

SCRUTINY REPORT



MEETING: Overview and Scrutiny Committee

DATE: Wednesday 23rd March 2022

SUBJECT: Anti-Poverty update

REPORT FROM: Councillor Richard Gold, Cabinet Member for Communities

CONTACT OFFICER: Lynne Ridsdale, Deputy Chief Executive / Chris Woodhouse, Strategic Partnerships Manager

1.0 BACKGROUND *[brief]*

1.1 Bury Council has significantly strengthened its focus on anti-poverty over the last 18 months. A more proactive and targeted approach has been taken to identifying and supporting households in need and financial crisis support was complemented with direct referrals for benefits assessment and help with financial management, including:

- receipt of crisis payments from over £1 500 000 available this year were conditional on financial resilience advice
- The Family Learning provision via Bury Adult Learning Centre is delivering family budgeting courses, including within community settings such as at Trinity Foodbank. Courses include, *What's Cooking? Health Eating on a Budget for Busy Parents; Family Finance -Budgeting for the Family;* and *Keep Calm and Budget* (for learners with mild to moderate mental health issues)

1.2 The national economic context means that many more of our residents may be facing financial hardship and therefore this work is increasingly important. Key issues include:

- The general increases in the cost of living. The Consumer Price Index, as a measure of inflation, rose by 5.5% in the 12 months to January 2022, to be the highest level for a decade. Key issues include rising fuel costs; transport and clothing
- In February 2022 Ofgem announced the energy price cap is to rise to £1,971 per year.
- Comparably low interest rates, for example a below-inflation rise in the state pension, which compounds people's relative spending power
- the end of the £20 uplift for households receiving Universal Credit has required households to budget for a reduction in income at a time of increasing costs

1.3 Whilst none of the above is exclusively to Bury, such factors influence local socio-economic vulnerability. This report outlines current anti-poverty activity and the current development of an updated strategy for the Borough.

2.0 TACKLING DEPRIVATION

2.1 The *Let's Do It* vision to tackle deprivation requires systemic change to put people at the heart of economic growth. Progress over the last 12 months has included

2.1.1 In December 2021 Bury became the only Greater Manchester council to be both a Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter Member and a Real Living Wage accredited employer. This means that all council jobs and contracts will be paid at least Real Living Wage value and has given a direct increase in earnings to over 4,000 local people who are involved in the supply and delivery of Council services. The Council is now setting an example across the Bury system about high quality employment

2.1.2 A People and Communities Plan is being developed for Radcliffe, as a pilot of a wider approach to connect local people to the opportunities of Strategic Regeneration and Levelling Up. The Radcliffe plan includes access to employment, skills development and access to public, community and wellbeing services and is being developed as a "Blueprint" for community development as an integral part to all future regeneration strategy.

2.1.3 Over the past 12 months the Council has led the digital eco-system to:

- Engage over 1,177 residents in community digital activity and over 250 learners via an adult learning digital course (since February 2021). The project aims to engage 1,500 residents by June 2022.
- Deliver 172 digital drop-in activities since June 2021, offering bespoke and reactive support 684 times. To encourage sustainability, each community partner is receiving a package of support with connectivity, to train volunteers and access digital equipment
- Distribute over 300 refurbished Samsung tablet devices which were received via the GM Tech Fund. 175 tablets were distributed to Bury schools, the remainder have been retained by the digital eco-system for a Loan Scheme which was launched in August 2021 for Bury Council services, local partners, organisations and residents. The digital inclusion work is broader than but central to financial resilience, by ensuring that residents can access the best deals and wider advice on line.

3.0 ANTI POVERTY SUPPORT THROUGHOUT 2021/22 : A TARGETED, PROACTIVE APPROACH

3.1 In October 2021 Bury Council received £1.5m allocation from the Household Support Fund. Consistent with a targeted and proactive approach these funds were distributed through the approaches outlined below:

3.2 Direct payments and general support was given to the **food banks and pantries**, through the Bury Community Support Network (BCSN) which is a partnership of 18 organisations, as well as independent operators including Ramsbottom Pantry, L'Chaim and Gift. Funding has been provided to support general resilience; for emergency presentations, including over the Christmas and New Year period, and to purchase stocks of physical vouchers for those with limited digital opportunities, eg Aldi Orange vouchers (which can't be used for spend on alcohol or gambling products).

