



Report of Paul Darby, Corporate Director of Resources, Durham County Council

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To provide an update and consult on the revised County Durham Poverty Action Plan which sets out a comprehensive response to the impacts of the wide-ranging poverty issues within the county, and to raise awareness and engagement for the Child Poverty Action Plan.

Executive summary

- 2 The council co-ordinates its efforts to tackle poverty through the Poverty Action Steering Group (PASG). This is a cross-council senior officer group, chaired by the Corporate Director of Resources and attended by the Cabinet member for Equality and Inclusion.
- 3 Partnership working is key to tackling the issues arising from poverty and during the pandemic this has been strengthened with the use of additional funding to enable those organisations to offer appropriate support when dealing with vulnerable households presenting with financial insecurity.
- 4 Work has therefore been undertaken with PASG and across services to consider the overall vision and objectives for the Strategy refresh – and the actions which will underpin delivery against the objectives set out in the Strategy.
- 5 A draft updated strategy and action plan has been developed as a result of that review process and is presented for consideration. Consultation is being carried out to ensure that partners and other key strategies, such as the emerging Inclusive Economic Strategy, and Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy are fully aligned.
- 6 The Child Poverty Working Group (CPWG) sits under the PASG and membership is made up of representatives from cross council services, key partner organisations such as education, health, police and voluntary and community sector organisations.

- 7 The CPWG has undertaken a refresh of its' plan on a page and associated action plan to reflect the changes in the overarching Poverty Action Strategy and Plan.

Recommendation

- 8 The Health and Wellbeing Board is recommended to note the contents of this report and asked to provide feedback as part of the consultation process.

Background

- 9 The latest annual update report setting out the progress made by the council and its partners in addressing poverty issues across the county was presented to Cabinet 15 December 2021. The report described the work of the council and partners to address and help alleviate the pressures which contribute to vulnerability arising from an individual's inability to meet their personal needs.
- 10 The council co-ordinates its efforts to tackle poverty through the Poverty Action Steering Group (PASG). This is a cross-council senior officer group, chaired by the Corporate Director of Resources and attended by the Cabinet member for Equality and Inclusion.
- 11 The Child Poverty Working Group (CPWG) sits under the PASG and is a multi-agency group of senior managers and leaders, chaired by the strategic manager for Early Help within Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children Service.
- 12 The council has worked closely with many key partners since 2011 to help County Durham residents cope with the changes to welfare and issues relating to poverty. Initially, the focus was on co-ordinating and providing help and assistance to those in crisis. In recognition of the wider impact of the changes on the county, the scope of the PASG was broadened in 2015 to take a more comprehensive overview of the wider poverty issues, and the council's first Poverty Action Plan was approved by Cabinet in October 2015.
- 13 Many of the drivers of poverty, such as the strength of the economy, employment, wage rates, national welfare provision and inflation, are beyond the council's direct control. Therefore, the Council developed a strategy and plan focused on improving services and opportunity for those residents in County Durham who are experiencing poverty.
- 14 The Council's ambition has always been to do more than passively support residents to claim benefits and pay their rent or to help those in crisis. The vision for 2020-21 was to *"to improve the standard of living and daily lives of those residents in County Durham who are currently experiencing immediate financial hardship due to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated economic shocks; and to help alleviate long term issues that can lead households on low incomes to experience financial pressures and poverty"*.
- 15 The Poverty Issues report presented to Cabinet in December 2021 set out in detail the range of factors influencing financial hardship across the county's households; particularly those brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. Government funding and the Council's financial support mechanisms have been utilised to mitigate some of those impacts which have been further compounded by rising costs of living, significant energy

cost increases, removal of the £20 per week Universal Credit and emerging pressures on the economy from recent events in the Ukraine.

Poverty Action Strategy and Plan 2020-2021

- 16 As the COVID-19 pandemic evolved and residents and communities were 'locked down', we started to see a shift in reported issues, particularly in relation to household finance.
- 17 The Poverty Action Strategy and Plan was updated to reflect this in November 2020. Existing actions were brought forward to address the impacts of the pandemic and some new short-to-medium term initiatives and investments were added.
- 18 Emerging actions required to help our residents' financial circumstances during the pandemic were captured under the following strategic aims and four workstreams were taken forward with key partners and stakeholders to help achieve these aims:
 - (a) to improve our understanding of immediate financial hardship and both short and long term poverty, and the impacts on County Durham's residents:
 - (i) short term – restarting/resetting society – June to December 2020;
 - (ii) medium term – living with COVID-19 – 2021;
 - (iii) longer term – recovering – 2022;
 - (b) to foster employability, personal wellbeing and sense of worth for residents experiencing immediate hardship and/or poverty;
 - (c) residents receive the best support and advice available concerning their financial situation; and
 - (d) children and families have access to specific resources in response to the measures in place to combat COVID-19.

