

Three Rivers Community Strategy

“Stable Economy” Report

1. Summary

1.1 Discussions were held to gain insight into the issues facing residents around economic stability. Stable Economy is one of four themes of the Three Rivers Community Strategy. The strategic objectives for Stable Economy are:

- Support our residents through the cost of living crisis
- Work with local businesses to upskill the workforce
- Promote local employment and volunteering opportunities

1.2 This report summarises feedback gathered from partners through engagement sessions held with organisations that support residents across Three Rivers and presents recommendations for next steps.

1.3 Discussions were held at the:

- Three Rivers Information Partnership
- Youth Strategy Partnership
- South Oxhey Community Network Forum.

1.4 Further discussions were held with; Services for Young People; the Watford Job Centre (DWP); Watford and Three Rivers Trust; and Citizens Advice Service Three Rivers.

1.5 Discussions focused on four key areas:

- Emerging themes with clients
- Employment and skill building initiatives that have worked well.
- Opportunities for greater collaboration.
- Whether sufficient information is available to residents and partner organisations.

2. Emerging Themes

2.1 Partner feedback was highly consistent across engagement sessions, identifying recurring themes relating to employment barriers for residents.

The most frequently raised themes were:

Theme	Mentioned in
Employment/work barriers	6/6 discussions

Theme	Mentioned in
Information/communication	6/6 discussions
Signposting between organisations	6/6 discussions
Digital exclusion	4/6 discussions
Cost of living/financial hardship	4/6 discussions
Skills/training	4/6 discussions
Housing	2/6 discussions

2.2 Employment / Work Barriers

Partners reported that employment remains a significant challenge to residents. Whilst many residents are in work, wages are often insufficient to meet rising living costs and insecure employment, such as zero hour contracts or part time work continues to negatively affect financial stability.

Young people are also facing barriers to get into work, such as the limited availability of work experience, reduced motivation and confidence and a lack of soft skills such as communication and time management.

There was also recognition that many residents are seeking volunteering or upskilling opportunities rather than immediate and full-time employment, particularly older residents and those approaching retirement, highlighting a desire as well as a need for accessible learning opportunities in the community.

2.3 Information and Communication

Access to clear and accessible information and effective communication was identified as a consistent issue. Residents can experience difficulties understanding household bills, benefit changes and information provided by services.

Language barriers, low confidence and difficulties navigating online systems can make communication for residents with services more challenging. Partners also reported that residents can delay seeking support, even when services are available, because they are unsure where to go, lack confidence in asking for help or find services difficult to engage with.

2.4 Signposting Between Organisations

The discussions highlighted the importance of effective signposting between organisations to ensure residents can access the right support at the right time. Difficulties navigating services or uncertainty about where to seek help can result in residents delaying support until they are in crisis, especially financial crisis.

Effective communication and stronger links and promotion between organisations were therefore identified as important in supporting residents to access appropriate financial, employment, housing and wider support with minimal delay.

2.5 Digital Exclusion

Digital exclusion continues to affect residents of all ages and can restrict access to employment opportunities and essential services. Barriers include the affordability of devices and internet access, lack of digital skills, language barriers when using technology - especially free technology such as library computers as these are often programmed in English and can impact confidence in using online systems if English is not someone's first language.

Increasing digitalisation of public services can prevent residents from accessing digital support independently, resulting in greater demand for in person one-to-one assistance. However, the DWP stated that having a video appointment trial group improved their customer engagement.

2.6 Cost of Living and Financial Hardship

The impact of the high cost of living continues to be evident across all client groups and themes. Organisations reported increasing demand for hardship support, food vouchers and financial assistance. Clients frequently struggle with budgeting, understanding household bills and managing benefit changes, with many becoming overwhelmed before seeking support. The cost of living was also identified as a factor contributing to employment and housing pressures, with households increasingly struggling to meet essential costs despite being in work.

2.7 Skills and Training

The discussions highlighted the importance of accessible skills development, training, volunteering and upskilling opportunities. For some residents, particularly young people, a lack of work experience and soft skills around confidence, timekeeping etc, can act as a barrier to employment and networking.

