

## Appreciative Enquiry - Emerging Themes for Cambridgeshire Poverty Strategy Commission

*Cambridgeshire Appreciative Enquiry Learning Network | January 2025*

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# Appreciative Enquiry contribution to the Poverty Strategy Commission

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## Background

In the early days of the [Care Together](#) programme we were inspired by how [Appreciative Enquiry was utilised in Plymouth](#) to work systemically, and have been fortunate to have Gary Wallace, Public Health Specialist at Plymouth City Council, offer us pro bono support to learn the basics through a three hour online training session.

Initially we experimented in East Cambridgeshire, involving colleagues from across the system (communities, faith sector, police, councils and health) to find out what helped people live happily and healthily at home for as long as possible ([brief write up](#)). We found it a practical way to work together to gain insight, especially in terms of giving us a framework to bring our insights and skills as system partners. We utilised this to shape the work of our Integrated Neighbourhood.

In the last couple of years more colleagues across the county have started using Appreciative Enquiry in different ways. Gary has provided further online sessions and we have trained just over 100 colleagues.

This year we invited those who have been trained to join an informal Learning Network with the aim of growing our collaborative work as we learn. The Poverty Strategy Commission is an opportunity to utilise Appreciative Enquiry for a shared systemic issue.

## Methodology

Appreciative Enquiry uses listening techniques to understand issues. Change is achieved by focusing on what matters to people and what is going well and working collaboratively to build on those. There are five stages: Define, Discover, Dream, Design, Deploy.

The Poverty Commission have already 'Defined' the purpose, and the Commissioners have the role of (co)Dreaming and (co)Designing, for the wider system to then Deploy together.

So, our task here is to use Appreciative Enquiry to 'Discover' - having lots of conversations to tap into community wisdom and to begin discussions about future hopes.

At our second Learning Network meeting attended by 18 colleagues we heard about the Poverty Commission and felt it provided the perfect opportunity to focus together on a vital issue which can only be successfully addressed systemically. We took the following steps:

1. We asked the Commissioners if we could contribute by capturing community conversations and looking for emerging themes. The Commissioners welcomed our involvement.
2. A working group was briefly formed to come up with a menu of questions (*See Appendix A*). These were shared with and shaped by the network.

3. We knew that it would be difficult to fit in conversations in the short timeline, especially over the festive period. We created a spreadsheet to record our planned conversations, enabling us to see our colleagues plans and aim to cover a broad demographic. We took into account the feedback from Resolve Poverty, that they had engaged with very few young adults.
4. Members of the Learning Network and two Poverty Commissioners started holding conversations in early December.
5. Appreciative Enquiry is intentionally conversational, very different to formal surveys. To maintain informality, we do not ask for demographic information. To create this report, we have used the observation of the Conversation Hosts to glean approximate demographics. *(See Appendix B).*
7. The first Sensemaking Session was held on 18 December as a hybrid meeting (In Soham Library and on Microsoft Teams), 17 people attended including two Commissioners. The second Sensemaking Session was held on 21 January (in Cambridge Central Library and Teams) and was attended by 18 people.
8. In the Sensemaking Sessions we read and listened to the people's words together in the first person and discussed what we observed, we capture what we believe to be the emerging themes below. And Appendix C is what AI (Microsoft Co-Pilot) identified as a summary of the key themes.

## Emerging Themes

We had anticipated framing the emerging themes around the four priority areas of the Commission. However, whilst these subject areas featured prominently in the conversations, it was more intrinsic themes that jumped out at us in the Sensemaking session: powerful messages about what enabled people to cope in the face of poverty and, in many cases to continue to have a sense of hope.

The summary created through Artificial Intelligence is framed around subject areas, and is really useful to read alongside this report – see Appendix C.

The majority of people we spoke to in this first tranche of conversations live in rural communities and we found that people's experience is in the fabric of the conversation (and overlaps with inclusion/transport) rather than in distinct sentences.

This section sets out the intrinsic themes that came to the fore in the Sensemaking:

### Trusted Relationships

Time and again the people we spoke to told us how vital positive relationships are to them.

#### *Informal:*

People frequently told us about the importance of informal relationships. How family, friends and neighbours were valued both for practical support (lending money, being a carer, giving lifts) and emotional support.

