

Food Poverty Working Group Interim Report

**Report of the Overview and Scrutiny
Management Committee**

March 2021

1

1 Introduction

As ward councillors, we're only too aware of the impact of food poverty in our communities – we know that food poverty affects people's physical and mental health & wellbeing, their sense of self, and contributes to social isolation. We've seen food poverty rise over the last few years, and we know that Covid has pushed more people into food poverty, with the worst yet to come.

It's hard to quantify the extent of food poverty in Sheffield, but we know that:

- Around 24,000 children are currently eligible for Free School Meals and therefore at risk of going hungry during the school holidays. This number is on the rise.
- According to data collected by Voluntary Action Sheffield from 19 food banks, between 13th April 2020 and 8th June 2020 the number of households supported increased by just over 92% from 1144 to 2202 households. We know that this doesn't represent the full picture of emergency food aid during this time – and shows us supply, not level of need, which could be much higher.

Through our links to communities, we're also aware of the invaluable work that so many organisations play in responding to food poverty – providing emergency financial and food aid; providing advice on debt and welfare; making good, affordable food available to people who need it; bringing people together through food to develop social networks and combat isolation.

It's this response to food poverty, and the Council's role in it that we wanted to look at and why we set up the working group. With limited time available to us, we recognised early on that we would be unable to consider food poverty in its entirety, so we have taken a phased approach to this work. This first phase focussed on food projects, and has identified areas for consideration in future phases.

This process has shown us that there is much good work going on in Sheffield to respond to food poverty, and many strengths to build on. We hope that our report and recommendations will raise the profile of this important issue affecting so many in our communities, and act as a catalyst for progress.

Food Poverty Working Group

March 2021

2 Our approach

2.1 During February and March 2021, the cross-party Food Poverty Working Group, established by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee, set out to:

- Consider the extent, impact and experience of food poverty in Sheffield, including how this differs amongst groups and communities across the city.
- Consider the support and services that are in place across the city to tackle food poverty; as well as best practice from other areas.
- Review the Council's response to food poverty, including strategic approach, use of resources and funding, working with partners.

Our aim was to make recommendations that would improve the Council's response to Food Poverty, leading to improved outcomes for Sheffield people.

In the time available to us before the end of the 2020/21 municipal year, it was not possible to consider the full range of issues we wanted to, so we have taken a phased approach to this work. This first phase focussed on the role of the Council in relation to food poverty and food projects, and has identified areas for the working group to consider in future phases (see section 3.5).

2.2 We met with officers from Sheffield City Council who work on food and poverty issues; we talked to a range of food banks and food projects operating in the City, and organisations who provide support and advice to people in food poverty. Members of the group attended meetings held by [Together for Sheffield](#), which bring together food projects across the city on a weekly basis, and we heard from academics from the University of Sheffield who research food poverty and food insecurity.

2.3 We launched a 'Call for Evidence' asking people to tell us about their experience of food poverty. We received 45 responses via the online form, as well as some responses by phone and email. These were from a range of perspectives – people who have experienced food poverty, people who work with food projects and advice/support organisations, and our frontline staff who work with people in food poverty. The information we gathered through this process, alongside case studies from Sheffield Citizen's Advice and food projects has helped us to put people's lived experience at the heart of our work.

2.4 Our discussions have been thought-provoking and wide-ranging. Links to the information we considered, and notes of our meetings are listed in appendix 1. The evidence we have gathered in this phase of the review will be available to inform future phases.

3 Our Findings and Recommendations

In this first phase of our work, we were keen to understand the role of the Council in relation to food poverty and food projects. Our questions to contributors focussed on what the Council could and should be doing in this area. Through our many and varied discussions, four key themes emerged, around which we have made our recommendations: **Strategy & Culture; Developing a comprehensive network of food support – mapping and development; Navigating the system; Leadership.**

3.1 Strategy & Culture

3.1.1 A key message that came through in many of our conversations, is that food poverty is the ‘tip of the poverty iceberg’. The root cause of food poverty is people not having enough income to meet their needs – and food is a cost that can be ‘squeezed’ - unlike rent and utility bills.

We heard consistent themes around why people find themselves in food poverty:

- **Insufficient income** – insecure work, gig economy, zero hours contracts, job losses due to Covid, insufficiency of Universal Credit. Exacerbated by lockdown – more people at home during lockdown, higher utility bills.
- **Welfare** -benefit sanctions and deductions, waiting for first universal credit payment, benefit cap, bedroom tax, people unaware of their benefit entitlements.
- **Debt** – rent arrears, debt – illegal loan sharks and approach to public sector debt collection/repaying overpayments.
- **Access to affordable food** - unable or can't afford to travel to access cheaper supermarkets. Covid affected the availability and cost of supermarket delivery slots. Cooking equipment and fridge and freezer space are an issue too.

Food banks also reported that they are seeing lots of people with mental health issues – for whom current mental health service provision is not sufficient, and victims of domestic violence – who they don't have the skills or resources to properly support.

