

Executive Member for Finance, Performance, Major Projects and Equalities 10 July 2023

Report of the Director of Customer & Communities

Financial Inclusion/Welfare Benefits Outturn 2022/23 and progress 2023/24

Summary

1. This report provides the Executive Member for Finance, Performance, Major Projects and Equalities in consultation with the Executive Member for Children, Young People and Education with the Financial Inclusion/Welfare Benefits outturn report 2022/23 and an update on the first quarter of 2023/24 including:
 - the financial support available to residents dealing with the challenges of the increased cost living impacts in 2022/23 and moving into 2023/24;
 - an update on benefits statistics and performance administered by the council including the York Financial Assistance Scheme (YFAS); and
 - other financial inclusion (FI) activity during 2022/23 including delivery of financial inclusion grant schemes.
2. It is clear to the council and partners that following the impact of the pandemic and the continuing cost-of-living crisis, increasing numbers of residents are needing financial support and presenting with vulnerabilities and complex needs. Welfare benefits including Universal Credit (UC) can be complicated for people to navigate, and the systems rely on people managing their own claims and having access to digital resources. The report summarises these impacts and action the council and partners are taking to help support residents in these increasingly challenging times.

Recommendations

3. The Executive Member for Finance, Performance, Major Projects and Equalities is asked to note the report and the support provided to residents who are financially vulnerable.

Reason: to ensure councillors, residents and stakeholder groups are aware of the ongoing financial inclusion activity across the city, the use of associated funding including cost of living support and their impacts.

Welfare Benefits Update

4. The council provides a broad range of welfare support to residents through the York Financial Assistance Scheme (YFAS), Council Tax Support (CTS) and Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP). The breadth of support was increased from 2020 through to 2022 to help residents during the coronavirus pandemic and more recently with the cost-of-living pressures mainly through the Household Support Fund (HSF).
5. Services across the council have collaborated and adapted to respond to increased needs and challenges caused by the coronavirus pandemic and more recently the increased cost-of-living pressures. These challenges have created increased pressure on services, the impacts are affecting a wider group of residents than in the past (pre-pandemic) and for many residents the issues are deeper and more complex.
6. Additional cost-of-living targeted funding has been made available by central government; however, this came with short deadlines and specific criteria through several different schemes. Each required local development and implementation, including the £150 Energy Rebate and Household Support Fund. This support was delivered with no additional staff resource and in several cases by teams carrying a number of post-pandemic vacancies. As in other areas of the council recruitment and retention continues to be particularly challenging.
7. Council departments continue to work in close partnership with voluntary and community organisations to make the best use of the resources available to support as many residents as possible impacted by post-pandemic and cost-of-living debt. The council has continued to learn

from experiences and those of residents, partners and from areas across the region and wider country.

York Financial Assistance Scheme (YFAS)

8. The YFAS scheme was established in April 2013, following the transfer of responsibility (and initially funding) from central government. The former national scheme, delivered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), was part of the Social Fund. YFAS is now fully funded and locally administered by the council and can assist residents to stay or move into the community or with emergencies.
9. In 2022/23 1455 YFAS applications were received. This is an increase of 171 on 2021/22, however still less than the pandemic peak in 2020/21. The budget out turned with a £57k call on YFAS reserves as set out at Table 1 below. The full YFAS statistics are set out at Annex A.
10. To provide some context around the impact of Government grants since 2020 on YFAS (covid support grants, and from November 2021 and into 2022/23 household support grants). The implementation of these schemes initially reduced demand on YFAS - a trend that reversed during 2022/23 (YFAS over budget) and this trend is continuing into 2023/24. In addition, the budget for YFAS has two years of additional £50k funding following a £50k reduction in the 2021/22 budget which will further exacerbate the situation as we move into 2024/25.
11. Table 1 below sets out all the welfare support provided across the 2022/23 period:

Table 1. Total Welfare Spend

Area	Spend 2022/23	Budget 2022/23	%
YFAS scheme	£343,999	£286,000	120%
DHP Spend	£175,195	£163,991	107%
Household Support Fund 2 (April - Sept 2022)	£1,037,906	£1,037,906	100%
Household Support Fund 3 (Oct 22- March 23)	£1,037,906	£1,037,906	100%
Discretionary Council Tax Support	£18,910	£24,204	78%
£150 Energy Rebate	£11,382,900	£11,138,715	98%
Housing Benefit	£24,152,277	N/A	
Council Tax Support	£7,701,460	N/A	
Total	£45,606,368		

Household Support Fund (HSF)

