

Corporate Food Poverty Policy

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Summary

This policy forms the final segment of the Council's Welfare Strategy approved by Executive on 12 July 2022 which covers the Council's overall approach to the Welfare of Middlesbrough residents, and links very closely to the Crisis and Vulnerability Policies in tackling food poverty in the borough.

It sets out how the Council will identify and holistically support residents who are in temporary and long-term food poverty. It provides guidance to employees about the council support services available to residents who access any food provision portals that can help with the root cause of the underlying poverty. It also covers how the council will improve signposting about the specific types of direct food support available locally.

Context

There are many drivers of food poverty, but at its heart is low income and economic insecurity which limit people's ability to have an adequate and nutritious diet. Rising food prices and increases in the broader cost of living have compounded this situation. Inflation has risen steeply in 2022 due to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, global supply issues, significant rises in gas and oil prices, and the war in Ukraine. UK inflation was 11.1% in October 2022. Inflation is forecast to continue to rise over this year, with the poorest households hardest hit, as essential goods and services are likely to be most severely affected.

A survey by the Financial Conduct Authority, 'Financial lives latest 2022 survey' has identified that in May 2022 12.9 million (24%) UK adults had low financial resilience, compared to 10.7 million in 2020. It also identified that adults living in the most deprived areas of the UK are nearly seven times more likely to be in financial difficulty than those living in the least deprived areas.

Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2019 data ranked Middlesbrough as the most deprived local authority for income deprivation and third most for employment deprivation. Overall Middlesbrough is ranked as the 5th most deprived local authority. As Middlesbrough has the highest proportion of neighbourhoods (almost half at 49%) that are in the top 10% of most deprived nationally¹, it is particularly exposed to this crisis.

Household food poverty or food insecurity embodies a huge number of interlinked complex issues around: Affordability - can everyone afford to budget for and purchase healthy food, and the equipment by which to cook and store it; Access - can everyone in the population obtain food; Availability - are there sufficient foods available within local communities; Nutrition and quality – do people consume the

¹ 2019 Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

right types of food in the right quantities; Sustainability – is there a reliable continuous access to food; and Education and skills – do residents have the required nutrition knowledge, cooking and preparation skills.

Purpose

The purpose of this new policy is to provide clear guidance for all Council Officers on addressing the causes and effects of poverty whilst enhancing signposting of vulnerable residents and customers to the most appropriate existing free and discounted food provision throughout the borough. It forms a road map to help someone who is in food poverty to address their immediate situation and support them to become self-sufficient, food-secure and not reliant on temporary aid.

Objectives

The Council's food poverty policy has the following objectives:

1. To help the council achieve its Strategic Plan 2021-2024 Priority to “address the causes of vulnerability and inequalities in Middlesbrough and safeguard and support those made vulnerable.”
2. To provide a structured approach to ensuring a professional, consistent and timely response to the identification and resolution of food poverty across all of the Council's functions.
3. To fortify local partnership links including Middlesbrough Environment City's Food Action Plan, Financial Inclusion Group and the Middlesbrough Food Partnership;
4. To improve long-term food security for the residents of Middlesbrough to reduce dependency on temporary food aid.

Outcomes

The outcomes expected from this policy are:

1. Promotion of **understanding of the drivers of food poverty**;
2. Ensuring employees and partners are confident in **identifying a food need**;
3. Creation and maintenance of clear signposting routes for residents experiencing food insecurity towards available **immediate food aid** within the borough;
4. **Addressing the underlying poverty cause** by providing clear navigation for residents who access any of the Council's services presenting with an underlying food poverty situation, to be able to access existing council support mechanisms including the Welfare Strategy and associated financial assistance, advice and support;
5. Development of a multi-agency **Food Poverty Action Plan (FPAA)** to build long-term food security for Middlesbrough.

Definitions

“Food Poverty”	The Department of Health defines food poverty as “The inability to afford, or to have access to food to make up a healthy diet”. It is not just about hunger, but also about being appropriately nourished to attain and maintain health.
“Food security”	Food Security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. (UN Food and Agricultural organisation.
“Vulnerability”	<p>Vulnerability can be permanent, transient or progressive. A vulnerable person is someone who, due to their personal circumstances is especially susceptible to detriment and who by characteristics and/or circumstances, is unable to act or respond appropriately to certain circumstances. This can also be any individual who is, or may be, in need of help or support due to mental health difficulties , disability, age, illness or frailty and who are, or may be, unable to look after their home and/or their wellbeing or unable to protect themselves from harm or exploitation by others.</p> <p>Middlesbrough Council recognises that vulnerability can come in many forms with no absolute definition and it can be multi layered. The council’s Vulnerability Policy dictates therefore that each case should be considered individually and with discretion, giving weight to the understanding that any residents//customers may at some point need some element of care and support in meeting payment obligations.</p> <p>Vulnerability Policy - June 2020</p>

Scope

This policy applies to all employees (both permanent and temporary), contractors and consultants of the Council who are given the authority to deliver supporting services to the residents of Middlesbrough, award discretionary payments and grants, or manage and collect debt and income which is owed to the Council.

