



Briefing – Cost of Living update for Inequalities Commission

Cllr David Baines, Leader of St Helens Borough Council

Date: 1st November 2022

Councils and local partners have delivered remarkable services and support and will continue to do what they can to protect people against higher costs, targeting help at those facing the most complex challenges. We can't tackle the problem alone - we need longer-term solutions that address wider cost of living pressures, which may be with us for some time to come.

What are we doing in St Helens.

Under the umbrella of #StHelensTogether (the campaign formed for the collaborative community response to COVID-19, that has now to come to encompass our entire approach of delivering help and support where it is most needed in our borough) we are quickly aiming to understand the impact of the crisis on the most vulnerable in the borough, as well as the impact on the operational costs of running the Council. St Helens Together will also be the lead campaign to support our communications, signposting, and action to support our residents in partnership with others.

The Council, along with its partners, continue to put communities, local people, and businesses at the heart of what it does. The first meeting of the Cost of Living Action Group took place in mid October to agree collective actions to address the issues caused by the crisis locally. If any members of the board didn't or couldn't attend and can offer support or would like to find out more please get in touch.

Today representatives of local public, private, faith and voluntary sector organisations have written to the chancellor regarding the cost of living emergency and asking for urgent fair funding for essential services. I'll circulate to the board.

Specific actions we're seeking to undertake include the following:-

Information and Advice – The Council website provides information, advice and signposts people to support that is available. The Council also uses its social media accounts to share signposting information to the community and amplifying the messages of key community partners that may be able to provide advice and support.

Council Tax Support – those on a low income may be eligible to receive support through the Council's Council Tax Reduction Scheme. For people already in receipt of support through this scheme and are struggling they can request an Exceptional Hardship Fund payment due to unusual or extreme circumstances. Under the Council Tax Regulations, a dwelling in which a disabled person lives may qualify for a reduction in the amount of Council Tax payable. There are further discounts available for others such as students, sole occupiers and care experienced young people.

Affordable Warmth Scheme - people living in fuel poverty can seek advice and information about the support available from the Affordable Warmth team or the local Energy Advice line managed by the charity EPPlus

Freephone 0800 043 0151. They will be able to advise on the simple actions that people can take in the home that will help save energy and money, as well as reducing greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide.

Rent & Housing – on occasion the Council may be able to support people facing difficulties paying rent. This support is called a Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP). It is most used for people affected by any national Welfare Reform changes.

Free School Meals – eligible families can apply for free school meals. The Council has also been awarded Holiday Activity Funding from the DfE for 2022/23. Officers coordinate activities in the Easter, Summer and Christmas holidays for children in receipt of Free School Meals to access. As well as children accessing the range of activities, they may not normally have access to they also receive food as part of the scheme.

Household Support Fund (HSF) – the Council has been allocated various grants from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to support residents with the Cost-of-Living Crisis. In April 2022 the DWP extended HSF from 1 April 2022 to 30 September 2022. However, the grant conditions changed with the requirement for:

- 33% of the grant to be spent on households with children
- Up to 33% of the grant spent on households without children
- 33% of the grant to be spent on households containing pensioners.

The focus remains on food, affordable warmth, help with utility bills and other essential households' items.

Food Pantries - It was through the discussions at the Inequalities Commission that we recommended the extension of food pantries. Also, Commission recommended the re-commencement of the fuel poverty working group which we have also done.

The Council is matching Torus funding to support the maintenance and expansion of food pantries, we have established the steering group to support the expansion. We are aiming to have 7 pantries, one in each locality, we have supported the mapping to recommend where we locate them based on deprivation and population density. We are also supporting Mission in the Economy in setting up the mobile pantry (we also supported the writing of the initial funding bid). We are also, supporting the fund-raising campaign, FEEDSTHELENS.

Winter Well Packs

The public health team are working with housing, communications, and the NHS to help prepare for winter. The team are also seeking to work with wider partners on joint resources and will produce winter well packs again this year, targeted at those who are most vulnerable to serious illness.

Live Well Directory

During the engagement with community members about Living a Good Life, people told us they want to know what is happening, when, where and also what support is available. To address this, public health and the NHS are funding a Live Well Directory, the same as is used in Knowsley and Liverpool.

Warm Spaces

As part of our St Helens Together approach, we wish to do more for our residents to ensure they are warm and to ease some of the unprecedented pressures on people at this time of year due to rising costs. Warm spaces are places where people can come together to stay warm, perhaps enjoy a cuppa or a bowl of soup. An exercise is currently underway to identify and map warm spaces across the borough. Organisations are encouraged to register their warm spaces at www.warmspaces.org

For further information contact:

Name: Rob Huntington

Email: RobHuntington@sthelens.gov.uk

