

## Stockport Local Assistance Scheme Consultation

Portfolio	Adult Social Care – Services for People
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### 1. Executive Summary

This report focuses on the outcome of a consultation in relation to a proposal to remove the Stockport Local Assistance Scheme (SLAS), a discretionary fund available to Stockport residents who are experiencing short-term crisis or longer-term needs in relation to resettlement and maintaining independent living.

The results of the consultation show a high level of opposition to this proposal with 86% of respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. When broken down by type of respondent, 90% of previous SLAS applicants disagreed, 91% of non-SLAS applicants disagreed and 91% of stakeholders expressed their disagreement. A small number of people (7%) are in agreement. When analysed by type of respondent 2% of previous SLAS applicants, 8% of non-SLAS applicants and 4% of stakeholders agreed with the proposal.

The main reasons for disagreement with this proposal include concerns regarding the impact on vulnerable people and the removal of a safety net for people who have nowhere else to turn during times of crisis. The recent implementation of Universal Credit in Stockport is also highlighted as a concern due to potential delays in payments. Many respondents feel that the removal of SLAS would lead to pressures elsewhere in the system, resulting in increased demand for already stretched local services and pressures on statutory Council budgets.

### 2. Background

Stockport Local Assistance Scheme (SLAS) was established in April 2013 as a result of a central government decision to transfer responsibility for Crisis Loans and Community Care Grants, two key elements of the Social Fund, from the Department for Work and Pensions to local authorities. Stockport Council has worked in partnership with local people and organisations to develop a service that offers timely and effective support to people experiencing need. This support has been offered in a variety of ways, in response to the actual needs of the individual or family, through a combination of practical support and signposting to local services. The support available through SLAS can be summarised as follows:

- To provide a safety net in an emergency, when there is an immediate threat to health or safety (for example, a lack of food and utilities)
- To help people to settle into new accommodation after for example, a stay in hospital or temporary accommodation (for example, help with furniture and/or white goods)

- Supporting people to continue to live independently when they are facing difficulties (for example, help to repair or replace an essential household appliance)

The consultation has focused on a proposal to end the Stockport Local Assistance Scheme in its current form. The Council no longer receives funding from central government to deliver this service and it has to make savings of £47 million over the next four years. This proposal is part of a wider review of all discretionary and statutory support funds available across the Council.

### 3. Methodology

Consultation on the proposal to end the Stockport Local Assistance Scheme began on 26<sup>th</sup> October and ended on 21<sup>st</sup> December '18. A number of approaches have been adopted to ensure that people who have used the service, Stockport residents and stakeholders have all had an opportunity to respond. The methods adopted are outlined in the table below:

Groups of people	Consultation methods
People who have applied to SLAS over the last 12 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Postal questionnaire</li> <li>- Online questionnaire</li> <li>- Focus groups ran by an independent research company</li> </ul>
Members of the public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Online questionnaire</li> <li>- Paper copies of the questionnaire available in libraries</li> </ul>
Stakeholders (local organisations and support providers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Online questionnaire</li> </ul>

A letter and paper copy of the questionnaire was posted to 1626 people who have applied to SLAS for assistance over the last 12 months. A total of 157 responses were received, which equates to a 9.7% response rate. Whilst every effort was made to ensure that letters were sent to the most up to date address, it should be noted that many SLAS applicants apply at a time when they do not have a settled address so some people may not have received a letter, which may account for the low return rate.

In order to ensure that the views of people who have used SLAS were heard during the consultation process, the Council commissioned Qa Research to carry out two independent focus groups to gather feedback on the proposal from people who have accessed SLAS over the last 12 months. These focus groups were held on 13<sup>th</sup> December '18 at The Hatworks in Stockport. A total of 16 people were recruited by the research company and 13 people attended on the day. A separate report has been produced by the research company, which provides detailed feedback from the people who attended, who all have personal experience of applying to SLAS (see Appendix 2).

In order to support the consultation and encourage feedback, a range of communication methods have been used. These have included targeted e-mails to

stakeholders, social media messages, press releases and a Stockport Review article.

