

CASE STUDY: Better Off - Developing the West Lothian Anti- Poverty Strategy



The community planning partners are committed to tackling poverty in West Lothian. The continued impacts of the 2008 financial crisis, and the challenges presented by the ongoing programme of welfare reforms, are two of the factors contributing to poverty in West Lothian. Online financial management further disadvantages those who are financially and digitally excluded.

The 'Better Off': West Lothian Anti-Poverty Strategy is a five-year Community Planning strategy that was developed in 2011 and updated in August 2013 following an initial review.

The strategy covers seven discrete themes and an annual action plan is developed based on these focus areas. The strategy involves a range of partners across the council area and it is overseen by an Anti-Poverty Working Group. The overarching aim is to improve the financial circumstances of those people in West Lothian affected by poverty.



What was the challenge/issue for West Lothian Community Planning Partnership?

The strategy was developed as a response to the welfare reform changes as well as the economic downturn and decreasing resources in the public sector. The aim was to tackle these issues by working more closely in partnership across different council and third sector services and improving outcomes for the customer.

Following a review in 2013 the strategy has been updated

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and continues to evolve to reflect the changes to welfare reform implementation and the council's approach to digital and financial inclusion.

What was the Partnership trying to achieve?

The key priorities of the strategy are:

- Strengthening partnership working
- Ensuring that actions and resources are more targeted and where appropriate pooled to help those who are most at risk of poverty

How did it tackle the issue?

Strategic approach

In order to achieve these key priorities the strategy is underpinned by a Welfare Reform Action Plan and the ongoing Anti-Poverty Action Plan. The structure of the strategy outlines the context and poverty profile of West Lothian and sets out the different themes for activity. Each theme links to different outcomes and indicators that are used to measure the progress that is being made. The themes are: economy/ income, employability/ economic development, housing, health, education, community and inequality. Below are some examples of the actions taken as part of the Anti-Poverty Action Plan:

- **Economy/Income:** Taking a holistic approach to income maximisation to address the struggle to make ends meet.
Example of outcome: West Lothian citizens are less at risk of poverty and financial exclusion as a result of having their disposable income maximised.
Example of action: West Lothian residents are able to save and borrow money at fair rates of interest.
Indicator: Number of new Credit Union members; new collection points opened with assistance from WLC.
Lead: West Lothian Credit Union
- **Housing:** Addressing issues around keeping up with rent, upkeep of a house and making sure the home is well heated and insulated.
Example of outcome: West Lothian residents are less at risk of fuel poverty through increased knowledge and understanding of energy issues and support to budget better.
Example of action: People save money on fuel as a result of home visits in relation to heating use advice and signposting for grants, better tariffs and payment options.
Indicator: Amount of money saved as a result of reduced fuel consumption.
Lead: WLC Advice Shop
- **Community:** People in poverty are less likely to be able to fully participate in their communities because many lack the disposable income needed to take part in clubs, events or other activities.

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Example of outcome: Information is effectively communicated to West Lothian residents to enable people to manage their financial affairs.

Example of action: Six major financial events, including an annual themed Money Week, will raise financial awareness and deliver financial education to West Lothian residents.

Indicator: Number of people attending events; feedback from events

Lead: WLC Advice Shop

Money Week 2013

Money Week is an annual event involving different community planning partners. The third event was held in 2013 with a focus around food reflecting the increase in demand for food banks in West Lothian. The events held as part of Money Week addressed topics around 'cooking on a budget', 'grow your own', 'planning and budgeting', 'saving and borrowing' and 'work and careers'. Over 1200 local people attended the events that were being held across the council area. Feedback forms are collected for each event and overall feedback from participants was very positive. Money Week aims at reaching people in more isolated communities and sharing information about the availability of advice and other services. Benefits of this approach include improved partnership working (a range of partners coming together to organise the week) and improved access and visibility of services.

Community Reference Group

As a way of involving people affected by the Anti-Poverty Strategy, the West Lothian Community Reference Group was set up by Poverty Alliance to work alongside the council and give input around practical solutions to tackling poverty and improving the lives of people in West Lothian. The group meets on a monthly basis and discusses issues ranging from in-work poverty to transport issues which are then raised with the Anti-Poverty Strategy Development Group.

Working in partnership

The West Lothian Council's Advice Shop is leading on the Anti-Poverty Strategy. As part of their approach, the Advice Shop team held a recent event to launch their annual report and invited along partners involved in the Anti-Poverty Strategy to hear their views on how referrals between partners could be strengthened and what should be future priorities for the Advice Shop. [Listen to some participants of the event here.](#)

What obstacles had to be overcome?

Pooling together all relevant updates and reports from the different partners involved in the strategy in order to monitor progress against the menu of outcomes and indicators has been challenging. Improving communication between partners around this and information sharing is seen as key to deal with this issue. The council is also looking at how to support those agencies that may require additional help to deliver on the

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actions within the Anti-Poverty Action Plan.

What are the results of West Lothian's actions?

Following the development of the initial Anti-Poverty Strategy, the approach was revised in 2013 and embedded into Community Planning. The revised 'Better Off: Anti-Poverty Strategy 2014-2017' has expanded the scope of the strategy to include Community Planning Partners' responses to Welfare Reform changes and issues around digital and financial inclusion. The strategy now includes two action plans which are monitored on a quarterly basis and reviewed annually.

Co-production has also been key to improving the strategy and a wide range of people have contributed by sharing their experiences of poverty and helping to develop an understanding of how poverty can affect lives. The strategy document reflects this by highlighting case studies and quotes from individuals.

The range of partners that are now involved in the Anti-Poverty Working Group overseeing the strategy includes the WLC Advice Shop, WLC Adult Basic Education, social housing landlords including WESLO and Almond Housing, alongside West Lothian Financial Inclusion Network, WLC Economic Development, WLC Education, WLC Employability and Regeneration, WLC Health Improvement Team, WLC Housing, WLC Construction and Building Services and WLC Revenues. Other key partners include West Lothian Citizens Advice Bureau, DWP, Skills Development Scotland, West Lothian Credit Union and West Lothian Food Bank.

Any lessons learned?

The partnership has grown and developed over the last two years. A key learning element has been to offer opportunities for partners, services and members of the council to come together. We have undertaken a series of welfare reform briefings to keep people up-to-date with developments. There has been a seminar organised for each of the key themes, for example, Crime and Poverty. The partnership has invited a high profile speaker to give an overview, then there are workshops organised which promote and develop local organisations and initiatives. This has supported organisations to meet and network and build lasting working relationships.

Next steps

Following the strategy review the Advice Shop plans to offer more targeted support by:

- extending its work in the community by offering an increase in outreach sessions across different locations
- continuing to work with partners to support older people to maximise their income and save money on fuel
- developing a campaign to focus on families, carers and those who have dementia

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Other steps include:

- increasing the range of volunteering opportunities on offer to help support service delivery and offering volunteers the opportunity to gain a qualification
- developing a West Lothian Advice Network to co-ordinate the delivery of money advice and to build capacity to simplify the referral process
- supporting the development of local credit unions
- conducting a study into the viability of social supermarkets and agree actions to alleviate food poverty and extend money management sessions

West Lothian Council has prioritised time limited funds to support the outcomes of the Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Further information

Better Off: Anti Poverty Strategy 2014-17

<http://coins.westlothian.gov.uk/coins/viewDoc.asp?c=e%97%9Dd%92o%82%8E>

Money Week 2014

www.westlothian.gov.uk/article/3768/Money-Week-2014

West Lothian Single Outcome Agreement 2013-2023

<http://www.westlothian.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=3333&p=0>