

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 2021 to March 2022.

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 and the 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 Key Highlights 2021/22

Over the past year the service has undertaken the following activities:

- Supported customers throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and recovery period using pro-active and reactive measures and successfully adapting to challenges and restrictions ensuring all customers who required support

implemented 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, video conferencing software and ask the advisor sessions on Facebook adding a new service delivery channel and increasing accessibility to the service.
- Developed and implemented new software to improve accessibility and processing timescales for Blue Badges.
- Continued development of the FORT referral and tracking system to allow internal and external services and organisations to easily refer customers ensuring they receive the support required at the earliest point. 710 users across 88 agencies are currently using the system which resulted in 4998 referrals being received during 2021/22.
- Introduced automation to Education Benefits for Free School Meals and Clothing Grants reducing the FTE required by one. This has allowed resources to be diverted to other areas of pressured work such as Crisis Grants.
- Supported 855 households experiencing fuel poverty by paying £60,025 in grants and issuing 1,783 in fuel vouchers worth £78,171.
- Offered holistic support and advice to customers looking to access the Foodbank. In total 3,768 Foodbank vouchers were issued by the service. The food insecurity project has worked with 77 customers experiencing persistent food insecurity to secure extra income of £119,190.
- Assumed Responsibility for the Under 22 Young Scot Travel scheme, with around 45% of all young people in West Lothian entitlement to the scheme now using it successfully. Efforts to increase take up will continue throughout this financial year and is helped by the delayed Scottish Government campaign that went live on 27 September 22.
- Provided additional support to 359 individuals through the Feeling the Pinch Fund amounting to £79,988.
- The service recorded the third best Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction performance in Scotland with new housing benefit claims being processed on average within 13 days against a Scottish average of 18 days.
- Delivered Winter Support Funding of £633,285 to 4,691 Council Tax Reduction recipients with additional vulnerabilities to assist with the additional costs experienced over the winter period.
- Provided direct financial support to Ukrainian refugees and their hosts with £39,950 paid directly to help support 232 individuals and £61,041 in "Thank You" payments made to 50 families hosting Ukrainian refugees.
- 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.

The Anti-Poverty Service continues 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.

D.3 Local Provision

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

The Advice Shop has helped 1,774 customers to manage their money and to resolve benefit problems within the Bathgate ward. This resulted in 22,549

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.

The Advice Shop generated £3,942,710 in extra income and successfully managed £274,629 in debt within the Bathgate ward.

D.4 Work delivered by team within the Anti-Poverty Service

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic and throughout the recovery period, 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 2021/22 The Advice Shop has supported 13,433 individuals resulting in 155,374 additional enquiries and contacts from these customers, covering money and debt, energy, housing and welfare benefits. This is a 54% increase compared to 2020/21 figure for contacts and enquiries.

The Advice Shop generated £28,126,573 in extra income and successfully managed £1,325,572 in debt.

109 appeals were lodged to help customers appeal a DWP benefit decision. 84% of appeals had their decisions overturned. This is a 43% decrease in the number of appeals compared to the previous year.

1,800 customers were provided energy advice to help improve household income and savings. This is a 5% increase from the previous year and amounted to £480,439. 13% of these customers were aged 60 years and over.

A range of targeted support and campaigns have been delivered over the period which include 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 have received additional, one-off funding to help the most vulnerable as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Service delivery continued to adjust throughout the pandemic. Further Implementation of new digital outreach sessions and re-introduction of face to face 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.

Benefits

In 2021/22, 1,350 Housing Benefit applications have been received and 21,098 change of circumstance notifications. Despite the demand, performance remains high and within the target, new housing benefit claims were processed within 13 days against a Scottish average of 18 days. Change of circumstances within 3 days

against a Scottish average of 5 days.

There were 2,917 applications received for Council Tax Reduction and 31,959 change of circumstance notifications. Again, despite the demand performance remains within the target with new Council Tax Reduction claims processed within 13 days and change in circumstances within 5 days.

Scottish Welfare Fund

In 2021/22 there continued to be a significant number of Crisis Grant applications received. There were 12,284 Crisis Grant applications received between 01 April 2021 and 31 March 2022, compared to 12,789 for the same period in 2020/21. The total financial support provided via Crisis Grants for this period in 2021/22 was £1,025,212 compared to 2020/21 is £1,022,126. Although the number of applications are slightly down in the last financial year compared to the previous year, the amount paid out on Crisis Grants was marginally higher. This is because the amount paid in each grant was higher. Households continue to struggle with household bills given the current cost of living crisis and it is expected that as we move into the winter months, the demand for Crisis Grants will increase.

