

People and Health Scrutiny Committee

14 November 2024

Cost of Living Challenge Update

For Review and Consultation

Cabinet Member and Portfolio:

Cllr R Hope, Customer, Culture and Community Engagement

Executive Director:

A Dunn, Executive Director, Corporate Development

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Report Status: Public

Brief Summary: This paper provides an update on the Cost-of-Living projects recommended for agreement by the Place and Resources Overview Committee (which members of the People and Health Overview committee were also in attendance for) on 11 July 2024.

Recommendation:

1. That members review and comment on the progress of the £2 million investment in preventative and reactive spend agreed in July 2024.
2. Note that government has recently announced that extension of the Household Support Fund to 2025/26.
3. Note that £1.5m of the cost of living fund has been committed so far and that no further commitments are intended to be made at this stage whilst the impact of the Household Support Funding is assessed. If necessary, the balance of the £0.5m cost of living fund can be transferred into next financial year.

Reason for Recommendation:

1. It was requested by the Place and Resources Overview Committee that quarterly project updates were brought to People and Health Scrutiny Committee.
2. The purpose of the Cost-of-Living fund, financed from the Council's reserves is to fill the gaps in other national support. Projects were costed at approximately £1.5

million to allow for emerging trends and policy from the Government in the Autumn and Winter.

3. **Background**

- 3.1 The Dorset Together: Cost-of-Living programme was created in 2022 in response to the rising cost of living and the financial impact of this on Dorset residents.
- 3.2 In the last financial year, a budget of £2 million from reserves was allocated to a series of projects which addressed gaps in the national provision of support. In June 2024 Cabinet agreed up to a further £2 million to continue to support residents with the ongoing impacts. Proposed projects were discussed at Place and Resources Overview Committee in July with delegated sign off given to the Executive Director for Corporate Development (S151) and the Cabinet Member for Customer, Culture and Community Engagement.
- 3.3 A full background of the programme to date can be found in the **background papers**.
- 3.4 A list of all originally requested projects with recommendations following Place and Resources Overview Committee for 24-25 can be found in **Appendix 1**.
- 3.5 Following the recommendations on 11 July, using the agreed member delegated authority, the Executive Director for Corporate Development (S151) and the Cabinet Member for Customer, Culture and Community Engagement agreed to support 14 of the proposed 17 projects. Progress on all projects are projects are in item 2 below.

2. Agreed Project Progress and Budget Update

2.1 The below table displays the individual agreed project progress and the budget spend to 31 October 2024.

Project no.	Project Title	Budget Amount agreed	Spend as at 31 October 24	Progress Report
1	Homelessness Support	£177,500	£177,500	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information and Awareness Campaign: Launched in July, it increased calls to our Housing Options team by 18% over the last 3 months compared to the same period last year. This early intervention helps improve outcomes for those starting to struggle. • Financial Support: Since April 1 2024, 120 households received financial aid to prevent homelessness or secure new housing through arrears payments, rent in advance, and deposits. • Supermarket Vouchers (April 1 - August 31, 2024): £20,000 worth of vouchers were distributed to 316 households in hardship, including 155 with children and 23 pension-age households. • Supermarket Vouchers (Since September 1, 2024): £1,675 worth of vouchers were given to 31 households in hardship.
2	Healthy Homes Dorset scheme	£200,000	£200,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ridgewater Energy, our delivery partner are currently in the project cycle of raising awareness, handling enquiries and conducting surveys to assess eligibility. • Focus on Park Homes: We are focusing on Park Homes, which often miss out on funding and house vulnerable residents. • Current Work: Improvement works are underway for 35 Park Homes, costing around £4,000 each, totalling £117,000. These homes are mostly in highly deprived areas of Portland, Weymouth, and Alderholt.

