



# **Sunderland Alcohol Pathways Poverty Proofing® Case Study with Amanda Lowery**

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## Introduction

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**“Poverty Proofing® is like a pair of glasses we now keep on all the time - it’s the lens through which we view our work.”**

Children North East began the Poverty Proofing audit with Sunderland Alcohol Pathways in November 2023. Amanda Lowery (Chief Executive Officer NERAF) was engaged with the work from the beginning. NERAF (Northern Engagement Recovery from Addiction Foundation) is a charity based within Sunderland that works with individuals and their loved ones who are affected by substances or alcohol.



**Amanda Lowery (Chief Executive Officer NERAF)**

Sunderland has significantly worse alcohol indicators compared to England as a whole and it is estimated that there are many people who are alcohol dependent who are not in treatment. According to local health needs assessments, Sunderland’s “unmet need” - the share of people estimated to be dependent who are not receiving specialist treatment - is very high. In 2023/24, 80.0% of alcohol users in Sunderland had an unmet treatment need (i.e., not in treatment), compared to 77.6% in England.

This project aimed to take a multi-agency approach looking at pathways to alcohol treatment services and aimed to work with key individuals and organisations inclusive but not exhaustive of:

- ICP including Primary Care/ PCNs / GPs
- Aspire within Wear Recovery
- NERAF (Northern Engagement Recovery from Addiction Foundation)
- Alcohol Care Team at Sunderland Royal Hospital
- A&E
- VCSE

Every organisation was offered Poverty Proofing training and the opportunity for their staff and patients to be involved in the consultation. Through Poverty Proofing existing services, one of the key aims was to understand whether poverty was a factor contributing to the high percentage of people not taking up treatment services. Sunderland City Council Public Health were the lead organisation and supported the engagement of stakeholders into the

project. They provided project oversight and were the key point of contact for feedback and the report. It was agreed the work would focus on Southwick.

This project was fully funded by the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board's NENC ICB Healthier and Fairer Communities Programme.

## Links between poverty and alcohol

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Poverty is strongly linked to patterns of alcohol-related harm, with people living in deprived communities experiencing significantly higher rates of hospital admissions, addiction, and alcohol-related deaths, even when they consume similar or lower levels of alcohol than those in more affluent areas. This relationship is explained by the "alcohol harm paradox," highlighted by the Institute of Alcohol Studies, which shows that wider social and economic disadvantages; such as poor physical and mental health, unstable housing, unemployment, chronic stress, and limited access to support services - magnify the damaging effects of alcohol.

This is particularly evident in Sunderland and across the North East, where long-standing economic deprivation, lower-than-average incomes, and persistent health inequalities have contributed to disproportionately high levels of alcohol-related harm. The most recent comprehensive regional estimate (2019–20) from Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID, via GOV.UK) indicates that the North East has the highest estimated rate of alcohol dependence of any English region - 17.73 per 1,000 adults ( $\approx$  1.77 %). By contrast, the national rate for England in the same dataset is 13.8 per 1,000 adults ( $\approx$  1.38 %). In communities facing intergenerational poverty, alcohol misuse not only harms individual health but also places sustained pressure on families, healthcare systems, and the wider community, reinforcing entrenched cycles of disadvantage and social exclusion.

**"Our clients have multiple needs – it's not just addiction, it's also poverty, domestic abuse, and a lot of wider vulnerabilities."**

NERAF first became involved in Poverty Proofing in 2023, at a time when the organisation was smaller and still developing its capacity, but keen to better understand the wider challenges faced by its clients. The work quickly resonated with staff because it closely reflected the complex realities of the people they support, whose needs often extend far beyond addiction alone to include poverty, domestic abuse, and wider vulnerabilities. Although Poverty Proofing was a new concept and language for the team, there was a

strong recognition that **“you don’t know what you don’t know,”** and the audit was seen as an opportunity to identify hidden barriers, particularly around access to groups and services. At the time, the most pressing issues facing people with alcohol dependency were closely linked to financial hardship, instability, and safeguarding concerns, and NERAF hoped the process would highlight practical ways to improve the service and strengthen support for this complex client group.

## Poverty Proofing® process

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The Poverty Proofing training was described as accessible, flexible, and informal, allowing staff and volunteers to engage meaningfully without feeling overburdened. 83 staff were trained and 23 staff were consulted.

**“It wasn’t resource intensive. It was just showing us different ways of looking at things.”**

The process encouraged reflection on the ways services were delivered and prompted discussions on what might inadvertently act as barriers for clients.

Barriers highlighted in the Alcohol Service Pathways report:

- **Service Experience & Coordination:**  
Service users felt they were sometimes spoken to disrespectfully, and reported poor coordination between services.
- **Housing Instability:**  
Temporary accommodation was often unsafe or unsuitable. Support varied significantly by area, with some experiencing a “postcode lottery,” power imbalances with private landlords, and relocation away from essential support networks.
- **Limited Access to Support:**  
Challenges included insufficient mental health provision (especially crisis support), lack of practical “life admin” assistance, minimal alcohol-free social opportunities, and heightened stigma for women and single parents.
- **Inconsistent Practice & Staff Attitudes:**  
Policies were not always implemented consistently. Staff attitudes varied, and many organisations lacked stable, designated points of contact.
- **Barriers to Substance-Use Services & Transport:**  
Community alcohol services were limited, often requiring long travel. Public transport was costly and infrequent, creating additional access barriers.

