



Northumberland County Council

FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 07 March 2024

Inequalities, Poverty and Hardship Plan

Report of Councillor(s) Guy Renner-Thompson, Cabinet Member for Inspiring Young People

Responsible Officer(s): Audrey Kingham, Executive Director for Children, Young People & Education

1. **Link to Key Priorities of the Corporate Plan**

This report is relevant to the following priorities in the NCC Corporate Plan 2023-26:

- Achieving value for money: Ensuring best use of resources and
- Tackling Inequalities: Working collaboratively to support residents soonest and to greatest effect.
- Driving Economic Growth: Building on strengths and connections to enable residents to see and access opportunities available to them.

2. **Purpose of report**

To update on the progress of the Poverty and Hardship plan, with a focus on children and young people.

3. **Recommendations**

- 3.1 Family and Children Scrutiny committee are recommended to consider and comment on progress described in this report, which has been amended and updated from the report taken to Health and Wellbeing Board in December 2023.

4. **Forward plan date and reason for urgency if applicable**

11 January 2024

5. Background

- 5.1 The Poverty and Hardship Plan - Section 4.5 of the System Inequalities plan - is Northumberland County Council's response to financial hardship and cost of living pressures.
- 5.2 This work aims to keep residents to stay safe and well while enduring cost of living pressures and to prevent further widening of the inequalities gap, supporting the longer-term preventative and proactive measures in the wider system inequalities plan.
- 5.3 It was previously agreed (HWB OSC 6th September 2022 and HWBB 8th September 2022) that £1m from the Public Health reserve be available to support the council's implementation of a Poverty and Hardship Plan.
- 5.4 The plan was developed and is delivered with representation from key areas of the Council and the Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise sector (VCSE). Priorities drawn from Public Health prioritisation exercise: 'aim to reduce inequalities' and 'local need', 'evidence of impact/ effectiveness', and 'prevention'. It includes relevant reports of Holiday Activity and Food investment (£1.02m) and Household Support Funding (£4,96 m)
- 5.5 **Population Health Management funding** in addition to the Public Health reserves, £1 million was committed to NCC by Northumberland Clinical Commissioning Group (now Integrated Care Board) via section 256 agreement.
- 5.6 £430K allocated to Population Health Management/Health Inequalities Fund for communities (£250,000), and Creative Health Strategic Manager.
- 5.7 November 2022 System Transformation Board agreed proposals for £570K cost of living funding for additional Citizens Advice Capacity, Make Every Contact Count trainer, and additional energy support via Primary Care.
- 5.8 Governance: The Section 256 funding and the Poverty and Hardship plan sit within the Inequalities plan and report therein.
- 5.9 **Areas of focus for the plan:**
The poverty and hardship plan focuses on
- hardship support including Household Support Fund, food, fuel and warm homes,
 - mitigating the impact of poverty and cost of living on children and young people,
 - building resilience in our households and communities.
- 5.10 Northumberland is an asset and opportunity rich county; the plan supports our aspiration that all residents can live their best life, and that children and young people are able and supported to thrive. Understanding our challenges and strengths and working together to build solutions is key.

6. Working with Knowledge

The council has access to information and data which can ensure the greatest impact and best value from limited resources available.

- 6.1 LIFT tool (Low Income Family Tracker) combines a welfare policy analytics engine with local authority data to identify financially struggling residents, design appropriate confidential, non-stigmatising interventions, and track the effectiveness of these interventions.
- 6.2 Development of a poverty and hardship data dashboard combining mixed source available information to give insights into household expenditure and current costs.

7. Financial pressures on households with low incomes

The impact of inflation which for housing fuel and water peaked at 11.8% in January, food prices rose by 19.2% in June 2023 – the highest for 45 years, while inflation is currently 4% (10.9% January 2023) long term average is 2.8% and prices are not following at pace.

- 7.1 Average weekly wages at £543 compared to £613 in England and £539 in the North East. Households are spending an average of 16% more on housing, fuel and water, and 27% more on food. Northumberland has a 5.7% unemployment rate (national 3.6%). Around 21000 households claim Universal Credit (UC).
- 7.2 31% of Northumberland children are living in poverty, two thirds of these live in a working household.
- 7.3 There are 11,100 children in Northumberland living in families with UC debt deductions (58% of all children living in UC households), losing an average of £75 per month from their entitlement – or a collective total of £420,000 a month across the county.
- 7.4 Free School Meal (FSM) entitlement is for families earning less than £14,000 per year on UC, or £16,190 per year on Child Tax or Working Tax credit. Low income is defined as 60% of the median which in the current year is £19,134.00. 10278 Northumberland children are eligible for FSM.
- 7.5 Rural residents typically spend between 10-20% more on everyday requirements than those living in urban settings, despite average wages being some 7.5 per cent lower.

