

Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee

7 January 2025

Child Poverty in County Durham



Report of John Pearce, Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services

Electoral division(s) affected:

All

Purpose of the Report

- 1 This report accompanies a presentation to Durham County Council's Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny on the progress of the Child Poverty Working Group (CPWG) in addressing and mitigating the impact of poverty on children, young people and their families in County Durham.

Executive summary

- 2 Poverty can affect every area of a child's development: social, educational, health and personal. Living in a poor household can reduce children's expectations of their lives and lead to a cycle where poverty is repeated from generation to generation. As adults, they are more likely to suffer ill health, be unemployed or homeless, and become involved in offending, drug and alcohol abuse and abusive relationships.
- 3 Child poverty in County Durham continues to be of concern and the CPWG under the guidance of the Poverty Action Steering Group has continued to be proactive and responsive with the aim of mitigating the impact of poverty, and the additional burden faced by families with the current high cost of living.
- 4 Throughout 2024 a range of programmes and initiatives continued to be offered including Fun and Food (Holiday Activities with Healthy Food), and the Start for Life Fund (provision of safe sleeping equipment and home safety equipment for under 5's). Also, new developments including Financial Inclusion in Education Settings and Free School

Meal Auto Enrolment, are ensuring help and support is available to those families who need it most, at the earliest opportunity.

- 5 The 2025 key priorities for the CPWG include the following:
- a) Mitigating the impact of child poverty as part of the North East Combined Authority Child Poverty Prevention Programme (CPPP);
 - b) Undertaking a range of co production activities with children, young people, parents, and carers to better understand the impact of and responses to poverty;
 - c) Expansion of the Advice in County Durham Portal, across the partnership;
 - d) Financial Inclusion in Education Settings campaign, for families who have children with Special Educational Needs (SEND), to ensure income maximisation;
 - e) Free School Meals auto enrolment conducted on an annual basis.

Recommendation(s)

- 6 Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee are recommended to:
- (a) note the contents of the report;
 - (b) provide comment to inform future priorities.

Background

- 7 Poverty can affect every area of a child's development: social, educational, health and personal. Living in a poor household can reduce children's expectations of their lives and lead to a cycle where poverty is repeated from generation to generation. As adults, they are more likely to suffer ill health, be unemployed or homeless, and become involved in offending, drug and alcohol abuse and abusive relationships.
- 8 It is estimated that approximately 4.3 million children live in poverty in the UK in 2022/23, and poverty rates are highest amongst families with children. This equates to approximately 30 per cent of children, or nine in a classroom of 30.
- 9 A recent report by the North East Child Poverty Commission ['No time to wait full report.pdf'](#) (February 2024) highlights more than one third of all babies, children and young people in the North East (35%) are living in poverty, with our region having experienced the steepest increases in child poverty over much of the last decade. It also warns that child poverty *'is not only limiting the life chances and outcomes of tens of thousands of children and families across the North East and their ability to benefit from everything this part of the world has to offer, it is holding the whole of our region back.'*
- 10 Latest available information shows the percentage of children living in relative poverty (aged 0-19) 2022/23 in County Durham was 19.3% compared to 20.5% in the Northeast and 19.5% in England.
- 11 Free School Meals (FSM) eligibility in County Durham is at 31.9% (23,200 pupils).

Child Poverty Working Group (CPWG)

- 12 The multi-agency CPWG 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 to use 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.
- 13 The CPWG has developed a plan on a page to prioritise actions to mitigate the impact of poverty on children and families across County Durham. The aim of the plan is: *to use all available resources to help prevent, reduce, and mitigate the impact of poverty on children, young people, and their families in County Durham.*
- 14 The plan focusses on four key priorities which are:

- (a) Undertake a range of co production activities with children, young people, parents and carers to better understand the impact of and responses to poverty;
 - (b) All those who have contact with children, young people and adults who are parents/carers in County Durham have the skills and knowledge to identify and support children and families affected by poverty at the earliest opportunity;
 - (c) Promote social inclusion to ensure all expectant mams/dads, babies, children, young people and families have access to health, educational and wellbeing activities which build resilience and supports children and families to thrive;
 - (d) Raise aspirations and resilience of children, young people and parents/carers.
- 15 Throughout the 2025 academic year the CPWG will continue to mitigate the impact of child poverty as part of the North East Combined Authority Child Poverty Prevention Programme (CPPP). The purpose of the CPPP is to build on the work currently being undertaken by local authorities to systematically address the symptoms and causes of child poverty across the region. This work will focus on developing Financial Inclusion Support in Education Settings and the Start for Life Fund.

Priority 1: Undertake a range of co production activities with children, young people, parents and carers to better understand the impact of and responses to poverty.

- 16 The CPWG recognise the importance of better understanding the impact of and responses to poverty, ensuring that those with lived experience have their voices heard and able to influence the work of the CPWG.
- 17 As part of the Financial Inclusion Support in Education Settings offer the Financial Inclusion Support Officers (FISO's) have conducted surveys with parents/carers in 12 secondary schools to seek views on the main areas of support needed and money management related activities and information sessions that they may be interested in. 409 responses were received and the main areas of support identified were:
- (a) Purchasing school items (uniform, equipment);
 - (b) Heating costs;
 - (c) Food costs (home and school meals);
 - (d) Grant applications;

- (e) Benefit assistance.
- 18 All families that gave their consent to be contacted as part of the survey received a follow up communication and offered support appropriately. Survey findings were also shared with schools and the CPWG.
- 19 Partners delivering Fun and Food activities work together with children, young people and families to help them influence and shape Fun and Food delivery including planning of activities and the range of healthy food provided.
- 20 To further develop this, a small working group will be formed in January 2025 to look at a range of co production activities with children, young people, parents, and carers to better understand the impact of and responses to poverty.

Priority 2: All those who have contact with children, young people and families in County Durham have the skills and knowledge to identify and support children and families affected by poverty at the earliest opportunity.

Financial Inclusion in Education Settings

Cutting the Cost of the School and Pre School-Day

- 21 The need to address poverty within education settings is a priority. Evidence suggests the cost of the school and preschool day to be significant on low-income families and has the potential to negatively impact on educational opportunities and outcomes. The CPWG aims to support all schools, nurseries, and colleges to mitigate the negative impact of poverty on children and has developed a range of cutting cost of the school/pre-school day initiatives.
- 22 **‘Cutting the Cost of the School and Pre School day’** is an established and proven training package for supporting schools to consider poverty from an education perspective. The training package for education settings aims to raise awareness of child poverty across County Durham and to:
 - (a) Gain a deeper insight into the scale and impact of child poverty;
 - (b) Challenge the stigma associated with living in poverty;
 - (c) Support schools to develop practical steps for cutting the cost of the school day.

- 23 This programme has been delivered to a number of primary, secondary and special schools and a session has also been delivered to school governors as part of the education development plan.

Financial Inclusion Support Officers (FISO's)

- 24 Funding from the Poverty Action Steering Group and the One Point Service has supported initial development of the Financial Inclusion Support Officer (FISO) programme in County Durham. Two full time posts currently work across twelve secondary schools:

Greenfield Academy (Newton Aycliffe)	Wellfield Academy (Wingate)
Bishop Barrington Academy (Bishop Auckland)	Dene Academy (Peterlee)
King James Academy (Bishop Auckland)	Consett Academy
Whitworth Academy (Spennymoor)	North Durham Academy (Stanley)
Wolsingham School	Durham Academy (Ushaw Moor)
Staindrop Academy	Parkside Academy (Willington)

