



# Scrutiny Task Group on Tackling Multiple Deprivation

July 2022 – January 2023

Final report



**CHELTENHAM**  
BOROUGH COUNCIL



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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1** Following a scrutiny topic request submitted by Cllr. Willingham, co-sponsored by Cllrs. Lewis and Pineger, a task group was set up by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (O&S) to address the issue of deprivation in Cheltenham.
- 1.2** The group sought to gain a wide-ranging understanding of the direct and indirect causes of deprivation, and the areas that the council could influence to improve the situation.
- 1.3** The group was set up in February 2022, with the formal process to start after the elections in May so that new Members could put themselves forward.
- 1.4** The group was asked to report back to O&S after six months with a set of recommendations or workplan for the next year.
- 1.5** This report sets out the group's findings and the resulting recommendations, of which there are 21.

## **2. MEMBERSHIP AND TERMS OF REFERENCE**

- 2.1** The task group's members were as follows:
  - Cllr. Wendy Flynn
  - Cllr. John Payne
  - Cllr. Diggory Seacome
  - Cllr. Suzanne Williams
  - Cllr. David Willingham (Chair)
- 2.2** Cllrs. Chelin, Harman, Joy and Pineger were reserves. The group was politically balanced, with one Member from each political group in addition to Cllr. Willingham as the proposer of the initial review.
- 2.3** The broad terms of reference provided by O&S were for the task group to look to ensure that CBC's policies and service delivery were targeted at working with communities to help them address the causal factors of multiple deprivation that it could influence, and work with other stakeholders to ensure that their efforts were similarly targeted.
- 2.4** The initial topic request also made a number of more specific suggestions, namely to:
  - Identify the causes, the causes of the causes, and possibly higher differentials of causation;
  - Identify the areas that CBC can directly influence to help tackle multiple deprivation;
  - Identify the other stakeholders that have the ability to help tackle multiple deprivation;
  - Identify the outcomes that we would like to achieve, and what indicators show whether our work is having the desired effect;
  - Hold scrutiny sessions with those stakeholders to ensure that we understand their aspirations and what they are able to contribute;
  - Perform a needs assessment for each of the areas looking at any Lower

Layer Super Output Area (LSOA) that is in the most deprived quintile (20%) for any of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) domains;

- Make recommendations to Council, Cabinet, CBC representatives on outside bodies, to the LGA, the MHCLG, etc. on the resources, policies, powers and funding that are needed to help tackle multiple deprivation;
- Provide an over-arching coordination role with the various other stakeholders to ensure that organisations' local delivery in Cheltenham are all directed towards the same outcomes and objectives.

### **3. METHOD OF APPROACH**

**3.1** At the task group's induction meeting on 26<sup>th</sup> July 2022, Members completed the One Page Strategy and set out their method of approach. It was agreed that due to the breadth of the issue at hand, it would be split into five general areas with one meeting focusing on each subject, followed by a 'mopping up' session at the end to determine the final recommendations. The five broad topic areas were:

1. Community outreach
2. Health
3. Education
4. Housing
5. Economic growth and employment

**3.2** The group was supported by a wide range of officers depending on the topic area, with Richard Gibson (Head of Communities, Wellbeing and Partnerships) attending all meetings as the sponsoring officer and Harry Mayo (Democracy Officer) likewise as the facilitator.

**3.3** Each meeting sought to hear from a variety of perspectives in order to build a comprehensive picture of deprivation in Cheltenham and how it could be alleviated in both the short and long term. For example, the education meeting heard from teachers and headteachers from both primary and secondary schools, in addition to those working in adult learning and English as a second language (ESOL) training.

**3.4** These meetings took place under Chatham House rules, with attendees able to speak openly about the issues they were facing, before Members drew out possible recommendations to inform the final report in consultation with officers and attendees.

**3.5** The key questions to answer throughout were how the council and its partners reached and supported people living in deprivation, the challenges faced while doing this, and the levers that the council could pull to improve the situation.

