Cheshire East
People's Panel on the Cost of Living
Report

Contents

About the authors

The recommendations produced by the members of the People's Panel on the Cost of Living are reproduced here in their own words. The remaining content was written by Andy Paice, freelance participatory democracy facilitator commissioned to lead this project, and Rachel Oliver, Head of Campaigns and Organising at Positive Money. No legal responsibility can be accepted for any loss or damage resultant from the contents of this document. It does not necessarily represent the view of Positive Money in relation to particular policy or projects.

About Positive Money

Positive Money is a campaign and research organisation that works to reimagine money, banks and the economy for the wellbeing of people, communities and the planet. It is a not-for-profit civil society organisation that started working in 2010. Their team do research, policy and advocacy work, and run projects and campaigns to work towards a money, banking and economic system based on the values of fairness, sustainability and democracy. The Cheshire East People's Panel on the Cost of Living is their first local participatory democracy project.

www.positivemoney.org.uk

Introduction

Overview of what it was and what happened

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 cost 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 rising cost of living?" and to develop a set of recommendations to present to Cheshire East Council. In January 2023, the Council will come back together with the panel to present the steps they have taken so far in response to the panel's recommendations.

The project was supported by Cheshire East Council and the not-for-profit campaign and research organisation Positive Money. The process was designed and facilitated by Andy Paice, an independent facilitator with several years experience leading participatory democracy events.

Who was involved

There were several stakeholders involved in the People's Panel project:

➢ The 21 panellists

➢ 323 Cheshire East residents who took part in the online survey

➢ Lead facilitator Andy Paice, + three supporting independent facilitators

➢ Five expert speakers who delivered presentations to the Panel to give different perspectives on the cost of living crisis:

- Will McKellar, Chief Officer of Citizens Advice Bureau Macclesfield
- Mark Bayley, People Directorate, Cheshire East Council, and a qualified teacher
- Lisa Adamson, External affairs officer, Centre for Local Economic Strategies. Lisa spoke about Community Wealth Building as a response to the cost of living crisis
- Jane Emery, Area Manager for Cheshire and Shropshire, Trussell Trust, and Involved with Nantwich Food Bank
- Rachelle Earwaker, Senior Economist, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

➢ Key staff members from Cheshire East Council, including Head of Policy and Change, Sarah Bullock, and Dr Andrew Turner, Consultant in Public Health.

➢ Three staff members from Positive Money, including lead organiser Rachel Oliver

Commissioners' Words

Positive Money
Rachel Oliver, Director of Public Engagement at Positive Money

"We believe that our current economic and political systems are no longer fit for purpose and are failing a growing majority of people. People with lived experience of issues are often far away from the centres of power and policy making. We want to help change this, by enabling more citizens to shape the decisions that shape their lives and communities.

We were very pleased to work with the passionate and committed team at Cheshire East Council to put on the Cheshire East People's Panel on the Cost of Living. We wanted to experiment with a process that applied the principles of a citizen's assembly, but that could be done at a more local and affordable scale. We were thrilled to be led by Andy Paice's experience and expertise in running this participatory democracy event and are excited to see the outcomes and broader impact of this first People's Panel."

Cheshire East Council
Sarah Bullock, Director of Policy and Change

"The first Cheshire East People's Panel supported our strategic vision of being more "Open" and our Corporate Plan priorities:
- To listen, learn and respond to our residents, promoting opportunities for two-way conversation
- To promote and develop the services of the council through regular communication and engagement with all residents

We wanted to pilot a participatory democracy approach as part of our refreshed approach to consultation and engagement. The cost of living crisis was selected as a theme as this was a dynamic area, which is impacting on all residents and we were keen to hear their experiences and solutions.

We would like to thank our committed and excellent partners at Positive Money, and lead facilitator Andy Paice, for their expertise, advice and commitment in delivering our first People's Panel. We would also like to thank all residents that participated in the survey and especially those that formed our final Panel. We hope this is just the start of our journey towards more participatory approaches and improved engagement with our residents."

Background

What is a People's Panel?

The People's Panel was a smaller version of a [Citizens Assembly](#) or Citizen's Jury. A diverse group of ordinary citizens comes together to learn about and discuss a particular issue and decide upon recommended solutions together. It normally involves independent facilitators, a panel of experts, and a commissioning body like a local authority.

Purpose of the People's Panel

The purpose of this 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.

Structure of the People's Panel

In Spring 2022, staff members from Positive Money and Cheshire East Council started preliminary discussions to explore the possibility of running a participatory democracy event with residents of Cheshire East. Both parties wanted to empower residents to have greater say over how to tackle the most pressing issues facing the community.

Positive Money searched for a facilitator, experienced in designing and leading citizens' assemblies, and was connected with Andy Paice, who has been involved in running several participatory democracy processes including the Scottish Government Digital Ethics Panel, Jersey's Citizens' Jury on Assisted Dying, Kingston Air Quality Citizens' Assembly and North of Tyne Combined Authority Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change.

The Council were in the early stages of developing a strategy to support people with the rising cost of living, so this felt like the most natural policy initiative to include some participatory decision making. Whilst both parties recognise the limitations on Councils, the Council were keen for their strategy to be steered by the recommendations of the panel as much as possible.

Whilst the scale of funding needed for a full scale citizens' assembly was not available, all parties agreed that a smaller scale process was possible and desirable. It was agreed that this project would be called the 'People's Panel'. A group of 20-24 residents would come together in person for 15 hours over two consecutive weekends to discuss solutions related to the rising cost of living. There would also be an online element to the process ahead of the in-person weekend, where all residents of Cheshire East could share their views on the topic.

Andy Paice, lead facilitator, was responsible for designing the process, with input from the Council and Positive Money. Decisions on all aspects such as the title, recruitment criteria, promotion plans and speakers, were taken together with both parties, with guidance from Andy. Wherever possible, we made decisions based on the principles of citizens' assemblies.

Positive Money and Cheshire East Council were the sole funders of this project. Each organisation covered the costs of different aspects. For example, the Council paid for and arranged the venues and catering, and covered the transport costs of those panel members who needed it in order to take part. Positive Money paid for the facilitation team, microsite and digital advertising. The Council chose one venue in a more rural part of the borough, and one in a more urban area - both run by not-for-profit organisations within the community.

The People's Panel Question

Cheshire East Council Officers, Positive Money and independent facilitator Andy Paice worked together with advice from local agencies and voluntary service groups to define the most appropriate question for the People's Panel to explore in creating its recommendations.

After considering different options they decided the question should be:

"*What can be done to make life more affordable for those most affected by the rising cost of living?*"

The focus was therefore on what would be needed to support those in local communities most affected by the rising cost of living. During the People's Panel sessions the scope of the inquiry under that broad question focused on things that they felt needed to happen at a community, council or even at national government level.

Discussions on specific measures and tips for individual households to save energy such as wearing extra layers of clothing or not wasting food, whilst being important, were not given as a remit for the People's Panel. The focus was on different levels of collective action.

Recruitment

Method

The recruitment strategy for the People's Panel on the Cost of Living was co-designed by independent lead facilitator Andy Paice, Cheshire East Council officers and Positive Money.

