

TITLE	Tackling Poverty Strategy Year 1 Report
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	The Executive on Tuesday, 21 March 2023
WARD	(All Wards);
LEAD OFFICER	Chief Operating Officer - Sally Watkins
LEAD MEMBER	Executive Member for Equalities, Inclusion and Fighting Poverty - Rachel Bishop-Firth

PURPOSE OF REPORT (INC STRATEGIC OUTCOMES)

This report presents an update on the first year’s delivery of the Tackling Poverty Strategy, 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 note the progress made in delivering on the Tackling Poverty Strategy during the first year.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is an update on progress during the first year of the Tackling Poverty Strategy, which was approved by Executive in June 2022. It covers the period July 2022 through to February 2023 (through to Q3 of the year one action plan).

Delivery against the tackling poverty action plan resulted in several positive interventions, such as:

- Ensuring that there was a significantly wider reach of communications to ensure more people in need receive information, advice and signposting to services and support.
- Development of the period poverty pilot to provide accessible and sustainable period products across the borough.
- Enhanced use of data and insight relating to those in need of support, to shape immediate and future services and support.
- Development of the Hardship Alliance Action Group to bring together a wider cohort of Voluntary and Community Sector partners to tackle poverty alongside the Hardship Alliance.
- Extension of the One Front Door initiative and development of a Community Coach service to provide more early intervention and prevention services.

Alongside delivery of the action plan, the Council consciously brought together the delivery of the Household Support Fund as part of the tackling poverty response. Officers and members of the Hardship Alliance co-produced the approach to allocation of funding across the borough to ensure as many members of the community as possible accessed the central government scheme.

In addition to delivering the year 1 action plan, due to rising inflation, food and fuel prices the council announced a cost-of-living crisis emergency in September 2022. This

resulted in a refocus of activity and a shared response led in partnership by the council and the Hardship Alliance.

Key deliverables have been:

- Distribution of low-energy household items such as slow cookers, heated blankets, draught excluders and air fryers to local charities and residents, to help to reduce household energy bills.
- Support and guidance to organisations in setting up warm spaces over the winter.
- Targeted support for vulnerable residents such as those with high energy use due to assistive equipment needs, and social care clients who fund their own care.
- Intensive work with council tenants in rent arrears to use Alternative Payment Arrangements
- Launching a crowd funding appeal, with money raised being made available for smaller charitable organisations to apply for projects supporting people in hardship.

BACKGROUND

In June 2022 the Executive approved the Tackling Poverty Strategy and accompanying high-level year 1 action plan.

The strategy recognises that, although Wokingham is seen as an affluent borough overall, this disguises the fact that there are many people in poverty. As a Local Authority, we recognise that only through working with our VCS partners can we ensure a wider reach across our communities. This relationship is managed through the Hardship Alliance and Hardship Alliance Action Group (HAAG) who have been implementing a range of actions to help deliver the strategy and address poverty in the borough.

The aims of the Tackling Poverty Strategy are 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 ensure residents in the most need were identified, supported, and gain the best results possible, three groups of residents were identified as 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.

Approach

In March 2022, there was agreement to ensure £500k hardship fund from the Local Council Tax Support Schemes Grant was used to directly fund the Tackling Poverty to deliver the multi-year action plan. For year 1 £236,556 has been allocated based on the agreed actions delivering the interventions outlined in this document.

In addition to this, a further £250k is being made available by the council to expedite the activity in the action plan and ensure the money is being used to directly support people in poverty.

Examples of the Hardship Alliance activity to date are:

One Front Door

Established during the Covid-19 pandemic, the One Front Door provides a single access point for people in need of support enabling onward referral to other partners across the VCS. The Tackling Poverty Strategy provided funding to enable a smooth transition from the One Front Door to the planned No Wrong Door approach.

The One Front Door has seen increased demand during 2022/23 with some key achievements being:

- A total of 9,799 people in the 10-month period to January have been supported with 20,156 unique issues compared to 7,320 people and 16,316 for the same period last year.
- Income gains for people supported have totalled £661,061 during the 10 months, whilst £322,728 of debt has been written off: helping residents manage their finances and see their way out of poverty.
- Clients have been signposted / referred out to at least 131 local charities services.

Case studies have been developed to promote the support offered and help encourage more people to come forward enabling earlier intervention and support: reducing pressure on other services.

Debt Advisor

The debt advisor was a new role introduced to provide greater support with a strong focus on debt. Since introduction of the role, they have:

- Helped 86 clients.
- Achieved £156,142 of debts written off.
- Rescheduled £53,298 of payments.
- Provided an inclusive service with 62% of those supported having long-term health conditions and / or disability and 21% ethnically diverse.