## Addressing barriers

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In response to the barriers highlighted in the Poverty Proofing report, NERAF has focused on removing both visible and hidden obstacles that prevent people from accessing support, reshaping services around dignity, coordination and real-life practicality. One of the most significant developments has been the creation of the Sunderland Recovery Coalition. Although not a direct product of the Poverty Proofing process, the Coalition has gone on to address many of the same issues identified through the audit, including poor service coordination, inconsistent access and fragmented pathways.

Before the Coalition, organisations often worked in isolation, with even staff unclear about what other services offered. Regular partnership meetings, shared agendas and day-to-day communication through a WhatsApp group have created stronger alignment, smoother referrals and better matching of clients to the support that fits their needs. What was once a fragmented landscape has become more joined-up, driven by a shared commitment to putting people before organisational boundaries.

Reducing shame, stigma and financial pressure has also been an important shift influenced by Poverty Proofing. Food at sessions is free, with optional donations, recognising that even small costs can become barriers. Surplus food is offered in ways that protect dignity. These changes were rooted in an awareness that **“there’s a difference between choosing to shop in a charity shop and needing to,”** and that people engage more openly when they feel respected rather than judged.

The introduction of outreach work has been one of NERAF’s most tangible responses to exclusion. Supported by Public Health funding, outreach has enabled engagement with people who would otherwise never access traditional services - individuals in care homes, those with disabilities or experiencing agoraphobia. In some cases, contact began with very small steps, such as meeting someone to walk a dog before building confidence to attend a group. What initially seemed risky became one of the organisation’s most powerful developments. As Amanda reflected, **“We’ve seen massive barriers coming down just off that alone - and certainly not the ones we thought were going to.”**

Transport and access to treatment were also identified as pressure points, particularly for those travelling long distances for detox or rehab and returning home with little support. Through the Rewrite Recovery project, NERAF explored the unfunded gaps around statutory treatment, the high-risk parts of the journey that often go unnoticed. This led to practical interventions such as arranging volunteers to accompany people in transit, checking in after they return, and preventing isolation during vulnerable transition periods. As Amanda explained, **“If someone’s sent to rehab and comes back with no support over the weekend, there’s a chance they’re going to relapse - so we look at what we can put around that.”**

Poverty Proofing has also shifted NERAF's internal culture. It is now a permanent lens applied to all service decisions, sitting alongside equality and access considerations. Staff routinely ask whether something might unintentionally create a barrier and whether there is a more accessible alternative. As described in the interview, **"It's about keeping that permanent lens... asking is there anything that might stop someone coming in, and can we change it?"**

Overall, Poverty Proofing has helped NERAF turn awareness into practical change - through partnership working, outreach, dignity-first practice, and gap-bridging support - while keeping clients at the centre. As Amanda put it: **"We're passionate about putting our clients front and centre. We try to look at every situation through a different lens and ask: if we do this, will it lighten their load, help them step down, and support them in moving toward recovery?"**

## Wider Reach

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The Recovery Coalition in Sunderland brings together the city's main addiction support providers - including Wear Recovery, Recovery Connections, AA, and NERAF - to improve communication, coordination, and collaboration. Although not directly part of Poverty Proofing, it addresses many barriers that previously existed, such as fragmented information, lack of partnership meetings, and inaccessible communication channels. The coalition meets monthly (rotating between operational and strategic staff), maintains a shared WhatsApp group, and produces a consolidated calendar of services and events, making it easier for staff and clients to navigate available support. It also enables sharing of training, spotting trends, and ensuring clients are matched to the most appropriate services. Amanda emphasised that the coalition was born out of necessity due to disjointed services and poor communication. By bringing organisations together, even small charities like theirs can facilitate joined-up working, build relationships, and create a "one-team" culture across Sunderland's recovery sector. The coalition has improved access for clients, increased awareness of services, and fostered collaboration that benefits both staff and those in recovery.

## Conclusion

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NERAF's experience of Poverty Proofing demonstrates the value of placing poverty at the centre of service design, rather than treating it as a background issue. What began as a learning exercise to "see what we didn't know" has become a permanent lens shaping how the organisation works, makes decisions, and supports people in recovery. From practical choices about food, costs and dignity, to wider developments in outreach and partnership working, poverty awareness is now embedded across the service.

This shift has had a tangible impact on who can access support and how they experience recovery. People who once faced multiple, overlapping barriers, including disability, isolation, unsafe housing, mental health needs and lack of transport - are now engaging with services in ways that were previously impossible. Outreach work, in particular, has allowed NERAF to reach individuals who would never have accessed traditional provision, supporting recovery at its earliest and most fragile stages.

Poverty Proofing has also strengthened NERAF's role within the wider recovery system. While not all developments stemmed directly from the audit, the values it reinforced (dignity, access, coordination and inclusion) now underpin wider partnership approaches such as the Sunderland Recovery Coalition. Together, these have helped shift recovery in Sunderland away from fragmented support and towards a more connected, person-centred system that better reflects the realities of people's lives.

The organisation's growth, from a small number of clients in 2021 to over 600 people accessing support last year - reflects not just expansion, but increasing trust, relevance and accessibility within the community. Crucially, Poverty Proofing has changed how staff think as well as what they do, encouraging continual reflection on unintended barriers and the lived experience of poverty.

**"Do it. You need to be looking through a different lens - your clients' situations have changed, and your services need to reflect that."**

In a time of rising costs and increasing complexity of need, NERAF's journey shows that Poverty Proofing is not an added extra, but a vital foundation for effective, compassionate and sustainable recovery support.

## References

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[Alcohol treatment services](#)

[Estimates of alcohol dependent adults in England: summary - GOV.UK](#)

[NERAF – Northern Engagement into Recovery from Addiction Foundation](#)

[Sunderland - Recovery Connections](#)

[PowerPoint Presentation](#)