

ITEM No ...2.....

REPORT TO: POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE – 7 MARCH 2022
REPORT ON: CUSTOMER SERVICES & IT: FRONT LINE SERVICE UPDATE 2021/22
REPORT BY: EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OR CORPORATE SERVICES
REPORT NO: 26-2022

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

To provide an update on activity undertaken by front line Customer Services and IT teams in 2021. This report highlights developments undertaken during the pandemic by the service and how these have mitigated some of the worst impacts of the pandemic for those with the least financial resources.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Is recommended the Policy and Resources Committee:-

- Note the content of the report and consider the impact of Covid 19 restrictions on individuals and families within Dundee and how the front line services of Customer Services and IT have provided a continuous service to mitigate the worst of these impacts throughout the pandemic.
- Note the implications of the removal of the £20 UC uplift and the decrease of the UC taper from 63p to 55p for those in work.
- Note the likely implications in terms of increased debt and demand for advice services from citizens and the increased level of crisis issues arising from cost-of-living increases.

3.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

No additional financial implications at this time.

4.0 BACKGROUND

This report details the changes to Customer Services and IT Front Line Services as a result of the Coronavirus Pandemic as well as the pandemic's impact on Dundee City Council residents and what has been put in place to mitigate against many of the challenges citizens have faced over the last 20 months.

5.0 MAIN TEXT

Universal Credit Migration

Introduced in Dundee on 8 November 2017, there are approximately 18,500 Dundee citizens claiming Universal Credit. Those customers still on existing legacy benefits, Housing Benefit, Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance and Tax Credits are expected to migrate to UC by 2024. Within the Housing Benefit caseload there are currently 3,665 working age claimants receiving legacy benefits.

Figure 1. below shows the number of customers in receipt of UC with a Council Tax Reduction (CTR) claim alongside the Housing Benefit (HB) caseload figures. This illustrates the caseload reducing year on year since full-service UC was introduced in Dundee in 2017.

Figure 1. CTR and HB Caseloads November comparison

November	CTR Caseload	CTR/UC	HB Caseload
2017	17,826	585	16,762
2018	17,494	3275	13,723
2019	17,188	4678	11,957
2020	17,993	6579	11,042
2021	17,861	7455	10,075

There have been several changes for UC claimants since the committee report 183-2018 which are detailed below: -

- 7 day waiting days removed
- Timescales: advance payments can be paid over a longer period
- Introduction of a budgeting loan
- Citizens Advice Scotland “Help to Claim” contract with the DWP to assist customers claiming UC
- Income taper reduced from 63% to 55% - which effectively means UC claimants who are working can keep 45p for every £1 they earn instead of just 37p.

Managed Payments to Landlord

Most UC recipients receive a single monthly payment which includes an element of eligible housing costs (rent). Such recipients are responsible for paying rent themselves however, if they are unable to manage their finances the landlord or claimant can apply for a Managed Payment to Landlord to be set up, also known as an Alternative Payment Arrangement (APA). Managed Payment of housing costs to a landlord would be paid first, in order to protect a claimant’s tenancy. Since the roll out of UC in November 2017 there has been an increase in the level of council house rent arrears. In addition to this, the number of UC recipients has risen from 1078 reported in Nov 2017 to 4031 as at Nov 2021. From this 4031 there are 3107 managed payments in place for Council tenants. The Corporate Debt Team have also seen an increase in the number of Council tenants now claiming UC. Managing the increase of claimants with UC continues to be challenging for staff as early engagement remains of high importance, especially for new applicants moving on to UC. New claimants have a 5-week assessment period before payment is made thus placing financial pressure upon them during this time as rent arrears continue to accrue. Corporate Debt Staff suspend further rent arrears action and ensure all forms of financial assistance have been applied for whilst tenants wait for their first payment. Approximately 84% of Local Authority tenants have rent arrears prior to claiming Universal Credit. The average rent arrears owed by a UC recipient is £812, compared to £773 for a non-UC household.

