

STAFFORDSHIRE MOORLANDS DISTRICT COUNCIL

Cabinet Delegated Decisions

13 January 2023

TITLE:	Cost-of-Living - Update
PORTFOLIO HOLDER:	Councillor Ross Ward - Portfolio Holder for Communities
CONTACT OFFICER:	David Smith - Head of Communities and Climate Change
WARDS INVOLVED:	All

**Appendices Attached – Appendix A: Revised Emergency Funding Proforma.
Appendix B: Support for Households – advice for Councillors.**

1. Reason for the Report

1.1 To provide an update on the Council’s response to the Cost-of-Living crisis.

2. Recommendation

2.1 That the Cabinet Member:

- Approves the action plan set out at Appendix A
- Notes the recruitment of an additional Community Officer to focus on delivery of the “well-being” agenda in Staffordshire Moorlands and the corporate objective of maintaining strong partnerships with community groups
- Approves funding Supports Staffordshire to recruit an officer to provide local advice and support to residents who are considering volunteering as a way of improving capacity within the voluntary sector
- Agrees to retain the Voluntary Sector Emergency reserve focussed on providing support to organisations that may find themselves struggling financially, with funding decisions signed-off by the Portfolio Holder for Communities
- Approves the distribution of opportunities for accessing relevant grants and other funding opportunities to Town and Parish Councils, businesses, and voluntary organisations, which support delivery of Council priorities.
- Supports the work being undertaken to role out the ECO4 scheme

- Notes the consortium bid for HUG2 funding submitted by Staffordshire Warmer Homes to improve the energy performance and heating systems of off gas grid homes
- Notes the planned review of arrangements for engagement between the District, Town and Parish Councils.

3. Executive Summary

- 3.1 On 4 October 2022, the Cabinet considered a report on the Council's response to the energy/cost-of-living crisis. The cost-of-living crisis has also been the subject of debate at Full Council, Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel, at two meetings of the Cost-of-Living Working Group. Discussions have also taken place with other key statutory organisations and the voluntary sector. This report provides a further update on the actions of the Council.
- 3.2 Discussions have indicated that further support should be focussed in three main areas:
- Support for the Voluntary Sector (volunteers and financial challenges)
 - Support for those in most need (identification of and support for the most vulnerable, mental health, digital access)
 - Work with Town and Parish Councils.

4. How this report links to Corporate Priorities

- 4.1 The action outlined within the report assists the Council to deliver Aim 1 of the Corporate Plan: *“To help create a safer and healthier environment for our communities to live and work”*. Specifically it supports the delivery of the following objectives:
- Increased supply of good quality affordable homes
 - Develop a positive relationship with communities
 - Effective relationship with strategic partners
- 4.2 The actions also support Aim 2: *“To use resources effectively and provide value for money”* by focussing on access to services and effective use of Council assets. The creation of micro enterprises supports delivery of Aim 3 (*“To help create a strong economy by supporting further regeneration of towns and villages”*) through encouraging business start-ups and enterprises. The actions also support delivery of the Council's Climate Change Strategy and consequently Aim 4 of the corporate plan (*“To protect and improve the environment and respond to the climate emergency”*).

5. **Alternative Options**

- 5.1 The report outlines the suggestions and comments from the Council's Cost-of-Living Working Group and also from discussions with key partners including those from the voluntary sector.

6. **Implications**

6.1 Community Safety - (Crime and Disorder Act 1998)

It has been argued that the cost-of-living crisis could cause an increase in acquisitive crime include theft of food and other goods from shops. Those struggling to get by may also fall victim to scams or illegal money lenders (loan sharks). Increased stress from financial and other pressures may lead to increases in domestic violence, neighbour disputes, etc. At the extreme end of the spectrum, the crisis could lead to social unrest.

Currently, there are no signs that the cost-of-living crisis is causing a direct increase in crime or disorder in Staffordshire Moorlands. This was also case following the financial crisis of 2007-08.

6.2 Workforce

The Cost-of-Living crisis creates an increase in demand for some Council Services. Council Officers, and their families, are also directly affected by the crisis.

