

<p style="text-align: center;">INTERIM REPORT OF THE</p> <p style="text-align: center;">NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL FOOD POVERTY WORKING</p> <p style="text-align: center;">GROUP</p>
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The Working Group, established by the County Council, was chaired by myself with Councillor Liz Simpson as Vice-Chair and comprised of Councillors Armstrong, Cessford, Dickinson, Nisbet, Wallace and Rickerby, supported by officers. We have met on three occasions to date, and I would like to thank those involved for their commitment.

The objective of the Group was to examine the level and implications of food poverty across Northumberland and how the interventions and priorities of various stakeholders could help address the issues. Members sought to identify and gain an understanding of the level and geographical spread of food poverty across the whole of Northumberland and the national and local interventions currently in place across the County for reducing food poverty. The Group would examine:

- Provision and distribution of food aid.
- Accessibility and reach of food offers.
- Identification of any key gaps or shortfalls.
- Continued assessment of access to food.

The complexity and spread of the problem led to the Group agreeing at an early stage that focusing on foodbanks, their usage and availability would only address one part of the poverty problem and that a strategic approach to the underlying causes of food poverty was required, with sustainable solutions to avoid people being forced into that position in the first place. It was also agreed that food poverty was a county-wide problem with rural areas often facing problems of accessing food rather than food shortages.

Members acknowledged the mental health damage caused by food insecurity and the anxiety and stigma attached to it. There is a myriad of underlying causes to food poverty such as unemployment and deprivation, exacerbated by the pandemic, and several resultant problems such as anti-social behaviour, isolation, drug and alcohol abuse. The Child Poverty Action Group reported that two-thirds of children facing food insecurity were not eligible for school meals. These issues themselves could form a separate part of the review.

A great deal of work is already taking place in the County to support families in dealing with wider family problems and the locality co-ordinators were already coordinating the many local food offers available across Northumberland.

The Group agreed that the way forward was to collate the wide range of data and information already available in order to map out the level and geographical spread of food poverty across the whole of Northumberland. Then to examine the national and local interventions currently in place, identify gaps and consider innovative ways

that coordinated effort and sustainable intervention could minimise dependency on food aid.

Northumberland Communities Together initiated work with five Partnerships studying data to gain a greater understanding of the problem across Northumberland and find ways to help communities and partnerships to consider inclusive and equitable, sustainable solutions for their communities.

Many organisations have carried out valuable work and provided immense support to families over years and the pandemic has highlighted how the Council, VCS and communities can work together to provide excellent support to families. It was important to harness this information and knowledge in order to understand the local position and consider a Northumberland response.

There are welfare benefits available, including the Winter Support Grant, but there was a need to understand how available benefits were accessed and the criteria surrounding Grant allocation. NCT was working with Children's Services to make sure any remaining resource from the Winter Support Grant was targeted to households in need.

The third sector organisations are invaluable in sourcing funding and supporting communities. Data from such organisations regarding referrals, numbers, and any follow up action helped give a more comprehensive picture and added value to the review.

NCC's key actions and progress towards alleviating food poverty and insecurity include delivery of the Winter Support Grant, Food Partnership networks and preparations for Holiday Activity and Food Programme (HAF).

Covid Winter Support Grant

Funding Free School Meals

Northumberland 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. 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%).

The Group welcomed a digital initiative that had arisen from Food Partnership initiative 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.

£3,680 of the funds issued by NCT was in relation to the Berwick Pilot, which involved testing the digital app to develop a system that would provide dignity and choice to eligible families in need over Christmas.

In addition, NCT 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 were allocated, supporting circa 500 households.

In summary £243,750 was 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.

The Government relaunched the HUGG voucher system for term-time payments to those with a free school meal entitlement and NCT worked with colleagues to engage with and prepare to support our Northumberland schools with £93,000 payment for February 2021 half term.

The Working Group agreed 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 increased 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.