3.1.2 Emergency food aid, whilst vital, is only a sticking plaster – we need to deal with the myriad of underlying issues - housing, employment, income maximisation to name but a few, to achieve long term solutions. Whilst some of these are out of local control – for example issues around Universal Credit, we believe that a joined up strategic approach to tackling poverty, including food poverty, with a tangible action plan underpinning it is essential for moving this agenda forwards.

We support the Council's development of a Tackling Poverty Framework for Sheffield, and the commitment to developing a Tackling Poverty Action Plan as part

of this – but all of our contributors were keen to stress that urgency around this is building. We know that Covid has disproportionately affected our poorest communities, and the worst is yet to come. We are approaching the ‘cliff-edge’ as some of the temporary Covid protections and support, such as furlough, Universal Credit uplift, stay on evictions etc. are removed. This adds further weight to calls for development of the Tackling Poverty Action Plan to be prioritised.

- 3.1.3 However, we’ve all heard the saying that ‘culture eats strategy for breakfast’. Through our call for evidence we heard that people often feel ashamed and embarrassed to ask for emergency food or financial aid, and that our own internal approaches and processes don’t always make it easy for people to access, or even be aware of, help that they are entitled to.

The Council should be challenging perceptions and stigma that deter people from accessing support; and advocating for Sheffield people to get the help and support they are entitled to – gateway, not gatekeeper. Actions to drive this culture change should be included in the Tackling Poverty Action Plan.

People told us that the process for applying for emergency financial aid can be lengthy and difficult, and that long phone waits on helplines can be problematic for people with limited phone credit. We need to ensure that our processes are efficient, joined up, and reflect this culture of advocating on behalf of Sheffield people.

Recommendations

- 3.1.4 Sheffield City Council should implement the Tackling Poverty Framework by prioritising development of the Tackling Poverty Action Plan. Tackling Food Poverty should be one element of this. It should be a citywide effort, across public services, the VCF, communities and business, and take a long term, structural approach to find lasting solutions.
- 3.1.5 As part of the action plan, Sheffield City Council should identify ways to foster a culture that challenges stigma, and ensures that Sheffield people are aware of, and able to access the benefits that they are entitled to.
- 3.1.6 Sheffield City Council’s processes should reflect this culture – and ensure that there aren’t any unnecessary barriers to people accessing support. We should consider how our processes that affect people in hardship - eg, council tax support, rent, poverty related grants, could be improved.

3.2 Developing a comprehensive network of food support – mapping and development.

3.2.1 We heard how attempts to map food support in the city by VAS, Sheffield City Council and Together for Sheffield, have resulted in information being collected from over 30 food projects. It has shown us that there is a vast array of approaches across the city, from small church and community-based food banks, providing 10-20 emergency food parcels a week, to larger food banks providing broader services such as debt advice, on to food projects providing cooked meals and social opportunities for hundreds of people a week. However, this mapping exercise has not been comprehensive, and there are inconsistencies in the information collected so far, which require further verification.

The food projects we spoke to told us that collaboration and collective working between food projects has improved greatly over the last year, partly driven by the response to the pandemic, but there were also concerns that without a comprehensive map of provision we don't know whether there is equitable access to food support across the city. Without this knowledge it is hard to know where to focus efforts to encourage new initiatives – or indeed to deter them where existing provision is sufficient. Understanding the provision available is also the first step in being able to help people access the right service for them – which we consider in section 3.3.

3.2.2 There has also been an attempt to understand food provision in Sheffield using Dr Megan Blake's ['Food Ladders' model](#). We spoke to Dr Blake, a researcher from the University of Sheffield about her work on food security - which is broader than food poverty and recognises issues of access and capability (see notes from meeting 3). Dr Blake's 'Food Ladders' model is aimed at building local resilience to food insecurity by developing three levels, or 'rungs' of intervention:

- **Catching:** a starting point for those in crisis eg emergency food aid
- **Capacity building:** supporting those who are not in crisis, but who might be struggling to access and/or afford good food, interventions that connect people and networks around food, enabling communities to build on their assets – eg shared cooking/eating projects, pantry schemes
- **Transformational:** self organised projects that meet the needs of the community as defined by the community, capitalising on local assets eg social enterprises, food growing projects.

Provision in an area should enable people to move through these rungs of the ladder. Of the 'Food Ladders' mapping done in Sheffield so far, most of the provision falls into the 'catching' category. Whilst this is vital for supporting people in crisis, we have already noted that emergency food aid is a sticking plaster.

We have seen how support beyond emergency food aid at these 'catching' projects, for example the work of [Sheffield Citizen's Advice in food banks](#), providing advice on debt, benefits and income maximisation, can be instrumental in helping people out of crisis. We need to ensure that there is then enough 'capacity building' support – for example cook and eat projects, community pantry projects – for people to move through the rungs of the 'Food Ladder'.

We recognise the importance of food in bringing people together, strengthening communities, and reducing social isolation; and we recognise the challenges that Covid has brought with it for this type of activity. Our work with food projects should reflect this, aiming to strengthen the ability of communities to support each other, and avoid institutionalising crisis support.

