

Report to:	Scrutiny Committee
Date:	5 December 2022
Title:	Cost of Living Update
Report of:	Ian Fitzpatrick, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Regeneration and Planning
Cabinet member:	Councillor David Tutt, Leader of the Council and Chair of Cabinet
Ward(s):	All
Purpose of report:	To update Cabinet on steps taken to support residents through the cost of living crisis.
Decision type:	Non-Key
Officer recommendation(s):	To note the progress of measures taken to support residents through the cost of living crisis.
Reasons for recommendations:	The Council has committed to a range of ongoing measures which are supporting residents and organisations across the borough.
Contact Officer(s):	Name: Seanne Sweeney Post title: Community Services Lead E-mail: Seanne.Sweeney@lewes-eastbourne.gov.uk Telephone number: 01273 085630

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Earlier in the year it became apparent that the UK was headed for a range of major financial challenges, which together have formed a significant cost of living crisis. The combination of increased fuel, energy and food costs coupled with inflation, is putting huge pressure on households particularly those on low incomes.
- 1.2 In May of this year Full Council declared a Cost of Living Emergency. This recognised that many residents will be adversely impacted as outlined above, particularly through the winter months.
- 1.3 It was also agreed that, along with some broader actions in response to the pandemic, a cost of living emergency fund be established. This £250,000 fund would broadly support priorities including food, fuel and accommodation at a number of pinch points across the year.

2 Council initiatives to date

- 2.1 The Council Tax Reduction scheme is available to households on benefits or low incomes, with Exceptional Hardship payments (EHP) accessible to those who receive a Council Tax Reduction, but still struggle to make their payments.
- 2.2 Additionally, Discretionary Housing Payments – the budget for which has decreased by approximately £100k this financial year – have been available to those who are eligible and potentially facing eviction, with over 220 awards confirmed at the time of writing, meaning this will be exhausted before Christmas. As a continued demand is expected, the Council has written to Government requesting that the fund be replenished as a matter of urgency.
- 2.3 Autumn’s edition of Tenants Open Voice was packed with information for tenants worried about how the cost of living crisis will impact them, including tips for energy saving, grants for households and support with food. December’s edition will incorporate a supplement on help and advice through the cost of living crisis.
- 2.4 A councillor-led, cross-departmental Cost of Living Working Group has been meeting monthly since July and brings together lead officers and Cabinet members to ensure an informed and cohesive response. This group has so far fed into the cost of living communications strategy, strengthened connections with key voluntary sector partners and instigated the uptake day described below. The working group will continue to meet as the Council works to design and deliver help for residents most in need.
- 2.5 In September the Council held a Household Support Fund (HSF) uptake day for local pensioners at the Town Hall. The event was extremely well attended and resulted in the allocated funds being awarded to pension-age residents. Officers are now working through applications for the third round of the HSF as well as exploring other options to best support residents in need.
- 2.6 The Cost of Living Working Group referenced above has also led to a new action group focussed on increasing benefit uptake across the town. Cabinet members and officers meet with key voluntary sector partners including Food Bank and Citizens Advice to develop and drive an increase in residents claiming support to which they are entitled. Implementation of a communications strategy around accessing entitlements is underway, with the aim of increasing reach across the Borough.

3 Warm Spaces and support for the voluntary sector

- 3.1 The Cost of Living Crisis Fund is primarily intended to support our local voluntary sector partners as they respond to the extreme challenges facing local people. In light of the urgency of this crisis, the Council made an initial payment of £20,000 to Eastbourne Food Bank to ensure availability of food for those in immediate need.
- 3.2 Thanks to the creation of the fund, a grants programme was launched in September and invited applications from local organisations who wished to develop or enhance a ‘warm space’ offer. Applicants have signed up to the

Council's Warm Space Principles and are included in the Warm Spaces directory which is available on the website. To date 19 grants have been given to Warm Space schemes and a borough-wide directory is maintained and available on the website.

- 3.3 In addition to Warm Spaces, the grant programme sought applications from projects and groups focussed on food resilience, advice provision (including debt & welfare), tackling digital exclusion and support for schools. To date upwards of £130,000 has been awarded to local initiatives including specialist money and homelessness advice, new and existing community fridges and help for schools going above and beyond to help struggling families through activities including breakfast clubs and uniform banks. A list of initiatives in receipt of a grant can be found at Appendix 1.

4 Consultation

- 4.1 This area of work has included much engagement with our partners in the voluntary and statutory sectors. This will continue as we move through the winter months and continue to collaborate in order to best support residents.

5 Corporate plan and council policies

- 5.1 These proposals are in line with the corporate pledge to promote inclusion and address deprivation through working with local charities or CIC's.

6 Financial appraisal

- 6.1 There are no new financial implications arising from this report. The Council initiatives to date include the establishment of a cost of living emergency fund (i.e., £250k) to broadly support various priorities including food; availability of the Council Tax Reduction scheme to households on benefits or low incomes; discretionary housing payments being made available to those who are eligible; the Household Support Fund (HSF); Warm Spaces; support for the voluntary sector; etc.

Deputy Chief Finance Officer (Corporate Finance) 15.11.22

7 Legal implications

- 7.1 This report is for noting only and does not directly give rise to any legal issues. Legal advice can be provided in relation to any of the measures outlined above, as and when required.

Legal input dated 16.11.22

Legal ref: 011580-EBC-OD

8 Equality analysis

- 8.1 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 will 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.

9 Environmental sustainability implications

9.1 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.

10 Appendices

- Appendix 1 – Grants to date

11 Background papers

None