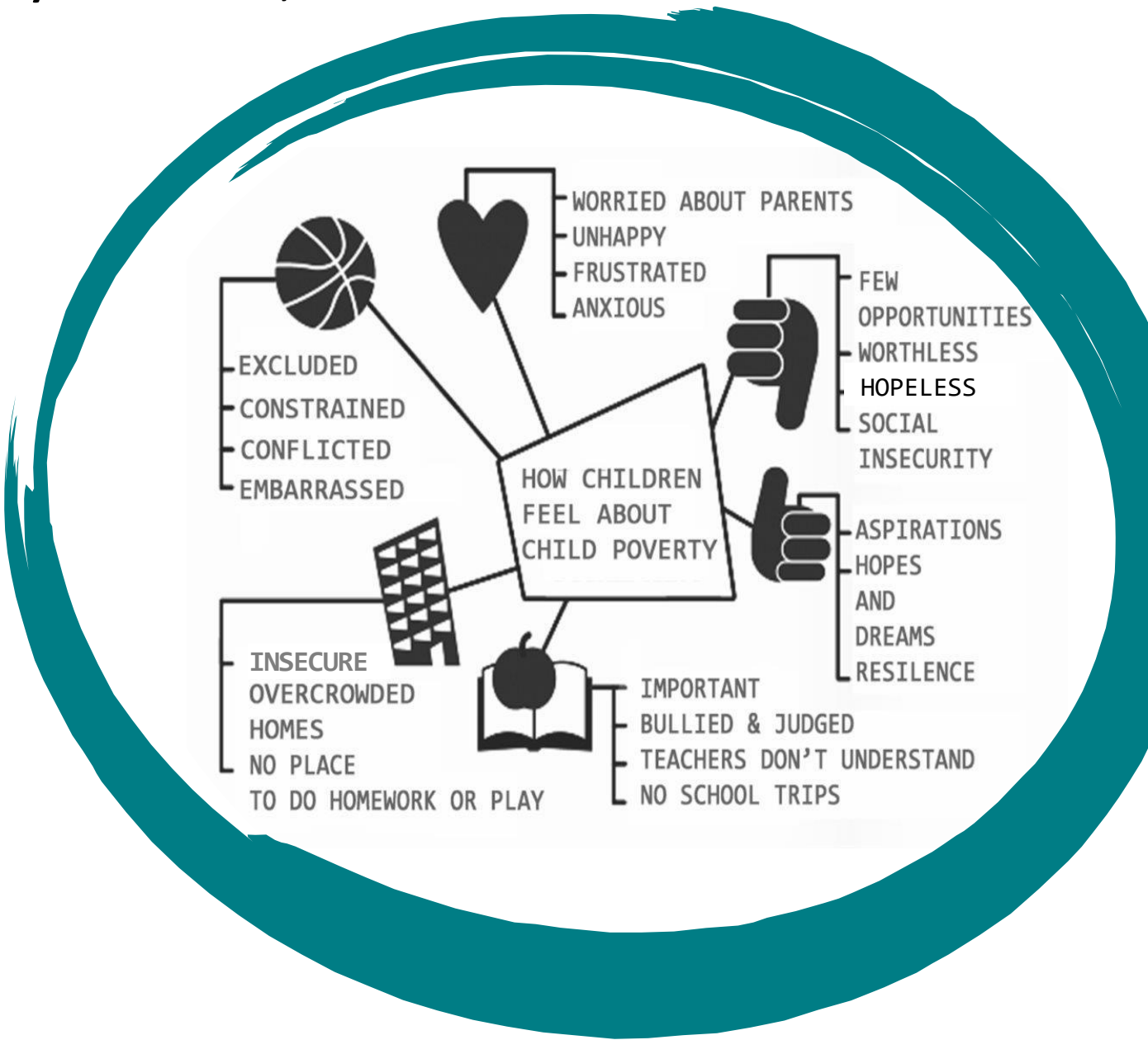


Our children deserve better ...

