

Cherwell District Council

Executive

3 October 2022

Cost of Living Update

Report of Corporate Director - Resources

This report is public

Purpose of report

This report summarises the work the Council is undertaking with respect to the current Cost of Living situation that our residents are experiencing.

1.0 Recommendations

The meeting is recommended:

- 1.1 To note the work that the Council is undertaking.
- 1.2 To support the Council's Food Champion and the work of the Food Insecurity Working Group.
- 1.3 To approve the allocation of £250k from the COVID fund to support the Food Voucher Scheme.
- 1.4 To continue to successfully deliver new Central Government funding initiatives that support our communities

2.0 Introduction

- 2.1 It is appreciated that residents, and businesses across Cherwell continue to feel the pressures of the current economic climate. This includes significant increases in the cost of food, energy, and fuel whilst incomes are not rising in line with this increase in costs. The government has delivered several grants to help households with heating and energy costs, with detail awaited on the application of the initiatives announced in the mini budget on the 23 September. It is however recognised that while these schemes are welcomed; especially as many communities are still struggling with impacts of Covid, further support will be critical to help our most vulnerable. This is where district councils can make a real impact with their knowledge of their communities, local issues, and proactive joint delivery with key partners. In August, the Council recognised the importance of leadership in our society and Councillor Phil Chapman is Cherwell District Council's Food

Champion. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee in September has also created a working group focussing on Food Insecurity.

- 2.2 This report highlights the work the Council has in place to assist our residents and outlines future workstreams and initiatives the authority is progressing.

3.0 Financial Support

- 3.1 There are several financial support packages that the Council administers on behalf of the Government including:

- The Council Tax Energy Rebate
- Discretionary Council Tax Energy Rebate
- Housing Benefit
- Discretionary Housing Payments
- Council Tax Support
- Household Support Fund

Council Tax Energy Rebate

- 3.2 The Council Tax Energy Rebate is a government funded scheme to provide all households that fall into Council Tax bands A-D with a one-off £150 rebate to support energy costs, meaning over 50,000 households being supported. If a household had not applied, the Council applied a credit to their Council Tax account, ensuring all eligible households receive the grant (totalling £7.63m).

Discretionary Council Tax Energy Rebate

- 3.3 The Discretionary Council Tax Energy Rebate is another government funded scheme that was created to support others in need that were not eligible for the Council Tax Energy Rebate. As the rebate was discretionary, the Council was able to use local intelligence to maximise the benefit of the fund. The Council developed a scheme that would support all of those in receipt of Council tax support with a total payment of £180. This enables the Council to support 6,336 households in receipt of Council Tax Support. It should be noted that if a household were already in receipt of the Council Tax Energy Rebate, they would receive an additional £30, meaning that they would have received £180 in total, creating an equitable state, and maximising the impact of this small discretionary fund.

Housing Benefit

- 3.4 Housing Benefit payments are made every year to support those who cannot afford to pay their rent, and we estimate that we will spend £22.6m in 2022/23 supporting 3,568 customers (an increase of 236 from the previous year). Obviously, the Council is alert to the fact that given the current economic climate, this number could increase significantly over the winter period.

Discretionary Housing Payments

- 3.5 Discretionary Housing Payments is a small fund provided by the Department of Work and Pensions (£183k) that the Council uses to provide additional support to

those who are still struggling to pay their rent. In the first quarter of the year, the Council utilised £30k of this fund (which is less than a quarter of the funding pot), which will enable additional support as more people request support.

Council Tax Support

- 3.6 The Council administers Council Tax Support, supporting 6,271 residents as part of the mandatory national scheme. The Council has adopted a banded scheme for those of working age, meaning that the level of the pay the resident receives informs the level of support the resident receives. This provides stability for both the resident and the scheme as the support stays consistent.

Household Support Fund

- 3.7 The final form of support is the Household Support Fund. This fund is again government funded, with Oxfordshire County Council receiving £3.3m, and the Council receiving £255k to administer. This fund is to support households, particularly those with children and pensioners who would otherwise struggle to buy food, pay essential utility bills, or meet other essential living or housing costs. These payments are paid to vulnerable adults following an assessment by our partner (Citizens Advice North Oxfordshire South Northants). Central Government has agreed the third tranche of this fund - it will be allocated to the County Council in October and the Council are currently in discussion with the County Council to ensure we can continue to work in partnership to deliver maximum benefits for our residents.
- 3.8 The Council has a website that can signpost residents to available support including Council Tax, help with utilities bills, foodbanks, and money advice. This information is also being made available in physical copies to enable those without access to the internet to be made aware. The link to the site can be found below. <https://www.cherwell.gov.uk/info/118/communities/977/help-with-the-cost-of-living>

