

Cost of Living Briefing Note

October 2022

Background

Earlier this year Braintree District Council set up an internal Cost of Living Partnership as well as a District wide partnership to support residents, with representation from the private, public and voluntary sectors. This was in response to increasing levels of concern about the impact of cost of living issues on residents.

Following a motion to Council in June 2022, a joint scrutiny committee was set up to review Braintree District Council's response to Cost of Living issues that may affect our district. This committee reported back to Council in October 2022, and Councillor Butland agreed to provide a response to Councillors as soon as possible, in addition to the expected response at Full Council, given the urgent nature of the issues affecting our residents.

This note is designed to give an initial response to the scrutiny review by highlighting the key areas that our teams and our partners are working on, with links to recommendations. Not all recommendations have been responded to at this stage. There are also activities noted below which have not been identified in the recommendations from the scrutiny report but have been included to give a fuller picture of the breadth of support being offered to our residents, businesses and staff.

Information and signposting for residents

Energy Advice

The Sustainability Team provide information on energy efficiency advice/grants e.g. ECO (Energy Company Obligation) and the Sustainable Warmth Scheme to provide energy efficiency improvements, our Handyman Service, and the Green Doctor Service. The team also provide information and links to other relevant organisations and services e.g. The Warm Home Discount and the Priority Services register offered by Energy Companies. This work is undertaken along with partner organisations such as Citizens Advice, Community 360 who also refer residents to this service line. For further information, contact energy.advice@braintree.gov.uk or call 01376 552525.

Our teams have supported the distribution of a variety of energy rebate payments that have been put in place nationally and regularly bid for funds to support residents with energy efficiency measures.

Communications and campaigns relating to energy usually include leaflets or booklets as part of media produced. Face to face promotion is undertaken regularly at community events or at various community group meetings which the team are regularly invited to. Current leaflets available include Don't Wait for Winter, Winter Warmth and Cost of Living, Home Energy Advice, Handyman, Green Doctor Service and Sustainable Warmth.

The Contact Magazine has just been distributed to all households in the district and included information around energy efficiency schemes.

Energy advice and information is also being included in the Council page in the local newspapers.

(This links to Rec. 1, Rec 3, Rec 16 of the Cost of Living Scrutiny report)

Money Saving Tips

Our website contains a range of information on money saving tips that relate to:

- reducing energy use
- meal planning, food budgeting and tackling food waste
- reusing and recycling
- saving advice on clothing, household items and other supplies
- transport costs

The website is updated regularly as we get more information and is supported by social media and digital residents' newsletters to provide bitesize pieces of information with a link to the website. Further work is being undertaken on web pages to make them easier to access, read and ensure that they are regularly updated.

Signposting to financial support & advice services, credit unions

There is now a dedicated debt management page on our website.

<https://www.braintree.gov.uk/community/debt-management-cost-living/3>

This includes general advice and support as well as contact details for key organisations such as Citizens' Advice, Step Change and the National Debtline amongst others. There is specific information on mortgage arrears, bankruptcy and debt management plans.

There is also information on credit unions, with details of the local credit union.

(This links to Rec. 1 and Rec. 6 of the Cost of Living Scrutiny report)

Campaigns and ongoing advice

Cost of living issues have been a communications priority since Spring 2022. Initially the Don't wait for Winter campaign was launched, encouraging residents to make changes early to improve energy efficiency and signposting to grants for energy efficiency measures.

There have been weekly messages going out addressing things such as food costs, fuel and energy as part of the Cost of Living and Don't Wait for Winter campaigns. These direct residents to the webpages which provide a thorough list of helplines and support for debt management.

Refuse vehicle panels are being developed to include grant information which is planned to go onto vehicles from November 2022.

Posters are being printed for display along high streets in vacant shops, community boards, supermarket information boards etc advising how to access grant funding for energy efficiency measures.

A hard copy leaflet has been produced which has advice and guidance as well as signposting to key services. This will be available on demand, but we are also looking at funding options for wider circulation. The rapidly changing situation and services available makes providing printed advice complex, and we need to be mindful that it can quickly go out of date, so the leaflet will focus on more static information and signposting.

Working with Parish Councils

A regular parish newsletter is sent to clerks, with a range of information in it, including cost of living support and energy advice. Parish Councils are including information provided by the Sustainability and Communications teams in Parish Magazines.

Officers meet regularly with all parish clerks to discuss how we support our communities and Cost of Living support is currently being discussed at these meetings.

A number of our Parish Councils would like to take part in the warm spaces programme, and we are co-ordinating a database across the district which will shortly be published on our website for residents to access.

