

Food Insecurity and the Council's emerging response and strategy

Report of the Head of Communities

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 Pandemic has highlighted a range of inequalities across Devon, including a rise in levels of poverty and food insecurity. This has coincided with the Council operating during the pandemic (and subsequent 'recovery') in areas directly supporting people around food, and other essential provision e.g., food and connection with the clinically extremely vulnerable; the provision of free school meals during holidays and lockdowns; and provision of grants to organisations delivering emergency food provision.

This has allowed the opportunity for significant local learning around the levels of food insecurity in Devon and with it the opportunity to understand the delivery and effectiveness of local support arrangements to those who need it. During the last year, the Council has invested over £5m in the provision of 'food' and essential supplies, particularly to those families eligible for free school meals (18,000), utilising post Covid funding made available from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). A further £54M is being made available for this Autumn/Winter.

The Council is intending to highlight the need to Tackle poverty and inequality as one of its key strategic priorities.

2. What is food insecurity?

Household food security is assured when members are confident of having economic and physical access to sufficient, acceptable food for a healthy life (Defra, 2014). Conversely, food insecurity was defined in the Low-Income Diet and Nutrition Survey, commissioned by the Food Standards Agency, and conducted across the UK between 2003 and 2005, as: Limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.

So, food security is impacted by many factors including household income, and the supply, quality, variety, and desirability of diet. It relates to every part of the entire food system, and the County Council's strategy and response covers each aspect.

3. Learning from COVID

Prior to the pandemic, councils in Devon had limited understanding around the issues surrounding food insecurity and had limited connection to organisations providing food support to local people, or a sense of their local capacity and reach.

Given the need to support people in lockdown, the Council provided significant investment in voluntary and community organisations (VCSE) to develop infrastructure and to fund support around food and essential supplies over the last eighteen months. The Council was asked to co-ordinate support to the 60,000 clinically extremely vulnerable (alongside wider communities), which was delivered through significant and positive collaboration with VCSE organisations, community groups and district, town, and parish councils as 'Team Devon'. During this time scores of 'mutual aid' groups were formed around food and wider support, often at a local community level.

As lockdowns eased, the need for support from some communities diminished and with that change, many mutual aid groups ceased to operate. However, as evidenced by the significant rise in those families eligible for free school meals, presentations with Early Help teams, childrens centres and district councils, the growth of food banks and the increase in local levels of food insecurity, there remains longstanding challenge to address the impacts of poverty.

By November 2020 Officers were keen to better understand

- What was the capacity of food support organisations and how they could best connect in Devon?
- What is the reach of food insecurity in the County and how those impacted were being supported?
- How best to ensure those most in need were able to access the help they required?

4. Food Networks and local research into Food Insecurity

Devon Community Foundation was grant funded by Devon County Council in late 2020 to commission local research leads (from local food or infrastructure organisations) at a district level to explore the nature of organisations working in some way with food, and whether and how they might work together more closely in future. This research was gathered at a district level and individual reports were produced and shared with partners, with an overall summary report produced alongside recommendations for future work.

The work highlighted effective organisations and positive work underway across Devon alongside a general agreement that better collaboration was required and that future networking and close working with councils should continue. However, the work also highlighted some overlap and competition in organisations and many gaps in local provision due to geography, transport links and the different purposes and targeting from food organisations.

Working alongside district councils and other partners the Council should continue to invest in work at a network level to develop capacity and further collaboration locally, particularly to enhance support to those suffering from food insecurity.

The County Council commissioned a 2021 report to establish the level of food insecurity in Devon. Results showed that levels of household food insecurity are at high levels across the county. Overall, 17% of Devon households were shown to experiencing food insecurity, with one in ten Devon households (10%) experiencing

substantial disruptions to their eating patterns, with household members eating less and going hungry. These households have reduced food intake because they do not have sufficient money to pay for enough food.

Prior to the pandemic, most UK households were food secure, with high food security (87%) or marginal food security (6%). Only a minority were food insecure, with low food security (4%) or very low food security (3%). Clearly the pandemic has had a significant impact on these levels at a national and local level.

Of significant concern within the research was that many of those most at risk of food insecurity are the least likely to access or able to access support from food organisations. Alongside this, families also struggled to access support from organisations offering wider support such as welfare funding, benefit advice or access to benefits themselves. This will be a result of a range of issues including geography and transport as well as stigma and barriers through language.

The Council and its key partners should continue to invest in learning to better understand the needs of those impacted to ensure that the right and appropriate solutions and support are accessible to them and if required re-designed and delivered.

In June 2021, this learning was shared with the Team Devon Leaders and Chief Executives' monthly meeting in the context of work to support households needing financial support in Devon. The Council had provided significant funding to district councils for this during the pandemic and it had highlighted the opportunity to add greater consistency to the distribution of funding, particularly to ensure those most in need to access support.

The group agreed to *“Reaffirm their commitment to using Covid-19 funds in Devon to meet the Team Devon priorities to tackling economic Impacts and addressing poverty by*

- 1 *Continuing to provide short-term support and helping to people who are economically vulnerable or in financial hardship and*
- 2 *Supporting ongoing work across Team Devon to understand and tackle the causes of poverty by working with community, voluntary and social enterprise organisations*
- 3 *Delegate to Simon Kitchen on behalf of Team Devon the development of a shared scheme to contribute to those priorities.”*

Local councils continue to work together closely in this area and there is a shared commitment across key officers on the development of shared arrangements, funding and learning to ensure vital support to families in Devon can be accessed by families in greatest need across the County. This partnership will be a key foundation to addressing food poverty locally, building on local networks focussing on food and the causes of poverty.

