

Social Justice

**“THE WORLD SAYS YES YOU CAN,
BUT ONLY IF YOU ARE PRIVILEGED.”**

A CALL FOR EVIDENCE

Living a life of disadvantage in Walsall

Full
Report

WALSALL FOR ALL
Connecting Communities, Connecting People

Acknowledgements

“People from marginalised groups feel like they live looking at a brick wall with a dead end. People experiencing disadvantage feel completely trapped, like they can’t escape. They feel like they will be stuck in the situation and that there is no way out. They certainly don’t feel that anyone wants to listen to them. So, trying to engage with them means there is so much untrust”

– Call for Evidence Participant

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The following people provided evidence, information, and valuable insight to the Call for Evidence group. Their contributions allowed the group to explore current systems and understand the experience from various viewpoints.

These people were selected to provide evidence based on their professional roles and locations within systems across Walsall. Their insights were invaluable and helped inform the group on wider issues such as systematic barriers to services and challenges faced in certain thematic areas.

In short, their contributions enhanced this report and allowed us to be a critical friend of services across our communities.

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Social Justice : Call for Evidence Report

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Foreword



A'isha Khan
CEO of Aaina Community Hub
& Chair of Walsall For All

As Chair of Walsall For All and CEO of Aaina Community Hub, I have had the privilege of witnessing first-hand the resilience, strength, and solidarity that exists within our diverse communities. Yet, I have also seen the persistent inequalities that prevent too many people in Walsall from living with dignity, security, and opportunity.

This Social Justice Call for Evidence has been a robust process, one rooted in listening and engaging with community representatives and key stakeholders. We heard from individuals and families experiencing food and fuel insecurity, from those who feel locked out of education, employment, or other areas, and from people navigating systems that too often feel cold and inaccessible. Their voices are at the heart of this report.

What emerges is clear: social justice must be more than a principle. It must be a shared commitment to equity, inclusion, and co-designing services and systems that truly see, hear, and serve the people of Walsall. This report is not the final word, but a call to action. I hope it will spark courageous conversations and collaborative change.

Thank you to every individual and organisation who contributed. Your insight and honesty will shape the way forward.

A'isha Khan,
CEO of Aaina Community Hub & Chair of Walsall For All

Introduction

Outline to the work, the ask, the process

Discussion for this work began on February 24, with a partnership discussion centred on developing an Anti-Poverty Strategy that referenced the Bradford Model, which was previously discussed at a Walsall For All Board Meeting. Increased levels of poverty and children living in poverty, particularly those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, were the initial prompts. However, during the Board Meeting, the Walsall For All Partnership explored the need to review a collaborative approach to anti-poverty measures across the Borough. The reason for this work is that Deprivation in Walsall is deeply entrenched and has worsened during the recession. We know that the children and families who often live in deprivation are impacted by health inequity driven by the social determinants of health. A key factor for these families is low income, with 1 in 3 (29.9%) children aged under 16 years living in low-income families, higher than the national average of 20.1% (HMRC Data, 2016). (1)

The high and increasing levels of child poverty put additional demands on wider services. Walsall ranks 17th for the income deprivation affecting children index (IDACI 2019), with the Borough's relative deprivation increasing over time (27th in 2015).

There have been numerous consultations taking place across Walsall within recent periods with its citizens including within Walsall For All Inclusion & Integration consultations with different organisations and groups around Walsall; over 750 people were consulted and it was highlighted that the cost of living is one of the main priorities that need focus across Walsall in the next decade. Many respondents spoke about the rising cost of living and how this was impacting their life choices and reducing opportunities for them. These insights have been instrumental in shaping the Walsall Community Cohesion Strategy 2025-2035, which places lived experience and community priorities, like the rising cost of living and other themes, at the heart of its vision for a more inclusive and united Borough.

The We Are Walsall 2040 strategy consultation, before the strategy launch (2), indicates that the cost of living is a significant concern identified during the consultations. It mentions, "Refinements to the outcomes under the theme of a strong economy for all so that we go further in addressing entrenched deprivation, skills gaps and debt awareness across the Borough," demonstrating that economic issues, including the cost of living, were prioritised based on the consultation feedback.

As a Partnership, Walsall For All acknowledges that Social Justice is seen to run intersectionally with poverty, as there are many ways to experience poverty beyond financial constraints.

In its 2012 document Social Justice: Transforming Lives (Cm 8314), 1, the UK Government set out a definition of Social Justice as being about making society function better, providing the support and tools to help turn lives around. Putting Early Intervention and Prevention first. (3)

The definition of Social Justice, according to the Oxford English Dictionary is justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities and privileges within a society.

Given the very real and unequal reality of life across the Borough, Walsall For All proposed exploring a collaborative, grassroots-led approach to examining the impact of poverty. This was coordinated following this discussion to bring together a cohort of interested individuals with lived experience of disadvantage to reach into our communities to identify, listen to, catalogue and bring to senior leaders a Call for Evidence around the experiences of citizens of Walsall across various communities.

To develop a Social Justice Strategy, a Call for Evidence committee was established across the Borough, bringing together representatives who will be known as Social Justice Champions.

The Social Justice Champion project group asks to provide an unflinching insight into what life is like for those who have the least living in our Borough.

**What does life in Walsall look like for those who are struggling?
What are the themes that drive Social Injustice?
What are the experiences and stories of our citizens?
What are the pathways into poverty?**

The Social Justice Call for Evidence members would be committed to being the voice of the voiceless and ensuring that their experiences are heard. You will read some of these stories throughout this document.

The Call for Evidence group, comprising community-minded representatives, came together through an expression of interest process to identify their motivations for joining the project group and their relevant lived or professional experience in the subject area of poverty. This allowed the members of the group to be clear from the outset what their requirements would be in terms of time committed, but that the project group would be using its connection to start looking at what Social Justice means in terms of life in Walsall currently, and what work was to do.

As a group, we also examined the definition of poverty. As a group, it was expressed that the language and connotation of the terminology we use matters, and it was immediately noted that someone identified and labelled as poor or living in poverty could provide long-term damaging/detrimental and stigmatising effects. With 44 out of our 167 neighbourhoods (LSOAs) now amongst the most deprived 10% in England, compared to 34 in 2015, entrenched poverty and deprivation are key subject areas for the group. (4)

The group agreed to meet biweekly for a period of five months to bring to life the lived experience stories being shared about being disadvantaged, as reflected in our communities' experiences. What we heard time and time again was,

'The world keeps telling you 'yes, you can, 'when in reality, only the privileged can.' This is why this report has this title.

As a group, we wanted to take an evidence-based approach which is methodical to the subject area and we started to review what are the pillars of Social Justice and The Centre for Social Justice claim that these five pathways are: educational failure; family breakdown; economic dependency and worklessness; addiction to drugs and alcohol; and severe personal debt (5).

As a group, we identified that we would like to explore the impact of the following themes, which we believe were significant challenges faced across Walsall communities currently. These themes were selected because of linkages to the evidence-based pathways identified by the Centre for Social Justice, coupled with localised intelligence of issues faced more locally within Walsall. Running across all these themes was the concern around Entrenched Poverty in pockets of our Borough.

The themes selected for further analysis were as follows:

- **Food and Fuel Insecurity**
- **Homelessness, Housing, and Housing Design**
- **Domestic Abuse**
- **Education, Employment, and Skills**
- **Health Inequalities**
- **EDI and Social Justice**
- **Addiction, Crime and Offending**
- **Entrenched Poverty**

During each session, a particular time was allocated to examining national trends, themes, and insights into each subject area to set the scene. However, the session time was primarily spent exploring and discussing the experiences of these themes within Walsall. The ability to reach into communities, due to the project group's own lived experiences and connections to those deemed "hard to reach" or seldom reached, provides a visceral and unique perspective. The insights and experiences captured are unique to this project and unlikely to have been discovered in previous consultations and events.

What's Missing from People's day to day lives?



Throughout this Call for Evidence period and our representatives being embedded in communities across our Borough, it has become clear that what is missing from people's day-to-day lives is more than just the income to fund a better life. Of course, our communities are feeling the pinch due to rising fuel and food prices however, during the process of this Call for Evidence consultations, we have identified that the citizens of Walsall are lacking Hope, connections, aspiration, friendships, peace, innovation, strength, a sense of calm and order and more importantly choice over their everyday lives. Engagement to consult with people across Walsall for this Call for Evidence took place in several different ways to maximise our reach across the Borough.

We did this in the following ways:

1. Walsall For All Community Advisors
2. Walsall Homelessness Prevention Conference
3. Social Justice Champions direct reach

Engagement Methods

Walsall For All Community Advisors

This community-led engagement provides a rich, qualitative insight into the everyday experiences, challenges and aspirations of people living in Walsall today.

As part of the community engagement process, six Community Advisors, each consulted with around 20 individuals from their local networks, resulting in feedback from a total of 120- 150 residents across Walsall. These engagements took the form of informal conversations, one-to-one interviews, and group discussions, allowing for open and honest dialogue about life in the borough.

A wide range of age groups were included, from young people aged 16-60, each offering unique insights into their lived experiences. Young adults frequently discussed issues such as crime, belonging, and limited opportunities, while older residents reflected on the town's decline and shared hopes for the future of younger generations.

The engagement also captured voices from Walsall's ethnically diverse communities, including South Asian, Eastern European, African, Caribbean, and White British backgrounds. Immigrant families and recently settled residents contributed perspectives on integration, cultural identity, and the challenges of adjusting to life in a new community.

Residents from different parts of the Borough were engaged, including areas such as Palfrey, Caldmore, Birchills, Pleck, Bloxwich and the Town Centre, ensuring that the findings reflected a wide geographic and social spread.

Engaged with 120 - 150 diverse Walsall residents aged 16 - 60

Negative themes identified

Crime & Safety

Crime and safety emerged as significant concerns. Residents highlighted rising incidents of knife crime, drug misuse, youth gang activity, and general anti-social behaviour. Many people reported feeling unsafe, especially at night, due to a visible lack of policing and weak enforcement. Older and vulnerable residents, including migrants, expressed growing anxiety about public harassment.

Urban Decline

Urban decline was another common theme, with many perceiving the town centre as neglected and dirty. The closure of businesses and deteriorating public spaces, combined with fewer shopping options and poorly maintained streets and green areas, added to a sense of abandonment.

Economic Challenges

Economic challenges were strongly felt, with increased poverty and homelessness becoming more visible. Young people, in particular, expressed concerns about limited job prospects and a shortage of part-time work opportunities. The rising cost of living, coupled with a lack of affordable housing, has intensified the financial pressures faced by many households.

Limited access to amenities

Limited access to amenities and public services have further strained the community life. There is a widespread perception of insufficient cost-effective recreational facilities, healthcare provisions, and evening public transport. The people we consulted felt that educational opportunities appear to be declining, and many feel there is a shortage of vibrant community spaces that encourage connection.

Environmental Issues

Environmental and cleanliness issues were frequently mentioned. Residents reported widespread littering, fly-tipping, and poor maintenance of public areas. Some neighbourhoods also struggled with pollution, overcrowding, and inadequate waste management services.

Community Disconnection

Citizens consulted felt that a sense of community disconnection was growing. Social tensions and cultural misunderstandings have led to a perceived breakdown in mutual respect and community spirit. Post-COVID working from home has also contributed to feelings of isolation among residents.

Positive themes identified

Strength in community

Despite these challenges, many residents find strength in the community and support networks. Strong family ties and trusted local groups provide vital support, while cultural diversity and community projects foster a sense of optimism and belonging in certain areas.

Green Spaces

Natural spaces, such as the Arboretum and its surrounding green belts, are highly valued. These provide opportunities for outdoor recreation, relaxation, and healthier lifestyles, particularly through walking routes and green areas.

Mixed Sentiments

The sense of belonging varies across the community. While long-term residents often feel connected through heritage and familiarity, others feel increasingly detached due to safety concerns and rapid cultural changes. Still, there is a strong current of hope for improvement. Some residents remain optimistic about Walsall's future and the role of community initiatives in driving change, though others feel frustrated with the slow pace of progress.

Accessibility & Affordability

Residents appreciate Walsall's accessibility and affordability. Its convenient location, near major cities and strong transport links, is seen as a positive. A relatively lower cost of living makes it attractive to families and newcomers.

Cultural & Educational Assets

Cultural and educational assets also offer points of pride. Places like the Leather Museum are appreciated, and local schools (especially those providing SEND support) are recognised for their quality and impact.

Key Requests and Solutions

- Residents consistently called for a stronger police presence and more effective crime prevention strategies.
- Revitalising the town centre with improved shops, cultural activities, and engaging public spaces was another top priority.
- Environmental improvements and better waste management were also frequently requested.
- Expanded public transport, especially during evenings, and the development of affordable housing for young people and families are seen as crucial steps.
- Finally, supporting local businesses and creating more job opportunities are viewed as essential for boosting the area's economic health.

Walsall Homeless Prevention Conference

Held annually in Walsall, the 2024 Homeless Prevention Conference was hosted by OHPP and One Walsall. The Social Justice Champions held an engagement stand and provided a QR survey on each table, allowing professionals and attendees to express their views on Walsall's landscape.

“The last thing people want to have who have been let down is HOPE! This means more rejection and failure.”

When asked,
“What do you think people are missing from their day-to-day life?”

The following answers were provided, which very much reflect the answers given by citizens.

- Ambition and routine
- Satisfaction from simple things
- Peace of mind
- Stability, Connections and Support in a fair way
- The freedom to live and enjoy their life without the worry of money. The cost of living has contributed to fear and mental ill-health
- Connection
- Safe, affordable accommodation
- Physical connection
- More drive around things like employment, education and housing
- Connections with each other and the local community.
- Balance, peace and space. Some were missing out on food and basic living essentials.

“What does Walsall need to prioritise or address for it to feel equitable and fairer?”

- Needs more funding for charities to deliver more projects
- Where and how people live
- Crime and remove the ghetto areas
- Fair life
- Social and community support
- Poverty Lens for all services: what is it like for a person to navigate your service
- All communities are respected and listened to, with equal opportunities.
- Bring people together through effective communication, meaningful engagement, and collaborative efforts. There is already a wealth of opportunities available; you need to encourage people to take advantage of more social activities. The Social Prescribers are incredibly important, and we need more of these.
- Safe, affordable accommodation
- Every street and neighbourhood has inspirational places to go for free
- More homes, education regarding benefits
- Housing.
- Positive messaging, poverty relief, opportunities for ETE

Social Justice Champions direct reach

Every 2 weeks, the Social Justice Champions who had expressed an interest in being part of the project group met to explore the pre-planned themes. Each meeting covered a different thematic area, and members would be sent prompts ahead of each session to prepare and bring to the meeting as their service update, allowing them to represent the communities they reached and represented.

Social Justice Champions were engaged within communities every day, working in locations across the Borough and in a genuine and place-based way.

The group included whg community-based colleagues, including Stronger Communities and Community Housing, reflecting the reach of Social Prescribing and whg community Champions. Members also included representation from Black Country Foodbank, Wider Community and Voluntary Sector representatives, Faith Leaders, and A Food Pantry Co-Ordinator. The group also included 2 of the four resilient communities locality leads.

These members consistently engage with our citizens and are trusted voices in their communities. All locations within the Borough of Walsall were served by the group, and a diverse range of backgrounds, experiences, and cultures was represented.

Each session, this group of passionate and committed individuals provided data, case studies, information and reflections of their communities within the given topics. Many of these experiences are included in this report. It would be difficult to quantify just how many people the group spoke to about their experience of poverty in Walsall.

Still, it was done on such a large scale that we can confidently say that the voices we heard are often the voices that are not often reached in other traditional consultation approaches.

So, where did we start?

We started with the belief that there's a big difference between being "broke" and being "poor". Poverty is the daily agony of not having enough money for groceries or having to decide between buying food for your children and paying the rent. Real poverty is isolating. It's living in fear of who will find out and how you will be judged. It started with the view that Poverty causes mental distress. Poverty affects people's well-being, and it began with a group exploration of the Lived Experience book "Poor" by Katriona O'Sullivan, who grew up in Birmingham and whose experiences of poverty struck a profound chord with the group. Through looking at Katriona's experience, we were able to see similarities in some of our communities and, more importantly, how "kindness and compassion" when experiencing financial hardship can either affirm or deny those labels of being in the situation you find yourself in.

We explored the definitions of poverty, and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation defines poverty as

"Poverty affects millions of people in the UK. Poverty means not being able to heat your home, pay your rent or buy the essentials for your children. It means waking up every day facing insecurity, uncertainty, and impossible decisions about money. It means facing marginalisation – and even discrimination – because of your financial circumstances. The constant stress it causes can lead to problems that deprive people of the chance to play a full part in society" (6)

In the 2025 Report entitled Poverty in the UK, a view of life in the UK ahead of the 2024 general election was unveiled, and it makes for a bleak read.

It shows that across the UK:

- Over 1 in 5 people in the UK (21%) are in poverty - 14.3 million people
- Of these, 8.1 million are working-age adults
- 4.3 million are children
- 1.9 million are pensioners

These numbers should shock us, but they often fail to have that effect. They have become wearyly familiar. And as raw statistics, they risk masking the human stories of the grinding, challenging reality faced by families who constantly battle to afford necessities, let alone build lives of dignity and progress. (7)

This report also unveils that the West Midlands had the highest rate of poverty at 27%, followed by the North-West (25%), London (24%), and Yorkshire and the Humber (23%). In the West Midlands, North West, Yorkshire and the Humber, and North East, between 25% and 30% of working-age adults are not in employment, compared to around 20% in regions with the lowest levels of poverty (the East, South East and South West of England).

The report also tells us that In October 2024, around 2.6 million of the poorest fifth of households (44%) were in arrears with their household bills or behind on scheduled lending repayments, 4.1 million households (69%) were going without essentials, and 3.2 million households (54%) cut back on food or went hungry.

We decided as a project group to commence our mammoth task by examining food and fuel, as these are themes that everyone can relate to, regardless of their income level. Everyone needs food, and everyone needs the security of a warm place.



Key Themes

- **Food and Fuel Poverty**
- **Housing, Homelessness and Housing Design**
- **Domestic Abuse**
- **Education and Skills / Employment**
- **Health and Wellbeing**
- **EDI and Social Justice**
- **Addiction, Crime and Offending**
- **Entrenched Poverty**

Food & Fuel Insecurity

“Food is more than sustenance; it embodies dignity, hope and empowerment” – Lisa Lucy Gakunga, Lucy’s Pantry.

