



BREAKING THE CHAINS OF POVERTY

Progress report on
West Lothian's
anti-poverty strategy



West Lothian
Council



Better off

West Lothian

‘Better Off’ is the West Lothian Community Planning Partnership’s approach to tackling poverty in West Lothian. The strategy was published in 2014 following consultation with West Lothian residents, community groups and key organisations.

Strategy aims to:

- Minimise the impact of poverty in West Lothian
- Ensure that people experiencing poverty have the skills, knowledge and support to cope with welfare reform and economic downturn
- Strengthen partnerships between organisations
- Develop targeted activity to help those most at risk of poverty

The strategy focusses on the undernoted priorities:

- Income and Financial Inclusion
- Employability and Economic Development
- Education
- Health
- Housing
- Community
- Tackling Inequality

At the heart of the strategy is the commitment and drive of partners to work collaboratively to mitigate the effects of poverty. Partnership work is integral to the success of the anti-poverty strategy; the Anti-Poverty Development Group is made up of representatives from a range of community planning partners, council services and third sector partner organisations. The group meets on a regular basis to monitor trends and co-ordinate activity to contribute to the outcomes of the strategy. Listening to those with lived experiences of poverty has been integrated into the work of the group and has informed the delivery of specific pieces of work. Partnerships have been strengthened through joint working and this has resulted in significant achievements over the lifetime of the strategy.

Addressing Attitudes about Poverty

A survey carried out in 2014 helped paint a picture of how people in West Lothian view poverty and related issues. The results of this survey were mixed and were used to develop activity to address common myths and tackle stigma associated with poverty.

The vast majority of respondents (82%) disagreed that people experience poverty because they do not want to work

61% believed that a large number of benefit claims are fraudulent

80% agreed that there is often no incentive for people to work as they are often better off on benefits

A conference was held in October 2015 to explore; common myths about poverty, the language we use to talk about poverty and how organisations can be more aware of poverty related issues and how their service users might be affected.

Poverty awareness training was piloted with primary school teachers in their probation year during 2016. Training was developed and co-delivered by the Advice Shop and teaching staff and focussed on the issue of child poverty.

“Very relevant with good practical strategies to implement in own setting”

“More discussion and interactive participation in activities would be good”

“Training was informative from both school and advice perspectives”

Feedback from these activities has been used to develop a new programme of poverty awareness training to be delivered to frontline Council staff and partner organisations in 2017.

A series of interactive workshops and e-learning resources will cover a range of topics including; addressing stigma and appropriate use of language, child poverty, welfare reform and disability and poverty.

Income and Financial Inclusion

Access to Advice

Consultation with local residents was carried out in 2014 which identified barriers to effective travel and transport options making it difficult to access advice services. Unsuitable timetables, routes and affordability were the main barriers identified. In order to improve access to advice services for people experiencing these barriers, partners have extended the availability of advice sessions within local communities.



The West Lothian Advice Network brings together advice providers to share information and resources and to promote good practice. The Advice Network has carried out a detailed mapping exercise and addressed gaps in service provision with additional outreach advice in under-served areas.

Budgeting Support

Universal Credit has been a focus of the action plan since the new benefit was introduced in West Lothian in 2015.



West Lothian Council Advice Shop has worked with the Department for Work and Pensions to offer personal budgeting support for Universal Credit claimants.

A budgeting advisor works closely with Universal Credit Work Coaches to offer individual tailored advice and appointments are available within two local Jobcentre offices on a weekly basis. Workshops have also been delivered to groups of long term unemployed claimants.

Credit and Debt



The number of households which are experiencing difficulties in managing their budget and have unsustainable levels of debt is increasing. Credit Unions have been working in local communities to give options to those with less financial choices to access affordable credit. West Lothian Credit Union has issued over £11m in loans to people in the community.

To help more low income households, West Lothian along with Fife and Falkirk Councils, have been working together to help more families access affordable credit. The project targets people who are likely to have incomes of lower than £15,000 with no record of savings and who have an extremely poor or no credit rating.

It will help households to build financial resilience, access and use mainstream banking options and build their capability to manage their money on a day-to-day basis.

Conduit Scotland, which is a not-for-profit Community Development Financial Institution, will provide fair and affordable loans. Along with affordable loans, Conduit Scotland will work in partnership with advice services to offer a holistic service with access to other support services. Conduit Scotland will work in conjunction with credit unions to help low income households become financially included.



Targeted Support

Over the lifetime of the strategy, campaigns have been developed to engage with key groups at risk of experiencing poverty. Two projects have been specifically targeting households with babies and young children.



