

CONFERENCE REPORT

"Energising, **inspiring and a unique and** practical opportunity to network with key players in Harlow who can make a practical difference to the grave issues of poverty prevalent in our community."

Attendee Feedback

ABOUT HARLOW POVERTY ALLIANCE

The Harlow Poverty Alliance is a multi-agency forum created to consolidate the ways we address the causes and impacts of poverty in the town.

The Alliance was conceived at the end of 2020 after representatives of many agencies and local government had been collaborating closely during the pandemic. We felt that we had proven the many benefits of working together more closely. This had involved ensuring that those affected by Covid had the basics to live off, especially food.

The pandemic revealed the ways in which many people were more susceptible to its impact as they were already living in relative poverty: regularly going into the kind of crises that needed social and material support.

Since that time several new initiatives have sprung up, and the Alliance has helped to ensure that as far as possible those who respond to poverty and other social issues work in a joined-up way across the town.

The Alliance identified three objectives:

1. Improving our shared understanding of the needs in the town: knowing what is happening; getting greater value from our collaborations for those affected by poverty; ensuring that decision-makers are aware of its causes and impacts
2. Recognising where there is need for new or earlier interventions to stop the effects of poverty escalating
3. Looking at how the public perception of poverty affects those impacted by it eg destigmatising poverty so that people seek help sooner.

The Alliance is open to all organisations who work with people in poverty, and others who might support them such as local businesses with social concern for the town.

Current partners in the Alliance

Active Essex • Barnardo's • Changing Lives • Citizens Advice Harlow • Community Embrace • DWP Harlow • Essex CC • Go Getters • Harlow Council • Harlow Education Consortium • Harlow Ethnic Minority Umbrella • Harlow Holiday Lunch Clubs • Harlowsave Credit Union • Herts and Essex Community Farm • Michael Roberts Charitable Trust •Mind in West Essex • Phoenix Resource Centre • Poverty Pound • Rainbow Services • Red Balloon Foundation • Streets2Homes • Smart Advice

The Alliance is currently chaired by Andy Thornton, CEO of Michael Roberts Charitable Trust - contact 01279 724515

ABOUT HARLOW



With transport links into London and surrounding counties, Harlow is an area of great opportunity, yet has long experienced high levels of deprivation. Some areas of the town compare poorly nationally, and Harlow has the second highest level of deprivation and highest level of child poverty in Essex.

Harlow has also experienced changes in population levels and types of accommodation, with an increase in people living in the area in temporary accommodation and permitted developments, both of which can have detrimental impact on quality of life. At the same time there is a rapid growth of higher income families into newer areas of the town.

Poverty and deprivation affect people in multiple ways, putting a strain on both mental and physical health, education, work opportunities and life expectancy. Employment opportunities, overcrowding, accommodation and ease of access to services and benefits are all contributory factors to the level of need in Harlow.

Section 1 Executive Summary

In 2021, after working together for around a year, the Alliance wanted to engage more individuals and organisations on our shared concerns, seeking to widen support for those in poverty, creating better joined-up working and to invite all stakeholders to review their own agenda for addressing poverty and its impact on Harlow citizens.

The event was generously supported by a grant from the Mulberry Trust, and hosted at no cost by Harlow Rugby Club, allowing it to be offered as free to attendees. Publicised through voluntary sector networks and on the local online newspaper, YourHarlow, 120 people (the venue capacity) enrolled through Eventbrite and around 90 attended.

Attendees were from a mix of statutory and voluntary agencies, local political parties, individual activists and people affected by poverty.

The programme for the day (see Appendix) involved an opening and closing plenary, two choices of sessions – the first on facts relating to poverty in Harlow, and the second a choice of sessions on health, policy, and networking for practitioners. Content from these is summarised in this report.

The closing discussion section involved our local MP; the CEO of the local voluntary sector alliance, and a foodbank user with lived experience of poverty. This session is available on the YourHarlow website: https://www.yourharlow.com/2022/07/02/harlow-poverty-alliance-host-conference-on-cost-of-living-crisis/

All presenters shared their slides with attendees following the event, leaving a huge amount of up-to-date information at the disposal of those looking to progress the many issues raised.

Most noted concerns recorded on the day were:

- cost to parents of child school travel;
- fragility of 18-30s coming out of the pandemic with little support;
- most support is coming from an overstretched voluntary sector;
- the difficulty of getting information to those who need support in the town.

41 attendees filled in feedback forms. 80% of attendees found the conference to be useful / very useful for their work or interests, with many stating that they gained an insight into the reality of the impact of poverty in Harlow and the help that is available.

Most noted issues in the post-event evaluation were:

- professionalism of presenters & dialogue throughout the morning;
- value of data and shared baseline of knowledge about the current picture in the town;
- the need for more time to discuss it all together;
- the high cost and low quality of much of Harlow's housing.

> "a very valuable insight into both the lived experience of different generations locally and financial strains on families. Also gained a better understanding of the benefit system, local services/help organisations from informal networking and realising how many are working together to help improve/widen opportunities for those struggling financially or from health impacts."

