

Extract from the minutes of the Policy Panel meeting of 21 September 2022

56. Cost of Living Crisis – Council Response

Michelle Tarbun, Group Manager - Wellbeing, Prevention & Partnerships, and Zoe Raven, Partnership & Delivery Manager presented the Council's work on assisting residents in addressing financial difficulties. The Group Manager explained that the situation was constantly changing and that officers sought to advertise all major developments to residents and elected members on a regular basis.

The Panel were told that the Council could not operate alone, and that partnership working was vital, allowing the pooling of talents and resources, and for residents to be quickly signposted to organisations which could assist with the issues they faced. A joint Council/Colchester Borough Homes working group had been set up and had then been expanded to become a wider 'One Colchester' Partnership working group, which had commenced the drafting of an action plan to cover the Borough. A current priority was to ensure provision of warm spaces for the coming Winter, and a mapping exercise was being conducted to see what warm spaces were already available and to ascertain geographic areas where they were absent or sparse in number. The Panel was also informed that Cabinet had recently approved additional funding to local foodbanks.

The communications campaign was outlined, with webpages on the Council's website to give information, advice and signposting relating to the cost of living crisis. Content had been designed to easily direct the public to relevant organisations which could provide assistance, to reduce labour-intensive demands on officers to provide direction and advice to residents. Social media posts also provided information and ways for people to obtain advice. A video was being produced for use in public areas such as libraries and GP surgeries. This aimed to reach a wider audience and increase residents' knowledge of their entitlements.

The established support teams already operated by the Council were described, with demand for their assistance continually increasing. Zoe Raven, Partnership & Delivery Manager, explained that Financial Support Officers triaged contacts from residents through to appropriate services and could offer foodbank vouchers where appropriate and administer discretionary funds. About 50% of funding allocated for use on discretionary housing payments had so far been allocated. The Council worked with Essex County Council [ECC] to pay out discretionary funding to applicants and ECC had the ability to offer vouchers for any applicants which had missed out on funding. The payment of Council Tax rebates was explained.

The cost of living crisis was having significant effects on pensioners, those residents who had disabilities and anyone who was not in a position to be able to increase their income via work. The Council was focused on maximising the claiming of entitlements and benefits by residents who were eligible. A summary was given of the appeals process for those residents who were turned down for different types of financial assistance. The Financial Inclusion Team's work to help residents maximise their incomes was described. Community Support Officers worked alongside Financial Support Officers to triage residents to where they could receive assistance, and were also able to address wider problems and offer advice on housing issues and ways to help residents improve their ability to gain employment. Officers were experienced at spotting signs of problems and could help assist in prevention of problems reoccurring for members of the public. Additional training was being rolled out to ensure that officers could maintain the efficacy of their support work. A database of support schemes and grants for people in energy poverty, including from energy providers, was being designed. It was also confirmed that councillors could refer residents to the Council's teams to obtain support and advice.

Council officers regularly conducted outreach work with partners, taking part in events run by local church groups, Community 360, the Job Centre, community centres and foodbanks. In addition, tools and training for identifying problems and directing those in need to services were provided to representatives of a range of community groups and partners. The Council's engagement with established groups helped to increase the spread of information and advice from the Council and its partners in providing support options. This work also helped to reach out and talk to people in need, outside of the formal benefits system, and also helped the Council engage with people who struggled to get into central Colchester.

The Partnership & Delivery Manager described plans to hold a roadshow across the Borough. Investment had been made into a program which could take in financial/economic information (such as rates of inflation) and identify the geographic areas which would be worst affected by changes. An information pack was being designed for distribution in the hardest-hit areas and the roadshow would be there to engage with residents or to give contact details for residents to contact the Council or its partner organisations at a later date. It was expected that the roadshow would also assist the Council in better engaging with rural communities.

The Group Manager emphasised that the Council's work was not only focussed on financial support and benefits, but also aimed to address the wider impacts on people, such as effects on mental health and wellbeing. A local delivery pilot scheme to help health, wellbeing and physical fitness was being run and supported by the Council. Addressing the pressures being experienced by its own staff, the Council was providing assistance including advice on the intranet, drop-in sessions to listen to problems and offer advice on subjects such as income maximisation, and a 24-hour 'phone lined for staff members or their family members to gain wellbeing advice and information about support that was available.

The vital nature of effective data collection and analysis was stressed, especially that which related to the relative efficacy of interventions made by the Council and its partner organisations. A dashboard to display such data was being developed to maximise the impact of interventions.

