

Our children deserve better ...

The interim report of the Milton Keynes
Child Poverty Commission, March 2020



milton keynes council

The Commission

Milton Keynes Council aims to provide support so every child has the opportunity to succeed.

(Council Plan Objective 5)

1. To meet its aims, the Council invited Hannah Markham QC to form a commission to look at the causes of child poverty in Milton Keynes. Forming the Child Poverty Commission (CPC), local people were invited to apply to be members and were joined by representatives from each political party. Commissioner details can be found below.
2. The Commission was tasked to produce a set of evidence and consultative-based recommendations by autumn 2020. However, the Cabinet suggested that there would be public policy development advantages if the CPC felt able to provide an interim report by March 2020. In addition, the Commissioners broadened its scope by adding an examination of the effects or consequences of child poverty to its causes. The available timescales were further shortened by the General Election period in November and December 2019. Consequently, this interim report can only provide a summary of the evidence collected so far, offering a useful perspective into the Commission's methodology and analysis.
3. The topic of child poverty attracts a lot of discussion and it is challenging to address. The work of the Commission is not complete and the resultant outline in the interim report will be used for phase two of the Commission that will develop concrete proposals.

4. The Commissioners are:

Hannah Markham QC,
Commission Chair

Cllr Jane Carr

Cllr Zoe Nolan

Cllr David Hopkins

Rev. Paul Oxley

Paul Sedgwick

Ben Thomas

Maureen Lloyd

Laura Osgathorp

Anita O' Malley

Tina Price

Jeremy Beake, Lead Officer to the Commission

Sarah Gonsalves, Corporate Leadership



The Report

A. Our focus

This report is about children, children who experience barriers to their aspirations, security and well-being. Children who, it was reported, face stigma and judgement on a daily basis. They grow up watching their parents face difficult decisions and pressures. As teenagers, they look on as friends and neighbours lead very different lives with very different possibilities. These children and young people live in Milton Keynes.



Since October last year, we have listened to partners and professionals, along with decision makers and support workers. Praise was widespread for what professionals and volunteers do to support people's basic needs. However, the scale of child poverty in Milton Keynes is shocking.

We spoke to parents, children and young people. What they told us was a story of frustrations and barriers. What they hoped for was an end to the harsh treatment and a respectful rethink of services. What they wanted were solutions that were locally focussed, more joined-up and better communicated.

Most of all parents wanted allies who would work with them to change the narrative for their children.

What is in this report?

We hope this report is not the typical 'interim report'. Instead, it is the first of two reports, which should be read together.

- In these pages, we start to tell the story of child poverty in Milton Keynes. A story that cannot be explained by the figures alone, but one that is based on what service providers, parents and children told us.
- At the end of this report, we start to say how this story can change, articulated in a number of things that the council can do, influence or promote. We recognise that invariably at this stage this outline is vague and will need more explanation.
- Therefore, using this outline as a starting point for the next phase of work, by the time of our next report – planned for October - we aim to give details of a new storyline by explaining how things can change.

The Commission has welcomed the candour and honesty of all those who have contributed so far. This topic naturally engenders some uncomfortable feelings. Yet, we hope that these feelings can be turned into a resolve to change the narrative, because "our children deserve better".

B. What we have done, so far

Briefing Paper

1. A briefing paper provided the Commission with a preliminary analysis of child poverty in Milton Keynes. Poverty, particularly child poverty, features in the sustainability goals of the United Nations, who highlight the need to build resilience of people in “poverty and vulnerable situations”.
2. We examined the work of the national Child Poverty Action Group, Social Metrics Commission and the Milton Keynes Child Poverty report of 2012. Moving beyond a discussion of numbers and concepts, we focused on the impact of child poverty across the Borough, using various lines of enquiry.

Stakeholder Expert Witnesses

3. The Commission has so far heard from a number of Stakeholder Witnesses representing the following areas:
 - Benefits
 - Advice services
 - Refugee support
 - Voluntary Sector
 - Children centres
 - Children Social Services
 - Youth clubs
 - Employment support
 - Health services
 - Homelessness
 - Housing Access
 - The Children and Young People’s Scrutiny Committee
 - As well as directly from users of Children Centres from Netherfield, Bletchley and Fullers Slade
4. A number of common themes emerged from these sessions. We were told that some of the remedies for child poverty lie outside of the Council’s control. In spite of this, the Commission resolved that our recommendations would be based on the Council’s power to influence and its power to promote or lobby, as well as its power to act through its services.
5. The Commission appreciated the time and effort all stakeholders took to engage with us and for the thoughtful and constructive nature of their contributions.



