

Many people are concerned about the cost of living crisis and Wiltshire Council is focused on supporting residents, businesses and communities and there is detailed information online.

Assistance has already been provided to residents through schemes such as the Household Support Fund (£2.7m to vulnerable households), the Council Tax Energy Rebate to residents in Council Tax bands A-D and the School Holidays Activity and Food programme (the FUEL programme). I am pleased to confirm that there will be a FUEL camp in Marlborough during the Christmas holidays.

The discretionary Council Tax Energy Rebate scheme for households in bands E to H is now open for those in receipt of Council Tax reduction, or if the property has been adapted to accommodate a disabled person (including severe mental disabilities). If you are a direct debit payer within bands E to H and are currently in receipt of council tax reduction your £150.00 rebate will be paid directly into your bank account, within the next 14 days. If you meet the criteria above, but are not a direct debit payer, you will shortly receive a letter inviting you to submit an online application and provide your bank details for payment to be made.

The £400 Energy Bills Support Scheme has commenced with the discount will be applied to automatically to household electricity bills for 6 months from October 2022. The discount is paid monthly, even if you pay for your energy quarterly or use a payment card. Prepayment meter users will get equivalent vouchers that will need to be redeemed.

Alongside this, the Government's Energy Price Guarantee – the "Energy Price Cap" ensures that a "typical" household will pay no more than £2,500 per year until April 2023 when there will be a Treasury-led review into how energy bills are supported going forwards. Of course, many households rural Wiltshire are off the gas grid, and rely on heating oil or LPG, in addition to electricity. The Government is also providing an additional payment of £100 to compensate for the rising costs of these other fuels; we await more detail about how this payment will be distributed.

In the meantime, Area Boards are being asked to work with their communities to ensure that local support is in place for the most vulnerable, including food banks. The council is co-ordinating information on what community facilities and services are being provided in the county to support people through the cost-of-living challenges. An interactive map is being developed so that in a few clicks people can quickly find what warm spaces and community food providers are available in their local area. Plans are also gathering pace for Wiltshire Council to introduce its own warm spaces in libraries and other public buildings. The Wiltshire Wellbeing Hub is supporting residents with financial and wellbeing concerns. The 09:30hrs restriction on concessionary fare bus passes has been lifted, so that they can be used at any time and Warm and Safe Wiltshire will continue to offer free and impartial energy advice to reduce fuel poverty.

Wiltshire Council's Cabinet received an update on its efforts to tackle the climate emergency locally, with a vast range of projects in place. The Wiltshire Climate Strategy was approved in February 2022 and since then the council has published its delivery plans, which set out

how it will become carbon neutral by 2030, and the actions it can take either on its own or in partnership with others, to lead the transition to a carbon neutral county.

The highlights from the detailed report include:

- 10,000 registrations across Wiltshire and Swindon for solar group buying scheme Solar Together Wiltshire with 1,000 of those (from Wiltshire) paying a deposit to confirm installation for solar pv and/or battery storage
- The council has carried out a tender process for provision and replacement of electric vehicle charging points at towns with a population of 10,000 or more.
- It will also be rolling out a grant to support town and parish councils to install electric vehicle charging points in their local area. A well-attended webinar was recently held to provide town and parishes more information.
- To encourage active travel, Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans (LCWIPs) are being developed to improve cycling and walking opportunities throughout the county – working closely with town councils.
- The council's Housing Energy Efficiency Programme will retrofit 5,000 council homes by 2030, with assessment carried out on the first 800. The aim is to reduce the amount of CO2 by 15,000 tonnes which in the process will make the properties more energy efficient and help save residents money.
- The council diverted 80.9% of the waste it managed from landfill (2021/22).

£700,000 additional funding will ensure that there are more Parish Stewards in the county over the next three years. This is in addition to the £2m funding package previously agreed for extra white lining, fly tipping enforcement and flood prevention. Currently there are 18 Parish Stewards, one for each community area, and they focus on delivering on the highways priorities of their local town or parish council. This includes jobs such as fixing minor road defects and filling potholes, to trimming bushes and hedges. The new two-person support team will be able to build on the success of the Parish Stewards, improving safety and the visual impact of local highways, and providing a better service for local communities.

Jane Davies

Wiltshire Councillor for Marlborough West.