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Alleviating poverty collaboratively:

A review of the Malvern Hills District Financial Wellbeing Partnership

First Year Report
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CPF
Centre for Personal
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Alleviating poverty collaboratively: A review of the Malvern Hills District Financial Wellbeing Partnership

1st Year Report

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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a collaborative research project conducted with the Malvern Hills District Financial Wellbeing Partnership (FWP) in 2021. The 16-month study provides insights and recommendations for partners and Malvern Hills District Council (MHDC) stakeholders to consider as they move forward. The report is divided into three main sections: findings, learnings, and recommendations.

The findings show that poverty is a multifaceted wicked problem, which individuals frame and interpret from different perspectives, informed by personal experiences, values, roles, and priorities. Despite this, the partnership is widely seen as successful, enabled by congruent leadership, asset-based community development principles, and an inclusive participatory architecture. While exceptional progress has been made, the partnership may need to develop collaborative governance to be more proactive and strategic in developing and delivering the Poverty Alleviation Plan and working towards a bolder long-term vision.

Key learning points concern the role and qualities of the partnership chairperson, the value of serendipity to ABCD in action, the opportunity to leverage community spaces and hubs, and the importance of continuing to experiment, learn, and innovate. The report also offers important insights into how the stigma associated with poverty, which can often prevent people from receiving the support they need, can be alleviated by reframing initiatives and spaces and using different language. We discuss how this learning might help address stigma in other areas of poverty.

The report offers five main recommendations. First, the partnership develops a bold, ambitious, long-term vision for the partnership. Second, the partnership pursues new ways to balance short-term remedies with longer-term prevention; we offer suggestions for accomplishing this while still working within system constraints. Third, we recommend the partners begin to think more strategically about the whole system to cultivate and leverage new connections. Fourth, we encourage the partnership to create more avenues for resident voice and participation. Finally, we recommend that the partnership develop a more explicit information-sharing strategy and offer a typology that could support this work.

1. Introduction

In 2021, academics from Aston University and Malvern Hills District Council (MHDC) initiated a joint research effort to support the poverty alleviation work undertaken by MHDC and its partners. The aim was to understand better how a local authority can collaborate effectively with multiple partners, agencies, and communities to address poverty. This was seen as particularly crucial given the looming cost of living crisis that has exposed growing numbers of residents to financial difficulties across the district. Given the highly complex nature of this issue, tackling poverty required a collaborative effort, and it was in that spirit that we embarked upon this research project.

Having agreed on the project scope with MHDC, we commenced the research, gathering relevant data. We observed Poverty Summits and FWP meetings and attended Malvern Hills District Collaborative and Connected Communities network events. These observations provided many insights into partnership working, poverty challenges, and the strategies pursued within a growing ecosystem of partners. We also interviewed more than 20 people from statutory and voluntary organisations to explore different perspectives and ideas regarding the poverty alleviation work undertaken. There was a shared conviction that MHDC and its partners had made tremendous strides over the last year. However, informants also discussed broader issues, shortfalls, and possible remedies.

We carefully analysed this data to identify key themes that might aid MHDC in building on its successes and inform the future planning of the FWP. Specifically, we scrutinised all meeting notes and interview transcripts and employed rigorous coding techniques and procedures to classify the data and develop thematic recommendations. This report is the result of this analysis.

We thank all study participants who generously offered their time and insights and MHDC for allowing us to participate in this partnership. It has been a privilege, and we hope this report aids the development of ABCD principles and partnership practice in Malvern Hills district and across Herefordshire and Worcestershire

2. Key Findings

We find that the partnership is working effectively with many benefits. Most people interviewed viewed the partnership positively, describing how the various forums enable partners to share knowledge and identify, discuss, and respond more collaboratively to urgent issues. Informants talked extensively about the urgent need for cooperation and the positive impact the partnership is having on communities and residents. Below, we outline some key factors that have contributed to that success, highlighting some areas the partnership might wish to consider moving forward.

