



Hardship Commission **Stoke-on-Trent** Initial Report

2015

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Summary of Initial Report

Assessment

- Stoke is defined as the 16th most deprived city in England, with 34% of working people living in households with incomes on or below the threshold of poverty and a further 16% in search of work or limited through incapacity - yet poverty-related hardship is not perceived to be its focus.
- There is no shortage of statistics on every aspect of the population. However, there is a lack of understanding of the depth, extent and culture of poverty, and therefore on how best to address it.
- There is no over-arching strategy aimed at poverty. Instead, there is a multiple array of initiatives and organisations working to address aspects of poverty - sometimes in collaboration with others and sometimes in competition - with the commissioning and funding process not that effective.
- It appears that this lack of understanding of and focus on poverty is due in part to a perceived negative attitude towards poverty and criticism of those in it, and in part to the belief that if the emphasis is put on growing the economy, then poverty will be addressed.
- Alleviating poverty and economic regeneration is heavily dependent on increasing the income of all, and those experiencing poverty in particular.
- Alongside growing the economy there needs to be a well planned and co-ordinated strategy, focused on helping those in poverty cope with it and helping them to succeed out of it.
- This is what the Hardship Commission's recommendations are based on. It does not try to address all aspects of hardship and all aspects that can contribute to poverty. It is very focused on those aspects that can help to improve income.



Recommendations

Attitude

The Commission to:

- Promote a caring, empathic and supportive attitude and culture towards those in poverty and disadvantaged.
- Emphasise that poverty is not a choice but a consequence.

Understanding

- The Commission will continue to champion and hold to account the awareness and understanding of and actions on poverty-related hardship.

Organisation and Networking

The Commission to promote strong strategic direction and action on key causes of poverty-related hardship based on:

- Organisations across the city collaborating around clear overall long-term strategies, with shared objectives.
- Better co-ordinated, incentivised efforts and funding.
- Commitment to the implementation of strategies and actions.

Cost of Living and Benefits

- Financial Inclusion Group (FIG) to lead on advising the Hardship Commission on minimising cost and maximising income.
- FIG partners and commissioners to commit to developing actions to maximise the take up of benefits.
- FIG partners to prioritise and promote advice, support and education on benefits, money advice and financial capability building.
- FIG partners to simplify, improve and localise the provision of benefits and money advice.
- The Hardship Commission to promote benefit take up, co-ordinate working and monitor impact of local policies.

Education, Training and Skills (ETS)

A Stoke-on-Trent dedicated ETS group to work in conjunction with the business-led group to:

- Define a targeted population of unemployed and low paid on benefits.
- Assess its education, training and skill needs with respect to the job market and orchestrate its provision.
- Monitor programmes and their success.
- Promote effective programmes of career advice in schools and colleges, supported by the involvement of the business world.

Work and Earnings

A Work and Earning Group to:

- Define a targeted population of unemployed and low paid on benefits.
- Target support for this unemployed and underpaid working population.
- Research barriers, incentives and mechanisms to help employers support and take on the unemployed.
- Encourage business development and locality regeneration targeted to the local population needs and ensure local employment from public sector investment projects.
- Lead on better wages and contracts of work.

- Campaign on living wage and apprenticeships plus better mechanisms of labour flexibility to help minimise the abuse of zero-hour contracts.
- Promote the need for business to support community actions, the benefits to be gained, and demonstrate the success in doing so, including involvement in schools and career development support.

Housing and Security

The council and partners to:

- Strengthen its emphasis on social housing, affordable new builds, empty properties and to campaign against the right to buy housing association properties.

Association Properties

Housing Associations to:

- Review housing allocation policies.
- Enforce standards in the private sector and re-provisioning of social housing to meet occupancy levels.
- Support vulnerable people to obtain and remain in their homes.
- Support the Safer City Partnership with respect to domestic abuse and interpersonal and community violence.

1. Introduction

According to the English Indices of Deprivation 2010, Stoke-on-Trent is the 16th most deprived area in England out of 326 districts. Over 30% of the resident population (approximately 75,000 people) live in areas classified in the 10% most deprived in England and almost one in six (nearly 39,000 residents) live in areas in the 5% most deprived. By contrast, only one in six live in areas classified as 'better than average'.

In terms of employment deprivation, the city is the sixth most deprived, and in terms of education, skills and training, the fourth most deprived.

Latest measures of both child and fuel poverty indicate that levels are, in general, one-and-a-half times the national average.

A report from the National Money Advice Service shows that more than 68,000 people in the city are over indebted, representing over 35% of the adult population.

While the official measures of poverty and deprivation provide an overview of the economic health of Stoke-on-Trent, they cannot provide the detailed understanding of the depth and extent of poverty-related hardship, and therefore the basis on which to determine the most effective actions to address it. To better understand both the nature and reasons for poverty, the city council established the independent Hardship Commission in 2014 to study and report on poverty-related hardship within the city boundaries and identify actions which could be taken by the council and wider public, private and voluntary sector organisations.



2. The Commission

The Commission is made up of a cross section of organisations and services that have an involvement with, or influence on, poverty-related hardship. Those represented are:

- Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)
- NHS Primary Care
- Public health
- Job Centre Plus
- Staffordshire Police
- Chamber of Commerce
- Education
- Stoke-on-Trent City Council
- Brighter Futures
- YMCA
- Saltbox
- Changes Health & Wellbeing
- Aspire
- Financial Inclusion Group
- The voluntary sector
- Businesses
- Individuals
- The Commission also heard from a number of specialists on specific topics.

The names of those who represented these organisations and contributed to this report are listed under Acknowledgements at the end of the report.

3. Commission's Aims

To minimise poverty and its impact and to strengthen the support for those who suffer it.

While the aims are fundamental to a humane and caring society, the approach needed to address poverty-related hardship is also a basis for strengthening the wellbeing and economy of the city. Stoke-on-Trent is like most other cities in that it suffers a degree of poverty within its population, which needs to be tackled in a determined and progressive manner. The actions that need to be taken will help address some of the acute economic issues while demonstrating that the wellbeing of its population, especially those most disadvantaged, is at the heart of its policies.

Due to the complexity and the difficulty in addressing such a sensitive and challenging issue, the outcome of the Commission's work could not be simple fix solutions, but a number of recommendations that deal with the fundamentals of financially-related poverty.

“What is the point? The Commission is wasting its time, nothing will ever change”

Comment



4. Approach

To work towards achieving its aims, the Commission has sought to:

- Understand the depth and extent of poverty in Stoke-on-Trent.
- Identify and assess the effectiveness of the existing means addressing poverty.
- Endorse and support those means that are effective, and research recommendations for strengthening and developing others.

These were addressed in a four-step approach.

1. Develop and validate the key background statistics defining poverty in Stoke-on-Trent.
2. Define, quantify and understand the profile of poverty in terms of:
 - Relative and absolute poverty.
 - Income levels below which poverty-related hardship is suffered.
 - Causes and impact of poverty-related hardship.
 - The number of families and individuals suffering poverty-related hardship in Stoke-on-Trent.

3. Carry out a programme of involvement and research to understand poverty via local workshops, structured interviews and literature reviews.

4. Assessment and Recommendations. To:
 - Assess the existing approach to, and means of, addressing poverty.
 - Research and make recommendations that will endorse, strengthen and improve the means of addressing poverty.

The Commission concluded an initial report in July 2015 on its findings and recommendations.

**“
What makes you think
anyone will take notice
of the Commission?
”**

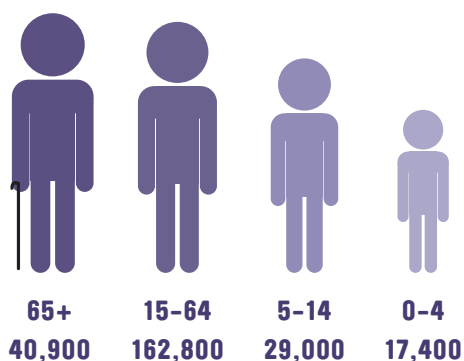
Comment



4.1. Statistics Defining Stoke-on-Trent

The statistics defining Stoke-on-Trent were mainly obtained from official sources within the council and are considered the most current at the time this report was concluded. While the Commission appreciates the difficulties in obtaining precise and accurate information and statistics on such a complex and difficult issue as poverty, it does however consider what it has obtained to be sufficient in providing a good understanding of the complex and difficult issues relating to poverty hardship in the city. The changes announced in the Government's summer budget have not been included.

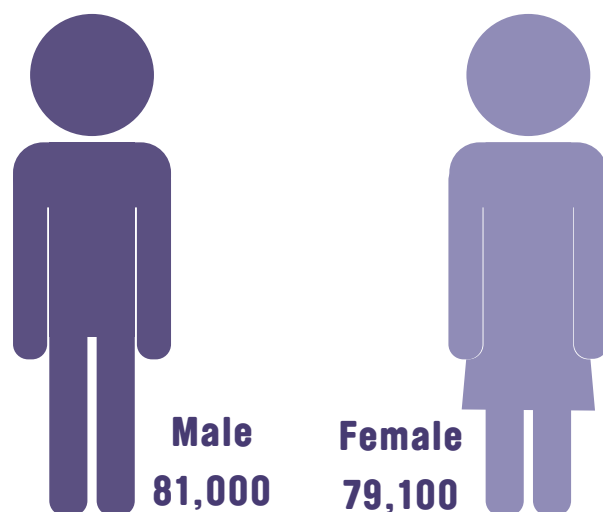
Total population - 250,100



• Economically Active	119,500
• Employed population	109,600
• Employees	98,100
• Self employed	11,500
• Unemployed	9,000

• Economically Inactive Aged 16-64	40,500
• Students	10,700
• Looking after family/home	11,600
• Long-term sick	10,300
• Retired	5,100
• Other	2,800
• Wanting a job	4,200