How recruitment for the People's Panel took place

1. A small website (microsite) was set up to publicise the Cheshire East People's Panel - cheshireeastpeoplespanel.co.uk
2. The website contained an open invitation: "Anyone who lives in Cheshire East and who wants to take part in the People's Panel is most welcome to register their interest…"
3. £150 worth of shopping vouchers was offered for their time and participation to all selected panel members completing both weekends.
4. Applicants either directly filled in a form on the microsite or were assisted in their application by calling a Freephone number.
5. Applicants answered questions on the form, sharing key information to make sure the final selection of the People's Panel represented a wide range of views and backgrounds in Cheshire East.
6. The application process ran for 2 weeks from Thursday 22 September to Thursday 6 October 2022. During this time a publicity campaign took place across the borough to ensure as many people as possible knew about the opportunity to apply. This included advertising via local press, local community groups, Twitter, Facebook groups, and through the Council's networks.
7. 107 applications were received
8. On 22nd September 24 panel members were selected using the Stratified Random Selection Tool made freely available by the New Democracy Foundation.
9. Members were selected to make sure there was a fair representation of panel members in terms of
    a. Gender

b. Age group
c. Living in an Urban or Rural area
d. Ethnicity
e. Level of impact of rising cost of living on households
f. Disability
g. Having caring responsibilities
h. Unemployment or being unable to work

10. Those selected by the Stratified Random Selection Tool were contacted by email and telephone and an emailed Welcome Pack with details of what to expect was sent to everyone before the Panel began.
11. Over the next few days anyone who dropped out was replaced, whilst making sure a fair level of representation across the different categories was kept.
12. After some dropouts at a late stage 21 Cheshire East residents became the final selected members who went on to attend both weekends of sessions.

Extra notes on the Selection Criteria

- For gender, age group, urban/ rural split - the selection broadly represented the local population.

- For the selection regarding the level of impact of rising cost of living on households, approximately 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 a choice to make sure that there was sufficient lived experience in the panel to respond to the question of *What can be done to make life more affordable for those most affected by the rising cost of living?*
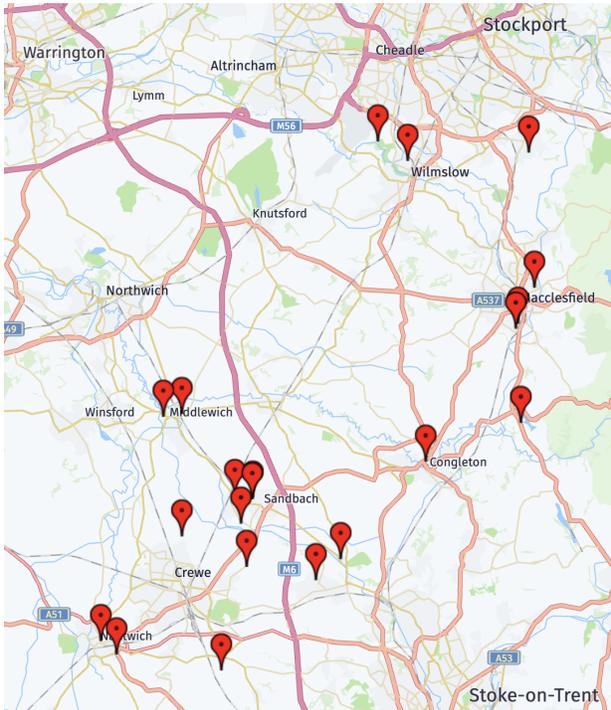
- For ethnicity the selection was weighted slightly so there would be a greater representation of minority ethnic groups because they are unequally impacted by the rising cost of living.
- For the categories of disability, having caring responsibilities, unemployment or being unable to work, a selection level was set to ensure representation in the panel.

The recruitment method as explained above aimed to replicate as much as possible that of a Citizens Assembly whereby a large number of invitation letters are sent out to random local addresses. This is known as a 'civic lottery' or sortition which is seen as the gold standard for these democratic events.

Recruitment for the People's Panel worked within the constraints of a lower budget than a Citizens' Assembly and aimed to be as close as possible to a sortition process. One main difference was in the open invitation that was sent out for anyone living in Cheshire East to register their interest, which did allow a greater possibility of self selection.

Of the 107 applications the final 21 members of the People's Panel represented a diverse group of residents from different backgrounds and age groups from all over the borough.

Interactive Survey

An interactive survey called Polis, sourced by the non-profit Crowdwisdom Project was an important part of the Cheshire East People's Panel engagement. It meant much broader public participation on the panel question could take place. Not only would the People's Panel give its responses to the question but anyone in Cheshire East could also be part of this important conversation.

What is Polis?

[Pol.is](Pol.is) is an online interactive survey which enables a whole community to respond to a given question and to vote on each others' statements. It uses machine learning to show distinct clusters of people with similar attitudes, who voted similarly. It automatically creates a report which shows the statements that made each opinion group distinctive. It is also very useful because it identifies statements that have high levels of agreement across opinion groups.

This public digital survey was used for the following purposes. It was to:
- enable any Cheshire East resident to be part of the council commissioned cost of living conversation regardless of whether they were People's panel members or not.
- source ideas and solutions from the local population and provide information to support the People's Panel in making their recommendations to Cheshire East Council.
- identify areas of consensus across different opinion groups.
- help the People's Panel better understand differences of opinion that exist within the borough regarding potential solutions to the cost of living crisis.

How was the interactive survey set up?

The survey was seeded with 20 statements as a range of responses to the People's Panel question. These were initial prompts to start the conversation. There were also statements to find out which sections of the community were participating such as "I live in a rural area of Cheshire East" or "Any further increases in household bills will mean we will struggle to afford the basics like eating enough or heating our home."

All participation was anonymous - no personal data was collected from respondents. A light touch moderation policy was used to make sure the conversation remained within the scope of the question.

The survey was accessed through the same microsite where people could apply to be a panel member. This was publicised via Twitter, on local community Facebook groups, voluntary sector groups, in the local press and via Facebook ads.

The interactive survey was launched on Thursday 22nd September and ran for 19 days closing on 11th October 2022.

Participants submitted statements in response to this question with these guidelines.

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What can be done to make life more affordable for those most affected by the rising cost of living?

Cheshire East Council & Positive Money

Contribute to the Cheshire East People's Panel on the Cost of Living by voting on the statements.

Share your own ideas and experiences in the box below

What do **you** think needs to happen at a community, council and national level? All ideas will be reviewed by the panel.

Return here from time to time to vote on new statements that others submit! Survey closes 11th October.

Welcome to a new kind of conversation - vote on other people's statements.

Anonymous wrote: *100+ remaining*

Universal childcare would allow parents to contribute to the economy (paying taxes) and to afford their increasing household bills.