The UK now has one of the highest poverty rates in Europe, with 9.77 million adults and 4 million children experiencing food insecurity in September 2022 and 4 million children in food poverty in January 2022 LGA 2023 (8) and according to the Food Foundation, who Published the Broken Plate report in 2025 Food insecurity remains highly prevalent in the UK. The Food Foundation's Food Insecurity Tracker shows that 1 in 7 households are food insecure, affecting approximately 7 million adults and 3 million children across the UK (9)

Across Walsall, food and fuel insecurity is a real topic of contention. Walsall held a food summit in 2023, and when asked what headlines capture the future we want to see, inclusivity, happiness, and health were strong suggestions.



The key underpinning of this food plan was for Walsall to have a sustainable, fair, and prosperous food environment where good-quality food is grown, available, and promoted, allowing our residents to make nutritious and affordable food choices.

It was revealed at the food summit that 33% of Walsall residents state that healthy, affordable, and accessible food is one of the most influential factors in their wellbeing.

Strategic Recommendations

- Ensure that food-related benefit maximisation is embedded into services such as the uptake of Healthy Start Vouchers and free school meals.
- Identify, develop, and promote cooking on a budget techniques and skills development, and embed them within community engagement.
- Source and ensure that community kitchens are available. For many, their home environments are challenging, and to support the promotion of cooking on a budget courses across the locality, there needs to be investment in community assets to have facilities that can accommodate these types of classes.
- Support more people to grow their own food. Be this on a window box, an allotment, or a community garden. Green growing spaces have a significant implication for improving health and wellbeing outcomes.
- Review licencing and planning regulations regarding the sheer number of fast food outlets available in a given location. Areas of deprivation are swamped with a high density of poor food outlets.
- Explore ways to support residents in reducing food waste and strategies to lower their food budgets.

Black Country Foodbank

During the Call for Evidence, we acquired Black Country Foodbank distribution data, which shows a 15.5% increase in food given out to adults and children in 2023, meaning 43,670 adults and children were supported during this period.



Black Country Information

Dudley, Sandwell & Walsall – a total of 28 distribution centres

Year	Food Kgs	Adults & Children	Adults	Children
2023	275000	43670	26843	16827
2022	238000	36415	22859	13556

15.5% increase in food given out

20% increase in the number of adults and children supported

17% increase in the number of adults supported

24% increase in the number of children supported

At a Walsall Level, the increase in demand for food bank access is rising year on year, with 5,313 vouchers being issued to support 12,085 adults and children in 2023 alone. It is worth noting that, in addition to the Black Country foodbank, there are also other localised provisions not included in these totals, including those of the Trussell Trust and more independent food banks linked to the community and voluntary sector.

LOVE . CONNECT . INVEST

Walsall Information

7 distribution centres

Year	Vouchers	Food Kgs	Adults & Children	Adults	Children
2017	2258	31500	5680		
2018	2632	35579	6219		
2019	3377	52421	7964		
2020	3258	50207	7407	4693	2705
2021	3065	54135	7340	4465	2875
2022	4491+47%	75318+39%	10887 +48%	6511+46%	4376+52%
2023	5313+18%	79902+6%	12085 +11%	7244+11%	4841+11%

Walsall Information

Walsall Distribution Centres 2023	Vouchers	12 month % change	food distributed Kgs	12 month % change	non - food distributed Kgs	12 month % change	no of adults & children	12 month % change
The Rock Church	769	52.0%	10812.19	32.8%	553.09	-6.6%	1429 (947 & 482)	36.4% (37.6% & 33.9%)
Ablewell	2011	7.7%	28035.7	-3.3%	2723.68	3.5%	4370 (2695 & 1675)	-1.3% (2.0% & -6.1%)
NTCG Willenhall	311	19.2%	4180.33	14.6%	548.91	6.0%	655 (403 & 252)	30.5% (28.8% & 33.3%)
Bridging The Gap	724	31.9%	10926.45	11.6%	856.23	-22.3%	1822 (1064 & 758)	34.5% (18.6% & 65.5%)
Thomas Project	529	1.0%	10660.23	-4.8%	2046.79	1.0%	1388 (778 & 610)	-4.5% (-2.0% & -7.4%)
All Saints	233	22.0%	3860.34	7.2%	446.58	-11.9%	590 (334 & 256)	14.1% (20.6% & 6.7%)
The Lamp	736	27.8%	11427.23	18.5%	1828.49	18.9%	1831 (1023 & 808)	18.9% (17.6% & 20.6%)
Overall 2023 figures	5313	18.3%	79902.47	6.1%	9003.77	0.7%	12085 (7244 & 4841)	11.0% (11.3% & 10.6%)

Black Country Foodbank

As a group, we identified areas where food bank access is more prevalent, and there has been a considerable rise in access across the majority of foodbanks, except the Thomas Project in Aldridge, which has seen only a 1% annual rise.

Navigating the increased demand to access the food bank has resulted in some challenges for the Black Country Foodbank, including limiting access and the depletion of certain items, such as toiletry supplies.

Over the last two years, as the increase has continued to rise, Black Country Foodbank has had to take some measures, including limiting usage to one visit per month (unless under certain circumstances). Food Donations have fallen in real terms, which has not matched the increased amount of food being distributed, with toiletry donations almost completely drying up.

Black Country Foodbank reports that the central storehouse has had to purchase staple food items to give to local distribution centres. Black Country Foodbank has raised how all distribution centres have received pots of money to enable them to buy food and toiletries, but this is not a sustainable model in the long run. The Trussell Trust has also reported similar issues.



Black Country Foodbank

When asked to consider why someone needs to approach a food bank. Data provided by Black Country Foodbank shows that on June 24, the top 5 reasons given for accessing foodbank support are:

- 1) Low-income unemployed
- 2) Benefit Issues
- 3) Debt
- 4) Low Income Employed
- 5) Utility Bills

During the Call for Evidence, customer experiences were gathered from individuals who had used a food bank provision. Linda said,

“I had no choice; I had to make a claim for universal credit after leaving a controlling relationship, and I had no way to make ends meet. I expected to feel judged, made to feel worthless, because trust me, I felt ashamed it had come to this, but I didn’t. I was given a warm drink and felt that by the time I left, I had faith someone cared.”



Lucy's Pantry Walsall

In addition to the conventional food banks within Walsall, we have several grassroots food initiatives and programmes working to meet the needs of the community further.

One such initiative is Lucy's Pantry, delivered by Blueprint communities CIC, which is open twice per week from St Crossing's Church in Walsall.

Lucy's Pantry is a membership style offer which allows members to access subsidised and free food parcels.



Lucy's Pantry states it is a beacon of hope dedicated to confronting food insecurity and reducing food waste. The mission is driven by the belief that access to healthy food is a basic human right and that everyone deserves to feel valued and nourished. (10) Currently, there are over 400 members registered with Lucy's Pantry in Walsall who can access the shop as they need.

This Model/approach is now being replicated across several community shops, which have been supported by Walsall Council to run across key localities in Walsall. The first community shop of this initiative opened in Bloxwich in January 2025 (11) to support families to help their money go further.

Some experiences of people accessing Lucy's Pantry have been captured to understand the impact such provisions can have on those accessing them.

Lucy's Pantry Walsall

Case Study 1

A mother facing challenges in providing for her two young children

Sarah, a mother of two young children, once had a job but hasn't worked in the last four years due to the demands of being a single mom, which made holding a job challenging, especially as affordable childcare proved unaffordable. Sarah tried to stretch her resources as best she could with the rising cost of living, often sacrificing her own meals so her children could eat. Going to food banks was a last resort, but each visit filled her with shame and frustration. She was constantly torn between providing for her family and paying the bills.

She found the Pantry online and became a member. Sarah now has access to affordable and nutritious food that fits her budget. For the first time in months, she could shop without the embarrassment of having to return items at the till due to insufficient funds. She has also been able to save some of her money and treat the children to occasional outings, helping her feel more in control and empowered as a mother. Beyond just providing food, Lucy's Pantry has given Sarah the resources to create cherished memories with her children.

Sarah also discovered a supportive community at Lucy's Pantry, connecting with other members facing similar challenges. The sense of community and feeling heard has alleviated the isolation she often felt, making her day-to-day life feel less daunting. Sarah plans to return to work once her children are a bit older. She describes Lucy's Pantry as more than just a food source; for her, it's a beacon of hope and a reminder that she is not alone.

Lucy's Pantry Walsall

Case Study 2

Facing mental health challenges made worse by financial worries

James, a middle-aged adult facing the challenges of anxiety and depression, turned to Lucy's Pantry at a particularly difficult time. Financial struggles had started to worsen his mental health, and he feared he might fall back into harmful habits, especially drinking, which had previously served to cope with his anxieties. Feeling vulnerable, James knew he needed support but felt a deep sense of shame at the idea of returning to a food bank, where he had turned during low points in his life.

Finding Lucy's Pantry offered James a sense of dignity. Here, he could access affordable, nutritious food, which brought stability to his finances and helped relieve some of the worries that triggered his anxiety. Being able to shop without the anxiety of overspending gave him some control back, and the Pantry's respectful, supportive environment helped ease his feelings of shame.

Over time, James discovered more than just food at Lucy's Pantry. He found a community that understands his struggles and offers him a safe space. Initially, he was hesitant and reserved, speaking little with others. But gradually, he started opening up, finding comfort in the regular chats and supportive interactions with other members and volunteers. With these new connections, he has felt motivated to prioritize his mental well-being and lean on healthy coping strategies rather than self-destructive habits.

For James, Lucy's Pantry has been a source of both practical and emotional support, giving him the stability and encouragement he needed to break the cycle of shame and take positive steps toward improving his mental health. The pantry has become a place of community and hope, helping James reclaim his sense of self and guiding him toward a healthier path.

Walsall Outreach Streets Feed

In addition to traditional routes to access food, Walsall has a wide range of charitable initiatives, from Street feeds delivered by various providers, which are not centrally regulated. It's impossible to know just the demand for these services due to the reactive nature and delivery of the provision.



During this Call for Evidence process, two of the Social Justice Champions supported a street feed in delivery facilitated by Walsall Outreach and the number of meals provided on the evening in question was 80 Chicken and Chips supplied and funded by local business donations, 25 Chilli Con Carne, 25 Packed lunches with sandwiches and crisps and 20 Vegetable Dhal, which volunteers provided. The Queuing system for this provision was significant, lining up visibly in the main high street in Walsall and waiting for the street feed to commence.

In addition to emergency food provision, toiletries, underwear, socks, and personal items such as clothing are also issued to regular attendees. The complexity of the needs of those attending this provision was significantly high, including medical issues. Volunteers say they do the best they can; however, language and interpretation are often key barriers here. In addition to these volunteers on the street, they find that they get to know the attendees quite well. With Jane telling us about someone's preferences for their hot chocolate or other likes, it's evident that people return week after week.

Walsall Outreach Streets Feed

There are a considerable number of similar provisions being delivered daily, none of which are regulated in any centralised way and are a reactive charitable response to what feels like an emerging food crisis. There is also little way to support and direct people attending from the crisis at these provisions due to the locations. There is little privacy and limited ability to speak openly about the support needed in this environment. The programme of street feeds available in Walsall is:

When and Where for Free Meals

Day	Time	Location
Monday	6:00 - 7:00 pm	Sikh Temple, West Bromwich Street (Langar)
Tuesday	6:00 - 7:00 pm	Sikh Temple, West Bromwich Street (Langar)
	6:00 - 6:45 pm	Walsall Outreach, Sister Dora Statue (opposite Lloyds Bank), Town Centre
Wednesday	6:00 - 7:00 pm	Sikh Temple, West Bromwich Street (Langar)
	7:00 pm	Walsall BME Advice Centre, Sister Dora Statue (opposite Lloyds Bank), Town Centre
	7:00 - 8:00 pm	FoodCycle Walsall, Green Lane Baptist Church
Thursday	6:00 - 7:00 pm	Sikh Temple, West Bromwich Street (Langar)
Friday	6:00 - 7:00 pm	Sikh Temple, West Bromwich Street (Langar)
Saturday	6:00 - 7:00 pm	Sikh Temple, West Bromwich Street (Langar)
	6:00 - 7:00 pm	Feed the Nation, Walsall Town Centre Market
Sunday	6:00 - 6:45 pm	Walsall Outreach, Sister Dora Statue (opposite Lloyds Bank), Town Centre

Walsall Outreach Streets Feed

Recommendations

- To fully understand the number of people accessing the emergency food provisions, it would be advisable to review all emergency provisions across Walsall and identify the numbers accessing these provisions. Are people attending duplicate locations? Is food provided, stored, and distributed with food health and hygiene standards? What mechanism is in place to support those volunteering to be safe in this role? Is there a need to ensure that the food provided is nutritious and healthy?
- Incorporate collaborative support from partnership agencies within these sessions to explore the reasons why someone is accessing the provision and, where possible, link it to wider support already provided. This may require additional support around translation and interpreter services.

We met many individuals during the outreach food session who expressed the importance of having access to a hot meal. How grateful they were that this was available to them; however, there was not a huge amount of time to unpick someone's circumstances and keep the line open for those waiting for hot drinks.

During the outreach session, we met a male whom we will refer to as Sparky. This male was very well known to the outreach volunteer team. Sparky said he loved to see Jane and the team each week, the team were people who cared about him and made him feel loved. Sparky said he had been in and out of homelessness for several years, and he didn't trust many people, but every week, where possible, he would remember to come and see his friends and get a hot meal.

Walsall Food Cycle

Walsall Food Cycle is part of a national programme delivered by Food Cycle, which has a vision to make food poverty, loneliness, and food waste a thing of the past for every community. During the Call for Evidence period, two of the Social Justice Champions volunteered and served at a community dining session where 24 attendees across a real diverse background were welcomed into Green Lane Baptist Church for a vegetarian 3-course meal.

The attendees had a variety of reasons for attending, ranging from being alone to having to watch their finances and attending weekly with their friends. The session saw volunteers integrated with guests who all ate together and shared their time to have conversations. There were also additional food products available for guests to take away, all at no charge. Numbers accessing weekly can fluctuate, but a small review was undertaken for Walsall attendance and is below.

Walsall Food Cycle

This provision is well-run, person-centred, and about bringing people together to share food. The attention to reducing stigma was evident in this provision, with all guests emphasising how they enjoyed meeting friends here and having something hot to eat. Of the persons attending the session, one guest, Shonda, advised that this was the only opportunity they had to eat out with their children because she couldn't afford to take them to restaurants like some of their friends. Another attendee, Paul, said they look forward to it every week because it gets them out socialising with others. They have the same table every week, and they meet their friends there. The provision felt far more than a food initiative. (12)

Leandra was another guest we met on this evening, and she said, "Food is expensive; there are days when I just have noodles, and I look forward to coming here every week for something homemade." Leandra didn't interact with any of the other people in the session, but she did speak to the volunteers whom she knows well. Leandra said these volunteers are "superheroes for what they do for us."

Food Cycle – Walsall Review July/June 24



Date	Number of people Attending	Menu
17/07/24	26	Potato and Cauliflower Soup, Chickpea and Pepper Curry & Banana Cake and Custard
10/07/24	31	Mushroom Soup, Ratatouille Pasta with Sourdough Pitta, Chocolate and Banana Sponge
03/07/24	22	Leek and Potato Soup, Cheesy Veggie Frittata, Sponge Cake and Fruit Medley
26/06/24	24	Chickpea Curry, Rice and Boiled potato with Carrots, Blueberry Sponge
19/06/24	CLOSED	
12/06/24	24	Mediterranean Soup with Bread Rolls, Potato and Chickpea curry & Chocolate Raspberry Sponge
05/06/24	27	Potato and Cauliflower Soup, Roasted red pepper pasta with Salad, Zesty Sponge with Orange Glaze

WALSALL FOR ALL



Nash Dom Resilient Communities Hub

Nash Dom Resilient Communities Hub in Palfrey also delivers several initiatives, including a food bank, community Fridge, and fuel support to its members. Located in the south of the Borough, where deprivation and diversity among its citizens are considerably high.

Data supplied by Nashdom state that they support an average of 35-40 households every month at their food bank. Additionally, an average of 20-25 individuals visit the community fridge, and approximately 40 households are supported to access the Household Support Fund each month.

Nashdom also delivered the Warm Hub during the cold season, which supported 238 unique residents from September 2023 to April 2024.



Nash Dom Case Study

A refugee family of five members recently arrived from Afghanistan and self-referred to our food bank in June. The family situation was assessed by our multilingual advisor to identify any other support needs. As none of our advisors speaks Pashto, we had to use Google Translate to do the initial assessment. As a result, the family was supported with a food parcel, adults enrolled in our ESOL course, and referred to the Afghan Community and Welfare Centre for further support, including school admission, as the family primarily speaks Pashto. It is faster and more efficient to receive support in their native language from there.

The nature of this and several other organisations delivering a Warm Hub in Walsall led us as a group to discuss the linkages between fuel and food insecurity. There are often real challenges made across Walsall between eating and heating. Rising fuel costs. People we spoke to usually referred to reducing their food spending to heat their homes. The practicalities of everyday life are extremely challenging.

Walsall has the 6th highest Fuel Poverty percentage in England, behind Stoke-on-Trent, Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Coventry, and Sandwell (National Energy Foundation Data released in 2024 based on 2022 data) (13)

Of the 116'132 households in Walsall, 24'371 Households are in Fuel Poverty (21%). Nationally, this is approximately 13.1%, indicating a significant issue in this area in Walsall. This information was supplied to the group by Rory Burke, Partnerships Manager for the National Energy Foundation.

During the Call for Evidence period, the Social Justice Champions talked to many people who had been experiencing fuel poverty, and despite there being a considerable number of services available to support citizens with fuel support in Walsall, barriers to service access were highlighted, such as

- stigma and shame in applying for help,
- feeling judged by those receiving the referrals,
- Income and expenditure were scrutinised by colleagues who had unconscious bias in their decision-making.
- Digital issues in navigating the application process were all cited.
- Feelings that the application processes were too difficult
- Support wasn't available in a timely way

Household Support Fund

Data on the take-up of the Household Support Scheme was obtained, showing that 25,932 households in Walsall were supported in 2023/24 with energy and water support amounting to £ 2,360.894, which provides considerable insight into the scale of the need in this area. As we know, this is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of actual support needed across our communities.

Households support via household support fund for 23/24

25,932 households – all funding provided was spent in 23/24 and planned expenditure for April – Sept 24.

Biggest demands and expenditure – 23/24

- Energy and Water - £2,360,984
- Food - £1,765,053
- Housing costs - £427,983,000

Policy in Practice data has been secured by the Council to mitigate impacts should funding cease by benefit maximisation campaigns

Community shops are being explored as potential mitigation for the borough

There are examples heard by the Social Justice Champions where several self-neglect cases, when unpicked, led back to fuel poverty. We heard of a case of a female called Susan who was initially known because she was lonely and isolated after COVID-19.

Susan had lost her only living relative and was living alone with her dog. Susan had no friends or family, and a home visit revealed that Susan was living in challenging conditions. Susan didn't trust anyone. Susan had significant health issues but wouldn't engage with her GP because she said doctors had killed her son.