The Prevention Intervention Money Advice Project delivered by West Lothian Citizens Advice Bureau works to provide advice to pregnant women and families of children up to one year old. The project has successfully worked with 737 women resulting in extra income worth £1.8 million for the families involved.

A project delivered jointly by Children 1st and West Lothian Council offered family support and money advice to young parents. Over the course of the project 72 young parents engaged with the support offered resulting in extra income worth £93,010 and £114,863 worth of debt managed. All young parents were also offered ongoing help through engaging with a support worker.



Employability



Youth Unemployment

The Steps N2 Work programme provides a variety of job opportunities for young people aged 16-24. Over the lifetime of the Better Off: Anti-Poverty Strategy, over 1200 opportunities have been created to address the issue of youth unemployment.

953

wage subsidy
opportunities

45

graduate work
experience
roles

143

West Lothian
Jobs Fund
placements

97

Modern
Apprenticeship
opportunities



Better off
West Lothian Money Week

Support to look for work

Successful employability fairs have been delivered in Fauldhouse and Livingston every year since 2011. The events bring together local employers and support services to offer a package of support to those looking for work. Local employment and volunteering opportunities are advertised and attendees can also get help to improve their CV, brush up on interview skills or access help with their work search.

Housing



Affordable Housing

As part of West Lothian Council's programme to build 1000 new affordable houses, financial advice has been offered to all prospective tenants. Individuals offered a new build tenancy are contacted and offered a full financial assessment including income maximisation checks, debt and budgeting advice. In the last year, 149 referrals were received from prospective new build tenants and 127 took up the offer of financial advice resulting in £41,578 extra income gained in benefits and awards of household items worth £14,165 through Scottish Welfare Fund grants.

Energy Advice

Energy advice providers in West Lothian have formed a partner's forum to co-ordinate activity and share resources to tackle the issue of fuel poverty.

A targeted 'Winter Warm' campaign was developed in 2015 to encourage uptake of the Warm Home Discount, a £140 rebate towards electricity costs aimed at low income households most at risk of fuel poverty.



Since the campaign launch, 370 qualifying households have been supported by the energy forum partners to apply for the Warm Home Discount resulting in savings worth £51,800.



Health

Health and Advice

West Lothian Citizens' Advice Bureau delivers advice sessions in several GP surgeries in West Lothian. The practice locations involved have high levels of need, lack alternative nearby advice services and can provide space to host the service. The aim of the project is to provide an information, advice and advocacy service to assist individuals and families to deal with poverty related issues. The service achieved total client financial gain of £223,447 in the last year.



The Advice Shop has taken the lead in providing advice within St John's Hospital, working with health care professionals to consider how best to promote and embed the service. As a result, there are 'pick up' points located throughout the hospital to take referral information and regular visits to wards to offer advice and support. Since October 2016 there has been a presence at the hospital information desk to encourage patients and carers to maximise income and improve their financial wellbeing. In 2016/17 there has been a financial gain of £628,369.

Tackling Food Poverty

A food poverty working group has been formed to look specifically at what can be done to support people experiencing food poverty.



The Insight Collective was commissioned to produce a report detailing the nature and extent of food poverty and insecurity in West Lothian. The report looked at local data and interviewed individuals with experience of food poverty as well as support services to produce a series of recommendations which has led to a food poverty action plan being developed.

**Increase awareness
and visibility of
the Healthy Start
voucher scheme**

**Map all non-
commercial shared
food growing spaces
in West Lothian**

**Establish a key
workers forum to
identify training
needs**

West Lothian Council has continued to support West Lothian Food Bank to help build sustainability. Whilst no-one should go hungry, food banks help when there is an emergency, most often because of benefit changes or delays. The 3 or More project helps those who face persistent food poverty. The project looks to work with individuals who find themselves requiring to use a foodbank three or more times in a six month period. One to one support is provided by a dedicated advisor looking at income and expenditure as well as looking at their debt and budgeting skills.





Education

Help with School Costs

Within West Lothian around 21% of school children receive a school clothing grant and 17% also receive free school meals based on family income. Those who qualify for free school meals and clothing grants are amongst the lowest income families therefore raising awareness and encouraging uptake of this support has been prioritised.

In addition to a general publicity campaign, information about financial support with school costs has been distributed through pupil post and groupcall text systems. In 2017, the Council's Revenues team worked with Education to identify households with school age children who may qualify. 2000 households were offered a 'fast track' application for free school meals and clothing grants resulting in 1201 returned applications which will benefit 2055 children.



