

REPORT TO: Health & Wellbeing Board
DATE: 12th October 2022
REPORTING OFFICER: Director of Public Health
PORTFOLIO: Health & Wellbeing
SUBJECT: Cost of Living Crisis
WARD(S) Borough-wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 To bring to the attention of the Board the predicated health impacts of the widely reported cost of living crisis and demonstrate the actions taken locally to reduce this impact

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That the Board:

- i) Note the content of the report
- ii) All partners discuss the impacts they are aware of and share what additional actions they are taking
- iii) All partners to promote community support opportunities widely

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 It is widely reported that the UK is in a cost-of-living crisis. Fuel costs and the cost of heating a home have increased significantly and risen again in October 2022. Economic inflation is driving an increase in the cost of household items including food, clothing, winter coats and blankets; this, combined with the changes to the welfare system, and rising prices in the shops due to inflation may leave many households struggling to make ends meet.

3.2 Across the generations its further impacts may include increasing levels of social isolation, worsening mental health, increasing levels of digital poverty, increasing demand on foodbanks, as well as increasing demand on council services and community, voluntary and faith organisations

3.3 Real household incomes are expected to fall in 2022. In August, the Bank of England expected post-tax household income to fall by 1.5% in 2022, then fall by 2.25% in 2023, before rising by 0.75% in 2024. And yet £15, 424*¹ (at 2019 prices) is the amount of annual income (net of housing costs and household fuel costs) that would be required for a household of two adults (with no children) to be defined as not living in poverty. Inflation is currently running at close to 10%.

3.4 The Office of National Statistics (ONS) conduction regular national surveys that have identified a worsening picture of debt, limited spending and lifestyle changes

¹ Personal communication Health Analyst Office for Health Improvement and Disparities but see also <https://www.jrf.org.uk/press/rising-energy-bills-devastate-poorest-families>

linked to price increases. Those living in the poorest families are making the deepest cuts.

The most common lifestyle changes they had made as a result were:

- spending less on non-essentials (57%, around 26 million people)
- using less gas and electricity in their home (51%, around 24 million people)
- cutting back on non-essential journeys in their vehicle (42%, around 19 million people)

More than a third of those whose cost of living had gone up cut back spending on food and essentials (35%, around 16 million people).

Almost a quarter (23%, around 11 million people) used savings to cover costs, and 13% (around 6 million people) said they were using more credit than usual.

3.5 A total of 38,750 Halton people live in the 10% most deprived area nationally: This is almost a third of all residents (30.4%) and the proportion living in the most deprived 20% nationally is almost half of all people (48.4 %.)

The main groups of people who are also predicted to be more at risk from the impacts include people living with a disability (15,770 households with one person with a long-term health problem or disability in Halton: 2011 Census); Children In Halton, 16.6% of children aged under 16 live in relative low income households; this equates to approximately 24,600 children. (Marmot report) and people living in households that meet the definition for fuel poverty (an estimated 7900 homes in total.)

3.6 The table below displays the characteristics of person who are more at risk of living in fuel poverty.

Table 1 Summary of Evidence on factors increasing risk of fuel poverty

Factor	Local Impacts
Low income households (and low financial resilience – and the two correlate).	In Halton, 16.6% of children aged under 16 live in relative low income households; this equates to approximately 24,600 children.
Families with dependent children	according to the 2011 census, there were 16,659 households with dependent children in Halton, which equates to 31% of households
Households with people living with disabilities	according to the 2011 census, there were 15,770 households with one person with a long-term health problem or disability in Halton, which equates to 30% of households
Minority ethnic households	according to the 2011 census, 3.5% of Halton households had 2 or more different ethnicities living at the address. This is lower than the England (9%) and North West (5.6%) levels.
Overcrowding.	According to the 2011 census 4.9% of Halton homes were considered over occupied. This is lower than the NW and England levels of 6.2% and 8.5% respectively

3.7

Table 2 provides a summary of the main population health cohorts and conditions that are impacted by or linked to cold homes. They are at greatest risk regarding complications and increased prevalence in the coming winter of 2022/23. This could contribute to having significance in terms of additional pressures on hospital resources, the community health and care system and excess deaths. This is taken from a briefing paper presented to the ICB in June 2022.

Table 2: Risk factors and Health conditions impacted on by Cold Homes.

