

Report to: Cabinet Meeting - 21 February 2023

Portfolio Holder: David Lloyd - Strategy, Performance & Finance

Director Lead: John Robinson, Chief Executive

Report Summary	
Type of Report	Open Report, Key Decision.
Report Title	Response to the Cost-of-Living Crisis
Purpose of Report	To provide an update on the development of proposals to assist tenants and residents, local businesses and employees with the rise in the cost of living
Recommendations	Cabinet is recommended to support the initial list of proposals set out at paragraph 2.0 below.
Alternative Options Considered	A number of different ideas/options have been explored, with those contained at Section 2.0 being those considered to be of most value at the present time.
Reason for Recommendations	To support tenants, residents, businesses and employees with the rise in the cost of living.

1.0 Background

1.1 Many residents and businesses are facing significant rises in their cost of living, from rising interest rates, increased costs for services and high fuel, energy and food bills. Through its day-to-day services, the Council already provides a wide range of support to those who are most in need of support and at its meeting held on 6 December 2022, Cabinet agreed to establish a fund of £150,000 to support new and additional initiatives.

1.2 A cross-council group of officers have been working together to consider how best to allocate the fund and their initial set of proposals are set out below.

2.0 Proposals

2.1

Project/Activity	Detail	Funding (£)
Food and clothing vouchers	It is proposed to purchase £20,000 worth of food and clothing (supermarket vouchers) that will be dispensed through the food banks and food clubs across the district. Food banks will record the postcode of recipients and report monthly on spend outputs. These will be available to those in need and can cover, for example, school uniforms, warm clothes, food, etc.	£20,000 (funded by the Shared Prosperity Fund)

Project/Activity	Detail	Funding (£)
Fuel vouchers	Following liaison with Citizens Advice, it is proposed to provide fuel vouchers as part of their existing fuel bank scheme. CA will allocate the vouchers based on an assessment of need and available to those on pre-payment meters who often pay higher unit prices for their fuel.	£30,000 (funded by the Shared Prosperity Fund)
Awareness raising and signposting for support	It is proposed to create high profile promotional 'wraps' for two of our refuse trucks, highlighting the services available from our partners, Citizens Advice Sherwood & Newark and Notts and Lincs Credit Union, as well as a link to our cost of living website pages to direct people to advice and support.	£5,000
Debt advice and benefit maximisation	An additional service to enhance our current offer delivered through Citizens Advice with a particular focus on maximising benefit take up. The proposed funding is intended to support a mobile service offering outreach across the district at various hubs – offices, food clubs, community centres, etc. In other words, taking the service to places where the people who need it are likely to be.	£40,000 (including £20,000 from HRA)
Low Cost Healthy Food Project	Targeted programme to support upskilling of residents with cooking healthy low-cost meal. A four – six-week programme with a varied menu of meals, including the provision of a slow cooker for participants. Delivered in partnership with Inspire as part of the multiply programme.	£4,500 (including £2,250 from HRA)
Support to local food clubs	Following a significant drop in footfall at foodbanks in January, we have had feedback that some households simply cannot afford the £3.50 necessary for a food club parcel. This funding is proposed to set up a voucher scheme so that households in need who cannot afford the £3.50 can receive an emergency voucher from their local food club. This will be limited to no more than three times in a year.	£2,800 (including £1,400 from HRA)
Household and hygiene packs	In addition to support for food, the main pressure that residents are reporting through the food bank is pressure on hygiene and cleaning products. We are therefore proposing to develop packs that can be made available through local hubs, food clubs, referrals, schools, etc. The packs will include: Hygiene Packs: sanitary products, shampoo, conditioner, toothpaste and brushes, deodorant, shower gel, toilet rolls, etc. Household pack: Washing up liquid, bleach, cleaning cloth/sponge, anti-bacterial spray, washing powder/eco egg and the potential of a laundry drying kit (pegs and rope to encourage people to dry outside, tackling the cost of drying and impact on indoor condensation).	£10,000 (including £5,000 from HRA)

