



DISTRICT COUNCIL
NORTH OXFORDSHIRE

Food Insecurity

Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

March 2025

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Executive Summary

This Food Insecurity Scrutiny Working Group was originally established in 2022 and was continued in 2023-24 and re-established again in 2024-25. The Food Insecurity Scrutiny Working Group was set up to provide oversight and assurance and contributions from elected members, through the review progress of the implementation of the Cherwell Food Action Plan and make recommendations and suggestions for consideration by the Executive Member for Wellbeing and Housing Services department.

The Scrutiny Working Group was originally established following the adoption of a Council motion which declared a food poverty emergency a commitment to the following actions:

- Designating a Food Champion
- Establishing & reporting to O&S the scale of the food poverty crisis in Cherwell
- Drawing up a Cherwell Food Action Plan to support local communities
- Developing a promotional campaign relating to underclaimed Health Start Food vouchers
- Supporting local communities to reduce food waste.

Prior to the food poverty emergency being declared, in June 2022 the Executive had endorsed and committed to the Oxfordshire Food Strategy.

The Oxfordshire Food Strategy sets out a vision where everyone in Oxfordshire can enjoy the healthy and sustainable food they need every day. A critical part of implementing the Oxfordshire Food Strategy has been the development of local Food Action Plans for each district, to ensure that the Food Strategy reflects local priorities and reflects the unique nature of the City and each of the Districts. These have been led by representatives from across the food system, through the Food Action Working Groups (FAWGs -are the multistakeholder groups who helped devise the plan). The Food Action Plan for Cherwell district is a multi-stakeholder plan, with a range of organisations taking responsibility for action.

The Cherwell Food Action Plan identifies initial actions spanning 2024 – 2027. Throughout this period, the Scrutiny Working Group is reviewing progress against targets and metrics and refine the actions, providing oversight and assurance and also provide contributions from the Working Group through the review progress of the implementation of the Cherwell Food Action Plan.

This report outlines the Scrutiny Working Group's assessment of the Cherwell Food Action Plan, focusing on its key priority areas. At each meeting, actions within the identified priority areas were reviewed, with a particular emphasis on tackling food poverty and diet-related ill health, as well as building vibrant food communities.



Members of the Scrutiny Working Group

The following Members were appointed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the 2024-2205 municipal year:

Councillor Rebecca Biegel - Chair
Councillor Phil Chapman – Vice Chair
Councillor Dr Isabel Creed
Councillor Gordon Blakeway
Councillor Andrew Crichton
Councillor Dr Chukwudi Okeke.

Aims and Objectives

The Aims and Objectives for the Scrutiny Working Group agreed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee are:

To review implementation of the Cherwell Food Action Plan and any associated issues and make recommendations and suggestions for consideration by the Executive Member and Wellbeing and Housing Services department.

The Scrutiny Working Group focused on Food Insecurity in Cherwell and on implementation and development of the Cherwell Food Action Plan but avoided drifting into other interrelated Wellbeing strategies and services.

Witnesses to the Inquiry

The Scrutiny Working Group has spoken with both internal and external expert witnesses during its inquiry, including Councillor Rob Pattenden - Portfolio Holder for Healthy Communities, Councillor Ian Middleton – Executive Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhood Services, who is also the Council’s appointed “Food Champion, they have been involved with the Scrutiny Working Group throughout 2024-2025.

The Scrutiny Working Group has also worked with Departmental Officers Nicola Riley, Assistant Director of Wellbeing and Housing Services, Edward Frape, Senior Healthy Place Shaping Officer and Libby Knox, Food and Wellbeing Officer, who have provided support, briefing reports and answered questions at each of our meetings.

The Scrutiny Working Group also received oral evidence from expert witness Alison Drake from the [Bicester Foodbank](#).



Councillor Phil Chapman at the Scrutiny Working Group visit the Banbury Larder

During the inquiry members of the committee have visited the [Banbury Larder](#) and seen first-hand the work going on there to support the community.

1. Tackling Food Poverty

- 1.1. The Food Insecurity Scrutiny Working Group has met throughout 2024-2025 in continuation of its work from previous years to oversee the delivery of Food Insecurity activities in Cherwell. This report outlines the Scrutiny Working Group's assessment of the Cherwell Food Action Plan from its work during this year, which has included tackling food poverty and diet-related ill health, as well as building vibrant food communities.

