

18 March 2016

To the new Mayor of London

Food poverty and malnutrition in older people

As the new Mayor of London, there will be a number of competing priorities in the first few months of your term in office. The London Assembly's Economy Committee believes that food poverty and malnutrition in older people should be one of these.

In March 2016, the Economy Committee held a public meeting with a range of stakeholders including Age UK, Sustain, the National Association of Care Catering (NACC) and the Chair of the London Food Board to investigate the rise of malnutrition in older people in London, and the link to food poverty. Our evidence paints a disturbing picture:

- Food poverty among older people is, to some extent, a hidden problem. Experts told us older people are less likely to use food banks, instead preferring to cut back on food and "making do". But this comes at a considerable cost, as the rise in cases of malnutrition in older people indicates. Nationally, more than 1.3 million people over 65 suffer from malnutrition, and the vast majority (93 per cent) live at home.¹ And it is not only affordability that can lead older people to cut back on food, loneliness and social isolation are critical factors behind why more older people are not eating properly and ending up in hospital malnourished.
- The economic costs of malnutrition are likely to be considerable. Studies show approximately ten per cent of public expenditure on healthcare (£13 billion in 2007) is attributable to malnutrition. And while this figure covers all age groups, a greater proportion of older people are at risk.²
- Social care funding has not kept pace with the increase in the number of older people. Spending per head on people aged 85 and over in England is at the same level it was in 2002. While during the same time, there has been a 34 per cent increase in the over 85 population.³ With the number of people aged 85 and over projected to more than double by 2039, the pressure on resources is set to increase dramatically.⁴
- Community meals provision is in decline. A third of UK councils have ended their 'meals on wheels' service. In London, only 13 boroughs provide home delivery of prepared meals to NACC nutritional standards 365 days per year.⁵
- Signposting by local authorities to alternative services is often poor, and, in extreme cases, harmful. The Committee was told that some older people were advised to use takeaway services as a replacement for meals on wheels.

We want the new Mayor to act to bring together health and social care partners to tackle this critical issue. Cost is often cited as a reason for cancelling community meals services, but the

¹ [Malnutrition Taskforce, 'A review and summary of the impact of malnutrition in older people' \(2014\)](#)

² [BAPN, 'Advisory Group report' \(2009\)](#)

³ [The King's Fund, 'Social care: a future we do not yet know'](#)

⁴ [ONS, population projections 2015](#)

⁵ [Sustain, 'Beyond the Food Bank: London Food Poverty Profile' \(2015\)](#)

savings from keeping older people in their homes rather than being admitted to care homes or hospitals, far outweighs the investment required to maintain these services. And there are existing models that show community meals can work at little additional cost to councils.

The Hertfordshire Living Service aims to be cost neutral in the coming years. While still partly subsidised by Hertfordshire Council, it receives funding through the Social Business Trust⁶ and the private sector. The service provides more than just hot meals. It runs a number of initiatives to improve the lives of vulnerable older people by supporting independence in the home. Similarly, the **Food Train in Dumfries and Galloway** supports older people to live independently, and prevents the growing isolation that comes with failing health, by providing a grocery shopping and support service.⁷ And **Plymouth Council** has shown how a community meals service can be maintained by exploiting underutilised assets. The Council has set-up a co-operative company called CATERed, which prepares community meals in school kitchens by the same staff preparing school meals. The service has seen a year-on-year increase in take-up, and is starting to bring in revenue to the Council.

To help you address this growing problem, we have identified three actions we would like to see you take to help reduce the number of older people living in food poverty or suffering from malnutrition in London.

- **Understand the problem better:** More needs to be done to understand the problem of older people living in food poverty and the link to an increase in cases of malnutrition in older people. Bringing together available data at a borough level from housing, health and social care datasets could help identify the level of need in the capital, particularly where there is currently no community meals provision.
- **Champion the issue with partners:** Your predecessor had great success in catalysing third sector, charity and commercial companies to innovate to support schools to provide free breakfasts for hungry school children. There is undoubtedly potential to do something similar for community meals for older people. Council leaders should be pressed on the importance of maintaining a community meals service. But health partners too should be made aware of the significant benefits of supporting community meals provision to reduce the number of older people being admitted to hospitals with malnutrition, and the significant costs that come with it.
- **Learn from best practice:** There are a number of successful community meals models operating across the UK. Through the London Food Board, and the support of the London Assembly, we would urge you to explore the viability of these schemes, and assess how they could be funded and developed in London.

We hope you will agree this is critical issue. By spending social care budgets more wisely, huge savings can be made. As a Committee we urge you to make this issue a priority in your dealings with local authority leaders and health partners, and look forward to future discussions with you as to how the actions we have proposed will be taken forward.

Yours sincerely



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Chair of the Economy Committee

⁶ <http://www.socialbusinesstrust.org/>

⁷ <http://www.thefoodtrain.co.uk/our-services/food-train>