



FOOD POVERTY IN SHROPSHIRE

Report For Shropshire Council Communities
Overview Committee

TACKLING
FOOD
POVERTY
TOGETHER

Shropshire Food
Poverty Alliance

1. Food crisis Vs food poverty

Food crisis and food poverty can be very different. Food crisis might be short-term for many, an unexpected life event or change for those with low financial resilience may spiral into financial crisis needing short-term help from a foodbank until the situation mends. Food poverty can be long term and more damaging to those affected and can be defined as “the inability of individuals and households to obtain an adequate and nutritious diet because they cannot afford healthy food”.

The causes of food poverty are complex and in many cases down to a combination of factors, including:

- Financial: Low wages combined with a high rate of part time and insecure work makes it difficult for many households to keep pace with the increases in the cost of living.
- Difficulty accessing healthy affordable food: People on low incomes can struggle to access low cost, healthy food. Many in poverty may not have their own transport and those in rural areas where public transport is limited, will struggle to access cheaper supermarkets. Even in towns, access is an issue for those without their own transport.
- Nutritional & cooking skills: The UK government recommends that we all plan our meals using the nutritional advice in the Eatwell Guide, however those in low income households may focus on cheap and filling foods, rather than those with optimum health benefits. Many may simply not have the cooking skills and experience they need to create meals from cheap, healthy ingredients.

Food poverty can be the tip of an iceberg of problems whereby families have only the food budget left to cut and whilst Foodbanks report that food crisis can cross social boundaries and affect anyone, there are many households living in chronic food poverty who are never able to afford a healthy diet.

Food poverty affects some of the most vulnerable in our society across all age groups including children, the elderly and those living with disability. It is not confined to those out of work, working families are impacted during school holidays when there are no free school meals, and older people living alone increasingly face the challenge of buying and preparing healthy food especially where their health is deteriorating and particularly after being discharged from hospital.

Chronic food poverty has far-reaching impacts on health and remains on the national political agenda. The House of Lords Food, Poverty, Health and Environment Committee are currently hearing evidence on the link between poor diet and health. Healthy life expectancy is almost twenty years shorter in the lowest income group when compared to the highest, with diet playing a significant role. The Chair of the Committee Lord Krebs said:

*"With healthy foods three times more expensive than unhealthy foods, people on low incomes are struggling to afford to eat well and levels of obesity and weight-related diseases are rising. The UK has the highest proportion of people worried about having enough to eat of all European countries."*¹

¹ <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/lords-select/food-pov-health-enviro-comm/news-parliament-2017/lords-evidence-food-insecurity-sustainability/>

It is difficult to estimate the scale of the problem in Shropshire as currently there are no official measures of the level of food poverty but our own research suggests that:

- More than 1 in 5 children in Shropshire are living in poverty²
- 27,000 Shropshire families, both in and out of work may have reduced food budgets due to Welfare reforms³
- Shropshire households have collectively lost an estimated £102 million per year from their budgets due to welfare reforms since 2015⁴
- 90% feel that food poverty levels are increasing (Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance Survey)

2. Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance: background, purpose, research and action plan

The Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance, a consortium of organisations committed to working together to tackle food poverty in Shropshire, was formed in January 2018. The alliance provides a co-ordination role for food projects across the County, has researched the scale of food poverty in Shropshire, is identifying which existing initiatives are working well and action planning how to tackle gaps in provision. It brings organisations together for closer working, resolving issues and identifying potential resources.

Our membership includes public, faith and voluntary organisations including food banks from across the county. The Alliance is currently co-ordinated by Shrewsbury Food Hub, and is steered by representatives from Citizens Advice Shropshire, Shropshire Council Welfare Support, Public Health, Age UK, the Diocese of Hereford, Shropshire Food Banks and University Centre, Shrewsbury.

The Alliance's vision is that everyone in Shropshire should:

- have access to sufficient good food
- be able to afford a healthy diet
- have the skills and knowledge to prepare healthy food.

Some of the underlying causes of food poverty are rooted in national or strategic issues which the Alliance recognises we cannot change, however we commit to finding pragmatic ways in which we might support and supplement those affected. Throughout 2018 the Alliance carried out participatory research to help develop a Food Poverty Action Plan for Shropshire, the aim of which is to try to reduce the risk of food poverty for families in Shropshire by connecting up support services and increasing the opportunities for families to access low cost healthy food to ensure a healthy and nutritious diet.