Our work on inequalities

- 3.9 The Council is incredibly active in supporting those who are struggling with the current economic climate and are experiencing inequalities, be it financial or wellbeing.
- 3.10 Recognising the growing concerns within many communities - CDC (Cherwell District Council) has adopted many specific initiatives to provide additional support – for example Better Housing Better Health, Cherwell Energy Efficiency Programme (CHEEP) Grants as well as Tenancy Support:

Brighter Futures

- 3.11 One such programme is the Brighter Futures in Banbury initiative which focusses on LSOA in Banbury that exhibit the highest levels of deprivation. COMF (Covid Outbreak Management Fund) funded programmes are still running which include the long-standing cookery skills programme which enables residents to learn how to make the best use of a slow cooker that they get to keep after attending the course as well as the new Growing Spaces project at Bridge Street Gardens,

which not only offers a fantastic way to get involved in your local community but a harvest of fruit and vegetables.

- 3.12 The Council is also holding its next Partnership reference group on 20 October at The Hill Community Centre with the focus on the current Cost of Living situation. One of the outputs from that session will be a hints and tips list from those participating. This will aim to equip the partnership to support their client group better. This can then be shared widely through print and social media channels.

Better Housing Better Health

- 3.13 The Better Housing Better Health programme is aimed at improving housing conditions for residents with long term health concerns and offers a telephone service and a visit to assess where changes could be made to improve the housing condition of residents.

CHEEP (Cherwell Energy Efficiency Project)

- 3.14 The CHEEP grant is an energy efficiency grant from Cherwell District Council available to private sector landlords for the improvement of existing rental properties. The maximum grant is currently £5000, subject to conditions and caps for certain works.
- 3.15 This 2022 version reflects recent legislation introduced to improve energy efficiency of private rented accommodation (known as the Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards or MEES) and the Council's commitment to being carbon neutral by 2030. It provides a contribution towards energy-efficiency improvements carried out by private-sector landlords in return for a commitment to continuing to make the property available for rent. More than 400 privately rented homes have been improved through this grant, and the Council has increased the grant available from £2,500 to £5,000 to increase take up and the quality of improvements. Obviously, those in the rented sector tend to be those with lower incomes, so any works that can both improve their living quality and reduce bills is welcome.

Warm Spaces

- 3.16 The Council has created a warm spaces network initiative. Working with local partners to provide a comprehensive and complementary warm space offer across the district, the aim being to identify and map venues available to drop into, enjoy the warmth and meet people. The Council is also looking to add activities and potential food offerings in these spaces too. The Hill were the first to pledge a warm space, and the Council's pop-up community space in Castle Quay will be another. We will be promoting the scheme throughout the winter and offer common branding for those places taking part.

Food Insecurity Working Group

- 3.17 As referred to earlier in the report, the Council has set-up a Food Insecurity working group and build upon the number of existing schemes that help those that are experiencing Food Insecurity already. The Council is a founder member of the Cherwell Community Food Network which brings together community food

providers and offers mutual support and development opportunities. Working through Covid the group already has closer working with other non-food partners, such as with the debt and money advisors for example, who regularly attend sessions and can signpost attendees at food banks, larders and fridges to appropriate support and advice.

- 3.18 As part of its remit, the Food Insecurity group will be focussed on the local promotion of the Healthy Start Voucher scheme. This is a national initiative to provide milk, vitamins, and fresh vegetables/ fruit to mothers with children aged 0-4. The take up of vouchers in Cherwell is not as high as it should be and research into why and local promotion will happen over the next quarter to inform greater take up of the scheme.
- 3.19 Developing an action plan for Cherwell that stems from the endorsement given to the Countywide Food Strategy will be a key area of focus for the Food insecurity Working group. Locally we will be encouraging initiatives such as the Waste Innovation and Sustainability Hub, and new growing projects, alongside more traditional targeted help.
- 3.20 The Council is also looking to issue to two £50 food vouchers to approximately 2,500 households who are currently experiencing significant hardships. This programme will be run and administered through the HUGGG app (which currently administers various voucher schemes on behalf of the Council). Full details of those who will be in receipt of the vouchers will be detailed to the Executive.
- 3.21 The funding for this scheme is expected to be taken from COVID funding that the Council has in reserve.
- 3.22 Contain Outbreak Management Funding (COMF) has been used to provide several health and wellbeing initiatives over the last two years. Cherwell District Council officers are working closely with partners to target the remaining funds over the winter months into initiatives that contribute to community resilience and ameliorating the impacts of hunger, cold weather and isolation. Projects such as Winter Warmers which provides a warm meal and another to take away and eat another day and Making Moves a bespoke exercise programme for residents in adult day care settings. Other programmes will be developed in and by communities to respond to the identified needs in a locality. Hyper local promotion and targeting will be key to ensuring successful outcomes from this funding. The Council already works in this way through its community development team and animating networks to respond to initiatives has proven benefits in terms of efficiency, reliability, and response.

