

Rother District Anti-Poverty Strategy

Context

Rother District Council is one of the five district and Borough Councils in the County of East Sussex in the South East of England. Rother is ranked 135th (out of 317) local authority for deprivation and contains fairly affluent areas that sit alongside pockets of significant deprivation. Rother now has two neighbourhoods among the most deprived decile (compared to one in 2019) both within Bexhill Sidley ward, and there are six LSOAs in parts of Sidley, Central Bexhill, and Eastern Rother that are among the most deprived 20% in England.

There are particular challenges facing the district which include:

- An ageing population: Rother has one of the oldest populations, 9.24% of Rother is aged 80+, almost double the national average of 4.96%. The proportion of over 65s is projected to increase by 20% by 2026 and 55% by 2041.
- Disabilities and long-term illness: Over 23% of Rother residents have a disability or long-term illness, which is significantly higher than levels nationally and in the South East. In addition, the percentage of the population who provide 50 or more hours per week of unpaid care is significantly higher than the national average.
- Housing tenure and affordability: The proportion of social housing in Rother is significantly lower than averages across the South East and nationally, and many residents have difficulty accessing affordable private rental properties.

In response to growing poverty levels in a number of localities in Rother, the council (led by the Rother Alliance, a coalition administration of independent, Liberal Democrat, Labour and Green Party councillors) committed to developing an anti-poverty strategy as part of the council's corporate plan 2020 to 2027. The council is realistic in its ambitions, as a district council it is limited in what it can do due to not only budgetary constraints but also because the main areas that can make an impact in addressing poverty are under the remit of East Sussex County Councils' or require national change.

Despite this, the council emphasised that the strategy and its accompanying action plan are part of its new approach to making positive changes on what it can control and increasing its influence to engage with others to make changes beyond what it can control.

The anti-poverty strategy is a five-year strategy from 2022 until 2027. The council described the strategy as being an important first step towards developing a more comprehensive response to tackling poverty locally. It is being used as a catalyst to improve existing ways of working and launch additional work across all key local stakeholders to improve outcomes for those living in poverty in Rother.

This case study provides variety among our other case studies because it has been formulated fairly recently, with the Cabinet approving the strategy in March 2022. As the strategy is in its early days, it has not yet been evaluated, but we have included it as an example of the measure's councils with limited scope and resources can take to address poverty.

Scope and design

Vision

The strategy sets out Rother District council's vision, *"to work together to tackle the symptoms of poverty in order to reduce its impact and create a fair, healthy, prosperous, thriving and sustainable Rother, now and for future generations to come"*.

Poverty definition and identification of the drivers of poverty in Rother District

The council defines poverty in relative terms, explaining that "you are poor if you are unable to live at the standard that most other people would expect. A child can have three meals a day, warm clothes, and go to school, but still be poor because her parents do not have enough money to ensure she can live in a warm home, have access to a computer to do her homework, or go on the same school trips as her classmates. More than 2,500 children in Rother are living in poverty".

In the strategy, they emphasise that references made to poverty are to relative income poverty. They define households in Rother as living in relative poverty if their combined income is 60% or less of the average (median) household income in after housing costs.

Rother is home to significant health inequalities and the council recognises that poverty is one of the main causes of poor health and health inequalities. They are working to deliver the vision set out in the strategy through a health and environmental lens. Using the Health Foundation evidence hub, they have identified the main drivers of health inequalities as being fundamentally poverty related. The council is focused on addressing these drivers where possible with key local stakeholders. The drivers include:

- Lack of money and resources
- Unemployment, work quality, and job security
- Housing affordability and quality
- Inadequate transport
- Exposure to pollution and access to the natural environment
- Barriers to community cohesion and participation

Funding

The district faces significant budgetary constraints, and as such there is no dedicated budget for the strategy. The council stressed that whilst they are restricted in how much they can do, the aim of the strategy is to improve the coordination of resources rather than creating new interventions.

Development of the strategy

Anti-Poverty Task and Finish Group

In 2020, a cross-party Anti-Poverty Task and Finish Group (APT&FG) was set up by the Overview and Scrutiny committee, to investigate the causes and effects of poverty locally and make recommendations to the cabinet to inform future council policy. It appointed six members, who were supported by officers from the Corporate Core, Policy and Housing, and Community services. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee provided input into the review.

The Rother Alliance developed a series of proposals for the APT&FG. They fell into two categories: research and evidence gathering (to determine the level of poverty across the district and establish best practice to combat it) and strategy and actions (improving the council's existing services, implementing new schemes and initiatives, and establishing an effective anti-poverty strategy to deliver on the aims set out in the group).

The APT&FG had two aims: to contribute to the development of the anti-poverty strategy and to identify new ways of working to reduce poverty and hardship within the district.

The group also had a number of objectives, these include:

- Reviewing how to boost financial inclusion and access to financial products.
- Assessing the impact of the Council Tax Reduction Policy and discretionary housing benefit payments (DHP).
- Investigating the availability of different forms of advice and the affordability of fuel, food, and other provisions and the role of the council in supporting this.

The APT&FG held events in 2020 and 2021 to gather evidence from key local stakeholders both external and internal to the council to meet its objectives and develop the strategy.

The first event involved a range of partner agencies, who the APT&FG asked to summarise the services they offer, the gaps in service provision, and the service users' experience of poverty.

The council emphasised that the evidence-gathering sessions were important to the development of the strategy as they highlighted that there is a strong commitment from key local stakeholders to alleviate the symptoms of poverty. In addition, the sessions highlighted areas for improvement in the delivery of services by the council and their partners. The evidence-gathering sessions helped established the strategies' key aims.

