

Working together to tackle poverty in Lewisham

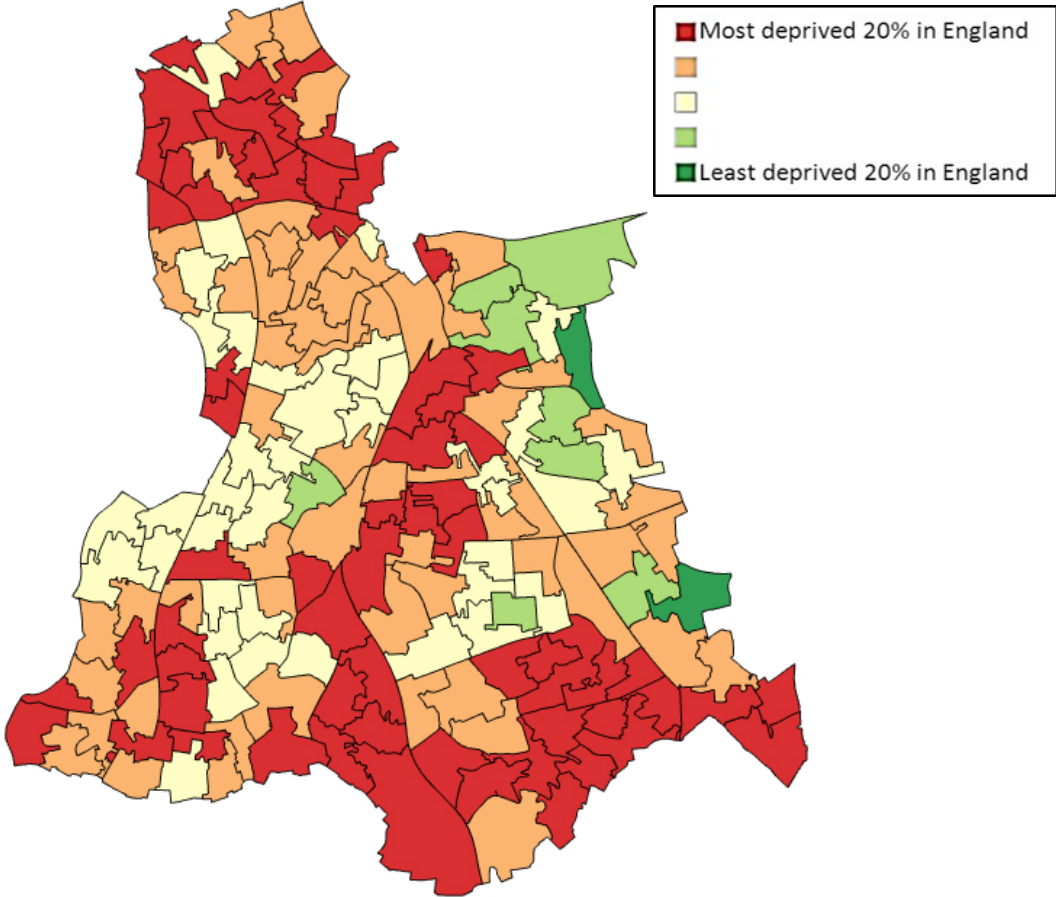
The final report of the Lewisham Poverty Commission, September 2017
Executive summary

Poverty in Lewisham

Lewisham is a successful, diverse and inclusive inner London borough. The borough has good transport links to the rest of London, excellent primary and improving secondary schools, attractive residential neighbourhoods and an active voluntary and community sector. Yet, despite its many assets, its proximity to Central London, and the efforts of the Council and other partners, Lewisham continues to have high levels of poverty and deprivation.

Unemployment in Lewisham has fallen significantly in recent years and incomes are higher than the national average. However, high levels of inequality and high housing costs contribute to high levels of poverty. Lewisham is in the top 20% most deprived local authorities in England, with particular concentrations of poverty in the north and south of the borough. One in four people working in Lewisham earn less than the Living Wage, and Lewisham has amongst the highest levels of child poverty in the country.

Figure 1. A map showing Lewisham’s Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) scores by small areas.¹



¹ DCLG 2015. The IMD measures relative deprivation across: income; employment; education, training and skills; health deprivation and disability; crime; barriers to housing and other services; and the living environment.

Poverty is complex and multidimensional. The Commission has used the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's broad definition, where poverty is a situation in which a person's resources are not sufficient to meet their minimum needs, including social participation.² Poverty blights lives. It is associated with lower educational attainment, with poor health and mental health, and with shorter life expectancy. Children who grow up in poverty often go on to suffer from poverty in adult life.

The Lewisham Poverty Commission was set up by Lewisham Council to investigate the extent of, causes of, and solutions to poverty in Lewisham. Made up of local Councillors and national experts, the Commission has heard a range of evidence on poverty in Lewisham, including the lived experience of residents who are struggling to make ends meet. From this evidence, four key areas of focus were chosen:

A) supporting residents to access well-paid, secure jobs inside and outside of Lewisham

Well-paid, secure jobs are the main route out of poverty. Lewisham is situated on the doorstep of London, a growing and thriving city, and three in five residents work outside of the borough. While the London employment market is easy for residents to access, the growth in jobs has been at the high and low end of the labour market, with comparatively few jobs in-between. There has also been a growth in insecure employment. Given this, and the Government's cuts to funding for training, it can be difficult for adults in low-paid and insecure jobs to progress to higher-paid and secure work. Lewisham's local economy is comparatively small, with the lowest number of jobs per capita of any London borough and a high proportion of jobs in Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). In the absence of large private employers, Lewisham's public sector institutions play an important role not just as providers of public services, but as major employers too.