Legislative and regulatory framework

Key elements of the legislative and regulatory framework for addressing food poverty are set out below.

National Food Strategy	Recommendations to make sure a generation of children do not get left behind and focusses upon food for disadvantaged children.
Data Protection Act 2018	Controls the lawful passing of personal data from one part of the Council to another.
Equality Act 2010.	Is an amalgamation of previous anti-discrimination laws. It is a law which protects from discrimination of unfair treatment on the basis of certain personal characteristics such as age
General Data Protection Regulation 2016 (GDPR) and Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA2018)	The GDPR/DPA2018 place a duty on the Council to comply with the data protection principles relating to processing of personal data: (1)(a) Lawfulness, fairness and transparency; (1)(b) Purpose limitation; (1)(c) Data minimisation; (1)(d) Accuracy; (1)(e) Storage limitation; (1)(f) Integrity and confidentiality (security); (2) Accountability (including the rights of data subjects).
Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 2000	Under the FOIA, the Council has a duty to make information available to the public upon request, unless specific exemption(s) apply. It is also obliged to proactively and routinely publish information that has been frequently requested in the past in its Publication Scheme. Information requests frequently include requests for information held in emails.
Local Government Acts 1972, 1985, 1988 and 1992, Lord Chancellor's Code of Practice on Records Management (S46 Freedom of Information Act)	Establishes requirements to manage records and information, and gives implied authority to share certain kinds of information with partners.
Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006	An Act to make provision in connection with the protection of children and vulnerable adults.

Roles and Responsibilities

Council roles

The council's overarching role in this Policy is to identify and address the underlying poverty causes of food insecurity. Specific allocated roles include:

Head of Service – Resident and Business Support	Overall responsibility for the delivery of the all Residents and Business Revenues and Benefits Service and the Policy Owner.
Other Heads of Service	Where appropriate to their role, Heads of Service have responsibility for the provision of local resident support in relation to services they manage.
Strategic Business Managers – Resident and Business Support	Responsible for the maintenance, review and monitoring of this policy. Managing the external partnership links with local agencies through the Financial Inclusion Group. Managing the provision of financial assistance, advice and support. Managing collection and advice for debt owed to the council.
Records Manager	Responsible for the development and implementation of the corporate Records Management Policy and Retention Schedule, and for this email policy, which underpins them. Will liaise with the Data Protection Officer.
Service Delivery Manager / Strategic Business Managers / Support Services Manager.	Where appropriate, responsibility for overseeing day-to-day compliance with this policy and the standards set out within it by their staff and other personnel they manage or commission.
All staff, contractors, consultants, interns and any other interim or third parties	Responsible for compliance with this policy.
Data Protection Officer	Responsible for provision of advice and guidance to the Council on its obligations in relation to data protection.

Partner roles

This policy outline's the scope of the council's contribution and approach, however it is acknowledged that the council is supported in the work to tackle food insecurity by many local partner agencies who provide associated support services including offering free and discounted food sources, advice and financial support.

Supporting policies, procedures and standards

The following policies, procedures and standards all holistically support this Corporate Food Poverty Policy:

Welfare Support Policy	This provides a framework for a joined up approach to a holistic welfare advice and support service for all relevant residents.
<u>Vulnerability Policy</u>	Intended for use by Middlesbrough Council employees when engaging with residents/customers where payment of a collectable debt is being considered.
<u>Corporate Debt Management Policy - 2021 Middlesbrough Council</u>	This provides a framework for the consistent management of all debt and income across the Council
<u>Stop The Knock Report</u>	A solution designed as a 'helping hand' to support customers who are experiencing difficulties in meeting payment obligations.
Data Protection Policy	This summarises the Data Protection Policy position of Middlesbrough Council and how it will comply with legislation, and associated codes of practice and official guidance in relation to the processing of personal data.
Cost of Living Communication and Engagement Plan	The Council and its partners offer a wide range of support and advice for people contending with the increasing cost of living. This engagement plan ensures those most in need know what help they can access.
Section 13a Discretionary Hardship Policy	Section 13a policy provides the Council with the power to make discretionary payments to Council Tax payers where hardship can be demonstrated and funds remain available.
Community Support Scheme Policy	This specifies how the Council will operate the Community Support Scheme (CSS) and to indicate the factors that will be considered when deciding if a CSS payment can be awarded.
<u>Corporate Crisis Policy 2022 Middlesbrough Council</u>	This sets out how the Council will support residents who are in a crisis situation, and gives guidance to staff about the specific types of support which are considered suitable and fund limits which can be offered

