

MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

15 April 2026

DRAFT FINAL REPORT OF THE OSB SHORT REVIEW THE COUNCIL'S APPROACH TO POVERTY

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AIM OF THE INVESTIGATION

1. As part of the Scrutiny Work programme for 2026/2027 the Overview and Scrutiny Board agreed to examine how the Council approached the issue poverty in Middlesbrough. Specifically, it wanted to understand if it was beneficial for the Council to adopt a poverty strategy to support that agenda.

COUNCIL PLAN – VISION AND PRIORITIES

2. The scrutiny of this topic fits within the following vision and priorities of the Council Plan:-
 1. Safe and Resilient Communities – Creating a safer environment where residents can live more independent lives.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

3. The original terms of reference for the short review, as agreed by Overview and Scrutiny Board, were as follows:-
 - To understand the definition of poverty and what this means for Middlesbrough.
 - With a specific focus on demographics, understand the causes and impact of poverty in Middlesbrough.
 - To explore the strategies, plans and policies the Council has in place to address and alleviate poverty in Middlesbrough.
 - To understand what work is being undertaken with external stakeholders to address and alleviate poverty in Middlesbrough.
4. During the evidence gathering process, OSB decided to narrow its focus on Terms of Reference 3, namely, to explore the strategies, plans and policies the Council has in place to address and alleviate poverty in Middlesbrough.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION/SETTING THE SCENE

Poverty Definition

5. Poverty is a broad and complex subject and can be defined in several ways. It is because it is complex, and somewhat subjective, that the Overview and Scrutiny Board were keen to understand how the Council was seeking to address the issue. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation defines poverty as,

“When a person’s resources (mainly their material resources) are not sufficient to meet their minimum needs (including social participation).”

6. While such definitions are helpful in general terms, there still a large degree of subjectivity within them. How does someone define “minimum need”, for example? It is within the context of those inherit complexities the Board reviewed the evidence it received.

EVIDENCE

7. The Board heard that poverty was a longstanding and important issue for the Council as it impacted on every facet of people’s lives. The Board also understood, and appreciated, that several initiatives and programmes were underway to address poverty and to support those experiencing it.
8. The Board were reassured to hear that several award-winning initiatives have been in operation and have been supporting residents experiencing poverty for several years. Such initiatives are exemplified with those within the Welfare Strategy under which 11 themes were being delivered including Discretionary Housing Support, Hardship Support and Food Poverty. Those initiatives had seen quantifiable support which included:
 - An additional 546 recipients of free school meals to those that were entitled to them.
 - 81 referrals to Middlesbrough Environment City equating to £3,000 in energy vouchers.
 - over 8,000 Housing Benefit Claims made with over £42 million having been made available.
9. While the Welfare Strategy is working well and is delivering good results for those in need of financial assistance, the Council wanted to fully understand its own approach to poverty and what poverty meant for the Council. To do this a “Poverty Sprint” was undertaken over a two-week period during which internal and external stakeholders worked together to map the issues surrounding poverty and what support was offered. Those stakeholders included subject specialists including the Council’s Director of Public Health, Public Policy experts from Teesside University and representatives from the Junction Foundation.
10. The Poverty Sprint was based around several themes including financial inclusion, educational and health outcomes and housing provision and aimed to address three general challenges:
 - II. *To understand how we can maximise whole-Council, cross-policy, cross-strategy action to drive real change to poverty in Middlesbrough.*
 - III. *To develop greater clarity of what we can do locally across the Council to achieve greater impact on poverty.*
 - IV. *To devise proposals for how we should develop interconnected strategies to maximise our collective impact on poverty.*

11. The Poverty Sprint demonstrated that poverty did not appear explicitly in many Council strategies and there was a tendency for the Council to develop policies and strategies on this matter in silos. As such, the Poverty Sprint recognised there was a need for a more joined-up strategic approach to poverty.
12. An action plan was created following the Poverty Sprint and good progress has been made against those actions.
13. However, it is sometimes difficult for work to support poverty to become embedded. It was clear that this was not due a lack of will from Council officers or external partners, but that it was sometimes difficult for officers to frame poverty as a singular issue. The Board found the analogy of policy perspectives useful and was advised that several policy perspectives were available and oftentimes applied simultaneously.
14. While an understanding of poverty frequently – and understandably - oftentimes focusses on a person's financial situation the Board recognises that poverty, while linked to a lack of financial resources, can have broader impacts such as social exclusion.
15. Examples of social exclusion include the loss of a family's primary income which would lead to that family experiencing increasingly challenging times and a lack of social participation. While this situation may not fit with traditional views of poverty, it is inextricably linked to it, and viewing poverty in this way reveals the Council's approach to supporting poverty would need to be more expansive.
16. Efforts to synthesise the Council's approach to poverty are underway. Members were advised that the current Council Plan, introduced in 2023, followed a standard format for such documents. During its creation it was discussed if the Council Plan should adopt a singular thematic approach or a "thematic pillar" approach. The Council Plan ultimately adopted a "Pillar" approach meaning Council business is being delivered according to themed pillars rather than an overarching single, crosscutting theme. While Council business is undertaken in the correct manner, the question of whether the Council should adopt a single, unified poverty strategy has persisted.
17. An example of a "singular approach" to a Council Plan was Leeds Council, which had decided that all Council activity be undertaken with a view of improving the lives of Children and Young People. Adopting this approach gave the Council a single lens to view all its activity. Members considered whether this would be a suitable approach for Middlesbrough Council to take.
18. Members were advised that the Council's current approach to poverty tries to embed the issue in a business-as-usual approach. To achieve this, the Council's

performance framework is to be enhanced, with the reintroduction of balanced score cards and regular performance clinics. This would involve individual departments and their contributions to thematic pieces of work, including the poverty agenda.

CONCLUSIONS

19. The Council does not appear to have an agreed, corporate, definition of what poverty means for it. Members appreciate that having a single definition of poverty is not only difficult to achieve, but adopting such a definition may inhibit the Council's ability to offer flexible services.
20. Significant work is being carried out under the Welfare Strategy to support people experiencing financial hardship. This work has delivered quantifiably positive outcomes for residents.
21. There are several policy perspectives that the Council uses to address poverty. It is recognized that these multiple perspectives can lead to a degree of confusion in their approach to supporting the poverty agenda.
22. The Council does not have an overarching poverty strategy. Instead, its approach to poverty is embedded within the thematic pillars of the Council Plan.
23. As part of the Council Plan refresh in 2026, work is being undertaken to enhance the performance regime. It is hoped this will introduce mechanisms to capture work supporting the poverty agenda.
24. How the Council managed the poverty agenda was, to a large extent, a political choice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

25. Based on the evidence gathered, the Overview and Scrutiny Board submit the following recommendations:
 1. The Council develops a clearer overarching approach to addressing poverty, including consideration of how this is best defined and framed (for example 'poverty' or more broadly 'social inclusion'), and supported by a strategy or a shared corporate ambition.
 2. If the Council chose the option of a mission statement, it should improve coordination and alignment across existing policies, strategies, and service areas, to develop a consistent approach to tackling poverty and its wider impacts, such as social exclusion.
 3. The Council considers its performance management in regards to how it tackles poverty, including whether it needs to develop clear benchmarks to understand and demonstrate how its efforts to tackle poverty have impact.

4. As part of Recommendation 3, an annual progress report should come to OSB.

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 - M Adams – Director of Public Health
 - J Savage – Head of Resident and Business Support
 - E Scollay– Chief Executive

APPENDICES

N/A

COUNCILLORS OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

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