

Cost of Living Community Conversations: New Forest

Workshops carried out October - December 2023.

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Background

Context:

Previous research established that the New Forest 'is an area of great inequality, with many people unable to live comfortably on their current income living alongside notable wealth.' The 'Cost of Living in the New Forest' report from 2022 also highlighted a number of issues including high housing costs, a lack of availability, poor mental health, a scarcity of employment opportunities, inadequate public transport in rural areas, and the cost of the food.¹

These local drivers of hardship have been exacerbated by the Cost of Living crisis throughout the United Kingdom, which has led to high inflation and rising unavoidable costs, such as food and energy. Nationally, as of October 2023, around 2.8 million of the poorest fifth of households (47%) were in arrears with their household bills or behind on scheduled lending repayments, 4.2 million households (72%) were going without essentials and 3.4 million households (58%) reported not having enough money for food.²

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a '**New Forest Cost of Living Steering Group**' was established to coordinate the response to growing hardship and to develop a preventative strategy to alleviate poverty. This group is comprised of 'Citizens Advice New Forest', 'Community First', 'New Forest Basics Bank' (based in Lymington), 'Ringwood Foodbank', 'Waterside Foodbank' (based in Blackfield), and 'Youth and Families Matter' (based in Totton).

The Cost of Living Steering Group subsequently applied for funding from the 'National Institute for Health and Care Research: Clinical Research Network Wessex' as part of their series on 'Communities Underserved by Research' to carry out this research in the New Forest.

Workshops:

Cost of Living Community Conversations was a series of workshops designed to provide people living in the New Forest on a low income with a chance to voice their issues related to the cost of living and to involve them in the process of

¹ 'The Cost of Living in the New Forest', 2022, New Forest Cost of Living Steering Group, <https://www.newforestcab.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Cost-of-Living-New-Forest-Report.pdf>

² 'UK Poverty 2024: The essential guide to understanding poverty in the UK', 2024 Joseph Rowntree Foundation, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/uk-poverty-2024-the-essential-guide-to-understanding-poverty-in-the-uk>

identifying solutions to overcoming such barriers, as well as highlighting valued initiatives and schemes. These insights will be fed back to local charities and policy-makers and will contribute to alleviating hardship in the New Forest.

Community Conversations was hosted by four community venues: the Avonway Centre in **Fordingbridge**, the Nedderman Centre in **New Milton**, St Anne's Neighbourhood Centre in **Hythe (Waterside area)**, and Youth and Families Matter in **Totton**, which are all in areas of known deprivation. These workshops took place in October, November, and December 2023, coinciding with the weekly Community Hubs, which are events where local groups and organisations offer a warm space, hot drinks, drop-in advice and other charitable support such as clothes swaps. The workshops were led by Tom Wardle, the New Forest Local Partnership Campaigns Manager.

Approximately 60 people took part in the workshops, the groups of which were predominantly composed of people who attended the Community Hubs and used Fareshare and other local services, in addition to some service providers. The vast majority of participants were women, with very few men. However, there was a good demographic spread between age groups, spanning from the young to the elderly.

A topic guide for conversations was developed to instigate the discussions, including questions about what residents liked and disliked about their community, how it had changed for the better or worse, initiatives, services and charities that they considered helpful and those which they would improve. There were also more specific questions concerning priorities for the Poverty Action Plan, such as public transport, mental health, healthcare, raising a family, building a community, and changes to local policy.

The first session took an open-ended approach, encouraging participants to brainstorm things that they liked about where they lived and things that they did not like or would change. The conversations moved between the general and specific issues about where they lived.

Building on the previous session, the second workshop centred on a mapping exercise. Participants placed green pins in useful places or initiatives, yellow pins in those with room for improvement, red pins in those which they did not like, and black pins to mark initiatives that no longer existed. The final activity was a 'Solutions Session', encouraging participants to propose ways of resolving the problems identified.

The third and final session focussed on the [Cost of Living in the New Forest report \(2021\)](#), using excerpts and quotations as a starting point for the conversations. Another activity was encouraging participants to write a similar

quotation in their own words. This final workshop ended with an invitation to take action collectively on these issues and to enrol as Community Researchers.

Legacy:

The findings of the Community Conversations sessions will be fed back to local charities including Citizens Advice, to organisations and groups who provide services at the Community Hubs, as well as to policy-makers. Furthermore, the Cost of Living Steering Group will use the findings from this report to inform its development of a 'Poverty Action Plan' for the New Forest.

Quotations and excerpts will be taken from the workshops and adapted into animated videos and other social media assets. These videos and social media assets can subsequently be shared with local policymakers and used to support any campaigning work carried out by the Cost of Living Steering Group and its members.

