

Arun and Chichester Citizens Advice

Cost of Living Survey: Executive Summary

The 2024 cost-of-living survey was designed to gather up-to-date insights into how residents of Arun and Chichester are coping with sustained economic pressures. This is our third survey which builds on previous years' surveys and aims to assess whether government interventions such as cost-of-living payments, housing support schemes, and energy discounts have had any tangible impact.

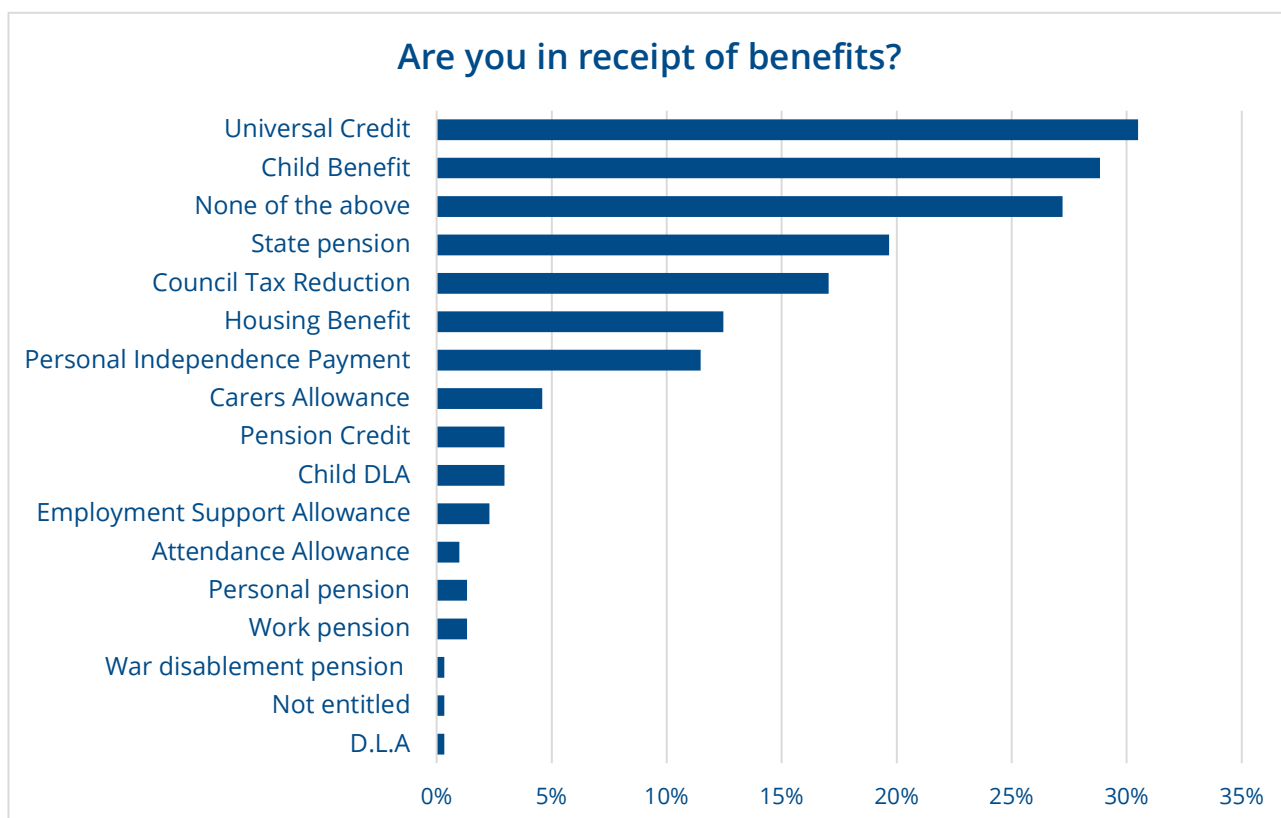
Importantly, the survey also sought to better understand how structural inequalities continue to shape the experiences of specific groups, particularly those who are disabled, have a long-term health condition, or who are reliant on welfare. As with prior surveys, special attention was given to identifying any groups that may have been overlooked in public policy responses, such as individuals in work but earning below a realistic living wage or those just above benefit thresholds.

