

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY



SCRUTINY PANEL 1 – FOOD POVERTY
CORE QUESTIONS – EXPERT ADVISORS

CEO – HOPE CENTRE

The Scrutiny Panel is currently undertaking a review:

- To examine the extent to which individuals and families are experiencing food poverty, the range of contributing factors and the changes that have been made to the way the Council and partners support residents during hardship.
- To review the impact and concentration of food poverty across the Borough of Northampton

The required outcomes are:

- To make informed recommendations to all relevant parties on the most appropriate approaches to take to mitigate the impact of food poverty in Northampton.
- To make recommendations on how the specific issues in relation to food poverty are dealt with from now until the new Unitary Authority.

CORE QUESTIONS: The Response from the Hope Centre

1. In your opinion, what are the main impacts of food poverty?

Food poverty is just one way of looking at poverty as a whole. Food poverty is not some separate thing: it is labelled in this way simply because in a world of surplus food, people think they can ameliorate it with the surplus they have or is available. The term is superfluous: we are talking about poverty. But if it helps the public to become motivated about poverty as a whole, because they believe they can make a difference, as with homelessness, then it has awareness value. Therefore poverty impacts on health, wellbeing, mental health, child development, obesity/malnutrition, dental poor health, crime, unemployment, future prospects and civil harmony. An unequal society is bad for itself, as studies such as the 'Spirit Level' have shown.

2. How widespread do you understand food poverty in the borough to be?

National data suggests that as many as 14m or 21% of the population are in some form of poverty¹. Given that Northampton is comparably poorer than the average for Britain by a ratio of 1:1.12 (based on salary average), this suggests that in Northampton, with a population of 225000, there are 53000 people (or 23.52%) in relative poverty. These are people who on a weekly basis experience issues of poverty which include issues with food. Within this total, 9.33% can be defined as destitute, or 4944 people². Realistically, this can be seen as a likely shorthand figure for those who might access regular food aid provision but others will need help periodically from sources beyond their immediate families.

Transferrable Canadian data³ suggests that no more than 20% of people in the highest levels of need ever approach food aid provision, for reasons of stigma etc.

3. In your opinion does food poverty differ across the borough of Northampton and what are the reasons for this?

¹ <https://fullfact.org/economy/poverty-uk-guide-facts-and-figures/> ;
<https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN07096>

² https://naccom.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/destitution2018_0.pdf

³ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11266-018-0039-2>

The above figure includes a disproportionate number who are of ethnic minorities; and women are generally thought to most likely to offer food to their children before themselves, meaning even within poor families, women are more likely to experience food issues. Obviously the figures are averaged, so this masks concentration in areas of greatest deprivation.

4. What strategic approaches are you aware of to tackle food poverty?

The government gives some tax encouragement to food retailers to share surplus food. Beyond this, there is no strategic action beyond broader welfare provision. That which is done is solely at the inspiration of individual organisations, both statutory (eg Partnership Homes, NCC Public Health, as supplied) and mainly charitable, often church based. There is a county food poverty group but this is not strategic; it largely engages only in strategic campaigning. It does very little to co-ordinate or support food aid providers nor engineer any organised supply or sharing of food.

Within the voluntary sector nationally the Trussell Trust is in essence a franchise system for local foodbanks, from a Christian perspective: it has no local co-ordinatory function, even amongst its own registered foodbanks. IFAN is a loose alliance of other providers, of which Hope is a member (and former board member) but does little co-ordination, mainly focusing on national campaigning.

Within the retail industry there is no strategic co-ordination, either nationally or locally. Fareshare is a national charity with regional (not local) branches supported by various companies, but it is not strategic. If you want food from Fareshare, you contact them and they arrange this, but it is chaotic and unstrategic, and often of variable quality, focused on short life, sometimes unusable items near use by date, which is not supplied in a co-ordinated way, can become unusable between their supply to food aid providers and its distribution to customers. It contains little ambient food. This is a just a fragment of the food supplied by supermarkets, which is offered chaotically to charities every day of the week, wasting time and money with multiple wasted journeys for a smashed pallet of rotten veg or pop, as is often the case. Much of that which they give away has no nutritional value.

The closest to strategic food aid is not in practice organised at all by any single entity, but each year, in two waves, supplies a vast amount of the food that is in turn supplied by food aid providers across the UK. These are the Christian festivals of Harvest and Christmas, where Churches and Schools (and the general public, at Christmas) voluntarily choose to collect and supply food to charities like Hope and others. It is co-ordinated, if at all, only by organisations like Hope, to try to co-ordinate donations to enable their management and not become overwhelmed. This is a vast operation and can involve in Hope's case perhaps 30 tonnes of donated ambient long life items being gathered, collected, sorted and stored in two quite short, concentrated periods. Because of Hope's size and efficiency we are the

closest to offering a structured way of managing what is in effect a spontaneous outpouring of kindness, but even we struggle at Christmas where we receive as much in clothes as food. If we have surplus, we then pass on to others (there is a degree of sharing amongst foodbanks generally, it isn't structured, it just comes from relationships and mutual respect).

