



Policy and Resources Committee

29 September 2022

Title	Financial Vulnerabilities: Cost of Living workstream
Report of	Chair of the Policy and Resources Committee
Wards	All
Status	Public
Urgent	No
Key	Yes
Enclosures	Appendix A: Cost of Living Support mapping Appendix B: Barnet Council Cost of Living Support leaflet Appendix C: RX Cost of Living workshop Appendix D: CAB & BOOST- The Impact of Outreach Advice
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Summary

This report provides an update to the Committee of the council's recommended approach to the cost-of-living crisis. We have built on the three-pronged approach to support financially vulnerable residents throughout the cost-of-living crisis, outlined previously to the Committee on [8 June 2022](#), and are proposing specific actions on:

1.1.1 Ensuring the administration's commitment to refund residents this year's 1% Council Tax increase is delivered:

- a) In a targeted way this year through the development of a Residents Support Fund of £2m (equivalent to 1% on council tax) which will provide financial support to residents in crisis; and

b) Universally, through council tax bills in 2023/24.

1.1.2 The development of a Barnet Residents Support Fund which will provide financial support to residents in crisis;

1.1.3 Investing in joined-up back-end systems and a software solution to streamline the application process;

1.1.4 Provide additional funding to Barnet Together Alliance to enable a community-led support network for residents;

1.1.5 Proactive and ongoing information dissemination process and public awareness campaigns that signpost residents to support network; and

1.1.6 Various other initiatives that provide targeted interventions to mitigate food and fuel poverty challenges to our residents.

These recommendations aim to support income maximisation for our residents and resource support to our voluntary, community and faith sector (VCFS), to enable community wealth building initiatives and provide a targeted approach to addressing financial vulnerabilities.

Focusing on the immediate need of residents, these measures are part of a wider long-term agenda to create a sustainable, net zero economy. We believe this is best achieved by immediate responses that focus on income maximisation but takes into consideration wider networks of community-led support that address social and health challenges that are either a driver or consequence of economic inequalities.

We also considered how the council can make changes to be more accessible and approachable to our residents and as part of the wider Transformation Programme we will use the learnings from this framework to improve our digital and front-door services. While this paper focuses on the immediate response to support residents in crisis, we will continue to monitor central government initiatives and respond accordingly.

Officers Recommendations

It is recommended that the committee approve:

- 1. The approach in relation to delivery of the administration's commitment to refund residents this year's 1% Council Tax increase.**
- 2. The renaming of the Welfare Assistance Fund to the Barnet Resident Support Fund and add additional funding to extend support to £2 million.**
- 3. The launch of the Barnet Resident Support Fund on 3 October 2022 which will include a streamlined application process.**
- 4. Funding of £0.120m to invest in systems and software to develop an application process and targeted support to residents in need and agree the procurement activity as this is not on the agreed Forward Plan presented to this Committee in December 2021.**
- 5. We recommend matching an additional £0.150m investment to deliver a £0.3m Barnet Together Community Response Fund.**

- 6. That the Community Innovation Fund include cost-of-living support measures into desired outcomes.**
- 7. Communications and information dissemination recommendations as outlined in this paper to ensure a proactive approach to reaching residents experiencing financial difficulties.**
- 8. Authorises the Chief Executive in consultation with the Chair of the Committee to implement any additional funding to respond to the cost-of-living crisis that can be delivered within existing budgets, legal and financial authorisations.**

1. WHY THIS REPORT IS NEEDED

Context

- 1.1 The paper put to committee on 8 June 2022¹ outlined a three-pronged approach to supporting financially vulnerable residents throughout the cost-of-living crisis:
 - 1.1.1 information dissemination and awareness raising, to support income maximisation and reduce escalation of debt;
 - 1.1.2 increased service support for individuals in crisis and supporting charities and community groups, and
 - 1.1.3 targeted approach for those in debt and experiencing financial vulnerabilities.
- 1.2 Since June 2022 the cost-of-living pressures faced by residents has exacerbated. As at July 2022, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) measure of inflation had risen to 10.1%, falling back slightly to 9.9% as at September 2022. This is only expected to rise further into 2023, resulting in a rise in basic living costs such as food and energy. These challenges are affecting individuals, families, and businesses (as well as having an impact on council resources).
- 1.3 These challenges are further highlighted by:
 - Greater London Authority's (GLA) August Cost of Living update² advised that: 12% of Londoners said they have regularly or occasionally been unable to buy food or essential items or relied on outside support in the last six months. This proportion almost doubles amongst deaf and/or disabled Londoners (22%), and triples (39%) among Londoners who say they are 'financially struggling'.
 - Earlier this year the Government released findings³ that up to 850 thousand families who were entitled to receive Pension Credit did not claim these benefits.

