

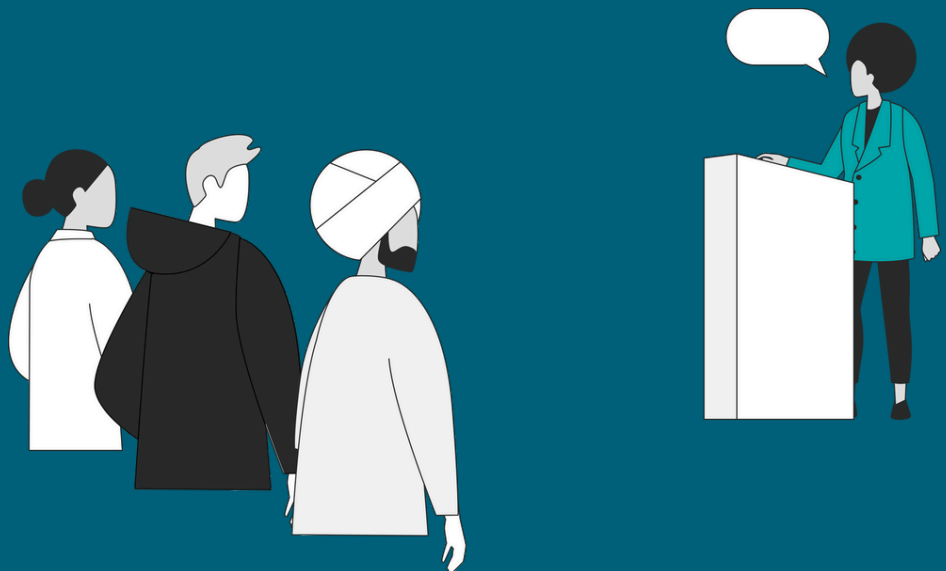


Working locally to end poverty nationally

FINAL REPORT:

Lived Experience of Poverty in Cambridgeshire - Research

December 2024



About us

Resolve Poverty is a leading anti-poverty organisation that delivers locally and regionally focused anti-poverty activities across the UK.

At Resolve Poverty, we work to the following strategic priorities:

- Maximising the financial resources available to households.
- Implementing strategic responses to poverty.
- Equipping stakeholders with the knowledge they need to tackle poverty.

We carry out our activities through three interdependent strands of work: advocacy, policy and research, programmes and knowledge development.

We have a proven track record of influencing councils and other public bodies' development and implementation of strategic approaches to poverty and the socio-economic duty, as well as creating spaces for a focus on policy responses to poverty.

We develop and deliver programmes such as our [Money Advice Referral Tool](#) and [Money Matters](#), aimed at boosting household incomes. We deliver training on poverty awareness and offer consultancy work to organisations considering their role in tackling poverty.

[Greater Manchester Living Wage Campaign](#), which has seen almost 800 employers accredited to the Living Wage Foundation since 2017.



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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the residents of Cambridgeshire who participated in this research, sharing their experiences with honesty and courage.

We are also grateful to the local organisations for their support in recruiting participants and welcoming us into their spaces to facilitate this important work.

Finally, we thank the Cambridgeshire County Council team for their support throughout this project.

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Executive summary

This report, commissioned by Cambridgeshire County Council to support the deliberations of the Cambridgeshire Poverty Strategy Commission, explores the lived experiences of residents facing poverty and financial insecurity across the county.

The commission was set up by local partners to explore how the system could work better together to address poverty, recognising that no one partner organisation has the ability, capability or capacity to address poverty on its own.

Through online and in-person workshops, the report identifies key challenges facing residents, including the rising cost of living, housing affordability, and limited access to support.

Based on these insights, the report provides strategic recommendations for the Cambridgeshire Poverty Strategy Commission to consider in order to improve local systems and strengthen the evidence base on poverty. The recommendations focus on improving access to support, fostering collaboration across sectors, and ensuring that residents with lived experience shape policy and decision-making. It calls for an ongoing commitment to build trust and ensure effective, inclusive participation in addressing poverty in the county.

Resolve Poverty hopes this report contributes to the Commission's efforts to improve systems and foster a more robust, evidence-based approach to addressing poverty in Cambridgeshire.

Key strategic recommendations

Based on the insights and feedback provided by residents, we have developed six strategic recommendations for the Cambridgeshire Poverty Strategy Commission to consider.

The report also includes other recommendations aimed at improving existing systems and addressing gaps in service provision.

These recommendations have been structured to foster collaboration across stakeholders and ensure that residents' voices are at the heart of decision-making.

1. Develop a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy and accompanying action plan

Cambridgeshire County Council should convene the development of a comprehensive, system-wide anti-poverty strategy, supported by a detailed action plan. This work must be undertaken collaboratively with district councils (Cambridge City, East Cambridgeshire, Fenland, Huntingdonshire, and South Cambridgeshire), the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, and key partners such as the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Integrated Care Board and voluntary sector organisations across the county.

Tackling poverty must be a shared responsibility, with all stakeholders working together to leverage local strengths and assets. It is essential to outline the spheres of influence available to all levels of local government and key partners, focusing on the areas they can effectively impact. While local government may not have all the levers necessary to fully address poverty, it can make the best use of the powers it holds to drive meaningful change. Effective collaboration with other sectors is crucial to address gaps and maximise collective impact.

The timing is critical, given the renewed focus on a national Child Poverty Strategy, highlighting the need for coordinated local action. A robust anti-poverty strategy is both essential and urgent to ensure Cambridgeshire's efforts align with and contribute to national priorities. Based on what residents told us was important to them, the anti-poverty strategy should concentrate on three core themes:

- **Prevention and reduction:** Addressing the root causes of poverty through long-term actions, including maximising incomes, fostering an inclusive economy, and improving access to affordable, safe, and secure housing.

- **Mitigation:** Delivering timely and targeted support to individuals and families in financial hardship, ensuring their essential needs are met effectively.
- **Partnership working:** Strengthening collaboration across public and voluntary sectors, sharing best practices and engaging people with lived experience of poverty in the design of services and policies.

The strategy must clearly define roles and responsibilities across stakeholders to ensure effective collaboration. It should align with existing local strategies, plans and programmes, avoiding duplication while complementing ongoing efforts. Governance structures must support accountability, with mechanisms to review progress and adapt the approach based on changing circumstances.

A range of monitoring and evaluation indicators should be used, recognising the need for a tailored approach. These indicators should track measurable improvements in outcomes, including access to services and support. Importantly, quantitative data must be complemented by insights from people with lived experience of poverty ensuring the strategy reflects community needs and priorities through continuous feedback.

The accompanying action plan should outline priority actions linked to the strategy's themes, specifying clear timelines, responsibilities, and evaluation metrics. Both the strategy and action plan must be treated as living documents, adaptable to evolving needs, ensuring their ongoing relevance and impact.

2. Embed the socio-economic duty across public bodies in Cambridgeshire

Public bodies in Cambridgeshire should embed the socio-economic duty into their decision-making processes. While Cambridgeshire County Council has already adopted the duty, other public bodies, including district councils, the combined authority, and the integrated care system, should also consider its adoption.

The socio-economic duty is contained within Section 1 of the Equality Act 2010 and was designed to ensure that strategic decisions and policies improve outcomes for those experiencing poverty. Specifically, its adoption requires that, "when making decisions of a strategic nature about how to exercise [their] functions", public bodies seek to exercise them in such a way as "to reduce the inequalities of outcome which result from socio-economic disadvantage" (Equality Act 2010 c.1). Despite being part of the Equality Act since 2010, the duty has not been enacted in England.

However, there is growing momentum for its voluntary adoption, and the government has committed to enacting the duty in its manifesto. Plans for broad consultation are underway to ensure its implementation is as effective as possible. This makes it an opportune time for public bodies in Cambridgeshire to act ahead of the duty's imminent statutory enactment next year.

Adopting the socio-economic duty would be vital to Cambridgeshire's strategic approach to addressing poverty. Embedding this duty within public sector frameworks strengthens local efforts to tackle socio-economic inequalities, ensuring that decision-making prioritises the needs of disadvantaged communities. By taking action now, Cambridgeshire can demonstrate leadership, fostering a cohesive anti-poverty ecosystem and aligning with national priorities to reduce poverty and inequality.

Research by Resolve Poverty (2024) found that 47 councils in England have adopted the socio-economic duty, marking a 21% increase since 2022. This reflects a broader commitment among councils to address poverty and socio-economic inequality. Adoption extends beyond local authorities; in Greater Manchester, 80% of councils have voluntarily adopted the duty, supported by widespread recognition of socio-economic disadvantage across the public sector. Notably, Transport for Greater Manchester adopted the duty in 2022, and NHS Greater Manchester is considering adoption with Resolve Poverty's support.

Resolve Poverty continues to advocate for national enactment of the duty while supporting public bodies in its voluntary adoption. As a member of the 1forEquality Campaign—a coalition of equality, civil rights, and anti-poverty organisations—we champion the socio-economic duty as a powerful tool to tackle poverty and promote a fairer society.

3. A system-wide commitment to robust participatory engagement

Many residents expressed that they do not feel their voices are being heard or acted upon in local decision-making processes, suggesting that existing methods may not effectively reach or engage all sections of the community. To address these concerns, Cambridgeshire's County Council, district councils, public bodies, and key partners such as those in the voluntary sector must commit to ongoing, innovative community engagement. This should focus on amplifying voices and removing barriers to participation.

