

Appendix 2

Title: Appraisal into Walsall Council's Crisis Provision and Operating Model during Covid-19

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1. Aim

The aim of this review was to consider to what extent the Council's current support provision, and operating model, is meeting the needs of families in financial hardship during the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Background and Methodology

Background

On 28 October 2020 the Leader of the Council committed to commission an appraisal of support provision for people who are financially vulnerable in Walsall. The appraisal was to be:

- independently led, and consider the crisis support provision provided by the Council, Key Partners, Children and Families and the Community and Voluntary Sector (including foodbanks and other community Groups)
- reported back to Cabinet for further discussion of the outcomes.

On 8 November 2020, the government announced a new £170m Covid-19 Winter Grant Scheme to support children, families and the most vulnerable over the winter period. The funding was to be ring-fenced, with at least 80% earmarked to support with food and bills, and will cover the period to the end of March 2021. Local Authorities were to receive the funding at the beginning of December 2020. Walsall Council was allocated £1,134,745.58 from this scheme.

Methodology

A mixed research methodology has been deployed to assess whether the Council's current support provision, and operating model, is adequate for meeting the needs of families in financial hardship during the Covid-19 pandemic. The appraisal consisted of two components:

1. A review of existing background data and literature materials to establish the needs of local residents, with particular focus on:
 - a) The cumulative impact of national and local welfare benefit policies on the financial wellbeing of Walsall residents (to include information about whether this has changed during the Covid-19 pandemic, taking account of relevant COVID-19 support offers);
 - b) Trends in the uptake of welfare benefits and local support schemes, against the regional and national picture (with particular focus on households with school aged children);
 - c) Impact of fuel poverty on households
 - d) The quality of current data and insight whether this could be improved;
 - e) The level of investment in support for local residents, taking account of the Walsall Crisis Support Scheme, Council Tax Reduction, Walsall Works and other relevant advice and assistance schemes;
 - f) How the Voluntary and Community Sector contribute to increasing local capacity and capability and further opportunities;
 - g) The type and frequency of the support required and how to best achieve this in a way that does not create long-term dependencies, and instead promotes community resilience;
 - h) The effectiveness of current levels of local assistance, identifying further opportunities to use support to help lessen disparities in infection and death rates of COVID-19. Factors to be considered, but not limited to, age and sex, occupation, obesity, comorbidities, geography, and ethnicity;
 - i) How the Council can strengthen and improve communications about support provision to ensure they are able to reach those in the greatest need.

2. Interviews with stakeholders, including key staff and partner agencies involved in this work to gain in-depth insight at a local level. This aimed to include dialogue with:
 - Schools and other relevant professionals
 - Representatives from Making Connections Walsall
 - Public Health
 - Local Foodbanks
 - Community led groups focusing on support for vulnerable people and families
 - Housing providers; and
 - Service Users

3. Report Findings

Resilient Communities Approach

A review of the relevant literature and information, has revealed that the Council has been working with a wide range of partner organisations, in an attempt to help to minimise the spread of COVID-19. A resilient communities approach has been applied, with the Council providing civic leadership, to help mobilise a public response through the voluntary and community sector.

Four Community Hubs have been operating across the following areas during the Covid-19 pandemic. The hubs receive referrals via email or via the Making Connections telephone line (which is answered by the West Midlands Fire Brigade). The main types of support offered by the four Community Hubs during the pandemic has been:

- a) Befriending (telephone calls to people who need support or are lonely);
- b) Shopping (which residents pay for)
- c) Collection of prescriptions
- d) Delivery of food parcels (only for individuals in significant financial hardship or isolating in line with Government guidance)
- e) Other types of support for individuals in crisis e.g. collecting and delivering of free school meals / vouchers for families self-isolating,
- f) arranging emergency boiler repairs, welfare benefits and financial advice are also offered (where appropriate).

In addition to the Community Hubs a large number of other organisations have also joined the Covid-19 response and made a positive contribution. Additional details about the Community and Voluntary Sector Response to the pandemic is included in Appendix C.

