
	Policy Panel	Item 8
21 September 2022		
Report of	Assistant Director, Customer Assistant Director, Communities	Author Sam Preston and Michelle Tarbun
Title	Cost of Living Crisis – Council Response	 07966237492
Wards affected	Not applicable	

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 As residents recover from the impact of Covid-19, a new crisis has emerged affecting the cost of living for everyone exponentially. Inflation, increased interest rates and rising fuel costs are pushing our resident's basic costs to unaffordable levels. The crisis is disproportionately affecting those on the lowest incomes and is likely to worsen existing inequalities across the borough.
- 1.2 The Council has committed to making its response to the cost-of-living crisis a major priority going forward. An immediate and evolving plan of activity has been designed to support residents as much as possible, working with systems partners.
- 1.3 A significant communications campaign has been launched, targeting groups that potentially would not have required support or assistance in the past. The aim is to ensure that all residents know that there is help if they need it and making it as easy as possible to access that help. A new cost of living support area has been launched on the Council's website and the team are working on a video showing the vast range of support services available.
- 1.4 Teams within Customer and Communities are re-focusing their work to support residents, providing financial assistance, providing support to improve energy efficiency, using enforcement to ensure private rented properties are of a decent standard, helping people to access food and other items they are unable to afford.

2. Action Required

- 2.1 For the Policy and Public Initiatives Panel to consider the planned response to the cost-of-living crisis to date.

3. Reason for Review

- 3.1 As a key priority for the Council, Policy and Public Initiatives Panel requested an overview of work carried out and plans going forward.

4. Background Information

4.1 *Cost of living crisis*

"The cost-of-living crisis needs an immediate response, from every level of Government, with partners and at pace. This Cabinet will prioritise support for those faced with terrible choices, between food or warmth or other essential needs, working with communities and

through our community partners to build community wealth. This will include working with partners, strengthening the capacity of the Council's high performing welfare support team and leveraging resources to provide targeted help for those in extreme difficulty, acknowledging rising demand for help and support for the most vulnerable." – Cabinet Vision and Priorities 8 June 2022.

4.2 ***Cabinet approved a three-point plan, as follows:***

1) Crisis Support:

- With rising demand and falling donations, we will intervene immediately to **support foodbanks in Colchester** and continue to work with partners to ensure demand is met and premises are secure.
- We will deliver a targeted and personalised **communications campaign**, with a high-profile **social media** strategy designed to avoid hardship and private sector rent arrears/eviction.

2) Increase help available:

- Establish a **Crisis Coordinator** role to identify those in greatest need and navigate holistic support from across the system to provide early help to avoid extreme hardship
- Focus on **maximising income and benefits** for those in greatest need and often new to the benefits system, exercising discretion where possible
- Strengthen our influence with **system partners** to increase impact, through joint funding, the new Alliance Director role and locally through **neighbourhood teams**

3) Prevent further hardship

- Maximise the benefits of the Local Delivery Plan in promoting **exercise, good health and wellbeing**
- Seek out innovative local solutions to help people find an **affordable home**
- Support residents suffering with **fuel poverty** to access energy efficiency and active travel options to reduce their energy costs and help tackle the climate emergency.
- Secure wider opportunities, from the Town Deal and Levelling Up funding, to achieve a step change in **tackling inequalities** including community wealth building and inclusive economic growth supporting training and employment opportunities

The Council has progressed quickly, working with Partners, with this work and an overview of the support available is included below.

5. **Our Teams**

5.1 ***Financial & Employment support***

Officers provide help and support for customers financial wellbeing including:

- Budgeting advice
- Signposting for debt advice and energy saving advice
- Direct financial assistance to help with housing costs, council tax costs and energy costs
- Full benefit checks and support completing applications
- Benefits appeals

- CV writing, interview skills and other employment support
- The team are currently distributing the Household Support Fund and the Discretionary Council Tax Rebate. They are offering support for residents in completing the online form providing bank details.
- The Financial and Employment Support Team, work with a wide range of partners to reach people within communities, currently there are outreach sessions in:
 - Job Centre Plus
 - C3 Church
 - YES
 - STAR Group
 - Community 360
 - Greenstead Local Housing Office
- From mid-September drop-in sessions will also take place at:
 - Tollgate Foodbank
 - Abbey Fields Medical Centre
 - St Margaret's Community Café
 - Shrub End Depot
- They also work with various charities and community groups, attending events and providing information on how to access support. Including:
 - Second **Welcome Event for Ukraine refugees** - 30 August in the One Colchester Hub space. Relaxed event for Ukraine hosts and guests to come together for food, music, support and advice from many partners including our own Welfare Benefits team and the DWP so financial, employment and benefit advice and assistance could be given on an individual basis.
 - **Essex Anchor Network Jobs Fair** – 9 September 2022
 - **Colchester Anti Loo roll Brigade Festival** – 10 September 2022
 - **Event with Independent Age** – date TBC
 - Drop-in Session at **Colchester Hospital** for staff and patients – date TBC

5.2 ***Council Tax and Corporate Debt***

If a customer is experiencing financial difficulties, it is important that they contact the Council Tax or Corporate Debt Teams as quickly as possible. Officers can help customers with suitable payment arrangements if required and can refer directly to the Financial and Employment support teams if necessary.

