

Community Network

Poverty In Bedford Borough

Bedford Borough Council and CVS Bedfordshire are working with Bedfordshire Advice Forum to bring stakeholders together to discuss poverty in Bedford with a view to developing a local Anti-Poverty Network

Tuesday 8 July, 6:30–8:30PM



Bedfordshire Advice Forum
Promoting and supporting advice and information services in Bedfordshire



BEDFORD
BOROUGH COUNCIL



Summary Report

1. Introduction and Background

The Community Network Event was held on Tuesday 8 July, at Addison Centre, Kempston, where 60 individuals from 31 different local organisations and charities came together to discuss how we can work together to tackle poverty in Bedford Borough. This Community Network Event was an opportunity to:

- Hear from Ian Brown, Deputy Director of Public Health, to receive an overview of the public health data relating to poverty in Bedford Borough
- Explore poverty on the frontline, by hearing from Bedfordshire Advice Forum (BAF), FACES, Citizens Advice, and Bedford Foodbank on their experiences supporting families in poverty
- Discuss what collaboratively addressing local poverty could look like with public services, partners, and voluntary sector organisations in Bedford Borough.

This year, a Child Poverty Strategy is expected to be released from the Government. Bedfordshire Advice Forum has been discussing how poverty can be addressed through VCSEs over the past 18 months with forum members and Community Voluntary Services (CVS Bedfordshire), and were keen to utilise this event to involve others in the conversation to explore what can be done to address local need.

[Deputy Lieutenant, Mrs Brenda Roberts](#), opened the event with a keynote speech. Brenda is deeply committed to community engagement and working with volunteers. She voiced strong support for VCSE organisations across Bedford who work daily to support people experiencing poverty and pledged to share the insights from this event with Lord Lieutenant Susan Lousada, ensuring continued advocacy and support.

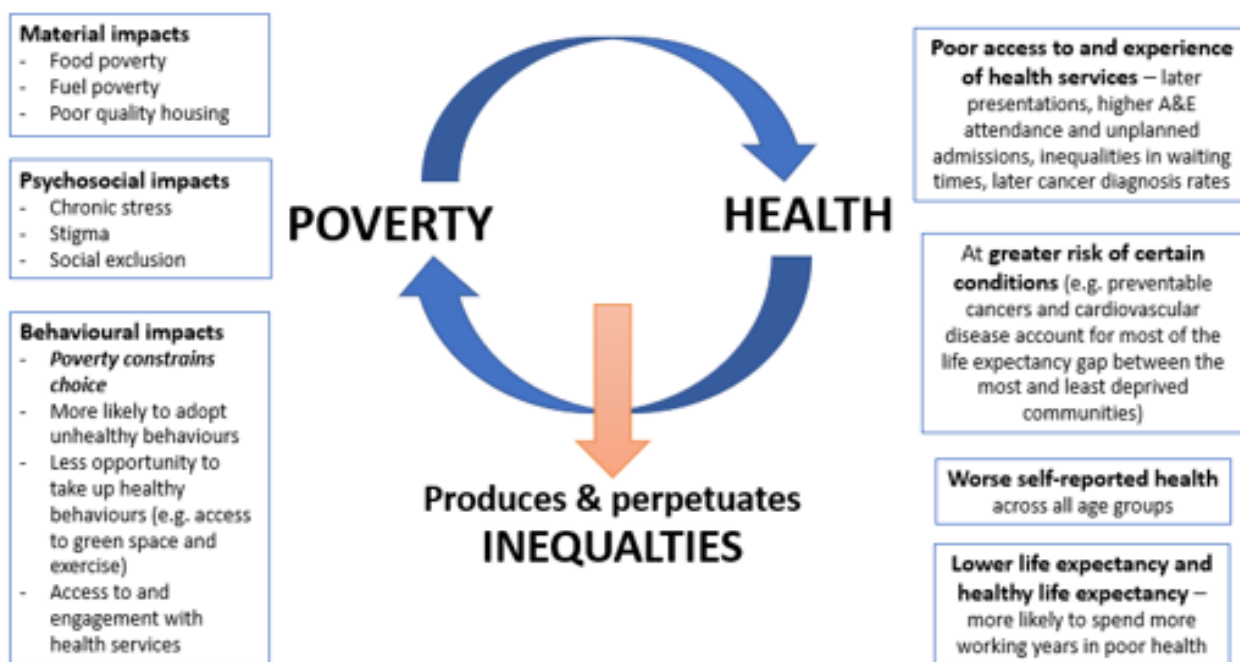
Brenda recognised poverty as a deeply rooted issue within many communities, highlighting how it acts both as a cause and a symptom of challenges such as domestic abuse, addiction, poor mental health, and wider health inequalities - disproportionately affecting the most marginalised. She emphasised the importance of these group discussions in shaping a truly collaborative response, helping to forge a shared vision for partnership working in the years ahead.

