



POCKETS, PROSPECTS, PLACES: SEFTON'S CHILD POVERTY STRATEGY

ALL TOGETHER FAIRER

All Together Fairer is a collaborative initiative focussed on improving health equity and addressing the social determinants of health in Cheshire and Merseyside. It unites public, private, and third-sector organisations to build a fairer, healthier region. Originating from the work of the Institute of Health Equity, the Programme is guided by IHE's 2022 report *All Together Fairer*, which outlines actionable steps for the subregion.

The work is led by the Champs Public Health Collaborative, a long-standing formal partnership of Cheshire and Merseyside's nine Directors of Public Health and the NHS Director of Population Health, as well as their teams and other health and care organisations.

Since its launch, All Together Fairer has expanded its scope, and the recommendations have helped to form the foundation of Cheshire and Merseyside's Health and Care Partnership five-year plan.

ALL TOGETHER FAIRER IN SEFTON

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The development of the strategy

In 2021, the Institute of Health Equity (IHE) partnered with the Champs Public Health Collaborative to identify key priorities and actions for reducing health inequalities in Cheshire and Merseyside. The resulting report, *All Together Fairer* (1), guided subsequent regional implementation efforts. At the same time, Sefton Council was developing its first child poverty strategy and recognised the alignment between the two strategies, seeing it as an opportunity to implement shared recommendations.

In response to the pandemic's worsening of health and social inequalities, Sefton Council declared a poverty emergency in 2021. This declaration led to local actions and a comprehensive review of evidence, which culminated in the creation of Sefton's Child Poverty Strategy, endorsed by the council's cabinet. Led by Sefton's Public Health team, the strategy emphasised a deep understanding of local issues and focused on practical actions that didn't require external funding or national policy changes. It adopted a prevention-first approach, informed by research on social mobility, poverty risk factors, and the influences that affect childhood outcomes.

The strategy's goals are to:

1. **Reduce poverty levels and time spent in poverty.**
2. **Mitigate poverty's impact on educational achievement, health, and wellbeing – now and later in life.**
3. **Prevent future poverty for today's children.**

The strategy's development involved using epidemiological data, national surveys, stakeholder workshops, and insights from families living in poverty. It also drew on successful child poverty strategies from other places, especially Scotland. A qualitative study of lived experiences of poverty in Sefton confirmed the importance of continuing an asset-based approach and ensuring community involvement at every step.

Child poverty in Sefton

Sefton, located in North West England, borders the Irish Sea and is surrounded by Liverpool to the south, West Lancashire to the north, and Knowsley to the east. Coastal communities in Sefton, such as Southport, Formby, and Ainsdale, rely heavily on the visitor and leisure economy. While this gives these areas a distinct character, it also limits economic growth and career opportunities, as many jobs are seasonal. The Port of Liverpool has had a longstanding impact on the south of Sefton, particularly in Bootle.

Sefton has a larger-than-average public sector economy, including a growing care sector that serves an increasing number of older residents. However, persistent child poverty is increasingly recognised as a factor contributing to Sefton's low productivity and low economic growth. The limited range of employment opportunities in sectors with good career development options leads to a "youth flight," where young people leave the area in search of better prospects. This exodus results in a local labor market with fewer qualified and skilled workers, which can discourage large-scale investment while reinforcing a reliance on low-skilled, low-paid jobs. These challenges form the context for the priorities outlined in Sefton's Child Poverty Strategy.

The borough of Sefton faces stark inequalities, including:

- **Life expectancy gaps:** Sefton ranks among the lowest in England, with a life expectancy gap of 14.1 years for males and 12.3 years for females (2018-2020). (2)
- **Economic inequalities:** Extreme wealth and poverty exist side by side in different parts of the borough. Five neighbourhoods are among the most deprived 1% in England, while three are among the least deprived 3%. (2) (3)
- **Child poverty:** In 2022/23, 21% of children in Sefton lived in low-income families, higher than the national average of 20%. This marks the first time in a decade that Sefton's child poverty rate has exceeded the national average. (4)
- **Educational gaps:** Pupils from families living on the lowest incomes in Sefton, measured by eligibility for Free School Meals, experience some of the largest learning lags in England. By the end of Reception, Sefton pupils lag behind the national average by 5.9 months. At Key Stage 2, the gap is 11.3 months, and at Key Stage 4, Sefton has the fifth largest gap in England, with a difference of over two years (25.9 months). (5)
- **Social mobility:** While Southport and Central Sefton rank high in social mobility, Bootle is near the bottom, at 502 out of 533 parliamentary constituencies in England. (6)
- **Income inequality:** Research shows that adults from areas of high deprivation earn less than their more affluent peers, even when both groups have the same qualifications. This income gap is particularly large in Sefton compared to other parts of England. (7)