*“My Mum helps me out. She's given me a bit of money to buy Christmas presents for people. I would have to skip meals otherwise to afford buying gifts. My Nan has helped me out by buying a car for me and paying for the insurance. I'm very lucky and blessed. This has saved me a lot of money on bus tickets, etc. - about £100-£120 a month.” (Conversation partner no 16)*

*Mostly my daughter, my grandsons and my friends. They all check in on me and ask me if I need anything. It makes a huge difference to my life. I've got a lot of support. My friends take me away for a weekend every now and then with my dog. My mobility scooter also gives me some freedom.  
(Conversation partner 19)*

There was also a sense of solidarity between people who have firsthand knowledge of poverty, the conversation hosts witnessed this happening whilst having conversations. For example, people exchanging hints and tips; at the Tea and Toast session, info was exchanged about the Christmas offering at Foodbanks and at Reimagine, members were letting each other know that the Household Support Fund had just reopened.

### **Formal/Organised Support**

Many people also commented on how certain types of organised support meant a great deal to them. Two notable observations related to:

**Peer Support:** There were numerous references to how much people value what we broadly termed Peer Support. The sense of solidarity/companionship/camaraderie/feeling understood that people spoke warmly about, usually in reference to the place that we were speaking to them in.

*‘This has been a good. Not like, you know, not just for yourself, but your mental health as well. I look forward to coming here every week, and I do come here every week. Just to see other mums and, so its social and you can have a cup of tea and have a cake and you know the kids play as well and there's a few of us that come and our kids are about I don't know like a week apart from each other so we can you know exchange thoughts and ideas and somewhere to meet because this is you know right in the middle because I live about half an hour away so I've met some really good friends coming here. I'm really positive actually because of something that was set up to create more than just that. Cilla is so openly welcome’ (Conversation partner 7, Babybank)*

**‘Human’ staff:** Many times people spoke about how individual staff members made a real difference. Often referring to how someone went above and beyond their job role. People commented on how much they valued personalised support where they felt like a person rather than something being processed.

*“I rely on this place, we come here a lot, Ruth helps us to keep going, it makes such a difference. She cares about people, she's got to know us.” (Conversation partner 12a)*

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*“Someone who made a real difference to my family was a Young People's worker in school. He was fantastic, turned life around for my boy who trusted him. That was six years ago, he's a confident young man now. That Young People's worker gave us such great support, even gave his phone number and my son rang him once when he couldn't face school, he came over and talked things through, it meant the world.” (Conversation Partner 11)*

## Sense of Purpose

We heard a lot of people reflecting that something that kept them going was a sense of purpose, something beyond the day-to-day which had meaning for them. This included descriptions of: Connection – either to specific individuals or to a community (of people, place or interest)

“It would be nice to meet more people in our community. In the old days when we lived in Wisbech we used to know our neighbours and there was always people out playing on the green outside our house... I used to love it, I'd take out cakes and biscuits and a drink whilst they were playing. We'd like to do similar here now, it would be good to meet people, perhaps have a picnic in the summer. It's a bit of a ghost town, we need something to get everyone out of their houses.”  
(Conversation 12)

Feeling valued – we especially noticed a number of references to people wanting to give themselves, keen to help others

*‘I like to help people and for neighbours to help each other. That helps my mental health, I've had lots of issues over the years, but I like to help people, it helps me feel better.’*  
(Conversation 11)

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*“I think this place makes a real difference to people. They have all sorts of different things on, I like to contribute. I'm a baker. If it's anyone's birthday I make a cake.”* (Conversation 31)

A sense of reciprocity, being an active citizen made a huge difference to people's sense of self-worth.

## Support to Gain Confidence. Feeling Welcome, not Judged.

We repeatedly heard how having support from someone you trust helped people gain confidence and progress.

*“Having someone beside me to do it really helped. I think when you are just on the phone on your own that's really hard. It's great that the council can help us not everyone's got a niece like me... the lady (at the District Council) was really helpful and really friendly she made me feel I could do it.”*  
(Conversation 14)

Importantly, this support needs to be freely offered, non-judgemental, given in the spirit of positive support, not condescending.

