

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

27 September 2022

Cost of Living – Verbal update from the Leader to Cabinet

We are acutely conscious of the pressures many people are already facing on the cost of living, and the real potential for these to grow over the autumn and winter period.

These include the capped-but-still-high cost of energy, increasing and sustained inflation, ongoing labour market pressures, and disruption to supply chains.

Clearly the additional support the government has announced recently in the mini-budget and through the [Energy Price Guarantee](#)¹ for residents and the [Energy Bill Relief Scheme](#)² for businesses is welcome, together with the proposed longer-term market reforms.

And I want to reassure you all that it is this Cabinet's and our officers' priority to make sure that Wiltshire is prepared for the further significant challenges we expect to face this autumn and winter.

In my last update, I outlined some of the things we are already doing on the cost of living – such as administering:

- The energy rebate to homes in council tax bands A-D (153k households all paid out or allocated as credit to council tax bills) as well as 1k discretionary payments to households in other bands
- The Household Support Fund which has already allocated £2.7m to pensioners, vulnerable working age adults, those in temporary accommodation and to food banks and associated projects for those in need. The scheme has been targeted at those least able to cope, with 23,000 awards made
- The Council Tax Reduction Scheme and an additional £140k for discretionary payments
- Housing Benefit and discretionary payments
- Local Welfare Provision
- The Holidays Activity and Food programme, which ran 17 camps again over the summer holidays for those on free school meals, helping 1600 participants with 16,900 meals

We are also continuing to support initiatives that address capped fuel prices through energy efficiency such as:

- Warm and Safe Wiltshire – free and impartial energy advice to reduce fuel poverty

¹ The Energy Price Guarantee will reduce the unit cost of electricity and gas so that a typical household in Great Britain pays, on average, around £2,500 a year on their energy bill, for the next 2 years, from 1 October 2022. It must be noted that many will indeed pay more.

² The scheme will be available to everyone on a non-domestic contract including businesses, voluntary sector organisations, such as charities, public sector organisations such as schools, hospitals and care homes.

- Home Upgrade Grant Scheme - £3m support on insulation and renewables
- Green Homes Grant - £4.4m scheme for those on low incomes to improve energy efficiency
- Retrofitting council housing stock – 500 homes a year
- Solar Together – a joint buying scheme for communities to purchase solar production and storage

Looking to the future, we will be delivering social media campaigns to promote the support available alongside webinars on managing the cost of living.

Our directors are meeting on a weekly basis to develop and target this support on the cost of living, with dedicated task and finish groups feeding into this, replicating the approach adopted during the pandemic.

This will also involve working with community groups and other public service partners to deliver the agenda and responding to central government's plans as appropriate.

The is in three themed cells: Residents (led by Emma Legg); the cost of doing Businesses, including supporting schools (Victoria Moloney); and our staff (Tamsin Kielb).

Taking these in turn:

i) Vulnerable residents

We are already seeing an increasing number of calls, of an increasing length and complexity, requesting support.

[Evidence from the Council Tax Service confirmed that a year ago in the last week of August we received 1228 calls, which on average lasted 3 minutes 42 seconds; this year we had 1419 and the call length has increased to 4 minutes 49 seconds. This is for a relatively quiet week in August but it equates to a 24% increase or 27 hours over the week where staff are having to spend more time counselling and guiding customer to whatever help is available.]

Consequently, we are reigniting the Wiltshire Wellbeing Hub which has continued to run successfully since the start of the pandemic [but we haven't continued to promote as per before so this will be refreshed], providing a common and trackable front door to assist residents with the full spectrum of financial wellbeing concerns.

As part of this work, we will refresh the directory of support which will provide a vital resource for all front-line staff, partners and the community to ensure they sign-post residents to the right support.

We are building on existing engagement with residents in local authority housing to ensure that they are receiving the right financial support.

We will be administering the next instalment of the Household Support Fund, as per previous grants, which will run until April. We are awaiting full guidance but there are increased flexibilities and DWP are indicating a greater focus on an application basis (with associated resourcing implications). We will develop local criteria once the government guidance is received.

We will also be responding to the government's consultation on the social rent cap and will be asking them to ensure this does not impact on our essential investment plans in the retrofitting of our social housing stock.

The Court of Protection team is working with their cohort of residents to ensure that are making good financial decisions and are not reacting unduly to negative messages.

Our business insight team will be working with services to identify our most vulnerable residents along with analysis examining for service overlaps, and how we can join up support thereafter.

We will be reviewing our already proportionate debt recovery policy, which will be overseen by a Debt Recovery Board.

We are also examining ways in which we might be able to share intelligence with other service and utility providers, such as Wessex Water, so that customers can get additional support.

We have since 1st September until the 31st March lifted the 09:30hrs restriction on concessionary fare bus passes, so that they can be used at any time, thus supporting the elderly and vulnerable to access essential services

We intend to build on the structured approach we have for engaging town and parish councils, and the voluntary and community sector that was developed during the pandemic.

We are also examining a variety of approaches to addressing food poverty, such as breakfast clubs and after school clubs delivered in partnership with businesses and the voluntary sector, food banks, community fridges and a countywide collaborative food network.

We will be encouraging area boards to consider ready-made projects such as these, to speak with officers to develop other projects, to consider creative use of their health and wellbeing funding and to explore the use of council and other public buildings as 'warm spaces'. Conversations are already underway with local churches about this provision.

The work of local health trainers is being refreshed to take account of the changing cost of different foods to ensure that we continue to support people to eat healthily, as well as continuing to help people to give up smoking thereby saving them money.

ii) Businesses (including schools)

We have established a 'cost of doing business' group to gather intelligence on the impact of the energy crisis on Wiltshire businesses, including through the LEP, FSB, Chambers, and with larger businesses and trade specific groups.

The group is ensuring that businesses are signposted to available support and that any complexities in accessing this are ironed out.

[Already we are aware of the potential for long-term impact, with one large Wiltshire business receiving an energy quote for 2024 that shows prices rising from £850k to £2.9M; and hospitality businesses being refused service or asked for £10k deposits

for new business energy accounts, as they are thought unlikely to survive. We are keeping a close eye on this in light of the Energy Bill Relief Scheme]

Across June and July, footfall data in Salisbury is also down an average of 30,000 visits a week since 2019. We are continuing to work with town councils to monitor footfall and empty shops across Wiltshire.

Our UKSPF programme is due to start delivery from Winter 22/23 across 3 years (subject to Government approval) and is targeted on cost-of-living impact, including provision for Warm and Safe Wiltshire and support to access employment and services.

Our commissioners continue to meet with service providers to identify any areas with which they are struggling and ways in which they can be addressed. Schools that are already managing an increase in national insurance and a higher-than-expected pay settlement (5.4% as against 3% budgeted) also have significantly higher energy bills to contend with.

Our school capital programme continues to focus on the least energy efficient school buildings for which the council is responsible. We are supporting schools to share best practice in reducing electricity demand and adopting solar generation, as well as to promote the uptake of suitable support with parents.

iii) Staff

We know that our own staff remain one of our most important groups to support and already we are seeing that social workers and other staff face increased travel costs, and we are exploring options to address this.

Wellbeing support continues to be promoted (such as employee assistance and financial wellbeing) and we are collating data on emerging and potential pressure points to tailor further support appropriately. Staff struggling with heating costs can continue to access our buildings.

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Finally, I continue to meet regularly with local MPs to appraise them of the support we are delivering as well as any issues with central government policy.