

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY BOARD

FOODBANK AND COMMUNITY SHOP PROVISION TASK GROUP

FINAL REPORT

April 2024



Bromsgrove
District Council
www.bromsgrove.gov.uk

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MEMBERSHIP OF THE TASK GROUP



Chairman – Cllr Esther Gray



Cllr Alan Bailes



Cllr Bakul Kumar



Cllr Peter McDonald



Cllr David Nicholl



Cllr David G. Stewart

SUPPORTING OFFICER DETAILS

Mat Sliwinski – Democratic Services Officer
Email: democratic@bromsgroveandredditch.gov.uk

FOREWORD FROM THE CHAIRMAN

The task group first met on 20 December 2023 and was set up as a result of concerns arising from the rise in foodbanks and community shops in some areas of the District to combat the poverty and deprivation families find themselves facing. This meant they were unable to meet their families essential need for food and other fundamentals during the cost-of-living crisis.

Following previous task group reports on fuel poverty, we were better informed about the impact of the cost-of-living on families both in terms of those out-of-work and those who are termed as working poor. The foodbank/community shop task group identified the criteria that would form a framework of investigation to establish how the charitable organisations were meeting the needs of the families affected.

We visited six locations over a period from 12 January 2024 – 19 February 2024. This included, Alvechurch Larder, New Starts (Aston Fields), Sidemoor Community Project [CIC], Catshill Baptist Church Foodbank, The Basement Project - in Bromsgrove Hanover Street and Hollywood Life Centre Foodbank. We wholeheartedly thank those organisations for what they do. We also thank them for taking the time to speak to the task team and showing us how they have managed the complex and time-consuming role of supporting people faced with food poverty.

We also thank Officers Judith Willis and Della McCarthy for their time in sharing their engagement with these organisations and their time to speak to the task group. This provided a clear background as to what the Council are doing in support of signposting residents of Bromsgrove District for help in this crisis, and in finding funding streams to support the organisations providing this service. This involves much more than this in real terms as Officers explore any opportunities, in what is a cost-of-living crisis, to continue their support of organisations as effectively as possible and to provide information to communities about what to do if they are suffering from fuel poverty, need access to warm hubs and help in claiming benefits.

The task group looking at Foodbanks/Community Shops represented a cross-party section of the full council at Bromsgrove District Council. I thank each of you for your participation in what entailed visiting all of those organisations across the district to ensure we could gather the information we needed to fulfil the criteria of the task.

We believe the recommendations made will ensure the Council can enhance this support and extend it where we identified gaps in provision. The gaps were found both geographically and in the level of support equally reaching all residents across the whole district. The important note to consider was that the council assist and do not take over and dictate which model must be followed, but that all organisations feel well supported. The organisations have evolved from what are unique communities with diverse needs. We applaud them for their initiative and energy in what they do.

Councillor Esther Gray
Chairman, Foodbank and Community Shop Provision Task Group

TASK GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

After consideration of the evidence available and interviewing witnesses the Task Group have proposed the following recommendations (supporting evidence can be found under the relevant chapters within the main body of this report):

Recommendation 1
That the Council update its website to include contact details of all foodbanks in the district which wish to be on the list. The Council will ensure that the webpage links to the foodbanks' websites and/or other contact details of the foodbanks, such as telephone and social media, are up-to-date and that information on how to get in touch is easily accessible.
Financial Implications for recommendations: There are no direct financial implications in relation to this recommendation.
Legal Implications for recommendations: There are no direct legal implications in relation to this recommendation. Foodbanks must first be asked whether they give permission for their contact information to be included on the Council's website before the website can be updated with their details.
Resource Implications: Officer time in updating and monitoring the webpages.

Recommendation 2
That all organisations providing foodbanks receive the appropriate and necessary support and resources from Bromsgrove District Council, which is proportionate and equivalent to their size and what they require. In the transition period, if the organisation is growing, appropriate support and funding needs to be allocated.
Financial Implications for recommendations: There are potential financial implications in relation to this recommendation if funding or resources are provided by the Council.
Legal Implications for recommendations: The Council follows a transparent and fair process when deciding to provide support. Also, it is understood that the Council will provide support subject to the resources being available.

