

Scrutiny Review: Child Poverty

A Review by the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel

2021/22

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Contents:	page
Chairs Foreword	3.
Conclusions and Recommendations	4.
1. Background	7.
2. Child Poverty in Haringey	8.
3. Tower Hamlets	13.
4. Child Poverty Action Group	16.
5. Findings	19.

CHAIR'S FOREWORD

Child poverty is increasing both nationally and within Haringey. This is despite targets for its reduction by 2020 in the Child Poverty Act of 2010. The impact of poverty on children is profound and long lasting. It is nevertheless inseparable from adult poverty though – poor children are part of struggling families.

Whilst the main the levers to address child poverty are at a national level, there are still actions that local authorities can take to mitigate it. Haringey is already doing much and significantly more than most authorities, although there is still more that could be done. It requires a collaborative and coordinated response. In particular, action that increases earnings and employment levels or maximises access to welfare benefits can be effective. Reducing household costs, such as housing and childcare, is also important.

The review looked at how child poverty could be addressed strategically within the refreshed Borough Plan and interventions that can be effective in mitigating it. The growing cost of living crisis will have a considerable impact on struggling families and it is therefore essential that the Council ensures that poverty one of its major priority in the next four years.



Cllr Makbule Gunes
Chair

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

Strategic Approach

Our Key Findings:

- ▶ Data on the scale of child poverty in the borough is concerning and levels are likely to get worse in the next four years due to increases in the cost of living. Poverty therefore needs to be a key priority within the refreshed Borough Plan.
- ▶ The Council already undertakes a range of initiatives to address poverty, such as targeted income maximisation work using data, the extension of free school meals and the Council Tax reduction scheme.
- ▶ Children are not poor in isolation but as part of families. There are also a range of causes and influences on poverty. The response therefore needs to be cross cutting, coordinated and collaborative.
- ▶ Families can struggle to find out what support they can get and how to access it. There is also considerable stigma with seeking help.
- ▶ The expansion of free school meals has provided the Council with a route into schools and can provide the opportunity to improve communication of the support that is available to families from the Council and partner organisations

Our Recommendation:

1. That alleviating poverty be set as a key priority within the refreshed Borough Plan.
2. That, as part of the refresh process for the new Borough Plan, a cross cutting review into poverty be undertaken that includes engagement with partners and residents to obtain a broader understanding of the issue and develop a strategic and coordinated response, including:
 - How the availability of support will be communicated, including the role of schools, Children’s Centres and community organisations
 - How inequality will be addressed; and
 - How stigma will be avoided, including a “cash-first” approach to support.

Customer Services

Our Key Findings:

- ▶ Customer Services are the first port of call for many struggling families seeking support and need to be of the highest quality. Work should be undertaken to increase further their accessibility and simplify application processes.
- ▶ The Covid lockdowns have made the levels of digital exclusion across the borough apparent and Customer Services therefore need to be fully accessible to those without access to IT.

- ▶ Families do not always seek to access services at the correct location. Work should be done to ensure that families are provided with assistance and support irrespective of where within the Council they seek to access support.

Our Recommendations:

3. That the Council's Customer Services be reviewed with a view to making them easier to access and simplifying applications and that this includes consideration how to make services of equal accessibility and quality for people without digital access.
4. That the principle of "no wrong door" be adopted and a wider group of officers than those working in Customer Services be given responsibility and the tools for assisting residents with support queries, including benefits advice.

Food

Our Key Findings:

- ▶ Food poverty is increasing and has been exacerbated by the withdrawal of budget food lines by many supermarkets. In addition, donations to food banks and similar initiatives are likely to be affected by the rising cost of living.
- ▶ Work on the development of the Council's Food Strategy should be prioritised. In addition, it should be a key part of the refreshed Borough Plan and any strategic plan to address poverty.
- ▶ Free school meals (FSMs) are a key way in which it can be ensured that all children receive at least one hot, nutritious meal per day.
- ▶ The quality of school meals is variable and it is important that contracts are monitored carefully by schools.

Our Recommendations:

5. That a progress report on the development of the Council's Food Strategy be included in the workplan for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for 2022/23.
6. That the roll out of FSMs be extended further to make them universal and, in addition, further funding be provided for their provision during school holidays.
7. That guidance for schools on effective school meal contracts be developed including ensuring that they are of high quality and nutritional value.

Schools

Our Key Findings:

- ▶ The role of schools is crucial in responding to child poverty as they have ready access to children and families and are trusted institutions.

- ▶ The cost of school uniforms and rigorous enforcement of uniform policies can impact adversely on the poorest families. In addition, there can be hidden costs in schooling which can also have a negative impact.

Our Recommendations:

8. That work takes place with schools to reduce the cost of the school day by promoting greater awareness of the financial impact of policies and initiatives on poorer families and, in particular, hidden costs.
9. That the Haringey Education Partnership works with schools to explore how they may engage more effectively with parents and carers that are hard to reach, including drawing on successful initiatives from elsewhere and consideration of the commissioning of external research.

