

Committee: Community and Children's Services	Dated: 1 November 2023
Subject: Cost of Living Response Update	Public
Which outcomes in the City Corporation's Corporate Plan does this proposal aim to impact directly?	2, 3, 4
Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?	N
If so, how much?	£
What is the source of Funding?	N/A
Has this Funding Source been agreed with the Chamberlain's Department?	N/A
Report of: Judith Finlay, Executive Director of Community and Children's Services.	For Information
Report author: Hannah Dobbin, Strategy and Projects Officer, Department for Community and Children's Services.	

Summary

This report updates the Committee on the City of London Corporation's (City Corporation) response to the cost-of-living crisis and Winter 2022-23, and plans for Winter 2023-24.

Recommendation

Members are asked to:

- Note the report.

Main Report

Background

1. In September 2022, Members were provided with an update report on how the City Corporation is responding to the cost-of-living pressures faced by residents.
2. The report set out actions under a number of priorities: communications to promote support provision; targeting financial assistance; winter warmth; tackling food poverty; increasing income from employment; and wellbeing.
3. These actions seek to mitigate the pressures some households face – supplementing government support and utilising government funding provided to help struggling households.
4. This paper provides Members with an update on how the City Corporation continues to respond to the cost-of-living pressures on residents.

5. The delivery and co-ordination of action is led by a Cost-of-Living Steering Group consisting of departmental and partner organisation representatives.

Update

Household Support Fund

6. In October 2021, Government made funding available to local authorities via the Household Support Fund (HSF). The expectation was that it should primarily be used to support households in the most need particularly those including children and pensioners who would otherwise struggle with energy bills, food and water bills.
7. The City Corporation has taken the view that individuals do not have to be in receipt of a means-tested benefit to get help from the HSF. Support can be accessed through City Advice as well as teams in the Department for Community and Children's Services (DCCS).
8. The HSF is administered by the City Corporation's Benefits Team in the Chamberlain's Department. This enables it to be targeted in line with data and intelligence held by that team. The benefits team works in partnership with teams in the DCCS to proactively identify those most in need.
9. Help is provided in the following ways: giving food vouchers to organisations such as City Advice and Age UK City of London to distribute; directly paying utility bills for those who are struggling; and providing essential items to help people reduce their fuel costs such as curtains. There is an online application form embedded in the Emergency Support Scheme to help people access food and fuel vouchers.
10. The City Corporation received £63,000 for the period 1 April 2022 to 30 September 2022 as part of the second round of funding (HSF2). Reporting for this period shows that 53 households with children, 184 households with pensioners and 141 'other' households were awarded support through HSF2.
11. The third round of HSF (HSF3) made £63,000 available for the period October 2022 to March 2023. The fourth round (HSF4) is allocated for the whole 2023/24 financial year and anticipated spend is £126,161.

Emergency support scheme

12. The 'emergency support scheme' (ESS) aims to support and assist those experiencing a crisis or an emergency, including families and individuals under exceptional pressure.
13. Those supported must be 16 years old or over and live in the City of London, or have recently been housed by the City Corporation on one of our estates. They must also be in receipt of certain benefits, such as Universal Credit, Housing Benefit, Pension Credits or Jobseekers Allowance.
14. The budget for ESS is £25,000 per financial year including admin costs as well as the awards. The majority of spend is on household goods, e.g. furniture and white

goods, and often supports people who are moving into a property from temporary accommodation. Support also includes high street vouchers, food vouchers and fuel payments for those on pre-paid meters.

Council Tax Reduction Scheme

15. The City Corporation continues to award Council Tax Reduction Support (CTRS) up to 100% of a claimants Council Tax liability. Entitlement to council tax reduction is means tested and worked out according to personal circumstances, household income and capital and other factors.

16. In September 2023, there were 93 pensioner households, and 140 working age households in receipt of this benefit in the Square Mile.

Discretionary Housing Payments

17. The government has made this funding available to support households in receipt of Housing Benefit or Universal Credit housing costs who have a shortfall in their rent and need additional financial support to make up this shortfall. Such shortfalls can be because of benefit caps, Local Housing Allowance restrictions or other pressures.

School clothing grant

18. The City Corporation reviewed its School Clothing Grant Policy in January 2023 following authorisation by the Community and Children's Services Committee. In a bid to reach a wider group of families, the policy was changed from providing assistance to those transitioning into reception or year 7 to families with children in any year group within a maintained setting. The amount of grant available to parents was raised from £150 to £160 per secondary pupil and from £50 to £60 per primary pupil. This is a contribution toward the total cost of a school uniform and will not necessarily cover the whole cost.

