

Cost of Living Working Group

Thursday, 16th November, 2023

COST OF LIVING WORKING GROUP MINUTES HELD IN HYBRID FORMAT

Members present: Councillor Bradley (Chairperson);
Alderman Copeland; and
Councillors Doherty, Flynn,
I. McLaughlin and Nelson.

In attendance: Mr. D. Sales, Strategic Director of City Operations;
Mr. J. Tully, Director of City and Organisational Strategy;
Ms. N. Lane, Neighbourhood Services Manager;
Mr. B. Carr, Portfolio and Programme Coordinator;
Ms. M. Higgins, Lead Officer, Community Provision;
Mr. S. Lavery, Programme Manager; and
Mrs. L. McLornan, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

No apologies for inability to attend were reported.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 5th October were agreed as an accurate record of proceedings.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were recorded.

Update on Delivery

The Neighbourhood Services Manager reminded the Working Group that the Council had agreed, at its meeting on 1st November, to allocate £1,019,000 through the Emerging Hardship Fund amongst the following three themes: Support to Children and Families, Support for Individuals and Families in Immediate (Emergency) Need and “Enhancing the Capacity of Existing Structures and Programmes”.

She reported that Fareshare had since advised that it would be unable to spend the £80,000 which it had initially been allocated and that the amount had been reduced to £40,000. She explained that the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee had granted delegated authority to Directors to reallocate any such funding and that, therefore, an additional £15,000 had been diverted to Social Supermarkets and an additional £25,000 had been diverted to Family Support Hubs.

The Working Group was advised that the letter of offer from the Department for Communities allowed for up to 10% of costs to be allocated to management fees for the operators and that most groups had confirmed that they would be able to work within that budget. She explained that some partners would have unavoidable costs relating to delivery infrastructure and that officers were working with those organisations to keep those to a minimum.

The Working Group was advised that the Red Cross had indicated that it would require 22% of its £75,000 allocation, totalling £16,600, to deliver its community connector programme in Belfast. The Neighbourhood Services Manager outlined that, while it would still allow the overall programme to remain with the 10% which had been budgeted, the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee would be asked to determine whether it wished to proceed with the funding for that programme.

The Strategic Director of City Operations advised the Working Group that, if the management costs of the Red Cross were not approved, the following options could be considered:

- engagement with organisations who might be able to provide a similar type of support to those aged 55+, noting that there might be a delay to the commencement of support for that element; or
- should that option not be feasible, the funding of £75,000 could be reallocated to the Warm and Well Scheme, which would ensure the cohort of people over 55+ would receive support with energy or heating costs.

A number of Members stated that they felt that the focus of the funding should be in addressing the need across the City.

In response to a Member's question, the Lead Officer in Community Provision advised the Working Group that the Trussell Trust had requested a reduction in its initial funding, from £80,000 to £30,000, as only three of its hubs in the City had confirmed that they would be able to participate in the scheme before the end of March 2024, at a cost of £10,000 each.

It was agreed that the Members would discuss the issue of the management costs requested by the Red Cross with their party groups, in advance of a decision being made by the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee the following week.

Additional PHA Funding

The Working Group was advised that the Public Health Agency (PHA) was keen to contribute up to £90,000 towards work in nine designated hot-spots which had been identified through the Warm and Well Programme. The Neighbourhood Services Manager explained that Council had allocated £50,000 to enhance the Warm and Well Programme, which would be delivered by National Energy Action city-wide.

In response to a Member's question, the Portfolio and Programme Coordinator confirmed that the £90,000 offered by the PHA was separate to the £1million Cost of Living support and that the Working Group was asked to consider the offer from the PHA

to augment the Warm and Well Programme to intensify levels of support in identified hotspots.

The Working Group agreed to recommend that the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee accept the additional £90,000 which had been offered by the PHA.

Schools Project Update

In relation to the Schools Project, the Portfolio and Programme Coordinator reminded the Members that the Council had agreed to allocate £250,000 towards supporting school-led projects to help alleviate the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis. He advised the Members that letters would be issued, in December, to all schools in Belfast and that any which expressed an interest would be asked to sign a letter of offer committing to provide monitoring information and to abide by eligibility criteria.

The Members were advised that, once the total number of participating schools was known, the Education Authority would release funding to the schools with the project to be completed by 31st March, 2024.

In response to a Member's question, the Portfolio and Programme Coordinator confirmed that statistics in relation to update from schools across the City would be available at the conclusion of the programme but that he would encourage Members to advise their local schools of the upcoming funding.

Noted.

Communications Update

The Neighbourhood Services Manager explained that the communications surrounding the scheme would focus on signposting people to existing services. She highlighted that officers had developed a cost-of-living guide to signpost residents to support and advice services available across the city.

The Members emphasised that it was important that lessons were learned from previous schemes which had resulted in organisations having been inundated with requests for help and thereby impacting their ability to operate effectively.

The Working Group thanked the officers for the work which had been carried out in respect of the scheme to date.

Noted.

Date of Next Meeting

The Working Group noted that the date and time of the next meeting would be agreed in conjunction with the Chairperson.

Chairperson