#### **4. Demographic information**

##### People who have accessed SLAS and Stockport residents

There have been 330 responses to the consultation from Stockport residents, of whom 157 have applied for assistance previously and 173 have not. The information in Appendix A offers a breakdown of the demographic profile of people who have accessed the SLAS service and those who have not, where this section on the questionnaire has been completed. The data relates to gender, age, economic status, relationship status and family situation.

##### Stakeholders

A total of 92 responses were received from stakeholders, these are local organisations who have possibly made referrals into SLAS for the people they support. Demographic information has not been captured for stakeholders as the form was completed by a member of staff on behalf of an organisation, not on an individual basis, as such this would not be included in the Equality Impact Assessment which accompanies this report.

#### **5. Breakdown of responses to the online/postal questionnaire**

The questionnaire included 11 questions and an opportunity to add general comments on the proposal. A summary of responses is included below:

##### Question 1 – Are you aware of the Stockport Local Assistance Scheme?

##### **SLAS applicants**

Of the 157 people who have previously accessed SLAS over the last 12 months, as would be expected all 157 answered that they were aware of the service.

##### **Non-SLAS applicants**

Of the 170 people who responded to this question, 169 responded that they were aware of the service, with only one person answering no to this question.

##### **Stakeholders**

Of the 92 stakeholders who responded to this question, 88 were aware of SLAS.

The responses across all three groups indicate that the majority of respondents to the questionnaire are aware of and are therefore likely to have an understanding of the Stockport Local Assistance Scheme.

## Question 2 – Have you ever applied for assistance through the Stockport Local Assistance Scheme?

### **SLAS applicants**

As to be expected, all 157 of people who responded to this question had applied to SLAS for assistance previously.

### **Non-SLAS applicants**

As would be expected, all 173 of responses to this question indicated that the respondents had not applied to SLAS for assistance previously.

### **Stakeholders**

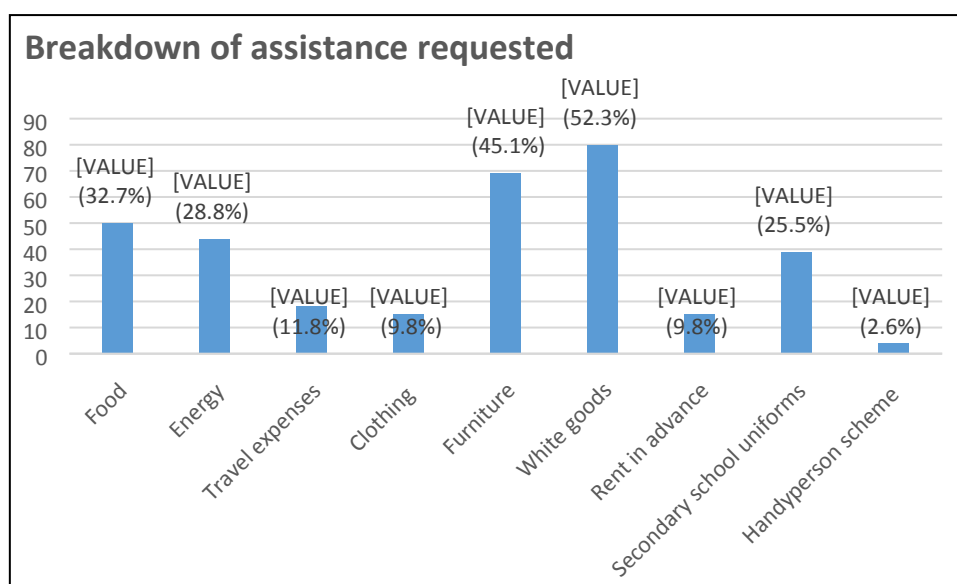
This question was framed slightly differently for stakeholders, who instead were asked 'Have you referred people to this service?'

A total of 79 stakeholders confirmed that they had referred people to SLAS, with only 9 respondents confirming that they have never made a referral into the service.

