

REPORT TO: Health & Wellbeing Board
DATE: 11 October 2023
REPORTING OFFICER: Director of Public Health
PORTFOLIO: Health & Wellbeing
SUBJECT: Cost Of Living Support
WARD(S) Boroughwide

1.0 **PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

1.1 To highlight the work done by the Public Health Team, Health Improvement Team and partners in initiatives providing support to the people of Halton related to the rising cost of living and to provide details on planned initiatives as we approach winter.

2.0 **RECOMMENDED: That the report be noted.**

3.0 **SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

3.1 **Background**

3.1.1 Before the Covid-19 pandemic, responses to poverty were sporadic, with a mixture of national and local schemes alongside community responses that generally operated independently of one another, with limited overarching coordination between services. The pandemic response highlighted many of the gaps in support available across the borough. Coupled with increasing demand from residents, linked with rising cost of living challenges, there has been an impetus to work collectively across the borough going forwards.

3.1.2 The Public Health team has led this collaborative working in the form of two networks, Feeding Halton and Affordable Warmth, focusing on food poverty and fuel poverty respectively. The groups' memberships consist of local authority departments, commissioned services, and third sector and community groups. The aim of both networks is to bring together any resources available to residents that tackle poverty to ensure a coherent approach to intervention and to provide direction for future services.

3.2 **Current level of demand**

Over the last two years, both of the Foodbanks operating in Halton have seen large spikes in demand which follow a steady rise in demand over the previous decade. September 2022 was the first

month in which more than 1000 residents used the borough's Foodbanks, and 40% of those receiving food parcels were children. Fuel poverty followed similar trends during the same two-year period. After a small drop in those requiring help with energy during Covid, the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) has seen a large rise in those requiring support, reaching 1200 a month in Winter 2022 – this represents an eight-fold increase in just two years.

3.3 **Food Poverty Initiatives**

Over the last 18 months, the Public Health team has worked with the national charity Feeding Britain, and local partners, to set up five social supermarkets as part of our effort to help residents cope with rising food prices. Social supermarkets sell redistributed surplus food from retailers and wholesalers at discount prices in the community. We have worked closely with three groups who run the shops: Halton Veterans, Four Estates and HBC Day Services. The shops provide a stepping stone away from Foodbank use, and a bridge between emergency handouts and using standard retailers. During the last 12 months, an arrangement has been reached with a regional catering company who will provide free food to the social supermarkets (worth approximately £3000 per year) as the social value element of their contract.

3.4 **Affordable Warmth and Energy Efficiency Initiatives**

Cold homes are associated with excess winter mortality, and with the exacerbation of existing health conditions, including asthma and other respiratory conditions, and arthritis. Living in a cold home also increases the risk of heart disease and cardiac events. Improving homes via solutions like energy efficiency and heating systems can reduce health risks.

3.4.1 The Council's has taken on a new role in delivering national retrofit schemes to improve energy efficiency and make home heating more affordable. Retrofit schemes consist of home improvements, such as improving insulation, to help address climate change as well as reducing the risk of fuel poverty for the occupants. The Council is exploring a new partnership with Energy Projects Plus, an existing partner that works in the Liverpool City region delivering energy advice and offering home visits to residents in need. This new partnership arrangement would improve the outreach of multiple schemes and increase take up of energy efficiency grants.

3.4.2 Examples of the financial support available to residents include:
ECO4 flex grant: This is a home energy improvement grant which will run until 31 March 2026. Cold homes significantly impact on physical and mental health. The scheme focuses on low income and vulnerable households and aims to improve the least energy efficient homes. Depending on eligibility, residents can be granted items such as new boilers, underfloor insulation, cavity wall insulation and window glazing.

- 3.4.3 **Great British Insulation Scheme:** This is a new scheme which provides wall, loft and floor insulation with the aim of reducing the cost of energy bills. This is different from the ECO4 flex grant because eligibility can be based on a residents Council Tax Banding rather than the Energy Performance Certificate (EPC).
- 3.5 **Winter outreach campaign**
As we approach winter, and food and fuel bills remain high, a six-month campaign has been created to bring together and advertise all the support available to residents. This will build on some of the campaign and outreach activities developed in previous years.
- 3.5.1 The Council's Cost of Living page has been updated to provide a single point of reference for Cost of Living support. This page was created last year to summarize all the support available to those struggling last Winter with the sudden rise in inflation. It contains information on resources available from the Council and national government. It also provides details of community support which has been brought together through the work of the Affordable Warmth and Feeding Halton Groups. The webpage contains information on how to access emergency support including food bank referrals and short-term energy payments, as well as details of local activities such as warm spaces open in Winter and school holiday activities for children. This year there will be a particular push around income maximization, with links to free benefit checkers to ensure residents are receiving all of the benefits to which they are entitled.
- 3.5.2 The outreach campaign is targeted at residents, HBC staff and frontline public sector staff.
- 3.5.3 **Local residents:** There will be direct communications to the public throughout the Winter. It is planned that a six-month social media campaign will include paid advertising to target those in greatest need, directing them to relevant online support. Residents may also receive information about available support with their Council Tax bills. As part of a new initiative from the HBC marketing team, the links which residents click to access online support will be able to track where the resident accessed the link. For example, the number of people that went on to access support that came from links used by GPs can be collated. This insight will be able to highlight those most in need and improve communications planning in future months.
- 3.5.4 **Front Line Staff:** Staff that deal directly with the public as part of Making Every Contact Count will be equipped to signpost service users to relevant Cost of Living support. A leaflet has been created that summarizes the main pathways people can take to access the main types of Cost of Living support. This will be distributed across

front line organisations, including GPs, Children's Centres and a wide range of smaller community partners.

