

Ealing Foodbank Visit (Scrutiny Review Panel 1 – Inequalities)

14 July 2016

In attendance:

Cllr Fabio Conti, Cllr Swarn Kang, Cllr Mohinder Midha, Anna-Marie Rattray, Lee Teasdale

A site visit was undertaken to the Ealing Foodbank café in Southall, which is held each Thursday at Saint Anselm's Catholic Church.

Marion MacNeil Voucher Partner Co-ordinator explained that following the London riots of summer 2011, local churches agreed that an initiative was required to help those struggling with monetary issues to ensure that they could feed their families in times of personal crisis.

In order to make use of the foodbanks, people were provided with vouchers – one voucher would allow a person to collect three days' worth of food for however many people were within that family. Vouchers were available from around 180 partners within the Borough, including the Council, children's centres, social workers, some doctor's surgeries, YMCAs, the Southall Sisters, St. Mungo's etc.

It was agreed that no residents should generally receive any more than three vouchers in any six month period, though there were exceptions to this rule and people were never 'turned away'. Asylum seekers in particular were not subject to this rule.

Unfortunately, fresh food could not be provided but every effort was made to ensure that food was nutritionally balanced and that dietary requirements were met/allergies were accounted for etc. Each voucher client was provided with a 'shopping list' on which they could tick off which food they required.

The foodbank cafés were held in five locations throughout the Borough each week:

Mondays 1-3pm – **Greenford (Greenford Methodist Church)**

Tuesdays 10am-12pm – **Hanwell (St Mellitus Church Hall)**

Thursdays 1-3pm – **Southall (St Anselm's RC Church)**

Thursdays 1-3pm – **Northolt (Northolt Park Baptist Church)**

Fridays 2-4pm – **Acton (Oak Tree Anglican Fellowship)**

It was also advised that a Saturday extension had just been agreed to take place in Greenford, starting later in the year.

Though the foodbanks were run by Christian organisations using a network of volunteers (in conjunction with the Trussell Trust who ran 424 foodbanks nationally), donations were received from many faiths. In 2015 the Ealing foodbanks fed 4,300

people with 44 tonnes of food, this gave the Ealing foodbanks the unfortunate position of being the busiest in West London.

It was stated that the three overriding causes for residents needing to make use of foodbanks were:

- Benefit delays
- General low income issues
- Welfare cuts

Debt and domestic violence issues were reasonably common contributory factors.

Efforts were made to advise and direct those in particular need towards professional bodies who could assist them in crisis situations. The foodbank had strong links with the Ealing Community Network whose extensive signposting lists were a great help. The foodbank also had links with advisors who could assist with court issues.

Concerns were raised about families becoming dependent upon foodbanks. It was advised that data was retained on all who used vouchers to obtain food, and that if patterns of extensive usage became apparent, then steps would be taken to see if further help and advice could be provided.

It was asked if the homeless used the foodbanks. It was advised that the foodbanks were not targeted towards the homeless, who would not have access to cooking facilities and who used other sources to help them. The foodbanks were targeted towards those seen to be in the 'next tier' - people at risk of losing their housing and those who were stuck working within zero-hours contracts and/or low-paid employment.

Storage issues were raised as a concern for the foodbank staff. The current storage facility was in the basement of Hanwell Community Centre, where a reduced rent was paid. The room available here was smaller than what was really needed; there were also frequent issues with damp/rodents etc. Currently extra storage had to be hired at extra cost through 'Big Yellow'. It was felt that a storage space of around 1500 square metres would be ideal, and this would also be ideally centrally located within the Borough to allow for easy access to all five different foodbanks. It was hoped that Ealing Council might support Ealing Food bank to find a suitable alternative.

Councillor Midha stated that she would be happy to help the foodbank in forging links with the Southall Gurdwara's.

The foodbank would also be losing some desk space it had been using for administration purposes. They had been provided with some free office space by Catalyst Housing, but unfortunately Catalyst was moving to a new location which would not have any spare capacity. Therefore it would be ideal if a small amount of office space (room enough for a desk) could be found for the foodbank, who would of course fund their own equipment. The possibility of them making use of space within Southall Town Hall was raised and would be looked into further.

The importance of helping foodbank users to retain a sense of self-respect was emphasised. It was felt that being able to provide people with food that met their cultural/dietary requirements meant that people did not feel quite so much like they

were relying on 'anything they could get' when it came to the meals they were providing to their families.

Embarrassment and self-respect issues were a major concern; many users would choose to attend foodbanks in a different part of the Borough to that which they lived in for fear of being recognised.

Marion MacNeil reported that she had been in the Perceval House customer centre for several hours in the previous week and had found that people were being treated very dismissively by the staff and were shown very little respect. There was no attempt to welcome people, say hello, refer to them as 'sir' or 'madam', and that the general demeanour of staff was unfriendly. Whilst it was appreciated that the centre was now understaffed and that the remaining staff were pressured and very busy, it was felt that it was a small thing just to treat people with more dignity and help with the sense of self-worth in people who were often struggling. She thought the Council should be leading by example, and this had clearly not been the case.