

Birmingham City Council

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

13 October 2023



Subject: Birmingham City Council Cost of Living Programme

Report of: Richard Brooks, Director of Strategy, Equality and Partnerships

Report author: Greg Ward, Programme Manager, Cost of Living Programme
Greg.Ward@birmingham.gov.uk
M:07500 809620

1 Purpose

- 1.1 The Council set up the Cost of Living (CoL) programme one year ago in September 2022. The purpose of the Task and Finish Group's report is therefore to consider the performance of the programme over this crucial first 12 months. This scrutiny process, which will be reported at the Co-ordinating Overview & Scrutiny Committee on 13th October 2023, involved three sessions, each focusing on a particular element of the programme.
- 1.2 The first session on 28th July 2023, examined the internal processes involved in delivery. The second, on 22nd September, considered the performance of three of the core work streams: Warm Welcome, Food Provision, and Information, Advice and Guidance, as well as the potential synergies between these delivery strands. The third session, on 28th September, sought to draw together the findings and to formulate recommendations for the future development of the Cost of Living Programme.

2 Approach to the review

Background

- 2.1 In April 2022, the invasion of Ukraine impacted significantly on a world only just emerging from the pandemic. As a result, the energy price cap jumped almost 60 per cent from £1,227 to £1,971. By October, the cap increased further to £2,500 a year – and this was not an absolute cap, it was based on unit costs.

- 2.2 This meant that the average family was projected to pay three times more for energy in 2023-24 compared to 2021-22. Although the government subsequently made provision for an energy subsidy, wider prices were rising at a pace not seen for four decades, particularly for essential items including basic foods.
- 2.3 The Cost-of-Living Emergency has particularly affected Birmingham because the city has high unemployment and low employment rates. The concentration of poverty is also in key ethnic groups, especially Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage families. The two-child limit for Child Benefit and Universal Credit affects ever more children born after April 2017. There is also multiple disadvantage including from disability (which affects both chances of employment, and household costs). Finally, the housing stock in the city is often in poor condition and poorly insulated, leading to very high levels of fuel poverty.
- 2.4 The Cabinet Paper of the 11th October 2022 stated that our Cost-of-Living response should align with and accelerate longer-term strategic work: for example, Early Intervention and Prevention, and Net Zero. A Strategic Response Group (SRG) was set up to oversee the programme.
- 2.5 Initial mapping of activity and needs identified the following focus areas:
- Ensuring the provision of a network of **warm spaces** across the city.
 - Improving the availability of **advice to residents**, with a focus on increasing benefits take-up.
 - Increasing **energy efficiency**, with a focus on reducing household fuel costs.
 - Increasing the **supply of food** through foodbanks and other food projects across the city.
 - Supporting our **staff**.

Progress to date

- 2.6 Since the beginning of October 2022, the Cost of Living programme has achieved the following:
- The development of a Warm Welcome network of 268 registered Warm Spaces. So far, 232 are in operation.
 - Approximately 140 foodbanks and other food projects were provided with cash contributions to allow continuation of their work over last winter. On a weekly basis, this has provided at least 14,000 people with food. This year we plan to support 170 food projects.
 - At least £2,674,685 in additional benefits maximisation has been identified through CoL programme funded in-person and telephone support.
 - 3,400 homes have received additional energy bill top ups.

- Over 20% of our staff have accessed support to help with the cost-of-living.
- We have created sophisticated datasets to pinpoint households in crisis in order to provide more targeted and multifaceted support.

2.7 It is important to state upfront that the Cost of Living programme was always intended as a coordinating mechanism rather than a new Council service. All the workstreams are led by other departments and teams in the organisation. These include Housing (Warm Welcome network), Public Health (Food Provision), Early Intervention and Prevention (Information, Advice and Guidance), Digital and Customer Services (the Contact Centre IAG and Local Welfare Provision), People, Place and Prosperity (Energy) and People Services (Staff Support).

2.8 The programme has also benefited significantly from a high level of leadership and support from over 400 partners across the city. Indeed, many of the assets including a large majority of Warm Welcome Spaces and Foodbanks are owned and managed by other partners.

Council Scrutiny

2.9 In April 2023, the Cost of Living programme team produced a progress report which was submitted to Cabinet. The programme will also benefit from an internal audit in November. In addition, In July, the Co-ordinating Overview & Scrutiny Committee commissioned this dedicated Task and Finish report to scrutinise progress.

2.10 The Task Group meeting of 22nd September was chaired by Councillor Sir Albert Bore and included Councillors Jack Deakin, Alex Yip, Morriam Jan, and Ray Goodwin. The Task and Finish Group of 28th September was chaired by Sir Albert Bore and included Councillors Jack Deakin, Robert Alden, Penny Wagg, and Ray Goodwin.

