

SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Cabinet **DATE:** 12 October 2020

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WARD(S): All

PORTFOLIO: Councillor Pantelic, Health & Wellbeing

PART I **NON KEY DECISION**

REFERENCE FROM OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY – NEIGHBOURHOODS AND COMMUNITY SERVICES IN SLOUGH

1 Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to ask Cabinet to consider the recommendation of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel (3rd September 2020) with regard to the report on Food Poverty in Slough.

2 Recommendation(s)/Proposed Action

The Cabinet is requested to resolve that the following recommendation of the meeting of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel be endorsed:

- That the Cabinet formally recognise food poverty as a priority that requires immediate action and commit to adopting the T&F Group's recommendations to reduce the levels around the Borough.

3. The Slough Joint Wellbeing Strategy, the JSNA and the Five Year Plan

3a. Slough Joint Wellbeing Strategy Priorities –

Addressing food poverty in Slough will contribute to achieving all of the SJWS priorities:

1. Starting Well: there is abundant evidence that food insecurity has a direct effect on children's physical and mental health. When children start school with a good level of health and development, they are more likely to succeed in later stages of education.
2. Integration: The inability to access sufficient, well-balanced and healthy diet can affect life expectancy and result in health implications such as diabetes, heart disease, obesity, depression, poor oral health, and premature mortality.
3. Strong, healthy and attractive neighbourhoods: Slough has pockets of severe deprivation, which if further contributing to health inequalities in the borough. These areas have particular challenges around food poverty, child poverty, fuel poverty and homelessness. Addressing these issues will have huge impact of the quality of life for those living in these areas and improve the social cohesion in Slough.

4. Workplace health: Having a good job, with a reasonable wage, provides security and allows individuals to thrive. By improving the working conditions and opportunities for Slough residents, SBC can prevent food poverty and the various challenging outcomes associated with it.

3b **Five Year Plan Outcomes**

- Outcome 1: Slough children will grow up to be happy, healthy and successful
- Outcome 2: Our people will be healthier and manage their own care needs
- Outcome 3: Slough will be an attractive place where people choose to live, work and stay
- Outcome 4: Our residents will live in good quality homes
- Outcome 5: Slough will attract, retain and grow businesses and investment to provide opportunities for our residents

4 **Other Implications**

(a) Financial

If the Council were to implement all measures suggested by the NCS Scrutiny Panel to reduce food poverty, this will require additional resources. Some of the recommendations can be implemented within existing budgets, including underspent revenue budgets (i.e. Cabinet and member CIF money) and Our Futures programme budgets. Other recommendations will require the allocation of additional resources, which may require comparable savings to be found elsewhere.

An indication of the financial impact is provided in the table below. A more detailed assessment of the financial costs of implementing any recommendations endorsed by the Cabinet will be conducted by officers as necessary.

Recommendation	Likely cost level	Responsible owner	Comment
<i>Develop a commitment and a proactive strategy to tackle food poverty in Slough</i>	No cost. Absorb within existing plans	Cross-functional	
<i>Create a directory of (and promote) all available services</i>	No cost. Absorb within existing plans	Cross-functional	
<i>Start to monitor household food insecurity</i>	Low cost	Vijay McGuire	This could be picked up by the new locality hubs but will still require further exploration
<i>Coordinate with schools to ensure all children have access to food 365 days a year</i>	High cost	Johnny Kyriacou	Private sector funded in other local areas
<i>Explore ways to reduce fuel poverty using regulatory tools such as the housing act 2004 and</i>	High cost	Colin Moone	The economic costs may be borne by businesses and