Demographic of respondents

The total number of respondents was 360, with 57% of residents living in Arun and 31% in Chichester. 12% of respondents lived in other areas.

Benefits and Debt

A significant number of survey respondents are receiving some form of benefits with Universal Credit being the most reported (approximately 31%) and Child Benefit (approximately 30%). 28% of respondents were not in receipt of any benefits.



Other commonly received benefits included the State Pension (19%) and Council Tax Reduction (17%), and Housing Benefit (about 13%). Smaller groups reported receiving Personal Independence Payment (11%), Carers Allowance (5%), Employment Support Allowance (2%), Pension Credit (3%), and Attendance Allowance (1%).

This survey highlights a notable change in benefit uptake compared to the previous year. In this year's survey, around 28% of respondents reported they were not receiving any benefits. This is significantly lower than last year's results where 47% of respondents reported not receiving any benefits. The increase in benefit claimants suggests that a growing number of people are now depending on financial assistance, potentially driven by rising cost-of-living pressures.

Almost 50% of respondents reported having no debts while 30% of participants have credit or store card debt, followed by borrowing from friends or family (26%), indicating that informal lending remains a key coping strategy. Smaller but notable percentages reported utility arrears (16%), personal loans (12%) and unauthorised overdrafts (9%). Less commonly, respondents mentioned mortgage arrears, payday loans and repayments on Universal Credit advances, each accounting for a small minority. Compared to last year's survey, the findings still show that many households continue to rely on borrowing to get

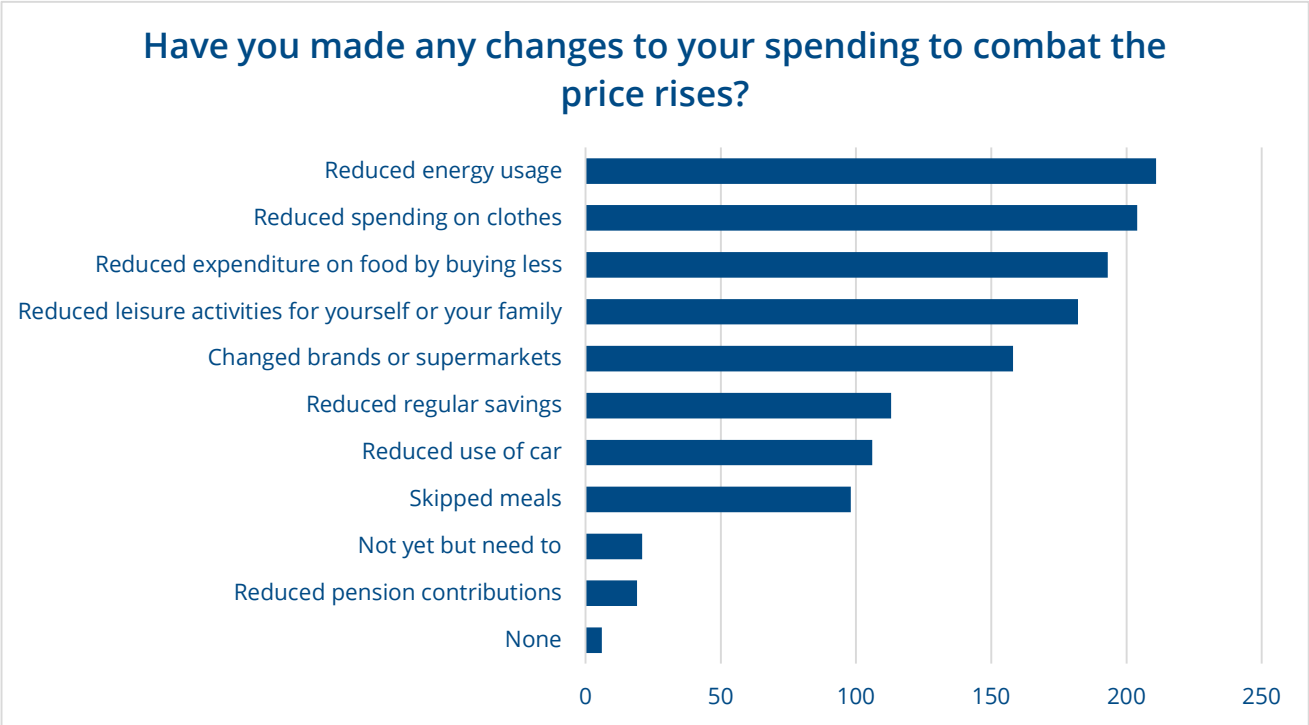
by. This financial pressure is not only reflected in the numbers but also in the everyday experiences of respondents.

