Measuring Household Food Insecurity in Brighton & Hove: some notes
Emily O’Brien, Feb 2017

1 Brighton & Hove Food Poverty Action Plan

Our ambitious 3 year partnership plan launched in November 2015 included 10 principles outlining how the city should address food poverty. The plan had 5 aims, each with an action plan. Aim 5 was ‘Commit to measuring levels of food poverty so we know if we are being effective,’ recognising that we can only track the success of a food poverty action plan if we are able to measure food poverty levels, which are not currently measured by Government or elsewhere. This is the action plan associated with Aim 5:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AIM 5</th>
<th>Measure levels of food poverty: ACTIONS</th>
<th>Who leads? (First organisation listed) + Who else involved?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5A.1</td>
<td>BHFP to continue to measure crisis or emergency food poverty by providing an annual snapshot of food bank use in the city.</td>
<td>BHFP</td>
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<td>5A.2</td>
<td>Continue to gather information on longer term or chronic food poverty in the city; also on national good practice/solutions.</td>
<td>BHFP</td>
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<td>5A.3</td>
<td>Explore how information from MUST (malnutrition screening) can inform understanding of food poverty in the city, in parallel with wider use of MUST outlined in Aim 2.</td>
<td>CCG</td>
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<td>5A.4</td>
<td>Use breastfeeding rate data to track rates of breastfeeding, taking note of trends in more deprived wards.</td>
<td>Joint: BHCC Early Years + Public Health</td>
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<td>5A.5</td>
<td>Use child measurement programme data to track rates of childhood obesity in different income groups.</td>
<td>BHCC Public Health via NCMP</td>
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<td>5A.6</td>
<td>Food Banks commit to measuring the reasons people are accessing them, using ‘Trussell Trust’ categories so that the data can be compared.</td>
<td>Individual food banks (BHFP to compile)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5A.7</td>
<td>Organisations and services track food poverty levels amongst their service users using question(s) already piloted by BHFP or including the broader city tracker food/fuel question, or ‘innovative’ methods e.g. video/visuals - BHFP to collate data</td>
<td>BHFP (to share/coordinate); Moneyworks Advice line; BHCC (Housing, ASC, other); Individual organisations</td>
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<td>5A.8</td>
<td>Universities strengthen their research partnership with BHFP and/or Food Matters, including at least one joint project around understanding or tracking food poverty or food prices/availability in the city (See also Aim 1B.6).</td>
<td>Brighton and Sussex Universities Food Network; BHFP; Food Matters.</td>
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<td>5A.9</td>
<td>The City Council measures on-going levels of long term or chronic food and fuel poverty via a question in the annual weighted ‘city tracker’ survey, Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG)/BHFP explore whether contracts for health and social care services can help with measuring levels of food poverty (by requiring data collection) or whether they can share existing data e.g. from health visitor assessments.</td>
<td>Citywide Connect; BHCC Adult Social Care; CCG</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2 Development of food poverty questions for sharing with partners (action 5A.7)

In 2013 we developed three simple questions for partner organisations to include in existing surveys or monitoring. We asked partners to share their results with us (anonymised) helping to build a picture of household food insecurity as it affects particular groups of people in the city. You can see our ‘call to action’ plus the three questions at http://bhfood.org.uk/Blog/play-your-part-in-the-city-s-food-poverty-action-plan-ask-a-simple-question

We would have liked to recommend a much longer set of questions. The most respected international systems (such as the ‘USDA’ in The United States) ask eight or more questions. Local organisations, however, weren’t willing to include so many questions in their existing questionnaires or monitoring exercises, so we ended up developing our own much shorter list of three questions. They were developed in conversation with experts including Kath Dalmeny at Sustain and leading academics Liz Dowler & Martin Caraher. Our questions changed slightly as time went on, in response to feedback, and because we later adapted one of the questions so it would match the city-wide ‘city tracker’ question (see below). Although we developed three questions, in practice most organisations only had room (or the will) to include one or two questions. Many adapted the questions to suit their needs.

