

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Scrutiny Panel – Food Poverty

23 July 2020

BRIEFING NOTE: DRAFT CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

During its evidence gathering meetings the Scrutiny Panel had tentatively referred to a number of potential draft conclusions and draft recommendations as detailed below for the Scrutiny Panel's consideration and further comment for inclusion in its final report.

Draft Conclusions

Definitions of Food Poverty

The Scrutiny Panel noted that there a number of definitions for food poverty. The definition used by Restore is the inability to afford, or to have access to, food to make up a healthy diet. It is about the quality of food as well as quantity. It is not just about hunger, but also about being appropriately nourished to attain and maintain health.” Additionally, there are clear links between levels of deprivation and food poverty. A key definition of deprivation used by local authorities is those areas (and their residents) which fall within the top 20% most deprived LSOAs nationally (i.e. Deciles 1 and 2 nationally). There are 422 LSOA's in Northamptonshire. In the IMD 2015 release 69 of these were in the top 20% nationally, 29 in the 1st Decile and 40 in the Second. A further definition of food poverty according to the Department of Health is “the inability to afford, or to have access to, food to make up a healthy diet”¹. It is closely related to household food insecurity which is the inability to be able to secure social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life². Hunger as a term to describe the physical feeling of insufficient food is used by a number of organisations working with people unable to afford food as a means of communicating messages to the wider public, including the Trussell Trust, FareShare, Magic Breakfast, and Church Action on Poverty. Hunger is one consequence of food insecurity but not an inevitability. The Department of Health defines food poverty as: ‘The inability to afford, or to have access to, food to make up a healthy diet.

¹ Department of Health, Choosing a Better Diet: a food and health action plan, 2005

² <http://www.fao.org/3/y4671e/y4671e06.htm>

Risks relating to food poverty

The Scrutiny Panel noted that the poor health and wellbeing and risk of chronic ill-health relates to food poverty are not only due to the direct dietary risks but also due to associated social and psychological impacts e.g. chronic stress related to food poverty and poverty more generally, poor school performance due to acute hunger, It is also important to consider the differences between acute hunger and chronic food insecurity.

Households that cannot secure adequate food that its nutritious impacts on food poverty and this includes poor health, chronic illness, poor mental health, crime, obesity, diabetes, heart condition and poor education.

The Scrutiny Panel recognised that food poverty can have a negative impact on both physical and mental health.

Food poverty - children

The Under Secretary has contacted all Head Teachers of primary and secondary schools in the UK to identify the issue of child food insecurity. Evidence gathering indicated that the impact of food deprivation meant children were living in relative poverty with 60% of the median income; this information could be provided to the Panel as he felt it was important so that the statistics could be cross referenced. He explained that food banks can't always provide fresh provisions therefore an understanding of the types of food offered would be a useful question to ask as there has also been some work done regarding the nutritional value of the food. As of the January School Census 2019, 11.7% (3934) of pupils were eligible for free school meals from a total of 33,642. A report, compiled by the End Child Poverty coalition, shows that 13,633 children are living in poverty in Northampton

The Scrutiny Panel realised that food poverty sits within wider poverty. Poverty within Northampton has increased from 16,000 to 18,000 children . There is a lot of concern and misery for the families throughout the area. Schools and health visitors are aware of this issue. The Scrutiny Panel highlights that there is a need to ensure that no children throughout Northampton are seen to be hungry. Holiday hunger is also an issue, and something needs to be done about this. It was noted that during the unprecedented situation of Covid19 that free school meals vouchers had been provided during school holidays and would include the summer break of 2020 also. It was further recognised that often children in poverty come from a working family. Regularly, people living in poverty have no electricity, saucepans or a cooker and obtain food from a food bank but do not have the facilities to cook it. There is a need for an Anti- Poverty Strategy.

The Scrutiny Panel notes that free meals are provided in nurseries in Scotland.

Food Poverty – reviews and statistical data

Central Government has confirmed it will begin to measure food insecurity from April 2019. Evidence gathering highlighted that in order to understand approaches to tackle food poverty it's important to understand the root causes of food poverty. An analysis by the House of Commons' Environmental Audit Committee "Sustainable Development Goals in the UK follow up: Hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity in the UK" identified three themes relating to the causes of hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition:

1. Low incomes and rising living costs:
2. Universal Credit and the benefits system; and
3. Cuts to funding for local social care services.

