Tackling food poverty in rural communities

August 2019

Introduction

This briefing highlights challenges faced by people in rural communities to access affordable food, as well as examples of responses to food poverty in rural and more dispersed areas. The briefing is informed by information and learning from the Food Power and other networks, as well as a Food Power/ Independent Food Aid Network workshop held in June 2019 and hosted by the Bristol Poverty Institute (attended by representatives from Cornwall, Devon, Herefordshire, North Yorkshire, North Wales, Northern Ireland and Shropshire delivering a range of food-related support and working with local food poverty alliances or networks, as well as academics). We acknowledge that food and food-related projects can be very powerful tools to reduce isolation and rebuild rural communities, but this briefing focuses specifically on people's access to food.

What do we mean by 'rural'?

The Office of National Statistics classifies any settlement over 10,000 in population as urban and everything else is therefore classified as rural. While we use the term rural throughout this briefing, we hope that the content is relevant to those working across other sparsely populated and/or more isolated communities whether or not they are officially categorised as rural. It is important not to see issues as being about rural versus urban areas, rather we need to ensure that rural poverty is well understood and the response is both adequate and appropriate, alongside response to poverty in urban areas.

What do we mean by rural (food) poverty?

Official statistics only tell part of the story; despite official statistic showing a fall in rural poverty, almost one in five children (19%) in rural areas live in relative low income after housing costs. Data must also be use with care. For example, using the relative cost of housing, can paint a rosier picture than reality. Also when applied to rural areas, indices of deprivation do not adequately highlight pockets of poverty within the large geographical areas used. Furthermore, people living in rural areas pay a 'rural premium' with an increased cost of living due to inflated travel and heating, research indicates this premium may add an additional £3000 per year costs for rural households. It is therefore vital to take account of this rural poverty premium. There have also been attempts to explore alternative ways to access deprivation in rural areas.

Poverty is experienced differently in rural areas and is often more 'hidden' than in urban areas and the voices of people experiencing poverty in rural communities is often missed. A combination of factors and challenges highlighted below lead to the people having to spend more to access food – due to higher costs of food itself and/or expenditure to access it, as well as limited options. Rural areas are hubs of agricultural production but local residents often have difficulties accessing fresh produce at affordable prices due to limited choice available locally. People living in poverty in rural communities can struggle due to distance from services, transportation costs and access to information. Information on people facing food poverty in rural areas is limited and people can feel forced to hide poverty and poor access to food. Uptake of free school meals and pension tax credits by eligible groups is often lower in rural areas

not because the need is not there but because of multiple barriers. The compounding effect of multiple challenges requires a holistic approach, rather than separate responses to individual challenges. Yet few organisations focus on (food) poverty in rural areas.

> *Despite the idyllic traditional image of the English countryside and lower rates than in urban areas, poverty persists in rural areas and can be particularly harsh. Rural dwellers are particularly affected by cuts to transportation and public services and are at a higher risk of loneliness and isolation. Without adequate access to transportation, people may not be able to reach places of employment where they could otherwise get a job. And in an era of "digital by default", lack of broadband Internet or access to libraries is particularly problematic.*
> [Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights on his visit to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#)

Challenges

Demographics of rural communities
There is generally a skew to an older population in many rural areas. This can present challenges in terms of social care needs, but also has an impact on the local economy. Alongside the needs of an ageing population, there is a significant population of people with industrial-related health conditions and disabilities. Furthermore, people can experience severe social isolation, showing how the 'more than food' approach is important to promote inclusion and (re)build communities.

Distances and sparsity within and between rural communities
By definition, rural communities are much less densely populated areas. It is important to remember people can also live in hamlets, isolated individual or small number of houses, not just in villages and small towns. People may well want to shop locally and support the local economy, but limited affordability and variable choice can undermine this desire. Local shops in many rural areas offer limited food choices, making it necessary to travel large distances to access supermarkets. Supermarket food deliveries can be very limited in some postcodes. Those on low incomes living in rural areas also struggle to access support services, which tend to be located in urban centres. Poor, and at times non-existent, internet and mobile coverage further hinder access to support. For those without transport the cuts to public transport have further limited access to food and support services.