Leisure and Physical Activity

Our Key Findings:

- ▶ Poor children should not be excluded from leisure activities. There are higher levels of childhood obesity in deprived areas and physical activity can play an important role in addressing this.
- ▶ There should be longer term planning of youth programmes, which have generally been funded on a short-term basis and through grants.
- ▶ Initiatives undertaken as part of the Haringey Community Gold scheme have been welcome and consideration should be given to whether some of these can be made permanent.

Our Recommendations:

10. That a commitment be made to provide permanent funding for youth programmes and services.
11. That the feasibility of longer term funding for successful initiatives undertaken as part of Haringey Community Gold be explored.

1. Background

- 1.1 The percentage of children living in poverty has increased in recent years, both nationally and within Haringey. The current Borough Plan 2019-23 has a number of priorities that address the issue, both directly and indirectly. Children and young people are a specific priority, with several outcomes focussed on their needs. There are also a number of other priority areas within the Plan that have a major impact on child poverty, including:
- Housing;
 - A safe, green and clean environment; and
 - A local economy that provides good training and job opportunities.
- 1.2 Since the Borough Plan was agreed, the Covid pandemic has taken place and this has had a severe impact on children and young people. The Plan is due to be refreshed in 2022. The review was set up to:
- Identify the current levels of child poverty within the borough and how these have developed since the start of the current Borough Plan; and
 - Consider interventions that may be the most effective in responding to the current challenges presented by child poverty and how these may be incorporated strategically within the updated Borough Plan to develop a coordinated approach to the issue.
- 1.3 The terms of reference of the review were as follows:
“To consider and make recommendations to Cabinet on Interventions that may have the potential to be the most effective in addressing child poverty and how these may be incorporated strategically within the updated Borough Plan.”
- 1.4 The Panel received evidence from the following:
- Jean Taylor, Head of Policy;
 - Margaret Gallagher, Performance Manager
 - Councillor Mufeedah Bustin, Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion, London Borough of Tower Hamlets;
 - Frances Winter, Strategy and Policy Manager, London Borough of Tower Hamlets; and
 - Hannah Aldridge, Child Poverty Action Group.
- 1.5 The membership of the Panel was as follows:
Councillors: Makbule Gunes (Chair), James Chiriyankandath, Emine Ibrahim, Sarah James, Tammy Palmer and Daniel Stone.

Co-opted Members: Lourdes Kever (Church representative) and KanuPriya Jhunjhunwala (Parent Governor representative)

2. Child Poverty in Haringey

Definition

- 2.1 There are a number of ways in which child poverty can be defined. The Child Poverty Act of 2010 defines it in terms of social and economic disadvantage. There are three benchmarks for this:
- Relative, based on families with net annual incomes below 60% of the UK median or average. This threshold can fluctuate from one year to the next;
 - Absolute: 60% of the average (median) net household income in 2010/11. This is £15,600 per year and does not fluctuate;
 - Material: Families who are unable to afford certain goods and activities and whose household income is below 70% of UK median average income for that year. It is often referred to as the social inclusion model.
- 2.2 The Act set targets to be met by 2020. These included reducing the proportion living in households:
- To below 10% for relative poverty; and
 - To below 5% for absolute poverty.
- 2.3 These targets have not been met. Internationally, a wider set of factors are taken into account and can include both material and spiritual considerations.
- 2.4 Child poverty is driven principally by the circumstances of adults. Children are more likely to live in poverty than adults though. The reasons for this include the financial burden of having children and the impact that they have on the ability of people to work.
- 2.5 The welfare system currently fails to compensate fully for all the additional costs of having children. There have also been changes in welfare support that have impacted adversely on families, especially the cap on the number of children covered by Child Benefit. In addition, there are circumstantial issues. Many children living in poverty come from lone parent families or larger households.
- 2.6 The distribution of child poverty is unequal. It is concentrated in specific geographic areas and disproportionately affects children who are Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and/or disabled. The gender of the head of the household is also a factor. Geographic inequalities are both national and mirrored within the borough. However, the outcomes of families living in poverty are worse for those living in affluent areas. The impact of poverty on children is greater than on adults and is long term. Low living standards can affect both physical and mental health and lead to educational disadvantage. There is also social stigma.
- 2.7 Medium and longer term consequences of child poverty include:
- Lower educational achievement;
 - Fewer employment opportunities;
 - Poorer mental and physical health outcomes.