Working age population - 160,100

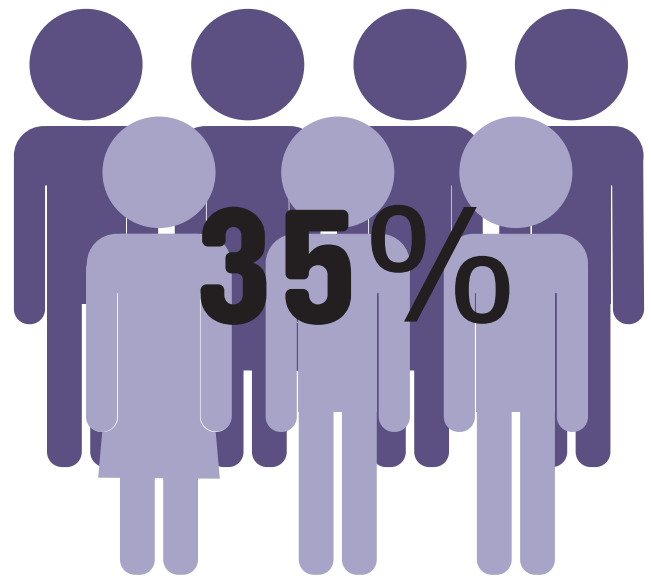


• Total Employment in Stoke-on-Trent	109,600
• Managers, directors	7,500
• Professionals	14,100
• Professional and technical staff	11,700
• Admin and secretarial staff	10,900
• Skilled trades	15,700
• Caring and leisure services	14,300
• Sales and customer services	8,100
• Plant and machine operators	9,700
• Unskilled occupations	17,600

• Do Not Want a Job	36,200
• Not incapacitated or limited	19,500
• Limited disability	10,700
• Major disability	6,000

• Total Jobs in Stoke-on-Trent	121,000
• Self employed	11,800
• Employed	109,200
• Manufacturing	14,400
• Construction	4,900
• Wholesale/retail/motor	20,800
• Transport storage	5,700
• Accommodation/food	4,500
• Communications and information	2,500
• Financial and business services	13,700
• Public administration, education and health	35,100
• Others	7,600
• Full-time (67.5%)	73,700
• Part-time (32.5%)	35,500

• Enterprises in Stoke-on-Trent	5,220
• Micro (0 - 9 employees)	4,345
• Small (10 - 49)	710
• Medium (50 - 249)	135
• Large (250+)	30



employed population on less than £7.65 / hour

- **Mean household income £27,000/year in Stoke-on-Trent compared to £36,000/year in the UK**
- **Median household income £21,000/year in Stoke-on-Trent compared to £28,000/year in the UK**
- **Indebtedness**
- Over indebted 68,398
 - Of whom are:
 - owner occupiers 48%
 - In full-time employment 41%
 - In part-time employment 17%
 - Under the age of 45 75%
 - Lack the skills and confidence to deal with creditors 41%

• Qualifications

	Individuals	%STO	%GB
• NVQ4/above	33,600	21.3	36.0
• NVQ3/above	67,900	43.0	56.7
• NVQ2/above	94,900	60.1	73.3
• NVQ1/above	113,500	71.9	85.0
• Others	14,100	8.9	6.2
• None	30,300	19.2	8.8

• Households total

	107,575
• Owned outright	30,628
• Owned with mortgage/loan	33,300
• Shared ownership	419
• Social rented by council	19,712
• Social rented	6,287
• Private rented	15,440
• Living rent free	1,789
• Single households total	35,532
• Single parents	13,068
• New houses built per year	300
• Vacant houses total	4,402
• Housing waiting list	6,500
• Homeless	440

• Ethnicity and Migration

• Born outside UK	20,700
• Ethnic minority	33,800
• English not main language	14,000
• International migration between 2001 -2011	+12,700
• Net domestic migration/year	-1,000

• Benefits

• Total welfare expenditure £408million (excludes state pension, Working Tax Credits and Child Benefits)	
• Total on out-of-work benefit	28,870
• Job seekers	3,480
• ESA and Incapacity Benefits	16,620
• Gender-related out-of-work benefits:	
• Females	14,740
• Males	14,130
• Claimants on:	
• One benefit	19,510
• Two or more benefits	9,360
• Duration of benefit claims:	
• 5 or more years	13,330
• 2 - 5 years	5,010
• 1 - 2 years	3,220
• 6 - 12 months	2,460
• 0 - 6 months	4,850
• Claimants with varying number of dependent children	
• Unknown number	17,500
• No children	4,740
• One child	2,940
• Two children	1,920
• Three children	1,080
• Four or more children	690
• Age distribution of claimants	
• 25 or younger	3,810
• 25 - 34	5,710
• 35 - 44	5,570
• 45 - 54	6,930
• 55 - 59	3,700
• 60 - 64	3,150

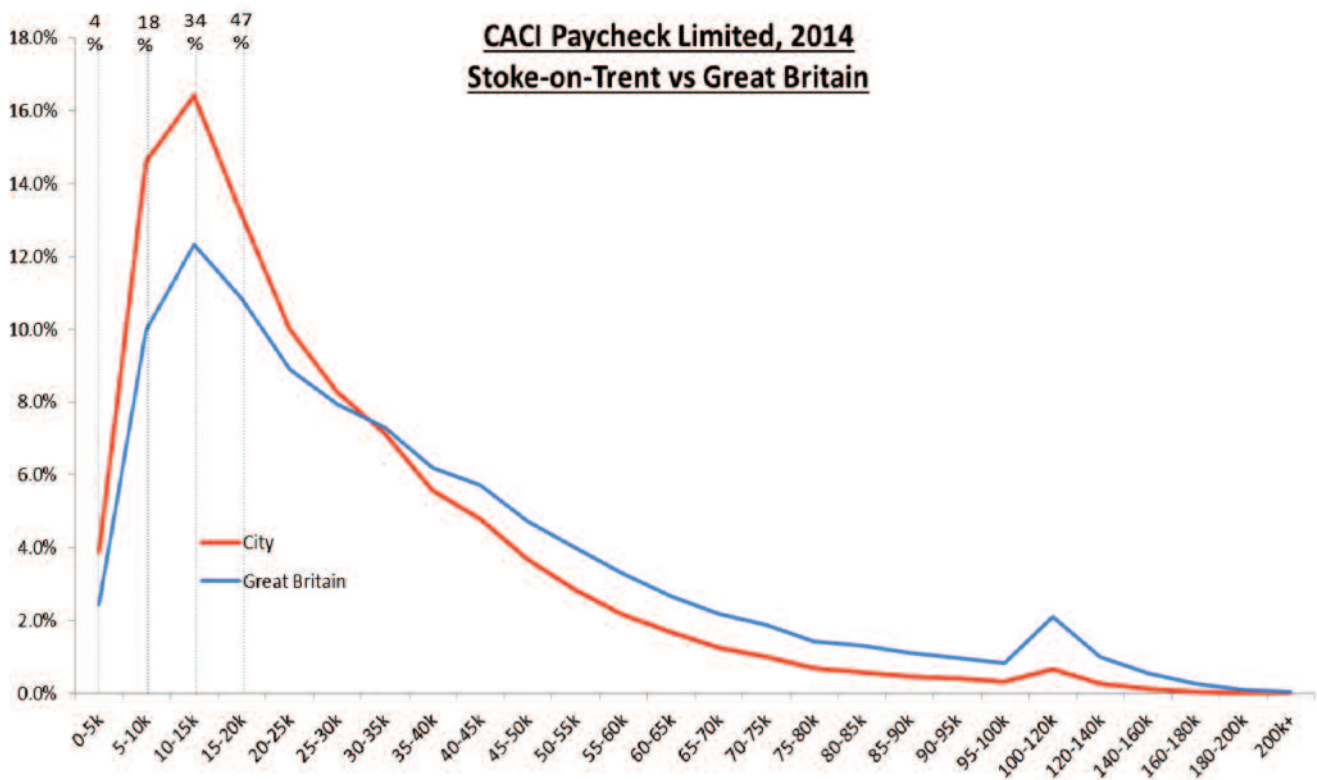
4.2. Defining and Quantifying Poverty

The statistics defining Stoke-on-Trent highlight the vulnerability of the city in terms of poverty-related hardship. However in order to establish its scope, the Commission needed to clarify how poverty and its impact are normally referred to, and how it applies to Stoke-on Trent.

There are two ways of defining poverty: Relative poverty and absolute poverty.

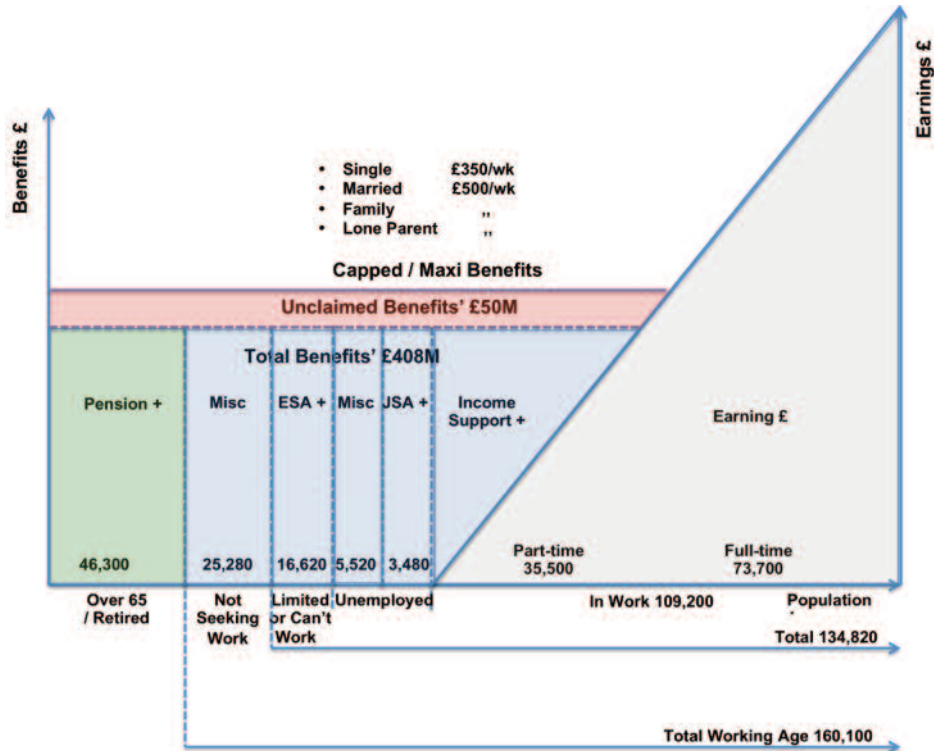
- In Britain the official definition is a relative measure defined as living on a total income below 60% of the median income (£21,000), which in Stoke-on-Trent is £12,600 p/a or £242 per week.

