

<b>TITLE</b>	<b>Impact of the Cost of Living crisis</b>
<b>FOR CONSIDERATION BY</b>	Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 20 June 2023
<b>WARD</b>	None Specific;
<b>LEAD OFFICER</b>	Director, Children's Services - Helen Watson

## **OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY**

The cost of living crisis has resulted in significant challenges for the Wokingham community.

Provision of an update on the work being undertaken to support children and young people in the borough to date will facilitate the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee providing challenge and support to the ongoing response with the aim of further improving outcomes for families.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

That the Children's Services overview and scrutiny committee notes the response to date to children's, young people's and families' support needs during the ongoing cost of living crisis.

## **SUMMARY OF REPORT**

A cost of living emergency was declared by the council in September 2022 in response to severe pressure on household finances due to the increasing cost of food, fuel and other essential items.

The emergency response was set up in early October, led by the Hardship Alliance and including Assistant Directors (ADs) from across the council, and comprised 7 workstreams, each led by a partner from the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) and an AD.

A demand-led partnership approach focussed on identifying and responding to emerging need across the community and resulted in:

- Clear understanding of need, available resource, and areas of challenge across the partnership, resulting in a focussed response to specific emerging demand;
- A communication strategy focussed on ensuring all residents were made aware of available support, including the household support fund;
- A crowdfunding campaign which raised £25K from the public, match-funded by WBC and the Wokingham United Charities (WUC) resulting in £75K being allocated to local hardship charities via a bidding process;
- Distribution of energy-saving items such as air fryers, draught excluders, heated clothes rails and light bulbs;
- Distribution of warm items such as blankets and hot water bottles; and
- Provision of a network of warm hubs across the borough.

In addition, the Holiday Activities and Food Programme, a DfE grant-funded initiative specifically focussed on alleviating childhood food poverty, has continued to grow and deliver free-of-charge provision during the Christmas, Easter and Summer holidays to families whose children are in receipt of benefits-related free school meals, supported by the Community Engagement Team.

This paper considers what is known about the demand for support from families with children, and how that demand has been met.

## **Background**

A cost of living emergency was declared by the council in September 2022 in response to severe pressure on household finances due to the increasing cost of food, fuel and other essential items.

The emergency response was set up in early October 2022. A Silver group led by the Hardship Alliance and including Assistant Directors (ADs) from across the council, initiated 7 workstreams, each led by a partner from the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) and an AD:

- Needs-led response
- Funding
- People resources
- Logistics
- Essentials
- Data
- Communications

This demand-led partnership approach focussed on identifying and responding to emerging need across the community and resulted in:

- Clear understanding of need, available resource, and areas of challenge across the partnership, resulting in a focussed response to specific emerging demand;
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- Distribution of energy-saving items such as air fryers, draught excluders, heated clothes rails and light bulbs;
- Distribution of warm items such as blankets and hot water bottles; and
- Provision of a network of warm hubs across the borough.

The silver emergency response group was wound down in April 2023, with further work taken forward through the newly formed Joint Inequalities and Tackling Poverty Group.

