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COMMUNITY | FOUNDATION

Somerset Cost-of-Living Crisis Appeal

Impact report

September 2023

The cost-of-living crisis and our communities

The Cost-of-Living Crisis took hold in 2022, pushing many people who were already struggling to make ends meet into desperate situations. Inflation hit a 40-year high and the cost of household essentials like food, energy and fuel rocketed.

Living in a rural county means that basic costs like fuel are already higher due to the distance from work, school or essential services. Many of our neighbours also rely on more expensive modes of heating for their homes such as oil-fuelled boilers, where costs have also grown significantly.

At the time of launching our Cost-of-Living Crisis Appeal, there were over 40,000 people in Somerset who receive Universal Credit, many of whom are living in working poverty, defined as when a working person's income, after housing costs, is less than 60% of the national average. There were also more than 11,000 pensioners claiming Pension Credit, which means they have a household income of less than £800 a month for single households or £1,200 a month for couples.

We were extremely concerned about how the most vulnerable would cope in the face of further very high inflation and wanted to understand how we could best support our communities. In November 2022, we created a survey to help us better understand the needs of local groups and what they were seeing on the frontline. Our survey, which had 170 responses, showed that:

- 90% of groups said that the people they support were in a worse or significantly worse financial situation than 2 years ago
- 87% of groups said their own running costs had increased, adding additional pressure onto the running of their services
- 69% of groups reported that they had already seen a rise in demand for their services as a direct result of the cost-of-living crisis.

We asked groups to share any concerns they had for their beneficiaries over the next 6 months. Alongside expected responses such as being unable to afford adequate food, heating or housing, this also highlighted some perhaps less obvious consequences of the crisis, such as people being unable to afford to travel to appointments or to take part in activities that help reduce social isolation and improve mental health.

Community spaces, such as village halls, told us they were facing huge increases in running costs which they were unable to pass on to their users as they knew they wouldn't be able to afford to shoulder the increased costs.

Our response

We launched our Somerset Cost-of-Living Crisis Appeal in August 2022 to help the most vulnerable people in the county and support small, grassroots groups to keep running their vital services in the face of an extremely challenging financial climate.

Thanks to the generosity of local people and funders we raised almost £900,000. Building on the feedback we received through our survey, our expert Programmes Team devised a funding programme with **4 key strands of support:**

1 - Support for local Warm Hubs

As communities considered how they could best respond to the energy bills crisis and look after the most vulnerable in their communities, the idea of providing 'warm spaces' spread across the county – and the country. Warm spaces popped up in a host of community buildings and hubs, and gave anyone who needed it a place they could stay warm, meet others from their community, and find advice and a friendly ear.

In October 2022, we provided our first round of Cost-of-Living Grants as a rapid response to the warm spaces idea, providing up to £1,000 per grant to help with the running costs for 40 warm spaces across the county. We awarded just over £37,000 of grants in this round.

The Old Stores Studio, Evercreech

The Old Stores Studio are a nonprofit art and craft studio run by members of our community for our community. A grant of £1,000 helped them provide a warm space in Evercreech along with free hot drinks and creative activities.

"This grant from Somerset Community Foundation has made a significant positive impact to our visitors and wider community. We have offered free hot drinks and a warm space with the possibility of taking part in creative activities if desired. During this time we have seen people make new connections and friendships with others and reach out to support each other as well as us being able to offer this as well.

We have also had a great deal of positive feedback online. People across our community feel that local people are taking care of each other and looking after each other as a result of us offering a warm space, and therefore generally feel more positive about their local community during a difficult time that is taking a great toll on many people's mental health. We are very grateful to have had the opportunity to support people and provide them with some positivity and a community hub and support in our space."

