

## PEOPLE SELECT COMMITTEE

### SCRUTINY REVIEW OF COST OF LIVING RESPONSE

#### **1.0 Executive Summary**

- 1.1 This report outlines the findings and recommendations following the People Select Committee's scrutiny review of Cost of Living Response.
- 1.2 In response to the ongoing cost of living crisis, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) has introduced a number of initiatives (for example the Cost-of-Living on-line HUB / Warm Spaces / Food Aid Fund) to support the Borough's residents. This review has built on the 'Scrutiny Review of the Cost of School Uniform' which was undertaken in 2020 and the recommendations of the 'Scrutiny Review of Child Poverty' undertaken in 2022. This review has considered SBC's response to ensure the Council effectively supports the current and emerging needs of its residents, whilst also evaluating its current approach to inform/provide a steer for ongoing and future activity.
- 1.3 As detailed in the 13 July 2023 Cabinet report, "Powering Our Futures – Delivering People, Place Economy", the Council is committed to the development of an Anti-Poverty Action Plan (to be co-developed with partners and those with lived experience). The plan will focus on how the Council can help prevent and mitigate the impact of poverty. This review will inform the development of this plan.
- 1.4 This review has considered the key components of the cost of living approach adopted by the Council at a time of increasing service demands (for both advice and support). Consequently, it has explored the possibility to develop, change and, if appropriate, grow the Council's services around the cost of living work to support more residents in the Borough.
- 1.5 The Select Committee 's key findings were as follows:
  - Poverty in the Borough of Stockton-on-Tees is a long-term issue which has been exacerbated by the ongoing cost of living situation. There is a notable disparity in life expectancy across the Borough, with a difference of 21.1 years for males and 17.1 years for females. 9 of the Borough's 26 wards are in the 10% most deprived in the country.
  - The Council's Cost of Living response has included both immediate short-term interventions and long-term strategies. This approach has gained recognition from the Local Government Association (LGA) and praise from external partners in the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector. It has also been recognised by being nominated for an APSE award.
  - Examples of the Council's Cost of Living response include: the online 'Here to Help Hub', which provides information on benefits, advice and support available; the 'Cost of Living Booklet', which is updated quarterly and available online and in print; quarterly newsletters, energy crisis support; and the establishment of Warm Spaces (Community Spaces) in partnership with the VCSE sector. There are also a wide range of other projects to meet any emerging needs, for example The Bread and Butter Thing (TBBT),

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) work, employee support, work around Child Poverty etc.

- As part of the review, site visits were arranged to two TBBT hubs, Victoria Park Community Hall, Thornaby and The Salvation Army, Stockton. This provided Members with the opportunity to speak to staff, co-ordinators and volunteers and witness the bag preparation and packaging processes prior to collection from members of the public. Members who attended acknowledged the importance of this initiative in alleviating some of the financial pressures residents are currently facing in light of high food prices.
- During the review, an additional online session was held to receive evidence from an LGA representative on local authority management of the Cost of Living situation. It was evident that Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council was leading the way on many aspects of this work. However, it was noted that the challenges around this will continue to grow. Therefore, it is important to continue to provide support to those affected by the Cost of Living.
- The importance of 'lived experience' has been repeatedly highlighted throughout this review. It has been evidenced that, as the Cost of Living situation has developed, services across the Borough have noted that the demographics of those seeking help and support has changed. For example, there has been increase in those with mortgages or residents from more affluent wards approaching the Council and agencies for help.
- Debt advice and debt management has been a consistent and prevailing theme throughout the evidence gathering process. It is necessary to consider the value that income maximisation support can have in providing one solution to this problem.
- The continuation of issues with the affordability of school uniform has been discussed at length and this is an area where long term intervention will be needed if school uniform policies across the Borough remain restrictive.
- The stigma associated with poverty and receiving support has been raised. However, innovative approaches to reducing this stigma have also been evident, particularly support provided to young people and families through schools.
- In response to the Cost of Living situation, the Council's Customer Services team has been the first point of contact for concerned residents approaching the Council. The volume of calls received, and level of residents in deep distress, has significantly increased since the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic. This has impacted on call response times, staff retention, recruitment, training, and the mental wellbeing of Customer Services staff. In response, additional support and training has been put in place for Customer Services staff.
- A range of benefits and initiatives are available to all Council staff members. Targeted support and training have also been provided to staff across the Council. Worthy of note, work with the Council's Community Service staff on men's health and wellbeing has resulted in the achievement of an LGC Award for Best Wellbeing Initiative. This targeted approach could possibly be extended to other areas of the Council where there is a need.

- This review has demonstrated the integral role of the Council's Cost of Living response, and its continued partnerships with external organisations, in supporting residents through the ongoing cost of living situation and the development of the Council's 'Powering Our Futures' initiative. It is essential that the Council continues to maintain and foster relationships with the VCSE sector to provide the best possible solution for residents during these unprecedentedly challenging times.
- As stated above, it is apparent that Cost of Living challenges will continue to grow and evolve. Therefore, the need to continue to develop this work is necessary.

## Conclusion

- 1.6 This review has highlighted how the existing challenges associated with poverty and inequality across the Borough have been compounded by the ongoing cost of living situation. Additional challenges have arisen through the widening demographic of those affected by the cost of living. However, the evidence submitted has confirmed that the Council's proactive approach has provided a comprehensive response and resulted in regional and national recognition. The contribution of the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector in mitigating the effects of poverty must not be underestimated and the continuation of partnership working is essential for future strategic planning.
- 1.7 Consequently, the review's recommendations seek to respond to persistent concerns (such as the affordability of school uniform and debt management) and provide a commitment to develop an anti-poverty strategy to cement the Council's long-term coordinated approach. Ensuring that residents and Council staff continue to be sufficiently supported is integral in this endeavour.

## **Recommendations**

The Committee recommend:

- 1) That findings from this review will inform the development of the Council's Anti-Poverty Action Plan/Strategy as part of the 'Powering Our Futures' programme. This will be coordinated with partners and will advocate the importance of lived experience.**
- 2) That the Council continues to work with schools and governors to address the issues around the affordability of school uniform and provide options to expand the provision of pre-loved uniforms are explored, through devising an action plan clearly outlining the steps to be taken to address these issues. The action plan will be shared with the Committee and progress reported as part of the wider recommendations. In addition, the Council will meet with Multi-Academy Trust school improvement leads to advocate the need for affordable school uniforms and the ongoing promotion of pre-loved ones.**
- 3) That the income maximisation service is widely promoted through Stockton News and social media channels as a means of assisting residents with debt management and financial difficulties.**
- 4) That, building on the success of previous staff drop in sessions around Cost of Living this targeted approach continues where there is a need.**
- 5) That, building on the existing success of the work undertaken, to continue to build on best practice from across the country working alongside the LGA.**