

Cost of Living Working Group

Thursday, 6th March, 2025

MEETING OF THE COST OF LIVING WORKING GROUP

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

In attendance: Mr. J. Girvan, Director of Neighbourhood Services;
Ms. M. Higgins, Lead Officer, Community Provision;
Mr. C. Tubridy, Hardship Programme Coordinator;
Mr. B. Carr, Portfolio Manager; and
Ms E. McGoldrick, Democratic Services and Governance
Coordinator.

Apologies

No apologies were reported.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 11th November, 2024 were taken as read and signed as correct.

Declarations of Interest

Alderman Copeland declared an interest in that a family member worked for the Greater Village Regeneration Trust which was associated with a delivery partner of the Hardship Fund.

Hardship Programme Overview

The Portfolio Manager reminded the Working Group of the Hardship Programme's financial commitment, thematic focus and design principles.

The Working Group was advised that the cost-of-living guide to signpost residents to the support and advice services available across the city had been updated and distributed to over 100 locations - community and leisure centres, libraries, family support centres, advice centres, older people organisations and social supermarkets. The Hardship Programme Coordinator highlighted that the Council's website also had a dedicated section at www.belfastcity.gov.uk/costofliving and included support and activities offered by partner organisations.

The Hardship Programme Coordinator provided an update for each of the delivery partners funded through the 2024/25 Hardship Programme.

It was reported that the South Belfast Foodbank would be unable to deliver the allocated funding of £12,500 due to capacity issues and it was recommended that the Working Group consider the reallocation of the funding, due to the time constraints of the delivery deadline.

During discussion, Members raised concerns that South Belfast residents were potentially missing out on accessing the foodbank services available and pointed out the importance of access for all those in need across the city, together with equality, fairness and balance.

One Member highlighted the need to explore alternative models to ensure a spread of hardship services across the city.

In response to a Member's question in relation to organisations accessing the Fareshare Funding, The Lead Officer Community Provision advised that further information could be provided to the Working Group on supported projects in Belfast and the application process, subject to GDPR constraints.

The Hardship Programme Coordinator also highlighted that Winter Warmth Packs were available by referral and details of the process would be shared with the Working Group.

After lengthy discussion, the Working Group noted the update and agreed that the funding of £12,500 previously allocated to South Belfast Foodbank be reallocated to the Schools Programme (via the Education Authority) in South Belfast, in the first instance, and if required, be extended to other priority schools across the city.

It was also noted that there had been a slight increase of £1,412 to the Schools Hardship Programme, following the late addition of two schools. This would be covered by underspends from the previous year and included in the report to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee in March.

Social Supermarkets Update (Verbal Update)

The Lead Officer, Community Provision, provided an update on the Social Supermarkets and Advice Services.

She outlined that 21 projects were providing food support and wraparound services in the 24/25 year.

She highlighted that an update had been provided at the People and Communities Committee in March in relation to the outcome of the recent open call for applications to the Social Supermarket Fund.

The Working Group was reminded that the Social Supermarket Support Fund had opened on 14th October, 2024 for applications and the Council had launched a campaign to advertise and promote the fund.

It was reported that the 2025/26 Social Supermarket Support Fund had received 33 applications totalling £1,278,670.28 by the closing date. Members were also advised that the People and Communities Committee had referred Social Supermarket Funding to the

Strategic Policy and Resources Committee for consideration as the Council had not yet received a Letter of Offer from the Department for Communities for this area of work. This update would be provided as part of the Hardship Programme report.

The Lead Officer, Community Provision, reminded the Working Group that the Council provided funding for advice services which were delivered through 5 area advice consortia, registered with advice NI.

Noted.

Next Steps

The Portfolio Manager advised that a further update would be reported to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee in March.

He highlighted that the Hardship Programme Delivery Period ended on 31st June and that a performance report would be submitted to the Working Group and the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee in August.

Noted.

Date of Next Meeting

The Working Group noted that next meeting was scheduled for 5th June.

Chairperson