Do,
Influence,
or Promote

Responses to the Call for Evidence

6. A ‘call for evidence’ was sent to contacts and services and published on the Council website. We received 46 written responses from organisations, businesses and individuals. Similar questions were used in meetings with Health Visitors and Maternity Care Services. These views were supplemented with feedback from the Youth Cabinet who devoted a session to the questions and the Disability Advisory Group who considered how disability affects child poverty.

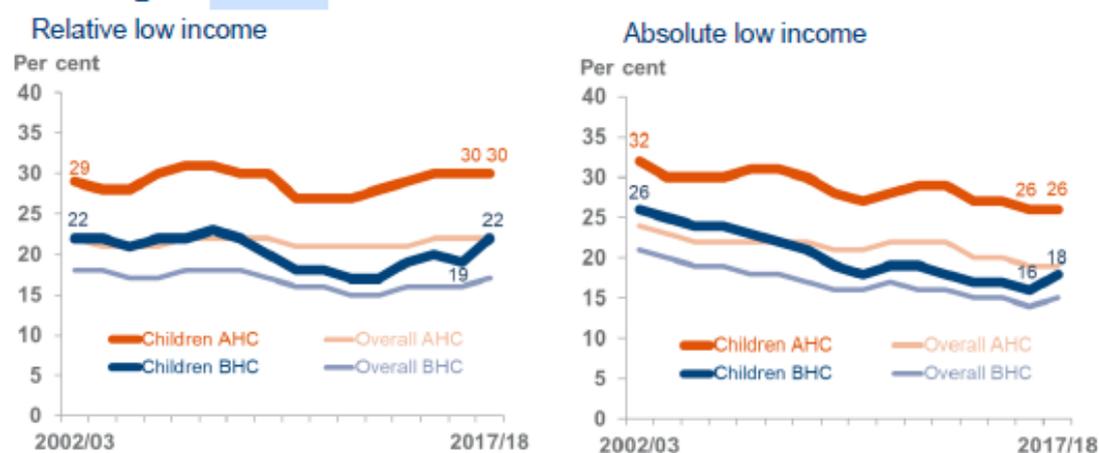
- The responses spanned the public and private sectors, from small firms to larger organisations, as well different areas of Milton Keynes. These responses reflected the level of interest in the subject. The questions asked in the ‘call for evidence’ are contained in Annex A.

C. What our research told us

National Child Poverty Figures

- The latest End Child Poverty estimates are for 2017/18 while the latest HMRC figures are for August 2016. HMRC presents estimates on a before-housing costs (BHC) basis only, but End Child Poverty reports estimates based on income after-housing costs (AHC).

Percentage of children in low income



- After a long period in which Child poverty fell, between the late 1990s and around 2010, the child poverty rate fluctuated in the first half of the present decade, but the trend is now upwards on all indicators. Child poverty in the UK is rising. Relative poverty, based on whether households have income less than 60% of the current median household income, did not immediately rise during the economic downturn a decade ago. Instead, the recent rise in child poverty reflects how low-paid incomes have not kept pace with the median income and has become the major cause of in-work poverty.

Milton Keynes Child Poverty Figures

(based on HMRC and End Child Poverty Figures May 2019)

| Before Housing Costs (BHC) | | | After Housing Costs (AHC) | | |
|----------------------------|---------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------|---------------------------------------|
| Number of children | % of children | Percentage point change since 2016/17 | Number of children | % of children | Percentage point change since 2016/17 |
| 15167 | 20.8% | 1.4% | 22940 | 31% | 1% |

