

DATA LABEL: PUBLIC



BATHGATE LOCAL AREA COMMITTEE

ANTI-POVERTY SERVICE UPDATE

REPORT BY HEAD OF FINANCE AND PROPERTY SERVICES

A. PURPOSE OF REPORT

The purpose of the report is to inform the Local Area Committee of the work undertaken by the Anti-Poverty Service from April 2020-March 2021.

B. RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the committee notes:

1. The Anti-Poverty Service provision in the ward; and,
2. The impact provision is having in terms of supporting the outcomes of the Community Planning Partnership's Anti-Poverty Strategy 2018-23.

C. SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS

I	Council Values	Focusing on our customers' needs; being honest, open and accountable; providing equality of opportunities; making best use of our resources; working in partnership
II	Policy and Legal (including Strategic Environmental Assessment, Equality Issues, Health or Risk Assessment)	None.
III	Implications for Scheme of Delegations to Officers	None.
IV	Impact on performance and performance Indicators	The activity contained in the report contributes to service KPIs.
V	Relevance to Single Outcome Agreement	<p>We are better educated and have access to increased and better quality learning and employment opportunities.</p> <p>We live longer, healthier lives and have reduced health inequalities.</p> <p>We have tackled significant inequalities in West Lothian society.</p>

VI	Resources - (Financial, Staffing and Property)	Activities delivered from approved budgets supplemented by external funding from Macmillan Cancer Support, European Social Fund and Scottish Legal Aid Board.
VII	Consideration at PDSP	None.
VIII	Other consultations	None.

D. TERMS OF REPORT

D.1 Background

The Anti-Poverty Service provides services to help the most vulnerable households in West Lothian. The service contributes to the Council's Corporate Plan priority "Minimising poverty, the cycle of deprivation and promoting equality" by providing comprehensive advice, support and assistance to people in West Lothian who are:

- Without work or in low paid work
- Are poor and / or fuel poor
- Have money / debt issues
- Have been affected by cancer or other long term conditions
- In crisis
- In receipt of benefits and /or have an entitlement to payments managed by the service
- Being assessed for social care services

The service aims to help these groups increase their disposable income, manage their debt, improve their budgeting skills, remain in their home and to appeal decisions made by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). The service also utilises the skills and knowledge of volunteers who provide a valuable role in supporting customers to access services and provide a listening ear which can offer a network of support and information.

The service is responsible for the administration of Housing Benefit, the Council Tax reduction scheme and the Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF). It also has the responsibility of administering and improving the uptake of free school meals, school clothing grants, education maintenance allowance and blue badges. It provides a front-line service to recipients of benefits, which includes assessing eligibility, processing claims, assessing benefits, processing discretionary housing payments, self-isolation grants as well as other payments to claimants.

All activity across the service is informed and prioritised by the Community Planning Partnership Anti-Poverty Strategy 2018 to 2023. The overall purpose of this strategy is to reduce the inequalities gap and tackle the causes of inequality to ensure that people are not financially excluded and minimises the impact of poverty on the people of West Lothian.

D.2 Provision

Over the past year the service has:

- Fully supported customers throughout the covid-19 pandemic through using pro-active and reactive measures and successfully adapting to challenges and restrictions ensuring all customers who required support received this.

- Digitalisation of areas of the service, improving efficiencies and offering more choice to customers at a time which suits them. This has included online forms, self-help tools and video conferencing software adding a new service delivery channel increasing accessibility to the service.
- Developed and implemented new software to improve accessibility and processing timescales for Blue Badges.
- Worked with Housing, Customer and Building Services to implement the Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan particularly focussing on preventions and early intervention.
- Introduced PayPoint as a cash pay-out service for SWF Grants which significantly improved reach and reduced traveling costs for vulnerable customers.
- Implementation of the FORT referral and tracking system to allow internal and external services and organisations to easily refer customers ensuring customers receive the support required at the earliest point. 48 partners are currently using the system which resulted in 3910 referrals being received in the 2020/21 period.
- The service recorded our best ever Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction performance with new housing benefit claims being processed on average within 11 days against a Scottish average of 17 days.
- Completed implementation of a revised Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction verification policy and the ability for customers to provide evidence in support of applications digitally.
- Developed and implemented processes to improve uptake on Free School Meals and Milk, Clothing Grants and Education Maintenance Allowance.
- Payment of an additional School Clothing Grant in January 2021 totalling £622,080 and supporting 7,776 children.
- Application for Education Maintenance Allowance was fully digitalised with all applications made online.
- Supported 436 households experiencing fuel poverty by paying £48,650 in grants.
- Working with customers and partners to increase uptake of the Discretionary Housing Payment. This supported 180 households with payments amounting to £119,011.
- Development and introduction of the Improving the Cancer Journey service offering a holistic service to those affected by cancer alongside the Macmillan@WestLothian and Macmillan Benefits teams.

We continue to embed services into the local community and to support customers to help mitigate poverty, to enable and empower people and work collaboratively with partners to maximise the benefits of our service at a customer's time of need.

Local Provision

The below section shows the number of people the Anti-Poverty service has worked with over the last year in the Bathgate area and further information on the Anti-Poverty Service.

The Advice Shop has helped 2,119 customers to manage their money and to resolve benefit problems within the Bathgate ward. This is a 9% increase from the previous year and resulted in 11,715 additional enquiries and contacts from these customers. As a result, customers have a better understanding of their situation and options available to them. Feedback shows this has a positive impact on individuals by increasing knowledge and understanding and ultimately improving the customer journey and empowering customers.

