

<b>Title of meeting:</b>	Cabinet
<b>Date of meeting:</b>	3 November 2020
<b>Subject:</b>	Tackling poverty during the pandemic: an action plan for the city
<b>Report by:</b>	Mark Sage (Tackling Poverty Coordinator)
<b>Wards affected:</b>	All
<b>Key decision:</b>	No
<b>Full Council decision:</b>	No

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## 1. Purpose of report

- 1.1. The Leader of the Council requested officers provide Cabinet with a report outlining the council's approach to tackling poverty and to make recommendations for action over the coming weeks and months.
- 1.2. The report provides Cabinet with an outline of:
  - 1.2.1. The issues in Portsmouth related to financial disadvantage;
  - 1.2.2. Strategic priorities for tackling poverty in Portsmouth during the current period of the COVID-19 pandemic;
  - 1.2.3. Proposals for action during the next six to nine months.

## 2. Recommendations

- 2.1. That Cabinet notes the ongoing impact of poverty in Portsmouth, and how this has been exacerbated for many households by the impact of the pandemic.
- 2.2. That Cabinet commends the work of council services and partners including Portsmouth HIVE and the wider voluntary and community sector, who have continued to provide vital support and assistance to residents to reduce the impact of poverty during the pandemic.
- 2.3. That Cabinet notes the learning from the resident research and other local data, on how residents have been affected financially.
- 2.4. That Cabinet approves the six priority areas for action outlined in section 4 and the implementation of an action plan to include the elements outlined in section 5.
- 2.5. That Cabinet instructs the Tackling Poverty Coordinator to lead on the coordination, delivery and monitoring of the action plan to address the six priorities, with the

Tackling Poverty Steering Group providing guidance, support and scrutiny to delivery.

- 2.6. That Cabinet identifies tackling poverty as an essential part of our response to the pandemic for all council services that can contribute to the delivery of the action plan.
- 2.7. That Cabinet approves the creation of a Tackling Poverty Support Officer job placement funded by the Government's Kickstart scheme.
- 2.8. That Cabinet notes the estimated cost to implement the income maximisation campaign, and that the cost of this will be met from the Emergency Assistance Grant.
- 2.9. That Cabinet agrees to lobby central government and relevant regulatory bodies to take action on the policy issues which can help to reduce poverty in Portsmouth outlined in section 7.5.

### **3. Background - poverty in Portsmouth and the impact of the pandemic**

- 3.1. Prior to the pandemic, Portsmouth was ranked 59<sup>th</sup> most deprived of 326 local authorities in England<sup>1</sup>, putting the city in the most deprived fifth of local authority areas in England. Of the 125 small statistical areas in the city (Lower Super Output Areas), one is in the most deprived 1% of neighbourhoods in England; Landport in Charles Dickens Ward. 15 of Portsmouth's 125 small areas (12%) are within the most deprived 10% of small areas in England - and of these, half (8) are in Charles Dickens ward. The rest are in Paulsgrove (3), Nelson (2), Fratton and St Thomas (1).
- 3.2. In resident research conducted by the council into the effects of the pandemic, 28% of households reported that their finances had been negatively impacted. This corresponds closely to a national poll conducted by YouGov on behalf of StepChange debt charity<sup>2</sup>, which found that 28% of adults had been negatively impacted financially.
- 3.3. The negative impact in Portsmouth is greater for females, families with children, and households on the lowest incomes. Further analysis of the data could provide additional information on the geographical distribution, nature of the negative financial impacts, and the circumstances of the household, such as their tenure.
- 3.4. Similar to the national picture, Portsmouth experienced a large rise in claimant unemployment<sup>3</sup>, starting in March, continuing to rise until May, and then remaining at the higher level up to the latest available data in August.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.stepchange.org/policy-and-research/debt-research/post-covid-personal-debt.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Claimant unemployment is the number of people seeking work claiming an out of work benefit, i.e. Jobseeker's Allowance or Universal Credit. It includes some people working for less than 16 hours per week.

