


## REPORT TO EMERGENCY COMMITTEE

24 June 2020

**Urgent Item**

<b>Subject:</b>	<b>Review of Sandwell’s Emergency Food Provision in response to Covid-19</b>
<b>Director:</b>	<b>Executive Director - Neighbourhoods Alison Knight</b>
<b>Contribution towards Vision 2030:</b>	
<b>Contact Officer(s):</b>	Nicky Denston, Service Manager – Business Excellence

### **DECISION RECOMMENDATIONS**

**That :**

1. the Executive Director – Neighbourhoods be authorised to close the food hub at Tipton Sports Academy on or before 31 July 2020 and operate at a reduced scale of 3 days a week until this point.
2. the Executive Director – Neighbourhoods be authorised to enter into negotiations with a supplier to provide and deliver food parcels to vulnerable residents, families and children until 30 September 2020.

### **1 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

- 1.1 To present the findings from a review of Sandwell’s emergency food provision in response to Covid-19.
- 1.2 To provide details of the options considered for the future of the food hub at Tipton Sports Academy.

## 2 **IMPLICATIONS FOR VISION 2030**

- 2.1 Providing food parcels to vulnerable families and children across Sandwell during the covid-19 crisis has assisted them in getting the best start in life. We want Sandwell to be a place where we live healthy lives and live them for longer and where those of us who are vulnerable feel respected and cared for. Providing healthy food parcels has supported residents to stay at home and protect their own health, the NHS and care providers.

## 3 **BACKGROUND AND MAIN CONSIDERATIONS**

- 3.1 On the 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020 the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government issued guidance outlining the need for a partnership approach between national and local agencies to support those people in our communities who are at the highest risk of severe illness ('the clinically extremely vulnerable') if they contract COVID-19 and therefore have been advised to isolate themselves ("shielding") for a period of time.
- 3.2 There are three strands of support being offered people who need to shield and do not have a close network of support available to them:
- Food: delivery of basic food parcels directly to people's doorsteps
  - Medicines: provision of prescription medication delivered by community pharmacies.
  - Social contact: local authorities, working with the voluntary and community sector, providing social support to people who might be feeling isolated at this difficult time.
- 3.3 The Council recognised the 'shielding list' does not identify everyone who either may be vulnerable or those who may require support and assistance during the crisis. We have therefore identified a local authority vulnerable-risk group to sit alongside the information we receive from the NHS.
- 3.4 The vulnerable-risk group contained a further 15,392 people in addition to the 6692 on the 'shielding list'. A proactive approach was taken to contact all of Sandwell's 135,000 households providing them with contact details of a practical support line dedicated to identifying support residents required such as food, medication or the need for urgent care and support.
- 3.5 Initial guidance from the government indicated that Sandwell would receive 10,000 food parcels and a sizeable storage facility was required. Tipton Sports Academy was identified as an effective solution. However, only 50 food parcels were delivered, and further government advice was local provision was required to fill any gaps in provision.

- 3.6 In response to the urgent need for food supplies for those on the shielded list or self-isolating, a food distribution hub was created at Tipton Sports Academy with support from Sandwell Leisure Trust from the 23 March 2020. The development of the food hub was the first in the West Midlands region and demonstrated the proactiveness of the response to help our vulnerable residents.
- 3.7 The setting up of an emergency food hub at very short notice with no experience or plans on how to do this was a real challenge. However, teams from across the council and with support from our partner organisations, the Albion Foundation and West Midlands Fire Service pulling together to develop what is now a smooth-running machine, delivering hundreds of parcels a day to vulnerable families and children.
- 3.8 A major success of the food hub has been the speed of mobilisation from a sports hall to a fully functioning food distribution hub within a matter of days. This required immediate responses to sourcing adequate volumes and types of food stocks, equipment, packaging, transport, refrigeration facilities and dealing with health and safety issues. The Council can demonstrate it can quickly mobilise employees, resources and infrastructure to implement emergency food provision and delivery in response to any future emergency.
- 3.9 The initial delivery of food parcels was focused on emergency provision identified via referrals from the practical support unit and the immediate need of shielded residents waiting for the delivery of government food parcels. At the start of lockdown government appointed suppliers experienced delivery issues and the food hub provided an immediate response and a vital stop-gap for vulnerable residents. Parcels have been delivered within 2 hours of a phone call from a resident to the practical support unit. This is exceptional performance at a time of crisis and feedback from residents on the speed of delivery, quality of contents of the food parcel and general customer service has been excellent.
- 3.10 Sandwell was the first in the region to establish its food hub and is seen as best practice in terms of its quick mobilisation, community connections and expansion to support other vulnerable groups within Sandwell. It has been represented on the vulnerable persons cell for food on a regional level and this has provided a platform to work with other local authorities, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), West Midlands Police, West Midlands Fire Service, West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) and the Department of Environment, farming and rural affairs (DEFRA) to feedback practical issues as well as informing government responses to food during the covid-19 pandemic.