For older residents and those approaching retirement, opportunities to learn, develop skills and remain active and employed in the community were also identified as important. Partners also highlighted that what skill development and training is available is not varied enough to positively impact a larger number of residents. For example, free courses are often focused on entry level skills and CV building and therefore aren't as beneficial to other residents who are in more advanced types of employment who may wish to retrain or upskill to a higher level.

2.8 Housing

Housing affordability remains a growing concern to the economic stability of residents. Partners highlighted rising private and social rents, limited housing availability and increasing housing insecurity as major destabilising factors. This affects both those in employment and those who are unemployed, with partners highlighting that many households, including dual-income households, simply cannot cover the rising cost of rent and utilities.

Whilst anticipated legislative changes may provide greater protection for renters, affordability remains a significant barrier for many households.

3. Initiatives that have worked well

3.1 Partners identified a number of successful initiatives and approaches.

Examples included:

- Step2Skills, ESOL provision and other adult learning programmes to upskill residents and provide them beneficial qualifications and experience.
- Healthy Hubs and community-based engagement projects to support residents wellbeing.
- Youth hubs and client-led support models to support younger residents.
- Community supermarkets and hardship funding to support residents in economic crisis.
- Digital inclusion projects and practical IT support to encourage learning and empower residents.
- Financial inclusion initiatives, including budgeting support and hardship advice.
- Healthy food sessions (when attended), low-cost and upcycling courses.
- Partnership working between voluntary organisations, schools and community groups.

- Centralising the list of jobs available within the Jobcentre has reduced many barriers to application and has given an advantage to customers who don't have to compete with external applicants

3.2 Partners consistently highlighted that initiatives are most successful where they are delivered locally, are relationship-based and provide personalised support rather than relying solely on online information.

4. Opportunities for collaboration

4.1 A strong theme throughout the engagement was the need to strengthen collaboration between organisations.

Partners identified opportunities to:

- Develop a shared directory of services and referral pathways.
- Increase networking opportunities for frontline practitioners.
- Improve awareness of partner organisations and the support they provide.
- Create more opportunities for joint outreach at community venues, Healthy Hubs and local events.
- Share employment, volunteering and apprenticeship opportunities more effectively.
- Strengthen employer engagement, particularly for young people and care leavers.
- Improve communication between strategic partnerships and frontline delivery organisations to reduce duplication, a direct contact to relevant partners would be key in large organisations.

5. Overall observations

5.1 Across all engagement sessions there was a high degree of consistency in the issues identified by partners. Employment, accessible information and signposting and digital exclusion continue to be the most significant challenges affecting residents.

5.2 Partners demonstrated a strong willingness to collaborate more closely and identified improved communication, information sharing and coordinated outreach as key priorities. There is an opportunity to build on existing partnership networks to improve access to services, reduce duplication and ensure residents are able to access the right support at the right time.

Partners also generally felt that the required information exists but does not consistently reach those who need it.

5.3 Feedback highlighted that:

- Residents often only seek information when they reach crisis point.
- Many organisations are unaware of the full range of support available locally.
- Existing directories are not always well known or regularly used.
- Younger audiences increasingly receive information through short-form social media content, whereas older residents often rely on community groups, WhatsApp networks and face-to-face engagement.
- Traditional noticeboards and printed information have limited reach.
- More proactive communication and targeted outreach is required to improve awareness.

Overall, partners suggested that improving communication between organisations is likely to improve communication with residents, reducing duplication whilst increasing awareness of available support. Most partners also expressed they would be happy to cascade information to their network if they received it.

6. Recommendations

Proposed areas for partnership focus include:

6.1 Improving communication and access to support across Three Rivers.

Consider how information shared could be made clearer and more consistent amongst partners.

6.2 Identify local employment support

How can we bridge the gap and make the most of services available?

6.3 Young people

How can services establish and promote existing opportunities for young people to gain meaningful experiences?

6.4 Learning Opportunities

How can we support organisations providing learning opportunities and encourage residents to engage?

7. Next Steps for Connecting Three Rivers Board

7.1 Agree priorities

7.2 Establish a task group to focus on the agreed priorities

7.3 Connecting Three Rivers Board to identify additional partners for involvement in the task group