There are a range of activities that Parish and Town Councils are leading, from Witham Town Council's Community Coat Rack to Halstead's community fridge as well as a wide range of community groups offering support in their local area.

Cost of Living Projects

Warm Spaces

The Communities Team has been contacting Parish Councils, faith groups, charities and community groups across the district to pull together a list of places that people can visit to meet up with others, keep warm, take part in activities and often have some warm refreshments.

There are already over 50 organisations in our database with warm space availability at different days and times, many of whom have already started offering this to communities or have been offering it for a long time. We are compiling an interactive map, which will be available by the end of the month, to enable our residents to find somewhere local to them. People may want to use this as an opportunity to get together, to volunteer to support others or to do something different this winter.

We are also currently exploring funding and logistical options to enable our Community Transport Team to help those who have difficulties getting to venues.

Braintree District Museum Trust started offering a Winter Warm Welcome at the beginning of October and will be running this through to the end of March 2023. There will be free entry to Braintree Museum every Saturday, short term volunteering opportunities available, activities and refreshments provided.

Fusion Lifestyle are working with us to finalise their warm welcome programme at leisure centres across the district, and we will update Members with more information as it becomes available.

Essex County Council have launched their Community Winter Warmth and Welcome programme this month, which could provide up to £1,000 support to community organisations who would like to offer a warm space this winter. This is part of a wider cost of living support package. Braintree District Council have already indicated their support of this programme through the investment plan for our Shared Prosperity Fund and are also looking at other funding sources to enable this programme to be operated as widely as possible across the district.

(This links to Rec. 7 of the Cost of Living Scrutiny report)

Winter Resilience Programme

Community 360 have led our winter resilience partnership over a number of years, and this year are looking to develop this further.

We started early this year, with the Don't Wait for Winter campaign and a series of roadshows and community marketplace events to promote information and support available, particularly during the winter period.

Community 360 are also aiming to distribute 500 bags to residents and have contacted partners to start identifying individuals that may benefit from receiving a bag. These bags will contain a blanket, hat, scarf & glove sets, flask, torch, socks, powdered drinks as well as leaflets with guidance, support and signposting.

(This links to Rec. 4 of the Cost of Living Scrutiny report)

Holiday Activity Programme

The Braintree District has had a partnership to provide a holiday activity programme for a number of years, which is led by Community 360 and includes Braintree District Council, Essex ActivAte, Braintree District Museum Trust and Fusion.

This is targeted at children who are eligible for free school meals and children from low income families. This year we are looking at funding options to extend it further, including investing part of our Shared Prosperity Fund allocation.

There are activity days at Fusion leisure centres and Museum Takeover days. Both are popular and during this summer, transport was offered to children from Sible Hedingham, to take them to the ActivAte sessions in Halstead.

(This links to Rec. 9 of the Cost of Living Scrutiny report)

Food bank support

There are food banks operating in Braintree, Great Notley, Halstead and Witham which are usually manned by volunteers. These are available on different days and times. Residents will usually need a referral to access the food bank either through Citizens' Advice or our Benefits or Housing Teams. More information is available on the website.

Some food banks also offer pet food to those in need. This isn't something that food banks promote specifically in relation to donations but are happy to take it in if they are able to.

Causeway House is now going to be set up as a food bank collection point, so that staff and members of the public can donate food. More information will come out to Members when available.

There are community fridges operating in Braintree, Great Bardfield, Halstead and Witham. These fridges take surplus food from supermarkets and businesses for people to take for free, helping to reduce waste and provide fresh food to those who need it. Residents don't need to qualify to use it, they can help themselves, leave something they don't need or make a donation towards running costs if they can. Further information on locations of fridges is available on the website.

<https://www.braintree.gov.uk/community/debt-management-cost-living>

(This links to Rec. 13 and 19 of the Cost of Living Scrutiny report)

Levelling Up – Shared Prosperity Fund

Braintree District Council submitted an investment plan for its allocation of the Shared Prosperity Fund which focussed our activity on supporting our residents through cost of living issues in year one. This is being used as a funding source to support some of the projects highlighted above. This funding has not been received from government yet, but we are hoping to receive it in November 2022.

For those projects which need to start, funding options are being identified to forward fund initiatives.

Support from Essex County Council

In September 2022, Essex County Council (ECC) launched its Cost of Living Support for Households and Communities and a range of support through a six point plan which included:

- Support on the provision of essentials
- Keeping warm
- Eating well
- Money management
- Information, advice and guidance
- Wellbeing

ECC have subsequently launched a £50m support fund, as well as the community winter warmth and welcome programme which is designed to support community groups to open warm spaces and a campaign to raise awareness of discounted broadband deals for eligible households on low incomes.