✅ Agree   🚫 Disagree   Pass / Unsure

Results

- 323 people voted.
- 366 new statements were submitted
- In total 20,761 votes were cast (agree, disagree, pass) on these statements.
- An average of 64.28 votes per voter and 2 statements per author
- The machine learning grouped 246 people into 2 identifiable opinion clusters.
- There were 49 participants in Group A and 197 in Group B

From the way in which the two clusters voted on statements, the following can be said about their differences:

Group A (49)	Group B (197)
Values supporting people to better themselves and have self reliance rather than giving them financial support.	Feels financial benefits need to be increased
Feels most can make changes to spend less	Sees the idea that the general public can make changes to solve their problems by spending less is like 'victim blaming'.
Less critical of the government	Critical of the government
More likely to not want either local or national government action	More likely to see the cost of living crisis as a problem for national government to solve rather than a local council issue
More likely to be able to manage cost of living increases	Less likely than group A to be able to manage cost of living increases
Large number of group A and B live in urban areas but group A was more likely to live in Rural areas than group B	

It should be noted that the figures of opinion group A (49) and B (197) are not necessarily representative of the proportions of Cheshire East residents holding these opinions as there was no way of controlling the sample of people responding to the survey.

Below is a 'beeswarm chart' from the automatically generated report. Each dot represents a statement. Statements to the left had a high degree of consensus i.e participants voted on these in a similar way with the majority either agreeing or disagreeing. Statements to the right were divisive—participants were split between agreement and disagreement.

In this conversation there was a much higher number of statements that people agreed upon than there were polarising, divisive statements. This is a common feature that emerges in Polis conversations. It demonstrates how, contrary to what we might read or see in social media, societies and communities tend to have more that unites them than divides them.

Consensus statements   Divisive statements

The iceberg image below also shows a similar theme. There are some differences between the way the two opinion clusters see what needs to be done to tackle the cost of living crisis, especially at the level of what the government should be doing. However the survey reveals a large number of statements that unite both groups on different themes:

Group A – 49 participants
"Don't make people dependent on government handouts"

Group B – 197 participants
"People need government support."

B

A

Ideas that united both groups:
- New builds should have environmentally sound and energy efficient properties, e.g with solar panels. Insulate and retrofit existing homes
- Encourage neighbourhood support for elderly people
- People having money problems should be given specific advice and help.
- Invest in sustainable transport, cheaper improved public transport and better services for rural areas
- People should try to come together more as a community e.g community kitchens
- Support organisations encouraging local food growing, seed sharing
- Much more…

The survey also revealed a large number of consensus statements across a variety of themes related to making life more affordable for those most affected by the cost of living crisis.

See Appendix - Interactive survey materials presented to the Panel for the statements with the highest agreement under each theme.

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The digest of the results as presented to the panel members can be found in Appendix 2 - Full pol.is report with all statements.

The full automatically generated report with the results with all the statements can be found at https://polis.crowdwisdomproject.org/report/r8eddcbryrca7himdjpbi - and in Appendix - Full pol.is report with all statements.

The Sessions

Session plans and design

The People's Panel took place over two consecutive weekends (15th and 16th October and 22nd and 23rd October 2022) in two venues in the borough of Cheshire East. There were six sessions of two and a half hours - a total of 15 hours.

Present at the sessions were:
- 21 People's panel members
- An independent facilitation team brought together by Andy Paice consisting of 3 facilitators and 2 support staff
- Observers from Cheshire East Council or other interested individuals who wanted to see the People's Panel in progress
- Speakers (on the afternoon of Saturday 15th October)
- A videographer (on Sunday 23rd October.)

Weekend 1

The first weekend took place at the David Lewis College Training Centre, (a local charity venue which supports people with learning disabilities) near Alderley Edge.

Saturday 15th October - Morning Session

Upon arrival at the venue the 21 panel members were allocated to three tables of 7, each with a facilitator. The day began at 10am with a welcome and introduction to the purpose of the People's Panel and what they would be doing over the course of the two weekends.

The initial activities consisted of panel members introducing themselves and then having discussions to set the guidelines of how they would like to work as a group and with the facilitators. Feeding back in plenary the group as a whole came up with the following:
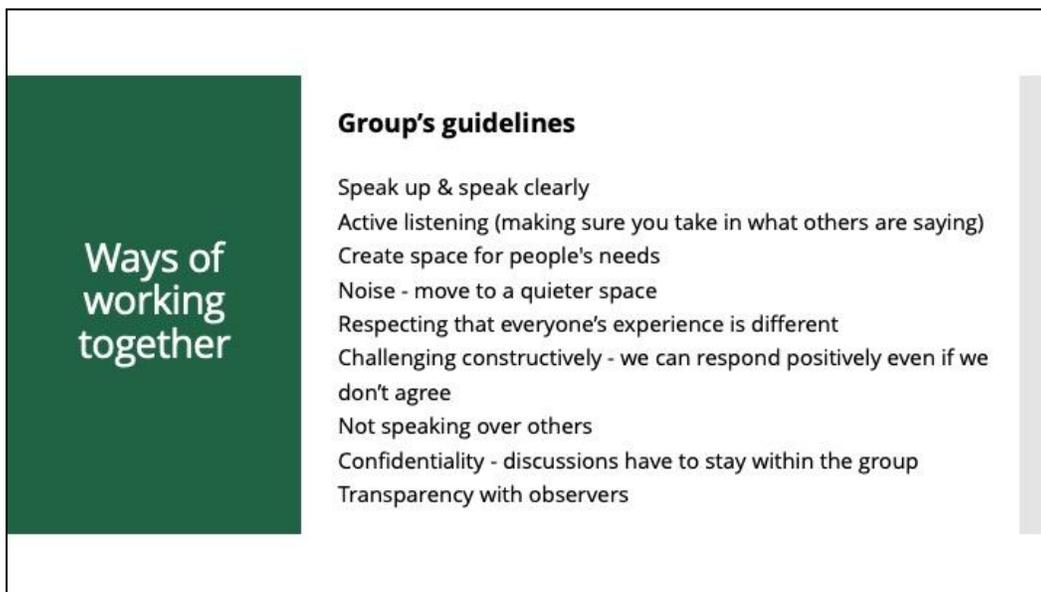
Ways of working together

Group's guidelines

Speak up & speak clearly
Active listening (making sure you take in what others are saying)
Create space for people's needs
Noise - move to a quieter space
Respecting that everyone's experience is different
Challenging constructively - we can respond positively even if we don't agree
Not speaking over others
Confidentiality - discussions have to stay within the group
Transparency with observers

The next activity in small groups started proceedings on the topic of the cost of living with a very open ended discussion. Panel members shared what they know, think or feel about the crisis or anything they felt strongly about that they wanted to say. This enabled the groups to start to explore the topic in their own terms recording their contributions on flipcharts with post-it notes.

