

Cabinet

9 April 2025

Poverty Issues Annual Report



Report of Corporate Management Team

Paul Darby, Corporate Director of Resources

Councillor Alan Shield, Portfolio Holder for Equality, and Inclusion

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To provide Cabinet with an update on:
 - (a) Progress of the council and partners in addressing and alleviating poverty, including actions delivered in line with our poverty action plan and the support given in response to the financial impact of the cost-of-living crisis on our vulnerable households;
 - (b) Core expenditure (funded by both central government and from council budgets) which specifically supports poverty related activities and enables support to be delivered to vulnerable households by the council and key partners;
 - (c) The most recent welfare, economic and poverty indicators for the county; and
 - (d) Priority actions to be progressed during 2025/26, as previously approved by Cabinet, which continue to reflect changes in the current poverty landscape, intelligence / learning over the last year and build on successful delivery to date.

Executive summary

- 2 Poverty is multi-faceted. It comes in many shapes and forms and varies both in terms of duration and severity. Poverty is not just about money, it relates to opportunity, participation, and access to services. Its impacts are felt at an individual, household, and community level.
- 3 Although 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, the council remains committed to tackling all aspects of poverty.

- 4 This report is the latest update setting out the progress being made by the council and its partners in tackling and supporting people who are affected by poverty across the county following the introduction of a poverty strategy in 2013.
- 5 It builds on previous update reports presented to Cabinet and includes an overview of the 'core' financial support mechanisms the council has in place as well as progress of the actions included in our poverty action strategy 2022-26, adopted by Cabinet in November 2022 and considered by Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board in December 2022.
- 6 The overarching vision of council's Poverty Strategy and Action Plan is working together with partners and stakeholders so fewer people will be affected by poverty and deprivation in the county, structured around four key objectives:
 - (a) Objective 1: use intelligence and data to target support to low-income households.
 - (b) Objective 2: reduce the financial pressures on people facing or in poverty.
 - (c) Objective 3: increase individual, household and community resilience to poverty.
 - (d) Objective 4: reduce barriers to accessing services for those experiencing financial insecurity.
- 7 The council has continued to provide effective 'core' financial support mechanisms to low-income households, as well as supporting advice provision across the county. Support mechanisms include the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme (LCTRS), Welfare Rights Support, Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) scheme, and the Welfare Assistance Scheme (WAS) for those in crisis.
- 8 The council has also drawn on national funding sources to sustain existing work and develop new programmes including funding from the Household Support Fund, Department for Education and UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF).
- 9 Additional investment and support to residents has been delivered through the work of the Poverty Action Steering Group (PASG) in line with the council's Poverty Strategy and Action Plan.

- 10 Since the last update delivery of several projects, all designed to “wrap around” government schemes and broader council strategies to provide a comprehensive package of support for residents have continued.
- 11 Work has concentrated on protecting our most vulnerable communities with initiatives focused on mitigating the impact of food and fuel poverty, ensuring access to welfare advice and guidance services, and promoting financial inclusion and pathways out of poverty.
- 12 A free school meals (FSM) auto enrolment pilot commenced in August 2024 with 1,727 families, containing 2,469 school age children, identified as eligible and enrolled onto Free School Meals. Saving families an estimated £1.1 million and unlocking circa £3 million of pupil premium funding to schools.
- 13 A pension credit take up campaign which used a range of data sources to identify and contact 1346 pensioners considered as potentially eligible to claim based on their circumstances has shown positive outcomes with 51.41% of targeted individuals are now successfully in receipt of Pension Credit. The campaign has facilitated an estimated £2,871,800 in extra financial support per year for pensioners in County Durham.
- 14 A welfare information, advice and guidance consultation ran from July to September 2024. 844 people engaged in the consultation, including 508 survey respondents. A report was presented to cabinet in January 2025, where recommendations were approved to enhance the current hybrid approach and explore service delivery through partner organisations based on resident feedback highlighting a preference to seek advice, support, and guidance through these channels.
- 15 Progress has also been made on projects to enhance access to data and intelligence and determine key measures that will enhance the council’s understanding of our residents and their financial issues, as well as supporting the development of mechanisms to assess and evaluate the impact and outcomes of PASG work and the Poverty Strategy over its lifetime.
- 16 Activity to increase awareness and maximisation of benefit entitlements and the council’s ‘first point of contact’ offer has been extended to include more detailed conversations to help those in financial difficulty as well as the continued provision of training to local Voluntary and Community Sector organisations to enable them to identify residents in need of financial support and signpost them to appropriate help.
- 17 The Financial Inclusion Support Officer (FISO) programme, which actively explores new ways to tackle child poverty and overcome the current challenges related to the cost-of-living crisis in educational

settings has continued to be implemented with two FISO's now in post working with 12 secondary schools and 1 College across County Durham.

- 18 During 2024/25 289 referrals have been received to assist with various needs, including accessing school uniforms, free school meals, welfare benefit checks, assistance with benefit applications and fuel poverty advice. Of the 289 referrals 39 were because of a SEND campaign that was piloted in in two of the secondary schools, targeting families with a child/children with an EHCP.
- 19 'The Bread and Butter Thing' food hub network is currently being expanded from 15 to 20 hubs which once in place will enable around 1,600 families each week to access low-cost food and advice (including financial support).
- 20 £114,459 has been allocated to AAP's for projects that aim to reduce the impacts of poverty in County Durhams communities. Ten projects have been supported which has seen over 1000 families benefiting from schemes aimed at improving support and outcomes for families.
- 21 90 people have undertaken training courses.100 people have been involved in initiatives aimed at improving mental health/ wellbeing, 33 children and young people have benefited from schemes that aim to support them in achieving and maintaining optimum mental health and wellbeing, 16 young people have been supported into education, training, and employment and 21 people have engaged in voluntary work.
- 22 The council has further developed and built on partnership working with the VCS and other public sector organisations to maximise resources, ensuring a common approach and draw on a wide range of expertise to help develop programmes and projects.
- 23 Whilst the council has supported its most vulnerable residents over recent years and has further increased support provision during the last year, the data presented in this report indicates that the risk of poverty and severe hardship increasing remains high in County Durham, and across the UK, driven by the increasing cost of living.
- 24 The impact of the strategy must be understood in the context of the ongoing economic pressures, which continue to impact our families, communities, and public services. Over the past year the focus has been on protecting our most vulnerable residents by providing a safety net. This has been done by drawing on the extension of the Household Support Fund and a range of other funding sources, and by working in partnership to sustain existing programmes and develop new ones.

- 25 The adoption of the strategy provides a joined-up framework for developing our longer-term goals and the locally led actions described in this report are a critical and effective part of helping lift people and communities out of poverty.
- 26 The Poverty Strategy aligns with existing strategies and plans in place across the county, including council documents such as the County Durham Plan and Digital Strategy as well as the County Durham Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy.
- 27 Furthermore, the Strategy was developed alongside the Inclusive Economic Strategy to ensure that at the same time as responding on the immediate challenges in front of us, we are focused on building a stronger County Durham, one where everyone reaches their potential, and we have a future focused economy.
- 28 The Inclusive Economic Strategy is fundamental to the success of the Poverty Strategy. The IES will support the generation of jobs, growth and opportunities that will enable pathways out of poverty to be built and prevent people falling into poverty in the longer term.
- 29 However, this report recognises that the major tools needed to address this challenge remain with national governments, in the form of social security, tax, and regulatory powers. There is much still to do to promote social inclusion and support people and their families over the coming months and years, particularly given the ongoing challenges of the current economic situation.
- 30 Over the next financial year, a key area of focus will be the development of a new poverty strategy to replace the current one which concludes October 2026. This process will be undertaken collaboratively, engaging with partners across sectors to ensure a holistic and inclusive approach.
- 31 The report was considered and noted by the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny management board (COSMB) on 28 March 2025, full comments can be found in appendix 3
- 32 The Council will also be alert to any future risks which may come from Government announcements around welfare reform, reductions in funding or any unexpected consequences due to the increase in Government around defence, including the recent announcement around changes to PIP criteria and assessments.
- 33 By maintaining our partnership-based approach to delivering the Poverty Action Strategy and action plan, we continue to make it everyone's business to respond to poverty and the risk to financial exclusion and delivery in line with the poverty action plan will continue to be closely monitored during 2025/26.

Recommendation(s)

34 Cabinet is recommended to note:

- (a) the progress being made by the council and its partners in addressing the impacts of poverty and the wider issues including the ongoing impacts of the cost-of-living crisis;
- (b) the actions for priority progress during 2025/26 detailed within the report and previously approved by Cabinet, which continue to reflect changes in the current poverty landscape, learnings in the last year and build on successful delivery to date.

Background

- 35 Poverty is multi-faceted. It comes in many shapes and forms and varies both in terms of duration and severity. Poverty is not just about money, it relates to opportunity, participation, and access to services. Its impacts are felt at an individual, household, and community level.
- 36 Although 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, the council remains committed to tackling all aspects of poverty.
- 37 This is the latest update report setting out the progress being made by the council and its partners in tackling and supporting people who are affected by poverty across the county following the introduction of a poverty strategy in 2013.
- 38 It builds on previous update reports presented to Cabinet and includes an overview of the 'core' financial support mechanisms the council has in place as well as progress of the actions included in the most recent iteration of our poverty action strategy 2022-26, adopted by Cabinet in November 2022 and considered by Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board in December 2022.
- 39 Although 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, the council remains committed to tackling all aspects.
- 40 The council co-ordinates its efforts to tackle poverty across council services through the Poverty Action Steering Group (PASG). This is a senior officer group, chaired by the Corporate Director of Resources and attended by the portfolio holder for social inclusion. We also work closely with our key partners to ensure that we share intelligence on emerging issues.
- 41 The poverty action strategy sets out the council's strategic approach to addressing the issues surrounding poverty. The action plan not only sets out the short-to-medium term initiatives and investments we are taking to help our residents recover from the pandemic and navigate through the cost-of-living crisis, but the longer-term action that we hope will manifest into a changed and improved situation, helping to break the cycle of poverty.
- 42 Many of the issues and challenges highlighted in this report cut across the key objectives in the Council Plan and as such the strategy aligns with wider strategies and plans in place across the county, including council documents such as the County Durham Plan and Digital

Strategy as well as the County Durham Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

- 43 The Poverty Strategy was also developed alongside the Inclusive Economic Strategy to ensure that at the same time as responding on the immediate challenges in front of us, we are focused on building a stronger County Durham, one where everyone reaches their potential, and we have a future focused economy.
- 44 The Inclusive Economic Strategy is fundamental to the success of the Poverty Strategy. The IES will support the generation of jobs, growth and opportunities that will enable pathways out of poverty to be built and prevent people falling into poverty in the longer term.

