

Wokingham Borough

**Tackling Poverty Strategy
2022-26**

1. Introduction

Wokingham Borough has consistently been one of the least deprived unitary authority areas in England¹., however, poverty has always been present and recently we've seen an increase in people and families on low incomes as well as more people facing unemployment and financial insecurity for the first time. This drop in people's financial position is primarily due to the impacts of the virus and of the conflict in the Ukraine, which have led to changes in the availability of resources, business closures and a dramatic rise in the cost of energy. This has driven an increase in the cost of even the most basic items, a trend which is expected to continue for at least a year. Without intervention this is likely to make it harder for those already in difficulties to lift themselves out of poverty and could result in a significant number of people struggling to make ends meet finding themselves in severe hardship.

People who find themselves in poverty, are more likely to face social isolation, declining physical and mental health and the rapid devaluation of any assets they own, all of which worsen their situation further. From a wider community point of view, these people are less likely to be able to make a positive contribution to the economy, to society, to the environment, or to realise their full potential. This means that what is expected to be a relatively short-term challenge to most communities, could result in people being trapped in long term poverty. It's fair to say that while we have all faced the same Covid storm these past 2 years, we have not necessarily all been in the same boat, and we want to address this.

Over the last year, we have been working closely with residents, partners in the voluntary sector and council colleagues to understand more about the inequalities that exist in the borough. We have used this information to better understand the challenge and to be clear about our ambition and how to achieve it by building on the support already offered to develop our Tackling Poverty Strategy. This aims to ensure that people struggling can access opportunities to improve their situation. In doing this, we will protect the dignity of anyone living through difficult times and ensure that they are empowered and provided with more options to help resolve their problems and return to play a full part in their community.

This isn't about quick fixes: it's about long-term changes that will make a real difference to our residents, our communities and our businesses.

Our partners across the voluntary and community sector are doing an excellent job to support those most in need and their efforts are appreciated by the council and the wider community. Through this strategy we want to continue the work that the council has been doing along with our voluntary sector partners in providing support to our residents: to drive this, we have created a Hardship Alliance with four leaders from our voluntary and community sector. This Strategy will be delivered through the Hardship Alliance with input from the wider voluntary sector. We are eager to ensure provision of support at the earliest opportunity: doing all we can to prevent people falling into, or further into, poverty and a downward spiral of events impacting on their health and wellbeing.

Wokingham Borough Council

Cllr John Halsall, Leader of the Council

Cllr Laura Blumenthal, Deputy Member for Anti-Poverty

Graham Ebers, Deputy CEO of the Council

Hardship Alliance

Amy Garstang, Wokingham United Charities

Emma Cantrell, First Days

Fiona Price, Age UK Berkshire

Jake Morrison, Citizen's Advice Wokingham

¹ Ranking least deprived in 2019 Indices of Multiple Deprivation.

2. Purpose of the Strategy

Poverty has existed for generations in society but is now increasing with more people, nationally and locally, experiencing poverty, and many of those that were previously in poverty being pushed further into debt. We are eager to ensure provision of support at the earliest opportunity doing all we can to prevent people falling into, or further into, poverty and a downward spiral of events impacting on their health and wellbeing.

The Tackling Poverty Strategy is designed to support those in poverty and help them to address the challenges they face in order that they are better placed to meet their own needs and aspirations for the future. It aims, through working in partnership, to promote an early intervention approach as part of the Council's role to prevent poverty. This will achieve better results for those in, or at risk of falling into, poverty rather than trying to resolve matters at a later stage when the solution is more complex. We will also take a longer-term focus on breaking the cycle of poverty. The strategy will help build stronger and more resilient communities, contributing to the Vision for Wokingham Borough to be a great place to live, learn, work and grow and a great place to do business², ensuring that everyone is included in the council's thinking and, where needed, supporting people to be better able to enjoy this aspiration.

The aim of the Strategy is to:

Do everything we can to prevent and work towards ending poverty in our Borough

It recognises that this is a longer-term aspiration, with many hurdles to overcome and in the life span of this 4-year strategy the intention is to:

- Lessen the short-term effects of poverty
- Prevent more people falling into poverty
- Better support our residents who are living in poverty
- Enable residents to better address the barriers to overcoming poverty

² Wokingham Borough Community Vision 2020 to 2024.

3. What is Poverty?

Everyone has their own personal idea of what is meant by poverty as there is no one specific definition. For consistency, the following definition is proposed by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) as it refers to more than just income. When referring to poverty, the most obvious element is income – but it can also include a lack of ability to source goods or access to essential services.

When a person's resources (mainly their material resources) are not sufficient to meet their minimum needs (including social participation)

Covid made clear the vital role that many people on lower incomes play within society, whether they are working in shops, providing care to others, or any of the range of other key roles: this strategy recognises and will help to address the challenges faced by people on low incomes, living in a wealthy and higher-cost area such as Wokingham.

Poverty is not just about unemployment or low income and can often be linked to reduced cashflow or shortfalls resulting in people being unable to meet their immediate outgoings, which could be because of spiraling costs due to reasons out of their control. For many, poverty in Wokingham is particularly highlighted because households affected are surrounded by areas of affluence.

There are many definitions for poverty (see Appendix 3) and these can be calculated either before or after housing costs. Clearly, in an area such as Wokingham Borough, with high value and high-cost properties, housing costs present an added challenge. For the purpose of this strategy, the focus will be on:

Relative income poverty (where households have less than 60% of contemporary median income) after housing costs (these include rent or mortgage interest, buildings insurance and water rates) and are presented after direct taxes and National Insurance, including Council Tax.

Put simply, this means that within Wokingham Borough, through the Tackling Poverty Strategy, the council and partners will be looking to target support and advice at people who feel they are struggling to pay for food, household fuel or the essentials to enable their family to live an active and healthy life.

Case Study

Child Friendly Cities & Communities is a UNICEF UK programme that works with councils to put children's rights into practice. The programme aims to create cities and communities in the UK where all children – whether they are living in care, using a children's centre, or simply visiting their local library – have a meaningful say in, and truly benefit from, the local decisions, services and spaces that shape their lives.

The overall aim for the project is for Wokingham to become a Borough where the Council along with our voluntary, public and private sector partners, and the wider community value children and young people, allow them to be children and young people, welcome them as an equal partner in developing their community, listen to what they say is important to them, and act on it. Through this programme, we want the Borough to be the best place to **be** a child or young person.

Following an initial discovery phase, actions from the UNICEF programme will feed into future years Tackling Poverty action plans.

4. National and Local Context

Around 1 in 5 people in the UK lived in poverty (2018/2019): that represents 14.5 million people living in poverty, which was before the impact of Covid-19. This is broken down into 8.2 million working-age adults, 4.2 million children and 1.9 million pension-age adults³. Of these in poverty, over half are more than 50% below the poverty line and this proportion had not changed since the millennium through to the pandemic – the full longer-term impact of the pandemic is yet to be understood. On top of this, the rapidly rising fuel and food prices are going to lead to more people struggling to heat their homes, move around the borough or to feed their families. These increases are driven by a combination of national and international events, making it almost impossible to predict the full impact at this time.

Data & Analysis

There are a number of key datasets at a national and local level which are useful in understanding the extent of poverty and the groups affected. Some of the key data to support this strategy follows. Work will continue to baseline more data at a local level to further understand the depth of poverty, groups affected and progress made over the life of the strategy.

The datasets used to inform this strategy are:

- Indices of Deprivation 2019, including the Index of Multiple Deprivation
- Unemployment figures
- Child poverty and Free School Meals
- Debt advice and related support
- Mental Health
- Homelessness and Housing

In developing this strategy, datasets held nationally, along with locally held information have been analysed to understand the local context and the challenges faced within Wokingham Borough. Full details of the data used is contained within Appendix 2, whilst an analysis of the main points taken from this is summarised here.

Data Summary

Wokingham Borough is overall, a very affluent area placed within the bottom (least deprived) 10% on the Indices of Deprivation, but when drilling down to a much more local level and looking at the Index of Multiple Deprivation, there are some areas⁴ which are much more deprived than the overall borough picture. Even these areas perform well compared to the most deprived communities nationally, but this again masks the challenges faced by a growing number of households in these areas and more widely across the Borough. It should be noted that this most recent data is from 2019 and therefore before the full impacts of Covid and the more recent cost of living increases are able to be reflected.

Looking at some of the underlying data aspects, it is clear that the employment picture is similar with Wokingham Borough overall performing better than the country as a whole. There was a spike in Universal Credit claimant rates during the peak of the pandemic, but this quickly reverted towards, but remaining higher than, the pre-pandemic position. Within this general picture those on lower incomes have fared worse and there has also been a significant impact on younger age groups. This is seen through more younger people, including graduates, either under-employed, or holding part-time rather than full-time jobs.

