

St Helens Together: Supporting the borough through the cost of living crisis

Background

Nationally, St Helens ranks in the top 40% of areas at greatest risk from the impacts of the cost of living crisis. In particular our research showed fuel poverty was going to be a big issue for the borough with estimates showing 42% of households in the borough were likely to be impacted by fuel poverty in 2023. Food poverty was also a concern, with food banks in the borough reporting a rise in the number of people accessing their services and a decrease in food donations. It was also reported that St Helens had the least amount of food banks and pantries in the Liverpool City Region.

With this in mind, we undertook some more research through our Cost of Living Index which identified which wards in the borough were the most vulnerable to some of these challenges. The Index was based on a number of indicators which looked at households in fuel poverty, those claiming universal credit, those claiming unemployment benefits, financial vulnerability, children in poverty, food vulnerability and deprivation indexes. This helped us rank which wards in the borough were most in need and helped us target support.

We also wanted to get an understanding of the picture on the ground. We understood the need, and importance, of engaging with local partners. With this in mind, we created a Cost of Living Action Group which included representatives from the council, NHS, Police, housing associations, food pantries and food banks, churches, community centres, colleges, schools, and sports clubs to identify where support was needed to be targeted in the borough and how we could work together to support those most in need. At the initial meeting the group discussed what needs they have been seeing from people accessing their services and discussed what we could do as a collective group to ensure people would be safe and supported during the Winter months. This helped the council prioritise and target support to those most in need through our St Helens Together initiative.

Keeping St Helens Warm

One of the key priorities that was indicated by the Index and that was raised by the group was to ensure residents who were struggling with the rise in the cost of their energy bills were still able to access a safe warm and comfortable space for free during the Winter months. Despite Government interventions to support residents with their energy bills and the targeted support through our Household Support Fund, we knew there would still be some residents who would be unable to heat their homes. With this in mind, we worked with local partners to develop a network of warm spaces.

We created a Warm Space Directory to allow local groups to register their venues and spaces as warm spaces with the council. All groups who registered their space as a warm space had to sign up to our Warm Space Charter which sets out our expectations for what warm spaces in the borough should offer. The Charter ensured that all warm spaces were welcoming, safe, discrete, and that providers treated residents equally, with dignity and respect. The Council opened all of their libraries and three of their children centres (which were only open to vulnerable children and their families)

as warm spaces. We also opened our leisure centres' showering facilities for free, for those struggling to afford to take showers at home. From the Household Support Fund we secured £10,000 for warm spaces which meant we could put on hot drinks for people attending Council owned warm spaces. At the time of writing we have 38 warm spaces registered on our directory which include churches, parish centres, community centres, food pantries and sports clubs. Thanks to the effort and support from local voluntary and community groups we now have at least one warm space in every ward in the borough.

We continued to monitor the number of people attending warm spaces by checking in and keeping engaged with warm space providers. From our engagement with providers we found out that warm spaces started to welcome some more people in each week, as well as the 'regulars' who attend. We also found that in the majority of cases residents would primarily be using the space for food provision, however keeping warm was an added bonus which saw residents staying there for longer. There were also instances of residents using the spaces to tackle social isolation or to use the facilities there such as charging points and wifi to work and sometimes look for jobs online. We are currently undertaking detailed surveys of our warm space providers to find out more about how and why warm spaces were used by residents which will inform the Council's decision for what's next for Warm Spaces as we approach warmer months.

Community engagement and support

As the numbers of people attending warm spaces increased, the council decided to develop Cost of Living Support Sessions at selected warm spaces to give people attending the spaces an opportunity to access support from the Council and local partners. In January and February 2023 we hosted a series of drop in events in warm spaces across the borough. Our Affordable Warmth Team, Food Provision Team, Revenues and Benefits Team and Wellbeing Service attended the sessions to provide advice on how to keep warm for less, what benefits they may be entitled to and how to keep fit and healthy during the winter months. Local partners such as Job Centre Plus, Citizens Advice, Credit Union, United Utilities, Job Centre Plus, and Torus (local housing association) to name a few attended our bigger sessions to provide advice on managing bills, and how to enhance their prospects for the future. The success of these events varied and in some instances we only got around 5 or 6 residents attending. However, we partnered with Job Centre Plus to host a bigger event in the Town Hall where 20 local partners attended to provide support. Over 80 residents attended this afternoon event. This is a model we will be taking forward for future support events.

Food provision

As mentioned earlier, food provision was a key concern for the Council. We heard reports from food banks and pantries in the borough that demand was increasing and that donations to food banks were decreasing. We acted on this and called for help from local businesses and partners to see what they could do to help the cause. Through generous donations and fund raising we were able to support our five main food banks and four food pantries. We collected over 2.5 pallets of food and essentials and raised thousands in funding to give some of our food providers cash donations.

We also understood there was a need to expand the number of food banks/pantries and community growers in the borough and worked with the voluntary and community sector to explore the options for expanding the number of food banks in the borough. We worked with Halton and St Helens

Voluntary and Community Action (VCA), Torus (a local housing association), local churches, and community groups to coordinate this. Through the VCA we have also set up a text donate service to make it easier for people to donate to the Food Alliance (the main body which distributes donations to food banks in the borough).

We have also supported Mission in the Economy (MitE) in setting up a mobile food pantry for the borough. We supported MitE in submitting a bid to the Government's [Faith New Deal Pilot Fund](#). The project was successful and the mobile food pantry received £124,842. Thanks to this funding, we now have a vehicle which has been adapted for the purpose of ensuring more residents across the borough have access to food provision. We have identified around 10 sites for the mobile pantry to visit across the borough.

We have also had support staff attending food banks and warm spaces across the borough to put on classes to show residents easy to cook, affordable, healthy, quick recipes. By teaching residents these skills we are hoping it helps them to choose the right ingredients when they shop, helping them to keep their food bills low and keep them healthy.

As well as expanding the offer of food banks in the borough we have also used the Household Support Fund to support residents in crisis with food vouchers, provide energy efficient white goods (such as slow cookers) for housing association residents, and provided vouchers or payments to families who were eligible to receive means-tested free school meals during the school holidays. In December 2022 schools distributed £45,000 supermarket vouchers to each eligible pupil.

Conclusion

We are currently evaluating how our work has impacted residents in the borough and if there is a need to change our approach in the future. As mentioned earlier in our case study, from our limited engagement with warm space providers, it sounds like the primary reason for people using the spaces is for food provision and to tackle loneliness. With this in mind, there is a strong case for the continuation of warm spaces but potentially coming under a different title to attract those who are also showing these needs but are not aware that provision like this is available to them.

The cost of living crisis isn't going away anytime soon, with energy bills due to rise again in the future. We will be putting plans in place in the future to continue to support residents and ensure those most in need are supported to remain warm, safe and healthy for the long-term.

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