**3.6** The task group would like to thank all the external attendees for contributing their experience and expertise, as well as the officers who assisted the scrutiny review.

### **4. FINDINGS, CONSULTATION AND FEEDBACK**

**4.1** This section is organised chronologically, with an outline of each of the five substantive meetings and their findings, to demonstrate how Members arrived at their recommendations.

**4.2** Each meeting is covered at the following points:

- Community outreach (4.3 – 4.9)

- Health (4.10 – 4.15)
- Education (4.16 – 4.24)
- Housing (4.25 – 4.31)
- Economic growth and employment (4.33 – 4.38)

### **Community outreach**

- 4.3** The first meeting took place on 31<sup>st</sup> August 2022 and concerned community outreach. Representatives from community groups and partnerships, food banks and Citizen's Advice, as well as council officers who worked closely with community partners through the Big Local and No Child Left Behind, attended to share their experiences, concerns and suggestions.
- 4.4** Attendees explained that the long-running problems they had faced for many years seemed to be on the brink of becoming insurmountable. The ongoing cost of living crisis was having an acute effect on the most vulnerable, and many people who had never struggled for money before were now in need of support, with deferral schemes being used more than ever. Figures published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that 7.2 million UK households were going without essentials, while 4.7 million were in arrears (of on average more than £1,600) and 3 million households were unable to keep their houses consistently warm.
- 4.5** Energy prices were identified as a primary cause of this. Food banks provided fuel vouchers, but were limited in terms of how many they could provide. Pre-payment meters, which shut off power as soon as someone was unable to pay, were another recurring issue. Community organisations were operating warm banks to help vulnerable people, but these did not solve the core issue. Members noted that the fuel crisis had led constituents to rely on candles, outdated gas appliances and makeshift fires for warmth, all of which carried safety risks.
- 4.6** Attendees highlighted the need to communicate with residents about all the different forms of support available to them, like fuel vouchers and benefits. The council played a valuable role as a trusted source of information and a co-ordinator of various partners and organisations, and could ensure that messaging was unified and efforts were not duplicated. Physical leaflets and online communications featuring key information on what to do during a crisis could be distributed to potentially vulnerable residents, alongside continuous and empathetic messaging about further forms of support.
- 4.7** Volunteering and peer support were highlighted as key factors, and members discussed how to encourage volunteering and support organisations that were reliant upon it. It was agreed that the pandemic had provided a valuable blueprint for how the community could come together to support the most vulnerable. Food bank representatives noted the need for consistency in donations, in particular focusing on non-perishable items.
- 4.8** School uniform was noted as a particularly difficult expense for struggling families, with full sets sometimes costing upwards of £150, and causing social stigma for children whose parents could not afford it. It was agreed that uniform swaps should be as widespread as possible, and that schools should be encouraged to relax some of their requirements, such as for PE kits.
- 4.9** Members highlighted the need for a data-driven approach to ensure the council's limited resources were targeted as effectively as possible. Social housing providers could help to build a granular picture of deprivation across the town, particularly for the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach residents. Members also noted that Tewkesbury Borough Council's financial inclusion partnership was a low-cost way to improve strategic oversight of community outreach.