2.1. Poverty as a multifaceted wicked problem

Working together to tackle poverty is exceptionally challenging because the issues are multifaceted, evasive, and wicked. Spiralling costs, wage stagnation and the cost of living crisis have plunged more residents into financial difficulties, with negative consequences. This includes "pensioners who are asset rich but cash poor", families who were not previously in need of support but are now facing dire hardship, and others on low incomes facing different forms of poverty. Participants agreed that poverty is a 'wicked problem' due to the systemic, entangled, and changing nature of the issues. Wicked problems are difficult to formulate because every "problem can be considered a symptom of another problem" (Grint, 2022¹). This was born out in our findings. Poverty is difficult to grasp and tackle because it cuts across so many areas, systems, and geographies with multiple causes, symptoms, and consequences. Hence, conversations have the potential to unfold indefinitely as people pull on the threads of tangled issues. While these exploratory conversations can generate valuable insights, it is important to retain an 'action focus' or 'bias for action' so that discussions of knotty issues produce positive action on the ground.

We also found that individuals frame and interpret poverty from different perspectives, informed by personal experiences, values, roles, and priorities. Many

¹ Grint, K. (2022). Critical Essay: Wicked problems in the Age of Uncertainty. Human Relations.

approached the concept of poverty from different angles, emphasising financial poverty, furniture poverty, child poverty, hidden poverty, access poverty, and other manifestations. Unsurprisingly, participants also pointed to a diverse range of root causes, obstacles, solutions, and consequences. These included, but were not limited to, the effects on mental and physical health, barriers to employment, strained family relationships, and the impact on children's education and prospects.

Hence, we find that the language of "poverty alleviation" is an essential unifying concept. However, it is important to keep in mind that people often bring different priorities, assumptions, and meanings to the term poverty, which will frame how they see and understand issues. The fact that people see the challenge differently is not unexpected or necessarily a problem. Indeed, a strength of the partnership has been to focus on what is similar rather than worry too much about where differences exist. However, when hatching plans and strategies, it is worth considering how partners' different priorities, motivations, and perspectives are accommodated and utilised to sustain engagement and benefit from diversity.

2.2. The importance of congruent leadership

All informants agreed that tackling poverty requires collaboration and that MHDC and its partners have made significant progress. Collaborative leadership emerged as a critical theme in interviews. Our analysis suggests that 'congruent leadership' has been a vital ingredient in building the partnership, with different leaders working together to drive the partnership. This multipronged leadership has three key pillars (Figure 1) that must be sustained in the future.

Figure 1. Congruent leadership: Three essential pillars



- **MHDC leadership and political commitment.** The Financial Wellbeing Partnership (FWP) was built on the leadership of Councillor Cynthia Palmer, who led a member Task and Finish group to look at the causes of poverty. Informants also noted that the partnership had received ongoing leadership and commitment from the council, with elected members and council leaders attending poverty summits, endorsing plans, providing financial support, and acting as poverty champions. This leadership and commitment are critical.
- **Council officer leadership.** All informants agreed that the leadership of council officers – Amanda Smith and Claire Vaughan-Wood – is vital to the partnership's success. Comments such as "Amanda is amazing; without her being on the board and pushing it, this wouldn't have happened" were common. Informants greatly appreciated how these officers managed funding, built trust, convened events, and employed a "highly collaborative approach" that facilitated positive interaction among the partners rather than prescribing what individual organisations should be doing. Consequently, partner organisations see the council as an ally, not a prescriptive organisation that controls the partnership. Because of this, MHDC is viewed positively as the leading "anchor organisation" or "hub" that supports, encourages, and enables multiple partners to collaborate, share, signpost, make connections, and deliver support to residents.
- **VCS organisation leadership.** It was also acknowledged that the partnership had been greatly enabled by the ongoing support, commitment, and leadership of organisations in the voluntary and community sector, such as Citizens Advice, Age UK, and Christians Against Poverty. These, and many other VCS organisations, bring different competencies and have different remits, priorities, and resource constraints. Yet, the leaders of these organisations have demonstrated a genuine willingness and desire to work together to tackle poverty challenges, which no organisation can address on their own.

The congruent leadership and commitment of MHDC (councillors and executive function), council officers, and VCS organizations have been vital in building the partnership. This congruent leadership will be essential for sustaining momentum in the coming years, especially if longer-term aspirations are to be achieved.

As the partnership has grown, the involvement of civil society, particularly private sector engagement, has become increasingly important. This includes, for example, the representation of the Worcestershire Ambassador on the FWP and the hosting of an inaugural Community & Business Breakfast Event. Building on such initiatives and further strengthening this civil society pillar will be key in the future.

2.3. Creation of a participatory architecture

This congruent leadership has also underpinned the creation of a new and evolving participatory architecture, encompassing a Financial Wellbeing Partnership (FWP), Poverty Summits, Connected Communities Network Events, a Hardship Support Group, a District Collaborative, and more besides.

