

# Hunger and food poverty: all-party parliamentary group inquiry

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## Summary

- This briefing summarises the main findings and recommendations from the APPG's inquiry into hunger and food poverty in the UK.
- An [Evidence Review](#) explores the nature of hunger and food poverty across the UK, the role of food banks and the failure of Britain's food system to provide universal access to healthy, affordable food.
- [Feeding Britain](#) sets out the Inquiry's conclusions with 77 recommendations to ensure that every individual and household has adequate resources, facilities and abilities to purchase, prepare and cook fresh, healthy and affordable food.
- Central to its strategy for zero hunger is a national network of local collaborations in which local authorities play a facilitative role, mobilising resources and brokering action across voluntary and private sectors.
- Both reports will be of direct interest to those members and officers with an existing interest in local food policy as well as those working to support local communities, low income households, poor families and vulnerable adults.

## Briefing in full

### All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger and Food Poverty

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Hunger and Food Poverty was established by Labour and Conservative MPs, Frank Field and Laura Sandys, in October 2013. Tasked with raising the issues of hunger and food poverty within the UK, it set out to proactively investigate the root causes and the rising demand for food banks across Britain, and identify ways of addressing the issue.

Last year, it commissioned [an Inquiry](#) to gather evidence from a wide range of organisations and individuals in relation to:

- the nature of hunger and food poverty in the country;

- the role of emergency food assistance schemes;
- the effectiveness and sustainability of our food model in providing universal access to healthy, affordable food and improving household food security.

Last month, the Inquiry published its final report together with a review of the evidence received, both summarised below.

## Evidence Review

The [Evidence Review](#) provides a detailed summary of the submissions to and findings of the Inquiry in relation to its main areas of exploration.

### *The extent and geographical spread of hunger and food poverty; the extent, nature and organisation of emergency food assistance schemes*

- Hunger is affecting people across the country – in urban, rural, wealthy and deprived areas – with financial shocks and sudden personal crises proving enough to expose them to hunger, regardless of where they live.
- The birth and rapid development of Britain’s ‘food bank movement’ has become deeply embedded in most communities over a few decades.
- New services and pioneering models of assistance are being developed to meet growing needs and set Britain apart from other advanced Western economies.

### *The underlying causes of hunger and food poverty in this country*

- Recent rises in the combined costs of basic essentials – housing, food and fuel – have eroded the value of the National Minimum Wage (NMW) and working-age benefits, exposing low-income households to hunger and food poverty, particularly as food tends to be the most flexible item in the household budget.
- This increased vulnerability is compounded by an accompanying decline in the ability to cook and prepare meals on a limited budget.
- The people most at risk of experiencing hunger and food poverty lack the practical and/or financial resources to deal with a crisis.

### *The circumstances behind the rising number of people requiring emergency food assistance in this country*

- Food banks cater to a wide range of people and patterns of local demand differ but the Inquiry identify two broad groups – “the poor” and “the very poor”.
- Long-term weakening of poorer households’ financial flexibility is aggravated by additional triggers. Chief amongst these are problems caused by the welfare benefits system - most usually, administrative errors, processing delays, changes in eligibility and sanctions – that result in sudden drops in household income or no income at all, sometime for weeks at a time.
- The safety net of discretionary support – hardship payments, short term benefit advance, local welfare assistance, flexible support fund – is not always accessible or sufficiently prompt in delivery.

- Other triggers include: debt, low pay, changes to working hours, unemployment, and, for families with children, the loss or absence of free school meals.

*The food choices and other forms of support available to clients using emergency food assistance; the effectiveness of emergency food assistance in meeting immediate and long-term needs; the possibility of these schemes becoming permanent features of the welfare state*

- There is significant diversity and flexibility amongst food assistance providers whose work is adapted to local circumstances, demand and resources.
- This difference is most evident in: the source, type and amount of food offered; the way the food is prepared, served and distributed; the eligibility criteria for individuals to receive food; and how/the extent to which providers sought to address long-term needs beyond an individual's short-term hunger.
- Food banks are not seeking to replace statutory welfare provision but they and other providers have the potential to play a key role in helping people overcome personal and financial crises and tackle deep-seated, underlying problems.

*The source of emergency food assistance providers' supplies – how much is supplied by consumers and institutions?*

- Food is generally sourced from a combination of personal, commercial and church donations, as well as through organisations, such as FareShare, that redistribute edible surplus food from supermarket supply chains.
- Food donations are a fragile basis on which to ensure emergency food supplies.
- Demand for emergency food should be reduced and more robust system put in place to ensure a reliable, varied source of food for individuals who are hungry.

