

People and Health Scrutiny Committee

17 November 2025

Cost of Living Challenge Update

For Review and Consultation

Cabinet Member:

Cllr R Hope, Customer, Culture and Community Engagement

Local Councillor(s):

All

Executive Director:

Steven Ford Corporate Director SPS

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Report Status: Public

Brief Summary: This paper provides a mid-year progress update on the 2025-26 Cost-of-Living projects presented to People and Health Scrutiny on 19th June 2025. A full evaluation will be presented following the end of the financial year.

Recommendation:

1. That members review and comment on the progress of the £1.2 million investment in preventative and reactive spend.
2. Note that government has announced the Household Support Fund will be phased out at the end of the current spending cycle. From April 2026, the Household Support Fund will be replaced by a new, long-term initiative called the Crisis and Resilience Fund (CRF).

Reason for Recommendation:

1. It was requested by the Place and Resources Overview Committee that project updates were brought to People and Health Scrutiny Committee.
2. The purpose of the Cost-of-Living fund, and via the Household Support Fund is to fill the gaps in other national support provided to those residents struggling as a result

of the high cost of living. Projects identified in this financial year were costed at £1.2 million.

1. **Background**

- 1.1 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.
- 1.2 For the financial year 2025/26 a budget of £1.2 million - £700,000 allocated from the Household Support Fund and £500,000 was allocated to a series of projects which addressed gaps in the national provision of support. This programme of support builds upon the last two years. Proposed projects were discussed at People and Health Scrutiny Committee with delegated sign off given to the Executive Director for Corporate Development (S151) and the Cabinet Member for Customer, Culture and Community Engagement.
- 1.3 A full background of the programme to date can be found in the **background papers**.

2. Agreed Project Progress and Budget Update

2.1 The below table displays the individual agreed project progress, and the budget spend to 31 August 2025.

Project no.	Project Title	Budget Amount agreed	Spend as at 31 August 25	Progress Report
1	Homelessness Support	HSF ⁱ - £200,000 CoL ⁱⁱ £167,000 £367,000	£113,956	Homelessness Prevention 1. Arrears/Rent in advance & deposit payments. This will support the team to negotiate with landlords to stop evictions from taking place or help to find new suitable accommodation (£200,000). 2. Tenancy Sustainment. To maintain existing capacity of one of the tenancy sustainment officers to keep proactive negotiations with landlords (£93,000) 3. Media and information awareness- Homelessness prevention/Early Help (£10k) and Key4Me (£10k) – To run a media campaign to continue to raise awareness of the importance of asking for housing help earlier in the process with us and VCS agencies, before eviction 4. Emergency Food vouchers – These will continue to be used for when a resident/s present with nothing and can immediately be given by members of the housing team whilst other emergency support can be prepared (£50,000) 5. Emergency Energy Top Ups: As above for energy support (£4,000) Key statistics: Total households supported to date: 44 - Households with Children: 14 - Disabled households: 26 - Pensioner Households (over 65): 4
2	Healthy Homes Dorset scheme	HSF - £60,000 £60,000	£38,438	The funding provides up to two white goods per household, including electric cookers, fridge/freezers, air fryers, microwaves and washing machines. These items are distributed by Ridgewater Energy following an assessment

				of the individual's home situation and confirmation that they meet the agreed eligibility criteria. Due to high demand, the fund is currently oversubscribed, with two-thirds of the annual budget already spent. As a result, the eligibility criteria have been reviewed: • Gas cookers will no longer be offered. • Eligibility is now based on clients having less than £200 disposable monthly income after essential costs. Key statistics: Total households supported: 53 • Households with children: 11 • Disabled households (ESAⁱⁱⁱ/PIP^{iv}/DLA^v): 29 • Pensioner households (AA^{vi}/PC)^{vii}: 4 • Other low-income households (UC^{viii}): 20
3	Citizens Advice – CoL Caseworkers	£110,000 (HSF) £100,000 (CoL) £210,000	£105,000	1 April to 31 August 2025 • 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 North Dorset and Bridport areas delivering advice that maximises income and solves welfare benefits and debt problems. • The funding for advice session supervisors has continued to support 250 volunteers in their delivery of service for Dorset residents. Key statistics: our COL caseworkers have helped a total of 1,258 clients deal with 3,408 issues and achieved income gains of £851,333