## Question 3 – Which of the following did you apply for?

### **SLAS applicants**

This question was aimed at people who have accessed SLAS in the past. The bar chart below provides an overview of the responses. Please note that some people will apply for more than one thing; this explains why the percentages do not total 100%. The responses mirror the general trend, that there are a higher number of applications for support with furniture and white goods than there are for short-term needs in relation to food and energy.



Question 4 – Have you ever applied for any other financial assistance from the Council?

**SLAS applicants**

A total of 70 people who have previously applied to SLAS confirmed that they had also applied to the Council for other forms of financial assistance and 86 people responded no to this question. The following provides a breakdown of other forms of assistance people have applied for:

- 32 people applied for a Discretionary Housing Payment (help to meet a shortfall in rent)
- 2 people applied for a Section 17 payment (emergency support available through Children's Services)
- 50 people applied for free school meals

**Non SLAS-applicants**

A total of 18 respondents who had not applied to SLAS previously did have experience of applying to the Council for other forms of financial assistance as follows:

- 4 people applied for a Discretionary Housing Payment
- 0 people applied for a Section 17 payment
- 12 people applied for free school meals

A follow on question was asked in relation to people's experience of applying for these payments. This information will be used to review current pathways into discretionary support across the Council.

Question 5 – Given the need to balance the budget as outlined in the Medium Term Financial Plan, how far do you agree or disagree that we should remove the Stockport Local Assistance Scheme?

The table below provides information on the responses to this question across all three groups of respondents:

	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Tend to disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Tend to agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
SLAS applicants	131 (84.5%)	9 (5.8%)	7 (4.5%)	1 (0.6%)	2 (1.3%)	5 (3.2%)
Non-SLAS applicants	147 (85%)	11 (6.4%)	2 (1.2%)	10 (5.8%)	3 (1.7%)	0
Stakeholders	80 (87%)	4 (4.3%)	3 (3.3%)	1 (1.1%)	3 (3.3%)	1 (1.1%)

The table above shows that there are high levels of disagreement with the proposal to end SLAS, with 90% of previous SLAS applicants, 91% of non-SLAS applicants and 91% of stakeholders expressing their disagreement. A small number of people

are in agreement; 2% of previous SLAS applicants, 8% of non-SLAS applicants and 4% of stakeholders.

#### Question 6 – What impact would it have on you if this service was removed?

##### **SLAS and non-SLAS applicants**

All 330 people who completed the questionnaire included a comment in response to this question. A total of 87% of respondents commented that there would be a negative impact if the service was removed, 12% left a comment that was neutral and 1% of people left a comment that indicated that removal of the service would have a positive impact.

Following analysis of these comments, a number of key themes have been identified which are summarised below:

- 63% of respondents felt that the removal of the service would have a negative impact on vulnerable people, who would no longer have their basic needs met and may be placed at increased risk of homelessness
- 31% of respondents felt that the removal of the service would have a negative impact on themselves and their family
- 12% of respondents expressed concern that there would be nowhere for people to turn to in times of crisis or when they are experiencing an emergency situation
- 6% of respondents were concerned that removal of the service would have a negative impact on those who apply for, or who are in receipt of, Universal Credit due to waiting periods and issues with fluctuating monthly payments
- 5% of respondents felt that removal of the service would create pressure on other service and budgets both inside and outside of the Council
- 3% of respondents expressed concern that people may be forced to turn to illegal money lenders, high interest credit providers or crime in some cases
- Of the 1% of responses that commented that removal of the service would have a positive impact, the main reason for this is that people feel that this would save the Council money and may mean that Council Tax bills can be kept to an affordable amount for those who have to pay this.

##### **Stakeholders**

The question to stakeholders was worded slightly differently and focused on the impact the removal of the service would have on their organisation, as opposed to them personally.

All 90 stakeholders who completed the online questionnaire included a comment in response to this question. A total of 92% of respondents felt that removal of the service would have a negative impact, 7% of comments were of a neutral nature and 1% felt that there would be a positive impact.