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



The Commissioners were:

Hannah Markham QC, Commission Chair

Cllr Jane Carr

Cllr Zoe Nolan

Cllr David Hopkins

Rev. Paul Oxley

Paul Sedgwick

Maureen Lloyd

Laura Osgathorp

Anita O' Malley

Tina Price

Jeremy Beake, Lead Officer to the Commission

Sarah Gonsalves, Corporate Leadership

We thank each and every one of those who gave their time to share information and provide evidence to the commission. To those who provided more intimate first-hand experiences of living in poverty, the commission extends their sincere thanks.

Our three challenges to child Poverty

“We want people to help us change things for our children, this means the Council and everyone else...” from a Parent from Coffee Hall

We are the Child Poverty Commission, made up of local people from Milton Keynes. We have been investigating child poverty. We reported, firstly in March 2020, that local levels were rising. Now, in this second report, we highlight what we need to do to challenge child poverty and support families.

Summary of our challenges for Milton Keynes

Parents asked for allies. They wanted ‘more than words’, a greater commitment and a voice in the decision-making process.

This requires a Child Poverty Challenge Board in Milton Keynes is established - an empowered group that includes local parents and young people, who can inspire and direct a reduction in the levels of child poverty.

1

Volunteers and project workers talked about the need for more initiatives, better resources and improved collaboration. They told us that from food projects to housing help, the quickest support comes from local groups.

This requires that children and young people’s work flourishes:

- With more new projects,
- changing the focus of existing services,
- developing existing initiatives in imaginative ways that, and
- using our 21 ideas for 2021 as inspiration.

This will require a new funding trust.

2

Local service managers reported how difficult reducing child poverty will be - structural change is necessary, building on what is already being done to meet the challenge with new collaborations that recognise the shared use of resources, the need for resilience and dynamic new partnerships.

This requires that organisations like the Council, change the way they work for children and families, using their influence, challenging child poverty and eliminating barriers. No organisation or service can do this work alone.

3

Child Poverty in MK



22,940
children in poverty
after housing costs



5 weeks
wait for Universal
Credit payments



1,600
households helped
through the Troubled
Families Programme



affording childcare
people said was their
major concern



970
children in temporary
accommodation
Nov 2020



£4.80
the cost of a return
bus journey from
central MK



3730
domestic abuse related
crimes (2019),
16% of all crimes



£220
average difference per
month between HRA
and local private rents



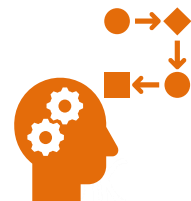
7,251
pupils known to
be eligible for free
school meals



24,000
working age people
without an NVQ 1 and
above qualification



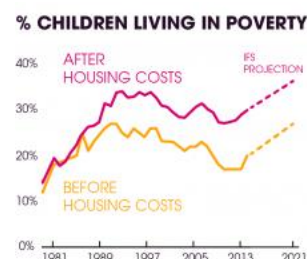
18%
of MK in the bottom
decile for housing
deprivation in England



11,055
(up 320% in a year)
September benefit
claimants

A. Child Poverty in Milton Keynes

It is difficult to grasp the scale of Child poverty in Milton Keynes - over 22,000 children are in poverty after housing cost are taken into account, which is still 10,900 children based only on income levels, 7000 qualify for free school meals (and are at risk of hunger) and 970 are in temporary accommodation. Some of these children face double disadvantage - they they have parents with poor mental health, have a disability or long-term limiting illness.



The numbers of children in poverty has continued to rise, mirroring what is happening nationally, but with two unique local features:

- in all parts of Milton Keynes, meeting housing costs is more of a struggle than it is in many other places outside of London, and
- most of these households have at least one adult working – which was particularly true before the Covid Crisis

In the months since our first report, the Covid Crisis has intensified child poverty in Milton Keynes, most notably benefits claimants have increased from 3,000 to over 11,000. We also know that this includes over 2000 '18-24-year olds' (390 in March) that have over 600 dependent children between them.

