

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL FOOD POVERTY WORKING GROUP

NOTES of the meeting of the NCC Food Poverty Working Group held virtually on Friday 29 January 2021 at 1:30 p.m.

PRESENT

Councillor W. Pattison (Chair)

COUNCILLORS

E. Armstrong	L. Rickerby
T. Cessford	E. Simpson
K. Nisbet	R. Wallace

OFFICERS

C. McEvoy -Carr	Executive Director of Children and Adult Services
E. Richardson	Senior Manager Specialist Services
P. Brooks	Head of Northumberland Communities Together
J. Roll	Head of Democratic and Electoral Services

07. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor S. Dickinson and Maureen Taylor.

08. MINUTES

AGREED that the minutes of the meeting held on 4 December be approved as a correct record.

09. NCT OVERVIEW

Members received a report and presentation (copies filed with the minutes), giving an overview of NCC's actions and progress towards alleviating food poverty and insecurity through delivery of the Winter Support Grant, Food Partnership networks and preparations for Holiday Activity and Food Programme.

The key issues were presented:

Covid Winter Support Grant

(i) Funding Free School Meals (non-term time)

Members were advised that Northumberland had received £992k ring-fenced grant for the period 1 December 2020 to 31 March 2021. 80% would support households with children and 20% to other households. 80% of the total funding was ring-fenced to provide support with food, energy and water bills with the remaining 20% providing support with other essentials linked to the scheme.

NCC offered a voucher system which allowed parental choice and avoided the problems faced in the summer term. The voucher platform 'Hugg' offered a choice directly to parents and carers of 9 supermarkets and is free to use. Any unclaimed vouchers could be reclaimed by the Council and reused for other initiatives. As of 11 January, there was an 89% claim rate on the vouchers issued by schools for the Christmas period.

(ii) Welfare Assistance Food, Fuel and Water.

After the close of schools on 18 December 2020, NCT provided support to parents over the Christmas holidays. £7,800 was allocated via the HUGG system to the NCT team for distribution over the Christmas holidays to families in need. Overall, a total of £3,735 was issued by NCT over this period, £3,560 was redeemed (a rate of 95%).

£3,680 of the funds issued by NCT was in relation to the Berwick Pilot, which involved testing a digital app to develop a system that would provide dignity and choice to eligible families in need over Christmas. allow with £3,520 redeemed (96% of this element). Several choices were offered, the most popular being a supermarket voucher, with £3,680 of vouchers being issued. Positive feedback messages were received.

In addition, NCT had provided COVID Winter Support Grant payments to all families with a 0–2-year-old entitlement and who are in receipt of support from Northumberland's Early Help Service. £57,120 has been paid out to families across Northumberland as part of the scheme.

Working closely with our Northumberland Citizen Advice Bureau (CAB) partnership to fund a COVID Winter Support Fuel pathway, £25,000 in fuel payments has been allocated, supporting circa 500 households.

In summary £243,750 had been paid out to over 7000 households since December 2020 for food and fuel support. We are currently seeing a 96% efficacy rate of redemption across the scheme.

(iii) Supporting Families During February Half Term

The Government relaunched the Edenred voucher system for term-time payments to those with a free school meal entitlement and NCT was working with colleagues to engage with and prepare to support our Northumberland schools with £93,000 payment for February.

The Working Group were asked to consider offering a further discretionary payment on top of the recommended FSM entitlement of £3 per day (£15 per week per child) to £30 per child. This would increase the CWSG allocation from £93,000 based on current pupil numbers to £186,630. Sufficient funds were available to do this, and it

demonstrated Northumberland's commitment to supporting families during this period.

(iv) Continuing to Promote Winter Assistance & Support

Information regarding NCT and the pathway for assistance and support would be provided to all families as part of the distribution and administration of FSM provision to individual households.

NCT continues to provide regular social media updates and has distributed over 10,000 postcards to various voluntary and community organisations across Northumberland who are providing emergency assistance and mutual aid support.

(v) Northumberland Food Partnership Update

The leads from each area of the county have met together via teams on three occasions since they were brought together in November 2020 providing updates and discussions about how each area might structure a local approach. A presentation provided to each Partnership would help them develop local strategies to address local community priorities and reflect the diverse areas they represent.

Thom Bradley leads in the central areas of the county and is proactively talking with larger organizations such as the NFU to explore how we can develop strong links within the partnership.

(vi) Updates

The report then provided updates for the North from Becci Murray of Berwick Community Trust; for the West from Liz Prudhoe from ADAPT ; for Central, South East, Bedlington, Cramlington and Seaton Delaval from Thom Bradley from SCENE; and for Castle Morpeth from Brook Burgess form Stobhill Link.

A number of common themes were emerging and had highlighted several discussion points, including:

- Storage for food items and equipment - Bulk and transportation of hot food delivery
- Food waste. - The challenge and the opportunities.
- Supporting and championing already successful projects
- Storing and sharing information and learning – what platforms can be used for all to access.
- Mapping what is already on-going at a local level
- How do we include local businesses and large organizations like the NFU?
- Innovation and Investment - How will the funding available be accessed? what will each areas application process look like?
- Maximising opportunities and assets - linking with health advocates (health trainers-health champions)
- Reaching the most vulnerable residents in Northumberland

(vii) Holiday Activity & Food Fund

The report advised that on 8 November 2020, the government announced that the holiday activities and food programme would be expanded across the whole of England in 2021. Northumberland had been allocated an initial indicative amount of £1,029,980. This provision was for children who receive benefits-related free school meals. The aim of the programme is to make free places available to children eligible for free school meals for the equivalent of at least 4 hours a day, 4 days a week, 6 weeks a year.

