

To: **Executive**
12 December 2023

Community Support: Winter Update
Assistant Director: Chief Executive's Office/Deputy Director: Public Health

1 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To set out the recent and upcoming support available to the community related to financial hardship and the continued recovery from the pandemic including addressing population health outcomes and inequalities. This includes the extended support over the forthcoming winter period and future activity during 2024.
- 1.2 To agree the spend of the ring-fenced time limited community outbreak management fund (COMF) to support local communities that have had the greatest negative impact from COVID 19 pandemic.
- 1.3 To recommend changes to the council's financial hardship action plan to respond to current cost-of-living pressures that have emerged since inception of the plan.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 To endorse the updated financial hardship action plan (appendix A).
- 2.2 To agree the COMF spending plan (appendix B).

3 Reasons for Recommendations

- 3.1 In 2022, the council recognised a need for a strategic, sustainable, and preventative approach to supporting residents who may be at risk of, or experiencing, financial hardship. Support throughout this period has been facilitated in large part by one off government grant funding and the development of a financial hardship action plan. Since 2022, there has been a consistent period of high inflation on items such as domestic fuel and food. This emphasises a need to review the plan content for continued relevance, particularly ensuring the priorities are appropriate for the upcoming winter period.
- 3.2 More broadly, there also continues to be a lasting impact from the pandemic on health and wellbeing for communities across the borough. Local research was conducted exploring the impact of COVID during 2023, which has supported the identification of key areas of focus. The council seeks to identify opportunities to support community development and resilience. Specific funding has been identified from the Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF) to support programmes that address these challenges these are set out in appendix B.

4 Alternative Options Considered

- 4.1 The review of community support process has considered a range of issues related to the pandemic and the cost-of-living. As part of the process of developing these recommendations, some issues were out of the scope of the action plan or grant funding conditions as this is a ring-fenced time limited grant provided by the Office of Health Improvement and Disparities OHID. Some elements of health and hardship are also outside of the influence of the council and are therefore not recommended for inclusion in the updated hardship action plan or COMF funded activities in appendix C.

5 Supporting Information

Community support over the last 12 months

- 5.1 During the first 12 months of the financial hardship plan, there has been significant progress made in the support available to residents. Appendix C provides an overview of some of the recent highlights. This activity has partly been enabled through the Household Support Fund, provided by the DWP to local authorities. This funding was extended until April 2024 meaning the council has been able to distribute over £900,000 of financial support since the start of the action plan. The funding has largely been used towards the provision of vouchers in the school holidays for families receiving free school meals. Support worth over £225,000 was given to Bracknell Forest pupils in the 2023 Summer holidays. Alongside this, the council supported an additional 1,627 households with grants and referrals for essential living costs during the 2022-2023 financial year. A further £105,000 to date has been provided to local charities to further extend their support to low-income families. The DWP has not yet confirmed any further funding post-April 2024.
- 5.2 Expansion of the welfare team (funded by one-off, temporary funding) enabled the council to proactively seek to improve the incomes of households. Utilising LIFT data software, households have been identified and contacted who may not be receiving welfare payments that they are eligible for. One campaign contacted 191 pension age households, through which, £113,879 in additional income was unlocked for these households. Other campaigns have resulted in improved uptake of benefits such as council tax support, and free TV licences. These initiatives focus on building resilience in our communities, and assisting residents to remain independent, preventing the need for more direct council support.
- 5.3 To date, 18 of the 45 actions in the action plan have been completed, with a further 21 in progress/ongoing and due to be completed by the end of the plan period. These actions have resulted in a greater level of support and resilience in the borough through activities such as the development of a comprehensive website for cost-of-living support. Wider benefits include the development of Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector forum to encourage greater levels of joint working. Of the actions not yet started, these are primarily linked to the employment theme, this work has been more challenging than original anticipated partly linked to the dependence on partnerships such as with the DWP and the limited direct influence the council has in this area.