Qualitative research conducted with children and families in Sefton highlights the daily struggles caused by financial hardship, emphasising the stark contrasts in wealth within their communities. (8) Findings also overturn the myth of ‘you can’t miss what you don’t have’.

“Some people have more money than they know what to do with, some manage and are okay, some struggle, and some have nothing. It’s those with too much money who make the rules and don’t know what it is like for everyone else. It shouldn’t be like this.”

Sefton child

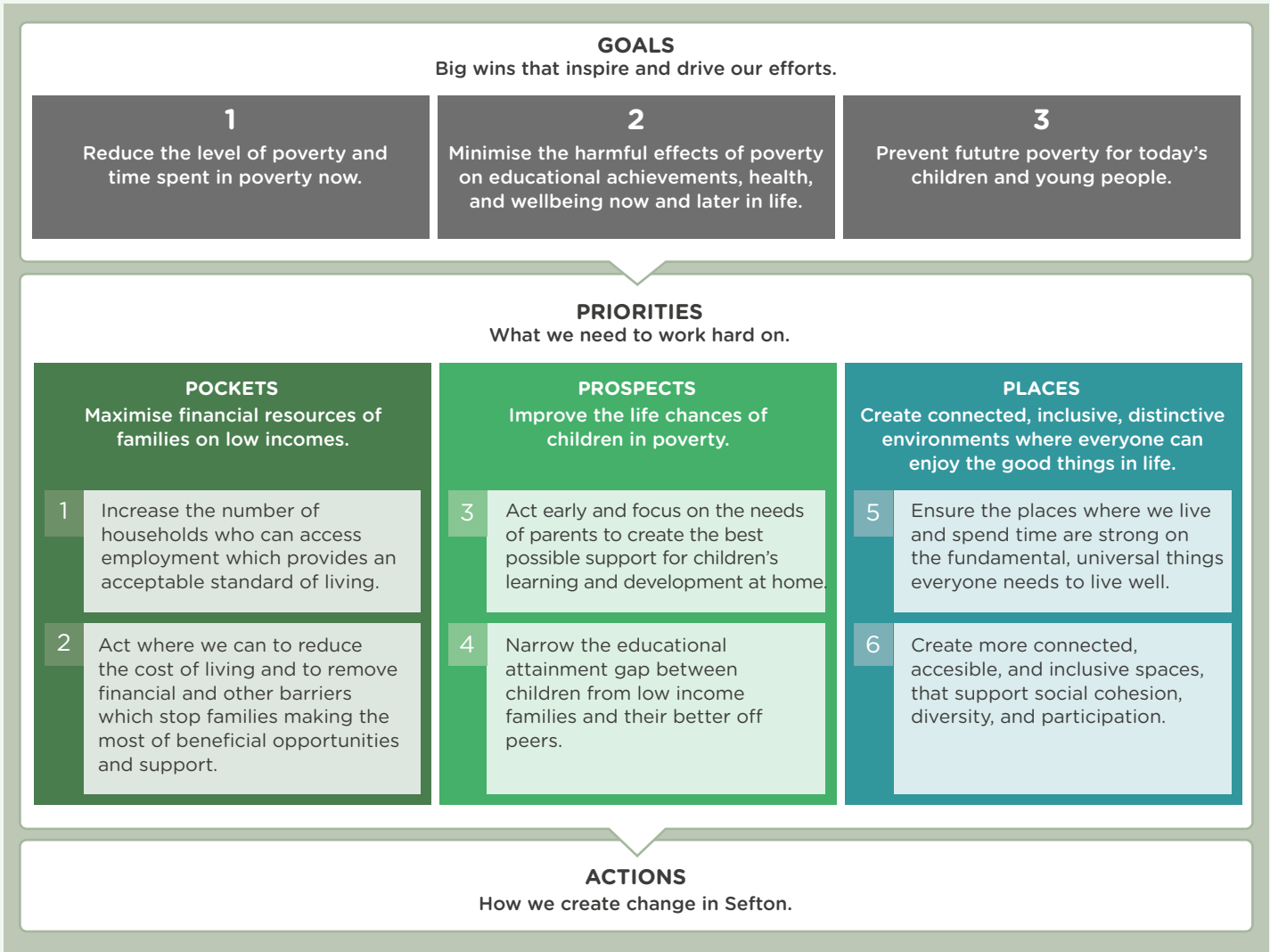
SEFTON’S STRATEGY: POCKETS, PROSPECTS, PLACES