*‘Support makes a difference when it's personal, when people care about you. You don't want to be judged. We all live differently and we all have problems at some point.’* (Conversation 11)

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*‘Or if there is help, make it more known how to, you know, get help. I think people will be... I don't know, too timid and be embarrassed to come over and speak, especially the young ones. I think it's important that you're not judged maybe anonymously’* (Conversation 9)

The same lack of judgement and openness was also seen to be important in terms of encouragement to try things for the first time.

*'It's a good mix of things, you can just sit and chat if you like, or you can get involved in the activities. There's a volunteer who will be here tomorrow who's learnt how to teach chair exercises, we have the elastic bands, I like that, I didn't think I would.'* (Conversation31)

## Sensemaking 2

The second Sensemaking Session both endorsed the findings of the first and teased out new themes/details. The broad themes remained:

- Trusted Relationships
- Sense of Purpose
- Support to Gain Confidence. Feeling Welcome, not Judged.

In this second session we broke into two discussion groups which gave us the opportunity to dig a little deeper into themes:

*Poverty premium – families and particularly single people demonstrating with real life examples that the cost of general living is more expensive for those on lower incomes:*

- paying a higher rate for energy as they are unable to manage direct debits as have an unstable incomes or previous debts
- Seeing their car insurance double this year, for no reason and unable to pay in one payment increases the fee.
- Being stuck in a rural community with no transport results in needing to shop at supermarkets whose prices are higher – they have a captive audience, and residents feel penalised, particularly relevant for those in rural communities, those without transport and those who do not live near a lower priced supermarket such as Aldi or Lidl
- Living alone is particularly expensive to heat a house, lots of shared stories on heating the individual rather than the house as a lower cost solution, things like increases in TV license and prescriptions mentioned a number of times
- A number of conversations included evidence of informal financial support and loans from and between friends and family in order to get by to the end of the month or week or for unexpected repairs (such as a car)

### How 'savvy' people are in coping with the Cost of Living

- Lots of examples of people shopping around, making wise choices and weighing up their options financially, spreading payments etc
- Evidence of people sharing top tips eg about deals, grants, and advice on money-saving.
- A sense that politicians/those with power judged people who were struggling unfairly and that they don't understand the reality (including Mental Load – see below)

## Mental Load

- Whilst mental health did not come up in discussions often, the mental load and burden of carrying all the many decisions did, including:
  - Budgeting – both large scale for the family and specifically eg adding up cost as you go round the supermarket, saving 10p here and there
  - Turning off plugs
  - Being exhausted by coping – exacerbated by discomfort of the cold
  - Keeping track of everything is hard and takes additional energy eg spread payments
- The stress and anxiety of coping with financial instability takes mental energy.
- These feelings are exacerbated by the fact that people do not have the opportunities to recharge (eg with treats, holidays and leisure activities)

## The importance of Community Connection / Current sense of Isolation – *particularly for older people, those living alone, single parents and those in rural communities*

- The modern world has meant families are disconnected and live far apart, resulting in a lack of connection and support when needed
- Living alone came across as particularly concerning and costly with additional burdens on heating / food and prolonged periods of no-human contact
- Whilst isolation came up in conversation, there was a sense of camaraderie, a shared sense that it is difficult for many.
- Free activities in churches, village centres and community spaces, often provided by faith groups and the voluntary sector provide a lifeline. Activities that provide food were an essential element of bringing people together for conversation and a sense of community
- There is a sense that there is a lot of help around, but it is difficult to find out about. Majority of programmes mentioned by people as to what has made the most difference / most helpful were community-based solutions – breakfast clubs, food clubs, community living rooms, coffee mornings, toddler and family lunch clubs etc
- Observations: The professionals noted that a promotion campaign is not necessarily the answer as VCS would undoubtedly feel the burden of increased pressure to further meet an increasing demand for support and help. Further exploration across the sector on a) increasing awareness of support and b) better understanding of pressures of VCS and community led support, c) further exploration of how to fund, encourage and support community solutions without this resulting in VCS or volunteer burnout

## The cost of Making Healthy Choices

- A great deal of discussions included awareness of choosing a healthy lifestyle, staying active and eating well. Discussions demonstrated that this is a privileged choice, for many not being able to achieve. Conversations of food costs increasing beyond their means, daily choices in how to stretch meals and budgets, which meals parents would skip etc and continuous planning of where to access free or affordable fresh produce were common throughout the appreciative enquiry.
- Many individuals mentioned the rising cost of exercise classes and clubs and this has become a luxury needing to be cut.