Household Support Fund (HSF)

- 7.6 Household Support Fund is to provide crisis and financial support to households in most need with food, fuel, and essentials, particularly for residents not entitled to other government support.
- 7.7 £3,142,349 has been awarded to vulnerable households – a total of 67,824 awards.
- 7.8 Household Children made up £1,784,556 of this. Children with a Disability/Special Education Needs are counted within Household Disabled Person which has seen additional awards totalling £675,406
- 7.9 By volume most awards were made ahead of school holidays to families with children entitled to Free School Meals (18997 awards), followed by energy and fuel support (2818), food support (2519), and energy essentials and wider essentials (1983).

- 7.10 More than £1m of awards were made in vouchers.
- 7.11 **Citizens Advice Northumberland** capacity – CAB currently manage £6m+ in debt, in the last year worked with 3199 clients, more than 1800 in relation to cost of living.
- 7.12 **Citizens Advice at the School Gates** North of Tyne Combined Authority core funded and in line with asset based working. Citizens Advice upskill local workforce to provide quality assured advice in school setting and direct CAB referral through Northumberland Frontline.
- 7.13 Autumn term 65 families supported across the 11 schools, achieving financial benefit gains of £129,000 and supporting clients with a total of £63,400 of debts.
- 7.14 Community advice in Primary care for the same period: 86 referrals, £483,879.58 in financial results for these clients.
- 7.15 A Financial Wellbeing collaborative has been initiated working with the Community Bank, Citizens Advice, and key stakeholders from all sectors. Using the Money and Pensions Services Financial Wellbeing strategy the group will first produce a simple pathway early in 2024 for residents to navigate the financial wellbeing advice and support available across the life course. Into 2024 the group will consider financial education and resilience for children and young people.

8. Warm spaces and pop ups

- 8.1 The warm spaces network is live ahead of winter with 102 spaces registered and offering a warm and social space to residents across the county. In line with Inequalities Plan question 2 - "What can communities do with a little help" - community embedded staff continue to work alongside our warm space network, and others to take forward initiatives that build cohesion and resilience at place.

9. Access to fresh and affordable food

- 9.1 Food support is the highest demand on Northumberland Communities Together (NCT) with a third of weekly calls (average 209) regarding food. Citizens Advice reports similar increases for crisis support managing an average of 1200 cost of living related issues per month for clients, predominantly crisis and charitable support.
- 9.2 Across the county 20+ food based resilience building pilot activities are in place including community lunch clubs, breakfast meet ups, growing walls, after school food, homework clubs, and community fridges. We commit to identifying best practice in addressing food affordability and access to healthy food.

10. Food insecurity and children

- 10.1 Northumberland County Council committed to continue supporting families eligible for Free School Meals during school holidays issuing HUGG supermarket vouchers to 10482 children/families (3724 Children with Special Needs and Disability) via schools to the value of £250 per child across the 6 holiday periods (01/04/23 - 31/03/24).
- 10.2 2024 pilot "auto enrolment" Free School Meals meaning entitlements in place at the earliest time giving families and schools access the national financial support available.

- 10.3 Northumberland Holiday Provision (HAF) provides the scope and funding for partners & providers across the county to engage free school meal eligible children and young people in enriching camps and activities that all include a food offer. Delivery is local and saw more than 9000 eligible children attending activities or camps in 2022, efficacy rate for Free School Meal children is around 43% - 62% varying per holiday, (the national average efficacy varies from 17% to 32%).
- 10.4 Healthy Start vouchers provide families with support towards fruit, vegetables, milk and vitamins. Current uptake is 77% of 2468 eligible families: A rise from 66% (Jan 2023) can be attributed to a refreshed collaborative effort across family hubs, community, and public health.

