
NORTH AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

29 November 2022

Cabinet

Title: Financial Inclusion

Purpose: To provide an update to Cabinet on Financial Inclusion services.

Recommendation: It is recommended that Cabinet notes the Financial Inclusion services that are being provided to local people, the increasing caseloads that are being handled in response to the cost of living crisis and through the expansion of service provision, and the initial findings of an ongoing review which will create a more integrated system to better support people in need.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report provides Cabinet with an overview of Financial Inclusion services provided by the Council. These services provide vital support to local people.
- 1.2 Staff have been working with an increasing caseload in recent months, providing additional support in response to the Cost of Living crisis. Additional funding has seen the expansion of service provision and the current review of services aims to create a joined-up approach to support further capacity and to provide equity of access and provision to all citizens in North Ayrshire.
- 1.3 A review of financial inclusion services has been taking place incorporating Money Matters, the Welfare Reform Advice Team and BONA, and recognising the importance of links to other teams including Customer Services and Financial Services teams.

2. Background

- 2.1 As part of the Council's Transformation Programme and in response to the incidence of poverty in North Ayrshire and the Cost of Living crisis, a review of Financial Inclusion services across the Council is being progressed at pace.
- 2.2 The Head of Service (Finance and Transformation) within the Health and Social Care Partnership was appointed to the role of Project Sponsor in June 2022 and has led the project in recent months.

- 2.3 In June, a project board and project team were formed to take forward the review. The project board consists of senior managers with responsibility for teams which either provide financial inclusion services or work in close partnership with these teams to support local people. The project team consists of the team managers leading these same teams. Appendix 1 shows the current reporting structures of the teams which were part of the review process, this also illustrates the wide range of Council services involved in supporting citizens with financial inclusion needs
- 2.4 The review has taken place over the summer months through a series of workshops involving the project board and project team and concluded that there is scope to join up Money Matters and Welfare Reform Advice Team, and further incorporating the key principles of the holistic approach of BONA. The current teams already provide excellent services to local people but sit in different parts of the structure which is not the most efficient way to deliver the supports.
- 2.5 As the following paragraphs outline, the teams provide many of the same services and it is considered that by bringing them closer together, there is scope to streamline referral pathways into these services and reduce the number of cross-referrals between the teams. This should create a more integrated system to support people in need in a more holistic way. As will be seen in the information below, caseloads are already increasing this financial year in response to the cost of living crisis.

Money Matters

- 2.6 The Money Matters team is part of the Health and Social Care Partnership. The team provides welfare rights assistance and representation to any resident of North Ayrshire to ensure that they receive their legal entitlement to state benefits. In doing so, they will carry out benefit checks and confirm the benefits which people are entitled to, help people to make a claim for benefits or to dispute benefit decisions or sanctions and provide representation at appeals tribunals. The team also provides welfare rights training.
- 2.7 Local people can contact the team for support, or can be referred by staff across the HSCP, the wider Council and NHS services and other agencies. They work closely with the Council's other financial inclusion teams and partner agencies.
- 2.8 The team has a significant presence in local communities; Welfare Rights Officers are based in HSCP offices across the area, as well as GP surgeries, schools and local foodbanks. This is critical in making the team as accessible as possible to local people.
- 2.9 The co-location of staff in schools and GP surgeries are recent developments. The schools project commenced in Autumn 2021 and has already generated £255k of additional income for local people over the last year, with welfare rights officers working in 7 schools across North Ayrshire.

- 2.10 Services commenced in GP surgeries at Frew Terrace in Irvine and the Ayrshire Medical Group in Stevenston at the end of June 2022 and have since been rolled out more widely to 9 surgeries across the area. Financial gains of £121k were reported to the end of September. Additional funding has recently been secured to further expand this service to 5 GP surgeries on Arran.

Welfare Reform Advice Team (WRAT)

- 2.11 The Welfare Reform Advice Team sits within Housing and provides services to Council tenants across the whole of North Ayrshire.
- 2.12 Like Money Matters, the WRAT provides welfare rights advice and assistance with benefits claims and with appeals and sanctions. WRAT also offers a debt advice service to tenants, support around rent arrears and other Housing matters, and employability support.
- 2.13 It is notable that the team received 154 referrals for debt advice during 2021/22 and by the end of September 2022 had already received 153 such referrals during the first six months of 2022/23.
- 2.14 WRAT also has a significant presence in localities, with Welfare Rights Officers and Debt Advisors based in local housing offices across North Ayrshire, to ensure that advice and support is accessible to tenants on a face-to-face basis.