Disability or long-term health condition

Participants were asked if they have a physical or mental health condition lasting or expected to last 12 months or more. Of 360 respondents, 226 people (about 64%) said they have a long-term health condition or illness, while 129 people (approximately 36%) said they do not. This highlights that a significant majority of respondents are living with long-term health challenges, which may make them even more vulnerable to the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis. Interestingly, only 41 respondents said they were claiming Personal Independence Payment. This is indicative of a broader issue that is reflected on a national level, of a low uptake of disability and health-related benefits, the result of which is disabled people and people with long-term health conditions not receiving the support they need. This is especially concerning during a cost-of-living crisis that is already disproportionately affecting this demographic.

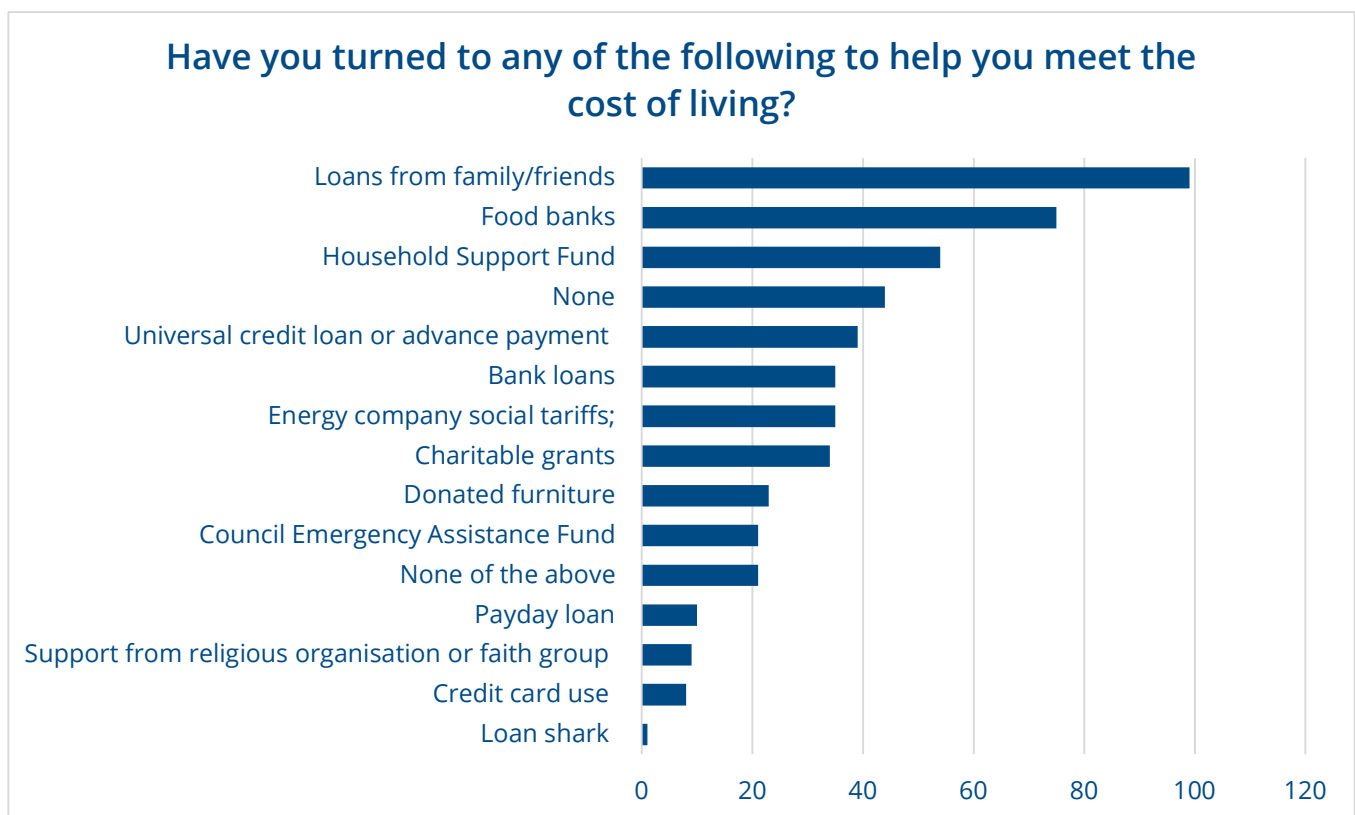
Impact of the cost of living

Behavioural changes



Most respondents have made changes to their spending in response to rising prices. The most common action was reducing energy usage, reported by 211 people, followed closely by spending less on clothes (204) and buying less food (193). These changes show that people are cutting back on both essentials and everyday needs to manage rising costs.

Alarming, 98 participants said they had skipped meals, highlighting the severity of hardship for some households. 59 people (60%) who reported skipping meals also stated having a disability or long-term health condition. A smaller number said they had not yet made changes but felt they needed to (21), and 19 respondents reported reducing pension contributions. Only 6 people said they had made no changes at all.