She eventually revealed she had no gas in her home, and it was discovered that the energy provider had told her because she couldn't afford the standing charge and gas each week to cap it off at the meter. Susan hadn't had a bath in over a year. Susan had no heating or hot water, and the quality of her life was significantly impacted. Susan said she would wear her coat to keep warm during the colder months. Susan was reluctant to seek help anywhere because her appearance wasn't good.

With support came trust, and Susan was supported to move into an over-55s scheme, where she lives among other people. She is now thriving, attending art clubs, cookery classes, and has recently been on a trip to a Christmas market with her friends. Susan was probably entitled to PIP or other benefits, but she wouldn't approach services for help, and when asked why, she said,

“I don’t want strangers knowing my business, and I don’t need the charity.”

Walsall Housing Group

As a housing provider, Whg has its own internal mechanism for supporting its customers, including an internal money advice service. They were asked to provide some information about the support they had provided to their customers, and from May 24 to Aug 24 (just four of the warmer spring months), the following support was provided.

- 442 supermarket food vouchers were issued to 221 unique households.
- 232 energy vouchers were issued to 118 unique households.

Reasons cited for needing financial hardship include:

- Income is depleted before the next payment due to the cost of living.
- Benefit sanctions.
- Increase in energy costs, in addition to the general increase in other bills.
- Sudden expense, not prepared for financial shocks.
- Change in household size, resulting in reduced income.
- Change in employment status, i.e., temporary work.
- Unclaimed entitlement
- Debts and increased enforcement action
- Household members are not contributing.

We were also able to identify that 57% of vouchers issued were to households with vulnerabilities ranging from physical health, mental health, and or long-term illness.

- 45% of the awards made were to households with dependent children.
- 55% of the awards made were to households with no children.
- 80% of the awards made were to unemployed households, 16% were in employment, and 4% were retired.

Key Challenges identified while looking at this theme:

- Stigma
- Preserving their Dignity
- Services have barriers in place that impact service access
- Race for Life – The fact that access isn't equally accessible

Domestic Abuse

Domestic abuse emerged as a significant concern during the call for evidence and through related consultations that ran in parallel, particularly the Walsall Women's Health consultation facilitated by Walsall Together. While this consultation was not part of the core activities of the Social Justice Task & Finish Group, it provided valuable insights into how women in Walsall experience and perceive the support available to them, especially in relation to domestic abuse.

These findings revealed that many women facing domestic abuse feel their experiences are overlooked, misunderstood, or even minimised by health and support services. In one stark example, a woman who disclosed abuse during a time of acute vulnerability was told to "go back home." She was left feeling disbelieved, dismissed, and too ashamed to seek further help, questioning the validity of her own experience.

Domestic abuse is complex and far-reaching, often involving emotional, psychological, sexual, and financial abuse, in addition to physical violence. Many women reported that health professionals did not fully understand or respond appropriately to the nuances of their experiences. While the IRIS programme, aimed at improving domestic abuse awareness and responses within GP practices, has been rolled out, there remain concerns that not all relevant staff have received training, limiting its impact.

The issue is closely tied to deprivation. Women as well as Men in low-income households often face heightened risks and greater barriers to support. Unlike more visible issues such as knife crime, domestic abuse remains a hidden but pervasive threat to women/men's safety and wellbeing in Walsall.

Given its severity and the long-lasting trauma it causes, domestic abuse must be prioritised within any broader strategy addressing crime, offending, and community safety in the Borough.

Homelessness, Housing and Housing Design

“Homelessness is the ultimate exclusion”
– Jean Templeton, CEO, St Basils
Walsall Homeless Prevention Conference 2024

In December 2024, Shelter shared that nationally, 354'000 people are homeless in England, which includes 161,500 children who will spend Christmas without a home - a shocking increase of 14%. Shelter claim 90'000 homes need to be built every year for the next 10 years to end the emergency (14)

The Social Justice Champions were provided with some information by colleagues from Walsall Council regarding the process and legislation which regulates how homeless applications are taken and processed in Walsall. This is a legal and statutory obligation that, during the process, requires the officer to be satisfied that

- The applicant is eligible for homelessness assistance.
- The applicant is homeless

Once the officer is satisfied of the above, further checks may be done to investigate if the applicant is:

- In Priority need
- Intentional homelessness
- Has a Local connection

The group were advised that in Walsall during 2023/24, 771 applications were owed prevention or relief duty, with 8 applications being refused due to ineligibility, withdrawn application, or assessed as not homeless within 56 days.

In addition to this, the Housing and Welfare team receive requests for support and advice for non-duty cases. This has seen an increase of 26% in the last year, with over 1500 new requests received in 23/24.

Key challenges faced by those requiring Housing from the Housing officer's perspective are that:

- The demand on the register exceeds the number of properties received. On average, the authority receives 13 properties, with over 140 applications being received each week. The waiting list is increasing, and wait times will increase.
- 3- or 4-bedroom properties, ground floor or adapted properties, are in extremely short supply, with wait times for households needing these accommodation types longer

Colleagues at the local authority have expressed a need to manage expectations as a challenge for families going through the process.

“We want to be inclusive, but we have eligibility criteria” – Submitted electronically at Walsall Homeless Prevention Conference 2024

It's clear from the national and local data alone that there are huge challenges within Housing, and this is not exclusive to Walsall, as we are in what some would say is a national housing crisis. However, the experience for citizens navigating, accessing, and hoping for a favourable decision when making a homeless application is a stressful and difficult process. Key challenges are faced across the system, with housing barriers around :

- Feeling judged
- Having had a negative experience before
- Unlikely to get temporary accommodation because you don't meet the very specific thresholds
- The cost of private rented accommodation is higher than the affordability for people who need it.
- Fear of the reality of being moved out of the area, away from work, school, and support systems

These were all experiences shared with us during the Call for Evidence period.

Homelessness, Housing and Housing Design

“There is an assumption that you have done something wrong to even be homeless. There is a burden to prove you’re not at fault because there just isn’t enough Housing for people to actually have a choice” - Call for evidence respondent

When looking at who is likely to become homeless, certain groups are deemed more vulnerable. Having the burden to prove vulnerability or “being more vulnerable than the next vulnerable person” to get assistance was something that was identified during conversations with people who have undertaken the application process. The Shelter has published guidance on this online (15)

The group was advised that in Walsall, a vulnerability assessment would be undertaken with an applicant, and the group was provided a vulnerability assessment form from housing colleagues that is used to determine vulnerability.

The assessment has questions like:

- What do you do on a typical day?
- If you previously had a drug/alcohol problem but are in recovery now, please give details
- What would you do if the council were unable to offer you housing today?
- What would you do to try to keep yourself as warm and dry as possible if you were sleeping on the streets?
- Do you socialise regularly?
- Do you drink alcohol? (What do you drink?)
- Did you leave your last address due to violence or a threat of it? Have there been multiple instances of violence? Is the situation escalating?

It’s clear that this is an intrusive, challenging process. However, for the authority to be able to identify an individual as vulnerable, they need to decide if the person would suffer or be at risk of suffering harm or detriment that an ordinary person would not suffer. The harm or detriment would have to make a noticeable difference to the person’s ability to deal with being homeless.

Some groups inevitably seem more susceptible to having challenges accessing housing including those who are newly arrived, people with unsettled immigration status, people with multiple disadvantages, people who struggle with English as a first language, rough sleepers or those who are transient and deemed chaotic, people with disabilities who need to move out of accommodation due to disability or health needs, young people who are excluded from family homes, care leavers, people with substance or alcohol issues, offenders subject to bail/probation conditions, people experiencing domestic abuse, people leaving prison.

However, universally, these additional vulnerabilities or the impact they can create aren’t factored into the process, which is a nationally replicated system. In this system, we need to turn Social Justice completely on its head and recognise that Housing is in fact not accessible to all, it’s not a fair and equitable system, and it is more likely only navigated successfully by the few. The experiences of people trying to and sometimes failing to get through this system are extremely challenging. Families can be dispersed, they can be left without cooking facilities, or not be located near schools or support networks. The challenges do not stop there. Once in temporary accommodation, the upheaval can continue.

“Nobody can understand as a parent how it feels to tell their child they are moving that morning, that they have to leave their friends, school, and everyone they know behind to go and live in a strange place, which is also temporary. Not knowing if the same will happen tomorrow, and again the day after that. I felt lucky in the first hotel. Yes, it was in Birmingham, but it had a children’s playroom and allowed the children to make connections. It was then sad when they had to leave without time to say goodbye.”

Case Studies

Missy's Story

Missy is a single mother of a 10-year-old child who has asthma. Missy was a survivor of domestic abuse, but through fear and shame, she didn't tell anyone. Missy fled her property to leave this relationship and left Walsall to live with family in Staffordshire. Due to school and work being in Walsall, Missy secured private rented accommodation where she moved in. Instantly, Missy realised there were damp and mould and repair issues in the property, and the private landlord was reluctant to do anything about them. The heating often didn't work, there was ongoing court action about custody of the 10-year-old. Missy asked Housing Standards at the local authority to intervene, and emergency heating was provided, which was considered a solution; however, Missy couldn't afford to fund the additional costs needed in electricity to keep the property warm.

Missy said her son was admitted to the local hospital due to a decline in asthma, and the rent was increased by the landlord twice until Missy felt she couldn't afford the rent any longer. She left the property and moved in with a friend. Upon approaching the local authority, Missy said she experienced numerous barriers. Missy was placed in temporary accommodation in Birmingham. She was then moved with no notice to another location in Walsall, meaning she had to pack up that morning and leave where she had stayed immediately. Missy was then in a more local temporary accommodation within Walsall until temporary accommodation owned by the authority became available. This was the third move.

Missy has since received an intentionally homeless decision because she "had willingly given up a tenancy that was reasonable for her to occupy". Missy feels it wasn't reasonable to expect her to stay in a property she couldn't afford, which made her child sick, and that it wasn't getting better despite her involving the right agencies. Missy is now in the process of appealing the intentionally homeless decision, and she has explained how intense and stressful this whole process has been. Missy feels that she has been "judged" and that things have been looked at things at face value, and that nobody can see the process from her perspective. Its all-tick boxes and criteria and Missy says "How can I get to work each day, get my son to school, keep everything upbeat, manage my son's health, save to move to a new property, keep on top of my mental health and do the right thing in this system that wants to keep adding barriers and putting me down for making bad decisions. I can't afford a private rented property right now, the rental market is crazy, and what alternative is there for me and my son."

There are however, within Walsall, amazing examples where support has been received and it's made a huge impact on someone's life. An example of this is Molly, who was able to move into the Young Person's temporary accommodation scheme. Molly shared her story with us and credits the fact that she was treated with dignity, that someone saw potential in her and looked past her circumstances to help her overcome barriers, as well as having somewhere stable to live, as being the reason she was able to move forward in her life.

Molly's Story – A Journey to Independence: My Path Through the Young Person Scheme

At the age of 17, I found myself standing in front of the Walsall Civic Centre, uncertain of what would come next. I had just started my apprenticeship, a step towards rebuilding my life after years of upheaval. I had finally found something that I hoped would give me a future, a chance to prove myself. But one day, my world crumbled.

During a phone call with my dad, I had been told I was no longer welcome to stay at his home. Again. My manager, who had overheard the conversation, pulled me into his office. As soon as I sat down, the tears flowed. This wasn't the first time my dad had asked me to leave, but this time, I couldn't just go back. There had been too many attempts to escape a toxic, abusive environment, but every time, my dad would deny everything, and I was left with no option but to return. This time was different.

My manager, seeing my distress, suggested I seek help at the Civic Centre. I explained that every time before, the system had failed me, as when I had presented as homeless, my dad would claim I was lying, due to my age, I would be sent back. But my manager insisted on coming with me. I don't know if I would have gone otherwise. The idea of facing another rejection, another round of disappointment, was terrifying. But his support made all the difference.

My relationship with my dad had always been complicated, marred by years of emotional and physical abuse. When I was 15, my mom forced me to leave after I confided in her about the inappropriate behaviour I was experiencing from her partner. She didn't believe me and sided with him, which left me with no choice but to move in with my dad. But after the abuse I had endured from him in the past, I knew I couldn't stay there for long. The environment was toxic, and I felt trapped, knowing I needed to get out as soon as possible.

When we arrived at the Civic Centre, my manager stressed how important it was for me to find stability, especially as I was just starting my apprenticeship. That stability came in the form of a room in a shared flat in Aldridge, through the Young Person Scheme. My point of contact for the scheme was a lifeline. They ensured I felt supported every step of the way. They provided me with a wardrobe and drawers for my room, simple things, but they made a world of difference. This temporary accommodation gave me the space I needed to focus on work, study, and prepare for the independent life I had always dreamed of.

Six months later, I was offered a one-bedroom flat of my own. The scheme continued to support me with essentials like white goods, a bed, and a sofa. They didn't just give me a roof over my head, they gave me a chance to succeed. Without the Young Person Scheme, I would have been stuck, struggling on an apprentice wage with no real way to get ahead or even consider renting privately. It was an opportunity I couldn't have dreamed of on my own.

Thanks to the support from the scheme, I have thrived. I have continued to progress in my career, gaining stability and experience. I now have a family of my own, something I never thought would be possible after everything I had been through. The Young Person Scheme didn't just help me find a place to live; it helped me find myself. It gave me a foundation to stand on, to build a life beyond the chaos of my past. The Young Person Scheme didn't just save me from homelessness, it saved me from a life of uncertainty. And for that, I'll be forever grateful.

Homelessness, Housing and Housing Design

“It’s intrusive being homeless. I have someone come to do a room check every week to see if I am keeping the property clean and tidy. In your own home, that would never happen; you would have a choice if you accepted visitors in your most private space.”

During the Call for Evidence period, the group we presented with understanding that housing is rugged to come by, that people were not equally able to access support and that during its research, the group heard about an initiative called Housing First which is an evidence-based approach to successfully supporting homeless people with high needs and histories of entrenched or repeat homelessness to live in their own homes. The overall philosophy of Housing First is to provide a stable, independent home and intensive personalised support and case management to homeless people with multiple and complex needs.

The Principles of Housing First are:

1. People have a right to a home
2. Flexible Support is provided for as long as it is needed
3. Housing and Support are separated
4. Individuals have choice and control
5. An Active Engagement approach is used
6. The service is based on people’s strengths, goals, and aspirations
7. The Harm Reduction approach is used

Within Walsall, 102 people have been accommodated by the scheme, which Councillor Adrian Andrew, Deputy Leader of Walsall Council, said: 16) We’re really proud of what has been achieved in Walsall to date in partnership with Green Square Accord and Walsall Housing Group.

The Housing First model doesn’t just change lives for the better — it’s my firm view that it has saved lives too. Our strong partnership is key to this success story.

Case Study Ryan (17)

“I’ve been part of the scheme for just over two years. I was on the streets before. I asked for some help and got that help from Housing First and they are one of the best going. I got in touch and got settled. I’m looking to get back into work. I passed my CSCS (Construction Skills Certificate Scheme) test last year. I’ve got certificates and training for painting and decorating.”

“Without a home, how can people go to work, study, feel happy and secure? “– Call for Evidence Participant

Having a home is a base on which people can find security, and it is essential for wellbeing, which is exactly what Molly and a number of others have shared with us during this Call for Evidence period. However, all too often, the experiences are marred by barriers and hurdles to overcome, and the experiences are not consistent, and there is clearly a disparity in the service access, navigation, and outcomes impacted because of being from certain demographics/backgrounds. The principles of Housing First are something that aligns itself with Social Justice theory, but in practice, it seems unlikely that this is something that unless you’re the most complex of the complex that can be offered to citizens in Walsall.

Recommendation

- Request and embed a Lived Experience review of the statutory customer experience of navigating and accessing homeless support from the local authority
- Critically analyse if the system is adding additional barriers, if colleagues are all aware of their own unconscious bias
- Embed Poverty Improved Care across Service Provisions in this space

Housing Design

During the session, the group also discussed how the design of properties and developments can impact Social Justice.

Design Injustice significantly reduces the quality of life by deepening economic disparities, restricting access to essential services, and reinforcing social exclusion. Poorly designed urban spaces contribute to overcrowded housing, limited green spaces, inadequate public transport, and environmental hazards, disproportionately affecting those who are poor. Urban planning shapes Housing conditions, food access, and economic mobility, yet too often, these decisions overlook the realities of poverty, fuelling stigma and widening privilege gaps.

To address these injustices, urban design must shift from exclusionary practices to inclusive, community-centred approaches. Tackling stigma requires recognising systemic barriers and designing with, rather than for, communities. Poverty-informed care in housing and public spaces ensures that design fosters a sense of belonging rather than exclusion. The concept of privilege walking, where some move through spaces effortlessly while others face constant obstacles, highlights the urgent need to rethink infrastructure to prioritise those who are less privileged by improving investment, accessibility and inclusion.



Embedding design justice principles — centring lived experiences, preserving dignity, and ensuring inclusive participation — can transform our built environments. By adopting equitable design practices and engaging communities in decision-making, we can create spaces that not only meet immediate needs but also restore dignity, strengthen social bonds, and expand economic opportunities. A just approach to design fosters resilience, accessibility, and long-term social equity, ensuring that places truly serve the people who live in them.

Design Justice Principles:

- Design with, not for: Involve marginalized communities directly in the design process to empower them and address their specific needs.
- Centered impacted voices: Prioritize the perspectives of those most affected by design outcomes to ensure equity and relevance.
- Prioritize impact over intention: Focus on the real-world effects of design decisions to avoid unintended harm to vulnerable communities.
- Consider broader implications: Acknowledge the social, economic, and environmental impacts of design choices to prevent reinforcing systemic inequalities.
- Honor community knowledge: Value and integrate local expertise to create culturally relevant and effective solutions.
- Share design tools: Make design knowledge accessible to empower communities to influence their environments.
- Strive for sustainable equity: Ensure design outcomes are both environmentally sustainable and socially just, benefiting all, especially the most vulnerable

Key Challenges identified by citizens of Walsall that impacted them while seeking support with Housing and homelessness issues were:

- Stigma
- Preserving their Dignity
- Services have barriers in place that impact service access
- Race for Life – The fact that access isn't equally accessible

Education, Employment & Skills

Next, as a group, we decided to take a deep dive into Education, Employment, and Skills within Walsall. We know that through research, Education and skills are fundamental drivers of social mobility, yet the current landscape in the UK reveals stark inequalities. Disadvantaged pupils are particularly affected, with lower qualifications significantly reducing their earning potential and increasing their likelihood of unemployment.

According to the Education of England Report 2020 (18), the Education Policy Institute reveals that Disadvantaged students are, on average, 18 months behind their peers when taking their GCSEs. Only 4.3% of students in alternative education settings pass their English and Maths GCSEs. (19) and reports from the Centre for Social Justice state that 58% of young adults in prison were permanently excluded from school, and 6 million adults lack qualifications at the GCSE level, limiting their employment prospects.

