

<b>Report of:</b>	Executive Member for Finance & Governance Director of Finance
<b>Submitted to:</b>	Executive
<b>Date:</b>	12 July 2022
<b>Title:</b>	Welfare Strategy
<b>Report for:</b>	Decision
<b>Status:</b>	Public
<b>Strategic priority:</b>	Vulnerability
<b>Key decision:</b>	Yes
<b>Why:</b>	Decision(s) will have a significant impact in two or more wards
<b>Urgent:</b>	No
<b>Why:</b>	N/A

**Executive summary**

This report seeks approval to adopt a new Welfare Strategy which brings together a significant number of existing and future policies under one overall strategic approach.

The intended purpose of the Welfare Strategy is to support Middlesbrough's most vulnerable residents (of which this forms part of the strategic plan), who are in need of financial assistance, advice and support. The strategy provides a menu of support mechanisms that are designed to respond to situations such as the recent cost of living crisis, consequences of the pandemic (also linking in to the strategic plan), and any other external factors that impact the financial pressures on residents and businesses. The strategy is designed to provide a single point of contact as a means to access this support.

The proposed decision is that Executive:

- *Approves the adoption of the Welfare Strategy.*
- *That delegated authority to approve any future revisions to the strategy be provided to the Director of Finance, as Section 151 Officer*

## **Purpose**

1. This report seeks approval to adopt a new welfare strategy.

## **Background and relevant information**

2. Middlesbrough Council's Welfare Strategy is intended to incorporate a number of existing and future policies under one overall strategic approach.
3. Over the past 2 years, a number of policies have been created or revised to reflect a more coordinated approach by the Council towards the provision of financial assistance, advice and support to the town's most financially vulnerable residents.
4. The new and revised policies also have helped provide a consistent approach to all residents who owe a debt to the Council, need help due to a crisis or specific need, or need help due to other external factors. The Welfare Strategy has been designed to incorporate all of the policies into a single offering that is easy for residents and staff to navigate.
5. The policies and solutions which the Welfare Strategy brings together includes:
  - General Welfare Advice & Support;
  - Vulnerability for adults, children and circumstances (such as a change in personal circumstances);
  - Community Bank – access to bank account and regulated loans;
  - Financial Inclusion Group (FIG) (access to 43 partnering organisations);
  - Discretionary Housing Payments and support;
  - Crisis Payments & Emergency Support;
  - Food Poverty solutions including food support for children;
  - Council Tax Reduction scheme / Housing Benefit and other means tested benefits;
  - Exceptional Hardship Fund - payments for those unable to pay their full Council Tax payment;
  - Hardship Support – access to white goods, furniture, fuel, etc.;
  - The Council's Stop the Knock approach;
  - Collecting debt through a centralised solution, in conjunction with the Council's Debt Management policy;
  - Non pursuance of debt as out lined in the Debt Write Off policy.
6. The objectives of the Welfare Strategy are as follows:
  - Effectively manage future Welfare Reform developments;
  - Help the town's most vulnerable including those on low income to support an improvement in their disposable income and help to achieve financial stability;
  - Provide a menu of available help and support;
  - Provide a clear and comprehensive message and to deliver in line with the individual polices which form part of this proposed strategy;
  - To ensure a corporate collaborative approach exists where there is a shared interest (resident and / or business);
  - To link in with the Council's Health and wellbeing / public protection offerings.

7. Any resident or business who is identified as requiring financial assistance will have their circumstances evaluated at the first point of contact, in line with this strategy. The expectation is that services and partners will signpost to Resident & Business Support, to ensure that appropriate support is provided.
8. Middlesbrough are already responding to a number of initiatives through funding provided by Central Government. The amount of funding provided is c £11 million, and from April 2022 to September 2022, 85% of the households in Middlesbrough will be able to access this. It is intended for this funding to be used to support residents who have been affected by rising cost of living and the current fuel situation.
9. At the moment, over 35,000 households within the town have received £150 Energy Rebate (c£5.2m has been paid). Notwithstanding, 9,000 children who meet the Free School Meal eligibility criteria have been provided with £60 (c £700,000 has been paid). There are a number of initiatives to follow, all linking in to providing financial support to vulnerable groups (children, adults, circumstances).
10. The proposed Welfare Strategy is attached to this report for consideration and approval as Appendix 1.
11. All wards are affected by this new strategy.