## Health

- 4.10** The second meeting took place on 4<sup>th</sup> October 2022 and concerned health, and especially the question of health inequality. Representatives from the Barnwood Trust and the county council's public health team joined nurses and social prescribers to discuss the issues they were facing.
- 4.11** Attendees explained the acute effects of inequality in Cheltenham, noting that the average life expectancy for men in the most deprived decile was 8.7 years lower than for those in the least deprived decile, while the disparity for women was 6.5 years. Various factors contributed to this, including access to a GP, hypertension, air pollution, substance misuse and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).
- 4.12** The importance of preventative care in order to change behaviours and identify vulnerable people as early as possible was highlighted. Early diagnosis was crucial, but those in the most deprived areas were the most likely to miss GP appointments. Inadequate transport was cited as a key cause of this, and outreach services as a solution. It was noted that a lack of transport had a similar negative impact on mental health, as it prevented people visiting friends and family and having regular contact with social groups.
- 4.13** Members acknowledged the challenges the health service faced, with limited resources along with lengthy waiting lists and a major post-pandemic backlog. Officers advocated a multi-agency approach considering all the interlinked factors, from the accessibility of physical activities to racial inequality in healthcare access. Members noted the importance of green spaces to physical and mental health and the need for these spaces to be usable for a diverse range of activities.
- 4.14** The group discussed the difficulty in gathering reliable data on alcohol consumption when drinking at home had become much more common during the pandemic. Moderate drinking was identified as a highly normalised contributing factor to long-term health problems, in addition to more visible binge drinking. Those suffering from substance misuse or alcohol addiction were supported by Change, Grow, Live, which worked proactively with other commissioned services across the county.
- 4.15** Attendees noted the overlap between health and other topic areas that the group was due to look at, for instance when patients developed respiratory diseases due to mould or damp at home. The importance of ensuring high housing standards was clear, both in the council's own stock and in the private sector. Members also highlighted the impact of reduced dental services, especially for children, noting that dental decay had wide-ranging consequences including a loss of focus at school.

## Education

- 4.16** The third meeting took place on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2022 and concerned education, with head teachers from both primary and secondary schools and adult learning coordinators joining Members to discuss the issues they were facing.
- 4.17** Attendees highlighted the key challenges they faced at their schools, including a recent increase in the number of pupils living in poverty. Multi-factor deprivation was particularly common amongst EAL students (those learning English as an additional language) and refugees, many of whom faced barriers due to trauma as well as language. Deprivation had a clear effect on speech and language development, health and motor skills, and made young people more vulnerable to anti-social behaviour and exploitation.
- 4.18** At schools in the most deprived part of Cheltenham, as many as 91% of pupils were living in poverty, while 55% were on pupil premiums. Members highlighted the

discrepancy between these two figures, which indicated that more than a third of pupils were not receiving the level of support that they needed.

- 4.19** Teachers explained the various ways they supported vulnerable pupils, including breakfast clubs, extracurricular activities and tailored programs like My Plan and My Plan+ for those with special educational needs or disabilities. Giving students experiences outside of school was also important, although school trips had been interrupted during Covid and were difficult to deliver with limited resources. They emphasised the need for young people to have cultural and creative experiences, and the value of the subsidised tickets schools received to take them to festivals and the theatre.
- 4.20** Further difficulties faced by schools included staff recruitment, with a lack of qualified candidates in the education sector for some years now. Schools were also struggling to recruit minibus drivers, causing particular issues for students living in areas with limited public transport. External agencies, who were often the only option for specialist provision, faced similar pressures in terms of staffing and capacity.
- 4.21** As for adult learning, the key challenge was in reaching people in the most deprived communities. Scheduling classes around the school day was one solution, along with using community centres, and it was important to avoid only advertising online as not everyone had access to the internet. Well-trained and empathetic teachers were essential, with the first lesson being crucial to building up trust.
- 4.22** Attendees were in agreement about the need to keep children and young people engaged in the education system, and to take a trauma-informed approach. Building relationships and offering positive role models made a real difference, and partnerships between primary and secondary schools and programs like Shaping Futures helped to do this. Technology was also highlighted as a valuable pathway, though one that required provision of computers and internet access.
- 4.23** Nature poverty was a recurring issue in deprived areas lacking accessible green spaces, and had been intensified during the pandemic and associated lockdowns. Keeping green spaces clean increased footfall and made them safer for young people, while pocket parks provided accessible green space in areas that otherwise lacked it.
- 4.24** The question of funding again loomed large, with implications for staff recruitment, referrals to external partners, provision of technology and general support for vulnerable pupils. Members noted that the council's status as a civic leader might allow it to harness corporate social responsibility and identify businesses and other organisations seeking environmental, social and governance (ESG) benefits by supporting projects tackling these issues.

