

# **Responsive Services and Customer Care Scrutiny Panel**

## **Policy Review 2014 – 2015**

### **Operation of Food Banks in Sunderland – Draft Report**

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# **1 Foreword from the Scrutiny Lead Member for Responsive and Customer Services**

During recent years there has been a massive increase in the number of food banks operating in the UK and the number of people using them. This increase and the reasons behind it, has been the subject of considerable debate and controversy.

The purpose of this review is to look at the current position in Sunderland. The review has limited itself primarily to the operation of food banks which are part of the Sunderland Foodbank Network, though it is recognised that there exists many smaller food banks and providers of subsidised meals in the form of breakfast and luncheon clubs.

In terms of the operation of food banks in the city we would pay tribute to the selfless and committed work of the volunteers who help provide the service. The findings of the recent Feeding Britain report show the city to be at the vanguard in terms of the organisation of the service.

However, for many the increase in the use of Food Banks represents a fundamental failure in the system of welfare in the UK and a symptom of a general growth in poverty and in particular food poverty. This increase brings with it the danger that Food Banks could become an institutionalised phenomenon, leading to dependency and effectively covering weaknesses in the welfare system. The Panel considers that it is important to tackle the root cause of the increase in the use of food banks such as benefit delays, benefit sanctions and low income.

In conclusion, I would like to thank my colleagues on the Panel and all of the officers and staff involved for their hard work during the course of the review and thank them for their valuable contribution.

Councillor Ronny Davison, Lead Scrutiny Member for Responsive and Customer Care Services

## **2 INTRODUCTION**

- 2.1 During recent years there has been a massive increase in the number of food banks operating in the UK and the number of people using them. This increase and the reasons behind it, has been the subject of considerable debate and controversy.
- 2.2 The purpose of this report is to look at the current position in Sunderland. It will also include consideration of the implications of the Feeding Britain report published in December 2014.
- 2.3 The current review has limited itself primarily to the operation of food banks operating as part of the Sunderland Foodbank Network. It is recognised that there exists many smaller food banks and providers of subsidised meals in the form of breakfast and luncheon clubs. The Panel notes that the Food Bank Network is currently undertaking an audit of such services which should be reporting in mid 2015. This will provide an opportunity to obtain a clearer and more balanced picture of free or subsidised food provision in the city.
- 2.4 The report follows on from the Panel's earlier review into the impact of welfare reform on the people of Sunderland.

## **3 AIM OF THE REVIEW**

- 3.1 The review will consider the operation and development of food banks in Sunderland.

## **4 TERMS OF REFERENCE**

- 4.1 The Panel agreed the following terms of reference for the review:-
  - (i) To consider what we mean by the term food bank;
  - (ii) To look at the operation of food banks in Sunderland;
  - (iii) To consider implications of the Feeding Britain report;
  - (iv) To assess the challenges facing local food banks in the city

## **5 MEMBERSHIP OF THE PANEL**

- 5.1 The membership of the Responsive Services and Customer Care Scrutiny Panel consisted of Councillors Ronny Davison (Lead Member)

## **6 METHODS OF INVESTIGATION**

- 6.1 The following methods of investigation were used for the review:

- (a) Desktop Research
- (b) Evidence from relevant Council officers
- (c) Evidence from Food Bank Providers
- (d) Visit to a number of Food Banks including Salvation Army at Austin House, Streetcare at St Gabriel's Church and St Bethany's at Bede Tower.
- (e) Attendance at Feeding Britain:Feeding Sunderland Event

## **7 FINDING OF REVIEW**

Findings relate to the main themes raised during the Panel's investigations and evidence gathering.

### **7.1 What is a Food Bank?**

7.1.1 Food banks are non-profit making organisations that provide food parcels to those in crisis who have insufficient money to buy food. They may be operated by a range of voluntary and public sector bodies but are often associated with church based organisations. Food banks differ in size and scale; from large national operators such as the Trussel Trust to smaller independent food banks run from premises by a handful of volunteers.

7.1.2 Indeed, many bodies providing food may not formally recognise themselves as food banks with the number of establishments being prone to frequent fluctuations. Food aid may also be focused on the needs of particular groups such as disabled people, asylum seekers.

7.1.3 Food banks are not the only source of emergency food. Free or subsidised breakfast or luncheon clubs also provide a network of food for the hungry. It is noted that the Food Bank Network is currently undertaking an audit of such providers in the city which should be reporting in June 2015.

