

Overview and Scrutiny Committee Report
Report of Director of Finance
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Food Poverty — Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Task and Finish Group

Executive summary

The Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) Committee is asked to consider and endorse the findings and recommendations of the task group it established to investigate food poverty in the Borough. The task group's report is attached as **Appendix 1**.

In a wide-ranging analysis, the task group's report suggests the scale of food poverty and insecurity within the Borough has not been recognised sufficiently, cautions against mistaking short-term action as a solution, and argues for action against the structural causes of food poverty and insecurity.

The task group's report puts forward recommendations for endorsement by the Committee. If adopted by the Committee, the group's report will go forward to the Executive. Importantly, the Committee has the option of referring its formal recommendations and conclusions for consideration at Full Council.

The task group's report was finalised in March 2019 but due to pre-election restrictions is able to be published only now.

Recommendation

That the Committee

- (i) adopt the report of the Food Poverty Overview and Scrutiny task and finish group;
- (ii) refer the Food Poverty Overview and Scrutiny report for consideration at Full Council on 23 July; and
- (iii) commend the findings and recommendations of the Food Poverty Overview and Scrutiny report to the Executive [with a response to the Committee required by November 2019].

Reason for Recommendation:

To address food poverty and insecurity in the Borough.

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1 The report attached at Appendix 1 sets out the investigation and conclusions of the Food Poverty Overview and Scrutiny task group. The task group's recommendations are repeated at section 6 of this officer report.
- 1.2 The Committee is asked to formally adopt the report of its Food Poverty task group and commend its findings to the Executive.
- 1.3 In addition, the Committee is requested to exercise its power to refer its Food Poverty report for consideration at Full Council (on 23 July), with the response of the Executive reported to a subsequent meeting of Full Council.
- 1.4 This officer report provides only an introductory outline to the task group's work; a full and proper understanding and appreciation of the investigation and proposals is best obtained from reading their report.

2. Strategic priorities

- 2.1 The Overview and Scrutiny task group review makes recommendations to address food poverty and food insecurity in the Borough. Supporting older, more vulnerable, and less advantaged people in our community is a strategic priority for the Council (identified within the Community theme of the Council's Corporate Plan).

3. Background: the establishment and role of the task group

- 3.1 In April 2017, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee established a task group to investigate food poverty in the Borough and report back. Together with identifying the causes, use, and provision of food aid in the Borough, the Committee tasked the group with investigating the impact and scale of food poverty and how to tackle it.
- 3.2 In addition, the group's review was to include investigating the use of surplus food as part of the local response to food poverty.
- 3.3 Overview and Scrutiny's decision to undertake such a review was prompted by concerns about continuing food poverty and food insecurity in the Borough.
- 3.4 Sections 1.4-1.6 of the task group's report provides a fuller explanation of the reasons for the review.
- 3.5 Membership of the O&S task group was cross-party:

Councillor Angela Goodwin (Chair)	Councillor Dennis Paul [until April 2018]
Councillor Angela Gunning	Councillor Pauline Searle
Councillor Sheila Kirkland	Councillor James Walsh

4. Task group's evidence

- 4.1 In addition to exploiting published reports and research, the task group sought evidence and views from a range of sources; namely, local and national food aid organisations, charities, users of food aid, academic experts, the Diocese

of Guildford, supermarkets, Council officers, Lead Councillors, and other local authorities.

- 4.2 The group collected much of its local evidence at formal meetings held between June 2017 and December 2018. The notes of much of the oral evidence gathered by the task group are included at Appendix 2 to their report.
- 4.3 In addition, the group commissioned an external researcher to help map the emergency food aid provision in the Borough. An outline of the resulting model of food aid provision is included at Appendix 3 to the task group's report.
- 4.4 The task group's process to gathering information and evaluating evidence is described further in section 2 of their report.
- 4.5 The task group's work locates food poverty and food insecurity issues in both national and local contexts. This discussion occurs in section 3 of the report, where the scale, impacts, and costs of food poverty and food insecurity are discussed in-depth. The same section of the report examines the significance of food bank usage and the stigmatisation of those in food insecurity.
- 4.6 In March 2019, the task group's report was shared for comments on factual accuracy with everyone who had participated in the review.

