

Appendix Two – Thriving

Ongoing support for Leeds residents as National COVID-19 Response schemes end.

Introduction

This appendix outlines the actions being taken in Leeds to mitigate the impact from national developments which are taking place over the Autumn, as national covid 19 response schemes end.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of austerity with sustained public sector funding cuts, welfare reform and an increase in low paid and insecure employment all contributed to increasing and deepening levels of poverty in the UK. Both national and local research undertaken in 2018, warned households were already less resilient and worse prepared for an external financial shock or crisis than in 2004.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put further pressures on low-income households and the most vulnerable in our society and has also pushed many more households into financial uncertainty, and hardship. Many households, particularly those with children have seen significant pressure caused by both a reduction in income, and the impacts of home-schooling during lockdowns and self-isolation periods resulting in increased fuel/food bills.

COVID-19 Response – National & Local

National Government introduced numerous measures to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Self-Employed Income Support and Furlough schemes combined with changes to the Universal Credit system including the £20 per week uplift and suspension of work search requirements, which have safeguarded many households by lessening the severity of income drops. Other measures such as mortgage forbearance and the ban on evictions also provided temporary relief to those experiencing financial issues related to the pandemic.

The Government also provided funding support via local authorities. In Leeds, funding allocated through various funding pots including the Local Authority Emergency Assistance Grant, Shielding Support, COVID Winter Grant/ Local Support Scheme, Self-Isolation Payments, Self-Isolation Practical Support and additional funding for the Holiday Activity and Food Programme. Projects have included the provision of emergency food, cultural food, baby supplies to vulnerable families, cooking skills to care leavers and emergency assistance to rough sleepers. Funding has also been used to set up and maintain the Community Care Hub network across all wards in the city.

Specifically, in terms of supporting low income and vulnerable families and individuals the **COVID Winter/ Local Support Grant** has enabled the Council to provide Free School Meals to all eligible pupils and those living in low-income households over the school holiday periods from December 2020 to September 2021. This funding has also been used to provide food, fuel and essential items directly to care leavers and low-income families with young children, assistance towards the cost of fuel to families and individuals claiming Council Tax Support, as well as support to third sector organisations and charities for food and essential items for vulnerable families and individuals.

The additional funding provided by Central Government has been temporary, with specific time frames and different monitoring and reporting arrangements. With the exception of Self Isolation Support and the recent announcement Housing Support Fund, all other measures have or will end by the end of the year. As a result, advice agencies locally have reported a significant rise in enquires related to benefits and Universal Credit, employment and housing, as well as increasing numbers of people presenting to services, unable to manage or cover basic living costs.

£20 uplift removal

One of the final COVID-19 related measures due to be lifted is the £20 uplift to Universal Credit, scheduled to end in October 2021. Findings of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Poverty have highlighted the disproportionate effect that this will have on vulnerable groups:

- 683,000 households, including 824,000 children, will no longer be able to afford to meet their essential needs
- This number would grow by 11% when the impact of the two-child limit is taken into account
- 20% of affected people are from a BAME background, half of affected households have a member who is disabled, and 60% of all single parents will experience the cut.

The APPG also finds the costs of poverty will surpass the £6 billion cost of extending the uplift. Despite calls from many charities and organisations including Citizens Advice, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, LGA as well as the devolved UK Parliaments for the UK Government to reconsider its decision and instate the uplift permanently, the Work and Pensions Secretary has rejected all calls and recently confirmed that the uplift will end as planned from October 2021.

Ongoing Support in Leeds to mitigate the impact.

This section outlines the actions being taken in Leeds to mitigate the impact from national developments which are taking place over the Autumn. Despite limited resources, Leeds City Council and partners across the city have been recognised for our work in reducing the impact of poverty and tackling inequality for many years. Throughout ten years of austerity and reduced public sector budgets, Leeds has employed a highly effective collaborative and co-ordinated approach to tackling poverty, which will continue to be built on and adapted to meet the changing needs of Leeds residents in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Benefits and Welfare

Housing Support Fund

At the end of September 2021, the government announced the launch of Housing Support Fund to support vulnerable households between October and the end of March 2022, with £500m being made available nationally. On 6th October the Council received draft guidance for the scheme which indicates that the remit is similar to the COVID Local Support Grant. Planning is now underway to ensure the funding received reaches families and individuals most in need.