- Observations: Education on healthy choices is not necessarily the answer – the ability to pay for and access these choices is. Further work to explore this across public health / community sector who campaign for food justice

## Teenagers and young people's experiences

- The teenagers we talked to demonstrated a high degree of impact and awareness of the challenges of living in poverty. Whilst they didn't recognise the phrase 'cost of living' they did demonstrate impacts felt - including choosing to quit expensive activities such as football club and drama club as they knew parents couldn't afford it, paying for a friend to come to town as they knew their family had no spare money and they were missing out on seeing friend leading to being isolated, discussions at home about increasing costs of school uniforms, bills etc and a reduction in leisure pursuits. Young people demonstrated compassion and empathy, hiding their needs and wishes from parents as they didn't want to add to pressures or costs. There was clear evidence of a mental load being carried by teens of the impact felt by financial pressures.
- Observations: Our conversations only included a small number with young people. Further study on impact felt by young people and the impact on mental wellbeing and life experiences would give useful insight.

## Specific and Practical issues:

- Some conversations demonstrated poor quality of housing with poorly executed insulation retrofit projects and concerns about damp and mould in older housing stock. Also a number of comments around lack of flooring.
- Digital exclusion didn't come up as a significant concern or burden in the second session (there were less older people spoken to in this set of conversations, which may be relevant).
- How significantly having a child with Special Educational Needs impacts people's lives, and that the multitude of effects
- Lots of people said they were reducing their use of cars and had stopped trips out to see friends and family.
- Quite a few people chose to bring up smoking and how increasingly aware they were of the cost and referenced this as a motivation to stop.

## Next Steps.

In the Appreciative Enquiry process, if the first round of conversations raises further questions, you refine your questions and go back out to have further conversations. If the work of the Commission extends beyond the initial timelines and the recommendations of the Commissioners lend themselves to this, we could potentially shape new questions together and do further Discovery rounds.

The team involved reflected that it would have been useful to host conversations in a broader array of venues (we tended to hold conversations at community activities). We also feel it would be fruitful for System Partners to do more indepth Place Based work alongside people with Firsthand Knowledge to inform and shape actions, our sense being that district level would work.



## Appendix A: Appreciative Enquiry Questions

### Opening blurb/explainer

In addition to introducing yourself, please explain:

- We're part of a team of people from the community and public sector, keen to find out how the Cost of Living is affecting people.
- There is an independent group of Commissioners who are focused on finding ways to create lasting change in Cambridgeshire.
- To do that well they need to hear what matters to you as a local resident. It's important that they hear about your experience.

We're aware that talking can bring up issues – please only tell us what you're comfortable sharing. We won't record or share any personal details, it's about sharing your experience.

