



**RIGHT TO FOOD
UK COMMISSION**
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VOICES OF THE RIGHT TO FOOD

WHAT PEOPLE ACROSS THE UK TOLD THE
RIGHT TO FOOD UK COMMISSION



FOREWORD

BY EXPERT LINK

Food poverty is spoken about as an economic problem – a matter of budgets, supply chains and statistics. We know it as something far more personal. We know what it is to weigh a bus fare against a meal, to be handed tins with no can opener, to have a kitchen but no way to fill the fridge, and to feel judged simply for asking for help. Behind every number in this report is a person making impossible choices, quietly, every day.

We also know that having food is not the same as being able to eat. A food parcel is no use in a room with only a kettle, or a shared kitchen ten people are queuing for. Delivery, storage, the energy to cook, a shop you can actually reach – these are treated as luxuries, when for many of us they are the difference between eating and going without. Food security means meals, not just ingredients.

We also know the barriers that too often come with seeking help: being sent between referral agencies, queuing in a line everyone can see is the free one, or being handed food that doesn't fit our culture, our faith, our health or what our bodies can manage.

But we have seen how much can change when systems are designed with people, not just for them – when support is offered with dignity and choice, and when the expertise of those who have lived this, is genuinely valued.

That is the opportunity this report opens up. This is why a right to food has to be a legal right, not a good intention. When something is a right, you can ask for it, question it, and expect it –

instead of feeling it is your personal failing to go without.

That right has to have teeth: someone accountable for it, a way to challenge it when food is denied, and support that reaches people before they hit crisis, not after.

It also has to be built with us, not just about us. We can see where language still leaves people out, where “vulnerable groups” forgets the elderly or the disabled at home, where wording needs to fit real lives rather than tidy categories.

People who have lived this know what works and what only looks good on paper, and that expertise should be paid for and built in at every level, as a permanent part of how decisions are made.

What has been created here reflects the honesty of thousands of people. Thousands shared their experiences with this Commission, and we have helped make sense of what they said – helping turn it into findings and recommendations that hold true to real lives. That is work that will outlast any single meeting.

The evidence has been gathered, and the recommendations are here. What matters now is that they are acted on – for us, for our families, and for everyone who would otherwise sit where we are sitting.

Members of Expert Link, who contributed their expertise and lived experience to the Right to Food Commission.

What people across the United Kingdom told the Commission about getting enough good food in their own words.

SIXTEEN CHAPTERS FOUR NATIONS 2475 VOICES COUNTED

ABOUT THE COMMISSION

The Right to Food UK Commission was set up to answer one question: should the United Kingdom put the right to food into law, and if it did, what would that law have to contain to make a real difference to people's lives? To answer it, the Commission decided not to begin with policy papers but with people with those who go without, those who queue, those who cook for others, and those who hold communities together with donated food and borrowed kitchens.

Over 2026 the Commission travelled the country. Commissioners sat in a welfare hall in Northumberland, a community centre in the Cynon Valley, a university room in Birmingham, a workshop in Liverpool, Scotland and Belfast and community hubs in north and east London. In every place the invitation was the same: tell us what is really happening where you live.

Travelling alone was not enough. Some of the people most affected by food insecurity are least likely to be in the room at a public community session because

the venue is not accessible, because there is no bus, because they are at work, because they are sleeping rough, because they are young, or because they do not trust institutions enough to walk through the door.

So, the Commission held additional sessions with groups that were under-represented in the community sessions: disabled people and carers, organisations working with people experiencing homelessness, young people in Belfast, migrant and refugee communities, and food workers themselves. Alongside all of this, an online survey gathered written testimony from people across England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and Cornwall, from teenagers to pensioners. Organisations working with those communities an advice service and food bank in Gateshead, a national coalition of Disabled People's Organisations, a women's equity organisation in Bristol, Amnesty International UK and ATD Fourth World also ran their own consultations and surveys and submitted the results.

HOW EVERY DISCUSSION WAS STRUCTURED

01. THE CHALLENGES.

WHAT MAKES IT HARD TO GET ENOUGH GOOD FOOD WHERE YOU LIVE?

02. THE SUPPORT.

WHAT HELP EXISTS, WHAT HAVE YOU USED, AND WHAT IS GOOD OR BAD ABOUT IT?

03. THE LAW.

WHAT SHOULD A RIGHT TO FOOD CONTAIN?

04. THE DIFFERENCE.

HOW WOULD THAT RIGHT CHANGE YOUR LIFE, YOUR FAMILY'S LIFE, YOUR COMMUNITY?

This booklet follows that structure. Each chapter belongs to a group or a place and keeps their words as close to the original as possible. Contributions are not attributed: people spoke on the understanding that their testimony would be used, not their names.

The chapters are followed by the threads that ran through every single session, and by our thanks. Every quotation in this booklet is reproduced as it was recorded in the session notes, survey responses and written submissions. Where words have been left out, an ellipsis marks the gap; obvious typing slips in live notes have been corrected, and nothing else has been changed.

"TONIGHT IS NOT ABOUT GRATITUDE. TONIGHT IS ABOUT TRUTH."

OPENING WORDS, NORTH LONDON SESSION

WHERE WE LISTENED

SESSION	WHERE	WHEN
COMMUNITY WORKSHOP	LIVERPOOL	29 JANUARY 2026
COMMUNITY SESSION	HIRST WELFARE, ASHINGTON, NORTHUMBERLAND	27 FEBRUARY 2026
COMMUNITY SESSION	ABERDARE, CYNON VALLEY	26 MARCH 2026
COMMUNITY SESSION	ASTON UNIVERSITY, BIRMINGHAM	21 MAY 2026
YOUNG PEOPLE'S SESSION	BELFAST	30 APRIL 2026
FLIPCHART SESSIONS	GLASGOW, GRANGEMOUTH AND DUNDEE	11 JUNE 2026
COMMUNITY HUBS	HARROW AND TOWER HAMLETS, LONDON	4 JUNE 2026
DISABLED PEOPLE'S SESSION	ONLINE, WITH GREATER MANCHESTER COALITION OF DISABLED PEOPLE	8 JUNE 2026
HOMELESSNESS SECTOR SESSION	ONLINE – SERVICES IN BRISTOL, MANCHESTER, CORNWALL AND THE NORTH EAST	16 MARCH 2026
FOOD WORKERS' SESSION	BFAWU ANNUAL CONFERENCE, YARNFIELD	10 JUNE 2026
SURVEY AND ADVISER EVIDENCE	CITIZENS ADVICE GATESHEAD AND GATESHEAD FOODBANK	OPEN THROUGH 2026
ACCESSIBLE SURVEY, THREE FORMATS	DISABILITY POVERTY CAMPAIGN GROUP, UK-WIDE	MAY 2026
CONSULTATION	BRISTOL WOMEN'S VOICE, BRISTOL	7 MAY 2026
SUPPORTER SURVEY	AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL UK	OPEN THROUGH 2026
PEER GROUP DISCUSSIONS	ATD FOURTH WORLD, LONDON AND ELSEWHERE	OPEN THROUGH 2026
ONLINE SURVEY	ENGLAND, SCOTLAND, WALES, NORTHERN IRELAND AND CORNWALL	OPEN THROUGH 2026

Sessions were facilitated by Commissioners including Barrie Margetts (Chair) Ian Byrne, Sarah Woolley, Angela Carriedo, Kemi Akinola, Regina Keith Murphy, Ian Sinha, Jen Clark, SallyAnn Kelly, Alex Colas, Paul Doherty, Kevin Morgan and Sharon Noonan-Gunning, with tables led by local practitioners and academics.

HOW MANY VOICES

RECORDED ATTENDANCE AND RESPONSE NUMBERS, BY PLACE AND GROUP

LOCATION	HOW THEY TOOK PART	PEOPLE
LIVERPOOL	COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WORKSHOP	70
ASHINGTON, NORTHUMBERLAND	COMMUNITY SESSION AT HIRST WELFARE	55
ABERDARE, CYNON VALLEY	COMMUNITY SESSION (ONE TABLE RECORDED)	94
BIRMINGHAM	COMMUNITY SESSION AT ASTON UNIVERSITY	10
GREATER MANCHESTER AND UK-WIDE	DISABLED PEOPLE AND CARERS, ONLINE SESSION	22
YARNFIELD	BFAWU ANNUAL CONFERENCE, FOOD WORKERS	95
BELFAST	YOUNG PEOPLE'S AND WOMEN'S ENGAGEMENT SESSION	48
SCOTLAND	SESSIONS IN GLASGOW, GRANGEMOUTH AND DUNDEE	97
LONDON	COMMUNITY HUBS COVERING HARROW, HARINGEY, TOTTENHAM AND TOWER HAMLETS	115
UK-WIDE	COMMISSION ONLINE SURVEY	130
HOMELESSNESS SECTOR	ONLINE SESSION WITH FRONTLINE SERVICES IN BRISTOL, MANCHESTER, CORNWALL, LONDON AND THE NORTHEAST	25
BRISTOL WOMEN'S VOICE	IN PERSON CONSULTATION	UNKNOWN
ATD FOURTH WORLD	SEVERAL PEER GROUPS OF EIGHT TO TEN ACTIVISTS WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE	90
GATESHEAD, UK-WIDE	CITIZENS ADVICE GATESHEAD AND GATESHEAD FOODBANK SURVEY	704
UK-WIDE	DISABILITY POVERTY CAMPAIGN GROUP SURVEY	97
UK-WIDE	AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL UK SUPPORTER SURVEY	823
TOTAL RECORDED		2475

The Commission counted people wherever the numbers were recorded at the time. The figures below are those written down in the session notes, survey returns and written submissions. Six sessions did not record attendance, so the total is a floor, not a ceiling the true number of people who contributed is higher.

