

Britain's not-so-hidden hunger

A progress report from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger

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Foreword from Frank Field MP, Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger

Why are there so many hungry people in Britain? Or are there?

Too many people in Britain are hungry. How many? We do not know. A very large part of this group of hungry people are children. Again we have only impressions which suggest that too many children have hunger as their most constant companion. Why, and how many, again we do not know. We again have impressionistic flashes of the numbers from teachers, social workers, and that great army of volunteers that try to get good food that would otherwise be sent to landfill or turned into energy, into the mouths of those who are hungry.

But these children have parents. Some, maybe most, of these parents do not have sufficient income properly to feed their children. Whether the reason for this is a long delay in paying benefits to which they are entitled, low or irregular wages, trying to square previous debts, spending too much on drink or drugs, or both, we do not know.

What we do know is that too many children have parents who could wake them, get them washed, dressed and fed, and take them to school, but who, for one reason or another, do not. Again we only have impressions which suggest that too many children have hunger as their most constant companion. We have too few facts to give any numbers.

Nor do we know how many children every day are hungry for much of the time. We do not know with any certainty how many children are neglected in such a way.

That these hungry children get themselves to school on time, or near enough, is one of the unspoken successes of human endeavour and the attraction of school staff who provide for these children possibly their only safe abode. Here these children are given the only love, care and nurturing they ever receive on a consistent basis. It is here that they receive the best part of their food – at breakfast clubs, school lunchtime and

homework or supper clubs. If the Prime Minister wished to meet his Big Society in action he would see it all too evident and flourishing in schools throughout the country, turning this way and that way to abate the hunger of too many of their pupils. It is here that he would realise in a flash how important it is to use a small sum of the proceeds from a levy on sugary drinks to pay for free school meals for poor children in the school holidays.

We report here of one little mite in Birkenhead, knowing that there was free food and fun in the town for poor children, pleading to be fed, being prepared to miss the fun if that was the world's entry fee to food. She told the volunteers, 'I don't mind missing the activities, but please can I come in and eat? I've had nothing today and I'm starving'. That wasn't of course the entry fee in Birkenhead and its Big Society. Nor is it the entry fee in towns and cities up and down the country where the Big Society simply gets on each day in feeding the hungry, and particularly hungry children.

Here, again, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger presents its best endeavours to inform the nation on the size, extent and persistence of hunger amongst us. Again we can only do so with the flashes of light Britain's Big Society directs over that part of the country that is hungry.

But again let me stress the question of failure. Why is it that this is the fifth report the Group has published? Why is it that the Group is still in existence? Why is it that in a country with a generous tradition of looking after its neighbours who have fallen on such bad times that a political breakthrough has not been made in implementing many more of the Group's main recommendations to beat hunger? There may be many reasons for this failure to win a major, let alone a spectacular breakthrough that could kick-start an all-out fightback against hunger.

Issues of this importance usually gain widespread voter traction quite easily. Britain, as far as we can tell, was shocked by the earlier revelations on the extent of hunger in our midst.

So we must take our share of the responsibility for this failure. Our primary purpose is to gain that very traction amongst the electorate that would deliver success.

More likely, I fear, it is because the facts we have at our disposal, and how these facts are deployed, somehow block the human empathy felt and expressed on so many occasions by significant numbers, and sometimes, a clear majority of voters.

Is one of the reasons why there is so little traction now from doing the figures published on the numbers of people using food banks, and a demand for effective action by voters, that they no longer believe the data that are published? If so, what is now the best course of action?

In this document we present our best endeavours to find out the numbers of food banks operating in our country, and also the number of organisations who do not call themselves food banks but who do provide food – often hot food.

Here is the beginning of one part of the agenda we have set ourselves. Possibly less than half of food banks are organised by the Trussell Trust. At a grassroots level the Trust has been successful in enabling individuals, mainly church members, to respond to the quiet pleas from the hungry. The Group has always saluted this group of workers, whether they have been in Trussell Trust or independent food banks.

But the political warfare that has broken out between the Trussell Trust and the Government is a disservice to the hungry. Voters' attention is concentrated on this political scrap, rather than on the basis of the argument which is over the numbers of hungry.

It is crucial that the Trussell Trust is more careful in the presentation of the numbers of hungry. The Trust does the most valiant work, but it needs to always register the fact that it probably presents data for less than half of all the

organisations helping to feed the hungry. And when it does present the facts it is crucial that the Trust recognises and spells out clearly the complications and intricacies that lay behind them.¹

The Group, through Anglican Dioceses, is trying to gain a register of all the other food providers and for them to feed the data they have into the national debate. This report contains some of the most revealing of information. In Bradford, for example, three independent food banks gave out an estimated 11,687 food parcels in the most recent 12 months for which data is available. Two independent organisations in Bradford gave out 2,183 food parcels as well as 8,987 meals, and a further five independent organisations gave out 59,582 meals.

The Group is also anxious for this information on the amount of food offered to be collected in a standard way. This leads us onto a major initiative the Group has undertaken since it last reported.

Charles Dickens made fun of Mr Gradgrind and his passion for facts. While Dickens educated the nation through his novels and other writings, tidal waves of reform were generated by the production of facts – from local statistical societies, royal commissions, and parliamentary select committees. Wave upon wave of information, which was as accurate as possible, was fed into the public debate.

To encourage this trend at a most professional and rigorous level the Group has written to the United Kingdom Statistics Authority asking them to be in the process of deciding what data needs to be collected, and by whom, if we are to have a much more accurate picture of the extent of hunger in today's Britain.

The main requests we have made to the United Kingdom Statistics Authority, are:

- How might we best define and measure hunger in the United Kingdom?

¹ There was some confusion and disagreement prior to the last General Election around the numbers of people relying

on Trussell Trust food banks. See, for example: <http://news.sky.com/story/1470021/the-truth-behind-food-bank-election-grenade>

- Might one solution be to ask all food banks to complete a common questionnaire, approved by the United Kingdom Statistics Authority, as giving the basis for more rigorous data than we have at present?
- What official data, such as those on the levels of savings amongst poor households, might be used to suggest how many households are consistently on the verge of hunger, if not actually plunged in it at the moment?
- How helpful a contribution might be made by data on the extent of anaemia and malnutrition?
- Is there robust enough data to suggest shorter, obese children, are disproportionately likely to be poor, and could this inform a set of indicators on hard-pressed children and their vulnerability to hunger? Does obesity amongst shorter children suggest a poverty diet?

The United Kingdom Statistics Authority is picking up this challenge by working with the Group to discover what the available data might tell us about the wellbeing or otherwise of those who consistently find themselves on the verge of hunger, and how big this group of people might be.

Frank Field MP
Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger

Introduction

The state of hunger and nutrition in the United Kingdom

A little over 100 days have passed since we issued a plea to the nation: if the United Kingdom is to stand any chance of eliminating hunger from its shores, and knowing whether or not it has successfully done so, it must begin collecting data on the numbers of people in our country who are hungry, or consistently find themselves on the verge of hunger, and why. We also argued that the time has come to find out how many children go to bed hungry and take that hunger to school with them, and why, and what more could be done to prevent this hunger. Alongside this, we called on the nation to begin building up a bank of evidence on the size and composition of the hidden army of volunteers who, day in day out, throw themselves into battle against hunger.

In the first 100 days since we issued this plea, we have begun piecing together a picture of the nation's hidden hungry – those of our fellow citizens who may not necessarily be relying on their local food bank, but who on a daily basis are at risk of going without a decent meal – as well as the provision that is in place to counter the visible signs of hunger in our communities.

Included within this short document are the preliminary results of this exercise, namely, a first step towards being able to report on the state of hunger and nutrition in the United Kingdom. It is based on the most up-to-date data and limited pieces of new empirical research, and represents a first jump at the bar we set 100 days ago.

The few additional pieces of data we have been able to source, coupled with the testimonies of teachers concerned by the plight of their hungry pupils, reveal themselves in this short document as a series of warning signs; each of which points to a phenomenon of hidden hunger in the United Kingdom. In an age when our country as a whole has never had such an abundance of resources:

- **a rising number of children are starting their first and final years of primary school underweight;**
- **a rising number of infants and pregnant mothers are anaemic; and**
- **a rising number of people admitted to hospital in an emergency are found to be malnourished.**

Although the overall numbers in each case remain relatively small, clearly there is something very troubling happening and there are at least two forces operating. One is the breakdown of parenting – some schools have reported that hunger is only part of the pattern of neglect suffered by some children – and the second is an increase in the numbers of families on a low income. It is a tragedy if either neglect or poverty strikes a child, but it is an unbounded horror if a child is hit by both.

We begin this short document with a look at the most recent data on the longer term pressures on household budgets that have given rise to the horror of hunger in poor households. We expand in the following section upon the fresh reports we have received over the past 100 days of children complaining in some cases of 'persistent' hunger when they are at school. We then set out some potential next steps towards establishing a way of measuring and then countering hunger in our country, before presenting the preliminary findings of our exercise to map the whereabouts of Britain's hidden army helping to feed the hungry.