### Opening Question

1. What ways are you finding to cope with the Cost of Living?

### Developing Questions

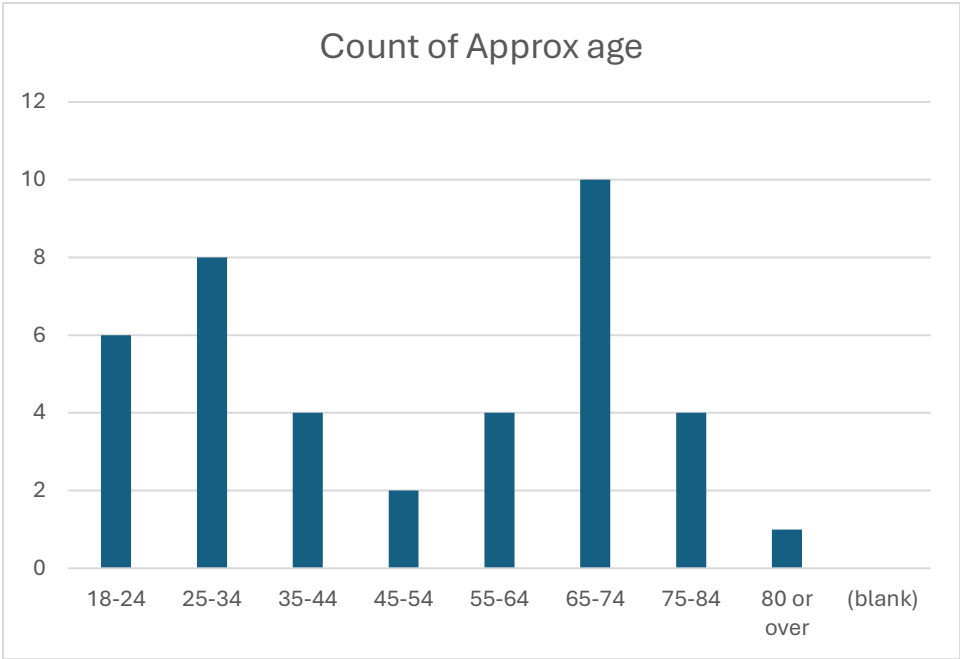
2. What keeps you going or gives you strength when things are difficult?
3. What are the places, things or people in your life that you can rely on?
4. If things could change in a way that made life easier or better for you, what would that look like?
5. What has been a small win in your life recently? How did it make you feel, and what do you think helped make it happen?
6. What is one thing you wish you had more access to in your daily life?
7. What advice would you give to those who support others in your situation more effectively?
8. What if anything has worked in the past that you'd like to see come back?
9. Who or what in your community has been most helpful to you? How has this support made a difference in your life?
10. What are your main money concerns at this time of year?
11. Is there anything you enjoyed that you have had to stop doing, due to lack of money?
12. Has lack of money made a difference to you, your children and your wider family? And how?
13. Does your income level made a difference to your ability to be healthy and well? If so, how?
14. If there's one thing you could choose for your future, what would that be?
15. What support are you aware of that is available to you in your community/local area?

# Appendix B: Demographic Data

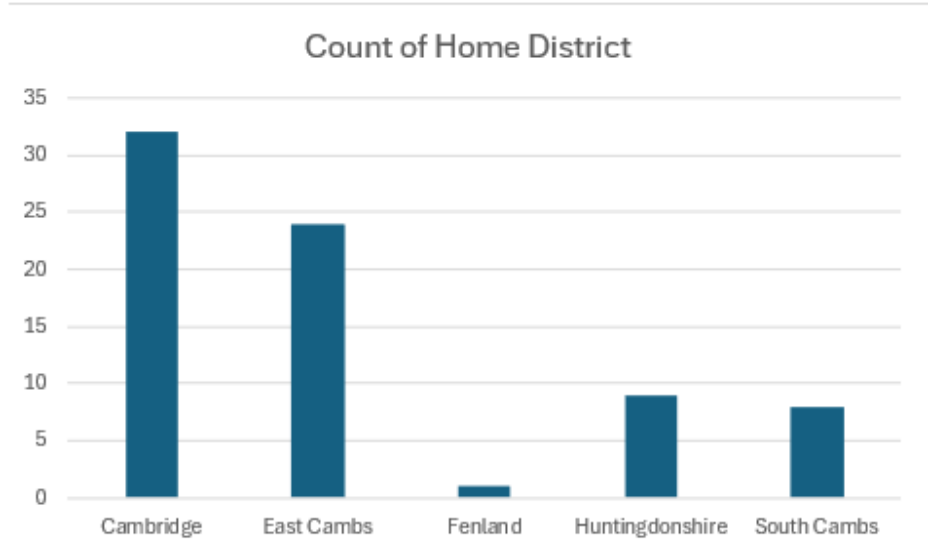
In total we spoke to 75 people

Based on observations of the Conversation Hosts, these are the demographics. Not all conversation hosts recorded demographics