5. Task group's findings and proposals

- 5.1 The main findings and conclusions of the review are put forward within sections 4 and 5 of the task group's report. Prior to presenting detailed proposals, the report considers the causes of food poverty and insecurity and the reasons for people accessing food aid.
- 5.2 Food poverty is an emotive subject and, as the task group reports, can become politicised. The task group contends that the concept of the deserving and undeserving poor can be seen within the current discourses of food poverty and food aid (for example, see sections 3.42-3.43). They suggest that such moral judgments appear an attempt to assign blame for food poverty on behavioural factors rather than financial ones.
- 5.3 The task group finds narratives that apportion primary responsibility for food poverty and insecurity on those experiencing it to be wide of the mark. The group concludes that assertions about individual behaviours, such as financial mismanagement or a lack of food skills, are unpersuasive explanations for why people access food aid. Similarly, the group considers another common explanation for people resorting to food aid – the occurrence of a short-term 'crisis' or event – as missing the whole picture. Instead, the group argues for a greater understanding of the wider context and continuing circumstances and conditions within which some vulnerable households and families live.
- 5.4 The task group concludes that structural drivers of poverty are a convincing explanation for food poverty and people resorting to food aid. The group marshals evidence from interviews, local case studies, food bank referral data, and academic research to support its contention.

- 5.5 The task group's exploration and conclusions relating to the structural causes of food poverty and insecurity are perhaps the most politically controversial aspects of its report. Here the task the group assembles a list of factors: a higher cost of living (including the unaffordability of housing locally); income stagnation; in-work poverty; and the impact of welfare reform and austerity. They highlight a failing social security safety net and the consequence of breaking the link between benefits and price rises. The task group suggests the limitations of 'stopgap' models of food aid.
- 5.6 The task group's report differentiates between upstream and downstream interventions or approaches to tackle food poverty and insecurity. The group's report is unequivocal that short-term, reactive, downstream measures will not solve food poverty and upstream action on the structural drivers of food poverty and insecurity is required.
- 5.7 The group notes that without food aid it is difficult to see where those in food poverty would turn while longer-term solutions are pursued. Therefore, while emphasising that food aid is not a solution to food poverty and insecurity, and maintaining its 'desire to avoid entrenching an inadequate system', the group recommends (within section 5 of its report) ways to improve the immediate, local response.
- 5.8 The task group evaluates the use of surplus food as part of the local response to food poverty and insecurity. Its report concludes that surplus food and food insecurity are two separate issues. The task group notes how the use of surplus food for emergency food aid may depoliticise issues of food insecurity.
- 5.9 The task group suggests measures to improve the model of food aid provision in the Borough but notes the limited benefit of receiving help from food banks and other short term, food-centred, responses. The report calls for the development of a food poverty strategy and action plan, with local food insecurity measured to provide a baseline to evaluate interventions and monitor progress.
- 5.10 As part of this proposed food poverty strategy, the report recommends increased promotion of the local social security net – defined as the local welfare assistance scheme, Discretionary Housing Payments, and the Local Council Tax Support Hardship Fund – and the Mayor's Local Distress Fund.

6. Task group's recommendations

- 6.1 The formal recommendations from the review are below; however, as stated above, an understanding of the rationale for them is only possible from reading the task group's report.
- 6.2 To address food poverty and insecurity in the Borough we recommend that:
- (l) The Leader of the Council write to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions outlining the problems caused by Universal Credit and other welfare reforms and calling for immediate upstream action on food insecurity.