2 - Cost-of-Living Grants:

Almost £500,000 of our funding was used through an open-to-all application process to make grants of up to £10,000. The programme offered a blend of large and small grants to support organisations to:

- help frontline organisations meet additional costs of delivering their services due to increased demand – for example increasing staff capacity to meet additional demand
- help other charities to offset the additional financial impacts of inflation / the cost-of-living crisis to ensure they can continue to deliver their services – for example supporting increased energy bills / staff costs
- help groups to subsidise community-based activities to ensure that they continue to be accessible to those who may otherwise struggle to afford to engage due to the financial impacts of the cost-of-living crisis – for example by offering social clubs or wellbeing activities for free or free-to-user community transport

Sweet Track Counselling Service, Glastonbury

Sweet Track Counselling Service provide free and low-cost counselling to people from Glastonbury and the surrounding areas. A grant of £7,320 from the Cost-of-Living Crisis Appeal helped them to offer over 400 free or heavily subsidised sessions to over 200 local people experiencing mental health issues.

“When we applied for this fund, we were already seeing the impact of the cost-of-living crisis, with people having to sacrifice their emotional and mental wellbeing over having to pay their bills or put food on the table.

We have experienced people coming to us desperate, suffering, in emotional and mental pain but unable to afford regular counselling. This fund has allowed us to offer an even lower cost. It has made therapeutic interventions accessible to all. We have noticed a ripple effect within the community where fellow family members of the clients in question are also coming forward to get support.

The difference has been huge, the difference has provided choice to individuals who previously they didn’t have one. It has enabled people who are suffering with mental distress to gain access to high quality therapeutic support. For some who are already accessing our services, it has given them hope as a route back into their therapeutic journey. For others, it has stopped them feeling worried that their therapeutic journey will be cut short due financial pressures.

One regular client was receiving support with a mental health diagnosis and trying to process and recover from a serious sexual assault. Her 1-2-1 sessions were her lifeline. Sadly, she had received an energy bill she could not afford and told us that she could no longer continue to come to therapy.

As soon as your grant came through, this individual was the first person we called. Her therapist was also extremely grateful and emotional that she could offer this lifeline. Our client felt that people considered and cared about her. As we type this, she continues to come for counselling and is making the most of every minute she has in her free sessions.”

The Kingsdon Centre Village Shop

The Kingsdon Centre runs a community shop in Kingsdon, a small village between Ilchester and Somerton. They operate a small cafe area which they've been running as a warm space for villagers. Funding of £4,000 from the Cost-of-Living Crisis Appeal helped them extend their opening hours and ensured they could absorb the significant increase in energy bills.

“Your funding has secured the ongoing viability of our lovely Community Shop. With the enormous increase in fuel bills this year, without the grant the shop would have been at risk of closing. It is the only shop in our village and without it we would lose access to essential items and the cafe area which provides a great venue for residents to meet their friends.

We have several recently widowed ladies in the village who are struggling with loneliness. They have established a weekly coffee morning at the shop, open to all, where they can catch up on local news and make new friends. Most importantly this can run through the winter months in a warm cosy environment.”

Purple Elephant Family Support, Frome

Purple Elephant received a grant of £4,640 to help them cover increased overheads and support their programme of free and subsidised activities for low-income families.

“The families that we support are often on low incomes and face daily challenges, which have been made worse by the increase in living costs, and in turn has increased levels of stress and anxiety both for adults and children. Day-to-day living has become harder and affording anything other than the essentials is nearly impossible. Added to that, several families have additional needs which are poorly catered for at the best of times.

The grant allowed us to expand our holiday activities, both in terms of the number of sessions and the length of each session, and to continue our Small Steps early intervention parenting support group through the school holidays. It also meant we could keep paying our staff fairly during the cost-of-living crisis. Being able to offer support groups and activities, especially during the school holidays, has really benefitted the families we support.

They can access something positive to do, get support and guidance from experienced staff, learn new skills, socialise, and have a hot meal, all in a safe and non-judgemental environment. We know that for some, our services are a lifeline and deliver what they need to keep going.”

3- The Somerset Move-In Fund:

The Somerset Move-In Fund was an initiative we created in 2020 with funding from a national charitable trust, Somerset [County] Council and funds from our Somerset Coronavirus Appeal. It was created in response to our *Hidden Somerset: Homelessness* report, published in 2019.

