

# **OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY BOARD**

## **FUEL POVERTY TASK GROUP**

### **FINAL REPORT**

**November 2022**



**Bromsgrove**  
District Council  
[www.bromsgrove.gov.uk](http://www.bromsgrove.gov.uk)

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# **Contents**

	<b>Page No</b>
1. Membership of the Task Group	1
2. Foreword from the Chairman	2
3. Summary of Recommendations	4
4. Background Information	7
5. Chapter 1 – Support already available and how the Council can help	8
6. Chapter 2 – External Support and what needs to be done to help	15
7. Chapter 3 – Areas to Note	20
8. Appendix 1 – Terms of Reference	21
9. Appendix 2 - Notice of Motion	23
10. Appendix 3 – Background Papers	24
11. Appendix 4 –Witnesses	25

## **MEMBERSHIP OF THE TASK GROUP**



**Councillor Rob Hunter (Chairman)**



**Cllr Andrew Beaumont**



**Cllr Sue Baxter**



**Cllr Janet King**



**Cllr Harrison Rone-Clarke**



**Cllr Caroline Spencer**

### **SUPPORTING OFFICER DETAILS**

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## **Foreword from the Chairman**

Our group was set up at the start of 2022 out of concern over the impact of sharply rising energy bills on the health and wellbeing of the people of Bromsgrove.

Since then, the fuel poverty crisis has become a cost-of-living crisis. General inflation in the UK is now at a rate far higher than many of us have ever seen before. It's no longer just about gas and electricity. Food and drink, clothes, and household goods have all been subject to eye-watering increases. All of us have had to tighten our belts, but for those already struggling to keep their head above water we have entered truly frightening times.

There were already around 5,000 households in Bromsgrove living in fuel poverty, even before this group started its work. This represents more than one in ten households in the district. In some wards it is more than one in five. We don't yet know how much this has increased, but we did hear evidence from Act on Energy that calls to their service have doubled over this time and that they are now frequently hearing from people who never expected they would ever need help.

We also know that 59% of households in our district have an EPC of D or below, indicating poor energy performance and greater exposure to rising energy costs. This is despite the best efforts of Bromsgrove District Council to seek funding to retrofit homes. As a country we simply have not done enough to insulate our homes and protect people from an increasingly volatile global energy market.

As part of our investigations, we heard from representatives of a broad range of public sector and voluntary groups who are already working incredibly hard to support vulnerable people and are making a huge difference. I would like to say a sincere thank you to Graeme Anderson (BDHT), The Reverend David Ford (Bromsgrove Churches Together), Rachel Jones (Act on Energy) and Nicki Hitchcock (Worcestershire County Council Libraries) for supporting our group but more importantly for the incredible work their teams do day in day out in our community. I would also like to thank our own officers Judith Willis and Della McCarthy for their time and dedication to this critical issue and that of their hardworking teams. Thanks also to Lisa Devey, Claire Felton and Julie Heyes for providing evidence to the Task Group.

As a task group we enjoyed rich input from councillors of all parties represented at Bromsgrove District Council and indeed from independent councillors of no political affiliation. I would like to thank each of you for your earnest and diligent engagement with the issues at stake. In particular, I would like to thank the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health and Wellbeing Councillor Shirley Webb, who has gone out of her way to help our group bring forward deliverable recommendations.

I'm proud of what we have achieved by working together. I believe our proposals will make a real difference, but they do not go nearly far enough and sadly will not solve all the problems we heard about over the last few months. So, we must continue to campaign for a better deal for our communities so that nobody ever needs to ask for help with something as essential as heating their own home.

My final thanks go to Amanda Scarce, Democratic Services Officer, who came back from retirement to help us make a success of this group and has over the years given a great deal to the people of Bromsgrove through her tireless work behind the scenes at Bromsgrove District Council.

**Councillor Rob Hunter**  
**Chairman, Fuel Poverty Task Group**

## Summary of Recommendations

After consideration of the evidence available and interviewing witnesses the Task Group have proposed the following recommendations, supporting evidence can be found under the relevant chapters within the main body of this report.

### **1. Chapter 1 – Support already available and how the Council can help**

<b>Recommendation 1</b>
That the Council ensures its webpages are up to date and takes a proactive approach in promoting the various areas of support (including an up to date list of Warm Hubs/Spaces and support provided by local libraries in the District) available through as many different mediums as possible. For example, through its social media account and by learning from the best practice approaches used by other councils.
<b>Financial Implications for recommendations:</b>  There are no direct financial implications in relation to this recommendation.
<b>Legal Implications for recommendations:</b>  There are no direct legal implications in relation to this recommendation.
<b>Resource Implications:</b>  Officer time in checking and updating the webpages and posting to the social media account.