12. The Government announced that the first Household Support Fund (HSF) for families in financial need was to be distributed by County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England from October 2021, replacing the Covid Support Grant. During 2022/23 two further HSF schemes continued as 'cost of living' support as set out in Table 1 above.
13. The HSF was introduced to support households in the most need with food, energy, and water bills. It could also be used to support households with essential costs related to these items and with wider essential costs where appropriate.
14. HSF2 ran from 1 April 2022 to 31 September 2022. Guidance stated at least one third of the total funding must be used to support households with children, at least one third of the total funding must be used to support pensioners, with up to one third of the total funding to other households genuinely in need of support.
15. The guidance for HSF3 from 1 October 2022 to 31 March 2023, set out that rather than focus on one specific vulnerable group, Local Authorities should provide support to a broad cross section of vulnerable households to prevent escalation of problems, including families with children of all ages, pensioners, unpaid carers, care leavers, and people with disabilities; particularly considering support for those vulnerable households who are ineligible for other government support with the cost of living.
16. City of York Council was allocated £1,037,906 for each of the six-month periods from 1 April 2022 to 31 September 2022 and from 1 October 2022 to 31 March 2023.
17. The two schemes required funding to be spent by the end of the relevant 6-month period (government returns must be provided). Any residual government funding was spent through Charis to provide food and fuel vouchers. The HSF 1, 2 & 3 schemes contributed £242.5k across 22/23 for food and fuel vouchers year.
18. For HSF schemes the grants were provided through two routes – by invitation and direct payment based on eligibility criteria and a

discretionary scheme for other residents. Table 2 shows the number of individual awards made.

Table 2. Household Support Fund awards

Invitation scheme	Households invited	Grant awards	£
HSF 2	6700	6700	£890,825
HSF 3	3128	2337	£485,425
Discretionary scheme	Applications received	Grant awards	
HSF 2	580	415	£75,172
HSF 3	467	357	£107,566

19. For HSF 3 separate allocations of funding were also made to Children's Services, £25k to support foster carers and £25k to support care leavers.
20. The government announced in February 2023 that further funding of £2,037,906 was to be provided for a new CYC Household Support Fund 4 scheme for a full 12 months from April 2023 to March 2024.

Fuel & Food Voucher Scheme

21. The York Fuel and Food Voucher scheme was set up using funding from both Government grant (HSF) and one-off council budget £250k. The scheme provides food and fuel vouchers delivered through advice support workers both CYC and charity/voluntary sector. An important element of the scheme is that these are provided to York residents affected by poverty and debt alongside information and advice on benefits and other longer-term support.
22. Applications can only be considered as part of an overall financial capability advice or support assessment, by phone or face to face, including as appropriate benefits checks and other information about reducing their out goings, e.g. social tariffs for broadband, energy efficiency measures.
23. If people need assistance with food and do not want a referral/ signposting to a support service or this is not appropriate, they are directed to other food support including
 - York Financial Assistance Scheme,
 - York Food Bank or

- community food support.

More information is available at www.york.gov.uk/HelpWithFood .

24. Fuel vouchers awards have been allocated at standard award amounts of

- 1 x £28 for a single person household
- 1 x £49 for a two or more-person household

A decision has been made recently to increase the payments to reflect the increases in cost of fuel to £49 and £98 respectively.

25. CYC Food Vouchers are provided for use at ASDA, Tesco or Morrisons Food vouchers awards are allocated at standard award amounts of

- 1 x £30 for a single person household
- 1 x £60 for a household of two to five people
- 1 x £100 for a household of six people or more

A decision has been made recently to increase the payments to reflect the increases in cost of food to £60, £100, £130 respectively.

26. Approved vouchers applications are sent electronically directly to the resident by SMS text or email. Households could receive a maximum of 3 food vouchers and 3 fuel voucher awards from the scheme during 2022/23. Anyone needing further assistance over and above the 3 vouchers can apply for additional support via York Financial Assistance Scheme (YFAS) at www.york.gov.uk/YFAS or York Food Bank as appropriate. Payments are summarised in Annex B.

27. There are 8 external support service partners in the scheme from the charity/voluntary sector, plus CYC teams including Local Area Coordinators, Benefits & Contributions Advisor, Housing Management Officers, Communities & Neighbourhoods. Over 80 support workers are registered to process applications to award vouchers.

28. Almost 4000 vouchers were issued in 2022/23:

Table 3. Food and Fuel vouchers

	No of vouchers	Cost including admin fee
Food vouchers	2,025	£122,185
Fuel vouchers	1929	£89,878

See appendix B for more details

Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)

29. The council received £164,640k in government funding for DHPs (2022/23) to help with residents housing costs and has an additional CYC budget of £27k in reserve. Table 2 below shows the 2022/23 spend and position at the end of quarter 1 2023/24.

Table 4. Discretionary Housing Payments

	2022/23	2023/24
Total DHP Fund available	£164,640	£163,991*
Amount spent	£175,195	£42,691
Percentage	107%	26%
DHP applications received	308	80
Number of DHPs awarded	258	41

*A further 10K from HSF 4 to be added to budget. CYC £27k contingency

Council Tax Support (CTS)

30. The number of CTS awards amongst working age residents, after rising during the peak of the pandemic, has fallen to pre-pandemic levels, as shown in Table 5 below. This reflects a reduction more widely in claims for means-tested benefits following the pandemic. CTS claims, however, are still comparatively lower than Universal Credit (UC) claims and claims for pensioners has reduced again indicating that not all qualifying residents are making claims.

