

Cabinet – 10 February 2021

Crisis Support Provision for families in financial hardship during the Covid-19 pandemic

Portfolio: Councillor Perry – Deputy Leader, Resilient Communities

Related portfolios: Councillor Andrew – Deputy Leader, Regeneration
Councillor Martin – Adult Social Care
Councillor Wilson – Children’s

Service: Resilient Communities

Wards: All

Key decision: No

Forward plan: Yes

1. Aim

1.1 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. Summary

2.1 This report provides an update on the outcome of an appraisal carried out by Bryn Hamer from Hamer Consulting Limited, which explored the extent to which local Crisis Support provision is meeting the needs of Walsall residents. The final appraisal report(attached as Appendix 2) summarises, and reviews, the robust and flexible approach the Council and its key partners have developed in seeking to meet the needs of Walsall families in financial hardship, during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Council’s approach to delivering Crisis Support has been expanded significantly following:

- receipt of an additional £1.1M government funding in December 2020 and;
- the changing nature of the pandemic including:
 - the National Lockdown announced in January 2021
 - roll-out of vaccinations for Walsall residents.

2.2 It confirms that partners from across Walsall have rallied together to help support the Council to achieve a common goal, of supporting the most vulnerable within our society during the Covid-19 pandemic. It acknowledges a significant level of innovation in the services delivered during this period and the improved relationships that have developed as a result of working

differently. It recommends that best practice examples are shared so that more families can benefit from the lessons learnt.

- 2.3 It calls for an improvement in the way that the Council, and its partners, capture data about the profile of customers, so that in the future, there is greater assurance that all sections of the community are able to access the help they need when they need it.
- 2.4 It also highlights the risk, that once the crisis is over, collaboration and communication between organisations could diminish. It therefore recommends the establishment of a Covid Partners Strategy Steering Group that would:
- (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
- 2.5 The Council's approach is not static and this report seeks Cabinet's endorsement of a range of other related activities (listed in Appendix 1) to further help families in financial hardship during the Covid-19 pandemic.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 That Cabinet notes the outcome of the Independent Appraisal of the Crisis Support Provision for families in financial hardship during the Covid-19 pandemic and endorses the recommendations listed in Appendix 1.
- 3.2 That Cabinet request a further report on progress made (in 6 months time).

4. Report detail

Context

- 4.1 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.
- 4.2 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.

- 4.3 Given the time pressures associated with delivering this work and the context in terms of the Covid-19 pandemic officers were asked to identify a suitable person to undertake the appraisal. In December 2020, officers commissioned Bryn Hamer, who is an Experienced Director and former Charity Trustee, with extensive knowledge of the Voluntary and Community Sector's in Walsall, to lead the appraisal. The research used a mixed methodology approach with two key components:
1. A review of background data and literature materials to establish the needs of local residents and services available to support them.
 2. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups with stakeholders, including key staff and partner agencies involved in this type work to gain in-depth insight at a local level.
- 4.4 The tight timescales given to complete the work, rising levels of Covid-19 infections in Walsall, the announcement of the Covid-19 Winter Grant Scheme, Tier 3 restrictions and a subsequent National Lockdown, have all created a very challenging period in which to undertake the appraisal. Council officers, and partners from the Voluntary Sector and Community Sector, have understandably needed to prioritise issuing Winter Grant monies and supporting vulnerable people. In particular, additional government burdens placed on teachers in this period, have prevented them from engaging directly in this research via focus groups.
- 4.5 The report acknowledges the limited scope of this initial appraisal, and makes recommendations that will facilitate further review and development of services in the future. A copy of the full report and recommendations are attached as Appendix 2.
- 4.6 The report recognises the innovation in service delivery and communication methods that have developed during the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, Walsall's unique approach to awarding Winter Grant Funding using Council Tax Reduction data (as opposed to Free School Meals data) which has resulted in 44% more children benefiting from the scheme. The use of Facebook advertising to help promote that grant, which enabled 82% of cash payments to be issued within three weeks, is also seen as Best Practice that should be rolled out across the Council and its partners.
- 4.7 Weaknesses were identified around the quality and type of data currently being collected about service users accessing Crisis Support, which made it difficult to provide assurance that all protected groups are being supported adequately. There is a recommendation to improve this, which is of particular importance, given the national research which suggests that some BAME communities are being disproportionately impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 4.8 The appraisal acknowledges the significant contribution made by the voluntary and community sector in the Covid-19 response. It highlights the enhanced collaboration and relationships that have developed during this period. It also

identifies that post Covid-19, there is risk that these networks could dwindle away. A number of the recommendations aim to prevent this, such as:

- Setting up a Steering Group to oversee Crisis Provision and Service Development;
- Giving the Voluntary and Community Sector a meaningful 'voice' at that table;
- Maintaining funding at a level sufficient to enable the sector to continue to function and provide essential services.

