

<b>Title of Report:</b>  <b>Hardship Fund</b>	<b>Officer Presenting: Director of Legacy</b>  <b>Author: Director of Legacy</b>
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## **1 Purpose of Report/Recommendations**

- 1.1 To provide Members with the recommendations from the Welfare Reform Working Group with respect to the Hardship Fund.

## **2 Background**

- 2.1 Members will be aware that at the Council meeting in October 2020 (ref C336/20) it was agreed that the Welfare Reform Working Group would be convened to consider the establishment of a Hardship Fund. After several meetings of the Welfare Reform Working Group, a further report was presented to Governance and Strategic Planning Committee (ref GSP 18/20) whereby approval was granted for a two stage process on the establishment of the Hardship Fund as recommended by the Welfare Reform Working Group and that a further report should be prepared for the Reconvened Council Meeting on Friday 4 December 2020 if Officers identify an opportunity to provide finances to the joint campaign of the Salvation Army and St Vincent De Paul.
- 2.2 Members subsequently agreed at the reconvened Council meeting of 4<sup>th</sup> December 2020 to allocate up to £50,000 towards the joint campaign of St Vincent de Paul and the Salvation Army. Following discussions with both charities Members were advised on 17<sup>th</sup> December that £15,000 of the £50,000 budget was allocated and Members resolved thereafter to ring fence the remaining £35,000 of this budget for Stage 2 of the Hardship Fund.
- 2.3 The Welfare Reform Working Group has met on three occasions since January to consider the current needs of local people in hardship and also to consider the best approach to take forward stage 2 of the Hardship Fund. In addition to these meetings the Anti-Poverty Task and Finish Group has met and received submissions from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and local organisations providing support to people in hardship. On the basis of these meetings and the considerations thereafter, the Welfare Reform Working Group now wishes to make recommendations for support in the following six areas: - Food; Fuel; Digital Connectivity; Advice Support; Training and Detailed Analysis on Need.

- 2.4 The following sections of the report provides information on each of these areas of support. Given the short timeframe between the last meeting of the Welfare Working Group and the deadline for submission of the committee report there are several sections with information outstanding. This information will be provided in the verbal report to Members at the Committee meeting.
- 2.5 The Welfare Reform Group will continue to consider stage 2 of the Hardship Fund as further detailed analysis on need is obtained and will make further recommendations to committee as relevant to this work.

### 3 Key Issues

- 3.1 There is considerable data available indicating the levels of poverty within the Derry City and Strabane District Council area. The table below provides a snapshot of some of this key data.

<p>Three year averages for <b>Relative Poverty</b></p> <p>NI 18%      DCSDC 23%</p> <p>(Source Family Resources Survey, DfC)</p>	
<p>Three year averages for <b>Absolute Poverty</b></p> <p>NI 15%      DCSDC 21%</p> <p>(Source Family Resources Survey, DfC)</p>	
<p><b>Employment Rate</b> (16-64)</p> <p>NI 71.9%      DCSDC 68%</p> <p>(Labour Force Survey, 2019)</p>	
<p><b>Economic Inactivity</b> (16-64)</p> <p>NI 26.2%      DCSDC 30.4%</p> <p>(Labour Force Survey, 2019)</p>	
<p>41.6% of all pupils entitles to free school meals</p> <p>(NISRA)</p>	<p>54.7%, of young people from the DCSDC area living in the 20% most deprived SOAs within NI</p> <p>(NISRA)</p>