- 25 The programme actively explores new ways to tackle child poverty and overcome the current challenges related to the cost-of-living crisis. It focuses on maximising income and supporting parents/carers to pursue pathways into employment. It also supports families by providing 1-1 advice on support available for children such as free school meals and clothing grants. This programme has recently extended to run until March 2026.
- 26 Working in partnership with Bishop Auckland College, the programme is also piloting an offer of support to young people and their parents/carers whereby young people are identified as being at risk of leaving further education provision to seek work, due to limited family finances. This additional support has been in place from October 2024, and will be reviewed to measure impact.
- 27 Outcomes and financial gains recorded so far (March 2024 – November 2024):
- (a) 229 families have been supported;
 - (b) £88,000 per annum of additional income has been raised for families from successful welfare benefit applications and appeals;

- (c) £37,000 has been raised from backdated lumps sums/benefit arrears raised for families;
- (d) Projected income expected - a further £302,000 from benefit applications and appeals that are pending;
- (e) By supporting with free school meal take up/checking eligibility – this has generated a saving of £9,800 pa for families, which in turn has generated pupil premium funding for schools of £21,000 per annum.

- 28 A targeted campaign for families with children with special educational needs was undertaken in November 2024. This campaign was aimed at supporting families with children who have an Education Health Care Plan or a Special Educational Needs support plan and was piloted with 2 secondary schools. During the first two weeks of the campaign 25 referrals were received and from these it was identified that 15 families were not claiming some form of financial support that they were entitled to.
- 29 Projected gains to up to the end of November 24 (income from benefit applications/appeals) is circa £69,000 per annum which highlights there is a need for further development of the campaign.

Help with Buying Items for School

- 30 The cost of school uniforms can be a struggle for families. Many schools now allow families to buy cheaper, unbranded uniform items, or offer uniform swaps. There are a range of recycled uniform schemes delivered through schools and voluntary and community sector partners. A dedicated web page has been developed for families to find out about this support [Help with buying items for school - Durham County Council](#).

Period Poverty Scheme

- 31 The [Period Poverty scheme](#) has been further extended into the academic year 2024/25 and is available to all state maintained schools and 16 to 19 education establishments in England. It provides anyone who has periods access to tampons, pads and more through their school or college if, for example, they cannot afford period products, have forgotten to bring them to school or college or have come on their period unexpectedly.

Additional Support Available for Families

Advice in County Durham Portal

- 32 The Advice in County Durham (AiCD) portal provides a quick and simple referral pathway for professionals to support families access a broad range of support services including benefit and debt advice. All One Point Service practitioners have been trained and registered to use the Advice in County Durham (AiCD) portal. A trial is being held in the east of the county providing access to the portal for all 0-19 health staff (including health visitors and school nurses). Further roll out across the wider partnership is planned for 2025/26.

Help with your Money Webpage

- 33 A dedicated web page [Help with your money](#) has been developed for County Durham residents and provides specific help and guidance to families with children. The page has information on a range of support available including applying for Healthy Start, applying for Free School Meals, debt advice/financial help and help with heating and fuel bills. As part of our Family Hub and Start for Life programme links to this page and promotion of Healthy Start is outlined in our Start for Life leaflet and website shared with every prospective or new parent.

Healthy Start Scheme

- 34 The Healthy Start scheme enables eligible families to get help to buy healthy food, milk and access to free vitamins [Healthy Start - Durham County Council](#).
- 35 The Healthy Start steering group is working hard to promote and increase the uptake of Healthy Start across the county. Partnership working ensures that Healthy Start is embedded in all agendas, such as the healthy weight and oral health strategies.
- 36 This 'whole system' approach ensures that all service providers have a responsibility for directing families to support. This includes maternity services and health visiting, to ensure that meaningful conversations with families take place from the earliest opportunity. The current uptake of the Healthy Start scheme for those eligible families is currently 75% which is one of the highest uptake rates in England.