The County Council should take a leadership role in setting clear expectations for engagement, supporting capacity-building efforts, and facilitating collaboration across public bodies in Cambridgeshire. This includes ensuring residents feel recognised and valued for their contributions while fostering an equitable approach that maximises participation opportunities.

District councils should prioritise informal and accessible engagement settings to foster trust and inclusion. Feedback from residents suggested initiatives such as open forums, community drop-in sessions, and digital platforms offering flexible participation options.

Residents also highlighted the importance of creative and enjoyable approaches, such as arts-based activities, to engage the community effectively.

Addressing barriers to participation

Feedback from residents emphasised the need to identify and address barriers to ensure robust participation. Strategies include:

- **Accessible and supported participation:** Ensure physical and mobility needs are accommodated while providing resources to cover transport, childcare, or other necessary expenses.
- **Peer support:** Introduce buddying schemes to assist individuals with anxiety, health, or mobility challenges.
- **Offering training and volunteering activities:** Empower residents to become advocates for change through offering training and volunteering activities for engagement in the community.
- **Utilise a range of engagement methods:** Combine accessible communication approaches, such as face-to-face interaction, printed materials, and digital outreach through social media, with creative activities like arts-based methods, visual storytelling, and interactive projects to enable residents to share their experiences in relatable ways.
- **Collaborative partnerships and trust-building:** Work with frontline services, grassroots groups, and local networks to lead lived-experience engagement activities. Feedback from residents highlighted the importance of building trust in engagement processes. Participants appreciated the independence of the research team, Resolve Poverty. Many individuals expressed their hesitations about engaging directly with official bodies, emphasising the need for safe spaces where they can share their experiences without fear, to foster openness.

All levels of local government and key partners in Cambridgeshire must prioritise long-term trust-building. This involves independent, approachable engagement practices, safe spaces for open dialogue, and mechanisms to translate community insights into actionable changes. Participatory engagement must be embedded as a core principle in anti-poverty activity to ensure local voices directly inform policies and practices. A unified commitment to this approach will help Cambridgeshire move beyond conversations. It will embed learning into policy reforms while building trust and fostering a sense of ownership within local communities.

4. Improve access and awareness of local support services

Access to local support services remains a significant challenge for many residents in Cambridgeshire, with recurring themes of confusion, poor communication, and inadequate infrastructure. Addressing these barriers is essential to ensure people get the help they need and reduce preventable demand for public services.

These challenges are particularly acute for those living in rural areas, where geographical isolation and digital exclusion often compound the problem. Additionally, communication barriers have been identified, with residents facing difficulties navigating local systems or accessing online information. These challenges often stem from language barriers and a lack of clarity or accessibility to official information.

Residents consistently emphasised the need for better access to primary care services. For healthcare partners, including the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Integrated Care Board, there is a pressing need to ensure that residents, particularly those in rural areas, can access timely and effective primary care. Expanding services and addressing barriers such as transportation and digital exclusion will be critical to achieving equitable healthcare access across Cambridgeshire.

Residents also highlighted the importance of improving access to key support services, such as community hubs, money and debt advice, and local welfare schemes. All levels of local government in Cambridgeshire and key partners must adopt a more coordinated and multi-channel approach to service delivery. This should include digital, telephone, and face-to-face support options, ensuring services are accessible to all. Expanding face-to-face services is particularly important for those who feel anxious about using phones or lack access to digital tools.

Cambridgeshire already offers a wide range of support, including debt advice, benefit checks, entitlement processing, and assistance through initiatives like the Cambridgeshire Local Assistance Scheme. This scheme works closely with organisations such as Cambridge and District Citizens Advice Bureau, Citizens Advice Rural Cambridgeshire, and the Cambridgeshire Community Reuse and Recycling Network to support residents in crisis. However, greater promotion of these partnerships and resources, such as the Household Support Fund, is needed to ensure all residents know the help available. Improved referral processes, better signposting, and targeted communication will help people maximise their incomes, claim the benefits they are entitled to, manage household expenditures, and reduce debt. Simplifying application processes, including making forms easier to complete, will remove unnecessary barriers. To ensure these efforts are effective and to identify opportunities for scaling successful initiatives, ongoing monitoring of support programmes is essential.

Better use of existing community assets, such as libraries, children's centres, and community hubs, can support the creation of integrated, one-stop-shop support models. These spaces play a vital role in bringing services closer to residents. Enhancing affordable and reliable transportation links is critical to addressing geographical isolation and ensuring residents can access employment, education, and vital services. The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority and the Greater Cambridge Partnership must prioritise improving public transport networks to create equitable and sustainable connectivity across the region.

5. Improve access to affordable, safe, and secure homes

Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council, continue to manage their own housing stock. Other councils have transferred their housing to stock transfer landlords, including Sanctuary, Clarion, and Chorus Homes (now part of the Places for People group).

While significant progress is being made through initiatives such as the Greater Cambridge Housing Strategy, the Cambridgeshire Housing Board, and the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority's affordable housing programmes, which have delivered 1,449 new homes, residents continue to face serious challenges. Many have highlighted the financial strain caused by unaffordable rents or mortgages. Common concerns include overcrowding, lack of privacy, children sharing bedrooms, and the inability to host friends—all of which have a profound impact on mental health, wellbeing, and social relationships.

The Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Joint Health & Wellbeing Integrated Care Strategy has highlighted the intersection of housing and health. The lack of suitable accommodation directly impacts health provision in Greater Cambridge, and addressing this issue is integral to improving overall wellbeing.

Residents clearly expressed what they want to see prioritised in the region:

- **Increasing the supply of affordable housing:** Partnering with local housing authorities and developers to accelerate new housing projects is essential, ensuring affordable housing is accessible to residents, particularly those struggling to afford market rents.
- **Addressing quality issues in existing properties:** Poor living conditions, including dampness and mould, remain significant. While there are systems in place for reporting and resolving these issues, more needs to be done to improve the speed and effectiveness of solutions.

6. Promote community wealth building

Residents seeking better employment opportunities faced barriers to skill advancement, particularly due to the lack of affordable local courses and accessible information about educational and training opportunities. Many highlighted that finding relevant courses or retraining options often felt challenging and unclear, especially without a central resource for this information.

Community wealth building is an approach that focuses on using local assets, resources, and powers to build an inclusive and sustainable economy that benefits everyone. It emphasises the importance of empowering communities, supporting local businesses, and ensuring wealth circulates within the local economy (Centre for Local Economic Strategies, 2020).

Based on what residents have told us, we recommend promoting community wealth building by collaborating with local and sub-regional partners, including Cambridgeshire County Council, the Greater Cambridge Partnership, and the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority. By working with social enterprises and other experts, this approach can help address inequalities in education, skills, and employment outcomes. Developing accessible pathways for learning, skills development, and employment support is essential to opening up higher-paid job opportunities. In addition, identifying and collaborating with anchor institutions will encourage good local business practices. Examples of these practices include:

- Paying the Real Living Wage
- Supporting fair recruitment practices
- Providing local employment opportunities, apprenticeships, and skills training programmes to enhance access to better employment for residents.

These initiatives will help stimulate local economic growth and create stable employment opportunities for residents.

1 Introduction

Cambridgeshire, like many areas across the UK, faces significant challenges related to poverty and financial insecurity, which the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing cost-of-living crisis have exacerbated.

Rising prices for essentials—such as energy, fuel, and food—along with stagnant wages and welfare reforms have deepened inequalities, pushing more households into financial hardship.

These challenges are further compounded by a decade of severe funding cuts to local government. Between 2010-11 and 2020-21, central government funding for local authorities fell in real terms by over 50%, while resources available to deliver services dropped by 26% (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2022).

In Cambridgeshire, the impact of these pressures is stark. In 2022, approximately 16,700 families in Cambridgeshire lived below the poverty line, including 13,500 children aged 0-15 before housing costs, with child poverty rates ranging from 8% in South Cambridgeshire to 21% in Fenland (Department for Work and Pensions, 2023). The 2024 Quality of Life Survey further revealed that 87% of residents expressed concern over the rising cost of living (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2024).

The government's forthcoming national Child Poverty Strategy, set to be published in Spring 2025, presents a significant opportunity to align national and local efforts to address poverty. This renewed focus raises important questions about how a national strategy can complement existing local and regional approaches and empower more localities to take effective action against poverty.

The work of the Cambridgeshire Poverty Strategy Commission is vital in shaping Cambridgeshire's strategic direction to address poverty effectively. This report, commissioned by Cambridgeshire County Council on behalf of the local system, explores the perceptions and experiences of Cambridgeshire residents facing poverty and financial insecurity gathered through in-person and online workshops. It provides valuable insights into the challenges people face, the changes they wish to see in the local system, and the positive work already being done to prevent and mitigate the impact of poverty across the county.

Drawing on these insights, the report sets out recommendations for the Cambridgeshire Poverty Strategy Commission to consider as part of its strategic review of how the local system might respond to challenges. The recommendations in this report are grounded in the recognition of systemic challenges while emphasising the potential to utilise local levers and build on existing strengths.

