

GM VCSE Local Infrastructure Cost of Living Response

VCSE Local Infrastructure is playing a crucial role in responding to the cost of living crisis in Greater Manchester, through the distribution of grants, provision of information, hosting of events, engaging with the community, provision of Warm Spaces, and a host of other activity.

This briefing outlines the vital leadership and delivery role played by the VCSE Local Infrastructure Organisations, the shared challenges in delivering this work, and key messages for the wider system.

The cost of living crisis is affecting all parts of our community, and the VCSE sector itself. The VCSE Local Infrastructure Organisations have a vital role to play in the system-wide response, due to their grant-giving expertise; significant experience in crisis, and poverty lobbying and response; and their close and trusted connections with the communities themselves.

In recognition of the severity of the impact on communities and the varied level of system responses, the Local Infrastructure Organisations have come together to understand what role they might play in the overall response; share good practice and resources; and collectively lobby for change in the wider system.

Information and Toolkits

VCSE Infrastructure organisations play a vital role in collating and providing information for individuals seeking help, for VCSE organisations seeking support with additional costs, and for communities wanting to know how and where to give help, such as donations and volunteering.

In addition to providing information webpages, LIOs have supported GM Poverty Action to create Money Advice Referral Tools in at least six localities, such as Bury's Money Advice Toolkit and Rochdale's Cost of Living Toolkit. With system partners, they have hosted webinars showcasing local support, and events for local communities offering practical tips and support.

Bolton CVS hosted Cost of Living information events in partnership with the council.

These were open to the public and provided cost effective cooking demonstrations, mental health and wellbeing support, debt advice and skills and training opportunities.

Engagement and Insight Gathering

Many Local Infrastructure Organisations worked with partners to generate local insight around the scale of the issue and the impact on the local community.

For example, Tameside Action Together has worked with Healthwatch Tameside to research the impacts of the cost of living Crisis on health and wellbeing; whilst Bury VCFA has gathered insight via their Social Prescribing Link Workers, to feed into the local Anti-Poverty Steering Group.

Warm Spaces

Local Infrastructure Organisations have played a pivotal role in establishing warm spaces by encouraging VCSE organisations to register any offers on the warm spaces website to promote the warm spaces available in the community.

They have also distributed grants to those wishing to establish a warm space and acted as a named support provider for those groups or organisations wanting to set up a Warm Hub. In addition to this, LIOs have played a key role in the communications around warm spaces.

In Wigan, of the 81 Warm Spaces operating in the borough, 60 were in VCSE sector spaces.





Grant Giving and Administration

Utilising their expertise in grant administration, Local Infrastructure Organisations have managed and distributed hardship funds, local cost of living grants, small grants, and the Household Support Fund.

Through the various routes, funding has been dispersed to individuals experiencing crisis and also, to a network of VCSE partners who are providing emergency support with food, energy, water, other household bills, clothing, furniture, white goods, household essentials, and transport costs.

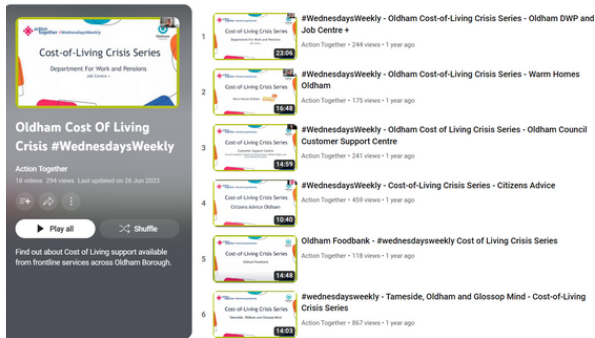
Local Infrastructure Organisations have also themselves raised funds to support local cases. For example, Sector3 raised £61k in its cost of living fundraiser and created a donation appeal for Stockport 4 Slow Cookers project.

In addition, LIOs have supported the distribution of wider resources, such as Macc, who supported Manchester Council to distribute 100 laptops to local community groups as part of its cost of living response work.

Macc has administered GM VCSE Cost of Living Grants on behalf of the Eric Wright Charitable Trust, targeted at medium sized VCSE organisations. They distributed Community Health Equity Fund cash grants to individuals and families, making 580 awards with a total value of £174,000, and individual funds through Real Change Manchester and GM Migrant Destitution Fund, making 48,000 individual hardship awards in the last 3 years.

