

Feeding Britain

Six Months On

A progress report on the work of the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom

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Introduction

Six months ago we published a report, **Feeding Britain**, which exposed a dysfunctional food system, an unfair premium paid by the poor for basic utilities, and a worryingly large number of holes in Britain's safety net. We argued that the combination of these three factors over the past decade had contributed to a large number of our fellow citizens being hungry.

Our report made 77 recommendations which, if seen through successfully, we believe would improve the way our food system works, bring fairness to the utilities markets, and mend those holes we identified in the nation's safety net.

Much of our effort over the past six months has been directed towards securing and implementing these reforms. We hope their overall effect would be to strengthen Britain's national minimum standard of living so it might once again be sufficient to protect our poorest citizens from hunger.¹ The ultimate aim of our proposals is to ensure a broken fridge or a relative being taken to hospital, for example, need not result in a situation where somebody is unable to afford or access food.

The inquiry which formed the basis of our report was sprung into action by the grave concerns we held about the numbers of people in our communities – be they in rich, poor, urban or rural areas – who need to visit their local food bank to stave off hunger.

We understand it will take a monumental effort to turn around some of the entrenched economic trends we identified in **Feeding Britain**. These trends have weakened the position of the poor not only in Britain, but in the United States, France, Canada, Germany and elsewhere, and they look set to continue doing so in the immediate future and beyond.

But we outline in this brief report the steps we have taken in the first six months of **Feeding Britain** to try and ameliorate the living standards of Britain's poor, and to better equip them to manage life's crises, so they need not be so vulnerable to hunger.

Another purpose of publishing this report, as well as to update the public on our work, is to issue a further plea for evidence from the foot soldiers who find themselves on the frontline of Britain's fightback against hunger. We want to hear about the progression and development of their work over the past six months, and to learn more about the numbers of people who need their help. We also seek further to understand what has happened in those people's lives to the extent they are plunged into crisis.

We would like to thank all of those individuals, agencies, and organisations from across the voluntary, public, and private sectors who have taken up our recommendations and so enthusiastically thrown their weight behind the fightback against hunger. We hope this brief report does some justice to their work.

¹ The 'Policy of the National Minimum' was devised at the turn of the 20th century by Beatrice Webb, as a means of 'securing to every individual, as the very basis of his life and work, a prescribed national minimum of the requisites for efficient parenthood and citizenship'. This idea which was so central to the thinking behind the Minority Report of the Poor Law Commission stipulated that it 'is the necessity, in order to prevent injury to the community as a whole, of maintaining from one end of the kingdom to the other a definite Standard Minimum of the conditions of civilised life, below which, in the interests of the whole, no individual shall be permitted to fall.'

Summary

Six Months On

Since **Feeding Britain** was published in December 2014 we have sought to engage with every organisation to whom we made recommendations, and to begin implementing some of our proposals through a series of local pilots.

While more than a third of our recommendations have been put into action over these past six months, two key statistics contained in this brief report reveal the scale of the challenge with which we are confronted, if we are to plot an effective course towards successfully countering hunger in this country:

- The proportion of income spent by the poorest households on food, fuel, and housing increased again to 42% in 2013, having leapt already from 31% in 2003 to 40% in 2012
- Britain is the most wasteful country in the European Union when it comes to food, with 15 million tonnes of food wasted per year

Progress Made

The Department for Work and Pensions, Department of Energy and Climate Change, the Financial Conduct Authority, and the utilities regulators (Ofgem, Ofcom, and Ofwat) have each taken important steps to act on our proposals. Some supermarkets, charities and energy companies have likewise moved swiftly to address some of the concerns we presented in **Feeding Britain**.

Following an initial round of meetings in each of the towns and cities we represent – Birkenhead, Salisbury, South Shields, and Truro – we are pleased to report some considerable progress being made through a series of pilot projects, for example, to tackle school holiday hunger and ensure people are able to access help to deal with the root cause of their hunger, when they receive their first food parcel.

Progress Needed

If the Government was able to deliver an improved service to new and existing claimants of benefits and tax credits – by processing new claims within five working days, introducing a continuous payment to prevent a claimant's income being cut off during a change of circumstances, and introducing a 'Yellow Card' warning in place of immediate financial sanctions – we believe the number of people relying on food banks would straight away be halved.²

We also call on the Cabinet Office and Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, in particular, to reconsider the stance they have taken on our recommendations. With the help of these two departments, in particular, the Government could open a new chapter in the debate on hunger by leading by example in the fight against low pay.

We also believe a renewed strategy is required to divert as much good quality surplus food as possible to those groups working with people facing severe hardship. Such a strategy needs to target those parts of the food manufacturing process, in particular, which contribute so heavily to the shameful amounts of food this country wastes.