Anti-Poverty Service

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic West Lothian Council's Anti-Poverty Service has continued to offer help and support to constituents across West Lothian. The service has pro-actively adapted to the current situation to maximise the help and support on offer to individuals and the information and results of this support is detailed below;

Advice Shop

In 2020/21 The Advice Shop has supported 14,258 individuals resulting in 72,540 additional enquiries and contacts from these customers, covering money and debt, energy, housing and welfare benefits. This is a 4% increase from the previous year.

The Advice Shop generated £30,026,258 in extra income and successfully managed £5,334,196 in debt.

163 appeals were lodged to help customers appeal a DWP benefit decision. 88% of appeals had their decisions overturned. This is a 63% decrease in the number of appeals compared to the previous year.

83% of money advice customers debt was successfully managed in 2020/21 which is a 10% increase on the previous year. Total debt amounted to over £4.1million.

1,707 customers were provided money and energy advice to help improve household income. This is a 14% increase from the previous year. 17% of these customers were aged 60 years and over.

A range of targeted support and campaigns have been delivered over the period to support self-employed, those who may have been entitled to Discretionary Housing Payment, increasing uptake in new Social Security Scotland payments and, help and advice relating to energy. Advisors were able to support customers to engage with charities and third sector organisations which had received additional, one-off funding to help the most vulnerable as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic; this included access to white goods, one off payments for energy or transport costs.

Service delivery has also had to adjust to the current restrictions and new requirements. Implementation of new digital outreach sessions and appointments have been well received by customers and staff.

Improved processes and system digitalisation has also meant that we have managed to continue to fully support customers. This includes the benefit check and budgeting calculator which is freely available to customers. Self-help guides and information continues to be developed and publicised by the service which information such as the West Lothian Food Map. The service has continued to provide face to face appointments where alternative options are not suitable.

Benefits

In 2020/21, 1,103 Housing Benefit applications have been received and 18,362 change of circumstance notifications. Despite the demand, performance remains high and within the target, new housing benefit claims were processed within 11 days and change of circumstances within three days.

There were 4,623 applications received for Council Tax Reduction and 38,385 change of circumstance notifications. Again, despite the demand performance remains within the target with new Council Tax Reduction claims processed within 10 days and change in circumstances within 3 days.

Scottish Welfare Fund

In 2020/21 there was a significant increase in the number of Crisis Grant applications received compared to pre Covid-19 levels. There were 12,789 crisis grant application received between 1 April 20 and 31 March 21, compared to the 8,647 in 2019/20. The total financial support provided via Crisis Grants for this period in 2020/21 is £1,022,126 compared to £375,801 in 2019/20. There is a significant increase in the cost of the grants due to households requiring increased grant amounts to cover the impact on the loss of household income due to furlough and redundancies.

2,872 Community Care Grant applications were received during the same period which resulted in £1,084,269 in Community Care Grant payments.

Self-Isolation Grant

This grant was introduced on 12 October 2020 to provide financial assistance to individuals who are required to self-isolate. Individuals are awarded a £500 payment if they are working, unable to work from home during self-isolation and will lose income as a result. Individuals also have to be in receipt of a qualifying benefit. In 2020/21 from mid-October to 31 March 2021, 1,409 applications were received and 404 individuals awarded a grant.

In 2021/22 from 1 April to 22 October 21, which covers roughly the same number of months as the analysis for 2020/21, 2,461 applications have been made to the fund with 997 individuals awarded a grant.

School Clothing Grants/Meals

In 2020/21, over 4,943 children were awarded free school meals and school clothing grants were awarded to 8,594 pupils.

Children eligible for Free School Meals have also benefited from financial support during the school holidays. In the summer of 2021/22, a total of £729,570 was paid to parents to help with the purchase of food during school holidays and in the October school break, a total of £92,070 was paid. In total 3,303,482 was paid throughout the 2020/21 period.

Discretionary Housing Payments

In 2020/21 the service has made 6,105 awards for discretionary housing payments amounting to £3,411,751.

1146 awards amounting to £632,989 were awarded for financial hardship and 4,959 awards amounting to £2,778,762 for under occupancy.

Family Pandemic Payments

The service administered the Scottish Government Family Pandemic Payments of £100 per child paid in December 2020 to children in receipt of Free School Meals based on low income. This resulted in payment amounting to £608,200

Priorities 2021/22

The Anti-Poverty Service has identified the following priorities for development over the 2021/22 year, which are:

- Continuing to work with partners and customers to mitigate the effects of the Covid 19-Pandemic for customers, including targeted advice and support to those who have been affected in areas such as furlough, redundancy and Cancer.
- Supporting customers affected by debt through Improving the Debt Journey to improve understanding and maximise tailored support for long term benefits.
- Supporting the roll out of the Child Disability and Adult Payment.
- Supporting payments for the Tenants Grant Fund.
- Payment of Scottish Governments Low income Pandemic payment of £130 to approximately 16,000 eligible households in receipt of Council Tax Reduction or qualifying Council Tax exemption.
- Retain Scottish National Standards for Information Advice Providers.
- Meal payments during school holiday periods with payments already made in the summer and October 2021 amounting to £1,042,625
- Payment of the Scottish Government Family Pandemic Payment of £100 per child.
- Automation of Education Benefits starting with School Clothing Grants and Free School Meals followed by Education Maintenance Allowance.
- Introduction of a new operating system by the National Entitlement Card Production Office.
- New Under 22 travel scheme for all those with a Young Scot card.

E. CONCLUSION

The report summarises the work of the Anti-Poverty service in the Bathgate ward area and provide an overview of the service as a whole. The Local Area Committee is asked to note the contents of the report and to consider how the service could better target its resources in this area. It is the intention to report on activity in the ward area on an annual basis.

F. BACKGROUND REFERENCES

None.

Appendices/Attachments: None.

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Date of meeting: 22nd November 2021