

Bath & North East Somerset Council		
MEETING	Full Council	
MEETING DATE	January 21st 2021	
TITLE:	Food Poverty Action Plan Update	
WARD:	All	
AN OPEN PUBLIC ITEM		
<p>List of attachments to this report:</p> <p>Appendix 1 B&NES Food Poverty Steering Group Terms of Reference and membership list</p> <p>Appendix 2 Testimonials from families</p> <p>Appendix 3 Draft Food Poverty Action Plan 20/21</p>		

1 THE ISSUE

1.1 The process for taking forward the development of a Food Poverty Action Plan for B&NES was agreed with the Children, Adult, Health and Wellbeing Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel on 28th January 2020. This included the formation of a local Food Poverty Steering Group to drive the work and support implementation of the plan. An update report was taken to the same panel on 14th July 2020. This report provides a further update on progress, local priorities, the evolving action plan and sets out the case to widen the scope of the food agenda for comment and engagement.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

The Council is asked to

2.1 Consider the information in this report, note the significant developments and progress made. Council is asked to reaffirm its commitment to addressing food poverty as a whole council issue.

3 THE REPORT

3.1 Terminology around this issue is important. The term 'food poverty' is used here to reflect wording in previous reports to Council, however, more fitting terms that reflect our ambition rather than what we intend to eradicate are being explored and will be used in future reports. The term 'household food insecurity' will also be used in this report to describe a situation where people do not have

means to reliably meet their needs for food of sufficient quantity, quality or variety in socially acceptable ways.

3.2 Household food insecurity is a growing national issue and B&NES residents living in areas of high deprivation are increasingly affected. Existing vulnerability has been greatly exacerbated through the past nine months of the coronavirus pandemic. Household food insecurity is a complex issue with three core and closely linked drivers at the household level:

- Insufficient household income to reliably and consistently afford a healthy and nutritious diet for all household members
- Poor networks of informal social support
- Adverse life experiences (job loss, bereavement, relationship breakdown, social exclusion, trauma, poor health etc)

3.3 These key drivers have been exacerbated by a decade of austerity measures that have led to cuts to universal and targeted services, stagnated wage growth and an increase in insecure employment models including zero-hours contracts. Much of the B&NES economy is dependent on the more precarious sectors of food, hospitality and service, and this is coupled with a higher than average cost of living in the area, mainly due to higher housing costs, which can all have a detrimental impact on household income.

3.4 The Food Poverty work in B&NES is led by the public health team and coordinated through by a Health Improvement Officer. The post was recruited as a 0.6 FTE, fixed term contract until July 2021. Recently funding has been secured through the St John's Foundation to extend the post until July 2024.

3.5 The B&NES Food Poverty Steering Group (see Appendix 1 for Terms of Reference) has met five times since its first meeting on 25th March 2020 at the start of the first coronavirus lockdown period. The main focus has been on understanding the challenges emerging for residents in relation to immediate food needs and provision of welfare support. The Steering Group has provided a network for members to share information, co-ordinate activity and both offer and request support. Membership currently stands at over 60 members representing a range of statutory, third sector, education and independent organisations.

As the new and acute needs that emerged through the coronavirus situation subside in coming months, household food insecurity which existed in B&NES prior to the pandemic will require the focused attention of the Steering Group to shift the emphasis of action from crisis intervention to long term solutions to reduce and eradicate household food insecurity.

3.6 Following a presentation by Andrew Forsey, National Director of Feeding Britain¹, the Steering Group formalised its relationship with the Feeding Britain network in September to access the benefits of;

¹ <https://feedingbritain.org/>

- Membership of a growing national network of partnerships around the country from whom we can learn and with whom we can share our own innovation and best practice.
- Support for funding of local projects with experienced bid-writers and possibilities of joint projects to increase traction with funders.
- A direct route of communication to government through the Feeding Britain trustees and their lobbying capacity to take forward aspects of the work that require legislation or national policy change.
- Access to, and possible involvement in the creation of a growing body of credible research into poverty and food insecurity and the complexity of solution-finding.