Feedback from focus group discussions have confirmed that by working with partners in this way, the Council's investment has gone further. Charitable donations, and external grant funding, has been pooled to deliver a better combined service for local residents. The Council has benefited from the detailed knowledge of local people that the voluntary and community sector have, which has helped:

- improve resident engagement,
- facilitated the recruitment of volunteers; and
- guarded against the misuse of local support schemes.

Voluntary Sector organisations and residents have in turn benefited from the bigger buying power of the Council (to help secure and distribute essential food stocks during periods of shortages). Although these same organisations recommended that procurement processes could be improved further, as shown in section 6. The sector have also been able to access Council training, support to become Covid-19 secure, and have also gained access to ICT equipment, insight and data-capture systems (which have helped improve their evidence base to enable them to apply for external grant funding opportunities).

Conversations also revealed that the voluntary and community sector have themselves built new and stronger relationships with each other during Covid-19, which has also led to success in attracting significant external investment for Walsall.

During the Covid-19 pandemic at points the Making Connections network struggled to 'scale up' fast enough initially to meet demand. When this happened, the Council stepped in to help e.g. procuring food and opening up a food distribution centre at Sneyd, with the support of local volunteers, to help pack and supply food parcels to the Making Connections network for distribution.

In the future, closer working relationships with other national organisations such as Foodshare or Trussell Trust should also be explored, to see whether this could deliver even greater value for money.

In general Community and Voluntary Sector organisations felt that they had been well supported by the Council during the Covid-19 pandemic. Partners are keen to see these relationships continue to flourish in a post Covid-19 world and feel that they are well positioned to potentially take on some of the work currently carried out by universal services, which they believe will also deliver better value for money.

Walsall Covid-19 Winter Grant Fund

Full details of the Walsall Covid-19 Winter Grant Fund and the outcomes are included in Appendix B.

This appraisal has confirmed that Council officers have taken a data led approach to identify low-income families in the greatest need to receive support through the grant.

There was evidence that lessons had been learned from feedback from residents in the first lockdown in 2020. For example, the decision to issue cash payments, as opposed to shopping vouchers to so many, was in direct response to parents' feedback, who stated that this approach would give them greater freedom to choose where they shopped, and in doing so help them to maximise what they got for their money.

The Council used eligibility for Council Tax Reduction (CTR) as a selection criteria, which was a different to that taken by most neighbouring authorities, who used eligibility for 'Free Schools Meals' (FSM) as the criteria for selecting families.

Initial indications from Phase 1 suggest this innovative approach, was a better one, as this has led to 44% more families with dependent children receiving grants than would otherwise have been the case.

The Walsall scheme has also included children who have not yet reached school age and those not currently in education. The approach was also well received by schools, who were not required to play a role in issuing the vouchers, which was positively received due to the increased pressure they were under (given that this coincided with additional guidance about Covid-19 testing being announced).

Whilst the majority of funding has been spent on cash payments, funding was also provided to the Making Connections network, to ensure that vulnerable adults, or families not in receipt of Council Tax Reduction could access additional support if needed. Interestingly, the Council's own Crisis Support Scheme has seen a 34% drop in applications since the Covid-19 pandemic commenced. This could be due to the closure of drop-in services at the Council's front-line offices or because other support measures have meant that the needs of vulnerable people are being met without needing direct intervention from the Council. Further details of the additional support measures now in place are included in the appendices to this report.

Data Informed & Communication

The Council used Mosaic data to 'profile' local residents, to help inform the communications strategy for the Winter Grant Support scheme. The tools used included:

- targeted press releases,
- newsletters,
- social media posts,
- direct email,
- text messaging,
- letters sent direct to homes and
- letters to parents via the schools network.

Facebook advertising was also used to help encourage uptake. This was a new approach for the Council and got great results. Facebook reaches a large part of the target audience and has real potential for further use. This advertisement post cost as little as £13.50 but reached 8.7k people with 359 of them clicking on the link to get more information.

