

# Cost of Living Working Group

Friday, 15th September, 2023

## COST OF LIVING WORKING GROUP MINUTES HELD IN HYBRID FORMAT

Members present: Councillors Bradley, Doherty, Flynn,  
I. McLaughlin and Nelson.

In attendance: Mr. J. Walsh, Chief Executive;  
Mr. J. Tully, Director of City and Organisational Strategy;  
Mr. D. Sales, Operational Director of City  
and Neighbourhood Services;  
Mr. K. Heaney, Head of Inclusive Growth  
and Anti-Poverty;  
Ms. N. Lane, Neighbourhood Services Manager;  
Mr. B. Carr, Portfolio and Programme Coordinator;  
Ms. M. Higgins, Lead Officer, Community Provision;  
Mr. J. Hanna, Senior Democratic Services Officer; and  
Mrs. L. McLornan, Democratic Services Officer.

### **Election of Chairperson**

The Working Group was advised that it was required to elect a Chairperson.

Accordingly, it was

Moved by Councillor Flynn,  
Seconded by Councillor I. McLaughlin and

Resolved - that Councillor Bradley be elected to serve as Chairperson.

### **Apologies**

No apologies were reported.

### **Declarations of Interest**

No declarations of interest were recorded.

## Draft Terms of Reference

The Working Group considered the undernoted Draft Terms of Reference:

### **“1.0 Context**

**Households are continuing to face significant pressures relating to inflation and the rising cost-of-living, which is having an adverse impact upon the most vulnerable in society, widening inequalities and increasing the prevalence of poverty across the city.**

**Despite the fact that, the majority of levers to fundamentally address cost of living pressures are reserved matters for the NI Executive and UK Government, Belfast City Council and the Belfast Community Planning Partnership is committed to doing what it can to address these pressures in both the short and long-term.**

**Mitigating the worst impacts of the cost-of-living crisis and tackling ever increasing poverty levels within the city has been a key priority for elected members, both in addressing immediate needs through the Fuel Hardship Voucher Scheme and offering people a route out of poverty through tailored wraparound support and advice through Social Supermarkets and other interventions.**

**The Council’s Strategic Policy and Resources Committee, at its meeting on the 26<sup>th</sup> June 2023, agreed to:  
establish an All-Party Cost-of-Living Task Group to help inform planning for a Hardship Scheme (based on funding available) and future initiatives related to mitigating the worst impacts of the cost-of-living.  
approve the creation of a specified reserve for hardship/cost of living funding received from the Department for Communities.**

### **2.0 Role**

**The Members’ Cost-of-Living Task Group will:**

- i. help co-design an effective hardship scheme including an appropriate sustainable allocation model and associated recommendations for implementation.**
- ii. help build consensus across parties on any proposed hardship scheme**
- iii. help the Council understand the lived experienced of, and issues faced by people of all age groups impacted by the cost-of-living crisis**
- iv. help understand the effectiveness and learning from previous approaches to addressing hardship adopted by the Council**
- v. reviewing lessons learnt from previous Council initiatives to ease hardship**
- vi. help maintain a focus on addressing the biggest issues affecting people of all age groups as a result of living in poverty or likely to become so.**

- vii. support the development of a medium-longer term cross-departmental Cost-of-Living/Poverty Framework which is evidence-based, outcome focused, appropriately aligned to the Belfast Agenda and other relevant programmes; and
- viii. ensure that the principles of equality, diversity and inclusion are at the heart of the city's response to the cost-of-living crisis

As the cost-of-living crisis is a citywide challenge, the role of the Tasking Group will be to identify opportunities to collaborate with partners to better co-ordinate the city's resources to best support those in most need and pool resources where appropriate to maximise impact for the city.

### **3.0 Membership**

The Cost-of-Living Task Group will comprise one nomination from each Party Group. The Group may choose to engage additional members as the cost-of-living crisis response develops including wider social partners and expertise as may be appropriate.

### **4.0 Management of business**

The business of the Task Group will be underpinned by the following principles:

- Confidentiality – should be maintained throughout with any discussions or emerging draft papers being treated in a restricted manner until formally taken to a standing Council Committee(s).
- Consensus – reports and/or recommendations will be brought forward for Committee consideration based on agreement by the Task Group
- Transparency – potential conflicts of interest will be raised if deemed relevant to the discussions of the Task Group

### **5.0 Decision making**

The Task Group will have a key role in the co-design and development of the proposed Hardship Fund and longer-term Poverty Framework and associated recommendations. Final decisions on these will be the responsibility of the Council's Strategic Policy and Resources Committee and Full Council.