¹

<https://barnet.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s72786/Cost%20of%20Living%20Approach%20Debt%20and%20Financial%20Vulnerabilities%20workstream.pdf>

² <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/the-rising-cost-of-living-and-its-effects-on-londoners>

³ [Income-related benefits: estimates of take-up: financial year 2019 to 2020 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/income-related-benefits-estimates-of-take-up-financial-year-2019-to-2020)

Following these findings, a recent Government led Pension Credit campaign saw a 275% rise⁴ in claims compared to the same period in 2021.

- Recent social insights from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) highlight that: Around 9 in 10 (91%) adults reported their cost of living has increased over the last month with the most reported reasons being an increase in the price of food shopping (96%), gas or electricity bills (79%) and the price of fuel (71%)⁵.

- 1.4 On 8 September 2022 the Government announced further measures to address these challenges including proposal to temporarily remove green levies on energy bills and cap the yearly energy bill for households at £2,500 for at least 2 years in addition to the £400 energy bills discount. This was alongside a 6-month package of support to businesses.

How we have supported residents since June

- 1.5 As well as administering support from Government, we have a range of funding support available to residents who are experiencing financial difficulties, in FY22/23 to date⁶ we have:

1.5.1 Approved and paid 77,397 council tax rebates totalling £11.61m (99.96% of allocation)

1.5.2 Awarded £0.626m from the Discretionary Housing Payments in partnership with BOOST, Citizens Advice Barnet (CAB), Barnet Homes, Christians Against Poverty (CAP) and other partners, helping 350 residents.

1.5.3 Awarded £0.245m from the Local Welfare Assistance Fund, helping 955 residents.

1.5.4 Awarded £2.536m (approx.) from the Household Support Fund in partnership with schools, supporting 14,462 children through school holidays, BOOST, AGEUK and CAP

1.5.5 Provided £0.017m in grants to residents from the Mayor's Benevolent Fund (School Uniform Fund) supporting 171 families

- 1.6 Signposting residents to current support; we have undertaken a significant communications campaign to support residents, which includes:

1.6.1 The development and distribution of over 10,000 leaflets (available in libraries, care centres, pharmacies, BOOST, foodbanks, Barnet Homes, care and support workers, Barnet Homes and other targeted locations) A copy of the leaflet can be found in Appendix B.

1.6.2 We developed a cost-of-living page on our website which provides information and phone numbers on local and central benefits, funds and support

⁴ [DWP's Pension Credit Day of Action sees weekly claims double - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/dwp-s-pension-credit-day-of-action-sees-weekly-claims-double)

⁵ [Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain: 17 to 29 August 2022 - Office for National Statistics](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peopleinwork/inequalityandpoverty/publicopinionsandsocialtrends/greatbritain17to29august2022)

⁶ Figures as of 13 September 2022

services available to residents, since its launch we have had over 5,000 visits, with our House, Energy and Utilities page receiving the most visits.

1.6.3 Provided updates and signposted residents to available support via Barnet First, the Barnet Council e-newsletter. Cost of Living pieces in our Barnet First newsletter have consistently received the most engagement and click throughs with cost-of-living news stories in August, receiving at least two thirds of engagement.

1.6.4 Undertaken activities to support central campaigns including Pension Credit Day of Action, Support for Households and energy scheme payments.

Activities conducted to inform design approach

1.7 Working off an already rich evidence base (as outlined in the 8 June 2022 paper) the design phase included a range of engagement, communications and outreach activities to gain further information on local challenges that are arising as a result of the escalating crisis.

