

UK Food Insecurity & Food Banks

Briefing Memo Exercise

Prepared for: Rt Hon. Emma Lewell-Buck MP

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Section 1 - The Assignment

You are working as a parliamentary researcher for Emma Lewell-Buck, Labour Member of Parliament for South Shields.

Mrs Lewell-Buck forwarded a 10-minute rule bill on 29th November 2017, asking the government to measure food insecurity. The bill will have its second reading on 2nd February 2018.

BBC Question time has invited Mrs Lewell-Buck to appear as a guest on Thursday 18th January 2018 for a debate on the topic of UK food insecurity. Other guests are Sarah Newton, Conservative MP and Minister of State for Disabled People, Health and Work; Tim Hayward, columnist and broadcaster; Giles Coren, restaurant critic and columnist for The Times and Jack Monroe, activist and food writer.

Topics for discussion relate to food insecurity, including food poverty, food banks and the welfare state. Therefore, Mrs Lewell-Buck requires a briefing memo on the relationship between food insecurity, food banks and welfare provision, focussing on rebuttals to Conservative party narratives surrounding food insecurity. Key facts need to be highlighted and recommendations made, focussing on plain English responses suitable for public discourse.

Section 2 - Introduction

Food insecurity in the UK appears to be a growing problem.

- Food bank usage is rising between 15-30% year on year.
- The Government is obliged to tackle food insecurity at many levels.
- Official records of insecurity are needed.

UK Food insecurity and food poverty are not officially recorded. The Trussell Trust reports usage of their food bank network grew between 15-30% in 2016-17 and this rapid expansion could be a symptom of burgeoning food insecurity.

Prominent public health figures have previously implored the government to investigate UK nutrition and hunger, due to the level of poverty and inequality identified in academic research.

The government is obliged to monitor food insecurity and eradicate hunger through participation in several international agreements. These commitments need to be upheld.

Section 3 - Existing Research

3.1 International Commitments

The UK government participated in the creation the following international initiatives, which seek to end hunger and food insecurity:

- **United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**
Pledged to end poverty and ensure zero hunger by 2030 as part of the UN SDGs (Department for International Development, 2017).
- **UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)**
Agreed to the UN FAO definition of food security.
- **UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)**
Voted to adopt the UDHR which invokes a universal right to food.
- **UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR)**
Ratified a broader definition of the right to food.

Key Definitions

UN SDG Goal 1 'End poverty in all its forms everywhere' (UN, 2015).

UN SDG Goal 2 'End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition' (UN, 2015)

UN FAO definition of food security '...when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.' (FAO, 2001 p.49).

UDHR Article 25(1) 'Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, ... and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.' (UN General Assembly, 1948).

UN CESCR definition of the right to food 'when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, has physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement' (CESCR, 1999).

3.2 Food Supply

- UK Food supply delivers a surplus of calories.
- Food prices have risen.
- Estimates show rising food insecurity.

Free trade has delivered abundant food to the UK, with a calorie supply of 3,424kcal per person, per day in 2013 (FAO, n.d.) against a requirement of 2-2,500kcal. This suggests that food insecurity is about access and structural issues, rather than food supply.

Food prices rose 30% between 2007-12 and a European study showed UK food insecurity rising most after the 2008 financial crash (Briggs and Foord, 2017; Davis, 2017).

3.3 Food Banks

- There are approximately ~1,000 food banks in UK.
- Up to 2.4 million food parcels were given out in 12 months.
- Average usage increased 13% in 2017 and up to 30% in established universal credit areas.
- Food bank data often mirrors food insecurity data.
- Feeding food insecure people with surplus or waste food is inefficient.

Food bank referrals are made by professionals who can qualify the individual's situation, such as a doctor, teacher or Job Centre employee. Most people using a food bank are demonstrably food insecure.

The UK's major food bank network is The Trussell Trust, a Christian organisation, and data is limited to this network. 427 Trussell Trust food banks gave out 1.2m food parcels in the 12 months to March 2017 and independent food banks could double these figures (Briggs and Foord, 2017; Caplan, 2017).