Poverty Action Strategy and Plan

- 45 The overarching vision of our Poverty Action Strategy and Plan is ‘to work together so fewer people will be affected by poverty and deprivation in the county.’ The document describes the extent to which poverty impacts the prosperity of the county and its residents and outlines the action we will take to improve the situation.
- 46 We know that tackling poverty takes time so the action plan not only sets out the short-to-medium term initiatives and investments we will take to help our residents recover from the pandemic and navigate through the cost-of-living crisis, but the longer-term action that we hope will manifest into a changed and improved situation, helping to break the cycle of poverty.
- 47 The strategy and plan are structured around the following four objectives:
- (a) Objective 1: use intelligence and data to target support to low-income households.
 - (b) Objective 2: reduce the financial pressures on people facing or in poverty.
 - (c) Objective 3: increase individual, household and community resilience to poverty.
 - (d) Objective 4: reduce barriers to accessing services for those experiencing financial insecurity.
- 48 Since the most recent strategy and plan were adopted by Cabinet (November 2022) significant progress in line with our action plan has been made. The strategy and action plan are living documents. They are designed to change as the poverty landscape changes, new funding

opportunities and programmes arise, and existing programmes end or are further developed. Some of the programmes in the action plan have now ended or have been redeveloped as detailed in the action plan update, attached at appendix 2.

- 49 A summary of the breadth of work undertaken over the past year developing and delivering the strategy and action plan in line with each objective is presented below.

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

- 50 Being able to access and utilise both the council's and partners' data and intelligence is incredibly important. It will allow us to identify vulnerable low-income households, target help toward them, and monitor (and learn from) the effectiveness of our initiatives and programmes.

- 51 We have invested significant time and effort improving access to data and intelligence, determining key measures that will allow us to better understand our residents and their financial issues, and developing mechanisms to assess the impact of our work. This has included:

- (a) The continued expansion of the council's 'multiple social vulnerabilities' dataset to include gas and electric priority register data, with work ongoing to complete the same process for water.

Engaging services in the use of a thematic needs index for the local area (Durham Index of Need) and its use for targeted action. For example, we are working with the enforcement team to identify those most at risk financially so we can provide appropriate support and appropriate recovery actions.

- (b) The ongoing development of performance dashboards that 'describe' the impact of poverty and cost-of-living across the county and continued development of a bespoke performance dashboard (made up of internal and external datasets) that will support targeted benefit take-up activity and assess the of impact interventions.
- (c) Continued activity to increase awareness of benefit entitlements and programmes which help people access and sustain suitable employment. This includes a widened 'first point of contact' offer to include more detailed conversations to help those in financial difficulty and provision of training to local Voluntary and Community Sector organisations to enable them to identify residents in need of financial support and provide appropriate advice and support.

- (d) Development of a pilot using new CACI data sets to address low levels of uptake of pension credit.
- (e) Registrations onto employability programmes and clients moving into employment, education or training are both better than target. Funding has been approved to extend programmes beyond December 2023 to March 2025.
- (f) Poverty Truth Commission has been set up and is hosted by Durham Community Action, during 2024 and 2025 focus will be on the area of Ferryhill, Bishop Auckland, Shildon and Newton Aycliffe.
- (g) Activity is underway to develop a Cost-of-Living Checklist so we can better understand the evolving needs of County Durham residents and allow us to tailor support accordingly.

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

- 52 We successfully auto-enrolled 2469 school children onto free school meals delivering an annual cost saving of £450 per child, which translates into a total financial benefit of £1.1 million for families across the county.
- 53 Our auto enrolment project has meant schools across the county will be getting over £3 million of additional funding in 2025 which can be used towards extra support in the classroom.
- 54 A pension credit take up campaign which utilised a range of data sources to identify and contact 1346 pensioners considered as potentially eligible to claim based on their circumstances has shown positive outcomes with 51.41% of targeted individuals are now successfully in receipt of Pension Credit.
- 55 The campaign has successfully increased the number of pensioners in receipt of Pension Credit by 692. Given that the average financial benefit of Pension Credit per recipient is £3,900 per year, this equates to a total financial gain of £2,698,800 per year.
- 56 In addition to Pension Credit, those residents also gain automatically eligibility for the winter fuel payment, worth an average of £250 per year, this provides an additional financial benefit of £173,000 per year.
- 57 Combining both Pension Credit and Winter Fuel Payment, the campaign has facilitated an estimated £2,871,800 in extra financial support per year for pensioners in County Durham.

- 58 The evaluation report, provided by County Durham Community Foundation (CDCF), at the end of 23/24 year of delivery showed that circa 21,000 people attended a Welcome Space which equated to an average of 179 people per Welcome Space. This results in an average cost per Welcome Space attendee of approximately £13.57. Over 1,000 volunteers have been involved with running Welcome Spaces, with 130 of these volunteers new to the organisations they supported.
- 59 Evaluation shows the network not only achieved its primary purpose of providing places for people to keep warm and well, but there was also a challenge to build on the previous Warm Spaces programme and to provide a wider range of activities and support. The number of people attending and benefiting increased by 23%, and projects have become more embedded and accessible to people.
- 60 Those attending were connected to support services that could help address particular needs, from financial advice to bereavement support. Many people benefited significantly from the social connection found at the Welcome Spaces.
- 61 Between October 2024 and March 2025, a network of 75 welcome spaces has been created, the scheme was made up of funding from UKSPF and DCC and totalled £190,558.
- 62 A full evaluation of the Welcome spaces provided throughout 24/25 will follow in Q2 of 2025.
- 63 A £998,000 allocation from the UK Shared Prosperity Funding was secured for 2024/25. This is part of a larger initiative around communities and place including social action and energy efficiency, together with community hubs. Projects including the expansion of the TBBT network to 5 further hubs and the extension of the Cost-of-Living.
- 64 Advice and Guidance project delivered by CACD, East Durham Trust, Durham Christian Partnership and Age Concern have been implemented.
- 65 A cost-of-Living support project was financed to be delivered by East Durham Trust, Citizens Advice County Durham, Age UK, and Durham Christian partnership, data shows during Q1-Q3 of 2024 this project has supported over 1,000 residents with advice, guidance or information, households' income increased by £906k and nearly £2.3 million written off in debt.
- 66 Since the last report, we have added an additional five operational hubs to the TBBT food hub network taking the total to 20. This was possible due to the UK Shared Prosperity funding (£150k) purchasing an additional refrigerated van.

- 67 The hubs, collectively supporting around 1,600 families each week with low-cost food and access to advice (including financial support), continue to provide a stepping stone from the crisis support through food banks and through the Welfare Assistance Scheme.
- 68 All hubs are regularly operating to full capacity (approximately 80) for every weekly slot with some members unable to obtain a weekly slot. This regular weekly over-subscription means weekly slots are having to be rotated leading to some households only benefiting from the low-cost shop on a fortnightly basis.
- 69 The 'Cutting the Cost of the School Day' (CCSD) programme continues to provide training to educational settings which aim to gain a deeper insight into the scale and impact of poverty on children and young people, to challenge the stigma associated with living in poverty and support settings to develop practical steps in which to cut the cost of the school day.
- 70 We are also working to understand the wider issues in the housing market. As part of the development work of the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2024/29, we investigated the reasons why people were presenting to the Housing Solutions Service from the private rented sector. Detailed analysis concluded that reduced availability of accommodation in the private rented sector is the main reason people are presenting as homeless or at risk of being homeless. Recent interest rate rises are impacting landlords who are either selling properties or increasing rents. This is driving an increase in evictions and is making the sector less affordable for those on lower incomes.
- 71 The Housing Poverty Group is working collaboratively on the issue of affordability in the current climate. A new money management and financial inclusion practitioners' group has been set up with local RPs to discuss the challenges faced by front line advisors and share good practice. An action plan is being developed to drive forward improvements.
- 72 The council is working in partnership with NEFirst Credit Union to provide interest free loans of up to £500 to qualifying residents. Durham represents 57% of membership. Council staff working with children can refer families who they feel might meet the requirements for the loan. We have developed a webpage on the DCC website to advise families of the support available when buying school uniforms.
- 73 The funding of a no interest loan scheme by the DCC Poverty Action Steering Group, has supported reducing loan declines, by allowing the credit union to offer small loans to those with very poor credit histories and scores. Also 2 local social housing companies and the National

Fair4 All scheme has meant more loans can be offered at zero percent. The original £31,162 granted to Nefirst has been recirculated in the community, and as loans are paid back, and they are reloaned:

- (a) £31,162 original PASG grant.
- (b) £29.235 loans granted.
- (c) £18,230 repaid to Nefirst, and reloaned.
- (d) £9,532 still available to lend.
- (e) Default rate lower than expected at 12% (20% expected)

74 The council was allocated £2.3 million by the Department for Education to co-ordinate and deliver free holiday activities and healthy food for children eligible for free school meals during the Easter, Summer, and Christmas holiday periods in 2024/25.