Table 5. CTS Caseload

Council Tax Support caseload	Working age	Pensioners	Total
March 2020	4,682	4,034	8,716
March 2021	5,512	3,887	9,399
March 2022	4,685	3,735	8,420
March 2023	4,446	3,572	8018

31. The government provided a further Council Tax Hardship Fund as part of its Help for Households cost of living grant support for 2023/24. York was allocated £214,818. Guidance states a discount of up to £25 should be applied to current Local Council Tax Support (LCTS) claimants that have an outstanding council tax liability for the 2023/24 financial year.

This additional support of £25 was included in annual bills for 2023/24 for those in receipt of CTS at the time of the bills being issued. New CTS claimants during the 2022/23 financial year will have the extra discount added at the time of their claim.

Council Tax £150 Energy Rebate

32. In March 2022 the Government announced a new scheme to support residents with the increased cost of living crisis through the Council Tax Energy Rebate at £150 per eligible property.
33. All residents who were liable for council tax at a property in council tax bands A to D, and who are responsible for payment of the energy bills qualified for the rebate. 74,421 households were eligible for a total of £11,163,150 support. In addition, a discretionary scheme was available for households in bands E-H.
34. The core scheme closed at the end of September 2022 and the discretionary element at the end of November 2023. All eligible households in bands A-D received either a payment into their bank account (78%) or a credit to their Council Tax account. 324 household in band E-H also received an Energy Rebate payment.
35. The standard payment per household was £150. Following these payments, the remaining budget of £249,600 was allocated as an additional payment to households in bands A-D in receipt of Council Tax Support and those who had received a discretionary payment in bands F-H. As a result, over 4,500 households received a further payment in November 2023.
36. Whilst most residents applied online as with all schemes there is an easy to access offline process over the phone through Customer Services. The demand for this service identified that many residents contacting us were not digitally excluded but were not digitally confident and needed further support and encouragement to apply. CYC teams and partners quickly came together to offer support at community venues to help residents to apply for their rebate.

Universal Credit (UC)

37. Support with claiming Universal Credit continues to be provided through [Citizen Advice Help to Claim](#) (CAY). The overall UC picture for York as of April 2023 remained high compared to the pre-pandemic position.

38. The number of UC Claimants claiming out of work benefits in March 2023 was 6,353, which has increased by 8.3% from last year, when the total was 5,866. Nationally, the number of people claiming the not in employment element of Universal Credit has increased by 10.6% from the same period.
39. Whilst the most recent figures show unemployment in the city at 1.8% the number of residents on UC has risen to 11.7k. This is a clear indication of the low wage economy in some sectors which is not taking residents away from reliance on welfare benefits.
40. Numbers of people claiming UC were high during summer 2021 and began to reduce after the pandemic. However, they are now rising again. With April 2023 figures higher than those in April 2022, highlighting current financial difficulties as set out in Table 6 below:

Table 6. Universal Credit claimants

September 21	April 22	September 22	April 23
12080	11,104	11,367	11,755

Information, signposting and communications

41. It has become even more important that residents know about what support is available if they are struggling financially and where to get advice and assistance to secure/ apply for benefits, grant and other financial support. The pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis have seen the introduction of a range of support, often time limited, as well as changes to ongoing benefits.
42. York Talk Money was created in 2021 to support people struggling financially. The Advice York partnership came together to host a month of activities, events, and signposting to resources. This included advice and support from partners including, Older Citizens Advocacy York, York Energy Advice, Stop Loan Sharks, and Community First Credit Union.
43. The partnership merged two national campaigns into a month of action in York called Challenge Poverty – Talk Money Month, with the aim to help residents:
 - Feel more confident about managing money
 - Know where to get good information and advice
 - Know what financial support is available and how to get it

- Get the best deal on gas, electricity, and internet bills
 - Find good debt advice.
44. To support the campaign the council set up an information page on www.livewellyork/talkmoney providing a pool of resources from a range of experts and promoting advice and support available at community hubs. This is an ongoing resource and has been the most visited page on www.livewellyork.gov.uk. (See table 7 below).
45. The campaign was successful and following the positive outcomes further week-long promotions were held in April 2022, July 2022, February 2023, and a month over October/November 2022.
46. The council worked with the Independent Food Aid Network to develop the. ['Worrying About Money?'](#) guide. This has been distributed across the city including libraries, community centres and support services.