The advantages of this approach are:

- We now have some stats we can quote on food poverty and especially how it affects particular groups of service users
- This is a low cost, low resource way to work as it uses what is there already, and fits with what organisations are able to offer
- The approach strengthens partnership and widens ownership. It is important that food poverty as an issue is owned collectively in the city, not by any one organisation.
- It is mutually beneficial. Organisations told us that including our questions was useful for them as well as for us, both in highlighting need and generating powerful stats and stories to show their funders or supporters. The City council’s housing department commented:
  “I am so glad we asked this set of new questions in this year’s … survey, it has highlighted there is a need.”

The disadvantages are:

- There are too few questions to get a full picture of household food insecurity in the households questioned, compared to asking eight or ten questions.
- It was fiddly developing the initial questions, though worth it in the end.
- We don’t have control. Sometimes we have to chase partners and struggle to get the data back. Indeed in one case (mentioning no names) an organisation regularly gathered a load of data from clients on paper forms but it seems they never analyse it, so were unable to feed back. It is also possible people have included the questions but not told us, so we don’t even know to chase them.
- It is not possible to compare one organisation’s data against another’s directly, as organisations don’t ‘weight’ their answers to be representative.

So far the City Council housing department has included these questions in its three yearly survey of tenants, and several voluntary sector partners (including the Warmth for Wellbeing programme, The Purple People Kitchen Food Bank, Amaze, BUCFP and Moneyworks) have built the questions into their monitoring. Some compelling evidence has emerged. For example, in 2013-14 15% of Amaze’s parents, who have children with special needs, said they had reduced the size of meals or skipped meals because
there wasn’t enough money for food. The ‘comments’ box also brought out the issue of parents skipping meals in order to feed their children. In the same year 68% of those that responded on the Warmth for Wellbeing fuel poverty programme indicated that, in the previous year, they had to choose between spending money on food and spending money on fuel (NB This was an earlier pilot question, since amended). In 2015-16, 42% of BUCFP’s centre users said they had reduced the size of their meals or skipped meals because they couldn’t afford food; 56% of centre users tended to agree or strongly agree that they would not have enough money to pay for food, water and heating costs after paying housing costs; and 62% of centre users tended to eat less healthily at home because they couldn’t afford healthier options.

3 City Tracker Survey (action 5A.7)

In 2014, Brighton and Hove City Council and Brighton & Hove Connected (The Local Strategic Partnership) worked with the Food Partnership to include a question on food and fuel poverty in their annual City Tracker customer satisfaction survey of residents. It was challenging to come up with just one question to cover both these areas, when ideally you need about eight questions just to ask about food poverty. In the end the question all partners agreed on was:

“Thinking about next year, how much do you agree or disagree that you will have enough money, after housing costs, to meet basic living costs? By this I mean to pay for food, water and heating”

The advantages of this approach were:

- We have data! In fact we have robust data.
- This is a relatively low cost way to work as it uses an existing survey.
- The approach has strengthened partnership working with the council.
- The links between fuel and food poverty are emphasised.
- As this is an annual weighted survey (i.e. it is representative of the profile of the city) it provides a baseline from which changes can be tracked.
- The data is broken down so it is possible to separate out data on people by age, gender or in relation to disability/health condition and see how their food/fuel poverty situation compares with the general population of the city (but not geographical areas – see below)

The disadvantages were:

- The evidence is limited as there is only one question included (not even three let alone eight…)
- The survey is vulnerable to cuts in future; many cities have abandoned customer satisfaction surveys. Including its continuation in the city’s food poverty action plan (to which the City Council is a main partner) was important to try and help to protect it.
- Whilst the sample size (1000) is large enough for the overall figure to be representative, when the data is broken down by postcode the sample size becomes too small to be statistically representative, so we can’t fully compare different geographical areas of the city

In the first year asked, 2014-15 the evidence generated was powerful and took many by surprise. It has been a driver in generating support for the food poverty action plan going forward. We found that 23% of people in our city anticipated difficulty paying for food, water or heating next year, with particularly high levels of insecurity in women, young working age people and those with a disability or long term health condition.

The 2015-16 survey revealed the same overall levels of household food insecurity as in 2014, despite a better economic picture. 23% of people didn’t think they would have enough income to cover basic living costs. Those most likely to struggle were concentrated in particular groups:
• Two out of five renting privately (42%) or living in social housing (41%) disagreed that they would have the ability to meet basic living cost compared to only 12% of those who own their home or have a mortgage.

• A third of those aged 18 to 34 (35%) compared to only 17% of those aged over 34.

