



Supporting Buckinghamshire residents and staff with the cost of living

February 2024



Background

- The national cost of living pressures are well documented
- Energy costs have increased
- Inflation has increased
- Household income has decreased
- Across the country, people are struggling to heat their homes, buy food, pay bills and manage other essential costs
- We are also seeing this in Buckinghamshire, where local research suggests that demand at Buckinghamshire food banks has increased by 162% from 2019 to 2021



Cost of Living Programme

- As a Council, we recognise the growing pressures being faced by our residents linked to the increases in the cost of living.
- We have seen an increasing level of demand for financial help and wellbeing support from Buckinghamshire residents and have made further provision to support residents who are in need, developed through close partnership working, particularly with the voluntary and community sector.
- Our Cost of Living programme, to coordinate our response to the cost-of-living pressures, started in September 2022.

Programme Objectives

Ensure that residents keep warm, have sufficient food and essentials for themselves and their families by:

- Signposting to support and advice with income, finance and debt problems
- Providing direct support
- Encouraging community and business responses
- Promoting energy efficiency measures

This was the starting point for the cross-council Cost of Living Programme, which grew into nine workstreams: Communications, Helping Hand, Food and Essentials, Fuel and Energy, Warmth, Money and Debt, Community Activity, Public Health and Support for Staff.



1. Communications

Our Communications workstream has underpinned all workstreams, focussing on delivering a wide-reaching promotion campaign covering multiple media as appropriate for each workstream so that residents are aware of the council and partners' initiatives and know how to access cost of living support in the county.

a helping hand

A HELPING HAND this winter

We know that many of our residents are finding things difficult at the moment. We are experiencing the worst cost of living pressures for many years and everyone is feeling the impact in some way. We are working hard to make sure that we fully support those who are struggling to cope and have introduced a range of initiatives to do so.

TARGETING GOVERNMENT FUNDING

We have received £2.4m from the Government's Household Support Fund to help our communities this winter. We will direct this money to those who need it in a variety of ways:

- £500,000 to support requests for financial help received by our Helping Hand team
- £820,000 for digital food vouchers – for eligible nursery and schoolchildren
- £300,000 for local community groups providing free support to residents such as foodbanks
- £360,000 of targeted support for priority groups including care leavers and pensioners
- £250,000 to boost the local Crisis Fund

GIVING RESIDENTS A HELPING HAND

Our Helping Hand scheme is there to support Buckinghamshire residents who are most in need. The scheme was first set up in response to the pandemic and has since evolved to offer support to people on low incomes or those experiencing a financial emergency.

The team can offer targeted support and direct people to further places they can go for help. Whether you are struggling with paying your bill, can't afford to buy food or need help with energy debts, get in touch with the team to help.

Call: 01296 531 151
Visit: buckinghamshire.gov.uk/lost-of-leaf

recycling & waste

FREE HOLIDAY CLUBS

For those with young families, the rising cost of living can be even more worrying with extra mouths to feed, clothes to buy and household running costs. Our **Free Holiday Activities and Food Programme**, funded by the Department for Education, allows us to provide additional support to families on lower incomes during longer school holidays.

Free, quality holiday activity clubs take some of the pressure off parents and carers and provide the children with a fantastic variety of holiday clubs and activities to go to. There's also a healthy meal at each session they attend. The scheme is running during the Christmas holiday and continues during the Easter and summer school holidays.

Visit buckinghamshire.gov.uk/haf

WELCOME TO OUR WELCOMING SPACES

Don't struggle with the cold, visit one of our Welcoming Spaces

With energy costs continuing to rise, many households are worried about putting on their heating. To help, we have introduced our Welcoming Spaces scheme. These are locations around the county where residents can go into safe and inclusive spaces, free of charge, to stay warm and enjoy a little company. The first venues to open were our libraries and community libraries. Visitors are welcomed through the doors during opening hours and can make use of the free Wi-Fi and computer access. Library staff are also available to offer information and support.

We are working with other community organisations to open up Welcoming Spaces in other locations so look out for further details.