Outcome

The overall approach has resulted in a large uptake in parents accessing the scheme. To date, 82% of cash payments have been made to claimants directly into their bank accounts. As the Council now holds the relevant bank account information, any future grant instalments can be paid more quickly and efficiently. Walsall Households in receipt of CTR who did not choose to apply to receive a cash payment directly into their own bank accounts, have also not lost out. Vouchers were issued to those who requested them.

The remaining households will still benefit from the financial support, which will now be credited to their Council Tax Account (reducing the amount they need to pay in Council Tax this year). The Council took an iterative approach, adjusting the scheme when new challenges arose. Evidence of this can be seen in the amendment to the scheme to include FSM children who attend local schools, but live out of borough, when it transpired that they would be disadvantaged as their own Local Authorities had not made this provision for them.

Benefits levels and support

On average the Council received 107 new Housing Benefit Applications per week in January to February 2020, but this had increased to 285 by April 2020, and this increased trend has continued subsequently.

Walsall applications for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) also increased by 12% (March 2020, compared to March 2019) with this trend also continuing. Despite the increase in demand, performance data confirms that the Council has managed to keep up, without customers experiencing backlogs.

In addition to the above, the Council has also issued a range of Business Grants to support local businesses during the Covid-19 pandemic and Covid-19 Support Grants to individuals required to self-isolate. The details of all this additional support is attached in Appendix C.

Officers have again used a range of communication methods to raise awareness of these forms of support and the increasing demand for these services, and expenditure levels, supports the view that there is a good level of public awareness of the various schemes.

Walsall had 13,386 more households on Universal Credit in August 2020 compared to August 2019 (a 54% increase during the year). This is considered a significant increase. In July to September 2020, the UK unemployment rate stood at 5.0%. Yet the unemployment rate was 4.5% for people from a White ethnic background however, compared to 8.5% for people from BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) (DWP, 2020).

National labour force analysis suggests that workers who are from a BAME background have been one of the groups most negatively impacted economically by the coronavirus outbreak (Foley, 2020). National reports suggest this is because BAME communities work in sectors most affected by the coronavirus pandemic and therefore are more likely to be in occupations categorised as vulnerable jobs. Many workers from BAME groups account for approximately 28% of the vulnerable jobs in the transport sector and 16% of the vulnerable jobs in the accommodation and food service sector nationally (DWP, Labour Force Survey, 2019). Covid-19 infection rates also suggest that locally some BAME ethnic groups have also been disproportionately impacted by the disease (Appendix E).

Given the high diversity of the Walsall population it is likely that many local residents have been impacted heavily and will be in need of additional help and support. Unfortunately, the data about the ethnicity of individuals who have accessed local support offers is very limited which has made it difficult to draw conclusions about whether the Council is meeting the needs of all (Appendix E and B). An improvement in this area is required and this is covered in the recommendations. Out-puts from group discussions, and individual interviews, did suggest that this area would benefit from some additional focus moving forward to help provide additional reassurance that all groups are being supported effectively.

Despite the limited data available, there is anecdotal evidence of some good practice within the sector with organisations working together for example:

- translation of key Covid-19 messages into a range of community languages;
- creation of bespoke food parcels to meet specific dietary requirements (Appendix D);
- and outreach support for individuals with no-recourse to funds (Appendix D).

Council Officers also talked openly about their decision to issue cash payments for Winter Grant being based partly on feedback from local schools, who had reported that some BAME parents had experienced discrimination when accessing mainstream supermarkets to spend vouchers during the first lockdown.

Housing and Covid-19

The government has provided a 'safety-net' to many financially vulnerable households during the pandemic in the form of not permitting evictions (except in limited circumstances) until at least 21 February 2021. The government has also issued a range of guidance on housing enforcement matters during the pandemic period and the Council has continued to provide support and guidance to landlords and tenants. Where landlords have breached legislation formal action has and will continue to be taken. For example, Improvement Notices and Civil Penalty Notices have been issued and in three cases, statutory Prohibition Orders have been warranted.