Poverty Action Strategy and Plan Review

- 19 Whilst the council has supported its most vulnerable residents over recent years and has intensified support during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is much still to do to promote social inclusion and support financially vulnerable residents and their families.
- 20 The PASG has reviewed the current strategy and action plan. This included consulting with services across the council and informally with key partners to ensure the Council was making best use of our collective resources, learn from what has worked well and identify any gaps, and use of available data and local intelligence to ensure the support is targeted to where it is needed most.

- 21 A PASG workshop was held in January 2022 to look back on what had been delivered and achieved so far and to identify areas where new/ revised practical interventions are required to help mitigate or prevent the impacts of poverty and help shape the revised strategy and action plan.
- 22 Attendees recognised the importance of working with our partners and attendees also highlighted the positive impacts of using intelligence more effectively and combining data to better target support and intervene before people get into crisis. Attendees also noted the need to better join up the Poverty Action Strategy and Plan with other council service delivery plans and the delivery plans of key partners.
- 23 Through group discussions it was apparent that whilst specific actions are still needed to continue to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the new action plan, the overarching vision needs to better address the wider issues of inequalities i.e. to reflect the longer term impacts of all forms of poverty which many residents experienced even before the pandemic and will continue to experience once we 'live and work with Coronavirus' going forward.
- 24 It was also apparent that some actions have been adopted as permanent ways of working i.e. 'business as usual' as they complement and help collectively to address the underlying issues around the county, but there are still gaps in current service provision, where projects and initiatives need to be identified to help achieve new priorities.
- 25 It is recognised that the Inclusive Economic Strategy is fundamental to opening up the routes out of poverty and will be key to ensuring communities are supported to thrive. Maximising money going into our local communities, job creation and supporting businesses to start up and grow are key determinants in terms of tackling systemic and generational poverty issues.
- 26 Work has also been undertaken with Public Health in order to ensure that health needs are better and more closely aligned to the Poverty Strategy.
- 27 Additional engagement exercises with individual council teams and key partners were also delivered to inform the refresh of the Poverty Action Strategy and Plan.
- 28 The CPWG has also refreshed their plan on a page and associated action plan; with the work being aligned across the two key strategic groups (see paragraph 39- 43).

Revised Poverty Action Strategy and Plan

- 29 The strategy aims to provide focus, strategic direction and priorities for improving services and opportunities for residents in County Durham who are experiencing poverty and will cover a four-year period up to 2026.

- 30 The aim is to do more than just support residents to claim benefits and pay their rent or deal with those in crisis, though these remain important components. The PASG are seeking to improve the evidence and analysis and to make it everyone's business to support residents and mitigate the impacts of all forms of poverty. The Council should aspire to developing a compassionate coherent culture that seeks to maximise the value of our collective resources and appreciates the obstacles that internal and external silos create to supporting our financially vulnerable residents.
- 31 To help develop a new Economic Strategy for the county, an economic review of the county has been undertaken and an Economic Statement developed. This was considered and approved by Cabinet in December 2021. This statement provides an overview of our economic performance, suggests the areas of the economy that we need to collectively support, and firmly positions the county in regional and national conversations relating to economic growth and levelling up. Consultation to help frame the development of the Economic Strategy by Summer 2022 is currently underway.
- 32 The review of the Poverty Action Strategy and Plan undertaken by the PASG has considered the council's Economic Statement and wider policy and considered how we can increase access to fresh, healthy, affordable food, support residents struggling with increases in the cost-of-living expenses and loss of income, and how we can help residents improve their overall financial circumstances.
- 33 The Vision for County Durham 2035 was written together with partner organisations and the public and sets out what we would like the county to look like in 15 years' time. It was approved by Council and launched by the County Durham Partnership in 2019.
- 34 The Vision for County Durham is structured around three ambitions, namely:
- (i) More and better jobs
 - (ii) People live long and independent lives
 - (iii) Communities are well connected and supportive of each other
- 35 Each of the three ambitions contains a number of objectives; the following objective which supports 'more and better jobs' has been adopted as the vision of the Poverty Action Steering Group, with the wording "to work together" added in:
- To work together so fewer people will be affected by poverty and deprivation in the county***
- 36 To achieve the best possible outcomes for residents experiencing poverty, it is proposed that the revised strategic objectives will be:

Objective 1: Use intelligence and data to target support to low-income households

Objective 2: Reduce the financial pressures on people facing or in poverty

Objective 3: Increase individual, household and community resilience to poverty

Objective 4: Reduce barriers to accessing services for those experiencing financial insecurity

- 37 The strategy is underpinned by a revised action plan which focuses on new actions and commitments which will enable the council to deliver the key priorities that have identified as being most important for reducing poverty levels in County Durham and achieving our vision.
- 38 Although a major focus of the last 24 months has been effectively supporting vulnerable households impacted by COVID-19 restrictions, moving forward the focus will be on a strong strategic approach to supporting residents through co-ordinated advice and guidance, with partners playing a key role in delivery. It will involve helping residents move away from accessing food/financial support through crisis intervention support such as foodbanks, energy banks and welfare assistance etc. by working with key providers such as the credit unions to improve access to low-cost loans and supporting work to address fuel poverty and digital exclusion etc.