³ UK Poverty 2020/21: Annual Report – Joseph Rowntree Foundation

⁴ These are Lower Layer Super Output Areas which are areas of around 625 households or a population of around 1,500 (the boundary of which does not change to enable comparison): Office for National Statistics.

With the Borough having a higher rate of people employed in professional and managerial roles than either the South East or England average, there is greater resilience within the borough as a whole to bounce back. This disguises the underlying challenges faced by those who have lost their jobs and are leading to the doubling of people in receipt of Universal Credit.

The impact on families has been significant, nationally and locally, with almost one third of children nationally living in poverty: in Wokingham Borough the rate is significantly lower with under 8% in relative poverty. Alongside this, looking at the increase in Free School Meals provides a strong local measure for children in families in poverty. Since the pandemic there has been an increase of 479 children receiving Free School Meals, which is an increase of around one quarter from the pre-Covid levels: this is proportionately a higher increase than nationally. In part this increase reflects the strong position of the Borough pre-Covid, but also highlights the different impacts of the pandemic felt by a large number of families within the borough. It is expected that this number will continue to increase in the short term as more people are encouraged to sign up and therefore access the support they are entitled to.

Mental health concerns have increased for all communities during the pandemic, but there is an increased impact on those who are in financial hardship. This is particularly linked to anxiety and depression, which is heightened for those experiencing job insecurity. Overall, the levels of people with mental health concerns are comparable with the South East.

Case Study

A working family with children can easily be struggling in the borough, even when on a good salary, due to the high housing costs. A family of two adults, one working and earning £50,000, with children of primary school age are in fuel poverty with most of their income being taken up on essential expenditure. After taxes the family income is £37,640, but they pay just under average rent for their 3 bed property in Wokingham, costing them £1,900 a month and a further £1,989 for council tax and another £500 for water rates, totalling £25,289 leaving £12,351. With child benefit of £2,556 added, this leaves the family only £14,907. As fuel costs for their property have recently moved off a fixed rate, they are now paying £3,000 per year. This is 20% of the available household spend placing the family into fuel poverty, whilst leaving less than £12,000 for the family to live on. They are struggling to have both adults working due to nursery and school drop-offs and high childcare costs.

5. Understanding the Borough

To enable a focus on this complex and challenging subject and to ensure residents in the most need are targeted and gain the best results possible, initial work with the voluntary and community sector partners identified three groups of residents that are to be the focus of this strategy. In each of these groups there is an increasing number of people who will be working, but their income is becoming less able to meet their outgoings: they may also have rising levels of debt. To support these groups there will be a range of actions to prevent more people falling into poverty, ensure early intervention for those that do find themselves in this position and provide support as they are helped to get out of poverty.

The three groups are:

Persistent Hardship

These people are on low incomes claiming universal credit or other benefits and are the focus of most of the existing government support.

Just About Managing

These are people who were just getting by on their own means, although frequently they have little money left at the end of the month, and little or no savings.

Asset Rich, Cash Poor

These are people who own their own home with limited savings and their financial or property assets are not easily accessible.

Case Study

An elderly couple, living in a 4 bedroom house, income from state pension and limited savings. They are looking to planning for their future when their care needs increase, however they are increasingly worried about paying the bills, especially their heating and food bills. They are cutting back on their small luxuries and limit their monthly expenditure to ensure that they can afford the cost of living rises expected this year. As they are living in the family home and have done so for many years, they do not want to move but were living in only a couple of rooms over the winter so that they could afford the fuel bills. They are now considering whether they need a large house for the 2 of them going forward and are looking into other options including sheltered housing and extra care housing. This is a difficult decision for them to make and they want to have all the information before discussing any potential change with their family.

6. The Approach

To deliver on the aim of doing everything we can to prevent and work towards ending poverty in our Borough, activity will focus on the 3 resident groups identified whilst seeking to break the cycle of poverty. Whilst it is acknowledged that making more cash available helps residents, this isn't within the scope of this strategy.

This approach involves increasing communication and challenging stigma through working in partnership with the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) and residents to combat the initial barriers people face to overcome poverty. This will encourage access for everyone to the services and support available, whilst adopting a people-focused approach where the council works with VCS partners to better understand the experiences of residents who are living in poverty and work with them to develop the support they need to meet their needs and longer term goals. This learning and these experiences will support development of the workforce, across the council and voluntary sector, with a continued commitment to learn and grow.

Early intervention and prevention is at the heart of the strategy, so those in poverty can get support as soon as possible, whilst actions are taken to prevent others falling into poverty, or their position worsening. The partnership will continue to enable innovative solutions: develop sustainable, cross-Council and partner initiatives that can actively support anyone experiencing the long or short-term impacts of poverty. The strategy will be the catalyst that connects other Council strategies, projects and plans, supporting partnership working to ensure a whole community approach to tackling poverty that will have a positive impact on residents.

To support people in the best way possible, the council proposes to take a **No Wrong Door** approach, through which anyone seeking support via one of the avenues available can be signposted and introduced to the best place to receive the support they need. This recognises that asking for support is not easy and once someone has overcome this barrier, they shouldn't need to go through the same process again. The *No Wrong Door* approach will ensure that when someone asks for support, they aren't turned away and are guided through the support network, without the need to keep on approaching other organisations, or retelling their story. Through effective partnership working between the council, town and parish councils and the voluntary and community sector, coupled with introductions to other agencies the council and partners can work most effectively together. This will simplify access for everyone taking the first step, supporting them to receive the help they need through the organisation best placed to provide the required support as quickly as possible.

Through this approach, the three objectives of the Anti-Poverty Strategy will be delivered across the partnership.

The Three Objectives

These objectives set out how the council and partners, through the Hardship Alliance, can collectively work together and focus our effort.

Support people and help them out of poverty

Strengthen community resilience, preventing more people falling into poverty

Improve life opportunities for residents who are living in poverty

7. Wokingham's Strategic Context

Within the Borough, this Anti-Poverty Strategy fits within a wider framework that sets out the Council's key priorities and delivery mechanisms across the borough. The main strategies that the Anti-Poverty Strategy aligns with, and this strategy's contribution is summarised here.

Council Plan

In February 2020, the Council set out a vision of Wokingham Borough as "A great place to live, learn, work and grow and a great place to do business". This vision is delivered through five strategic priorities:

- Providing safe and strong communities
- Enriching Lives
- Delivering the right homes in the right places
- Keeping the Borough moving
- Enjoying a clean and green Borough

These are underpinned by two inward-focused priorities, or enablers, setting out how the council will work:

- Changing the Way We Work for You
- Being the Best We Can Be

This strategy is fundamental in delivering the vision for the Borough and has strong links with the first three of our priorities, whilst driving a change in the way the council works for and with our residents.

Health & Wellbeing Strategy

There is a close link between poverty and poor health outcomes: poverty can be a cause or consequence of poor quality of life. A person's wellbeing is directly affected by their mental and physical health. Tackling the barriers faced by those on low incomes through increasing the promotion of healthy lifestyle choices and exercise, such as by accessible cycling schemes, will increase quality of life.

The Health & Wellbeing Strategy sets out priorities:

- Reduce the difference in health between different groups of people
- Support individuals at high risk of bad health outcomes
- Help children and families during the early years of life
- Promote good mental health and wellbeing for all children and young people
- Promote good mental health and wellbeing for all adults
- Physically Active Communities

There is an integrated approach to deliver these aspects of the strategy with partners taking a lead, but addressing poverty is fundamental to delivery of all of these priorities as a way of enhancing wellbeing.

Other Strategies

The council has many other strategies that the Tackling Poverty Strategy aligns with and new strategies as they are developed will consider what they can contribute towards addressing poverty in the borough. This strategy sits alongside the Equality & Diversity Strategy as part of the Council's approach to increasing inclusion.

8. Developing the Action Plan

This strategy is underpinned by annual action plans which are developed each year to address the immediate impacts felt by residents and work to prevent more people falling into poverty whilst also moving more people out of poverty. This partnership-developed approach and action plan requires working closely with and relies on the support of the strong voluntary and community sector within the Borough.

The strategy presents short-term actions such as: communications; signposting and removing barriers; building on the one front door successes to lead into a *No Wrong Door* approach; and providing an initial response to meet immediate needs, whilst progressing through to longer-term actions working with residents using a personalised approach to address the root causes of their poverty.

The action plan will be delivered over a four-year period and refreshed each year to ensure that it remains relevant, builds on actions from the previous years and is able to develop innovative solutions to addressing challenges faced by people within the Borough. It also enables the strategy to remain nimble and pick up emerging challenges at a local, regional, national or international level which will impact on poverty and quality of life in the borough.

