

**NO TIME
TO WAIT:**

NORTH EAST

**CHILD
POVERTY
COMMISSION**

**AN AMBITIOUS BLUEPRINT FOR TACKLING
CHILD POVERTY IN THE NORTH EAST**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AMANDA BAILEY | FEBRUARY 2024

INTRODUCTION

The North East of England has enormous strengths, incredible potential, with many exciting economic opportunities ahead - and can be the most fantastic place to grow up and raise a family.

However, **more than one third (35%) of all babies, children and young people in our region are living in poverty** - with the North East having experienced the country's steepest increases in child poverty over much of the last decade.

This is not only limiting the life chances and outcomes of tens of thousands of children and families across the North East - and their ability to benefit from everything this part of the world has to offer - it is holding the whole of our region back.

Whilst the UK Government continues to hold the most important levers available to tackle child in poverty in England, and we desperately need a joined-up national child poverty strategy - which this research should help to inform - we have a real opportunity in the North East to begin to turn the tide on this defining challenge for the region: devolution.

Our report makes the case for using the vehicle of devolution to take a 'public health approach' to tackling the structural drivers and impacts of child poverty in, and on, our region - **convened, co-ordinated and driven forward by our mayoral combined authorities, but a collective effort in which organisations across all sectors must pull together and play their part.**

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

Following previous research published by the North East Child Poverty Commission (NECPC), exploring why our region has experienced a steeper increase in child poverty rates than the rest of the country, this project began with the question:

What should a child poverty strategy for the North East look like?

This new report seeks to provide an answer, underpinned by extensive quantitative data analysis, on:

- **The extent of child poverty across our region and how this has grown over most of the last decade;**
- **The depth of poverty for North East children, and how this has changed in recent years;**
- **The scale of inequality that exists across geographies within the North East;**
- **The key drivers of higher child poverty rates and hardship in our region – including low pay, insecure work, out-of-work poverty, the demographics of our region, and what are described as ‘work-constrained families’; *and***
- **The significant impacts of poverty (both immediate and longer-term) for North East children and families.**

KEY NEW FINDINGS FROM THIS ANALYSIS INCLUDE:

- Whilst child poverty has risen markedly across all North East local authority areas over much of the last decade, **the inequalities that exist within in our region are significant**: in the North East Mayoral Combined Authority (NEMCA) area, the two wards with the very highest and lowest (before housing costs) child poverty rates are both in Newcastle: Elswick and North Jesmond with a difference of 55 percentage points. In the Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA) area, this gap stands at a staggering 62 percentage points (between Newport in Middlesbrough and Mowden in Darlington).
- The proportion of North East children in poverty that are from **working families** has risen from 56% to 67% in less than a decade. And more than one in five (21.5%) children in households with all parents in work are in poverty in our region – a figure that has doubled since 2014/15.
- **The intensity of child poverty in the North East is getting worse** – such that one in five (over 100,000) of all children in our region are now living below the 'deep poverty' line. This includes the more than one in ten (c.60,000) of all North East children that are living in 'very deep poverty'.
- 63% of children living in poverty across the North East are estimated to be in **'work-constrained families'** - who face at least one significant barrier to boosting their income through work, or by taking on extra work.
- Almost one in five (18%) North East children are living in households that are **'food insecure'**, meaning they do not have access to sufficient food to facilitate an active and healthy lifestyle.
- Seven in ten (69%) children in our region are living in families with **zero or little savings to protect them from economic shocks or unexpected bills**.

This quantitative analysis is brought to life and reinforced by **wide-ranging qualitative research we have undertaken throughout the region over the best part of a year** - including through semi-structured interviews with all local authorities, combined authorities and several other organisations across the region; a series of in-person and online roundtables hosted for us by a broad range of cross-sector organisations across the North East; listening sessions we held with parents and carers with the invaluable support of several community-based organisations; in-person and survey engagement with young people facilitated by Youth Focus: North East; as well as NECPC's regular conversations with stakeholders throughout the region and the insights provided by the cross-sector advisory group we established for this project.

