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FOOD POVERTY IN EXETER: STEPS FOR POSITIVE CHANGE



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COLLECTIVE ACTION TO ADDRESS FOOD POVERTY

This report includes research findings that are based on the input of more than seventy people from 35 local agencies, twelve people with lived experience of food poverty, and by data provided by Public Health Devon and Exeter Foodbank. It is a work in progress and we aim to provide updates on food challenges in Exeter based on the experience of our collective action to challenge food poverty in the city and with ongoing input from those whom our actions affect. In 2018, Food Exeter was awarded funding from the national Food Power programme to begin work to investigate food poverty in Exeter and initiate a collective multi-agency response. Led by the Fair Access to Food working group, the project included representatives from The Exeter Diocese, Exeter Community Initiatives, St Sidwell's Centre, Public Health Devon, The University of Exeter, plus several individuals.

INTRODUCTION

In 2018-2019 Food Exeter carried out research to understand what food poverty and household food insecurity [1] looks like in Exeter. Food Exeter is a registered charity, working on strategic solutions to reduce food poverty and food insecurity. It became clear that evidence on the realities of food poverty in Exeter was almost non-existent. Food Exeter's working group 'Fair Access to Food' undertook a year of research to establish some base line evidence and build understandings of the causes of food poverty and potential steps to address these issues in Exeter. The Food Power Network funded the project, with additional funding from The University of Exeter.



Photo credit: St Sidwell's community centre

THE ISSUE OF FOOD POVERTY IN EXETER

Food Poverty has been on the rise in Exeter. The number of emergency food parcels provided by EFB has risen continually each year, and has increased by 138% since 2012/13. In 2018/19, the foodbank provided three days' worth of emergency food to 6,878 people, of which 2,158 were children[2].

In conjunction with these food poverty statistics, health indicators related to diet are also concerning. Almost 30% of children at age 10-11, and more than half of adults, are overweight or obese. Over a third of adults are not eating the recommended 5 a day of fruit and veg and deprived Exeter wards host the highest density of fast food outlets [3].

Food poverty creates detrimental impacts on health, mental health and ability to function within mainstream socio-economic systems. Both benefit issues and precarious employment can switch someone experiencing low income to become a vulnerable adult who requires additional services. These issues can trigger mental and general ill health, precarious accommodation, homelessness and food poverty.

Switching back towards positive health and employment is a difficult road that requires the intervention of a variety of services and professionals. Access to food and nutritious eating is at the core of establishing positive health and the ability for Exeter residents to work, volunteer and engage positively within communities. Therefore the rise of these challenging issues within Exeter, such as Food Poverty is detrimental to creating positive communities that contribute to overall Exeter economic and community life.



FOOD EXETER'S RESEARCH PROCESS

During 2018 Food Exeter collected data, input from people with lived experience and the views and ideas of local agencies. The research and subsequent Food Poverty Summit were supported by the University of Exeter through a funding award secured by Dr. Rebecca Sandover, who led the research project in partnership with Food Exeter's Co-ordinator.

The process began with a short online survey asking people who may have been working with people facing food insecurity what they thought food poverty looked like in Exeter and what were the main issues that a food poverty action plan should address. 13 people responded and the survey had the added benefit of raising awareness of our initiative

Key organisations who provide support to people facing food poverty were invited to a Fair Access to Food Workshop on 2nd July 2018. The workshop explored what was preventing people from getting enough nutritious food to eat and gathered ideas for what more could be done and the strategic aims and actions of an action plan. The workshop also mapped the food support currently being provided. 18 participants attended representing 17 organisations.

Partnering with Exeter Foodbank 12 people, who were collecting food parcels at the Mint Methodist church on two days in July 2018, were interviewed. Interviewees told us about their circumstances and reasons for needing a Foodbank parcel; their experience of accessing the Foodbank and other support systems; their experience of the benefits system; their ideas for preventing the need for foodbank parcels and ways to improve support to people in food need.

On 13th November 2018 Food Exeter held a Food Poverty Summit with 55 participants representing 35 organisations where initial research findings were shared, participants learned more about food poverty and held group discussions to contribute to the development of a collective response. Agencies invited included health, social care, community organisations, schools, children and youth services, churches, local councillors, DWP, the University and College, local food producers and colleagues from other food poverty partnerships. Participants shared their experiences and ideas on the themes of what is causing food poverty and how can we best respond; how best to tackle child hunger and malnutrition; and how to better support the food needs of vulnerable adults.

CAUSES OF FOOD POVERTY IN EXETER

Two significant causes of food poverty emerged from our interviews with Exeter Food Bank (EFB) clients.

WELFARE REFORM

Welfare reform has had significant negative impacts on benefit claimants as they have experienced their benefits being stopped, reduced or benefit applications delayed. These processes have led claimants to experience food and fuel poverty, precarious accommodation and homelessness, ill health and mental ill health, accrue debt and more. Food Bank interviewees reported that welfare systems are confusing, disjointed, slow and failing them when significant life change occurs, i.e. the loss of work through ill health etc. Participants reported that these failures directly led to food bank use, whether for the short term or on a longer term basis. For some interviewees, benefit changes meant that they were 'forced' into job searching even though they had debilitating mental ill health and had previously accessed ESA (Employment and Support Allowance). Interviewees reported frustration and desperation in attempting to navigate welfare systems.

PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT

Low Income Foodbank interviewees referred to life changes such as job loss and health changes creating crises that led to applications for welfare and subsequent food bank use. Interviewees reported that experiences with insecure work exacerbated food poverty and mental ill health. Interviewees spoke of deep frustration and despair in trying to navigate the welfare system, with one participant still waiting at the time of interview, more than 2 months after application, to hear about its outcome. For some of these EFB Clients who had dependent children, the need for survival created 'desperation', 'stress' and resulting health impacts. Interviewees frequently used these words to describe their crises situations. Service providers reported that the transition from benefit use to waged incomes also incurred challenges and hardships.

CAUSES OF FOOD POVERTY IN EXETER 2018

WELFARE REFORM

Welfare reform has created significant negative impacts on benefit claimants, resulting in benefits being stopped, reduced or benefit applications delayed.

INSECURE EMPLOYMENT

Life changes such as job loss created crises that led to applications for welfare and subsequent food bank use.

HEALTH

Life changes, such as mental ill health and general health issues also created personal crises that led to participants experiencing hardship including food poverty.

GAPS IN SUPPORT

When crisis hit, EFB Clients experienced gaps in emergency provision and support, plus a lack of information and coordination amongst agencies.

IMPACTS OF POVERTY RELATED TO FOOD AND NUTRITION

SELF-CARE CHALLENGES

Clients referred to a general lack of food skills, food education and access to cooking facilities.

HEALTH CHALLENGES

Mental ill health is exacerbated by food insecurity due to experiences of stress and the effects of long term hardship and reliance on food aid. Other health conditions such as diabetes are hard to manage when experiencing food insecurity.



Photo credit: Exeter Food Bank

ACTION POINTS FOR POSITIVE CHANGE

SUGGESTIONS FOR POSITIVE CHANGE ON: CHILD HUNGER

- Support schools to identify students who are beginning to experience food poverty and establish clearer pathways for referrals for support. Schools are supported to improve free school meals take-up. Action for change is discussed at a Schools Heads Summit.
- Free to access Breakfast clubs are supported across Exeter schools. The use of food tech room where secondary school children can help themselves to simple food meals i.e. toast, porridge, sandwiches, fruit and veg sticks (food resources could be collected and donated via Exeter Food Action). Explore the possibilities for using volunteers to support this, such as Exeter College Catering.

SUGGESTIONS FOR POSITIVE CHANGE ON: VULNERABLE ADULTS

- Community centres need supporting to establish free cafés distributing surplus food, holiday hunger programmes plus free lunches and free food at youth clubs. Centres can also be supported to help to address loneliness and hunger.
- Exeter already has a range of organisations working with vulnerable adults. There needs to be better coordination of these organisations and their activities addressing food poverty and household food insecurity. Action is required to link up community, health, voluntary, statutory bodies & church groups. Links need to be made to existing programmes, such as community builders, GP social prescribing etc.
- A multi-agency working group is needed to research and define the unique and the common barriers to healthy food by different groups of vulnerable people.

SUGGESTIONS FOR POSITIVE CHANGE ON: LOW INCOME FAMILIES

- A central collection of data and research on issues is required, including information on organisations offering support. This needs to link with DCC and the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment to ensure that food poverty is highlighted within the JSNA.
- We need to improve available information on resources and organisations that can support families. For example where do families, who are not in crisis, go for support? Support is needed from DCC on cross- services signposting.
- There is a need to address social stigma and build dignity into services.
- There is a need to include input from those experiencing food poverty. How are community voices represented at a City Council level?
- Support community initiatives that support low income families to access food including community food growing, community food sharing events, community cafes.



Photo credit: Live West

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING FOOD POVERTY AND FOOD INSECURITY IN EXETER

In order to build on this will for collective action, 3rd Sector organisations and enterprises seeking to address Food Insecurity in Exeter need support to work together effectively. There is a need to work in partnership with Exeter City Council and so effect joined up discussions to support collective action. Part of this approach includes the need to provide further support to stretched frontline services.



Specific recommendations include:

- Strategic and community based action is required to address Food Poverty in Exeter.
- Social enterprise initiatives, as well as, local authority, charity and service based action is required for positive change.
- Community-based services are needed that provide food education and reskilling.
- Food services such as community cafes and social food enterprises need supporting to improve access to healthy, local food and food sharing.
- Community food growing initiatives can boost community resilience and provide another means to address food poverty.
- Partnership working with local authorities is required to address issues raised and to develop a Food Poverty Action Plan.

Strategic and community based action is required to address Food Poverty in Exeter. Community-based services providing food education and reskilling, food services such as community cafes and social food enterprises that improve access to healthy, local food and food sharing could all help in ameliorating the impacts of food poverty.

However for services and enterprises to be successful in addressing food poverty in Exeter, an alliance of partners working in this field, including Exeter City Council and Devon County Council, needs to be formed so that best practices are shared and steps towards positive change can be established and implemented.

By boosting preventive steps on food poverty and household food insecurity, fewer Exeter residents will experience crisis circumstances, which will not only support individuals but will also improve the wider Exeter community and economy.

REFERENCES

1. Challenges in accessing nutritious food affect those in poverty, crisis and those experiences general hardship. Food Poverty and Food Insecurity are terms used to cover all these circumstances.
2. Statistics available from Exeter Food Bank.
3. Statistics available from Public Health Devon – Devon Food Poverty Dashboard 2018.

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