

**Report to: Policy and Resources Committee, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2023**

**Report of: Corporate Director – Operations, Homes & Communities**

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**Subject: COST OF LIVING TASK & FINISH GROUP – CLOSING REPORT**

**1. Recommendation**

**That the Committee:**

- 1.1 Notes the contents of this report and in particular the work undertaken by the Task & Finish Group; and**
- 1.2 Notes the work of the T&F group has concluded and oversight of the Council's role in responding to the cost of living crisis will be undertaken by Health & Wellbeing Committee.**

**2. Background**

- 2.1 On 24<sup>th</sup> May 2022, Policy and Resources Committee, approved the establishment of a cross party 'Cost of Living' Task and Finish Group (T & F Group) to consider the Council's response to the emerging crisis and consider the impact, mitigating actions and support that could be provided to residents
- 2.2 Membership of the T & F Group was as follows:
  - Cllr Louis Stephen (Green, Battenhall) – Chair
  - Cllr Lucy Hodgson (Con, Warndon Parish South)
  - Cllr Karen Lawrence (Lib Dem, Claines)
  - Cllr Jill Desyrah (Lab, Warndon)

The T&F Group was provided with officer support through Lloyd Griffiths (Corporate Director for Operations, Homes & Communities), Shane Flynn (Corporate Director for Finance & Resources), Tom Mountford (Head of Homes & Communities) and Warwick Neale (Community Services Manager).

- 2.3 The T&F Group met on 13 occasions between its first meeting on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2022 and its last meeting on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2023 which concluded the work of this group. This closing report intends to set out the work of the group during this period and its key outcomes.

**Free School Meals**

- 2.4 The primary responsibility for schools and the allocation of free school meals lies with Worcestershire County Council and through the April-September 2022 allocation of the Household Support Fund, the County Council announced that they would fund

Free School Meals for eligible households across the County for the first two weeks of the summer holidays.

- 2.5 The T & F Group proposed the extension of the provision of free school meals for the remaining 4 weeks and 1 day of the school holidays for approximately 3,200 children (including pre-school aged and 16–18-year-olds in education). The estimated cost of this scheme was £215,000 which was met through the hardship reserve and approved through Managing Director Urgency Powers shortly before the end of school's summer term. This decision was reported to Policy and Resources Committee at its meeting of 26 July 2022.
- 2.6 On 6<sup>th</sup> September 2022, Policy and Resources Committee approved a proposal developed through the T & F Group for an extension to the free school meal offer until March 2023 to include 4 weeks of school holidays (1 week each at October and February half terms and 2 weeks at Christmas). The total cost to provide free school meals during this period in Worcester was approximately £215,000. The Department for Work & Pension's decision to extend the Household Support Fund enabled this provision to cover 2 weeks at Easter as well.

### **Financial Inclusion / Income Maximisation**

- 2.7 The report of 6<sup>th</sup> September also requested additional funding for Worcester Citizens Advice Bureau to fund a 0.5 FTE Advice Quality Supervisor at a cost of £20,000 to be allocated from the Hardship Reserve. This enabled additional volunteers to be recruited and trained to provide additional debt assessments, income maximisation appointments and to enable Citizens Advice to open an additional morning each week for drop-in sessions, increasing accessibility to the service.
- 2.8 This allowed the Citizens Advice to facilitate an additional footfall of approximately 250 face to face drop-in sessions, approximately 100 additional debt assessments, a further 60 additional advice appointments with anticipated financial outcomes of around £160,000 in additional income for clients. A full report of outcomes is expected in October 2023.

### **Cost of Living Conferences**

- 2.9 An initial action from the Task and Finish Group led to the facilitation of a Cost-of-Living Crisis Conference aimed at bringing together agencies who provide help, advice and support services from across the District to outline their offer, to establish links and networks as well as mapping out gaps in service provision. The event on 13 July 2022 was attended by over 60 individuals representing 31 organisations and provided a directory of services and action plan with oversight of the Task and Finish Group.
- 2.10 The Task and Finish Group have continued to meet and deliver against the action plan. The group identified a need for 3 further conferences to investigate and explore the following topics:
- Income Maximisation and Financial Support on 8<sup>th</sup> November 2022
  - Housing and Homelessness on 26<sup>th</sup> January 2023
  - Health and Wellbeing on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2023.

