

Impact of the cost-of-living crisis on health and opportunity in the communities of Manor Farm, Bristol Estate and Whitehawk in East Brighton

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RESEARCH FOCUS

Equal access to good healthcare, housing and education and support which allows individuals to reach their full potential is the mark of a civilized society. This study aims to explore the effects of the cost-of-living crisis on people living in the Manor Farm, Bristol Estate and Whitehawk areas of East Brighton. These are areas of deprivation, already experiencing health inequalities. When basic needs are not being met, what are the implications for future opportunities in life?

Our research questions were:

- 1. What are the local experiences of the cost-of-living crisis?**
- 2. How has the cost-of-living crisis affected health in these communities?**
- 3. What are the concerns for the future in these communities?**
- 4. What support in the local community has helped?**

RESEARCH METHODS

This research used both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Survey

We circulated a survey in person to local community groups and via text message through Wellsbourne Healthcare CIC GP practice between November 2023 and January 2024. The survey was anonymous and included free text responses to some questions.

Focus group

A focus group was conducted with four community members. Consent was given, confidentiality was agreed upon with respondents and the session was recorded. The focus group was transcribed, and thematic analysis used to identify patterns from the data.

FINDINGS

Survey

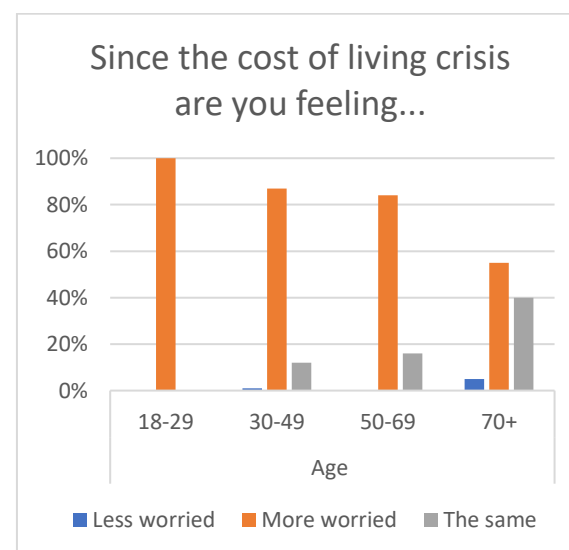
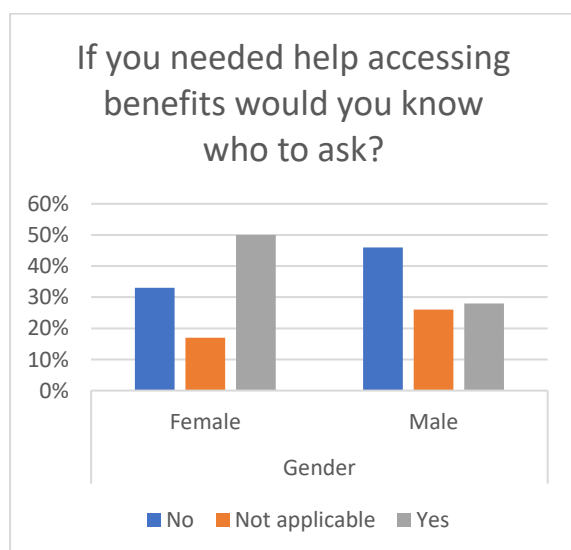
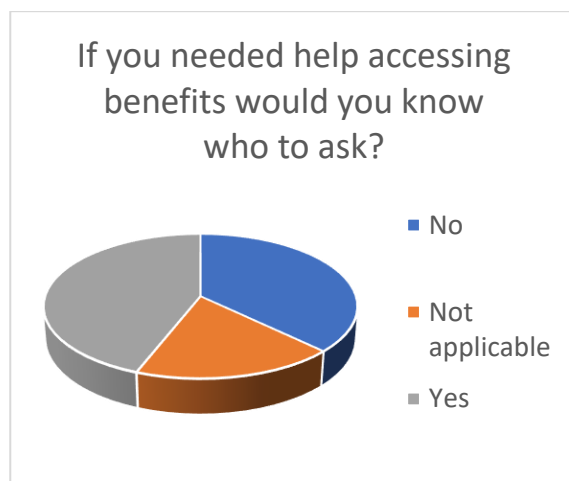
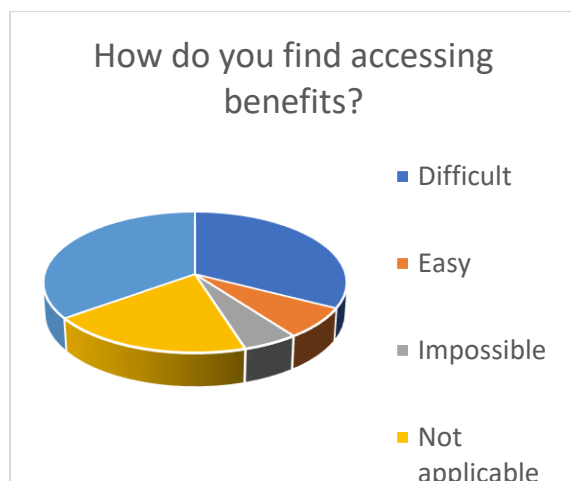
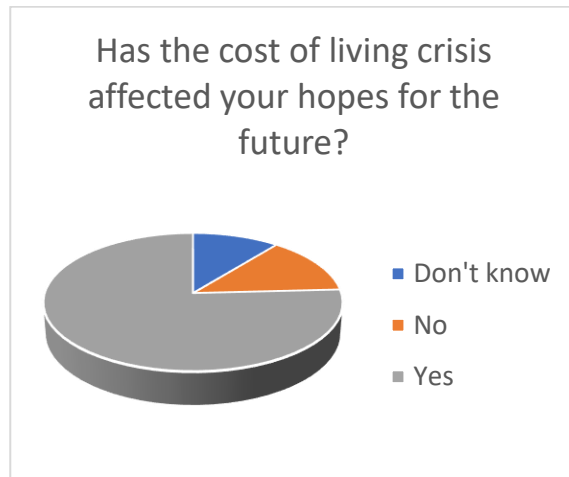
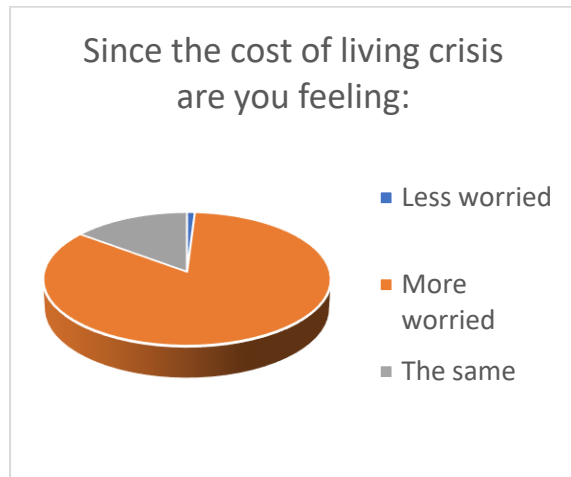
We received 211 completed surveys (25 completed on paper and 186 online).

71% of respondents were female, across the age range 18 to 70+. For 12% of people English was not their first language. 44% considered themselves disabled, and 63% were in receipt of state benefits. 35% of people reported being in a care giving role.

Since the cost-of-living crisis 89% said they had been forced to change shopping and eating habits, 47% said it was more of a struggle to pay for other items, 25% said it was more of a struggle to pay

for over the counter medicines, and 11% said it was more of a struggle to pay for prescription medicines.

84% reported feeling more worried since the cost-of-living crisis – this was more pronounced in the younger groups (100% of 18-29yr olds reported being more worried) than the older groups (55% of age group 70+ reported being more worried). 76% of people said that it had affected their hopes for the future.