When allocating any resources in the form of funds, the Council would need to take into account data such as the number of users, number of potential users within the geographical area covered by the organisation and other factors, in deciding the level of support.

Resource Implications:

Officer time ensuring that the approach compiled with equalities. Resource implications if support is provided.

Recommendation 3

That the Council develop a consistent universal understanding/ guidelines of what level of recording of users' personal information is required for the needs of the community engaged in the foodbank service without breaching the GDPR legislation. That the Council recognise there might be specific recording requirements as conditions attached to accessing specific funding streams.

Financial Implications:

There are no direct financial implications in relation to this recommendation.

Legal Implications:

There are direct legal implications in relation to this recommendation, in particular around making sure the Council is clear on what level of recording of users' data is required as part of any grant process / Government requirements to access the grants.

Resource Implications:

Officer time in establishing a clear set of guidelines/policy.

Recommendation 4

That the Council endeavour to investigate, under the auspices of existing arrangements available to the Council, such as the Bromsgrove Partnership, whether communities in areas of the district that do not currently have foodbanks require this provision, and that the Council make best effort to create a food bank in Rubery where a need has already been identified.

Financial Implications:

It is noted that any Council-led investigation would need to be funded as the Council does not have dedicated officer capacity to undertake this investigation.

Should it be deemed feasible for the Council to create additional foodbank provision, there would need to be a budget approved to create a food bank in Rubery or anywhere else. This has not been required previously with existing food banks as these have been established by the local communities/groups themselves.

Legal Implications:

There are no direct legal implications in relation to this recommendation.

Resource Implications:

Officer time in investigating the feasibility of establishing food bank provision / in contacting the voluntary sector.

Recommendation 5

That the Council continues to develop opportunities to enable foodbank organisations to come together as part of a network to support each other and to promote the sustainability of the help being provided to the community across the district. That the Council makes clear that joining the network is a pre-requisite if applying for Council funding, should this become available in future.

Financial Implications:

There are no direct financial implications in relation to this recommendation.

Legal Implications:

There are no direct legal implications in relation to this recommendation.

Resource Implications:

Officer time in informing the organisations of this proposal and Council's role in supporting the setting up and facilitating of a network with a view to it being owned and run by the Network of community organisations itself. Network of community groups was already in place in Bromsgrove and foodbank organisations could be encouraged to join these networks.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The Task Group met on 20 December 2023 and selected a Chairman. The elected Chairman, Cllr Esther Gray, then obtained the Task Group's agreement regarding the aims and objectives of this review. This followed a discussion at the meeting of Overview and Scrutiny Board in October where Members were provided with an overview presentation on foodbank provision in the district. It was also agreed that this Task Group must be completed as quickly as possible but that it was very dependent upon the task team being able to gain appointments with the organisations who run the identified Foodbanks and Community Shops across the district.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE TASK GROUP

- Establish how accessible the foodbanks/community shops are for residents.
- Consider the operating models being used by each organisation to gather information which might help share and promote best practice for success.
- To consider the scope of the project in the deliverables achieved by established organisations and describe the major objectives of those organisations; and their primary aims in meeting community need and compare needs identified in a diverse widespread district.
- To look for gaps in support for those facing food and other essentials poverty in Bromsgrove District and explore how these could be met.

WHAT WE DID:

We met with the main person identified as in charge of the operation on site and spoke with other staff or members of the organisation.

We observed residents making use of the provision and on occasion spoke with them about how accessible they found it. We were also shown around the layout of buildings and storage areas establishing what space and resources were shared with other users of the building or where some also co-existed within areas where the community socialised and used the space as a warm hub.

We were given documents outlining times of opening and how the principles of operation were drafted. We saw leaflets advertising the provision and also, on occasion, had reference to web pages and social media pages for reference in our evidence gathering.

SUMMARY OF WORK COMPLETED:

The Task Group visited six locations over a period from 12 January 2024 – 19 February 2024. This included: Alvechurch Community Larder, New Starts (Aston Fields), Sidemoor Community Project (CIC), Catshill Baptist Church Foodbank, The Basement Project Bromsgrove - Hanover Street and Hollywood Life Centre Foodbank.