2.11 Councillor Goodwin manages the Birmingham Spitfire Centre at Castle Vale. Councillor Goodwin received special dispensation to attend the Task and Finish Group sessions in order to provide expert knowledge and guidance. All interests were declared.

2.12 Please see the terms of reference appended. The Chair of the Task and Finish group particularly emphasised the need to hear the views of external partners. It is important therefore to note that the questions listed in the terms of reference served as a starting point to stimulate discussion and were not all tabled directly.

2.13 The critiques and recommendations for each session are considered below.

Overarching Critiques and Recommendations

3 General Approach to the Cost of Living Programme

Context

- 3.1 This session considered internal processes and governance. This included the role of the Strategic Response Group, the effectiveness of the officer delegated decision making process, budget management and funding, grants allocation, the role of procurement and the evaluation methodology, the approach to partner relationship management and the role of insight and intelligence in the programme.

Critique

- 3.2 The streamlined governance structure, which was facilitated by the decision to delegate spending allocations to the Strategic Response Group is considered to have worked well in view of the need for urgent delivery.
- 3.3 The Financial Reserve allocated to this programme has been carefully managed and the grants provided are considered to have been vital to continued operations by the wider city partners. A major programme with over 400 partners cost only £3.7m in its first year. This represents good value for money.
- 3.4 In Phase 2, there is no allocation from the Council's General Fund for this programme. There will therefore be a reliance on external ring-fenced funding from the Household Support Fund and areas like Public Health. Current financial constraints make finding new resource for this programme, and eliminating departmental duplication, ever more important.
- 3.5 Delivery was procurement compliant.
- 3.6 At the early stage, the immediate set up of the Warm Welcome network and support for the Foodbanks was imperative. There is now an opportunity to consider ways in which the council can ensure the resources for this programme reach more communities in the city and can be adapted and tailored to better fit the needs of individuals and groups.
- 3.7 Administration of the Household Support Fund (c.£25m in 2023/24) was allocated to the Cost of Living Programme by a Cabinet decision in June 2023. This is very welcome but has also created the challenge of setting up the infrastructure for distribution of the fund monies. As the next step, we will further survey the city to ensure that support is going to those in most need and to reach out to new communities with an offer of collaboration and support.

- 3.8 The programme currently focuses on immediate needs such as food, warmth, and financial support. These are however symptoms of an underlying lack of sufficient household income for many in the city who are not currently sharing in the economic opportunities that Birmingham generates. Low employment rates in Birmingham are a key driver of poverty and cost of living problems.
- 3.9 The April Cabinet approved an evaluation framework for the programme. There will be challenges to overcome in ensuring the accurate recording of performance data because there is a need to be sensitive to avoiding stigma in recording outcomes in client group.

Recommendations

- I. An inclusive growth strategy for the City should be developed as part of the legacy of the Cost of Living programme.
- II. More thought needs to go into ensuring that families are aware of cost of living support during the school breaks, when their household costs increase.
- III. While the Strategic Response Group has encouraged departmental collaboration, the programme team should strengthen internal communications to maximise opportunities and avoid duplication with other departments.
- IV. Consideration should be given to the expansion of the SRG to include representatives from business, skills providers and harder to reach communities.
- V. Given current financial constraints, officers should investigate the potential of Lottery Funding and other external resources for cost of living activity.
- VI. Officers should further consider the methodology for recording programme performance data and return to the Council with a proposed approach.

4 Warm Welcome Network

Context

- 4.1 This session considered the variety of Warm Welcome Spaces and how the partners work together. Particular attention (as with all the sessions below) was given to the partners' view of the role of the Council and future opportunities for the network.
- 4.2 The external witnesses for this session were:
- **Fred Rattley, Director for Community Regeneration, Church of England, & Chief Executive, Thrive Together Birmingham.** Fred brings his experience with the introduction of Places of Welcome, as well as extensive local community engagement in Birmingham. As one of the key partners from the outset of the programme, Fred has played a vital role in shaping the concept of the Warm Welcome network. He has continued to use his local knowledge to drive engagement and awareness across the network.

- **Rabiyah Latif, Thrive Together Birmingham's Near Neighbours Co-ordinator.** Rabiyah, working with Thrive and BCC, has engaged extensively with people across Birmingham, providing exceptional value to the engagement efforts in East Birmingham. Rabiyah's work has enabled the project to develop across previously untapped areas and she continues to support the growth and maintenance of the Warm Welcome network.

