



Cost-of-living crisis consultation report

"This is a systemic issue that runs deep, and of course we want to see communities moving on from dependence, but we can't overlook the fact that this is an emergency."

Good Food Oxfordshire

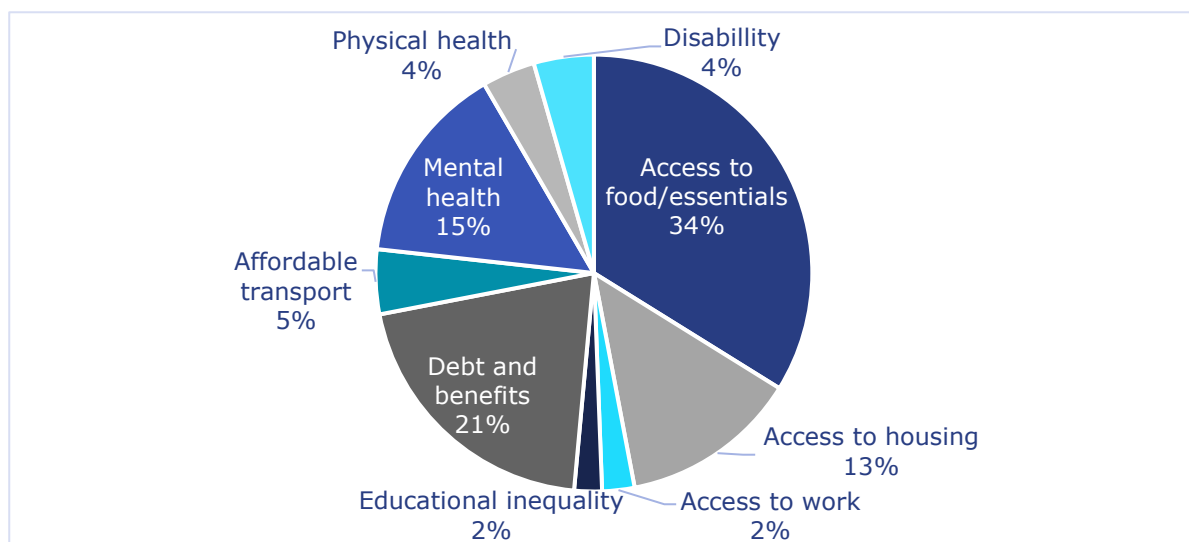
September 2022



We asked our network of charity contacts what the biggest issues are for Oxfordshire communities in the cost-of-living crisis, and what type of activities need funding support.

We received nearly 100 responses to our survey, and 38 people attended our consultative workshop, where we asked the same questions and explored the survey responses. The following is a summary of the survey results, which were reinforced by the workshop discussions. The comments are taken from both the survey and workshop.

What are the biggest issues for Oxfordshire communities in relation to the cost-of-living crisis?



Respondents had to rank their top three answers from a picklist of options. We weighted the responses, and the priority issues came out as access to food/essentials, debt and benefits, and mental health. **Access to food/essentials** received 34% of all responses and was seen by far as the priority issue, with 52% of respondents selecting it.

"We're in a position where those with the least are suffering the most... we need to address the basic human needs that are most at risk right now – food, shelter, money for bills." **Barton Community Church**

Debt and benefits received 21% of all responses and was seen as the second priority by a third of responders. **Mental health** received 15% of all responses and was seen as the third priority by 23% of responders.

"For those most affected by the crisis just affording essentials like food and energy will be the priority. For many who lack family or other support networks, understanding how to access help and what is on offer is a real problem. The combination of financial concerns, debt and not knowing where to turn can easily lead to mental health problems often unseen and unknown by others." **MHA (Methodist Homes)**

"Cost of living incurs debt; the foodbanks provide the support until the next payday! We try to signpost to CAB for debt advice. We will see a surge in use once the utility bills arrive." **Carterton Community Foodbank/Community Fridge**

"We are finding that young people are hungry when they come to youth club. We are also worried about their mental health. We know young people suffer when adults around them struggle, and with limited places to go and be themselves, they are going to feel even more isolated. We know young people are feeling lonely at the moment and the cost-of-living crisis is only going to make this worse!" **Got2B CIC**



The headline numbers match the commentary on this first question, where short-term crisis needs sit alongside concerns over the longer-term impact, particularly on the back of the pandemic. This reinforced the **inter-relatedness of these issues** and how those most in need will have more than one issue to overcome.