The Council is recruiting an additional Community Officer to focus on delivery of the "well-being" agenda in Staffordshire Moorlands and the corporate objective of maintaining strong partnerships with community groups.

The actions include the roll-out of Mental Health First Aiders to provide support to Council Officers.

6.3 Equality and Diversity/Equality Impact Assessment

The impact of increases in the cost-of-living can be more severe for some sections of society. The impact may vary according to factors such as age, disability and race.

6.4 Financial Considerations

The Council will provide an additional £20,000 for a 0.5 Volunteering for All Officer, which will be taken from the Council's reserves

6.5 Legal

No specific implications

6.6 Climate Change

Insulating homes decreases the amount of fuel needed to heat them, reducing carbon emissions. The Committee on Climate Change argues that “near-complete” decarbonisation of how we heat our homes would be required for the UK to meet its emission reduction targets. This can be achieved through changing to cleaner fuels and reducing the amount of energy required.

Increased energy prices can lead to reduced energy consumption which can have positive impacts on carbon emissions but negative impacts in terms of a range of other factors such as health.

The creation of micro enterprises may provide a mechanism for creation of “green jobs”.

6.7 Consultation

An initial report setting out the Council’s response to the Cost-of-Living Crisis was considered by Cabinet on 4 October. The cost-of-living crisis has also been the subject of debate at Full Council, Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel, at two meetings of the Cost-of-Living Working Group. Discussions have also taken place with other key statutory organisations and the voluntary sector.

6.8 Risk Assessment

The impact of the cost-of-living crisis on our local communities and businesses was discussed in the Cabinet report of 4 October 2022.

The Council must respond appropriately to the risks created by the crisis, whilst ensuring that the Council is able to maintain a balanced budget.

The full extent and duration of the crisis is unknown, which creates risks in terms of being able to respond appropriately in the short, medium and long term to the effects of the crisis.

Neil Rodgers
Executive Director (Place)

Web Links and Background Papers

Minutes of Communities Overview & Scrutiny Panel 17
October 2022
<https://democracy.highpeak.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=190&MId=2594&Ver=4>

House of Commons Library Research Briefing: Self-
Disconnection of pre-payment meters, 14 December 2022
<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research->

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[briefings/cdp-2022-0236/](#)

House of Commons Library Research Paper: Domestic energy prices, 25 November 2022

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9491/>

House of Commons Library Research Briefing: Fuel Poverty in the UK, 9 May 2022

[Fuel poverty in the UK - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\)](#)

House of Commons Library Research Briefing Energy Bills Support Scheme: Government policy and FAQs, 9 August 2022

[Energy Bills Support Scheme: Government policy and FAQs - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\)](#)

House of Lords Library, In Focus: Home insulation and the net zero target, published Wednesday 17 June 2020.

<https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/home-insulation-and-the-net-zero-target/>

Ofgem: Self-disconnection and self-rationing: decision

<https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/sites/default/files/docs/2020/10/self-disconnection-and-self-rationing-decision.pdf>

Gas and Electricity Markets Authority: Standard conditions of electricity supply licence

Get help to keep your home warm – the Energy Company Obligation

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-energy-company-obligation-find-out-if-you-are-eligible>

www.supportstaffordshire.org.uk/volunteering

7. Detail

7.1 On 4 October 2022, the Cabinet considered a report on the Council's response to the energy/cost-of-living crisis. Cabinet noted the action being taken to respond to the crisis and approved:

- the creation of a Fuel Bank for Staffordshire Moorlands to support those residents paying for their household energy via a pre-payment meter and who are experiencing fuel poverty.
- the ECO4 statement of intent and delivery of the scheme in collaboration with Beat the Cold
- further conversations with the North Staffordshire Financial Inclusion Group about working together to develop an affordable credit model that includes Staffordshire Moorlands.

Communities Overview & Scrutiny

7.2 The Communities Overview & Scrutiny Panel considered the report on the Council's response to the Cost of Living on 17 October 2022. In response, the Committee agreed to establish a working group, jointly chaired by Cllrs Herdman and Swindlehurst, to consider the issue in more detail.

