

## **COST OF LIVING (CoL) BRIEFING - FEBRUARY 2023**

This briefing covers the period from mid-January to February 2023. The CoL response for Stroud is a partnership between the statutory and voluntary sectors. Our efforts have been helped by the working relationships formed through the Community Hubs development project. Many of our partners have turned away from other funded work to respond to the CoL crisis. SDC aims to support with funding, time or influence. Our partners have agreed to provide regular data for these monthly briefings, but at times their capacity may make this difficult. These briefing will be shared via the Members Hub, the Town & Parish Councils Hub, the Know your Patch network and the Community Hubs network.

### **Data & Insight**

#### **Stroud Foodbank**

The Foodbank are coping okay with demand and they're looking at training for staff and volunteers to cope with the complexity of issues and also looking after their emotional wellbeing. The Foodbank Citizens Advice caseworker is leaving in March so they are recruiting for a replacement and also continuing to look at how they signpost people effectively to help with crisis.

#### **Key points:**

50% increase in month of January in 2023 compared to 2022.

73.7% increase on parcels over whole year compared to 2021

123% increase on parcels over whole year compared to 2019 (pre-pandemic)

#### **Jan & Feb 2023 and 2022 Parcel Summary & Analysis**

<b>Month</b>	<b>Adult</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Total Parcels</b>
<b>Year</b>	<b>Parcels</b>	<b>Parcels</b>	
February 2023	<b>TBC</b>	<b>TBC</b>	<b>Figures to be confirmed. Circa 700 around 45% increase</b>
January 2023	447	281	728 (c. 50% increase on Jan 22)
February 2022	293	186	479
January 2022	312	175	487

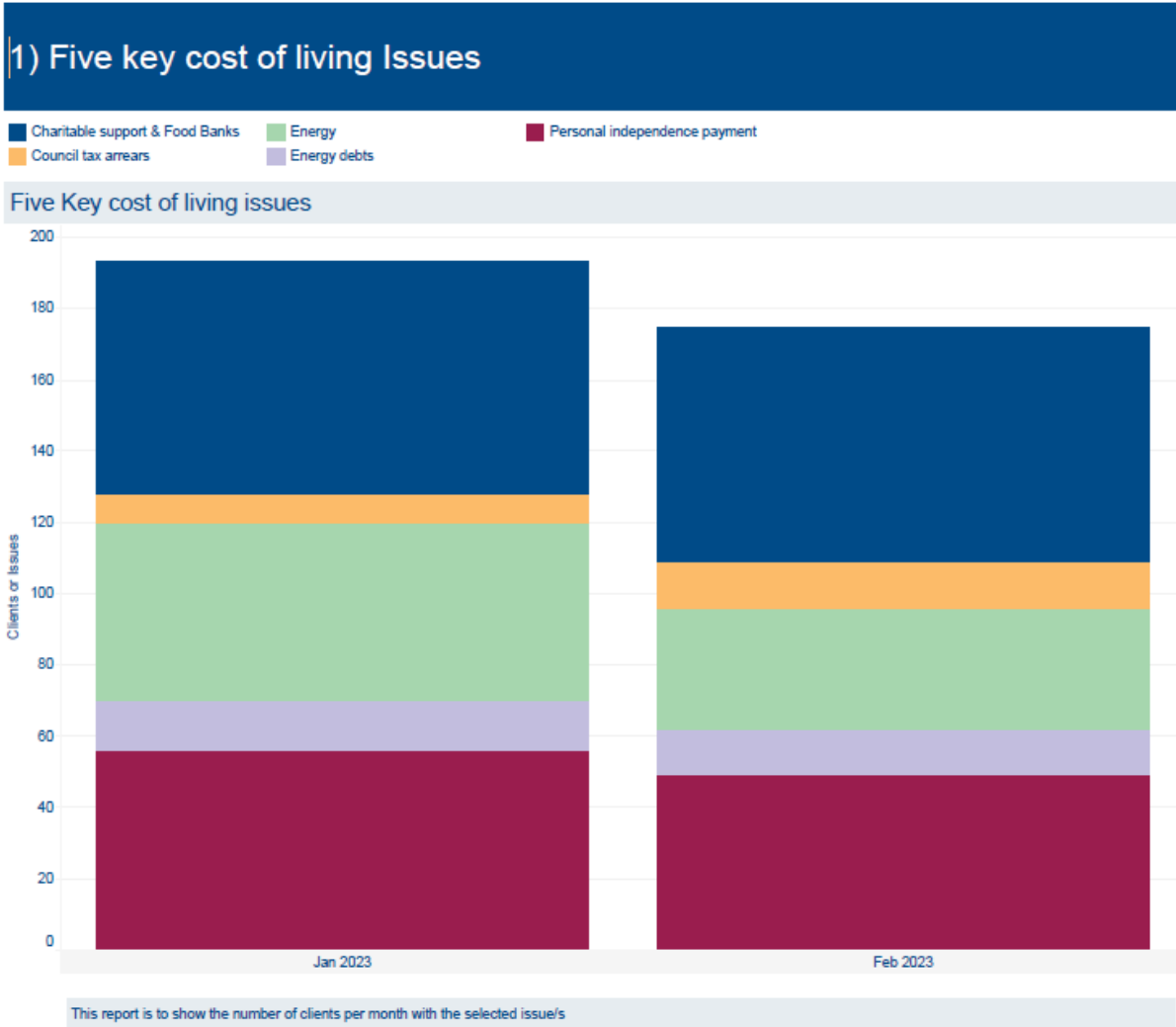
**Stroud Citizens Advice** – Demand continues to be high and the CA have instigated new methods to manage high call levels. Most non-urgent calls are dealt with within 5 days, urgent calls within the day. Staff and volunteers are tired and worried about letting people down. The complexity of callers situations is increasing, making advice harder and taking longer. Many referrals come from partner agencies like P3 or Independence Trust who would previously have been be able to deal with money issues, but now it is too complex. Delays in benefits