2. Poverty In Bedford

Ian Brown, Deputy Director of Public Health, gave an overview of what the data tells us about local poverty.

“Poverty means not being able to heat your home, pay your rent, or buy the essentials for your children. It means waking up every day facing insecurity, uncertainty, and impossible decisions about money. It means facing marginalisation – and even discrimination – because of your financial circumstances. The constant stress it causes can lead to problems that deprive people of the chance to play a full part in society.”

~ Joseph Rowntree Foundation



He explained that poverty has a direct impact on health, with the data showing that children experiencing persistent poverty are at an increased risk of experiencing poor mental health, obesity, and long-term illnesses. This ultimately leads to worse health in adulthood, and is associated with worse educational outcomes, employment status and socioeconomic position. Adults in persistent poverty are almost twice as likely to report poor health compared to those that are not in poverty (31% vs 18%). This is part of the poverty-health cycle, which produces and perpetuates poor health and health inequalities.

Poverty in Bedford is not evenly distributed across the Borough. While the most deprived areas are often highlighted the majority of socioeconomically disadvantaged people do not live in these neighbourhoods. Nationally, for example, 57% of income-deprived individuals reside outside the most deprived fifth of areas in England (McCartney et al., 2023). This means that many families and older people experiencing low incomes – whether measured through relative low-income rates among children (DWP, 2024), Universal Credit claims (DWP, November 2024), or income deprivation affecting older people (MHCLG, 2015-2016) – are dispersed throughout communities, rather than concentrated only in areas of highest deprivation.

While there are people experiencing poverty everywhere, the data tells us that within Bedford Borough:

	Bedford Borough	Greyfriars	Queens Park	Cauldwell	Kingsbrook
% of children in relative poverty	20%	43%	47%	30%	34%
% of households on Universal Credit	23%	50%	44%	40%	35%
% of older people with income deprivation	12%	37%	26%	25%	21%
% population non-white British	36%	68%	78%	66%	52%

Children and young people

- 6,600 are eligible for free school meals
- 690 live in households with no central heating
- 1 in 5 children in poverty are from working families
- Children from the most disadvantaged areas are twice as likely to have obesity (29% vs. 14% for the least disadvantaged).

Working age adults

- 4,200 adults are unemployed
- 5,000 adults are economically inactive with long-term sickness or disability
- Adults in routine and manual occupations are almost twice as likely to smoke (25% vs 14% adults overall).

Older people

- 4,288 over 60s experience income deprivation
- 1 in 10 pensioners claim pension credit
- Average healthy life expectancy is 61 years for men and 62 for women
- The life expectancy 'gap' is 12 years for men and 10 years for women.

Ian also explored the dimensions of poverty, going on to explain that approximately half of the households currently in Temporary Accommodation are families. The data shows us that families in temporary accommodation may struggle to cook healthy affordable food, access employment, education and family support, and children may not be able to concentrate on their schoolwork.

Housing

- In Nov 2024 there were 14 people sleeping rough on a single night, but over a year more than 100 people sleep rough
- People who sleep rough are much more likely to have substance misuse and mental health problems, and their average life expectancy is 45 years
- Around 900 households are in temporary accommodation.