Recommendations

- 3.2.3 Sheffield City Council should consider how it can work with food partners to accelerate the mapping of food support across the city.
- 3.2.4 Sheffield City Council should work with food partners to ensure that when people access emergency food aid, they are also able to access wider forms of advice and support to help move beyond crisis.
- 3.2.5 Sheffield City Council should consider how it can work with food partners to encourage joint working across the sector, to ensure that we have a range of viable initiatives in Sheffield beyond emergency food provision, that enable people to move through the rungs of the 'Food Ladder' - such as social eating projects and community pantries.

3.3 Navigating the System

- 3.3.1 In the previous section we noted the range of food support that is available across the city. We heard through our call for evidence that for many, this picture of support is complicated – with lots of organisations offering different services with different eligibility criteria and different referral processes. Frontline staff and support workers told us that they were unclear where to direct people to, and people seeking support told us they weren't sure where to go for information.
- 3.3.2 Contributors told us that there is a role for the Council in helping people to find the right support for them – in identifying pathways and mapping 'routes in'. We know that there are a variety of ways we could do this, and have done successfully in other policy areas, such as the [Asylum Journey Sheffield](#) which details support available for asylum seekers, and the [Sheffield Flourish Mental Health Guide](#). One response to our call for evidence suggested that we should develop a searchable online resource that details what support is available and what the requirements are to access it, as well as considering how we make information available to those without phone or internet access.

Recommendations

- 3.3.3 Sheffield City Council should consider how it can work with partners to develop mechanisms to help people find and access the right form of food support for them.

3.4 Leadership

- 3.4.1 We've seen through this work that food poverty and food insecurity are complex issues. Projects tackling food poverty are often not only addressing poverty – but other issues too – including waste, sustainability, community asset building. This cuts across a wide range of council activity – economy, environment, health and wellbeing, community development.
- 3.4.2 There is no natural political or organisational 'home' for this agenda currently within council structures. We feel that identifying and articulating where internal leadership on this lies, will help us to drive progress and improve outcomes for Sheffield people.

Recommendation

- 3.4.3 Sheffield City Council should identify where internal political and organisational leadership on poverty, food poverty and food insecurity sits in order to drive progress on this cross-cutting agenda.

3.5 Areas for future consideration

3.5.1 This interim report represents the findings of the first phase of this work. We have identified further areas for consideration in future phases of this work:

- **Free school meals** – encouraging take-up, holiday provision, cash vs vouchers, provision for those with no recourse to public funds.
- **Food supply** - how food is circulating around the system, where its coming from, and whether there is equitable access.
- **Learning from other areas** – considering approaches in other cities to developing new food projects and initiatives eg Bread and Butter Pantry in Manchester.
- **Food growing** – considering food growing projects and their role in tackling food poverty.

4 Conclusion

We'd like to thank everyone who has given their time, energy and thought to this working group. Hearing such a wide range of views has helped us to better understand the response to food poverty in Sheffield, and informed our thinking and recommendations.

We'd also like to thank the individuals and organisations, large and small, who work so hard in our communities responding to food poverty – your dedication and commitment, especially over the last year with all of the difficulties Covid has thrown at us – has not gone unnoticed and we applaud your efforts.

This process has shown us that we have a rich and diverse offer of food provision across our city. It's shown us that this is a strength we can build on, as we develop a better understanding of what provision is out there, and look at how we can better help people to access the right form of support for them. It's shown us that we need a strategic approach and culture that tackles the underlying, structural causes of poverty, and clear leadership to drive this complex and important agenda forwards.

We look forward to the response to our recommendations, and further discussions on how we can improve our response to food poverty. This interim report marks the beginning of the conversation, not the end. We recognise that there is much still to consider in relation to food poverty, and we look forward to seeing the findings and recommendations of future phases of the work.

Food Poverty Scrutiny Working Group

March 2021

**Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee
Food Poverty Working Group
Evidence Gathering Sessions**

Meeting 1

Witnesses:

Colin Havard, Community Development Co-Ordinator, Sheffield City Council
Cat Arnold, Policy & Improvement Officer, Sheffield City Council
Jess Wilson, Health Improvement Principal, Sheffield City Council
Emma Dickinson, Strategic Commissioning Manager, Sheffield City Council

Documents:

[Food Poverty Briefing](#)
[Notes from meeting](#)

Meeting 2

Witnesses:

Clare Lodder & Ellen Taylor, Sheffield Citizen's Advice
Terry Gallagher & John Hull, S2 Foodbank
Rene Meijer, Food Works
Graham Duncan, St Mary's Church

Documents:

[Advice in Foodbanks – Sheffield Citizen's Advice report](#)
[S2 Foodbank briefing](#)
[Food Works briefing](#)
[Notes from meeting](#)

Meeting 3

Witnesses:

Dr Megan Blake, University of Sheffield
Shakila Sharif, Food Worker, Voluntary Action Sheffield
Colin Havard, Community Development Co-ordinator, Sheffield City Council

Documents:

[Food Ladders Briefing](#)
[Pantries Impact report](#)
[Food Research Highlights](#)
[Notes from Meeting](#)

Meeting 4

Documents:

[Overview of Call for Evidence results](#)
[Case Studies – Sheffield Citizen's Advice](#)
[Tales from the Foodbank – Case Studies](#)