Early progress made, and obstacles encountered, on the route to ending hunger as we know it in the United Kingdom

Also included within this short document is a brief summary of the responses we have received from various organisations to the fresh set of recommendations we issued a little over 100 days ago. The urgency with which the nation wishes to take up our proposals to counter hunger, as we show, varies between each organisation.

We are particularly pleased to report that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs has

acknowledged, and is acting on the difficulties caused to families in receipt of tax credits, when their payments suddenly cease following a change of household circumstances. It is working with the Group to review this process, in an attempt to try and prevent unnecessary hardship. A major breakthrough has also been achieved to help eliminate the premium prices paid for gas and electricity by mainly poorer households on prepayment meters.

However, as is made clear throughout this document, there is so much more work required from all of us to ensure all of our fellow citizens are able to access and buy food that is of sufficient quantity and quality.

We attempt in this short document to map the first steps that have been taken along the route we set out a little over 100 days ago to abolish hunger as we know it in the United Kingdom. We also hope that, on the back of this document, the nation will continue building up a bank of evidence, which is as accurate as possible, on the extent and causes of hunger afflicting our fellow citizens.

The effectiveness of the nation's response to the hunger in our midst, as we approach the turn of a new decade, will then be judged on the progress made against this evidence. Will significantly fewer people find themselves having to rely on food banks? Will childhood hunger have been abolished, without the need for parents on low incomes to incur extreme additional sacrifices to their own health and wellbeing?

We very much hope that by 2020, the nation will be in a position to provide an emphatic and affirmative answer to both of these questions, amongst many others we have posed in this short document. But, first, we take a look at the longer term prospects for household budgets and how they might impact upon the nation's vulnerability to hunger.

The longer term drivers of hunger

Changing pressure on household budgets

We have in successive reports identified the longer term changes in the pressure on household budgets that have worked against the diets of the poor.² It is these changes that hold the key to Britain's current vulnerability to hunger.

We now have fresh data on the state of household budgets, as they stood at the end of 2014.³

- The average household required 25 per cent of their income to cover the costs of food, fuel and housing; an increase of five percentage points since 2003, and the same as in 2013.
- The very poorest households required 41 per cent of their income to cover the costs of food, fuel and housing; an increase of ten percentage points since 2003, but a slight fall of one percentage point on 2013.
- The very wealthiest households required 17 per cent of their income to cover the costs of food, fuel and housing; an increase of two percentage points since 2003, and one percentage point higher than in 2013.

Among the very poorest households, expenditure on food as a proportion of income is at the same

² Throughout the earliest part of the post-war period, the British people lived through a time when the proportion of their income spent on what we have defined as the basic essentials of any household – food, fuel, and housing – fell. The proportion of income spent on housing rose steadily from 1953, but the continual proportionate fall in the other bills resulted, overall, in this budget of basic necessities falling proportionately overall:

- The proportion of household income spent on fuel bills decreased from 5.2% in 1953 to 3% in 2003.
- The proportion of household income spent on food and non-alcoholic drink decreased from 33.3% in 1953 to 16% in 2003.
- And while the proportion of household income spent on housing increased from 8.8% in 1953 to 17% in 2003, the overall combined proportion of household incomes spent on

level (16 per cent) as it was in 2003. It had previously fallen by 12.2 percentage points between 1994 and 2003. Moreover, the proportion of their income required to cover fuel and housing costs, which had also fallen throughout the 1990s, increased by eleven percentage points to 26 per cent between 2003 and 2013, before falling only slightly to 25 per cent in 2014.

Such is the weight of the additional burden that has been placed upon household income by fuel and housing costs, large numbers of people consistently find themselves on the verge of hunger, if not actually hungry. It may only take an interruption in benefit or tax credit payments, or the need to buy a new pair of school shoes for their children, for example, to expose such households to hunger.

The slight relief of pressure on the poorest households' budgets in 2014, whilst welcome, was marginal. A complete reversal of the unprecedented increase since 2003 in the proportion of income required to meet the costs of life's essentials, looks to be a distant prospect. So too does the simultaneous rebuilding of a small surplus income that insures against life's emergencies. It was forecast in this year's Budget that the proportion of household income set aside by the average household for a rainy day would fall from 5.4 per cent in 2014 to 3.3 per cent this year, before recovering only slightly to 3.9 per cent by 2020.⁴ What can be done to

housing, fuel and food declined from 47.3% in 1953 to 36% in 2003.

However, from 2004 to 2011, for the first time in post-war Britain, the overall combined proportion of household incomes spent on housing, fuel and food increased:

- The proportion of household income spent on fuel bills began increasing in 2003 from 3% rising to 5% in 2011.
- The proportion of household income spent on food and non-alcoholic drink also in 2003 increased from 16% to 17% in 2011 (this includes a decrease by 1 percentage point to 15% in 2005 before increasing again in 2006).
- The proportion of household income spent on housing increased from 17% in 2003 to 18% in 2011.

³ Office for National Statistics, *Family Spending: 2015 edition* (December 2015)

⁴ Table B.1., *Budget 2016* (London: HM Treasury, 2016): p. 136

reinstate poorer households' financial buffer, so that food need not be sacrificed to pay the bills or meet an unexpected expense?

Moves to ease the pressure on household budgets

A first really encouraging move in this direction came with the Competition and Markets Authority's recent proposal to place a cap on the energy costs incurred by mainly poorer households on prepayment meters.⁵ This cap, which looks set to come into force in 2017 and run through to 2020, will save this group of households an average of £90 each year in energy costs. Such a move could all but eliminate the additional routine costs levied upon this group of households over and above the costs levied upon mainly more fortunate households who pay by Direct Debit.

We firmly believe that this most welcome move should be used to kick-start a wide-ranging reform programme to lower the costs of gas and electricity for poorer households. Ofgem, the energy regulator, has taken the positive step of reviewing the series of charges that, as we have shown in previous reports, discriminate so heavily against the poor. We have suggested to Ofgem that, as a next step, our proposed New Deal on Prepayment Meters⁶ should be implemented alongside the Competition and Markets Authority's overall price cap. A course of action along these lines would ensure that by 2020, the playing field in the energy market will have been well and truly levelled. This levelling out would relieve a great amount of pressure upon poorer households' budgets, and could help a sizeable number of parents out of the dilemma they face today, over whether to feed the gas meter or their family. Such a possibility should act

as a great incentive for reformers. But what of the alternative scenario, should 2020 usher in a mere continuation of the status quo?

Without a radical course of action, as outlined above, alongside bold action to counter the spiralling cost of renting, market prices will remain stacked against the budgets of the poor. Hunger, as our previous reports have shown, thrives in such conditions and it will continue to do so.

The most recent data on family budgets demonstrates that there exists an urgent need for reforms that will lighten the burden of fuel and housing costs on poorer households. We have also shown here that, crucially, such reforms are possible.

We seek in the next chapter to explore whether, and how these developments in household budgets may have manifested themselves, or not, in the nation's vulnerability to hunger.

⁵ Competition and Markets Authority, *Energy market investigation: Summary of provisional decision on remedies* (London: CMA, 2016): p. 32

⁶ Our proposed New Deal on Prepayment Meters calls on each energy supplier by 2020 to: proceed as soon as possible with 'Smart Pay As You Go Meters' for their poorest customers, on the understanding that they eliminate the premium charged over and above the costs incurred by other customers; publish the additional costs incurred on supplying and maintaining each prepayment meter, to

enable a comparison with the premiums charged to households who rely on a prepayment meter; abolish fees for the installation and termination of a prepayment meter; provide two-week credit tokens to households relying on emergency food parcels and who cannot afford to top up their prepayment meter; and offer rebates to prepayment customers caught out by the standing charge on their meter over the summer months.

The not-so-hidden signs of hunger – under-nutrition, malnutrition, and anaemia

The ongoing debate on hunger serves as a crucible for a wider debate on the horrors of under-nutrition, malnutrition, and anaemia.

Under-nutrition weaves its way into the lives of adults and children when their food is insufficient, irregular, and lacking in the nutrients that are required to develop and maintain one's body and mind. Under-nutrition leads people to become underweight and, among children, it has been linked to poor mental development and school achievement as well as behavioural difficulties.⁷

Malnutrition arises similarly from a poor diet, although this may be because it contains either too few or too many nutrients. Its symptoms include stunted growth, a very thin or exceptionally flabby figure, and an impoverished blood supply. Hence those who are malnourished may also be obese.

Anaemia, which describes the lack of red blood cells a person needs to function properly, is a frequent accompaniment of under-nutrition and malnutrition. Anaemia among pregnant women increases the risk of a premature birth and subsequent low birthweight of their child, and leaves the child more vulnerable themselves to becoming anaemic.⁸ An anaemic child is likely to be pale, tired, and weak, as well as being more likely to find it difficult to focus at school.

A common thread that knits together each of these horrors is a lack of decent food. The force of this phenomenon is particularly potent among children and it is embodied, at its starkest, in a state of hunger.