In each of the locations, 'Community Changemakers' groups have been set up with the intention of meeting in 2024. These groups are designed to take action on local issues and will be facilitated by Tom Wardle as part of his Community Organising programme with the Trussell Trust. Similarly, participants were offered the opportunity to train as Community Researchers and continue the research. The materials and activities developed for Community Conversations could also be repeated in other areas of the New Forest that were not involved in the initial workshops.

Findings:

Public Transport:

Public Transport was cited as a major problem throughout the New Forest, not only in semi-rural areas such as the Waterside area and Fordingbridge, but also in more urbanised areas like Totton.

Living without private transport can be incredibly difficult. One participant in the Waterside area remarked: *"I couldn't be off the road. Even though I was in so much debt, I needed my car. I had to keep my car on the road because of public transport. It wasn't just for work, it was for hospital appointments too."*³

In the Waterside area and Fordingbridge in particular, the cost of groceries in local shops was problematic and it was equally expensive to travel to a larger supermarket on public transport. In the Waterside area, participants proposed the idea of contacting local supermarkets about obtaining (or reinstating) a free bus to larger supermarkets.

Not having private transportation is a serious obstacle to finding stable employment given that two of the major employers in the New Forest are care work and hospitality, which both entail unsociable hours not serviced by public transportation. *"If you are going to have to be somewhere for nine o'clock, yes, you can get a bus. If you've got to be somewhere at seven o'clock, then you can't. So for any jobs that start early, you just aren't going to get there."*⁴

Similarly, public transportation was an obstacle to education. Parents said they had to walk to school with their children because of the price of public transportation. Likewise, in Totton and the Waterside area, there is nowhere to study A-Levels and students would have to pay a lot to travel to local colleges.

Community Spaces:

In every venue, participants really valued the opportunity to socialise with other people at the community hubs and larders. *"It helped me because you can come here, have a laugh, meet friends and have a coffee. And also because of the cost of living going up, it can help people with that sort of thing."*⁵ Another participant in the more isolated area of Fordingbridge cited the benefit of the *"the social aspect*

³ Hythe (Waterside), Session 3, December 2023.

⁴ Totton, Session 2, November 2023.

⁵ New Milton, Session 2, November 2023,

*of interacting with other people when you're having your tea and coffee, with other people who are lonely. It's very good."*⁶

In particular, many participants spoke about the benefits to their mental health of being able to meet with friends and people in similar circumstances and to talk over a cup of tea or coffee. *"Again, it's just having more community to be there for each other. Everyone's feeling it, and everyone's stressed out but no one gets together anymore. It's only places like this that we do."*⁷ This sense of community was particularly important in the New Forest, the semi-rural nature of which can be isolating: *"I feel lonely. There's nowhere to go except for here."*⁸

Leisure, Exercise and Social Activities:

Broadly speaking, those who took part in the mapping exercise observed that there were regular activities in community spaces, even in more isolated areas. Local charities and faith groups often put on inexpensive groups for children, teenagers and elderly. However, others noted that there is comparatively little to cater to working-age adults and disabled people. As such, various participants expressed an interest in expanding the provision of hobby clubs or social clubs. A repeated suggestion made was to run cooking classes, potentially using Fareshare ingredients. *"If there were courses to go on to help us use the ingredients that we get, then that helps you to meet friends, so that's good for your mental health and we could learn to budget too."*⁹

Some participants criticised the increased cost of leisure and exercise activities since public leisure centres were contracted out: *"The leisure centre I'm going to put as a red pin because it's so expensive. There's no community anymore. It's all about privatisation, there's nothing public. They've priced everyone out. It's £32 for swimming lessons now."*¹⁰

Libraries were often identified as valued community assets offering practical cost of living support, as well as some free leisure and social activities.

Communication of support services and local initiatives:

One of the most discussed issues was the way in which community initiatives were communicated and publicised. Although there is ample community activity

⁶ Fordingbridge, Session 2, November 2023.

⁷ Totton, Session 2, November 2023.

⁸ New Milton, Session 2, November 2023.

⁹ New Milton, Session 2, November 2023

¹⁰ Totton, Session 2, November 2023.

in many areas of the New Forest, *“you have to do your homework”*¹¹ to learn about what is going on and where support is available. Various participants mentioned that they had only heard of the Community Hubs through word of mouth and expressed concern that many people remain unaware of their existence.

There was widespread consensus that the communication issues could be overcome by using local Facebook groups more, as well as more offline publicity, such as on public noticeboards or in local newspapers. Previously, the Z-Cards were very useful to service providers for signposting. Another suggestion was to employ someone to tie together all community activities and to coordinate the publicity.