² The evidence we received during our inquiry suggests one third of food bank referrals are made due to a delayed benefit payment, and between one sixth and one quarter of referrals occur following a loss of benefit money resulting from a sanction.

Recommendations

We therefore recommend that, as a matter of urgency:

- The Department for Work and Pensions should implement as soon as possible its new approach to sanctions using warnings and non-financial penalties following a first failure to comply with conditionality on the Work Programme
- The Department for Work and Pensions should reconsider its decision not to accept electronic requests from advice workers for their clients to be paid a Short Term Benefit Advance, nor to consider automatically paying a Short Term Benefit Advance to those claimants whose benefit payment hasn't arrived after a certain period of time
- The Department for Work and Pensions should assess what impact its decision to remove telephones from Jobcentre Plus will have on claimants' ability to look for work
- The Treasury should consider introducing a continuous payment of a minimum tax credit tariff whilst a change of household circumstances is processed, with adjustments being made to later entitlements if necessary to recoup these monies
- Every Government department should pay a minimum hourly rate equivalent to the Living Wage to all staff – directly employed, outsourced and agency workers – and write a clause into major public contracts which would look favourably upon those bidders paying at least a Living Wage to all of their staff
- The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills should consider extending this year's remit for the Low Pay Commission so it can research the affordability of a higher minimum wage in highly profitable industries, such as finance and banking, which would cover all directly employed, contracted and agency workers
- Our Inquiry heard from people using food banks that they would like to be able to access fresh fruit and vegetables more readily. We believe this could be achieved through partnership working between the retailers and charities fighting hunger: we therefore recommend national retailers and charities should consider if their existing partnerships might be improved. For instance, Tesco currently supplements its national collection for the Trussell Trust by 30%, a small proportion of which we believe might be diverted to vouchers entitling food bank users to free fruit and vegetables
- The Treasury should consider running a three-month consultation on two options: first, to divert existing monies from anaerobic digestion or some of the proceeds from the Landfill Tax to incentivise the redistribution of surplus food, and second, if necessary, to legislate against food waste
- The Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) should set food retailers and manufacturers a target of doubling the proportion of surplus food they redistribute to groups working with those in need and reducing the amount of food disposed of in landfill, and turned into compost or energy, by 100,000 tonnes each year by the end of this Parliament

- Retailers should consider how technology might enable them to make better use of their surplus food. FareShare's 'FoodCloud' app, for instance, enables local branches to connect with local charitable groups and advertise good quality surplus to them quickly. Food banks can then respond by text message and arrange to collect food
- All food banks, however small, should consider whether they are collecting effective data about why individual users are being referred to them, and how this might be published in order to improve the evidence base about the underlying causes of hunger
- The Department for Communities and Local Government should consider granting Local Authorities the power to specify the provision of basic cooking facilities as a minimum requirement for private landlords, if their local food banks were to provide evidence of negligible cooking facilities in their clients' homes
- The Department of Health should consider what additional information could be provided to parents on low incomes when they receive Healthy Start vouchers, such as information on local food skills training or eating well on a budget
- Ofgem should ask each energy supplier to build on the outstanding recent examples of individual best practice, as part of a 'New Deal on Prepayment Meters'
- The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs should extend its WaterSure discount to families with two children or more

Britain's national minimum

In **Feeding Britain** we presented data showing how the living standards of Britain's poor had improved – in terms of the falling proportion of income required to foot the bills for food, fuel and housing – for 50 years of the post-war period, between 1953 and 2003. But the sluggish (and, at times, non-existent) growth in real wages and benefit levels since then,³ combined with the higher costs incurred on food, fuel, and housing, brought with it a phenomenon without precedent in post-war Britain.

Since 2003 we have all been pushed closer to crisis, as an ever growing share of our income has been required to cover the basics. More worryingly, our report spelt out how disastrous an impact this had had on the household budgets of the poorest, eroding as it has the safeguards that are meant to have formed an absolute minimum standard of living below which none of our citizens could fall, and which at its most basic level is designed to protect people from being hungry. The evidence presented in our report suggests Britain's national minimum is failing to achieve this most basic of objectives.

We noted in **Feeding Britain** how the proportion of income spent by the poorest households on food, fuel, and housing had leapt from 31% in 2003 to 40% in 2012. Moreover, the most recent data suggests the squeeze on the poor has continued, with a further increase of two percentage points in 2013 bringing this combined expenditure to 42% of household income.⁴

Our report also drew attention to the rupturing in parenting, cooking and budgeting skills which many people told our inquiry they had noticed over a similar period. Whereas such skills were once passed down through successive generations, we found in our evidence that for some families this is no longer the case. Accompanying this has been the havoc wreaked on some household budgets by the addiction to gambling, drink, drugs or cigarettes. A recent report suggests over 432,000 children are made poor because their parents smoke.⁵ We re-emphasise here our argument that these trends have damaged the wellbeing of too many families, and made them more vulnerable to hunger.