### 3.11 Key statistics from the food hub are:

- Over 10,000 parcels have been delivered as at 5 June 2020
- 20 residents living in temporary accommodation have been supported with donated hot meals and basic food stocks on a weekly basis.
- Over 50 residents referred from 2 local faith groups have been provided with weekly food parcels.
- 296 children not currently on the school roll have been receiving the weekly equivalent of £15 of food on a weekly basis.
- Over 500 children and families have been supported via referrals from the Children's Trust.
- 14 schools have been provided with more than 200 food parcels on a weekly basis to support vulnerable families they have identified.
- Over 80 Sandwell employees have been involved in packing and delivering food parcels since 23 March 2020.
- In the region of £6k of food has been provided to Sandwell's food banks during this period which represents feeding 250 families.

## 4 THE CURRENT POSITION

- 4.1 In total over 10,000 food parcels have been provided to vulnerable residents in Sandwell. The decision was taken to focus on immediate and urgent need and parcels are provided to residents on a one-off basis unless a further referral is accepted by the practical support unit. The intention from the commencement of the food hub was to identify alternative pathways for support and the offer from the voluntary and community sector has proven to be a real success as we have seen referrals from the practical support unit reduce by 50% over the last 4 weeks. Other local authorities took the route of providing weekly food parcels to all vulnerable residents', but this may have initiated some reliance within their communities and at a considerable expense.
- 4.2 One of the major outcomes of the Sandwell food hub has been the response to immediate need but also the transfer of need to more sustainable options. Working in partnership with voluntary and community sector partners to find community-based solutions that meet on-going needs has included the Good Neighbours initiative and Community Offer as well as, relatively small scale, community kitchens and food pantries.
- 4.3 The food hub has expanded its offer over the last 11 weeks providing invaluable assistance to a wider range of vulnerable residents. The offer is now available on a weekly basis and has provided 393 meals to 20 residents living in 9 venues of temporary accommodation, weekly to 296 children currently not on the school roll, direct referrals from 14 local schools and referrals from the Children's Trust. Over one-third of referrals,

a total of 2692 parcels have been provided to support vulnerable children and families.

4.4 The food hub's success over the last 11 weeks has not been purely due to the deliveries of food parcels to vulnerable residents. It has created a far bigger impact and sustainable legacy that has and will improve the lives of the people of Sandwell. The outcomes delivered are:

- **Employees** - In total over 80 employees have been redeployed to work at the food hub and they have benefitted from this on several levels. Transferable skills have been utilised to work in different roles, many of them practical and manual. Individuals and teams from across the council have come together to work for the same purpose and this has led to the development of positive working relationships and friendships which would not have been created previously. Some employees have demonstrated leadership qualities which has supported their personal development and may lead to potential future opportunities within the organisation. There has been overwhelmingly positive feedback from those employees who have been redeployed to work at the food hub.
- **Collaborative working** - with our stakeholders and partners including the West Midlands Fire Service, Sandwell Leisure Trust and the Albion Foundation it has demonstrated public and voluntary services can collaborate beyond organisational boundaries, particularly in the event of a crisis. There are further opportunities available to work collectively on the food offer going forward.
- **Food Banks** - The current operating model of the food banks would not have been able to deliver an immediate or sustained response to the increased demands during this crisis, particularly because of a reduction in donations and real difficulties in purchasing food in bulk from supermarkets. The food hub has been supplying the food banks with supplies and donations on a weekly basis to ensure they are well stocked. On average food banks in Sandwell saw an average increase in demand of 188%, with the highest being a 358% increase in Smethwick. The food hub has been supplying the food banks with supplies and donations on a weekly basis to ensure they are well stocked.
- **Networking and contacts** - Working with local businesses and suppliers has created future supply chains and networks for both supplies and donations which can be utilised in the future by food banks, food pantries and community kitchens across Sandwell, supporting them to become sustainable. An area of interest is the spatial mapping of deliveries which identifies in each of the six towns that residents accessing food parcel support do not live near their local food bank. This demonstrates that the reliance on existing food

banks during this time would have met the needs of the vulnerable-risk group in Sandwell.