1.8 We have undertaken mapping exercises to get an understanding of what current provisions are available to residents, how they access this support and what challenges residents experience in accessing this support. Findings from this exercise include:

1.8.1 Data released by DWP in February 2022 highlighted Barnet as having the 5th most Pension Credit caseloads in London Boroughs at 7,651. However, when compared with caseloads to over 65 population and State Pension claimants, Barnet is tracking at 14% and 16%, indicating more work needs to be done to raise awareness of these benefits. To date we have undertaken activities in line with Pension Credit Day of Action to encourage uptake, however, given this is an age group that is difficult to reach through our normal communications channels, we will work with VCFS to undertake more focused activities and wider London initiatives.

1.8.2 We currently provide £250,000 support to the Barnet Food Hub. We have also updated our Food Security Action Plan which has committed to acting on drivers of food insecurity with a special focus on tackling inequalities.⁷

1.8.3 There are a number of business-as-usual activities currently undertaken such as Care Leavers, Skills and Employment, Homelessness Prevention and Tackling the Gaps initiatives which focus support to vulnerable residents.

1.9 Our team conducted a workshop to hear from frontline staff who assist residents by providing welfare and financial support, debt management or general advice to understand what activity is currently taking place and any identify any gaps that exist. The findings and recommendations from this workshop can be found in Appendix C.

⁷ [Draft Barnet Food Plan 2022 - 2027 | Engage Barnet](#)

- 1.10 Further qualitative research was carried out by our resident experience team, to gather insight on what residents need and expect from our services. These insights have included feedback on financial support with residents wanting:
- ‘Direct access to financial support and actionable help when they contact the council rather than being referred to advisory, community, and wellbeing services. For example, getting direct help with getting bills paid, accessing funds’
 - ‘Wanting benefits information provided at any point to be practical and helpful. To consider how information will be used pragmatically.’
 - ‘Providing clear rationale for decision making (benefits and financial support) – as a proactive step.’
- 1.11 We have also engaged with other local authorities across London, partners and VCFS to understand what infrastructure was in place to support a hub model.
- 1.12 Whilst looking into best practice approaches, it was highlighted through both internal and external specialists, as well as in the August 2022 – GLA Cost of Living update⁸, that many residents who will be vulnerable are also impacted by mobility challenges, lack of access and fear of reaching out for help. Using a previous model adopted throughout the pandemic, we engaged with CAB and BOOST to explore the feasibility of satellite advisers that can provide outreach support to residents who fall in this category. A case study can be found in Appendix D that outlines how a further partnership can be utilised to address these challenges.

Recommended Approach

- 1.13 **Refunding residents this year’s 1% Council Tax increase:** To help with the cost-of-living crisis, the administration made a local election pledge to refund residents this year’s 1% Council Tax increase. The administration’s intention is that the refund is delivered in the most cost-effective and immediate way to help those most in need now, and, also, to ensure that everyone benefits from the refund without diverting resources that could be used to help residents directly.

We are therefore recommending:

- a) **Immediate targeted delivery of the refund** through the development of a Residents’ Support Fund of £2m (equivalent to 1% on council tax) which will provide financial support to residents in crisis this year (outlined in 2.14), and,
 - b) **Universal delivery of a 1% refund in 2023.** We anticipate that cost of living pressures will continue well into next year, and therefore, as part of a balanced and continuous package of measures we are recommending that the council tax is set at a 1% reduced amount.
- 1.14 **Development of a Residents Support Fund (RSF):** As part of the design phase, we reviewed our current Local Welfare Assistance fund which supports residents in crisis. Throughout this review we identified that the current application process and policies can be daunting to residents. To address this concern, we will streamline the

⁸ [The rising cost of living and its effects on Londoners - London Datastore](#)

application process as well as invest in tools that enable a more proactive approach to reach residents who fall into the financially vulnerable category (outlined further in 2.15). We will also align funding, outreach and distribution to central and internal initiatives, to ensure resources are targeted to those who need it most, when they need it. In line with this review, we have renamed this fund the Resident Support Fund and provided an additional £1.5m into the fund, taking the total fund to £2m (equivalent to 1% on council tax).

The fund will be developed and administered by our Welfare and Benefits team. To ensure we can be targeted with our resources and meet the needs of our residents throughout the crisis we are upskilling and re-prioritising the focus of the incoming welfare team from Capita on the 1 Oct 2022 and increasing the team temporarily with 3 additional Income Maximisation Officers (recruitment is taking place now) who will provide outreach support and specialist advice to residents who are / or at risk of experiencing financial difficulties. This will support the findings in the Debt and Financial Vulnerabilities paper to reduce costs of enforcement, debt collection and writing off debt.