The report underscores the importance of developing a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy and action plan by bringing stakeholders together to maximise synergies and impact. It also identifies areas requiring further exploration beyond the scope of this report. This highlights the need for ongoing inquiry to strengthen the evidence base for effective anti-poverty activity.

We hope this report will encourage further engagement and support a strategic approach to tackling poverty. Resolve Poverty remains committed to this effort, bringing expertise in policy guidance and practical support to help drive meaningful change across Cambridgeshire.

1.1 Key areas of inquiry

This research aimed to deepen understanding of the challenges residents have experienced in Cambridgeshire regarding poverty and financial hardship and to explore the changes they wish to see, based on existing examples of good practice and gaps in provision. The discussions were structured around three key areas:

1. Community concerns and priorities

Residents shared their primary concerns and priorities, focusing on the most pressing issues related to poverty in their communities and groups most in need of support.

2. Local anti-poverty efforts: what is working well and what could be improved

Residents discussed how local councils and organisations address these challenges and identified areas where support could be strengthened.

3. Opportunities for community engagement

Residents expressed how they would like to be involved in local decision-making about poverty-related issues, suggesting ways to improve opportunities for meaningful participation.

1.2 Methodology

We conducted our research by directly engaging with Cambridgeshire residents with lived experience of poverty and financial insecurity. Centred on the three key areas of inquiry, we engaged with 95 residents through focus groups and by visiting existing community support groups in Cambridgeshire in late October and early November. The sessions encouraged engagement through interactive group discussions and one-to-one conversations, allowing residents to share their stories. These discussions covered how residents engage with 'the system' and access services, and how their experiences might influence positive change in the area. Members of the Resolve Poverty team facilitated all sessions to maintain consistency and independence in approach and delivery.

The data gathered from these workshops was collated and analysed to identify key themes. Our findings in this report aim to faithfully convey the tangible and less visible impacts of poverty on individuals and communities across Cambridgeshire, including through participants' anonymised stories and quotes. Given the nature of the discussions, some themes and quotes address sensitive and potentially distressing experiences. We approached these topics with care, ensuring participants were supported throughout, and we encourage readers to seek support if affected.

Our research was guided by the principle that researchers should undertake research where their subjects are, rather than expecting participants to come to them. We, therefore, initially determined locations using relevant poverty-related datasets from the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Insight website. This process was intended to maximise the geographic accessibility of the workshops for those living in areas with higher prevalence of poverty and deprivation, such as Elm and Christchurch Ward and Huntingdon. Participant recruitment took place throughout October in collaboration with Cambridgeshire County Council, local public bodies and VCSE sector organisations, who facilitated outreach and engagement. A complete list can be found in Appendix Two.

A core principle of our research was that all residents who wished to participate should have an equal opportunity to be heard. To support this, we conducted eight in-person workshops with 56 participants across the five Cambridgeshire districts (Cambridge, East Cambridgeshire, Fenland, Huntingdon, South Cambridgeshire) and two further online workshops with 33 participants for those who could not attend in person.

We worked with the County Council and partner organisations to find suitable venues to maximise physical accessibility, ensuring that people with disabilities could attend. Additionally, those who faced barriers to engagement or preferred not to join a group setting were offered the opportunity to meet one-on-one with a member of the Resolve Poverty team, six one-on-one sessions were held.

Our hybrid approach sought to accommodate the needs of participants in different locations in Cambridgeshire, enabling flexibility for those who preferred in-person or online participation. We achieved a good balance of participation, with an average of 16 participants per district. Across the five districts, we engaged with 16 participants in Cambridge, 17 in East Cambridgeshire, 19 in Fenland, 14 in Huntingdon and 13 in South Cambridgeshire.

Our approach ensured that our research was balanced and representative of different demographics and communities within the locality, particularly regarding age, disability, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status. A full breakdown of the demographic data can be found in Appendix One. We have received demographic information from 79 (83%) of the 95 participants. Participation in the demographic survey was voluntary, and some respondents did not provide this information.

We sought to reflect the entire locality by achieving gender parity and ensuring that the 10% of the Cambridgeshire population born in EU countries were adequately represented. In addition to its intrinsic importance, the wide variety of perspectives, issues and proposals for improvement noted by residents across different locations and demographics clarified the instrumental value of such an approach.

At Resolve Poverty, we are committed to upholding the highest ethical standards in research. Recognising that participation in research can be overwhelming for some, especially on sensitive issues, we took measures to create a safe and transparent environment. We minimised risks and harms by emphasising anonymity, respecting voluntary participation, and fostering a genuine atmosphere of respect. This approach aimed to build participants' understanding of the research process and ensure they felt comfortable and valued. We also closely monitored for any signs of distress and provided referrals to additional support services for those who required assistance following workshops.

Furthermore, we only recorded workshops where appropriate and with participants' permission. Recording was not feasible in some sessions due to privacy concerns or specific participant preferences. Throughout the research process, we adhered to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018, ensuring findings were anonymised to protect participants' identities.

The budget for this work also enabled additional benefits for communities across Cambridgeshire. Over £3,500 was distributed to participants as compensation for their time. Partner organisations that assisted recruitment were also supported, including Hunts Forum, the Red Hen Project, Cambridge Cyrenians, and the Rosmini Centre. Cambridgeshire ACRE, whose efforts facilitated significant engagement, received £1,480 to support their ongoing work delivering local groups and services, such as providing food and warm spaces for residents.

1.3 Approach to data analysis

The methodology for this research combined note-taking during workshops and audio recordings to capture participants' insights. This approach allowed for a detailed exploration of key themes and issues, offering rich and comprehensive qualitative data on the lived experiences, opinions, and proposals for change expressed by participants in Cambridgeshire.

The transcripts and notes from the sessions were analysed to identify key themes emerging in relation to the research questions and discussion guide. Key points, participant insights, and anonymised illustrative quotes were recorded and categorised using Excel.

Recurring themes and insights were validated through triangulation across multiple sessions and data sources.

This ensured that the findings presented were reflective of the discussions that took place during the workshops. However, due to the exploratory nature of the research and selective audio recordings, this report does not quantify the frequency of specific issues raised by participants. Instead, the focus is on identifying qualitative patterns and providing a nuanced understanding of the key challenges and opportunities highlighted.

When terms such as "many" are used in this report to describe perspectives or themes, they reflect recurring patterns observed within the sample of research participants. These terms are not intended to generalise to the wider population but rather to convey the qualitative nature of the findings and the insights shared during the workshops.

1.4 Limitations and future considerations

While this research provides valuable insights into the challenges of poverty and financial insecurity in Cambridgeshire, several limitations should be acknowledged, alongside areas for future exploration to enhance the evidence base.

Despite efforts to engage a diverse range of participants, certain groups were underrepresented, including younger residents aged 18–24 and those with long-term physical or mental health conditions and carers, particularly those providing significant levels of unpaid care. Additionally, many participants were recruited through community organisations, which may not fully represent the experiences of those outside formal support networks.

The timeline for this research impacted the depth of engagement possible, limiting the ability to explore complex systemic issues in great detail. While useful insights were gained and key themes identified, several areas would benefit from further investigation to provide a fuller understanding of the challenges facing specific groups in Cambridgeshire.

Future research could focus on a deeper exploration of the barriers certain groups in the community face:

- **Global Majority communities:** Barriers to accessing local services, such as a lack of cultural inclusivity and communication issues when accessing information and getting support online and face-to-face.
- **Younger people:** Barriers to accessing education and securing sustainable employment opportunities.
- **Men:** Inequalities in accessing support services, particularly in mental health and general healthcare provision.
- **Individuals with long-term physical or mental health conditions:** The intersection of health challenges and financial insecurity, and barriers to accessing appropriate support.

- **Older people and unpaid carers:** Challenges these groups face in rural areas, particularly where younger populations are declining, and disparities in access to essential services.

We hope that the deliberations of the Cambridgeshire Poverty Strategy Commission can build on the findings of this research to address these limitations and expand the evidence base. Resolve Poverty would be happy to provide further support to the Commission, utilising our expertise to conduct additional research into these areas and ensure that diverse perspectives are captured comprehensively.

2 Concerns, priorities, and local anti-poverty efforts

This section outlines the main concerns and priorities expressed by residents. It focuses on issues such as the cost of living, awareness of available support, housing affordability and quality, access to essential services, and the impact of stigma.

We gathered insights on how local government, public bodies, and community organisations are responding to these challenges and identified areas where support could be enhanced.

Additionally, this section presents key recommendations based on resident feedback for the Cambridgeshire Poverty Strategy Commission to consider to improve the local system.

Cost of living

Participants highlighted struggles with rising bills, food prices, childcare costs, and debt. Many shared how these issues are affecting their ability to cover basic needs. One participant noted, "Food prices have doubled, and I have to shop around for the best deals." Another shared, "I'm skipping meals so my children can eat." Debt was also a growing concern, with many borrowing money from family members to make ends meet. One participant said, "I had to borrow from my parents just to pay the electric bill, and now I'm worried about paying them back." Others mentioned relying on difficult financial measures, like pawning items or taking out high-interest loans, to cover basic expenses. The combined pressures of rising living costs and insufficient support have left many residents feeling hopeless. One participant shared, "I reckon at least 95% of [residents] were in debt in some form... [The council] gives you advice, but... it's easier to get a loan and then get into problems."