Critique

- 4.3 As an opening comment, partners felt that the Cost of Living programme was one of the best voluntary sector initiatives they had encountered as there was felt to be a high level of co-production embedded into the initiative.
- 4.4 Despite early use of the phrase “warm banks,” partners were pleased that their advice on the more inclusive branding of the “Warm Welcome” network was taken on board by the Council. Also, that the social rather than just the “physical warmth” element of the offer was made prominent. There is a need to avoid language that stigmatised users. The emphasis therefore had to be on the “social welcome” that the network offered.
- 4.5 An important part of the approach was to work with organisations which had set up Warm Welcome spaces well before the Council's declaration of the cost of living emergency in October last year. The creation of parallel, duplicating facilities was therefore avoided.
- 4.6 Warm Welcome was very much informed by listening to those citizens who had had, or have, a lived experience of poverty. The approach to Warm Welcome is a philosophy rather than a strategy; a philosophy that emphasises dignity and the avoidance of stigma.
- 4.7 The roots are a previous social inclusion enquiry which led to an initiative called *Places of Welcome* and were also in the spirit of *Flourishing Neighbourhoods* which goes back to the year 2000. These earlier initiatives are a poignant reminder that there was significant poverty in the city before the current cost of Living crisis.
- 4.8 The philosophy behind these places is based on the five “P” s: 1) A warm, welcoming **Place**; 2) **Provision** of a hot drink or perhaps some food; 3) **Provision** of advice and support; 4) **Presence**, where everyone is made welcome and there is no isolation; and finally, 5) **Participation**, where everyone has something to offer. The latter point is considered important in terms of encouraging service users to volunteer at their spaces as a way of building confidence and self-worth. A vital element of Warm Welcome is therefore the social interaction that the spaces encourage, and this should be made more prominent in their promotion. This is about bringing people together in a warm, welcoming environment.
- 4.9 Not everyone can visit a Warm Welcome Space and many people cannot leave their own homes. Contact and prevention of loneliness is an area that the Warm Welcome network has developed and will need to take further through an outreach befriending service which will often be technology enabled.

- 4.10 An essential element of Warm Welcome was considered to be the micro grants of £500 which enabled partners to help heat their warm spaces or to buy tea, coffee, and other provisions.
- 4.11 As previously discussed, a future challenge will be to ensure that there is necessary provision across the whole city. The network should reach out to local connectors and community activists and invite them to join the Warm Welcome Network.
- 4.12 The Near Neighbourhood Network has been central to connecting local groups in East Birmingham with the Warm Welcome network. This UK government programme has been in existence for 13 years. It seed-funds partnerships between community and faith organisations. The network is admirably diverse.
- 4.13 One of the findings has been that there are groups in the city who have been operating their own spaces without realising they could be part of a wider network and then be able to access micro grant funding.
- 4.14 Some organisations tend to be better informed than others and this issue highlights the need for co-ordination at a hyper local level. Many local projects are small, and volunteer led. There is therefore little capacity to seek connections with the Council. Some of these groups specialise in a particular demographic or activity. Part of the solution may be to encourage Warm Welcome members to reach out and support their neighbours and local partners.
- 4.15 Another challenge is that a number of groups feel they would need to set up something new and that their current offer and activity would not qualify. Breaking down this perception is necessary to enrich the network and ensure greater diversity and equity. However, some providers also feel comfortable with continuing to offer their bespoke support and do not need or seek wider engagement. This independence should be respected.
- 4.16 There has been a concerted effort to tailor some spaces to certain groups and communities. This drive for diversity is ongoing and should be further encouraged.
- 4.17 There were concerns within the Task and Finish Group that some businesses and partners had difficulty understanding how to engage with the network. An example was a small business that wanted to start a soup kitchen for senior citizens. This company has struggled to engage with the Council on Warm Welcome.
- 4.18 The Warm Welcome network, with 268 spaces registered across the city, is considered to be an important asset for engaging with hard to reach groups. The network needs to provide more services to prevent personal financial crisis.
- 4.19 While some Foodbanks double up as Warm Spaces, a closer working relationship between the wider Warm Welcome network and the foodbanks should be encouraged.