1.15 **Investment in systems and software to develop a more joined-up approach:**

Throughout the design phase we received consistent feedback that the application process is fragmented and there is no clear referral pathway. This in part is due to different eligibility criteria and funding allocations as well as back-end system challenges. It has also been identified by our front-line teams that the referral process could be simplified to ensure we are providing a consistent and quality service to our residents, as well as extending the referral process out to wider networks to ensure we can reach as many residents as possible. Evidence from the June 2022 paper also indicated the need to be more proactive and empathetic to residents who are experiencing financial difficulties. To address these challenges, we have undertaken three measures:

- To access the RSF, as well as other financial support, we have identified a solution that streamlines all funding options, and with the guidance of a benefits calculator, residents can easily navigate what support is available to them into one easy to use application form. This form will also benefit our wider organisational objectives by simplifying the application process for our teams and partner organisations who support residents through the application process. This form will go live to the public on the 3 October 2022.
- Propensity profiling software that will identify financial vulnerability, allowing segmentation and a tailored communications approach which provides an opportunity to signpost residents who are experiencing financial vulnerabilities to local and central benefits and fund support schemes.
- Barnet has an extensive support network that goes beyond council services such as Mental Health services, Barnet Homes, Foodbanks, BACE Holidays, BOOST, CAB and Green Doctors. To ensure we take a holistic approach and provide a sustainable service that makes a positive impact on residents' lives in the long-term, we will be developing a triage tool that works as a referral system. This tool will be developed as a priority with the aim to go live over the coming months.

1.16 **Further support to VCFS and wider community organisations:** As with the COVID pandemic, support from and for the VCSF infrastructure in the borough will be

critical to supporting vulnerable residents. We are discussing with the Barnet Together Alliance (BTA) options (indicative) for:

- Local spaces which provide targeted activities and initiatives to residents, specifically warm spaces initiatives as we head into winter.
- Warm clothing and school uniform banks for children and families.
- Specialised support to pensioners and residents who are disabled, or deaf and hard of hearing, specifically with accessing benefit and care services support.
- Specialised support for migrants and refugees, specifically around translation services in public health and community initiatives to enable access to information and support.
- Provide food and fuel vouchers which residents can access.
- Further participation of a range of third sector and faith groups that represent the diverse communities of Barnet and will be crucial in providing a holistic support network for residents.

To support these objectives the Barnet Together Alliance has directed the full £0.150m from the Community Response Fund into a pool of funding that will be available to Barnet VCFS groups to bid towards developing initiatives to support residents through the cost-of-living crisis. The council proposes to match this funding with an additional £0.150m, bringing the fund to a total of £0.300m. The fund will be administered by our partners in the Barnet Together Alliance. The council will provide our match fund to the Young Barnet Foundation as a one-off grant. We are in active discussion with BTA about expectations.

Round 3 of the Community Innovation Fund (joint funding with Health) will go live in October 2022 and we are building cost of living into the desired outcomes [sought from this round]. This will provide community groups with access to a further funding to focus on cost-of-living support.

1.17 **Public awareness and communications support:** Led by the communications team, we will develop a communications strategy which will focus on reaching a range of different audiences to inform residents about central government and local support available, with a special focus on reaching residents who are experiencing financial hardship, low-income families, and individuals. As such we will not only focus on raising awareness of the measures as outlined in this paper but providing further support to VCFS groups by co-designing and amplifying communications activities, developing assets and using our own communications channels to provide an all-encompassing support network to our residents. Key recommendations include:

- Develop a public awareness campaign that focuses on central and local support, funding and resources;
- Work with networks and steering committees to ensure critical information dissemination reaches as many residents as possible;

- Use data and insight to make informed decisions about where we target our resources and reach residents in need; and
- Conduct public opinion research with a diverse group of residents to understand local challenges.

