

**CULTURE AND COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY PANEL**

A meeting of the Culture and Communities Scrutiny Panel was held on 12 September 2019.

**PRESENT:** Councillors C Dodds, L Garvey, J Goodchild, L Lewis, C McIntyre, J Rostron and J Thompson

**ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:** Soroush Sadeghzadeh, Project Manager, Middlesbrough Foodbank  
J Cain, Local Democracy Report, Gazette

**OFFICERS:** S Blood

**APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE** Councillor R Arundale, Councillor D Smith.

**DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS**

None declared

**19/10 MINUTES FROM THE MEETING HELD ON 25 JULY 2019**

The minutes of the meeting held on 25 July 2019 were submitted and agreed as a true record.

**Agreed-** that the minutes be agreed

**19/11 FINANCIAL INCLUSION- INTRODUCTORY PRESENTATION- FOODBANKS**

The Chair of the Panel outlined that this was the first meeting in respect to the panel's investigation on Food banks in Middlesbrough.

The Chair introduced Soroush Sadeghzadeh, Project Manager of Middlesbrough Food Bank to the meeting. The manager advised that he had been working with Middlesbrough Foodbanks for just over 3 years. Middlesbrough Food Banks first started operating in 2012 as a direct response from information which outlined some families across Middlesbrough could not make ends meet.

The Trussel Trust was the overarching body which provided support to foodbank networks across the UK. There were currently 420 foodbanks across the UK and the panel were advised that between April 2018 and March 2019, 1.6 million emergency food parcels were distributed to people in crisis by Trussel Trust Foodbanks, a third of which were given to children.

**How do foodbanks work?**

The Manager outlined that foodbanks work on a voucher based system, where by referrals are made by agencies across Middlesbrough. The Trust currently partners with 119 agencies across Middlesbrough, which include, for example, the Citizens Advice Bureau, Social workers and GP surgeries.

Agencies make assessments on an individual basis and depending on the outcome, they will be issued with a voucher. Individuals have a choice of 8 distribution centres across Middlesbrough where they can redeem the voucher for a food parcel. The food parcels are aimed for short term crisis, and can be redeemed immediately unless the foodbank is closed and in this case the individual will be issued with an emergency food parcel. Emergency food can be distributed by the agencies, however the Manager outlined if Councillors felt a need to be holder of emergency vouchers they could sign up. This would involve a detailed discussion and informal training.

The food parcels were valid for 3 days, and were a nutritionally based parcel containing non-perishable food. The Trussel Trust work with nutritionists and provide a packing list to the

distribution centres. The food parcels were different sizes depending on the family made up.

### **Additional support for families**

The Manager spoke to the panel about the additional support which was provided to families through an initiative called 'more than food'. The initiative was in place to support families to overcome difficulties and signpost them to agencies. Extra support was provided through the following:

1. Referrals for Fuel (gas and electric)- Middlesbrough Foodbank were able to refer families to Middlesbrough Environment City (MEC) who have a small pot of funding to support families.
2. Food Recipe Cards – provided by Middlesbrough Environment City, there are aimed to educate families on basic recipes and how to make the food go further.
3. Stagecoach- following an incident where a mother had walked 4 miles carrying a food parcel to get to home, the Trussel Trust approached Stagecoach, who now provide free travel vouchers which can be provided to families. Stagecoach do not cover all routes across Middlesbrough, however it was a great assistance to families, who otherwise would have to walk carrying a heavy parcel.
4. Mental Health support- Firm Foundations work with Middlesbrough MIND and provide advisors in Clifford Street and North Ormesby Foodbank a few hours a week. Studies have shown that poverty can lead to low mental health and having advisors in the centre, who individuals can talk to on an informal basis has been a great asset.

### **Volunteers**

The Manager outlined that there was a team over nearly 110 volunteers operating the foodbanks, 50% of which volunteer 4 hours a week. All volunteers are trained, including the Trussel Trust general training, safeguarding, mental health awareness, suicide awareness, first aid at work and other training was providing depending on the individual need. A member queried how many volunteers were required to operate a foodbank and whether there was a requirement for all volunteers to be DBS checked? In response, the panel learnt that operating a foodbank required 4 volunteers, sometimes more depending on the size of the foodbank, and only lead volunteers required DBS checks. The Board of Trustees looked into the legalities of this and were advised as long as volunteers undertake safeguarding training there was no need for them to have a full DBS check. However the Manager outlined that most do have a DBS due to their other volunteer roles (e.g. through church groups).