Council Tax Support

The council currently delivers Council Tax Support (CTS) to working age claimants through two localised schemes, with different rules and calculations (Universal Credit (UC) CTS Scheme and the General CTS Scheme). The intention is that Leeds will have one scheme (the UC CTS Scheme) once everyone on the General Scheme has migrated to Universal Credit.

Free School Meals (FSM)

The FSM caseload in Leeds has grown significantly since the Department for Education introduced transitional protection (TP) from 1st April 2018. The current (July) FSM caseload is 33,429 and has increased by 1,800 this last academic year alone. In Leeds, parents can apply to claim FSM either via a paper form or online via the combined housing benefit/council tax support/free school meal form.

Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)

DHP is intended to provide short term assistance to residents until their circumstances improve. DHP can be awarded to residents who require further financial assistance towards their housing costs because either their housing benefit or universal credit housing costs does not fully meet their rental liability. In some cases, DHP can also cover rent in advance and bonds.

As well as the annual guidance for local authorities provided by the DWP, Leeds also has its own guidance material in place to help officers decide on eligibility and to improve consistency, taking account of the financial circumstances of the household plus their age and health. Many awards are made to people affected by the under-occupancy (the bedroom tax) and the benefit cap. In Leeds, officers will also offer advice about ways the customer can improve their financial circumstances, including signposting to other support services.

The DWP allocate a DHP grant to each Local Authority. In Leeds for the last 3 years, the Council have topped up the DHP fund by £500k. In 2021, National Government has changed the way it is allocating DHP grants to LA's and rather than providing a lump sum up front, it is splitting the grant over two payments. The initial grant is £1.2M which is much reduced compared to last year's £2.1m. Although a further grant will be received in October 2021, the amount is unknown presenting significant budgeting challenges.

In 2020, 3556 applications were received in addition to 2141 award renewals.

Self-Isolation Payments (SIP)

In September 2020, the Government introduced Self-Isolation Payments - a lump sum £500 payment for working people on low incomes who have been told to self-isolate and are losing income as a result. The aim of the scheme is to help ensure people on low incomes self-isolate when they should, and to encourage more people to get tested.

Locally, the Council designed an online application process and discretionary criteria as well as introducing a system for managing applications and delivering payments. To date 12,092 applications have been assessed and 6,946 awards have been paid totalling £3.47M.

The Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) recently identified Leeds as a best practice authority in terms of the number of awards and overall efficiency. The scheme was initially expected to run until 31 January 2021 but has since been extended to 30th September 2021.

Local Welfare Support Scheme.

Central Government provided ring-fenced funding to Local Authorities for the provision of Local Welfare Support Schemes until 2015/16. At this time, many local authorities either reduced or ceased to operate LWS schemes, however Leeds has been able to maintain its own provision through internal funding, prioritising the most vulnerable groups. The Local welfare support scheme can provide emergency support for food, fuel and essential household items as well as ongoing signposting and referrals where appropriate. The scheme was the basis for the COVID-19 Emergency Food Response and is now under review in light of the changing needs and experiences of Leeds residents.

In addition, Leeds City Council are also undertaking a 'cash grants' pilot in partnership with foodbanks and the Trussell Trust from October 2021. The city wide collection of Foodbanks will be the referral agents into the pilot, with a co- designed online referral form to streamline the process and ensure the right customers can access and benefit from the scheme.