<b>Recommendation 2</b>
That a poster or booklet is created which includes a simple straight forward guide to all the various areas of support – this should be accessible in local buildings such as the libraries and Councillors provided with copies to hand out to residents or distribute for display on noticeboards.
<b>Financial Implications for recommendations:</b>  There are no direct financial implications in relation to this recommendation. Although it is acknowledged there would be a small outlay for printing costs.
<b>Legal Implications for recommendations:</b>

There are no direct legal implications in relation to this recommendation.

**Resource Implications:**

Officer time in creating the document.

**Recommendation 3**

That Councillors are provided with the contact details of Act on Energy and encouraged to proactively liaise with the outreach workers to ensure access to support is readily available to residents within their Wards.

**Financial Implications:**

There are no direct financial implications in relation to this recommendation.

**Legal Implications:**

There are no direct legal implications in relation to this recommendation.

**Resource Implications:**

Officer time in supporting the Councillors.

**Chapter 2 – External Support and what needs to be done to help**

**Recommendation 4**

That the Bromsgrove Partnership, supported by the Council, takes a lead role in the collection of high quality intelligence/data to ensure that the Council's partners can target their interventions where support is most needed.

**Financial Implications:**

There are no direct financial implications in relation to this recommendation.

**Legal Implications:**

There are no direct legal implications in relation to this recommendation.

**Resource Implications:**

Officer time in supporting the Bromsgrove Partnership.



<b>Recommendation 5</b>
That the Bromsgrove Partnership (with input from all District Councillors and/or relevant Parish Councils) take a lead role in co-ordinating appropriate support, to ensure it is readily available for residents throughout the whole district, for example this could mean the provision of a Warm Hub/Space and the facilities offered by the local libraries.
<b>Financial Implications:</b>  There are no direct financial implications in relation to this recommendation.
<b>Legal Implications:</b>  There are no direct legal implications in relation to this recommendation.
<b>Resource Implications:</b>  Officer time in supporting the Bromsgrove Partnership.

<b>Recommendation 6</b>
That the Cabinet actively explores all funding options (for example the UK Shared Prosperity Fund) available to the Council in order to ensure that, if needed, it is able to provide financial support to VCS organisations throughout the district in providing the support detailed in recommendation 5 above.
<b>Financial Implications for recommendations:</b>  There are no direct financial implications in relation to this recommendation, although it is acknowledged that there may be financial implication in the future should Cabinet consider the suggestion.
<b>Legal Implications for recommendations:</b>  There are no direct legal implications in relation to this recommendation.
<b>Resource Implications:</b>  Officer time in administering any scheme that is set up in the future.

## **Background Information**

Councillor Rob Hunter presented a topic proposal form containing proposed terms of reference for a Task Group to be set up to investigate the position in respect of fuel poverty in the District. Councillor Hunter explained that residents were facing an unprecedented rising level in the cost of living and that it was important that the Council provided as much support as possible to those residents identified as in need.

Following consideration of the topic proposal at its meeting on 28<sup>th</sup> March 2022, the Board agreed that a Task Group should be set up and appointed Councillor Hunter as its Chairman at that meeting.

At the May meeting of the Board, the membership of the Task Group was confirmed and a six month timescale set for the completion of the investigation. The first meeting of the Task Group took place on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2022. The Task Group has held 8 meetings in total since that date and held discussions with a number of key witnesses, both internal and external partners. In view of the topic of the investigation, the Task Group Members were keen for any recommendations to be considered as soon as possible.

# **Chapter 1**

## **The current position and what can be done to help**

The Task Group was keen to understand at the beginning of its investigation the support which was already in place for residents and to ensure that this information was readily available to them. The Task Group interviewed Judith Willis, Head of Community and Housing Services, who provided Members with a detailed briefing paper, which explained the support that was available and how residents could access this. This included the following areas:

### Energy Advice

The Council funds an energy advice service, delivered by Act On Energy and information on this service was available through the Council's website. Residents can call the energy advisors to receive guidance on how best to reduce their fuel bills, with support on a range of topics, including finding the best tariff and energy deals, how best to use heating controls, lifestyle changes that can make significant savings and available grant funding for energy saving home improvements.

### Warmer Worcestershire

The Council also works closely with other partners via the Bromsgrove LSP and the Warmer Worcestershire Network. Its aim is to deliver reductions in both fuel poverty and carbon emissions through improved energy efficiency across the housing stock. Its membership was made up of the six district councils, the county council, Act on energy, Age UK and Public Health. It was noted that the Network was in the process of producing a Countywide Fuel Poverty Plan.

