

MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL  
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

**FINAL REPORT OF THE CULTURE AND  
COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY PANEL-  
FOODBANKS**

**CONTENTS**

<b>Aim of the Investigation</b>	
<b>Terms of reference</b>	
<b>Findings</b>	
<b>Conclusions</b>	
<b>Recommendations</b>	
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	
<b>Background Papers</b>	



## **AIM OF THE INVESTIGATION**

1. The aim of the investigation was to examine Foodbanks in Middlesbrough. The interest in this topic came from Councillors concern about the number of Middlesbrough residents accessing foodbanks and the level of poverty across the Town.
2. The Panel were also mindful of the Mayor's pledge to end hunger across the town, and therefore felt this a worthwhile topic to examine.
3. The Culture and Communities Scrutiny Panel looked at the topic over one meeting on 12 September 2019 and evidence was provided by Soroush Sadeghzadeh, Project Manager of Middlesbrough Food Bank.

## **TERMS OF REFERENCE**

4. The terms of reference for the meeting were to examine:
  - What is a foodbank?
  - Why do foodbanks in Middlesbrough exist?
  - National and Middlesbrough Foodbank usage?
  - The Trussel Trust
  - Who uses foodbanks?
  - How do foodbanks operate in Middlesbrough?
  - Volunteers
  - Additional support provided, and
  - Middlesbrough Council support

## **Findings**

### **What is a foodbank?**

5. A foodbank is a non-profit, charitable organisation that distributes food to those who have difficulty purchasing enough to avoid hunger or who are unable to make ends meet.

### **Why do foodbanks in Middlesbrough exist?**

6. Middlesbrough food banks first started operating in 2012 as a direct response from information outlining that some families across Middlesbrough could not make ends meet. Since 2012, the reliance on foodbanks has grown and there are now 8 distributions centres across Middlesbrough, providing emergency food parcels to those in need.
7. The panel were mindful that it was difficult to establish a full picture of foodbank provision in Middlesbrough. Due to the increasing level of poverty and homelessness across Middlesbrough, the Panel acknowledged that there were additional food banks (free food) operating outside the Trussel Trust network for example, the Guru Nanak's Free Kitchen (The Sikh Community), provide food from the Tunnel near Zetland car park, close to St. Columbus Church every Sunday evening. Free Food operate in different ways to foodbanks, often informal and the Panel were advised these are often not suitable for children. Information on these additional free food provisions are available via the

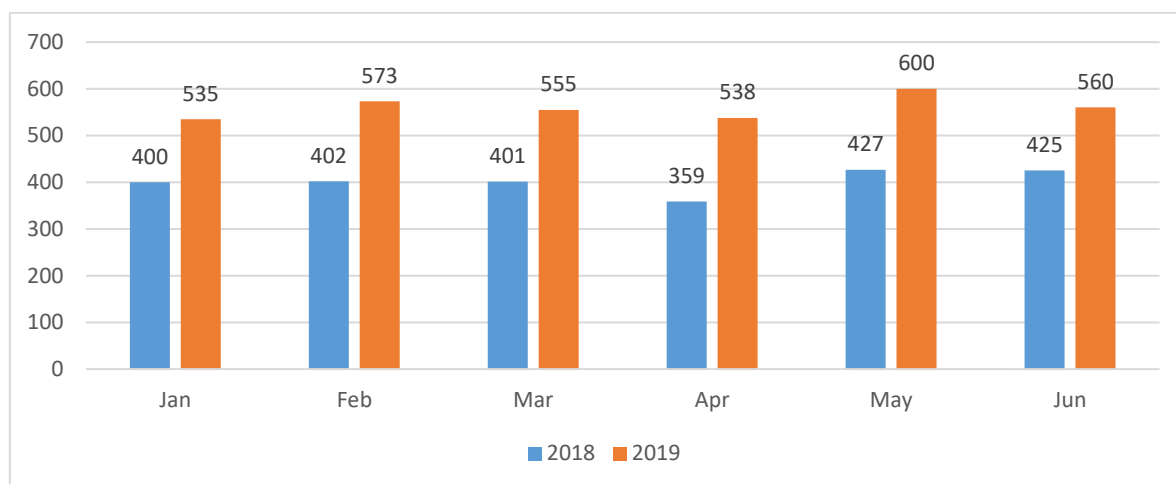
Middlesbrough Council website, however these are not included in the evidence for this scrutiny investigation.<sup>1</sup>

### National Foodbank Usage

8. The Trussel Trust is the overarching body which provided support to foodbank networks across the UK.
9. Statistics provided by the Trussel Trust outlined 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. In the North East alone, 55,713 emergency food parcels were provided to adults and 32,995 to children.