19. Over the course of the 2022/23 academic year, the numbers applying for a school clothing grant tripled from 9 to 28. 17 children benefitted from the grant compared to eight during the 2021/22 academic year, which is over a 100% increase.

20. So far, in preparation for the current 2023/24 academic year, the City Corporation has received 21 school clothing grant applications, 16 of which have been successful. It is anticipated that this figure will rise following further promotion of the revised policy.

Holiday Activity and Food programme

21. The Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme is a government initiative that aims to provide healthy food and enriching activities during the school holidays, primarily to children and young people aged 5 to 16 who are eligible for benefits related free school meals. It is funded by the Department for Education.

22. 47 individual children and young people were engaged during the four days of the HAF programme. 34 of these were primary aged and eligible for free school meals, and 11 were secondary aged and eligible for free school meals. The remaining two children were primary aged. The popularity of the sessions was beyond expectations. All the children enjoyed access to activities and lunch. The programme received positive feedback from parents and service users alike.
23. The current HAF contract with Society Links runs from 1 March 2023 to 31 December 2023 (plus two one-year optional extensions).

Winter packs

24. 75 winter packs were distributed to people known to Adult Social Care (ASC) containing items and information to keep them warm during the cold weather and cost of living crisis. Packs included a thermal blanket, thermal socks and hat, hand warmers, hot water bottle (no longer included as standard as risk of scolding for some people) and a wall thermometer.
25. Libraries were given an additional 10 packs to distribute and the Housing team 25 packs. ASC also replaced fan heaters and other old, potentially dangerous heaters with more cost effective and safe oil-filled radiators for those known to have care and support needs.
26. The packs were revised for the hot weather over the summer as this can also present challenges to people with care and support needs. The cold weather packs will be revisited for Winter 2023-24.

Awareness raising

27. There has been extensive awareness raising through the Department of Community and Children's Services' communication channels and providers.
- Fortnightly communications update on all cost-of-living support services.
 - Cost-of-Living Flyer – promoting resources and support - sent to all households in the City of London.
 - Flyer for 'Get Online Week' to include signposting to cost of living support.
 - 2 x press releases (Warm Spaces Funding, winter vaccinations and support with cost of living).
 - 4 x City Advice outreach events (2 x Golden Lane and 2 x Portsoken).
 - City Advice footer added to rent account letters to City tenants.
 - City Advice 'How to cope with the Cost of Living Crisis Part 1' information sheet in May 2023.
 - Wraparound letter going into City Matters (7 December) which is intended as a reminder of the activity and campaigns around winter safety.
 - Web page ([Getting help with the cost of living - City of London](#)) created and promoted on front page of City website.
 - Libraries offer of computers and basic IT support added to resources and promoted.
 - Public access terminals to be provided in both community centres from January utilising funding from City and Hackney Health and Care Board (C&HHCB).

- Make Every Contact Count (MECC) training promoted to all front-line services and increased uptake of training by City Corporation staff.
- Green Doctor service promotion.
- Webinar training delivered by the Green Doctor service for City Corporation and commissioned service staff was provided in March 2023. The training included:
 - What is Fuel Poverty?
 - The actual energy crisis.
 - How the free energy consultations work.
 - Who could benefit from the service.
 - How to refer individual.

Tackling food poverty

28. The HSF has been deployed to provide direct help with food costs, and indirect support by providing support to other household costs such as utility bills. Further support has been provided through the HAF programme to deliver food and activity to children eligible from term time free school meals.
29. Family Action runs the Food Pantry based at Artizan Library in the City of London. The Pantry is grant funded and opened at the end of August 2023. It is currently only taking referrals from services such as City Connections, City Corporation social care and City of London libraries, but no-one would be turned away. Members pay £1 per family to join and then you can purchase a bag of food worth approximately £10-£15 for just £4. You must live or work within approximately 15 minutes of a club to become a member. The Pantry is open once a week and there are currently 30 members signed-up. 18 members attended the club run on 5 October 2023 which generated £198 worth of financial savings for members.
30. St Luke's Community Centre – located just north of the City – provides a range of food support services. It operates a food hub and has just launched a food co-operative, and a food pantry is also proposed. The food hub provides food support to residents living in St Luke's area of benefit – which in the City of London includes the Golden Lane estate - who are on a low income and in financial difficulty. There are currently no fees for the Food Hub, however, the proposed alternative Food Pantry model will be based on a weekly fee in order to meet anticipated greater needs. St Luke's accepts referral and individual referrals and supports those meeting its criteria.