3.7 The significant increase in demand for support with food and income related issues since March are illustrated with the following figures shared by some of the key partners from the Steering Group:

3.8 From March to September 2020 Universal Credit (UC) claims in B&NES increased from 7500 to 13,660, with the steepest rise between March and May. This also resulted in an increase in children becoming eligible for free school meals (FSM). For the nearly 3000 UC claimants who are aged over 50 it can be more difficult re-enter the Labour Market at their previous pay rate.

3.9 B&NES Welfare Support team awarded grants totalling over £21,000 specifically for food support from April to September 2020. This accounted for around one third of the 1528 grants awarded for crisis financial assistance for that period. The team also provided white goods to the value of £45,000 to residents and made 550 referrals to the area's foodbanks. The Welfare Support team are also managing additional Government funded schemes to:

- (1) relieve Coronavirus-related debt/financial crisis.
- (2) £500 Test and Trace payments for people who have lost income through self-isolation and meet the qualifying criteria.
- (3) support those facing eviction, since the ban on evictions was lifted on 21st September, through the Discretionary Housing Payment Scheme.

3.10 By September St. John's Foundation Crisis Fund had benefitted 1149 people through 558 applications and a total of £231,424. White goods and support around food insecurity have featured strongly in the applications. St John's are long-term funders of FareShare South West's work in B&NES and have offered specific support to Julian House and Mercy in Action.

3.11 Citizens Advice (CA) have dealt with over 4500 cases since the first lockdown, predominantly involving benefit claims and significant debt issues.

3.12 Further rises in claimant numbers are expected as furlough schemes come to an end and service, retail, hospitality and entertainment sectors continue to see large numbers of job losses.

- 3.13 The B&NES community response has been broad, diverse, flexible and continues to evolve as the pandemic situation changes and the pre-Covid scale of existing household food insecurity becomes increasingly evident.
- 3.14 In the early stages of the pandemic acute need around food crisis was largely met by increased use of established foodbanks. Across the Southwest region use increased by 124% by April 2020 compared to April 2019.
- 3.15 The broader community response which quickly followed involved the coordination and mobilisation of a large network of businesses, community projects, charities², volunteers and B&NES council teams to safely provide food parcels, chilled / frozen meals and home deliveries to thousands of B&NES residents over the months of Covid-19 restrictions.
- 3.16 That community response, while still very much addressing acute crisis where it arises, has evolved into a growing network of community-based support offering FOOD (Food On Our Doorstep) Clubs, Food Pantries, Community Cafes, Community Fridges, Village Larders and redistribution of locally grown produce from allotments and gardens via an innovative new project called CropDrop. The FOOD Clubs and Pantries run on membership models where households pay a small weekly subscription (around £3.50) to access around £15 worth of varied groceries.
- 3.17 Most of the projects described above are among the 35 charities, schools and children centres who are B&NES members of FareShare Southwest. They provide wholesale food surplus for redistribution to the people engaged with the projects. Nearly 17 tonnes of food, enough for around 40 000 meals, is shared in B&NES every month via FareShare.
- 3.18 All members seek to offer as much wraparound support as possible to help people not only address acute needs and hunger but also the causes of food insecurity to prevent future crisis. This support includes financial guidance, referral and signposting to other services, building social connection and relationships, and practical skills-building around cooking, budgeting and food growing.
- 3.19 The Sustainable Food Partnership and 3SG set up an online Food Finder platform showing which local businesses were offering food deliveries and takeaway during the lockdown.³
- 3.20 John Thornfield, Funding manager at St John's Foundation, shared his feedback on perceptions of the work in B&NES to address food poverty and how it is being coordinated:

“Looking more widely at themes, our conversations with the likes of FareShare and Feeding Britain, indicate that B&NES is an exceptionally well-coordinated locality with a strong emerging strategy around food insecurity. With a proactive local authority public health team working in close alignment with a major local funder in St John's and an influential national player in Feeding Britain, allied to the good work

²Charities and community groups include Mercy in Action, Oasis, Bath City Farm, Southside Family Project, Bath Area Play Project, Food Cycle, Age UK, BEMSCA, Community at 67, Youth Connect, Square Hot Meal and Sporting Family Change