Through the Spirit of Manchester fund, Macc have also provided 20 grants of £1,000 to smaller local VCSE organisations to support their cost of living response work.

Action Together's #WednesdaysWeekly Webinars showcase and hear from a range of services and organisations providing support and help to residents through the Cost of Living Crisis.



Local Leadership and Coordination

All Local Infrastructure Organisations have provided cost of living response leadership and coordination in their localities bringing partners together for sharing insight and mutual support.

Macc has hosted Manchester summits, bringing voluntary and public sectors together to discuss how the crisis was affecting the residents of Manchester; how to support each other through the next few months (and beyond); and to gather campaigning ideas.

In Rochdale, Action Together are part of the anti-poverty network which provides governance on the Council's anti-poverty work. Similarly, in Bury, Bury VCFA feed into the Anti-Poverty Steering Group as well as speaking and representing the VCSE sector on various local boards.

Local Infrastructure organisations are also playing a pivotal role in the development of local Anti Poverty Strategies by facilitating wider sector engagement - many localities now have a strategy in place and the remainder are committed to developing one.

Broader Poverty Response

In addition to locality-led cost of living leadership, Local VCSE Infrastructure Organisations continue to work in collaboration with partners at GM level to drive the anti-poverty agenda forward, representing the Sector and sharing locality insight at the GM Cost of Living Response Group.

The Local Infrastructure Organisations have also added their weight to wider VCSE partner campaigns, such as GM Poverty Action's work around the future of the Household Support Fund.

Bury VCFA facilitated engagement and conversations on the Bury Anti-Poverty Strategy with Bury Older People's Network, Bury VCSE Leadership Group, Bury VCSE Children's Partnership, Bury Community Support Network (network of food banks/pantries)





Challenges

- Demand and complexity of cases outstripping VCSE resource.
- Financial insecurity of LIO and wider VCSE contracts is impacting on their ability to 'add on' further un-funded support and absorb additional demand.
- Cost increases on existing contracts are not being matched by funders and commissioners, including VCSE staffing costs.
- Significant variations in strategic connections at local level, with strong connections between public and VCSE sector partners in some locality and no connections or route in in others.
- Ability to follow best practice of directly funding individuals and groups in crisis, is at risk, should the Household Support Fund be discontinued in March 24.
- Variations in funding landscape for VCSE activities and need to move beyond relying on emergency opportunities.
- Insufficient involvement of lived experience in shaping responses.
- Immature systems for capturing data, insight and community intelligence across Greater Manchester, and within localities.

Opportunities for LIOs

- Joint lobbying on continuation of Household Support Fund between LIOs and other relevant partners such as GMPA.
- Messaging and communications about what is available locally and what the VCSE sector role is in this.
- Potential to look at a GM wide best practice model based on learnings of localities with strong strategic connections and routes in.
- Consistent messaging and advocating for improvement within the system .

Key Messages from the Sector

1. VCSE Local Infrastructure Organisations must be considered local anchor institutions in responding to cost of living challenges due to their grant-giving expertise; significant experience in crisis and poverty lobbying and response; & close and trusted connections with the communities themselves.
2. A long-term issue requires long-term investment - we need to move away from reliance on emergency opportunities, and do this urgently. Around 62% of all local welfare spending in England is from the Household Support Fund - should this end in March 24, GM will need to find a sustainable way of maintaining cost of living funding.
3. The Household Support Fund and other grants are a crucial way of getting funding directly to individuals and groups - the system should prioritise maintaining this offer for GM.
4. The VCSE Sector is struggling to meet demand, due to:
 - a. The longevity of the crisis - this is now an on-going issue
 - b. Increased demand and complexity of cases;
 - c. Financial insecurity meaning a less buoyant sector, less able to flex and deliver unfunded support.
5. The VCSE sector itself is struggling due to cost increases not being matched by funders and commissioners - this needs to be addressed urgently.
6. GM needs an overarching Anti-Poverty Strategy and a strategic space where risk is reviewed and responded to, and the sector must be considered a core partner in this.
7. We want to build strategic connections in localities where these are under-developed - help us to do this.
8. Please make use of our connections to make sure that the voices of lived experience shape system-wide responses.



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To learn more about our work with VCSE Infrastructure partners, or to discuss how we can work together, please get in touch - we'd love to hear from you.