*The effectiveness and sustainability of our food model in providing universal access to healthy, affordable food in this country*

- As well as lacking the resources with which to buy and prepare food, households in food poverty and at risk of hunger, find it difficult to access decent food.
- Britain's food system does not provide universal access to decent, affordable food - access to shops is variable; there are disparities in choice, quality and pricing of food; there are high levels of waste and surplus usable food.
- Local initiatives involving the local production and distribution of food could be key contributors to rectifying these failings.

*Improving household food security*

- Food banks are tackling a presenting problem through which it may be possible for them to focus on the myriad challenges and crises in people's lives.
- Immediate action is required to halt and reverse the rising demand for emergency food assistance.
- National and local coordination of resources is required in order to reduce reliance on food assistance and enable it to be used as a gateway to tackling the more stubborn, deep-seated aspects of hunger and food poverty more effectively.
- Key twin components of a strategy for the future should be:

- redistributing surplus food to voluntary organisations working with vulnerable people;
- matching local resources with the needs of people who are hungry or living in food poverty - providing them with a 'hand up' rather than a 'hand out'.

## **Feeding Britain: a strategy for zero hunger in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland**

[Feeding Britain](#) is the Inquiry's final report. It surveys the evidence gathered and perceives a wider, social phenomenon: that the "*normal and natural connections*" that used to exist between people, families and friends and supported wider social networks, self-help communities and neighbourhoods are no longer present – hunger and food poverty are presenting problems.

It sets out a strategy which renews the welfare state so it can better reflect and encourage the relationships which contribute to the wellbeing of Britain's citizens, in particular its poorest.

### *Concentrating on hunger*

Rather than dwelling on wider issues around food insecurity or the different definitions of food poverty, the Inquiry focuses on "*the simple but devastating fact that hunger stalks this country*", be it people with insufficient money to buy food or those with a very limited range of food, little or no ability to prepare and cook food and/or no facilities to cook that food.

It tasks the main political parties, voters and above all the voluntary sector with the existence of hunger within society as a most basic and fundamental challenge.

### *A new phenomenon*

The Inquiry perceives a new trend across advanced Western economies in which the welfare state's 'national minimum' is no longer effective. The rising costs of food, housing and utilities now take a growing proportion of household budgets, with disproportionate consequences on lower income households. Food banks play an essential role in their deepening budgetary crisis, acting as a buffer to cover the impact of sudden cash shortfalls or allowing them to reallocate food money to debt repayments in order to avoid court action, eviction or the loss of a utility.

### *A way forward*

The inquiry identifies two groups of people for whom food banks have become essential:

- those who need an income 'buffer' as a result of a sudden or temporary drop in income/financial circumstance and the chance to re-establish control over their finances;
- those with complex needs that extend beyond their immediate hunger, such as mental illness, homelessness or addiction problems, and require long-term assistance and support if they are not to be hungry.

## **Our strategy: A Zero Hunger Britain**

The Inquiry describes its vision for a 'Zero Hunger Britain' in which everybody has the resources, abilities and facilities to purchase, prepare and cook fresh, healthy and affordable food, no matter where they live. It sets out a route map to:

- ensure that low-income households can afford and have access to decent food;
- reverse the rising demand for emergency food assistance in this country;
- help ensure that food assistance providers are able to focus their resources on supporting those in need of the more intensive, long-term help that the voluntary sector is best placed to provide.

Its recommendations promote a mixed economy of welfare that bridges public, private and voluntary sectors. They address the food industry, employer organisations, government, local authorities and, in particular, the voluntary sector.

### *Feeding Britain*

The Inquiry's central recommendation is the creation of a new national network of food banks, food assistance providers, voluntary organisations redistributing fresh surplus food, the food industry and government – *Feeding Britain*. It advocates the early establishment of twelve pilot projects in each UK region, drawing together private, voluntary and public expertise to test its approach to eliminating hunger.

It envisages the development of local networks of towns, cities, counties and regions with six main functions:

- i. to encourage the redistribution of fresh surplus food to voluntary organisations working with people in food poverty, matching supply with demand and reducing dependence on donated food;
- ii. to co-ordinate food waste prevention in the supply chain, working with food retailers and manufacturers to harvest and donate farm crops rejected by retailers for failing, for example, marketing/visual specifications;
- iii. to encourage local action and meet local needs by building on local knowledge and existing arrangements;
- iv. to function as centres of knowledge and excellence by implementing best practice food models and training local food entrepreneurs;
- v. to foster the co-location of food assistance and other services in One Stop Shop/ Food Bank Plus models that can help people out of hunger by addressing root causes such as debt, low pay, access to benefits and addictions;
- vi. to maximise the take-up of free school meals and tackle school holiday hunger.