Table 7. York Talk Money web page views

Live Well York Talk Money page views - Oct 21 to Oct 22			
Month	LWY Total Views	Talk Money views	% Of Page Views
Oct	30050	1373	4.57
Nov	32047	309	0.96
Dec	24999	213	0.85
Jan	31232	580	1.86
Feb	29936	421	1.41
March	29519	185	0.63
April	30107	638	2.12
May	37353	360	0.96
June	32725	230	0.70
July	40782	1236	3.03
Aug	36653	588	1.60
Sep	36545	1294	3.54
Oct	37210	1745	4.69

47. The partnership has agreed to continue the York Talk Money campaign this year as an important way to support people through the continuing cost-of-living crisis. The campaign will take place during the following weeks, in the lead up to the summer holidays, Christmas and February half term:
- Monday 26 June to Friday 3 July 2023

- Monday 30 October to Friday 11 November 2023
- Monday 29 January to Friday 5 February 2024

48. The CYC and Live Well York (LWY) website have been key tools in providing welfare support information to keep people up to date with the ongoing changes and differing criteria. Regular updates to staff have been provide through emails, briefing sessions and network meetings.

Work of Welfare Benefits Officers

49. The Income Services Team through its visiting Benefits and Contributions officers have supported 703 residents providing advice and support which has generated additional welfare benefit gains of £3,621,929 2022/23.

Early Support Fund

50. The Early Support Fund is a small fund available to Local Area Coordinators (LACs), Housing Management Officers and Community teams to support residents who face additional barriers, such as people with long term health needs, families, older people, and single people in private rented accommodation. A key focus is on homelessness and debt prevention, including those in rent and council tax arrears.
51. The Early Support Fund can provide a flexible grant to families identified as needing assistance to improve their overall financial position and reduce inequalities created by or exacerbated by the negative effects of the Covid pandemic and the impact of increases in cost-of-living.
52. This grant is one small part of an overall action plan to secure the longer-term financial security, social inclusion, and wellbeing of residents. In this way it will contribute to creating resilient citizens and communities. Early Support Grants are not emergency grants. Where there is an emergency, applications should be made to York Financial Assistance Scheme.
53. The fund is being run jointly across Local Area Coordinators, Housing and Communities. A new online application process with the web went live in September 2022. This joint approach has worked well and demonstrated collaborative working across departments.
54. In 2022/23 95 grant awards have been made totalling £17,593.69. £2,400 funding will be carried over to 23/24 to continue the fund. An application has been made to the Belfry Catalyser Fund for additional funding for 2023/24 to support the work.

Council Tax Debt Project

55. This was a pilot that supported residents with debt issues at the point of contact through being in Council Tax debt. A dedicated welfare benefits adviser took up post from April 2022 to March 2023. Following training they tested several approaches to targeting support for people in Council Tax debt.
56. The project tested contact routes through referrals from other support services, providing drop-in advice sessions across the city at community venues and direct calls to people in arrears. The worker provided in-depth advice and support to 55 households and assisted with 71 applications for additional support. As a result of the pilot 24 households received additional financial support averaging £442 per household.
57. Independent evaluation for the project has been funded through the Deciding Together funding programme via Two Ridings Community Foundation. The council is working with Healthwatch who have undertaken evaluation with residents and the Centre for Housing Policy who have produced a report following research with CYC staff and other support agencies, both in terms of the Council Tax recovery process and the impact on residents; The process of pulling together these reports is ongoing as well as documenting any learning, good practice, difficulties and challenges from this explorative way of working that can be built on in future.

Community Hubs

58. The Communities Team continues to support community hubs across the city. The Good Place Network, which brings together those running community hubs, venues and food projects across the city, continues to grow and offers a vehicle to share information and link groups into campaigns such as Talk Money Month and to share good practice and resources.
59. In April 2023 a Good Place Network meeting was held dedicated to looking at food insufficiency. Speakers from Good Food York and Leeds Independent Food Aid Network highlighted challenges and models of practice. Members of the Good Place Network then looked at local challenges in themes covering supply and demand, volunteer capacity, distribution, networking and collaboration, storage, advice and support, sustainability and the Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) programme. The feedback from this meeting was used to support the Every Mouthful Matters regional Net Zero Fund bid which was successful at expression

of interest phase and a full business case a centred around the development of a distribution hub for redirected/waste food. The business case has subsequently been submitted, the outcome of which will be announced in August this year.

60. Since the Good Place Network meeting in April representatives of community food groups are being supported to come together as a dedicated food subgroup of the Good Place Network to make the most of opportunities to collaborate and to establish a recognised brand for community food groups in York. The first meeting of this subgroup was due to take place on Friday 30th June 2023. The next full meeting of the Good Place Network will be themed around funding and is due to take place in the Summer.

Warm Hubs

61. During the colder winter months December 2022 to March 2023, 19 community organisations across 12 wards were supported through a Good Place Warm Place grant fund. The organisations funded in this way were a mixture of existing community hubs seeking support to maintain or grow their offer against a backdrop of increased running costs and organisations making a warm hub offer for the first time. Information regarding Warm Places was made available to residents via the CYC website with a link to a dedicated listing guide on Live Well York. Many of the settings involved in the Good Place, Warm Places initiative continued their offer beyond March 2023 in order to support the community with the cost-of-living crisis. All have been linked into the Good Place Network. A similar process is being planned for Winter 2023/24 supported by Household Support Funding.