Household Support Fund

- 37 The Household Support Fund continued to support families in 2024. 30,191 supermarket vouchers were issued to families with children in receipt of benefits related free school meals (April 24 – September 24) totalling £2,175,414.
- 38 In addition, £81,000 was allocated for the provision of Christmas food hampers in December 2024. Working together with a North East charity Feeding Families, Children's Services and Health Visitors identified

families most in need to benefit from these hampers. The funding covers the costs associated of the provision of 2,000 hampers.

Stronger Families Grant and Greggs Foundation Trust Fund

- 39 The Stronger Families Grant and Greggs Foundation Trust contribution continues to be utilised by frontline practitioners in Children and Young People Services and the wider partnership. The grant includes provision of:
- (a) disposal of bulky waste;
 - (b) skip hire;
 - (c) home safety equipment;
 - (d) essential household items such as, cookers, beds and carpets.
- 40 In the financial year 2023/24 175 awards (£28,000) and April 2024 – November 2024, 133 awards (£19,500) were made to families.

Feeding Families

- 41 In partnership with the North East charity Feeding Families, food parcels are provided on demand to teams across the county. Demand for these continue to be high and are accessed by frontline practitioners supporting those most in need. The offer now also includes personal hygiene and household cleaning packs.

Reducing Food Waste - The Bread-and-Butter Thing (TBBT)

- 42 This is an affordable food club, with hubs across County Durham. Members of TBBT pay £8.50 for approximately £35 worth of food including fruit and vegetables, chilled goods, and cupboard staples such as pasta and cereal.
- 43 The food comes from supermarket surplus, food factories and farms. This means contents vary from day to day depending on what is available. Members do not have to come every week. They will receive a text from TBBT each week, and if they do not want to access the provision that week they can easily opt out.
- 44 County Durham currently has 19 TBBT hubs (supported by local volunteer community groups) at Annfield Plain, Bishop Auckland, Bowburn, Bullion, Cornforth, Crook, Dawdon, Eden Hill, Haswell, Leadgate, Newton Aycliffe, Spennymoor, Stanley, Ushaw Moor, Tow Law, and Wheatley Hill, Blackhall, Gilesgate, and Burnopfield with a one more hub at Trimdon scheduled to come on stream this financial year making a total of 20 hubs equitably located across all areas of Co.

Durham. More information can be found here:
<https://www.breadandbutterthing.org/members>

Priority 3: Promote social inclusion to ensure all children, young people and families have access to health, educational and wellbeing activities which build resilience and supports children and families to thrive

Holiday Activities with Healthy Food Programme 2024 - Fun and Food

- 45 The Department for Education (DfE) provides all Local Authorities with funding to provide free holiday activities and healthy food for children and young people on benefits related Free School Meals during Easter, Summer, and Christmas holiday periods. All sessions are free and include a breakfast/lunch/tea and snacks. A wide range of positive activities are offered including sport, dance, art and crafts, outdoor adventures, fun with animals, circus skills, seaside trips and much more.
- 46 Prior to the Easter 2024 delivery period some changes were introduced to the Fun and Food programme to ensure that the programme was meeting the funding restrictions set out by the Department for Education and children in receipt of free school meals got priority access to this service.
- 47 Working together with schools in County Durham Fun and Food Tickets were distributed to eligible families through school communications channels. The tickets allow eligible parents/carers to explore what is on in their area and to book their children on to any activities. An enquiries inbox was also developed for any parents/carers who may have questions FunandFoodTickets@durham.gov.uk.
- 48 Working with other colleagues in the council an additional £600,000 funding from UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and Household Support Fund (HSF) was secured to expand the Fun and Food offer over the Summer and Christmas holidays to fund places for children, not in receipt of benefits related free school meals, but who are otherwise vulnerable. This has significantly added to the programme funded by the DfE.