CHAPTER ONE

LIVERPOOL

29 JANUARY 2026 · COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WORKSHOP · 70 PARTICIPANTS

THE CHALLENGES

Liverpool opened with the thing that is often missed: people were not only short of food, but they were also short of the means to use it. Participants described families choosing between heating the house and switching on the oven, a person in temporary accommodation who's only cooking facility was a kettle, and parents at a food education session who could not take part because they had no table and no bowl. One person of twenty-eight had never handled an onion.

A special needs teacher described children sneaking food out of school, which led the school to set up a pantry from surplus. Attempts to teach parents to cook it ran into the same wall they could not afford to run the cooker, and growing vegetables was impossible without a garden. Working families were using food banks. Food banks could not meet dietary requirements. There was no public access to drinking water for people sleeping on the street: pubs were closed to them, and people pleading at fast food counters described being treated with contempt.

“RIGHT TO FOOD IS THE RIGHT TO EXIST.”

THE SUPPORT

What helped was rarely the emergency parcel. Food pantries where people pay a nominal amount worked because they carried no shame and because once someone was through the door there was time to talk and to connect them to other help. Education that looked at the whole situation, rather than at diet alone, helped. What did not help was being left standing in the rain outside a closed church door, staff taking the best of the surplus before it reached anyone else, a limit of two tins of beans rather than three, and food that had already gone off. Some people resorted to shoplifting. Emergency parcels were being handed out by volunteers who themselves needed help.

WHAT A RIGHT TO FOOD SHOULD CONTAIN

Liverpool was clear that a right to food cannot only be a right to food. It has to be the right to cook, the right to the means to cook, and the right to the time to cook. Participants called for community kitchens and community cafés in town centres, restrictions on the density of fast-food outlets, hot food and clean water and working toilets in public space, support for British farmers, national coordination of surplus redistribution, a law against throwing edible food away, ethical practice from food providers including how they pay their own staff, and wages that move with inflation. Several wanted the racism and misinformation that blames minority groups for social problems named and confronted as part of the same fight.

THE DIFFERENCE IT WOULD MAKE

People spoke about the long view. Less shoplifting and less antisocial behaviour. Less pressure on the NHS. Children who could be told the truth about where their dinner came from. “It’s not about today,” one person said, “it’s about in 10 years’ time get today right and the future will take care of itself.”

“HOW CAN YOU EXPECT PEOPLE TO DO

SATS IF THEY HAVEN’T GOT A FULL BELLY?”

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

LIVERPOOL

"People are making choices about heating or using the oven."

"In temporary accommodation and the only cooking facilities is a kettle."

"During a food education for parents, they said they can't do it because they haven't got a table and they haven't got a bowl."

"There was a person who was 28 and they never dealt with an onion."

"No public access to water for people sleeping on the street. Can't use the pubs. Pleading with McDonald's, get water thrown on them."

"Told by GP to have a healthy diet but there's no money to follow the GP's advice."
"Right to food is the right to exist."

"Food banks people are left in the rain outside. The church wouldn't open the doors. They have no empathy."

"KFC give out chicken but made to feel like a beggar or humiliated."

"Some staff take the best surplus food for themselves before other people. Only allow you to take 2 tins of beans not 3."

"Emergency food parcels handed out by volunteers who also need help themselves. Reliant on good will when it should be the government who has a duty of care."

"Need the knowledge of people who experience poverty to commission services and tap into local knowledge."

"Right to food is more than just food... right to cook and right to the means to cook, the right to the time to cook."

"Can't address food poverty without addressing cost of living, suitable accommodation, skills and experience in preparing food, confidence in preparing food."

"Address the root causes of poverty providing food is not enough, it has to be a person centred approach."

"It's not about today, it's about in 10 years' time. Get today right and the future will take care of itself." "Everyone is a human being."

CHAPTER TWO

ASHINGTON AND THE NORTHEAST

27 FEBRUARY 2026 · HIRST WELFARE, ASHINGTON · 55 PARTICIPANTS

THE CHALLENGES

This was the largest community session and the most wide-ranging. Rurality came first: whole villages with no supermarket, online deliveries arriving wrong or short-dated, and support services too far away without a car. Then cost why processed food is cheaper than fresh, why healthy items cost more, why energy prices rise in spring rather than falling in the winter when heat is needed. Then time: shift work, late nights, and parents and grandparents squeezed so hard that life skills are no longer passed on.

Participants described new parents under pressure to formula feed with no breastfeeding support and the price of baby milk rising; an “allergen tax” on gluten-free, dairy-free and halal food; disabled people unable to reach or move around a shop; people with dementia refused support because they were under sixty-five; nurses working full time at Wansbeck and living on pot noodles. Food grown in the community was being sold in supermarkets many miles away and sold back at a premium. Portion and packaging sizes did not fit single households. And pride ran through everything people not asking, not applying, not walking in.

**“IT ISN’T THE RIGHT TO FOOD WE SHOULD
BE TALKING ABOUT; IT’S A RIGHT TO DIGNITY.”**

**“APPARENTLY THERE IS THE RIGHT SORT OF HUNGRY
PEOPLE AND THE WRONG SORT OF HUNGRY PEOPLE.”**

THE SUPPORT

The list of what people used was long and mostly voluntary: food banks needing a doctor’s referral, breakfast clubs, warm spaces, community pantries, the Bothy, Full Circle, the YMCA, Citizens Advice, unions, churches, family and friends. The Bothy was praised because it helps with benefit forms as well as food and because people come for the pantry and the hot meal and stay for the company; Full Circle teaches cooking to people who arrive with ingredients they do not recognise. Warm spaces, veterans’ quiz nights, taxis to events and a burger and a drink for a pound were all named as support because they were social, not clinical.

The criticisms were sharper. Three parcels in six months. Bank statements demanded. Being interviewed before being fed. Named food bank vans parked outside the house. FareShare licences at more than a thousand pounds a year. Surplus arriving as cakes, pastries and bread. Apps where everything good has gone before you open them. Funders who want a shiny new project while long-standing organisations go under. And teachers keeping a cupboard of snacks for their class, one child asking whether he could take some for his hungry brother.

WHAT A RIGHT TO FOOD SHOULD CONTAIN

Universal free school meals, named again and again because they remove the stigma, the bullying and the sorting of children into deserving and undeserving. Free meals for older people. Two healthy meals a day for every child. Guaranteed basics: bread, milk, potatoes, baby formula, with breastfeeding support. No allergen tax and no extra charge for a medically necessary diet. Community kitchens, community gardens, allotments and social eating hubs, with transport to reach them. Food exempt from VAT. Standardised pricing so a small shop cannot charge more than a large one under the same brand name, and no rural premium. Access to a food shop within a fifteen-minute walk, or affordable transport to one. Food access embedded in local planning. Home economics restored in schools. Adequate benefits, sustained funding for the organisations already holding this up, and statutory provision instead of charity.

THE DIFFERENCE IT WOULD MAKE

People here talked about hope as much as food. Successive governments had presided over a lack of investment, and people had stopped believing they would be heard. A right to food, they said, would mean an economy that treats people who are not in work as still having value, wellbeing that is not an optional extra subject to political weather, and an end to being blamed for going hungry in the sixth wealthiest country in the world.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

ASHINGTON AND THE NORTHEAST

"This is an emergency a climate emergency and nature crisis and an emergency for food insecurity. We need transformation."

"Cost why is processed cheaper than fresh food?"

"You can't remove pride. We're the 6th wealthiest country and no one should be falling short of food or skills."

"It isn't the right to food we should be talking about; it's a right to dignity. Why are we trying to solve a problem about food?"

"What happens to the hungry people who don't make the list? It's time-consuming finding food."

"You're only allowed to go three times in six months to a food bank."

"The whole system is set up against decent food and then makes us feel guilty because of it. People are asking for help but are being questioned."

"Apparently there is the right sort of hungry people and the wrong sort of hungry people."

"Food banks should not exist. The charity should not have to pick up the slack."

"Explain when you walk in, and you're expected to tell strangers all the details of your life. You have to actually make it through the door there must be a safer way."

"People are in poverty even if they're working. Nurses from the Wansbeck work full time and trying to feed their kids, they're burnt out, often they find themselves just eating big pot noodles."

"Food is grown in our community, and it's sold in supermarkets miles away from us. Why do we have to pay a premium?"

"Food banks I know they're there but it's soul destroying going, as I should be able to feed the kids."

"In school's teachers are buying people food... one kid came up to the teacher and said, can I get some for my brother because he's hungry too. How can you expect people to do SATs if they haven't got a full belly."

"When you see young kids that don't know where their meals are coming from crying at the end of school term, it's heartbreaking."

"There are days where I can't leave the house... going shopping and that wipes me out, I can't get myself everything and then I'll have to rest for the rest of the week."

"Successive governments have presided over a lack of investment and now people have lost hope in the ability to be able to be heard."

"The charity sector is not the place to hold up this society, it has failed. Volunteers are holding the UK up; there needs to be statutory provision."

"We need an economy which prioritises health and well-being. People who aren't in work still have value."

"What sort of country takes taxes off people and leaves them hungry?"

The valley's own answers were the best of what was described: organic growing in the Cynon Valley where you pick your own at no cost in exchange for an hour's gardening; a small field of wheat where local children learn where bread comes from; pay-as-you-please and contribute-time-for-food arrangements that let people bond over food rather than queue for it.