Linda is not eligible for Pension Credit as her income is slightly above the earnings threshold, meaning she will miss out on the Winter Fuel Allowance this year. She shared she is **"definitely going to feel it"** and will need to use her heating less, in spite of being worried about what this could mean for her health. Linda said she feels judged by society, as if she should be able to afford to live without the Allowance and is seen as **"living in a nice area where people surely can't struggle for money."**

A key theme from residents was that they were less concerned about which level of government—county, district, or city—was providing support. What mattered to them was having clear guidance on where to access help. Residents expressed frustration that, while services were available, it was not always easy to navigate who could offer what support. They wanted to know where they could turn for assistance, emphasising the importance of having easily accessible, straightforward information about available resources.

Recommendations

2.1 Strengthen preventive approaches to addressing poverty

Facilitate earlier access to a comprehensive range of support services across Cambridgeshire, recognising the significant efforts already underway by Cambridgeshire County Council, district councils, and partner organisations. These efforts include outreach for welfare rights, debt advice, benefit checks and processing, entitlement assistance, and financial capability support. While these activities are already in place, there is a continued need to ensure that all residents can fully maximise their income and financial stability, building on existing initiatives.

The recent launch of the Pension Credit campaign by Cambridgeshire County Council is encouraging and can help older residents access their entitlements. Local councils should continue to scale up efforts to promote the take-up of benefits through targeted communications and broader promotional campaigns, including Healthy Start vouchers, Free School Meals and other benefits. These efforts should be further improved through stronger coordination and alignment across local authorities in Cambridgeshire.

2.2 Enhance promotion and accessibility of the local safety net

We understand that the Cambridgeshire Local Assistance Scheme already works closely with organisations like Cambridge and District Citizens Advice Bureau, Citizens Advice Rural Cambridgeshire, Cambridge Re-Use, The Ferry Project, and Cambridgeshire Community Reuse and Recycling Network to identify and reach people and families in crisis before they seek help. However, there needs to be greater promotion of these partnerships and the Household Support Fund to ensure all residents are aware of these critical resources. Additionally, reviewing eligibility criteria and simplifying the application process, such as making forms easier to fill out, will help more residents access the support they need without unnecessary barriers.

2.3 Improve accessibility of cost of living resources

Ensure that resources related to the cost of living in Cambridgeshire are clearly signposted and easily accessible, regardless of which level of local government or organisation provides them. Residents have indicated that their main concern is not which entity offers the support but having clear guidance on where to find the help they need.

Information about available welfare rights, debt advice, benefit checks, housing support, and financial assistance from county and district councils should be easy to find. Efforts should be made to promote this information through various channels to reach all residents, including those who may not use online resources. Outreach should include community services such as Citizens Advice, local council websites, and physical locations like community centres and libraries.

Awareness of available support

A lack of awareness about the available cost of living support, money and debt advice emerged as a significant theme among participants. One participant shared, "I didn't even know there was help available until someone at the community centre told me." This information gap prevents many from accessing the necessary support to cope with rising living costs. Residents mentioned that they were unaware of local schemes such as the Household Support Fund, which others found challenging to access due to extensive application requirements. One resident explained, "You hear about support through word of mouth, but if you don't know the right people, you're left in the dark."

Participants expressed frustration over the uneven distribution of support across different communities. For example, one participant mentioned that Chesterton had fewer support activities and services compared to Ashbury. This disparity reinforces the feeling that support is not reaching all communities, leaving many without the necessary resources. During an online session, a particularly strong point was made about the lack of awareness. When asked if people knew about available support services, there was silence before one participant commented, "This shows the amount of information disseminating in our community, and yet we may blame the government, but I think these agencies have a lot to cover." This sentiment highlights the significant gap in information that continues to prevent residents from accessing the help they need.

Additionally, there was a sense that traditional advice services and other local providers, such as housing organisations, GP practices and local government, lacked presence within the community.

One participant said, "I'm not seeing them." This limited visibility of critical services further contributes to residents' struggles to access essential support. The comment "I'm not seeing them" reflected more than just physical absence—it pointed to a lack of outreach and community integration. Many participants shared that they felt disconnected from services that should be available to them, contributing to a sense of isolation and helplessness. Others reinforced this view, highlighting that support services feel distant, hard to access, or not attuned to their local needs. The inability to easily identify or engage with available services leaves many feeling unsupported, particularly those struggling with multiple barriers.

Accessing services often involves complicated qualification criteria and numerous requirements, making it challenging for residents seeking assistance. This complexity and lack of awareness result in many individuals missing out on the help they are entitled to. One participant expressed, "The amount of paperwork and criteria makes it exhausting even to try." Another resident noted that navigating council websites can be difficult, and the limited opportunities for in-person engagement further complicate the search for the support they need. When participants were asked about the support services available in their local community, many mentioned Citizens Advice. However, they found it challenging to access due to the distance and the need for in-person appointments. One participant noted, "Citizens Advice is great, but it's difficult to reach them because their offices are far away, and you need to go in person for the first appointment."

Language and technology barriers also emerged as significant challenges, particularly for non-native English speakers and those unfamiliar with digital systems. The shift towards online services has further isolated individuals lacking digital literacy, making navigating resources or completing necessary forms difficult. One participant expressed, "For those who don't know the language, it's hard to even look for help... everything is online now, but they don't know where to start." Another shared, "Older people didn't grow up with technology... some don't even have a smartphone, let alone a laptop."

The fear of using services due to their complexity was also evident. Many participants felt that service systems are too complicated to navigate, especially for those struggling with literacy or unfamiliar with bureaucratic processes. Miscommunication often leads to confusion, deterring people from seeking assistance. One participant said, "They send letters, but people don't always understand. They're afraid to make mistakes, thinking they'll lose money or face trouble."

Community-driven initiatives, such as the Red Hen Project and Cambridgeshire ACRE, were widely recognised for providing essential support and information. The Red Hen Project was frequently praised for offering families financial guidance and debt support. One participant stated, "If it weren't for the Red Hen Project, I wouldn't know where to go for additional support."

These local organisations have become essential for many families who need help navigating complex financial challenges. Similarly, Cambs ACRE hosts weekly sessions with free refreshments and informal gatherings, offering residents a space to learn about local resources and support options: “At Cambs ACRE, I learned about support I never even knew existed,” a participant noted, emphasising the importance of accessible, community-based information hubs.

Expanding access to free or low-cost services and ensuring residents are aware of money and debt advice was crucial. Participants wanted consistent, clear communication about available support, with suggestions for information booths at local events, farmers' markets, or high-traffic areas such as shopping centres or transportation hubs, such as bus or train stations. These booths would allow people to stop by, ask questions, and learn about services related to financial support, housing, or healthcare. In addition, better use of existing community assets, such as libraries, children's centres, and community hubs, can support the creation of integrated, one-stop-shop support models. By utilising a variety of spaces, including information booths in high-traffic areas and one-stop-shop locations within community hubs, it's possible to create a more comprehensive approach to information-sharing. These spaces would allow residents to access multiple services and resources in one place, improving the visibility and accessibility of support while reducing the reliance on "word of mouth" as the primary method of discovering support services.

Recommendations

2.4 Enhance collaboration among support services

Foster better cooperation and information-sharing across services in Cambridgeshire, particularly between district councils, advice services like Citizens Advice, housing organisations, and community-based initiatives such as the Red Hen Project and Cambs ACRE. This collaboration should focus on creating a seamless “no wrong door” approach where residents are not redirected between services but instead find clear, coordinated support at their first point of contact. This approach will reduce confusion and improve the overall experience for residents seeking help.

2.5 Understand access barriers across communities

Cambridgeshire Poverty Strategy Commission should consider undertaking further research to understand the specific barriers to accessing services across communities in Cambridgeshire. The research should map residents' journeys across the county, identifying where they attempt to access support and the obstacles they encounter, including issues such as digital literacy, transportation limitations, and awareness of available resources. The findings should guide targeted outreach and service adjustments to address gaps in support, particularly in areas with fewer resources or outreach activities.

2.6 Develop a comprehensive service map

Create a user-friendly visual map of local support services, both online and in physical locations, such as libraries, community hubs, and high-traffic areas like shopping centres or transportation hubs. This map should be accessible to all residents, directing them quickly and effectively to the appropriate services. Additionally, the map should be available in multiple formats to ensure it reaches those with varying levels of digital access and literacy, further enhancing the visibility of support services in both online and in-person settings.



Emma and Steve have three children aged 5, 3 and 2. Emma came to the UK from Romania a few years ago and both parents were in work until they had children. Since that time, the cost of childcare has meant that **it worked out better for them financially for Emma to be out of work and to care for their children**. She used to work in adult social care and would like to return to this, if childcare costs were more manageable or once full-time childcare is not required for her young children. In the meantime, they feel **stuck in poverty with rising food and energy bills**, and they are worried about the upcoming winter. Emma helps her neighbours to access support services where they need them but would like to see more done to incentivise work and to help with childcare.

Housing

The affordability of housing was a significant concern for participants. Many spoke about the extremely high cost of renting and buying homes in the area. One participant shared, "House prices are so high that people I know have had to move out of the area because they simply can't afford to stay." Another added, "Even with a steady income, it's impossible to save for a deposit when rent takes up most of what I earn." The lack of affordable housing options left many residents feeling hopeless.