Project/Activity	Detail	Funding (£)
Distribution of energy boxes	Energy boxes containing items to help combat energy usage: suggested items being dehumidifier packs, LED bulbs, a plug timer, torch and hot water bottle to support those residents facing fuel insecurity. This will work out at £30 per box.	£10,000 (including £5,000 from HRA)
Webinars for Businesses	Offering 'help from the business experts' webinars with free access to specialist advice to support the challenges local businesses are facing with the rising cost of living. The approximate cost of this is £10,000.	£10,000
Social Media 'shop local' campaign	A campaign to encourage people to shop locally.	£15,000
Localised Council Tax Support take up trial	<p>Council Tax Support is a means/income tested discount that provides vital support to council taxpayers by reducing the amount of council tax due. Working age households can receive a discount of up to 80% of their council tax charge for households in Bands A and B up to £1,400 and for other bands a maximum discount equivalent to a Band A charge (£1,501).</p> <p>There are currently 6,682 households receiving Council Tax Support, the total value of that award is £6.9m, of these 3,527 are working age. A recent data mapping exercise has identified that there are 593 Council rented households in receipt of Universal Credit but have not applied for Council Tax Support. The likelihood is that if these households completed an application form a proportion of them would qualify for an award.</p> <p>It is proposed that a different approach is adopted for increasing take-up, namely home visits to support tenants to complete the online form and capture required evidence so that the claim can then be processed. Since these households are in receipt of an in work benefit it is envisaged that the visits would be made outside of normal working hours. As such, overtime would be required at £30.85 per hour in addition to mileage/fuel costs.</p> <p>To provide proof of concept, we propose 100 visits are made and a record kept of the number of successful applications awarded. A project board of officers from Housing Services and Revenues and Benefits would manage and monitor the project. If successful, the pilot would be extended to all households and could also be used to support tenants who qualify for Pension Credit.</p>	£2,500 (funded by the HRA)

3.0 Ongoing Work

3.1 It is important to emphasise that the initiatives set out above are in addition to the ongoing activities already in place, which include actions such as:

- Signposting businesses to support/grants via our website.
- Shortening processing times for business rate relief so businesses receive their money more quickly.
- Ongoing support to the four food clubs we assist to run independently.
- Running the “Fuelling You with Support” event on 30 November 2022 which brought together partners and agencies to provide a single event for residents to access support and advice.
- Continuing the ‘No Eviction Pledge’ which was introduced during the Pandemic, and ‘pledging’ that the Council will not pursue eviction whilst the tenant(s) are engaging with us and working with us to reduce their debt.
- Continuing our ‘Getting to Know You’ visits at the start of the tenancy, involving a conversation about a new tenant(s) situation and providing an opportunity to signpost for support where appropriate.

3.2 Support for Colleagues

In addition to the outlined above, the Council is providing support to staff by offering:

- 5% or £1500 interest free loan
- Free parking (2 years)
- £10 Leisure Centre Membership
- 20% off Microsoft and discounted Virgin Media Broadband and TV
- Credit Union Payroll Scheme
- Discreet Counselling and Support
- Free eye test and discount on specs for regular VDU users

4.0 Implications

In writing this report and in putting forward recommendations, officers have considered the following implications: Data Protection, Digital and Cyber Security, Equality and Diversity, Financial, Human Resources, Human Rights, Legal, Safeguarding, Sustainability, and Crime and Disorder and where appropriate they have made reference to these implications and added suitable expert comment where appropriate.

Financial Implications (FIN22-23/8338)

4.1 Cabinet approved an allocation of £150,000 (funded £100,000 from the General Fund and £50,000 from the HRA) on the 6 December 2022 in order to fund new and additional initiatives to support residents and businesses.

4.2 The total cost of the proposals set out above amounts to £149,800. Based on the initiatives above budgets have been allocated into both the General Fund and the HRA, with an additional amount that can be contributed from the Shared Prosperity Fund. The tables at 2.1 and 2.2 above detail the proposed spend with the proportions to be allocated to the HRA and Shared Prosperity Fund where appropriate.

4.3 Based on the above, the table below shows the remaining allocations which will be set aside for further initiatives:

Fund	Original Allocation	Proposed spend above	Remaining funds
General Fund	£100,000	£63,650	£36,350
HRA	£50,000	£36,150	£13,850
Shared Prosperity Fund	£0	£50,000	£0 (Year one)
Total	£150,000	£149,800	£50,200

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

Cost of Living report to Cabinet, 06/12/2022