The Child Poverty Strategy for Sefton has several key features:

- **Long-Term Vision:** Aims to address child poverty comprehensively by 2030.
- **Holistic Approach:** Recognises that child poverty is a complex issue that requires a coordinated response from multiple sectors.
- **Focus on Prevention:** Emphasises locally-driven efforts to address the socio-economic factors contributing to poverty throughout people’s lives.
- **Alignment with All Together Fairer:** Reflects the 8 policy objectives in the Marmot report for Cheshire and Merseyside. (1)
- **Diverse Actions:** Proposes a combination of universal and targeted interventions to effectively address child poverty.

Figure 1 outlines the strategy that was launched in December 2022 to over 100 stakeholders, representing a wide variety of local organisations. (9)

Figure 1. Sefton’s Child Poverty Strategy



DELIVERING THE STRATEGY

Since the strategy's launch, three senior-level conferences have engaged over 300 delegates to develop actions and opportunities to address child poverty in Sefton.

The Public Health Team adopts a whole-system, asset-based approach, empowering local partners to initiate and drive change.

Monitoring, governance and communications

In 2024, Sefton's Public Health Team appointed a Senior Advanced Practitioner for Social Determinants to lead the child poverty programme and maximise collaborative efforts. A new Child Poverty Steering Group was formed, accountable to both the Children's and Young People's Partnership Board and the Health and Wellbeing Board. This group is responsible for providing direction, overseeing governance, and aligning the collective efforts of partners.

The group's accountability framework focuses on achieving tangible milestones, drawing on real-world evidence, and promoting shared learning, rather than relying on rigid numerical targets. The aim is to inspire and support broader policy changes and actions to effectively tackle child poverty through a variety of approaches.

In addition to establishing a clear governance structure, a communications plan has been developed to outline the Council's consistent, organisation-wide approach to addressing the causes and effects—both immediate and long-term—of growing up in poverty. The plan also specifies how Sefton Council will communicate this work to different audiences.

The plan defines the roles and responsibilities of the Corporate Communications Team, Council staff, partners, and the Child Poverty Steering Group. The plan underscores the importance of collective efforts to deliver the strategy, with an emphasis on collaboration across the sectors that influence health and social outcomes in Sefton. Coordination is led by the Advanced Practitioner for Social Determinants.

Pockets and prospects: Local economies and poverty

Sefton's economy, which is largely driven by the public sector and small private businesses, has historically struggled to provide secure and well-paid employment for all. Improving access to quality jobs with growth potential remains a major challenge in the area. Many roles lack adequate pay, job security, opportunities for progression, and flexibility for carers.

A key priority of Sefton's Child Poverty Strategy is enhancing learning, skills development, and employment opportunities for young people, adults, and parents.

The holistic support offered by *Sefton@Work* programmes includes confidence-building activities, skills development, help with job applications, referrals to health and wellbeing services, and practical assistance. (10) These programmes have had a significant impact on employment opportunities for young people. Over the past five years, Sefton has maintained one of the lowest rates of 16-17 year-olds not in education, employment, or training in the North West of England. (11)

Invest Sefton supports local business growth and attracts inward investment. In 2024, Invest Sefton specifically focused on addressing inequalities and introduced The Caring Business Charter. (12) The Charter aims to improve employment opportunities for care-experienced young people.

Ambitious spatial and economic regeneration projects led by the Council prioritise children and young people as key beneficiaries in social value agreements with contractors. (13) These agreements include training and work experience opportunities for school leavers. For example, the Council is partnering with Sound City, a leading independent music festival and educational organiser, to create more prospects for young people in Sefton. This includes mentorship, financial support, and opportunities to launch careers in the music industry.