Figure 2. Council Rent Arrears over the last 4 financial years

Financial Year	Total Value Current Tenant Arrears
2018/19	£2,679,789
2019/20	£2,911,244
2020/21	£3,154,607
2021/22	£3,753,788

Figure 3. Bi-monthly report detailing Universal Credit Managed Payment Data

UNIVERSAL CREDIT MANAGED PAYMENT DATA					
Month Ending	Number of Current UC Cases	Number of Managed Payments	Number of Managed Payments in Arrears	Arrears Value of Managed Payments (from 0.01p)	Average Arrears
May-20	3468	2924	2615	£2,016,172	£771
Jul-20	3551	3009	2788	£2,313,127	£830
Sep-20	3596	2607	1916	£1,419,642	£741
Nov-20	3633	2564	1893	£1,331,628	£703
Jan-21	3701	2573	1979	£1,305,206	£660
Mar-21	3808	2155	1751	£1,253,210	£716
May-21	3819	2657	2209	£1,633,062	£739
Jul-21	3870	2800	2432	£1,919,155	£789
Sep-21	3972	2930	2592	£2,090,306	£806
Nov-21	4031	2997	2676	£2,172,424	£812

The Corporate Debt Team take a proactive approach to working with tenants to prevent a build-up of rent arrears. In recognition of the impact of Covid 19 staff take a sensitive and supportive approach to arrears monitoring with the priority to ensure families incomes are maximised and the most vulnerable are protected.

New software (Mobyssoft – Rentsense) is currently being introduced with the aim of reducing rent arrears, increasing collection rates and creating capacity within the team to support our most complex and vulnerable tenants by sustaining tenancies and preventing homelessness.

5.1 Cost of Living and the £20 Universal Credit Uplift Removal

On 6th October 2021 the £20 weekly UC uplift, introduced in the March 2020 budget at the start of the pandemic, was removed from UC Claimants' claims (meaning a loss of £1040 per annum). On 24 November 2021 the Universal Credit Taper was reduced from 63p to 55p for any income earned above the work allowance meaning UC claimants in employment could effectively receive up to £1000 extra.

The last 23 months have seen challenges for households due to the uncertain nature of the pandemic, an increase in the city's UC claimant caseload within that period and the recent cost of living increases in relation to fuel and food. In many cases people have had to transition to unfamiliar benefits such as Universal Credit for the first time in their lives. The impact of the removal of the £20 per week UC uplift from 6th October 2021 is still becoming clear as are the implications of the end of the furlough scheme. For example, it has been estimated that removal

of the £20 uplift will push 22,000 Scottish children into povertyⁱ with 200,000 in total affected across the UK. At present the competing pressures of benefit reduction and the increased cost of living represent a significant risk to many families' weekly incomes just at the point when gas, petrol and electricity prices are rising. In November 2021 UK inflation jumped to 5.1%. It is now running at 5.5% the highest rate since March 1992. Evidence of the already present impact of these issues was highlighted in Fuel Well Dundee's 2021/22 application process. 4088 applicants were asked to provide information relating to the reasons for their application and the difficulties they were experiencing. These were the main issues reported:

Figure 4: Fuel Well Issues reported November - December 2021

Issue reported	Numbers	Percentage of customers reporting this issue
Money not stretching far enough	2913	67%
Increased usage due to Covid 19	1842	42%
Unexpected high bill	765	18%
Other	620	14%
Other Benefit issues	317	7%
New benefit claim	185	4%
Lost job/redundancy	151	3.5%
Off supply/going off supply	94	2%
Furloughed	12	<1%

5.2 Council Advice Services' Response To Socio-Economic Issues

During the pandemic many advice services within the city (including Council Advice Services) were reconfigured for home working. At the same time there was a reduction in suitable venues available to undertake face to face advice. Telephone consultation became the normal means for advice delivery (with some testing of remote access to services where possible, e.g., Tribunal Hearings). Agreements were explored with agencies such as DWP to accept application forms completed in non-standard formats (e.g., via attached client statements drafted in conjunction with advisers) as workarounds to ensure that claims were actioned and submitted timeously. Standard statements that customers could input into their UC journals were also devised by advisers to speed up their customers' responses to DWP requests and support customers generally.

Areas of work where face to face contact was unavoidable required risk assessments to be put in place to ensure staff and customer safety. Customer Services and Advice Services undertook interviews in Dundee House by prior appointment where a telephone or online solution was not an option. In the case of Energy Advice DEEAP staff were able to do limited and controlled home visits where energy supply issues could only be dealt with in customers' properties. Risk assessments and necessary PPE were put in place to ensure a safe system of work.

One area where work was understandably curtailed was in the area of personal budgeting support where much of the work is undertaken face to face or in groups. It is hoped that budgeting support can resume at some point in 2022. Fuel Well Dundee gives the service the opportunity to develop work with a large proportion of Dundee Citizens struggling with the cost of living. A new training schedule is being developed for staff and external agencies and the service will review financial capability framework options using the learning from Dundee Money Action (DMA) which closed its doors in March 2021. For the last 12 months of its lifespan DMA offered personal budgeting and debt support to its customers via remote or telephone access.