2866 Community Care Grant applications were received during the same period which resulted in £1,212,699 in Community Care Grant payments.

Self-Isolation Grant

This grant continued during the 2021/22 financial year but went through a number of changes by Scottish Government in relation to qualifying criteria. During this year, those that qualified received a £500 payment if they are working, unable to work from home during self-isolation and lost income as a result. Individuals also have to be in receipt of a qualifying benefit. In 2021/22 6002 applications were received and 3008 individuals were awarded a grant. The total paid was £1,504,000.

The grant is due to end on 31 October 22 however we await final confirmation from Scottish Government. We are now only receiving a few applications for this grant on a weekly basis. The amount of the award also changed in May 2022 from £500 to £225.

School Clothing Grants/Meals

Education Grants are reported in academic years running from August to June the following year. In the Academic Year 2021/22, over 4,913 children were awarded free school meals and school clothing grants were awarded to 7,468 pupils. From August 2021, all children from P1 to P4 were awarded Universal Entitlement to Free School Meals, this increase to include P5 from January 22.

Children eligible for Free School Meals or living in households with low income, have also benefited from financial support during the school holidays. In the Academic Year, including the summer of 2021, a total of £1,207,254 was paid to over 5,700 children. This was paid to parents to help with the purchase of food during school holidays periods.

Discretionary Housing Payments

In 2021/22 the service has made 6,196 awards for discretionary housing payments amounting to £3,410,786.

1126 awards amounting to £492,204 were awarded for financial hardship and 5,070 awards amounting to £2,918,581 for under occupancy.

Bridging Payments

Scottish Government Bridging payments replaced the previous Family Pandemic Payment and were paid during the 2021/22 Academic Year and continue to be paid until the end of this calendar year. We await information from Scottish Government as to whether these will continue however given the payment is a compensation payment for the late roll out of the Child Payment which is due for roll out at the beginning of 2023, it is unlikely that these will continue. The payment is made to all children who qualify for Free School Meals because they live in a low-income household, or any child entitlement to Universal Entitlement to School Meals if they live in a low-income household. During 2021/22, the October 21 and December 21 payment was £160, however the payment changed and in April 22 and June 22, the payment reduced to £130. Over the Academic Year 2021/22 £3,103,400 was paid to over 5,500 children.

D.5 Priorities 2022/23

The Anti-Poverty Service has identified the following priorities for development over the 2022/23 year, which are:

- Continuing to work with partners and customers to assist in the recovery from the Covid 19-Pandemic which includes targeted advice and support.
- Providing advice and support to customers and partners to help mitigate the effects of the increased cost of living crisis which includes in work poverty.
- Increasing awareness, understanding and knowledge of support available in relation to poverty through arranged events, training and information sharing channels such as social media.
- Providing face to face support in community settings such as Community Hubs, Health Care Settings and Partnership Centres.
- Supporting customers affected by debt through Improving the Debt Journey to improve understand and maximise tailored support for long term benefits.
- Supporting the roll out of the Child Disability and Adult Disability Payment.
- Providing focused support and advice to those affected by addictions with multiple issues and/or a history of none engagement with support services.
- Providing targeted support to customers who have exhausted Foodbank vouchers.
- Retaining Scottish National Standards for Information Advice Providers.
- Making meal payments during school holiday periods with payments already made in October 2022 amounting to £127,995
- Payment of the Scottish Government Bridging Payment until the end of the 2022 calendar year of £130 per child.
- Continuing to support the Under 22 travel scheme for all those with a Young Scot card by promoting the scheme in schools; businesses and on our own website and social media pages.
- Awarding an additional £80 clothing grant to all qualifying children as at January 2023. This is estimated to benefit around 6000 children
- Awarding a £20 fuel payment to all Crisis Grant recipients who apply and are awarded a Crisis Grant that includes a fuel request from 1 October 2022. There is currently a budget of £44,000 for this scheme
- Supporting Ukrainian Refugees to access all available advice and support including financial, housing, debt, energy, training and employment.
- Increasing uptake of the Council Tax Reduction scheme
- Delivering further Winter Support Fund payment of £80 to 4,242 Council Tax

Reduction claimants with additional vulnerabilities to support them with additional costs over the winter period.

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. It is the intention to report on activity in the ward area on an annual basis.

F. BACKGROUND REFERENCES

None.

Appendices/Attachments: None.

Contact Person: Nahid Hanif, Anti-Poverty and Welfare Advice Manager

Tel: 01506 283022 Email: Nahid.Hanif@westlothian.gov.uk

Donald Forrest

Head of Finance and Property Services

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