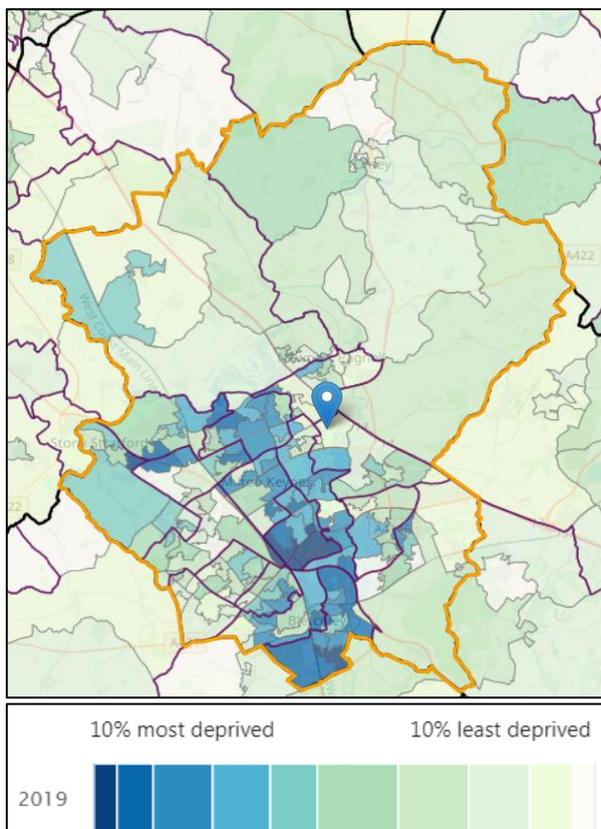
3. Examining the local situation the Commission found:

- a) Child poverty is rising. The latest figures suggest that there are currently high levels of child poverty in Milton Keynes, and that since 2013 - for the first time in almost two decades - child poverty has started to rise in absolute terms.
- b) The definition of child poverty in the figures is insufficient. We heard of households with higher incomes, who had presented as homeless and were in temporary accommodation. The children in these families experienced poverty, because of their vulnerable situation.
- c) Child poverty is multi-faceted. Children are in poverty when they lack the “resources to obtain the type of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary or at least widely encouraged and approved, in the societies in which they belong” (Townsend 1979:31)
- d) Children move in and out of poverty. In the Millennium Cohort Study, a representative sample of children from the UK born in 2001, about half (47%) of children experienced relative poverty one or more times between the age of 9 months and 11 years, and 9% of children experienced persistent poverty.

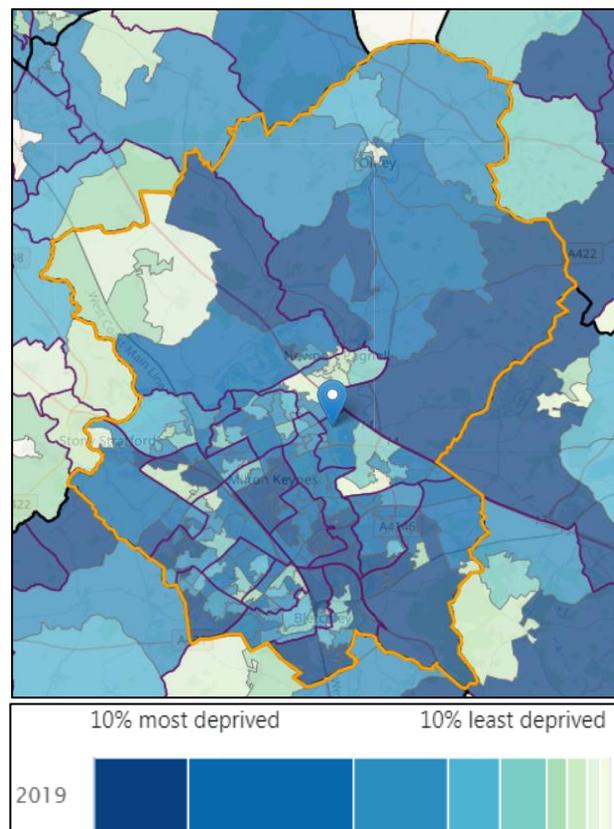
Ward figures (based on old ward boundaries)

| Ward | % of children BHC | AHC |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|--------|
| Woughton | 38.30% | 48.40% |
| Campbell Park | 34.10% | 44.60% |
| Eaton Manor | 31.80% | 49.90% |
| Middleton | 25.60% | 33.30% |
| Wolverton | 25.50% | 40.80% |
| Bradwell | 23.40% | 37.00% |
| Walton Park | 22.00% | 28.50% |
| Denbigh | 20.80% | 39.70% |
| Stantonbury | 20.70% | 36.30% |
| Bletchley and Fenny Stratford | 20.10% | 34.20% |
| Linford South | 19.30% | 30.60% |
| Stony Stratford | 18.70% | 29.30% |
| Emerson Valley | 18.20% | 25.20% |
| Furzton | 17.50% | 25.80% |
| Linford North | 16.90% | 29.10% |
| Whaddon | 16.20% | 29.90% |
| Loughton Park | 15.10% | 23.30% |
| Hanslope Park | 11.60% | 22.10% |
| Sherington | 11.60% | 22.10% |
| Danesborough | 10.00% | 15.90% |
| Olney | 8.80% | 14.60% |
| Newport Pagnell North | 8.20% | 15.40% |
| Newport Pagnell South | 8.10% | 13.80% |

Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2019



Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) with proportions in the legend



Access to Housing and Services Deprivation with proportions in the legend

- Comparing Milton Keynes to elsewhere using the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD 2019), told us which areas had higher proportions of children aged 0 to 15 living in income-deprived families. The map above left highlights those areas that are among the 10% most deprived areas for child poverty in the country and in Milton Keynes there are seven of these areas. However, this shows income deprivation only and does not take into account access and affordability of housing.

For this, we need to look at the 'Access to Housing and Services Domain', which is mapped above right. This domain measures the financial accessibility of housing and location of services and shows a massive 18% of the Milton Keynes Borough in the most deprived 10% of the country. In the South East region, only Slough has a higher average level of deprivation on this domain. However, Slough does not have the statistical combination with Child Poverty, having no areas in the most deprived 10% on the IDACI.

Additionally, in Milton Keynes, more than 75% of all children in poverty are in households where at least one person is working (children in non-working household is estimated at 4,900). This creates a 'perfect storm for child poverty', making Milton Keynes almost unique in the mix of these three aspects of poverty.

The Commission of 2012

5. The child poverty commission of 2012 framed its recommendation on the development stages of the child, this report called for a number of policy interventions. The twenty-four (24) recommendations were revisited and the progress towards their implementation reviewed. This can be summarised:

- Seven recommendations have been superseded by large-scale policy changes locally or nationally. For example, universal credit and how it encourages people to find employment and the 'Time for Twos' provision of childcare and maternity/paternity changes.
- In five areas, no progress can be reported either because the recommendations were vague assuming that services would develop specific actions, or because the Council could only lobby for change, which was not forthcoming. For example, this applied to the recommendation that "employers should be encouraged to offer flexible working hours that fit around school terms and hours".
- In the remaining twelve areas, progress has been reported, although for breakfast clubs and language and skills successes this was patchy and not sustained. While other recommendations were rolled into larger programmes such as "Strengthening Families" whose future has been unclear. Further, two recommendations were subject to the local employment programmes, which have met with challenges since 2012.
- One recommendation simply asked, "Do we need a 'living wage' campaign for Milton Keynes?" In 2016, the Council was accredited as a living wage employer by the Living Wage Foundation and promoted the living wage in the Borough. This has made an important contribution to staff retention and development in the Care sector as well as influenced many local companies to follow suit.

Having concentrated on employment as a major remedy, the commission of 2012 could not have imagined that by 2019 more than 18,000 children in Milton Keynes would experience poverty, but live in households with one or more employed adult.

Wider evidence

6. The commission looked at evidence for various organisations and commissions nationally and internationally and was able to get a flavour of the wider evidence base. Many of these papers and reports are structured around the outcomes leading to some type of Child Poverty Strategy. Common outcomes include:

- Improved life chances of children in poverty
- Maximising financial resources of families on low incomes
- Children from low income households live in well-designed, sustainable places

The causes of Child poverty include:

- Low paid or unsecure employment amongst the household adults
- Persistent unemployment amongst the household adults
- Disability of household member(s), both mental and physical

- High basic living costs, such as housing
- Inadequate (or untimely paid) benefits
- Addictions

The consequences of child poverty include:

- Destitution
- Stigma
- Lower cognitive development
- Lower health outcomes
- An achievement gap
- Fewer opportunities

D. What we found

Children & Family Wellbeing

1. Parents told the Commissioners that they would like the Council to remain positive, concentrating upon the children’s prospects and family wellbeing. However, we heard many examples of what one responder called the ‘impossible choices’. This is the observation that many Milton Keynes families are forced to make choices between food, clothes and heat for their children.



Reflecting upon her current experience a senior health visitor profession said, “Children are sadder now, than only a few years ago. Local charities such as Home Start, used to provide support for emotional well-being. Now funding is rarely sustained, services are less joined up, infrastructure for children has not kept pace with the community, and families lack the resilience to cope. All in all there is an emotional poverty creating a widening gap in many

Parent from North Milton Keynes

“Wait 5 weeks for Universal Credit, why so long? Then you need a loan to survive. But when the payment comes through you have to pay back loan so after bills and rent ... we don't have enough money for food and school clothes. But I make sure the kids eat. All that's left is foodbank and community fridge and some so-called advice on 'money management'.”