<i>through the effective promotion of the various energy company obligation schemes already in operation in Slough</i>			higher income customers
<i>Increase the capacity of the LWP team and provide customer service training</i>	High cost	Vijay McGuire	This could be actioned as part of Our Futures Phase 2 but will still require further exploration
<i>Support and develop financial advice services</i>	High cost	Vijay McGuire	This could be actioned as part of Our Futures Phase 2. In addition, there is potential as part of our strategic approach to commissioning to commission support around debt welfare / financial advice services.
<i>Develop community orchards and plant fruit trees around the borough</i>	Low cost	Ketan Gandhi	This could be part of the new parks and allotment strategy currently being developed.
<i>Engage retailers and voluntary groups</i>	No cost. Absorb within existing plans	Shabnam Ali/ Ketan Gandhi	
<i>Consider more collaboration with probation services</i>	No cost. Absorb within existing plans	Garry Tallett	
<i>Improve working conditions and opportunities for Slough residents</i>	High cost	Shabnam Ali	This is an overarching recommendation and specific actions would need to be financially assessed.
<i>Organise an annual conference on food poverty</i>	Low cost	TBC	

(b) Risk Management

Risk assessments will be conducted by officers as necessary in the implementation of the Task and Finish Group's recommendations.

(c) Human Rights Act and Other Legal Implications

There are no Human Rights or legal implications arising from this report. Should the implementation of the recommendations necessitate any legal assessment, it will be carried out as required.

(d) Equalities Impact Assessment

Should the implementation of the recommendations necessitate such an exercise, it will be carried out as required.

(e) Workforce

The implementation of the Task and Finish Group's recommendations will require officer time and commitment, as well as agreement from line managers.

5 Supporting Information

5.1 The Food Poverty Task and Finish Group was formed in response to the issues raised by members of the NCS Panel in their meeting on 31st October 2019. At that meeting, members of the Panel discussed data from Slough Foodbank and expressed concern at the increasing reliance on food banks and similar provision in Slough. The Panel then decided to set up a task and finish group to investigate the causes of this increase and suggest actions to reduce it.

5.2 The Task & Finish Group collected evidence to assess how effective the model of food aid provision in Slough is in meeting short- and long-term needs of residents. Members of the Group held meetings with and received oral and written evidence from a number of individuals and organisations residing and/or working in Slough, including Slough Food bank, Shelter, DWP, probation services and schools. The Group also held meetings with staff from the SBC Homelessness Outreach, Debt Management and Local Welfare Provision teams. Furthermore, the Group held evidence sessions with local residents in Slough who had experienced food poverty. A video entitled Britain's Hidden Hunger that documented food poverty in Slough among other parts of the UK in November 2019 was also shared with the Group, and the person who produced the film was also interviewed to obtain further evidence. Members of the Group also visited Marish Primary School, where they witnessed first hand the breakfast club run by the school and held a meeting with a group of teachers and other staff members. In addition, the Group conducted a short survey for schools to get an idea about child poverty and school food provision in the borough, and six schools responded. The Group's full report can be found [here](#).

5.3 Recommendations:

1. Develop a commitment and a proactive strategy to tackle food poverty in Slough.

In its 2019-2020 Manifesto, the Council has a broad commitment to 'tackle inequalities locally and work to improve health, life chances and opportunities for all Slough residents'. However, there should be a similar political commitment from members to devote resources to tackling poverty in Slough. At the very least, the

Council should provide leadership and a more coordinated approach to the tackling of food poverty and food insecurity.

2. Create a directory of (and promote) all available services.

This is especially important during times of national/local crises, such as the COVID pandemic. Therefore, it would be useful if SBC can map out the services currently offered, create an information package for users, and ensure Slough Food Bank, schools, children centres, citizens advice, community centres and local charities know about these and help to promote their work. A number of departments within SBC may have compiled their own lists of services available to local residents; however, this information should be made available in a single directory online.

In addition, SBC should actively promote these services and improve uptake by better informing residents about them, encouraging those at risk to seek help and assisting them with filling in forms and applications where possible. It is also important to assess the cultural barriers that exist among residents from different backgrounds and make sure everyone is well informed about the services available. Having a single directory in several languages would overcome this barrier, and an online directory would allow for effective review by SBC and easy access for residents. It would also be great to include a wider directory of approved partner services.

