



# **CEREDIGION TACKLING HARDSHIP STRATEGY 2020 - 2023**

## **PROGRESS REPORT MARCH 2022**

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## Introduction

This report sets out the steps taken by Ceredigion Public Services Board (PSB) to provide a co-ordinated response to the increased risk of hardship in Ceredigion due to the impact of Covid-19. It outlines the work that partners and colleagues have delivered in 2021-22 to maximise support with essential living costs, gain optimal physical and emotional wellbeing and to ensure supportive and connected communities throughout Ceredigion.

The Tackling Hardship Strategy 2020-22 was published in August 2020 as a successor to Ceredigion Combatting Poverty Strategy 2016-20. It was agreed that the strategy will be extended to 2023 to bring it into line with Ceredigion PSB Local Well-being Plan which comes to an end in 2023.

Three key objectives of Ceredigion Tackling Hardship Strategy:

- To develop a **shared understanding** with partner agencies of the evolving impact of COVID-19 on hardship in Ceredigion through the collation and analysis of data.
- To co-ordinate and **consolidate collaborative efforts** with partner agencies in order to promote and take advantage of all available help and assistance
- To **identify gaps** in support and evolving hardship needs in order to develop early effective intervention that will strengthen individual and community resilience as we adjust to the impact of COVID-19.

An action plan is delivered by a range of partners and public sector teams, listed at Appendix B. The Action Plan is divided into 3 separate pillars for implementation:



We wish to acknowledge the commitment and support that colleagues and partners have demonstrated and thank them for their continued recognition of the importance of working collectively to tackle hardship in Ceredigion.

## The Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010

Section 2 of the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010 puts a statutory duty on Welsh authorities to prepare and publish a strategy that will contribute to the eradication of child poverty in Wales. The broad aims for contributing to the eradication of poverty are:

- to increase income for households with children;
- to ensure that children are not materially deprived;
- to promote and facilitate paid employment for parents of children;
- to provide parents of children with the skills necessary for paid employment;
- to reduce inequalities in educational attainment between children;
- to support parenting of children;
- to reduce inequalities in health between children and between parents of children;
- to ensure that all children grow up in decent housing;
- to ensure that all children grow up in safe and cohesive communities;
- to reduce inequalities in participation in cultural, sporting and leisure activities between children and between parents of children;
- to help young people participate effectively in education and training;
- to help young people take advantage of opportunities for employment;
- to help young people participate effectively and responsibly in the life of their communities.

Public Services Boards may publish their strategy as an integral part of their Local Well-being Plan. However, Ceredigion Public Services Board has chosen to publish a separate strategy in order to keep a specific focus on issues relating to poverty in Ceredigion.

The Tackling Hardship Strategy is monitored by Ceredigion PSB Poverty Sub-group which meets four times per year. Matters relating to Child Poverty are scrutinised by the Children & Young People Services Provider Forum that meets one week before the PSB Poverty Sub-group in order that issues can be escalated to the Poverty Sub-group immediately.

# 1

## ESSENTIAL LIVING COSTS

*(Help for those experiencing financial hardship)*

Financial support was offered directly to individuals and businesses who were struggling. This included a focus on training and employment, so that the local workforce was ready and able to return to work when Covid restrictions eased and that local employers were ready to reopen for business.

### **Porth Cymorth Cynnar: Early Help service**

The team responded to **714** referrals for practical and financial support. Lists of food deliveries, food banks, grants and other resources were published on the Council website. **250** winter coats were provided to young people aged 0-25.

### **Porth Gofal: Financial Assistance and Social Housing**

The Warm Homes Fund, ECO Flex are administered by the Local Authority to help tackle fuel poverty and improve energy efficiency; the Local Authority also signposts to the Welsh government Nest scheme. Some grant schemes were suspended during lockdown which resulted in fewer installations, however: **246** first time central heating systems were installed, **50** broken boilers were replaced, and **433** applications were received for ECO Flex grants during the year.

