

Cabinet – 20 October 2021

Progress update – 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 Services

Service: Resilient Communities

Wards: All

Key decision: No

Forward plan: No

1. Aim

- 1.1 To inform cabinet about the progress made in regards to delivery of Crisis Support Provision in Walsall since the findings of a review were reported to Cabinet on 10th February 2021.

2. Summary

- 2.1 This report provides a progress update of Crisis Support Provision for vulnerable people and families within Walsall (see Appendix 2 for further detail). The update summarises the extent to which local Crisis Support provision is being delivered to meet the needs of Walsall residents and provides an update on the recommendations made by Bryn Hamer and endorsed by Cabinet on 10 February 2021. The recommendations included the establishment of a Covid Partner Task and Finish group 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

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 That the content of the report is noted.

4. Report detail

Context

- 4.1 On 10 February 2021 a report was submitted to cabinet which detailed the findings of an appraisal carried out by Bryn Hamer from Hamer Consulting Limited which was commissioned by the Leader of the Council on the 28 October 2020. The aim of the review was to consider the council's current support provision and operating model and whether it was meeting the needs of families in Walsall during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 4.2 The recommendations proposed to help families in financial hardship during the pandemic were:
- (i) To establish a steering group
 - (ii) To establish an action plan
- 4.3 A Covid 19 Task and Finish Group was established at the outset of the pandemic to coordinate resources for support vulnerable individuals and families in financial hardship during the Covid 19 pandemic. The group reviews emerging themes through data and identifies areas of greatest impact and need and coordinates our partnership approach. As this group was already established, it was agreed that this group would also take on responsibility for coordinating the recommendations endorsed by Cabinet in respect of Crisis Support. The group has met regularly throughout the pandemic, and consists of partners from across the Council, local housing providers, Health, Voluntary and Community groups and One Walsall.
- 4.4 The Task and Finish group has continued to embrace the resilient communities' approach by focusing on delivering high quality advice and support to those in need of it. Individuals have in many cases managed their issues themselves or with support from their own networks. Community groups have performed above expectations and delivered responses attuned to their communities with efficiency and kindness. The Money Home Job service and other Council services have provided a safety net through crisis support and by issuing various additional pots of grant that have been provided by the government as part of the national Covid 19 response. The combined approach from the partnership has provided a complete package of proportionate solutions to support the local community.
- 4.5 Details of the wide range of Crisis Support offered to Walsall residents is attached as an Appendix. The key achievements are set out below:
- Over 1,800 test and trace payments were made to local residents.
 - Over 43,500 individual cash payments were made, helping almost 12,000 families through the Covid Winter Support Grant and Covid Local Support Grant schemes with payments totalling over £2,300,000.
 - Hardship payments were made to 25,029 households to reduce their Council Tax liability.

- The Black Country Foodbank reported an 11% reduction during January 2021 to July 2021 (which we believe links to the other support being offered via local support schemes and increased universal credit).
- Making connections delivered over 390 food parcels from Nov 2020 to July 2021 to the most vulnerable who were self-isolating.
- Making connections dealt with over 17,000 befriending calls to those most impacted by social isolation.
- Making connections supported over 11,000 vulnerable individuals with welfare checks, advice, food and other support.
- The Department of Education Holiday Activities and Food programme for Walsall received £1,799,290 for 2020/2021 to deliver enriching healthy activities and food programmes during the holidays for up to 14,000 children who are eligible for free school meals. As a result over 8226 health recipe food boxes were delivered during the Easter and Summer holidays and 86% families said that they learnt a new skill from using the recipe boxes provided.
- The Council worked with partners to secure First-Time gas connection and gas central heating investment for 60 park homes and 85 other dwellings at a cost of £345,000.
- The Council secured £4,500,000 in funds to help retro-fit the homes of those in fuel poverty.
- The Council secured ECOflex (The Energy Company Obligation) investment for vulnerable people to help reduce carbon emissions and tackle fuel poverty; so far 97 approvals have been issued for heating and insulation with an estimated value of £246,000.

Council Corporate Plan priorities

- 4.6 The Covid 19 Task and Finish group has collectively contributed towards helping to deliver 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

- 4.7 The availability of ongoing resources to fund Crisis Support is a risk given the Council's challenging financial position. There is a risk that grant funding provided by central government will not continue. Changes to Universal Credit rates and the long-term impact of Covid-19 on the local economy may increase demand for Crisis Support.

Financial implications

- 4.8 There are no direct financial implications as a result of this report.

Legal implications

- 4.9 There are no legal implications as a result of this report.

Procurement Implications/Social Value

- 4.10 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 in the future if the Council decides to deliver this scheme in a different way as a result of taking stock of lessons learnt.
- 4.11 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. The Task and Finish group will continue to maximise this investment to benefit local people.
- 4.12 Opportunities to 'Purchase Local' for minor contracts, in accordance with statutory and regulatory requirements is currently being explored. The task and finish group will look to ensure that wherever possible and appropriate to do so, all 'contracts and quotations for work are sought from local suppliers in the first instance.

Property implications

- 4.13 There are no property implications as a result of this report.

Health and wellbeing implications

- 4.14 Maintaining Crisis Support provision is essential if we are to be able to continue to take a proactive approach to supporting vulnerable individuals and families to safely:
- remain at home during the Covid-19 pandemic
 - continue to work, where possible
 - maintain financial capability

- access testing and vaccinations

Staffing implications

4.15 There are no direct staffing implications as a result of this report.

Reducing Inequalities

4.16 Quantitative and Qualitative evidence from reports, and discussions with key stakeholders suggest 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. The Council is developing new ways of working to support the creation of better insight and data to help inform the development of future services. The steering group will continue to improve data capture methods and review progress towards reducing inequalities across the community.

Climate Change

4.17 The Covid 19 Task and Finish group will continue to develop a list of ongoing actions aimed at better alignment of pooled partner resources to meet customer needs.

Consultation

4.18 There is no direct need for consultation as a result of this report.

Decide

4.19 The report is for information only and no decisions are required.

Respond

4.20 The Covid 19 Task and Finish Group will continue to work with key partners to help identify emerging trends and key thematic groups with the aim of improving coordination of Crisis Support and maximising the impact of that investment.

Review

4.21 The Covid 19 Crisis Support provision will continue to be monitored monthly through the Covid 19 Task and Finish Group. In addition this work has been incorporated into the service plan for Customer Engagement and Resilient Communities teams.

Appendix: - : Covid -19 Impact on benefits, finances, housing and jobs update

Background papers

Cabinet report 10 February 2021

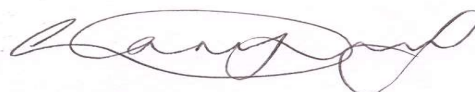
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12.10.2021



Councillor Perry
Deputy Leader & Portfolio Holder
Resilient Communities



Councillor Andrew
Deputy Leader & Portfolio Holder for
Regeneration

12.10.2021

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)