

## Emergency Food and Hunger Risk in Oxford and Oxfordshire

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October 2019

To understand food poverty in the six constituencies of Oxfordshire, it is necessary to understand the nature of food poverty. Food poverty is primarily due to a wider situation of poverty; as the vast majority of people do not grow their own food, most people have to buy food. Food poverty is not a binary situation of having food or not having food, but rather is a spectrum: from cutting back on the types and/or quantities of food that people eat, to the complete inability to buy food. Whilst the less severe end of the spectrum may not seem problematic, research has shown that being in such a situation leads to an increased chance of malnutrition; and in children negatively impacts upon their education.

Good Food Oxford takes a rights-based approach to food, insisting that access to good food is a basic human right which we all should be able to exercise. We all have the right to enough food, no matter our circumstances. In our society, we all believe in compassion and fairness – and people being unable to put food on the table, for themselves or their children, simply isn't right.

Food poverty is a systemic issue in which people are locked in poverty by a variety of circumstances that can be changed. This attitude avoids a fatalistic attitude in which it is assumed that nothing can be done or that it is simply an individual's fault for their circumstances. So part of ending food poverty is creating the keys; in the form of improved public services, and crucially in-work wages and benefits that people can live on; thereby releasing the grip of poverty. Changing the language that is used about food poverty has been proven to change attitudes, and in conjunction with changing the economy so that nobody has to suffer, it will be possible to reduce and ultimately end food poverty (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2019). These considerations underpin Good Food Oxford's work on food poverty and access to good food.

Currently the government does not collect statistics on food poverty. However, there are various indicators that demonstrate a degree of food poverty. The statistics that were collected are as follows.

Income deprivation, in which people either are living on state benefits or have significantly lower income than average, is an indicator that people might struggle to buy adequate amounts of food i.e. mild food poverty. Significantly, recent research from Good Food Oxford has shown that the National Living Wage and Universal Credit are both inadequate to meet the cost of living in Oxford, and the Oxford Living Wage should be around £10.02 per hour (Green et al., 2019). Income deprivation is highest in Oxford East at 14% and lowest in Henley at 6%. Next fuel poverty was investigated. The inability to heat your home is a particular problem in winter where the requirement for food increases anyway due to cold weather, indicating moderate food poverty. Fuel poverty is highest in Oxford East with 12.1% of households affected, and lowest in Witney with 7.3% of households affected.

Foodbank data, indicating severe food poverty, was also collected; the data is not automatically collected by the government but rather Good Food Oxford asked foodbanks to voluntarily send data on the number of people affected so the data is not complete\*. In the financial year 2018-19, 4810 people including 2014 children in the Wantage constituency required foodbanks; this is the highest figure in Oxfordshire\*\*. In Oxford this data does not include those without access to cooking facilities, as the foodbank is not able to give out parcels to people without cooking facilities. Currently there are no means of measuring such extreme food poverty but it should be highlighted that it exists.

Amongst children, child poverty was used as a proxy for the category "at risk of food poverty". This was highest in Oxford East, with almost 23% of children suffering some degree of household poverty. Child poverty is lowest in Henley at 7.15%. The use of Healthy Start Vouchers, indicating moderate food poverty, were highest in the Wantage constituency; with 1004 eligible and 440 utilising the vouchers as of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019. In Oxford West and Abingdon there was the lowest requirement, with 236 eligible and 101 utilising the vouchers. Notably there appears to be difference of percentage uptake across constituencies, with

some postcodes having consistent underutilisation of Healthy Start Vouchers; the reasons why require further research.

The data gathered on severe food poverty can be considered an indication rather than absolute figures, as research has shown there is a degree of stigma attached to using food banks, with up to 4.6 times more people likely to be in need compared to those who actually attend (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2015) (Douglas et al., 2015). Whilst more research is needed to understand food poverty better, what is clear is that to decrease food poverty levels, income – both paid income from work and benefits – needs to increase so that everyone can buy adequate, nutritionally suitable food.

\* No significant foodbank data was able to be collected from the Banbury constituency so that data is not included.

\*\* Data for children is not included in foodbank data for Didcot so estimates are based upon income deprivation and child poverty for Didcot wards.