This approach recognises that the situation internationally and nationally will get worse in the shorter term, impacting on local efforts to prevent more people falling into poverty. Through the initial work funded by this strategy there will be increased support to help people tackle with their growing challenges.

Case Study

People moving into new social housing receive their house with no carpets, washing machine, cooker or microwave. They also may not have any of the smaller electrical items required for day-to-day living such as a kettle. The ***Make A House A Home*** project supports people who can't afford it by providing carpeting and these white goods required to live in the home they have just received: this is essential for day to day living, avoids the health benefits of people "getting by" without carpeting and therefore suffering from the dust rising through floor boards. Through providing these essential items, families are able to start living and settle into their new home without the stress of then having to trawl around charity shops or spend over £1,000 in making their house fit to live in.

9. Delivering & Funding the Strategy

The council provided a temporary Anti-Poverty Officer for up to one year to support development of the strategy and the accompanying action plan, as well as developing networks within the council and VCS as key delivery partners. Successful delivery of the Strategy will require a community-led response that includes working in partnership across the council departments, with the VCS through the Hardship Alliance and engaging with the town and parish councils.

To enable delivery of the work required, the Council committed £500k of funding to support the strategy. This funding is not about giving extra money to those in poverty, since it simply wouldn't make enough of a difference with the rapidly rising costs currently being experienced. Instead, the funding is about providing the capacity to take the tackling poverty action plan forward. Some of the main ways the Council is increasing capacity through this funding are appointments of an:

- Inclusion Officer for 2 years to focus Council work and action planning
- Part time Funding Officer to source and create funding opportunities for projects across the VCS
- Project Officer for the Hardship Alliance to lead VCS action planning and delivery
- Debt Advice worker within Citizen's Advice Wokingham to support people who are struggling
- Community Coaching support within the VCS helping people develop the skills to break out of poverty

As well as these posts, some of the funding will be used to provide training, communications & signposting to support available for people, working across the Council and through the Hardship Alliance and partners. In the short term this funding also supports continuation of the One Front Door as well as development of the No Wrong Door approach to help more people access the support they need.

The funding above will be in addition to money received from the Government to support initiatives such as the Holiday Activities and Food Programme and the Covid Local Support Grant which provides funding for meals to support children on free school meals through the holidays. These funding streams from the government have already provided £1.2m for Wokingham Borough to directly support those most in need.

It is important that grant funding can be attracted to support delivery of the strategy, enabling VCS partners to continue the work they do within local communities. This is increasingly difficult in an overall affluent borough, requiring additional staff capacity in this area, working with the VCS to leverage funding as well as accessing local and national grants.

10. Measuring Success

The strategy is supported by an action plan, which will be reviewed each year to ensure that actions are delivered, develop the next year's actions and ensure that the strategy with accompanying measures remains relevant.

Once new data becomes available following publication of the 2021 Census data, we will have a better understanding of the population, households and the challenges faced. This will enable establishment of a more reliable baseline later in 2022.

Progress towards the ambition of doing everything we can to prevent and work towards ending poverty in our Borough will be difficult to gauge in the short-term, so the performance measures will sit alongside the strategy, to enable progress to be understood. Some of the measures evidence demand, an increase in which gives the council and partners more visibility of the scale of poverty within the borough and identifies the people or families who may require further support. Accessing this support should help these people in the longer-term to move out of poverty, leading to an improvement in measures in the scorecard that contribution towards the outcome targets forming the Strategy's ultimate ambition. For this reason, the success measures look to establish an understanding of the numbers of people in poverty, the numbers seeking support and the repeatedly asking for support, as shown below.

Experiencing Poverty	Requesting Support	Improving our Approach
No of children on Free School Meals	No of people asking for help for the first time	No of trained mental health first aiders
No of people on Healthy Start Initiative	No of repeat debt clients	No of people supported by digital donations
No of people on benefits / Universal Credit	No of repeat essential item grant clients	No of people benefiting from digital skills training
No of people experiencing fuel poverty	No of Foodbank repeat referrals	No of people receiving employment support
No of people supported by the VCS	No of people provided with debt advice	No of people receiving careers guidance
No of households in relative poverty after housing costs	No of apprenticeship opportunities in the borough	No of tenancies sustained through early intervention

Outcome Measures	
Life satisfaction	Feeling life is worthwhile
Happiness	Anxiety

Success will be demonstrated through:

- a short-term increase in first time requests for support
- a continuous reduction in repeat requests for support
- a longer-term improvement in the four outcome measures

In addition to these measures, focus groups will also be held through the partners in the Hardship Alliance to get views from people in poverty around how they are feeling and the changes they are seeing. This is important information to look at alongside the data.

An annual update on delivery of the strategy and progress towards the outcomes will be published alongside each year's action plan.

Appendix 1 – High Level Action Plan

This high-level action plan sets out some of the key actions to be taken by the council and partners to support delivery of the Tackling Poverty Strategy.

The Action Plan for Year 1 is below, which will be built on in subsequent years to take forward existing actions, address challenges faced and pick up emerging opportunities. The action plan has a combination of actions from the council and VCS partners through the Hardship Alliance.

Objective 1 Support People and Help them Out of Poverty		
Priority	Year 1	Lead
Target communication, advice and guidance to ensure residents are supported and signposted to the right support available to ensure their immediate needs are met	1. Embed learning across all frontline services on how and where to signpost residents who are experiencing poverty.	Sally Watkins
	2. Develop & promote the offer available to better enable residents to access support and advice they need.	Sally Watkins
	3. Review all debt related communications to ensure the language, tone and content is signposting those that need support to the right place, at the right time in the right way.	Sally Watkins
	4. Develop a targeted communications campaign to promote take-up of support and advice that is available across the borough.	Sally Watkins
	5. Implement text / social media messaging service for key teams across the council to provide key messages to residents via their mobiles: increasing access and impact.	Sally Watkins
Work with the VCS to provide debt advice & support people to tackle their debt and to develop budgeting skills	1. Invest in a dedicated Debt Advice worker within the VCS to enable people to deal with their debt and claim support they are entitled to.	Sally Watkins
	2. Improve training and support to help people develop budgeting skills to avoid increasing debt in the future.	Sally Watkins
	3. Establish mechanisms for signposting and cross-referral between the VCS, Town / Parish Councils and debt advice to provide the support people require.	Simon Price
Develop a <i>No Wrong Door</i> initiative that ensures residents can choose how they seek support, through enhanced partnership working with the VCS groups, Town & Parishes & Council services	1. Continue support for the One Front Door initiative that helps VCS partners support people in poverty with advice and access to services.	Sally Watkins
	2. Promote Community Navigators self-referral opportunities and embed this within working practices.	Simon Price
	3. Determine how the No Wrong Door will work, as a successor to the ongoing activity driven through the VCS One Front Door, and attract funding to support the continuation of this support.	Sally Watkins

Objective 2 Strengthen Community Resilience, Preventing People Falling into Poverty		
Priority	Year 1	Lead
Provide support to people most in need, enabling them to understand and overcome their debt	1. Develop the Community Support model, working with residents to break down the fear associated with debt and provide coaching to overcome challenges and empower them.	Sally Watkins
	2. Provide joined-up support or early intervention within the VCS and clear links into the council to reduce evictions and prevent homelessness.	Simon Price
	3. Explore opportunities with the VCS, Berkshire Credit Union and debt advisors to promote saving and sustainable borrowing.	Simon Price
Enhance opportunities to work with residents who are digitally excluded to open up new ways of engaging and accessing support	1. Continue and expand the digital donations project, targeting those most in need and supported by a roll-out of the digital champions scheme.	Rhian Hayes
	2. Work in partnership with schools and VCS groups to improve digital access for people across the borough, including supporting all children to continue to learn from home.	Viki Elliott-King
	3. Extend digital skills programmes available (including those offered by adult and community learning team and VCS partners).	Rhian Hayes
Establish a range of job and training opportunities for those looking to enter employment or improve their earning potential	1. Establish an outreach model for additional employment support covering all age-groups and utilising local venues to reach out into communities.	Rhian Hayes
	2. Provide accessible careers guidance and support for all residents entering or wishing to return to work: linking in with local business to address employment gaps.	Viki Elliott-King
	3. Review procurement social value requirements to increase emphasis on provision of paid work / apprenticeship opportunities within the borough, including for people who are disadvantaged or vulnerable.	Rhian Hayes

