

<b>TITLE</b>	<b>Anti-Poverty Strategy 2022-26</b>
<b>FOR CONSIDERATION BY</b>	Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on 23 February 2022
<b>WARD</b>	None Specific
<b>LEAD OFFICER</b>	Chief Executive - Susan Parsonage

## **OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY**

The Anti-Poverty Strategy aims to help prevent people falling into poverty, offer support to those already in it, and help those in poverty to get out of it, either as a result of short term changes following the pandemic, or as a more entrenched issue.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

The Committee are requested to review and comment on the strategy and year 1 action plan in order that comments can be considered along with ongoing public engagement to inform finalising the strategy for submission to Executive after the May elections.

## **SUMMARY OF REPORT**

This report presents the Anti-Poverty Strategy as part of the consultation and engagement process. The Anti-Poverty Strategy aims to help prevent people falling into poverty, offer support to those already in it, and help those in poverty to get out of it, either as a result of short term changes following the pandemic, or as a more entrenched issue. It aims, through working in partnership, to promote an early intervention approach as part of the Council's role to prevent poverty.

The aim of the Anti-Poverty Strategy is to lessen the effects of poverty, enable people to overcome the barriers linked to poverty and prevent more people falling into poverty in the first place. It recognises that this is a longer-term aspiration and in the life span of this 4-year strategy the intention is to:

- Lessen the short-term effects of poverty
- Prevent more people falling into poverty
- Better support our residents who are living in poverty
- Enable residents to better address the barriers to overcoming poverty

In doing this the strategy will target three groups of residents:

- Persistent Hardship
- Just About Managing
- Asset Rich, Cash Poor

The objectives of the strategy over the next four years are to:

1. Support people in poverty
2. Strengthen communities in their resilience to poverty
3. Improve life opportunities for residents who are living in poverty

## Background

The draft Anti-Poverty Strategy, attached as Appendix 1, is being developed in partnership with the voluntary and community sector (VCS) who have been fundamental in the co-design and delivery. They have been engaged in discussions to inform development of the strategy since September 2021 and in December 2021 a Hardship Alliance was created to lead this work, engaging four key partners in the VCS who will form a link to the wider sector and work closely with the council to provide leadership to the strategy.

As part of the strategy development, there has been a programme of consultation and engagement activities:

- November 2021 – initial engagement with people in poverty
- January 2022 – public consultation began including an online survey, 4 stalls across the borough and focus groups of people in poverty
- February 2022 – formal consultation ends and results are analysed

Halfway through consultation, the online survey which had received almost 100 responses. A Cross-Party Working Group was established to oversee development of the strategy and this group will be looking at feedback from consultation in March along with proposed changes to the strategy so that the final strategy and action plan can be presented to the Executive after the May elections.

For the purpose of the Anti-Poverty Strategy, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation definition of poverty is being used:

*When a person's resources (mainly their material resources) are not sufficient to meet their minimum needs (including social participation)*

Within Wokingham Borough, we are maintaining a focus on relative poverty after household expenses have been taken into consideration: this is households with less than 60% of contemporary median income after costs for direct taxes and National Insurance, including Council Tax are taken into consideration and then rent or mortgage interest, buildings insurance and water rates are deducted.

Poverty definitions is a complex matter, with varying means of calculation – a more detailed explanation of the approach used is included within appendix 3 of the draft strategy attached.

The strategy aims to promote a prevention and early intervention approach to address poverty in the Borough, working towards the community vision for Wokingham Borough to be a great place to live, learn, work and grow and a great place to do business.

The aim of the Anti-Poverty Strategy is to provide equality of opportunity to all of our residents regardless of their financial circumstances. It recognises that this is a longer-term aspiration and in the life span of this 4-year strategy the intention is to:

- Lessen the short-term effects of poverty
- Prevent more people falling into poverty
- Better support our residents who are living in poverty
- Enable residents to better address the barriers to overcoming poverty

To enable a focus on this complex and challenging subject and to ensure residents in the most need are targeted, receive a personalised response and gain the best results

possible, a resident segmentation approach was developed. This has identified three groups of residents that are to be the focus of this strategy:

**Persistent Hardship** – These people are on low incomes claiming universal credit or other benefits and are the focus of most of the existing government support.

**Just About Managing** – These are people who were just getting by on their own means without qualifying for support, although frequently they have little or no money left at the end of the month; there is no financial resilience.