### **Housing**

- 4.25** The fourth meeting took place on 24<sup>th</sup> November 2022 and concerned housing, along with a range of related topics including housing enforcement, living environment deprivation, fuel poverty, crime, policing and antisocial behaviour. Attendees included Cheltenham Borough Homes (CBH), Citizens Advice, charity representatives and CBC housing, licensing, enforcement and safeguarding officers.
- 4.26** The group heard that homelessness due to no-fault evictions across the UK had risen by 76% between May 2021 and June 2022. Homelessness applications in total were up 20% in Cheltenham compared to 2021, primarily due to eviction from private rented properties. It was expected that national legislation regarding Section 21 notices would be rewritten, but nothing concrete had happened yet. The risk of eviction made tenants unwilling to pursue cases against substandard landlords, even

when facing issues like mould. CBH took a housing-first approach based on wraparound support with eviction only as a last resort, and there had only been two from their properties in the last year.

- 4.27** The group heard how damp and mould had been further exacerbated by high energy prices and wet weather. Mould was treated as a key priority by CBH, and they had no Category 1 (i.e. extreme) cases within their housing stock. However, there was no guarantee that private sector landlords were as diligent, so the council's Housing Act powers were key. The enforcement team had made 340 households safer through inspections throughout the year, and a borough-wide housing conditions survey was due to take place in 2023. Recruitment was again an issue, though, with implications on capacity for discretionary enforcement work. The council's partnership with Solace helped it to cope with medium- to high-level antisocial behaviour, while Safer Streets Funding had been secured via the Police and Crime Commissioner.
- 4.28** The cost of living crisis was closely linked to housing in a number of ways. Tenants who were only just getting by were not willing to pursue cases against landlords when it might leave them without a home. Tenants also had very little recourse to challenge rent increases, while the Local Housing Allowance was not unfrozen in the Autumn Statement as some had anticipated. Members advocated communication between housing providers and health services to identify individuals in poor quality housing who might be at a higher risk of respiratory conditions, and regular briefings for councillors on the associated signposting and referral routes.
- 4.29** Fuel poverty was again highlighted as a key theme, with Citizens Advice reporting that energy was now the second most common area for inquiries after benefits. Fear of energy bills was also having an impact, with some residents who could afford to heat their homes not doing so because they were afraid of the price. Time-limited vouchers and the Household Support Fund were helpful, but they only offered intermittent aid. CBH worked with tenants to maximise their income, but income levels had dropped significantly after furlough support came to an end.
- 4.30** Members discussed schemes like Donate The Rebate and Pay Warm Forward, which provided support to those in need. The Warm and Well service, co-funded by the council, had seen twice as many enquiries in September 2022 than in September 2021, while a 42% increase in the length of the average call indicated greater complexity in the challenges people were facing. Antisocial behaviour also had complex causes, including the effects of the pandemic on young people's development, and a multi-agency approach was needed to maintain effective safeguarding systems.
- 4.31** Housing insecurity had a noticeable effect on mental wellbeing, and was a key factor in structural, multi-generational deprivation. It was closely linked to unemployment: 45% of those who approached CBH as homeless were unemployed, and the unemployment rate for the most deprived decile in Cheltenham was six times higher than in the least deprived decile. Long-term solutions for this included working with people at a young age, for example with children's services at the county level, to ensure young people started school on a level playing field.

### **Employment and economic growth**

- 4.32** The fifth meeting took place on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2022 and concerned employment and economic growth, with representatives from the Business Improvement District, Chamber of Commerce, GFirst LEP and Citizens Advice, in addition to CBC Revenues & Benefits and Inward Investment officers.
- 4.33** The group heard how unemployment or being on a low income were primary contributors to multigenerational cycles of deprivation. In St Pauls ward, for example,

35% of children were living in poverty, which made them more likely to have poor physical and mental health, and in turn made them more likely to underachieve and face future difficulties in employment. The need for major developments like Golden Valley to deliver community benefits and add social value to the surrounding area was highlighted.