Objective 3 Improve Life Opportunities for Residents who are living in Poverty		
Priority	Year 1	Lead
Make social and temporary housing accessible for those that need it and improve affordability of running costs	1. Develop schemes which support residents who move into Local Authority Housing, Social Housing or temporary accommodation to have their homes equipped to live in.	Simon Price
	2. Undertake a stock condition survey of the whole council housing stock to develop an energy benchmark.	Simon Price
	3. Promote installation of and support available for LED lighting, cavity wall, loft insulation, boiler controls and other ways to make the property consume less energy and to reduce energy bills.	Rhian Hayes
Revise decision making approaches to include poverty, so that decisions consider the issue and real life impacts are understood	1. Add socio-economic factors as a consideration so that those facing poverty are at the heart of decision making.	Sally Watkins
	2. Develop a programme of lobbying to encourage changes in policy or approaches to help those in, or at risk of, poverty.	Sally Watkins
	3. Review decision making approaches to include poverty, so that decisions consider the issue and real life impacts are understood.	Graham Ebers

Recognise the links between poverty and health to improve services that provide support and address the needs of residents in poverty	1. Increase health promotion of lifestyle choices around nutrition, healthy eating and exercise that support people on low incomes.	Ingrid Slade
	2. Review opportunities for making the sports, arts and cultural offer more accessible to those on lower incomes within the borough.	Rhian Hayes
	3. Promote the mental and physical health benefits of walking, cycling, green spaces, Wokingham Bikathon, Cycle Hubs as affordable ways of getting exercise.	Ingrid Slade

Appendix 2 – Data for the Strategy

Key Datasets

A number of key datasets were used in developing this strategy, drawing data together from both national and local sources. The data from these and key points for each is summarised below. The timing for the data varies, with some not yet being available to fully understand the impact of Covid.

The one additional dataset which is missing is that from the Census since this data is so far out of date to make it meaningless and the newest data will not be available for several months. When the 2021 Census data becomes available, this will feed into the next annual review of the strategy.

Indices of Deprivation 2019

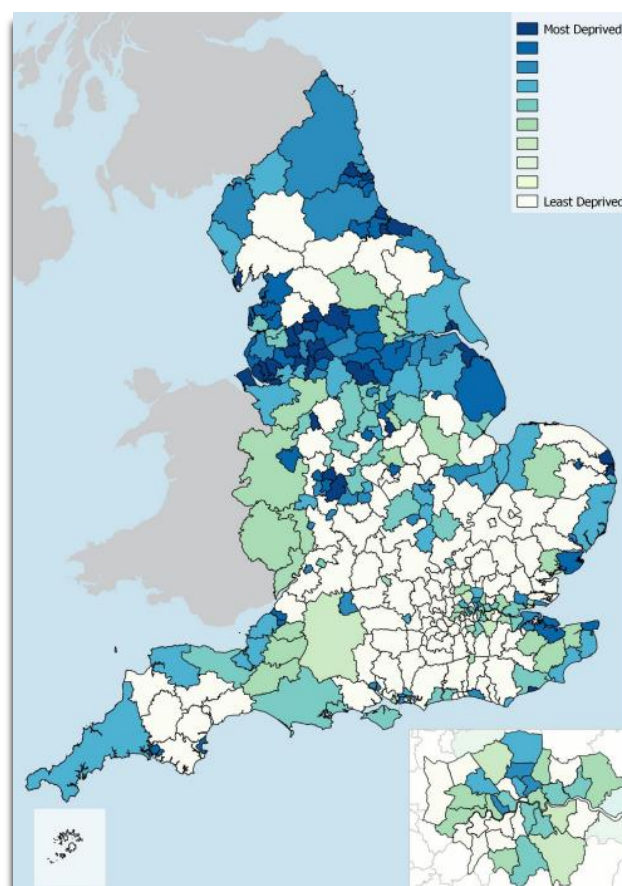
The Indices of Deprivation are a unique measure of relative deprivation at a small local area level (Lower-layer Super Output Areas) which represent a small part of a ward: often being only a few streets. Data on these has been produced by Office for National Statistics since 2000. The Indices of Deprivation 2019 (IoD 2019) is the most recent release. The Indices provide a set of relative measures of deprivation for small areas across England, based on seven different domains, or facets, of deprivation:

- Income Deprivation
- Employment Deprivation
- Education, Skills and Training Deprivation
- Health Deprivation and Disability
- Crime
- Barriers to Housing and Services
- Living Environment Deprivation

At the national level, the index paints a useful picture of the distribution of poverty across England. The map⁵ shows a picture, at a given point in time, of the levels of deprivation experienced in each local authority across England.

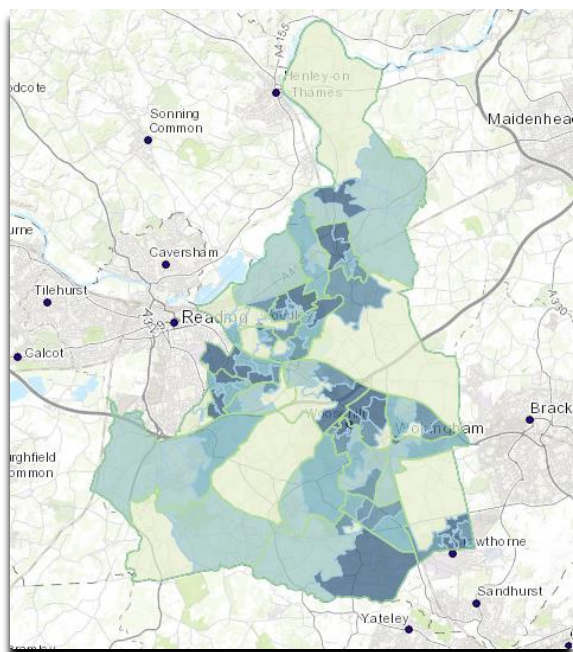
The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) also allows us to look at a more local level. The below map shows the relative levels of deprivation across the Borough. As at the national level, locally we can see pockets of more deprived areas and we can identify our 5 most deprived wards as:

- Wokingham Without
- Norreys
- Loddon
- Finchamstead South
- Bulmershe and Whitegates



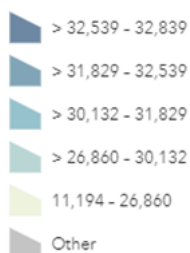
The map also clearly shows that whilst there are pockets of deprivation, deprivation isn't restricted to these areas and shows that whilst local targeted solutions are important, they must be supported with more wide-reaching approaches to ensure everyone has the support they need.

⁵ Office for National Statistics: Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019 – Distribution by local authority based on proportion of neighbourhoods in the most deprived decile nationally.



LSOA

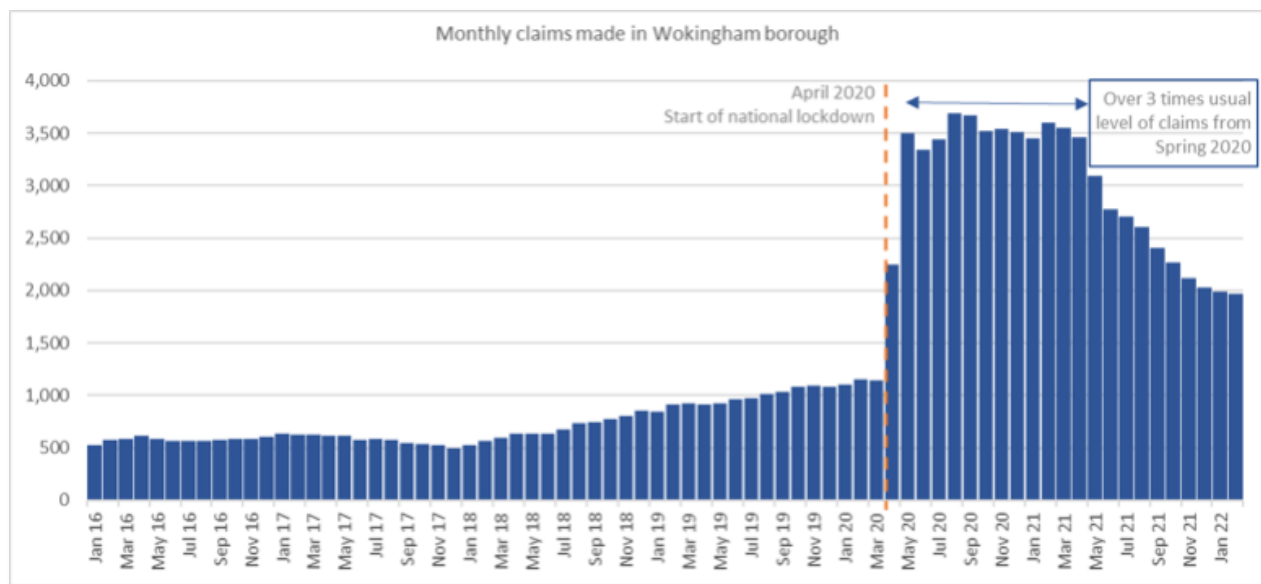
Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)
Rank|2019



Wokingham's Lower Super Output Area Deprivation 2019 Rankings⁶

Unemployment & Low Income

As the latest UK figures for number of claims for Universal Credit show, unemployment has been a big challenge over the lockdown period, despite furlough. However, it is worth noting that the number of claimants continues to fall following the increase during Covid, but this remains significantly higher than pre-Covid levels.