Visit: buckinghamshire.gov.uk/cost-of-living

We've also got funding of nearly £5m for residents on lower incomes (less than £30,000 a year) who live in homes with lower energy ratings (D, E, F or G). If you think you may qualify for a grant to make your home more energy efficient go to: buckinghamshire-applications.co.uk

Key activities have included:

- 'Help with the Cost of Living' website section regularly updated with new information
- Joint communications with HAF and Helping Hand to encourage uptake of HAF and redemption of holiday food vouchers
- Launch of Community Food Chain comms
- Christmas Gift of Giving campaign including Food Champions comms
- Printed Residents Support Leaflet distributed through key partners
- Coordinated with partners on activity through Community Action Days in Opportunity Bucks wards



Everyone needs a
helpinghand
from time to time



Is heating your home a struggle?
We might be able to offer you a
helpinghand



Key activities have included:

- Raising profile of Helping Hand support available, including engaging with key partners to promote support offered by Helping Hand – most recently with Bucks Mind and Wycombe Mind
- Coordinating use of the Household Support Fund £4.8m (from April -March); using this to support over 7,500 residents since April 2023
- Delivery of holiday food vouchers for eligible children in receipt of pupil premium
- Pre-paid Utility cards contract in place – allowing debts for gas/ electric and/or water to be cleared by the resident
- Working closely with the MEAM team to provide additional support to residents who have had the most contact from the Helping Hand team within Opportunity Bucks wards



Visit Buckinghamshire.gov.uk/haf to find out more

 Funded by UK Government

Do you know someone who could benefit from a free Warm Pack?



Each warm pack contains a fleece blanket, hat, snood, gloves, socks and a reusable canvas bag.



You can collect a warm pack from the library in Amersham, Aylesbury, Beaconsfield, Buckingham, Burnham, Chesham, Hazlemere, High Wycombe, Marlow and Princes Risborough.

Please check library opening times on the council website.

Our libraries are also welcoming spaces where residents can keep warm this winter. Find out more at Buckinghamshire.gov.uk/welcoming-spaces

If you or your family is in need or is experiencing a financial emergency or crisis,

contact Helping Hand: Buckinghamshire.gov.uk/helping-hand
01296 531 151 | 0800 999 7677 (out of hours)

Or visit one of our council access points, located in our libraries.

Case Study 1

- Single, 59-year-old male with a disability reducing his ability to work.
- All white goods broken over previous years and no funds to replace them.
- Debts with gas/ electric suppliers.
- Struggling to complete the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) forms to receive additional benefits

Outcomes:

- White goods purchased and installed
- Heart of Bucks grant to clear gas and electric arrears
- Referral to Citizens Advice Bucks to support with PIP application and benefit maximisation

I cannot begin to thank you enough for your help with this. The last few years have been absolute hell for me, from a standpoint of health, ability to work, rising food and energy prices and low income. This is a huge weight being lifted from me, giving me breathing space once again

3. Food and Essentials

This workstream was focused on developing support mechanisms for food and essential items, ensuring that people who are vulnerable are well signposted and these are easy for residents to access.



Key activities have included:

- Food Champions Network expanded to now include Bedgrove, Aylesbury
– currently 47 food champions
- Gift of Giving – Christmas volunteering and donations plus Christmas food champions comms
- Ongoing financial support for food banks, community food schemes such as hot meals, community fridges, hampers, Bucks New University food scheme
- Ongoing signposting and referral to food banks and other meal schemes via the Helping Hand team
- Developing new models for food support with Bucks Food Partnership (BFP), and area-based Food Action Plans under the Opportunity Bucks Programme
- BFP launched their Food Ladder Project with Chesham selected as the pilot area to launch the recommendations from their findings report and we will be supporting this work



Could you become a
Food Champion?



4. Fuel and Energy

This workstream aimed to develop new and innovative measures to ensure that we target support to residents struggling with fuel and energy costs who need it the most.