The comments have been analysed and a summary of the findings is included below:

- 64% of stakeholders expressed concern regarding the impact on vulnerable people with references to the loss of a safety net during times of crisis and questions over where support workers will turn to when supporting people to furnish a new tenancy, which could result in tenancy failure, rent arrears and homelessness
- 26% of stakeholders have commented that it would be much harder to deliver support to vulnerable people. Concerns raised include the detrimental affect removal of the service may have on people's physical and mental health, an increased likelihood of people falling into arrears and debt, and potential delays in moving people on from hospital/temporary accommodation
- 14% of stakeholders commented that removal of the service would result in pressures on other services or parts of the system. Comments include that there would be disruption and delays, that extreme financial pressure may lead to family/relationship breakdown which may result in homelessness and that there may be increased pressure on statutory services and budgets, most notably for the Council. Stakeholders have commented that their organisations do not have access to funding or resources and it is becoming increasingly difficult to secure these for the people they support
- 7% of stakeholders have also referred to the recent roll out of Universal Credit in Stockport, which has had implications for people they have supported. There are concerns that removal of SLAS would leave people with nowhere to turn to if they experience a shortfall or delay when moving onto Universal Credit
- In relation to the 1% of responses that indicate that removal of the service would have a positive impact, the respondent felt that the people they refer to SLAS are in receipt of full welfare benefits but often do not manage their finances effectively and removal of the service would encourage people to budget properly and make wiser financial decisions.

Question 7 – Where else do you think you could look for support if the Stockport Local Assistance Scheme was removed?

The following table summarises the responses to this question across SLAS and Non-SLAS applicants. Please note that respondents were encouraged to select all options that apply, so the percentages do not total 100%.

Stakeholders were not asked this question specifically as it does not apply to them.

	<b>Family/Friend</b>	<b>Bank/building society</b>	<b>Credit Union</b>	<b>Other</b>
SLAS applicants	41 (32.8%)	12 (9.6%)	40 (32%)	62 (49.6%)
Non-SLAS applicants	77 (53.8%)	17 (11.9%)	33 (23.1%)	65 (45.4%)

Question 8 – If you required financial assistance in an emergency, are you aware of any other schemes or services that could support you?

**SLAS applicants**

Of the previous SLAS applicants who responded to this question, 14 (9%) of people were aware of other services that could help in an emergency and 141 (91%) of people did not know where alternative support may be available.

**Non-SLAS applicants**

A total of 18 (10.8%) of people who hadn't applied to SLAS previously were aware of other local services that may be able to offer support in an emergency and 149 respondents (89.2%) were not aware of any such services.

**Stakeholders**

Stakeholders were asked a slight variation of this question as follows 'Are you aware of any schemes or services that could support people who need financial assistance in an emergency?'

A total of 32 (34.8%) of stakeholders were aware of alternative services that may be able to offer financial support in an emergency and 60 (65.2%) of respondents were not aware of alternative provision.

Question 9 – Can you provide details of these schemes or services?

The following examples were provided in the responses to this question:

- Stockport Foodbank – for food and fuel
- Other foodbanks
- The Wellspring
- Stockport Homes – furniture recycling scheme
- Fuel via the Warm Homes Scheme
- Charities such as SSAFA and the Royal British Legion where people have served in the Armed Forces
- Vicars Relief Fund
- Turn 2 Us
- Buttle UK
- Budgeting loans / advances from the DWP
- The Targeted Prevention Alliance / Wellbeing and Independence Network
- Credit Union
- Smartworks (ladies clothing available when moving into employment)
- The Pantry (through Stockport Homes)
- British Heart Foundation (white goods)
- Age UK Stockport (blankets and heaters during winter)
- Social care – adults and children's
- Charis Trust
- Energy companies can sometimes provide help
- GLO church (Offerton)



Some stakeholders commented that it is becoming increasingly difficult to secure grant funding from charities for the people they support and obtaining a decision following the submission of an application can take a month or even longer. There were a number of comments in relation to financial support available through the DWP for people in receipt of welfare benefits through budgeting advances and loans. However, there was an acknowledgement that these have to be repaid, which results in lower benefit payments over time and an increased risk of debt as people struggle to manage on a reduced income.