B. Children and young people are the focus

This report is addressed to the people and organisations in Milton Keynes. We must challenge child poverty together. This work is about children, children who experience barriers to their aspirations, security and well-being. However, it is often hard to help them directly, instead we must work to change their environment.

The building blocks of a good childhood haven't changed – secure relationships, a stable home and inspiring schools. Parents told us that they need help to provide these basic needs, by dismantling the barriers they face. This will mean a new commitment from businesses, community groups, families and public services across Milton Keynes to work together to challenge child poverty.

Recommendation 1. Establish a Child Poverty Challenge Partnership in Milton Keynes. An empowered group that includes local parents and young people that can inspire and direct the reduction in child poverty, build a commitment amongst all businesses, groups and services, and provide better information about the available projects and services.

C. Increasing support now

What struck people who read our first report was the scale of lost opportunities and the fragmented nature of the response. From food projects to housing help, we heard how people work tirelessly, but our approach needs a higher gear. We don't want this report to gather dust!

Councils cannot do everything. Challenging child poverty will need a myriad of small initiatives and the development of some existing ones. We need to think in a new way. To help inspire this, we present 21 ideas for 2021 – they are not exhaustive nor perfect, but things different groups can be done now. We must:

1. Rethink what we are already do; changing the purpose or aim so that we can focus on child poverty and build resilience.
2. Increase in-kind support and direct funding for small projects. This vision needs a new funding process.
3. Start with 'shovel-ready ideas', changing the way we work to have the greatest potential impact on the persistence of child poverty.

Recommendation 2. This requires that children and young people's work flourishes:

- With more new projects,
- changing the focus of existing services,
- developing existing initiatives in imaginative ways that, and
- using our 21 ideas for 2021 as inspiration.

This will require a new funding trust.

See
pages
5-6

D. Changing the narrative

Parents are frustrated that the story of child poverty seems to repeat itself. They spoke about the wonderful services, but also the way how some services placed barriers or larger burdens or even costs on families. This is not just local public services, but local businesses and national government too. One of the ways the narrative will change is if authorities commit to challenging these barriers and burdens.

Recommendation 3. This requires that organisations like the Council, change the way they work for children and families, using their influence, challenging child poverty and eliminating barriers. No organisation or service can do this work alone.

See
pages
8-16

E. What can we do now?

Challenging Child Poverty: 21 ideas for 2021

- 1. Publish a list of projects and services** that challenge child poverty this will include how to access them and how someone can be referred
- 2. Help people to know “what is out there”** through better promotion using official channels and social media
- 3. Encourage people to support a local initiative** by increasing in-kind and voluntary support to local projects and services and using the list of projects and services
- 4. Better service information to help parents** considering the high percentage of parents in Milton Keynes not born in the UK and the needs for simple explanations
- 5. Reuse ‘pre-loved’ clothes and school uniforms**, refocusing existing schemes to concentrate on supporting the costs of clothing local children
- 6. Stop the stigma of poverty** by including this into our definitions of bullying and abuse in our communities, schools and settings
- 7. Use local centres and facilities better** for in-kind donations of pre-loved items for the 0-5 age group as well as other items, such as clothing, for all age groups
- 8. More storage space for child poverty initiatives** by releasing public owned capacity to projects who are limited by storage space
- 9. Launch a Child Poverty Trust** through the Community Foundation in partnership with local agencies provide grants for small projects to tackle issues within their communities
- 10. Ensure no child is hungry**, supporting to meet basic food needs, including a commitment to providing food in school holidays to those on Free School Meals and those deemed in need