Over the past decade, with a growing number of people finding themselves pushed closer to trouble, the proper functioning of Britain's safety net should have played a central role in catching those in danger of falling below the national minimum, and becoming exposed to hunger.

But the rapid growth of Britain's food bank movement over this past decade signals failure on this front. Having been battered by the severe headwinds that afflicted the world's most advanced economies, Britain's national minimum failed to hold firm. The selfless dedication of those people helping to run Britain's food banks, lunch clubs, soup kitchens and so on, has been both vital and necessary to prevent hunger in this country reaching even more catastrophic levels.

In an attempt to bolster Britain's national minimum, our report set out a series of proposals to ensure:

³ According to the House of Commons Library, in the decade to 2013 the real value of the National Minimum Wage increased in each year prior to 2007 and fell every year thereafter; the real value of Jobseeker's Allowance fell by £3.55 per week; the real value of Child Benefit for the first child fell by £1.80 per week; and Income Support was almost unchanged compared to 2003

⁴ House of Commons Library analysis of Family Spending data published by the Office for National Statistics

⁵ Charmaine Belvin, John Britton, John Holmes and Tessa Langley, *Parental smoking and child poverty in the UK: an analysis of national survey data* (MBC Public Health 15:507, May 2015)

- All families would possess the skills and resources they need to buy and cook a decent meal
- The benefits system could more effectively deliver support to people while they look for work
- Paid work would provide failsafe protection against hunger
- No child would go hungry in the school holidays or miss out on free school meals, if entitled, during term time
- Our poorest citizens would no longer be ripped off when paying for basic essentials

These proposals stemmed from our unanimous desire to reduce with immediate effect the need for emergency food handouts.

We also suggested ways in which those organisations who administer this emergency help might develop new methods to try and ensure a household's descent into crisis need not become a prolonged period of hunger. In **Feeding Britain** we promoted a system of support and advocacy within food banks which could straight away resolve some of the matters that had led somebody to need a food parcel. The aim here was to ensure a first visit to a food bank need not become the first of many.

Likewise those people who visit their local food bank and have been unable, for whatever reason, to shop and cook on a budget would, under this 'Food Bank Plus' system, receive the help they need so they can have the confidence and skills to do so.

But we understood that even if all of these proposals could have been enacted overnight, we would still be confronted today with a not insubstantial group of people who are not able to access or afford food on a daily basis.

We therefore dedicated a sizeable proportion of our report to the question of how Britain's food system could be reformed, most notably with the help of organisations that redistribute good quality surplus food to groups who work with those at the very bottom of the pile, both to improve the efficiency of the food system and also to contribute towards the rebuilding of Britain's national minimum.

Tackling hunger in our towns

Following the publication of **Feeding Britain** we called a series of meetings in each of the towns and cities we represent: Birkenhead, Salisbury, South Shields, and Truro. These meetings helped us to establish local networks that could begin implementing some of the reforms we had proposed in **Feeding Britain**. We are pleased to report some considerable progress in our first six months.

Birkenhead

Food Bank Plus - In March 2015 Wirral Foodbank began piloting a 'Food Bank Plus' model. This involves having representatives from Involve Northwest (a local welfare rights organisation), Merseyside Fuel Poverty, NHS Health Trainers, and a Money Advice Project present in one of the food bank's distribution centres at set times of the week to help and advise people on the issues that have led them to rely on a food parcel.

166 people relying on Birkenhead's food banks have been helped by Involve Northwest, as have 39 by Merseyside Fuel Poverty, and 54 by Money Advice Project. The NHS Health Trainers talk with nine people each week. One third of those helped by Involve Northwest no longer needed to return to the food bank, as their problems had been addressed during their first visit.

Fuel Bank – Wirral Foodbank is also one of 22 food banks chosen to pilot nPower's 'Fuel Bank' initiative. Under this scheme, which, in Birkenhead, is due to be launched in July 2015, if somebody referred to one of three selected distribution centres informs a volunteer that they cannot afford the gas and electricity required to cook the contents of their food parcel, they will be given a voucher worth £49 which entitles them to two weeks' worth of fuel at home.

Holiday Hunger – In May 2015 four pilot projects experimented with various means to feed hungry children during the Whitsun school holiday. 120 children were fed over three days, with each project attracting interest from parents on the back of various non-food activities which would be entertaining for the children. The Tranmere Community Project, for example, which fed 48 children, laid on a 'sports cage' donated by the Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service.