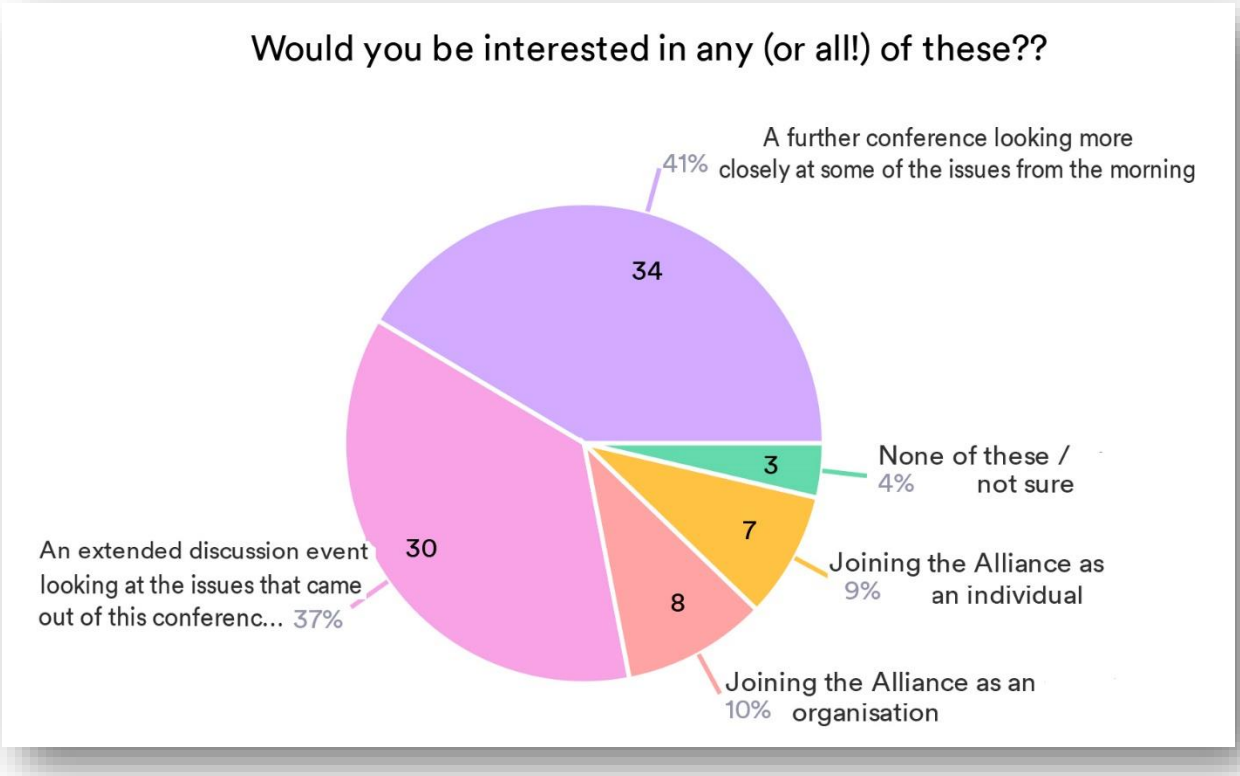
"The event was extremely informative and some of the statistics quoted within really shocked me. It would be interesting to see the stats in a year's time to see what impact if any responding to the impact of poverty on health, levelling up and preventing crisis has."

Many valued the chance to hear the lived experiences of local people affected by poverty, as well as the opportunity to network with other organisations and share ideas, with the focus being on knowledge-sharing rather than anyone delivering a 'sales pitch'.

97% of attendees would like to attend follow up events or join Harlow Poverty Alliance. The majority of attendees would like these events to delve into the issues of the day in more detail, with more opportunity for attendees to participate.

Suggestions for follow up topics not covered on the day include housing, youth, accessing support in a digital world and mental health.

The programme for the day is reproduced in the Appendix



"This was my first conference. This is a great resource for Harlow and it was good to see it so well attended by positive and constructive people who care about Harlow."

Section 2 – Session Summaries

Hardship in Harlow – facts and figures 1

Presentation by Julie Houston from Harlow Council sharing current data relating to poverty

Harlow is the second most deprived area in Essex, ranked 104th nationally, and with two neighbourhoods which fall into the 20% most deprived, nationally. Harlow is the eighth most densely populated of the East of England's 45 local authority areas.

Figures given show Harlow to have a predominantly young population, which has increased by 13.9% from 2011-2021 to 87,300 – a higher growth than the overall increase for England. By 2039, the population is projected to be 102,960. In 2021, Harlow ranked 206th for total population out of 309 local authority areas in England, moving up 18 places in a decade.

Poverty

In January 2021, Harlow had the second highest number of households in the county who were worried about food security. The town has become a hotspot for fuel poverty, with newly fuel-poor households likely to have a discretionary income of £30-249 *(this has of course escalated since then)*.

In 2021, 50% of Harlow households had less than £125 a month disposable income: the highest rate of this level of low income in the county. Around 24% in Harlow have less than £30 monthly disposable income. Certain wards are more affected than others, with 61% of Bush Fair's population having less than £125 discretionary income a month. During the pandemic lockdowns 10% of people in Harlow fell into a low level of discretionary income – the highest percentage in the county at the time.



In Harlow 18.4% of adults are identified as being over-indebted, compared to an average of 14.7% in the East.

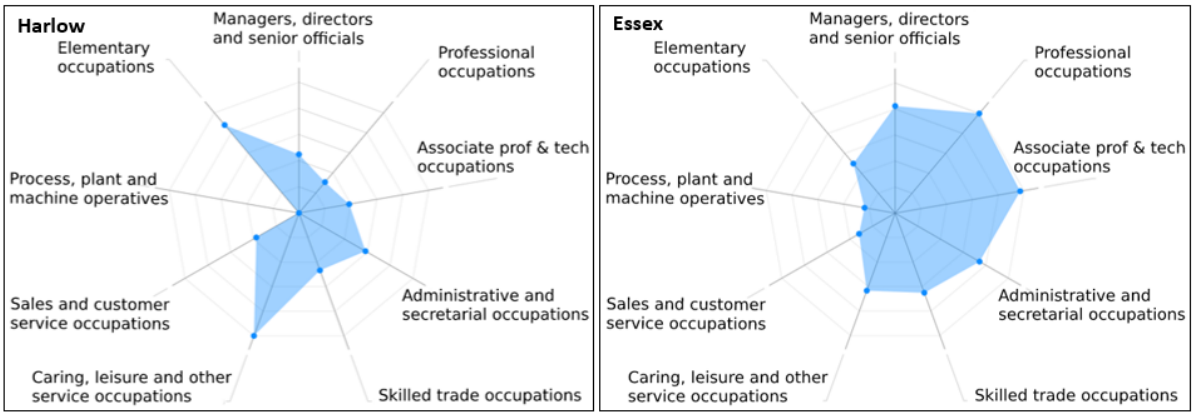
Around 12% of the population are on Universal Credit: 10,500 in September 2021. 30% of these were aged 30-39, 13% aged under 24. While the gender split of the overall population in the town is slightly lower for females, they represent a higher proportion of Universal Credit claimants, at 56%.

