

Bath & North East Somerset Council		
MEETING/ DECISION MAKER:	Children, Adults, Health and Wellbeing Policy Development & Scrutiny Panel	
MEETING/ DECISION DATE:	17 May 2022	EXECUTIVE FORWARD PLAN REFERENCE
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TITLE:	B&NES Food Equity Action Plan 2022 - 2025	
WARD:	All	
AN OPEN PUBLIC ITEM		
List of attachments to this report:		
Appendix 1 B&NES Food Equity Action Plan 2022 – 2025		
Appendix 2 Equality Impact Assessment		

1 THE ISSUE

- 1.1 B&NES Fair Food Alliance has been in operation since March 2020 and this report reflects on the achievements of the alliance since its last report to PDS (May 2021) and, following a review of progress and consultation with stakeholders, presents its refreshed priorities and action plan for the period 2022 – 2025.

2 RECOMMENDATION

The Committee is asked to;

- 2.1 Note progress since the last report (May 2021) and endorse the new Food Equity Action Plan 2022 – 2025 and future priorities for the B&NES Fair Food Alliance.
- 2.2 Support the ambitions of the B&NES Fair Food Alliance by considering ways in which other Council and partnership strategy and policy can help to increase income equality and food security locally

3 THE REPORT

- 3.1 A recent report from the Resolution Foundation¹ stated that 2022-23 will be dominated by high inflation, driven by rising oil and gas prices, as the global economy emerges from the pandemic, worsened by the conflict in Ukraine. Higher energy costs and shortages in the supply of raw materials and goods will push up prices. The report expects overall UK prices in 2022-23 to rise on average by 7.6%. Real wages and benefits will increase less than inflation in 22/23. The impact of this will be experienced disproportionately by households on lower incomes because they spend a higher proportion of their income on energy bills, and they have less flexibility in their budget and fewer savings to draw on.
- 3.2 The Food Standards Agency define Food Security as 'having access at all times to enough food that is both sufficiently varied and culturally appropriate to sustain an active and healthy life'. Recently published data from the Family Resources Survey² for 2020/21 indicates that 7% of households in the UK are food insecure. In the South West 4% of households have low or very low food security. According to this survey households most likely to be food insecure are single adults with children, households on any income related benefit, those whose tenure is social renting and Black African, Caribbean and Black British households.
- 3.3 In B&NES we have used our resident **voicebox survey** since 2019 as one way to help us understand the levels of food insecurity locally. The questions asked are based on the Family Resources Survey but not directly comparable. The most recent survey undertaken in November 2021 showed that the majority of respondents (86%) reported having had enough of the kinds of food they want to eat over the last 12 months. 12% of respondents said they had enough food but not always the kind they want to eat and 2% said that they sometimes or often did not have enough food to eat in the last 12 months. This suggests a significant number of local residents are having to make compromises on the quality of food they are eating and around 4,000 could be experiencing food shortages. These results are similar to the 2020 voicebox survey. We have seen an increase since 2019 in households reporting that they sometimes or often worry that food will run out before they can afford to buy more from 9% in 2019 to 11% in 2021. This equates to 21,000 residents.
- 3.4 A recent survey by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported an increase in adults reporting a rise in their cost of living from 62% in November 2021 to 83% in March 2022, prior to the rise in the energy price cap. The main contributors to rising costs reported were food, energy bills and fuel costs. Whilst most households will be impacted by rising bills, those in low-income households are more disproportionately affected.³

¹ <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2022/03/Living-Standards-Outlook-2022.pdf>

² <https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/profile/wider-determinants/data#page/1/gid/1938133044/pat/159/par/K02000001/ati/15/are/E92000001/iid/93862/age/1/sex/4/cat/-1/ctp/-1/yr/1/cid/4/tbm/1>

³ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/expenditure/articles/impactofincreasedcostoflivingonadultsacrossgreatbritain/november2021tomarch2022#changes-in-the-cost-of-living>