Child Poverty Action Plan

- 39 The Child Poverty Working Group recognises the need to coordinate a multi-agency strategic approach to address the causes of and impact of poverty on children, young people and families living in County Durham. The working group have agreed the Joseph Rowntree Foundation definition of poverty: *'When a person's resources are well below their minimum needs, including the need to take part in society'*. The group agreed this definition describes not only monetary and resource poverty but also poverty of opportunity.
- 40 Child poverty in County Durham continues to be on the rise with an estimated 27.3% of children under the age of 16 living in relative poverty and 25.1% of children under the age of 16 living in absolute poverty. Between 2015/16 and 2020/21 the number of pupils known to be eligible for, and claiming, free school meals increased by 50%, rising to over 21,300 eligible pupils.
- 41 The CPWG overarching vision is: *Children, young people and families have the resources to meet their basic needs, including accessing opportunities to take part in society.*

- 42 To achieve the best possible outcomes for children, young people and families experiencing poverty, it is proposed the revised objectives for the CPWG will be:

Objective 1: To understand the level and impact of poverty on children, young people and families in County Durham in order to better target support and resources;

Objective 2: Practitioners across the County Durham Partnership have the skills and knowledge to identify and support children and families who are affected by poverty at the earliest opportunity;

Objective 3: Promote social inclusion and family resilience to help ensure all children, young people and families have access to culture, leisure, sport and wellbeing activities;

Objective 4: Raise aspirations and resilience of children and young people making the move into further education, training or employment.

- 43 In line with the County Durham Approach to Wellbeing the CPWG will undertake co-production activities throughout the summer months utilising the 'Fun and Food' programme to work with children, young people and parents/carers to help shape and influence the key objectives and help partners to deliver help and support which is accessible, acceptable and builds family and community resilience.

Next steps

- 44 The revised strategy and action plan is attached at Appendix 2. These new and updated actions complement existing projects, initiatives and services and will be delivered alongside to further enhance and improve outcomes for our residents.
- 45 Through consultation and engagement, all partners will be encouraged to comment and contribute to the ongoing development and delivery of the revised Poverty Action Strategy and Plan, and Child Poverty Plan on a Page (Appendix 3) as this will be fundamental to its successful delivery and achieving better outcomes for the residents of County Durham.
- 46 The council's PASG will continue to provide leadership and direction in delivering against the action plan and co-ordinating and joining up the response internally within the Council. Existing workstreams including the CPWG will continue to work with services and partners to deliver some of the immediate actions where necessary, although it is expected a lot of the activity can be delivered through existing resources and organisations. Working with partners from across the public, private and third sector will continue to underpin our approach.
- 47 The existing relevant services, projects and initiatives from the previous action plan which have been adopted as 'business as usual' will continue

to be monitored and reported via the appropriate service reporting channels and also regular updates will be given to the PASG.

48 The strategy and action plan will be formally reviewed on an annual basis.

Conclusion

49 The council has consistently recognised that it cannot reduce poverty on its own as this requires a system wide response: collaboration and a focus on delivering common outcomes is the key to success.

50 Although a major focus of the last 24 months has been effectively supporting vulnerable households impacted by COVID-19 restrictions, the Council and its partners have continued to address the underlying issues experienced by low-income households.

51 During the pandemic our efforts to address and alleviate poverty increased significantly but there is still much to do. By maintaining our partnership-based approach to delivering the Poverty Action Strategy and Action Plan and Child Poverty Action Plan, we are making it everyone's business to respond to poverty and ensure financial inclusion.

Other useful documents

- [Cabinet report, Poverty Strategy and Action Plan, April 2022](#)
- [Cabinet report, Poverty Issues, December 2021](#)
- [Cabinet report, Poverty Issues, November 2020](#)
- [Cabinet report, COVID-19 planning and response, 5 June 2020](#)
- [Poverty Dashboard – Durham Insight](#)

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

There are no direct legal implications arising out of this report.

Finance

The council supports welfare provision and poverty alleviation through a number of service budgets across the council, such as the Welfare Assistance Fund and Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) policy which are administered by the council's Transactional Services Teams. The council also offers discretionary Council Tax relief to individuals and households in financial hardship and has protected residents from government reductions in Council Tax Benefit through the approach it has taken to local Council Tax Support.

The longer-term financial implications for the council are at this stage difficult to quantify and are dependent on the speed of economic recovery.

Consultation

The draft Poverty Strategy and Action Plan will be informed by feedback and engagement through consultation with council services and partners during the coming months.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

The council's Welfare Assistance Scheme, Discretionary Housing Payments policy, and Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme, have been subject to equality impact assessments where appropriate.

Climate Change

Not applicable.

Human Rights

Note applicable.

Crime and Disorder

Not applicable.

Staffing

There are no staffing implications.

Accommodation

Not applicable.

Risk

Not applicable.

Procurement

Not applicable.