**Asset Rich, Cash Poor** – These are people who own their own home with limited savings and their financial assets are not easily accessible.

The strategy will mainstream the work that was started during the Covid-19 pandemic when, working with Citizen's Advice, the One Front Door was established and will look to transition this to a No Wrong Door approach: supporting those in poverty through whichever avenue they are comfortable with seeking support, without the need for them to repeatedly tell their story to different people.

The Anti-Poverty Strategy has three objectives which form the basis of the partnership approach to addressing poverty within the borough. The objectives are to:

1. Support people in poverty
2. Strengthen communities in their resilience to poverty
3. Improve life opportunities for residents who are living in poverty

This will be achieved through an action plan which will be refreshed each year to build on actions from previous years, whilst being able to react to emerging challenges and opportunities.

Instead of waiting for the strategy to be developed, a number of initiatives have already taken place to support those in poverty. These include:

- Implementation of the One Front Door through Citizens Advice Wokingham
- Launch of the Hardship Alliance
- Funding through the Household Support Grant
- Opening of the Charity and Community Hub
- Launch of the online Local Support Hub
- Holiday Activity and Food Programme
- Winter Warmer project
- Support for SHARE
- Helping residents reduce their energy bills
- Kickstart scheme
- Employment support
- Support for A Christmas Presence shop in Wokingham town centre
- Stay Warm and Well leaflet

Work is also continuing on communicating availability of support through Free School Meals, the Healthy Start Initiative, benefits take-up and other schemes to support people in poverty or on low incomes.

## Analysis of Issues

A significant amount of data is available at a national or local level to identify the increase in poverty within the borough. Work continues with council services and partners across the VCS to identify further data that is helpful to identify the scale of the challenge and areas where most support is needed.

Some of the main datasets used to inform this strategy are:

- Indices of Deprivation 2019, including the Index of Multiple Deprivation
- Unemployment figures
- Child poverty
- Free School Meals
- Mental Health
- Homelessness and Housing

A data analysis is included within the draft strategy, included as Appendix 1, which identifies that whilst Wokingham Borough is an affluent area placed within the least deprived 10% on the Indices of Deprivation, there are pockets of deprivation and the size of these is rising.

- There was a spike in Universal Credit claimant rates during the peak of the pandemic, but this quickly reverted towards, but remaining higher than, the pre-pandemic position.
- Those on lower incomes have fared worse and there has been a significant impact on younger age groups with more younger people, including graduates, either under-employed, or holding part-time rather than full-time jobs.
- Since the pandemic there has been an increase of 479 children receiving Free School Meals, which is an increase of around one quarter from the pre-Covid levels. It is intended to drive these numbers higher through further publicity of eligibility.
- Fuel poverty is becoming an increasing challenge for many households with recent rises, but an absence of data at a national or local level makes quantifying this particularly challenging.

There has also been initial consultation with people in poverty to identify their challenges and where they would go to seek support. This was responded to by 244 people and their views considered to inform the strategy.

Many people in poverty will approach a friend, family member of VCS organisation for support rather than coming to the council. The strategy recognises this and sets out mechanisms for working with and supporting the VCS to work in partnership in delivery of the strategy and identify opportunities for attracting grants and other external funding to deliver the strategy. It is hoped that this will support the organisations people rely on for immediate assistance: addressing the symptoms such as inability to buy food; whilst the longer term causes such as lack of job or training needs to gain better employment are worked on.

To achieve this the strategy takes an individual and customised focus rather than a more generic approach to support those in poverty.

## 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)	N/A		
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	N/A		
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	N/A		

### **Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision**

Proposals and costings are being developed for consideration by the Executive.

### **Cross-Council Implications**

Adoption of this strategy will provide the basis for further work across the council and services to improve the way people in poverty are worked with and supported. The priorities and focus of this strategy should therefore be reflected in approaches taken by other services.

### **Public Sector Equality Duty**

Addressing poverty challenges within the borough in an equitable way will support delivery of the Public Sector Equality Duty. The annual action plans and supporting lower-level actions will be subject to an equalities assessment.

### **Climate Emergency – *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***

The only aspects related to carbon neutrality are measures around energy efficiency in council housing stock and the provision of support from those residents in fuel poverty.

### **Reasons for considering the report in Part 2**

None

### **List of Background Papers**

Anti-Poverty Strategy 2022-26 Consultation Draft

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