While nearly half of respondents said that they had no further areas left to cut back on, this chart shows that many have still not accessed formal support to help manage the cost of living. Loans from family or friends were the most common source of help, used by 99 respondents, followed by food banks (75) and the Household Support Fund (54). These figures suggest that many are relying on informal or emergency support, rather than structured financial assistance.

Fewer respondents accessed Universal Credit loans or advance payments (39), bank loans (35), or energy company social tariffs (35). Others reported using charitable grants (34) and receiving donated furniture (23), while 21 people had accessed the Council Emergency Assistance Fund.

Use of less conventional sources was lower but still present, 10 respondents had used payday loans, 9 had turned to faith-based support, and 8 used credit cards.

Mental Health

To understand how people are feeling about the ongoing crisis, respondents were asked how worried they are about the current rise in the cost of living. The results show a clear sense of concern across the board. 70% of respondents said they are very worried, while a further 24% said they are a little worried. Only 5% said they were not worried at all, and 1% were unsure.

These figures reflect a high level of anxiety within the community and are in line with last year's findings, where most people also expressed serious concern about affordability. The dominance of "very worried" as a response suggests that this crisis is not only continuing but also deepening, leaving people increasingly uncertain about how they will cope with essential costs such as energy, food, and housing.

Following on from the question on overall financial concerns, respondents were asked to identify which specific living costs are currently contributing to their worries. The results show that utilities (gas, heating, water, and electricity) were the top concern mentioned by 299 respondents. This was closely followed by groceries and weekly food shopping, with 271 people expressing concern about the rising cost of feeding themselves and their families.

Only a small number of respondents (20) said that none of these costs were currently causing them concern.

