

TITLE	Anti-Poverty Strategy - Position Statement
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	The Executive on Monday, 7 March 2022
WARD	None Specific;
LEAD OFFICER	Deputy Chief Executive - Graham Ebers
LEAD MEMBER	Leader of the Council - John Halsall

PURPOSE OF REPORT (INC STRATEGIC OUTCOMES)

This report presents an update on the Anti-Poverty Strategy as well as giving an overview of many of the initiatives that have supported the residents in poverty across the borough. It is an essential aspect of the work undertaken to make Wokingham borough inclusive and a great place to live, learn, work and grow and a great place to do business.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Executive:

- 1) recognise progress in development of the Anti-Poverty Strategy;
- 2) acknowledge the extensive work completed since Covid-19 to support those in poverty across the borough, much of which has been done by, or in partnership with the voluntary and community sector; and
- 3) agree the provision of £500k from the Local Council Tax Support Schemes Grant with immediate effect to support further development and delivery of the initiatives being developed as part of the strategy. Any future funding that is required to deliver the strategy will be taken back to a future meeting of the Executive.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an update on development of the Anti-Poverty Strategy, whilst giving an overview of the work and initiatives to address or support people in poverty across the Borough while the strategy is being developed and consulted upon.

The strategy recognises that, although Wokingham is an affluent borough overall, there are many people in poverty and that the Covid-19 pandemic has increased this in both the short and longer term.

The Anti-Poverty Strategy cannot be delivered without working effectively with the strong Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) who have been fundamental in the co-design and the co-delivery of both the strategy and the initial response to support those in poverty.

In order to deliver the strategy and implement short term actions ahead of approval of the Anti-Poverty Strategy after the May elections, the Executive are asked to approve the funding request of £500k as set out in the body of the report. This is to come from the Local Council Tax Support Schemes Grant for 2021-22 and to be used through to 2025 and supplemented by additional funding which will be attracted, and to support key initiatives in the short term such as the One Front Door, funding for which ends on 31st March 2022.

Following analysis of consultation responses and further development with the Hardship Alliance, the revised strategy will be presented to the Executive for approval after the May elections in order to continue with delivery across the partnership.

BACKGROUND

Although Wokingham Borough is consistently one of the least deprived areas of the country, poverty exists everywhere and its prevalence and impact has increased during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Wokingham Borough Council has always worked to reduce the number of residents living in poverty and minimise the effect on those who are. Community engagement and development to build individual, family and community resilience and capacity has long been part of the council's work, as have schemes to support people into employment, provide affordable or social housing and lessen financial burdens (such as through the Council Tax Reduction Scheme).

However, the impact of the pandemic has led to a need for a stronger focus on this area and the council has responded with its own initiatives, collaboration with community partners and the development of a longer-term strategy.

Strategic Approach

Over the past six months, the council has been developing an Anti-Poverty Strategy, in conjunction with our partners across the Voluntary and Community Sector, who are fundamental to its 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.

The draft of the Anti-Poverty Strategy has been consulted on throughout January and February 2022, following early engagement in November to support development of initial proposals. There have also been four events in venues around the Borough to get direct views from residents.

Initial feedback from the consultation to date suggests that people recognise the need to address poverty and consider this strategy timely with growing concerns around food and fuel prices. People are also concerned that there needs to be support for those who view themselves as being just above the breadline since they are facing growing challenges. People also feel that it is much more difficult to ask for support in an affluent borough such as Wokingham, which supports a media campaign to reduce the stigma associated with poverty. There is strong support for the targeted approach being developed as part of the strategy rather than a more generic offer that will not meet people's needs and there is an urge to build in some radical thinking and innovative solutions.

The final Anti-Poverty Strategy will be updated following the consultation to build in responses, but the overall intention will prevent more people falling into poverty whilst supporting those who are already in poverty: 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 draft 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 further 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 draft 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

Through focussing work on these objectives, we intend to support people in their short-term challenges whilst enabling them in the longer term to live sustainably within their own means. It is not just about addressing the symptoms of poverty, but working with people to identify and tackle the root causes: this delivers sustainable outcomes for our residents. Work within this strategy is not just focused on those in benefits, but the wider population with low income or limited means after their core bills have been paid.