- 4.20 There should be a greater focus on supporting new immigrants to the city. There are nine hostels for newcomers and creating conveniently local Warm Spaces could create more engagement with this cohort.
- 4.21 While there is learning and innovation within the individual workstreams, further cross learning between partners in different workstreams should be encouraged.
- 4.22 Partners were concerned that the Council's current financial situation could lead to a reduction in community space when this was needed more than ever.
- 4.23 A case study was conducted by Cadent Energy who has developed spaces to offer energy advice. By promoting the offer of a meal to communities, rather than just energy advice, they were able to dramatically increase interest. The emphasis here is less on offering a service, and more on offering a relationship. The same approach may work well in encouraging people to seek financial and benefits advice. Sponsorship for the Warm Spaces from Cadent was positively welcomed.
- 4.24 The importance of data was underlined. New data maps being developed by the City Observatory could be beneficial in identifying "deserts" of provision and encouraging proactive engagement with new partners.
- 4.25 The point was made that the current financial situation at Birmingham City Council may have a negative impact with small third sector organisations. The Warm Welcome network can perhaps provide early and preventative support to those organisations that start to struggle.
- 4.26 The Warm Welcome network and the Foodbanks will continue to be a critical point for social connection. It is welcome that around 100 laptops, accessed through the WMCA, have been distributed to the Warm Spaces and can be used to access isolated citizens at home.
- 4.27 Some Warm Welcome members do not have access to corporate largess and must be further supported to access private sector sponsorship. There is a sense that some corporate social giving tends to go to the same partners repeatedly. There is a need to reach out to a wider network of less well-connected partners.
- 4.28 The Council could clarify and focus its "ask" for social value from its supply chains. Steps should then be taken to ensure that the proceeds of this social value are shared fairly across the city. This change should be coupled with a campaign to persuade companies to seek to employ people from harder to reach communities and then to help them develop careers.

- 4.29 There was consensus that the Council should investigate the creation of capacity to enable smaller organisations to obtain grants, and to assist in training on filling out funding applications. Some foodbanks have raised considerable resource; one operation raised £10k. This fund raising knowhow should be disseminated across the network. This applies equally to both the Warm Welcome and Foodbank networks. There was acknowledgement that the opportunity of Lottery Funding for Cost of Living priorities was not taken up because this capacity was not available.
- 4.30 In conclusion, Warm Welcome is an outstanding example of how the Council should engage with communities in the future. The fact that it is not a transactional service but rather a network of relationships was seen as an asset. The Council's convening power and its emphasis on co-production is welcome, as is the desire to ensure the dignity of the clients is protected, while stigma is reduced.

Recommendations

- VII. While the communication effort has been extensive, there is still an uneven awareness of the network across the city. Officers should liaise with the Communications and Citizen Involvement teams to consider how these gaps can be addressed, particularly in connecting with small, hyperlocal groups who may perceive they do not qualify to join the network.
- VIII. Future communications on Warm Welcome should do more to emphasise the social aspects on citizens gathering at warm spaces and the benefits of befriending and social interaction.
- IX. The small business mentioned in the critique should be approached directly by officers, and lessons on engagement with this business should be learned.
- X. The Cost of Living Team should liaise with Youth Services to ensure they are fully aware of and integrated into the Warm Welcome network.
- XI. The location and mapping data of all of the Warm Welcome Spaces should be published on the City Observatory website, and the link circulated to the Members.
- XII. The map of the Warm Welcome Spaces should be shared with Birgit Kehrer from Change Kitchen, so it can be shared with the Food Justice Network.
- XIII. A top priority is to ensure that the three remaining wards, currently not part of the Warm Welcome offer, are able to join the network. These are Small Heath, Birchfield (application pending) and Sutton Four Oaks. Officers should contact local councillors and community groups in these wards to ensure they are connected to this offer.
- XIV. Further steps should be taken to integrate support for citizens on council tax, debt management, benefits, and other financial advice with the Warm Welcome network. The next phase of Warm Welcome should also focus on gaps in provision for specific communities of experience such as youth groups, older people, people fleeing domestic violence and those struggling with social isolation.

- XV. The relaunch of Warm Welcome should encourage cross-learning with other organisations.
- XVI. The potential to obtain new physical spaces for Warm Welcome should be explored further, and council community spaces should be protected and enhanced.
- XVII. Warm Welcome spaces should be located near migrant or newly arrived communities.
- XVIII. Officers should work with the Procurement team to ensure emphasis is given to fighting poverty in the Council's future negotiation on social value with suppliers. This should be coupled with a conscious effort to ensure that any added resources this creates are shared across a wide range of partners. The "ask" should be coupled with a drive to create employment opportunities for economically deprived households.
- XIX. Officers should investigate creating capacity to allow smaller organisations to find grants, and to help with training on filling out funding applications. This applies equally to both the Warm Welcome and Foodbank networks.

