

Tower Hamlets Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Food Insecurity in Tower Hamlets

Scrutiny Review



April 2023

Chairs Forward

I am pleased to present this report which explores the level of food insecurity in the borough and the impact it has on our residents. In delivering this review, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee aims to ensure our residents are provided with appropriate support to navigate an extremely challenging cost of living crisis. One of the council's key priorities is to tackle poverty and food insecurity in the borough. To do this, we first need to grasp and understand the current scale of the problem. I hope this review, through our close engagement with food banks and listening to the lived experiences of residents, supports the council to gather the intelligence it needs to provide robust and comprehensive action.

Tower Hamlets is wonderful, exciting, and diverse borough. Rich in history and cultures. Many come to the borough to experience the unique and dynamic communities that coexist. However, Tower Hamlets is also a place of contrasts and contradictions, where a thriving economy co-exists with high levels of poverty. Despite the economic power house of Canary Wharf and the banking sector and the City of London on our door step, Tower Hamlets remains one of the poorest boroughs in London, with one of the highest rates of poverty in the country, 39 percent or more people living in poverty in the Borough. Tower Hamlets also has the highest rates of child poverty in the UK, and highest rates of elderly people in the country who live in low income households. It is devastating to comprehend that the residents in our borough continue to experience some of the highest levels of poverty in the UK. The situation has been exacerbated by the current national cost of living crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Food insecurity is a symptom of poverty; if families do not have enough money, they will not be able to afford enough food to make up a healthy diet. It is suggested that people living in more deprived areas are more likely to be overweight or obese. This is not surprising; although food insecurity can be triggered by a crisis, all too often it is a long-term situation for people living in poverty, without the ability to access or afford enough food for a healthy diet.

The findings from this review have been deeply concerning, with some of our residents facing an imminent and desperate food poverty crisis. Such was our level of concern as we heard evidence from residents and food banks, the Committee called on the Mayor and Cabinet to take immediate and emergency action to support residents during the Christmas and new year period through providing additional financial support to the food banks and food pantries. This would allow them to increase the amount of food parcels and resources they can provide.

The Committee was pleased to see a swift response with a further £200,000 funding commitment to provide vulnerable families with direct food support through Tower Hamlets food hubs during this difficult period. We would now like the Mayor and Cabinet to consider our longer term recommendations which we hope will ensure a more sustainable response to this on-going crisis.

I would like to thank all of the council officers, food banks, residents and a wide range of organisations from across the borough who gave their time and effort to contribute to this Review. I am also grateful to my Overview & Scrutiny colleagues for their support, advice and insights.

Councillor Sabina Khan

Finance and Resources Scrutiny Lead



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1. Recommendations

Our key recommendations:

- A. Provide a longer term commitment to continue funding the LBTH Food Hub so that there is more certainty in delivery of food aid to local food aid organisations and retention of expertise and experience to help with continuity
- B. Council and partner services to work with food banks to provide opportunities for residents in low paid employment to develop their skills and to get into better employment
- C. Facilitate opening up food aid provisions in the evening or weekend to support those who may not be able access these services in the weekday, especially for the ‘working poor’.

Communications	
R1	Effectively communicate information about support provisions to those facing food insecurity and to front-line workers. As part of this Develop an up-to-date directory of services that can be easily accessible and understood by different beneficiary groups, food banks and front line services
Food aid provisions	
R2	Provide a longer term commitment to continue funding the LBTH Food Hub so that there is more certainty in delivery of food aid to local food aid organisations and retention of expertise and experience to help with continuity
R3	Council to work with food aid providers to grow and sustain an independently run food aid network to ensure better joined up delivery of food aid in the Borough
R4	Facilitate opening up food aid provisions in the evening or weekend to support those who may not be able access these services in the weekday specially for the ‘working poor’.
R5	Continue developing dignified approaches to accessing food for those facing food insecurity including increasing the number of food stores to reduce reliance on food banks.
Quality of food provision	
R6	Improve the quality of secondary school food. As part of rolling out universal free school meals in secondary schools, improve the quality of food provision, ensuring it is healthy, filling, and appetising.’
R7	Work with foodbanks to improve nutritional value provided in foodbanks and engage foodbank users to promote healthy start vouchers, nutritional and health related services to improve health and reduce health issues happening because of poverty.
R8	Increase uptake of Healthy Start Cards and expand fruit and vegetable voucher schemes, developing a plan and funding to meet targets.
Maximising Income	
R9	Stipulate within commissioning specifications for information and advice services, that the services need to often operate from foodbanks

R10	Council and partner services to work with food banks to provide opportunities for residents in low paid employment to develop their skills and to get into better employment
Sustainability	
R11	Develop closer collaboration with private sector to unlock financial resources to help tackle food insecurity in Tower Hamlets