Delivering the policy

OUTCOME 1 - Understanding the many drivers of food poverty

It is vital to understand that for food poverty there are many drivers, the underlying causes are often quite complex, and that the contributing factors can be multiple for individuals and families. Some can be sudden and unexpected for individuals and families who have previously been food-secure, and some can be prolonged and persistent. The drivers can include:

- Low / insufficient income;
- Unemployment / sudden loss of a job;
- Under-claiming of eligible benefits entitlement;
- A sudden illness or long-term illness;
- An unexpected bill;
- The death of a parent or partner;
- Poor budgeting and money management skills;
- Significant indebtedness;
- Loss of a home or home transience;
- A sudden family crisis;
- Unpaid carer situations;
- Delays in payment of benefits, or loss of certain benefits;
- Substance abuse or alcoholism;
- Young and inexperienced adults with little or no support in place;
- Poor mental health;
- Temporary or insecure employment / zero- hour contracts;
- Learning disabilities;
- Domestic abuse;
- Unplanned pregnancy or unexpected family growth due to sudden familial fostering.

The above list is illustrative and not exhaustive.

OUTCOME 2 - Identifying the need for food

The Council is in a unique position in that it contains a huge variety of teams which engage with residents on different fronts, either through the offering of direct council outbound services, through links with our public partners (e.g. schools and health services) or as a result of direct inbound contact from members of the public, many of whom may present with an overt or underlying food poverty need. It is important to understand that food poverty is not just about hunger, but also about being appropriately nourished to attain and maintain health. It is also important to recognise the differences between acute immediate hunger and chronic food insecurity.

The following are some of the trigger comments or situations that should alert council employees to a potential food poverty situation:

- Requests for foodbank referral;
- Sustained use of Eco-shops or food kitchens;
- Crisis requests for emergency assistance;
- Reliance on cheap low-quality or out of date food lacking nutrition;
- Evidence of skipping meals either individually or as a means to ensure dependants are fed;
- Children presenting at school or council services/activities hungry;
- Child 'holiday hunger' outside of term-time school meal provision;
- Limited cooking skills and nutrition knowledge;
- Lack of adequate cooking and food storage equipment in the home;
- Scavenging for discarded food / foraging for wild food;
- Stealing food;
- Children or adults unable to engage or concentrate on activities due to lack of sufficient energy;
- Presentation or exacerbation of related illnesses as a result of insufficient / insecure food access and poor diet eg diabetes, heart disease, obesity, rickets, scurvy, anaemia.
- Chronic stress related to food poverty and poverty more generally

OUTCOME 3 – Immediate Food Aid

Due to lack of financial resources the council is extremely limited in its ability to offer the direct provision of food in all but certain temporary schemes or exceptional specific circumstances and therefore under this outcome of the Policy the council acts in a signposting and partnership role to local support agencies and food providers.

In partnership with these local agencies, the council will create and updating a dedicated online resource for employees and local service providers signposting and mapping sources of emergency free and low-cost food provision currently available locally. The council also provides a public webpage on it's website to directing residents towards local food provision and supporting services.

This includes:

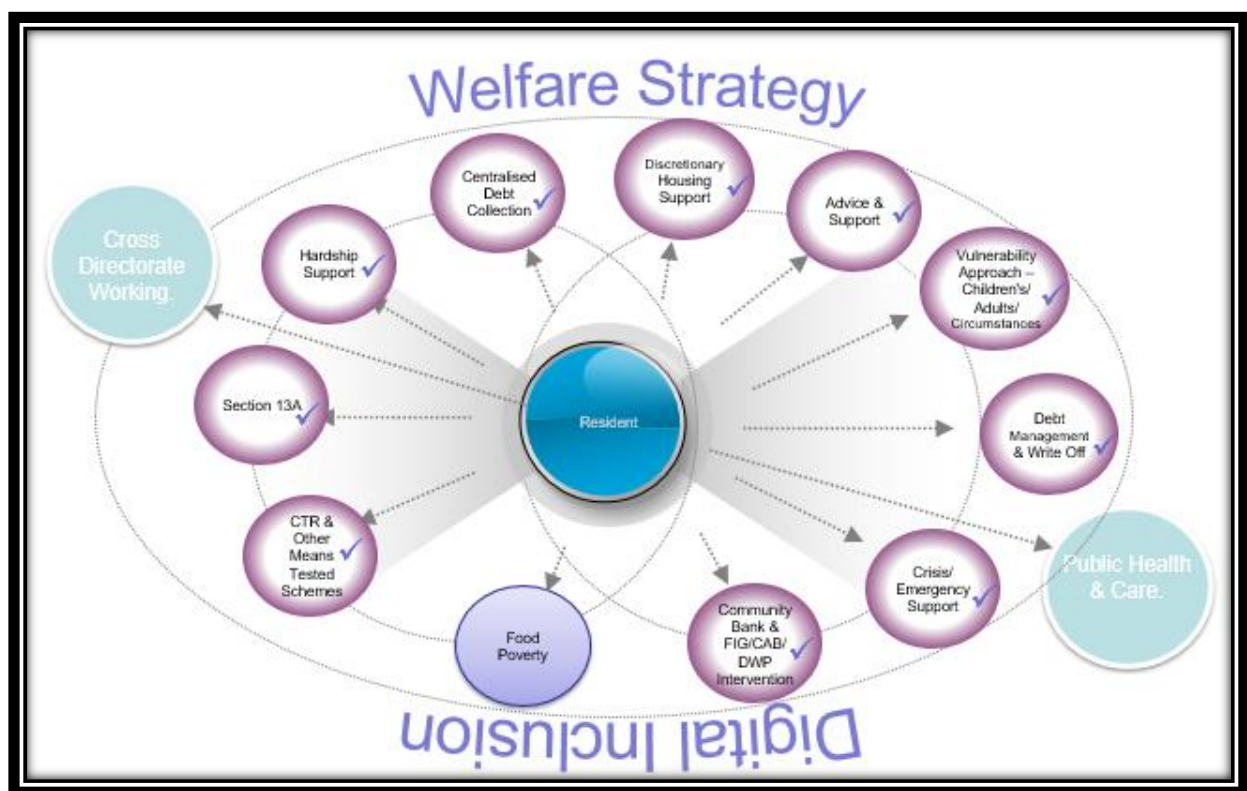
- Short term immediate provision of free food, including foodbanks and agencies providing emergency food parcels.
- Council crisis payments and vouchers for food.
- Free School Meal provision access.
- Council and partner activities that include meal provision – including those offered through the Holiday Activities Fund.

- Sources of discounted food and groceries, including eco and community shops and low-cost hot meals provided in the town.

OUTCOME 4 – Addressing the underlying causes

The council's role in this policy is to address the underlying poverty cause through its new Welfare Strategy framework, the objective of which is to support individuals in freeing up disposable income to enable families to feed themselves. As listed under 'drivers for food poverty' above, the underlying poverty causes are often quite complex, and sometimes can be multiple. Therefore each case should be fully understood based on its own merits, and support should be provided or signposted to in the most appropriate form in order to address the cause and help avoid the need for repeat referrals. Support is designed to be sustainable in order to help someone who is in food poverty to eventually become self-sufficient and food-secure.

Led by the Resident and Business Support service, the Welfare Strategy provides a holistic multi-faceted solution to addressing these complex needs:



Employees and partners who identify a food poverty situation with a resident should refer them into the Resident and Business Support Welfare solution.

The overarching Welfare Strategy will help residents in a number of different ways, such as providing assistance with shortfalls in rent, maximising state benefits and ensuring residents are able to free up disposable income in order to enable them to feed themselves. The Strategy does however include the caveat that emergency aid is a temporary intervention with limited resource and there is an expectation that residents will take proactive and positive steps themselves to become self-sufficient and avoid reliance on public aid.

A summary of some of the steps which will be taken by the council, subject to the individual situation and the council's available resources, to address the underlying cause once a resident is identified as potentially being in need are as follows:

Low income

- Conduct a Benefit entitlement review to maximise take up, supporting those customers to claim where they are not able to do so,
- Conduct a council tax account review to ensure all applicable discounts, exemptions and reliefs are in place as per entitlements
- Provide support to help with shortfalls in rent through the Discretionary Housing Payment scheme,
- Consider Emergency assistance through the Community Support scheme
- Link in with other Council services/other organisations through data sharing agreements to access difficult to reach client groups,
- Signpost to a consolidated advice and support web page, which has been designed by Revenue and Benefits Services. This page holds valuable information of where to go for help with:-
 - Debt Advice,
 - Help with Gas and Electric,
 - Rent and Council Tax Support,
 - Free School Meals and Foodbanks,
 - Housing Support and Money Advice,
 - Health and Wellbeing.
- Work closely with the Tees Valley Routes to Work team to help residents identify any barriers to finding employment.

