



# Cabinet

8<sup>th</sup> March 2023

**Report of:** Cllr Malise Graham MBE (Portfolio Holder for People and Communities)

## Cost of Living: Supporting our Community

<b>Corporate Priority:</b>	Excellent services positively impacting on our communities
<b>Relevant Ward Member(s):</b>	N/A
<b>Date of consultation with Ward Member(s):</b>	N/A
<b>Exempt Information:</b>	No
<b>Key Decision:</b>	Yes
<b>Subject to call-in:</b>	Yes

### 1 Summary

- 1.1 Increases in costs such as fuel, energy and day to day living costs continue to impact on households across the country. The Council is concerned about the increased cost of living and associated financial resilience and wellbeing of communities across Melton and has continued to respond proactively to assist and support households affected by the rising cost of living, whilst also taking steps to mitigate and reduce cost pressures where possible.
- 1.2 It is important that the Council's response is evidence led, dynamic and able to respond to the needs and changing needs of our communities. This report provides a current position update including an overview of achievements to date, continued partnership engagement, ongoing activities and the work proposed over the next 3-6 months, as part of the Council's Cost of Living action plan.
- 1.3 This report also seeks delegated authority to progress the development, procurement and project management of a specific cost of living project funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

## 2 Recommendation

### That Cabinet:

- 2.1 **Note the actions completed to date to support communities with rising costs of living**
- 2.2 **Endorse the proposed actions for the next 3-6 months through a programme of work to mitigate the impacts of cost-of-living increases for households across the Borough**
- 2.3 **Delegate to the Director for Housing and Communities, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for People and Communities, authority to finalise a scope and progress procurement and project management arrangements to enable enhanced access to household provisions across the borough through a mobile solution funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund**

## 3 Reason for Recommendations

- 3.1 Cost of living increases are impacting households across the country, impacting financial resilience and wellbeing across communities. It is important that the council understands local needs and takes appropriate and proportionate action to support residents at a time of significant pressure on household finances.
- 3.2 Through a cost-of-living plan, a range of actions have been progressed / are in delivery. More actions and opportunities to support residents with their financial resilience and wellbeing are planned and / or due to commence. The Council will need to continue to be dynamic in its response in response to local need and impacts, and through a cost-of-living project group is overseeing a range of actions and interventions.
- 3.3 The rising costs of living and associated implications create both an immediate risk and a longer-term challenge. There are no easy solutions. The Council must do all that it can to support residents with their immediate needs, mitigate financial pressures for households, progress appropriate preventative solutions where possible to reduce household bills and costs, whilst also focussing on enabling prosperity in communities and reducing the risk and need for such interventions in the future.
- 3.4 The council was successful in its application for funding to support a cost-of-living project through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. Feedback from residents and local partners has helped to guide focus on the need for enhanced access to household provisions across the borough through a mobile solution.

## 4 Background

- 4.1 Increases in costs such as fuel, energy and day to day living costs continue to impact on households across the country.
- 4.2 The Council is concerned about the increased cost of living and associated financial resilience and wellbeing of communities across Melton and has continued to respond proactively to assist and support households affected by the rising cost of living, whilst also taking steps to mitigate and reduce cost pressures where possible.

- 4.3 It is important that the Council's response is evidence led, dynamic and able to respond to the needs and changing needs of our communities. This report provides a current position update including an overview of achievements to date, continued partnership engagement, ongoing activities and the work proposed over the next 3-6 months, as part of the Council's Cost of Living action plan. This report also seeks delegated authority to progress the development, procurement and project management of a specific cost of living project funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund as part of the cost-of-living action plan.
- 4.4 The Cost-of-Living Action Plan has continued to evolve since it was initially developed. It is intended to be a live document which is evidence based and will need to be continually updated and adapted to reflect the needs of communities across Melton. The action plan is a corporate piece of work spanning multiple teams and linking with a range of partners. It is split into three thematic areas:
- a) **Insights and evidence (leading to action):** Using data and insights to understand risks and potential impacts across our communities. Looking at existing data sources and listening directly to tenants, residents and stakeholders about the cost-of-living challenges being experienced by our communities. Using feedback, evidence and insights to shape and inform our response including to provide an evidence base for future projects, policy developments or funding applications. Learning from local, regional and national best practice and contributing fully to sector learning and leadership.
  - b) **Communication and information:** Recognising the importance of clear and accessible information and communication, and the need for a range of communication tools and methods. Understanding how hard it can be to navigate multiple sources of information and seeking to help households find and access the information and support they need. Use of the #Here4Melton branding to support a campaign-based approach to raising awareness of support available to help people with the cost of living.
  - c) **Support:** To ensure that households that need support know where to find it and to do all that we can to provide or facilitate access to support for those who need it, including through working with partners to support households across Melton. To learn from good practice and to review the impact and accessibility of support.

