

Response to All Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger and Food Poverty

This response has been prepared by Financial Action and Advice Derbyshire, a consortium of around 50 organisations who have joined together to combat poverty and reduce financial exclusion in Derbyshire. This response is endorsed by Derbyshire County Council and Derbyshire Food Bank Forum.

Financial Action and Advice Derbyshire recognises the valuable role that food banks play in providing emergency food relief for people in need by providing financial support and technical assistance to food banks. However, reliance on food aid should not be part of any modern social or public health policy, and as such our aim is to ensure that everyone in Derbyshire has enough to live on.

Derbyshire is a largely rural county with pockets of deprivation largely centred around former coal mining communities in the eastern side of the county, and in the High Peak area north of Buxton. However, we would like to stress that poverty exists in the countryside too, often in unexpected places and in such low numbers as to be invisible to statisticians.

There are currently 22 food banks in Derbyshire, an exponential increase in the last three years since 2011 when there was only one food bank operating.

The Trussell Trust are a key player in the delivery of food banks nationally but in Derbyshire run only a quarter of the food banks in the county. Therefore we urge the APPG to consider that the figures on usage of food banks quoted nationally are not representative of the whole picture, and that figures should be factored accordingly to reflect the true scale of the issue. We consider that there is considerable under-reporting of usage due to lack of accurate data.

We have structured our response around the Inquiry's terms of reference.

To understand the extent and geographical spread of hunger and food poverty in this country.

There is little accurate data on either usage or demand for emergency food relief across Derbyshire. Anecdotally we are aware of around a tripling of demand over the past 18 months as reported by our food banks. Clay Cross Food bank alone reported that it fed 2,557 people in 2013, compared with 944 in 2012 – an increase of 171%.

Derbyshire County Council have introduced a simple data tracking system so that food banks can report quarterly on patterns of usage, reasons for referral and postcode information to track reach into communities. From this we will be able to map supply and demand and remain committed to ensuring that gaps in provision are filled. The nature of food bank growth has meant that it has largely been driven by the willingness of local volunteers to get involved. The County Council has recognised that there are geographical areas not served by a food bank but where demographic information suggests local demand. Whilst the County Council and its partners have no desire to place food bank provision on any kind of statutory footing (because in an ideal world they wouldn't be needed) there is a recognition that enabling provision is a key role.

Derbyshire's rural nature presents a range of food challenges. Residents often live some miles away from cheap supermarkets and may not be able to afford the bus fare to travel into major towns to shop. Food choices are limited (particularly access to fresh fruit and vegetables) and considerably more expensive.

To investigate the underlying causes of hunger and food poverty in this country

The underlying causes of hunger and food poverty are complex but the harsh reality is that many hardworking families in the UK are living in poverty and do not have sufficient income for a healthy diet. Government statistics have shown that food prices have risen by 12% in real terms since 2007 and within the same period UK workers have suffered a 7.6% fall in wages. This means that increasing numbers of people are not earning enough money to meet basic nutritional needs. Fuel costs and lack of cheap supermarkets mean that in some areas like Derbyshire families cannot afford fresh fruit and vegetables and buying cheap, sweet, fatty foods that require little or no cooking.

These increases in the costs of food and energy, coupled with a deep recession, high unemployment, low wages and massive changes to the welfare system have served to pitch many families and individuals into a very precarious financial position with little or no security. When something goes wrong the consequences can be disastrous. The overwhelming causes for referral to food banks in Derbyshire are; sanctions on benefits imposed by Job Centre Plus, delays and reductions in benefits, low wages and delays in wages being paid. The high costs of living (food, rent, transport, energy) – all of which are considerably higher in a rural area exacerbate the difficulties faced by trying to survive on a low budget. We also note an increase in individuals with mental health problems not receiving adequate community support. The county council has recognised that take up of Discretionary Loans needs to be improved and steps have been taken to ensure that this funding is made available to more people.

To identify the circumstances behind the rising number of people requiring emergency food assistance schemes in this country.

It is vital that the Inquiry recognises the complexity of people's lives and the lack of financial resilience that leads people to resort to emergency food aid. People who have just been able to keep their heads above water in the past now find themselves in real difficulties, albeit temporarily. This can be for a number of reasons – eg replacing heating boilers, major car repair bills or a sudden drop in income caused by illness or loss of work. Few people have sufficient savings to tide them through a difficult period in their lives and soon find themselves without money for food. Often people have to make a choice between heating their homes or eating. Food Banks tell us that there is an acute sense of despair across some of our poorest communities which cannot be articulated or captured in statistics but which is nevertheless palpable. This compounds the day to day difficulties that people are facing and becomes debilitating.