**1,405** applications were made for Social Housing and **12%** of applicants cited 'financial concerns' as one of their reasons for needing assistance (14% in 2020-21). Increasing construction costs and a limited supply of contractors has resulted in a challenging year in terms of developing and delivering affordable homes. Despite this, **132** affordable housing units were delivered in 2021-22 (68 for the rental market, 8 for 'rent to own' scheme and 56 Extra Care housing units).

Care Leavers were given additional hardship financial support which has ensured that many have been able to keep their tenancies.

### **Housing Support Provider: Care Society**

Practical support is offered to those who are homeless or potentially homeless – food parcels, income maximisation, advice on the Social Housing Register and temporary or private rented housing options. The **57** units of temporary accommodation are generally fully occupied but it is becoming more difficult for people to afford service charges and other essential costs due to rising prices. People are generally struggling with mounting debt.

### **Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction Scheme**

**5,617** people were in receipt of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction Scheme in March 2022, a 6% decrease from the previous year. The average speed of processing new claims was just under **19** days and **7** days for any changes needed.

Despite the additional pressures in prioritising the Covid 19 Self Isolation Support Scheme and Winter Fuel Payments the speed of processing averages remain within the Housing Benefit UK averages for 21/22. **£337,443** worth of Discretionary Housing Payments have been paid out to support those experiencing financial difficulty and help safeguard tenancies.

### **Free School Meals and Pupil Deprivation Grant**

Incorporating Free School Meal assessments alongside other benefits has streamlined the process for those entitled. Free School Meals claimants have continued to increase from 953 (Sept 2019) to **1,783** (March 2022). All schools now operate a cashless catering system. BACS payments or vouchers for £19.50 per week per pupil eligible for free school meals were provided over each school holiday (this scheme is due to end on 31/08/2022). Ongoing payments of Pupil Deprivation Grant for school uniform and equipment is provided to relevant year groups.

### **Childcare**

Childcare places have continued to fall. This is a real concern, particular in light of the recent announcement of free childcare for all 2 year olds, and the reliance of the working population on childcare. **1,596** childcare places were available in March 2022 (a reduction of 74 places since March 2020). **£364,472** was made available to the sector to alleviate the impact of the pandemic and to support the delivery of the Childcare Offer.

### **Training, Employment & the Local Economy**

The Council's Employment Support Team has expanded. **42** of their clients were successful with job outcomes and **18** people completed employability qualifications, including HGV qualifications, to support their job searching process.

Employers now regularly attend the two Jobcentres in Ceredigion to offer face to face job interviews to DWP customers. Kickstart has been embraced by employers in the area and a range of vacancies have been made available to 18 to 24 years old DWP customers. This provides vital evidence of employability when the young person goes on to a different employer.

The Council's Public Protection Team have advised a wide range of businesses on measures required to comply with coronavirus restrictions. **2,659** advisory visits have been made to premises this year.

### **Ceredigion Citizens Advice**

Accessible services continued through the year as well as energy advice training for frontline staff and members of the public via video conferencing. **832** individuals were helped with 5,655 enquires.

**£528,840** of additional income was secured for clients and **£132,024** worth of debts written off. The largest area of benefits work is benefits for people with a disability and the advice service responded to over 800 requests for help with Personal

Independent Payments (PIP), Attendance Allowance (AA) and Disability Living Allowance (DLA).

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## PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

*(Help for those experiencing exhaustion, stress and anxiety)*

Targeted and universal support was offered to individuals who were experiencing stress, exhaustion and anxiety as a result of the pandemic. The longer term aim is to increase the amount of support available to improve emotional and mental well-being and to provide respite to those who needed it.

### Policy and Performance Service

Ceredigion County Council Corporate Well-being Objectives were reviewed and amended to focus attention on the need to recover from the pandemic, in terms of supporting the economy, safely re-opening services and protecting people from poverty.