- 3.5 The number of people claiming **Universal Credit** in B&NES has increased by 61% in B&NES over the last 2 years, from 7,435 in Feb 2020 to 11,982 in March 2022. Alongside this we have seen an increase in the number of children eligible for **free school meals** (FSM). In B&NES as of 31st March 2022 there were 4,505 children eligible for free school meals representing 16.38% of children on roll. This is comparable to the South West and lower than the national average of 19.7% as of October 2020. It represents an increase of 781 children in B&NES becoming eligible between May 2020 and March 2022.
- 3.6 Nationally there has been a rise in the number of children becoming eligible for free school meals during the COVID 19 pandemic. The increase in eligibility from January 2020 to October 2020 was higher than each of the previous year on year increases. Pre-pandemic increases in eligibility rose from 13.6% in January 2018, to 15.4% in January 2019, to 17.3% in January 2020. This is in part due to transitional protection which means once you become eligible for FSM the eligibility continues, regardless of changes to household finances, until the end of the current school phase, primary or secondary. This protection will no longer be in place for children starting a new school phase from September 2023. The Department for Education have permanently extended free school meal eligibility to children in all households with no recourse to public funds (NRPF), subject to maximum income thresholds.
- 3.7 For the period 1st April 2021 – 30th September 2021 **food banks** in the Trussell Trust network based in B&NES distributed a total of 3,158 food parcels to individuals and families. This compares to a total of 4,433 parcels distributed in the same period during 2019. A drop in food bank usage during 2021 was also seen nationally and a number of factors are thought to have contributed to this including the Universal Credit (UC) increase, government schemes like Kickstart and furlough, government grants to local councils as well as support for children and families during school holidays and the development of affordable food projects. The Feeding Britain network is concerned that this situation could reverse due to the removal of the UC uplift and additional pressures on household incomes now starting to take effect due to increased food, energy and living costs. Locally Citizens Advice have reported increasing numbers of people accessing their services who have received all the support that is available to them but still cannot make their household budget balance, due to either energy price increases or reductions in Universal Credit.
- 3.8 The **B&NES Fair Food Alliance** (BFFA) provides the governance and structure to drive the strategic direction and co-ordination of food insecurity work locally. The overall aim of its work is to ensure that everyone living in B&NES can reliably afford and access suitable food to meet their needs for energy, nutrition, and social & cultural connection, with dignity and without resort to emergency food aid. Below is a summary of the collective work of the BFFA and highlights of specific contributions from its members since May 2021 (points 3.9 – 3.25).
- 3.9 The alliance has benefited from strategic partnerships with St Johns Foundation, Feeding Britain and Fare share SW which have enabled learning from best practice, the ability to influence policy and strategy both locally and nationally, and attracted additional resources for co-ordination and delivery. It has secured over £200,000 of funding from St Johns Foundation, Feeding

Britain, the Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF) ⁴and DWP to support its work over the last year.

- 3.10 The ambitions of the Fair Food Alliance have been articulated through a local action plan and operationalised through two active and committed multi-agency task groups; the Affordable Food Network (AFN) and Income Maximisation Group (IMG). The alliance is also committed to listening to and involving local people with lived experience of food insecurity and this is a key principle and theme of its work.
- 3.11 The **Affordable Food Network** has progressed from co-ordination of emergency food provision during the pandemic, working alongside our existing food banks, to identifying additional need and developing solutions at a local level to meet that need. This has included significantly expanding the type of food support available in the community, resulting in an additional 10 new affordable food projects now operating across B&NES.⁵
- 3.12 **Fare Share SW** has re-distributed an average of 11,660kg of food per month in B&NES to 31 charities/organisations from April 2021 – March 2022. The amount of food being distributed has decreased over the last 6 months from a peak of 15,000kg/month in July 2021 to around 9,000kg/month in March 2022. The organisations in B&NES receiving these food supplies are working predominantly with families with children and people on low or no income. Recipients also include organisations working with people who are homeless, older people and those with a focus on mental health. It is estimated that around 4,200 people per week in B&NES are recipients of this food.
- 3.13 The **Crop Drop** project which distributes donated fruit and vegetables from growers across B&NES to affordable food projects, expanded its reach considerably in 2021. From June to December 2021 the project made 156 drops of produce from 19 different growers, to 27 local food projects, all co-ordinated and delivered by volunteers.⁶
- 3.14 There has also been a huge co-ordinated effort to ensure families were able to access food and activities during the school holidays. In 2021, all upper tier local authorities, including Bath and North East Somerset, received government funding to coordinate and provide support for children and young people in receipt of benefit-related free school meals through the Easter, Summer and Christmas holiday periods. This funding aimed to address particular pressures for families caused by school holidays where children from low-income households are at an increased risk of reduced access to out of school activities, social isolation and reduced exposure to healthy eating and physical activity.
- 3.15 During 2021 the **Holiday Activities and Food** programme engaged with 130 children and young people over Easter (average 3.8 sessions per child), 1,910 over the summer (average 4 sessions) and 401 over the Christmas period (average 2 sessions). In October 2021, the government announced a further investment for the Holiday Activities and Food Programme for the period 2022/23 – 2024/25. A lead provider has been commissioned locally to co-