As part of this process the Alliance has:

- Mapped levels of food poverty
- Gained insight by interviewing people in food poverty

² 31% of children in North Shropshire, 26.2% of children in Shrewsbury and 29.8% of children in Ludlow are living in poverty <http://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/poverty-in-your-area-2019/>

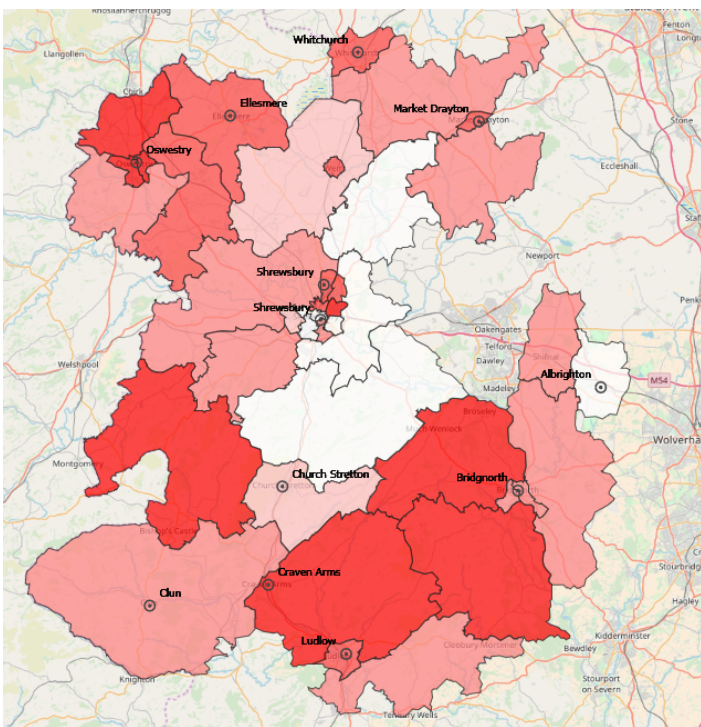
³ BEATTY, Christina and FOTHERGILL, Stephen (2016). *The uneven impact of welfare reform: the financial losses to places and people*. Project Report. Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam University.

⁴ BEATTY, Christina and FOTHERGILL, Stephen (2016). *The uneven impact of welfare reform: the financial losses to places and people*. Project Report. Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam University.

- Carried out surveys (Organisations, schools and individuals in food poverty) with 100+ responses to date
- Visited food banks across the county
- Run three workshops to create connected solutions (58 attendees)
- Researched best practice from other counties to identify which approaches might work best in Shropshire

Mapping Food Poverty in Shropshire

Because the UK does not routinely collect data on levels of food poverty, the Alliance worked with CREST at University Centre Shrewsbury to understand which parts of the county are more likely to be affected by higher levels of food poverty. The map below combines five key indicators, with the darker red areas highlighting areas with higher levels of food poverty.



Indicators used:

- Food retail businesses per square km, benefits claimants, adult obesity, households with slow internet access, households without access to a vehicle.

The location of food banks is also marked.

“Our Menu for Action”

The resulting 12-point Action Plan can be viewed in more detail at www.shropshirefoodpoverty.org.uk. The plan aims to:

- increase support for people in crisis,
- prevent food poverty by supporting people in maximising their income and supporting projects to improve access to low cost food, growing and skills in health and nutrition
- Increase awareness of the issue and embed it in the policy of statutory bodies and community organisations, so that we can develop an effective strategic response across the county.

This menu sets out how we can build on the resources we already have in the community to support people in food crisis, prevent people falling into food poverty and strengthen partnership working. It stresses the importance of

building from the grassroots up to meet local needs in each locality but our challenge is how we can hope to deliver on this with very limited funding. Some of the actions can be achieved by connecting existing resources, but many will need additional resources to create positive impact.

3. What is currently happening to address food poverty in Shropshire?

Foodbanks

Shropshire's food banks provide invaluable support to an increasing number of people in food crisis.⁵ Initiated by local church groups, food banks run on limited resources and rely upon the goodwill of the community for food donations and upon volunteers to run each session. They have built strong links to referring agencies across the county to ensure that food is available to people if they experience a crisis and Shropshire foodbanks are also innovating by extending the range of food they offer and the number of people reached.

More recently though, some larger Shropshire foodbanks diversified their support into a "foodbank plus" model to address the person's underlying issues, their hierarchy of needs starting with the person themselves, their money issues including access to debt and budgeting advice and leading to more practical skills to make best use of their available money by teaching food budgeting and cooking skills. There may be help to get online and support to upskill in order to seek and apply for work through resident job clubs. In part, these early developments have been supported by small pump priming grants from Shropshire Council's Welfare Support Team.