Moreover, the Centre for Social Justice in its Two Nations report (20) identified that economic inactivity has risen since the COVID-19 pandemic, with Universal Credit claims increasing by 106% since March 2020. This report reveals a widening gap between those who can get by and those stuck at the bottom, a gap that was further stretched by the impact of successive lockdowns. This trend underscores the connection between education, skills, and employment security.

Educational and Skill deficits are more pronounced in specific populations, with children from deprived areas facing significant disadvantages. A child from a low-income area is 27 times more likely to attend an 'inadequate' school compared to their wealthier peers, limiting their educational opportunities and prospects. (21)

The Centre for Social Justice in the Providing the Alternative report evidenced that just 1.1 percent of pupils who complete their GCSEs in alternative provision (AP) achieve five good GCSE passes; almost half of pupils in AP do not progress to a sustained destination; and 58 percent of young adults in prison were permanently excluded from school (22)

Education Policy Institute claim that Children with a high persistence of poverty (those on free school meals for over 80% of their time at school) have a learning gap of 22.7 months – twice that of children with a low persistence of poverty (those on free school meals for less than 20% of their time at school), who have a learning gap 11.3 month (23)

Ethnic minority and migrant communities also experience considerable barriers due to language difficulties, cultural differences, and a lack of tailored educational support, making it harder for them to access education and training. Women, particularly mothers, often struggle to pursue further education due to childcare responsibilities and limited financial support, restricting their ability to develop skills and secure stable employment.

Additionally, individuals with mental health challenges frequently experience disrupted education, which further impacts their ability to acquire essential skills and participate fully in the workforce.

Walsall Landscape

Walsall, like many parts of the UK, faces significant challenges in education and skills development. In the Walsall Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2022-25 Walsall fares particularly poorly in terms of Education, Skills & Training deprivation showing that nationally we have the 14th most deprived locality and in terms of employment this is 38th (24)

Many of the issues that challenge the citizens of the Borough that we have consulted during this consultation centre around the fact that they rely on Universal Credit, often due to a barrier in gaining education or development of employable skills, which highlights the real urgent need for accessible education and training pathways. Language barriers are regarded as presenting another key challenge, particularly for migrant communities, where limited English proficiency restricts access to both Education and Employment.

Additionally, low qualification levels and skill shortages further hinder economic mobility, preventing many from securing stable and well-paying jobs, which can contribute to financial difficulties and insecure job opportunities.

Education, Employment & Skills

Labour Supply

Employment and unemployment (Apr 2023-Mar 2024)				
	Walsall (Numbers)	Walsall (%)	West Midlands (%)	Great Britain (%)
All People				
Economically Active*	141,000	78.5	78.1	78.6
In Employment*	132,800	73.8	75.0	75.5
Employees*	108,700	60.3	66.5	66.1
Self-Employed*	24,100	13.5	8.4	9.2
Unemployed (Model-Based)§	7,700	5.5	3.9	3.9
Males				
Economically Active*	75,000	83.4	82.9	82.5
In Employment*	68,400	75.8	78.9	79.1
Employees*	53,600	59.3	67.0	67.1
Self-Employed*	14,800	16.5	11.6	11.7
Unemployed§	*	*	4.7	4.1
Females				
Economically Active*	66,000	73.7	73.3	74.6
In Employment*	64,400	71.9	71.1	71.9
Employees*	55,100	61.3	65.9	65.1
Self-Employed*	9,300	10.6	5.1	6.7
Unemployed§	*	*	3.0	3.6

Economic inactivity (Apr 2023-Mar 2024)				
	Walsall (Level)	Walsall (%)	West Midlands (%)	Great Britain (%)
All People				
Total	37,400	21.5	21.9	21.4
Student	11,200	29.9	27.2	26.6
Looking After Family/Home	7,000	21.2	21.4	19.1
Temporary Sick	1	1	1.1	1.9
Long-Term Sick	10,500	28.1	29.3	27.3
Discouraged	1	1	1	0.2
Retired	*	*	10.4	13.5
Other	1	1	10.4	11.3
Wants A Job	8,300	22.3	19.0	17.3
Does Not Want A Job	29,190	77.7	81.0	82.7

Workless Households (Jan-Dec 2022)			
	Walsall	West Midlands	Great Britain
Number Of Workless Households	14,900	266,700	2,858,400
Percentage Of Households That Are Workless	18.3	14.6	13.9
Number Of Children In Workless Households	*	126,000	1,270,500
Percentage Of Children Who Are In Households That Are Workless	*	11.8	10.3

Despite these obstacles, Walsall has taken proactive steps to address these disparities through innovative initiatives aimed at upskilling the workforce and enhancing employment prospects. Programmes such as Walsall Skills for Life and Walsall Works Programme have been instrumental in providing residents with essential training, qualifications, and career support, helping bridge the gap between education and sustainable employment.

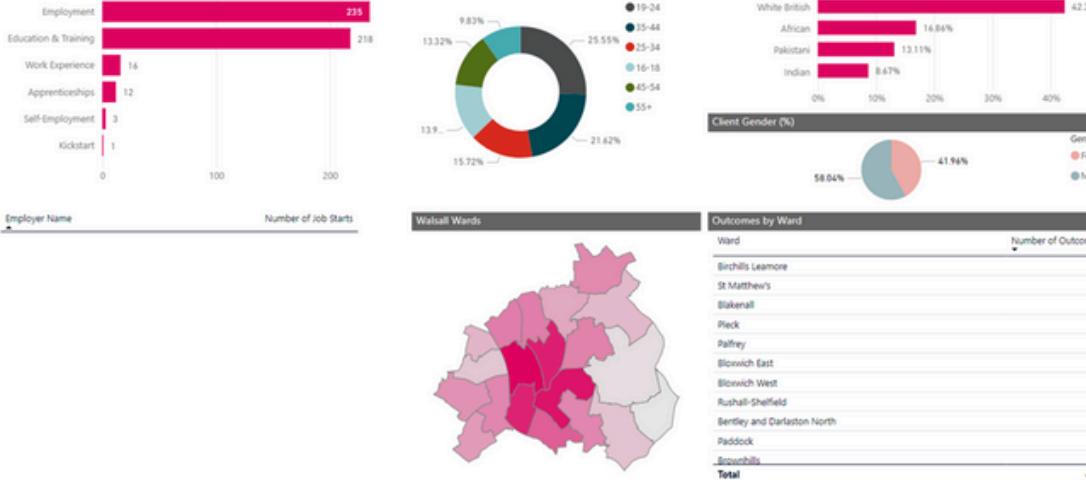
Data supplied to the Social Justice Champions from Walsall Works revealed that 16,927 participants were engaged in Walsall Works since its inception in 2012, with:

- 2,280 are going into training or education through the scheme.
- 153 people secured work experience. The number of people who went into volunteering could not be supplied
- 3,373 entered Employment
- 1,108 commenced Apprenticeships



Outcomes Report

Outcome Groups	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Total
Work Experience	32	14	24	17	24	6	2	6	10	18	153
Self-Employment	4		6	4	8	5	7	5	9	10	58
Kickstart							119	34	2	1	156
Employment	1	449	154	342	252	443	285	313	380	395	359 3373
Education & Training	668	41	268	62	161	190	163	179	230	318	2280
Apprenticeships	1	721	119	58	77	41	22	20	15	18	16 1108
Total	2	1874	328	698	412	677	508	624	619	664	722 7128



Walsall's Challenge

Unemployment

- Key neighbourhoods of focus are: Walsall Central, Caldmore, Palfrey, Pleck, Goscote, Ryecroft, Coalpool, Moxley, Darlaston West, Darlaston Central, Leamore, Birchills, Reedswood, Alumwell, Beechdale, Bentley, Mossley, Willenhall West
- 2,130 Youth Claimants are claiming a benefit, of which 30 are 16-17 years old and 890 are aged 18-21 years olds

Employment

- 9,780 Universal Credit Claimants are currently 'actively seeking work'
- 12,806 residents are 'in work' but in low paid income
- Average salary is lower in Walsall in comparison to the national figures
- Barriers highlighted include lack of motivation to seek work, inflexibility with hours, lack of employability skills and disengaged / reluctant to work

Skills

- Mis-match of skills
- Data shows approx. 16,900 (9%) of the adult population have no qualifications (regional average 8.3%).
- 27% hold a NVQ Level 4 (regional average 37%)
- Need 4,700 people to gain Level 1 to match national averages
- Biggest skills deficit is around poor digital skills, language, location, cost barriers

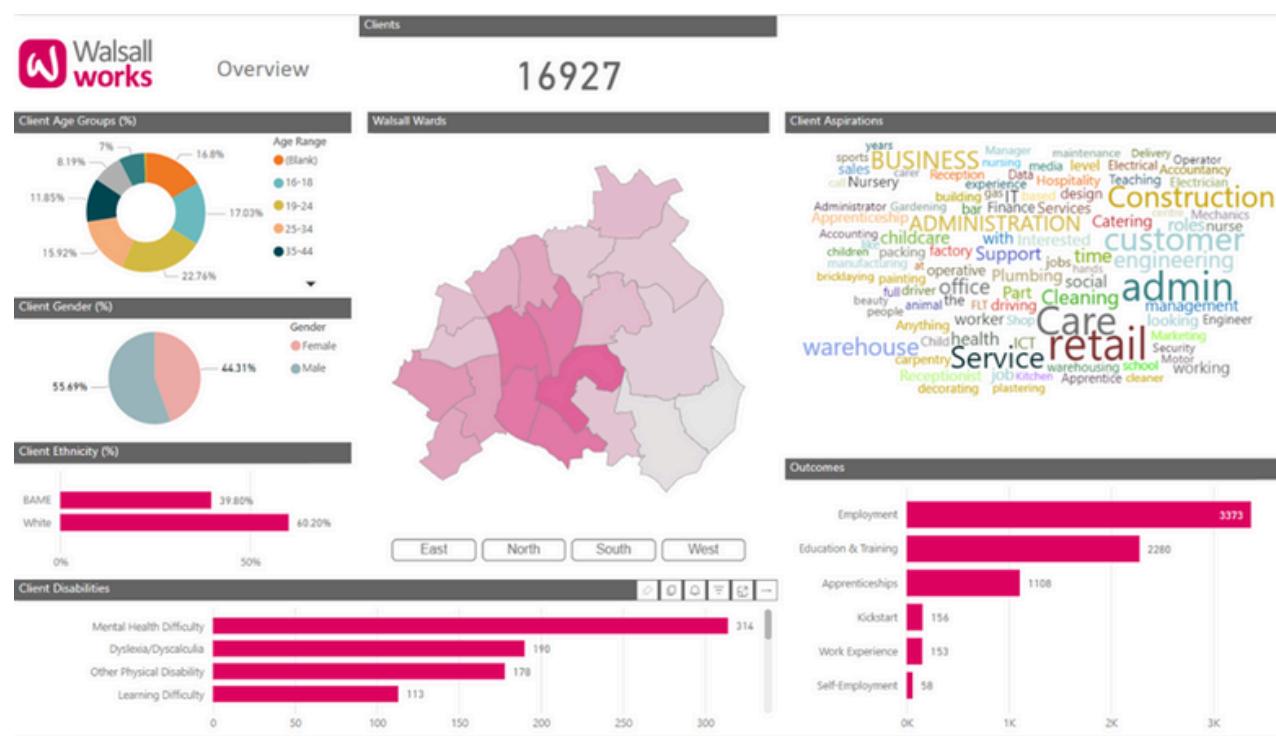


PROUD OF OUR PAST, OUR PRESENT AND FOR OUR FUTURE

Education, Employment & Skills

In terms of demographic data for those engaged in the programme

- 55.6% Male and 44.3% Female.
- Engagement by age is broken down as follows
 - a. Aged 16-18 - 2,453 clients
 - b. Aged 19-24 - 3,279 clients
 - c. Aged 25-34 - 2,294 clients
 - d. Aged 35-44 - 1,707 clients
 - e. Aged 45-54 - 1,180 clients
 - f. Aged 55+ - 1,008 clients
 - g. Prefer not to say or Other - 2,487 clients
- The ethnicity data supplied suggests
 - a. 60.20% White British
 - b. 44.31% BAME groups (no breakdown supplied)



Yet despite these interventions and services there continues to be huge gaps in attainment across the borough and disadvantage is significantly linked to this.

The Group requested to know if it's possible to access the postcodes of people engaged in the Walsall Works programme. We were advised that most participants reside in the wards centred around the town centre, i.e., St. Matthews, Birchills Leamore, Pleck, Palfrey, and those in the West, i.e., Darlaston North, South, and Central, which means that North of Walsall, where deprivation levels are significantly high, would not be overly represented. It also raises the question of whether engagement is linked to location solely because of the travel costs associated with engaging from further afield. Is this something that would be affordable?

We were advised that data around sexual identity was not available and that any Health issues/disabilities declared were captured in recent years, but do not reflect an accurate picture of the overall health-related issues participants may have experienced. We were advised that the capturing of disabilities and health data has improved significantly in the past year due to contractual requirements with funders.

The Group were advised that Walsall Works is linked with various funding streams and programmes, including:

- Commonwealth Games Legacy Fund
- UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF)
- Path 2 Apprenticeships
- Restart Scheme
- Social Value Initiatives
- Multiply Programme (focused on improving numeracy skills)

Because Social Justice Champions raised issues about the difficulties faced by those in our communities who did not have English as a first language, the Group also requested to deep dive into the Walsall Skills for Life Programme, which delivers several ESOL and Skills Building Courses. The programme integrates language learning with wellbeing support, confidence-building, and employment readiness.

Key programme Highlights include:

- Between May 2023 and March 2024, 406 learners signed up.
- A quarter of these learners transitioned into full-time, part-time, or self-employment.
- The last quarter (May-July) saw 274 learners complete their provision.
- The total figure of learners who have passed through the Walsall Skills for Life programme is now 3,180

A recent visit from the MHCLG and Belong Network Chief Executive recognised Walsall's Community-Based ESOL provisions as one of the most successful programmes in the country, which encompasses language learning with wellbeing support and confidence building.

We currently have three main providers offering unaccredited ESOL provisions, and they are located in Palfrey, Caldmore, Birchills, and Chuckery. The providers are;

- Aaina Community Hub: predominantly caters to Central and South Asian women from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan.
- Nash Dom CIC: predominantly caters to Central and Eastern European, including Ukrainians (both male and female).
- Sher Ali Imtiaz: men's classes only, predominantly from South Asia.
- Simple Steps Training CIC: has one of the most diverse provisions for women from Central and South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan), East Asia (China), West Africa (Ghana), East Africa (Ethiopia and Eritrea), Arab Countries including Iraq, Morocco, Algeria, Lebanon and Syria, Central and Eastern Europe

They were advised that additional new provisions were about to commence this month, with an expected 200+ learners signing up to start with the programme, adding additional provisions to specifically cater for newly arrived communities from West Africa and the Romanian community, based in Dudley Fields, who have recently been subjected to discrimination and hate crime.

Case Study from Simple Steps Training CIC

Request from Public Health to encourage South Asian women to attend their Breast Screening (mammogram) appointments. Simple Steps Training CIC delivered sessions on the importance of this and what the mammogram would entail. 19 ladies attended their mammogram independently without a translator. 2 women were diagnosed with breast cancer; however, they are on the road to recovery and are still attending the classes.

The group also heard from colleagues from whg, who, as part of the Stronger Communities Directorate, have an employment and training team that utilises the whg 5-step Model. The approach embedded within the cycle of change theory aims to support individuals in building capacity when they are pre-contemplative or not considering any behavioural change. The Model uses an evidence-based approach to build trust, develop aspirations, and sustain behaviour change, which in turn has been used to motivate and inspire individuals who may not have the confidence to attend a traditional employment and training programme. Additional support is available to obtain a driving theory test, first aid training, and digital skills development. Testimonials highlight the transformative impact of these initiatives, with many individuals gaining the confidence and qualifications needed for long-term employment.

whg Employment and Training Initiatives key highlights:

- 425 residents improved their employability skills.
- 52 secured jobs, including 24 within whg itself.
- 74 gained accredited qualifications

whg Work 4 Health Programme: linking residents to job opportunities within Walsall Manor Hospital:

- 198 residents improved their job prospects.
- 167 secured employments and are now working in healthcare

Qualitative Insights

During the consultation period, our Social Justice Champions reached out to our communities to explore the experiences of citizens in Walsall, and this engagement has led to us hearing shared, powerful personal experiences that highlight the challenges they face in Education and Employment.

When asked what the experience is like within Walsall, feedback suggests complicated, costly and outdated systems which produce unequal and ineffective experiences. The overall perspective of feedback received from those feeding back was that the citizens of Walsall are not seeing an equitable, poverty-aware system which is inclusive to all.

When it comes to Citizen experience of Education & Skills in Walsall, what is the word that comes into your mind?

21 responses



The Social Justice Champions were asked to provide feedback on the barriers faced by citizens, and while fear of the unknown, Lack of awareness, lack of self-belief, and not knowing what is available were highlighted, significant barriers were noted around childcare, digital inclusion, language barriers, anxiety, and mental health.

The impact of poverty was universally acknowledged as a barrier, such as not affording travel, equipment, or course-related costs, which would be a significant obstacle to people engaging in education or training activities.

For many migrant communities, language remains a significant barrier, making it difficult to access education, training, and job opportunities. Limited English proficiency often leads to exclusion from mainstream services, restricting social and economic mobility. Employment struggles are another common concern, with many residents expressing frustration over job insecurity and the lack of career progression despite being employed. Individuals on zero-hours contracts or in low-wage roles often find themselves in precarious work situations with limited opportunities for advancement.

Additionally, some residents feel that work does not always provide financial stability, as wages in insecure jobs often do not cover the rising cost of living. As a result, some believe that remaining on benefits offers greater security than low-paid work, further emphasising the need for sustainable employment solutions and targeted skill development initiatives in the local community.

Case Study 1: Anna – A journey from language barriers to professional success

Anna arrived in the UK in 2007 with limited English skills. Despite significant challenges — balancing work, childcare, and navigating an unsupportive relationship — she pursued education when opportunities arose. Over the years, she gained qualifications in:

- Youth Work (Levels 1 & 2)
- Functional Skills in English and Maths (Entry 3 to Level 2)
- Level 3 Diploma in Counselling
- Level 5 BTEC in Therapeutic Counselling

Anna's tenacity, perseverance and resilience showcase the importance of accessible lifelong learning opportunities, but also how significantly difficult it can be to get yourself on this ladder.