3	Citizens Advice – CoL Caseworkers	£214,489	£107,489	<p>1 August to 28 October 2024</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our (2 FTE) Dorset Energy Unit energy caseworkers have supported the residents across the council area with their energy problems. They have helped to deal with off-grid customers struggling when preparing for winter, dealt with energy supply problems and given specialist support to improve efficiency and save money for our clients. • Our (1.5 FTE) Cost of Living outreach caseworkers have delivered advice in a targeted way for the areas of greatest deprivation, including providing home visits for those unable to access our service due to disability or age. They work in the Blandford, Gillingham and Bridport areas delivering advice that maximises income and solves welfare benefits and debt problems. They continue their partnership with others such as Blandford Town Council to deliver the service. • The funding for advice session supervisors has continued to support 250 volunteers in their delivery of service for Dorset residents. <p>Key statistics: our COL caseworkers have helped a total of 219 clients deal with 593 issues and achieved income gains of £253,778</p>
4	Discretionary Housing Payment Allowance.	£100,000	£0	Draw down will begin in Q4 once the statutory funding has been exhausted.
5	Disabilities Facilities Grant	£150,000	£150,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Energy Improvement Grant is using £150,000 of cost-of-living crisis funding. The grant is designed to enable homeowners with a disability to quickly access

				<p>financial assistance to conduct a wide range of energy improvements around the home. Funding is made available through the Dorset Accessible Homes Service.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • So far 24-25 CoL project 10 grants have been given (Q2 24/25) totalling £40,229.
7	Emergency and affordable food security	£100,000	£0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not yet allocated due to the Autumn round being covered by Government-funded Household Support Fund • Work has been ongoing with food projects to develop robust referral mechanisms to ensure residents who use those projects have access to wraparound support as needed. • A targeted grant programme will open in November 2024.
8	Sustainable and affordable food security projects	£75,000	£34,970	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding for Community Cooking and Skills courses – Park Community Centre, Weymouth (Friendly Food Club £12,420) - will be aimed at young families and timed after school drop off with the aim to cook and share a meal at the end of the session. The venue is currently setting up a community fridge to enable surplus food to be distributed which will be available to those who attend. • Community Teaching Kitchen (Tumbledown, Weymouth £10,000) - can offer cooking lessons to children and families, school children, young people not attending school, and any other groups who may benefit from attending such sessions at Tumbledown. They are aiming to teach people to cook healthy fresh food on budgets, with one member of staff being a domestic science teacher and three volunteers trained by the Friendly Food Club to provide such cooking sessions. The kitchen will also be used for processing produce from the farm into chutneys, pickles and jams, with

				<p>members and volunteers all involved in the whole operation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic Food Hygiene Certificate via virtual college distributed by Volunteer Centre Dorset (£5,050) • Cooking Kits for community groups x 10 - the barrier of lack of equipment has been identified in terms of set up – the kits would be sited across the county in community venues and be available to borrow by groups wishing to offer community cooking opportunities such as shared lunches etc. (£7,500) • Under development – we are working with groups hoping to restart some community lunch clubs for older people in East and North Dorset which were not continued after Covid.
9	Targeted means tested energy support HSF referral scheme	£100,000	£0	Following the Government’s announcement in the Autumn Budget to extend the HSF, this may now be covered from this fund – awaiting confirmation at time of report writing. Verbal update to be given at meeting.
10	Targeted programme for Cost-of-Living advice, support and anti-scams for vulnerable residents with learning disabilities.	£25,000	£25,000	<p>People First Dorset</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 sessions (6 Weymouth, 4 Dorchester, 2 online) reached 93 adults with learning disabilities. • Topics: budgeting, digital safety, health, and emotional wellbeing. • Survey of 55 members: 73% struggle financially, 76% worry about scams, 87% feel socially isolated, 42% find it hard to get out, 78% want more focused workshops, 20% struggled to answer. • 2025 plan: Smaller, targeted workshops based on identified needs
11	Support for older residents benefit applications	£75,000	£60,000	Budget increased from £50,000 to support the emergent Pension Credit application campaign (making them eligible