### Essential Living Fund

The Financial Independence Team at the Council administer the Essential Living Fund (ELF) and this fund provides support to residents with energy and utility bills, supermarket vouchers, food parcels and white goods. As part of an application for ELF the Team will try to establish some further details to see what other support may be available that has not already been accessed. This could include a number of DWP benefits such as Universal Credit, free childcare and school meals or discretionary housing payments. Where appropriate the Team will signpost applicants to other agencies and partners in order for residents to access this additional support.

### Household Support Fund

This was funding provided by the DWP to support vulnerable households as part of the ongoing recovery from the pandemic. Worcestershire County Council was the lead and accountable body for the funding, with a proportion of the funding being allocated to the district councils. The fund specifically related to the provision of support to meet daily needs, such as food and utilities, including

help with energy bills. This has enabled the Council to issue fuel vouchers to eligible residents. In addition, funding was also allocated to Act on Energy to provide vulnerable residents with one off fuel payments of up to £500, pre-payment fuel vouchers of up to £150 and replacement/repair of boilers/heating systems. This scheme was initially for the period October to March 2022; however it was extending to October 2022 with additional funds being provided, with specific guidelines also being amended as to who it should be aimed at supporting.

During the discussions with the Head of Community and Housing Services the Task Group questioned the availability of data and it was acknowledged that whilst there was national and regional data available it was produced by Central Government and often significantly in arrears. Members asked how the data available was used to target interventions and to assess the success of the support provided. It was explained that no one data set was perfect on its own for targeting, for example an area may be modelled as having high fuel poverty, but there may be a wide variation within that area of energy bills and income. Warmer Worcestershire had recently purchased Home Analytics Data from the Energy Saving Trust for all district, which extrapolated existing data to all properties in the district, including EPC rating and predicted fuel poverty scoring. This would be used to target specific funding such as Sustainable Warmth to properties most likely to be eligible for it, based on EPC and income.

Following on from the discussion with the Head of Community and Housing Services the Task Group began to form a picture of the support that was already provided to residents and were keen to understand this in more detail. This was done through interviewing representatives from the Council's Financial Inclusion Team and Act on Energy, the service funded by the Council.

### **Financial Inclusion Team**

The Task Group provided Lisa Devey, Customer Support Manager with a number of pre-prepared questions, which were responded to in writing.

- Members were advised that there were 4 main schemes the Council was involved in administering: Essential Living Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, Council Tax Hardship and Household Support Fund (HSF). The HSF was administered by Citizens Advise for the Council, with the remaining schemes being administered internally by the Benefits Section.

Officers spoke regularly to partners to establish any new funding streams or initiatives and the internal schemes were all considered by the same team to offer a single service, Officers also signpost where relevant to other partners.

- Members has asked for details on how an initial enquiry was dealt with and Ms. Devey explained that Officers spoke to each resident as an individual to ascertain their circumstances. This helped them work out which scheme(s) would best suit their needs, offer the most support and maximise their income. The Team made sure to take the time to listen

and signpost to other partners where appropriate; for example, Citizens Advice, Act on Energy, DWP, NewStarts, foodbanks and the like.

- Members also asked if Officers had seen an increase in enquiries in recent months? And if so, what measures were in place to ensure that any future increase was able to be managed in a timely manner. It was questioned whether the Council would have sufficient funds to support residents through the coming months and whether there was a contingency plan in place to cover this. Ms. Devey responded that whilst they had seen an increase in enquiries, demand had remained quite consistent for the Team. However, she believed that there had been more demand and pressure felt by Citizens Advice and Act on Energy.

It was further commented that as other schemes had ended such as test and trace, she had been able to make more resource available and felt that the Team was in an excellent position should volumes spike during the winter months.

- The Task Group had raised concerns around how the services that were available were communicated to residents, as it was felt this was key to supporting those residents that were in most need of support. It was confirmed that this was an area the Team had been working on alongside partners. The Council now had a dedicated Cost of Living page on the website and a postal leaflet would be available from early October, with the details of all the partners who can help alongside a brief explanation of the services they provide are included on this leaflet. A series of partnership surgeries throughout the district were also being planned. This would allow residents to get answers and support in one place from several organisations.