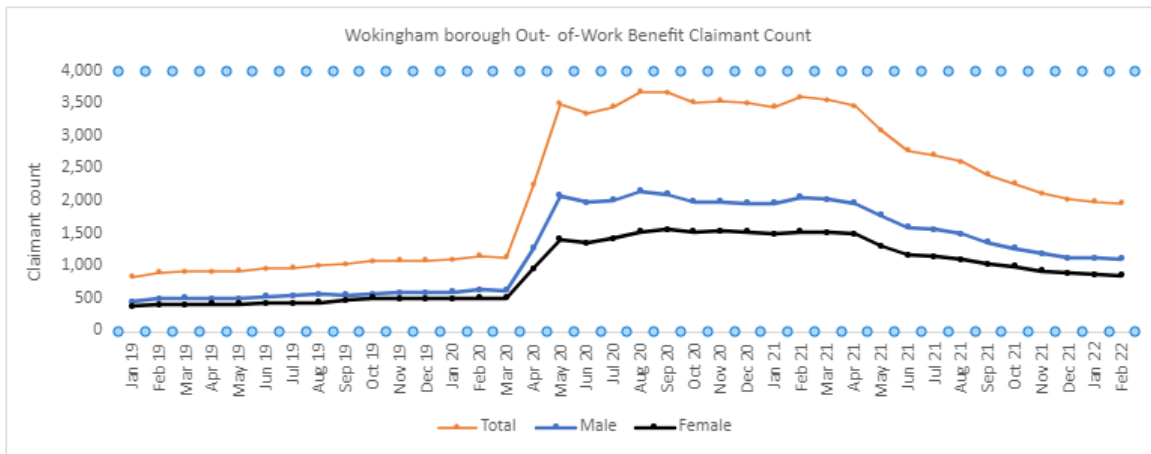
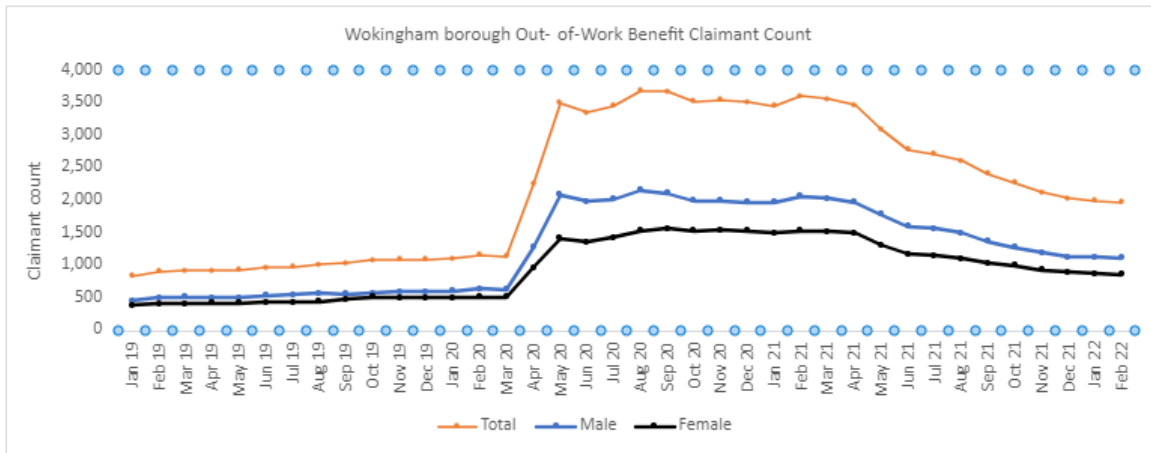


Universal Credit Claims made monthly January 2016 to January 2022

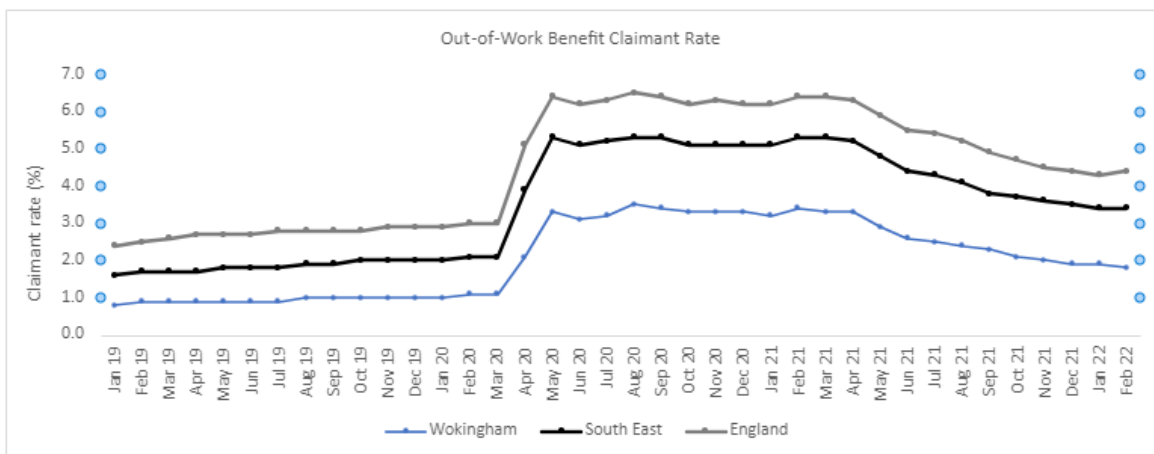
Poverty significantly impacts on those who are working, as well as those who are not working. In 2018/19, 51% of working-age adults in workless families were in poverty, compared with 15% of those in working families: this relationship is changing with increased living costs growing at a faster rate than either wage or benefits increases. The full impact of this is not yet seen through the data.

⁶ Indices of multiple deprivation 2019 by LSOA taken from the Berkshire Public Health's data observatory.

The graph⁷ below shows the claimant count of universal credit since January 2019 to February 2022 for the Borough in total and split by gender. We see a similar uptick in the level of universal credit and job seekers allowance claims, with a slow but gradual decline in levels from a peak around February.



Placing those levels into context the below graph shows the claim rates for Wokingham Borough, the South East and England as a percentage of the population of each area.



Whilst this graph suggests the situation in the Borough is much better than in the country more widely the total figures are still significant. Claimant rates in the borough peaked at 3,685 residents in August 2020 reducing to 1,965 in February 2022 (a reduction of 53%): this is made up of 1,110 males and 855 females. Citizen's Advice Wokingham data supports this, showing that Universal Credit and Tax Credits were the most popular

⁷ Universal Credit and Job Seekers Allowance claimants - for persons aged 16 and over in Wokingham by month. Data from the ONS via the Berkshire data observatory

queries with growing numbers seeking support in this area each year⁸. Pre-pandemic claimant levels hovered around 1,000 people. The current trend continues to show reducing claimant numbers though uncertainty regarding the full impact of increased household and fuel costs outstripping wage increase remains, seeing many more households struggling and unable to meet costs which would enable them to sustain employment.

Impact on Younger People

The number of 16–17-year-olds who were Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) at the end of February 2022 was 66 (representing 1.7% of the population). This is an improvement on the previous two years but is still 45% higher than pre-pandemic figures.

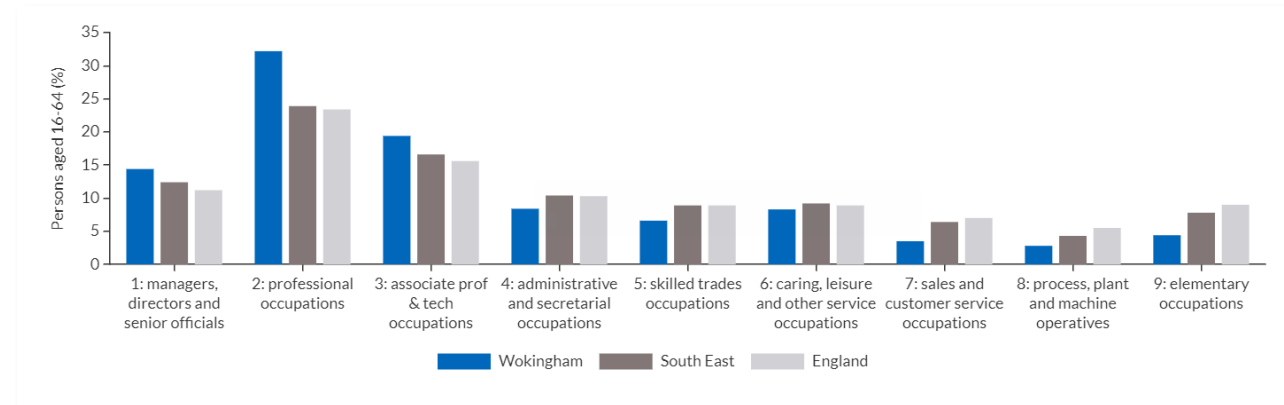
The percentage of young people who are long term NEET (6 months or more) is increasing and at the end of February was 29%. The number of young people with SEND who were NEET at the end of February was 41 (representing 14.7% of those with SEND). This figure has remained relatively consistent for the previous 3 years and is only 6% higher than pre-pandemic figures.