75 However, working with other colleagues in the council we secured an additional £600,000 funding from UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Household Support Fund 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 we know are vulnerable. This will significantly add to the programme funded by the DfE.

76 The programme delivered:

- (a) DfE Funding: 4863 children, 89% FSM eligible, 36,380 sessions booked.
- (b) HSF/UKSPF: 3,984 children, 12,571, sessions booked.

77 The Bread and Butter Thing Family Trips (additional £10,000 secured): 5 trips across Family Hubs, 389 places booked

Objective 3: increase individual, household and community resilience to poverty.

78 Digital Durham continues their work on the implementation of “The Digital Community Hubs programme” which will involve Digital Durham and Technical Services colleagues in Digital Services equip up to 26 community organisations located mainly in the 16 ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods and rural communities, with devices, connectivity, and the necessary skills to help digitally excluded residents get online.

79 The implementation of the Financial Inclusion Support Officer (FISO) programme which actively explores new ways to tackle child poverty

and overcome the current challenges related to the cost-of-living crisis is now in place. It focuses on maximising entitlement to generate income from social security benefits and on supporting parents/carers to pursue pathways into employment. It also supports families by providing advice on support available for children such as free school meals, clothing grants etc.

- 80 Two FISO's are now in post working with 12 secondary schools and 1 college across County Durham, a referral process was created for school staff, parents/carers, and young people to access the service. The officers visit each school weekly for face-to-face appointments. An online referral form is also available on the DCC website for anyone who's child attends one of the participating education settings.
- 81 During 2024/25 289 referrals have been received to assist with various needs, including accessing school uniforms, free school meals, welfare benefit checks, assistance with benefit applications and fuel poverty advice. Of these 289 referrals 39 were as a result of a SEND campaign that was piloted in in two of the secondary schools, targeting families with a child/children with an EHCP.
- 82 We continue to deliver initiatives to support rough sleepers, ex-offenders, and other vulnerable people into accommodation. Accommodation officers are continuing to build links with letting agents and independent landlords and 26 properties have been secured for ex-offenders.
- 83 We continue to support Children Looked After (CLA) who are aged 17.5 years and transitioning to independent living and have developed a new 'skills for life' booklet which contains valuable information relating to understanding what skills young people have and what they need for the future.
- 84 A cost-of-Living support project was financed to be delivered by East Durham Trust, Citizens Advice County Durham, Age UK, and Durham Christian partnership, data shows during Q1-Q3 of 2024 this project has supported 969 residents with advice, guidance or information, households' income increased by nearly £907k and over £2.2 million wrote off in debt.
- 85 We continue to deliver training programmes to equip our frontline staff and volunteers with the skills to help increase resilience to poverty. For example, financial literacy and budgeting training, mental health awareness, and identifying financial abuse (as a form of domestic abuse) and the support available within communities.
- 86 The Durham Help service has been implemented successfully. To date, 225 individuals have accessed the support of a Mental Health

Employment Practitioner, of which 86 individuals were referred from Employability Durham, 66 individuals were referred from DurhamEnable, and 58 individuals were referred from DurhamWorks.

- 87 In terms of outcomes, 53 individuals have gained employment as a result of receiving support with a further 95 individuals being signposted and referred to more specialist, long-term mental health provision. The delivery of Durham Help is evaluated on an ongoing basis, with 50% of individuals reporting an improvement in their self-esteem, 65% of individuals seeing an improvement with how they manage their depression, and 75% of individuals stating that their anxiety levels had improved.
- 88 The Workplaces Project is providing opportunities for school pupils in Year 10 and 12 who are identified as at risk of not making a successful transition into education, employment or training to learn more about the world of work through bespoke visits to employer premises as part of an underpinning six week programme. Since delivery commenced in June 2023, 1,445 pupils have engaged in the project to date, including 1,329 Year 10 pupils and 116 Year 12 pupils.
- 89 The Workplaces Project is evaluated on an ongoing basis, with feedback obtained from school pupils, school staff and employers. We also utilise our DurhamWorks Young People's Engagement Worker to evaluate specific employment sector themed events that are organised for schools. For example, evaluation of a recent Health and Social Care themed event found that 95% of pupils who attended considered it to be useful for them, with one pupil commenting, 'I think it opened my eyes to career options I never knew existed, they were educational, and I enjoyed them very much.'
- 90 We continue to support young people as they prepare to progress further into education, employment, or training.
- (a) DurhamWorks Programme for Schools. Supports young people in years 10 and 11 who have been identified as being at risk of becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training). The programme includes careers advice, one-to-one mentoring support, and various activities focused on transition support, improving motivation, and Work-Related Learning and Enterprise.
 - (b) The Workplaces Project. Helps young people in years 10 and 12 gain an insight into the world of work through visits to workplaces. They learn about specific employment sectors, the different job roles, as well as recruitment processes.
 - (c) DurhamWorks, DurhamWorks 3 and DurhamWorks Futures. These programmes all provide support to young people aged 16-

24 who are NEET. It includes one-to-one transition support, help to access learning (including English and maths qualifications), and securing employment within a defined timeframe.

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

- 91 The council has refreshed and implemented its first point of contact offer at the Customer Access Points – focusing on digital inclusion and self-serve and continues to raise awareness of the availability of social tariffs through communication with a range of stakeholders, customer touch points and support organisations.
- 92 A Welfare Advice Consultation open from July to September 2024. 844 people engaged in the consultation, including 508 survey respondents, and the remaining from discussions in public meetings (AAPs), key organisations and partners.
- 93 A full report of the review, including the consultation feedback was presented to Cabinet on 15 January 2025 for their approval. Cabinet approved the recommendations to enhance the current hybrid approach which includes exploring opportunity to deliver more of this service through our partners in response to resident feedback in the consultation that this is where they prefer to seek Information, advice, and guidance.
- 94 This would lead to some adjustments to how the service is delivered in future with the aim of making it easier for residents to know where to go for support.
- 95 A procurement exercise is required to test the market and negotiate total cost of delivery, it is anticipated this will conclude in the summer of 2025 and the council will be in a position to communicate any changes.
- 96 To read the consultation feedback, go to [Advice Review - Summary of Consultation Findings](#)
- 97 A benefits calculator is now available via the DCC website to support residents to check how much Housing Benefit they could get if they rent their home, how much Council Tax Reduction they could receive if they are the person responsible for paying the Council Tax for the home they live in and to find out if they are entitled to Income Support, Pension Credit or Tax Credits. Since the launch of the online calculator the page has been accessed by 20,811 users, with consistent monthly engagement.
- 98 The Digital Durham website has been updated with further digital inclusion information, e.g., where to get free internet access and

cheaper deals available to those on low incomes and an online postcode checker has been developed to help direct people to local digital inclusion related support.

- 99 Good Things Foundation have joined forces with several mobile providers to launch the National Databank which aims to tackle data poverty by providing free mobile data, texts, and calls to people in need.
- 100 In County Durham, Digital Durham and its partners have distributed thousands of free data SIM cards to low-income households, these SIMs, provided through partnerships with organisations like the Good Things Foundation and TBBT Hubs, typically offer between 20GB and 40GB of data per month along with free calls and texts.
- 101 Like a foodbank but for mobile data, the National Databank provides free mobile SIM cards to help digitally excluded people get connected. Digital Durham is working to encourage more external organisations and customer facing council teams and services to support the scheme. As a result, there are 37 physical drop-in Databanks in the county, as well as many more teams distributing SIMs directly to clients.
- 102 The Digital Durham Team continue to seek hyperlocal distributors for the DataSIMs.
- 103 Additionally, the availability of social tariffs, DataSIMs and new postcode checker has been proactively communicated to stakeholders, support organisations and a range of customer touchpoints.
- 104 108 County Durham venues have been identified as offering some sort of free digital-related support including access to a device, connectivity, and digital skills support. An online postcode checker on the [Digital Durham website](#), is being promoted to customer facing staff and organisations to direct people to local support.
- 105 The PASG communication and engagement plan has been reviewed and updated to reflect focused activity for 2025/26.
- 106 The Poverty Action Steering Group's work has continued to concentrate on protecting our most vulnerable communities through the cost-of-living crisis with initiatives focused on mitigating the impact of food and fuel poverty, ensuring access to welfare advice and guidance services, and promoting financial inclusion.

Participation, Voice, and Advocacy

- 107 The council continues to work with a range of partners on the ground in communities and through a wide range of partnerships to ensure the voice of those living in poverty is heard.

- 108 Currently, a focus is being placed on poverty proofing, partnership working, advocacy and lobbying, and locality-based provision as ways of promoting participation and voice.
- 109 A Poverty Truth Commission has been set up and is hosted by Durham Community Action, during 2024 and 2025 focus will be on the area of Ferryhill, Bishop Auckland, Shildon and Newton Aycliffe with the aim to:
- a) Change the narrative and reduce stigma around poverty by sharing stories from people who are living with poverty.
 - b) Create opportunities for decision makers to hear the reality of those struggling with poverty.
 - c) To bring those with experience of poverty together with decision makers to make better decisions and bring about change.
- 110 A key role of the PASG is to raise awareness of socio-economic inequalities through the promotion of poverty proofing. Members of the group act as champions in their own services and through interactions with other organisations to promote the adoption of poverty proofing in new policy and strategy development as well as new projects, programmes, and initiatives.
- 111 The PASG aim to ensure the Durham voice is heard in regional and national policy and have continued to contribute to regional and national consultations and participated in local and national studies including studies from the North East Child Poverty action group and contributed to national studies.
- 112 Lobbying has been delivered on the continuation of the Household Support Fund, the income threshold for Free School Meals and the free school meal support for post 16 education.