This distance will affect residents' ability to access food retailers, as well as provisions of emergency food. Instead, rural communities have access to convenience shops supplying highly processed convenience foods at high prices. For many, even convenience stores are difficult to reach when compared to those living in rural areas. The average rural consumer would need to *drive* for 9 minutes to reach the closest convenience store meanwhile it only takes the average urban consumer 7 minutes to *walk* the closest one. It is a much less convenient than in urban areas for people to shop on a daily basis, meaning they may miss out on 'deals', fresh produce. People shopping on tight budgets need to be able to affordable healthy food, however many of the supermarkets which offer food at the lowest prices are located in the larger towns. Many smaller towns and villages have very few food retail outlets and food is often sold at a premium rate, with little choice of healthy options.

An additional issue is that some supermarkets will not deliver to rural postcodes. There is still limited coverage for supermarket deliveries. The consequence is that families can tend to shop locally, meaning that they can buy even less food for their money. This can lead to them to buy food which is filling, rather than food which has high nutritional value. Many local supermarket chains use differential pricing even on own brand products meaning that shopping costs more at their shops in remote rural areas with more well-off people being willing to pay a premium. Supermarket convenience stores have also been reported to charge up to 7% more than their larger store counterparts. Supermarket convenience stores often do not stock own brand goods which results in consumers paying twice as much to buy a branded product.

This presents a number of challenges to those wanting to promote access to good food, as well as emergency food aid. Only some food banks deliver out to communities and there are significant challenges in setting up any food-buying or coop group across a dispersed population. However it's important to note how such provision can be very valuable, even where it reaches a smaller number of people than in urban areas and can cost more per head.

Transportation
Access to affordable transport can be very limited, or indeed non-existent, within rural communities. These transportation challenges can increase food poverty as people can find it difficult to transport larger amounts of food home from shop or food-related projects. Bus transport is often infrequent, expensive and often requires multiple legs, for example an initial trip to a larger village or town, or a lift to a bus stop. Community transport in many areas has been reduced in recent years, driven partly by public sector cuts and profitability, and many older people or disabled people are left stranded and unable to access sources of good fresh food. Indeed, local funding for bus routes in England and Wales is down by 45% (£78 million) since 2010.

Many people living in poverty do not have access to their own transport and cuts to public transport, particularly in rural areas, make it difficult for families to access more affordable food options. It was reported that on average, people living in rural areas travel 45% further per year than those in England as a whole and 53% further than those living in urban areas. Where there are services the cost of rural bus transport is often a significant factor limiting choice for those on low incomes. Also, those who have access to vehicles will also pay more for petrol than those living in urban areas to travel to supermarkets, markets and other food retailers. Transport often connects people to a main town rather than around the area though a hub and spoke type arrangement. This can lead to long journey times around a county as well as significant disconnect between places.

Digital connectivity and exclusion
Limited internet connection in many rural communities affects information sharing within rural areas and access to services. Mobile phones are often people's default way of accessing the internet (rather than through laptops or PCs). Public services and employers' focus on digital provision of services adversely affects those in rural areas where connectivity is often poor and local services such as libraries and community centres either have been cut or have limited opening hours. Completing a job

application or social security benefits claim can be a significant challenge, including during the roll-out of Universal Credit.

Fuel poverty
Many rural communities are also living in fuel poverty and making choices in winter as to whether to heat their homes or buy food. Many rural communities are off the gas grid meaning that heating has to be fuelled by oil, LPG or solid fuels. This limits choice of electricity tariffs as people can't take advantage of dual tariff deals, but also oil and LPG are more expensive and oil in particular is a problem as a minimum delivery will cost anywhere from £200 to £250 depending on the price at the time. People using LPG gas bottles say that cooking or heating enough water for a bath or shower can limit their choices over what food they cook. Having the oven on for an hour can be too expensive. Many people still use coal fires and night storage heaters, including in social housing. Furthermore it cannot be assumed that people will be able to access emergency grants or funding from councils or energy companies for heating oil of solid fuel in times of crisis.

Low wages
Many rural areas have relatively low wage economies, with low paid sectors disproportionately represented. Local employment is often in low wage, seasonal or zero hours contracts creating unpredictability and poor financial resilience. Economic shocks such as illness, redundancy or unexpected life events such as divorce or bereavement can quickly spiral into a financial crisis. Many rural economies have a shrinking labour pool as people move away for jobs, housing and services accompanied by a growing retired or inactive population as people move to the country to retire and younger people move to more urban areas for employment and other opportunities.