Further analysis of these numbers also shows that there is an increase in the number of people who are in employment having part-time roles.

Impact on the Economy

Following the pandemic, the economy has recovered beyond expectation at the national level, with the impact of the cost of living crisis, including rising energy bills and interest rates yet to be seen.

Locally our jobs market is skewed towards high skilled professional, managerial and technical occupations⁹. Whilst this means a high level of average earnings and prosperity because those roles are well paid, the absence of entry level and more vocational level jobs may prove a blocker to accessing employment for more long term unemployed or for young people with lower educational outcomes.

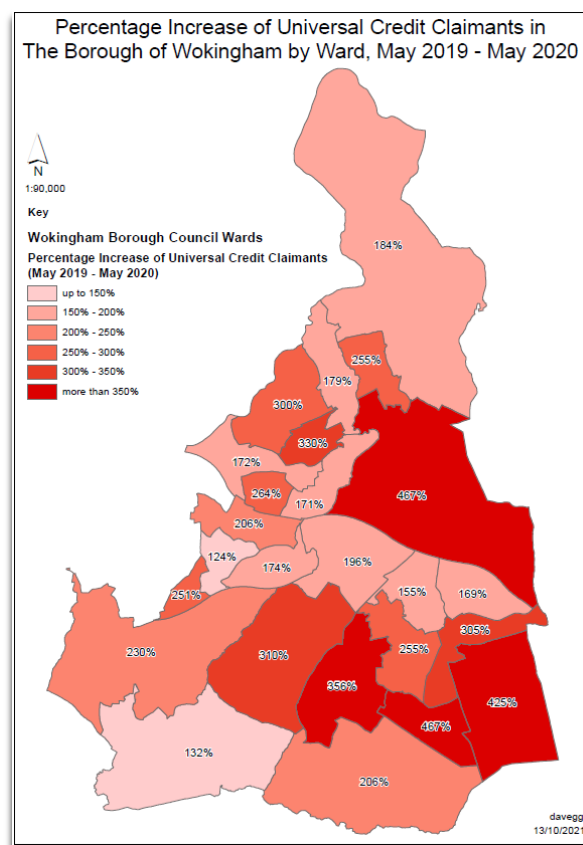


⁸ Citizen's Advice Wokingham – Local Authority Data Dashboard

⁹ Occupation type from the ONS Annual Population Survey 2022

Some of these opportunities may, however, be available in the wider Berkshire employment market. The same data for Reading and Bracknell Forest shows that they have 7.3% and 8.1% of jobs in elementary occupations compared to just 4.4% for Wokingham Borough.¹⁰ Whilst some areas of mass employment are near our areas in most need this does not always mean they are easily accessible. A trip from Wokingham Without to Doncastle Road in Bracknell's Western Industrial area is only a few miles and 10 minutes in the car. Using a combination of foot and public transport however it can take close to an hour. Enabling routes into employment, be it skills development, economic development in the borough or providing communication routes that allow residents access to jobs outside the borough is an important aspect to improving employment and earning potential for residents: particularly those living in more deprived areas.

Analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows that for people to stand still financially they need to see annual pay increases of around 7%¹¹. This is not realistic for most people, which is likely to see more people becoming less financially secure and some of these starting to lead to an increase in Universal Credit claimants from in-work but low-pay households.

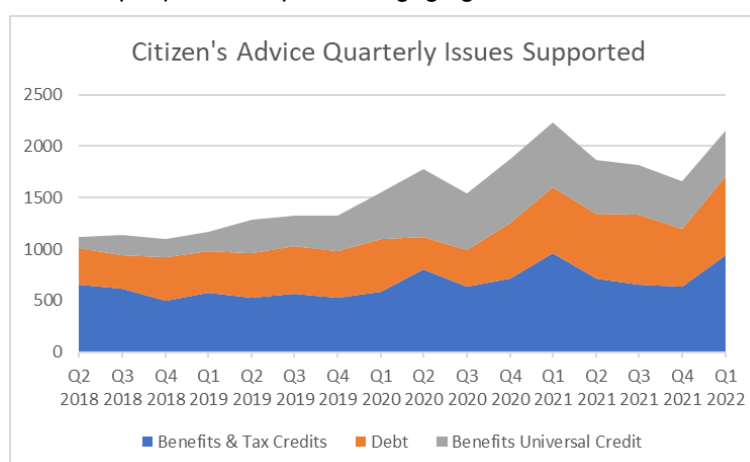


Benefits & Debt Concerns

Local data from Citizen's Advice Wokingham¹², as shown in the graph, demonstrates an increase in the number of issues being raised with them by their clients around debt and benefits related work.

Whilst this has fallen from its peak, it is still significantly higher than pre-Covid levels and the last quarter has shown a marked increase. This represents over 700 people each quarter engaging with Citizen's Advice for support on these issues, with each client having an average of 2.8 issues to deal with. A further 50 people are seeking similar support through Age UK Berkshire each quarter.

It is predicted that nationally a further 1.3 million people¹³ will fall into absolute poverty this year, representing an additional 2% of the population. This will bring the numbers in absolute poverty before housing costs up from 8.77 million to just over 10 million, with an increase from 11.1 million after housing costs to around 12.5 million people.



¹⁰ Thames Valley Berkshire: Skills Priority Statement, 2020.

¹¹ Institute of Fiscal Studies: Analysis of Government Fiscal Events 2021.

¹² Citizen's Advice Wokingham – Local Authority Data Dashboard

¹³ Jubilee Debt Campaign, March 2022.

Child Poverty

In 2021, there were 2.92 million children (aged 0 to 19) in families in relative low income families and 2.37 million in absolute low income families across the United Kingdom, with 81% of these children aged under 16. There is a stark difference across the country ranging from 3% to 42% across local authorities for relative low income families and from 3% to 39% for absolute low income families at March 2021¹⁴.

Locally, this data from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) shows that 6.3% of families in Wokingham Borough are in absolute low income (compared to 15.1% nationally) and 7.6% in relative low income (18.7% nationally). This is a much better position than the national and regional figures. To put this into context, in 2021 in Wokingham Borough 2,344 children were in absolute low income families and 2,814 families in relative low income families.

When combining this DWP data on children in low income families to take into account housing costs, the data demonstrates much higher rates of child poverty within Wokingham borough¹⁵. This demonstrates that there has been little change in the rate of children in poverty over the previous five years, but the lag in production of this data means that the 12.5% increase in the DWP data above from 2019/20 to 2020/21 is yet to be reflected within the data. Given that housing costs have increased at a higher rate than wages or benefits, there is likely to be a further increase in the percentage of children living in households in poverty. This

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Number	5,064	5,342	5,473	5,467	5,621	5,390
%	15.3%	16.0%	16.0%	15.8%	16.0%	14.8%

evidences the need for further promotion of Free School Meal take-up.

Free School Meals

In January 2021, 1.74 million pupils nationally were eligible for free school meals: this is, 20.8% of all pupils, being an increase of nearly 300,000 pupils since January 2020, when 1.44 million (17.3%) pupils were eligible for free school meals. The number of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) was already increasing prior to the pandemic and is predicted to continue to rise with the current cost of living increases.

Although the number of children eligible from FSM in the Borough is considerably lower than the national average this is 2,117 pupils (8.9% as at October 2021), living in the borough and at our local schools eligible for support. However, as the cost of living increases, it is expected these will continue to rise significantly in line with increased need.

This represents an increase of 578 young people from January 2020 through to October 2021. Whilst some of this increase can be accounted for by an overall growth in school pupils, the percentage of those receiving free school meals has increased by almost 30% (likely to be in line with national growth, which showed an increase of 13% to October 2020, although Wokingham Borough started from a lower significantly level).

In Wokingham Borough in 2019, only 28% of children receiving Free School Meals obtained English and Maths GCSE at grade 5 or above, which is lower than the national average, compared to 58% of children who do not receive Free School Meals¹⁶. Poverty is having a huge impact on the future of these children.