In addition to affordability, the quality of housing was a significant issue. Many participants reported conditions, such as dampness and mould, particularly in private rentals. One participant described, "The state of some private rented housing is unacceptable, with damp and mould making it unhealthy to live in." These unresolved maintenance issues left residents feeling neglected and unsupported by their landlords and housing services. The social housing waiting lists were also a major problem, with families waiting for years without progress. One resident said, "I've been waiting for years to get social housing, but the list is endless." Adding to these frustrations, participants felt overlooked as new developments seemed to be built indiscriminately in the area.

Residents living in inadequate housing noted the irony of seeing brand-new homes being constructed across the street while they struggled with poor conditions. This perceived inequity left many feeling that these new developments prioritised wealthier people who commuted from London over residents in urgent need of affordable housing.



Jessica is a single mother of two children. Following a relationship breakdown, the family moved into a private rented house that had significant problems with damp and mould. Once these started to negatively affect the health of her children, Jessica and her family were moved to social housing. The family rely on their local foodbank, with Jessica saying that **"once our bills go out, we have nothing left for food."**

Jessica shared that she would like to work to help their financial situation but does not currently as she has not been able to find a job that can be flexible to her being a single parent, in particular that would mean she can take the children to and from school.

While challenges with affordability and quality dominated residents' experiences, there were also discussions around the need for social landlords to provide more community-oriented support. Participants highlighted the importance of housing providers offering additional resources and creating community connections for residents. For instance, Cross Keys Homes in Peterborough was praised for its initiatives, including decluttering courses for residents with hoarding issues and cooking clubs. Participants pointed to these programmes as examples of how social landlords can help foster a more robust community network and address social challenges beyond just housing. Many felt similar initiatives could be implemented locally to create a more supportive environment for social housing tenants.

Recommendations

2.7 Promote access to housing advice

Launch targeted awareness campaigns and outreach efforts to encourage residents to seek housing advice early. District councils, as the authorities responsible for housing benefits and council tax payments, should be central in providing accessible, clear information on housing support options. These campaigns should focus on educating residents about their rights and available benefits. Outreach can be conducted through multiple channels, including community centres, libraries, local websites, and information booths at high-traffic areas like shopping centres and transport hubs. Collaboration with local housing services, charities, and community groups will ensure that advice is tailored to the needs of different communities, including those facing language or digital barriers.

2.8 Enhance Council Tax Support for low-income residents

District councils should review Council Tax collection practices and Council Tax Support policies to ensure additional support is available for low-income residents. This review should focus on the adequacy of existing support schemes, such as Council Tax Support. District councils must ensure that eligible residents are aware of these schemes and provided with easy access to application forms and guidance. Moreover, district councils should review how Council Tax arrears are managed to avoid causing further financial hardship for residents, focusing on flexible repayment terms and additional support for those struggling with debt.

2.9 Improve access to affordable, safe, and secure homes

District councils and housing authorities such as Sanctuary, Clarion, and Chorus Homes (now part of Places for People) should prioritise affordable housing in planning and development processes.

Access to services: healthcare

Participants described significant difficulties accessing healthcare services, particularly mental health and dental care. One participant mentioned, "It's almost impossible to get mental health support. The waiting times are so long that many people just give up." This sentiment was echoed by others, with participants especially concerned about the lack of specialised care for children, such as autism assessments or ADHD testing, which often required long wait times or were unavailable locally. For some families, the situation was so challenging that they had to repeatedly advocate for their children to receive basic support, describing it as "an endless fight" to access services.

Participants also noted a gap in post-natal support, with mothers facing limited contact with health visitors and insufficient time to address their needs. One participant shared, "The post-natal support is not good at all. You don't get help before you need it, and by then, it's often too late." Another mother explained, "I went to social services to demand support as I was going through post-natal depression." These experiences emphasise the need for more proactive and accessible support for mothers during the post-natal period.

GP surgeries are seen as key community hubs for improving access to support services, particularly in rural areas where resources can be harder to reach. For example, in Ely, a participant mentioned a van visiting a local doctor's surgery to distribute information about available services. Similarly, an East Cambridgeshire GP surgery was highlighted for using social prescribers—staff who connect people to appropriate non-clinical support, such as services for managing debt, claiming benefits, or joining community activities like befriending groups or art classes. Participants widely agreed that GP surgeries could play a stronger role in linking people to essential support.



Peter is 83 and lives on his own after his wife passed away. He expressed that he is facing difficulties with his mental health and is receiving counselling support, sharing **“I often don’t want to be here anymore. I am lonely and I go back home each night to a cold, empty house.”** Peter has also been struggling with financial challenges. He shared that he has never had a secure job and has instead had to regularly move between part-time or insecure employment. He likes cooking but, due to rising energy bills and ongoing money worries, he has decided not to heat his home or use his microwave or oven, meaning that he is **“eating everything cold at home, mainly things like baked beans out of the tin.”** Media coverage of rising inflation, the impact of the cost of living, and in particular the Winter Fuel Allowance cut, has increased his concerns and added to his decision to cut back on energy use.

Access to dental care was also a common concern, with participants reporting the difficulty securing NHS dental appointments. Some participants shared that they had to travel outside the area or consider private services, which were often financially out of reach. This lack of accessible dental care led many to forgo necessary treatments, adding to their health concerns.

In response to these challenges, participants shared examples of community-driven initiatives that foster mental health support and connections outside of traditional healthcare settings. Mind’s Good Mood Café was highlighted as a valuable resource, providing residents with a safe space to discuss mental health, socialise, and find support. Similarly, Moody Mondays, run by the Cambridge Acorn Project, was recognised as a welcoming drop-in group that offers free hot drinks and one-on-one support from professionals and volunteers. This group helps individuals and families address issues such as relationship difficulties, offering accessible community support without needing referrals or prior appointments.

Recommendations

2.9 Prioritise poverty reduction through the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Integrated Care Board

All levels of local and regional government, key partners in Cambridgeshire and the Cambridgeshire Peterborough Health and Wellbeing Board should support the Integrated Care System in prioritising poverty reduction. Addressing the wider social determinants that impact health and wellbeing at the local level should be central to a strategic approach to addressing poverty.

2.10 Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Integrated Care Board should explore expanding financial wellbeing support in non-traditional healthcare settings

The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Integrated Care Board should consider expanding welfare rights, benefits, and debt advice services within non-traditional healthcare settings. Findings have demonstrated the valuable role of social prescribers in these settings, particularly in reaching individuals in rural areas. Building on this approach within Cambridgeshire would enhance the support available to residents, creating a more comprehensive network for addressing financial and health needs. Independent evaluations should be prioritised to solidify the evidence base for these services.

2.11 Enhance access to Healthy Start Vouchers

Healthcare providers and all levels of local government, with support from the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Integrated Care Board, should work together to increase awareness and simplify access to Healthy Start vouchers. This can be achieved through targeted public campaigns, including local advertising, information in community spaces, and outreach in high-traffic areas such as town centres, libraries, and transport hubs. Healthcare teams, including midwives and health visitors, should promote information about Healthy Start vouchers to pregnant women, parents, and carers of children under 4. Simplifying enrolment and providing support in various languages will make it easier for people to access this support.

Access to services: transport

The limited availability and high cost of public transport were key issues for participants, particularly in rural areas where infrequent services left many feeling isolated. In Littleport, for example, participants shared that buses only run every two hours, with one person explaining, "Taxis are expensive to go for a big food shop in the local area. It costs £30 for a round trip, which people do not have." Despite new housing estates, the level of service provision, particularly public transport, has not kept pace with the town's growth, leaving many feeling disconnected. One resident commented, "Without a car, it's almost impossible to get anywhere, as the bus service is limited and unreliable."

In other areas, such as Huntingdon, participants noted that buses were overcrowded, unreliable, and increasingly expensive. Some participants described feeling isolated from major supermarkets due to lack of bus routes, which forced them to rely on local convenience stores with inflated prices. Public transport limitations particularly affected single parents in rural villages, who could not afford to go on days out with their children.

Another resident looking to downsize shared that they could not exchange their larger home for a bungalow because the available options were not on public transport routes.

For many participants, specialised transport services like the FACT community bus were valuable in connecting them to local amenities and reducing the isolation caused by limited public transport. The FACT bus was highlighted as a helpful resource, especially for those in more remote areas, providing access to essential services that would otherwise be difficult to reach. However, the need for similar services with improved accessibility was widely expressed.

Participants also raised concerns about accessibility issues within the public transport system. Individuals with disabilities reported challenges in using public transport due to limited accessible bus spaces and a lack of awareness among drivers regarding disability symbols like the sunflower lanyard, which indicates a hidden disability. One participant shared their experience: "The bus driver shouted at me to move when a man with a buggy came on... I was wearing the sunflower lanyard, but they didn't understand what it meant." Suggestions for better signage explaining the sunflower lanyard were mentioned as ways to reduce anxiety for disabled passengers, helping to improve their experience on public transport.

The need for specialised services like Call Connect was also discussed. However, some participants found that its advertised flexibility needed to align with reality. "There's a little bus service you can get... but they're only doing set bus stop routes, which is confusing because they advertised home pick-ups," one participant noted. While some individuals had access to disabled bus passes, limitations like restricted travel times and inconsistent services further complicated their ability to use public transport effectively.