Currently Harlow has the highest number of claimants as a proportion of residents aged 16+ in the whole of Essex, at 5% of the adult population. The number of youth claimants (16-24 year olds) is the fourth highest level in Essex.

About 17% of children in Harlow live in low-income families. This is the same as England as a whole, meaning that around 3,260 children face greater risk of poor economic health outcomes in the longer term.

Employment

Harlow has a less diverse range of job types, with a higher proportion of people in caring, leisure and other service occupations compared to the rest of Essex, which has a higher representation in managerial/ professional/ associate professional roles.



In 2021Harlow had the 4th lowest average hourly wage in Essex, while working the longest hours – a trend that has been developing since 2015, with Harlow residents working more and earning a lower hourly wage. Median gross annual earnings are £27,857 – considerably lower than the East figure of £33,250.9 and below the England figure of £32,944. The most common income bracket in the town is £20K-29,999 which accounts for 22% total income.

It is estimated that Harlow has approximately 4,000 employees on zero-hour contracts.

Accommodation

As of September 2021, Harlow has the highest rate of households in temporary accommodation in Essex: more than double the rate of all other districts excluding Basildon. Harlow has the third highest rate of Houses of Multiple Occupancy (HMO), which are associated with several negative outcomes, including overcrowding.

The simple average house price in Harlow is £327,700 and the average wage is £25,000. A one-bedroom flat averages £171,900, and a four-bedroom house is £485,800.

In 2019 it was estimated that 70% of houses in the town are privately owned, 24% local authority rented, and 6% (4,939 households) were private renting.

Health

Health in Harlow is in the bottom 20% for England, and life expectancy at birth is the second worse in Essex for both males and females. Since 2015, a female's life expectancy at birth has been in decline. In the most deprived areas in Harlow, life expectancy for men is 7.1 years lower than the Essex average, and 3.5 years lower for women.

Harlow has the 3rd highest suicide rate in the county.

Education

In 2019 around 6,900 Harlow residents had no qualifications. The majority of people in Harlow have NVQ level 1 and above – in 2020 there were 44,200 with this level of education, and Harlow is consistently below the GB average of residents with an NVQ level 4 and above.

Overall, the population of Harlow had fewer degrees or GCSE Grade A-C than the average of the population in Essex.

Harlow has a higher proportion of Free School Meal students who are achieving a good level of development (61.5%) compared to the rest of Essex (56.2). The trend for Harlow is of increasing attainment from 2017-19.

Hardship in Harlow – facts and figures 2

Presentation from Ayub Khan of Citizens Advice Harlow on who is coming to them, and with what problems

Last year 2,819 people in Harlow sought help from Citizens Advice. Approx 1 in 30 residents.

The majority have issues with debt, benefits and tax credits, and Universal Credit, with housing and utilities and communications not far behind.

Mental health was the primary health condition affecting clients. On average, Citizens Advice clients experiencing mental health problems will also have 5 separate advice problems – from unmanageable debts to employment, housing access to welfare benefits. In 2021/22 the top advice issues for clients with mental health problems in Harlow were financial capability, PiP, and fuel (gas, electricity, oil, coal etc).

The biggest need when it comes to benefit issues relates to making the initial claim, followed by Personal Independence Payments (PiP). The top debt issues are Council Tax arrears, debt relief orders and fuel debt.

A third of adults report worsening mental health problems since the start of the pandemic and socio-economic issues have become harder to solve. Many of the people now visiting are from middle income households and had never thought they would be needing assistance from Citizens Advice.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists reports that 1 in 4 adults will have a mental health problem at some time in their lives. For those experiencing debt, this increases to 1 in 2. Getting the right advice at the right time can play an important part in supporting people with mental health problems to build personal resilience and improve patient outcomes.

Practical problems are putting a strain on people's mental health and the services which support them.

Using a Citizens Advice financial model, data shows that for every £1 spent on the service, Citizens Advice Harlow provides £27.28 of public value. By helping to prevent homelessness and housing evictions, Citizens Advice are saving the local authority £160,478. By reducing the use of mental health services and keeping people in work, the NHS is saved £106,101.

What the research tells us

Research shows practical problems are putting **pressure on mental health services.**

Mental health **recovery rates are significantly lower** for people who have problem debt.

Money advice is extraordinarily effective in resolving problem debt.

80% of people who receive money advice feel **more in contro**l of their finances - likely to **reduce psychological distress** and move the individual back towards recovery with treatment.

citizens advice Harlow

Understanding Universal Credit

Presentation from Niraj Joshi and Kylie Brown, Harlow Job Centre, on how the Universal Credit system works

Claims can be made online or via phone call and the date of this initial contact becomes the claim date. Verification of the claim will then be made through a follow up phone call or through face-to-face meeting at the Job Centre, where eligibility of the claim will also be checked. If this all goes well a First Commitments interview is arranged to detail what is expected from the claimant.

The assessment period lasts for a calendar month and any income received in this period will affect entitlement. Payments are made 7 days after the assessment period ends. Within this 5-week waiting period, if their ID has been verified, claimants can apply for an advance similar to an interest-free loan, repaid out of their subsequent benefit allocation.

There are several factors or "elements" which affect how much Universal Credit a household is entitled to.

If a claimant works while in receipt of Universal Credit, their benefits are reduced by 55p for every £1 earned during an assessment period.

Benefit caps apply to some people and limit the total benefit a claimant can receive. These apply to people over 16 who have not yet reached State Pension age. If a person is in receipt of other benefits, such as PiP, Armed Forces Compensation Scheme or Carers' Allowance, they will be exempt from a cap.