Example of benefits

Single parent with 2 children secondary school age and £925 monthly rent – the lowest rent for 3-bed house in MK on Zoopla (seen 06/02/2020).

From UC, they would receive £ 1653.78 (this includes LHA £827.21 private 3-bed rent). After paying rent, she has £877.85 a month / £202.58 a week

children's development".

We reflected upon the role of schools in responding to these "impossible choices" and particularly the work of pastoral leads in identifying and supporting vulnerable children. Schools have a large role to play in ensuring that no child goes unsupported. However, one headteacher of a Milton Keynes school reflected about the lost referral and support pathway, which helped families that were struggling, as well as other partnership between schools and council services. Health visitors agreed that the key to supporting families who have impossible choices was more collaborative and joined-up referrals and activities.

2. Family pressures are an observable feature of child poverty. The increase in domestic abuse reports is one indicator of these pressures. The TVP's Chief Inspector observed that domestic abuse was one of the two most reported incidents in Milton Keynes and suggested a link between child poverty, domestic abuse and risk of homelessness. When asked about the levels of addiction in their local areas, residents commented that "it was common" with people exhibiting multiple addictions to alcohol, drugs or gambling.

A professional working in Bletchley provided a further insight, "Many of our parents are single mothers and their own parents or wider family live outside MK. Where families have been rehoused in Milton Keynes from London or other areas, this has a significant impact on support, particularly childcare. It is not easy for many single parents to work without some back up when children are ill, or on school holidays, even though unemployment levels here are lower than in many other areas of the country. Crèche facilities are very limited and childcare expensive." This observation was also true of refugee families and families that had moved to Milton Keynes for work.

The support that community and voluntary groups provide was recognised in the Commission's evidence. There was a clear difference between voluntary organisations, which operate across Milton Keynes and those, often smaller groups that work in the communities – sometimes with a wonderful specific aim like 'Girl pack'. Food banks and community fridges add to this landscape of community-based services. We also heard from people organising thrift stores and community lunches for £1, who regularly attract sixty-plus people who are keen to increase their contribution. However, the community foundation reported that more was required to ensure that such groups were ready to attract funding as funding and opportunities for these smaller community groups were limited.

Parents about local life

"The best job going around here is the school assistant job. But so many qualified people wanted that job, because it meant you had half terms and holidays too. Nowadays everyone has to work, mums and all". .."Many people get the bus, but if you have to take two buses you cannot take the job because you will always be late. ... "So you are limited, you take any job whatever the money and you don't get treated with any respect. But it's even worse if you need to find someone to look after your kids."

3. The Council was challenged to promote the provision of local childcare, enabling parents, especially women, to work. One short reply stated, “Poor access to quality childcare is a massive obstacle”. The Commission were told that there were three main problems with the current childcare provision. These were:

- low paid families have access only to the free childcare provision provided by the Council – nurseries, which have shorter days and a lack of flexibility in the hours provided
- the quality of childcare is not sufficient to support child development
- State support for childcare costs is poorly targeted, poor value for money and does not provide support for up-front costs. We heard of one person who was unable to take a highly- paid job she was offered due not being able to meet these upfront costs.

The Commission considered how children in disadvantaged and poor environments are on average less likely to succeed in school and in their future economic and social lives.

Additionally, how programmes that improve learning abilities, behaviour and parental relationships early in childhood help to break the cycle of poverty and inequality. Evidence from children (and family) centres suggest that day care for pre-school children can aid development levels, having beneficial effects on behavioural development and school achievement.

4. Educationists and health visitors told us that an improved learning culture would encourage achievement, this seems most apparent in the educational success of families with particular backgrounds. One head teacher suggested that the Council should actively influence cross-school developments on child poverty. This would involve an improved focus on sharing good practice that showed “how schools are achieving success” for example the “best use of Pupil Premium, Sports Premium or other resources”.

To overcome the issues of engagement and skills, the promotion of family learning was suggested. This refers to educational activity that involves both children and adult family members, and where the learning involved is aimed at both. Family learning is part of a whole Borough aspiration to create a culture of learning. We heard how parents, carers and other family members were critical to the progression and success of a child’s future, and that inspiration and support can travel across the generations. In this context older person mentoring schemes, such as ‘Grandmentoring’ were mentioned as a way to encourage cross-generational learning.

