

Right to Food Event Spotlight Review

By ICE Creates for Cheshire East Council

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Crafted especially for you by team

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2 Introduction

'Right to food is a basic right', yet food poverty¹ affects 1 in 5 households with at least one unemployed adult in the North-West.² The use of food banks is predicted to increase as the rising cost of living is forcing many to choose whether to 'eat or heat'.

In Cheshire East there has been a sharp rise in the number of people accessing food banks, which a recent study explains is due to low incomes, unemployment, delays in benefit claims and mental health problems³. It is likely that the current figures do not reflect the true extent of food poverty, as the stigma and shame attached to using food banks prevents many residents and families from using food banks and from getting the support they need.

In response to these challenges, Cheshire East Council (CEC) organised a collaborative Spotlight Review Event to bring together a range of stakeholders⁴ including local councillors, council officers and representatives of community, voluntary and faith (CVF) sector organisations who support local people to access food.

As noted by Councillor (Cllr) Critchley in the opening speech, the lead up to this Spotlight Review started 12 months ago when Cllr Critchley submitted a motion to CEC to write to the national food strategy which was commissioned by the Government in 2019 requesting that a right to food was enshrined in the law. However, within two months submissions to the food strategy were no longer accepted and the motion became outdated.

Nevertheless, discussions between Cllr Critchley, Cllr Jill Rhodes, Cllr Laura Smith, officers of the Adult Health Committee and CEC Communities Team ensured that the issue was still on the agenda within Cheshire East.

Within this context the purpose of the Spotlight Review was to:

- Raise the profile of this increasing concern related to access to food.
- Understand the current challenges.
- Work together to create some tangible actions and next step to focus on.

To achieve these objectives, the Event was split into the following two activities:

1. Representative from CVFS organisations gave presentations about their current support provision and about the current challenges they face as well as the hardship of the people they serve.
2. ICE Creates, a behaviour change agency, facilitated a co-creation session to build on the presentations and explore the **current challenges**, create a shared **vision** for the future and to co-design the **first steps** needed to improve access to food for all.

¹ The inability of individuals/households to secure adequate and nutritious diet in socially acceptable ways.

² Department for Work and Pensions (2022), Family Resources Survey: financial year 2020 to 2021. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2020-to-2021/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2020-to-2021>.

³ Cheshire East Social Action Partnership, July 2021 - taken from JSNA report.

⁴ Please see Table 1 in the Appendix for breakdown of attendees.

3 Key findings

3.1 Current provision

3.1.1 LiveWell Emergency Assistance Scheme

Delivered by Cheshire East, this scheme was introduced in 2013 to provide a safety net for people in a crisis, with an annual budget of £220 000. Support is provided in the form of vouchers or goods, and applications are considered on a case-by-case basis, with the exception of requests for food. To benefit from the scheme, applicants must live in Cheshire East, or have connections to the area before moving here; and secondly, the applicant must agree to work with officers to resolve the issues they are facing if they are to receive the award.

In 2021/22 over 97% of the grants awarded were for furniture and white goods, this was followed by other expenses such as removals and rent deposits. Furthermore, individuals who receive the award are provided with additional support and signposted to appropriate services to ensure they are maximising their income and accessing all of the support available to them.

3.1.2 Citizens Advice Bureau

Citizens Advice provide people who work and live in Cheshire with free impartial, independent, and confidential advice on most matters including employment, benefits, housing and debt. In the last 12 months, Citizens Advice Bureau in Cheshire North has supported 1,100 clients with debt issues, 360 of which were referred to food banks. Whilst working with clients, they have found that debts aside, a lot of clients are struggling to afford the basics and often prioritise paying for other things rather than food.

Real-life story

A single parent, had to buy a school uniform for his daughter who was starting a new school. He prioritised buying the uniform over food because he knew that his daughter would get fed at school, and he would not eat.

3.1.3 Nantwich food bank

Unfortunately, representatives from Trussell Trust were unable to attend, however this short video (<https://vimeo.com/719012274/5c0bf195dd>) demonstrates the current challenges faced by the nation including Cheshire East.

3.1.4 Silklife Foodbank Macclesfield

Silklife is a foodbank 'offering food, hope and dignity' through the provision of emergency food boxes containing nutritional and non-perishable food for 5 days for people in the neighbourhood who are temporarily unable to provide for themselves. They operate on the

basis of referrals. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic they received an average of 60 referrals per month, this increased to 300 in December 2020 and is now currently sitting at around 150 referrals per month, which translates to about 300 people in need of food, mainly due to debt or poor mental and physical health.