2. Introduction:

- 2.1. The Tower Hamlets Overview and Scrutiny Committee identified food insecurity in the Borough as a subject for a Scrutiny Review. The rise of cost of living in the country due to unprecedented rise in inflation rates, along with high energy costs, has impacted on many people's ability to buy basic essentials including food. As Tower Hamlets has the highest rate of poverty in the country this has a significant impact on the local population, exacerbating food insecurity already existent in the Borough. The evidence gathering for the report provided stark confirmation of this.
- 2.2. The purpose of the scrutiny review was to:
 - understand the extent to which food poverty is affecting local residents and the contributing factors,
 - review the current food model provisions, its accessibility and effectiveness,
 - examine the sustainability of council's current and future plans to tackle food poverty in the Borough.
- 2.3. Tackling the cost-of-living crisis is the number one priority for the Executive Mayor as set out in the Mayor's manifesto. This is reflected in Tower Hamlets [Council Strategic Plan 2022 -2026](#), where priority 1 is focused on tackling cost of living crisis. This priority has a number of commitments which relate to this review on food poverty including:
 - Set up a Holiday Food programme to feed children entitled to free school meals during the school holidays.
 - Support children and young people through a package of measures including universal Free School Meals throughout primary and secondary school.
 - Develop our local safety net in partnership with food banks and voluntary organisations.
- 2.4. It must be noted that food insecurity happens as a result of poverty. Therefore, tackling poverty is key to reducing food insecurity in the Borough. The Committee notes that the Executive Mayor has announced a number of initiatives over the past few months that will ease the financial pressure on households facing poverty, this includes:
 - Setting up of a series of warm hubs for residents who may be struggling to heat their homes due to soaring energy prices.
 - Introduction of Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) to support sixth form schools and colleges.
 - Putting a freeze on council tax.
- 2.5. At the first scrutiny review session on 1st December, Committee members recommended urgent funding for foodbanks to support residents facing food insecurity over the winter period. The Committee was pleased to see that the Executive Mayor subsequently announced extra 200k for urgent funding to support foodbanks over the winter period. In March 2023 the Executive Mayor committed a further £814k into local Food Hubs, to improve provision and nutritional offering.

3. Review approach

- 3.1. The review was led by Cllr Sabina Khan the scrutiny lead for Finance and Resources and supported by Jaber Khan, Senior Strategy and Policy Officer, and later Zaid ul-Islam (Graduate Management Trainee) and Ayaan Gulaid (Strategy and Policy Officer)
- 3.2. To inform the review evidence was gathered through one session with service providers and Overview and Scrutiny committee members, in addition to a few smaller sessions hearing lived experiences of residents and a number of sites visits.

Review session with service providers - Thursday 1st December 2022

The first evidence gathering session set out the context to the review, and invited relevant stakeholders from the council, VCS organisations who provide a service to residents facing food insecurity, along with the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) members. The Committee heard presentations from both internal and external service providers as well as contributions from those present.

Site Visits:

The Committee conducted several site visits at key locations across the Borough. This included Bow Food Bank, Limborough food pantry and Felix Project (food redistribution organisation). The aim was to see first-hand the work taking place to tackle food poverty and gather intelligence on effectiveness from providers, and where possible, service users.

Experiences of local residents and service users.

Two face to face focus group sessions were held to collect the views and experiences of service users. This helped develop a picture of how effective the current support systems are to tackle food poverty, and what they feel needs to be done to improve provision.

As part of gathering evidence of peoples lived experiences, a written submission was received from the Disability Network on their experiences of local residents and service users. All of these sessions and submission covered the following key areas:

- Their experiences of food insecurity in the Borough.
- Their experiences of accessing services related to food insecurity and any barriers to access.
- What can the council and its partners do to improve the situation.

At the OSC Committee held on 12th December 2022, a briefing paper with [some urgent recommendations](#) was agreed to help residents facing food insecurity over the winter period that went to Cabinet members.

As part of the Review evidence was received from a range of officers, partners, and committee members, including:

Name	Designation
Cllr Sabina Khan	Scrutiny lead for Finance and Resources
Cllr Saied Ahmed	Cabinet Member for Resources and the Cost of Living
Cllr Marc Francis	Member, Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Cllr Bodrul Choudhury	Member, Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Ellie Kershaw	Interim Divisional Director, Growth and Economic Development

Dominic Hinde	Household Resilience Team Leader, Growth and Economic Development
Vincent Wood	Food Security Officer • Growth & Economic Development
Katy Scammell Natalie Lovell	Associate Director, Public Health Public Health Programme Manager for Healthy Environments
Muhammad Hafizur Rahman Zarrah Rahman Muhammad Habib	Tower Hamlets Youth Council
Joyce Archbold	Director, Society Links
Joanna Read Steve Gilbin	Executive Director, Bow Food Bank Trustee, Bow Food Bank
Sufia Alam	London Muslim Centre
Halima Islam	Co-opted member (Overview and Scrutiny Committee)
Jahid Ahmed	Co-opted member (Overview and Scrutiny Committee)
Isabel Rice	London Food Poverty Campaign Coordinator, Sustain
Damian Conrad	Community Partnerships Manager, Felix Project
Bethan Mobey	Toynbee Hall
Membership organisations from	Disability Network