Standard allowance	22/23
Single	
Single under 25	265.31
Single 25 or over	334.91
Couple	
Joint claimants both under 25	416.45
Joint claimants, one or both 25 or over	525.72
Child amounts	
First child (born prior to 6 April 2017)	290.00
First child (born on or after 6 April 2017)/ second child and subsequent child (where an exception or transitional provision applies)	244.58
Disabled child additions	
Lower rate addition	132.89
Higher rate addition	414.88
Limited Capability for Work amount	132.89
Limited Capability for Work and Work-Related Activity amount	354.28
Carer amount	168.81
Childcare costs amount	
Maximum for one child	646.35
Maximum for two or more children	1108.04

The session went on to discuss more complex case studies to show how compound issues affect claimants, based on the table of allowances shown above.

What help is available now in Harlow? 1

Presentation from Emma Meek, Active Essex on support services and facilities in Harlow

The Department for Education fund free holiday activity and food (HAF) programmes for young people eligible for benefit based free school meals (FSM) and other vulnerable groups. In 2021 Active Essex managed delivery on behalf of Essex and Thurrock County Councils, under the name Essex ActivAte, and will be funded to continue this work for the next three years.

The programme is required to be delivered in Easter, Summer and Christmas holidays, with 20 days at 4 hours minimum required to fall over summer.

As well as meals and activities, Essex ActivAte provides nutritional education, mentoring support and signposting for the whole family, as well as being SEND and mental wellbeing hubs.

WONDE codes (dedicated to recipients of Free School Meals) can be issued through the same system as FSM food vouchers and released during the school holidays.





What help is available now in Harlow? 2

Presentation from Sharon Summerfield, Rainbow Services about Harlow Community Hub



Harlow Community Hub provides a unique one stop shop of direct advice to help those in need.

Referrals can be made to each of the hub partners' services via the Community Hub, which can be reached in a variety of pop up places, the main ones being the Harvey Centre, Harlow Foodbank and Moot Hall, or through self-referral to the helpline or email. Details below:
Helpline 10am- 2pm (01279 927005)
harlowcommunityhub@rainbowservices.org.uk

The Community Hub is configured as a unique One Stop Shop, designed to give direct advice in the first instance – this is not a signposting service. The emphasis is on giving a quick response based on a holistic approach to people's problems and needs.

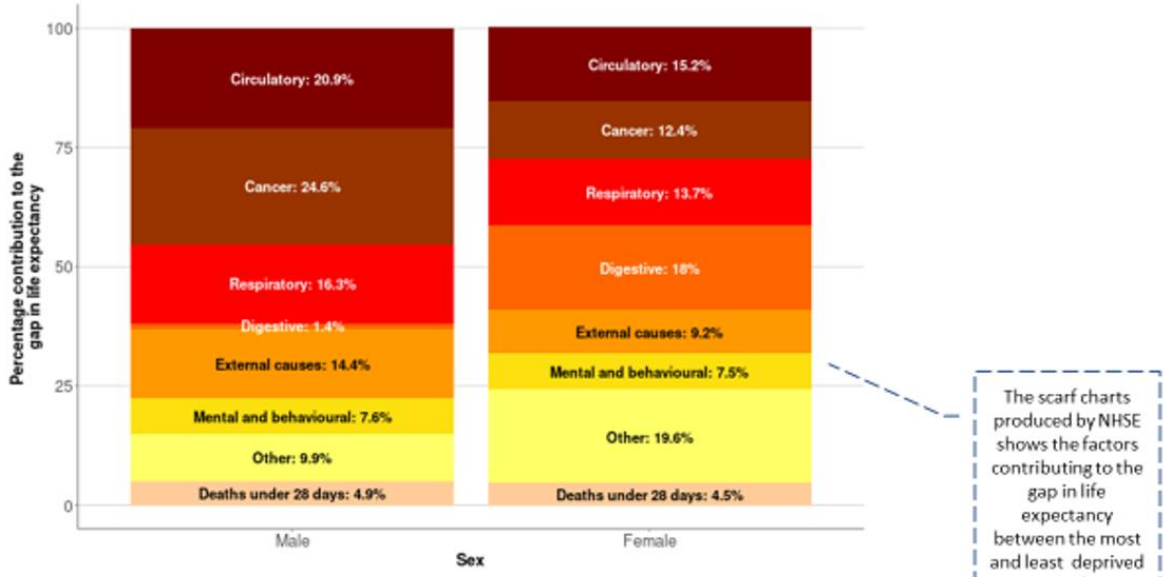
Responding to the impact of poverty on health

Presentation from Dr Amil Aneja from Harlow North Clinical Commissioning Group and Mind in West Essex profile current issues and responses to growing poverty in the town

Harlow North Primary Care Network covers 59,000 patients via practices in Old Harlow Health Centre, Church Langley Medical Practice, Nuffield House, Sydenham House, Addison House and Barbara Castle.

Health inequalities can be created by socio-economic factors, geography (eg rural/urban areas), sex, ethnicity, disability and socially excluded groups such as homeless people. These inequalities impact life expectancy, avoidable mortality, long term health conditions, mental health, inequalities in access to and experience of health services, behavioural risk factors.

Scarf chart showing the breakdown of the life expectancy gap between the most deprived quintile and least deprived quintile of Harlow, by broad cause of death, 2015-17



Source: Public Health England based on ONS death registration data and mid year population estimates, and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2015

There are several factors at play in Harlow which impact the short- and long-term health of the population, with every area being one of concern.

When compared to the rest of Essex, Harlow:

- Has the lowest level of family income,
- The highest alcohol related admissions for under 18s
- Most at risk of poorer development in early years around literacy, mathematics, understanding the world and expressive arts & design at Early Years stage making future success harder
- Has the highest level of unstable living arrangements
- It is the most disadvantaged of our Districts based on the index of multiple deprivation.

Harlow's Permitted Development Residence developments:

- highest need individuals and often accompanying children
- an employment rate of 2%,
- smoking in up to 81%,
- mental health is a significant co-morbidity in around 60%

- 32% noted barriers with seeking mental health support
- The isolated locations can be a major barrier for schools some of which have had to employ extra staff to help deal with some of the mental health issues that children face.