- **Impact on personal finances** - It has become apparent that individuals and families have been feeling the financial strain throughout the pandemic and the food hub has assisted these residents with essential food supplies at a time where they were struggling financially. The provision of food has supported families who may not have accessed local authority support previously but have been affected by unemployment or furlough arrangements during this period. Going forward, work needs to be done to ensure that residents are referred for help with benefits, debt and budgeting from the Sandwell Advice Providers Network. Advice is available by phone and face to face services are opening up for vulnerable people.
- **Emergency Support** – Providing emergency support without developing a long-term dependency on the council has been a key achievement. 43% of residents received only 1 food parcel over the last 11 weeks and less than 2% of residents had more than 5+ parcels. This has demonstrated that the food hub has been effective at delivering an emergency only response which hasn't led to a reliance on continuous food parcels. This will lessen the impact on residents when the food hub is reduced. Many other councils have been providing weekly parcels to their vulnerable residents. However, Sandwell have been successful in ensuring that those residents without family, friends or neighbours to help them out have been supported by volunteers or voluntary organisations. Although the food hub offer is Monday to Friday, the Community Alarms service have been providing weekend cover for a 7 day a week service.
- **Safeguarding and welfare** - of our residents has been a real outcome from the delivery of parcels. On numerous occasions, delivery drivers have identified issues where residents have required additional support and in some instances emergency assistance. Following 2 attempted calls, for difficult to reach residents, cases are passed over to Adult Services and the Community Offer to check for alternative contact details and where necessary welfare visits are conducted. Early identification and resolution via the established pathways and have led to positive outcomes for the residents involved. Non-delivery of school parcels has led to the identification of changes of address of children and safeguarding alerts on some occasions which again have been proactively resolved. Via the development of relationships with local faith and community groups

we have been able to identify other harder to reach vulnerable people in Sandwell.

- **Social contact** - The delivery of parcels, although social distancing is adhered to always, has provided socially isolated individuals a small amount of contact which can prove invaluable for their mental health.
- **Emergency response** – Demonstrated our ability to scale up the approach to meet the changing demands throughout the pandemic. The scope of the food hub has successfully been widened to meet emerging demands such as those from the Education service and residents living in temporary accommodation.
- **Education** - The food hub has significantly augmented schools' ability to deliver front line support to struggling families and helped plug a poverty gap between children eligible for a free school meal and those families who have been barely coping due to significantly reduced income. It has helped schools identify those families in need of additional support and gave them another avenue to connect directly with them to ensure children were safe and well. This has boosted the reputation of the council with schools and the community and encouraged schools to create new partnerships with the Albion Foundation, food banks and other local voluntary organisations.
- **Flexibility of approach** – The strength of the approach has been the ability to review and develop the offer as time has progressed. This has included reviewing of the parcel contents in conjunction with public health leading to a 40% reduction in the cost of each parcel whilst ensuring it met the basic weekly needs of residents and public health dietary standards. Sandwell's parcels have been one of the only parcels regionally to provide fresh produce such as cheese, butter and eggs and be supplemented with frozen meals.
- **Geographical spread** - in terms of demand West Bromwich has seen the highest number of parcels but has the highest levels of population in general and the highest levels of over 65+ in Sandwell. Although Tipton has the lowest 65+ in Sandwell, it does have the highest levels of deprived households in Sandwell, which is why it has seen the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest number of deliveries from the food hub.

## 5 CONSULTATION (CUSTOMERS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS)

- 5.1 Feedback from customers who have received deliveries from the food hub have been extremely positive. There has been a high number of compliments both written and directly from customers to delivery drivers. The speed of delivery and the quality and contents of the box are the primary reasons for compliments. This has been supplemented by positive comments from local schools, food banks and faith groups who have been grateful for the provision of food parcels and donations.
- 5.2 A total of over 80 employees have been involved in the daily running of the food hub. Feedback from employees has been extremely positive and the overarching view has been a sense of satisfaction and community pride.
- 5.3 As part of the development of alternative options there has been consultation with the key partners including Sandwell Leisure Trust, the Albion Foundation, West Midlands Fire Service, Public Health, Education and Adult Services.

## 6 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 6.1 An options appraisal has been developed identifying the advantages and disadvantages of the different proposed options. This has been used to inform the recommendations. Appendix 1 refers.

### 6.2 Option 1 – Retain the existing food hub service

Continue with the current arrangements of providing and delivering food parcels from the food hub at Tipton Sports Academy for vulnerable residents and those identified by Children's Services and Education.

### 6.3 Option 2 - Transfer food hub service to existing food banks

Transfer any remaining stock and relevant equipment to the Sandwell food banks. Residents will have to go to their local food bank to access supplies, although two of the food banks have been providing limited delivery.