4. Defining Food Insecurity

- 4.1. Food insecurity is an individual's "limited access to food due to lack of money or other resources". Food insecurity can be defined as "limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways"¹. Several terms such as 'food poverty', 'food insecurity' and 'hunger' are often used interchangeably.
- 4.2. This definition takes into account a number of variables, such as one's capacity to acquire and purchase food as well as the social stigma frequently connected with using foodbanks or other similar programmes to obtain food. The capacity to prepare food, which necessitates the tools and energy sources needed to store and prepare the food, together with the abilities and knowledge necessary to produce wholesome meals, is another aspect.
- 4.3. Food insecurity is commonly a symptom of broader financial insecurity (housing, fuel costs, employment, education, etc.). The issues are exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis. It can also be impacted by:
- Availability issues (supply chain disruption, panic buying)
 - Access issues (food deserts)
 - Environmental issues (crop yields, effects of the climate emergency)

5. National and regional context

- 5.1. The UK's food poverty rate is [among the highest in Europe](#). Around one in five people (20%) were in poverty in 2020/21, which equates to 13.4 million people. Of these, 7.9 million were working-age adults, 3.9 million were children and 1.7 million were pensioners.²

¹ [State-of-Hunger-2021-Report-Final.pdf \(trusselltrust.org\)](#) p.19

² [uk_poverty_2023 - the essential guide to understanding poverty in the uk 0 0.pdf \(jrf.org.uk\)](#)

- 5.2. In June to July 2022, of the 91% of adults in Great Britain who reported an increase in their cost of living, 95% saw the price of their food shopping go up, and [44% had started spending less on essentials including food](#). According to a [Food Foundation report](#), 9.7 million adults faced food insecurity in September 2022. More than half (53.8%) of universal credit claimants were food insecure.
- 5.3. Food price inflation reached [17.1 percent](#) by end of January 2023, amounting to over £643 rise in the average annual food cost.
- 5.4. The government published a [Food Strategy](#) in 2022 which focuses on longer-term measures to support a resilient, healthier, and more sustainable food system that is affordable to all.
- 5.5. Inadequate income is the primary cause of food insecurity nationally. Low income (39%) was the [leading cause of referrals to Trussell Trust food banks from 2019 to 2020](#), followed by benefit delays (17%) and benefit adjustments (15%).
- 5.6. London has the highest rate of poverty of any region in the UK, with more than a quarter (27%) of London residents in poverty after housing costs.
 - 1 in 5 adult Londoners have low or very low levels of food security
 - 1 in 6 parents in London have children living in low or very low food security-around 400,000 children.
 - Trussell Trust (food bank) usage, often used as a measure of acute food poverty, is up 284% since 2012. In 2017, 10% of its 1,332,952 food packages were distributed in London.
 - Due to rising costs, 42% of 500 surveyed London parents reported cutting food purchases; 30% reduced fruit and veg; and 21% skipped meals for their child to eat.
- 5.7. In 2018, the Mayor of London announced the [London Food Strategy](#), a five-year plan which outlines key priorities for ensuring that all Londoners have access to healthy, affordable, and sustainable food.

6. Local Context

- 6.1. Tower Hamlets is one of the most deprived Boroughs in the country. In 2019/20 the overall poverty rate in Tower Hamlets was 39 percent, the highest rate in London.³
- 6.2. It has the highest level of child poverty in the UK with over 50% children living in households below the poverty line (after housing costs) . Over the past 5 years, the number of children estimated to be living in low-income families in Tower Hamlets increased by more than 6000.
- 6.3. 44% of older people in Tower Hamlets live in low income households which is also the highest proportion in the UK. Overall 14.2% of Tower Hamlets households are in fuel Poverty but for households of older people this is almost certainly higher.
- 6.4. Poverty in employment is high. Although more people are working than ever before, rising living costs, the effects of the pandemic, and benefits at a 35-year low in real terms have had a disproportionate impact on those on the lowest wages. According to the Borough Profile (2020):
 - more than three-quarters of poor children live in families where at least one person works
 - 29,000 employees in Tower Hamlets earned less than the London Living Wage
 - 63% of families receiving tax credits were working
 - nearly half (47%) of housing benefit claimants were working
- 6.5. 4,591 low income households identified by internal data⁴ as food insecure in Tower Hamlets (where food cost is higher than income after expenditure).

³ Taken from Tower Hamlets Borough Poverty Profile from Trust for London [Tower Hamlets | Trust for London](#)

⁴ Food Poverty - LIFT Data October 2022

Of those households identified:

- 2,833 are low income single people
- 2,751 are social tenants
- 3,585 are not in work (1,006 are in work)
- 1,031 live with disabilities

Absolute numbers of food insecure people likely to be much higher.

