

## The cost of living in the New Forest

Dr Dianna Smith, Dr Lauren Wilson, Laura Paddon, University of Southampton; Steering committee members including Alison Talbot, Oliver Stanley, Chris Lee, Stephanie Thurston, Tim Houghton, Ryan Stevens, Richard Knott

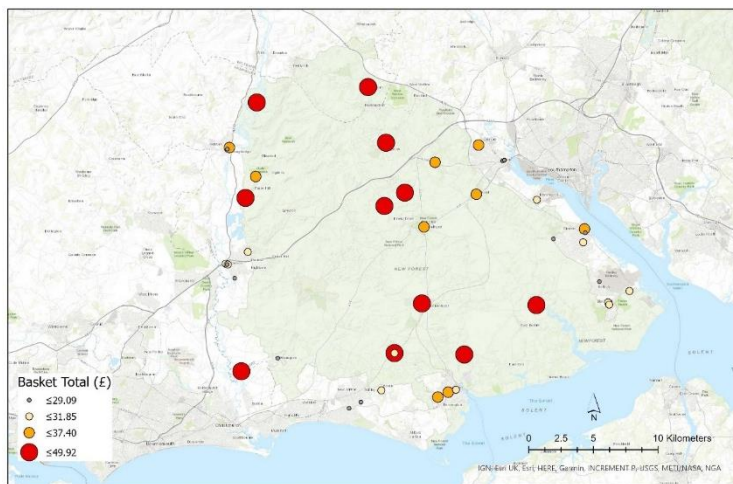
The New Forest district is home to a National Park, a significant tourist attraction, as well as being a notable destination for the marine industry, given its location on the Solent across from the Isle of Wight. These characteristics have an impact on the resident population by influencing the cost of living, including the cost of housing, with the availability and type of employment available in an area also impacted by seasonal shifts in visitors. These factors, combined with the location and transport networks, influence the opportunities available to residents in a district with many rural areas.

A committee convened to lead research into the cost of living in the New Forest focusing on the experience of lower-income households. Between June and September 2021 data were collected on the cost of housing, food, transportation across the New Forest. Records from services including Citizens Advice, the New Forest District Council and food banks were brought together to create a representation of the unavoidable costs of living in this district. To understand the lived experience of households, a survey was shared with people using support services and 20 interviews with service clients were completed. A wider perspective was gained through ten interviews with service providers and social prescribers.

### Results

Overall clear themes emerged about the difficulties residents face in accessing suitable employment and affordable food and housing, largely influenced by cost of transportation. From the survey (n=79), 68.8% were living in households where the annual income is below £20,000. We identified a rural poverty premium, where necessities cost more than in urban areas but there are barriers to employment to increase income and difficulties accessing affordable alternatives for housing, food and childcare. One example was the cost of a 20 item basket of food and household items that cost between £16.27 at a large Tesco in New Milton but £38.70 at Tesco Express in the much smaller village of Brockenhurst (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Food basket costs across the New Forest



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*'It's [FareShare food scheme] is the most amazing scheme and I wish every little area had a scheme like that'*

Tracey, Ringwood

*'For someone like me who doesn't drive, it's definitely the small shops that are quite expensive to live on'* Gabby, Blackfield

Food aid, including mobile food larders with FareShare, offer vital support by providing low cost food at ten locations across the New Forest<sup>1</sup>. Food is an elastic cost, and across the New Forest 4% of the population used a food bank in 2020 with 7,331 parcels of food provided by four of the food banks in Totton, Ringwood, Waterside and Lyminster.

Housing was another pressure on household budgets. There is limited access to social housing in this district and private rents are high compared to the local housing allowance (LHA), which is based on nearby cities of

<sup>1</sup> <https://fish.hants.gov.uk/kb5/hampshire/directory/service.page?id=Yr5Lt2B54IA>

Southampton, Bournemouth and Salisbury. The Table 1 shows the cost of private rented housing in Lymington compared to the LHA. In addition, council tax is high compared to incomes and utilities including electricity and water are named as the highest costs for many households, especially for those who are able to access social housing. The removal of the energy price cap will affect these lower income households quickly and may lead to further requests for fuel vouchers to top up prepayment meters provided by Ringwood and Lymington food banks.

Table 1: Private rent costs in Lymington

Bedroom Type	LHA (Monthly)	Price	Difference
1 Bedroom	£594.99	£700.00	-£105.01
		£1,100.00	-£505.01
2 Bedroom	£775.02	£1,200.00	-£424.98
		£975.00	-£199.98
		£1,450.00	-£674.98
		£2,950.00	-£2,024.99
3 Bedroom	£925.01	£1,350.00	-£424.99
		£1,300.00	-£374.99
4 Bedroom	£1199.98	£2,400.00	-£1,200.02
		£1,850.00	-£650.02

**Transport is the limiting factor for many:** *'Because I can't drive, that is a big disadvantage basically because there is a lot of places where you could get a job but because it's further out than you can get to by public transport. Because like I've done care work in the past but if I wanted to get into that I would have to be able to get transport at all different times because they want you to be flexible about your shifts and stuff and that is quite hard finding how you would do it on public transport'* Sharon, Totton

Service providers noted that mental health has a large role in the difficulties faced by residents, as poor mental health was a barrier to employment and low income contributed to poorer mental health. Interviewees commented that often there was a lack of community, or sense of belonging and support locally that may help people who feel isolated. This aligns with a report from 1999 which was shared in the media under the headline 'Poor and Isolated'<sup>2</sup>; much of the same issues of rural isolation, high living costs for housing and transport, lack of public transport, are still visible 22 years later.

## Recommendations

Overall, there is an appetite to investigate these issues and work together to find solutions to these challenges. A poverty plan, setting out actions and monitoring, will put in place a strategy that can be implemented by a working group. A series of detailed recommendations are provided that can be implemented in collaboration with local government, charities and residents to ensure the opportunities are feasible and sustainable over the longer term as financial support from central government fluctuates.

- Mobile support to reach isolated communities including debt advice and welfare support; re-opening of community hubs to reduce isolation and address mental health, a clear upstream driver of low income.
- Help with transportation including subsidised travel on buses and reduced parking costs, car share schemes, vouchers for petrol/diesel and car repairs
- Improved public transportation timetables and free buses that go to larger supermarkets
- Maintain mobile food larders and share low-cost meal ideas; support with budgeting skills
- Information on resources for residents: online, in public spaces, that are easily searchable
- Ongoing data collection at regular intervals to facilitate monitoring
- Establish a working group to oversee a Poverty Action Plan, collaboratively with residents, community leaders, charities to ensure feasibility of any planned actions. Bring aid organisations together to facilitate collaboration locally

*'actually, if we can help people with those sorts of things, it may be that they don't need the food bank...'* Helena, service provider

<sup>2</sup> See 'Poor and Isolated'. New Forest Post Issue 913, 5 August 1999.

