SHROPSHIRE HEALTH AND WELLBEING BOARD

Meeting Date: 11th November 2021

Paper title: Children's food insecurity in Shropshire

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1. Summary

Throughout 2020 the Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance undertook a piece of research (2 online surveys with 56 general respondents and 41 schools, 3 online interactive discussions with 23 individuals, 9 cases studies and action-based research with Tuition Behaviour Medical Services Shropshire) into children's food insecurity in Shropshire. This research identified high levels of concern around children's food insecurity in the county, 77% of schools, and 53% of general respondents who responded to our survey thought children they knew may be going hungry because there is not enough food in the house. It also enabled us to identify key areas of work where progress may be made to help tackle the issue.

2. Recommendations

Following the research, we held an online workshop looking at the findings from the research and priority areas of work going forward on Wednesday the 6th of October 2021. The event was well attended, and several priority areas of work were discussed. Collaboration across the public and voluntary sector was highlighted as important to progressing the work. We ask that the board notes the report's contents, in particular, there are two urgent areas of work

-**Increasing uptake of Healthy Start vouchers**-The scheme is due to be digitalised soon (exact dates yet to be confirmed) but this would be an ideal time to launch extensive comms work and form a Healthy Start task force from across the voluntary sector, NHS and Shropshire Council. This scheme is a vital nutritional safety net for young children and currently only half of eligible families in Shropshire claim their vouchers.

-**Stigma has been reported as a major barrier to accessing support-** a joined-up approach to tackling this and embedding dignity and respect must be at the core of any work in this area. We can start to do this by ensuring that respectful communication happens at all stages and frontline staff are trained and supported to recognise the impact that living with food insecurity/ poverty has on an individual. We are anticipating that the upcoming Autumn/Winter period will be a difficult one for many families with the combined effects of the end of the Universal Credit uplift, a rise in fuel and food costs and the end of the furlough scheme meaning we are expecting to see levels of household food insecurity increase. Ensuring the support available reaches those who need it is very important. We ask for your engagement in this conversation as we explore how we can reduce the barriers for those in need of support.

Whilst these are the direct actions for the NHS, there are many other areas where action is needed to protect the health and wellbeing of children in Shropshire and many other key opportunities for improvement to be addressed, these are summarised in the report below.

3. Report

Children's Food Insecurity in Shropshire, 2020/21

Throughout 2020 the Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance conducted research into children's food insecurity in Shropshire with funding from Sustain's Food Power. This report summarises our findings, which highlight the need for urgent action on children's food insecurity across Shropshire and map out solutions at both local and national level. While the problem of children's food insecurity predates the COVID19 pandemic, we feel this report is particularly timely as households with children have been hit hard by the crisis and there is an opportunity to rebuild post COVID

What do we mean by food insecurity?

Food insecurity refers to a lack of access to enough good, healthy, and culturally appropriate food. Food insecurity may be long term or temporary. It can be influenced by income, employment, race/ethnicity, disability and the area in which people live.

The Food Foundation's latest report shows that pre-pandemic there was a rising trend of household food insecurity and despite vital emergency measures in place, more people are food insecure now than before the pandemic. In January 2021, 12% of households with children (equivalent to 2.3 million children and 1.3 million adults living with them) had experienced food insecurity in the past 6 months and over 200,000 children have had to skip meals because their family couldn't access sufficient food during lockdown.

What is the impact of food insecurity on children?

Living without reliable access to nutritious food impacts on every aspect of a child's life. Children who are living in food insecure families are more likely to suffer from lower educational attainment, an increased risk of chronic health conditions such as asthma, as well as anxiety and stress. Department for Education data demonstrates the impact disadvantage has on educational attainment. The 2019 GCSE data shows of the 143,000 pupils classed as disadvantaged (defined as having been eligible for Free School Meals within the five years before sitting GCSEs or if they have been in care or adopted from care) just 456 achieved top grade 9s in English and maths, compared with 6,132 out of 398,000 other pupils. Hunger in childhood has been linked to depression and suicidal episodes in teenagers. Poor nutrition also has an impact across generations. Mothers who are lacking in iron are more likely to have children born with low birth weight, with higher rates of developmental problems child mortality, high blood pressure, diabetes, coronary artery disease and obesity.

