

Poverty in Rutland: Scrutiny Review

December 2018



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Foreword from the Scrutiny Commission

In August 2016 Scrutiny Commission, with support from Members of Scrutiny Panels, decided to undertake a review of Poverty in Rutland. This was a new approach to Overview and Scrutiny and would see the Scrutiny function within Rutland County Council identifying a policy area and initiating and feeding into policy development for that area. By adopting this new approach we gained the benefit of all our members' experience, skills and knowledge in order to benefit all our residents.

Rutland is a great place to live and work. However, within our population, we know there are issues of relative poverty. These can be visible issues that we can see in small areas of the County but they can also be hidden away, for example loneliness and rural isolation. It is right and proper that we consider all residents when we produce policies and our first aim will be to define what poverty is in Rutland.

Through the review so far we have confirmed that Rutland is seen as a relatively affluent area, but the result of this is that those suffering from or on the verge of poverty can feel further marginalised and reluctant to ask for help. This is why we want to ensure that we look more closely at local needs and how all our future policies can be managed in a way that makes sure we don't adversely affect those who are less well-off, whilst ensuring that support and advice is readily available, well publicised and accessible to all that need it.

We want to thank everyone who has been involved in the project and hope that the outcome will be a genuinely positive one for the Rutland Community.

The Scrutiny Commission (Councillors Burkitt, Conde, Callaghan)

Background and Introduction

1) Scope of the Review

The Rutland County Council Corporate Plan highlights the need to support individuals, families and our community to reach their full potential. The focus within the plan on growth will assist in generating and supporting enhanced economic prosperity. In addition to this the following 3 strands were identified as key areas for investigation and development as part of this review:-

- Education and Advice
- Tackling the stigma of poverty
- Poverty Proofing

2) The Process

September 2016 - Member Workshop held in order to:

- a) Establish a database and profile of poverty information for Rutland – raise awareness and knowledge amongst our Members
- b) Establish the objectives for the review
- c) Agree the process for the review
- d) Identify the areas which members wish to consider in more detail as part of the review
- e) Identify potential expert witnesses

December 2016 - February 2017

Each scrutiny panel investigated a range of issues relating specifically to their panels (Appendix A1). This included an examination of the evidence base, hearing from expert witnesses and exploring some of the solutions to the issues identified.

April - May 2017

Green Paper published. Consultation with Key Partners, Members and Public.

3) Objectives of the Review

- i. To develop an agreed definition(s) of Poverty in Rutland
- ii. To develop recommendations to be approved by Full Council that will outline for Rutland how the Council will act to positively impact on poverty within the County.

4) The Context of Poverty in Rutland

In Rutland the context looks and feels different to that within the national context. Very early in the process the following became apparent:-

- a) Relative poverty is a key issue within Rutland. It isn't unusual to find within a community individuals and families living next to each other at opposite ends of the poverty spectrum. As the incidence of poverty is comparatively low the support mechanisms that might be present in areas where poverty is more prevalent are scarce. E.g. It is only recently that discount retailers have started to emerge in Rutland.
- b) Pockets of deprivation exist within otherwise affluent communities.
- c) The reality is that almost anyone within the Rutland community can experience poverty at a point in time through changes in circumstance - in many instances beyond their control. For example bereavement, illness, redundancy or relationship breakdown.

Members were keen therefore not to be restricted in their interpretation of a 'definition' of poverty. They were clear that this review was about:-

- Relative poverty and disadvantage
- Crisis – caused by a range of circumstances
- An acceptance that 'Capital rich' does not equate to the means to live on
- Rutland's isolated community brings with it different causes of and solutions for poverty
- The vital importance of information, advice and support
- Stigma associated with poverty and entitlement to assistance

5) The Definition of Poverty in Rutland

It was clear from the evidence and feedback considered as part of the review that Poverty could be subjective dependent on the demographic of a particular area. Members were keen to find a definition which reflected the specific challenges affecting Rutland Residents.

It is proposed that the definition below captures the unique nature of the Rutland demographic and as such the way in which poverty may be experienced in Rutland:

Poverty in Rutland manifests itself in a feeling of financial isolation where information and advice can be difficult to access and services and support can feel out of reach in terms of both cost and the ability to understand and be understood. In Rutland those in poverty may feel marginalised from a society which on the outside appears to be relatively affluent and as such people may hide or ignore the burden of their financial difficulties resulting in an escalation of their issues.

Statistical Evidence and Information

In examining poverty within Rutland a number of data sources were examined including national and local sources. Information was also drawn from a document produced by Citizens Advice Rutland in 2016¹.