"One-off or even a short series of urgent crisis shops/energy top-ups are not the answer but a brief moment of relief. Efforts need to focus on the bigger picture, re-education and case work to tackle the deeper issues and assist the clients with real and relevant decisions to make these times of extreme hardships more bearable. Tailored where necessary for the client's specific circumstance. Hardship is being faced today by those who never before have faced challenges. People are ill-equipped to deal, experiencing extreme confusion and are panic-stricken with anxiety. Those in full time employment, those who own their own homes are not exempt from difficulty and worry." **Vale Community Impact**

"These conditions are often multiple and compounded therefore difficult to prioritise one over the other. Many of the people most in need will have several of the barriers to surviving and thriving in the community." **Flo's the Place in the Park, Oxford**

"It is more important to 'teach people how to fish' rather than to give them a fish for today." **Oxford Churches Debt Centre**

"Interconnected issues. Cost of housing is generally an issue when it is so expensive that huge parts of household budget get taken up with housing costs, leaving people unable to afford the essential food and fuel. Given this is a systemic issue, the immediate need is help with food and essentials. Debt and benefits support provide the best possible chance at independence, dignity, people being able to make their own choices, moving beyond the cycle of deprivation." **Good Food Oxfordshire**

"A lot of small charities will close as donations from supporters lessen and fundraising becomes more difficult. For victims of domestic abuse the impact will be felt by the whole family as debt, stress, and worry will create a perfect storm." **Clean Slate**

Alongside the need to give immediate support AND think about longer-term impact, was the recognition of issues that affect Oxfordshire in particular. **Access to housing** was seen as the next priority (at 13% of all responses), with awareness of this risk increasing if not tackled in a more considered way.

"Housing needs to be made much more energy efficient through retrofitting, to keep bills lower and to reduce the risk of eviction (through non-payment of rent/utilities/council tax)." **Aspire**

"We see how families have no money for any enriching or extra activities with their children, nor the money for transport to free venues. Children are suffering as a result with a seriously diminished childhood that will play out in their learning and development... We find families in private rented accommodation (common given shortage of social housing) are doubly disadvantaged because of the premium they have to pay on top of housing benefit, and with added instability." **Home Start Oxford**

The rural nature of the county raised the need for regular, affordable, and reliable public **transport**, or support for the community groups to provide transport. This issue was raised many times in the comments, together with how those with more complex needs require additional and specialist support.

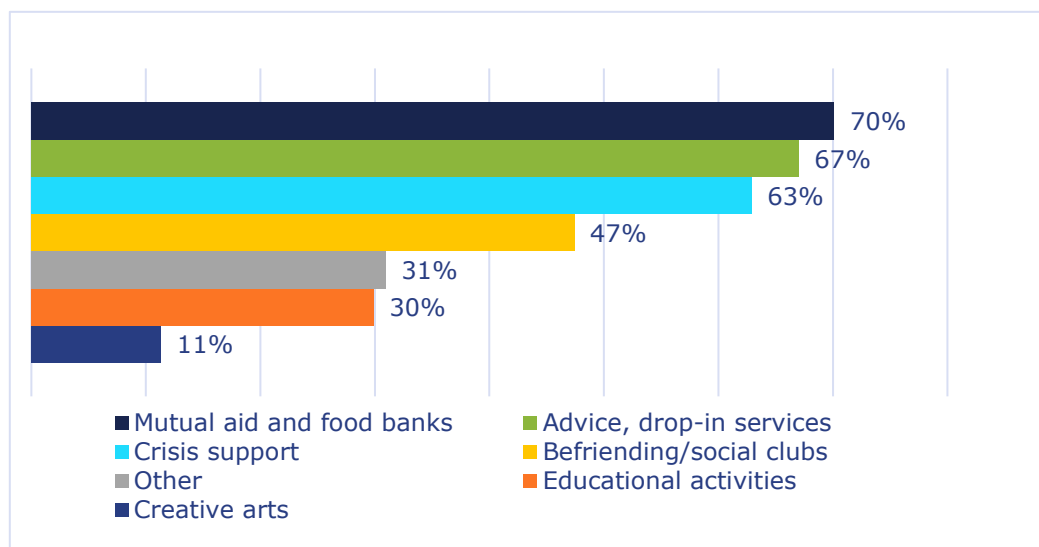
"Most of our members have been confined to their homes for long periods over Covid, and now some of the activities they previously engaged in have not resumed. Most live in residential homes or similar, they cannot travel independently but there are not sufficient support staff to accompany them. If we were able to provide transport, we could provide activities to lift their mood and improve the quality of their lives at this difficult time." **Oxford and District Mencap**

"Now the Wolvercote mini-bus that took them shopping has ceased, as has the only bus serving the community, access to shops can be a problem. Paying for a taxi is sometimes the only option." **Cotteslowe Seniors**

"The elderly are a very proud generation and a subsidy to their usual paid activity such as attending a day centre is more acceptable than direct benefits." **Wychwoods Day Centre**



What type of activity would best support communities with the cost-of-living crisis?



