

North Norfolk District Council Cost of Living Summit and possible future actions

- Summary: North Norfolk District Council hosted a Cost of Living Summit on 3 November 2022. The event was well attended by statutory and voluntary and charitable organisations operating in the district and by local representatives. The event was positively received and feedback has been good. A cost of living survey targeted at residents, undertaken immediately preceding the event, received 966 responses over the course of a week. The report considers what further action can be taken by the Council and partners to support residents of the district to manage the impacts of the Cost of Living Crisis.
- Options considered: The report identifies some further actions that could be taken by the Council and partners addressing issues raised at the summit.
- Conclusions: The Cost of Living Summit identified further actions that could be taken by the Council and partners to support residents of the district to manage the impacts of the Cost of Living crisis.
- Recommendations: **To consider the further actions identified and decide which of these the Council would like to develop further.**
- Reasons for Recommendations: **To act upon the findings of the Cost of Living Summit and support residents of the district to manage the impacts of the Cost of Living Crisis.**

LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS AS REQUIRED BY LAW

(Papers relied on to write the report, which do not contain exempt information and which are not published elsewhere)

*The Cost of Living Summit presentation pack.
The Cost of Living Summit was a hybrid event with the majority present in person and some attending remotely via Zoom. The event was recorded through Zoom.*

Cabinet Member(s)	Ward(s) affected – all
Contact Officer, telephone number and email:	

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Council hosted a Cost of Living Summit on 3 November 2022. The event was attended by statutory and voluntary and charitable organisations operating in the district and by local representatives. The event was positively received and feedback has been good.
- 1.2 A cost of living survey targeted at residents, undertaken immediately preceding the event, received 966 responses over the course of a week.
- 1.3 The report considers what further action can be taken by the Council and partners to support residents of the district to manage the impacts of the Cost of Living Crisis.

2. Main body of report

- 2.1 The Cost of Living Summit focused on the two main issues impacting households; the cost of food and the cost of energy.
- 2.2 Presentations on initiatives seeking to address food poverty were received from the Cromer Foodbank, the Norfolk Community Foundation (Nourishing Norfolk project) and the Salvation Army (Sheringham).
- 2.3 Presentations on initiatives addressing energy poverty were received from officers of the Council covering Energy Rebates, Household Support Fund, Discretionary Hardship and Support Grant, Norfolk Warm Homes and Warm Spaces.
- 2.4 The results of the Cost of Living resident's survey were also presented.
- 2.5 The Cromer Foodbank was established in 2012 and has grown year on year and currently has outlets in Cromer, Sheringham, Holt, North Walsham, Stalham and Aylsham. It reported to the Summit, that despite demand for its service significantly increasing, donations continued to match the demand for the food it provided. However there was concern over the increased demand for support with energy costs. The budget for energy support for 2022/23 is £75,000. North Norfolk District Council has donated £10,000 to the Food bank and this will be used to support residents with energy costs. The Food Bank stated that it looks forward to a time when its services will be no longer needed.
- 2.6 The Norfolk Community Foundation (NCF) presented details of its campaign 'Nourishing Norfolk' to deliver Food Hubs across the County. Food Hub is a generic term for food outlets operating under a range of names such as Community Supermarket, Social Supermarket, Community Larder or Pantry where food is sold at prices which are approximately 65% of those of the lower end commercial food stores (e.g. Lidl, Aldi). Food Hubs operate from a wide range of premises including shipping containers situated near to community facilities. The Hubs usually occupy premises which are leased under advantageous terms to keep costs low or which are purchased outright from charitable funds. The Hubs generally employ a member of staff to manage the facility but otherwise are supported by volunteers.

