OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

4 June 2019

* Councillor James Walsh (Vice-Chairman)

* Councillor Colin Cross
* Councillor Liz Hogger
* Councillor Tom Hunt
* Councillor Gordon Jackson
* Councillor Steven Lee
Councillor Masuk Miah
* Councillor John Redpath
* Councillor Tony Rooth
* Councillor Deborah Seabrook
* Councillor Patrick Sheard
* Councillor Paul Spooner

*Present

Councillors Paul Abbey, Christopher Barrass, Chris Blow, Dennis Booth, Angela Goodwin, Lead Councillor for Housing (social and affordable), Homelessness, Access and Disability, Angela Gunning, Julia McShane, Lead Councillor for Health and Wellbeing, the Voluntary Sector, Grants Panel, Play Strategy and Project Aspire, Maddy Redpath, John Rigg, Deputy Lead Councillor for Sustainable Transport, Transformation & Regeneration and Economic Development, Pauline Searle, Lead Councillor for Arts, Parks, and Countryside, James Steel, Lead Councillor for Leisure, Heritage, Tourism, and PR and Communications, and Fiona White, Deputy Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Safeguarding, Inclusion, Public Safety, Community Safety, and Vulnerable Families.

In accordance with Council procedure Rule 23(j), Councillor George Potter attended as a substitute for Councillor Masuk Miah.

OS1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

The Committee was advised of an apology for absence from Councillor Masuk Miah and a substitute as detailed above.

OS2 ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED: That Councillor Paul Spooner be elected Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the 2019-20 municipal year.

Councillor Spooner thereupon took the Chair.

OS3 LOCAL CODE OF CONDUCT AND DECLARATION OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS

There were no declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests.

OS4 MINUTES

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 5 March 2019 were approved.

In response to a question, the Committee agreed that actions outstanding from previous meetings should be reported through a standing agenda item.

OS5 FOOD POVERTY - REPORT OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY TASK AND FINISH GROUP

The Chair welcomed Dr Martin Caraher, professor of food and health policy at the Centre for Food Policy, at City, University of London, Maria Zealey, from Surrey Welfare Rights Unit, and members of the food poverty task group.

Dr Caraher gave a presentation entitled, 'Food poverty and hunger in the UK: Race to the bottom.' He confirmed that he would focus on the issues at a national level rather than the specifics of the task group's report.

Dr Caraher stated that a lack of cookery skills was not in itself a cause of poverty. He criticised notions of a deserving poor and undeserving poor and indicated that the need for food banks and charity showed a dismantling of state provision. He informed the meeting that the root causes of food banks required attention. The meeting was advised that 14 million people in the UK live in poverty, with 8 million struggling to put food on the table, and over 4 million children at risk of food poverty.

Dr Caraher indicated that the first government measurement of food insecurity would be available in 2020/21 from the inclusion of questions in the Family Resources Survey starting in April 2019. He suggested that data within the food poverty task group's report provided sufficient proxy measures to act on.

The meeting was advised of the link between obesity and food poverty and the need for a comprehensive policy approach to such issues, rather than separate strategies.

Dr Caraher indicated that the 25 per cent increase in food prices between 2007 and 2012 had had a disproportionate effect on those on low incomes. He stated that between 1998 and 2009 household income for low-income households rose 22 per cent while food prices rose by 33 per cent.

Dr Caraher advised the meeting that households saved an average of 4 per cent between 2007 and 2010 by trading down to cheaper products. He noted that low-income households have not managed to make savings by trading down probably because they were already purchasing cheaper products. He stated that food was the elastic item in household budgets and that the lowest income decile typically bought less food rather than trading down.

Dr Caraher stated that falling income and static welfare benefits (after housing costs) combined with rising food prices had reduced food affordability by over twenty per cent for the lowest income decile households between 2007 and 2010. Dr Caraher advised the meeting that the energy intake of households fell by almost 10 per cent between 2007 and 2010. He indicated that food prices were forecast to increase by 15 per cent in the next 6 months, regardless of any impact from Brexit.

Dr Caraher provided information indicating that average household debt in the UK had almost doubled between 2000 and 2015, to nearly £12k. The meeting was advised that NHS workers, and supermarket workers were among those people taking out pay day loans to pay for essentials such as food, while Asda had contributed £20m to food charities at the same time as employing many low paid workers. The Committee was advised of the adverse implications of the gig economy (with over 900,000 people on zero hour contracts in the UK) for family life, food poverty, and obesity.

The meeting was informed that numbers of food banks had grown since the financial crisis of 2005. Dr Caraher stated that food banks did not address the root causes or drivers of food

poverty, but at best tackled issues of immediate want. The meeting was advised that about 8 out of 10 people living in food poverty do not use a food bank or charity provision. The meeting was advised that the weekday opening hours of food banks often meant low-income workers were unable to access them.

Dr Caraher informed the meeting that the Beveridge Report had no reference to food, as the assumption at the time was that such issues would be addressed through a basic income.

Maria Zealey advised the Committee that action could be taken locally, not just nationally, to address issues within the report.

The Committee Chairman introduced the members of the task group and indicated that Councillors Angela Goodwin and Pauline Searle had recently become members of the Executive. He invited Councillor Angela Goodwin to present the task group's report. Councillor Goodwin confirmed that she and Councillor Searle were attending the meeting not as members of the Executive, but to help explain the review and its conclusions and to answer questions from the Committee.

