

Food Strategy Action Plan – Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Board

Report to Cabinet on 13 May 2025

Background

1. The Overview and Scrutiny Board met on 9 April 2025 to consider the Food Strategy Action Plan. The Cabinet Member for Adult and Community Services, Public Health and Inequalities - Councillor Tranter and the Partnerships and Inclusion Manager – Laura Hill provided an overview of the background to the Food Action Plan and responded to questions. The Board heard evidence from the following people on the work being carried out to support people to access food and receive help and signposting for the wider determinants relating to finance, health, housing, environment etc.:

Alan Tilley - Chief Executive Officer, Turning Heads -

<https://www.turningheads.org.uk/>;

Karen Marcellino - Torbay Community Helpline Manager, Torbay

Communities - <https://www.torbaycommunities.com/torbay-community-helpline/>;

Kelly Bedoyan - Torbay Food Alliance Co-ordinator, Torbay Communities -

<https://www.torbayfoodalliance.org/>; and

Jed Stevenson - Local Motion Change Agent, Local Motion Torbay -

<https://localmotion.org.uk/torbay/>.

2. Members also viewed a video on systems thinking which was hosted by the Sustainable Foods Network.
3. The Board asked questions in relation to how does the support from Turning Heads compare to other organisations; were people donating fresh produce from their allotments; what was being done on a 'systems approach' to work with manufacturers and supermarkets around healthy food and to reduce the number of fast food outlets in Torbay; what was being done to encourage people to exercise more; actions 11 and 13 relate to promoting and advertising healthy food, how do we do this; was Ocombe Farm still producing food; how closely was the Food Alliance working with other food banks e.g. Paignton Community Larder; has there been a change in the way people are accessing food banks, for example there seems to be a lot of children turning up to services very hungry; and how would schools be involved in food growing projects.

4. In response to questions about access to fresh produce, Members were informed that it was difficult for food banks and social supermarkets to afford to buy in fresh fruit and vegetables with offers sometimes being limited to potatoes, carrots, onions etc. Turning Heads had explored the Government's proposal to take waste food directly from farms but the scale was too large and would have involved a contract around £14m. A lot of waste from farms in Devon was being thrown away. It was estimated that approximately 20% of farm waste that cannot be sold to the supermarkets was just left to rot. It was really difficult to get access to fresh produce. There were some local networks and the Food Alliance shared knowledge and produce where possible, however, due to the limited amount of fresh produce it was not normally possible to share this as it was sent out to families as soon as it was received. The Food Alliance worked across Torbay and the Paignton Community Lader was a member and they did have access to fresh fruit and vegetables. There was a need to scale up access to fresh produce to be used in food banks and social supermarkets. An example was given that 2,500 Christmas hampers was given out in 2024 which contained a full meal and desert for the families, however, people were still coming to the food banks saying they don't have any presents for their children for Christmas and many parents were going without food to ensure their children were fed.
5. The Board noted the links between food poverty and health, particularly type 2 diabetes, with Torbay having the highest numbers of people with type 2 diabetes in the whole Country. The funding from Public Health only supported preventative work. They were no longer doing face to face talks with people about diet for those who already have it, which could help people to manage or control it.
6. Members were informed that Turning Heads runs digital skills courses as there were lots of people who were not online or able to follow processes. This was affecting their ability to work and access appropriate benefits which was impacting on the NHS and causing further poverty and hardship. A large number of people were unable to make healthy changes to their food as they were in temporary accommodation with limited cooking facilities. There were also links to fuel poverty where people could not afford the gas or electric to cook meals. 800 referrals were made last year for financial support. When people contact the Torbay Community Helpline for food they will encourage the person to tell them about their complete situation and then signpost them to relevant support and help. The conversations can be difficult and people may not want to tell them about their wider issues and some may not actually need the food bank which can lead to challenging conversations and sometimes staff facing abuse and aggression. Food banks take referrals from Libraries, the Council, Probation and other agencies who all have good relationships with the Food Alliance and will join up with the helpline. People can also apply online themselves.
7. The Board was advised that there had been an increase in demand for food support with a lot of requests through the website. A lot of times people would go direct to the food bank as they had heard about it from their friends. Sometimes people don't have phone credit to phone the helpline but could access the internet.

8. Members were advised that it was difficult to use produce from allotments as food grown from allotments can't be sold e.g. the social supermarket charges £5 for a £35 shop and it could be seen that the supermarket was benefitting from selling the produce. There were some links with allotments last year. Occombe Farm was still growing their own food and provide it to outlets such as Sainsburys.
9. In response to questions around systems approach, it was noted that the proposals were not about reducing advertising income but encouraging businesses to advertise healthy food and using the Council's influence. An example was given that Sustainable Food Places run a campaign around smart sugars and reducing sugars – see <https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/campaigns/2017sugarsmartuk/>. This needs to be done as part of local policy setting as well as at a National level influencing the manufacturers and supermarkets. It was agreed that links to resources and research papers would be shared with Members after the meeting. There was a need to understand the power in the room and that other communities have and how we could link together to support an encourage small business that align to healthy food initiatives. Local Motion Torbay were leading on work around this including working with schools to utilise green space owned by the Council to grow food. Recruitment for a Food Growing Co-ordinator was being undertaken to link in with different community stakeholders and schools. They would also be using People's Parkfield who could provide tools, growing and learning opportunities and share knowledge. Members noted a project with Hayes Road Primary School on growing using polytunnels as well as setting up bee hives at South Devon College which had potential to be rolled out to other schools. It was important to share where things were happening well and to see how it could be replicated.
10. Members acknowledged the benefits of healthy lifestyles and wished to encourage people to be out walking and keeping as fit as they could be taking advantage of the coast path walks and the natural environment e.g. Cockington and Dartmoor, but recognised that generally the population was inactive.
11. Members were advised that there was a good network, together with members of the Sustainable Food Spaces and Torbay Food Alliance which had been held as a model of good practice with other areas looking to Torbay as an example of good practice.

13. Conclusion

- 13.1 The Board reflected and debated the information provided to them, both verbal and written and formed the following recommendations to the Cabinet. On being put to the vote, the motion was declared carried unanimously.

14. Recommendations

14.1 That the Cabinet be recommended:

- a. to approve the Torbay Council Food Action Plan set out at Appendix 1 to the submitted report; and
- b. to explore how to use Small Business Week to promote healthy eating and behaviours in Torbay;

For Information:

- that the Democratic Services Team Leader be requested to arrange site visits for Councillors to Turning Heads and some of the food banks (in liaison with the Torbay Community Helpline Manager); and
- that the Democratic Services Team Leader be requested to write to all Councillors to encourage them to engage with Local Motion Torbay on their work, particularly around system changes and food insecurity.

Background Papers

<https://www.torbay.gov.uk/DemocraticServices/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=218&MId=24540&Ver=4>