Holiday Period	DfE Funded Children	% FSM Eligible	Sessions Booked
Easter 2024	1,330	89	5,509

Summer 2024	2,481	87	26,849
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* Table indicates breakdown of DfE funded Fun and Food activity

Holiday Period	UKSPF/HSF Funded Children	Sessions Booked
Summer 2024	2,505	9,835

* Table indicates breakdown of UKSPF/HSF funded Fun and Food activity

- 49 Additional summer holiday funding was also secured from The Bread and Butter Thing, providing 5 Family Trips (389 places) to families that were being supported by the Family Hubs.
- 50 We will continue to promote the Fun and Food programme on our website www.durham.gov.uk/funandfood and our social media channels ([20+ Fun and Food County Durham | Facebook](#)). We have worked closely with the Area Action Partnerships (AAPs), members of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) and other partners, to promote the fantastic free range of activities and food available to support families during what we know can often be challenging times.

Start for Life Fund

- 51 Funding was provided through the Household Support Fund 2023/24 and further funding has been secured from Public Health in 2024/25. This allows professionals only, to apply for funding for safe sleeping equipment including cots, mattresses and bedding, home safety equipment such as fire guards and safety gates, pushchairs, and prams, ensuring that our most vulnerable families (with children 0-5 years) who are facing financial difficulties have access to safe sleeping (inside and outside of the home) and home safety equipment to keep children warm, safe, and secure.
- 52 Applications have been submitted from a variety of practitioners and 673 households were supported between September 2023 – November 2024.

Family Hubs in County Durham

- 53 In our network of 15 Family Hubs, families can access to advice, help and support via a 'one stop shop' from early pregnancy to nineteen years of age or twenty-five for a child with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). They also provide an opportunity to ensure prospective and new parents have access to financial support during and beyond their transition into becoming parents/ carers.

- 54 Family Hubs also offer pre-loved clothes including baby clothes and equipment, winter coats and shoes, school uniforms, access to a community pantry with emergency non-perishable foods and personal hygiene packs.
- 55 Family Hubs are registering as Data Banks and will be able to provide free sim cards for families who are in need. This may be to support an expectant parent to access their maternity notes, or to help a parent to access job searches.

Free School Meal Auto Enrolment

- 56 In line with the work of the Child Poverty Group and the Poverty Action Steering Group a pilot was conducted to auto-enrol school age children onto Free School Meals.
- 57 Entitlement to Free School Meals can benefit a family by up to £400 per year for each child in receipt. There is also a benefit to schools, who receive additional pupil premium funding for each child in receipt of Free School Meals, £1,480 for primary age children and £1,050 for secondary age children.
- 58 The auto enrolment process used school census data held by the council and data held for the administration of Housing Benefits and Local Council tax Reduction from the Department for Works and Pensions (DWP), to identify families who may qualify for FSM but had not yet claimed.
- 59 2,254 children were identified as in school-based education and eligible for Free School Meals, with 1,789 children able to be auto-enrolled directly with their school. Due to being unable to identify the current educational establishment for 465 children, letters were sent to the families for the letter to be provided to the school directly for the child to be enrolled onto Free School Meals.
- 60 215 children identified are currently in home-based education and would therefore not be eligible for FSM at this time. The letter sent to these families confirming this also included further signposting to support that is available to them including the Welfare Assistance scheme and the Household Support Fund application.
- 61 The 2,254 children represented a 9.6% increase from the January census which confirmed 23,483 children in County Durham were in receipt of free school meals.
- 62 This increase in eligibility has a positive impact on the pupil premium available to schools, with an increase in funding of circa £3 million available to schools across County Durham following the latest census data submission.

63 This pilot has been fully evaluated and auto-enrolment be implemented as a business-as-usual delivery model, with activity conducted on an annual basis.

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

64 The latest data (June 2024) shows that the proportion of young people aged 16-17 who are NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) in County Durham is 5.6%, compared to an average rate of 5.5% for the North East and an average rate of 3.5% for England.

65 The proportion of young people in County Durham whose destination is 'Not Known' is 0.8%, compared to an average rate of 0.7% for the North East and an average rate of 1.8% for England. The number of 16-17 years olds who are NEET in County Durham is 635 and the number whose destination is Not Known is 94. The overall number of 16-17 year olds in County Durham is 11,391. It is important to note that over a quarter of the North East 16-17 year old cohort resides in County Durham.