Further Government announcements were expected, and assurance was given to the Panel that the Council would advertise any additional entitlements to financial support which apply to residents within the Borough. A plea was made for councillors to help officers in reaching those residents who could benefit from the assistance which was available.

Councillor Jeremy Hagon attended and, with the permission of the Chairman, participated in the Panel's discussion.

The Panel thanked officers for their work, and it was acknowledged that the Council had limits to its capacity to help residents, making its role as an enabling organisation an important one, providing direction to a range of organisations which could offer help and support. This would become even more important as the cost of living crisis increasingly affected households which had previously been comfortably off. Praise was given for the recognition of the wider effects on wellbeing, including the effects on the Council's own staff.

Panel members underlined the need to provide contact pathways for residents to access help even if they were not digitally active and could not engage with online contact avenues. Efforts to take advice and contact roadshows out into different communities were praised and officers were urged to consult with local councillors in areas where sites were found to be difficult to locate. A Panel member suggested that producing and delivering leaflets door-to-door might help the Council reach those without digital access. Officers were asked if there was scope for Council officers to attend councillors' advice surgery sessions to offer advice. Concern was raised regarding how to reach digitally excluded residents in small rural communities, who would find it harder to access advice and where communally held knowledge of the benefits and financial assistance options could be lower than in some other types of community. Panel members suggested that the Council could look at approaching local community newsletters and newspapers to carry advice articles and adverts carrying information from the Council regarding where residents can seek help and advice.

A further concern was that the scarcity of social housing meant that applicants often had to move away from family support and advice networks in order to gain housing. A Panel member urged for more to be done to examine whether local links to areas could be strengthened regarding the allocations policy in place over the letting of Council-owned properties, and how new developments might be forced to provide a certain number of new properties which would only be available for those with links to the local area. It was confirmed that Scrutiny Panel was due to examine this issue at its meeting scheduled for 8 November 2022.

Concern was raised by a number of Panel members that the Council's current website design was dull and unappealing. Requests were made for a rebranding and brightening of the content and branding, to engage better with visitors and emulate the appealing branding shown in other publicity materials and presentations produced by the Council. The importance of language/wording choice was emphasised by one Panel member, who asked how the Council decided upon the wording of its materials. A suggestion was made that the Council could look to match the wording and approach taken by central government's online content. The Group Manager took on the suggestions regarding online presentation and wording and told the Panel that she would discuss this with the Council's Online Team to seek ways to improve how information is presented.

The Panel discussed the Cabinet's three-point plan to address the cost of living crisis. Point three, 'Prevention of Hardship', was discussed and a Panel member suggested that this should be reworded, as the Council could help to minimise hardship but could not prevent it entirely. An example given was the suggestion that the Council should take a tougher line with utility providers who were responsible for lengthy loss of supply to residential properties owned by the Council. The Deputy Leader of the Council agreed that language use was very important, especially during crises, and argued in favour of the use of the phrase 'Prevention of Hardship' as the Council could offer crisis support to prevent additional hardship.

A request was made for a summary to be produced and circulated to councillors to show what types of requests for help are made of the Council by residents, and the numbers of requests being made.

The Panel asked for details of any funding or support which might be available to support potential providers of community/communal warm spaces. The Group Manager explained that the County Council had funding which could be used by community groups to help them offer warm spaces.

Responding to questions about the local development pilot funding to improve physical and mental health, the Group Manager explained that the funding was to support communities to set up initiatives to improve levels of wellbeing, and offered to share more information to councillors who would like to know more. The link between physical fitness and wellbeing was emphasised by the Panel.

Officers were asked what support there was available to help and advise residents facing difficult financial and lifestyle decisions, and whether data held on vulnerable residents could be used to identify those who might benefit from being contacted to discuss potential avenues of support.

The Group Manager explained that data sharing, including with the County Council, could be difficult. The data teams at the Council and County Council did talk regularly. Regarding the use of data to identify people who may need support, this

was easiest for tenants of Council or private properties, but was more difficult with people who owned their own properties.

The Panel were informed that the 'Anti Loo Roll Brigade' mentioned in the report was a community group, set up during the height of the pandemic, which aimed to provide community support and help to those in need.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that: -

- a) The Council makes its website more user-friendly, with better branding to maximise its effectiveness at providing information and links to organisations which could provide advice and assistance
- b) Cabinet ensures that future resourcing reflects the need to support people across all communities within the Borough

RESOLVED that the Policy Panel had previously examined the situation relating to the payment and claiming of Universal Credit and that an agenda item be provisionally added to the Panel's Work Programme for 2023-24 for the Panel to re-examine the local situation relating to Universal Credit in twelve-month's time.