Partnership Working

- 113 Much of the work of the PASG including delivery of the Strategy and programmes and projects detailed within the Poverty Action Plan are dependent on partnership working.
- 114 Through partnership working, the PASG continues to raise awareness of poverty across the county, advocate for improving the life chances of those living in poverty and connect with our communities on the ground.
- 115 This has included local work with the Advice and County Durham Partnership supporting access to welfare advice, support and guidance, participation in regional LA officer groups, as well as supporting regional

cross-sector stakeholder networks such as the North East Child Poverty Commission.

- 116 Collaboration with education partners, including Durham University, has also taken place to help gather more intelligence and data to help identify different methods of support and the most appropriate delivery.

Core Council Funding

- 117 The council continues to provide effective 'core' financial support mechanisms to low-income households, as well as supporting advice provision across the county.

- 118 A range of policy interventions that support vulnerable low-income households are in place, including:

- (a) **Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme (LCTRS)** – there are currently just over 53,465 LCTRS claimants across the county, of which 20,268 (38 percent) are pensioners and 33,197 (62 percent) are working age claimants. Almost 83% of all working age claimants receive maximum help, leaving them with no council tax to pay. LCTRS support is forecast to be around £67 million this year.

We will continue our current LCTRS into the 2025/26 financial year (1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026).

- (b) **Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) scheme** – each year the council receives a specific grant from the Department for Works and Pensions (DWP) to fund a local scheme which provides top up payments to those in receipt of the housing benefit element of Universal Credit to meet any shortfall in housing rental costs. The total allocation for 2024/25 is £836,254 with a total of 940 awards made between 1 April and 1 December 2024, with a total spend and commitments to year end totalling £650,868.22. It is anticipated that the full grant will be spend before the end of the financial year.

- (c) **Daily Living Expenses and Settlement Grants** – over the last five years the Welfare Assistance Scheme payments have totalled £2,966,551. In the current year it is forecast that £728,000 will be spent on the scheme.

We continue to see a downward trend and fewer claims have been received for assistance compared to last year and a move towards pre-pandemic levels of demand which is also being supported by the offer of further wrap around support with a

referral to our partners who can support with food/fuel poverty while offering debt and budgeting advice and support.

The average spend has reduced due to the new model offering more than just a cash-based approach.

- (d) **Welfare Support, advice, and Guidance** – the council recognises that effective advice and information services play a critical role in enabling residents to access available financial support, deal with issues of indebtedness and promote sound money management and is committed to ensuring that those in need of advice and information have access to suitable services across the county at a local community level.

The council supports and funds welfare support and debt management advice and guidance provision for residents via several routes.

Durham County Council is in the minority of councils that offer an in-house Welfare Rights team. The team offer a fully encompassing service providing welfare and benefits' advice to customers, from responding to the initial inquiry about entitlement to benefits through to representation and advocacy at appeals and ultimately, Upper Tribunals with the aim of maximising benefit entitlement.

The team also continue to deliver training in partnership with Advice in County Durham to both internal staff and external partners and lead on a range of benefit take up campaigns.

During quarters 1 to 3 of 2024/25 the team have worked with 4,309 new service users maximised income to the value of £11.1 million and 86% of claims have received a successful outcome.

To further contribute towards its strategic aims and objectives, the council partners with Citizens Advice County Durham (CACD) to provide advice services to residents within County Durham.

The council provides funding to CACD to support the provision of a free, independent, impartial, high quality service offering information, advice, and casework services to residents of County Durham to maximise entitlement to and raise awareness of benefits, debt advice and a wide range of advice services to facilitate sustainable applications and where necessary, appeals.

- 119 At the start of 24-25 the WA reserve was £1,167,038. This is anticipated to increase to £1,273,637 (£106,599 underspend as at Q3). Any underspend against this budget is retained in an earmarked reserve that

is overseen by the Poverty Action Steering Group to help fund a range of interventions set out in the Poverty Action Plan. This has included the following:

Scheme	Funding amount	Funding agreed date
Financial Inclusion Support Officer – Schools	£31,249	26/04/23
Welcome Spaces	£150,000	18/10/23
CACI Datasets	£21,994	7/11/23
Advice in County Durham	£100,000	12/24

The forecast earmarked reserve balance that will be carried over to next year is £1,040,386.

- (a) **Council Tax Exemption for Care Leavers** – from 1 April 2017 the council implemented a policy of exempting care leavers from council tax up to the age of 25. This policy offers additional support to those leaving care to facilitate their transition to independent living. The current cost of the scheme for 2024/25 is £320k, subject to both Council Tax annual increases and an increase in those eligible for this support.

DCC Employee Support

- 120 The council also continues to support employee financial wellbeing as part of our wider approach to workforce health and wellbeing.
- 121 We continue to increase employee awareness and education around financial wellbeing by running regular workplace campaigns, including Talk Money Week; offering learning opportunities, such as our free Financial Ability workshops; and providing information and signposting to helpful resources on our employee wellbeing portal.
- 122 Our Employee Assistance Programme provides psychological support and counselling services for a variety of personal or professional issues that may impact employee wellbeing. Employees and their immediate family members can access support via the telephone helpline, online portal, or mobile app, if struggling with financial concerns, family issues, life-events, bereavement, health concerns or legal matters.
- 123 We have refreshed and improved access to our employee benefits package to help employees make the most of the schemes available. Our employee benefits package features a range of voluntary salary sacrifice and payroll deduction schemes than can help employees to

spread the cost of travelling to work, put away more money for retirement, help to build a savings pot, or make small charitable donations. A new employee discount scheme launched in December 2023, helping employees to make their money stretch further.

Area Action Partnerships

- 124 Area Action Partnerships (AAPs) are partnerships that consist of members of the public, representatives for Durham County Council, town and parish councils, police, fire, health, housing, business, university, and voluntary organisations.
- 125 AAP's give local people and organisations a say on how our services are provided. There are 14 AAPs in the County.
- 126 Each of the 14 AAP are allocated £10,000 from the welfare assistance reserve to support projects tackling poverty. The total allocation is £140,000 and in the first half of 24/25, £114,459 has been utilised to deliver 10 projects. This has been further supported by £136,296 in match funding (£5500 from elected members Neighbourhood Budgets, £126,896 from external sources and £3900 in internal match from other DCC departments.)
- 127 These projects include outreach projects a baby bank, training courses and a food bank.
- 128 The funding of these projects will see:
 - (a) Over 1000 families benefiting from schemes aimed at improving support and outcomes for families
 - (b) 90 people undertaking training courses.
 - (c) 100 people involved in initiatives aimed at improving mental health/ wellbeing.
 - (d) 33 children and young people benefiting from schemes that aim to support them in achieving and maintaining optimum mental health and wellbeing.
 - (e) 16 Young people supported into education, training, and employment.
 - (f) 21 people engaged in voluntary work.
- 129 From 01 April 2025 the 14 Area Action Partnerships will become the 12 Local Networks. The Poverty Action Steering group will continue to work with these groups to tackle poverty and shape the council's support offerings based upon resident and partner feedback.

Government Funding

130 This section describes the government funding which is currently in place to support lower-income households and those in financial difficulty, and how that funding has changed and /or will change.

Household Support Fund (HSF)

131 The Household Support fund is a government funded grant which has been awarded to local authorities on an annual basis since 2020. It is to support people struggling with food, energy, and water costs, or who need essential household items. In cases of genuine emergency, it can also be used to support housing costs if existing housing support schemes do not meet this need.

132 The amount of funding and the criteria for the scheme can vary.

133 The total value awarded to Durham since October 2020, including the current HSF6 round is £30,503,983.95 and the fund currently supports approximately 52,000 individuals and their families with financial support per annum.

134 In the latest iteration of the scheme (2024/25) the council has been allocated £4.6 million, covering the 6-month period of October 24 to March 25. The funding available has been allocated as follows:

- (a) A direct allocation to children and education services - £2,200,000 of the total grant - to provide support for those in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM), care leavers and kinship carers. The funding will also allocate a small grant to schools to support pupils/parent with appropriate clothing, household essential or other eligible items. The fund will also look to support other appropriately identified schemes within the grant terms and allocation.
- (b) Grant allocations to local partners to administer and target support through existing schemes for households experiencing fuel poverty (including County Durham Foodbank and East Durham Trust).
- (c) A grant allocation to Durham Carers Centre to support all age carers and Age UK to support older people.
- (d) An application-based process for low-income households and a regular household deficit who are not in receipt of other forms of cost-of-living support. This will help support those in work families who are struggling with the increased cost of living and aren't necessarily eligible for additional benefits.

- (e) An allocation to households of pensionable age, who are in receipt of means tested local council tax reduction but are not eligible for winter fuel payments. Eligible households will receive £150 for a couple and £100 for a single household. Eligible households do not need to apply and will receive notification via a post office pay out voucher.
- (f) A referral to our funded food and fuel banks to support individuals who are not eligible for support through the welfare assistance scheme.
- (g) A grant allocation to Housing Solutions to support an immediate move to a suitable property to prevent homelessness. This grant will provide basic essential to enable the move whilst wider grant application(s) through Settlement Grants etc are made.

135 The Autumn Budget confirmed the extension of the Household Support Fund (HSF) by a further year, from 1 April 2025 until 31 March 2026, however, the HSF7 grant allocation for this period has been reduced to £8.2 million compared to £9.2 million allocated during 2024/25.

'Fun and Food' in County Durham

136 The council was allocated £2.3 million by the Department for Education to co-ordinate and deliver free holiday activities and healthy food for children eligible for free school meals during the Easter, Summer, and Christmas holiday periods in 2024/25.

137 Working with other colleagues in the council an additional £600,000 funding from UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Household Support Fund 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 we know are vulnerable.

138 The programme has a dedicated webpage¹ and Facebook group², and each event also had effective signposting for families to access further advice and support.