3.5.5 To ensure front line staff are confident to explain some of this support, Cost of Living briefing sessions will be held from October 2023 onwards. The sessions will cover the types of problems staff may come across, how to navigate the resources available, and where to refer clients depending on their situation. These sessions will be offered to HBC's own staff as well as wider public sector and community partners. A comprehensive range of physical and online resources will be available, including QR codes which link directly to available support. Groups will be encouraged to share these through their own communications in the coming months.

3.5.6 **HBC Staff:** Staff will be encouraged to use email banners to share information about support available to residents. In terms of the welfare of HBC's own staff, a link to the Cost of Living website will be added to every HBC payslip between October and March. Managers will also be encouraged to ensure that staff have time to look through the support available as part of their duty of care to their teams.

3.6 **Pension Credit**

Residents who are over 65 years and receiving council tax benefit are likely to be entitled to Pension Credit. In February 2023, the Public Health team began a piece of work to identify which residents may be entitled to pension credit but were not receiving it. Through liaison with the HBC Council Tax team, approximately 900 residents were identified. All of these residents were contacted via letter. Over 240 residents responded and asked for support in applying. All were offered one-to-one to support at a time convenient to them to complete a pension credit application. The initiative was highly successful. It has been calculated that the income generated for those residents in Halton will amount to approximately £1.2 million over the rest of their lifetimes. This piece of work will be repeated in February 2024

3.7 **Bus Travel Support**

Between June and December 2022, the number of missed GP and hospital appointments in the UK cost the NHS an estimated £290 million. The cost of travel can be a barrier to people attending NHS appointments. To tackle this, bus passes have been provided to those who earn less than £26,000 a year and attend regular GP or hospital appointments. This has been done with the aim of reducing the number of missed appointments to improve the health and wellbeing of local residents. Importantly, the scheme also saves the NHS money. Residents can apply for this support twice between April 2023 and March 2024.

3.8 **Medical Equipment Energy Support**

Many residents in receipt of disability benefits were severely food insecure during the Winter of 2022. Some of these residents are reliant on electrical medical equipment. To alleviate the financial pressures associated with rising energy costs, these residents are eligible to receive a £60 Asda food voucher from the Council. This support is not means-tested - the resident is only required to show evidence that they use electrical medical equipment. This support can be applied for twice between April 2023 and March 2024.

3.9 **NHS Pre-paid Prescription Certificate**

The cost of an NHS prescription is currently £9.65. If a resident is receiving regular or multiple prescriptions at one time, this is an increased pressure on top of other household bills. This added pressure may result in residents not collecting their prescriptions, negatively impacting their health. A three-month pre-paid NHS prescription certificate is being provided by the Council to enable residents to access free prescriptions for a three-month period. This is available to any resident who earns less than £26,000 a year. Residents can apply for this support up to four times throughout the period of April 2023 and March 2024.

3.9.1 Halton's Stop Smoking Team can also refer residents to this scheme if they wish to stop smoking using Nicotine Replacement Therapy. This offer has been extended to this cohort to minimise the financial barriers residents may encounter, improving accessibility of the Stop Smoking Service.

3.10 **Warm Spaces**

During the winter months, the Public Health team will work with stakeholders who provide designated warm spaces in Halton to provide free tea and coffee to residents who attend the warm spaces. This builds on the success of the warm spaces initiative last year.

4.0 **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

4.1.1 Initiatives to tackle the Cost of Living crisis will inform the strategic development of the Halton Borough Councils policies across multiple sectors, including housing, employment, education and Public Health

4.1.2 The work of the One Halton Wider Determinants Delivery Group will be informed by the work undertaken by Halton Borough Council on cost of living.

5.0 **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no financial risks associated directly with this report.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Children & Young People in Halton

Support for families which addresses Cost of Living pressures, and the initiatives within this paper, will impact on the children and young people of Halton and have the potential to improve outcomes for residents of all ages.

6.2 Employment, Learning & Skills in Halton

None

6.3 A Healthy Halton

The work programmes identified in this report focus directly on this priority, significantly improving residents' health and wellbeing, enabling them to live longer, healthier and happier lives.

6.4 A Safer Halton

None

6.5 Halton's Urban Renewal

None

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

7.1 None

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

8.1 Initiatives to tackle the Cost of Living crisis in Halton are designed to be accessible to all residents. Resources and information are provided in a variety of ways so as not to digitally exclude any residents.

9.0 CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

9.1 Affordable warmth initiatives aim to reduce residents' energy bills. These initiatives also address climate change, by supporting residents to use less fuel.

10.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

None under the meaning of the Act.