For the final activity of the morning the Panel were asked to mentally put the Cost of Living crisis to one side and to engage in a journaling, imagination exercise of being transported 20 years into the future, in a time machine, to the year 2052. They were invited to imagine the kind of community and society they would wish to see and to note down what was happening. The purpose of this was to create aspirations which could act as a reference point when making recommendations on the second weekend.
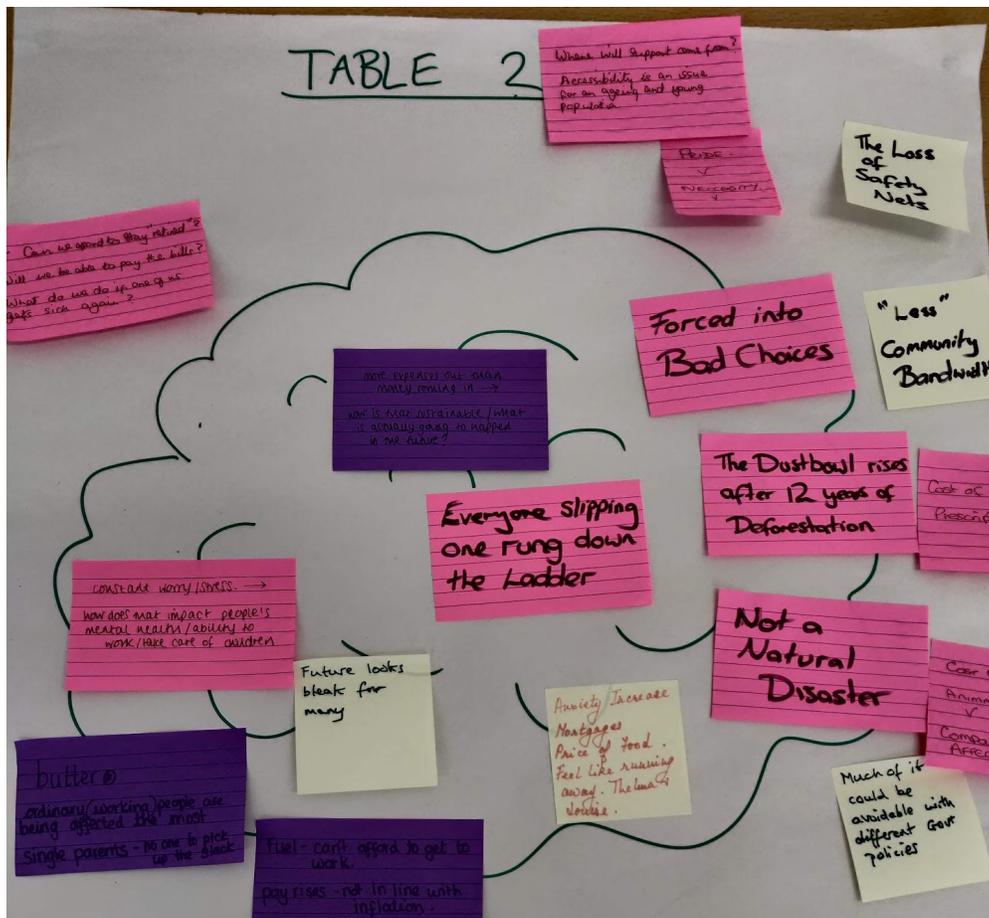
During the lunch break panel members recorded aspects of their future journaling on a flipchart to serve as a collective record.
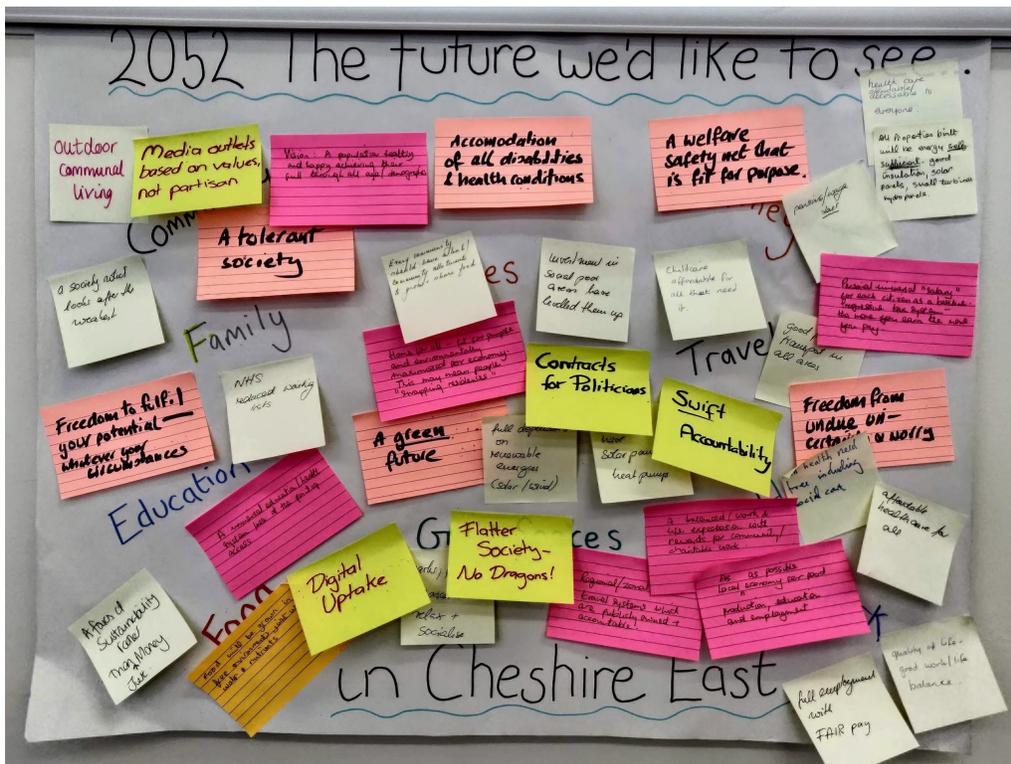
Saturday 15th October - Afternoon Session

The second session was devoted to the People's Panel listening to a variety of speakers on the topic of the Cost of Living Crisis so that panel members could complement their own knowledge with information from different sources.

The following speakers came to the David Lewis venue and gave brief presentations on the following topics:

1. Will McKellar - Chief Officer of Citizens Advice Bureau Macclesfield,
   How Citizens Advice Bureaus are experiencing and Addressing the Cost of Living Crisis
2. Mark Bayley - People Directorate, Cheshire East Council,
   Cheshire East Schools & their experience of the crisis
3. Sarah Bullock -Director of Policy and Change, Cheshire East Council,
   What the council is already doing and ways in which it can act
4. Lisa Adamson - Expert on Community Wealth Building,
   Community Wealth Building as a (long term) response to the CoL crisis

The presentation by Sarah Bullock had particular relevance for informing the People's Panel what sphere of influence Cheshire East Council has regarding action for the cost of living crisis. A copy of the table below summarising the council's sphere of influence was made available to the People's Panel to help them as they progressed towards making recommendations.