Photos of multisensory outputs and showcase event:

Focus group and free text answers from survey

The following themes emerged from the focus group and free text answers in the survey:

1. Deterioration of health and mental wellbeing (Unable to afford a healthy diet)

Responses revealed that local people are finding it harder to maintain a healthy diet since the cost-of-living crisis. Some members of our community have restricted diets because of an intolerance or health condition. They expressed that such foods like gluten free or healthier options are not available at their food bank and they are just too expensive to buy from the shops. This can mean that their health condition is likely to get worse affecting them both physically and even mentally. Here are some comments from them:

'..cause I lost my disability premium I can't afford to keep to my special diet and I can end up being really ill'

'As I have autistic children the food vouchers make their strict diet easier as they don't eat food bank food'

2. Feelings of shame

Many people in our community need to use food banks. Contrary to the idea that people are simply taking advantage of free food at food banks, we found that many people who have to make use of them feel a sense of shame. Eligibility for food bank use is assessed, which can be a humiliating process for many people.

'I feel personally embarrassed to attend food banks, although times have got harder I do use them'

'I feel ashamed to go to a food bank, un-entitled'.

3. Reduced opportunities: Inability to realise short and long term aspirations

Responses from both survey questions and focus group discussion have made it clear that people in our community want to work to improve their lives. Despite this determination, local people feel despondent and demoralised. The cost-of-living crisis is further thwarting their future aspirations, from the ability to buy children birthday presents to owning their own home.

'Cannot buy Christmas presents, afford to heat my home or pay my main bills, such as rent and council tax.'

'I wanted to open my own business after finishing college and feel like that is now impossible as I cannot save up the funds to set my business up'

'I am a migrant health worker on a skilled visa. Given the current economic climate with everything soaring high, income is not keeping its pace, plus the political climate has gone a bit migrant hateful, I am considering to move to another country again'.

4. Unable to save for a rainy day

Members of our community expressed that it is impossible to save and so when things need to be repaired or replaced they have no available funds to do this.

'I need help, I'm living with a leaking roof and I suffer with depression badly'

'I can't afford to get essential things fixed in my home-like the electrics, broken taps, cooker and a working kitchen.'

5. Poor people pay more

During our focus group it was evident there was frustration that people struggling to pay their energy bills were further penalized by the repayment tariffs on meters. In addition, it was noted that when shopping in supermarkets typical '2 for 1' deals and bulk buying are beyond affordability for people on low incomes, thus annual cost for regular food and household items are increased.

'It's the same with my gas and electricity right, at the moment I'm just over or under £1000 in debt with Scottish Power so they've got me on a debt meter in my flat. Every time I put on 30 quid they take 20 of it so it leaves me 10.'

'And it goes quicker when it's an emergency as well you're on a higher rate'

Multisensory outputs

When presenting our results to stakeholders we have used multisensory ways of presenting the data. Some of these outputs used touch: tactile graphs, and weight (hessian bags were filled with an amount of rice proportional to the number of responses to a question option).

Another way in which we represented our findings was with sonification of results. This is where each response to a survey question is given a different tone, and responses are heard as a series of tones. We would love you to listen to some examples of this that are available here: [Wellsbourne Healthcare CIC - audio files](#) | [SCDC - We believe communities matter](#). We used sonification for 5 questions and from this created a composition that combines the different question outputs. The purpose of the composition is not to be able to pinpoint specific individual data points, but as a piece to listen to in the context of the rest of our results and the more granular findings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the 1980s the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher coined her phrase *"there is no such thing as society"*, putting the onus on individual responsibility. Throughout our consultations we have heard a very different story from service users and volunteers at various local community groups. Our recommendations centre on this common theme: **people need people**.

Recommendation 1: Community activity needs to be properly funded, supported and invested in.

Quotes from our community's focus group show the value of community activity and why it needs longer term funding. Community projects depend on short-term funding applications and jumping through bureaucratic hoops to re-imagine projects proven to deliver to communities. There needs to be more trust in organizations' decision making to continue essential community projects such as after school groups, warm space cafes offering advice and support, and community gardens.

'I would rather help the community that the last four years have helped me and give it back to them. By volunteering, I'm working for a million pounds a month rather than whatever they are gonna give me.'

