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**THIFF Forum Meeting Minutes: Food Insecurity**

Monday 12th May 2025, Good Shepherd Mission, Bethnal Green

A group of people sitting at a table

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**Introduction: Rev James Olanipekun, THIFF Interim Chair**

Rev James emphasised the forum's influence: “This forum has a voice — and it can be a loud voice” and encouraged more engagement with authorities to amplify community concerns through trusted faith-based networks. He then introduced the main topic of the evening – food insecurity:

* + Importance of addressing poverty holistically — not just food banks but systemic solutions.
  + Concern over under-publicised support options.
  + Clear links between health implications and long-term conditions tied to food poverty.
  + Stigma, shame, and social impacts for those using food services.

**Speaker: Ryan Lynch – Good Shepherd Mission**

* Over 45 years in operation (building from 1851).
* Offers extensive community services:
  + Foodbank, homelessness outreach, youth work, women’s groups, mother & toddler groups.
  + Monthly Saturday family activities and continuous outreach.
* 50 volunteers – who are essential to operations. Funding primarily from church congregation (minimal council funding).
* All guests receive free food — the people that come along are not seen as ‘clients’ but as community members.
* Drug recovery support – including rehab referrals and a football team led by an ex-addict.

**Discussion Section: Challenges and Observations**

**A group of people sitting in a room

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**Food Poverty & Causes**

* **Bow Foodbank**: Multifaith origins, their service peaked during the pandemic , providing food to 1,000 families a week); numbers have fallen now to about 500 a week but this figure is rising.
* Causes of food poverty are complex and varied:
  + Housing quality and rising rents.
  + 2-child benefit cap, language barriers, limited knowledge of entitlements.
* Faith groups and mosques also offer food services — however, better mapping of these services is needed.

**Language Barriers & ESOL**

* High demand for English classes – insufficient provision of pre-ESOL (basic literacy) support.
* Isolation due to language leads to reliance on interpreters.
* Initiatives like **Chatty Café** help with informal learning.
* Churches and volunteer groups offer ESOL and basic support.
* Suggestion to better coordinate capital and spaces in faith settings for teaching.

**Housing and Social Challenges**

* Immigration and housing rules affecting stability.
* Family breakdowns are often a challenge to be navigated, especially linked to visa status and domestic abuse.

Structural issues keep people in poverty.

Those in Salvation Army hostels can’t work without losing benefits — the system creates dependency.

**Unemployment & Health**:

* + Underlying health conditions impact employment opportunities.
  + Issues like addiction, gambling, and family breakdown exacerbate poverty.

**Access to Cooking & Food Facilities**

* Many lack access to kitchens or refrigeration.
* Fast food often cheaper than home cooking due to energy costs.
* Initiatives:
  + Cadent partnership – distributed slow cookers.
  + Community kitchens and food education are crucial.
* Identified gaps:
  + Fuel poverty, basic cooking skills, food storage.

**Support & Coordination**

**Mapping and Referral Systems**

* Current mapping systems inadequate – they don’t cover baby banks, or place for school clothing, etc.
* Proposal: Use Plinth platform:
  + Community-owned CRM to track visits and outcomes.
  + Funded partly by Bow Foodbank.
  + Allows individual stakeholders to keep their data (such as opening times etc) updated, allows better referral network.

**Social Prescribing & Outreach**

* Suggest inviting **social prescribers** to forums.
* **Joy App** replacing THCAN — useful for referrals.
* Outreach ideas:
  + Supermarkets as info hubs.
  + Faith and community events to build trust.
  + More systematic and unified flyer distribution.

**Engagement with Local Authority**

* Positive response from Mayor’s team after recent campaign on food hub funding.
* Urged creation of a cohesive representative body (not political, but advocacy-focused).
* Emphasised need for:
  + Data and case studies to demonstrate impact.
  + Monetary value of volunteer hours (estimated £2M+).
  + Authentic engagement — “council officers need to meet residents face to face.”

**Local Initiatives mentioned during discussion**

* **Alexandra Rose Vouchers** ([Rose Vouchers - Alexandra Rose](https://www.alexandrarose.org.uk/rose-vouchers/))
  + Aimed at promoting healthy eating.
  + Referrals via healthcare professionals or social prescribers.
  + Estimated value: £40/month for fruit & veg.
* **Family Hubs** ([Tower Hamlets | Family Hubs](https://thfamilyhubs.co.uk/))
  + Provide essentials (e.g., nappies) along with food.
  + Need better inclusion in food support mapping.

**Next meeting will look at how a potential lack of suitable English language learning opportunities impact upon a person’s ability to find support**