The number of pilot projects is set to expand in the Summer holiday. A representative from each of the schemes will attend a meeting in July at which a shared calendar will be drawn up, so the town has some sort of provision on as many days as possible during the holiday.

A welfare contract which sets out duties and rights – In July 2015 an information leaflet will be made available to Wirral Foodbank and Birkenhead Jobcentre Plus. The leaflet will contain advice on discounted water, fuel and communication tariffs available to households on low incomes, and emergency helplines in respect to utility bills, debt, and benefits and tax credits. The leaflet is designed to be given to people making a new benefit claim or visiting their local food bank for the first time. Its purpose is to address those concerns raised in **Feeding Britain** around those households on low incomes who may find themselves in crisis, in part, because they aren't aware of the help and discounts they might be entitled to which can help make their money go further.

We have also asked Merseyside Jobcentre Plus whether it makes clear to claimants who cannot afford to make up-front payments for transport to certain appointments, that they might be entitled to receive up-front grants from the Flexible Support Fund.

Free School Meals – Wirral Council is looking at ways it can use its Housing Benefit/Council Tax data automatically to register all poor children from eligible families for free school meals, so no child misses out on their entitlement. We are in dialogue with the Information Commissioner

over the possibilities of establishing a national scheme to maximise the take-up of free school meals.

Community Shop – Premises have been secured in the town’s main shopping precinct for a new Community Shop. Once funding has been secured from a non-government source, the Community Shop will operate as a ‘social supermarket’ in which people on low incomes can sign up for six months’ membership which entitles them to shop there and, as a condition of doing so, to receive help with cooking skills, budgeting, and looking for work. Each social supermarket has an on-site café and runs group sessions designed to help individuals with the problems that have led them to be vulnerable to hunger. The food itself is good quality surplus produce bought from supermarkets’ supply chains for 10p in the pound, and sold to members for 30p in the pound. Once established, the Community Shop is self-sustaining.

Food growing – Wirral Clinical Commissioning Group is considering our request for a new GP Food Co-Op in Birkenhead. The scheme would involve building gardens in GP surgeries to enable patients to learn how to grow their own food, and is based on a similar initiative in Lambeth.

Living Wage – Wirral Council is already a Living Wage employer.

Salisbury

Holiday Hunger – Salisbury focused on launching a pilot to tackle school holiday hunger, having identified a lack of provision in the city and surrounding area.

The pilot was a local partnership between the Salisbury Trussell Trust, social enterprise The Pantry Partnership and St Michael’s Church. Although the principal aim was to provide a freshly cooked hot meal to local families in need, the partners also wanted to ensure it was about more than a single lunch.

Participants were therefore invited to attend a local community centre from 11:00, where a range of activities were offered to children and space was provided for parents to have a cup of tea. Activities included time in a garden run by the Trussell Trust on the community centre site, a craft zone and team games in the hall.

A three course meal was provided at lunch time, which was entirely prepared by volunteers from donated produce kindly provided by the local Waitrose branch. Volunteers were keen to ensure that the meal was nutritionally balanced, appealing and made good use of all donated ingredients.

In order to tackle the more enduring problem of holiday hunger which extends beyond a single meal, attendees were also provided with a bag of donated store cupboard staple ingredients and a recipe card to make use of them.

By way of ensuring the pilot was targeted at families in need, a Parent Support Worker linked to two local primary schools referred families to the lunch club, and reminded them when it was taking place to ensure a high turnout.

The pilot operated for one day a week over the two weeks of the Easter holiday, and fed approximately 45 people over the two days. Feedback was positive, with many attendees commenting the major attraction was the free activities on offer as well as the food provided. The total cost per person worked out at just £6.31.

The team are keen to move to a more sustainable model for the Summer holiday, when they hope to run the project again.

South Shields

Food Bank Plus – Follow up meetings have been held in South Shields to explore how the area's various food aid groups can collaborate to work more effectively by creating a 'Food Bank Plus' network that joins up food aid with other services like benefits advice.

Living Wage – In December last year South Tyneside Council announced that it would begin the process of introducing the Living Wage for staff. The process of transferring staff over to the Living Wage began in April 2015, with the process due to be completed by April 2016. By the time the process is completed, around 1,000 members of staff will be moved on to the national Living Wage of £7.85 an hour.

Community Shop – Charities in South Shields were impressed by the Community Shop model, and agreed that a social supermarket could make a valuable contribution to alleviating food poverty in the town. We are working with Community Shop and other stakeholders including the Coalfields Regeneration Trust to identify suitable premises for a new branch, and are seeking funding to help establish the shop.