'I think things here work really well, considering like other places. I don't know. Like it's sort of like in other communities, it's just everyone's sort of on their own. Whereas, here, it's probably, like it's really good, at sort of supporting each other.'

We found examples of practice that can help particularly with themes 1 & 2 from our work ('unable to afford a healthy diet' & 'feelings of shame'). The Crew Club in Whitehawk and Bristol Estate Community Room have a policy of running a 'Community Larder' whereby local people can help themselves to what they need and are encouraged to take fresh food that will otherwise go off. This takes away some of those feelings of shame around accepting charity.

There is also a community garden at Wellsbourne Healthcare CIC, run by volunteers. The focus of the garden is to grow food and to create a therapeutic environment for patients and the local community. Gardener Jools Lawton is an experienced grower and committed to growing growers. As responses to our survey showed that many people were unable to access fresh fruit and vegetables, this project has the potential for a far-reaching effect on the community.

Recommendation 2: Systems of welfare services need to be designed around people.

Our community has made it clear that many of the welfare service systems of support are not working for people. Universal credit for those working and unemployed, leave too many unable to provide for themselves or their families. People are struggling with a system that puts them off working.

'Because a lot of people that do work are actually worse off than when you don't work because you have to pay more'.

Working people are struggling to pay for prescriptions. Wellsbourne Healthcare CIC have provided a donation pot to help those who are working and cannot afford their prescriptions.

'And it doesn't really make sense that people on Universal Credit get free prescriptions, but then people on really low paying jobs don't, because you still bring about the same money.. '

One participant told us they had to leave a job they loved because they couldn't afford to travel to work and pay bills. Another participant spoke about having to make a decision to leave a stressful job to prevent deterioration of mental health and to afford medication. The cost-of-living crisis has deepened the struggle of our community in an area of the city, already suffering disproportionate deprivation.

Recommendation 3: We need a national conversation on Public Spending

This work has shown the value of community involvement in national conversations to address poverty and punishing policies. There is a need for citizens assemblies and other participatory democracy.

In 2020, The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's annual UK Poverty report (published immediately before the pandemic) began with the following statement: "for a decent standard of living, we all need

security and stability in our lives. Secure housing, a reliable income, and support when things get difficult. For too many of us, there is no such security. Millions of people in the UK are struggling to get by, leading insecure and precarious lives, held back from improving their living standards.

It's time to take action on poverty and put this right."

Well, has anything changed for the better? From the evidence we have gathered locally, it's a big NO! Does it look like things are going to get better in the near future? Again, a big NO! In fact, things have got even worse since 2020.

To improve the health and wellbeing and provide equality of opportunity to such disadvantaged communities as East Brighton and the many others throughout the UK will require significant change at national level. Work needs to be paid at a rate so that those working a full week can more than survive, and those who cannot work or cannot find work will be supported so that they can also more than just exist. The Minimum Standard Income (MIS) is a level of income is required in order to Live Well in the UK. In 2023, Loughborough University's Centre for Research in Social Policy estimated that a single person needed to earn £29,500 to have an acceptable standard of living, up from £25,000 in 2022. A couple with two children needed to earn £50,000, compared to £44,500 in 2022. It is certain that the MIS will need to be greater for 2024 in order for people to live well.

In light of these reports and the local evidence we have provided there has to be change nationally. We can only do so much locally because if things are broken at the top it means that we are fighting the system all the time and this will continue as it has done for countless decades if there is no change at National Level.

CONCLUSION

We all want the best for our families, but it is a fact that on the whole that those that have most resources receive the greatest opportunities to live a good and fulfilling life. Before the cost-of-living crisis, access to these basic needs were already limited for people of our and other underserved communities, and now due to the cost-of-living crisis people in these communities are not managing to maintain good mental and physical health, which means that the potential and aspirations of these individuals are being squandered. Where is the investment in the people of such communities which will assist them to prosper in life as those who prosper because of their superior availability to resources and support. This is an Injustice. The lack of fairness for all is an abomination and is not the mark of a Civilised Society.