
Child Poverty in Oxford

Report of the Child Poverty Review Group

Commissioned by Oxford City Council's Scrutiny Committee

May 2022

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Foreword by the Chair



The issue of Child Poverty was identified as a particular concern by the Scrutiny Committee as early as September 2021, at a time when key drivers of concern included the removal of COVID-related supports such as the furlough scheme, £20 uplift to Universal Credit and inflation running at 3%. Since then, this situation has become far more acute with the dramatic increases in the cost of living.

Despite Oxford City's general affluence, child poverty has remained persistent over the last decades. In 2019, 29% of children in Oxford lived below the poverty line, affecting approximately 9 children in every classroom of 30. The majority (70% nationally) of these children live in working families where unaffordable housing and low wage poor quality jobs have now combined with the rising cost of heating and food, making life miserable for the city's poorest residents. Similar patterns are seen nationally, with 3.9 million children living in poverty in the UK in 2020-21 – a figure predicted to rise and one which seems inconceivable in the sixth richest economy in the world.

It is almost impossible to list exhaustively the negative consequences on children of growing up in poverty. Poorer health outcomes, lower educational attainment and earnings, and higher entrapment in the criminal justice system are pervasive themes which resonate into adulthood. These effects are even more obvious when poverty is combined with coming from a racially minoritised background or suffering from mental ill health. The dramatic increases in the cost of living over the last year mean not only that many, many more children are facing poverty, but that those already in poverty are facing acute curtailments to the most basic life needs, having to choose between heating and eating, let alone engaging in more 'discretionary' activity such as learning or social participation; causing life-long scarring and stigmatisation.

It is a common mistake, however, in discourse over child poverty to focus exclusively on the negative consequences of child poverty in the future. In the words of Baroness Lister of Burtersett, Honorary President of the Child Poverty Action Group, children should be valued and cared for as "beings" rather than "becomings". Children and families in poverty are facing suffering and unhappiness which requires intervention in the present. Disempowerment and having to rely on others is frustrating and embarrassing in the present, not just because it curtails future development. The stigma of poverty is one of many compelling reasons for universal and "cash first" approaches being most favoured, according to evidence presented to the committee.

The struggles which accompany not having sufficient resources to engage in society on the same basis as everybody else are of concern right now, and seek immediate repose. The human rights of all children including asylum seeking children, enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), includes the right to expressing opinions and being listened to. Ironically, in the discourse around poverty, the voices of children and families *living in poverty* are relegated to the margins. Limited testimony, when available, has revealed the devastating impact: *"Poverty feels like a tangled web that you*

can never escape”¹ and “makes me feel sad when mum says we haven’t got much money but I’m OK with it and have to support my mum”².

It is, nonetheless, heartening to know that the Council’s initiatives around tackling inequalities are preventing much greater suffering - many of which were recommended by the Scrutiny Committee’s 2015 *Combatting Inequality* report. These have included a comprehensive Council Tax Reduction scheme, sustained support for the city’s advice centres, work on the Oxford Living Wage and the Council’s Housing Strategy.

Yet, in addressing the roots causes of poverty, there is a need for a stronger and more unified stance and action across the city’s major institutions. Embedding the Socio-economic Duty, for example, would help to tackle the negative underlying circumstances which will otherwise continue to cause further suffering in the future. Working in unison, Oxford’s institutions could act as anchors and develop a greater capacity to ensure all our communities and children thrive in the here and now and the days to come.

Councillor Dr Hosnieh Djafari-Marbini, Chair of the Child Poverty Review Group

DRAFT

¹ ATD Fourth World - Oxford University, January 2019

² Milton Keynes Child Poverty Commission led by Naomi Eisenstadt

Chapter 1: Introduction

1. This report is intended to provide a considered and independent opinion on what the Council and its partners could do to improve the lives of children and young people in poverty within the City, and to prevent more children experiencing it. The report sets out the work undertaken by the Review Group, together with their conclusions and recommendations to the Council's main decision-making body, the Cabinet. Each recommendation is supported by a narrative based on the discussions of the Review Group at each of its meetings.
2. The Child Poverty Review Group has a cross-party membership comprising the following City Councillors:
 - Councillor Dr Hosnieh Djafari-Marbini (Chair)
 - Councillor Lucy Pegg
 - Councillor Ajaz Rehman
 - Councillor Liz Wade
 - Councillor Dick Wolff also attended as a substitute for Councillor Pegg for some meetings.
3. This report will be presented to the Council's Scrutiny Committee for endorsement on 08 June, and subsequently to the Cabinet. Due to the breadth and importance of the issues touched on by the review it is not anticipated that there will be an immediate response from Cabinet. It is often the case that there is no Cabinet meeting in August, meaning a response is anticipated for Cabinet's September meeting.
4. The Review Group would like to place on record its thanks to all of the people who contributed to the review, which has enabled the recommendations in the report to be made. The City is fortunate to have a wealth and diversity of people who are committed to addressing this pressing issue and who have been most generous with their time. Particular thanks goes to Oxford and District Action on Child Poverty for their immense help throughout the process, from identifying key speakers to preparing much of the background.

Chapter 2: Methodology

5. The Review Group's work involved a total of 7 meetings which were held between January and March 2022 via Zoom.
6. The topic, child poverty, was selected by the Scrutiny Committee in July 2021 after it agreed the importance and urgency of tackling this issue in order to support every child living across the City to thrive. Child poverty is a complex topic and while primary responsibility for its causes, consequences and the levers to lift children out of poverty does not rest with Oxford City Council, it has a role to play in supporting families and doing all it can to reduce the impact, tackle and prevent child poverty. The interplay between various agencies and multiple layers of central government policy, the NHS, the County Council, the City Council and the private and third sectors, amongst others, is key to understanding and addressing the causes and consequences of child poverty – as no one agency holds this responsibility.
7. The breadth of stakeholders belies what a complex issue it is to address. Some areas, Milton Keynes, for example, have established child poverty commissions to develop rigorous responses to child poverty, but these are a significant commitment for an entire Council, and far beyond the capacity of Scrutiny to undertake. An approach was made to the County Council to offer to undertake a joint review, but the Scrutiny function was in the process of undergoing a significant restructure making the timing inconvenient.
8. This review has not sought to provide a fully-developed 'solution' to child poverty locally due to the time and resource available. Instead, it has considered three issues:
 - i) To review at a strategic level the degree to which the Council is anti-poverty and to identify ways to embed further poverty tackling and prevention measures into the Council's activity at a strategic level
 - ii) To look at how the Council might work with other partners to develop a broader spectrum response to child poverty than possible when acting independently
 - iii) To identify 'quick wins' which the Council might wish to implement to tackle some of the negative consequences of child poverty
9. The Review Group's findings and recommendations have been informed by evidence provided by 11 external guests, lead Councillors and Council officers, as well as a number of written internal and external reports. One noticeable absence is a lack of individuals with first-hand experience of child poverty. Seeking the views of this group may appear to be a significant omission but it is the product of a deliberate choice. The rationale for this departure from recognised good practice does, however, require explanation.
10. Largely, this decision flows naturally from the issues alluded to above: complexity, capacity and the intended outcome of the review. Child poverty is extremely complex in the way it manifests itself. Whilst there are commonalities, differences in age, ethnicity and family structure, for example, do make for different experiences of child poverty, needing different solutions. To take account of these differences at such an individual scale would have expanded the scale of the review beyond its capacity. This, however, is not sufficient justification on its own. A second reason is that seeking meaningful first-hand information from young people in a sensitive manner is a skill, particularly if you factor in differences of age and ethnicity. Failure to exhibit the necessary skill would likely

result in a highly demeaning experience for these children. The skill, and time, to do it properly was not available to the Review Group, therefore it was determined that the risk-reward balance was skewed too far to be justified. Finally, with this review not intended or resourced to identify a holistic response, providing more of a high-level review instead, the need for the fine-tuning that lived experience provides is less. Involving those with lived experience remains vitally important, and this review recognises that. It does, however, also recognise that there are more and there are less appropriate times and fora to do so, and is of the view that the present review is justified in not having sought first-hand experience of child poverty.

11. Contributors to the review included:

- Katherine Barber (CEO, Homestart Oxfordshire)
- Fran Bennett (Associate Fellow, Department of Social Policy and Intervention, University of Oxford)
- Ian Brooke (OCC Head of Community Services)
- Lucy Cherry (OCC, Leisure and Performance Manager)
- Suzy Donald (Growing Minds, Oxfordshire Community Foundation)
- Naomi Eisenstadt (Chair, Northamptonshire Health and Care Partnership, formerly Independent Advisor to the Scottish Government on Poverty and chair of the Milton Keynes Child Poverty Commission)
- Andrew Grinell (CEO, Poverty Truth Network)
- Nicola Holmes-Brown (CEO, Donnington Doorstep)
- Nabila Qureshi (Director, Oxford Mutual Aid)
- Mandy Richards (Centre Manager, Agnes Smith Advice Centre)
- Zahra Tehrani (Young Women's Music Project)
- Graham Whitham (CEO, Greater Manchester Poverty Action)
- A combined submission from Oxford and District Action on Child Poverty

12. Representatives from the parties represented in Oxfordshire County Council's Administration were invited to attend some meetings of this review, as was the Chair of Oxford Strategic Partnership. Unfortunately, busy schedules and COVID-related disruption meant attendance was not possible.

Chapter 3: Background

Understanding Child Poverty

13. To understand why child poverty is such an important topic which urgently needs addressing, it is important to understand what is meant by child poverty. The topic of child poverty is large and wide-ranging, therefore this review has sought to summarise the key issues. As one of its external witnesses, the Review Group sought the advice from Fran Bennett, Associate Fellow, Department of Social Policy and Intervention at the University of Oxford. The content of the following section is credited to her as the presentation she gave exceeded what could have been undertaken by the author of this report. What follows is largely a transcript of that presentation, with some additions.
14. Beforehand, however, it is important to address why the topic of *child* poverty has been selected over poverty in general. There are a number of interconnected reasons. The first is that unfortunately, and in the overwhelming number of instances incorrectly, public perception has placed the blame for poverty on the individual. “*People in low paid jobs should have worked harder in school.*” “*They’d have more money if they cooked from scratch.*” “*They should have stopped at two children*” and so on. Children, however, are dependent on their parents, making them blame-free for their situation, even to those who would put blame on the parents. Focusing on the child enables discussion of many general poverty issues by removing the opportunity for discussion to become side-tracked by prejudicial assumptions. Focusing on children therefore acts as a vehicle to addressing wider issues, but the second benefit of a child-focused review is that it is one where there is less resistance to action, and where the drive to overcome inaction and do more than the status quo is higher. By focusing on the plight of children, more is likely to be achieved. Finally, precisely because of their dependence on others and reduced autonomy, children who are in poverty are more reliant on others to make a case on their behalf, which is what this review seeks to do.

What is child poverty and how is it measured?

15. When broaching the topic of poverty measures, it is important to differentiate between wider concepts of poverty, which give a sense of the experience of poverty; definitions of poverty, which determine whether someone is in poverty or not; and measures, which determine the degree of poverty a person is in. These have different functions and are not easily interchangeable.
16. There is a sense that many of the measures of poverty are very narrow and as such do not give a full sense of the experience of poverty. While true, such measures are necessarily narrow because they are required to serve a specific function. Relying on narrow measures is not a sign that the broader issues are unimportant, quite the opposite, but in order to be able to speak with accuracy, a narrow focus is required.
17. Poverty can be defined and measured in broadly two different ways, absolute poverty and relative poverty. *Absolute poverty* relates to the adequacy of material resources to meet basic needs. Does a person have enough money to buy food, for example? *Relative poverty*, which measures the material resources available to individuals relative to others in society, enables discussions of poverty to be situated and relevant to a specific time and place. It may be true that as a country the UK is richer than it ever has

been, or that relative to those in poorer countries even the poorest have access to more material possessions, but such points, true as they may be, obstruct discussion of the present (and no less real for being in a wealthier country or time) challenges faced by those in poverty. Based on this, the basic definition of poverty used within this review is that people who are in poverty *'have resources so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities.'*³ Poverty is thus at heart a situation caused by insufficient material resources, which excludes affected individuals from participation in wider society. Child poverty relates to this experience for anybody under the age of 18.

