

**Minutes of Challenging Poverty in Devizes event**  
**21st October 2022, 7:30 pm**  
**At Ceres Hall, the Corn Exchange, SN10 1HS**

**Speakers and Panellists:** Hon. Danny Kruger MP, Emma Revie (CEO, Trussell Trust), Councillor Iain Wallis (Wiltshire Council), Suzanne Wigmore (CEO, Wiltshire Citizens Advice)

1. **Short introduction:** Richard Oliver (Chairman and trustee, Devizes and District Foodbank).
2. **Speaker Danny Kruger MP:** After a reference to the political changes of the last few weeks, and the responsibility of politicians to address poverty, the speaker mentioned the current social and economic model of exploiting cheap labour, and reliance on imports. Buying cheaper goods and services from abroad makes the pound seem stronger and allows a better standard of living, but growth is focussed on London and the south-east, to the detriment of other areas.

The speaker suggested that the social and economic model needs to change, to allow for more community-level support to combat poverty. Technology has rapidly changed our way of life, and employment patterns have also changed: one income is no longer enough to live off, many people work multiple jobs to make ends meet, and most people do not have a job for life.

An over-reliance on imports has impacted the food economy, where the UK only produces 60% of the food consumed, leaving the market vulnerable to shocks such as Covid-19 or the war in Ukraine. Paradoxically, unhealthy foods have become cheaper than healthy ones, leading to obesity occurring alongside other forms of malnutrition.

The Government has supported individuals via the Cost of Living payment (a £650 payment) and Council Tax Energy Rebate scheme (a £150 payment), and Wiltshire Council have used the Household Support Fund to support the most vulnerable households. It is important that communities are empowered and able to support themselves, alongside support offered by the social security system and government. Civil society (non-governmental and not-for-profit organisations) has a role to play, as do town and parish councils in working out where and how to meet financial needs.

3. **Speaker Emma Revie:** The Trussell Trust has a network of over 1,300 food banks across the UK, providing wrap-around support as well as food parcels. Although every food bank is different, they are all embedded in their communities and offer a warm welcome and a listening ear.

From April to March this year, Devizes and District Foodbank gave out 1,800 food parcels, one third to children. As a whole, the Trussell Trust gave out 2.1 million parcels in the last year, up 14% from pre-pandemic and up 81% from the last five

years. The Trussell Trust has seen winter levels of need this summer, and more people unable to cook food or travel to work or appointments due to rising costs.

The Government has intervened with the Cost of Living payment and energy price guarantee, although research suggests the Cost of Living payment is only of short-term benefit, having lasted around a month on average.

Research by Heriot-Watt University shows that people with disabilities or long-term health problems, single parents and people with caring responsibilities are over-represented in food bank referrals. Volunteers, communities and central government all have a role to play in challenging poverty. Central to this will be sufficient benefit levels and fewer benefit deductions or sanctions, and an end to the five week wait for Universal Credit. Funds such as the Household Support Fund, to local authorities, need to be longer-term so that councils can plan how best to use and target them.

4. **Speaker Iain Wallis:** The speaker represents Wiltshire and Devizes Town councils. Anyone can fall into poverty, through a series of events such as job loss, relationship breakdown, ill health or homelessness.

Devizes, North (East) and Devizes, South (West) are in the top 30% most deprived in England, and Devizes, East (Central) is in the top 40%.

Wiltshire Council have put in place schemes to challenge poverty in the area:

- Warm and Safe Wiltshire, to address fuel poverty
- Home Upgrade Grant to increase energy efficiency of homes
- Green Homes Grant to increase energy efficiency and reduce carbon footprint of homes
- Retrofitting council houses - 500 a year
- Solar fitting for 1000 people
- Bringing back Wiltshire Wellbeing Hub for vulnerable residents
- Proactively identifying those at risk and sharing with partners such as Wessex Water for timely support
- Cost of doing business - steering group looking at the impact of the cost of living on small businesses
- Support for Wiltshire Council staff
- Giving out the Household Support Fund (in its third instalment)
- Continuation of Council Tax discounts, FUEL scheme for children during school holidays, and Local Welfare Provision for emergency need

5. **Open questions:** The first question was what will happen once the Household Support Fund is over in March, and the energy price guarantee rises in April. Danny Kruger responded that we won't know until closer to the time.

Question on free school meals (FSMs): At the moment, eligibility requires an annual income of below £7,400 when on Universal Credit (after tax and not including benefits). This excludes many families who would benefit from FSMs, meaning that

some children are going hungry. Danny Kruger responded that he would look into eligibility and **welcomed information from schools and families about specific cases**. There was a suggestion that FSMs could be universal. Suzanne Wigmore responded that targeted support always means there are gaps or people who miss out on support. They are helped by Citizens Advice. It is possible to use databases such as Universal Credit to target support, as was the case with the Cost of Living payment.

Question on role of voluntary sector in challenging poverty: Volunteers are often fulfilling multiple roles, so we shouldn't rely on the voluntary sector too much. There is a need for government support in the cost of living crisis, but we will always need community groups and volunteers. Emma Revie stated that volunteers play an important role in food banks, providing companionship and support, but that food banks should not be seen as the first port of call. Emergency food provision has become embedded in the public psyche, when the statutory sector also needs to play a role. Suzanne Wigmore explained the value of volunteers to Citizens Advice, both in receiving extensive training and also having local connections and knowledge.

Question on Citizens Advice funding and Devizes Library community hub: Citizens Advice Wiltshire has had its budget cut by £100,000 and the question was if that funding will be returned. Iain Wallis responded that Citizens Advice still gets £500,000 a year, and that the council budget is shrinking due to inflation. They will be re-assessing the budget in future. The second question was around having council staff in Devizes Library, where there used to be a drop-in. Iain Wallis responded that staff have been re-routed to other schemes such as distributing the Household Support Fund, but the drop-in may be re-opened at some point. He recognised that there are fewer places to get help in person. Keith Brindle, vicar of St James Church, mentioned **Warm Spaces**, which will be venues in Devizes offering warmth, social spaces, and signposting. Danny Kruger mentioned that there was funding on offer for such spaces, and they would help build up the community by being open to anyone seeking a social space.

Question on Universal Credit: Insufficient benefit levels are one of the biggest causes of poverty in the UK, with the Universal Credit Standard Allowance for single people under 25 having gone up by only £14 in the last 3-4 years despite inflation. The Trussell Trust is campaigning for Universal Credit to be raised in line with September 2022 inflation levels. Danny Kruger stated that raising benefit levels in line with inflation is something the government is discussing.

Minutes by Alex Montegriffo (Community Organiser and Campaigns Manager, Devizes and District Foodbank)

Any comments or questions to: [alex@devizesanddistrict.foodbank.org.uk](mailto:alex@devizesanddistrict.foodbank.org.uk)

Feedback form for event: <https://us13.list-manage.com/survey?u=3b9eba65eff08c854b9913042&id=283e92cf35&attribution=false>