It was anticipated that this funding should cover 4 weeks in the summer and a week's worth of provision in each of the Easter and Christmas holidays. Local authorities and their providers will have flexibility about how they deliver this level of provision to best serve the needs of children and families in their area. There will also be flexibility in how the programme can be delivered to older children. A local stakeholder working group has been established to take forward the coproduction, development and delivery of the Northumberland HAF Programme.

Members made the following comments:

- The report was very well received.
- Councillor Simpson agreed the report was excellent but queried why Blyth Valley and Wansbeck had been omitted from the area updates. Paul Brooks responded that they had been omitted as they were not holding their inaugural meeting until the following week, but they would be included after that. The Partnership Lead in those areas had been meeting individually with the different organisations to agree a vision and way forward before holding the meetings. **The report of the meeting would be circulated to members of the Group.**
- Regarding paragraph 4, the Chair suggested that there were still a lot of people who had not heard of NCT and queried how this could be addressed. She referred to a family who had depended on the local community to give support. She asked if, budget allowing, a leaflet could be sent to every household promoting NCT. Officers responded that every effort was made to continuously reinforce the work of NCT through social media, over 10,000 postcards had been delivered, promotion through a separate communication channel to community, statutory and voluntary groups, inserts in council tax letters, a presence at the testing sites, newspapers, magazines and radio. However, there would be always those reluctant to contact the Council. Councillor Rickerby suggested leaflets be distributed to GP surgeries. A mailing list of around 170 key people are communicated with on a fortnightly basis and this contact list was continually growing. A Facebook page was available for NCT regarding coronavirus updates. A stock of leaflets was available for distribution further. Regarding funding, there was a little funding available for initiatives around infection prevention or control and some other support. The comment was made that community support to families was the way forward to reduce reliance on NCT and the Council and then any referral be passed on as appropriate. **Officers would look at this issue and see if anything can be done to assist.**
- Regarding a query on promotion of childcare provision, families on lower incomes were entitled to free childcare for a few hours a week. However,

funding for 0-2 year early years support had been cut and provision would end soon. Barnardo's (were Sure Start) provided an excellent service, including the promotion of breastfeeding.

AGREED that the information be received.

10. STRATEGIC PRIORITIES OF THE WORKING GROUP

It was suggested that, given the huge issue of food poverty, it was necessary to focus on a set of strategic priorities of the Working Group. These were suggested as follows:

- To continue to identify opportunities to influence, coproduce and deliver community activity that strengthens our relationship with VCS, local communities and residents, whilst delivering positive outcomes,
- To develop social search engine and data analysis to help find relationships in datasets and visualise the drivers of poverty. Helping to analyse, identify and engage the people most impacted or in need, and
- To continue to look at how we can best utilise our welfare support systems to ensure financial support programmes and funded schemes are most appropriately targeted, deployed; then analyse the impact and effectiveness of the interventions.

This would allow officers to layer data held corporately to identify household level of poverty and risk and to target intervention at a local level. The data would be collated into a 'heat map' for the Group to prioritise intervention and evidence impact. Tracking of funding and grants would identify how much support the household is receiving and, in time, whether there has been an economic improvement for that household or improvement in social mobility.

Members welcomed the establishment of Community Hubs, noting that Cramlington Hub would be in place online in April. Once safe to do so, the buildings would allow stakeholders to share the buildings to connect and share initiatives and services and join up with other providers

11. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Councillor Simpson referred to the 'Monday Men' initiative which she would like to see replicated across the County.

AGREED that the Link be circulated to the Group for information.

12. NEXT STEPS

The presentation suggested the next steps as follows:

Covid Winter Support Grant:

- Increase the FSM allocation from £15 per week per child to £30;
- Establish trusted partners referral pathways with key VCS partners and foodbanks.
- Identify households at most risk of financial crisis.
- Identify poor fuel households containing vulnerable residents.
- Provide support and assistance to those who do not meet self-isolation payment criteria but are in need of support to stay at home.

Food Partnerships

- Map local community provision and gaps.
- Explore options for further expansion and roll out of Northumberland choices digital solution
- Share learning and innovation within the partnerships.
- Identify opportunities to better connect to deal with surplus food and wastage within partnerships.
- Promote and champion partnerships and identify local opportunities.

Holiday Activity and Food Programme

- Establish a working group to ensure the approach is a community led, asset based, mixed sector delivery model which is inclusive and high quality.
- Map FSM children and other priority groups.
- Map local offers and resources.
- Link HAF activity to communities and Hub developments.
- Link food to local food partnerships and local enterprise and opportunity.

The Chair suggested that NCT have a greater presence on the Council website and recommended a map which would allow residents to click on their area to identify initiatives, news stories and support in that area. It was recognised that communications team were currently challenged with dealing with the pandemic, testing and vaccination programmes. However, there was a space on the website which informed residents about initiatives currently in place to help support those in need and seeking to inspire communities to help provide that support.

It was agreed that employment and regeneration was critical to helping alleviate poverty and it was suggested that economic regeneration in Northumberland be considered at the next meeting.

Paul Brooks referred to a digital initiative that had arisen from Food Partnership initiative for the last school holidays which provided parents with an App and unique code to choose the type of support they wanted. They were prompted to take up the community offer first to access surplus food in their area, but then offered a choice of ordering a hamper, family take-away, or when safe to do so, to take the family to a community café. They were then able to choose a voucher, or the money paid directly to their mobile phone to allow them to pay bills etc. This gave families dignity and choice. Members welcomed this initiative.

AGREED that the 'next steps' be approved.

13. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Chair was anxious that a report be submitted to Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee prior to the election and asked that the Group meet in one month. It was suggested that it would be challenging to receive robust data and analyse it in that time. Once the analysis was complete, a date would be circulated.

COUNCILLOR WENDY PATTISON

CHAIR