³ <http://banesfoodfinder.org.uk/>

emerging from 3SG and the wider Community Wellbeing Hub, we feel very confident in the progress that is being made”

- 3.21 **Funding** Support for this network has been strengthened by a combined Holiday Food Grant Programme of £30K from Feeding Britain and St John’s Foundation over the summer. There was a further £50K fund from public donations initiated by Wera Hobhouse MP and a generous single business donation, distributed through 3SG and administered through the St John’s Foundation in October.
- 3.22 Schools have worked hard to identify and connect with their more vulnerable families to offer additional support including the technical support required to access vouchers and provision of food parcels and home delivery as needed. Many have reported that this new route to connecting with families has had a positive effect on the relationship between families and the school. This is echoed in the testimonials of families supported by voluntary sector projects too (see Appendix 2).
- 3.23 The national Free School Meal voucher system over the summer holidays saw families with children eligible for free school meals (FSM) receive vouchers worth £90 to cover the 6-week period. We know this was not sufficient to meet all need and there are other families who fall outside of eligibility criteria but still have very low incomes and need additional support.
- 3.24 The government Covid Winter Grant Scheme which began early December 2020 has largely been directed to fund a locally administered voucher system, arranged through Education Business Support and Welfare Support to provide for all children eligible for FSM and those in early years who fulfil the eligibility criteria for FSM. Between the 8th and 29th December, the Welfare Support team issued vouchers in respect of more than 3,700 children in B&NES. The vouchers will cover the Christmas holiday and a similar exercise will be conducted for the February half term period. The remaining funding will be accessible to other households in need of support through application to Welfare Support services.
- 3.25 Further government funding, through an extended Holiday Activities and Food programme will cover the Easter, Summer and Christmas school holidays in 2021. The value of that grant is not yet known.
- 3.26 The £20 a week uplift in Universal Credit value from early April is likely to have been an important driver in keeping emergency food needs from spiralling as the pandemic progressed. It will be important to consider and prepare for the potential impact on demand when the uplift ends in April 2021.

4 FOOD POVERTY ACTION PLAN

- 4.1 Proposed priorities for action, drawn from discussions with Steering group members, have been incorporated into an evolving action plan (see Appendix 3). Delivery of these actions is led by three task groups to guide and develop the work and report back to the Steering Group.
- 4.2 The task groups are:
- Income Maximisation

- Food for All
 - Hear My Voice
- 4.3 The **Income Maximisation** group is chaired by St John's Foundation and has representation including DWP, DHI, Welfare Support, Citizen's Advice, Age UK, CleanSlate, and Curo. A key purpose is sharing information and best practice across B&NES so people can be confident of a consistent response when approaching any member organisation for support and advocacy around financial issues including benefits advice, debt solutions, household budget management or employment / enterprise support.
- 4.4 The **Food for All** theme is currently focused around two key projects; developing an Affordable Food Network of free and affordable food projects, and supporting the development of CropDrop, a volunteer-led initiative to redistribute locally grown allotment produce to the projects in that network. Both are seeking to build resilient and forward-thinking resources for local communities to alleviate and prevent ongoing food insecurity and help people make stronger and more meaningful personal connections with sources of healthy locally grown food.
- 4.5 The **Hear My Voice** theme is taking shape through work with both Bath University and Bath Spa researchers to carry out initial exploratory local research, with people with life experience of household food insecurity and any agencies with whom they are already closely engaged. This will inform funding applications for more significant pieces of research.
- 4.6 Both Universities are also examining their own contribution to the local food economy and how food insecurity may impact their own staff and students. This involves exploration of the impact of their own procurement and use of food, considerations around being a Real Living Wage⁴ employer and supporting students on low incomes who may be affected by the issues directly.
- 4.7 The key areas around Data and Communications are currently co-ordinated by Public Health with support from Steering Group members.
- 4.8 In order to address key drivers relating to poor social networks and adverse life experiences we are actively engaging with existing partnerships such as, B&NES Community Safety and Safeguarding Partnership (BCSSP) and the Early Help and Compassionate Communities partnerships.
- 4.9 B&NES Renewal Board have agreed for public health to lead on the development of an integrated strategy on obesity, physical activity and food in 2021. The prevention and mitigation of the effects of food poverty is best addressed at a systemic level and the food elements of the new integrated strategy will link to the wider sustainable food agenda. Alongside this a commitment by the Council to sign and implement the Healthy Weight Declaration⁵ (HWD) would further help to support work around household food security.

