

GMPA's Food Poverty Programme Update, and Introducing Sian Mullen

By Tom Skinner

Addressing the underlying causes of food poverty has been a major focus of GMPA's work over the last three years. Many of you have contributed to it, including through the Greater Manchester Food Poverty Alliance project which co-produced the [GM Food Poverty Action Plan](#), published last year.

Since then, we have pushed for many of the actions in the plan to happen. This includes:

- The GM Combined Authority collating information about poverty levels, access to food, Healthy Start voucher uptake and more, and sharing this with Local Authorities.
- A greater recognition of the Combined and Local Authorities' roles in reducing poverty as a means of tackling food poverty, and elected members and officers being tasked with this.
- Increasingly joined up thinking about food provision during the school holidays. (Although we eventually want to reach a state where the need for charitable food aid is significantly reduced.)
- More recently we have been very involved in helping to support and shape GM's response to Covid-19, particularly addressing the extra impact that the pandemic has had on people in poverty.

To build on this work we recently recruited to a new post – Food Poverty Programme Coordinator - that will focus on implementing the action plan and support measures that address the underlying causes of food poverty. This work will include piloting place-based partnership approaches to reducing food poverty in different localities across Greater Manchester. We were delighted to have appointed Sian Mullen to the role.

Sian Mullen

Sian has worked in the development and humanitarian sectors both in the UK and abroad for many years. She is passionate about working to alleviate poverty to create a more equal society, and is excited to be focusing on reducing food poverty in Greater Manchester.

Sian has lived in Manchester since 2012 when she came to complete her PhD in Humanitarianism.

Prior to joining GMPA she worked as a programme manager with Oxfam, coordinating their poverty alleviation programme across Greater Manchester. She has also been an active volunteer with several charities involved in food provision including during the Covid-19 response.



At GMPA we are excited about working with Sian and many of our partners over the coming years as we work towards our vision of a Greater Manchester free from poverty. Linked to this is the need for national action on food poverty. Part one of the [National Food Strategy](#), an independent review supported by a team of experts across the food system, was published last month. You can read GMPA's comments in response to the strategy on the following page.

Tom Skinner
Director, GMPA

The National Food Strategy: What does it do for food poverty?

By Sian Mullen, GMPA Food Poverty Programme Coordinator

Part one of the [National Food Strategy](#), an independent review supported by a team of experts across the food system, was published last month. It aims to make, “urgent recommendations to support the country through the turbulence caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and to prepare for the end of the EU exit transition period”. Initially, the strategy does a good job of steering the conversation towards the relationship between food and economics. It highlights some of the factors that cause food poverty: sudden unemployment, the housing benefit cap, and delay in receiving universal credit. Equally, it recognises that the lack of a “*financial buffer*”, experienced by those in low paid jobs, means they are less likely to be able to cope with the shock of a loss of income. Thus, it correctly determines that food poverty is not caused by a lack of food, it is caused by a lack of funds to buy it.



However, the strategy recommendations do not focus on fixing these underlying causes of poverty. Aside from a brief note to continue to measure food poverty (an important factor in ensuring the right work is done in the right place), the focus is directed towards free meals and voucher support. It predominantly focuses on children, presumably based on the slightly misleading assertion that, “new food bank users are overwhelmingly children and young people”. A closer look at the statistics relating to this claim reveal that while 21% of users during COVID-19 were families with dependent children and 5% did not have dependent children, the other 74% of respondents ‘preferred not to answer’. It is questionable to draw any conclusions around the age of users from such statistics. Equally, 22% of new food bank users (over the age of 16), were aged between 16-24; a significant, but not overwhelming proportion of the population.

This is not to detract from the importance of ensuring that children have access to nutritious food. However, this singular emphasis on children runs the risk of a strategic focus that concentrates on food handouts and vouchers as opposed to changes in welfare and employment policies to ensure adults have access to a decent and reliable income in order to feed themselves and their children.

One of the key recommendations is an increase in the value of Healthy Start vouchers. Whilst valuing initiatives aimed at ensuring children are nutritionally healthy, there are flaws to this approach. Firstly, if people do not have enough money to provide for their children, then they should receive more money. Cash assistance avoids issues surrounding accessing vouchers, issues around accessing shops where you can spend vouchers, and provides the recipient with dignity and equality when buying products (for an interesting perspective on the relegation of those on benefits to a world outside of money see: [Williams \(2013\)](#)). Critics argue that vouchers are necessary to ensure funds are spent as intended, however evidence suggests that cash schemes are successful in meeting project aims ([Bailey \(2013\)](#); [DFID \(2017\)](#)) and the level of control provided by vouchers is unreasonable and promotes dependence on handouts,

“One of the principles of universal credit is to encourage personal responsibility. It’s inconsistent ... to say a benefit claimant should be trusted to pay their rent, but we shouldn’t trust them to buy food...” ([CPAG](#))

Secondly, the uptake of Healthy Start vouchers is low with the current rate at only [48%](#). If vouchers are going to be the temporary answer, then there needs to be a focus on maximising take-up through proper promotion of the support that’s available, reducing complexity and stigma and measures to ensure vouchers can be accessed easily.