Breakfast clubs – We have approached the breakfast club charity Magic Breakfast with the aim of establishing breakfast clubs at schools in South Shields. We have provided Magic Breakfast with details of local schools that may benefit from the scheme.

Truro

Following two initial meetings, a large number of local groups have agreed to be part of the Cornwall and Devon Hub for **Feeding Britain**.

The work being done in Cornwall in collaboration with the local authority and the NHS has been discussed as a model of how partners can work together to try and ensure food as a system is considered.

We are planning to meet again soon to monitor how we can take forward and assist with some of the recommendations in the **Feeding Britain** report.

We have discussed various issues that concern us and have written letters to Cornwall County Council on certain matters. In particular work has been done to see whether there can be more movement on free school meals and signposting siblings and others to take up their entitlement. Through the **Feeding Britain** network Cornwall has been in touch with other local authorities who have made positive moves in this direction.

At our last meeting we discussed our view on the priorities of the various recommendations in the report and we will continue this discussion at our next meeting and agree what next steps we can take.

The Hub gives a very good forum for various groups to come together. Independent food banks talk with Trussell Trust food banks, and together they talk with the Devon and Cornwall Food Association which works to recycle food from shops and their suppliers.

We have discussed the language used around this topic of food poverty and begun to consider whether we can talk about celebrating food, and 'food wealth' as well as food poverty. We have plans to consider community celebrations and engagement more widely.

An invitation

We would welcome the chance over the next six months to talk with MPs, Peers, Bishops and any other interested parties who wish to launch a local pilot in their area.

Mending Britain's safety net

As soon as it became clear from our inquiry that there are some inherent problems in the way some benefits and tax credits are administered, we sought to engage with the Government in the hope it might consider our proposals to mend Britain's welfare safety net. It has been very willing to do so and we welcome the positive approach it has taken to try and address our concerns.

For example, the Government has committed itself to:

- Testing improvements to speed up the time taken to process a new benefit claim
- Providing more information to people awaiting their first benefit payment about Short Term Benefit Advances, to help tide them over until this first payment is made
- Piloting a new approach to sanctions using warnings and non-financial penalties following a first failure to comply with conditionality on the Work Programme
- Fixing an IT technicality which had resulted in sanctioned claimants losing all of their Housing Benefit payments and Council Tax support
- Allowing regional Jobcentre Plus offices to distribute leaflets produced by the voluntary and private sectors listing claimants' rights in respect to utility costs
- Offering some claimants the right to 'sign on' by post in some circumstances, for example, if they have health issues that restrict mobility or journeys that take more than one hour door to door by public transport
- Protecting funding for Local Welfare Assistance schemes which can help tide over some families in times of crisis
- Introducing a 'clearance time target' for all benefits, which includes the Mandatory Reconsideration process for people claiming Employment and Support Allowance, from April 2016
- Considering alternative means of allowing claimants to submit personal information required for a new benefit claim, through a secure web portal
- Ensuring claimants are made aware of their right to appeal before any sanction is imposed
- Implementing the Low Pay Commission's recommendation for an increase in the National Minimum Wage to £6.70 in October 2015

We are determined that each of these commitments should make an effective contribution toward reducing the numbers of people having to rely on food banks. Given the urgency of these matters, we have written to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in respect to each of these commitments asking:

- What improvements are being tested in which Jobcentre Plus offices, what impact are they having on the time taken to process a new benefit claim, and when will they be implemented in full
- What progress has the Government made in improving awareness and, as importantly, take-up of Short Term Benefit Advance payments to bridge the gap between a claim being made and a first payment being received
- Where and when will the 'Yellow Card' approach to sanctions be piloted, and can this be implemented as soon as possible
- Have there been any further instances of sanctioned claimants losing all of their passported benefit payments, and if so, are further improvements required to the Jobcentre Plus IT system, or would perhaps a phone call to the Local Authority suffice each time a claimant has been sanctioned

- How many claimants have taken up their entitlement to ‘sign on’ by post, thereby saving on travel costs, and has this enhanced their ability to look for work
- At how many days will the ‘clearance time target’ be set for the Mandatory Reconsideration process, and will the Government consider granting a lower assessment rate of Employment and Support Allowance to those claimants whose Mandatory Reconsideration exceeds this target
- What progress has been made in setting up alternative means for claimants to submit personal information for a new benefit claim, to avoid the delays caused by a lost birth certificate, for example
- Has the Government assessed the impact of its reforms to the application process for Hardship Payments, and have they resulted in a higher proportion of vulnerable claimants taking up this emergency support following a sanction
- Would the Government assess what impact its decision to remove telephones from Jobcentre Plus will have on claimants’ ability to look for work