Development of this strategy is timely with people seeing inflation increasing significantly faster than wages or benefits, rising utility bills which could see these doubling for people who aren't on fixed tariffs and particularly impacting those with pre-payment meters. Alongside this food prices are showing a large increase, which is disproportionately affecting many of the lower priced and staple items such as rice, pasta and bread meaning that core food costs are growing at a disproportionately high rate.

Through this strategy, as well as working with our partners, there are key things that we recognise as a council that we can do to support people. How we respond as a Council is a core part of this strategy and will be further informed through the consultation and focus groups underway.

Responding to poverty

Early in development of the strategy, it was recognised that there is a need to further promote the huge amount of work that has taken place since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic to support those in poverty. This work has been carried out by the Council and the strong Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) partners who have direct links into the people and communities that are struggling.

Some of the main initiatives that have supported residents over the last two years are summarised below. Many of these have been the focus of an extensive and ongoing communication campaign: recognising that awareness raising, signposting and de-stigmatising are fundamental to supporting people across the Borough.

Immediate response

One Front Door

At the start of the pandemic, the Council worked with voluntary sector partners to establish the Wokingham Borough Community Response that provided emergency help across the borough. From this successful collaboration came the One Front Door, which is led by Citizen Advice Wokingham, supported by other voluntary and community groups and funded by WBC.

The One Front Door provides a comprehensive support, including to those facing poverty, through:

- Help with rising energy costs: Help paying utility bills, access to fuel vouchers, energy efficiency packs, Advice on changing suppliers and more
- Support with accessing food and other essentials: Foodbank referrals, household item grants, urgent food and toiletries, urgent prescription collection, and more
- Other assistance: Practical help and advice on welfare checks, benefits and debt, employment, housing, and more

The council recognised the value of this initiative early on in the pandemic and agreed to extend provision to 31st March 2022.

Other initiatives

Launched the Hardship Alliance

The council has brought together four local charities: First Days, Citizens Advice Wokingham, AgeUK Berkshire and Wokingham United Charities to form the Hardship Alliance. The alliance has the core objectives of prevention, supporting people in poverty, strengthening communities in their resilience to poverty and improving life opportunities for people living in poverty. It has co-created the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy and will lead on the delivery of the final approved strategy.

Household Support Grant

Launched in November 2021, the fund was awarded to all local authorities to help the most vulnerable households cover essential costs in the coming months. The council made the strategic decision to distribute the majority (more than £300,000) of the £525,573 allocation from Central Government directly to the Hardship Alliance, ensuring it reaches the people who need it most to support fuel poverty, and helps them cover other essential costs in the coming months. This is a different and more direct approach than most other councils took: enabling localised and direct support from the voluntary sector partners targeted at those most in need. The rest of the funding is being used on food vouchers for families with children eligible for free school meals, to help during school holiday periods.

Charity and Community Hub

The Wokingham Charity and Community Hub opened in January this year to provide a home to ten local voluntary organisations and a base for residents to drop-in for advice, help and support.

The charities now calling the hub home are:

- Involve (which is managing the hub)
- Cranstoun Wokingham
- Home Start Wokingham District
- Health Watch Wokingham Borough
- The Link Visiting Scheme
- Mind in Berkshire
- CLASP
- Promise Inclusion (Pinc)
- Wokingham Volunteer Centre
- Wokingham Foodbank (moving in over the next few weeks)
- Citizens Advice Wokingham are already located at Waterford House on the second floor and are also part of the hub

Local Support Hub (online) launched

Building on the Covid-19 webpages that provide accurate information about the pandemic, the council launched its Local Support Hub pages as a single source of information and advice on issues such as welfare benefits, debt, housing, relationship problems, mental health, unemployment, and more. This will be developed in the coming months to better enable residents to access support and advice as they need it.

Holiday Activities and Food (HAF)

More than 650 children attended the five-week HAF programme during the school summer holidays, with activities for primary, secondary and those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), delivered in partnership with local organisations, and more than 10,000 free healthy meals provided. Funded by the Department for Education and the council, the HAF programme offered weekly activities to children across the borough who were eligible for benefits-based free school meals. The programme has also taken place during half terms and the Christmas break.