18. The standard measure of whether someone is in poverty is whether an individual lives in a household with less than 60% of the median equivalised disposable income. There is much to unpack in this. The choice of average used, median rather than mean is important because it locates the measure in the average experience of individuals, rather than the average wealth owned within the country. If a country's wealth inequality grows but its overall wealth remains the same, use of a mean figure would not see a change in the poverty threshold, despite more people having relatively fewer resources. However, it should be noted (and relevant at present) that the use of a median figure does mean that if living standards fall for everybody (or many people), say in an economic recession, the median threshold will adjust downwards. This is an inherent issue with median averages – it does not remove the benefits of using a relative measure, but it is worth noting that figures reported in a recessionary economic environment are liable to under-represent the challenges faced within a population.
19. What is meant by equivalised income? This simply recognises the fact that household composition matters when discussing the level of income needed to avoid poverty; a family unit of seven could earn more than a family unit of two, but the former be in poverty and the latter not. Equivalised income adjusts for the needs of different household incomes in different household compositions.
20. Likewise, what is included and excluded from 'disposable' income? This is really reference to housing costs. Those in poverty are already likely to be minimising their housing costs and are unlikely to be able to downsize in any meaningful way. Given that the cost of housing can be very different across the country (and Oxford is particularly expensive), the capacity to strip out a major variable enables more accurate reflection of real life experience between areas with very different housing costs.
21. It is also important to recognise what is not offset within 'disposable' income figures. The Social Metrics Commission has pointed out that the cost of living for people with a disability is higher, whether that arises from needing more heating or having to use taxis, for example. Disability can be an avenue for higher benefit entitlements, which are counted within an individual's income, but the overall higher cost of living is not. As such, the reality behind the statistics is that disabled people are more likely to be experiencing poverty, and to be in deeper poverty than might be perceived from the figures. The situation is the same for families in need of child care, meaning families with younger children are also liable to have their plights under-represented in official figures.
22. The Child Poverty Act of 2010, since repealed, created four targets which covered relative poverty levels, absolute poverty levels, material poverty and the persistence of

³ Peter Townsend (1979). *Poverty in the United Kingdom*. Allen Lane and Penguin Books: London (p31)

poverty- suggesting that one measure alone is insufficient. While this review uses the basic definition of poverty set out above, this report does also rely on a number of other measures. This means it is not always possible to make a direct read-across between quoted poverty figures, but these figures nevertheless are sufficient to illustrate trends and the points they underpin.

Who experiences child poverty?

23. The sad fact is that child poverty is not uncommon. In 2019/20, 31% of children in the UK were in poverty, 4.3million, which relates to nine children in every class of 30.⁴ Poverty amongst children is more prevalent than in the population as a whole, where the figure stands as 22%.
24. Child poverty, whilst widespread, is not evenly distributed amongst demographic groups. Children in one parent families are twice as likely to be in poverty as those in two parent families, with just under one in every two children from one parent families being in poverty, compared to one in every four amongst couples⁵. Similar figures are found amongst racially minoritised groups, where 46% of children are in poverty, compared to 26% of white British children⁶. The figures can be even starker amongst specific ethnic groups. In its 2020 report⁷, The Runnymede Trust set out child poverty rates by ethnic group, which showed higher rates among children from Bangladeshi (60%) and Pakistani (54%) families compared to children from Black (47%), Indian (27%), Chinese (31%) and Mixed (41%) families. There are also strong connections between poverty and disability – with 37% of children in families where someone is disabled living in poverty, compared to 28% of children in families where nobody is disabled.⁸ With women forming the overwhelming proportion in single parent families, stark differences between white British and other ethnic groups, and strong links between poverty and disability, what these facts say is that much inequality finds its expression in child poverty, and that concern for children must go hand in hand with a concern for a fairer, more equal society.
25. Factors relating to protected characteristics are not the only telling statistics, however. Although worklessness has a strong correlation with poverty, 75% of children living in poverty live in families with at least one worker⁹. Although it can contribute, poverty is far from being a function of worklessness. Family size also matters, with families with three or more children (notably, above the government’s two child benefit limit), being almost twice as likely to be in poverty as children in one or two child families (47% vs 24%). Another key area is child age, with child poverty being more prevalent in families with a child under five due to having young children affecting parents’ ability to work, working hours and pay. Child poverty rates can be seen to decrease as the age of the youngest

⁴ Poverty is actually measured at a household level, for which ‘children living in poverty’ is a shorthand. To be technically correct, what is meant by this is the number of children living in households which are in poverty. Statistics in this section from: Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2022). *UK Poverty 2022*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation: York.

⁵ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2022). *UK Poverty 2022*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation: York.

⁶ Child Poverty Action Group calculations from Households Below Average Income, Statistics on the number and percentage of people living in low income households for financial years 1994/95 to 2019/20, Tables 4_3db & 4_5db. Department for Work and Pensions 2021.

⁷ Runnymede (2020). *The Colour of Money*. Runnymede: London

⁸ Child Poverty Action Group

⁹ Households Below Average Income, Statistics on the number and percentage of people living in low income households for financial years 1994/95 to 2019/20. Table 4.3db. Department for Work and Pensions 2021.

child in the family increases – aged under five (36%), aged between five and ten (28%), aged between eleven and fifteen (26%) and aged between sixteen and eighteen (25%)¹⁰.

26. What this tells us is that poverty can be and is experienced by many, too many, types of people. However, being in a racially minoritised community, a large family, or having a young child are all particular risk factors which increase the likelihood of experiencing poverty. It is also necessary to understand that, whilst poverty levels may rise and fall, the figures presented represent net changes and many more people fall in and out of poverty. Persistent poverty, defined as being in poverty in three of the last four years, is experienced by 1 in 5 children. Evidence shows that the negative consequences of poverty are more profound for families the longer they spend, and the deeper they are, in poverty. Approximately 40% of children in families in deep poverty lack a range of goods and services because they cannot afford them, compared with just over 30% of children in non-deep poverty and 10% of children not in poverty. It is also likely that longer spells of poverty have greater impacts than short-term temporary spells¹¹. Linked to this, the Child Poverty Action Group highlights that children are more likely to experience poverty, remain in poverty for longer and experience deeper poverty than other groups.

What causes child poverty?

27. Much literature has been produced to explore this question, so the following is a summary of the headline causes. The main cause of child poverty is often thought to be adults being out of work, however as referenced above, currently 75% of children living in poverty live in a household where at least one adult is in work. The Child Poverty Action Group states that poverty rarely has a single cause and attributes it to a multitude of causes including rising living costs, low pay, lack of good quality work and inadequate social security benefits which means some people do not have enough resources. This points to larger structural causes and inequalities contributing to the problem.

28. The lowest paid 20% of the UK labour market have experienced a long-term deterioration of their terms of employment, which is seen as a major cause of enduring poverty in the UK. The culmination of low wages, high childcare costs and part-time employment serves to reduce household incomes, while many lower paid jobs do not offer progression routes to higher wages – with some being characterised by unpredictable hours and incomes. Many non-working adults in households where there are children are inclined to work but face barriers to securing employment, such as childcare responsibilities. 66% of children in families with no working adults live in poverty¹². A number of out-of-work adults living with children are not expected to work due to caring responsibilities – responsibilities which in themselves are recognised as a risk factor for poverty. Over 75% of adults with caring responsibilities are of working age and with childcare costs high, families are often faced with no choice but to fulfil their caring responsibilities at the expense of employment. Caring responsibilities are predominantly fulfilled by females (just under 60%) and as referenced elsewhere in this report lone parent families are, in the main, headed by a female and have the highest poverty rate of

¹⁰ Figures on in-work poverty and child age obtained from Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2022). *UK Poverty 2022*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation: York.

¹¹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2022). *UK Poverty 2022*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation: York.

¹² Child Poverty Action Group

any family type. This points to women, and their children, having a lower income and being disproportionately at risk of poverty¹³.

29. Due to current financial pressures across the country, the position of those on low incomes is set to get worse over the coming months. Inflation is rising faster than wages and welfare benefits and the impact of the increase in the energy price cap is sweeping households throughout the nation. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that the effective inflation rate as of April 2022 was highest for those on the lowest incomes¹⁴, which may be because those people have less of a buffer against rising costs than those on higher incomes. This comes against a backdrop of the withdrawal of the £20 per week uplift to the Universal Credit standard allowance which, for those out of work was not compensated by the reduction in the taper rate and the increase in the work allowance. This was described as the biggest overnight cut in benefit rates. It is no surprise, therefore, that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation highlighted that families in receipt of Universal Credit or legacy benefits have very high levels of poverty, with certain elements of the benefits system actually increasing poverty.
30. Housing costs are also a key contributing risk factor to child poverty. The roof over families' heads is the hub from which they are connected to employment, education, key services and their communities; therefore the stability, quality and size of a family home is crucial¹⁵. Where housing costs are unaffordable, this can drag families into poverty due the inability to keep up with payments – over time this can lead to destitution and even homelessness. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation states that poverty for renters is particularly driven by housing costs coupled with low incomes; and the private rented sector in particular lacks the security provided by longer-term tenancies, stronger protections against eviction, tighter regulations and the social ethos of the social rented sector.
31. It can also be argued that an ongoing focus on means-tested poverty relief, rather than poverty prevention, is a contributing risk factor as it does not address the root causes of children and families falling into poverty. A focus on poverty relief rather than prevention has the effect of reducing take-up of the support which is available. This is because, to many, accepting benefits and support means having to accept the label of being poor, which is often an underestimated barrier for people accepting help.
32. A further consideration is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. While many more affluent families were able to save money throughout lockdowns due to their reduced ability to spend money on social outings, many households on lower incomes saw their costs increase as a result of isolating at home – for example increased heating bills. Reductions in public transport usage also effectively prevented less affluent people from travelling to places to buy cheaper food, meaning their food bills increased. The impact of the pandemic has been felt most by the poorest people. It has exacerbated financial difficulty, as well as made it harder for this group to access essential public services to maintain health, address social care needs and access much-needed support and advice. Existing educational inequalities have also been increased, as COVID-19 has widened the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged pupils. Factors

¹³ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2022). *UK Poverty 2022*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation: York.

¹⁴ <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/15905>.

¹⁵ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2022). *UK Poverty 2022*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation: York.

including the digital divide and home learning environments have served to potentially deepen poverty throughout the pandemic and for years to come.

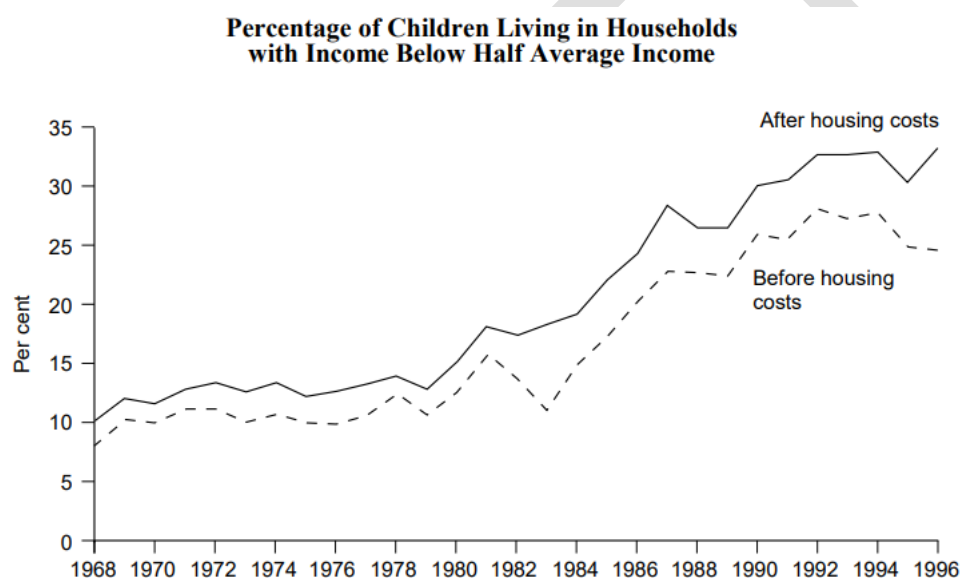
What are the consequences of child poverty?

