Anything is possible: Tackling child poverty together across Tees Valley



30 June 2026, AV Dawson, Middlesbrough

Main takeaways

Attended by around 120 people from all sectors across the area, 'Anything is possible: Tackling child poverty together across Tees Valley' was held on 30 June 2026, at AV Dawson's Port of Middlesbrough headquarters – with the support of Point North community foundation and The Teesside Charity.

Our event aimed to:

- Confirm cross-sector appetite for working together across Tees Valley on child poverty
- Identify immediate and longer-term priorities, for collective, strategic action on this issue
- Secure commitments from partners to continue the conversation and help us take this work forward together

The headline messages from our event - and in feedback shared afterwards - were:

- There is **clear, cross-sector desire for an ambitious, long-term, strategic child poverty action plan for Tees Valley**, recognising the significant and wide-ranging impacts of poverty on babies, children, young people and families locally, and on Tees Valley as a whole. This co-developed plan should aim to 'shift the dial', setting collective aspirations and finding the funds to match them, not the other way round.

- **Tees Valley Combined Authority should use its convening role, resources and leverage to co-ordinate this work**, with a steering group and significant input from VCSE and other community-based organisations, families and young people – alongside buy-in from the five local authorities, other anchor organisations and sectors (e.g. health, education, housing, police & business), and agreed shared outcomes and accountability.

- This should **build on the extensive work already taking place across Tees Valley to tackle child poverty and expand opportunities for young people and families** – and learn from work happening in other areas. Resources and capacity are limited, and we will achieve more – with greater impact – by working together.

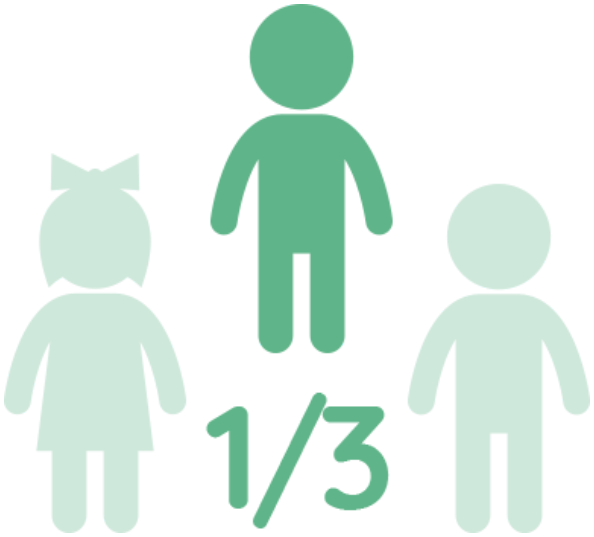
- Organisations greatly appreciated the opportunity provided by the event **to make or renew connections, learn from each other, share challenges and ideas, and discuss potential collaboration – on a cross-sector basis, and at a Tees Valley level –** and want this to continue.

- There is **a huge amount of expertise, knowledge and cross-sector commitment to making Tees Valley a better place for babies, children, young people and families**. Organisations want to work with Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA) to harness this through ongoing engagement.

- Organisations want to understand **how they can work with TVCA to ensure the** Tees Valley Local Growth Plan **and new economic opportunities reach and benefit those most likely to be at risk of poverty**.

- There is **appetite for the five local authorities to have more opportunities to learn from each other, and potentially collaborate on and enhance, the work they deliver at a local level** (including nationally-funded programmes, such as the Crisis and Resilience Fund and the Holiday Activities and Food programme).

Child poverty in Tees Valley



Around 1 in 3 babies, children and young people across Tees Valley are growing up in poverty

Across the UK, 27% of children were growing up in poverty in 2024/25. This rises to **31.3% of children across Tees Valley** (65.9% of whom are living in a working family) – broken down to 28.7% of children across Darlington; 31.9% in Hartlepool; 38.7% in Middlesbrough; 31.3% in Redcar and Cleveland; and 26.2% in Stockton. The rate is far higher than this in many Tees Valley localities.

As the 'case for change' in the national child poverty strategy sets out, **'children who experience poverty often have adverse outcomes that continue to influence their life into adulthood'**. This can include worse physical and mental health (beginning before a child is born); worse educational attainment; worse employment outcomes with higher risk of unemployment and lower earnings in work; and worse life outcomes overall, including lower life expectancy.