In addition, we have written to:

- The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, asking whether the Government would consider extending this year’s remit for the Low Pay Commission so it can research the affordability of a higher minimum wage in highly profitable industries, such as finance and banking, which would cover all directly employed, contracted and agency workers
- The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, asking whether the Government would consider introducing a continuous payment of a minimum tax credit tariff whilst a change of household circumstances is processed, with adjustments being made to later entitlements if necessary to recoup these monies
- The Secretary of State for Health, asking how many patients have taken up the option of accessing their medical records for free online, and whether GPs are informing their patients who wish to appeal a decision in respect of their Employment and Support Allowance, of their right to access records in this way.

We remain concerned, however, that the Cabinet Office continues to reject our proposal to ask each Government department to pay a minimum hourly rate equivalent to the Living Wage, and to write a clause into major public contracts which would look favourably upon those bidders paying at least a Living Wage to all of their staff – including directly employed, outsourced and agency workers. We urge the Cabinet Office to reconsider its stance on low pay.

Likewise, we call on the Department for Work and Pensions to reconsider its decision not to accept electronic requests from advice workers for their clients to be paid a Short Term Benefit Advance, nor to consider automatically paying a Short Term Benefit Advance to those claimants whose benefit payment hasn’t arrived after a certain period of time. Depending on the effectiveness of the Department’s new awareness raising initiative for new claimants, and its impact on take-up rates, we might wish to pursue this at a later date.

In order to continuously improve our knowledge of the reasons why people in this country are having to rely on food parcels, we renew our calls to food banks to amend their referral categories so they can differentiate more clearly between the various benefit-related problems they encounter.

We are pleased this approach was piloted in March 2015 at the West Cheshire Foodbank,⁶ and would ask that it is rolled out more widely as soon as possible.

⁶ Spencer A., Ogden C., and Battarbee L., *#cheshirehunger: Understanding Emergency Food Provision in West Cheshire* (March 2015)
http://westcheshire.foodbank.org.uk/resources/documents/Cheshire_Hunger_March_2015_Full_Report_Final.pdf

Helping Britain cook

We made a series of recommendations in **Feeding Britain** which, if enacted, we feel would boost the resilience of families struggling to cope with cooking, parenting, and budgeting.

We are pleased that the Government has taken on board our proposal to extend the Troubled Families Programme so that it now accepts direct referrals from schools in cases where children arrive hungry. The Government also issues non-statutory guidance to schools on teaching parenting skills, while financial literacy is now taught in Citizenship classes on a statutory basis for children in Key Stages 3 and 4. Cooking is now compulsory in Local Authority maintained schools at Key Stage 3.

However, we feel there are some further moves that can and should be taken to help equip families with the resources and abilities they need to cook. We have therefore written to:

- The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, asking whether the Government would consider granting Local Authorities the power to specify the provision of basic cooking facilities as a minimum requirement for private landlords, if their local food banks were to provide evidence of negligible cooking facilities in their clients' homes.
- The Secretary of State for Health, asking whether the Government would consider what additional information could be provided to parents on low incomes when they receive Healthy Start vouchers, such as information on local food skills training or eating well on a budget

We have also asked the Trussell Trust to update us on the innovative approach it has piloted to teach cooking skills to clients referred to its food banks.

The Merseyside branch of Love Food Hate Waste has kindly offered to work with Wirral Foodbank to provide help on making small amounts of food go further through storage techniques, better use of leftovers, and improved knowledge of use-by dates.

Protecting Britain's consumers

We presented evidence in **Feeding Britain** of how Britain's poorest consumers are paying disproportionately high costs for basic utilities, over and above the bills paid by the rest of us, which can subtract vital monies from their food budget.

The main concerns presented to us related to the premium paid for fuel by poorer households relying on prepayment meters, the limited eligibility for the Warm Home Discount, the difficulty of paying for water, the costs incurred on calls made from pay-as-you-go mobiles, and the high cost of obtaining short-term credit.