Because of this seasonality, most foodbanks and Hope are running low after Easter, with real issues later in the summer.

There is a real need for structured leadership of local food aid, with co-ordination to get short life food to organisations who can use it best; to co-ordinate pickups and manage the supermarkets. In practice there is competition, for the supermarket food, where slots to access their offerings are fiercely fought over. Some providers are especially competitive.

Hope is moving to seeing its large warehouse (the single biggest in the county, by some distance) as being a community food hub where we, through size and organisation and funding, can support smaller foodbanks to access food through us. We would welcome opportunity to do this on a more structured basis, becoming a local distributor to other local food aid projects, a role really needed.

5. What approaches are in existence to reduce people's dependency on food aid, such as Food Banks?

There are two broad ways of looking at why people are food poor: one, that they are feckless, lazy, can't manage the money, don't know how to cook, have too many children, are drug addicts, spend their money on fags etc etc. The second is that the low level of wages and benefits, in relation to other costs, like food, travel, and most of all, housing, mean that regardless of their personalities or individual characteristics, they are largely poor because they don't have enough money, including if they are working. Hope would generally recognise the latter view as being more broadly accurate. The best way to reduce such poverty would be a functioning welfare state or incomes policy with government commitment to ending poverty but sadly this not the case, as poverty increases daily and will likely get worse. The solutions to this at individual level may include education and teaching, but we are not aware of much structured work of this type and are in any case, secondary to improved income levels.

At the local level a commitment by the council and pressure on its contractors do become Living wage employers would help, setting an example and applying leverage.

In terms of activity within food aid settings, Hope supports the progressive approach in part of the food aid movement as members of IFAN. This model of practice includes such activity as:

- Campaigning against low wages and benefits
- Growing food locally
- Support for people to learn new skills and get better paid work

- Empowering service users to be voices for change, improving confidence etc
- Sale based methods of food aid, such as social supermarkets, selling food at proper prices, rather than making it entirely charitable.

Hope does all these (see 'Big Hunger' MIT 2017 by Andy Fisher for further examples of such initiatives). There are a number of other examples of progressive work but these are not means of reducing dependence on food aid but do have other value, such as refusing to supply large quantities of unhealthy food to users, not requiring referrals by health or social care professionals, not limiting to 3 parcels in crisis only, dignified offer of food, no evangelising as a condition for food etc).

It is sometimes suggested that the addition of wrap around services can reduce continuing use of food aid. This includes benefits advice, access to drugs, alcohol and mental health support, plus education. All of these are potentially useful and Hope makes all of these available. However they should be used in the context of the measures above and not conditional; i.e. there can be no assumption that people must take such services up to access food aid. There should be no presumption of need for such services as they are only in some cases the cause of need. Whether better take up of already inadequate benefits provides any real solution is arguable. Even where people have everything they are entitled to, they still experience food poverty.

6. How do you understand food poverty is being addressed?

We have listed most of these above.

The benefits system and proper wages are the most effective methods.

Aside from small scale efforts conducted by specific agencies and groups for their own customers, and the work carried out by Partnership Homes and the educational role of Public Health, previously submitted, the overwhelming response at any scale is from the voluntary sector and the churches.

The churches offer foodbanks, Hope offers a social supermarket, where food and toiletries are supplied at charge, usually 1/3 or less of retail price, with lots of free items (sanitary products, toothbrushes and toothpaste etc). People pay a membership fee of £2 a month, but thereafter can attend every week, whereas in foodbanks people are often restricted to 3 visits in crisis, although often that is relaxed. You often have to be referred to foodbanks; you can self-present to Hope, our only condition being evidence of benefit status, including in work benefits.

The other main distinction between foodbanks and Hope's offer is the volume of fresh food, especially veg and fruit. Many foodbanks mostly have access to ambient food only, and have much more limited amounts of fresh. This reflects the donation pattern. Hope avoids this by growing a lot of veg ourselves on our extensive allotments, and by sourcing fresh food. Some foodbanks grow a little veg

themselves, but not in the serious manner Hope attempts (as an example, we have 14x as much growing land as Re:Store).

There is some wrap around support at some local foodbanks, and at Hope. We have a student social worker attending most sessions to refer into Hope's wider provision. This is unconditional in offer.

We feed about 250 people a week.