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claims is a concern for many. Covering outreach advice sessions with volunteers is a challenge but 5 new advisors are about to complete training and will be expected to cover outreach sessions.

The figure below shows the 5 keys cost of living issues for Stroud callers (charitable support & funding, council tax arrears, energy, energy debts and personal independence payments).



**SDC Household Support Vouchers – £5,750** of supermarket vouchers have been distributed to front line services and community groups in January and February 2023 so far. This includes Community Hubs, Foodbanks and Citizens Advice. New organisations continue to join the scheme, including new schools and Parish Councils.

Household Support Funding for 2023/24 is under discussion. It's likely that the grant will be for a year, rather than the quarter which enables us to plan longer term. More details will follow from Gloucestershire County Council.

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**GCC Household Support Fund Individual Grant** – Data from GCC on Stroud allocations of this fund will be updated when we have it.

**Energy Vouchers** – Energy continues to be the second highest request after food support. Data from Severn Wye on demand from Stroud district will be updated when we have it.

**Community Hubs** – Hubs continue to be in high demand and staff and volunteers are dealing with complex issues. SDC have managed to secure extra funding for their food work from COMF and the NHS local commissioning, worth £7k each for 10 Hubs. Hubs continue to pay to stock their food pantries as surplus food and donations have decreased. Most work a ‘pay as you feel’ donation system, but many cannot pay. Onsite advice workers is crucial to reaching the people most in need. We are working on how to improve this. Hubs are providing useful data on demand which prove that a little investment on their front line resource, provides a high value of support to local people. Further information on this will follow. **One Stroud Town Hub has calculated that that for £140 per year per person they provide nutritional support, bags of food, cooking tips, wellness checks, social contact, referral advice, links to foodbank, peer support and volunteering opportunities.**

**Warm Spaces** – As expected, Warm Hubs are a mixed story. Venues who added extra hot food or drinks to existing social provision continue to grow. Many spaces who opened just as Warm Spaces have not experienced demand and will likely stop. In a few areas, Warm Spaces has been a catalyst for community action, where community members are interested in organising more social events. The Community Hubs project continues to provide light touch support for this work as a positive output for healthy, well connected communities.

### **Cost of Living Working Group**

In early February the CoL Working Group discussed SDC income from rents and Council Tax. At present, rent arrears and Council Tax income do not seem to be affected by the cost of living crisis. In view of demand for foodbanks and support vouchers, it seems that people are choosing not to miss bills by using their food budgets. As bills increase in Spring for utilities and council tax, we may find more residents cannot pay. The Working Group will review data on this in coming months.

The CoL Working Group also discussed the lack of affordable transport for Stroud District after a concern was raised at Community Services & Licensing Committee. The Working Group approached the Gloucestershire County Council Member for Transport and the Officer for Transport and asked that they meet to discuss our concerns. To date we have had no response but will keep trying .

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