The official sets of data offer scant information on the numbers of children whose hunger has brought about a physical deterioration at such a

young age. But what they do tell us, quite frankly, is disturbing.

In an age of rampant child obesity there has been a shock increase in the numbers of children starting their first and final years of school underweight. Our analysis of the most recent official data from the National Child Measurement Programme suggests that, last year in England:

- 6,367 children started reception class underweight; an increase of 16 per cent since 2012; and
- 7,663 children started their final year of primary school underweight; an increase of 15 per cent since 2012.

Moreover, according to House of Commons Library analysis of the most recent data from the World Bank:

- The number of anaemic infants in 2011 reached its highest level in two decades. 502,643 children aged under five in 2011 were anaemic; an increase of 46 per cent over the preceding decade.

We have, on the back of these findings, followed up with the Secretary of State for Health asking for urgent action to maximise the take-up of Healthy Start vouchers. The take-up of these vouchers represents an effective way of increasing vitamin intake among poorer families with very young children. Our previous report carried evidence from Sustain suggesting that one quarter of poorer families, for one reason or another, are failing to take up their entitlement to these vouchers. They are therefore unable to benefit from free milk, fruit and vegetables, for which Healthy Start vouchers can be redeemed at their local shops.

Although the overall number and proportion of children classed as being underweight or anaemic remains relatively small, we are disturbed to note that, following a sustained period of decline in the

⁷ V.J.B. Martins et al, 'Long-Lasting Effects of Undernutrition', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 8 (2011)

⁸ L.H. Allen, 'Anaemia and iron deficiency: effects on pregnancy outcome', *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 71 (2000)

two decades prior to the economic crisis of 2008-9, recent trends point towards an increase in their number.

We are disturbed also by the apparent emergence of similar trends among the adult population. Although the overall proportion of adults in England who are underweight fell by a fifth of a percentage point in 2014, to 748,222, House of Commons Library analysis of the most recent data from the World Health Organisation and Office for National Statistics suggests that, in England and Wales:

- The prevalence of anaemia among pregnant women has reached its highest level in two decades, having increased from 151,206 (19.8 per cent of all pregnant women) in 2001 to 207,277 (22.8 per cent of all pregnant women) in 2011.

Moreover, data from the Health and Social Care Information Centre reveal that, in England:

- There was an increase of 43 per cent between 2010 and 2014 in the number of people admitted to hospital in an emergency who are found to be malnourished; from 4,660 in 2010-11 to 6,686 in 2013-14.

The increase in the number of patients who, following an emergency admission, are found to be malnourished could be accounted for by rising numbers of elderly patients being admitted to hospital in an emergency. It is also important to emphasise again that the numbers of people to which we refer here, as a share of the national population, are relatively small.

However, it is equally important to note how the increase in their number since the economic crisis follows a long period of year-on-year reductions. Given that, over a similar period, Britain has witnessed an explosion in the numbers of people relying on food banks, evidence of such increases in under-nutrition, malnutrition and anaemia, poses two questions: are the groups of people at risk of such physical

deterioration those same people relying on food banks? Or, alternatively, do they represent an additional cohort of our fellow citizens whose lack of adequate food until now has been hidden beneath the radar?

We look more closely in the following chapter at how big an army of people each day could find themselves among Britain's hidden hungry.

The beginnings of an overall measurement of Britain's vulnerability to hunger

In seeking to present an overall estimate of the number of households in this country who are on the verge of hunger, the most recent official data allows us only to extrapolate the results from the one-off Low Income Diet and Nutrition Survey that was conducted in 2004, and published in 2007.

Given the changes in market prices which, over the past decade, have worked so disproportionately against the budgets of the poor, it is highly likely that household circumstances since the 2004 survey will have changed. In some cases they will have changed dramatically for the worse. Some households may, on the other hand, have experienced an upturn in fortunes, while others may also find themselves in more than one category. But were the same proportion of Britain's poor to provide the same answers today as they did in 2004, we could estimate that:

- 203,840 households struggle to buy sufficient food because they lack money;
- 377,891 households worry they will run out of food because they cannot afford to buy more;
- 213,169 households either cut back on what they eat or skip whole meals; and
- 48,448 households every now and then go a whole day without eating because they cannot afford any food.

Clearly such estimates, which are based on official data that were collected over a decade ago, leave us a long way from coming to terms with the hunger that exists in our country today. The Government, to its credit, has been straightforward and acknowledged in correspondence with us that 'some of the poorest families are struggling to afford to feed

themselves'.⁹ Like us, though, it cannot say how many.

There has, nonetheless, been some progress on this front. For we are now able to build upon the Trussell Trust's first estimate of the number of people relying on its food banks. The Trust estimates that 298,000 people received food parcels in the six months to September 2015.¹⁰ We very much welcome the publication of this estimate, and we hope the Trust will incorporate this practice into its regular six-monthly reporting of data.

But this progress, welcome as it is, remains limited. Given the data we present elsewhere in this document, this group of 298,000 people is likely to represent only a part of the number people relying on food banks, let alone all those who are hungry. How might the country therefore gauge most accurately the extent of both of these phenomena?

We propose that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs should consider incorporating questions from the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES), or something similar, into its annual Family Food Survey. Data from FIES, or something similar, would enable the country to monitor the proportion of households who skip meals, run out of food, or reduce their weekly food intake, either due to a lack of money or for other reasons.

A second equally helpful option would be for Public Health England to act similarly through its annual National Diet and Nutrition Survey, or to commission an additional one-off survey focusing on the nation's vulnerability to hunger.

We propose further that officials from the Department, as well as Public Health England, should hold immediate discussions with the United Kingdom Statistics Authority on whether, and how, they might best deploy FIES, or a similar

⁹ Correspondence from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to Frank Field MP, dated 29 February 2016.

¹⁰ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2015/11/18/uk-foodbank-use-still-at-record-levels-as-hunger-remains-major-concern-for-low-income-families/>

set of questions, to begin measuring the extent of hunger in our country.

Similar moves are underway in Canada, the United States and the devolved nations of the United Kingdom, to begin measuring households' vulnerability to hunger.

The Government should grasp this opportunity to enhance and better inform the public debate on hunger in the United Kingdom as a whole. Moreover, an effective anti-hunger strategy capable of moving beyond food banks will necessarily need to be driven by such comprehensive data. We look in the next chapter at how such a strategy might most effectively address childhood hunger.

The presence of all too visible signs of hunger among children

We encountered fresh evidence in the 100 days that followed our most recent report, of the hunger that awaits some children when they go home from school. The exercise from which this evidence emerged took the form of a brief survey which was circulated to 19 schools in Birkenhead and 13 in South Shields.¹¹ We also received helpful feedback from local authorities in South Ayrshire and North Ayrshire. Our objective was to build a better understanding of various aspects of childhood hunger, namely, how many children are hungry, and why, and what can be done about it.

How many children arrive at school hungry, and why?

We still hold no uniform data on the extent of childhood hunger. However, we were informed that, in South Shields, ‘a significant number of pupils say they feel hungry’ and, at one school in the town, some children ‘complain of persistent hunger’. The local authority reported that a growing number of teachers are providing snacks on an ad-hoc basis for children who arrive at school feeling hungry.

Summarising the feedback from schools in its area, North Ayrshire Council attributed childhood hunger to parental ‘unemployment, low pay, those living in poverty and in-work poverty in some cases. In extreme cases, children and young people arriving hungry to school may be as a direct result of neglect’.

Meanwhile, at one school in Birkenhead, ‘the proportion of children who come into school hungry is approximately 20 per cent in each class every day. The reasons children have given for being hungry included, getting up late, some children state that they didn’t feel like breakfast, and on two occasions, children reported that there had not been any breakfast options available at home’.

Even among those who had eaten something, the school suggested that ‘some children will arrive at school eating chocolate bars, packets of crisps and drinking fizzy soft drinks of a morning, as some parents feel that this is a suitable replacement for a substantial breakfast.’

Another Birkenhead school reported that, ‘from our investigation 143 children arrive to school hungry each day which equates to 27 per cent of our school [...] Many of our students live in a chaotic household, they are often responsible for getting themselves out of bed to arrive at school on time and ready to learn. They will often eat their first meal of the day at break (I am)’.

An important follow-up question, therefore, must be to what extent this ‘one in five’ figure relating to hungry children is an extreme occurrence, or whether it represents a more uniform pattern across the country. Can it really be true that a group of children that is equal in size to those who are eligible to receive free school meals, comes to school hungry each day?

How do families manage in the absence of free school meals at weekends and during the holidays?

The signs of childhood hunger in some cases – we know not how many – become most visible to school staff on Monday mornings or the first day back from the school holidays. Teachers and school cooks find on such occasions that, in the absence of free school meals, successive days for some children have passed by without a proper meal.

One headteacher from South Ayrshire reported that, ‘there are a number of pupils who return to school following holidays (and weekends) who have missed the regularity of a breakfast and a midday meal.