139 48,951 sessions were delivered and 8,667 children and young people engaged with the 2024 programme and participated in activities such as arts and crafts, environmental and wildlife activities, STEM activities, sports and physical activity, and yoga and wellbeing. Healthy meals and snacks were provided with each activity.

¹ www.durham.gov.uk/funandfood

² [Fun and Food County Durham | Facebook](#)

- 140 The Easter, Summer and Christmas programme delivered:
- (a) DfE Funding: 4863 children, 89% FSM eligible, 36,380 sessions booked.
 - (b) HSF/UKSPF: 3,984 children, 12,571 sessions booked.

Single Homelessness Accommodation Programme

- 141 MHCLG have confirmed funding for 2025/26 for the Rough Sleepers Initiative (RSI) & Accommodation for ex-Offenders Initiative (AFEI) to enable the continuation of both initiatives. Beyond 2025/26 a multi-year settlement is due to be announced which will provide longer term stability.
- 142 The Single Homelessness Accommodation Programme (SHAP) programme is progressing with specific properties now identified for elements of the programme.
- (a) Survey and investigation works have commenced on five apartment hubs at a former children's home in Tow Law
 - (b) Planning consent has been approved for the conversion of Bishop Auckland Registry Office for five units. Works are due to commence on site.
 - (c) A planning application has been submitted and is under consideration for eight units in Spennymoor.
 - (d) Work continues to identify and acquire 15 dispersed with two complete, five offers accepted and two under offer.
- 143 The property acquisitions and leasing programme is on track to acquire 40 temporary accommodation properties by March 2025. Thirty-six properties have been acquired since the start of the scheme and a further four have offers accepted.

Supported Housing Improvement Programme (SHIP)

- 144 The review of all 20 supported housing providers within the Supported Housing Improvement Programme (SHIP) to ensure properties provide the correct level of support to tenants is on track for March 2025. Funding has been secured to extend the scheme to March 2026.
- (a) 336 tenant reviews have taken place. Tenant reviews validate housing benefit decisions and ensure tenants are receiving above minimal amount of care, support, and supervision.

- (b) 129 support plans, records of contact and referral forms have been scrutinised to ensure contact with the tenants is taking place.
 - (c) 168 properties have been inspected. 154 failed the first inspection, of which 83 have since been brought up standard and five have been returned to the landlord. Work ongoing with providers to improve standards in remaining properties.
- 145 The SHIP continues to support housing providers to become registered providers (RPs) or partner with RPs, supporting Housing Benefit subsidy loss.
- 146 The SHIP scheme has been extended until March 2026 following a successful bid for DCC funding.

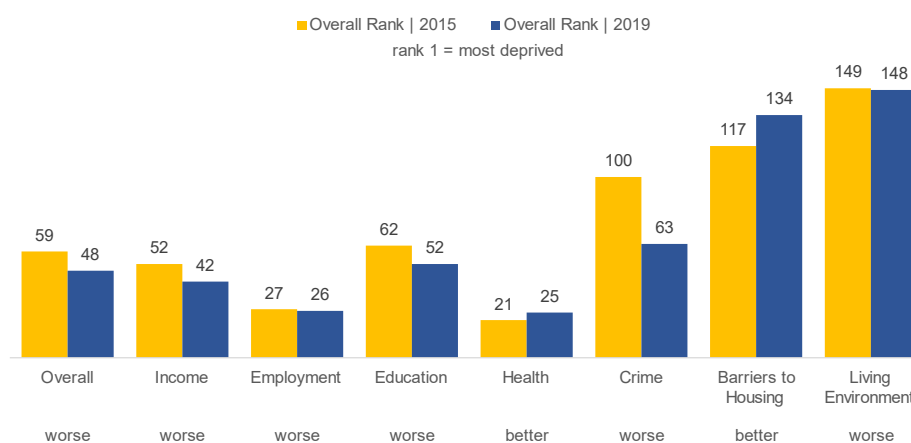
UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF)

- 147 A successful bid was made in February 2024 for £998,000 to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund
- 148 This bid was to help tackle the increase in cost of living and alleviate poverty in County Durham
- 149 This was done by focusing on initiatives and projects in several areas: food poverty, child poverty and advice services.
- 150 This included funding four partners to deliver cost of living and debt advice out in the communities, the opening of five additional 'The Bread and Butter Thing' hubs and an extension to the 'fun and food' holiday activities for those children not eligible for free school meals.
- 151 The cost of living and debt advice has delivered a 10 times return on it's £300k investment in the first three quarters of delivery, meaning residents of Durham have seen over £3million of income increases or debt managed.
- 152 A 12-month extension to the UKSPF was announced in the 2024 Autumn statement with further details to follow.

National, Regional and Local Picture

- 153 This section draws on the most recent available data; however, it is important to acknowledge that some of the information may no longer reflect current conditions due to the absence of more recent updates. We anticipate national data sets will be updated in 2025, which will provide a clearer and more accurate regional and local picture.

- 154 Across County Durham, poverty issues are exacerbated by high levels of deprivation. The county is ranked the 48th most deprived area in England (from 151 upper tier local authorities³) with almost half of residents living in the 30% most deprived areas.
- 155 Further analysis shows the county to be the 26th most deprived for employment and the 42nd most deprived for income. The situation has deteriorated since the last survey in 2015.



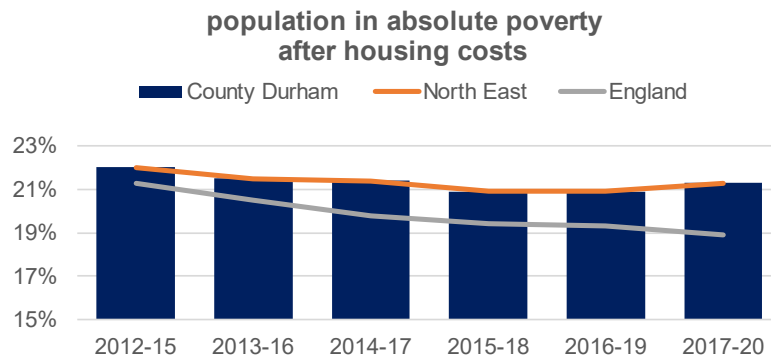
- 156 Although the amount of money that a County Durham household has available for spending or saving after all direct and indirect taxes have been paid and any direct benefits received (gross disposable household income) is increasing, it remains lower than the wider North East and the rest of England.

	2020	2021	Change
County Durham	£16,362	£17,228	+ £866
North East	£16,935	£17,563	+ £628
England	£21,414	£22,213	+ £799
Gap with England	£5,052 24% lower	£4,925 22% lower	improving

- 157 Whilst it is difficult to evidence the drivers for this improved position between 2020 and 2021 Business Register and Employment Survey (BRES) data indicates an increase in jobs in the county, particularly full-time position. This period also covers a time of Universal Credit (UC) uplift which may have had an impact, particularly given we have a higher percentage of the working age population claiming UC than the rest of England.

³ [2019 Indices of deprivation](#)

158 We estimate that just over 112,000 of our residents (21.3%) live in absolute poverty⁴ after housing costs. This is on par with the rate across the North East but is worse than the UK average (18.9%). The absolute poverty gap between County Durham and England has widened in recent years.



159 Latest data for the North East region suggests that around 56% of working-age adults with relative low income⁵ are living in households where at least one adult works.

160 One in five people are claiming Universal Credit in County Durham – The proportion of the 16 to 64 population in County Durham claiming UC, for any reason, has increased since April 2021 from 16.2% to 19.5% in September 2024.

161 In work poverty is further reflected in data relating to Universal Credit⁶ (UC). Across County Durham, whilst the number of people claiming UC has fallen recently from a high of 36.5% in December 2021 to 33.1% in September 2024, the increase has been greater across those with dependent children with an increase from 42.1% to 48.2% or 12,406 to 25,622 households.

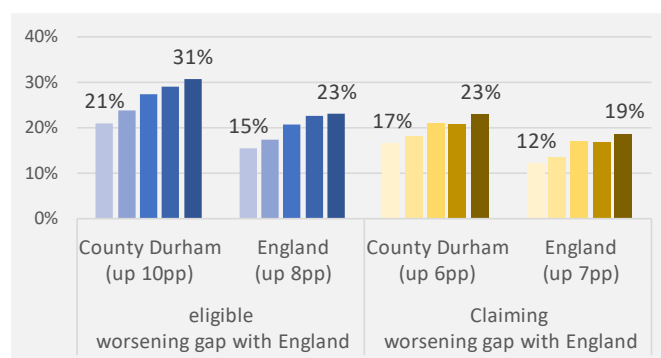
	UC Claimants	UC Claimants in work	% of UC claimants in work
Sep-23	58,729	19,909	34%
Sep-24	65,192	21,580	33.1%
Change	+6,463 (+11%)	+1,671 (+8.39%)	-0.9% percentage points

⁴ Data relates to 2017/20 and reports people living in households with income below 60% of the 2010/11 median (adjusted for inflation). Median is the point which half of households have lower income and half higher income.

⁵ Data relates to the average of 2019/20 and 2020/21 and relates to income below 60% of the median for that year. Median is the point which half of households have lower income and half higher income.

⁶ UC is a single payment replacing the following benefits - income based job seekers allowance, income related employment and support allowance, income support, working tax credit, child tax credit, housing benefit.

- 162 The next iteration of poverty data will be updated in 2025.
- 163 It has been suggested⁷ that the poorest quarter of households are set to see their incomes fall further. This marks a significant decline in wealth for a proportion of the UK compared to 10 years ago, with more people falling into absolute poverty⁸.
- 164 Much of this fall is due to the impact of inflation on energy, food, and fuel.
- 165 The proportion of children and young people eligible for FSM across the county has steadily increased over the last five years – and at a faster rate than the England average. In terms of claiming, the proportion has also increased – but at a slower rate than the England average.
- 166 An approach aimed at addressing the gap in Free School Meal support was the auto enrolment pilot by proactively identifying and enrolling eligible families across County Durham ensuring that children did not miss out on vital assistance due to administrative barriers.