Tackling Fuel Poverty

The council has a published Fuel Poverty Action Plan (Appendix F, last updated June 2020) and this and the initiatives it supports has helped a range of households in Walsall during the pandemic. Services have continued during the pandemic in many areas including:

- 251 household supported to access EcoFlex investment estimated at £585,000
- 116 households helped to secure affordable warmth funding to secure new gas connections and gas central heating (estimated £313,000 investment)
- Collective fuel switches enabling residents to secure lower energy bills.

Another key area has been the continuation of the umbrella partnership called Walsall Local Energy and Advice Partnership (LEAP), which works collaboratively to help to tackle issues associated with Fuel Poverty in the borough. There has been notable success in this with over 1000 customers receiving assistance (as detailed in Appendix C and F). The scale of the issue is significant though with Accent Research for Ofgem/Citizens Advice, Consumer Perceptions of the Energy Market (Q3 2020) summarised by Citizens Advice indicating that nationally 24% of consumers - expect to struggle to pay their energy bills in winter 2020/21. Additional work to ensure the LEAP partnership brand is maximised to increase customer sign-up and greater collaboration including with the Making Connections network. Officers are in discussions with the national charity Foundations about securing financial support to link energy advice with Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) work.

Support for disabled households

The continued work of the council in helping families access DFGs, at a time of covid, secured wide recognition when requested to present on the topic to a national DFG forum for Foundations in December 2020.

For example between 1 April 2020 and 19 January 2021 a total of 430 DFG were approved by the Council.

An alliance between South Staffs Water and the Council, also offers vulnerable customers a 60% discount in the first year, and a 40% discount in the second year. This is available for all South Staffs Water customers who had a DFG approved in 2020/21 and also homeless families living in temporary accommodation. The Council and South Staffs water are now in

discussions about how to develop this relationship further, so that more help can be offered to low income families in the borough who are in receipt of benefits. Again, increasing awareness of different opportunities, and connecting partners within the wider Walsall network together, could reap additional benefits for vulnerable local people.

A joint Winter Communications Campaign has also been developed to try to get the message out, with key messages being released regularly via social media over the next few weeks.

Limitations of research

There were significant time restraints placed on completing this research, due to a desire for the recommendations to be considered by Cabinet in time to influence decision making about future delivery models and budget setting for next financial year.

Rising levels of Covid-19 infections in Walsall, the announcement of the Covid-19 Winter Grant Scheme, Tier 3 restrictions, and a further National Lockdown, have also created a very challenging period in which to undertake the appraisal, and prevented face to face contact with service users and limited availability some professionals.

Council officers, and partners from the Voluntary Sector and Community Sector, understandably said that they needed to prioritise issuing Winter Grant monies and supporting vulnerable people in this period. In particular, additional government burdens placed on teachers, prevented them from engaging directly in this research via focus groups. Listening to ongoing feedback from Key Stakeholders will be critical to future success and the report recommendations further engagement as a priority action.

4. Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought partners together from across Walsall to help achieve a common goal, of supporting the most vulnerable within our society. This has resulted in increased innovation in service delivery and improved relationships. If and when the Covid-19 pandemic is over, there is a real risk that these relationships and networks will dwindle, with communication and collaboration slowly falling away. To avoid this, the Council will need to continue to provide strong leadership, taking a 'strength based' approach, but also bringing people together, to problem solve, and collaborate about future service delivery.

The Walsall economy, and job market, has been damaged significantly due to the pandemic, with worse predicted when the government furlough scheme ends. Key to our future economic success, will be harnessing the resources of all statutory, and voluntary sector partners to not only protect vulnerable people, but also to support them back to self-sufficiency. The Voluntary and Community Sector has played a lead role in the Covid-19 response, and in the future will expect to be treated with increased respect, and be offered a meaningful 'voice' at the table to design future models of delivery. It is critical that funding levels are sustained sufficiently to allow the sector to continue to function and provide the essential services they offer.