‘Following school holidays, when some pupils are asked what they have missed most about school, a number of pupils will report that they have missed getting their lunch, as well as the

¹¹ We included all schools with a higher than average proportion of pupils who are entitled to free school meals.

The findings from South Shields were fed back to us by South Tyneside Council.

regularity and structure of a day with set meal times.’

It was also reported to us from school cooks in South Shields that ‘children are much hungrier on Mondays and sometimes ask for larger portions’.

Does a free school meal represent a child’s only meal each day?

Again, although we cannot give a definitive answer, we were given the impression that, for a minority of children, the school lunchtime represents the only chance each day to eat something substantial. We heard from two out of the 19 Birkenhead schools that ‘there are children who arrive in school hungry having had no breakfast or possibly a meal from the previous lunchtime’, and that ‘we realise that the lunch that our children receive in school may be the only hot food that they eat each day’. It was reported in similar vein by one headteacher in South Ayrshire, that ‘some of our children do not actually have dinner as such and might not eat between lunch and breakfast club the next day’.

Has the time come for a national programme of free school breakfasts?

School breakfast clubs, where they already operate, are popular and effective. It was reported to us from South Shields that ‘breakfast clubs tend to do well in the borough because children enjoy the social interaction over a good breakfast at 8am’. One Birkenhead school reported that its partnership with Magic Breakfast had been really successful, while another of the town’s schools described its efforts to ‘pre-empt’ childhood hunger with the introduction of a daily onsite toast club. Toast club is offered free for any child entitled for free school meals. Elsewhere, one school breakfast club in South Ayrshire recently ‘has grown from approximately 12 pupils per day to roughly 45 per day’.

However, we are aware that not all schools currently offer a free breakfast. Given that there are some children in this country who, aside from their free school meal, are fed nothing of

substance, we will continue pushing for a national programme of free school breakfasts.

We do not currently know how many schools run breakfast clubs on a pay-as-you-use basis, or otherwise. This is despite the Government dedicating £3 million from the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived, to support the development of breakfast clubs. We would welcome clarification from the Government as to how, and where, this grant has been used. Following our previous request, we would also welcome confirmation from Magic Breakfast as to which schools it works with, and where, so we can encourage other schools in our constituencies that are not on their list to begin operating their own breakfast clubs.

Accompanying any such programme, which would guarantee children a free school breakfast, must be the enforcement of parental responsibility. It was reported to us from South Ayrshire that, ‘the main problem was children who lived in chaotic households with limited parental support’. If parents persistently fail either to feed their child, or to ensure their child arrives on time to receive a free school breakfast, we believe they should receive a home visit from the school’s pastoral staff before a possible referral to the Troubled Families programme.

Could a national programme of free school breakfasts be paid for by the additional Pupil Premium monies secured from automatically registering all eligible pupils for free school meals?

Free school meals, as we have seen, are built into the frontline of the defence against childhood hunger. Hence the importance we have attached to the automatic registration of all eligible children to ensure they receive their daily free school meal. We again wish to salute Wirral Council for leading the way on this front. We are pleased that several more local authorities took up this policy, while others expressed support for it to be rolled out across the whole country, in the 100 days following our most recent report. Here we offer two further justifications for the policy.

First, we understand that some schools dedicate sums from their Pupil Premium budgets to cover the costs associated with free breakfast provision. We applaud this move. Children are much more likely to be settled and ready to learn if they have eaten a decent breakfast.

The Pupil Premium windfall delivered by a policy of automatically registering all eligible children for free school meals could be considerable.¹² This would then enable many schools adequately to cover the costs of a free school breakfast programme, thereby ensuring all children start the day ready to profit from their education.

A second justification is that many schools at morning break time offer a free glass of fresh milk to those pupils who are registered to receive free school meals. Studies dating back to the Victorian era have linked higher milk consumption amongst children with more rapid gains in height and weight. If a child is not registered to receive their free school meal, they could also be missing out on a glass of fresh milk each morning. Given the data we have presented on the prevalence of under-nutrition and anaemia among young children, is not the nation missing an open goal by allowing children to miss out subsequently on the free school meals and milk, and perhaps even breakfast, to which they could be entitled?

Is hunger emerging as part of a wider pattern of neglect?

The latest reports we have received suggest that, in some cases, hunger amongst children could be emerging as just one part of a wider pattern of neglect. Here we are introduced to the prospect of children leaving school at the end of every day to return to dark homes that lack warmth in every sense of the word, with cupboards so bare that all they serve up is the prospect of an empty stomach. Two schools suggested simultaneously that 'if children are coming in hungry it would be seen as part of a bigger picture of neglect', and

hunger is a 'contributory factor of perceived neglect'.

Children in this nightmare situation may be brought to the attention of social services. Indeed, the legal criteria for neglect covers a lack of sufficient food. Parents of course should not be penalised for being poor, but there are steps that can be taken to safeguard children's wellbeing and prevent them going hungry as a result of neglect. North Ayrshire Council, for example, reported that school staff 'know their children well and would be able to clearly identify children with a wellbeing need, in this case, arriving hungry at school. Any need of this type, or indeed any other identified wellbeing need would be immediately addressed.

'If this was clearly not a one-off incident, and where this wellbeing need was identified as an ongoing issue for any child then the staff would seek assistance, either by directly reporting it as a child protection issue, asking for support from social work, health or potentially a local authority support service'.

Such an approach is crucial to identifying and supporting persistently hungry children. We wish naturally for such protection to be afforded to all children. However, the official data suggest that such protection across local authorities in England, is patchy. Following a 1.4 percentage point increase between 2010 and 2013, the proportion of children being looked after following abuse or neglect subsequently fell by one percentage point between 2013 and 2015. The reasons behind this sudden fall are unclear. However, it is possible that one reason might perhaps be the changing criteria used by some local authorities to define and act on neglect.

Recent surveys conducted among social workers have picked up concerns around the level at which local authorities set the threshold that determines whether a child is 'in need'. A majority (70 per cent) of social workers surveyed last year were of the view that this threshold had

¹² In Wirral alone the additional Pupil Premium funding amounted to £725,000.

risen due to budgetary restrictions across local government.¹³ This could of course raise the disturbing scenario of a ‘postcode lottery’ of unmet need across the country, although we cannot be sure at this stage.

We have therefore written to Ofsted asking whether it has detected a raising of this threshold among local authorities, and, if so, whether there are any particular trends beginning to emerge on this front. Is hunger amongst a group of children in one part of the country more likely to remain under the radar, than in others? We have also asked Ofsted whether it might consider collecting reports from school staff on the numbers of pupils consistently arriving hungry, and the reasons why.

Aside from the number of people relying on food banks, the number of children arriving at school hungry is beginning to emerge as a most visible indicator of our nation’s vulnerability to hunger.

We now turn to the hidden army of volunteers in Britain’s Big Society who are helping to feed the nation’s hungry.

¹³ 1,000 social workers were surveyed as part of “Are child protection thresholds too high?”, *Community Care*, 10 September 2015

The hidden army feeding the hungry

Here we publish the findings that have been submitted to us by Anglican Dioceses following a nationwide request for information on the composition of the emergency food landscape. The findings we present here cover only a fraction of the country. However, we estimate from the surveys that have been presented to us from Berkshire, Bristol, Cornwall, Cumbria, Devon, Oxfordshire, West Yorkshire, and the area surrounding Guildford, that there are:

- 138 Trussell Trust food bank centres (43.4 per cent of emergency food provision);
- 81 independent food banks (25.5 per cent); and
- 99 independent organisations administering a combination of food parcels and meals (31.1 per cent).

This is by no means an exhaustive list, and we wish to maintain and update it on an ongoing basis as further submissions are received. However, the information presented to us shows that in:

Bradford

- Five Trussell Trust food bank centres distributed an estimated 5,901 food parcels in the most recent 12 months for which data is available;
- Three independent food banks distributed an estimated 11,687 food parcels in the most recent 12 months for which data is available;
- Two independent organisations distributed 2,183 food parcels as well as 8,987 meals in the most recent 12 months for which data is available; and
- A further five independent organisations distributed 59,582 meals in the most recent 12 months for which data is available.

Bristol

- Ten Trussell Trust food bank centres, and nine independent food bank centres, distribute food parcels.

Calder Valley

- One independent food bank distributed 8,050 food parcels in 2015.

Cornwall

- 15 Trussell Trust food bank centres, and six independent food banks, distribute food parcels; and
- 14 independent organisations distribute a combination of food parcels and meals.

Cumbria

- Ten Trussell Trust food bank centres, and seven independent food banks, distribute food parcels.

Derbyshire

- Eleven Trussell Trust food bank centres, and four independent food banks, distribute food parcels; and
- 16 independent organisations distribute a combination of food parcels and meals.

Devon

- Nine Trussell Trust food bank centres, and 19 independent food banks, distribute food parcels; and
- 22 independent organisations distribute a combination of food parcels and meals.

Elmbridge

- Eight Trussell Trust food bank centres distribute food parcels.

