



Report to: Cabinet Meeting – 31 October 2023

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Paul Peacock, Strategy, Performance & Finance

Director Lead: John Robinson, Chief Executive

Lead Officer: Cara Clarkson, Business Manager – Regeneration & Housing Strategy, Ext. 5923

Report Summary	
Type of Report	Open Report, Key Decision
Report Title	Update on the Council’s Response to the Cost of Living Crisis
Purpose of Report	To provide an update on the delivery of proposals to assist tenants and residents, local businesses and employees with the rise in the cost of living.
Recommendations	That Cabinet: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) note the progress against the Cost-of-Living Action Plan as outlined in section 2 of the report; and b) approve the additional proposals set out in section 3.2 of the report funded from the existing budget previously approved; and c) approve that a further report be brought to the next meeting of the Cabinet in December 2023 outlining the proposed projects for 2024/25.
Alternative Options Considered	Alternative options include not providing a cost-of-living response; however, this has not been considered viable given the pressures faced by residents, staff and business alike.
Reason for Recommendations	To support tenants, residents, businesses and employees with the ongoing challenges of the cost of living.

1.0 Background

1.1 On 6 December 2022, Cabinet agreed to establish a fund of £150,000 (funded £100,000 from the General Fund and £50,000 from the Housing Revenue Account) to develop the Council’s response to the cost-of-living crisis. With the addition of a further £50,000 from the Shared Prosperity Fund, on 21 February 2023, Cabinet agreed the additional activities and projects designed to support residents, businesses and staff. These have been collated in a ‘Cost-of-Living Action Plan’ and presented at Section 2.1.

1.2 In addition to the activities captured under the 'Cost-of-Living Action Plan' the Council continues to offer the following core services:

Support for Businesses and Residents

- Signposting businesses to support/grants via our website
- Business rate relief
- Ongoing support to the four food clubs we assist to run independently
- Continuing the 'No Eviction Pledge' which was introduced during the pandemic, 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, an opportunity to have a positive conversation with tenant(s) about how their home is working for them, providing advice and signposting for support where appropriate.

Support for Colleagues - Support to staff by offering:

- 5% or £1500 interest free loan
- Free parking (2 years)
- £10 leisure centre membership
- Discounted Virgin Media Broadband and TV
- Credit Union payroll scheme
- Counselling and support services
- Free eye test and discount on specs for regular screen users

2.0 Progress against the Cost-of-Living Action Plan

2.1

Project/Activity	Update	Spend
Food and clothing vouchers	£20,000 worth of food and clothing (supermarket vouchers) would be dispensed through the food banks and food clubs across the district. In total 264 individual households have been supported through this scheme.	£19,885 spent of £20,000 allocated
Fuel vouchers	Working in partnership with Citizens Advice Newark and Sherwood, 288 individual households have been supported to access fuel vouchers following an assessment of need. Vouchers are available to those households on pre-payment meters who often pay higher unit prices for their fuel.	£30,000 spent of £30,000 allocated
Awareness raising and signposting for support	Two, high profile 'wraps' have now been installed and are in circulation across the district on our refuse trucks. The wraps highlight 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.	£4,990 spent of £5,000 allocated

Project/Activity	Update	Spend
Debt advice and benefit maximisation	Following discussion with Citizens Advice, the service is now offering an outreach service across the district including at various hubs – offices, food clubs and community centres, taking the service to places where the people who need it can access it and delivering outreach outside of core hours, seeking to reach households who may be in work but struggling.	£40,000 committed against £40,000 allocated
Low-Cost Healthy Food Project	This project was set up to deliver a targeted programme to support upskilling of residents with cooking healthy low-cost meals. Following delays in securing a deliver partner, this project has just begun with Academy Transformation Trust Further Education (ATTFE) stepping in as delivery partner. As a result of the delayed start only £184 has been spent from this budget, however the remaining is committed for spend by the end March '24.	£4,500 spent with £4,500 committed against £4,500 allocated
Support to local food clubs	This funding proposed to set up a voucher scheme so that households in need who were unable to afford the £3.50 to access the food club could be supported. Given the pressures on food clubs it is now proposed to reallocate this funding to purchase food stock, supporting the pressures being experiences with securing additional food from FareShare (please see more in section 3.5 below)	Funding uncommitted – proposed to be reallocated as per the table at 3.2 below. £2,800 unspent
Household and hygiene packs	In response to feedback from food clubs, that the main pressure that residents are experiencing (after food) is the cost hygiene and cleaning products, this project has issued 497 cleaning and hygiene packs across this district. Packs have been distributed to households in need through local hubs, food clubs, referrals, schools and included: 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).	£9,999 spent of £10,000 allocated

Distribution of energy boxes	This project has distributed 314 energy packs to households. The energy boxes contained items to help combat energy usage including: LED bulbs, a plug timer, torch and hot water bottle to support those residents facing fuel insecurity and dehumidifier packs.	£9,520 spent of £10,000 allocated
Webinars for Businesses	This project has engaged 90 businesses across the district in webinars, delivered by retail and business specialists, including support in growing businesses successfully.	£10,000 spent of £10,000 allocated
Social Media 'shop local' campaign	The shop local campaign has reached a total of 281,788 residents on social media.	£15,000 committed of £15,000 allocated
Localised Council Tax Support take up trial	100 homes have been contacted under this project to promote council tax support. Of the 100 households contacted, 23 households have applied for council tax support and 17 have been successful in securing support totalling £11,769.	£2,500 committed of £2,500 allocated

3.0 **Proposed Additional Activity**

- 3.1 In February, the total budget allocated to projects outlined in section 2.1 was £149,800 against £200,000. This section proposes a range of projects against the unallocated £50,000 from the original budget (£100k General Fund, £50,000 Housing Revenue Account and £50,000 Shared Prosperity Fund) along with the underspend from the food voucher project.
- 3.2 The biggest pressures facing families are still being reported as food and fuel poverty. The projects below therefore aim to support issues of food and fuel insecurity both at the point of need arising (through food clubs and emergency food parcels) but also by supporting households to become more resilient by providing opportunities to grow their own food through two new community gardens and expansion of cooking sessions.

