

Chippenham Area Board Child Poverty (Deprivation) Initiative

Interim Report by Cllr Chris Caswill to the 7 January 2013 Area Board meeting

Background

At its meeting on April 30, the Area Board agreed that Deprivation would be one of its three Focus Areas for 2012/13. This decision was prompted by the 2011 Joint Strategic Assessment for Chippenham report that 10% of the children in the Community Area were living in poverty. This was the joint second highest percentage of any of the Wiltshire areas.

Action taken

At the time it was felt that the scope of the Board initiative should be extended to include wider issues of deprivation but it has become clear that the wider remit is too large to tackle sensibly with the time and resources available. The work done has pragmatically concentrated on the question of child poverty, albeit within a wider deprivation framework.

The first step was to look more closely at the data which underlie the headline 10% figure. This was done in conjunction with staff from Public Health and the Rise Children's Centre. The core data are produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) for the inelegantly titled Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) which have been created to provide areas of approximately equal size across country, whose boundaries are expected not to change over time. These do not map neatly onto local authority ward boundaries but can for the most part be associated with individual wards.

In the Chippenham Community Area there are five LSOAs with notably high proportions of children living in poverty. At the last count, 34% of children living in Chippenham Hill Rise NW and 30% of children in Chippenham Queens E were identified as living in poverty as then defined. The three other areas with high levels were Chippenham Audley S, Chippenham Avon E and Chippenham London Road W. The available indicators also suggest that families living in these areas will suffer from multiple aspects of deprivation, such as poor levels of educational attainment, poor health and relatively high levels of antisocial behaviour and crime.

Secondly I read a number of national and local reports, including the Council's Child Poverty Strategy and the Joint Strategic Assessment. Of the many national reports the 'Everyday Insecurity' study¹ is recommended for its detailed analysis of benefits and the likely effects of upcoming changes. Thirdly I identified a number of people actively concerned with these issues locally (in housing associations, the voluntary sector, public health, schools, churches) and invited them to an informal brainstorming meeting on the situation in Chippenham and possible future action. I am very grateful for their contributions and what follows draws heavily on that discussion.

Some interim conclusions

The vast majority of families living below the poverty level in the Chippenham Community Area will get financial support from a range of welfare benefits. Unless Chippenham is somehow atypical, some of those families will have one or more adults in full or part-time low income work. Whether workless or not their benefit income is now under pressure from the Government's 'welfare reforms', such as the overall cap on benefits and reductions in Council Tax relief, Child Tax Credits, Incapacity Benefit, Disability Living Allowances and Housing Benefit. So their circumstances are very likely to get worse in the coming year, and it is reasonable to suppose that the number of children and families in Chippenham living in poverty is likely to increase. It is hard to imagine that the numbers of families and children living in these reduced circumstances in Chippenham can be solely or even primarily ascribed to unwillingness to work and excessive dependency on the welfare state.

These changing circumstances will in any case increase pressures on family finances. Nationally it is estimated that 3.6 million households have no savings and no assets to fall back on. The cumulative effect of benefit changes is likely to push many local families beyond the "tipping point " and into debt, or further into debt. Many will resort to pay day loans all doorstep lenders, and pay horribly high interest. Alternative sources of credit are too few, and not sufficiently accessible.

National reports and local knowledge indicate that the everyday realities of poverty for both adults and children are likely to include shortages of food, clothing and heating. As yet detailed local evidence is not available but it has been said that it is readily to hand.

On the positive side there is a wide range of institutions and agencies dedicated to providing advice and support, including children's centres, schools, the local authority, housing associations and voluntary organisations. Government policy is also to involve

¹ "Everyday Insecurity: Life at the End of the Welfare State", New Economics Foundation, November 2012, available online

private sector organisations as part of its package of welfare reforms. Wiltshire Council is probably the most significant (and certainly the largest) of the involved organisations - with multiple roles including provider of social services support, housing and housing policy, educational resources, collector of local tax, guardian of public health and most recently provider of emergency finance.

Whilst it is encouraging that there are so many involved in the support process, this is a complicated picture. If it seems complicated from the provider side, it must appear even more complicated to many families struggling to make ends meet.

Some interim recommendations

In these troubling circumstances, the question for the Area Board is whether it can make a useful and positive contribution. I believe it can and recommend that it does. The Board is a local community leader with strong connections to Wiltshire Council. It also has connections to and includes a significant group of local public and voluntary organisations. It is a forum for discussion and has a remit to reach out to the Chippenham public.

And there is an appetite for leadership in this area, to increase awareness of the problems faced by those local families and their children who are having to cope below the poverty line, to review and improve the support which is and could be available, and to encourage communication at this local level between the many agencies who are in different ways engaged in providing that support and advice.

Specifically I recommend that the Board agree to continue this initiative, and commit to holding a special meeting on local child poverty within the next six months. Subject to those agreements, I propose the following short term actions:

- an invitation to Wiltshire Voice to facilitate discussions of these issues with affected families in the Chippenham Community Area
- a request to Wiltshire Council for help with preparation of an easily accessible set of LSOA data on child poverty in Chippenham
- a meeting between local organisations and representatives and Wiltshire Council officers to discuss possible next steps, including ways of getting accessible advice and support to hard pressed families
- requests to local schools for information on any issues which they are encountering, and steps taken to provide other help for pupils who are financially disadvantaged, supporting the Council's initiative to encourage take up of free school meals

- requests to the Town and Parish Councils, CHAP and the COB to consider contributions they can make, and their involvement in the ongoing discussions
- continuation of the informal local network which was established at and after the brainstorming meeting
- a particular focus in these discussions on problems of debt and saving
- consideration of what more can be done locally to communicate with hard to reach families

For the longer term I recommend exploration of the possibility, and value, of setting up an independent Chippenham Poverty Forum to provide a continuing local focus on these challenges.

If it is agreed to go forward on these lines, a further report will be provided to the next Board meeting.

(Cllr) Chris Caswill

19 December 2012