Ultimately, if we are going to end food poverty then we need to address the problems that lead to food poverty. What we really need in Greater Manchester is a strategy that focuses on ensuring everyone has access to a decent and reliable income. Yes, we need some short-term fixes to the symptoms, but without a strategy that has a clear long-term goal of a decent and reliable income for all, the problem of food poverty will remain.

Ensure Local Welfare Assistance is the lifeline it needs to be, during this crisis and in the future

By Gareth Duffield, Area Manager – Greater Manchester, Merseyside and Cheshire, Trussell Trust

During the pandemic we have seen a soaring rise in need. The number of food parcels provided by food banks in the Trussell Trust food network increased by 89% in April compared to last year, with a staggering 107% rise in parcels for families with dependent children.



Over the past few months, we've heard lots of suggestions that focus on getting food to people who can't afford it. But food isn't the answer to people needing food banks. We are working towards a society where everyone has enough to buy food for their family, cover their housing costs, heat and light their homes, and to be able to buy all the other essentials we all need to get by.

During this crisis, [we have been working in coalition with other anti-poverty charities to call for lifelines to help us all weather this storm](#), such as through suspending the repayment of Universal Credit advance payments, and increasing benefits that go towards the cost of raising children.

One important safety net is local welfare assistance schemes (LWA) which can provide cash grants to keep households afloat in times of financial crisis. When properly run, they get money to people quickly and can reduce the likelihood that people will become homeless or need to turn to a food bank.

It was heartening that the Prime Minister has announced a [£63 million fund](#) for these schemes; and of this, councils in Greater Manchester have received an allocation of £3.9m. Now this money has been allocated, it is absolutely crucial that these funds are administered properly if these schemes are to be the lifeline we so desperately need at this time. We are asking local authorities to:

- **Spend the money as intended:** We recognise that local authorities are under huge amounts of pressure in many areas of their budgets, but we must ensure this money is not swallowed up by the growing holes in local authority budgets.
- **Build awareness of Local Welfare Assistance and the new funding:** We know awareness of LWA can be extremely low. Poor publicity, unclear application processes and onerous application forms can limit uptake and leave people turning to food banks instead. Local authorities should promote and publicise the existence and purpose of schemes and agree an approach to signposting and support pathways with food banks.
- **Ensure people in need can access Local Welfare Assistance:** Given the scale of present hardship, local schemes should consider relaxing their qualifying criteria to ensure those most in need get support. For example, considering applications from low income working families or those with no recourse to public funds.
- **Ensure people get the right kind of support:** There must be a flexible, tailored approach to the kinds of support people receive, including the option for cash payments, rather than just food vouchers or other in-kind benefits, so people can buy food and other essentials like gas and electricity like anyone else. We know that GMPA have also been advising councils to adopt this approach.

It will also be important for local authorities to monitor the impact of this new funding, so that we can build the case for long-term investment in local welfare assistance.

We are calling on the UK Government to allocate £250m a year in funding for local welfare assistance, which would bring spending in England in line with equivalent schemes in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. We need to ensure that the £63m fund is not a one-off, but instead local authorities can continue to provide this vital funding during the challenging times ahead.

Thank you to all our campaigners, food banks, and partners such as The Children's Society, who helped make the changes we've seen so far happen. Please continue to [join our calls](#) for long-term investment into this crucial local lifeline.

No one should be forced to use a food bank. When we stand together, we can make a real impact – we hope this new money is an important first step in doing just that.



Gareth Duffield

Greater Manchester Real Living Wage Campaign Update



As Greater Manchester (GM) emerges from the lockdown, we will need to work to make sure the coming recession doesn't mean a race to the bottom for workers in GM. We need to work together to ensure that we deliver the 'Better' in the #BuildBackBetter strategy and build back in a way that protects and improves the conditions and pay of our lowest paid workers. We need to support the key workers who have supported us all through this crisis and campaign to make sure that at the very least, they are paid the Real Living Wage. We need to ensure that we do not retreat in terms of numbers of already accredited Living Wage Employers and that we seek to protect the most vulnerable workers in those sectors that have traditionally paid people low wages.

What does this mean for the campaign for decent work for all workers in GM in general, and the campaign for a Real Living Wage in particular? These themes were discussed at a webinar on July 8th organised by the GM Living Wage Campaign on the topic of decent work, the Real Living Wage and the post lockdown GM economy. Follow [this link](#) to see discussion and hear from our panel made up of Jenny Martin from Unison NW, Amy Rothwell from Boo Consulting and Graham Whitham from GMPA. We were also joined in the discussion by Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham.



Following on from the webinar, we are continuing the discussion and debate and in the coming weeks we will be publishing a series of podcasts of our conversations with people involved in these key issues. The first of this series of three is a discussion I had with Andy Burnham, where we covered a range of topics that will be interest to those supporting the living wage campaign in GM but also to a much wider audience.