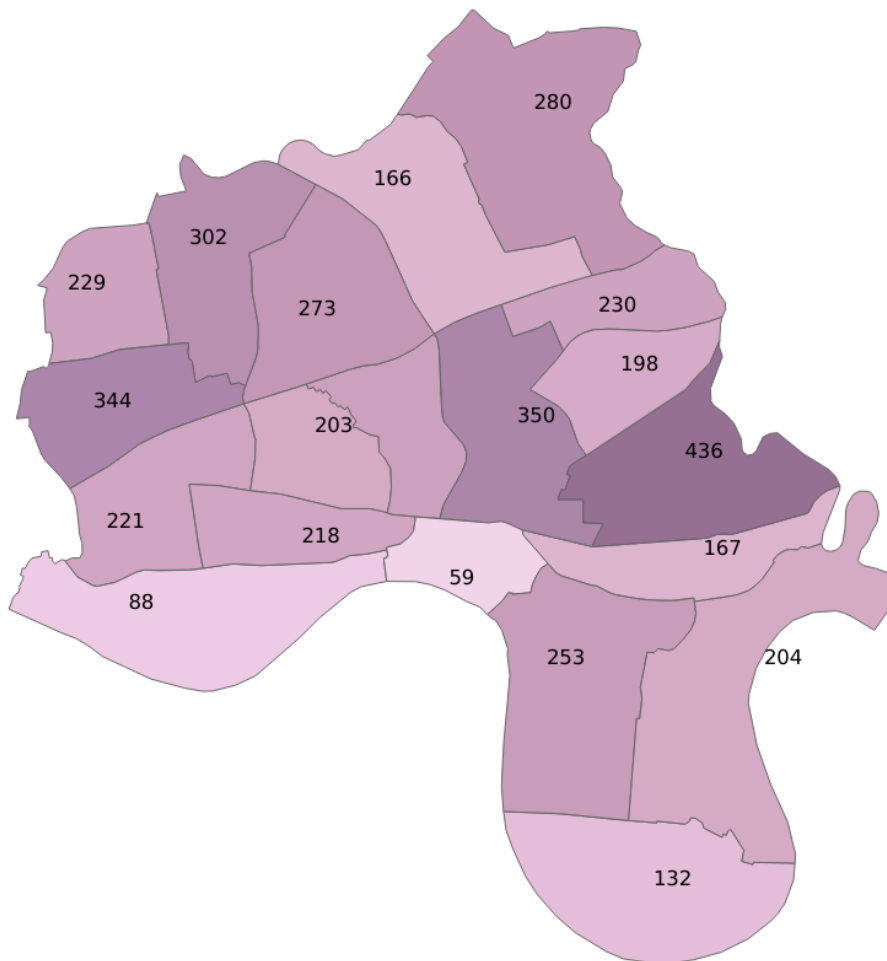


Figure 1 Low income household by ward

7. Responses to Food Insecurity in LBTH

7.1. In the Borough there are various responses to food insecurity from both the council and VCS organisations

Council responses:

7.2. Council has a multipronged approach to tackling food insecurity in the Borough. This includes:

- Delivering projects that directly assist food insecure residents.
- Empowering local grassroots organisations through grants, food, and equipment.
- Supporting advice services with funding to provide wrap around provision.
- Continuing work to meet financial insecurity and maximise incomes.

7.3. There are a number of projects that directly assist food insecure residents including a food hub, Food Store Network, Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme, and some additional food specific support:

- Food Hub:** Collates and distributes food to more than 60 VCS organisations in the Borough. It has delivered more than 2,000 tonnes of food to date (equivalent to 4.8 million meals). The projected impact of distribution of food from the Food Hub in 2022-23 will be equivalent to 2.25million meals, which is enough to feed 2,503 families in the borough every day of the year (based on a typical family size of 2.47 people).
- Council has a **Food Store Network** which is a 'Pantry-style' model targeting medium and long term food insecurity with a focus on service user dignity. It offers significant quantities of repurposed food for a £3.50-per-week members fee, alongside wrap-around support. Over the course of the project seven sites will:
 - Provide a net benefit of £627,900 in food costs to residents.
 - Support 2,100 service users directly.
 - Benefit an estimated 12,397 people.
 There are ambitions to increase the number of Food Stores in the Borough to at least twenty which will ensure every ward in the borough can be served using this model.
- Holiday Activities and Food (HAF):** DfE funded programme designed to tackle food insecurity and bridge experience gap for Free School Meals (FSM) eligible children in the holidays. 35 organisations were delivering HAF clubs in 2021.
- Cash first schemes:**
 - Providing more than £2.6m of supermarket vouchers to FSM eligible children and those identified as vulnerable in the holidays since 2020.
 - Piloting market voucher schemes delivered by Public Health with Fresh Street and Alexandra Rose.
 - Promoting the Healthy Start Voucher Scheme to those who are eligible. Pregnant people and families with children under the age of 4 may be eligible for help to buy healthy food and milk if they are on certain benefits.
- Additional food specific support:**
 - Almost 20,000 meal boxes provided to FSM eligible and vulnerable children including breakfast bags in partnership with School Food Matters
 - More than 20 industrial fridges and freezers provided to maximize delivery from food aid groups
 - Convening organisations through the Food Partnership and the Fair Food For All subcommittee
 - Operational support for The Felix Project to assist their delivery and maximize surplus in the borough

Voluntary and community Sector (VCS) Response:

7.4. There are various forms of VCS responses to tackling food insecurity. A number of organisations are catering for emergency food aid provision, primarily food banks. Felix Project is also a key stakeholder in the Borough which redistributes surplus food and hot meals to local food aid organisations so that the food reaches the residents who are in need.