Food

- The number of food parcels distributed by Bedford Foodbank has trebled in 5 years to 24,000
- Healthier foods are more than twice as expensive per calorie as less healthy foods
- The most disadvantaged fifth of households would need to spend 45% of their disposable income to afford a 'healthy diet', 70% if they have children
- Poor diet in childhood can lead to obesity, stunted growth, worse oral health, reduced concentration.

Energy

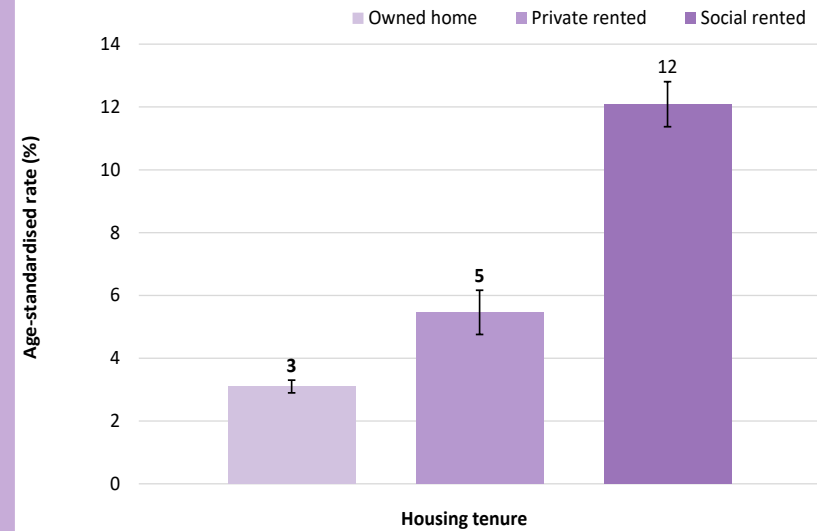
- 1 in 10 (7,600) households in Bedford Borough are living in fuel poverty
- In Queens Park it's closer to 1 in 5 households
- A cold home can lead to cardiovascular and respiratory disease, accidental injuries, increased deaths and impact child development
- The cost of fuel poverty to the NHS is estimated to be £1.3bn every year.

The data also shows us a strong correlation between disability, ill health, and poor housing conditions. Bedford Borough residents who live in socially rented homes are more than twice as likely to have a disability, and four times as likely to report bad health than residents who own their own home.

**Prevalence of disability by housing tenure in Bedford Borough
(Census, 2021)**



**Prevalence of bad or very bad health status by housing tenure in
Bedford Borough (Census, 2021)**



The role of the Council in partnership:

Employment and skills	• Jobs Hub • Connect To Work • English for Speakers of Other Languages
Energy	• Energy advice • Better Housing Better Health • Welcoming Spaces
Finances	• Help with cost of living webpage • Council Tax Support • Housing Benefit
Food	• Free School Meal auto-enrolment • Holiday Activity and Food Programme • Food Matters grants for VCSEs
Health	• Social prescribing (including green social prescribing and the maternity social prescriber)
Housing	• Shelter and support for people who are sleeping rough, e.g. Rogers Court • Supporting people into settled accommodation

3. Poverty on the Frontline

Bedfordshire Advice Forum

Len Simkins introduced [Bedfordshire Advice Forum](#) (BAF), a local network for not-for-profit organisations that offer social welfare advice and information. It was established in 1997 to promote and support advice agencies through networking, training, and support. 28 years later there are a total of 19 member-organisations. In 2024 BAF members discussed a need for a new anti-poverty network in Bedford Borough, and through 2025 they have worked with the CVS and Bedford Borough Council to organise this Community Network event to connect with other organisations who are also passionate about addressing local poverty.

Bedford Foodbank, established in 2012 and now operating from its warehouse on Murdock Road, provides free food, toiletries, and support to local people in crisis. Clients are referred by agencies such as Citizens Advice, housing officers, social services, children's centres, health visitors, and local charities. With a foodbank voucher, they can access emergency food parcels at any of the seven foodbank centres across Bedford and Kempston. Since opening in 2012, 135,617 people have been fed by Bedford Foodbank.

