Maximising the impact of local responses to poverty

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Greater Manchester Poverty Action (GMPA) has been supporting local authorities in Greater Manchester and across the country to introduce anti-poverty strategies. What role do local anti-poverty strategies play in helping individuals and communities? What can be learned from work that is currently being done? And what makes a good strategy?

In recent years, local authorities and their partners have faced successive crises affecting their populations. The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent cost of living crisis have borne down particularly hard on low-income residents. Localities have stood up with swift and reactive responses to need in the face of crises that have presented acute challenges to areas where poverty is high.

Many localities are considering, and in some cases revisiting, how they can take a proactive and strategic approach to tackling poverty. They are doing this with a view to limiting the impact of future economic and other shocks on individuals and communities. Central to this approach is the development of local anti-poverty strategies. These strategies are being led by councils and developed and delivered in partnership with partners from across sectors.

This commitment to taking a local leadership role in response to poverty is occurring in the context of there being no UK government agenda explicitly focused on tackling poverty, and no statutory requirement on localities in England to set tackling poverty as a strategic priority.

In developing and implementing anti-poverty strategies, localities are recognising:

- the impact poverty has on individuals and communities, and the pressures this places on often under-resourced local public services;

- the need to set tackling poverty as a strategic priority to bring partners together, join up existing anti-poverty initiatives, and identify opportunities for further action;

- that there are several specific ways in which localities can tackle poverty, and the potential of these has not been fully realised. This includes maximising household income through widespread adoption of the real living wage and taking local steps to increase benefit uptake.

GMPA has been supporting local authorities in Greater Manchester and across the country to introduce anti-poverty strategies. We have also reported to the Greater Manchester Combined Authority on the strategic and policy role they can play in this agenda. Increasingly, councils and other relevant stakeholders from across the country are seeking out learning from these activities.

In February, GMPA published *Local anti-poverty strategies – good practice and effective approaches*.[1] Drawing on six case studies where local strategies are in place, this report sets out the strategic approach local authorities and their partners can take to tackling poverty and identifies the key elements required to maximise the effectiveness of a local anti-poverty strategy.

The value of a strategic approach

Understandably, there will be apprehension about what value an anti-poverty strategy adds. Translating what local authorities and partners would ideally like to do into the reality of practical change is complex and challenging. The absence of a UK government strategy to tackle poverty, combined with central government policies that compound poverty, such as cuts and reforms to benefits, adds to localities' challenges in addressing poverty. National austerity measures have strained local resources, further hampering efforts to combat poverty.

Given this context, there may be a sense that local authorities and partners are already doing all they can to address poverty, so what does a local strategy add? GMPA's report analyses six local anti-poverty strategies implemented across the country: Salford City, Rother District, East Devon District, Cambridge City, Leicester City and Scottish Borders. We looked at the scope and design as well as the aims and measures of success. Our findings have shown that local anti-poverty strategies add value in three distinct ways.

- Firstly, they set clear objectives and set out how they will be achieved, underpinned by a shared understanding of poverty and its causes.

- Secondly, they improve co-ordination and empower key local stakeholders to do more to address poverty, as there is a coherent framework. This helps marshal limited resources and capacity, and fosters a collective determination to address the issue across partners.

- Thirdly, they increase accountability for action, as they provide measurable targets to determine whether the actions set out are making a difference, but there is an emphasis on longevity and the ability to learn as the strategy progresses.