6.0 OTHER AREAS OF FRONT LINE ACTIVITY

6.1 Customer Services

The Customer Services team delivers services on behalf of different departments across the Council, in turn building stronger interdepartmental partnerships. This has resulted in greater digital choices, enhanced customer service and greater impact in delivering efficiencies.

During the Covid 19 Pandemic the team have been heavily involved in making outbound calls to the citizens of Dundee who are required to self-isolate along with supporting customers who call into the Covid Helpline as well as supporting customers requiring help with the various grants and pandemic payments DCC (Dundee City Council) have administered on behalf of Scottish Government.

Face to face enquiries resumed when restrictions were relaxed which allowed customers the option of visiting Dundee House to have their query dealt with. From April 2021 – December 2021 Customer Services saw 4,500 customers face to face using a new appointment system which ensures both Customer and Staff safety.

Figure 5. and figure 6. below show telephone interaction from customers with the Customer Services Team over the last three years and is indicative of the impact of Covid and the restrictions being imposed and relaxed over this time.

Figure 5. Annual Customer Contact with Customer Services

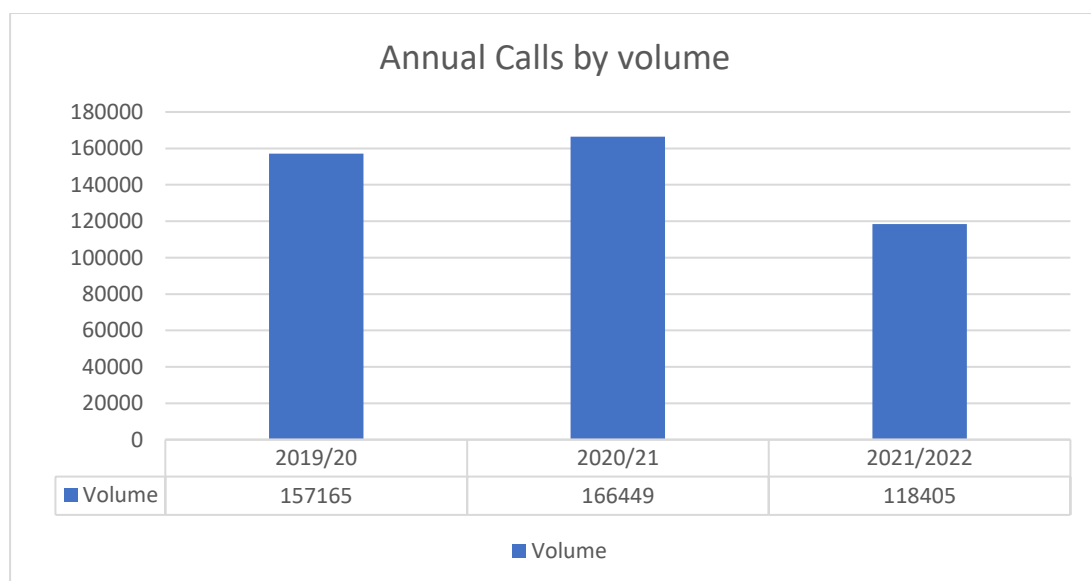


Figure 6. Customer Services calls broken down Quarterly

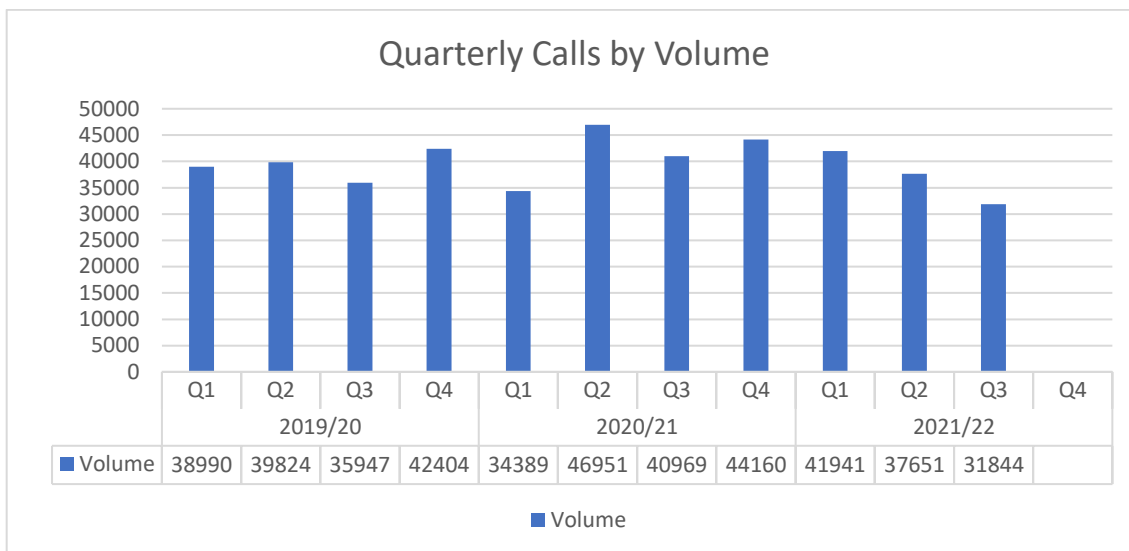
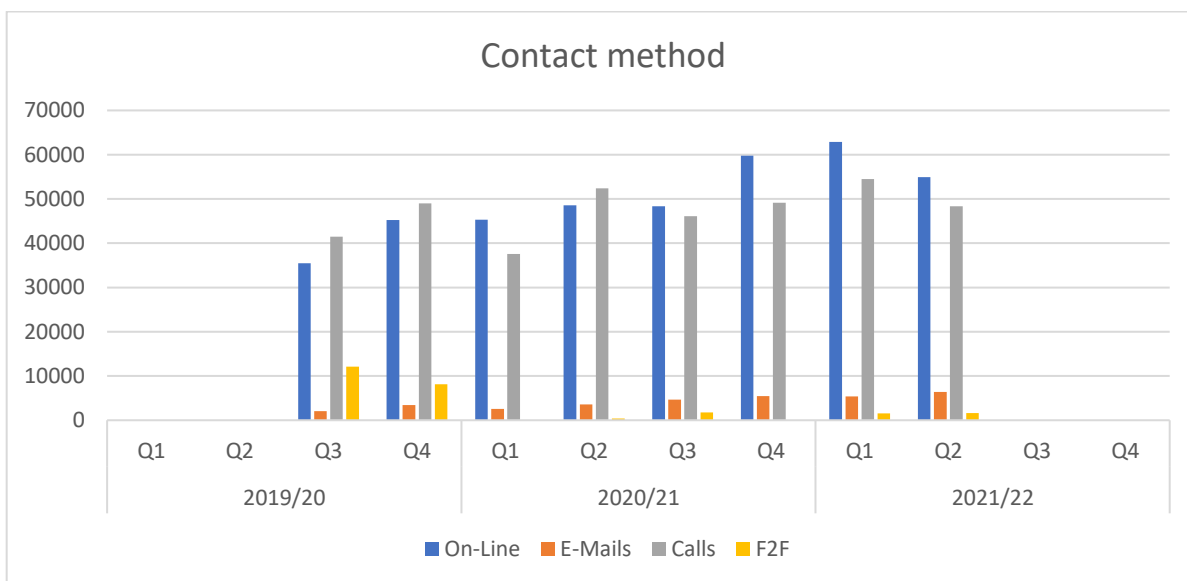


Figure 7 below gives a breakdown of the different methods customer are contacting the Service. The team continue to expand online choices to maximise efficiencies whilst enhancing the digital service available to customers.

Figure 7. Contact methods by quarter



6.2 Food And Medicine (Customer Services/Council Advice Services)

On 24th March 2020 as the first lockdown was introduced, Customer Services and Council Advice Services began a systematic process of offering proactive assistance to customers in need, in particular those who were socially isolated or reliant on family or friends for assistance due to age or disability. Linking in with the data supplied in the Chief Medical Officer’s Shielding list supplied to us, we instituted a food and medicine programme to help assist those in need

whether it was to access food, supermarket delivery slots, deliveries of vital medication or financial support. As understanding of the public's needs grew we expanded this programme to include aspects such as mental health signposting, food insecurity service access, dog walking, benefit checks, debt advice, access to sanitary products and dietary support. This involved almost weekly changes to the process and the Firmstep forms on the council website (developed in conjunction with IT) as it was tweaked to meet customer demands.

The Shielding data also afforded the Customer Services Team the opportunity to proactively contact each and every individual listed with an offer of support and the option to access these additional supports at any point throughout the pandemic. Those who opted into the support were then contacted and triaged by Council Advice Services staff who either handed off the cases to those teams or agencies who could assist or dealt with individuals' needs in house. Each customer therefore received a tailored service based on their individual circumstances.

