

Cherwell District Council

Executive

2 October 2023

An Action Plan Regarding the Cost of Living Crisis

Report of Assistant Director Wellbeing and Housing

This report is public

Purpose of report

This report presents both the activities Cherwell District Council is currently engaged in to support residents experiencing difficulties because of the rising cost of living and provides an update on a range of new actions designed for this winter and so complete the action agreed in the motion adopted by Full Council on 17 July 2023:

“This council notes the ongoing pressure on the budgets of local residents and calls on the Executive to draw up a cost-of-living action plan within 100 days.”

1.0 Recommendations

The meeting is recommended:

- 1.1 To approve £100,000 investment in the additional activities programmed for winter 2023 and set out within this report as an action plan.
- 1.2 To approve the development of an evaluation framework that captures the impact of these actions and require officers to update the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in November 2023 and January 2024 on progress made.

2.0 Introduction

- 2.1 At the Full Council meeting on 17 July 2023, the following motion was debated and unanimously agreed.

“This council notes the ongoing pressure on the budgets of local residents and calls on the Executive to draw up a cost-of-living action plan within 100 days.”

- 2.2 Having considered the pressures our residents are experiencing because of the increases to the cost-of-living we have shaped the action plan around the following five focus areas that will support our residents: Health and Wellbeing; Food Insecurity; Fuel Poverty; Accessing Advice; and Maximising Income.

- 2.3 This report has two appendices. Appendix One captures the proposed action plan and Appendix Two the current initiatives or actions Cherwell District Council will be taking this winter to help residents tackle the cost of living crisis. Progress and impact will be reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

3.0 Report Details

- 3.1 The action plan is shaped around the following five focus areas:

- Health and Wellbeing
We know that our physical and emotional wellbeing can be impacted detrimentally when our basic needs are not being met. The emerging Cherwell wellbeing strategy 'Everybody's Wellbeing' uses insight and research to identify how we can build stronger, more resilient individuals and communities through a range of interventions and preventative measures.
- Food Insecurity
High levels of inflation have impacted the cost of food and non-alcoholic beverages over the last 12 months. It is critical that emergency food provision remains accessible to those experiencing crisis through members of the Cherwell Community Food Network while longer term interventions are explored to reduce dependency on foodbanks, such as the growing spaces projects we have supported across the district. The work of the Food Insecurity Working group and the development of a local food strategy frames this work.
- Fuel Poverty
Drastic increases in the cost of fuel mean households in fuel poverty will not heat their homes consistently, and possibly sufficiently, this winter, leaving them at an increased risk of health complications. The warm welcome network of community spaces assists this, while longer term support is provided to improve energy efficiency. Better Housing, Better Health is one way we assist. The County Council has a resident support fund for people to apply for assistance. Front line customer service and c are upskilled to identify customers at risk and refer for further support.
- Accessing Advice
The cost-of-living crisis is constantly evolving, it is crucial that households can access specialised advice to navigate the assistance available and identify solutions to prevent and alleviate crisis. We will be working with partners to make sure advice is in a range of places and through trusted sources. We fund Citizens Advice locally to offer a broad spectrum of support and advice to people living with debt. Our customer service and housing team teams regularly signpost residents for targeted support. We produce a 'Who can help?' booklet with local connections and information.
- Maximising Income
With increases to living costs seen across the board it is important that households have the tools they need make their money go further. This can mean accessing emergency financial assistance to alleviate a crisis, as well as opportunities to grow household income over the longer term. Working with Age UK Oxfordshire and Citizens Advice to ensure that residents are benefitting from

pension credits, Sure Start vouchers and accessing any benefits they could be entitled to. Our revenues and benefits team deliver support and advice on Council Tax reduction scheme and Discretionary Housing Payment. Most Residents receive the practical help and support when they need it.

- 3.2 Additionally, £100,000 of funding has been ringfenced to provide district wide support for residents to reduce social isolation and reduce food waste. Scheme details will be launched at the end of October in line with Food Insecurity Working Group (FIWG) workplan.
- 3.3 An evaluation framework will be developed and expanded to monitor the impact of the work programme and reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Food Insecurity working Group currently review a data dashboard covering topics, such as the number of food grants given, the number of growing spaces and yield, the number of participating spaces in the Cherwell Warm Welcome network. This will be used as a basis to monitor the action plan.

4.0 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

- 4.1 Working in partnership across the district with statutory and voluntary sector organisations, both strategically and on a hyperlocal basis, officers will continue to ensure that Cherwell residents can access support and secure help when needed.
- 4.2 The council recognises that the response to the cost of living crisis is iterative and will need to be flexible to best meet changing needs of residents.
- 4.3 The broad range of everyday activity currently running is intended to support residents' wellbeing across the five key themes identified, recognising the interplay between them and their respective impact on the lived experience of residents.

5.0 Consultation

With stakeholders, through conversations on particular programme elements, we have been able to co-produce schemes and projects designed to suit the needs of residents.

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 review all programmes and reduce expenditure to statutory levels only.
Rejected: The Council takes its community leadership role seriously and works in partnership with voluntary organisations, charities, and other administrations to provide help and support to residents at their most vulnerable and challenging times. Cutting services and support at this time would not be in that interest.

Option 2: To expand the provision of support.

Rejected: The Council would have to use reserves to commit to a wider support package which is not prudent in the current financial climate

7.0 Implications

Financial and Resource Implications

- 7.1 This programme of actions can be delivered within the allocated budget. The additional £100k will be funded from resources held within Policy Contingency.

Comments checked by:

Michael Furness, Assistant Director of Finance (S151 Officer), 01295 221845,
michael.furness@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

Legal Implications

- 7.2 There are no legal implications arising as the programme is within the council's remit to deliver and all grant aid will be subject to a robust process with appropriate monitoring.

Comments checked by:

Shahin Ismail, Interim Head of Legal Services, 01295 221808,
shahin.ismail@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

Risk Implications

- 7.3 The risks involved in this programme will be captured at an operational level and the data dashboard will assist in highlighting where non delivery or over supply is happening.
- 7.4 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee will provide oversight of this. The risk in not engaging this programme would impact on residents not managing to cope with additional financial pressures which would in turn produce additional demand for statutory services.

Comments checked by:

Celia Prado-Teeling, Performance and Insight Team, 01295 221556
Celia.prado-teeling@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

Equalities and Inclusion Implications

- 7.5 These actions are line with our Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion framework, seeking to ensure that all residents who are experiencing difficulties because of cost-of-living pressures will be enabled to take action to minimise that impact. The risk register will capture the risks of this investment not reaching intended recipients.

Comments checked by:

Celia Prado-Teeling, Performance and Insight Team, 01295 221556
Celia.prado-teeling@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

Sustainability Implications

- 7.6 The co-promotion of Better Housing Better Health and Insulation and retrofitting programmes sit alongside the provision of support for warmer homes and heating.

Comments checked by:

Jo Miskin, Climate Action Manager, Tel; 07900 227103

Jo.miskin@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

8.0 Decision Information

Key Decision

Financial Threshold Met: Yes

Community Impact Threshold Met: Yes

Wards Affected

All

Links to Corporate Plan and Policy Framework

Support our most vulnerable residents.

Work with partners to address the causes of health inequality and deprivation

Lead Councillor

Councillor Phil Chapman, Portfolio Holder for Healthy and Safe Communities

Document Information

Appendix number and title

- Appendix One - Cherwell District Council Cost of Living action plan Winter 2023/2024
- Appendix Two - Cherwell District Council Cost of Living Current activity grouped by focus / theme.

Background papers

None

Report Author and contact details

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