Question 10 – Do you have any other comments you would like to make about this proposal?

### **SLAS and non-SLAS applicants**

A total of 234 comments were left in response to this question. 90% of respondents left a comment that expressed the removal of SLAS would have a negative impact, 8% left comments of a neutral nature and 2% left comments in support of the proposal.

Following detailed analysis of the comments, the following key themes have been identified:

- 54% of respondents have expressed serious concerns in relation to the impact on vulnerable people. Comments relate to the loss of a crucial safety net, a 'lifeline' to people who may have nowhere else to turn, as well as concerns over the deterioration in the health of vulnerable people. Some people have expressed a view that the Council should be protecting this service above all others as it has a duty of care to vulnerable people. Some people commented that local authorities are facing difficult decisions as a result of austerity and cuts from central government and they are very concerned that vulnerable people in Stockport may be adversely affected as a result of this
- 9% of respondents felt that the proposal should not go ahead and that the SLAS service should continue
- 8% of respondents have left comments that question the Council's allocation of resources, believing that services for vulnerable people should be protected and that savings should be found from other areas, such as senior management and consultancy costs, a reduction in the salary costs and expenses of Council staff, MPs and councillors and by selling Council buildings and assets to release capital. Some people commented that they do not agree with the areas the Council is prioritising funding towards
- 3% of respondents have commented that services such as SLAS are open to abuse and that this needs to be prevented so that only the most vulnerable receive support
- 3% of respondents have expressed concern regarding the implementation of Universal Credit in Stockport and that this could lead to delays in payments, more sanctions, increased likelihood of rent arrears and debt. Some people have expressed a view that the timing of the proposal is not good as the impact of Universal Credit needs to be understood before any decisions about the future of SLAS are made

- 2% of respondents have raised concerns that the people affected by the proposal are unlikely to respond to the consultation, so their views will not be heard.

## **Stakeholders**

A total of 49 other comments were received from the stakeholder group, with 88% of comments expressing the view that the removal of SLAS would have a negative impact and 6% of comments of a neutral nature.

Following detailed analysis of the comments, the following key themes have been identified:

- 45% of respondents have expressed concerns about the impact on vulnerable people. Stakeholders feel that each year sees a reduction in the resources available to vulnerable people, making it harder for them to support people. Many stakeholders feel that the removal of this service would have a serious and significant impact on the people they support, as their essential and emergency needs would not be met. SLAS is referred to as a safety net and a lifeline to the most vulnerable people in Stockport and some respondents are querying where they would refer people to if the service ended
- 18% of stakeholders feel that the SLAS service should be reformed rather than removed completely. Comments include that the budget could be reduced so that people can still receive some essential items, but a scaled down version of the current offer, which is then targeted to people in the greatest need
- 12% of stakeholders have commented that the removal of SLAS would shift the financial burden to other areas in the Council, most notably social care for adults and children, Council Tax and fees and charges. Stakeholders have commented that there would be increased pressures on the NHS, advice services and potentially homelessness as people would not receive the support they need to maintain independent living
- 12% of respondents have commented that the removal of SLAS at the same time that Universal Credit is being rolled out in Stockport is unfortunate timing and could leave people in a desperate situation.
- 8% of stakeholders feel that savings should be taken from other Council budgets in order to protect SLAS and other services to vulnerable people

## **6. Summary**

The above overview of the responses and comments relating to the proposal to remove the Stockport Local Assistance Scheme demonstrates that overall there are high levels of disagreement and very little support for this proposal from Stockport residents and stakeholders alike. The main concerns relate to the negative impact on vulnerable people, the pressure that this would create on local services and other parts of the system and an increased burden on statutory Council budgets, most notably Adults and Children's social care. Concerns regarding the removal of a safety net at the same time that Universal Credit is being implemented in Stockport are also shared by many of the respondents. Many people understand that the

Council is facing significant financial pressures but have commented that services to the most vulnerable should be protected above others. There is some support for reform of the current service, potentially with a reduced budget and offer so that support is still available to people when they most need it, during times of crisis or change, when there is no other support available.