Furthermore, participants expressed concerns about the increased fares, which has added to the discomfort for regular users. One participant remarked, "I use public transport, and it's not a good experience. The discomfort, along with the fare increase, is also an issue." They highlighted how this disparity in transport provision impacts access to employment opportunities, as residents from villages find it challenging to reach jobs in larger towns like Wisbech due to inadequate transport links. Overall, participants emphasised the urgent need for improvements to enhance accessibility and connectivity across the region.

Recommendations

2.12 Develop and sustain improved public transport services for rural and growing areas

The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority and the Greater Cambridge Partnership should address public transport limitations in rural areas like Littleport and those surrounding Huntingdon. Establish a sustainable funding solution that supports regular and accessible bus routes. These enhancements should aim to reduce isolation by connecting residents to essential services and larger towns, ensuring affordability and reliability of transport.

2.13 Expand accessible and inclusive transport options for disabled and vulnerable residents

In line with the Cambridgeshire Active Travel Strategy, it is essential to make public buses more accessible by improving passenger spaces and enhancing driver training to recognise disability symbols, such as the sunflower lanyard. Additionally, clear signage should be implemented to assist passengers with hidden disabilities and help reduce travel anxiety. Specialised services, like community buses, should also be expanded with adequate funding to ensure reliable and accessible transport in remote areas.

Access to services: education

Access to education posed significant challenges for low-income families. The high cost of school uniforms, school trips, and extracurricular activities limited children's participation in learning and enrichment opportunities. One participant shared, "The cost of school uniforms is too high, and it's becoming unmanageable with a large family." This financial strain extended to essential resources such as school trips and extracurricular activities, making it increasingly difficult for children from low-income households to fully engage in school. For many families, the cost of these items is not just an inconvenience but a barrier that prevents children from accessing the same opportunities as their peers, contributing to feelings of exclusion and further entrenching educational inequalities.

Parents of children with additional needs expressed mixed opinions on the local education system's ability to provide adequate support. Whilst some found school staff proactive in dealing with issues and avoiding judgment, others felt the system was often inadequate for meeting their children's unique needs. This inconsistency made some families struggle for the necessary support, impacting their children's learning and wellbeing. In addition, while initiatives like the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) and the Holiday Voucher Scheme were mentioned as addressing some children's nutritional needs during school holidays, many families were unaware of these schemes. One participant shared, "I didn't know these holiday schemes existed until recently, but many families like mine could really benefit from them." This lack of awareness has limited the impact of these programmes, preventing them from reaching the families who need them most. There were calls for expanded support during non-holiday periods, as many low-income households continue to struggle with food insecurity and other basic needs throughout the year.

Recommendations

2.14 Increase uptake of Free School Meals and uniform assistance for low-income families

Enhancing outreach efforts and streamlining the enrolment process for free school meals and school uniform assistance will make it easier to identify and support eligible students. Expanding initiatives like the School Uniform Wardrobe Project, which collaborates with schools to provide accessible and affordable uniforms, should be a priority. By addressing the financial burden on families, these initiatives will help ensure that all children, regardless of their economic background, can participate fully in school life without the added stress of unaffordable costs.

2.15 Enhance support for students with additional educational and mental health needs

Early and localised intervention for students with additional needs, including those requiring mental health and special educational support, should be prioritised across the system. Coordinating efforts across the NHS, Early Help, and Social Care services to provide comprehensive, integrated support within school settings is essential.

Access to services: employment

Adults seeking better employment faced several barriers, particularly regarding skill advancement. A key issue identified by participants was the lack of affordable local courses. Many expressed frustration with the limited opportunities to access training or education that would help them improve their job prospects. One participant said, "There are no affordable courses locally to help people get better jobs or retrain." This lack of affordable educational resources left many individuals stuck in low-wage jobs or unable to progress professionally. The cost of retraining was often a significant barrier for those facing financial insecurity, and without affordable options, it became difficult for many to access the tools they needed to move forward in their careers.



Louise lost her job following the pandemic and is claiming Universal Credit. She shared that she is only left with £10 a week for food once her regular bills have been paid, and that she has this in cash to help her with budgeting. She is not able to afford unexpected or one-off costs, and her dad had helped her to buy a light bulb to replace a broken one. Louise felt like she was **"going round in circles"** with employment support, as she has been referred for help with her CV on multiple occasions. She is keen to get back into work and regularly attends local jobs fairs.

Another barrier was the lack of accessible information about educational and training opportunities. One participant shared, "It feels like you have to be in the know to find out about courses or training opportunities." Many noted that even when programmes were available, they were often not well-publicised or were difficult to find. The absence of clear, accessible information about skills development, career advancement, and employment support made navigating the complex landscape of training opportunities harder. This issue was particularly pronounced in rural areas, where access to information and services was more limited, creating additional barriers for individuals trying to improve their employability.

Moreover, there was a notable need for training and employment programs aligned with local labour market demands. Many participants felt that existing programmes lacked the relevant skills sought by local employers, creating a disconnect from available job opportunities. Addressing this disconnect would offer residents more targeted training opportunities and improve the regional workforce's competitiveness and financial security.

Recommendations

2.16 Increase access to skills development and employment opportunities with key local partners

All levels of local government in Cambridgeshire and the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority should take the lead in ensuring that skills development programmes are accessible, targeted, and relevant to residents' needs. These programmes should prepare individuals for meaningful participation in the labour market, promote financial security, and offer pathways to stable employment. Collaboration with local training providers and employers is crucial to ensure that training aligns with the local economy's needs and equips residents with in-demand skills.

2.17 Encourage adoption of the Real Living Wage across local employers

All levels of local and regional government in Cambridgeshire should use their influence to encourage local employers to adopt the Real Living Wage as part of fair employment practices. Local governments can highlight its value for employers and employees by championing the Real Living Wage. Businesses that pay the Real Living Wage often experience improved staff motivation, productivity, and lower turnover, while employees benefit from fair compensation, job satisfaction, and increased financial security.

2.18 Expand the impact of community wealth building initiatives

Encourage key anchor institutions, such as health trusts and universities, to prioritise local procurement and support small businesses, self-employment, and social enterprises. By keeping more spending within Cambridgeshire, this approach will help create a thriving local economy and generate sustainable employment opportunities for residents, further promoting community wealth building.

Stigma

Stigma was identified as a significant barrier to accessing support, particularly when it came to food banks, financial assistance, and mental health services. Many participants shared feelings of shame or embarrassment about needing help, often viewing it as a personal failure. One participant mentioned, "The stigma around using food banks is huge; people feel like failures if they have to ask for help." This sentiment was echoed by others who felt that societal attitudes made it difficult to acknowledge the need for support.

The stigma was not just a personal barrier but was reinforced by the negative attitudes they encountered when seeking help. Some participants shared troubling experiences of being treated poorly by staff in support services, further discouraging them from seeking assistance. One participant noted, "They made me feel small, like I wasn't doing enough to help myself." Another added, "It felt like they judged me for being in this situation instead of offering real help." Such experiences of judgment can deepen the sense of isolation and helplessness, making it even harder for individuals to reach out for support.

In addition to these challenges, stigma contributed to anxiety, low self-esteem, and a deterioration in psychological wellbeing for many participants. The fear of being judged or not being seen as "deserving" of help had a detrimental effect on their mental health. For some, the stigma not only prevented them from seeking support but also led to a sense of internalised shame and a belief that they were failing at life. Yet, some participants challenged this perspective, one participant said, "It's nothing to be ashamed about. Everyone in the whole world has gone through a hard time. There's no shame in saying I need some help."

Many residents emphasised the importance of maintaining their agency and sense of self-worth. They expressed the need for assistance in a way that allowed them to retain their independence and dignity, recognising that seeking support was a part of taking responsibility and overcoming challenges rather than a sign of failure.



Anna is a member of the Traveller community and lives with her husband and children. She shared that she feels **“judged straightaway when she tries to get help”** and that there is **“nowhere to go for them.”** The family are struggling to get by and Anna shared that she has tried to get mental health support as she had been self-harming, but was told that she did not meet the threshold for support. One of the children is being bullied in school for being a member of the Traveller community, and Anna wants to take them out of school but is worried about not being able to home-school them.

Recommendations

2.19 Develop poverty awareness training to challenge stigma and discrimination

Develop poverty awareness training in Cambridgeshire for staff in local and regional government services and relevant local organisations. The training should be informed by people with lived experience and focus on challenging stigma, changing attitudes, and promoting empathy. By addressing biases and treating individuals with dignity, this training will make it easier for people to seek help without fear of judgment. It should also highlight the importance of maintaining personal agency and empowering individuals to access services while preserving their self-respect.

Community spaces and support networks

Feedback from various sessions highlights the essential role of community spaces and support networks, such as community centres, libraries, cafes, and shops, in local anti-poverty efforts. These spaces provide critical services like food access and social programmes while fostering a strong sense of belonging and reducing isolation. They also encourage individuals to seek help without the stigma often associated with formal support services. Community-level support services are well-used and deeply appreciated, with examples like Cambs ACRE's weekly sessions, offering free refreshments and a welcoming atmosphere. Similar initiatives, like those at Wisbech Village Hall and local meal-sharing programmes, are recognised as vital lifelines, particularly for families struggling to meet basic needs. Volunteers and local leaders play a significant role in these spaces, actively supporting one another and helping those in need.