## 5 Main Considerations

- 5.1 Cabinet considered an initial cost-of-living update report in [July 2022](#). An update on key activity as part of the Council's cost of living response since the last update report is included below:
- 5.2 **Insights and Evidence (leading to action)**
- 5.2.1 Our Director for Housing & Communities represented Leicestershire Districts at a national DCN/Capita roundtable discussion on supporting communities through the cost-of-living crisis. A summary of the roundtable discussion can be found here: [Roundtable: Supporting our communities through the cost-of-living crisis – District Councils' Network](#)
- 5.2.2 The Council's evidence led Housing Asset Management Plan was approved by Full Council in December 2022, creating a five-year action plan and capital programme to invest in and improve improving council homes. Engagement with tenants and the council's scrutiny committee resulted in increased emphasis and investment in the plan on taking steps to reduce households bills through the acceleration of a storage heater replacement

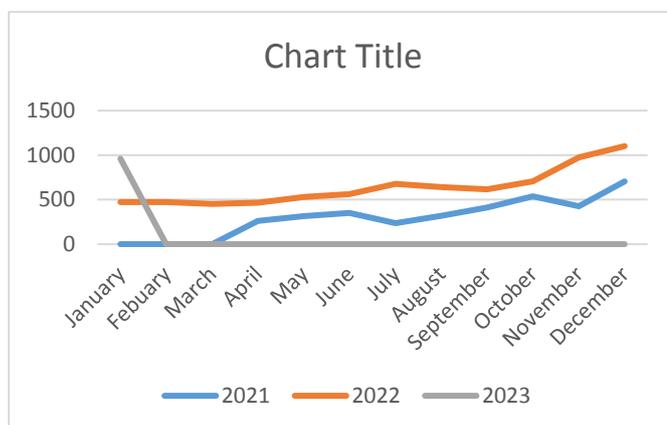
programme to enable more affordable heating sources within councils homes, and the continued progression of a programme to replace all aluminium windows with UPVC windows to improve thermal efficiency of our properties.

- 5.2.3 Through our dialogue with tenants, we have heard concerns about the rising costs of living. Whilst the increase in council rents in April 2023 is below inflation, we understand that household finances are under pressure and that some tenants may not have access to other financial support or safety nets. In February 2023, Full Council approved a budget to create a £50,000 hardship fund in 23/24 for council tenants to help mitigate pressures for tenants who are struggling. Officers have sought views from tenant representatives to help shape the criteria and design of the hardship fund. Development and implementation of the scheme is a key next step for the cost-of-living action plan.
- 5.2.4 Further to a recent programme of work relating to damp and mould in the rented sector, an opportunity to strengthen relationships with private rented sector landlords was identified. As a result, an initial virtual landlords forum will be held in May 2023. A key item on this agenda will be cost of living with a focus on information, support, referral pathways and preventing homelessness.
- 5.2.5 Officers from district councils, county council and health partners meet regularly through a Community Leads Partnership. This partnership links directly to the countywide health and wellbeing structures and has been invaluable in ensuring shared learning, dissemination of information and good practice and a forum to consider cost of living issues and risks affecting communities across the county. Shared learning and engagement through this partnership has led to the expansion of the reach / remit of council's community grants policy and the development of proposals for a community support and information day in Melton (see section 5.4). Partners have recognised the need to understand more about the impact of the rising cost of living on older residents, and this will become a key focus for a future meeting.
- 5.2.6 Demand for the Household Support Scheme peaked in January 2023:

<b>Time period</b>	<b>Successful Referrals</b>	<b>Unsuccessful / Ineligible Referrals</b>
May - September 2022	419	79
October - December 2022	431	13
January – March 2023	612	44