Consultation group of young people

“We know people (other children and young people) that miss meals, do not have breakfast or lack things like (winter) coats. It is well-known and of course they get bullied.”

“We all worry about money... We all have anxiety... some just more than others... like do you wear brands, even fakes or know get TV channels, see films or whatever. Sometimes it’s just about not having your hair right.”

Young people told us: “the school is the most obvious centre to help with child poverty”. Suggesting that they could be centres for food banks, uniforms and education costs in the community. Young people were also concerned by the cost of post-16 education, in a situation where families could not afford the costs of transport and study.

Financial Wellbeing

5. Income limitation is an obvious cause of poverty; however, we heard how financial wellbeing was not always income-linked. Instead it was often related to the cost of ‘essential basics’, such as rents, food, heating and transport. This means that family cash-flow management and the extra costs incurred by families because of housing were prominent in what we heard. This is probably the largest change since 2012.



The evidence from those who have been through the benefits services painted a picture of long waits and an inefficient system that could be ‘harsh’. We heard from those in the Council’s Benefits Services who spoke about how things have changed. The Council now deals with a smaller number of applications. However, the Local Welfare Provision, which was maintained in Milton Keynes, continues to show evidence that for its £0.5 in spend it saves the Council in the region of over £9 million in extra services.

We heard from Swan Credit Union Ltd, who told us that two thirds of its 1900 members are in MK. They suggested that a Child Benefit Savings and Loan Scheme, where members redirect their child benefit payments to their account and are eligible for immediate loans had been beneficial. This had helped to prevent people getting into debt and particular with benefits delays and the resultant cash flow issues.

6. Over 1,400 children in Milton Keynes spent Christmas 2019 in temporary accommodation, part of the 135,000 children in the UK. Experiences of children in this situation vary, helped in part by services avoiding the worst forms of accommodation. However, such experiences can involve a lack of space, security and facilities for cooking and eating, an impact on education, friendships and sleep and a disruption to their development.

Parent who was in temporary accommodation

“Being in temporary accommodation feels like having your life on hold. The worst thing for us was the moving around. We were moved from Milton Keynes because of the housing situation to Watford, then Luton, Rugby and then Northampton and finally to Coffee Hall.

This meant we had to find schools, work and help every time. It was impossible, but luckily, my family were at the end of the phone else I would have despaired. For the kids it was just a constant strain.

7. We heard from Housing Access Services, who suggested that some low-income families are 'being punished two-fold', no longer able to access social housing, but also unable to access enough housing benefit to rent privately. One council officer told us: "the crippling effects of the housing crisis and significant cuts to benefits have forced thousands of parents into impossible situations in order to keep a roof over their children's heads, many having to choose between crippling debt, overcrowding or homelessness." They added, "With more housing access resources we could help people earlier, so they stay in their own home and avoid homelessness."

The Local Housing Allowance rate has not kept pace with the rise in the local housing market meaning that private renting is "simply unaffordable" under benefit rules. It was suggested that this leaves families having to choose between paying rent and feeding their children. There was praise for the Council's rent deposit scheme and recognition of the role of the Council in helping people avoid homelessness.

8. Infrastructure meant one thing to local residents – that was 'how local' were key services and amenities? Local shops did not have the range of fresh food offered by the market, but transport to these places was expensive. Without cheap transportation, services and employment were inaccessible. Without local places to buy fresh and inexpensive food, people could not avail themselves of cheaper and healthier food. Indeed food and services came at a higher cost to pocket and health as an individual had to travel or were limited in their local shopping offer, or even take-away food.

Unsurprisingly, we heard that local areas matter to people and there is scepticism of the council's motives and planning. We looked at evidence that opportunities were yet to be grasped in infrastructure, transport and regeneration programmes, where aspects of such projects have not always accorded with local expectations. With competing issues of new technology, climate change and community requirements, we heard how good infrastructure can provide basic needs and builds community resilience. In particular, we heard how digital solutions could be the answer to the need for good information, with a general call to (re)-use of local centres and de-centralise services.

Parents from Central Bletchley

Getting somewhere is a biggest issue, wouldn't it be great if things were local. Everything has been centralised and needs two buses. We have lost the job centre, the housing services and other things.