- 167 Although the cost-of-living landscape is a major factor in the increase in FSM, it is also linked to Universal Credit roll-out (and the associated protections).
- 168 The most recent data (2022) suggests 26,600 (11.5%) estimated households across the county are in fuel poverty. North East 10.9%; England 13.1%.
- 169 With the increase in cost of living due to the inflationary rate of food and fuel we have seen a dramatic increase in people who are in employment finding themselves struggling financially and at risk of falling into poverty.
- 170 This was highlighted by the changes to the Household Support scheme in 2024 where the DWP specified that part of the fund had to be

⁷ 2022 report by the Resolution Foundation

⁸ people living in households with income below 60% of the 2010/11 median (adjusted for inflation)

available to those people who were not receiving other forms of additional help but were still struggling with the day to day living expenses.

- 171 This group have been referred to as ‘just about managing,’ as the household income tends to just cover the basic household expenses but leaves little surplus for any increases or unforeseen expenses while the income is normally too high to qualify for any traditional benefits support.
- 172 Durham is particularly at risk of this due to the type of work which is predominantly available in our area which is normally lower paid, has less reliable hours and not always of a fixed term nature.
- 173 On the ground our VCS and public service partners continue to report the following:
- (a) Rising demand at food banks is impacting capacity.
 - (b) More people in work are using food banks.
 - (c) More families are struggling to get by and afford essential basics.
 - (d) Increases in the number of people presenting with debt problems.

Rural Proofing and Digital Inclusion

- 174 When considering the national, regional, and local picture, it is important to recognise the geography of the county. County Durham is largely rural with some of the lowest population densities in the country – of the 300 recognised settlements, only 23 have a population of 5,000 or more⁹.

Land Type	Area of county	Population	Population density per hectare
Rural	57%	7%	0.3
towns and villages in a rural setting	32%	37%	2.7
Urban	11%	56%	12.1

- 175 The A68 splits the county. 90% of the population live to the east of the A68 in 40% of the geographical area. 10% live to the west in 60% of the geographical area.

⁹ 2011 census

- 176 The character of our rural areas and settlements varies, from the more remote locations in the Pennine Dales in the west of the county, to the larger villages in former coal mining communities in the centre and east of the county.
- 177 The needs of residents in rural areas differ from those in non-rural areas. Although all people living in poverty can expect to pay more for almost everything they buy, this is exacerbated in rural areas where the cost of food and fuel can be higher, houses can be more difficult to insulate (and therefore more expensive to heat), and where reduced public transport links puts increased emphasis on having a private car.
- 178 Lack of transport can prevent people accessing services, education, and employment. Cost, poor availability and long journey times have disconnected less affluent areas and rural communities from their wider labour markets.
- 179 We continue to deliver rural proofing activity to ensure the differing needs and issues affecting residents in rural areas are considered. This remains a priority in 2025/26.
- 180 Furthermore, the ability to interact digitally, essential to addressing social and economic inequalities and levelling up our communities remains a challenge for our rural communities.
- 181 Many of the cheapest ways of accessing goods and services are only available online, mainstream banking has disappeared from many of our highstreets (especially in rural areas) and many educational courses and job applications are restricted to online access. In addition, people who are not using online services can lack a voice and visibility in the modern world, as government services and democracy increasingly move online.
- 182 However, some people can afford neither the equipment nor the broadband required to get online and even when poorer households are physically able to access the internet, they are less likely to have the skills to utilise it. In rural areas levels, digital inclusion may be further reduced by poorer quality broadband and mobile connections.
- 183 The council continues its delivery of the Digital Durham programme working with partners to further develop our digital infrastructure and increase the number of properties able to access full fibre to the premise broadband services at an affordable cost.
- 184 Coverage for super-fast broadband is currently 98% for County Durham (circa 242,478 households), with gigabit capable broadband currently at 78% coverage (circa 192,392 households).

- 185 The availability of fast and reliable broadband connectivity continues to improve with the delivery of the Digital Durham programme, with more than two thirds of the county now able to access gigabit capable broadband speeds.
- 186 Social tariffs offering cheaper broadband and mobile packages are available to people in receipt of certain benefits. A list of known packages is available on the [Digital Durham website](#).
- 187 There are now 108 venues across County Durham offering some sort of free digital-related support including access to a device, connectivity, and digital skills support. The [online checker](#) on the Digital Durham website, is available to customer facing staff and organisations to direct people to local support.
- 188 Like a foodbank but for mobile data, the [National Databank](#) provides free mobile SIM cards to help digitally excluded people get connected. Digital Durham is working to encourage more external organisations and customer facing council teams and services to support the scheme. As a result, there are 37 physical drop-in Databanks in the county, as well as many more teams distributing SIMs directly to clients.
- 189 Digital Durham is implementing a project to work collaboratively with The Bread and Butter Thing (TBBT) and DurhamLearn, to provide 600 learners across County Durham with the opportunity to partake in a six-week digital skills course. Upon successful completion of the course, the learner will be gifted a tablet and data-loaded SIM card that will provide free connectivity. In addition, a tablet case with a built-in keyboard will be provided. This will better support those who may be looking to utilise the device for job seeking or for further education purposes.
- 190 Alongside the digital hubs, this offers the opportunity to tackle digital inclusion at grassroots, community level, breaking down one of the main barriers to digital inclusion in County Durham – the affordability of devices and connectivity.
- 191 By partnering with TBBT and working within our Hubs, which are based in the 16 left behind neighbourhoods and rural areas, this programme will target the most vulnerable residents and those most likely to be digitally excluded including older people, people in lower income groups and people with disabilities. Project timeline to be confirmed.
- 192 Additionally, a multi-agency steering group has been aligned to the County Durham Together Partnership to consider the digital inclusion landscape. The group intends to support a more strategic and joined up approach to digital inclusion, explore opportunities to mitigate digital inclusion gaps.

National Policy Update

193 There have been changes to national policy (both welfare and cost-of-living related) since the last update was presented to Cabinet and which have or will have an impact the financial position of residents across the county during 2025/2026 and beyond. The main changes are listed below:

Increase to the National Living Wage (NLW)

194 Around 30,000 employees in County Durham currently earn less than the NLW. Women are the hardest hit, with around 19% being paid less than the living wage, compared to around 14 percent of men. This equates to around 17% of employees in County Durham, which is worse than the England average of around 12 percent.

195 The NLW increased by 9.8 percent in April 2024 to £11.44 an hour, and from 1 April 2025, it will increase further by an additional 6.7 percent to £12.21 an hour.

196 This represents an increase of over £1,400 to the annual earnings of a full-time worker on the National Living Wage and is expected to benefit over 3 million low paid workers across the UK.

Other Minimum wage increases for April 2025 Include

197 The National Minimum Wage (NMW) for 18–20-year-olds will increase by 16.3% to £10.00 per hour.

198 The NMW for 16–17-year-olds and apprentices will increase by 18% to £7.55 per hour.

Expanding community water fluoridation in the North East

199 The government plans to expand water fluoridation across the North East, aiming to address high rates of tooth decay, especially in deprived communities. By reaching an additional 1.6 million people this initiative is expected to reduce oral health inequalities and improve dental outcomes in children and adults, particularly in areas facing economic challenges.

200 Currently about half of the North East has fluoridated water and expanding this coverage aims to ease the strain on NHS dental services and support better health for vulnerable populations. It includes further expansion across County Durham.

Fit Note Reform

- 201 The government is piloting reforms to the fit note system aimed at improving job retention for individuals with health conditions. Through a 64 million investment, the “WorkWell” programme will be tested in 15 areas, expanding fit note responsibilities beyond GPs to include non-clinical professionals trained to support people with health issues. This approach aims to reduce pressures on GP’s, streamline access to support services like mental health counselling and physiotherapy, and help individuals with long term conditions to remain in work.

Decarbonisation of Social Housing

- 202 The decarbonisation of social housing in County Durham is progressing through the governments Social Housing decarbonisation Fund (SHDF) and related initiatives.
- 203 With new funding under SHDF Wave 3, Durham County Council and social housing providers are refitting homes to improve energy efficiency and lower emissions.
- 204 Recent local efforts have involved retrofitting approximately 1,300 homes, including upgrades such as insulation, solar panels, and heat pumps which are crucial for lowering household energy expenses. It is anticipated tenants could save as much as £400 each year.

National Insurance Contributions (NICs)

- 205 In 2024 the starting rate for National insurance employees pay fell twice, from 12% to 10% and then again to 8%. The previous Conservative government said that the two cuts were worth approx. £900 a year for a worker earning £35,000pa.
- 206 Following the Autumn statement in October there was no announcement for any further changes to the employee rate of National Insurance contributions.
- 207 From April 2025, the rate of National Insurance employers pay will increase from 13.8% to 15%. The threshold for which this is paid will also decrease from £9,100 a year to £5,000 a year.
- 208 This is anticipated to have a negative impact on an employer’s cash flow and may have a medium to long term negative impact on employment in our area through reduced employment options and a repressed wage growth.

The Back to Work Plan

- 209 From 6 April 2024 the welfare system will be reformed focusing on the long-term sick and disabled, and long-term unemployed. Sanctions will be strengthened for those who choose not to engage with measures that help them find work.
- 210 In March 2025, the Government made an announcement for changes to the benefits system aimed at cutting the growing amount the UK spends on welfare. This will see stricter tests for personal independent payments, no reassessments for those with the most severe conditions, the work capability assessment being discontinued, the amount of incapacity benefits under universal credit being frozen for existing claimants and reduced for new claimants and more incentives to work being introduced.
- 211 The earliest change will be the freezing of incapacity benefits amount from April 2026 along with the reduction of the amount for new claimants. PIP changes will not be in place until November 2026. The Poverty Action Steering group will continue to monitor this announcement as more information is released and look to work with partners to provide clarity and support for those residents who will be impacted by these changes.