In addition to offering support, these community spaces provide food access in ways that reduce the stigma associated with traditional food banks. Social supermarkets, for example, allow residents to purchase fresh food at affordable prices, allowing them to feel like they're "thriving instead of just surviving," as one participant told us.



This contrasts with conventional food banks, which may lack variety or be perceived as judgmental. Participants emphasised the positive impact of alternatives like social pantries, which provide a more dignified food experience.



Dawn volunteers at a local pantry model, that charges people a small amount for a selection of food. Despite having her own money worries, Dawn shares that she regularly pays for others to get their food as she **“knows how much they are struggling.”** Dawn said that **“people come in here with no money but they know that we will help. They aren’t heating their homes anymore so they come for the warmth here as well as the food.”**

There is also a clear call for more community spaces catering to a broader demographic. Additional activities for older children and teenagers are needed, as many residents noted that most available groups and activities are primarily designed for children under five. Existing youth spaces, such as those offering pool tables or boxing, were seen as beneficial but needed more promotion. “I didn’t know about the youth club until recently, but it really helped my son,” one participant shared. The accessibility of family-friendly spaces is also a concern, as many leisure centres are either too expensive or too crowded. Furthermore, rural communities expressed a strong need for more local touchpoints, such as food sessions and support hubs, ensuring that all residents can access essential services, especially in areas where traditional support services are limited or difficult to access.

Recommendations

2.20 Expand and diversify community events

Host more community-based events across Cambridgeshire, replicating successful models like free food and social activities. These events should be designed to attract residents from all backgrounds and provide them with information about available support services. By offering welcoming spaces, these events can reduce isolation and serve as non-stigmatising entry points for individuals seeking help. They also foster a sense of community and raise awareness of resources available to those in need, ensuring everyone has the opportunity to connect with the support they need.

2.21 Increase utilisation of local spaces

Identify and repurpose underused spaces across Cambridgeshire for regular, free activities such as craft workshops, reading groups, or social gatherings. These spaces should be used to promote social connections and encourage community engagement, particularly in areas where access to formal support services may be limited.

3 Challenges facing diverse groups

Through our research, we identified distinct challenges facing different groups within the community.

While the rising cost of living affects many households, some groups are disproportionately impacted by poverty due to a combination of various socio-economic factors.

The following points highlight key challenges and priorities shared by participants.

Older people

Isolation and fuel poverty were prominent concerns, with older residents often struggling to heat their homes due to rising energy costs. One participant noted, "Older people aren't heating their homes because they can't afford it." Many older residents, particularly in rural areas, also struggled to access the support they were entitled to. A lack of awareness around pension credits and available support was common, leaving them feeling disconnected from services. This disconnect was particularly evident in rural areas where accessing information and assistance often required travelling long distances or dealing with complicated application processes.

Younger people

Many parents expressed concern about the lack of structured recreational opportunities for their children, particularly those over 12. Parents noted that there are few local options for older children to engage in, which limits their ability to participate in activities outside of school. As one parent mentioned, "Kids just hang out in the streets or parks... there's nothing for them to do, so they end up getting into trouble." This lack of opportunities and limited access to local employment and training programmes for young adults was a recurring concern. Parents highlighted that these gaps in support contribute to a sense of frustration and limited options for young people, making it harder for them to develop new skills or pursue career paths.

Families

For many families, childcare costs represent a significant barrier to securing work or increasing hours to alleviate financial stress. High childcare expenses often limit parents' ability to work full-time, forcing them to make tough decisions about their work-life balance. Many participants shared that while they were aware of some government support options, such as subsidised childcare hours, these supports were limited in scope and difficult to navigate.



Heather has had to make choices around work based on the high costs of childcare. Unable to afford full-time day-care, **she relies on 16 hours of “free” childcare and must find jobs that fit around these hours**, which restricts both the number and types of hours she can work. Heather frequently uses the Government website to find information on childcare support, but she feels that current services are insufficient, particularly for young families. She believes that additional childcare support options and more local services should be available to help families like hers access flexible employment opportunities and better manage work-life responsibilities.

Lily is keen to return to work but feels that there is limited employment support that fits her situation. She needs training courses that not only offer career advice but also provide childcare alongside, enabling her to attend in person. Lily believes that **local support services offering integrated childcare and employment resources** would greatly improve her ability to re-enter the workforce.



Traveller community

Members of the Traveller community reported feeling stigmatised when attempting to access support. Trust was identified as a significant barrier, with participants expressing that stigma and a lack of understanding of their needs limited their engagement with services. However, they noted that having a Traveller Liaison Officer had been a positive step toward building trust. There is a strong desire for services tailored to the community's specific cultural context, fostering greater trust and understanding.

Eastern European community

Language barriers significantly impacted members of the Eastern European community, particularly in accessing services and understanding support options. Participants from this community described difficulties in understanding official communications, such as letters, which they told us are often only available in English. This language gap meant many had to rely on interpreters when accessing services, but council-provided interpreters were only available in specific departments, adding to the complexity. Participants often had to depend on community groups or informal networks to interpret crucial information, which added to their stress and limited their access to timely assistance.

Global Majority

"Global majority" refers to ethnic groups other than White British and white groups, which comprise about 80% of the world's population. Participants from Global Majority communities expressed concerns that their needs are often overlooked or not prioritised when accessing services or seeking support. They highlighted the importance of improving representation and fostering cultural understanding within service provision to ensure their perspectives are acknowledged and their needs effectively addressed. For example, one participant mentioned the difficulty they face when accessing mainstream services, as they often felt the services were not tailored to their cultural needs. Another resident described challenges in communicating with service providers due to language barriers, which led to misunderstandings and delayed access to necessary support, particularly in healthcare settings.



Mark's story

This personal story illustrates the experience of a veteran adjusting to civilian life in Cambridge, highlighting the challenges faced by ex-service members, particularly in relation to housing, financial stability, and mental health.

After serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, Mark returned to civilian life with both physical and psychological challenges, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). He encountered significant barriers in accessing adequate support. One of the most pressing issues he highlighted was the lack of communication about entitlements specifically available to veterans. For example, although he had been eligible for a war pension, he only recently learned about this benefit.

Mark expressed frustration with the complex housing situation in Cambridge. Even with a steady income, he faced obstacles such as the requirement for a guarantor to secure a rental property. The high cost of housing in Cambridge and limited access to affordable options have added to his stress. He perceived that his military service did not provide any advantage in accessing housing resources, contrasting his experience with what he observed as better treatment or benefits extended to students and newer residents. This sense of inequity has contributed to his disillusionment, fostering a perception that the council's housing policies fail to adequately support veterans transitioning to civilian life.

Financial challenges were also a recurring theme in his experience. Rising living costs, particularly for essential utilities, have made budgeting difficult.



He has increasingly relied on credit, which brings additional financial pressure, particularly when combined with his existing council tax and other civic responsibilities. While he mentioned seeking support from charities like the British Legion, he felt that local government could be more active in offering financial guidance and direct assistance to veterans, who often lack the networks and knowledge to navigate these systems independently.

Mental health remains an ongoing struggle for Mark. He described feeling unsupported in his efforts to manage PTSD and TBI, citing the difficulty in accessing specialised healthcare. He indicated that while some services are technically available, the pathway to accessing them is often unclear, leading to additional stress. These gaps in healthcare support, he noted, are compounded by financial and housing difficulties, creating a cycle that affects his overall wellbeing and sense of stability.

Reflections and implications for further research

Mark's experience highlights the need for further research into the significant gaps in men's access to support services and the unique challenges veterans face in navigating these systems. Such research could provide a clearer understanding of veterans' needs and help inform improvements to the local support structure for ex-service members and men experiencing similar difficulties in accessing assistance.

4 Community engagement and opportunities for residents to have their say in local decisions

This section outlines the key themes from participants' feedback on how they want to be involved in local decision-making.

The discussions focused on residents' past experiences engaging in local decision-making processes, the barriers they face in participating, and their suggestions for improving engagement to make it more meaningful.

Across the workshops, several themes emerged, including a lack of trust in local government processes, a desire for more inclusive and accessible engagement methods, and a call for greater accountability from local institutions. The feedback was clear that residents want to be genuinely involved in local decision-making. They emphasised the need for meaningful participation beyond tokenism, with real opportunities to influence outcomes. Residents also stressed the importance of being treated equally in discussions, ensuring their experiences and expertise are respected in decision-making.

Additionally, many participants expressed a desire for ongoing engagement. They were interested in the outcomes of this research, the work of the Cambridgeshire Poverty Strategy Commission, and what it means for addressing poverty in Cambridgeshire. They emphasised the importance of sustained engagement to ensure that assumptions are not made about people's circumstances within their communities.

Lack of trust and accountability

Many participants expressed frustration with the current local and regional government decision-making processes, feeling that their voices were often disregarded and that little changes resulted from their involvement. The general sentiment was that local government only engages with residents around election time and fails to maintain meaningful communication outside of this period. This lack of engagement leads to disconnection and disempowerment among community members. We heard from the participants:

- "The council only comes around during election time... we don't hear from them otherwise, but that's when they should be listening."