Figure 2. A participatory architecture targeting poverty alleviation



Research shows that establishing a participatory architecture that facilitates the engagement of diverse stakeholders in a series of temporally and spatially interconnected events is vital for dealing with grand challenges (Ferraro et al., 2015²). Informants agreed that the Poverty Summits, Connected Communities, and FWP were effective at bringing groups of diverse stakeholders together to share, signpost, and connect. This is supported by work community builders who facilitate

² Ferraro, F., Etzion, D., & Gehman, J. (2015). Tackling grand challenges pragmatically: Robust action revisited. *Organization Studies*, 36(3), 363-390.

conversations between community partners to listen, learn and support asset-based approaches. While our analysis affirms the value of this emerging participatory architecture, the partnership may wish to consider how these different spaces, and the valuable knowledge they generate, might be better interconnected. For example, how can community builders' work (knowledge) and more community voices (see 5.4) be fed into the FWP to inform discussions and planning? As it matures, the FWP needs to think more strategically about the emerging participatory system and where new connections and conduits need to be forged (see 5.3). While connections cannot be imposed or controlled, they can be nurtured and encouraged.

2.4. ABCD as a unifying and orienting paradigm

MHDC has embraced an asset-based community development (ABCD) approach, which has informed the partnership philosophy and provided a unifying paradigm. The ABCD approach emphasises the value of connected communities. To achieve partnership goals, promote wellbeing, and support residents, many partners have sought to cultivate relationships with local communities to identify, support, and empower community assets (e.g., residents, groups, facilities, and community spaces). As one informant told us, this is powerful because "you realise that the communities can do it themselves" when we bring them into the system and provide the support they want and need.

Accordingly, instead of looking for new resources and infrastructure to address a particular paucity in the community, ABCD encourages communities to look for spare or underused resources that can be mobilised, joined up, or transformed to create new capacities for those communities. A powerful example of this has been the engagement with Malvern Town Football Club as a community hub, offering different support services in the heart of the community.

While ABCD principles are written into the poverty alleviation partnership plan, emphasised in meetings, and central to the connected communities network, it is interesting to note that in interviews, it was mainly those working for the council (e.g., MHDC, County Council) who referred to asset-based principles; indeed, no one from outside the public sector voluntarily mentioned the words 'asset-based' or 'ABCD'. This could point to an issue where some parts of the participatory

architecture fully embrace the principles and possibilities of ABCD while other areas are adopting a deficit or charity model, i.e., 'done to' and 'done for' people³. In the FWP, for example, there is a lot of discussion about delivering household support funding, getting support to people, and making residents aware of services, a push or delivery mindset. There is less discussion about resident-led solutions, the need for more diversity and inclusion, and bringing resident voices into meetings. The partnership may wish to reflect on how ABCD is embedded within current FWP practices and whether opportunities exist to do more following ABCD principles.

2.5. Governance light action-heavy approach

The FWP currently embraces a 'governance light action heavy' approach. This has reduced the administrative burden and enabled the partnership to function as a loose 'network of partners with a common interest in alleviating poverty. This is appreciated by partners who are often time-poor with many demands and many forums to attend. The "action-heavy approach" encourages partners to bring requests ('what's your ask?'), make contributions ('what's your offer?'), and pick-up actions as they emerge. The FWP's main benefit is that it allows multiple partners to check in, share updates, offer mutual support, and make connections to jointly respond to the cost of living crisis. However, some felt that the partnership could be more proactive and strategic as an entity, thinking more longer term.

As the partnership evolves, the FWP might need to consider if it needs to develop its collaborative governance arrangements to enable the partnership to play a more proactive and strategic role in developing and delivering the Poverty Alleviation Plan and working towards a bolder long-term vision (see 5.1). By collaborative governance, we mean thinking about principles of engagement, different partner motivations (and capacities) and processes for collective decision-making and implementation. This might include, for instance, thinking through how the partnership might need to strengthen its capacity for joint strategic action (e.g., roles, processes, structures, or tools) and agreeing on how the partnership will hold itself accountable for shaping and delivering future plans and galvanising goal.

³ This is not a criticism. Rather, they constitute alternative ways of serving, which potentially depart from asset-based community development according to Cormac Russell.

3. Key learning

This section highlights key learning points that the partnership may wish to consider moving forward.