Many customers were extremely grateful for the offers of support and what was provided. As the process and extent of the supports grew the network of support was expanded to include joint working with the Sources of Support and Pharmacy teams within Health and Social Care, the Food Insecurity Network, Dundee Volunteer and Voluntary Action (DVVA) and Alexander Community Development. As individual outbreaks in particular factories occurred in the summer and autumn of 2020, we took action to contact those employees self-isolating in the same way as we had offered support to those in the shielding category.

It was also the case that any Dundee citizen who was struggling could still access the supports available despite not being in the shielding category. Many took up this offer throughout the pandemic.

As the Self Isolation Support Grants were launched in late 2020 this process was also initially added to the food and medicine triage programme but later dealt with through a separate process in order to reduce the questions asked for those who solely wished to make an isolation support grant application. To date we have seen 11,863 applications to the food and medicine process and the option still remains live on the council's website for those who need it.

6.3 Covid Hardship Payments Paid In 2020/21

This year Benefit Delivery Team have made various new payments on behalf of Scottish Government to families to combat the financial effects of Covid. This was in addition to the usual work undertaken, however despite this additional work the Team continued to exceed the Scottish average for Housing Benefit processing. Figure 8. below details the extent of support provided. The Hardship, Family Pandemic and Bridging payments were made to families in receipt of free school meals on a low income. The Low Income Pandemic Payment was made to families in receipt of Council Tax Reduction and certain exempt categories of Council Tax.

Figure 8. Hardship payments: Amounts and volumes

Payment	Amount	Children/Families	Total Paid
Spring Hardship Payment*	£100	6569	£656,900 *Children in early years also paid
Holiday Support Payment*	£2.25 per day	5706 * on average	£886,800

Family Pandemic Payment	£100	5351	£535,100
Autumn Bridging Payment	£160	5329	£838,240
Winter Bridging Payment	£160	5210	£833,600
Low Income Pandemic Payment	£130	18,013	£2,341,690
Fuel Support Payment	£50 single £100 couples	4436	£249,800

6.4 Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)

Funding for Discretionary Housing Payments has been devolved to Scottish Government since April 2017. Scottish Government continue to fully mitigate the Under-Occupancy Charge (also known as the Bedroom Tax) within this funding.

Figure 9. below details DHP funding from 2018/19 to date including Dundee City Council's contribution to the total. Figure 10. details awards made to tenants during those years.

Figure 9. DHP Funding 2018/19 to 2021/22

Year	Bedroom Tax	DHP	DCC Contribution	Total
2018/19	£1,997,619	£420,079	£250,000	£2,667,698
2019/20	£1,962,771	£427,962	£250,000	£2,640,733
2020/21*	£2,220,152	£913,391	£150,000	£3,283,543
2021/22*	£2,661,722	£727,188	£100,000	£3,488,910

*Please note £459,037 extra funding was awarded to Local Authorities in 2020/21 due to the extra need vulnerable families experienced as a result of the Covid pandemic, £155,000 was awarded in this financial year. The Benefit Delivery Team adopted a proactive approach to ensure as many families as possible were supported.

Figure 10. DHP awards to tenants 2018/19 to 2021/22

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021 to date
Awards	5520	5621	5595	5226
Total Spend	£2,637,777	£2,746,667	£3,210,587	£3,137,681
Spend on UC (includes SSSC)	£651,278	£956,052	£1,311,571	£1,436,591

The team also ensure families who are affected by the Benefit Cap are supported through the DHP fund. This cap was introduced in 2013 as part of the Welfare Reform programme to limit the amount of benefit a working age household can normally receive. The cap is applied to Housing Benefit and Housing Costs within Universal Credit when certain benefits are combined. Currently 45 benefit capped households are being supported through a DHP.

6.5 Local Authority Hardship Fund

This fund continues to be available to local authority tenants who find themselves in rent arrears. Good partnership working across the Customer Service teams ensure this fund is highlighted to tenants, in turn helping them to sustain their tenancy.

Figure 11. shows details of DCC funding, awards and spend from 2018 to the present.

Year	DCC Contribution	Awards & % Spent on UC tenants	Spend
2018/19	£450,000	833 - 85%	£444,177
2019/20	£250,000	468 - 93%	£250,000
2020/21	£450,000	589 - 89%	£450,000
2021/22	£500,000	390 - 94%	£408,989

6.6 The Tenant Grant Fund

Dundee City Council administers the Tenant Grant Fund on behalf of Scottish Government as a way of preventing evictions for private and social rented tenants who have built up rent arrears as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The fund enables local authorities to prevent homelessness and sustain tenancies by directly reducing, alleviating or paying off rent arrears altogether where tenants and landlords are willing to work together and agree a payment plan.