This project adds greater value by providing another dedicated debt specialist who can support the wider team.

Community Coach

Through the Hardship Alliance we funded a Community Coach. The Coach provides intensive support to selected families who face complex challenges including financial instability. The aim of the support is to work with the families to resolve these issues, to help them as appropriate to build relationships with professionals and support services, and to give them the confidence to resolve problems themselves in the future. These interventions are intended to prevent long term and potentially spiralling problems, which would be costly for the families themselves and for the community more widely.

The Community Coach was appointed in July 2022 and by the end of January 2023 had provided support to 23 households, including 49 children. Results are necessarily qualitative. Families have used the coaching to tackle challenging in areas including improving household finances, building positive relationships with children's schools, and tackling mental health issues. Feedback from families involved includes increased confidence, sense of achievement and being able to see a way out of their problems, one saying they were "excited about the future for the first time in a long time".

Tackling Poverty Project Co-ordinator

The co-ordinator has been in post since October 2022, with the role initially established to help in the action planning, project management and co-ordination of Hardship Alliance activity to support the strategy. This includes action planning and researching projects.

In the short space of time, they have established, grown and coordinated the Hardship Alliance Action Group, a wider circle of VCS organisations with a focus on hardship which now meets monthly to share good practice and challenges, support one another, and help to deliver the action plan. Because this network was already established, the

response to the cost-of-living crisis was quicker and more effective than it might otherwise have been, enabling rapid roll-out of essential items, warm spaces and winter warmer packs.

They have researched opportunities such as Make a House a Home and No Wrong Door: bringing learning from other areas to inform the approach being explored for Wokingham. Current activity is supporting future action planning and building relationships with the fundraising officer at Involve, who will be supporting the Hardship Alliance with identifying and bidding for additional funding to tackle poverty in future years: delivering on the need to attract additional funding to support the strategy.

Period Poverty initiative

The council has been working in partnership with First Days Children's Charity and Wokingham Foodbank to provide reusable sanitary pads / pants and Mooncups to people struggling financially. This initiative enables people who access these services to be provided with products free of charge, with funding support from the council. This saves people around £5-10 per month and helps meet our climate emergency objectives, being an excellent example of work in aligning two of the council's priorities and their respective emergency responses. Products are also available at a discounted rate to people who can afford to pay and want to make use of this more environmentally sustainable approach whilst saving money.

Following the pilot, this project is now being expanded, working with other charities in the borough to increase reach and availability of products, expanding availability to all libraries and other venues, coupled with improved education.

Supporting Local Tenants

As part of the year 1 action plan mapping around services provided to those moving into properties within the borough was undertaken. This clarity of provision was key to ensuring those in need were able to access additional support to acquire essential items as they need them.

The next stage of activity will be the launch of the "Make a House a Home" scheme, this project aims to provide individuals and families with items, such as ovens, microwaves and curtains as well as beds and required furniture based on individual need. It will further reduce their reliance on support services by addressing immediate needs and therefore improving people's overall well-being. Added to this, it prevents people from getting into debt to buy the items and therefore helps to keep them out of poverty.

This work is supported by the council changing its policy on blanket removal of flooring from void properties, ensuring carpets are only removed if necessary. This was seen as a major barrier by many tenants.

Improved decision-making

Through adopting a broader definition of inclusion, low income has now been included in the council's Equality Impact assessments (EqIA) alongside the 9 protected characteristics. This means that major decisions taken by the council will have to consider whether there could be an adverse impact on people with low incomes and identify mitigating actions.

Advice and Guidance

The Tackling Poverty Strategy has been supported with significant communications activity which is an underpinning aspect of delivery. This is essential with more people

now struggling through the cost-of-living crisis and many of them therefore not knowing what support is available or how to access it.

Examples include:

- The Website hub was rebranded to a dedicated Cost of Living hub, updated, and expanded to be the key signposting point for the borough (plus continued work and adjustments to drive traffic) leading to an increase of 5x the traffic to the pages and 10x the number of successful signposts.
- The cost-of-living pages were discovered 71% of the time by a referral (i.e., due to promotion by social media etc)
- 75,000 Cost of Living crisis booklets were delivered to every property in the borough to provide key information on how to get help.
- A cost-of-living email to all WBC email addresses (80,000 addresses) was sent in January, generating 7,947 signposts for residents, including 6,500 individuals.
- 138 posts were seen 246,938 times – an engagement rate 6.42%
- A signposting programme was run from October to December, where weekly updates on key topics were sent out and amplified via Councillors, Town & Parish Councils, VCS partners, Schools and Information Champions Network.
- Promotion of Household Support Fund grants (2,000+ households supported)
- Promotion of Warm spaces programme (8,000 map views of warm space sites) – recruiting sites and listing them