Trussell Trust food bank usage in the six months from March to September grew 13% between 2016-17. Usage increased up to 30% in areas where Universal Credit had been operational for at least 6 months (The Trussell Trust, 2017).

US and Canadian data shows that food bank usage mirrors food insecurity, suggesting rapidly growing food insecurity under Tory universal credit welfare reforms (Davis, 2017).

Food banks are stocked using public donations of food or money, or through food waste organisations such as FareShare who redistribute food industry surplus to charities. Feeding food insecure people with surplus food is an inefficient way to operate the food system (Caplan, 2017).

3.4 Political

- Benefit irregularities are the primary reason for food bank use.
- Conservative ‘Big Society’ policies put responsibility on communities to self-support.
- Food insecurity may represent a lack of entitlement.
- Food banks depoliticise the problem.
- Neoliberal policies have pursued welfare cuts and free market solutions for issues such as food insecurity.

Big Society encouraged communities to support vulnerable people through voluntary enterprises such as food banks, thereby reducing state responsibility (Briggs and Foord, 2017; Dowler and O’Connor, 2012).

Yet, the overwhelming reason people use food banks is due to irregularities in benefits. In this respect, food banks may act as a buffer for government welfare inadequacies (Perry et al, 2014; Loopstra and Lalor, 2017).

Conservative ministers have praised the charitable food bank work of the church, creating a superficial win-win situation for the church and government (Cameron, 2014). Yet, redistributing surplus food to food insecure people may depoliticise the issue of food insecurity and food waste (Riches, 2011; Caplan, 2016).

Structural or political issues are possible drivers of food insecurity through diminished entitlement to food (Dowler, 2012). From this perspective, food banks simply represent emergency food aid, rather than lifting people from food insecurity.

3.5 Employment

- UK workforce is polarised between high and low earners.
- Food banks are used by people in employment and training.

The UK labour market is being polarised into privileged high earners and insecure low earners, such as those on zero hour contracts (Holmes and Mayhew, 2012).

Food banks are also used by people in employment or training. Tesco, who redistribute food surplus from their stores, have employees who use food banks (Tesco, n.d.; Caplan, 2017). Some nursing students, who work up to 70 hours a week between placements and part-time employment, also reported using food banks (Sprinks, 2015).

3.6 Social & Cultural Elements

- Food bank users often face harsh public criticism for personal choices.
- Blame and judgement are common.
- Food bank recipients can be stigmatised or shamed, which can impact negatively upon mental health.
- Food banks disrupt healthy family life.

Poor individual choices are often blamed for food insecurity and food bank users may face public judgement for their health, weight, knowledge, integrity or skills, which can divide public opinion and deepen food insecurity (Glaze and Richardson, 2017; Caplan, 2017).

Food donated to food banks may be based on unhelpful judgements about the recipients and food bank volunteers report feeling resentments. These can all entrench divisive public opinions (Cameron, 2014; Riches, 2011).

Food bank users experience self-induced stigmatisation and shame (Caplan, 2017), which are shown to increase the severity of eating disorders and negatively affect mental health (Jackson et al, 2015; Kelly and Tasca, 2016). There is evidence that food insecure individuals are likely to have worse mental health than food secure (Power et al, 2017).

The tinned, long-life food parcels may have a disruptive effect on family life, by compromising the practices of choosing, buying and preparing meals (Cameron, 2014). A standard food bank parcel is very different to a consumer-chosen minimum requirement, as seen in Consensual Budget Standard food baskets (MacMahon and Weld, 2015).

3.7 Food Security

- Food insecure people lack power.
- UDHR requires governments to collect food insecurity data.
- Security against hunger is a basic human right.
- Food insecurity is a persistent threat to marginalised, under-privileged people, who are easily side-lined by government (Shepherd, 2012).

The UDHR requires member states to collect food insecurity data (UN HRC, 2012). Government failure to do so contravenes basic human rights and also reduces people's power to enact them.