7.1.4 Most food banks aim to provide:-

- (a) emergency food help to those in crisis
- (b) a signposting service to agencies who could help with a client's underlying problem.

### **7.2 Food Banks – Operation in Sunderland**

7.2.1 There are currently around half a dozen major food banks operating in Sunderland including:-

- Salvation Army at St Austin House, Southwick;
- Bethany Church in Houghton
- Bethany Church Bede Tower, City Centre
- Hetton New Dawn
- StreetCare St Gabriel's
- Washington Food Bank

- Gentoo

- 7.2.2 Smaller food banks operate from a number of locations throughout the city most notably Shiney Row and Houghton. The Panel was informed that while this provided for a fairly even geographical coverage of the city, there is a gap in provision in the Silksworth area which the Food bank Network is currently looking to address.
- 7.2.3 The Council itself operates an emergency food aid service as part of the transfer of the Crisis and Community Support Schemes from the DWP to local authority control in April 2013.
- 7.2.4 The Council's scheme provides food and other emergency aid to residents based on local eligibility criteria that has recently been reviewed in order to respond to the Welfare Reform changes that are emerging. We were informed that the food aid provided by the Council is modelled on the systems operated by the voluntary sector food banks. Given the limited resources available, the Council has been clear that only by pooling available resources can an adequate emergency food aid service be provided across the city.
- 7.2.5 While emergency food provision has always existed, the number of food banks and scale of demand has increased drastically over the last few years. Figures from the Trussell Trust indicate that nationally the number of people receiving three days' emergency food increased significantly from 346,992 in 2012-13 to 913,138 in 2013-14. In the North East, they estimate that food banks have helped 36,273 adults and 22 873 children in 2013-14.
- 7.2.6 Over recent years, this increase in demand for Food Banks has also been replicated in Sunderland. While detailed figures for the city are not available, the Salvation Army estimates that they have provided around 500 food parcels in 2014. Canon Bamber of the Sunderland Food Bank Network estimated that this represented around half of the parcels provided by the Food Bank Network. Combined with the approximately 1100 items awarded by the Council through its Crisis and Community Care Support Schemes, this represents a city wide figure of at least 2,000 during 2014 – though it is likely that the number is far greater.
- 7.2.7 A breakdown of the number of people dealt with by the Salvation Army at St Austin's together with information such as the referring agency is attached for information.
- 7.2.8 In view of the importance of understanding more about the prevalence of food poverty and the use of food banks in the city, the Panel welcomes more the development of more accurate city wide data on outlets.
- 7.2.9 During the review, the Panel met with Canon Bamber from Sunderland minster and several other members of the Sunderland Food Parcel Network in order to discuss the way in which food banks operate in the city. The Panel heard that the Network was set up by the main food banks to help develop a citywide provision for food parcels, work collectively and coordinate

resources. From the beginning it has been emphasised that the food bank services should be a “hand up and not a hand out”.

- 7.2.10 Referrals are made by frontline care professionals (such as doctors, health visitors, social workers, Citizens Advice Bureau staff, welfare officers, the police and probation officers) who will identify that a person is in crisis. The Network operate a triage system whereby requests for food come through Sunderland Minster and are then referred on to an appropriate food bank provider. It was estimated that around 5/6 call per day are received.
- 7.2.11 Clients eligible for help are usually referred to the geographically nearest Food Bank though this will depend on factors such as individual opening hours and ensuring the most effective use of resources. There is also scope for partners to share information advice and foodstuff with other providers depending on need.
- 7.2.12 Every effort is made to try to ensure that the system is not abused while retaining flexibility. It was noted that there are circumstances in which people are refused if they are felt to be simply abusing the system. We heard that the Food Banks try to limit people to 3 food parcels in to avoid the danger of dependency.
- 7.2.13 Most providers can accommodate home delivery for those with mobility issues though this can provide major operational and practical issues and is generally discouraged.
- 7.2.14 During our discussion with the food bank providers, there was a consensus that the triage system operates very successfully in the city and in many ways represented an example of good practice. With any voluntary system there were occasional operational issues. Some food banks have limited opening hours, some operate at weekends while some do not. However, it was felt that the triage system can help promote a relatively coordinated service.
- 7.2.15 The Panel considers that the Network has clearly engendered a strong sense of joint working and cooperation between the main providers which is to be commended.
- 7.2.16 While every effort is made to keep bureaucracy to a minimum, records are kept by the Minster and some of the individual food banks themselves to help to provide a basis for follow up work to address an individuals long term needs and to highlight any trends in usage.
- 7.2.17 For people attending food banks some are asked questions on their personal circumstances, the reason they are seeking assistance and sign posted to those who can help further.
- 7.2.18 All of the food banks we spoke to considered it important that food banks do not operate in a vacuum and therefore every effort is made to develop links or refer people to appropriate bodies who can help with long term problems.

