**Child poverty: Birmingham’s approach (2007-2014 – and ways on to 2020)**

**The UK’s Child Poverty Act (2010)** set targets for the national government to meet by 2020 (on four measures of child poverty, including a measure of relative poverty where the household’s income is less than 60% of the median national income). The Act placed a duty on local authorities to produce an assessment of child poverty in their area and to use this as the basis for producing a strategic approach to reducing levels of child poverty locally.

**Prior to the Act**, Birmingham had already:

* Nominated a link officer to act as key contact with the government’s Child Poverty Unit
* Circulated key partner agencies with briefings about the nature and causes of child poverty, the scale and distribution of child poverty in Birmingham, and the likely actions that would have immediate or longer term impacts on levels of child poverty in the city
* Brought together, in a series of focused conversations, nominated officers from each directorate of the City Council (covering Children’s Services, Economic Development, and Family Learning) together with relevant nominees from the local Learning and Skills Council (responsible for funding and developments in adult/ young people skills and training), health services, Department of Work and Pensions/JobcentrePlus (responsible for payments of welfare benefits, as well as for getting unemployed people into jobs), Birmingham Chamber of Commerce (as the link into employer networks) , Birmingham Strategic Partnership (established to produce the city’s Community Strategy to 2026), and the voluntary sector network for children and young people; with others being brought into the conversations, as appropriate, for specific topics.
* Distributed data on levels of child poverty disaggregated by electoral ward, by the census Super Output Areas (of a few houses), and by family type.
* Taken an outline review of the position in Birmingham to the City Council’s Strategic Management Team/ Executive Management Team, and to the multiagency Children and Young People Board for the city.
* Used a broad-based summit meeting of people from a wide variety of local agencies to explore local child poverty issues, based on real-life case studies drawn from the lives of children in poorer families in the city.
* Been part of a peer review process with several other local authorities (moderated by a local university): checking the credibility of the city’s approach to reducing the number of children living in poverty
* Undertaken briefings (on their particular potential for reducing levels of child poverty through their day-to-day activities) with networks of children’s voluntary sector groups, housing associations, local residents/community organisations, financial inclusion agencies, and local managers responsible for community development and neighbourhood services.

**In response to the Act**, Birmingham produced its assessment and strategic framework by the required deadlines. A framework set out the actions across the City Council directorates and partner agencies, that were already in place for 2010-11, and which were likely to have some leverage on levels of child poverty in the city.

The assessment and the framework of planned actions were updated in January 2012 and again in 2013 incorporating the latest figures for levels and distribution of child poverty, to demonstrate where progress was being made against the planned actions to 2014, and to confirm the ongoing effectiveness of the approaches being taken.

**Planned actions, to 2014, that had leverage on levels of child poverty**

The range of planned actions that were most likely to have an impact on levels of child poverty across the city, and that were already contained within City Council directorate plans and within the plans set out by partner agencies, included:

1. Actions with immediate impact on child poverty:
* Increasing the availability of jobs locally, and ensuring that there is support for parents to access job opportunities (particularly in areas of high child poverty).
* Consideration of the payment of a ‘living wage’, the extension of family-friendly flexible working, and ensuring that adequate and sufficient childcare is available to support parents wanting to work.
* Increasing family incomes by maximising the take-up of various entitlements and discretionary benefits.
* Home improvements, particularly in areas of high child poverty, to reduce the amounts that families need to spend on fuel.
1. Actions that will impact on child poverty in the near future:
* Improving the employment prospects of young people/young adults, many of whom may become parents in the near future, by improving the vocational, basic and functional skills levels of this group, increasing the availability of Apprenticeships, creating clearer routes to real employment, and reducing the numbers not in education or training by age 19.
* Work to support families with complex sets of needs, assessing the needs of the whole family and ensuring rapid interagency responses.
* Improving the quality of homes in the privately-rented sector (to prevent ill health contributing to reduced employability of parents) as well as providing more homes for larger families and countering homelessness particularly for families.
1. Actions that will impact on child poverty in the longer term:
* Early interventions in the lives of at risk children and young people to prevent later difficulties occurring, so that those children grow up more likely to be adults not in poverty.
* Improving children’s social, emotional and behavioural capabilities so that they have more resilience to deal with issues that arise in their lives.
* Improving the health and wellbeing of children and closing the health gaps between groups of children across the city.
* Engaging children and young people in decisions that affect their lives, and providing access to additional school and community activity for children in poorer families; creating a greater sense of self-significance and responsibility as they grow towards adulthood.
* Improving parenting skills and behaviours where these are putting children at risk of poor development.
* Improving those primary schools that are well below the level of other schools in the city, responding to children who need the additional support to achieve skills and qualifications; giving underachieving pupils better routes towards future success and employability as adults.

