

BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO TOWN AND COMMUNITY COUNCIL FORUM

6 MARCH 2023

REPORT OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR COMMUNITIES

COST OF LIVING / WARM HUBS

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide the Town and Community Council Forum with an update on the cost-of-living support activity, more specifically Warm Hubs, being provided to communities across Bridgend County Borough.

2. Connection to corporate well-being objectives/other corporate priorities

- 2.1 This report assists in the achievement of the following corporate well-being objective under the **Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015**:

- **Helping people and communities to be more healthy and resilient** - taking steps to reduce or prevent people from becoming vulnerable or dependent on the Council and its services. Supporting individuals and communities to build resilience, and enable them to develop solutions to have active, healthy and independent lives.

3. Background

- 3.1 The squeeze on household incomes has increased over the past 12 months and the increase in energy prices has played a significant role. Whilst not exclusive to Wales, Welsh households are being hit particularly hard as average incomes are lower than across many parts of the UK and energy costs tend to be above average.
- 3.2 The impact of the rising cost of living affects everyone but there are groups who are likely to be hardest hit. Worse off households, those who are unemployed, on low incomes, people from minority ethnic groups, lone parents, children and young people, people with disabilities, women and social and private renters, spend a greater proportion of their total income on food, housing and energy costs and therefore have less flexibility to meet increased costs. Those who were able to balance their budgets instead start struggling or find themselves in crisis.
- 3.3 Issues with older housing stock means many homes are relatively less energy efficient, lacking insulation for roofs, windows, and walls. In rural areas homes are more likely to be reliant on solid fuel, oil, or LPG for their heating. These are all factors pushing bills up.
- 3.4 In April 2022 the domestic energy price cap was increased to £1,971 per year leading the Welsh Government to estimate that up to 45% of households could be in fuel poverty and up to 8% of households could be in severe fuel poverty. As 1 in 5 homes in Wales posed an unacceptable risk to health prior to the cost-of-living crisis the

increase in households affected by fuel poverty is likely to increase excess winter deaths overall.

3.5 In September 2022, in response to the escalating cost of living crisis, specifically the increasing cost of energy, Welsh Government announced £1m of funding would be made available to support communities to develop Warm Hubs or expand and enhance Warm Hub provision.

3.6 In October 2022 it was announced that the funding would be distributed via local authorities who would work with local partners in the development and delivery of Warm Hubs. Bridgend County Borough Council was allocated £44,590 to support Warm Hubs through a grant scheme to be spent by 31 March 2023.

4. Current situation/proposal

4.1 Warm Hubs are intended as places in local communities where people can find a safe and warm environment during the day to help reduce the cost of heating their own homes and to help people facing extreme fuel poverty this winter. Depending on their location and facilities, Warm Hubs offer a range of support including basic refreshments and snacks as a minimum, extending to a more substantive meal where possible, enrichment activities such as arts and crafts, exercise and cultural activity and the provision of advice and support services such as health and wellbeing, financial matters, and digital accessibility for those who attend.

4.2 The aim of the Warm Hubs fund is to provide safe, accessible, friendly, free to use spaces to provide support with the rising cost of living whilst helping communities to stay and be well. The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) set out the purpose of the funding in their '*Warm Hubs Funding – outline and guidance (Oct 22)*', that being to utilise funding to directly support Warm Hubs themselves and the people who attend them and for any additional expenses associated with using a place as a Warm Hub.

4.3 To facilitate the allocation of grant funding a scoping exercise was undertaken across the County Borough. To reflect the diversity of local communities across the County Borough and help to address the unique challenges in different areas, a series of local meetings were held. 11 meetings were organised, and efforts were made to invite representatives from community groups, town and community councils, community venues, Bridgend County Borough Council (BCBC) Councillors and Third Sector organisation including Halo and Awen. These meetings were facilitated by the BCBC Cost of Living Coordinator.

4.4 Groups and organisations were identified in part using local intelligence based on information gathered by Employability Bridgend's Triage team. As part of the delivering the Community Renewal Fund project CELT, the Triage team created a comprehensive dataset of community venues and community delivery partners across the County Borough. Additionally, the Triage team already have a significant bank of knowledge regarding services and activities available in and around Bridgend that directly benefit individuals engaging with Employability Bridgend as well as those referred to the service who require more specialist support.