Epsom and Ewell

- Five Trussell Trust food bank centres distribute food parcels; and
- One independent organisation distributes a combination of food parcels and meals.

Farnborough

- One Trussell Trust food bank centre distributes food parcels; and
- One independent organisation distributes a combination of food parcels and meals.

Guildford

- One Trussell Trust food bank centre, and three independent food banks, distribute food parcels; and
- Two independent organisations distribute a combination of food parcels and meals.

Hart

- Three Trussell Trust food bank centres distribute food parcels.

Kingston upon Thames

- Four Trussell Trust food bank centres distribute food parcels.

Leeds

- 20 Trussell Trust food bank centres distributed an estimated 4,161 food parcels in 2014;
- Nine independent food banks distributed an estimated 4,955 food parcels in 2014; and
- A further 22 independent organisations distributed an estimated 62,991 meals in 2014.

Mole Valley

- One Trussell Trust food bank centre distributes food parcels; and
- One independent organisation distributes a combination of food parcels and meals.

Oxfordshire and Berkshire

- 22 Trussell Trust food bank centres, and 14 independent food banks, distribute food parcels; and
- Five independent organisations distribute a combination of food parcels and meals.

Reigate, Banstead and Redhill

- One Trussell Trust food bank centre, and one independent food bank, distribute food parcels; and
- Four independent organisations distribute a combination of food parcels and meals.

Runnymede, Chertsey and Addlestone

- Three Trussell Trust food bank centres distribute food parcels; and
- One independent organisation distributes a combination of food parcels and meals.

Staines and Spelthorne

- One independent food bank distributes food parcels.

Surrey Heath

- Two independent organisations distribute a combination of food parcels and meals.

Tandridge, Godston and Caterham

- Three Trussell Trust food bank centres, and one independent food bank, distribute food parcels.

Waverley

- Three Trussell Trust food bank centres, and three independent food banks, distribute food parcels.

Woking

- Three Trussell Trust food bank centres distribute food parcels; and
- One independent organisation distributes a combination of food parcels and meals.

We wish to continue building a more comprehensive picture of the provision that is in place to relieve hunger in this country, so steps can then be taken to co-ordinate this provision, pool resources, and spread examples of good practice. But what of the progress made on our most recent proposals to prevent this hunger?

[Progress made on A route map to ending hunger as we know it in the United Kingdom](#)

We put forward in our most recent report, *A route map to ending hunger as we know it in the United Kingdom*, 68 proposals for reform which, based on the evidence we received, could alleviate the nation's vulnerability to hunger. These proposals were divided between nine central government departments and agencies, as well as the nation's airports, supermarkets, utilities regulators, schools, Big Society organisations, and local authorities.

We then wrote to each organisation to whom recommendations were made in our most recent report. Over the past 100 days we have received responses from:

Airports

We found last year that a large minority of food banks offer people toothpaste, shower gels and other hygiene products, in a noble attempt to meet a series of basic needs at no additional cost. It was suggested to us that an arrangement should be reached with Britain's airports whereby such products confiscated during security checks are offered to local food banks. Upon enquiring, we learnt that Liverpool's John Lennon Airport already has such an arrangement in place with one local food bank.

We therefore wrote to each main airport in the United Kingdom suggesting that they make contact with their local food bank to offer them unopened non-alcoholic drinks, toothpaste, shower gels and other hygiene products that are confiscated during security checks. We have since heard from:

Belfast International – The airport 'has always redistributed such items and has partnerships with several local charities to ensure that all confiscated items are put to the best possible use'.

Bristol – The airport already donates its unopened items, confiscated during security

searches, to a local hospice and the city's largest homeless shelter.

City – The airport donates products to Newham Food Bank on a monthly basis.

Gatwick – While it would like to develop this service, upon consulting with its security and legal teams, the airport feels unable to do so. As the items have been confiscated for security reasons, it does not feel sure that the items will not already have been tampered with.

Heathrow – The airport is concerned that it has 'no mechanism of ensuring that the contents of the bottles are as described on the label [...] although it may not be possible to donate these items for [this reason], we are nevertheless exploring other options with local organisations, for example, how we can distribute unwanted leftover food items from Heathrow's extensive range of food outlets to local charities as other large organisations have done'.

Luton – The airport has confirmed that 'we have made contact and are working with our local food banks regarding products we can offer them. In addition we are also in discussions with our catering outlets at the airport on how they can also support the local food banks'.

Manchester – The airport 'is happy to explore an extension of [relationships with local food banks to include the donation of unopened liquids] and will proactively contact food banks in our area to see how we can work together'.

British Chambers of Commerce

We recommended in our most recent report that the Federation of Small Businesses, British Chambers of Commerce and British Hospitality Association should encourage their members to offer their services to their nearest food bank. Such support might include, but need not be limited to, short employment courses for the long-term unemployed. It was reported to us in evidence that such support could help address some of the deep-seated causes of hunger.

The British Chambers of Commerce informed us in its response that it has invited its members to consider what more they could do ‘to support individuals needing help and assistance to rebuild their lives and employment prospects’.

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

The evidence that was presented to us last year suggested that, in some cases, households’ long-term low income is exacerbated by zero-hours contracts under which workers are not guaranteed a minimum number of hours from week to week. There was clearer evidence in 2015 to suggest that the irregular income from zero-hours contracts is making it difficult for some of those households reliant on this form of work to budget.

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, Sajid Javid, has rejected our proposals to conduct a survey of workers employed on zero-hours contracts, to monitor their income and wellbeing, and to consider whether further legislative steps are required to protect them from hunger.

We have therefore written separately to Ipsos MORI, the Trade Union Congress, and UNISON asking whether they might commission such a survey. An exercise along these lines would throw light on the ability, or otherwise, of this group of workers to afford food. It could also point the way towards any further legislative action that may be required to enshrine paid work as a safeguard against hunger.

Department for Communities and Local Government

The facilities offered to tenants in return for their rent monies are sometimes unbelievably inadequate. Chichester Food Bank, for example, reported to us last year that ‘some clients have no cooking facilities, sometimes not even a kettle’.

Following the evidence submitted by **Feeding Birkenhead** of inadequate or non-existent cooking facilities in some rented accommodation,

Wirral Council will soon introduce basic cooking facilities as a minimum requirement for new landlords seeking accreditation, and existing landlords looking to renew their accreditation. We very much welcome this move and we encourage other local authorities to act similarly.

The Minister of State for Housing and Planning, Brandon Lewis, confirmed in response to our most recent report that local authorities can draw upon existing regulations to require licensed or otherwise accredited landlords to provide basic cooking facilities. However, he rejected our proposal for this requirement to be extended to all landlords.

We followed up with the Minister asking whether he might consider, as an immediate step, reminding each local authority of their right to draw upon these regulations covering licensed landlords, and to publish a list of those local authorities who have failed to do so. The Minister said in his latest response that he believes the Government’s forthcoming response to the consultation on mandatory licensing for Houses in Multiple Occupation, ‘will provide a timely opportunity [...] to remind local authorities of their right to require all landlords to provide their tenants with basic cooking facilities’.

Department for Education

We recommended in our most recent report that the Department for Education should consult on the most effective use of its free school meals budget to ensure all poor children, regardless of their parents’ employment status, are guaranteed a free school meal each day, and that it should clarify as a matter of urgency the entitlement to this support of children whose parents are in receipt of different components of Universal Credit.

The Department confirmed in response to a recent parliamentary question that it is working with the Department for Work and Pensions on updating the eligibility criteria for free school meals under Universal Credit. Under the present system, children whose parents work for low

incomes, and are in receipt of Working Tax Credit, are automatically disqualified from receiving free school meals. The Department confirmed also that, 'in the meantime, while this work is on-going, any child whose parent or guardian is receiving Universal Credit will continue to be entitled to free school meals'.

Department of Energy and Climate Change, and Ofgem

Warm Home Discount

We very much welcomed in our most recent report the decision taken by the Department of Energy and Climate Change to allow families with young children trying to survive on a low income, regardless of their employment status, to apply for help towards their energy bills through the Warm Home Discount scheme. However, we noted in the report that such families still do not receive the same automatic entitlement as poor pensioners. We proposed that a next reform to counter hunger should be to grant automatic help for all poor families with young children.

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, Amber Rudd, confirmed in response to this proposal that the Warm Home Discount scheme will run throughout the remainder of this Parliament, and that the Government would consult on its future design to ensure vulnerable families with children could receive appropriate support. We welcome the Secretary of State's engagement on this matter.

Once the consultation has begun, we will submit proposals for all poor families with children – regardless of the family's employment status – automatically to receive the discount.

