

<p align="center">Health & Adults Scrutiny Sub-Committee</p> <p align="center">Thursday 16th September 2021</p>	 <p align="center">TOWER HAMLETS</p>
<p>Report of: Denise Radley, Corporate Director for Health, Adults and Community</p>	<p>Classification: Unrestricted</p>
<p align="center">Food Poverty in older people and low-income families</p>	

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<p>Wards affected</p>	<p>All Wards</p>

Summary

This report summarises what food poverty is and who is affected by it in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets (LBTH). It specifically highlights the food poverty needs of older people and low-income families and showcases which food provision is in place for these vulnerable groups.

1. LBTH works collaboratively with stakeholders including the Food Partnership to lead the Food Poverty agenda. The following recommendations have been collectively identified from the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) and subsequent engagement and prioritisation from the Food Partnership. The proposed recommendations will be delivered by the Food Partnership and its members in collaboration with LBTH:
 - Explore opportunities to keep the Tower Hamlets Voluntary and Community Service (VCS) Support Hub open.
 - Explore opportunities to expand the number of food pantries in Tower Hamlets and potential ways to improve access to some of them specifically for older people.
 - Continue to support and collaborate with the Food Partnership.
 - Deliver a big push, if needed, to get all lunch clubs open again post the Covid-19 lockdown.
 - Review options for current food support service for those who cannot leave the house (this is currently only being offered at weekends).
 - Explore piloting a “cook together, eat together” type project.
 - Consider how best to promote services to older adults that might be digitally

excluded.

- Develop an up-to-date directory of services easily accessible to everyone and provide useful information on the Tower Hamlets website including signposting.
- Work with the CCG (Clinical Commissioning Group) to explore screening for food poverty at primary care level.
- Raise awareness of the Home & Settle project at the Royal London Hospital (a service which can provide food support to people leaving hospital).
- Explore fruit and vegetable prescription schemes.
- Explore further food voucher opportunities, such as the Alexandra Rose Voucher Scheme.

2. Equalities Considerations

Equalities have been considered as part of this report. This report focuses on older people and low-income families. Both cohorts are vulnerable to food poverty.

1 REASONS FOR THE DECISIONS

- 1.1 This paper is for information. It provides an overview on how Tower Hamlets Council is addressing food poverty with a specific focus on older adults and low-income families.

2 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 2.1 No alternative options have been explored. The recommendations have been identified in partnership with key stakeholders through a needs assessment conducted on Food Poverty (published in 2019) and subsequent evidence reviews on this agenda.

3 DETAILS OF THE REPORT

What is food poverty and who is most at risk?

- 3.1 Food poverty is the inability to afford, or to have access to, food to make up a healthy diet. The main cause of food poverty is lack of money and resources. The food environment can also be a risk factor for food poverty. Some groups are more at risk of food poverty than others, including:
- Poorer, larger, younger families
 - Single parents and their children
 - Adults/older people who live alone
 - People in the lowest income quintile/people who are unemployed
 - People from a Black and Minority Ethnic background
 - People who have a disability
 - People who are homeless or in temporary accommodation
 - People with no recourse to public funds (NRPF)

- 3.2 The table below highlights the current position our residents face from Food Poverty in Tower Hamlets.

Indicator	Situation in LBTH
Households living in food poverty	4,393
Single parents with school age children eligible for Free School Meals	4,545
Couples with school age children eligible for FSM	6,292
Debt	31% of LBTH residents were indebted in 2018.
Pensioners in receipt of benefit	51% of all pensioners in the borough are in receipt of some form of benefit (8,060 pensioners) Of those 8,060 pensioners, 1,837 are in council tax arrears, totaling £738,379. Which is an average of £400 per person.
Density of fast food outlets	The density of fast-food outlets in local authorities in England ranges from 26 to 232 per 100,000 population. In Tower Hamlets the rate is 133.6 fast food outlets per 100,000 population.

- 3.3 In 2020, 4,752 concerns were raised by LBTH residents around food running out through the online self-isolation form (92.8% of all concerns). 4,259 residents needed help with food (83.1% of requests). Households requesting support were predominantly in the second Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) decile (1954) and the third IMD decile (1558).

