

REPORT TO: Health and Wellbeing Board

DATE: 10th July 2024

REPORTING OFFICER: Director of Public Health

PORTFOLIO: Health and Wellbeing

SUBJECT: Wider Determinants of Health: Responding to poverty & tackling the drivers of health inequalities

WARD(S) Borough Wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 This report presents the effects of the cost of living crisis on those living in poverty in Halton and the cumulative efforts of Public Health, the local authority and the voluntary sector to alleviate them.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That the Board:

- i) **Endorse the work taking place in Halton;**
- ii) **Note the importance of multi-agency approaches to tackling inequalities and collective work;**
- iii) **Note the requirement for a long-term focus on prevention to combat the drivers of poverty and health inequalities; and**
- iv) **Discuss how to sustain support for interventions, to ensure they remain open and available to all.**

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 Definition

Households are considered to be in poverty if their income is 60% or less of median national household income. Our aim in Halton is to support those in our communities to live in comfortable warm homes with access to affordable healthy food.

3.2 National picture

Inflation grew rapidly from the end of 2021 reaching its peak at the start of 2023 (Appendix 1). Inflation has steadily fallen since then returning to 2.3% in April (Appendix 2) with a continued decline expected. The main driver of inflation has been the cost of energy with the fall in inflation over the past year solely driven by a drop in fuel costs with food costs having risen over the year (Appendix 3).

The Government introduced the energy price cap in the Winter of 2022 to protect customers from further price rises, however, the cap still represented a 3 fold increase on a bill for the average household.

It is important to note although this means prices will not continue to rise at the alarming rate we have seen in the past 2 years, it does not reverse the squeeze on living standards we have experienced.

3.3 The Halton approach

During 2023 the government made cost of living payments to those on mean tested benefits, totalling £900 over the course of the year. When these payments were made during the year we saw a notable drop in the demand for crisis support (Appendix 4). Unfortunately, these payments provided short term relief and demand rose in between. However, it does inform the priorities of our approach to combatting poverty, follow initiatives that maximise income and reduce household costs while ensuring available support is well advertised and accessible in the community.

Poverty is fundamentally an issue of income not meeting necessary expenditure. The source of this income and the level of necessary expenditure will vary from individual to individual leading to different rates of poverty amongst different demographics within the Borough.

The local range of poverty responses are a mixture of national and local authority schemes alongside organically grown community initiatives. With increasing demand from rising cost of living challenges there was impetus to work collectively going forward. Public Health led on this in the form of two networks, Feeding Halton and Affordable Warmth, which have since been joined together to form the Poverty Alliance. The group's membership consists of local authority departments, commissioned services and third sector and community groups. The aim is to better coordinate any available resources that tackle poverty to ensure a coherent approach to intervention and pursue innovative approaches collectively.

3.4 Outreach

Central to this coherent approach has been to lead on outreach both in connecting front line organisations to services and speaking directly to the public. Over Winter we ran training sessions for front line staff on available support including foodbanks, social supermarkets, emergency energy payments for both pre-pay meters and direct debits as well as a range of options supported by the household support fund. The sessions were attended by over 70 staff from a range of departments from primary care to social workers.

We continue to run regular Partners in Prevention events. The events aim to provide a face to face forum for professional networking for the full range of organisations offering public services in Halton. The Winter event at the start of this year took place in the Shopping City in Runcorn. The event was open to the Public to bring together local support to connect with residents in an informal environment. 17 groups attended including family hubs, short breaks services, wellbeing enterprises, libraries and energy projects plus amongst others. The upcoming event next month will be ran alongside Adult Social Care as we look to expand the way we connect organizations to the support their clients require.

For the past two Winters we have created and ran the cost of living webpage as a central information point for all cost of living offers in Halton for professionals and the public to refer to. To improve signposting to this page between January and March we ran a campaign with marketing company Global media. The campaign consisted of a radio and video advert all linked to our central cost of living page with support options for those struggling with the weekly shop, the cost of energy and activities for kids amongst a range of help accessing national support. Over the course of Q1 the radio advert was listened to 63,142 times with 50% of these coming through the Radio and Spotify and 38% the Phone, reflecting the importance of targeting different forms of communication beyond our website. The video advert was viewed 47,008 times with 27,189 individual viewers. We also ran some sponsored Facebook adverts, particularly around specific support such as the healthy start scheme that we could target at the eligible demographic. This advert had another 13,000 views. The cost of living webpage had 4,228 visitors during Q1 of this year with support for food and household bills the most popular support searched for.