Many people have council tax arrears and can't get on top of our debts. We are not listened to and even medical services are impossible to access, for example, we can't register with a dentists.

Community Wellbeing



9. There was ample evidence for the suggestion from a Senior Officer's contention that effective work is "related to community work and making sure young people becoming functioning citizens". This places an importance on the targeting of preventive services and the reality that many families need support from a range of services.

As previously mentioned, this suggests a joined-up approach to providing that support with schools and health visitors. Additionally, it also means more a targeted support for families that are particularly hard to reach through the established channels and services. We heard how outreach providers, working with the Council and other partners are identifying these families, so that they can understand their needs and develop the most appropriate strategies to support them. We heard how good and accessible social services are a necessary part of an effective child poverty strategy.

Evidence suggests that particular groups of children are especially vulnerable. In particular, we heard how families with a child or children with one or more disability experience poverty. Often this is in additional needs such as larger barrel washing machines or adaptive homes. We know from previous reports that many homes in Milton Keynes are unsuitable, but even in an adapted home there are extra expenses. We heard that high-quality childcare and support for those with disabilities could play an important part in preventing, as well as reducing, poverty. We heard directly from young people who recognise that some groups are more at risk and that stigma added another disadvantage, with its effects on mental wellbeing and ability.

We heard of successes through the local welfare provision and social care preventative services, but we also heard that more could be done for vulnerable children. These children include disabled children or children of disabled parents; children in care; children leaving care; children with a parent in prison; children who are carers; asylum seeker/refugee children; and some gypsy and traveller children.

A parent from Netherfield

"So many families have a hard time, especially when they go on UC (Universal Credit) ... because of the five weeks (gap to first payment) ... they find themselves having to go to the food bank.

Though this is limited to 5 a year ... it's meant to be ... but so many people just can't afford basic things, they allow it. And you can't get fresh stuff here and its £4.80 return by bus to the centre. You can't help yourself. We even tried to get an allotment. Nothing doing."

10. Children and Family Centres were commonly mentioned in terms of solutions. Family Centres are going great work and are a focal point for other community and voluntary work. Health visitors spoke about the need to improve parental engagement with centres and schools. Children's participation in community activities was considered beneficial to their learning and to their social and cultural development. This required engagement, which in turn required a level of self-confidence. A vicious/virtuous circle was being articulated between confidence – engagement – beneficial services or diffidence – disengagement – unutilised services.

A common request was to do more 'around' the family and children centres so that services can in their words "join-up and attract outside funding for extra services". People spoke of these centres becoming places where the access of services, like Citizens Advice, health and housing, so they would become local using digital means.

11. The evidence linking child poverty with ill health was said to be "over welcoming". This includes evidence of lower birthweights, the increase in various infections, and the experience of child mental ill health. Maternity services reminded us that this starts pre-birth where the mother's mental and physical health can seriously affect the child.

One way to meet these challenges would be "to target health promotion and services through local schools". Health visitors thought increasing dental care through schools would be a vehicle to the promotion of oral health and healthy eating as well as ensuring that children received dental care. This could address, "the rise in obesity and combat the health consequences of poverty". Health visitors also thought some cooking skills had been lost and proposed the use of a scheme similar to that of Grand-mentors, where older people in the community share skills. We found evidence that successful schemes like this are happening in places such as Moorfields Family Centre.

12. The commission received evidence of the links between disadvantage, skills poverty and structure of low paid jobs in Milton Keynes. Children in families where one or more adults is in low paid and insecure employment are especially vulnerable, with an increased risk of poverty and poorer developmental outcomes. The central concern is that children affected by such poverty are subject to cycle of poverty that will see them follow into insecure and low paid employment

Young children quotes collected by a local voluntary agency

"We didn't have any food at home and I had not had any breakfast today. I was really hungry" (girl aged 9)

"Mummy and me had to move to a new house and she could not afford any food and we did not know where to get any help" (unknown age of child, but story given to a member of primary school staff)

Milton Keynes was characterised as “employment rich and skills poor” and some of its residents as “working poor”. Jobs exist for those without skills, but they are of an unsustainable and unstable nature. In-work poverty is now the overriding issue with the highest impact. It is no longer the case that unemployment can be attributed as the main cause of poverty. Some employment projects reported more women than men are seeking assistance in an approximate 60/40 split.

