



Council name	<b>COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL</b>
Name and date of Committee	<b>CABINET – 7 NOVEMBER 2022</b> <b>COUNCIL – 16 NOVEMBER 2022</b>
Report Number	<b>AGENDA ITEM 7</b>
Subject	<b>RESPONSE TO WARM PLACES MOTION AND FUNDING TO SUPPORT COST OF LIVING CRISIS</b>
Wards affected	ALL
Accountable member	Cllr Jenny Forde - Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing Email: <a href="mailto:jenny.forde@cotswold.gov.uk">jenny.forde@cotswold.gov.uk</a>
Accountable officer	Claire Locke Group Manager Tel: 01285 623427 Email: <a href="mailto:claire.locke@publicagroup.uk">claire.locke@publicagroup.uk</a>
Summary/Purpose	To set out how the Council is responding to the Cost of Living and Warm Places Motions and to make recommendations for funding allocations for specific initiatives.
Annexes	None
Recommendation(s)	That Cabinet resolves to: (a) Note the response to the Cost of Living and Warm Places Motion detailed in this report and, (b) Recommendation to Council to agree to allocate match funding of £20,000 for the Council Tax Hardship Fund from the balance of the Covid-19 Hardship Fund earmarked reserve, and, (c) Recommendation to Council to agree to allocate £40,000 from the Council Priorities Fund towards establishing a Food Network.
Corporate priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Delivering our services to the highest standards</li><li>● Responding to the challenges presented by the climate crisis</li><li>● Helping residents and communities access the support they need for good health and wellbeing</li></ul>



Key Decision	NO
Exempt	NO
Consultees/ Consultation	Chief Finance Officer Monitoring Officer Leader (Chair of Cost of Living Steering Group) Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing

## 1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1. At its meeting in July Council agreed a Motion relating to the Cost of Living Crisis, agreeing to lobby Government for action and to determine how additional support should be provided to those in need, and where the funds could be found to enable it to be delivered. The Council also agreed to "... set up a cross party working group in response to the motion which would report back, in advance of the budget setting process, with recommendations that Council could take to help address the cost of living crisis."
- 1.2. In September Council agreed a Motion, part of which required a cross party group be set up urgently to implement 'public warm places' and also to look at other ways to help our Cotswold residents most negatively impacted by unaffordable heating and living costs.
- 1.3. A Member led cross party Cost of Living Crisis steering group has been formed and held its first meeting on 3rd October. The Group is meeting every 2 - 3 weeks to oversee progress on assessing what additional support the Council could offer to residents in relation to coping with the Cost of Living Crisis.
- 1.4. The Council already assists many residents with advice and support on matters like housing and homelessness, benefits and Council Tax. The Communities team also engages with many voluntary sector and community groups, working together to provide valuable support tailored to local needs.

## 2. ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

### 2.1 Communications

With a large amount of advice and support already available from both statutory bodies, charitable organisations and community groups, a key focus has been on ensuring these offers are communicated clearly to residents, so they know what support is available and where and



how to access it. The Council started a campaign in July to highlight support available to residents and this has been developed over recent months.

As part of the campaign the Council has initiated a number of things:

- A website has been set up which provides a series of links to the support available covering everything from benefits advice, food and energy costs, through to help with childcare costs. The webpage also suggests ways people can help support others. <https://www.cotswold.gov.uk/council-tax-and-benefits/help-if-you-re-struggling-with-the-cost-of-living/>
- A leaflet has also been produced and is being distributed via Council officers and Voluntary Sector partners.
- Town and Parish Councils were briefed at a recent Town and Parish Forum on the support being offered and where to signpost residents for assistance.
- The council is posting via all its digital channels including social media and the e-newsletter which now includes a specific cost of living section
- Working with local media to highlight support available
- A double page spread has been included in the next edition of Cotswold News due to go to all households in early November to reach those not able to access digital channels, setting out what services and support the Council is offering and how to access them. (if this is what has been done)
- All Councillors have been informed of the campaign and have been encouraged to support it

There is a Warm and Welcome network which supports organisations to open their doors and provide a warm welcome to those struggling to heat their homes this winter. Organisations can receive guidance and register their space and residents can find spaces near them via the website [www.warmwelcome.uk](http://www.warmwelcome.uk) The Council will be promoting this network as well as promoting other community based support, highlighted later in this report.

## 2.2 Housing and Homelessness prevention

The Council's Housing and Revenues and Benefits teams continue to offer support to residents who may be struggling to pay their rent. It is likely that there will be an increase in the number of people at risk of becoming homeless, as people struggle to afford housing and other living expenses. Advice is provided on issues including suitability and affordability of accommodation including applying for affordable housing via HomeseekerPlus, liaising with landlords, resolving family breakdown issues and domestic abuse. In some circumstances financial support can be offered through the Homeless Prevention Fund or Discretionary Housing payments to reduce rent arrears. Whilst support is offered to those who are struggling to pay their Council Tax, the Council does not currently have a Hardship Fund,



which could be used to provide one-off support in specific financial circumstances. This has been identified by the Member Steering Group as a specific area of need and it is therefore recommended that £20,000 be allocated ( from the Covid-19 Hardship fund earmarked reserve) to create a 'Council Tax Hardship fund'. The County Council have agreed to match fund any allocation, creating a bigger funding pool for Cotswold residents.

### 2.3 Community Support

The Council continues to work with its Voluntary Sector partners and the many community groups that provide essential support at a local level. This support includes facilitating access to services for people who may be struggling financially, have physical or mental health conditions or feel isolated. There are a wide range of activities delivered at a local level which help address some of these issues such as coffee mornings, activity based events like Knit and Natter and Family Fun days.