1.18 **Holistic and joined up information dissemination:** It was identified in the internal workshop held that there are several teams and a number of staff, who have a wealth of experience working with and providing support to residents. Fuller findings can be found in Appendix C. It is important this group of staff are kept informed throughout the crisis period. As such it was recommended that we:

- Establish a formal network of teams supporting residents through the cost-of-living crisis (and beyond when presenting with financial vulnerability), ensuring faster information dissemination across services and regular debrief sessions on resident needs and feedback to enable staff to adapt approaches as the situation develops
- Define what the current offer for cost-of-living support is across the teams (internal & external) and create a 'virtual' collaboration between teams, so residents receive a more joined up response. This will create clearer access routes, specifically available for cost-of-living support
- Review team naming and terminology used to reduce anxiety when residents make contact

1.19 **Partnering to provide debt and special benefit support to residents:** In response to the pandemic Citizens Advice Barnet and BOOST set up a new partnership whereby a CAB adviser (funded from the Barnet Community Innovation Fund) was embedded within the team at BOOST, providing advice to their clients on a range of problems and access to more specialist support.

The outcome of this model was positive and as a result we will fund 2 additional outreach workers. One will adopt the above-mentioned partnership model and provide specialist debt and money advice to residents, while the other will be recruited by BOOST to provide benefits advice from their office at Burnt Oak Library as well as provide outreach support in foodbanks and other community spaces.

BOOST have also partnered with Debt Free London to install a debt advice kiosk into their Burnt Oak Library office.

1.20 **Increased provision and network to distribute food and fuel vouchers:** Setting eligibility criteria sometimes limits who we can help, but it is necessary to ensure that those most in need can access the support until we are able to better evaluate and measure the local needs. For a lot of our partners, sometimes this eligibility criteria can get in the way of being able to be an important check-in point for residents who have multiple risk indicators. We will continue to work with our current partners, through our Barnet Together Alliance partnership, as well as expand this support to new VCFS groups to supply food and fuel vouchers.

1.21 **Digital inclusion initiatives:** During the pandemic the council had to consider how we can support residents remotely, highlighting the importance of the council's role as a

support network for residents, and the barriers that residents who are digitally excluded face when trying to access support. Financial barriers can lead to digital exclusion and supporting residents to get online is crucial in response to the cost-of-living crisis. National research ⁹shows tangible benefits by doing this; time saved, increase in earnings, better employability prospects and being able to save money by shopping online.

As part of our response, we have:

- Invested in tools that make our current digital services more accessible to all resident needs;
- Provided digital literacy, skills workshops that support residents to build confidence in using digital tools;
- Supplied laptops for residents who are digitally excluded due to financial barriers;
- Working with micro and small businesses to help them get online, become a part of the digital economy, and benefit from a wider network of retail customers, services and suppliers;
- Have a strategic partnership with CommunityFibre which includes free fibre broadband connection to residents in need and community spaces as well as a no eligibility required social tariff; and
- Working with the Good Things Foundation to better promote the National data bank¹⁰, which can provide free data sims directly to our residents.

Other considerations

1.22 Impact on Business: Following the pandemic businesses in Barnet were starting to see a return to normal, however the rise in costs are challenging businesses, with the ONS reporting that inflation of goods and services and energy prices are the top concern for businesses¹¹.

The Government's announcement on 8 September¹² indicated that energy support will be available for a period of 6 months to businesses and other non-domestic energy users, including charities and public sector organisations like schools, following this period the Government will target resources to vulnerable industries. The Government will review this scheme in December to identify where best to target this resource and it is unclear if further support will be directed to businesses at this time.

1.23 Impact on council resources: Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation in July was standing at 10.1% and the Monetary Policy Committee is forecasting that this will rise to 13% or more by January 2023. This is having a significant impact on council resources. The council is facing rising energy costs as high as 68% and fuel costs as high as 41% in Quarter 1, in addition, the street lighting budget could have a

⁹ [the economic impact of digital inclusion in the uk final submission stc 0.pdf \(goodthingsfoundation.org\)](#)

¹⁰ <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/databank/>

¹¹ [Business insights and impact on the UK economy - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

¹² [Energy bills support factsheet: 8 September 2022 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

significant pressure from increase in energy prices circa £0.500m. This is actively being reviewed as part of monthly monitoring and contingency is being used a tool to help mitigate the impact on services and reserves.