3.1. The partnership chairperson: Essential qualities

Our findings offer insights into the leadership capacities vital for fostering connections between issues, knowledge, and people in partnership meetings. Research on partnerships emphasises the importance of shared leadership while acknowledging that specific individuals do and often must emerge and assume more prominent roles for the partnership's work to progress. When the FWP was established, it was considered essential to have a chairperson who was not a council member to avoid the perception that the council was controlling the group. However, following the chairpersonship of Marie Henry and Annie Robson (CEOs at Citizens Advice), Amanda Smith (MHDC) eventually took on the role of Chair. The partnership may wish to reflect on how this happened, whether this was the correct change, and what rules or processes need to be in place regarding the FWP Chair.

Our research suggests that the qualities of the Chair are more important than the home organisation; we found no evidence that a chair from the council was seen as problematic. Indeed, informants mentioned Amanda's collaborative approach and facilitation. Based on our observations of how different chairs facilitated conversations and connections in meetings, we recommend that the chairperson should possess specific qualities. These include a clear understanding of the partnership's objectives, system-wide knowledge to enable on-the-spot links during meetings, excellent interpersonal skills to engage participants, and effective leadership to motivate partners towards common goals.

3.2. The value of serendipity to ABCD in action

As noted, MHDC has made great strides in building a participatory architecture. Poverty Summits, FWP meetings, and connected communities network events provide valuable 'spaces' for diverse actors to participate, interact, and contribute over a period of time. Many benefits arise from this participatory architecture; partners can exchange information, share stories, and co-develop solutions.

Our analysis also reveals that a hidden and often underappreciated benefit of these collaborative spaces is they invite serendipitous connections. We noticed and documented many instances where people with problems spontaneously connected to people with solutions. While we could not track the full impact of all these impromptu connections – i.e., what they led to following the meetings – they appear to play a vital role in harnessing and supporting ABCD in action. For example, when a charity's Chief Officer connected with community pantries and took it upon herself to apply for funding to help them address the cost-of-living crisis. Or when impromptu connections arose around 'setting up a community fridge', 'putting DWP clinics in community locations' and 'putting someone in situ at foodbanks and community fridges' to improve access to the HSF.

While such serendipitous connections cannot be planned, they can be encouraged by creating generative spaces that pull together 'potentially' compatible people, problems, and solutions. There may also be value in tracing these impromptu connections to capture the real impact of partnering to do ABCD in action, building on the ripple effect mapping that is being done. Seen in the aggregate, the ripple effect of these serendipitous connections is potentially huge. As one council officer recounted, "at the last Connected Communities network event, we had people saying that there were over 100 connections made, which is incredible."

3.3. Leveraging community spaces and hubs

A consistent theme in our research is that community 'spaces' play a vital role as anchor points for bringing community members together and signposting them towards services, resources, and solutions that can help residents. Community spaces include libraries, theatres, old pubs, sports facilities, job centres, foodbanks, supermarkets, churches, and more. There are powerful examples of prominent spaces, such as Malvern Town Football Club and the Octagon Centre, being used as a hub for delivering community services. Similarly, according to informants, co-locating services (e.g., Citizens Advice offering support at Malvern Hills Foodbank) have had a significant and positive impact.

A key learning point is that community spaces are critical "assets" for drawing residents together and providing support, including residents helping residents.

Given the importance of community spaces, we suggest the partnership consider developing a space utilisation strategy that includes mapping current spaces, considering how they are utilised to alleviate poverty, identifying where gaps exist, and devising plans to create multi-benefit spaces in areas of need through collaboration. For example, place-based initiatives could be deployed in less well-covered areas to offer community members opportunities to gather, connect, share experiences, and be signposted to services and resources. Thus, the partnership should focus on a) the strategic use of existing spaces and b) creating more spaces for the community in areas where there are no such spaces available. This will be especially useful if used in conjunction with the work of community builders and the ABCD approach, which requires mobilising under-used capacities in the district. A further recommendation would be to map and 'measure' the extent to which these places/spaces have been used.

3.4. Reframing to alleviate stigma

Our research found that stigma represented a significant obstacle for those seeking support, particularly for those most in need of assistance. This issue has become increasingly pressing in recent years. A growing number of individuals who have not previously required aid have struggled with various forms of poverty due to the cost of living crisis. According to informants, feelings of "shame", "embarrassment", and "denial" can prevent people from seeking the help they need for fear of being judged or discriminated against. Consequently, there may be pockets of hidden poverty because people are falling into hardship and not receiving support because they are unwilling, reluctant, or ashamed to come forward.