Data and Insight

The other underpinning aspect of work is improved data and insight: producing a better understanding of the people and needs of the borough at a very local level. This includes:

- Using emerging data from the 2021 Census to develop a Borough Profile that helps to identify where those most in need of support are.
- Using a CACI data set to understand who is more likely to be in the Just About Managing and Asset Rich, Cash Poor cohorts, so advice and guidance on support can be delivered in a more targeted way.
- A fortnightly dashboard bringing together demand data from the council and VCS partners, to track the impact of the cost of living crisis on residents, partners and businesses. This enabled a quick response to issues as they emerged, avoiding a potentially worsening situation.

Cost of Living Crisis

Alongside the delivery of the year 1 action plan, the cost of living crisis resulted in an emergency response being mobilised, with the council working in partnership with the Hardship Alliance and Hardship Alliance Action Group (HAAG). This response included:

- Distribution of low-energy household items such as slow cookers, heated blankets, draught excluders and air fryers to local charities and residents, to help to reduce household energy bills.
- Support and guidance to organisations in setting up warm spaces over the winter.
- Targeted support for vulnerable residents such as those with high energy use due to assistive equipment needs, and social care clients who fund their own care.
- Intensive work with council tenants in rent arrears to use Alternative Payment Arrangements and enable them to stay in their homes.
- Launching a crowd funding appeal to help tackle poverty in the Borough with money raised being made available for smaller charitable organisations to apply for projects supporting people in hardship. The application process is managed

by Berkshire Community Foundation in conjunction with Wokingham United Charity.

Success measures

Due to the current cost-of-living crisis, any success measures need to be seen in the context of a worsening financial climate for most people.

In the short to medium term, success is measured by the reach within the community in relation to advice, guidance, and signposting. This ensures key messages are getting to those residents most in need.

Some of the measures in the Tackling Poverty Strategy evidence demand, an increase in which gives the council and partners more visibility of the scale of poverty within the borough and identifies the people or families who may require further support.

Accessing this support should help these people in the longer-term to move out of poverty, leading to an improvement in measures in the scorecard that contribution towards the outcome targets forming the Strategy's ultimate ambition. For this reason, the success measures look to establish an understanding of the numbers of people in poverty, the numbers seeking support and the repeatedly asking for support, as shown in the examples below:

- No of children on Free School Meals
- No of repeat debt clients
- No of Foodbank repeat referrals.
- No of people supported by the VCS.
- No of people receiving employment support

Next Steps

An action plan for year 2 is now being co-produced with the Hardship Alliance and will be presented to Executive in Summer 2023.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces unprecedented financial pressures as a result of; the longer term impact of the COVID-19 crisis, Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the general economic climate of rising prices and the increasing cost of debt. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are optimised and are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	£177,908	Yes	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£143,900	Yes	Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£178,192	Yes	Revenue

Other Financial Information

The Tackling Poverty Strategy is being delivered through the targeting of resources across the Council and includes £500k specific grant funding agreed in March 2022. An additional £250k was agreed at council in February 2023 from the Council Tax Relief Scheme, to support residents in financial hardship. Members of the Cross Party Working Group for Inclusion along with the lead member for Finance and the Hardship Alliance are considering options for allocating the funding to expedite delivery of the action plan.

Overall resources will be further supplemented by additional external funding attracted and the further utilisation of organisations beyond the Council.

Stakeholder Considerations and Consultation

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

Public Sector Equality Duty

Implications for the PSED are at the forefront of the strategy and an EqlA has been completed alongside finalisation of the strategy and covering the Year 1 Action Plan. The EqlA will be reviewed and updated as part of developing the action plan for year 2

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*

There are no implications for Climate Emergency arising from this report, but continued expansion of the period poverty initiative will have a positive impact.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2

Not applicable.

List of Background Papers

None.