There is also Elsie's café, or Shop Xero. Technically this is not a food poverty project, as anyone can go in and buy; it's main ethos is food waste rather than poverty, though inevitably people on low incomes go to their shop, so it makes some contribution.

It should also be recognised that Hope's day centre and street based food distribution offers food support to some of the most destitute, including the homeless. Long before there were food banks, there were soup kitchens, feeding not just homeless people, as they still do. We see up to 130 people a day in the Hope day centre.

7. How can the Borough Council, together with its partners, can collectively respond to food poverty?

We have indicated that greater co-ordination of food aid would be welcome, but not necessarily by the Borough, but the Borough can be influential in encouraging this, as could NCC. Food aid is a voluntary sector/faith community thing, and given so little funding is made available, attempting to co-ordinate that which it does not fund would not be appropriate. If funding were available then it would be a different matter, but the key role and leadership of the independent sector should be recognised and retained.

We have talked about setting an example by wages etc earlier.

The Borough and NCC could also make larger amounts of land available for growing veg, but this would need revenue support for gardeners. A local sustainable food strategy would be a good idea, as Hope played a significant role within during 2018 but has been unable to continue due to other pressures in 2019.

Making available free or discount warehouse space to enable Hope or others to organise and store food would be a help. Our current warehouse is a major financial challenge. Making shop space available would be really helpful.

8. In your opinion what are the specific issues relating to food poverty?

The shortage of food to provide to people in need is the single, overwhelming issue.

The overwhelming canard of food poverty is that it can be 'solved' by greater use of food 'waste', or surplus food, mainly from supermarkets. Supermarkets are becoming very adept at managing their stock lines so the amount of fresh, short life food they have is reducing all the time. We have said before, what they make available is literally only the things they cannot sell, much of which is very unhealthy. Shops give away almost nothing fresh, and little of nutritional value, and they never supply ambient in volume, as profit rules here. You can access better stuff through upchain communication with the industry via Fareshare etc but locally only really Hope and Shop Zero are organised enough to do this, and again, volume is really quite limited and in practice Hope and others pay to receive this, it's not free.

This is an example of local waste food availability from a shop, notification of which arrived as this was being typed:



Dear Robin,

You have been allocated a surplus donation. The following is available to collect:

Tea: 0.28 trays

Soft Drinks & Juices: 0.22 trays

Collect from: ALDI

Location: ALDI, ALDI NORTHAMPTON - EARL STREET, Earl Street,
Northampton, NN1 3AU

Collect by: 3rd January 2020 13:00

To see more information about this donation, [click here](#)

To change your subscription details [click here](#)

This is par for the course. If we attempted to collect all of the waste/junk food from supermarkets, it would go a very short way towards meeting dietary needs, and waste a lot of time. There simply is not enough waste food to feed even a small percentage of those in need.

(I have not discussed the restaurant sector here, it's a minor and potential minor contributor.)

There is a wider ethical point here: do we really want to create a system where poor people eat food the supermarkets feel is unfit to sell to 'normal' people? They have a right to eat the same food as anyone else. This is a matter of food justice or the right to food.

Most of what Hope offers has been donated by the general public. There is quite simply not enough food in *any* category available to feed all of the people who could be in need or even might seek help. If all of the most acutely in need group came in for food aid, i.e the c.5000 people identified above, the collective food aid providers of Northampton simply could not feed them. We could do so perhaps for a few weeks after Christmas, when our stores are full, but they would be emptied before Easter. There simply is not enough donated food, or food waste available to meet the potential level of need out there at the present time. To achieve this would require food retailers to donate a much higher volume of food, including fresh produce and ambient food at scale, and the general public to donate vastly more, and for a much larger amount of food to be grown by Hope or others. This is not a matter of small scale tinkering, but really significant change in behaviour and attitude by everyone, including advertising to overcome stigma and encourage take up.

Hope is exploring sourcing fresh or even ambient food on the wholesale market and will trial this in 2020. This will effectively just be a shop where we don't aim to make the excessive profit of the ordinary food retail sector, but do cover costs, where access is again restricted to those on low incomes. Lease of a building or shop at zero cost would be a great help here, enabling us to keep the food price low.

9. Are you aware of the existence of “holiday hunger” and what is its impact?

This is simply another way of describing poverty, breaking down food poverty into yet another category.

10. Please supply details of the support that your organisation or group offers?

We have described this in previous answers.

11. Please supply details of your thoughts on suggested solutions regarding food poverty.

We have done so in previous answers.

12.Are you aware of the number of people who are registered for pupil premium? Please supply details.

We have no knowledge of this.

13.Do you have further information or comments regarding food poverty which you would like to inform the Scrutiny Panel?

No.