

## TRAFFORD COUNCIL

Report to: Health Scrutiny  
Date: 27<sup>th</sup> of January 2022  
Report for: Discussion  
Report of: Diane Eaton

### Report Title

**Welfare and Benefits Advice - Information and Advice**

### Summary

**Trafford provides information and advice on a number of welfare issues which includes, but is not limited to benefits advice. The purpose of this report is to demonstrate the current information and advice strategy to elected members.**

### Recommendation(s)

**This paper's seeks to provide information on the current advice and guidance offer to our residents of Trafford.**

Contact person for access to background papers and further information:

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Background Papers:

### Background Information

*Background information – must include all relevant and explanatory information.*

*It should also include consideration of the following implications. Please specify what the implications are or if they have been included in the body of the report. If any do not apply, insert 'not applicable' so that it is clear that all implications have been considered.*

*Implications:*

Relationship to Corporate Priorities	Priority 1- Reducing Health Inequalities Priority 2- Supporting People out of Poverty
Relationship to GM Policy or Strategy Framework	
Financial	Financial implications include costs of externally commissioning services only.

Legal Implications	Tendering process and procurement law must be considered
Equality/Diversity Implications	Ensuring all residents of Trafford have access to advice and information relating to Welfare rights and benefits advice.
Sustainability Implications	<i>See guidance note overleaf</i>
Carbon Reduction	Ensuring a place based approach supports carbon reduction
Staffing/E-Government/Asset Management Implications	
Risk Management Implications	For consideration in options paper which is yet to be agreed.
Health and Safety Implications	

## 1.0 Background

### Future of Advice and Information

- 1.0.1 Work to develop a Trafford wide information and advice strategy commenced prior to the pandemic but was temporarily halted in order to divert commissioning and provider resource towards the COVID response.
- 1.0.2 As a result of the COVID pandemic, access to information and advice, including specialist information and advice, has been a key focus of our responses. Commissioned providers have been central to this and as demand for services has increased, people need support more urgently than they did before the pandemic and subsequently the way that those services are delivered has had to change and adapt.
- 1.0.3 The Living Well in My Community Strategic Design Group (LWIMC SDG) was established to focus on COVID recovery and service redesign/reform, with a specific focus on universal services and support provided by Trafford's VCFSE sector organisations as information and advice falls within the remit of the LWIMC SDG.
- 1.0.4 Trafford Together I&A Strategy Group (TTIASG) has led on the development of a partnership wide draft Information and Advice strategy for Trafford with representatives from in house (Welfare Rights and Housing Options), commissioned and non-commissioned Information and Advice services and registered housing providers. The group is chaired by the Specialist Commissioner for information and advice, supported by the Commissioning Officer.
- 1.0.5 Understanding the current offer has been essential in order to develop a strategy and as a result, TTIASG completed a mapping exercise between June and August 2021.

	No of Orgs	%
<b>Benefits &amp; Tax Credits</b>	5	71%
<b>Universal Credit</b>	4	57%
<b>Debt</b>	4	57%
<b>Money matters</b>	4	57%

<b>Health</b>	5	71%
<b>Education</b>	5	71%
<b>Housing</b>	4	57%
<b>Caring Responsibilities</b>	4	57%
<b>Legal</b>	4	57%
<b>Travel / Transport</b>	4	57%
<b>Utilities and Communications</b>	4	57%
<b>Employment</b>	2	28%
<b>Immigration &amp; Asylum</b>	2	28%

1.0.6 The table shows the majority of providers offer information and advice around finances, with a smaller number offering more specialist information and advice with only 2 providers offer information and advice around employment issues.

1.0.7 The development of Trafford's I&A Strategy is underpinned by a number of key principles, reviewed and agreed by TTIASG members include :

- Co-production test and learn,
- accessibility,
- place based working,
- no wrong door,
- the relationship between our in house and commissioned services,
- preventing crisis and developing resilience through income maximisation,
- self-help where possible but not as a default option,
- the right type of help,
- improving the Digital Front Door for information and advice,
- face to face information and advice.

1.0.8 The strategy also has strong links with a number of other Trafford Council Strategies, including: Digital Strategy; Poverty Strategy; Carers Strategy; VCFSE Strategy.

1.0.9 The Information and Advice Strategy is currently in draft and due to the impacts of COVID the current arrangements have been extended for a period of 12 months whilst the development of the information and advice strategies continues. The slide below provides an overview of the aims of the strategy moving forward:

## Developing a Trafford wide Information and Advice Strategy

- The draft strategy has been co-produced by the I&A Strategy Sub Group of the LWIMC SDG, but also has close links with the Poverty Strategy Group.
- Key headlines from the draft strategy include:
  - Responding to the impact of COVID
  - Understanding and valuing what we already have
  - Co-production
  - Accessibility
  - Place based working
  - No Wrong Door
  - The relationship between in house and commissioned services
  - Preventing crisis, developing resilience, income maximisation
  - Self help where possible but not as the default
  - The right type of help
  - Improving our digital front door
  - Face to face support
  - Agreeing what good looks like
  - Links with the Poverty Strategy and the VCFSE Strategy



### 1.1 Commissioned Providers

1.1.1 Trafford commission a number of information and advice services jointly with several other Local Authorities. The contract is delivered by Citizens Advice Stockport Oldham, Rochdale and Trafford (CASORT). In addition to this arrangement, Trafford also commission 3 smaller contracts which focus on specific communities within Trafford with the total value of these contracts is £179,000 per annum. Figure 1 below offers a summary of current commissioned services.