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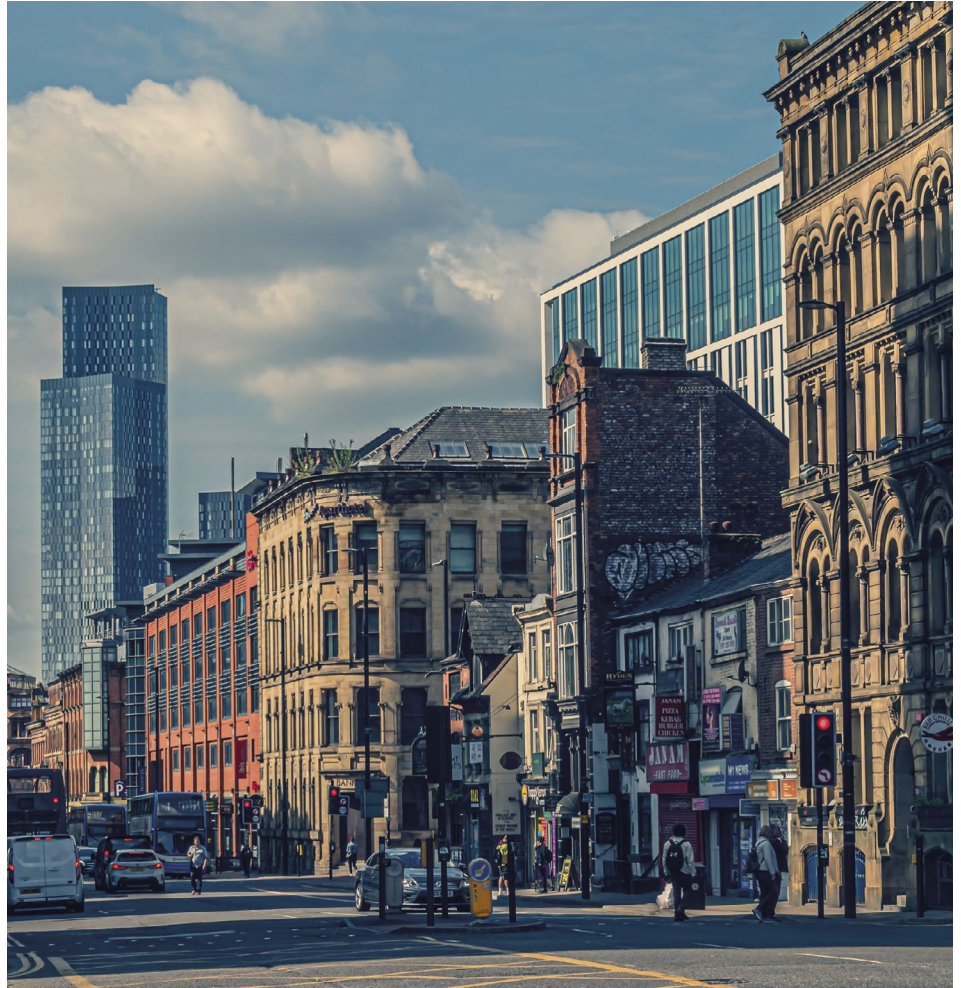
Key elements of a local anti-poverty strategy

Based on our findings, we have developed a framework identifying the elements a local anti-poverty strategy needs to maximise its effectiveness. The 12 key elements described below are used as the basis for developing or enhancing local anti-poverty strategies.

1. Define poverty and its drivers

Local authorities need to develop a clear, agreed definition of poverty and its drivers.

Creating a shared understanding of poverty is the cornerstone for action, as it will enable both internal and external stakeholders to understand their role. This should include adopting a relative as well as an absolute understanding of poverty. This means local strategic and policy responses to poverty should focus on ensuring residents can participate fully in society as well as responding to basic needs.

Alongside this, it is important to clearly identify the main drivers that limit people's ability to meet their basic needs and to participate fully in society, and recognise that poverty is largely about insufficient access to adequate financial resources – ie, a lack of money. Local authorities should focus on the three key drivers of poverty: income from employment, costs of living, and income from social security and benefits in kind. This approach means local action to address poverty needs to prioritise boosting household income and increasing access to financial resources, including taking a cash-first approach to local welfare provision.

2. Political and officer leadership

For an anti-poverty strategy to be effective, local authorities must have a permanent senior officer and political leadership to address poverty. This is crucial to drive ambition and ensure effective operational working, delivery of the intended outcomes of the strategy, and strong communication with local communities on what work councils are doing to tackle poverty. Clear leadership that names poverty as a portfolio responsibility for an elected member can help build cultural change across councils, and avoid poverty being included under the catch-all of 'inequality'.