33. Research shows that family income impacts on children's lives and development in a variety of ways. Increased household income is linked to better outcomes across health, education, general wellbeing – and as a result increased life chances. Those in poverty lack everyday essentials and one-off items afforded by their more affluent peers. It is said that, for those experiencing poverty, *poverty fills up your brain so you can't focus on anything else*.
34. Poverty is likely to increase stress within households, due to worries about finances and the ability to provide for the family, which in turn can impact on familial relationships. Family dynamics and relationships are an important influential factor in a child's emotional development, therefore the impact of poorer family connections can have long-lasting implications for children. Children living in poverty also frequently report feeling excluded or embarrassed among their more affluent peers, which is cited as a key source of unhappiness. Feeling bullied and judged can severely impact children's feelings of self-worth and mental health, which can be carried forward into later life.
35. An educational attainment gap is visible between the most and least disadvantaged pupils. Many children living in poverty fail to reach the same level of educational attainment as those from wealthier families, which can be evidenced by the fact that in 2015, 33% of children in receipt of free school meals obtained five or more good GCSEs, compared to 61% of children who were not¹⁶. There is also the argument that many teachers do not understand the plight of children living in poverty and are therefore unequipped to offer the necessary support to improve educational outcomes. Children living in poverty are also likely to miss out on opportunities at school such as field trips, as the cost to attend is often a barrier.
36. The adverse impacts of poverty can be seen to extend to all areas of a child's life – including home, school and friendships. It hampers their life chances and their ability to enjoy their childhood. Ultimately, child poverty reduces the likelihood of children fulfilling their potential and being given the opportunity to thrive.

¹⁶ Child Poverty Action Group

Historic Background and Current National Context

37. As can be seen in the graph below¹⁷, rates of child poverty during the late 1960s and the following decade were low, at around 12% of children, with a modest upward trajectory. This trajectory changed sharply in 1979, with the country seeing significant growth almost year on year until 1996, by which time rates of child poverty had almost tripled and stood at over 30%, the third highest rate with the OECD¹⁸.



38. Prior to the Child Poverty Act (since repealed) being passed in 2010, a number of interim targets were set to cut the number of children living in poor households by a quarter by 2004/05, and by a half by 2010/11. These targets were supported by a raft of other anti-poverty policy measures, which included: the introduction of the National Minimum Wage, Sure Start, greater financial support for childcare, increased education spending, and an annual increase in spending of £18bn per annum by 2010/11 on benefits for families with children, including the development of child-specific Child Tax Credits.

39. It is not possible to accurately measure the effectiveness of the implementation of these anti-poverty measures, as they were introduced during a period of economic growth in which poverty figures would be expected to decline. However, relative poverty, the most common measure, moves in line with economic growth; as such any reductions in

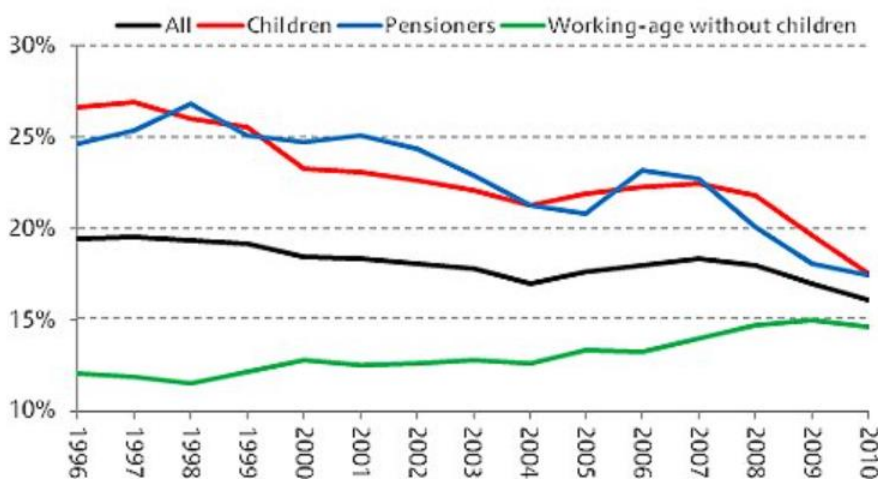
¹⁷ <https://ifs.org.uk/fs/articles/0004a.pdf> p.166

¹⁸ https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/CPAG-Ending-child-poverty-by-2020-progress-made-lessons-learned-0612_0.pdf p.13

poverty owing to economic growth would lead to flat rates of poverty, not falling ones. Further, as can be seen below¹⁹, child poverty rates fell at a faster rate than overall poverty; indeed, poverty actually rose slightly amongst working age individuals without children in the same period. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has suggested that without government intervention levels of poverty would have remained the same or increased by 6% between 1997 and 2010²⁰.

40. The effect of government policy to reduce poverty did see a significant fall. In total, approximately 900,000 fewer children were in poverty at the end of May 2010 than in May 1997, the rate falling from 27% to 17%. Persistent poverty rates, being in relative poverty for three out of the last four years and a measure with closer correlation to poor outcomes for children than short-term poverty, fell from 17% to 12% over this time.

Figure: Relative poverty rates since 1996-97



Notes: Years refer to financial years. Poverty line is 60% of median income. Incomes measured before deducting housing costs.

Source: Family Resources Survey.

41. When the Child Poverty Act 2010 was signed into law, it represented a legal expression of the government’s commitment to ending child poverty within a decade – by 2020. At a national level, the Act imposed a legal duty on governments to produce a child poverty strategy and to move towards four UK-wide targets by 2020 as follows:

- Relative poverty – for less than 10% of children to live in relative low income families (below 60% of the median).

¹⁹ <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/6738> NB - the measures of poverty are not the same as in the previous graph, hence the different absolute figures.

²⁰ <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/6738>

- Combined low income and material deprivation – for less than 5% of children to live in material deprivation and low income families (for this target, low income is defined as below 70% of the median).
- Absolute poverty – for less than 5% of children to live in absolute low income families (below 60% of an adjusted base amount, with the base year being 2010/11).
- Persistent poverty – for fewer children to live in relative poverty for long periods of time, with the specific target to be set at a later date.

42. These targets, however, were scrapped in 2016 when the Child Poverty Act was abolished as part of the Welfare Reform and Work Act. In addition, since 2010 local councils have faced serious reductions in the income received from government and been faced with difficult decisions to cut services. Relevant to children, many councils were forced to close Sure Start centres – which had until then provided services with a focus on achieving the best possible outcomes for children and families. In Oxfordshire, all 44 Sure Start Centres were closed in 2017. Whilst free childcare for 30 hours per week has been implemented for poorer parents of 3 and 4 year olds, the level of compensation given to providers means that private fee payers are generally relied upon to make up the difference. In poorer areas, where there are fewer people able to pay private fee rates, childcare provision is less viable and therefore harder to access for families who need it most. Over a quarter of local authorities are anticipating a reduction in the number of free early education entitlement offered. On top of this, Child Care Vouchers were scrapped to new users and replaced with a Tax-free Childcare scheme. The two may sound similar, but importantly Tax Free Childcare is not available to those on Tax Credits or Universal Credit, again further disadvantaging the poorest families who are most in need.

43. The current government has overseen a significant rise to the National Minimum Wage or, as it is now referred to, the National Living Wage. In 2015 the government asked the Low Pay Commission, responsible for setting the Minimum Wage, to plot a course to make the minimum wage rise to 60% of median earnings by 2020, an effective rise of 13%. However, it is important to note that wages are only one source of income for many lower-income households. Benefits are key source of income for lower-income households and have been subject to numerous reductions through various welfare reform measures, including:

- The limitation on accommodation-related support via the Local Housing Allowance for private renters
- The implementation of the ‘bedroom tax’ for social renters
- The removal of the work-related activity group component of the Employment Support Allowance
- The two-child limit, meaning Universal Credit is no longer paid for more than two children
- The benefit cap, placing a ceiling on benefits receivable without reference to individual circumstance

On top of this, benefit levels were frozen from 2016-20 on most working age benefits. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, this measure alone increased the number of people in poverty by 400,000 and affected 27 million people, including 11 million children. The vast majority of those affected live in working families with children.

People living in poverty were, on average £560 worse off, equivalent to around three months of food shopping for an average low-income family²¹. This, in conjunction with other changes, the limited proportion of individuals actually on the minimum wage, and the fact that the neediest individuals are most heavily reliant on benefits, mean that the benefits of a higher minimum wage are a long way from offsetting the other changes made.

44. Today, the poverty rate in the UK is 22%²². The point of providing this historical overview is to illustrate the fact that child poverty is sensitive to government policy. Local authorities are not powerless in reducing child poverty, but to some extent they too are bound by government policy and have limited strength and influence to affect change in isolation beyond that policy. Meaningful intervention, therefore, requires significant commitment and vitally, a coordinated, partnership approach.

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²¹ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/end-benefit-freeze-stop-people-being-swept-poverty>

²² <https://www.jrf.org.uk/data/overall-uk-poverty-rates#:~:text=More%20than%20one%20in%20five,and%202.1%20million%20are%20pensioners.>

Chapter 4: Findings and Recommendations

Part 1: Reviewing the Council's Policies

Background

45. The starting point of a Scrutiny review must always be the Council's own policy, for that is where there lies the greatest opportunity to influence and effect change. However, it is important to recognise that there are many causes and impacts of child poverty – beyond what a council could expect to address alone. In light of the mismatch between need and ability to deliver solutions, what does being an anti-poverty council actually look like? With the limitations and inevitable trade-offs the Council faces, what 'should' it be doing? As set out in the methodology, this review has not sought to provide a fully-developed 'solution' to child poverty locally - this part of the report seeks to consider the above questions from a strategic perspective. Part 3 of this chapter represents a list of more operational suggestions which were raised as part of the review – these suggested are not intended as a comprehensive response.
46. In determining how anti-poverty the Council is at a strategic level, the criteria selected determine the conclusion reached. The Review Group's methodology therefore requires explanation.
47. Ultimately, the approach taken reflects the Review Group's capacity and level of specialism. The option taken was to base the review on the strategic priorities for poverty-prevention identified by others. The template selected was that of Naomi Eisenstadt's report, *Shifting the Curve*, in her then-role as Independent Advisor to the Scottish Government on Poverty and Inequality²³.
48. There are positives and negatives to having taken this approach. The advice given to a national government in Scotland will be different to that provided to a council aspiring to do the right thing in terms of poverty-prevention in England. However, the view taken is that the advice is not wholly dissimilar. Whilst there are areas in the *Shifting the Curve* report which are not relevant to a council, the recommendations made touch on fundamental themes. As a result, the Review Group selected the recommendations made in the *Shifting the Curve* report over which the Council has some policy influence as the framework for determining the degree to which the Council's strategic policy is poverty-preventative. The other reason for selecting this report is that the author, Naomi Eisenstadt, was kind enough to speak to the Review Group, allowing for follow-up queries and discussion.
49. There is confidence that the approach taken provides a solid steer of the general position of the Council and sets out potential avenues for further improvement.

