

Cost of Living Working Group

Thursday, 4th September, 2025

MEETING OF THE COST OF LIVING WORKING GROUP

Members present: Alderman Copeland; and
Councillors Bradley and I. McLaughlin.

Also attended: Councillor Long (representing Councillor Nelson).

In attendance: Ms. N. Lane, Neighbourhood Services Manager;
Ms. M. Higgins, Lead Officer, Community Provision;
Mr. K. Heaney, Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty;
Mr. C. Tubridy, Hardship Programme Coordinator;
Mr. B. Carr, Portfolio Manager; and
Mrs. L. McLornan, Committee Services Officer.

Election of Chairperson

The Working Group was advised that a number of apologies had been received for the meeting.

The Working Group agreed that Councillor Bradley would serve as Chairperson for the meeting, given that she was the only Member attending in person, and to postpone the election of Chairperson until its next meeting.

(Councillor Bradley in the Chair)

Apologies

Apologies were reported from Councillors Flynn and Nelson.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 6th March, 2025 were taken as read and signed as correct.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were recorded.

Hardship Programme 2024/25 Overview

The Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty outlined that the budget for the Hardship Programme 2024/25, including an underspend from 2023/24 of £100,773, totalled £1,100,773.

The Working Group was reminded that the thematic focus groups which were to receive support through the programme were:

- (i) children, young people and families;
- (ii) individuals or families in emergency need; and
- (iii) older people.

The Portfolio Manager explained that the Programme would be delivered in such a way that maintained the dignity of the person accessing support; it would be needs driven; that any individual accessing emergency support would be offered access to other wraparound services to help address need on an ongoing basis; and that the support given would not displace or duplicate but add value to what was already in existence.

The Working Group was advised that, as of 4th September, 2025, £608,830 of returns had been completed, and that all returns, totaling £1.1million, were required by 30th September.

Noted.

Delivery Partners Updates

Representatives from each delivery partner organisation were welcomed to the meeting to provide an update on the outcomes and activities which they had been able to provide as a result of the funding. The Members were advised that representatives from St. Vincent de Paul, the South West Food Bank and the Dundonald Food Bank had sent apologies for the meeting.

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

- Hugh McVeigh (National Energy Action)
- Jim Dunbar (Education Authority - EA)
- Roy Reaney (North Belfast Food Bank)
- Lisa McComish Brennan (Belfast Health and Social Care Trust)
- Caroline Milligan (Early intervention BHSC)
- Declan McKillop (Fareshare)
- Sinead Kelly (Save the Children)
- Paschal McKeown (Age NI)

In turn, each representative provided a brief overview of the number of individuals and households which were provided with support; the type of support provided; any onward referrals (for example, Speech and Language Therapy or ADHD diagnoses), signposting (Advice NI) and collaboration with other groups; as well as feedback regarding the Fund. The support given included helping those in need with utility bills; alleviating barriers to learning through breakfast clubs and uniform support; providing emergency food and toiletries; hot meals in daycare centres; and vouchers for local grocery shops. As a result of the Hardship Fund, a significant amount of food waste was diverted, helping to massively reduce CO2 emissions; children who had received hot meals at daycares were not only receiving the nutritional value and reducing the burden at home, but were also reported as being more adventurous with food as a result; the money that people were able to save as a result of receiving assistance through the scheme was then able to be used for other beneficial and critical things for the household.

Regarding the lower participation from schools in the South and East of the City, several Members requested further information in relation to the schools which had not applied for funding through the EA Programme. They suggested that exploring alternative ways of promoting the scheme might encourage more schools to engage with it, adding that there was often a perception that deprivation did not exist in certain areas or within certain schools, for example, Grammar schools. A Member suggested looking at the NISRA figures on deprivation. The officers confirmed that a breakdown of schools could be provided and that they could survey the schools which had not applied for funding through the scheme to ascertain the reasons.

The Working Group thanked the representatives for their attendance and the officers for the update which had been provided.

DfC Anti-Poverty Consultation Response

The Working Group was advised that the Council's response to the Department for Communities Anti-Poverty Consultation was approved by the Council on 1st September, 2025. The response stated overall support for the strategy's vision, broad areas of focus and outcomes but noted concerns in relation to the absence of any detail on specific actions, timelines, targets and a robust performance management framework. The Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty advised the Members that several key points raised at the Council Meeting would be included in the consultation response.

Noted.

2025/26 Budget Position

The Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty advised the Working Group that £75,000 was currently available for the Hardship Programme for the year 2025/26. He stated that the impact of any Hardship Programme for 2025/26 would be significantly reduced unless additional funding was secured.

The Working Group requested that a further meeting be held in October to consider funding proposals which could be submitted to a future meeting of the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee.

Noted.

Anti-Poverty Event - October 2025

The Members were advised of an upcoming Anti-Poverty Event which would be held on 2nd October, 2025, at St. Comgall's, with a large number of organisations working in the Anti-Poverty ecosystem attending. The Working Group noted that further information on the event would be circulated in due course.

Chairperson