

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL
SCRUTINY PANEL 1 - FOOD POVERTY

Wednesday, 20 November 2019

PRESENT: Councillor Russell (Deputy Chair, in the Chair); Councillors Bottwood, Roberts and Smith and P Foster (Co Optee)

Witnesses Rhosyn Harris, Consultant in Public Health
Deborah Mbonfona, Health Improvement
Mike Kay, Chief Executive, NPH
Nicky McKenzie, Assistant Director, NPH

Geraldine Mahney, Customer Services Manager
Tracy Tiff, Democratic and Member Services Manager

Member of the public Robin Burgess, CEO, Hope Centre

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Dennis Meredith.

2. DEPUTATIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESSES

Robin Burgess, CEO of the Hope Centre, requested that this Panel takes full submission from the voluntary sector; community food and is offered by them their evidence is crucial. Gathering food to alleviate food poverty is a massive task and he urged the Panel to understand this and hear the full evidence.

3. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

Councillor Allan Bottwood declared an interest in as a Board Member of NPH.

3. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 25 September 2019 were signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

4. WITNESS EVIDENCE

Rhosyn Harris and Deborah Mbonfona highlighted the key points from the written evidence and gave a presentation which reflected Public Health's definition of food poverty. They explained that Northampton had a 56% take up of Healthy Start Vouchers whilst the average is 52% nationally.

The Panel made comment, asked questions and heard:

The main barriers to partnership working are:

- There is lots of partnership working and work completed already
- There is a need to being able to maintain 'momentum'

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. Rhosyn Harris and Deborah Mbofona urged the Panel to recommend this in its final report. It was 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.

The Panel supported the living wage employer.

It was explained that means tested benefits do not consider those who are in work and in poverty but receive no benefits.

The Health Protection Team has been in contact with all food banks but there was no compulsion for food banks to provide information on the number of food parcels that they provide. The need for the Panel to receive details of the number of food parcels distributed was highlighted

The Emmanuel Church provides 40 parcels a week for around 100 people with referrals generally coming from schools.

The Chair invited Robin Burgess to provide comment. Robin Burgess expanded further that more information would be required rather than just the amount of food bank parcels handed out, as at the Hope Centre, for example, 120 people come in for food daily whilst there is a separate food provision that helps 250 families per week. He added the following:

- That information could be provided via the groups
- It needs to be reviewed how much aid is given out and where and whether there is poor uptake and why
- He would produce a written report explaining how the living wage would impact

Robin Burgess further advised, that in his opinion, 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.

The Grow and Eat Project is also in operation.

The Panel commented that there were lots of different Groups 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. Expert advisors further commented and queried:

- How to improve our approaches to diverse ethnic groups. Northampton has a diverse population of 30% BAME
- Should older people who find themselves on their own and running out of money had access to quality food
- To ask the University if they would be interested in the future about doing a qualitative research paper regarding food poverty (it was suggested that there is liaison with the Overview and Scrutiny Committee)
- They were concerned regarding the cost of distribution of food from the Trussell Trust. Want to work with the existing food poverty network and they could also be a useful vehicle

Mike Kay and Nicky Mckenzie from NPH, highlighted the salient points from their written evidence. These included:

- 90,000 households in the Borough may be affected by food poverty of which they support 9,000 who live in NBC homes
- They look to work in partnership with other bodies
- In house NPH staff bring in food and create food parcels although they have now formalised this
- NPH is an accredited living wage employer

The Panel made comment, asked questions and heard:

- 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
- Tenants are signposted to other sources of assistance i.e. Oasis House
- The number of parcels and their locations is reported on a monthly basis and Mike Kay confirmed this could be shared with the Panel
- The difference between social rents and private rents was queried
- Cooking facilities are key and the Panel queried whether there are ways of educating people on how to cook and ensuring even older properties having full use of cookers
- How overcrowding impacts on food poverty was queried

Mike Kay and Nicky McKenzie explained that NBC sets the rent and NPH applies the policy. It was confirmed that the standard arrears letters went through Tenant Consultation Panel before the letters are sent out. There is an escalation process, letters get firmer throughout the process and it was highlighted that tenants are encouraged to communicate with NPH. NPH is 100% decent homes compliant. Lots of new kitchens had been put in by NPH, although kitchens do not generally have white goods fitted. Cross Street did however, have built in appliances.

The Panel was further advised that there is a huge challenge regarding social versus statutory overcrowding as it is up to each Local Authority to decide which to apply. NBC follows the statutory overcrowding guidelines. NPH completes lots of analysis to avoid social overcrowding. NBC agreed that NPH could identify families who were socially overcrowded and allows them access to the housing register just for the Century House and Spring Boroughs schemes.

The Help at Home Project is very good and helpful.

There are two key ways that NPH provides assistance to vulnerable tenants who need extra support; it uses the housing register and identifies those who will struggle to get a tenancy and works with them prior to the tenancy agreement (6 weeks pre-settlement). Assistance is provided, for example acquiring a bed, white goods etc. Should the tenant need ongoing support they will be referred to NPH Support Service, which works with them for up to 2 years or with 4 weekly intervention.

Mike Kay and Nicky McKenzie were thanked for their informative address.

AGREED: That the information provided informs the evidence base of this Scrutiny Review.

5. PUBLISHED REPORTS AND DATA

5.A NEU COUNCILLORS NETWORK: STATISTICAL DATA: REGIONAL ESTIMATES; EAST MIDLANDS CHILD POVERTY (2019)

AGREED: That the information provided informs the evidence base of this Scrutiny Review.

5.B UN REPORT: FOOD POVERTY

AGREED: That the information provided informs the evidence base of this Scrutiny Review.

5.C TRUSSELL TRUST: FOOD BANK STATISTICS

AGREED: That the information provided informs the evidence base of this Scrutiny Review.

5.D HOUSE OF COMMONS LIBRARY: FOOD BANKS IN THE UK

AGREED: That the information provided informs the evidence base of this Scrutiny Review.

5.E INSTITUTE FOR FISCAL STUDIES REPORT: LIVING STANDARDS, POVERTY AND INEQUALITY IN THE UK: 2019

Councillor Emma Roberts raised queries regarding the report regarding Statutory versus Social overcrowding.

It was requested that the Head of Housing and Wellbeing is asked to attend the January 2020 meeting to provide details of the Policy in relation to statutory and social overcrowding.

AGREED: That the information provided informs the evidence base of this Scrutiny Review.

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At this point, the Chair conveyed her disappointment that not all expert advisors had been present and the meeting and she would liaise with the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee regarding contacting the organisation in this respect.

The meeting concluded at 7:20 pm