Key Statistics

- 2.8 34% of Haringey's population live in poverty, which is the 5th highest of all London boroughs. This compares with the median across London of 28%. The child poverty rate is higher than this, at 42%. This is within the average range for London, where some boroughs have rates of over 50%. Poverty rates are highest amongst families with children and lone parent families.
- 2.9 There are a range of different indicators related to child poverty and Haringey is below average for London in ten of eighteen of these across London. The indicators cover a range of themes, including work, living standards, housing and shared opportunity. There is a particularly low level of social mobility in Haringey, with the borough being in the bottom quartile for London. On the measure of income deprivation affecting children, Haringey is ranked 61st in the UK and 10th in London.
- 2.10 Provisional Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) data on children living in relative low income families has shown an increase of over 25% from 10,663 families in 2015/16 to 13,380 in 2019/20. The number of children in absolute poverty in Haringey has increased from 2015/16 to 2017/18 but has fallen slightly since then. At the same time, the London average has increased consistently since 2016/17, rising from 8,848 to 10,306, though Haringey remained above the average.
- 2.11 In respect of income deprivation affecting children, there is a clear contrast between the east and west of the Borough. The west has some of the least deprived areas in the country whilst the east has some of the most. Overall, Haringey is one of the more deprived local authorities in London and in the country as a whole for children. It ranks 10th in London and 61st nationally, out of 317.
- 2.12 Northumberland Park is the ward with the highest percentage of children in relative low income families with 29%. Haringey is in the 2nd most deprived decile for income deprivation affecting children, which means it is more deprived than over 80% of local authorities nationally.
- 2.13 Data from October 2021 shows that there were 22,500 children in the Borough in low income households. 56% of these were from lone parent families, 37% in families that were out of work and nearly 2,000 children were in food poverty. In terms of children eligible for Free School Meals (FSMs), South Tottenham has the highest percentage in the borough, with many parts having more than 40% of children eligible. 20% of families in receipt of FSMs would be unable to meet all their expected costs in school holidays without extra support. 3% of families on legacy benefits who receive FSMs in term time and can meet their costs are pushed into cash shortfall in school holidays as a result of extra food costs. This figure rises to 4% for families on Universal Credit.

Drivers

- 2.14 The drivers for poverty in Haringey are as follows:
- Low numbers of jobs: Haringey has the 2nd lowest job density of all London boroughs;

- High levels of unemployment - Haringey has the 2nd highest rate of long term unemployment in London;
 - High numbers of low paid jobs - Haringey has the 2nd largest proportion of people earning below the London Living wage.
- 2.15 Haringey has developed a Social Progress Index, which collates how the borough compares with other boroughs on a range of metrics to provide a view of Haringey's economy, under the 5 pillars of the Economic Development Strategy. The five pillars are:
- Fairness and equality;
 - Good work;
 - Business and enterprise resilience;
 - Environmental sustainability; and
 - Health and well-being.
- 2.16 Haringey is one of the lowest performers in London across these, ranking 27th and in the bottom six. Haringey had an over-representation of residents with no qualifications, while those with higher qualifications are under-represented compared to the wider labour market. The percentage of young people in Haringey in Education, Employment or Training is amongst the lowest in London. Haringey also has the 4th highest level of fuel poverty in London at 18.3%, which is significantly higher than the average. The Tottenham area has a much higher proportion of its population in bad health than the rest of Haringey and this can be traced back to childhood for many.
- 2.17 In respect of educational attainment, not every child has an equal chance of success. Attainment for children and young people varies significantly depending on both affluence, disadvantage and ethnicity. There are gaps for children in receipt of free school meals, looked after children and children from armed forces families. The attainment gap for disadvantaged children has grown from -7.9 in 2020 to -10.5 in 2021. 57% of Haringey students progressed to higher education in 2019/20 compared to 56% in London and 43% nationally. 48% of FSM students progressed, just higher than London (45%) and England (27%).
- 2.18 There is a current trend of families moving out of central London and towards the outer areas and beyond. The increase in private rents and the economic impact of Covid has influenced this. The number of troubled families leaving the borough has an impact on funding for the Council due to the potential loss of grants. The drop in the population from the EU was showing in school rolls but it is hard to predict what the impact will be ultimately.

Current Interventions

- 2.19 Haringey is doing more than most local authorities to address child poverty issue and there is currently much going on. The Council works closely with schools and other partners. The focus is on early help and prevention, particularly household finance. The Council also looks for opportunities to bring the issues to the attention of central government. Recent developments in respect of Universal Credit are positive but not for those in work. There is also specific work taking place on debt policy and strategy and this involves partners, such

as the Citizens Advice Bureau. The borough is also one of the few to provide wider access to free school meals.

