



SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

16:35 to 19:00

23 March 2017

Present: Councillors Wright (chair), Maguire (vice chair), Bogelein, Coleshill, Davis, Fullman, Grahame, Herries (substitute for Packer) Malik and Peek

Apologies: Councillors Bradford, Haynes, Manning and Packer

Also present: Rosie Ogleby, Feeding Britain and Caroline Seaman, food literacy practitioner

1. One minute silence

As a mark of respect for those killed and injured in the attack in London on 22 March 2017, the committee held a one minute silence.

2. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Public questions/petitions

The chair reported that two questions had been received from members of the public and that the issues that they had raised would be addressed under item 6 (below), an investigation into food poverty

4. Minutes

Subject to noting that at page 8 of the agenda:

paragraph 4, should read:

‘Hannah Worsley explained that emergency boxes were provided to families and individuals for 72 hours before social services and other support is made available’.

At paragraph 5, replace ‘...and a meal at schools...’ with ‘...and a meal at different venues around Norwich...’

that the reference in paragraph 5 to 'ten centres' should reference 'ten clubs'; and

at paragraph 8, the sentence ending...food poisoning concerns were not considered' should read ...food poisoning concerns were less important'

It was:-

RESOLVED to agree the minutes of the meeting held on 23 February 2017.

5. Scrutiny committee work programme 2016-17

Members gave suggestions for groups to be invited to take part in the scrutiny committee meeting on 22 June regarding city accessibility including:

- University of East Anglia accessibility taskforce
- Royal National Institute of Blind People
- Norfolk and Norwich Association for the Blind
- Age UK
- MIND and Mencap
- The Hamlet Centre

RESOLVED to ask the strategy manager to review the suggested groups and report back to the committee at its meeting on 6 April 2017

(Councillor Bogelein left the meeting at this point)

6. An investigation into food poverty

The vice chair presented the item and reminded members that they would be looking towards suggestions for solutions to the problem of food poverty in Norwich.

The first public question was received from Clive Lewis MP:

"I am pleased to note Norwich City Council is making an in-depth inquiry into food poverty among its citizens.

Andrew Forsey (senior parliamentary researcher) tells us, in his report to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger,

"The key underlying causes of hunger and food poverty in this country are to be found in the long-term erosion of poorer households' financial buffer, coupled for some, with a diminished ability to cope on a low income." (Forsey sa:50)

Norwich City Council's inquiry has therefore been correct to look at the underlying structural causes of this disturbing increase in food poverty. I'm aware this has involved assessing the current government's continued economic approach, one which has growing wealth and income inequality built into its core ideological underpinning.

It is striking that the witness from your Scrutiny Committee meeting last month (Joanna Mack of the Open University) told you that, "Most people in poverty are in work".

The government's own data tells us that in Norwich South 16% of men and women are in receipt of some sort of Universal Credit (in Norwich North this is 15%) compared to 13% for the Eastern Region of the UK (Source: ONS, 2017).

I've been informed your own Cabinet Member for Equality and Fairness, Vaughan Thomas, spoke eloquently of the problems claimants regularly face. In particular, the seeming ease (and resulting hardship) with which claimants are sanctioned by the government appointed oversight agency.

Most disturbing of all has been the testimony you have heard from some of those in Norwich who find themselves reliant on food banks in order to feed themselves and their children.

Clearly, it is both factually wrong and futile to blame those in food poverty; such blame does little to solve the plight of them and their children. What is needed is a much broader effort to rewrite the narrative of food poverty and lay the blame at the feet of the real culprits - those who designed and implemented a failing economic system in combination with an increasingly punitive social security safety-net.

Can I therefore ask Norwich City Council's Scrutiny Committee, "What does Norwich City Council currently do to help its citizens in food poverty? And what can the City Council do in a sustainable manner to begin to turn the tide of food poverty in our city?"

Councillor James Wright, chair of the scrutiny committee replied:

"Thank you for your questions Clive, and for the interest that you have taken in the work of our committee.

Like you, I found the testimony of some of those reliant on foodbanks particularly powerful. The committee was able to hear the audio supplied by Norwich Foodbank which gave an especially human dimension to the situation they face. These fellow citizens went from being nameless case studies on paper to real people that the committee could empathise with.