Other support for low-income households in Leeds

Leeds Welfare Rights Unit

Leeds City Council's Welfare Rights Unit provides free, confidential, impartial advice and support to Leeds residents for all UK welfare benefits, including; help to complete claim forms, guidance and support when making appeals, benefit entitlement checks and guidance on using benefit systems. Leeds Welfare Rights Unit also provide signposting and referral support to other agencies in the city for clients with wider/additional support needs.

Leeds Advice Contract

Citizens Advice Leeds successfully delivers the Leeds Advice Service contract for Leeds City Council, in partnership with Chapeltown Citizens Advice and Better Leeds Communities. The service offers a mixed provision of face to face, telephone and digital support to any Leeds resident in need of free, impartial and confidential advice to resolve a range of enquiries including benefits, housing, employment, debt and many other issues.

In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, significant changes to the service were necessary in order to respond to the evolving situation, and national government guidelines and restrictions including closure of all face-to-face services and operating via telephone and digital options exclusively. Citizens Advice Leeds are anticipating that by the end of the year, more than 26,000 people will have been helped by the service.

Although the Leeds Advice Contract includes an element of debt and money advice the majority of funding for these services is provided through the Money and Pensions Service (MAPS) contract which currently funds 11 debt advisors qualified to undertake casework advice for the city across Citizens Advice Leeds & Chapeltown, Ebor Gardens Advice Centre, St Vincent's Support Centre and Better Leeds Communities. The Money and Pensions Service are currently tendering nationally for a 3-year Debt Advice Contract to start from April 2022, which has caused uncertainty within the debt advice sector. Although more funding is being made available nationally there has been a shift to fund more telephone and digital advice and it is highly likely that there will be reduction in the number of face-to-face qualified debt advisors funded.

Leeds Debt Advice Network

Leeds has a multitude of debt advice providers operating in the city offering free, confidential and impartial services. Leeds Debt Advice Network is made up of (and open to) all debt advisers operating in the city, such as Burmantofts Community Projects, Money buddies, and St Vincent's, and was developed in order to develop collaborative working between front line debt advisers, practitioners, support services, and creditors collecting debts. Other network members and attendees include GamCare, IMLT, TV Licensing, Zest, Green Doctor and various Leeds City Council representation, such as Housing and Council Tax. Members from across the network meet regularly in order to discuss debt advice issues, policy matters and to share best practice and relevant service information.

Housing Leeds – Money and Budgeting Service

Research conducted in 2018 found social housing tenants to be significantly more likely than homeowners to face digital exclusion, lack access to banking services, use high-cost credit and be in financial difficulties. The Money and Budgeting Service provided by Leeds Credit Union and funded by Housing Leeds offers one to one, tailored support and advice to Housing Leeds tenants. Prior to COVID-19, the service operated through 22 surgeries around the city in community centres, one stop centres and libraries, as well as offering home visits where appropriate. The service adapted to remote

working and has seen a significant increase in referrals, providing support to an increased number of tenants since the start of the pandemic.

DWP - Social Justice Team

Leeds is one of the only cities to have a Social Justice Team in place, operating as an alternative to the traditional 'work coach' and 'job centre' approach for highly vulnerable UC claimants. The team take referrals from DWP work coaches as well as other organisations (such as Housing Leeds) in order to support people who have significant barriers to finding work such as addiction issues, homelessness, history of offending, domestic abuse etc. The team operate in the community, and compliment other agencies such as probation and support services, to help a claimant to maintain their benefit claim, while improving their situation in a timescale that's achievable for them as an individual.

The Social Justice team have been a key element of DWP delivery throughout the pandemic and have received national recognition as well as a recent regional award. It is anticipated that the work undertaken in Leeds could be used as a potential framework for future national implementation.

Social Prescribing Services

Social Prescribing is a way of linking individuals with a range of local community services to improve social, emotional and mental wellbeing. The Project Development Team are part of the Linking Leeds Social Prescribing Service and Leeds City Council, and work collaboratively with partners across the Council, NHS, Public Health, Third Sector, and local communities to reduce health inequalities and improve health outcomes. The team respond to gaps identified in local health and wellbeing support and create new groups, projects and activities to fill those gaps and improve the health and wellbeing of local residents.