- 2.20 There are three specific levers that the Council has to address child poverty:
1. *Building the social infrastructure.* This involves building good quality universal services and developing an education offer that works for everyone, as well as wider services for children and young people, such as social care, youth clubs etc;
 2. *Supporting the poorest in the community.* This is done by helping families to access the financial support they are entitled to and providing emergency help including through the benefits system. Direct financial help was provided during the Covid pandemic and entitlement to free school meals expanded. The Council now also provides Council tax support to poorer families with children.
 3. *Making Haringey a child friendly place.* Actions in support of this include investing in affordable housing that is suitable for families and in local places, like leisure facilities. The aim of this is to make Haringey a good place for children to grow up in.
- 2.21 The Council aims to prioritise children with families in its services. The Borough Plan focusses on key outcomes and themes and includes:
- Increasing the proportion of early years settings which are rated by Ofsted as outstanding, including those in the most deprived wards;
 - Piloting provision of free school meals to children aged 5-11, evaluating its impact for the most deprived children and considering if it could be expanded;
 - Improving the attainment of children from BAME backgrounds, looked after children or those from deprived households and closing the attainment gap to the wider population;
 - Supporting schools and partners to deliver initiatives to ensure that period poverty does not impact on access to education;
 - Providing high quality education, employment and training post-16 provision which meets the needs of all children to develop skills and experience irrespective of background; and
 - Seeking to close the gap in health and well-being outcomes.
- 2.22 In addition, the Council's Fairness Commission included recommendations on making Haringey a Child Friendly Borough, spaces and support for children and young people and school exclusions. Work is now beginning on the Borough Plan refresh, which will include further consideration of child poverty issues.
- 2.23 Families in need can currently also access the Haringey Support Fund. This is a scheme to help residents who:
- Have a low income;
 - Are facing unexpected costs;
 - Need help to meet their immediate needs; or
 - Need help to pay for essential items that are difficult to budget for
- 2.24 This is possible with funding from the UK Government's Household Support Fund and is funded until March 2022.

2.25 The role of maternal employment opportunities and childcare is also being looked at as part of the Council's work. However, being in work is not always a way out of poverty any more. It is currently unclear what the impact of the Covid pandemic has been on the childcare market but it is thought that there has been a decline in the amount of informal care, which will have an impact on people with small children seeking work.