- 3.5. Nine Portsmouth wards have higher rates of working age adults who are seeking work and claiming an out of work benefit than the UK average of 6.5%, with the highest rates in Nelson (10.6%) and Charles Dickens (9.4%) wards.
- 3.6. From 21 September, the courts started to deal with evictions again. Although the 'eviction ban' has ended, people are unlikely to lose their home immediately, as the legal process could take several months. For most tenants on Assured Shorthold Tenancies (AST) there are 3 stages; notice, court action, eviction by bailiffs.
- 3.7. From 29 August, most AST tenants are entitled to 6 months' notice, but could be given shorter notice in some cases, for example; 4 weeks' notice if they have rent arrears of more than 6 months, and little or no notice if they are facing eviction for antisocial behaviour.
- 3.8. Notices from before 29 August 2020 could still be valid depending on the notice type and when it was given. So most tenants given notice now cannot face court action for eviction until the Spring, but there will be tenants facing eviction sooner who received a valid notice prior to 29 August.
- 3.9. Eviction from an AST was already one of the most common reasons for families facing homelessness and seeking assistance from the council. This is likely to be compounded by the cost of private rented sector housing in Portsmouth compared to the assistance available from welfare benefit entitlements (even after this year's rise in Local Housing Allowance rates), the number of households who have been negatively financially impacted, and the number of new claimants of Universal Credit, which pays one monthly lump sum and only pays direct to the landlord in specific and limited circumstances.
- 3.10. There are also issues with the quality of some private rented sector housing. In Portsmouth there are 13,500 homes rated E, F or G (around 21% of all homes with an EPC rating), with the private sector (rented and owner occupied) accounting for the lowest average EPC ratings. Assuming similar levels in homes without an EPC, the total number of cold homes in the city would be over 18,000.<sup>4</sup>
- 3.11. Work is already underway to address issues of quality and access in Portsmouth's draft Private Rental Sector Strategy<sup>5</sup> (currently under consultation), and the Portsmouth Homelessness Strategy<sup>6</sup>, and this work will need to respond to the additional challenges presented by the pandemic.
- 3.12. Work to address fuel poverty in Portsmouth, along with other advice about home energy efficiency, is coordinated by the council's Energy Services Team, under the

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.portsmouth.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Energy-and-water-at-home.pdf>

<sup>5</sup>

<https://democracy.portsmouth.gov.uk/documents/s26304/PRS%20Strategy%20report%20Appendix%201%20-%20Strategy.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://democracy.portsmouth.gov.uk/documents/s21508/Appendix%201%20-%20Draft%20Homelessness%20Strategy%202018.pdf>

Switched On Portsmouth brand<sup>7</sup>. In October, Cabinet approved work towards a home energy support service that would provide advice and support appropriate to every household in the city, to make homes warmer and more energy efficient.

- 3.13. Foodbanks and soup kitchens have continued to operate in Portsmouth throughout lockdown, putting in place measures to safely continue to provide food to people in need, and make best use of the donated and surplus food available in the city. The Portsmouth Foodbank Network, coordinated by Portsmouth City Council, brings together over a dozen voluntary sector organisations providing food aid.
- 3.14. Foodbanks typically provide food parcels of 3 days' food for the whole household, some by referral and some by open access. Foodbanks can assist anyone in the city who is struggling to afford the cost of food. Soup kitchens typically provide one cooked meal or snack and a hot drink, with additional items to take away. Soup kitchens typically assist single adults who may be sleeping rough, sofa-surfing, or vulnerable for other reasons, but do assist a small number of families as well.
- 3.15. Portsmouth does not have a central Local Welfare Assistance scheme since ring-fenced central government funding was abolished in 2015. Local welfare helps to fill gaps that are not met by national welfare benefits provision, such as sudden unexpected costs, gaps in entitlement when circumstances change, or assistance for people excluded by benefits regulations.
- 3.16. The council publishes a list of help for people in financial hardship, which is available online to residents and agencies supporting people in need<sup>8</sup>. As a result of the pandemic, there has been an increase in local groups looking to support residents' essential needs. One example is the Baby Bank delivered by Family Church at the Empower Centre, which has won additional funding to expand its offer of help to families who struggle with the costs of a new-born baby.
- 3.17. HIVE Portsmouth, in partnership with the council, is delivering a number of projects that address the needs of people in poverty. This action plan links to the school uniform shreshop, the development of the white goods shop, the digital lending library, and the community food hub and further work to support organisations providing food aid in the city.