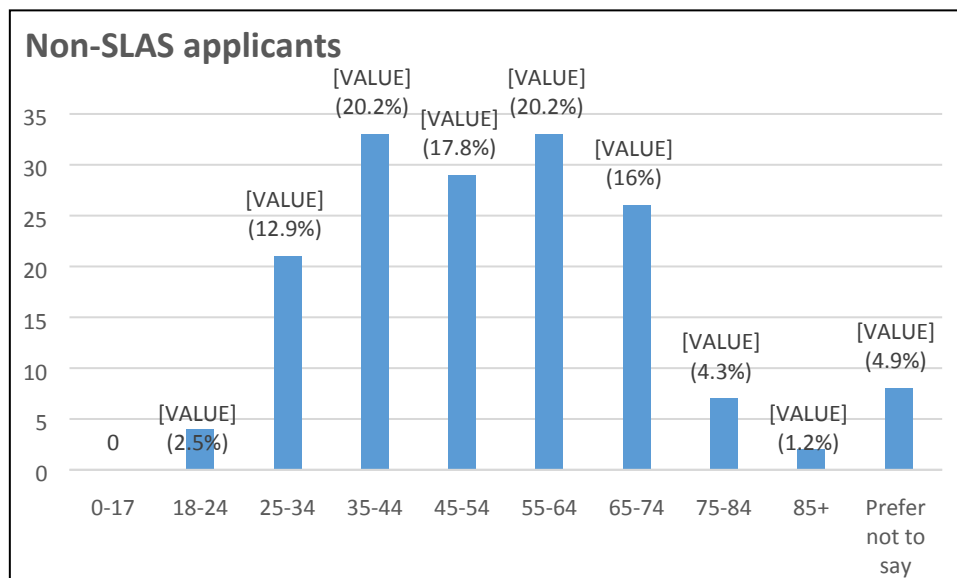
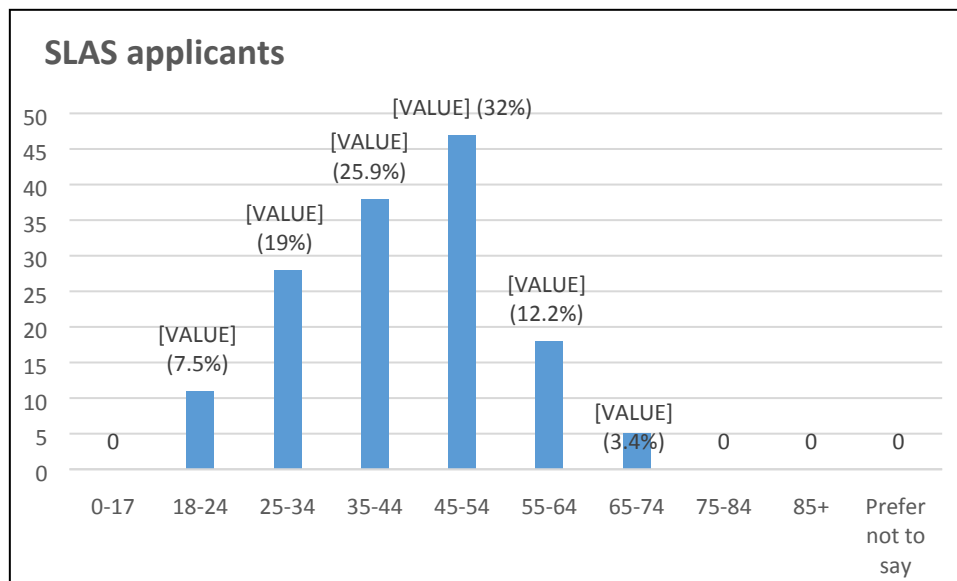
## Appendix A

### Demographic data – SLAS and non-SLAS applicants

#### Gender

	Male	Female	Prefer not to say
SLAS applicants (157)	43 (28.7%)	107 (71.3%)	0
Non-SLAS applicants (173)	48 (29.1%)	106 (64.2%)	11 (6.7%)