### **Act on Energy**

The Task Group also interviewed Rachel Jones, the CEO of Act on Energy and again, provided her with a number of pre-prepared questions. Ms. Jones provided Members with background information on how Act on Energy had originally been established in 1998 and how its role had developed over the years, from that of providing advice around climate change to the current position it found itself in, which was largely dealing with concerns around fuel poverty. The majority of enquiries were around providing support in paying bills and advice on energy efficiency, whilst many of the energy efficiency steps would only make a small difference to the annual cost of a bill it was a way of empowering those people and giving them the belief that they could take back some control over what was happening. There was a lot of confusion around the price cap and tariffs, so work was also being carried out in trying to explain what this also meant and how it impacted on overall costs. It was also noted that there was already a number of “scams” circulating, and Act on Energy was trying to raise awareness about this and encourage people to be aware of them and not be taken in.

Ms. Jones provided data around the number of enquiries which they dealt for the district, for the last 6 months there had been over 1,200 whereas for the

previous year for the same period there had been just over 500. Members commented on the significant increase and Ms. Jones provided more detail around the changing demographic of those enquiries. This included 12% being over the age of 65 and the inclusion of a new category which was for working adults, which took up some 47% of the enquiries. It was also noted that the calls being taken had changed significantly over the last 6-12 months, with a much greater emphasis being on the mental health of those calling in and much more detail being given to Act on Energy. This in turn had an impact on the officers taking the calls and Ms. Jones explained that appropriate measure had been put in place to ensure staff received the relevant support themselves in order to be able to provide a good service.

The Task Group were advised about specific funding that Act on Energy had been administering and it was noted that whilst this was appreciated it often came with tight timescales and a very complicated application process. An example was given for the Household Support Fund which had stipulated that of the funds provided one third must go to the over 65 age group. This was historically an age group which had always been a challenge and one which was often reluctant to ask for help. Ms. Jones explained that Outreach Workers had been accessing various community centres and events to talk to people about the help that was available as this was often the best way to engage with them.

Members were provided with data in respect of specific issues, and it was noted that over 200 were in respect of debt, with an average fuel debt for the county of around £750, with Bromsgrove being slightly higher. Again, it was important that people understood the meaning of the fuel cap and of the tariff system and just exactly how much they paid for both electricity and gas. Members were provided with how Act on Energy were trying to educate residents through various means, including via the website using videos and through leaflets, which would be distributed by the outreach workers. In the longer term it was important to look at energy efficiency and how people can make their homes better. It was also noted that the OFGEM website provided some useful information and data.

Ms. Jones also provided Members with information around how Act on Energy worked with the Bromsgrove Partnership and Councillor Shirley Webb was also on the Bromsgrove Partnership and she provided Members with details of the work that was being undertaken and the support provided by Act on Energy to residents. She was able to give first hand experience of the work of the Outreach Workers and how they had helped her within the Ward. Members were keen to hear about the work of the Outreach Workers and asked for all Councillors to be provided with their details for future reference.

### **Notice of Motion**

Appendix 2 of this report provides details of a Notice of Motion from Councillor Harrison Rone-Clarke, which was considered at the Council meeting held on 17<sup>th</sup> October 2022. During the debate on this matter, the Leader agreed to action point 1 and following discussion it was agreed that point 2, in respect of considering the use of the Parkside complex as a day centre/warm hub/space,

would be referred to the Fuel Poverty Task Group for further investigation. The Task Group held a meeting in early November and invited the Head of Legal, Democratic and Property Services and the Business Development Manager from the Council to attend together with the Bromsgrove Library Manager to discuss options available in supporting residents with a Warm Hub/Space.

The Task Group Members had already been provided with a briefing note which explained the Worcestershire Libraries Warm Space provision throughout the county and the Library Manager provided further detail around the specific support offered at the Bromsgrove Library, which was based in the Parkside complex. The Library Manager explained that she also covered the libraries in Droitwich, Rubery, Hagley and Catshill and provided a detailed summary of what the libraries were able to offer, this included comfy seating, study and work desks, access to wifi and various activities. It was noted that this was something that the libraries had always provided, but there had been an increase in use of these facilities over recent years. The aim was to further promote the facilities in the coming months, when it was likely that there would be an increased need as the cold weather set in. Currently, the Parkside Library was unable to offer free warm drinks, but this would be something which could be considered in the future. The libraries also provided support by signposting people to other organisations who were better placed to provide specific help. The Library Manager commented that it was likely that in the coming months those needing support would never have accessed it previously and therefore would not be aware of how to access many of the services available. It was also noted that often people who came to the libraries were those who felt digitally excluded for whatever reason and were not necessarily the older members of the community. This was something which the Task Group had discussed with other witnesses and had raised concerns about. It was clear from the information provided by the Library Manager that the library service was much more than simply borrowing a book and already provided a great deal of support to a wide variety of local residents in many different ways.

