

## Introduction

An action plan to tackle food poverty is in the very early stages of development in Gloucestershire. A new cross sector partnership has formed called Feeding Gloucestershire and is being facilitated by voluntary sector organisations with the support of the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) and Feeding Britain. Feeding Britain is a charity established in 2015 by a group of cross-party MPs and peers concerned about rising hunger in the UK.

In Stroud District, there are a number of Food Hubs that have developed in partnership with food surplus charities, local food producers and retailers, The Long Table and the Foodbank to make affordable food available to their communities. At the moment most of this work is being supported by volunteers and is not held together in a dedicated network or supported directly by SDC staff.

This report highlights some initial learning from our local context and Feeding Gloucestershire and recommends that Stroud District Council set up a new Food Justice Task and Finish Group to engage with the new food partnership and embed learnings from their work into relevant council action plans.

## Local Context – Stroud District Foodbank and Citizens Advice usage.

To give some local context, Stroud District Foodbank have recorded the highest reason for food crisis as **low income** followed by **benefit changes** and **debt**.

They have provided a three-year comparison of June and July Foodbank referral for 2019, 2020 and 2021.

June	Adults	Children	Total
2019	132	72	206
2020	267	160	427
2021	164	96	260
July	Adults	Children	Total
2019	163	91	254
2020	223	120	343
2021	190	173	362

August is normally a quieter month for the Foodbank but has been steady in August 2021 with 298 people fed (170 adults and 128 children) - around a 15% increase on August last year. Demand is highest in Stroud, followed by Dursley. A full break down of usage per ward for August 2021 can be seen in Appendix x).

Stroud District Foodbank continue with their doorstep delivery service to all those in need. Their average delivery contains all of the usual tinned and store cupboard basics as well as fresh fruit and veg, bread, cat and dog food, toiletries and household items.

Stroud and Cotswold Citizens Advice record their highest reasons for advice sought in 2020-2021 as **benefits and tax credits** (1,692), **universal credit alone** (553), **debt** (1,180) and **employment** (1,210).

A full break of CA advice sought by category and by ward can be seen in appendix x). Locally, Citizens Advice works closely with the Foodbank and they have recently piloted placing an CA advice worker with the Foodbank team to make accessing advice easier for those in food crisis. This ties in with recommendations by Feeding Britain.

### **Feeding Gloucestershire Partnership**

The new Feeding Gloucestershire partnership would be grateful for District Council representation on their new steering group. As a new strategic group they are considering their first action plan. Their initial priorities include:

1. Working with Feeding Britain to embed Advice Workers in local food hubs in response to the **Pathways from Poverty** pilot project.
2. Supporting the development of **Affordable Food Networks**
3. Promoting a **Cash First** approach

### **Recommendations for the Food Justice Task and Finish Group:**

1. A new Food Justice Task and Finish Group is set up from CS&L, Environment and Housing Committees to embed food poverty actions into appropriate council action plans.
2. Stroud District Council nominate an officer to attend the Feeding Gloucestershire steering group.

### **Pathways from Poverty Report 2020**

Pathways from Poverty is a pilot project by Feeding Britain covering three localities in England. In 2020 the National Lottery funded them to evaluate the main impact of their work on food poverty after the first 18 months of the COVID pandemic. The report's findings are guiding the work of Feeding Gloucestershire,

Learning from Pathways from Poverty Report 2020:

1. The reasons why people require food aid are intrinsically linked to broader issues of poverty: benefits delays, debt, insecure housing or jobs, difficulty in accessing online services and more.
2. The Pathways from Poverty Project was established to ensure that people in food crisis have immediate access to quality advice and case advocacy to tackle the issues that made them vulnerable to hunger.
3. The variation in issues people have presented with over the previous 18 months demonstrates the need for experienced Advice Workers. This covered Universal Credit and benefit issues; employment insecurity and wage delays; relationship and family issues, including domestic violence; debt and other consumer issues; housing and homelessness; health and wellbeing; and applying for services covering blue badge parking and school admissions. Simply put, the advice support increases people's freedom and independence from root causes of poverty.
4. The Covid-19 pandemic meant that from late March 2020 there was a significant spike in activity as people impacted by changes in employment circumstances approached Advice Workers for guidance. Many had not previously engaged with the benefit system and were anxious about their immediate income. Alongside the increased demand arising from

unstable employment, there were increased referrals from victims of domestic violence and people in insecure housing, despite the restrictions on evictions.

5. The advantage of a neighbourhood-based Pathways advisor in a local food hub is that it delivers advice on the doorstep of those people who really need it, but are less likely to travel into an urban centre to seek help.
6. Whilst many people are confident enough to engage over the telephone, some people will only engage on a face to face basis. Many people simply don't possess the digital skills, kit or internet access to engage online. Advice Workers tried to combat this in the pandemic by engaging people face to face as they collected food parcels.
7. The expectation is that demand for Pathways from Poverty will continue to increase from this point forward given:
  - a. The second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic and the impending impact upon the economy and the health and wellbeing of people across the country;
  - b. Gap in eligibility for employment support schemes which leave certain groups of workers and self-employed people exposed to hardship;
  - c. The commencement of 'normal' DWP operations in relation to Universal Credit job search, sanctions, PIP assessments, etc;
  - d. The lifting of restrictions stopping people from being evicted

#### **Recommendations for the Food Justice Task and Finish Group:**

Work with Feeding Britain, Stroud District Foodbank, Stroud & Cotswold Citizen's Advice and emerging Community Hubs to jointly support community based advice workers in Stroud District. This work is already being piloted by the Foodbank and Citizens Advice in Stroud.