Challenging Child Poverty: 21 ideas for 2021

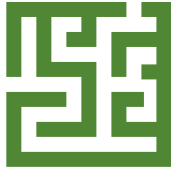
11. **Employability programmes for lone parents**, bringing together expertise from existing employability projects, focusing on those looking for support
12. **Encourage local employers to pay the Living Wage** based on the true cost of living, increasing the number of employers in Milton Keynes who are accredited living wage employers (presently 126)
13. **Deliver a holiday activities and food programme** to the most vulnerable children
14. **Ensure all children have the digital education tools they need** to aid and improve their learning building upon the government schemes
15. **Widen eligibility of support services** to families with children with a disability such as laundry services
16. **Use a credit union.** These are for everyone but need more investors to provide an alternative to payday loans or illegal money lending.
17. **Launch a deposit scheme for childcare** like the one provided for housing
18. **Change how some services operate**, routinely considering barriers such as childcare for example in mental health or other services
19. **Give parents a better voice** by asking about the barriers they face in accessing and using services
20. **Help parents access Mental Health services** by adjusting to dismantle barriers, such as childcare and needs of dependents
21. **Better 'joined up' referrals** collaboration between services, projects and voluntary groups to refer families directly and speedily to support

.... **But what about structural change?**

F. Necessary structural changes

outlined in our first report

Children & Family Wellbeing



Improved support



Access to affordable childcare



Domestic abuse reduction



A learning culture built

Plus

Due regard to child poverty in all key decisions



Financial Wellbeing



Improved benefit efficiency



More homelessness advice & prevention



Allowances and rent market match



Better regeneration & transport options

Community Wellbeing



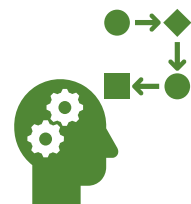
Targeted preventative services



Children Centres Extra



Health outcomes improvement



Employment practices & skills improved

Annual report



G. Service Recommendations

1. **Support, Benefits, Prevention**

“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 the loan so after bills and rent ... we don't have enough money for food and school clothes. But I make sure the kids eat.”

Parent quoted in our first report

Support

- Milton Keynes entered the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and related economic shock from a starting position of growing child poverty and low levels of financial resilience. 65% of families in the bottom income quintile had either no savings or savings below £1,500.
- The pattern of employment loss and furloughing by income suggests that the future economic consequences of COVID-19 may be borne by those on lower incomes. This in turn heightens the risks of persistent poverty without ongoing support.
- The Council's response through Foodbank Extra provided key insights into how the Council can support the third sector to meet the challenges of support.

Benefits

- Universal Credit provides people in work and on a low income or out of work with a benefit. Providing benefits to bolster people's incomes for as long as necessary should remain a priority. But there is a flaw in the government's current approach to Universal Credit that risks undermining people's resilience to poverty. The wait for Universal Credit puts at risk people's ability to cope, reassurance for renters and quick recovery for people who have lost their jobs.

Prevention

- Preventing child poverty should no longer be regarded as a side programme of the Council, but as an essential instrument to transform the lives of local children. Evidence shows that funds that help build resilience in the face of a crisis are more likely to create opportunities.
- Bringing the Council's various responses to prevention through the Social Fund and statutory funding together and refocusing this work on building resilience and investing more in this service, would strengthen families to tackle the issues they face.

1.



Support, Benefits, Prevention

<p>What is needed?</p>	<p>Over the last two decades various governments have repeatedly stated that work is the best route out of poverty. This implies that work is not the only route but is the preferred or main route in tackling child poverty.</p> <p>However, as we have noted, pre-Covid most children in poverty in Milton Keynes were in working families. A dual process therefore required; sustainable income sources must be accompanied by a strategy to help families be more resilient.</p>
<p>What services are doing?</p>	<p>The Council supported projects and people directly throughout the Covid crisis. Supporting over 1000 households a week throughout the crisis.</p> <p>The Covid-19 Strategic Recovery Framework outlines how Milton Keynes and its people can successfully recover from the impact of COVID-19, including retaining high levels of employment and reducing unemployment, and providing practical help and support to those in need</p>
<p>Recommendation 3.1</p> <p>What more could the Council and its partners do?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lobby national government – forming a broad consensus- to reduce the waiting time for universal credit from 5 weeks to 2 weeks, to ensure that changes in employment do not lead to persistent child poverty • Extend the MK Foodbank partnership to continue providing food to vulnerable people including children in poverty and those in financial difficulty • Focus the work of prevention (such as the Council’s social fund and activities under section 17 of the Children Act 1989) to build family resilience based on the principle that “providing early help is more effective in promoting the welfare of children than reacting later”.

