### ENGAGE DUNDEE SURVEY 2023: EXPLORING EXPERIENCES OF THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS

volunteers debt
activities struggling hopelessness
services advice food savings
carer mental transport
shame social larders helplines
work stigma wellbeing
disability family lifestyle loneliness
electricity benefits support gas community
resources bills stress cold health
access money pervasive

# **BACKGROUND**

The survey was a collective effort between national and local organisations and information gathered will aid efforts to tackle inequalities and support residents to cope in the current financial climate. The survey explored difficulties/changes experienced, personal finances, use of services, health and wellbeing, and future support. Information on personal characteristics was also collected. The survey opened in September 2023, was promoted across a range of platforms, and support provided for people to participate. Data was analysed by officers in Dundee City Council and NHS Tayside.

### **WHO RESPONDED?**

The survey was completed by 1181 individuals from all parts of the city. The majority were female and working aged, most were in employment, just fewer than half were home owners and almost one quarter lived alone. One third were on means-tested benefits, 1 in 12 unemployed, and 1 in 10 unfit for work. 259 individuals were providing unpaid care for another person. 699 incidences of disability or ill health were reported, most commonly mental health issues and long-term conditions.

## **RESULTS**

**Household costs:** the minority reported coping financially across all categories of household expenses eg food, childcare, broadband, gas/electricity, rent/mortgage. Upwards of 70% were struggling to manage the cost of basics such as food and home energy.

**Transport and accessibility:** fewer than half of those who used public transport were coping with cost/availability and over three-quarters struggled to afford taxis if necessary. 70% were struggling with the cost of running their own vehicle including those who needed it to get to work.

**Leisure/ social activities:** many could not find the money to use local facilities or pay for special occasions meaning that life lacked pleasure. 61% were struggling to afford to see family and friends. Respondents often felt isolated and that their children were missing out on valuable experiences.

**Relationships:** family relationships were slightly less impacted than other aspects of people's lives. Relationships that were most vulnerable were those out-with immediate family perhaps due to the cost of transport and lack of affordability of social occasions.

**Personal finances:** the majority had been unable to afford regular bills or payments, some making difficult financial decisions on how to spend limited resources. 8 in 10 had used savings, 59% were unable to pay an unexpected but necessary expense and the same proportion borrowed more money.

**On-line and telephone support:** using telephone helplines or advice lines at a local or national level was not a positive experience for the majority. However, two thirds of those who used websites or self-help resources found it to be positive.

**Specific types of support:** this explored areas where people might require advice such as money, health, or employment. Where people used these services it was more likely to be positive than not.

**Specific cost of living support:** this assessed whether respondents had used specific and targeted cost of living support. Participants found this overwhelmingly positive with satisfaction ratings of over 90% for free/low cost meals and activities in community buildings.

It was not uncommon for respondents to be unaware of services or think they did not qualify because they were employed. Others were ashamed to admit they were struggling or had negative experiences before so did not want to ask for support again. Many positive comments were made about the non-stigmatising support provided in communities.

**Health and wellbeing:** 86% reported stress-related feelings as a result of the cost of living. 73% reported low mood, 56% social isolation and 50% hopelessness. 71% were sleeping worse and almost half of those with pre-existing physical or mental health problems stated these had worsened. A similar proportion felt less able to carry out their job. Respondents commented on other impacts with some unable to afford special diets, dental treatment and non-prescribed medication.

Changes over the past 12 months: the survey explored whether there had been potentially positive changes such as more community spirit or active travel. A minority indicated changes with the exceptions of wasting less food and cutting down on things they didn't need.

**Future support:** the most commonly requested option was access to low-cost/free activities followed by support with health and wellbeing. Other suggestions included support to get into work, more face-to-face appointments, access to benefits, better housing, and increased support for homeowners.

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

- The majority of those who responded are struggling with cost of living
- Many are just keeping their heads above water and others are not making ends meet
- Ability to cope with life changes and escalating costs is likely to reduce
- People are cutting back significantly on social and leisure activities
- Some feel hopeless and are making difficult choices on how to spend limited finances
- There are significant impacts on health, wellbeing, and lifestyles
- Struggling financially is pervasive and a source of shame and stigma
- Services are a lifeline but do not meet the needs of everybody
- If the economic climate does not improve the need for support may increase

"My mental health has suffered greatly due to worrying constantly about having enough money for basic needs."

"I am existing but not living."

"I know I am not currently in crisis mode but this is unsustainable and I know it will eventually get to crisis mode. It just all feels so hopeless."

This type of survey has limitations. People could choose whether to respond, some might have been excluded, and those who did participate may have been more affected by the cost of living. Whilst the information is useful, we cannot assume that all residents are facing the same challenges and conclusions cannot be made about specific services.

#### **NEXT STEPS**

The results of the Engage Dundee survey are being shared in a range of settings including with communities and respondents who left their contact details. Discussions and further analyses will help raise awareness, discuss possible actions, and agree priorities.