Up to 2013 there were clear responsibilities for taking forward actions against each element in this Framework. Birmingham’s approach to tackling issues of child poverty has been taken forward, to this stage, without additional bureaucracy and without the need for the introduction of separate structures or processes.

**Birmingham in relation to national, regional and other Local Authority levels of child poverty, and the progress made 2007-11**

In 2011, across England as a whole, based on national assessment measures, there were 20.1% children in poverty. This represented a change from 20.6% in 2010 and 21.6% in 2007 (i.e. a 1.5 percentage point drop from 2007). In the same period Birmingham had 32.4% children in poverty in 2011, a reduction from 33.7% in 2010 and 37.9% in 2007 (i.e. a fall of 5.5 percentage points across 2007-2011). So, across the period 2007-2011 Birmingham was reducing its level of child poverty at four times the national rate of reduction.

If Birmingham is to reduce, by 2020, its level of child poverty to the current national level this will require a reduction of approximately 1.4 percentage point/year. This rate of reduction has been maintained over recent years and progress will continue to be monitored in terms of closing the gap to national figures. The 2007 figure of 37.9% has been taken as a baseline against which progress can be measured 2007-2011; 2011-2014; 2014-2017 and 2017-2020. This single measure is only one way of representing levels of child poverty and is being used as a background indicator of Birmingham’s relative situation rather than as a single simple target. Other ways of measuring child poverty are available and all indicate similar levels and distributions.

In 2011, of the major cities, Birmingham had the fifth largest proportion of children living in poverty (below Manchester’s 36.6%, Nottingham’s 34.4%, Middlesborough’s 33.2% and Liverpool’s 32.5% ). With 90,060 children in poverty (in 2011 – a reduction of 2575 from the 2010 total) Birmingham continued to have by far the largest volume of child poverty to deal with of any local authority in England.

**Child poverty levels within different areas of Birmingham**

For Birmingham as a whole the 2011 total percentage of children in poverty was 32.4% with a 5.5 percentage point reduction from 2007. Both of these figures hide a very wide variation across the various wards in Birmingham.

Six wards had levels of child poverty that were better than (ie lower than) the national average. These were the four Sutton Coldfield wards, Harborne and (new to this group in 2011) Hall Green. Fourteen wards had child poverty levels worse than the national level but better than the average for Birmingham. The other wards had levels worse than the Birmingham average (32.4%). In the worst of these the level of child poverty reached 46.5% (down from 49.9%.in 2010).

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Better than national average (20.1%) | Worse than national average; better than Birmingham average | Worse than, or equal to, Birmingham average (32.4%) |
| Sutton Vesey (6.7%) | Oscott (20.6%) | Billesley (32.4%) |
| Sutton New Hall (6.3%) | Edgbaston (21.4%) | Acocks Green (32.6%) |
| Sutton Four Oaks (7.7%) | Moseley & Kings Heath (21.5%) | Quinton (33.2%) |
| Sutton Trinity (13.7%) | Bournville (21.9%) | Hodge Hill (33.7%) |
| Harborne (17.3%) | Perry Barr (23.7%) | Springfield (34.3%) |
| Hall Green (19.4%) | Selly Oak (24.1%) | Stechford & Yardley North (34.3%) |
|  | Handsworth Wood (26.2%) | Tyburn (35.8%) |
|  | Northfield (27.2%) | BordesleyGreen (36.6%) |
|  | Sheldon (27.8%) | Weoley (37.4%) |
|  | Brandwood (29.1%) | Bartley Green (37.8%) |
|  | Stockland Green (29.3%) | Kings Norton (39.0%) |
|  | Erdington (30.0%) | Lozells & East Handsworth (39.1%) |
|  | Longbridge (32.1%) | Washwood Heath (39.6%) |
|  | South Yardley (32.2%) | Kingstanding (40.2%) |
|  |  | Soho (40.3%) |
|  |  | Shard End (41.0%) |
|  |  | Aston (42.2%) |
|  |  | Ladywood (44.6%) |
|  |  | Sparkbrook (44.8%) |
|  |  | Nechells (46.5%) |
|  |  |  |

These were the overall figures for each ward. Within each ward there remained significant variation by smaller (Lower Super Output) areas.