Dealing with your questions in turn, at present Norwich City Council has no specific strategy to help its citizens in food poverty. Work carried out around financial inclusion and the provision of allotments are, for example, two areas that can go some way to assist those experiencing food poverty but we recognise that more could and should be done.

In many respects, that fact that we are spending two meetings looking and the causes of, and potential solutions to, food poverty shows how important all members of the committee see this issue.

Turning to your second question, I hope that an outcome of this scrutiny work will be that the City Council has a sustainable strategy moving forward for how it can help reduce food poverty.

Whilst the committee is yet to suggest any recommendations, I hope that one may be that the council looks at creating a formal Food Poverty Strategy to act as an umbrella for existing services and partner relationships.”

Clive Lewis asked the following supplementary question:

“How capable is Norwich City Council of implementing a food poverty strategy, bearing in mind current resources and the potential resources available through the changes to the business rates systems?”

Councillor James Wright, chair of the scrutiny committee replied:

“With the current state of local government finances the council would not be able to do this alone and would rely on organisations being willing to work with us on such a strategy. We would need to work collaboratively with the third sector to provide such provisions.”

The second public question was from Emma Stopford of FarmShare:

“Norwich FarmShare is an eco-award winning Community Supported Agriculture project based in Norwich. Our members pay a monthly subscription in order to receive a weekly share of seasonal, locally and ecologically grown produce and we also provide educational visits for youth groups and school children, volunteering opportunities and social events which are open to all.

We would like to develop the ways in which we can make this produce available to people on lower incomes/suffering from food poverty. We would like help to be able to accept Healthy Start Vouchers and to look into how we can offer vegetables at a reduced rate if people are able to help us through volunteering roles like other similar Community Supported Agriculture schemes across the country. We would also like to make sure that healthy, local, ecologically grown produce is celebrated in Norwich and that people know where they can access it.

We are in the final negotiations with Matt Hewes at the Council about moving onto an underused allotment site on Valpy Avenue and so would be well placed to provide these kinds of opportunities. We would like to do a lot of awareness raising around us moving onto this new site and engagement sessions with the local community.

One of the main methods of support which would help us to proceed with these strategies would be to secure funding for a Volunteer Co-ordinator, perhaps initially for one year. This person could further develop the volunteering opportunities we offer and manage volunteer learning on site as well as running healthy and seasonal cooking and eating sessions to raise awareness about the importance of healthy, local produce.

Could the Committee give a view on how Norwich FarmShare can be best included in the Council’s strategy to end food poverty - including the suggestions above and

other ideas the Committee may have and could the Committee help ensure that Norwich FarmShare is to be formally included in this strategy?"

Councillor James Wright, chair of the scrutiny committee replied:

"Thank you for your question Emma, and for including some very helpful information in your question about the work that Norwich FarmShare does around ensuring that good quality seasonal food is available locally to your members.

As you will have heard in my previous answer, at present the council has no specific strategy to end food poverty but I hope that one outcome of this meeting is that we go some way into identifying a course of action that Cabinet could take in order to establish one.

Whilst I cannot guarantee anything ahead of our discussions, I am sure that members of the committee will look on the notion of a Community Supported Agriculture scheme in a positive light as one of the tools available to the council to help potentially reduce food poverty."

Emma Stopford asked the following supplementary question:

"One reason for Farmshare moving to the allotment site on Valpy Avenue is that it is currently underused and people living in the area could utilise this resource. How could sessions be run in this area without spending a lot of money?"

The strategy manager replied;

"This will be one of the challenges the council faces as we develop a community enabling approach which will look to residents to help with such activities. Savings from other services could then be channelled into setting up community led projects."

Rosie Ogelby from Feeding Britain gave a presentation to the committee (available on the council's website) and explained the work of Feeding Britain. She said that Feeding Britain was an independent charity set up by members of an All Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger. The aim of the group was to consider why a country such as the UK was reliant on the work of foodbanks. The current work of Feeding Britain included twelve local pilots being run around the country which brought together a range of local groups already working on food poverty. These twelve pilots would be drawn together into a national framework which would share evidence to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger. She added that Feeding Britain would be very happy to have a pilot group in Norwich.