- 7.2.19 In this sense there was a repeated commitment that food aid should be seen as a means of a “hand up rather than a hand out”.
- 7.2.20 It was noted that many people who are dealt with have multiple needs and it is vital that there is good partnership working in place for this and close links with a range of statutory and voluntary agencies in order that underlying issues can be addressed.
- 7.2.21 All of the food bank providers were keen to foster the co-location of One Stop/Food Bank Plus model in which food assistance providers work with hubs that can address the root causes of the problem such as debt, addictions, access to benefit, coping with a low income, leaning cooking skills.
- 7.2.22 It was stressed that if a person is in extreme economic distress then it is difficult for them to think constructively of issues such as training and job search. It is therefore important to meet their basic needs so they are able to bring order and stability into their lives and build for the future.

### **What is in Food Parcel?**

- 7.3.1 The contents of food parcels tend to be similar across the different food banks we spoke to including that of the Council.
- 7.3.2 Most parcels are designed to last 2-3 days and provide a range of often long life products such as tinned soups and meat. The emphasis is on filling food that is easy to prepare and popular with clients. While not necessarily fitting in with a 5 a day philosophy, it was felt that this approach tied in with the emergency nature of the food being provided. For example, clients tend not to want products such as pulses and lentils as they can be time consuming and costly to cook.
- 7.3.3 Fresh foods such as bread, eggs, butter and fruit/vegetables are provided by some food banks such as the Council’s but for the majority of the food banks their use is constrained by the ability to store. It was felt that the provision of fridges and freezers for food banks could help to overcome some of these difficulties (subject to satisfactory business cases being made). Based on our discussions with the food bank providers, the Panel would therefore suggest that the Council looks into the practicalities of offering to purchase fridges and freezers for those food banks who express an interest.
- 7.3.4 However, food banks are not just limited to the provision of foodstuffs. All of the providers we talked to just wanted to help people who are in genuine need and were very willing to go the 'extra mile' to expand their provision, if possible to include practical necessities such as can openers, cooking equipment, toiletries and baby items, clothes.
- 7.3.5 We note that most of the food banks do provide deliveries to the disabled people but there are major issues around the access to a driver and associated costs such a service is kept to a minimum.

- 7.3.6 During our visit, it is clear that the storage facilities at our food banks are often basic. While in many ways this is seen as adequate for the needs of what is an emergency service, the Panel does feel that there is scope to improve storage facilities at Council and other food banks. We suggest that this may be an area in which the Council could help by way of spare office furniture and equipment.
- 7.3.7 Food Banks exist on public food donations sourced through churches, companies, schools, public bin collections at supermarkets and food donated by supermarket.
- 7.3.8 A number of supermarkets in the city such as Sainsbury and ASDA make surplus or waste food available to food banks. Such food is not out of date but rather is excess food ordered that cannot be returned to the supplier.
- 7.3.9 Most of the food banks confirmed to us that food supplies are not a major problem. A bigger problem is the storage, transport and distribution of food that can be made available by supermarket. The Salvation Army referred to occasions where food supplies had to be refused because of a shortage of storage space. The intention is to work with the Network to help them in solving this issue; potential solutions involve supporting an approach to the supermarkets that are making food available in order to persuade them to assist with transport for delivery.
- 7.3.10 Essential to the work of the food banks is the work of the volunteers who help run the food banks by packing, sorting and distributing the food. Based on our discussions with the food bank providers there appears to be an adequate number of volunteers at the present time though it was recognised that more could always be done to ensure a sustainable supply of volunteers in the long term. More of an issue for the Food banks was access to resource to help them coordinate the work of volunteers and provide support in areas such as transport and storage of food stuff.
- 7.3.10 During our visit, the Panel met with some of volunteers and most impressed by the high levels of enthusiasm and commitment shown.