Respondents again chose from a picklist of options to answer this question; this time they were able to choose as many options as they wanted. **Mutual aid and food banks; advice and drop-in services; and crisis support** were clearly the leading activities to be funded. Every respondent chose more than one option, proving the need for multiple support activities. Responses to the "Other" option included practical support, setting up community hubs, specialist help, and direct financial support.

"We have seen a massive increase in food parcels requests and drop-ins at the café for free meals the past months, and not only from the most disadvantaged but from couples who are both working but can't pay their bills as not enough money for everything." **Waste2Taste CIC**

"We are seeing unprecedented demand for our services. We advised 200 more households last year than in the previous year...Many more people than usual are in severe financial hardship. We are delivering crisis support in combination with our advice services. Our own costs have increased, but we have less time to spend on fundraising because it is all hands on deck to meet the advice/crisis support needs for all those who contact us." **Agnes Smith Advice Centre**

In the workshop, there were a lot of parallel discussions about having a **dedicated, safe, and warm space**, particularly in the winter, for people to meet and be social, across all of Oxfordshire. This would also be a trusted space, available for all the community and with support activities and resources, including food and meals. This type of hub was also raised as important for young people and families, as well as more vulnerable groups. The crisis creates unsafe situations, on many levels, as people cannot afford to leave their homes.

"Our young people struggle to leave the house." **BYHP**

"Survivors of sexual and/or domestic violence are less likely to feel safe to leave abusive situations due to fears of the rising costs of living independently. We have also had service users not attend appointments due to costs of travel." **Oxfordshire Sexual Abuse & Rape Crisis Centre**

"Being too afraid to ask for help because of fear of discrimination. The stigma of not being able to manage/look after your family is difficult to admit to." **Down to Earth Community Café**

"Local groups know their communities best and can target those who need the most help." **The Ray Collins Charitable Trust**

"The cost-of-living crisis has come quickly on the heels of the Covid crisis so some of our most disadvantaged families are being further disadvantaged. One of the things that we have done successfully is to run drop-in play and learn/family support sessions for young children and their families in local villages this summer. Taking services more locally has enabled us to engage with some isolated families and give and signpost to sources of advice/support. Venue hire and staffing requirements make this a more expensive way of delivering services though." **The Maple Tree**



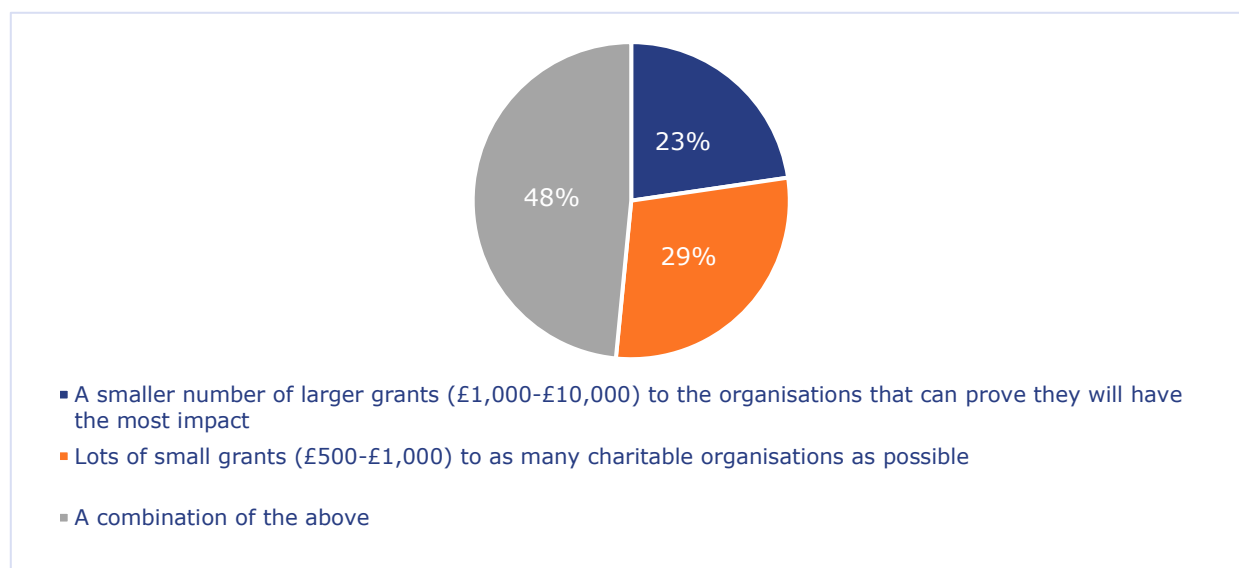
Charitable groups would welcome **more time to network**, share ideas, resources, and what works, as well as more help to promote their services. These organisations are working at breaking point currently, with demand for their services higher than ever before. This is before knowing what will happen later in the year, as so many of their service users were already struggling last winter.