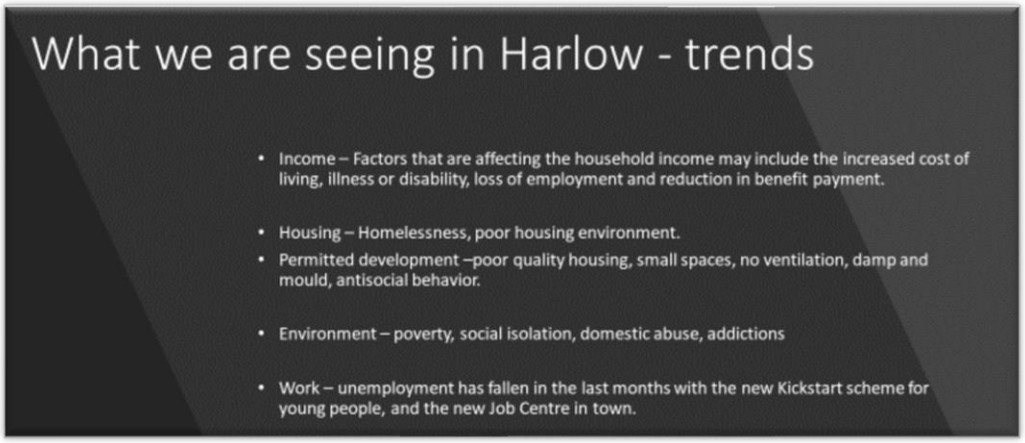
SNA District Profiles

	EPPING FOREST	HARLOW	UTTLESFORD
EDUCATION STRONG PASS GCSE 5-9	HIGHER THAN ENGLAND & ESSEX AVERAGE	LOWER THAN ENGLAND & ESSEX AVERAGE	HIGHER THAN ENGLAND & ESSEX AVERAGE (2ND HIGHEST IN THE COUNTY)
EMPLOYMENT	THIRD HIGHEST AVERAGE INCOME ABOVE ENGLAND & ESSEX	LOWEST AVERAGE INCOME IN ESSEX LOWER THAN ENGLAND & ESSEX	FOURTH HIGHEST AVERAGE INCOME ABOVE ENGLAND & ESSEX
ENVIRONMENT	4TH LEAST DENSELY POPULATED IN ESSEX	MOST DENSELY POPULATED IN ESSEX	LEAST DENSELY POPULATED IN ESSEX
AIR QUALITY – CONCENTRATION OF FINE PARTICLES	HIGHEST IN ESSEX	3RD HIGHEST IN ESSEX	3RD LOWEST IN ESSEX
DENSITY OF FAST FOOD OUTLETS	4TH LEAST DENSELY POPULATED IN ESSEX	2ND HIGHEST POPULATED IN ESSESX	LEAST DENSELY POPULATED IN ESSESX
LIFESTYLES			
• OBESITY RECEPTION	LOWER THAN ESSEX & ENGLAND	ABOVE ESSEX & SIMILAR TO ENGLAND	LOWER THAN ESSEX & ENGLAND
• OBESITY Y6	HIGHER THAN ESSEX LOWER THAN ENGLAND	HIGHEST IN ESSEX AND HIGHER THAN ENGLAND	LOWER THAN ESSEX & ENGLAND
• OVERWEIGHT & OBESE ADULTS	LOWER THAN ESSEX HIGHER THAN ENGLAND	HIGHER THAN ESSEX & ENGLAND	LOWER THAN ESSEX & ENGLAND

It is known in the long term early years education is key: once a child falls behind, they struggle to catch up. And that this is true in areas of deprivation. Education is critical for social mobility, income and future life chance: but again people from more deprived backgrounds don't enjoy the same educational results and therefore the same future life chances as others.

In the medium term people who are overweight are more likely to have higher future health needs.

Lifestyle factors for Harlow are identified as outliers against national and local benchmarks.



What could change?

Developing the Personalised Care Team SPLW Care Coordinators and Health and Wellbeing Coaches, Children and Young People Mental Health Practitioners who will work collaboratively to support patients to tackle the social determinants of health.

Connecting patients to the voluntary sector, and building closer relationships with Citizens Advice, Harlow Council and VCSE groups; improving access to health services for vulnerable groups at high risk of poverty and social exclusion.

"really useful information sessions which highlighted how poverty has become endemic in the Town..."

Levelling up, not left out? What can change and how?

Information from Richard Puleston of Essex County Council on the core objectives and long-term ambition of the levelling up programme

Essex County Council holds the local responsibility for the government's levelling up agenda. Its focus is Essex-wide, developing priority areas in the county based on an assessment of inequalities and need. It has established a vision and strategy for the next four years, which features four strategic aims:

Strong, inclusive and stable economy

1. High quality environment
2. Health, wellbeing and independence for all ages
3. A good place for children and families to grow

These come with 20 commitments.



Harlow has the highest rate of child poverty in Essex, at 32%, compared with 18% in Uttlesford, 20% in Chelmsford, 30% in Tendring and 29% in Basildon.

Levelling up doesn't mean making everyone equal if that is at the expense of making others worse off. The agenda recognises there are no quick fixes, and issues for both people and places need to be addressed. There are five main focuses to levelling up Essex: economy, environment, health and wellbeing, education and skills, family and community.

In the strategy existing services are perceived to be dealing with symptoms, whereas the levelling up work needs to address the root causes. It needs to build on sustainable change, supporting aspiration, enterprise and opportunity - among individuals, families and communities, rather than creating dependency.

What Does Levelling Up Mean for Essex?

"Everyone should have the opportunity to succeed in life and fulfil their potential; and all places and communities should be able to share in this."

We don't believe that the Council should specify what "succeed in life" means for people. People will have their own definitions of success for their own lives and it is important that they do – but as a Council are focused delivering change in the outcomes for people in five areas that align most closely with our areas of responsibility:

Economy	Environment	Health & Wellbeing	Education & Skills	Families & Communities
• Improving access to 'good jobs' that pay well and offer security, flexibility, and progression	• Improving access to green spaces and air quality; mitigating the effects of climate change; and transition to net zero	• Supporting people to have high level of physical and mental health, and lead independent and active lives	• Improving educational attainment and access to quality, relevant skills as part of lifelong learning	• Supporting people to feel safe and have strong ties and mutual support with one another in their family and community

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There will need to be a diverse approach with blended service delivery, strategic place shaping, local capacity building, devolution and using convening power.