### Middlesbrough foodbank usage

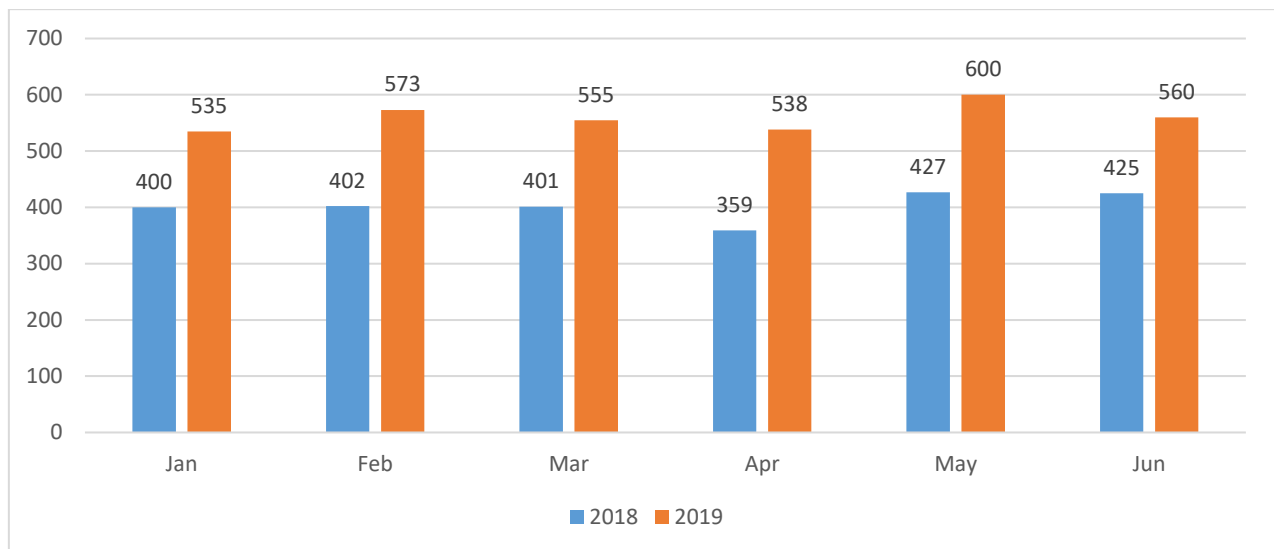
10. The below table provides Middlesbrough's statistics between January 2018- June 2018 and January 2019-June 2019. It was evident that there had been an increase in usage in foodbanks in 2019 compared to last year.



(Provided by the Trussel Trust)

11. Looking at monthly comparisons set out below, there was roughly a 30-40% increase every month in 2019. The Panel were made aware that there had been 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.

<sup>1</sup> <https://middlesbrough.gov.uk/community-support-and-safety/homelessness/free-food>



(Provided by the Trussel Trust)

## The Trussel Trust

12. Middlesbrough foodbank is part of the Trussel Trust network, a Christian organisations based in Salisbury. There are currently 428 foodbanks across the UK within the Trussel Trust network, which helps to tackle food poverty and hungry in our communities.
13. The Middlesbrough Foodbank Manager advised that the Trussell Trust provide two aims: firstly to provide emergency food to those in crisis and secondly, to provide a signposting service to other agencies to help individuals with other problems they may have.

## Who uses foodbanks?

14. The Panel learnt that there is an assumption that only individuals who are in receipt of benefits use food banks however this is not the case.
15. There are various reasons why individuals may find themselves using foodbanks, for example;
  - Benefit delay
  - Low income (including zero hour contracts)
  - Unemployment
  - Sickness (including mental health)
  - Debt

16. The Trussell Trust reported that over the past year, the three main reasons for referrals were 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

17. The Panel were aware of the 5 week delay for Middlesbrough residents to receive their first payment of Universal Credit. Whilst the Panel understands and appreciates the changes in Welfare reform, the delays in payments have had a detrimental effect on families, as those (not all) under the old benefits system could budget, now find it difficult to make ends meet and as a consequence are forced to use foodbanks.

### **How do foodbanks operate in Middlesbrough?**

18. The foodbanks operate through a referral basis, where by professional agencies across Middlesbrough can issue vouchers to individuals or families in need.

19. The Trust currently partners with 119 agencies across Middlesbrough, which include, for example, the Citizen Advice Bureau (CAB), Social workers, GPs and health visitors)

20. The referral agency looks at cases on an individual basis, taking basic details from the individual to complete the voucher. The information helps to identify the cause of the individual's' crisis and offer practical guidance, but also means they are able to prepare suitable food for the right number of people in the household.

21. 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, or key individuals across the Town.