Prepayment Meters

We are pleased that Ofgem, the energy regulator, has acted on our concerns by committing itself to:

- Reviewing the rip-off charges placed upon households wishing to switch from a prepayment meter to another tariff. Ofgem accepts that these charges of up to £60 plus a security deposit of up to £150 'can act as a barrier to accessing cheaper payment methods for those that cannot afford to pay them'
- Reviewing the provision of telephone services by energy companies, including the use of higher-rate telephone numbers and the costs borne by households needing to call their supplier
- Questioning energy companies about the lack of choice available to poorer households on prepayment meters, who currently have a narrow range of tariffs to choose from
- Obliging energy companies to allow prepayment customers with debts not exceeding £200 to switch to another company offering a better deal
- Considering the proposal in **Feeding Britain** for an industry-wide minimum standard for helping poorer households who build up debt on their prepayment meter through unpaid standing charges that build up through the summer months

We also welcome the steps announced by some of Britain's energy suppliers to offer poorer households a fairer deal. For example:

- Both OVO and E.ON have announced pilot schemes to wipe out the premium charged to mostly poorer households who pay for their gas and electricity using a prepayment meter. The scheme involves rolling out 'Smart Pay As You Go Meters' which offer a full range of tariffs and discounts currently available only to Direct Debit customers
- British Gas is working on a standing charge rebate scheme for customers who do not use very much energy and who are struggling financially. To make this possible, Ofgem granted British Gas a derogation earlier this year
- EDF Energy has established a two-year price freeze which brings its prepayment customers into line with those households who pay by cash or cheque
- nPower has established pilot schemes in 22 locations to provide fuel vouchers worth £49, which works out to two weeks' worth of gas and electricity, to families and individuals who receive a food parcel but cannot afford to top up their prepayment meter

We are keen for such good practice to become embedded within the energy industry. We have written, therefore, to all the energy companies and Ofgem asking whether they might, as part of a 'New Deal on Prepayment Meters':

- Proceed as soon as possible with 'Smart Pay As You Go Meters' for their poorest customers

- Publish the additional costs incurred on supplying and maintaining a prepayment meter
- Abolish fees for the termination of a prepayment meter
- Provide credit tokens to households relying on food parcels and who cannot afford to top up their prepayment meter
- Offer rebates to prepayment customers caught out by the standing charge on their meter over the summer months

We hope such moves might free up some vital cash in poorer households' budgets for food.

Warm Home Discount

We are pleased that the Government announced in January 2015 that it would extend the eligibility for applications to the Warm Home Discount – an annual fuel discount of £140 – to cover all families on low incomes, regardless of their employment status, if they have children under the age of five or disabled children of any age.

We also welcome the Government's decision to implement a standard set of rules for all energy suppliers involved with the scheme, so that no household can be excluded from applying on the grounds that their supplier uses different criteria from the rest.

Water

We were made aware of the difficulties some families face when trying to cover their water bills. While the national roll out of water meters saves many households money on their bills it has also made water more expensive for some families, particularly those consisting of a single parent and two children.

Ofwat, the water regulator, rejected our recommendation to audit each water supplier's customer base to find out how many and which households might lose out from the installation of a water meter. It said that it would instead encourage each supplier to offer cheaper tariffs to poorer customers who find they can no longer afford their bills after being put on a water meter. However, social tariffs remain a voluntary exercise and may not be reaching a large enough proportion of those in need.

We have written, therefore, to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs asking whether the Government's WaterSure discount, which takes money off bills for families on low incomes with three or more children, could be extended to such families with two children.

Mobile Phones

Our most immediate concerns with regards communications were the low awareness of discounts available to households in receipt of certain benefits, and also the rip-off costs incurred on calls to the '0844/0845' numbers used by Jobcentre Plus, banks and other utility companies.

We are pleased to report progress on both fronts. First, Ofcom told us in advance of **Feeding Britain** being published that it would be working with Jobcentre Plus to make sure all eligible households would be informed of the discounts they could receive on making calls from a mobile phone. And second, we have gained commitments from Ofgem, Ofwat, and the Financial Conduct Authority, to take action against the use of higher-rate telephone numbers in each successive industry. Jobcentre Plus has also begun phasing out the use of these rip-off numbers.

High Cost Credit

The Financial Conduct Authority announced in advance of **Feeding Britain** that it would limit firms' ability to automatically deduct arbitrary amounts of money from individuals' accounts as a debt collection method. Following our report it announced also that it would require as soon as possible payday loan brokers to amend their privacy policies so vulnerable consumers wouldn't have charges unfairly imposed on them. The previous Government also announced a cap on the overall costs of high cost credit.

We have written to the Financial Conduct Authority asking for a report on the effectiveness of these reforms in helping to protect vulnerable consumers from the worst effects of high cost credit. We have written also to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions asking whether the Government will ensure all Credit Union account holders are eligible to receive Universal Credit.

Putting Britain's food to good use

This country's food system requires major surgery if it is to function properly both for producers and consumers.

We expressed in **Feeding Britain** the anger we feel about the colossal amount of good food produced and put on sale in this country which ultimately goes to waste. We realise, of course, that a large proportion of this food is wasted before it even makes it to the supermarket shelf. Data released since we published **Feeding Britain** shows that the waste produced in the food manufacturing sector remains a major contributor to Britain's unenviable record as the most wasteful country, when it comes to food, in the European Union.⁷

And so we ask again, why are we as a country wasting millions of tonnes of good food each year, when we know a sizable number of our fellow citizens are hungry?

