

Agenda Item 42.

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| TITLE | Cost of Living Crisis Response |
| FOR CONSIDERATION BY | Community & Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 17 th October 22 |
| WARD | None Specific |
| LEAD OFFICER | Chief Executive - Susan Parsonage |

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

A structured response to the growing Cost of Living Crisis is essential in order to provide vital support to people in the borough who are struggling due to spiralling food, energy, fuel and housing costs which fall significantly behind increases in pay or pensions.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee consider the initial response to support residents and reduce the impact of the Cost of Living Crisis within the Borough and are asked to suggest innovative approaches which can feed into proposals and delivery plans being developed through the Hardship Alliance.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

This report presents an overview of the council's approach, working through the Hardship Alliance, to address the Cost of Living Crisis within the borough. It sets out the workstreams which have been established to focus work along with key aspects of what is being provided by way of support in each of these areas of focus.

Background

The development of the Tackling Poverty Strategy, in December 2021, we created the Hardship Alliance, engaging key partners in the voluntary and community sector (VCS) who form a link to the wider sector. With announcement of the Cost of Living Crisis Response, the Hardship Alliance were ideally placed to lead this work, ensuring effective collaboration between the Council and the wider VCS.

The Hardship Alliance comprises:

- Wokingham United Charities (chair)
- Wokingham Borough Council
- Citizen's Advice Wokingham
- First Days
- Age UK Berkshire
- Wokingham Foodbank

The Hardship Alliance, in leading this work will forge the relationships and linkages into council services and VCS partners to support delivery. They have recently established the Hardship Alliance Action Group, which represents a broader number of VCS partners also working to address poverty within the borough.

Detailed plans for each of the workstreams are currently being developed through fortnightly meetings established with the Hardship Alliance and Assistant Directors, operating as a Silver response.

Analysis of Issues

With rising inflation, driven largely by increases in food prices and energy costs, more people are going to be struggling. The governments mini-budget has now led to increased interest rates, driving up mortgage costs and private sector rents, whilst capping energy prices at a level which is more than double what many people were paying a year ago. Inflation is over 10% and predicted to remain at that level, causing further pressure on spend whilst wage rises are significantly lower.

Locally, we are seeing significant increases in demand for debt and benefits related support; soaring use of the foodbank and Share schemes; and more people now struggling who prior to these changes had been managing well, without many concerns for their future.

A data dashboard and analysis is being developed, based on local and real time data which will see increases in the numbers of people struggling as seen in council services and VCS partners. This will be updated from weekly data sources.

An initial discussion with the Hardship Alliance led to the creation of 7 workstreams, each led by a member of the Hardship Alliance with Assistant Director(s) from the council. These workstreams are:

- Developing a Needs Led Approach
- Funding
- People Based Resources
- Logistics
- Essential
- Data

- Communications

Through these workstreams detailed actions will be taken forward at pace to deliver support on the immediate needs and respond to emerging challenges as far as possible. This work recognises the growing number of new people who will be needing support, who have never previously been in that position and are therefore less aware of what support is available or how to access it.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

| | How much will it Cost/ (Save) | Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall | Revenue or Capital? |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|---------------------|
| Current Financial Year (Year 1) | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Next Financial Year (Year 2) | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Following Financial Year (Year 3) | N/A | N/A | N/A |

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation / Decision

It is intended to run a Crowdfunding campaign in association with Berkshire Community Foundation to raise extra money for VCS partners to deliver the response, with no additional council finances sought at this stage. This will sit alongside other funding identified to help the VCS in their response, aiming to reduce further increases in demand on council services and budgets.

Cross-Council Implications

Adoption of this strategy will provide the basis for further work across the council and services to improve the way people in poverty are worked with and supported. The priorities and focus of this strategy should therefore be reflected in approaches taken by other services.

Public Sector Equality Duty

Addressing rising poverty challenges through the cost of living crisis within the borough in an equitable way will support delivery of the Public Sector Equality Duty.

Climate Emergency – *This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030*

Through some of the actions we are looking to provide warm hubs for people struggling to heat their homes, along with energy saving packs which will support from the growing number of residents in fuel poverty.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2

N/A

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| List of Background Papers |
| None |

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