Debt

Where a council debt is in place, the service should deal with the resident under the vulnerability policy, the corporate debt management policy, the crisis policy and the corporate debt write off policy (whichever are relevant to the circumstance of the case), all of which have a defined approach which can help and support residents who are believed to be suffering from food poverty. This in itself may mean that debt repayments are reduced, suspended or written off in accordance with the terms of the policies.

For identified vulnerable customers, where reasonable to do so we will:-

- Carefully consider their circumstances before taking any action;
- Support them to agree the best method of recovering outstanding monies and the easiest way for them to pay;
- Update their account with any information they provide to us to aid us with dealing with any vulnerabilities they may have that are influencing their ability to meet their payment obligations;
- Where further action is necessary, if contact has not been maintained, we will aim to make an appointment with them before progressing with any next steps;
- Adapt our processes if we are aware that someone is vulnerable to minimise any hardship or distress;
- Carefully explain our processes and decisions and aim to keep them fully informed;
- Signpost them to any help and advice, which is available;
- For multiple debts we will signpost to debt advice services and consider consolidated debt solution, supported by Welfare Rights;
- Reduce the level of costs charged for those customers that take steps to self-help;
- In exceptional cases, if financial circumstances mean there is an inability to pay and if residents are accessing self-help options (i.e. routes to work, access to learning etc.), options to reduce the debt using the Council's hardship provision may be considered.

Crisis

Where a resident claims a discretionary payment, such as a Discretionary Housing Payment, Crisis Payment, Section 13 a payments; Section 17 (Crisis Support), which includes a referral for food, then a review of the circumstances of the case should be carried out by the team dealing with the award, and where required, signposting should be given to:

- Welfare Rights - [Middlesbrough Council Welfare Rights Unit | Middlesbrough](#)
- Citizens Advice Bureau - [Free confidential independent impartial advice | Middlesbrough Citizens Advice \(mcab.org.uk\)](#)
- Department for Work & Pensions (if sanctions are in place or deductions from benefits)
- Adult Social Care - [Contact social services | Middlesbrough Council](#)
- Children Services – if a young child is involved [Contact social services | Middlesbrough Council](#)
- Middlesbrough Matters - [Home - Middlesbrough Care Matters Directory \(middlesbroughmatters.co.uk\)](#)
- Safeguarding Adults (where someone is at risk from abuse) - [Safeguarding-Adults-Leaflet-English-Updated-June-2020.pdf \(tsab.org.uk\)](#)

Where appropriate, all front facing Council staff should signpost the resident to access [Free School Meal provision](#) if this has not been previously claimed.

The council will also look at whether the resident shows any signs of being in fuel poverty particularly for gas and electricity. In doing this, checks will be made to see if they have been paid any grants and rebates to which they are eligible, refer the resident to the council's existing [fuel poverty and energy saving](#) solutions, and the [South Tees Affordable Warmth partnership](#), of which the Council is a partner organisation.

Welfare Support

The Council will provide a joined up approach to a holistic welfare advice and support solution for all relevant residents who present to the service in food poverty.

Support will include (but is not limited to):

- A full review of the case including payment resolution;
- Support through the Discretionary Housing Payment process (where applicable);
- A financial Health Check including advice on Benefit take up;
- A full review of existing debt (including responding to payment problems / reducing the amount to pay if possible);
- Engagement with the Stop the Knock approach;
- Referrals to Food Bank and other food related initiatives;
- Crisis Support & white goods provision.

OUTCOME 5 – Development of a Food Poverty Action Plan (FPAP)

On adoption of this policy, a cross-council and multi-agency Food Poverty Action Plan will be supported with input from partners to address emerging local issues on this theme and provide time-bound targeted actions, and regular updates will be provided through the established Financial Inclusion Group to ensure actions are coordinated.

Monitoring and review arrangements

The implementation and effectiveness of this policy and its supporting procedures will be monitored and reported on by the Head of Service and associated management team. The policy for the first 12 months will be subject to quarterly review to track use and performance, followed by a full review every 3 years.