The Task Group went on to discuss with the Head of Legal, Democratic and Property Services the potential use of the Council space at the Parkside complex as a warm space, but given the provision already provided by the library, it was felt that this was much better suited to the needs of residents, than the Council space. Although, it was acknowledged that if further support was needed in the future, perhaps with a contribution towards the cost of warm drinks for example, this was something which could be considered at that time. The Task Group were keen to ensure that the provision of support was not duplicated in anyway.

Members also discussed the support provided at Amphlett Hall and the Business Development Manager confirmed that she was in close contact with Age UK who provided a variety of support and would ask them to provide details of this in order for it to be included within the resources available on the Council's website. It was agreed that the promotion of the support available through both the libraries and Amphlett Hall should be included in any promotional documentation that the Council produced.

## **General**

It was clear to the Task Group that there was in fact more support available to residents than it had originally thought, but the concern was whether this was easily accessed and that the application processes were completed in a timely and efficient manner. Concerns were raised in respect of the majority of support being through access to the internet and it was acknowledged that this was not always readily available to some residents. Members discussed how the services could be better communicated to residents and how they could be supported in accessing them.

The Task Group gathered data from the Council's Web Team about the number of times specific webpages had been accessed to see whether there was any increase in more recent months as the cost of living crisis began to take hold, although the data was not able to show any particular increase in the number of people accessing these pages, it did show that there were "peaks and troughs" throughout recent months.

The Task Group were also provided with data from the Citizen's Advice Bureau who provided a free advice service to residents covering housing, financial, welfare and budgeting from a grant given by the Council. Unfortunately, the data only covered the first quarter of 2022-23 so the Task Group were unable to assess whether there had been a significant increase in recent months. However, it was acknowledged that this was an important service that was provided and something Members were keen to see continue, particularly in light of the difficult times facing residents in the future.

Whilst the Task Group acknowledged that there was support available to residents, its main concern was how this was communicated to those in need of help and its general accessibility. It was also acknowledged that everyone had a part to play in ensuring that residents were supported, this included Councillors taking an active role in promoting the services and supporting residents as much as possible. This could be done by liaising with residents directly or through local voluntary organisations or parish councils for example, to ensure that the information available was up to date and readily available. The Head of Community and Housing Services had advised the Task Group that officers were considering preparing a leaflet which would have all the relevant information in one place and the Task Group were keen for this to be put together and made available in as many places as possible, again it was felt that Councillors had a role to play in helping distribute this and it was also suggested that a simple A4 poster also be provided to be displayed in prominent places within each Ward. It was felt that they would be better placed to know how this could be done most effectively.

Finally, it was noted that a specific page had been set up on the Council's website, where all relevant information was available. The Task Group wanted to ensure that the information was up to date and easily accessible, with the information being reviewed and monitored regularly.

The Task Group therefore recommends the following:



**Recommendation 1**

That the Council ensures its webpages are up to date and takes a proactive approach in promoting the various areas of support (including an up to date list of Warm Hubs/Spaces and support provided by local libraries in the District) available through as many different mediums as possible. For example, through its social media account and by learning from the best practice approaches used by other councils.

**Recommendation 2**

That a poster or booklet is created which includes a simple straight forward guide to all the various areas of support – this should be accessible in local buildings such as the libraries and Councillors provided with copies to hand out to residents or distribute for display on noticeboards.

**Recommendation 3**

That Councillors are provided with the contact details of Act on Energy and encouraged to proactively liaise with the outreach workers to ensure access to support is readily available to residents within their Wards.

## **Chapter 2**

### **External Support and what needs to be done to help**

At one of its earliest meetings the Task Group took the opportunity to meet with and interview Della McCarthy, the Bromsgrove and Redditch Partnership Manager, as it was felt that she would be able to provide information around the work of external partners and the work they were undertaking. It was felt that she may also be able to help with contacts for potential external witnesses.

During the meeting the Task Group was provided with a summary of the role of the Partnership (which was made up from representatives from the public and voluntary sector), the partners involved (including representatives from the Council, Police, Primary Care, Heart of Worcestershire College, Age UK and NewStarts) and the separate theme groups within the Partnership. The main board was chaired by Mr. Graeme Anderson, Chief Executive of BDHT. Della was able to provide the Task Group with details of the Better Environment Group, which she felt would be useful for the Task Group's purposes and chaired by Rachel Jones from Act on Energy, who the Council worked with closely (see full details in previous chapter). The Task Group were able to get a much better understanding of the role of Partnership from these discussions, understanding the benefit of partnership working and the importance of maintaining those links. This provided the Task Group with some early ideas about how the Partnership could play a part in providing the much needed support to residents in the coming months.