- 3.3 **Proactive offers of flexible financial support** eg emergency boiler repairs, essential white goods or urgent winter provisions and a £100 Edenred voucher for food or fuel, were made to potentially socio-economically vulnerable households through:
- A mailshot from Revenues and Benefits to the 5,232 residents in receipt of Universal Credit and Council Tax support who will have been affected by the removal of the £20 uplift
 - A mailshot to all Six Town Housing Residents
 - Direct referrals from public services within neighbourhood teams including Children's Early Help; school pastoral teams and housing options supporting those in temporary and traveller accommodation
 - Referrals via the Community Hubs and community partners, including BCSN foodbanks/pantries; the African-Caribbean Women's Network on the back of the race listening activity and the Jewel Foundation with whom a voucher exchange scheme has been developed for households to be able to use support at kosher shops in the Prestwich area.

- 3.4 To date 680 proactive referrals for residents in need of support have been made from 35 different organisational sources. Those accessing financial assistance were also referred to the Citizen Advice Bureau and Bury Directory for **debt and financial management advice** including benefits eligibility; affordable warmth, digital inclusion and mental wellbeing through the Getting Help helpline. The highest number of payments to date have related to households living in Moorside, East and Radcliffe West wards, the lowest being Tottington, Pilkington Park and North Manor.

In response to this demand, specialist community-sector expertise on finance and debt management is being supported and developed including:

- Ongoing support to Citizens Advice Bureau Bury and Bolton (CABB) including Money Advice advice and casework services via Money and Pensions Service (MaPS)
- Welfare Benefit (specifically Universal Credit application support) advice and casework services via our Help to Claim (HtC) contract from DWP
- Development of our specialist employment advice service

Within the third financial quarter of 2021/22, Bury and Bolton Citizens Advice had 797 direct contacts with Bury residents and the income gain for local people as a result of such interaction was £1.509m.

- 3.5 **Free School Meal vouchers** were allocated (without a need for families to apply) to cover school holidays from October 2021 to Easter 2022. This benefits 6,470 young people from 3,346 families. Families were also provided activity invitations and with details of the Holiday Activities Fund - a food and nutrition programme- which will take place over the forthcoming Easter and Summer holidays, with adaptations made for families which will be observing Ramadan during April.

- 3.6 Funding for the Local Welfare Assistance crisis scheme was also increased, to meet a 300% increase in applications. Given that demand here has exceeded planned resources, funding is to be re-balanced as described overleaf.

	Initial local funding allocation	2021/22 spend to date	Balance
Free School Meals	£582,300	£388,200	c. £194,100 Balance to Easter school holidays
Targetted support to Universal Credit & Council Tax Support Claimants	£523,200	£377,200	£146,000 Additional provision into local Welfare Crisis Fund
Additional targeting through Public Service & community networks	£305,000	£217,807	£87,193 Balance will cover equivalent demand over remaining month and provide additional provision into local Welfare Crisis Fund
Local Welfare Support Fund	£100,000	£100,000	

3.7 In addition, a further £97,000 increase was made to the **Homeless Prevention Grant** to support vulnerable renters across the social and private sectors. The Housing Options team, in consultation with the Homeless Partnership Board, have led engagement to target this funding including referrals from:

- Landlords across all sectors
- The DWP through a new process designed to utilise the duty to refer portal
- Revenue and Benefit through Discretionary Housing Payment requests
- Citizen's Advice mortgage rescue cases

Work is on track to fully spend this allocation by 31st March 2022 on a mix of Six Town Tenancies, private rented sector case and a number of registered social landlord tenancies, supporting 38 households in total. Allocation is made on the basis of sustainability, i.e. not just clearing existing rent arrears but ensuring tenancies can be sustained for at least a further 12 months. Actions include, for example, issuing new PRS tenancies and funding deposit bonds.

4. FURTHER SUPPORT AND TARGETING

4.1 Within the last month work has accelerated to increase awareness and access to the anti-poverty support. Improvements have been made to the ease of access to information on financial hardship through a consolidated page on the Council website, accessible through a single link on the homepage of www.bury.gov.uk. The page acts as a 'front door' and details support for immediate financial help available via the Council including discretionary payments and the Household Support Fund. This is complimented by the broader community based support through the Citizens Advice Bureau, local groups via the Bury Directory and Community Hubs, alongside energy efficiency support.

4.2 The webpage has been promoted through a social media campaign and shared with colleagues across public and community organisations for further cascade. This will be further updated to reflect the national government support in relation to energy bills from April 2022, including the £150 Council Tax rebate for households in Council Tax bands A-D; this equates to 73,000 households

locally, of which c. 50,000 pay by direct debit and there remains a large volume with whom further details will need to be sought for the rebate to be paid.