Households most at risk or in financial crisis were identified including those poor fuel households containing vulnerable residents. This allowed us to provide support and assistance to those who do not meet social isolation payment criteria but need support to stay at home.

Northumberland Food Partnership

Partnership leads from each area of the county meet to provide updates, share learning and innovation and discuss and how each area might structure a local approach to address local community priorities and reflect the diverse areas they represent. They map local community provision and identify gaps, explore options for further expansion, roll out of Northumberland Choices digital solution, and identify opportunities to better connect to deal with surplus food and wastage within partnerships.

Pro-active talks with larger organisations such as the NFU explore how we can develop strong links within the partnership.

Holiday Activity & Food Fund

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. A local stakeholder working group was established to take forward the coproduction, development and delivery of the Northumberland HAF Programme. This would ensure the approach is a community led, asset based, mixed sector delivery model which is inclusive and high quality. Priority groups such as FSM and local offers and resources were mapped and HAF activity matched to communities and Hub developments.

The key national messages were:

- School holidays can be pressure points for some families because of increased costs and reduced incomes.
- Some children are more likely to experience 'unhealthy holidays' in terms of nutrition and physical health.
- Some children from lower-income families are less likely to access fun activities.
- Free holiday clubs are a response to this issue. They work best when they provide consistent and easily accessible activities, for more than just breakfast or lunch.
- The holiday activities and food programme would expand in 2021 so that children receiving free school meals in England would be offered free healthy meals and enriching activities over the Easter, summer and Christmas holidays.
- The investment of up to £220m would be delivered through grants to local authorities.
- The important role played by community and voluntary organisations in this programme over the past three years was commended and local authorities were encouraged to work with a wide range of partners in the delivery of the programme.
- Covid-19 had presented challenge and uncertainty. It was unclear when schools would open and when it would be safe to run holiday activity clubs face to face again. However, the 2020 programme gave an indication of what could be achieved despite restrictions. The offers ranged from full face-to-face outside activities to food parcels with home activity packs.
- A set of national minimum standards around health food, enriching activities, physical activities, nutritional education and policies and procedures aimed to support a high-quality provision. The offer should be inclusive and accessible (eg SEND, rural children), offered to all FSM children in the local authority and

be provided for at least 4 hours for 4 days for 4 weeks (4x4x4 model) in the summer and for a week at Easter and Christmas.

- The national model also aimed to support high-quality provision co-ordinated across a local area to help children eat more healthily, be more active and take part in engaging and enriching activities, feel safe and not isolated, have greater knowledge of health and nutrition and be more engaged with school and other services.

Northumberland Model

- A local stakeholder working group was established to take forward the co-production, development and delivery of the Northumberland HAF Programme.
- The HAF Strategic Group (partners included NCT, Early Help, Community Education, Inclusion) provide oversight to the programme to ensure it is providing a high-quality experience for the children. The Community Lead ensures that schools and local VCS providers are collaborated with to ensure connection with local services in local places to help inform the HAF programme. Five locality roles connect with partners and provide oversight to the local programme delivered by Host Delivery Teams, who run the day-to-day programme.
- The Northumberland model was in year 4 of delivery.
- The national 4x4x4 model fitted with Northumberland's model.
- 8,747 children were entitled to Free School Meals in January 2021, representing a 2.4% increase since January 2020, or 16.5% of pupils to 18.9%.
- 32% or 16,806 children were identified as living in poverty (endchildpoverty.org.uk).
- £1,029,980 would be invested in the programme for 2021 and provided over 4 days at Easter, 4 days x 4 weeks in summer and 4 days at Christmas.
- In March and within restrictions, Northumberland provision included 15 school led camps with food, 3 special school led provision and 10 community led camps with food. There were also 14 'pop up' provision activities. As of 22 March, 1152 children were expected to attend.

Innovative mapping of demand and need allowed delivery to be prioritised. The 4x4x4 model worked well to build relationships and attendance and engage with parents.