### Ceredigion Family Centre Network

**637** families were supported by the **Family Centre Network**, initially online, but as restrictions eased, through face to face sessions. **420** resource and activity packs were distributed to families and **32** referrals were made for targeted support from Team around the Family, Speech and Language team, Mind, Citizens Advice Bureau, Childcare for Employment (PaCE), Flying Start and Carers' support.

### Schools Services

Well-being has been a priority in the majority of schools' Development Plans. Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs) are teaching assistants trained to provide emotional and social skills support to children. **95%** of schools now have a trained ELSA. Face to face school counselling resumed in September 2021 and **194** pupils have engaged since the start of term.

**DASH Ceredigion** offer recreation opportunities for disabled children/young people and respite for families. The lack of out of school childcare provision led to a big decline in use of Ymuno support, with no new referrals and only **3** children receiving support in 2021-22. The pandemic resulted in a reduced number of DASHAway Weekends during the year and a term time youth club for smaller groups of young people with a disability. **36** children attended Sumer Playscheme activity days and **2** children received one-to-one support.

### Hywel Dda University Health Board and Porth Cymorth Cynnar: Carer support

**179** Carers were supported and **537** applications were received for the Carers Fund. 139 Adult Carer cards and 11 Young Carer cards have been issued, giving those who carry the card an easy way of verifying their caring responsibilities, access to

benefits and discounts and priority shopping times during the pandemic. The Carers Unit Spring magazine focused on ways to improve Mental Health and well-being.

### **Porth Cymorth Cynnar: Support and Prevention**

Over 300 wellbeing packs were distributed to children and young people as part of the Winter of Wellbeing initiative. Outreach and detached youth work has been developed in partnership with Dyfed Powys Police and Choices. **498** young people were supported this year: 60% due to challenging behaviour, 20% for reasons of emotional and mental wellbeing and 20% for reasons of substance misuse, social isolation or other.

Ten local voluntary youth organisations were funded to develop emotional and mental wellbeing support and provision for young people. **143** young people benefitted from a range of indoor and outdoor creative arts, music and drama activities.

### **Area 43**

North and South Ceredigion GP Clusters have commissioned Area 43 to provide a counselling service to young people aged 13-30. They also offer emotional support to young people in Cardigan and opened a youth café to provide a place for relaxation and also as a site for information, signposting to services and direct service provision for young people aged 14-25.

### **Hywel Dda University Health Board: Community Development Outreach**

**823** people engaged with the team and various public health messages are now available in 19 different languages. **70** individuals were signposted or referred for specific health issues and **38** people received one-to-one support.

A new text-based service – ChatHealth – is now available to support the emotional and mental well-being of young people aged 11-19. The service is cited as very accessible and was used by a homeless young person to access support without the need for referral by a GP or other professional. Kooth is another new online counselling and emotional well-being service for young people aged 11-18 years.

### **Schools and Culture: Theatr Felinfach**

A range of online drama sessions were offered for children and young people during the period of lockdown. Older members of the Fun and Leisure group took part in a Keeping in Touch postcard project. The Christmas pantomime was successful, despite Covid restrictions, offering 266 participation opportunities and attracting audiences of over 800 people. Face to face participatory work began in earnest in Spring 2022 with opportunities for young people to work with professional artists in art, dance, history and drama. Over **13,000** on-line and face to face opportunities to participate were provided during the last 6 months of the year.

### **Porth Cymorth Cynnar, Well-being Centres**



National Exercise Referral Service (NERS) activities recommenced in Autumn 2021. Clients are now offered face to face and virtual activities. A phased approach to the reintroduction of the scheme has been adopted in response to the coronavirus transmission rates in the county and numbers able to attend activity sessions have gradually increased in response to Welsh Government guidelines. **150** people are now regularly active on the scheme but there is a waiting list of 105 clients.

A new category of “Passport Membership” has been introduced for individuals in receipt of a means tested benefit at a cost of £15 per month individual and £30 a month for families which provides unlimited access to fitness suite/exercise classes / swimming at council operated facilities.