Increase in benefit payments.

- 212 From April 2025, for those who cannot work for legitimate reasons, the government will uprate all 2024/25 working age benefits by 1.7%, in line with CPI inflation in September 2024, and will continue to protect pensioner incomes by maintaining the Triple Lock and uprating the basic State Pension, new State Pension and Pension Credit standard minimum guarantee from April 2025 in line with average earnings growth of 4.1% in 2025-26, in line with earnings growth, meaning over 12 million pensioners will receive up to £470 per year.
- 213 Local Housing Allowance rates will not be raised in 2025.
- 214 The Carer's Allowance weekly earnings limit will also be raised to improve financial security for carers to support them into work or to work more hours if they choose.
- 215 The government is also creating a new Fair Repayment Rate, which caps debt repayments made in Universal Credit, allowing 1.2 million households to keep more of their Universal Credit award.

Increase in free childcare for working parents.

- 216 Currently, eligible working parents of three- and four-year-olds receive 30 hours a week of free childcare and working parents of nine-month-olds can access 15 hours of free childcare.
- 217 From September 2025, working parents will be able to access 30 hours of free childcare per week for 38 weeks per year from when their child is nine months old, to when they start school.

Decrease in the Energy Price Cap

- 218 As of October 1, 2024, the UK energy price cap has decreased to £1,717 for a typical household, down from £1,928 in January 2024, however it will increase by 1.2% to £1,738 from January 2025.

Winter fuel payments

- 219 In July 2024 it was announced that the criteria for Winter Fuel Payments would be linked to Pension Credit entitlement from Winter 2024, ruling out eligibility of the payment for thousands of pension age residents.

Universal Credit migration

- 220 Universal Credit migration continued for those on a legacy benefit payment. However, 2024/25 saw the migration window for those on Employment and Support allowance accelerated from 2028 to September 2024, impacting an additional 5,500 Housing Benefit claimants in County Durham.

Challenges and Opportunities

Local Authority/Statutory/Wider Funding

- 221 The impact of inflationary pressures on the Council, other public sector services and the VCS continue to pose threats to our ability to sustain key services and infrastructure. Inflationary costs far outstrip government funding and council tax increases and the rise in demand outstrips capacity. It is critical that moving forward strategy continues to maximise the benefits of working in partnership to deliver outcomes for residents.
- 222 Many support programmes are government funded, and this poses challenges. Firstly, delivering these programmes depends on drawing on the resource and skills of Council staff alongside our partners and delivery of these programmes is time and resource intensive, requires a range of governance and delivery systems to be established and draws

on a variety of funding streams. This places further strain on limited resources.

- 223 Secondly, the programmes are often short term and ad hoc with limited longer-term funding security.
- 224 The PASG continue to advocate for local welfare funding, currently delivered in the form of Household Support Fund and Discretionary Housing Payment, to be put on a permanent, sustainable footing with a greater emphasis on preventative services and the promotion of households' financial resilience.

National Strategy/Policy

- 225 Many key policy decisions that determine levels of poverty are set nationally. The PASG must work in the context set by national policy. A key priority for the PASG is raising awareness of the extent and impact of poverty across the county to advocate for better anti-poverty policy. This is something which has continued following the change of Government in July 2024.

Economic Uncertainty

- 226 The current economic landscape presents several challenges with the impact of higher interest rates continuing to impact mortgage holders and renters as well as impacting businesses and may well reduce investment and reduce consumer demand.
- 227 Whilst the rate of inflation has reduced over the previous two years and real wages rise, food and energy remain relatively high continuing to put pressure on household budgets.
- 228 It is also noted that the rise in real wages may not benefit the lowest wage earners and as such living standards look set for a continued squeeze. The impact on our residents, communities, public services, businesses, and VCS will continue against the backdrop of uncertainty and reduced resilience.
- 229 The increase in Employers national insurance contributions is also expected to be inadvertently felt by employees, either through job insecurity or restricted wage growth.

Setting Realistic Expectations

- 230 As previously noted, while there is much that can be done locally, many of the policies that determine poverty levels are set nationally, and the socio-economic profile of the county leaves increases the potential impact of the cost-of-living crisis.

231 Setting realistic expectations, focussing activity on where local services can make the most difference and adopting a pragmatic approach to the evaluation of poverty alleviation strategic activity requires us to be open about the scale of the challenge, the impact that local policy can have and the challenges local services face.

Summary of Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board Feedback (COSMB)

232 The report has been considered and noted by Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management board (COSMB), full comments can be found at appendix 3 considerations which emerged included.

- (a) The ongoing challenge of short-term funding, such as the Household Support Fund and UK Shared Prosperity Fund
- (b) The need for face to face support and the impact on this from the change from 14 Area Action Partnerships to 12 Local Networks.
- (c) The need for smaller community groups to be supported to offer advice and be able to be part of a tender process
- (d) The possible impact of Pension Credit take up on care fee contributions.
- (e) The opportunity for further signposting and highlighting leaflets in our community hubs
- (f) Opportunities for our digital offer to include community hubs and help the hubs to support our residents
- (g) The reduction in numbers through the welfare assistance scheme for food and fuel and if this reduction has had an impact on demand in our community groups

Moving Forward

233 Whilst the Council has supported its most vulnerable residents over recent years and has further increased support provision during the last year, the data presented in this report indicates that the risk of poverty and severe hardship increasing remains high in County Durham during late 2024 and into 2025 and is being driven by the increasing cost of living.

234 The locally led actions described in this report are a critical and effective part of helping lift people and communities out of poverty. But the report recognises that the major tools needed to address this challenge remain with national governments, in the form of social security, tax, and

regulatory powers. There is much still to do to promote social inclusion and support people and their families over the coming months and years, particularly given the ongoing challenges of the current economic situation.

- 235 By maintaining our partnership-based approach to delivering the Poverty Action Strategy and action plan, we continue to make it everyone's business to respond to poverty and the risk to financial exclusion.
- 236 Progress in line with the poverty action plan will continue to be monitored and actions for priority progress during 2025/26 are detailed at appendix 2.
- 237 Opportunities for place and locality based working and co-production are being developed and implemented and despite the challenges of the cost-of-living crisis, the council and partners are maintaining and developing the range of programmes which help provide support for our most financially vulnerable residents and help provide essential support. For example, through the cost of living and financial wellbeing support initiative, provision of welfare advice services and welcome spaces programme.
- 238 Work on the advice review will continue to ensure the support available meets the current need of our residents in the most appropriate delivery model while providing value for money.
- 239 Exploring maximising awareness and take up of social tariffs to reduce the pressure of household bills will be a priority during the next financial year.
- 240 We are exploring a project aimed at improving collaboration and data sharing with foodbanks and agencies that provide crisis food, fuel, and support services. This initiative is designed to help residents address both underlying and immediate needs by ensuring they are referred for appropriate support where necessary. This project seeks to reduce duplicate provision, enhance efficiency and minimise potential misuse of the crisis food and fuel system, ensuring more effective assistance for those in need.
- 241 Protecting our most vulnerable communities will remain a priority but wider work will continue with programmes such as regeneration and skills, education, health, and housing. Over the longer term, these programmes are fundamental to support prevention, pathways to support and participation from communities.
- 242 The Council will also be alert to any future risks which may come from Government announcements around welfare reform, reductions in

funding or any unexpected consequences due to the increase in Government around defence.

- 243 Evaluation of the current strategy will take place during 2025 with a new refreshed strategy and action plan being developed, consulted on, and presented to cabinet in 2026, which will guide initiatives and actions for the period of 2026-2030.

Conclusion

- 244 Poverty is multi-faceted. It comes in many shapes and forms and varies both in terms of duration and severity. Poverty is not just about money, it relates to opportunity, participation, and access to services. Its impacts are felt at an individual, household, and community level.
- 245 Whilst the council has supported its most vulnerable residents over recent years and has further increased support provision during the last year the data presented in this report indicates that the risk of poverty and severe hardship increasing remains high in County Durham, and across the UK, driven by the increasing cost of living.
- 246 The locally led actions described in this report are a critical and effective part of helping lift people and communities out of poverty however, the major tools needed to address this challenge remain with government, in the form of social security, tax, and regulatory powers. There is much still to do to promote social inclusion and support people and their families over the coming months and years, particularly given the ongoing challenges of the current economic situation.
- 247 By maintaining our partnership-based approach to delivering the Poverty Action Strategy and action plan, we continue to make it everyone's business to respond to poverty and the risk to financial exclusion and progress in line with the poverty action plan will continue to be monitored during 2025/26.

Background papers

[Poverty Action Strategy and Plan 2022-26](#)

[Poverty Issues – Cabinet: December 2021](#)

[Poverty Issues – Cabinet: November 2020](#)

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

There are no direct legal implications arising out of this report, which is provided to give members an overview of the current situation regarding poverty issues and to update on the progress of the council and partners in addressing and alleviating poverty across the county.

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 Revenues and Benefits Service. 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.

Consultation

The Poverty Action Plan and Strategy was informed by feedback and engagement through consultation with council services and partners.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

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

Climate Change

Not applicable.

Human Rights

Not applicable.

Crime and Disorder

Not applicable.

Staffing

There are no staffing implications.

Accommodation

Not applicable.

Risk

Not applicable.

Procurement

All procurement guidelines are adhered to in the delivery of the poverty strategy and action plan.