5.3 ***Housing Benefit***

The team work to assess benefit claims as quickly as possible, to ensure people get the money they are entitled to. They are also currently contacting residents who may be eligible for Council Tax Support but have not yet applied.

The Local Council Tax Support Scheme is being developed for 2023/24 and consultation will start shortly with proposals to increase the level of support provided by the scheme to those eligible.

5.4 ***Digital Access***

Supporting resident to get online to access the best financial deals and supply recycled IT kit free. The Digital Access team continue to work in the community in various spaces to assist residents to get online safely and make use of better deals on services and purchases, cheaper shopping etc.

5.5 ***Community Enabling***

The main connection between CBC and residents, community groups, faith groups. Provide advice and signposting.

5.6 ***Healthy Homes***

Work with vulnerable residents to adapt homes to keep people safe and warm in their own property rather than having to use the health and care system.

5.7 *Private Sector Housing*

Advice, inspection & enforcement in private rented properties. Service to assist Landlords and residents to make homes as safe as they can be.

5.8 *Bereavement Services*

Signposting to Social Care fund for financial assistance if people are struggling to pay for a funeral and also administer the CBC responsibility to arrange and pay for a cremation if there is no family or funds available.

6. *Employee Support*

The Financial and Employment Support Team will be holding drop-in sessions to ensure employees are accessing any benefits or financial support they are entitled to.

Employees also have access to the Employee Assistance Programme, Occupational Health Service and access to internal Mental Health First Aiders. In addition, they can access various discounts via Vine Extras, Colchester Leisure World and travel costs. Internal comms will continue to promote to all employees the support available.

7. *Recent Actions and Next Steps*

- Following a presentation to One Colchester, a One Colchester Cost of Living working group is being set up to co-ordinate a system approach.
- A meeting was held with Independent Age to build relationships and share support and advice available so we can work closer together to support older residents.
- Recruitment is underway to increase the level of resource in our team to cover fuel poverty, using ECC & CCG Inequalities Funding.
- The teams continue to identify and attend outreach opportunities to engage with harder to reach groups.
- Updates went to the Alliance Executive Group on 30 August & Community 360 Board on 3 September.
- Working with One Colchester to look at options for public warm spaces that offer a safe warm place for people to go. A review underway about what is already on offer and looks at gaps and possible new venues.
- Monthly update to all Members will continue and verbal updates to each Leadership meeting will begin in September.

8. *Equality, Diversity and Human Rights Implications*

Although there are no particular references to equality, diversity and human rights. The work to support residents will be promoted as widely as possible, with a particular focus on groups that would previously not engage with or needed support from the Council and wider systems partners.

9. *Standard References*

There are no particular references to the Strategic Plan; consultation; community safety; health and safety or risk management implications.

10. *Consultation*

In this section show that consideration has been given to the timing and method of consultation. Also give an indication of what will happen to the responses.

11. Publicity Considerations

11.1 *Communications and Website*

Work is ongoing to improve and update the CBC website to ensure that the cost-of-living support and key contacts are prominent, clear & up to date. www.colchester.gov.uk/cost-of-living

Social media posts are being sent out regularly signposting residents to support and advice. Please feel free to repost so we can secure wider contacts.

We are currently focussing on school uniform support available as it is time to return following the summer holidays. [The Free School Uniform Project \(dnanetworks.org\)](http://The Free School Uniform Project (dnanetworks.org))

Stats on the CBC website hits and social media to follow in September briefing.

- 11.2 We are also working on a system wide video to demonstrates the support available in Colchester that can be used for staff in any organisation, Members for resident support, Town & Parish Council, system partners, social media etc. CBC are leading this, but system partners have been consulted on the contents. The costs of this will be picked up by the CCG funds detailed above. We hope to have a draft video by the end of September to start sharing.

12. Financial Implications

New Investments

We have secured £15k from the CCG Inequalities fund to assist with our outreach programme of work. This money will help with transport and event branding costs using our new City status logo. The Digital Access Team have also secured external funding for a Digital Access Point at Colchester Foodbank and Beacon House that will give easy access to all our cost-of-living support and contacts. We hope to have these in place by the end of September.

13. Health, Wellbeing and Community Safety Implications

This work is aimed at supporting residents through the cost-of-living crisis. By providing support, advice and financial assistance we hope to help residents cope with increasing costs whilst staying warm and healthy.

14. Background papers

Enclosed copy of presentation slides demonstrating the wider system support on offer by all partners in Colchester.