- Absolute poverty is not having enough to live on, with people making decisions such as whether to heat or eat.
- The question of how much money is the minimum needed to just exist varies considerably as it depends on the size of the household, where someone lives, in what type of accommodation and to the individual's basic needs. Therefore, the only reasonably reliable indicator of poverty that is generally accepted is that of relative poverty. In Stoke-on-Trent, this equates to £242 per week.
- In this study, only income-related hardship is considered, as there are other forms of hardship not due to poverty



- The distribution of incomes as a percentage of the working age population on the previous page shows the high percentage of low paid jobs and the degree of relative poverty.
- The graph indicates that 38% (or approximately 60,500) of all households in Stoke-on-Trent live on less than £16,000 per year – the minimum amount required to access basic goods and services in Britain.
- A significant number of people in the city rely on welfare benefits exclusively. The rate at which these benefits are paid varies very significantly.
- The analysis of hardship in terms of depth and breadth in the table below shows a high number of households in varying degrees of hardship due to the combination of the degree of debt and level of income.
- Due to the difficulty in quantifying poverty-related hardship under one criterion, the following schematic diagram may help show this in a working age population of 160,100 and retired population of 46,300, in terms of earnings through work, and income through benefits and pensions, for the different categories of population.
- While official statistics are not easy to interpret precisely, they do provide an indication of groups at the greatest risk of experiencing hardship in the city.

Income Category [Households – % of income group]	1. Chronic Hardship	2. Broad Hardship	3. Deep Hardship	4. General Hardship	5. Potential Hardship	1-5 Chronic to Potential
£20,000 - £25,000		1,228		21	5,017	6,266
		3.6%		0.15	14.9%	18.6%
£15,000 - £20,000	574	5,727		1,387	6,729	14,417
	3.0%	29.6%		7.2%	34.8%	74.5%
Less than £15,000	567	114	393	1,338	1,750	4,162
	13.0%	2.6%	9.0%	30.7%	40.2%	95.5%
City Total	1,141	7,069	393	2,746	13,566	24,915
	1.0%	6.0%	0.3%	2.3%	11.5%	7.8%



These can be categorised as shown below.

- In work but household income of below £16,000 (from Joseph Rowntree Foundation) means people have to make decisions between basic goods and services. These households tend to:
 - Be in low paid work.
 - Struggle to secure sufficient hours in work and may be on a zero-hour contract.
 - Have experienced a reduction in welfare benefits over last 2 years.
 - Experience difficulties accessing benefits due to insecure employment.
 - have no formal qualifications
- Working age people who are unemployed and actively seeking work.

These individuals may:

- Find that their skills and experience do not match the employment opportunities available
- Engage in undeclared work.
- Find that out of work benefits do not meet their basic needs.
- Incapable of or limited working capability due to health reasons.
- Not seeking work due to:
 - Being in full-time education
 - Looking after home and family.
 - Other.
- Over 65, working or retired but do not have an income of sufficient level to access basic goods and services.

The actions related to some of these categories that will be described later come under two major emphases:

Helping to cope with poverty and helping to succeed out of poverty

Causes and Impact:

The factors that influence and cause poverty-related hardship are numerous and subject to a great deal of debate. For this reason, the Commission has avoided trying to make a comprehensive list, especially since all individuals are not affected in the same way. However, a list of examples below demonstrates the sort of factors and influences that could lead to poverty hardship, and which have helped the Commission in its understanding of this complex and difficult issue:

- Lack of example or aspiration when growing up.
- Deprived childhood (child poverty in Stoke-on-Trent is 28% of the population).
- Language and cultural differences and difficulties.
- Inequality and prejudice within society.
- Lack of capital and finance to make best use of earnings and purchases.
- Lack of income - earnings and/or benefits
- Low income and under-employment due to poor quality of jobs.
- Poor housing and environment conditions.
- Lack of adequate transport for access to work and support.

- Lack of any or right jobs.
- Physical and/or mental disability and incapacity.
- Old age and pension level.
- Lack of effective career guidance and support.
- Lack of education and qualifications.

The impact of poverty-related hardship can again be very varied and considerable, leading, for example, to:

- A very stressful home and family environment.
- Feeling trapped with limited success and support choices.
- A condition of just coping with existence.
- Desperation and loss of hope.
- Loneliness and rejection.
- No confidence and self esteem.
- Debt and financial difficulties causing entrapment in poverty.
- Fuel and food poverty (15% of population in fuel poverty - 15 food bank centres).
- Poor health (physical/mental).
- Insecurity and fear.
- Violence and crime.

4.3. Research and Understanding

4.3.1. Local Workshops

Organisations involved with poverty-related hardship were invited to attend half-day workshops, the purpose of which was to share views and understanding on:

- Poverty in Stoke-on-Trent.
- How poverty is addressed.
- What can be endorsed, encouraged, improved or done differently.

Agenda and Structure

- An overview presentation on poverty in Stoke-on-Trent in terms of poverty definitions, depth, extent, causes, failings and impact.
- Understanding the existing means for addressing poverty - what exists, what works, what doesn't, what aggravates or frustrates.
- What can be endorsed, encouraged, improved and done differently, to minimise poverty and its impact, and strengthen the support for those who suffer it.

The workshops, as with the structured interviews below, helped considerably in developing and reinforcing the understanding of poverty-related hardship in Stoke-on-Trent, how it is addressed and what may help strengthen this.

4.3.2. Interviews and Literature Review

A qualitative study was carried out to enable the Hardship Commission to understand the needs of people in poverty-related hardship, with a view to informing action to prevent and mitigate the impact of hardship on local people. This was also supported by a literature review. The study was outsourced, with the provider responsible for the following:

- Carrying out a literature review based on agreed research questions.
- Identifying groups who experienced the most hardship in the city and those at increasing risk of severe hardship.
- Engaging specified target groups for consultation.
- Gaining insight from the target group.
- Producing a report on the key findings from the consultation and detailed recommendations, as to how hardship affects people's lives and how they can be supported to reduce these impacts and move out of hardship over time.

The study raised questions, highlighted issues and helped confirm certain understandings. It acted as one of various inputs to the Commission's report and helped towards providing a stronger overview on the complex subject of poverty-related hardship.

4.4. Assessment and Recommendations

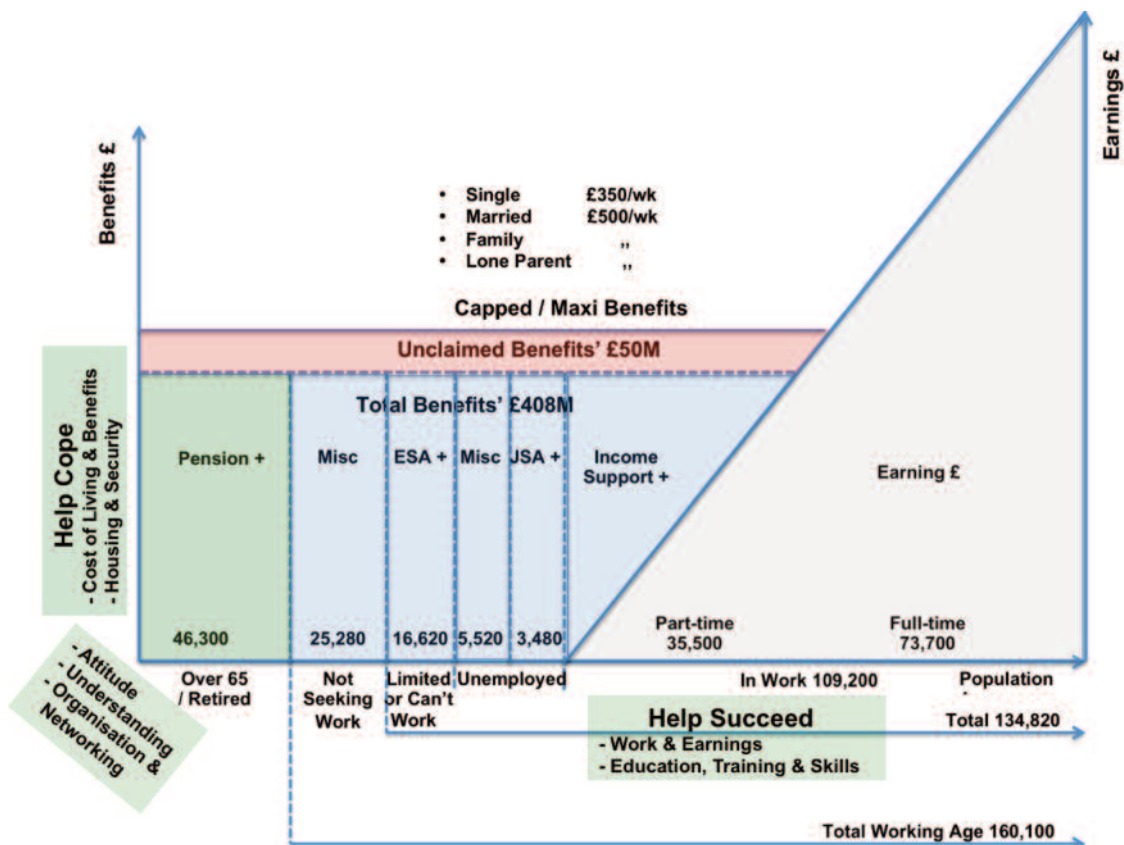
In order to address poverty, the Commission felt it was important to try to understand the existing approaches to poverty across the city, identifying strengths and successes as well as the difficulties and shortcomings. This was done via questions, observations and considerations under a number of headings which evolved with time, and which helped to focus the work of the Commission. These headings eventually became the areas for recommendations - helping to cope with poverty and helping to succeed out of it.

