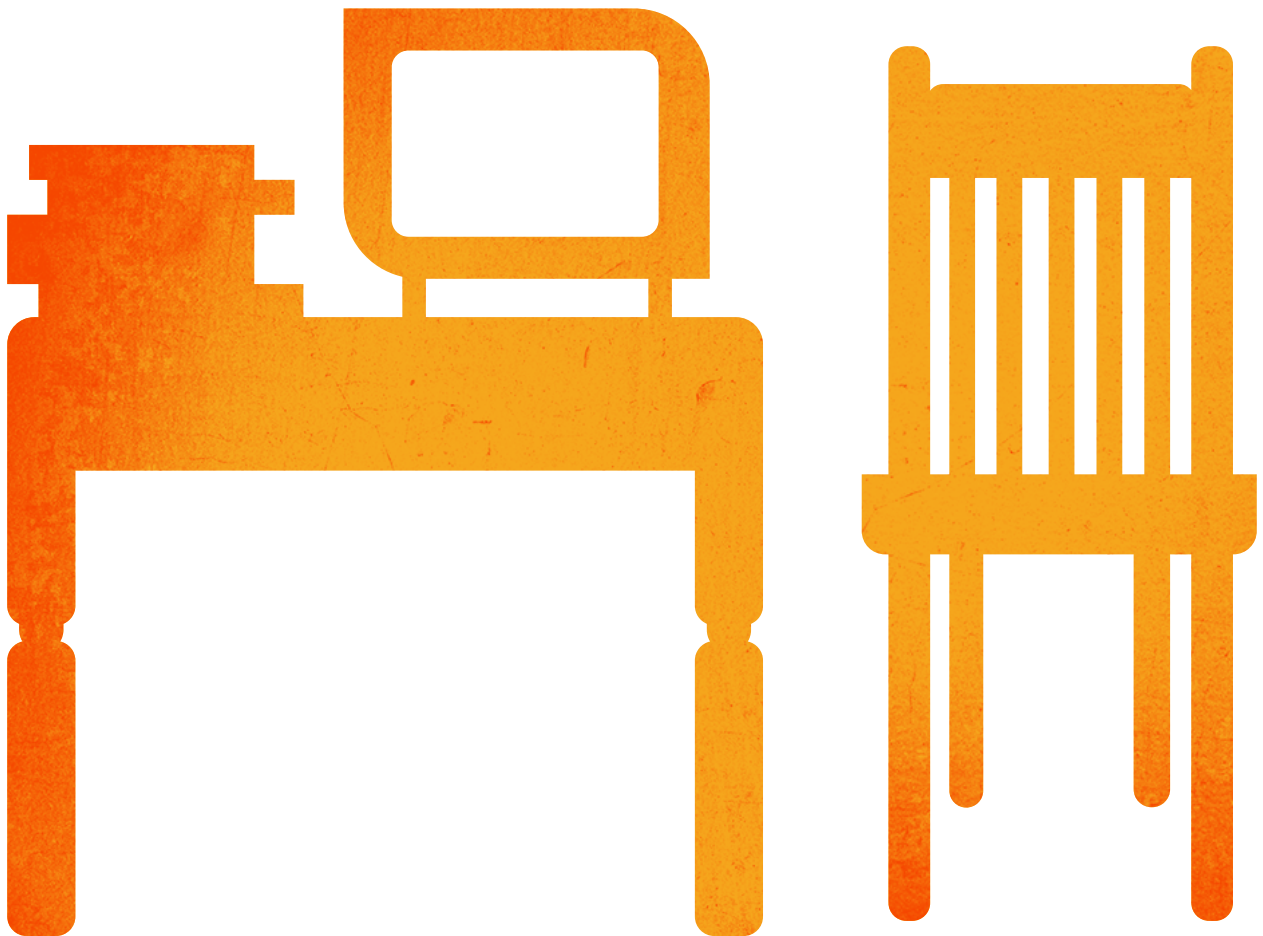
Empathy

When running an LWA scheme it is essential to be empathetic towards the service users. Again, this is something that would probably be unavailable for an individual buying an item themselves with cash.

Furniture Provider: “There’s other things in people’s lives. It is not just about a furniture delivery.”

When you have been in a crisis situation, the value of having someone listen to you, and do their best to help you, cannot be overstated. Often, in our rush to analyse the tangible benefits of crisis support schemes, we can forget the importance of simply letting someone know that they are not alone.

Furniture Provider: "You [a customer service professional] might be the only person that an end user is interacting with all week...sometimes we'll be on the phone to somebody for what seems like quite a long time, I'll be talking about things like, you know, my sister getting married last week, or you know health issues, that sort of thing. And our team never cut the tenant off, we will always speak to people where we can"



Benefits of cash first

Though EFP believe that there are significant advantages to providing furniture and white goods through a contracted supplier, there are reasons why local authorities may wish to provide cash for furniture.

One council summarised their reasons for using cash. They told us:

Local Authority C: *“We provide cash towards furniture rather than the specific items needed for two reasons:*

- 1. Residents have more choice as to what and where to buy their items. It also helps households to budget better.*
- 2. For the local authority, the cash first approach reduces the cost of coordination, logistics and administrative costs.”*

Resident choice and council costs are important things to consider, and EFP encourage every local authority to think about where they fit into their local priorities. However, EFP still believe that item provision is preferable where a council runs a comprehensive scheme.