Previously there were three wards where more than 50% of children were growing up in families in poverty. Although levels remain unacceptably high, by 2011 there were no wards with the majority of children growing up in poverty. Significant progress had been made but there was much more still to be done.

Although the levels of child poverty in the high child poverty wards were reducing substantially these wards were overall the same ones that had been high in child poverty over the past few years. For these high child poverty wards there was variation in the extent of reductions over the 2007 to 2011 period.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Changes 2007 – 2008 – 2009 – 2010 - 2011 (as % and percentage points) |
|  | 2007 % | 2008  | 2009  | 2010 | 2011% | 2010-11 Change |  2007–2011: 4year change |
| England | 21.6 | 20.9 | 21.3 | 20.6 | 20.1 | -0.5 | -1.5 |
| West Midlands | 24.0 | 23.3 | 24.0 | 23.3 | 22.7 | -0.6 | -1.3 |
| Birmingham  | 37.9 | 35.9 | 34.9 | 33.7 | 32.4 | -1.3 | -5.5 |
|  |  |  |
| Nechells | 61.7 | 56.0 | 53.1 | 49.9 | 46.5 | -3.4 | -15.2 |
| Sparkbrook | 58.6 | 52.3 | 50.0 | 47.8 | 44.8 | -3.0 | -13.8 |
| Aston | 58.4 | 51.4 | 47.8 | 44.2 | 42.2 | -2.0 | -16.2 |
| Washwood Heath | 54.5 | 49.0 | 45.6 | 42.3 | 39.6 | -2.7 | -14.9 |
| Ladywood | 51.4 | 48.2 | 46.1 | 45.3 | 44.6 | -0.7 | -6.8 |
| Lozells/E.Handsworth | 52.3 | 46.2 | 43.2 | 41.4 | 39.1 | -2.3 | -13.2 |
| Bordesley Green | 52.9 | 46.0 | 42.7 | 39.3 | 36.6 | -2.7 | -16.3 |
| Kingstanding | 45.8 | 44.7 | 44.0 | 43.9 | 40.2 | -3.7 | -5.6 |
| Soho | 49.6 | 44.3 | 43.2 | 41.2 | 40.3 | -0.9 | -9.3 |
| Springfield | 45.8 | 41.7 | 38.6 | 35.6 | 34.3 | -1.3 | -11.5 |
| Shard End | 41.3 | 41.4 | 42.3 | 42.1 | 41.0 | -1.1 | -0.3 |
| Kings Norton | 38.3 | 40.3 | 40.6 | 39.9 | 39.0 | -0.9 | +0.7 |
| Hodge Hill | 40.0 | 39.7 | 37.1 | 35.3 | 33.7 | -1.6 | -6.3 |
| Weoley | 38.4 | 38.8 | 38.8 | 38.4 | 37.4 | -1.0 | 1.0 |
| Bartley Green | 38.7 | 38.7 | 38.6 | 38.2 | 37.8 | -0.4 | -0.9 |
| South Yardley | 40.4 | 38.2 | 36.2 | 34.0 | 32.2 | -1.8 | -8.2 |
| Acocks Green | 37.8 | 38.0 | 36.8 | 34.0 | 32.6 | -1.4 | -5.2 |
| Tyburn | 39.5 | 37.8 | 37.1 | 36.2 | 35.8 | -0.4 | -3.7 |
| Billesley | 32.6 | 33.3 | 34.9 | 33.9 | 32.4 | -1.5 | -0.2 |
| Longbridge | 33.9 | 33.2 | 33.5 | 32.3 | 32.1 | -0.2 | -1.7 |
| Stechford/Yardley N. | 34.7 | 34.4 | 33.6 | 35.5 | 34.4 | -1.1 | -0.3 |
| Quinton | 33.2 | 32.7 | 32.5 | 33.6 | 33.2 | -0.4 |  0.0 |
| Stockland Green | 32.0 | 30.7 | 31.7 | 29.6 | 29.3 | -0.3 | -2.7 |
| Brandwood | 28.1 | 28.8 | 30.0 | 29.2 | 29.1 | -0.1 | +1.0 |
| Erdington | 29.6 | 29.2 | 29.3 | 31.0 | 30.0 | +1.0 | +0.4 |
| Northfield | 25.7 | 26.7 | 27.1 | 27.6 | 27.2 | +0.4 | +1.5 |
| Sheldon | 28.0 | 27.6 | 28.1 | 28.3 | 27.8 | +0.5 | -0.2 |
| Selly Oak | 26.3 | 25.8 | 26.1 | 25.4 | 24.1 | -1.3 | -2.2 |
| Handsworth Wood | 27.8 | 27.2 | 25.9 | 24.6 | 26.2 | +1.6 | -1.6 |
| Perry Barr | 24.8 | 23.8 | 24.6 | 24.3 | 23.7 | -0.6 | -1.1 |
| Edgbaston | 23.8 | 23.0 | 23.7 | 23.1 | 21.4 | -1.7 | -2.4 |
| Bournville | 22.1 | 23.1 | 23.1 | 21.6 | 21.9 | +0.3 | -0.2 |
| Moseley & Kings Heath | 24.3 | 23.0 | 22.7 | 21.6 | 21.5 | -0.1 | -2.8 |
| Oscott | 20.9 | 21.4 | 22.3 | 21.7 | 20.6 | -1.1 | +0.3 |
| Hall Green | 20.4 | 21.4 | 20.5 | 21.2 | 19.4 | -1.8 | -1.0 |
| Harborne | 17.2 | 17.4 | 17.7 | 16.8 | 17.3 | +0.5 | +0.1 |
| Sutton Trinity | 13.3 | 14.0 | 13.5 | 14.6 | 13.7 | -0.9 | +0.4 |
| Sutton Four Oaks | 7.5 | 6.9 | 8.0 | 8.1 | 7.7 | +0.4 | +0.2 |
| Sutton New Hall | 7.2 | 6.8 | 7.5 | 7.9 | 6.3 | -1.6 | -0.9 |
| Sutton Vesey | 6.5 | 6.4 | 7.0 | 7.4 | 6.7 | -0.7 | +0.2 |