Action Plan

Scheme	Summary	Cost	When
Warm Spaces Officer Responsible: Jon Wild	Offering Warm Spaces across the district for those who are struggling to stay warm and to meet people.	No immediate cost to the Council given we are utilising existing assets and working with partner organisations to deliver the scheme. Additional costs may be accrued dependant on the activities on offer (and the Contain Outbreak Management Fund will be utilised for this in the first instance).	Ongoing. The framework will be advertised in October/November and will be regularly refreshed and communicated via our communications networks.
Food Insecurity Working Group Officer Responsible: Edward Frape	Developing an action plan for Cherwell, whilst promoting healthy living schemes and initiatives.	No immediate cost to the Council.	Ongoing. The working group had its first meeting on 29 th September, reporting back to Scrutiny in October.
Winter Warmers Officer Responsible: Jon Wild	Provides a warm meal to eat and another meal to take away.	Currently funded from the Contain Outbreak Management Fund.	Ongoing. The scheme is already active.
Food Vouchers Officer Responsible: Stephen Hinds/Kevin Larner	Provides up to 2,500 households who are experiencing hardships with food vouchers.	Earmarked £250k from the COVID reserve.	To be administered in two tranches (£50 vouchers, £100 per household in total).
Household Support Fund Officer Responsible: Kevin Larner	This fund is to support households, particularly those with children and pensioners who would otherwise struggle to buy food, pay essential utility bills, or meet other essential living or housing costs.	Central Government has agreed the third tranche which will go to the County Council in October.	We are in discussions with the County Council to expedite the transfer of this money to CDC to maximise the benefits to our residents without undue delay.

4.0 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

This report provides an update on work the Council is undertaking with respect to the Cost of Living Situation. The Council is committed to supporting our residents where we can help them through this current period of economic uncertainty.

5.0 Consultation

This report sets out existing work streams and as such no formal consultation on the content or recommendations is required. It should be noted that our work

supports the most vulnerable in our communities and we work with those communities, the voluntary sector and partners to ensure we provide the most effective services.

6.0 Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection

6.1 The following alternative options have been identified and rejected for the reasons as set out below.

Option 1: To reject the recommendations.

7.0 Implications

Financial and Resource Implications

7.1 Financial and Resource implications are detailed within sections 3.20 – 3.21 of this report.

Comments checked by:

Michael Furness, Assistant Director of Finance & Section 151 Officer,
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Legal Implications

7.2 There are no legal implications from this report.

Comments checked by:

Shahin Ismail, Interim Assistant Director Law, Governance & Democratic Services,
Shahin.Ismail@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

Risk Implications

7.3 There are no direct risk implications arising from this report. Any risks that may rise in the future will be managed through the service operational risk and escalated to the leadership risk register as and when deemed necessary.

Comments checked by:

Celia Prado-Teeling, Interim Assistant Director – Customer Focus,
Tel: 01295 221556 Celia.prado-teeling@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

Equalities and Inclusion Implications

7.4 The report must show how “in planning, delivering, monitoring and evaluating our work, equality and diversity issues are appropriately considered from the outset.” New proposals must be screened for relevance against our statutory duties to promote equality and where relevant an impact assessment.

Comments checked by:

Celia Prado-Teeling, Interim Assistant Director – Customer Focus,

Tel: 01295 221556 Celia.prado-teeling@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

8.0 Decision Information

Key Decision

Financial Threshold Met: Yes

Community Impact Threshold Met: No

Wards Affected

All

Links to Corporate Plan and Policy Framework

This report supports all Corporate Priorities

Lead Councillor

Councillor Barry Wood, Leader of the Council

Document Information

Appendix number and title

None

Background papers

None

Report Author and contact details

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