Better Off North Ayrshire (BONA)

- 2.15 BONA is a demonstrator project which is currently operating until March 2023. It is a Public Social Partnership (PSP), established through a Memorandum of Understanding with CHAP to demonstrate the commitment to collaboration and innovation in the delivery of public services. PSPs are voluntary partnerships involving one or more organisations from the public and third sectors. CHAP is a local charity that provides housing, welfare and debt advice services.
- 2.16 BONA delivers a person-centred service including advice on benefits, budgeting, debt, housing, health and wellbeing, digital and employability. The approach is piloted to residents of the Three Towns and Arran and operates from the Michael Lynch Centre in Ardrossan as well as Ardrossan Academy and Auchenharvie Academy.
- 2.17 The project provides works closely with Money Matters and the WRAT, as well as external partners. The pilot was designed to focus on those with complex and significant challenges.
- 2.18 An external evaluation of year 1 of the BONA pilot was carried out and highlights the financial and social benefits which services provided in a joined-up way can bring to people's lives. The single point of contact to access multiple services, benefits, budgeting, debt, employability, energy, digital, health and wellbeing and housing supported by a keyworker provides a holistic approach. The principles of the BONA pilot will be encompassed in the new approach to financial inclusion services provided by the Council for all residents in North Ayrshire moving

forward.

2.19 Summary of services and financial outcomes

	Money Matters	WRAT	BONA
Supports	All North Ayrshire residents	North Ayrshire Council tenants	Residents of 3 Towns and Arran
FTE staff	37.3	14	2 Council staff plus funding to CHAP
Cost	£1.5m	£0.566m	£0.238m
Financial gains 19/20	£15.3m	£1.644m	n/a
Financial gains 20/21	£15.9m	£1.702m	n/a
Referrals 21/22	4956	1528	261
Financial gains 21/22	£17.5m	£2.2m	£0.104m
Referrals 22/23 (to end Sept)	2982	1040	142
Financial gains 22/23 (to end Sept)	£7.6m	£1.234m	£0.174m

Outcome of service review

- 2.20 As part of the outcome of the review, a temporary senior manager post will be appointed to lead the joined-up financial inclusion services across North Ayrshire, with responsibility for integrating the teams and developing the Council's financial inclusion strategy. The new team will provide more holistic support by joining together services and ensuring that key work with third sector and community partners as well as national partners continues.
- 2.21 The advert for this post closed last week and interviews are scheduled to take place. In the short-term, this post will be line-managed by the Head of Service (Finance and Transformation), NAHSCP, as the project sponsor and in the longer-term, this will be transferred into the Council structure.
- 2.22 Cabinet agreed in August to invest a further £258k in financial inclusion supports and this will be taken forward quickly as part of the new joined-up team. A need for additional debt advice support has been identified through the review.

3. **Proposals**

- 3.1 It is proposed that Cabinet notes the Financial Inclusion services that are being provided to local people, the increasing caseloads that are being handled in

response to the cost of living crisis and through the expansion of service provision, and the outcome of a review which will see services better aligned to create further capacity. This will help ensure a consistent approach to support across North Ayrshire.

4. Implications/Socio-economic Duty

Financial

- 4.1 Financial inclusion services provide significant levels of additional income for local people, through supporting them to access benefits to which they are entitled. These are detailed in the table at 2.19 above.

Human Resources

- 4.2 Creation of a joined-up financial inclusion team will result in the closer alignment of posts which are currently in separate structures in the HSCP and Housing.

Legal

- 4.3 None.

Equality/Socio-economic

- 4.4 Financial inclusion services provide local people with a range of support services and access to financial benefits.

Climate Change and Carbon

- 4.5 None.

Key Priorities

- 4.6 Financial inclusion services support the Council priority -" Aspiring Communities".

Community Wealth Building

- 4.7 Additional financial gains for local people will support spend in the local economy.

5. Consultation

- 5.1 Consultation has taken place with the leads for financial inclusion services throughout the service review and in the gathering of information for this report.

Caroline Cameron
Director, Health and Social Care Partnership

For further information please contact **Paul Doak, Head of Service (Finance and Transformation), North Ayrshire HSCP**, on pdoak@north-ayrshire.gov.uk.

Background Papers

Appendix 1 – reporting structure of teams contributing to the review