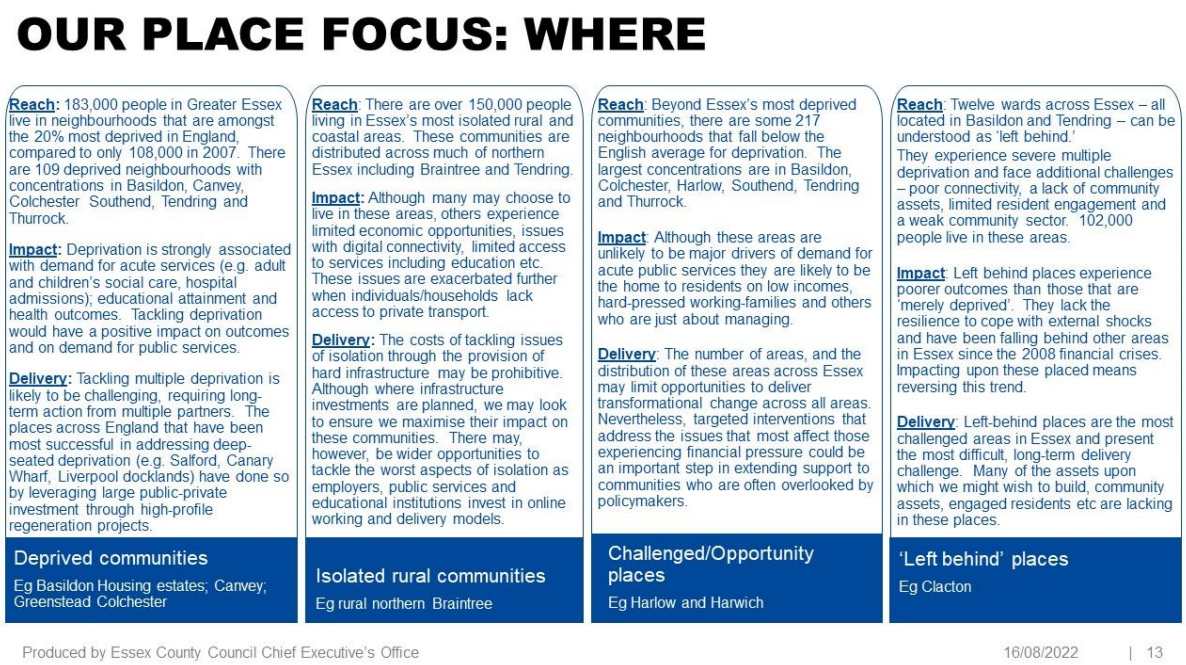


Based on a vision of life in 2030, 14 priority interventions have been identified: seeking to improve early life attainment, build skills for a workplace free-from barriers to progression, developing an enterprise culture that enables a vibrant economy with safe, inclusive and sustainable communities.

Regions for intervention are based on socio-economic analysis.

Cohorts of focus include low income working families, children and adults with learning difficulties, SEN and mental health needs, families with children on FSM, and better employment opportunities for young adults (aged 16-25).

For delivery across Essex, communities have been broken up into areas: deprived, isolated and rural, challenged/opportunity, and left behind. Harlow is defined as being challenged/opportunity area:



Focus will be on targeted interventions that address issues that most affect those experiencing financial pressure.



Initiatives in Harlow include a pilot Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts an Mathematics (STEAM) skills engine at Harlow College, community supermarkets, family friendly working, digital inclusion, applying for regeneration/levelling up funds, an innovation hub for business and sustainable transport corridors.

Harlow Poverty Alliance has been identified as a key partner in local planning / action:

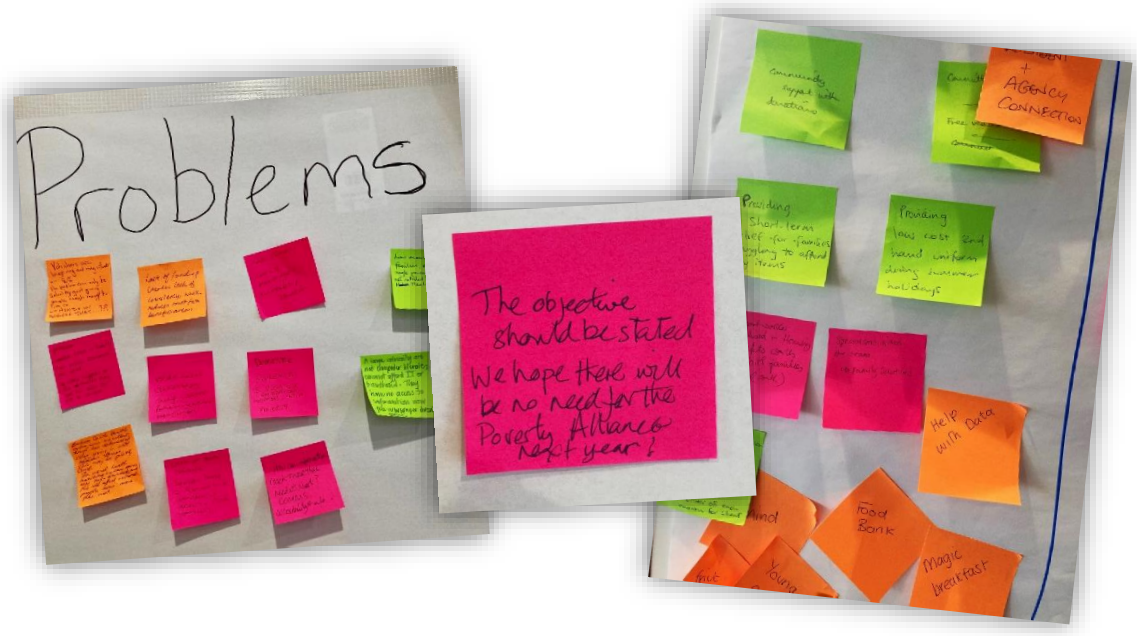
HARLOW – WORKING WITH PARTNERS

Group	Theme	LU Missions Bucket	Lead Org	Partners Involved									
				ECC	District / Borough / Cities	Health	Police	Fire	Education	Housing	VCS	Business	Central Govt.
Harlow Growth Board	Economy	1.Boosting Productivity 2. Spreading Opportunities	Harlow Council	✓	✓				✓		✓	✓	✓
Harlow Health and Wellbeing Board	Health and Wellbeing	2. Spreading Opportunities	Harlow Council	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
West Essex Cost of Living Summit	Economy+ Health and Wellbeing + Community	1.Boosting Productivity 2. Spreading Opportunities	Health	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓		
West Essex Health Inequalities Group	Health and Wellbeing	2. Spreading Opportunities	Health	✓	✓	✓					✓		
Harlow Community Safety Partnership	Community	3. Local Pride	Harlow Council	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Harlow Poverty Alliance	Community	1.Boosting Productivity 2. Spreading	Harlow Foodbank	✓	✓						✓		

The session finished with an invitation for participants to influence the planning through the Poverty Alliance.

Two sessions without formal presentations are not reported on here:

- Lois Sparkes from Mind in West Essex led an engaging follow up to the presentation on the impact of poverty on health
- Andy Thornton from MRCT brought practitioners together to network with others working in similar areas to themselves, many of which had not yet met each other.



Section 3 – Closing Panel

This 30 minute session involved a broad range of questions and opinions which can be viewed on the YourHarlow website: https://www.yourharlow.com/2022/07/02/harlow-poverty-alliance-host-conference-on-cost-of-living-crisis/

This is a summary of themes from the discussion rather than a transcript.

Robert Halfon MP reiterated the government's ongoing concern for people in hardship. Beginning with the longer term vision, the best thing for those in poverty in this country is that the economy is strong and productivity and employment are high, enabling the overall resilience of the economy and supporting households to become prosperous and self-reliant. The government's role here is to empower that, creating opportunity for all citizens, from early years education and development of skills to reducing barriers to employment, equality of opportunity in the workplace, innovation, industry, global competitiveness etc. These all ensure that the population of the nation benefit from collective prosperity and individual hard work.

Alongside that, in the short term the government continues to invest in relief for those who have been most affected by the cost of living crisis. The £37 billion recently announced will support those most in these in the coming two years (2/3 of this will go to people on benefits and 1/3 to pensioners). It will put money directly into the pockets of people in need and also contribute to rebates, relieving household costs on fuel.

Mr Halfon reiterated the complexity of the juggling act needed to escape the debt and interest burden from the Covid pandemic plus external factors causing the cost of living to rise rapidly. In protecting the nation against inflation we will all benefit. He similarly reiterated his gratitude for the endeavour of the agencies, statutory and voluntary, in the room and their devotion to their neighbours in Harlow. The complementarity of our efforts, he asserted, was of great value to the town.

Sharon Summerfield spoke more about the immediate needs of people in the town. Recognising that the voluntary sector, mostly represented here, is much more on the front-line and finding it difficult to cope with the growing number of needs. These are not simply financial, but as the theme of the conference suggests, the impacts of living in poverty ripple out into so many other elements of people's lives. This complexity is growing, and whilst appreciating the government's support for frontline and voluntary services, there is a sense that we will not be able to cope.

She paid tribute to the valuable and consistent levels of collaboration that exists across the town, which was a characteristic of our successful support of our community in the pandemic.

Sophie Clark, speaking as a periodic use of the foodbank, reiterated her gratitude that the voluntary sector has put in place such support for people on low or precarious incomes. She is grateful that the provision exists, but cannot understand how this transition has happened in the country, where previously we were able to support people to sufficient levels when on benefits, but now so many people have insecure work patterns and incomes.

The audience, mostly of caring professionals, appeared to be more familiar with responding to the stark human need of families and individuals affected by poverty and were highly supportive of Sophie's dilemmas.

A number of questions from the floor concerned the political solutions offered by

our MP. These illustrated different party-political approaches to solving the crisis of poverty, eg much greater state intervention, investment in other technologies, to a longer-term distribution of wealth towards those in longer-term need.

The session broadly illustrated the long-term political discourse in this country about the ways we support those needing welfare, and as such this was one occasion in the morning where the political options were debated more openly, though without obvious conclusion.

Audience members from the voluntary sector often broadened the discussion to the extended ramifications of poverty as it affects people, particularly when multigenerational. Its immediate impacts could not wait for the economy to get better before greater support or interventions are put in place. There was a sense of need for much higher public investment to enable sectors of our town's community to escape its impact.

The overwhelming feeling in the room was one of sympathy, empathy and solidarity with those who have been compromised by low incomes, often in relation to poor quality housing. Particularly in Harlow this extends to the Permitted Developments, which are widely perceived to have failed in the original ambition to offer supportive low-cost housing for residents displaced from London. Mr Halfon contested that some of these have been more successful, highlighting those in developments of higher quality former commercial buildings, but recognised that others have led to less-than-ideal conditions for inhabitants.

For the record, representatives of the governing party on Harlow Council had been invited to take part in the opening and closing sessions but did not take up the offer.

"I appreciated the networking, talking over issues with like-minded colleagues, focused workshops to get a better understanding of certain topics."



Summary from the Chair of the Harlow Poverty Alliance

In this inaugural conference we hoped to gather more people around our ambition to tackle poverty in Harlow. The turnout that we had has genuinely helped to extend the reach of our initial work and we are grateful to the broad range of interested parties who came along.

We recognised that it was ambitious to introduce so much content – covering in four hours what we could have spent all week discussing. Our intention was to ensure that clear information was made accessible to those interested, enabling our future conversations to be as fact-based as possible. This was inevitably at the cost of more in-depth participation or discussion.

We wanted to host an event where the statutory and voluntary sectors were brought together as allies in service of those most affected by poverty in our town. The inclusion of biographical content from people caught in poverty recurrently illustrated that poverty is not just about money, but emotively it triggers practical human concern for our neighbours who can be trapped in a situation that we often feel is simply 'not right'.