Child poverty therefore not only has **potentially lifelong impacts for individual babies, children, young people and families** locally – restricting access to opportunities, the ability to participate fully in society and limiting potential – it also has **significant implications for our wider economy**. Child poverty additionally places **huge immediate and longer-term pressures on public and local community services across Tees Valley**, including education settings, the NHS, councils, housing, and voluntary and community sector organisations.

Event background

'Anything is possible: Tackling child poverty together across Tees Valley' was voluntarily organised by a small group of community partners, including Close-Knit Families and the North East Child Poverty Commission. We wanted to begin a conversation with others about how we can do more – together across Tees Valley – to tackle child poverty strategically; recognising, building on and adding value to the extensive work already taking place across the area.



Held on 30 June 2026 at AV Dawson in Middlesbrough, with the support of Point North community foundation and The Teesside Charity, our event was attended by around 120 people. This included representatives from TVCA, the five local authorities, funders, people working in voluntary and community organisations, education, health, housing, business, criminal justice, and faith groups. And the event was timely, coming soon after:

- The publication of Our Children, Our Future – the first UK-wide child poverty strategy in a decade;
- A new Local Outcomes Framework for local authorities and partners – which includes the reduction and alleviation of child poverty as a 'contextual metric'; and
- The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 – which has broadened the standard powers or 'areas of competence' that apply to all combined authorities (officially now known as 'mayoral strategic authorities').

On the day



Alongside several interactive sessions, attendees heard from a range of people throughout the event.

Officially opened by our host **Alfie Joey**, the day began with a stirring performance of 'A Million Dreams' by **pupils from Easterside Academy** primary school. Introducing the choir, Point North Chief Executive **Michelle Cooper** encouraged attendees to 'dream big' and build on the positive difference they and others were already making locally.

Two of the working group of volunteers who organised the day - **Beth Munby** (Close-Knit Families) and **Amanda Bailey** (North East Child Poverty Commission) - then explained the background to, and impetus for, the event. Children North East's **Lorna Nicoll** emphasised that 'change is possible'; sharing examples of the charity's pioneering Poverty Proofing work in education, healthcare and culture settings - before setting attendees an interactive 'budgeting' challenge, based on the monthly finances of a low income parent.

We were delighted to be joined by journalist, broadcaster and author **Steph McGovern**. In an inspiring discussion, Steph spoke about how growing up on Teesside was her 'superpower'; the importance of young people in the area having real opportunities, including vocational options and meaningful experiences of the workplace; the need for greater investment in Tees Valley, and for people to have more control of how funding is spent locally through devolution.

Steph also spoke passionately about the importance of building young people's confidence - and the need for employers to do more to harness young people's many strengths, which she sees regularly through her work with local young women's and girls' charity, Rubies; and having created a Women in Engineering Scholarship with Teesside University.

A panel discussion was chaired by **Beth Farhat** (North East Child Poverty Commission), with panellists **Mark Adams** (Public Health South Tees), **Matt Forrest** (Tees Valley Housing Partnership and Thirteen Group), **Haleem Ghafoor** (Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council), **Beth Major** (The Junction) and **Sarah McPhie** (Citizens Advice Stockton and Citizens Advice Middlesbrough) discussing the impact of child poverty on their work, and how collaborating across sectors and geographies can make a bigger difference to children and families.

Our final contributor for the day was TVCA Chief Executive, **Tom Bryant**. Before taking questions from attendees, Tom spoke with Alfie Joey about the opportunity of expanded devolution; the new 10-year Tees Valley Local Growth Plan and its commitment to drive inclusive growth; leveraging new investment; transport infrastructure; the importance of local people being able to access new economic opportunities; and strengthening relationships with cross-sector stakeholders across Tees Valley.







Key issues and common themes



As well as our speakers and panellists, attendees were asked to share their insights and ideas throughout the day, via slido polls, roundtable discussions and pledges to take action. A survey was also sent to all attendees – and anyone who registered their interest in our event – after it took place.

This is a high-level summary of the key issues and common themes raised during the day (including in our panel discussion and questions to speakers), and in feedback shared afterwards.

When asked via slido:

What are the key barriers to 'anything is possible' for children, young people & families across Tees Valley?

The most common answers from event attendees were:



And, when asked:

Why is strategic action on child poverty across Tees Valley important?