CHAPTER THREE

ABERDARE AND THE CYNON VALLEY

26 MARCH 2026 · ABERDARE, WALES · COMMUNITY AND FRONTLINE WORKERS · 94 PARTICIPANTS

THE CHALLENGES

One table in Aberdare was made up of health visitors who were on strike: paid at the wrong grade, carrying caseloads beyond capacity, and five weeks without pay. “We might need a food bank soon,” one said. “We are 100 people.” They described visiting more and more children in poverty, families without access to fresh fruit and vegetables, and young parents with no knowledge of cooking, food preparation or planning not through fault but because nobody taught them. “I grew up like that, not knowing how to cook.” Language barriers meant visits conducted through a translation app. The role of being a parent, they said, has been devalued; what is wanted is people in work.

Another table ran a community hub kept alive by donations forced to become a café because the council would not support it otherwise. Elsewhere in the room: vulnerable adults placed in temporary accommodation with no kitchen, which makes conventional food support useless; the price of baby formula; free school meals in secondary schools tied to benefits that families with no recourse to public funds cannot claim, excluding children in Wales because a parent is subject to immigration control; asylum seekers living on £49 a week, often not knowing where a food bank is, facing language barriers, or afraid to go out and look.

“WHERE IS THE DIGNITY IN HAVING TO BEG?”

“WHAT SORT OF COUNTRY TAKES TAXES OFF PEOPLE AND LEAVES THEM HUNGRY?”

THE SUPPORT

The valley’s own answers were the best of what was described: organic growing in the Cynon Valley where you pick your own at no cost in exchange for an hour’s gardening; a small field of wheat where local children learn where bread comes from; pay-as-you-please and contribute-time-for-food arrangements that let people bond over food rather than queue for it. A table led by Dr Kevin Morgan heard about school food projects moving to pantry-style subsidised payment rather than free parcels, open to everyone so that nobody is marked out but dependent on grant funding, and therefore never secure.

The problems with the existing model were named plainly. Food banks with not enough food, long exclusion lists, three interviews before a parcel, and no one who wants to be there. Supermarkets have tightened their own waste, so what reaches redistribution is thin and much of it unusable projects spend their time sorting what cannot be given out. Travel costs nine pounds return for a fifteen-minute bus ride to the nearest large store. A school allotment was lost to an expanding car park. Teachers were buying food for children. And funders keep asking organisations to innovate when what is needed is to keep doing the thing that works.

WHAT A RIGHT TO FOOD SHOULD CONTAIN

A universal floor below which nobody falls. Free school meals treated as part of the educational offer no more paid for by parents than desks or books are and argued for as universality rather than poverty relief. Food built into secondary schools so that access is ordinary. Community-led procurement and funding for growing projects, co-operatives and field-to-fork schemes. An end to no recourse to public funds and the right to work for people seeking asylum. Welfare restoration, the removal of the benefit cap, regulation of baby formula, higher business rates for the largest supermarkets and legislation to stop their dominance. Accredited courses and youth work that treats mental health and food together. Expanded growing in schools, from allotments to market gardens, and Welsh Veg in Schools extended.

THE DIFFERENCE IT WOULD MAKE

“Don’t highlight food banks,” one participant said. “Why not be a community hub with free food?” The change people wanted was a change in feeling: free food that carries no stigma, a place you are glad to walk into, community control of the resources that keep a valley fed, and children who grow up knowing where food comes from.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

ABERDARE AND THE CYNON VALLEY

"We might need a food bank soon; we are 100 people."

"I grew up like that, not knowing how to cook."

"We are there in their houses, and it is difficult not to judge. The role of having a parent is devalued; they want people working."

"A lot of elderly and disabled people are not depressed; they are frustrated that they depend on processed food because that is what they can afford."

"Access to free food should not be stigmatised. It's not a place that you go to that you don't feel right about."

"We need to have community control, it is not all about data"

"Food bank no one wants to be there... tell people interviewed 3 times; feel agitated and want to walk away. Where is the dignity in having to beg?"

"What sort of country takes taxes off people and leaves them hungry?"

"Don't highlight food banks... why not be a community hub with free food."

"Attending the food bank or asking for help to buy food is embarrassing, lots of young parents."

"Teach kids at school how to fish and grow food; they will feed thousands forever and clean rivers."

"Contribute time to the garden in payment for food, pay as you please, and bond over food."

"Asylum seekers are living on £49 per week. This is hard for a single adult; the poverty it puts children in is huge."

"The right to work would significantly reduce food insecurity among asylum-seeking communities."

"Food support systems in the UK are effectively performing public services unofficially. It is a social infrastructure that the government has disowned."

"Local restaurants and food chains offer free kids' meals for every paying adult. What if the adult cannot afford to eat?"

"Families cannot afford to buy healthy food options, vegetables, fruits, etc., despite parents working full-time."

"Funders want organisations to keep innovating all the time when it's simply continuing to provide the service that's needed. The issue isn't going to be solved with grants."

"It might be helpful to review messaging around FSM and the benefits of universality rather than as a poverty reduction programme."

CHAPTER FOUR

BIRMINGHAM

21 MAY 2026 · ASTON UNIVERSITY · 10 PARTICIPANTS, LECTURERS

THE CHALLENGES

Birmingham was the session where culture, faith and race were placed at the centre. Participants described a halal premium higher tariff, import costs and price rises on cultural staples and a food aid system that rarely stocks what their communities eat. When a halal meal is available it is taken by people who do not need halal, simply because meat is so rare in a parcel. Ready meals are not halal. Butchers will not pass on offcuts, and asking feels shameful. When supermarket price caps were discussed, the staples on the list were western staples; rice, chapati flour and yams cost more.

Income was the other half of it. International students without family support living on one meal deal a day. People seeking asylum on £38 a week in a house, £8 a week in accommodation. A living wage that is not a real living wage. And a bitter awareness of waste alongside hunger: eighty people at an event, food left over, and a twenty-minute wait to sign a disclaimer before it could be taken out to homeless people nearby. Participants described a postcode lottery in what food aid contains, unconscious bias in who gets helped, health outcomes compromised by a switch to processed food on arrival in the country, and vitamin deficiency before people even enter the UK.

“WE PAY A CULTURAL TAX”

“IT’S VERY EXPENSIVE TO BE POOR.”

THE SUPPORT

Food and hygiene banks across the city, an allies’ network part-funded by the council that wraps food around a workshop so that nobody has to arrive as a claimant, subsidised food on campus, a campus food bank and a hardship fund. But students do not know the support exists; the referral system was described as broken; and some well-funded organisations were said to carry a mentality of rationing and exclusion. The community relies heavily on food banks, and as a result cannot get nutritious food, quality food, or food they actually want. There is no option.

WHAT A RIGHT TO FOOD SHOULD CONTAIN

Food as a human right, with diverse food options available to all demographics at low or no cost equitable, not identical. Affordable canteens in every school, college and university. Home Office responsibility for food support while an asylum claim is processed, and the right to work. A basic income adequate to live on, and work that pays enough to make working possible. Subsidised food prices in deprived communities. Funding and reach for the small and voluntary organisations serving specific communities. Reform of health and safety rules so small shops and caterers can pass on surplus without fear. Participation for communities in making food policy, and health literacy taught alongside food literacy.

THE DIFFERENCE IT WOULD MAKE

Participants talked about being able to eat as themselves food with their own flavours, their own faith and their own memory rather than being grateful for whatever a parcel contains. “People come together for food,” one said. A right to food would mean not having to compromise on health to belong here.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

BIRMINGHAM

"A living wage is not a real living wage."

"International students are here without family support. People live on noodles or a meal deal, just one meal deal per day."

"The income for asylum seekers is not enough... how can you buy groceries even from the food bank if you go late, they run out?"

"It's very expensive to be poor and if you're rich you can bulk buy a bag of potatoes or a sack of rice to make it stretch, you can get more for your money."

"We pay a cultural tax."

"Even if there is a halal meal available, people will take it that don't need halal just because meat is so very rare in the food banks."

"There's food waste in the butchers but they won't give it away and there's stigma to ask, but the butchers don't want to give us the off cuts."

"People don't want to be seen as poor, they don't want to stand in a queue. There's a difference between what they need and what they like."

"There's a post code lottery of supplies. You get good stuff out of the city and in the city you get stuff that goes off tomorrow."

"We need health literacy, not just food literacy."

"When they were suggesting supermarket price caps, the staples list considered were western food."

"You can't just address the food 'cause the cost of rent is so high, housing is the biggest issue including council tax."

"Students don't know support exists. Sometimes there are four people sharing a room."

"We do have a food bank on campus, we also have a hardship fund... and if you need help you're told that it's better if you don't come to university if you can't afford it."

"The community rely a lot on food banks, as a result it's very difficult to access nutritious food and quality food or even food that they want, there's no option."

"Food is a human right."

"Everyone has the right to basic universal income that is reasonable to live on."

"Poverty and tampon tax - language might put people off. Language matters."

"Service providers are not dictators. There should be a code of practice for organisations."

CHAPTER FIVE

BELFAST

BELFAST · YOUNG PEOPLE'S ENGAGEMENT SESSION · 48 PARTICIPANTS

THE CHALLENGES

The Belfast session was mostly about school food, and it was unsparing. A bag of crisps in the school vending machine has gone from 80p to £1.20. There is no menu, just grab and go. Chips are rock hard, gravy is watery and clumpy, and sometimes the chicken is pink. Pupils are not allowed out at lunchtime and teachers confiscate food they bring in. They eat off cardboard plates with cardboard cutlery. There is no fruit. The bins in the canteen are full. When inspectors visit, the good food comes out.

