

Oldham Health and Wellbeing Board

Statement on the health impact of poverty and the cost of living crisis.

We know that poverty is a major detriment to a person's health. The borough of Oldham^a on average is one of the most deprived boroughs in the country, with some of the highest rates of child poverty in Greater Manchester.

We are now seeing the impact that the cost of living crisis is having on people's finances and in turn their health. This crisis has shown itself to be a very real risk to our most vulnerable residents and is widening health inequalities across Oldham.

Poverty shapes all aspects of a person's life: how they are born, live, work and age. As such, it is a critical determinant of their health¹. To put this into perspective, a reduction in household income of £1000 is associated with a fall in healthy life expectancy of 0.7 years for women and 0.5 years for men².

On a basic level, the energy we all require is three times more expensive to get from healthy than unhealthy foods³. The homes people live in are another critical factor in health: fuel poverty leading to cold, damp homes, increases the risk of heart and lung diseases and mental health problems for adults and children⁴. Cold homes also exacerbate long term conditions including diabetes, musculoskeletal conditions and dementia⁵. Overcrowded homes predispose to lung conditions including tuberculosis, viral and bacterial infections, and poor growth in children⁶.

It's not just physical health that's affected by poverty. The social and mental health impacts of severe financial pressures including debt, requiring food and financial assistance, and subsequent restrictions in social activities, have severe impacts on child and adult mental health⁵. Children living in poverty are more likely to die in infancy, develop asthma, become overweight, perform poorly in school, and die in an accident⁷.

These are unconscionable social costs, in a relatively affluent nation, and lead to considerable economic losses. Recent research has found that health inequalities cost the UK almost £30 billion each year⁸.

Through the 10 years before the COVID-19 pandemic, life expectancy in the UK stalled, and health inequalities increased⁹. On this background, poorer health as well as social and environmental vulnerability factors in more deprived sections of the population left this group open to the worst effects of the pandemic. These effects were clearly seen in COVID-19 mortality rates, which in the most deprived 10% of local authorities were more than double those in the least deprived¹⁰.

In Oldham, which sees some of the highest levels of deprivation in the UK¹¹, relative and absolute child poverty rates (36% and 30% respectively) are far higher than the national averages^{12,13}. This is reflected in health outcomes such as life expectancy, which are more

^a Throughout this statement 'Oldham' refers to the Metropolitan Borough of Oldham



than two years less in Oldham than the averages for England. Healthy life expectancy for men in Oldham is 56.6 years: the lowest of all the boroughs in Greater Manchester and women in Oldham have on average 5.7 years less of life spent in good health, compared with the national average¹⁴. This is closely linked to deprivation levels, with differences in life expectancy across the borough of around 12 years¹⁵.

Ill health is an important cause of lost productivity across Oldham. A high proportion of the working age population is classified as economically inactive (26.9% compared with 21.5% in Great Britain), and of these 38,700 people a disproportionate number are long-term sick (26% in Oldham compared to 24.2% nationally)¹⁶. This is not evenly distributed across the borough: more deprived populations in Oldham suffer more disability and ill health and have lower levels of employment¹⁶.

The ongoing cost of living crisis is challenging residents across Oldham. Household finances are being strained further by rising energy bills and increased inflation. Figures of over 14 thousand Oldham households in fuel poverty and approximately 11.5 thousand in food poverty^{12,17} will increase, as people struggle to meet their basic needs. This will have serious repercussions for the health of our population.

As well as the many direct health effects relating to food, housing, and heating – described above – energy costs will compromise the health of people who require oxygen equipment and fridges to store medication⁵. By creating challenges for local and regional NHS and social care services, individuals most reliant on these services will suffer as hospitals struggle to discharge patients to safe and warm homes, and care packages and services are no longer able to deliver due to high fuel costs⁵. In this way, the crisis will affect already vulnerable groups the most – children already experiencing poverty, the elderly, and those with health and care needs – thus furthering health inequalities in the borough.

These health inequalities are likely to have severe impacts on productivity in Oldham, and therefore on economic growth. Direct illness and disability, as well as caring responsibilities for incapacitated relatives, will take individuals from the workforce, hampering much-needed economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic⁵, with long term adverse effects for the borough.

Oldham Council, aware of these challenges, has declared a cost of living emergency. A cost of living summit was hosted earlier this year with local partners to explore the issues and to discuss how best residents may be supported through these difficult times. Since then, the council have announced a £3m support package, funded directly from council resources, to support local residents through the ongoing crisis. This package will cover a range of areas:

- £420k - Doubling the Warm Homes scheme
- £90k – Establishing Warm Banks across Oldham
- £455k – Increasing specialist Helpline staff
- £95k – Additional digital inclusion staff and projects in libraries including more tablet lending
- £600k – Increasing Community Engagement team
- £450k – Additional emergency grants for food, energy, housing and childcare



- £310k – Increasing Citizens Advice sessions in every district every week
- £445k – Support for our partners in the community who deliver vital services including Oldham Foodbank and Action Together.
- £40k – To prevent children financial hardship missing school

A new money advice referral tool is also available to help signpost residents to the full range of available resources throughout Oldham.