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/contain-outbreak-management-fund-2021-to-2022/contain-outbreak-management-fund-guidance-financial-year-2021-to-2022>

⁵ <https://www.banesfoodfinder.org.uk/>

⁶ <https://www.cropdrop.org.uk/end-of-year/2021>

ordinate delivery and ensure that the equivalent of at least six weeks' holiday provision is available for eligible children each year.

- 3.16 **Healthy Start** vouchers for pregnant women and those with children under 4 years on low incomes moved from a paper-based system to a digital one from April 2022. The vouchers, which provide money for milk, fruit, vegetables, pulses, formula milk and access to free vitamins are being actively promoted locally to raise awareness of the move to the new digital card and to highlight support available to help with the transition. The move to digital distribution has resulted in a fall in the number of families accessing the scheme due to operational issues with the change and a lack of public awareness.
- 3.17 The **Income Maximisation** Group has focused on co-ordination, ensuring that local agencies are fully aware of each other's work and offer to the community. The group has ensured that benefits available are widely promoted and that other mechanisms for improving household income such as employment support and skills development and energy efficiency schemes are also part of the offer. It has also worked collaboratively to pilot new ways of reaching local people with advice and support needs, as well as looking at how to shift the balance from crisis fund provision to a more preventative approach to financial support.
- 3.18 The Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF) for 2021/22 provided local authorities with funds to help reduce the spread of coronavirus through public health initiatives, including community support to those disproportionately impacted. This funding enabled the income maximisation group to pilot a **Pathways from Poverty**⁷ approach in four areas of B&NES, delivered by Citizens Advice and Clean Slate. The model, developed by Feeding Britain, involves placing specialist advice workers into community-led food projects to help resolve some of the wider issues that households are facing when they receive help with food. The advice workers build trusted relationships with households in these familiar settings, and can then provide expert support around benefits, debt, budgeting, housing, energy, or employment. Early feedback from both projects is that the support is very well received, and that digital exclusion is a key feature for most people accessing the service.
- 3.19 COMF funding also enabled the piloting of a **Poverty Proofing Schools Audit**⁸ with 10 schools in B&NES. This project will help schools to increase their understanding of the barriers and challenges faced by pupils and families who are living on a low income and help them make positive changes to policies and practices. Following evaluation the ambition is to create a tool that all schools in B&NES can use to help them identify and mitigate the impact of poverty on children's learning and development.
- 3.20 The income maximisation group has also developed a local version of the Independent Food Action Network Cash First **'Worried about money?' leaflet**⁹ which will be available both online and physically in community venues to help signpost people to the range of support and advice available locally.