- 1.24 **Support for Barnet Council staff:** As we start to announce our measures and ramp up support for residents, we need to consider that Barnet Council employees may also be experiencing challenges. In common with most councils, Barnet follows a process of national collective bargaining to determine its pay award to staff. The current offer from employers to unions, for outer London, is £2,200. Different unions are in different stages of advising and consulting their members.

While the timescale for this is outside of the council's control, it is hoped that an award will be agreed in the autumn, backdated to 1st April 2022. By following the national process, the council ensures that its pay levels remain above the London Living Wage.

The council will also continue to encourage its partners to provide the Living Wage to their staff. In addition to basic levels of pay, the council also provides a range of other employee benefits, including retail and leisure discounts, and the provision of an emergency loan facility through "Salary Finance". The council also takes a proactive approach to the wellbeing of its staff, including providing an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) which includes access to financial and debt-management advice and is part of the London Capital Credit Union.

2. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 The cost-of-living crisis has got worse since the 8 June 2022 paper, with many predicting the possibility of a global economic recession. It is expected that Autumn will deepen these challenges as we experience significant rises in energy prices and interest rate hikes to take place. It is our position that we should operate in a crisis management approach and where possible lean on current infrastructure to roll out immediate response as outlined in Appendix A.
- 2.2 The overall objective of this work is to improve resident outcomes such as financial wellbeing and mental health and an overall impact on the quality of life, with a specific focus on developing a bespoke approach to those most vulnerable in the borough.
- 2.3 The intended outcome for this work is to primarily support; those currently in financial hardship and prevent those most at risk of financial vulnerability from escalating into hardship. The work would also support better debt collection from those who can pay, allowing savings to be made and reinvested into transformation of services.
- 2.4 We aim to achieve this by:
- 2.4.1 Supporting collaborative council working, identifying opportunities for joined up approaches across the council, partners and VCFS, and building confidence in sharing data in a way that is secure, controlled, and compliant.
 - 2.4.2 Refocusing our current approaches so that they are tailored to individuals, empathetic and proactive to signposting support.
 - 2.4.3 Creating an insight driven model to inform prevention strategies on

the specific needs of residents as individuals.

- 2.5 Alongside the financial impact, there are much wider benefits in supporting those in debt and financial vulnerability, for example solving this challenge would ultimately spearhead a transformation of culture at Barnet; proactive collaboration across services and a preventive way of working, as we begin to develop a more holistic picture of resident vulnerability across council services.

3. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND NOT RECOMMENDED

The alternative options considered include:

- 3.1 Do nothing – given the crisis impacts essential items such as food, housing and energy this option is not recommended.

4. POST DECISION IMPLEMENTATION

- 4.1 We have attached our approach in Appendix A.
- 4.2 Further updates on this implementation and additional developments will be provided in future committee meetings.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR DECISION

- 5.1 Corporate Priorities and Performance
- 5.1.1 Measures in this paper have been developed in consultation with the Transformation team.
- 5.2 Resources (Finance & Value for Money, Procurement, Staffing, IT, Property, Sustainability)

Finance & Value for Money – The development of our RSF will include the £0.500m from the Welfare Assistance Fund as well as an additional £1.500m from a ring-fenced reserve of £2.000m set aside for the administration's 1% Council Tax Rebate pledge. We expect to also add additional funds as allocated by Central Government from the Household Support Fund for the period October 2022 – March 2023, of which the council's allocation is £2.4m. Expenditure plans for this allocation are being drafted for submission in October 2022.

The Barnet Together Community Response Fund proposal of £0.300m will be funded by £0.150m from the Community Response Fund held by the Barnet Together Alliance. The match-funded balance is from the remaining £0.500m Council Tax Rebate reserve of £2.000m.

A further £0.120m will be allocated from the remaining £0.500m balance in the Council Tax Rebate reserve to the development of joined-up back-end systems and application processes, as well as a reporting and monitoring solution that provides the council with actionable insights to target our resources. We see this investment as crucial to supporting our income maximisation priorities for residents as it will streamline our process and identify central funding schemes

that benefit our financially vulnerable residents. This will also support the findings in the Financial Vulnerabilities paper to reduce costs of enforcement, debt collection and writing off debt.

The total cost of providing the targeted cost of living interventions is within existing resources held for emergencies. These are separate from the council's financial resilience reserve amounts and the general balances required under s25 when the Section 151 Officer sets the prudent and safe level of resources underpinning the annual budget.