The Task Group found three organisations that take no agency referrals before meeting residents and listening to what they needed, then made best efforts to supply what they need from what they have gathered to hand. Those that take no referrals are: Alvechurch Larder, Sidemoor Community Project and Hollywood Life Centre Food Bank.

The Task Group found that three organisations take agency referrals before the residents are able to access the provision. Those organisations that take referrals are: New Starts, (for foodbank but not for Community Shop), Basement Project (as well as self-referrals) and Catshill Baptist Church, (which they described as a left over from being part of Trussell Trust organisation, although the forms completed are considerably reduced in information gathered.)

The organisations that take referrals say that it is to control the operation and to manage food distribution in an equitable fashion. However, after further discussion they reveal that they also use the information to try to help the resident by providing other help; by signposting to that help or encouraging them to take further help and guidance from sources close to the organisation. There were observably advertised occasions to get help with fuel poverty or gain access to organisations that support applications for funds they may be entitled to claim. Some of the foodbanks also provide speakers who help residents with budgeting skills.

In terms of specific focus, the Basement Project caters primarily for under 26-year-olds, which help their families incidentally.

Two of the foodbank organisations visited have contact with local schools. Catshill Baptist Foodbank link to Catshill schools who supply food from, for example, the Harvest Festival. The Basement Project reach out to many but not all schools; they mainly find contact with schools closer to Bromsgrove Town Centre. They have not, for example, had links with Waseley Hills High School, Rubery, for some time and did not identify the primary schools in that area in discussion at all. They have some historical links with Woodrush School in Wythall but did not mention any primary schools in that area. No mention was made of schools in Romsley, Hagley, Barnt Green or Alvechurch.

QUESTIONS THAT AROSE DURING THE INVESTIGATION:

- 1) How equally is the funding in support of children and families shared across the Bromsgrove District? It appears that one or two of the foodbank organisations, which do not cover the whole of the district, are able to receive external funding. Some of this may be because they have bank accounts, which is a prerequisite to receiving such funding and can account for how it is spent in line with the requirements of the funding.

This leads to recommendation 2: That all organisations providing foodbanks receive the appropriate and necessary support and resources from Bromsgrove District Council, which is proportionate and equivalent to their size and what they require. In the transition period, if the organisation is growing, appropriate support and funding needs to be allocated.

- 2) There is a question of mistaken assumption that the destitute and working poor are not found in all areas of the district. There is no evidence that areas such as Belbroughton, Hagley or Rubery in Worcestershire have a foodbank or community shop at all. Some residents may be travelling across the county boundary to find help. This is unknown as we did not survey residents. In effect we know that in Rubery, Worcestershire residents are signposted across the county boundary to Birmingham South area for help.

This leads to recommendation 4: That the Council endeavour to investigate, under the auspices of existing arrangements available to the Council, such as the Partnership, whether communities in areas of the district that do not currently have foodbanks require this provision, and that the Council makes best effort to create a food bank in Rubery where a need has already been identified as there is no known foodbank currently operating in the Bromsgrove District side of Rubery.

- 3) Each area where there is a foodbank or community shop has some enthusiastic people who volunteer to help their community. However, do they reach everyone in need in that area? Some are missed due to where they are located and/or timings of opening hours and/or that the method of operation puts barriers in the way such as gathering referrals. We have testimony from the task group in their surgery in the council district of those that fail to get help on occasion due to the need to obtain an agency referral. Referrers can be Bromsgrove District Council (including Councillors), Doctors, Clergy and other identified bodies such as BDHT.

This leads to recommendation 3: That the Council develop a consistent universal understanding/guidelines of what level of recording of users' personal information is required for the needs of the community engaged in the foodbank service without breaching the GDPR legislation. That the Council recognise there might be specific recording requirements as conditions attached to accessing specific funding streams may require this.

FINDINGS

The Task Group met on 22 and 29 February 2024 to complete the assessment of information and evidence gathered. On 22 February 2024 we also had the support of Officers: Judith Willis and Della McCarthy. We thank both Judith and Della for the patience and support in adding to the enquiry undertaken.

We found a wonderful example of human kindness wherever we went. The atmosphere was welcoming and genuine in their efforts to support the community. They were all unique, which is to be expected, as the widespread communities across the District are also unique.

Area of concern the Task Group wish to Highlight.