- 4.34** It was noted that there were currently some 20,000 job vacancies across the county, while around 8,500 people were in receipt of unemployment benefits. There was value in upskilling people in order to get them back into work, and in more effectively advertising vacancies. Employers also needed to be open to different working patterns in order to attract back people who had left the workforce during the pandemic.
- 4.35** Citizens Advice noted that many people out of work were dealing with so many different challenges that they were not prepared to enter the workforce. Mental health and access to transport were highlighted as key barriers for the long-term unemployed. People were inevitably less willing to take a low-paid part-time job if they couldn't rely on transport to get them there and back. Transport was a county council responsibility, but community transport networks and 'buddy' systems organised by employers could enable people to gain access to the workplace.
- 4.36** The rising cost of childcare was a further obstacle for those wanting to come back to work, while the out-of-hours nature of the retail and hospitality sectors made them difficult for those with caregiving responsibilities to enter. Recruitment issues were a natural consequence, and added to the perfect storm for businesses along with supply chain issues and energy costs.
- 4.37** Revenues and Benefits officers explained that the authority's council tax support scheme gave different levels of relief to some 4,000 working age residents, with around two-thirds of these receiving 100% support. The number of people on the scheme had risen by 25% during the peak of the pandemic, but had now settled down again as people found work or more hours. Officers worked closely with residents in debt to avoid having to obtain liability orders, and found that it was generally the first bill people paid due to the clear statutory enforcement process.
- 4.38** Attendees suggested that there was an opportunity to organise larger employers and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to build a focused vision for how they could support the town. The council's status as an anchor institution and its role within the BID and No Child Left Behind made it a valuable co-ordinator. It was noted that the average employment age across the county was decreasing, due to the retiree population increasing and young people moving away. A key priority was therefore to encourage young people to stay in the town for the long term, and various programs worked with schools in order to support this. Green jobs and their links to the council's pathway to Net Zero were highlighted as a valuable part of this, as young people wanted rewarding jobs that helped the planet.

## **5. RECOMMENDATIONS**

**5.1** Throughout the task group process, a large number of possible recommendations were proposed. The final recommendations below have been identified, in consultation with Members and officers, as those which are within the council's control, responsive to the issues raised and deliverable in a timely manner.

**5.2** Taking all its findings into consideration, the task group are making the following recommendations to:

- 1. Distribute accessible key information to households to ensure residents are fully aware of the support funds and benefits available to them and how**



to apply.

2. Take advantage of online and social media communication opportunities, but ensure support is not only advertised online.
3. Ensure borough councillors are fully briefed on signposting, referral and support routes throughout the cost of living crisis, through member seminars and ongoing support.
4. Consider a financial inclusion partnership (like that between Tewkesbury Borough Council and Citizens Advice) to increase strategic working.
5. Continue to provide signposting and advice to residents regarding debt management support, raise awareness of predatory lending and report any concerns to the appropriate regulatory body.
6. Provide specific advice to CBH residents about how to get support with the causes and risks of mould and damp, and ensure that reports of respiratory diseases are followed up in the council's housing stock.
7. Use Housing Act powers to pursue issues like mould and damp to the highest possible standard through enforcement in the private rented sector.
8. Tackle fuel poverty in CBH dwellings by investing in the retrofit of existing homes, continuing a fabric-first approach and delivering net zero carbon homes on council-owned land-led sites.
9. Engage with the NHS to encourage use of outreach vehicles in areas with particular difficulties in accessing healthcare, and lobby the county council and Integrated Locality Partnership to expand outreach clinics in deprived areas.
10. Strengthen partnerships and encourage data sharing between health services and housing providers, taking into account the physical health risks of poor quality housing.
11. Ensure that pollution and its impact on public health continue to inform decisions, especially within the Air Quality Management Area (AQMA), and continue to work closely with the county council on the issue of air quality.
12. Ensure that as many schools as possible are involved with No Child Left Behind, and use these links to encourage uniform share banks and clothes recycling programs.
13. Support work building digital literacy and getting young people interested in future careers in cyber and digital technology, and continue working with the Large Enterprise Action Group to link schools with businesses and digital creative pathways.
14. Work with the Communities Partnership to provide tailored support for young people in school who are at risk of being excluded, as well as those with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and other contributors to cycles of deprivation.
15. Continue to recognise the physical and mental health benefits of access to good quality open spaces, and ensure that parks and green spaces are safe and accessible for all residents to enjoy a diverse set of outdoor activities and the natural environment.