This revealed a divergence of political approaches and solutions as well as the diverse methods of addressing the impacts of poverty. More than anything we hope that the many levels of information and discussion will have stimulated all concerned to review their own agenda, be they political, charitable, statutory organisations or simply citizens concerned about his matter. We all have a part to play.

The timing of the conference, amidst dire predictions about the economy in the coming years, heightened our awareness. Harlow may not be a poor town by national standards (in fact it is quite "average") but by Essex standards, and as a satellite town of the capital, it has some endemic needs and issues that concern a wide-range of stakeholders - a cause of avoidable suffering.

It is hard to see how these can be addressed unless we work together closely. In that respect, we made a good start.

It was also the first chance that most of us have had to hear any of the plans regarding the government's levelling up agenda in Harlow. It is hard to assess what impact this might have on the town, but it was good to be invited to influence it.

Thankfully a significant number of attendees opted to join the Alliance in the future, and with an overwhelmingly positive response for future events we feel that we have a mandate to keep up the momentum.

The first event in the future will probably be an extended dialogue to consider the issues raised by this one, and the second a more in-depth look at particular issues that arise from that, enabling us to tackle poverty and its impacts with greater focus and coordination.

I warmly thank all who joined us on the day: the wonderful contributors who gave their time for free; those affected by poverty whose openness ensured that the morning remained 'real'; the Harlow Rugby Club who gave us premises for free, and finally our sponsors at the Mulberry Trust whose generosity made it all possible.

Andy Thornton – Chair Harlow Poverty Alliance August 2022

HARLOW POVERTY ALLIANCE – IDEAS AND PROBLEMS BOARD CONTENTS

Throughout the day participants were invited to post up their ideas and frustrations (problems that need to be overcome) here is what they put up.

Ideas	Problems
Could mental health workers attend foodbank to offer support to people who are struggling mentally?	Lack of social housing. Developers having a financial hold of a planning decisions (section106 promises)
Can we establish a subgroup of collaborative organisations for (1) employment (2) mental health	How can information reach those that need it most? Comms v accessibility of information
Breaking down misconceptions of why people use foodbank and services provided	Volunteers are inspiring and magnificent but... The problem can only be sold by government giving people enough money to live on... How do you achieve that...?
Groups to access for those who just need a cuppa and talk loneliness free service befriending maybe	Lack of funding creates lack of consistency which reduces trust from beneficiaries
Healthy homes campaign	lack of funding & lack of knowledge of the escalating situation
Government should provide essential services, not the voluntary sector who are provided with limited funding but can run out at any time	Low-income working families, especially single parents. Often not entitled to free school meals etc
Families with children need to be placed within short distance from the school	A large minority or not computer literate; cannot afford IT or broadband.
Children on low income need priority to be placed with siblings	They have no access to information now the free newspaper doesn't exist
Increase the age of children entitled to free public transport. To all primary school ages.	Domestic violence is pushing children and women into poverty
Poverty is often hidden and stigmatised – could more be done on the neighbourhood basis along the lines of "neighbourhood watch" people taking more responsibility for their neighbours?	We need to access services freely through different formats – free services/paper/Internet
We need to disseminate information-don't rely on IT, use local newspaper – eg Harlow Guardian	Problem: limited times a family can access the foodbank per year. What happens on the months they are not able to get a voucher? *(editorial footnote -this doesn't really happen anymore & the Bounty Club + Community Embrace are available without the need for vouchers)*
Business start up support for 18 to 30-year-olds	Barbara Castle health Centre was excellent though has deteriorated since going in with Addison house. This may be partly Covid.
Well-being and mentoring support for ex-young offenders	The usual health monitoring system seem now non-existent, and this will affect vulnerable people's lives more than most
Well-being support services for 18-30s. Group sessions (activity or information based) but not necessarily called 'well-being'	
Group well-being support for young carers as well as sessions with topics of interest e.g. careers	
Young people: long-term mentoring support in and outside work	
Website with links to different organisations with a brief outline of what they do and hyperlink (plus date so we know it's current)	

Appendix - programme for the morning

Time	Choices		
8.30 – 9.15	**Coffee & registration** **Please make sure you have ticked your session preferences after registering**		
9.15 – 9.45	**Plenary - Launch & welcome** *The shape of the day, outline of sessions, the Poverty Alliance's key issues.* *Video from Harlow Foodbank's Changing Minds project – living with poverty in Harlow*		
Information giving sessions – choose 1 out of 3 each time 9.50 - 10.20	**Understanding Universal Credit** *Presentation from Harlow Job Centre explaining how the Universal Credit system works.*	**Hardship in Harlow- Facts and figures** *Presentation from Harlow Council sharing current data relating to poverty, and Citizens Advice Harlow on who is coming to them, and with what problems.*	**What help is available now in Harlow?** *Presentation from Rainbow Services and Active Essex on support services and facilities in Harlow*
10.25 - 10.55	**Understanding Universal Credit** *Repeat of the above*	**Hardship in Harlow- Facts and figures** *Repeat of the above*	**What help is available now in Harlow?** *Repeat of the above*
11.00 – 11.25	**Coffee break** **Agency Fair**		
Presentation then discussions 11.30 – 12.20	**Responding to the impact of poverty on Health** *Representatives from Harlow North Clinical Commissioning Group and Mind in West Essex profile current issues and responses to growing poverty in the town*	**Levelling-Up not Left Out? What can change and how?** *Learn more about the Levelling Up Programme, and proposed early activity in Harlow: information around the core objectives and long term ambition.*	**Preventing crisis: multi-agency workshop** *Designed for frontline workers in organisations helping those experiencing poverty: a chance to meet and hear what others are doing, and to discuss how thigs could work better for those we support.*
12.20 – 1.10	**Function Suite** **Closing panel** Robert Halfon / Sharon Summerfield / Sophie Clark / *Chair Ayub Khan*		
1.10 – 2.00	**Lunch** **Agency Fair**		

This report was compiled by Emma Batrick and Andy Thornton working for the Michael Roberts Charitable Trust
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