

Cost of Living Crisis

Winter 2023/24 Plan



Foreword

Cllr Jane Carr, Cabinet Member



From high energy prices to the price of the weekly shop, the cost of living crisis has been felt by most people, but for those on low to medium incomes the impact has been greatest and shows no sign of easing. This plan sets out how we will help.

Sadly, we know the cost of living crisis is not something we can solve here in Milton Keynes. However, we are determined to protect the most vulnerable from the effects of it and for the second year running we are setting out a plan to show how we will do that.

Through a combination of our own funds and government grants, our wide-ranging package will deliver over five million pounds of help for those most in need. Once again this will include direct financial assistance alongside more practical support for residents delivered in partnership with local organisations.

Cllr Jane Carr

Cabinet Member for Tackling Inequalities and Child Poverty

Section 1

Working in partnership to help residents

We know that once again this winter will be difficult for many residents, and we are committed to doing all we can to help. Working in partnership with local organisations will be critical if we are going to be able to reach out and help those most in need.

Working in partnership with our Parish and Town Councils

We know our Parish and Town Councils are at the heart of their local community and so will be offering **£150,000** to help them run informal activities from community cafes to social clubs. We will distribute this money using the formula we have used before to do so, adjusted for population size and deprivation. Many Parish or Town Councils are already organising support and this funding can be used to extend this so that more people can benefit.

Working in partnership with local charities

The city council already has a strong partnership with the MK Foodbank and other smaller groups like Baby Basics, MK Storehouse and St Marks Meals. We're already helping them out, paying around **£9,000** each month towards rent and overheads so they can operate without worrying about these costs.

We have set aside **£100,000** of the governments Household Support Fund to help support food charities in MK that support the most vulnerable.

Council funds have supported SOFEA with the expansion of Food Larders which provide residents a more efficient way to access food as well as acting as a network of support and advice.

On top of this funding the council is investing £300,000 of grant funds with local charity and community organisations to help with financial advice, debt counselling and prevention, like Citizens Advice in MK. **We will also continue to help residents by signposting them to local organisations and raising awareness of the help and support on offer city-wide.**

Section 2

Help for children and families

Many families continue to struggle with increased food costs alongside other cost of living pressures. Although the city council has a range of services, like our children and family centres, we plan to do more again this winter.

Help with food costs when schools are closed

When schools are closed, children entitled to free school meals do not get their daily hot meal. We now have a fourth wave of 'Household Support Fund' money from government and over **£800,000** of this will be used to give families of children who are entitled to free school meals £15 of supermarket credit per child per week, during the one-week October half term, two-week Christmas holiday and one-week February half term. We will also agree with schools how any children who are not entitled to free school meals but need some extra help how they can be added to the programme.

Extra activities this winter

A winter activities and food programme is due to take place for four days from 2-5 January 2024. We will be using **£200,000** of government funding to pay for this programme which will offer fun activities and free hot food.

We will be working with schools to promote the programme and ensure that we target those children and families who would most benefit from participating.



Section 3

Help with energy and housing costs

High energy costs continue to be on the minds of many residents – with things worse for those on a lower income, including the many people who have a prepayment meter in their home. That is why we are again targeting our help on those most in need.

This winter, we will be investing **£59,000** of city council funding to extend an already running helpline that any local resident can use to get free energy advice and home improvements.

Extra help for council tenants

We are setting aside **£50,000** of city council housing funding (called the Housing Revenue Account – or HRA for short) towards a scheme to help council tenants facing exceptionally tough circumstances who do not get help with their housing costs. This funding will be targeted on tenants who are in most need, for example those households who are falling into rent arrears and do not qualify for government funding.



Targeted help for renters

We will also use **£464,000** of government funding to operate a Discretionary Housing Payments scheme to help with shortfalls in rent on top of the normal housing benefit scheme, including people in 'shared ownership' situations.

In addition, we have up to **£2.08 Million** of government funding available for use where residents get into difficulty and arrears.

We have also recognised the real difficulties that private renters are facing keeping up with their rent. To support this group we have set up a specific scheme with **£300,000** of Council funds to assist with arrears, where tenants are faced with losing their home.

Section 4

Help for residents facing immediate hardship

Unexpected bills can leave many people really struggling. That is why we will again be running an enhanced grant scheme this year to provide short-term support to meet immediate needs and help them to access the essentials.

We have allocated **£3.5 Million** of the Government's Household Support Fund to support households with essential living costs in 2023/24. This help is aimed at anyone who is vulnerable or cannot afford to pay for essential items. The council will work with local partners and use their own outreach programmes to identify households experiencing hardship as well as accept self-referrals from the public in application for financial support. This will be added to the **£150,000** of city council funding already set aside for this purpose (referred to as Local Welfare Provision).

Grants will be available to help people who meet the eligibility criteria with things like:

- Food
- Energy and water bills
- Repair or purchase of essential household appliances
- Servicing and repair of heating systems
- School uniform or other essential clothing
- Household items like cookers or washing machines
- Other essential living costs

Of the £3.5 Million Household Support Fund we have set aside **£450,000** to specifically help with energy bills over the autumn and winter.

Residents can easily apply online using a form on our website or call us if that is easier for them.

Section 5

Raising awareness of the help on offer

Last year we created a special Cost of Living Help logo and we'll continue to use this widely on our communications material. We have a special page on our website for cost of living information and have updated our fact sheet for residents full of useful information on the help available.



Over the winter we will be using our media channels to post and share helpful links, resources and information, encouraging people in most need to apply for crisis support.

Special campaigns

We will again be running three campaigns through the winter, these will be:

1. **Healthy Start** - If someone is receiving a qualifying benefit and are pregnant or have parental responsibility for at least one child under the age of 4, they can receive £4.25 each week of the pregnancy (from the 10th week of the pregnancy) then £8.50 each week for children from birth to 1 year old and then £4.25 each week for children between one and four years old. Healthy Start is government funded. www.healthystart.nhs.uk
2. **Better off calculator** – In addition to promoting the national benefits calculator we've invested in an additional calculator that signposts households to government schemes as well as benefits.
3. **National Money Helper service** – We will be promoting the moneyhelper.co.uk service which has resources to help residents with all-purpose money management advice, including a 'bill prioritiser' (the service has options for phoning in as well as online tools).

Finally, we will again be highlighting the MK Community Foundation's cost of living fundraising appeal. This important appeal has the potential to support lots more local organisations and services to help residents during this winter.

Visit www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/cost-living-support and click the links at 'help with essential costs'.

Our website is always available
www.milton-keynes.gov.uk

You can call us on 01908 691691

Our customer service team are available 9.00am to
5.15pm Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday and
10.00am to 5.15pm on Wednesday