Councillor Goodwin, along with the other members of the task group, drew attention to selected aspects of their report. The Committee was advised about the working poor and low-income families in food insecurity and the existence of poverty in both rural and urban settings within the Borough was highlighted. With reference to the East Surrey Poverty Truth Commission, the meeting was informed that Guildford was not the only area in Surrey looking to address poverty.

The Committee was advised that an estimated 8.4 million people experienced food insecurity in the UK, including approximately 19 per cent of children. The Committee was advised of the financial costs to families caused by the absence of free school meals during the summer holidays. The meeting was advised about the CHIPS holiday playscheme running in the Westborough and Stoke wards and the lack of similar schemes in other parts of the Borough.

A member of the task group referred the Committee to the considerable amount of surplus food generated by supermarkets and subsequently distributed to charities and other organisations in the south east. The Committee was advised that the stigma associated with food poverty caused residents to access food banks far outside their neighbourhood areas. In addition, the meeting was informed of the failure of the relevant Lead Councillor to respond to the task group's requests to contribute to the review.

A member of the task group suggested the importance of monitoring the impact of Universal Credit.

The Committee was advised that four of the Borough's wards were within the third most deprived areas of England. The meeting was informed that 14.5 per cent of the Borough's children lived in poverty [after housing costs] and in three neighbourhoods the figure was over a quarter of children.

The Committee was advised that in 2017-18 over 2,000 food parcels were distributed to households in the Borough and that the number was expected have risen for 2018-19.

The Committee's discussion raised the following points and clarifications:

- The meeting was advised that Food cycle was a scheme providing meals using surplus food cooked in spare kitchen space.

- Councillors discussed the value in providing food aid as part of a wider umbrella project delivering a range of services, such as occurs at the Lighthouse Centre in Woking.

- In response to a Committee member suggesting the merit of a strategy with a wider focus than food poverty, the Committee was advised that the recommended food insecurity forum could provide a basis for a wider partnership approach.

- Members highlighted some of the health and social impacts of poverty and the interrelationships between issues.

- The extension of the CHIPS holiday playscheme to rural areas was suggested.

- The Committee requested confirmation of whether the Council paid the real Living Wage or the national Living Wage. In addition, the Committee asked for the number and percentage of Guildford Borough Council employees that are not paid the real Living Wage.

- The meeting heard proposals for the calculation of a minimum income standard for the Borough or county, leading to a Guildford or Surrey Living Wage. Dr Caraher indicated that some regional variations for the minimum income standard had been calculated

- Councillors discussed the value of proactive, early intervention or a triage approach to help people avoid a crisis. A member of the Committee suggested that organisations such as Citizens Advice and Christians Against Poverty did not have the resources to deal with the numbers of people seeking their advice and were unable to provide more accessible opening hours for those at work. The value in extra resources for existing advice services was suggested.

- With reference to the task group's recommendations about developing signposting to the help available to people in food insecurity, a Committee member suggested the benefit in deploying improved branding.

- A Committee member suggested the possibility of using green spaces and other land within the Borough for growing local food, perhaps through community schemes.

- The Committee was advised of evidence about differential supermarket pricing.

- The Committee was advised of the social significance of food in the UK and the impacts of excluding people from it.

- The meeting was informed that research had demonstrated the benefits of providing meals at work to both employers (for example, directly through higher productivity) and to employees' family life.

- Committee members noted the evidence within the report about the impact of Universal Credit on food bank demand. The meeting was advised that the transfer to Universal Credit of those in receipt of legacy benefits would involve millions of households. The Committee was informed that 1½ million children would lose rights to free school meals when Universal Credit was rolled out fully.

- A member of the Committee advocated cookery programmes to address the lack of food skills.

- The task group members confirmed that they had been presented with evidence of faith-based obligations or interventions at local food banks.

- A member of the Committee commented on the task group's recommendation to extend the remit of the Mayor's Local Distress Fund and review its application procedure. He indicated that the matter was one for the trustees of the Fund and questioned the proposal to review the ongoing involvement of a third party and the extension of the Fund's use.

- The Lead Councillor for Health and Wellbeing, the Voluntary Sector, Grants Panel, Play Strategy, and Project Aspire welcomed the task group's report and indicated she would be speaking further to the task group members.

- The Director of Community Services indicated that food banks were a response to the underlying issue of low income.

- Dr Caraher informed the meeting that England's Chief Medical Officer was considering subsidising healthy foods. Furthermore, Dr Caraher he indicated a need to consider strategies in an integrated way, reminding the meeting that Aneurin Bevan had been the minister for health and housing.

- In response to questions about local actions, the meeting was advised of alternative models to food banks: the food bank plus model centred on early intervention work rather than crisis response, Can Cook in Liverpool, Food Nation at Newcastle, Food Cycle, and community stores. Dr Caraher suggested that rather than adopting any particular existing model, Guildford should consider other models in the process of developing its own and consider joining the Sustainable Food Cities network.

- Maria Zealey suggested the importance of action on the Local Housing Allowance. With reference to the payment card system used in the Surrey County Council Crisis Fund, the meeting was advised to avoid designing specific services for poor people.

The Chairman thanked Dr Martin Caraher and Maria Zealey for attending to inform and advise the Committee.

RESOLVED: (I) That the Committee adopt the report of the Food Poverty Overview and Scrutiny task and finish group.

(II) That the Food Poverty Overview and Scrutiny report be referred for consideration at Full Council on 23 July 2019.

(III) That the findings and recommendations of the Food Poverty Overview and Scrutiny report be commended to the Executive, with a response to the Committee required by November 2019.

The meeting finished at 8.48 pm

Signed ..... Date .....

Chairman