Felix Project:

[The Felix Project](#) is a food redistribution organisation that rescues safe and nutritious surplus food from the food industry in order to reduce food waste and food poverty.

This is accomplished by obtaining food from supermarkets, wholesalers, and other food suppliers that is both fresh and nutritious but cannot be sold for a variety of reasons. It is then redistributed and delivered to a variety of charities across London that provide meals, snacks, or food parcels, ensuring that food that would otherwise go to waste reaches vulnerable Londoners. The Felix Project provides funding to many food aid organisations in Tower Hamlets. The council works closely with the Felix project.

Food banks:

There are different types of foodbanks that operate from the Borough, this includes:

- **Open Access** – A food bank that anyone can go to for food.
- **Limited Access/referral only** – A food bank that needs someone to refer you into the service. Please contact the organisation for more details.
- **School food provision** – A food bank or food aid service that specifically works with students and parents who attend the school.
- **Hot meals service/Hostel** – Provides hot meals or premade goods to residents.

The Tower Hamlets Food Partnership

7.5. The council is a member of and supports the Tower Hamlets Food Partnership, a multi-sector network hosted by Women's Environmental Network (WEN) that brings together charities, businesses, social landlords and statutory services with an interest in food. Along with meeting immediate food needs, the partnership is committed to working on upstream solutions to address the root causes of poverty and reduce the need for food banks, as well as to championing models of food provision that are sustainable, dignified, offer choice, and provide pathways to other advice and support services.

8. Findings

Impact of food insecurity on residents:

- 8.1. The review heard from a number of stakeholders and residents on the impact of poverty and food insecurity. Some of the key impacts are stated below.
- 8.2. Cost of living has been increasingly affecting more residents in the Borough which has impacted many residents ability to buy essential items including food. As a result the number of residents needing emergency food support increased rapidly, with demand for emergency food support surpassing pandemic levels over the winter. Bow Food Bank - one of the largest food banks in the Borough -increased their support to 800 households a week. Other food support provisions have reported similar issues and a rise in demand.
- 8.3. The review found many people in low paid jobs are increasingly needing to access emergency food aid to be able to sustain themselves. Bow Food Bank has reported that 50 percent of people accessing their food bank are in some kind of employment.
- 8.4. The desperation has led to an increase in theft. Shoplifting of essential items and medicine have increased. The number one shoplifting item according to Safer Neighbourhood Team is Calpol. Theft of essential products for babies is also on the rise.
- 8.5. Some residents, especially those on pre-payment metres, are often taking extreme measures to balance the books and prioritising paying rent, council tax and energy bills over food. The Committee heard that many households were skipping meals and going hungry, and amongst other measures are using the toilet multiple times before flushing to save on pre-payment meters.
- 8.6. Residents have mentioned that they have little option other than to feed their families unhealthy food due to higher cost of healthy food which is likely to have long-term consequences on their health.
- 8.7. Demand for cold tinned food in food banks has gone up due to rise in energy bills with many preferring cold food over using energy to heat or cook food.
- 8.8. The review heard that stigma and shame is often preventing residents including young people from accessing food provisions and the help they need for their families. Language is also a key barrier accessing various support
- 8.9. Loneliness: due to cost of living situation many residents stated that they avoid inviting guests to their houses. On the other hand, some people have refused invitations because they are unable to afford to reciprocate. This is reducing the opportunities for social interaction within some communities, hence creating loneliness and isolation which is likely to have a significant impact on residents health and wellbeing.
- 8.10. Many from the diaspora are supporting family members abroad outside their own immediate family. This has put further strain on their budgets.
- 8.11. The review heard from the Disability Network that People with disabilities experienced greater risk of food insecurity due to additional disability related costs which have increased.

Food aid provisions

- 8.12. As stated in section 7, Tower Hamlets has a number of different provisions from emergency food aid to more sustainable approaches to reducing food poverty such as the Food Stores. The evidence gathering examined some of the food aid provisions with the key findings stated below.