### **Environmental Services**

Improvements to walking and cycling routes have continued. Schemes delivered include Gwbert Road, Cardigan, Lampeter University path upgrade, Waunfawr footway scheme, Penglais secondary school traffic calming and Llwyn yr Eos primary school footway upgrades. The Active Travel Network Map Review was approved, and the Future Route maps submitted to Welsh Government by March 2022

### **Porth Cynnal – Mental Health & Substance Misuse Services**

**116** active cases were open to the Mental Health team (Jan-Dec 2021) and over **137** Mental Health Act assessments/ activities were undertaken. **121** packages of support, domiciliary care and placements were provided. The ‘Breathing Space’ scheme provides financial respite from debts when someone is in mental health crisis or an inpatient. This scheme is promoted widely by the team.

The Substance Misuse team has a fluctuating case load of about **50** clients. The majority of their clients are experiencing alcohol misuse; there has been an increase in the number of older adults that are identified by Alcohol Liaison Nurses in the hospital. **61** referrals were received (2021-22) and 18 cases were closed. 14 showed an improvement at closure, 2 had stayed the same and 2 had worsened.

### **Housing Support Provider: Care Society**

As a consequence of the pandemic coupled with the growing cost of living crisis, mental health issues are manifest. A lot more people are needing help and support and there are problems with recruitment. Access to specialist services to help directly with these issues is still extremely difficult.

### **Penparcau Community Forum**

Over 100 bags of food can be collected for pick up outside Penparcau Hub. Deliveries of 35-45 bags of food, flowers and company are made to those who need it around Penparcau. The most vulnerable receive a visit and a phone call at least once a week on top of the food deliveries. They now operate 7 days a week and

have signed up to the CAB scheme which has installed a phone and a laptop at the Centre in order for people to contact CAB remotely.

**3**

## COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

*(Making sure that people are able to access services)*

The following activities were designed to foster local community response teams and identify barriers to accessing services. The longer term aim was to further strengthen community support networks and address barriers faced by those unable to access services online or by telephone.

### **Porth Cymorth Cynnar: Early Help and CAVO**

Ceredigion 'Connect to Kindness' campaign has built up gradually. The social media group now has **676** members, 11 'Kindness Connectors' have been recruited and 26 activities are registered on the Ceredigion 'Connect' page. **1,735** national and local services for Ceredigion citizens were listed on Dewis Cymru website in March 2022 (a slight decrease from 1,811 resources in September 2021).

**238** individuals signed up to the delta Wellbeing Project that supports them to remain independent in their own home for longer and **17** tablets were distributed to clients. **16** iPads were loaned to parents with pre-school children

### **Ceredigion Council Customer Contact**

Cash offices remain closed in March 2022. Ceredigion Libraries are open for Click and Collect and access to PCs by appointment. Access has been reduced to 60 minutes to allow for Covid restrictions. A comprehensive online library service is available, but the aim was to extend availability of internet on Library vans and to extend computer appointments to 2 hours.

### **Porth Cymorth Cynnar: Community Well-being & Learning**

Dysgu Bro and Hyfforddiant Ceredigion Training started term online. Free sessions to access online learning were offered and digital kit loaned to learners who needed it. The aim was to work with ALN service for schools to provide transitional learning for those with additional learning needs, this has not been possible however as the Centres are still closed.

The tender process for building work on Lampeter Wellbeing Centre is nearing completion. It's anticipated that building work will commence in July 2022 and completed in early 2023. 3D Layout Plans of the Wellbeing Centre are on display in Lampeter Leisure Centre.

### **Porth Cymorth Cynnar: Support & Intervention**

The mobile youth outreach provision has engaged with 4 communities and **32** young people who had been identified as at risk due to their current living situation and associated behaviours.

The team continues to work collaboratively with Ceredigion Actif, Sport Wales, Ceredigion Training and other key partners to provide opportunities for projects, activities, tasters and workshops, for example: taster day sessions in carpentry, mechanics, hairdressing, beauty and plumbing for year 11 leavers and post-16 provision with Ceredigion Training.