66 A range of support is provided to young people to raise their aspirations and resilience as they prepare to progress into further education, employment, or training. This includes the DurhamWorks Programme for Schools, the Workplaces Project, and DurhamWorks Re-engagement Programmes for young people aged 16-24 who are NEET.

67 DurhamWorks Programme for Schools supports young people in Year 11 who are identified as being at risk of becoming NEET, to make a successful transition into post-16 education, employment or training. Young people receive a combination of careers guidance, one-to-one mentoring support, as well as the opportunity to participate in Work Related Learning activities that are supported by Business Ambassadors, who are volunteers from local businesses and organisations.

68 The Workplaces Project provides opportunities for young people in Years 10 and 12, to gain a valuable insight into the world of work and to find out about the skills and aptitudes that employers value through bespoke visits to workplaces.

69 DurhamWorks Re-engagement Programmes support young people aged 16-24 who are NEET by offering a holistic assessment of need, one-to-one transition support, and access to learning opportunities to develop their motivation, confidence and work ready skills.

- 70 DurhamWorks prioritises support for young people who are at greater risk of not successfully progressing into education, employment or training, including young people who have SEND, Children in Care/Care Leavers, young parents, young carers, young people who engage in offending behaviour etc. This involves close collaboration/joint working with a range of Durham County Council services in order to achieve successful outcomes.

Communications

- 71 Regular communications are shared about the work of the CPWG to ensure that all key stakeholders are kept up to date with the support that it is available to children, young people and families. This includes:
- a) Briefings for council members;
 - b) Newsletters and updates to internal staff;
 - c) Newsletters for external colleagues including schools, health visitors and school nurses;
 - d) Weekly VCS Alliance online bulletins;
 - e) Fun and Food Facebook Page;
 - f) School and Governors portals;
 - g) DCC Online platforms and social media.
- 72 In addition to this regular training sessions are delivered to frontline practitioners including all new children's social workers to raise awareness of child poverty in County in Durham, the impact it can have on children, young people and families and the support that is available to them.

Future Developments

- 73 The 2025 key priorities for the CPWG include the following:
- (a) Mitigating the impact of child poverty as part of the North East Combined Authority Child Poverty Prevention Programme (CPPP);
 - (b) Undertaking a range of co production activities with children, young people, parents, and carers to better understand the impact of and responses to poverty;
 - (c) Expansion of the Advice in County Durham Portal, across the partnership;

- (d) Financial Inclusion in Education Settings campaign, for families who have children with Special Educational Needs (SEND), to ensure income maximisation;
- (e) Free School Meals auto enrolment conducted on an annual basis.

Conclusion

- 74 Poverty continues to be a key concern for children and families living in County Durham. We understand the negative impact living in poverty has on a child's life chances. Data and intelligence tell us that all measures of poverty are increasing for children and young people living in our county. The current high cost of living is exacerbating the financial pressure on many families.
- 75 The CPWG is committed to developing and implementing a range of programmes and initiatives to help mitigate the negative impacts of poverty on the everyday experiences of children and young people in our county. Ongoing support and oversight from elected members are welcomed.

Background papers

- None.

Other useful documents

- None.

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 placed a duty on government to report on child poverty. The Act, however, repealed parts of the Child Poverty Act 2010, including the duty placed on local authorities to prepare and publish an assessment of the needs of children living in poverty in their area.

Finance

Probity of all funded projects.

Consultation and Engagement

Consultation with children and families will take place in developing projects that mitigate child poverty.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Equality of opportunity for children and families most at risk of negative impact of poverty.

Climate Change

None.

Human Rights

Equal opportunities.

Crime and Disorder

Research shows families living in poverty are more likely to be involved or victims of crime and anti-social behaviours.

Staffing

None.

Accommodation

None.

Risk

None.

Procurement

None