- 3.2 These statistics all relate to the situation pre Covid when at a time the trend of in-work poverty was rising. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has reported that the Coronavirus pandemic has put even greater pressure on workers in groups already at higher risk of poverty such as low pay sectors, minority ethnic groups and lone parents. At a UK level, they have reported that before coronavirus, around 35% of private renters and 42% of social renters worked in the hardest-hit sectors (manufacturing, retail, accommodation and food, and arts, entertainment and recreation). Between April and June, around 32% of private-renting employees and 34% of social-renting employees were furloughed by their employers.
- 3.3 The local advice centres have reported an overall increase in clients and in particular from clients who have little or no experience of accessing support services designed to help people in hardship.
- 3.4 The interventions outlined below are designed to offer immediate support to people in hardship. Whilst it is recognised that it is not possible at this point to state definitively how many citizens within our Council area will continue to require support the evidence currently available on for example the weekly referrals to food banks, the number of clients accessing advice support, the level of enquiries managed by the local partnership boards and the increase in benefits paid as a result of the Wrap around Service of DfC all indicate to the existence of a current unfilled need.
- 3.5 Moving forward the Welfare Reform Working Group and the Anti-Poverty Task and Finish Group have indicated the need for more strategic interventions at a policy level and to finding routes out of poverty. There is a commitment to seek policy changes and the co-design of programmes that reduce reliance on short term fixes and develop resilience through more proactive means. These considerations will be subject to further reports to Committee at a later date.

### 3.6 **Food Poverty**

Members will be aware from previous reports submitted to Council and the most recent at the Special Council meeting on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2021 that food poverty continues to present as a key issue for people experiencing hardship. Under the Department of Communities phase 3 funding £71,000 was allocated to eight local growth partnership areas and to date 1,372 vouchers have been issued. In addition to this support, the Department has provided the Bulk Order Food Scheme. Some Members of the Welfare Reform Working Group were concerned that despite this investment that food poverty continues to be an issue. Officers contacted the Foyle and Strabane Food Banks as well as the Churches Trust and all three organisations confirmed that demand exceeded their current supplies. This was exemplified by the Foyle Food Bank who originally anticipated 90 referrals from the local growth partnerships but were in fact receiving on average 340 per week. In addition, they receive approximately 80 referrals from other sources. The additional amounts requested by the Food banks to the end of March 2021 are:

Organisation	Amount Requested	Estimated No of Beneficiaries
Foyle Food Bank	£10,000	TBC
Strabane Food Bank	£800	TBC
Churches Trust	£2,160	TBC

### 3.7 **Fuel Poverty**

Some Members of the Welfare Reform Working Group indicated their concern that many of the local growth areas were experiencing on-going fuel poverty. People most affected tended to be in rented private accommodation, were on low incomes and had been more adversely impacted by the Coronavirus pandemic. There was a particular concern raised in relation to rural areas accessing fuel support. Officers undertook to complete more research on this area of support. At the time of writing this report some information was outstanding and it was agreed that a verbal update on this support area would be provided at the Committee meeting.

### 3.8 **Advice Hours**

Members of the Welfare Reform Working Group expressed their concern at the potential reduction to advice services as currently proposed in the draft Department for Communities budget. It was recognised that all three advice centres are currently providing additional hours which are needed to cope with the current levels of demand. Officers provided Members with the costs of providing additional hours across the three centres by 20 advisors during April 2021 as follows: -

Advice NW -	£13,596.40
Dove House -	£ 2,385.61
Resource Centre Derry -	£ 495.21

### 3.9 **Digital Poverty**

As reported at the Special Council meeting regarding Phase 3 of the Department for Communities funding, the local partnerships had prioritised connectivity for young people attending post primary schools. It was also recognised that there were young people living within our Council area but attending schools in other local authority areas and that a support mechanism needed to be put in place for these young people to access digital technology. On that basis, Members agreed to allocate £12,000 from the DfC funding to both the Derg and Sperrin Local Partnership areas. Some Members of the Welfare Reform Working Group indicated that they were aware from partnership meetings that demand for digital technology in these areas has exceeded the original budgets allocated.

Across the three rural district electoral areas there are circa 17,000 young people between 0-24 with an average representation of 34% in these areas. Within Derg and Sperrin in particular many of the young people attend school outside of the Council area with the Scared Heart College in Omagh reporting that approximately 100 of their pupils come from Sion Mills, Castlederg, Newtownstewart and Douglas Bridge. Officers have discussed with RAPID the needs in the three areas and considering the feasibility of what can be delivered within the timescale in terms of procurement, availability of equipment, application process and eligibility checks, it is proposed that each area would receive £10,000 to provide additional digital technology. The average unit costs £350 which would enable an additional 85 young people to benefit from this support. It is further proposed that RAPID work within the three rural DEAs to design the application process and eligibility criteria and submit to Council officers for approval prior to expenditure.