#### **4. Strategic priorities for tackling poverty during the pandemic**

4.1. The council's Tackling Poverty Coordinator is the lead officer responsible for delivery of the Tackling Poverty Strategy, supported by the Tackling Poverty Steering group, composed of officers representing relevant council services, social landlords, and voluntary and community sector organisations engaged in work to tackle poverty.

4.2. The Tackling Poverty Strategy 2015-20<sup>9</sup> identified six priorities:

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<sup>7</sup> <https://switchedonportsmouth.co.uk/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.portsmouth.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/bas-help-and-support-local-money-advice-help-for-people-in-financial-hardship-directory.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.portsmouth.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/tackling-poverty-strategy.pdf>

- 4.2.1. Improving our children's futures;
  - 4.2.2. Providing good quality, sustainable employment opportunities that enable a reasonable standard of living for residents;
  - 4.2.3. Helping residents to be financially resilient;
  - 4.2.4. Helping people move out of immediate crisis, but also helping them to solve their problems longer term;
  - 4.2.5. Improving residents' lives by recognising the links between poverty and health inequalities;
  - 4.2.6. Shaping wider policies and decisions so they reduce the risk of poverty.
- 4.3. These six priorities remain central to our approach to reducing rates of poverty, and mitigating the effects of poverty. However, the impact of the pandemic as outlined above means that some areas are more urgent and require greater attention while the effects of the pandemic on household finances continue.
- 4.4. Tackling poverty is a key priority for Portsmouth's Health and Wellbeing Strategy, and an issue that underpins many of the health inequalities our residents face. Work to re-focus the Health and Wellbeing Strategy has been postponed due to the response to the pandemic, but work will continue in 2021. This work will provide an ideal opportunity to explore the links between poverty and health inequalities and how both issues should be addressed strategically.
- 4.5. The Tackling Poverty Steering Group (TPSG) has recommended that work to refresh Portsmouth's Tackling Poverty Strategy should be postponed until 2021, when it can be conducted in tandem to the Health and Wellbeing Strategy.
- 4.6. In order to ensure that crucial action takes place to tackle poverty and the effects of the pandemic, the TPSG has identified six priority areas, where action should take place over the coming weeks and months, to focus the tackling poverty work pending a full review of the strategy.
- 4.7. The priority areas are:
- 4.7.1. Income maximisation;
  - 4.7.2. Debt management;
  - 4.7.3. Preventing homelessness;
  - 4.7.4. Reducing fuel poverty
  - 4.7.5. Employment and skills;
  - 4.7.6. Digital inclusion.

## **5. Action plan**

- 5.1. More information about the action required under each priority area is included in Appendix 1.
- 5.2. The draft action plan is outlined below:

Priority area	Outcome	Action
Income maximisation	Increased uptake of welfare benefit entitlements	Communication campaign
	Essential items for people in financial hardship	Delivery of Emergency Assistance Grants
Debt management	Specialist debt advice	Communication campaign
	Debt and mental health support pathways	Portsmouth Mental Health Alliance workstream on debt and mental health
	Best practice in council debt collection protocols	Review of debt collection protocols
Preventing homelessness	Early support for tenants falling into rent arrears	Partnership working to identify those at risk of homelessness and resources to safeguard tenancies including support for city council tenants and private rented sector landlords to prevent evictions
Reducing fuel poverty	Increased referrals into Switched On Portsmouth offer of fuel poverty support, including pathways for healthcare settings	Communication campaign and development of further partnerships with potential referrers
	Gas and electricity meter top-up scheme extended and expanded	Supplement funding for The Environment Centre scheme using Emergency Assistance Grant
Employment and skills	Improve employability and access to employment for people in financial hardship	Delivery of the council's skills strategy, in partnership with Jobcentre Plus and other key stakeholders
Digital inclusion	Provide devices and internet connections for residents who are digitally excluded due to financial hardship	Use Emergency Assistance Grant funding to support digital inclusion projects for school students and vulnerable adults