Physical Health

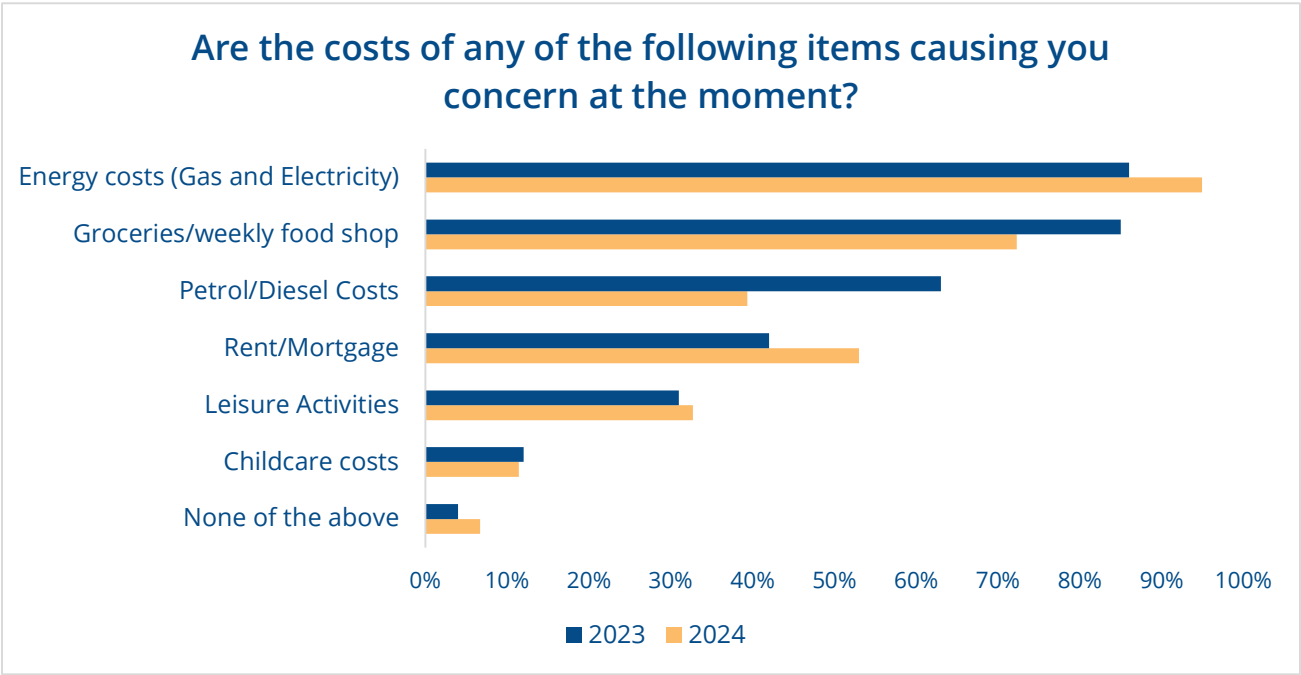
Of those whose physical health had been impacted by the cost of living, 46% of female respondents and 20% of male respondents said their health had become "a little worse", while 23% of women and 9% of men reported that their health had become "much worse".

Only 1% of respondents noted that their health had slightly improved, and a very small number, including those who identified as non-binary also reported experiencing worsening health, though in low numbers.

The findings show that the level of worries people have is far higher for those that have health conditions. Even with NHS support, individuals face additional costs such as medication, travel expenses, treatment costs and other healthcare needs, meaning their monthly budget needs to stretch further making it harder to absorb rising costs of essentials like food, housing and utilities.

2024 in comparison to 2023

Most of the respondents (77%) reported being worse off this time last year, with only 5% reporting being better off. Interestingly, when we look at the difference by health status, 82% of people who report having a health condition are worse off compared to 67% without a health condition. Interestingly, 8% of those with no health conditions reported being better off whilst only 3% of those with health conditions said they were better off.



The general trends of which costs are causing people concern have remained consistent across both surveys. In both 2023 and 2024, energy costs were the main cause of concern, closely followed by groceries. In 2024 rent and mortgage costs are of higher concern than in last year's survey. Petrol and diesel costs have reduced significantly in this year's survey.

When looking at individual costs, people in 2024 are more concerned with energy costs than in 2023, which is not surprising due to the volatile energy

market. Less people were concerned about petrol/ diesel costs in 2024 when compared with the previous survey, this could be due to the decrease in those costs in the latter part of 2024 when the survey was distributed.

Free comments

We had three questions in the survey where participants were asked if they had any further comments or additional thoughts they would like to share.