Figure 12. Tenant Grant Payments made to date

Tenure Type	Tenants Supported	Amount
Local Authority	52	£70,355
Registered Social Landlord	44	£50,683
Private Tenancies	8	£11,141
Totals	104	£132,179

Customer Services & Benefit Delivery, Corporate Debt, Council Advice Services and Housing are proactively working with the most vulnerable in Dundee to ensure this fund is highlighted to those in need. We have already identified a significant number of potential candidates, particularly those living in Private Tenancies through the Fuel Well Dundee data gathered in 2021/22.

6.7 Fuel Well Dundee 2020/21 And 2021/22

Fuel poverty and increased living costs have again been highlighted as a concern for Dundee households over the 2021/22 winter period and remains a priority for the Dundee Fighting for Fairness Commissioners. Energy bills have also gone up for many households across Scotland since the energy price cap was increased on 1st October 2021. The cap was raised by the energy regulator Ofgem to take into account the rising cost of gas and electricity. This means standard tariffs could increase by £139 per year (to £1,277 in total per year – which is the average UK household energy cost) with prepayment customers seeing a potential increase of £153 to £1,309 per year.

Council Advice Services, including Dundee Energy Efficiency Action Project (DEEAP), developed plans to utilise £400,000 of Scottish Government Funding to Support Individuals from Covid-19 to address winter fuel poverty, following on from the success of 2020/21's Fuel Well Programme which managed to reach 2700 households across Dundee last winter and released £295,000 to assist with fuel costs.

New applications for the 2021/22 Fuel Well Dundee scheme were taken from 15/11/2021. The scheme saw an overwhelming public response with 4468 applications already taken, 3044 of these in the first 7 days. On 20th December 2021 the first 3496 payments were made to households totalling £217,770 after Council Advice Services staff had processed 74% of the applications. All households subsequently approved after the first payment date received double payments in January 2022 with existing approved applicants receiving their second payment in the last 2 weeks in January. It is hoped that the scheme can be re-opened again in March 2022, funding permitting. At present Fuel Well has paid out a total of £507,120 to 4088 households.

As well as a cash first approach the scheme will also link customers up with other supports such as benefit checks/entitlement (765 referrals), advice in relation to debt (371 referrals) and of course longer term support in relation to energy advice (1307 referrals). We also have 786 cases looking for support for children's warm winter clothing through Cosy Bairns.

Questions on the Fuel Well Dundee form were co-produced with the Fighting for Fairness Commissioners and were aimed at identifying different types of customer need. This year customers will only have to make one application and if approved this will lead to 2 consecutive monthly payments (with a higher rate for households with children). We also hope to compile a record of customers' current suppliers in order that we can contact those customers automatically in 2022 when their supplier opens up the Warm Home Discount scheme, offering support where needed to make a new application. By doing this, we aim to ensure that as many Dundee citizens as possible do not lose out on the Warm Homes discount scheme which in some cases suppliers may only offer for limited periods in each calendar year. Each year customers have to make a new application which can often mean deadlines are missed in those subsequent years.

Last year's successful partnership with SCARF Energy Advice has also been expanded to concentrate on private tenants and owner occupiers who will be able to access longer term solutions in relation to their heating systems and energy efficiency at home. SCARF and DEEAP are currently working through hundreds of Fuel Well cases and we have confirmation from SCARF that Fuel Well Dundee will end up being Home Energy Scotland's biggest referrer in this financial year by some distance. £200,000 worth of energy efficiency measures have already been installed via Fuel Well Dundee case referrals.

6.8 Scottish Welfare Fund

The Scottish Welfare Fund, managed by Council Advice Services, is a grant-based fund that seeks to achieve better and more sustainable outcomes through taking a holistic approach to the processing of grant awards alongside other sources of assistance and services for clients. Wider forms of assistance are also provided such as white goods, access to budgeting, money advice, energy advice, income maximisation, community care assessments and employability services. All of the above are undertaken routinely in Dundee in order to fulfil the intention of a holistic approach.

The fund is intended to:-

- Provide a safety net in an emergency when there is an immediate threat to health and safety in the form of Crisis Grants (CG). Claims for assistance will meet national performance indicators of award decisions within 1 working day. (100% cleared within

1 working day where all information has been received from the applicant allowing a decision to be made).

- Enable independent living or continued independent living, preventing the need for institutional care in the form of Community Care Grants (CCG). Claims for assistance will meet national performance indicators of award decisions within 15 working days.