4.4.1. Understanding Poverty

Assessment

Understanding poverty-related hardship in Stoke-on-Trent is fundamental to how it is and needs to be addressed in terms of:

- The extent and depth of poverty in Stoke-on-Trent
- The experiences of those in poverty.
- The impact of poverty on different groups of people including children, young people, those employed and unemployed, the old, the disabled, those who can and those who cannot help themselves.



- The impact of poverty on the economy and perception of Stoke-on-Trent internally and externally.
- The benefits to be gained by tackling causes of poverty as well as the symptoms.

Throughout their work the commissioners repeatedly found that assumptions and statements made about people in poverty were often based on literature and anecdotal evidence but without a good understanding of the nature, depth and extent of local poverty. This acts as a barrier to developing responses, which have the maximum long-term benefit.



Recommendations

The Hardship Commission to continue as an on-going champion of poverty and its impact by:

- Being a strong focus on all actions relating to poverty.
- Ensuring a close awareness and realistic understanding of the level of poverty, its impact and its reduction.
- Developing a more accurate map of hardship and needs across the city based on data from service providers instead of national datasets, for planning targeted actions and support.
- Ensuring an awareness and promotion of the needs and culture of those disadvantaged by poverty.
- Recognising and bringing to the fore the increasing inequality within our local society, its causes and its consequences.
- Encouraging and developing the implementation of recommendations agreed.
- Monitoring the progress of those organisations responsible for the implementation of recommendations and holding them to account.

4.4.2. Attitudes Towards Poverty

Assessment

The way poverty-related hardship is perceived has a major impact on the way the state, councils and organisations respond to it. Even the attitude of individuals and families to those worse off than themselves can have a big influence within communities. But how is attitude assessed? The answer to the following may give an indication.

- Are the attitudes and approaches towards those in poverty hardship ones of:
 - Respect and understanding?
 - Acceptance of their situation as opposed to blaming them for it?



Going to the food bank is embarrassing

Comment



- Being caring and sympathetic?
- Being helpful instead of obstructive?
- Dictating to them what to do instead of being supportive?



The people at the benefits counter treated me like I was doing something wrong

Comment



- Also, is the attitude towards poverty one of treating it as a priority and the basis for developing a healthy, caring economy and community?

The attitude of the Government towards poverty, with its association with benefits, tends to create the unfortunate perception that it cares more about what it thinks will impress the electorate, its MPs and what will help it achieve its economic targets. As a consequence, its overall attitudes and approaches towards those in poverty are perceived not to be ones of understanding, respect, sympathy and support, but ones with a strong element of perceived blame and penalties.



I constantly worry about being accused of things and having my money stopped

Comment



This attitude is so prevalent that the Church of England has found it necessary to speak out strongly against controversial policies, that they say hit those in poverty hardest. However, there are aspects of current reforms that have the basis of being constructive towards addressing poverty if implemented effectively.

Recommendations

The Hardship Commission to encourage the council, Job Centre Plus, NHS, Police, Chamber of Commerce, voluntary sector and media to develop and promote:

- A caring, empathetic and supportive attitude and culture towards those in poverty and disadvantaged.
- Poverty as not a choice but a consequence.
- Incentive, recognition and reward-driven provision of employment, benefits and health support systems for those in poverty and disadvantaged.

Make poverty-related hardship a priority and put those suffering it at the centre of policies.



4.4.3. Organisation and Networking

Assessment

Poverty-related hardship is a difficult and complex issue requiring a determined, clearly defined and linked up approach to addressing it, involving many organisations. To get a feel for this, the Commission used the following as a guide to what exists:

- Are there long-term strategies to address poverty-related hardship that all organisations can relate and contribute to?
- Is poverty a major consideration in all policies that can have an influence on it?
- Are all the strategies on poverty-related aspects pulled together to ensure a cohesive approach?
- Do statutory and support organisations work together to alleviate poverty?
- Is this hindered by a failure to share information and resources, and to minimise duplication and waste?
- Do the council, Job Centre Plus, voluntary sector, faith organisations, NHS, police, fire services, Government agencies and business work as one system in support of those in poverty hardship? If not, should they? If so, how?

- Are data and administration systems integrated, efficient and user friendly, or can they be major hurdles for those in poverty and those helping them?
- Are services easy for people in poverty-related hardship to access?
- Is funding of initiatives on poverty-related hardship too piecemeal and disjointed to gain any effective overall progress?
- Is funding of poverty-related initiatives such that it incentivises commissioned organisations to go for the easy wins and avoid the difficult ones?
- Is the commissioning of services very short-term, reducing the consistency and effectiveness of services?
- Is competitiveness among organisations counterproductive at times?
- Lack of leadership.
- Protecting limited resources.
- Competitive survival.
- Lack of structure and strategy.
- Lack of trust.
- “My way is best”.
- “This is our responsibility”.
- Fear of mistakes.
- Competing for limited funds.
- Lack of awareness.
- Lack of willingness.
- Lack of credibility.
- No time to work together.
- Too much talking with no clear outcome and direction.

We recognise and acknowledge that each organisation is autonomous with its own aims and objectives, which sometimes are shared with other organisations, but often are not. However, the risk is for statutory and non-statutory organisations to work on their own and only relate to others when it suits them. This can be due to many reasons such, including:

The intention can often be there but the obstacles are just too difficult. The Commission believes organisations should aim to co-operate around clear overall long-term strategies, with shared objectives and better co-ordinated efforts wherever possible.

The consequences of not doing this are:

- Differences remain unresolved.
- Barriers remain, resources are not pooled, harnessed and made best use of.
- Admin systems continue to be complicated and dysfunctional.
- Duplication and waste continues and those in poverty suffer.
- Poor deployment of scarce resources.

An initiative called Co-operative Working is an example of what could be a way forward. It is currently being rolled out across the city and is a partnership between public and voluntary services, offering a more joined up and co-ordinated approach to supporting individuals and households. The service will address the top demands in context, which are help me find employment/training; help me with my finances/debt; and help me find a property. By addressing these needs of individuals it is hoped this initiative will be a great help to alleviate poverty across the city.

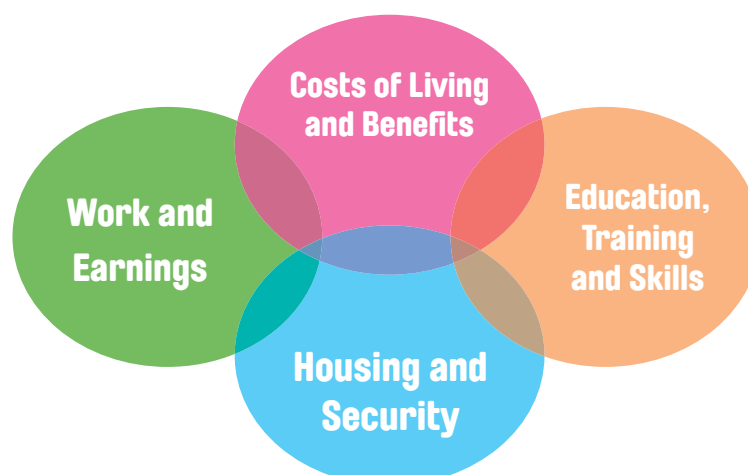
A further way forward is working with communities in a fully engaged way, using the principles of assets-based community development. This can lead to the development of confident and resilient communities, which are a strong force for preventing hardship, are better able to respond to issues such as hardship, and are better able to support people within those communities and who experience hardship.

When community members act together to achieve common goals, there are indirect benefits resulting from improved social support and supportive networks, which can reduce social isolation and nurture a sense of community, trust and community competence. Research indicates that community empowerment initiatives can produce positive outcomes for the individuals directly involved, including improved health, self-efficacy, self-esteem, social networks, community cohesion and improved access to education leading to increased skills and paid employment.

Recommendations

As stated previously, the approach needed to address poverty-related hardship is also a basis for strengthening the wellbeing and economy of the city.

- The Commission to encourage the strengthening of emphasis on poverty-related hardship in the council's approach to economic regeneration, through strategies that all organisations can relate and contribute to.
- The Commission's recommendations to form the basis for a strategic approach to tackling poverty-related hardship.
- The Commission to encourage the formation of subgroups to lead on the key areas of poverty-related hardship and to do so in a co-ordinated fashion, with partners committing to work towards implementing the recommendations.
- The council and other commissioners to commission organisations based on long-term partnerships, where investing in strong relationships can develop improved outcomes.
- The Commission to encourage the bringing together of those organisations specialising in providing specific services and opportunities for those in poverty hardship, with a named group champion, in order to help them:
 - Work closer together to maximise their services and opportunities.
 - Collaborate and share information and resources.
 - Define and negotiate resources and support for their services.
 - Establish strong networking that benefits all providers and beneficiaries.



Recommendations

- The Commission to encourage and support Co-operative Working in addressing the top demands of poverty hardship.
- The Commission to endorse and encourage working with communities in a fully engaged way, using the principles of assets-based community development. Interventions would include, for example:
 - Expanding the involvement of residents in shaping how local budgets are used.
 - Helping to develop the capacity of communities to participate in local decision-making.
 - Embedding assets-based working within public sector organisations.

4.4.4. Cost of Living and Benefits

Assessment

The following searching questions and observations are designed to help gain an insight into the factors that influence those in poverty-related hardship and what is available to help them cope.

- To what extent do those in poverty-related hardship suffer a cost of living premium?
 - Essential goods and services to meet basic needs and participate in society take up a relatively larger share of low-income budgets.
 - The price of essential goods and services has risen relatively quickly in recent years, meaning the cost of living has risen faster for those on low incomes.
 - Low-income individuals are less likely to be 'active consumers' switching suppliers and shopping around, partly due to a lack of access to 'enabling goods' that give consumers advantages, e.g. a bank account or internet access.
- What ways could be developed to help those suffering poverty-related hardship reduce their basic living costs?
- How can those suffering poverty-related hardship benefit from energy price negotiated deals and other price-related advantages?