The Task Group thought it would be useful to also speak to Mr. Anderson, in his role as Chair of the Partnership, but also as the CEO of the district main social housing provider.

The Task Group had also been provided with contact details and information in respect of the Churches Together Group who had held a symposium on June to look at how it could support communities with the anticipated increasing cost of living crisis. It was felt that it would therefore be useful to interview Rev. D. Ford, who was taking a lead role within this Group.

#### **Churches Together and BDHT**

Rev. David Ford and Mr. Graeme Anderson, CEO BDHT attended the same meeting, and a detailed discussion took place following them initially providing information about the work they were doing.

Rev. Ford provided some background information of Churches Together and its members. He explained the role he felt the churches had to play in supporting the communities but could not act alone in meeting the needs of residents. It was important that they partnered with statutory and community organisations who were also responding to the crisis. It was important that they were aware of all the support that was available and how best to access it. This could be through increasing support of organisations they already worked with rather than starting up something new, but what was clear was that there was

a real need for that support and that it was likely to increase. The concern was that there was no clear data which helped those organisations to understand what was needed and the level of the need. From discussions that had already taken place it was clear that the need was different to many others and that it was much more widely spread across the district, it went beyond the areas of deprivation that people were already aware of and was not impacting on families that would under normal circumstances be able to manage their finances. It was commented that people appeared to have significant outgoings and did not have savings to draw upon. The increase in the cost of fuel and its knock on effect on the cost of living, meant that many people appeared to be at their financial limit, with no room for manoeuvre, which was a real concern. The concern was that this was unknown territory and imperative that the right support was provided in the right places.

It was clear that Warm Spaces was an essential part of the support that could be provided, and the churches were looking at how they could support this. However, it brought with it its own challenges as not all churches had the funds to cover the cost to do this and some of the church halls also had inefficient heating systems, which would be difficult to run throughout the winter. There were a number of ways that Churches Together were looking at providing support and again this included providing a hot meal to those that needed it, but this also came at a cost and until data was available that gave an indication as to just how many people would need to access support, it was difficult to gauge just what was needed and the cost. All the support Churches Together provided was reliant on volunteers too, which added another dimension to the provision of support in the longer term. There were also a number of other things to take into consideration, for example would access to a warm space be done through a referral system, as was the case with foodbanks, was there an opportunity for the Warm Spaces to be used as an educational hub, by potentially linking it to the local college as work experience for students to assist with cooking meals, or to help teach those attending how to cook on a budget. There was a lot to think about and a need for there to be a central point for its co-ordination to ensure there was no duplication of services and that they were both what was needed and in the right place.

Mr. Anderson explained how he felt both BDHT and the Bromsgrove Partnership (in his position as Chair) could support residents and the challenges faced.

It was explained that whilst there were a number of places where data could be accessed, this was a new challenge that was being faced and the data available may not be appropriate to the current situation. He gave an example of how the Partnership had assisted in the collection of data during the pandemic and that it had been found the best way for this to be done was simply by knocking on doors and asking the relevant questions. This had been supported by BDHT officers who were familiar with the local areas and had a good relationship with many residents due to the work they carried out. It was important that the Partnership members worked together, asking the question to GP surgeries for example about what they were made aware of. All parties needed to come together to understand the problem before it would be possible to find a solution.

to it. It was acknowledged that BDHT as the single largest provider of social housing in the district, had a significant role to play. Mr. Anderson commented that, as had previously been mentioned, there were areas which were well known to be classed as areas of deprivation, however the cost of living crisis was bringing to light a whole new set of demographics and even those in reasonably well paid employment, who previously had a disposable income, were beginning to feel the pinch, which was likely to increase as the winter months loomed. Everyone had a role to play in trying to help and support residents and finding the best way to do this, whether it be through Warm Spaces or other means of addressing some of the complex issues that people would be facing.

The Partnership was able to co-ordinate the collection of data and the provision of support, but it was a much wider problem which needed to be addressed by all those involved. In light of the information around the demographics of those needing help, it was suggested that the type of support needed may well be very different in each area and this would need to be considered carefully when planning an approach to take. It was important to empower people and for them to share their skills and resources.

Mr. Anderson explained to the Task Group how his staff supported its residents, through a variety of means, including one to one support, budget and job coaches and signposting. BDHT worked in partnership with the CAB who were able to deal with more complex financial difficulties.

