



Same Storm, Different Boats

Sunderland, Covid-19 and Health Inequalities:
Redressing the Balance



SUMMARY



Director of Public
Health Annual
Report 2021-2022

www.sunderland.gov.uk

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the pandemic the people of Sunderland have come together to support each other and work together across the city as never before. Some of the main challenges Sunderland and its people have faced so far in this pandemic have been substantial, but it has also emphasised the huge value of working closely with residents and partners to help close the health gap and reduce inequalities.

From the very first day of lockdown in 2020, communities in Sunderland mobilised – supporting each other and working together to help the most vulnerable. [The Public Health Annual report 2021-2022](#) recognises the potential impact of the pandemic on these communities and aims to continue our city's collective efforts to redress the balance.

Inequalities already existed in Sunderland and Marmot (2020) reported a widening of inequalities in the North East. Sunderland has eight out of the 225 neighbourhoods defined nationally as 'left behind' neighbourhoods. These are areas that experience a combination of social and economic deprivation. Here is a summary.



Gerry Taylor,
Director of Public Health, Sunderland



SAME STORM, DIFFERENT BOATS - SUMMARY

Our healthy city plan

The 2030 vision for health and wellbeing in Sunderland is that “Everyone in Sunderland will have healthy, happy lives, with no one left behind”. The [Healthy City Plan](#) was borne out of this commitment and is the refreshed statutory Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy for the city.

The framework for reducing health inequalities focuses on prevention where the responsibility for the health and wellbeing of our residents goes beyond the health and social care system, with all residents and organisations in the city playing a role in achieving this vision.



Starting well in Sunderland

Between 2015 and 2020, the percentage of children living in poverty in Sunderland increased from 19% to 27% (the current England average is 19%). Poverty can affect mental and physical health together with access to opportunities for many children and is often linked to a range of challenges that impact on life chances and positive outcomes including behaviour, health and wellbeing, education and employment. Whilst there are not yet any official national child poverty indicators covering the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, projections suggest that the impact will be substantial. Both relative and absolute poverty are expected to have risen sharply in 2021/22. Illness due to Covid-19 and Long Covid, and job loss are the primary causes of this projected increase. Children born into poverty are at greater risk of poorer health outcomes including infant mortality and obesity. Sunderland City Council is committed to improving health for children, young people and families through opportunities, such as the Change 4 Life Sunderland Programme and the Holiday Activity Food programme, to keep healthy, well and active.

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Living well in Sunderland

Good quality housing and employment, strong communities and access to support when needed are all key components to living well. Unemployment is linked with poorer health outcomes but it's important to recognise that having a job in itself isn't necessarily the entire solution. In fact, the majority of those living in poverty are in households with some form of paid employment. The number of people in Sunderland in employment dropped between July 2020 and June 2021. Levels of pay have also fallen in this time period – coupled with the cost-of-living crisis, this could push more people into poverty. The council is working with partners on a range of initiatives to support residents through the cost of living crisis this includes providing a Local Welfare Provision Scheme supporting people in financial difficulty with food and fuel.

There is a new contract with Shelter to deliver free specialist and independent housing advice, and the Sunderland foodbank also maintained its services throughout the pandemic seeing a 15% rise in use. A Food Partnership Coordinator is working to develop a public health approach to improving the food system of the city.

We know that different groups of people have experienced the pandemic differently and one area of concern is the impact on mental health. A Mental Health Strategy is in place to support a mental health transformation work programme taking place throughout Sunderland.



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Ageing well in Sunderland

The pandemic has had a huge impact on older adults with the mortality rate from covid increasing with age and older people having experienced challenges relating to social isolation, mobility and caring needs. Loneliness and social isolation are growing concerns and the latest data (2019/20) showed that the rate of emergency hospital admissions due to falls in people aged 65 in Sunderland was higher than the wider North East and England as a whole. The Ageing Well Delivery Board has been collaborating on key priorities to better understand barriers to access social care support to improve early intervention, prevention, and signposting, as well as holding 'Let's Talk Ageing Well' events to engage with residents across the city.