Dundee's Scottish Welfare Fund has seen a huge increase in activity since the start of the pandemic in March 2020 with a particular increase in the number of crisis grant applications. In the 12 months to 31/01/2022 the service saw its highest number of applications taken (13,860) comprising 10,983 Crisis Grants and 2,877 Community Care Grants.

Figure 13. Scottish Welfare Fund Application Data for 14 months to 31/01/22

Month	CG App	CG awards	CG Spend	CCG App	CCG Awards	CCG Spend
Dec 20	739	540	£53,925	218	142	£102,396
Jan 21	1028	706	£70,687	238	133	£100,438
Feb 21	760	572	£48,855	271	177	£137,227
Mar 21	799	647	£58,860	318	236	£195,401
Apr 21	702	470	£46,305	286	252	£179,539
May 21	734	453	£47,570	277	232	£181,494
Jun 21	830	597	£69,541	221	154	£115,395
Jul 21	920	665	£69,905	202	101	£68,609
Aug 21	906	612	£62,907	222	83	£78,144
Sep 21	856	599	£60,690	200	113	£80,180
Oct 21	954	590	£59,850	198	114	£79,172
Nov 21	1140	728	£69,120	239	145	£85,041
Dec 21	1095	700	£65,233	237	215	£178,792
Jan 22	1287	718	£70,859	206	122	£80,798
Total	12750	8597	£854,307	3333	2219	£1,662,626

By way of comparison when the numbers of applications received in 2017-2018, when volumes were last reported under the welfare reform heading, are compared with current levels we have seen a 39% increase in applications overall (Crisis Grants saw a 57% increase). Despite these increases the Scottish Welfare Fund Team still manages to process new crisis grant applications within 1 working day on average and new community care grant applications within 14 Working Days On Average.

6.9 Self Isolation Support Grants

In October 2020 the Scottish Government launched the Self Isolation Support Grant Scheme as part of the Scottish Welfare Fund Scheme in order to assist people on low incomes to self-isolate and in doing so prevent the spread of Covid-19.

In order to qualify applicants must:

- have been required by the Test and Protect Service to self-isolate as a result of Covid-19, either because they have tested positive for coronavirus, have recently been in close contact with someone who has tested positive or are awaiting a test result;
- Be employed or self-employed
- Be unable to work from home and will experience reduced earnings as a result; and
- Be currently receiving, or have been awarded but not yet received a payment of: Universal Credit; Working Tax Credit; Income-based Employment and Support Allowance; Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance; Income Support; Housing Benefit; and/or Pension Credit.

Grants are paid per eligible person, not per household, therefore a couple who both meet the eligibility criteria for a grant will be paid £500 each.

The scheme has been regularly updated to cover the impact of the vaccination programme on self-isolation rules and more recently the developments stemming from the discovery of the Omicron variant of the virus. Staff have adapted their practice and decision making to each of these changes as they have been introduced.

In the course of the last 70 weeks since the scheme began, Council Advice Services have processed 6861 applications for the Self Isolation Support grant. At times the demand on Council Advice Services has been extremely challenging, especially in the current period from December 2021 – February 2022. This has been due to the sheer number of applications that have been received from individuals having to self-isolate. In turn this has seen us have to reduce other areas of work in order to concentrate on processing the £500 grants that are essential for those on low incomes who do not receive contractual sick pay whilst self-isolating. There have been periods when infection rates have increased dramatically and over the course of the scheme weekly applications received have ranged from a low of 7 in a week all the way up to 629 in one recent week. Figure 14. below shows the sharp increase in numbers from December when Omicron infection increased. Staff have been drafted in from other parts of Council Advice Services and from other areas of Corporate Services in an effort to meet the demands of the scheme. Such a variation in numbers has in turn made planning difficult when infection rates have soared. However despite this the Scottish Welfare Fund have managed to continue to process Self Isolation Support Grants throughout the pandemic.

6.13 Free School Meals And Holiday Support Payments

Free school meals are a vital element of support available to pupils in school. They ensure children have access to a free and nutritious meal whilst in school, which in turn helps with their learning and development. During the pandemic, free school meals provision has been enhanced by way of payments during school closure times and school holiday periods to help families budget for a nutritious meal outwith the school environment.

The universal free school meals available to all Primary School pupils in P1 to P3 was expanded in August 2021 to include all pupils in P4. The scheme will be expanded further from January 2022 to include all P5 pupils. The aim is that all primary school children will receive universal free school meals from August 2022.

The team have made over £886,224 in Holiday Support payments this year alone, supporting on average 5706 children per holiday period as detailed in 6.3.

