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TITLE OF REPORT: Food Poverty and Gateshead's response.

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Summary

A response to Food Poverty in Gateshead, and the interventions undertaken by the Council and its partners to mitigate its impact.

What is Food Poverty

1. For context:

- Gateshead has a population of 196,200 of which 102,800 are economically active.
- There are 10,100 workless households in Gateshead, equating to 15.9% of households across the borough, compared to 13.9% workless households nationally.
- The North East Child Poverty report that Child poverty in Gateshead is currently 38.9, an increase of 12.4% over the past 10 years. However, in some areas of Gateshead that percentage is significantly higher, such as Felling 56% and Bensham and Sherrif Hill both at 43%. Whilst we don't have an exact number of people living with food insecurity given its often hidden nature, we do know that there has been a 97% increase in demand and almost 10,000 people supported by The Gateshead Foodbank in the previous year, with almost 3,000 of those being children.
- There are over 40 VCSE organisations in all areas of Gateshead offering various levels of emergency food support to local people, some large charities and some grassroots organisations, which begins to outline the scale of food insecurity in the borough.

2. Food poverty encompasses both the affordability of food and its accessibility. Whilst there is no official definition The Department of Health state its 'the inability to afford, or to have access to, food to make up a healthy diet'.

3. Other common terms used to describe food poverty include household food insecurity, food insecurity, food vulnerability and hunger.

4. Short term food insecurity can be triggered by a crisis in finances or personal circumstances, including job loss, housing changes, benefit delays, unexpected and unplanned household costs, and bereavement but during the cost of living food insecurity can be persistent for many, a consequence of having insufficient money to meet basic needs.
5. Low wages that do not cover the real cost of living and therefore doesn't enable the access, affordability or facilities to prepare a healthy diet as needed. In these circumstances food budgets are often the first thing to be cut to accommodate other priorities such as housing costs or utilities. To illustrate this, in Gateshead the gross weekly pay for full time workers is £605 per week compared to £682 per week nationally, a gap of £77 per week.
6. Food poverty has an evidenced impact upon an individual's health and wellbeing, including higher risk of dietary related illnesses and diseases with the costs of healthy or balanced diets considerably higher than those high in fat, salt and sugar. The Broken Plate report evidence that healthier foods are almost three times as expensive per calorie as less healthy foods.
7. [The Food Foundation](#) report that the poorest fifth of UK households would need to spend 47% of their disposable income on food to meet the costs of the Government recommended healthy diet. This compares to just 11% for the wealthiest fifth.

Gateshead Background

8. Since 2018 Gateshead Council in partnership with several of its VCSE partners created and supported a community food network in Gateshead, which included:
 - Gateshead Foodbank, Pickle Palace, Bensham Food Co-op, Bensham Foodbank, Lobley Hill Foodbank, Soul Food Spaces, Vinnies Café, Salvation Army, Gateshead Older people's Assembly, Joe's Place, Blaydon Methodist Church, Food Nation and several Council services, including Housing Teams.

This network came together at a time when they all offered a community food offer in Gateshead for residents in need. This network met quarterly and used it as an opportunity to share best practice, good news stories and to identify ways to collaborate to make greater use of the food they were able to offer. An example of this was the creation of a closed Facebook Group to allow the sharing of surplus food between partners which was then redistributed to reach people and prevent it being wasted.

9. The network has grown significantly since then both in membership and how responsive it is to sharing surplus food, donated items and resources between each partner. No longer known as the Gateshead food network, instead rebranding to become 'Gateshead Food partnership', which includes all the partners above with the addition of:

- Feeding Families, Comfrey Project, Peace of Mind, Aive Church Community Pantry, St Chad's Community Project, Royal Horticultural Society, EmBells, Skills4Work, Winlaton Centre, Christchurch Felling, The Felling Food Network, The Bank Chopwell, Chopwell Community Association and other Council services Housing and Public Health.

10. In 2022 Cabinet agreed that funding should be allocated to VCSE partners delivering food support for local people in need, funded by the Council's allocation of the Household Support Fund. This is an arrangement which still operates now and sees c.£250K of HSF funds allocated to third sector partners to support households in need, with over 24,000 people receiving food. This is in addition to the 8,000 FSM eligible children fed during holiday times and a further 5,000 awards made via direct application.

A New Approach

11. Post pandemic and following the establishment of a new Communities, Health & Wellbeing Service within the Council, the need for a formal food partnership and broader network was identified, resulting in an application being made to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) for an initial £200K (later increased to £337K to utilise an UKSPF underspend) to recruit a Food Partnership Lead for an initial 2 year fixed term, a Council Officer to explore a whole food system approach for Gateshead and deliver its aims of
- Creating a new and expanded Food Network in Gateshead.
 - Apply for and secure '[Sustainable Food Places](#)' accreditation.
 - Development of a food surplus sharing and bulk purchasing project.
 - Create a '[Food Charter](#)' for Gateshead and develop a food partnership website, viewable [here](#).
 - Taking part in Sustain's [Good Food Local](#) approach.
 - Reducing food waste and increase local growing.