²³ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/independent-advisor-poverty-inequality-shifting-curve-report-first-minister/pages/10/>

Findings and Recommendations

Supporting the Living Wage

50. Poverty has long been associated with worklessness; a salary being presumed to provide sufficient income to prevent poverty. However, the more unevenly incomes are distributed between the most and least affluent, the more the average income rises and increasing numbers of individuals receive less than 60% of the median income, which is the main measure of poverty. Today, the link with worklessness and poverty has been broken and in-work poverty is a recognised phenomenon; 75% of children in poverty have at least one parent in work. Salaries are not necessarily sufficient to ward off poverty. This is particularly the case in Oxford, which has a particularly high cost of living. As such, seeking to ensure that workers are paid a salary which enables a basic standard of living is an important plank in preventing some younger residents from experiencing child poverty.
51. In recognition of Oxford's particularly high cost of living, the Council has developed and promoted its own voluntary Oxford Living Wage accreditation scheme with the support of the Living Wage Foundation, an accreditation available to those employers paying all their staff at least 95% of the London Living Wage. In November 2021 a total of 55 employers had signed up, including major local employers such as the Oxford Bus Company and Oxford University (though not the colleges, although individual ones have also become accredited).
52. Beyond the Living Wage itself, the Council does seek to leverage its position as a procurer of goods and services to extend good practice through including social value weightings in procurement decisions. To be clear, however, these cannot mandate that companies pay the Oxford Living Wage. They do, however, amongst other things, seek to promote apprenticeships, which are a key source of career development opportunities for children growing up in poorer backgrounds.
53. On the subject of the Oxford Living Wage, the Review Group has held much discussion without coming to a firm conclusion. The details are recounted here, however, as it is an important issue for the Council to come to a view on. During his presentation to the Review Group, CEO of Greater Manchester Poverty Action, Graham Whitham presented one project which has been going on in Greater Manchester, which is the development of a voluntary Good Employment Charter, which seeks to raise employment standards in the local area²⁴. In addition to pay levels, it sets requirements in other areas, such as work security and work flexibility. Whilst pay levels are foundational in preventing poverty, without other good working practices paying a living wage may not be enough. If work pays well, but is not flexible to help a single parent to look after their children, that parent may be unable to work at all. Likewise, a job which offers a good hourly rate but uncertainty over the number of hours may also not help a worker to keep their family out of poverty.
54. Whilst the initial instinct is that pushing for more improvements must be better, the Review Group is uncertain. There is clear value in trying to extend a range of good

²⁴ <https://www.gmgoodemploymentcharter.co.uk/>

employment practices locally. However, the current Oxford Living Wage has the benefit of simplicity. It is a clear and easily-understood concept and there is the possibility that if the Council expanded towards promoting multiple areas of good employment practice that its message may be diluted and less positive change effected as a consequence. As such, the Review Group is undecided on which path to pursue, but it does wish to raise this issue as a question for the Council to make a decision on.

Recommendation 1: That the Council discusses whether to adopt an Oxford Good Employers Charter and promote it instead of the Oxford Living Wage.

55. A final area which the Review Group has identified for improvement relating to the Living Wage is the failure to replace the role of Living Wage Champion following the departure of the previous post-holder. Although these champions do not have any decision-making power, they do raise the profile of important issues and ensure that they do not get crowded out by other priorities. The Review Group would welcome either a like-for-like replacement, or, if it is decided that the Council should broaden its efforts in this area towards wider good practice in employment, that the replacement's remit should be the same.

56. Given the references made to champions, it is convenient here to raise a further recommendation. The Review Group does see poverty prevention as needing to be driven from the top of the organisation, by both the Chief Executive and the Leader. However, it does recognise that there are capacity issues with these two individuals, who are already working extremely hard. The addition of a child poverty champion would increase focus on this topic.

Recommendation 2: That the Council appoints a living wage/good employment champion.

Recommendation 3: That the Council appoints a child poverty champion

Ensuring residents have access to the benefits to which they are entitled

57. Benefits exist for a reason; it is determined as a matter of policy that individuals in particular circumstances require financial support. A failure to see eligible individuals claiming benefits based on their circumstances will lead to them receiving less income than policy indicates that their circumstances dictate, thus leaving them, and their families, more prone to experiencing poverty. In its discussions with external witnesses the Review Group was presented with an uncomfortable reflection from Mandy Richards, Centre Manager at the Agnes Smith Advice Centre, which, as well as other things, helps individuals access the benefits to which they are entitled. Following successive rounds of welfare reform it was her experience that securing individuals the benefit support for which they were eligible was no longer enough to allow, with careful budgeting, a household to balance the books. Effectively, access to welfare is necessary to help families avoid living in poverty, but it is not necessarily sufficient. The fact that it is necessary, however, means it remains an important response.

58. Before embarking on the assessment of the Council's activity on this area, a short digression. When inviting expert witnesses to address the Review Group, each was asked for their suggestions for recommendations. Related to the reflection detailed

above, one of Mandy Richards' suggestions was the need for pressure on government to be maintained to provide a level of welfare which adequately underpins the living standards of those relying on them. The Review Group is happy to endorse this; as a high-profile Labour-led Council it is important that the Council uses its position to continue making the case to government over the adequacy of benefit levels.

Recommendation 4: That the Council continues to communicate forcefully to central government the impacts of the current inadequate welfare system, and pushes for one which adequately meets the needs of those relying on it.

59. A sign of the Council's commitment to ensuring that residents get access to the correct benefits is through the team providing the Welfare Reform service. The team exists to help people experiencing changes to their benefits or struggling to sustain their tenancy to find work, access training and get other support they may need to improve their situation for the long term. Providing this service is not a statutory requirement, meaning the spending committed to it is a sign of the level of priority afforded to it by the Council that it is retained, even in a period of intense financial pressure. From April 2021 to March 2022 the team, along with other work such as support around benefits, helped 59 people into work and prevented 220 households from experiencing homelessness. The latter statistic, retaining a stable home, is a critically important factor in child welfare on multiple levels.
60. Most benefit levels are set by central government. However, the Council does have some limited discretion over some benefits, and in those instances it is generous. Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) are administered in the Council by the Welfare Reform Team. DHPs are funded by central government grant but the Council has discretion to exceed this sum. When it does so, however, the funds must come from the Council itself. In 2019/20 the Council administered 121% of the government grant received, and in 2021/22, 122%. The latter equated to an investment in those requiring this benefit support of £101,000 over 411 households. For 2022/23, the Council has made allowances for £224,000 of overspend, which reflects the reduced sum received from government, and the anticipated increase in demand for DHP support.
61. In the instance of DHP payments beyond government grant, the Council is, in the most direct way possible, ensuring that those who require DHPs are able to access them – by funding those payments itself. These payments are exceptionally important in preventing child poverty owing to the demographic profiles of those receiving them: 66% of all DHP spending is on families subject to the benefit cap, and often lone parents unable to work enough hours to qualify for alternative benefits. This latter group did not benefit, or benefitted only minimally, from the announced uprating to Universal Credit.
62. A second area where the Council has discretion is over the Council Tax Reduction Scheme. Council Tax Reduction Schemes are a replacement for Council Tax Benefit, which puts the onus on individual councils to set the discount rate they will provide to those on low incomes. Here, the Council is also generous, including a banding for complete exemption from council tax. It should be recognised that, as the majority recipient of council tax, it is the County Council which forgoes a substantial proportion. The sum which is not collected is not the sum it costs the Council to run the scheme. Nevertheless, in 2019 fewer than one in five councils provided a band which included

complete exemption from council tax within their schemes²⁵. It is thought that this number has fallen since to below 20 councils nationwide. Again, where it has discretion, the Council is willing to make financial commitments on benefits which place it as one of the most generous amongst local authority peers.

63. The Council's activity in ensuring that residents get access to benefits is not, however, limited to its own work. Through its voluntary sector grants programme it funds advice centres which, among other things, provide an alternative, often more local means of support to access benefits. The Review Group does not have figures, but as budgets have become tighter and tighter grant support for the voluntary and community sector has become less common and less generous. The Council's current budget includes £473,461 for advice centres. Reduction to core funding of £25,000 was proposed to advice centres but reversed during the Budget consultation. The competing pressures on the Council are very evident in this situation. On the one hand, a wish to provide help to residents to access the support they require, but on the other, acute financial pressure. The Review Group's view is that advice centres can not only provide advice in a more cost-efficient way (often using volunteers, not paid staff), but that the positive outcomes they generate saves the Council money in other parts of the system. Housing a homeless family, for instance, is very costly. As such, from a business perspective as well as a poverty-prevention one, funding must be maintained. An issue to raise at this early stage is that of inflation. The Council's core grant has not been uprated for inflation. When inflation was running at less than two percent, sometimes less than one this mattered only moderately. However, inflation is running at 5.9% and the bills for heating and powering buildings are increasing even more. If the Council were to maintain its funding on a non-inflation adjusted basis, this would amount to a material cut. The Review Group recognises that Council finances are extremely tight, but it also sees the vital importance of advice centre provision, particularly as the cost of living crisis gets worse. As such, it highlights this issue to the Council now in order to allow the greatest amount of time to find the best way of safeguarding advice centre grant payments, and to uprate them by the rate of inflation at minimum.

Recommendation 5: That the Council commits to maintaining advice centre funding on, at minimum, an inflation-adjusted basis for the next four years.

64. A further example of the Council's commitment to ensuring access to benefit advice is through the administration of the government's Household Support Grant. This was established during the pandemic primarily to ensure individuals have money for food and fuel, though administrators have some discretion to broaden this use. Applying for this funding is a good way to identify individuals who are struggling financially. The Council has used the opportunity of applications to provide a benefits check to all individuals coming forward, rather than just administering the money. It has also been forward thinking to broaden access to this advice, and to the benefit itself. In the former case, some of the Council's grant was passed on to advice centres to administer, providing an additional route through which individuals in need could get their benefits checked. In the latter case, community groups – ethnic and locality-based – were also given the ability to administer the grant directly, removing potential barriers to access of language, culture, distance or unfamiliarity.

²⁵ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06672/SN06672.pdf> p.18

65. Overall, therefore, the Council is evidencing a strong commitment to ensuring that those eligible for benefits do receive them, including directly funding those benefits where central government funding is insufficient to meet demand

Building social housing

66. For many, housing costs are a significant component of monthly expenditure. This situation is even more acute in Oxford which is currently deemed to have the most unaffordable housing in the country, where the average house costs 12.4²⁶ times the average wage. In itself, this is hard, but it is exacerbated by the structure of the Local Housing Allowance, which bases its calculations on what benefit recipients should be given not just as a function of prices within the city, but including cheaper outlying areas also. For those on low wages generally, finding affordable accommodation in Oxford is hugely challenging. For those with families, it is harder still. The building of social housing, therefore, which provides individuals homes at a far more affordable rate is critical to reducing non-discretionary family expenditure, and thus poverty.

67. In regard to house building, the Council's activity is extremely ambitious. It seeks to develop over 1,200 affordable homes (of which over 700 are to be for social rent) over the next five years. This is an expansion of the Council's current portfolio of 15% for all tenures – around 9% for social rent. Given that the total population of Oxford is estimated to be 162,000 people, the addition of 700 homes purely for social rent will make a material difference in meeting the excess demand for socially rented housing in the city. Indeed, if criticism were to be made of the Council in this regard, it would not be for lack of activity but for over-ambition. For a period of approximately three years, the Council's coverage of borrowing repayments coming from rents falls to below best practice levels before recovering. From the Review Group's perspective, the Council's commitment to building more homes for social rent is absolutely clear.

68. This level of commitment was recognised by the Oxfordshire and District Action of Child Poverty in its written submission, which also highlights as a particularly commendable service the support provided to private sector tenants through the post of the tenancy liaison officer. Along a similar vein, the Council has sought to raise the minimum standards of private rented sector housing within the city through applying to central government to implement Selective Licensing, for which it has been successful. In this general area, the Council's activity as a landlord should also be noted, with a conscious investment made in softer, early intervention and support to those tenants during the pandemic who fell into rent arrears. At the same time as it seeks to provide more social housing, the Council is also taking measures to improve the experience of tenants generally.

69. Of course, the Council is not only responsible for delivering its own social housing, but it also has a duty to oversee the Planning function, which determines the number of social houses built by other developers generally. Whilst the Council's Local Plan states that for qualifying developments, 50% must be made available for social housing, typically developers seek to reduce this on the grounds that doing so makes the development unviable. The Review Group notes the success that the Council has had in challenging developer claims over viability, particularly at the Oxford North development. It is

²⁶ The Halifax via <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-58162371>

recognised that this challenge did require resource investment to get the advice of external experts. However, the cost (and ease) of doing so is much less than having to build elsewhere the equivalent social homes which would otherwise be lost. The Review Group wishes to recommend that the Council continues to resource challenges to viability assessments in order to secure the development of the fullest number of social housing possible.

Recommendation 6: That the Council continues to resource challenges to viability assessments which, if accepted, would result in significant shortfalls from the Local Plan requirements.