Community research on impact of COVID 19 on population health

- 5.4 Research was conducted in February and March including a telephone survey of over 1,800 Bracknell Forest residents, 60 in depth interviews and 7 focus groups. These focused on exploring the longer-term impacts of COVID. Key findings from this research:
- Whilst the pandemic was a largely negative experience for many respondents and impacts remain, it is now over-shadowed by current issues such as energy prices (cited by 70% as an issue), cost of living and food prices (both cited by 63% as an issue) and inflation (cited by 51% as an issue). In comparison, the pandemic was cited by 21% as an on-going issue.
 - Negative impacts tend to outweigh positive for children and young people. Specifically, for 0–4-year-olds, social skills, relationships and speech and language development were notably negatively impacted. Among older children and young people, mental health, educational development, and isolation showed a negative impact.
 - Financial situation: Respondents with a disability were more likely than other respondents to report a negative financial impact.
 - Social isolation: On average, 1 in 4 respondents felt social isolation and loneliness. 39% of 18–24-year-olds were more likely to have felt isolated or lonely, reporting that the pandemic had a very negative/negative/quite negative impact. This was the highest proportion across all age groups.
- 5.5 These findings evidence the needs of the local community and will inform the support to be provided to them, during the winter period and throughout 2024. Specifically, a series of actions have been identified as set out in appendix B to address these key challenges and to provide additional support to residents in Bracknell Forest.

Winter 2023 support

- 5.6 Additional hardship support is in place for residents over the Winter period. This includes through community led support and services across the council. Amendments to the current Financial Hardship plan aim to recognise and coordinate this support. The review of the plan has enabled the identification of priorities and emerging issues, particularly over this coming winter period.
- 5.7 It was found that fuel and food poverty continue to be a challenge. The number of people experiencing financial hardship has not risen significantly but the depth of financial challenge has become greater. Research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has shown that projected impacts from the current rises in the cost of living could still be felt until 2027. Debt and the affordability of credit also remains a major issue. Domestic abuse and mental health issues were also identified as issues not currently addressed within the plan. Some minority ethnic communities also remain unaware of the available help for issues of financial hardship in the borough.
- 5.8 These findings and the subsequent recommended changes are contained in the amended plan in appendix A. This version has removed 29 completed or (now) business as usual actions and incorporated findings from the review process. The changes aim to give the plan greater relevance and effectiveness in supporting emerging priorities raised by the review process whilst also considering future

responses. Specifically, actions within the plan have been amended to meet the following identified gaps:

- Explore how financial hardship support can be better connected to those experiencing mental health challenges.
- Expand the signposting of local support to those who have experienced domestic abuse.
- Increase signposting activity throughout the winter period, including by extending the messaging and engagement with seldom-heard communities to ensure financial support is known to them.

- 5.9 Amendments to the plan will cover the winter 2023-24 period and will strengthen the offer to communities across a period that sees increased household expenditure. Increased signposting for seldom heard communities will provide additional support to groups at heightened risk of experiencing hardship. Funding for residents through the Household Support Fund will also continue with direct financial support to be provided for low-income households not qualifying for the government's £900 cost-of-living payment. There will also be enhanced support for the voluntary and community sector via the community winter hardship grant. Continued joint work is in place to promote a winter wellness campaign.
- 5.10 Given the current financial and resourcing challenges, it is also recommended that prioritisation should be made to focus on themes where the council can have the greatest influence. Therefore, more actions are related to the themes of signposting and essential living costs, rather than areas such as employment support. However, the council will continue to work with partners such as the Job Centre to ensure local support is available across all areas.