In 2024:

- **24,258 people** were fed - including **8,095 children**
- **200,546kg of food and toiletries** were given out
- **477,490 meals** provided
- **11,525 households** used **Bedford Foodbank** including:
 - 2,729 households referred by **Citizens Advice Bedford**
 - 114 families referred by **FACES**.

Case Study: A pregnant client, referred to Bedford Foodbank by the Council's Local Welfare Provision Team, was living with her partner, sister-in-law, and four children while awaiting social housing. Alongside emergency food support, the foodbank connected her with FACES for family support. A Citizens Advice adviser at the Foodbank informed her about her Child Benefit entitlement and helped her

apply for a Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP). As a result, she secured Child Benefit of £76.45 per week and received a DHP to assist with rent. With this additional income and support, her household finances have stabilised, and she no longer needs to use the foodbank.

Simon Kelly introduced himself as the Interim Chief Executive Officer of **Citizens Advice Bedford**, which has offered free, independent, confidential, and impartial information, advice, and guidance to residents across Bedford Borough since 1939. Support is available by phone, email, or in person, either by appointment at their office or at local outreach sessions.

In 2024/25, Citizens Advice supported 7,159 people in Bedford seeking help with a wide range of issues linked to poverty. Clients received advice on benefits such as the Winter Fuel Payment, debt (with an average client debt of £8,537, mainly from credit cards and rent arrears), and homelessness or threatened homelessness. Many also needed support with financial capability, including budgeting and managing household costs. While Citizens Advice helps people tackle urgent problems and crisis needs – often in partnership with foodbanks and local charities – it also highlights the wider need to address the root causes of poverty in our communities.

Case Study: A client facing eviction for £1,836.98 in rent arrears also had around £6,000 in Council Tax debt and significant water arrears. Following a recent separation, and with health conditions preventing her from working, she struggled to pay bills and was relying on food and fuel vouchers to supplement her Universal Credit income. With her adult children having left home, her housing support was reduced, leaving her with a budget deficit of over £450 per month. Previously financially stable, she was distressed by her situation. We supported her to apply for Council Tax Support, Personal Independence Payment, and the Limited Capability for Work element of Universal Credit. These successful claims increased her income by £731 per month, cleared her Council Tax bill, and provided a back payment of over £1,500, which she used to reduce her debts.

Michaela Martindale (Chief Executive Officer) and Claire Alexander (Family Support practitioner) introduced **FACES (Family and Children's Early-help Services)**, an independent Bedford charity, based at Church Lane Community Centre, offering practical and emotional support to families under stress. They provide a wide range of services for children and families experiencing challenges such as mental and physical health issues, domestic abuse, poverty, isolation, and behavioural difficulties. FACES tackles different forms of poverty through initiatives like fresh food pop-up shops to address school holiday hunger, 'Partnership Tuesday' to support those in fuel

poverty, warm spaces and housing advocacy for families facing housing insecurity, guidance and grants for families experiencing bed poverty, and dental poverty support through tailored interventions.

In 2024 FACES baby bank supported families by distributing:

- 300 prams, buggies and strollers, worth £50,000
- 145,600 nappies, worth £29,120
- 624 tubs of formula milk, worth £7,488
- 3,100 toiletries items, worth £29,120
- 3,096 beds and bedding items, worth £160,000
- 25,000 clothing items for children aged under seven years old, worth £102,000
- And 7,900 other items such as highchairs and baby items, worth £316,000.

Case Study: Family A, who had experienced historic domestic violence, moved into temporary accommodation in Bedford. For safety, their youngest child (aged seven) initially lived with grandparents, where limited knowledge of dental hygiene and nutrition meant a diet high in sugary foods. With FACES' support, the child visited a dentist and had several decayed baby teeth removed. FACES also provided benefits advice, leading to successful backdated claims for Child Benefit, Disability Living Allowance, and Universal Credit. The family received food parcels from Bedford Foodbank and was signposted to Citizens Advice for housing advice. FACES continues to provide them with practical and emotional support.