5 Food Provision

Context

- 5.1 In this session, the Task and Finish Group examined the Council's support of the Foodbanks. This exercise included a discussion on the cultural appropriateness of the foodbank offer, and the challenge of sustaining foodbank provision in the longer term. Consideration was also given to the use of food pantries and the wider food justice network.
- 5.2 It should be noted that "foodbanks" is a broad term that covers a variety of food providers such as food pantries and social supermarkets.
- 5.3 The external witnesses for this session were:
 - **Birgit Kehrer, Director of Change Kitchen.** Birgit set up Change Kitchen; a social enterprise Community Interest Company (CIC) that utilises surplus food. The CIC also delivers community projects and provides food for those in need. Change Kitchen recently set up a healthy takeaway model that provides nutritious, tasty food on a "pay as you feel" basis.
 - **Florence Cadge, Coordinator for the Food Justice Network (FJN).** Born out of the Pandemic, the network consists of more than 300 individual foodbanks, community cafes, food pantries and other Birmingham food aid organisations. The FJN has created a map to increase awareness of, and increase access to, food projects. Florence was a member of the Council's Food Provision group which delivered action as part of the Cost of Living response. Florence is employed by The Active Wellbeing Society. This organisation received CoL grant money to support their community projects, including for a community cafe (Florence was not present for the grant panel decision related to her employer's grant application.)

Critique

- 5.4 Food insecurity in Birmingham is among the worst in the country. According to data released earlier this year by the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, around half of the city's citizens, which is around 600,000 people, suffered some kind of food insecurity in 2022.
- 5.5 As stated above, there is a strong justification for supporting foodbanks. After almost 15 years of wage stagnation, Birmingham has an extremely high level of deprivation. It is not only the unemployed who are going to food banks to make ends meet. Both those who are employed, and those on benefits, rely heavily on the sector's support.
- 5.6 Lack of income, rather than food scarcity, drives hunger in Birmingham. As well as falling wages and growing unemployment in 2023, the inflation rate for food and drink in the UK was 14.8%, which is the highest it has been in 40 years.
- 5.7 According to the Trussell Trust, this year, there was a 33% jump in the number of emergency food parcels recipients received and this reflects the hard choices many families must now make.
- 5.8 Forty three percent of citizens live in areas ranked among the most deprived and this is why the Food Justice Network is so important.
- 5.9 There is strong partner support for the Council's Food Provision Team and for the Food Strategy. Both are excellent examples of co-production. Council funding helped with food provision last winter, and also some food training.
- 5.10 The Food Provision work strand actions are aligned with the city's strategic approach. This was laid out in the Food Security and Resilience theme of the Birmingham Food System Strategy, approved in March 2023. The reason the Food Provision element was able to mobilise action so quickly was because of the relationships built across the city during the co-production of the strategy. Please find the link to the strategy.
https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/info/50279/food_revolution/2602/birmingham_food_strategy_system
- 5.11 The other key element was learning from the Covid-19 response, and the food provision action that took place across the city.
- 5.12 The Food Justice Network has also been extremely valuable to the food provision sector. The network has built trust with its members and has helped small and hard to reach organisations to solve their challenges.
- 5.13 Preserving the dignity of the Service Users and creating as sustainable a model as possible, are both core principles.
- 5.14 The Healthy Takeaway Café embraces these principles because it offers more choice and dignity for people and is also more sustainable, because people can pay what they can afford and "pay forward" for others to eat as well.

- 5.15 The Café also recognises a crucial point made in the last session of this group: Participation. The Café trains client users as volunteers and this can lead to mainstream employment. This initiative has been supported by the Council's Public Health team and also by the Mandela project. This is not just about feeding people but helping them to transition into employment.
- 5.16 The Healthy Takeaway Café would like to find out more about how to become a registered Warm Welcome Space and to encourage others in the food provision network to do the same.
- 5.17 Winter is when people struggle the most to pay both energy and food bills. As traditional sources of supermarket and individual support were under significant strain, it was therefore important that the Council supported the foodbanks during this time.
- 5.18 The Council's monthly level of support for food banks was arrived at through consultation and a survey of the commissioning of food by the foodbanks. This helped decide the level of grant for the Council's food aid funding last winter. The amount was £800 a month for six months for approximately 100 Foodbanks.
- 5.19 The estimate of the number of foodbanks in need was based on FJN mapping. It turned out that this was an underestimation and so a further amount of £400 for three months was provided for the additional foodbanks that came forward. This amount reflected the fact that there was approximately three months left of the winter at this time.
- 5.20 There is a need to recognise that the culturally based food needs of certain communities may require additional financial support. There was discussion about whether those foodbanks serving more expensive halal food needed further assistance.
- 5.21 The foodbanks also linked into other available support and the other cost of living work streams. Foodbank partners were asked to consider additional options which would help people who use their service, including signposting to other local support, such as the Warm Welcome Network, Healthy Start vouchers, cost of living resource leaflets, and by signing up as a healthy start vitamin distributor. This was with the support of the Council's information and Guidance teams.
- 5.22 Initially, there was a concern within the Council that the Winter fund might lead to an unsustainable level of dependency. Therefore, there was also an effort to persuade foodbanks to create sustainable capacity, through the purchase of new food preparation and storage equipment. The Council provided the Affordable Infrastructure Fund for equipment, which allowed foodbanks to increase their capacity to offer food support.
- 5.23 There is also a need to shift Council support from that of a simple foodbank offer to more sustainable food interventions such as food pantries, community kitchens and surplus food hubs. This is challenging and not always possible because of the elevated level of immediate need in many of our communities. However, this is only one type of sustainability.