The stigma attached to using some services (e.g., foodbanks, job centres, warm spaces) was often mentioned as a barrier to supporting families. However, we found that reframing initiatives and support, using different language, can help address stigma. Informants talked about how community pantries and fridges were successful because they were framed as citizens helping reduce food waste. As one person put it, "because they're food waste projects, they bring some anonymity to people.....people come and feel they are helping the cause by taking food waste." Others echoed this, "it doesn't matter who you are, economically, you can come and

get some wonky carrots." This was frequently contrasted with the stigma associated with using foodbanks (e.g., emergency food to people in crisis) that require residents to ask for help and get a voucher.

A potentially important takeaway for the partnership is to consider how reframing might address stigma in other areas of poverty. For example, would referring to foodbanks as community pantries reduce stigma and make them more accessible? Could reframing be used to change conversations around fuel poverty, access poverty, and furniture poverty? For instance, Roundabout re-use household furniture, which could be positively framed as citizens reducing waste or helping to save the planet. Conversations with housing associations about retaining used carpets could be framed as a sustainability benefit, which might unlock new possibilities.

Similarly, place-based initiatives intended to offer residents support – warm spaces, community events – could be framed in ways that destigmatise space, draw people in, and deliver multiple benefits, e.g., warm spaces that combine art and support or community events that combine family fun and support. By reframing to alleviate stigma, the partnership can shift narratives around poverty and empower communities to take a more active role in addressing these issues.

3.5. The importance of experimenting and learning

The partnership needs to keep experimenting and learning. This includes challenging assumptions and changing routines when needed. Research on wicked problems emphasises the importance of distributed experimentation, i.e., using small, targeted interventions to generate impact, discover solutions, promote learning, and scale what works effectively in places. In the Malvern Hills district, there has been a lot of experimentation and success, but it is important to keep innovating. As a recent Local Government Association report⁴ (2023) noted, it is essential to maintain a mindset that encourages creativity and flexibility to try new things and create space for experimentation and innovation with partners.

⁴ <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/state-strategic-relationships-between-councils-and-their-local-voluntary-and-community#1-executive-summm%E2%80%A6%201/7>

This is not always perceived to be the case due to the inherent conservatism of councils. One informant reflected: "I don't think we have the entrepreneurship, the creativity, the risk-taking, to actually do something different; let's try." This means the partnership must determine what 'failing well' looks like, recognising that not every experiment will deliver hoped-for results. People tend to share successes but mask failures. The whole point of experiments is to learn as much from the failures as the successes. To encourage an entrepreneurial spirit, the partnership should create a 'safe space' for partners to be candid about challenges, experiments they have tried, and where they failed; this will encourage learning and innovation. Such an approach can support the FWP and the District Collaborative's Pivot to Wellness.

4. Recommendations

4.1. Create a bolder partnership vision

We recommend that the FWP develops a bold, ambitious, long-term vision for the partnership. A compelling vision creates a sense of purpose that empowers and motivates people to act. With so many people overstretched, spread out, and working in challenging circumstances, sustaining the commitment of multiple partners and enrolling others to contribute is vital. In a New Local Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) workshop on designing out poverty, participants emphasised the importance of a compelling vision of the future: a 'rallying cry' that inspires, energises, and brings new partners into the fold. This resonates with research showing how "hope cultures" fuel engagement with grand challenges, even in the face of adversity.

When a hope culture is stronger, organisations more vibrantly pursue a grand challenge – wellbeing flourishes, and the organisation will ambitiously pursue its goals. When the strength of a hope culture flags, so does the vibrant pursuit of the grand challenge. (Sawyer & Clair, 2021)

Language is important here. Currently, the partnership has focussed on alleviating poverty and responding to a cost of living crisis. But if we look to the future, could the partnership vision be to eradicate poverty and increase financial wellness in

Malvern Hills district? This is bold and would require innovation and change, but why not challenge the assumption that it can't be done, even working with system constraints? After all, the Trussell Trust vision is for a UK without food banks and the UN Sustainable Development Goal 1 is to end poverty in all its forms everywhere. So why not be ambitious and aim for that? Or, put differently, why not paint a compelling picture of what Financial wellbeing for all looks like in five years.