In the first 6 months of 2021, the Project Development team set up a broad range of support groups and projects which collectively delivered 1034 hours of support to people living across the City of Leeds, and in the last month alone, Linking Leeds received 527 referrals into the service.

Healthy Holidays

For 2020/21 delivery of Healthy Holidays, Leeds City Council received £3.9 million from the DfE's HAF fund – a substantial increase compared to previous years. This increase allowed the programme to target more children and fund provisions covering all areas of the city. Delivery in Easter provided just over 42,800 food hampers/meals with 2513 children accessing face to face activity (Easter was affected by restrictions still in place). Summer delivery saw 130 different providers operating, including 26 LCC hub sites. An in-depth evaluation now taking place, alongside planning for Christmas delivery. There is currently no indication from the Department for Education on whether there will be funding made available for 2022 or beyond.

Community Care Hubs

Work continues with Voluntary Action Leeds (VAL) and voluntary sector partners serving as Community Care Hubs - supporting members of the public impacted by COVID-19 across all wards in the city.

Community Care Hubs continue to offer emergency food, social inclusion, befriending calls etc, but are now aiming to encourage residents, where appropriate, to transition toward independence, with many organisations now offering alternative food club/pantry provisions. Wrap around support and onward referrals will also be offered to help tackle the root causes of crisis and poverty related issues.

The ambition is for the CCH network to remain in place where possible, however the current funding will end in December 2021 so the network will need to gradually become self-reliant. VAL are currently working on alternative funding options with the network including big lottery.

Financial Inclusion Team

The Council's Financial Inclusion Team works on a range of strategies and projects aiming to tackle poverty by increasing access to affordable financial services, access to free, independent and accredited advices and improving financial wellbeing. Work is based on a strong evidence-based approach, collaboration and partnership working and includes building relationships with other council services and partner organisations. As well as the above mentioned schemes, the Financial Inclusion Team are involved in various other projects including (but not limited to);

- **Leeds School Uniform Exchange Project** – Coordinated by Zero Waste Leeds, the Leeds School Uniform Exchange project aims to reduce the amount of uniforms sent to waste, increase donations and ultimately help more families on low-income access low cost or free uniform. In addition to a dedicated web platform and inspiration guide, the initiative continues to link closely with Healthy Holidays Programmes, and throughout Summer 2021, Zero Waste Leeds facilitated 'pop up' shops in locations and events around the city – making good quality free uniform easily accessible in communities. 72 schools, 28 face book pages and 6 community schemes are part of the initiative.
- **Leeds Money Information Centre**
The Leeds Money Information Centre (MIC) website brings together free, independent and quality marked money and financial support for the city, covering a range of subjects such as benefits, debt, loans and savings, affordable credit, household budgeting and emergency food support. The website is regularly reviewed to ensure that all service delivery information is up to date and accurate.
- **Emergency Food Work**
The team has long supported the work of the Leeds Food Aid Network and Fareshare Yorkshire and throughout the pandemic, the team also helped to support the COVID-19 emergency food response established by the council to ensure resources continued to meet demand as the situation has evolved. The team is also involved in the ongoing 'Food Resilience' Toolkit and mapping which will support food providers in the city to help families.
- **Leeds Credit Union** The team works closely with LCU to increase awareness and membership. Throughout the pandemic LCU maintained its normal lending policy, and continues to offer face to face services ensuring residents can access money and financial services in accessible community locations.