#### **7.4 Why Do People Use Food Banks**

- 7.4.1 One of the more controversial aspects of the operation of food banks rests with the reasons why people use them.
- 7.4.2 During our visit and discussions with food bank providers, the Panel was told that there is no one particular section of society that uses food banks. Food bank clients include individuals and families in crisis situations, and working and non-working households there were various reasons why people may need to use a food bank, including:-
- Delay in receiving benefits
  - Changes or reductions in benefits



- Effect of benefit sanctions
- Low income (including zero hours contracts)
- Delayed wages
- Homelessness
- Unexpected loss of job
- Unemployment
- Sickness (including mental health issues)
- Debt
- Domestic violence
- Refused crisis loan

7.4.3 These reasons have been echoed by the recent reports of the Trussell Trust and the All-party report into Feeding Britain which have argued that at least half of all food bank users are referred because they are waiting for benefits to be paid, because they have been sanctioned or because they have been hit by the bedroom tax or removal of working tax credits.

7.4.4 The reports also refer to the increasing number of working people using food banks citing low pay and rising cost of living. In this sense food banks are acting as a buffer zone for families experiencing sudden drops in income helping people over a financial emergency and allowing time to deal with any deep seated issues.

7.4.5 During our visit, we heard anecdotal evidence that benefit delays, changes and sanctions penalise those in the most difficult of circumstances and can cause extreme financial hardship and temporary lack of food. In some cases people are left with choices to make, such as whether to pay a heating bill or buy food.

7.4.6 We were told that many food bank users were also not made aware by the DWP of the various crisis payments available in different circumstances and that more could be done to better inform claimants of the options available.

7.4.7 We were also told that for many for many people, turning to a food bank was a last resort and one particular concern we heard was that the over-65s were often too embarrassed to access food banks.

7.4.8 However, there is at this time no consensus on the reasons why people use food banks. For some the growth in the use of food banks reflects a breakdown in personal household and budgeting skills. Others have contended that the rising demand was simply the result of there being more food banks in existence. Still others have seen the growth as in part reflecting the withdrawal of other sources of emergency aid.

7.4.9 The Panel would therefore join with others in recommending that the Government undertake more research to find out more about the reasons why people are increasingly using food banks.

## **7.5 Implications of the Feeding Britain Report**

- 7.5.1 Our review has coincided with the publication of the Feeding Britain report into food poverty published in December 2014. The report was produced by the Church, food providers, food industry and voluntary sector and represents a comprehensive piece of research into not only into the growth of food banks in the UK but also the way in which the service might be best developed into the future.
- 7.5.2 As mentioned earlier the report makes a series of recommendations based on analysis that food poverty is primarily caused by rising prices, a low national minimum wage, income poverty, and a flawed benefit system hampered by complex programmes and criteria.
- 7.5.3 The report calls for reform of the utilities market in order to control price rises and ensure that rises do not disproportionately affect the poorest in society. It also calls for action to deal with excessive interest charges and action to tackle the problem of low pay. The report highlights the effect so of delays in benefit payments and the inappropriate use of sanctions. The report call for action to deal with the food waste in our society and measures to improve the use and distribution of surplus food. Also measures to improve housekeeping skills.
- 7.5.4 A central recommendation of Feeding Britain report is the creation of a national network of food banks and food assistance providers whose membership would be composed of the food bank movement and other providers of food assistance, the voluntary organisations redistributing fresh food surplus, the food industry and representatives of Government.
- 7.5.5 The local Network is seen as having a number of functions:-
- Redistribution of surplus food
  - Coordinate food waste prevention by working with supply chains of food retailers and manufacturers
  - Build on knowledge of local arrangements
  - Develop centres of excellence Information on debt – access to benefits
  - Foster the colocation of the One Stop/ Food bank Plus Model
  - Measures the take up of free school meals in schools
- 7.5.6 As an initial step the report recommends the establishment of 12 pilot projects – one in each region of the UK.
- 7.5.7 The Panel notes that the models set out in the report in many ways reflects the kind of work already going on in Sunderland in terms of partnership working, cooperation and the concept of the colocation based on a Food Bank Plus model.
- 7.5.8 The Panel also highlighted that high profile given by the report to the need to pilot and implement schemes to maximise the take up of free school meals and tackle holiday hunger. For example the report refers to a spike in Food Bank use that can occur at times when children do not access to free school

meals. A Working Group is being formed to learn from good practice elsewhere and identify specific actions/pilots.

- 7.5.9 The report also refers to the potential role of local authorities in working with local food organisations to free up land for food production, retail and storage. The panel would suggest that this recommendation is looked at in further detail in order to consider its potential implications for the Council.