Case Study 2: Work 4 Health – Changing lives through employment

Parveen engaged with the Work 4 Health programme via whg, and she secured an NHS role after completing a tailored pre-employment training course: "This programme changed my life. It gave me the skills and confidence to get a job where I can support others."

Recommendations/Suggestions given to the Social Justice Champions in this space include.

- Expand ESOL provisions: More targeted language learning opportunities for new communities, including on-site childcare support for mothers.
- Embed and develop capacity building within employment and skills provisions to allow support and encouragement to develop aspirations and goals.
- Deliver across localised areas using data to identify where disadvantage is impacting employment and using a targeted approach to reach those who are underserved and left behind.
- Improve access to vocational training: More funded training and apprenticeships to help low-skilled workers transition into stable employment.
- Address employment insecurity: Advocate for stable contracts over zero-hours arrangements and ensure employment training aligns with local job market needs
- Support working parents: Implement subsidised childcare options to allow mothers to upskill and enter the workforce.
- Expand mentoring and support programmes: Partner with local employers to provide mentorship schemes for young people and adults looking to retrain.

Key Challenges identified while revisiting this theme overlapped with food, fuel, and homelessness. Citizens of Walsall believe that a significant amount of work needs to be done in these areas.

- Stigma
- Preserving Dignity
- Services have barriers in place when accessing the services
- Race for Life – The fact that access isn't equally accessible

Health and Well-being

“People from marginalised groups feel like they live looking at a brick wall with a dead end. People experiencing disadvantage feel completely trapped, like they can’t escape. That feels like they will be stuck in the situation, feeling there is no way out. They certainly don’t feel that anyone wants to listen to them. So, trying to engage with them means there is so much untrust.” Call for Evidence participant.

Well-being is something everyone experiences on a continuum. It determines everything we do; how we behave, think, feel, and act. Positive wellbeing does not mean you are always happy or unaffected by your experiences, but poor wellbeing can make it more difficult to cope with daily life. Whilst some people are aware of the measures they can take to improve their wellbeing, others are not, but the reality is that we can all take steps towards protecting or enhancing it. (25)

Health is not something that citizens of Walsall universally see as a priority. For some, it's as simple as being able to get a GP appointment when needed and their prescriptions. For others, it alludes to more subjective forms of wellbeing, where they experience life satisfaction, purpose, and control. Within the context of these community conversations, it is very much clear that what people expect is a very basic level of care, and their aspirations about health in general are very low. There are real examples of unequal access and service level barriers, often referred to as health inequalities, through engagement with the Social Justice Champions.

Health inequalities are defined as unfair and avoidable differences in health across the population, and between different groups within society. These include how long people are likely to live, the health conditions they may experience and the care that is available to them.

Sir Professor Marmot argues, “Health Inequalities and the Social determinants of health are not a footnote to the determinants of health. They are the main issue.” In his report, Fair Society Healthy Lives 2010 (26), Marmot states, “Health inequalities are largely preventable. Not only is there a strong Social Justice case for addressing health inequalities, but there is also a pressing economic case. It is estimated that the annual cost of health inequalities is between £36 billion and £40 billion through lost taxes, welfare payments, and costs to the NHS”

Marmot reflects that six key principles should be adopted to address health inequalities.

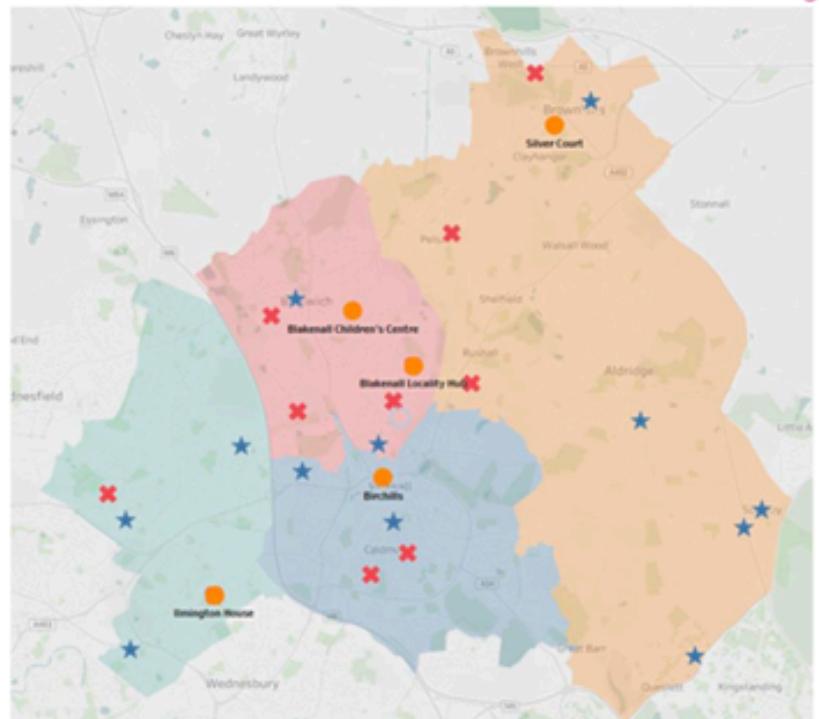


Marmot Principles

1. Give every child the best start in life
2. Enable all children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives
3. Create fair employment and good work for all
4. Ensure healthy standard of living for all
5. Create and develop healthy and sustainable places and communities
6. Strengthen the role and impact of ill health prevention
7. Tackle racism, discrimination and their outcomes
8. Pursue environmental sustainability and health equity together

With some cities across the UK being recognised as Marmot Cities. Walsall could look to these locations to view the impact of such commitment. Through key work undertaken by Walsall Family Hubs, giving every child the best start in life is very much the aim of this Programme (27), which, through research, has shown that the first 1,001 days of a child's life are crucial for their development and wellbeing and can have a significant impact on their future.

Geography of Hubs, Spokes and Walsall Connected Sites



- Hubs
- ✖ Spokes
- ★ Walsall Connected

The remaining Marmot Principles remain food for thought for strategic leads. They will need to consider whether we follow the advice of Sir Professor Marmot and embed these principles within key partnership areas.

Much of the work to explore health inequalities in Walsall is currently driven by Walsall Together, which is a partnership of health, social, housing, voluntary and community organisations. Walsall Together are working to improve physical and mental health outcomes, promote wellbeing and reduce inequalities across the Borough.

Walsall Together aims to work more closely with partners to tackle the widening gaps in health inequalities by focusing on not just health but the wider determinants of health, such as Housing, Education and Employment and the vital role that people and communities play in health and well-being.

Local voluntary organisations, charities, community groups and the people of Walsall will be at the centre of their planning and decision-making. Walsall Together are committed towards improving the health outcomes of our citizens, and it would be a recommendation of this work that Social Justice is embedded within the future of the Walsall Together programme.

Walsall is forward-thinking in addressing health inequalities, having developed the Walsall Wellbeing Outcome Framework (28). The Outcomes Framework was co-produced and serves as a tool to support strategic leads across Walsall, ensuring that wellbeing is at the heart of all decision-making. Walsall has its own agreed-upon definition of what constitutes well-being. The definition was agreed as part of the Walsall Wellbeing Outcomes Framework.

“Well-being is managing the quality of my life. It’s the things I do and have that make me happy and make my life better.”



Plasma of Hope

The Social Justice Champions heard from Marie Claire Kofi, founder of Plasma of Hope, a UK-registered charity supporting individuals living with Sickle Cell Disease or other related illnesses.



The Group heard how Sickle cell disease (SCD) primarily affects Black and minority ethnic communities. Yet, disparities in healthcare access and treatment persist, leading to poor health outcomes for many patients. Plasma of Hope works to advocate and raise awareness of Sickle Cell and Thalassemia.

Plasma of Hope - Health Inequalities in Sickle Cell Care – A Walsall Perspective

A 26-year-old Francine from Walsall, living with Sickle Cell Disease, frequently experiences severe pain crises that require emergency medical attention. Despite arriving at A&E in excruciating pain, she regularly faces delays in receiving pain relief, often waiting over four hours for treatment while other patients with less urgent conditions are prioritised.

The lack of understanding from healthcare professionals exacerbates the issue; her pain is frequently underestimated, and she has been questioned about whether she truly needs strong pain relief. Paramedics and emergency staff often lack specialist knowledge of SCD, leading to delayed interventions and ineffective treatment plans. Additionally, social care professionals struggle to recognise the wider impact of SCD, resulting in limited support for their ongoing health and social needs.

Key Issues Highlighted:

- Lack of awareness and understanding among health and social care professionals.
- Delays in emergency intervention, particularly in administering timely pain relief.
- Systemic racial bias in pain perception leads to inadequate treatment.
- Limited access to specialist care and long-term social support.

This case underscores the pressing need for enhanced education and training for healthcare and social care professionals, expedited pain relief protocols in emergency settings, and specialised support to enhance the quality of life for individuals with sickle cell disease. Addressing these disparities is critical in ensuring equitable and compassionate care.

We heard that often, patients with Sickle Cell need to go out of Walsall for treatment, and there is a need to establish more sickle cell-specific clinics in underserved areas like Walsall, allowing for more tailored and timely assessments by specialists. It was also suggested that Walsall should encourage hospitals to hire sickle cell patient advocates or coordinators who can assist in ensuring timely care and bridge communication gaps between patients and healthcare professionals.

Plasma of Hope is also advocating for a Sickle Cell Card/Passport: Implement a standardised "sickle cell passport" system, where patients carry a document detailing their condition and treatment history, allowing them to receive appropriate care more quickly. The Call for Evidence group heard how Sickle Cell patients are often Stereotyped: Some patients are unfairly labelled as "drug-seeking" when requesting pain relief, leading to delays in treatment and further complications from unmanaged pain.

Due to the nature of Sickle Cell and the Complexity of Managing Multiple Appointments, the condition may require frequent hospital visits, blood transfusions, and check-ups. Coordinating these appointments, especially for those with limited mobility or transportation, can complicate daily life but also be significantly costly.

Members heard testimonials about the difficulty of accessing benefits, navigating social services, applying for disability benefits, and fighting for recognition of their condition can be an additional burden for sickle cell patients, especially when assessors do not understand the episodic nature of the disease. Members were advised that the episodic nature of the disease makes it difficult to prove consistent disability, and this can result in people living with the condition not being able to access the required health or financial support.

Social Prescribing is a service available to citizens in Walsall and is fundamentally about recognising that health is impacted by social, economic and environmental factors too. It aims to look at the bigger picture and support people to take greater control of their health and address their needs in different ways. There are two key elements of social prescribing: The Link workers and the voluntary and community resources they refer individuals.

Currently, in Walsall, there are three main ways in which social prescribing link working is delivered. This is in the whg primary care and making connections at Walsall Council. There are two new approaches in development, in public health and as part of family hubs.

The schemes that social prescribing link workers refer to can involve a variety of activities which voluntary and community sector organisations typically provide. Examples include volunteering, arts activities, group learning, gardening, befriending, cookery, healthy eating advice and a range of sports. The group heard numerous customer stories and examples of how being supported to address the root cause of anxiety/depression and other health-related problems was life-changing.

The Call for Evidence group provided an overwhelming number of examples where services were available to support an individual, but for some reason, the citizen simply did not engage. Services often report difficulties engaging those hard-to-reach customers and the group heard about the whg community champion model which had been present in Walsall for over 20 years. Due to the nature of whg being a landlord which has almost 21'000 homes in Walsall there is a unique and often lifelong relationship with its customers.

whg Community Champion Model uses a 5-step engagement approach to support customers through the cycle of change. The model has been lifted and shifted to support people experiencing barriers to accessing health services in several areas including diabetes, loneliness and isolation, asthma and more recently to help with the uptake of breastfeeding initiation and sustainment in Walsall.

As The Model has developed, Community Champions would act as 'pied pipers', hand-holding and supporting people within their community to co-design services that would benefit them and others. A community champion can encourage sustained positive behaviour change. The approach is initiated in community locations where people go in their everyday lives, such as schools, GP clinics, supermarkets, etc.

The Model is embedded in community engagement, meaning it goes to customers, it doesn't expect customers to come to them.



Previous Community Champions are now Social Workers, Managers, Social Prescribers, Communications officers, Parent Support Workers and Housing Officers.

Design illustration © Julian Miranda 2024

Scan to find out more!

"You were that person that I needed to put me right. Now I go out and about and engage with the outside world" – Community Champion Customer

The community Champions work in a Psychologically Informed Way, continuing to engage, nudge, coach, and encourage, while also handholding to step one. Key to the model's success is the role of a trusted advocate in initiating a conversation. Using plain, simple, non-jargonistic language, Community Champions will engage in Clever Conversations, utilising coaching and motivational interviewing skills. The Model is designed to fit into the stage that the participant is currently at, and this is often before they are even aware of the potential and associated benefits of change (pre-contemplation).

Within the framework of the model, the Community Champions will encourage participants to share what matters to them and then use this as a platform to initiate the Stages of Change.

To the parent/carer, the Community Champion will present quite informally, but the Champion will be using an agreed script or framework to host the conversation within

Key Challenges identified while revisiting this theme overlapped with food and fuel, homelessness, education, Employment, and Skills. Citizens of Walsall feel that there is a considerable amount of work to be done in these areas:

- Stigma
- Preserving Dignity
- Services have barriers in place when accessing the services
- Race for Life – The fact that access isn't equally accessible

EDI (Equality, Diversity & Inclusion)

"I can't go to other organisations without booking an interpreter or taking someone with me due to language barriers." – Aaina Hub participant.

Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) have become central to addressing systemic inequalities in the UK. The concept of EDI in Social Justice is not just about representation but also about ensuring equitable access to opportunities, addressing disparities in socio-economic outcomes, and fostering an inclusive society.

The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities Report (2021) argues that while progress has been made, significant disparities persist in education, employment, health, and criminal justice. The report highlights the importance of moving beyond broad 'BAME' categorisations and addressing specific inequalities within different ethnic and socio-economic groups. (30)

The Centre for Social Justice Report further identifies key barriers to inclusion, including discriminatory employment practices, educational disadvantages, digital exclusion and structural inequalities in access to services. (31)

Moreover, research indicates that institutional discrimination continues to impact access to housing, healthcare, and economic mobility, particularly for ethnic minorities, disabled individuals, and women.

EDI-related inequalities do not affect all groups equally.

"Inclusion implies being allowed entry into existing spaces, while belonging encompasses a deeper sense of acceptance, affirmation and community. Belonging means feeling valued for who you are, not merely tolerated for your presence. It's about creating environments where every woman feels empowered to bring her fully authentic self to the table, without fear of judgement or discrimination" – Deirdre Labassiere, HACT Community Investment Conference, Birmingham 2024 (32)

Walsall, like many cities and towns across the UK, is becoming more diverse. The rapid pace of demographic change has presented challenges in ensuring that everyone feels a sense of belonging and shared purpose. These factors are why Walsall For All has recently launched its integration and cohesion strategy on March 24 (33). This strategy reveals

Walsall, like many cities and towns across the UK, is becoming more diverse. The rapid pace of demographic change has presented challenges in ensuring that everyone feels a sense of belonging and shared purpose. These factors are why Walsall For All have recently launched their integration and cohesion strategy on March 24 (33). This strategy reveals

The EDI landscape in Walsall is shaped by its evolving demographic diversity and socio-economic disparities, as highlighted in the Social Justice sessions.

Discussions emphasised both opportunities and barriers to achieving true Social Justice. Walsall has undergone significant demographic changes, with Census 2021 data showing that nearly one-third of its population is now non-White British. This shift brings cultural richness but also presents challenges in fostering community cohesion.

Walsall has a moderate level of diversity compared to UK standards, with a population that is not White British (non-WB) slightly higher than the averages for England & Wales. However, our population changes quickly, and the Borough is among the top 20 local authorities in the UK with the fastest changes.

Walsall's non-WB population is not distributed evenly, and the wards of St Matthew's, Paddock, Pleck, and Palfrey are much more diverse than others. Non-WB groups mostly live near or in Walsall town centre. Therefore, Walsall has a 'halo effect' – more diverse urban areas surrounded by whiter areas.

Our diversity encompasses a wide range of cultures, with 146 languages spoken in our schools. The largest ethnic group in the Borough is White British, comprising approximately 67.4% of the population. The following are the largest groups of people from Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi backgrounds. The minority ethnic groups have grown significantly and now represent 32.6% (a third) of Walsall's population, compared to 23.1% (a quarter) ten years ago in 2011.

Some new emerging communities from Central and Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Central and West Africa have also settled in Walsall.

Our neighbourhoods are experiencing fast and diverse changes in their makeup. This includes, but is not limited to, age, disability, ethnicity, and LGBTQ+. There is a wide variety of differences between the wards, from Pelsall with 95% White British people to Pleck with only 10% White British people. (34)

Walsall For All is eager to “build a future where Walsall is not just a place to live, but a place to belong and thrive.”

The intrinsic commonality between integration, cohesion, and belonging, and Social Justice is closely aligned with the Integration and Cohesion strategy, leading to the following actions.

- All members of our community feel engaged and empowered - both those who are part of majority communities, and who may have lived in Walsall all their lives, and members of minority communities, including people who have recently moved to our Borough.
- Newcomers feel welcome and supported as they integrate into the Borough.
- Different cultures and traditions are celebrated and cherished.
- Shared spaces and opportunities foster interaction and understanding among diverse groups.
- Individuals have access to services, resources, and opportunities that enable them to reach their full potential.
- A drive to bring people together through empathy and understanding of the individual’s life journey.
- Inequality is recognised, considered and reduced.

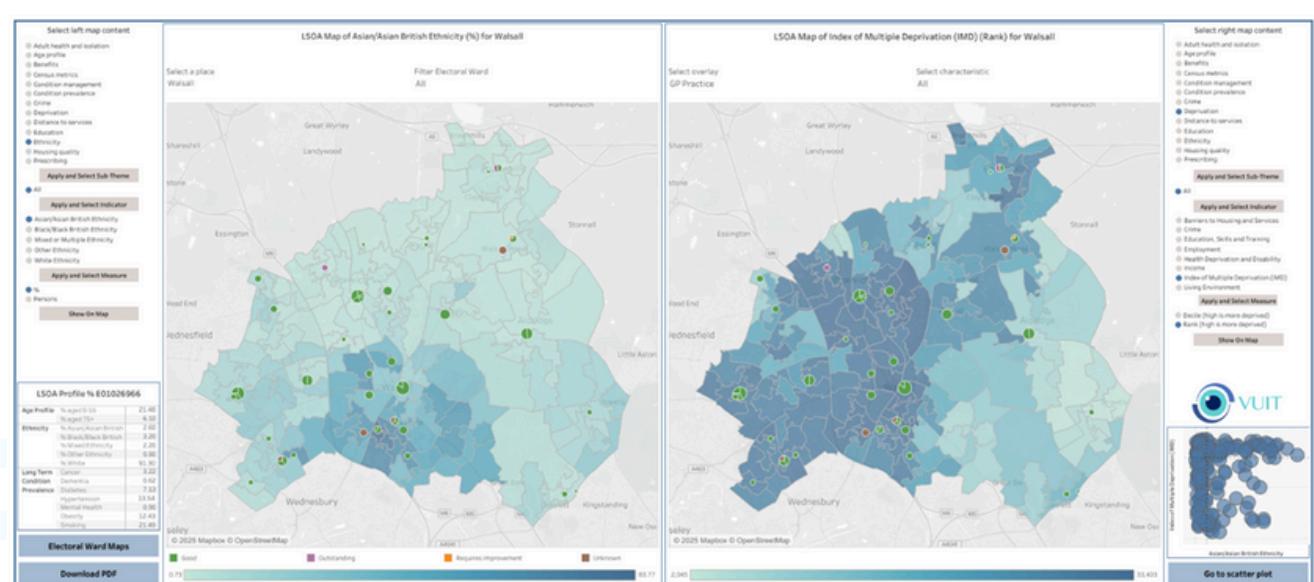
Engagement within our communities across Walsall for the Social Justice consultations, alongside the Integration and Cohesion Strategy, has revealed that certain community groups experience greater disadvantages across multiple aspects of life. This is confirmed by data that correlates deprivation with ethnicity in Walsall.