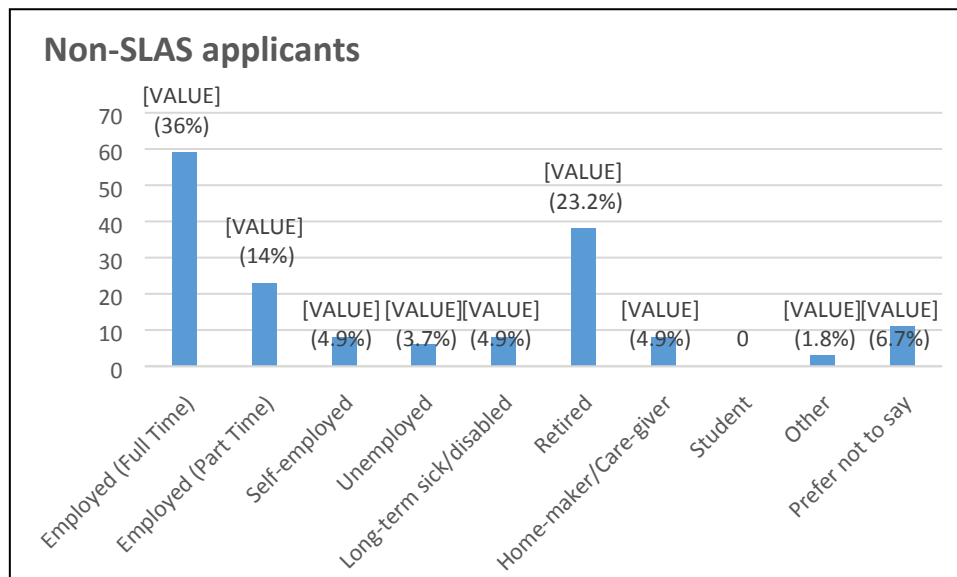
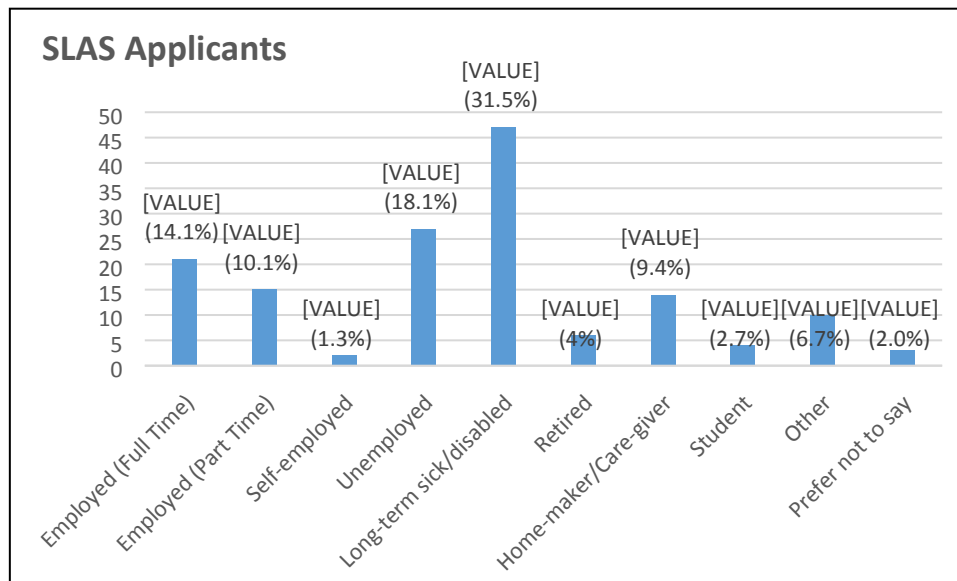
#### Age