Council Corporate Plan priorities

4.9 The recommendations will help towards delivering the following corporate priorities:

- Children have the best possible start in life and are safe from harm, happy, healthy and leaning well – ensuring the right support packages are in place to support families on low incomes to be able to feed and provide essential utilities for their children.
- Economic growth for all people, communities and businesses – providing a strong voluntary sector that can help support people to manage during a crisis but also help them to become self-sufficient and more resilient afterwards.
- People have increased independence, improved health and can positively contribute to their communities – preventing people from being impacted by Covid-19 or other health issues; promoting independence can help improve mental and physical health and wellbeing.
- Communities are prospering and resilient with all housing needs met in safe and healthy places that build a strong sense of belonging and cohesion – ensuring that vulnerable people are protected from the impact of fuel poverty, tenancies are sustained and they feel to be part of their community.

Risk management

4.10 The analysis has highlighted a range of inter-connected actions to maximise the help and support for Walsall families in financial hardship, during the Covid-19 pandemic. It has also highlighted the wider and sustained benefits for families and the borough that could be achieved in the future from the collaborative approach continuing. The key risk is resources not being available to continue this work.

Financial implications

- 4.11 To keep the cost of this review to a minimum, Council Officers initially supported the process by drawing together and summarising key data and relevant information (these documents are referenced in the background information). The author of the appraisal, Bryn Hamer, then independently led a series of meetings with Council officers, and held separate focus groups with representatives from Voluntary and Community Groups and other relevant stakeholders, to further explore the literature and consider how best to improve the crisis support provision in Walsall.
- 4.12 One of the recommendations in Appendix 1 is to provide ongoing funding for the Walsall Crisis Support Scheme in 2021/22 at the same rate as prior to the Covid-19 pandemic (£500,000). This will be necessary to help people when Covid-19 government measures such as benefits uplifts and furlough cease. The level of investment will need to be reviewed to take account of any increase in the impact of Covid-19 and any reduction in funding from central funding.
- 4.13 Council officers will continue to encourage, and support where possible, local charitable organisations to apply for relevant funding packages to increase external funding coming into the borough. The Council and One Walsall are already providing support to local organisations to help them to maximise their chances of gaining additional external funding to support local people.

Legal implications

- 4.14 The Council already has a Crisis Support Scheme, which was approved by Cabinet on 19 March 2015. The scheme assists the council and residents in a range of areas including preventing homelessness.
- 4.15 There are no legal implications as a result of this report.

Procurement Implications/Social Value

- 4.16 In accordance with the Council's procurement rules, the Council obtained a quotation from Bryn Hamer Consultancy Ltd, which due to its low value, allowed a direct contract award to be made.
- 4.17 The procurement of goods or food as part of the Walsall Crisis Support Scheme is undertaken in compliance with Public Contract Regulations 2015 (the Regulations) and the Council's Contract Rules. These arrangements may need to be reviewed if in the future the Council decides to deliver this scheme in a different way.
- 4.18 Walsall Council's Social Value Charter sets out clear principles for how the council will work with Partners to improve economic, social, and environmental well-being and maximise social value benefits for people and communities in Walsall. One of the recommendations in this report is for Council officers to seek to take greater advantage of the Social Value offers being made to the Council, to help benefit vulnerable people living in Walsall.

Property implications

4.19 There are no property implications for the Council.

Health and wellbeing implications

4.20 Continuing to take a proactive approach to support vulnerable and shielded individuals to safely:

- remain at home during the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown
- continue to work, where possible
- access testing and vaccinations

will reduce the risk of harm experienced by community members and take the pressure off the NHS.

4.21 The recommendations contained within this report are in full accordance with the Marmot objectives. The Walsall Crisis Support Scheme, along with the voluntary and community network, already deliver services that help give children the best start in life and also help young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives. The proposals aim to maintain this positive work in the future.

