



**Rochford District  
Council**

<b>REPORT TITLE:</b>	Cost of Living (COL) Payments
<b>REPORT OF:</b>	Report of the O&S COL Working Group

**REPORT SUMMARY**

The O&S Committee on 5 July 2023 agreed the following: “That the Committee creates a working group as set out in the report and makes nominations for membership of the group.” The Committee duly nominated membership and this report highlights the outcome of the deliberations of the Working Group to examine options for payments to residents in light of the Cost of Living crisis.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- R1** - That the Committee notes the findings of the Working Group.
- R2** - That the Interim Director - Resources allocates £7000 from the Council Tax Hardship Fund for one-off use in the current financial year.
- R3** - That the Director – Communities and Health arranges for a grant award of £7000 for roadshows to assist residents to access support to help them with the cost of living.
- R4** - That Council considers, as part of the 2024/25 Budget process, the inclusion of ongoing funding of £5000 per annum for similar purposes.

**SUPPORT ING INFORMATION**

**1.0 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 1.1 The Working Group was set up by O&S Committee, which was in turn instructed by Council on 21 February 2023 to consider the proposals in this report.

**2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 2.1 Whilst alternative options were considered for payments to residents (see below) there were no other options considered in discharging the obligations of the O&S Committee in responding to the Council recommendation.

**3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

- 3.1 The Working Group used as its terms of reference those set out in the report of the Interim Director – Resources, as agreed by the Committee on 5 July. The Interim Resources Director advised the Working Group, specifically at its meeting on 26 July and thereafter liaising with the Chair, who managed the Working Group discussions and co-ordinated the finalisation of recommendations.

- 3.2 The Working Group considered:

1. Direct payments to residents based on criteria to be decided.
2. Reimbursement or awards to residents moving into private sector accommodation.
3. A specific scheme targeted at Council Tax payers similar to one operated by Uttlesford District Council.
4. A grant award to a suitable body that could provide experienced advice and signposting to residents to support them.

- 3.3 Taking the above in turn:

1. The benefit of such a scheme would be that it could potentially be aimed at those households not necessarily already in receipt of benefits, but nonetheless in challenging economic circumstances. But this was considered either too expensive, if a payment was made to a range of residents that was of sufficient value to make a difference to them; or (to make it affordable to the Council) too insignificant a payment to make any difference. It also carried with it a sizeable overhead, as any targeting would involve a process of gathering information from residents regarding their income/wealth.
2. This option again considered a scheme that helped residents in ways that might not otherwise be able to access financial support. Similar difficulties as in (1) would result, as any scheme would still have to be targeted.
3. Uttlesford's scheme was considered – it was established by the creation of a funding pot arising from ring-fencing the income derived from their 2023 Council Tax increase. It operates by means of an application process, with criteria set in advance, with some similarities to its Council Tax Hardship Fund. Whilst Uttlesford were reluctant to discuss the success or otherwise of the scheme, it is common that such initiatives are subject to low take-up and incur overheads that, given the low take-up, make the scheme ineffective. Whilst Rochford does have a Hardship Fund, it did not set aside the income from its 2023 Council Tax increase as it was earmarked to fund mainstream Council services.
4. In order to minimise the cost of implementation, it was felt by the Working Group that a grant award for roadshows would be most effective, especially as it would be aimed at a community/voluntary group with experience of such an initiative. There would need to be a process of inviting bids for the grant, then awarding the grant, so there are some administrative costs involved.

3.4 Therefore the Working Group concluded, and has recommended here, that a projected underspend on the Council's 2023/24 Hardship Fund of £7000 be earmarked for the purposes of roadshows to support residents with the cost of living.

3.5 Beyond this year, such events were thought to be of value on an ongoing basis. Whilst it was not the intention of the Working Group (nor is it within its powers) to commit the Council to ongoing expenditure, the Group wished to include a recommendation for Council, when considering the 2024/25 Budget, that £5000 be set aside for similar purposes.

#### **4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 The sum of £7000 is projected to be available from an underspend on the Council's Hardship Fund, which can be used for the purposes set out in the report. If Council is so minded, an ongoing £5000 per annum could be identified as part of the Budget/Medium Term Financial Strategy considerations, although there is no funding for this at present.

#### **5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 Any grant award would need to be made in keeping with the Council's usual procedures for awarding grants.

#### **6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS**

6.1 The cost of supporting the Working Group to date have been contained within the workload of the Interim Director – Resources. There may be a cost to the Director – Communities and Health to administer the grant award.

#### **7.0 RELEVANT RISKS**

7.1 There is a risk that the Hardship Fund will unexpectedly have a higher than anticipated demand upon it in this financial year, which could result in an overspend as a result of allocating £7000 as above. This is considered a small risk and should be manageable as part of the Council's overall budget monitoring.

7.2 There is also a small risk that no suitable community/voluntary group will prove to be suitable for awarding the grant. If this were to occur, the Working Group may wish to reconvene to consider alternatives.

#### **8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION**

8.1 Not applicable.

#### **9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 The purpose of the Working Group, and this report, is to identify ways in which residents can receive support with the cost of living. Only a limited amount can be done, given the lack of resources available to the Council, beyond what is already done to support residents, e.g. through the Council Tax Support Scheme and Hardship Fund. The grant award criteria will seek to ensure that no group with protected characteristics will be disadvantaged.

**10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS**

10.1 None.

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**SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)**

<b>Council Meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>
<b>Council</b>	<b>21 February 2023</b>
<b>O&amp;S Committee</b>	<b>5 July 2023</b>