SMART Sunderland is also exploring how technology can help to reduce loneliness and isolation, working closely with the Sunderland VCS Alliance to deliver activities across communities, engaging residents to reduce isolation as well as improve physical and mental health.

Maintaining a strong visibility of the Sunderland Ageing Well Ambassadors programme has meant more local people can influence the future direction of the Ageing Well Delivery Board. Funding has been secured to support this work over a four-year period.



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The impact of Covid-19 on access to public health, health and adult social care and NHS services

From the start of the pandemic services adapted to ensure they were able to maintain contact with people and ensure that safeguarding remained a key focus. Some of the good practice and models that proved successful during this time continue to be used going forward.

For example;

When the country went into lockdown, it was essential that the 0-19 service remained flexible to protect the most vulnerable children, young people, and families so that safeguarding remained a key focus, threaded through all virtual and face to face contacts.

A new drug and alcohol treatment service provider commenced in July 2021. The service maintained access and the waiting time for accessing substance misuse treatment in Sunderland was under three weeks in 96% of presentations.

96% of people received access to substance misuse treatment in Sunderland in under three weeks



MOVING FORWARD

There is no doubt that Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the health of many of our residents above and beyond the virus itself. There is an incredible amount of exemplary work taking place in our communities in relation to public health and this must be applauded, and the lessons learnt embedded in our future provision.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1

Deliver the Healthy City Plan with a focus on reducing inequalities.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Continue to develop, promote and widen uptake of local welfare schemes in recognition that more people are now living in poverty.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Ensure key findings from the Health Related Behaviour Survey are used to influence and shape local programme delivery to meet the needs identified by children and young people.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Embed a Health in All Policies approach across the council and partners.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Work with local employers who can provide employment and apprenticeship opportunities, especially to our vulnerable people and people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

RECOMMENDATION 8

Carry out further research to improve our understanding of inequalities in access to health services and excess deaths.

RECOMMENDATION 3

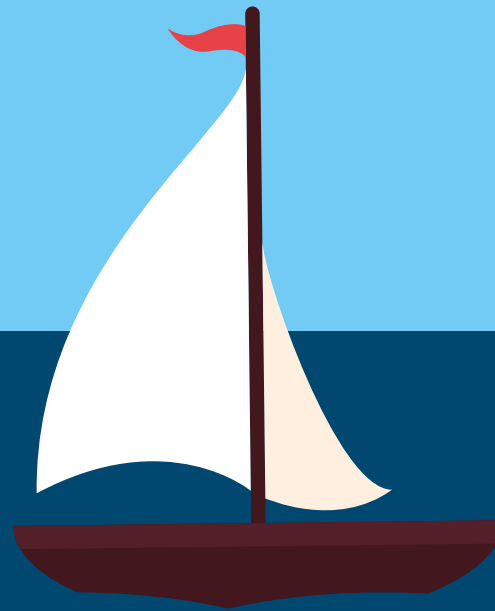
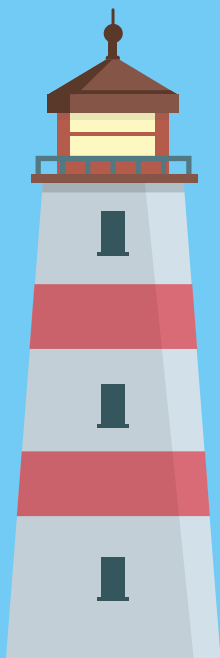
Build on the community response to the pandemic in order to engage the population and ensure diverse and under-represented groups' voices and experiences are heard.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Continue to embed programmes which support the development of speech, language and communication skills in children so they are able to flourish and achieve their full potential.

RECOMMENDATION 9

Ensure we are responding to employee health and wellbeing needs following the intense effort of responding to the Covid-19 pandemic.



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Acknowledgements

My thanks go to everyone who has contributed to this report, including the Public Health Team, colleagues from services across the council, our partners in health and social care and in the community.



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