The answers given could be grouped into seven themes (with sample responses shared here):

Hope, ambition and vision for the future
'People need a vision to believe in'
'To provide a clear ambition for the area that people can get behind, and a demonstration of investing in children and their futures'

A better Tees Valley
'To be talked about for being great'
'Give people and the area a chance to thrive'
'We don't want to talk the area down, but we need to address chronic poverty and inequality'

Strength in joint working
'No one organisation can fix the issues'
'To avoid duplication and competing for funding'
'More can be done through collaboration'
'Co-ordinate efforts where they are needed most'

Fairness and expanding opportunity
'Our young people deserve better'
'It's the right thing to do'
'Everyone deserves a chance to live a full, healthy life in a prosperous, resilient community'

Improving outcomes

‘Affects whole families’ life chances’

‘Lifelong impact of experiencing child poverty’

‘So they can live longer, healthier, happier lives’

‘It will shift the dial’

Importance of longer-term, strategic thinking

‘We cannot afford not to take action’

‘We need top level buy-in to make change possible’

‘Shared strategic priorities’

‘Long-term plan that can survive political cycles’

Realising potential

‘Children should have the opportunity to realise their potential regardless of background’

‘We can’t afford to waste potential’

‘Achieve individual and the area’s potential’

During roundtable conversations, our panel discussion, questions to speakers and in post-event feedback,

A wide range of – often interconnected – policy areas were raised as key concerns/issues to tackle

And, whilst it was felt by many that any Tees Valley-wide work should focus initially on a small number of priorities, the policy areas raised included:



- **Financial stability for families** – ensuring more people (including those in work) have access to the right support and advice; at the right time and in the right place, helping to provide a more stable platform from which they can build.

- **Youth opportunities** – expanding youth provision and enrichment, work experience/encounters with employers, mentoring, careers guidance, vocational opportunities and apprenticeships; and removing barriers to employment (e.g. unnecessary academic requirements).

- **Transport** – reach (particularly in rural areas, with the need for minimum service levels), frequency, reliability and affordability - with proposals made for further reduced - or free - fares for certain groups, e.g. young people not in education, employment or training (‘NEET’) and parents/carers with children under 5.

- **Employment for parents/carers and in-work poverty** – creating more good jobs in local neighbourhoods; tackling low pay and insecure work (including through promotion of the real Living Wage locally); breaking down barriers to employment, such as unnecessary recruitment practices; and making better use of procurement and recruitment by anchor employers to target opportunities at those who need them most.

- **Education** – the cost of education, and the impact of poverty on students’ ability to fully participate and self-esteem; attendance issues; the relentless focus on ‘academic’ achievement; SEND provision; high rates of exclusion, suspensions and elective home education; greater TVCA engagement with schools and the local education system – and the need to intervene earlier to *prevent* young people from becoming ‘NEET’.

- **Housing and fuel poverty** – affordability, availability, quality and energy efficiency (in both the private rented and social housing sectors), and the fundamental importance of children and families having safe, decent, and stable homes. Tees Valley needs a Warm Homes plan, linked closely to skills and job creation.



- **Health inequalities** – including how poverty and hardship can significantly exacerbate these from the earliest stages of life, with more targeted support required for families in the first five years - alongside **mental health** and **health literacy** as key concerns.

- **Food insecurity** – and the need to create a plan to ensure more people have access to affordable, healthy food in their communities, including by better joining up existing food-related support.

- **Literacy** – including greater understanding and support to improve adult literacy, and more programmes for children from the earliest stages (bringing Dolly Parton's Imagination Library to Tees Valley being one idea suggested).

- Other specific policy concerns raised included **digital exclusion**, **violence against women and girls**, **crime** and the **criminal exploitation of young people**, and the role of **culture and creativity** / supporting children and young people to build **cultural and social capital.**

Feedback also focussed on systemic challenges and ways of working

Alongside those set out in the headline messages from our event, these included:

- **The disproportionate impact of poverty and/or barriers to opportunity for specific groups and communities** (for example single parent families, the overwhelming majority of which are headed by women; Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic families; families where someone has a disability; and care-experienced young people) – and how we can tackle this, including through the Tees Valley Local Growth Plan and ensuring new economic opportunities reach them. There is significant underemployment and untapped potential within these groups and communities which we need to unlock.

- Ensuring that **youth voice** and the '**lived/living experience' of those directly affected by poverty and hardship** are central to decision-making, planning and implementation of local plans (including the Local Growth Plan and Pride in Place), on an ongoing and accessible basis – recognising this can include people working within community-based organisations and elsewhere. The work of TVCA – and other organisations – needs to be rooted in local communities and feel more relevant at a local, or neighbourhood, level.