5 WIDER LOBBYING AND CROSS-STRATEGY WORKING

⁴ www.livingwage.org.uk

⁵ <https://foodactive.org.uk/what-we-do/influence-policy/local-authority-declaration-on-healthy-weight/>

5.1 Wera Hobhouse MP has agreed to champion the National Food Strategy recommendations, as they impact on household food insecurity, in Parliament. These are to:

- (1) Expand eligibility for the Free School Meal scheme to include every child (up to the age of 16) from a household where a parent or guardian is in receipt of Universal Credit or equivalent benefits.
- (2) Extend the Holiday Activity and Food Programme to all areas in England, so that summer holiday support is available to all children in receipt of free school meals. (Funding has been agreed to extend this scheme from April 2021).
- (3) Increase the value of Healthy Start vouchers to £4.25 per week, and expand the scheme to every pregnant women and to all households with children under 4 where a parent or guardian is in receipt of universal Credit of equivalent benefit (The value of the vouchers will increase from April 2021).

5.2 Our Steering Group members are also encouraged to provide data and testimony to support the national lobbying by Public Health England, Sustain and Feeding Britain on wider associated issues of food policy and welfare provision.

5.3 It is crucial that B&NES not be drawn into the rising global pattern of ‘solving’ household food insecurity with the equally problematic overproduction of food; endemic in our industrialised food supply chain which creates a great deal of surplus⁶. Food waste isn’t accidental or unavoidable– it is an intrinsic and necessary part of our current industrial, commodified food system. Household food insecurity is rooted in social and economic inequality and it is this which creates the barriers to and availability of sufficient sources of healthy food. We must de-couple these two problems rather than use them each to mitigate the other and, consequently, serve to perpetuate them both.

B&NES should continue to take a whole Council approach, considering the potential contribution each department and team can make to the eradication of food poverty locally and linking with work on wider sustainable food systems.

6 STATUTORY CONSIDERATIONS

6.1 By developing a Food Poverty Action Plan, B&NES Council, in partnership with a wide range of local stakeholders and partners, will strengthen collective action to:

- (1) support residents experiencing or at risk of household food insecurity and
- (2) through a focus on preventative action contribute towards minimising health inequalities longer term.

7 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (FINANCE, PROPERTY, PEOPLE)

7.1 No additional resource implications at present.

7.2 The Health Improvement Officer role within the public health team will be supported beyond the current contract by St. John's Foundation funding.

8 RISK MANAGEMENT

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

9 EQUALITIES

9.1 Household food insecurity can be a very dynamic experience and is something that can affect anyone; individual circumstances can change rapidly as this year particularly has demonstrated. Research shows however, that some sections of the community can be particularly vulnerable to experiencing food poverty. Following discussions with the Council's Equalities Team the Food Poverty Steering Group will collaboratively complete an Equality Impact Assessment in order to:

- consider how our local action plan is targeting support to the most vulnerable groups in our area
- highlight and address barriers that some groups might face in accessing support

10 CLIMATE CHANGE

10.1 This work has the potential to contribute to achievement of carbon neutrality as part of a wider focus on food in B&NES which aims to reduce food waste and increase access to fresh, seasonal, local produce. Work is in progress to forge meaningful links between the work around food poverty and wider cross-departmental work in the Council in relation to addressing the Climate and Biodiversity Crisis, sustainable food, minimising over purchasing, better use, local food production, and soil health.

11 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

11.1 None

12 CONSULTATION

12.1 Information in this report has been provided by members of the Food Poverty Steering Group and the draft action plan is a product of discussions and consultation with group members and other stakeholders since March 2020.

12.2 This report has been approved by the S151 Officer and Monitoring Officer

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Background papers	Children, Adult, Health and Wellbeing Policy Development & Scrutiny Panel 14th July 2020

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