This appraisal has identified a lot of strengths in both the delivery model and also service delivery, but closer working relationships, and better information sharing and communications between all local partners, could drive further innovation and achieve greater value for money for Walsall Residents.

5. Recommendations

The recommendations are in two sections:

- A. Provides details about a proposal to establish a new Steering Group to oversee future service delivery.
- B. Provides specific actions that should feature in the first 'action plan' developed to be overseen by that new Steering Group

A. Establishing a Steering Group:

A Covid Partners Strategy Steering Group will be formed to oversee the delivery of these recommendations, which will form a Plan. The Group will meet every three months to

- (i) review progress on each recommendation;
- (ii) review emerging borough level data relating to Covid-19 to identify any additional actions to reduce the impact of covid 19 on families in financial hardship;
- (iii) coordinate the resources for supporting families in financial hardship

The Group will be responsible for quarterly updating the Plan, to ensure it remains relevant.

Membership will consist of chief or principle officers responsible for:

- Adult social care
- Children services
- Public health
- Housing benefit administration

The Group will be chaired by a Chief Officer from one of the above.

Membership will also be extended to representatives from local social housing providers, education and key voluntary and community groups, as well as One Walsall.

B Action Plan Recommendations

Best Practice – To deliver maximum community benefits

1. Where the Council and its partners have been innovative and delivered best practice for example;
 - Use of CTR rather than eligibility to Free School Meals to 'passport' through for help;
 - including children who have not yet reached school age and those not currently in education in the Covid-19 Walsall Winter Grant Scheme.Promote this to other local authorities, especially neighbouring ones in the West Midlands (so that there can be a more constituent 'offer' to vulnerable families).

Financial Support

2. Continue ongoing funding for the Walsall Crisis Support Scheme in 2021/22 at the same rate as prior to the Covid-19 pandemic (£500,000). The level of investment to be reviewed at a future date to take account of any increase in the impact of Covid-19 and any reduction in funding from central funding.

Monitoring

3. All services to be encouraged to use ethnicity monitoring especially when related to Covid-19 related support due to the identified higher risk factors for BAME individuals. Key areas for inclusion crisis support.
4. Data collection and analysis to become core to the rollout of the Council's new CRM system. This will help ensure the most effective deployment of services (eg type of help and channel of communication) for those most in need.

Maximising Value for Money and Social Value

5. Review by June 2021 whether closer working relationships with other national organisations such as Foodshare or Trussell Trust can deliver even greater value for money in food parcel and related work / support.
6. Identify specific staffing resource that can be used to actively investigate the potential for increased Social Value to help bolster the Crisis Support.
7. Review of both Home Energy Conservation Act (including Fuel Poverty) Action Plan and work with LEAP to maximise all opportunities for help for vulnerable families through advice, support and financial assistance.
8. Review procurement arrangements with local voluntary sector to ensure value for money and social value for expenditure with local suppliers

Broadening Scope

9. Improve offer to individuals and families with no recourse to public funds (as CTR data does not include anyone from this category).

Post Pandemic

10. Council commitment to seek to ensure that assistance and joint work with charity and voluntary sector is not ceased post Covid-19 pandemic and that the excellent partnership work is continued for the benefit of the borough
11. A six-month post Covid plan to be drafted with the voluntary sector and then communicated to ensure dealing with the aftermath of the crisis is as essential as dealing with the crisis itself
12. The Hub delivery model, which worked so well in the crisis, should be supported further; especially in terms of co-ordination, mitigating duplication and signposting best practise

13. Making Connections (or a similar forum) to be supported as a vehicle to promote Community Association's collaboration
14. Focus to accelerate on new ways of communicating with stakeholders and customers. This needs to develop new areas such as Facebook advertising alongside working with the voluntary sector to mitigate digital exclusion
15. With the financial implications of Covid on the voluntary sector extra effort is required to see if funding can be 'pooled' in the most effective way (eg help with consortium bids)