Item	Proposed Cost (£m)	Funded From	Funding Available (£m)
Resident Support Fund	2.000	CT Rebate Reserve	2.000
		Local Welfare Support Reserve	0.500
Barnet Together Community Response Fund	0.150	CT Rebate Reserve	
Joined Up Systems and Applications	0.120	CT Rebate Reserve	
TOTAL	2.270		2.500

In implementing these cost-of-living responses, the council will not adversely impact the Medium-Term Financial Strategy, nor its revenue position on the General Fund as set out in the budget approved at Full Council in March 2022.

Any further funding to be implemented in response to the cost of living that is contained within existing resources and appropriate delegations is recommended to be delegated to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Chair of the Committee.

- 5.2.1 Procurement – A procurement exercise will be undertaken to recruit a service design capability
- 5.2.2 Staffing – A recruitment process has been undertaken to hire 3 new income maximisation officers and an internal secondment for a cost of living lead.
- 5.2.3 IT – We are currently undertaking due diligence to acquire software to support a streamlined application process, triage tool, financial dashboard and backend systems.
- 5.2.4 Sustainability - This will support our decision to make a financially sustainable and

resilient Barnet, ensuring no resident is left behind as we become more sustainable.

5.3 Legal and Constitutional References

5.3.1 The council's Constitution, Article 7 Committees, Forums, Working Groups and Partnerships, sets out the functions of the Policy and Resources Committee:

(1) To be responsible for:

- Strategic policy, Finance and corporate risk management including recommending: Capital and Revenue Budget; Medium Term Financial Strategy; and Corporate Plan to Full Council
- Finance including Corporate procurement, Effective use of resources, Procurement Forward Plan, Information Technology

(2) To be responsible for those matters not specifically allocated to any other committee affecting the affairs of the Council.

5.3.2 Under Barnet's Contract Procedure Rules, due to the expected value of this procurement it must be authorised by a decision of the relevant theme committee, which for Finance is Policy and Resources Committee, unless it is included on the Annual Procurement Forward Plan.

5.3.3 Procurement of software solution is an immediate need to administer the RSF. In accordance with single tender action, Contract Procedure Rules 6.1 will be utilised.

5.4 Insight

5.4.1 Recommendations outlined in this paper builds off evidence from the previous paper dated 8 June, Cost-of-Living approach: Debt and Financial Vulnerabilities workstream, conducted by the Insights and Intelligence team.

5.4.2 The work to date has been cross-functional and included teams from Strategy and Resources, Resident Experience and Insight and Intelligence teams. In addition, we have conducted qualitative research with residents, services and VCFS.

5.5 Social Value

5.5.1 The decision taken within this report will provide financial support to our most vulnerable residents.

5.6 Risk Management

5.6.1 There is a risk that if we are unable to deliver this piece of work, we will remain reactive as opposed to becoming proactive in the support that we offer our residents. We anticipate that the impact will result in an increased number of residents as the cost-of-living rises, resulting in many more of our residents being considered 'at risk' of financial hardship.

5.6.2 Another risk is that this work will not produce the intended impact to our residents. We aim to reduce this risk through several controls such as discussions, updates and reviews at the Prevention and Sustainability Think Tanks, CMT and the Financial

Vulnerabilities Action Group. This project has also engaged and been developed with other services, residents, VCFS, the Council Management Team, senior managers, and other relevant staff, since its inception to the current point to ensure that we keep how we can best support our residents at the centre of our pilot design.

5.7 Equalities and Diversity

- 5.7.1 Equality and diversity issues are a mandatory consideration in the decision-making of the council.
- 5.7.2 Decision makers should have due regard to the public-sector equality duty in making their decisions. The equalities duties are continuing duties they are not duties to secure a particular outcome. The equalities impact will be revisited on each of the proposals as they are developed. Consideration of the duties should precede the decision. It is important that Council has regard to the statutory grounds in the light of all available material such as consultation responses. The statutory grounds of the public-sector equality duty are found at Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 and are as follows below.
- 5.7.3 A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:
- a) Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
 - b) Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - c) Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
- 5.7.4 Having due regard to the need to advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it involves having due regard, in particular, to the need to:
- d) Remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic;
 - e) Take steps to meet the needs of persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it;
 - f) Encourage persons who share a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.
- 5.7.5 The steps involved in meeting the needs of disabled persons that are different from the needs of persons who are not disabled include, in particular, steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities.
- 5.7.6 Having due regard to the need to foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it involves having due regard, in particular, to the need to:
- Tackle prejudice, and