### *Tackling immediate hunger*

The Inquiry commends the food bank movement for its remarkable pace of development and its evolution of services from, originally, addressing short-term hunger to, more recently, addressing the deeper needs of people in crisis. It is concerned to ensure that food banks do not replace statutory welfare provision and advocates a new approach to food assistance, using food as a gateway to help solve more deep-seated problems. It highlights:

- emergency food providers using the opportunity to start intensive steps to helping people out of food poverty – food parcels followed by support for diet planning, food preparation, cooking, shopping and household budgeting;
- the co-location of welfare benefits, debt advice and other services at food banks;
- local authority supported developments of ‘social supermarkets’ through which people on low incomes can register and shop for heavily discounted food, gathered from manufacturers’ surplus produce, and receive help with debt problems, budgeting support and financial skills.

### *The role of Local Authorities and local models for the future*

The report sees local authorities as having a great deal of local knowledge and local partnerships working far better than centrally determined ones, highlighting examples of local collaborative working. It looks to local authorities to:

- encourage the production and retail of locally grown food;
- play a key role in addressing access to affordable food in deprived areas;
- work with local food organisations to free up land for food production, retail and storage, as and when resources are available.

### *Other recommendations*

The Inquiry’s proposals span policy areas with a view to facilitating the work of emergency food providers and tackling the financial pressures and conditions that predispose people to food poverty. Recommendations target government action to:

- establish an Office for Living Standards in the Treasury to monitor pressures on low-income household budgets and hold an annual Parliamentary debate;
- reallocate EU funding to support the food poverty reforms and reintroduce a needs element to the local settlement to support local authorities’ contribution;
- ensure a more reliable, varied source of emergency food - increasing the use and redistribution of surplus and waste food and removing reliance on donations;
- address the affordability of gas, electricity and water, in particular the additional costs and higher tariffs paid by poorer households;
- tackle the interest rates and recovery methods used by lenders that result in escalating personal and household debts;
- reduce the costs of and improve access to services that require mobile phone and internet use;
- improve household resilience by strengthening skills including cooking, parenting and budgeting;
- extend access to free school meals to the children of low income households and extend provision through school holidays.
- pursue policies which seek to raise the NMW, increase take-up of the Living Wage and reduce the tax burden on low paid people;
- reform the benefits system so that it is able to deliver payments quickly and without error or unnecessary delay, relax the sanctions regime, increase access

to hardship payments and short-term benefit advances, and minimise sudden shifts in income in the wake of changes to an individual's circumstances.

The Inquiry concludes that hunger is here to stay in Britain until counteraction is taken and that appropriate action is not only desirable but possible.

## Comment

The APPG report is groundbreaking in the scope and depth of its exploration of hunger, and its causes, in the UK today. The breadth of its consideration is reflected in the number of recommendations (77) and their policy reach – across eight government departments, into all tiers of local government, along the food industry supply chain to the voluntary food bank movement. The Inquiry proposes nothing less than a reform of our welfare state to address a problem that is as basic as it is endemic and, it concludes, a national disgrace for so rich an economy.

There is an irony in the Inquiry's central allegations: that the very institution – the welfare benefits system - established to protect people from hunger is now a key cause; and that a key mechanism - the NMW - is unequal to the challenge of the rising costs of living. Its analysis of the fragility of household budgets and food skills are persuasive, supported by international comparisons which echo the British experience.

The focus for strategic action is dispersed across policy heads at government level. At practical level, the recommendations target the existing food banks, dominated by the Christian faith-based Trussell Trust, and want room at the table for others – community groups, social enterprises, voluntary organisations, local supermarkets – to start reshaping and extending the nature of emergency food provision.

This is also where local authorities have the potential to play a pivotal role: building local food policy around the often complex needs of those at risk of hunger, facilitating and supporting local hubs of activity that match local food needs with provision, bringing voluntary and private sectors together, mobilising resources, encouraging local innovation and creating local momentum. "*The hour is late*": hunger, by its very nature, requires an immediate, practical response in which the Inquiry tasks everyone to contribute as a matter of urgency.

### Related briefings

[Update on Food Banks](#)

[Below the headline - latest Oxfam report](#)

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