- 5.24 The other type of sustainability was a central theme of the Task and Finish Group discussion and is a more fundamental question: can we permanently reduce the number of people who require emergency food? There are tens of thousands of people across the city who are live in severe poverty. The sustainable solution is to increase incomes across the city. The single most important way of increasing incomes is by increasing employment rates.
- 5.25 A single minimum wage job brings in the equivalent of about £20,000 of income to a household. Such a rise in income would make a significant difference for many families, The employment rate in the city is 10% lower than the national average. That is 70,000 people.
- 5.26 The most significant priority is perhaps youth employment. If more young people are employed, they are more likely to avoid becoming low-income adults with income deprived children.
- 5.27 The Cost of Living programme seeks to provide some additional activity in the skills and employability space this year but given the Council's financial position, this is challenging.
- 5.28 The discussions from the Task and Finish Group reflected a feeling that integration with other services could be taken further. Not only could more foodbanks become Warm Welcome Spaces, but they could offer other services such as support for employment. In this regard, the Healthy Takeaway Café was seen as best practice. Wider employment support of this type would help people with their immediate needs but also assist them to move out of personal crisis.
- 5.29 Foodbanks, particularly food pantries, have a role to play in addressing loneliness by creating an environment conducive to befriending. There was also a suggestion of linking more food pantries to community gardens to create new supply chains and to allow food pantry volunteers to experience food growing in the open air. In the next session on Information, Advice and Guidance, there is further discussion on social isolation.
- 5.30 Fair Share was seen as a vital part of the work of the Foodbanks because the Charity distributes large quantities of food. However, because of the size of their food acquisitions, choice is inevitably restricted, and foodbanks often need to supplement Fair Share food with meat and other proteins.
- 5.31 One of the issues facing Birmingham is there is a lack of infrastructure in the city to break food down into smaller batches that could be distributed to the foodbanks. There is a desperate need for a community kitchen and other infrastructure to make this possible. Having the backing of a scaled network such as the foodbanks might help the Food Justice Network with bargaining with food providers, especially with regard to obtaining fresh foods.
- 5.32 The setting up of Community Kitchens could also encourage people to cook together and therefore to socially interact.

- 5.33 The Incredible Surplus organisation was highlighted as best practice because it intercepts food and other usable materials that would otherwise go to waste from supermarkets, restaurants, and other sources, and provides them to individuals and community organisations on a pay as you feel basis. The enterprise also supports healthy eating training.
- 5.34 As stated above, partners were concerned that the Council's current financial situation could lead to a reduction in community space when this was needed more than ever.
- 5.35 Due to high demand for food provision, some foodbanks are having to limit their support to only one package of food per month rather than weekly. Questions were asked as to whether there could be more external support to increase provision at these organisations.
- 5.36 Finally, partners were keen to emphasise that the Public Health Food team were extremely helpful in setting up the application process for the cost of living grants.

Recommendations:

- XX. With Change Kitchen's agreement, officers should investigate the potential for the Healthy Takeaway Café to become a registered Warm Welcome Space and encourage others in the food provision network to do the same.
- XXI. Officers should investigate whether more foodbanks could offer other citizen support services.
- XXII. Officers should investigate the need to provide additional support to food banks that cater for certain cultural requirements such as halal food.
- XXIII. Officers should investigate whether those foodbanks that are only able to offer one package of food per household per month could be further supported.
- XXIV. New models of sustainable food provision should be included in future grants to the foodbanks.
- XXV. The Council should work with the Food Justice Network to explore the possibility of setting up a Citywide Community Kitchen to break large, donated packages of food into smaller units for the foodbanks.
- XXVI. The Active Wellbeing Society should circulate information on its activities to Ward Members.
- XXVII. Community Food Gardens should be connected with the city's food pantries where this is currently not taking place.

6 Information, Advice and Guidance

Context

- 6.1 The Task and Finish Group wanted to consider the role of the Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) teams within the Cost of Living Programme. Specifically, the difference from business as usual, the roles of the different agencies and how they work together. The impact of both reactive and proactive support.
- 6.2 The external witnesses for this session were:
- **Shamiela Ahmed, Senior Manager: Programmes, Heart of England Community Foundation.** The Foundation agreed to vary their current Neighbourhood Network Scheme contract to enable the brokering of IAG services to external partners. Shamiela worked with the Cost of Living team to manage the tender process to enable community-based outreach services to be commissioned in wards with the least financial resilience.
 - **Sharon, Client, IAG:** A citizen of Birmingham who has kindly agreed to share her experience of the service provided through the NAIS extended hours. This additional service was funded through the Cost-of-Living programme to support citizens during the crisis.