- 16. Continue to take a whole system approach to dealing with drug and alcohol addiction through Change, Grow, Live, and maintain strong links between supported housing associations, specialist support agencies and other commissioned services across the county.**
- 17. Support green skills and jobs, particularly for young people, amongst the council's partners on the pathway towards Net Zero.**
- 18. Continue supporting Solace's work on antisocial behaviour and the Community Safety Partnership's sub-group on ASB hotspots.**
- 19. Use the council's networks and partnerships to promote continued support for food banks, including lobbying supermarkets where appropriate for consistency in their donations, focusing on non-perishable items.**
- 20. Look to ensure that the dividends of major developments like Golden Valley are leveraged to deliver community benefits and social value to deprived areas around them.**
- 21. Facilitate ongoing conversations between partners across the issues raised by the Scrutiny Task Group, and use the CBC website to ensure there is clear signposting regarding these topics.**

**5.3** Further information relating to these recommendations, including the responsible officer/s, their links to the council's Corporate Plan and suggested measures of success, are attached as an appendix to this report.

## **6. FURTHER ISSUES RAISED**

**6.1** The group also highlighted a range of issues either contributing to or linked to multiple deprivation which lay outside of the borough council's control. It was agreed that these issues should not go unmentioned in the final report, even though it was not possible to determine a specific action the council could take in relation to them.

**6.2** This section of the report should not be read as a further set of recommendations, but as an acknowledgement that the interlinking factors contributing to deprivation extend far beyond the council's own sphere of influence.

**6.3** Further issues raised by the task group included:

- the nationwide crisis in teacher recruitment;
- the lack of reliable and cost-effective transport links in deprived areas;
- the impact of reduced school dental provision;
- the need to reform Section 21 notices (i.e. no-fault evictions);
- the need to increase the Local Housing Allowance;
- the rising cost of childcare;
- the provision gap between the proportion of schoolchildren on pupil premiums and the proportion living in poverty;
- the possibility of matching unemployed people with suitable job vacancies across the county;

- the need for TV providers and licensing bodies to allow customers struggling with money to cancel subscriptions more easily;
- the possibility of limiting the sale of cheap, high-alcohol drinks;
- the need for national action against predatory lending;
- the need for energy suppliers to move away from pre-payment meters and onto other options that don't immediately cut off those who can't pay;
- the need for comprehensive support for children and young people, especially in areas suffering from generational deprivation.

## **7. TAKING FORWARD THE RECOMMENDATIONS FROM SCRUTINY**

- 7.1** Further detail on the task group's recommendations is attached as an appendix to this report. This includes how they relate to the council's 2023-27 Corporate Plan, the responsible officer/s, and suggested measures of progress, if applicable.
- 7.2** If approved by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, the report and recommendations will be presented to Cabinet for consideration.
- 7.3** It is suggested that the Overview & Scrutiny Committee reviews the progress of the group's recommendations as approved by Cabinet in a year's time.
- 7.4** In the meantime, the final recommendation advocates facilitating ongoing conversations between partners across the topics raised by the Scrutiny Task Group.

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