3. Start to monitor household food insecurity.

Local measurement of food poverty is essential to better understand and tackle the issue of food poverty in the Borough. Food poverty can be monitored through a borough-wide survey every two years, for example, on a sample of households. Data can be then analysed and used to model the issue of food poverty, measure existing food poverty and calculate food poverty risk. This will allow for better resource planning and targeting at a strategic level. A programme to address the issue can be then developed in the long term. To achieve this, data sharing with partners will also need to be agreed. This could be picked up by the new locality hubs which would be in a better position to engage with their areas. This will also provide further insight to SBC about residents views on poverty.

4. Coordinate with schools to ensure all children have access to food 365 days a year.

This is especially important to tackle holiday hunger. Schools in Slough are exerting massive efforts to help children and parents throughout the year. These initiatives should be matched by similar ones funded by the Council (and partners) and designed in collaboration with schools. SBC should provide funding in order that all Slough Schools provide pupils with a non means tested free breakfast, funded from underspent revenue budgets and/or generalist section 106 contributions.

Several other local authorities have intervened to reduce child food poverty in their areas. Examples include providing Free School Breakfast by Blackpool Council and Hammersmith and Fulham Council. Blackpool's scheme has been run by the council since 2013 and provides universal free breakfast for primary school children in Blackpool. Hammersmith and Fulham Council have also started providing universal free breakfast to all primary school pupils and free lunches for secondary students regardless of family income since January 2020; the scheme is entirely funded from contributions negotiated by the council with property developers as one of the conditions for granting planning permission. In 2019, Hammersmith and

Fulham Council allocated £1,963,188 of S106 funding to fund the first two years of primary school breakfast club provision.

Last summer, Tower Hamlets Council distributed more than 21,000 free meals to children attending summer holiday clubs and activities at a cost of £80,000 in order to tackle some of the pressures families face during the school holiday period when free school meals are unavailable funding to provide meals for children.

5. Explore ways to reduce fuel poverty using regulatory tools such as the housing act 2004 and through the effective promotion of the various energy company obligation schemes already in operation in Slough.

The Energy Company Obligation (ECO3), also known as the Affordable Warmth Obligation, is a government energy efficiency scheme in Great Britain that places obligations on large gas and electricity suppliers to help households with energy efficiency measures such as loft and cavity wall insulation and can sometimes include the installation of a new boiler, though only in owner occupied properties and this will usually require a contribution from the householder. Those who live in private housing and claim certain benefits may be automatically eligible for assistance under this scheme. Social housing tenants may be eligible if their property has EPC rating of E, F or G. Residents can also contact suppliers directly and they do not have to be customers to receive improvements from a particular supplier. However, eligibility does not automatically guarantee the supplier will install the measures.

In addition, SBC created a statement of intent that declares certain individuals other than those covered automatically by the scheme, eligible for assistance. There are various providers working in Slough; the main one being Aran Energy Services, and they have been provided with data by SBC to assist them in identifying fuel poor homes. The Local Authority approves each case under this scheme though it is entirely funded by suppliers via ECO.

The Warm Home Discount Scheme entitles eligible persons to a discount on their bill and this does not effect their entitlement to Winter Fuel Payment or Cold Weather Payment (benefits available to people on certain benefits). Individuals are automatically eligible if they are a pensioner and are on Pension Credit, but fuel companies also give this benefit to people at risk of fuel poverty e.g. those on low income. The benefit can be applied for directly from suppliers as they each have some discretion over eligibility.

During the COVID outbreak, SBC launched a new Green Doctor scheme to provide free home energy advice. Trained assessors are sent to the homes of eligible residents to provide energy efficiency advice and assistance in applying for benefits like the Warm Home Discount, and arrange for installation of small measures such as draft proofing.

Whilst SBC has a system that can help people, it is not very well advertised and the front of house staff seem not to be aware of it; hence one of our recommendations is to create a directory of all our available services. Coventry Council, for example, provides a page on their website of the different options that are available to residents and delves into the advantages and disadvantages of the varying options.

A more joined up approach between the housing regulation team and Housing Services generally, Social Care, and the Third sector could also make a real

difference in improving SBC performance in dealing with the issue of fuel poverty in Slough (which in turn will impact food poverty).