Winter warmth

31. As part of its wider action plan, the City Corporation developed a 'Warm winter welcome' campaign. This provided a directory of warm spaces and events – such as libraires, community centres and activities in cultural and faith spaces in the Square Mile.

32. The City Corporation awarded grants to three agencies to provide support Winter 2022-23:

- Age UK City of London was awarded £2,000 to provide warm spaces and a friendly welcome in the City's community spaces. 43 winter warm hub sessions were delivered between December 2022 and March 2023. 53 people benefited from the grant, 55% were aged 75 years old and over, 45% were 65-74 years old and 85% were White. However, funds had to be redirected to wider community outreach activities due to lack of uptake.
- Bankside Open Spaces Trust (BOST) was awarded £2,000 to provide a warm hub for residents on Wednesdays for 12 weeks January to March 2023. 44 people benefited from the grant; 53% of those were aged between 45 and 64 and 47% were mixed/multiple ethnic groups.
- The Carers Centre was awarded £2,000 to provide a warm space for carers and those they care for in the City of London, providing social interaction, healthy refreshments and wellbeing activities.

33. There are currently no plans to re-issue the grants this Winter.

34. All three libraries in the City of London - Barbican, Artizan Street and Shoe Lane - signed-up as official warm welcome spaces. Activities across the libraries included:

- Barbican – 'Warm Wednesdays' with a free tea and coffee station, mindful colouring and games which ran for approximately four months. Green Doctors pop-up advice stand and 'Warm Library' events such as art group which averaged around 15 people per week and memory group which averaged around 10 per week.
- Artizan Street – tea and coffee with books and chat averaged three people per week and an Age UK Warm Up (tea, biscuits and board games) averaged around two people per week. Posters and leaflets promoting Green Doctors and City Advice targeted at cost of living issues.
- Shoe Lane – display of cost of living related books and leaflets, Green Doctors pop-up advice stand and tea, coffee and biscuits at every adult event. Dragon Café in the City workshops ran from January to May 2023 and were attended by 423 people, and talks and events held during the same period were attended by 174 people.
- Junior library activities at all three libraries included colouring and toy sessions and Shoe Lane Library ran 'Warm Tuesdays' offering puzzles, Lego and Duplo to families and children.

35. Planning is underway for warm libraries activity this winter, it is thought that this will likely be similar to last winter but the formal plan has not yet been agreed.

Increased access to computers at libraries

36. City Corporation lending libraries offer free use of computers, Wi-Fi, scanning and low cost printing/photocopying to make sure everyone has equal access to the support that is available to them. Staff will also assist with creating email accounts and can provide assistance with form filling. Membership is not necessary.

Green Doctors

37. The City Corporation has commissioned Groundwork London to provide a Green Doctor (energy adviser) service to help people stay warmer and use less energy. Any City of London resident is eligible for the free service being funded by City and Hackney Health and Care Board.
38. 12 visits to residents took place between January to, and including, September 2023. Savings to residents have predominantly been achieved by changes to behaviour and costs saved range from £22.33 to £500.07.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

Strategic implications

39. The poverty reduction action plan aligns to the commitments of the Corporate Plan, Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy, and Children and Young People Plan.

Corporate implications

40. This piece of work aligns with and will support the following outcomes of the Corporate Plan:

Contribute to a flourishing society

2. People enjoy good health and wellbeing
3. People have equal opportunities to enrich their lives and reach their full potential
4. Communities are cohesive and have the facilities they need

Financial implications

41. Current activity is being funded through resources made available from government and in principle funding from the City & Hackney Health and Care Board. Further initiatives may require additional funding to be identified but given the pressures on departmental and corporate finances cannot be guaranteed.

Resource implications

42. Officers from the Chamberlains Department and DCCS have absorbed this work within existing capacity. It may be that further growth in activity would require dedicated resource.

Legal implications

43. None

Risk implications

44. None

Equalities implications

45. Targeted action on reducing poverty in the City of London will work towards reducing health and wellbeing, and income inequality across the square mile. Poverty disproportionately impacts those with protected characteristics.

Climate implications

46. None

Security implications

47. None

Conclusion

48. The City Corporation has taken action to support the residents impacted by the cost-of-living crisis. A multi-agency steering group was set up in Autumn 2022 to oversee the implementation of an action plan and maximise the impact that can be delivered through the services offered and funding available. The steering group will reconvene on 30 October to assess current activity and concerns or new demand going into this Winter. This will inform decision making around activity for Winter 2023-24.

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