

Report to:	Cabinet
Date:	14 September 2023
Title:	Cost of Living Update
Report of:	Ian Fitzpatrick, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Regeneration and Planning.
Cabinet member:	Councillor Christine Robinson, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Community Wellbeing.
Ward(s):	All
Purpose of report:	To update Cabinet on work delivered by the Council in supporting residents through the Cost-of-Living crisis, with proposals to continue and build on key work-streams and partnerships.
Decision type:	Non-key
Officer recommendation(s):	<p>(1) To note the initiatives undertaken to date in response to the cost-of-living crisis.</p> <p>(2) To agree that the coordination of cost-of-living responses and dedicated role continue for a further year.</p> <p>(3) To agree a one-off grant of £20,000 for Lewes District Citizens Advice to support the continuation of specialist UC advice.</p>
Reasons for recommendations:	To enable the Council, in partnership with local organisations, to continue an effective and holistic cost-of-living response, helping residents as the crisis continues to impact negatively on households.
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1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Country continues to face a range of financial challenges which together have formed an ongoing and entrenched cost-of-living crisis. Rising rents and interest rates (the 14th rise in a row has been announced at the time of writing), coupled with the sharp increase to household staples and consistently high

utilities mean that people continue to struggle, and this is only likely to deepen as we head into winter.

- 1.2 Despite various successful initiatives and interventions by both the Council and partners across the district, the impact of the crisis continues to bite. It is clear more needs to be done to help local people and the voluntary sector through the winter and beyond, and crucial to build on the successful foundations laid over the past year, as set out below.

2 Council initiatives to date

- 2.1 The Council's 'Safety Net' fund of £500,000 was created in 2022 to address a gap for low-income households that did not meet criteria for additional government support. The fund has been utilised with some flexibility to enable it to help as many residents as possible having funded upwards of 1,000 awards to date.
- 2.2 The Council Tax Reduction scheme is available to households on benefits or low incomes, with 100% reduction for eligible pensioners. Additionally, Discretionary Housing Payments continue to be available to those who are eligible and potentially facing eviction, with more than 1,000 awards confirmed this financial year.
- 2.3 The Council's Exceptional Hardship Payment (EHP) scheme has helped vulnerable residents who have seen a reduction in Government assistance towards Council Tax liability or are suffering extreme financial hardship.
- 2.4 The Council will shortly implement the Policy and Practice dashboard (also referred to as LIFT). The software enables local authorities to identify households at risk of debt and mounting payments, as well as maximising their income and preventing arrears, thus incurring less costs to the Council.
- 2.5 Recent editions of Tenants Open Voice have continued to offer tips and advice for tenants struggling with the ongoing reach of the crisis. It includes money saving tips and information on how to access free green energy advice, the local Food Partnership and Universal Credit.
- 2.6 District News is the quarterly magazine produced by the Council and delivered free of charge to households across the district. In addition to key updates from the Council more broadly, there remains a focus on cost-of-living support which the autumn edition will maintain also.
- 2.7 Following a successful first cost of living summit in October 2022, a second was held at Southover House at the end of February 2023. As with the first, the summit saw attendance from a range of partners with presentations from Lewes District Food Partnership, Ovesco (a local organisation working towards community owned renewable energy) and Warm Space schemes. A second round of funding was launched (as outlined in paragraph 3.2) along with a renewed commitment to facilitate the cross-sector Cost of Living Partners Action Group (CoLPAG).

2.8 Having declared a cost-of-living emergency at Full Council in the summer of 2022, the Council set up the Cost-of-Living Working Group. Made up of key officers from departments across the Council, the group ensures a joined-up response for residents and enables discussions, ideas, and flexibility so as to produce collaborative and considered interventions. The Deputy Leader and portfolio holder for Community Wellbeing (which includes oversight of the Council's cost-of-living response) also attends the meetings, ensuring strategic leadership.

3 Grant funding and support for the voluntary sector.

3.1 In July of 2022, Cabinet agreed a £250,000 Cost of Living Crisis Fund to provide vital support to voluntary sector partners in the district as they responded to extreme challenges faced by residents. A dedicated, part-time post was also created to mobilise and coordinate provisions across the district and administer the grant fund.

3.2 The fund enabled the Council to deliver two rounds of grant funding. The first – in the autumn of 2022 – focussed on emergency food responses, Warm Space schemes, enhanced advice provisions and addressing digital exclusion. The second round was delivered in spring 2023 and was designed to address needs and gaps identified by the Council led CoLPAG. Local charities and organisations were invited to apply for grants around sustainable food access (including cookery classes and community gardens), specific wellbeing support for volunteers, guidance around green energy and debt/money/welfare advice.