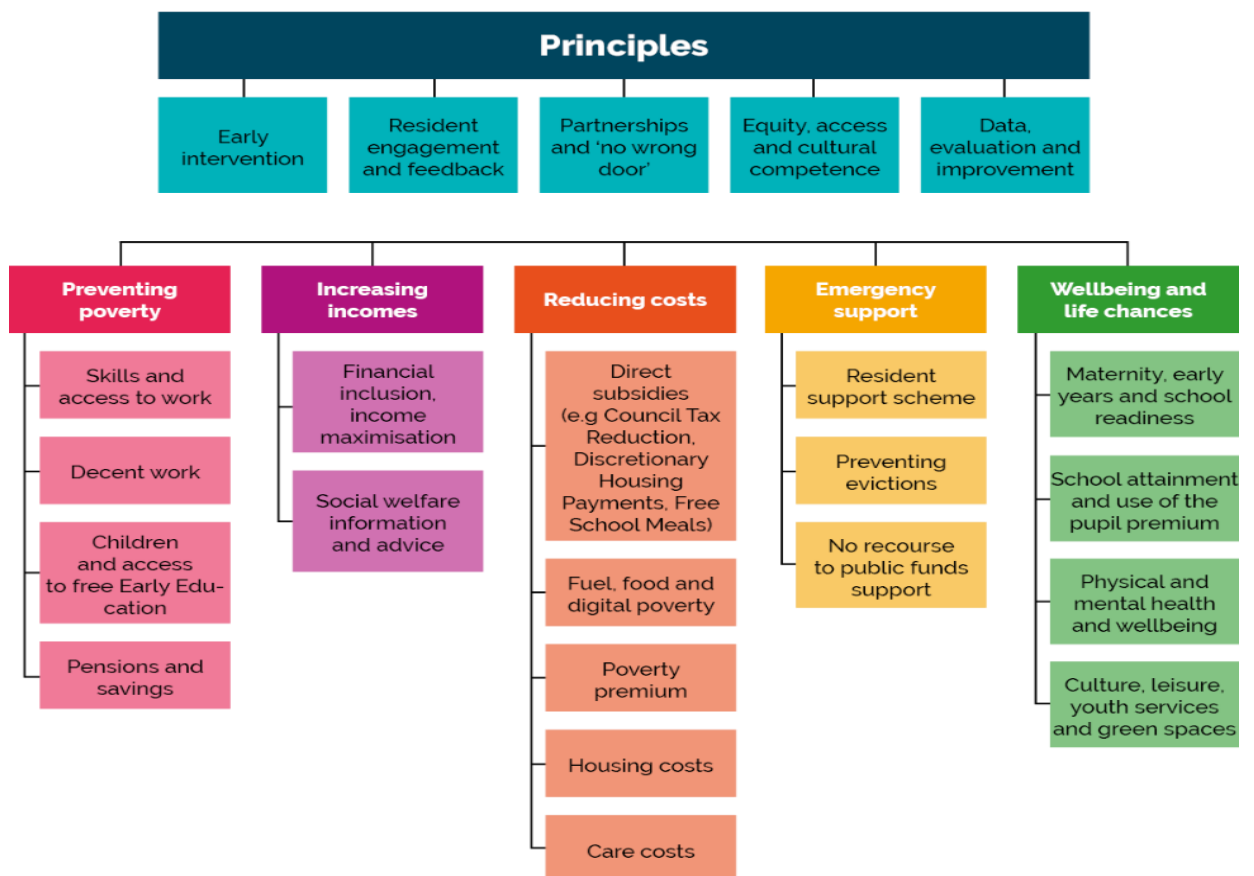
3. Tower Hamlets

- 3.1 The Panel received evidence on the recent review by Tower Hamlets on poverty and, in particular, the interventions that were recommended within it. The review was led by a team of four Cabinet Members. It was set up to look at what Tower Hamlets was currently doing and gain an understanding of why poverty remained such a major issue. Its objective was to develop strategic recommendations to inform future poverty reduction interventions by the Council and its partners.
- 3.2 There was a particular focus within this on child poverty, poverty affecting older residents and Council supported programmes. Rates of child poverty in Tower Hamlets are the highest in the country and pensioner poverty is also very high.
- 3.3 The review sought to answer the following questions:
- What are the factors which are leading to high poverty levels in Tower Hamlets?
 - What local interventions can have the greatest impact on poverty?
 - What do we know about the impact of poverty-related programmes supported by the Council?
 - What should the Council do differently so that its poverty-related programmes achieve the greatest possible benefits for low-income residents?
- 3.4 There were nine review meetings in total. Ahead of the review, there was a call for evidence. Lockdown had made the process more complicated as it had required focus groups to be undertaken on-line. Toynbee Hall and peer researchers assisted with the review process, holding three workshops with residents with experience of life on a low income. Despite the challenges faced, they still managed to hear from 300 people.
- 3.5 There are a number of drivers for poverty in Tower Hamlets:
- Worklessness;
 - Rising in-work poverty;
 - Rising living costs; and
 - Benefit levels.
- 3.6 High housing costs are a particular issue. There is a close link between inequality and poverty, with some groups significantly more likely to experience poverty. Disabled people, those from Black Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds and lone parents are more likely to live in poverty than average.
- 3.7 Residents had provided useful feedback to the review and had highlighted that community support and bringing residents together was an important way of dealing with poverty. Anxiety and shame was a big issue, particularly with young people. Digital exclusion was especially significant at the current time. The importance of health and well-being was emphasised, including access to green space, culture, leisure and youth services.
- 3.8 The review had looked at what could be done to respond to these issues. There were a number of key principles that were set:

- Early intervention was important so that action was taken before needs became acute;
 - They also used the principle of “no wrong door” so that people were able to access support irrespective of where they sought assistance in the first instance;
 - Equity of access and awareness of poverty were also key issues.
- 3.9 The Council funds several programmes to address poverty. These included:
- Free school meals for all non eligible children in Years 3 to 6;
 - A Council Tax reduction scheme;
 - School clothing grants for Year 7s;
 - Ensuring every child was on-line;
 - Children’s Centres;
 - A subsidised holiday childcare scheme;
 - Holiday activities and food; and
 - A youth service.
- 3.10 There is an extensive Tackling Poverty programme that was set up in 2017 and includes:
- An Outreach team;
 - A Resident Support Scheme;
 - Holiday hunger;
 - Benefit uptake campaigns;
 - Pilot projects with teams and external partners; and
 - Covid support and recovery, including emergency pandemic food work.
- 3.11 A data driven programme has been set up to improve benefit take up by targeting those who might be entitled. LIFT data has been used to proactively identify households who might be entitled to a Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP). LIFT data has also been used to identify which areas of the borough to target services in. For example, the prevalence of households known to be eligible for Free School Meals was used to make sure that there are Holiday Activities and Food clubs in the areas with the highest prevalence. East End Citizens Advice Bureau are now also using the LIFT database
- 3.12 Short and long term priorities have been set, as well as areas for further consideration. Communication has been set as a specific short term priority as it was found that a lot of services were not well-known. Proactive use of data and the benefits calculator had also been highlighted as well as delivery of the government Kickstart and Restart schemes. Of particular significance is that there are more jobs in the borough than people of working age. There will also be a continuing focus on addressing the needs of children and young people within the Council’s strategy.
- 3.13 Many jobs in some parts of Tower Hamlets are high paying finance jobs and not accessible to local residents. There are also issues relating to aspirations and awareness of opportunities, particularly amongst parents. Some schools undertake specific work with parents to address these issues. There has been a Race Inequality Commission involving the Council and partners that had recommended a number of actions to increase employment.

3.14 Communications are of particular importance so that residents are fully aware of support that is available. Tower Hamlets Connect brings information and advice together on health and social care, local events and community services across the borough. They are currently trying to avoid having stand-alone services by ensuring that all were linked together as part of a strategic plan. The benefits calculator that is used by the Benefits Team is shared across the Council so that any officer can use it to assist a resident. There is close work between the Children’s Service and the Tackling Poverty team. The use of Children’s Centres is also being extended, such as for food hubs, youth services and training of staff.

3.15 Some schools are working closely together and share resources. This has helped them to address some of the challenges that they and other schools face. Many schools in Tower Hamlets have Welfare Officers and/or Family Liaison. Schools recognise the challenges that poverty presents and need to be able to respond. Children’s Services are being moved into localities and this might help provide greater support for schools.



Tackling poverty: what can a local area do?

