

Report to:	Cabinet	20 March 2023
Lead Cabinet Member:	Councillor Bill Handley, Lead Cabinet Member for Communities	
Lead Officer:	Liz Watts, Chief Executive Officer	

Further support for cost-of-living crisis for South Cambridgeshire residents

Executive Summary

1. This report provides Cabinet with recommendations for how the Council could continue to support residents through the cost-of-living crisis. Existing funding is available to deliver the recommended programme of support over the next two years. The recommendations aim to create self-sustaining systems that will continue beyond initial funding and provide support to residents across the district experiencing hardship. The funding recommended follows a package of support agreed by the Cabinet on 14 November 2022 for up until the end of March 2023.

Key Decision

2. Yes. The key decision was first published in the February 2023 Forward Plan.

Recommendations

3. It is recommended that Cabinet approve the priorities set out in paragraphs 28 – 35, and £206,000 funding set out in paragraph 37 to continue to support South Cambridgeshire communities during the ongoing cost-of-living crisis.

Reasons for Recommendations

4. Following the cost-of-living crisis declaration at a meeting of Full Council, a report was agreed by Cabinet on 14 November 2022 to provide a range of support targeted at more vulnerable residents to help with the current cost-of-living crisis.

The funding for many of the schemes proposed in that report comes to an end on 31 March 2023.

5. The cost-of-living crisis continues to have a major impact on individuals, families, and businesses nationally, including those living and working in South Cambridgeshire and this report summarises the work that has already been done and recommends additional support through the next 2 financial years.
6. The crisis is impacting people with moderate to good incomes as well as those already in hardship. The increase in day-to-day bills, especially energy and food, is pushing those struggling deeper into hardship and poverty.
7. We are hearing reports that the impossible choice between “heating and eating” may present more problems for our Health Services, which are still recovering from the demands caused by the Covid pandemic. Individuals who are unable to keep themselves warm, or feed themselves sufficiently, many of whom have underlying health conditions or are considered vulnerable, may develop health conditions as a result which require GP or hospital treatment.
8. There is evidence to suggest that some are less able to cope with the cost-of-living crisis so soon after the pandemic. Households, particularly those with low incomes, have run down savings and increased debt since the start of the pandemic. The Office for National Statistics found that by December 2020, nearly 9 million people had to borrow more money than usual because of coronavirus. Groups which are more likely to have taken on more debt since the start of the coronavirus pandemic include renters, people from minority ethnic groups, parents and carers, disabled people, and young people.
9. The effects of the cost-of-living crisis will continue for a number of years. Inflation will remain high through 2023 and the economic outlook continues to look challenging for many people and businesses. The Council has a duty to support the most vulnerable residents and with many existing projects ending on 31 March 2023, the recommendations in this report extend support over the following years.
10. The situation residents face is complex and there are no easy solutions. There are both long-term and short-term causes of the current crisis including:
 - The extraordinary rise in the cost of energy and fuel.
 - Interest rate rises.
 - The very high cost of housing which is extremely evident within South Cambridgeshire and its effects on rents in the area.
 - Rising food prices.
 - Income and wages, including social security benefits, have stagnated and some benefits such as Universal Credit (UC) have been reduced following increases during the pandemic.
 - The longer-term effects of the pandemic.
 - An ageing population.

- The current war in Ukraine (resulting in increased costs across a range of goods, services, foods, and energy).