4. How can we work collectively to address Poverty in Bedford Borough?

After hearing from the speakers, the room discussed what could improve in the way we are currently working together to address local poverty. BAF have been keen to have collaborative conversations within a forum or network and felt that a discussion with partners and organisations supporting the community could highlight some of the potential next steps.

The group discussions were rich, and the data shows clear themes that were important to those in the room:

Narrative Change & Awareness	Coordination & Infrastructure	Community-Led Engagement & Trust
Skills & Capacity Building	Equity & Access	Innovation & Resources

Narrative Change & Awareness

A strong theme was the need to shift the way poverty is understood and spoken about. Poverty is not only about income but about dignity, opportunity, and belonging - and it looks different to different people. Stigma and misinformation discourage families from seeking support, and many people do not identify themselves as “living in poverty” even when they are struggling.

Attendees emphasised the importance of awareness raising from a young age, with schools seen as a critical space to challenge stigma, teach life skills, and build compassion. Organisations themselves also need support to prioritise poverty, reframing it as a collective challenge that requires courage to “speak up” about social injustices, or decisions being made that impact the families that we support.

The suggestions that started to form include:

- Co-design campaigns with young people and those with lived experience to shift local narratives

- Embed poverty awareness in schools and children's services and activities
- Create and discuss consistent messaging across public services and their VCSE partners that reduces shame and builds empathy.

Coordination & Infrastructure

Another recurring theme was the need to improve joined-up working. While partnership working is valued, many felt there are many networks and forums that become a "talking shop" with overlapping agendas, creating duplication and reducing the time available for direct client work. Instead, poverty should be embedded as a "golden thread" in existing forums, with stronger data-sharing and consistent communication across organisations. It was suggested that anti-poverty champions could be identified in different organisations and would be able to ensure that poverty is always on the agenda at the existing forums they attend. These anti-poverty champions could then form a group that could meet less regularly to share updates on progress, linking the work that is being done across the borough in various action groups and forums.

Attendees called for a central directory or digital platform. The conversations in the room highlighted the great work that many organisations are doing to support communities who may be experiencing poverty, but the point was made that both organisations and residents are not always aware of what support is available. The groups felt that there needs to be a clear directory or accessible and user-friendly webpage that shows all the support available for different age groups and demographics within the community.

There are sites that list many helpful services, but they often do not include all the work that grassroots organisations are doing to support communities, and because of their size (and the constant changes that we see across the sectors) they are not always kept up to date.

Some helpful resources mentioned include:

- [Bedford Local Offer](#) – holds a directory of services available in Bedford Borough provided by the public and voluntary sectors
- MiDoS – NHS database that can be used for GPs and social prescribers to find appropriate activities, support, or services for the communities that they are supporting

- [Joy](#) – a platform that social prescribing link workers and other healthcare professionals to connect patients with nonclinical services that can improve their health and wellbeing.

It was raised that although these platforms are extremely helpful, more work should be done to encourage organisations to share information to be included on the sites.

Drop-in meetings, such as cost-of-living forums that are taking place in Central Beds, were seen as effective for rapid referrals and shared problem-solving between key organisations.

Community-Led Engagement & Trust

Trust was seen as central to tackling poverty. Communities want to be heard, and we want to ‘work with’ not ‘do to’. Attendees stressed the need to co-produce solutions with residents, empowering them to lead their own initiatives and contribute through volunteering or community champion roles.

Face-to-face engagement was highlighted as an impactful way to reach communities and build relationships in informal settings such as coffee mornings and drop-ins in trusted community spaces – although the room agreed that this builds rapport and reduces barriers, less time and money is spent making this a priority because of capacity and budget constraints, meaning that face to face support is often left to the voluntary sector and grass roots community groups with little funding.

Participants noted that community centres and ladders, when well supported, can be vital anchors in deprived neighbourhoods. However, not all organisations feel confident in creating safe, welcoming environments where people feel respected.