Things that the Council can do	Outside the control of the Council
Listen to your ideas and use them to change how we do things	Change amounts of income and disability benefits – Universal Credit, Pension Credit, Job Seekers Allowance
Work with our partners across the Borough and Region – including the voluntary, community and faith sector, the NHS, Police, Fire, Housing, Local Businesses, Town and Parish Councils, neighbouring Councils	Change amounts of tax relief
Talk to others in government departments, including sharing information with Local Members of Parliament	Amend eligibility for national schemes, such as the Energy Bills Support scheme
Offer use of our buildings (for example, libraries and leisure centres) and fleet vehicles	Stop doing anything that we have a statutory duty to deliver
Staff and volunteer support	Change national government policy
Raise money using Cheshire East Crowd (crowdfunding)	
Promotional campaigns, publicity and marketing	
Health and wellbeing support	

After hearing all four speakers, the Panel worked in small groups formulating questions for the speakers, followed by a 'carousel' session where the speakers rotated between the different groups spending 10 minutes at each table to answer questions and talk with panel members.
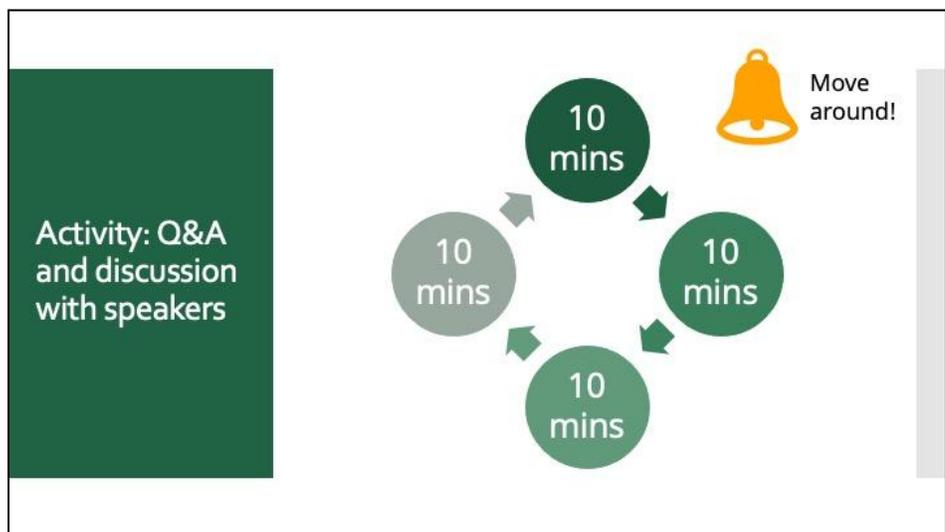
In the second part of the afternoon a further three speakers were scheduled to present via videoconference. In the event, unfortunately, the third speaker was not available.

1. Rachelle Earwaker - Senior Economist, Joseph Rowntree Foundation,
   Big Picture view of the Cost of Living Crisis
2. Jane Emery - Area Manager Cheshire and Shropshire for the Trussell Trust & Nantwich Food Bank,
   The local Food Bank situation
3. The coordinator of a Covid Mutual Aid project that is now helping with Cost of Living in Bedfordshire.

Both Rachelle and Jane gave presentations followed by an open question and answer session.

After this the Panel were given some quiet time to make notes on what they felt were the most important things they had heard from the day's speakers. At the end of the day the Panel was asked if there was any information or particular perspective they felt was missing and that might help them to develop recommendations.

On voting slips each panel member had an opportunity to write down an extra theme or speaker they might like to hear from in the following weekend (so that the facilitation team could endeavour to find a suitable speaker.) They were also given the option to say if they felt they had had enough input before starting their work on recommendation drafting.

Sunday 16th October - Morning Session

First, the result of the voting for additional themes/speakers was announced. There was an equal split between those feeling they had received enough information and those wanting to hear from new speakers. However there were some double votes so the decision was taken to go ahead with inviting new speakers.

Preferences to hear additional input:

- From Central government, MP or politician (5 requests)
  This received the highest number of votes. The next day an invitation was issued to all 5 local MPs to see if they or a representative would be able to attend on Saturday 22nd October. It was made clear to the Panel that this may not be possible given the short timescale, but the request was nevertheless made. Unfortunately none of the MPs could make it at short notice and apologies were received from Esther McVey MP, Fiona Bruce MP and Edward Timpson MP.
- Someone with lived experience (2 requests)
- Mental Health perspective (1 request)
- Energy cost solutions (1 request)

The first activity of the morning consisted of reviewing the information the Panel had received so far from Saturday's speakers. Discussions were facilitated around the following questions:
- What are the problems you feel need to be addressed?
- What are the most important points you want to carry forward?
- What kinds of solutions that would answer our People's Panel question are you starting to think of?

Responses were recorded to carry forward to the second weekend.

Then facilitators gave the Panel a detailed presentation of the results from the local interactive survey on the cost of living. Most of the Panel were already familiar with the survey to some degree as they had been encouraged to vote and comment on it as a preparation for the weekend sessions. The survey report had also been accessible to the People's Panel prior to the sessions via the Welcome Pack they received.

The Panel received information on how the survey crowdsourced ideas from the community on the Panel question and how it identifies different opinion groups and shows ideas where most people agreed. All of the interactive survey materials presented to the Panel can be seen in Appendix 3 - Interactive survey materials presented to Panel and Appendix 2 - Full pol.is report with all statements.

As this Polis survey created a huge amount of statements and information, A3 digest sheets were created that showed the statements with the highest level of agreement across opinion groups under the following themes:

Cheshire East Survey: Statements with the highest agreement

"What can be done to make life more affordable for those most affected by the rising cost of living?"
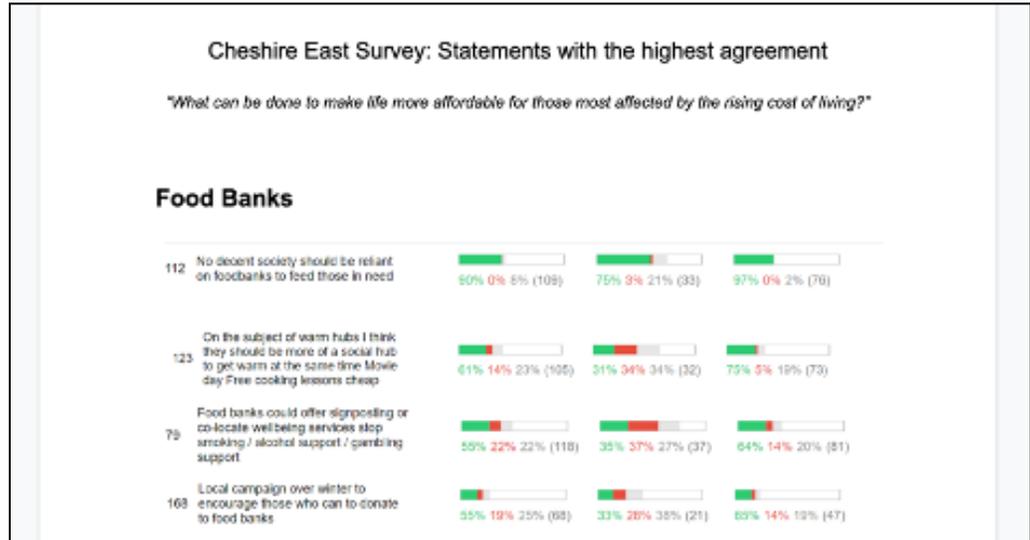
Food Banks

1. Housing
2. Energy
3. Community Support / Charity and Voluntary sector
4. Transport
5. National Government/Policy
6. Financial advice
7. Education and skills
8. Food Banks
9. Warm Hubs
10. Local Businesses
11. Other

Each table had 3 or 4 of these A3 survey statement sheets randomly shared out for them to look at, discuss in pairs, and make a note of any ideas and statements they felt would be useful to take forward as potential ideas for recommendations.

Having studied the survey results, panel members started to prepare for the second weekend. Facilitators supported the groups to come up with brief headlines on post it notes for topics they might be interested in including in the final recommendations. At the end of the session, facilitators gathered together all of the post it notes on a large board and a whole group clustering exercise took place.