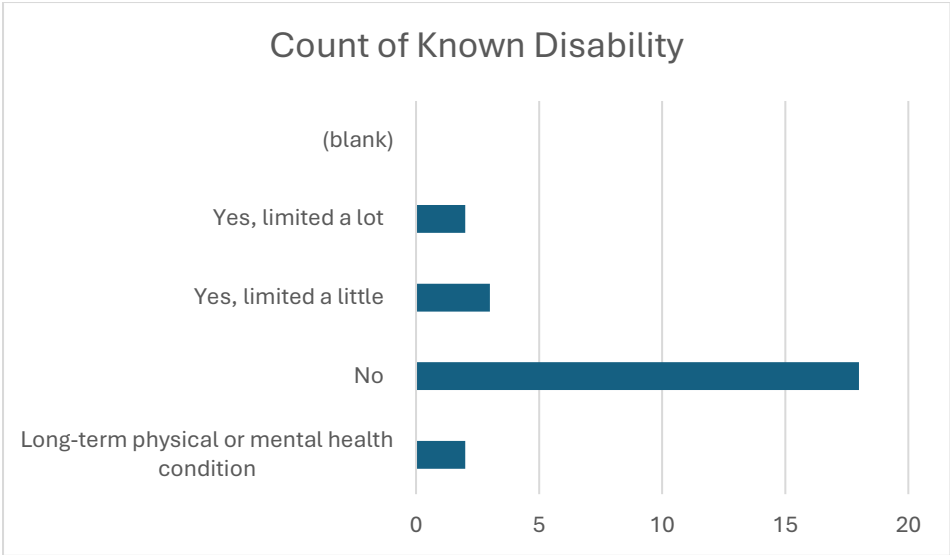
We used the same demographic categories as Resolve Poverty.



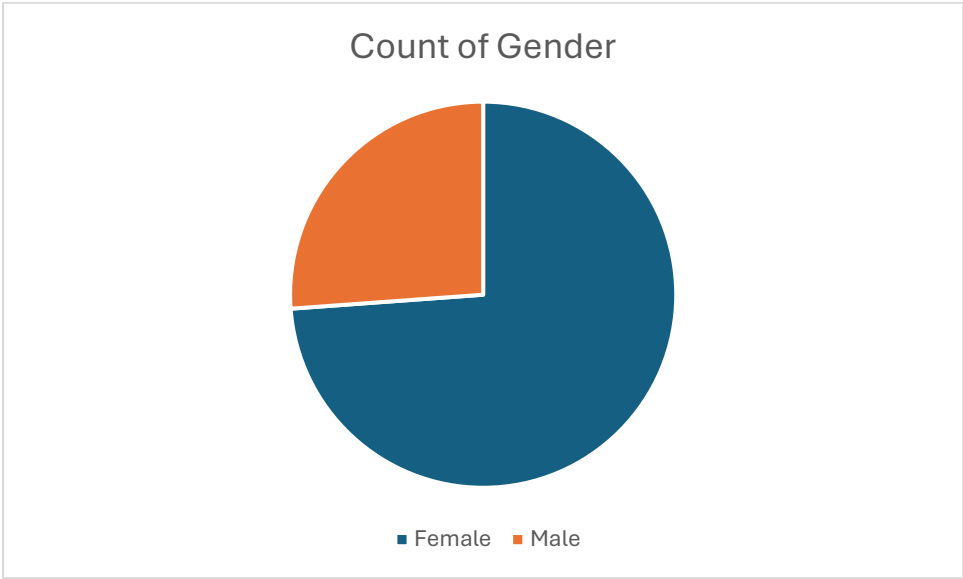
39 of 75 recorded.



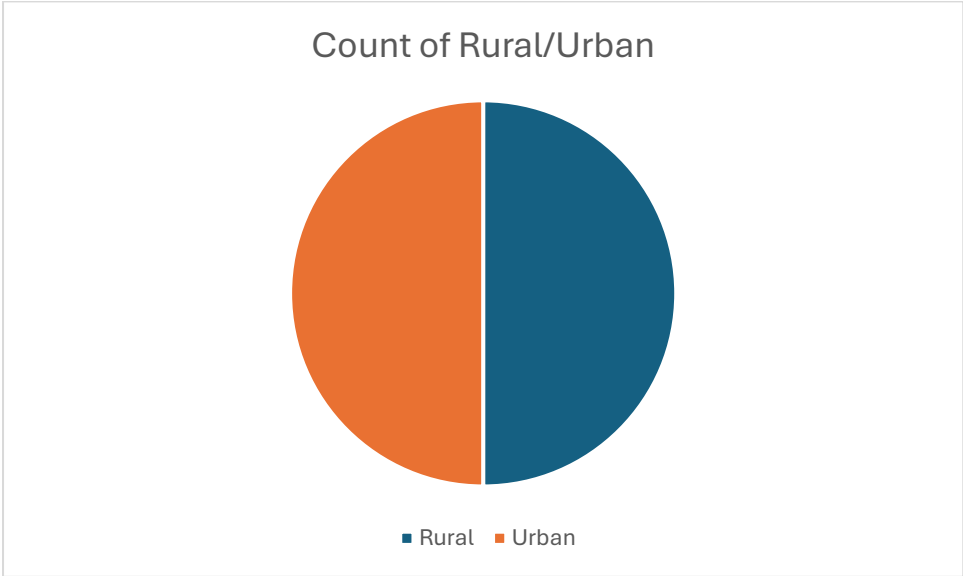
75 of 75 recorded.