Food Sufficiency and Holidays Activities and Food (HAF)

62. The Community Officers for Food and the Holiday Activity & Food (HAF) Programme continue to work together to ensure that activity providers have clear up to date information in order to signpost families to support, and to continually gather and update intelligence on emerging challenges and opportunities. They match activity providers up to local food providers in order to encourage participation in the HAF programme in turn increasing the number of places available to eligible children and young people. The number of children attending HAF activities during the

Easter School Holidays 2023 was 1740 compared to 1035 during the same period in 2022. There has been an increase again in interest from activity and food providers for the summer holiday period and as a result approximately 12,000 spaces on activities have been secured and opportunities to add to this are being explored.

63. A centralised booking system has been procured to support the reach and improve the user experience of the HAF programme and is due to be operational this Summer. The system works through linking to existing school systems and generates booking credits directly to eligible families. Schools and others will be able to further add in additional children under a 15% eligibility stretch provision in the programme. Another benefit of the system is that families will be able to find all of the HAF offers in a single place rather than being directed to the booking systems of individual providers.

Housing Update

64. Council tenancy rent arrears in 2022/2023 (Monday April 4th 2022 to Sunday April 2nd 2023) increased for a range of reasons including:
- the legacy impact of the pandemic on people's finances, employment, and ability to access furlough payments;
 - local and national restrictions on the approach to arrears collection and enforcement actions (only 'soft' contacts were made during the restricted periods) and moving forwards the backlog of available court times, which is currently being worked through;
 - implementation of a new Housing wide ICT system including an implementation period, staff training and ongoing ICT issues and rectification of these continues throughout the year and into this new financial year;
 - staff recruitment and retention issues city wide;
 - the ongoing impact of welfare reform, natural migration of Housing Benefits to Universal Credit and the roll out of Universal Credit including a backlog of new financial year annual rent increase notifications (now cleared by end May 2023). These must be uploaded to DWP systems on an individual basis;
 - the ongoing impact of the cost-of-living crisis.
65. Arrears recovery action had been suspended for such a long period that the process effectively started from the beginning with many cases from

an enforcement escalation perspective. This did not apply where existing court orders were in place however due to recovery actions being restricted further requests for reinstatements of orders were required from the courts. Service of notices (of intention to seek possession, which is the start of the legal process) have had to be renewed in almost all cases as they had expired after 12 months.

66. All contacts are focused on providing advice, making reasonable repayment agreements, accessing benefits/grants and maximising income wherever possible as well as other appropriate support where needed. Arrears at March 2022 were £1,377,634.71 and increased further throughout the following year.
67. From April 2022 to March 2023 rent arrears increased further to £1,835,051.76, an overall increase by 33.2%. Currently rent arrears stand at £1,754,821 (as at 28.05.2023). Arrears have, as predicted, increased due to the reasons outlined above.
68. There was an influx of UC Claims which had to be verified with DWP for yearend which took almost two months to clear to the end of May 2023. This means that there is a delay in the increase of payments from DWP to tenants for this financial year's rent increase of 7% which manifests as an increase of arrears to the authority. Unfortunately, there is no way means of sending bulk file to DWP to advise of all rent increases which is a national issue. Tenants must inform DWP independently and then they confirm this with us.
69. There are tenancies with 3420 UC claimants with a current balance of £1,363,826.23 which is 45.6% of the housing stock (approximately 7500). UC is paid in arrears by one month and also results in a delay in arrears amounts at end of the reporting periods. Housing Benefit is paid directly to rent accounts weekly.
70. The Housing Management Team have continued to work in partnership with other council departments and partners across the city to help people access the support they need. They took part in the implementation of the Breathing Space system providing some relief from formal action where appropriate, usually due to issues such as mental ill health. These have also increased in frequency over the last 6 to 12 months due to cost-of-living and increased cost of utilities. The team has worked closely with DWP to obtain Alternative Payment Arrangements where third party payment arrangements restrict the ability of people to cover basic costs. This means UC is paid directly to the rent account in these cases.

71. They have also assisted tenants with Discretionary Housing Payments, Financial Hardship Funding, YFAS applications, Food and Fuel Vouchers, alternative housing (if they were either under occupying or over occupying) and need to move to assist with their financial situation. Repayment arrangements have been re-negotiated where they had become unaffordable, and the use of Direct Debit to help people budget has been promoted. They have also made use of the DWP fund for people trying to get back into work which assists in such things as travel to and from interviews and with clothing for interviews etc.
72. A small hardship fund from the Housing Revenue Account was set up to assist people who live in council homes with basic rental payments due to specifically pandemic issues (help with rent arrears for CYC tenants only). This was renewed again last year and was taken in part to assist the Early Support Fund (also part funded from General Fund) managed by Local Area Coordinators. This funding has been increased in this new financial year as the team is seeing larger arrears amounts now due to cost of living and vulnerabilities.
73. The Housing Management Team have been piloting new roles from within existing resources to better support people moving into council homes, and when people get into difficulties during the rest of their tenancy. The pilot is for 12 to 18 months and will be assessed at regular intervals in terms of income, arrears, vulnerabilities, and sustainability amongst other measures – all of which will be contained in this report next year.