Food Hub

8.13. The council's Food Hub has been central to ensuring residents facing food insecurity are supported through local food aid provisions. Continuing to provide the necessary funding to the Food Hub is essential for local food aid providers to be able to support residents with food. The Food Hubs importance can be understood by some of the following key functions it undertakes without which many of organisations providing food aid will be unable to do so:

- It creates a point of contact for 60 disparate VCS organisations, allowing to quickly communicate with this cohort and deliver messaging via couriers completing food deliveries
- It provides an adaptable service that can provide logistical support based on emerging needs and opportunities – for example serving as the delivery mechanism for this year's Christmas gift appeal at short notice, and facilitating the collection and delivery of repurposed foods to specific new projects as needed
- It provides key supplies to the Tower Hamlets FOOD Store network, which would struggle to maintain provision without access to this food.
- It provides delivery services to VCS which other parties have struggled to replicate
- It provides a mechanism for LBTH to directly influence the quality and quantity of charitable food in the borough, which has been particularly important during the cost of living crisis due to supply chain disruptions that have impacted partners
- It is providing key soft skills and opportunities for a team of 25 volunteers. In particular the hub has provided a platform towards employment in local industries for several young people, and provides a consistent benefit to several people with disabilities and additional needs.

8.14. The review was pleased to note that an extra £200,000 had been allocated for the Food Hub to support residents over the winter period however at the time of this review funding has yet not been allocated for Food Hub to continue in the next financial year. The review strongly recommends that funding is allocated early to the Food Hub and over a longer period of time for the purposes of planning, continuity and retention of experience and expertise along with certainty of delivery to local food aid providers. Whilst finalising the report for the review its come to our attention that in March 2023 the Executive Mayor committed a further £814k into local Food Hubs, to improve provision and nutritional offering which could help with continuity.

<p>Recommendation: Provide a longer term commitment to continue funding the LBTH Food Hub so that there is more certainty in delivery of food aid to local food aid organisations and retention of expertise and experience to help with continuity</p>
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Emergency food aid

8.15. A number of VCS organisations are providing emergency food aid for residents facing need. A key challenge faced by food aid organisations include often demand outstripping supply. At the same time more recently food aid organisations have reported that donations and funding they receive is reducing. Storage space for foodbanks are often at

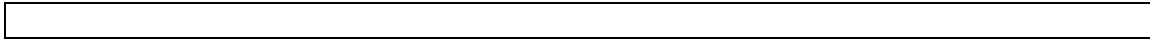
a premium as the venue can be used for multi-purposes during the week, which means they can't always stock up essential items at the venue.

- 8.16. The review heard from food aid organisations who felt there was non-adequate communication and collaboration between the different food aid providers which meant that they were not as effective as they could be in supporting residents who were facing food insecurity. A number of reasons were identified for this. One of the key reasons was not being aware of the different food aid organisations that exist in the Borough, the services they provide and how to contact them. Mapping all food aid providers and regularly updating the list of food aid organisations with their services and contact details will help individual food aid organisations and other stakeholders connect with each other and collaborate where necessary. We understand that the council has a list of food aid providers and previous Women's Environmental Network developed a list which is now outdated.
- 8.17. Along with the information, the food aid services we spoke to felt strongly on the need to have a network of food aid organisations that meet regularly to ensure better sharing of knowledge, information, resources, and minimising waste. They felt it will also enable collaborative applications for funding to maximise impact and to help understand how much of the need is being met and where the food aid needs to be targeted. For a period of time there has not been any operational food aid network to develop and enhance collaboration. Especially during the cost of living crisis there is definitely a need for one.
- 8.18. The review was pleased to note that recently the Fair Food for All sub-group got revived with first meeting being held on 3rd February 2023. The participants included Bow Food Bank, Felix Project, LBTH Food Hub and representative from Tower Hamlets Community Advisory Network (THCAN) . It was chaired by an officer from the council's Tackling poverty team. The purpose of the meeting included providing more operational information, discuss wraparound support and share information from the different organisations present at the meeting. As it was the first meeting numbers invited and attending were limited.
- 8.19. However feedback from food aid organisations expressed a need for a network which is led independently by the food aid organisations will result in much more collaboration between the food aid organisations enabling more effective results. We understand that some discussions are taking place to explore if the Fair Food for All sub-group could be that group with food aid organisations leading it or whether an independent food aid network is the way forward.

Recommendation: Council to work with food aid providers to grow and sustain an independently run food aid network to ensure better joined up delivery of food aid in the Borough

- 8.20. The review found that nearly all the food aid provisions operate in the day time. This means that some people, especially the working poor who are unable to make it to the food provisions in the day due to work can miss out. Felix project receives lot of surplus food from supermarkets that can be distributed in the evening in certain days but due to no food aid provision open in the evening they have been unable to distribute the food in the Borough. Feedback from Bow Food Bank suggests that some people who are working in the day do struggle to access emergency food aid so an evening or weekend provision is likely to help these people.

Recommendation: Facilitate opening up food aid provisions in the evening or weekend to support those who may not be able access these services in the weekday especially for the 'working poor'.