Members of the Social Justice group felt that through community engagement and research, it’s clear that ethnic minority communities face some of the most significant barriers, including higher rates of poverty, unemployment, and health disparities.

They are underrepresented in senior leadership roles across various sectors, limiting their ability to influence decision-making and policy. Additionally, ethnic minorities are disproportionately found in low-income jobs and the gig economy, where job security, benefits, and progression opportunities are often lacking.

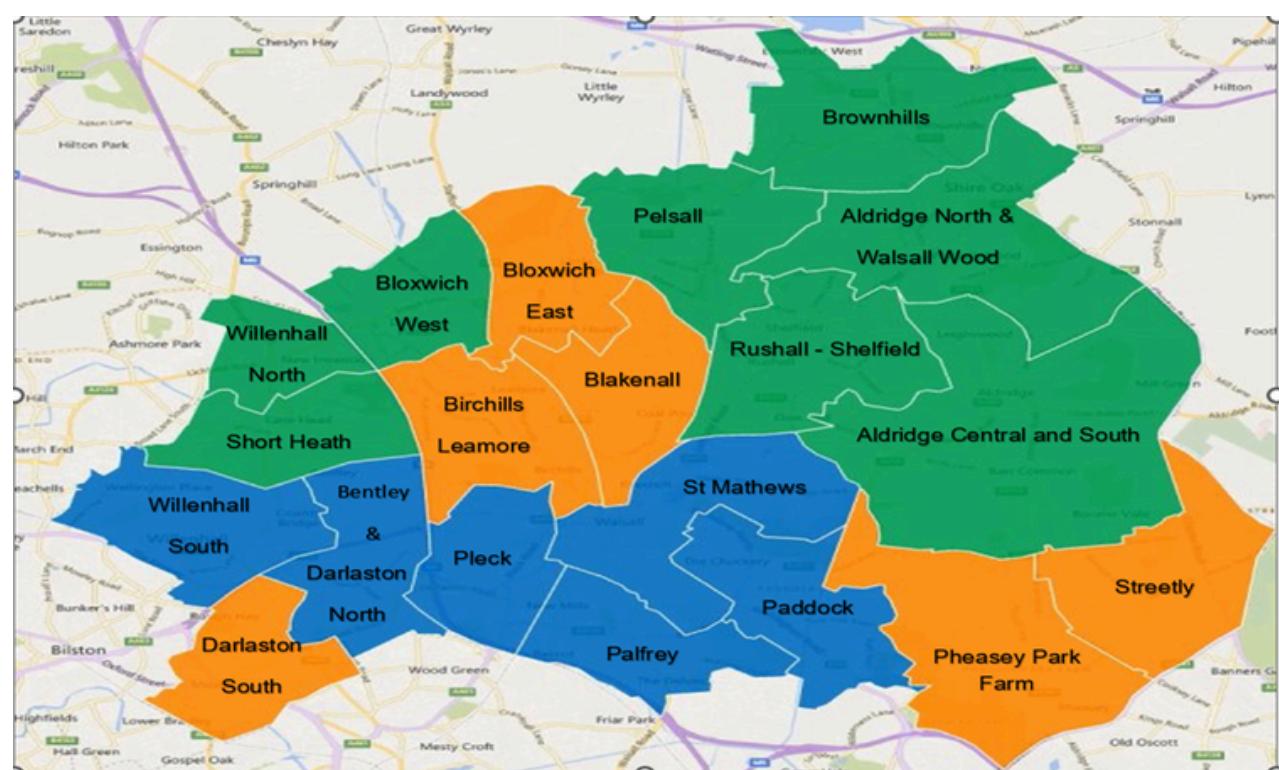
Data and experience of women in Walsall tell us that women and gender minorities also experience persistent inequalities, particularly in the workplace. The gender pay gap remains a significant issue, with women consistently earning less than men across most industries. These disparities are even more pronounced for women from ethnic minority backgrounds, who face both racial and gender-based discrimination that limits their career progression. Accessing leadership roles and political representation is particularly challenging, as systemic barriers continue to exclude many women from higher decision-making positions.

Disabled individuals encounter high levels of employment discrimination, making it difficult for them to secure and maintain stable jobs. Currently, only 52% of disabled people are in employment compared to 81% of non-disabled individuals, highlighting the structural challenges they face in the labour market. Beyond employment, disabled individuals struggle with limited access to public services, infrastructure, and digital inclusion, which further restricts their ability to participate fully in society.



LGBTQ+ communities also face significant disadvantages, particularly in areas such as employment, housing, and healthcare. Reports indicate widespread discrimination in workplaces, with many individuals experiencing bias, exclusion, or a lack of workplace protections. In housing, LGBTQ+ individuals are more likely to experience homelessness or struggle to secure stable accommodation. Additionally, there is a notable gap in tailored support services, with many policies failing to address the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly those who belong to other marginalised groups. These systemic barriers contribute to ongoing inequalities and reinforce the need for targeted policies and interventions to promote greater inclusivity and Social Justice.

The EDI landscape in Walsall is shaped by its evolving demographic diversity and socio-economic disparities, as highlighted in the Social Justice sessions. Discussions emphasised both opportunities and barriers to achieving true Social Justice.



The map above illustrates how our communities have evolved over time, and how some areas that were once predominantly White British are now becoming increasingly diverse.

Green - established provincial (low level of non-WB, low change)

Orange - newly diversifying (low level of non-WB, high change)

Blue - growing and changing (high level of non-WB, high change)

The group was also provided a thorough explanation of the EDGI (Ethnic Deprivation Group Index), which is a metric designed to quantify socioeconomic deprivation across various ethnic groups within a population. This index combines indicators such as income, employment, education, housing conditions, and health access, offering insights into disparities faced by different ethnic groups. Its relevance and practical application are particularly important in areas with significant ethnic diversity. By using the tool, there are clear examples from Walsall, contrasting the deprivation experiences of different ethnic groups, which highlight how EDGI can improve the effectiveness of policies and initiatives. A key takeaway from this presentation is the focus on addressing deprivation with a nuanced approach, rather than using broad, one-size-fits-all solutions.

Economic disparities remain a pressing issue, as ethnic minorities in Walsall experience higher unemployment rates, lower average incomes, and difficulties in accessing housing. Research indicates that these disparities are influenced by factors such as discrimination, limited access to resources, and systemic inequalities. Linguistic barriers further complicate integration, with over 50 different languages spoken in Walsall schools. Despite this diversity, language support services remain inadequate, making it difficult for many individuals to participate in education and employment fully.

Community cohesion challenges have also been noted across consultations, with reports highlighting a rise in hate crimes, social isolation, and economic exclusion among minority groups. Faith leaders and community representatives have stressed the need for stronger relationships between diverse communities and local institutions, advocating for inclusive policies and efforts to address cultural misunderstandings.

In response to these issues, the Cohesion Strategy 2025-2035 has been developed to tackle key themes such as the cost of living, gender inequality, cultural integration, mental health, and social isolation. The strategy emphasises the importance of targeted community support, policy interventions, and inclusive engagement to ensure that Walsall continues to grow as a diverse and inclusive town where all residents can thrive. Walsall Community Cohesion Strategy (2025-2035) focuses on economic inclusion, mental health support, and fostering community integration. A key element of the strategy is promoting gender equality and ensuring better representation of diverse voices in leadership roles.

Additionally, it advocates for faith literacy among public service providers, aiming to create a more inclusive and culturally aware approach to service delivery.

Walsall Data – Quantitative vs Qualitative

Quantitative Data

- Unemployment rates for ethnic minorities in Walsall are 25% higher than for White British residents.
- Over 60% of Black Caribbean households are single-parent households, increasing economic pressures.
- Reports of discrimination in public services have risen by 15% in the last year.

Qualitative Insights

- Faith perspectives on EDI highlight stereotyping and discrimination in public service provision.
- Women from ethnic minority backgrounds report higher barriers to employment and career progression.
- LGBTQ+ individuals face exclusion from key local services, particularly mental health and housing support.

Interventions, Programmes, and Solutions happening on a local level – Best Practice

Several initiatives in Walsall are actively promoting equality, diversity, and inclusion in Social Justice by addressing key issues such as economic disparities, cultural barriers, and community cohesion. The Aaina Community Hub plays a crucial role in supporting women and children from diverse ethnic backgrounds by offering ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes, employment assistance, and mental health services. By tackling cultural and linguistic barriers, the hub ensures better access to healthcare and education for marginalised groups, creating pathways for greater social and economic participation.

The group were able to hear how Aaina supports 150+ women per week and delivers several services, including:

- Educational Sessions: ESOL, IT, Independent Driving Theory
- Health & Wellbeing Sessions: Sewing, Cycling, Exercise, Health Clinic
- Advice & Support: Bills, Council Tax, Housing, CV, Job Search, School Admissions, Benefits, DV
- Weekend Session: 5-11 years old (approx. 30-35 children in attendance)
- Homework Club, Urdu Class, Baking, Craft, Free Play
- Girls Youth Club: 8-16 years old (approx. 25-30 girls)
- Cooking, Baking, Crafts, Outdoor Play
- Coaching and Mentoring: 16-21 years old
- CV, Cover Letters, University Applications, Volunteering, Advice & Support

The WeAreWalsall2040 Strategy is heavily linked to the EDI theme, and The Group gained an overview of the plan as we advance. It is evident that there is a significant crossover to the theme of Social Justice, with the WAW2040 strategy outlining the vision for the future of Walsall to ensure the development of the Borough and its residents.

- Social Inclusion - The strategy aims to improve social inclusion by focusing on finances, skills, and jobs. This will help create a more equitable and inclusive society in Walsall.
- Vision for the Future - 'WAW2040' outlines a vision for the future of Walsall, creating a more sustainable, prosperous, and inclusive community. The strategy is a long-term plan to improve the lives of people in Walsall.
- Economy and Housing - The strategy focuses on improving Walsall's economy and housing, creating more jobs and affordable housing for the citizens.
- Environment and Health - WAW2040 aims to create a cleaner and healthier environment for all citizens, with a focus on promoting physical activity and well-being
- Skills - The 'WAW2040' strategy aims to improve social inclusion by providing access to training and learning opportunities for residents, enabling them to develop new skills and improve their employability.
- Jobs - The 'WAW2040' strategy aims to improve social inclusion by creating more job opportunities for residents and ensuring that all jobs provide fair pay and good working conditions.
- Access to Education - Ensuring access to education is an essential aspect of social inclusion. It provides individuals with the opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills, thereby improving their chances of securing employment and making a meaningful contribution to society.
- Access to Healthcare - Access to healthcare is a fundamental right for all individuals. It ensures that everyone, regardless of their background, has access to medical care and can maintain their physical and mental health.
- Access to Housing - Access to housing is a fundamental human need. Individuals need to have a safe and secure place to live to fully participate in society and achieve their potential.
- Access to Employment - Access to employment is crucial for social inclusion. It provides individuals with the opportunity to earn a living, contribute to the economy, and feel a sense of purpose and fulfillment.
- Financial Exclusion - Financial exclusion is a significant barrier to social inclusion, making it challenging for individuals to participate in the economy, access essential services, and achieve financial stability.

Faith-based inclusion programmes have also been instrumental in fostering community cohesion. By engaging mosques, churches, and temples in outreach and educational initiatives, these programmes encourage interfaith dialogue and promote mutual understanding. They also focus on hate crime prevention, ensuring that faith communities feel safe, supported, and included in wider societal discussions. These initiatives collectively contribute to making Walsall a more inclusive and equitable place for all its residents. The Social Justice Call for evidence heard from faith representatives at places of welcome (Bilal Academy pictured below) and via direct engagement with faith groups.



Case Study 1: Aaina Community Hub – Empowering Women in Walsall

A single mother of three struggled to access employment due to language barriers. Through Aaina Hub, she attended ESOL classes, received career coaching, and accessed childcare support. She is now employed in a local business and actively supports other women in similar situations.

Recommendations/Suggestions

- Enhancing language support services is essential to improving access to education, employment, and public services for diverse communities in Walsall.
- Expanding multilingual resources in education and the workplace would allow individuals with limited English proficiency to navigate opportunities for career advancement better. Additionally, providing interpreters in key public services such as healthcare and legal aid would ensure that language barriers do not prevent individuals from receiving essential support and fair treatment.
- Addressing workplace discrimination remains a critical step in promoting equity and inclusion.
- Implementing targeted employment programmes for underrepresented groups would help bridge the employment gap and create more opportunities for diverse talent.
- Promoting leadership opportunities for women and ethnic minorities would ensure that decision-making spaces reflect the diversity of the community, fostering more inclusive policies and work environments.
- Strengthening anti-discrimination measures through awareness campaigns on hate crime prevention would help reduce incidents of racial, religious, and cultural discrimination.
- Public service providers should receive comprehensive training on unconscious bias to ensure fair treatment for all individuals, regardless of background. By equipping professionals with the knowledge and tools to address discrimination, institutions can build more inclusive environments that protect the rights and dignity of every individual.
- Improving digital and economic inclusion is vital in an increasingly technology-driven society.
- Expanding free digital literacy programmes for low-income and minority communities would empower individuals to access online resources, apply for jobs and engage with digital services.
- Supporting entrepreneurship among women and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds would help create new economic opportunities and reduce financial barriers to business development.
- Fostering interfaith and intersectional dialogue is crucial in promoting social cohesion and mutual understanding. Schools and workplaces should integrate faith and cultural literacy training to encourage greater respect for diverse backgrounds.
- Establishing community dialogue forums would provide safe spaces for open discussions on intergroup tensions, enabling individuals to share experiences and collaboratively work towards solutions. These initiatives would help create a more inclusive and harmonious society in Walsall.

Addiction, Crime & Offending

When asked what Walsall needed to prioritise or address for it to feel equitable and fairer.

Addressing crime and tackling community safety were responses that large numbers of citizens raised as pressing matters across Walsall. The Social Justice Champions and Walsall For All Community Advisors expressed that the significant concerns experienced by the community members in this area largely lay in the following themes:

- High crime rates, including knife crime, drug misuse, youth gang activity, and anti-social behaviour.
- Fear for personal safety, especially at night, due to limited police presence and inadequate enforcement.
- Rising concerns about public harassment, particularly for older and vulnerable residents (i.e., migrants).

Currently, the local authority has a community safety consultation live (at the time of writing this report, findings, and engagement in this official route will be important when determining if there is trust or belief that engaging in an official consultation via Walsall Council is something our community members will feel is worthwhile.

During our consultation period, there were concerns that Walsall was in decline, with safety at night being a particular concern within the town centre, making this an area that was simply off-limits.

We have seen Midland Langar launch the 'Catalyst for Change', an outreach project which is dedicated to creating a safe haven for young minds in Walsall Town Centre and beyond. Operating Monday to Friday, the mission is to combat knife crime, anti-social behaviour and bullying, ensuring a brighter future for our community's youth (35) and on Saturdays, a Walsall Street Pastor service is available which is made up of Christian volunteers from various churches and denominations across Walsall, who go out in teams into Walsall town centre on Saturday nights between the hours of 10 pm until approximately 4 am. (36) however perceptions and feelings across the communities we consulted with was that these interventions do not deflect from the need for street presence, interventions and there were questions raised as to the effectiveness of these services.

When viewing crime statistics by strategic leads, the community are often advised that the numbers are often not alarming or concerning in comparison to other localities of similar size and demographics; however, community members were clear that this doesn't highlight the complete picture of living with the ever-looming concerns around safety for yourself or your children.

Conversations in this space with citizens raised that youth culture wasn't something that authorities and statutory agencies had a good understanding of. Conventional and traditional engagement approaches didn't seem to be attractive to young people, and the pull towards alternative lifestyles or getting caught up in disturbances was something many parents feared for their children in Walsall.

Feedback from citizens in this space largely emphasised being proactive and preventative, as opposed to acting after a disturbance has taken place, utilising S60 police powers when an incident has already occurred. There were suggestions that lived experience, mentoring, distraction activities, and involvement in disciplined activities such as boxing, music, and art were areas that should be invested in, as well as youth services and centres.

There was little empathy for those actively caught in offending circles, and consultations revealed that community members thought that sentencing and outcomes for those who had been involved in criminality were something that needed to be tackled to raise the deterrent.

Conversations around addiction were often conflicting, with anti-social behaviour and needles being discarded in community locations, etc, which causes community issues around safety. Still, there was also some feedback that statutory drug services were stretched and not able to meet the needs of people needing support and assistance.

“Everyone around us was in the thick of it, we had nothing, so as tends to happen in places like that, alcohol and drugs took hold of most people, it's what kept them going”, Katriona O Sullivan, Author, Poor.



Jordan's Story

Jordan had been transient and lived in a number of places and talked through his experience of drug treatment services, safe houses, dry houses, and inpatient care. Jordan shared he received 9 months of CBT Therapy, attended mandatory groups, volunteered, engaged in mindfulness and holistic therapies, creative art, and exercise. By all accounts, he did all the right things. Jordan engaged with support, learned how to budget, follow rules, live alongside other people, and share a connection. Jordan says

"Getting therapeutic support challenged my beliefs that I was not a part of anything and that the 'System' was there to take from me."

Jordan explained that despite all this work, "it didn't work," and I returned to my hometown with the attitude of "just getting on with it". Jordan shared that drug use and escapism are so prevalent and deeply woven into his community that it made returning to what is familiar, hurrying back into "normal" life, too hard to resist.

Jordan poignantly said, "If you were to quantify & measure the success of these treatments through crunching the numbers and plotting the statistics - it would be very daunting, it would probably look like a failure.