7.3 Following wide-ranging discussions at their first meeting on 22 November 2022, members of the Working Group made a series of suggestions:

- Extend the opening hours of the reception at Moorlands House, and one stop shops, to enable members of the public and vulnerable people to seek advice.
- Consider extending the use of the reception area at Moorlands House by external organisations.
- Use Moorlands House as a 'warm space'.
- Stop all bailiff action until March 2023.
- Provide Members with more information about Staffordshire County Council's distribution of the Household Support Fund.
- Strengthen the links between council and voluntary groups.
- Provide warm spaces and support voluntary sector organisations.
- Allocate funds to Biddulph Town Council to distribute to local organisations, rather than distribution by the District Council.
- Provide information to working people not on benefits who are experiencing hardship and what support can be offered.
- Think creatively about how / when people can access support outside of working hours.
- Make the cost-of-living hub on the district council's website more prominent.
- Ensure adequate staffing to turn around request for support quickly.

7.4 The second meeting of the working group took place on 6 December 2022 and focussed on the development of a “Cost of living” fund. Members of the working group commented as follows.

- Applications for support should not be judged by the amount of funding in the organisation’s bank account.
- Some organisations may consider themselves to be financially stable but may encounter unexpected costs.
- Any application form should be widely publicised and should be accompanied with a covering letter with guidance and assistance to complete the form.
- A quick mechanism for assessment of applications was needed.
- The draft form considered by the Working Group was aimed at planned tasks and established organisations. Some organisations were delivering basic ongoing support (food/heating) and required financial assistance.
- A dedicated officer in each town could be identified to assist with the completion of the application form.
- Clarification was requested around religious organisations being able to apply for funding as in some areas Food Banks and warm spaces are in churches.
- If the form was too detailed, then it would deter organisations to apply and would take a long time to process.
- The Council needed to identify the people most in need (in receipt of benefits/in rent arrears with private landlords).

Moorlands Together – Cost of Living Meeting

7.5 On 8 December 2022, the Chief Executive chaired a meeting of the Moorlands Together Partnership that brought together representatives from the District and County Councils, Support Staffordshire, Fire and Rescue Service, Buxton and Leek College, North Staffordshire Combined Healthcare NHS Trust and Your Housing Group.

7.6 Partners identified a range of issues related to the cost-of-living crisis

- There are significant gaps in staffing across agencies, which impacts on the ability to respond to demands.
- Lack of sustainability of some of the actions introduced to tackle the crisis and, in particular, challenges for the voluntary sector organisations in terms of capacity.
- A culture of people not wanting to accept support within the district.
- The district normally sees a spike in mental health issues and suicide in winter, which is consistent with the national pattern. These issues could be even more prevalent with the added financial pressures.
- People living with mental illness can experience financial issues that are quite specific to their type of illness. They may require bespoke advice on money matters and benefits.
- Providing services to people in some rural areas can already be a challenge. This is made more difficult and challenging by increased transport and energy costs.

- Digital poverty can mean some people are unable to access services and help and resources. There is a need to improve digital skills, not just the functional digital skills that are needed for the workplace, but also those that allow people to do an online shop, set up secure passwords, etc.
- In general, we are not seeing an increase in crime that can be attributed to people struggling financially, but people are more vulnerable to scams.
- Young people can be particularly affected with a reported rise in mental health issues and low-level anxiety. Many students and those in work have low incomes and lack financial resilience.
- The Fire Service have seen an increase in people reinstating open fires and using unsuitable fuels. People need to heat their homes safely and not use unsafe heating/cooking appliances or burn unsuitable material.
- Simple things that can make a big difference when responding to the cost-of-living agenda (or vulnerability in general). For example, there is currently no simple way of helping elderly people to find someone to help maintain their garden. Consequently, gardens can become overgrown and unsightly and cause issues for the resident, neighbours and act as a signal that an elderly person living there for people who may wish to prey on vulnerable people.