Priority Area 1: Tackling Food Poverty and Diet-Related Ill Health

Presentation of Deprivation Data

- 1.2. The Food and Wellbeing Officer presented deprivation data through the [Priority Places for Food](#) platform. This data examined alongside our existing knowledge of the areas of deprivation allowed us to identify those most in need. Using statistical data and feedback from local partners assisting residents in need helped ensure our efforts were best directed. The Working Group utilised this data to provide a steer to the Portfolio Holder and departmental officers with targeted suggestions to support these initiatives.

Support for Schools in High Deprivation Areas

- 1.3. In April 2024, letters were sent to all schools in targeted areas with higher deprivation levels, offering support to enhance their curriculum through free school food and nutrition programmes, facilitated by the CDC Food and Wellbeing Officer.

Rural Support Initiatives

- 1.4. For rural areas, the Food and Wellbeing Officer provided advisory and logistical support and in Hook Norton this led to the establishment of the Hooky Neighbours Pantry, which then enabled the group to successfully apply for funding, through the programme of Cherwell District Council Food Grants.

Household Support and Community Food Grant Funding

- 1.5. Officers presented evaluations on Household Support Funding (HSF) and Community Food Grant funding. Following consideration of this, the Scrutiny Working Group suggested establishing a new community food grant to further the Cherwell Food Action Plan objectives through HSF6 grant funding. A specific suggestion was made by the working group to ensure targeted support for diverse cultural groups, particularly the Afro-Caribbean community. This resulted in the Redeemed Christian Church of God, in collaboration with the Nigerians in Banbury group, receiving grant aid for their work in the

community as part of the HSF standard grant-making process.

Expansion of Food Voucher Distribution

- 1.6. Officers presented data on food voucher distributions across three main providers in Cherwell:
 - North Oxfordshire Community Foodbank (Kidlington)
 - Bicester Trussell Foodbank
 - Banbury Trussell Foodbank

- 1.7. The Scrutiny Working Group identified a lack of vouchers being issued in Banbury, despite its high deprivation levels. Officers were instructed to investigate the distribution process and expand access. Consequently, three additional partners were included in the voucher distribution scheme:
 - Home-Start (Banbury, Bicester and villages)
 - The Sunshine Centre (Banbury)
 - Sunrise Multicultural Project (Banbury).

Site Visits and Presentations

- 1.8. Throughout the year the Scrutiny Working Group received regular updates from Cherwell Council officers and was able to scrutinise the progress of implementing the Food Action Plan, developed by Good Food Oxfordshire and Cherwell-based organisations, including the District Council. It has also received evidence from external organisations and undertaken site visits to gain insights into how projects are working on the ground.

- 1.9. In December 2024 members of the Scrutiny Working Group visited [The Banbury Larder](#) and reviewed the impactful work of volunteers in redistributing surplus food.

- 1.10. In January 2025 the Scrutiny Working Group received oral evidence and a presentation from Alison Drake, the Manager of Bicester Foodbank, which is a Trussell Trust supported food bank. She provided a presentation on the organisation's work in combating poverty and hunger. Key highlights included the provision of on-site hot meals, food education initiatives, cooking classes, and efforts to ensure a balanced selection of fresh and staple foods.



Members of the Food Insecurity Scrutiny Working Group visiting the Banbury Larder Food Bank in Banbury.

2. Building Vibrant Food Communities

Priority Area 2: Building Vibrant Food Communities with the Capacity and Skills to Enjoy Food Together

Distribution of Support Service Information

2.1. Officers presented updated support service leaflets for review. The Scrutiny Working Group provided feedback on distribution strategies, ensuring that signposting information was made available through the following channels:

- Cherwell District Council website
- Public libraries
- GP surgeries
- Warm Welcome network (community centres, faith groups, etc.).

2.2. Regular updates were shared with the Scrutiny Working Group for ongoing feedback and improvements. These are all available online too:

<https://www.cherwell.gov.uk/info/118/communities/977/cost-of-living-support>

Community Food Grant Applications

2.3. The Scrutiny Working Group reviewed 19 successful applications for community food grants, funded through Household Support Funds received from Oxfordshire County Council. The Working Group applied scoring and funding criteria to ensure alignment with the Cherwell Food Action Plan's objectives and the £28,000 allocated HSF funding.