4.2. Move towards a more ambidextrous partnership

Our second recommendation is to create a more ambidextrous partnership that balances short-term remedies with longer-term prevention. The early poverty summits had quite a long-term focus, with discussions centring on education, training, employment, and preventative pathways. However, as the cost of living crisis has bitten, attention has shifted to alleviating poverty, i.e., getting money, support, and help to those who need it. This is seen in the amended Poverty Alleviation Plan, which states: "This plan has been reviewed (in February 2023) to address the ongoing cost of living crisis and recognise that, at least for the immediate short-term, the partnership has a focus on crisis management."

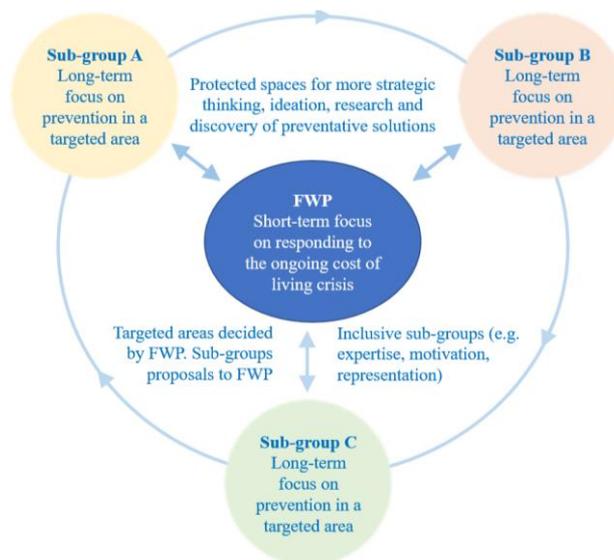
While this short-term focus is essential, it squeezes out longer-term strategic discussions about the root causes of poverty problems, interventions today that could have significant ripple effects, and investing in long-term change so that the cycle of poverty is broken or reduced. The pay-off from longer-term investments may take several years to be realised, but the impact on residents could be profound. Focusing on prevention could not only reduce future suffering; it could also reduce the costs of providing support as the need for help would reduce.

Informants discussed the tension between addressing short-term crises and investing in longer-term prevention strategies. To many, the current approach is applying sticky 'plasters' rather than addressing underlying causes of poverty and breaking the poverty cycle. This short-term focus was linked to the funding system. People talked about how government funding cycles, short-term timeframes, and spending rules shaped, constrained, and disrupted responses to poverty. Because funding is often only available on a short-term basis, organisations must apply for

and handle the funds in an accelerated manner. However, this means that the scope of planning and responding to long-term needs slides into the background.

Notwithstanding these constraints and how the causes of poverty are complex, systemic, and entangled with government policy, we suggest the partnership moves towards a more ambidextrous model that seeks to tackle the short-term crisis while still encouraging the pursuit of long-term prevention strategies. The notion of partnership ambidexterity comes from organisation studies, where researchers stress the importance of simultaneously pursuing exploitation (e.g., executing short-term strategies using things known) and exploration (e.g., searching and investing in new solutions for the future)⁵. These principles fit well with the short-term vs long-term dilemma. One example of how the partnership could apply these principles is summarised in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. Moving towards a more ambidextrous partnership



We recommend that a two-layer approach be developed, with the strategic layer focusing on the long-term vision and agenda to address the most challenging aspects of poverty and an operational level which focuses on the critical requirements needed for addressing the challenges on the ground and as they arise. The number of subgroups would be a matter for the FWP to decide, in line with the governance

⁵ We can provide more information on organisational ambidexterity if requested.

light, action heavy approach and the District Collaborative landscape. The important thing is to ensure that the subgroups maintain a strong focus on long-term prevention and are not drawn into short-term work. We recognise capacity as an issue. However, this could be overcome by making the sub-groups inclusive, encouraging new connections, potential serendipity (4.2), and more community representation in line with ABCD principles.