				<p>for winter fuel allowance). Supported by Citizens Advice for complex cases</p> <p>Project update detail in section 3</p>
12	<p>Helping Hands programme</p>	<p>£50,000</p>	<p>£25,000</p>	<p>Island Community Action (ICA) - 1 September- 31 October</p> <p>The project provided 510 at-home and 1,691 out-of-home interactions through over 20 services and activities. They collaborated with various organisations to improve referral and support systems related to the cost-of-living crisis, covering areas like Carers, Finance, Food, Home Safety and Transport.</p> <p>The project includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At Home: Befriending, Food Bank referrals, Good Neighbour errands, and telephone check-ins. • Out of Home: Community Crafters, club activities, food-based activities, social activities, transport for essential appointments and shopping support. • ICA have created a new collaborative approach to supporting and referring those in need of support related to the cost-of-living crisis. This has included working with Citizens Advice Bureau (via Energy Bus), Christians Against Poverty, Age UK (related to the Household Support Fund), local Food Banks and Dorset & Wiltshire Fire & Rescue and plan further partnership discussions to support older and vulnerable residents. • An updated A to Z Directory has been created to cover relevant subjects, and ICA continues to take a holistic approach to client support.

				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ICA will provide benefits application (project 11) for older residents of Portland as part of this grant award.
13	Village/community hall/community spaces CoL sustainability.	£30,000	£30,000	Sessions have been delivered on marketing, policy development and budgeting and resources have been developed such as template policies, ACRE* information sheets and other resources (*Action with Communities in rural England)
14	Community Transport Network	£100,000	£0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Following the recent investment from the HSF in local community transport, several community schemes have identified the need for further funding. Applicants will be able to apply for up to £10,000 for capital projects with 20% match funding and/or up to £5,000 for revenue (no match funding required) Fund will be opened and application via Dorset Council website by mid November 2024. Applications will be sent to the local Town/Parish representative for comment and the panel will allocate funding in Q4 on a case-by-case basis.
15	Customer Services Digital inclusion device loan scheme	£10,000	£10,000	<p>10 further iPads as part of our iPad lending scheme-representing a 33% increase.</p> <p>The additional devices enable us to improve our digital inclusion offer across the Dorset Council area. Previously customers were only able to borrow an iPad from one of seven designated libraries (with 30 devices available). The additional funding means an iPad can now be borrowed from any one of our 23 council run libraries. The new devices will be available for loan from 1 November.</p> <p>We are working with communications colleagues to develop a marketing campaign to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> improve our partnership and stakeholder messaging about the new offer

				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> improve our reach to digitally excluded groups through an outreach visit programme. <p>Impact data will be collected via a customer survey instigated on return of the device – reporting will be available for the next scrutiny date.</p>
16	Children's Services 4 targeted priority programmes that support low-income families	£100,000	£0	Following the Government's announcement to extend the HSF, this may now be partially/fully covered from this fund – awaiting confirmation at time of report writing. Verbal update to be given at meeting.
	Total	Awarded £1,506,989	Spend to date £819,959	

2.2 The below table gives project updates for the 3 projects that were recommended as tentative or declined following the Place and Resources Overview committee on 11th July 2024.

Project no.	Project Title	Budget Amount Requested	Progress report
6	Invest in Lendology	£50,000	On 7 th July members of the Place and Resources Overview were not familiar with the Lendology scheme and requested that a separate paper be presented at Scrutiny and that a recommendation would be made on progression of this project. The paper was presented by the Service Manager for Housing Standards at People and Health Overview committee as part of the Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy paper on Tuesday 29 October. The updated policy was supported by members of the overview committee and recommended for Cabinet sign off.

			The lead Cabinet Member and Executive Director for Corporate Development (S151) will review the minutes and recording of the paper, and I will give a further verbal update at the meeting.
11	Age UK NSW	£50,000	An update is detailed in part 3 of this paper.
17	Digital Place	£150,000	<p>The Overview committee did not agree this should be categorised under the cost of living as it is a business as usual project for Dorset Council. It was recommended that it should be considered under a sustainability or economic regeneration budget.</p> <p>The lead Cabinet Member and Executive Director for Corporate Development (S151) agreed with this recommendation and this project will not be progressed as part of the cost of living programme.</p>

2.3 Overall the cost-of-living support programme is on track to deliver the agreed projects within the agreed timeframe. With the very recent extension announcement of the HSF in the national Government's budget, there may be some adjustments to how the projects are funded. The cost of living programme was designed to fill in the gaps in other funded programmes so with the change in national government there was always going to be a degree of movement for this.

2.4 As the impact of the new Government's budget announcement on the cost of living for Dorset's residents becomes clearer, we will continue look to find any new gaps or emerging trends identified in our data and intelligence from our VCOSOs and frontline staff to create further support projects.