Warmer Winter project

Our Community Engagement team supported local charities, First Days and SHARE, to provide blankets to residents who needed some help to keep warm over the winter. Residents have been encouraged to collect blankets from key locations across the borough. We also accepted donations of new or nearly new good quality blankets.

Support for SHARE

The council provides support for the SHARE scheme that offers fresh produce and surplus supermarket stock to the community that would otherwise have been wasted. The independent community group runs regular drop-ins for people to pick up produce

in Shinfield, Woodley, Finchampstead, Winnersh and Wokingham. The council manages and runs some of the sessions as well as helping with food collections.

Helping residents reduce their energy bills

As fuel prices increase, the council is making sure support is available to help residents make their properties more energy efficient, reduce the cost of running their home and cut their carbon emissions as well. The Help to Heat scheme has already helped more than 1,300 residents install free, or low cost, insulation to their homes. And we hope to support many more as the scheme remains open to new applications.

We've also launched the new Green Homes Grant (GHG LAD2) which provides free grants to help residents on low incomes and living in low energy efficient properties make a wide range of improvements to their homes. This includes installing solid wall insulation, solar panels, or even air source heat pumps and improved glazing

Kickstart Scheme

The council was approved to join the Government's Kickstart scheme in January 2021 with the aim of getting 16-24-year-olds who were struggling to find work, into employment during the Covid-19 pandemic. Each job placement was new, lasted for 6 months and helped young people to build their confidence and experience in the workplace while earning a regular wage.

Employment support

To improve the way it supports people into employment, the council set up an outreach team and dedicated contact phone and email lines for those looking for work. The team can support residents with a range of activities to help them find the right job for them and help them to develop skills to feel confident applying for jobs and going to work. Face-to-face appointments can also be made in key locations across local communities, including The Rainbow Centre in Winnersh and the Oakwood Centre in Woodley.

Support for A Christmas Presence shop in Wokingham town centre

The council provided support (including a free shop in the Elms Field development) for A Christmas Presence. The shop was a collaboration between the council, First Days Children's Charity, Wokingham Foodbank and Share Wokingham to provide gifts and festive food items for households that are financially struggling.

Stay Warm and Well leaflet

The leaflet provided information on help available with fuel costs and other expenses during the winter. It was distributed to targeted resident groups in November 2021 alongside a letter promoting the Household Support Fund.

BUSINESS CASE

The Executive are asked to acknowledge the extensive work that has been implemented, with VCS partners, across the Borough to support people in poverty and recognise the need for ongoing promotion and marketing of these initiatives.

The final Anti-Poverty Strategy will come to Executive on 26th May for consideration and implementation. In order to enable delivery of the strategy, the Executive are asked to approve the grant funding of £500k, funded from an earmarked reserve (from the Local Council Tax Support Schemes Grant for 2021-22). It will be used to support initiatives such as the One Front Door and its successor as well as posts across the Council and VCS partners. Delivery of the required work to address poverty in the Borough will cost significantly more than this, so a fundamental aspect of the approach is creating the drive and capacity to bring in external funding to support VCS partners in their key initiatives. Without the funding requested, the strategy will not be able to be successfully delivered and there is a significant risk that the Council's commitment to addressing poverty will be questioned by the VCS partners and wider community.

Anti-poverty is a significant issue and in addition to the grant funding set out above and any potential future request to the Executive for additional funding, we will be working with partners, businesses and other interested parties to contribute towards delivery of the strategy.

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)	£500k	No - £500k grant no additional required	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)		Yes – to be carried forward from above	
Following Financial Year (Year 3)		Yes – to be carried forward from above	

Other Financial Information

This funding is a key part of the delivery of the strategy and would impact on the approach taken and outcomes possible if the required funding is not approved.

Stakeholder Considerations and Consultation

Consultation has taken place with the public, VCS partners, Town and Parish Councils, interested people and various stakeholder groups. O&S Management Committee have been engaged and a Cross-Party Working Group has provided oversight of the development processes.

Public Sector Equality Duty

Implications for the PSED are at the forefront of the strategy and an EqIA will be completed alongside finalisation of the strategy post consultation and in conjunction with development of the Year 1 Action Plan.

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

This report will have no implications on carbon neutrality.

List of Background Papers
None

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