Critique

- 6.3 The Heart of England Foundation is an independent charity with 28 years of grant funding experience across the West Midlands and Warwickshire. In that time, they have distributed over £33m. For every pound they receive, 93 pence go back into the community; and for every pound invested in the Foundation, they generate £4.18 worth of social value.
- 6.4 In May 2023, £630,000 of new funding for external benefits advice was approved by the Strategic Response Group. There was quite an elongated sign off process because the amount of funding required was too high for delegated officer approval through the Strategic Response Group and required a Cabinet decision.
- 6.5 There was therefore a tight turnaround, in part, because people and communities started to hear about the impending funding. Once a call had been put out, partners fed back that the deadline for the grant applications was too tight and so it was extended.
- 6.6 Heart of England then ran a number of workshops. These were delivered online. Invitees included the Warm Welcome network.
- 6.7 There were 75 applications. Each was assessed by a grants officer from Heart of England and due diligence was carried out on each of the applicants to ensure a fit with the criteria.

- 6.8 Of the original 75 applications, 27 were successful. Efforts were made to ensure a good geographic spread across the city. There were also successful applicants among those organisations that work in a variety of Birmingham languages such as within the Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Chinese communities.
- 6.9 The successful organisations had not been notified at the time of the evidence session, because the Household Support Fund awaited further approval through Spending Control before direct commissioning of these community groups can take place. *[Needs updating before finalisation of paper]*
- 6.10 Sharon is a service user of the Information, Advice and Guidance service. The Chair specifically wanted to thank Sharon for agreeing to act as a witness.
- 6.11 Sharon had originally had a career as a carer. However, the agency that Sharon worked for was offering her less work and what work there was, was often at short notice. Given a drop in her household income, Sharon understandably experienced high levels of stress and depression.
- 6.12 Sharon decided to go to the Jobcentre to see if she was entitled to benefits. The Jobcentre told her she was entitled to a state pension because of her age. However, the state pension only provided for a small proportion of her household needs.
- 6.13 A visit to the Neighbourhood Advice and Information Service (NAIS) yielded new advice. Sharon was provided with full housing benefit & council tax support including a three month backdate. This was a transformation from a zero hour employment structure to increased benefits of £11,385per annum.
- 6.14 The advisor who supported Sharon was from the Erdington Neighbourhood Advice Centre. This advice was provided during the extended hours that were paid for by the Cost of Living programme. Had this additional support not been in place, given the demand for benefits advice, Sharon may have struggled for a timely appointment.
- 6.15 Sharon's helpful testimony brought into sharp relief the need to support people before there is a real personal, health and financial crisis.
- 6.16 As part of the transformation of the Council, which is a key part of the organisation's financial recovery plan, it is imperative that redesign is around a smaller cost base.
- 6.17 A core principle of the redesign is early intervention and prevention. This is because of the budgetary pressures across children's and adult social care, and emergency housing support. These pressures are all costs of failure. They are the costs of people tipping into crisis. Within the current fiscal control arrangements, preventative spending should therefore be allowable if it prevents significant additional costs in the future.
- 6.18 As in Sharon's case, isolation and lack of support can exacerbate money worries. Often the only contact is through facilities such as the neighbourhood shop which provides local human contact.

- 6.19 As stated in the previous session on Warm Welcome and the Foodbanks, people also often come to the warm spaces in search of social contact rather than just warmth.
- 6.20 The way a foodbank works can help address isolation. If the foodbank has a queuing system, people just pick up their food and go. However, if foodbanks are designed to be drop in centres for social interaction, the result can be so much more positive.
- 6.21 Social isolation can also be made worse by the design of wider places, for instance where blocks of flats have no community space or, where benches have been taken away in green spaces. The latter is often to prevent anti-social gathering, but it can also cause social isolation.
- 6.22 As already emphasised above, this is why the preservation of the Council's community spaces is so important. In addition, there may be empty shops that could also be turned into Foodbanks, Warm Welcome spaces, or for wider uses such as cultural venues or "pop up" museums and libraires.
- 6.23 Early Intervention and Prevention through the IAG team is complemented by excellent on-line tools such as self-serve benefit calculators. Gov.uk and "Turn to Us2 offer these tools. The calculators work like Confused.com and Go Compare, but because they are not advertised, there is little awareness of their existence. Warm Welcome and the Foodbanks have a role in promoting these aids to benefit maximisation.
- 6.24 To reach more citizens underclaiming benefit, there is a need for more support from DWP and the Job Centres. DWP work coaches have large caseloads and ten minute appointment slots. They therefore scratch the surface in meeting citizen needs and identifying unclaimed benefits.

