



HEALTH AND WELLBEING BOARD

7th December 2023

Report Title:	COST OF LIVING UPDATE
Report of:	DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH

REPORT SUMMARY

This report provides the Health and Wellbeing Board with an update on cost-of-living work being taken forward by Wirral Council and partner organisations of the Health and Wellbeing Board. The report offers an overview of the challenges residents and businesses are facing because of cost-of-living pressures and the mitigating actions that are in place to support them and help alleviate some of these pressures.

This matter affects all wards in the Borough; it is not a key decision.

The activities outlined in this report support the vision of the Wirral Plan 2021 – 26, to 'create equity for people and place' and will contribute directly or indirectly to the five themes of the Plan:

- Sustainable Environment
- Brighter Futures
- Inclusive Economy
- Safe and Pleasant Communities
- Active and Healthy Lives

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Health and Wellbeing Board is recommended to:

1. Note the latest updates and activity that have/are being carried out by partner organisations.
2. Continue to develop appropriate joint arrangements and actions to help mitigate the impacts of the cost-of-living pressures on residents.

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 Following the Council's Policy and Resources Committee in November 2022 the Health and Wellbeing Board were nominated to take the lead strategic role for action to tackle cost of living challenges in the borough.
- 1.2 This report provides members of the Health and Wellbeing Board with an update on the pressures local people are facing due to cost-of-living pressures and the current activity being taken to try and mitigate impacts and support local people.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 Other options considered include not taking local action in relation to the cost-of-living pressures or to act as individual organisations. These options pose a risk to the health and wellbeing of residents, risk duplication of effort and an uncoordinated approach. Therefore, they have not been considered.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 Households in the United Kingdom have experienced a significant fall in living standards since late 2021. As of January 2023, 92% of UK households reported that their cost-of-living had increased compared with a year earlier. In the same month, 67% of households had experienced monthly increases in their cost-of-living, down from a peak of 91% in the Summer of 2022.
 - 3.1.2 Living standards decreased mainly because of the increase to higher food, electricity, and fuel costs. The crisis is even more acute for the poorest UK households, which typically spend a higher proportion of their income on food and housing costs. Although real households' disposable income (RHDI) grew by 1.2% in Quarter 2 (Apr to June) 2023, (*Office for National Statistics [here](#)*) many families are still facing real hardship.
 - 3.1.3 Although the UK economy returned to growth in 2021 and avoided high levels of unemployment, inflation has reached levels not seen for decades. In October 2022, the CPI inflation rate reached 11.1 percent and is not expected to fall below the Bank of England target of two percent until at least 2024. While wages are currently growing, they are not keeping up with these rapid price rises, with regular pay falling by 2.6 percent in November 2022 when adjusted for inflation. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) calculates that total earnings in the three months to July 2023 were 8.5% higher than in the same period a year earlier. The ONS suggest the earnings figures were affected by one-off payments to NHS staff and civil servants but that real pay – adjusted for inflation – rose at an annual rate of 1.2%.
 - 3.1.4 The war in Ukraine has also exacerbated inflation, particularly in relation to food and energy, the two sectors driving much of the high inflation. The crisis in the Middle East has not yet had major economic effects in the UK but as the crisis continues it may have a further detrimental effect on the economy.
 - 3.1.5 Energy prices in particular have hit UK households hard, especially following an increase to the energy price cap (a mechanism to limit what suppliers charge per unit of energy) in April 2022. And although the price cap dropped from 1 October 2023 to an annual level of £1,923 many households are still feeling severe economic pressure as we head into winter.

- 3.1.6 Poverty, poor health outcomes and health inequalities are inextricably linked. The Marmot Review (see [here](#)) and others have established that the lower one's social and economic status, the poorer one's health is likely to be. Extensive qualitative and quantitative analysis has been collated to understand current and projected impacts on Wirral residents, as well as reviewing evidence for local action that can be taken to mitigate the impacts; this can be found [here](#):
- 3.1.7 A full breakdown of up-to-date statistics on how the Cost-of-Living Crisis is affecting Wirral can be found [here](#)

Latest updates from Health and Wellbeing Board Members

- 3.2 There is an extensive range of help and support in place across Wirral, with many agencies working in partnership to help coordinate an effective and comprehensive offer locally. The following is a snapshot of some of the latest activity.