Pockets: Council services

An example of Sefton Council's commitment to the 'Pockets' poverty-related priorities in the strategy is the provision of discounted and free access to leisure services, which offer activities supporting the physical and mental wellbeing of children living in families experiencing poverty.

Between November 2023 and October 2024, Sefton's Leisure Services and Active Lives issued:

- 2,032 discounted *Choices Passes*, which provide discounted access to leisure activities.
- 4,930 memberships, available to those on discounted or free schemes and programmes.

- Free access for 219 looked-after children, including 41 in support roles and 19 foster families.
- The *Be Active* school holiday programme, which offered 33 free places to families in need and 82 school-funded places from April 2023 to October 2024, enabling children to take part in positive, free activities that promote physical health.

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING INITIATIVES

The Child Poverty Strategy has led to the introduction of school-based mentors through the *121 Programme*, which aims to improve the health, wellbeing, attendance, and engagement of children and young people. (14) Additionally, the Sefton Young Persons Emotional Wellbeing Toolkit was launched to improve mental health support in schools and colleges, providing access to local and national services, including the online Kooth mental wellbeing platform. (15)

STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS

The strategy prioritises collaboration, engaging partners and senior leaders to take ownership of efforts to eliminate poverty. This approach has inspired initiatives such as a voluntary sector-led respiratory programme, developed in partnership with Alder Hey hospital in Liverpool, to support families with young children experiencing respiratory issues.

POVERTY PROOFING EDUCATION

Sefton has partnered with the charity Children North East to implement the Poverty Proofing© programme in schools, starting in January 2025. (16) This initiative aims to reduce barriers to participation in education, learning and enrichment activities through three key principles:

- **Voice:** Amplifying the voices of those affected by poverty
- **Place:** Considering community context
- **Structural inequalities:** Identifying and addressing organisational changes needed to remove barriers faced by those living in poverty.

FOCUS ON CARED FOR CHILDREN

Sefton's Child Poverty Strategy recognises the unique and compounded challenges faced by Children in Care and includes initiatives aimed at improving their life prospects. Research consistently shows that young people leaving care experience poorer outcomes in both education and employment compared to their peers. (17)

The likelihood of being NEET increases significantly once young people leave care, which underscores the need for targeted interventions to improve outcomes for this age group. (18) One such initiative is the Caring Business Charter, launched in June 2022. This initiative, aligned with Sefton@Work, is specifically designed to reduce the number of care leavers who are NEET. It provides young people with access to high-quality information, advice, and guidance (e.g. CV preparation, job search assistance, interview coaching, and financial support for clothes, travel, and training). The Charter also leverages funding to help overcome barriers to employment and foster relationships with local employers.

The Caring Business Charter has already had a positive impact. In the last reporting period, 10 care-experienced young people secured fully funded paid work placements, 4 found part-time employment, and 8 entered apprenticeships. Additionally, the council has introduced a weekly "Get into Work" panel, chaired by Children's Services, to identify and address barriers to engagement. This panel includes a range of internal and external stakeholders and ensures that tailored, intensive support is available to help young people transition successfully into the workforce or further education.

While care leavers face significant challenges in moving into work or higher education, Sefton is actively addressing these barriers through focused strategies and collaborative initiatives aimed at improving their life chances and ensuring they have the support they need to succeed.

NEXT STEPS

Sefton's Child Poverty Strategy is delivering a unifying and energising approach, bringing together partners both inside and outside of the Council. The strategy has entered a new phase with the appointment of the Senior Advanced Practitioner for Social Determinants and the formation of a multi-agency steering group responsible for driving the entire child poverty agenda. This group will ensure that Sefton's ambitions for change are effectively realised, supported by a robust progress and accountability framework; overseen by senior leaders, and ultimately accountable to the Health and Wellbeing Board.

Preventing child poverty for future generations requires consistent systemic change, driven by multiple agencies and organisations, with strong support from senior leaders.

Over the last three years Sefton Council's Child Poverty Strategy has demonstrated that partnership working, with shared goals and agreements, can deliver immediate and tangible changes. This has sparked optimism and momentum in Sefton, driving further progress to support its children and young people. The evidence is clear: collaboration improves quality of life across generations and is key to tackling child poverty and inequality.

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