¹⁴ Children in Low Income Families: Local Area Statistics FY ending 2021 – DWP

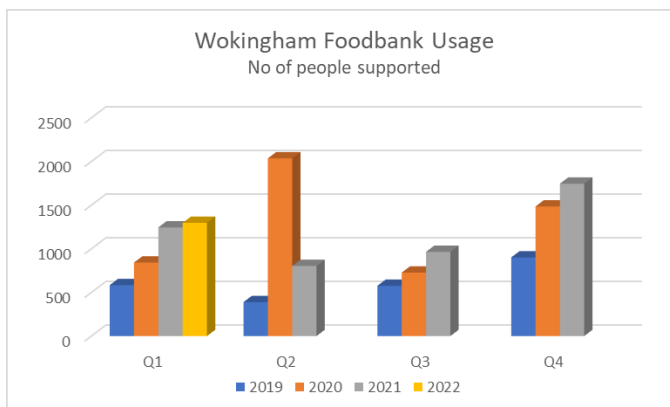
¹⁵ Households Below Average Income (HBAI) Data – Centre for Research in Social Policy

¹⁶ First Days – Annual Report 2020/21

Food Poverty

An area which has seen a significant increase in profile, particularly since the start of the pandemic, is food poverty and the normalisation of Foodbanks within society. Most areas saw a number of new foodbanks pop up in response to need at the first lockdown, with many continuing beyond the lockdowns and throughout Covid-19 with their focus no longer on supporting people on furlough or who had lost their jobs, but helping families meet their wider food needs. Wokingham has a number of similar food operations, with reporting here focussing on Wokingham Foodbank. This demonstrates a year-on-year increase in most quarters, with the number of people supported in both 2020 and 2021 being around double the number from 2019, despite the existence of more food banks in the borough.

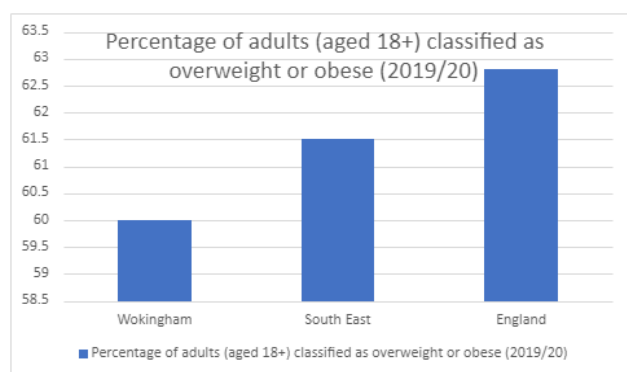
For many people, the use of food banks is becoming an aspect of the households weekly budgeting and is now an essential aspect of getting by. The support provided by foodbanks, as well as enabling signposting to other services for advice and support, also enables households to be better able to meet other essential costs such as rent, council tax and heating.



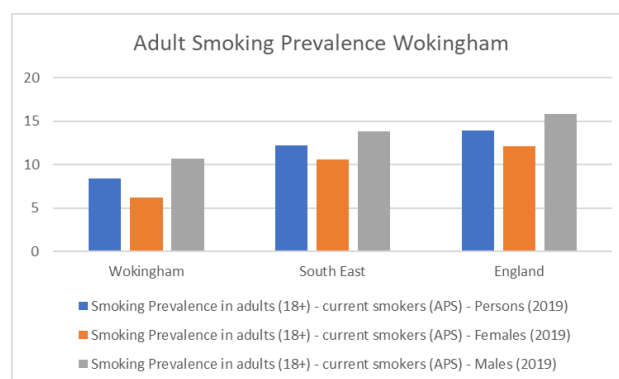
Health

The relationship between poverty and health is a complicated one and does not run only one way. Not only does poverty affect the health of those living in it, but poor health can also lead to poverty. The impacts of poverty on physical and mental health are lifelong and can be seen in higher rates of morbidity, obesity, smoking, high blood pressure, respiratory illness, anxiety and depression. Covid has only widened these disparities

Wokingham has one of the healthiest populations in the country with life expectancy at 85.5 years for men and 82.4 years for women: this is above the national average for both genders. Rates for obesity and smoking are also below the national average.¹⁷



Public Health England, 2019/20 – Active Lives survey, Sport England



Annual Population Survey (APS), 2019

There is a causal link between poverty and mental health¹⁸, with the 20% least well-off people in the UK being at least twice as likely to develop mental ill health than the richest 20% of the population. In trying to further

¹⁷ <https://wokingham.berkshireobservatory.co.uk/health-and-social-care>

¹⁸ The Mental Health Foundation.

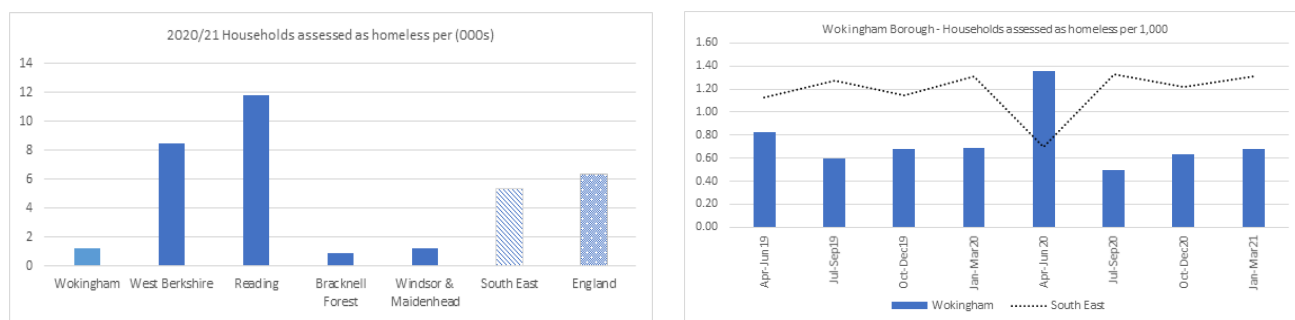
understand the impact of Covid-19 on mental health, 58% of people living in a household receiving benefits were regarded as currently having poor or very poor mental health¹⁹.

The estimated prevalence of mental health disorders²⁰ in Wokingham Borough is lower (11.6%) in comparison to England (16.9%) and the Southeast region of England (14.8%). Applied to local population estimates this would be just over 15,000 residents but this is likely to be an underestimate of the true prevalence²¹.

This need translates through to increased demand for local services. The recently launched Wokingham Wellbeing Service supporting people referred by GP living with mental health issues) has received 50 referrals between April – June 2021, in the first quarter of the service, rising 112 referrals between July – September and continuing growth to 131 referrals between October – December 2021, demonstrating a growth in the underlying need in our community.

Homelessness

Wokingham Borough has one of the lowest levels of Homelessness in the South East, as shown in Graph 1. Covid has impacted on this situation with around 1 in every 1,000 households in the Borough declared homeless, reaching a peak of 1.17 per 1,000 in April-July 2020, demonstrated in Graph 2. This represents around 100 households in the borough being declared homeless.

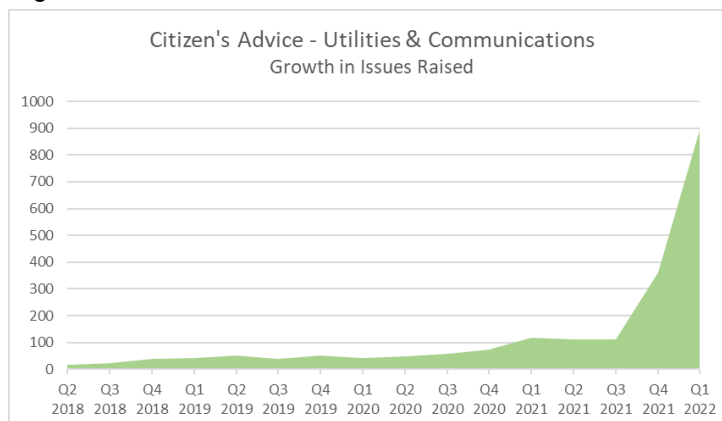


Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities

There are around 45 to 50 people in temporary accommodation at a given point in time and an average of around 5 people rough sleeping each month. 45% of people approaching the council are successfully prevented from becoming homeless.

Fuel Poverty

Data for this is old and taken from a snapshot produced by the Office for National Statistics in 2018 which does not form part of their regular data collection programme. It shows that at that time 4,046 households in Wokingham borough were in fuel poverty. This represents 7.1% of households in the borough, comparing favourably to a national average of 11.4%. Clearly this will have changed a lot when the impact of recent fuel price increases, on the back of Covid related challenges, is able to be captured: this worsening picture is currently expected to continue through to 2024 with rapidly increasing numbers being pushed into fuel poverty.