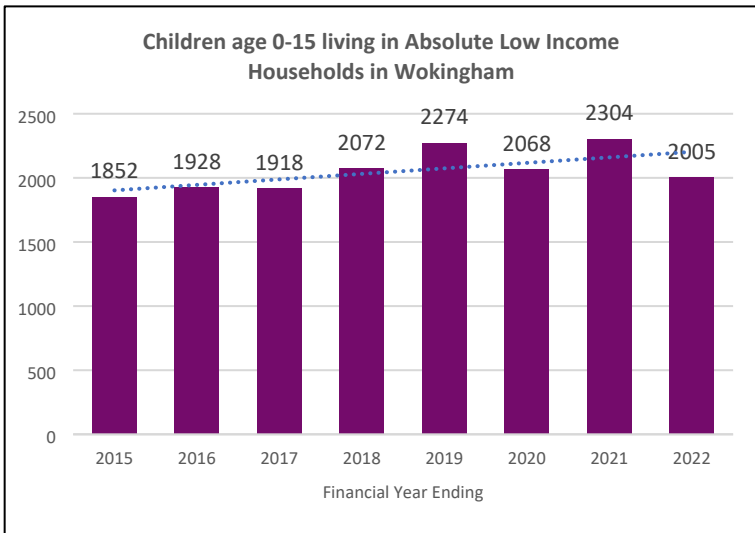
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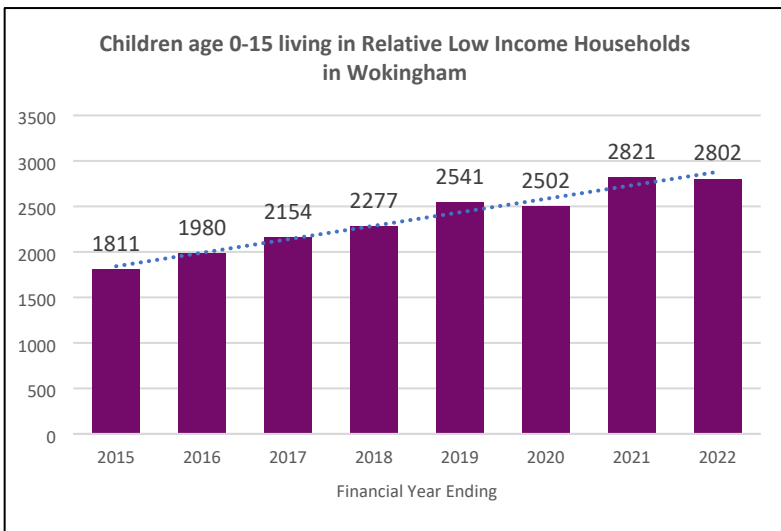
## Demand Trends and Available Support

### 1. Contextual Data on Low Income Households and Free School Meals (FSM) Claimants

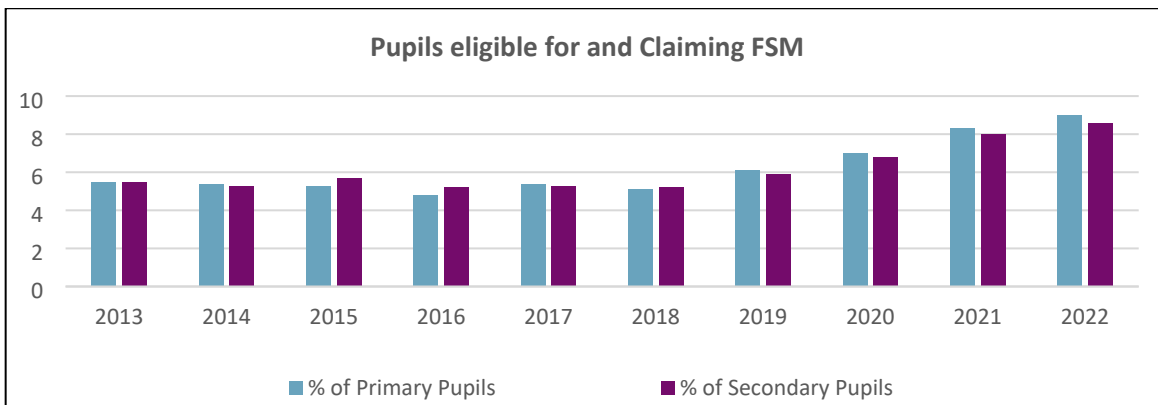
**Figure 1: Children living in Absolute Low Income Households 2015-2022**



**Figure 2: Children living in Relative Low Income Households 2015-2022**



**Figure 3: FSM Claimants in Wokingham, 2013-2022**



Whilst the % of children living in households of absolute or relative low income is lower than the national average, in Wokingham the trend over time is a rise, despite numbers dropping in 2022.

The number of pupils (secondary and primary) eligible for and claiming FSM increased from around 5% of pupils in 2013, to around 9% in 2022.