Whilst much of the conversation surrounding the cost-of-living crisis has been focused on the effects of rising energy for those on the lowest incomes, this theme did not factor significantly in the additional comments. Many respondents outlined that they have had to make behavioural changes in order to cope with rising prices and that this will have wider implications for their long-term future.

What appeared to be prevalent was the effects on those who are above the income threshold and not able to receive benefits, similar to last year's survey. Many people who have otherwise been in relatively good financial health feel that they are falling through the gaps and being left with no support. Households with working parents and children feel they have been greatly impacted by rising costs, as being in full-time work reduces the amount of support they receive.

I'm struggling with food
Grateful for help available House prices and rent are out of control
People need help I need to feed my children
Stress and sleepless nights
My children need school uniform
More and more people are struggling
Limited and expensive food shopping
Housing benefit is not in line with current rental costs
Cost of living is high Council Tax is too high

Conclusion

The findings from this year's survey closely mirror those of last year, indicating that the situation remains largely unchanged. The key concerns around rising costs have remained consistent throughout both surveys, highlighting that the same cost-of-living challenges continue to affect people—despite ongoing support efforts from the government and local authorities.

People with health conditions and disabilities are more worried about the rising cost of living but are less able to cut back on spending to make savings. Furthermore, the physical and mental wellbeing of disabled people and people with long-term health conditions has been disproportionately, negatively affected by the crisis.

Another significant group of residents in Arun and Chichester feeling overlooked during this crisis are those on low incomes who do not qualify for benefits or financial assistance. Many are living on the edge financially, and without appropriate support, they risk slipping into serious hardship. Respondents state that they earn too much to be eligible for benefit or grant support, but not enough to get by.

Furthermore, there is a clear indication that many people, despite struggling immensely with the cost of living, are not taking advantage of external support that they may be entitled to. There was a small proportion of respondents who had a disability or long-term health condition who were also claiming PIP (41 respondents). Accessing charitable support and initiatives such as the Household Support Fund and energy company social tariffs was also low amongst all survey respondents.

Arun and Chichester Citizens Advice will continue to promote awareness of benefits, grants, schemes and charitable support to ensure residents are well-informed about the assistance they can access.

Lastly, we have seen that considerably more respondents said that they were in debt in the 2024 survey than in 2023. Thus, even if the immediate crisis of high prices begins to decline, the long-term implications of the cost of living will have repercussions for years to come.

Recommendations

We welcome the decision by the government to extend the Household Support Fund for another phase (HSF7), we are equally delighted to welcome the Government's new £1billion Crisis and Resilience Fund as a "lifeline" to those facing financial difficulty- moreover, this fund is to be placed on a permanent footing. A more sustainable, long-term plan for localised social welfare will enable local authorities to plan and ensure consistent support for those that currently have no way out of deprivation.

Secondly, Arun & Chichester Citizens Advice continues to collaborate with the district and borough Councils and other charitable organisations in the community to improve the visibility of available support. There is a particular need to raise awareness of non-means-tested assistance, which can be vital for households that do not qualify for benefits but are still facing financial hardship. A more targeted approach is also essential to reach the most vulnerable members of our communities, such as individuals who depend on medical equipment to ensure that they can access all available support, including hardship grants.

With imminent changes to the Welfare system, we also need to work to increase the uptake of disability-related benefits, working with the DWP and other local organisations to help overcome the various administrative challenges that prevent many people with disabilities and long-term health conditions from accessing the support that they are entitled to.

Lastly, we recommend that local authorities and other organisations that work to reduce poverty levels adopt a comprehensive Financial Resilience Framework aimed at protecting the most vulnerable from the ongoing impacts of the cost-of-living crisis. This framework should focus on addressing the root causes of poverty while empowering individuals and communities to build long-term financial resilience, enabling them to better withstand future financial shocks. Taking a holistic approach to poverty reduction will not only ease the immediate hardship faced by those currently in need but also support the long-term prevention of poverty and destitution across Arun and Chichester.

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