2.4. The Group supported an initiative to improve the spread of funding. They agreed it was fair to allocate every worthwhile application some funding. The Executive Portfolio Holder approved a range of funding that allowed a percentage of a grant to be allocated. The range of allocations were 100% or 50% or 25% depending on the applications score against the grant criteria.

Community Cooking Initiatives

2.5. New grant applications included funding for community cooking projects aimed at building capacity and skills for shared food experiences. These initiatives promote social cohesion and enhance food literacy within local communities.

Food support services



Contact information for food support services across Cherwell

Supporting those in need as well as reducing community food waste and surplus



3. Conclusion

3.1. The Scrutiny Working Group has provided a strong steer and key suggestions to improve the reach and effectiveness of the Cherwell Food Action Plan.

- The expansion of food support services
- Targeted funding for underrepresented communities
- Enhancing community engagement initiatives.

3.2. Continued monitoring and evaluation will ensure that these actions contribute effectively to reducing food insecurity and fostering resilient food communities in Cherwell as part of the standard performance monitoring framework.

3.3. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee agrees the programme of Scrutiny work carried out each year at its first meeting in June, after having been established by full Council in May. This includes the work of the Scrutiny Working Groups. The Food Insecurity Scrutiny Working Group was established by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in 2023, in response to the cost of living crisis.

3.4. During 2023 to 2025 the Food Insecurity Scrutiny Working Group has provided oversight and a steer to the Executive Portfolio Holder and the Council's Food Champion, on the implementation of the Council's Food Insecurity Action Plan by officers. Members and officers have felt this to be a valuable way to engage non-executive Members and officers together in this important area of work.

3.5. The Scrutiny Working Group has helped the Executive build upon existing initiatives, strengthen partnerships with community organisations, and implement sustainable solutions that address the root causes of food insecurity. Additionally, ongoing data collection and assessment will ensure that interventions remain effective and responsive to evolving needs. Disbanding the group may prematurely risk losing momentum and leaving vulnerable populations without essential support, making continued action essential for long-term impact.

3.6. It is therefore felt that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee should give consideration to re-establishing the Food Insecurity Working Group for another year into 2025-2026, in consideration of the fact that food insecurity remains a persistent issue that requires long-term, sustained efforts to create meaningful change.



Bicester Food Bank display

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Councillor Rob Pattenden - Portfolio Holder for Healthy Communities, Councillor Ian Middleton – Executive Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhood Services, who is our Council’s “Food Champion”, for their support and involvement throughout this year.

Thank you in particular to the Council officers Nicola Riley, Assistant Director of Wellbeing and Housing Services, Edward Frape, Senior Healthy Place Shaping Officer and Libby Knox, Food and Wellbeing Officer, who have provided support, briefing reports and answered questions at each of our meetings.

Thank you to Bicester Food Bank for proving evidence to our scrutiny inquiry. Thank you to Alison Drake from the for taking the time to attend our meeting to tell us about all of the excellent work at the Bicester Foodbank and sharing her insights and best practice.

Thanks also to the Banbury Larder who welcomed us to their vibrant community networking community restaurant and foodbank. Thanks to Taraji Ogunnubi and the team of helpers and volunteers who welcomed the Scrutiny Working Group to the Banbury Larder, where we attended a festive party at Marlborough Road Methodist Church in December. Members were able to tour the Community larder but also see the fantastic joined up community provision with a ‘warm space’, free kitchen for tea and biscuits, a monthly lunch club, the job club and Citizens Advice Information Point (CHIP).

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is appointed by Cherwell District Council to carry out the local authority scrutiny functions.

Membership of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Councillor Dr Isabel Creed (Chairman)
Councillor Nigel Simpson (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Gordon Blakeway
Councillor John Broad
Councillor Phil Chapman
Councillor Grace Conway-Murray
Councillor Andrew Crichton
Councillor Frank Ideh
Councillor Harry Knight
Councillor Simon Lytton
Councillor Lynne Parsons
Councillor Barry Wood

Formal Minutes

Minutes of proceedings are available to view or download from the Council website at <https://modgov.cherwell.gov.uk/mgCommitteeDetails.aspx?ID=116>

Committee Staff

The current staff of the committee are:
Michael Carr - Interim Principal Officer - Scrutiny and Democratic Lead
Martyn Surfleet - Democratic and Elections Officer.

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Cherwell District Council

March 2025

www.cherwell.gov.uk