Young people also named the unfairness they see every day: that some pupils pay and some do not, that paying for school meals at all feels wrong, and that cooking classes cost between £1.50 and £3.50 so pupils end up owing money. Outside school: takeaway shops on every corner, a youth centre whose cost of feeding all its children has risen from £350 to £750 a meal, single mothers on one income, prices rising while wages stand still, and mothers who have to say no.

WRITTEN BY YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE SESSION

"I HAVE THE RIGHT TO FREE SCHOOL MEALS, HYGIENE PRODUCTS, EDUCATION, HEALTHCARE, FOOD, WATER, SHELTER, HEALTHY MEALS, NUTRITION."

"I HAVE THE RIGHT TO LIVE IN A CLEAN HOME."

"I HAVE THE RIGHT TO AFFORD NUTRITIOUS MEALS."

"A NUTRITIOUS MEAL EVERY DAY TO FUEL YOUR BODY."

"I WANT TO FEEL SAFE."

THE SUPPORT

Their coping strategies were domestic and practical: a weekly shop, meal prepping, a list to keep to a budget, an air fryer because a full meal is beyond reach. And parents saying no.

WHAT A RIGHT TO FOOD SHOULD CONTAIN

Free school meals; healthy, properly cooked meals that schools are required to provide; fruit and vegetables; clean water; free sanitary and hygiene products with no pink tax; heating and electricity; a stable home; free higher education. On the other side of the ledger, what government should not be allowed to do: keep raising the price of essentials, put a price on water, tax basic needs, or set benefit rules that shut out households with two incomes. Wages, they said, must keep up.

THE DIFFERENCE IT WOULD MAKE

The young people wanted a say. They proposed mystery shopping their own school food instead of relying on inspectors, school council meetings where pupils vote on the menu, and schools made accessible to disabled pupils. They wanted to feel safe, and they wanted a clean town. And they wanted skinny chips.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

BELFAST

"A living wage is not a real living wage."

"International students are here without family support. People live on noodles or a meal deal, just one meal deal per day."

"The income for asylum seekers is not enough... how can you buy groceries even from the food bank if you go late, they run out?"

"It's very expensive to be poor and if you're rich you can bulk buy a bag of potatoes or a sack of rice to make it stretch, you can get more for your money."

"We pay a cultural tax."

"Even if there is a halal meal available, people will take it that don't need halal just because meat is so very rare in the food banks."

"There's food waste in the butchers but they won't give it away and there's stigma to ask, but the butchers don't want to give us the off cuts."

"People don't want to be seen as poor, they don't want to stand in a queue. There's a difference between what they need and what they like."

"There's a post code lottery of supplies. You get good stuff out of the city and in the city you get stuff that goes off tomorrow."

"We need health literacy, not just food literacy."

"When they were suggesting supermarket price caps, the staples list considered were western food."

"You can't just address the food 'cause the cost of rent is so high, housing is the biggest issue including council tax."

"Students don't know support exists. Sometimes there are four people sharing a room."

"We do have a food bank on campus, we also have a hardship fund... and if you need help you're told that it's better if you don't come to university if you can't afford it."

"The community rely a lot on food banks, as a result it's very difficult to access nutritious food and quality food or even food that they want, there's no option."

"Food is a human right."

"Everyone has the right to basic universal income that is reasonable to live on."

"Poverty and tampon tax - language might put people off. Language matters."

"Service providers are not dictators. There should be a code of practice for organisations."

CHAPTER SIX

SCOTLAND

GLASGOW, GRANGEMOUTH AND DUNDEE · 97 PARTICIPANTS

THE CHALLENGES

Scotland's sessions were recorded on flip charts and sticky notes, and the notes read like a map of structural failure. In Castlemilk there is no supermarket £5.3 million went to a private developer and there is still no shop, so people walk to a Tesco Extra and pay to get there. New housing developments arrive with no food provision at all. Temporary accommodation restricts what can be cooked or stored; some households are "cooking" pasta and noodles with a kettle. Since 2019 there are more people, more food banks and fewer volunteers, and rural prices run around a quarter higher than city prices.

Two themes here were sharper than anywhere else. The first was debt: buy-now-pay-later products marketed as help but pushing people under, employers offering advances on next month's wages, and an epidemic of illegal money lending that people cannot get out of once they are in, with threats, intimidation and worse. The second was hidden need people in less deprived postcodes with nowhere to turn, twelve- to eighteen-year-olds described as a forgotten group, and a policy vacuum around single men, especially younger men, in low-paid insecure work and isolated.

"FINE WORDS, BETTER NOT TATTIES."

ASKED WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF CHARITIES STOPPED

"DEATH. SOCIETAL COLLAPSE. CRISIS. THIS IS THE JOURNEY WE ARE ON."

THE SUPPORT

Pantries, larders, community meals, gardening and gleaning projects, community-supported agriculture, intergenerational cooking, minibuses and taxis to the shops, and neighbours helping neighbours. One larder bought £62,000 of food in a year, with 897 members paying £57,000 towards it and fundraising covering the rest; demand went from £120 a week to £1,000 a week; an £80 bag goes for £3. Dundee City Council was singled out as the only Scottish local authority funding its larder network directly. Cash-first approaches were strongly supported because they preserve choice. Churches and community-based housing associations were named as trusted places.

The frustrations were about the model, not the people running it: constant short-term pilot funding, provision that stops at a boundary line, organisations plugging gaps created by state failure, fragmentation between sectors with no shared vision, and a lack of political will to break the status quo. The Universal Credit uplift was remembered as the one intervention that visibly reduced food bank use.

WHAT A RIGHT TO FOOD SHOULD CONTAIN

A legal right to food across all four nations, designed to fit Scotland's own legal and policy framework with the caveat, stated repeatedly, that rights without accountability, legal aid and resources may not change outcomes. Duties on public bodies, including local authorities and the NHS, as duty bearers. Universal free school meals from P1 through high school, including holidays, with a delivery model that treats food as part of a nurturing school rather than a means-tested benefit. Public diners and civic restaurants, building on the Dundee pilot. Review of public procurement. A right to grow, with every school's land used. Benefits re-linked to the cost of living, a minimum income guarantee, price caps considered on fruit and vegetables, proper resourcing and penalties on illegal lending, and payment for people with lived experience who take part in making policy.

THE DIFFERENCE IT WOULD MAKE

The word written most often on the Scottish flip charts was DIGNITY, in capitals. Alongside it: choice "no more beans!" good food with memory, food that is culturally meaningful and familiar rather than merely sufficient in calories, and a Good Food Nation in which access to nutritious food is ordinary and shared.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

SCOTLAND

"No more beans!"

"Good food with memory."

"Food parcels won't feed a family."

"Raise incomes for all."

"Everybody should be able to access nutritious food."

"Build a Good Food Nation."

"Fine words, better not tatties."

"What would happen if charities stopped? Death. Societal collapse. Crisis. This is the journey we are on."

"£1.69 for a tin of tomato soup. Food prices should go down as well as wages going up."

"Everything is structurally against working-class people being able to buy and cook decent nutritious food."

"Since 2019: more people, more poverty, more foodbanks. Empty shelves. Things not getting better."

"If recovering from illness, cancer, etc., healthy food is important for recovery. Why is healthy food expensive?"

"Impacting all kinds of people, not just those on poor salaries."

"Education is important, but if there is no money cannot put that into use and vice versa."

"12-18-year-olds forgotten? Big vacuum around single men."

"Klarna and other credit arrangements seem to be aimed at being helpful but in some cases are causing financial issues."

"Epidemic of illegal lending / loan sharks. People cannot get out once involved."

"Need to shift responsibility back from individuals to public policy."

"Every school has food plans and is supported to provide food."

"Headteachers report lunch is often the last thing some children eat until breakfast clubs or holiday provision."

"Rights need to start somewhere."

"Sceptical that legal rights alone change outcomes - no legal aid and limited accountability."

"Profits can appear obscene when people are struggling or starving."

"Need to address the vested interests of big supermarkets in the discussions about food access, quality and affordability."

"Dignity. Right to grow."

CHAPTER SEVEN

LONDON

HARROW, HARINGEY, TOTTENHAM AND TOWER HAMLETS

COMMUNITY HUBS AND CO-OPS · 115 PARTICIPANTS

THE CHALLENGES

In north London one person went hungry for weeks because they were too embarrassed to tell their family and ate at friends' houses instead. Another could not afford to plug in their cooker; a friend who is an electrician wired it for them. Children in high school refused free school meals out of shame "No, we don't need that," "I'd rather stay hungry until I finish school and then eat something" while parents skipped meals so their children could eat.

In Tower Hamlets, food support is community-led rather than council-organised, and it is fragile. Supply is inconsistent: thirty people waiting and fifteen portions delivered. People practise "food bank cycling" visiting several to assemble a shop which is hardest on those with mobility problems and no car. Provision leans heavily on cakes, pastries and tins; some is expired, and much of it is unsuitable for cultural, religious or health needs. Food banks are closing for want of donations, funding or affordable rent, exactly as need rises. Planning law obstructs soup kitchens; one had to register as a bakery to distribute food legally. Both groups described councils holding community organisations at arm's length high rents, empty buildings left for years unanswered phones. One centre stood unused for seven years and took four more years of asking before the work was done.

"IT'S NOT ORGANISED BY THE COUNCILS. IT'S ALL JUST COMES DOWN TO PEOPLE WITH A BIG HEART WHO ARE DOING WHAT THEY CAN."