### 6.3 Option 3 – Develop a community food offer

It is proposed to develop A 'community food offer' for residents in Sandwell. The aim is to initially establish a baseline of current provision around food in key areas such as volunteering, transport, food banks, community kitchens and partner organisations such as voluntary and faith groups. The intention is to develop a web of support for children, families and vulnerable people who require access to emergency food.



#### 6.4 Option 4 – Close food hub from 31 July 2020

Close Tipton Sports Academy as a food hub completely from 31 July 2020.

#### 6.5 Option 5 – Reduce scale of offer at Tipton Sports Academy

Continue to use the facility of Tipton Sports Academy as the infrastructure is already in place and reduce the delivery from 5 days a week (Monday to Friday) to 3 days a week (Monday, Wednesday and Friday). This service would close on or before 31 July 2020.

#### 6.6 Option 6 – Only provide parcels to vulnerable children and families

Continue with the current arrangements at the food hub but only provide parcels and delivery to those identified by Children's Services and Education.

#### 6.7 Option 7 – Close food hub on or before 31 July 2020 and use supplier to purchase and deliver all food parcels

Close the food hub on or before 31 July 2020 and transfer all remaining food stocks to the food banks. Those residents suffering financial hardship, who are not self-isolating or suffering from covid-19 and are able to leave their homes will not receive a food parcel from the food hub. These residents will be required to apply for a Local Welfare Provision food voucher to access food from their local food bank.

To support those residents in crisis who are vulnerable and self-isolating a contracted supplier will provide and deliver a food parcel with next day delivery. The parcels contents would be sufficient to last the resident for 6 days. In emergency cases a food parcel will be delivered to the resident within 4 hours. Other options to support immediate response will be explored. The next day delivery principle would be utilised to provide parcels for those identified by Children's Services or Education.

Bulk purchase of food for the food banks will continue, with a review in mid-September 2020.

## 7 STRATEGIC RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

7.1 The total spends on the food distribution hub as at 5<sup>th</sup> June 2020 is £0.279m. A breakdown of this expenditure is summarised in the table below.

<b>Expenditure</b>	<b>£</b>
Food supplies	217,211
Packaging	3325
Equipment	17,487

Safety equipment	168
Security	38,862
Stationery	1,709
Leaflets	1,119
Other	133
<b>Total</b>	<b>279,434</b>

- 7.2 The total spends on the food distribution hub as at 5<sup>th</sup> June 2020 is £0.279m. A breakdown of this expenditure is summarised in the table below.
- 7.3 The recommended option 8, which would utilise a supplier to provide food parcels and deliver them to residents would require the council to purchase a minimum of 2000 parcels at a cost of £15.35 per box. Delivery of the boxes would cost an additional £7 per box. The total of the service excluding VAT would be £22.35 per box. Our current food parcel costs £24 per box and this does not include delivery.
- 7.4 All costs directly related to food will be fully funded from the Covid grant received by MHCLG due to the emergency response to the crisis.
- 7.5 Using a supplier for future food parcels will not impact on the EU procurement threshold of £189,330 therefore a formal procurement exercise in line with EU legislation is required. The Councils Procurement and Contract Procedure Rules have been updated as follows; *“For new contracts below the threshold for supplies and services set out in the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 (PCR 2015) a direct contract award may be made, provided that value for money can be demonstrated and subject to budget holder approval”*.

## 8 LEGAL AND GOVERNANCE CONSIDERATIONS

- 8.1 As part of the government arrangements for supporting residents Sandwell has responded by providing food parcels for those individuals on the NHS shielded list and those residents identified as being on Sandwell’s vulnerable-risk list.

## 9 EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 9.1 An equality impact assessment is not required at this stage.

## 10 DATA PROTECTION IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 11.1 Personal information on children and families is held by schools only. The delivery of food parcels and the process of receiving the recipients contact details including name, address and telephone address have been agreed by the council’s information governance unit.

## **11 CRIME AND DISORDER AND RISK ASSESSMENT**

- 11.2 Provision of food parcels provides support to families where many of them are experiencing financial hardship. The support provided can prevent incidences of crime linked to deprivation within families with little or no support networks.
- 11.3 Tipton Sports Academy was identified immediately by West Midlands Police as a priority 1 response location. This has been supplemented by 24-hour security and there has been no incidences of crime and disorder at the facility.