This continuous high demand for food, combined with the sharp drop in donations seen in the first quarter of this year due to donations being redirected to support people affected by the war in Ukraine, has meant that Silklife have had to use their savings to go out and buy food to continue providing emergency food parcels. Furthermore, the increase in cost of living, raise in bill and fuel prices has resulted in the food bank itself struggling to meet their own needs.

Despite these challenges, they are continuing to operate, develop their relationships with local businesses and are working hard to help people in their local community. For instance, they work with a dietician to ensure the meals provided are nutritious and come with a meal planner for three meals per day. They also run an employability café which aims to address the reasons why people may be accessing the food bank in the first place and help them be able to meet their needs on their own.

Real-life stories

Media freelancer – This individual is a regular donor to the food bank, however during the pandemic they had no work, and with the increasing costs of living they had to use the food bank to access food to not go hungry.

Domestic violence survivor and her child were placed in emergency accommodation without any cooking facilities, or shops nearby over Easter weekend. Thus, they were provided with a 'kettle bag', which included food that you can make only using a kettle.

3.1.5 New Life Church

New Life Church operate a free, independent foodbank for people in extreme hardship situations to help them access food and meet their needs. They work closely with local businesses and supermarkets such as Greggs, Tesco, Aldi and more to receive donations in the form of food as well as other necessities such as nappies, cleaning and washing products and white goods. In addition to this, they provide holistic support to people through the food bank and church and provide people with opportunities to long-term solution to the challenges they face, such as debt advice and signposting them to grants and running job clubs to help people into employment and off benefits.

The majority of people (~80%) who access their food bank are referred to them from a range of organisations such as schools, mental health services, social care, NHS, midwives and many more, with the remaining proportion of individuals (~20%) self-referring to the foodbank.

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic they used to feed around 100 people a month, however, this doubled during the pandemic as people became furloughed. They began to see more people using the food bank multiple times instead of just one off as previously noted and they often had to go and purchase food from supermarkets because they were running out of stock. Although they were able to meet the increased demand the pandemic brought, they noted that the food provided is not very sustainable and nutritious, and they infrequently receive fresh fruit and vegetables. This makes it especially difficult for some of their users who have special diet requirements due to health conditions to be able to meet those.

Real-life story

An **elderly couple** recently accessed the food bank as all of their finances are going to paying for taxis to their hospital appointments, leaving them with no money for food.

3.1.6 Lingua.GM

Lingua.GM, 'connecting human minds through culture, words and technology' are a not-for-profit professional local translating and interpreting service providing linguistic, mental health, and wellness services along with community engagement. Lingua.GM is comprised of bilingual mental health practitioners serving the local community to meet the needs of individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds who do not speak English. Currently there are over 20 different languages spoken in this area, and a significant proportion of these individuals are slipping through the system. Many are unable to access support because they cannot understand nor speak English. Thus, Lingua.GM is playing a key role in supporting minority ethnic communities by providing them with direct mental health support, shopping vouchers to spend at their local international shops on culturally appropriate foods and making food deliveries to their residence.

3.1.7 Cre8 – Project Grow

Cre8 is a charity based in Macclesfield that aims to empower local people. As part of their offer, they run Project GROW which encompasses a surplus food grocery, community garden and health and wellbeing activities. The surplus food grocery aims to reduce food waste and provide people with affordable access to food by offering them £20-£30 worth of food that is nearing the end of its self-life which has been donated by supermarkets, shops, other charities (Fairshare), partners (Silklife Foodbank, Neighbourly), suppliers in exchange for a £3 weekly membership fee. The membership is open to anyone and there no specific requirements nor restrictions, apart from allowing only one visit per week. Although they do not provide emergency food aid, Cre8 work closely with Silklife Foodbank and regularly signpost people in need to them. Nevertheless, they currently support 150-170 families per week and since joining Faishare have used 51 tonnes of food. This has largely been due to their investments in vans, and drivers, including a chilled van allowing them to pick up daily from Fairshare and local supermarkets and to work collaboratively with partners to deliver

food to people too. As the food supply is there and the demand is increasing, they are looking to increase the number of collection days and locations within Macclesfield to reach even more people in need, with a goal of becoming self-sustainable following the end of the national lottery funding in 2 years.