The Council had already been supporting residents in the following ways: -

11. Dedicated income and money maximisation officer advice - available within Housing Advice and Benefits teams to help ensure people are claiming all support and assistance available to them including pre-tenancy advice and support in terms of managing finances, negotiating the costs of moving into a new home and some collaborative work with housing providers around affordability.
12. Specialist debt advice to residents at risk of homelessness because of affordability and debt (service accessed via the Housing Advice Team), provided by Citizen's Advice Bureau Money Advice Service.
13. Council tax payments – residents can spread payments over 12 instalments rather than 10 instalments as had traditionally been the case.
14. Improved information to increase and maximise income: [Cost of living support - South Cambs District Council \(scamb.gov.uk\)](https://www.scamb.gov.uk) – all information is now in one place to ensure people are aware of support by the Council and other organisations. This is supported by a printed resource.
15. Supporting residents with Trussell Trust Food Bank vouchers - authorising and providing vouchers offering onward support and signposting as appropriate.
16. Providing home energy improvements (for example, loft and wall insulation and solar PV) to homes where households are at risk of fuel poverty, funded through government schemes. (This work is delivered under the Action on Energy Cambridgeshire brand name, in collaboration with the other Cambridgeshire local authorities through the Cambridgeshire Energy Retrofit Partnership).
17. The Council is also working with partners to ensure good understanding locally of the support available such as:
 - Cambridgeshire County Council on the Household Support Fund that provides one off food and fuel payments. The Council is a trusted partner and able to authorise vouchers.
 - Local Energy Action Partnership (LEAP) who provide energy and money saving advice to residents and an onward referrals service for income, benefits debt advice and funded energy efficient improvements.

Following agreement by Cabinet on 14 November 2022, these additional measures commenced: -

18. Reducing the cost of heating and cooking by providing free slow cookers and electric blankets to those 'just about managing'. At the time of writing, over 300

people have been supplied with either an electric blanket or slow cooker, with many receiving both.

19. Expansion of Warm Hubs project that had commenced across South Cambridgeshire to provide a community space whereby residents are able to socialise and save on their heating bills while not heating their home during that time. So far, 25 Warm Hubs have opened across the district and as of 1 February 2023, have received over 2,000 visits.
20. The development of the Warm Hubs, where they have been successful, have provided opportunities for people living in loneliness and isolation to connect with their neighbours and make new friends building important local support networks. These appear to be proving most successful in those villages and communities which lack other amenities.
21. Introducing a food parcel service to those communities without access to a food bank but in need of food aid. The food parcel delivery provides a bespoke selection of foods to feed an individual or family group for up to a week and can be delivered within 24 hours of the initial request. Deliveries can be made to a registered Warm Hub or the residents' home in some circumstances.
22. Further support through Community Chest grants. An additional £20,000 was made available for projects specifically helping tackle the effects of the cost-of-living crisis.
23. Additional budget of £100,000 to be used over 2022/23 and 2023/24 for Discretionary Housing Payments for people on Universal Credit (UC) or Housing Benefits for help with housing costs.
24. A dedicated cost-of-living Project Officer to deliver projects thus far, and to act as a single point of contact for all cost-of-living crisis related enquiries through the Council.
25. Although initial feedback has already been overwhelmingly positive, a full evaluation report will be undertaken in May 2023 containing more data. Lessons learnt so far have shaped the recommendations in this paper to ensure residents continue to receive a high standard of support.

Focus of additional work to support residents through the cost-of-living crisis in 2023/24 and 2024/25

26. The Council declared a cost-of-living crisis at its September 2022 Council meeting, and subsequently passed a number of measures to support residents, with most of these measures ending on 31 March 2023. Below are the recommended options that officers have developed following engagement with the Lead Cabinet Member for Communities. The recommendations recognise the

need to create self-sustaining systems that do not require ongoing funding from the Council. Many of the recommended options require funding which is shown below. All the additional work can be funded through the use of available earmarked reserves.

27. Following on from the investment last year, the Integrated Care System (ICS) have indicated that they will provide further grant funding for 2023/24 to continue projects which demonstrate a focus on preventing people needing further health interventions and community engagement. Final confirmation is required to understand the details of this grant and its terms, but it is likely some match funding will be required for projects.

Priority Opportunities

28. **Cost-of-living crisis response strategy** – Develop a strategy to build on this report that would detail the Council’s approach to the cost-of-living crisis. An overarching strategy would help the Council to deliver a considered and budgeted range of holistic support. It would align to other strategies and policies such as equalities, health and wellbeing, and climate change, and link with projects such as housing initiatives with our own tenants, Community Led Planning (CLP), and Homes for Ukraine. The approach taken would be in collaboration with Parishes, Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) groups, Cambridgeshire County Council’s Think Communities Team, and the ICS to create self-sustaining, place-based solutions.
29. **Roadshow of cost-of-living talks** – Existing community groups/events/meetings that take place in a community (or set up for this purpose if necessary) to raise the issue of the impacts of cost of living on the most vulnerable and highlight a range of support available. This would improve reach and uptake of grants and other support services. These would be organised in partnership with Parish Councils.