3. Focus on prevention, reduction and mitigation

An anti-poverty strategy must have at its core a focus on preventing and reducing poverty. Strategies should adopt medium- and long-term actions.

While it is critically important that the focus of an anti-poverty strategy is on prevention and reduction, an anti-poverty strategy also needs to articulate how the council is supporting people in an immediate financial crisis through local welfare provision. Steps that councils can take include a cash-first approach to supporting people. This approach maximises dignity, choice and control for recipients of support. It reflects that lack of income is the primary cause of financial hardship.

As part of a focus on reducing poverty, local welfare provision should also be resident-focused, identifying a clear and sustainable pathway out of poverty rather than simply offering a one-off transactional piece of support.

4. Prioritisation

Local anti-poverty strategies should not look like 'shopping lists'. A strategy should be prioritised to ensure implementation is feasible. It should clearly state what councils and local partners could and should achieve and set out clear statements against which progress can be effectively measured.

5. Partnership working

An anti-poverty strategy will not be effective without local authorities working in partnership with external partners and communities. Local authorities need to engage with local stakeholders, establishing an anti-poverty partnership group, to clarify requirements and expectations on how best to work together to achieve the objectives set out in the strategy. This is essential to share best practices and avoid duplication.

6. Lived experience engagement and co-production

People with lived experience of poverty are best placed to challenge the existing ways of working and ensure that anti-poverty efforts are centred around community needs. Localities need to enable people with lived experience of poverty to fully participate in developing and implementing an anti-poverty strategy.

7. Reinforcing and aligning with existing strategies

Given the cross-cutting nature of poverty, an anti-poverty strategy must not sit in isolation. Tackling poverty needs to be incorporated into existing strategies rather than operating as 'ad-hoc' to existing commitments and services. To ensure addressing poverty is a focus of everything councils do and align budgets, members' portfolios, and activities, there needs to be a strong focus on tackling poverty in corporate strategies, economic strategies, housing and equality policies.

8. Governance

Good governance is necessary for an effective anti-poverty strategy. This should be internal and external to the council, taking on responsibility for monitoring progress and overseeing the implementation of the strategy.

9. Action plan

Actions to deliver the aims and objectives of the anti-poverty strategy need to be kept under review. Accompanying an anti-poverty strategy should be a high-level action plan to increase efficiency and accountability. This should set out current and future actions, timelines and milestones, and who is responsible for the actions. Councils need to report honestly on how they are performing against the targets and milestones, and action plans are important for refreshing the agenda.

10. Adopt the socio-economic duty

To support the effectiveness of an anti-poverty strategy, local authorities should voluntarily adopt the socio-economic duty. The socio-economic duty contained in Section 1 of the Equality Act requires public authorities to actively consider the way in which their decisions increase or decrease inequalities that result from socio-economic disadvantage. Successive governments have chosen not to enact the duty, and socio-economic disadvantage is often missing from equality impact assessments that include consideration of other protected characteristics. GMPA has been working with local, combined authorities and other public bodies[2] to increase the awareness and voluntary adoption of the duty as a means of creating better outcomes for those with lived experience of poverty. Voluntary adoption of the duty enables councils to ensure the impact of decisions on poverty are taken into account at all levels and at all stages.
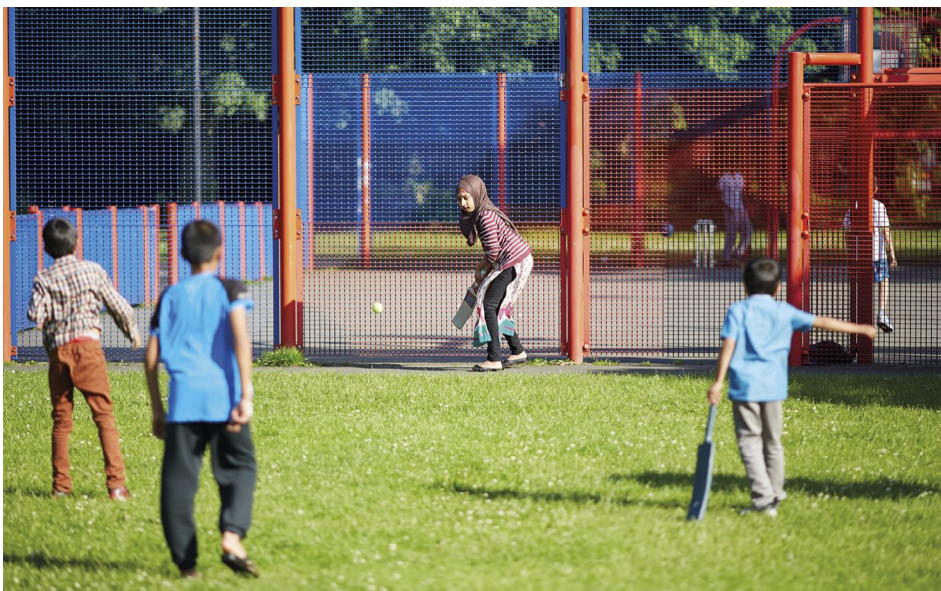
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11. Adaptability

