

Corporate Policy Committee

Date of Meeting:	23 March 2023
Report Title:	Cheshire East People's Panel
Report of:	Jane Burns, Executive Director Corporate Services
Report Reference No:	CP/65/22-23
Ward(s) Affected:	All

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. The purpose of this report is to inform Corporate Policy Committee of the recommendations of the Cheshire East People's Panel on the cost of living, and to update on the actions that are progressing and planned as a result of the recommendations.
- 1.2. The Cheshire East People's Panel met over two weekends in October 2022 to discuss the question "what can be done to make life more affordable for those most affected by the rising cost of living?". The Panel was formed as part of testing a new approach to consultation and engagement, endorsed by the Committee.
- 1.3. The People's Panel is a form of participatory democracy and particularly supports two priorities within the "Open" aim of the Corporate Plan these are: to listen, learn and respond to our residents, promoting opportunities for a two-way conversation and to promote and develop the services of the council through regular communication and engagement with all residents.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 The Cheshire East People's Panel was formed in September 2022, by Cheshire East Council and the not for profit, campaign and research organisation, Positive Money. This project was progressed as a pilot scheme, to test out a participatory democracy process, as part of the refreshed approach to Consultation and Engagement.

- 2.2** In October 2022, 21 residents of Cheshire East came together to form the Cheshire East People’s Panel on the Cost of Living. The purpose was for a diverse group of residents to decide upon recommendations to ease the effects of the increasing costs of living. The panellists met over two weekends to discuss “what can be done to make life more affordable for those most affected by the cost of living?” and to develop a set of recommendations to present to Cheshire East Council.
- 2.3** A final report from the People’s Panel was received by Cheshire East Council in December 2022. The report is at **Appendix 1**. The report contains the 12 recommendations of the People’s Panel. The recommendations were grouped into three themes: community and appropriate support, energy, transport and planning, and rethinking funding and distribution.
- 2.4** Officers from across the council worked together to provide responses to the recommendations proposed by the People’s Panel. The initial council responses were fed back to the Panel on 28 January 2023, at a face-to-face feedback session. The council is already working on, or considering plans to take forward, 10 of the recommendations. The council explained that it was unable to take forward 2 of the recommendations and explained why. The full response is at **Appendix 2**.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1.** To note the report of the Cheshire East People’s Panel and to thank the People’s Panel for their participation, report and recommendations. (**Appendix 1**).
- 3.2.** To agree the suggested actions proposed in response to the recommendations (**Appendix 2**).
- 3.3.** To share the report with all Members of Cheshire East Council.

4. Reasons for Recommendations

- 4.1.** The recommendations have been made to support progress against delivery of the Corporate Plan. The People’s Panel were advised that their report would be published, alongside the responses from the council. This ensures that the participatory democracy process is open and transparent.

5. Other Options Considered

- 5.1.** Careful consideration was given to whether to pilot the People’s Panel or to continue with more traditional engagement models in relation to the cost of living. Positive Money funded the project to the value of £12,000. Therefore, it was considered an opportunity for Cheshire East Council to test a participatory democracy process with external support and funding. The council funded room hire, refreshments and travel expenses for those panel members that required support.

- 5.2. A further option considered was to hold a larger scale Citizens Assembly. Some councils support Citizens Assemblies of 100+ people from their populations to learn about, deliberate upon, and make recommendations in relation to a particular issue or set of issues. Due to both the amount of funding available, and that both organisations wanted to experiment and learn about the process, a Citizens Panel model was the preferred option.