New Deal on Prepayment Meters

We also registered as a most prominent source of concern the reliance of many poorer households on prepayment meters which, by and large, charge a higher tariff on each unit of energy over and above the costs paid by mainly more fortunate Direct Debit customers. Based on the evidence of hardship experienced by a sizeable

number of this group, we submitted to the Government and Ofgem a proposal for a New Deal on Prepayment Meters. This proposal called on energy suppliers by 2020, to:

- Proceed as soon as possible with 'Smart Pay As You Go Meters' for their poorest customers, on the understanding that they eliminate the premium charged over and above the costs incurred by other customers;
- Publish the additional costs incurred on supplying and maintaining each prepayment meter, to enable a comparison with the premiums charged to households who rely on a prepayment meter;
- Abolish fees for the installation and termination of a prepayment meter;
- Provide two-week credit tokens to households relying on emergency food parcels and who cannot afford to top up their prepayment meter; and
- Offer rebates to prepayment customers caught out by the standing charge on their meter over the summer months.

In December 2015 we added a sixth strand to this proposal, in the light of concerns around the potential incorporation of 'peak tariffs' into Smart Pay As You Go Meters. We sought a firm guarantee from energy suppliers that households who currently rely on a prepayment meter will not be charged more for their gas and electricity once they are transferred to a 'Smart Pay As You Go Meter'.

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change stated in her response that the energy costs incurred by mainly poorer households on prepayment meters would be 'revolutionised' once Smart Pay As You Go Meters have been rolled out in full, as the costs of maintaining each meter would be substantially reduced. We have since sought confirmation from the Secretary of State as to when all existing customers using prepayment meters can expect to be transferred

to Smart Pay As You Go Meters, and thereby begin to reap the benefits of lower energy costs.

Ofgem confirmed in its response to our proposed New Deal on Prepayment Meters that it:

- Will play its part in implementing the final recommendations of the Competition and Markets Authority's investigation into the energy market. One recommendation was to prioritise existing prepayment meter customers for new Smart Pay As You Go Meters.
- Prohibits energy providers charging more for one payment method compared with another, unless this can be justified by cost. However, whereas Ofgem has previously put this cost at £50 when comparing prepayment meters with Direct Debit accounts, the official data suggest that the premium widened in 2014-15 to £58 on electricity and £78 on gas.
- Expects the lower costs of supplying Smart Pay As You Go Meters to be passed onto customers in the form of lower prices.
- Encourages energy providers to end charges for installing and removing prepayment meters. As a result of this effort, fewer than five per cent of customers now face removal charges, and one per cent face installation charges. We have proposed that Ofgem sets itself a target of achieving zero per cent on both counts by 2020, which would be a huge achievement.
- Has found that 14 tariffs currently offer standing charges of between zero and £60 a year, and that it encourages energy providers to follow good practice such as the annual rebate introduced by British Gas to reimburse the standing charge for vulnerable customers reliant on prepayment meters.

Building on our proposals, Ofgem confirmed in its response that it has been consulting on ideas to

help prepayment meter customers access more competitive tariffs; address the additional costs prepayment meter consumers can face, while ensuring these costs do not fall disproportionately on those least able to afford them; and require energy providers to treat prepayment meter customers fairly.

The need for fairer treatment was given further impetus by the most recent official data on energy costs, which showed that:

- standard electricity bills for Direct Debit customers increased in real terms by £57 between 1996 and 2015, compared with an increase of £70 for prepayment customers;
- standard gas bills for Direct Debit customers increased in real terms by £314 between 1996 and 2015, compared with an increase of £324 for prepayment customers;
- energy suppliers cut standard electricity bills for Direct Debit customers last year by an average of £10, while prepayment customers were offered an average cash reduction of £5;
- the average cash premium paid by prepayment customers, over and above the costs incurred by Direct Debit customers on a standard electricity bill thereby widened in 2014-15 from £53 to £58;
- energy suppliers cut standard gas bills for Direct Debit customers last year by an average of £39, while prepayment customers were offered an average cash reduction of £33; and
- the average cash premium paid by prepayment customers, over and above the costs incurred by Direct Debit customers on a standard gas bill thereby widened in 2014-15 from £72 to £78.

Moreover, upwards of 40 per cent of families relying on two of **Feeding Birkenhead's** school holiday food and fun projects cannot afford the gas and electricity required to cook food at home. In the run-up to Christmas, we were told

that some people being helped by the food bank at Birkenhead's St James Centre pleaded for candles so they need not sit in a dark, cold home on Christmas Day. They simply could not afford any gas or electricity.

Department for Work and Pensions

The delayed payment of benefit

The delayed payment of benefit remains a most common event triggering the need for help from a food bank.

During our initial inquiry in 2014, we encountered concerns around the inability of Jobcentre Plus staff to access all the information they need promptly to process and pay a new claim. We were told that different sources of information were located on different computers, and that staff would have to wait extended periods of time before they could access them. This was reported as being a most significant factor leading to the delayed payment of benefit.

The then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith, acknowledged in response to our most recent report that Jobcentre Plus staff need to access different screens and systems to source further information on benefit claims, depending on the benefit being claimed, as various IT platforms are used.

The then Secretary of State confirmed that Universal Credit is being built on a new platform and will provide staff with one single view of a benefit claim.

Whilst this new platform is to be welcomed in principle, it does not yet apply to all benefit claims and will not do so until 2020-21. Moreover, the Department cannot tell us how many Universal Credit claims it has been able to process within one month, nor how many have taken much longer than this. Our most recent report picked up on the increased risk of hunger

which arises while claimants await their first Universal Credit payment.

In addition, we now know from a recent parliamentary answer that, within the current system, 154,309 people between March 2015 and February 2016 waited more than ten days for their Jobseeker's Allowance claim to be processed. Of this group, 44,014 people waited more than 16 days.

We therefore followed up with the then Secretary of State on 1 March 2016,¹⁴ asking him to estimate as soon as possible how much it would cost to enable all Jobcentre Plus staff immediately to access one system on one screen. We believe that such a step is necessary if the Department is to stand a reasonable chance of reducing the likelihood of delays occurring while it processes a claim for any one of the existing range of benefits available to people below retirement age.

The then Secretary of State also confirmed that the ten-day target for processing a new benefit claim does not include the time taken to pay benefit to a new claimant – it only covers the period from when an application is made to the date an applicant is notified of the decision on their claim.

We remain very much concerned that the Department does not know how long it takes to process and pay new benefit claims. We therefore asked the then Secretary of State to consider recording the length of time taken to pay a new benefit claimant once their claim has been processed. It has become apparent, even from our own recent constituency casework, that some claims take a long time to be paid even after they have been processed. As we wrote in our very first report, we believe the Department should set itself a long-term goal of processing and paying all new benefit claims within five working days of a claim being made.

¹⁴ Government departments are expected to reply within five weeks of receiving correspondence from the House of Commons.

The then Secretary of State reported that the Department is still considering the feasibility of our recommendation to introduce an online format for submitting documents to support benefit claims. Whilst we recognise there are important security implications of any such approach, we have asked the Department to inform us by when it expects a final decision to be made on this proposal. Again we believe that the availability of such a format could help to speed up the process of deciding upon a new claim.

The then Secretary of State rejected our proposal for Jobcentre Plus staff automatically to offer new claimants a Short Term Benefit Advance if their benefit claim has not been processed and paid within ten working days. We understand that the Department cannot make such an offer without being sure that the criteria of entitlement to benefit, affordability and financial need have been satisfied. We therefore asked the then Secretary of State to consider an alternative proposal, requiring staff automatically to invite claimants or their advice worker to apply for a Short Term Benefit Advance if their claim has not been processed within either five or ten working days. A further option would be to issue such an invitation immediately after eligibility for benefit has been determined. The take-up of any one of these options would add some welcome reinforcement to the nation's safety net.

Emergency benefit payments

A system processing millions of benefit claims will not get every claim right, all of the time. Hence the importance we and many others attach to the system of emergency payments; namely Short Term Benefit Advances and Hardship Payments.

The anti-hunger potential of emergency payments is clear; according to the Trussell Trust, 'in areas where awareness of Short Term Benefit Advances has improved, there have been positive results, with fewer people being referred to food

banks because they had not been told about Short Term Benefit Advances'.

The then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions confirmed in response to our most recent report that the Department has raised awareness of Short Term Benefit Advance payments through the Government's website, together with a national rollout of information posters and leaflets in job centres. In addition, refreshed guidance has been issued to staff, and the then Secretary of State confirmed that Jobcentre Plus is regularly reviewing processes for dealing with vulnerable claimants to make sure that best practice is being applied in job centres across the country.

However, the then Secretary of State rejected our request for a review of Hardship Payments and their ability to protect particularly vulnerable claimants from hunger and homelessness.

The operation of the social security system

Some of the day-to-day workings of the social security system have compounded the difficulties faced by some claimants. We are uncomfortable with the evidence of claimants being unable to talk to somebody about their benefit claim without incurring a large phone bill, for example, as well as them being unsure about who to turn to when a problem has arisen with their claim.

The then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions reported that the Department's staff already provide information to claimants on the various methods available to them for speaking to a member of staff about their claim. He reported also that the Department already provides direct contact telephone numbers to 'key stakeholders and charities', which they can use as escalation points in exceptional circumstances where an urgent resolution is required.