### **Schools and Culture Services**

Pupils suffering from Covid related anxiety or that were self-isolating were provided with learning resources for home learning. All schools were provided with a digital revision aid to help them prepare for an unexpected closure and absenteeism is closely monitored in order to offer the appropriate support as soon as possible. Staffing issues presented the greatest challenge due to a severe lack of supply staff. Some schools and many classes were closed for periods during this time frame. Every possible measure was taken to keep schools open.

### **CCC, Economy & Regeneration – Digital Development**

While Ceredigion has seen improvements in digital infrastructure over the past 12 months and some areas experience some of the quickest broadband speeds in the UK, there are areas of the County that still fall below the levels of other areas of Wales and the UK in regard to superfast broadband and mobile connectivity.

26.5% of the region currently has access to Ultrafast Broadband (100mbps+) compared to Wales (48%) and the UK (68%), while 8.5% of premises in Ceredigion cannot access a connection of more than 10Mbps compared to only 2.25% for Wales and 1.8% for the UK experiencing this issue.

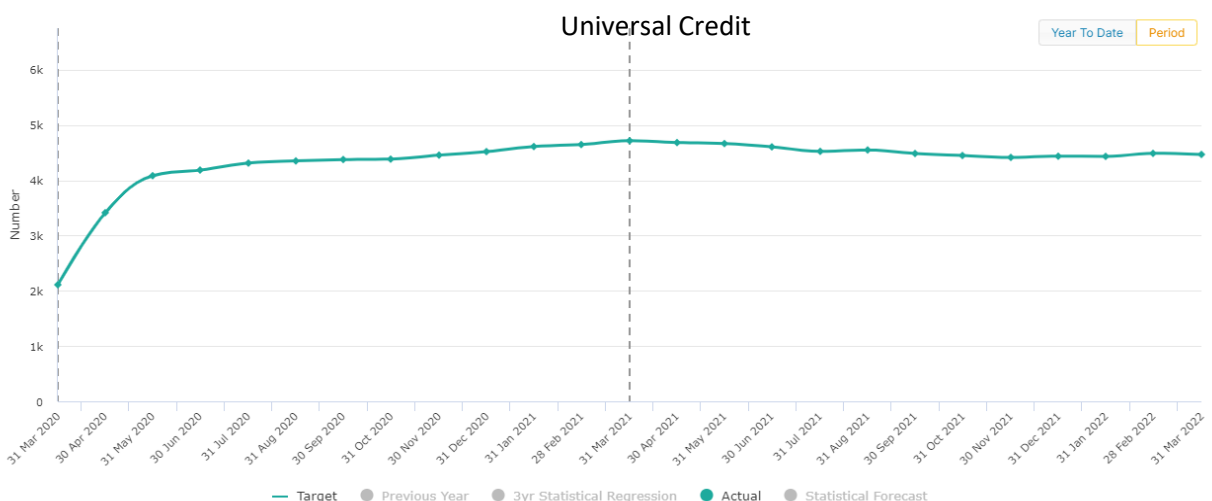
Despite these figures Ceredigion currently has 26.5% coverage of Fibre to the Premises (FTTP), allowing download speeds of up to 1gbps (1000mbps), which is greater than the Wales average of 26% and the highest level for a rural Local Authority and several other Local Authorities in Wales,

## What the Data tells us - did we make a difference?

A great deal of support has been provided by colleagues and partners to mitigate the impact of hardship caused by the pandemic. We must however rely on hard data to tell us if we are making a difference. A series of data dashboards have been created that enable the PSB Poverty sub-group to monitor the efficacy of the support provided. These capture live data from websites such as DWP and Office for National Statistics. The dashboards will be demonstrated at a national showcase event in Autumn 2022, hosted by Welsh Government and Wales Centre for Public Policy.