3.1.8 Plus Dane Housing

A housing association with a social purpose to support their customers and tackle social inequality. Plus Dane Housing recognise the current cost of living crisis with energy prices expected to increase by 98% in October this year compared to last year and the impact this is having on people, and they want to help. They have incorporated social values within all of their contracts with other organisations, making every contact count. Thus, if a plumber goes to fix a problem at one of their properties, they are also encouraged to provide some training or job opportunities to their tenants in need to support them out of hardship.

In addition, they provide their customers with a myriad of additional mental health support, resettlement support, crisis support and 360 support. As part of their crisis support, they provided people with 57 energy vouchers, allowing them to save some money for food and, during their winter campaign they supported 289 customers by providing them with shopping vouchers or food parcels. However, they expect numbers to double this year and they recognise that this is not a sustainable support nor a long-term solution to people's struggles. Thus the 360 support they also provide is aimed at making people more resilient, improving their mental health, and providing them with employment opportunities to create sustainable solutions and prevent people becoming dependent on emergency support.

Furthermore, they have set up a community shop selling surplus food from supermarkets at discounted prices for individuals on benefits to give them confidence and enable them to improve their situation and move away from relying on food banks. A community kitchen and a hub have also been created to provide social spaces for people, and offer them education, training and employment further contributing to their social progression and supporting them out of crisis.

3.1.9 Community and Voluntary Services Cheshire East (CVSCE)

The Food Network was started early in the pandemic by the CVSCE to bring together organisations, and allow them to share information, best practice, and resources, providing them with practical and logistical support where needed. Fifty-seven organisations were in regular contact and took part in a consultation with the Food Network: these included food banks, community pantries, community cafes and other services.

Similar to the challenges described by many other organisations, the Food Network reiterated that the increased demand for emergency food aid, reliance on donations and their decline, the current living crisis, combined with upcoming winter pressures are some of the pressures currently affecting organisations supporting people to access food.

Some other important challenges included:

- **Storage pressures for longer life goods** - having access to appropriate storage and the cost of that.

- **Shelf life of donated foods** - needs to be stored correctly and quickly given out.
- **Coordination of logistics** - transportation, bagging of goods, opening times, and geography of service provision across Cheshire East.
- **Repeat requests for service** – people fall into a pattern of accessing emergency food provision and it is very difficult to get out of it. The volunteers may not have the skills or connections with people to signpost them to relevant services and provide them with long-term support to break out of the cycle.
- **Reduction in volunteers** – people have less and less time and capacity to volunteer.

The Food Network also noted it is vital that service users are treated with dignity, in a non-judgemental way and are provided with wrap around support that is connected which removes any barriers to accessing further support and helps them break out of the cycle. In addition, organisations need to provide support for their volunteers, and recognise that their role is difficult and tiring and they need to also have a support network that keeps them going. They should also be provided with specialist training to be able to have a conversation with people who access their services and provide them with more holistic support rather than just giving out food.

On a more practical level, they reported that there was excitement about the food coordinator post providing strategic support and connection with other service delivery. Additionally, organisations wanted bags to be sourced centrally and to have a collective funding bids.

3.2 Understanding the current challenges

Building on the presentations, the key challenges facing providers and the people they serve were discussed.

One key challenge raised was that **'we don't know enough about the people using our services'**. Organisations make a lot of assumptions about why people are accessing emergency food aid, who they are and what their needs are.

Reduced donations brought to light the overreliance on supermarket donations and that more could be proactively done to 'think outside the box' and tap into other resources. Attendees concluded that there is in fact a lot of food that goes to waste on the journey from 'field to fork' that could be accessed by providers. Currently, a **very large proportion of food is wasted before it makes it to supermarkets** and a further proportion of food at the supermarkets that does not get sold is also thrown away. Thus, the concern that needs addressing is not how do we get more donations, but how do we reduce food waste and utilise all of the food that is produced? This can be difficult to achieve if the Food Network is not joined up and it does not include producers and manufacturers which will be key contributors to the new model of utilising food waste instead of mainly relying on donations.

Attendees also discussed that **current efforts are focused on providing people with access to emergency food provision 'downstream'** rather than working 'upstream' to improve the food ecosystem and prevent people from getting into crisis in the first place. While the emergency food provision in Cheshire East is a vital form of support, many said that more needs to be done to develop a strategic response to food access. This would help prevent dependency on food banks and promote independence among service users, enabling them to be able to afford food without having to rely on emergency food aid. While there was an agreement in the room that this needed to happen, it was highlighted that the economic case for prevention and early intervention needed to be made.