Next steps during 2024

- 5.11 The current Financial Hardship Action Plan ends on 31 March 2024. At present, there is no confirmed government funding beyond this period to extend the action plan or continue the extent of hardship support. Most of the activity up to this point has been funded by one-off, temporary funding. Therefore, there will be a transition from the action plan to business as usual, bringing services back to the form and level of pre-COVID support, led by the Welfare team.
- 5.12 Beyond the offer of additional grant funding, the core support of the Local Welfare Scheme offers emergency hardship support for households in need. The statutory function of the Welfare team is the administration of Housing Benefit, Council tax support and Discretionary Housing Payments and it is not required to provide any support with financial hardship outside the scope of those benefits and discounts.
- 5.13 However, a wide range of support for the local community has been developed to maximise the £795,000 of remaining Covid Outbreak Management Fund (COMF). This aims to deliver an extended period of support into 2024, recognising the continued impact of coronavirus, including on health outcomes, health inequalities, the economy and individual financial pressures due to the impact of COVID19. A summary of the activity to take place is included in appendix B and includes funding towards the provision of a financial inclusion and welfare advice service, mental health initiatives for young people and enhancing the warm, well, and safe programme to help those with existing long term health conditions with improving energy efficiency of their house and have a holistic health check to include nutritional and falls risk assessment.

- 5.14 One further area that could be explored beyond April 2024 is a one-off payment towards the council tax bills of low-income households (those receiving council tax support). This could help mitigate the impact of possible rises in council tax for the most financially vulnerable households. In the last three years, similar support has been in place, though this had been supported as part of national schemes. No such scheme has been announced yet for 2024/25. Most recently, for the current financial year, the government has funded £25 support for council tax, the council funded an additional £25 for low-income pension households and £75 for low income working age households. This was to a total cost of approximately £254,000 across 5,900 households. Specific additional funding would need to be agreed to provide this.

6 Consultation and Other Considerations

Legal Advice

- 6.1 There are no legal issues arising from this report that requires specific legal comments.

Financial Advice

- 6.2 Awaiting to see if the DWP Household Support Grant is extended past March 2024. Funding to date, has been temporary grant funding received from the government following the pandemic. Sufficient unspent COMF grant is held within reserves to fund the activity included in appendix C. Spend must be monitored and incurred in accordance with the grant conditions to enable the Council to submit the required returns and statement of assurance to UKHSA. The monitoring will also ensure that any unused funds are identified and re-applied in accordance with the grant conditions.

Other Consultation Responses

- 6.3 Several groups have been part of the review and update of the action plan. This includes the officer financial hardship group and the members welfare advisory panel. Their feedback has been included as part the plan contained in appendix A.

Equalities Impact Assessment

- 6.4 An equality impact screening was completed as part of the original plan development. This screening has been reviewed to include the current recommendations made. This concluded that there remain no groups adversely impacted by the recommendations. The plan seeks to reduce the inequality experienced by those facing financial hardship, and the groups most likely to be affected. Specifically, the updated plan seeks to enhance actions related to awareness and signposting for seldom heard communities and ethnic minority groups.

The findings of the Covid Impact survey found that geographic and other inequalities existed in impact of covid pandemic on the health and wellbeing of the local population. Gender, age, ethnicity, and disabilities were associated with some of these inequalities. The plan includes projects that aims to target these population groups.

Strategic Risk Management Issues

- 6.5 There are no strategic risk management issues identified as part of these recommendation.

Climate Change Implications

- 6.6 The recommendations in Section 2 above are expected to slightly increase emissions of CO2. Whilst this will not be a direct impact, reducing financial hardship is likely to increase economic activity, this in turn may generate more CO2 emissions through activity such as travel to work, purchasing essential items etc. However, it is considered vital that all households can meet their basic living costs, such as food and heating. Some of this may be offset by improving the energy efficiency of households that meet the criteria for support through the warm, well and safe programme.

Health & Wellbeing Considerations

- 6.7 The projects in appendix C aim to improve the health and wellbeing of those that are likely to have suffered the most from the COVID 19 pandemic. It is likely to reduce health inequalities that have widened due to the pandemic. There is a direct link between financial hardship and health and wellbeing. These recommendations seek to reduce hardship and therefore this is anticipated to have a positive impact on residents' health and wellbeing.