- 5.2.7 At a workshop of the Council's Helping People Partnership (now the Community, Health and Wellbeing Partnership) in January 2023, partners discussed the community supermarket proposal included within the UKSPF investment plan, including options and ideas for delivery, current evidence, reach and impact, outcomes and the balance between meeting immediate needs and not accepting food poverty as the norm. Feedback from a subsequent meeting of foodbank providers has also been received which has further helped to shape the development of this proposed project, and parish councils have been offered an opportunity to share views on option to enable enhanced access to household provisions across the borough through a mobile solution, including improving access for rural communities. Feedback from stakeholder discussions so far includes:
- Importance of not accepting food poverty as the new normal
  - Importance of supporting households with food provision in an emergency

- Ensuring UKSPF fosters independence rather than dependency.
- Importance of maintaining dignity for residents, and addressing the causes of financial hardship
- Whilst there is emergency food provision in the town, services are insecure and financial support would be appreciated
- Concern that rural community residents might not be able to access all of the services currently provided, limitations also include funding for fuel / transport
- Importance of continued engagement and consultation with existing foodbank services
- Interest in scope to further reduce waste in the food chain, overcome challenge of irregular food supply
- Importance of receiving insights from the LCC led food insecurity survey (completed by foodbank providers with service users) to help with future service design
- Foodbanks have been eligible to access grant funding from LCC through the Household Support Fund
- Foodbanks experiencing significant higher levels of demand, and reduced donations. Demand data from the Storehouse (foodbank provider in Melton) is shown below



January	0	471	960
February	0	471	0
March	0	452	0
April	262	465	0
May	316	531	0
June	352	564	0
July	235	678	0
August	319	643	0
September	412	616	0
October	538	707	0
November	427	973	0
December	705	1101	0
Year	3566	7672	960
Total Number	32094	69048	

5.2.8 Our teams have engaged with community groups and parish councils to map available community spaces (warm spaces) where people can access a warm place to meet and to socialise. In keeping with many other local authorities, we have not set up our own warm spaces but have committed to support residents impacted by the rising cost of living, including by providing wider wraparound support to residents, and supporting groups who are offering warm spaces. Current insights suggest that take up of warm spaces where groups were already established is most effective and more sustainable than establishing new spaces for this purpose. Warm spaces within the Borough are detailed on the council's website.

### 5.3 Communication and Information

5.3.1 We have continued to update our web page dedicated to available support and how residents can access further help ([Cost of living – Melton Borough Council](#)). It has been updated to include information on warm spaces, and to include a direct link to Leicestershire County Council's cost of living page. The cost-of-living email banner continues to be used by Council staff on email correspondence including with residents and stakeholders.

5.3.2 The Council's tenant newsletter has included information for tenants on the cost of living, energy saving ideas and support available.

- 5.3.3 A cost-of-living support information leaflet and poster have been developed produced and made available to stakeholders, teams and residents. Copies were provided to all members at the December meeting of Full Council, with a request to make them available within local communities to help raise awareness of the support available to residents.
- 5.3.4 An update on our cost-of-living work was shared with all members in the January 2023 portfolio holder update and an update presentation shared at the February Parish Council Liaison meeting
- 5.3.5 Social media posts include details of a Community Support and Information Day in March 2023

## 5.4 Support

- 5.4.1 The reach of the council's community grants policy was revised to include consideration of how proposed projects address the impact of emerging issues such as cost of living crisis, health inequalities, deprivation. The revised policy can be found [here](#). Community grant awards for 2023/24 are being considered by Cabinet in March 2023.
- 5.4.2 We continue to offer support to residents who may be struggling due to the rising costs of living. Our teams have risen to the challenge and adapted the way they work and the support they are providing, particularly through the community support hub (case management team). The direct referral form to our case management team to provide advice and assistance to anybody who is struggling with the cost of living, and to enable and track referrals to the Household Support Fund continues to work well and can be accessed here: [Cost of living support \(melton.gov.uk\)](https://www.melton.gov.uk/cost-of-living-support)
- 5.4.3 Our teams in both Parkside and Phoenix House have donated food items through a coordinated collection for local foodbanks
- 5.4.4 We are proactively supporting residents who are experiencing financial hardship through the Government's Household Support Fund, which has been a lifeline for many residents in accessing food and fuel vouchers. Since the scheme began in May 2022, our teams have successfully enabled over 1400 households to access support through this scheme, the highest of any referring partner across Leicestershire. Where applicants have not been eligible to access the scheme (around 130 of those households who approached us for support) our teams have provided other information, advice and support relevant to their circumstances.
- 5.4.5 Successfully delivered the evidence based discretionary scheme for the council tax / energy rebate, including:
- Award an additional £25 for those in Bands A-D in receipt of Council Tax Support
  - Award £150 to households in bands E-H and in receipt of Council Tax Support
  - Application-based hardship scheme
- 5.4.6 Appointment of income and tenancy sustainment officer (housing), with a focus on the end-to-end process for income management including connecting households with support appropriate to their needs and circumstances.
- 5.4.7 Engagement with Leicestershire District Council partners to ensure we maximise access to the countywide Lightbulb service to support older residents to remain healthy at home in Melton

