

Cost of Living Crisis Roundtable (06.10.22) Report

'Many families are choosing whether to eat or heat; many can't afford either'

Representatives met from across Oxfordshire's voluntary and community sector, NHS, local schools, county, city, and district councils to discuss a collaborative response to the Cost of Living crisis. Set out below is a summary of these discussions.

Understanding the Cost of Living Crisis

Concepts

- This is not another, separate crisis, but rather part of a sequence of worldwide crises including COVID and the impact of climate change
- This crisis requires us to reconsider 'vulnerability' since it will affect everyone
- This crisis will continue long-term

Additional Drivers of the crisis

- Housing insecurity and homelessness
- Lack of **staff retention**, especially among front line workers—we have a long-term labour problem in Oxfordshire
- The **volunteering landscape has changed**: many have moved on, feel it's too demanding or not rewarding enough, or have other duties / personal pressures
- Food banks and larders are seeing a significant **reduction in donations**

Lived experience of the crisis

- Residents are experiencing **widespread and significant anxiety**
- Increased anxiety may contribute to increased risk of **domestic abuse** and **poor mental health and wellbeing**
- Frontline groups are seeing **stigma**, shame, embarrassment, and loss of dignity

Who is especially vulnerable?

Those living in Oxfordshire who are:

- On low income but just outside benefits allowances
- Privately renting
- On pre-payment meters for gas and electricity
- Reliant on fuel-oil
- Families with very young children, especially single parent families, and pregnant women
- Elderly, pensioners, disabled, or young people
- Recently discharged from hospital

We should bear in mind that

- There are **many new groups of people in need**. These groups are not familiar with what help is available or where and how to access it. Some may be fearful and reluctant to seek help
- Just because usual measures show an area as affluent, doesn't mean no one there is struggling—our communities are mixed and varied

How we should approach this crisis

'We must be just as dynamic, bold, and ambitious as during COVID'

- Bear in mind that our staff and volunteers are already **run-down** from the extended COVID pandemic
- Maintain our **collaborative working spirit & professional curiosity**
- Work across organisations to collaborate—and to **avoid duplication**
- Remember the importance of **local approaches**
- Implement a range of approaches from county-wide to 'hyperlocal'
- Remember that many people often need a **bespoke solution**
- Advocate our need at **the national level** by sharing our local experiences

Communications

'Good advice is a health intervention'

- People need clear, timely, and non-stigmatising information
- **Make every contact count**
- Information must be easy to understand and **accessible** to all people
- All methods should be considered including non-digital hand out leaflets (including via Cllrs), picking up the phone, knocking on doors, speaking to local newspapers, BBC Oxford & local radio, TV, school newsletters, posters & QR codes, parish councils, notice boards, & bus stop billboards
- Common branding may be useful for residents e.g. for warm, welcoming spaces
- Internal communication to our own staff
- Make use of system-wide **Communications Cells** established during COVID to coordinate
- Communications between VCS, statutory bodies, and health services: can we disseminate regular email updates summarising county-wide work on this crisis?

Specific Ideas

- **‘Warm, welcoming spaces’**
 - Warm spaces should not be named as such—perhaps, ‘warm welcome’
 - They should be about more than just warmth: **social opportunities**, human contact, and access to further help and information
 - There must be **specific reasons** for people to attend to overcome the stigma of seeking warmth
- [#CLICKZERO](#): supporting a campaign to make essential online services data free
- **Community oil buying schemes** have been used to make heating oil cheaper, albeit are experiencing challenges in the current energy market
- **Buying food wholesale**: this allows food groups to buy at wholesale prices and share out, which is cheaper and avoids supermarket limitations
- **“Can we help?”** events: joined up events offering advice from a range of partners—can be hosted in Council-owned spaces
- Helping residents to **prioritise bill payments**
- Providing accessible & accurate **information to those working on the frontline**
- **More help for frontline NHS workers**: subsidised meals, help paying for petrol
- **Donation pool**: encouraging residents to donate their £400 energy rebate if they feel others could benefit more from it
- Giving charities longer to spend public sector grants: this allows them to develop long-term strategies and more sustainable plans
- Oxfordshire’s Public Health team have just put together [“Community Profiles”](#) with statistical data and **rich, personal insights**—for everyone to use

Principles for joint working

- We will build on what already works using our **existing structures & partnerships**
- Our response is **local**: different approaches are needed in different places. However, we are committed to joined up, **person- and family-centred** ways of working, aligned across agencies
- Long-term strategy
 - *‘Often we are only keeping crises at bay for another day or week’*
 - We will plan for the sustained impact of the cost-of-living crisis, not just the immediate response
 - Prevention remains better than cure: the more we can do to help people avoid crises and harm, the less impact in the long-term
 - Although humanitarian interventions are needed in the short-term, there is a real need for a long-term ‘community resilience’ strategy which should be woven into all of our actions and interventions