- Bridgnorth Food bank have developed their weekly food bank sessions by inviting representatives from the local housing association and mental health teams who are able to offer immediate support to clients when it is needed.
- Shrewsbury Food bank have developed a foodbank plus model, enabling them to work with clients more intensively over the longer term on the causes of their situation. Through their 360 programme they are able to offer money advice, cooking courses and assistance in getting back into the workplace.
- Oswestry Food bank runs a job club, helping people to get online and apply for jobs.
- Whitchurch food bank run a 6 week "Eat well, spend less" course for Housing Association tenants (funded through Meres and Mosses), teaching them to cook healthy nutritious food that they can take home to their families.
- Ludlow food bank has begun a voucher scheme for food bank clients so they can access fresh fruit and vegetables at local greengrocers. They have also experimented with a meat voucher in collaboration with a local butcher. In addition, they have developed a cookery leaflet which helps clients to make the most of their food parcel.
- Shrewsbury and Bridgnorth food banks have started to offer surplus fruit, vegetables and bakery items from supermarkets to food bank clients. As most of this food is past its best before date, it is offered separately in addition to the food parcel.

⁵ In spring 2019 the Trussell food banks in north Shropshire (Oswestry, Whitchurch and Market Drayton) reported a 27% increase over the previous year and Shrewsbury Food Bank reported a 23% increase.

- Whitchurch foodbank have been working with local schools to address holiday hunger. Working with local schools they have also supported 55 families on low incomes throughout the holidays with food parcels to help feed children who normally would receive free school meals.

Other community responses

The community sector across Shropshire have also developed a wide range of projects which help address food poverty. Many of these projects bring free or affordable food to the whole community, with the aim of overcoming the stigma felt by some accessing foodbanks.

- Ludlow Hands Together are co-ordinating the Ludlow Food Network which brings together all organisations in the town with a connection to community food. There are regular community meals in the town, and Hands Together Ludlow are planning the collection and distribution of surplus food to the community. They also run social inclusion and technology groups.
- Market Drayton Town Council have funded cookery courses at the Zone to help those out of work and in food crisis to build their cooking confidence.
- In Oswestry Osnosh run a free community meal on Thursday Lunchtime cooked from unsold supermarket food. They also collect supermarket surplus which is available to the community on Fridays at low cost.
- Shrewsbury Food Hub collects unsold food from 18 supermarkets and delivers it free of charge to 56 community groups in the town, including schools, the foodbank, and the ark. They also support open food share tables in four churches in the town, where anyone is welcome to come and take surplus food away for free or a small donation. In addition, some of the schools use the surplus food to directly support families at the school in high need.
- In Shrewsbury Riversway Elim Church run a community fridge and freezer 3 days a week. Surplus food is available for free or a small donation to the community.
- In Wem the Youth Club and local businesses have come together to run a cookery course (funded through Meres and Mosses Housing Association) and a free breakfast club throughout the summer holidays. There is also an Incredible Edible community garden where produce is freely available for the community.

Grassroot pilots

The Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance would like to encourage more community initiatives which increase access to affordable healthy food. As part of this objective we are working with Shrewsbury Food Hub which has been successful in gaining funding to work with four communities in Shrewsbury and Wem to test grassroots approaches to improving access to good food. Community meetings have been held in Meole Brace, Harlescott and Wem to discuss what is already available in each area and what types of projects the community would like to see developed.

- The community in Meole Brace have decided to develop a monthly community meal at the Meet Place cooked by local residents. They also have started a holiday lunchtime club for children addressing holiday hunger.
- In Harlescott the community are planning a cookery project based at Shrewsbury Academy which aims to work with families to build cookery skills and a community meal at the Grange centre.

- The community in Wem are considering ways to extend their food hub to bring more free food into the community.

Shropshire Larder Website

Shropshire Larder [Home](#) [Emergency food](#) [Low cost food](#) [Eating well](#) [Money advice](#) [Local to you](#) [About Us](#)



In April 2019 the Alliance launched the Shropshire Larder website (www.shropshirelarder.org.uk) which brings together locally relevant information for people in Shropshire who are living on a low budget. The site collates information on how to access food banks, the location of community food projects, how to eat well on a budget and where to access support from local agencies in Shropshire.

