

**Cabinet Member Brief
Overview & Scrutiny Committee
(Regulatory, Compliance and Corporate Services)
12 January 2021**

Welfare Reform & Anti-Poverty Update

The Welfare Reform and Anti-Poverty Cabinet Member Reference Group met on 16 December 2020. The following updates were received:

Winter Programmes

Officers from Communities reported on two new funding streams to local authorities across the country from Central Government. One is to support local authorities to provide ongoing advice and direct support for clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) residents in the borough. The other fund is called a Covid Winter Grant Scheme and is to enable local authorities to provide support to children, families and individuals between until 31 March 2021.

Officers also updated Cabinet Members regarding opportunities for the local authority to bid for community champions funding and holiday activity funding. Cabinet Members noted and endorsed the development of bids for these funding streams.

Cabinet Members noted updates regarding the food programmes, affordable warmth, winter coats and the Mayor's toy appeal.

Healthy Start Vouchers

Public health officers provided an overview regarding healthy start voucher scheme, a government scheme to improve the health of low-income pregnant women and families on benefits and tax credits. Women who are at least 10 weeks pregnant and families with children under four years old and are in receipt of qualifying benefits are eligible for healthy start. Women also qualify during the whole of their pregnancy if they are under 18 when they apply, even if they don't receive any benefits or tax credits.

In Sefton, application forms for healthy start vouchers are provided by health visitors and midwives or applied for online directly by the applicant.

Cabinet Members raised concerns regarding the low uptake of the healthy start vouchers in Sefton and it is requested for officers to develop an action plan to develop a greater understanding of the barriers and to work with partners to encourage take up.

Childhood Poverty

Cabinet Members recognised that a lot of work is taking place to support families within the borough and the need to also focus on childhood poverty as a thematic priority under welfare reform and anti-poverty was agreed.

It was noted that poverty has a significant impact on physical and mental wellbeing issues, and infant mortality.

Cabinet Members emphasised the need to fully understand childhood poverty in Sefton. Officers are requested to work with internal groups and community voluntary partners and report on local data to develop an understanding of childhood poverty in Sefton and inform planning.

Cabinet Members also emphasised the need for childhood poverty to be a theme consistent throughout policies and plans for welfare reform and anti-poverty and the Council.

Debt Issues

Cabinet Members and officers discussed the impact of redundancies in the latter part of 2020, the full consequences of which are expected to be felt in 2021 when government funding and support is removed.

Officers highlighted that there is a new portion of the population who are experiencing financial disruption who have not accessed welfare or other support before. It was noted that a pilot has taken place in Lydiate to support those finding themselves in this situation.

Officers from Customer Centric Services provided Cabinet Members with an update in relation to universal credit and discretionary funds.

ELAS Update

Cabinet Members received a report providing a summary of demand and provision for the period 1 April 2020 – 29 November 2020.

There has been an increase in applications for ELAS being received compared to previous periods reported. It was noted that additional resource has been allocated to support ELAS.

Overall, 3,768 applications have been received for the specified period of which 59% were awarded.

Mental Wellbeing

The negative legacy of the covid pandemic was discussed in relation to the impact of mental wellbeing. Issues highlighted include the impacts upon mental wellbeing of:

- redundancy and debt
- loss of loved ones
- family break-up
- loss of loved ones.

Public health officers reported that Sefton has not seen an increase in suicide rates, however, it is noted from the partnership that there is an increase in clients reporting suicidal thoughts and self-harm.

It was reported to Cabinet Members that there is a small fund being utilised to support the mental wellbeing of middle-aged men in the borough.

Cabinet Members endorsed the use of a proportion of the unringfenced covid funds to be utilised to promote good mental wellbeing and support people accessing the correct services.