6. Increase the capacity of the LWP team and provide customer service training. In light of the new Locality Hub strategy, the Council should review the current welfare provision services and map these out to ensure full coordination between the hubs and with other teams within SBC, such as the Housing and Troubled Families Teams, and with partners. Having regular meetings with the Job Centre is essential to stop clients being sent back and forth between agencies.

It is also vital to ensure that each of the hubs has enough resources to provide an excellent service. This will require hiring more officers/training existing to support this team, providing proper customer service training for new recruits, and having online facilities readily available while also maintaining face to face services for those who do not have internet access or the skills to use online services. This should be actioned as part of Our Futures Programme.

7. Support and develop financial advice services. Currently, the Debt Management Service is made up of one person only. The Council should increase the capacity of this team in order to support more residents. The increased capacity can be funded from underspent revenue budgets (i.e. Cabinet and member CIF money). The council should also consider using generalist 106 funding in order to create further posts. Users of the locality hub should be encouraged to book an appointment with the Debt Management Service as this is an invaluable resource which could help curb debt management for many residents. Currently, those in high debt circumstances are allocated a meeting but this should be a prevention measure at the very least and therefore increasing resources to this service will add overall value to the longevity of debt management.

8. Develop community orchards and plant fruit trees around the borough. Even though this will not provide a radical solution for the problem, it would help improve residents' health and wellbeing. Surrey County Council last year declared a climate emergency and committed to work with partners on Surrey's collective response to become carbon neutral as possible; they committed to facilitate the planting of 1.2 million trees by 2030. South Oxfordshire District Council are also looking at various proposals around biodiversity in response to the council's climate emergency declaration, including tree planting. Furthermore, Didcot Town Council have allocated a budget for planting and maintaining trees and have started planting walnut trees in their parks.

SBC are currently working on a new park strategy and an allotment strategy, which have proposals for community orchards and foraging areas. In order to promote healthy eating, SBC can facilitate a project with local schools in a community orchard at one of the local community parks and advertise this as borough wide initiative. Schools along with SBC could take turns to manage and maintain the orchards. Studies show that gardening can help tackle obesity, and working outdoors with young children will encourage child development growth. As part of the allotment strategy, schools can be invited to also grow vegetation and learn about growing healthy food which can be picked by the children. These green initiatives can also be extended to local charities.

9. Engage retailers and voluntary groups. The Council should encourage more retailers to accept Healthy Start vouchers and donate food to the food bank and local charities. Better coordination with Slough

Foodbank, Shelter and other charities providing help for residents should be also considered.

10. Consider more collaboration with probation services.

Sharing data between SBC and the Probation services can allow SBC to plan ahead for the release of any ex-offenders. The council should collaborate with the probation service and the LEP to provide training and job opportunities for this particular group.

11. Improve working conditions and opportunities for Slough residents.

SBC should use its procurement strength to require contractors to pay at least the living wage, ensure that employees are entitled to company sick pay, and prohibit the use of zero hour contracts except in exceptional circumstances. Local residents should be also prioritised when recruiting staff. The Economy Growth Board should prioritise in engaging with local businesses in facilitating upskilling local residents.

12. Organise an annual conference on food poverty.

SBC should host an annual event/conference with partner organisations to monitor and action further measures to reduce food poverty in Slough.

6 **Comments of Other Committees**

- The report was unanimously endorsed by members of the NCS Scrutiny Panel on 3rd September 2020.
- A draft of this report was discussed by Slough's Residents Panel Board during their meeting held on 18 August 2020. The recommendations by the Food Poverty Task and Finish Group were endorsed by the Residents Board.

7 **Conclusion**

The Cabinet is requested to formally recognise food poverty as a priority that requires immediate action and commit to adopting the NCS Food Poverty Task and Finish Group's recommendation to reduce the poverty levels around the Borough.

8 **Background Papers**

'1' - Agenda papers and minutes of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel, 31st October 2019.

'2' - Agenda papers and minutes of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel, 3rd September 2020.