## 8 Conclusions

- 8.1 During the last few years, we have seen a rapid increase in the number and use of food banks both nationally and within the city. While food banks and emergency food aid has always existed in some form the recent increase has been unprecedented.
- 8.2 For many this increase represents a fundamental failure in the system of welfare in the UK and a symptom of a general growth in poverty and in particular food poverty. They also point to the danger in the provision of such food becoming an institutionalised phenomenon, leading to dependency and effectively covering weaknesses in the welfare system. Instead it is important to tackle the root cause of the increase in the use of food banks such as benefit delays, benefit sanctions and low income.
- 8.3 For others, it is an example of individuals and volunteers coming together to provide help and charity for they neighbour. Whatever, the viewpoint, we do feel that it is important to gain a better understanding of the numbers using food banks in the city, any trends that are emerging and an understanding of the reasons why people use food banks and free or subsidised meals.
- 8.4 We also feel that given the rise in the number and use of food banks it would be useful to have a clear definition of what we mean by the term food poverty and what we mean when we say that people are living in food poverty.
- 8.5 In terms of the operation of food banks in the city we would pay tribute to the selfless and committed work of the volunteers who help provide the service. The findings of the Feeding Britain report show the city to be at the vanguard in terms of the organisation of the service.
- 8.6 The Council should look to work with the Network to where possible assist with such issues as transport and storage and distribution to help broker discussions with the supermarkets on ways of helping them to meet their food waste targets in return for assistance with distribution.
- 8.7 The Food Network provides a sound basis for the coordination and on-going development of food banks in the city. They provide a platform for the coordination of work of the main food providers and the exchange of information and best practice and the development of a database as to who are using the service and why again Jim, some the network are not developing data bases of who is using their service and why, and don't intend to – I understand why Members would want it all tied up nicely, but we have to trust providers, and they will deliver in manner they see fit .
- 8.8 During our discussions the Network reiterated that view that they would generally dissuade the opening of further food banks as there was the danger of hampering effective coordination and creating additional demand and dependency. As a Panel we would concur with this view.

- 8.9 We do not suggest that food banks should take the place of statutory welfare provision but one of the strengths of the food bank movement has been its ability to reach “the hardest to reach” groups using food as a gateway to help solve more deep seated problems. Therefore food banks can be seen as a start of a journey for some people, helping them with benefit advice, job search, training needs drugs and alcohol issues.
- 8.10 In this way we can see a significant overlap in relation to hot food and the need for wider adult social care. Many of those using food banks are people with physical, mental health and social isolation issues.
- 8.11 As mentioned earlier, benefit related problems are seen as the single biggest reason given for food bank referrals by most food banks. Lengthy delays in the administration and receipt of benefit payments have caused severe hardship for new claimants. However, it would appear that avoidable problems are occurring with DWP in the administration and processing of social security benefits and that people are not always aware of their entitlement to hardship payments. We need to ensure that claimants are that payments are available, how to apply for them, and the eligibility.
- 8.12 We heard that the Council is currently working with the DWP to develop an information leaflet explaining the operation of the sanction system and providing straightforward advice and guidance. We feel that such joint working is a very constructive step forward. However, we do have concerns that the introduction of Universal Credit could bring with an increase in delays and a resulting increase in the demands on emergency aid such as food banks. This was certainly the feedback that we received when speaking to food banks on this issue, and we welcome the changes made to the Council’s Crisis Support Scheme to help those left without support due to Universal Credit.
- 8.13 We feel that there is a key role for the Council in continuing to develop volunteering in the city. It is noted that a revised volunteering Strategy is currently being prepared for the city which should help to ensure a sustainable supply of volunteers into the future.
- 8.14 One area where the Panel has considerable concerns is in the growth of holiday hunger in the city and we are pleased that this issue was highlighted in the Feeding Britain report. We feel that more work needs to be done to consider the reason and implications of its growth and the ways in which we can best combat it. We would therefore suggest that a further piece of work could be undertaken into the options available for dealing with the issue of holiday hunger in the city.

## **9 RECOMMENDATIONS**

9.1 The Panel's recommendations are as outlined below:-

- (a) that the Council looks into the practicalities of offering to purchase freezers for those food banks who express an interest;
- (b) that the Council work with the Network to help to broker discussions with those supermarkets who provide surplus food on ways of providing transport for delivery;
- (c) that more research be undertaken by the Network into the number and location of food banks, luncheon clubs and subsidised food outlets in the city;
- (d) that joint working continue with Jobcentre Plus to make claimants more aware of the operation of welfare benefit sanctions, short term benefit advances and the existence of emergency payments;
- (e) that the Council works with the Network to help to dispel myths surrounding use of food banks.