4	Discretionary Housing Payment Allowance.	£48,000 (CoL) £48,000	£0	Draw down will start once the statutory funding has been exhausted. (<i>A condition of the Discretionary Housing Payment Allowance grant from government is that it is spent prior to utilising other resources</i>) Since April 2025 we have received 767 applications for DHP. We have paid (or committed to pay up to 31 March 2026) £442,857.10 Funding this year was £458,298 from central Government + CoL £48,000, so there is currently £63,440.90 remaining with 5 months left. This will likely mean we will need to consider all applications very carefully going forward
5	Disabilities Facilities Grant	£50,000 (HSF) £50,000	£17,031	- The Energy Improvement Grant is using £50,000 of cost-of-living crisis funding. The grant is designed to enable homeowners with a disability to quickly access financial assistance to conduct a wide range of energy improvements around the home. Funding is made available through the Dorset Accessible Homes Service. - So far 25-26 CoL project 3 grants (2 x replacement boilers, 1 x replacement windows/doors) have been given (Q2 25/26) totalling £17,031.
6	Community Transport Network	£30,000 (HSF) £30,000 (CoL) £60,000	£45,000	In Progress: Grant Programme for Community Transport Schemes - now closed – reopening Winter 2025 - Offered capital grant of up to £5,000 with 20% match funding required and/or a revenue grant of up to £2,500 (No match funding required for revenue) - Funding Panel met on 18th September 2025, supported 22 applications to the value of £45,000
7	Emergency and affordable food security	£125,000 (HSF) £120,000 (CoL) £245,000	£109,500	Targeted grant programme to foodbanks and social supermarkets in July. Total of 18 projects funded which included a mix of foodbanks, social supermarkets and refuges. These projects supported a total of 4,811 households in July 2025.

				• 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 further targeted grant programme will open in November 2025 ahead of the winter pressures which usually sees rise in demand due to the seasonal tourism economy.
8	Sustainable and affordable food security projects	£70,000 (HSF) £70,000	£54,360	The funded food projects take a preventative, upstream approach to tackling food insecurity by building long-term community resilience. Rather than focusing solely on emergency provision, these initiatives aim to equip individuals and groups with practical skills, confidence, and infrastructure to support healthier, more sustainable food practices. Through cooking education, volunteer training, and network development, the projects foster local capacity, reduce reliance on crisis services, and promote social connection—laying the groundwork for more resilient communities in the face of ongoing economic pressures. The projects funded to date: Funding for Cooking for good on Portland (Friendly Food Club £5,000) – deliver 12 cookery and food education workshops across Portland in partnership with local community and health partners. - Sessions will be tailored to local needs and hosted in community settings. A train-the-trainer model will equip volunteers to continue delivery beyond the project period. <u>Outcomes:</u> Improved cooking skills, food budgeting and health awareness, alongside reduced food insecurity and strengthened community resilience. Get Dorset Cooking – pilot (Friendly Food Club - £19,813) A six-month pilot supporting community groups to run their own cooking sessions, building on previous training and addressing local barriers. A dedicated coordinator will provide training days, webinars, volunteer matching, microgrants, media support and a celebration event. <u>Outcomes:</u> Communities are empowered to lead their own sessions, boosting food confidence, healthier eating and social connection—key factors in tackling food insecurity.