4. Child Poverty Action Group

- 4.1 Hannah Aldridge from the Child Poverty Action Group gave evidence on the actions that local authorities could consider undertaking to alleviate child poverty in their area. She reported that child poverty was 31% in the UK but higher in London, with 38%, and very high in Tottenham, with 48%. It has been rising in the UK in the past decade due mainly to austerity. There has been a particular increase in in-work poverty. Household income comprises earnings and welfare benefits. Action that increases earnings or employment levels or maximises access to welfare benefits can therefore be effective.
- 4.2 Reducing household costs, such as housing and childcare, is also important. Poverty rates vary according to demographics, with some groups having substantially higher levels of risk. This includes families with under-fives, more than three children, where someone was disabled, single parents and BAME families. The categories are all concerned with barriers of getting into work. BAME families can face additional barriers to employment, such as systemic inequality and structural racism. Policies to address poverty therefore also needed to address this if they were to be effective.
- 4.3 In discussions with government, CPAG categorised effective child poverty strategy into five themes:
- Social Security;
 - Work;
 - Childcare;
 - Education; and
 - Housing.
- 4.4 Local authorities needed to be realistic when considering how to address poverty. The main levers for addressing it are at national level so the amount that can be done is constrained.
- 4.5 In respect of social security, the following could be effective:
- Maximising the use of statutory crisis grants;
 - Helping families to navigate the benefits system; and
 - Work to maximise the income of residents through effective advice services.
- 4.6 In respect of employment, the following could be done:
- Assisting parents and carers to overcome barriers to employment;
 - Providing tailored support;
 - Encouraging employers to pay the London Living Wage.
- 4.7 In respect of childcare, the following could be done:
- Having awareness of gaps in provision, especially in respect of Special Educational Needs (SEN); and
 - Making sure it was available across the area.
- 4.8 In respect of education, work could be undertaken with schools to reduce the cost of the school day. This could include increasing awareness of activities that could lead to additional costs for parents and being mindful of the cost of school

trips. Extending hours could also help parents. Action could be taken on housing through the use of duties under the Homelessness Prevention Act. This could include working with landlords to secure affordable homes and increasing supply.

- 4.9 She reported that the progress that had been made in London over a long period of time in closing the attainment gap in education had been lost due to the pandemic. CPAG had been lobbying the government to expand the school offer through extending the school day. Provision needed to be accessible for all and be regular. The cost of activities also needed to be kept low.
- 4.10 One of CPAG's key current projects was around the cost of the school day. They had been speaking to children in Greenwich and Coventry about the subtle costs that they came across that could hold back their progress. Things like charity bake sales could make children feel excluded and drive up absences. In addition, they were lobbying government to expand the free school meal offer, which could also be a gateway into other services. Provision in England was the least generous in the UK.
- 4.11 In respect of "quick wins", she felt that income maximisation was probably the most effective. There are particular difficulties relating to Universal Credit as it is complicated and volatile, despite it being designed to be smooth and responsive. Access to advice is therefore very valuable. This can be especially effective if available in schools or advertised through them. There is a government scheme called "The Best Start in Life" that focusses on the first 1001 days and creating family hubs across the country. Local authorities can apply for funding for this. The scheme is not prescriptive about what services should be provided and she would encourage all local authorities to put welfare rights advice in them and services to maximise income. CPAG is currently undertaking a project called "Your Work, Your Way" which was focusses on second earners and ensuring that both partners are able to work. It is the second earner, who is typically the mother, who faces the biggest barriers in getting into work. The Universal Credit taper rate is steeper for second earners, even though they face the biggest barriers.
- 4.12 Welfare Rights advisers are working with second earners and this includes looking to see where local childcare is available, helping them to make their first upfront payments and identifying jobs that worked well around the school day. CPAG are running the project in partnership with two local areas. Access to childcare has proven to be a major issue and, in particular, getting the first payment for childcare. Universal Credit is paid four weeks in arrears but childcare needs to be paid up front, some requiring a whole term. CPAG are lobbying the government to bring payment for childcare forward. In the meantime, there is a role that local government could pay in helping to bridge this gap. There is currently the Flexible Support Fund, which is poorly understood and advertised, and this can be used to reduce barriers into work such as this.
- 4.13 In respect of customer services, she stated that it was important that these are of good quality. People often have a negative experience of the DWP and local authorities needed to consider carefully the provision of services for people who

were in need and ensure that they were accessible. In terms of housing support, she felt that local authorities could invest in stabilising tenancies of those who at risk. In particular, work could be undertaken to identify private leases that were coming to an end in order to prevent homelessness. Those in temporary accommodation can find it difficult to access housing support as Universal Credit were often reluctant to assist those in temporary accommodation and they could find themselves being passed between the DWP and their local authority, who were responsible for Housing Benefit. Local authorities could work closely with the DWP to ensure that people were able to access Housing Benefits.

- 4.14 Ms Aldridge emphasised the importance of schools. In particular, they allowed families with children to be reached and services to be delivered to them. However, children only begin accessing them when they are five but early years settings can also be used to provide services. Local authorities can reach out to childcare providers to gain an understanding of how their finances worked and what scope there was for them to be assisted so that parents were under less pressure to make their first payment up front.