Beyond food banks

- 8.21. It is understood that emergency food aid though necessary, only provides a temporary solution to those facing food insecurity and does not reduce food insecurity. According to [a report on cost of living](#) by Institute of Health Equity, there is good evidence that food aid providers that offer one-on-one advice, more food options, and membership-based models have a greater impact on reducing food insecurity over time than traditional food banks that only provide food.
- 8.22. The council's Food Store model is an effective initiative that enables people to maintain their dignity through paying a small amount to buy large quantities of food rather than being dependent on food banks. It also has food provisions with better nutritional value. So far 7 food stores have been established in the Borough catering for people on a ward basis and there are plans to have at least 20 food stores in the Borough. Expanding these at least to each ward will really help residents in need and reduce the reliance on foodbanks.
- 8.23. During site visit and Limborough food store it was observed that the residents accessing food stores are being referred to various wrap around services which can help with maximising their income and support them on different issues. The review heard when visiting Limborough Food Store that residents accessing the food store were also benefiting from other services within the same venue due to developing familiarity with the venue. Along with being able to access support this has also helped develop friendships and connections which is helping them with their wellbeing .

Recommendation: Continue developing dignified approaches to accessing food for those facing food insecurity including increasing the number of food stores to reduce reliance on food banks.

- 8.24. Along with food stores, other approaches to restoring dignity in accessing food could be looked at by the council. This will provide more options for local residents and to reach a wider audience. Supporting food banks to transition to social super markets could be a way sustainable way of doing that. In Lewisham for example food aid providers for people who are food-insecure are transitioning from offering a food bank to offering a 'social supermarket'. Six food projects are in the process of becoming a place where residents can shop for their weekly basket of food for a small membership fee only⁵.

Quality of food provision

- 8.25. The first session of the review heard youth council representatives speak about young people's experiences of food insecurity. One of the strongest points from their presentation was on the quality and quantity of food provided in secondary schools. They mentioned young people in secondary schools including sixth forms are going hungry because of inadequate meal portion size or for not being able to meet the income threshold for free school meals. There are times that food runs out leaving young people to opt for cold food. The school meals in secondary schools were described to be of poor quality and extortionate in price for what they get and therefore, pushes many sixth formers to make unhealthy choices like eating out in local chicken shops. This same feedback about secondary school meals was reiterated at evidence gathering sessions held in the

⁵ <https://www.instituteoftheequity.org/resources-reports/evidence-review-cost-of-living-and-health-inequalities-in-london/click-here-to-read-the-report.pdf>

community where parents mentioned how their children will come home hungry despite being given money to buy food from the school. This meant some go hungry and others opt to eat outside of the school, in places like chicken and chips shops where food is unhealthy.

“I give my son money for school meals, but I find out that he has not used it and not eaten during his lunch. He comes back home hungry and when I ask why he did not spend money on food in school he says that that he can’t eat the food as it has no taste”.

Recommendation: Improve the quality of secondary school food. As part of rolling out universal free school meals in secondary schools, improve the quality of food provision, ensuring it is healthy, filling, and appetising.’

- 8.26. The quality of food that residents can access in food banks can vary. The review found that food banks tend to distribute food with lower nutritional value in comparison to food stores. This is of course partially due to food donations the food banks receive and the resources that has at their disposal. It is strongly advisable that the council should work with food aid providers so that the standards of food provided by the food aid organisations can be improved.
- 8.27. Healthy start vouchers support people who are 10 weeks pregnant or have a child under 4 to buy healthy foods and get free vitamins. However since registration has gone online for the voucher scheme in early 2022 there has been an estimated shortfall of £412,00 as shown in the [interactive map](#). These changes meant that all existing recipients were required to re-apply online in order to continue to receive this support. A number of challenges during digitisation of the Healthy Start scheme by the government has hampered uptake to the scheme which is summarised [here](#). At a local level Public Health are taking a number of actions to increase uptake of the scheme including creating awareness through promotion of the scheme using various methods and training frontline staff.
- 8.28. In order to tackle diet related health conditions and barriers to accessing healthy food, Public Health has been piloting fruit and vegetable voucher projects to improve residents' access to healthy affordable food, whilst also improving the good food economy (the vouchers are redeemable in local markets and greengrocers). Currently 2 models of delivery are being piloted – Alexandra Rose Scheme in Children’s Centres and Fruit and vegetable on prescription pilot. More details on the 2 schemes can be found in Appendix 1. It is recommended that the current schemes continue and expanded once the pilot is completed in order to support residents facing food insecurity during the cost of living crisis.

Recommendation: Work with foodbanks to improve nutritional value provided in foodbanks and engage foodbank users to promote healthy start vouchers, nutritional and health related services to improve health and reduce health issues happening because of poverty.

Recommendation: Increase uptake of Healthy Start Cards and expand fruit and vegetable voucher schemes, developing a plan and funding to meet targets.