70. Shared ownership is too expensive for many people, which is why the Review Group prefers social rent.

Recommendation 7: That the Council exerts all the influence it can to see developers building homes for social rent rather than shared ownership.

Addressing fuel poverty for those on low incomes

71. The *Shifting the Curve* report was published in 2016, at a time when the average annual UK energy bills for typical levels of consumption were below £1200. Today they are £1,971²⁷, with further increases of 50% expected in the autumn. The overwhelming majority of heating costs are non-discretionary, particularly for those who are either subject to a medical condition and/or those who are already watching their spending closely. Below this level, negative impacts on health, wellbeing and educational attainment become quickly apparent. The cost of maintaining a home to a reasonable standard of warmth correlates with the negative experiences of child poverty and has become far more acute. Consequently, the Council's efforts to prevent fuel poverty make a vital contribution to individuals' experiences.

72. The Council's responsibility for fuel poverty is fairly limited, but not so limited that it did not bare consideration. Within its own powers the Council makes three important contributions towards fuel poverty. The first is in the development of Local Plans, which determine the standard to which new build properties or extensions requiring planning permission must be built. Minimum standards are determined by the nationally-set Building Regulations, but (presently, at least) Councils may, if can be justified to the Inspector, require a higher standard. This is important for the issue of fuel-poverty, for although its effects are undeniably slow to be realised, it is those living in poverty who are most likely to encounter minimum regulatory standards. The Council currently requires that new-build developments achieve at least a 40% reduction in carbon emissions from 2013 Building Regulations, one of the highest rates in the country.

73. Linked to the above is the Council's aforementioned house building programme. As a major housing developer in the City, the standard to which the Council builds its own houses is important, particularly as many of the homes it develops are for social rent, therefore for the less affluent. The Council's current specification is that the homes it develops must be 70% more efficient than Building Regulations, a step up from its own Local Plan level. Clearly, there is potential to improve this figure, and the Council is piloting a small-scale zero carbon development in the Barton development which will

²⁷ <https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/publications/price-cap-increase-ps693-april> - figures are for direct debit customers

inform the degree to which this figure could be raised without reducing the viability of the developments, thereby undermining the strategic objective around building social housing. Setting a baseline well above the minimum is a solid response to the potential for fuel poverty amongst its residents, and the fact of a pilot which goes further indicates the likelihood that where practicable, the Council's ambitions are to go further.

74. Finally, unlike many councils in the country, Oxford still retains responsibility for its housing stock. Not all of those properties are particularly energy-efficient. The Council has made a budgetary commitment and begun work to ensure that no Council-owned home is less than an EPC 'C' rating. The work is being prioritised according to the level of inefficiency, with the most inefficient homes being given priority over those with higher relative efficiencies. The Review Group recognises that delivering retrofitting across an entire portfolio in a cost and time-efficient manner is complex, for example, it may be necessary to do all buildings in a block at the same time. It is wary, therefore, of adding to that complexity. However, the fact is that some residents may, for example, require that their houses are heated to a high temperature for medical reasons. It is perfectly possible that a person in an EPC D property with a medical need for high levels of heating will be out-paying someone in a similarly sized EPC E property who does not have the same vulnerability. The Review Group does not wish to suggest that vulnerability should be the overriding consideration for prioritising retrofitting works, but does ask that the Council consider it as a factor.

Recommendation 8: That on top of the Council's prioritisation of retrofitting Council homes with the worst EPC ratings, vulnerability of the tenants is also used as a means of prioritisation.

Addressing workplace inequality

75. Two *Shifting the Curve* recommendations here are treated together - 'Do more to tackle occupational segregation' and 'Encourage pay rate disclosure' as, at the scale the Council operates on at least, they really address the same issue: tackling inequality in the workplace. It is worth recalling some of the facts presented earlier on this report to understand why addressing inequality is an important part of poverty-prevention, for example the fact that children from minoritised ethnic communities are twice as likely to face poverty than white British children, or that children from one parent families, which are predominantly headed by a female, are also twice as likely to live in poverty. Ensuring a fair deal for women, disabled people and members of different ethnic groups is therefore an important step in addressing child poverty in the workplace.

76. In addition to the statutory pay disclosure the Council makes for higher paid employees, each year the Council is required, under the Equality Act, to publish a Workforce Equalities Report showing the three-year trends on a number of key workforce equalities indicators. In addition to the requirement that it publish information on any gender pay gaps, the Council also publishes details of ethnic and disability pay gaps. Key takeaways from the most recent report are as follows:

- Over half of the workforce are women (58.2%), which is above that of the population of Oxford (47%). In the last year, the proportion of women in senior roles has increased by 6%, now making up 41% of roles at grade 11. However, the pay gap (mean figure) remains at 11.4%, with the highest quartile being the only one where men outnumber women. The pay gap figure is above the overall figure for the South East (8%).

Pay quartiles by gender

Quartile	Males %	Females %
Top	52.27	47.73
Upper Middle	46.02	53.98
Lower Middle	35.23	64.77
Lower	33.71	66.29

- There was a slight reduction in the workforce of black and minority ethnic employees over the reporting period to 12.4% from 13.0% in 2019. As of 30.09.21 this figure had recovered to 13.07%. This is lower than those economically active in the local population of Oxford (18%) and below the Council's target of 13.5% by 2022. Recruitment data suggests a drop in the proportion of black and minority ethnic candidates applying for and appointed to roles with the Council. The overall ethnicity pay gap is 11.4%, and minoritised ethnic groups are approximately two and a half times more likely to be found in the lowest earnings quartile than the highest. This is stark, given that the figure for the South East generally is almost half this, at 5.9%.

Pay quartiles by Ethnicity

Quartile*	BAME %	White %
Top Quartile	7.55	92.45
Upper Middle Quartile	10.69	89.65
Lower Middle Quartile	16.35	83.65
Lower Quartile	20.25	79.75

- 10.8% of workforce have declared a disability, relatively stable compared to last year and compares favourably with the local population at 6.7%. Data suggests an increase in the number of disabled candidates applying for and appointed to roles with the Council. The disability pay gap is 7.7%.

Pay Quartiles by Disability

Quartile	Disabled%	Non Disabled %
Top	8.33	91.67
Upper Middle	14.10	85.90
Lower Middle	12.82	87.18
Lower	13.46	86.54

- The average age of the Council's workforce is 45. The proportion of staff under 30 years of age has decreased across the 3 year reporting period from 16.4% to 13.3%. The proportion between staff aged over 50 has increased marginally during this period.

77. On the basis that the Council's ethnicity and gender pay gaps are bigger than the South East average, it would be easy to conclude that the Council is underperforming. It is undeniable that there is work to do. However, the direction of travel is also important. On the gender pay gap, some progress has been made, with the figure being 12.3% in 2020. The ethnicity pay gap, however, has grown from 10.3% in 2020 to 11.4% most recently. As recognised by the Council's own action plan; improving the recruitment, retention and development of staff members from minoritised ethnic communities is an ongoing challenge. In comparison to its performance in other anti-poverty measures considered above, this is the Council's weakest result.

78. The Review Group has two recommendations to make arising from workforce equalities issues. The first concerns the fall in the proportion of staff under 30 from 16.4% to 13.3% over a three year period. This is significant. Poverty impacts the opportunities available to younger people who experience it; children who have received free school meals are half as likely to be earning a living wage by the age of 25 compared to those who have not²⁸. The provision of opportunities for younger people who have experienced poverty themselves is a necessary intervention to prevent the effects of poverty from cascading down the generations. The Review Group appreciates and applauds the work the Council has done in developing apprenticeships, which target this group particularly well. Nevertheless, the numbers of younger staff have deteriorated despite these efforts. The Review Group would like to see more being done in this area, so suggests that a specific section be devoted in its workforce equalities plan to developing opportunities for young people.

Recommendation 9: That the Council includes within its workforce equalities plan a specific section on developing opportunities for young people.

79. Gender imbalances over responsibility for childcare and the impact on the number of hours worked is a significant contributor to the gender pay gap, and also to poverty levels. Flexibility, particularly for single parents, is a highly relevant factor to enabling them to participate in the workforce in the first place. The Review Group suggests that as a first step in ascertaining how well the Council is performing in this regard, that it simply asks them this question as part of its staff survey.

Recommendation 10: That the Council includes within its staff survey questions about whether the Council is a family-friendly employer.

Interim Conclusions

80. At this point it is worth taking stock of the Council's performance against the themes set out, for the list examined above covers those areas where the Council makes proactive policy interventions.

81. Scrutiny was assured verbally by the Leader of the Council during discussions over the Council's Business Plan that tackling and preventing poverty, though not explicitly referenced in the Council's strategic objectives, is at the very core of the Council's activity and purpose. When examined in more detail, this claim is proven by the facts. The Council is already leveraging its influence to deliver higher wages in the City; it goes above and beyond what most councils do to ensure that individuals secure the benefits

²⁸ <https://www.hrmagazine.co.uk/content/news/free-school-meals-recipients-struggle-to-earn-a-living-wage>

to which they are entitled, including making transfers from its own funds to uphold benefit levels and access; its commitment to building social housing is ambitious and, if fully delivered, will have a meaningful impact on housing supply for those in low pay in the City; the Council operates to a high standard in both tackling and preventing fuel poverty as much as it can for renters in both its own homes and the private rented sector. The area where there is work to do relates to tackling inequality in the workplace, particularly for members of minoritised ethnic communities. In this area, though delivery may be lagging demographic change, the underlying commitment is clearly present and the Review Group encourages the Council to continue collaborating with and promoting union membership.

82. At the start of this section it was asked what, realistically, given the limitations the Council operates under, 'should' the Council be doing. The answer is largely that in those areas mentioned, it is already delivering. The Council has a strong anti-poverty foundation. What follows is an exploration of topics suggested in *Shifting the Curve* which the Review Group considers would improve on that existing good work, specifically ways to develop, systematise and make more sustainable the current commitment. Much of the discussion here is not about child poverty directly, but poverty generally. The former is obviously a subset of the latter, but the Review Group does ask that a generalised anti-poverty picture does not obscure the immediate needs of children and young people specifically.

Commence the socio-economic duty in the Equality Act 2010

83. Before writing about enactment of the socio-economic duty, it is necessary to understand what it is. It is also important to note that, while socio-economic duty relates to poverty as a whole rather than child poverty specifically, the Review Group is of the view that it is an important framework for action on child poverty.
84. Included during its drafting, section 1 of the Equality Act 2010 incorporated the following requirement. Relevant bodies: 'must, when making decisions of a strategic nature about how to exercise [their] functions, have due regard to the desirability of exercising them in a way that is designed to reduce the inequalities of outcome which result from socio-economic disadvantage.' Effectively, the impact of any strategic decision on those in poverty would have to be weighed-up in the making of that decision as a matter of course. When the Equality Act was implemented, however, this section was not (and has not been since) - leaving the current nine recognised protected characteristics. As the *Shifting the Curve* report notes, the decision not to implement it lacks a degree of logic. 'All groups are 'protected' save the largest group that encompasses huge numbers of the individuals in the protected groups: people in poverty. Particularly in terms of gender, race and disability, rates of poverty for these groups are higher than for the general population.'
85. As a follow-on to the recommendation made in *Shifting the Curve*, the Scottish government did implement the socio-economic duty in 2018. The Welsh government did the same in 2021. In England, councils are still not under a duty to implement it. However, a number of councils have seen the potential benefits of testing all policy against its impact on socio-economic inequality and have chosen to voluntarily adopt it. Others have taken steps to reduce income inequality, thereby supporting the spirit of it.
86. The Review Group has considered the question of whether the Council should formally adopt the socio-economic duty. The socio-economic duty is a tool for poverty-prevention

which goes beyond child poverty but is clearly of relevance. As part of its considerations, the Review Group received a presentation from Graham Witham, CEO of Greater Manchester Poverty Action, the author of a guide to implementing the socio-economic duty for local authorities²⁹. On balance, it is the conclusion of the Review Group that the Council should formally adopt the socio-economic duty. There are a number of reasons for this:

- i) From the Review Group's review of the Council's policy, the Council performs strongly on directly anti-poverty measures. However, whilst vital, there is a huge volume of policy which is not directly focused on poverty. Although less direct in effect, the greater volume means that the cumulative impact of small changes could add up to significant differences being made. There is a big difference in outcomes between a council which has effective policies against poverty and one where anti-poverty considerations are structurally and systematically embedded into all its strategic decision-making. Adopting the policy formally would close this gap and bring to bear the entirety of the Council's corporate capacity to address poverty issues.
- ii) The point is made as part of Greater Manchester Poverty Action's guide that poverty is the result of political choice. This is illustrated by the fact that two devolved administrations with different priorities to central government have made the socio-economic duty a requirement. If the Council is in disagreement with national government over this matter, it is at liberty to make a different political choice and voluntarily assume the socio-economic duty. Presumably the political positions of the Scottish and Welsh administrations are closer to those of the Council than central government, and the Council would wish to make a similar political choice.
- iii) Given that equalities impact assessments are already understood (though, admittedly, also currently being worked upon to improve effectiveness), extending their application to include a new area would not be difficult relative to the impact it could generate.
- iv) The Equality Act applies to and is understood by other organisations that the Council will need to work in partnership with to tackle child poverty. As will be seen in the following part of this report on partnerships, the Review Group feels this 'common language' is important to support cross-working. As a consequence, it is important that the Council be seen to be setting a positive example by adopting it itself.