During the assessment of the evidence and information gathered some additional concerns arose about the current Bromsgrove District Council (BDC) funding for foodbanks. The Task Group felt this aspect needed further clarification to fully understand the allocation of BDC funding.

It was explained that foodbanks are not funded directly from BDC funds. Instead, BDC distributes funding received from Government grants such as the Government's Household Support Fund when such funding streams become available.

We felt that it remains imperative that we understand what criteria BDC uses when grant funding is distributed, including how foodbanks are assessed for suitability for receiving grant funding. We would like to understand how much funding grants BDC currently distributes to foodbanks and to which organisations.

Are there any criteria for receiving grant funding? How is the effectiveness of financial support measured? Is there any value for money measurement which is used to ensure grant funding is well spent?

In the development of the wording for the recommendations we also discussed these further concerns. We recognised that this aspect of concern came outside and in addition to the remit and primary focus of the task group. (Outlined above).

This additional highlighted concern links to recommendation 2: That all organisations providing foodbanks receive the appropriate and necessary support and resources from Bromsgrove District Council, which is proportionate and equivalent to their size and what they require. In the transition period, if the organisation is growing, appropriate support and funding needs to be allocated.

However, further work is required to establish if appropriate procurement policies are followed, and money is spent wisely in support of an equitable level of support across the whole district. This might be achieved with a further conversation with Officers of the Council in Overview and Scrutiny.

On 29 February 2024 one final meeting concluded the wording of the recommendations to meet the objectives of the task undertaken and that this would allow gaps to be addressed and Officers authorised to pursue these as soon as possible.

In particular, communication to the residents of the whole of the Bromsgrove District on the webpage with links which should ensure all and every location available to them can be signposted. Councillors of the Task Group Team also saw that the organisations would most likely benefit from the development of a network, to be facilitated by Officers, to develop links across the district which help all organisations to share the gathered food and essentials where an emergency occurs to meet the needs of residents as effectively as possible. It also supports organisations because they might find a source of advice as they develop their operations.

This is found in the recommendation 5: That the Council continues to develop opportunities to enable foodbank organisations to come together as part of a network to support each other and to promote the sustainability of the help being provided to the community across the district. That the Council makes clear that joining the network is a pre-requisite if applying for Council funding, should this become available in future.

The issues identified in whether there will or will not be funding will not entirely be within the grip of BDC and therefore some imaginative thought by both the organisations and the Council will be required to help residents and make access to support as simple as possible will be a challenge going forward.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY DECISION TO ESTABLISH THE TASK GROUP

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD - 16th OCTOBER 2023

The following was agreed by the Overview and Scrutiny Board at its meeting on 16th October 2023 (Minute No. 41/23 – Community Shop Provision in the District):

“RESOLVED that a Task Group be established to investigate the topic of Community Supermarket / Food Bank provision in the District.”

WITNESSES

The Task Group considered evidence from the following sources before making its recommendations.

The Task Group would like to thank all the foodbanks who have hosted the group and allowed the group to find out more about their work. The Task Group would like to offer special thanks the organisers of these food banks for their dedication in helping provide a vital service to the residents of Bromsgrove:

Keith Wiseman, Alvechurch Community Larder
Reverend Simon Gudger, Catshill Baptist Food Bank
Pastor Steve Crosthwaite, Hollywood Christian Life Centre
Marion Kenyon, NewStarts
Caleb Mallard, The Basement Project
Anthony Theophanous, Sidemoor Community Project

The following officers provided support to Members throughout the investigation:

Judith Willis, Head of Community and Housing Services
Della McCarthy, Bromsgrove and Redditch Partnership Manager

Supporting evidence, including the summary of the visits undertaken, can be found under the relevant chapters within the main body of this report.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Council:

Presentation to Overview and Scrutiny Board, Overview and Effectiveness of Community Supermarkets and Foodbanks in Bromsgrove, 16 October 2023 (Minute No. 41/23 Community Shop Provision in the District – Overview)

<https://moderngovwebpublic.bromsgrove.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=292&MIId=4140&Ver=4>

External:

Pratt, Alison., Food Banks in the UK, *House of Commons Library (Number 8585)*, 22 November 2023

<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8585/CBP-8585.pdf>