

Cost of Living Update – February 2023

The following briefing note summaries sources of information and support, and actions that have been taken by the Council and partners.

For a summary of the resources and recent announcements, take a look at the Council's [dedicated Cost of Living page](#). This includes links to information for sources of national and local support.

The [interactive community directory](#) which helps people to search for warm spaces and community food providers in their area, also lists the easiest bus routes to help people find help more easily.

Free sims and mobile data from Wiltshire libraries

Wiltshire Libraries are working with the Good Things Foundation to distribute free SIMs and mobile data to people in need. The [National Databank scheme](#) is supported by UK mobile networks including Vodafone, O2 and Three.

The free SIMs and mobile data are available from Chippenham, Devizes, Salisbury, Trowbridge and Warminster libraries.

To be able to access the National Databank you must be 18+ years old and from a low-income household. One or more of the following must also be true:

- You have no or poor access to the internet at home.
- You have no or poor access to the internet away from home.
- You can't afford your existing monthly contract or top-up.

If you meet the criteria, [contact](#) Chippenham, Devizes, Salisbury, Trowbridge or Warminster libraries to find out more and to book an appointment.

Bus fare reductions over winter

Wiltshire bus users can now travel on most routes in the county for just £2 or less for a single fare until 31 March.

The fare price reduction has been funded by the Government and is aimed at getting more people to use buses across the country during the current cost of living challenges.

As part of the promotion, many single bus fares in Wiltshire have been capped at just £2 for both adults and concessions. If the single fare was originally less than £2, it will remain at the reduced price, and many day return tickets have also been reduced.

Vital help with energy bills for more homes – the Energy Bills Support Scheme (EBSS) Alternative Funding scheme

The EBSS Alternative Funding is a one-off £400 non-repayable discount to eligible households who have not received the main EBSS payment automatically to help with their energy bills between 1 October 2022 and 31 March 2023, but are still facing increased energy costs. Individuals will need to apply for the EBSS Alternative Funding via a Gov.UK portal which has yet to go live.

The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) expects eligible households to include those with a commercial landlord or intermediary, such as park home residents and some housing association tenants. The EBSS Alternative Funding is expected to reach a significant number of vulnerable people, including self-funding residents in care homes. DESNZ is expecting approximately 900,000 households in Great Britain (around 3%) to be eligible for EBSS Alternative Funding. No household will be eligible for both the EBSS payment and an EBSS Alternative Funding payment.

Details of the scheme have yet to be published by the Government, and the Government portal is not yet live, but we expect it to be so in the last week of February. We will publish information on the website as soon as we know more.

Support for Council House Tenants and Housing Associations

The council's tenancy sustainment team has been supporting tenants through the ongoing cost-of-living crisis by assisting them to get access to more than £600,000 in new and backdated benefits, external grants and third-party debt cleared.

In addition, following funding received from the Government's Green Homes Grant, the Council has been improving the energy efficiency of 100 properties. This work has been received well by those who have benefited from it, particularly the fact that homes are being made more energy efficient amid the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. The council is currently focussing the project on those with the greatest potential increase in energy efficiency.

The Household Support Fund has also allocated funding to the Housing Service for outreach work to rough sleepers, and to support Council House tenants to combat hardship through the allocation of vouchers. This is building on the strong engagement work of this team, who under the people they work with well to provide the most effective support.

Through partnership working, and the sharing of information, we are highlighting to housing associations how their tenants can access support. We are confident that their tenants have been able to access services as, for example, Housing Association tenants made up 42% those being supported in the Wiltshire Installs project with 16% being Wiltshire Council tenants, Owner Occupier 28% and Privately rented 14% .

Households to get new cost-of-living payments from spring 2023

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) announced on the 3rd of January, more detail on the payment schedule for the next round of cost-of-living support unveiled in the Chancellor's Autumn Statement on 17 November.

The £900 payment for over eight million eligible means-tested benefits claimants (including those on Universal Credit, Pension Credit, and tax credits) starts in spring. Payments will go directly to bank accounts in three payments over the course of the financial year. There will also be a separate £150 for over six million disabled people and £300 for over eight million pensioners on top of their winter fuel payment.

Payments will be made automatically if individuals are eligible and there will be no need to apply. Claimants who are eligible for any of the cost-of-living payments and receive tax credits, and no other means-tested benefits, will receive payment from HM Revenue and Customs shortly after DWP payments are issued.

Exact payment windows will be announced closer to the time but are spread across a longer period to ensure a consistent support offering throughout the year. They will be broadly as follows:

- **£301** – First Cost of Living Payment – **during Spring 2023**
- **£150** – Disability Cost of Living Payment – **during Summer 2023**
- **£300** – Second Cost of Living Payment – **during Autumn 2023**
- **£300** – Pensioner Cost of Living Payment – **during Winter 2023/4**
- **£299** – Third Cost of Living Payment – **during Spring 2024**

Those eligible will be paid automatically, and there will be no need to apply. For more information, please visit [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk).

Winter Fuel Payment videos

The DWP has also created some short videos answering key questions about Winter Fuel Payments. The videos are now also available in British Sign Language version

We would encourage you to share these videos:

[Winter Fuel Payment - British Sign Language](#) and [Winter Fuel Payment Information](#)

Most of those eligible do not have to claim their Winter Fuel Payment, as it is awarded automatically.

People who have not been paid by 13 January 2023 are encouraged to check their bank account before contacting the Department's [Winter Fuel Payment Centre](#).

Energy support for businesses

The **Energy Bill Relief Scheme** launched in under Liz Truss and Jacob Rees-Mogg was Business and Energy Secretary for an initial period of 6 months end at the end

of March. On January 9, Government announced plans to replace the scheme, from the start of April, with a new **Energy Bill Discount Scheme (EBDS)**.