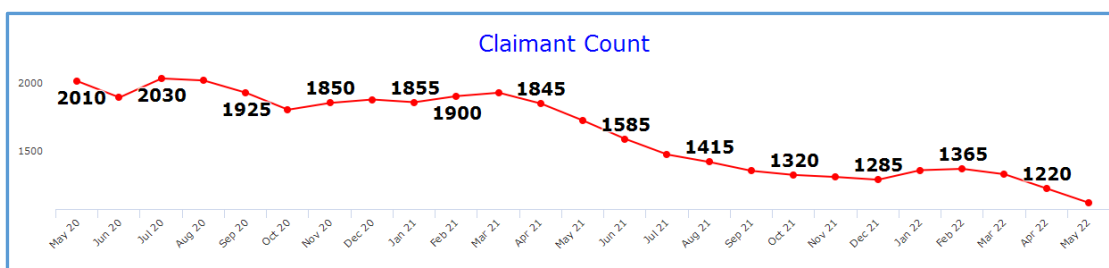
### Universal Credit

The number of people on Universal Credit in Ceredigion saw a sharp increase in March/April 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic. They continued to increase gradually to March 2021 but numbers have now started to decrease. The figure at March 2022 remains 112% higher than recorded in March 2020. It is likely that, with the increased cost of living, the number of people in receipt of Universal Credit will not reduce in the near future.

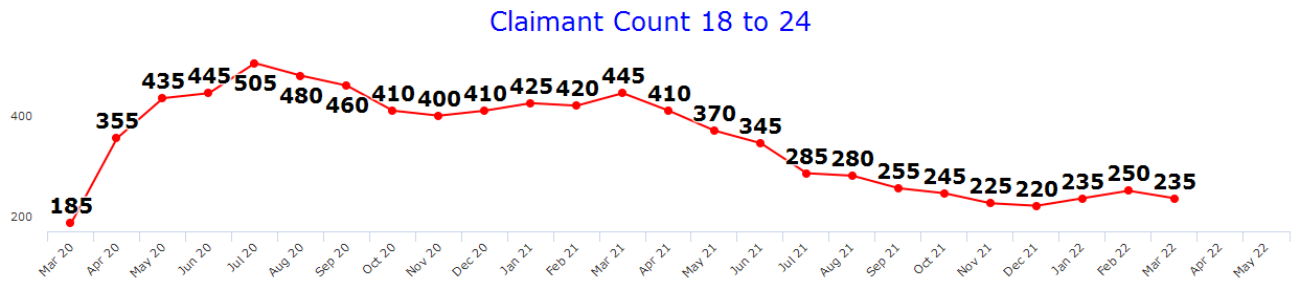


### Claimant Count

The Claimant Count is a measure of the number of people claiming benefits principally for the reason of being unemployed. The number of claimants also increased when the pandemic first impacted the UK, and, similar to Universal Credit figures, had decreased significantly by March 2022, however they remain 60% higher than in March 2020.



