

Report To:	OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Date:	16 FEBRUARY 2023
Heading:	SCRUTINY REVIEW: COST OF LIVING
Executive Lead Member:	NOT APPLICABLE
Ward/s:	ALL
Key Decision:	NO
Subject to Call-In:	NO

Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to present Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with the deferred report from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting in December 2022. Additionally, this report provides details of the State of Ashfield Debate centred on the cost of living crisis held in December 2022, along with the fifteen steps agreed at that meeting.

Recommendation(s)

Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members are recommended to:

- a. Note the information contained within the report.
- b. Consider next steps for the Scrutiny Review: Cost of Living.

Reasons for Recommendation(s)

Cost of Living was added to the scrutiny work programme 2022/23 by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in June 2022. Furthermore, a cost of living emergency has been declared by Council and a State of Ashfield Debate took place focused on the key issues arising from the cost of living crisis.

Alternative Options Considered

No alternative options have been considered at this stage of the review. Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members will consider all work being undertaken across the Council in efforts to mitigate the impacts of the cost of living crisis and avoid duplication of work.

Detailed Information

STATE OF ASHFIELD DEBATE – DECEMBER 2022

A State of Ashfield Debate was held on Thursday 8 December 2022. Members welcomed attendance from representatives across the voluntary sector to discuss the cost of living crisis, these included:

- Kathryn Stacey and Janis Abraham – Citizens' Advice Ashfield
- Angie Peppard and Matt Pike – Our Centre
- Trevor Clay and Yvonne Campbell – Under One Roof Community Resource Centre
- Dave Williams – Department for Work and Pensions
- Teresa Jackson – Ashfield Voluntary Action
- Diane Carter, Katie Jordan, and Paula Longden - Mid Nottinghamshire Place Based Partnership

The Chairman explained to Members that the main purpose of the meeting was to enable the leader and his Cabinet colleagues to gather information on the issues and matters which were of concern to Members and which could be considered as part of the preparations for business planning and the proposals for the Council's budget and policy framework.

Members listened to various presentations delivered by attendees and took the opportunity to undertake a question and answer session for the rest of the meeting.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Leader of the Council presented the following fifteen steps the Council will be taking to assist the residents of Ashfield through the cost of living crisis:

RESOLVED

that the Council formally approves the following 15 practical steps to assist the residents of Ashfield through the current cost of living crisis:-

1. Utilise leisure centres as community living hubs for residents to access a warm energy room (including use of electricity charging and Wi-Fi for use of mobile phones/laptops). Explore options for leisure centre showers to be used for free by our residents.
2. Explore the use of energy rooms at Council buildings.
3. Promote to residents local businesses and voluntary and community organisations which offer warm spaces to residents who cannot afford to heat their homes.
4. Maintain a 100% Council Tax Support Scheme for residents to March 2024.
5. Continue to maintain a cost-of-living hub on the Ashfield District Council website which gives useful information to residents, including signposting residents and businesses to benefits, Council Tax and housing support, Council services support, support for businesses, money, bills and debt support, health and wellbeing support and support from other organisations.
6. Promote help with the cost of living to residents who may not be able to access online information. Utilise Ashfield Matters as a tool to provide timely, up to date information on how residents can access support.

7. Explore options to waive charges to rent rooms to any voluntary organisations who provide help to residents through cost-of-living activities.
8. Support the voluntary sector to secure any available funding which may be able to help residents with the cost of living. Continue to lobby for fairer funding from the Government to continue to provide critical services for residents.
9. Continue to provide money management advice offering free financial health checks and work with the NHS to provide advice and help on healthy eating on a budget.
10. Share and promote the food support locations in Ashfield with residents to support them with feeding their families from organisations such as food banks and food share schemes.
11. Our Housing Teams are available to assist tenants with money management advice to help with daily costs and maximise benefits. Our teams can also ensure your insulation in a Council property is at the appropriate level and external drafts dealt with.
12. Continue successful Spring Clean events including giving residents one free bulky waste collection to save on disposal costs.
13. Work with partners such as the DWP on holding Cost of Living Zones to ensure residents can access all the support and benefits to which they are entitled.
14. The Council will continue to provide 2 hours free parking (this financial year) to encourage residents to shop locally and cut their fuel bills.
15. Continue implementing the Council's successful play park strategy offering free state of art play facilities for families across Ashfield.

Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, in line with the Scrutiny Review: Cost of Living, are asked to consider the fifteen steps above and the impact they will have on assisting residents, businesses, and community groups in Ashfield through the cost of living crisis.

DEFERRED REPORT FROM OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – DECEMBER 2022

At the previous meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in December 2022, Members were presented with a report providing further requested information relating to the Scrutiny Review: Cost of Living. At the meeting, due to limited attendance, the Chairman advised those present that he would be deferring the item to the February 2023 meeting of the Committee.

Please see below details of the Scrutiny Review: Cost of Living report presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in December 2022, as deferred.