Housing costs
While often costing less than in many urban areas, house ownership can be out of reach for many low-income households in rural areas too. In some areas, pressure on housing costs can increase because of the number of second homes or holiday rentals. Council or other social housing stocks are low; in some areas there are thousands of people on the waiting list for social housing. This can also result in limited social or affordable private sector lettings. The demand for second homes often drives the price of houses up thus making them unaffordable.

In terms of emergency accommodation in rural areas, this can often be allocated in one town in an area or county. This can lead to disproportionate impact on services in one place. Due to limited availability of accommodation there is often a reliance on cheap hotels and bed and breakfasts with limited or no cooking facilities beyond a kettle. There is also a growing trend of people being offered accommodation across much wider geographical area, meaning households don't have local connections to family, friends or connections to local income and food-related support

Cuts to services
Rural areas can often lose out in funding allocations or investment from statutory or voluntary schemes, due to a tendency to target funding and support at high density areas. In more recent years, this

depletion has been combined with cuts to or withdrawal of public, or publicly-funded, services to have a particular impact in rural areas and can be felt acutely by people living in rural areas. The combination of reductions in children's centres, libraries, schools, advice services, challenges to access to health and mental health services, as well as declines in post offices and local shops and other privately-run services all add this deficit in provision.

Yet the need and demand for support services has grown while access to them has shrunk. Some people have to travel significant distances to their nearest Jobcentre spending valuable cash on bus fares since Jobcentres insist on weekly or daily signing on. Residents in areas with poor transport provision may find it difficult to find employment resulting in lower disposable income which further exacerbates food poverty in these areas. Many may be reluctant to move to areas with greater employment opportunities due to having to leave family and friends. Many services have centralised, focusing on areas with the highest deprivation indices, leaving the rural population feeling abandoned and forgotten. This can combine with transport challenges to severely restrict access to services.

Tackling food poverty in rural areas

A wide range of organisations, alliances and networks have undertaken varied activities to address food poverty in rural areas. Alliances have formed partnerships with universities, charities and food aid organisations to develop steering groups and action plans. Alliances are keen to ensure their programmes/projects are addressing the needs of individuals experiencing food poverty. Alliances have involved experts with lived experiences of food poverty in developing action plans. Developing county-wide action plans can be challenging due to organisations mainly working at local, rather than county-wide, levels.

There are a wide range of interventions happening in many rural communities across the UK. The approaches to tackling food poverty in rural communities will differ to the approaches in urban communities. Below are some examples of activity from around the country. Food Power is keen to collect and share other examples; please contact the team if you would like to share information.

Carlisle
Carlisle Foodbank has identified a number of challenges of trying to reach people in rural areas. Poor public transport is real barrier, so in some cases support workers from housing associations, charities and the local tenant farmers' association and in some cases food bank referral vouchers are posted out. The food bank is exploring other ways to ensure it is reaching people in smaller communities, while also maintaining dignity of food aid recipients.

Cornwall
The Cornwall Independent Poverty Forum campaigns as End Hunger Cornwall targeting local MPs, councillors and other decision-makers. The group have found that public support for work in Cornwall has risen since the introduction of Universal Credit given the visibility of the problems people have experienced during the rollout of the new benefit. The group have found it useful to hold high profile public hearings on specific issues as this has generated media interest and helped the group publish evidence-based reports on these issues.

Derbyshire

[Feeding Derbyshire](#) is a countywide partnership aimed at finding sustainable solutions to help feed people who are struggling with low incomes and debt and to enable them to access good quality, nutritious food. The Feeding Derbyshire partnership is headed by Rural Action Derbyshire (RAD) alongside the Diocese of Derby, Citizens Advice and Community Voluntary Services across the Boroughs and Districts, FareShare East Midlands and Derbyshire County Council. This programme evolved out of an initial need to develop a food bank network. Feeding Derbyshire works across the whole county but this brings strengths alongside some challenges. The County Council has long held the view that services should be equitable and fairly-distributed. This means that whilst some critical services such as emergency food provision and food distribution are located in the more densely populated areas, these can be distributed around the whole county through strong networks in the voluntary and community sector, co-ordinated and supported by Feeding Derbyshire and RAD. Feeding Derbyshire has pursued its goal in a number of ways:

- Supporting community cafes and kitchens to use food from FareShare to cook meals sold at low-cost. These community cafes and kitchens are located in each Derbyshire borough and district and hosted in children's centres, schools and churches. In some instances, Feeding Derbyshire covers the cost for projects' initial subscriptions to FareShare to assist them during the more expensive start-up phase. Piloting a range of approaches including a Community Pantry in Glossop in the High Peak and a delivery scheme where users can pay a small subscription to access a weekly food delivery including fruit and veg sourced by FareShare.
- Calling out supermarkets with differential food and petrol pricing and who do not do not carry their more affordable lines in rural stores.
- Running campaigns to increase the uptake of Healthy Start vouchers, free school meals and Pension Credit.
- Exploring the role of village halls to become 'digital hubs' and a place for food and resources to be shared, including shared shopping orders.

Dumfries and Galloway

In Dumfries and Galloway, distance and rural sparsity is a key issue so they have identified a range of solutions ranging from very practical (providing bus fares to food banks users to get their food back home) and community led initiatives such as community kitchens where people can get a hot meal.

Moray

In North East Scotland, the [Fairer Moray Forum](#) consulted with diverse groups with lived experiences of food poverty with the aim of ensuring plans and projects meet the direct need to these groups. To [develop its plan](#) the alliance facilitated focus group discussions with a wide range of people including those experiencing homelessness, older people's groups, parenting groups and college students. The alliance recruited a volunteer with lived experiences of food poverty to assist in the facilitation of these focus
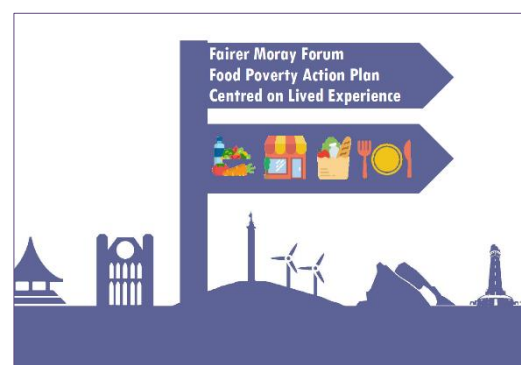
groups in order to encourage sharing experiences. The [Fairer Moray Forum Food Poverty Action Plan](#) focuses on five outcomes:

1. Remove the stigma around poverty
2. Income maximisation
3. Increase access to food and/or the social value of food
4. Increase food knowledge
5. Develop holiday food provision

North Wales, including Flintshire

The [North Wales Food Poverty Alliance](#) developed a steering group with representatives from the local authority, Public Health Wales, Bangor University, social landlords, the Trussell Trust and others in an effort to address food poverty in local areas. The alliance published a [charter](#) and organised a regional conference for November to in order to obtain a better understanding of the levels of food poverty in the region, share good practice and lessons learnt and develop ideas for further work.

Alongside its long-established work in Liverpool, the social enterprise Can Cook in conjunction with the Local Authority is looking to establish [good food hubs](#) in Flintshire and North Wales. Each Hub is a good meal distribution point, selling Can Cook's affordable meals to the residents who use the centres' services or are able to reach out to other residents such individuals who are unable to get to the centre or families that may need support. Furthermore, Flintshire Council, in partnership with Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board and ClwydAlyn, has joined forces with Can Cook again to run the [Share your Lunch](#) campaign to address hunger during the school holidays. This summer the programme aims to provide over 700 meals per day across 27 different play schemes over the six-week holiday.

Oban, Lorn and the Isles

One of the significant problems people face, if they are in a remote location, is knowing what help they are entitled to which could reduce the incidence of food poverty. There is also a culture of not wanting to ask for help and a fierce independence which means that people can end up not asking for help there is a crisis. Many communities have limited access to supermarkets that offer inexpensive food and they rely on expensive, local shops which limits food availability.