Choice

Giving people the agency to choose what they purchase is one of the main arguments in favour of cash first^{13,14}. For food, this is essential: people are experts in their own needs and they know how to source their food. Limiting choice over such a basic need can be stigmatising¹⁵.

When cash is provided, people are empowered to make their own choices. Money can be used by a household to buy what it needs, and its inherent flexibility unlocks wider benefits, such as paying off outstanding bills¹⁶.

For furniture and appliances however, while choice can be preferable it is outweighed by the benefits of furniture provision. The financial savings, certainty for the council, and customer service that is provided are much more important than the ability to choose between two electrical manufacturers. With bed frames and appliances in particular, the health, social and financial benefits of access to a functional item far outweigh any stylistic choices. Once you have acquired the basics, there is always scope for households to buy items that suit their personal preference as they move away from the emergency situation that led to them requiring crisis support.

Furniture Provider: *“We’re not saying this is your bed for life... what we’re saying is, it’s your bed, so you’re not sleeping on the floor anymore. And then, you know, touch wood this is one part of you...trying to progress in life and maybe one day you will get the bed of your choice...it’s like, what’s the best word for it, it’s a starter.”*

The furniture supplier we spoke to also suggested that individuals in crisis can benefit from having a good quality item, with a good warranty chosen for them. The supplier removes the burden of having to go out and decide which appliance is the best use of limited resources, and ensures that the item received is the right one for the job.

13 The Trussell Trust (2022) [Cash-first approaches to supporting people facing financial hardship locally: a literature review](#)

14 APPG on Ending the Need for Food Banks (2022) [Cash or food? Exploring Effective Responses to destitution](#)

15 Ibid.

16 Lipscombe, L. and Walker, C. (2022), [An Evaluation of the Leeds City Council Cash Grant Pilot programme](#)

Costs

Whether providing cash creates financial savings depends on the particular local authority and the nature of the scheme that they run.

If a council is running a smaller scheme that does not have a large focus on furniture and appliance provision, giving cash to those few people who do receive essential items makes a lot of sense. Any customer service and delivery costs are then the responsibility of whichever private sector supplier the recipient chooses to purchase their items through.

However, if a local authority is committed to more comprehensive furniture and appliance provision, then working with an expert supplier to provide a quality service is preferable. At this level of expenditure, it is likely that providing the furniture itself will actually create savings for the local authority due to the economies of scale it allows, as outlined above. Moreover, the recipient could benefit from the extra support available through a well-run LWA scheme. And with the huge levels of need exposed by our Extent of Furniture Poverty (2023) research¹⁷, we believe every local authority in England should provide essential items to residents in crisis.



¹⁷ End Furniture Poverty (2023) [The Extent of Furniture Poverty](#)

Summary

When supporting people with food, cash-first is preferred as it is more dignified and effective. When it comes to furniture and appliances, the evidence from the councils, suppliers, and customer-service professionals suggests that in-kind support can increase both dignity and effectiveness.

Well-trained staff can provide vulnerable individuals with far more dignified and empathetic support than would be possible in a one-off transaction with a retailer. Services can be created with vulnerable end users in mind, and tailored to their particular needs. There may be some slight limitations in item choice, but this is less likely to have the stigmatising effects that limiting food choice can do. Moreover, the burden of choosing a long-lasting and quality appliance, in addition to arranging for delivery and installation, can be removed from an individual in crisis.

For a council that is committed to furniture and appliance provision, supplying furniture can be more effective than providing cash, too. Economies of scale can be utilised through bulk buying arrangements and there is certainty for councils that large sums of money are being used by recipients to access essential goods that confer long-term benefits. Services can be prepared for common issues that may arise, such as arranging repeat deliveries and cutting delivery times for extremely urgent cases.

Each local authority is expert on their own area, and they may decide cash is best for them. EFP strongly believe, however, that working with a furniture supplier to provide essential items alongside extra support, is the best way that LWA schemes can help people in furniture poverty.

Finally, though delivery method is important, the most vital thing is that support is available in some form. With over six million people in the UK living without essential furniture items because they cannot afford them¹⁸, EFP believe that every local authority should have a local welfare assistance scheme that includes a substantial furniture and appliance element. At a time when local authority budgets are stretched to unprecedented levels and six have effectively declared themselves bankrupt¹⁹, this is extremely challenging but no less necessary.

In recent years, our research has exposed the continual closures of such schemes, which provide vital support^{20,21,22,23}. This is a trend that must be reversed. LWA schemes offer a safety net that prevents crises from escalating, supports people in our communities, and can create savings for local and central government in the long run. EFP will continue to advocate for local crisis support and champion the excellent work that local authorities do in combatting furniture poverty through LWA.

18 End Furniture Poverty (2023) [The Extent of Furniture Poverty](#)

19 The New Statesman (2024) [Council bankruptcy tracker: authorities under increasing financial strain](#)

20 End Furniture Poverty (2021) [A Postcode Lottery of Crisis Support](#)

21 End Furniture Poverty (2022) [The State of Crisis Support](#)

22 End Furniture Poverty (2022) [Resetting Crisis Support](#)

23 End Furniture Poverty (2023) [On the Cliff Edge: Crisis Support 2022/23](#)

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We would like to thank all of the local authorities that gave their time and expertise to this project, and the team at Furniture Resource Centre, who gave detailed information on how they run contracts for LWA schemes, with all of the extra steps they take to ensure they support people at a time of crisis in the best way possible. The local authorities we received evidence from were:

- Bristol
- Bolton
- Calderdale
- Cheshire West
- Ealing
- Leeds



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