

# Cost of Living Working Group

Wednesday, 11th September, 2024

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

Members present: Councillor Flynn (Chairperson); and  
Councillors Doherty and Nelson.

In attendance: Mr. K. Heaney, Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty;  
Mr. C. Tubridy, Hardship Programme Co-Ordinator; and  
Mr. B. Flynn, Committee Services Officer.

### Apologies

An apology was reported on behalf of Councillor I. McLaughlin.

### Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 6th June were taken as read and signed as correct.

### Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest recorded.

### Hardship Programme 2024/25

#### Current Hardship Programme - budget position and options for allocation.

The Working Group considered the following report which had been prepared by the Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty:

#### **“1.0 Purpose of Report**

**1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Members on the current position in regard to the development of a 2024-25 Hardship Programme to support those vulnerable people impacted by the cost-of-living crisis across the city.**

#### **2.0 Recommendations**

**2.1 The Working Group is asked to:**

- i. note the contents of this report including recent response received from the Department for Communities.**

- ii. note the current budget position (£100,773) in relation to the development and delivery of a hardship programme in 2024/25
- iii. consider and provide feedback on the proposed allocation model for the current available funding for 2024-25 as set out in para 3.11
- iv. note that if any further funding is secured that options would be brought back to the Working Group and SP&R Committee
- v. note the planned stakeholder event to be held in City Hall on Tuesday 29 October 2024

### **3.0 Main Report**

- 3.1 Members will recall the updated provided to the Working Group in June 2024 on the need for and positive impact of the £1million+ hardship scheme implemented in the 2023/2024 year which was fully funded by the Department for Communities. Members will be aware that the Council fully funded and delivered a £1million Fuel Hardship Programme in 2022/23.
- 3.2 At the meeting in June, Members had been informed that whilst some underspend from previous years was available to support a hardship programme in 2024/2025, the amount available is £100,773, which is significantly lower than previous years.
- 3.3 As agreed by Members, the Council issued correspondence to the Department for Communities seeking confirmation as to whether any in-year funding allocation for hardship would be made available to Council and highlighting the need for a longer-term commitment to such funding by the Department and NI Executive.
- 3.4 Attached at Appendix 1 for Members information is the response received from the Permanent Secretary of DFC, Mr Colum Boyle. The correspondence states that given the very constrained financial/budgetary position and competing priorities, the Department is currently unable to provide any hardship funding for 2024/25. It also confirms that it would not be possible at this time to consider a recurrent hardship funding model.

### **Hardship Support 2024-25**

- 3.5 In considering any allocation of hardship support in 2024-25, Members will recall the target cohorts and design principles previously agreed as set out below.

### ***Thematic focus of support (cohorts)***

- 3.6 The Hardship Scheme will seek to support those most vulnerable affected by the cost-of-living crisis with a key focus on enhancing

the capacity of existing organisations across the following themes:

- Support to children and young people and families
- Support to individuals/families in emergency need; and
- Support for older people.

**Design principles**

**3.7** The Members' Cost of Living Working Group agreed that the following guiding principles to inform and help shape the design of the emerging Hardship Fund.

- Dignity - delivered in a way that maintains the dignity of the person accessing support.
- Needs driven - targeted at those most in need and can demonstrate this.
- Wraparound – any individual accessing emergency support should be offered access to other wraparound services to help address need on an ongoing basis.
- Promote sustainability – not displace/ duplicate but add value to what is already in existence.
- Delivery Infrastructure - proper infrastructure (internally within BCC and externally within other organisations) is in place to support the delivery of support.

**3.8** Members will be aware of the increasing pressures facing many individuals, families and households across the city as a result of the cost-of-living crisis and recent government decisions including changing the eligibility criteria for winter fuel payments for pensioners. The most vulnerable in society are experiencing the greatest impact, widening inequalities and increasing the prevalence of social isolation. Recent research published by the Department for Work & Pensions had highlighted a growing trend in the number of children living in poverty within Belfast which was 21.3% in 2023.

**3.9** In considering the possible focus of the hardship support available in 2024-25, which is significantly lower than recent years, it is important to ensure we seek to maximise the impact of such investment and create economies of scale. Members will appreciate the necessary planning and preparation required by partners to implement, and importantly verify spend, of any funding allocated.

**3.10** As a reminder for Members a summary table is attached at Appendix 2 outlining the scope and impact of the of the £1m Hardship Programme (2023-24) and the significant role played by a range of partners across the city.

**3.11 Taking account of the current budget available (£100,773) in 2024-25 and the prevalence of child poverty, it is suggested that members consider the following proposed allocation of funding.**

Theme	Partner(s)	Funding amount	Potential support provided
1. Support to Children and Families	Save the Children	£50,773	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Funding to enhance delivery of grant programme across Belfast.</li> <li>▪ Referrals through 13 referring partners Sure Starts and community referral partners</li> <li>▪ <b>Estimated 1,007 Individuals supported</b></li> </ul>
2. Support for Individuals & Families in Immediate (Emergency) Need	Family Support Hubs (11 Hubs including Colin)	£50,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Supported families provided with a voucher for food or utility costs</li> <li>▪ <b>Estimated 1,300 individuals/families supported.</b></li> </ul>
		£100,773	

**3.12 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, including energy poverty. Members will note that at the recent Full Council meeting on 2nd September, a commitment was made to explore all opportunities to secure further funding for the hardship programme. Clearly if any additional funding is secured in-year, further proposals will be brought back to the working group and then the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee for consideration and approval.**

**3.13 Members will also note that £785,744 funding has been secured in 2024-25 to enhance the support available through the Social Supermarket network across the city, which has been a key strand of previous years hardship programmes.**

**3.14 Members will also note that officers are working with key support agencies across the city to host an exhibition event in City Hall on Tuesday 29 October 2024 which will acknowledge and showcase the important work being done across the city to help people in poverty. The event will enable key service providers and support organisations to network with each other, to explore possibilities to collaborate and importantly to understand the referral pathways to key areas of support which exist for vulnerable people. Elected Members will receive an invite to the event in due course.**

**Cost of Living Guide**

**3.15 As in previous years, officers are developing a cost-of-living support guide to signpost residents to support & advice services available across the city. It will be distributed to approximately 100 locations - community & leisure centres, libraries, family support hubs, advice centres, older people organisations, social supermarkets & foodbanks. The Council's website will also have**

a dedicated section at [belfastcity.gov.uk/costofliving](http://belfastcity.gov.uk/costofliving). It will signpost to the same support organisations & list locations where guides can be picked up.

**4.0 Financial & Resource Implications**

4.1 There is currently £100,773 identified from underspends to support the delivery of a hardship programme in 2024/25.

**5.0 Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment**

5.1 An Equality Screening and Rural Needs Assessment will be undertaken for the delivery of any Hardship Programme for 2024/25.”

The Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty outlined the principal aspects of the report. He requested that Members identify the themes that should be prioritised for support if additional funding were to become available, with a view to those views being conveyed to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee for its consideration.

The Working Group discussed several options and there was agreement that projects that would address child poverty and fuel poverty should be considered as priority, should additional financial funding be obtained. However, the Working Group agreed that it would be prudent to await further direction from the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee, at its meeting on 20th September, in this regard.

The Working Group agreed to adopt the recommendations as set out under 2.1 within the report.

It was noted that the views of the Working Group, regarding the prioritisation of any additional funding, be conveyed to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee for its consideration and direction.

**Date of Next Meeting**

The Working Group agreed to meet on Wednesday, 9th October, at 1:00pm.

Chairperson