Best Wishes and Stay Safe.

[John Hacking](#),

Greater Manchester Living Wage Campaign Co-ordinator

Follow the campaign on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#)

The Greater Manchester Living Wage Campaign is a GMPA programme

Food support provision through Covid-19

GMPA have been working with Filippo Oncini, a researcher at the University of Manchester, to help him investigate the obstacles, needs, and prospects of the food support providers active in Greater Manchester immediately after the Covid-19 peak.

Through July-August Filippo carried out a mixed method study, inviting food support providers to fill out a questionnaire and take part in interviews online.

We are pleased to [publish the preliminary findings](#) which will be a valuable starting point to reflect on the emergency responses put in place, the most common difficulties and the expectations food providers have for the near future.

While most respondents reported an overall increase in food and financial donations to their organisations during this period, and had not been needing to turn people away due to lack of food or staff/volunteer time, almost all reported that their volunteer capacity had decreased and that their financial stability had been affected by Covid-19. Meanwhile, concerns were raised about whether food donations would continue to meet the levels of need, which are at risk of increasing due to factors such as the end of the furlough scheme, winter hardships, and the possibility of a no-deal Brexit.

Filippo's report concludes, "A social contract between the state, businesses and social groups cannot rely on a sector of the economy, no matter how well organised, intentioned and funded, for shielding the most vulnerable from poverty, precisely because food aid should be a very last resort, and not the central backbone of the social welfare."

[You can read the full report of the preliminary findings here](#)

Help to showcase the work of Greater Manchester's VCSE sector



The State of the Sector survey 2020 is now live. All VCSE organisations are encouraged to take part in this important piece of research so that once again valuable evidence can be provided to decision makers about the significant social and economic contribution the VCSE sector brings to Greater Manchester. [To take part in the survey click here.](#)

Older people urged to claim Pension Credit to ensure they can access a free TV licence

The call comes after recent changes, introduced on August 1, 2020 which mean older people aged 75 and above are no longer automatically entitled to a free television licence and will need to be claiming Pension Credit to have their TV licence paid for. It is estimated that around £100m worth of Pension Credits are unclaimed in the city-region each year.

As well as a free television licence, Pension Credit can also open up access to other additional benefits, which can in some cases add up to £1,000s per year for residents. Some additional benefits include free dental treatment, help buying glasses and transport costs to hospital. Currently, the average Pension Credit claim in Greater Manchester is around £60 per week or £3,000 a year. To find out more and claim visit [Pension Credit](#) or alternatively call 0800 99 1234.

Covid Realities project

by Dr Ruth Patrick. Funded by the Nuffield Foundation, Covid Realities is a collaboration between the Universities of York and Birmingham and the Child Poverty Action Group

This project is seeking to document and better understand the experiences of families on a low income during the pandemic. The [website](#) creates an online, safe space for parents and carers on a low income to document their experiences during COVID-19; and to work with us to develop policy recommendations for change. The website also hosts a [space](#) for researchers to collectively explore the practical, ethical, and methodological challenges in researching poverty in the pandemic.

The GMCVO logo consists of the letters 'GMCVO' in a white, sans-serif font, set against a dark grey rectangular background.

The Greater Manchester Equality Alliance (GM=EqAl), hosted by GMCVO, brings together the voices and experience of people and communities who face disadvantage, prejudice and marginalisation in order to influence policy making in Greater Manchester. The aim is to ensure that equality, diversity and inclusion are at the forefront of decision making at the highest levels in all governance structures across the sub-region. To do this we are growing our network to include individuals and organisations from every sector who want to see rapid progress on equality. Please [sign up to the network](#) and share the link. There is no closing date.

The Coronavirus outbreak and how it relates to GMPA's work

As the effect of the Coronavirus outbreak impacts people's lives across the city region, our small team at GMPA will be doing what we can to highlight consequences of the virus on people experiencing poverty and on efforts to tackle poverty.

We will be working to ensure tackling poverty is at the forefront of people's minds when thinking about how Greater Manchester rebuilds and recovers after the pandemic. Please check on the [Covid-19](#) page of our website over the coming weeks for further details. The page also provides links to useful resources including local authority hubs, national agencies and VCSE infrastructure organisations. Please take every possible care and thank you for all that you are doing.



For more information about Greater Manchester Poverty Action

please visit our [website](#), follow us on [Twitter](#) or visit our [Facebook](#) page.

We want to find ways of working together, share the network's successes and provide a voice for the people living in poverty in our region but we can only do this with your help and support.

Copies of previous newsletters are available on our [website](#). If you would like to submit an article please [get in touch](#). For more information please contact us by [email](#).

NB GMPA does not have full-time dedicated administrative support so please do not expect an immediate response.

Views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily the views of GMPA. We try to fact-check all articles and events, but if you notice an error please [let us know](#) so we can correct it in a future newsletter.