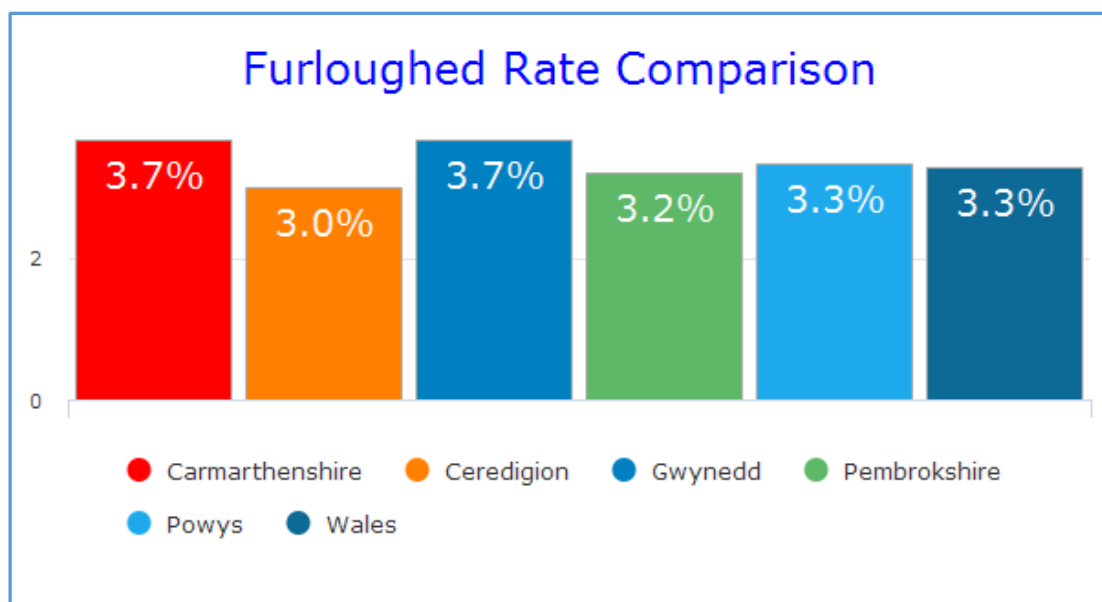
## Youth Employment



The impact of Covid on young people has been of particular concern and so we monitor the number of 18-24 year old claimants. Previously, this cohort was showing a similar trend to the overall claimant count, however it now shows a faster return to employment rate; with a percentage change of 27% more claimants between March 2020 and March 2021. 185 young people were claiming benefits for reason of being unemployed in March 2020, this increased to 445 young people at March 2021 but reduced to 235 at March 2022.

## Furlough Scheme

At its height in July 2020, 20% of those eligible for the furlough scheme in Ceredigion had taken it up. (4,700 of 23,700 eligible individuals). The scheme began to taper in July 2021 and employers were asked to contribute towards the cost of furloughed employees' wages. At the close of the scheme in September 2021, 3% of those eligible for Furlough were still supported by the scheme (a total of 700 people). This is generally in line with the mid-Wales region.



It is more difficult to measure impact on well-being locally. Since March 2020, the Welsh Government has funded a survey of public views on the coronavirus (Covid 19). The study is conducted online by Ipsos MORI with adults in Wales aged 16 to 74. We are confident that attitudes nationally are generally reflected at a local level.

People's perceived threat of Covid has diminished significantly. In March 2020 78% of people felt that Covid posed a high or very high threat to the country. Understandably, this had reduced to 29% by March 2022. Interestingly, people's perceived threat of Covid to themselves was much lower. 43% felt that Covid posed a high or very high threat to themselves in March 2020, and this had reduced to 20% in March 2022.

People were also asked if they felt that they would be able to pay bills one month from now. In April 2020, 31% of people were extremely or very concerned about being able to pay their bills. The percentage fluctuated between 18% and 31% over the next two years but March 2022 saw a high of 35%. This is when the cost of food and fuel had started to increase, and it is apparent that factors other than the pandemic have started to impact on people in Wales.

The National Survey for Wales is run by the Office for National Statistics on behalf of the Welsh Government. The survey runs continuously across Wales each year, covering around 12,000 people aged 16 and over. People were asked whether there were plenty of people they can rely on when they have problems. The pandemic may have helped people to feel more supported, since 69% felt that they had people they could rely on in 2019-20 and this had increased to 78% in 2021-22. 22% of people still felt that they 'did not' or 'more or less' had someone to rely on, however.

Finally, child poverty in Ceredigion is higher than average and has seen the second highest increase nationally since 2014-15. In Ceredigion 3,459 children are living in poverty. This is a key regional issue affecting Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire as well. The proportion of all three areas in West Wales is higher than average, and all three have increased since 2014-15.

## Conclusion and Findings

The percentage of applicants to the Housing Register who cited 'financial concerns' as one of their reasons for needing assistance has reduced very slightly, from 14% in 2020-21 to 12% in 2021-22. However, there are reports that it is becoming more difficult for people to afford service charges and other essential costs due to rising prices. People are generally struggling with mounting debt and the percentage of people in Wales who are concerned about being able to pay bills one month from now reached a high of 35% in March 2022.