Food poverty is clearly linked to poverty more generally and poverty can be measured in a number of ways. One useful metric is "income deprivation" which measures the number of people who are in receipt of various means tested benefits. In 2015 the total number of people affected by income deprivation in Northampton was 27,279³ of whom 7,806⁴ were children and 6,193⁵ older people.

A review by the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), Church of England, Oxfam GB and The Trussell Trust "Emergency Use Only: Understanding and reducing the use of food banks in the UK"⁶ gives the following recommendations for preventing need for food banks:

- Improve access to short-term benefit advances: increase awareness, simplify the claim process and improve data collection to identify support needs.
- Reform sanctions policy and practice: increase access to hardship payments, clarify communications about sanctions, mitigate the impact whilst a sanction is being reconsidered and address issues for Housing Benefit.
- Improve the ESA regime: ensure claimants are not left without income whilst challenging a decision made because of missing medical certificates or missed appointments.
- Sustain and improve access to emergency financial support through Local Welfare Assistance Schemes.
- Ensure Jobcentres provide an efficient and supportive service for all clients.
- Improve Jobcentre Plus Advisers' awareness of, and ability to respond to, mental health problems.

³ Income Deprivation domain of [Indices of Deprivation 2019](#)

⁴ [IDACI 2019](#)

⁵ [IDOPI 2019](#)

⁶ https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/Foodbank%20Report_web.pdf

- Improve access to appropriate advice and support.

Emergency Food Aid

Use of emergency food aid (i.e. food banks) can give an indication of the levels of need around acute food poverty. Food Banks are primarily for adults and families and the Scrutiny Panel noted that it is important that children have direct access to food through schools and nurseries. Initiatives are in place as schools for those children that come in hungry such as free breakfast clubs. They are therefore provided with both a free breakfast and a free lunch during school days. There is a good referral system into food banks. The Night Shelter is a good example of the positive impact good quality food can have on people's health and esteem. Northampton Partnership Homes (NPH) runs a food bank and also makes referrals. It is a food bank for Council tenants. Volunteer tenants put the food parcels together however NPH delivers them which ensures dignity remains. Food parcels distributed by NPH was put in place due to the need for crisis intervention. The number of parcels and their locations is reported on a monthly basis

During the evidence gathering the Scrutiny Panel heard that Officers working in the Council's One Stop Shop, each month donate items of food that can be donated to those in need. This is funded totally by the staff who do this mainly because they come into contact with people on a daily basis that require food donations and other assistance.

Various statistics were provided to the Scrutiny Panel. The Emmanuel Church provides 40 parcels a week for around 100 people with referrals generally coming from schools. The Hope Centre has around 120 people come in for food daily whilst there is a separate food provision that helps 250 families per week. Re Store coordinate food parcels across 6 churches in Northampton Borough and in 2018 distributed 4500 parcels.

The Scrutiny Panel notes that it is expected that the food banking system would continue to grow.

It is highlighted that there is a stigma around poverty and poor-quality food is also poor value for money. Zero hours contract often have an impact on poverty and food poverty.

Assistance available and Partnership Working

The Scrutiny Panel recognises that there is a lot of assistance available regarding budgeting from organisations such as CAB, Housing and Money Advice and Community Law. The Scrutiny Panel recognised that approaches are often

neighbourhood based; there is a need adequate funding and are reliant on skills and leadership and a strong voluntary and community sector. Approaches include:

- Voluntary action
- Food banks
- Community organising and social action
- Neighbourhood enterprise
- Community-based credit unions
- Developing physical assets
- Community-led housing

The Panel acknowledges that there are lots of Groups and organisations doing different things in relation to food distribution, which needed looking at collectively to ensure the sharing of information; which is very important across all of the Groups; as every Group needed to know about each other's work so that there was no duplication.

The Scrutiny Panel emphasised that, in the run up to West Northamptonshire Authority, there is a need to consider joint responsibility of Agencies regarding homelessness, poverty and food poverty. There is lots of partnership working and work completed already and there is need to be able to maintain drive. Evidence gathering highlighted that a main barrier is leadership. There is a need for strong leadership and a clear vision. Leaders should be drawn together to provide the necessary direction. The Scrutiny Panel further emphasised that there is a need to have individuals with the relevant passion to lead e.g. Food Poverty Champions who can identify the partners who have the motivation and drive to bring all together. Goals will be similar across all the boroughs and districts. With the move to the West Northamptonshire Authority, the Scrutiny Panel agreed that a way forward could be to use this issue to come together across the County and consider the following actions for local authorities recommended by Sustain:

- Developing a food action plan to tackle food poverty
- Improving the uptake of Healthy Start vouchers
- Promoting breastfeeding via the Baby Friendly Initiative
- Harnessing the value of children's centres
- Ensuring low-income families have adequate access to childcare
- Ensuring children's access to food 365 days a year
- Becoming a Living Wage employer and promoting the Living Wage
- Ensuring all residents have physical access to good food
- Supporting and enhancing meals on wheels provision
- Supporting financial advice services and providing crisis support

The Scrutiny Panel recognises that there is a need to do more to co-ordinate between food providers. Hope has worked with Northamptonshire Poverty Network but more needs to be done and co-ordinated. A summer festival, or similar, to "unlock" food

would be useful. The Scrutiny Panel felt that the promotion of food poverty to allotment holders and shops would be useful regarding them providing any excess produce.

There will be full migration to Universal Credit from December 2019. As of 16 September 2019, there were 11,350 claims for housing benefit, in May 2019 it had been 14,000. There is a five-week waiting period for Universal Credit that has been causing issues and problems. Money management support is important for example pay bills such as rent first. A Council Tax Reduction Scheme is in place; everyone now has to pay at least 35% of the Council Tax bill for their property but some Groups are protected.

HM Revenues and Customs (HMRC) works collaboratively with partner organisations to help people. It has a claim commitment, but it needs individuals to tell officers about their circumstances. Individuals can contact HMRC for assistance. HRMC works with food banks in Corby and Towcester and speaks with customers regarding their income and the types of support available to them. The Universal Credit app is easy to use. In addition, there is a programme of training in place that comprises 39 vulnerabilities. Mental health training includes suicide and ex-offenders. A lot of outreach takes place through schools and advice can be given. It was recognised that the Manager, HMRC regularly visits NBC and is part of the Welfare Reform meetings; that comprise a number of partners. Improvements come from these meetings.

It was realised that some individuals are fearful to go to the Job Centre. There are lots of posters in the Job Centre regarding partner agencies. A lot of outreach takes place through schools and advice can be given.

The Scrutiny Panel supports the living wage employer.

Draft recommendations

Detailed below are a number of draft recommendations that the Scrutiny Panel has considered for inclusion within its final report during the evidence gathering process of this Review:

That it is investigated where the gaps in food banks within Northampton are.

That child poverty needs are included in any Strategy in relation to poverty. food poverty strategy and note that the process of developing an Anti-Food Poverty Strategy can of itself have wider impacts such as:

- Raising the profile of food poverty, especially with local decision-makers
- Developing a shared positive vision
- Creating a sense of empowerment for experts by experience
- Empowering diverse groups to raise their voices to call for food justice
- Ensuring the local council and other partners take ownership of agreed actions
- Sharing of good practice across local authority boundaries to support specific projects

That Food Poverty Champions, who can identify the partners, who have the motivation and drive to bring all together lead on the production of an Anti-Food Poverty Strategy.

That with the move to the West Northamptonshire Authority, the way forward in relation to the production of an Anti-Food Poverty Strategy includes the following actions for local authorities as recommended by Sustain:

- Developing a food action plan to tackle food poverty
- Improving the uptake of Healthy Start vouchers
- Promoting breastfeeding via the Baby Friendly Initiative
- Harnessing the value of children's centres
- Ensuring low-income families have adequate access to childcare
- Ensuring children's access to food 365 days a year
- Becoming a Living Wage employer and promoting the Living Wage
- Ensuring all residents have physical access to good food
- Supporting and enhancing meals on wheels provision
- Supporting financial advice services and providing crisis support

That the Manager, HM Revenues and Customs is formally invited to visit food banks in Northampton, to work with customers and aid regarding budgeting and where further help can be obtained.

That Universal Credit app. Is widely promoted.

That Officers are instructed to work with partners in generating more events such as a summer festival where assistance in relation to food poverty can be highlighted.

That the Health Start Voucher Scheme is promoted.

That promotion of food poverty is highlighted to allotment holders and shops regarding giving away excess produce as emergency food aid.

That it is recommended to the West Northamptonshire Authority that Northampton is promoted and becomes a living wage and sustainable food town.

That the West Northamptonshire Authority is asked to lobby for national campaigns and challenge national Policy on food poverty.

That a copy of this report is provided to the MPs within West Northamptonshire.