25 of 75 recorded



65 out of 75 recorded



70 out of 75 recorded.

## *Appendix C: How AI (Microsoft Co-pilot) summarised the themes from the Conversation Write Ups*

### **Financial Struggles and Cost of Living**

Many individuals expressed significant financial struggles, particularly in managing daily expenses such as food, utilities, and housing. For example, a mother of two mentioned how her family struggles to live on £900 a month, with her partner needing mental health assessments that are difficult to obtain[1]. Another mother shared her challenges with Universal Credit and the impact of her son's special educational needs on her ability to work[1]. The rising cost of living, including food and energy prices, was a common concern, with many individuals having to make difficult choices between heating and eating[1].

### **Health and Disability**

Health issues and disabilities were frequently mentioned as exacerbating financial difficulties. Several individuals discussed the challenges of accessing necessary medical assessments and support for conditions such as ADHD and epilepsy[1]. The impact of health issues on employment and daily life was also highlighted, with one individual mentioning the long wait for a diagnosis and the financial burden of medication[1].

### **Mental Health**

Mental health was a recurring theme, with many individuals discussing the stress and anxiety caused by financial instability and the lack of support. One mother mentioned how attending community groups helped her mental health by providing social interaction and support[1]. Another individual highlighted the importance of community support in managing mental health issues[1].

### **Community and Social Support**

The importance of community and social support was emphasized throughout the conversations. Many individuals found solace and assistance through community centers, food banks, and support groups[1]. For example, a mother mentioned how attending a Babybank helped her with essential items for her children and provided a sense of community[1]. Another individual discussed the positive impact of community pantries and Timebanks in providing support and fostering a sense of belonging[1].

### **Housing and Living Conditions**

Poor housing conditions and the impact on health and well-being were significant concerns. One individual described living in a house with severe damp issues that led to hospitalizations for her

children[1]. The challenges of finding affordable and suitable housing were also mentioned, with some individuals having to move frequently due to poor living conditions or domestic violence[1].

## **Employment and Education**

Employment challenges, particularly for those with caring responsibilities or health issues, were frequently discussed. One mother had to leave her job due to her son's special educational needs[1]. The lack of adequate support in schools for children with special needs was also highlighted, impacting parents' ability to work[1]. Education was seen as a crucial area for investment, with one individual emphasizing the need for better funding to ensure children receive the support they need[1].

## **Food Insecurity**

Food insecurity was a common issue, with many individuals relying on food banks and community support to meet their needs. The high cost of food and the difficulty of affording nutritious options were significant concerns[1]. Conversations also highlighted the importance of community initiatives in providing food support and reducing the stigma associated with food banks[1].

## **Government and Policy**

Several individuals expressed frustration with government policies and the perceived lack of understanding from those in power. There was a sense that policies did not adequately address the needs of those struggling with poverty and that more should be done to support vulnerable populations[1]. The need for systemic change and better socioeconomic policies was emphasized[1].

## **Personal Resilience and Coping Strategies**

Despite the challenges, many individuals demonstrated resilience and resourcefulness in managing their situations. Strategies such as budgeting, seeking community support, and finding creative ways to save money were commonly mentioned[1]. The importance of kindness, community, and mutual support in coping with difficult circumstances was a recurring theme[1].

In summary, the document highlights the multifaceted nature of poverty and the cost of living crisis, touching on financial struggles, health and disability, mental health, community support, housing, employment, food insecurity, government policies, and personal resilience. The conversations provide a poignant insight into the lived experiences of individuals facing these challenges and underscore the need for comprehensive and compassionate support systems.