2.



Childcare, Homelessness, Children Centres

“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.”

Parent quoted in our first report

Childcare

- High quality early education and early help services directly tackle the effects of poverty on children and families by supporting children’s development and improving educational outcomes. Also, flexible, affordable childcare provision is central to supporting parents to improve their income or accessing education and training.
- Families at risk of poverty, especially those in private rented accommodation are particularly poorly served by the childcare system. Flexible childcare is scarcer and more costly in some areas, early help services have been hit from their highs a decade ago, and a complex system of childcare subsidies and deposit requirements lead to opportunities being lost.

Homelessness

- Whilst living in temporary accommodation may not be the dystopian nightmare of popular thought, it is expensive both for the local authority and the family, and a risk factor for poverty and poor outcomes.
- Changes in approach at the Council have been successful in identifying warning signs and intervening to support people in their own homes.

Children Centres

- Poverty is not just a function of income, but families can be trapped in an emotional whirlpool - not able to be resilient and/or start employment.
- The use of Children Centres as a focus for local services for children a decade ago made a big difference to outcomes. Rebuilding this through partner agreements and/or by leveraging outside funds for projects based out of children centres would address the causes and consequences of child poverty in a more holistic manner, building resilience and addressing basic needs.

2.  **Childcare, Homelessness, Children Centres**

<p>What is needed?</p>	<p>The work of childcare, homelessness prevention and Children Centres in Milton Keynes has increased and improved in the last ten years both in quality and quantity. However, each suffers from a common challenge of delivering for all families in a sustainable way.</p> <p>Children in poverty are more likely to have two parent working families and be in any wards in Milton Keynes. Existing policies do not always consider these factors and therefore the negative effect of homelessness, lack of childcare and access to local services can be greater.</p>
<p>What services are doing?</p>	<p>Services are already:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● working with childcare providers, schools and other organisations to ensure safe, affordable childcare places ● ensuring that families that lose their home are placed in decent temporary accommodation ● delivering children centres of outstanding quality
<p>Recommendation 3.2</p> <p>What more could the Council and its partners do?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Develop a ‘Childcare plus’ project to deliver a childcare deposit scheme, increased affordable places and a greater contribution from partners such as schools and providers ● Develop an Accommodation plus project, finding ways to prevent homelessness by sustaining people in their own homes by partnering with housing providers and voluntary organisations ● Develop a ‘Children Centres plus’ project forming new partnerships and seeking outside funds to use the children centres to their best potential as centres of delivery in local areas <p>It is not a simple matter to project the effect that service improvements could have on reducing child poverty. Instead the aim should be to create a momentum in moving children out of poverty. This is best done through supplementary programmes to mainstream services.</p> <p>These specific programmes need to be focused and time specific.</p>

3.



Abuse, Rent, Health

“We didn’t have any food at home, and I had not had any breakfast today. I was really hungry”

Girl quoted in our first report

Abuse

- There is a complex and often reciprocal relationship between poverty and domestic abuse. With poverty not only the consequence of abuse, but pressures on families due to poverty often exasperates and intensifies such incidents.
- Domestic abuse has increased significantly in Milton Keynes since 2016. Research shows that a variety of factors may contribute to the poverty of women and children who have experienced domestic violence, including lack of affordable housing and barriers to employment.
- Throughout the March to May lockdown the instances of both children and domestic abuse were reported to be down, but after initial lockdown ended there was sharp increase.

Rent

- The Local Housing Allowance rate only just covers the cost of the lowest market rent for a four bedroomed house in Milton Keynes around £1200 per month. This has increased by nearly £200 in the last two years.
- The Council is both a large influence within the local housing rental market and shares the burden of the differences between local housing allowance and market rents. Changes in approach at the Council have been successful in identifying warning signs and promoting interventions to support people in their own homes.

