

## **SUBMISSION FROM COMMUNITY FOOD MORAY**

### **Background**

Community Food Moray (CFM) operate as a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO). We provide accessible affordable fresh food provision for communities at risk of financial, social and rural deprivation and isolation throughout Moray and assist in the provision of emergency food for people in crisis. In addition we undertake training, workshops, cooking sessions and community food and health projects within healthy eating guidelines to assist health behaviour change in target communities and groups.

Moray is a diverse area of rurally isolated communities covering 864square miles (2238Km<sup>2</sup>) and a population of 92,910 (2012 census)people. The main employers are distilleries and this gives the illusion of an area of wealth. Youth unemployed is high.

### **Emergency Food provision in Moray**

In August 2011 Community Food Moray established an emergency food service to work along side Moray councils housing support team and Moray Womens Aid. The provision was to help those in most need throughout Moray by way of a referral system for a one off food parcel containing mainly fresh food items as a way of maintaining a balanced diet during such a vulnerable time. Initially the need for this provision was estimated at 4 per month. As the financial crisis began to show signs in Moray the requests for food parcels began to increase. One year later in October 2012 our average referral requests were 10 per month. It soon became clear that emergency food aid could not be maintained with fresh produce alone. A volunteer at community food moray began to make an appeal for non-perishable donations, we also worked with Buckie Tesco in Moray the Christmas before to collect items for local people in need.

This was the first experience we had of the growing need in Moray. The main issues at that time were;

- Rising fuel prices
- Rising energy costs
- Rising food prices
- Reduction in working hours for paid workers
- Increased unemployment and redundancy in the area
- Increase in family breakdown as a result of financial pressures

We managed to maintain our services until April 2013. The impact of the welfare reform was evident almost overnight.

From the beginning of April 2013 our referrals jumped from 10 per month to on average 15 per week. The highest number so far was 30 referrals in one day on January 20th 2014. Some of the reported reasons for this;

- Bedroom tax causing people to have debt problems because they can not afford the additional costs, these debt problems preventing them from leaving their present accommodation. They are then trapped in a position of needing to leave their home but unable to apply for a transfer and so the debt increases
- Loss of home due to bedroom tax as people cannot afford to pay so their only way out is to give up their home.
- Sanctions on benefits causing people to seek additional help but they have to make choices to 'heat or eat'
- Waiting time for benefits to be reinstated or accessed
- Waiting time for crisis loans when the situation is an emergency
- We have also experienced people with long term illness and disabilities having to wait for the results of financial help or appeals against decisions for financial help
- The Moray money advice team also reports an increase in multiple Dept's brought about by many of the points mentioned.
- We have also experienced a number of people using food bank who need ready to eat food provision because they cannot afford to pay for the electricity to be switched on in order to cook any food.
- A pattern of increased referrals can also be observed during cold weather spells. Fortunately this has not been as severe as most years so the figures could have been higher.

The geographical location of people who access the foodbank can be difficult to measure due to the process of our referral system. But we have since reviewed our methods of recording and our records show;

- IV30 - central elgin has the largest but the main homeless refuge points are located here
- IV36 - Forres (has a refuge point)
- AB55 – Keith
- AB56 – Buckie
- AB38 - speyside rural communities

Our records also show that the Scottish welfare discretionary awards team now put through the highest number of referrals to the foodbank.

### **Impact of increased referrals to the organisation within the third sector**

The impact has been very detrimental at times. We operate a volunteer led resource so the demand on people giving their time has been very high. People have needed a great deal of support although they are happy to help those in need. On occasions when people have tried to self-refer volunteers have needed emotional support to deal with it. Obviously we are not experts in social work or needs assessments so we have had to undertake procedures to deter self-referrals. The impact has also resulted in a change of priorities with the majority of time being focused on emergency food provision and taken away from our day to day activities. It has also prevented us from spending time to grow the CFM social enterprise in order to sustain our organisation. The past year should have been a crucial time to do this as a young organisation we needed to show growth over a 3 to 5 year period. Unfortunately we have been pulled away from this priority and so will not achieve our own goals this financial year. Thankfully we did receive joint BIG lottery funding in partnership with Moray Citizens Advice meaning a full time worker has been put in place. Again as a result of the increase in April 2013 we ended up requiring extra space for the foodbank than was originally planned so our accommodation and overhead costs have also increased since putting in the bid for funding.

Although the food bank has raised our profile as an organisation it has also been to its detriment because the support we would have had locally is now restricted to helping the food bank, so our other great work gets forgotten. The financial impact is most evident. Any local donations that would have gone in the 'pot' are now specified to be used for 'foodbank' activity. This, together with the shift in priority means that as an organisation we need to make cuts to services and employees. Therefore adding to the bigger picture of people in financial crisis and unemployed. At present foodbanks in general are receiving UK wide support, resulting in other third sector work going unrecognised. We have observed this locally as some of our partner agencies have missed out on funding over the 'Moray Foodbank'.

### **Impact of Food banks on the individual**

The impact of the Moray foodbank on the individual can be viewed from an indirect and direct point. Indirectly we have had to focus our efforts elsewhere so reducing the work we do with communities and groups to improve local health and well-being. In addition we have experienced a direct response in people feeling demoralised into needing to access the foodbank.

One of our concerns is that we cannot provide all fresh food, although we have maintained an element of this, people will naturally opt for the easy option and open a can or packet. Although we request healthy options to be donated people will still give high fat, high sugar, high salt items, we do our best to balance this during packing and also add in healthy eating information. Unfortunately in our experience it is at these vulnerable times that people make choices to the detriment of their long term health. The biggest problem is accessing non-perishable meat items that fall within healthy eating guidelines. We are still to see the impact of these food choices.

## **Impact on local authorities**

The main two departments we work with have inevitably reported a large increase in their workloads due to people needing additional help with living costs, gaps in benefits, sanctions and waiting times. The same can be said about the increase to Moray CAB volunteers. CFM have also identified a need for an information and recipe booklet to include very basic skills, this has had to be passed to our NHS partners so the additional demands of the food bank provision are far reaching.

## **What ideally needs to improve?**

- The waiting time for people seeking a discretionary award
- Review of the bedroom tax or at least a more supportive way to introduce it
- Financial support for people waiting for benefit decisions
- Review of the costs for basic needs; food, heat, light and travel

## **Next steps for CFM**

As part of the funding from BIG Lottery we are setting up a drop in service once a week to encourage service users to seek specialist advice. This will hopefully encourage people to be empowered into making decisions to improve their situation and be less reliant on the food bank.

## **Community Food Moray**

**February 2014**