6. Focus Groups Feedback from Voluntary Sector Stakeholders

Focus Group Approach – Led by Bryn Hamer

1. Introduction&Explanation: Explain who I am, what the strategic review is and its purpose. Feedback will be anonymous and confidential if requested. The following questions were designed to stimulate an open and candid debate....
2. Can you briefly describe your role within supporting Families with Financial Hardship in Walsall?
3. What were the key impacts on Families with Financial Hardship pre Covid?
4. What are the current key impacts on Families with Financial Hardship during Covid and then after?
5. What are the major needs (ie questions to answer) to mitigate these impacts?
6. How would you describe the response from the Walsall community?
7. What role did the council have within this?
8. What worked well?
9. What could have worked better?
10. What is needed from the Council going forwards?

Schedule of Focus Groups / Interviews

Group one – Date 23.12.20
Sue Evans – Manor Farm Community Association
Allan Boot – Black Country Food Bank
Rebecca Dodd – Accord Age Matters
David Taylor – Ryecroft Community Hub
Group two – Date 13.01.21
Keely Gabriel – Ablewell Advice Services
Sanjay – Seva Kitchen
Diana Southall – Old Hall People’s Partnership – follow up call on 21.01.21

Voluntary Sector and Delivery Partner’s Feedback

Key Impacts Pre-Covid:

- Combined impact of austerity and changes to Universal Credit has seen increasing debt issues
- Increasing use of foodbanks and dependency on them
- Mental Health issues were seen to be on the increase even before Covid

Key Impacts of Covid:

- Everything is exacerbated by the financial pressure from insecure work (eg furlough) and the direct and indirect impacts of lockdown
- Mental Health with impact of social distancing
- Families who were ‘getting by’ are being brought into hardship and in need. They have not been ‘in the system’ before leaving them with a major knowledge gap

- Major redundancies and loss of work is yet to take place – building employment skills will be crucial
- Access to people and volunteers is a real issue in being able to help families in need
- Access to funding will become even harder
- New approach to delivering advice and support required. We need to bring a wider range of people with us eg different channels (social media) and simple communications (less jargon)

Response to Covid19 – from Community and Council:

- Overall the community came together well. It felt like a true multi-agency approach
- The Council did act like a catalyst to help and support wherever needed
- Council have been accessible and visible
- Making Connections was a helpful forum for a coordinated approach
- Realisation Council's funding is under major strain so under the circumstances their support and help was considered to be invaluable
- Council had a step change in listening to the agencies on the ground – it has felt like a change in mindset
- Hub approach has worked well in organising regionally and adapting to regional needs

Walsall Council – What could have gone better?

- Felt slow to start in March – understandable given the unprecedented times
- Procurement processes – are they getting Value For Money?
- Method and forms of communications could be improved – eg more/better use of digital
- Role of Making Connections Walsall has been crucial
- Procurement processes need improvement – Voluntary services can help get Value For Money
- Some frontline services were turned off, but volunteers were still expected to give these services
- Better intelligence, data collection and analysis to help the delivery on the ground

What is needed from the Council Going Forwards?

- Need a plan for the next 6 months – one that looks at immediate issues post Covid but also looks to address the causes not just the symptoms
- Joined up, multi-agency approach to continue and to be embedded
- Hub approach with existing eco system of support to be continued
- Making Connections to continue and be strengthened
- Delivery of services needs to be through the VCSE due to strong local knowledge and ability to deliver on the ground
- Efficient access to pooled funding
- New model of face to face and remote working and digital communication
- Procurement to be improved – faster, cheaper and more local
- Greater use of Council assets – eg buildings
- Help in regulation and governance to ensure the credibility of new services
- Provide data and analysis
- Ensure local projects are joined up and aligned for the greater good and impact

- Council needs to help joined up approach of the above and play a coordination role, signposting important work, ensuring best practise and mitigating unnecessary duplication