There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that many families rely on free school meals to give their children at least one good meal a day and that children may be going hungry in the school holidays as demonstrated by a noticeable increase in food bank referrals during the holidays. In Derbyshire we piloted breakfast clubs for children in communities where eligibility for free school meals was highest. Teachers reported that children were coming to school hungry and unable to concentrate and providing a nutritious breakfast resulted in improvements in behaviour and achievement.

Statistics are limited, but taking one of our food banks data as a typical example we know that nearly a third of all referrals to the All Christians Together Food Bank between February 2013 and May 2014 were caused by problems with benefits – sanctions, delays, change from IS to JSA. Debt accounted for 17% of referrals and 11% of referrals were attributed to mental health issues. It

should be recognised that many people will be experiencing a range of issues rather than just one and most likely it is the compounding effect of these issues that creates a crisis.

Case Study

Hard working mum of two Karen (47) from Chesterfield never thought she'd have to use a foodbank. But when serious illness left her unable to work for more than a year, it became a vital lifeline. "I was living on cup a soups and 20p packets of noodles because that's all I could afford" explained Karen.

"I was going hungry and some days I didn't eat at all. My weight dropped to 7 stone. I have worked all my life and supported both my girls through university. I had a good job with a good salary, my own home and a mortgage. When I became ill and unable to work I started using my savings to pay my bills because I'd never had to claim benefits in my life and wasn't aware that I was entitled to anything. It was only when I got into real financial difficulties months later that my brother suggested I should get some help – but by then I was in serious debt. My social worker recently referred me to the food bank in Chesterfield. I never thought I'd need to use a food bank. I used to donate to charity – now I'm using one"

To understand the extent, nature and organisation of emergency food assistance schemes in this country.

There is a diverse range of emergency food services in Derbyshire. There are 22 food banks operating in the following areas: Ashbourne, Belper, Bolsover, Buxton Chesterfield, Clay Cross, Glossop, Heanor, Holmewood, Ilkeston, Killamarsh, Langley Mill, Littlemoor, Long Easton, Matlock, New Mills, Ripley, South Normanton and Swadlincote. There are also soup kitchens, community kitchens and other food projects. Often these spring up in areas to meet a local need but it is not always easy to find out information about initiatives.

Many of the food banks in Derbyshire are connected to other helping services, such as County Council Childrens Centres, voluntary sector projects, churches and adult education centres. Others are part of wider voluntary sector helping services such as allotment schemes, shelters and emergency accommodation.

People can't just turn up at a food bank and collect free food whenever they want to. They will first have been assessed and given a voucher by social workers, childrens centres, schools, advice centres, GPs or the probation service. Vouchers entitle the holder to three days of emergency food and there is a limit of three vouchers. There is some anecdotal evidence that suggests that some church schemes would not turn any away they thought was in genuine need if they didn't have the appropriate referral voucher.

Food is mostly donated by local people. Donations can be made at a range of places including community centres, Citizens Advice Bureau offices and libraries. Fareshare is involved in some of our food banks through local connections such as the Co-operative and Nestle. Another food distribution company 3663 supports the Salcare food bank and community kitchen in Heanor.

To discover the food choices and other forms of support available to clients when using emergency food assistance

For obvious reasons the majority of emergency food parcels contain non-perishable foods which have relatively long "use by" dates. However, Derbyshire food banks are also involved in sourcing

fresh food from Fareshare, local supermarkets and shops, allotment societies and through individual donations.

Food banks will signpost users to other services within the county although it is likely that this support will have already been provided by the referring agency. However, volunteers do promote services such as debt advice, benefits checks and other voluntary sector schemes such as toy libraries and befriending schemes to people picking up food parcels when appropriate. We do have a concern about the quality, consistency and impartiality of advice given by voluntary agencies. For example, we know of some faith-led foodbanks inviting users to join them in prayer or dispensing advice which they may not be qualified to give.

To investigate the source of emergency food assistance suppliers – how much is supplied by consumers and institutions.

In Derbyshire most of the food supplied is donated by local people as stated above. We are concerned about the volume of wasted food in our society and would welcome a lead by the government in making better use of short dated perishable products, and possibly a change in the law along the lines of the Good Samaritan Food Donation Act in the US to protect food donors and organisations from liability arising from donated food.

The estimates from WRAP on the amount of waste in the food and drink supply chain demonstrates ample capacity to redistribute surplus food as currently only a tiny percentage is redistributed.