11. Warm Homes – Energy Pathways

- 11.1 Fuel poverty is driven by low incomes, high energy prices and energy inefficient homes. Households are fuel poor if after accounting for fuel costs households are left with a minimal income. We also see correlation between fuel poverty and debt.
- 11.2 Northumberland Energy Pathway makes up around 30% of the current Household Support Fund projected spend (£1.4m). Over the reporting period May to December 2023 1229 households have accessed energy support and resilience measures administered by Citizens Advice energy team:

£351,249 potential Income Gain, including £35,437 in benefits awards

£403,365 other supports, including Energy Efficiency advice

£16,800 Debts written off

- 11.3 **Energy Pathway Plus** (Warm Homes on Prescription) prioritises households adversely affected by cold homes for energy efficiency and support interventions, including larger families and households with a member with a disability. This work is a collaboration between NCT, Citizens Advice, Community Action Northumberland, NCC Environment team, Public Health, and Primary Care, including the additional investment from Integrated Care Board (see 4.6)
- 11.4 To date 62 clients have benefitted from an energy audit and bespoke interventions: Income gain - £38,706 including maximizing income/Warm Home Discounts, other income gain (including Energy Efficiency advice/savings) £25,336
- 11.5 70% on signposting and resilience building (eg to Solid Foundations employability programme)

12. Children and young people : Starting and Growing Up Well:

- 12.1 For the best start and to grow up well, children must be able to see and access opportunities available to them. The plan acknowledges the significant support activity across the county but notes barriers to children and young people accessing education, enrichment, and gaining key life skills to build their futures.
- 12.2 **Eat Sleep Play Learn fund** This funding has four broad categories: eating, sleeping, playing, and learning. 262 awards have been made to date to the value of £44742.44 directly benefiting children and young people – most awards are for beds, bedding, clothes, and uniform items.
- 12.3 **Holiday Activity and Food Programme (HAF)** Department for Education funded (£1.02m for Northumberland p/a), HAF is designed to remove pressures from

families during school holidays and provide food, and fun, enriching activities for children entitled to Free School Meals. Northumbria University evidenced that every £1 spent on HAF added £11 in wider social benefits for families.

- 12.4 Securing additional funding from National Lottery Community Fund / North East Child Poverty Trust has enabled Northumberland to expand our community led offer to include children experiencing other barriers such as bereavement, disability, or social and emotional factors. Northumberland's Holiday Provision is coordinated in partnership with Leading Link.
- 12.5 In 2022 9965 children and young people attended HAF camps and activities, 883 with Special Educational Needs / Disability over all three holiday periods. Still awaiting winter data, 5300 children have attended more than 23,000 sessions in 2023. Northumberland HAF 2023 focused on developing a teen programme (HAF+) to date there have been 6 teenager camps with 1395 teenagers attending HAF overall.
- 12.6 Winter 2023-24 24 camps offered combined places of 2995 children and the equivalent of 89 days of enriching activities with each camp averaging just under 4 days.
- 12.7 Q20 events live theatre in 7 venues across the county over 4 days including an accessible performance.
- 12.8 Winter Family Activities: Wide range of enriching and engaging activities facilitated by more than 30 partners across Northumberland all with lunch, ranging from physical to educational.
- 12.9 Northumbria University's external evaluation of Northumberland's HAF provision documents a well-coordinated programme making significant difference to children's wellbeing, self-esteem, and school readiness.
- 12.10 HAF providers are working together with partners to form a Children and Young People Network as part of Thriving Together – our VCSE Support Contract. This network, launching in March, will encourage sharing best practice, build relationships, and increase readiness for future collaborative funding opportunities.

13. Mitigating poverty in an education setting

- 13.1 Proposals were invited from education colleagues – early years through to Further Education – that responded to local need, reduced inequalities, incorporated prevention, built upon community strengths and offered value for money.
- 13.2 To date proposals to the value of £177,000 have been funded–
 - 8 school led interventions addressing the inequality gap in attainment and supporting children to stay in school.
 - 3 proposals are out of school activity- rural youth provision, a listening exercise to capture the views of young people in Ashington, and emotional wellbeing programming.
 - 2 years of Globalbridge support – a CV builder tool effective in showcasing alternative and vocational skills and readiness for work.
- 13.3 **Education family support role:** additional capacity to work with children and young people at risk of missing school because of Domestic Abuse, Poverty/homelessness,

or matters arising from Protected Characteristics. This role will ensure the most timely and efficient response to support continuation of education for the young person.