87. In light of these points, the Review Group supports the adoption of the socio-economic duty within the next 12 months. In order to ensure that it is depoliticised, the Review Group suggests that the Council agree an anti-poverty cross-party motion.

Recommendation 11: That the Council considers and agrees a cross-party motion committing to formally adopting the socio-economic duty and using its influence to encourage local partner institutions to do the same.

²⁹ This guide can be found at <https://www.gmpovertyaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Socio-Economic-Duty-Guide-v6.pdf>

Recommendation 12: That the Council adopts the socio-economic duty within the next 12 months.

88. The guide to local authorities on implementing the socio-economic duty contains a number of practical steps to make to ensure that the potential of adopting it is realised. The Review Group supports all these practical steps. However, two are identified as priorities.

89. The first relates to leadership. Research indicates that for implementation to work, there must be full buy-in from senior Elected Members and officers, consistently pressing for organisational change. The Review Group's view is that there is good reason to place responsibility for it at the top of officer and member-trees: the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive. For the Leader of the Council, tackling socio-economic disadvantage converges closely with existing aspects of the portfolio – Inclusive Growth and Partnerships – that it is a natural addition to responsibilities. On the officer side, precisely because it is a corporate-wide issue and not related to one specific service area, making the Chief Executive responsible seems appropriate. This also reflects the importance the issue is afforded by Members and staff of the Council.

Recommendation 13: That the Leader of the Council's portfolio is expanded to include poverty prevention.

Recommendation 14: That the Leader of the Council and Chief Executive are identified as the lead councillor and officer for implementing the socio-economic duty.

90. The second issue is one of data. It is important when making a commitment to the socio-economic duty that the right data points are chosen as KPIs. This aids monitoring of success and accountability. In order for a baseline to be established it is necessary that this be done earlier rather than later. As such, the Review Group recommends that suitable KPIs begin to be monitored as part of the Council's performance indicators in its quarterly Integrated Performance Reports.

Recommendation 15: That the Council develops clear metrics on tackling and preventing poverty, and includes those metrics within the KPIs it monitors in its Quarterly Integrated Performance Report

Undertaking a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder review

91. This final section largely reflects the limitations of the Review Group in terms of capacity. The size and complexity of this topic makes it impossible that Scrutiny could provide a fully considered and comprehensive road map for moving things forward on this agenda. As a comparator, the Milton Keynes Child Poverty Commission is approximately double the length of this review and brought in significant external expertise to support its development³⁰. What this review has made clear to Members is that it is vital that

³⁰ The report is available here: <https://milton-keynes.cmis.uk.com/milton-keynes/Document.aspx?czJKcaeAi5tUFL1DTL2UE4zNRBcoShgo=p3etWU8jrsf%2FtP%2BGweKkzOU76sw7sL2uy2I6QBzAo4Ditz8Kdfoagw%3D%3D&rUzwRPf%2BZ3zd4E7lkn8Lyw%3D%3D=pwRE6AGJFLDNIh225F5QMaQWCtPHwdhUfCZ%2FLUQzgA2uL5jNRG4jdQ%3D%3D&mCTIbCubSFfXsDGW9IXnlq%3D%3D=hFflUd>

additional work be undertaken. It is the view of the Review Group that from an internal perspective, the adoption of the socio-economic duty is an important step in regularising the Council's work towards poverty prevention. There also needs to be an explicit, targeted and coordinated plan. Poverty prevention must become more than an undercurrent to the Council's work, but a key and active focus. At present, the Council has no poverty strategy.

92. The Council's Thriving Communities Strategy is in development, but Review Group members who attended the Member briefing on this were disappointed at the prioritisation it displayed. Largely, the draft strategy is a universal strategy which, while vital to preventing poverty, does not facilitate specific discussions around the advantages and disadvantages of particular areas of focus and how appropriate they are for tackling specific issues – in this case child poverty. While the Review Group does not wish to criticise the work being undertaken in relation to the Thriving Communities Strategy, it recognises that it illustrates how tackling and preventing poverty can get 'crowded out' if it is not made explicit. The Review Group's recommendation is that the Council undertakes to develop a Poverty Prevention Strategy, which is able to commit sufficient resources to develop a more comprehensive road map of the next steps the Council must take.

Recommendation 16: That the Council produces a Poverty Strategy within the next eighteen months.

93. While the Review Group recognises the importance of engaging with those who have lived experience, it made a conscious decision not to follow this line of enquiry due to its level of appropriate skill and capacity for undertaking such an exercise – as set out earlier in this report. However, the Review Group would recommend that the Council seeks to gather and reflect lived experiences of child poverty in order to inform a Poverty Strategy and any appropriate future strategies and policies in the longer term. Through the variety of contributions to this review, it has been made clear that Oxford has a particular concentration of capable and committed individuals who want to tackle poverty, and child poverty, locally. These include members of the voluntary and community sector, academia and members of local anchor institutions. If the Council is to develop its own Poverty Strategy, the input and expertise of external key stakeholders will be key in developing something which really addresses the real issues.

94. A model which brings these stakeholders together – the Council, other statutory leaders, those with lived experience, and those involved in academia or the voluntary sector – is one which was suggested might be of relevance to the Council's current situation by Graham Whitham. Poverty Truth Commissions typically take between six and eight months to understand key issues and possible solutions from those who are experts by experience, meaning the views of those with lived experience are placed at the foundation. Beyond that, it facilitates meetings between civic leaders and those with lived experience on ways forward. The Review Group suggests that this would be an extremely good practice means of unearthing the issues and possible solutions required

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for any Poverty Strategy³¹. It is recognised that undertaking this sort of approach properly requires resourcing. However, whilst no firm commitments have been made, informal discussions between the Chair of the Review Group and others have indicated that there are sources of external funding available which could support this venture. As a first step, the Review Group would like to see the Council agree in principle to undertake one, and as a second, to investigate more fully the potential for external funding.

Recommendation 17: That the Council agrees, subject to securing funding, to hold a poverty truth commission within the next 12 months.

Recommendation 18: That the Council investigates options for securing external funding to support a poverty truth commission.

95. Regardless of whether a Poverty Truth Commission does proceed, one issue which the Review Group picked up on was the way that, by squeezing poorer children out of participating in society, they become less and less visible, and further marginalised. The Review Group is keen that the experience of young people is collected and publicised as a means of not only counteracting this, but celebrating the diversity of Oxford's younger population. Because of this, and the wish not to 'other' poorer individuals, the Review Group suggests that the stories of young people generally and their experience of living in the City is collected and publicised.

Recommendation 19: That the Council collects and publishes the stories of young people and their experience of living in the City.

Ensure that public service delivery is respectful, person-centred, and preserves the dignity of people in poverty

96. As referenced in the methodology section of this report, this review has not heard directly from individuals with lived experience and so has little evidence on the level of respect, person-centeredness and dignity experienced by children living in poverty.

97. One effect of poverty is to make individuals dependent on the institutions which administer support. The support that is offered, however, is only part of their service. How that support is provided has a major effect on the wellbeing of the people who use those services. The Review Group wishes to flag the importance of this issue and highlight that a Poverty Truth Commission would rightly focus on this alongside more strategic issues. It is vital that the Council tries to keep individuals and families out of poverty in the first place, but it is equally vital that it is sensitive to the needs of individuals who are experiencing it.

98. One pertinent issue related to this is how the Council distributes money to those in need. Rightly, when distributing public money there must be a concern that the money is being spent as intended. This has, when it comes to individuals in poverty, manifested itself in providing vouchers or goods rather than money, which can be swapped for the specific items they are supposed to fund, be it fuel, food, or white goods. Although understandable, the point was made by multiple groups working with those in poverty

³¹ More details on Poverty Truth Commissions can be found here:
<https://povertytruthnetwork.org/commissions/what-is-a-poverty-truth-commission/>

that this is a mistake. It is flawed for two reasons. Firstly, because of the disempowering effect it has on recipients. But secondly, because it assumes that meeting the specific needs the vouchers are supposed to fund optimises outcomes for an individual in financial distress. Poverty creates a nexus of interconnected pressures. It is not helpful to be provided a bag of potatoes if you do not have money to buy electricity to cook them with. To generate good outcomes from the distribution of money it is necessary that the recipient has the flexibility to judge for themselves how best to optimise their situation in light of the pressures they face. This does run the risk of money being 'misused', but this is a potential downside which will not necessarily apply to all recipients, whereas the disempowerment and inflexibility of vouchers affects all recipients. The unity of voices heard by the Review Group on this subject, and the expectation that losses associated with 'misuse' would be more than compensated for by the better outcomes generated overall make the Review Group keen that the Council should review its position on how it provides support to those in poverty.

Recommendation 20: That the Council provides cash support for those receiving poverty-related support, not vouchers or support in kind.

99. On a related issue, feedback from front-line providers indicated that the current vouchers made available through the Household Support Grant or Healthy Start are not always straightforward for recipients to use. It is easy to overlook just how important smooth functioning of this type of service is to recipients. If you have just enough through vouchers and cash to buy, for example, baby food and nappies, and then you find that the shop assistant is unsure whether your vouchers can be accepted and will have to check with their manager when they are next in, you are faced with an unfair choice. The lack of a buffer to fall back on makes the consequences of poor functioning systems such as this far more serious than in many other areas of the Council's functions. The Review Group was asked by front-line services, and endorses their request, that the Council takes steps to smooth out this process and ensure that when there are problems, a system is put in place to ensure it is resolved promptly.

Recommendation 21: That the Council contacts shops listed as accepting Household Support Grant or Healthy Start vouchers to ensure that they are accepted, and provides a service where individuals or agencies can highlight where problems occur.

Part 2: Partnership Working

Background

100. The complexity and multi-faceted nature of child poverty means it is all but impossible for any single stakeholder to tackle it alone, not even central government. Despite central government controlling many of the most effective levers, such as welfare levels, the Child Poverty Act placed responsibilities on other bodies to work in partnership. The section above suggests that the Council's strategic policies are indeed strongly anti-poverty. However, the scale and complexity of the problem means the Council must look to work in partnership with those who operate on a larger scale and hold additional policy levers. In the absence of significant drive from central government this task becomes even more necessary.
101. When the Child Poverty Act was in place it placed duties on local authorities, albeit primarily upon top-tier ones (in Oxfordshire, the County Council), to put in place arrangements to work with partner authorities named in the Act (such as the City Council) to reduce and mitigate the effects of child poverty in their local area. The Act required named partner authorities to cooperate with the local authority in these arrangements. Further, it placed a duty on responsible local authorities to prepare and publish a local child poverty needs assessment. This would enable them to understand the characteristics of low income and disadvantaged families in their area, and the key drivers of poverty that must be addressed. Finally, the Act required responsible local authorities and partner authorities to prepare a joint child poverty strategy for their local area, which would set out the contribution that each partner authority would make and address the issues raised in the needs assessment. This formed a comprehensive and dedicated partnership infrastructure. However, with the Child Poverty Act since repealed, no such infrastructure presently exists. Whilst it would gladly welcome the voluntary recreation of a similar infrastructure, the Review Group recognises this is at the more hopeful end of the spectrum, given the resource pressures faced by all would-be parties. As a consequence, the Review Group has considered how existing partnerships might leverage their influence to address poverty issues more generally, and in some cases child poverty more specifically.
102. There is obvious overlap between this section and the Review Group's recommendations around holding a Poverty Truth Commission. The purpose of this Part is to explore what the opportunities are for partnership working, without predetermining either the Council's decision to hold a Poverty Truth Commission or any outcomes which may arise.

