

TITLE	The Council's Proposed Approach to Poverty
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	The Executive on Thursday, 28 January 2021
WARD	None Specific;
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Communities, Insight and Change Keeley Clements
LEAD MEMBER	Leader of the Council - John Halsall

PURPOSE OF REPORT (INC STRATEGIC OUTCOMES)

This report sets out the Council's strategic approach to addressing poverty and deprivation in line with the strategic aims of the Community Vision to develop Safe and Strong Communities and Enriching Lives.

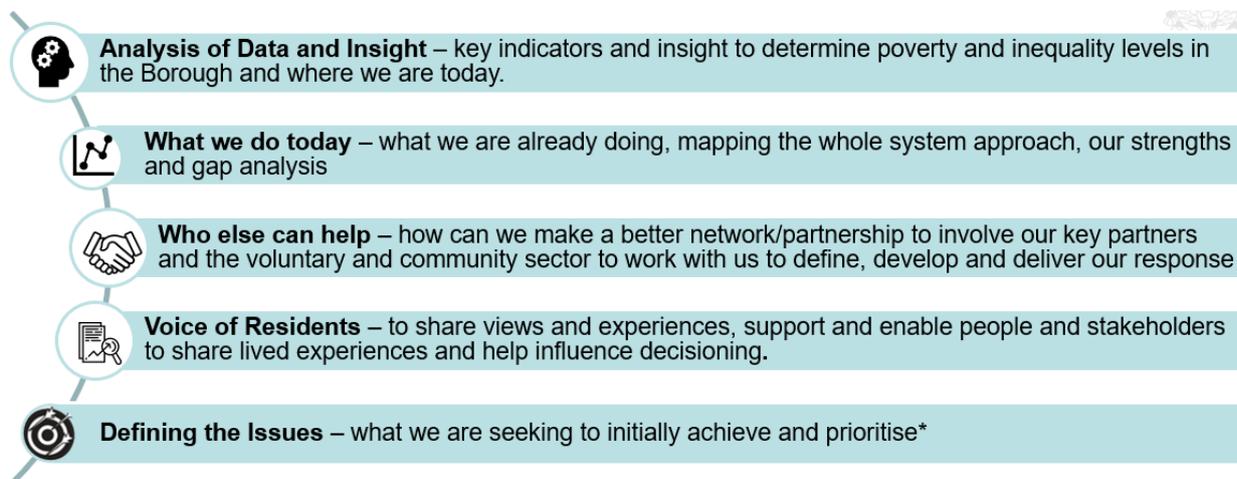
RECOMMENDATION

That the Executive endorse the Council's approach as set out within the report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Council, working closely with its partners, strives to support all residents to lead healthy and fulfilling lives with particular focus on supporting those in most need. Nationally, the level and extent of poverty has been rising and the pandemic has resulted in additional pressures and growing challenges, including disproportionate impacts on people already facing disadvantage. There is also an emerging picture of an increase in people facing employment and financial insecurity for the first time. To provide the right support to meet these increased pressures, it is necessary to strengthen our understanding of the drivers that are leading people into poverty and how best to prevent, mitigate and develop a clearer pathway out.

The approach is to initially focus on these 5 core blocks of work;



This report sets out the details of what these blocks of work entail, and the Executive is asked to endorse the approach and commencement of work with our partners as described, with a view to receiving updates at appropriate milestones.

BACKGROUND

The Covid 19 pandemic has had a huge impact upon the lives of residents in the Borough. It has brought into closer focus the hardship faced by people already living in poverty or facing financial or employment insecurity and the additional pressures arising from the pandemic. Existing inequality and disadvantage, for example, relating to wages, employment, health, gender, ethnicity, education and social isolation have been exacerbated by the crisis. It also opened up new issues such as access to home working, home schooling and reliance on public transport.

The Council, working closely with its partners, strives to support residents in most need, including measures to support the more deprived areas of the Borough and people facing poverty. Throughout the pandemic period the Council has focused on responding to the needs of residents, doing all it can in conjunction with the voluntary and community sector organisations to help residents access support, guidance and essential supplies as well as distributing grants/financial support and addressing housing needs.

