

Brent Food Aid Network

A Post-Pandemic Roadmap for Food Security

April 2020

Introduction

Once Brent Council resumes normal operations and the Bridge Park Food Hub is no longer functional, there will be a vacuum in food aid provision across the Borough. Currently the Hub is distributing approximately 400 food parcels a day on a 4-week commitment cycle to residents who contact the Council in urgent need of food, before a new referral is required. Other food aid organisations – both new and established – are also experiencing a significant increase in demand across the borough. Some of this additional demand is currently being supplied by pop-up hot food suppliers who may not be actively involved in BFAN. They are often serving thousands of meals a week but some of this demand is located outside of Brent.

More broadly, an economic depression is widely predicted to follow the pandemic, with massive job losses and increases in debt, evictions and Universal Credit claims, among other things. Some analysts are also predicting global food shortages, which could impact the UK – especially in terms of fresh food. This will disproportionately impact the most vulnerable in Brent who are already falling through the cracks, such as those from BAME communities, women, children, people with no recourse to public funding, the homeless, disabled and those on low income. As a result, there will inevitably be additional pressures on food aid in Brent for many months – if not years – to come. It will of course also increase the need for signposting and advice work, which primarily concerns Brent Council, post-lockdown, but will also impact food aid organisations that provide these services.

To be clear, food aid and/or food waste reduction is not a solution to poverty or food insecurity and far more must be done to address root causes – which include a benefits system that is not fit for purpose, low wages, a lack of social housing, to name but a few issues. There is concern among BFAN members (and food aid organisations more generally) that food aid should not be further embedded as an integral part of the welfare system. Food Banks should not exist and additional council support for food banks establishes a paradox that, in an ideal world, BFAN would rather avoid. Nonetheless, these are exceptional times. While food aid organisations will have to do more to respond to increased levels of need in the period ahead, the onus remains on Brent Council to reduce the need for people to request emergency food handouts in the first place.

The focus of this paper is to set out practical ways in which Brent Council can work more effectively with food aid organisations by:

- Increasing the resilience of vulnerable residents to economic crisis, so that they have greater food security and are less dependent on food aid.
- Rethinking access to fresh and healthy food beyond food aid to ensure no-one's basic Human Right to Food is contravened – this includes through community gardens and markets stalls as well as by increasing access to the skills and equipment needed to cook healthy food.
- Acting as an 'enabler' to support food aid provision across the borough and increasing the capacity of food aid/access organisations to respond to greater food insecurity in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Key Elements of a New Food Access Infrastructure

Note: The points below are not intended to establish a permanent food bank model in Brent. They constitute a temporary model of crisis support that can enable organisations to respond to increased need in a variety of ways.

- Existing food banks and community kitchens have increased capacity to meet local needs, with paid staff where they deem it necessary.
- Existing organisations have the support they need to scale up or expand their operations into other parts of Brent or other forms of food aid provision where they deem it necessary.
- New food aid organisations, which serve a previously unmet need, get the support they require to become constituted, apply for funding and provide a temporary additional service to their community.
- Food aid organisations can purchase supplies at cost price from wholesalers/supermarkets.
- Community gardens established across the borough to produce fresh fruits and vegetables for the community, especially in areas of high deprivation. Given that many areas of high deprivation have few spaces that are suitable for scaling up production because they are highly urbanised, food production is also scaled up by establishing community led orchards, market gardens and farms in areas of the borough where there is more land.
- Market stalls established in areas of deprivation to improve access to fresh fruit and vegetables at low cost.
- Engagement with food aid services/growing projects are established as an important form of civic and community engagement, with clear routes to engaging people in running and supporting these initiatives for the benefit of vulnerable people in the community.
- Community engagement extends to engaging local businesses, faith groups, schools and potential donors to provide material or in-kind support to food aid and food access organisations.
- A hub established as a clearing house for surplus food that would otherwise go to waste, or for large quantities of food donated by community groups, gardens or farms which could then be distributed to food aid organisations as needed.
- A borough-wide campaign to reduce food waste and support food aid initiatives.
- Brent Food Aid Network members are working together to share knowledge with each other and regularly communicating their findings and their needs to Brent Council.
- Brent Council is responsive to the needs of BFAN members.

Key Recommendations to Achieve the Vision

Immediate Priorities

- Establish an exit strategy for how Brent Council can wind-down the Bridge Park Hub without causing a food security crisis or causing a sudden influx for existing food aid organisations. For example, post-Covid lockdown, many organisations will probably lose many volunteer drivers, which will mean that home delivery would only be possible for those truly unable to leave their home.
- Ensure adequate facilities and other resources are available to food aid organisations in the aftermath of the pandemic to meet increased levels of need.

Welfare Advice and Preventing Financial Crisis

- The provision of better Council support (e.g. in relation to benefits and housing issues) to residents is widely seen by BFAN as the single most critical factor in supporting food aid organisations and reducing food insecurity among residents, and should therefore be a priority for the Council.
- Advice Work in Brent needs to be scaled up to support those who use food aid services. Advice services need to be available in multiple languages and have more staff who are well trained in supporting the most vulnerable.
- Brent Hubs to work more closely with food aid organisations – they could be opening more days a week and for longer. In some cases, advisors could operate from food aid organisations – e.g. during food bank sessions.
- Allocate additional resources to welfare assistance and other emergency grants that reduce pressures on food aid organisations. This could include issuing vouchers that people can redeem in supermarkets.
- Job centres should improve their signposting to direct people to appropriate organisations as soon as possible.
- Improve the Council Tax benefits system by providing additional support to those who need it and better dissemination of information in different languages.
- Print other crucial information in different languages.
- Provide additional support services to refugees and asylum seekers as this demographic is highly dependent on food aid. This support must also be made available in a variety of languages including Arabic, Somali, Romanian, Albanian etc.

Funding and Capacity Building

- Establish a Brent Food Aid Fund that distributes grants to constituted food aid organisations with manageable application and reporting requirements (given the limited capacity of most of food aid organisations). The grants would be for capacity building and core/staff costs rather than food budgets. The grant process could be managed by CVS Brent, along the same lines as the Brent Advice Fund. Alternatively, it might be possible to allow CIL funding to be used for this purpose. The funding essentially needs to be for revenue not just capital.
- Diversify funding to BFAN and improve resilience through working with the council to develop council commissioned and contracted food aid services with the BFAN. This could include 'meals on wheels' type services or use of the Better Care Fund (integrated health and social care fund).
- Council to support the inclusion of BFAN and CVS in any accountable care system (ACS) developments in association with the CCG to develop a system approach to food aid and also to address the causes of food poverty.
- Establishing longer-term funding security for food aid organisations which will continue to include grant funding but could potentially be developed to include formally commissioned services by the council and CCG from the BFAN.

Removing Barriers and Costs

- Reduce or remove rent payments for established food aid organisations, as well as other costs that the council has influence over, such as waste management.

- Negotiating contracts with wholesalers/supermarkets to ensure that food aid and food access organisations can purchase food at cost/below market rates or collect fruits/vegetables near expiration to reduce wastage.
- CVS to continue to support with DBS checks for staff/volunteers in food aid organisations.

Mapping

- Map levels of demand and current capacity to meet it, in order to help address the causes of food poverty. E.g. what are the numbers of people unable to work due to mental health issues and what is the council/CCG commissioning to meet that need? What is the actual level of need for affordable housing and what is the council's plan to address this? Etc.

Land and Property

- Ensure security of tenure in suitable premises for food aid organisations to operate from, without conditions or unnecessary complications. The premises should take into account the nature of their operation/demand etc.
- Allocate land for new community growing projects across the borough.

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