

Cost of Living Crisis

Winter Plan

November 2022



Foreword

Councillor Jane Carr

Cabinet Member



From rising energy prices to the price of the weekly shop going up, the cost of living crisis is being felt by most people, but for those on low to medium incomes the impact is greatest. This plan sets out how we will help them.

Through a combination of our own funds and government grants, our wide-ranging package will deliver over £3.3 Million of help for those most in need. This will include direct financial assistance alongside more practical support for residents delivered in partnership with local organisations.

But the work does not stop there. I will be working hard over the winter bringing together different charities and community organisations, connecting them with businesses that want to help. That is why I will be launching a Winter Gift Appeal, highlighting how locally based businesses like Sainsbury's, who generously provide Christmas gifts to children in need each year, are setting an example other firms can follow.

Sadly, 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 this plan sets out how we will do that.

Councillor Jane Carr
Cabinet Member for Tackling Social Inequalities

Section 1

Working in partnership to help residents

We know 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 **£180,000** to help them open 'warm places', run pop-up cafes and other informal social activities where people can meet up as well as be warm and enjoy a hot meal. 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. On top of this, we will offer an extra **£80,000** to MK Foodbank to help them extend their help, with a focus on top up shops and raising the total number of food parcels each person can receive.

SOFEA is another important local food charity and are behind the eight Community Larders that have been set up in MK offering access to low cost food without any means testing. We will be offering **£20,000** to SOFEA to help them keep the eight Community Larders going over the winter as well as provide food to other charities and community groups.

This additional £280,000 is on top of over £300,000 of city council funds that have been given to 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 are struggling with rising 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 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 and their families must find the money to cover these extra meals. We now have a third wave of 'Household Support Fund' money from government and around **£700,000** 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 for the two-week Christmas holiday and the one-week February 2023 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

The 2022 Winter activities and food programme is due to take place for four days from 19th to 22nd December. We will be using **£190,000** of government funding to pay for this programme which will offer a 'Summer of Play' type experience in the Christmas holidays, with fun activities and free hot food.

We are aiming to have around 7,000 places available over four days. 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

Surging energy costs are 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 targeting our help on those most in need.

This winter, we will be investing **£59,000** of city council funding to provide a helpline that any local resident can use to get free energy advice and home improvements. This service is now up and running.

We are also setting aside **£200,000** of city council funding for experts to carry out home visits and energy reviews and help residents find out more about funding that might be available to help pay for home improvements, like insulation.

Extra help for council tenants

We are setting aside **£200,000** 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.



Targeted help for renters

We also have **£450,000** of government funding which means we can 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.

Special help with council tax

Our discretionary **£100,000** Council Tax Reduction Scheme will continue this winter (in addition to the main government-funded scheme) to support people experiencing financial hardship pay their Council Tax.

Section 4

Help for residents facing immediate hardship

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

In October we received notification that we will be receiving £1.7 Million through the government's Household Support Fund initiative. As set out in Section 2, around £700,000 of this will be distributed to families of children who are entitled to free school meals.

However, most of the money, **around £1 Million** will be used to support residents, including people with a disability, facing immediate hardship.

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

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

We will be promoting this fund, and how to apply, through agencies and professionals to ensure as many people as possible are aware of the help on offer.



Section 5

Raising awareness of the help on offer

We have created a special Cost of Living Help logo which we will be widely using on all our communication material. We have set up a special page on our website for cost of living information and have pulled together a fact sheet for residents full of useful information on the help available.



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

Special campaigns

We will also be running three special 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 1 and 4 years old. Healthy Start is government funded. We will run a local campaign to promote awareness of Healthy Start.
2. **Benefits calculator** – We will be highlighting and promoting the national benefits calculator and encourage residents to check which means-tested benefits you may be entitled to, for example tax credits or universal credit.
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 things like a 'bill prioritiser' (the service has phone-line options as well as on-line tools).

Finally, we will 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.

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

Our website is always available

www.milton-keynes.gov.uk