## 2. Available Support

Support has been made available to families from a variety of sources, local and national. A communications campaign, fronted by a comprehensive WBC website information page (see below), has focussed on ensuring that all residents area aware of what is accessible to them. Source: [Cost of living help - Wokingham Borough Council](#)

### Cost of living help

#### Money to help with food, bills, energy costs and other essentials

The [Household Support Fund](#) is now open for applications to help with food, energy, bills and other essential costs.

If you've applied for or received support between October 2022 and March 2023, you will now be able to apply again during this new round (started April 2023).

#### Survey - how has cost of living crisis impacted you?

The [Hardship Alliance](#) is surveying residents on how the cost of living crisis has impacted their lives.

It takes about five minutes to fill in and will shape future support offered in the borough. Closes Friday 9 June.

[Respond now](#)

#### Find out about all the Government schemes

Visit the [Help for Households website](#).

#### Talk to someone if you need help

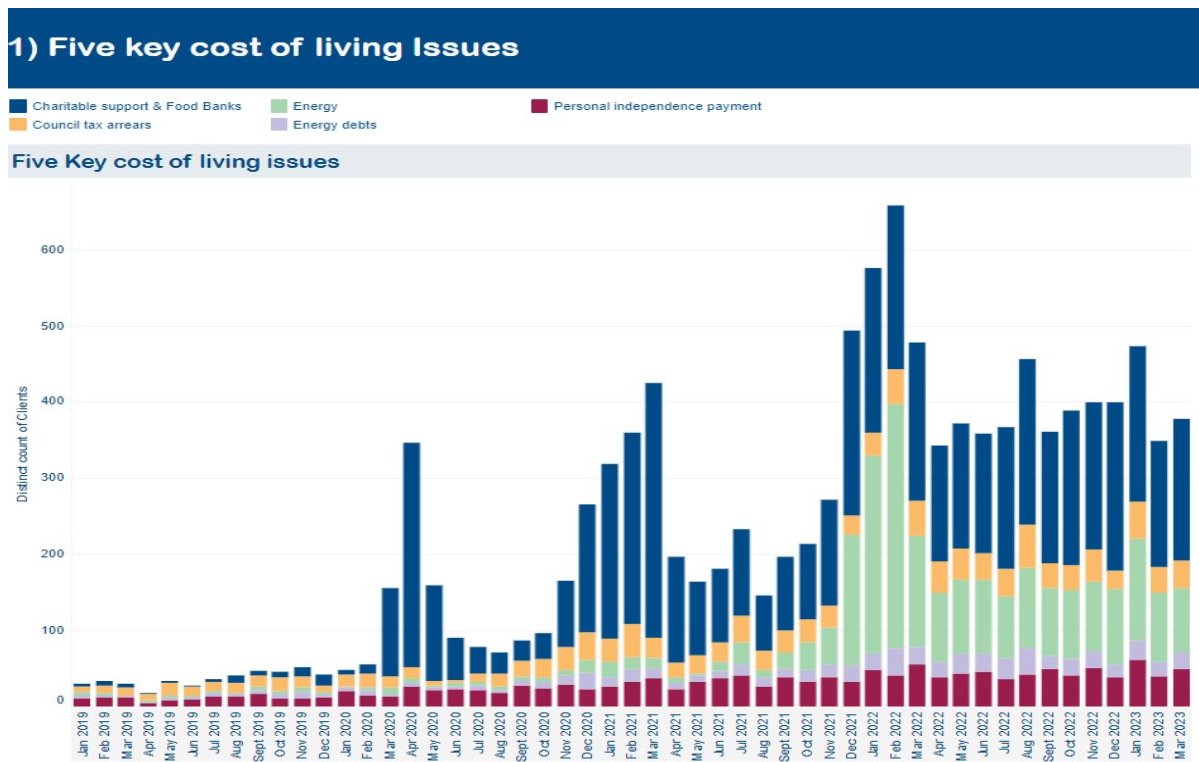
Contact One Front Door, a service led by Citizens Advice, Wokingham, that helps residents find the most appropriate support. Use the [online referral form](#) or [0808 278 7958](tel:08082787958), Monday to Friday.