Recommendation: £1,000 to be allocated for this project. This covers room hire and materials cost for 10 talks in targeted areas.

30. **Evolution of Warm Hubs into Community Wellbeing Hubs** – Cambridgeshire Acre were appointed to provide warm community spaces in South Cambridgeshire and were provided with funding to last through to 31 March 2023. Learning from the extensive community engagement throughout this process, ‘Warm Hubs’ would evolve into Community Wellbeing Hubs, offering more services. These places could provide free, cheap, or ‘pay as you feel’ food and hot drinks, social interaction, access to affordable food, a warm space, connection to statutory services such as Job Centre, Housing Advice and voluntary groups such as Citizens Advice, energy and debt advice, and anything else the community wanted or needed. This project could be developed within Community Led Plan and be place-based, reflecting the needs of the particular village or town.

Recommendation: £25,000 to be allocated for a minimum of 5 Community Hubs across the district. Further funding will be bid for to increase this offering, subject to the terms of the ICS bidding process.

31. Council Tax Support Campaign - Run a larger communications campaign to increase uptake of the Council Tax reduction scheme. The campaign would use a range of communication channels but would include letters to areas with higher deprivation informing people of their potential eligibility. Data resulting from this scheme may also help the Council target future/additional support. This has been evident through the electric blanket/slow cookers scheme.

Recommendation: £10,000 allocated for a targeted letter campaign.

32. Extend the provision of electric blankets and/or slow cookers – Expand this scheme to provide energy saving appliances to residents just about managing. The feedback from this scheme has so far been very positive. We would also seek to target residents in receipt of care from the District Nursing Teams, again working in close collaboration with our partners in health. Planning a targeted approach will begin over the summer period to launch in November 2023.

Recommendation: £30,000 to support approximately 500 people.

33. South Cambridgeshire Sustainable Food Network - A sustainable food network would link together all foodbanks in the district to learn from one another and distribute food that would otherwise be going to waste; create links with local farmers to donate excess food that is not suitable for supermarkets; encourage communities to grow fresh vegetables for those most vulnerable; and promote healthy eating and more plant-based diets. This combats both the cost-of-living crisis and the climate crisis by creating a sustainable network, initially led by an officer at the Council, who would then mentor one of the volunteers to take over with external funding (funding currently available) once in operation.

At the Climate and Environment Advisory Committee's request, a report is being prepared by the Climate and Environment team for their meeting on 4 April setting out options for a South Cambridgeshire Sustainable Food Strategy. A sustainable food network would be an integral part of this.

This would include, though not be limited to, setting up new foodbanks, creating community vegetable gardens, facilitating a better relationship between supermarkets and foodbanks to donate excess food, and delivering food parcels to those in need. Funding would be provided to set up new foodbanks in target areas where gaps exist which should become self-sufficient after expiration of initial funding as work would be done to set up regular donations from the community and supermarkets. Community vegetable gardens would help create a more constant local supply of fresh seasonal vegetables to foodbanks in the district and encourage healthy eating and community cohesion. Food would be

distributed through the Sustainable Food Network, targeting food to those most vulnerable while also tackling food waste issues.

Recommendation: £45,000 allocated to the project as a whole. Initial allocation of this funding is £15,000 to fund 5 new foodbanks, £10,000 to cover land agreement and running costs for community vegetable gardens, and £20,000 for the provision of food parcels, although the sub-allocations are subject to change as work continues.

34. Data analysis to explore prevention methods - Many data sets are held within the Council and partner organisations that contain information on individuals and geographical areas at risk of, or already in, poverty. Officer resource would allow investigation of whether the Council's data could be used to attempt to implement prevention methods. This project is envisaged to run through to March 2025.

35. Officer resources – To deliver the projects set out in this report, a dedicated cost-of-living Project Officer at grade 4 is required beyond March 2023. Many of the projects outlined in this report will continue for a two-year period and thus require officer resource for that.

Recommendation: £80,000 for one full time equivalent Project Officer at Grade 4 on a two-year fixed term contract.