Jordan said If that's your job and you care about change, it might subtly give you a knot in your stomach & send stress and fear hormones coursing through your body to see the cost of this and then my failure. See it enough and you might get a sense of hopelessness & think "what's the point in trying (for others)?" Although you can't understand the world without numbers, you also can't understand it through numbers alone.

Emotional & personal development, individual and societal healing are things that are difficult to track & measure, to score, quantify and crunch into a chart with an upward trend that pleases, sparks hope & satisfies a board room of investors and funders who are so detached from the problems rotting our cities and torturing our cities up & down the country - these things are difficult to track but absolutely essential to a healthy society. NOW, my experience with & barriers I've faced with services in England. Overstretched and underfunded at every level as far as I can tell.

As someone who has been afforded all the support of a loving family & still had to learn to ask for help - making a decision to seek out and engage with local services was a hugely profound moment. It felt like a weakness. All the stuff I'd been carrying with me, slowly restricting my ability to engage and function in the world - I'm finally ready to talk about it, to ask for help. I call Mind, I call CGL & ... nothing. I call again, self-referral forms and... nothing. Overstretched and underfunded.

I had to take my deepest moment of vulnerability & courage and almost force the services around me to listen. You could argue that my issues were not complex or, complex enough yet, alarming enough to take priority over the countless people already waiting & I might even agree but I'm sure you would also agree that for any human brave enough to bring their mess & trauma to the table, hold their hands up with this and say "Help, I'm ready to start dealing with this. To get better, to be better." - for that person to be met with silence or indifference in a world leading country is truly a modern tragedy. Doomed to wander in a society that exploits and reinforces trauma.

After receiving few and far between support from services - 6-week course at CGL, very robotic and impersonal, my recovery was doing the okie cookie - as many do - and I was made aware of a recovery service in Acocks Green. I had to stop working to be eligible for admission, which was an easy trade off, I was received welcomely and quickly into what felt like an oasis in the desert. 12 weeks of rehabilitation groups, a community of people who understand addiction and trauma - I believe this is where my recovery truly started yet I didn't stay clean. Through these periods of non-abstinence - again, a hard to quantify, non-linear journey of healing - I was supported by the organisation I lived in, organisations they worked alongside and the organisations they signposted me to.

It is this care in the community that has given me the space to develop & recover. The barriers for these services I believe are societal, rooted in trauma and lack of care for the individual. Overstretched and underfunded. Maybe if we gave the same billboard space to Lindale and Foundation2Change as we do to fashion brands, telecommunication companies, alcohol brands and the sugar industry, we would start to see a real impactful difference in the value our society places on itself as people instead of the accumulation of things.

So, in short, my experience with the services has been a mostly positive one. They have saved my life, are teaching me how to deal with life and give me the space, guidance & freedom to be here today solid in my recovery - but they need more space to give, more funds to give more time and more guidance to the growing number of people with more challenges and needs to face up to than I have. More recognition, more visibility in our society so we can inspire more hope. I've witnessed far more people not receive adequate help and care - in the aforementioned services and beyond - than those who receive it.

I want to live in a society that provides more help and care to its inhabitants than not. Do you?

Entrenched Poverty

“People like me don’t just feel like they can access the spaces you need to in order to be heard. If you’re not heard, then you’re not included.” Call for Evidence Participant

The Young Foundation have defined ‘entrenched deprivation’ as persistent and profound poverty and disadvantage that has proven resistant to change and improvements in quality of life for residents (37) within Walsall. There are concerns that in certain small estates, there are pockets of perpetuating poverty that are entrenched and often multi-generational. It is very possible that in very small areas of social housing, official measures of deprivation, such as super output area statistics, often disguise the real extent of deprivation as understood by local people and local agencies because data is skewed by the presence of more affluent households. This can result in resources being spent elsewhere and smaller areas being overlooked.

During our Call for Evidence consultations there are a number of tensions across Blakenhall, Bloxwich and Mossley areas heavily located in the North of Walsall. Communities located in the North of Walsall have been labelled “Britain’s roughest estate” (38). Communities located in the areas labelled “problem areas” are said to be “fearing for their lives” (39) because crime has become so common place. The result of the labelling of such areas means that residents in these areas see an us and them mentality.

During the course of our consultation, we considered the implications of labelling communities and groups and the importance of understanding the cultures in our places across Walsall, and were able to reach into the Mossley location to intrinsically understand what life is like within this community.

The reality of life in Mossley by Emma Parkin

I am a community housing officer for whg, and I work in a place-based way. My community consists of houses and flats within the WS3 (Mossley) postcode. I have been responsible for this community for the last 7 years, and the majority of the first two years was spent trying to gain trust.

The Mossley estate doesn’t have a very good reputation, but I would say people who live on the estate feel the opposite.

The challenges of the area are well documented. If you search policing priorities for this area, you will see that they are regarding ASB related to young people and tackling drug dealing in the area. Mossley is located in Bloxwich West. In every statistical analysis compiled of the area, you will hear that unemployment is high, deprivation is high, Educational attainment is low, and that the area itself is a hotspot for gangs and crime.

What I would say as someone working intensively with this community is that it’s just a really tight-knit, closed community. They are a very proud community. They come together to help and support one another, looking out for each other. Sometimes, of course, this inevitably means they will turn a blind eye to things or assist in potentially criminal activity to help one another out. It’s a community where everyone knows everyone. You don’t tend to move out of the area, and so everyone is pretty much related or interconnected. There is a real sense of being able to help one another out by sharing their skills. It’s not uncommon for people to cut the gardens of their neighbours for a fiver, of course.

Money is something that there is a real glaring need for on the estate. Unemployment rates are high; its multi-generational and passed-down attitudes do not favour investment in education, and people prefer other activities.

The people of Mossley are incredibly resourceful, and a genuine circular economy exists on the estate. People often do small jobs for each other to earn a little money, which is frequently spent at the local chippy, shop, or with the local dealer. The money just seems to go around that estate.

I would say that the health of people on the estate isn’t something that is prioritised, and it’s not always great. There is a considerable drug problem in the area. Cannabis, Heroin, and Crack are the ones you hear of more. I would say statutory agencies often don’t get a good reception on the estate. I would say that more challenging behaviour often goes under the radar. The people of Mossley are entrepreneurial. The skills alone to manage some of the drug activity demonstrate amazing people skills, including the ability to provide good customer service, meet deadlines, and have a strong work ethic. However, the focus is not on the right type of outcomes. There is a hierarchy on the estate, and everyone knows who is at the top of the food chain. They are loyal to each other without fault. As someone whose job it is to help people sustain a tenancy, you can imagine that there is just a lot that people don’t share or disclose. It’s not uncommon for the dispersed youths to be hanging out in the communal area within the blocks of flats.

There is one customer whom I feel that so many services just never really took the time to understand. Customers had a one-bedroom flat, and her mother lived in it with her. The customer had mental health issues, and professionals never saw her at home. The mum would always take her to appointments, and my customer was often asleep when I called around. I started to suspect that she was being overmedicated and financially controlled.

There were hoarding behaviours in the property, and in the end, we had to get my customer into respite because she had ulcerated legs, etc, and to allow us to sort out the flat. It was here that we would see a complete change in my customer, who became more alert, and it was clear that foul play was involved. There was such a battle between services and the mother, but it was clear my customer was far more capable than we initially believed. The story for my customer is positive because she loved being in respite so much that she didn’t want to return home. My customer now lives alone after her mum passed away, but this case shows how hard it is for services to infiltrate the estate.

There is a system in place where “watchers,” often younger teens, keep an eye on anyone entering the estate. If someone appears official, they report back to others, and this information then alerts and spreads around the neighbourhood like wildfire. If police are looking for someone, it’s not uncommon for neighbours to open their back doors and allow the youngsters to pass through to avoid detection. There is an unwritten rule that you would help others in the community, and this is one example.

The youngsters on the estate tend to drive up and down on electric scooters, motorbikes and stolen cars. There is no off-road parking, so cars line the street, and there have been times when I have been circled by youngsters when I have visited. This behaviour can be intimidating, but you can’t show that; otherwise, it will continue or escalate. You have to be pretty streetwise to work here every day. There are areas where the youths hang out on the street. I have reported these concerns to the authorities, who have been reluctant to accept that there is organised crime in the area. I would say that the people of Mossley involved in criminal activity are intelligent. They stay under the radar. They don’t want to attract people to the area. They don’t commit crimes on their doorstep. The rules are very much that you look after your own. There is an affinity between them, like a brotherhood. You can see people becoming increasingly established in this. There was a recent spate of windows being smashed. We couldn’t get to the bottom of this, but after speaking to someone I thought had a connection to the local gang, I mentioned that this has no impact on the occupant, as they report to us. We just reglazed, so it’s a pointless exercise. I would appreciate it if they would stop smashing windows.

Overall, I have found the majority of people on the estate to be warm, kind and I love working there. You must be resilient; you have to know your boundaries, and you have to keep your ear to the ground. I don’t like going out in pairs because it reveals vulnerability. I very rarely conduct joined-up visits because the relationships I have with people have taken years to establish, and one person coming along can completely undermine that. There are lots of entrenched attitudes on this estate. It’s largely a very white, very disadvantaged location, and it doesn’t accept people from outside very easily. Lettings have to be managed super sensitively because, in all likelihood, unless you’re from the area, you would find it hard to settle in the area. The people are genuine and very proud of their roots.

What we learned from Mossley

During our consultations with people from within these marginalized and closed off communities we have established that local perceptions about the reputation and identity of the estates show interesting variations and reflect wider issues of pride, belonging and self-esteem in the neighbourhoods. How people view their community depends on their connections and affiliation to the area but in the main the people we spoke to love living where they live.

Residents of these communities did however tell us they do not want to be labelled disadvantaged or poor. Despite its poor reputation to other communities, there is a very strong sense of pride amongst the community. The sense of belonging is intrinsically important to this community.

We know that building aspirations and supporting communities and individuals to shake off labels is a way to change the fabric of that’s the norm within any given community but the way in which any intervention will impact on poverty will depend on the point in time at which it occurs in relation to household experiences of poverty.

Some interventions or programmes will have short-term almost instant impacts on poverty by raising household income or reducing expenditure, for example, facilitating access to employment or reducing household fuel bills. Alternatively, some interventions may not relieve poverty in the immediate term but enhance the prospects of individuals exiting poverty in the future. Volunteering opportunities in the community, for example, might provide skills and experience that increase the likelihood of finding paid work at a later point in time. Finally, some community-led activities can serve to prevent poverty where the intervention takes place before households would otherwise experience material difficulties.

People from deprived communities however are unlikely to make the natural steps to change without real community investment where relationships of trust can be forged and someone shows belief and encouragement that this is an individual or community issue.

Table 1: Potential impacts on poverty utilising community-led activities as identified by Walsall Citizens

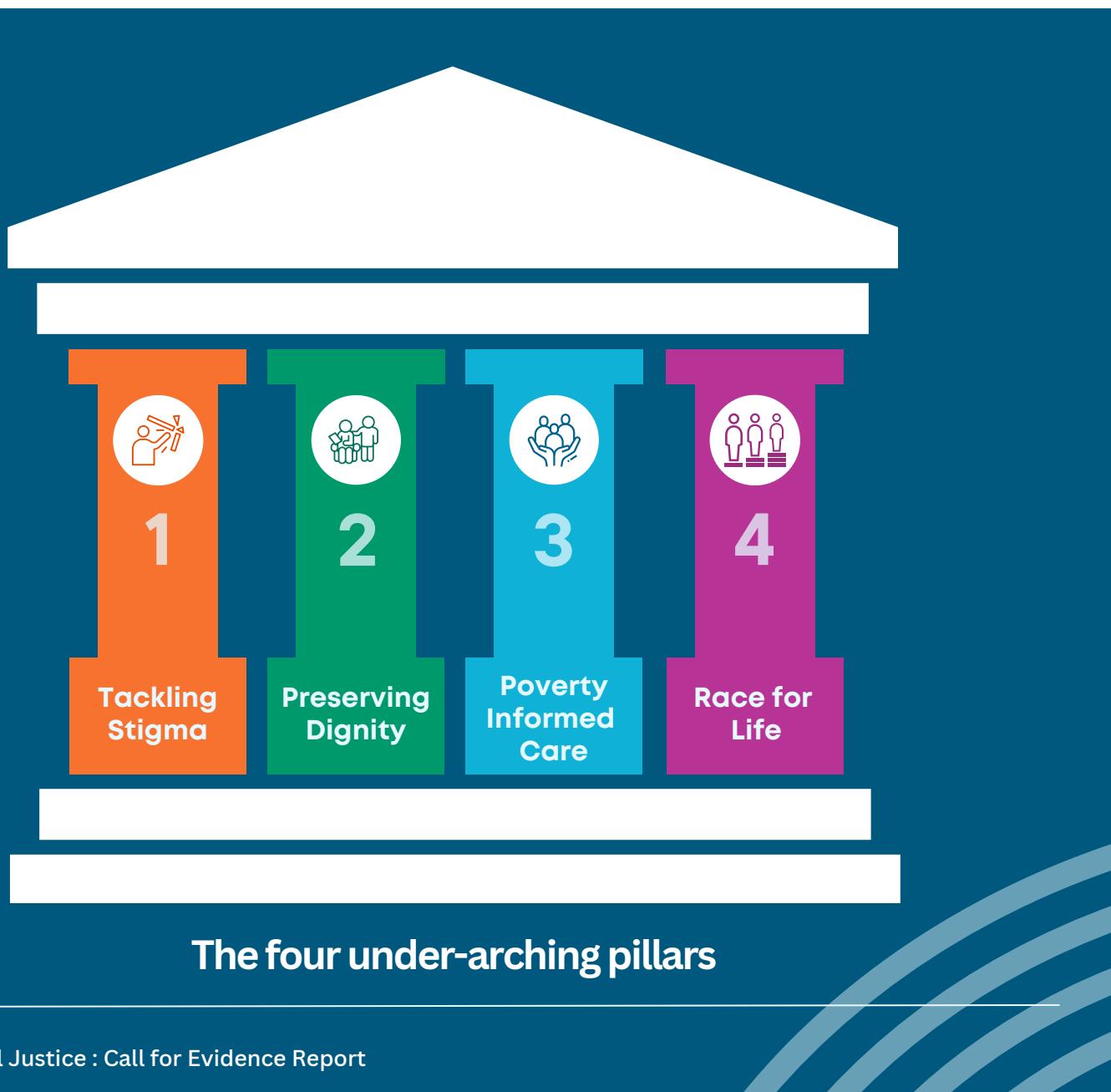
Activities may impact on 'material' poverty where they generate outcomes around:	Activities may impact on 'non-material' poverty where they generate outcomes around:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased Job Availability Employment Support including Capacity Building Tackling Worklessness or lack of aspirations/skills Increase Enterprise and Entrepreneurialism in the Borough Strengthening Local Economic Growth Reducing or Subsidising Living Costs (i.e. food, fuel or housing) Campaigning and Supporting Income Maximisation for Walsall Citizens Poverty Proofing across Walsall Services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tackling inequity in Education Supporting the Borough to identify what makes it healthy and how this can be wider than primary care Housing (increasing Availability, Quality or Security) Increased Community Safety and tackling community norms Improving the Physical Environment of Walsall Foster Social Interaction and Connection Community Cohesion/Belonging Community Empowerment and Choice

Findings and Recommendations

The Pillars of Social Justice

However, interesting community insights into the thematic area were, and despite the subject theme, which impacted poverty, there were four commonalities in every thematic area that emerged as principles that the group repeatedly came back to.

The group has called these the Under-Arching Pillars of Social Justice. If you envisage Social Justice as a house, then these four concepts are the supporting beams that hold the house up.



“The powerful narrative that poverty is caused by personal flaws or ‘bad life decisions’ rather than policy choices or economic inequality has become ‘deeply embedded in the public consciousness with serious ramifications for how financially vulnerable people are seen, spoken about and treated.”

Within the final Social Justice champion session, we delved into detail about the concept of our identified Pillars of Social Justice, which were derived from our engagement within communities.

Regardless of the organisation, locality, community member or individual we spoke to regarding the issue of living in poverty these under arching pillars were recurrently viewed as improvements for our wider partnerships, systems and services to embed within our approaches to reduce the difficulties and inequalities felt across Walsall and to ensure that services made conscious steps to introduce targeted reach to support those in the community who were the ones most in need. We heard time and time again how even if someone asked for help, the experience of support was often anything but pleasant, and that there was an overriding wish that this would change.

People think services treat them like they are a puppet show, dangling things in front of them, but really, things are often out of reach. Some services can be greedy and exploitative. There are enough resources on the planet for everyone, but some people seem to take more and more. Others are conditioned to accept less and less. Those who need the help often do not approach to feel heard or seen.”
Call for evidence participant.

Tackling Stigma



Stigma, by definition, is a set of negative and unfair beliefs that a society or group of people have about something — a mark of shame or discredit. Stigma is felt, it is carried, and it is reaffirmed. Joseph Rowntree Foundation states Ending stigma won't end poverty, but stigma holds together the structures that sustain poverty and, at its worst, incite violence. We circled the idea that power can be reclaimed in 'making the invisible, visible' (40)

Stigma was initially described by Erving Goffman in 1963. Goffman identified stigma as any characteristic or attribute by which a person was devalued, tainted or considered shameful or discredited. (41) The International Journal of Mental Health Systems states, most authors agree with Goffman's basic definition, which identified the main elements of stigma such as labelling, stereotyping, social isolation, prejudice, rejection, ignorance, status loss, low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, marginalisation, and discrimination

"Stigma entrenches people in poverty in ways that are underestimated and poorly understood. It is dangerous and, at its worst, can kill." Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Stigma is a powerful glue that holds poverty in place, enabling and exacerbating inequalities of wealth, health and opportunity. Loosening the grip of stigma is a crucial lever for broader progressive social change. (42)

Within Walsall, we are seeing an outpouring of concern regarding specific communities and individuals, as they have been labelled as the "problem". We have heard consistently throughout our consultations that how the issue of poverty is framed is intrinsic to people coming forward and seeking support. We also have a moral responsibility to ensure that our terms of reference and the way we see people experiencing hardship are seen as a societal issue. The first step to resisting stigma that comes from any given situation is to know it's not your fault, you didn't ask for this, and you didn't create it. Although the situation is caused by things far beyond you, people must know that they are not alone and that it can be overcome.

Publications and Information shared with our communities, like the one published by Walsall Council on 19th Dec 2024, stating

Investigations have revealed that 84% of those seen regularly begging on Walsall streets in recent months do have accommodation and are not homeless (43)

The impact and potential to cause disturbance and division for those who live in these communities based on stigma is significant. We were advised that trust in certain services is exceptionally low within our more deprived areas.