			Basic Food Hygiene Certificate via virtual college distributed by Volunteer Centre Dorset (£5,100) <u>Outcomes:</u> Strengthens the wider food project network by equipping volunteers with essential skills. Not Just Sundaes early evening supper club, Wareham (£5,000) This initiative addresses food insecurity in Wareham through a weekly community supper using surplus food and a cookery club teaching basic cooking skills. Target groups: Low-income families, older adults and individuals experiencing isolation. <u>Outcomes:</u> Reduced food poverty and waste strengthened community ties. Training from Friendly Food Club will support long-term sustainability Community Cooking Sessions – Westham, Weymouth (Friendly Food Club £12,687) Sessions will cover budgeting, tactical food shopping, healthy eating, energy-efficient cooking, online food planning and progressive cooking skills. <u>Outcomes:</u> Residents gain cost-saving food skills, healthier diets and reduced energy use—building resilience during the cost-of-living crisis. Bridport Community Cook Up (Ripple Workshop, Bridport - £1,760) A pilot project bringing together diverse Bridport residents through shared cooking, crafts and meals. <u>Outcomes:</u> Enhanced community cohesion, celebration of diversity and reduced social isolation. The project builds on a successful Beaminster initiative and will inform future food hub development. Food Network Development & Meetings (£5,000) Locality-based food security network meetings. <u>Intended outcomes:</u> Reduced foodbank referrals, stronger, evidence-based partnership working, identification of gaps in provision to guide future funding, increased understanding and visibility of alternative food models (e.g. social supermarkets) and collection of personal stories to reduce stigma and promote engagement.
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9	Support for older residents benefit applications	£55,000 (HSF) £5,000 (CoL) £60,000	£60,000	These funded projects are collectively working to improve financial resilience among older residents across Dorset by increasing access to welfare benefits and related support. Building on last year's work, early activity has focused on outreach, capacity-building and partnership working, with several projects already generating referrals and delivering direct support. Much of this work is in person assistance in completing applications for Attendance Allowance; Personal Independence Payments (PIP); Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and Pension Credit. There is a focus on <u>home visits</u> to the most vulnerable older people to maximise benefit claims, improve financial stability, enhance referral pathways and increase awareness of entitlements and reduce need for crisis intervention Innovative approaches—such as targeted text messaging and home visits—are helping to reach those who may otherwise be missed in partnership with the Primary Care Networks (PCN). While some projects are still in their setup phase, others are already demonstrating impact through increased engagement and cross-agency collaboration. As we move into autumn and winter, referral numbers are expected to rise, and further data will help to evidence outcomes and inform future funding decisions. Projects are supported by Citizens Advice for complex cases We have partnered with the following organisations to deliver targeted advice to older people: • The Lantern Trust (Weymouth, Portland, Chickerell) - £10,000 • The You Trust (Dorset Council Area) - £10,000 • Island Community Action (Portland) - £7,500 • Age Concern North Dorset (£10,000) • Citizens Advice Purbeck and East Dorset (£15,000) • Age UK NSW (Dorset) (£7,500)
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10	Children's Services HAF (Holidays & Food programme)	£30,000 (CoL)	£30,000	Funding enabled the provision of an additional 1,000 places as part of the summer HAF programme. Due to growing demand, many providers operated waiting lists for their camps. In total, just under 16,000 places were offered to children eligible for benefit-related free school meals. Participants engaged in a diverse range of activities, including forest school sessions, football camps, performing arts workshops, and water sports. Every child received a hot, nutritious meal each day.
	Total	Awarded £1,200,000 [HSF - £700,000 / CoL - £500,000]	Spend to date £573,285	

2.2 Overall, the cost-of-living support programme is on track to deliver the agreed projects within the agreed timeframe.

2.3 Full monitoring and statistical impacts of the funding will be provided in the report provided to People and Health Scrutiny Committee after April 2026.