The pilots were not just about food, they looked to address the issue of poverty as a whole. Debt advice was being offered at food bank sites as well as credit vouchers for a two week top up for a prepaid electricity meter being included in food parcels.

She said that the key message was the importance of collaboration between government, businesses and the third sector.

Caroline Seaman gave a presentation to the committee (available on the council's website) and explained her work around food literacy. She said that the rise in foodbank use meant that foodbanks had become more visible to the public.

She said that food literacy levels were low in Norfolk, partly due to the loss of skills from one generation to the next. Those having families at a young age had increased the speed of this loss between generations.

She said that there were accessibility problems with people eating five portions of fruit and vegetables each day. Often, the fruit and vegetables in convenience stores were of a low grade and farm shops were not as accessible to those without a car. People needed skills to be able to take advantage of the range of produce available in supermarkets and often needed their own transport to carry food home.

She explained the Healthy Start voucher system and said that recipients need support to make the best use of their vouchers. Healthy eating needed to start as early as possible so that children could gain the knowledge and skills to continue this way of eating and for parents to raise healthy children.

Until issues were addressed around food literacy, those in food poverty would not have the ability to make use of the food available to them and this would need to start within communities.

Discussion ensued in which Rosie Ogleby, Caroline Seaman and the strategy manager answered member's questions.

In response to member's questions, Caroline Seaman said that there were some issues in Norfolk about where Healthy Start vouchers could be redeemed. She said that a minimum spend for online shopping could be a barrier for people but she said that there was evidence of communities building resilience by putting together a Healthy Start club and shopping online as a group. Market traders were keen to accept the Healthy Start vouchers but there was some difficulty around the redemption of the vouchers. Rosie Ogleby said that market traders could think about collecting the vouchers together to reduce the bureaucracy around the redemption of them.

Members sought more information on Feeding Britain. Rosie Ogleby said that Feeding Britain was not looking to set up a national infrastructure but instead was focused on coalitions of local groups. These groups were housed in different ways across the country including in local government and MP's offices. She said that it was about finding local projects that add value to each other.

The strategy officer gave members some information on the projects that the council already undertook which help tackle the causes of food poverty. He said that although free school meals were under the remit of Norfolk County Council, Norwich City Council had written to families in receipt of housing benefit and the take up of these meals had increased in specific schools. The council maintained a council tax reduction scheme that ensured that the most vulnerable households pay no council tax. Advice hubs were being piloted in communities, such as at the holiday hunger events. Although there was no formal food poverty strategy, support was already in place for many people.

Members discussed community supermarkets and the viability of setting these up. Rosie Ogleby said that there were many models for this type of project. The most

well-known was the community shop which cost around £250,000 for the initial infrastructure or mobile food vans could cost around £60,000 to £80,000. Once the initial outlay had been sourced, the projects should sustain themselves through profits. She said that some councils had provided premises for free or for a peppercorn rent for community supermarkets.

In response to a member's question, Rosie Ogleby said that there was a very new social enterprise in Liverpool which bought surplus food and trained people to produce healthy ready meals for schools and meals on wheels schemes to use. Profits from these meals were then reinvested into food poverty groups.

(Councillor Peek left the meeting at this point)

Members broke into small groups to review the evidence they had heard and to discuss suggested solutions to food poverty. They presented their main points which included:

- Using charitable trust funding to resource projects such as social supermarkets
- Developing a food poverty strategy to act as an umbrella document for existing actions
- Increasing awareness of Discretionary Housing Payments
- Developing community led food literacy projects
- Increasing awareness of the Go4less cards which entitled residents to reduced allotment fees
- Linking older and socially isolated people with good food literacy skills with younger generations in need of such skills

These would be considered at the meeting of the scrutiny committee on 6 April 2017.

RESOLVED to:

- (1) thank Rosie Ogleby and Caroline Seaman for their presentations;
- (2) ask the scrutiny liaison officer to add an item to the work programme for the meeting of the scrutiny committee on 6 April 2017 to discuss solutions to food poverty; and
- (3) ask members to bring suggested solutions to the issue of food poverty to the meeting on 6 April 2017.

CHAIR