Some citizens advised us that they see certain buildings as "social services buildings which you don't want to be seen coming out of," and that people feel that these organisations have a different understanding of what life is like.

It should look at its wording and narrative to ensure that individuals are not blamed for unequal access to services or wider societal issues. Focusing the blame on individuals normalises inequality, makes it acceptable; 'we don't then have to act'.

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"It's them and us, middle-class social workers, frowning and pursing their mouths as if you were a bad stain. You could always tell which side of the system you were on. You would know by the way someone moved if they were to be trusted. We were trained from birth to say nothing to these people. We knew they had the power to take our money, our house, us kids," Katriona O Sullivan, Author of Poor.

During the Call for Evidence period, we heard from citizens who have said, "They (police) are leaving the gangs just to take each other out but it's us in the middle who get hurt." The complete lack of faith and trust in public services being there to help and assist in even the most desperate of situations is something that needs to be addressed. Poverty and poverty stigma need to be tackled simultaneously. Anti-poverty work needs to be anti-stigma work.

Accessing and engaging with these communities to work alongside them in this way is not without its challenges. To make a real difference to those experiencing poverty and to enable social mobilisation within these communities, there needs to be real consideration of the approach.

In our lifetimes, we have all had experiences that shape us and stay with us. As a group, we have shared many examples where stigma and the fear of being judged have kept us from asking for help. Stigma is a powerful preventer and will stop those who need services from coming forward to ask for help.

We have collected numerous case studies, experiences and met so many of our citizens throughout this Call for Evidence, that there is no doubt which ever thematic area we were discussing Stigma around neurodiversity, learning disabilities, Not having enough money, being homeless, at risk of homeless, disabled, have a long term health need, left school with no qualifications, not having English as a first language, coming to the UK from abroad, Having substance misuse issues, offending history, being LGBT at the heart of all the thematic areas lies stigma and the feeling of being judged for your circumstances.

Preserving Dignity

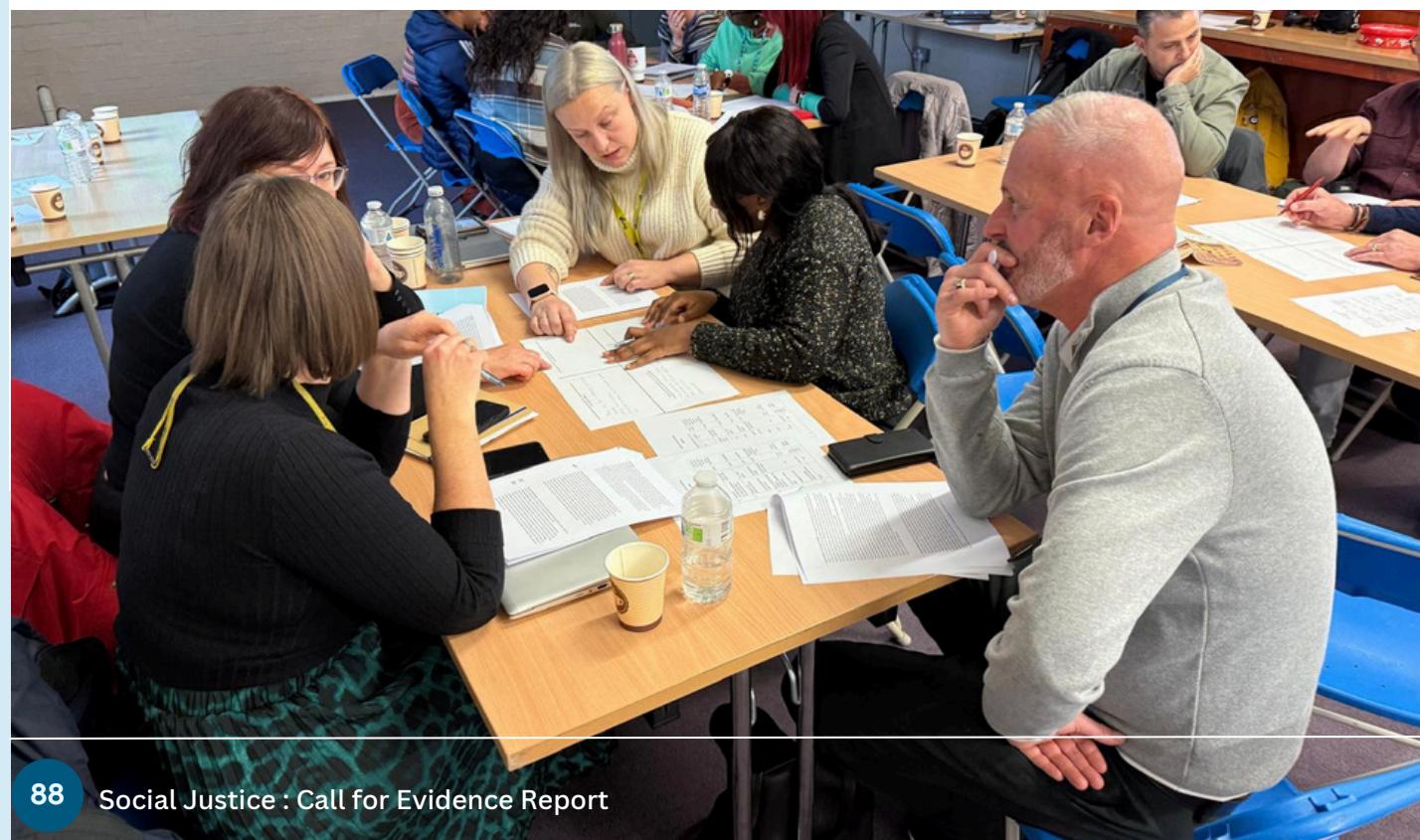


“The thing about dignity, and the reason it is a transformational concept, is that it knows no social, economic, gender, or ethnic barriers” (44)

Heavily linked to stigma, dignity is the inherent worth and respect due to every human being, regardless of their socioeconomic status, and the right to live a life free from dehumanising conditions and the violation of fundamental human rights. (45)

Preserving Dignity in service provisions is essential for numerous reasons, including:

- It supports self-respect - Treating people with dignity helps them maintain their self-respect, and it's a fundamental human right.
- It yields improvements in health and well-being - Feeling dignified can enhance a person's mental and physical well-being, promoting a positive outlook.
- It builds trust and respect - When people feel their dignity is respected, they're more likely to cooperate with their care plans and trust their caregivers.
- It promotes fairness and equality - Everyone should be treated with dignity, regardless of their age, race, gender, or health.
- It encourages independence - Dignity helps people feel in control of their own lives and participate in their own care.



Here are some ways Citizens of Walsall feel that we can promote dignity in service provisions:

Communicate with respect

Use the right tone, be open and honest, be aware of your own biases, and make sure people can easily make complaints or suggestions.

Support active participation

Involve people in their care, provide choices or options, and ensure you are doing or not doing too much.

Provide accessible information/services

Make sure information is easy to understand, such as by using large print, Braille or translation into their first language. It means not expecting small children to interpret adult subjects. It can be BSL, Hearing Loops, or use a trauma-informed approach to consider how you wish your customer to engage with you. Is the area suitable? Can the conversation be overheard? Is digital exclusion an issue? Are there unnecessary steps making people jump through hoops?

Recognise their lived experience

Accept and acknowledge that their lived experience is unique to them. It can be traumatic and difficult to open up, which means they may not see the situation in the way you want them to.

They may need reasonable adjustments.

Poverty Proofing



"Having the ability to compete with others comes down to affordability. Disadvantage comes down to what we have versus what we need and what we have to spend. The cost-of-living issues, worrying about putting the heating on, being on benefits, and just not having enough to meet your needs, don't feel fair when it's you". Money seems to rule the world. If you don't have enough of it, you can't make choices" – Call for evidence participant.

Children North-East have recently celebrated 10 years of Poverty Proofing© (46). The concept of Poverty Proofing© supports organisations to understand how those living in poverty may struggle to participate in key life experiences, such as education, healthcare, and cultural experiences. The idea of Poverty Proofing© is to help services remove the financial barriers for those on low-income families when accessing key organisations and services. (47)

As a result of their work, Children North-East now works with arts and cultural venues, leisure centres, early years settings, and healthcare services. The charity aims to create a toolkit, training model, and approach to embed its learning. This Call for Evidence recommends that poverty proofing be reviewed and considered across all statutory customer-facing services.

Poverty-proofing is the concept that no activity or planned program should identify, exclude, make assumptions about, or treat differently those whose household income or resources are lower than those of others. (48)

Poverty Informed Care is a mindset that allows us to stand in awe of people who face the impacts of poverty daily and choose us anyway. Poverty Informed Care is a form of service acknowledging the audacious courage it takes to pursue advancement when even your basic needs are tenuous (49)

Poverty-Informed Care is a commitment to reducing barriers within our services for people, so they may utilise our help to change their economic reality.

Poverty Informed Care is an intentional choice to be compassionate to the people you serve. Working in a poverty-informed care way is an acknowledgement that our services are not equal and a desire to level the playing field. It goes beyond welcoming people into the spaces we operate in, but ensuring we demonstrate they are wanted in these spaces.

Living a life of being poor or destitute is the experience of many across Walsall. We have children going to school hungry, parents missing hospital appointments because they can't afford the travel costs, we have a huge disparity across our regions, and the needs of those most disadvantaged are not at all equal. That means our services are not accessible to all, and our offer is not Borough-wide, even though we claim it to be.

Another citizen we spoke to is Donna, and she asked us to imagine you're running out of benefits; you have three children, and you can't ask family or friends to loan you money again because you already asked them last week, and you haven't paid them back. Your benefits don't ever last the month, and it's always this way since your partner left, and your household income took a hit. You have to think hard about whether you can afford to buy electricity, whether you can put the heating on, or whether you need to go to the supermarket for food this week. The alternative is a food bank, but to get a voucher, you have to justify to a professional why you're not able to meet yours' or your children's immediate needs and even if they don't ask you the difficult questions (which they will, they always do) you know they are thinking well you have a relatively new mobile phone why don't you sell it, do you have sky at home? Are they Nike trainers she is wearing, and you know that they are looking at you like, why don't you put food on the table? Would you go to ask for help? I'm not sure you would.

We also need to consider how services perceive their role in supporting those in poverty. Walsall Healthcare NHS have a provision to seek support with travel costs to appointments. However, our Social Justice Champions established that to do this, the citizen needed to pay upfront, go to a public desk where registration is held and ask for help, so in reality, there would be a reluctance to do this. We were unsure of the process for claiming bus fares back or the wait times, but in fact, it's not simple. This gesture, therefore, becomes tokenistic and impractical for those needing this support to access it.

Any activities and approaches to engage with citizens will only be possible if someone's basic needs are met. People can't come to a focus session or a coffee morning if their electricity is about to run out. As a system, we need to understand that our citizens' time is as important as anyone else's in employment, and using incentives to meet basic needs is a way to remove the stigma associated with engaging in a manner that isn't deemed patronising or dehumanising.

The Race for Life



“People always connect better with those who have a heart. There is often a need to show compassion and provide supportive hand-holding. Love, support, networks and having a guiding hand sit at the centre of addressing disadvantage. People often don’t feel compassion or love when experiencing disadvantage, but you know when you’re speaking to someone who has been there before” – Call for Evidence participant.

This concept, which we often hear about walking in our customers’ shoes, is one that all too often lets us down as a system. During the Call for Evidence commission, we have heard of examples where a walk-through of the front-line system (50), which was in place for strategic leads to head into the realities of real life with grassroots colleagues. The Walk on the front line was done not in a tokenistic way, but to understand and unpick that customer journey from their perspective, tackling system injustices and navigating system change.

“Real system change means we can achieve positive outcomes for people at the same time as saving money” – Birmingham Changing Futures Together Programme.

The concept of Racing for Life is a simple one. Imagine two people are going head-to-head in the Olympics, one has been aware of the race, trained for the race, eaten a healthy diet, has the correct equipment to undertake the race, they have supporters cheering them on and they have been given the best lane on the day. On the other hand, there is another athlete who didn’t have knowledge of the race; they didn’t have breakfast that morning, they didn’t have specialised running shoes, nobody was championing them, and they had to walk to the race, arriving exhausted. They were given the outside lane. In reality, it’s not a fair race, and this is reflective of life in our communities. Some have so many more advancements and opportunities, and they will thrive, while many will be left looking on from the stands, wondering how to reach the finish line and what they must invest in to make life feel more equal.

During the Call for Evidence closing summary, the group engaged in an exercise called the “Privilege Walk,” a tool designed to practically demonstrate the impact that having privilege can have on a person’s ability to thrive. The exercise clearly demonstrates that the race for life is not equal in much the same way as the opportunities, access and outcomes of our citizens. Privilege does play a significant role in who crosses the finish line and wins in the race for life.

The privilege walk highlights the impact of unfair and avoidable inequalities that we allow our systems to perpetuate. We need to do better at understanding the experiences of our citizens, and we must begin to listen, absorb and use the information we are being told to make lasting changes. We must be open to the real-life reality of living in our Borough, and we have to use our voices of influence to advocate, amplify and constructively challenge where we are putting additional hurdles in the way for citizens to jump over.

We can champion others and use our opportunities to extend a helping hand, providing them with the route out of poverty.

We have excellent examples across Walsall where the voice of lived experience is now being recognised as a vital asset. Having the ability to co-design, shape and review a service offer from the perspective of those who have previously used it will yield valuable and critical intelligence. Having those who have accessed your service go on to deliver your service to others in the same shoes they used to be is a powerful enabler. Our workforce should reflect the diversity of the people we serve.

It’s all too common for events, new programs, and initiatives to be developed, only to have low engagement. Often, this is the result of services deciding what they think a community needs or wants and then getting it so very wrong. Services that have the remit to engage with people from disadvantaged backgrounds should have lived experience, cultural competency and coaching and mentoring skills embedded within the staffing team as a compulsory requirement. At least a Lived Experience advisory panel, which conducts peer reviews to monitor customer experience.

We do have exemplars of this happening in Walsall, and we have been fortunate to have some of these organisations involved in this Call for Evidence to provide us with rich and powerful insight over the last twelve months. These trusted voices on a grassroots level have been able to allow us to engage with those who have failed to reach customers, all too easily left behind. Statutory service providers are often the services that are feared most in disadvantaged communities, such as the police, children’s services, education colleagues, DWP, and Health Services. All have the absolute ability to adopt an approach that challenges and shapes perceptions in a bold and radical way, benefiting our communities.

Supporting Principles & Action Plan

Representation Matters

- Move from tokenistic consultation to engaging in a meaningful way with seldom-heard voices. If you do what we always do, we will always get what we have always got.
- Embed lived experience/Diversity in your organisation and services
- Your workforce should reflect the people it serves. Examine recruitment processes and consider how accessible they are; utilise a targeted recruitment option. Shape your processes to increase representation.

Effective Partnerships and Collaborations

- Developing strengthened collaboration to increase resilience and thriving communities
- Ensure that the boundaries of our services will be clear, and by working in collaboration, we can provide Inclusive services.
- Embed a No Wrong Door approach/mentality across wider systems. Working in partnership to prevent people from falling out of our systems
- Prevention is Key

Data-driven decisions with heart and purpose

- We should make use of the data and insight available to us. We have access to a wealth of information.
- We need to utilise data to direct resources and target the right individuals and communities to drive overall improvements.
- We have to put people at the heart of the data. It's easy to lose the connection to reality when it's seen as numbers.
- Being bold in allocating resources based on where the need is.
- Strengthening the understanding across communities about equity and the implications of this.

Reviewing our own organisations through the lens of social justice

- Being a critical friend to our own approaches and identifying where we place barriers. Where we complicate or potentially exclude
- Challenge our own unconscious bias in operational delivery
- Recognise the impact of Social Justice on citizens and move towards viewing issues as a societal issue rather than an individual failing
- Use our voice and influence to drive systemic change to challenge and improve our systems

Embed the theory of belonging to our organisations and services reaching beyond EDI

- Be Bold, Be Radical, and be open to change
- Inclusivity sits at the heart of all we do. Inclusion is not enough. Belonging extends beyond access to services to being valued for who you are, rather than just tolerated in the space.

Conclusion

"Social Justice is about making society function better – providing the support and tools to help turn lives around" - Social Justice Transforming Lives 2012

The UK Government's approach to Social Justice in 2012 was built on five core principles: a focus on prevention and early intervention; prioritising recovery and independence over maintenance; promoting work as a sustainable route out of poverty while ensuring unconditional support for those who cannot work; recognising that the most effective solutions are often designed and delivered locally; and ensuring a fair deal for taxpayers.

This approach recognised the inseparable connection between Social Justice and social mobility: the idea that everyone should have the opportunity to progress, regardless of their background. However, having a Social Justice Strategy is not just about enabling social mobility; it is about ensuring that everyone has a fair chance to even step onto the ladder.

Through this Call for Evidence, we have identified both the four foundational pillars and five guiding principles of Social Justice in Walsall. These are ambitious and bold, but they provide a framework for real, tangible action. Throughout the Borough, Senior leaders bear a significant responsibility for advancing social justice, encompassing creating equitable systems, addressing injustices, and fostering inclusivity within their organisations and communities. This involves actively reviewing policies and practices, advocating for marginalised groups, and promoting a culture where everyone feels valued and respected. By embedding the pillars and principles into their services, Walsall can move to a fairer, more just society, one where disadvantage is no longer an accepted reality but a challenge effectively addressed through collaborative effort.

Alan Boot, Black Country Foodbank Coordinator, summarised the essence of this work: "My gain is our gain, which will conclude in shared success." Disadvantage and Social Injustice were described in powerful ways during our consultations. When asked what these terms meant to them, participants expressed feelings of being forgotten, neglected, isolated, and without opportunity. They described social injustice as enforcing inequality, deepening insecurity, and creating a sense of hopelessness. Many felt that disadvantage meant being in a constant state of struggle, rushed, running behind others, stigmatised and battling despair, with no clear way forward. Carrying this weight every day is exhausting and all-encompassing.

Yet, when asked what Walsall could look like without disadvantage, a different vision emerged. Residents spoke of a Borough with strong community spirit, where communication flows easily and support networks are reliable and inclusive. They envisioned a place that is secure, equitable and connected: a Borough where access to safety, food and shelter is universal and mental and physical well-being are prioritised. A Walsall without disadvantage would be progressive, hopeful and prosperous: a place where resilience, creativity and innovation thrive, and the playing field is levelled for all.

This Call for Evidence was a collaborative effort, bringing together partners from all sectors to ensure that all voices, especially those often unheard, are represented. The insights gathered here must now translate into action. By embedding the recommendations and principles outlined in this report, Walsall can take meaningful steps towards ensuring that the future of tomorrow is far better than the realities of today.



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WALSALL FOR ALL
Connecting Communities, Connecting People

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