The ability of food banks to offer fresh fruit and vegetables and other perishable items such as dairy products is extremely limited because of storage and stock rotation issues. However, these items are essential components of a healthy diet, particularly for children, pregnant and breast feeding women and older people. Other approaches such as extending fruit and vegetable provision in schools, children's centres and through voluntary services meals distribution to older people should be considered, or through vouchers which can be exchanged in supermarkets and local shops.

More suppliers should be encouraged to participate in Fareshare and Food Cycle schemes to make better use of surplus food.

To consider the effectiveness of emergency food assistance in meeting immediate and long term needs, and the possibility of these schemes becoming permanent features of the welfare state.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that emergency food assistance is effective in meeting immediate needs by helping people through a time of crisis. This can often lead to long term benefits as recipients are often also helped to access additional services such as welfare advice, budgeting help and debt support which will help them break out of crisis.

We feel very strongly that food banks and other forms of emergency food assistance should not become a permanent feature of the welfare state, but instead government should seek for meaningful responses to address the causes of their existence. Many of us believe that the true success of actions to address food poverty will be demonstrated when food banks are no longer needed.

Government must give consideration to unintended consequences of the tightening of criteria around the benefits regime and the administration of sanctions in particular. The minimum wage should be scrapped and the living wage introduced, and penalties for not paying for energy by direct debit made unlawful.

Only by increasing income to a level where people can afford a healthy nutritious diet will food poverty be tackled.

To examine the effectiveness and sustainability of our food model in providing universal access to healthy affordable food in this country

Our current food model is fundamentally flawed. Healthy products are too expensive and unhealthy products high in fat and sugar are too cheap. Evidence tells us that when families are under financial pressure the only thing they can cut back on in many cases is food. That translates into eating less fresh fruit and vegetables, not cooking from scratch and buying cheaper, lower quality foods which are often sweet, fatty, salty or processed. Poor diets lead to poor health, lower attainment by children in schools and creates a vicious cycle of poverty that can be hard to break out of.

In rural areas in particular, food deserts contribute to the problem and result in communities with the greatest need for affordable quality food having the least access. In some of our communities in Derbyshire it costs £6 for the bus fare to get to the nearest Tesco. Access to budget supermarkets like Aldi or Lidl is almost non-existent due to distance and cost of travelling.

Uptake of free school meals can be poor due to the stigma of being perceived as poor, particularly in our rural communities.

Derbyshire County Council, through its public health and community development programmes, is committed to supporting universal access to healthy and affordable food. But where there are significant numbers of people who cannot afford to put even basic food on the table for their families, advice on eating healthily and reducing waste may be perceived as meaningless for some of our communities. Support for the work of the voluntary and community sector to provide services such as food banks, as well as the Council's provision of children's centres and adult care are undermined by successive government cuts to local government funding. Local government is willing and able to provide services to meet the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable people, but it cannot do so without funding.

To consider approaches to improving household food security in this country

The only way to truly improve household food security in the UK is to abolish poverty. Many factors have contributed to the current situation which some would see as a reversal of the journey that Britain embarked upon after World War 2 to make good food affordable and available to everyone.

While Britain has a strong and thriving farming sector, it is not self-sufficient in food production. We import 40% of total food consumption leaving us vulnerable to global commodity prices. Food prices have risen steeply since 2007 with massive spikes in 2008 and 2011, leaving many poorer families struggling to pay for even basic essentials. Price rises hit poorer people worse as they tend to spend a higher proportion of their income on energy and food than those on higher incomes.

Paying people enough to live on is key, but also there is a need to improve some core skills. We need to avoid teaching people how to be poor, but at the same time there are lost skills in shopping and cooking on a budget, particularly amongst young people.

Recommendations

1. Ensure that everyone has sufficient income to live on, by increasing the minimum wage to Living Wage levels and review annually based on the real cost of living to ensure it keeps pace with prices.

2. For those people who can't work, or need extra support, ensure that the benefits system works to ensure that everyone has sufficient income to live on, and that they are not unfairly penalised by a bureaucratic, inflexible system that does not take into account the complexities of people's lives – and the reality of, for example, zero hours contracts.
3. Fund local government and the voluntary and community sector to provide the safety net which helps people when the welfare state system fails or when people need additional support to meet their needs.
4. Make it unlawful for energy companies to charge a premium for people who cannot pay by direct debit.
5. Encourage more food manufacturers and supermarkets to donate surplus food to people in need.
6. Work to tackle national food security by working with farmers to produce more food so that Britain can be more self-sufficient in food production and less vulnerable to global threats to food security.
7. Consider imposing a tax on commodities high in sugar to reduce obesity and use the monies raised to improve access to healthy food, such as by providing free school meals to all children through their entire school life.