In late June 2020, we consulted with representatives from a wide range of local charities working with homeless people and those at risk of homelessness. We wanted their insights on local need and how we could use our modest funding to make the greatest impact in preventing homelessness, moving homeless people into their own home and helping them to sustain their tenancies. They told us that one of the simplest and most effective things we could do is to provide move on funding for those they support.

The Somerset Move-In Fund initially provided two-years of funding to local charities to help with initial deposits and rental advances and to provide carpets, furniture and soft furnishings to make a house a home.

Funding from the Cost-of-Living Crisis Appeal meant we could provide **follow-up funding of £120,000** to 6 key organisations working with homeless people locally. Our funding will allow each organisation to offer up to £2,000 of support for individuals moving into their new home.

Arc, Taunton

Arc received funding from the first Move-In Fund programme in 2020 & 2021. Funding from the Cost-of-Living Appeal meant we could give them a further £10,000 in June to help more individuals moving into a permanent home.

“The cost-of-living crisis has had a significant impact on our organisation as the cost of providing our services has increased greatly, and the demand on our services has also risen. Financially our costs have risen, particularly in terms of energy costs linked with our 16 properties. In addition to costs increasing, our income has reduced as fundraising has become more of a challenge.

For the first time in many years, we have a fairly lengthy waiting list. It’s therefore more crucial that we can successfully move our clients on into independent accommodation, creating spaces in our supported accommodation services for new referrals.

The first round of the Move-In Fund made such a significant impact on our client group that when the fund ended, we continued it by using other donated unrestricted funds. We did not want to remove this opportunity that had been such a great help. This money will mean we can continue with this provision, while using other unrestricted funds in other areas of our services.”

One of Arc’s beneficiaries, Rob, said, “Receiving my white goods package from Arc was such an amazing weight off my shoulders. It allowed me to relax and not worry about how I was going to store food, wash my clothes and generally live a normal life. It is awesome going to the shop and buying simple things like ice cream!"

4 - Helping community buildings become more sustainable:

Community buildings are extremely precious resources and the cornerstone of so many of our communities across Somerset. We supported many community buildings through our Cost-of-Living Grants, with most grants going towards significantly increased overheads. These grants were crucial to help these organisations weather the storm and give them breathing space to find alternative solutions.

Having a significant and flexible fund built from the appeal also gave us the space to think creatively about how we could help community buildings become more sustainable – both financially and environmentally.

That's why we're working together with Community Council for Somerset (CCS) to pilot a scheme offering energy audits for 17 community buildings across Somerset, such as village halls, community sports pavilions, scout huts, faith buildings or reading rooms.

Each community building will have a site visit from **Inspired Efficiency**, to assess their current infrastructure and energy usage. This visit will be followed up by a written report detailing findings and recommendations to improve their energy efficiency, including the estimated capital costs to suggested improvements and the payback period (years). The 17 successful applicants will receive their subsidised energy audit and a full report by the end of March 2024.

This project will also provide 1 hour of 121 support from CCS Community Advisors and a bespoke funding search to help groups identify the best funders to support their improvements.

We aim to use the balance of our Cost-of-Living Appeal funds to provide funding to the 17 groups to support them to make the recommended improvements. We are also in discussions with various local funders and donors to SCF about joining us as co-funders.

This work will ensure the Cost-of-Living Appeal funding will leave a more permanent legacy, helping to strengthen and preserve our incredibly special community buildings for generations to come.

Supporters of the Cost-of-Living Crisis Appeal

We're thankful to the following organisations for their generous support of our Somerset Cost-of-Living Appeal, and to the **more than 200 individual donors** who gave so generously to support local people in need.

Somerset Council
Department for Digital Culture Media & Sport
Fairfield Trust
Magnox
McGreevy Charitable Trust
M&G Plc
The Barratt Development Foundation
The British Red Cross
South Somerset District Council
Sedgemoor District Council
Somerset West and Taunton District Council

Thank you so much for helping us provide vital funding and support through our Cost-of-Living Crisis Appeal. Thanks to you, we could offer a lifeline for local groups and vulnerable people facing incredibly tough times.

For more information, feedback or questions, contact
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