Food Poverty and Older People

- 3.4 The main causes of Pensioners' Food Poverty include:
- Increased digitalisation of welfare benefits
 - Cuts in adult health and social care provision and confusion in older people about this provision
 - Reduced support from local authorities and volunteer groups
 - Imminent increases in pensioner poverty e.g., due to changes to Pension Credit entitlement
 - Growing financial exclusion among older people
 - Bereavement
 - Changes in household situation/income/community transport
 - Loneliness and social isolation
 - The diminished availability of Meals on Wheels services
 - Inadequate social care packages.
- 3.5 The characteristics that make older people more vulnerable to negative effects associated with food poverty include greater prevalence of chronic disease, progressive neurological disease, acute illnesses which leaves them unable to eat for consecutive days, mobility issues and social difficulties.
- 3.6 The Covid-19 pandemic has shone a light on issues that were ever present for older people. Discussions with local community organisations in Tower Hamlets have identified the following as key issues in regard to the food needs of older people:

- **Access:** Many pensioners in Tower Hamlets live in “food deserts”¹ and are struggling to find healthy, affordable food near them. Furthermore, food banks are often not appropriate for the elderly for reasons such as not being suitable for dietary or cultural needs.
- **Digital exclusion:** Older people often experience fear and anxiety around the digitalisation of services and are struggling to access them as a result. For example, in the March 2020 lockdown, anecdotal evidence from older people revealed that they struggled with access to cash because they were not used to using ATM machines or paying for their shopping by card.
- **Transport:** Many older people struggle carrying food from the shop home and often cannot access delivery services either because they are digitally excluded or because the minimum spend is much higher than what someone would need if they are living alone.
- **Mobility:** Arthritis in fingers and hands often makes it difficult to prepare food and use utensils. Furthermore, older people struggle getting to the shops and walking around the shop which disincentivises them from getting their weekly shop.
- **Information:** Often elderly are struggling to access the information they need and are relying on community organisations to signpost them to the right place. Furthermore, most support is delivered over the phone which is not always appropriate when working with older people.

Access to Food Provision for Older People

3.7 Access to food provision for older people was a key recommendation for the Food Poverty JSNA. The following initiatives are in progress:

- Pension Credit Campaign – proactively engaging eligible pensioners to take up this benefit through personal letters and posters, etc.
- Lunch clubs - provide the opportunity for older people to socialise over a regular shared lunch. There are many lunch clubs available in Tower Hamlets, some free, others charging a small fee.
- Meals on Wheels Alternatives - Since February 2020, the Council has not provided Meals on Wheels services. Everybody in receipt of Meals on Wheels had a face-to-face individual personal care and support review to discuss the changes and were supported in making plans for alternatives. Follow-up checks were made– (and have continued to be made as appropriate), at periods and in a manner proportionate to the risk, to ensure new plans are working.
- Meal delivery/meal provision – community organisations are supporting vulnerable residents with hot meal deliveries or food parcels. This includes Neighbours in Poplar, Women’s inclusive team and Whitechapel Missions among many others.
- Click and Collect - Council-run volunteer led scheme for those shielding/self-isolating to click and collect shopping.

Access to food provision for low-income families:

3.8 Of 23,043 primary school pupils in Tower Hamlets, 14,786 are eligible for the national **free school meal** (FSM) offer. There are 8,257 who are not eligible for the national FSM offer but who are covered by the local universal FSM

¹ A food desert is an area that has limited access to affordable and nutritious food.

offer. Nationally FSM are provided for infant school children (reception, years 1 and 2) across the country, with the Council resourcing free school meals to years 3-6 in addition to this. For every child in primary school, FSM presents a saving for families of £448.50 a year.