An anti-poverty strategy cannot 'stand still'. For it to serve its purpose it should be viewed as adaptable, rather than a collection of actions that should be rigidly adhered to. Therefore, anti-poverty strategies should be continuously reviewed to ensure that they are accountable and adaptable to the needs of local communities as circumstances change.

12. Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are critical to understanding whether the actions set out in the strategy are making a difference, ensure the most effective and efficient use of resources, and enable adjustments to be made where necessary. Local authorities should identify a clear set of metrics against which they can track progress in addressing poverty, and develop a public-facing dashboard that highlights local poverty indicators to help increase understanding in the local population. People with lived experience of poverty should be engaged in this process.

What do we mean by a local anti-poverty strategy?

In our report, we emphasise the importance of understanding what local anti-poverty strategies are and what they are not. Recognising the essential elements that distinguish an effective strategy from a collection of initiatives is crucial. A robust, local anti-poverty strategy involves:

- identifying the key issues contributing to poverty;
- establishing clear priorities for action;
- embracing a commitment to cultural change; and
- fostering collaborative partnerships across multiple stakeholders and aligning with and complementing existing strategies.

Ultimately, a local anti-poverty strategy must strive to make a lasting positive impact on the lives of those facing the greatest financial hardships.

However, a local anti-poverty strategy cannot be considered genuine if it is merely shelved away, collecting dust as an internal document. Similarly, presenting a list of existing initiatives undertaken by a local authority to address poverty falls short of meeting the criteria of a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy. A genuine strategy demands a proactive and dynamic approach beyond a passive compilation of efforts, offering a framework for coordinated and sustainable action that is open to scrutiny from external and internal stakeholders.

No 'silver bullet'

There is no 'silver bullet' to address poverty. While the main drivers for change lie with national government, local authorities and their partners have a significant role to play based on their remit and expertise. Our findings have demonstrated that local anti-poverty strategies can serve as a vehicle for progress. However, for these strategies to be effective, they must be grounded in realism, feasibility and active collaboration with key local stakeholders. A good understanding of poverty, coordinated efforts and the availability of resources are crucial components to addressing the specific needs within communities.

Despite the existing determination to do better, the potential of local anti-poverty strategies in building resilient communities remains largely untapped. Anti-poverty organisations such as GMPA continue to build on this work, working closely with local authorities to implement and strengthen local responses to poverty. With the right advice and guidance, local authorities and partner organisations can be at the forefront of working towards a more equitable society where poverty is reduced, and individuals have equal opportunities to thrive.

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Footnotes

1. P Rimmer and others, Local anti-poverty strategies – good practice and effective approaches, GMPA, 2023
2. See gmpovertyaction.org/socio-economic-duty