The three main themes that emerged from this activity were:
A: Energy, Transport & Planning
B: Rethinking Funding and Distribution
C: Community and Appropriate Support
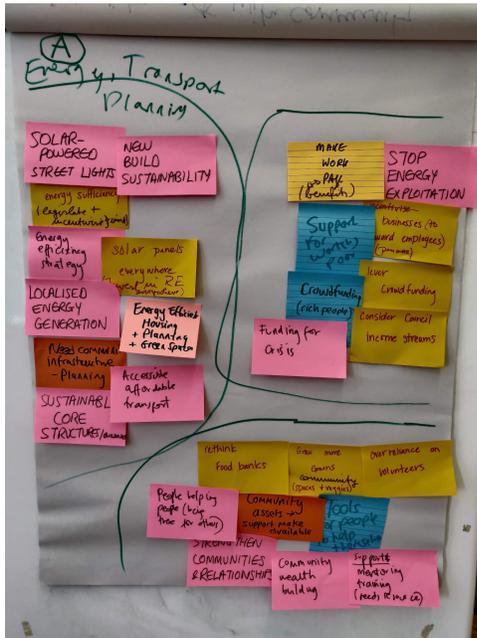
To conclude the first weekend, all panel members used named postcards to note down their 1st, 2nd and 3rd preference of which theme they would like to focus on in groups in the second weekend. All panel members received their first shopping voucher gift worth £50 at the end of the first weekend.

Weekend 2

The second weekend took place at the Everybody Health and Leisure Community Centre, Holmes Chapel.

Saturday 22nd October - Morning Session

After a warm up activity with panel members greeting anyone they hadn't yet had a chance to meet, everyone joined the 3 themed groups. Each panel member had been allocated at the very least their second choice of theme to work on.

The morning session was an opportunity to do a deep dive into thinking about solutions that could be developed into recommendations. Each themed group (A: Energy, Transport & Planning, B: Rethinking Funding and Distribution, C: Community and Appropriate Support) had 7 panel members and a facilitator. Groups were also provided with the following resources to help them in their discussions:

- Typed up notes carried forward from weekend 1 related to each group's theme
- The vision for the future (2052) flipchart
- Local interactive survey (Polis) results
- Sheet with what the council can and can't do
- People's panel question card

As mentioned, the emphasis for this session was on solutions with groups rising to the challenge of weighing up the pros and cons of different ideas. Each person was given more space and time in this session to develop their ideas, and facilitators noted down the discussions on flipcharts and reflected back each contribution to make sure each idea was properly recorded.

As the discussions progressed, it was clear that all three thematic groups wanted to offer both short term ideas to help alleviate the immediate needs of those most affected by the cost of living crisis, and suggest longer term solutions to make life generally more affordable for Cheshire East's communities in the future.

Equally the ideas that would eventually become recommendations spanned the range of actions that could be taken up by local communities, actions for Cheshire East Council itself, and actions that would need to be taken at national government level. The panel realised that the Council did not have direct influence over the national level and that any recommendations in that domain could only be passed on or used as lobbying points.

Each group finished the session with a list of ideas that would be raw material for drafting recommendations on the Sunday.

Sunday 23rd October - Morning and Afternoon sessions

Ensuring that the People's Panel was a convivial experience for panel members was important to the facilitation team. So the day began with a lighthearted warm up activity with the whole panel standing in a circle to play a party game "Zip, Zap, Boing."

Before drafting recommendations the Panel were given guidelines as to what would help make good recommendations

What makes a good recommendation?

- Make your sentences are clear and readable
- Make the recommendations specific – what needs to be done, by who and when?
- Make sure it responds to the People's Panel question
- Consider the impacts and consequences of your recommendations
- Use verbs (action words) to start your recommendations.

Implement   Create Prioritise Improve   Encourage

Minimise   Enable Lobby Promote
Increase   etc.......

The drafting of the recommendations in each group took place in 3 stages:

1. *Drafting recommendations on each theme*
   Groups had approximately an hour to review their work from the previous day and start to turn their ideas into recommendations. Each recommendation was to include a headline, specific details and (if they had time) extra information regarding what they thought the impact of the recommendation would be, and any other considerations that needed to be borne in mind.

2. *A first round of looking at other groups' work*

   Groups then moved to the other groups' tables for half an hour of commenting on, and suggesting improvements to, the other draft recommendations that they were seeing for the first time.

   A second round of looking at other groups' work

   Groups moved once again for a final round of editing, suggesting improvements etc. In both of these rounds the facilitators remained at the tables to report back the reasoning why their group had come up with these points. In this way the whole People's Panel had an opportunity to input into and influence all of the recommendations.

3. *Creating a final set of recommendations*

   Returning to their own draft recommendations, the groups then had fifty minutes to see all of the comments from the other two groups and decide which suggested edits they wanted to integrate and which ones to discard. Groups were aware that all recommendations would be voted on at the end. So they knew it was in their interest to have a reasonable amount of open mindedness regarding suggested edits. The idea of this process was for all recommendations to represent the People's Panel as a whole (rather than having separate competing groups.)

During the afternoon break, all final recommendations were written up into the voting sheets.

Rec number 8

What can be done to make life more affordable for those most affected by the rising cost of living?

THEME: Localism (Rethinking funding + Distribution)

⭐ FINAL RECOMMENDATION ⭐

Adopt a community wealth building approach
- Support local businesses with regard to procurement (e.g. prioritise local businesses) and their cost base (e.g. business rates)
- Engage anchor institutions in deploying their resources for local benefit.
- More effective use of diverse buildings (commercial / council / anchor institutions) to support linkages between organisations — pop. encourage shared use of space as social incubators.
- Consider where the money goes from procurement of public services (e.g. care homes)

Impacts (What difference will the recommendation make?)

Local businesses winning work
Citizens creating businesses
Retain local spend & employment.
Maximise social value via local procurement.

Considerations (Who might be affected positively or negatively? Are there any negative consequences, costs, anything that might prevent progress?)

Then the whole People's Panel gathered in a circle to hear all of the recommendations being read out by volunteers from each group.