⁷ <https://feedingbritain.org/what-works-centre/pathways-from-poverty/>

⁸ <https://thehub.bathnes.gov.uk/Page/21430>

⁹ <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/cash-first-leaflets>

- 3.21 During 21/22 the Councils **Local Welfare Provision (LWP)** budget was increased from £190,000 to £590,000 through receipt of government grants to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. Good progress was made in using the additional funding with approximately £440,000 being distributed to B&NES residents during the financial year. The majority of the funding supported residents with debt, household goods and food. Of those residents supported 80% were social housing tenants, 13% private rented tenants and 7% other household types. A request has been made to carry forward the £150,000 underspend to supplement the 22/23 welfare budget, which will then total £340,000. The £150,000 will strengthen the LWP budget for 2022/23 to enable the council to support residents with cost of living pressures, however some of this funding may need to be diverted to support residents with rental costs as the Government has reduced the DHP budget by 30% to £189,354 in 2022/23.
- 3.22 In addition to the above funding, in 2021/22 the Welfare support team also distributed £1.55M of funding through the Covid Winter grant, Covid Local Support Grant and Household Support Fund. This money was provided to residents through supermarket vouchers, to support households whose children received free school meals during school holidays, and through provision of pre-paid debit cards to help households with energy costs, and through Citizens Advice Bath and North East Somerset to support their fuel voucher scheme. The Welfare Support team also awarded £272,700 in **Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)** to residents in 2021/22, to help with rent arrears, and to supplement Housing Benefit or Universal credit to ensure that residents could pay their rent. A total of 290 residents were supported with DHP's in 2021/22.
- 3.23 The **Household Support Fund (HSF)** will continue for 6 months from April 2022 and may be extended in October, however details of how the council will use this money to support residents have not yet been finalised. The B&NES funding allocation for the HSF for the first half of 2022/23 is £967,000, and the new grant conditions attached are that at least 1/3 must be spent on households with children, up to 1/3 on households without children and at least 1/3 on households with a pensioner. Support is likely to take the form of the continuation of the Free School Meal voucher scheme and possibly cash payments to support households with rising energy costs.
- 3.24 The **Energy Rebate Scheme** is also being introduced for residents in 2022/23 and this comprises two elements, the Main scheme and a Discretionary fund. The Main scheme will consist of a one off £150 payment to each household in council tax bands A-D. The Discretionary fund is a one off payment of £150 and is intended to support residents who do not qualify under the rules of the Main scheme, for example because the resident is not liable for council tax or lives in a property of band E or above, but are nonetheless exposed to rising energy costs. This could be because they receive certain income-related benefits, have a household member on disability benefits or are on a low income (<£500 per week combined earnings and pensions).
- 3.25 **St John's Foundation** have also supported 497 households (both individuals and households with children) over the last year with a total of £244,737 which has mainly been needed to buy carpets, white goods, furniture and manage council tax arrears. This is significantly less than the amount given out in 2020 due to the increase of welfare support funds via the Council.

3.26 The alliance works closely with the **Feeding Britain** network to provide evidence, case studies and examples of good practice to inform suggested improvements and changes to national policy and legislation. Key areas that the Feeding Britain network is currently lobbying for include;

- automatic registration for free school meals and healthy start;
- eliminating penalties associated with the use of pre-payment meters for gas and electricity
- reviewing the eligibility criteria for free school meals.

3.27 The B&NES Food Equity Action Plan 2022 – 2025 (see Appendix 1) has been developed by the B&NES Fair Food Alliance following an extensive period of engagement and consultation with key stakeholders and research by University of Bath involving residents with lived experience. The Action Plan reflects the key themes and feedback received during the consultation. There was strong consensus on the main areas of focus going forward. Underlying the approach is the challenge to ensure that leftover or surplus food does not become the answer to food insecurity and that prioritising financial wellbeing and security is key to addressing inequality of access to affordable food locally.

3.28 The Action Plan reflects both the operational and strategic ambitions of the alliance in ensuring a focus on prevention and early identification of food insecurity and, when working with those in crisis, ensuring that support given is easy to access, inclusive, dignified, respectful, and joined up at a local level.