We heard how a lack of part time jobs, uncertainty around hours or shifts and zero hours contracts makes financial security and planning very difficult to achieve. Access to and cost of childcare, housing, food, clothing and transport (including reliability/journey length) have a negatively impact in already stressful situations. Many are working two or more part-time jobs usually to no avail. These are often low skilled, poorly paid positions, which are hard to reconcile with the high cost of living.

Furthermore, it was suggested that basic skills training did not have any synchronicity or coordination. It was thought that the Council could use its influence to encourage employers and skill training services to coordinate their approach and address what one respondent called a ‘patchwork’ approach.

Further quotes from peoples experiences

“They told me that I had lost my job by text, no support or anything” (Speaking of suicidal feelings) “I would not be here if not for the centre”

“It is just the harsh way things are. Especially the Council, five minutes in a job – no UC for five weeks and the council say you have to pay all the Council Tax now”. “I love how some people say that we can all eat healthily have you seen what’s in local shops or tried to carry things back home from the central market”

General observation

13. Child poverty is largely a structural issue. The Commission welcome wider recognition of this from the national government, from partner organisations, as well from the Council. In the evidence, we saw a perfect storm or toxic triangle of housing access issues, of low-income households, of in-work poverty, as well as the movement of services and supports from local areas.

The task of Milton Keynes Council will be to shape itself towards children in material need, being aware that the historic vision of Milton Keynes was never just to build houses or estates but to “build communities for everyone”, recognising that what the Council does, promotes and influences goes beyond its Borough borders to the surrounding work-place area.

E. Addressing child poverty

The story we have highlighted can change and the Council can do, influence and promote change. As we stated this outline will require further work to develop recommended activity based on what is possible. However, reading this report people may already have suggestion for each of the following:

A. General duty

1. The Council can have due regard to the causes and consequences of child poverty in all its functions and decision-making.

B. Children & Family Wellbeing

The Council can:

2. Improve support, help and information for those with ‘impossible choices’
3. Increase the availability of affordable childcare
4. Uses its influence, to reduce levels of domestic abuse
5. Promote a family learning culture in Milton Keynes

C. Financial Wellbeing

The Council can:

6. Improve benefit efficiency and information
7. Widen the availability of homelessness prevention advice and guidance
8. Uses its influence, to close the gap between the HRA and local market rents
9. Promote the opportunities afforded by the new infrastructure, transport and regeneration projects

D. Community Wellbeing

The Council can:

10. Provide more targeted preventative services
11. Deliver a Children Centres Plus programme
12. Uses its influence, to improve health outcomes
13. Promote improved employment practices and skills

E. Child Poverty in Milton Keynes Assessment

14. The Council can publish an annual assessment of child poverty in Milton Keynes with its budget report, alongside its equality impact assessment

F. What Next?

1. There were obvious limitations to evidence gathering. These have been overcome by the commissioners seeking out evidence directly and following up on lines of enquiry but there are still areas we will want to explore. One area we will explore is the contribution of schools and their pastoral teams, as well as more direct contact with children.

Phase 2

2. In the next phase of the Commission, we will be examining our areas to address in light of feedback from the Cabinet and Scrutiny. We will want to develop this outline; understanding what works, what we would like to see achieved and whether achievement is feasible.
3. We will share our outline with the people we met from the Children Centres and feedback and the responses from the Council, as well as speaking to key professionals inside and outside of the Council. What we will be looking for are practical solutions that address the underline challenges outlined in this report.
4. It is our aim to have this work completed by September and report to Cabinet in October.

Report

5. A final report will contain the findings from Phase 2 and will not repeat the evidence in this report. The report will contain our final recommendations, which we hope will outline a shared offer to the children of Milton Keynes.

The Commissioner's believe that together we tackle the causes and consequences of child poverty and provide our children with something better, because they deserve this from us.

Dear Reader,

Having read our report - and especially the outline on page 17, was your response "They could do *that* (any outcome 1-14) by doing A, B, or C"? If so, please give us this feedback and any ideas or comments by writing to the email found at the end of this report.

Thank You – the Commissioners

Annex A

Call for evidence questions:

1. In what ways could the Council provide more support to address the causes and consequences of Child Poverty?
2. What works in reducing the negative impact of growing up in poverty on a child's life chances?
3. What do you see as the key mechanisms through which poverty is translated into poorer life chances for children and young people?
4. What are the barriers to implementing anti-poverty policies for children and young people, based on existing (and extensive) evidence?
5. Is there anything unique about child poverty in Milton Keynes?

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