## 6. Resources to deliver the tackling poverty action plan

- 6.1. The Tackling Poverty Coordinator is the city council's lead officer responsible for action on poverty, but does not directly deliver services to support residents.
- 6.2. The work to support residents in financial hardship will be undertaken by a range of council services and partner agencies, many of which are facing significant demand pressures, exacerbated by the precautions required to deliver services safely during a pandemic.

- 6.3. While recognising the huge challenges teams are working under, it is vital that council services treat work to tackle poverty as a priority, because of the significant impact it can have on residents' wellbeing.
- 6.4. While the Tackling Poverty Coordinator has support from services across the council and partner agencies, coordinated via the Tackling Poverty Steering Group, there is no specific resource to provide administrative or research support to this role. The government's Kickstart scheme to fund six month work placements offers the opportunity to create a temporary role of Tackling Poverty Support Officer to provide additional capacity to support and monitor delivery of this action plan, while providing valuable work experience for a young person on Universal Credit.
- 6.5. Developing a brand and marketing tools for the income maximisation scheme will require funding for design work and social media promotion costs, estimated in the region of £800.
- 6.6. This funding should be provided by the Emergency Assistance Grant, because of the role of the campaign in ensuring residents in need access sources of emergency assistance.

## **7. Legislation and policy**

- 7.1. A number of changes to legislation and regulations have been implemented by central government to provide specific areas of protection to people who have been adversely financially affected by the pandemic.
- 7.2. These changes include:
- 7.2.1. Temporary halt on eviction action, including the ban on evictions over the Christmas period;
  - 7.2.2. The Everybody In programme to provide additional resources to house non-priority homeless people during lockdown;
  - 7.2.3. Personal debt forbearance measures, including unsecured credit and mortgages;
  - 7.2.4. Uplift in the Universal Credit personal allowance rates equivalent to £20 per week;
  - 7.2.5. Raising the Local Housing Allowance rates to the 30<sup>th</sup> percentile of average local rents;
  - 7.2.6. Free school meal voucher scheme for eligible families during lockdown, extended through the summer holiday;
  - 7.2.7. Digital
  - 7.2.8. Allocation of Emergency Assistance Grant funding to local authorities;
  - 7.2.9. Test and Trace Support Payments for employed or self-employed people who will lose income as a result of being required to self-isolate.

- 7.3. These additional measures are welcome, however the evidence indicates that the negative financial impacts on households will continue for significantly longer than the policy measures that were designed to mitigate them.
- 7.4. There is therefore a role for the local authority in lobbying central government to provide further assistance that will safeguard residents from falling into poverty, and assist those who cannot afford to make ends meet.
- 7.5. The areas of policy already identified that could help to reduce poverty in Portsmouth at this time include:
- 7.5.1. Maintaining the £20 uplift in the weekly personal allowance for Universal Credit and providing a cost of living uplift to all welfare benefit entitlement rates in April 2021, and extending the personal allowance uplift to the legacy benefit rates (Employment and Support Allowance, Jobseeker's Allowance, Income Support and Working Tax Credits).
  - 7.5.2. Ensuring that Universal Credit put in place processes to enable a simple automated system for social landlords to provide details of their annual rent increase, and to increase the Housing Cost Element for tenants in a 53 week rent year, to ensure their Universal Credit assessment is based on their full rental liability.
  - 7.5.3. Maintaining Local Housing Allowance rates at a minimum of the 30<sup>th</sup> percentile of average local private rented sector rents.
  - 7.5.4. Reducing the waiting time for Support for Mortgage Interest payments from the current nine months, and removing the exclusion of low income workers from receiving help with their mortgage interest.
  - 7.5.5. Extending the Test and Trace Support Payment scheme beyond 31 January 2021 if workers are still facing a loss of earnings due to self-isolation, and reviewing the criteria of the scheme to identify gaps in the current provision.
  - 7.5.6. Providing additional ring-fenced funding to local authorities to provide specialist money advice to residents with unmanageable debt levels due to the impact of the pandemic.
  - 7.5.7. Putting regulations in place to ensure creditors offer assistance to people who are unable to afford contractual obligations due to a loss of income, including the right to end contracts early or reduce the contracted service and cost.
  - 7.5.8. Providing funding to schools to ensure all children have access to devices and internet connections.