5. Winter Support Grant and Household Support Grant

In December 2020, the DWP as part of a national fund, provided a grant of £2M to Devon County Council (DCC) to provide support direct to families over the Winter.

Officers had a matter of days to develop plans and delivery, in part hampered by a range of restrictions on how the money could be utilised. This provided for the delivery of supermarket vouchers (£30) to children and families eligible for free school meal over the Christmas holidays to cover they missed whilst being away from school. This offer was extended to eligible young people in colleges. The Council also promoted the free school meal eligibility and encouraged families to apply (which in part has been highlighted by the rise in eligibility from 15,000 to 18,000 over the last year).

In addition, significant funding was distributed to a range of food organisations (community kitchens, food banks, food box providers) alongside the funding of a scheme with Citizens Advice to provide support around energy bills and debt advice. Extra support was made available to the most vulnerable children, with Early Help Teams, Childrens Centres and organisations specifically supporting BAME communities able to help families with an additional grant of up to £100 per family to support them to buy food and pay utility bills over the winter.

This funding was extended several times (Covid Local Support Grant) up to the end of September 2021 meaning that each of the subsequent school holidays families have been given vouchers to cover free school meals alongside the funding of a range of innovation to support families in need.

The Winter Grant and subsequent Covid Local Support Grant was used to fund the Goodie Box and Get a Healthy Start projects, where recipe kits for families with young children experiencing financial difficulty were delivered during school holidays. This project has run three times during 2021, with almost 6000 deliveries of food, recipes and wellbeing activities for children being made directly to the houses of vulnerable families. Evaluation showed it was successful in not only providing food but encouraging children to get involved in food preparation and supporting families to try new healthy and sustainable recipes with no financial risk. The Goodie Box will likely run again for February 2022 half term.

Funding has also been secured to support the development of community fridges across the county. Although these have a focus on reducing food waste and sustainability rather than insecurity, they can play a key role in creating more accessible ways of obtaining free or low-cost food in communities for those who need it most.

The Holiday Activities and Food Programme has also provided important support to families in receipt of free school meals; programmes across the County have provided enriching activities and nutritious meals during the Easter and Summer holidays, utilising funding from the Department of Education.

The coronavirus pandemic continues to impact on family budgets, and many people are finding it especially difficult now as we move into colder winter months. The government has recently announced a new Household Support Fund to help those most in need this winter. It will be available until Thursday 31 March 2022, and Devon's allocation of it will be just over £5 million. The fund is designed to support households in most need with food, energy and water bills, and other associated essential costs. DCC is working with the eight district councils and other partners to

make the funding available as quickly as possible. Details for how households can access the funding will be available as soon as it is confirmed.

Whilst this funding has and will continue to have significant impact on thousands of families in poverty, due to restrictions in the funding it is unable to be used to build longer term capacity in the local food system. Concerns continue that many people in food poverty will continue to fall through the net when inconsistencies remain regarding support and eligibility, alongside the challenge that many local sources of support are not accessible due to geography or stigma. Partners must look to address this.

The Council has begun initial conversations with DWP to explore an agreement to work closely, likely through an initial local pilot, to provide support proactively and direct to families identified as those most under financial strain. This would not only give confidence that support was being delivered to those greatest at risk of food insecurity but would also allow partners to learn from these families around what support could provide lasting impact on them and their lives.

6. Wider strategic work in Food

The Devon Food Partnership has been established as a strategic food partnership for Devon, Plymouth and Torbay, enabling collaboration and open communications with food stakeholders across the county. The partnership brings the County Council together with other key organisations in an Interim Steering Group. It also facilitates smaller task groups to complete discreet projects and act.

The scope of the partnerships work is guided by the six Sustainable Places principles:

- **Healthy Food For all:** Tackling food poverty, diet related ill-health and access to affordable healthy food.
- **Food for the Planet:** Tackling the climate and nature emergency through sustainable food and farming and an end to food waste.
- **Food Governance and Strategy:** Taking a strategic and collaborative approach to good food governance and action.
- **Sustainable Food Economy:** Creating a vibrant, prosperous, and diverse sustainable food economy.
- **Catering and Procurement:** Transforming catering and procurement and revitalizing local and sustainable food supply chains.
- **Good Food Movement:** Building public awareness, active food citizenship and a local good food movement.

The Interim Steering Group is creating an initial draft strategy for the partnership, informed by consultation with stakeholders in the food system. The outputs of this activity will be important to inform the development of strategic direction for DCC around food and food insecurity more specifically.

The multi -agency Devon Recovery Group, chaired by Meg Booth from Devon County Council, is also likely to highlight Food Insecurity and Poverty as one of its priorities for future work and focus, having considered evidence regarding its local impact post pandemic.

7. Next Steps for the Council

As this report highlights, the Council should continue to work with a range of partners on both the long-term opportunities to learn and develop change alongside the short-term distribution of support from funds such as the Household Support Grant.

The following are the current priorities for the Council to develop in partnership, over the next 12 months.

- **Deliver the Household Support Fund to families across Devon to 31 March 2022**
- **DCC/district councils to commission/grant fund development of Food Networks in Devon, working across VCSE partners**
- **Work jointly on developing a new learning phase building on the experiences around food insecurity to link with wider hardship/welfare**
- **Agree common Team Devon principles for welfare/hardship/support and wider poverty, where helpful**
- **Develop a menu outlining a common offer with minimum expectations for each District area. Include consideration of digital inclusion and how data is shared**
- **Develop a common Team Devon strategy for this work.**

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Electoral Divisions: All

Cabinet Member for Public Health, Communities and Equality: Councillor Roger Croad

Local Government Act 1972: List of Background Papers

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Background Paper	Date	File Reference
Nil		

Food Insecurity and the Council's emerging response and strategy - Final