- 2.11 Each conference was hosted by Worcester City Council at the Guildhall. An open invite to each conference went out to the voluntary and community sector as well as relevant agencies. Members from the T & F Group attended each conference and gave context to the programme of events. Each conference welcomed speakers who were able to set the scene and identify potential challenges for each topic. These presentations set the context to enable attendees to split up into smaller groups to discuss and report back to the wider conference on the barriers to access and opportunities to improve services.
- 2.12 The Income Maximisation and Financial Support conference was attended by 31 people from across 20 organisations. Introductory presentations were provided by:
- Debt and money advice on the front line - Geraint Thomas CAB
  - Financial pressures on the ageing population - Clare Thomas, Age UK
  - Navigating the system - Gwyn Sherriff, DWP
- 2.13 The Housing and Homelessness conference was attended by 31 people representing 21 organisations. Introductory presentations were provided by:
- Worcester Cares – Stephen Edwards Chair of Worcester Cares Alliance
  - Private sector housing – Tom Mountford, Worcester City Council
  - Social Housing - Clare Greensall, Platform Housing Group
  - Homelessness - Jonathon Sutton, St Pauls Hostel
- 2.14 The Health and Wellbeing conference was attended by 24 people from 17 organisations. Introductory presentations were provided by:
- Summary of health issues for Worcester- Matt Fung Consultant in Public Health Worcestershire County Council
  - Active Herefordshire & Worcestershire in Worcester - Lorea Sarobe, Project Manager, Active Herefordshire & Worcestershire
  - The Primary Care Perspective - David McDowell NHS Primary Care
- 2.15 The take-away actions from each conference were collated and used to create an action plan, see **Appendix 1**.
- 2.16 The conversations and outcomes also informed opportunities to enable activity in other complimentary pieces of work such as the Department of Work and Pensions Household Support Fund allocation and Child Poverty Corporate Fund.

### **Awareness Raising and Promotion**

- 2.17 In addition to the conferences, a number of other initiatives were delivered through the Task and Finish Group. This included the development of dedicated web pages on the Council website, promotional activity including the development of posters with a QR code which has been widely distributed and articles in the City Life magazine. In addition, promotion of warm spaces was undertaken including support to organisations to register their provision across the City.
- 2.18 The agency directory of services outlining key contacts and services provided within the City surrounding the cost of living agenda was widely recognised as a key tool for agencies. A public version of the directory was also developed and published on the Council's website.

- 2.19 Participants of the conferences welcomed the opportunity to meet in person, to share, collaborate, identify opportunities for improving their services and to network. In order for this to continue, it was agreed that the Worcester Cares and Healthy Worcester Forums would continue to provide this forum and retain the response to the Cost of Living Crisis in Worcester as a key standing agenda item.

### **Financial Contributions**

- 2.20 The total funding deployed through the work of this group is as follows:

#### **Hardship Reserve**

Meet the shortfall in the provision of free school meals	£215,000
Fund a 0.5 FTE Advice Quality Supervisor at Worcester CAB	£20,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£235,000</b>

#### **Department of Work and Pensions Household Support Fund 2022/23 allocation**

Worcester Foodbank	£100,000
Discretionary Welfare Assistance Scheme	£100,000
Spend to Save	£56,059
Super market vouchers for pre school children and 16-18yo's	£25,000
Multi agency crisis fund	£25,000
Administration of crisis fund	£5,000
Age UK Malvern and Worcester	£63,029
Marketing and promotion	£4,089
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£378,177</b>

The following has been allocated for 2022/23 from the Department of Work and Pensions

Worcester Foodbank	£100,000
Discretionary Welfare Assistance Scheme	£106,000
Spend to Save	£60,000
Super market vouchers for pre school children and 16-18yo's	£78,000
Marketing and promotion	£9,686
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£353,686</b>

Child Poverty Corporate Funding Reserve:	
Set up of a Community Fridge at Dines Green	£3,200
Discretionary Welfare Assistance Scheme for childhood essentials	£40,000
Action for Children – crisis fund	£6,800
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£50,000</b>

- 2.21 This area of work is now being overseen by the Health and Wellbeing Committee which has constitutional responsibility for Financial hardship and support relating to the welfare of residents.

- 2.22 The Council has played a pivotal role in the response to the Cost of Living Crisis in the City. This has included the provision of financial support, providing opportunities for organisations operating in the City to come together to share knowledge of service offers, to mitigate and bridge gaps in service provision and to maximise the offers of support available to residents. In addition, the Council has helped in raising awareness of the support that is available across the City.
- 2.23 The Council has statutory responsibilities which this area of work takes us outside of and therefore, it is important that all agencies and services that offer support fulfil their role and play their part in supporting residents. The Council will continue to be a partner in this work including directing the Household Support Fund and continuing to raise awareness of the support available.

### **3. Preferred Option**

- 3.1 That the Committee notes contents of this report and in particular the work undertaken by the T&F Group.
- 3.2 Note the work of the T&F group has concluded and oversight of the Councils role in responding to the cost of living crisis will be undertaken by Health & Wellbeing Committee.

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**Background Papers:** None