While the old scheme capped energy prices in a blanket fashion, businesses can only benefit from the new scheme when prices are at or above £107 per MWH for gas and £302 per MWh for electricity.

At this point, bills will automatically be reduced. This reduction applies to businesses, charities and public sector bodies and is less generous than previous support provided.

Higher discounts are on offer for energy-intensive businesses such as steelmakers and manufacturers. The threshold at which the discount kicks in is also lower for these firms

The EBDS will run for 12 months from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024

Warm & Safe Support

Wiltshire Council's friendly library staff are continuing to play their part too, by working with Warm and Safe Wiltshire and The Rural Communities Energy Support Network, to assist residents seeking basic energy advice and make referrals to experienced energy advisors in all but its smallest libraries. All libraries can signpost people to community partners and agencies that can support people through the rising cost of living. Libraries are also collection points for Warm Packs, which includes a hot water bottle and blanket, for anyone who would benefit from some free essentials. In all but the smallest libraries there are at least two energy champions who are trained to offer advice and support people to access help.

There are no criteria for anyone who might need to use the library as a warm space, staff and volunteers will be friendly and welcoming so that people feel as comfortable as possible. There are also opportunities to spend more time in the library to take part in board games, colouring, jigsaws and tea and chat where these are part of a local library programme.

The council is always looking for volunteers to support library services, so if anyone has time to spare and wants to join a friendly team this winter they should email libraryenquiries@wiltshire.gov.uk or visit [Libraries](#).

Rural Communities Energy Support Network

The Rural Communities Energy Support Network, delivered as a partnership between the Council and the Centre for Sustainable Energy, is looking to recruit people from local communities would like to be able to offer people in their community more support around staying warm and keeping the bills down

Volunteers would gain access to training and resources so they can offer energy saving advice.

If this sounds like something you would be interested in, or you know someone else who might be, please go to www.cse.org.uk/rcesn or email warmandsafe@cse.org.uk

Warm and Safe advice service

The service has continued to play a prominent role in Wiltshire's cost of living support to low-income households, by providing energy, debt, bill advice, small grants, insulation advice and referrals. Since the beginning of October, the service has received **1009 enquires**, made **144 heating and insulation referrals**, **87 Priority Service Register sign ups** and provided **£26,000 in food and fuel vouchers** and distributed **£30,328 of Surviving Winter Grant** to Wiltshire households.

Boater Support

Public Health working alongside Economic Development secured UK Shared Prosperity Funding (UKSPF) to support the boater community, who find themselves disproportionately affected by the cost-of-living crisis. The funding has allowed Public Health to mobilise an outreach programme with Julian House to support our boating community with emergency fuel and food vouchers, within an extremely tight timescale to ensure the boaters secured the funding at a time of great need. The project was delivered throughout the 3-week cold period in December and helped **71 Boaters and 4 Roadside Travellers** with both fuel and food vouchers. Households were identified by Julian House based on eligibility criteria: low income, health condition, single parent and children with health condition.

Wiltshire Installs project

The Wiltshire Installs project is delivered by Warm and Safe Wiltshire and has been particularly busy this winter. The scheme aims to provide new boiler/repairs, Fuel and food voucher support to households that can demonstrate that they comply with the strict eligibility criteria: low income, have a health condition, their energy needs are off the mains Gas network and have a prepayment meter. The scheme has supported **209 households** since the beginning of October 2022, through a mixture of prepayment meter and food vouchers, in addition **11 new boilers** have been fitted where households have had a no heating situation.

Support for households that rely on life saving equipment.

Warm and Safe Wiltshire has worked in partnership with both Integrated Care Board and Adult commissioning to identify households that rely on life saving equipment, who are disproportionately affected by the high energy prices. Through November families have been offered support through the provision of food and prepayment meter vouchers, to date **13 families** have been supported.

Community Case Worker

This winter we have increased the ability to support Council, Primary Care, NHS and Voluntary and Charitable organisations with outreach work through the Community Case Worker project (Warm and Safe), which has allowed us to deliver 24 events, outlining the Warm and Safe service and the referral routes available to organisations to allow households ease of access into the service. In addition, this role has allowed us to provide 1 to 1 support and advocacy to people in crisis.

Wiltshire's Wellbeing Hub is available to help advise people through the cost-of-living crisis

As well as specific and general telephone contacts, the Council is making their Wellbeing Hub phone line available for people who may be worried about the cost-of-living crisis and needing some information and advice.

The hub was originally set-up at the start of the pandemic to provide information and advice. Anyone can access the hub and it can provide confidential advice, information, and signposting from the council's friendly team in relation to the current high cost of living.

People can call the hub Monday to Thursday 9am to 5pm and Friday from 9am to 4pm on 0300 003 4576 or email wellbeinghub@wiltshire.gov.uk. The opening hours will continue to be regularly reviewed depending on what the demand is for the service.

Promoting Fundraising Campaigns

As part of our work with our Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise partners, Wiltshire Council is helping to promote the Wiltshire Community Foundation's [Cost of Living Appeal](#) through our networks.

Building on the work of previous appeals where people who can afford to are encouraged to donate any surplus winter fuel allowances, the wider community is being asked to help generate vital funds to help grassroots voluntary groups and charities in Swindon and Wiltshire who are supporting families and individuals in the face of escalating rent, food, and energy prices.

The money raised through this joint appeal will fund a new grants programme to support projects which are keeping people fed and warm and provide additional practical support and advice to help people cope throughout this period of great hardship.

You can donate to the appeal [here](#) or call the donation line on 01380 738989 from 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday.