

NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET (POLICY AND RESOURCES) SCRUTINY SUB COMMITTEE

18th April 2023

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF PEOPLE AND ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

S REES

Matter for: Information

Wards Affected: All Wards

Report Title – Cost of Living Crisis Update

Purpose of Report

1. To provide the Committee with an update on the council's ongoing response to the cost of living crisis.

Background

2. Prioritising the needs of the most vulnerable living in our communities has always been a key priority for the council and work to support this priority has been threaded through the council's various planning frameworks e.g. corporate planning activities, strategic equality planning activities and employability programmes.
3. In September 2019, the council held a Poverty Symposium to identify opportunities for improving the way that services and support are delivered to people on low incomes across the county borough. A key conclusion was that many levers of poverty are in the hands of the UK Government / Welsh Government.

Unfortunately the output from this event was put on hold whilst the council and partners focussed their efforts on the emergency response to the pandemic.

4. However, during the pandemic, the council and partners were mindful of the further impact the pandemic had on inequalities. Evidence demonstrated the poorest areas experienced the greatest impact both in terms of health and financial impacts. Those who faced the greatest disadvantage prior to the pandemic were hardest hit and as a consequence inequalities across Neath Port Talbot widened.

Addressing these inequalities continues to be a cross-cutting theme across all council planning activities in the short, medium and longer term.

Cost of Living Crisis:

5. Since the pandemic, the inequalities across our communities have been further compounded by the cost of living crisis which has dominated the headlines for over a year.

According to a Public Health Wales (PHW) report, the crisis is a public health emergency, potentially on the same scale as the pandemic.

(<https://research.senedd.wales/research-articles/the-cost-to-life-how-soaring-living-costs-affect-people-s-health-and-wellbeing>).

To help our communities through this crisis, the focus of the council's work to date has been on making sure all Neath Port Talbot residents are aware of the financial help and household support available to them by:

- Sign posting to what help and advice is available;
- Administering the help and support which has been made available;
- Working with partners to see what more we can do recognising there is already a lot going on at the community level and identifying where we could add value.

6. Signposting:

The “Help with the Cost of Living Communications Campaign” has been key in the council’s ongoing response to the cost of living crisis.

This has included:

- A dedicated webpage (www.npt.gov.uk/costoflivinghelp) which is updated on a continuing basis with new information on what support residents could be eligible for to help with the rising goods and energy costs, inflation and cost of living pressures.

During 1st September 2022 to 26th February 2023 the webpage received 32,312 page views, putting it the 12th most viewed webpage on the council’s website.

- Distribution of 15,000 “Help with Cost of Living” leaflets. This included distribution to Food Banks across Neath Port Talbot and to places registered on the Warm Hubs / Spaces Directory by Local Area Co-ordinators.
- Various press releases
- Social media campaign – Has included signposting people to the above webpage, reminders on the Fuel Support Scheme, Food Poverty Grant, and the Warm Spaces Directory, signposting people to energy saving tips on the UK Government’s “Help for Households’ webpage <https://helpforhouseholds.campaign.gov.uk/energy-saving-advice>
- Radio advert campaign to reach those that may not be on social media pointing people to their local library to pick up a help with cost of living leaflet
- WalesOnline advertorial (online)
- South Wales Evening Post advertorial (offline)
- Following the Members Seminar held on 21st October 2022, a commitment was made to produce regular updates on the latest / new information about the support/schemes available to help people with the cost of living. To date six stakeholder updates have been circulated to the Cost of Living and Poverty Prevention Partnership, Members and various council services.

7. Administering Support:

- **Warm Spaces Directory**

The warm spaces directory on the council's website has been developed with multi-agency partners and lists those public spaces or buildings where residents can go to keep warm and safe. There is an interactive map and search function to help people find one.

The directory has had 9,771 pages views between its launch on 12th December 2022 to the 26th February 2023 and 3,932 directory searches.

To support the above, the council is administering the Welsh Government Warm Hub / Spaces Grant which Welsh Government allocated £55,906 to Neath Port Talbot. To date (28.02.23) £34,488 (38 premises) have received monies from the grant to support their warm hubs / spaces.

- **Welsh Government - Food Poverty Grant 2022/2023**

The Welsh Government Food Poverty Grant is a grant to help community groups and organisations tackle food poverty.

The grant was made up of two different funding streams – The Direct Food Support Award and the Household Support Fund. The criteria for both funding streams was very similar and focussed on supporting groups and organisations across Neath Port Talbot that are assisting people with food poverty and insecurity. The two funds together totalled £139,578.00, of which an amount of £5,000.00 was for capital items such as white goods and kitchen equipment.

The grant funding has been administered by the Food Legacy Coordinator and advertised on the council's social media pages and the dedicated webpage which contained all the funding criteria information and application process details.

In total, 33 groups have received funding and £139,569.38 has been allocated so the grant has now been closed.

The majority of groups who applied for the funding were foodbanks and Big Bocs Bwyd Schools, who received approximately £99,017 to help with purchasing food supplies, food hygiene training for volunteers and Fareshare membership fees up to the end of March 2024.

Other beneficiaries ranged from Housing Associations who wished to purchase supermarket food vouchers for their most vulnerable clients, to groups setting up lunch clubs, community growing schemes and cooking on a budget workshops. Funding was also given to Local Area Coordinators to assist their vulnerable clients with supermarket food vouchers. Funding was also used to pay for food for groups, to supplement the Warm Hub / Spaces Grant Funding.

8. Hardship Relief Scheme

Following the allocation of £2m by the previous administration to establish a Hardship Relief Scheme, the council entered into an arrangement with Warm Wales.

In just two weeks the Hardship Relief Scheme received over 700 referrals. The decision was made to temporarily close the Scheme just before Christmas to ensure all those who had been referred could be contacted.

The Scheme re-opened on January 20th 2023 and to date (02.03.2023) has received over 1000 referrals (these are a mix of self-referrals and referrals from third parties). Residents are seeking support with a range of matters including fuel debt, replacement of broken white goods and home repairs.

Alongside this, support is also provided on other issues such as adding vulnerable householders to the Priority Services Register and supporting eligible residents to access capped water tariffs and programmes like the Nest, boiler replacement scheme.

To date (02.03.2023), 400 householders have received direct support from the fund; approximately 300 have received top-up vouchers (funded via the Fuel Bank Foundation but accessed through interest in the fund), some of whom will also have accessed other forms of support; and around 300 are being supported currently with outcomes pending.

To date, (02.03.2023) support has totalled just over £110,000.

Positive responses have been received around the support provided by the Scheme. A monitoring report will be presented to members shortly which will provide up to date information on the number of households / individuals supported by the Scheme, the geographical spread of the support provided, demographic data and a number of case studies demonstrating how the support has helped people across our communities.

9. Claiming Benefits

Over the last year, the Welfare Rights Service have continued to maximise the incomes of people living in Neath Port Talbot through the Welfare Benefits system.

Benefit checks are completed regularly and support is provided with claims for disability benefits such as Attendance Allowance, Personal Independence Payments, Disability Living Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance and Universal Credit.

The service represents people at appeal tribunals where it is felt they should have been given an award but were refused, and have a 95% success rate.

More recently the service has been advising and supporting people to claim the many cost of living intervention schemes to ensure they are receiving everything available to them.

Helping people via the Discretionary Assistance Fund scheme has increased rapidly over the last year with the need to claim Emergency Assistance Payments to tide claimants over until their next benefit payment. Also the Unit has seen an increase in requests for Food Bank Vouchers.

In the year from April 1st 2022 to present the service has supported 2496 people and raised over £6.2 million.

10. Help with Household Bills

Fuel Support Scheme

The council is administering the Welsh Government's Fuel Support Scheme, the aim of which is to reduce the impact of the rising cost of energy and the cost of living crisis.

To date (16.03.2023) we have received 21,970 applications of which 21,970 have been processed with 21,308 paid which amounts to £4,261,600. Of those paid, 15,371 relate to the 16,001 who were targeted at the beginning of the scheme meaning 96% of those targeted have been paid.

Two additional support schemes to assist with rising fuel costs will commence shortly.

- i) **Energy Bills Support Scheme Alternative Funding** (£400) is available to clients who did not qualify for the £400 automatic payment (paid over the course of 6 months from Oct 2022 to March 2023) from energy suppliers, due to claimants not having a direct relationship with an energy supplier.

The scheme is running from 27th Feb 2023 to 31st May 2023.

- ii) **Alternative Fuel Payment (Alternative Fund)** (£200) is available to clients who use alternative fuels, but have no direct relationship with an Electricity supplier (i.e. whereby they would already have received this payment automatically).

The scheme is running from 6th March 2023 to 31st May 2023.

The Council will not be taking applications for these two schemes but will be assisting in making payments to eligible claimants (the application process is via the Gov.UK website/application portal and a designated UK Government call centre).

Cost of Living Support Scheme

The council is administering the Welsh Government's Cost of Living Support Scheme. To date (24.02.2023) the £150 cost of living payment for all eligible households in Neath Port Talbot that fall within council tax bands A to D has totalled £8,197,800 (54,652 customers). In addition, £150 has been paid to 5,742 customers totalling £861,300 under the Discretionary Cost of Living Support Scheme. From the Discretionary Cost of Living Fund £250,000 has been awarded to the Discretionary Housing Payment Fund and £100,000 to food banks.

11. Budget 2023/2024

The 2023/24 revenue budget approved by Council on 2nd March 2023 contained a number of measures which provide additional resources intended to mitigate the impact of the cost of living crisis on our residents. These included:

- A two-year expansion of two welfare benefits advisors in the Welfare Rights Service, helping more residents to maximise their income through benefits advice;
- Further streamlining of internal assessment arrangements – ultimately ensuring that residents are advised of their total entitlement to help and support through a 'tell us once' model of service;
- Improvements in the speed with which we pay micro businesses and SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises);

The support of Digital Services colleagues will be required in order to progress with these proposals. Work will commence shortly to scope the resources required following which a more detailed timeline can be developed.

12. Support for In-Work Poverty

The council is taking actions to support employee financial well-being, including developing a Financial Well-being Strategy, and introducing an Employee Assistance Programme to support the wider well-being of employees, including financial well-being and mental health, recognising the link between the two.

Sharing of information is a key action in our strategy, ensuring employees know how and where to access the support they need. The council has a network of Employee Mental Health Champions, created in partnership with Time to Change Wales, and is rolling out Mental Health First Aid across line managers. Targeted work is also undertaken, so for example, the Welfare Rights Team provided face to face sessions to support employees to understand benefits available and how to apply for them. The nationally agreed pay award in 2022 / 23 increased the pay of our lowest paid employees by 10.5%.

13. Working in Partnership with the Third Sector

The origin of this was NPT Safe and Well which mobilised and oversaw the humanitarian assistance during the pandemic. The work has now been re-focused to support the multi-agency humanitarian response to the cost of living crisis.

This work is also an area of focus for the Public Services Board in the Board's update Well-being Plan. The membership of the group is made up of representatives from across the Council and the third sector. The Group is co-chaired by Karen Jones, Chief Executive, Neath Port Talbot Council and Gaynor Richards, Director of CVS.

On the 16th March 2023, the Group convened a Cost of Living / Poverty Prevention Workshop to reflect on what has been achieved to date, highlight what issues are being seen across communities in Neath Port Talbot and to agree what interventions are required to be taken next to tackle those issues.

The workshop was attended by members of the Cost of Living and Poverty Prevention Partnership and the Third Sector Strategic Forum.

An output report from the workshop has been produced and is being considered by the Steering Group on April 6th 2023. New areas of focus will include debt, mental health and housing and the development of a longer term approach to addressing the determinants of poverty.

14. UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF)

On 19th January, Cabinet approved the five Neath Port Talbot strategic “anchor” projects to be funded by the Neath Port Talbot UKSPF allocation:

- Place
- Valleys and Villages
- Sustainable Communities
- Enhanced Business Support for Growth & Innovation
- Employability

Within the Sustainable Communities anchor project there are a number of interventions which will provide an additional resource to accelerate the work to support the needs of our communities which includes:

- The Sustainable Communities Growth Fund (SCGF) which aims to increase support offered within the communities of Neath Port Talbot, addressing areas of need. Grant value will be £1 million over a two year period. The fund will be flexible, with an initial focus on poverty, including the cost of living crisis, transport, equalities, youth activity and community safety
- Poverty Coordination – The Poverty coordination activity will provide resource to coordinate services across the county borough to enhance support for households and gain intelligence about what additional support is needed to support our communities to inform the development of a Poverty Plan. Resource will also be provided to further utilise the Low Income Family Tracker (LIFT) database which enables us to identify people who may not be accessing the benefits they could be entitled too.

Members may wish to consider further scrutiny activity which could take the form of:

- Requesting further updates on the work the council and external organisations are doing in partnership to mitigate the impact of the cost of living crisis across our communities.

Financial Appraisal

15. There are no specific financial consequences arising from this report as it is for noting only. The report does contain a significant amount of financial information and Members are encouraged to seek further information from the officer contact if there are any further clarifications required.

Integrated Impact Assessment

16. An Integrated Impact Assessment is not required for this report.

Valleys Communities Impact

17. The advice, support and assistance set out in this report has been made available across all communities in Neath Port Talbot.

Workforce Impact

18. No impact.

Legal Impact

19. No impact.

Risk Management

20. No impact.

Consultation

21. There is no requirement for external consultation on this item.

Recommendation

22. It is recommended the Sub Committee note the update provided within the report.

Officer Contact

Huw Jones, Chief Finance Officer

Email: h.jones@npt.gov.uk

Sheenagh Rees, Head of People & Organisational Development

Email: s.rees5@npt.gov.uk

Caryn Furlow-Harris, Strategic Manager – Policy & Executive Support

Email: c.furlow@npt.gov.uk

Angeline Spooner-Cleverly

Employability, Skills & poverty Co-ordinator

Email: a.spooner-cleverly@npt.gov.uk

Sarah Waite, Principal Officer, Community Support Services and Early Intervention & Prevention

Email: s.waite@npt.gov.uk

Ann Hinder, Principal Officer

Email: a.hinder@npt.gov.uk

Stuart Mason, Principal Benefits Officer

Email: s.c.mason@npt.gov.uk

Allison Southall, Directorate Support Officer

Email: a.southall@npt.gov.uk

Liam Hedges, Corporate Communications Business Partner

Email: l.hedges@npt.gov.uk