We encountered during and since our inquiry, thankfully, some wonderful groups who firstly intercept some of this food before it gets dumped or burnt, and secondly, prepare and serve this food as a means of reaching out to those individuals who might be homeless, or otherwise live with chronic addictions or any one of a range of seemingly insurmountable barriers that stand between them and what most of us would see as a 'normal' standard of living.

While many of the reforms required to fix Britain's food system lie beyond our remit and expertise, we believe one of the most pressing matters is to drastically reduce the amount of good food going to waste, and to ensure much, much more finds its way to those people facing severe hardship.

In **Feeding Britain** we sought to lay down the gauntlet, therefore, by asking: how can our food system be made to work more effectively so everybody, no matter what their circumstances, can eat a decent meal or, at the very least, access basic food?

In seeking answers to this question we have looked at ways the redistribution of good quality surplus food to those in need might be better incentivised. But we have also been keen to explore what role innovative food growing schemes at a local level might play, so more communities can produce, sell and eat their own food.

We acknowledged in **Feeding Britain** some of the existing efforts on the part of retailers and manufacturers to cut back on waste, and also the initiatives being rolled out at a local level to produce more home-grown food. But we were equally clear about the huge amount of work left to be done.

We therefore welcome the development of the Plan Zheroes initiative, as well as the agreement reached in June 2015 between FareShare and Tesco to launch a 'FoodCloud' app. Using 'FoodCloud', Tesco store managers will be able to alert charities in their area to the amount of surplus food they have at the end of each day. The charity then confirms it wants the food, picks it up free of charge from the store and turns it into meals for those in need. FareShare members, such as homeless hostels, women's refuges and breakfast clubs for disadvantaged children, will benefit from the scheme.

⁷ 'UK tops chart of EU food waste', *The Guardian*, 22 May 2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/22/uk-tops-chart-of-eu-food-waste>; and for further information, see https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/422618/Digest_of_waste_England_-_finalv2.pdf

In an attempt to stimulate further action in this field, we have written to:

- The Chancellor of the Exchequer, asking whether the Government would consider running a three-month consultation on two options: first, to divert existing monies from anaerobic digestion or some of the proceeds from the Landfill Tax to incentivise the redistribution of surplus food, and second, if necessary, to legislate against food waste.
- The Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), asking whether they might react to the appalling set of data showing Britain to be the most wasteful country in the European Union, by setting food retailers and manufacturers a target of doubling the proportion of surplus food they redistribute to groups working with those in need and reducing the amount of food disposed of in landfill, and turned into compost or energy, by 100,000 tonnes each year by the end of this Parliament.

Conclusion and a call for evidence

We remain of the belief that if all 77 of our initial recommendations were implemented, hunger in this country would be reduced to a bare minimum.

Just over one third of these recommendations have been put into action, six months after we published **Feeding Britain**. We intend to push for further action in this Parliament to ensure the remaining two thirds are implemented.

We have set out in this report some of the commitments that have been made to improve the delivery of benefit payments, to ease some of the pressure on poorer households' budgets, and to make it easier to redistribute good quality surplus food to those in need.

But we are keen to ensure these welcome commitments not only are seen through, but are built upon to ensure good practice prevails across the board, be it, for example, in the administration of benefits, or the workings of the utilities and food markets.

Likewise we have made a further plea in this report for some urgent measures to improve real wages at the bottom end of the labour market, and to reduce drastically the shameful amount of food going to waste in Britain's food manufacturing sector.

We have also outlined some of the work we are doing to prevent children going hungry during the school holidays, and to ensure a range of help is available to people making a first visit to their local food bank.

But in order to continue campaigning for the necessary reforms, we need to hear regularly from those of you who are working on the frontline of the fightback against hunger. As importantly, we want to hear from those of our fellow citizens who have experienced a period of hunger, and perhaps have had to rely on a food parcel or a meal prepared by a charitable group in their community.

Might you therefore send please evidence on the development and progression of your work, as well as the number of, and reasons behind, people being referred to your project over the past six months, to Andrew Forsey, our Secretary, on andrew.forsey@parliament.uk?

The core Members of Feeding Britain are The Rt Hon Frank Field MP, John Glen MP, Baroness Jenkin, Emma Lewell-Buck MP, Sarah Newton MP and The Rt Revd Tim Thornton, Bishop of Truro.

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If you have any enquiries relating to this document please contact andrew.forsey@parliament.uk