

Cost of Living Working Group

Thursday, 5th October, 2023

COST OF LIVING WORKING GROUP MINUTES HELD IN HYBRID FORMAT

- Members present: Councillor Bradley (Chairperson);
Alderman Copeland;
Councillors Doherty, Flynn,
I. McLaughlin and Nelson.
- Also attended: Councillor R. McLaughlin
- In attendance: 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;
Mr. B. Carr, Portfolio and Programme Coordinator;
Ms. M. Higgins, Lead Officer, Community Provision; and
Mrs. S. Steele, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

No apologies were reported.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 15th September were agreed as an accurate record of proceedings.

Declarations of Interest

No Declarations of Interest were reported.

Emerging Hardship Fund

Key considerations in developing Hardship Funding Framework – presentation

The Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty provided the Members with an overview of the Council's ambitions and potential focus of the Emerging Hardship Fund which had been informed by discussions with the Working Group.

He advised the Members of the design principles which would underpin the development of the proposed scheme including the timebound nature of funding from DfC which was required to be delivered by the end of March 2023, therefore, there was an urgency to get the scheme operational.

He also highlighted the importance that any proposed delivery agents would have the capacity, infrastructure and a proven track record of supporting those in need. The hardship fund needed to add value to any existing support mechanisms and ensure there was no duplication or displacement of any current assistance.

Taking account of the initial feedback received from Elected Members, it was proposed that the following groups would be the focus of any emerging Hardship Fund:

- Children and Young People (including those with special needs);
- Families and/or Individual in emergency need;
- Aging Population; and
- Newcomer Communities.

The Members were in agreement regarding the proposed focus areas, stating that they felt that these covered the most vulnerable affected by the cost-of-living crisis

The Members then considered a draft of the proposed funding framework model, which included the themes, proposed delivery partners and an indicative funding allocation as set out below:

Theme	Partner(s)	Funding Allocation (indicative)
1. Support to Children and Families	Schools via Education Authority	£250,000
	Save the Children	£200,000
2. Support for Individuals & Families in Immediate (Emergency) Need	SVDP	£100,000
	Red Cross (55+ Age Group)	£100,000
	Generalist Advice Providers	£100,000
	Trussell Trust	£75,000
	Fareshare	£75,000
3. Enhance Capacity of Existing Structures & Programmes	Winter Wellbeing Community Programmes	£19,000
	Warm & Well Programme	£50,000
	Social Supermarkets	£50,000
	TOTAL	£1,019,000

Following discussion in relation to both the proposed delivery partners and the indicative funding allocations, there was agreement in principle from the Members.

A Member requested that consideration be given to the potential to increase the funding allocated to the Social Supermarket support given the impact these were having across the city.

The officer noted that the funding allocations were indicative at this stage and might vary based on final discussions with the proposed delivery partners in relation to their capacity to deliver in-year. The Members agreed that any emerging model must be flexible to ensure available funding and associated support was delivered in-year.

The Members also discussed the fact that the referral pathways needed to be strong to ensure that local partners were aware of the scope of the support available.

Given that there was agreement, in principle, in regard to the guiding principles, cohorts and the indicative funding allocations, it was agreed that a report would be submitted to the October meeting of the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee seeking agreement, which would enable officers to progress the establishment and implementation of the Hardship Scheme.

Final Terms of Reference

The Working Group was reminded that, at its inaugural meeting in September, the Members had considered the Draft Terms of Reference and agreed to meet monthly, with additional meetings called if required. The undernoted Terms of Reference had been amended to reflect this change:

All-Party Members' Cost-of-Living Task Group

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 26th June 2023, agreed to:

- (i) 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.
- (ii) 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 experience 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 monthly basis or as otherwise required. 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.

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

The Members agreed the Final Terms of Reference.

Date of Next Meeting

It was agreed that the date of the next meeting would be agreed in liaison with the Chairperson.

Chairperson