

City-owned public diners could help fund food insecurity

City-owned public diners should be explored as a solution to help fight food insecurity in Edinburgh, according to a councillor.

Councils across the UK used to run public, low-cost diners for residents, but the last of them closed in the 1970s.

Now, Green councillor Dan Heap, representing Sighthill/Gorgie, wants to see Edinburgh explore bringing them back through a six month trial run.

He told the Local Democracy Reporting Service: "The idea is that you have a place where you can access a basic meal.

"It won't be a gourmet meal, but it will be a healthy meal produced with local ingredients. You can get a reasonable price.

"It will be designed to be not for profit, and that will be reflected in the price, It's meant to help people access local, healthy food, which is not always easy at the moment, given the cost of living and given food prices."

In a motion Cllr Heap has put forward to the next full Edinburgh Council meeting, he proposes a six month trial run of one restaurant, providing meals for at least one afternoon and one evening a week.

According to the motion, it would involve a "small range of

simple and healthy meals” with locally sourced ingredients, including at least one vegan option.

A report by a charity published in 2022 found that an estimated 30,000 people in Edinburgh went hungry due to a lack of money in 2020.

And UK government figures published this year showed that 11% of Scottish households struggled with low food security in 2022-23.

Public diners in the UK started during the second World War, as a means of helping to keep the public fed.

At their height, over 2,100 such public diners existed throughout the country, run mostly by local authorities.

Often known as ‘British restaurants’, the vast majority of them were financially self sustaining, using massive economies of scale to help drive down prices.

Hundreds continued running after the war, mostly in council ownership, with the last one in Cambridge closing in the mid 1970s.

Some councils today do own restaurants and pubs, but to date no local authority has tried to bring back the concept of a public diner.

Heap’s motion comes on the heels of a report by food charity Nourish Scotland which encourages councils to bring back public diners.

The charity sees public diners as a way of both helping to combat food insecurity across the country and providing places for communities to come together.

Heap says that the concept of a public diner already exists in Edinburgh, through canteens in schools and businesses.

For him, the idea is worth being made universal, so that everybody in society can benefit from it.

Nourish Scotland points to the success of similar schemes in Poland and Singapore, where the state to this day helps to fund low-cost restaurants available to the public.

In Poland, 'milk bars' – canteens that provide low-price, mostly vegetarian meals, have existed for over a century.

Today, the state subsidises 70% of the price of most meals they offer, providing a low-cost dining option for anyone who wants it.

And in Singapore, the state runs over 100 'hawker centres', dining halls where street vendors can sell food.

Rents are controlled for vendors, and the state controls prices of some staple foods and provides most of the utilities and amenities needed for them to function.

In both countries, the cheap public food options also provide a place for community to flourish, with families and groups of friends often visiting the same milk bars or hawker centres on a weekly or daily basis.

Heap believes this would be an important element of any public diner scheme that Edinburgh might eventually roll out.

He said: "Why should people not have the chance to go out once a week for a meal? Lots of people have the ability to do that. Some people don't.

"I think there's something in getting people out to a place where they can socialise, where they don't have to do the washing up after.

"I think it's not just access to food, because you can do that through other means, like food banks. There's something a bit extra that this adds.

“It’s an idea whose time has come.”

By Joseph Sullivan Local Democracy Reporter