Participants valued the drop-in advice offered by Citizens Advice outreach workers, particularly at the Nedderman Centre and at Youth and Families Matter. New Forest District Council outreach workers were also cited as being very helpful for advice and filling in paperwork. At the Nedderman Centre, participants suggested a second outreach session for advice and support, separate from the larder.¹² Similarly, those who took part noted that the staff and volunteers at the Community Hubs were very helpful at directing people to support services and connecting them with local initiatives. *“If you are struggling, then they can tell you where to go.”*¹³

Some participants called for more outreach advice and drop-ins, saying that that formal advice was becoming increasingly inaccessible, having been scaled back. Likewise, they expressed concern that the presence of advice services at the Community Hubs might be withdrawn.

Access to Food and Larders

The larders provided by Fareshare at the community hubs were highly valued by participants in Community Conversations, many of whom relied on it: *“Without the van, I don’t know how I’d survive”*.¹⁴ These help residents to reduce their food costs significantly: *“It helps the budget through the week. You’re not going out and doing that £40 shop.”*¹⁵

One week the larders were unable to attend, which underlined how vital they are to many people. *“I’ve spoken to a lot of people who come here for Fareshare*

¹¹ Totton, Session 3, December 2023.

¹² They argued that food could be perceived as stigmatising and could therefore deter people from attending for advice and support.

¹³ Totton, Session 1, October 2023.

¹⁴ Fordingbridge, Session 1, October 2023.

¹⁵ Totton, Session 3, December 2023.

*and when one Wednesday it wasn't here, they all said 'God, we never realised how much it helped us until it wasn't here, and I spent a fortune when it wasn't here.'*¹⁶

Various people indicated that they would like to see some sort of provision of Fareshare larders more regularly than once a week, or some other surplus food projects. Furthermore, because of its operating hours, the larder system is currently inaccessible to working people.

As mentioned above, in rural areas, transport is an obstacle to obtaining cheap food given the high price of smaller, local shops.

Housing:

Participants in Community Conversations frequently identified housing as one of the biggest challenges facing people on a low income in the New Forest, in terms of availability, price, and condition.

There was a widespread consensus amongst the participants in Community Conversations that there was a severe lack of availability of social housing locally. One participant spoke of their experience of living in temporary accommodation. Furthermore, landlords are often unwilling to rent to people in receipt of benefits: *"They think that because you are on benefits, you're not going to pay."*¹⁷

The high price of housing and renting was frequently referenced by participants at every Community Conversations workshop and was described as *"extortionate"*¹⁸ and *"sky high"*.¹⁹ *"The prices have just gone silly. And obviously the private side of it is even worse"*²⁰, one participant remarked.

The condition of social housing was also cited as a problem by various participants, who had had problems with mould and vermin. However, these problems were often too expensive to fix and the burden fell on tenants. *"Just because you're in social housing doesn't mean you should have to accept poor quality housing."*²¹

Some participants said that New Forest District Council were slow to respond to issues. For example, one participant had been waiting over a year just to join the housing waiting list.

¹⁶ New Milton, Session 1, October 2023.

¹⁷ New Milton, Session 2, November 2023.

¹⁸ Totton, Session 2, November 2023.

¹⁹ New Milton, Session 3, December 2023.

²⁰ Totton, Session 3, December 2023.

²¹ Hythe (Waterside area), Session 3, December 2023.

School Uniform:

The cost of school uniform was widely cited as a major expense by parents, often costing them hundreds of pounds per year. Many schools in the New Forest operate a policy where the uniform has to be bought from a specific shop and a generic, supermarket version is not permitted. At many local schools, it is obligatory to have the school logo on multiple pieces of the uniform. *"The sheer price of some of these things that have got to have logos on are just ridiculous. It just adds to the price of sending children to school."*²²

Some schools have even changed their school badge recently, meaning that old uniforms are outdated. Various parents said there was social pressure to have the latest, specific uniform and worried that their children would be mocked if they did not. *"And then the kids have a hard time if they have second-hand uniform and the other kids spot it's second-hand."*²³

Other issues:

Anti-social behaviour: Lots of participants expressed concern about the levels of crime and the absence of police. Although this might seem unrelated to cost of living, they said they were deterred from using free public spaces for leisure.

Digital Exclusion: There are fewer digital champions available nowadays, participants said. Generally too, some participants criticised the amount of digital literacy required for day-to-day living and administration.

Access to healthcare: Multiple participants expressed concern about the difficulty of getting a doctors or dentist appointment. Transport was a frequent obstacle to accessing healthcare and attending appointments.