Members had further requested officers explore the possibility of purchasing broadband vouchers. However at this stage it has not been possible to determine the extent of this need and the variations in packages between contracts and pay as you go options. Therefore it is recommended that further work is completed on this area and if in the future an additional funding becomes available officers could review the need at that time again.

### 3.10 **Training:**

As an interim step towards assisting people in hardship, an outline training programme has been developed which would raise awareness of the nature and impact of poverty in the DCSDC area today. It would also equip participants with knowledge of how and when to contact local specialist services.

The one-day Poverty Awareness Training Programme would offer free training to support 30 public and voluntary sector workers to address some of the challenges facing those living with poverty. The programme would be targeted at front line workers including Housing Officers, Job and Benefits staff, GP practices, Health Visitors and Social Workers. It is proposed that officers explore the possibility of partnering with one of the Statutory agencies in taking forward this programme. The total cost of the programme is £5,000 and quotations would be sought to appoint a service provider.

### 3.11 **Evaluation**

The Members of the Welfare Reform Working Group are seeking to gain further insight and understanding of all the support that is available to people living in poverty. It is recommended that the Council appoints a Services Provider through a quotation process who will provide a detailed synopsis of the support available from Government departments, statutory agencies and the community and voluntary groups. The synopsis will also detail the levels of access to this support and where support may be experiencing an under or over demand. Specifically, the synopsis is seeking to establish the level of support that is currently available to help people with their basic needs. The information is required to be presented and/or mapped geographically and by sectoral interest groups. This synopsis is considered to be of significant importance as it will help to inform the scope and focus of the Hardship Fund for stage 2.

### 3.12 Summary of Support Requested:

<b>Support Need</b>	<b>Delivery Mechanisms</b>	<b>Total Amount Requested</b>
Food	Foyle Food Bank	£10,000

	Strabane Food Bank	£800
	The Churches Trust	£2,130
Fuel	Local Growth Partnerships	TBC
Digital	Three Rural Local Growth Partnership areas in Partnership with RAPID and the Post Primary Schools	£30,000
Advice	Three Advice Agencies	£16,500
Training	Open procurement for quotations	£5000
External Synopsis	Open procurement for quotations	£9000

### 3.13 **St Vincent de Paul**

Members will recall that St Vincent de Paul was awarded £15,000 for their Christmas campaign towards assisting people in hardship. The Society has requested permission to extend their expenditure to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021. As a new grantee of the Council, the Society needed additional time to set up its system for the draw down of funding which meets Council's audit requirements. Officers are content with the performance of the Society in the administration of this funding and with their request for an extension.

## **4 Financial, Equality, Legal, HR, Improvement, Rural Needs and other Implications**

- 4.1 Members are advised on the basis of the table above the total current ask is £73,430 with a sum to be confirmed for fuel which will be presented at the meeting. Discussion has taken place with the Lead Finance Officer who has advised that this sum (tbc further confirmed) along with the £15,000 committed to date to St Vincent de Paul hardship support can be accommodated through savings in community services budgets and associated DfC financial loss claims.
- 4.2 Members are advised an Equality Screening exercise has been completed and the programme has been screened out for EQIA.
- 4.3 Members had identified specific issues in the rural areas with respect to digital technology which has been addressed in this report. Fuel issues were also highlighted and a verbal update on this matter will be provided to Committee.

## **5 Recommendations**

- 5.1 It is recommended that Members consider the contents of this report, and approve the following the following allocations:

Foyle Food Bank	£10,000
Strabane Food Bank	£800
The Churches Trust	£2,130
Local Growth Partnerships (Fuel)	TBC
Three Rural Local Growth Partnership areas in Partnership with RAPID and the Post Primary Schools	£30,000
Three Advice Agencies	£16,500
Open procurement for quotations	£5000
Open procurement for quotations	£9000

5.2 And that St. Vincent de Paul be granted an extension for expenditure to end of March 2021 for the sum of £15,000 as previously approved in their letter of offer.

### **Background Papers**

C336/20; GSP18/20