State of the Voluntary Sector

7.7 Support Staffordshire will be conducting a 'state of the sector' survey in early 2023 to provide some hard data about the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and other problems being faced by the voluntary sector. In advance of this detailed survey, some preliminary feedback has been obtained:

- Workers and volunteers are having to deal with high workloads, complex needs and high levels of pressure.
- Some organisations have received additional funding to provide vital support in response to the cost-of-living crisis but are struggling with capacity to deliver the commissioned services.
- Difficulties across the sector in recruiting enough volunteers. Some organisations report that a lack of volunteers is a bigger problem than lack finance with some reporting that they are still receiving generous financial donations.
- The response of many organisations to the crisis has been to improve information about available resources and referral pathways, but this can place even more pressure on stretched voluntary groups.
- Lots of informal groups were set up at the beginning of COVID leading to some concerns about safe practices, etc.. It can be more effective to channel support into an existing group especially since there are many very well-established and well-run voluntary groups in the district.
- Voluntary sector organisations often lack capacity to complete funding applications.
- Support Staffordshire can provide practical support to help such groups be more effective and encourage good practice.

8 Next Steps

- 8.1 Discussions at the Cost-of-Living Working Group, and those with voluntary sector organisations and other partners, have indicated that further support should be focussed in three main areas:
- Support for the Voluntary Sector (volunteers and financial challenges)
 - Support for those in most need (identification of and support for the most vulnerable, mental health, digital access)
 - Work with Town and Parish Councils.
- 8.2 The Council recognises that the cost-of-living crisis increases the pressure on Council services. The Council's capacity to respond to this agenda was also raised by the Cost-of-Living Working Group. In response, and following a review of the service, the Council is recruiting an additional Community Officer to focus on delivery of the "well-being" agenda in Staffordshire Moorlands and the corporate objective of maintaining strong partnerships with community groups.

A Support for the Voluntary Sector

Support for Volunteering

- 8.3 The recruitment and retention of volunteers has been identified as a key barrier to service delivery by voluntary sector organisations.
- 8.4 In response, the Council is proposing to fund an officer to provide local advice and support to residents who are considering volunteering as a way of improving capacity within the voluntary sector. The officer would have a particular focus on those who are not in work and struggle to overcome barriers to employment such as low self-esteem, lack of confidence, low skill levels or poor social skills. The officer would identify, collate, and promote local volunteering opportunities; meet prospective volunteers face-to-face; and support people into volunteering placements by, for example, accompanying them to their first meeting.
- 8.5 The officer would be employed by Support Staffordshire, which is a nationally quality accredited volunteer centre service and has been providing volunteering support in Staffordshire for over 50 years. Support Staffordshire already operate an interactive database (Simply Connect) that allows voluntary groups to advertise their opportunities and individuals to search for them (www.supportstaffordshire.org.uk/volunteering).
- 8.6 Initially this will be a part-time post and funding will be provided for two years.

