



# OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY VIEWS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

TO CABINET 16 DECEMBER 2020

Report Title	RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – FOOD POVERTY
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**Agenda Status: PUBLIC**

## 1. Purpose

- 1.1 To present to Cabinet for consideration, the comments and recommendations of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the findings of the Scrutiny Review – Food Poverty.
- 1.2 All Overview and Scrutiny review reports are published on the Overview and Scrutiny page on the Council's Webpage and a copy of this report can be located: [www.northampton.gov.uk/scrutiny](http://www.northampton.gov.uk/scrutiny) - Previous Scrutiny Reviews.

## 2. Recommendations

- 2.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends to Cabinet that:
  - 2.1.1 That a Working Group, owned by the Community and Engagement Team, is set up and tasked with analysing the gaps in foodbanks within Northampton and the Working Group works with Partners to seek solutions to increasing food provision within these areas.
  - 2.1.2 That child poverty needs are included in any Strategy in relation to poverty, 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
- 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

2.1.3 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, which must include all demographics, ensuring that it is an all-inclusive Policy is investigated.

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

NB: The Scrutiny Panel updated some the actions recommended by Sustain so that they are more Northampton based

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

2.1.5 That a Working Group, led by the Community and Engagement Team, is set up and tasked with identifying areas where holiday hunger is a concern and to seek solutions to increasing food provision for children 365 days a year. In addition the outcomes that have come out following the Marcus Ashford Scheme within Northampton are continued and built upon to ensure food provision is developed for all children 365 days a year.

2.1.6 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.

2.1.7 That the Universal Credit app. is widely promoted.

2.1.8 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.

2.1.9 That the Health Start Voucher Scheme is promoted.

- 2.1.10 That the promotion of food poverty is highlighted to allotment holders and shops regarding giving away excess produce as emergency food aid.
- 2.1.11 That it is recommended to Northampton Partnership Homes (NPH) that it considers reviewing Tenancy Agreements to ensure that support is provided to older people to ensure that they are in receipt of the correct pension credits.
- 2.1.12 That the Northampton Community Forums are asked that a presentation is given to each Forum, in particular the Older People's Forum, that promotes the provision of pension credits and how this can be applied for.
- 2.1.13 That a Grants Officer is engaged with the main role of investigating funding for crisis support and the Grants Officer works closely with all organisations in this respect.
- 2.1.14 That it is recommended to the West Northamptonshire Authority that West Northamptonshire becomes a living wage Authority and a sustainable food Authority.
- 2.1.15 That the West Northamptonshire Authority is asked to lobby for national campaigns and challenge national Policy on food poverty.
- 2.1.16 That a copy of this report is provided to the MPs within West Northamptonshire and the MPs are asked to respond to the recommendations, in particular, recommendation 2.1.14.

### **3. Background and Issues**

3.1 The purpose of the Scrutiny Panel was:

- 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

#### **Key Lines of Enquiry**

- What are the impacts of food poverty?
- How widespread is food poverty in the borough?
- What strategic approaches are in existence to tackle food poverty?
- What approaches are in existence to reduce people's dependency on food aid, such as Food Banks? To receive an understanding of how food poverty is addressed
- To evaluate how the Borough Council, together with its partners, can collectively respond to food poverty
- To identify the specific issues relating to food poverty
- To identify the existence and impact of "holiday hunger"
- To identify how food poverty differs across the borough of Northampton and the reasons for this

- 3.2 Following approval of its work programme for 2019/2020, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, at its meeting in April 2019 commissioned Scrutiny Panel 3 to undertake the review – Food Poverty. An in-depth review commenced in June 2019 and concluded in September 2020. Due to unprecedented situation of the Covid19 pandemic, meetings were cancelled during March 2020 and July 2020.
- 3.3 A Scrutiny Panel was established comprising Councillor Dennis Meredith (Chair); Councillor Cathrine Russell (Deputy Chair); Councillors Mohammed Aziz, Alan Bottwood, Emma Roberts and Zoe Smith. Paul Foster, Emmanuel Church and Clive Ireton, Northamptonshire Food Poverty Network were co-opted to the Review.
- 3.4 This review links to the Council’s corporate priorities, particularly corporate priority - improving the health and wellbeing of local people.
- 3.5 The Scrutiny Panel established that the following needed to be investigated and linked to the realisation of the Council’s corporate priorities:

### **Evidence Collection**

- 3.6 Background data, including:
- Presentation to set the scene: To identify the prevalence of the problem locally
  - Relevant national and local background research papers
  - Definitions – Food Poverty
  - Causes of food poverty
  - Best practice and successful initiatives in Northampton and comparable Local Authorities
  - Relevant Council Policies and Strategies
  - Relevant Statistics and relevant reports, including:
    - Poverty indicators
    - Demographics (national and Local)
    - UN report on food poverty
    - Institute of Fiscal Studies report on food poverty
  - Relevant Legislation, including:
    - Child Poverty Act 2010
    - Changes to Universal Credit
    - Introduction to benefits and the impact
  - Best practice external to Northampton
  - Internal expert advisors:
    - Cabinet Member for Housing and Wellbeing, NBC
    - Head of Housing and Wellbeing, NBC
    - Head of Revenues and Benefits, LGSS

- Cabinet Member for Community Safety, NBC
  - Chair of the Community Safety Partnership (CSP) and the Community Safety Team
  - Cabinet Member for Finance, NBC
  - Section 151 Officer, NBC
- External expert advisors:
    - Community Law, Northampton
    - Child Poverty Action Group
    - Education Services, Northamptonshire County Council
    - Director of Children’s Services, Northamptonshire County Council
    - Community and Voluntary Sector
    - Northamptonshire Citizens Advice Bureau
    - RESTORE
    - Public Health, Northamptonshire County Council
    - Rapid Relief
    - Representations of the Sikh Community
    - Cabinet Member for Children’s Services, NCC
    - Head Teachers of local primary and secondary schools (written evidence)
    - Local Youth Clubs, including Community Spaces
    - Partnership Manager, Department of Work and Pensions

Site visits

## 4 Key Findings and Conclusions

4.1 After all of the evidence was collated the following conclusions were drawn:

### Definitions of Food Poverty

4.1.1 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”<sup>1</sup>. It is closely related to household food insecurity which is the inability to be

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

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 life<sup>2</sup>. 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.

### **Risks relating to food poverty**

- 4.1.2 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.
- 4.1.3 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.
- 4.1.4 The Scrutiny Panel recognised that food poverty can have a negative impact on both physical and mental health.

### **Food poverty – children**

- 4.1.5 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.
- 4.1.6 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

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

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.

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

### **Food Poverty – reviews and statistical data**

4.1.8 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.

4.1.9 Zero hours contract often have an impact on poverty and food poverty.

4.1.10 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 27,279<sup>3</sup> of whom 7,806<sup>4</sup> were children and 6,193<sup>5</sup> older people.

4.1.11 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"<sup>6</sup> 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.

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<sup>3</sup> Income Deprivation domain of [Indices of Deprivation 2019](#)

<sup>4</sup> [IDACI 2019](#)

<sup>5</sup> [IDOPI 2019](#)

<sup>6</sup> [https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/Foodbank%20Report\\_web.pdf](https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/Foodbank%20Report_web.pdf)

- Improve Jobcentre Plus Advisers' awareness of, and ability to respond to, mental health problems.
- Improve access to appropriate advice and support.

### **Emergency Food Aid**

- 4.1.12 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 at 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
- 4.1.13 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.
- 4.1.14 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.
- 4.1.15 The Scrutiny Panel notes that it is expected that the food banking system would continue to grow.
- 4.1.16 Evidence gathered highlighted that teachers and social workers often note some children being uncomfortable in inviting friends home, due to the state of the home and poor quality food.
- 4.1.17 It is highlighted that there is a stigma around poverty and poor-quality food is also poor value for money

### **Assistance available and Partnership Working**

- 4.1.18 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

4.1.19 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.

4.1.20 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

4.1.21 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.

- 4.1.22 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.
- 4.1.23 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.
- 4.1.24 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, □□RC regularly visits NBC and is part of the Welfare Reform meetings; that comprise a number of partners. Improvements come from these meetings.
- 4.1.25 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 felt this was not sufficiently aimed at Northampton.
- 4.1.26 The Scrutiny Panel supports the living wage employer.

## **5. Options**

- 5.1 Cabinet will need to consider the possible options as part of its response to the recommendations.

## **6. Implications (including financial implications)**

### **6.1 Policy**

- 6.1.1.1 The work of Overview and Scrutiny plays a major part in the development of the Council's policy framework through its work programme.
- 6.1.1.2 The report and its recommendations have policy implications in relation to the Council's response to food poverty. Cabinet's response will need to consider these issues in detail.

### **6.2 Resources and Risk**

- 6.2.1 Cabinet will need to consider the resourcing issues for the recommendations made.

## 6.2.2 Legal

6.2.2.1 Legal issues will need to be considered as part of Cabinet's response to the recommendations.

## 6.3 Equality

6.3.1.1 Equality issues will need to be considered as part of Cabinet's response to the recommendations.

## 6.5 Consultees (Internal and External)

6.5.1 The Committee received evidence from a variety of sources as detailed in paragraph 3.6 of this report.

### Background Papers

Overview and Scrutiny Committee report – Food Poverty (November 2020)  
Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 9 November 2020

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