2.5 Full monitoring and statistical impacts of the funding will be provided in the report provided to People and Health Scrutiny Committee in April 2025.

2.6 As agreed at Overview committee in July 2024, further allocation of support is being made to support Dorset's most vulnerable residents with cost-of-living projects in the next financial year budget development.

3. Support for applications for Pension Credit

3.1 At the Place & Resources Overview committee, it had been recommended that the original project request to offer Age UK North, South and West Dorset £50,000 (no. 11) to support older peoples benefit claimant applications be separated out to geographical locations and that a fund is developed to for local organisations already undertaking this work be able to apply in to.

3.2 Following the national government announcement in September that the winter fuel payment was only for residents on pension credit, we took the decision that this fund would have a primary focus on targeted support for older people to complete applications for Pension Credit and other related older people benefits.

3.3 Due to potential underspend on other cost of living projects and the emergent deadline of 21 December to apply for Pension Credit to be eligible for this year's winter fuel allowance, it was authorised to increase the total value of this funding to £75,000.

3.4 Citizens Advice agreed to offer a 'one day benefits first aid' course to support any local organisations who would like some guidance for their volunteers and staff to support this activity to ensure as many eligible residents as possible have their application approved first time.

3.5 In addition to the support funded from the Cost of Living programme, Dorset Council has undertaken a full marketing campaign aimed at older residents and their families to encourage them to apply for pension credit where eligible or to access alternative support from partner organisations.

3.6 This is a list of the organisations who were awarded the funding from the fund.

Organisation	Location/Target residents	Amount
Age Concern North Dorset	Sturminster Newton, Gillingham, Shaftesbury and surrounding villages and hamlets	£7,000
The Lantern Trust	Weymouth, Chickerell, Dorchester & surrounding villages	£10,000
Age UK Bournemouth,	East Dorset including Ferndown, West Moors, Wimborne, St Leonards and St Ives, Blandford,	£10,000

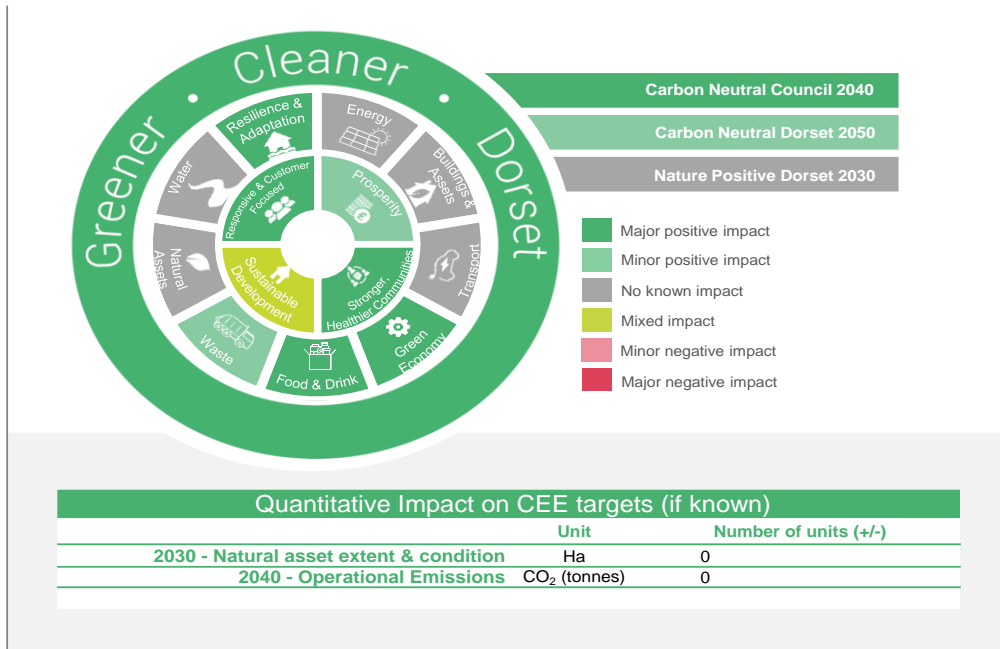
Poole & East Dorset	Corfe Mullen and surrounding villages	
Age UK North, South & West Dorset	Dorchester and surrounding villages– Weymouth, Chickerell, Chesil coast villages area - Bridport, Lyme Regis area, Beaminster and Broadwindsor, Sherborne, Sturminster Newton, Blandford, Gillingham, Shaftesbury, Wareham, Swanage, Lychett Matravers	£35,000
Ferndown Community Support CIC	Ferndown, Verwood and adjoining areas	£3,000
The YOU Trust	Across the Dorset Council area focus on hospital discharge of older people	£10,000
Total		£75,000
Island Community Action	Portland	NA – included in their separate Cost of living grant