## **8. Reasons for recommendations**



8.1. The recommendations outlined in section 2 will ensure the council has a clear direction for action to tackle poverty over the coming months, focussing on a specific set of actions, with the right resources in place to coordinate actions and monitor delivery.

8.2. By lobbying for action on the national policy issues outlined, the council will lend its weight to the case for further central government measures that will reduce the number of people falling into poverty, and provide assistance to those who are struggling financially.

## **9. Integrated impact assessment**

9.1. An Integrated Impact Assessment has been completed to identify the impact of the actions outlined in this strategy (Appendix 2).

## **10. Legal implications**

10.1. The report outlines the legality and basis for the recommendations and there are no discernible risks.

## **11. Director of Finance's comments**

11.1. The costs associated with delivering the action plan detailed in section 5 of the report will be met from the Emergency Assistance Grant and existing cash limited resources.

11.2. The tackling poverty support officer post will be employed by the council and funded through the Government's Kickstart fund.

11.3. The Kickstart Scheme provides funding to create new job placements for 16 to 24 year olds on Universal Credit who are at risk of long term unemployment. The funding covers:

11.3.1. 100% of the National Minimum Wage (or the National Living Wage depending on the age of the participant) for 25 hours per week for a total of 6 months;

11.3.2. Associated employer National Insurance contributions;

11.3.3. Employer minimum automatic enrolment contributions.

11.4. In addition to this, the Council will be able to apply for £1,500 grant for this post, this will cover the setup costs such as training and IT costs and to support the young person develop their employability skills.

11.5. The estimated cost to implement the income maximisation campaign is around £800 and will be met from the Emergency Assistance Grant.

Signed by:

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James Hill, Director of Housing, Neighbourhood and Building Services

**Appendices:**

**Appendix 1** - Action on priority areas

**Appendix 2** - Integrated Impact Assessment

**Background list of documents: Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972**

The following documents disclose facts or matters, which have been relied upon to a material extent by the author in preparing this report:

Title of document	Location
<b>English Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2019</b>	<a href="https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019">https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019</a>
<b>Tackling Poverty Strategy 2015-20</b>	<a href="https://www.portsmouth.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/tackling-poverty-strategy.pdf">https://www.portsmouth.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/tackling-poverty-strategy.pdf</a>

The recommendation(s) set out above were approved/ approved as amended/ deferred/ rejected by ..... on .....