22. The foodbank distributions centres are based at the following locations and further information on opening times can be found at <https://middlesbrough.foodbank.org.uk/locations/>:

- St Barnabas, Linthorpe
- Coulby Newham Baptist Church
- Grove Hill Methodist Church
- St Timothy's Hemlington - Operating from Hemlington Medical Centre
- Middlesbrough Community Church
- Berwick Hills Baptist Church
- Holy Trinity North Ormesby
- Trinity Methodist Church, Whinney Banks

23. Food parcels are valid for 3 days, and are a nutritionally based containing non-perishable food (tinned food, long life milk). The Trussel Trust work with nutritionists and provide a packing list to the distribution centres.

24. Middlesbrough foodbanks run independently and are responsible for their own funding, however have central support provided for branding, material and ongoing advice. Every foodbank under the Trussel Trust network is listed on the national website which is updated on a regular basis.

25. Foodbanks also collect data from the vouchers which include client's details and reasons for referral. This information is updated on a central online system, and this enables the Trust to capture national,

regional and local snapshots as well as providing statistics on foodbank usage. Foodbanks also record information on food donations and food distributed.

26. Donations come from a whole host of organisations and volunteer bodies. Schools and Churches regularly donate as the foodbanks will also further cash donations from residents from the Town and from those further afield.
27. The Panel were humbled to hear of a gentleman who had relocated from Middlesbrough to Greater Manchester but donated 50 new pairs of shoes to the foodbanks. These were a great addition for children over Christmas.
28. The Trussel Trust is also partnered with Tesco, who not only act as a collection point but with every collection, top up in cash, which means they can buy in bulk which is more economically viable.

## **Volunteers**

29. Middlesbrough foodbanks would not be able to operate without the dedication from volunteers. There is currently a team of nearly 110 volunteers operating the Middlesbrough 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.
30. Foodbank require at least 4 volunteers to run a foodbank and more for larger foodbanks. Anyone can volunteer over the age of 18.
31. During the investigation, a member queried whether volunteers need an enhanced disclosure as part of the training. They learnt that only lead volunteers required enhanced disclosures. 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 an enhanced check. However the Manager outlined that most do have enhanced disclosures due to their other volunteer roles (e.g. through church groups).
32. A site visit was organised for the Chair and the Panel members to attend the depot of Middlesbrough Foodbank on Skippers Lane. The visit was invaluable to the scrutiny investigation and provided first hand viewing of how the food bank operates and the work involved. Following the site visit, the Chair provided a brief to the panel, which is provided to the report at Appendix 1.
33. During discussions with the Panel, the Chair praised the work of the volunteers outlining that *“there would be no food bank without the volunteers who sacrificially give their time to help those less fortunate”*.

## **Additional Support**

34. Through the referrals, additional support can often be identified. This is provided through an initiative called 'more than food'. The initiative was in place to support families to overcome difficulties and signpost them to agencies.
35. The Panel were advised that extra support was provided through the following:

- 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.
- 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.
- 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 is a great assistance to families, who otherwise would have to walk carrying a heavy parcel.
- 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, where individuals can talk one to one on an informal basis has been a great asset.

### **Middlesbrough Council support**

36. It was evident to the Panel that although there is an underlying wish for there to be no food banks, they are a lifeline for some families.
37. Monetary contributions and grant funding are essential to the financial costs of the foodbank. The Panel learnt that it costs £3,900 a month to run foodbanks in Middlesbrough and they are generally short of £500 every month despite regular and one off donations.
38. The costs are down to rent, and running of the van to collect donations and deliver to the distribution centres.
39. In 2017, Middlesbrough foodbank expanded and as a result had to move from the old depot site at St Cuthberts to Skippers Lane. This move saw an increase in rent and the foodbank having to pay commercial rates on the depot.
40. The Council has always been supportive of Middlesbrough Foodbanks and they are members of the Council's Financial Inclusion group. Over the past 3 years, Middlesbrough Foodbank have bid to the Financial Inclusion grant which they were awarded money towards the essential running costs of the foodbank.
41. The grant has enabled the Foodbank to purchase new office equipment and a printer, which is 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.

### **Conclusions**

42. From the investigations, the panel made the following conclusions:
  1. Whilst in an idealistic world, the Panel would like to put a stop to foodbanks, they value the important contribution they make to people's lives, as without them, families and individuals would go hungry. The Panel would also like to commend the fantastic work undertaken by the volunteers.