Most of the Department's benefit lines have now been moved over to a Freephone (0800) system. We very much welcome this development. However, we have discovered from a parliamentary answer that, to date, 2.2 million

calls have been made to the Universal Credit helpline.¹⁵ This helpline originally operated as an 0845 number and it is now listed as an 0345 number. The average call duration is 7:29 minutes and calls can cost up to 45p per minute. It is conceivable therefore that claimants could have spent a total of up to £7.4 million calling to enquire about Universal Credit.

We followed up to ask the then Secretary of State whether he would phase out the Department's use of 0345 numbers for claimants wishing to enquire about a Universal Credit claim, and to replace it with a Freephone number.

Changes to an existing benefit claim

A major cause for concern within the social security system – again one which brings food banks into play – is the sudden cessation of income for those people already in receipt of benefit who report or undergo a change in circumstances.

The then Secretary of State, in response to our proposal to continue the payment of a minimum rate of Employment and Support Allowance right up until eligibility for Jobseeker's Allowance has been established and a new claim has been set in train, reported that the Department routinely undertakes a 'decision assurance call', which provides advice and support about next steps and routes to other benefits available to Employment and Support Allowance claimants who are found fit for work.

We remain concerned from the evidence presented to us, though, that not all claimants who are caught with no money in the transition from one benefit to another are receiving the timely support that is so necessary to prevent hunger. We have therefore asked the Department how many such claimants received an assurance call and what were the outcomes achieved from these calls.

Moving from welfare into work

The transition from Jobseeker's Allowance into work brings with it a barrage of extra costs that must be met before a first month's wages are paid. These additional costs, according to our evidence, can restrict new employees' ability to purchase food.

The then Secretary of State highlighted that Universal Credit will remove the possibility of people being left without money when they move from out-of-work benefit into work. He also stated that the discretion available to job centre staff through the Flexible Support Fund was a most responsive way to meet individual needs.

However, our evidence suggests that, despite half the Flexible Support Fund remaining unspent last year, there was probably lots of unmet need which resulted in people having to rely on food banks while they waited for their first wage packet to arrive. We therefore reiterated our call to the then Secretary of State to ensure the Flexible Support Fund is used effectively to meet the needs of each claimant who finds work. Such a move would ensure that nobody must go without food during their first month in work, after leaving out-of-work benefit.

Work Coaches in Food Banks

The Department for Work and Pensions has begun piloting a scheme whereby a member of staff from its Jobcentre Plus network is stationed in a food bank to provide advice on benefit-related matters and the process of looking for work.

The then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions confirmed that, one day a week, a Work Coach visits the Caritas Lally Centre in Manchester to support vulnerable people who have visited the Centre's food bank. By appointment only, the Department's staff support claimants with back-to-work and job search activities – including CV preparation and

¹⁵ Answer given on 26 February 2016, by the Employment Minister to written question 28133 tabled by Frank Field MP on 23 February 2016.

interview skills – and they help with any queries about individual benefit claims. The early results suggest that claimants have been helped better to understand what requirements are applicable to them, the difference between Jobseeker’s Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance, queries about Housing Benefit and work experience opportunities, as well as to solve complex queries that cut across different government agencies.

The then Secretary of State confirmed that the Department is looking at launching another Work Coach/food bank partnership in Morecambe. At this stage, whilst welcoming its willingness to engage with food banks and address some of the benefit problems that have led people to be hungry, we recommend that the Department should proceed with caution and, perhaps, consider whether voluntary welfare rights organisations could be supported to fulfil these functions.

Universal Credit

We recommended in our most recent report that the Department for Work and Pensions should immediately revoke the requirement that new Universal Credit claimants may only apply for an emergency payment within the first 21 days of what might be a 42-day wait for their first Universal Credit payment.

The then Secretary of State confirmed that claimants who are in financial need and have difficulty managing until their first payment of Universal Credit can apply for an advance payment from their Universal Credit award, and that this offer is no longer restricted to the first 21 days from when a claim is submitted.

Financial Conduct Authority

We recommended in our most recent report that all suppliers of gas, electricity, water, communications, and credit should introduce a ‘breathing space’ mechanism. This would allow pre-existing contractual commitments to be suspended or at least eased for a fixed period and without charge, to allow households experiencing

a sudden loss of income to reorganise their finances, particularly in compassionate circumstances or where households have an exemplary track record with payments.

The Financial Conduct Authority, having already committed itself to reviewing in the first half of 2017 the price cap on high-cost short-term credit, reported in its response that it requires companies to ‘treat customers who are in arrears or default on credit products with due consideration and forbearance. This can include suspending interest and charges, waiving fees or allowing more time to make payments. Where customers are developing a repayment plan, firms are also required to suspend active pursuit of a debt for a reasonable period. We have added guidance that the FCA views 30 days as a reasonable period but firms may choose to offer longer’.

The Financial Conduct Authority also confirmed in its response that the Government is currently exploring whether some form of ‘breathing space’ would be a useful and viable mechanism to safeguard vulnerable households repaying debt. This has been triggered by one of the recommendations made by the Farnish Review of the Money Advice Service, that the Government ‘reviews the legal framework for debt administration, in order to provide consumers who agree to specified debt repayment schemes with a “breathing space” by freezing interest and charges, and to ensure a fair and appropriate basis for debt repayments to different classes of creditor.’

HM Treasury

The queue for help from Britain’s food banks tends to grow once the school bells ring to mark the beginning of the holidays. For those children who usually receive a daily free school meal during term time, these bells often usher in a period of going day after day without a substantial meal. We therefore wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, proposing a small levy on sugary drinks to help pay for a

national programme of free school meals and fun during the holidays.

We very much welcome the Chancellor's announcement in his most recent Budget of such a levy to take effect within the next two years. The Government, as things stand, intends to hypothecate the proceeds for investment in school sports and breakfast clubs. It does, however, seem open to additional suggestions as to how some of the proceeds might be used to improve children's health.

We took heart from the acknowledgement given by the Secretary of State for Education, Nicky Morgan, in the ensuing debate on the Budget, of the need to address childhood hunger in the school holidays. We are following up with the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Education, to ask whether a small sum of the proceeds from the levy could be used to address this need.

We note with interest the Northern Ireland Assembly's recent vote in favour of its own new tax on sugary drinks, although the Executive is currently reluctant to take up this proposal. We have therefore written to Northern Ireland's Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, asking whether he might consider taking up the proposal and allocating the proceeds towards school holiday provision.

A second matter we raised with the Chancellor was the need to help all households, in particular the poorest, to begin building up a rainy day fund.

Some people relying on food banks tend to have a low level of financial cushioning, so that benefit delays, or unexpected outgoings, can trigger the need for an emergency food parcel. We believe it is important that people are helped to build up their financial resilience for when disaster may strike, and we encouraged the Government to consider ways in which this can be encouraged.

We recommended specifically that long-term resilience should be the main aim of budgeting support offered to benefit claimants, and that, as a first step, the Treasury should ask National

Savings and Investments to create accounts that are tailored for individuals who might otherwise struggle to budget, let alone save.

The Chancellor confirmed in response to this recommendation that, as part of the Government's commitment to supporting people to save at all income levels and all stages of life, he is bringing forward a new 'Help to Save' scheme to support poorer households build up a rainy day fund. Households who sign up to the scheme will be able to save up to £50 a month into a Help to Save account and receive a 50% bonus after two years. The scheme, which is a welcome first step towards helping more people to save, will be rolled out over the next two years.

A third area we raised was around the financial incentive, or otherwise, for food retailers and manufacturers to prevent good food from going to waste while there are people in this country who are hungry. Whilst the Chancellor does not think that a different fiscal approach to the redistribution of surplus food is required at this moment, he has reported that he will keep the current system of fiscal incentives under review.

On an immediately more positive note, the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, Damian Hinds, confirmed in his response to our most recent report that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs recognises how the cessation of tax credits following a change in household circumstances can be a difficult time, and it is currently reviewing this particular process, with our input, to see if it can be made more efficient, with a new claim put into payment more quickly. We very much welcome this move and, as part of this review, we have resubmitted our proposal for a minimum payment to be offered to claimants while this process takes place.

Local Authorities

Free school meal registration

Our previous report identified a key role for local authorities in identifying and automatically registering eligible children for free school meals.

We noted how Calderdale, Liverpool, North Ayrshire, and Wirral, for example, had been pioneering this initiative. We have since received further feedback on this proposal:

Bristol City Council has begun investigating the feasibility of implementing the identification and automatic registration of eligible children for free school meals, and **Rochdale Borough Council** is undertaking a small pilot exercise within its local area. **Knowsley Borough Council** is to begin implementing the policy from October 2016, while **Durham County Council** has written to offer its support for the policy to be rolled out nationwide.

Since 2008, **Blackpool Council** has incorporated free school meal entitlement within its application forms for Housing Benefit and Council Tax support. Working with its software provider, the Council has enhanced its Housing Benefit/Council Tax support processing system, which enables officers to identify children in families who have not been registered to receive their free school meal entitlement, parents then to be informed of their eligibility, and schools to be sent a weekly list of eligible pupils. This is all done automatically, without parents having to provide any additional information or complete any additional application forms.