Key activities have included:

- Providing assistance with fuel bills and pre-payment meter cards through Helping Hand where residents have been unable to get help from their energy companies
- Promoting existing energy schemes such as the Sustainable Warmth Fund
- Promoting energy saving measures and link to energy companies via a social media campaign
- Investment in relevant schemes, for example Better Housing Better Health
- Launch of the Energy Doctor scheme to support eligible households with smaller energy efficiency measures such as draft proofing and energy saving lightbulbs
- Letters sent to eligible properties in Buckinghamshire for the energy doctor scheme with 113 households in Opportunity Bucks areas and 171 outside of Opportunity Bucks benefiting from an Energy Doctor visit



5. Warmth

The Warmth workstream is focused on developing and providing practical support to residents, to enable them to keep warm during the cold winter months.



Key activities have included:

Continuation of 'welcoming spaces' where people can come together in a warm, safe and supportive environment - currently **17 listed on the Bucks Online Directory (excluding libraries)**

- During the winter of 2022-23, 320 warm packs were ordered and distributed via the 9 County libraries
- During the winter of 2023-24, 640 warm packs were distributed throughout Buckinghamshire; utilising key partners to ensure those who needed them the most received them
- By offering the warm packs this way, it has opened up new opportunities to work with local community groups that we haven't had engagement with in the past and share the Helping Hand offer



Proud to be one of
**Buckinghamshire's
Welcoming Spaces**

We're a warm, free, safe space

Please come in and make yourself comfortable

Information, support, free access to wifi, computers and a cosy corner



For help with the cost of living, please visit:
buckinghamshire.gov.uk/cost-of-living



Buckinghamshire
Council



helpinghand

6. Money and Debt

Through our Money and Debt workstream we recognise the financial pressures residents are facing and have sought opportunities to reduce these pressures whilst ensuring residents are linked in to the support available to them.



Key activities have included:

- Working with Citizens Advice Bucks (CAB), a ‘warm referrals’ portal has been launched, allowing the Helping Hand team to provide resident details to CAB and contact made to offer debt support without the need for the resident to call them
- Funding provided through the Household Support Fund to Christians Against Poverty and Citizens Advice Bucks to support with the cost of Debt Relief Orders and applications for bankruptcy – thereby removing the worry for the resident to find this cost at a difficult time
- We have updated council tax reminder and annual bill messages highlighting available support – including a link to Bucks Mind – and utilise the Council Tax Support Fund to assist the most vulnerable
- We are working closely with the Economic Development Team to identify opportunities for future job fairs; ensuring these will be targeted in Opportunity Bucks wards where employment challenges have been identified in the ward action plan. The aim is to ultimately reduce dependency on the Helping Hand team if improved employment opportunities are available



Case Study 2

- Single mum with two children (one with a registered disability)
- Survivor of Economic Abuse during her marriage (all bills were put into her name without her knowing)
- Works full-time
- Struggling emotionally after the divorce and unable to open any debt related letters
- Received a court summons for Council tax

Outcomes:

- Heart of Bucks grant of £2,000 awarded to clear the Council tax arrears
- Engagement with Women's Aid for counselling and support.

I want to express my gratitude to you and the Helping Hand team for your help with the grant towards my council tax bill. As well as the way I was treated with dignity and compassion when I came to you for help. The help with the bill was a great relief to me

7. Community Activity

Our Community Activity workstream has focused on developing and supporting community-led initiatives, maximising the use of detailed community knowledge to extend support into communities and to residents who need it the most.



Key activities have included:

- Community Boards have supported with:
 - Funding opportunities for cost-of-living related projects
 - Communicating signposting information
 - Investing in more hot meals sessions/supper clubs
 - Continuing to support projects through funding, engagement & partnership working with communities and Helping Hand
- Hot meals community toolkit launched
- Guidance for developing Community Fridges including funding options
- Food waste residents' toolkit
- Sharing signposting information with key partners



Make yourself warm
and comfortable in our
Welcoming Spaces



Waddesdon Hall **Community Fridge**

Everyone welcome, please help yourself

Together we can reduce food waste and offer
a Helping Hand to our local community

Where: Waddesdon Hall

When: Monday and Tuesday | 10am - 12 noon
Thursday and Sunday | 5pm - 7pm

Everybody needs a helpinghand from time to time

DONATIONS WELCOME



Buckinghamshire
Council



WADDESDON HALL
A GREAT VENUE AT THE HEART OF THE VILLAGE



helpinghand

8. Public Health

Our Public Health workstream has helped to provide an evidence base to inform our approach, conducting research to support targeting of interventions.