3.2.1 Wirral Council

- The Council leads a wide range of support with partner organisations across the borough. A key part of this is co-ordinating effective communication to ensure that people in Wirral know about all of the support that is available to them and how to access it in one place.
- Information about the support available for people struggling to make ends meet is constantly updated on the Wirral Council website ([here](#)).
- **Wirral Infobank** contains detailed information on the wide range of support available including:
 - Benefits and tax information and advice
 - Debt or financial hardship, organisations offering advice and information on managing debt, or financial hardship grants
 - Housing options
 - Managing your finances
 - Community food support
 - Emergency food and fuel support
 - Warm hubs and Neighbour Hubs
 - Free or low-cost community activities

Wirral Infobank is available [here](#). There is also a helpline on **0151 606 2005** for people unable to go online.

Small Grants Fund

- 3.2.2 Community groups can apply for up to £20,000 to help local residents in need £650,000 of Small Grants Programme funding is available for frontline groups in Wirral who can help residents who are struggling to afford food and other essential items. Information and recipients of the previous round of the Small Grants fund can be found at the Wirral View Website [here](#)

Warm Hubs

- 3.2.3 Provision of Warm Hubs is being led by the Community, Voluntary and Faith (CVF) sector. There are currently over thirty public areas where people can go to keep

warm and socialise, spread right across the borough. Full details of all the Warm Hubs can be found [here](#).

Magenta Living

3.4 Magenta living have developed their own Cost of Living Strategy which outlines their approach and a range of support including:

- Financial Inclusion support to apply for the Rent Relief Fund – providing £77,500 of funding to date.
- Providing E-vouchers through which they have issued £2000 worth of supermarket vouchers to customers in need.
- Cost of Living factsheets and Cost of Living Roadshows to engage with customers and promote support from other organisations. Using a benefit calculator and regularly signpost their customers to help and support through creative use of their website and social media.
- Working in partnership with Wirral Food Bank to implement an emergency food hamper system for crisis intervention for customers.
- Working with the Torus Foundation to supply Fuel Vouchers, and with Energy Project Plus to provide advice and vouchers to their customers.
- To tackle furniture poverty, they are working with Refresh Furniture to provide good quality safe home furnishings.

3.5 Wirral Community Health & Care NHS Foundation Trust

- **Integrated Care Coordination Team**
Provides holistic assessment of the home environment, including economic wellbeing.
- **0-19s Service**
Grocery Corner – non-perishable food items and self-care items delivered to Birkenhead and within Birkenhead Healthy Child Clinic. This offers immediate support plus some longer-term options are also available. Links to social supermarket within children's centres and refer for budgeting advice. Also works with support from the Life Church, e.g. summer packs and for distribution in school holidays and Christmas boxes. Drop-in centre in St Catherines to meet together before or after clinic to get a cup of tea from the café offering a warm and friendly environment.
- **Christmas Hampers**
In partnership with the children's centres and round table groups to support the delivery of Christmas hampers alongside toys from Radio City toy appeal.
- **Signposting and benefit support**
Families are supported to access CAB sessions at children's centres to ensure that all the correct entitlements are accessed for their family. Also support access to the Healthy Start scheme which provides milk and fresh food for families via a shopping card that they can use in recognised stores. Advise and refer to organisations and provide support for access to fuel vouchers and budgeting support.
- **White goods and referrals for essential items**

Linked with agencies and charities, referrals for families who require any essential items. St Vincent de Paul is often used as a referral option for this, and this charity have been able to ensure access to white goods/cots/prams.

- **Holiday Access Funding**

Support with partners review of HAF funding allowing venues to request funding to offer summer activities and access to clubs with meals, fit club team have also supported with the advice and support around the food choices to ensure that the providers are offering healthy, nutritious meal choices within this offer.

- **Support for Staff**

Health Service organisations all have a wide range of services aimed at alleviating cost-of-living pressures faced by their own staff.

Healthwatch Wirral

- 3.6 Healthwatch Wirral are initiating several local projects to help try and alleviate some of the problems local residents face from the cost-of-living crisis. Wherever possible they go out into local communities to try and avoid people having to travel. They ensure information about debt, benefits and energy bills are regularly highlighted in their newsletter and high-profile social media campaigns. They are also involved in imaginative campaign to distribute ipads within the local community to help tackle digital exclusion.

Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service

- 3.7 The National Fire Chiefs Council have developed a Toolkit which is used by each Fire and Rescue Service in England and Wales – **Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service** (MFRS) have adopted this toolkit which can be found [here](#). MFRS visit 60,000 properties each year in Merseyside to talk with residents about Home Fire Safety. At these visits, particularly throughout the colder months, Firefighters and Fire Prevention staff give detailed information on cost-of-living support including:
1. Correct candle usage
 2. How to heat a home efficiently and safely
 3. The dangers of drying clothes near open fires
 4. Checking old or faulty electrics or electric appliances (such as electric heaters or electric blankets)
 5. The importance of chimney inspections/cleaning – if using an open fire
 6. The importance of Carbon Monoxide alarms if using an open fire
- 3.8 Fire service staff are also able to identify and signpost those who require support from Housing providers, Local authorities, Utility companies etc.
- 3.9 For fire service staff they have a socio-economic deprivation staff network which meets quarterly so that our staff are represented at a strategic level.

Jobcentre Plus

- 3.10 Jobcentre Plus actively promote the Governments Help for Households support which can be found [here](#). They work closely with local partner organisations, to coordinate support, signposting their customers for appropriate advice.

Economic Resilience

- 3.11 Under Investment Priority 'Community and Place' of the Liverpool City Region UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), a £2m support scheme has launched to help the region's most vulnerable residents withstand the cost-of-living crisis. The Combined Authority (CA) has joined forces with The Women's Organisation, Citizens Advice and other community providers to offer the Better Off Support (BOS) programme.
- 3.12 The scheme will deploy a range of targeted advice, guidance and support to people hardest hit by the sudden rise in the price of food and energy to help them escape financial chaos and achieve a level of personal stability. BOS will help people deal with debt and manage their money whilst providing support to maximise income, as well as guidance on energy efficiency and how to access home improvement schemes.
- 3.13 Locally, Wirral Council is delivering on three investment priorities which will assist in mitigating the economic impacts of the cost-of-living for our residents and businesses, these are:
- **Phase 1** 'Communities and Place' which can be delivered from April 2022 and aims to foster local pride and build safe and resilient neighbourhoods. Phase 1 will see a broad range of initiatives including additional promotion of local high streets to encourage people to use their local shops and support high street sustainability, there will be a campaign for 'Small Business Saturday' on 2nd December 2023 and a weeklong campaign for Wirral in Spring 2024.
 - **Phase 2** 'Local Business' support commenced 1 October 2023, aiming to create jobs, promote collaboration, and increase private sector investment. Wirral Council commissioned Wirral Chamber of Commerce to deliver a fully funded Business Support Service which is universally available to all Wirral businesses and entrepreneurs. Recognising the increased cost-of-living, the Business Support Service offer's advice and support for businesses to implement sustainable energy solutions to assist in the reduction of high energy costs along with general business support and guidance around all other topics. The Phase 2 'Local Business' strand will support the commission of specialist support for an identified growth opportunity in the borough.
 - **Phase 3** 'People and Skills' will commence in April 2024 and will improve skills and qualifications to reduce economic inactivity. The Local Authority led flagship Employment & Skills programme will provide bespoke employment support to economically inactive people to help them re-enter the labour market. This programme will be the successor programme to the ESF funded 'Ways to Work' Programme. The redesign will focus on those furthest from the labour market and will also strengthen the recruitment and redundancy support offer for businesses.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 Wirral council has been allocated £ 6,098,690 for the latest iteration of the Household Support Fund. The scheme and funding span a 12-month period 01.04.2023 – 31.03.2024. This is a change from the 3 previous rounds, each of which ran for a 6-month period. The HSF R4 Small Grants Programme (Winter 2023 scheme) has now been launched and applications have already been received.

- 4.2 The main areas of support will continue to offer children food provision across school holidays through NEO community. They deliver to every school in the area. The other main funding stream offers fuel support to residents with both arrears and ongoing fuel support.
- 4.3 The small grant scheme supported 43 organisations to deliver a total of £609,717 with £583,926.00 going to support vulnerable people in the community and £25,791.00 to cover the admin/delivery of the projects.
- 4.4 The table below shows how these allocations have been distributed. The amounts have been allocated in accordance with guidance provided by the Department of Work and Pensions.