The Council registered its concerns, however, over the Government's policy of allowing academy schools to opt out of local authorities' Free School Meals Assessment Service, to take the devolved budget, and to run their own eligibility services. Parents under this system would then need to apply directly to each school.

Given the widespread academisation of schools that is likely to take place between now and 2020, we have asked the Department for Education to ensure that all children entitled to free school meals can receive them without having to make another separate application to their school.

Welfare reform

In the 100 days following our most recent report, the Government's policy of lowering the annual household benefit cap from £26,000 to £20,000 (and £23,000 in London) passed through Parliament.

While some parents may of course respond to this loss of income by redoubling their efforts to find work, thereby gaining exemption from the cap, many others are likely to find it much more difficult to make ends meet.

We therefore encourage local authorities to build on the best practice in the administration of the local welfare safety net – a last line of defence for those families at risk of falling into poverty – which in some areas is adequately meeting emergency need and in others may need to be strengthened.

We are aware that, following a previous round of welfare reform in 2013, Croydon Council in London wrote to all local residents affected by the benefit cap and the under-occupancy penalty (commonly known either as 'the Bedroom Tax', or 'the Removal of the Spare Room Subsidy'), setting out how much they would lose. It then developed the tools and policies that residents needed to build 'action plans'. These plans helped residents to mitigate their losses by saving or earning money in other ways. The Council then engaged with residents to help them develop these action plans: the aim was to help residents help themselves. These action plans not only looked at getting people into work, but focused on health issues, such as smoking cessation. They also supported more people away from homelessness, saving the Council money.

We very much encourage other local authorities to take a similar approach to helping those families who are affected by the lower benefit cap.

Local Feeding Britain pilots

Feeding Birkenhead provided free food and fun for 125 children during the February half term

and, with the support of good quality surplus breakfast foods from Kellogg's and His Church, is about to pilot three new school breakfast clubs during term time. A further three community food hubs are being established to provide supper and homework clubs during term time, and free food and fun during the holidays.

Feeding Coventry was set up in February 2016 with the purpose of countering school holiday hunger, establishing a new social supermarket, and creating a network of community kitchens to improve access to affordable, good quality food.

We have also received reports from two other local networks.

Bradford and Keighley Food Poverty Network meets regularly and communicates outside of meetings. Wellsprings Together Bradford develops several resources to support this network, including paper based lists with maps of where free food can be accessed. Alongside this is an online resource which allows local food banks and other groups to keep in touch and co-ordinate the collection of data.

Wellsprings Together Bradford is about to begin producing quarterly and annual statistics for the whole of Bradford, including the number of food banks, hot food providers and pay-as-you-feel cafes, the number of parcels and meals distributed, and the number of people fed.

Leeds Food Aid Network is to begin co-ordinating and publishing statistics on food assistance provision covering Leeds, Bradford, Wakefield, Calderdale and Kirklees. Also stemming from this co-ordination has been more effective signposting and referrals so that people in need can access assistance. With help from FareShare, there has also been a more effective means of distributing food to those in need. The co-ordination of local anti-hunger services, with the Trussell Trust taking the lead through its More Than Food programme, has also extended the local Food Bank Plus offer.

Mobile phone operators

Two out of the five main mobile phone operators have responded positively to our proposal for a 'breathing space' mechanism.

EE informed us of its 'promise to pay' mechanism to support those of its customers with a temporary cash flow problem, allowing them up to an additional 28 days for payment. No restrictions are placed on the use of the phone during this period. EE also offers a Monthly Recurring Charge discount for its customers who have longer term financial difficulties. The discount entails 50 per cent off its normal price plans to give its customers a chance to improve their financial position. EE's Basic Plan, as an alternative, offers 150 minutes and 150 texts for £10 per month.

Three likewise operates a 'promise to pay' mechanism, under which customers can delay payment for 30 days but with no collections activity or impact on their services during this period. Three's customers can also enter into a payment plan, during which service and contractual obligations are suspended for up to three months, so as to ensure they do not accrue additional debt.

Supermarkets

The vast majority of food banks and other charitable food providers receive the bulk of their food supplies from the public. These supplies most often take the form of donations through supermarket collections, church congregations and school Harvest Festival activities.

Our most recent report was clear that, whilst all of us must redouble our efforts to minimise the numbers of people having to rely on food banks, we must also try to ensure that food banks and other voluntary providers of food do not run short of supplies and face the prospect of having to limit the support they can give to the hungry. We therefore recommended that supermarkets should:

- on top of their incredibly important partnerships with the Trussell Trust and FareShare, allow both national organisations as well as independent groups operating at a local level to collect locally based surplus food from their stores;
- consider using the proceeds from their plastic bag charges to support the diversion to the hungry of fresh food that has become surplus; and
- appoint a 'Food Rescue Champion' in each store to take responsibility for the diversion of surplus stock to the hungry. Such a role would necessarily entail building relationships with local voluntary groups working with our most vulnerable citizens, so that a local timetable for collections can be agreed. This innovation of course would be in addition the existing arrangements that have been established by national commitments. It should not seek to replace them.

On a broader note, we applaud the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) for recently brokering an historic commitment from supermarkets to reduce their food and drink waste by 20 per cent over the next decade.

We have received responses to our specific proposals from four supermarkets setting out how they will make progress towards this goal:

ALDI – A number of ALDI's suppliers have recently started working with Company Shop and Community Shop, to sell surplus food products at significantly discounted prices to those in need. It has already committed to donating the proceeds from the plastic bag levy to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

The Co-operative – A new depot-level redistribution programme was recently established with FareShare, which has tripled the amount of surplus food diverted for human consumption, from 85 tonnes in 2014 to 300 tonnes in 2015. The Co-operative is trying to build food redistribution into its normal operating

processes, so it becomes part of each member of staff's daily duties. It has yet to decide how to use the proceeds from the plastic bag levy.

Tesco – The supermarket has promised that it will not waste any edible surplus food by the end of 2017. No excess food is currently produced by its depots, as FareShare receives the entire surplus stock. As it rolls out its FareShare FoodCloud, Tesco will be giving its store teams in-depth training to help them divert as much food as possible through to their collecting charities and it will be asking stores to nominate a designated member of staff in each store to champion this initiative. Having surveyed its customers on the best use of proceeds from the plastic bag levy, Tesco will be putting them towards the regeneration of community spaces.

Waitrose – Nearly 100 different charities and social enterprises collect surplus food from over half of the supermarket's branches. The amount of surplus food donated in the six months to January 2016 totalled £434,000 worth of stock. Local Waitrose branches are given the freedom to find a local solution that works for them. Esther Community Enterprise helps Waitrose identify local organisations working with the hungry that can receive surplus stock. The Waitrose legal team is producing simple guidance and support for local charities when using surplus food – particularly the very small organisations. Waitrose has also designed a training package, to launch this year, specifically on surplus food.

One of the ways in which one Waitrose 'Food Rescue Champion' pilot store is seeking to reduce food waste is to provide 50 items of fruit to a local school, with some of the fruit made up of items that are still good to eat but which are past their 'best before' date.

Waitrose is contributing the proceeds from the plastic bag levy towards a new dementia centre of excellence at University College London.

Conclusion

We hope this short document will form a helpful contribution to the national debate on hunger, and how it can be countered.

The recent increases we have uncovered in some sections of the population of under-nutrition and anaemia, following a long period of decline on both fronts, are deeply troubling; as is the limited additional evidence we have been able to source on the extent and nature of childhood hunger. Moreover, we now have a slightly deeper understanding of the size and composition of the hidden army feeding Britain's hungry. We also know that the pressure placed upon poorer households' budgets by fuel and housing costs remains extraordinarily high, thereby ensuring that hunger is never far from the door, but that there are options open to reformers seriously intent on easing this pressure. Where next from here?

A most urgent requirement is for the nation to come to terms with the full extent of its vulnerability to hunger. We are pursuing this matter with the United Kingdom Statistics Authority, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and Public Health England. We will also continue engaging with food banks – be they run on an independent basis, or as part of the Trussell Trust network – to monitor as best we can how many households have been plunged into a state of hunger, and why, as well as the provision that is on hand to relieve this hunger, before facilitating the co-ordination of action to counter it.

Whilst we have documented here some welcome policy developments which could bring with them a reduction in the numbers of hungry, clearly we have a huge amount of work left to do if we are to secure a broader reform programme along the lines we have set out in successive reports. Again we cannot emphasise more strongly the need for immediate action on three fronts: to deliver continuity of income through the prompt processing and payment of benefits and tax credits; to enshrine paid work at the National

Living Wage as a safeguard against hunger; and to guarantee all children at least one decent meal, and preferably more, every day, both during and outside term time. We will continue advocating such action to bring an end to hunger as we know it in the United Kingdom.

This report was published on Friday 15 April 2016 by a cross-party group of Members of Parliament and Peers who serve as officers on the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger. The document can be accessed online at www.feeding-britain.org.

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