Carers Leeds: Support for Unpaid Carers

The impact of COVID-19 has led to increasing numbers of people taking on an unpaid caring responsibility as well as many people who were already providing unpaid care now providing more intensive levels of care. Evidence from Carers UK suggests that many unpaid carers feel exhausted, isolated, under-valued, taken for granted and overlooked. Carers Leeds is an independent Leeds based charity that is commissioned jointly by Leeds City Council and NHS Leeds CCG to provide a single point of access to comprehensive information, advice and support for unpaid carers aged 16 and over in Leeds. This confidential service ensures that unpaid carers have the right information and support, tailored to their individual needs and circumstances. The most common reasons for unpaid carers contacting Carers Leeds are:

- Finance and benefits
- Access to services, respite, holidays
- Assessments and personal budgets for the carer or cared for person
- Opportunities for social contact
- Looking after your wellbeing as a carer
- Equipment and support for the cared for person

Employability Support.

Leeds Employment Hub is a single point of contact for European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) funded programmes and Jobshops that provides tailored and comprehensive support into employment or education to all unemployed Leeds residents. A large team of Employment Advisors deliver the programme by providing one to one support, tailored preventative and remedial support to eligible residents who are disadvantaged in the labour market.

The Service continues to be successful in securing ESIF funding that will now be in place until December 2023, supporting around 3,500 people per year in Leeds to improve their skills and significantly increase their prospects of moving into sustained employment. The Employment and Skills Service has successfully secured a bid to support disadvantaged young people (15-24). Subject to contract, the programme, will see 1600 young people supported up to end December 2023, who are NEET or risk of becoming NEET.

ESIF programmes are predominantly focused on residents who are not employed. The service has successfully gained funding for residents that are ineligible for ESIF programmes, supporting underemployed residents in low paid, low skilled jobs as well as those at risk of redundancy. Residents at risk of being redundant will be offered support beyond the limited statutory minimum offered by DWP and National Careers Service and residents seen as underemployed will be able to access services and support that to now have not been offered through ESIF and other mainstream support.

Programme to support mental health through neighbourliness:

The Council continues to work in partnership with the NHS and the Third Sector to provide a broad ranging programme to support mental health. An example of an asset-based project to support neighbourhood action around mental health is a new initiative (with the working title of 'Hey neighbour') to be launched in October. The project aims to build on the formal and informal volunteering developed during the pandemic and provide a vehicle to encourage and support positive neighbourhood action. This project will enable face to face connections and the activities created will provide an opportunity to connect with others to improve mental wellbeing. An online presence will form the basis of a campaign which will build from October 21 to March 22 to highlight the many positive examples of neighbourliness in Leeds, with the intention of inspiring other grassroots activity.

A budget of £50,000 is available through small grants of £100 - £2,500 to provide opportunities for individuals and small organisations. Creative and community outreach work will ensure the funds are prioritised to areas with the highest need. Individuals and small groups will be supported to develop community partnerships where appropriate and community outreach will also stimulate community building through an asset-based approach. Partnerships within Forum central, Public Health and Voluntary Action Leeds will help ensure the funds and campaign material reach those in

communities across Leeds, and ensure linkages with other programmes such as the Winter Friends. The project will embed and deliver Covid actions across the 8 priorities of the new Mental Health Strategy.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has put further pressures on low-income households and the most vulnerable in our society and has also pushed many more households into financial uncertainty, hardship, to seek support and advice and to claim benefits. Advice agencies have reported a significant rise in enquires related to benefits and Universal Credit, employment and housing. In addition, partners are also reporting that many more people presenting to services are unable to manage or cover basic living costs.

There is widespread concern that removal of the £20 uplift from October 2021 will cause significant hardship, with research from Joseph Rowntree Foundation suggesting that 6 million low-income families will lose £1,040 from their annual income, creating serious financial hardship. 500,000 people to be swept into poverty - including 200,000 children. Families with children will be disproportionately impacted and 6 in 10 of all single-parent families in the UK will be impacted. Research has also shown Yorkshire and the Humber has been identified as one of four areas that the cut will have the most severe impact.

For Leeds the depth of experience and the strength of the partnership developed over many years has been crucial in the rapid response to the COVID-19 pandemic thus far, and the city's ability to adapt, collaborate and deliver multiple projects and initiatives will be vital support for the residents of Leeds.