"THERE'S LESS SOCIALISATION... PEOPLE AREN'T REALLY INVITING; THERE'S NOT MUCH OF A SOCIAL GATHERING."

THE SUPPORT

The strongest voice in this chapter was a Romanian community hub in Harrow, begun in a small space around 2017 and expanded through the pandemic into its own centre. It runs a food hub every Tuesday for more than 150 families on site with about twenty housebound households delivered to; digital support on Wednesdays with SIM cards, phones and laptops; a warmth hub on Thursdays with fresh soup and refreshments; and one-to-one support in Romanian. It gives out slow cookers and shows people how to use them. Members spoke about it as more than food: "Every Tuesday, I receive food from the organisation. It is very helpful for me... It's fresh food. It's perfect for me. I save money. I use money for another direction, for electricity." "This food improved my life." "I go there for friendship. I need friends. I need Romanian people. I need to speak the same language." Many in the community do not trust authorities or are ashamed to ask; the hub describes its work as building a bridge, with a social worker visiting monthly to help mothers navigate schools.

Food co-ops were described as the more dignified alternative: members pay a monthly subscription and buy in bulk together tropical fruit, household basics rather than receiving donations. A Haringey network is trying to link co-ops so people can buy more together for less. Growing was the other thread: one organisation started in a family garden in 2017 and by the pandemic was running two of the largest food operations in the country, at Tottenham Hotspur Stadium and Alexandra Palace. "No boundaries, no religious stigma, no politics just a group of like-minded people growing organic food and sharing organic food." Their growing spaces, they insisted, are there to be picked from and eaten: "My growing spaces are there to be enjoyed, to be looked at, and to be used to eat." Food clubs and community cookouts were valued as much for the sitting and talking as for the food.

WHAT A RIGHT TO FOOD SHOULD CONTAIN

Legal protection for community food work "the law protects us, and that is what we must remember; it gives us a legal stand." Enforceable food standards: a set proportion of fresh food, halal and vegetarian options, nothing expired or in poor condition. Land unlocked for growing. Reliable, always-open access points that everybody knows about. Youth programmes built around food and cooking. Cooking taught beyond Year 10, and classes where children and parents learn together. Investment redirected towards children, older people, people who are ill, and housing.

THE DIFFERENCE IT WOULD MAKE

If the right to food became law, participants said, organisations could keep working in their own way with legal security, and hunger would fall. "We are not needing campaigns like this. We should not, in this country, need a campaign where there is right to food." And the everyday difference: less anxiety about tomorrow, children who eat and are therefore happier at school, and neighbours inviting each other to eat again.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

LONDON

"Tonight is not about gratitude. Tonight is about truth."

"I can't afford to cook. I can't even afford to plug in my cooker to turn it on so that I can cook for myself."

"No, we don't need that. I'd rather stay hungry until I finish school and then eat something."

"Every Tuesday, I receive food from the organisation. It is very helpful for me."

"It's fresh food. It's very good for me. It's perfect for me."

"I save money. I use money for another direction, for electricity. It's important."

"This food improved my life."

"I go there for friendship. I need friends. I need Romanian people. I need to speak the same language."

"Same background. Same idea, same culture. Same religion. Same community. It's important."

"Why should we trust the council? What do they want from us?"

"We wanted to create that bridge between the community and authority."

"People pay. They actually pay a monthly subscription, then that money is used to purchase the food."

"No boundaries, no religious stigma, no politics - just a group of like-minded people growing organic food and sharing organic food."

"My growing spaces are there to be enjoyed, to be looked at, and to be used to eat."

"An idea is a seed. If you plant that seed and you germinate it and it grows into a plant, that's what we do with our ideas."

"The law protects us, and that is what we must remember. It gives us a legal stand."

"We should not, in this country, need a campaign where there is right to food."

"Sit and talk and communicate with each other. Eating this food together helps them to connect with each other."

"It's not organised by the councils. It's all just comes down to people with a big heart who are doing what they can."

"If there's 30 people waiting to collect something, they will bring you only 15. Which means it's not enough food or supply."

"Especially some people with their mobility, walking issues, it's going to be very difficult to get from one area to another."

"Most of the food they are giving are apple cakes... which is not good for our health."

"If you're having to eat, especially the elderly, if you're having to eat from a tin... it's not really good for the health."

"There's less socialisation... people aren't really inviting, there's not much of a social gathering."

"People aren't really coping well... you're thinking about the tomorrow, you might not have enough for yourself and your family."

"It normalises the idea that people are going to have to use food banks forever and ultimately are always going to be dependent on these supermarkets."

"A lot of them are closing because they don't have enough supply... sometimes the building that's being rented is not enough money to fund it."

"The law wouldn't allow for it... so he started it as a bakery so he could legally distribute food, because they wouldn't allow that in the community."

"Maybe like a food standard. A percentage of the food should be fresh... it shouldn't be in poor condition."

"If there were some standards and regulations about what did go out, then that could make a difference."

CHAPTER EIGHT

DISABLED PEOPLE AND CARERS

8 JUNE 2026 · ONLINE, WITH GREATER MANCHESTER

COALITION OF DISABLED PEOPLE · 22 PARTICIPANTS

THE CHALLENGES

This session was the most difficult to hear and the most precise. "It's multi factorial," one participant began: no transport, forms only online, post offices and banks closing, distribution centralised. A carer described a non-verbal son who needs the back door open all day and a house that therefore cannot be heated, a washing machine running five times a day, a prepayment meter charging more per unit, and a specific brand of beans that costs more because it is the only one he will eat. "I feel like we're being punished because we're on benefits." She had gone without food herself; her waist had dropped from over thirty-one inches to twenty-six.

Others described a mother in hospital with scurvy, because if you say no to the meal you are not offered another; social care packages that do not fund anyone to sit down and eat with you; meals on wheels withdrawn; home delivery with a minimum spend or a charge; gluten-free food costing far more; supermarkets a twenty-minute walk away; carers allocated so little time for meal preparation that ready meals become the only option. Food banks are out of town, hold food people cannot eat or cook, and offer no choice "heard of someone who always gets pasta and cannot cook it." One participant runs an independent food bank where more than thirty per cent of users are disabled people. Greater Manchester now has some 305 food banks. And a housing association confiscated a picnic table within two weeks because residents were not allowed to congregate.

"DISABLED PEOPLE ARE NOT JUST EXPERIENCING POVERTY THEY ARE BEING SYSTEMATICALLY PREVENTED FROM MAINTAINING THEIR HEALTH."

"FOOD SECURITY MEANS MEALS, NOT JUST INGREDIENTS."

"THERE IS A PERSON BEHIND THE STATISTIC."

THE SUPPORT

A subsidised lunch every Thursday at £2.50, which cannot buy much. Free school meals expanded, though not always a quality meal. An independent food bank that stopped a council tax summons. Organisations that shop with and for people and walk them through the system rather than talking at them. Against that: a council that refused access to the household support fund; a charity that made someone feel "like the lowest of the low", allowed help for two weeks only, collection in person at a time of their choosing, by taxi, from a disabled person who had explained they could not travel. Food clubs at £5 that mostly hold surplus. Advice only by phone or website. Referrals promised and never made. "When people are in need it's not what you know, it's who you know. There are deserving and undeserving poor." A third of eligible disabled children were not getting free school meals because they cannot eat standard meals, because they are off school ill, or because they are in alternative provision or waiting for a place. Sixty-five per cent of disabled people report barriers to shopping, including online: inaccessible websites, complicated checkouts, no clear product information, poor support.

WHAT A RIGHT TO FOOD SHOULD CONTAIN

This group set out the most detailed legal architecture of any session. A statutory duty to make sure everyone can get food, with a route to redress. Responsibility for assessing food needs, and equality impact assessments with structural adjustments the food equivalent of reasonable adjustments. Food built into carers' assessments. A guarantee that asking for help cannot be held against you for safeguarding or social care purposes: needing food is not neglect. A right to be believed and taken at your word. Monitoring of local cost data and of the additional cost of disability. Access facilitated where there is no other way to get food. Choice and quality written in, with agency inside the food bank system. Social security and wages sufficient to afford food. Planning and procurement powers used to create good local food environments, and a right to grow. Above all: "Change it so have meal banks not food banks." Not everyone has a carer or a relative who can cook, and a bag of ingredients is not a meal. Participants also asked for public diners and civic restaurants designed with disabled people in mind staggered times, changing places toilets, not everyone in one big room and for meals on wheels rebuilt for this century.

THE DIFFERENCE IT WOULD MAKE

"Dignity is a minimum. Shouldn't have to be scrambling and struggling for food." "Food shouldn't be something you desperately seek; it should be something you have." The session also asked a question the Commission carried with it afterwards: why is this country so preoccupied with national security while people who live here go hungry? "We will have the best defended food banks in Europe is that something to be proud of?"

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

DISABLED PEOPLE AND CARERS

"It's multi factorial... there's no transport... filling in forms online... food distributions centralised, post offices are closing down, banks too, these aren't minor things."

"There are only certain types of foods my son will eat. He won't eat Tesco's beans, only Heinz, and that costs more. I feel like we're being punished because we're on benefits."

"As a carer I've gone without food, I went from having a waist size of over 31 inches in April down to 26 as the result of weight loss."

"We charge £2.50 for our subsidised meals, but you can't get much for £2.50. It's tortured to see members like this."

"People need to be careful with the words they choose... 50% of life is dictated by disability. There is a person behind the statistic."

"When you are starving, benefits stopped. There is nowhere to go. The council wouldn't let me access household support fund."

"Charity made me feel like I was dirt, made me feel like trying to get something for nothing... They made me feel like the lowest of the low..."