4. **Financial Implications**

Cabinet agreed that up to £2m can be utilised from council reserves to support this programme in this financial year. Current commitment totals at £1,506,989m. In light of the announcement by the Government in the Autumn budget to extend the Household Support Fund, we are proposing that the expenditure this financial year sticks to the current commitment of £1,506,989m.

Cabinet agreed that future financial support of cost of living will be considered as part of the annual budget setting process, not part of general reserves.

5. **Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications**



ACCESSIBLE TABLE SHOWING IMPACTS

Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Strategy Commitments	Impact
Energy	No known impact
Buildings & Assets	No known impact
Transport	No known impact
Green Economy	major positive impact
Food & Drink	major positive impact
Waste	minor positive impact
Natural Assets & Ecology	No known impact
Water	No known impact
Resilience and Adaptation	major positive impact

Corporate Plan Aims	Impact
Prosperity	minor positive impact
Stronger healthier communities	strongly supports it
Sustainable Development & Housing	neutral
Responsive & Customer Focused	strongly supports it

6. **Well-being and Health Implications**

This programme of activities has been designed to positively support the well-being and health of Dorset Council's residents.

7. **Risk Assessment**

7.1 **HAVING CONSIDERED:** the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Low

Residual Risk: Medium

Although the previous £2 million has achieved its purpose and has significantly supported our vulnerable residents to weather the cost-of-living challenge, the challenge has not ended. Emerging trends throughout 23-24 have shown that housing issues became more prevalent.

The Government reduced the winter fuel allowance to households on pension credit only. Dorset has the highest population of older residents in the country, many of them fall just outside of these criteria but will struggle to pay their fuel bills this winter. In mitigation, Dorset Council has made provision for those residents affected with targeted support projects from the HSF and this fund alongside a full marketing campaign and support from VCS partners.

The financial provision from the Government has been extended for Household Support Fund (HSF) for 2025/26. This fund supports many vulnerable people including paying for free school meal vouchers in the school holidays, supermarket vouchers (to support with increased energy prices), and grants to foodbanks and social supermarkets.

8. **Equalities Impact Assessment**

Proposals for the Cost-of-Living Challenge programme of activities continue to target our most vulnerable residents. Means testing is used where possible to ensure the additional funding reaches those in greatest need.

In March 2023, our data and insights team undertook extensive data modelling to identify those households in greatest need. Using this data, we were able to identify gaps in national government and local support to date. We continue to work closely in partnership with our VCS partners such as Citizens Advice and the food security organisations.

9. **Appendices**

- Appendix 1 – List of the originally proposed projects and recommendations with next steps following Place and Resources Overview Committee 11 July

10. **Background Papers**

- [Cost of Living Challenge Cabinet paper 23rd February 2023](#)
- [Cost of Living Challenge People and Health Scrutiny paper 7th March 2024](#)
- [Cost of living Challenge Cabinet paper 11th June 2024](#)
- [Cost of Living Place and Resources Overview Committee 11th July 2024](#)

11. **Report Sign Off**

- 11.1 This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Legal and Democratic (Monitoring Officer), the Executive Director for Corporate Development (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Portfolio Holder(s)

Appendix 1 – List of the originally proposed projects and recommendations with next steps following Place and Resources Overview Committee 11th July