5.4.8 Increased the number of staff members trained as mental health first aiders to 9 as at December 2022 in recognition of the likely increased stress for households and colleagues across the council and importance of responding positively and proactively. Cost of living discussed with team managers through health and safety audits, to understand impacts on staff teams.

5.4.9 Working with (and funded by) the Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust, we now have a Mental Health Neighbourhood Lead in post who is assessing support, needs and access to services including in rural areas in relation to mental health. This will directly inform and contribute to a Community, Health and Wellbeing Plan for Melton

5.5 **Cost of Living Action Plan – Key Activities over next 3-6 months**

**Here for Melton: Community Support and Information Day.** Hosted by Melton Borough Council, residents are encouraged to attend a drop in event at the Parkside Council Offices on Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> March 2023. Council teams and partners will be available between 2pm and 7pm to provide advice, support and assistance to residents. Organisations in attendance will be able to offer a wide variety of information and support to residents ranging from becoming more energy efficient, recycling, budgeting, fire safety, accessing support with the rising costs of living and physical and mental health support. Key teams will also be on hand to answer questions and provide any immediate support needed.

This event has been developed further to success of other district councils across Leicestershire. It is proposed to repeat the event in a more rural location(s) at a later date.



Contribute to the planned review of the **Lightbulb Service**, including consideration of future service needs in the context of cost-of-living impacts on households

Continue to maximise access to the **Household Support Fund** for residents across the Borough. The extension of the fund to April 2024 has recently been announced by Government.

Begin to implement the **Housing Asset Management Plan** and capital programme, including accelerated storage heater replacement programme and aluminium window replacement programme.

Implemented the **council tax support fund** for 23-24, with a credit of up-to £25 applied to the annual council tax bills for those in receipt of council tax support. A discretionary

<p>scheme for those in financial hardship will then be made available for the remainder of 23-24 or until government grant has been exhausted.</p>
<p>Validate and make payment of applications received in relation to the <b>Energy Bill Support Scheme</b>. The scheme will benefit those households without a direct relationship to an electricity supplier, such as those living in park homes and care homes. A non-repayable lump sum of £400 will be made to customers within 28 working days of applications being received by the council. This scheme is now open and will close on 30th June 2023.</p>
<p>Implement a <b>hardship scheme for council tenants</b>, working with tenant representatives to design the scheme, and ensuring that it forms part of the wider support offer to tenants</p>
<p>Work with partners to alleviate immediate challenges relating to <b>food poverty</b>. Funding through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund provides an opportunity to support residents through the cost-of-living crisis. Finalise a scope and progress procurement and project management arrangements to enable enhanced access to household provisions across the borough through a mobile solution funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund [community supermarket / cost of living intervention]</p>
<p>Host virtual <b>landlord forum</b> to build relationships with private sector landlords, raise awareness of cost-of-living support and seek to prevent homelessness</p>

## 6 Options Considered

- 6.1 The Council could choose not to focus efforts on the cost-of-living crisis. This is not recommended as it would not be in line with the Council’s commitment to help and support its communities at a time when communities are likely to be experiencing financial pressures. There is a need to provide and facilitate access to support now, whilst also considering longer term needs and solutions.

## 7 Consultation

- 7.1 The Cost-of-Living action plan is directly informed by customer feedback, insight and evidence and by feedback from stakeholders and teams.
- 7.2 Feedback and insights from stakeholders including existing foodbank providers has been taken into consideration and will inform the UKSPF funded cost of living project. Further engagement with stakeholders will take place before finalising any project / procurement arrangements.
- 7.3 Feedback and insights from tenants has been taken into consideration and will inform the criteria and scheme design for the hardship scheme for council tenants. The Council has listened to tenants views and concerns about rising costs of living, including rent increases.