3.5 **Funding for interventions**

The interventions we have supported during the cost of living crisis reflect the multi-agency approach we have taken with support a combination of national, local and voluntary initiatives. Many of these initiatives are aided by the household support fund (HSF). The fund is an ad hoc pot of money given to councils by central government to help programs supporting residents with cost of living issues. It is currently in its 5th iteration which runs out at the end of September, no announcement has been made to commit to this funding beyond then. Some of the main food and fuel services funded are as follows:

- Food support for families- This includes the largest scheme the fund supports with food vouchers for children eligible for free school meals during the school holiday periods. This is essential

support to families with children who we see disproportionately need to use foodbanks compared to single adults.

- Fresh food at Social Supermarkets- We have 5 Social Supermarkets in Halton that provide redistributed surplus food at a discount in a community setting. We have been able to provide HSF funding to subsidize fresh food purchases to ensure healthy food is still available to those struggling.
- Foodbanks- Both Foodbanks in Halton have seen huge increases in demand since the pandemic and subsequent cost of living crisis. With donations struggling to keep up with demand HSF funding makes sure 3 days' worth of food is still available to anyone who requires it.
- Energy payments- HSF supports energy projects plus and the discretionary support fund to provide emergency energy payments to those struggling on both pre-pay meters and direct debit. This has been an essential offer over the past 2 years and forms a large part of the preventative approach we have to housing conditions below.

3.6 **Prevention approach**

Housing Conditions

Research:

As part of our work to tackle fuel poverty we have been looking into home conditions and the effects of damp and mold on the health of residents. This work has covered 2 main areas; identification of those in poor housing, particularly those with respiratory conditions and the pathway to available support currently in place.

We have set up a research piece with Bridgewater to look at how 0-19s are assessed during home visits. This includes looking at what questions are asked by staff during visits, training of staff in identifying signs of damaging mold, and the recording and escalation process for those with health conditions most at risk due to poor housing conditions.

As part of this work, we've met with the team at Halton Housing that covers home improvements to see if there is some shared learning and joint interventions we can do together. Halton Housing have recently been using air quality monitors in properties susceptible to damp to track home conditions for residents, with structural improvements or education on behaviour for residents with sustained high levels of humidity.

Working with both Bridgewater and Halton Housing a lack of data available on health conditions was a barrier to proactively targeting support. We continue to look into data sharing opportunities with primary care via the CIPHA fuel poverty dashboard which brings

data sets together to predict those at greatest risk of fuel poverty cross referenced with certain health conditions.

For available interventions we've grouped these into 3 categories to cover the reasons residents require support; financial, behavioural and structural. For those struggling to heat their homes we've secured continuing emergency support for fuel vouchers for those on both pre-pay meters and direct debit until the end of September ensuring every resident regardless of property type has a pathway to support with bills. For those requiring some education on causes of mold and when to ventilate their property we will be working with Energy Projects Plus who will offer home visits as part of their warmth for health scheme. Alongside these visits we have purchased some mold cleaning kits, dehumidifiers and hygrometers which measure humidity to equip residents with what they need to keep the problem away.

Home improvements:

For properties requiring structural improvements public health has taken the lead on the expansion of the Eco Flex scheme. The scheme offers grants for home improvements such as wall and loft insulation to private properties. Public Health is now working with the group consumer rights to improve the connection between those eligible and suppliers including outreach to all homes in Halton. In 6 months over Winter 40 successful applications were signed off for work to begin on improving the residents home efficiency.

Enforcement:

The environmental health team are responsible for enforcing housing standards in both the social and private rented sector. The environmental health team are an integral part of the public health directorate which ensure the councils regulatory functions are aligned with the councils public health objectives and facilitates the escalation of cases for further investigation. Where cases of damp and mold are identified, these will be escalated to environmental health for investigation and where necessary appropriate enforcement action. The environmental health team have been awarded some funding as part of a DLUCH project to better understand the incidences of damp and mold and increase enforcement of housing standards in the private rental sector. This will require the team to ensure that referral pathways into the service are optimised to maximise the opportunities for the team to intervene and improve standards.

Social Value

We are continuing to help connect social value offers received from local businesses to groups in the community. The offers are a mixture of financial support to corporate volunteering days. Included in this is an agreement we struck with Trevors caterers who are one

of the main food suppliers the council procures. On a quarterly basis they provide food supplies to all 5 social supermarkets in Halton as part of their contract, providing around £3000 worth of support over the year. This will continue over the course of their contract. Building on the success of these offers we are looking to build a social value portal, an online page where local businesses can connect with community groups they want to support. This will both formalise the current process included in our social value policy and give a platform to advertise for further support with the wider business community in Halton.

