

Report to Council

19 October 2022

By the Leader of the Council



**Horsham
District
Council**

DECISION REQUIRED

Not Exempt

Cost of Living Support

Executive Summary

The national cost of living crisis is having an impact on people across the Horsham District. There is evidence to suggest that it is starting to impact on groups of people who would not typically use the community and voluntary sector or benefits system for support. The report has been developed following discussions with Age UK, Citizens Advice and Horsham Matters in October 2022 to implement measures to positively benefit the wellbeing of Horsham District residents. The £250,000 costs will be funded from the earmarked community fund reserve, spread over a two-year period.

The recommendations follow actions taken by the Council in June 2022 to the use of £300,000 (the equivalent of the 2021/22 Council Tax increase) to invest in schemes and organisations that support residents struggling with cost of living issues.

Recommendations

That the Council is recommended to:

- i) Enter a partnership agreement with Citizens Advice to provide two new advisors to support residents through the cost of living crisis, costing approximately £160,000 over a two year fixed period.
- ii) Fund the Low Income Family Tracker for a two year period costing approximately £40,000 in total.
- iii) Provide an additional £25,000 one-off funding to Horsham Matters to support the Foodbank provision in 2022/23.
- iv) Agree to a new corporate project to create an accessible directory of services.
- v) Create a flexible fund of £25,000 to support in year interventions identified through partnership work with community groups and voluntary sector organisations. Use of this fund will be subject to approval by Director of Communities in consultation with Cabinet Member for Finance & Parking and the Cabinet Member for Community Matters.

Reasons for Recommendations

It is considered that these proposals will have a significant and valuable impact on Horsham District residents who are being affected by the increases in the cost of living. Making the decision at this meeting will allow support to start to be provided immediately. Full Council must approve budgetary changes.

Background Papers: None

Wards affected: All

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Background Information

1 Introduction and Background

- 1.1 Horsham District Council has been active in targeting actions to address the impact of the cost of living crisis on its communities. In June 2022, Council agreed to the use of £300,000 (the equivalent of the 2021/22 Council Tax increase) to invest in schemes and organisations that support residents struggling with cost of living issues. This sum included a £15,000 grant to Horsham Matters to increase fuel crisis support and other cost of living support interventions, an extra £90,000 in Discretionary Housing Payments to help those struggling to find enough money to pay their rent, and an extra £60,000 to help Citizens' Advice fund more advice workers for people in financial difficulty.
- 1.2 Officers from the Community Services team have also facilitated a series of community advice drop-in sessions throughout the District to ensure advice is available to all. These are scheduled to continue into 2023.
- 1.3 Furthermore, officers within our Community Services team have also been actively working with partners in the voluntary sector, faith groups, parish councils and other public sector bodies to develop a shared understanding of the impact locally and agree measures that can be taken to support residents. These have taken the form of one to one conversations, Third Sector Leaders Networking events and shared learning of District and Borough Councils across West Sussex.
- 1.4 Additionally, at its last meeting Council agreed the following motion:

“This Council notes that:

 - On the 1 April 2022, Ofgem increased the energy price cap by 54 per cent and this is predicted to rise again in October.
 - In light of the increased energy price cap, the average standard tariff energy bill is rising by £693 per year the average pre-pay meter energy bill is increasing by £780 per year. This is expected to rise again in October.
 - The Consumer price index (CPI) shows twelve-month Inflation is now at 10.1% up to July 2022. Inflation is predicted to rise further next year.
 - Evidence shows that food bank use has increased dramatically in Horsham. In July 2021, the Horsham Matters food bank fed 213 people, of whom 84 were children. This year those figures have already more than doubled – in July 2022, 483 people were fed of whom 187 were children.

The Council, in recognising the cost of living crisis facing this Country, resolves to continue to deliver support to those most in need and to continue to work with partner authorities and with third sector organisations to support all those in our community.”
- 1.5 In the period since that meeting, officers have been working with the Leader and Cabinet to consider possible options to provide additional support to residents and have also been working with the voluntary sector to understand the situation locally.