5. Findings

Strategic Approach

- 5.1 The evidence that the Panel received on the scale of poverty in the borough was sobering. The current challenges are likely to get worse due to the recent increases in the cost of living, such as those affecting fuel prices. Addressing poverty should therefore be a top priority within the refreshed Borough Plan. It is nevertheless important that there is realism in developing a response. The main levers for addressing poverty are at national level so aspirations and targets need to be realistic.
- 5.2 The Panel was glad to hear that there is much that the Council is doing, with many of the same or similar initiatives to those recommended by CPAG or being undertaken in Tower Hamlets already in place. Much income maximisation work is being undertaken and data is being used extensively to target this. Free school meals (FSMs) have been expanded and schools given access to a discretionary fund to support families, as and when required, as part of this. There is also an expectation that schools will signpost families to advice services. Significant efforts have also gone into the Haringey Support Fund. The offer of money has been used to incentivise the take up of other benefits, particularly Healthy Start vouchers, as well as ensuring that families are signposted to a range of other support. In addition, the emerging Early Help strategy places a strong emphasis on support to families with young children and, in particular, the financial context.
- 5.3 The Panel was impressed by the strategic and coordinated approach that has been developed by Tower Hamlets. The scope of this is wider than just children but poverty does not stop when children become adults. Children are also not poor in isolation but as part of struggling families. Many issues are cross cutting and require a Council wide response. The Panel is of the view that a coordinated approach needs to be developed and that this should include collaboration between a wide range of services, especially children's and adult's services.
- 5.4 It therefore recommends that a cross cutting review into poverty be undertaken, including engagement with partners and residents. The objective of this would be to obtain a broader understanding of the issue and develop a strategic and coordinated response.
- 5.5 Some families are more at risk of being in poverty, especially those with children with special educational needs and BAME and lone parent families. The Panel also noted that families with children who had a disability face significant additional costs and feel that wider recognition needed to be given to this. Inequality should therefore also be clearly addressed within such a review.
- 5.6 There is considerable stigma associated with being poor and this may deter some families from seeking help and support. CPAG advocates a "cash first" approach to supporting families. This prioritises getting money into people pockets rather than providing vouchers as it reduces stigma and allows families to shop around. The Panel is of the view that this approach to supporting families should therefore be adopted in Haringey where possible.

- 5.7 There is evidence that families struggle to find out what support they can get and how to access it. This may be due to several reasons, including people not having English as a first language, and extra efforts need to be made to get information through to some communities. Any overarching poverty strategy should include detail on how initiatives will be communicated effectively to residents who need support. Schools, children’s centres and community organisations can all play an effective role in this. In particular, they should all be informed directly and routinely of any campaigns that are specific that are taking place.

Recommendations:

- **That alleviating poverty be set as a key priority within the refreshed Borough Plan.**
- **That, as part of the refresh process for the new Borough Plan, a cross cutting review into poverty be undertaken that includes engagement with partners and residents to obtain a broader understanding of the issue and develop a strategic and coordinated response, including:**
 - **How the availability of support will be communicated, including the role of schools, Children’s Centres and community organisations**
 - **How inequality will be addressed; and**
 - **How stigma will be avoided, including a “cash-first” approach to support.**

Customer Services

- 5.8 Customer Services are the Council’s first point of contact for residents living in poverty who need support. It is therefore essential that these are accessible and of the highest standard. There is some anecdotal evidence that residents can find it difficult to resolve issues and the Panel is of the view that Customer Services should be reviewed with a view to making them more accessible and simplifying applications.
- 5.9 The extent of digital exclusion became apparent during the Covid lockdowns, especially for children as it enabled them to access education. It affects some of the poorest members of the community. A significant number of devices were distributed in Haringey but this does not mean that the issue of digital inclusion has been resolved as there are other issues such as access to broadband and data.
- 5.10 Customer Services have developed greater use of online access in recent years and this has proven to be effective and enabled better use of the Council’s limited resources. However, Customer Services should not be over reliant on online interactions and must include equally good service provision for those without digital access.
- 5.11 It should not be assumed that residents will always know how to access services or will seek advice and support at the right location. In such circumstances, they can often find themselves being referred elsewhere. This can cause

frustration and in some cases people may not bother to continue to seek help. The Panel noted to the Tower Hamlets scheme to ensure that all officers had the tools to assist with advice on benefits as well as the principle of “No Wrong Door” they have adopted. The Panel would therefore recommend that similar initiatives are developed in Haringey so that a wider range of officers are able to take responsibility for helping families and individuals, making it less necessary to redirect them.