Regional networks

We are currently working with Liverpool City Region on the development of a regional food poverty strategy. This will build on the work we have done establishing the Feeding Halton network to look at sustainable funding and resources for community food initiatives. We have worked with national lobbying group Feeding Britain on successfully lobbying DWP to share data on those eligible for the healthy start scheme to encourage increased sign up. For fuel poverty we are part of the Cheshire and Merseyside fuel poverty steering group to look at opportunities for collaborative work with primary care on tackling the wider determinants of health. Finally, we are part of the All together fairer steering group that connects all Boroughs in the region together who are working to implement the indicators in the Marmot report.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Housing policy

The council is currently renewing its housing policy. This has included the views of Public Health on the priorities of housing conditions and the work to improve pathways for those with health conditions living in poor housing.

4.2 Social Value Policy

The council is currently in the process of renewing its social value policy which has been in place since the social value act came into force in 2012. As part of this we are exploring possibilities of creating a social value portal to host offers of community investment from providers the council trades with. This will formalise the success we have had on an ad hoc basis in connecting business offers with community groups.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The Household support fund has been in place for 4 years in various iterations and has supported many key services that those in crisis

rely on. The funding is due to end at the end of September creating a cliff edge for some services at the start of Winter when demand for certain services, particularly energy support, is needed the most.

5.2 Charities are predominantly funded through either donations which have reduced as the cost of living affects the wider public or support from the local authority which is under increasing financial pressure. Without the services groups provide in community demand for council support would increase.

6.0 **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES**

6.1 **Children & Young People in Halton**

Poverty and its effects disproportionately impact children and young people in Halton. Providing the best start in life can be significantly impaired by the issues outlined in this paper. Children and young people will need to be at the heart of decision making moving forward.

6.2 **Employment, Learning & Skills in Halton**

Halton Borough Council provides employment services for local residents through the Halton People into Jobs scheme. Finding appropriate work that pays a living wage is vital to addressing some of the issues within this paper. Although it is to be noted that those in full time work are not immune to living in poverty, given the cost of living issues.

6.3 **A Healthy Halton**

Spending on groceries in the past year has increased by 20% across the country with many forced to choose cheaper, unhealthier options or reducing the amount they consume. The opening of community food initiatives like social supermarkets and supporting in providing affordable fresh food ensures healthy meals are available to families struggling locally.

6.4 **A Safer Halton**

Halton has a significantly worse rate for violent crime compared to the rest of the country. Tackling inequalities and supporting the sustainability of local initiatives will help embed local support within communities.

6.5 **Halton's Urban Renewal**

The 5 Social Supermarkets have provided new community hubs in Halton as a base for residents to access wider services with the initiatives ran by local community organisations.

7.0 **RISK ANALYSIS**

7.1 There are ongoing risks to the welfare of local people due to the effects of the wider determinants of health and poverty.

7.2 The breadth of support that can be offered is currently dependent in many cases on non-recurrent funding as highlighted above. Continuing work in these areas will be at risk depending on future funding settlements

8.0 **EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

8.1 Health inequalities are a significant factor across Halton. Those suffering from poorer health are more likely to live in the more deprived areas of the borough and more likely to be living in poverty. Those living in the most deprived Wards in Halton have a life expectancy 13.7 years worse for men and 9.3 years for women compared to the least deprived wards.

8.2 Addressing the issues highlighted in the paper will go some way to addressing health inequalities, although further improvements will require system wide working across Halton including partner organisation in Health, Housing and employment.