Skills & Capacity Building

Supporting families to build independence requires more than signposting, and we also need to focus on equipping people with the skills to thrive. Budgeting, financial literacy, and other life skills are not consistently taught in schools, leaving young people unprepared for adult responsibilities. Adults in low-paid or part-time work also need pathways to upskilling, with employers seen as key to creating opportunities.

Within the system itself, frontline staff and volunteers need ongoing training: both in technical skills (e.g., digital literacy) and in relational skills such as creating safe, compassionate spaces. Empowering organisations with knowledge and confidence to prioritise poverty was also raised as a gap.

Equity & Access

Discussions highlighted the many structural barriers that prevent families from accessing support with dignity. Housing was identified as a foundation issue: without safe, clean, and secure accommodation, families cannot rebuild their lives. Health inequalities also emerged, with examples of GP services unable to meet basic needs for disabled residents.

Different groups experience poverty differently - transport costs, digital exclusion, and stigma all have a direct impact on who gets left behind. Carers, young carers, and disabled people face additional costs and barriers to employment, and it was felt that there is no real clarity on the support available or the organisations who lead on the work to address these inequalities. The voluntary sector shared that service users using statutory services were describing them as inaccessible and unsupportive, with people bounced between agencies without holistic help.

Innovation & Resources

Finally, participants expressed a desire for creative solutions and sustainable resourcing. Ideas included micro-loans to help families manage crises, expansion of the family hubs, and dedicated coordination roles to sustain momentum.

Employers were seen as partners in creating fairer opportunities, particularly for skilled workers. The suggestion was made that employers should be able to work with the voluntary and public sectors to better understand the communities they are in, and receive training on how they can support people in poverty and upskill local workers.

It was recognised that some areas of Bedford Borough, such as Greyfriars, may be overlooked in poverty strategies and deserve more targeted investment. Partnership working that focuses on the place-based model has worked well and this should be used for all areas of deprivation – this can be seen in Kingsbrook and Cauldwell, where BPHA facilitate a Kingsbrook and Cauldwell Neighbourhood Network, bringing together the local organisations working in the area and focusing on collaboration and awareness raising.

It was also recognised that small grassroots organisations play a significant role in supporting communities that are not known to statutory services, but these smaller organisations need support with visibility, accessing funding, and volunteer recruitment.

5. Conclusion

The discussions at the Community Network Event have made clear that poverty is not a single-issue challenge, but a thread woven through housing, health, education, employment, and community life. The six themes that emerged (narrative change, coordination and efficiency, relationships and trust, access and inclusion, learning and skills, and innovation and resources) show that while the barriers are complex, the appetite for collaborative solutions is strong.

Participants emphasised that tackling poverty requires more than additional services; it requires a cultural shift towards openness, compassion, and genuine partnership. The call was not simply to create another network, but to ensure that existing forums are strengthened, community voices are elevated, and action remains focused and sustainable.

Actionable items that were suggested include:

- Anti-Poverty Champions being identified in organisations working to address local inequalities, and contributing to the existing forums such (but not limited to) the council forums below:
 - o the ‘Stronger Communities Implementation Group’ which sits within Public Health – focused on addressing wider determinants of health.
 - o The Integrated Neighbourhood Working Group, which is led by BLMK ICB – focused on place-based working.
 - o The Bedfordshire Advice Forum – focused on information sharing and collaboration between advisory support services.
 - o Health and Housing Partnership meetings.
 - o The Cultural Minorities Forum (Name TBC), which is currently establishing ToR to be a space for minority-led organisations and organisations that support minority groups to share learning and encourage representation in decision making processes.
 - o The Youth Offer Working Group, which is establishing how to improve reach for Family Hubs

- Bedford Inclusive Town Forum, which is focused on accessibility and inclusion for those with learning disabilities, SEND, and physical disabilities.
- Training for professionals to raise awareness and understanding in the issues that communities face, and how to engage with them
- Developing local directories and encouraging VCSEs to share their details through to be included.

These insights could help shape Bedford's local response to the forthcoming national Child Poverty Strategy.