

Cost of Living Working Group

Thursday, 14th October, 2025

MEETING OF THE COST OF LIVING WORKING GROUP

Members present: The Deputy Lord Mayor (Councillor Doherty); and Councillors Bradley, I. McLaughlin and Nelson.

In attendance: Mr. J. Girvan, Director of City and Neighbourhood Services;
Mr. K. Heaney, Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty;
Ms. N. Lane, Neighbourhood Services Manager;
Mr. C. Tubridy, Hardship Programme Coordinator;
Mr. B. Carr, Portfolio Manager; and
Mr. B. Flynn, Committee Services Officer.

Election of Chairperson

Moved by Councillor I. McLaughlin,
Seconded by The Deputy Lord Mayor (Councillor Doherty); and

Resolved – That Councillor Bradley be elected to serve as the Chairperson of the Working Group until the date of the Annual Meeting of the Council in 2026.

(Councillor Bradley in the Chair)

Apologies

Apologies were reported on behalf of Alderman Copeland and the Director of City and Organisational Strategy.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 4th September, 2025, were taken as read and signed as correct.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were recorded.

Hardship Programme 2024/25 Update and Budget Position

The Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty reminded the Working Group that the budget for the Hardship Programme 2024/25 had totalled £1,100,000. Of that amount, £925,672 had so far been allocated across the several thematic areas and 49,604 individuals had received support. It was reported that, as of 7th October, £127,369 had been provided

across the District Electoral Areas in the Schools Programme, with 21,921 pupils having received assistance for the purchase of uniforms, stationery and meals, and other miscellaneous items. The percentage breakdown for the overall Programme expenditure stood at 25 percent allocated to support older people; 17 percent to support individuals/families in emergency need; with 58 percent allocated to families and children and young people.

The Working Group was informed that a sum of £75,000 remained within the budget and that a draft report (copies of which had been circulated to the Working Group) would be submitted to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee on 24th October. The views of Members were sought on how the remaining fund should be allocated to ensure maximum benefit across the city.

After discussion, the Working Group agreed to recommend to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee that it agree that the remaining budget, and any further underspend identified, be allocated and distributed through the Family Support Hubs. It was agreed also that the fund be distributed through the provision of 750 x £100.00 family vouchers to address immediate emergency needs, that is, food or utility costs.

Hardship Programme 2024/25

Arising from discussion, the Working Group noted that the level of funding to support the Hardship Programme in 2025/26 would be reduced significantly unless additional funding was secured.

Anti-Poverty Event – January 2026

The Working Group was reminded that the first Anti-Poverty Networking Event had taken place in the City Hall in October, 2024, at which the Council had launched its Cost of living Support Guide. It was reported that a second networking event would be held in St. Comgall's School, Divis Street, in January 2026, and that invitations and information would be forwarded to Elected Members and a wide range of individuals, community-based groups, organisations and agencies.

Noted.

Social Supermarket Programme 2024/25 - Update

The Neighbourhood Services Manager provided an overview of the current Social Supermarket Programme, which, as of the date of the meeting, had provided support in the sum of £773,320, with £5,577 households and 14,294 individuals receiving assistance.

The Working Group noted that the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee, at its meeting on 19th September, had agreed that an additional £100,000 be allocated for the Social Supermarket Fund and that a report be considered at the October meeting in this regard. In addition, the Committee had agreed to endorse a recommended approach and assessment criteria and granted approval to operate an open call for grant applications to the fund in 2026/27.

After discussion, the Working Group noted the information which had been provided and it was agreed that officers would undertake an audit of the various delivery models

operated by Social Supermarkets across the city, particularly in respect of the signposting services made available, holistic working methods and examples of good practice.

Cost-of-Living Support Guide

The Working Group noted that officers had updated the cost-of-living support guide, which had been launched in October, 2024. The aim of the guide was to signpost residents to support and advice services across the city. The guide, in respect of which 15,000 copies had been printed, would be made available at 150 locations, and that digital versions would be available on the Council's website, which would also have a dedicated section signposting users to the various support organisations.

Chairperson