**In this section**

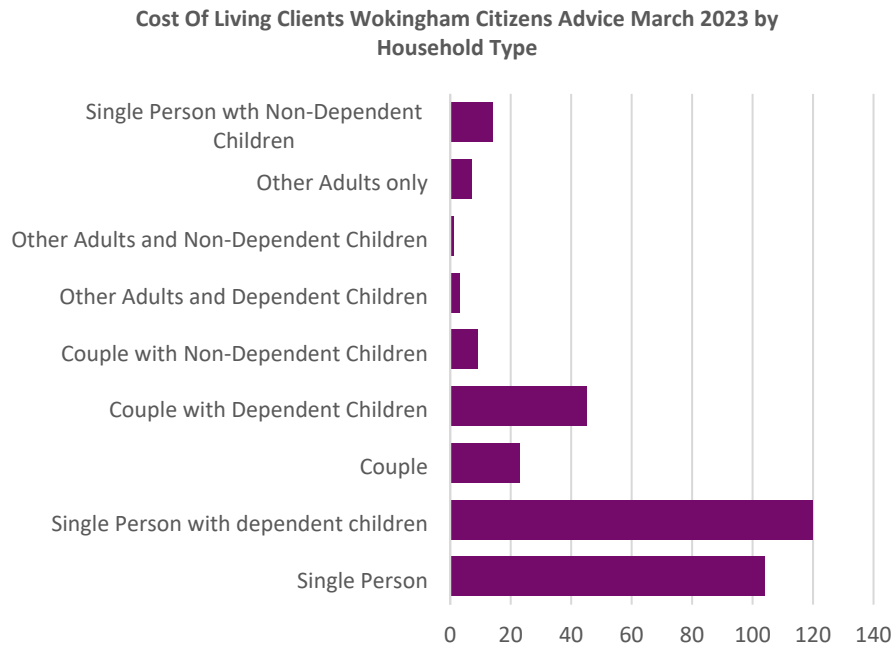
<p><b>Financial support</b></p> <p>Find out what financial support is available</p>	<p><b>Food and fuel</b></p> <p>Find out how to get support with food or fuel</p>	<p><b>Family and home</b></p> <p>Find out how to access support for you and your family</p>	<p><b>Health support</b></p> <p>Find out how to get help with your physical and mental health</p>
<p><b>Food map</b></p> <p>When and where you can get help with food</p>	<p><b>Tackling Poverty Strategy</b></p> <p>How we're reducing poverty in the area</p>	<p><b>Household bills</b></p> <p>Help with getting discounts or reducing bills at home</p>	<p><b>Household Support Fund</b></p> <p>Money and vouchers for essentials and feeding children</p>
<p><b>One Front Door</b></p> <p>Get help and support from Citizens Advice Wokingham</p>	<p><b>The Hardship Alliance</b></p> <p>Group responding to poverty in the borough</p>	<p><b>Priority services</b></p> <p>Register for priority help during power cuts if you're vulnerable</p>	<p><b>Help with essentials</b></p> <p>Services you can use to get food, clothes, furniture and more</p>
<p><b>Period poverty partnership</b></p> <p>Privacy icon We're helping people in</p>	<p><b>Warmer winter project</b></p> <p>Items for free if you're struggling with energy costs at</p>	<p><b>How to help others</b></p> <p>Sign up for email updates. <input type="text"/> Email Address <input type="button" value="SUBSCRIBE"/></p>	<p><b>Employment</b></p> <p>Chat icon</p>