Progress to date

12. Following the appointment of the Council's 'Food Partnership Lead' (Nikki Dravers) in December 2023, a new Gateshead Food Partnership was formed, comprising a wider membership than any previous food network before it (as outlined above). Including Council service areas who bring added value, such as the Business Development function who have been able to bring food manufacturers and suppliers to the network resulting in a new agreement with Team Valley fruitier JR Holland to take their surplus fruit and vegetables and circulate across the network. Quarterly partnership meetings with themed agendas are now taking place with recent themes including, reducing waste, local growing, dehydrating and sharing surplus.
13. In September this year Gateshead became a member of [Sustain's Sustainable Food Places](#) and is now working towards Bronze accreditation. This is an evidence-based project focusing on six key areas:

- Taking a strategic and collaborative approach to good food governance and action.
- Building public awareness, active food citizenship and local food movement.
- Tackling food poverty and diet related ill-health and increasing access to affordable healthy food
- Creating a vibrant, prosperous, and diverse sustainable food economy.
- Transforming catering and procurement and revitalizing local and sustainable food supply chains.
- Tackling the climate and nature emergency through sustainable food and farming and an end to food waste.

Bronze accreditation typically takes in the region of 6-12 months to acquire although the process can take longer. The journey to reach gold accreditation is a long and complex one. Middlesbrough as an example reaching this milestone after 10 years of ongoing work.

14. In spring this year, the Council consulted the food partnership to help identify a third sector partner that could be the deliverer of a project, to be funded via UKSPF, that would see surplus food redistribution and bulk purchasing that would enable VCSE partners offering food to local people in need to access low cost purchasing or free foods that would otherwise have gone to landfill.
15. Green Heart Collective, a local CIC formed in 2019, and who are based on Gateshead High Street were identified as a partner with the resource, ability and values to deliver this project.
16. Officers have worked internally with the Business Team to secure an appropriate unit within Blaydon Business Centre, with Fleet Services to secure an electric van for use in redistribution and delivery of surplus or purchased foods, and with Legal colleagues to draft contracts to offer clear structure and to safeguard all involved parties.
17. Green Heart received the keys to the unit earlier this month and the process has begun to get unit ready for the project to commence, with several of the partners ready to use the service on offer, most notably the ability to purchase food items at cost price rather than supermarket or wholesaler prices.
18. The focus on increased local growing is also ongoing as partnership members reach out to local growers at allotments and community gardens with the aim of providing fresh fruit and vegetables to foodbanks and other community food offerings across Gateshead, helping to reduce waste but also to give greater reach to fresh produce for those who wouldn't ordinarily be able to access it due to cost or availability. The identification of unused land that could be utilised for growing spaces is also an ongoing piece of work.

19. A 'Gateshead Food Charter' has now been developed and outlines an ambitious vision to make Gateshead a place where:

- Everyone has access to healthy, nutritious and affordable food, moving from reliance on food aid to food justice and resilience
- Diet-related health inequalities are significantly reduced, citizens of Gateshead have the power and resources to demand that healthier food is made more affordable, appealing and accessible
- Everyone has the knowledge, confidence, and motivation to buy, cook and enjoy food and to shape their local food environments
- Good food contributes significantly to a vibrant and diverse local economy, creating good quality employment
- Our communities, organisations and businesses are connected and united to work towards a better food system for all, that protects and enhances our environment.

20. The Council, via Public Health and the Food Partnership Lead is taking part in the 'Good Food Local' approach, a benchmarking programme developed by Sustain to measure, map and report the level of commitment to good food against neighbouring Councils. This has already been done across all Councils in London with the North East chosen as the next area to adopt this approach. This project is in its infancy and so more information will be made available as the project becomes embedded.

Next Steps

21. The Communities, Health & Wellbeing Service via the Food Partnership Lead and the Food Partnership will continue to deliver upon the themes of work outlined above.

22. The Food Charter will be launched at a '[Food Summit](#)' to be held at the Baltic on November 8th, which has drawn an audience of over 160 attendees, all of whom are committed to a better food system in Gateshead. The feedback and views of participants will help shape future delivery of the Food Partnership. All attendees will also be invited to sign the Gateshead Food Charter.

In conclusion

23. Whilst Food Poverty exists in Gateshead; the Council continues to work together with the Food Partnership with a long term aim to reduce the impact of food poverty on local people. However, this is a huge theme of work and will not be solved quickly. It should be recognised that this will take several years, and significant policy and government intervention before meaningful progress and sustained change can be seen.

24. The Council and the Food Partnership will continue to develop these themes of work, including working closely with Sustain to enable it to work through the 'Sustainable Food Places' accreditation levels to become an exemplar with Gold accreditation over time.

Recommendations

1. The views of the OSC are sought on the above update and may wish to consider a further presentation in the autumn of this year to receive a progress update on:
 - a) The progress of Gateshead's journey to gaining Bronze accreditation of Sustainable Food Places and to offer support for subsequent applications for Silver and Gold accreditation.
 - b) The progress of the newly created food purchasing and surplus redistribution project in Gateshead.
 - c) The progress of the Good Food Local approach in Gateshead and to the comparisons between neighbouring Council's across the region.

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