Key findings from our Shropshire- based research

- 77% of schools, and 53% of general respondents who responded to our survey thought children they knew may be going hungry because there is not enough food in the house.
- Rurality was identified as a key barrier to low-income households accessing affordable food in Shropshire
- In Spring 2021 6034 children in Shropshire are eligible for Free School Meals, a 48% increase from 2019.
- 56% of schools and 37% of general survey respondents did not think that all eligible families in their school were signed up to free school meals- stigma and confusion around the system were reported to be the main barriers.
- In Shropshire only half of families eligible for Healthy Start claim their vouchers.
- 60% of schools in Shropshire reported running a breakfast club, but less than 5% of these reach more than 30 children.
- Schools reported a wide range of ways they support children with food in the school day, including providing free fruit at breaktime, running a school garden or allotment and lessons on cooking and nutrition.
- Vouchers were identified as the preferred way to support children eligible to Free School Meals in the holidays

- Shropshire is home to a variety of community projects supporting children and their families with food.

Key recommendations

These recommendations have been developed by gathering all of the feedback we received over the course of our research and reflect what people across Shropshire reported they believe to be both potential local points of intervention as well as the bigger, systemic issues at play.

1. **The rurality of Shropshire presents additional challenges for low-income families to access food.**

   Local actions: Map what already exists to identify gaps and investigate options to increase access to services and affordable nutritious food in rural areas.

   The bigger picture: A rebalancing of national funding policies so there is a recognition of the challenges and higher costs people in rural areas face and lack of access to services.

2. **Government funded schemes designed to support children (Free School Meals and Healthy Start Vouchers) don't reach all families who need support.**

   Local actions: Launch a Shropshire wide campaign to increase the uptake of Free School Meals and Healthy Start vouchers.

   The bigger picture: A full review of Free School Meals is needed, in particular the threshold for eligibility was highlighted as a cause for concern throughout our research. Nationally there are many voices calling for a review of the Free School Meal system, due to the levels of household food insecurity which have been made worse by the COVID 19 pandemic, including Marcus Rashford's End Child Food Poverty Alliance.

3. **Schools need support to run breakfast clubs.**

   Local actions: Explore how breakfast club provision could be increased by researching existing challenges in setting up and sustaining breakfast clubs, targeting children eligible for Free School meals and reaching children in rural settings.

   The bigger picture: National funding of breakfast clubs needs to consider rurality to ensure all areas of the country have equal opportunity to provide them.

4. **Schools need support to be able to prioritise food throughout the school day.**

   Local actions: Involve the whole school community to provide consistent messages which develop a love of healthy food. Reach out into the community to find people who have the skills and time to support schools to build more food activities into the school day. See our case studies of successful partnership projects in Shropshire or explore initiatives like Marches Grow Local that link people land and people who want to grow.

   The bigger picture: A national curriculum and funding structure which allows schools to prioritise food. We can learn a lot from the Food For Life Schools Award Scheme, their work demonstrates that schools who are able to take a whole school approach to food find this makes a positive contribution to pupil health and wellbeing, with many schools reporting a clear impact in their Ofsted report in terms of pupil's personal development and wellbeing.

5. **Solutions still need to be found to address holiday hunger.**

   Local actions: Develop a partnership approach to providing sustainable, non-stigmatising ways of supporting children from low-income families with food in the holidays. Ensure that the Holiday Activities and Food funding reaches as many children entitled to Free School Meals as possible and that the provision of nutritious meals is central to the programme's delivery.

The bigger picture: Long term funding to support children from low income families to access quality food provision in the school holidays. Vouchers were reported to be the preferred form of support for families in Shropshire.