In terms of the challenges facing service users themselves, it was highlighted that support to access food was 'one part of the jigsaw' and that many **people who experience food poverty also face wider challenges** related to debt, employment, benefits, housing, substance use and mental health. It was discussed that providers – and the staff and volunteers who work there – play a key role in signposting/ referring people to wider support and that more needed to be done to establish clear pathways across the system and to equip volunteers with the knowledge, confidence and skills to fulfil this role.

Moreover, there is a lack of education around cooking, budgeting and finances that needs to be addressed. A lot of the current users of emergency food aid, do not know how to cook, budget, and spend money correctly. Others may be suffering with mental health problems which impact their life and ability to work, which has a knock-on effect and leads them to requiring support to access food.

To close this discussion, attendees raised the question of **'how do we measure success?'** Is it more people accessing services successfully because they are more aware of them and are more accessible, or is it less people accessing services because they do not need them? Attendees agreed that metrics need to be established to continually monitor progress and evaluate success.

3.3 Vision for the future – At its best

The second part of the afternoon discussion focused on creating a 'vision' for the future. Attendees were first posed with the question 'At its best, supporting people in Cheshire East to access food is like what?' However, the scope of the question was quickly changed at the start as attendees wanted to move away from a 'fixing' mindset to a more 'enabling' one, so the question was adjusted by attendees to 'At its best, Cheshire East's approach to food access is like what?'

At its best, attendees wanted to see a collective and co-ordinated approach to a sustainable food chain system. Currently, a lot of food banks and other organisations are working in silo, without consulting each other, not sharing knowledge, information, and resources. Thus, a more join-up approach where organisations work collaboratively, to reduce duplication and be more efficient is needed. For instance, if one organisation has access to a chilled van that is doing deliveries in a similar area to them, can both organisations work together and share the van?

Furthermore, producers and manufactures need to be brought into this conversation in order to be able to create a sustainable food chain system. This means working directly with local farmers to get any food that is past its sell by date/ doesn't meet the criteria to be sold and using it in food parcels and community shops. Additionally, schools, hospitals, coffee shops and other businesses can be connected with local farmers too who can sell to them milk or food that is near its use by date at discounted rates, reducing food waste and supporting local farmers and the community. Similarly, organisations should be working with local restaurants and hospitality staff to obtain any left-over food that would normally go to waste, which would not only take the pressure off food banks from mainly relying on donations, but it would also help the environment.

In regard to emergency provision and support, it was discussed that awareness needs to be raised so that people know about these services, especially food banks and community shops, and are not deterred from accessing them due to shame or embarrassment. Furthermore, a clear pathway of referral is necessary which will be able to support a person in crisis to get back on the path out of poverty. Similarly, a collaborative approach is required with these wider organisations and services to develop an early intervention flagging system. Thus, any individuals accessing wider support, such as for their mental health, can be assessed and if deemed at-risk of food poverty be referred to community shops or other appropriate services that can interfere earlier on before this individual has gone days without eating.

3.4 Co-creating tangible actions and next steps

For the third task of the afternoon, attendees were asked to write down answers to the question: 'What are the most important first steps we need to take?' Their responses are summarised below.

- The first step has been made today by bringing together key organisations, networking, developing relationships, identifying challenges, and developing the vision for the future.
- Next, we need collaborative and co-ordinated working between services across Cheshire East to share existing information and resources.
- Engage with wider services, organisations, and suppliers such as producers and manufacturers and work collaboratively with them to tackle food waste.
- Set up community food bank allotments and gardens.
- Explore existing volunteering driving services and collaborate with them, e.g. volunteers delivering medicines, could they also deliver food to rural areas on their way?
- Increase awareness of community shops, cafes and other services and ensure these are accessible to all including people who do not speak English as a first language.
- Engage with residents to gather their input and views on the strategy/plan – in order to co-design an approach with them and for them.
- Establish a tracking tool for referrals and decide on success criteria/ metrics.
- Develop a short-, medium- and long-term strategy.
- Include this agenda in the Shared Prosperity Fund.