Appendix 2: Poverty Action Strategy: current position of the action plan

OBJECTIVE 1: USE INTELLIGENCE AND DATA TO TARGET SUPPORT TO LOW INCOME HOUSEHOLDS.

Actions / projects / programmes completed to date:

- Work with partners to identify locations that can act as community hubs for residents to obtain financial advice/ information and help to improve their digital skills.
- Continue to develop a joined-up Business Intelligence approach to managing poverty data and to identify and engage with people who are entitled to benefits but are not claiming.
- Enhance understanding of the housing market to help people struggling with their housing costs to remain in their homes through implementation of the council's new Housing Strategy.
- Understand the levels of reported financial abuse within specialist domestic abuse services and partners.
- Work with partners to strengthen the process for identifying people who are vulnerable, a) financially, b) in relation to health and well-being.
- Ensure public health contracts maximise opportunities to refer and/or signpost individuals and families to financial support.
- Work with external partners such as the DWP to provide support to those who are impacted by the transition to Universal Credit.
- Delivery of a Free School Meals Pilot (FSM), saving families an estimated £1.1 million and unlocking circa £3 million of pupil premium funding to schools.
- Work has continued with the delivery of the next phase of development of 'The Bread and Butter Thing' (TBBT) network and hubs. Using funding from the UKSPF a fourth TBBT van has been purchased and has increased the hubs from 15 to 20 and capacity from 1200 to 1600 residents a week.
- Worked with our four partners EDT, CACD, Age UK County Durham and DCP to deliver cost of living and debt advice out in the communities.
- CACI data was utilised for the Pension Credit take up campaign to enable us to pinpoint regions where residents are statistically more likely to underclaim benefits.
- Reviewed DCC funded welfare advice and guidance services across County Durham focusing on location, accessibility, and quality of service.
- Worked with communities and partners to review and reframe communication and engagement plans to reduce stigma around poverty, support access to information on available financial support. and increase uptake of financial entitlements.

- Promoted the availability of lower cost digital connectivity services such as social tariffs for those in receipt of certain benefits.
- Development of a programme “Poverty Truth Commission” to give people who are in poverty a voice to tell their story and change the narrative to reduce stigma which can be associated low income.
- Worked with external partners such as the DWP to provide support to those who are impacted by the transition to Universal Credit.

Actions / projects / programmes to be completed during 2025/26:

- Improve data capture and intelligence which informs the work and reporting mechanisms of the Poverty Action Steering Group and wider partners.
- Develop an approach for using confidential datasets, ensuring the data can be shared, joined up and used without compromising data protection legislation.
- Use national and local data to inform initiatives and projects aimed at addressing poverty; this includes predictive modelling to develop effective, targeted approaches when needed to address emerging issues affecting households.
- Continue delivery programme of targeted campaigns to increase the number of people undergoing benefit checks, for example, social tariffs and pension credit.
- Exploring a project to share data with foodbanks and crisis support agencies to streamline referrals, reduce duplication and prevent misuse of crisis food and fuel services.

OBJECTIVE 2: REDUCE THE FINANCIAL PRESSURES ON PEOPLE FACING OR IN POVERTY.

Actions / projects / programmes completed to date:

- Financial Support Officers (FISO) who are supporting across 12 secondary schools, to assist with various needs, including accessing school uniforms, free school meals, welfare benefit checks, assistance with benefit applications and fuel poverty advice.
- Cost of Living (CoL) Advice and Support Delivery through partner organisations, Age UK County Durham, Citizens Advice County Durham, Durham Christian Partnership and East Durham Trust.
- Expand the use of the benefit calculator to other services across the council.
- Delivery of a Free School Meals Pilot (FSM), saving families an estimated £1.1 million and unlocking circa £3 million of pupil premium funding to schools.

- Continued to provide effective support mechanisms for more vulnerable households, through the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme (LCTRS), Discretionary Housing Payments and Partnership support arrangements.

Actions / projects / programmes to be completed during 2025/26:

- Implement Free School Meals (FSM) Auto enrolment part of business as usual.
- To test the feasibility and impact of an auto enrolment system for post 16 students with a college to improve take-up of free school meals.

OBJECTIVE 3: INCREASE INDIVIDUAL, HOUSEHOLD AND COMMUNITY RESILIENCE TO POVERTY.

Actions / projects / programmes completed to date:

- Fully understand the findings from the latest 'left behind communities' research and identify appropriate actions to address some of the issues highlighted.
- Deliver initiatives that support rough sleepers, ex-offenders, and other vulnerable people into accommodation. SHAP
- Implement and evaluate the impact of the new Durham Help service offering mental health support to residents who are looking for employment, education, and training through the various DCC employment programmes.
- Provide targeted and engaging delivery of numeracy and literacy to improve the levels of basic skills across the county (through the Multiply programme and mainstream Adult Education Budget).
- Evaluate the delivery of support to 1,300 school pupils in years 10 and 12 who are classed as vulnerable and at risk of not making a successful transition into education, employment, and training.
- Expansion of the TBBT network to 5 further hubs.
- Changes to Welfare Assistance Scheme working collaboratively with partners to provide a holistic support model which combines various avenues of support and has moved us from a cash first approach to meeting residents' needs through specific tailored support, allowing us to use further wrap-around support available at food banks, community supermarkets, and community hubs. Referrals ensure support is available throughout the financial year.
- Employability and Skills is delivering three employment support programmes to residents in County Durham, funded by UKSPF until the end of March 2025. These programmes are: DurhamWorks, DurhamEnable and Employability Durham.

Actions / projects / programmes to be completed during 2025/26:

- Expansion of FISO into Primary Schools to assist with various needs, including accessing school uniforms, free school meals, welfare benefit checks, assistance with benefit applications and fuel poverty advice.
- Exploring opportunities for more poverty alleviation work with combined authority.
- Continuation of Household Support Fund (HSF) delivery.
- Foodbank data sharing to support the sharing of both personal and non-personal data (as appropriate and necessary) between those foodbanks and agencies that provide crisis food, fuel, and/or advice support.
- Investigate the possibility of expanding/duplicating the Mental Health Hospital Discharge Scheme (dispersed accommodation – housing first model) to support people leaving services and increasing throughput to support more vulnerable people.
- Support Inclusive Economic Strategy Delivery Plan activity.

OBJECTIVE 4: REDUCE BARRIERS TO ACCESSING SERVICES FOR THOSE EXPERIENCING FINANCIAL INSECURITY.

Actions / projects / programmes completed to date:

- Social tariffs offering cheaper broadband and mobile packages are available to people in receipt of certain benefits.
- Digital Durham now has a network of 108 venues across County Durham offering free digital-related support including access to a device, connectivity, and digital skills support.
- Digital Durham have worked with external organisations to provide 37 physical drop-in Databanks who provide free mobile SIM cards help digitally excluded people get connected.
- A free school meals (FSM) auto enrolment pilot was implemented to identify school age children eligible for Free School Meals. Saving families an estimated £1.1 million and unlocking circa £3 million of pupil premium funding to schools.
- Ran a targeted Pension Credit (PC) take-up campaign to identify and engage eligible pensioners, raise awareness about unclaimed benefits and support them in accessing financial entitlements. The campaign has facilitated an estimated £2,871,800 in extra financial support per year for pensioners in County Durham.
- Financial Inclusion Support Officers working across 12 secondary schools to assist with various needs, including accessing school uniforms, free school

meals, welfare benefit checks, assistance with benefit applications and fuel poverty advice.

- Reviewed DCC funded welfare advice and guidance services across County Durham focusing on location, accessibility, and quality of service.
- Further development of online postcode checker to facilitate signposting to digital inclusion related support in terms of access to devices, connectivity, and training/skills.
- Explore opportunities to develop a digital inclusion strategy which supports a strategic and joined up approach to digital inclusion and mitigates the digital inclusion gaps.

Actions / projects / programmes to be completed during 2025/26:

- Investigate the feasibility of broadband providers, working with social housing providers, to provide social tariffs for those in receipt of certain benefits.
- Continued delivery of the Digital Durham programme working with partners to further develop our digital infrastructure, coverage for super-fast broadband is currently 98% for County Durham (circa 242,478 households), and ongoing work to increase the number of properties able to access gigabit-capable broadband services and improved connectivity at an affordable cost. County Durham gigabit coverage is currently 78%, (circa 192,392 households)., and expected to increase as the rollout progresses.
- Deliver Digital Inclusion course and device gifting scheme, breaking down one of the main barriers to digital inclusion in County Durham – the affordability of devices and connectivity.
- Explore the use of QR codes to streamline access to resources and reduce the stigma or complexity for financially insecure households.

Appendix 3: COSMB Comments

At a meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board held on 28 March 2025 members received the report of the Corporate Director of Resources in respect of the Poverty Issues annual report for 2024/25. Members were invited to consider and comment on the report in advance of the final report being considered by Cabinet in April 2025.

Members of the Board made the following comments:-

- The Board acknowledged the work done by officers in this area to support our residents and the challenges residents face in relation to poverty and the increase in the cost of living.
- The Board raised the concern of the amount of limited term funding used to support residents in this area.
- The Board also sought assurances of how smaller community groups could be supported to be able to continue to support residents and be in a position to tender for advice services.
- The Board raised the continued need for face to face services for some residents and how this may be impacted by the change from 14 Area Action Partnerships to 12 Local Networks
- The Board also queried the impact a Pension Credit campaign may have on those residents who currently do not pay for their care fees, would this negatively impact those residents.
- An opportunity was raised by the Board of further awareness in our community hubs by the development of a leaflet highlighting all available support
- A query around the availability of digital support in our community hubs was raised as this would present a digital lifeline for some of our most isolated residents
- The Board also sought assurances around the reduction in demand of our welfare assistance scheme and the reasons behind this reduction and any impact our community groups may have felt from this.
- The board welcomed the review of the strategy due to take place during the financial year 2025/26