- 3.9 The Food Poverty JSNA identified that the Council should 'identify funding for holiday provision with cost-effective interventions that provide healthy food for children'. **Holiday hunger provision** helps to increase a family's purchasing power. The Tackling Poverty Team has been given a grant of approximately £1,805,130 by the Department of Education for six weeks of provision in 2021. This covers a week at Easter, four weeks in summer and a week at Christmas. This programme is targeted towards FSM eligible children.
- 3.10 The Food Poverty JSNA also endorsed increased uptake of **Healthy start vouchers** (HSV) in areas with low uptake, and encouragement of market traders to accept healthy start vouchers. HSV help increase a family's ability to afford healthy food. Evidence shows they act as a nutritional safety net, increase intake of fruit and vegetables for voucher beneficiaries, and can have positive long-term impacts on the nutrition of mothers and young children. However, alone they are not sufficient to outweigh the negative effects of poverty. From the period 12/2020 - 01/2021, there were 4,197 beneficiaries eligible for HSV and 2,397 beneficiaries entitled. Take up in LBTH was 57%. Work is ongoing to try and increase uptake
- 3.11 **Food banks** provide emergency food to those in need. They have reported a dramatic increase in demand throughout the pandemic.. In Tower Hamlets, most food banks are either drop in/open access or area specific registration is required. Hot meals services are also available in LBTH.
- 3.12 The Food Poverty JSNA also recommended to 'Pilot a food pantry in area of greatest need'. A food pantry is a local membership-based organisation which leverages in redistributed food. One **food pantry** has been established so far, The Food Store in Limborough House on the Burdett Estate. This is being run by Burdett FC, in collaboration with Poplar Harca. It is funded through the Tackling Poverty budget. Members come in each week to select which items they would like in return for a weekly membership fee (approximately £25 - £30 worth of food for a membership fee of £3.50 per week). Members are referred by partner organisations and receive access to support services to tackle the reason for referral. The food is of high quality, and the model of offering choice and a shopping experience, and that they are paying, means there is greater dignity and less stigma. The plan is to develop a further 10 pantries using part of the Council's covid recovery funding.
- 3.13 The Food Poverty JSNA also recommends exploration of **food voucher opportunities**. The Public Health team are currently piloting a Fresh Streets fruit and vegetable voucher scheme, covering 100 households for a 6-month period. Households will be sent weekly vouchers (value £5) for fresh fruit and vegetables in an area near Whitechapel and Watney Market that scores high on index of multiple deprivation scores. Vouchers can only be used with local fruit and vegetable suppliers (not supermarkets).
- 3.14 **Cash-first approaches** have been identified by Sustain as a key area councils can tackle to reduce food poverty. The Council were identified by Sustain as a leader in this area in 2020. 'Tackling poverty' was one of the priority areas identified in the Food Poverty JSNA.

- 3.15 The Council has a comprehensive approach to supporting residents financially. The **Resident Support Scheme** provides goods and funds to residents, and the Resident Support Outreach Team provide advice and support with Universal Credit applications. The Council has a maximum council tax discount of 100% and has funded welfare advice/crisis grants. The Council also runs regular benefit take-up campaigns (e.g. pension credit campaign). The Council has developed an Employment and Job Brokerage Scheme through WorkPath and is a London Living Wage Employer.
- 3.16 The Council's **Food For Health Programme** was identified by Sustain as a key area councils can work in to reduce food poverty. Our Food for Health Award programme has been running since 2009 and aims to improve the provision of healthy food options across the borough.

Emergency Pandemic Food Work

- 3.17 During the early stages of the pandemic the Tackling Poverty team set up processes by which those residents in need were able to access support quickly. This included both those in need directly due to the requirement to self-isolate, and those affected by hardship due to the impact of the pandemic. In 2020, we delivered over 6,000 food parcels directly to residents.
- 3.18 In 2020, the Council established a food hub to support for food banks and other voluntary organisations. The food hub is currently operating from Granby Hall, having previously been at the New City College. Redistributed surplus food is brought in from The Felix Project, while corporate support has also been received in the past. A crowdfunder has been established to bring in donations and enable the Tackling Poverty team to purchase supplementary goods, and a proportion of the Covid Winter Grant/Covid Local Support Grant has been used to purchase additional supplies. So far the hub has provided over 800 tonnes of food to local organisations, supporting 37 organisations including 5 schools.
- 3.19 The Covid Local Support Grant (an extension of the Covid Winter Grant) is a grant from the Department for Work and Pensions to provide direct assistance to residents for food and fuel. LBTH received £3 million which includes costs for administration. This has been spent to provide supermarket vouchers to FSM-eligible children and those at risk of food insecurity through schools, as well as making some available to other services such as hostels, Children's Centres, Homelessness team, Leaving Care Team, Linkage Plus and many more. We also added some funding to the Resident Support Scheme crisis grant programme to allow multiple food claims in a year, and purchased food to support Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations through the food hub.