Health

- Poor diet can be responsible for poor health and costs health services nationally an estimated £6 billion a year even before Covid-19. The post-lockdown recession will see many more families struggle to feed themselves adequately.
- The School Food Plan for government in 2013, proposed three “quick and relatively straightforward steps” to take to tackle the nutritional crisis facing the poorest children. This included an expansion of free school meals to working families and into school holidays. However, little action had occurred until the recent outcry.

3.



Abuse, Rent, Health

<p>What is needed?</p>	<p>Barriers to reducing child poverty are linked to basic human needs of safety, shelter and sustenance. In Milton Keynes we need to address:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The rising instances of domestic abuse • The gap in affordability of private rents, which are on and above the local housing allowance • Any child who does not have a proper sustenance, especially in school holidays <p>In our first report we showed that the combination of these factors was regionally unique to Milton Keynes.</p>
<p>What services are doing?</p>	<p>Services have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launched a new strategy on domestic abuse, including better partnership and referrals • Seen the local housing allowance rise, making lower level rents more affordable • Delivered school holiday meals in 2019 and 2020 to children in need
<p>Recommendation 3.3</p> <p>What more could the Council and its partners do?</p>	<p>The challenge for the council and its partners is in delivery. It may seem impossible to make adequate interventions which will change to eliminate abuse, make housing affordable and change the health of children. In these areas, the task is to change the direction of the ‘supertanker’ so that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce domestic abuse related crimes every year for the next five years as a proportion of all crimes as well the number of incidents, using 2019 figures as a benchmark • Reduce the gap between the Local Housing Allowance and the bottom quartile mark of local private market rents to zero • Improve accessibility to mental health services for parents by stipulating adjustments for childcare responsibilities within contracts • All eligible children receive school holiday meals for every holiday periods and increase their available to more children



Learning, Regeneration & Transport, Employment

“Getting somewhere is the biggest issue, wouldn’t it be great if things were local...”

Parent quoted in our first report

Learning

- We understood the need for family education includes: the need to narrow the gap between those children who experience poverty and their wider cohort and ensuring that parents have the basic skills to be able to take the opportunities of employment.
- However, the most pressing need is to build literacy in managing the resources they have. We heard of families in crisis, unable to manage and the work of centres and credit unions coaching people with personal finance basics. In order to have financial security and independence, knowledge of managing savings and spending is essential.

Regeneration & Transport

- Milton Keynes Council has had big ambitions for child poverty no more so that in its 2015 Regeneration Strategy which said: “We will tackle the root causes of poverty by improving access to employment and increasing income levels.” However, this ambition has not yet been delivered.
- Local people told us that promoting neighbourhood economies in which local shops, services and facilities are developed is fundamental to any action on poverty.
- Transport remains an issue in Milton Keynes, one which does not have any easy answers without large scale investment. Simply put the transport links between some communities and opportunities are poor and the cost of having to come to the centre is not affordable.

Employment

- In our first report we spoke of structural change, building resilience and addressing basic needs. In no place is this needed more than in the area of employment. Post Covid more than ever there will be the need to assist people with training and reskilling, with a focus on groups, like women and young parents, that find themselves at the most disadvantage.
- Sustainable employment must be more than just green companies, but the concept should include building resilient jobs with robust contracts and living wage pay levels.

4.



Learning, Regeneration & Transport, Employment

<p>What is needed?</p>	<p>Parents who can address their financial challenge and provide aspiration, support and stimulation to their children.</p> <p>Neighbourhoods and communities that offer a high level of social and cultural benefits that alleviate the material aspects of poverty and provide improved opportunities.</p> <p>Residents of Milton Keynes who meet their potential, with developed skills or can access well paid employment through responsive sustainable transport. Businesses and employers that provide sustainable jobs that pay a living wage.</p>
<p>What services are doing?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Working together to help deliver major long-term projects to create skills for the future MK economy, including a practical support scheme to help women and young people train or re-skill and find work ● Support for business rebuilding after Covid and future university for Milton Keynes. The Council has included child poverty as a priority in both its Economic Recovery Plan and its Covid Recovery Framework ● Ambitious plans for the regeneration of estates and the town of Bletchley
<p>Recommendation 3.4</p> <p>What more could the Council and its partners do?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Addressing the issues of affordable transport through new responsive schemes ● Using the leverage to promote sustainable jobs and the living wage ● Develop more domestic finance information and help ● Deliver the council’s regeneration ambitions ● An educational electronic device in the hands of every child, a commitment from schools, services and local voluntary groups to ensure every pupil over 12 has access to a Chromebook or higher.