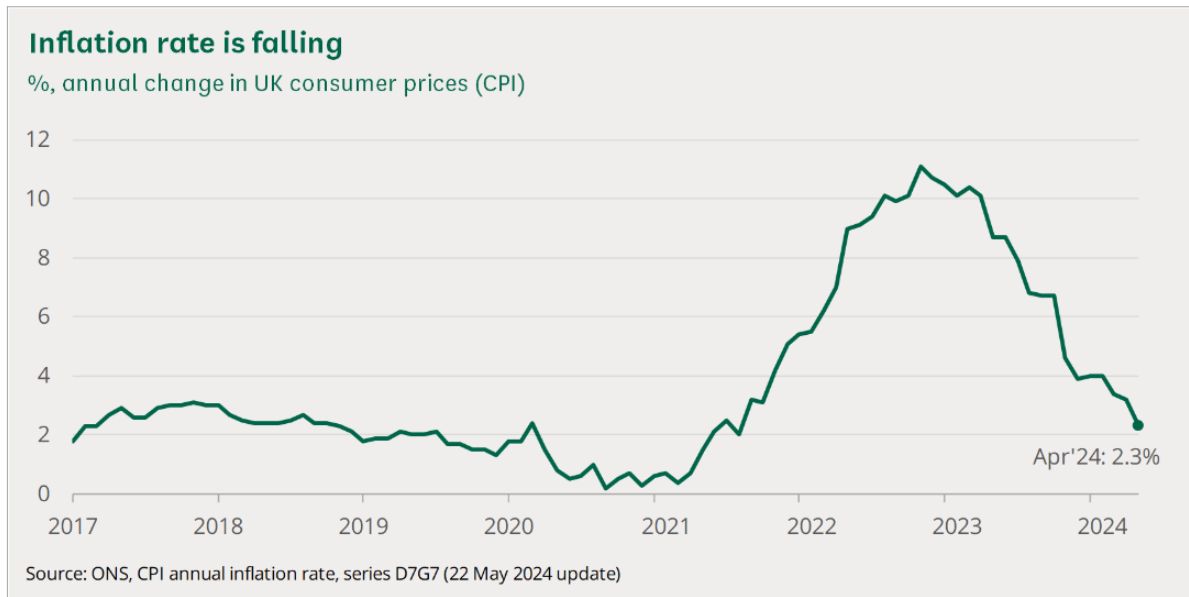
9.0 **CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 The expansion of the Energy Company Obligation scheme (ECO) presents opportunities to improve the energy efficiency standard of homes with an EPC rating of D or below. The aim of improving home standards is to reduce the amount of energy usage a household requires both reducing bills and tackling climate change.

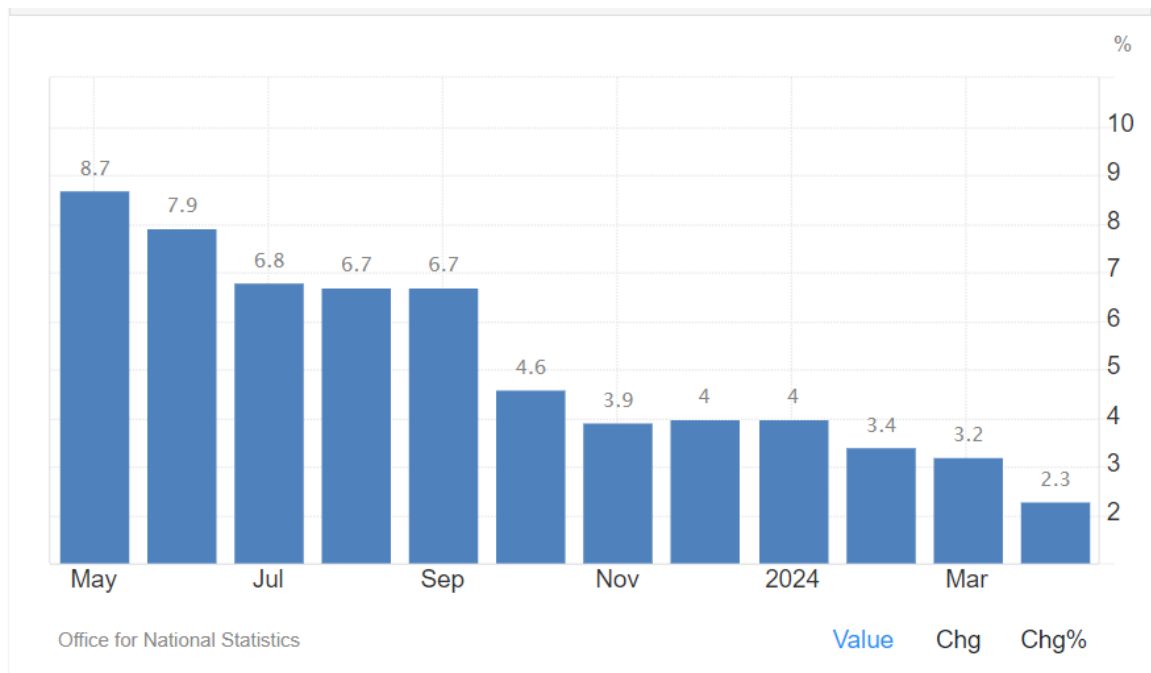
10.0 **LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

None under the meaning of the Act.

Appendix 1: ONS, Long view of UK inflation rates.



Appendix 2: 12 month change in UK inflation to April 2024



Appendix 3: Inflation changes in Q1 broken down by component

Components	Last	Previous	Unit	Reference
Energy Inflation	-16.70	-12.70	percent	Apr 2024
Food Inflation	2.90	4.00	percent	Apr 2024
Rent Inflation	7.20	6.90	percent	Mar 2024
Services Inflation	5.90	6.00	percent	Apr 2024

Appendix 4: Halton Foodbank use during the cost of living crisis. Note the July & November 2022 drop in usage when cost of living payments were made.