The FAO definition of food security focusses on access, which may be restrictive when the core problem is actually hunger. An alternative definition would be "securing the vulnerable against hunger" (Shepherd, 2012).

3.8 The Right To Food

- Right to food must not be reduced to minimum calorific requirements or a 'right not to starve'.
- UDHR is an ethical yardstick to measure government.
- 'Adequacy' is a term which may be compromised by government.
- Beneficiaries need to be involved in solutions.
- Hunger created by welfare failings can be seen as 'structural violence'.

The right to food in the UDHR is vital to achieve social justice (Lambie-Mumford, 2013; Dowler and O'Connor, 2012). It may not be law, but it acts as an ethical yardstick to measure government against, promoting equality and freedom from poverty (Patel et al, 2007).

The right to food also promotes 'adequacy', however, the government definition of adequacy may be compromised (Patel, 2007). The UK government also agreed to 'respect, protect and fulfil' the right to food and avoid actions which may restrict people's access. Meanwhile, they blocked the ability to make direct complaints to the United Nations, who could fight welfare cuts that restrict people's access to food (UN General Assembly, 2008; Just Fair, 2014; Riches, 2011).

The right to food is not a simple nutritional requirement, nor is it a 'right not to starve'. It needs to meet social, economic and cultural values in society (CESCR, 1999).

Food banks are not held to any human rights standards (Silvasti and Riches, 2014). Civil society and the charitable sector must have a role in fulfilling the right to food (FAO, 2005), but needs to be supported by the development of rights-based policies.

Communities should only be encouraged to feed themselves if the beneficiary is involved in the solution and empowered (UN HRC, 2011), a requirement which food banks and FareShare do not fulfil.

Although 'Big Society' could be argued to empower communities, it also benefits the privileged by enabling welfare reforms, which contravene the right to food. The most oppressed and food insecure people rarely have the power to pursue their own rights, requiring others to act on their behalf (Blakeley, 2013; Patel et al, 2007).

If physical or mental harm is inflicted by hunger and caused by avoidable structural forces, such as welfare failings, it falls into Galtung's (1969) concept of 'structural violence'.

Section 4 - Recommendations

4.1 Key attacks

- There is an excess of food in the UK, there is enough food to feed all.
- Food bank usage is rapidly growing under the Conservative government.
- Universal credit appears to be driving food bank usage.
- Food banks shirk government responsibility, pushing it onto the church and the private/charitable sector.
- Redistributing food surplus is inefficient. It enables food waste, instead of reducing it at source.
- Food bank usage often mirrors food insecurity.
- 30 years of food banks in North America has not resolved food insecurity.
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights explicitly requires the collection of food insecurity data.
- The government is failing to meet its international commitments to end hunger and food insecurity.
- Hunger caused by structural issues can be considered as 'structural violence'.
- The right to food must not be reduced to 'a right not to starve'.
- The government has failed to defend citizen's right to an adequate, sustainable food supply.
- Food insecurity is tackled by empowering people, ensuring entitlement to food through structural and political means.
- Food banks may propagate food insecurity and poverty.

4.2 Key rebuttals

- “It’s their own fault”
The Government has a duty to help people, rather than cast them out to charity.
- “People must find work”
The Government must support food insecure people who are trying to work, e.g. trainee nurses and zero-hour contracts.
- “Benefits discourage work”
Current welfare reforms appear to be increasing poverty, and the resultant food insecurity worsens mental health.
- “Food banks are a symbol of community”
Feeding food insecure people on charity provided by the waste and surplus of the privileged is not an egalitarian society.
- “Food banks stop someone from starving”
For three days only. Why are there growing numbers of starving people in one of the most economically advanced societies in the world?
- “Universal credit supports people”
The evidence does not support this, it appears to be driving people to food banks.
- “Charity builds community”
Charity has also been shown to entrench divisive opinions and food poverty, not solve it.
- “Food banks tackle food insecurity”
The Government has no record of food insecurity to prove this.

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