In Wokingham, there has been an increase in people facing employment insecurity, either due to job losses or furlough and an increase in out of work benefit and universal credit claims since the pandemic began. There are also additional pressures facing young people in terms of access to education, employment or training but impacts have been felt through all age groups. Although the full scale of the economic and social impacts of the crisis are yet to be felt, it is likely that the impacts for some will be profound.

Addressing the Impact of Covid 19

The council quickly mobilised to support residents in most need and has implemented the following direct support to address Covid 19 Impacts:

- Expanding the 'One Front Door' citizens advice service
- Enhanced Mental Health Support
- £20m in business support grants and £20m other reliefs
- Flexible repayment plans for Council tax (and distributing Council Tax Hardship Fund)
- Economic recovery and business task force renewal
- Distributing the Covid Winter Grant – prioritising children in receipt of benefits-related free school meals through distribution of food vouchers during Christmas and Feb half term breaks, children who have left care (up to 25yrs) and families and individuals, with or without children, who are struggling to meet the cost of food, fuel and related items, as assessed by Citizens Advice "One Front Door".
- Digital Donations Initiative – supporting children and families with access to digital equipment to promote digital inclusion.

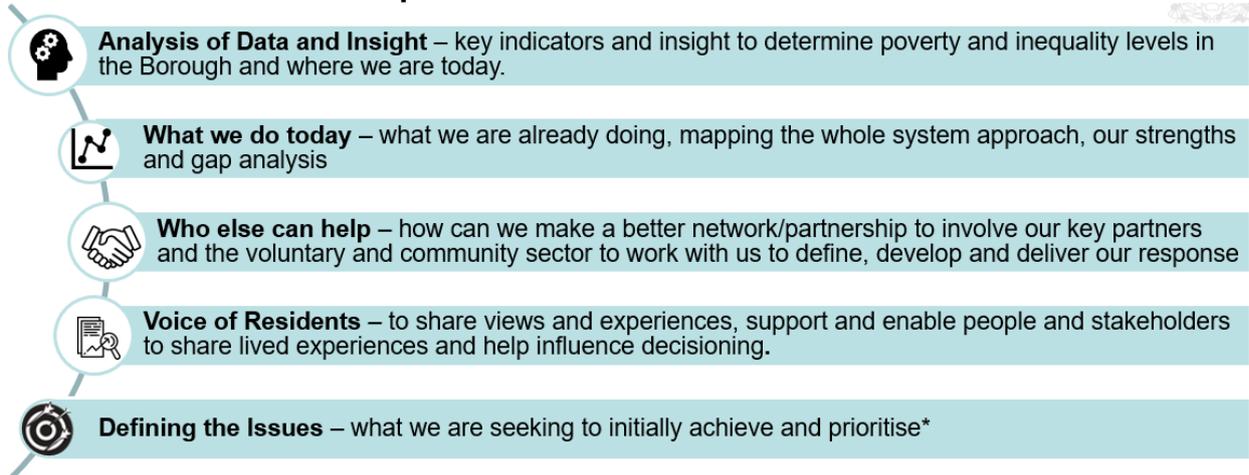
In addition to taking timely action in response to the needs and issues arising from the pandemic (as summarised above) it is necessary to strengthen our understanding of the drivers and impacts to ensure that we are supporting our residents where it is needed most.

Analysis of Issues

Strengthening the Councils Strategic Approach to Poverty

To ensure that our direction is properly informed, it is proposed that the following core areas of activity must be worked through to ensure that arising actions will lead to improved outcomes for residents in both the short and longer term.

5 Core Elements for Development



*A living workstream – we will work to horizons

Analysis of Data and Insight – the complex and interdependent nature of poverty means we must identify relevant data and insight that covers a wide range of factors. To address this we will:

- Work with third parties who specialise in this area to obtain as much data granularity around the topic as possible
- Glean as much insight from our Partners, Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations (including Community Safety Partnership, Citizens Advice and charities) and work with them to develop our approach
- Source Voice of Customer through creation of lived experience forums such as the Poverty Truth Commission
- Create a strong mix of financial and non-financial indicators

From our initial work to date, we have identified we need to be able to fully track and monitor a mix of indicators to strengthen our understanding. A suite of indicators will be sourced around the following;

- Personal income and expenditure including debt
- Job market, worklessness, jobseeker claimants, furlough
- Benefits and welfare support
- Food Insecurity (referral numbers and accessing foodbanks)
- Children achieving their full potential (including educational attainment and developmental milestones)
- Adult education and training
- Free school meal and pupil premium eligibility
- Health Inequalities

- Indices of Multiple Deprivation and other national poverty and low-income indicators for children and adults
- Relationship between inequality and protected characteristics

Where we are today – analysis and monitoring of the data and insight indicators above will give us a clearer idea of where poverty and deprivation exists in the borough and how it manifests so we can focus our actions where they will have the most impact and better outcomes for our residents.