KEY THEMES FROM THESE CONVERSATIONS INCLUDE:

- **The vast amount of time, energy, capacity and resources now focussed on dealing with the impacts of poverty**
- **The extent to which parents and carers affected by poverty are supporting their communities**
- **The way in which families on low incomes can be treated by 'the system', and the lack of understanding for people's circumstances**
- **A collective agreement that tackling child poverty must be a regional priority**

RECOMMENDATIONS

We set out a blueprint for what an ambitious, solutions-focussed programme of co-ordinated, cross-sector, regional action to tackle child poverty could look like - based on four strategic priorities for the North East that are grounded in the findings of our research.

Within these priorities, we suggest **a series of complementary, actionable recommendations** - several of which build upon the enormous amount of activity to tackle poverty that is already taking place, at different levels and in different parts of the North East.

We have also identified several groups of children, young people and families on whom we believe regional efforts should be focussed for maximum impact; these are detailed in the report.

With relentlessly-focused leadership, vision and determination - we believe this proposed programme of work is achievable, drawing upon our combined commitment, capacity and resources as a region.

It is undoubtedly ambitious, but we should be ambitious for **every** baby, child and young person growing up across the North East. Until we adopt this whole systems approach to tackling the structural drivers of child poverty and its wide-ranging impacts in, and on, our region, we will never achieve the economic and social outcomes we all want to see.

BABIES, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE GROWING UP IN POVERTY ACROSS OUR REGION DESERVE BETTER - AND THEY DON'T HAVE TIME TO WAIT.

PRIORITIES FOR THE NORTH EAST: A BLUEPRINT FOR ACTION

PRIORITY 1:

MAXIMISING FAMILY INCOMES NOW, THROUGH:

- Proactive, combined authority-wide take-up campaigns
- Expanding the reach of income maximisation – and making it the norm
- Making better use of data
- Reducing costs and barriers to services for families
- Using our collective purchasing power to 'disrupt' the status quo

PRIORITY 2:

MAKING WORK A ROUTE OUT OF POVERTY, THROUGH:

- Making the North East and Tees Valley combined authority areas Living Wage Places
- Strengthening and expanding the reach of 'good work' commitments
- Ensuring all communities can benefit from economic opportunities, inward investment and good work
- Expanding existing anti-poverty work with employers
- Funding tailored employment support programmes for parents and carers
- Mapping and filling childcare gaps

PRIORITY 3:

THE BEST START IN LIFE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION, BY:

- Expanding free school and college meals to all families receiving Universal Credit or legacy benefits
- Addressing the shortfall in the 2-year-old early education offer
- Expanding the Baby Box scheme across the region
- Widening the reach of the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme
- Creating a North East and Tees Valley 'Youth Guarantee'
- Establishing Mayor's Funds to support this work

OVERARCHING PRIORITY:

SECURING A REGION-WIDE ANTI-POVERTY COMMITMENT, THAT INVOLVES:

- Adoption of the Socioeconomic Duty by organisations across the region
- Taking all decisions through an anti-poverty lens
- Making poverty prevention and reduction 'everybody's business'
- A collective agreement to do things differently here
- Elected mayors vocally advocating for North East children and families

And these broad recommendations - set out in detail in our report - include:

Proactive, combined authority-wide take-up campaigns and significantly ramping up the reach of income maximisation work, to ensure every family is receiving the support they are entitled to -

BASED ON OUR NEW FINDING WITH POLICY IN PRACTICE THAT THE ANNUAL VALUE OF UNCLAIMED BENEFITS AND SOCIAL TARIFFS ACROSS THE NORTH EAST IS A STAGGERING £1.33 BILLION.

Making the North East and Tees Valley combined authority areas Living Wage Places - based on our analysis of the scale and impact of in-work poverty in the region, and research finding that:

IF JUST A QUARTER OF PEOPLE PAID BELOW THE REAL LIVING WAGE IN THE NORTH EAST WERE UPLIFTED TO THIS RATE, IT WOULD PUT AN ADDITIONAL £75 MILLION BACK INTO THE REGION'S ECONOMY.

Expanding free school meals as an immediate priority to all children and young people in families receiving Universal Credit or legacy benefits -

BASED ON OUR NEW ANALYSIS FINDING THIS WOULD BENEFIT AROUND 75,000 PRIMARY, SECONDARY AND COLLEGE STUDENTS AT MOST NEED OF RECEIVING THIS ADDITIONAL SUPPORT ACROSS THE NORTH EAST.

NORTH EAST

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A full copy of our report is available on our website:
WWW.NECHILDPOVERTY.ORG.UK