	Organisation	HSF 4 Proposals
Wirral Household Support Fund - small grants programme	Various organisations	£ 1,300,000.00
Early Years food, bulk school pantries & essentials hampers (school holidays)	Neo Community	£ 1,300,000.00
School Emergency Food Pantries - fresh deliveries	Neo Community	£ 186,000.00
Additional Emergency Financial Support spend	Wirral Council	£ 200,000.00
Financial support with fuel (pre-paid meters)	Wirral Council via Fuel Bank	£ 700,000.00
Financial support with fuel (Energy and water debt) - direct debit customers	Wirral Council referrals from CAB & EPP	£ 1,100,000.00
Crisis support with emergency heating	Energy Project Plus	£ 46,000.00
Crisis support with white goods	North Birkenhead Development Trust & St Vincent de Paul Society	£ 160,000.00
Housing Support Costs (Rent)	Wirral Council	£ 100,000.00
Food support for out of school activities	HAF – Edsential CIC	£ 150,000.00
Housing Benefit Only Cohort	Wirral Council	£ 30,000.00
Care Leavers support - pantries and energy	Wirral Council / Neo Community	£ 67,600.00
Older person support / freeing up NHS beds	Age UK	£ 100,000.00
Childrens services support for vulnerable families	Wirral Council	£ 500,000.00
Administration costs	Wirral Council and Partners	£ 150,000.00
Total Award		£ 6,093,600.00
Balance		£ 9,090.00

- 4.3 Further details with regards to the indicative spend outlined in the above table are available in appendix 1.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Many of the services and support mechanisms provided by the Council are carried out through a variety of legal powers that assist those functions, having regard to the public sector equality duty, best value, and other requirements.
- 5.2 As well as exercising its powers under these specific provisions, the Council has a wide-ranging general power of competence that will enable it to act in this way to secure the best interests of the Borough, its economy, and the persons resident or present in its area.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

- 6.1 All partner organisations are integrating Cost-of-Living work into their existing work programmes.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 7.1 Failure to recognise and respond to cost-of-living challenges will put residents at risk from a whole set of consequential impacts, if they are not able to access funding required to afford their basic needs. This includes:

- Falling into poverty
- Poor physical and mental health
- Evictions from accommodation and the impact on health of poor housing
- A decrease in educational attainment
- Loss of employment, business and livelihoods
- Exposure to unscrupulous individuals e.g., loan sharks
- Negative impacts on community safety caused by potential increases in theft, burglary, and other relevant crime
- Increased safeguarding risk of the grooming and exploitation of children, young people, and vulnerable adults, posed by organised crime gangs/county lines activity.

If the Council and partner organisations do not respond to cost-of-living challenges in terms of fulfilling community leadership roles, the consequential impact on residents could be long-term, and may result in exacerbated financial and capacity pressures on the Council and its partners in the future.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 8.1 The Council coordinates partnership working and engagement to ensure an effective and comprehensive range of support. Partners have been working together for some time to determine the impact, mitigations already in place and what additional support can be provided if required.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Wirral Council has a legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work, do not discriminate against anyone. An Equality Impact Assessment is a tool to help council services identify steps they can take to ensure equality for anyone who might be affected by a particular policy, decision or activity.

9.2 There is scope for there to be fundamental equality implications as a result of the cost-of-living challenge. Several pieces of insight have been undertaken with local people to inform the work programme ensuring the voice of residents and those who are particularly vulnerable are informing policy and communications. The reports are available to view at the following link [here](#)

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

10.1 Actions to mitigate the cost-of-living challenge will also contribute towards attainment of Wirral Cool 2 Strategy, and the Councils carbon net zero target by 2030. For example:

- Heating and powering buildings currently makes up 40% of the UK's total energy usage. Support provided to reduce risks of fuel poverty may include improving the energy efficiency of homes, which will have a beneficial impact on reducing carbon emissions.
- Initiatives related to supporting people in food poverty may also support the reduction of food waste.
- initiatives to support local businesses to support sustainable energy usage in support of reduced energy costs

11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

11.1 The activity identified in this report will take place across Wirral and will be based around the local public sector and community organisations active in the Borough. These 'anchor institutions' will work together to mitigate impact on local residents and businesses as far as possible.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Household Support Fund – Winter Allocation

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Local Government Association, Cost of Living Evidence Hub: <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/safer-and-more-sustainable-communities/cost-living-hub>

Cost of Living Crisis, Wirral Intelligence Service JSNA (Joint Strategic Needs Assessment), Wirral Council:

<https://www.wirralintelligenceservice.org/state-of-the-borough/cost-of-living-crisis-2022/>

TERMS OF REFERENCE

This report is being considered by the Adult Social Care and Public Health Committee in accordance with Section (C) of its Terms of Reference: To provide a local governance structure for local planning and accountability of health and wellbeing related outcomes

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Health and Wellbeing Board	Date
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Cost of Living

29 September 2022