¹⁹ MIND - The Consequences of Coronavirus for Mental Health

²⁰ Common Mental Health Disorders e.g. depression, anxiety, etc

²¹ OHID, 2022

The continually rising fuel price rises globally will push significantly more people into fuel poverty, but the extent of this increase is currently unknown. Data from Citizen's Advice²² shows that 85% of people nationally don't think that the energy rebate will make a significant difference in their ability to pay their energy bill. Nationally, 5% of people are worried about their ability to pay the rising fuel costs before the price cap increase in April, even after cutting back on other essentials: in Wokingham borough this figure is marginally better at 3%, with 6% concerned following April increases and 14% concerned by October when the energy price cap will rise again.

Data in the chart above from issues raised with Citizens Advice Wokingham²³ shows a rapid increase in utility related concerns, with this rising from being one of the smaller areas of need (consistently coming in around 15th on the list of issues raised with Citizen's Advice prior to 2022) to become the area with most issues raised by people over the last six month.

²² Citizen's Advice – Cost of Living Action Pack, March 2022

²³ Citizen's Advice Wokingham – Local Authority Dashboard

Appendix 3 – Definitions of Poverty

This strategy draws on the work of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in understanding, defining and measuring poverty: recognising that poverty is a complex problem that needs a range of measures each telling different things.

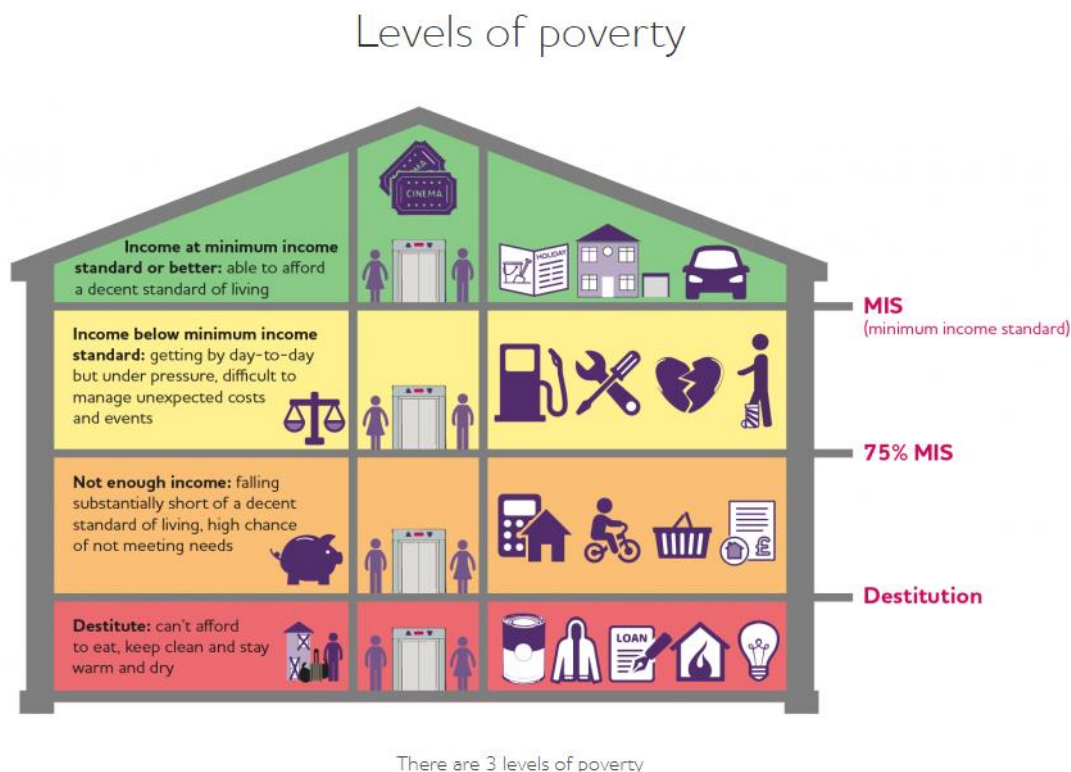
Measures include:

- JRF's Minimum Income Standard (MIS) – MIS itself is not a measure of poverty, but is what the public has said is sufficient income to afford a minimum acceptable standard of living
- Relative income poverty, where households have less than 60% of contemporary median income
- Absolute income poverty, where households have less than 60% of the median income in 2010/11, uprated by inflation
- Material deprivation, where individuals / households can't afford certain essential items and activities.
- Destitution, where individuals / households can't afford basics such as shelter, heating and clothing.

Relative and absolute poverty can be presented before and after housing costs (these include rent or mortgage interest, buildings insurance and water rates) and are presented after direct taxes and National Insurance, including Council Tax.

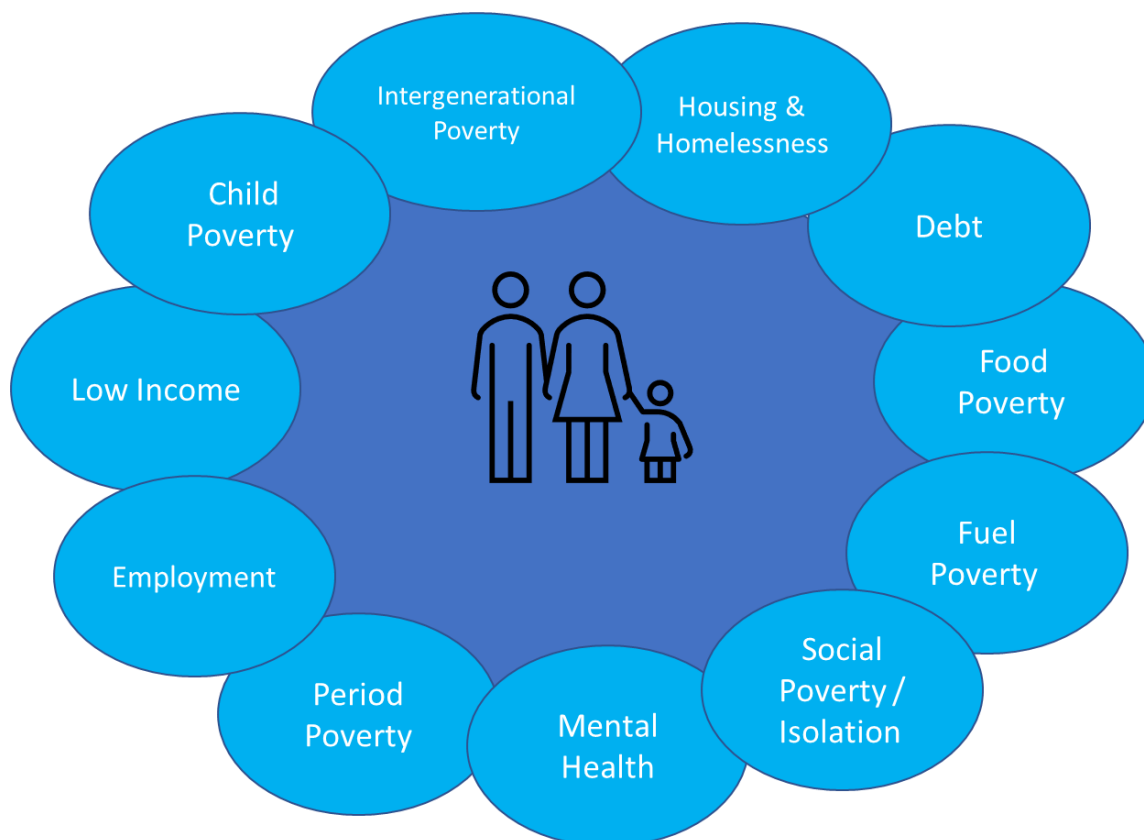
For the purpose of this strategy, the focus is on relative poverty after housing costs are taken into consideration.

JRF present these levels of poverty diagrammatically as below²⁴. This shows that both relative and absolute poverty levels (at 60% of average income) are below the Minimum Income Standard that the public have said is sufficient (set at 75% of average income):



Appendix 4 – Key Aspects of Poverty

In the council, our person-centric approach identifies 11 key aspects affecting poverty, one or more of which may impact on people facing poverty within the Borough. Many people in entrenched poverty will be affected by several, if not all, of these aspects.



These aspects have been identified from an analysis of research by JRF and others into poverty brought up to date to give increased prominence to aspects such as food and fuel poverty which have increased in visibility since the start of the pandemic.

There is also an emergence of other poverty aspects being picked up, with bed poverty and phone poverty also being addressed by some areas. Whilst there is work underway around support with providing beds within the borough, which is picked up as an aspect of the Make a House a Home actions, neither of these areas are specific areas of focus within the current strategy and action plan focus on. Any increase in concern for these areas can be picked up in future action plans as we maintain a nimble approach to respond to emerging need, whilst recognising the need to focus effort to have the greatest benefit for our community.