### **Reasons for referrals and statistics**

The Manager explained to the panel that there were many reasons why families are referred to foodbanks, however the three main reasons for referrals are as follows:

1. Low income- one person in the household is working, however for some reason they cannot make ends meet or they face financial crisis, for example, a broken washing machine.
2. Benefit delay (in Universal credit)
3. Benefit change

The Manager expressed that his ultimate goal was to close down all foodbanks, however he knew this wasn't possible, especially from the latest statistics. He stated that within the last 3 years, there had been a 9% increase in foodbank usage and in 2015-16 there was a 35% increase in usage.

The statistics from January to June 2019 were compared to the statistics from 2018 which outlined an increase in foodbank usage. Looking at monthly comparisons, there was roughly a 30-40% increase every month in 2019. There was an increase in foodbank usage during school holidays and in some cases, it has been known that parents skip meals because they are unable to support their families.

### **Support and partnerships**

Foodbanks rely on people in the community volunteering and providing donations. The foodbanks would not be able to operate without the volunteers who sacrificially give their time to help those less fortunate.

Support was provided from schools, churches and quite often, the foodbank receive cash donations from residents from the Town and from those further afield. The Manager gave the example of a gentleman who had relocated from Middlesbrough to Greater Manchester but donated 50 new pairs of shoes, which were a great addition for children over Christmas.

The Trussel Trust has also partnered with Tesco, who not only act as a collection point but with every collection they top up in cash, which means they can buy in bulk which was more economically viable.

In terms of support from Middlesbrough Council, the Panel were made aware that in 2017, the foodbank had to move from St Cuthberts to a larger depot on Skippers Lane. This resulted in the foodbank paying commercial rates and higher rent. It costs £3,900 a month to run the foodbanks in Middlesbrough. From regular donations and one off donations, the Foodbank was generally short of about £500 every month. The Council's Financial Inclusion Group have financially supported the Foodbanks over the past few years by provided a grant. This has allowed the foodbank to purchase of new office equipment and a printer, which was essential as the foodbanks print off 400-600 vouchers a week. The grant had also supported the move to the new premises and towards the purchase of a new van.

The Members of the panel were keen to know what further support could be provided to the foodbanks. In response the manager outlined that support can be provided through volunteering, donating food, donating money and partnering with the Trussel Trust. After a discussion, it was agreed that the Democratic Services Officer would enquire with Human Resources about including Middlesbrough Foodbanks on the benefactors of dress down Friday.

Following on from the presentation, the members declared their lack of knowledge in where to signpost residents if they require a foodbank. It was discussed that a wider awareness session for Councillors would be beneficial and information on foodbank opening times should be promoted, in libraries and HUBS and potentially in the LoveMiddlesbrough magazine. This would be explored and discussed with officers.

A member also raised the issue of free bus travel and the warrant of a further discussion with Arriva with regard to providing free bus vouchers. It was also discussed that the Town Hall or central council building should be dedicated as a food drop off point and therefore this would be explored.

The Chair and panel thanked the Manager for his informative presentation.

**AGREED-** That the information presented at the meeting be considered in the context of the scrutiny panel's investigation.

19/12

### **SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME PLAN- TERMS OF REFERENCE**

Following on from the presentation, it was agreed that the information provided had given the panel substantial information on the operation of Foodbanks, and it agreed that a draft report would be established and presented to the November meeting.

The panel also expressed a wish to visit the depot and following correspondence, a visit had

been arranged for Monday 14 October 2019.

**AGREED- that the information be noted and a draft report be submitted to the Panel in November 2019.**

19/13 **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD UPDATE**

The Chair provided a verbal update on the matters considered at the Overview and Scrutiny Board on 5 September 2019.

The Chair advised that the Board were provided with an update from the Executive Member from Finance and Governance regarding her portfolio and the current financial challenges of the Council.

The Board also addressed the Scrutiny Forward Work Plan for all scrutiny panels and had an update on the Executive Forward Work Programme and well as a discussion on the role of ad hoc scrutiny.

**AGREED: That the update be noted**

19/14 **DATE OF NEXT MEETING- 24 OCTOBER 2019**

The Chair outlined that the date of the next meeting would be Thursday 24 October 2019.