Recommendations

- XXVIII. Online benefits support and the use of benefit calculators should be made available to the Warm Welcome Network and Foodbanks.
- XXIX. The Early Intervention and Prevention of personal crisis should be a core principle of the future redesign of the Council.
- XXX. Investment in early intervention for areas that are non-statutory or non-essential could save money in the future. This should be a core principle of Council investment moving forward.
- XXXI. Officers should approach the BIDs to see if there are empty shops that could be turned into community spaces that could help citizens avoid isolation and stimulate community cohesion.
- XXXII. Continue to lobby for more resource to expand the work of the DWP work coaches.

7 Overall Conclusions of the Task and Finish Group

Context

7.1 The Task and Finish Group finally considered some broader conclusions pertaining to all the workstreams within the Cost of Living programme:

Conclusions

7.2 Building citywide networks of Warm Welcome spaces, food provision, and other partners is an effective way of reaching our most excluded citizens. This is about evolving and building the networks and continually drawing in new partners. It is also more about relationship building rather than the transaction of services.

7.3 The co-production element of the Cost of Living programme has released impressive new resource, innovation, and cooperation. This has allowed the strategy to evolve and be flexible in meeting new needs.

7.4 The Cabinet's decision to allow officer delegated decision making in consultation with the relevant Council Cabinet Member and 151 officer made for nimble and frictionless governance. Where decisions were above the allowable level (£500k), the required Cabinet governance process slowed the pace of action dramatically.

7.5 Warm Welcome and the Foodbanks are key tools in combating isolation, championing local residents and creating new preemployment opportunities through volunteering. Foodbanks and Warm Welcome should seek ever closer co-operation.

7.6 Many people in or near crisis will be best reached through other people, through the communities that they live in and the networks that they are already part of. The Cost of Living networks therefore need to growth their partnerships and their diversity so as to include the hardest to reach communities. They will be aided in doing this by ongoing and up to date mapping and data collection.

7.7 The preservation of community spaces is crucial, even in these difficult financial circumstances.

7.8 Early intervention must be a core principle in any redesigned council structure.

7.9 The Council Procurement Team should review their social value policies to seek further support for initiatives that fight poverty.

7.10 It is imperative that Phase 2 of the programme contain a significant level of employment support so as help people generate higher incomes. Incomes that prevent citizens moving from crisis to crisis

7.11 Councillors themselves are at the heart of their communities and are central to the delivery of the next phase of the programme. Members can provide new levels of creativity and innovation built on their knowledge of local best practice. They are the central conduit of their communities.

- 7.12 The Task and Finish Group structure, first used to review the Council's support for Ukrainian refugees, works well in teasing out issues and finding collective, collaborative solutions to the Council's challenges.
- 7.13 In conclusion, the Council's Cost of Living programme has performed well. The programme will benefit from the recommendations in the paper. Further thought should be given as to whether this model might also act as a blueprint for other forms of Council engagement and delivery.
- 7.14 The Task and Finish Group wished to note their appreciation to all the witnesses who gave up their time to provide such valuable feedback on the Council's Cost of Living programme.

8 Evidence Review Sessions

Workshop 1(14/07/23): General Approach to the Cost of Living programme

Workshop 2 (22/09/23): Individual Cost of Living workstreams

Areas of scrutiny: Warm Welcome, Food Provision, Information, Advice and Guidance

9 Any Finance Implications

- 9.1 The Cost-of-Living programme was initially funded in 2022/23 by £5m from the Financial Reserve. Given the Council's current finances the programme was part funded by the monies from the Integrated Care Board (ICB) and the Communities Outbreak Management Fund (COMF) so this along with prudent management of the resources meant that the reserve was not fully utilised in 2022/23.
- 9.2 For 2023/24 the forecast underspend against the reserve will not be spent. Instead, other options are being explored to fund the programme such as the Public Health ring-fenced Grant

10 Any Legal Implications

- 10.1 The legal implications will be considered as and when necessary if the proposals set out in the report are accepted for implementation.

11 Any Equalities Implications

- 11.1 The programme has been subject to a full Equality Impact Assessment and there is ongoing work, as stated above, to continually improve both equality and equity in the programme.

12 Appendices

- 12.1 Cost of Living Scrutiny Task and Finish Group Terms of Reference (July 2023).

13 Background Papers

- 13.1 Cabinet Cost of Living Progress Report (April 2023). [CMIS > Meetings](#)