Emergency Funding for the Voluntary Sector

- 8.7 As set out in the Cabinet report of 4 October, the Council's has funded the voluntary sector over many years to provide services that respond to food and fuel poverty, including homelessness prevention and debt advice via Citizen's Advice.
- 8.8 The importance of the voluntary sector within the district was brought sharply into focus by the Coronavirus pandemic. The voluntary sector often led the way in providing much needed assistance to residents; and particularly those vulnerable individuals who were required to shield and could not access other forms of support. The Council recognised that failure of these critical organisations could result in the loss of valuable services and critical support for those in crisis within the district. It could also increase pressure on statutory services through people moving more quickly into crisis if lower-level, preventative support services are not available. In response to the potential loss of services, the Council established a reserve that could be used to provide support to organisations that may find themselves struggling financially.
- 8.9 The Voluntary Sector Emergency reserve was established quickly in response to the pandemic and involved organisations completing a short form that was then considered by the Head of Communities and the Head of Finance. The Finance Service carried out a 'light-touch' check on the organisation's financial position and considered whether the financial pressures were due to mismanagement and also the future viability of the organisation. These checks were intended to provide a speedy response whilst also providing reassurance that the Council was using public money appropriately.
- 8.10 Voluntary sector organisations have told us that they are directly affected by the cost-of-living crisis through both changes in demand for their services and increased operating costs primarily driven by rising energy prices. Some organisations report large increases in demand for their services, whilst others report reductions in attendances, for example, because people are unable or unwilling to attend sessions. In both cases, this impacts on running costs and cash flow.
- 8.11 The emergency reserve has been retained to continue to allow the Council to provide support to voluntary sector organisations that are struggling to remain operational because of increased, and generally unplanned, financial pressures brought about by the cost-of-living crisis. In this way, the Council is seeking to ensure that viable organisations that provide vital cost-of-living support to our communities are not allowed to fail. Some organisations support hundreds, or more, vulnerable people and their loss would be catastrophic for their clients and the district as a whole.
- 8.12 The application form for emergency funding has been revised after taking account of feedback provided by the Cost of Living Working Group. It is also proposed that all future applications for such funding be signed-off by the Portfolio Holder for Communities to provide democratic oversight.

- 8.13 The Council is proposing to introduce an on-line Community Lottery to help raise funds for the local voluntary and community sector, and support good causes within the district. This will take up to six months to establish, largely because of the time taken to register such a lottery with the Gambling Commission, but going forward this will provide an additional source of funding for organisations that wish to engage with the lottery.

UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF)

- 8.14 The UKSPF is part of the national Levelling Up agenda and is based on three investment priorities: Communities and Place, Supporting Local Business, and People and Skills. The 'Communities and Place' priority includes interventions for "investment in capacity building and infrastructure support for local civil society and community groups" and "Community measures to reduce the cost of living, including through measures to improve energy efficiency, and combat fuel poverty and climate change".
- 8.15 The district has been allocated £416,133 under the fund for 2022/23 with indicative settlements up to March 2025, which would bring the total amount available to the district to £3,428,937. A local UKSPF Board has been set up in the Moorlands to determine a delivery plan and agree timescales for areas of investment across the District. The Board will meet early in the New Year and more details on the proposed programme of interventions will be available following that meeting.

Rural England Prosperity Fund

- 8.16 The challenge of providing services across our district has been identified. The Rural England Prosperity Fund, which runs from 1 April 2023 until 31 March 2025, provides a potential mechanism for addressing this challenge. Community Interventions allowed under the fund cover: Capital grants only: Investment in capacity building and infrastructure support for local civil society and community groups and Capital grants for local arts, cultural, heritage and creative activities. The investment will complement the main UKSPF funding.

Other Funding Opportunities

- 8.17 The Council has recently subscribed to Grantfinder, which is a searchable database of funding opportunities. In addition to highlighting opportunities that the Council may wish to apply for directly, it will also be used to identify details of relevant grants and other funding opportunities which could be accessed by Town and Parish Councils, businesses or voluntary organisations, and which support delivery of Council priorities. We intend to begin to send out regular bulletins from January 2023.
- 8.18 This service will augment the funding provided to Support Staffordshire to build capacity within community groups serving Staffordshire Moorlands. Voluntary sector organisations can obtain fundraising support from Support Staffordshire, including being able to carry out funding searches and register for e-mail alerts through Funding Central (a website managed by the National

Council for Voluntary Organisations). Support Staffordshire also offers members:

- Support with overall fundraising strategy and planning
- Training on preparing and writing applications for grant funding
- Support with research for grant funding applications and tenders
- Proof reading of grant funding applications; and
- Writing of grant funding applications and tenders

B Support for those in most need

Identification of the most vulnerable

8.19 The Council has liaised with its enforcement agents to ensure that they have measures in place to support customers when collecting arrears. Measures include

- Propensity to pay checks to identify those debtors who are financially vulnerable.
- Additional training to help identify financial vulnerability and to tailor conversations and arrangement plans to avoid hardship.
- Issuing Pre-Compliance stage letters to allow customers to pay outstanding amounts without incurring additional costs.
- Including default arrangements plans with all Notices of Enforcement, so that debtors can pay in accordance with the plan rather than having to 'pay in full' as soon as the notice of enforcement is issued.
- Increased payment options to include Apple pay and increased customer contact methods (such as WhatsApp) in response to customer preference.
- implementing the findings of behavioural science research to tailor letters and communications to 'nudge' people into making contact about their debt.