- What means exist or can be introduced to control rent levels in the private sector?
- Does the provision of help and support in addressing poverty suffer from poor communications, system complexity, and lack of incentives?
- Is the availability of financial help, fuel poverty support, debt and financial advice, family counselling, etc. designed through the eyes and needs of those in poverty?
- Could centres of information and advice be more accessible, localised and effective?
- Is the presentation of information and support too complex and confusing?
- How well orchestrated and co-ordinated is advice and support?
- Why is the lack of benefit take-up at approximately £50 million
- To what extent are welfare reforms affecting poverty-related hardship?
- Are food banks a reliable reflection of the depth and extent of poverty-related hardship?
- How motivated and incentivised are employment and benefit offices?

Essential costs may be reduced or compensated for by, for example, discounts for targeted energy customers, the universal service obligation in the telecoms sector or money to offset some costs (such as housing and childcare), but this needs a clear and determined strategy of education, information and practical support, as well as some imaginative commercial initiatives.

As for income in 2015, in Stoke-on-Trent 59% of working people rely for their income on a combination of earnings, social security benefits and tax credits. While increasing earnings and moving people off benefits and onto earnings are the best routes out of poverty, the commission is pragmatic enough to realise this is only part of the solution.

For the foreseeable future many people will continue to rely on social security benefits either because they are unable to work or they are unable to move into work yet. Among the former are pensioners who rely on a mixture of the state retirement pension, pension credit and occupational or personal pensions.



I feel that unemployment centres have quotas on sanctions and are ruthless in achieving them

Comment



Alleviating pensioner poverty relies on adequate pension provision and the maximum take-up of pension credit and other means-tested benefits. People with long-term ill health or serious disabilities are frequently unable to work or are so disadvantaged in the labour market they are effectively excluded from work. Long-term sickness and disability benefits provide their only income, topped up with means-tested benefits where possible. These benefits are complex to claim and many recipients are among those with the least capacity to manage their claims without support. This is especially true when they wish to challenge decisions. For people moving into short-term, casual or low-paid work (e.g. on a zero-hours contract), benefits and tax credits form a significant part of their income, often providing the consistency that earnings do not.

All of these groups have in common a greater or lesser reliance on social security benefits. Given the low level of social security benefits relative to other measures of poverty, ensuring maximum take-up is essential.

It has been estimated that Stoke-on-Trent's share of the national amount of unclaimed benefits could be as high as £50 million annually.

Single person's (25 years+) entitlement to

Job Seekers Allowance: £73.10

National Minimum Wage (NMW)
for a 37 hour week: £240.50

Minimum Income Standard (MIS)
(ex. housing costs)
for single person: £197.86

JSA as % of NMW: 30.4%

JSA as % of MIS: 37%

According to research undertaken by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation RF, almost a third of eligible people in the UK in 2009-10 were not claiming the means-tested benefits they were entitled to. Just over half of the estimated £10 billion unclaimed benefits could have been claimed by working age families.

Despite service delivery reforms and the progress made in reducing pensioner and child poverty, take-up rates for most income-related benefits declined in the decade to 2009-10. Tax credits were introduced in 2003-04 but in 2011-12 H.M. Revenue & Customs still estimated that £3.29 billion in Working Tax Credit and £1.19 billion in Child Tax Credits went unclaimed.

Improving take-up of means-tested benefits by those in and out of work will make a major contribution to poverty reduction. Below are some reported findings and considerations.

- The increased income associated with greater take-up could also contribute to improvements in other outcomes, such as health, family wellbeing and employment participation and retention.
- Measures to improve the take-up of means-tested entitlements need to be central to anti-poverty strategies.
- The most significant factor associated with non take-up appears to be the level and accuracy of knowledge about an entitlement and its eligibility rules, linked with the perceived cash value of the benefit when compared to the effort involved in claiming and maintaining entitlement.
- Take-up rates can be improved by increasing the level of knowledge about entitlements and the eligibility rules and by reducing stigma and the complexity of claiming. Local initiatives are most effective.
- Universal Credit is expected to increase benefit take-up, especially among the least well-off households, but it seems likely that continuing welfare reforms will have negative effects.
- Research points to the value of welfare benefits advice being made available through local, trusted, and more accessible settings, including children's centres, community and voluntary centres, health care locations and, to some extent, through welfare-to-work providers.
- Welfare-to-work providers and employers have an important role to play in promoting in-work benefit take-up, which could contribute to employment retention and in-work poverty reduction.
- There is a need for continuing research and experimentation to stimulate continuous improvement in service delivery and a better understanding of 'what works' in promoting take-up.
- In addition it is the Commission's view that improving take-up also boosts local economies as research shows that most benefits are spent in local shops and businesses.
- Local initiatives need to include not just information on the availability of and support in claiming benefits, but also expert advice on challenging decisions that may be wrong.

In an era of austerity, and welfare reforms aimed at reducing expenditure on social security, it may be counter-intuitive to promote the take-up of benefits, but this is essential if we are to prevent the growth of acute, absolute poverty and maintain the very basic income levels of the city's least well-off residents.

Where appropriate, initiatives and services should help to provide and/or indicate routes out of poverty and help people take these up.

Recommendations

The Commission's recommendations below are based on maximising the income available to people in poverty hardship and minimising their costs as far as possible.

- The Financial Inclusion Group (FIG) to develop their role, on behalf of the Hardship Commission to:
 - Study, advise and recommend ways of helping to minimise costs of living for those suffering poverty, for example cheaper energy, the supply of public water, retail provision, childcare and transport and any other area of costs where being in poverty creates higher costs than those experienced by better off residents. It should also provide support to the provision of food banks in appropriate locations.

In addition it should support the Sustainable Food Partnership and monitor access to food for those in poverty, including holiday hunger for young people.

- Advise and support on benefits, debt and finance, and financial education through:
 - Promoting the delivery of the full range of benefits advice, debt and finance advice and financial education.
 - Working to ensure the provision of ethical financial services, such as Community Development Finance Institutions (CDFI) and credit unions which can give appropriate help to people in hardship and provide a means by which they may (re)enter the more standard financial systems.
 - Engage with providers of mainstream financial services, including banks, to illicit maximum support. Include national bodies where appropriate.
- Simplify, improve and localise financial and benefit information and support, for example:
 - Encouraging partners from public, private and voluntary sectors to co-ordinate, simplify and improve the presentation of information on benefits, debt and financial advice.

- developing locality-based first tier advice and support services to advise and direct people to the correct source of support and help.
- Major on all aspects of ensuring benefit take-up and welfare reforms:
 - Promoting benefit and tax credit take-up as a priority for and core task of the Co-operative Working programme and FIG.
 - Helping with the introduction of the welfare reforms and dealing with the issues arising from them.
- Establish indicators of FIG's progress and success.
- Local commissioners commit to funding benefit and tax credit take-up activities to kick start a campaign to promote full take-up of benefits.
- Co-operative Working to ensure that bespoke support is provided to the most vulnerable individuals and households. Co-operative Working Phase 2 to be progressed to achieve even greater alignment and holistic support to the most vulnerable.

- The Hardship Commission to:
 - Encourage local service providers to co-operate in promoting benefit and tax credit take-up and the reduction of the cost of living in support of FIG.
 - Encourage the council and key voluntary organisations to work very closely together with Jobcentre Plus in making the welfare reforms work effectively and to work in an empathetic manner with people in poverty, or likely to get into poverty.
 - Ensure the continuous monitoring, assessment and reporting on welfare reforms and their impact, and the mitigation of their unintended effects.
 - Monitor quarterly, with explanations and justifications, the level of sanctioning of those on benefits.
 - Monitor quarterly the council's use of discretionary payments and to contribute to policy decisions on these.
 - Monitor the impact of the council's minimum council tax contribution on the least well-off residents and make recommendations to members.

4.4.5. Education, Training and Skills

Assessment

With education, training and skills being important elements on the route out of unemployment and low paid work, the Commission listed the following examples for consideration and guidance in its attempt to assess what is needed.

- Educational preparations for the world of work:
 - The support of the hardest pressed families through children's centres.
 - Qualified career advisers working with every young person to create individual career plans (independent information, advice and guidance IAG).
 - The use of the Pupil Premium Funding (additional funding allocated to schools to support the most deprived learners) allocation to close the gap in attainment between those eligible for this and those who are not, as checked in all schools and academies receiving an annual LA health check and during Ofsted inspections.
- Every young person participating obligatorily in education, employment and training until their 18th birthday.
- The tracking by the LA of all young people until their 20th birthday.
- The identification of young people at risk of NEET (not in education, employment and training) by schools and the LA, and the intensive support provided to prevent them from becoming NEET.
- The various programmes, for example Youth Contract, European Social Fund "Get Set", which are focused on NEET support.
- The LA's policy of working towards a zero permanent exclusion figure to reduce the number of disadvantaged young people excluded from school.
- The coming together of local schools to develop a learning pathways model for those pupils who are better suited to a learning pathway outside of mainstream education, and who would otherwise be at risk of exclusion.
- Health, lifestyles and wellbeing education are made a high priority in the school curriculum.
- Does the funding of college education and training incentivise the retention of the successful and rejection of the less so?
- Does the business and education/training world understand the needs and difficulties of each other, and work in collaborative and supportive ways to address these?

- Is the co-ordination and funding of training provision across Stoke-on-Trent effective in satisfying the needs of businesses and individuals?
- What support do employers need to take on apprentices?
 - Is the policy of financial support for those employers (up to 50 employees) who haven't taken on an apprentice in the last three years to do so sufficient and effective and should more be done?
 - Is the provision of apprenticeship training, support and advice to employers, including recruitment, sufficient?
- How are adults with limited or no qualifications, confidence and self-esteem, encouraged and helped into education and training programmes?
- Is the range of programmes available to support people into work - some of which are mandatory, for example the Work Programme, others of which are voluntary, such as Families Matter - sufficient and effective?
- How can the Co-operative Working caseworker 'understand me' conversation with every individual gain a thorough understanding of the gaps and needs of the individual and be best supported in the overall drive to deal with poverty?