Options

1. Recommended option – accept all the recommendations set out in paragraphs 28 to 35 thereby continuing to support our commitment to helping residents through the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, initially approved by Cabinet in November 2022.
2. Cabinet could choose not to progress with any of the recommended options set out in the report and either do nothing, or ask officers to carry out further work.
3. Defer a decision until a later date, pending further information.
4. Approve some of the recommended options set out in the report and provide officers with feedback on those to be prioritised.

Implications

36. In the writing of this report, taking into account financial, legal, staffing, risk, equality and diversity, climate change, and any other key issues, the following implications have been considered: -

Financial

37. Funding for the projects outlined above will be drawn from existing and available earmarked reserves. Each option has been costed and evaluated as part of the

package of ongoing support that the council provides to residents. If all options were agreed, this would cost a total of £206,000 and all funding would come from earmarked reserves.

Financial summary of recommendations

	Funded by SCDC reserves (£)
Roadshow of cost-of-living talks	1,000
Evolution of Warm Hubs into Community Hubs	25,000
Council Tax support campaign	10,000
Extend the provision of electric blankets and/or slow cookers	30,000
South Cambridgeshire Sustainable Food Network	45,000
Officer resources (2 years)	80,000
Contingency	15,000
Total	206,000

Staffing

38. Creation of a new full time equivalent 2-year fixed term post at Grade 4 will be necessary to deliver the full range of projects outlined.

Risks/Opportunities

39. The recommendations in this report have the opportunity to ease the effects of the cost-of-living crisis to those most vulnerable in South Cambridgeshire. Were the Council not to continue its support to residents it is likely that more people will need to access other services offered by the Council and public sector partners.

Equality and Diversity

40. An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) was undertaken in November 2022 regarding cost-of-living support. As the recommendations in this report are a continuation of this work, it will rely upon the same EqIA. The EqIA has identified that the proposals have the potential to impact positively on several different protected characteristic groups, especially those who we know to be most vulnerable to the cost-of-living crisis, such as older people and young children, and disabled people.

Climate Change

41. The recommendations to set up a South Cambridgeshire Sustainable Food Network and to extend the provision of electric blankets and/or slow cookers align closely with the council's Zero Carbon Strategy, action plan and net zero targets. Electric blankets and slow cookers are likely to result in lower electricity use and associated greenhouse gas emissions. Food is a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions and a sustainable food network would be an important part of a strategy to reduce these.

Health & Wellbeing

42. The health impacts associated with financial hardship, debt, poor nutrition, and cold, damp homes are manifold. This project aims to deliver numerous positive health impacts by using a mix of universal and targeted approaches which will be localised and nuanced based on the needs of the neighbourhood.

Consultation

43. Community engagement with volunteers, residents, and services across South Cambridgeshire, which will be shared in full once the initial funding is complete. Ongoing and continued consultation with Think Communities, the ICS, Voluntary Sector and Council officers.

Alignment with Council Priority Areas

44. Growing local businesses and economies

This proposal involves working closely to deliver projects via the voluntary sector through the provision of grants. This creates positive impacts by supporting local not-for-profit organisations to develop their business models, provide employment for local people and build social value through the creation of increased volunteering roles across the District.

45. Housing that is truly affordable for everyone to live in

This project will link services such as Local Energy Advice Partnership and other debt and energy advice organisations to residents in need of housing and financial support. Leading to residents gaining access to fuel grants and home improvements which could lead to energy efficiency savings.

46. Being green to our core

The project plans to create a sustainable food network, bringing together foodbanks, allotment growing groups and supermarket chains to reduce food waste, and reduce food miles by offering locally grown, unwanted items to local people.

47. A modern and caring Council

This project aims to help support those people already suffering financial hardship and help prevent those just about managing from falling into debt by offering a range of practical and financial help. The breadth and depth of the project addresses the wider determinants as it aims to address matters relating to housing, income, jobs, social and community cohesion and access to health services.

Report Authors:

Lesley McFarlane – Development Officer – Health Specialist
Telephone: (01954) 713443

Chris Riches – Project Officer, Communities
Telephone: (01954) 713036