- 2.7 The NCF expects that the operations can be self-sustaining in terms of advance purchase of stock and staffing costs over time, once a customer base has been established. They consider that Food Hubs are preferable to Food Banks in that they offer greater choice to customers and paying for the food, albeit it at a reduced cost, offers greater dignity for customers.
- 2.8 The NCF has supported the establishment of 15 Food Hubs including the mobile Food Hub operating in the Wells-next-the-Sea area. It has supported the establishment of further Food Hubs in Sheringham (in partnership with the Salvation Army) and North Walsham which are due to open by the end of the year and which have funding to cover their set up and first year of operation. The NCF is seeking funding of £60,000 to further the establishment of Food Hubs in Cromer, Holt, Fakenham and Stalham. The Council has been approached by NCF to assist with this funding gap.
- 2.9 The North Norfolk Health and Wellbeing Partnership provided £25,000 to the Wells Community Hospital Trust in support of the mobile Coastal Community Supermarket. The facility also delivers other support in addition to low cost food. The King's Lynn and West Norfolk Health and Wellbeing Partnership also funded the facility.
- 2.10 The Salvation Army (Sheringham) presented details of the wide ranging support that it offers to residents of the Sheringham area and how it works in partnership to deliver this support. Further details of the establishment of the Sheringham Food Hub were provided.
- 2.11 There are a number of Community Fridges/Larders in the district run by volunteers and although these might have a primary focus on reducing food waste they also assist local residents who are experiencing food poverty.
- 2.12 There are also a wide range of projects which can assist with food poverty and which also have wider health and wellbeing benefits including community allotments and supporting residents to grow their own food.
- 2.13 The Council could undertake further work to review the options and determine the most cost effective and sustainable way to address food poverty considering the geography of the district and the demand for volunteer support.
- 2.14 The Council will continue to deliver its core statutory services to its residents including support through Benefits and with housing. These services are experiencing increased demand and it is expected that increasingly this demand will be from customers that have not had to seek assistance previously. The Council also currently funds some discretionary services which support our most vulnerable residents (who will be affected to a greater extent due to cost of living pressures) and which are seeing increased demand and greater complexity. The Council will continue to administer programmes of support linked to cost of living pressures on behalf of Government.
- 2.15 The Council has invested in a 'Poverty Dashboard' or Low Income Family Tracker which will enable it to identify households vulnerable to poverty and target its support activity to those households and deliver campaigns to increase benefit uptake. This system became operational in November shortly after the Summit and will increasingly direct the proactive work of the Benefits Team through the newly established Financial Inclusion Team. This resource is available for a period of 12 months before the license expires and a decision as to whether to continue with the service will be required. The cost to renew the license is currently £25,000 per annum.

- 2.16 The Low Income Family Tracker has identified that there are 60 households in Council Tax arrears who are likely to be facing a cash shortfall which means that they do not have any disposable income to repay this debt. The Council should consider suspending all recovery action until the Financial Inclusion Team has had the opportunity to contact these households and confirmed their circumstances and ability to pay. This will enable consideration to be given to supporting the households with debt advice and where appropriate to make a claim for Discretionary Housing Payment.
- 2.17 The Norfolk Warm Homes Grant is available to support low income households with the cost of certain energy saving initiatives. The demand for contractors however does mean that it can be some time between a grant being approved and completion of works which means that successful grants applicants will not reap the benefits of the works until after the height of the current spike in energy prices. This however should not deter residents from applying for the grant as such works will provide long term benefits both in cost savings and thermal comfort.
- 2.18 The Council is a member of the Norfolk Warm Homes partnership and will apply for funding for other Government initiatives as and when they become available. Being a member of the Partnership increases the chances of being successful in attracting Government funding. The post delivering this work is funded to March 2024.
- 2.19 The Norfolk Community Foundation has led a campaign to support the establishment of Community Hotspots (Warm Spaces). 34 applications have been received for funding in the North Norfolk District Council area but the current funding received in donations from the campaign to date will only allow for 17 to be funded. The Council has supported organisations wishing to establish Warm Spaces through the Community Connector Service and will continue to support both those that have been successful in receiving funding and those that haven't who are still able to move forward and will promote these opportunities to residents.
- 2.20 The Cost of Living Survey identified some possible areas for action. Over 60% of respondents said that they would not know where to seek help if they were struggling with the cost of living which suggests that the Council and other partners delivering support need to further promote their services. The Council included a four page spread devoted to cost of living issues in its recent Outlook publication which is being delivered to all households in the district in early November. The Council is also planning further promotion of key messages through its social media channels over the coming months including communicating the results of the Cost of Living Survey and promotion of the newly established Financial Inclusion Team.
- 2.21 The headlines of the Cost of Living Survey were presented to the Summit but further analysis of the survey results has not yet been undertaken. Consideration will be given to the detailed free text responses and possible contact of respondents where contact details have been provided and consent for further contact given.
- 2.22 The breakout sessions at the Cost of Living Summit identified a number of areas for action that can be further explored by the Council and partners including; taking services closer to the community including mobile services; further utilising spaces in the community to get information to local residents including schools, GP surgeries and local shops; early years education in budgeting and meal preparation; development and distribution of simple recipes and cook books; hard copy information to those who do not have