2. In terms of locations, the Panel noted that there was no town centre foodbank, and it was felt this would be a benefit to reduce travel for those individuals and families who live centrally.
3. In relation to the operation of the foodbanks, the Panel saw the value in local councillors working with Middlesbrough Foodbank, not only to have up to date information on locations and opening times but if willing, to act as emergency voucher distributors.
4. Lastly, the Panel, whilst acknowledging the excellent working relationship with Middlesbrough Foodbank and the Council's Financial Inclusion group, would like to further develop the support provided by Middlesbrough Council. Following the review, the Council agreed that donations from dress down Friday would be given to Middlesbrough Foodbanks, this has been scheduled for early 2020.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

43. The Culture and Communities Scrutiny Panel recommends to the Executive:

1. That the Council work with the Trussel Trust to develop a foodbank within the Centre of Middlesbrough. Whilst the Panel is conscious that Middlesbrough town hall may not be a suitable location, initial discussions have taken place with officers of the Council and a number of potential locations have been identified. The Panel recommend that these be explored and be kept up to date on progress.
2. In terms of the operation of the foodbank, the Panel is aware that this will depend on the goodwill of volunteers. It is therefore recommended that agreement be sought for Middlesbrough Council staff, where appropriate, to be granted paid time off to volunteer in the Foodbank. Appropriate training from the Trussel Trust would be provided for this.
3. That the Civic Centre reception become a food and toiletries donation drop off point for Middlesbrough Foodbanks. This would be published on the staff weekly bulletin and officers would work with the Trussel Trust to ensure that there are regular collections.
4. That an awareness session on foodbanks be established for elected members. This would include information regarding foodbank drop off points, locations of the foodbanks and information on how to become an emergency foodbank voucher distributor.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

44. The Culture and Communities Scrutiny Panel would like to thank the following for their assistance with its work:

- Soroush Sadeghzadeh, Project Manager of Middlesbrough Food Bank.
- Volunteers of Middlesbrough Foodbank
- Martin Barker and Joanne McNally, Middlesbrough Council.



## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

29. The following sources were consulted or referred to in preparing this report:

- Minutes of the Culture and Communities Scrutiny Panel meetings held on 12 September 2019.
- The Trussel Trust website

### **COUNCILLOR CHRIS MCINTYRE -CHAIR OF CULTURE AND COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY PANEL**

The membership of the scrutiny panel is as follows: Councillors C McIntyre (Chair), D Smith (Vice Chair), L Lewis, J Goodchild, R Arundale, B Hubbard, J Rostron and J Thompson.

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# VISIT TO FOOD BANK

# APPENDIX 1

Date:14/10/2019

Attendees: Cllr R Arundale, Cllr C Dodds, Cllr C McIntyre, Cllr J Thompson

## INTRODUCTION

We have recently looked at the role of foodbanks in our community as a subject for scrutiny. The outcome was that our knowledge about them has increased and also our awareness has been raised.

To gain further insight, a visit to the food bank distribution centre situated on Skippers Lane, Middlesbrough was organised.

During our visit we had discussions with the volunteers and the organisers which were extremely informative. Some of the issues discussed are shown below -

### 1) VOLUNTEERS

**Age of volunteers** ranges from 18 to 65 plus, however generally the main volunteers tend to be around the age of retirement as they generally have more time to spare.

**Turnover of volunteers** is low as they feel it is such a worthwhile cause and that their contribution is meaningful and really makes a difference.

**Typical shift of a volunteer** is 6 hours however they are free to do less or more hours. Whatever hours they can do is much appreciated.

### 2) DONATIONS

Much of the food received is donated by supermarkets and churches. This particular time of year is very productive as many churches organise Harvest Festivals and the produce is donated.

What is perhaps not too well known is that food banks are happy to receive toiletry items, soap, shampoo, nappies etc.

Other donations they are in need of are **monetary donations**. The running costs for the site plus their van is approximately £500 per month. Money is not only needed to meet running costs but also to buy food when at certain times of the year the food donations “slow down” or when food banks are used more (ie: school holidays) and therefore food donations do not meet demand.

Food is checked to ensure it is not out-of-date.

### 3) FOOD BANKS– A PRO-ACTIVE APPROACH

A popular misconception is that food banks are just there to give “hand-outs” to certain members of the community who are struggling. This is not the case. Staff receive training to assess food bank users, to determine the reasons why they have reached this point in their lives and to help them out of the situation they are in so that they do not reach a stage of “**food bank dependency**” but become empowered to change their lives for the better. For instance some have needed food banks as a result of debt or mental health issues. Staff liaise with agencies

such as **CAB** and **MIND** when necessary to give vulnerable people extra support, guidance and the confidence to make life-changes.

**CONCLUSION:**

I was impressed with the hard work and dedication of the staff, they are making a positive contribution to our community. It is sad that families and vulnerable people now, more than ever find themselves struggling but it is heart-warming to know we have such amazing people who are passionate and give up their own time for the benefit of others and provide such a vital service.

**Councillor Chris McIntyre- Chair of Culture and Communities Scrutiny Panel**