"They said I would have to get a taxi at a time they specified. What am I going to do?"

"When people are in need it's not what you know, it's who you know. There are deserving and undeserving poor."

"My mum was in hospital and she has scurvy. The problem is that if you are in hospital or care homes they ask you if you want food and if you say no they don't give it."

"Heard of someone who always gets pasta and cannot cook it."

"Food is often thing person sacrifice as can buy cheaper food but the impact is devastating."

"Scary that govt not doing anything about food banks - acting like part of normal infrastructure in the country."

"Housing Association won't allow people to congregate in communal spaces... put out a picnic table and it got confiscated within two weeks."

"Can get ingredients but may lack energy, human energy, to prepare a meal."

"Many people don't have the admin skills and get stuffed by a system that is brutal and uncaring."

"Disabled people are not just experiencing poverty, they are being systematically prevented from maintaining their health."

"Food security means meals, not just ingredients!"

"Listening but not actually doing anything. When you challenge you get targeted. Have to fight for benefits."

"We help people to cook and they take the meal home to feed the family. We shop with and for people. Walk them through the support, not just talking."

"There is no mechanism for meeting an individual needs."

"Right to be believed, taken on their word, trusted."

"If you need to get help make sure it can't be held against you for social care / safeguarding purposes (it is not neglect)."

"Change it so have meal banks not food banks... need to focus on a meal, not food. Not everyone has a carer or family that can cook for them."

"Dignity is a minimum. Shouldn't have to be scrambling and struggling for food."

"Food shouldn't be something you desperately seek, it should be something you have."

"Why obsessed with national security and not worried about people who live here? We will have the best defended food banks in Europe - is that something to be proud of?"

"Food banks are a compromise."

"Average income basket is wrong as based on a middle-class basket - not a person on benefits basket."

"Every disabled person gets very own chef!"

CHAPTER NINE

PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

SESSION WITH FRONTLINE SERVICES IN BRISTOL, MANCHESTER, CORNWALL,

LONDON AND THE NORTHEAST · 25 PARTICIPANTS

THE CHALLENGES

Services described the same trajectory everywhere: “it’s getting busier, we see a lot more people in all the time,” while donations fall. The quality and quantity of surplus from redistribution has dropped as supermarkets tighten their own ordering and shelf-life rules. A day centre receives food from FareShare and still spends £300 a week at Asda to fill the gap. A drop-in in Truro has no proper kitchen and relies on donations from bakery chains: “gets quite boring, and not good nutritional value for clients.” Once or twice a week they manage a slow-cooker curry or stew. The central problem was named exactly: “It’s not the lack of food, it’s the lack of facilities.” A person sleeping rough cannot boil a kettle or heat a pot noodle. A food bank parcel of ambient goods is useless to them. Many placed in B&Bs have neither kettle nor microwave. People walk between provision points “a lot of our clients do 20,000 steps as a norm” needing far more calories than a pasty provides. Rural homelessness is worse again: in Cornwall, access to any service is limited by the shape of the county. In Bristol there is at least one free community meal somewhere every day, but distance and access decide who eats. Provision closes at short notice and thins out at weekends: “if you are homeless, you are in trouble.” Research in Middlesbrough following a list of free food places found mostly middle-aged men struggling to navigate the system. Services also reported racial tensions at free food sites, and people arriving under the influence. Refugees in Manchester avoid the city centre at night for fear of being stopped and so miss the community kitchens there.

“CELEBRATING FOOD AID IT HAS BECOME NORMAL.

IT’S UNACCEPTABLE, IT SHOULDN’T BE HAPPENING.”

“STIGMA IS A HUGE ISSUE FOR OUR SERVICE USERS.

PEOPLE NOT EVEN NECESSARILY ACCEPTING THEM IN.”

“ONCE YOU’VE MADE PEOPLE FEEL COMFORTABLE

IN AN ENVIRONMENT, THEY WILL KEEP COMING BACK.”

THE SUPPORT

What works is low-threshold and unconditional. Day centres where clients need give no name or details to get food. Food clubs three times a week in the areas of a city with the deepest food poverty, not means tested, giving ingredients a mix of ambient and fresh through a pop-up shop that is free or £3.50 for £20 to £25 worth of food. Evening meal vans. Health outreach alongside the soup kitchen. Immigration advice, laundry, tents, sleeping bags, yoga and nature walks in the same building as the meal. Signposting works best by word of mouth: “it’s mainly people helping people.” What does not work is a free food list that changes without warning, uneven provision across the week, and community kitchens or gardens that rough sleepers do not feel welcome in.

WHAT A RIGHT TO FOOD SHOULD CONTAIN

Catering made mandatory in every hostel and shelter, which would in itself reduce begging. Day shelters funded by government to provide three meals a day, seven days a week. Food provision in hostels, day centres and outreach funded properly “it’s a ridiculous ask of charities to provide the support, staff and expertise, and find the food from a magic food cupboard.” Every property equipped with cooking facilities and white goods: fridge, kettle, microwave, air fryer. An essentials guarantee in the benefits system. A price cap on basics like bread and milk, and an end to the premium on medically necessary food £3.60 for a gluten-free loaf. More food co-operatives so people can buy in bulk. Cooking teaching that starts from what people actually want to eat, with slow cookers handed out at the end of the class. Tenancy support that covers budgeting, cooking and bills. Accommodation offered near where people already are, with vouchers and travel if it is not. And a mass council house building programme: “having a home with a kitchen would massively reduce hunger.”

THE DIFFERENCE IT WOULD MAKE

A hot meal, at a predictable time, in a place where you are expected rather than tolerated. Services said that once someone feels comfortable, they return and returning is what makes everything else possible: health care, benefits, housing, recovery.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

"It's getting busier, we see a lot more people in all the time."

"Reduction in quality and quantity of food they are receiving from Fareshare."

"Gets quite boring, and not good nutritional value for clients."

"Homeless people can't put the kettle on, can't heat up a pot noodle. Can't have a hot meal."

"A lot of our clients do 20,000 steps as a norm. Level of calories they need to maintain themselves, more than a pasty."

"Food bank useless if you are homeless, a lot of ambient food so can't prepare food."

"Cornwall is a challenge by the very nature of the county. If you are experiencing homelessness in the countryside, access to services is very limited."

"I would say that in Bristol there are plenty of kitchens where you can get a free community meal... but it's about distance and access to these meals across the city."

"Celebrating food aid it has become normal. It's unacceptable, it shouldn't be happening."

"It's mainly people helping people."

"Most local authorities have a free food list shut at short notice, uneven provision on different days."

"Stigma is a huge issue for our service users. People not even necessarily accepting them in. Expect to be treated badly."

"Once you've made people feel comfortable in an environment, they will keep coming back."

"Community kitchens or gardens not always the most accessible for people experiencing homelessness, rough sleepers not always comfortable in those spaces."

"No provision on the weekend, so if you are homeless you are in trouble."

"It's not the lack of food, it's the lack of facilities."

"Many people placed in B&Bs and do not even have a kettle or microwave."

"Schools, cooking skills, and food education."

"It's a ridiculous ask of charities to provide the support, staff and expertise, and find the food from a magic food cupboard."

"Should be a cap on basics like bread and milk. E.g. cost of food for allergies - £3.60 for a gluten free loaf of bread."

"Mass council house building programme - having a home with a kitchen and also help financial situation - would massively reduce hunger."

CHAPTER TEN

FOOD WORKERS

10 JUNE 2026 · BFAWU ANNUAL CONFERENCE, YARNFIELD · 95 WORKPLACE REPRESENTATIVES

THE CHALLENGES

The people who make the country's food described not being able to afford it. Ninety-five union representatives set out the same set of adaptations: switching to discount supermarkets and travelling further to reach them, own-brand instead of branded, tinned and frozen instead of fresh, buying reduced items at the end of their life and freezing them, bulk buying, rationing portions each meal, batch cooking, eliminating waste, and cutting out treats entirely. "Cannot remember the last time I brought treats, we just eat the bare necessities." Several described working overtime simply to live missing their children growing up and never seeing the extra money because it goes on bills.

Food inflation has outrun pay rises, so wage increases are invisible. Portion sizes have been reduced at home. Quality has fallen because cheaper food does not last, so shopping happens more often. School holidays are the hardest stretch. Older relatives are choosing between heating and eating and are least likely to say so. Some are skipping meals for days and have long since stopped heating the house. One representative had resorted to light theft to eat, taking only items marked not fit for sale. Another noted that the only food they eat is at work, subsidised but mostly fried.

"QUEUING AT FOODBANKS IS DEGRADING, IT ADDS TO THE STIGMA OF NOT BEING ABLE TO PROVIDE DECENT FOOD, CLEAN CLOTHES AND A WARM HOME... PEOPLE WHO WORK FEEL EMBARRASSED, STRESSED AND OFTEN DEGRADED JUST AS MUCH AS STAY AT HOME FAMILIES."

THE SUPPORT

Kids-eat-free schemes, free school meals, breakfast and after-school clubs, staff shops and workplace food donations, Christmas hampers, cash-back and surplus apps, outlet stores, vouchers and loyalty offers. Faith provision was named warmly: a Sikh temple feeding the whole community from donations by local businesses, mosques running feeding-the-needy schemes, soup kitchens, church-run food and clothing banks. Cooperation Town food co-ops were praised for reducing costs while building community rather than dependency, and one workplace had started a get-to-know-your-neighbour campaign to share meals and ingredients.