3. **New Crisis and Resilience Fund**

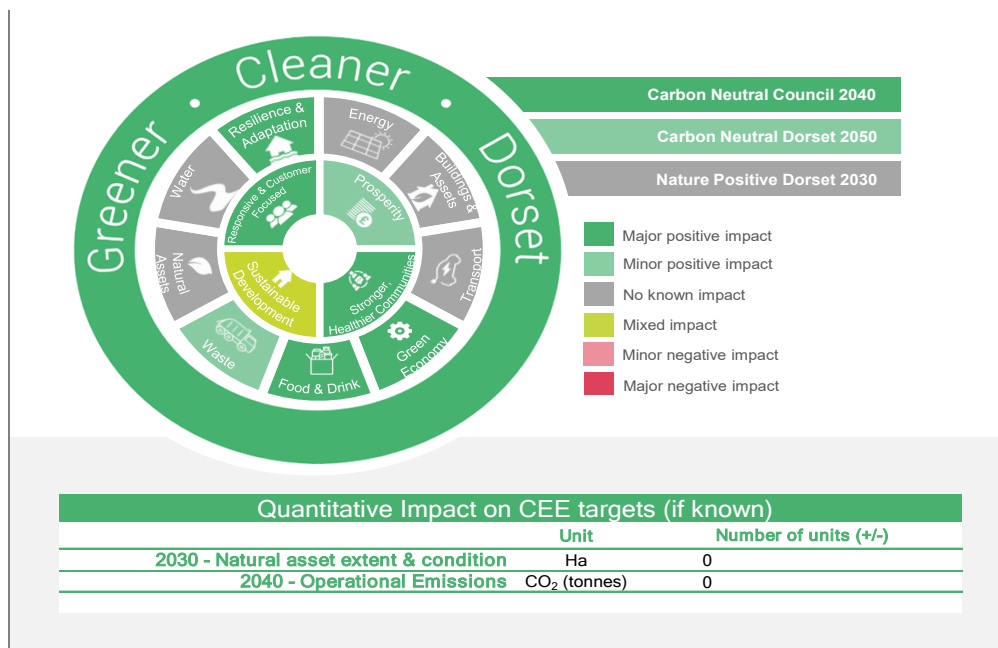
- 3.1 The Household Support Fund (HSF) was originally introduced as a temporary measure during the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis. It was announced that the HSF will be phased out at the end of the current financial year. From April 2026, the Household Support Fund will be replaced by a new, long-term initiative called the **Crisis and Resilience Fund (CRF)**. This marks a significant shift in how emergency financial support is delivered to vulnerable households.
- 3.2 The Crisis and Resilience Fund will operate on a multi-year funding basis. Unlike the HSF, which was renewed annually, the CRF will operate with a funding agreement in place until at least 2028/29, giving councils more financial stability and time for strategic planning.
- 3.3 The CRF will have an expanded scope and incorporate Discretionary Housing Payments and support for children outside of term time, aiming to reduce the reliance on emergency food parcels.
- 3.4 The new fund will have a preventative focus, designed not just for crisis response but also to support preventative measures, working with voluntary and community sector to help households before they reach crisis point.
- 3.5 The Council is confident in our ability to design a robust and responsive programme under the new Crisis and Resilience Fund, building on the foundations laid by the Cost-of-Living Programme over the past three years. This will also draw on the valuable experience and impact of Children's Services through the Holiday Activities and Food programme as well as a range of supportive and preventative initiatives such as those highlighted in this report.
- 3.6 Our strong relationships, trusted partnerships and deep insight we gain from working closely with our voluntary and community sector partners will be central to shaping and delivering this new programme effectively.
- 3.7 We have yet to receive further details of the new Crisis and Resilience fund or the financial settlement. Further information will be shared once we receive it from central government.

4. **Financial Implications**

Cabinet has approved the use of up to £0.5 million to support this programme this year. An additional £700,000 from the Household Support Fund allocation brings the total programme funding to £1.2 million

In future years Cabinet agreed that future financial support of cost of living will be continue as part of the annual budget setting process.

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 Cost of Living programmes have achieved their purpose and have significantly supported our vulnerable residents to weather the cost-of-living challenge, the challenge has not ended. Emerging trends throughout 24-25 and throughout the current financial year have shown that for many, especially vulnerable groups, poverty is becoming deeper and more entrenched. The combination of high housing, rurality and the lack of good quality job opportunities available locally have meant poverty has remained prevalent.

The financial provision from the Government has been announced and from April 2026 the new Crisis and Resilience Fund will replace the current Household Support Fund. 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**

EqIA is attached in the background documents of the report for People and Health Scrutiny Committee 19th June 2025

9. Appendices

N/A

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](#)
- [Cost of Living Challenge Update report.pdf](#) People and Health Scrutiny Committee 14th November 2024
- [Cost of Living Challenge People and Health Scrutiny Committee 19th June 2025](#)

11. Report Sign Off

- 10.1 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 Corporate Director for Finance and Commercial (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Portfolio Holder(s)

ⁱ HSF – Household Support Fund

ⁱⁱ CoL – Cost of Living

ⁱⁱⁱ ESA – Employment Support Allowance

^{iv} PIP – Personal Independence Payment

^v DLA – Disability Living Allowance

^{vi} AA – Attendance Allowance

^{vii} PC – Pension Credit

^{viii} UC – Universal Credit