Support with benefits for people with a disability is Ceredigion Citizen Advice service's largest area of work.

The scheme that funds the payment of £19.50 per week per pupil eligible for free school meals during school holidays is due to end on 31/08/2022. Child poverty in Ceredigion is higher than average and has seen the second highest increase nationally since 2014-15.

The number of Universal Credit claimants in March 2022 remains 112% higher than recorded in March 2020. It is likely that, with the increased cost of living, the number of people in receipt of Universal Credit will not reduce in the near future. The number of people claiming for reason of unemployment remains 60% higher than in March 2020.

Childcare places have continued to fall. This is a real concern, particular in light of the recent announcement of free childcare for all 2 year olds, and the reliance of the working population on childcare. The pandemic and lack of out of School Childcare provision is also impacting on access that disabled children have to childcare, recreation and leisure opportunities.

There are 105 people on the waiting list of the National Exercise Referral Service (NERS) and there has been an increase in the number of older adults experiencing alcohol misuse.

498 young people were supported by the Council's Support and Prevention service this year: 60% due to challenging behaviour, 20% for reasons of emotional and mental wellbeing and 20% for reasons of substance misuse, social isolation or other. A lot more people are needing help and support with mental health issues, and it is difficult to recruit staff, which makes it more difficult for providers to respond to the issues. Access to specialist services to help directly with these issues is still extremely difficult.

Increasing constructions costs and a limited supply of contractors is creating challenges in terms of developing and delivering affordable homes.

Staffing issues presented the greatest challenge to schools remaining open due to a severe lack of supply staff.

Cash offices remain closed in March 2022. Access to libraries in March 2022 was limited to 60 minutes to allow for Covid restrictions. A comprehensive online library service is available, but the aim was to extend availability of internet on Library vans and to extend computer appointments to 2 hours.

The number of national and local services for Ceredigion citizens listed on Dewis Cymru website in March 2022 decreased a little, from 1,811 resources in September 2021 to 1,735 resources in March 2022.

While Ceredigion has seen improvements in digital infrastructure over the past 12 months and some areas experience some of the quickest broadband speeds in the UK, there are areas of the County that still fall below the levels of other areas of Wales and the UK in regard to superfast broadband and mobile connectivity.

## Next Steps

1. Continue to develop the data dashboards to ensure we have a shared understanding of the evolving impact of hardship in Ceredigion through the collation and analysis of data.
2. Review the list of contributing partners (see Appendix B). We know that there are opportunities to work collaboratively with more partner agencies in order to promote and take advantage of all available help and assistance.
3. The action plan is a live document designed to be updated during the life of the Hardship Strategy. It's anticipated that poverty levels will continue to rise in Ceredigion, but as a result of the rising cost of living rather than the direct impact of Covid. This is likely to require a change of focus and the action plan will be reviewed to reflect this.
4. Ensure that the work of this sub-group feeds into the Local Well-being Plan 2023-28



## Appendix A: Contributing Partners

Hywel Dda University Health Board, Partnerships, Diversity & Inclusion
Ceredigion County Council, Porth Cymorth Cynnar, Community Wellbeing & Learning
Ceredigion County Council, Finance & Procurement
Area 43
Ceredigion County Council, Porth Cynnal
Plant Dewi, Family Centre Network (Borth, Llandysul, Lampeter, Tregaron)
Ceredigion County Council, Porth Gofal
Cymdeithas Gofal The Care Society
Ceredigion County Council, Policy, Performance & Public Protection
Ceredigion County Council, Economy & Regeneration
Ceredigion County Council, Schools & Culture
Ceredigion County Council, Customer Contact
Ceredigion County Council, Highways & Environmental Services
DASH
Department of Work & Pensions (DWP)
Coleg Ceredigion
Ceredigion Citizens Advice
Penparcau Community Forum
Ceredigion Association of Voluntary Organisations (CAVO)