

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

Welfare Reform & Anti-Poverty Update

The Welfare Reform and Anti-Poverty Cabinet Member Reference Group met on 1 April 2021. The following updates were received:

Updates from the Welfare Reform & Anti-Poverty Steering Group

Officers from Public Health and Communities provided an update from discussions regarding community shop, confirming that there is still support from the Partnership.

An update was provided regarding a presentation received from Sefton CAB relating to debt issues. It was noted that CAB, foodbanks and other partners have reported an increase in demand for services and that mental health is a key issue.

Childhood poverty was also discussed with the Partnership.

Notice of Motion – Poverty Emergency

A notice of motion was put to the council meeting held 4 March 2021 declaring poverty emergency. Cabinet Members emphasised the need to be action focused in response to the poverty emergency and will be a standing item for discussion for future meetings of the Welfare Reform & Anti-Poverty Cabinet Member Reference Group.

Childhood Poverty

Public Health Officers presented a report regarding childhood poverty outlining indicators and drivers for childhood poverty, the impacts of growing up in a low impact household and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the causes and consequences of poverty.

It was noted that there was an increasing trend of those in absolute low income and relative low income families, and eligibility to free school meals prior to the pandemic.

It was emphasised that multiple causality and disadvantage can impact on whole areas.

It was discussed that for working families in poverty the increase in Universal Credit was not enough to bridge the gap.

The profile of jobs in Sefton highlighted in the report include retail, health and care, and hospitality and leisure. It was noted that these sectors are lower income, less likely to be able to work from home and include populations at higher risk of exposure to COVID-19.

It was reported that the pandemic has adversely impacted childhood poverty in a number of ways including:

- Household income
- Employment opportunities
- Access to services
- Cost of living
- Mental health
- Physical wellbeing
- Access to education, learning and development

Prevalence of mental distress was discussed. National research shows that those with poor mental health have a 50% higher likelihood of having a low income and are 70% more likely to experience persistent poverty.

Social mobility and pay potential was discussed. It was noted that Sefton has a relatively small gap in terms of education attainment but a large gap in pay potential in employment.

It was discussed that a response to address childhood poverty in Sefton could include prevention, mitigation and provision of immediate basic needs.

Cabinet Members thanked officers involved in producing the report and acknowledged the level of expertise across the council. Cabinet members emphasised the need for this report to be the start of a call for action.

Cabinet Members agreed for a welfare reform report to be taken to Cabinet which would include an overview of the welfare reform and anti-poverty work with a specific focus upon childhood poverty.

Healthy Start Vouchers

Discussion took place regarding the healthy start voucher scheme, a government scheme to improve health of low-income pregnant women and families on benefits and tax credits. It was discussed that evidence is needed to understand where the blockers are in order to support take up of the scheme.

Breathing Space

Officers from Customer Centric Services presented a report regarding the debt respite scheme (breathing space) which will give someone with problem debt the right to legal protections from their creditors. The scheme will come into effect on 4 May 2021.

The standard breathing space is available to anyone with problem debt, giving them legal protections from creditor action for up to 60 days.

The mental health crisis breathing space is available for those receiving mental health crisis treatment, giving legal protections from creditor action for as long as the person's mental health crisis treatment, plus 30 days (no matter how long the crisis treatment lasts).

Officers provided an overview of the scheme application process and the notification process for the council as a creditor. It was emphasised that there will be a need to monitor the scheme as demand is unclear at this stage.

Officers reported that the council is working with partners to raise awareness of the scheme.

ELAS

Cabinet Members received a report providing a summary of demand and provision for the period April 2020 – February 2021. It was emphasised that figures do not fully reflect demand as temporary support has been in place. However, March 2021 figures are returning to expected levels.