Holiday Lunch and Activity Clubs

Research shows that many pupils experience a 'learning loss' during the school holidays. West Lothian Council has invested in providing holiday activity clubs during school holidays to reduce this. Food is also provided at holiday clubs to address the food insecurity that may be experienced by families entitled to free school meals, often called the 'holiday hunger gap'.



The first clubs took place in summer 2016 and provision has since expanded with new clubs added in October 2016, Easter 2017 and summer 2017. The clubs run over five weeks during the summer holidays at primary schools by the council's Active Schools and Community Sport coaching staff. Schools are open from 11am to 1pm, for activities such as football, athletics, dance, games or basketball, followed by a hot lunch menu. Pupils from schools in the surrounding communities are all welcome to attend free of charge, as long as they are registered by an adult.

The total number of registrations for summer 2017 across all the provisions is now 579 compared to 333 last summer. Meals were also provided for 305 children at play schemes run by Community Education staff and Boghall Drop in Centre held a day's activity which 90 children attended and meals were provided.



“ When we started Money Week, the focus was on raising individual awareness and giving partners an opportunity to come together on a focussed piece of work. Everybody that has joined Money Week has to be able to see that they [can] reach an outcome that is useful to them. That’s a key part of its success. ”

Elaine Nisbet, Anti-Poverty and Welfare Advice Manager, West Lothian Council

Money Week has been delivered annually in West Lothian since 2011. The week offers a series of events designed to increase awareness of poverty related issues and the support available to help those experiencing poverty in West Lothian. Over 5500 individuals have participated in Money Week since 2011 and West Lothian’s approach has been featured as an online case study by the Improvement Service to promote good practice.

**Local
employability
fairs**

**Energy
advice
surgeries**

**Community
film
screenings**

**Donation drive
for local
causes**

**Community
gardening
demonstrations**

**Five Day Money
Makeover budgeting
toolkit – 174 sign ups
over 2 years**

Tackling Inequalities



Welfare Reform

Since the introduction of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 it has been a priority to ensure that the public are informed of upcoming changes to the benefit system, and are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to manage changes. Significant welfare reforms have included;

**Transfer from
Disability Living
Allowance
to Personal
Independence**

**Roll out
of
Universal Credit**

**Introduction of the
Underoccupancy
Charge in Social
rented properties**

**Changes
to
Sanction rules**

**The introduction of
the overall Benefit
Cap and later
lowered Benefit Cap**

Support for Individuals

Families affected by the new lower benefit cap have been contacted and offered tailored advice and support to deal with the impact of the cap on their household income. 36 affected households have received advice and support to make claims for benefits and tax credits resulting in £24,784 extra income gained. Those affected have also been supported with advice regarding housing, debt and money management.

Discretionary Housing Payment is a cash fund to provide short term assistance towards housing costs for people facing financial hardship. DHP has been successfully used in West Lothian to help those most affected by welfare reform to cope with the changes to their benefits. All households in West Lothian who saw their Housing Benefit reduced by more than £5 per week following the introduction of the lower overall benefit cap have been offered DHP to top up their benefit until the end of March 2018. This will allow affected families to continue to work with support services to consider their options to manage their financial situation in the long term. DHP has also been successfully applied to households with an under-occupancy charge deducted from their housing benefit to enable people to remain in their home and ensure that tenancies are affordable and sustainable.

As the qualifying criteria and rules for benefit entitlement have changed and become more complex, raising awareness of claimant's right to appeal unfair decisions has been promoted. Advice services provide representation at social security tribunals free of charge.

Over the 5 years of the strategy this support has resulted in:

72%
of appeals won

Total financial
gain of
£7,991,807

Average annual
income gain for
customers of over
£3,000

Support for Services

It is recognised that services across West Lothian play a key role in offering the necessary support, advice and information to the public. It is important to provide front line staff with up to date information to ensure they are fully aware of welfare changes, the impact this will have on their customer base and how they can provide support to customers affected by these changes. This has been achieved through;

The anti-poverty strategy development group has monitored legislative changes and taken an active role in engaging with public consultation such as the Scottish Government's consultation on Social Security in Scotland.

A range of self-help guides, desk aids and video clips have been designed to offer information about issues related to welfare reform.

4 rounds of Welfare Reform Briefings offering training to all front line staff across West Lothian on upcoming changes to Benefits.

Universal Credit training offered to front line staff and advisors to prepare for supporting customers to manage the change to Universal Credit

In Work Poverty

Changes to the quality and nature of work, low pay and job insecurity now means that employment is not a guaranteed route out of poverty.