#### **What decision(s) are being recommended?**

12. That Executive:

- *Approves the adoption of the Welfare Strategy.*
- *that delegated authority to approve any future revisions to the strategy be provided to the Director of Finance, as Section 151 Officer*

#### **Rationale for the recommended decision(s)**

13. The Council now has a significant number of welfare related policies and these will continue to evolve over time. The adoption of the Welfare Strategy will provide a corporate and coordinated approach which will ensure future policies will complement and strengthen this strategy.
14. The Welfare Strategy will ensure targeted support is provided for the financially vulnerable within the town, through a menu of financial assistance, advice and support.

#### **Other potential decision(s) and why these have not been recommended**

15. No other potential decisions have been recommended as this strategy provides an overarching and consolidated approach to considering resident's needs in line with the approved supporting policies which inform this strategy.

#### **Impact(s) of the recommended decision(s)**

##### ***Legal***

16. There is no legal requirement to have a Welfare Strategy, however the rationale for this is outlined above. Many of the existing policies are however adopted under various

legal powers such as the Local Government Finance Act. Each policy, when adopted, makes reference to any legal requirements which either provide for it, or impact upon it.

### **Strategic priorities and risks**

17. The proposed policy will contribute as follows to the Council's strategic plan.

<b>People</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Business</b>
<i>Provide residents of Middlesbrough (and particularly those who are vulnerable) with access to coordinated financial support and advice.</i>	NA	<i>It is important that residents have access to all support, financial or other. This strategy will support other corporate offerings in particularly those within Adult social Care and Public Health.</i>

18. This policy will impact on the following risks:

- **08-059 Incorrect assumptions in the MTFP** – by helping those who are vulnerable, the strategy will aim to support residents to be able to access additional financial support (where appropriate), which is intended to free up disposable income so that residents can meet their Council Tax obligations;
- **08-075 Reduction in Council Tax Collection** – as above;
- **08-102 Court Costs Income** – if residents fulfil their Council Tax obligations, this potentially will reduce the amount of income generated for the Council through court costs.

19. There are no direct links to Strategic Plan initiatives, however this strategy links to the following Strategic Plan priorities:

- **Vulnerability** - We will work to address the causes of vulnerability and inequalities in Middlesbrough and safeguard and support the vulnerable.
- **COVID-19 Recovery** – The strategy will support the recovery of local communities, businesses and the Council's operations from COVID-19, taking opportunities to build back more support and improved services.

20. A number of the policies over which this strategy sits, have had individual Impact Assessments carried out.

### **Human Rights, Equality and Data Protection**

21. The Welfare Strategy incorporates a number of policies which have been individually impact assessed. The details of the policies and associated impact assessments can be found below under '*background papers*' below. Since the Welfare Strategy incorporates these existing policies, there has been no further Impact Assessments carried out. The strategy does not change the aims and delivery mechanisms of the existing policies and approaches.

22. As part of the roll out of these policies, the exchange of data has been reviewed to ensure that all exchanges are legal and lawful. Links to all of these policies are included in the strategy.

### **Financial**

23. The strategy and all relevant policies are already provided for financially, either by central Government or the Council.

### **Actions to be taken to implement the recommended decision(s)**

Action	Responsible Officer	Deadline
The Welfare Strategy will be published on a number of pages on the Council's website.	Mark Symmonds	By 31 July 2022
Training will be rolled out for relevant staff to ensure they are able to support residents to claim the support, and administer awards fairly and consistently within the proposed strategy.	Janette Savage	By 30 September 2022
Attendance at all Departmental Management teams to inform them of this strategy and associated policies	Janette Savage	By 30 September 2022

### **Appendices**

1	Draft Welfare Strategy
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### **Background papers**

Body	Report title	Date
Executive	Stop the knock report / Vulnerability Policy – Collectable Debt ( <i>including Impact Assessment</i> )	16 June 2020 <a href="#">Meeting of Executive on Tuesday 16th June, 2020</a>
Executive	Corporate Crisis Policy ( <i>including Impact Assessment</i> )	11 January 2022 <a href="#">Agenda for Executive on Tuesday 11th January, 2022</a>

Executive & Full Council	Local Council Tax Support 2022/23 ( <i>including level 1 &amp; 2 Impact Assessment</i> )	14 February 2022 <a href="#">Agenda for Executive on Monday 14th February, 2022</a> 23 February 2022 <a href="#">Agenda for Council on Wednesday 23rd February, 2022</a>
Executive Member for Environment, Finance and Governance	Section 13A (1) (a) (Exceptional Hardship Fund) Policy	26 April 2022 <a href="#">Agenda for Executive Member for Environment, Finance and Governance on Tuesday 26th April, 2022</a>
Executive Member for Environment, Finance and Governance	Corporate Debt Management Policy ( <i>including Impact Assessment</i> )	21 July 2021 <a href="#">Agenda for Executive Member for Environment, Finance and Governance on Wednesday 21st July, 2021</a>

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