However, there is an opportunity to further increase community resilience during the current cost of living crisis and beyond through seedcorn funding. A one-off '**Cotswold Connected Community and Food Programme**' has therefore been developed which complements the Council's 'Crowdfund Cotswold' initiative and forms part of our asset based community development approach. It aims to flexibly support initiatives that can be realised in the near future to increase community resilience during the current cost of living crisis and beyond. The intention of the programme is that the work and funding builds on the assets that are found in the community and mobilises individuals, associations, and institutions to come together to realise and develop their strengths.

Funding will be allocated to projects which are community-led, self-sustaining by the communities themselves and reflect a true partnership approach.

Examples for projects include:

- Community Food projects such as Community Fridges/larders/pantries
- Community Hubs
- Friendship/Talking Café's
- Intergenerational projects
- Community activities aiming to connect people
- Community transport
- Development of Community Partnerships

Hence, the 'Cotswold Connected Community and Food Programme' aims to create 'welcoming spaces' that provide holistic and community minded activities without the stigma of addressing the 'most vulnerable' and solely providing a warm space. It is hoped that this approach leads to community projects that leave a meaningful legacy and that will increase



community resilience in the longer term, whilst also providing warm places for those that need it.

This programme is open to not-for-profit Voluntary and Community Sector organisations and Social Enterprises. The Council would also like to hear from individuals or a small non-constituted group with a great idea, although cannot be awarded directly to them. Private businesses, sole traders or statutory organisations are not eligible.

Existing external funding of £75,000 which the Council receives for community based activity has been identified and the Steering Group has agreed to ringfence the funding for this project.

### **Food Network**

Residents can receive free food and other essential household supplies from the several Food Banks located within the district. However, there are other forms of provision that can complement food bank services and add a great deal of value to communities.

Community larders/pantries and fridges provide access to food at low or no cost through access to surplus groceries and therefore have the added benefit of tackling the growing issue of food waste. They differ from food banks which offer emergency food to people in crisis through a referral system. Community fridges and larders offer fresh or frozen food that may be locally grown, shop produce nearing its sell by date or home cooked meals that people have prepared. Larders enable people to choose what they would like and make a donation for what they take, based on what they can afford. This is a sustainable way to provide good quality food to people at hyperlocal level.

Community kitchens or cooking initiatives bring people together to cook and eat. These initiatives not only offer a healthy cooked meal but company and conversation. The Community Interest Company, the Long Table in Stroud ([thelongtableonline.com](http://thelongtableonline.com)) is a very successful example of a community kitchen which aimed to tackle food waste and isolation. The Council is already working with the Long Table to encourage communities to host cheerful and good quality 'community feasts' during Christmas time.

There are already some community groups keen to increase the food based activities in their area. The Council is keen to support the establishment of a food Network, offering a range of opportunities such as Larders, Community Fridges and Community kitchens to support local people. Some funding would help the creation of this network and is likely to help lever in additional Crowdfund Cotswold or charity funding.

### **2.4 Tackling Financial Hardship**

The Member Steering Group is liaising with the Citizens Advice Bureau and there is a shared concern regarding those residents who may sit just outside the benefits system and are



therefore not eligible for additional payments such as the £650 cost of living payment. Further work is needed to understand the income band this may cover, the number of households affected and the potential cost involved in providing some discretionary assistance. As this is a recently identified issue the financial implications are not included in this report but may be the subject of a future report.

#### **4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 The suggested allocation for the Council Tax Hardship fund is £20,000. This will be funded from the balance of the Covid19 - Hardship Fund earmarked reserve. With match funding from the County Council this would provide £40,000 to help support those that meet certain criteria and cannot afford to pay their Council Tax.
- 4.2 It is recommended that funding of £40,000 is allocated to support the establishment of a Food Network. There is no budget available for this funding and the allocation will need to be funded from the Council Priorities Fund.
- 4.3 Existing external funding of £75,000 which the Council receives for community based activity has been identified and earmarked for the 'Cotswold Connected Community and Food Programme' project.
- 4.4 Funding for the above initiatives would be included as part of the budget setting process for 2023/24 with a report to Council in February 2023.

#### **5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 The Council undertakes a number of statutory services which will support people through the Cost of Living Crisis, these include benefit payments and advice on homelessness prevention. However, the additional support being offered, which is set out within this report is discretionary.

#### **6. RISK ASSESSMENT**

- 6.1 There is a risk the funding allocated for the Hardship fund is insufficient to meet demand or that households continue to need support, as the fund does not resolve financial issues, it provides a one-off relief to households struggling to pay their bills.

#### **7. EQUALITIES IMPACT**

- 7.1 The support offered through the cost of living crisis is targeted at any one in need. The Hardship fund would assist those in financial difficulty who could be anyone of any age, if they are liable for Council Tax payments and are in receipt of Council Tax Support. The Cotswold Connected Community and Food Programme would benefit a wide range of residents, across



different ages and to meet different needs. The programme is focussed on promoting equality and diversity with people caring for each other and sharing resources, regardless of background. The Food Network would not only assist those who may struggle to afford food but would also bring communities together and reduce food waste. Anyone irrespective of age or financial standing, could play a part in this and benefit from the inclusivity it creates.

## **8. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 8.1 The Community based activity advocated in this report delivers support at a local level. This reduces the need for people to travel outside the immediate area in which they live. This is particularly important as many of the Cotswolds rural communities have limited access to public transport and would therefore be reliant on car use.
- 8.2 The Food Network would reduce food waste, promoting locally grown food, use of shop produce nearing its sell by date and donation of excess meals cooked at home.

## **9. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

- 9.1 The Council could decide not to allocate funding for the initiatives described in this report.

## **10. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 10.1 None

(END)