While the National Minimum Wage is statutory and must be paid to all employees, employers can choose to pay the Living Wage on a voluntary basis. The Poverty Alliance approved West Lothian Council's accreditation to the Scottish Living Wage Accreditation Initiative with effect on 1 April 2016.

As part of this accreditation;

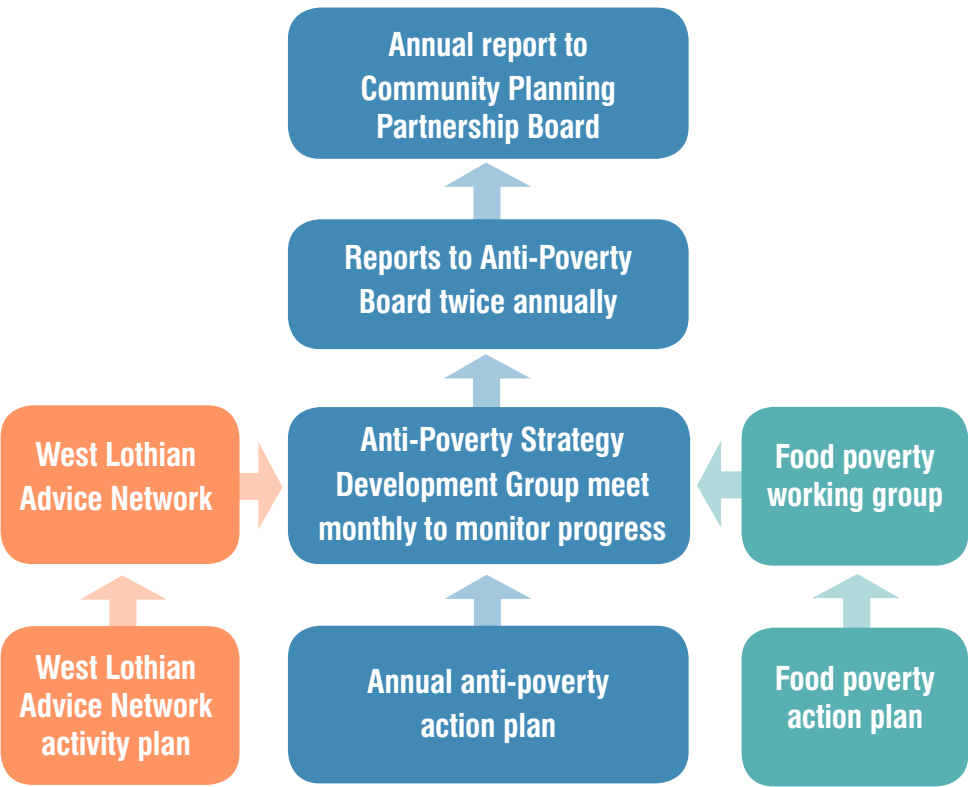
- the council committed to pay the Scottish Local Government Living Wage Rate of £8.33 an hour to all council employees from 1 April 2016,
- a scheme has been introduced enabling apprentices to move to the living wage during their apprenticeship
- the council worked with West Lothian Leisure to introduce the Living Wage Foundation rate of pay to all employees
- social care workers in the independent and third sectors paid the living wage from October 2016.

Work is underway to encourage and support local employers and community planning partners to work towards paying the living wage.



Monitoring and Evaluation

The anti-poverty strategy has a clear structure of accountability. Action plans are reviewed annually and progress monitored and reported regularly to the Anti-Poverty Board and Community Planning Partnership Board.



Looking Ahead

A refreshed 'Better Off: West Lothian Anti-Poverty Strategy' will be developed by March 2018. A key element of the refreshed strategy will be a 'co-production' approach to gain insight and understanding of those with a lived experience of poverty. This means gathering evidence from service users and representative organisations as well as those who administer services.



It has been agreed that the following approach will be taken:

- Develop key themes which will be the focus of sustained intervention over the life of the strategy. With an emphasis on prevention, targeting and explicit links with other strategies.
- Offer opportunities for public sector, voluntary, business, those who have interest in and who have a lived experience of poverty to provide evidence, debate and discuss the key themes.
- Deliver poverty awareness training to front-line staff from council, community planning partners, third sector and public. An element of this training will be discussion on the key themes, gathering of evidence on what is happening in West Lothian and listening and recording ideas, suggestions and new ways of working.
- Work with a range of different groups and agencies to collect personal testimony from their customers and will be designed to hear evidence from people who have direct experience of poverty.

If you would like to be involved with the refresh of the Anti-Poverty Strategy please email the Advice Shop.

e: advice.shop@westlothian.gov.uk



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