On the theme of **money** the following actions were prioritised:

- A single point of access approach to applying for crisis support
- Move from signposting to direct referral amongst support agencies
- Strengthen financial support/advice within other service provision eg social prescribing, hospital discharge
- Promote fuel poverty solutions/support
- Ensure financial support is part of frontline staff induction and training
- Promotion of safe and affordable borrowing and saving options
- Ensure physical activity opportunities are affordable to families
- Widening task group participation to encourage knowledge and skills share with other sectors eg drugs, homelessness, mental health

On the theme of **affordable food** priorities include;

- Provision of community food hubs with wraparound support
- Strengthen action on nutrition advice and cooking skills
- Clear communications on support available
- Improving access to equipment for food storage/preparation and cooking
- Strengthen links with early help and children's services.
- Integrate food insecurity within the context of wider healthy weight, physical activity and food strategy
- Support longer-term funding arrangements for the Affordable Food Network

On the theme of **dignity and inclusion** the priorities are;

- Increase focus on older people – understanding need/barriers to access
- Continue to work on reducing stigma associated with accessing support
- Better understand needs of 18 – 25 yr olds living away from home

- Continue to look at ways of involving people with lived experience in the work of the alliance

3.29 The alliance is developing a suite of key performance indicators to help monitor and report on progress with the actions where local data is available. These may include;

- Increasing uptake of entitlements e.g. healthy start programme, free school meals
- Reduction in reported household food insecurity and children's experience of hunger
- Reduction in usage of food banks/other emergency food aid
- Increase in knowledge, awareness of household food insecurity amongst agencies and how to access support
- Increase in sustainable food/community hubs
- Reduction in need for emergency financial support
- Increase in use of green spaces for food growing
- Number of schools in B&NES completing Poverty Proofing Schools Audit

3.30 There are national, sub regional and local drivers of low income and food insecurity and the alliance will use its learning and the experience to highlight where policy and systemic change could prevent residents reaching crisis point. Income inequality is a key determinant of health outcomes and healthy life expectancy. There are opportunities in the development of local and sub regional strategies and policy, including growth and economy, housing, planning, transport and climate and nature emergency to contribute to the financial wellbeing and food security of all local residents including those on low incomes, and with no recourse to public funds.

4 STATUTORY CONSIDERATIONS

4.1 By developing a Food Equity Action Plan, B&NES Council as part of the B&NES Fair Food Alliance will support residents through seeking to prevent, reduce and mitigate against the effects of experiencing household food insecurity and thereby take preventative collective action to address health inequalities longer term.

5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (FINANCE, PROPERTY, PEOPLE)

5.1 Funding for a 3yr fixed term post to co-ordinate the delivery of the B&NES Food Equity Action Plan has been received from St John's Foundation. This post sits within the Council Public Health team (Aug 2021 - July 2024). The BFFA does not have an operational budget. Funding for the continuation and/or development of projects within the Action Plan will be the subject of separate business cases/funding bids as required.

6 RISK MANAGEMENT

- 6.1 A risk assessment related to the issue and recommendations has been undertaken, in compliance with the Council's decision making risk management guidance.

7 EQUALITIES

- 7.1 An Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed (see Appendix 2) and actions incorporated into the B&NES Food Equity Action Plan.

8 CLIMATE CHANGE

- 8.1 This work has the potential to contribute to achievement of carbon neutrality as part of a wider focus on food and food systems in B&NES which aims to reduce food waste and increase access to fresh, seasonal local produce.

9 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 9.1 None

10 CONSULTATION

- 10.1 The B&NES Food Equity Action Plan 2022 – 2025 has been developed by the B&NES Fair Food Alliance following an extensive period of engagement and consultation with key stakeholders and research by University of Bath involving residents with lived experience. The consultation process involved engagement with all BFFA members through alliance and task group meetings, an online workshop with wider stakeholders, presentation to the Prevention and Early Intervention sub-group of the B&NES Community Safety and Safeguarding Partnership. It also included commissioned research from University of Bath who carried out semi structured interviews with a range of local support groups, charities and agencies as well as in-depth interviews with 20 service users from across the area, age range and lived experience. Two face to face workshops with over 60 attendees, were held in early April in Bath and Midsomer Norton to enable those involved in the research to hear and validate the initial findings and recommendations. A report on the full findings of this research will be available in May 2022.

- 10.2 This report has been cleared by the S151 Officer and monitoring Officer.

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Background papers	B&NES Food Equity Plan Report to Children, Adults, Health and Wellbeing Panel May 2021 https://democracy.bathnes.gov.uk/mgAi.aspx?ID=27752
Please contact the report author if you need to access this report in an alternative format	