The reassuring indications from these figures are that, over the year, the largest reductions in levels of child poverty were mostly in the wards with the highest levels of need. This again is an overall closing of gaps – this time between ‘worst’ wards and the city average. Hardly any wards showed significant increases in levels of child poverty over the year. Whilst there are many successes in closing the gaps between high child poverty wards and city average, if success is to be attained then (in addition to the wards just mentioned above) thought needs to be given to reducing less extreme levels of child poverty in several wards.

In summary: Prior to 2011 Birmingham was thus making better than national average progress in reducing the level of child poverty (closing the gap to national figures) with most progress being made in the wards with highest levels of child poverty (closing the gaps between high-poverty wards and the city average). Child poverty is still a significant issue for Birmingham, not least because of the size of the child population.

**Since 2011-12 the context has changed substantially, both nationally and locally**

Since 2012 a key part of the city approach to poverty in general has been the work on social inclusion – focusing on reducing inequalities, ensuring that all people in neighbourhoods can flourish, and increasing young people’s engagement in developing the Birmingham of the future.

A recent revision to the national child poverty strategy sets out four areas of focus – Jobs, Livelihood, Education, and Local responsibility. These are felt to be helpful themes in thinking about the next steps actions in Birmingham.

The financial situation of families has been open to change predominantly because of the national changes in welfare arrangements. The impact of the several recent national and local decisions will show through as the next sets of validated figures are released.

The next 3-5 year period, thus, presents new challenges to combatting levels of child poverty in the city, but may also open up new opportunities: hence the continuing need for some revision to Birmingham’s Approach to Child Poverty framework.

There are some things that are well-known:

* The map of areas of multiple deprivation is not changing much over the years – the city still has work to do on this, but in a much harsher climate than previously
* In-work poverty accounts for the majority of children in poverty – linked to low wages and insecure employment
* Child poverty is not an abstract idea – it has direct daily impact on the lives of families – shown in a range of ways eg the recent increase in the number of young children with anxieties, self-harming and suicidal tendencies
* The discourses around poverty are unhelpful; being poor should not equate with caricatures of dependency, evil or fecklessness
* There has been an increase in the volume of private sector housing that is of poor quality
* There are many strengths within Birmingham’s communities. An asset-based approach will build on these; a deficit-based approach does not

**What do families in poverty want changing?**

Over recent years there have been various opportunities for talking with residents experiencing poverty. Their views about what needs to be changed have been fairly consistent and include:

* Contact with people who have a better, more sympathetic, appreciation of the family’s day-to-day issues
* Costs, timings and quality of childcare to support parents who wish to return to work
* Access to affordable work, where there are gains in income after travel costs, loss of some welfare benefits, childcare costs etc are all taken into account
* Need for a sense of hope amongst young people – many of whom will become parents in the near future
* Sustained quality of education – for immediate adult work-related skills, and schooling for children’s longer-term future success
* Clear and helpful support routes into employability: for parents; for young people
* Increased amount of reasonable housing: affordable; not overcrowded; with private landlord acting fairly
* Reduction of outgoings on basics (transport costs; daily foodstuffs; fuel costs)
* Avoidance of loan sharks (who tip manageable household debt into situations where a family goes ‘over the edge’)
* The flow of finance not being interrupted through unnecessary delays in paying welfare benefit; or because of sudden unexpected sanctions
* Access to good healthcare; at times that fit with family and work responsibilities
* Faster, and more effective, responses from police/health around families caught up in issues of domestic violence, alcohol/drug abuse, mental health difficulties.
* Less negative media portrayal (as ‘scroungers’) of people who want to work but are unable to find/sustain suitable work

**Ways forward**

To move forward in the new context, from 2014-2017 and on to 2020, (in addition to the continuing actions already within Birmingham’s child poverty framework) there are a number of practical activities in the city that may help:

* Birmingham City Council is using whatever flexibilities it has to reduce the burdens on poor families
* Housing Associations now see themselves as much more than simply landlords. They are increasingly operating as frontline services offering a range of supports to families
* The ‘Think Family’ approach (previously ‘Troubled Families’) is making good progress - maybe slower than in other areas – and provides a quick entry point to families with multiple difficulties
* Adult and child mental health services are being brought more into focus; with more to be done on specific issues such as children being placed on adult wards
* Currently, there are 3500 16-21 year olds who present themselves as homeless: Often due to family conflict; 88% with no immediate source of income; many with mental health issues; with little idea of how to grasp, and hold on to, opportunities (so easily blamed as ‘don’t take opportunities that are there’). Work is being done with this group to build ‘character’ and resilience as well as sort some of their personal issues, and offer employability training.
* Employment agencies, locally, are having success in getting large numbers of people with drug issues (many of them parents) into work
* There continues to be a growth of Apprenticeships and ‘back on track’ programmes (apprenticeships with wraparound support) for young people. There is renewed focus on the need for young people to build up a history of employability before some of them become parents
* There is a strong focus, once more, on families in bed and breakfast accommodation
* Local communities are strengthening activities that can put children on a better route to success. As one example, Castle Vale area has established an Education Partnership – focusing on all-age educational regeneration: understanding the pathways from conception to age 19 (working with a university to get a deeper understanding of this)
* The ‘Health’ landscape is moving from one characterised by fragmentation and change to one that can offer more co-commissioning and working together. The quality of Primary Care/ standards of General Practitioners (neighbourhood doctors) are a top priority. There is a strong mechanism (the Health & Wellbeing Board) to move things forward. A key factor, in October 2015, will be the transfer of health visiting services to Birmingham City Council – with the opportunity to look at the numbers of health visitors and how they are used (focusing back on child development/ capacity of family to cope, rather than just checking a list of medical conditions such as clicking hips)
* Businesses appear to have a stronger appetite to help with social issues – more than the old corporate social responsibility volunteering-type activities
* Schools now have substantial amounts of Pupil Premium monies directly from central government – national payments of an amount for each Looked After Child and for each child entitled to free school meals (ie from a poorer family). This money is designed to be spent directly on activities that will close achievement gaps between poorer children and their peers.
* There is a recognised need for a more helpful, overarching narrative on poverty across the city
* A stronger emphasis on supporting the growth of entrepreneurial skills and jobs
* A national and local push on business contribution and employer practices: wage levels, family-friendly working arrangements, zero hour/ insecure jobs
* A clearer sense of how local activities and city-wide activities need to mesh together for maximum effect

In moving forward, 2014-2017, there is a continuing need to ensure that this work gets carried forward at the scale and pace needed in the city, with sufficient traction to continue to make differences, and plugged into the social inclusion process already in place. The updated thinking framework is emerging, and the successful actions are being maintained such that – despite national austerity measures impacting heavily on poor families in the city – Birmingham will continue to take seriously its duty to counter levels of family poverty in the city.