## 8 Next Steps – Implementation and Communication

- 8.1 Implementation of actions contained within the Cost-of-Living Plan has begun and will form part of the Council’s core response to Helping People. The action plan will continue to be developed and delivered.
- 8.2 Key activities for the next 3-6 months are shown at section 5.5.

## 9 Financial Implications

- 9.1 There are no financial implications arising directly from this report. However, council resources and staff time will continue to be refocussed / reallocated to support households as required
- 9.2 The cost-of-living action plan and associated evidence base has been used to seek external UKSPF funding. A budget of £72,000 has been secured to enable a cost-of-living intervention through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to be spent by 31 March 2025. Delegated authority is requested to finalise a scope and progress procurement and project management arrangements to enable enhanced access to household provisions across the borough through a mobile solution funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund
- 9.3 The cost-of-living plan is a live and evidence led document. It is being updated in response to needs and insights. It is possible that financial implications may arise in the future, if a project or set of projects require a financial contribution. The Council will use its usual governance and decision-making processes if any such proposal arises.
- 9.4 The Council must also note that cost of living increases may impact on households' ability to pay key household costs such as rent and council tax. Every effort must be made to support households who are struggling to ensure they can meet their financial obligations whilst also considering any cases of hardship on a case-by-case basis and implementing appropriate support or other measures.

**Financial Implications reviewed by: Assistant Director for Resources**

## 10 Legal and Governance Implications

- 10.1 It is proposed that delegated authority be granted to the Director for Housing and Communities, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for People and Communities, to finalise a scope and progress procurement and project management arrangements to enable enhanced access to household provisions across the borough through a mobile solution funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund
- 10.2 All projects and spending must adhere to any conditions attached to use of the grant issued under the UKSPF Fund.
- 10.3 Any other projects arising from the Cost-of-Living Plan will be subject to the Council's decision-making governance processes and any applicable law as appropriate.

Legal Implications reviewed by: **Deputy Monitoring Officer 28.02.23**

## 11 Equality and Safeguarding Implications

- 11.1 There is a risk that households and individuals will be more vulnerable and less resilient as a result of the increased costs of living. An assessment of situations that may lead to people being most or disproportionately affected by the increased costs of living has been carried out and the cost-of-living action plan has been developed with these risk factors and at-risk groups in mind.

## 12 Community Safety Implications

- 12.1 There are no community safety issues arising directly from this report.

## 13 Environmental and Climate Change Implications

- 13.1 There are no environmental and climate change implications arising directly from this report. However, the Council must remain alert to the importance of energy efficiency measures, particularly from a housing perspective, in supporting households with rising energy costs. The Council's lead officers for climate and environment are part of the cost-of-living group and are supporting the ongoing development and delivery of the cost-of-living action plan.

## 14 Other Implications

- 14.1 **Health and Wellbeing Implications:** The cost-of-living pressures facing households are likely to impact on the health, wellbeing and resilience of our communities. The cost-of-living plan seeks to address this.
- 14.2 **Human Resource Implications:** There is great appreciation and awareness that the squeeze on household budgets does impact on the council's own workforce. The pay claim for 2022 has now been finalised and has resulted in a fixed payment of £1,925 to all employees. Communication and support is in place and ongoing to ensure colleagues are aware of and able to access the mental wellbeing and financial support available to them at the right time and additional mental health first aiders have been trained. Our colleagues provide invaluable services to the community so we will do our very best to ensure they are well supported during this period of uncertainty and financial pressure.

## 15 Risk & Mitigation

- 15.1 The cost-of-living increases create inevitable risk and pressures for our communities. Risk factors that may lead to disproportionate impacts have shaped the development of the cost-of-living action plan and this will be further updated in response to emerging evidence and feedback. The action plan seeks to mitigate impacts for our communities where possible. It will not be possible to mitigate risks or impacts of increased costs of living completely.
- 15.2 Cost of Living is included within the council's strategic risk register and is currently assessed as high risk.

## 16 Background Papers

- 16.1 UK Shared Prosperity Fund Draft Investment Plan
- 16.2 Cost of Living Action Plan
- 16.3 Strategic Risk Register

## 17 Appendices

- 17.1 None

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