4.3. System thinking: Seeing and leveraging connections

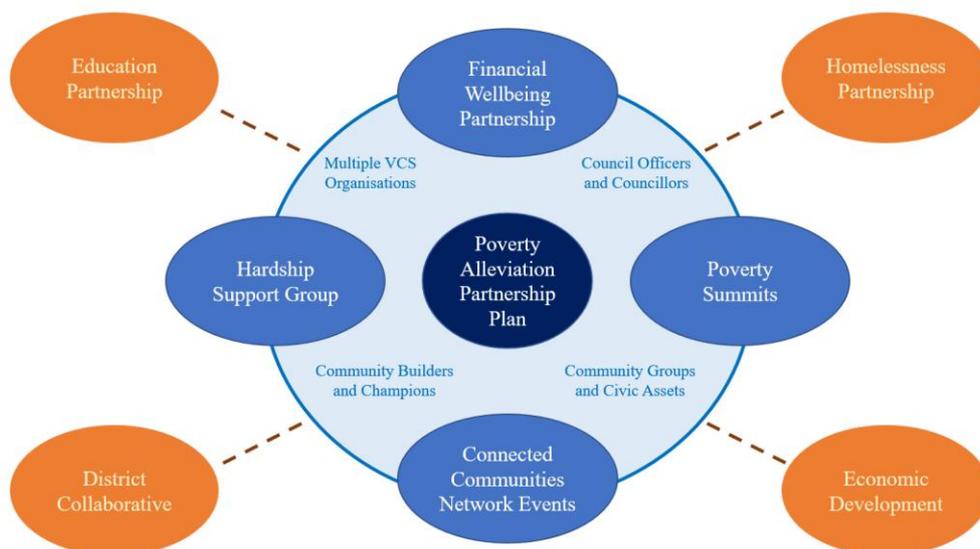
We also recommend that the FWP start thinking more strategically about the whole system rather than individual services or seeing poverty in isolation. Systems thinking is about understanding the complex interrelationships between various parts of a system and how they contribute to the behaviour and outcomes of the system as a whole. It is a way of looking at the bigger picture and seeing how different parts of a system are interconnected. There are two aspects to this.

First, the FWP should seek to engage more key stakeholders and services that informants feel are underrepresented, such as local businesses, social housing providers, local police, fire brigade, mental health services, and homelessness teams. This will strengthen the District Collaborative landscape and connected communities approach underway. It may not be possible to incorporate everybody into FWP meetings. However, the partnership could seek to create specialised action networks, i.e., networks (or key task and finish groups) that form around priority themes, such as child poverty, food security, or employment. According to informants, these have been used to great effect in other districts. Because they have a concrete focus and remit, they are often easier to manage and navigate and are likely to yield measurable results. Thus, they can augment the participatory architecture (Figure 2) by alleviating challenges associated with limited resources and capacity. They also provide pathways to bring together people interested in having a conversation for a common purpose. One leader noted that "leadership comes from passion and desire to do something to make change happen." Action networks provide space for such leadership to meet and flourish.

Second, we encourage the partnership to think more strategically about opportunities and areas it has not ventured into yet. As noted, poverty is a wicked

problem that cuts across multiple domains and services. For example, Malvern Hills district has a district collaborative, a homelessness partnership, an emerging education partnership, and an economic development strategy (see Figure 4). While some connections are already in place with the District Collaborative and Homelessness partnership, there are opportunities for further connections, allowing other areas to connect and address mutual concerns using ABCD principles. For instance, there is immense untapped potential to engage with businesses and the private sector and align with the emerging economic development strategy.

Figure 4. Seeing and leveraging opportunities for new connections



4.4. Create more avenues for resident voice and participation

A central tenet of ABCD is an inclusion focus, encompassing conversations with local communities and participatory approaches. However, some informants felt the partnership could do much more to bring the community's voice into FWP meetings and forums. The FWP does an excellent job assembling VCS organisations and critical partners, many of whom work with people in communities. But community representation is mainly mediated by others in leadership roles. We recommend the partnership open avenues for the voice of residents, particularly people with lived

experience of poverty, to come into the partnership more regularly. There are two routes the partnership may consider.

First, collect, share, and learn from stories of people who have lived experience of poverty. In a New Local JRF workshop on designing out poverty, participants recounted how they had deliberately designed in spaces for leadership groups and practitioner groups to hear people's stories; stories that are often rich, emotive, and intricate and reflect where people can get stuck in complex systems, how that evolved, and what made the difference. Creating more space for such stories will enable leaders and partners to learn, spot incorrect assumptions, identify where new corrective action is needed, and embrace a more person-centred approach.

Second, the partnership could consider creating a "community champions group" or "Poverty Truth Commission," with a direct line into the FWP. Alternatively, the partnership could work with Housing Associations, such as Platform, to utilise tenancy engagement structures and link to the strategic housing partnership. More generally, it would be interesting to ask partners how they incorporate participant voice in their various organisations to see if lessons could be learnt about how it should be incorporated, handled, and managed as part of a partnership.