.....  
 Leader of the City Council

## Appendix 1 - Action on priority areas

### 1. Priority one - Income maximisation

- 1.1. Every year in the UK around £16 billion of welfare benefit entitlements go unclaimed<sup>10</sup>, including over £2 billion of each of Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit, Housing Benefit, Council Tax Support and Pension Credit (figures for Universal Credit are not yet available). Citizens Advice Portsmouth has estimated that 3,300 pensioners in Portsmouth are not claiming up to £2,000 Pension Credit per year that they may be entitled to – which means an estimated £6.6 million of Pension Credit went unclaimed in Portsmouth in 2017/18. For the over 75s, this also means they will be missing out on their free TV licence, from 1 August 2020, and their Warm Home Discount reduction in their electricity bill.
- 1.2. As over a quarter of households in the city are believed to have had a reduction in their household finances, this is an important opportunity to ensure everyone is receiving the financial assistance they are entitled to.
- 1.3. This will help the affected households to manage the impact of the pandemic on their finances, and bring more money into the local economy.
- 1.4. Working with the council's Corporate Communications team and money advice services in the city, the Tackling Poverty Coordinator will develop a branded campaign to raise awareness of unclaimed entitlements, and direct people to sources of information, advice and help, to maximise their income.
- 1.5. Money advice services will also have access to funding from the council's Emergency Assistance Grant fund<sup>11</sup>, to provide essential items for people in financial hardship.
- 1.6. This campaign will also be used to communicate with residents and organisations in the city in relation to other aspects of this plan, to deliver simple messages to help people improve their financial circumstances.

### 2. Priority two - Debt management

- 2.1. Now that the statutory forbearance measures introduced in response to lockdown have ended, people whose finances have worsened may be facing liabilities they are unable to afford.
- 2.2. There is evidence to show that many people struggle with unmanageable debt for long periods of time before they seek specialist help. In Portsmouth the main providers of debt advice are Advice Portsmouth, the council funded advice centre

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.entitledto.co.uk/blog/2020/february/16-billion-remains-unclaimed-in-means-tested-benefits-each-year/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-local-authority-emergency-assistance-grant-for-food-and-essential-supplies>

delivered by You Trust, Citizens Advice Portsmouth, which receives central government funding from the Money and Pensions Service, and the city council housing offices, which each have a specialist money adviser supporting the housing officer team.

- 2.3. The campaign outlined under priority one will include messages encouraging people to seek free, impartial, confidential and local advice from these services, at an early stage when they are worried about being able to meet their debt liabilities.
- 2.4. This campaign will also support the Portsmouth Mental Health Alliance workstream on debt and mental health, which focuses on the associations between problem debt and mental health issues and aims to improve joint work between and improved pathways between debt advice and mental health services.
- 2.5. The council also takes debt recovery action against residents that owe money, in a range of functions; Council Tax collections, Housing Benefit overpayments, Housing service rents and leasehold and service charges, Adult Social Care charges, and Parking charges.
- 2.6. The Council has both a legal duty and a responsibility to its residents to ensure that income due is paid promptly. Effective collection of debts enables more resources to be available for the delivery of essential services.
- 2.7. These services operate independently, and therefore would not automatically know if their customer was being contacted by one or all of the other services in the council that collects debts.
- 2.8. As more households struggle with their finances, these teams could see the number of debtors continuing to increase, including people who have not owed money to the council before
- 2.9. In collecting debts, the council takes account of vulnerability and financial difficulties, and signposts residents to advice services. However, the approach to this may not be consistent across different services.
- 2.10. The council should undertake a review of debt collection protocols to explore opportunities to work more closely together, to provide a more consistent approach and share best practice across departments, and consider the need to implement a debt strategy to support this.

### **3. Priority three - Preventing homelessness**

- 3.1. Reductions in household income make rents and mortgages less affordable, which is likely to lead to a rise in arrears and consequently homelessness.
- 3.2. In order to prevent homelessness, either the current housing costs have to be made affordable, through increased income or reduced outgoings, or the household have to find a different home that is affordable.

- 3.3. Although the Housing Needs, Advice and Support team are already delivering schemes to increase access to the private rented sector, there are significant numbers of households in temporary accommodation, because the level of supply of affordable private rented sector and social housing tenancies is insufficient to meet the existing demand.
- 3.4. Building more affordable homes in the city is the only long term solution, but in order to respond to the urgent situation created by the pandemic, the focus will be on keeping people in their homes, and increasing access to private rented sector homes.
- 3.5. Working together with tenants, private rented sector landlords, benefits agencies and voluntary sector organisations in the city, the city should take a proactive approach to identifying those at risk of homelessness, utilising all available resources to safeguard tenancies and prevent homelessness.