- 4.3 The key information included on the Hardship Help webpage has been included as a leaflet for distribution with Council Tax bills so that every household in the Borough has this information regardless of their digital access. It provides contact details into the Welfare Support Team for immediate financial support and Community Hubs for wider local advice and information.
- 4.4 Consistent with the "LET'S do it" principle of evidence-based intervention, a comprehensive piece of data analysis is underway to further target anti-poverty activity in the Borough. From analysis of the Index of Multiple deprivation, including the Lower Super Output Areas, together with community sector intelligence including the GM Poverty Action and The Co-operative Group's Community Wellbeing index, the following areas have been identified for particular targeted support:
- Bury 007E – Moorside, East neighbourhood (including the area around Kingfisher Drive/Thrush Drive)
 - Bury 016C – Radcliffe North, West neighbourhood (including the area around Coronation Road/ Westminster Avenue)
 - Bury 021B – Besses, Whitefield neighbourhood (including the area around Ribble Drive and down to Westminster Avenue)
 - Bury 007D – East ward, East neighbourhood (including the area around Hazelwood High School)
 - Bury 020C – Unsworth, Whitefield neighbourhood (including the area around Rufford Drive/ Rippon Avenue)
 - Fernhill and Pimhole, at 32.09%, have the highest percentage of households have a higher demographic risk of food insecurity in the Borough
 - Child Poverty hotspots which have been identified as Sedgley 50.4%, East ward 45.5%, Radcliffe West 42.3% (source: GM Poverty Action)
- 4.5 Such data, in conjunction with insight from public service leads and local Councillors, has informed a series of interventions which have been led by the community hubs to support people in greatest need. This has included pop-up stalls, tailored local advice and opportunities to discuss options through:
- Collaborative engagement with Six Town Housing in Chesham (including links to the Christian Fellowship) and promotion of local anti-poverty support at the Spring into Bury East community afternoon on Sunday 20th March.
 - Citizens Advice set up a pop-up stall alongside Energyworks (energy efficiency advice by Groundworks) and Bury Adult Learning at the Radcliffe Neighbourhood Pitch event on 5th March and recent volunteering event at the Outreach Centre.
 - Engagement with Ribble Drive and Mersey Drive schools to target advice to parents in Whitefield, including opportunities for debt advice and energy cost support.
 - Drop-in sessions at Sedgley Park Children's Centre in conjunction with Jewel, alongside additional support available weekly at Prestwich Library during March.
 - Street level engaged at Peel Brow on the local support offer in the north of the Borough.

Further such actions to improve and embed the Council's approach will be harnessed in an updated anti-poverty strategy, as set out in section 5.

4.6 Work has also taken place with Six Town Housing and the Bury Community Support Network with regards to Manchester Credit Union. This has included feedback increasing the accessibility and scope of existing services. The Credit Union currently has 1800 members in Bury to whom it has lent over £3m to date. Partners are keen to develop the relationship and the feedback is being addressed as part of a wider development plan.

4.7 In February 2022 it was announced that there would be additional local hardship support in the Council's budget for 2022/23 through:

- £240,000 in grants to support parents experiencing financial hardship with school uniform costs
- £100,000 in a new 'cost of living' support fund for those in hardship but who typically aren't eligible for existing welfare support schemes, including those experiencing in-work poverty

Details of these schemes are being finalised and promotion of access to these schemes will be broadly publicised through Council, education and community channels.

4.8 In addition, an awareness campaign through Bury Market highlighting how recipes and cooking approaches to eat balanced meals affordably with low energy use cooking methods. activity is being developed through Bury Market. This will be embedded into the new anti-poverty strategy including such activity in delivery of the Bury Food Strategy.

5. DEVELOPING BURY'S NEW ANTI-POVERTY STRATEGY

5.1 Further actions to improve and embed the increasingly targeted approach to addressing the causes and impacts of poverty will be harnessed in an refreshed anti-poverty strategy for the Borough, which is underway.

5.2 Following the principles of Let's Do It, the revised strategy will be evidence-led and co-produced with the Bury Voluntary and Community Faith Alliance, Citizens Advice Bureau and the Bury Community Support Network, so that the strategy is inclusive of communities of place, interest and (lived) experience.

5.3 As a prompt for development, a framework for the strategy is being developed based on the key areas of focus proposed by the Greater Manchester Poverty Action network, namely:

- Food and Wellbeing
- Finance and Debt
- Fuel Poverty
- Housing
- Child Poverty
- Work and Wages

5.4 In addition, it is proposed to align anti-poverty work with delivery of Bury's Inclusion Strategy including

- Strengthening understanding of the socio-economic duty within the Equality Act, in sync with the deliver of Bury's Inclusion Strategy
- Challenging and addressing stigma and unconscious bias in relation to poverty

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Scrutiny is asked to:

- Note the significant progress that has been made in developing a proactive and targeted anti-poverty offer including the allocation of hardship support funding.
- Comment on the proposed actions to further strengthen the anti-poverty offer and form the basis of an updated strategy
- Include updates on the new anti poverty strategy in the 22/23 work programme.

List of Background Papers:-

None

Contact Details:-

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