'There are no big businesses in Lewisham, or trades young people can be apprenticed to'
Grove Park Assembly

Recommendations:

- The Council and its public sector partners, as the borough's main employers and biggest spenders in terms of procurement, should cooperate closely to support local economic growth and good jobs. This group of anchor institutions should work to establish a 'Lewisham Deal' which outlines joint commitments to good work and inclusive economic growth. This should include a commitment to fair pay, flexible work and investing in training.
- The Council and its public sector partners should develop a shared approach to skills and local economic development. Building on the strength of the Council's existing apprenticeship programme, this should include maximising spending of the apprenticeship levy to support access to high-quality employment and better career prospects.
- The Council should support inclusive growth and good jobs in the local economy. It should support the creation and growth of new businesses, including by increasing the availability of high-quality business premises, through the provision of co-working spaces, and through a local currency to stimulate local demand. The Council should continue to promote fair pay, including through incentives for local employers to become accredited Living Wage employers.

² See <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/definition-poverty>.

B) Tackling child poverty by supporting parents into decent work

Lewisham is in the top 20 local authorities in the country in terms of child poverty. Child poverty has a direct impact on the life chances of young people, limiting their ability to achieve their potential. Children in lone parent households are more likely to grow up in poverty as lone parents often struggle to find flexible and high quality employment that fits around childcare.

'We young single parents aren't getting the help that we're supposed to. There is work out there, but the work that you want to do, who's going to look after the children or pick them up for you?... Once we can get help, there is cleaning jobs out there, there is evening jobs out there. If I could get somebody, I would go. It's not as though I don't want to work. I'm happy to work because I'm having it hard.'

A single mother and Phoenix resident.

Recommendations:

- The Council should take the lead on providing flexible and high-quality employment opportunities for local residents, including those with childcare responsibilities. It should become an accredited Timewise employer, and encourage other local employers to follow its lead.
- The Council should raise awareness of and increase the use of local high-quality childcare provision. The Family Information Service (FIS) directory should be improved to include detailed information on available childcare and information on eligibility criteria for that care. This should be provided through an accessible digital platform.
- The Council should work with Children's Centres, providers and parent groups to explore ways to encourage parents and extended family to participate in the provision of childcare, including by exploring options for co-operative childcare clubs and parent-led nurseries. Parents participating in these forms of co-produced child care can then also be supported into related careers.

C) Improving the local housing market

The cost of housing is an important factor in London's and Lewisham's higher poverty rate. Over one in four Londoners live in poverty after housing costs are taken into account, compared with one in five nationally. House prices in Lewisham are lower than the London average, but they have risen sharply, and the median house price is 14 times greater than the median income. Given high housing costs and a shortage of social homes, more residents are living in the private rented sector. Rents are rising fast, and many residents are subject to rogue landlords and insecurity.

Recommendations:

- The Council should continue to deliver as much affordable and social housing as possible, as part of mixed communities. It should push developers to maximise the amount of affordable housing and push the government to lift the cap on borrowing from the Housing Revenue Account.
- The Council should establish a social lettings agency in Lewisham to work with mainstream landlords in order to offer more secure tenancies at the lower end of the market. This could be done either through expanding the work of its existing lettings agency or encouraging an existing social or ethical lettings agency to operate in the borough.
- In order to protect tenants in the private rented sector, the council should seek to expand its landlord licensing scheme and a local tenants' union should be established in the borough to offer advice services and organise campaigns. Lewisham Citizens, Goldsmiths' students union and existing tenant and residents associations could be asked to develop the union.

'Provide more advice on what people should do with rent arrears' Crofton Park Assembly

D) Strengthening support within communities

Lewisham has a strong community and a long history of civic activism. At present, there are over 800 active voluntary groups, with a recent survey revealing that 35% of Lewisham residents had volunteered over the past 12 months. From speaking to residents, we know how valuable support within communities can be for people facing poverty. Where people can tap into both formal and informal networks, they are more likely to be able to access goods and services (including information, advice and support), to find work and to feel connected to a place.

Recommendations:

- The Lewisham Local collaboration³ should consider developing an anti-poverty fund to fill the current gap in micro-grants to support local community activity. This could be funded by using relevant financial contributions from planning obligations.
- The Council should improve and promote its employee volunteering policy to encourage council staff to contribute to local communities. This employee volunteering policy can then be used as an exemplar for Lewisham Local partners to promote to businesses inside and outside the borough, and encourage best practice.

'It needs to be easier for people to know how they can volunteer' **Blackheath assembly**

Working together to tackle poverty

The Commission encourages Lewisham Council to adopt these recommendations and to begin implementing them as soon as possible. The Commission recommends that the next Mayor appoints a lead member on poverty, and that they report back on an annual basis to scrutiny and the executive on progress in tackling poverty in Lewisham.

However, the Council can't do this alone. If we are to make a real difference in tackling poverty, we need to work together with local partners, and we need policy change from national government.

The Commission will be writing to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, and the Housing Minister to start a conversation about improvements to the welfare system, to prevent people going into debt, and improvements to local government finance, to increase the building of social housing.

Poverty can be tackled but only if we all work together.

³ For more information about Lewisham Local, see www.lewishamlocal.org.uk/