No.	DC/ VCSO lead	Project recommendations by P&RO committee 11/07/24	Amount	Next Steps
1	Housing – Homelessness prevention	To continue the additional support provided in Q3&4 23-24 with 4 priority programmes of support: Support	£177,500	Delegated authority to support once monitoring has been agreed.
2	Place - Economic Regeneration	To continue to invest in the Healthy Homes Dorset scheme, focusing on geographical locations of disadvantage. Support	£200,000	Delegated authority to support once monitoring has been agreed. Ensure social worker teams can refer in and fund vulnerable residents
3	Citizens Advice	To extend the CoL caseworkers and adding a further 0.5FTE to assist with increased demand. Additional resource for volunteer training and supervision Support	£214,489	Delegated authority to support once monitoring has been agreed.
4	Corporate Services - Revenue and Benefits	To continue to support the Discretionary Housing Payment Allowance. Support	£100,000	Delegated authority to support once monitoring has been agreed.
5	Adults Services - Housing	To continue to support the Disabilities Facilities Grant Support	£150,000	LC – to confirm whether we put a charge on the houses? <i>(no due to tight regulations on reclaiming, most residents aren't eligible – very costly)</i> Delegated authority to support once monitoring has been agreed.

6	Adults Services - Housing	Investment in Lendology. Support	£50,000	Service Manager Housing Standards to give a briefing about Lendology at an overview / scrutiny meeting. Decision will be made following this.
7	Communities and Partnerships & VCSO	Continue to invest in emergency and affordable food security that has a referral system. Support	£100,000	Agreed but with flexibility for special cases who can prove worth outside of referral system. Delegated authority to support once monitoring has been agreed.
8	Communities and Partnerships & VCSO	Invest in more VCS led sustainable and affordable food security projects in areas of most need. Support	£100,000	Projects funded to be discussed at 1/4ly scrutiny committee, very important its grass roots up. Delegated authority to support once monitoring has been agreed.
9	Children's Services & VCSO	Boost the Household Support Fund (HSF) targeted means tested energy support referral scheme Support	£100,000	Consider other referrers such as Vale pantry (dependant on means testing criteria) LC speak to Sarah C. Delegated authority to support once monitoring has been agreed.
10	People First Dorset	Invest in a targeted programme for Cost of Living advice, support and anti-scams for vulnerable residents with learning disabilities. Support	£25,000	Delegated authority to support once monitoring has been agreed.
11	Age UK NSW Dorset	Invest in their information, advice and guidance service for vulnerable older	£50,000	Concept of funding to support older people access IAG services and get

		<p>residents to ensure they are receiving all the income they are entitled to.</p> <p>Declined as is</p>		<p>support for benefit form completion, however not support directly specifically for just Age NSW as other agencies that support residents with this geographically. Develop a targeted support fund and invite bids.</p> <p>Need to consider support provision for East Dorset</p>
12	Island Community Action	<p>Invest in their Helping Hands programme that directly supports 1020+ vulnerable older/vulnerable people on Portland.</p> <p>Support</p>	£50,000	Delegated authority to support once monitoring has been agreed.
13	Dorset Community Action	<p>Support for village/community hall sustainability.</p> <p>Support</p>	£30,000	<p>Must include Church/Faith halls in this offer also as part of grant agreement</p> <p>Delegated authority to support once monitoring has been agreed.</p>
14	Place – Community Transport & VCSO	<p>Invest in the sustainability of Dorset's community transport network.</p> <p>Support</p>	£100,000	<p>Feed into Transport EAP</p> <p>Delegated authority to support once monitoring has been agreed.</p>
15	Customer Services - Libraries	<p>Invest in the extension of the digital inclusion device loan scheme.</p> <p>Support</p>	£10,000	Delegated authority to support once monitoring has been agreed.
16	Children's Services & VCSO	<p>To continue the additional 4 targeted priority programmes that support low-income families</p> <p>Support</p>	£100,000	<p>If HAF funding extended, consider increasing amounts on this project. Focus HAF projects for small rural areas.</p> <p>Delegated authority to support once monitoring has been agreed.</p>

17	Economic Regeneration – Digital Place	Invest in the Digital Doorway device programme for vulnerable residents Decline	£150,000	Cllrs. Did not agree this was CoL but a fill in for BAU so declined to support this project. However should be part of a sustainability programme.
		Total:	£1,556,989	
18+		Yet to be allocated for quarters 3 and 4 according to emerging trends.	£443,011	
		Budget total:	£2,000,000	