Fuel Poverty and Warm Hubs

The End Fuel Poverty Coalition is a broad coalition of anti-poverty, environmental, health, and housing campaigners, charities, local authorities, trade unions, and consumer organisations. The Coalition defines fuel poverty as the condition by which a household is unable to afford to heat (or

cool) their home to an adequate temperature. Fuel poverty is caused by low income, high fuel prices, poor energy efficiency, unaffordable housing prices, and poor quality private rental housing.¹

In August 2022, the Child Poverty Action Group, a group that works on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty, published fuel poverty estimates for the United Kingdom. The analysis estimates that by January 2023, over half of households in the UK (15 million) will be in fuel poverty – spending over 10 per cent of net income on fuel. These households will on average be spending £37.51 above the 10 per cent threshold. Over 80 per cent of large families, lone parents, and pensioner couples will be in fuel poverty.²

At the previous meeting of the Committee, Members discussed ‘Warm Hubs’ resolving that it be ascertained as to whether the Council is utilising buildings and/or preparing any events over the winter to provide warm, safe places for people. Warm Hubs are intended as places in local communities where people can find a safe, accessible, and warm environment during the day to help reduce the cost of heating their own homes and to help those facing extreme fuel poverty through the winter.

Following this, the Council’s Health and Wellbeing Team have provided information regarding efforts to organise and establish Warm Hubs in Ashfield. At an Ashfield Community Development Group meeting in September 2022, attendees representing organisations were asked to think about support they could offer in establishing Warm Hubs amidst the rising cost of living.

Interested organisations were asked to register for the Warm Welcome Campaign and notify the Council of intentions to set up Warm Hubs so the information could be shared. The Warm Welcome Campaign website includes a feature where people can find a space in their local area and details of the facilities on offer.

Information for Council Employees

At the previous meeting, Members learned of work being undertaken internally by the Council to understand the impact of the cost of living crisis on employees. Members wished to understand what information had been made available to employees to provide support throughout the cost of living crisis and the many issues associated.

A Cost of Living Helpful Information page has been established on the internal website for Council employees. The page features various links where employees can access financial information, energy/utility help, unions, and additional support such as confidential support services for anyone struggling to cope.

Furthermore, Aspiring Leaders within the Council have recently asked employees to take part in a short survey relating to the cost of living crisis. 134 employees took part in the survey with the results showing that 122 of responders feel they will be worse off.

Cost of Living Hub

At the previous meeting of the Committee, Members discussed the importance of the Council acting as an information hub for residents and requested further information on what dedicated pages are currently available on the Council’s website offering support, signposting, and guidance to residents seeking help and advice with a wide array of issues relating to the cost of living crisis.

¹ End Fuel Poverty Coalition, *About Fuel Poverty*, September 2022.

² Johnathan Bradshaw and Antonia Keung, *Fuel Poverty: Updated Estimates for the UK*, Child Poverty Action Group/Social Policy Research Unit – The University of York, 4 August 2022.

A cost of living support hub has been established on the Council's website. The hub is featured prominently on the main page of the website and features numerous pages with key information and links to help residents and businesses during the cost of living issues. This includes links to information on:

- Benefits, Council Tax, and Housing Support
- Council Services Support
- Support for Businesses
- Money, Bills, and Debt Support
- Health and Wellbeing Support
- Support from Other Organisations

The page also links to the Government's cost of living factsheet updated in June 2022. The factsheet provides information and advice on:

- Energy bills support scheme information
- Cost of Living payment for people on means tested benefits
- Pensioner Cost of Living payment
- Disability Cost of Living Payment
- Household support fund

A further link is also included to the Cost of Living: Support in Ashfield Directory produced by Ashfield Voluntary Action. The directory includes information for many organisations throughout Ashfield that are offering an array of support such as:

- Food banks, food clubs, and other food related support
- Money, debt advice, benefits checks, and other financial support
- Mental health support
- Children and family support
- Energy and fuel support
- Housing
- Domestic abuse
- Useful contacts/links

A 'Feeding Ashfield' page has also been established on the Council's website. Feeding Ashfield is a network of local food banks, food clubs, allotments, and other organisations working collaboratively with the aim of providing improved access to food and educational opportunities throughout the District.

The Feeding Ashfield page provides details of services available such as food banks and food clubs and features an interactive map to find the locations of food banks, food clubs, and community allotments in Ashfield.

Implications

Corporate Plan:

The cost of living crisis has many implications for all key priorities set out by the Council within the Corporate Plan 2019 – 2023. Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members will use the priorities within the Corporate Plan to understand to understand how the Council should respond to the crisis going forward.

Legal:

There are no direct legal implications resulting from the recommendations within this report.

Finance:

There are no direct financial implications resulting from the recommendations within this report.

Budget Area	Implication
General Fund – Revenue Budget	None.
General Fund – Capital Programme	
Housing Revenue Account – Revenue Budget	
Housing Revenue Account – Capital Programme	

Risk:

Risk	Mitigation
The cost of living crisis is an issue of key priority for the Council following the declaration of a cost of living emergency and the impacts to many aspects of the Council's service delivery.	The Council is using many different forums to understand the key issues caused by the cost of living crisis such as Overview and Scrutiny, an organised State of Ashfield Debate, and internal working groups.

Human Resources:

There are no direct human resources implications resulting from the recommendations within this report.

Environmental/Sustainability:

There are no direct environmental or sustainability implications resulting from the recommendations within this report.

Equalities:

There are no direct equalities implications resulting from the recommendations within this report.

Other Implications:

None.

Reason(s) for Urgency

None.

Reason(s) for Exemption

None.

Background Papers

None.

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