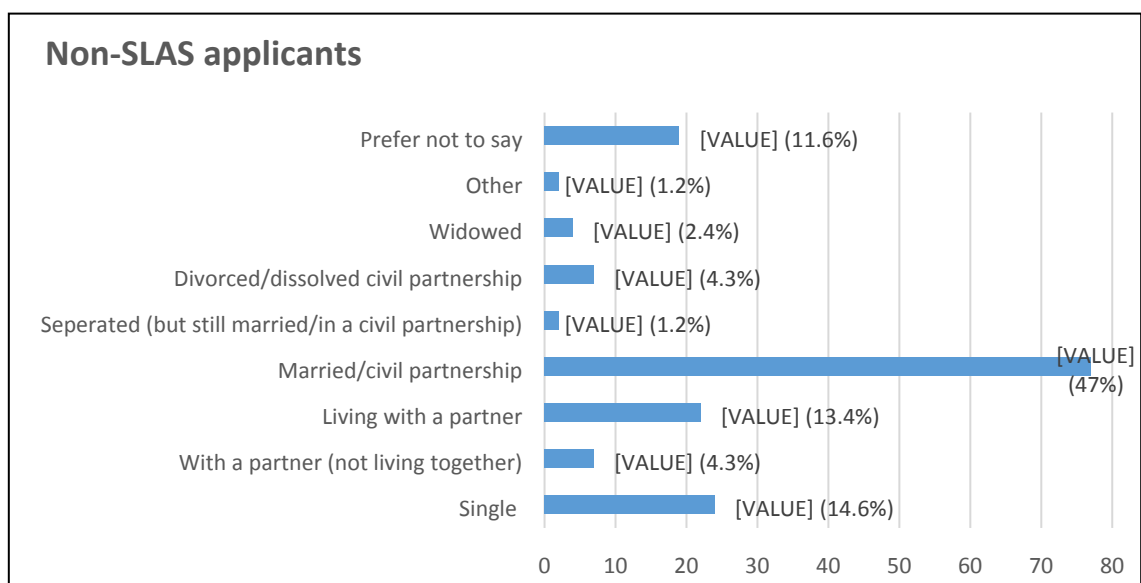
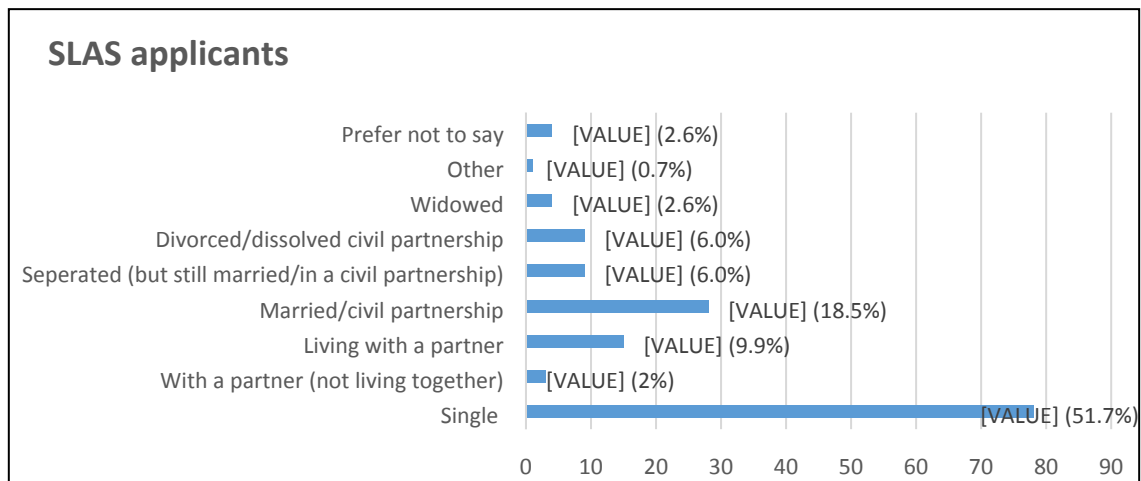
## Disability / long-term illness

	Yes	No	Prefer not to say
SLAS applicants (157)	66 (44.9%)	69 (46.9%)	12 (8.2%)
Non-SLAS applicants (173)	38 (23.8%)	110 (68.8%)	12 (7.5%)

## Economic status



## Relationship status



## Family situation

Do you have any children under the age of 18, or any other dependents?