- “There's no point in getting involved; they're going to do what they're going to do anyway.”
- “The police, council, and social services should work together... everyone does their own thing, and people end up slipping through the cracks.”

Some participants also expressed dismay and a lack of interest in being involved. This reflects a sense of futility in engaging with local government due to perceived inaction or a lack of transparency. One participant noted, “It feels like a useless activity getting involved in any consultation.”

In addition to these concerns, participants strongly called for greater transparency in how their council spends public money. Many had little knowledge of how funding is being used within their community. One participant expressed: “I would love to see where council money is spent. It will give us insight into whether they are really working or not.”

Another participant shared: “Residents often want to know how their tax money is being spent. Providing clear, accessible breakdowns of council budgets and spending can help build trust between local authorities and the public.”

Desire for inclusive and accessible engagement

A clear theme emerged around the need for more inclusive and accessible engagement methods. Participants strongly preferred diverse opportunities to participate in decision-making, ensuring that all voices are heard, including those who may not be online or feel excluded from formal, structured consultations. One participant shared, “There isn't much information on how to lend my voice as an individual. Having a say in local decision-making can feel challenging.”

Participants voiced strong support for creating more informal, relaxed settings for engagement, such as community forums, suggestion boxes, and social gatherings. They emphasised that councils should prioritise non-judgmental spaces where residents feel respected and valued. This was especially important in how they interact with council officers and councillors, as trust in council services and fairness in decision-making often depended on the quality of these interactions. Residents shared the following thoughts:

- “They really need to listen to the people to get more information on what is actually happening and how people are being affected.”
- “If the council held forums or sessions where they just wanted to listen to the public, that would be one of the easiest ways to address issues.”
- “Not everyone is online... especially older people. There should be suggestion boxes in public spaces for people who might not be comfortable sharing openly.”

Participants also emphasised the need for more community-centred meetings in informal settings, such as coffee mornings and baby groups. These gatherings were seen as valuable opportunities to engage a broader range of residents and foster a greater sense of belonging within the community. Councils should continue to explore and support these informal spaces, as they can strengthen community ties and increase participation across diverse groups.

Participants also highlighted the importance of individual councillors, officers, and frontline staff in building trust. They preferred local government to engage in personal and accessible ways, creating opportunities for individuals to feel comfortable and confident through direct, face-to-face contact. By building personal connections, residents believed this would strengthen their trust and support.

In addition, participants pointed to creative, interactive initiatives, such as the Imaginarium, as effective ways to make engagement more accessible and engaging. The Imaginarium provides a platform where residents can express their ideal vision for their community in a fun, non-judgmental way, particularly appealing to younger residents and families. As one participant described: "At the Imaginarium, children said, 'Everyone has wings instead of transportation,' showing how they imagine freedom in a redesigned community. Having something like the Imaginarium lets people share their vision for the community without the usual barriers."

These creative engagement opportunities allow residents to connect with decision-making process in an informal and welcoming way, helping to lower the barriers that often prevent people from sharing their ideas.

Recommendations

4.1 A system-wide commitment to robust participatory engagement

Many residents expressed frustration with not feeling heard or acted upon in local decision-making processes, indicating that current engagement methods may not effectively reach or involve all groups in the community. To address this, local government, public bodies, and key partners such as those in the voluntary sector must commit to ongoing, innovative community engagement in Cambridgeshire. This engagement should focus on amplifying voices and removing barriers to participation, ensuring that residents feel recognised and valued for their contributions. The County Council should take a leadership role by setting clear expectations for engagement, supporting capacity-building efforts, and facilitating collaboration across public bodies in Cambridgeshire. This will help ensure a more inclusive, equitable approach that maximises participation opportunities for all community members.

Being closest to local communities, district councils should prioritise informal and accessible engagement settings that foster trust and inclusion. Feedback from residents suggested initiatives such as open forums, community drop-in sessions, and digital platforms that offer flexible participation options. Residents also highlighted the importance of creative and enjoyable approaches to engagement, including arts-based activities that allow residents to express their experiences and ideas in relatable and impactful ways. As part of this approach, the following strategies should be considered:

4.2 Ensure engagement is accessible

To ensure inclusive participation, all levels of local government should offer flexible, informal engagement methods such as community forums, suggestion boxes, and in-person meetings. This approach will reach a broader range of residents, including those who might be excluded from digital or formal engagement methods. Additionally, engagement should be respectful and non-judgmental, creating spaces where residents feel valued and heard. Personal interactions, particularly those involving councillors, officers, and frontline staff, are key to building trust and ensuring that all residents, regardless of background or experience, feel respected and treated equally.

4.3 Strengthen community capacity and empowering resident advocates

Residents have expressed a desire to use their experiences to help others, but many feel uncertain about how to get involved. Strengthening community capacity means creating opportunities for residents to share their insights and experiences in ways that benefit both themselves and others. Local government and community organisations need to work together to provide these opportunities. Collaborating will enable residents to take on advocacy roles within their communities, amplifying their voices and bridging the gap between local government and residents.

4.4 Increase transparency in public spending

We know that local government regularly publishes information regarding how public funds are spent. However, residents have expressed a need for more accessible and detailed breakdowns of budgets and financial decisions. Transparency in how local government funds are allocated is crucial to building trust. By providing clear, accessible information about how taxes are being spent, councils can demonstrate accountability and allow residents to understand the alignment of spending with community needs. This increased transparency will foster greater trust and ensure that financial decisions reflect the priorities and concerns of the communities they serve.

5 Conclusion: A strategic approach to addressing poverty in Cambridgeshire

This report highlights the critical need for a coordinated, long-term response to poverty in Cambridgeshire.

Residents shared their experiences of struggling with poverty and financial insecurity, emphasising the need for better access to support and more preventative measures to stop issues from escalating.

They called for a more coordinated and effective approach that ensures services meet community needs while addressing the root causes of poverty.

The Commission's work comes at a pivotal time for Cambridgeshire, as the new government's establishment of a Child Poverty Taskforce and development of a national Child Poverty Strategy offer a valuable opportunity to strengthen the county's response to poverty. This report provides insights on how Cambridgeshire can align its local efforts with national priorities, shifting from reactive crisis management to a proactive strategic approach. By building on the findings and recommendations outlined here, Cambridgeshire can focus on preventative measures that address poverty at its root, reduce financial insecurity, and enhance access to vital support. A strategic approach will help Cambridgeshire avoid duplication, maximise the reach of its resources, and bring partners together to create a stronger local response to poverty. The insights gathered from this report highlight the importance of ongoing engagement with people with lived experience in shaping and prioritising actions within the local system.

Resolve Poverty is committed to maintaining an ongoing relationship with the Cambridgeshire Poverty Strategy Commission and Cambridgeshire County Council, offering continued support to advance the recommendations outlined in this report and to explore further areas raised in the research.

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Appendix 1: Demographic data

Location

District	Number	Proportion
Cambridge	16	20%
East Cambs	17	22%
Fenland	19	24%
Huntingdon	14	18%
South Cambs	13	16%
Total	79	100%

Age

Age	Count	Proportion
18-24	3	4%
25-34	8	10%
35-44	12	15%
45-54	14	18%
55-64	10	13%
65-74	14	18%
75-84	12	15%
80 or over	6	8%
Total	79	100%

Ethnicity

Ethnic group	Count	Proportion
White British	53	67%
White other	5	6%
Mixed or multiple ethnic group	4	5%
Asian or Asian British	1	1%
Black, Black British, Caribbean or African	8	10%
Prefer not to say	8	10%
Total	79	100%

Gender

Gender	Count	Proportion
Male	31	39%
Female	43	54%
Prefer not to say	5	6%
Total	79	100%

Caring responsibilities

Caring responsibilities	Count	Proportion
No	62	78%
Yes, 1-19 hours a week	10	13%
Yes, 20-49 hours a week	4	5%
Yes, 50 or more hours a week	1	1%
Prefer not to say	2	3%
Total	79	100%

Long-term illness

Long term physical or mental health condition	Count	Proportion
No	60	76%
Yes, limited a lot	6	8%
Yes, limited a little	8	10%
Prefer not to say	5	6%
Total	79	100%

Economic activity status

Economic activity status	Count	Proportion
Employed full-time (30 hours or more a week)	21	27%
Employed part-time (up to 30 hours a week)	6	8%
Self-employed/freelance	2	3%
Unemployed, available to work	6	8%
Unable to work because of sickness/disability	9	11%
Full-time student	0	0%
At home, looking after family	1	1%
Retired	34	43%
Total	79	100%

Appendix 2: Organisations that assisted in recruitment and promotion

We thank these organisations for facilitating our lived experience engagement through referrals and promotion:

- Cambridgeshire ACRE
- Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Integrated Care System
- Cambridgeshire and Peterborough NHS
- Cambridgeshire Cyrenians
- Cambridgeshire, Peterborough and South Lincolnshire Mind
- CCC Changing Futures
- CCC Communities Service
- CHS Group
- Fullscope
- Healthwatch Cambridgeshire and Peterborough
- Hunts DC
- Red Hen Project
- Re-imagine Resource Centre
- The Rosmini Centre
- The Springs, Riverside.



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