The Task Group raised concerns with Mr. Anderson around the use of pre-paid gas and electric cards. Mr. Anderson explained that very often this was the only way in which people were able to access utilities and that it was surprising how many people did not have access to a bank account and were therefore not able to use direct debit as a form of payment. Whilst it was not an ideal way of getting gas and electric, it was commented that actually a lot of people were very good at budgeting and the difficulty was that there were simply not receiving enough money to cover the ever increasing cost of living. The lack of a bank account also had an impact on a number of benefits which were paid to people, for example the recent £150 refund which had been paid from central Government through the Council Tax, had meant that those who did not pay by direct debit were some of the last to receive it, but were likely to be those in most need of it. The lack of a bank account was a definite disadvantage to many people, as was also the lack of access to a smart phone. The impact of many services only being accessible online or by telephone had an impact on many people.

The Task Group discussed whether the funding provided by central government to both residents (through the benefit system) and to local authorities was sufficient to meet the ever increasing needs and also that a number of schemes put in place to provide additional support were very restrictive and complicated to navigate in a very short timeframe. Rev. Ford commented that it was likely that the Council would feel the impact in a number of ways, as he believed that Council Tax arrears would increase as a result of the increase in the cost of living generally. The situation was an urgent one, which needed to be

addressed and it was important that a co-ordinated approach was taken to mitigate the longer term effect on local communities.

### **General**

The Task Group had been keen to involve both the Head of Community and Housing Services and Councillor Shirley Webb, as portfolio holder in its investigation and Councillor Webb was able to give evidence of the work that she was carrying out in her Ward supported by the Parish Council and other organisations. This included a flyer which had been produced (and printed by the Parish Council) which had details of Warm Spaces accessible each day of the week throughout her Ward. These were being distributed to as many people as possible to ensure that those that needed the help could access it. She hoped that the Act on Energy Outreach Worker would be able to attend some of those Warm Spaces in order to chat and provide support to those attending. She had also taken the time to distribute the Act on Energy leaflets to schools and her wish was for all children in the district to be given a leaflet to take home, to ensure those homes which needed support were aware of what was available. It was agreed that Councillors had an integral part to play in the work that was needed as they were most familiar with their own Ward, and it was important that they familiarised themselves with the support that was available and how it could be accessed.

From the discussions held with Rev. Ford and Mr. Anderson it was clear that there was a need for a co-ordinated approach to be taken and for data to be gathered to ensure that any support was the right support and targeted in the right places. It was acknowledged that there may be a need for additional financial support to be provided to some organisations to be able to provide that support, for example there may be some centres (or churches) who would be willing to help but were unable themselves to cover the full cost of their own heating, so a little support in this respect would be appreciated. The Task Group acknowledged that the Council was also facing its own challenges in respect of funding and that its budget for 2022/23 had already been agreed. However, the Task Group felt that it was important that all avenues of funding were investigated and applied for to ensure that the best possible support could be provided to its residents.

The Task Group therefore recommends the following:

<b>Recommendation 4</b>
That the Bromsgrove Partnership, supported by the Council, takes a lead role in the collection of high quality intelligence/data to ensure that the Council's partners can target their interventions where support is most needed.

<b>Recommendation 5</b>
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That the Bromsgrove Partnership (with input from all District Councillors and/or relevant Parish Councils) take a lead role in co-ordinating appropriate support, to ensure it is readily available for residents throughout the whole district, for example this could mean the provision of a Warm Hub/Space and the facilities offered by the local libraries.
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<b>Recommendation 6</b>
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That the Cabinet actively explores all funding options (for example the UK Shared Prosperity Fund) available to the Council in order to ensure that, if needed, it is able to provide financial support to VCS organisations throughout the district in providing the support detailed in recommendation 5 above.
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## **Chapter 3**

### **Areas to Note**

There were a number of areas that the Task Group touched upon during its investigation, and which it wished to highlight. It was felt that these areas may warrant further investigation in the future, and which could have a positive impact in the long term.

#### **Local Planning**

Members may wish to further investigate how the Council may be able to influence housing developers in the future to ensure that future housing developments were as energy efficient as possible.

This was also discussed with Graeme Anderson, from BDHT and he was keen for future builds to be as energy efficient as possible.

#### **District Heat Network**

The Bromsgrove District Heating project could help to bring local resilience and stability to the cost of heating and an update on its current position may be something which the Overview and Scrutiny Board may wish to receive and investigate further.

#### **Private Rented Housing Sector**

Minimum Energy Efficiency Regulations were in place regarding private rented homes and the Council's Private Sector Housing Team have the power to enforce these, should they be made aware of a property being let with an EPC rating of F or G without a registered exemption. Again, this may be something which the Overview and Scrutiny Board may wish to either receive regular updates on or investigate in more detail in the future.