The problems: food banks open on days that clash with shifts, hard to reach and hard to ask for. Parcels containing food that cannot be eaten or that nobody knows how to cook, which then goes to waste – "this adds to the overall guilt of the situation as you feel ungrateful, despite not being able to use it." Sub-standard product sent to schools and care homes. Donation points at supermarkets visibly emptier than they used to be. And theft rising because the rest is not enough.

WHAT A RIGHT TO FOOD SHOULD CONTAIN

Employment that pays enough to buy the food you choose. A guarantee of basic essentials bread, milk, eggs untaxed, alongside period and hygiene products. Three nutritious meals a day accessible without a food bank. Every person able to access daily basic food and to cook it, including in rented and temporary accommodation. Community kitchens, hubs and allotments in every community, grow-your-own packs, and pay-what-you-can food stores stocked by local traders and farmers. Food provided by the employer while on shift, and affordable food in every workplace. Reinvestment in school kitchens; cooking and budgeting taught as standard; meals on wheels reintroduced. Food banks funded properly rather than scraping for grants. Company donations that are not simply what was about to be thrown out. And a look at France's ban on supermarket food waste.

Asked for the single government priority, this session answered with wages and power: a substantial minimum wage rise to a wage of dignity, a four-day week with no loss of earnings, free school meals for all, price caps on food, capped food inflation, an end to supermarket profiteering, legislation on food waste, better pensions, easier access to benefits so entitlements are not left unclaimed, higher pay for agricultural workers, capped public transport costs, and taxing wealth.

THE DIFFERENCE IT WOULD MAKE

"We need decent pay, less hours and more family time." The overall message from the food industry's own workforce was that food insecurity is no longer confined to people out of work: it now reaches the people who produce, pack and sell the nation's food. A right to food would mean the people who feed the country can feed themselves.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

FOOD WORKERS

"The cost of food has risen faster than our wage rises, we are still struggling, we have reduced our portion sizes as a result."

"Having to work overtime to be able to afford to live, missing out on children growing up and family time as a result, and not able to enjoy the additional money as it's paying bills."

"Cannot remember the last time I bought treats, we just eat the bare necessities."

"Buying the reduced price products at the end of life to freeze through doing this and buying cheaper, the taste of things is not the same."

"It is getting harder and harder to actually do a full weekly shop, as having less money to buy food."

"Older relatives are really struggling and having to choose to either pay bills or buy food."

"Only really eat at work now as the food is offered to staff for a low cost, though the majority is fried so not very healthy."

"Had to resort to light theft to eat, but only taking the 'not fit for sale' items."

"Skipping meals often for days, and have long since stopped heating my house."

"The fear of rent increasing again is causing panic as it will further reduce the amount of money left to purchase food, and there isn't much now."

"Really concerned about elderly relatives and neighbours as they are less likely to let us know they are struggling."

"Queuing at foodbanks is degrading. It adds to the stigma of not being able to provide decent food, clean clothes and a warm home."

"People who work feel embarrassed, stressed and often degraded just as much as stay at home families."

"People in the community have had to abandon even the smallest of luxuries like a cake, a can of beer or even toiletries."

"The school holidays are hard, it's hard to feed the children and keep them occupied."

"Free school meals really help some children, but it needs to be for all children as others are struggling too."

"Sometimes the foodbank parcels contain food that can't be eaten, or that we do not know or have the ability to cook, which can cause waste. This adds to the overall guilt of the situation as you feel ungrateful, despite not being able to use it."

"Three nutritious meals a day should be accessible, rather than relying on foodbanks - need community hubs and spaces where meals can be made and eaten together with others."

"Every person should have access to daily basic foods and have the ability to cook with them."

"Foodbanks should be funded, not having to scrape around for grants and donations."

"Minimum wage increase to ensure everyone has a wage of dignity."

"We need decent pay, less hours and more family time."

"Sub standard products are being sent to schools and nursing homes instead of good quality products."

"Started a get-to-know-your-neighbour campaign"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ONLINE SURVEY

OPEN THROUGH 2026 · ENGLAND, SCOTLAND, WALES, NORTHERN IRELAND

AND CORNWALL RESPONDENTS AGED UNDER 18 TO 65+ · 130 PARTICIPANTS

THE CHALLENGES

The survey reached people who would never attend a public meeting, and its written answers are the plainest evidence in this booklet. Over a hundred people described the same arithmetic. "Every purchase is determined by the cost; first course of action whilst shopping is to look for the reduced items... each trip to the shop is a challenge, not a pleasure." "Despite having two full-time wages coming into my household, the rise in the cost of living has severely impacted our ability to afford healthy food." "I work full time, not entitled to any benefits and struggle to feed myself a healthy diet due to the cost of food, some days I skip meals which is not healthy." "You don't cope, you survive." Specific costs recur: a diabetic diet, a gluten-free loaf, a low-protein dairy-free diet costing double a normal shop, neurodivergent children who will only eat particular foods and those foods being the expensive ones, and packs too large for one older person so food is thrown away. Disability and illness run through the responses sight loss making labels unreadable and cooking unsafe, mobility problems making shopping and carrying impossible, long Covid, dementia in the household, a carer buying only microwave meals. One respondent, a mother, wrote about going to bed hungry after leaving what was left in the cupboard for her children: "that is when I ask myself, what have I done wrong?" Another described a six-week gap between losing an NHS job and benefits beginning, with £5 a day to live on, oats strained through a T-shirt, and sleeping through the afternoon to skip lunch.

"I AM NOT COPING. I AM EXISTING."

"WE ARE THE 'MIDDLE INCOME' PEOPLE WHO ARE WORKING LOADS OF HOURS BUT APPARENTLY EARN TOO MUCH TO RECEIVE HELP."

THE SUPPORT

The most common answer to "have you had any support?" was one word: no. Where there was support, it was family a mother lending money for the shop, a daughter cooking an extra portion once a week or local: a pantry where £5 buys £20 of food you choose yourself, a food co-op, community fridges and shops, surplus apps, a church lunch club, a domestic abuse charity, a social prescriber, a housing association's vouchers. Where people had used a food bank, they were grateful and unhappy at once: parcels of tins with nothing fresh, no allowance for allergies or specific needs, hoops to jump through and sometimes nothing at the end, and a community larder where asking for a little more brought shame. Many wrote that pride kept them away entirely, or that they did not qualify, or that they no longer knew how to get a voucher now that everything is online.

A significant group of respondents were themselves the support: food bank and pantry coordinators, a school running a food bank against its own healthy eating policy because need overrides it, a day centre providing a £3.50 cooked lunch and teaching shopping and budgeting, a diabetes dietitian issuing food bank vouchers, a Welsh food partnership working on local growing. Their message was consistent demand is rising, donations and funding are falling, and the sector cannot hold it. "The charity sector can't cope with managing the weight of access to food, which is a human right... We are relying on YOU to fix the system."

WHAT A RIGHT TO FOOD SHOULD CONTAIN

Asked what a government promise on the right to food should include, respondents named: affordable fresh fruit, vegetables, meat, fish, bread, milk and eggs; price controls on basics and an end to supermarket profiteering; free school meals for all children through primary and secondary, with holiday provision and free breakfast; benefits and wages that cover the actual cost of food; food vouchers or a guaranteed weekly food budget; culturally appropriate and allergen-safe food as standard; a right to real food rather than ultra-processed food; the right to grow in your own garden and to save your own seed; protection for small farms; public diners as piloted in Scotland; community kitchens, larders and food clubs open to everyone rather than only to the poor, to remove the stigma; cookery as a compulsory school subject; better regulation of the infant formula market with specialist breastfeeding support; and, from one respondent whose son is tube fed, recognition of enterally fed people, who are usually overlooked entirely.

THE DIFFERENCE IT WOULD MAKE

Not having to worry about the cost of food. "Being able to not worry and live well." "To be able to eat." One respondent put the case for consistency better than any policy paper: "One-off help matters in a crisis, but what really changes things is knowing you'll be able to feed yourself or your family next week and next month too."

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

ONLINE SURVEY

"Every purchase is determined by the cost, first course of action whilst shopping is to look for the reduced items... each trip to the shop is a challenge, not a pleasure."

"You don't cope, you survive and do what you can to do so."

"I am not coping, I am existing."

"We are the 'middle income' people who are working loads of hours but apparently earn too much to receive help."

"Despite having two full time wages coming into my household, the rise in the cost of living has severely impacted our ability to afford healthy food for our family."

"I work full time, feeding my household has become harder due to increased costs of food. This shouldn't be the case when you work full time."

"I have to budget every penny, sometimes skip meals because I don't have money for food."

"When I was made redundant, I had to lay my pride aside and go to a Foodbank. It was the hardest thing to do. I could not tell my children that these items in my shopping bag were gifted by the Foodbank. I felt ashamed."

"But when I go to bed hungry because I let the children have what is left in my cupboard... that is when I ask myself, what have I done wrong?"

"It was very humiliating and I wasn't applicable for food banks until my mental health team got involved."

"It's hard to get help from food banks as you have to jump through many hoops and still don't get help at the end."

"Community larder is £4 and only get a small amount. They'd rather give it to animals than be seen to allowing people to take more veg or bread, for example. They shame you if you dare ask for more."

"I go and eat at the mosque and take plenty home but struggle to heat it. Too ashamed to tell anyone."

"Because of my disabilities I am finding it hard to pay my energy bills and buy healthy foods because of the cost of both."

"Feeding neurodivergent children can be challenging due to texture and smell. In my experience, the food they prefer tends to be more expensive which is financially challenging."

"I use a local food pantry. I get to choose my own food for £5. The value is usually £20, I can have meat, fruit and veg as well as staples."