Staffing implications

4.22 There are no direct staffing implications for the Council.

Reducing Inequalities

4.23 Quantitative and Qualitative evidence from reports, and discussions with key stakeholders, suggests that the crisis support schemes in Walsall are helping to reduce health inequalities and provide those in the greatest need with the help they need to remain healthy during the pandemic. There is however very limited data available and providing full assurance is not possible. Data about the ethnicity of children receiving Free School Meals, suggests that BAME children are under-represented in this cohort. One of the recommendations in the report is to increase recording and analysis of ethnicity to enable further analysis to be done.

4.24 The Public Health England Report 'Disparities in the risk and outcomes of COVID-19' (August 2020) highlighted range of key factors for England:

- Age: A survival analysis looked at people with a positive test, and those 80 or older, when compared with those under 40, were seventy times more likely to die. These are the largest disparities found in this analysis. Working age males diagnosed with COVID-19 were twice as likely to die as females.
- Deprivation: The mortality rates from COVID-19 in the most deprived areas were more than double the least deprived areas, for both males and females. This is greater than the ratio for all-cause mortality between 2014 to 2018 indicating greater inequality in death rates from COVID-19 than all causes;

- **Ethnicity:** An analysis of survival among confirmed COVID-19 cases shows that, after accounting for the effect of sex, age, deprivation and region, people of Bangladeshi ethnicity had around twice the risk of death when compared to people of White British ethnicity. People of Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Other Asian, Black Caribbean and Other Black ethnicity had between 10 and 50% higher risk of death when compared to White British. Death rates from COVID-19 were higher for Black and Asian ethnic groups when compared to White ethnic groups. This is the opposite of what is seen in previous years, when the all-cause mortality rates were lower in Asian and Black ethnic groups. Therefore, the inequality in COVID-19 mortality between ethnic groups is the opposite of that seen for all causes of death in previous years.

Consultation

- 4.25 During the appraisal consultation was undertaken with key stakeholders with additional input from Council officers.
- 4.26 The rising levels of Covid-19 infections in Walsall, the announcement of the Covid-19 Winter Grant Scheme, Tier 3 restrictions and a National Lockdown, have all created a very challenging (and unprecedented) period in which to undertake the consultation. Particularly, additional government requests placed on teachers in this period, have prevented them from engaging directly in this research via focus groups. Teachers are to be consulted in future reviews and to also be represented in the recommended Steering Group.

5. Decide

Cabinet is requested to consider the findings of the review into current Crisis Support Provision for families in hardship and the recommendations detailed in section 3 (with further information provided in Appendix 1).

6. Respond

If approved, then the Director of Resilient Communities and Director of Customer Engagement will jointly work together to lead the implementation of the recommendations in Appendix 1.

7. Review

Usage and outcomes of the Walsall Crisis Support Scheme will be monitored, and findings will be fed into the development of the new Customer Engagement Strategy. This report also recommends a progress report be presented to Cabinet in circa 6 months time.

Background papers

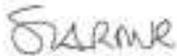
- Appendix 1: Draft proposed Recommendations
 Appendix 2: Appraisal Report and Focus Group Feedback from Bryn Hamer

Other Background Papers (Referenced in Appendix 2)

Appendix A:	Resilient Communities, Our Strength Based Model: Making Connections Hub Data (Walsall Council, 2020).
Appendix B:	Covid-19 Winter Grant Scheme, Delivery and Impact (Walsall Council, January 2021)
Appendix C:	Covid-19 Impact and Support, National and Local Context (Walsall Council, 2020)
Appendix D:	Customer Case Analysis, Impact on Individuals with No Recourse to Public Funds (Walsall Council, 2020)
Appendix E:	Covid-19 Ethnicity Analysis, Making Connections (Walsall Council, 2021)
Appendix F:	Home Energy Conservation Act Action Plan (LEAP, 2020)
Appendix G:	Walsall Crisis Support Scheme Briefing Note (Walsall Council, 2020)

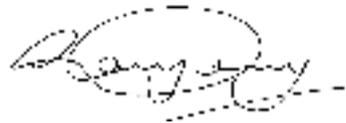
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21 January 2021



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21 January 2021



Councillor Andrew
Deputy Leader & Portfolio Holder for
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21 January 2021

Appendix 1

Draft proposed Recommendations for Action to continue to help families in financial hardship during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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

- (iv) review progress on each recommendation;
- (v) 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;
- (vi) 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)