

Introduction and Background

There are seven indices of multiple deprivation relating to income, employment, education, health, crime, housing and the living environment. According to the data on these indices, Tunbridge Wells ranks as the least deprived local authority in Kent.

In considering the response of the O&S Task and Finish Group, it is perhaps first important to set out what the Council already does. The Council expends very large sums (the vast majority of its revenue budget) on financial support including Council Tax Support (£6.6m), Housing Benefit (£27m), Council Tax discounts (£8m) and other discretionary support (£500k).

The Council also already undertakes a number of initiatives to support deprived and vulnerable residents including:

- Promoting uptake of Pension Credit – supporting pensioners living below minimum income threshold.
- Free school meals – matching data with KCC to target support to families missing out.
- Disability Allowances – analysing HB data to identify where residents with a disability may be eligible for more support.
- Water (social tariff) – work with South East Water to help low-income households to reduce their water costs. The Social Tariff caps freshwater charges and provides 25% or 50% discount on wastewater charges.
- Homelessness Prevention – targeting discretionary support to families in crisis or at risk of moving into crisis.
- Council Tax arrears – financial inclusion officer within the Council Tax team assists households in financial difficulty.
- Citizens Advice – data sharing agreement to enable pro-active outreach for households in a continuous cycle of arrears.
- The Council's 'Go Card' scheme which provides reduced-price access to cultural and leisure activities.
- A 'Gateway' service that brings together a number of council and partner services under one roof to join up activity and provide a comprehensive set of services.
- From April 2022, the Gateway service will move to The Amelia Scott building. A core purpose of the building (and service within it) is to widen access and to reach a broader demographic.

In terms of promoting employment, the Council's Economic Development team has undertaken the following actions:

- Delivered two Jobs & Training Fairs per year in partnership with Jobcentre Plus. The fairs include training sessions on employability issues that job seekers can choose to attend.
- Business and Schools link – careers advice and guidance
- Engagement with West Kent Careers Education, Information, Advice & Guidance Network (CEIAG),
- Supporting the West Kent Enterprise Adviser Network operating with schools across the Borough
- Delivered an annual 'Skills Fest' in the Assembly Hall Theatre.
- Promoted apprenticeships and other pathways to careers with employers, schools and providers.

The Council has also promoted and support the Kickstart programme (a job placement scheme for 16-24 year olds on Universal Credit) and has commissioned a post-pandemic review of the local economy to inform future activity and future iterations of the Economic Development Strategy

In addition, throughout the Covid Pandemic, the Council has provided a wide range of support (set out in a report to Cabinet in July 2020) including the establishment of a Community Hub by the Head of HR, Customer Services and Culture, work to tackle social isolation, support for voluntary and community sector organisations, support for localised work by parish and town councils and the delivery of the 'everyone in' initiative to house all homeless residents. The Council is one of a small number of local authorities that is continuing with the programme after it officially came to an end (and the funding ceased).

The Council's budget strategy is forecasting a deficit in excess of £1.7m and any proposals for any additional activity, staff resources or expenditure will need to be considered against this backdrop alongside proposals as to how this additional activity will be funded. In addition, for some benefits or reliefs, there will be consequences for other precepting bodies including Kent County Council, Kent Police and Kent Fire and Rescue Service.

Response to Recommendations

Recommendation	Response
<p>1. That a senior officer be designated to co-ordinate the Council's responses across all departments for those functions whose actions have an impact on income, education & training and access to housing and services.</p>	<p>Stephen McGinnes, Mid Kent Services Director, chaired the 'Community' cell as part of the Council's Covid response alongside the Head of HR, Customer Service and Culture who led on the provision of support to vulnerable and isolated residents through the Community Hub and social isolation workstreams. He will continue to take a lead in this area including in liaising with partners who lead on issues to do with income, education, training and housing.</p>
<p>2. That the Cabinet determine and publicise metrics relating to these three elements of IMD with clear accountabilities to officers for their delivery.</p>	<p>The Council gathers a wide range of information and metrics on those aspects that relate to its activities and uses these to inform its activities. It is important to remember that other organisations (notably DWP and KCC) take the lead on issues relating to education and some elements of income support. The Cabinet would be more than happy to receive suggestions from the Task and Finish Group on any metrics that they feel would be both appropriate and relate to the activities of the Borough Council.</p>
<p>3. That the Council initiates community-based surveys, group discussions and public displays in each of the six wards listed in the original motion to ascertain our residents' expectations and needs and their ability to access services currently.</p>	<p>Cabinet believes that ward councillors are best placed to undertake such surveys and lead on such discussions/displays but would be happy to support them in this endeavour.</p>
<p>4. That the Working Group continues to meet and gather evidence which will lead to a discrete number of multi-agency Community Action Plans, co-ordinated and facilitated by TWBC in 2022.</p>	<p>We are happy for the Working Group to continue to meet and will determine how best to deliver – or encourage others to deliver – any proposals that arise from their work.</p>