access to digital forms including the development of a one page flier with the contact numbers of key local agencies; promotion of services through community radio; campaigns e.g. no money day; and events for agencies to come together (such as the Cost of Living Summit) to share and disseminate information on the services available in the area.

2.23 The Norfolk Community Advice Network NCAN issued a statement of emergency on 13 October 2022. This statement (appendix 1) detailed the unprecedented level of demand for the services delivered by partners of the network. The statement advised that services were buckling under the pressure of demand and asked for the support of local decision makers including;

- Looking at budgets and consider the prioritisation of frontline advice services
- Reviewing contingency funding allocations and making awards to advice charities
- Extending existing contracts without any service breaks or delays in payments
- Allow award recipients to spend this money more flexibly
- Advise agencies at the earliest possible time if additional information is needed to make payments or decisions about contingency funding, or about continuation of funding contracts
- Helping to find and fund more advisors
- Help to triage effectively, getting the right help efficiently to people most in need, by using the NCAN referral system
- Come to the partnership meeting on 9 November when all viable solutions will be explored

2.24 At the NCAN Partnership Cost of Living Emergency event on 9 November a number of pledges were asked of decision makers including;

- Continuing to pay benefits until it has been proven that the recipient's circumstances have changed positively rather than pausing payments and having those people fall into financial crisis.

3. Corporate Plan Objectives

3.1 Customer Focus – Many of the possible actions would deliver a more customer focused service to our residents and improve outcomes.

3.2 Quality of Life – food and energy poverty will have a detrimental effect on the quality of life of our residents. Initiatives which seek to reduce the impact of poverty will have a positive impact in the quality of life of our residents

4. Conclusion

4.1 The Cost of Living Summit was positively received by those attending. The Cost of Living Survey identified that a significant number of our residents are being negatively impacted by cost of living issues. The Council in the normal course of its work and through delivery of Government sponsored initiatives

(e.g. distribution of Energy Rebate and Household Support Fund) is supporting the most vulnerable residents in the district. The Council and its partner organisations however could do more to support residents with the impacts of cost of living and some of the identified actions could be implemented relatively quickly and easily without additional resource. Other actions will take longer or will require significant resource and these need to be given additional consideration to ensure that they are the right actions to focus any available resource on.

5. Medium Term Financial Strategy

The report does not make recommendation for the provision of any additional resource at this point.

6.0 Financial and Resource Implications

This report has no financial implications but will potentially lead to further work which may have financial implications.

7.0 Legal Implications

This report has no legal implications.

8.0 Risks

There are potentially reputational risks to the Council if it is not seen to be doing enough to support residents with the cost of living.

9.0 Sustainability

Sustainable communities need to thrive and support their most vulnerable. This report considers what more the Council can do to support its residents with cost of living issues.

10.0 Equality and Diversity

This report consider the impact of food and energy poverty on our residents. Inequalities means that the more vulnerable members of our communities are likely to feel the greatest impact.

11.0 Section 17 Crime and Disorder considerations

It is accepted that there is a link between poverty and crime and disorder.