Recommendations:

- **That the Council’s Customer Services be reviewed with a view to making them easier to access and simplifying applications and that this includes consideration how to make services of equal accessibility and quality for people without digital access.**
- **That the principle of “no wrong door” be adopted and a wider group of officers than those working in Customer Services be given responsibility and the tools for assisting residents with support queries, including benefits advice.**

Food

- 5.12 Access to affordable food is becoming an increasingly important issue and use of food banks has grown massively in recent years. The recent increase in the cost of living is further impacting on the ability of families to buy food. In addition, supermarkets have been withdrawing cheaper and budget lines of food. These additional pressures are further increasing dependency on food banks. However, the ability of people to donate food is likely to be eroded by the increases in the cost of living and current relief arrangements may be difficult to sustain.
- 5.13 There needs to be multiple ways for families to access food. Initiatives can include local growing projects, allotments and community shops but some will not necessarily work for all families. In particular, some families may not wish to use food banks. Families also need to have access to fuel so that they are able to cook food. The Panel noted that Haringey Food Network is looking at how healthy and sources of food can be accessed by the community.
- 5.14 There needs to be long term and sustainable solutions to food poverty, including an analysis of challenges and barriers. Solutions should not just be reliant on philanthropy or the goodwill of others. What constitutes the base or minimum food requirements for a family needs to be identified as part of this.
- 5.15 A Food Strategy has been in development for some time. The aspiration was to develop a stronger and more diverse food ecosystem, led by the local food network. The Panel recommends that work on the development of the Food Strategy be prioritised. In addition, it should be a key part of the refreshed Borough Plan and any strategic plan to address poverty.

Recommendation:

That a progress report on the development of the Council's Food Strategy be included in the workplan for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for 2022/23.

School Meals

- 5.16 One way in which it can be ensured that children receive at least one hot, nutritious meal per day is through having a good quality school meal. The Panel is therefore of the view that consideration should be given to extending provision of FSM to make them universal. In addition, funding for free school meals during school holidays should also be extended.
- 5.17 It was noted that the quality of school meals is variable. The Panel is of the view that it is important that contracts are monitored carefully and recommends that the Council draw up guidance for schools on effective school meal contracts.

Recommendations:

- **That the roll out of FSMs be extended further to make them universal and, in addition, further funding be provided for their provision during school holidays.**
- **That guidance for schools on effective school meal contracts be developed including ensuring that they are of high quality and nutritional value.**

Schools

- 5.18 The role of schools is crucial in responding to child poverty as they have ready access to children and families them and are trusted institutions. However, they are under huge amounts of pressure at the moment. Schools vary in their ability to communicate effectively with parents and carers though. Some schools are very good at this whilst others are less so. Many are also now struggling with the heavy demands placed on them and not in a position to take on any additional responsibilities.
- 5.19 A lot of work has been undertaken to increase the take up of Healthy Start Vouchers for families with small children but they are nevertheless undersubscribed. However, the expansion of FSMs has provided the Council with a route into schools and can provide the opportunity to improve communication of the support that is available to families from the Council and partner organisations, including emergency assistance and the wider Covid support package.
- 5.20 The Panel expressed concern at the issue of strict school uniform policies. In some cases, the total cost of a uniform can exceed £70 and this could impact on some of the poorest children, who can be sent home for infringements. Recent statutory guidance has stated the need for uniforms to be affordable. It was noted that some schools in the borough had uniforms that were supermarket friendly. Some also offer vouchers for uniforms.

- 5.21 The Panel heard that there can be other costs that are hidden but impact on poor families. As Haringey is characterised by wide economic disparities, it is likely to be a significant issue in the borough. This will be particularly true for poor families in more affluent neighbourhoods. It notes the CPAG initiative to reduce the cost of the school day and feels that similar work should take place in Haringey.

Recommendation:

The work takes place with schools to reduce the cost of the school day by promoting greater awareness of the financial impact of policies and initiatives on poorer families and, in particular, hidden costs.

- 5.22 Parents can play an important role in the educational attainment of children. Engagement and communication with schools plays an important in this. Schools can find it difficult to involve some parents due to the long hours that they need to work to financially survive and support their children. The Panel is of the view that work should be undertaken by the Haringey Education Partnership with schools to explore how to engage more effectively with parents and carers who are hard to reach. This should include drawing on successful initiatives from elsewhere and consideration of the commissioning of external research.

Recommendation:

That Haringey Education Partnership works with schools to explore how they may engage more effectively with parents and carers that are hard to reach, including drawing on successful initiatives from elsewhere and consideration of the commissioning of external research.

Leisure and Physical Activities

- 5.23 It is important that poor children are not excluded from leisure activities. In particular, there are higher levels of childhood obesity in deprived areas and physical activity can play a role in addressing this. There is a perception that it necessarily involves cost though. There are lots of free opportunities available but people may not always be aware of them. It is important that data is obtained from those who attend Council promoted events so it can be determined who has attended whether the target demographic has been reached.
- 5.24 Youth programmes, including summer schemes, have generally been funded on a short-term basis and through grants. Whilst the budgetary reasons for this are understood, it has made longer term planning more difficult. The initiatives undertaken as part of the Haringey Community Gold scheme have been particularly welcome and consideration should be given to the feasibility of at least some of these being made permanent.

Recommendations:

- **That a commitment be made to provide permanent funding for youth programmes and services.**
- **That the feasibility of longer term funding for successful initiatives undertaken as part of Haringey Community Gold be explored.**