### **6.0 Meeting frequency**

The Task Group will meet initially on a fortnightly basis however, the frequency may be altered as agreed by the Group. The Group will operate initially for a six-month period from August 2023 – January 2024, at which point the arrangements will be reviewed.

## **7.0 Resources and support**

**Secretariat support will be provided through Democratic Services / CX Office.**

**Programme, policy and other support will be provided by the Council's Community Planning and CNS teams."**

The Working Group agreed the Draft Terms of Reference and, in relation to meeting frequency, agreed to meet on a monthly basis, with additional meetings called if required.

### **Setting the Context**

#### **Funding opportunities; Building on the experience of previous schemes; Key considerations in developing the Hardship Funding Framework; and Next Steps**

The Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty provided the Working Group with a detailed presentation on the work which officers had carried out to date in respect of a proposed Hardship Fund 2023/2024. He explained that, while the majority of levers to address poverty were held by the NI Executive and UK Government, it was also a key priority for the Council. He outlined that approximately £1million of funding from the Department for Communities was available to develop a hardship scheme for 2023/2024.

The Members were advised that lessons from previous hardship schemes would help inform the planning and programme design. He outlined that the formation of the All Party Working Group would support the development of a medium/long term framework which was evidence based, outcome focussed and strategically aligned to the Belfast Agenda; and that it would ensure that the principles of equality, diversity and inclusion were at the heart of the City's response to the cost-of-living crisis. The Members were advised that need was best met through targeted support, given previous experience from both Citywide and regional schemes.

The Working Group was advised of what schemes would be deemed eligible and ineligible under the terms of the funding from the Department for Communities.

During discussion, a number of Members stated that it was important that the scheme was accessible to those who most needed it, including reasonable adjustments for those with disabilities, those from minority ethnic communities and for older or isolated people, and that it was clearly and consistently promoted, with clear delivery timeframes.

In response to a number of Members' queries, the Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty confirmed that the Working Group could agree to invite relevant external groups to provide advice and to share information on lived experiences with the Council. A Member added that he worked with a local foodbank and that he could share information with officers about a number of organisations who were carrying out important work for those in need across the City on a daily basis.

The Members were reminded that, unfortunately, as the demand and community need would no doubt be beyond what the 2023/2024 Hardship Fund could meet, it would

be important that we target those most in need and manage the expectations and potential frustration from members of the public.

In response to a Member's query regarding the recent news that the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust's private provider of its Meals on Wheels service would cease its contract with the Trust on 30th September 2023, he advised that officers would liaise with the Trust in relation to that issue

Regarding the eligibility criteria previously applied to similar hardship schemes, the Members were advised that feedback from partners was that the criteria had been too broad and should be aligned with household income bands up to a maximum of £43,500 annually, thereby ensuring that the support went to those most in need including those who may be experiencing in-work poverty.

A Member highlighted that dignity had prevented some of those in need from applying to previous schemes and that should be taken into consideration in designing the new scheme. He suggested, for example, that perhaps vouchers for supermarkets could be distributed instead of signposting people to visit foodbanks.

The Members were advised that, building on the experience from previous schemes, partners would need sufficient lead-in time to establish supporting systems for delivering programmes and that it would be essential to provide full cost recovery to organisations in order to support delivery, such as salary and administration costs.

A number of Members stated the importance of robust contract management and assurance arrangements being put place, including reporting and record keeping, mid/end programme verification, recouping of underspends, and Audit Governance and Risk compliance and guidance. Officers advised that effective internal resourcing and clear roles and responsibilities regarding procurement, co-ordination & delivery, finance, monitoring and verification were essential.

During discussion the Working Group was advised that any support provided through the Hardship Fund should follow certain guiding principles, including, for example, that any individual accessing emergency support should be offered access to other wraparound services to help address need on an ongoing basis and that any support would not displace or duplicate but, rather, add value to what was already in existence and impactful.

The Neighbourhood Services Manager outlined early considerations around the potential focus of support through any emerging scheme, namely, (i) 'Food Hardship' and targeting areas of need, (ii) ability to respond to crisis 'Emergency Needs' and (iii) 'Enhancing Additional Support'. Some early thoughts on possible delivery options had been raised for the Working Group's consideration and Members agreed to provide feedback to officers. It was proposed that officers would further explore the viability of the initial proposals, without prejudice, to bring back to the next meeting of the Group for consideration. .

The Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty reminded Members that the delivery of the Hardship Scheme must take place within this financial year, up to March 2024, and, therefore, there was an urgency to get it operational in a managed and prudent way.

The Working Group thanked the officers for the information which had been provided.

**Date of Next Meeting**

The Working Group noted that the next meeting would be in early October, the date and time of which would be agreed with the Chairperson.

Chairperson