Project/Activity	Detail	Funding (£)
Expansion of food clubs to evenings	<p>Pending FareShare confirmation, it is proposed to undertake a trial expansion of two food clubs to offer an out of hours/ evening food club provision.</p> <p>This is in recognition of families where households may be working but they are still 'just about managing' and require support.</p> <p>£10,000 will provide for the initial up-front cost of food for 6 months. As with all food clubs, it is then hoped that delivery will be self-sustaining after this initial startup period.</p>	£10,000

Project/Activity	Detail	Funding (£)
Expansion of cooking sessions with ATTFE and Newark College	<p>It is proposed to expand cooking sessions with our partners ATTFE and Newark College.</p> <p>£10,000 will provide 28x 7-week courses @ £50/week for ingredients. The course delivery will be mobile and travel across the district, targeting parents in school hours.</p> <p>In addition, those attending can secure a Level 2 Personal Development qualification.</p>	£10,000
Securing emergency food parcels	<p>Food clubs across the district are receiving requests for circa 2-3 emergency food parcels each week.</p> <p>Emergency food parcels are allocated as a last resort in circumstances where households have run out of all essentials and cannot access a food club (which has limited opening hours).</p> <p>Emergency food parcels provide significantly better value for money than vouchers and an upfront investment will allow larger catering packs to be bought and split to ensure value for money.</p> <p>It is proposed to use the underspend from the £3.50 food club vouchers scheme, with an additional £10,000 to fund emergency food parcels across the Blidworth, Bilsthorpe, Beaumont Walk and Ollerton Food Clubs.</p>	£12,800
Develop two additional community gardens	<p>It is proposed to develop a further two community gardens – one within the Newark and the second within Sherwood.</p> <p>It is proposed to allocate £5,000 to each garden to replicate the success of the Feel Good Gardens model on the outskirts of Sherwood Pines. The funding will provide all set costs up including: raised beds, equipment, seeds, storage and volunteer training. This is also an opportunity to build skills and make new connections</p>	£10,000
Winter Fuel Support	<p>It is proposed that a further £10,000 is committed to support additional fuel vouchers for households on pre-payment meters (the most expensive fuel) as we enter into the winter period.</p>	£10,000

3.3 In addition to the projects proposed above for the remainder of 2023/24, Cabinet may wish to give consideration to supporting the cost-of-living crisis beyond March 2023 either through continuation of the above projects or through additional projects. Examples that may be considered include:

- Developing 'Grow Your Own' vegetable packs for households (circa £5k).
- Considering a mobile food bank to reach those residents who cannot attend a physical base (costs to be established).
- Employing a full-time food-coordinator to dedicate resource to tackling food insecurity (circa £35k including on-costs).
- A market traders start up grant - A small grant programme that works with potential new market traders to open a stall on a local market with a 50% rent reduction for up to 12 weeks. The programme works with market operators to complement existing traders with new services and offers (circa £15,000).
- A Town Centre Gift Card - The creation of a town centre gift card that aims to support local independent retailers to promote local trade and increase local spend.

3.4 Risks to project delivery – shortage of food through FareShare.

FareShare is a national network of charitable food re-distributors who take food from across the food industry and distribute this to almost 8,500 charities and community groups across the country. FareShare continue to be an outstanding partner in helping tackle food poverty across the district however, with the increase in demand for their service, they have struggled at times in securing the volume of food needed for all clubs. The risk of not securing the adequate volume of food may manifest as increased costs to purchase food and/ or failure to meet demand. Officers are working closely with FareShare to manage this risk and maintain a sustainable service.

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 (FIN23-24/244)

- 4.1 The Cabinet meeting of the 21 February 2023 approved a budget of £200,000 (funded £100,000 from the General Fund, £50,000 from the HRA and £50,000 from the Shared Prosperity Fund). Of this budget £149,800 was allocated towards projects with £50,200 to be allocated once further projects came forward.
- 4.2 The table at paragraph 2.1 shows the spend and commitments to date of the allocated budgets. Of the £149,800 allocated, £146,394 has been spent and committed. Of the remaining £3,406, £2,800 relates to the support to local food clubs which is proposed to be reallocated into securing emergency food parcels as per the table at paragraph 3.2.
- 4.3 The table at paragraph 3.2 includes proposals to spend £52,800. The budget remaining, inclusive of the underspend described in the paragraph above, is £53,606 which means there would be £806 remaining. It is proposed that further fuel vouchers would be purchased with this remaining budget.
- 4.4 Any further projects, as described at paragraph 3.3, that are supported would require further budget approval and hence a further report would be tabled at Cabinet to gain that approval.

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 – 6 December 2022](#)

[Cost of Living Report to Cabinet – 21 February 2023](#)