Once all of the 12 recommendations from the 3 groups had been read out, all panel members voted on them. Each participant had 12 tokens to place in [Feedback Frames](#) to register their strong agreement, agreement, neutrality, disagreement or strong disagreement towards each recommendation. They rated each one by dropping their token in a range of slots hidden by a cover for secret voting.
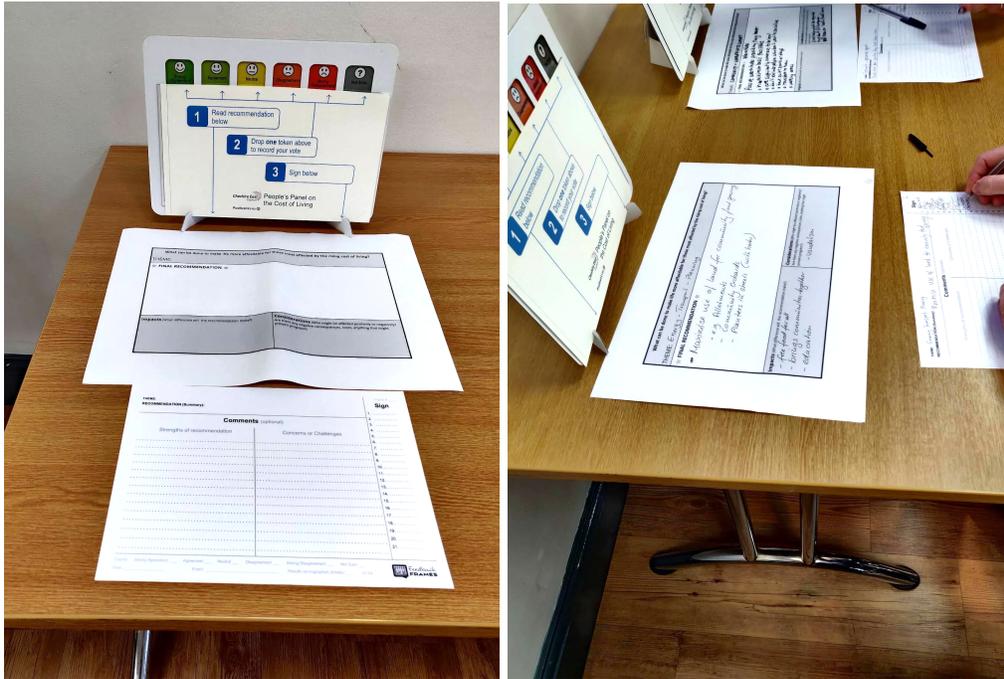
This voting process was done to test the level of consensus regarding the recommendations and to create a ranked, prioritised list to hand over to Cheshire East Council. When the results were revealed and entered into the visual graph, it was clear there was a very high degree of agreement for all of the recommendations.

Theme Group	Rec number	Score (out of 5 - rounded decimals)	Score (as %)	Consent Score (degree of agreement)	Recommendation heading	Strong Agreement 5	Agreement 4	Neutral 3	Disagreement 2	Strong Disagreement 1	Not Sure
Energy, Transport, Planning	4	4.5	90.5	95%	Develop and implement a policy to require sustainble energy use on all new developments	14	5	1	1	0	0
Community and Appropriate Support	6	4.5	90.0	100%	Increase awareness of current existing schemes for support	12	6	2	0	0	0
Community and Appropriate Support	12	4.5	89.5	95%	Food accessibility for short and long term	14	4	2	1	0	0
Rethinkning Funding & Distribution	10	4.4	88.6	95%	Make a renewed effort to reach everyone in need	13	5	2	1	0	0
Rethinkning Funding & Distribution	11	4.4	87.6	100%	Make information about needs and funding avaliable at a very local level	11	7	3	0	0	0
Energy, Transport, Planning	1	4.3	85.7	95%	Maximise use of land for community food growing	9	10	1	1	0	0
Energy, Transport, Planning	5	4.2	84.8	100%	Improve and make more effective the dial a ride service across Cheshire East	9	8	4	0	0	0
Energy, Transport, Planning	7	4.2	84.8	95%	Introduce sustainable energy technologies to existing council owned buildings	8	11	1	1	0	0
Rethinkning Funding & Distribution	8	4.2	83.8	90%	Adopt a community wealth building approach	10	7	2	2	0	0
Community and Appropriate Support	3	4.1	82.9	90%	Increase benefits and support working poor	11	5	3	1	1	0
Energy, Transport, Planning	9	4.0	81.0	95%	Prioritise provision of affordable buses for more people	6	11	3	1	0	0
Community and Appropriate Support	2	3.7	73.3	86%	Pursue warm hubs providing they have stated criteria...	6	7	5	1	2	0

Sarah Bullock, the Director of Policy and Change at Cheshire East Council thanked the People's Panel for their commitment and sustained efforts over two weekends and received the recommendations on behalf of the council. Along with Rachel Oliver from Positive Money, she explained what would happen with the recommendations in terms of next steps.

The People's Panel concluded with a group photo and the distribution of the remaining shopping vouchers to all the panel members.

Ideas and discussions that didn't feature in the recommendations

Whilst 15 hours of sessions was fairly long compared to many local authority public engagements, the programme was nevertheless tight for the panel members to create and finalise their recommendations on a very complex issue.
Some of the ideas that were under discussion did not have time to crystallise and make it into the final list of recommendations. Panel members made the request that ideas in formulation should still at least be featured in the report.

In response to this request the following is a representation of those discussions that took place in each themed group:

GROUP A - Energy, Transport and Planning

Group A explored a variety of possible recommendations under three areas of Energy, Transport and Planning.

Under the theme of **energy** the group discussed the importance of localised energy generation and the idea of encouraging and supporting the use of onshore wind turbines. The group supported the idea, but felt it wouldn't address the question of helping life to become more affordable to the same extent as the other points they were considering.

Other points discussed, but not finally formulated into recommendations, were the topic of energy exploitation and the profiteering of large energy companies, as well as possible financial support for energy bills for those that need it, especially those on pre-payment meters.

Regarding **transport**, ideas that were explored but not translated into a full recommendation included company transport services and encouraging car sharing. Also, to alleviate the cost of living, they entertained the idea of cheaper parking, but the idea was not pursued as it was felt that would have a negative consequence of encouraging increased car use.

Under the theme of **planning** participants felt that as lots of new housing is built, the community infrastructure must also be built to avoid people having to travel long distances and spend money to access services. They also felt there was a need for more sustainable core structures where people can gather as a community, socialise and keep warm without it costing a lot.

The group also discussed the need for rules to have sufficient green spaces in all new developments. Some felt these rules may already exist, therefore this didn't make it into the recommendations.

GROUP B - Community and Appropriate Support

Group B devised its own system of voting on the points that it felt most strongly about and those 4 ideas made it into the final recommendations.

Other ideas considered were:

- the increased promotion of schemes that enable people to pass on useful but unwanted items for free such as the Nantwich Reuse scheme as this would help reduce landfill waste and fly tipping whilst providing goods to those who need them.
- Increased support and promotion of Community Support projects like Alsager Community Support which signposts to where people can get help, has volunteer drivers taking people to surgeries and shopping, organises school uniform swaps etc.
- Community wealth building (which did in fact make it into the recommendations via group C)

GROUP C - Rethinking Funding and Distribution

Under this theme there were some larger topics and inquiries that didn't end up forming into recommendations, because they seemed too big, complex or hard to work out what might be a suitable recommendation for the Council.

Key amongst those points was:

- What could or should be the Council's role in lobbying government or advocating on behalf of residents to make it clear that local residents just can't make ends meet and that something has to give?

- An exploration of the idea of 'Making work pay'. There was a feeling that the transition from benefits to work was being blocked for various reasons (e.g. wages being too low, child care too expensive, benefits being cut as soon as people start earning) however this did not end up as a recommendation.

- Concerns over the use of crowdfunding. Many saw this as backfilling for what should be publicly funded services. The group didn't manage to come to an agreement as to whether a recommendation should be made that the Council's crowdfunding mechanism should simply be abolished, or whether that would mean vital services would end up without any funding.