• A third of those with a health problem or disability that affects their activity (33%) compared to only 21% without.

4. Annual Food Banks & Emergency Food Survey

Whilst we believe strongly that we should focus on household food insecurity or ‘long term’ food poverty in our food poverty action plan, we also track emergency food use via an annual survey of food bank use in the city.

The majority of our fifteen food banks are independent, and there is only one run by the Trussell Trust. As they are run by a range of organisations, from faith groups to community organisations to children’s centres, without a central organisation collating data we would not know about levels of food bank use in the city.

We have carried out the survey since 2014, using an online ‘survey monkey’ survey followed up by telephone calls to those who have not responded, if necessary filling in the survey by phone with the respondent. The survey is carried out at the same time each year. The aim is to capture data from all the food banks so as to be as accurate as possible, although there are unavoidable issues with having completely accurate data including:

• The figures all depend on how you define a food bank. For this survey, organisations self-identify. Some organisations give out food parcels as part of other activities and they are not captured in this survey.

• We ask food banks to estimate numbers of ‘food parcel’s’ but food parcels come in varying sizes with varying contents- some food banks vary parcel size for different recipients depending on numbers in household and circumstances.

• Whilst some food banks keep meticulous records, some are estimating. The estimate may vary depending on who from the food bank is completing the survey.

On a more fundamental level, as with all measurements that look at food bank use, food bank use is not a proxy for food poverty. It is very likely there are many people in the city who may not be able to access a food bank e.g. people with physical or mental health or mobility issues or who don’t know about food bank provision or don’t feel able to seek them out because of stigma. Therefore this survey only gives a snapshot of the demand for food banks in the city and does not take into account the many people who are struggling but cannot or choose not to access food banks.

The 2016 survey found that despite the improvements in the national economy, food bank usage remains steady in the city, increasing slightly on 2015 figures. 15 food banks in Brighton and Hove gave out food parcels to an average of 298 households per week. The average value of a food parcel was £23. Nine of the fourteen...
food banks reported that there had been increase in demand over the last year

This compares to 2015 when 15 food banks gave out roughly 289 food parcels (average value of a food parcel was £22). In 2014, 13 food banks distributed 266 food parcels.

For the first time in 2016 the survey was able to record reasons for people using their food bank using Trussell Trust categories, as several food banks now record this data as a collective action for the city’s food banks in the Food Poverty Action Plan.

Other uses for the survey are finding out more about issues facing food banks in the city, what additional services they would like to provide, and how they would like the Food Banks & Emergency Food Network, which the Food Partnership hosts, to develop. For example, in 2016 the biggest gap identified was housing advice which four food banks currently provide and another eight would like to offer, reflecting concerns about housing raised elsewhere in the survey and at network meetings.

They survey is also used for identifying changing training needs. Ongoing training needs are food safety/hygiene and first aid. In a 2016 network meeting, food banks had talked about the increase in demand from migrants (which caused issues such as translation difficulties, and people without recourse to funds accessing food banks long term) so a question was added. Five food banks suggested they would benefit from training in understanding migrant rights and cultures.

With shared meals a focus for the city’s food poverty action plan, a question was included on catering training and four food banks were interested in catering skills for large groups.

The intelligence from these annual surveys is shared with partners, for example advice services and the city council, so it can inform planning. The annual surveys can be viewed at http://bhfood.org.uk/resources.
4. Other data and research

We spend a lot of time talking to organisations and individuals, especially during the consultation process for developing the Food Poverty Action Plan. We carried out a series of focus groups with users of lunch clubs and food banks, and involved organisations through consultation events and by going to visit them – we find going to see what people do is the best form of research.

We get quite a bit of intelligence through running our Food Poverty Awareness Training sessions for frontline workers such as housing staff – these are interactive and people are encouraged to share their experiences (and their solutions) which in turn inform our strategic work.

We have carried out own research into key areas such as Eating Together: Exploring the role of lunch clubs and shared meals in Brighton & Hove. Summary report and related blog (June 2015) and Healthy Ageing and Food - bringing a food focus to Brighton & Hove an 'Age Friendly' City (September 2016).

We also explored rates food poverty, by looking at other existing data sources, which a volunteer compiled for us in Identifying Food Poverty in Brighton & Hove.

Much of our research is available at www.bhfood.org.uk/resources