Health Conditions and Risk Factors	Description and Rationale
Respiratory problems:	Asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
Circulatory problems:	Raised blood pressure leading to increased risk of strokes and heart attacks. Coronary events to be more fatal during colder periods.
Mental health:	Young people living in cold homes are more likely to be at risk of multiple mental health symptoms, experiencing four or more negative mental health symptoms
Long-term conditions	Cold conditions can exacerbate existing medical conditions including diabetes, certain types of ulcers and musculoskeletal pains. In addition, cold homes may slow down recovery following discharge from hospital
Older people:	Cold homes have been associated with lower strength and dexterity and exacerbated symptoms of arthritis, which can increase the risk of falls and unintentional injury.
Children and young people:	More likely than others to experience mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety. More likely to experience slower physical growth and cognitive development. Had higher risks of respiratory problems, long term ill health and disability. 1.5 to 3 times more likely to develop symptoms of asthma than children living in warm and dry homes.
Wider determinants:	Association between cold homes and poor educational performance among children, partly due to higher rates of sickness and absence from school. Improvements in the warmth of the home could reduce absences from work, which is likely to have a positive impact on work-related health.
COVID-19:	Additional pressure on health and care services this coming winter is likely from a further wave of Covid 19. The severity and impact of a further Covid 19 wave in the context of high vaccination uptake is uncertain.

Seasonal Flu:	Each winter also brings the possibility of a severe seasonal flu. The chances of such happening this winter are possibly higher given the influence of past two winters limiting social contact and reducing exposure to flu virus that would have offered some degree of higher population immunity from flu
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3.8 **Support Available**

3.8.1 National

In February 2022 the Government announced a one-off £150 Energy Rebate payment to Council Tax payers in bands A to D. The £150 Energy Rebate payment has now been made to a number of households and the remaining will have their Council Tax account credited with the £150 energy rebate.

Additionally all households will start receiving £400 off their energy bills from October, with the discount made in 6 instalments to help families throughout the winter period, it is non repayable and will be administered by their energy company.

3 additional payments are available to low income households (up to £650), people on a qualifying disability benefit (up to £150), and people entitled to a Winter Fuel Payment, this is also referred to as the pensioner cost of living payment (£300). It is not clear at the time of writing if these payments could be combined for some individuals.

The Government also announced an energy bill cap of £2500, note however that the cap equates to a 'typical' usage of 12000kWh of gas and 2900 kWh of electricity per year. Households using more will pay more and it should be noted that the current reliefs are announced on a basis of one payment type for each household and as such treats as equivalents; a single older person living alone, and a lone parent with an older mother and with two teenage children. The first household may heat only two rooms, the second will likely be heating six. Yet the first is getting more relief than the second.

3.8.2 Local

A range of cross sector approaches are in place to support local people over and above the central government offer of support much of which remains undefined at present.

3.8.3 Fuel support

Citizens Advice partner with HBC to offer Debt Advice and Pre Paid fuel vouchers Energy Project Plus (EPP) offer free helpline for advice on energy efficiency, reducing fuel bills and grants/discounts etc. as well as home energy visits and installation of simple measures (e.g. energy saving lightbulbs).

Cheshire Green Doctor also run helplines for advice on energy efficiency, reducing fuel bills, and grants, they do signpost to relevant organisations around money/debt advice etc.

Housing associations offer various cost-of-living advice and support for their tenants. Some are also looking at means to better identify/target vulnerable homes

The affordable warmth referral form available on HBC website to assess needs and signpost to relevant support. The referral form is a means to gain free and impartial advice and support to help reduce energy bills, keep homes warm and offer debt

advice. The offer is working in partnership with local organisations highlighted above.

3.8.4 Funding/grant schemes

- Citizens Advice has been working with Halton Housing (and other Council Teams) to distribute School Uniform grants.
- ECO4 Flex (Energy Company Obligation) funding scheme: heating and energy efficiency measures in fuel poor and vulnerable homes. The application form is on the HBC website. Halton accepts and processes referrals; applications currently go through Halton Direct Link, to public health team for review.
- The Sustainable Warmth Fund has recently opened to applications targeting those and most in need of energy improvement installations (e.g heating, insulation, double glazing but excluding gas boilers) for around 442 privately rented/owned homes. This is managed by HBC Regen team.
- EPP's Warmth for Health scheme: grant funding towards the costs of repairing/replacing heating systems (and boiler servicing), for low-income homeowners with chronic health conditions who are ineligible for ECO Funding
- EPP's ECHO (Emergency Central Heating Offer) scheme – funds repair/replacement of broken gas boilers, for homeowners earning <£31k or receiving income support.(subject to the necessary funding)
- Community Grants: £500 groups for development – not specific to cost of living increase.
- Halton Foundation (managed by Merseyside Foundation) give out vouchers for white goods etc. in emergency situations.
- LEAP Appliance Scheme – white goods replacement scheme (the white goods service is subject to funding being available)

For individuals in urgent need, there is an option to apply to the Council's discretionary support team who may be able to help with food and other emergency support.