8.20 The Council is refreshing its Debt Recovery Policies to provide further focus on identifying vulnerability and signposting to multi-agency support. As part of our on-going approach, our Revenues and Benefits Team will seek to identify those who are likely to be vulnerable during contact with customers and income information.

Supporting the Most Vulnerable

8.21 The Energy Companies Obligation (ECO) is a programme designed to reduce Britain's energy consumption by funding home improvements. The scheme is funded by energy suppliers and the fourth phase of the scheme (ECO4) was launched in August 2022.

8.22 The main objective of ECO4 is to improve the energy efficiency of housing stock occupied by low income and vulnerable households. One route that can be used to identify these households is 'ECO4 Flexibility' (ECO4 Flex). Under ECO4 Flex, a participating Local Authority can refer private tenure households

that it considers to be living in fuel poverty or on a low income and vulnerable to the effects of living in a cold home.

- 8.23 The Council has published its ECO4 statement of intent, which is needed before a local authority can take part in the scheme. This can be viewed at <https://www.staffs Moorlands.gov.uk/article/4362/Energy-Company-Obligation-ECO>.
- 8.24 The Council is now working with Beat the Cold to deliver the scheme using information held by our Revenues and Benefits Service to identify people who may be eligible to benefit from the scheme. We will contact relevant households to encourage take-up and we are also exploring ways of setting up a GP referral pathway.
- 8.25 Staffordshire Warmer Homes have made a consortium bid for funding to support energy efficiency and renewable energy generation in off gas grid areas (Home Upgrade Grant: Phase 2 (HUG2)). SMDC residents will be able to apply for this funding. This is aimed at low income households with a low energy performance rating. ECO4 plus has been announced to support households on low Council Tax bands (A to D). This is to be introduced in spring and we are awaiting details to support promotion.
- 8.26 Staffordshire Moorlands District Council is the only Council in Staffordshire to collaborate with the Fuel Bank Foundation to provide financial and practical support for those who prepay for their energy. Prepayment meter (PPM) customers have historically paid more for their energy than direct debit customers. They also have limited credit in comparison with customers paying by other methods, who have the option to go into arrears. Self-disconnection can happen when a consumer with a prepayment meter does not have enough money to top-up their meter and their meter cuts out, or when they do not realise that credit on the meter is running out.
- 8.27 Ofgem reported in 2020 that there were 4.3 million electricity and 3.4 million gas prepayment meter customers in the country. Ofgem data show that 1 in 7 customers self-disconnected in 2019 and nationally Citizens Advice reported that the number of people that they had seen in 2022 (up to October) who were unable to top up their PPM was more than for the whole of the previous five years combined. The number of people that Citizens Advice have seen nationally who are having PPMs installed for debt was between 700 and 900 per month in nearly every month since November 2020, up from 400-500 in most months in the previous three years.
- 8.28 The Staffordshire Moorlands Fuel Bank, which is delivered in collaboration with the Fuel Bank Foundation and Beat the Cold, is now in place. This provides an important safety net for people on pre-payment meters (PPMs) who have been, or are at risk of, self-disconnection.
- 8.29 Access to the Fuel Bank is not provided over the weekend. However, it is a requirement for electricity providers to provide Emergency Credit and Friendly-hours credit under Ofgem's Electricity Supply Standard Licence Conditions, "Friendly-hours Credit" means an amount of credit provided overnight, at

weekends and public holidays to a domestic customer when that domestic customer's Prepayment Meter credit runs low or runs out to ensure continuity of electricity supply or return on supply.