## **12 SUSTAINABILITY OF PROPOSALS**

- 12.1 The food hub was set up in response to the covid-19 emergency and is not intended to be a permanent facility. Alternative options to provide food support are outlined in section 6 and Appendix 1.
- 12.2 Following a campaign by footballer Marcus Rashford the government has made the announcement that free school meal provision is to be extended in England to cover the Summer school holiday period. This award of £120m will see children receiving vouchers of £15 per week and will support 1.3m children across England. An additional £63 million will be given to local authorities to help those who are struggling financially due to the impact of COVID-19. This will allow authorities to step in and provide discretionary financial help to those facing severe hardship to allow them to pay for food and other necessities. These measures will help to support children and families in Sandwell.
- 12.3 There are 296 children currently not on the school roll within Sandwell who would qualify for free school meals if they were in education. Under the announced government guidelines these children would not benefit. These children have been supported since the food hub commenced on 23 March 2020 and it is proposed to continue with this support until 30 September 2020.
- 12.4 The council will continue to identify vulnerable children and provide them with food support as and when it is required. This will be via direct referrals from Children's, education and schools. The Regional Schools Commissioner has indicated that schools will not be asked to be open for children over the Summer break. Although holiday play activities may be delivered instead. Prior to the end of the school term schools will be asked to provide information about families in need to ensure they access food support.

12.5 For those residents suffering financial hardship during this period, food vouchers are available outside of local welfare provision. They can be applied for via the council's website or are accessible from voluntary organisations.

12.6 The council will support local food banks in dealing with any issues of increased demand as a result of the recommendations.

### **13 HEALTH AND WELLBEING IMPLICATIONS (INCLUDING SOCIAL VALUE)**

13.1 The supplies for the food hub were initially purchased from local wholesalers as supermarkets were not providing bulk buying options for local authorities. Both wholesalers used, although national companies were both located in Sandwell. As demand grew, local suppliers were utilised for a range of food products and equipment. Sandwell businesses equated for 71% of supplies purchased and of those 50% are small and medium sized enterprises. Over 90% of donated items provided to the hub were from Sandwell businesses and organisations and 100% of those were used to increase the contents of food parcels or to support Sandwell food banks.

13.2 As part of the transition arrangements from the food hub residents continuing to receive parcels will be provided with a leaflet identifying alternative arrangements to support them in gaining access to food. As well as containing information on the vulnerable persons offer from supermarkets, there is an opportunity for some Sandwell businesses to promote their food delivery options to Sandwell residents, supporting Sandwell's community wealth building principles.

13.3 Public health will have input into the final contents of the supplied food parcel to ensure it meets nutritional standards. The food parcels purchased will contain non-perishable items and there are the opportunities to cater for dietary requirements.

13.4 A second wave of the pandemic is predicted for autumn/winter. This could be significantly increased localised outbreaks or a new wave of general transmission across the community. If we see localised outbreaks we would work with the supplier alongside Public Health to take requests for support to the individuals affected, in coping with time limited self-isolation. If there is a new wave of transmission, then the supplier would be engaged again to produce and deliver food parcels directly to residents.

## **14 IMPACT ON ANY COUNCIL MANAGED PROPERTY OR LAND**

14.1 Tipton Sports Academy has been the venue for the food hub since the 23 March 2020. This is a council owned asset managed by Sandwell Leisure Trust.

14.2 Provisional date for Sandwell Leisure Trust to reopen Tipton Sports Academy is the 4 July 2020. It is planned that the academy will not revert to the full pre-covid programme of activities and the current space utilised for the food hub could continue to be used. This would be subject to a full risk assessment.

## **15 CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY OF REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS**

15.1 The recommendation following the development of an options appraisal is Option 7:

- To continue with the food hub at Tipton Sports academy on a reduced scale, operating 3 days a week.
- To close the food hub on or before 31 July 2020.
- Develop a scheme with a supplier to purchase and deliver food to vulnerable residents and requests from children and education until the 30 September 2020.
- To be reviewed if a second spike of Covid-19 happens.

15.2 It is expected that the number of referrals for vulnerable residents will continue to reduce week by week as shielding comes to an end. Community Offer will provide support for vulnerable residents and it is anticipated that more community-based access to food will gradually start to open.

15.3 This recommendation would enable a service to be provided until the government's recommended shielding period ends. It also ensures that the good work being provided to support schools and their vulnerable children and families continues until children fully return to school in September 2020.

15.4 This recommendation would need to be reviewed if there is a second spike of covid-19 and shielding arrangements and self-isolation rules are enforced again.

## **16 BACKGROUND PAPERS**

16.1 None

**17 APPENDICES:**

Appendix 1 – Options Appraisal Food Hub

**Alison Knight**  
**Executive Director - Neighbourhoods**