3.3 The dedicated post of Cost of Living Project Officer, has so far played a crucial role in responding to and coordinating partners across the district, playing a lead role in developing and implementing the Council's Cost of Living Strategic Action Plan. Along with identifying and building key relationships whilst strengthening the broader networked approach, the post-holder has:

- Delivered two summits
- Supported various local partner 'one stop shops'
- Collated and maintained a Community Directory
- Supported targeted digital exclusion workshops
- Facilitated both CoLPAG and the internal Cost of Living Working Group
- Launched and administered a range of grants to local groups.

The above is a non-exhaustive list. In addition to this, the post supports a continuing holistic Council approach to the crisis, whilst identifying vulnerabilities and opportunities across the district.

4 Proposals

4.1 Although the Cost-of-Living Project Officer and the Council more broadly have made great progress in devising and galvanising multi-disciplinary solutions across the district, the resilience of communities will be tested again in the coming months. There remain several clear challenges and workstreams for the months ahead, and being able to respond flexibly and quickly through the winter will mean that successful inroads can be further strengthened. It is therefore

proposed that the role (which is part-time 20 hours per week) be extended for one year.

Several imminent areas of work have already been identified and include:

- Community Spaces (previously Warm Space Schemes): review/map of current offer and support a provision of social prescribers/ mental wellbeing info, digital exclusion and advice sessions for partners, with a workshop for schemes held in August.
- CoLPAG: continue this vital engagement and refresh outcomes.
- Further targeted engagement with rural communities: working with Neighbourhood First and retirement schemes in the rural areas and coordinating outreach.
- Build on the conclusions of the Poverty Truth Hearing which took place in June and was organised by Lewes District Food Partnership and well attended by Council representatives.
- Focus on further improvements to consistent and holistic approaches through communications, multi-discipline one-stop shops and officer awareness (the “no wrong door principle”).

4.2 Lewes District Citizens Advice (CitA) have continued to offer information, advice, and casework on a range of issues including debt, benefits and employment amongst others. As with the pandemic, CitA have seen a sharp increase in contacts from residents as the cost-of-living crisis has continued. With such things comes an inevitable increase in publicity for the charity as professionals (and the media) point to CitA as the go-to organisation to support people through challenges. However, the rise in referrals rarely reflects an increase to capacity and resources, and though CitA utilise volunteers to deliver services, these take a great deal of time to induct and cannot provide the advice of qualified specialist staff.

4.3 To support a continuation of specialist, free advice for residents around Universal Credit through Lewes District Citizens Advice, it is proposed that the Council provide a one-off grant of £20,000 to uphold this work.

5 Consultation

5.1 This area of work has included much engagement with the Council’s partners in the voluntary and statutory sectors. This shall be maintained as the Council moves through the winter months and continues to collaborate in order to support residents effectively.

6 Corporate plan and council policies

6.1 Much of the contents of this report places an emphasis on sustainability and will complement the Sustainability Policy. In addition to this the Council’s corporate plan places a central focus on helping the most vulnerable in the district, and the measures outlined support this priority.

7 Financial appraisal

- 7.1 Cabinet previously agreed to establish a Cost-of-Living Crisis Fund, with £250,000 being allocated to supporting the local voluntary sector to support residents with the cost of living.

This report proposes to continue this response and supports residents as the crisis continues to impact negatively on households.

As a result, there is a need to retain the administrative support required to coordinate this support for a further period of 1 year at a cost of £20,000. This additional resource would be time limited and will not form part of the council's future based budget.

8 Legal Implications

- 8.1 Subject to the identification of a relevant and sufficient budget, Cabinet may lawfully agree recommendations 2 and 3 of this report.

Date of legal input: 16.03.23

Legal ref: 012300-LDC-OD

9 Equality analysis

- 9.1 The cost-of-living crisis is likely to impact many household budgets, with utilities, food products and fuel increasing in price. Working-age people on low-incomes or squeezed budgets are likely to be impacted more as the year progresses, and older people particularly by increased heating costs in autumn and winter. Residents in rural locations who rely on oil to heat their homes may be subject to increased oil costs. People reliant on cars, including those in rural locations, could be impacted by increased running costs. Food items have already seen some price increases, and those with children may see an increase in their weekly food cost.

10 Environmental sustainability implications

- 10.1 Although the primary consideration of this report is the alleviation of hardship, where residents are in a position to reduce their fuel costs through energy efficiency measures in their home, the current pressures on fuel costs may have the incidental benefit of reducing use of fossil fuels which contribute to global warming. The strategic action plan will include measures to improve food resilience therefore may bear some improvement around food waste and local produce.

11 Contribution to Community Wealth Building

- 11.1 By taking a collaborative approach to supporting local people, through giving grants to local voluntary and community organisation, the council is promoting the community wealth building principle of plural ownership.

12 Appendices

- 12.1 None

13 Background Papers

13.1 None