- The need for **greater engagement with, recognition of, and support for the VCSE sector from TVCA and local authorities** - as delivery partners (particularly in relation to employment support); as an important employer within Tees Valley in its own right; and as trusted community anchors. This should include a formal vehicle through which VCSE organisations can be represented (akin to the Tees Valley Business Board), and the provision of bespoke business support for VCSE organisations and leaders.





- **Social value/CSR** – and how businesses' social value/CSR commitments can be more strategically and creatively connected to actual need in Tees Valley, made more accessible to VCS organisations, and monitored to maximise impact. Alongside this, there was strong support for community-based organisations to play a central role in the planning and delivery of the proposed new **Teesside Wealth Fund**; and for the **private sector to be better supported to understand its role** in tackling child poverty.

- **Funding** – more longer-term, joined-up (and core/unrestricted) funding is required to tackle long-term, complex challenges; to provide VCS/grassroots organisations and their staff with more stability; and to support the building of trusted relationships, which takes time. VCS organisations often find themselves in competition with each other, and should be empowered to collaborate, better understand what each other does, and join forces to secure funding - whilst funders should simplify funding streams and pool resources to fund more work in partnership.

- **Collaboration and learning** – better mapping, and joining up, of the significant amount of work that is already taking place across Tees Valley to tackle child poverty, but often in silos and focussed on responsive activity; providing spaces and resources through which learning, good practice, intelligence and ideas can be shared across geographies and sectors; providing opportunities for organisations to explore collaboration, new partnerships, the co-location of support/services, how to measure impact, and innovation - and being brave about testing new ideas and stretching themselves to go further, together. A repeated theme was the need for **better data-sharing**, and more aligned data collection, across organisations, sectors and geographies.

- **Making tackling child poverty 'everybody's business'**, **challenging assumptions** and **reducing stigma** around this issue – so that it becomes easier for families to ask for help or access support, before they reach crisis point; with more staff working with children, young people and families receiving poverty awareness training; all organisations adopting a 'no wrong door' approach to those seeking support - and all organisations being encouraged to think about their role in preventing, reducing and mitigating child poverty.

- **Collective advocacy for Tees Valley** – more opportunities for cross-sector organisations to work with TVCA and others to advocate together on behalf of Tees Valley, for example around national policy and funding.





Thank you

We are grateful to everyone who gave up their time to take part in, or support, the day - our event host, speakers and panellists, the Easterside Academy choir (assisted by Sing Education), Resolution, the organisations who had a table in our small exhibition space - and of course everyone who joined us to share their ideas, knowledge and expertise.

We would again like to thank Point North and The Teesside Charity for making our event possible, and to AV Dawson for being such fantastic hosts.

And we'd particularly like to thank the working group who voluntarily conceived and planned the event during their spare time, and helped the day run smoothly.

Our Working Group

Nicole Ahmed (Public Health South Tees)
Amanda Bailey (NE Child Poverty Commission)
Jen Booth (Family Action)
Sarah Brooks (Northern Neonatal Network)
Ruby Eglon (Thrive at Five)
Samm Goodall (The Children's Foundation)
Helen Hall (The Children's Foundation)
Sean Harris (Tees Valley Education)
Oliver Harness (Teesside University)
Jacqui Hutchinson (RCVDA)
Linda Johnstone (Public Health South Tees)
Joyce Liddle (Durham University)
Sarah McPhie (Citizens Advice Stockton & Citizens Advice Middlesbrough)
Josh Mitchell (Citizens Advice Stockton)
Beth Munby (Close-Knit Families)
Jonny Munby (Close-Knit Families)
Joe Petch (RCVDA)
Diane Smith (The Teesside Charity)
Sean Soulsby (The Children's Foundation)

Next steps

We know from feedback provided during and since the day that many attendees have already taken welcome steps as a direct result of attending our event. These include exploring their organisation's recruitment practices, and opportunities provided for young people; establishing new partnerships and activity; agreeing to Poverty Proof their work; raising awareness of this wider issue with colleagues and networks; adapting their policies and practice; and committing to greater involvement of youth voice and lived experience in their decision-making.

However, the overriding message from the day was the need for an ambitious, long-term, strategic child poverty action plan for Tees Valley.

We are therefore delighted that partners have committed to working together to co-develop an action plan, with Tees Valley Combined Authority acting as convenor to support this cross-sector effort. Further details on the approach and next steps will be confirmed in the near future.