**3. Citizens Advice**

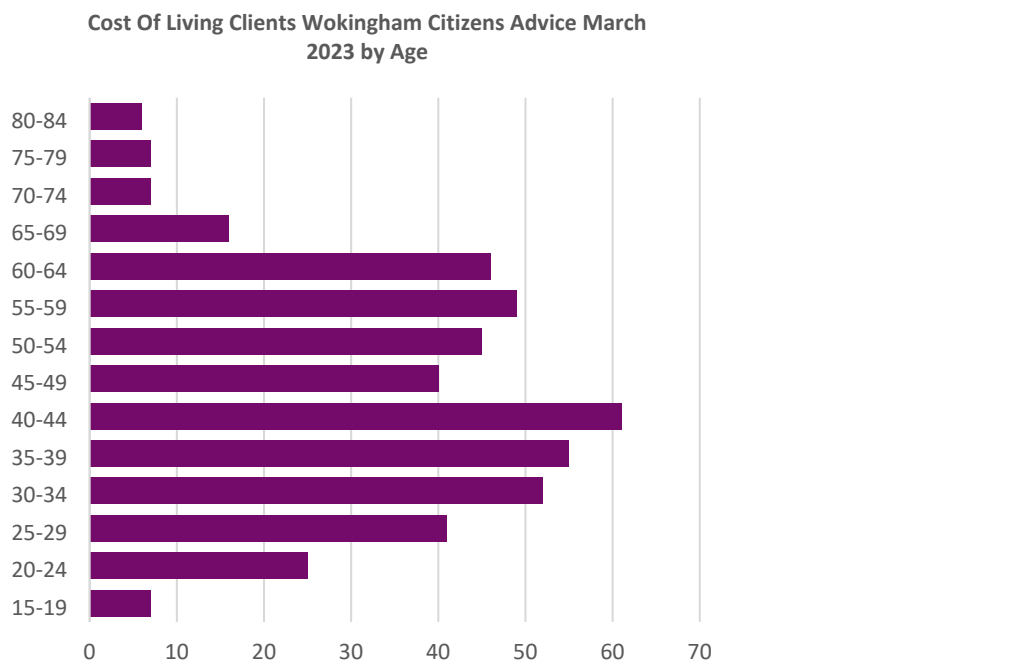
**Figure 4: Overall demand (Source: Citizen’s Advice Wokingham)**



**Figure 5: Cost of Living Clients by Household Type March 23 (Source: Citizens Advice Wokingham)**



**Figure 6: Cost of Living Clients by Age March 23 (Source: Citizens Advice Wokingham)**

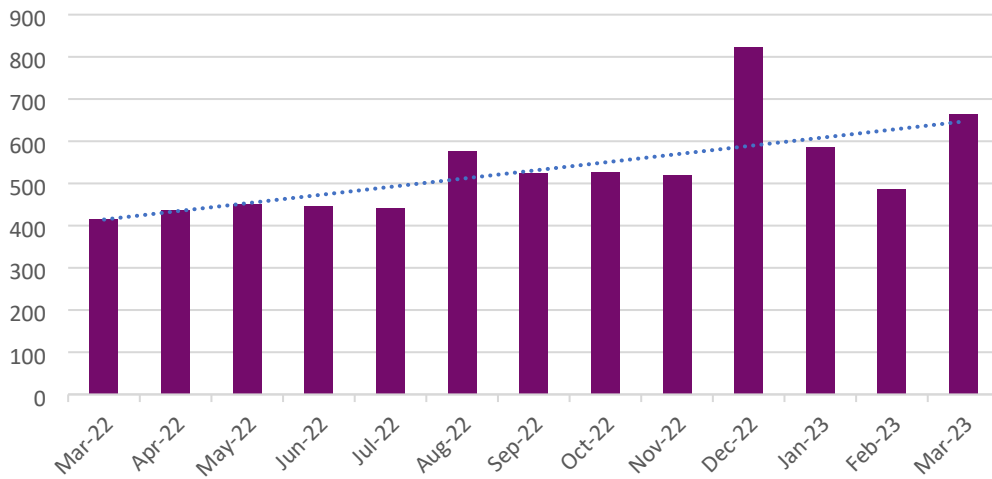


Citizens Advice Wokingham data indicates, perhaps not surprisingly, that demand peaked during the winter months of 22/23 driven by challenges meeting energy costs. In March, over a third of those seeking support were single parents with dependent children, and whilst clients were spread across age categories, approximately two fifths were in the 30-44 range.