Digital Inclusion

74. The cost-of-living crisis has continued to highlight the importance of digital inclusion and the inequalities face by those without access. Without IT equipment and/or internet access the following is now more difficult:
 - making new or managing benefits claims for vital support;
 - accessing online discounts for essential household costs, fuel, insurance, phones, for example;
 - connecting with family and friends;
 - accessing education, training, and employment;
 - accessing other help and support from organisations who have moved services online;
 - children accessing schoolwork and other learning;
 - accessing GP services
75. CYC supports the IT Reuse services run by York Community Furniture Store and is part of the City's York 100% digital inclusion partnership (led by Explore York in partnership with the council). IT Reuse supports

residents offering free refurbished IT equipment, mobile phones, wi-fi hubs and data sim cards and funding has been provided through FISG and HSF grants and funding.

76. CYC fund a part time post (extended to March 2024) to support the 100% York digital partnership and co-ordinate this work. A joint action plan has been developed to help identify and tackle areas of digital and social exclusion. 100% Digital York acts as an 'umbrella' brand that aims to bring all the work happening across the city together, this can be seen from the digital support pages on Live Well York which have been developed so that information for both organisations and potential users is in one place. It also provides a collaborative approach to event planning and marketing; the intention is to add more value through this joint partnership approach.
77. Using the experience and learning from Leeds digital inclusion work, the Digital York Partnership Co-ordinator role has prioritised work on a community-based approach. This approach focusses on work with community organisations to support staff with digital confidence who in turn can work with the community. In this way digital support is provided improving skills and confidence in local trusted spaces with local trusted people. The Acomb area has been the initial focus for this approach as it has a developed network of community partners and volunteers. Taking this approach (Keeping Digital) Digital Cafes have been further rolled out in other community venues, supported by volunteers. Digital cafes are held monthly at Tang Hall Explore, Sanderson House, St Wulstan's and the Community Stadium.

Other activities funded by Financial Inclusion budgets.

78. This section of the report covers other activities funded by the council that have supported financial inclusion during 2022/23 as well as highlighting activity in place for the current year.
79. The Financial Inclusion Steering Group (FISG) is responsible for overseeing the delivery of financial inclusion work and has strategic oversight of the council's DHP, YFAS and CTS schemes. Membership continues to expand and now includes York Food Bank and Two Ridings Foundation joining the York Food Justice Alliance, the Welfare Benefits Unit, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York CVS, York Explore, Citizens Advice York, Community First Credit Union, and several CYC directorate representatives. There is a standing invitation to a representative of the Parish Councils. The new Executive Member for Finance, Performance,

Major Projects and Equalities, and Executive Member for Children, Young People and Education will be standing members of the group.

80. The group's purpose is:

'To ensure that local people have the knowledge of and access to appropriate services, allowing them to make more informed choices to achieve and maintain financial stability'.

Financial Inclusion Strategy

81. The group has worked over the year to finalise the Interim Financial Inclusion Strategy 2023-25 building on partners' overall assessment of key challenges, ambitions and priorities. This was supplemented by work undertaken in October 2022 at the City's Cost of Living Summit. The Strategy can be found here (item 30):

[Agenda for Decision Session - Executive Member for Finance and Major Projects on Monday, 13 March 2023, 10.00 am \(york.gov.uk\)](#)

Financial Inclusion Grants

82. Grants overseen by the group awarded to local organisations to deliver projects that meet the group's objectives for 2022/23 amounted to £157,726 made up of £150,000 base budget and an underspend of £7,726 from 2021/22.

Outcomes of projects funded in 2022/23

83. Nine projects were funded for 2022/23. Despite some of the residual difficulties and constraints of the pandemic all providers were able to maintain the delivery of high levels of support to residents by building on and further developing the alternative and flexible ways of working that emerged during the height of the pandemic. The cost-of-living crisis added another challenging dimension to the sector with unprecedented increases in demand for their services. All partners responded swiftly and positively to these challenges by working collaboratively and innovatively to continue to support vulnerable residents in the city. The table below is a high-level summary of what the projects set out to deliver.