4. There is more that could be done

These incentives are laudable and show what can be done by tapping into existing community resources but they are small scale and isolated and will not address long-term food poverty in Shropshire. Across the UK there are a wide range of initiatives which have been developed to support people on low incomes and in food crisis to access healthy affordable food. Many of these approaches could be adopted in Shropshire.

- Improving the Food Bank Plus model. Placing specialist advisors within food banks or fast-tracking referrals is proven to reduce food poverty and address the underlying issues quicker.⁶ Some food banks in Shropshire have adopted this model, but smaller foodbanks lack the necessary resources (financial, time and space). In addition, many of the organisations providing advice in Shropshire have limited resources. Creating closer links between agencies and improving signposting has the potential to address the underlying issues behind food poverty quicker.

⁶ See <https://feedingbritain.org/what-we-do/flagship-projects/food-bank-plus/>

- Building skills and knowledge. Skills building is a key aspect of many projects across the UK. Improving budgeting skills, combined with developing nutritional and cookery skills for children, families and older single people can help low income households to better manage their budgets and improve health and wellbeing.
- Community led projects which increase access to healthy affordable food. Affordable food boxes, Food co-ops, food clubs and community meals bring low cost food into areas of high need and can help to increase access to affordable food in rural areas. Projects can also bring benefits to specific groups, eg. Help with shopping for older people, food parcels for people being discharged from hospital or community meals to overcome social isolation. This gives people alternatives to foodbanks themselves perhaps reducing the stigma felt by many.
- Breakfast Clubs and Holiday Hunger. Research has demonstrated that breakfast clubs for children reduce hunger and improve concentration and behaviour.⁷ However, many schools in Shropshire are ineligible for funding from national schemes such as the National School Breakfast Programme and school budget constraints prevent schools from providing a free breakfast to children from low income families. Across the country there is a growing concern about holiday hunger for children who receive free school meals in term time, with many counties setting up schemes.

5. Challenges and opportunities

Food poverty is a symptom of greater poverty that can seriously affect health and wellbeing, children's education and family stability. The principle of helping those who are in food poverty to better manage budgets, improve nutritional skills and showing them how to create and cook good meals for themselves and their families must inevitably benefit Shropshire's poorest and more vulnerable residents and ultimately therefore Shropshire Council.

Challenges for the community sector

In the current financial climate, extending incentives to tackle food poverty across Shropshire may need to tap into what is already available and in regular use, incorporating food poverty and its alleviation into design and thinking. There are many organisations and individuals in the community who are keen to deliver projects, but the challenges faced by the community sector include co-ordination, funding, joint working and space for community projects.

1) Co-ordination

The response to food poverty in Shropshire remains piecemeal and until the Alliance conducted research in 2018 there was no strategic response or effort to bring organisations together to share knowledge and collaborate. The Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance is working with organizations across the county, collating and sharing information, identifying funding opportunities and raising food poverty awareness however there is only funding for this co-ordination role until April 2020. The council has match funded external grants using money from Public Health and from the Welfare Support Team but these sources are now exhausted and the coordinator role is at risk.

⁷https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/603946/Evaluation_of_Breakfast_Clubs_-_Final_Report.pdf

2) Funding

Identifying funding for community led initiatives including Food banks and community food projects in the current financial climate is challenging. Organisations in the community sector often rely on short-term piecemeal funding, and although the will to deliver more services for their communities is there, funding is a real barrier. Foodbanks in Shropshire rely on the community for food and monetary donations, and in some parts of the county donations do not always match the local need. One possible solution is to prepare joint funding bids for a partnership of organisations delivering food poverty initiatives across the county, however there is limited capacity in the community sector to co-ordinate and prepare large scale funding bids.

Challenges for Shropshire Council

In many other parts of the country, councils are taking a lead role in developing strategies to address food poverty. There are 57 Food Partnerships across the UK, many of which are led by local authorities, which aim to tackle food poverty, build community food knowledge and skills, develop a sustainable food economy and reduce waste and the ecological footprint of the food system.⁸ There are a further 68 Food Poverty Alliances which focus purely on the issue of food poverty.⁹ There are also twelve Feeding Britain pilot areas where different approaches to food poverty are being piloted.¹⁰ These approaches have demonstrated the benefits of investing in a coordinated response to food poverty.