In parts of Northumberland, such as Blyth and Bedlington, holiday activity has successfully operated for many years, but this is not widespread across the County. Many areas benefit from active community groups who may only need advice or support, but provision is patchy. Successful programmes would be explored and built upon with a view to expanding delivery.

Some activities were planned for the Easter holidays, but the focus was to be ready with a more comprehensive programme for the summer holidays, including the use of green space and beaches, subject to Covid restrictions. 1152 places had been

offered with schools for those families and pupils who would benefit from the engagement and the Free School Meals payment had been raised to £45. Some would provide food pop ups as part of the offer. Online interactive sessions were also being provided and the Winter Support Grant had been widely publicised.

There were particular gaps and challenges identified in the North of the County with wider spread of provision and lower attendances. Attention was focusing on pulling the provision together by the summer and providing transport where needed.

Pockets of provision do exist such as Hexham Churches Together and the Hexham Youth Initiative which provide summer camps and trips and, before Covid, were very well attended. Officers would work with them to identify any challenges and help provide support. In Ashington and Newbiggin, the HAF, NCT and Active Northumberland were mapping provision and need and building confidence with parents to inform a summer programme of activities. There was high demand in those areas and provision needed to be targeted to those families in real need rather than made widely available to all. It was envisaged that a larger event would be possible in the summer. It was noted that not all children wanted to participate in sport, and assurance was given that the activities would be mixed and include many exciting and educational events.

Next Steps

Officers will 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. They will further 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 will 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.

CONCLUSION AND STATEMENT OF INTENT

(i) Increase Free School Meal uptake/ Breakfast Clubs

Concern was expressed that many families may not take up FSM due to pride or the fear that their child may be stigmatised or bullied. However, excellent and sophisticated practices were in place in many schools which guarded against identifying FSM recipients. It was suggested that some schools could go further in ensuring systems were in place to eradicate stigma associated with FSM and it was:

AGREED that a working Group comprising representatives from NCC, NCT, School governors, pupils and families discuss the impact of stigma associated with FSM, especially given the availability of social media to exacerbate any stigmatisation or bullying and agree practices to address the problem.

(ii) No family in Northumberland to need access to a foodbank.

Members discussed whether there was a better alternative to foodbanks, for example vouchers for a supermarket. It was anticipated that numbers accessing foodbanks could increase as covid restrictions continued. Communities had provided outstanding support to foodbanks and deliveries, but there could be still some families falling through the gap. There were also similar problems of stigmatisation and reluctance as experienced with Free School Meals, and some criticism that vouchers may not be used for food. Foodbanks relied on donations and therefore did not always supply the items required by the family which ultimately added to food waste. A food parcel or hot meal provision for the family may be more appropriate at a time of crisis.

It was emphasised that foodbanks were crucial in a crisis but did not address the fundamental cycle of deprivation that caused the need to access them, such as unemployment, sickness etc. The vision was to have no need for foodbanks at all and for families to be able to access the appropriate support to address their complex needs and root issues and get out of the cycle. Foodbanks should alert services to more holistic support such as education, financial support, money management, rather than be used as a matter of course. NCT could provide an access point to holistic services rather than have multiple foodbanks across the County. It was acknowledged that one size did not fit all, but it was essential to have a clear picture of the foodbank landscape and assess whether they can fulfil the needs of those accessing them.

Some foodbanks had experienced a drop in referrals due to several reasons: NCC FSM voucher scheme allowed more parental choice to allow them to shop at supermarkets; community cafés etc. providing alternatives to foodbanks. Such alternatives could reduce the dependency on foodbanks, although this would not be achievable overnight. Smaller Community Groups were connecting into wider partnerships and thinking more innovatively to identify instances of more holistic need at the point of contact.

It was agreed that a Community Hub approach to accessing all appropriate services was considered to be the most suitable way forward.

RECOMMENDATION: Council is requested to consider the progress made and commit to continue with and build on the good work carried out to date.

COUNCILLOR WENDY PATTISON

CHAIR