Recommendations

There were 12 recommendations that ended up being delivered to Cheshire East Council in the last session of the People's Panel on the cost of living. 5 recommendations were submitted under the theme of Energy, Transport and Planning, 4 under Community and Appropriate Support and 3 under the theme of Rethinking Funding and Distribution.

The recommendations are shown in the table below in rank order of the voting score which shows the overall level of agreement.

What can be done to make life more affordable for those most affected by the rising cost of living?

Voting Score	Rank	Theme	Recommendation
90.5	1st	Energy, Transport & Planning	**Develop and implement a policy to require Sustainable**

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Energy use (SEU) on all new developments (housing and commercial)

- Provide guidance on SEU
- Implement a strategy in planning and development of Refuse, Delay and Obstruct to ensure rigorous compliance
- Close loopholes and ensure transparency, review post build

Impacts
Reduce energy demand
Role modelling for SEU in existing buildings

Considerations
Prioritise SEU in social housing

Additional individual comments on voting sheets:

Concerns & Challenges
"Review of completed schemes needed"

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<td>90.0</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Community and Appropriate Support</td>
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Increase awareness of current existing schemes for support

- Heavily promote and improve and maintain an offline and online benefits and support directory (which includes local voluntary support)
- Make leaflets very widely available e.g "Here is where you can get help" "Do you need help locally?"
- Heavily promote 1to1 support for those most affected to help with practical support and building confidence
- Council support to set up voluntary organisations and support with training volunteers

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<td>89.5</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Community and</td>
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Food accessibility for short and long term
Short term:

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		Appropriate Support	- Make food banks more accessible by widening the eligibility criteria - Food banks to offer advice on more affordable options such as food clubs - Encourage and support the development of food clubs to complement food banks. (By food clubs we mean clients paying a small fee for fresh surplus food. The council should make it mandatory for businesses in the local area to contribute excess food to food clubs. Long Term: Utilise natural free food sources accessible for everyone - Plant small orchards or fruit trees at the end of streets and in parks - New developments should have a significant percentage of fruit orchards, fruit trees, fruit bushes - Promote foraging with emphasis and food security not novelty
88.6	4th	Rethinking Funding and Distribution (Distributing funds according to need)	**Make a renewed effort to reach everyone in need - universal consideration plus targeted provision** - Ensure outreach is effective and everyone's voice is heard - Provide funding and support to local organisations to work together to help those in need (e.g to facilitate redistribution of full allowance for people who want to pass it on) - Consider universal supports (e.g free school meals for all) **Impacts** - Getting help where it needs to go - Ensure that nobody is missed (e.g rural households using oil) **Considerations** Avoid large employers to rely on availability of public financial supports

87.6	5th	Rethinking Funding and Distribution (Transparency)	**Make information about needs and funding available at a very local level** ● Make existing information accessible (e.g develop interactive presentation formats to be utilised in the high street) Use and rent empty shops to distribute. ● Create a system for residents to support local funding decisions **Impacts** ● Equip people to challenge decisions ● Build trust ● Stop people voting against their own interests
85.7	6th	Energy, Transport & Planning	**Maximise use of land for community food growing** E.g allotments Community orchards Planters in streets (with herbs) **Impacts** Free food for all Brings communities together Education **Considerations** Vandalism --- Additional individual comments on voting sheets: Strengths *"I like the long term solution/effect"*
84.8	7th	Energy, Transport & Planning	**Improve and make more effective the dial a ride service across Cheshire East** a) Linking together other or existing transport services to share resources, promote and interact b) Implement a branding/umbrella term collectively across Cheshire East c) Easier accessible information on services

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Impacts
More branding awareness and access more people using service
Essential for vulnerable of isolated, unable to use other transport methods

Considerations
Can be quite un-cost effective, especially amongst rural longer routes
Door ro door required to reduce fall risk , especially during inclement weather
Expand to include more people in medium term

Additional individual comments on voting sheets:
Concerns or Challenges
"This is an issue wider than one service"
"This is wider than dial-a-ride"
"Where is the Energy recommendation?"

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<td>84.8</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>Energy, Transport & Planning</td>
<td>

Introduce sustainable energy technologies to existing council owned buildings.
- Retrofitting existing council buildings both public and domestic
- Include council owned infrastructure e.g lamposts/signage etc
- Encourage other agencies to follow suit

Impacts
- Lead by example
- Assists towards carbon zero
- Avoids global energy volatility

Considerations
Includes both generation of energy and technology to reduce energy usage

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83.8	9th	Rethinking Funding and Distribution (Localism)	**Adopt a community wealth building approach** ● Support local businesses with regard to procurement (e.g prioritise local businesses) and their cost base (e.g business rates) ● Engage anchor institutions in deploying their resources for local benefit ● Make effective use of diverse buildings (commercial/council/anchor institutions) to support linkages between organisations - encourage shared use of space as social incubators ● Consider where the money goes from procurement of public services (e.g care homes) Impacts ● Local businesses winning work ● Citizens creating businesses ● Retain local spend and employment ● Maximise social value via local procurement Additional individual comments on voting sheets: Concerns or Challenges *"Worry about best value - local can cost a lot more."*
82.9	10th	Community and Appropriate Support	**Increase benefits and support the working poor** ● Council to lobby government to increase benefits at least in line with inflation ● Expand local authority and local organisations non-criteria based discretionary awards e.g discretionary housing payments, council tax hardship award etc Additional individual comments on voting sheets:

			Strengths *"This is essential!"* Concerns & Challenges *"Discretionary award set up to avoid cronyism"* *"Wrong target - should be <u>local</u> MPs, not national govt"* *"Contact local MPs first!"*
81.0	11th	Energy, Transport & Planning	**Prioritise provision of affordable buses for more people** ● Expand criteria for concessions ● Ensure access to key amenities e.g GP, Hospitals, shops in town and retail parks, support services e.g CAB Impacts ● Reduces costs to vulnerable citizens ● Increase access to shops which in turn increases council funding through business rates, which means more money available to support residents who need help most. ● Strengthens social networks ● Improves mental health through access to services and people ● Provides incentives to encourage people to use public transport rather than private transport Considerations ● Pay particular attention to rural communities to ensure they have access and connectivity ● Costs of implementation
73.3	12th	Community and Appropriate Support	**Pursue warm hubs, providing they have:** ● Minimum basic facilities ● Are sufficiently numerous to be local ● Don't exclude people who don't want to socialise ● Have quiet zones or days ● Transport to them ● Working areas

			Considerations Direct help might be required - they don't fit everyone. Not keen on "Warm Hubs" name --- Additional individual comments on voting sheets: Strengths *"Warm Hubs should be part of existing provision"*

Next Steps

Following the two in-person weekends, Andy Paice, supported by Positive Money, wrote this report, and delivered it to the panel members and Cheshire East Council. A video of the process will be used to share the story of the People's Panel in a more succinct and accessible way. This will be shared by the Council, Positive Money and the facilitators.

Sarah Bullock, Head of Policy and Change at the Council, is taking the recommendations to her Council team, in order to establish how best to action them. They will then present their proposals to Councillors, for their sign off.

In January 2023, the panel and members of the Council will come together in person for a few hours on a Saturday morning to discuss how the recommendations are being taken forward. There will be a presentation from the Council, and space for the panel to ask questions, share reflections and have some more open discussion with Council staff.