14. Community resilience

- 14.1 Local relationships and access to reliable information help residents feel secure and able to manage. Ensuring good information is available, and building resilience, knowledge and capacity in communities builds on Empowering Communities and System Inequalities Plan.
- 14.2 Cost of Living website published November 2022 and ongoing expansion of Frontline library. 14000 residents have viewed NCC cost of living support, and more than 200 entries on Frontline library with more than 2000 referrals or signposts made. Frontline is commissioned in partnership with Integrated Care Board (ICB), Thriving Together, and the Council.
- 14.3 Citizens Advice community advice model increased to expand support available across Northumberland, including the additional investment from ICB for targeted training to VCSE organisations and Primary Care, complementing the “at the school gates” approach
- 14.4 Make Every Contact Count wellbeing trainer, funded by the ICB, has been in post since July and to date has attended networks and meetings across the county building confidence in talking about money and finance. Working with the Financial Wellbeing group to add value to the pathway development for residents and to take this work forward with a training plan.
- 14.5 Appointed 4 additional locality based fixed term staff to further embed asset-based community development approaches

15. Rural advocacy

- 15.1 Poverty, work, housing, and access to services are all experienced differently in rural settings. This role, embedded in Glendale Community Trust supports residents, and champions initiatives that serve our rural communities and contribute to the development of rural strategy and Combined Authority to ensure Northumberland's unique situation is articulated in regional policy.

16. Employability on a page

- 16.1 Cross sector employability network to create a live Northumberland wide employment and training pathway in one place – easier to navigate for colleagues and residents. This simple tool will be made available to all partners early in 2024.

17. Reading for Wellbeing (R4WB)

- 17.1 Building on the Ann Cleeve initiative the R4WB project workers are being supported by a refreshed steering group to reach into local communities and build capacity in the form of hyper local reading champions for adults and children.

18. Population Health Management/ Health Inequalities Fund

As noted in 4.6 £250,000 funding has been allocated to the VCSE sector in Northumberland to support communities to test new activities and interventions that improve health and life chances in Northumberland.

18.1 This process is managed by the Council's VCSE Support Contract holder – Thriving Together. The fund was launched on 4th May 2023 and 10 awards were agreed on 7th June by a cross sector panel to the value of £199,755.00. Awards were confirmed to applicants on 15th June and delivery period is 1st July 2023-31st December 2024.

18.2 Successful proposals were in relation to young people and substance abuse, neurodivergent women, drama for older residents, biking and employability, sensory impairment, legal advice for life limited patients, health literacy and digital skills, and social isolation.

19. Poverty and Hardship over coming months

19.1 A reserve of £50,000 is in place to be able to respond to needs arising given the current circumstances. The planning group continue to meet and work the plan monthly, an insights session is in planning for early 2024 for wider stakeholders.

20. Options open to the Council and reasons for the recommendations

20.1 Not Applicable

21. Implications

Policy	Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy and Corporate Plan. VCS Liaison Group "Working in and with VCSE in Northumberland" Northumberland Children and Young People's Plan "Partnership's hopes and ambitions for young people in the future."
Finance and value for money	Represents good value for money, ensuring best use of limited resources, and insights for future decision making
Legal	Section 256 arrangement: The NHS Act 2006 makes provision for payments to be made between local authorities and NHS bodies which ensure that any such payments are subject to common conditions concerning financial management. These conditions apply to any payments made using section 76 and 256/257 of the NHS Act 2006.
Procurement	Compliant with procurement process
Human resources	Input from Public Health, Education, Childrens Social Care, and Northumberland Communities Together staff – within existing roles. Additionally supported by VCSE contract holder Thriving Together (in current roles and contract arrangements)
Property	n/a
The Equalities Act: is a full impact	No - not required at this point Addresses wider inequalities including wider determinants of health inequalities. Works to open opportunities, maximise

assessment required and attached?	income, and increase information and knowledge sharing. Informs narrative, understanding, and solutions regarding communities and households experiencing poverty and disadvantage
Risk assessment	n/a
Crime and disorder	Inroads to mitigating poverty and working at place level should have positive impact on crime and disorder over time
Customer considerations	Ensuring information and support is appropriate, effective, and accessible to customers, and best value for money is key to this plan
Carbon reduction	Builds on hyper local and local activity, using existing assets
Health and wellbeing	The funding is to improve the health and wellbeing of residents of Northumberland
Wards	all

22. Background papers

Not applicable

23. Links to other key reports already published

HWBB report December 2023:

<https://northumberland.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s18144/Poverty%20and%20Hardship.pdf>

Northumberland Inequalities Plan:

<https://northumberland.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s11715/03.%20Northumberland%20Inequalities%20Plan%20Report.pdf>

Proposals for the allocation of Public Health Reserves:

[08. Corporate Report Template August 2019.doc \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#)

24. Author and Contact Details

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