Currently 19% or 30,300 of the working age population have no qualifications of any kind compared with 9% for the rest of the country. This is indicative of the challenge to be addressed.

There are a significant number of pupils leaving school each year with limited literacy, numeracy and no qualifications. In addition 2.5% of the primary and 7.3% of the secondary school populations are persistent non-attenders. What hope have they of succeeding in life? The failing and disadvantaged adult or student is in danger of becoming a lost cause, and once out of the education and training systems, can be forgotten, until his or her failings become part of the failing society. The sad fact is that the cost of the failed and lost individuals to society vastly outweighs the cost of preventing them failing in the first place. Every individual has the potential to contribute positively to society and is worthy of being invested in for that short period of development needed to avoid the consequences of many costly years on possible benefits, ill health and even criminal activities.

Recommendations

While the Commission recognises the challenges facing the education and training authorities and organisations, it recommends a specific focus on the needs of the unemployed and low paid.

- The Commission to establish a group made up of education, training and skills experts from the field of business, employment, education, training, and the world of the disadvantaged and unemployed in Stoke-on-Trent. It will complement and support the work of the LEP's Education Trust, Skills Staffordshire, Staffordshire Providers' Association in:
 - Establishing a defined and targeted population made up of the unemployed and low paid receiving income-related support in Stoke-on-Trent.
 - Assessing the training and skills needs of this population in relation to the job market.
 - Targeting individuals' qualifications, training and skills to job market requirements and personal vocation.
 - Orchestrating the provision of education, training and skills.
 - Maximising the development of education and training courses for those with limited or no educational qualifications or skills.
- Linking longer term unemployed to meaningful activity to reduce associated mental and physical health harms in line with the Chronic Worklessness Study 2014.
- Monitoring the success of all related programmes and actions.
- The group to include permanent and influential representatives of: FE colleges, council, Jobcentre Plus, Chamber of Commerce, primary and secondary education, LEP, voluntary sector, training organisations.
- Schools encouraged to use role models in the city to champion education at primary age and beyond, and to find ways to encourage parents to support school staff and be engaged in their children's education. This with the goal of ensuring that every child is able to read, write and be numerate on leaving primary school.
- Businesses encouraged to be engaged with schools, to showcase what can be achieved and to develop knowledge and aspiration among - children of all ages. The chamber to help coordinate this and develop support for businesses to engage effectively with schools.
- Ensure good health and wellbeing education in all schools.

4.4.6. Work and Earnings

Assessment

Work and earnings are significant elements on the route out of poverty-related hardship and the Commission has listed a number of questions in its attempt to understand the challenges of Stoke-on-Trent.

- Why has Stoke-on-Trent got 47% of its working population with an income of £20,000 per year or less compared to 35% for Great Britain?
- Are the reasons for a predominantly low wage economy due to lack of job opportunities, lack of skills or lack of both?
- Is the lack of aspiration over emphasised in explaining the reasons for the high levels of deprivation in Stoke-on-Trent?
- What are the causes for the 9,000 unemployed and the 34%, or 55,000, earning on or below the relative poverty level?
- How serious an issue is the availability and quality of jobs to poverty hardship in Stoke-on-Trent?
- Are local businesses and organisations engaged in a drive to reduce unemployment and poverty?
- Is regeneration of the city geared to local communities and quality of jobs?
- Is there an agreed and targeted strategy for unemployment and job creation which all organisations support?
- What control is there on workplace abuse and low wages?
- Is the minimum wage ignored and abused?
- Is the living wage practical, realistic and should it be strongly promoted?
- Are zero-hour contracts a serious form of labour abuse or a major contributor to job creation?
- What effects are welfare reforms having on employment and unemployment?
- How positive and effective are the Jobcentre Plus incentives for local Jobcentres to succeed in training support and work placement?

**“
I’d rather work
and lose out on
benefits than be
on benefits”**

Comment

Earnings and income through work, benefits or both, with the availability of adequately paid work being the priority, largely dictate having enough to live on. Whether there are sufficient adequately paid jobs or a lack of appropriately qualified individuals to fill available jobs is not clear. According to official statistics, there are 160,100 working age adults in Stoke-on-Trent, 109,600 of whom are employed, 9,000 unemployed, 3,480 on Job Seekers Allowance and 30,300 with no qualifications of any kind. The combination of minimum wage coupled with zero-hour contracts, while providing maximum flexibility to the employer, leaves the individual vulnerable to fluctuating earnings with the benefit system incapable of being flexible enough to give full support.

Public, voluntary and business sectors are the three major employers, with the public sector suffering the cost cuts of Government policies, and the voluntary and business sectors striving to succeed in highly competitive markets. The public sector organisations still contribute greatly to the job market and although having little scope for expansion, they have a lot of scope for ongoing job opportunities for the local population. The Voluntary and business sectors have opportunities for ongoing job opportunities and expansion, but unlike the public sector

require a lot of support and help to develop these opportunities. There are many organisations that can provide this support and help and the Chamber of Commerce is key in doing this. It is totally rooted in the local community but has the support of a national organisation with its influence and global reach on all aspects of the world of work as indicated below.

- Ensuring that employers are aware of the help available to support the wellbeing and development of their staff through projects such as the Workplace Wellbeing Charter, the Health and Wellbeing Grants fund, criteria that are specifically needed for the area, including businesses making available support or advice for staff who face financial hardship.
- Working with businesses to develop aspirations and highlight the importance of qualifications through the likes of the local Ceramic Skills Academy, Investors in Young People Award and the development of relevant apprenticeship programmes.
- Providing opportunities for young people to gain the skills they need to work in the business environment by offering speakers, mentors, experiences and courses.

- Working with other organisations in support of the unemployed and disadvantaged such as Jobcentre Plus, colleges and training organisations.
- Working with the office of the police commissioner to develop programmes such as domestic abuse champions in the workplace.
- Developing a local programme of multicultural events to encourage understanding of the different cultures in the city and their contribution to the business life, and business opportunities.



Recommendations

The Commission to establish a group made up of representatives from business, Chamber of Commerce, LEP, council, Jobcentre Plus, education and training to advise, help and support the Commission in the development and implementation of its recommendations.

- The Hardship Commission to:
 - Support Jobcentre Plus and its reforms as the major mechanism for helping people into work through assessment, training, work experience, job matching and benefit support.
 - Encourage the council, businesses, education and training organisations to work closely together with Jobcentre Plus in making the new Jobcentre Plus and welfare reforms work effectively.
 - Ensure Jobcentres are strongly incentivised on successful job placement and service.
 - Assess and monitor the adherence to the minimum wage at £6.70/hour for all adult employees in all businesses.
 - Campaign for and monitor the introduction of flexible minimum annual hour contracts in place of zero-hour contracts at a minimum of £6.70 hour
 - Encourage a Living Wage (£7.85) campaign for businesses, and look at a campaign to encourage employers to develop a wage

structure which can reduce the amount of in work benefits in the area. The Commission to campaign that this is a Government policy and to offer to be a pilot area for any schemes which will be developed.

- The Commission to ensure the development of a commissioning framework for ensuring that in any public sector contracts (both local authorities and other partners such as universities), the impact on the targeted groups are taken into account and clearly managed and monitored – and this to not be simply just about an increase in apprenticeships. Such a framework across the city should highlight the desire to deliver optimum social value for the city region, although it should also be transparent.
- Any social value should be calculated on what matters to those in hardship, not what the outputs are according to other demands on the systems. There needs to be clarity on the outcomes that are essential to the area and an emphasis on these relevant outcomes rather than outputs. This will help more effective contract management too.
- Adopting a social value approach will enable contracts to be awarded on the

basis of more than money. Weighting of social value elements within the pre-qualification and tendering documentation will be required, but this activity will lead to a widening of the market as other smaller or socially-driven businesses see an opportunity to compete. This will help the development of businesses in the area and social enterprises as appropriate.

- There is a need for the Commission to develop this work, as there will need to be some understanding of the barriers to this approach and a timescale for its full implementation. One key area will be to define the social value priorities and translate them into specific outcomes that can be readily contracted and monitored.
- Local purchasing is central to the premise of fairness and social value, but should not be to the detriment of the maximum social value that can be achieved by working across local and national boundaries. The chamber is developing ways in which businesses can record their social value and impact at various levels and would be interested in exploring how this can be used both to encourage businesses to bid for work and to calculate the social value of the business community.

- It is crucial that this approach is taken up by elected members and significant players across the relevant institutions and will require an overt recognition of the importance of tackling hardship using the various tools available through employment and procurement.
- The Commission to aim to track and ensure that the benefits of Government and EU programmes are felt within the city's deprived communities and by those residents living in poverty. The Commission to lobby that this is a key indicator for any funding regimes and needs to be monitored and reported (e.g. LEP; City Deal groups).
- The Commission to campaign for better wages for apprentices, perhaps, for example, linking tax benefits to the businesses (such as a business rate holiday) with providing apprentices with a job at the Living Wage. The chamber would partner in developing this.
- Business rates holidays could be used to support the alleviation of hardship by being a benefit to businesses to take on the long-term unemployed.
- Targeted campaigns, initiatives and programmes needed on jobs creation, including the training of individuals to work

elsewhere in the country where skilled labour is in short supply e.g. building trade, IT, nursing.

- The chamber to be commissioned to provide a support mechanism for businesses taking on long-term unemployed residents as they will have different employment needs and expectations and this can sometimes cause disruption within a business.
- The city council, with other local authorities, to encourage the planning of skills needs (and therefore provide, hopefully, opportunities for those in hardship to find work). This could be modelled on the type of jobs to be created per square foot so that each development would be able to have a quota against it. This could be made part of the planning process.
- The lack of career advice is unhelpful, especially to those unemployed or with limited experience. Therefore there needs to be some cross agency work done to develop suitable career pathways (e.g. in the care sector) working across the different employers who may be in a variety of sectors.
- The Commission to encourage more community based economic development through developing capacity within communities to develop solutions that are

relevant to those areas. This would include the establishment of community-based businesses and community-based training programmes, as well as developing leaders of these areas who are willing to speak out on the residents' behalf. This to include the strengthening and expanding of its approach to brown site environment development through local community involvement.

