

## A national standard for eligibility for older people and vulnerable groups to receive food such as meals on wheels

### **A submission from Sustain to the National Food Strategy call for evidence**

**Our big idea for the National Food Strategy is this:**

- **A national standard for eligibility for older and vulnerable people to receive food e.g. meals on wheels, with a duty on government to see this provided, reversing the cut of a third of services over the last three years.**

This proposal would deliver safe, healthy affordable food to an increasingly neglected section of society: older and vulnerable people who currently suffer from a postcode lottery of provision of meals on wheels, lunch clubs or similar provision, and would also ultimately save taxpayers money, by reliving costs off the NHS.

The Care Act 2014 and its statutory guidance call on councils to prioritise wellbeing, prevention and reducing loneliness, not just crisis management. Needs related to eating, drinking and meal preparation are identified in the assessment criteria. But the good intentions of the Care Act are currently unfulfilled; a number of key factors have led the decline in meals and food provision over the last decade. These include a major shortfall in local authority funding meaning support is available only for those with high level or crisis needs. Meals or food provision are not a statutory requirement for councils and out-dated and negative attitudes mean that many local decision-makers and professionals do not see the potential for modern effective meals service.

Meals provision has been an area ripe for cuts and support around food falls into the same trap as other preventative interventions: acknowledged as a sensible idea that would save money in the long-term, but seen as 'not fundable' due to pressure on the annual budget.

In many areas the quality and reach of services have also been allowed to decline, resulting in a vicious cycle of lack of demand. There is little awareness or scrutiny of the cuts to these services, with those affected having little voice to oppose the cuts. Equally, there is a variable knowledge of the alternative models for providing services, including social enterprises.

Poor nutrition in older people, or in people who for various reasons cannot easily get out to buy food is part of a vicious circle: lack of nourishment makes them frailer, which in turn makes them less able to provide nourishing food for themselves. In recent years meals on wheels services have been neglected or terminated in many parts of the UK. In 2014 services were provided by two thirds or top tier authorities, but by 2018 this had declined to less than half (42%) of councils (APSE, 2018). With more of the £20billion burden of malnutrition (BAPEN, 2015) in old and vulnerable people being pushed onto the NHS, there is a need to invest in ringfenced local authority spend on lunch clubs and meals on wheels services which for £3.60 a day (NACC, 2018) pales in comparison to the £400 a day it costs to keep someone in hospital (Department of Health, 2016).

#### **Evidence of success**

There is no single model for success, but there are a number of public and not-for-profit providers bucking the decline in food support for older people (Sustain, NACC and others, 2018). Some are sustaining, and in some cases, growing services, through modernising their offer and diversifying their financial model, for example by offering supported employment or apprenticeships to make it easier for cost-effective food enterprises to flourish. Hertfordshire Independent Living Service (HILS)

is one example of meals on wheels provision which operates at large scale and at reasonable cost to the public sector and individuals. Importantly, the service offers a wide range of additional support including welfare, nutrition, hydration and safety checks and advice, as well as partnering with others to maximise its impact. HILS also offers a significant proportion of their roles to people in supported employment schemes. Please see the case study in the attached document for more information.

### **What does this big idea need to succeed?**

The first thing this multi-faceted problem needs is long overdue attention. We recommend that the National Food Strategy commits to establish an inquiry or similar time-limited research project to look at the state of provision of food for older and vulnerable people with care needs, with the specific mandate to set a criteria for eligibility of this provision, to ensure that no-one in need is going unsupported. It should also explore how, beyond voluntary efforts, this could be adopted nationally, and what the costs would be of making this a duty for government – national and local. This should consider reviewing and strengthening the Care Act statutory guidance as part of the response.

Another role that the National Food Strategy, and an inquiry or similar exercise, could have, would be to better promote the range of models for meals on wheels services to local decision-makers and the action they can take to support services now. For example, there is currently no mention of this issue in the Government's Prevention Green Paper, which would be an obvious place for consideration.

Support from the local authority and other public sector bodies is key to services being sustainable, whether services are provided directly by a local authority, a local authority trading function, or a social enterprise, charity or private contractor. This support can be financial, but there are a number of other steps local authorities can take to practically assist a service. For example, councils, health services, advice organisations, housing associations and others can maximise referrals to local services to reduce per-head costs. Some older people pay VAT on the cost of their meals, putting them out of reach for some and making it harder for services to reach the required economies of scale. Councils can fix this by formally referring people to services, thereby making the meals VAT-exempt.

We therefore hope that the National Food Strategy team can advocate its inclusion in governmental strategy on prevention and champion funding and other support for public bodies and/or social enterprises or others to pilot, enhance or scale-up provision.

### **References**

APSE (2018) Meals on wheels survey 2018

[http://www.publicsectorcatering.co.uk/sites/default/files/attachment/nacc\\_-\\_meals\\_on\\_wheels\\_report\\_2018.pdf](http://www.publicsectorcatering.co.uk/sites/default/files/attachment/nacc_-_meals_on_wheels_report_2018.pdf)

BAPEN (2015) The cost of malnutrition in England and potential cost savings from nutritional interventions <https://www.bapen.org.uk/pdfs/economic-report-short.pdf>

Sustain, NACC and others (2018) Meals on wheels: Enhancing and expanding services

[https://www.sustainweb.org/publications/meals\\_on\\_wheels\\_good\\_practice\\_case\\_studies/](https://www.sustainweb.org/publications/meals_on_wheels_good_practice_case_studies/)

**To further discuss the proposals in this submission, please contact Simon Shaw, [simon@sustainweb.org](mailto:simon@sustainweb.org)**