#### **4. Wokingham Foodbank**

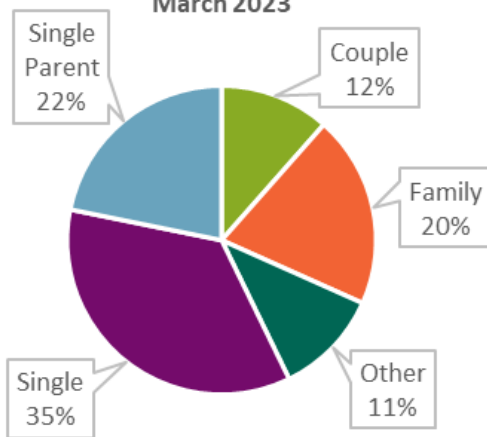
**Figure 7. Demand for support from Wokingham Food Bank**

**Total Numbers of People Supported by Wokingham Foodbank March 2022 to March 2023**

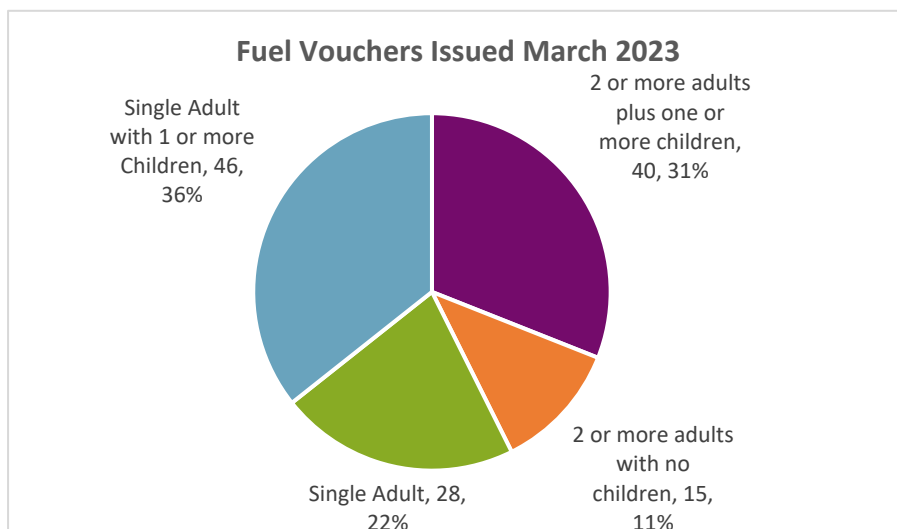


**Figure 8: Wokingham Foodbank referrals by household type**

**Wokingham Foodbank Referrals by Household Type - March 2023**



**Figure 9: Wokingham Foodbank fuel vouchers issued by household type**



Wokingham foodbank data indicates similarly that families with children have and continue to struggle with food and energy costs. In March 2023, 44% of referrals were for families including single parents, and 67% of the fuel vouchers issued were to families with children.

## 5. Household Support Fund

### ***FSM Food Vouchers***

Between October 2022 and March 2023 £240,030 worth of food vouchers were issued during school holidays to families with children in receipt of benefits-related Free School Meals (2,253 children benefitted). This included the Easter Holidays 2023.

### ***Non-FSM Support***

Between October 2022 and March 2023 £133,630 of support was given to non-FSM households. £70,440 of this was for households with children (587 households).

## 6. Holiday Activities and Food Programme (for children in receipt of FSM)

In 2022/23:

- 168,384 hours of engaging activities were delivered
- Over 31,572 healthy meals were enjoyed by children and young people

### **Analysis of Issues**

Activity is continuing to support the response to the cost of living crisis through the Joint Inequalities and Tackling Poverty Group through close monitoring and response to emerging demand trends.

### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION**

***The Council faces unprecedented financial pressures as a result of; the longer term impact of the COVID-19 crisis, Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the general economic climate of rising prices and the increasing cost of debt. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are optimised and 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**



N/A

**Cross-Council Implications** (how does this decision impact on other Council services, including properties and priorities?)

N/A

**Public Sector Equality Duty**

Please confirm that due regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty has been taken and if an equalities assessment has been completed or explain why an equalities assessment is not required.

TBC

**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***

Please state clearly what the impact of the decision being made would be on the Council's carbon neutral objective.

**Reasons for considering the report in Part 2**

**List of Background Papers**

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