Key activities have included:

- Input into internal and external cost of living comms content
- Linking in with key public health partners for signposting
- Exploring the potential benefits of conducting a cost-of-living survey to explore behavioural aspects of accessing cost of living support
- Launched the Better Points app

EARN VOUCHERS FOR HEALTHY ACTIVITIES

3 simple steps!

Download the app today!



1 Download BetterPoints



2 Complete activities (e.g. walking) and collect points

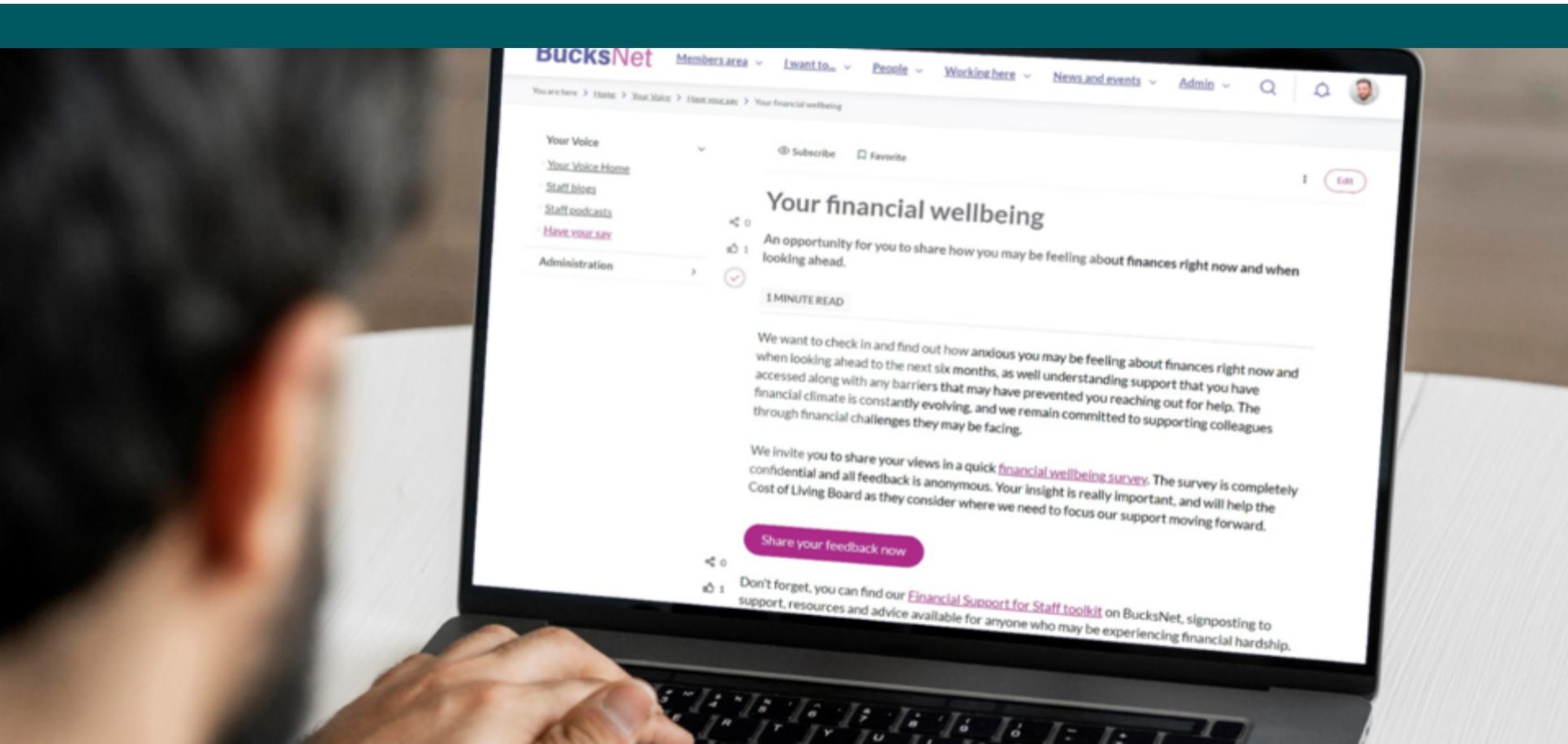


3 Spend vouchers at high streets or charities



9. Support for Staff (Internal)

We recognise that we also need to support our staff during the cost of living pressure. We have developed a comprehensive package of support, including a dedicated internal network, to ensure that we provide support to staff who need it.



Key activities have included:

- Internal comms campaign highlighting support available (including digital, events and print content)
- Staff mileage loan and extension of working hours parking scheme
- Employee hardship fund (ended June 2023)
- CAB Money Matters webinars
- Office pantry and hygiene item scheme
- Flexible working pool
- Extra staff payments in July and January 23
- Staff Financial Wellbeing surveys to inform and target activity
- Nominated for a PPMA award and shortlisted for Best Health and Wellbeing Initiative



10. Funding

The Helping Hand team is largely reliant on funding from the Department for Work and Pensions Household Support Fund. Just under £4.8 million was allocated to Buckinghamshire Council to spend between April 23 – March 24.



Department
for Work &
Pensions

Household
Support
Fund



How the funding is being spent:

- Direct support from the Helping Hand team – including white goods and beds/ mattresses
- Fuel vouchers to top-up pre-payment meters
- Heart of Bucks – grants of up to £2,000 to clear priority debts including rent arrears, Council tax arrears, gas, water and/or electric bills
- Holiday food vouchers for children eligible for pupil premium, early years' pupil premium or 2-year old funded free education places
- Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Organisations – providing funds for food banks, community fridges, hot meal projects etc
- Targeted Cohorts – including clothing vouchers for care leavers

Government has not announced an extension to the Household Support Fund for 2024-25 so this offer is subject to ongoing review