Findings and Recommendations

Health and Care Bill: Integrated Care Boards

103. At present, the Health and Care Bill is in the process of being implemented. At the top level, this legislation seeks to break down the barriers between healthcare providers and other sources of care in order to provide a more integrated service. Practically, this means the abolition of Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) and replacing them with Integrated Care Boards (ICBs). ICBs will have oversight of Integrated Care Systems (ICSs), which control the commissioning powers of CCGs. ICBs will also have (top tier) local authority members on the boards in order to facilitate joint working.

104. The issue that makes ICBs of relevance to child poverty are the express aims of ICBs, which are: to achieve greater integration of health and care services; improve population health and reducing inequalities; support productivity and sustainability of services; and help the NHS to support social and economic development. Child poverty is a direct consequence of inequalities and inadequate social and economic development. The issue falls squarely within the remit of ICBs.

105. It is important to note that the ICB for Oxfordshire covers not only the entirety of the county, but also Buckinghamshire and Berkshire. It is a high-level body covering in excess of one million people. However, the expectation is that devolution will occur to more local 'places' or 'sub-places', which would be a more suitable forum for partnership working to occur on a local basis, and where the Council would expect to have some influence. However they are broken down, the local one is liable to include Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, one of the largest employers in the city, with over 14,000 employees. The theoretical opportunity exists, therefore, for the Council, with its existing good practice and concern over inclusive growth - apprenticeships, the Oxford Living Wage, social value in procurement - to engage with and influence a key anchor institution specifically with a remit to tackle health inequalities and promote social and economic development. The Review Group is keen to see that the Council is proactive in ensuring this opportunity is realised.

Recommendation 22: That the Council finds out what the planned governance arrangements are for the local ICB 'place' or 'sub-place'

Recommendation 23: That the Council lobbies appropriately to ensure it is included in any local ICB 'place' or 'sub-place'

Recommendation 24: That the Council agrees an executive member to represent the Council, preferably the Leader and Cabinet member for Inclusive Growth, Recovery and Partnerships and/or the Chief Executive as appropriate.

Oxfordshire Recovery and Renewal Framework

106. In March 2022 the Cabinet adopted the Oxfordshire Recovery and Renewal Framework. The Framework is the formalisation of the joint-working which has taken place between local authorities across the County during the pandemic, outlining how partner councils will collaborate as COVID-19 begins to recede. Specifically, it focuses on three shared themes – shared economic prosperity, better health and wellbeing, and stronger communities – as well as two cross-cutting strategic priorities: climate change action and tackling inequality.

107. It is important to recognise that the Framework is not, therefore, something which derives its purpose from an anti-poverty perspective. It is broader than that. There are, nevertheless, clear areas of intersection between it and the promotion of anti-poverty measures. For example:

- Ensuring access to skills training and employment opportunities for all residents but in particular young people entering the employment market and those who will not return to their previous employment following the end of furlough support

- Proactively promote equal and fair access to all economic opportunities, maximising the talent and creativity from a diverse and inclusive workforce across Oxfordshire
- Reduce the educational attainment gap in disadvantaged families.
- Support the resilience and sustainability of the voluntary and community sector, specifically to deliver community-led interventions with preventative impact.

108. In addition, although the Framework has now been adopted by its member councils, which makes it more difficult to change, it recognises that it is a ‘call to action’ for all partners to consider other interventions which may need to be put in place to address these system-wide issues and themes.’ The effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine are starting to be felt; as both countries are major oil, gas and food-producers, prices have increased markedly on top of the existing pressures. It is the suggestion of the Review Group that with the exacerbation of cost increases in light of international events, and the clear cross-over between areas of the Framework and anti-poverty measures, there is justification to align the work of the Framework more explicitly with tackling poverty.

109. The more ambitious suggestion is that constituent members agree that child poverty falls within the category of a ‘system-wide issue or theme’, requiring a specific intervention to be developed. This is clearly a significant undertaking, particularly given that agreement has only recently been given to the original draft Framework. However, it is ultimately a question of priorities. The Review Group considers the urgency of the situation to justify creating a specific, bespoke sub-group to address and coordinate this issue, with the involvement of the voluntary and community sector that the Framework seeks to empower; this is the gold standard outcome in terms of partnership working and one which the Review Group would wish to see.

Recommendation 25: That the Council’s representatives seek the agreement of other Framework members to establish a sub-Group to the Recovery and Renewal Framework focusing on child poverty, or, poverty prevention.

110. In the event that the above recommendation is not deliverable, the less ambitious suggestion builds on Scrutiny’s comments on the topic when it was considered, which noted the following: ‘At present, the Recovery and Renewal Framework is light on how it intends to monitor whether it is working. There is a balance to be found, with monitoring sufficiently rigorous to maintain focus by partner organisations and maintain delivery momentum. On the other hand, it is important that monitoring is not allowed to become an industry of its own and get in the way of the intended outcomes of participating in the Framework.’ The Review Group stands by Scrutiny’s view that monitoring must not become an industry. On the other hand, with the current and forthcoming scale of child poverty, as well as the cross-overs between the Framework’s own objectives and policies which would help address child poverty, the Review Group also feels there is good justification to identify a number of core KPIs which traverse both child poverty and the Framework’s own objectives to create greater accountability and momentum towards delivering these outcomes. Assuming ‘what gets measured gets done’, this would tune and shore up the contribution of the Framework to anti-poverty outcomes whilst working within its agreed aims.

Recommendation 26: That the Council requests that a number of KPIs which are both anti-poverty in nature and relate to the Framework’s aims be developed and monitored on a quarterly basis.

Oxford Strategic Partnership

111. Reference has been made above to ‘anchor institutions’, those organisations in a locality which have sufficient scale, influence or money that changes to their own policies amount to significant change within that locality. Thus, in Oxford, for example, the Universities and Colleges, Oxford Universities NHS Foundation Trust, Oxfordshire County Council, private sector employers such as BMW and Unipart and voluntary sector organisations such as Community First Oxfordshire, Oxfordshire Community Foundation and Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action all constitute anchor institutions.
112. The Oxford Strategic Partnership (OSP) is a forum which brings many of the key stakeholders together from the public, business, community and voluntary sectors. The OSP helps to provide direction for the city's future, respond to local priorities and engage more effectively with local concerns. Specifically, its aims include:
- Identifying current major issues and concerns that will benefit from collective intervention
 - Identifying and engaging relevant partners, and facilitating their working together to develop and implement collaborative interventions
 - Empowering partners and communities to take action
113. It must be noted that the OSP itself is not a delivery or operational organisation but one which targets and coordinates specific issues for collaboration between its members and their affiliates, those through which collaboration will yield the greatest local benefit. Bringing together multiple anchor institutions for this purpose, it is not surprising that the Review Group views the Oxford Strategic Partnership as being a key opportunity for coordinated action against child poverty, and that the urgency of children choosing between heating or eating, or parents having to choose between baby food and nappies falls squarely within the OSP's remit.
114. The key question the Review Group must find a response to is in what way the OSP could meaningfully be involved. However, before considering this, it is necessary to recognise the OSP's current work, which has been around ‘Inclusive Growth’. The influence of the Council, which has ‘enable an inclusive economy’ as one of its strategic priorities is evident and welcomed. The Review Group recognises that the Council is working in this regard exactly as it ought to – leveraging the effect of its own good practice by influencing others – and that the outcomes will have had a positive benefit. Nevertheless, as the environment for poorer families and children becomes more acute, the sufficiency of the status quo reduces.
115. The Review Group's suggestion is that a new theme for the Oxford Strategic Partnership should be adopted: how to adopt the socio-economic duty. The arguments in favour of this are the same as those made for the Council itself adopting the socio-economic duty, namely that socio-economic considerations and poverty prevention and mitigation are built into the structure of participating organisations. Clearly, this is not without problems. The public sector equality duties are only relevant to a proportion of OSP members. On the other hand, there are good reasons to adopt the suggestion. Firstly, if only those who were subject to the public sector equality duty adopted the socio-economic duty, it would

still mean anti-poverty influence on an extremely wide variety of policies. Secondly, the challenge that it would only be relevant to certain members of the OSP is far from fatal. On the basis that the socio-economic duty is a means to an end, and not an end in itself, there is much value to be had in bringing the combined (and notably high) level of knowledge and expertise locally to exploring how other organisations might embed anti-poverty considerations into their policy-making.

116. Practically, as noted above, the Review Group received a very helpful presentation from Graham Whitham on the implementation of the socio-economic duty in local authorities, and the Review Group suggests that the OSP may wish to begin a conversation with him to explore how to take this idea further forward.

Recommendation 27: That the Council proposes to OSP partners that the OSP adopts a new theme – embedding poverty prevention in policy, and that for public sector organisations this is based around adopting the socio-economic duty.

Recommendation 28: That the Council proposes to OSP partners that they invite Graham Whitham for advice on how to take forward adopting the socio-economic duty.

Parish Councils and Neighbourhood Fora

117. A main focus of the Review Group's recommendations has been about partnering with large, anchor institutions which have significant influence across the wider local area, the Council should also remember that within the city there are four parish councils. These have their own strengths, including the fact they are based in some of the most impoverished areas of the city. The Review Group is keen that the Council should engage as broad a coalition of partners as possible. To this end, it suggests that the Council uses its Parish Councils' Forum to raise child poverty as an issue and test the appetite and capacity of parish councils to become involved in addressing the issue of child poverty in their areas.

Recommendation 29: That the Council holds a discussion at its next Parish Council Forum to explore the issue of child poverty in Oxford, parish contributions and ways of integrating and improving efforts.

Part 3: Immediate Improvements

Background

118. The majority of the Review Group's recommendations are covered in the preceding parts of this report. However, in the course of its discussions with experts who understand the issues, the Review Group has also encountered or developed other, smaller suggestions which can be implemented more quickly. Given the urgency of the situation for many residents, more immediate actions form an important part of the Council's overall response. For ease of reference these recommendations are grouped thematically.

Findings and Recommendations

Food

119. Food larders, whereby individuals pay around £3.50 for ten items from an available stock are a source of low-cost food in Oxford, with seven around the city. The Council supports these larders as part of its participation in the wider Oxfordshire Food Strategy, and makes available a free three-month trial. Whilst they are a source of low-cost food, feedback to the Review Group is that the model is a long way from being ideal for those in poverty, despite being low cost. They were described during the Review as being 'available, but not accessible.'
120. The first issue identified is cost. Sadly, low-cost food, even at £3.50 a week, is now becoming beyond the means of families who are having to pay more and more for their energy. The only way it can become affordable is if it is no-cost. What is important here is that the service is most exclusionary for those most in need. Secondly, food larders must be visited in person and are only open for very limited hours. Rose Hill food larder, for example, is only open on Tuesdays from 2pm to 4pm. This can be very troublesome, particularly for single parents, as it clashes with collecting children from school, or is during part of the working day. Simply getting there is not always possible for these reasons, but the high proportion of disabled people in poverty also creates a very direct challenge to access by a subset of those who really need the service. For some such people, delivery of affordable food is vital. Other groups find the need to register and provide details to participate a barrier. Finally, it has been noted that a universal larder system has been poor at being culturally appropriate, with a lack of halal options being available. Again, with ethnic and religious minorities being over-represented amongst the number of those in poverty this is an issue for a significant number of potential users.
121. The Review Group recognises that food larders have much to commend them. They are expressly universally available, which reduces the stigma to using them. However, according to the Council's website they are primarily concerned with reducing food waste. This objective should be praised, but is not explicitly aimed at addressing food poverty. The Review Group's view is that those who cannot afford to feed themselves must be the Council's primary priority when it comes to food, and that the way this system works should be reviewed to address those specific needs. Given that the Council is not primarily responsible for the local Food Strategy, the Review Group asks that it is brought up as part of discussions surrounding the Oxfordshire Food Strategy. In addition, the Review Group is of the view that the Council should provide support to 'cash first' or 'food first' organisations which explicitly work with and support those experiencing

food poverty or insecurity and are seen as a less stigmatising support mechanism – for example, OX4 Food Crew and Oxford Mutual Aid.