Table 8. Financial Inclusion projects funded for 2022/23

Organisation	Project title	Brief Summary	Amount
Blueberry Academy	Blueberry 50/50 On Line Marketplace	Run an online market for young people with learning difficulties to manage online sales for recycled/reuse items generating income and acquiring skills from their enterprise activities.	£9,000
Experience Counts	50+ Project	Deliver four employment related programmes to residents aged 50+.	£19,320
Changing Lives	Financial & Social Inclusion Worker	Support vulnerable and hard to reach residents to gain financial independence.	£19,479*
Refugee Action York (RAY)	Advice & Support – Equal Access for All	In collaboration with CAY provide support to refugees, asylum seekers and migrants to access practical support, information and guidance relieve hardship, reduce isolation, advance education, and improve integration.	£13,480
Peasholme Charity	My Money, My Life	Continue delivery of its financial capability pathway service	£27,543
Citizens' Advice York	Financial Inclusion in the Traveller Community	Continue project working with the Travellers Trust to deliver and co-ordinate advice services to the Gypsy & Traveller Community.	£5,385

Organisation	Project title	Brief Summary	Amount
Age UK (York)	Reaching Out to Older People in their Community	Enhance the financial stability of older people (50+) living on a low income, promoting improved health and wellbeing, reducing reliance on other services, and to help retain their independence.	£18,692
IT Reuse	IT Reuse project	Provide low-income households with refurbished devices to reduce digital and financial exclusion.	£26,864*
Welfare Benefits Unit	Advice Extra	Extend reach of services to underpin first tier advisors in responding to more complex cases.	£17,299

*Partially funded

Outcomes for projects funded for 2022/23

84. At least 1,900 residents were directly helped by these projects. Specific outcomes include 78 households that saw a recorded £87k (annualised) income gain. Over 1,250 unique benefit issues were handled with many from those who found themselves reliant on welfare benefits because of the pandemic and cost of living impacts particularly those having to claim UC for the first time. Those needing help with making Personal Independence Payments claims, struggling with debt and financial hardship and housing issues all featured strongly in the type of support needed along with energy and food affordability concerns. Some projects directly engaged in supporting the refugee community in particular those from Ukraine. One organisation is embedding the project piloted under the funding into its normal business activities.
85. In addition, as a direct result of some of the project interventions 10 people found employment and 31 took up training or learning opportunities. Many others benefitted from broad access to support and advice helping build confidence and resilience. The nature and extent of

the support provided to individual participants varies from project to project (for example, some require a high intensity prolonged one to one package of help whilst others are of a more limited transactional nature) and is reflected in the outcomes reported. Straight comparisons between projects are not always appropriate.

Funding of projects for 2023/24

86. The fund received 17 applications from 15 organisations seeking total funding of £309,702, far exceeding the £150k available. This was the highest level of interest for several years reflecting the very exceptional pressure on both residents and those organisations that provide critical support. Seven of the bids sought to build on projects already funded by this funding stream in 2022/23 and three were from organisations that have not asked for this funding before.
87. Eleven bids were successful. Seven of those were awarded the full amount sought and four were partially met. The total value awarded matched the £150,000 budget available. All projects are for twelve months. The table below summarises the projects funded.

Table 9. Financial Inclusion projects funded for 2023/24

Organisation	Project title	Brief Summary	Amount
1. Age UK (York)	Providing Benefits Advice through Home Visits	Extension of their Money and Benefits advice service offered to people over pension age, providing an additional two days per week of support in response to increased demand.	£11,644
2. Welfare Benefits Unit	Advice Extra	Continuation of the Advice Extra project, building on innovative practice developed over the last few years helping to underpin first tier advisors in responding to more complex cases.	£14,585

Organisation	Project title	Brief Summary	Amount
3. Peasholme Charity	My Money, My Life	Continue delivery of its financial capability pathway service, offering a range of interventions to support people from a point of 'crisis' through to a place of financial stability.	£25,764
4. Community Furniture Store	IT Reuse project	Continue to help reduce digital exclusion through device provision and skills enhancement, building on key partnerships and learning from existing project. Collect digital equipment, which is wiped/repaired/configured by volunteers for distribution to individuals facing digital exclusion, enabling users to access information, manage finances, look for work, and upskill, enhancing their well-being, financial security.	£20,000*
5. Experience Counts	50+ Project	Deliver two employment related wrap around training programmes to residents aged 50+ providing individualised coaching and support to advance into employment, self-employment, volunteering, or further training.	£9,800*

Organisation	Project title	Brief Summary	Amount
6. Coterminous CIC	Employment & Enterprise Programme	Provide practical support and employment advice to help people navigate their way back into meaningful employment through focussed training and workshops. Aimed at York's most marginalised residents many of whom are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.	£15,840
7. OCAY (Older Citizens Advocacy York)	Benefits Advocacy	Deliver comprehensive advocacy support to clients (aged 50+) caught in the benefits system to ensure they maximise their entitlement. Provides emotional/practical support to manage the challenges many face in making claims.	£6,938
8. Refugee Action York (RAY)	Financially Included – supporting access to services and support	In collaboration with CAY continue and build on the existing project to support refugees, asylum seekers and migrants to access practical support, information, and guidance, to relieve hardship, reduce isolation, advance education, and improve integration.	£14,271*