How we work with our partners:

- Working with Red Kite Housing we asked them to support their tenants by leaving in place good condition carpets when they offer new tenancies. This was introduced in August 2023 and has been positively received. Other Housing Associations are now also offering this to their tenants.
- Fairhive Housing's Welfare Manager set up the weekly Community Hub at the Vineyard, Aylesbury. This is a one-stop shop drop-in for anyone and provides multi-agency support & advice on housing, employment, training and well-being. A representative from the Helping Hand team attends each week.
- Bucks Fire & Rescue Service regularly makes referrals to the Helping Hand team for support for vulnerable residents that they have visited. In addition, they receive referrals from the HH team for support with hoarding.



Helping Hand stats (April –December 23):

- Over 7,500 applications were received during this period
- On average 194 applications were received each week
- 49% of applications received during the year had previously applied within the same year
- Over 400 cookers, 370 fridge freezers and 330 washing machines were delivered and installed
- Over 235 Heart of Bucks grants of up to £2,000 each awarded to clear priority debts (rent/ council tax/ gas/ water/ electric)
- Over 58,000 digital food vouchers distributed to over 14,500 eligible children in receipt of pupil premium or 2-year-old funding during the school holidays
- Over £400,000 spent on VCS organisations including foodbanks, hot meal projects and community fridges



Case Study 3

- Married couple with three young children. Wife works full-time, husband has been made redundant and applying for multiple jobs
- Husband is struggling with his mental health
- Requested support with food

Outcomes:

- Foodbank referral made
- Supermarket vouchers issued
- Signposted to his GP and Healthy Minds
- Referral made to The Getaway Foundation for a well needed holiday for the family
- Christmas hamper and presents provided

Can I say a massive thank you please. Once again you have gone above and beyond. I had literally just told the girls we couldn't afford a proper Christmas dinner this year and then you called with that news! You will never know how grateful I am and they had such an amazing day! The food, the chocolate, all the toys - I was in literal tears at your generosity.