6. Background

- 6.1. In summer 2022, Cheshire East Council met with the organisation Positive Money, who were looking for a local authority partner to test a model of participatory democracy. In September 2022, Cheshire East Council were informed that they were successful in being selected as a partner for this project. A key reason for this was the demography of Cheshire East, particularly in relation to inequalities between affluent and deprived areas, and the contrasts of urban and rural communities. These factors supported the creation of a diverse People's Panel.
- 6.2. Citizens panels or assemblies are usually centred around a particular issue or set of issues. The question that the Cheshire East People's Panel considered was:
- “What can be done to make life more affordable for those most affected by the rising cost of living?”***
- 6.3. The purpose of the People's Panel was:
- To create a better understanding of the rising cost of living and how it affects local residents
 - To involve Cheshire East residents in decision making on this important issue
 - To hear from residents about what they think Cheshire East Council and local communities can do to help make life more affordable
- 6.4. A survey went live on 23 September 2022 and closed on 6 October 2022. This attracted 322 responses, with people submitting 366 statements on their experiences and views on the cost of living in Cheshire East and 20,761 votes were cast. Machine learning grouped respondents into two identifiable opinion cluster groups. In the survey responses generally, there was a much higher number of statements that people agreed upon than there were polarising, divisive statements.
- 6.5. People undertaking the survey were given the option to apply to join the People's Panel and over 100 respondents applied to join the Panel. The survey and application could be completed directly online or by dialling a freephone telephone number. Key information was requested on the application form to ensure that a representative panel could be selected.

- 6.6.** Panel members were selected using a stratified random selection tool, made freely available by the New Democracy Foundation. The tool was used to ensure that there was fair representation in terms of: gender, age, living in an urban or rural area, ethnicity, disability, having caring responsibilities, employment status and the level of impact the rising cost of living was having on the household. For the selection in relation to cost of living, a higher level of representation was selected in relation to the impact of the rising cost of living. 40% of Panel members had expressed they experienced difficulty in paying either basics or household bills due to the rising cost of living. This level of representation was to ensure that there was sufficient lived experience in the panel to respond to the question.
- 6.7.** Members of the People's Panel received a thank you of £150 of shopping vouchers. A £50 voucher was given at the end of weekend one and a £100 voucher on the final weekend. Through anecdotal feedback given by Panel members, this was a key driver in people applying for the Panel and ensured that people that would not normally engage with the council wanted to participate.
- 6.8.** The People's Panel took place over two consecutive weekends in October 2022 in two different venues. During the first weekend, Panel members learned more about the cost of living crisis from a number of speakers. Speakers were from the council, Macclesfield CAB, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Trussell Trust and Nantwich Foodbank. The majority of the sessions consisted of a series of facilitated, deliberative workshops. The Panel were supported to develop their ideas into recommendations. On the final day tokens were used for the Panel to vote on recommendations. The draft recommendations were then presented to the council.
- 6.9.** The council received the final report from the People's Panel in December 2022. Officers considered the recommendations and work was undertaken across council directorates to produce a consolidated response. From the 12 recommendations, there are 10 recommendations that the council were either already doing or can start to consider and progress. There are two recommendations that the council are unable to progress.
- 6.10.** A feedback session was organised to offer the Panel the opportunity to receive a face-to-face response from the council in relation to their recommendations. The feedback session took place in January 2023 at Crewe Lifestyle centre. 19 Panel members were able to attend this session. The feedback session was fully funded by Positive Money.

6.11. Summary of recommendations of the People’s Panel and the initial responses from the council;

No.	Theme	Recommendation	Response
1	Community and appropriate support	Increase awareness of current existing schemes for support	We can take this forward
2	Rethinking funding and distribution	Make a renewed effort to reach everyone in need – universal consideration plus targeted provision	We can take this forward (partial)
3	Rethinking funding and distribution	Make information about needs and funding available at a very local level	We can take this forward
4	Energy, Transport and Planning	Maximise use of land for community food growing	We can take this forward (partial)
5	Community and appropriate support	Increase benefits and support the working poor	We can take this forward (partial)
6	Energy, Transport and Planning	Develop and implement a policy to require Sustainable Energy use (SEU) on all new developments (housing and commercial)	We can't take this forward
7	Energy, Transport and Planning	Prioritise provision of affordable buses for more people	We can't take this forward
8	Community and appropriate support	Food accessibility for short and long term	We're already doing this (short term) We can take this forward (long term) (partial)
9	Energy, Transport and Planning	Improve and make more efficient the dial a ride service across Cheshire East	We're already doing this
10	Energy, Transport and Planning	Introduce sustainable energy technologies to existing council owned buildings	We're already doing this
11	Rethinking funding and distribution	Adopt a community wealth building approach	We're already doing this
12	Community and appropriate support	Pursue warm hubs, providing they have	We're already doing this

- 6.12.** The full detailed responses from the council are at **Appendix 2**.
- 6.13.** Cheshire East Council will now be considering options for continuing models of participatory democracy and will report on a preferred option during 2023/24. This is part of the ongoing consultation and engagement work that Corporate Policy Committee agreed in December 2022 (see Background Paper 2).