This report proposes expenditure on partnership initiatives that could make a tangible difference to people's lives in the Horsham District.

- 1.6 The Monitoring Officer is aware of this report and was consulted on moving it forward as an urgent time as well as checking the report. The Interim Director of Resources advised on the simplest way to set up the budget needed.

2 Relevant Council policy

- 2.1 The recommendations in the report support Horsham District Council's corporate priority 'A strong, safe and healthy community'.

3 Details

- 3.1 On 3 October 2022, officers met again with representatives of Age UK, Citizens Advice and Age UK to better understand the issues in the District, to hear first-hand the situation locally and to understand from them what Horsham District Council could do to help support them to support residents. Some of the key facts raised by partners were:

- There is an increasing demand for food parcels (around 900 parcels were given to residents in August 2022)
- There has been a 30% reduction in food donations to the food bank and a reduction in financial contributions
- As older people spend more time in their homes to avoid getting cold outside, there has been an increase in social isolation
- Citizens Advice are being contacted by middle income families for support and advice – people who have never received benefits and have not had to seek external support previously
- Citizens Advice are supporting 3,000 people per quarter in Horsham District, with around 100 people a week visiting their offices. They advised that there had been an increase in people needing advice for complex financial situations, including because of visits from bailiffs
- Around 50% of Citizens Advice Customers have mental health issues
- The increased energy costs at Citizens Advice equate to the cost of one part time advisor

- 3.2 As a result of that meeting, progress is being made on a number of initiatives that can be delivered with existing resources, including:

- HDC Property Team is working with Horsham Matters to identify a facility that can be used in November and December to allow them to prepare Christmas food parcels

- Resilience training is being developed for employees and volunteers at both Horsham District Council and the voluntary sector so that they are better placed to manage the personal impact on them of listening to and supporting people in crisis
- Developing an event for Horsham District Councillors to provide training and advice to provide Members with a more detailed briefing on the current issues, the support and help that is available and how as elected Members they can best support and signpost their residents

3.3 It is considered that significant further progress could be achieved locally with additional expenditure which could be funded through the earmarked Community Fund reserve which contains £250,000 that was set aside for supporting the community through difficult times most notably under Covid-19.

3.4 The following initiatives are proposed which have been developed with our partners:

Large scale, meaningful and proactive partnership with Citizens Advice.

£160,000 over two years. This would fund two additional advisors employed within the Citizens Advice service and based within the HDC Community Development Team. They would have a peripatetic role and would work with community groups across the District to deliver debt advice and advise people about income maximisation (such as ensuring that people claimed all the benefits – both those provided through the state and employers). They would also use the Low Income Family Tracker (see below) to target specific sections of community to proactively deliver a service and a preventative approach to debt awareness and advice.

Invest in the Low Income Family Tracker (LIFT). £40,000 over two years. This is a service facilitated by Policy in Practice which allows organisations to effectively interrogate data sets and records to identify residents who may be able to access more financial support or benefits that they would be entitled to. For instance, it could be used to identify residents not claiming a Single Persons Discount on their Council Tax, or identify households receiving specific income related benefits such as the Personal Independence Payment. The latter example would allow HDC to proactively target that group with the other associated income and non-financial benefits that they should be entitled to. There is significant evidence nationally that there are a number of under accessed non-financial benefits that will have a positive impact on the finances of households. These include childcare vouchers, NHS low income scheme and working from home tax rebates. The advantage of this initiative is that it would allow us to start to help people before they have identified themselves that they need help.

Supporting Horsham Matters with Foodbank provision. £25,000. It is suggested that on the basis that demand for the service is continuing to grow combined with a reduction in both food and financial donations, it would be appropriate to provide an additional one off payment to support them.

Establish a flexible fund support in year interventions identified through partnership work with community groups and voluntary sector organisations. £25,000. Use of this fund will be subject to approval by the Director of Communities in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Community Matters and the Cabinet Member for Finance and Parking.

