

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY



SCRUTINY PANEL 1 – FOOD POVERTY

CORE QUESTIONS – EXPERT ADVISORS

Response from Community Law

➤ How widespread is food poverty in the borough? Whilst we have directly referred 42 clients to a food bank in the last 12 months, we consider a lot of our work prevents the need to make such referrals. CLS also has a policy of only making such referrals when the individual is our client and actively engaging with advice; this is to prevent a foodbank referral simply be used as a ‘sticky plaster’ to solve a problem in the short term rather than addressing the longterm or underlying reason for the need.

For the last 6 months, CLS has held a fortnightly advice session within the Cafe at Emmanuel Church when they hold their foodbank session. Since we started there, we have advised 52 people, all of whom have presented as being in need of food, but who also have expressed that their issues with food are related to money issues. We provide the people we see with advice on benefits, debt and fuel poverty all to provide a holistic approach to addressing the difficulties they have with a view to reducing the risk of them returning to food poverty in a very short period of time.

➤ What approaches are in existence to reduce people’s dependency on food aid, such as Food Banks? Independent benefit, debt and fuel poverty advice is very effective and addressing food poverty. It places people in the best possible position to be able to afford food. It does this in a number of ways:

- It ensures people are accessing all the money they are entitled to
 - Their debts are managed by making realistic and affordable arrangements/moratoriums agreed
 - All relevant grants are applied for to clear any energy debt
 - People know what is a priority and do not spend their limited funds on things which are not a priority at the expense of essential items

- People's outgoings are reviewed and reduced wherever possible, such as checking energy supplier and switching where appropriate

➤ To receive an understanding of how food poverty is addressed CLS provide specialist benefit, debt and fuel poverty advice. One of the root causes of food poverty is usually related to lack of money to buy food. The advice set out above addresses this. We are also an agency who make active referrals to foodbanks as appropriate so that people are not left without food. CLS along with numerous other agencies, retain emergency food which is donated by staff and given to clients when there is not an available food bank session.

➤ To evaluate how the Borough Council, together with its partners, can collectively respond to food poverty CLS believes investment in independent advice to address the money issues people in the borough are facing is one very positive way to address food poverty. Demand outstrips supply presently with almost every drop in advice session held at the Guildhall being oversubscribed coupled with a 2-3 wait for appointments. Staff are placed under a lot of pressure, trying to respond to more urgent cases and manage large caseloads due to a lack of available appointments.