- Promote understanding

5.7.7 Compliance with the duties in this section may involve treating some persons more favourably than others; but that is not to be taken as permitting conduct that would otherwise be prohibited by or under this Act. The relevant protected characteristics are:

- Age
- Disability
- Gender reassignment
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Race,
- Religion or belief
- Sex
- Sexual orientation
- Marriage and Civil partnership

5.7.8 The public sector equality duty considerations are key for the development of our programme of activity as well as our Corporate Plan.

5.7.9 In our development of the priorities, we will be carrying out Equality Impact Assessments as applicable for each individual project area.

5.7.10 As outlined in this report, in our development of the Corporate Plan, we will focus on Tackling the Gaps, our resident focused equality activity, and, in doing so, aim to embed equalities considerations into everything that the council does. We will also take protected characteristics, including seldom heard voices, into consideration in any engagement activity.

5.7.11 As a part of our Corporate Plan, we will also note our values as a council ('caring, learning, inclusive, collaborative'), out of which 'inclusive' is focused on EDI.

5.7.12 Forthcoming draft reporting to P&R Committee in December 2022 will outline this further, as part of the draft Corporate Plan as well as through our Equalities Annual Reporting.

5.8 Corporate Parenting

5.8.1 The purpose of this pilot is centred around providing a better quality of life our residents most at risk of financial vulnerability. In creating these measures, we took into consideration both residents who are already financial vulnerable and those at risk. By doing this we hope to improve circumstances and provide better outcomes to households impacted by the rising cost of living and thus, the children and young people that are part of these households. From our research, we understand the stress from debt and financial vulnerabilities in a household can have a negative

impact on children and young people if not addressed.

5.9 Consultation and Engagement

5.9.1 Working of an already rich body of evidence we undertook a cross-service workshop and we've also liaised with the VCFS in our co design workshops to ensure multi-service perspectives are accounted for.

5.9.2 As part of the development of our proposal we have undertaken desktop research to understand how other local authorities are dealing with similar problems and challenges; learnings from these models will be used to develop our model.

5.10 Environmental Impact

5.10.1 We continue to put the environment at the heart of what we do and see an investment in energy saving communications as an important aspect of support residents minimise their energy bills and implement measures that can limit negative impact on the environment.

5.10.2 As part of our Sustainability Commitment, we are committed to achieving net zero as a council by 2030, and as a borough as soon as possible after this, and no later than 2042. Therefore, any proposal will be developed with this in mind.

6. Background papers

- Policy & Resources Committee paper dated 8 June - Cost of Living approach: Debt and Financial Vulnerabilities workstream accessed <https://barnet.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s72786/Cost%20of%20Living%20approach%20Debt%20and%20Financial%20Vulnerabilities%20workstream.pdf>
- The rising cost of living and its effects on Londoners - [The rising cost of living and its effects on Londoners - London Datastore](#)
- Income-related benefits: estimates of take-up: financial year 2019 to 2020 - [Income-related benefits: estimates of take-up: financial year 2019 to 2020 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)
- Department of Work and Pension's: Pension Credit Day of Action sees weekly claims double - [DWP's Pension Credit Day of Action sees weekly claims double - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)
- Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain: 17 to 29 August 2022 - [Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain: 17 to 29 August 2022 - Office for National Statistics](#)
- Draft Barnet Food Plan 2022 – 2027 - [Draft Barnet Food Plan 2022 - 2027 | Engage Barnet](#)
- The economic impact of Digital Inclusion in the UK - [the economic impact of digital inclusion in the uk final submission stc 0.pdf \(goodthingsfoundation.org\)](#)

- Good Things Foundation: National Databank - [National Databank - Good Things Foundation](#)
- Business insights and impact on the UK economy: 8 September 2022 - [Business insights and impact on the UK economy - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)
- Energy bills support factsheet: 8 September 2022 - [Energy bills support factsheet: 8 September 2022 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)