What we do today – will include (1) considering the pathway into, through or out of poverty from a residents' perspective ie customer journey, informed by 'Voice of Customer'; and (2) mapping the whole system approach to improve understanding of both gaps and strengths of the councils current approach with a view to ensuring the whole system is working together and both short and long term outcomes can be achieved.

The Council, working closely with its partners, strives to support residents in most need, including measures to support the more deprived areas of the Borough, to address the drivers of poverty, promote social inclusion and mitigate detrimental impacts in the following ways;

Homelessness and Housing

- 465 affordable dwellings were completed in the Borough in 2019/20
- Housing 1-4-5 challenge – delivering housing in partnership with our housing companies and through the HRA
- Regeneration to improve housing (eg. Gorse Ride)
- Tenancy Sustainment Service provides support and early intervention to residents in difficulties
- Rough Sleeper outreach work – wrap around support for rough sleepers
- Housing First Units – funding received
- Private rented sector access fund
- Discretionary housing payments

WBC and Partner Organisations Poverty Support

- One Front Door – Citizens Advice Wokingham – single point for help and advice on unemployment, debt, benefits, health and wellbeing
- Community Engagement outreach work – working directly within more deprived areas of the borough, offering advice, support and referral signposting to partner support as well as promoting social inclusion and tackling food insecurity through schemes such as 'Grub Club'
- Working with our Partners to ensure our residents can lead healthy and fulfilling lives

Unemployment and Support with Finances

- Debt management worker to support residents with financial difficulties
- Joined up support with our partners to support those seeking work including work with DWP, KickStart & Apprenticeships
- Local Welfare Payments
- Administering Eco-flex and Green Home grant scheme to alleviate fuel poverty
- Working to the Citizens Advice and LGA Council Tax Protocol principles of fairness and partnership working to support people to pay their bills and access debt advice

Who else can help – our approach will be to work collaboratively with residents, partners and key stakeholders to co-create a solution, working together to define, develop and deliver. We will create a shared understanding of the challenge to integrate actions to bring about sustainable long-term change.

This partnership operating model will include formation of an expert group of key organisations and stakeholders to maximise impact and use collective intelligence to its best advantage. This encourages accountability and responsibility across the whole system and can help to break down barriers and silos, enabling actions to mobilise in a timely way of their own accord to meet identified needs.

Voice of Residents – we will establish the structure to actively listen to views and experiences to gain actionable insight. Whilst the voluntary and community sector can play a vital role in providing a voice at the table to represent residents, involving people with lived experiences will provide richer insight.

Defining the Issues* – we will define what poverty means and how it manifests itself for our residents and fully establish what needs to be addressed in the short and longer term to have the most impact This will be a fluid and live plan with clear identifiable aims and horizons.

(*given the vastness and complexity of the issues, our approach is to do this in horizons and be continually and dynamically updated, we see this as the most challenging area given the number of partners)

Next Steps

The 5 core blocks of activity as described above will be worked through to inform a dynamic plan that will be brought back to the Executive for approval in due course, including details of key milestones and progress updates.

..FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	See ‘other financial information’		Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	See ‘other financial information’		Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	See ‘other financial information’		Revenue

Other Financial Information
The activity set out in this report to strengthen the Council's approach to poverty will initially be picked up within existing resources and activities. Any additional budget requirements will be sought from Executive as supplementary estimates.

Stakeholder Considerations and Consultation
A plan to consult and involve residents is set out within the details of the report.

Public Sector Equality Duty
This report has had due regard to the public sector equality duty and where applicable and available has included information relating to impacts upon people with protected characteristics and inequality.

Climate Emergency – <i>This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030</i>
The purpose of this report is to endorse the Council's proposal to strengthen its approach to poverty. Where cross cutting implications are identified through this work, the impacts will be given due weight in decision making

List of Background Papers
N/A

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