- 8.30 The Council has contacted voluntary organisations and village halls across the district to offer support in promoting their welcoming (warm) spaces. Take-up of this offer has been low but further promotion will be done in January 2023. We have sought feedback on the usage of welcoming spaces. Current information is limited but suggests that there may not have been a great demand for such services, whereas demand for support at the district's foodbanks remains relatively high. This may reflect NHS guidance on preventing the spread of COVID-19, which still advises people to "limit the number of people you meet and avoid crowded places".

Micro-Enterprises

- 8.31 The Moorlands Together Partnership meeting recognised that small actions can deliver big benefits: using the issue of elderly people being unable to continue to care for their garden as a specific example.
- 8.32 In some areas, local authorities have provided support for people and communities to use their talents to start and run small enterprises and community businesses that support and care for other local people. Such schemes create good local jobs and keep local money local. They also help people to connect and contribute to their community, which can provide a range of positive benefits including improved mental health.
- 8.33 Stoke-on-Trent City Council is amongst around 27 councils that are working with Community Catalysts CIC to help develop local micro-enterprises (www.communitycatalysts.co.uk/).
- 8.34 The Council's Regeneration Service is proposing to investigate the model with a view to preparing a further model on how such a scheme could be delivered in the district. The model could potentially assist with the delivery of other Council priorities including the creation of "green jobs".

Mental Health

- 8.35 Poor mental health can impact both directly and indirectly on the delivery of the Council's services. Primary responsibility for responding to mental health rests with the NHS and Staffordshire County Council as part of their public health role. The District Council supports the actions of these key partners and others as appropriate, but also takes specific actions in relation to the delivery of its own services. Key actions include:
- Arranging additional training for relevant officers from the Revenues and Benefits, Customer Services and Housing Services on providing support to vulnerable individuals/families who are neurodiverse (those with Autism, Dyslexia or ADHD).
 - Publishing an information digest that sets out the Council's support for individuals who are living with dementia

- On-going training for Customer Service Advisors to equip them with the skills to identify people at risk and to respond appropriately. This includes suicide awareness.
- The Council's housing advice team working with appropriate agencies to support those people who are suffering from a mental illness or impairment to help prevent homelessness. (More information can be found at:
- <https://www.staffs Moorlands.gov.uk/article/3580/Suffering-with-a-mental-illness-or-impairment-and-threatened-with-homelessness>)
- Introducing a new safeguarding case management system to improve reporting of safeguarding concerns,
- Quarterly meeting of the Council's Safeguarding Group.
- Rolling out Mental Health First Aiders across the organisation in recognition of the importance of helping the Council's workforce to manage their mental health. Many officers are having to respond to increased demands for support and an increasing number of requests from people whose behaviour can be challenging.

Digital access

8.36 The Council published its Access to Services Strategy in February 2022. The Strategy focuses on 4 key themes:

- Access.
- Customer focus.
- Innovation and technology.
- Service process reviews.

8.37 The council's website has 300 online forms available for customers that allows them to pay, apply, or report as appropriate. It also contains information and FAQs for customers to self-serve 24/7. For those who are digitally excluded our telephone lines and receptions are open each day where customer advisors process enquiries and provide support and advice. Customer advisors will also provide digital support and assistance as required

8.38 In response to feedback from the Cost-of-Living Working Group, a banner has been added to the top of the Council's website to direct people who need support to the on-line Cost of Living hub. Members of the group also emphasised the importance of Councillors having access to information that they can pass onto people in-need. A single-page advice sheet has been created and this can be found at Appendix B. A copy of the advice sheet will be sent to all Councillors.

C Work with Town and Parish Councils

8.39 The Council recognises the important role that each of the three tiers of local government play within the district. It is important that the actions of the three tiers are aligned to maximise benefits, avoid duplication, and make best use and appropriate use of resources.

8.40 The Council organises a quarterly Parish Assembly has part of its approach

towards supporting Town and Parish Councils. The Assembly regularly invites speakers from the County and District Council.

- 8.41 The Council will be consulting with Town and Parish Councils in early 2023 with a view to obtaining views on how the working arrangements with the Councils can be improved. This will include considering the role of the Parish Assembly.