Recommendation 30: That the Council seeks, in the Oxfordshire Food Strategy, that either food larders are made more accessible to those in poverty, or greater provision is made for them.

Recommendation 31: That the Council provides support to ‘cash first’ or ‘food first’ organisations as less stigmatising support mechanisms for those in poverty.

122. The lack of catering for specific dietary requirements for ethnic and religious individuals by food larders was referenced above, but arguably there is a group whose needs are more pressing still given the lack of alternatives, babies. Not all mothers are able to breastfeed their children. Reports to the Review Group are that there is high demand for access to formula and baby food, yet very little availability. Healthy Start vouchers do provide some support in this area for poorer parents, but the undeniable fact is that formula is very expensive.
123. The limitations of food larders have been used as vehicle to discuss this topic, but it would be wrong to lump responsibility to address this important issue on them. Indeed, this is an issue which could easily fall between the cracks in terms of which agency has ultimate responsibility for address it. This being so, the Review Group wishes to flag the importance of this as a problem, and to use its involvement as a stakeholder in the Oxfordshire Food Strategy to see that this issue is looked at and addressed.

Recommendation 32: That the Council seeks that the Oxfordshire Food Strategy gives full consideration to how parents in poverty can access formula and baby food.

124. Another issue raised to the Review Group by frontline workers on the subject of food was that owing to cost pressures and practicality, most food at food banks, and even at food larders sometimes, is dried or tinned. There is little fresh food, and not a lot of variety. Food is about much more than just sustenance; a monotonous diet may prevent starvation but it is not ‘feeding’.
125. The Review Group’s suggestion relates to the fact that the Council hosts multiple markets. Some, like Gloucester Green market are very sizeable, attracting many traders who will have unsold and un-resalable food at the end of the day. The point is taken that the Council does not manage the market it hosts, but as host there is an opportunity to have conversations with stall-holders and local organisations to encourage them to work together to make the fresh food and wide variety of unsold cooked food left over at the end of a market day available to residents in need.

Recommendation 33: That the Council leverages the relationships it has as a market host and landlord to explore how unsold food might be distributed to local organisations and people in need.

Education

126. It is recognised that COVID-19 deepened pre-existing inequalities. Specifically related to child poverty, one of the clearest examples was the different experience of home schooling between more and less affluent families. Broadly speaking, children with parents with capacity to devote time to teach their children, generally wealthier, benefitted from the additional attention. On the other hand, the children of parents unable to devote time to their children stagnated.
127. Parental capacity, however, was not the only hurdle faced by children in poorer households in maintaining their education during lockdown. Naturally, much learning gravitated online. This move highlighted the scale of digital exclusion in Oxford; for instance, at the start of home schooling in Bayards Hill Primary School in Headington, only 33% of pupils could access a computer to do their school work. As in many areas, in education some of the positive changes made during the pandemic are expected to continue, including elements of online learning. To facilitate this for those without access to a computer, a continual stream of computers is needed. Oxfordshire Community Foundation has established a scheme to accept old computers and ready them for re-use by the digitally excluded, called Getting Oxfordshire Online. The Review Group is sure that the Council made donations of old computers at the height of the pandemic, but it is keen that this support is ongoing.

Recommendation 34: That the Council donates its old iPads and laptops to Getting Oxfordshire Online.

128. The pressure to conform to societal norms is inherent in situations of child poverty, even though an individual does not have the funds to do so. This pressure, in combination with the prevalence of easy access to credit, is financially dangerous. Overdrafts, or buy now pay later options may provide an immediate relief of this pressure, but at the cost of exacerbating it in the future. The Review Group is conscious of this risk, and suggests that inclusion of financial education, particularly around credit, would be a sensible service to offer as part of its Youth Ambition programme.

Recommendation 35: That the Council provides financial education as part of its Youth Ambition work

Fuel

129. Historically, for those on low incomes the best advice regarding fuel was to be on a direct debit if possible. This enabled energy supply to be maintained, but was also a slightly cheaper option. In discussions with Oxford Mutual Aid and Agnes Smith advice centre, it transpires that this advice is not necessarily correct in the extraordinary situation faced within the energy market. The price cap does not change the fact that pre-payment meters are marginally more expensive. However, for a significant number of providers the use of a pre-payment meter is a convenient way of identifying those in need and who may be eligible for particular support. Conversely, it means that for those struggling with their energy bills but who have been advised to move on to direct debits, additional support is not forthcoming. With multiple energy providers with different policies it is not easy to make general statements about this, but it is significant enough to be noted. The Review Group recommends making those who provide benefits checks and debt advice

aware of this fact, as well as communicating to its tenants that they should investigate (or ask for help to do so) whether additional support from energy companies may be available if they were to change their payment system.

Recommendation 36: That the Council briefs debt and benefit advisors and current tenants on the current potential downsides of not being on an electric meter

Recreation

130. When finances are extremely tight, public space becomes even more important as it allows free access to recreational activities, be it play areas for young children, sports fields, or just space to relax and enjoy the outside. For those on low incomes, distance to such public spaces is also important. Constantly juggling the pressures inherent in not having enough money, being unable to pay for a bus fare, or having a child unable to travel long distances for health reasons are all reasons why access to public space is necessary at a very local level.
131. The Review Group is aware that with housing so constrained within the City, areas of open space such as parks and other public spaces are tempting locations for development. The point may even be made that a particular play area or park is under-used and has capacity to have more children using it. This overlooks, however, the fact that for those at the bottom end of the income scale, access to parks and open space is not necessarily replaceable. It may be impossible to switch from using one park to another. Consequently, the Review Group thinks it is necessary that parks and public spaces – play areas and nature reserves – must be explicitly protected, particularly in less affluent areas. These are where they are needed most, and where residents have the least capacity to transfer elsewhere. The forthcoming Local Plan provides an excellent opportunity to embed this policy.

Recommendation 37: That the Council adopts as a policy in its forthcoming Oxford Plan a position that parks and public space, particularly in less affluent areas, must be safeguarded from development.

132. A further significant source of recreational space is that owned by the Universities and Colleges, sports facilities in particular. With undergraduates tending to be in Oxford for perhaps 60% of the year, much of this capacity is under-used outside term time. The point has been made consistently throughout this review that the Council has insufficient resources to meet the variety of challenges around poverty on its own, so must seek to leverage its influence to effect as much positive change as possible. The availability of sports and recreational space, particularly to young people from poorer areas, is an area the Review Group would wish to see the Council raise.

Recommendation 38: That the Council discusses with the local universities and the Colleges over whether, in light of the reducing access to sports and recreational facilities amongst poorer young people, access outside of term time to these facilities can be broadened.

Voluntary and Community Sector Partners

133. The Council established a hub system during the COVID-19 pandemic as a means of locating and coordinating support to the most vulnerable in the communities they were most needed. Whilst the precise nature of the demands on the hubs has altered since their inception, they have generally been thought to be a significant success and are expected to continue. As part of the review which has been undertaken on how best to continue, the Council has had discussions with advice centres, but Mandy Richards, Centre Manager of Agnes Smith advice centre fed back that there were more discussions to be had to clarify how best to ensure the hubs and advice centres complement one another. In light of the vital role the advice centres play, the Review Group endorses this and raises it for further action.

Recommendation 39: That as part of the Council's review of the working of its hubs, it makes specific reference to the opportunities for closer working between them and the City's advice centres.

134. The Council recently agreed a new Strategic Grants Programme. One of the features of the new Programme is that the Council has a degree of flexibility to adapt where funding is directed to in the face of changing circumstances and demand. The Review Group recognises that tackling and preventing child poverty must involve resourcing. At a time of stretched finances this means prioritising between competing demands. With the trajectory for the world and national economy being so negative, and the expected squeeze on living standards so severe, the case for prioritising greater action on poverty is clear. On the grounds that this year's funding has only recently been agreed, any change will not be immediate. The situation in nine months will be even more urgent than it is now; the Review Group recommends getting ahead of this by adopting poverty-related funding as a strategic grants priority for the next round.

135. Linked to this is a point made by Naomi Eisenstadt, with which the Review Group agrees. Child poverty tends to be cast as an early years issue – babies and primary school children. However older children, particularly teenagers, also face their own specific challenges. Social expectations and challenges are much greater on older children, and their relative autonomy can make gang membership or other crime more likely. Equally, teenage years are when exams are taken, which then have a large bearing on future prospects. The Review Group is keen to highlight these serious issues, and as part of its suggestion on strategic grants wishes to make a specific case for explicitly including youth club provision in more deprived areas as part of this in order to boost provision in this under-served area.

Recommendation 40: That the Council adopts as a strategic grants priority for its next round of funding poverty prevention, including youth club provision in more deprived areas.

136. Oxford is fortunate that there are many members of the community willing to support those in financial need, with a diversity of organisations having been established as a consequence. This diversity is manifested in the scale and resources available. Some have warehouse space available to keep food, for example, whilst smaller groups rely on the capacity of their volunteers. In discussion with front-line providers during the review the point did arise that for some of the smaller organisations, lack of storage space was a limiter on their capacity. This was specifically the case for the Young Women's Music Project, whose offer in providing baby products was said to be obstructed by lack of storage space. If the Council is able at little difficulty to increase the capacity in

community responses to poverty, it should. The Review Group's suggestion is that the Council has a persistently high number of unused garages, and that it might make a number of these available throughout the city for community organisations who need a place to store food or baby products before disbursing them to those in need.

Recommendation 41: That the Council makes available long-term unused garages to voluntary and community groups for storage of food or baby products.

Communications

137. Developing capacity to support those who are in poverty, particularly families, is vital. However, an equally important consideration is the importance of communicating the availability of such support and ensuring that those who need it can access it at the point they require it. Poverty complicates life by constantly having to devote energy to managing the absence of adequate resources; this can leave little capacity spare, for example, to look for outside help. This is compounded by the fact, based on feedback received by the Review Group, that accessing support for the Household Support Grant is not straightforward even when it is known about, that recipients are often unsure about interactions between this and other benefits, and that help to navigate the application process is often needed. Communications about poverty-related support are therefore both more important, and more difficult to be effective. As a result of this, the Review Group's view is that a dedicated poverty-related communications strategy is needed to grapple with the specific requirements of promoting poverty-related support.
138. One key issue the Review Group would like to highlight around communications is the importance of including personalised, relevant information directly to an individual. Leaflets, videos and social media all are useful in raising awareness broadly. However, *"Poverty fills up your brain so you can't focus on anything else."* General information sharing is not sufficient; direct, targeted and relevant information must also be shared with individuals if a response is needed. The Review Group is aware that GDPR issues make this more difficult; personal information must be used, and stored, for a purpose and not generally. However, it would like the Council to look into how far the Council can target and personalise communications using email and text messages, for example, within the rules in order to get a greater response.

Recommendation 42: That the Council produces a specific communications strategy – leaflets, videos and social media, but also personalised text and email – promoting access to sources of financial and food support.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

139. The Review Group has made a total of 41 recommendations asking the Council to consider what it 'should' be doing to tackle and, importantly, prevent child poverty. The Council has a moral duty to support every child and young person living within the City to thrive and child poverty is an issue that must be urgently addressed if that duty is to be fulfilled.
140. This review recognises the work already being undertaken to address the plight of children living in poverty, however it notes that more can be done in order to shift this important issue to the forefront of the agenda. As a key institution within Oxford City, the Council has a vital role to play in facilitating partnership working and collaboration to address the causes and consequences of child poverty – seeking improved outcomes for children and young people citywide both now and in the future.

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