Communications and engagement

- 8.29. During the different evidence gathering sessions it became apparent that many residents were not aware of the various forms of support available to help with food insecurity. Same could be said about some front-line workers awareness of the support available. Despite council's current promotion of the different support provisions it appears that information is not reaching all the people that really need it. Some of the barriers mentioned included language, digital exclusion and not generally having access to the information. Many of the residents we spoke with who needed emergency food support were not aware of food banks in the Borough. It may be worth reviewing and strengthening the communications and engagement approach so that local residents are more aware about the support available to them including accessing short-term and long-term food aid provisions. Some of the frontline workers we spoke to (i.e. parental engagement workers, VCS frontline workers) who work with these residents were also not informed enough to be able to sign post to different services.
- 8.30. Similar feedback about not being aware of information was also received from member organisations from the Disability Network who mentioned that publicity of these services should also cater for those facing cognitive impairments by providing 'easy to read and easy to understand' sources that explain food banks and how they can be accessed. Along with the information member organisations of the Disability Network also mentioned that their clients cognitive and physical impairments restrict them from gaining easy access to food provisions.

Recommendation: Effectively communicate information about support provisions to those facing food insecurity and to front-line workers. As part of this Develop an up-to-date directory of services that can be easily accessible and understood by different beneficiary groups, food banks and front line services

Maximising Income

Access to information, advice, and guidance (IAG)

- 8.31. It was noted during the review that currently there does not appear to be onsite information, advice, and guidance (IAG) services being provided from the food stores though residents can access the services through referrals. Good practice examples suggest that people are more likely to access advice sessions when it is co-located with food banks and community food provisions to help people access housing and employment support and claim benefit entitlements For example, in Cheshire, the ['Meeting Place Project'](#), which implements and supports emergency charitable community food provision, had advice services based at the venue, allowing people to access advice, particularly those who are less likely to seek advice outside of community settings. The primary goal of this pilot was to create conditions that made advice more accessible to people who would otherwise avoid seeking advice outside of their organisations. It is recommended that when commissioning some of these wrap around services ensure delivering sessions on site is stipulated in the commissioning documentation during procurement in order to maximise attendance

Recommendation: Stipulate within commissioning specifications for information and advice services, that the services need to often operate from foodbanks

Employment and skills

8.32. As stated previously in the report that over 29,000 people in the Borough are in low paid employment, Bow Food Bank had also reported that over 50 percent of those accessing their food bank are in some kind of employment. Therefore providing opportunities for those in low paid employment to upskill and those not in employment to gain skills and get into employment will enable people to maximise their income and reduce food insecurity. In order to do this it is recommended that council and partner services work with food aid organisations to provide with these opportunities for residents accessing their services.

Recommendation: Council and partner services to work with food banks to provide opportunities for residents in low paid employment to develop their skills and to get into better employment

Sustainability

8.33. The councils food security provisions through the tackling poverty team are delivered via various funding sources including LBTH funding and Central government funding. Below is the breakdown of 2022/23 funding for projects delivered through the tackling poverty team

Project	Annual Budget
LBTH Food Hub	£400,000
Food Pantries	£15,000 per site (approximate)
HAF (2022)	£1.75million (fully DfE funded)
FSM voucher programmes (2022)	£3.13million (of which £1.75million is local funding)

Public Health also delivers initiatives that strives to tackle food insecurity including through providing healthy and affordable food options for those facing food insecurity. For example the total cost for Alexandra Rose and Fresh Food Scheme is £120k per annum (with an additional £60k investment from our partner)

- 8.34. The resources to tackle food insecurity is finite and it can be argued that the funds within the sector is reducing. As stated for example food banks have reported reduction in donations and higher demand from residents is impacting on their ability to meet the need. Therefore it is paramount that resources are used more efficiently to tackle food insecurity in the Borough.
- 8.35. Stronger collaboration and partnership work is necessary to ensure that the resources are used effectively and new resources can be unlocked. Tower Hamlets has a strong food partnership, however there are areas that could be tapped into more in order to maximise the use of existing resources and where possible unlock new resources.
- 8.36. It was observed that there could be stronger partnership with both the private sector and faith sector in this regard. Some of the food aid providers are benefitting from private sector cooperate volunteers. Felix project for example rely on a large number of cooperate volunteers for their day to day activities. However with the depleting financial capacity for food aid organisations it is important to explore if private sector organisations can support

food aid organisation or projects working on tackling food insecurity in the Borough financially.

Tower Hamlets has a thriving faith sector and faith organisations have played a crucial role in the Borough during times of crisis such as during the Covid pandemic and also now in tackling food insecurity. However a more strategic collaboration with the faith sector can help in unlocking resources and getting access to residents in need.

<p>Recommendation: Develop closer collaboration with private sector to unlock financial resources to help tackle food insecurity in Tower Hamlets.</p>

- 8.37. Some food aid organisations feedback on the need to have strategic collaboration to understand the needs of those facing food insecurity and assess if their needs are being met. At the moment there does not seem to be an effective way to work collaboratively on this between VCS organisations and the council which may mean people are not provided effective intervention or others falling through the gaps. There is a desire from some food aid providers to have a central point of coordination to engage in research across the delivery sector to best understand the need (while remembering many local people use services specifically that keep their data confidential) and support the development of a joined-up strategy and support smaller providers to join in with that strategy.