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Appendix 1

Year One Action Plan Progress (Q1 July 2022 – Q4 July 2023)

Objective 1 Support People and Help them Out of Poverty				
Priority	Y1 Action	Status	Expected completion date	Detail
Target communication, advice and guidance to ensure residents are supported and signposted to the right support available to ensure their immediate needs are met	Embed learning across all frontline services on how and where to signpost residents who are experiencing poverty	In progress	Y1 Q4	Key briefing given to front line officers Managers Briefing introduced corporately Training due to be delivered by First Days which has been postponed due to focus on Cost of Living Crisis.
	Develop & promote the offer available to better enable residents to access support and advice they need	Complete		Development of the local support hub Dedicated comms plan Cost of living crisis leaflets to all residents
	Review all debt related communications to ensure the language, tone and content is signposting those that need support to the right place, at the right time in the right way	In progress	Y2 Q1	WBC Debt staff booked on to First Word 3Cs training, with 100+ templates in scope for review.
	Develop a targeted communications campaign to promote take-up of support and advice that is available across the borough	Complete		Comms plan developed and reviewed through Hardship Alliance governance
	Implement text / social media messaging service for key teams across	Complete		Text messaging implemented for Housing Rents

	the council to provide key messages to residents via their mobiles: increasing access and impact.			Social media comms campaign in relation to signposting and advice
Work with the VCS to provide debt advice & support people to tackle their debt and to develop budgeting skills	Invest in a dedicated Debt Advice worker within the VCS to enable people to deal with their debt and claim support they are entitled to.	Complete		Debt advisor recruited
	Improve training and support to help people develop budgeting skills to avoid increasing debt in the future.	In progress	Y1 Q4	Delayed due to Cost of Living Crisis emergency response
	Establish mechanisms for signposting and cross-referral between the VCS, Town / Parish Councils and debt advice to provide the support people require.	Complete		Utilising local support hub for cross-referrals Set up of collaborative working group with Towns & Parish clerks where key topics such as debt/tackling poverty will be discussed
Develop a No Wrong Door initiative that ensures residents can choose how they seek support, through enhanced partnership working with the VCS groups, Town & Parishes & Council services	Continue support for the One Front Door initiative that helps VCS partners support people in poverty with advice and access to services	Complete		Extended funding to March 2024
	Promote Community Navigators self-referral	Complete		Launch of JOY app for social prescribing https://services.thejoyaapp.com/

opportunities and embed this within working practices.			
Determine how the No Wrong Door will work, as a successor to the ongoing activity driven through the VCS One Front Door, and attract funding to support the continuation of this support.	In progress	Y2 Q1	Agreed to delay due to Cost of Living crisis emergency response. Initial scoping of NWD approaches in other local authorities taken place

Objective 2 Strengthen Community Resilience, Preventing People Falling into Poverty				
Priority	Y1 Action	Status	Expected completion date	Detail
Provide support to people most in need, enabling them to understand and overcome their debt	Develop the Community Support model, working with residents to break down the fear associated with debt and provide coaching to overcome challenges and empower them.	Complete		Launch of community coaching model
	Provide joined-up support or early intervention within the VCS and clear links into the council to reduce evictions and prevent homelessness.	Complete		Extension of rough sleeper support provider Through Cost of Living crisis emergency response, data used to proactive identify and engage those who require early intervention and support
	Explore opportunities with the VCS,	Complete		Explored opportunities with Boom (local credit union) with

	Berkshire Credit Union and debt advisors to promote saving and sustainable borrowing.			opportunities identified for WBC staff and residents, to be adopted as part of Year 2 action plan
Enhance opportunities to work with residents who are digitally excluded to open up new ways of engaging and accessing support	Continue and expand the digital donations project, targeting those most in need and supported by a roll-out of the digital champions scheme.	Complete		Wokingham Lions and First Days launched local project with WBC libraries as local donation points Exploring replication of digital champions network which exists within WBC as part of wider community offer, potentially through libraries as part of Year 2 action plan.
	Work in partnership with schools and VCS groups to improve digital access for people across the borough, including supporting all children to continue to learn from home.	Complete		Wokingham Lions and First Days launched local project with WBC libraries as local donation points Exploring replication of digital champions network which exists within WBC as part of wider community offer, potentially through libraries as part of Year 2 action plan.
	Extend digital skills programmes available (including those offered by adult and community learning team and VCS partners).	Complete		Digital skills offered through learning partner Activate Learning Adult education delivering Microsoft office skills courses
Establish a range of job and training opportunities for those looking to enter employment or improve their earning	Establish an outreach model for additional employment support covering all age-groups and utilising local venues to reach	In progress	Y1 Q4	Support and guidance in local community centres and libraries Career advisor based in local community centre, telephone, in person and online consultations available

potential with the VCS groups, Town & Parishes & Council services	out into communities.			Three month pilot launched with bookable outreach sessions in 3 community venues and dedicated phone-line. Connected with local DWP contact around local employment support
	Provide accessible careers guidance and support for all residents entering or wishing to return to work: linking in with local business to address employment gaps.	In progress	Y1 Q4	Optalis providing dedicated support for NEET Community engagement team provided with local signposting information linked to careers guidance Local skills gap report from LEP used to inform local course offerings and promotion of Berkshire Opportunities website
	Review procurement social value requirements to increase emphasis on provision of paid work / apprenticeship opportunities within the borough, including for people who are disadvantaged or vulnerable.	In progress	Y1 Q4	Working group established, social value policies from across the council being brought together under one overall policy. Implementation to form part of Year 2 action plan