Rutland is 148/152 in terms of the index of multiple deprivation upper tier local authorities in England. However we do know that there are wards within Rutland that suffer from income, employment, education, skills and training deprivation. We are aware of health inequalities and barriers to housing and fuel poverty. Child Poverty in Rutland currently affects 505 children under 16 (8.5%).

A snapshot of Rutland specific data in relation to poverty is captured in **Table 2**. This information dispels the ‘myth’ that poverty and relative poverty doesn’t exist in Rutland.

Table 2

Food bank vouchers issued in Rutland	306 issued during 2014/15
Homelessness applications	67 (15/16)
Children eligible and claiming for Free School Meals	272 (15/16)
Households living in Fuel Poverty	10.6% (2014)
Hardship applications	205 received during 15/16
Housing Benefits claimants	2031
Number of children living in poverty	8.5%
Debt enquiries to the Rutland CAB	1415 during 15/16

This overview of information is drawn from a much larger evidence base which can be found in Appendix B – Supporting Evidence, Poverty in Rutland.

¹ Rutland – the best place to live..... For everyone? A report on poverty in Rutland 2016. Citizens advice Rutland

The Scrutiny Process

The full list of issues identified through the Scrutiny Process can be found at Appendix A1, the main themes are summarised below:

1) Education and Advice

There was a need to improve support in core financial life skills. This needed to start at the earliest stage of life – in our schools. Access to advice and support for individuals and families must also be in place to support in times of crisis and when circumstances change prompting a risk of crisis.

2) Tackling the stigma of poverty

Rutland data identified a high proportion of unclaimed benefits and entitlement. Expert witnesses and anecdotal feedback indicated that there is often an unwillingness to ask for help and take up entitlements. This can make an existing problem worse as individuals and families miss out on much needed financial support.

3) Poverty Proofing

It was essential that we understand the impact on individuals, families and communities of decisions taken by the Council. It was also necessary for us to understand the impact of decisions taken elsewhere that impact on the Rutland community.

A mechanism is required to ensure that when decisions are taken the impact on individuals, families and communities are considered in relation to the impact on economic well-being.

Support Currently Available

The Scrutiny Process also highlighted areas where the Council was currently providing support for individuals and their families at risk of, or suffering from, financial hardship including:

- Financial Crisis Support
- Local Council Tax Support
- Housing Benefit, Housing Support and Homelessness Services
- Contract with Citizens Advice for provision of services in relation to housing, homelessness, debt and welfare issues
- Sign- posting through the “Help with money” website page
- Financial Safeguarding alerts
- Benefit Health Checks
- Education and support for vulnerable children and young people in relation to key life skills (financial management and budgeting)
- Working with partners to reduce levels and impact of child poverty through the Child Poverty Strategy and Pledges
- Use of Community Agents to promote community activities and assist with access to services
- Transport and Travel Schemes

Response to the Consultation

Response to the consultation was poor with only a handful of responses being received from external and stakeholder organisations, elected members and members of the public. Social isolation and the need for support services which were tailored to meet the specific needs of people living in Rutland were highlighted.

Conclusion

The Review covered a wide range of subjects including child poverty, fuel poverty, financial awareness and debt and the relationship between health and poverty. This Green Paper was key to providing a context for further discussion of the issues around poverty in Rutland.

Poverty can be difficult to define and it is clear that some aspects of poverty that have been considered are evident across the Country, whilst others are unique to Rutland, it is hoped that the availability of information and continued discussion will raise awareness of these more hidden aspects of poverty in Rutland.

The review identified that there is a real need to do more to support those who find themselves 'living in poverty'. However, there is also a strong need to make sure that we do all we can to support individuals and families where they are at risk from changing circumstances of moving into a 'poverty' situation.

Recommendations

1. Ensure key Council employees within RCC are aware of financial support that is available and are able to identify circumstances where signposting to these services would be appropriate;
2. Ensure that the Council's dedicated website page is reviewed on a regular basis and includes all current information regarding financial support and services available in a clear and easy to understand format;
3. Amend the Corporate Report template to include a prompt to encourage authors to consider potential impacts of Council Policies on the economically disadvantaged;
4. Commit to identify and review policy changes and other interventions on a regional and national scale that might impact on the economic well-being of individuals, families and communities within Rutland;
5. Request periodic reports from Citizens Advice Rutland to be submitted to the Growth, Infrastructure and Resources Scrutiny Panel detailing take up of financial crisis support and analysis of the causes and impact of intervention;
6. Develop a programme in partnership with key stakeholders to improve education in relation to debt to enable Children and Young People to be more financially literate.