Organisation	Project title	Brief Summary	Amount
9. York Community Energy	Supporting parents struggling with energy bills	The project aims to increase the financial resilience of single parents/ families with children who are struggling with their energy and other bills, ensuring they get support with managing bills and keeping warm while saving energy where possible. Includes outreach activities and practical support on energy and other issues.	£16,221
10. York Explore	100% Digital York Partnership	The project exists to focus on supporting digital inclusion across the city working with over 15 partners. This funding extends the post of Digital Inclusion Co-ordinator (18.5 hours p.w.) for an extra 3 months to 31/3/24 (currently funded to 31/12/23).	£4,100*
11. Citizens' Advice York	Financial Inclusion for the Traveller Community	Continue the existing project working with the Travellers Trust to deliver and co-ordinate advice services to the Gypsy & Traveller Community.	£10,837
		TOTAL	£150,000

*Partially funded

Council Priorities

88. Whilst the work contained in this report met many of the priorities laid down in the then Council Plan the activities that are ongoing either through grant schemes, working across services within the council and

with other partners including the voluntary and community sector clearly will contribute to the council's ambitions around:

- affordability (addressing and mitigating the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis and ongoing impacts of poverty)
- reducing inequality (for example the ongoing work in addressing the actions in the Financial Inclusion strategy and 100% digital inclusion work)
- health and wellbeing (for example all the work in communities plus FISG grants supporting residents affected by food insufficiency, loneliness and access to support) and
- climate change (examples include the IT reuse scheme and food related Net Zero bid).

Implications

89. (a) **Financial** – The direct financial implications to CYC relate to the funding of both FISG bids and the YFAS scheme which are funded within approved budget allocations/reserves.

(b) **Human Resources (HR)** - There are no implications.

(c) **Equalities** – There are no direct implications of this report as the report is for noting , however the work undertaken by the council and partners will have impacted positively on all residents accessing the support and those with intersectional and multi complex needs are likely to have been most affected by the impacts of the pandemic and Cost of Living Crisis.

(d) **Legal** – There are no implications.

(e) **Crime and Disorder** - There are no implications.

(f) **Information Technology (IT)** - There are no implications.

(g) **Property** - There are no implications.

Risk Management

90. The key risks are in relation to YFAS, DHP, and other available hardship funds to support residents through what seems likely to be a protracted cost of living crisis and include:

- Forward planning of ongoing support through future budget processes as well as maximising government support will be key as the expected impacts will exist into the long term.
- Managing the budget to ensure that customers get the same service and support irrespective of when they apply in the financial year.
- The pandemic and now the cost-of-living crisis has impacted on the funding of the council and of our partners in the voluntary and charity sector, so service resilience across all partners needs to be a key consideration for decision makers in the short and medium term to protect ongoing service delivery.
- Any failure to provide an appropriate service will have a negative impact on the wellbeing of vulnerable people.

91. These risks are managed through constant monitoring and review. The actual figures for UC, YFAS, DHP, Government support schemes and rent arrears are reported to each FISG meeting to allow early intervention.

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Report Approved ✓

Date 28th June 2023

Specialist Implications Officer(s) None

|

Wards Affected: *List wards or tick box to indicate all*

✓ All

Annexes:

Annex A – YFAS Statistics

Annex B – Food & Fuel Voucher Statistics

Background Papers:

Household Support Fund Scheme Approvals:

[Decision - Household Support Fund April 22 – September 22 \(york.gov.uk\)](https://www.york.gov.uk/decision-household-support-fund-april-22-september-22)

[Decision - Household Support Fund October 2022 – March 2023 \(york.gov.uk\)](https://www.york.gov.uk/decision-household-support-fund-october-2022-march-2023)

[Decision - Household Support Fund 4 \(york.gov.uk\)](https://www.york.gov.uk/decision-household-support-fund-4)

FISG grant scheme approvals 22/23:

[Decision - Approval of Financial Inclusion Grant Funding and Awards 2022/23 \(york.gov.uk\)](https://www.york.gov.uk/decision-approval-of-financial-inclusion-grant-funding-and-awards-2022-23)

FISG grant scheme approvals 23/24:

[Agenda for Decision Session - Executive Member for Finance and Major Projects on Monday, 13 March 2023, 10.00 am \(york.gov.uk\)](https://www.york.gov.uk/agenda-for-decision-session-executive-member-for-finance-and-major-projects-on-monday-13-march-2023-10-00-am)

Financial inclusion strategy:

[Agenda for Decision Session - Executive Member for Finance and Major Projects on Monday, 13 March 2023, 10.00 am \(york.gov.uk\)](https://www.york.gov.uk/agenda-for-decision-session-executive-member-for-finance-and-major-projects-on-monday-13-march-2023-10-00-am)

List of Abbreviations

CAY	Citizen's Advice York
CFS	Community Furniture Store
CTS	Council Tax Support
CVS	Council for Voluntary Services
CYC	City of York Council
DD	Direct Debits
DI	Digital Inclusion
DHP	Discretionary Housing Payment
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
FISG	Financial Inclusion Steering Group
HB	Housing Benefit
IT	Information Technology
k	Thousand
LWY	Live Well York
MCN	Multiple Complex Needs
UC	Universal Credit
YFAS	York Financial Assistance Scheme