#### **Affordable Food Networks**

The affordable food projects established within the Feeding Britain network aim to provide access to affordable and nutritious food in a sustainable and dignified manner. Whilst acknowledging that food banks play a vital role in crisis support, the development of affordable food models allows a longer-term provision for the local community. The ability to choose items, make a financial contribution and shop in a setting as similar to a regular supermarket as possible creates a more positive and less stigmatised experience for families and individuals on low incomes. The funds raised from membership fees also allows reinvestment into high quality food supplies and financial sustainability for the project, without the need to rely on grant funding. Affordable food networks are hosted in a variety of locations, adopt different pricing structures and utilise differing membership criteria. A regular fee allows members to choose their own food from the community shop at around a third of the cost in supermarkets. Networks may choose their own fee levels or eligibility criteria including means testing members, access for those on free school meals or universal members to everyone in a particular postcode.

#### **Recommendations for the Food Justice Task and Finish Group:**

Stroud District Council should embed the Affordable Food Network principles into the emerging Community Hubs project. Several community groups started working like this in the pandemic with the support of charities and SDC community funding. Support from Feeding Britain could help to move it forward.

### **Cash First Approach**

The CASH FIRST approach is being advocated by food charities all over the UK. It is based on various levels of intervention, the FIRST being advice and support to maximise income or benefits and the LAST being food parcels.

Using the CASH FIRST approach means that everyone who comes into contact with someone in food poverty needs to know how to signpost to good financial advice. That financial advice needs to be accessible and funding in place for emergency payments to be made.

Based on a successful Scottish programme, currently 12 English Councils are using the money advice leaflet developed by the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) (See appendix . It is for anyone with money worries and makes it clear what help is available to them. For Stroud this would include the appropriate council benefits advice, Citizens Advice, Clean Slate and other local sources of support.

Feeding Gloucestershire would like to promote the CASH FIRST approach by adopting the IFAN money advice leaflet and distributing it to anyone who is working with people in food poverty.

### **Recommendations for the Food Justice Task and Finish Group:**

Stroud District Council develop adopt the IFAN Money Advice Leaflet and consider how the principles of CASH FIRST fit with our current approach to food poverty referrals and those of our partners.

### **Aligning with SDC Leisure, Health & Wellbeing Strategy and the 2030 Strategy**

The new 20 year Leisure and Wellbeing Strategy will lead to a number of actions relevant to Food Justice, primarily within the Health & Wellbeing Plan. This will include embedding Food Justice work into the emerging Community Hubs project.

The 2030 Strategy includes elements of Food Justice in improving access to affordable, sustainable food. The Community Health & Wellbeing Manager will work with the 2030 Community Action Officer to consider how climate change food work could tie in with Food Justice work. As both the 2030 team and Community Health & Wellbeing team have limited resource, a joint post would enable the development of this Food Justice work.

### **Recommendations for the Food Justice Task and Finish Group:**

Consider using COVID funding for a joint post between the 2030 Strategy team and the Community Health & Wellbeing team to develop Food Justice work and climate action around food.

### **Stroud District partners to be included in Food Justice work**

<b>External</b>	<b>SDC Teams</b>
Stroud & Cotswolds Citizens Advice Stroud District Foodbank The Long Table / Freezers of Love Existing and emerging Community Hubs	Community Health & Wellbeing Community Safety Tenants Services Housing Advice Revenue & Benefits

Children and Young People Services (Gloucester County Council)	2030 Strategy Team
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### Conclusion

A new Food Justice Task and Finish Group should be established, comprising:

<b>Committee Members:</b> Community Services and Licensing Housing Environment	<b>Officers:</b> Community Health & Wellbeing Community Safety Tenants Services Housing Advice Revenue & Benefits 2030 Strategy Team
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The Food Justice Task and Finish Group should consider the following:

1. Embedding food poverty actions into appropriate council action plans.
2. Working with Feeding Britain, Stroud District Foodbank, Stroud & Cotswold Citizen's Advice and emerging Community Hubs to jointly support community based advice workers in Stroud District.
3. Embedding the Affordable Food Network principles into the emerging Community Hubs project with support from Feeding Britain.
4. Adopt the IFAN Money Advice Leaflet and consider how the principles of CASH FIRST fit with the current SDC approach to food poverty referrals and those of our partners.
5. Consider using COVID funding for a joint post between the 2030 Strategy team and the Community Health & Wellbeing team to develop Food Justice work and climate action around food.