"It will be different across the county, but there will be individuals struggling everywhere and many may be isolated and not aware of support out there. Community groups that can truly ensure information is distributed to local parishes are important in identifying individuals that might not otherwise ask for help."

Citizens Advice West Oxfordshire

"Support from OCF to promote the activities that take place as a result of the funding, so initiatives can reach those who need them most." **The Berin Centre**

How should funding be targeted?



Nearly half (48.5%) of all respondents agreed that a **mix of smaller and larger grants** would be the best use of limited funds. This would allow the grants to tackle both immediate crisis response as well as longer-term solutions.

Additionally, the comments and discussion raised the fact that charities' own core costs would also increase, so core costs should be a significant part of the funding, particularly as at the same time they are having to reduce or remove any fees for their services. Many smaller organisations do not have the resource for dedicated fundraising and are focusing on service delivery.

"Core costs to help charities cover the extra expenses would be most beneficial at this time, similar to Covid response. We are all working hard to alleviate the problems, and we don't have time to reinvent projects, we need to be trusted to continue doing what we do best." **My Vision Oxfordshire**

"Anything that will allow charities to absorb their fuel costs would be beneficial." **2nd Abingdon Scout Group**

"Flexibility is always helpful – the crisis will hit different organisations and the people they serve in different ways." **ACT Oxford**

"Like all charities running premises, we're seeing a huge rise in our food and energy costs. We predict that we'll need to spend another £18-£25K on utilities next year. Making funding for core costs like this would help us tremendously." **Emmaus Oxford**

"We are concerned paying for toddler group may not be perceived as priority for families compared to paying for electric/heating." **Great Western Park Baby & Toddler Group**

"Funding towards staffing would enable us to open up the Community Centre more often and for other services to run during the day from the Centre. This could benefit the local community, including more vulnerable people, by giving access to company, warmth, our Community Fridge and allow partnerships, with other organisations, to come in and support with advice, signposting, education, art activity and so on." **South Oxford Community Association**



Conclusions

The needs of communities persist and have increased – charities and community groups are seeing a huge increase in demand, from existing users with more or deepened issues, as well as new users of their services. This demand is far beyond what they saw during the pandemic. There is a genuine fear from the community as to how they will cope.

Cost of living issues are multiple and inter-related – crisis support funding is vital to meet the demand for essentials – food, heating, clothing – together with practical support and guidance. The community needs and wants to know where to go and what help is available across a range of concerns.

Super local community hubs are needed – services need to be close by and delivered by trusted organisations. This means widening the services offered (delivering community activities and food and practical advice) or utilising a partnership of organisations within an existing community hub.

More complex issues and preventative solutions will take longer to resolve – local charitable organisations have the experience to support their communities, but not necessarily the right 'toolbox'. Offering more personal support or fixing the source of a problem, rather than offering a sticking plaster solution, takes more time and resources. However, this future-proof approach will provide greater benefits to the community overall.

Charities need investment to continue – at a time when they need to offer heavily discounted or free services, their own costs are rising, there are fewer volunteers (as they have gone back to work or are unable to now offer support), and the salaried roles charities can afford are not attractive or competitive.

Charitable organisations need support to promote their services – to ensure they are reaching all those who need their services, but also so that the organisations themselves are aware of all the support on offer and can signpost confidently.



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