Partnership working

The strategy is a culmination of work done by the APT&FG, in collaboration with wider authorities, outside bodies, and the voluntary sector. This is to ensure that the aims are relevant, and the action plan is achievable with the resources available locally.

The strategy highlights that tackling poverty requires a commitment from all partners to joint working. The council has been given a commitment by voluntary, statutory, and business sectors to work to address poverty.

The strategy and action plan have been developed and are being delivered by the council in partnership with Rother Voluntary Action (RVA) through the Local Strategic Partnership (LSA). The council highlighted that the RVA's knowledge has been fundamental to the strategy as they have insight into what is happening on the ground, and they already coordinate much of the activity in the area which supports residents facing financial difficulties.

In November 2021, a multi-agency event was held by the council in partnership with RVA. The event reviewed the recommended objectives of the APT&FG and identified the aims and actions that would support the delivery of the strategy. RVA presented feedback and case studies following a series of consultations with local community groups from urban and rural areas of the district. The findings of the APT&FG, informed by the evidence gathering sessions, were reviewed, and condensed into a series of aims and actions, which have been captured in the strategy's action plan.

Consultation

To identify any gaps for inclusion and gather further evidence of the potential impact of the strategy and action plan, the council consulted with a range of groups. The majority of the consultation took place via an online questionnaire from April to May 2022, however written and telephone consultation responses were also accepted. The groups who responded included:

- Users of community and support services.
- 25 local organisations including seven town and parish councils.
- 13 charities and voluntary agencies alongside three public sector organisations and two political parties (branches).
- Internal council departments such as the Planning Policy team.

Priorities

The strategy highlights the following three aims for the council and community services operating in the Rother District to reduce levels of poverty:

Coordination: developing local strategic commissioning and operational structures to coordinate services designed to alleviate poverty. The evidence-gathering sessions identified a lack of coordination and duplication of services, leading to service users experiencing confusion because of the array of statutory, voluntary, and community services available.

Access: maximise the accessibility of services so that those in the greatest need can be reached. The evidence-gathering sessions demonstrated that there are gaps in service accessibility; Rother is predominantly rural which means it is challenging to deliver services due to poor internet access and support hubs situated in inconvenient locations.

Promotion: promote information, advice, and support to service users and professionals. The evidence-gathering sessions conveyed that there needs to be upskilling of council staff so that residents are provided with information and advice in a timely manner.

Delivering the strategy

Responsibility

To support the development and delivery of the strategy and action plan, it is being led by the council's head of housing and community service. However, the council emphasised that the strategy has been important in enshrining to council officers that every department must consider how their work is contributing to reducing poverty in Rother and the need for cross-departmental work.

Leadership

A change in political leadership was central to the formation of the anti-poverty strategy, as councillors with first and second-hand experience of poverty brought with them a determination to tackle the issue. The anti-poverty strategy responsibility sits under the cabinet portfolio for housing and homelessness and there is a spokesperson for young person's/child poverty.

Anti Poverty Strategy Steering Group (APSSG)

The multi-agency Rother APSSG works to deliver the aims and actions identified within the strategy and the action plan to ensure objectives remain achievable. The APSSG will provide periodic progress updates to the Rother LSP.

The council emphasised that the APSSG will develop and refine its objectives as it establishes itself, identifying gaps in service provision and areas where greater collaboration and coordination between services can support outcomes for residents.

Socio-economic duty

Encouraged by our influence that adopting the socio-economic duty is a central element of a strategic approach to addressing poverty a motion was submitted in September 2022 for the cabinet and council to explore voluntarily adopting the socio-economic duty. To affirm the council's commitment to preventing and combatting hardship, alongside a Cost-of-living Emergency declaration.

Links to other strategies

The council highlighted that delivery of the strategy is integrated with a range of existing strategies including its Housing, Homelessness, and Rough Sleeping Strategy, Local Plan and the Hastings and Rother Food Networks 'Food insecurity Strategy for Rother'.

Through the strategy, the council are seeking greater strategic alignment with wider health and well-being aims and objectives, including those of the East Sussex Health and Wellbeing Board, as they recognise that poverty is both a cause and consequence of the poor health that is impacting on residents in the district.

Monitoring and evaluation

The strategy is in its early stages and as such the council has not defined the specific measures that will be used to evaluate the impact of the strategy. The action plan currently sets out the actions which underpin each objective, the timeline for completing these and who is responsible for this. The majority of these are the responsibility of the APSSG, who are currently refining the action plan. Some of the key actions include:

- Delivering new Bexhill place-based Hub and new rural virtual Hubs and supporting existing service hubs with more targeted signposting.
- APSSG creating a 'street sheet' leaflet summarising services and where they are located to support greater accessibility.
- APSSG to develop a training resource video of local services for residents and frontline staff.

Oversight and governance

Rother Local Strategic Partnership (LSP)

The council described the LSP as the 'logic vehicle' for supporting and monitoring the progress of the strategy action plan due to the strategy being embedded in partnership working. This also has the advantage of ensuring buy-in from high-level leadership in the area. The LSP's role is to promote the strategies objectives through the East Sussex Strategy Partnership, support the coordination of existing resources and influence future service commissioning through its networks.

The LSP will provide an annual report which will: detail the successes and progress made towards meeting the objectives, outline priorities to action for the year ahead, and look at the poverty challenges and responses from partners.