Figure 1.

Provider	Services available	Contract value	Contractual arrangements
<b>Citizens Advice Trafford</b>	Full range of welfare benefit, debt, housing, immigration, employment information and advice, from level 1 to level 5, Formally quality assured	£140,000 per annum	Jointly commissioned with Stockport, Oldham and Rochdale Councils Contract end 31 <sup>st</sup> March 2022
<b>LMCP</b>	Low level I&A focussed on South Asian Community, including signposting to other services and focus on care choices Not formally quality assured	£17,000 per annum	Commissioned by Trafford Council Contract ends 31 <sup>st</sup> March 2022
<b>ACCG</b>	Low level I&A focussed on Afro Caribbean Communities, including signposting to other services and focus on care choices Not formally quality assured	£10,000	Commissioned by Trafford Council Contract ends 31 <sup>st</sup> March 2022
<b>Age UK Trafford</b>	I&A focussed on older people, including welfare	£12,000	Commissioned by Trafford Council

Provider	Services available	Contract value	Contractual arrangements
	benefit, debt, housing, care choices, finances. Formally quality assured		Contract ends 31 <sup>st</sup> March 2022

## 1.2 Access Trafford

1.2.1 Access Trafford currently handle calls over 13 different service areas. Customer Service Advisors provide signposting where appropriate to customers as well as very basic benefits advice. Signposting is completed to CAB for general benefits and welfare advice, the Welfare Rights Team for complex cases, to Trafford Assist for fuel, food and furniture, foodbanks across Trafford (normally when a resident has exceeded Trafford Assist awards), and the Department of Works and Pension to make a claim for benefits.

1.2.2 The Access Trafford Contact Centre will also offer advice and signposting for customers who may already have a benefit claim with the Council or are likely to qualify based on circumstances. Examples are listed below.

- Signpost customers who are struggling to pay rent where appropriate to apply for UC or Housing Benefit (HB) and in some cases Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) award from the Council.
- Signpost customers who may need help at home or with residential costs to apply for a financial assessment if they are below the basic capital threshold.
- Signpost customers who are having difficulties paying Council Tax and are on a low income to make a claim for Council Tax Support (CTS). Advisors will also offer to start the claim for the customer. For our most vulnerable residents we will complete the form over the via a “call back” appointment.
- Advisors will also explain awards of CTS, HB and Financial Assessments, explaining how the award has been calculated and if a change in the customers circumstances has seen a reduction/increase in their award, the reasons why and options available to them.

## 1.3 Trafford Assist

1.3.1 Trafford Assist is the Council’s Local Welfare Assistance scheme helps residents to meet; immediate short term needs in an emergency or as a result of a disaster, return or remain in the community and help them to live independently in their own home and further meets essential travelling expenses, for example, to attend a funeral of a close relative.

1.3.2 Trafford Assist provides financial support for emergency help for food, utilities, essential travel expenses and white goods.

1.3.3 Applications are made online via the Council’s website, with support given via agencies such as the Citizen’s Advice Bureau (CAB) alongside other partners including our customer services teams (Access Trafford), if people need support completing the forms and/or are not digitally enabled. Decisions regarding food and utility bill requests are made within 24 hours (week days) and are paid directly into the residents’ bank accounts, unless a voucher is requested.

## **1.4 Internal Welfare Rights Team**

1.4.1 The Welfare Rights Team is an in-house service which provides benefits advice, budgeting support, and debt advice to residents of Trafford. The team structure includes an Advice and Information Manager (Poverty Lead), Benefits advice officers, a budgeting support officer, and a trainee debt advisor.

1.4.2 The benefit advice officers support Trafford residents using a place based approach and provide advice and information around a range of benefits (income support, Universal Credit (UC), Disability Living Allowance (DLA), Personal Independence Payments (PIP) Employment and Support Allowance, Tax Credits, Attendance Allowance (not an exhaustive list) across Children's and adults. The officers specialise in providing 'enhanced' casework consisting of; appeals and tribunals by providing representation to the residents of Trafford, complex cases and support with less complex work enquiries for our internal workforce and deliver a 9am-1pm benefits advice line.

1.4.3 The budgeting support officer provides budgeting advice to those affected by the Benefit Cap and Universal Credit implementation. The officer completes a diagnostic assessment to assist with income maximisation, undertaking benefit checks and engaging benefit advice colleagues where appropriate. The role further supports residents in identifying and assisting with; problematic debt, preparation of financial statements and referrals to specialist debt advice services when required. An additional key role include identification of housing problems, liaising with housing providers and HOST to explore preventative action and liaising/negotiating with creditors and benefits administrative agencies.

1.4.4 The Debt Specialist role is a career pathway position with the intention of becoming a debt advisor. This role currently provides; budgeting support, income maximisation, preparing realistic financial statements, and outlining potential strategies for the resolution of residents' debts and negotiating with creditors/debtors. Once fully trained the Debt specialist would support with debt relief orders and prepare and represent residents at court hearings.

1.4.5 Between the 5th April - 26th November 2021, the Welfare Rights team received 1706 contacts, which resulted in 786 open cases with a total financial income gain of £961,593.95 for our residents or c. £1,223.40 per person. In comparison to the same period last year there has been a 14% increase in new referrals and a 40% increase in calls to the advice line, with a 27% increase in the number of total contacts to the service.

### **Recommendation**

The committee is asked to note the services delivered and clarify if any further information is required.