Sustainable Food

- 3.20 Food growing and production have been identified by Sustain as a key area councils can tackle to reduce food poverty and LBTH were identified by Sustain as a leader in this area in 2020. Current initiatives include:
- Tree planting on council owned land and parks
 - Tower Hamlets Food Growing Network. This is coordinated by Women's Environmental Network (WEN) and is a thriving network of

local community gardens, city farms, community organisations and individual food growers.

- The Council has committed to work with WEN to develop and implement the Climate Action Fund work. Just FACT (Just Food and Climate Transition) is WEN's 5-year programme to co-create a just transition to a low-carbon food system with communities, which began in 2021.

Partnerships and collaborative approaches:

- 3.21 Tower Hamlets Food Partnership (THFP) was established in 2018 by the Council. It was a recommendation from the Food Poverty JSNA 'to bring stakeholders together regularly to co-create solutions, develop action groups on priority areas and identify a way for the partnership to be sustainable'. Communication was a priority area identified in the Food Poverty JSNA, covering recommendations 26-28. This included designing a Tower Hamlets Food Partnership website to act as an information hub; use social media to share information about good food with people across Tower Hamlets; and engage with businesses, organisations and campaigns, etc. Over 150 people from 80 organisations have become members or attended an action group meeting.
- 3.22 Principles for Sustainable Food Recovery were developed by the Food Partnership. The Principles are promoted through the Food Partnership webpage and WEN raises public awareness of food, health and sustainability issues through a monthly THFP newsletter to all members.
- 3.23 The Food Partnership have established action groups to tackle key food issues more effectively:
- **Fair Food for All** was established in May 2019 to coordinate work on food insecurity. The group is a Food Power alliance and meets quarterly. The aim of this group is to collectively tackle issues specific to food poverty.
 - **Just FACT Forum:** This is part of WEN's 5-year Just FACT programme to co-create a just transition to a low-carbon food system. This group comprises local strategic partners and thematic experts and aims to bring together local conversations on climate and to promote the programme work beyond Tower Hamlets.
 - **The Community Food Network:** This is an emerging group bringing together WEN's food grower network with food educators, shared meals providers and other food projects to build power and share resources.

Further initiatives to explore and other relevant initiatives

- 3.24 In March 2019, Tower Hamlets became one of the first councils to declare a climate emergency. Current initiatives include:
- The Council promotes the national Love Food Hate Waste campaign to encourage residents to reduce their food waste.
 - The Council has a Fairtrade Procurement Policy and has Fairtrade status. All the fish used in schools and community catering is MSC.

- The Council is a member of Procurement Across London (PAL), a framework agreement focusing on the supply and delivery of fresh fruit and vegetables to schools, academies, free schools both existing and yet to be established, as well as other Council premises.
- Food waste: The council provides a food waste collection service to all street level properties in the borough.
- Bio-Solar project: This Council project involves delivery of biodiverse roofs to existing Tower Hamlets Homes (THH) blocks, to increase habitats within estates and minimise over heating in properties.
- The Council was recently awarded the Bronze Sustainable Food Places Award (which WEN bid for) and is working towards Silver accreditation.

4 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 Food poverty is linked to inadequate income, poor dietary and lifestyle habits, and health inequalities, placing the “food poor” at higher risk of developing chronic diseases such as hypertension, diabetes and cardiovascular disease.
- 4.2 Some resident groups are more likely to experience food poverty. This includes people of older age who often experience multi-factored inequality driven by digital exclusion and issues in accessing appropriate services to meet needs. Age is a protected characteristic in the Equalities Act 2010.
- 4.3 Inequality in access to food is often not a singular issue and can therefore not be seen in isolation. Inequality often stretches over other areas of life such as access to services, school performance, living situation and employment opportunities. Giving our residents affordable access to healthy and nourishing food through the food poverty agenda will help reduce these inequalities.

Linked Reports, Appendices and Background Documents

Linked Report

NONE

Appendices

NONE

Background Documents – Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements)(Access to Information)(England) Regulations 2012

NONE

Officer contact details for documents:

N/A