3.5 Commitment to action

The closing task was designed to prompt attendees to commit to action to gain buy-in beyond the Spotlight Review. Attendees were asked to make two statements: 'I will' and 'We will'. The following commitments were made:

I will:

- Ensure this is on the agenda of shared prosperity fund.
- Ensure residents know what is available in their locality – Foodbanks, social supermarkets.
- Campaign for local activity with friend, family, and community to volunteer support with food delivery.
- Ensure CRE8 continues to be part of those discussions/conversations.
- Engage and communicate actively and positively within the development to the strategy.
- Encourage the formation of a forum for the emergency providers.
- Ensure information and resources can be more accessible. Refer to services available.
- Review as wrap around services to gauge how we reduce repeat referrals.
- Endeavour to end food poverty.
- Support all providers in the VCFSE space to contribute to the conversation.
- Keep reviewing liaison and links with stakeholders for improved access to E.A Scheme.
- Raise awareness within my team and consider how we can identify opportunities as part of future connections between services and commissioning.

We will:

- Commit to support policy on this issue.
- Work towards a shared strategy that serves the whole community effectively and efficiently.
- Produce a strategy.
- Work together, sharing ideas and also process of what's working well, what isn't and how could it be improved.
- Work to develop good partnership links across the sector to improve the pathway of support for people.
- Keep raising awareness on poverty – under issues.
- Change the food eco system for the better.
- Develop an access to strategy that works (includes) everyone that lives/works in CE.

- Continue to work together.
- Develop systems to facilitate quick responses/solutions to emergency food need and, sustained solutions.
- Gather intel from residents to feed into the plan.
- Use today as a benchmark and starting point to work together, raise this issue and resolve it.

4 Strategic Recommendations

Informed by the insights, 5 key strategic recommendations have been made that can be used to guide the next steps beyond this Spotlight Review to influence policy and improve access to food in Cheshire East.

1. Establish a working group and co-create a strategy with service users.

A working group should be set up including key stakeholders who will share responsibility and take ownership of driving this agenda forward. Additionally, the strategy needs to be co-created with local residents, with an 'upstream' focus - how can individuals be identified and supported before they have to access emergency food aid?

2. Establish a referral pathway/process.

There should be a clear pathway and referral process for individuals who have accessed emergency food aid to be signposted to the appropriate services that will help them break the cycle of food poverty and poverty in general. Providing people with this long-term support will reduce the dependence on food banks and enable individuals to get back on their feet. Keeping track of where individuals are in the referral pathway and whether they are re-accessing emergency food aid can act as a measure of success of the changes being made and the support provided.

3. Upskill volunteer workforce to advice, signpost and make referrals.

Volunteers should be provided with the knowledge, confidence, and skills to provide advice to people who access their services, signpost them and make referrals to wider organisations (e.g. mental health services, debt advice etc.) as the challenge of food poverty cannot be addressed in isolation.

4. In collaboration with the Food Network, provide a social space for information sharing.

A clear need was identified by organisations to be able to share knowledge, information, and resources among each other. The Food Network is well placed to support this as it already has established relationships with local organisations. Sharing physical resources such as storage space and vans is another aspect which should be considered and implemented to reduce duplication and improve the efficiency of the current services.

5. Collaborate with producers and manufactures to support a food surplus model of food procurement.

Food banks, community shops and other organisations should establish relationships with local farmers to acquire food that does not meet the criteria to be sold or is near its use by date. This will reduce the demand for donations and create a more sustainable approach to food access both for the environment and for the organisations.

5 Appendix

Table 1: List of attendees, including their name and organisation/role (n=25)

Name	Organisation/Role
Dan Coyne	Cheshire East Council
Sharon Joynson	Cheshire East Council
Kerry Ball	Cheshire East Council
Cllr Rhodes	Cheshire East Council – Chair of Adults & Health Committee
Cllr Critchley	Cheshire East Council – Member of Adults & Health Committee
Cllr Cowes	Cheshire East Council – Member of Adults & Health Committee
Nina Gavin	ICE Creates – Facilitator
Katrin Georgieva	ICE Creates – Minute Taker/Live Theming
Dave Atkinson	Silklife Foodbank
Usman Ashiq	Plus Dane Housing
Jenny Priest	Plus Dane Housing
Graham Brown	CRE8
Chantelle Thomas	LiveWell Cheshire East Council – Systems Trainer & Support Officer
Jenny Owen	Citizens Advice North
Lisa Noakes	Citizens Advice North
Liz Shaw	Citizens Advice Cheshire East
Kathryn Sullivan	CVSCE
Helen Gerrard	Cheshire East Council - Head of Service – Customer Care
Liz Rimmer	Cheshire East Council – Benefits Manager
Melina Safari	LinguaGM
Dr Susie Roberts	Cheshire East Council – Public Health Consultant
Jo and Steve	New Life Church
Helen Clark	Cheshire East Council – Strategic Commissioning
Amanda Beech	Green Tree House

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