More information is available on their website <https://www.essex.gov.uk/cost-of-living>

Financial Support

Discretionary hardship payments/Exceptional Hardship provision

Braintree District Council's Finance Team operate several schemes to support those in our district who are most in need.

Discretionary housing payments support those in the district with exceptional hardship and who are unable to meeting housing costs. This scheme is designed to prevent homelessness. Last financial year we distributed almost £250,000 of support. This year's funding from DWP has decreased by 30% to £174,853.

There is also an Exceptional Hardship Scheme which allows payments to be made to those struggling with Council Tax arrears where exceptional hardship is evident. We have dedicated offers to support those who need advice and guidance and refer to Citizens' Advice who are able to provide a full review of finances and work with creditors.

Our Benefits Team also has a welfare visiting officer who can take referrals from the team to support those who are struggling to access financial support.

Essential Living and Household Support Fund

Braintree District Council is supporting Essex County Council to distribute a one-off payment of £80 to all pension age residents on housing benefit or Council Tax support, through the Household Support Fund. Where we have had the direct debit details for residents eligible, we have paid this directly into their bank accounts; for those where we did not have details, Essex County Council issued a voucher for local supermarkets.

The essential living fund is a countywide scheme which allows residents in financial hardship to receive white goods, such as cookers, fridges and other household equipment. Residents can apply for this scheme through Southend City Council <https://www.southend.gov.uk/extra-financial-help/essential-living-fund>

Energy Rebate – Discretionary Scheme

Following on from our support for the energy rebate scheme earlier this year, Braintree District Council are continuing to distribute the discretionary element of the scheme until the end of November 2022. This is for eligible households in bands E-H.

Further details can be found on our website <https://www.braintree.gov.uk/council-tax/council-tax-rebate>

Supporting our Businesses

The Sustainability and Economic Development teams are developing a green advice and guidance document for businesses, which will be included in the Business E-Bulletin and distributed to over 4,500 businesses across the district.

The Economic Development and Sustainability teams promote the LOCASE business support grant scheme, to support businesses in match funding low carbon changes and investments to businesses SALIX funding for energy efficiency installations.

The DigiGo scheme is also promoted to the business community to reduce transport fuel costs.

The Sustainability Team provides an energy advice service for businesses energy.advice@braintree.gov.uk All businesses contacting the Sustainability Team through this advice line are provided with advice on a range of energy efficiency or green travel measures.

There are regular business bulletins and dedicated business Facebook group which provide advice and guidance, signposting to a range of funding opportunities and contact details if businesses would like to know more or get some support.

(This links to Rec. 16, 20 and 21 of the Cost of Living Scrutiny report)

Supporting our staff

We are aware that our staff will also be impacted by cost of living issues and have put in place a range of measures to support them.

The staff intranet has advice, guidance and tips on energy efficiency, reducing food waste and ways to help reduce costs. There is signposting to help with energy bills, childcare costs, benefits, grants and loans as well as debt advice and support and links to the employee assistance scheme which provides specialist support around mental health, debt advice and cost of living support. There is also a hard copy of this information for those who do not have easy access to the intranet. Weekly communications go out to staff with up to date information, guidance and latest offers.

There are a number of staff benefits designed to reduce costs for staff including Kaarp benefits and Vine Extras. There is also discounted access to leisure facilities, active travel schemes and health vouchers.

Members will be aware that we are part of the national pay negotiations in relation to the pay award for staff. An offer has been made by the national employers and this is still under consideration by some of the unions. There is expected to be a response from unions in early November 2022.

Funding and next steps

The above is aimed at giving a snapshot of the activity as of October 2022. Our response to cost of living issues is, by necessity, responsive and therefore this position will be likely to change regularly.

The report has noted that a number of funding sources are being considered at this stage, some external, including the Shared Prosperity Fund allocation for year one and a considerable amount of existing resource is being directed to support the Council's efforts to respond to the impact of cost of living issues on our residents, businesses and staff.

The members' development evening on October 26th has been repurposed to focus on the cost of living, to give members further information to allow them to support their constituents.

A response will be provided to the Scrutiny report in December 2022, and there will also be regular updates to members over the coming months on activity and support arrangements. In the meantime, if members require further information, the website now has dedicated cost of living pages with links to a range of information and resources.

<https://www.braintree.gov.uk/community/debt-management-cost-living>