6.14 GP Co-Location Update/Funding For Deep End Practices

Early access to money and welfare benefits advice has a positive impact on individual health and wellbeing. In 2017 Council Advice Services and its partner agency Brooksbank Centre and Services was the winner of a special award (Chairperson's Gold Award) at the COSLA Excellence Awards for its work embedding face to advice within 8 Dundee Practices. Since the start of the pandemic access to these surgeries has been limited due to Coronavirus restrictions. However despite this, advisers within Welfare Rights and Brooksbank have kept up remote contact with practice managers at the surgeries and have continued to take referrals from health professionals throughout the pandemic, making regular trips to surgeries to access supporting medical evidence for patients with benefit or money advice issues.

Co-location in 8 practices means that 57,045 patients in Dundee now have access to Welfare Benefits advice within a stigma free, trusted setting within their community. This alternative model of service delivery within Dundee GP practices promotes both an early intervention approach by accessing medical evidence on behalf of patients with the patient's explicit consent and better supported applications and mandatory reconsiderations for sickness and disability benefits such as Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and Personal Independence Payment (PIP). Patients at these practices can be referred by their GP or health professional to an experienced Welfare Rights Officer or can self-refer via reception staff within each practice. In the absence of confidential appointments within the practice during the pandemic Welfare Rights Officers have conducted consultations online or by telephone. Although numbers have dropped during the pandemic, Council Advice Services still generated £1,130,936 in extra household income for GP surgery patients through benefits and tax credit claims in 2020/21. This represented just under 10% of the total Council Advice Services gains for 2020/21 which totalled £12,241,084 overall.

Scottish Government have recently announced 2 year funding for this model which has been renamed Welfare Advice and Health Partnerships (WAHPs). Research by the Improvement Service, which Council Advice Services had participated in, has shown that WAHPs provide a simple, effective, person-centred approach to tackling health inequalities, improving individual health and well-being and producing cost-savings for the public sector. By providing advice services in a non-stigmatised setting, which usually involves referral by a trusted member of the medical profession, WAHPs are able to offer a delivery model which supports earlier intervention and engages individuals who would not usually use 'traditional' advice services.

Dundee has been granted funding which will meet the costs of 2 additional Welfare Rights Officers between February 2022 to February 2024. The intention is to continue to work in partnership with Brooksbank Centre and Services and fund a welfare rights officer within that service as well as within the Council's Welfare Rights Team for the 2 year period. 3 additional GP practices in Dundee serving the most deprived populations will be approached to try and expand the model beyond the current provision.

Funded by Scottish Government, the Improvement Service will work in collaboration with NHS Scotland and the Scottish Public Health Network to provide support to this initiative going forward.

6.15 Advice Strategy 2022-23

The advice strategy for Dundee is currently being reviewed, given the ever changing nature of the landscape of advice and how the Coronavirus restrictions have had an impact on agencies and their ability to deliver advice services. However the underlying principles have not changed and regardless of the operational adjustments that may need to be made, the plan for an advice strategy will still contain the following areas of need which will be tackled collectively by the agencies currently signed up to it (Brooksbank Centre and Services, Dundee Citizens Advice Bureau, Dundee Council Advice Services and SCARF).

- Tackling Poverty and Employment in Dundee
- Access to affordable credit and financial products
- Health and Income Inequality
- Minority Ethnic Community Support
- Child Poverty Mitigation
- Building Stronger Communities
- Outreach in Dundee Communities
- Food Insecurity and a Cash First Approach
- Provision for substance use advice and support
- Long term covid sufferers and mental health impacts of the pandemic
- Immigration advice following on from Brexit
- Linking with public health around areas such as maternity and smoking cessation

This strategy will provide a framework that can be used to continually assess and consider future activity in relation to Welfare Benefits, Money Advice and Energy advice provision within the city. In signing up all agencies will agree to act collaboratively to ensure that they work, plan and deliver services in line with the strategic priorities of the City Plan, Council Plan and the Dundee Partnership's Fairness Action Plan to reduce Social Inequalities and Child Poverty in Dundee. By doing so the organisations will co-ordinate activities designed to contribute to the outcomes set to make the biggest impact on Dundee and its people as a whole.

We propose to review and redraft the current advice strategy for presentation at a future Policy and Resources Committee with representatives from all the partner agencies present.

7.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This report has been subject to an assessment of any impacts on Equality & Diversity, Fairness & Poverty, Environment and Corporate Risk. There are no major issues.

8.0 CONSULTATIONS

The Council Management Team were consulted in the preparation of this report.

9.0 BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

ROBERT EMMOTT
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE SERVICES

17 FEBRUARY 2022