It is recognized that Shropshire receives less funding than many other counties, and therefore the council may not be able to have the same level of involvement as some council areas. In lieu of direct financial support however, there are opportunities to use what the Council already has in place within our infrastructure and organisation to help with poverty and to work more collaboratively with those organisations combatting food poverty

1) Joining up our own support

The Customer Service Centre (CSC) handles the majority (over 250,000) of contacts from Shropshire citizens each year and many present in some form of need. Uniquely our CSC includes the First Point of Contact (FPoC) team for adult and child services and concerns and alongside this we are building a new multi-team support model whereby the direct help the Council has available to give can be used in real time to support people. Key to this is the Welfare Support Team with its access to crisis funding, working alongside the Safeguarding, Adult Services and Mental Health Social Workers and Occupational Therapists all collectively supporting the FPoC team. All homelessness calls are handled by the Welfare Team who use crisis funding to de-escalate risk, provide budgeting advice to aid customer resilience and in appropriate cases illustrate through better off calculations how work could improve finances. This approach is

⁸ See <http://sustainablefoodcities.org/index.html> for more information.

⁹ See <https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpower/map/> for more information

¹⁰ See <https://feedingbritain.org/> for further information

helping to identify and tackle poverty in general whilst attempting to increase personal resilience but it is incomplete as not all of our available help is in this “single front door”.

There is a case for integrating at the point of maximum customer contact, our own natural in-house provisions that we as a council have at our disposal, from crisis funding to free school meals and transport, school uniform grants to help with heating and fuel poverty. In this way, those who approach us in need receive maximum help in real time to support them in a crisis whilst provision of budgeting guidelines and better off in work calculations give people something to aim for.

2) Estates and infrastructure

The community sector sometimes struggles to find affordable space from which to run projects. For example, the ability of some foodbanks to diversify their help is currently restricted by their location, a case in point being Bridgnorth where the foodbank stated a willingness to expand their range of help with appropriate premises. Similarly, Oswestry foodbank were not able to work with Council services from The Centre in Oak Street because rental costs were prohibitive to them. Other community initiatives such as community meals and cookery projects also struggle to find suitable accommodation. For example, a new community meal initiative in Shrewsbury lead by Osnosh and supported by Shrewsbury Food Hub is struggling to find free regular premises.

There is possibly more the Council could do to accommodate foodbanks and other community food initiatives alongside our own community provision so that they become part of the wider support network for vulnerable people, not just a place to go in crisis but part of the journey to resilience. This would require the council to offset any rental requirement against the longer term value of increasing budgeting, shopping and cooking skills and thereby resilience in return for rent-free accommodation. This could particularly be the case where unused kitchen facilities in our premises might be used to run community kitchens and skills courses.

3) Transport infrastructure

There may be scope to utilise the Council’s daily transport infrastructure as a means of transporting food between foodbanks to meet demand or to other community led food poverty projects that connect people in rural areas with cheaper sources of healthy food.

Whilst the logistics of this are likely to be complex, involving our own regular daily transport and delivery infrastructure, deliveries and travel within our estates services and individual staff journeys, there may be potential to tap into this at minimal if any cost to the Council in order to help foodbanks transfer stocks to meet varying demand as well as transporting produce that would help fuel other community food incentives similar to those illustrated earlier in this report.

4) Assistance with funding bids

Shropshire Council has long experience of assisting VCS organisations to make collaborative bids for funding. The staff that fulfilled this role are still within the workforce but are now engaged in other roles. With the agreement of appropriate line managers we could still utilise this expertise and their contacts to assist the Food Poverty Alliance with funding bids.

Conclusions

To conclude, Members are respectfully asked to recognise both the good work to tackle food poverty that is in progress across the County and the challenges that this faces in respect of funding ongoing incentives and particularly the risk to the co-ordinator role that is so central to helping set these up.

The Council, both a major provider and procurer of support and services for our more vulnerable residents can do much to help identify need, alleviate crisis and obtain specialist help for people in need but access to our own provisions is uncoordinated and may require separate contacts in order to access help. This may be beyond the ability of our most vulnerable residents and could increase the time taken to get the help needed. Additionally therefore, members are respectfully asked to consider the role that Shropshire Council can play in supporting these incentives and how joining up of our own services might assist this.

The Council, as a major county-wide organisation represented in many communities, has both premises and transport infrastructures that we could potentially use to extend food poverty incentives. Whilst much good work is being done in our communities through groups and individuals who are willing to take up the challenge when given support and direction, members are respectfully asked to consider whether the council could utilise its own assets and transport infrastructure in a supporting role.

Chris Westwood

Customer Services and Welfare Support Manager

On behalf of Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance

4 November 2019