There are many potential benefits of greater resident participation. In addition to enabling people to feed into the partnership, it may also be capability building as members of communities are empowered to exchange knowledge and ideas. Thus, creating more avenues for resident participation could be an avenue to build capacity, skills, and confidence in line with ABCD principles.

4.5. Develop an information strategy: The Goldilocks problem

Our research highlighted several challenges in generating, disseminating, and using information effectively across a network of partners, groups, and residents with different information needs, preferences, and levels of involvement. There were also several information dilemmas—first, the Goldilocks problem. On the one hand, there is a legitimate need for the partners to get more information about various issues linked to poverty. On the other hand, too much information is never ideal, as people often get overwhelmed with the information they receive from various

channels. Striking a balance requires careful thought. Second, it was apparent that information would often become obsolete quickly. Changes in the macro-environment, changes in government policies, and changes in community dynamics meant that information relevant today was often not relevant tomorrow. Consequently, databases are unlikely to solve the issue as things change rapidly.

We recommend the partnership develops a more explicit information-sharing strategy that defines the information needs of key stakeholder groups, determines the best communication channels, and establishes a basic governance structure with roles and responsibilities for messaging to the right audience while staying connected so messages are consistent. This information strategy needs to have two strands that address (a) how multiple partners communicate with each other and (b) how partners communicate with people who need support, including those who may be hidden, isolated, or digitally excluded. We suggest that the information-sharing strategy should seek to maximise the potential of both digital and non-digital media channels. To help the partnership, we have developed a basic typology of roles, where the council's role diminishes, and responsibility shifts to the partnership and to networks that support ABCD in action. All four messaging approaches are needed for an effective information-sharing strategy.

Figure 5. A typology to support the information strategy.

	Council-led Messaging	Council-supported	Partnership-led Messaging	Community-led Messaging
Summary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council leads the collection and dissemination of information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council provides tools, resources, and infrastructure to support service provider delivery. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnership agrees and delivers an information-sharing strategy targeting stakeholder needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dispersed groups create ways to connect and exchange around common issues.
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FWP Newsletters • Council website 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SLA with service providers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share good practice • Targeting residents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WhatsApp groups • Email listservs

Council-led and council-supported messaging seems well covered. However, there is scope to develop partnership-led messaging, recognising that this is a complex, broad, and evolving area to tackle with many stakeholders. Partnership-led messaging, or single agency messaging with a FWP tag, could involve, for example,

championing issues, education, pursuing door-to-door initiatives in targeted places and more. This may or may not involve the council. Not relying on the council may empower the partnership as the lead actor, avoid over-burdening one or two individuals, and circumvent council bureaucracy where appropriate to do so.

There is also potential to champion and leverage more community-led messaging. For example, creating more social media groups, using WhatsApp and Facebook, could afford more widespread collective engagement and organising. Dispersed community groups with a common interest or concern can instantly share information, make connections, find help, offer mutual support, and coordinate activities. Such groups can be place-based or issue-based. For example, during a Connected Communities Network event, there was a huge appetite for creating a WhatsApp group to support the existing network. However, as far as we know, this never happened because no one led it, perhaps because of an expectation it is or would be council led. Community-led messaging must, of course, be community-led. The partnership may wish to consider how it might nurture, support, and champion such information networks in critical areas. These can become important channels for the partnership to tap into.

5. Summary

This report presents the partnership with findings, insights, and recommendations to consider as it moves forward. We have focused on what we believe to be the most significant takeaways for the partnership's future direction. We would also like to touch on two additional themes worth noting.

First, some informants suggested that as the partnership matures, it should wield more influence as a collective entity, including advocating for change and working more strategically. We hope this report provides some food for thought on how this might be accomplished. It will be for the partnership to consider and discuss how the learning from this research might be applied and what milestones should be utilised to track progress.

Second, a brief word on resilience and continuity. Some informants expressed concerns about the partnership's sustainability. Some worry that political changes

could destabilise the tremendous progress made if elected officials do not offer the same support or embrace ABCD principles as they do now. As noted in section 3.2, congruent leadership, which includes MHDC leadership commitment, is critical for the partnership to stay on a positive path. In addition, informants are conscious that the leadership of key council officers – Amanda Smith and Claire Vaughan-Wood – is vital to the partnership's success and sustainability. While their role is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, it may be wise for the partnership to consider succession planning or mentoring to ensure continuity into the future.

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