#### **4. Priority four - fuel poverty**

- 4.1. The council's strategy for energy and water at home was approved by Cabinet in March 2020. This strategy outlines the council's approach to ensuring that the energy and water used by residents is affordable and sustainable, and includes targeted action on fuel poverty.
- 4.2. Portsmouth's package of fuel poverty support is included in the council's Switched On Portsmouth (SOP) offer, a one-stop shop for information and help to save energy and save money<sup>12</sup>. The Energy Services team coordinate the SOP Partnership, a multi-agency group focused on delivery of the strategy's action plan.
- 4.3. By accessing SOP, either online or through our free telephone advice line, residents in fuel poverty have access to specialist advice to help them navigate the various local and national schemes available.
- 4.4. Although it is not currently possible to conduct large numbers of home visits to provide advice and small energy saving measures, working with our partner Agility Eco we are able to offer in-depth telephone advice, with home visits for the most vulnerable and those for whom telephone advice is insufficient.
- 4.5. In the year March 2019 to February 2020, Agility Eco completed over 400 home energy visits for Portsmouth residents, but with over 11,000 households in the city meeting the government's definition of fuel poverty<sup>13</sup>, this is just a small proportion of those who may need our help.
- 4.6. The council's partnership with The Environment Centre has enabled the delivery of a gas and electricity meter top-up voucher programme, funded by Ofgem's Redress

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<sup>12</sup> <https://switchedonportsmouth.co.uk/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.portsmouth.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Energy-and-water-at-home.pdf>

scheme. This funding will be supplemented by funding from the council's Emergency Assistance Grant.

4.7. Maximising signposting and referrals into SOP has been identified as a key strand of the action plan, which will be supported by the income maximisation campaign outlined in Priority One above.

4.8. One specific area of focus is increasing engagement and referrals from healthcare services, and the SOP Partnership will work closely with Public Health Portsmouth to address this.

## **5. Priority five - Employment and skills**

5.1. The council's draft Skills Strategy outlines our approach to improve skills and employment outcomes for residents, with a particular focus on the impact of the pandemic.

5.2. This strategy should form the basis of action on employment and skills, led by the Employment, Learning and Skills service, working closely with the tackling poverty action plan.

## **6. Priority six - Digital inclusion**

6.1. The pandemic and in particular the period of lockdown and self-isolation for those shielding, has exacerbated the impact of digital exclusion. Being online enables people of all ages to access a wide range of learning, shopping, entertainment and social resources, alongside access to trusted sources of information on the pandemic.

6.2. Portsmouth schools have distributed a survey to parents to gather more data on the extent of digital exclusion among their pupils. Some schools are considering options to provide laptops to all pupils, under leasing arrangements, but the likely cost of around £10 per month per child will be unaffordable for many parents and there is no specific government scheme to provide financial assistance for this.

6.3. It should be noted that there are also financial risks associated with being online, including illegal scams and targeted advertising of high cost credit and online gambling.

6.4. The council's Community Learning Service (CLS) provides access to free courses that give people the key skills to get online and use email, including learning how to stay safe online. CLS has reopened The Learning Place and can offer some in-person sessions, however numbers are significantly reduced due to social distancing measures. The nature of these courses means that it is not possible for them to be delivered online.

6.5. As well as the skills to use online resources, digital inclusion depends on having both an internet-enabled device (laptop, smartphone, tablet), and an internet connection

(broadband connection or 4G, which could be via a smartphone contract, dongle, or MiFi device).

6.6. Work has already begun on two local projects that will enable residents who are currently digitally excluded to get online:

6.6.1. HIVE Portsmouth digital lending library;

6.6.2. Digital donation scheme for schools.

6.7. The council should use funding from its Emergency Assistance Grant to support these schemes, funding devices and internet connections for digitally excluded residents in financial hardship.