7. Consultation and Engagement

- 7.1.** The pilot of the Cheshire East People's Panel, a participatory democracy approach, took place in October 2022. This project was an experimental initiative to inform the approach to consultation and engagement in future.

8. Implications

8.1. Legal

Councils have a statutory requirement to consult residents in certain areas, for example for issues such as planning or redevelopment. Statutory consultations are bound by legal requirements. There are no statutory requirements to undertake participatory democracy approaches. There is no legal requirement to deliver, or respond to, the recommendations of the People's Panel. The council had made an agreement to consider the recommendations of the People's Panel and provide a response to them.

8.2. Finance

Consultation and engagement activities are delivered within existing resource. The People's Panel project received funding of £12,000 from Positive Money. Funding of approximately £8,000 was provided from the council, this came from the budgets of the Research and Consultation team and the Public Health team. Council funding was used for venue hire and refreshment costs, shopping vouchers and travel expenses for those that required them. The People's Panel therefore cost around £20,000 to deliver. Finance implications will be considered in an options appraisal of any future participatory models. Any additional financial implications would be subject to production of a business case and would be in line with the Medium-Term Financial strategy.

8.3. Policy

This report is in line with our Policy objectives as set out in the Council's Corporate Plan. The People's Panel particularly supports two priorities within the "Open" aim of the Corporate Plan these are: to listen, learn and respond to our residents, promoting opportunities for a two-way conversation and to promote and develop the services of the council through regular communication and engagement with all residents.

8.4. Equality

The People's Panel was selected to ensure that, as far as possible, it fairly represented the population of Cheshire East. This process covered the following protected characteristics: gender, age, disability and ethnicity. Panel selection did not cover the protected characteristics of religion, pregnancy and maternity, gender reassignment, sexual orientation or marital status.

8.5. Human Resources

It was agreed that officers from the council who supported the People's Panel weekend sessions could accrue the time as lieu time, to be taken in accordance with business need.

8.6. Risk Management

The People's Panel project had a reputational risk that the council would be unable to progress any of the recommendations put forward. To mitigate this risk, the council presented at the first weekend and worked with the Panel to explain the scope of the council's influence and some of the constraints that local authorities face. This approach appears to have been successful, as the council can progress 10 of the 12 recommendations.

8.7. Rural Communities

The selection process for the People's Panel asked for post code information in order that representatives of both rural and urban communities could be selected to ensure that the Panel was representative of Cheshire East residents. The lived experience of residents from rural communities came through in the deliberative sessions, particularly in relation to off grid and oil powered heating, and in relation to transport and accessibility across the borough.

8.8. Children and Young People/Cared for Children

The People's Panel was only open to people aged 18 and over. This approach was selected following discussions with Children and Families around safeguarding risks and training. The learning of the People's Panel has been shared with Children and Families and there is an appetite to replicate a similar model with children and young people. There is ongoing engagement activity with representative groups such as the Youth Parliament.

8.9. Public Health

Public health was a founding member of the People's Panel project team. The initiative supported understanding and tackling of the wider determinants of health. The deliberative workshops discussed a range of social, economic and environmental factors, which all impact on people's health.

8.10. Climate Change

The People's Panel advocated solutions that promoted environmental sustainability. The recommendations received reflect that the People's Panel agree and support the climate change priority of the council.

Access to Information	
Appendices:	Appendix 1 – Cheshire East People's Panel on the Cost of Living Report Appendix 2 – Response to the recommendations of the People's Panel
Background Papers:	Background paper 1- Report to 14 July 2022 Corporate Policy Committee, entitled "Approach to Consultation and Engagement" CP/6/22-23 Decision report template (cheshireeast.gov.uk) Background paper 2- Report to 1 December 2022 Corporate Policy Committee, entitled "Consultation and Engagement" CP/48/22-23 Decision report template (cheshireeast.gov.uk)
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