- The Commission to join forces with commissions in other cities and regions to lobby for some clear wins – such as using business rates or NI holidays for employers taking on hard to reach people and helping them out of poverty.
- Businesses need to be encouraged to engage with schools, to showcase what can be achieved and to develop knowledge and aspiration among our children of all ages. The chamber can help co-ordinate this and develop support for businesses to engage effectively with schools.
- There needs to be a mapping of provision including the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector along with statutory provision to understand the overlaps and gaps in supporting people out of poverty.

4.4.7. Housing and Security

Housing Assessment

Safe, decent and affordable housing is essential to meet the basic human need for shelter, regardless of income. However, for many people experiencing poverty, maintaining a safe, decent and affordable home is becoming harder. Like poor health, poor housing can both create poverty (it is notoriously difficult to get or keep a job without an address) and be created by it (people in poverty often live in poorer quality housing).

The relationship between health and housing was recognised by many of the great Victorian social reformers and is as valid today as it was over a hundred years ago.

Affordability: House prices are comparatively low in Stoke-on-Trent. This does not necessarily benefit local population because:

- Prices reflect purchasing power and demand.
- In a low income area people's ability to borrow is limited.
- A significant number of owner-occupiers own their properties outright but are "asset rich and cash poor". This affects their ability to:
 - Maintain and modernise properties.
 - Move, to free up cheaper properties for first-time buyers.

- In rental terms, rents are relatively low but so are wages and many people can only afford to rent if subsidised by housing benefit or Local Housing Allowance.
- House-building has started to recover following the economic downturn, with 436 new or converted properties completed in 2013/14, up from 394 the previous year. Is this sufficient?
- If around 2,480 families across the city are classed as in 'housing need', why have around 2,592 properties in Stoke-on-Trent been vacant for six months or more?

Impact of Welfare Reform: Bedroom tax for many makes much of the available social housing unaffordable. The benefit cap currently reduces housing benefit, effectively rendering housing for some larger families unaffordable without Discretionary Housing Payments. The reduction in the cap will bring many families with three children within its orbit.

- There are currently around 2,800 council tenants who lose up to £25 a week in housing benefit because they under-occupy their home, with 1,950 requiring a one-bedroom property. But since the introduction of the bedroom tax, only 561 one-bedroom homes have become available. What is being done about this?

Cost of Moving: Even if there are smaller properties that people could move into to avoid the bedroom tax, the cost of moving which includes the cost of moving and downsizing furniture, settling utility bills, buying new curtains and carpets, the installation of white goods and replacing gas cookers with electric for example - can easily be higher than the housing benefit shortfall for people who have no savings. This financial cost excludes consideration of the loss of local social networks, moving schools and potentially increased travel costs and new childcare arrangements that moving can prompt.

Private Rented Sector: The local authority now houses many more people in the private rented sector. However, restrictions to local housing allowance and extension of single room rent to people under 35 makes it unaffordable for many.

Stock condition is poor and enforcement of standards is difficult because insecurity of tenure creates fear of "retaliatory evictions". There is a lack of effective protection against illegal eviction due to:

- a. People are not aware of their rights.
- b. Cuts to legal aid.
- c. No effective tenancy relations function in the city council.

Social Rented Sector: There is insufficient, decent affordable rented housing to meet needs. Stoke-on-Trent's stock profile has not changed to reflect changes in household structure and benefit restrictions.

Right to buy has depleted council homes for rent and the extension of the right to buy to housing associations will undoubtedly compound the problem.

- Are there effective social and affordable housing/accommodation policies?
- Is a housing waiting list of 6,500 justifiable considering there are 4,402 empty houses across the city?
- Although the vast majority of empty houses are non-council owned, why does the council not use its legal powers to deal with this?
- Around a third of the council's 19,000 properties are three-bedroom homes. Many of the properties shunned by tenants are two and three-bedroom homes. The council has introduced joint tenancies giving two or more people security of tenure as a single tenant, while splitting the rent between them. How effective has this policy been?

- Council houses are being offered for rent on the open market because people do not want to live in them – despite 1,779 tenants on the waiting list for properties. Is £25,000 per conversion of three-bedroom houses into one-bedroom flats excessive? Do private landlords find this viable?
- Why are council houses sold when there is such a long waiting list? Should this policy be challenged when it is not appropriate to the prevailing circumstance?



Housing Recommendations

- Housing strategy and policy should acknowledge the poverty of many of the City's residents and address the structural factors within the local housing systems that exacerbate poverty, such as the profile of the housing stock by:
 - promoting the building of smaller social and affordable housing alongside more expensive properties for purchase
 - introducing a proactive empty homes strategy to bring empty properties back into social use
 - supporting campaigns against the extension of the right to buy to Housing Association properties
- Housing Management:
 - review allocations policies to ensure appropriate occupancy
 - enforce property and management standards in private sector
 - LA to reinstate Tenancy Relations function to prevent illegal eviction and harassment of tenants
 - restriction, where possible, of council tax concessions to minimise empty properties
 - re-provisioning social housing to meet occupancy levels
- Supporting people to afford decent homes:
 - ensure vulnerable and least well-off tenants are supported adequately
 - invest in measures to address homelessness and rough sleeping and engage roofless and rough sleepers in moving into affordable, secure accommodation
 - maintain homelessness prevention measures to prevent people who are insecurely housed from becoming homeless
 - promote take up of Housing Benefit, Local Housing Allowance and Discretionary Housing Payments
 - LA to explore how to offer incentives to landlords to offer longer leases at lower rents
 - clarification of how the local authority will define vulnerability following the recent Supreme Court ruling
 - promotion of shared ownership schemes where appropriate

Security Assessment

While having a sound home is an essential need, how safe and secure an individual feels within his/her living and working environment is equally so. The following are some of the questions and issues that have arisen.

- How great an extent is security an issue for those in poverty?
- Is crime and violence a significant cause and a consequence of poverty?
- Is the abuse of those in poverty part of security policies?
- Is bullying, especially of the young, a major contributor to an individual's future poverty?
- Is security addressed with poverty in mind e.g. community development, housing, policing, self help groups?

Those suffering poverty are already suffering a lack of confidence, insecurity, fearfulness of the consequences of their circumstances and loss of trust in society, without the additional distress caused by local crime, violence and abuse aimed at them.

Security Recommendations

The Safer City Partnership to ensure joined up working between all agencies in dealing with crime and security, with a focus on poverty:

- Knowing and assessing the type and degree of abuse in each ward.
- Community relationship building.
- Awareness of and support for those suffering domestic abuse and violence.
- Particular focus on the needs and conditions of recent immigrants and asylum seekers.

Communication

It is hoped that this report will serve to:

- Strengthen the understanding of the level of poverty, its impact and its reduction within Stoke-on-Trent.
- Ensure a stronger awareness and promotion of the needs and culture of those in financial poverty.
- Bring to the fore the increasing inequality within society, its causes and its consequences.
- Promote a more caring, empathetic and supportive attitude and culture towards those in financial poverty.

- Show poverty as not a choice but a consequence.
- Demonstrate that poverty exists in all major cities and that Stoke-on-Trent can lead the way in how to address poverty constructively.
- Show that addressing poverty is a humanitarian obligation but also good for the economic and social wellbeing of the city as a whole.
- Thank people for sharing their experiences of poverty, its causes and aggravations.
- Thank people for putting forward ideas and means of helping those in poverty and dealing with poverty as a whole.
- Explain the recommendations and commitment of the Hardship Commission.

While the Commission has a role to play in helping to focus attention and help on those who suffer poverty hardship, so does the population as a whole have a responsibility to help those in need.

Health and Wellbeing

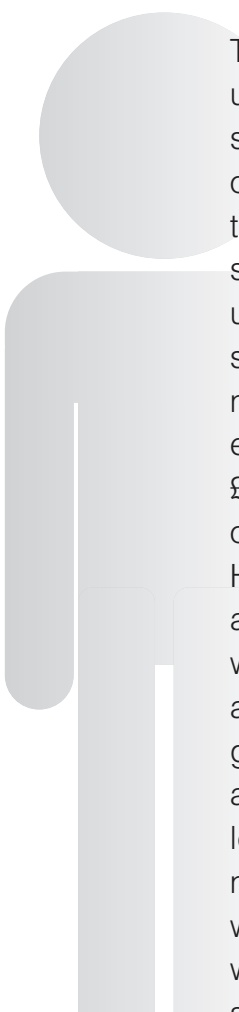
The hardship Commission does not try to address all aspects of hardship and everything that can contribute to poverty. It is very focused on those aspects that can help improve income. However, it recognises the serious issues of health and wellbeing in poverty-related hardship and looks to the Health and Wellbeing Board to help address these through:

- Committing to a focus on health equality and reducing health inequalities in the city, which will greatly enhance the life chances of those in poverty-related hardship.
- Working with partners to implement a large-scale approach to making every contact count so that support around alcohol, substance misuse, smoking and other lifestyle issues is readily available, appropriate and proportionate.

Personal Examples of Hardship

These are reports of individuals interviewed and how they described their situations.


Young Man 1



This was a young man of 17, brought up by his mother, who later married his stepfather with whom he did not get on and threw him out of his home at the age of 16. He was on income support of £114 every two weeks for under 18s, but this stopped when he started earning over £5 per week. He is now working 10 hours per week, earning £180 a month - equivalent to £90 every two weeks, a loss of £24 or £48 per month compared to benefits. He much prefers to work but there is a big loss. He pays £25 in rent per week to the YMCA, where he works as a volunteer helping the 16-24 age group. He is very mature for his age and feels that the tough time after leaving home made him so. He had no idea of what to expect then and was shocked by what he experienced, which led him to bad, and attention-seeking behaviour. When made

homeless, he relied on friends to start with, then social services put him in contact with the YMCA, where he stayed twice over 18 months. After the first stay he tried living in a house with four other youths, but survived three months before returning. He sees the YMCA as a haven where he can sort himself out and looks forward to working within the organisation as a support worker nationally or internationally. He believes there is a need for support from psychologists more so than counsellors, who do not have the right understanding and insight. He gained more from one visit to a psychologist with his mother than all the previous meetings with counsellors. He also believes there is a great need for lifestyle skills training at school in years 10-11 to help kids be aware of the dangers and learn how to cope.