5.



Shaping Services

towards children in material need

Shaping

- The current situation as we emerge from Covid in Milton Keynes shows a challenging picture. Recessions often falls disproportionately on the poorest and most vulnerable in society. There are none more vulnerable than children in material need.
- All services must use all the tools at their disposal leveraging, promoting and lobbying as well as taking action. It is the hope of the commission that a broad political consensus can be built when approaching national government.
- Everybody should consider what they can do immediately, what is medium term and what are longer term strategies.

<p>What is needed?</p>	<p>A council shaped towards children in material need. This means building on good practice of assessment and priorities and going further. Services will need to refocus to address child poverty more directly in their mainstream services.</p>
<p>What services are doing?</p>	<p>In setting up the Commission, the Council showed itself willing to change. Through the Covid crisis all organisations worked to meet local need and through the recovery plans we have learnt how we can reduce child poverty. The Council has also begun to have due regard to child poverty in all its functions and in all key decisions. This will ensure that small changes will alleviate issues that can widen without action.</p>
<p>Recommendation 3.5</p> <p>What more could the Council and its partners do?</p>	<p>To be more effective all services in statutory services must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All managers and services shape their work to reduce child poverty, so that the priority of child poverty reduction and alleviation is ‘breathed throughout the council’ • Publish a report for Milton Keynes every year regarding progress

Last Word from Hannah Markham Q.C. Chair of the Milton Keynes Child Poverty Commission



The task for the commission and indeed for the Council is a daunting one. Child Poverty across the Country has been increasing and the situation for one in every second child in Milton Keynes has become dire. The commissioners who came together brought a diverse and eclectic range of experiences, opinions and viewpoints, all focused at taking effective and progressive steps towards assisting the Council, business and people of Milton Keynes to come together to work to reduce Child Poverty.

The aims throughout were clear; the commission wanted to draw on what we and others have learnt since the last report and to hear from those working on the ground for their views about what best could and should be done. We heard from those directly experiencing poverty and listened to a broad range of life stories from parents and children alike. Wonderful stories of entrepreneurship shone through as did the remarkable work being undertaken at the Children's Centres throughout the Council and by the food banks and fridges. People who work 'at the coal face' assisting with benefit enquiries and help in housing, shared their views, frustrations and hopes. Taking this evidence enabled a remarkable insight into what works and what might work, looking always to the future and learning from the past.

The advent of Covid-19 served only to highlight and focus the precarious nature of the lives we live and how often so many of us could find ourselves in need of assistance. It also demonstrated how quickly partnerships could be created and new initiatives pursued. In particular, the Community Foundation is bringing to the fore some vital thinking across communities and sectors, including charity work and business links. There is however still much to be done. The businesses, residents and charities of Milton Keynes need to continue to work hard to create opportunities and to provide support. The Council has pledged their support to break the cycle and to challenge child poverty. The aims are set out in the report.

The reality is that green shoots of hope are there, tangible changes are within reach and it is the hope and aspiration of all who have worked on this report that a real change can be brought about through the aims set out in the report so that by the time of the next review it will no longer be one in every second child who lives in Poverty in Milton Keynes. Our 21 ideas for 2021 encapsulate those shoots of hope and build on the creativity, innovative thinking and resilience already in place to turn the tide and bring about a real and tangible change.

Corporate Policy & Equality

Milton Keynes Council

Civic Offices

1 Saxon Gate East

Central Milton Keynes

MK9 3EJ

Email: equalities@milton-keynes.gov.uk