General commentary about the Cost of Living:

Throughout the New Forest, there was concern about **falling living standards:** *"We're in the 21st century; we shouldn't be living like this!"*²⁴

Throughout the New Forest participants believed that decision-makers were out of touch with the cost of living crisis and they called for them to visit larders to see the **reality of living on a low income:** *"I would say to politicians, spend a month in our shoes to appreciate how so many are struggling."*²⁵

²² Hythe (Waterside area), Session 3, December 2023.

²³ Totton, Session 3, December 2023.

²⁴ Hythe (Waterside), Session 1, October 2023.

²⁵ Fordingbridge, Session 3, December 2023.

One participant believed that there was a common **misconception that the New Forest has very little poverty** due to its outward affluence: *“I think because we come under the New Forest, people drive around the New Forest and see all these lovely houses and think we’re all rich and we’re all the same but we’re not.”*²⁶

Many **unavoidable costs** are mounting, which is driving hardship and deprivation. The price of energy bills was described as *“crippling”*²⁷ and one participant spoke of recently having to decide between heating and eating. Various participants reported that they have been forced to use the **emergency food banks** due to the rising cost of living.

With the ongoing Cost of Living crisis, people who were **‘Just About Managing’** are now particularly impacted because they fall outside of the threshold for benefits and they are not eligible for support such as the Cost of Living payments. One service provider made the point about **in-work poverty**: *“Many households who may be working are struggling with bills and costs of food and living. They fall outside of being able to claim benefits and because of working, are left stuck.”*²⁸

Similarly, being eligible for **Free School Meals** opened a lot of doors for families, such as the Holiday Activity Fund. Participants would like to review the threshold if possible, which they considered to be very low. *“My family, we are on that cusp where living is quite hard but we earn a smidge too much to get Free School Meals and all of that help, like the Holiday Activity Fund, has been taken away.”*²⁹

Service providers were worried that **charities** are increasingly having to **“plug the gap”** between the structural problems that residents face and the statutory services offered by local authorities.³⁰ Concerns were also raised about the lack of volunteers at multiple venues.

Various participants expressed frustration at the **Benefits** system, such as insufficiency of housing benefit. Some parents made the point that they would be effectively **penalised** for working as they would have much less time to spend with their family and very little financial advantage. *“It’s “get back to work, work 30 hours or we’re going to cut your benefits” but you’re working to pay for the childcare and you’re about £20 a month better off.”*³¹

²⁶ Totton, Session 2, November 2023.

²⁷ Fordingbridge, Session 3, December 2023.

²⁸ Hythe (Waterside), Session 3, December 2023.

²⁹ Totton, Session 1, October 2023.

³⁰ Fordingbridge, Session 1, October 2023.

³¹ Totton, Session 2, November 2023.

Conclusion

Cost of Living Community Conversations provided an opportunity for people living on a low income in the New Forest to speak about initiatives that made life easier for them, as well as problems that they faced, and to propose solutions. Participants spoke candidly about hardship they had faced and the ongoing pressure caused by the rising cost of living.

In particular, Cost of Living Community Conversations highlighted that the participants in the workshops highly valued the Community Hubs. They appreciated the opportunity for social contact, the advice and support offered, and the Fareshare food larder. Similarly, the mapping exercise demonstrated that in most of the studied areas, there was a good range of community activities, although participants suggested improving how these were publicised.

There are a number of interconnected barriers and challenges facing people living on a low income in the New Forest, which are both local and national in nature. These broadly mirror the conclusions of the previous 'Cost of Living in the New Forest' report from 2021.³² The limited availability of public transport was a major barrier to income, to employment opportunities, education, and cheap food sources, particularly in semi-rural areas. Throughout the New Forest, participants raised concerns about the price of school uniform. Housing was also cited as a significant problem in the New Forest, in terms of availability, price and condition. Such deprivation is often masked by the apparent affluence of the New Forest.

These structural issues have been compounded by various rising unavoidable costs. As well as those who live on a low income, concerns were raised about people in the New Forest who were previously 'Just About Managing' but who are now struggling more than ever.

These insights and proposed solutions from people with lived experience of these problems will now feed into the New Forest Cost of Living Steering Group's forthcoming Poverty Action Plan, intended to tackle challenges facing people living on a low income in the New Forest. Likewise, the 'Community Changemakers' groups have been set up to take action on these issues at a grassroots level.

³² <https://newforestcab.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Cost-of-Living-New-Forest-Report.pdf>

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Finally, we are enormously grateful too to all the participants for sharing their story and local knowledge.