Background Papers

[Current action plan](#)

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Appendix A – Updated financial hardship action plan: Winter 2023

[Attached as a separate document]

Appendix B – 2024 projects to mitigate impact of COVID19, supporting communities.

Area of spend		Amount	Led by
Public mental health	CYP mental health (Self harm, eating difficulties and low-level emotional health – mapping the risk and prevalence within Bracknell Forest)	£80,000	Public Health, P, P & R
	Digital offer -peer support, early identification, and appropriate support for CYP with symptoms below the CAMHS threshold. (Jointly with Frimley ICB) 40K core funding, 56K 11-17 year and 56K for 18–25-year-olds (Exact figure is likely to be less if commissioned across E Berkshire jointly) Year 1 from COMF, Year 2 onwards on a sliding scale (reduction in numbers) from Public Health Reserve	£152,000	Public Health, P, P & R and Frimley ICB
	Adult mental health recovery college (Steppingstones) targeted groups enhancements	£40,000	Public Health, P, P & R
Welfare advice	Additional Financial Inclusion Officers to mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Early Help and Communities) 2.5 welfare officers for a year	£100,000	Head of Welfare, People
Inequalities	Accommodation to house rough sleepers this winter to mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.	£60,000	Head of Housing, People
Mitigation of Covid Impact- health deterioration in people with long term conditions	Improving Housing for those with long term health conditions-building on the Warm well and safe programme	£95,000	Head of Climate Change and Sustainable Living, Delivery
Social isolation	Establishing a buddy network targeted at groups identified from the COVID Survey 1 year (2 and 3 year from Public Health Reserve.	£50,000	Public Health, P, P & R
	Establishing local neighbourhood Friendship Tables initially in neighbourhoods identified with higher negative impacts (costs of facilitator and starter kits) Year 1. Year 2 and 3 facilitator and replacement kits (30K per annum from Public Health Reserve)	£40,000	Public Health, P, P & R
Support for Long Covid	Work with primary care to offer post treatment recovery based on the health and wellbeing sessions for people with long terms conditions currently run by Everyone Active (Sports Centre)	£25,000	Public Health, P, P & R
Communications Recovery and control	Recovery – uptake of health checks, know your numbers	£12,000	Public Health, P, P & R
COVID/Pandemic Prevention and Control	Resilience stock of PPE and LFD test kits (current stock expiring) and storage	£77,000	Public Health, P, P & R
	Hand hygiene training in Primary schools, Special schools, Secondary Schools, Colleges, Pupil referral unit, Care homes, Family Hubs/Larchwood, Assisted Living, PH Team & other teams	£40,000	Public Health, P, P & R
Covid Inquiry	Contingency for COVID-19 Inquiry work	25,000	AD Strategic Projects
	Total plan	£796,000	

Appendix C – Recent support provided to low-income households.

Council achievements in first 100 days of new administration – financial hardship

Following the election in May, the council's new administration made a commitment to increase targeted cost of living support to residents experiencing financial difficulties. Some of the successful projects included the following:



Hosting a Help for Households event in Princess Square with 15 partners sharing help for cost-of-living.



23 households were identified to be eligible for a council tax reduction, saving **£34,554** in total.

3 households were identified to be eligible for council tax exemption, saving **£10,447** in total.



£7,110 was awarded to **24 qualifying households** through the Local Welfare Scheme.

Discretionary Housing Payments were granted to two households, generating **£1,876** for them.



Meeting with local headteachers to explore financial challenges their pupils are experiencing and signposted materials and support available for parents.



299 households contacted so they can receive their council tax energy rebate directly as not eligible to pay council tax.



Cost-of-living drop-in session was held in Great Hollands and more venues are being looked into.



Website updated with new support and information.



Promotional materials provided to community hubs and libraries.



Reach Out
Supporting you with the cost-of-living



 **Bracknell Forest Council**