Objective 3 Improve Life Opportunities for Residents who are living in Poverty				
Priority	Y1 Action	Status	Expected completion date	Detail
Make social and temporary housing accessible for those that need	Develop schemes which support residents who move into Local	In progress	Y2 Q2	Delayed due to Cost of Living crisis response. Initial mapping and signposting of local

it and improve affordability of running costs	Authority Housing, Social Housing or temporary accommodation to have their homes equipped to live in.			offer completed to support VCS partners. Next stage is development of a dedicated Make A House A Home project Initial project scoping underway, launching in year 2 of action plan
	Undertake a stock condition survey of the whole council housing stock to develop an energy benchmark	Complete		Stock condition survey completed for all council owned properties through WBC asset team
	Promote installation of and support available for LED lighting, cavity wall, loft insulation, boiler controls and other ways to make the property consume less energy and to reduce energy bills	Complete		Government backed schemes promoted through WBC energy team comms plan. Includes 'Help to Heat' scheme and 'Green Homes Grant'. Local partners and data used to target leafleting of residents who may benefit from the Eco3 scheme
Revise decision making approaches to include poverty, so that decisions consider the issue and real life impacts are understood	Add socio-economic factors as a consideration so that those facing poverty are at the heart of decision making	Complete		Socio-economic disadvantage included as part of the council's Equality Impact Assessment Training on completing Equality Impact Assessments being delivered by Inclusion team to WBC staff
	Develop a programme of lobbying to encourage changes in policy or approaches to help those in, or at risk of, poverty.	In progress	Y1 Q4	Members lobbying priorities collated and stored centrally VCS partners lobbying priorities discussed and reviewed at partnership meetings Lobbying of government taken place on a number of issues,

				including joint letter from the council and Hardship Alliance regarding allocation of Household Support Fund Review of lobbying priorities and programme to be reviewed by CPWG in June 23
	Review decision making approaches to include poverty, so that decisions consider the issue and real life impacts are understood	In progress	Y1 Q4	Changes to fees and charges underwent an Equality Impact screening in advance of the 2023/24 budget proposals. Poverty proofing the school day discussion in progress. Due to be on the agenda at the headteacher association and work on cost of the school day to be a key theme in year 2 action plan.
Recognise the links between poverty and health to improve services that provide support and address the needs of residents in poverty	Increase health promotion of lifestyle choices around nutrition, healthy eating and exercise that support people on low incomes	Complete		Healthy start initiative promoted on social media and at HAF events. Awareness training delivered by public health team Free to access health services promoted via multiple comms channels
	Review opportunities for making the sports, arts and cultural offer more accessible to those on lower incomes within the borough	Complete		Local Cultural Education partnership established Opportunities being explored through Physically Active partnership HAF scheme run during school holidays provides lower income families with activities
	Promote the mental and physical health benefits of	Complete		MyJourney wokingham website promoted "Strategy into Action – Physically Active

walking, cycling, green spaces, Wokingham Bikathon, Cycle Hubs as affordable ways of getting exercise.			Communities" action plan being delivered
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Appendix 2 – Household Support Fund

The Household Support Fund (HSF) is allocated to councils by the DWP to support people in their local area. Two rounds of the Household Support Fund were awarded from April 2022-March 2023.

The approach to distributing the HSF was co-created and co-delivered by the Hardship Alliance. This resulted in a wider support offer to residents such as debt advice, support interventions for older residents, and access to school uniform for families in need.

Commitment to utilising this grant funding to support families in receipt of free school meals has been a key theme throughout 2023-24.

April – September 2022

£525,574 was awarded and distributed to local residents through the Hardship Alliance.

A total of

- 6,080 households were helped in this period.
 - 4808 of which were households with children.
 - 634 households with pensioners
 - 638 other households.

October 2022- March 2023 (so far)

£525,574 was awarded and is in the process of being allocated.

A total of

- 2,127 households have been helped in this period.
 - 1,679 were households with children.
 - 110 households with disabled people
 - 119 households with pensioners
 - 219 other households

Impact

For Age UK:

- All clients who applied for HSF:
 - had a dedicated session with an information and advice officer.
 - completed a benefits check.
 - were advised on any other issues in relation to finance, social care, local activities, energy efficiency.
- Only 2% refused further help.

First Days Childrens Charity:

- helped 265 new people to access school uniform as a result of them applying for HSF.

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