In the last year [Hope Kitchen](#) gave out 4,050 lunches and 2,320 dinners and 760 people received food from our food bank. They have the unique challenge of serving an area which includes six island communities, as well as remote villages on the mainland. One of the difficulties how people can access food when they are an hour away from Oban or have to use a ferry to get to Hope Kitchen. Hope Kitchen have developed excellent partnerships with other agencies as well as local haulage firms and the ferry companies who will deliver parcels and collect donations. Hope Kitchen also has a community garden

where local people are helped to grow their own food. This is difficult in an area which has a climate not conducive to growing but the project has focussed on vegetables and fruit that are grow well on the West Coast. The Plant to Plate project has inspired remote communities to start local growing schemes which can help people access nutritious and cheap, locally produced food.

Shropshire

The Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance is an alliance of organisations including Shropshire council, University Centre Shrewsbury, Citizens Advice Shropshire and local food banks aiming to tackle the growing concern of food poverty within the county of Shropshire. The alliance developed a 12-point Menu for Action to address food poverty within the county. During the development of action plans, Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance utilised participatory research tools; this included three workshops for community members to input their solutions on how to tackle food poverty. To ascertain the direct effects on households experiencing food poverty, the alliance surveyed local people with lived experiences of food poverty through an online survey and conducted one-to-one interviews.

The alliance is proactive in developing sustainable responses to food poverty. It developed the Shropshire Larder to offer advice to people on how to access emergency food; where to access low cost or free food in Shropshire; advice on eating well on a budget; and where to get local help with money issues. Crucially, the Larder tries to provide as comprehensive information as possible and not just refer people to the local Citizens Advice, which has limited capacity and increasing demand from more complex cases across the county.

Actions also include 'micro-interventions' such as providing an emergency accommodation box which includes a bigger cup, chopping board and other equipment to make more of very limited cooking facilities. Shrewsbury Food Hub (which coordinates the wider alliance) has worked with other small towns in the county to develop their own hubs; a key lesson from this work is that you need a committed person in a place in each town to succeed in this. The alliance is now working with local communities to develop grassroots project proposals to a local seed corn funding scheme to pilot preventative solutions to food poverty.

South Wales

South Wales Food Poverty Alliance has [mapped both the levels of food insecurity and the response](#) across the 13 local authority regions and published a [Call to Action](#) to address food poverty in the region. The alliance has found it challenging to work across the geographical range of the 13 local authorities. Therefore in terms of supporting specific projects, the alliance is focusing on some specific opportunities in the region, rather than trying to spread its efforts too thinly.

The alliance have developed an Advocacy Action Plan to collectively push for positive change based on the recommendations in the report. Taking the SWFPA and the mapping report 'on tour' around the region is helping to stimulate local conversations and more co-ordinated action and build a bigger network of connected organisation rooted in local communities. This can only be beneficial in effecting positive long term change.
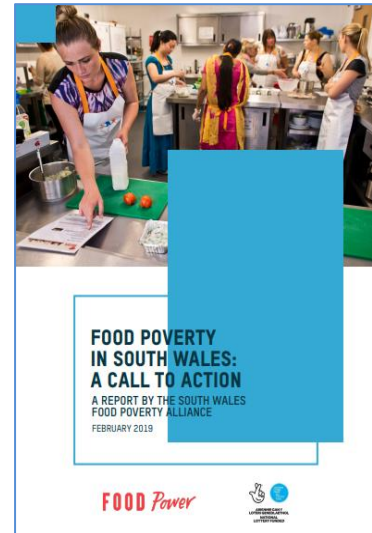
Conclusion

There is a clear need for policy makers and practitioners to recognise the specific nature of rural food poverty. There is a wealth of good practice around the UK and beyond, but this needs to be drawn together and some evaluation carried out to identify what works best and identify successful practice and innovation. More research is needed to map and quantify rural poverty, recognising that it is a complex issue closely linked to wider issues such as fuel poverty, rural premium, loss of local services and transport.

Further information

[Food Power case studies, including from rural areas](#)

[Food Coops Toolkit](#)

[RSA Food Farming and Countryside Commission](#)

[Wales Centre for Public Policy: What works in tacking rural food poverty](#)

[Joseph Rowntree Foundation Framing toolkit: Talking about poverty](#)

[Good Things Foundation](#)

[Digital Unite](#)

Credits

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