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**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 County Durham Poverty Action Plan which sets out a comprehensive response to the impacts of the wide-ranging poverty issues within the county.

**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 and subsequent 'cost of living crisis' 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 During 2022 work was undertaken with PASG and across services to consider the overall vision and objectives for a Poverty Strategy refresh – and the actions to underpin delivery against the objectives set out in the Strategy.
- 5 An updated strategy and action plan was developed following the review process with consultation carried out to ensure that partners and other key strategies, such as the emerging Inclusive Economic Strategy, and Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy were fully aligned.
- 6 The Poverty Strategy and Action Plan 2022-26 were approved by Cabinet in November 2022.

**Recommendation**

- 7 The Health and Wellbeing Board is recommended to note the contents of this report and supporting presentation.

## Background

- 8 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.
- 9 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.
- 10 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.
- 11 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 associate economic shocks; and to help alleviate long term issues that can lead households on low incomes to experience financial pressures and poverty"*.

## Poverty Action Strategy and Plan Review

- 12 Whilst the council has continued to support its most vulnerable residents over recent years and intensified support during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a recognition that there was much still to do to promote social inclusion and support financially vulnerable residents and their families.
- 13 As such the PASG committed to undertake a detailed review of the strategy and action plan in 2022. The review included consultation with services across the council and informally with key partners to ensure the council was making best use of 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.
- 14 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.

- 15 Attendees recognised the importance of working with 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.
- 16 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 needed 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 going forward.
- 17 It was also apparent that some actions had 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 that there were still gaps in current service provision, where projects and initiatives needed to be identified to help achieve new priorities.
- 18 It was recognised that the Inclusive Economic Strategy was fundamental to opening the routes out of poverty and would be key to ensuring communities were 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.
- 19 Work was also undertaken to ensure that health needs were better and more closely aligned to the Poverty Strategy. Poverty damages health and poor health increases the risk of poverty. Improving mental health and wellbeing and maximising opportunities to support residents to stop smoking, reduce alcohol intake and be a healthy weight can have a positive impact on health and reduce the risk of experiencing poverty. For example, when income and smoking are taken into account over 25,000 households are driven into poverty each year
- 20 Additional engagement exercises with individual council teams and key partners were delivered to inform the refresh of the Poverty Action Strategy and Plan.
- 21 The Child Poverty Working Group also refreshed their plan on a page and associated action plan; with the work being aligned across the two key strategic groups.

## **Revised Poverty Action Strategy and Plan**

- 22 The revised [Poverty Strategy and Action Plan \(durham.gov.uk\)](https://www.durham.gov.uk/poverty-strategy-and-action-plan) were formally approved by Cabinet in November 2022 and provide strategic direction, and identification of priorities for improving services and opportunities for residents in County Durham who are experiencing poverty.

- 23 Moving forward the focus will be the maintenance of a strong strategic approach to supporting residents through co-ordinated advice and guidance, with partners playing a key role in delivery.
- 24 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.
- 25 The aim is to do more than just support residents to claim benefits, pay their rent or deal with those in crisis, though these remain important components. The PASG aims 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.
- 26 The strategy vision is '***To work together so fewer people will be affected by poverty and deprivation in the county***' and to achieve the best possible outcomes for residents experiencing poverty, four strategic objectives have been identified.
- 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
- 27 The strategy is underpinned by an 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.
- 28 The actions complement existing projects, initiatives and services and will be delivered alongside to further enhance and improve outcomes for our residents.
- 29 Since the implementation of the strategy and action plan a range of activities have been delivered in line with the four strategic objectives and an update on this activity is available in the presentation.

### **Next steps**

- 30 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.

- 31 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.
- 32 The strategy and action plan will be formally reviewed on an annual basis.

## **Conclusion**

- 33 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.
- 34 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, November 2022](#)
- [Cabinet report, Poverty Strategy and Action Plan, April 2022](#)
- [Cabinet report, Poverty Issues, December 2021](#)
- [Cabinet report, Poverty Issues, November 2020](#)
- [Poverty Dashboard – Durham Insight](#)

## **Author**

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## **Appendix 1: Implications**

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### **Legal Implications**

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

### **Finance**

The council supports welfare provision and poverty alleviation through several 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 was 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