Development of a new corporate project to create a user focused and accessible service directory for local residents. It is considered that this could be broken down into category of need (e.g. debt, social isolation, new or expectant parents) and/or locations. This would be based on the existing list of community services that are provided on the HDC website but would be redesigned and promoted to better meet the needs of our communities. At the current time, no costs have been identified as the project will be delivered from existing staffing resources. It may be that as the initiative develops there will be a budgetary requirement, which will be considered by SLT and reported to Council if appropriate.

4 Next Steps

- 4.1 Subject to the approval of the recommendations, officers will work with Citizens Advice to progress the recruitment of two new members of staff, which will allow the initiatives the support initiatives to commence by January. The financial support to Horsham Matters could be provided immediately and officers from teams across the Council will work corporately on the new project.

5 Views of the Policy Development Advisory Group and Outcome of Consultations

- 5.1 Due to the fast moving nature of this issue, the proposals have not been discussed with a Policy Development Advisory Group, hence the report coming as an urgent item. The Cabinet Member for Community Matters will continue to brief her Policy Development Advisory Group on the progress. The proposals have been developed in partnership with the voluntary sector and it is considered that they will provide appropriate support to residents.
- 5.2 The Monitoring Officer and Interim Director of Resources have reviewed the report and the proposals and are satisfied with their legal and financial probity.

6 Other Courses of Action Considered but Rejected

- 6.1 It is considered that the proposals set out in the report will have a meaningful impact on local residents. By using funds to deliver support and advice we can target more residents and deliver value for money. Whilst it was an option to focus purely on initiatives that could be delivered from within existing resources, it was not considered that this was appropriate given the scale of the cost of living crisis and HDC's role in supporting its communities.

7 Resource Consequences

- 7.1 The estimated expenditure will be funded from the earmarked Community Fund which contains £250,000. As expenditure is undertaken it will be match funded from the reserve in the year, up to the value of £250,000. The approximate expenditure in 2022/23 is expected to be £60,000, but net neutral after the application of

reserves to fund this. Spend in future years will be incorporated into the budget setting process for each year.

- 7.2 The creation of two new posts would ensure that the key work around providing advice and using the LIFT product can be delivered with a minimal impact on existing HDC priorities. It is anticipated that a new project to develop an accessible service directory will largely be deliverable from within existing staffing resources, although there may be an impact on current projects and workstreams. This will be considered as part of the project and any issues will be escalated to SLT for consideration.

8 Legal Considerations and Implications

- 8.1 The establishment of new budgets is reserved to Council under the Council's Constitution. This report requests a referral of the matter to Council to set up such a budget. This urgent item has been dealt with in accordance with 4d.4 of the Council's Constitution.

9 Risk Assessment

- 9.1 The proposals set out in the report are designed to reduce the risk of additional demands being placed on HDC services. The cost of living crisis will create additional pressures for a number of services, including Housing, Community Services and Revenues and Benefits. It is considered that through providing additional support the increase in demand for Council services will be partially mitigated.

10 Procurement implications

- 10.1 There are no procurement implications.

11. Equalities and Human Rights implications / Public Sector Equality Duty

- 11.1 This support will be targeted at those people who are most in need, the majority of whom will be on low of middle income levels. Data will be used to ensure that communication is targeted to those people that it is considered are most in need of support. The two fixed term advisors will work with partner organisations to understand the parts of the community who will be most in need of support and will ensure visibility and communication with those groups in a way that works for them.

12 Environmental Implications

- 12.1 There are no specific environmental implications arising from this report, although the development of all activities and initiatives will be mindful of HDC's target to be carbon neutral by 2030.

13 Other Considerations

- 13.1 There are no direct crime and disorder implications, although it can be anticipated that an increase in personal financial difficulties will lead to an increase in reported crime. The use of all databases and other sources of information will ensure that GDPR and data protection legislation is fully complied with.