4.5 The purpose of the scoping meetings was to discuss community solutions to the rising cost of domestic energy, identifying and capturing information on the support

and activities already available to avoid future duplication and create a position to build from. Following the meetings, circulation lists for each area were created to assist with future communication both to and between local representatives. The mailing groups have been an effective way of gathering further information and sharing local knowledge and updates on Warm Hubs.

- 4.6 Information shared includes a weekly update of activities across Bridgend County Borough as the information gathered increases in value when shared locally by trusted groups and organisations. This information is also shared with BCBC Councillors and with relevant services and networks including the Public Services Board, Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub, Citizens Advice, housing associations, schools, health care workers, Early Help, Care and Repair, Probation services and Job Centre Plus teams in Bridgend, Maesteg and Porthcawl.
- 4.7 The information gathered for the weekly circulation is also provided to the BCBC Comms team who were able to create a dedicated cost of living link on the front page of the BCBC website. Alongside the warm space information, the updates provided to the Comms team from the warm spaces team included links to food banks and community pantries. Links to financial support have also been incorporated bringing together information on the range of support BCBC can help residents to access.
- 4.8 Funding was drawn down from the WLGA and agreement was subsequently made with Bridgend Association of Voluntary Organisations (BAVO) in January 2023 to provide the administration of the funds. BAVO's role extends to the advertising of the Warm Hubs funding scheme and the collation of applications, with BCBC responsible for the decision making through a Grant Panel, and monitoring and reporting to WLGA.
- 4.9 The BCBC Grant Panel is comprised of the Employability and Enterprise Manager, Group Manager – Sports and Physical Activity Prevention and Wellbeing and the Cost of Living Coordinator. The Grant Panel has been able to agree applications quickly, meeting twice weekly since the grant fund was opened. Applications to the fund have now exceeded the amount of funding available from Welsh Government and over 30 recipients have received Warm Hubs funding. Additional funds are being made available through BCBC's Discretionary Cost of Living Funds to ensure eligible applications received to date are funded.
- 4.10 WLGA monitoring requirements have been built into the application process and data will be collected as soon as possible after 31st March 2023. Publicity is being gathered to support monitoring and visits are being made to warm hubs to maintain good communication links.

5. Effect upon policy framework and procedure rules

- 5.1 There is no effect upon the Council's policy framework or procedure rules as a result of this report.

6. Equality Act 2010 implications

- 6.1 The protected characteristics identified within the Equality Act, Socio-economic Duty and the impact on the use of the Welsh Language have been considered in the preparation of this report. As a public body in Wales, the Council must consider the

impact of strategic decisions, such as the development or the review of policies, strategies, services and functions. This is an information report, therefore it is not necessary to carry out an Equality Impact assessment in the production of this report. It is considered that there will be no significant or unacceptable impacts as a result of this report.

7. Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 implications

- 7.1 The Warm Hubs have built on work already in progress across the communities of Bridgend. In every area there are a variety of activities engaging local people and the emphasis on enhancing and expanding existing community-led provision reduces the risk of dependency on the Council and its services.
- 7.2 Strengthening links between community groups in local areas has helped to develop communication across local areas. Where this was already happening, community-led solutions have been quicker to implement and in general been successful. Sharing information and understanding what is offered across a locality helps to avoid duplication, offering individuals more opportunity to connect and helping to increase engagement in existing provision.
- 7.3 The development of Warm Hubs across Bridgend County Borough is an example of how community-led solutions can help to build community resilience. Working in parallel with the Local Authority to support active, healthy, and independent lives, supporting those who are hardest hit by the rising cost of living, and developing the sense of community locally.

8. Financial implications

- 8.1 Warm Hubs have been funded using funds made available to Local Authorities by Welsh Government. Demand for the funding has exceeded the amount allocated to Bridgend County Borough Council by Welsh Government and additional monies are being allocated from Discretionary Cost of Living funds.

9. Recommendation

- 9.1 It is recommended that the Town and Community Council Forum notes the report.

Janine Nightingale
Corporate Director, Communities
06 March 2023

Contact officer: Maxine Barrett
Cost of Living Coordinator (Employability Bridgend)

Telephone: (01656) 643648

Email: Maxine.Barret@bridgend.gov.uk

Postal address: Civic Offices, Angel Street, Bridgend, CF31 4WB

Background documents: None