6. **Maximise the reach and impact of community projects.**

Local actions: Collecting evidence from the impact of community led projects and sharing this learning will help new projects to develop. See the toolkit for food projects which combines learning from initiatives across Shropshire. 2021 saw many people wanting to give time to help projects in their community, we can build on and harness this enthusiasm going forward by showcasing the brilliant work going on in Shropshire.

The bigger picture: The value of the community sector in supporting children with food needs to be recognised. More funding and support needs to be made available to ensure projects can be sustainable and have a lasting legacy.

You can access the full report on the Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance's website here.

4. Risk assessment and opportunities appraisal
As stated in the above report, experiencing food insecurity has implications for a child's emotional and physical well-being, as well as major implications on their educational attainment.

5. Financial implications
None of note

6. Climate Change Appraisal
Not applicable

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Campaign for Better Transport, 2019, *How Shropshire Campaigners helped to stave off bus cuts*

The Conversation, 2020*, Free School Meals: the life long impacts of childhood food poverty*

David M Quinn and Morgan Polikoff, 2017, *What is summer learning loss and what can we do about it?*, Brookings

Department For Education, 2021, *Healthy Start vouchers uptake data England*

Department for Education, 2019*, Key Stage 4 performance 2019*

Department For Education, 2019/20, *School pupils and their characteristics*

Department For Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2018, *Fuel Poverty in Rural Areas*

Department for Work and Pensions, 2021, *Universal Credit statistics*

The Food Foundation, 2021, *A Crisis within a Crisis: The Impact of Covid 19 on Household Food Security*

Kellogg's, 2015, *Isolation and Hunger: the reality of the school holidays for struggling families*

Miguel Ángel Esteban Navarro, 2020, *The Rural Digital Divide in the Face of the COVID 19 Pandemic in Europe: Recommendations from a Scoping Review, Informatics*

Nourish Scotland and The Poverty Truth Commission, 2018, *Dignity in Practice: Tools for community food providers*

Office for National Statistics, 2018, *Exploring the UK's digital divide*

Paul B. Stretesky,2020, *Holiday Hunger and Parental Stress, Evidence from Northeast England,* Health Living Lab, Department of Social Sciences, Northumbria University

Shropshire Bus Project, 2020, *Summary Report*

Shropshire Council, 2018, *Economic Snapshot*

Shropshire Council, 2020, https://shropshire.gov.uk/information-intelligence-and-insight/facts-and-figures/employment-and-economy/

Shropshire Council, 2021*, School Breakfast Evaluation Surveys*

Spring School Census, 2021

Sustain, 2011, *Free School Meals for all (evidence from trials in Hull and Scotland providing Free School Meal to all children)*

Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder) or your organisational lead e.g. Exec lead or Non-Exec/Clinical Lead

Kirstie Hurst Knight- Children & Education

Appendices

Methodology

The surveys

We designed two surveys as part of our research, one for organisations and individuals and another specifically for schools. The surveys were conducted mainly online (with options to complete by phone), using Survey Monkey and was open from 23rd November 2020 to 18th January 2021. It was advertised on the Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance Website and social media platforms, circulated via our networks through email. Additional follow up calls were made to organisations and schools with which we had existing relationships. Other Shropshire based organisations also kindly shared the survey through their newsletter. A total of 97 survey responses were received, 56 of these were our general survey and the remaining 41 were responses to the school survey. It was clear that many people had given the questions a lot of thought, particularly in the free text responses. We would like to thank all those who completed the survey.

The data

Survey respondents were self-selecting.
For some survey questions participants were given the option to 'skip,' where this is the case percentages reflect the total number of answers for that question, rather than the total number of survey responses. Where a question had an "Other" option, some expansion and explanation of the free text responses has been provided in this report, but not all entries are represented. Similarly, wholly free text questions have been analysed to some degree, but it should be noted that many responses were subjective and open to interpretation.