Recommendations for action

The cost of living crisis is only making already poor health levels in Oldham worse. We need change if we are to have a healthy and productive town. We are calling on the Government to:

1. Act on levelling up promises – deliver investment and support for Oldham.
2. Support local authorities and the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector to meet the needs of local residents in these challenging times. Funding for local areas will be key in supporting those who are most vulnerable in their communities, including children and older people.
3. Reintroduce the £20 Universal Credit uplift to mitigate impacts of the crisis for those struggling the most¹⁸
4. Take a “cash first approach” to food insecurity – as recommended by the Independent Food Aid Network. This will help prevent institutionalising food aid and uphold individuals’ dignity. This approach can be seen in the actions of the Scottish Government and in certain local authorities^{19,20}
5. Expand eligibility for free school meals to include all children in households on Universal Credit, and uplift the current level of support for free school meals to take account of the significant increases in inflation, including food and energy prices.
6. Continue to provide support with the cost of energy to ensure every household has the means to meet their basic needs of heating, lighting and cooking; and provide additional support to make all homes energy efficient.

In line with the British Medical Association’s ‘Declaration for National Wellbeing’, we also recommend rigorous health impact assessments for new policies, with consequent reviewing of policies with identified risks, and the creation of a UK-wide version of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill, seen in Wales and Scotland²¹

Oldham Council Leader, Councillor Amanda Chadderton said: “The facts speak for themselves – if we want to have a healthy, productive town that gives people a chance to flourish then we must address our levels of poverty.



“In a modern country like ours having rates of child poverty as high as they are is just not acceptable. Our young people deserve better. They deserve the best possible start in life so they can go on to become whatever they aspire to be. We are failing them if we don’t act and address the health issues caused by poverty.

“We’re doing everything we can in Oldham to tackle health inequalities that are only being made worse by the cost of living crisis, but we need more support from Government if we’re to see true change in the systemic problems we’re seeing impact so many. There’s been a strong focus nationally recently on economic growth and productivity. Whilst this is of course important we need to also consider that people like full time carers, those unable to work because of disability and those who are retired also deserve to have a decent life. This means we need adequate support in the form of benefits and allowances and not decreasing or stagnating these payments that only further chip away at people’s quality of life.

“We can do better than this. We have the power and ability to lift people out of poverty and into a good standard of living – we just need to take action.”

Councillor Howard Sykes MBE, Leader of Oldham Liberal Democrat Group, said: “The cost of living crisis has highlighted the many health, well-being and economic inequalities in our society.

“That’s why we need action now if we’re to help the people in our borough who are in poverty or on the edge of it. People are being expected to cope with rising costs with little signs of this crisis coming to an end any time soon. This is on top of coming out of the Covid pandemic which many are still feeling the impact of both financially and health-wise.

“We know that healthy life expectancy is affected by loss of income so we can’t sit back and watch as our resident’s health is put at risk due to a crisis that was no fault of theirs and which they can do little to resolve.”

Laura Windsor-Welsh, Oldham Director for Action Together Oldham, said: “During the cost of living crisis we’ve seen a significant and worrying increase in the number of people needing support. Whilst we have some fantastic charities, voluntary and community groups in Oldham they are becoming overwhelmed, trying to plug the gaps left by national policy decisions. Oldham residents need targeted, system wide help to get them out of poverty.

“Last year we helped launch the Poverty Truth Commission in Oldham, putting residents who experience poverty at the heart of working with local decision makers to understand and address the root causes of poverty. The commission’s work quickly identified that a lack of resource means Oldham’s efforts to address poverty are struggling to deliver the desired results for residents.

“We won’t stop in our local efforts to end poverty, but we have to acknowledge that if we want to be truly successful then we’ll need stronger, wider intervention on a national scale.”



Mike Barker, Managing Director of Oldham's Integrated Care Partnership, said: "Poverty and health are clearly linked – we can see the effects it's having right in front of us. So, we need to be acting earlier to prevent negative health outcomes from taking place." **Oldham Council**

"Whilst the NHS is here to treat people if our residents have the means to live healthier lives it will result in fewer problems for them later in life. Addressing poverty early has so many benefits both to mental and physical health, the advantages to lifting people out of it cannot be overstated."

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