- (II) The Executive formally recognise food poverty and insecurity as issues meriting priority action in the Borough.
- (III) The Executive reiterate its support for the principle that pay should reflect living costs and that the Council becomes an accredited real Living Wage employer with the Living Wage Foundation then promote the Living Wage scheme to employers locally.
- (IV) The Executive develop and implement a Food Poverty Strategy and Action Plan that includes, but is not limited to:
 - (a) Facilitation of a food insecurity forum for the Borough (invited stakeholders to include food aid providers, food bank referrers, the Citizens Advice, churches, schools, sheltered housing, supported accommodation providers, and other experts by experience).
 - (b) Development and training sessions on food poverty and insecurity for Councillors, led by the relevant Lead Councillor, that includes advice on dealing with residents in severe hardship, how to make food bank referrals, the roll out of Universal Credit, and the local social security safety net.
 - (c) Prioritisation of a community space, 'Lighthouse' style resource for the Borough.
 - (d) Preparation and delivery of a formal food access plan to identify barriers to accessing affordable and nutritious food and actions to address them.
 - (e) Measures to encourage the creation of a community store or social supermarket (such as a *Your Local Pantry*).
 - (f) Development of local measurements of food poverty and insecurity, including engaging with external experts whenever possible, and working with partnership organisations such as Guildford's Health and Wellbeing Board.
 - (g) Extension of the remit of the Mayor's Local Distress Fund and reviewing the application procedure.
 - (h) Increased promotion of existing initiatives that target food poverty and insecurity and provide help to residents in hardship (including, Surrey's Local Assistance Scheme, the Discretionary Housing Payments fund, Guildford's Local Council Tax Support Hardship fund, the Mayor's Local Distress Fund, and emergency food aid providers).
 - (i) Maintaining and publicising, including on the Council's website and through partners, the current provision of food aid that is accessible to Guildford Borough residents.
 - (j) Review of the application process and criteria for the Council's Local Council Tax Support Hardship fund.

(V) The Executive ensure the Overview and Scrutiny review of food poverty is publicised.

(VI) The Executive request local emergency food aid providers consider the findings of the Overview and Scrutiny review of food poverty and insecurity (for example, the consideration of self-referral gateways and removal of the three-visit cap; altering food voucher forms by adding a tick box to specify Universal Credit as the primary cause of the referral; a possible name change to exclude the term 'food bank'; a limited delivery service; further staggering of opening times; improved availability of food parcels in more places around the community; ensuring there are no faith-based obligations, questions, or interventions with food aid users at any stage of a visit; and endorsement of the Dignity Principles).

Furthermore,

(VII) That the Executive submit to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee an update on the above recommendations no later than November 2019.

7. Power to refer report to Full Council

7.1 The Council's Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules enable the Committee to refer its formal recommendations and conclusions for consideration by Full Council, with the response of the Executive reported to a subsequent meeting of the Full Council.

7.2 The primary purpose of such a referral is to showcase the work of O&S and share its findings with the public and wider membership of the Council, and demonstrate that the Executive is responsive to O&S. In addition, a referral would provide an opportunity for debate on a matter of local concern.

7.3 The Council introduced this power of referral partly in anticipation of statutory guidance to recommend that O&S reports and recommendations be submitted to Full Council rather than solely to the Executive. The statutory guidance (issued late in May 2019) sees this referral and debate as part of communicating O&S's role and purpose and raising awareness of its work.

8. Pre-election restrictions

8.1 The task group's report was scheduled to be considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at a special meeting arranged for late March 2019.

8.2 However, the task group's report was judged so politically sensitive that its publication and consideration was not possible during the pre-election period. As a consequence of this delay the task group's report is being published in late May but dates from March 2019.

9. Financial implications

9.1 There are no financial implications at this stage. However, should the Executive accept the recommendations within the task group's report then there is an expectation that the initiatives proposed will incur expenditure. For example, the Council becoming an accredited real Living Wage Employer, increasing promotion and protection of the local social security net, facilitating

a food insecurity forum, or prioritising a Lighthouse style resource for the Borough.

10. Legal implications

10.1 There are no legal implications arising directly from this report at this stage.

11. Equality and Diversity Implications

11.1 The Council has a statutory duty under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 which provides that a public authority must, in exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to (a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Act (b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it; and (c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it. The relevant protected characteristics are: age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation.

11.2 This duty has been considered in the context of this report and it has been concluded that there are no equality and diversity implications arising directly from this report at this stage.

12. Human Resources implications

12.1 There are no direct, immediate human resources implications arising from this report at this stage.

12.2 However, the Executive's acceptance of the proposed actions may have resource impacts, including absorbing food poverty and insecurity work within an officer delivery team.

12.3 In addition, becoming an accredited real Living Wage employer may have an effect. Currently, the Council pays the UK Living Wage to all established posts and fixed term contracts. Other arrangements are in place for casual workers, interns, apprentices and staff who have been transferred into the Council under TUPE. The Council has a commitment in its Pay Policy to pay the Living Wage, but is not accredited.

13. Background Papers

None.

14. Appendices

Appendix 1 – Report of the Food Poverty Task and Finish Group