3.8.5 Existing planned events:

- Whilst “Warm Banks” appears to be a beneficial offer it is not without risk as it increases costs of heating for the provider at a challenging time and also may entice people out of their homes into an even colder environment in order to travel to them for a short term benefit. As such existing opportunities for events already taking place in the community are being identified and will be advertised on a rolling basis.
- Citizens Advice are reviewing a ‘Warm zones’ initiative, which would see them and other agencies open through extended opening hours/weekends, enabling people to warm up and speak to professionals if required.
- Bridgewater 0-19s are planning to resume drop-in baby clinics in late September/Early October to potentially have professional partners available at these drop-ins to offer advice/support (e.g. on timetable or targeted based on needs). Families would be invited and made aware of support available.
- Libraries and Community Centres have started to roll out Warm Space initiatives.

- For Healthy and Active Ageing Week there were events held at Shopping City and Widnes Market working with partner organisations to promote Affordable Warmth.
- There is an annual Stay Well This Winter Campaign which includes the promotion to the public and front line professionals. Further work is ongoing to roll out the offer with all GP practices, this includes training social prescribers and social care in practice staff who are based in GP's.
- A number of Housing providers will be running events over the coming months where the local offer will be promoted.
- Whilst the above seems a comprehensive offer some of the schemes and services above are short-term or reliant on funding of which is not guaranteed in the longer term, e.g. EPP Service Level Agreement.
- A quarterly Affordable Warmth steering Group led by public health raises awareness for staff and customers/ clients about the issues related to affordable warmth and the support available to a wide range of internal and external partners including Health, Social Care both Children and Young People, Housing, Cheshire Fire Service as well as a number of Third Sector organisations.
- A fortnightly Halton Winter Resilience Group has just been stood up to look at the health and social care impacts of winter, whilst not specifically cost of living focused it will include planning linked to this.

3.8.6 Food Support

There are now a number of social supermarkets set up as well as the Community Shop and Food banks to support people needing food.

Feeding Halton is a network that works on initiatives to tackle food insecurity in the borough. It is a network organisation with numerous partners. The group oversaw the summer provision of free meals for children as part of the holiday activity fund. Citizens advice provides shopping vouchers for food to the most in need.

3.8.7 Awareness raising

A cost of living web page is on HBC website. Further details of the schemes above are now available. The web page links to all of the Council and partners links to local help - <https://www3.halton.gov.uk/Pages/health/costofliving.aspx>

Additional media work is planned including a communication plan to share the link above to all stakeholders including Council members and staff, NHS and VCS partners and a number of media releases are planned.

4.0 **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 It is clear that due to the background level of need within Halton that many of our households will be affected by the rising cost of food, fuel and cost of heating their homes. There are a range of support measures available and partnership working is ensuring that support reaches the most vulnerable in a way that addresses both the immediate problem as well as supporting a more sustainable

5.0 **OTHER/FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 The financial implications predominantly lie with the people who live and work in Halton. The funding provided through grants and additional support has been ring

fenced by Government although the staff resource now focused on this area across the system will have an opportunity cost.

- 5.2 Money and mental health are often linked. Having poor mental health can make managing money more difficult and problems with debt and money can impact mental health, for this reason additional work is focused on providing advice and signposting to sources of mental health and wellbeing resources.

6.0 **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES**

6.1 **Children & Young People in Halton**

Experiences during the early years and in education are particularly important for immediate and longer-term health and outcomes. Improving health through the provision of adequate food and warm housing with promote educational development at an individual level.

6.2 **Employment, Learning & Skills in Halton**

There is great potential for businesses to improve the health of their employees and communities more broadly

6.3 **A Healthy Halton**

The majority of the report details the clear impacts on health of the current cost of living crisis

6.4 **A Safer Halton**

None

6.5 **Halton's Urban Renewal**

One of the most significant ways that healthy environments and sustainable warmth can be forged is through good quality housing with good access to services, shops, community facilities, leisure and entertainment and good quality natural environments

7.0 **RISK ANALYSIS**

- 7.1 Whilst it is likely that predicted price rise will have an impact at population level, the government did announce a series of measures which are expected to reduce the impact. Details of all the schemes are not know at time of writing but local schemes are in place. The most risk lies within the fact that much of the data supports our understanding of who may be at risk but data sharing is not yet routine and the challenge is finding those who may be most hard to reach and ensuring they get the help they require.

8.0 **EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

- 8.1 This is in line with all equality and diversity issues in Halton and supports a reduction in inequalities. In particular noting the impacts on people who will be disproportionately affected by reasons of age, disability and ethnicity

9.0 **LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

None within the meaning of the Act.