#### **Learning from other councils**

The Task Group briefly touched on work that other councils were doing to address the impact of fuel poverty, both immediately and in the long term. This again, may be something which warrants further, more detailed investigation to ensure that this Council was doing all it could to support its residents.

### **OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY BOARD**

#### **Fuel Poverty Task Group**

#### **Terms of Reference as at February 2022**

##### **Background to the Proposal**

Local residents face crippling energy costs as a result of the lifting of the energy cap at the start of February. Average bills are set to increase by £693 a year whilst those on pre-payment metres will face an average rise of £708 per year. Families are facing increases of more than 50% in their annual energy costs at a time when other essential costs including petrol and food are also increasing rapidly.

[Recent research](#) from the ONS shows that a third of households are already cutting back on gas and electricity spending, with the impact disproportionately affecting those on the lowest incomes. This energy crisis presents a real threat to the health and wellbeing of our residents. The purpose of this group is to examine what support the Council can offer to residents who are most adversely affected by the energy crisis and ensure we are doing as much as we can to prevent fuel poverty in our community.

This links to the Council's objectives as set out in the 2019-2023 Council Plan. One of our Strategic objectives is to promote work and financial independence, with an action to support residents to manage their finances. The energy crisis represents an unprecedented challenge to these objectives, which merits further investigation.

##### **Aims and Objectives of the Task Group**

- Explore what insight the Council has into the likely impact of the energy crisis on local residents, such as EPC ratings data, volume of support referrals.
- Explore what support is available locally, who provides it, how residents can access it and how success is measured
- Explore what measures are being taken to retrofit our social housing stock in order to make it as energy efficient as possible
- Explore what opportunities are available for residents in private rented housing to improve the energy efficiency of their homes
- Consider whether there are any gaps in support for those facing fuel poverty in Bromsgrove and explore how these could be filled



- Investigate whether there are any areas of good practice at other councils that we could learn from
- Investigate whether there are any new national or regional policies or funding schemes that we could take advantage of to support local residents.

**NOTICE OF MOTION**

**MOTION – COUNCIL 17<sup>th</sup> OCTOBER 2022**

The following Notice of Motion has been submitted in accordance with Procedure Rule 10 by Councillor H. Rone-Clarke:

“Council recognises that the current cost of living crisis is both an emergency and a matter of paramount concern for local residents.

Therefore, council resolves to:

1. Lobby the new Prime Minister for concrete action to be taken in order to support the public through this upcoming crisis
2. Consider use of the Parkside complex as a day centre during the Autumn/Winter period to support residents who cannot afford to heat their homes, providing a warm space to sit and even socialise.”

**BACKGROUND PAPERS**

**Council**

Essential Living Fund

**External**

Household Support Fund  
Government's Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund  
Information from various Nearest Neighbours' websites

**Points of Reference**

[Fuel poverty statistics - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/fuel-poverty-statistics)

[What is Fuel Poverty? | National Energy Action \(NEA\)](https://www.nea.gov.uk/what-is-fuel-poverty)

[What Is Fuel Poverty In The UK | MoneySuperMarket](https://www.moneysupermarket.com/energy/fuel-poverty/)

[Fuel poverty factsheet, England, 2020 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/864442/fuel-poverty-factsheet-england-2020.pdf)

[Fuel poverty definition and meaning | Collins English Dictionary  
\(collinsdictionary.com\)](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/en/english-dictionary/definition-of-fuel-poverty)

[Fuel poverty | North Lanarkshire Council](https://www.northlanarkshire.gov.uk/fuel-poverty)

**WITNESSES**

The Task Group considered evidence from the following sources before making its recommendations:

**Internal Witnesses:**

Claire Felton – Head of Legal, Democratic and Property Services  
Judith Willis - Head of Community and Housing Services, Guy Revans, Head of Environmental and Housing Property Services  
Julie Heyes – Business Development Manager  
Della McCarthy – Bromsgrove and Redditch Partnership Manager  
Lisa Devey – Financial Inclusion Team (written submission)

Councillor Shirley Webb – Portfolio Holder for Health and Well Being and Strategic Housing

**External Witnesses:**

Graeme Anderson, Chief Executive, Bromsgrove District Housing Trust  
Rev David Ford, Churches Together  
Rachel Jones, Chief Executive, Act on Energy  
Nicki Hitchcock - Bromsgrove, Droitwich, Rubery, Hagley and Catshill Library Manager, Worcestershire County Council

**Legal, Equalities and Democratic Services**

Bromsgrove District Council, Parkside Offices, Market Street  
Bromsgrove, Worcestershire B61 8DA  
Email: [scrutiny@bromsgrove.gov.uk](mailto:scrutiny@bromsgrove.gov.uk)