Single Mother



This was a single mother with a 19-year-old son suffering from autism, tourette syndrome, OCD and an undiagnosed motor neuron type disorder. She was born abroad and moved to live in the UK in 2001 and gained citizenship. Her mother lives nearby and her brother is in Birmingham, her father is still abroad with her step-mother. Due to the need to care for her son, she has been on benefits for most of her time in the UK. She tried to be a freelance bookkeeper for four years but it was too difficult due to the intensive caring for her son. Plus, she was better off on benefits. Her income:

- Works for two hours per week for £20 (which is the maximum before benefits are reduced £1 for each pound extra earned).
- Income support £45.25 per week.
- Carer's allowance £61.35 per week.
- Child benefit £20.50 per week.
- Child tax credit £117.50 per week.
- Disability allowance in the form of a small automatic car. No money with car.
- Middle rate disability allowance of £9 per day approximately while at home, which he is on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. At boarding school Monday to Friday.

Total weekly income approximately £291.60

- Rent of £77.75/week paid as housing benefit.
- Council tax support 70% of approximately £500 p/a.

In July 2015, when her son finishes college, she loses child tax credit and child benefit of £117.5 and £20.50 totalling £138 per week, plus council tax goes up by 25% due to two adults living at home.

While her son will get employment support allowance at £57 per week, this does not replace the loss of £138 and the increase in council tax. She is worried about the future. Her social worker says she will no longer be legally responsible for her son but that alters nothing. He is incapable of looking after himself and of accepting that he is disabled (he dislikes admitting or thinking he is), so when asked if he can work, will say yes and so jeopardise his Job Seekers' Allowance when he cannot. She is not sure what will happen income and care-wise long term. She has many complaints about the system such as lack of respect, understanding and system failures. She promised to create a list of all that she has experienced, which she did in great detail.

Older Man



He is a single, 61 year old, out-of-work building labourer, living alone in the council home in which he was born. He has been out of work for 10 years. He suffers from various conditions: ileostomy bag, heart bypass, left knee cartilage with arthritic complications and failing memory (attends memory clinic). He moved in with his mother in 2006 who is now dead. He lives alone, feels very lonely and considered suicide two years ago. The council house is in very good condition but very cold. The heating's never put on. He used five units of gas between 21 August and 24 November according to his bills. The breakdown of his income and expenditure is as follows:

ESA benefit income per week: £72.40

Expenditure per week:

- Council tax (30% contribution) £4.46
- 'Bedroom Tax' (two spare rooms) £20.77
- Gas £11.41
- Electricity £5.00
- Water rates £8.10
- TV Licence £3.03
- Telephone £5.00
- House insurance £1.37

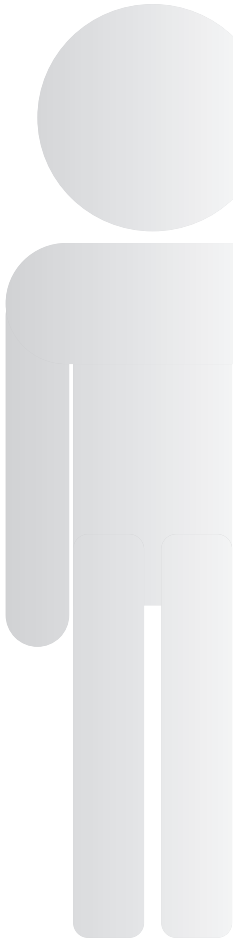
Expenditure total: £59.14

Net per week for food and clothes £13.26

He currently receives £20.77 from a council fund to cover the bedroom tax but this may stop. He also gets his rent paid through housing allowance of about £80 per week, giving him a total income before any deductions of £173.17, leaving him £34.03 for food and clothes. He considers himself unlucky in being 61 years old, just too young to be a 'pensioner' and therefore not eligible for twice the weekly benefit, full council tax support and exemption from the 'Bedroom Tax'.

He has had a very hard time and needed help from family, friends and the food bank three times per year over the past year. He is embarrassed about going to the food bank. TV seems to be his only source of company. Moving to a single-bedroom flat would be expensive and disruptive. Now he lives close to amenities, buses, family and friends.

Young Man 2



This is a young man of 21. His mother had one child from her first partner, then three with his dad and then one with his stepfather. He saw his life as quite happy until the age of 10 and the arrival of his stepfather, who decided after a while to ignore and not speak to him. His stepfather also took the view that his real family was with the child he had with his mother and the rest should be ignored, and made this quite clear to the children. From aged 12 onwards, he admitted to going out of his way to shock, be bad, loud, getting himself expelled from school, mixing with the wrong sorts, being thrown out of the home, and sacked from jobs. He abused drugs and alcohol but has been off drugs for two years, and while physically in a better shape, mentally he is very sensitive and disturbed. He feels

more normal when drunk, and often tempted to go back on drugs to feel better. The nights are full of bad places, as are some of the days mentally. He feels they will always be so. He feels constantly depressed and anxious. He lives on £150 every two weeks in benefits due to a sick note from his doctor. He cannot receive dole pay due to being sanctioned for not attending one of three interviews, which was in Leek and due to his job commitment, he was unable to attend the time allocated. He feels that unemployment centres have quotas on sanctions and are ruthless in achieving them. He is currently not working. He seems very vulnerable, young for his age and frail-looking with no plans and not sure what will be his future.

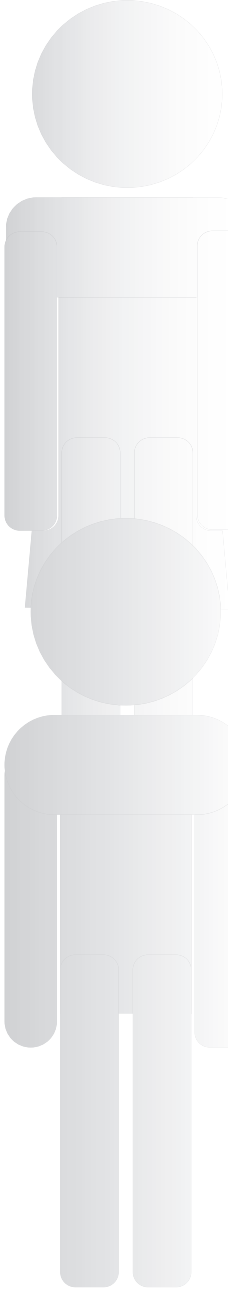
Asylum Seeker



This woman came to England in 2004 to study computers in Manchester, where she had a daughter with a previous partner. When her visa ran out in 2009, she asked for asylum and was rejected due to there being no threat to her in returning to Malawi. Due to her lack of status, she cannot claim any benefits in her own right. She lives with a refugee from Malawi, the father of second her daughter. She lives on his earnings of £100 per week, plus his housing benefit, as well as £80 per week child benefit and £20 per week child tax credit.

These benefits are only possible through this temporary relationship, which if it ended would leave her with nothing. If this were to happen, she would most likely end up in an asylum centre in Leicester while she fights to remain in this country. She says she owes the NHS £5,000 for the prenatal, maternity hospital and postnatal care for her last child. She also survives with help from her church, friends and food vouchers. She is educated and presents herself well but is quite vulnerable while in this country.

Couple



Ben and Jane were both working with no financial issues. They couldn't manage on just one income but 'were getting by with two wages'. Ben had been employed at the same company for some time. However, management changes at the company led to substantial changes to Ben's role and increased pressure. The employment changes adversely impacted on Ben and he had to leave his job due to health issues. One consequence of leaving employment was a drastic reduction in household income. Although Ben was not far from receiving a state pension neither partner is able to retire early due to financial reasons. As such, they are now dependent on savings for getting by.


Ben describes the worst part of his situation as not knowing where to turn for help and support. He went to the local Jobcentre Plus for help and advice but came away with "a fistful of leaflets and very little else". He described a "feeling of not being listened to and simply fobbed off with leaflets".

Ben managed to get some help from Money Matters to find out what benefits he could claim. He also received help and advice from his doctor. The savings that Ben and Jane relied on while waiting for benefits applications to be processed have now depleted. Ben has been assessed by his doctor as being unfit for work. Nonetheless, he is concerned that any future DWP health capability assessment, which finds that he is fit to work, may lead to a reduction in benefits. If this occurs the couple no longer have the savings 'safety net' on which they previously relied on.

Acknowledgements

The following were part of the Commission during or for part of the 12-months period of this initial report. All are thanked for their time and commitment, as are all those who participated in the workshops, interviews, and recommendations.

- Barbara Wain - Changes Health & Wellbeing
- Boris Bodnarec - Stoke-on-Trent City Council
- Charles Stewart - Stoke-on-Trent City Council
- Chris Dawes - Independent chairman
- Danny Flynn - YMCA
- Gill Brown - Brighter Futures
- Lloyd Cooke - Saltbox
- Martin Evans - Staffordshire Police
- Sarah Robinson - Stoke on Trent College
- Simon Harris - Citizens Advice Bureau
- Terry Crowe - Councillor
- Wayne Hughes - Aspire Housing
- Zafar Iqbal - Public health
- Sara Williams - Staffordshire Chambers of Commerce
- Martin Tideswell - The Sentinel
- Paul Roberts - GP, Willow Bank Practice
- Tracy Jackson - Stoke-on-Trent City Council
- Steve Johnston - Stoke-on-Trent City Council
- Paul Baddeley - Stoke-on-Trent City Council
- Fran Jones - Stoke-on-Trent City Council
- Kate Townshend - Stoke on Trent College
- Andy Greenhough - Stoke on Trent College
- Alan Turley - Independent member
- Judy Kurth - Public Health
- Julie Obada - Stoke-on-Trent City Council
- Craig Sands, Jane Briscoe and Suzanne Hackley - Stoke-on-Trent City Council



**Thank you again and
may those in poverty
in Stoke-on-Trent
benefit from this report.**