"Myself and countless colleagues and partners are exhausted, depleted, desperate, while supporting people in an ever worsening system."

"The charity sector can't cope with managing the weight of access to food, which is a human right."

"We are relying on YOU to fix the system... Please cure it for good."

"Right to real food, not a right to ultra processed food."

"Hungry children cannot learn well."

"Not having to worry about the cost of food."

"One-off help matters in a crisis, but what really changes things is knowing you'll be able to feed yourself or your family next week and next month too."

instead of getting a handout... I don't want a food bank, I want something..."

CHAPTER TWELVE

GATESHEAD

WRITTEN SUBMISSION · CITIZENS ADVICE GATESHEAD AND GATESHEAD

FOODBANK · SURVEY OF 170 RESIDENTS AND 534 ADVISER EVIDENCE FORMS

THE CHALLENGES

Gateshead sent the Commission the most heavily evidenced local picture it received: Citizens Advice service data from January 2022 onwards, 534 adviser evidence forms submitted under the category “Charitable Support & Food Banks” between 2024 and March 2026, and an anonymous survey of 170 people gathered online and in person at food banks, pantries, community hubs and discount food projects. Demand for food support stayed at historically high levels from early 2022, spiked in 2023 and peaked in the first half of 2024; it has steadied since but remains far above pre-crisis levels. Food insecurity in the borough is no longer an emergency but a condition. It does not fall evenly. Single adults living alone are consistently the largest group coming to Citizens Advice with food bank issues, followed by single parents. Working-age adults between 30 and 59 account for the most cases. People with a disability or long-term health condition are the single largest group in need. Minoritised ethnic residents are over-represented relative to their share of the local population. The survey found 39% had run out of food in the past month, 59% had skipped meals because they could not afford food, 87% said rising prices had made it harder to eat well, and 54% said a lack of food had damaged their health or wellbeing. Disabled respondents were nearly four times more likely to have run out of food than non-disabled respondents (60% against 16%); single parents likewise (59% against 15%); people living alone were five times more likely to say they had no money left for food after rent and bills (45% against 9%).

“I ALWAYS MAKE SURE MY DOG HAS FOOD - I WOULD RATHER GO HUNGRY.”

“FOOD PRICES HAVE ROCKETED SO CANNOT AFFORD THE FOOD I USED TO ENJOY.”

THE SUPPORT

54% had used a food bank, 32% a food pantry and 30% a community kitchen but only 31% knew what help was available before they went looking, and 49% did not. The barriers people named were not knowing where to go (64%), travel costs (42%), a referral requirement (37%) and fear or lack of trust (29%). Two-thirds (67%) said they were not always able to choose food that met their dietary, cultural or health needs, and 49% reported stress, shame or worry about asking for help at all.

Practitioners working in community food provision were clear about what makes the difference. Food banks supply enough for the short term but are gated by referral and built for crisis. Community markets and pantries let people choose, pay a small amount, and shop in something resembling a normal environment which matters for dignity, and also for neurodivergent people who find supermarkets unmanageable, and for families who cannot risk buying an unfamiliar food that might be wasted. The constraints are supply and money: stock depends on donated surplus rather than on what people need, and funding is short-term.

WHAT A RIGHT TO FOOD SHOULD CONTAIN

Gateshead's recommendations begin with income adequacy and financial stability, and go on to culturally appropriate and nutritious provision, removal of referral barriers, earlier intervention through trusted services such as Family Hubs, clearer local pathways, investment to stabilise community food supply, and specific attention to the structural disadvantages facing people under 25 and people facing immigration-related barriers. 92% of survey respondents agreed that everyone in the UK should have a legal right to affordable, nutritious food.

THE DIFFERENCE IT WOULD MAKE

The submission's own conclusion is that repeated visits to food aid signal entrenched financial shortfall and structural inequality, not a run of bad luck and that emergency food, however well run, cannot reach the causes. What people asked for was consistency: enough income, food they can actually eat, and a way of getting it that does not cost them their dignity.

“FAMILIES BEING ABLE TO CHOOSE THEIR OWN FOOD, ACCESS LOCAL AND CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE OPTIONS, AND AFFORD REGULAR, NUTRITIOUS MEALS WITHOUT RELIANCE ON EMERGENCY SUPPORT OR FEELING JUDGED.”

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

GATESHEAD

"Food prices have rocketed so cannot afford the food I used to enjoy."

"cost of living is impacting all aspects of living."

"Less fatty food cost more."

"I have coeliac disease... gluten free products... rarely the same price as non gluten free products."

"I feel that you shouldn't use a Foodbank unless you are in crisis... there should be a voice in your head... to get yourself out of this situation."

"embarrassed going through [the] referral process."

"I always make sure my dog has food - I would rather go hungry."

"like piggy in the middle"

"ADHD - need more protein as MH [mental health] suffers,"

"I end up having fits... I only eat salad from shop as it cheaper... doctor already said it's not good on my health,"

"being able to buy food for one person,"

"because of increasing rental prices in UK, most of them end up not able to manage their essential needs."

"healthy food [needs to be] affordable"

"I'll often try do a yellow sticker shop... I feel guilty though - but single low wages is why."

"community food hub and pantries have made a huge and positive change... more variety."

"been told that I don't qualify... and when in desperate need there is no help available the same day."

"I would say that the main barriers people experience in accessing food in our community are money and trust. Even when we offer food and other household items at lower prices than anywhere else, we sometimes find that people would rather do a bigger shop at Aldi... larger, more established brands... have something approaching a monopoly on trust."

"In particular I think the price of halal meat and the difficulty of procuring it in the various food projects in the area creates a lot of need..."

"Low incomes and rising costs are key, alongside benefit delays, limited transport, and lack of nearby affordable options. Families also face stigma and complex referral routes for support."

"Feeding Families boxes and the Bread-and-Butter Thing (TBBT) are well established... [however] many families become aware of support... once they are already struggling."

"Higher and more stable incomes, earlier intervention through trusted services like Family Hubs, clearer local pathways to support, and expansion of dignified food models..."

"They provide essential immediate support and act as a gateway to wider help... however, they are..."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DISABLED PEOPLE'S ORGANISATIONS

WRITTEN SUBMISSION · DISABILITY POVERTY CAMPAIGN GROUP · SURVEY OF 97

RESPONDENTS IN STANDARD, EASY READ AND BRITISH SIGN LANGUAGE FORMATS

THE CHALLENGES

The Disability Poverty Campaign Group is a national coalition of Disabled People's Organisations. Its submission sets the arithmetic out first: to reach the same standard of living as a non-disabled household, a disabled person needs on average an extra £1,095 a month. Spending on food and energy takes a larger share of disabled households' budgets. Nearly four in ten households with a disabled adult were food insecure in 2023. Over half of parents and carers of disabled children report skipping or cutting the size of their meals. Evidence suggests up to three quarters of food bank users are disabled or live with a disabled person.

But affordability is only half of it. Inaccessible public transport, inaccessible supermarket checkouts 65% of respondents to a government study reported access barriers in retail additional delivery charges for online shopping, and digital exclusion combine to force a reliance on low-cost processed food, which then worsens the very conditions people are managing. The coalition ran its own survey to put lived experience alongside the published data, asking seven questions in three formats. Nearly three-quarters said their income does not reliably cover the cost of the food they need to stay healthy 49.5% sometimes, 25.8% never. 80.4% said rising food prices had made it harder to afford food. 84.2% said difficulty affording food had damaged their physical or mental health; every BSL respondent reported a negative health impact. 55.2% skip meals or reduce portions at least once a week, and 17.7% at least once a month. 90.6% face at least one barrier to physically accessing food. And 57.7% said disability-related costs reduce the money available for food "a lot", with a further 30.9% saying "a little".

**"FOR MANY DISABLED PEOPLE, FOOD IS NOT OPTIONAL
TO HEALTH IT'S ESSENTIAL TO MANAGING THEIR CONDITION."**

THE SUPPORT

Only 25.9% had used a food bank in the previous year. The submission treats that as the most revealing figure in the survey: set against the scale of hardship reported elsewhere in the same responses, it shows that food bank use is not an adequate proxy for food insecurity. The barriers that keep people from food also keep them from food aid distance, limited opening hours, referral requirements, no energy left for the journey so people skip meals instead. The result is hidden food insecurity that no official figure captures, and no GP, social worker or charity picks up until it is severe.

WHAT A RIGHT TO FOOD SHOULD CONTAIN

Six recommendations: uprate all disability benefits to reflect the real cost of living and reverse planned cuts to Universal Credit for new claimants; introduce legislation to incorporate a right to food across the UK; embed food security into health and social care policy, including screening for food insecurity in healthcare settings; reduce essential disability-related costs through a social energy tariff, affordable accessible transport and help with equipment costs; introduce accessibility standards across the food system, starting with supermarkets and delivery, and remove referral barriers to food aid; and co-produce food policy with disabled people rather than consulting them.

THE DIFFERENCE IT WOULD MAKE

Poor diets worsen existing conditions faster and more severely for disabled people, leading to complications and hospital admissions that need not have happened, in a health service already under strain. The coalition frames food poverty as a public health issue as much as a welfare one and asks that disability-related food insecurity be treated as central to any strategy for the right to food not as a subsection of it.

**"DISABLED PEOPLE ARE NOT JUST EXPERIENCING POVERTY THEY ARE BEING
SYSTEMATICALLY PREVENTED FROM MAINTAINING THEIR HEALTH."**

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

DISABLED PEOPLE'S ORGANISATIONS

"Any costs increase in food will only further push Disabled people deeper into food poverty."

"food poverty for Disabled people is not solely about affordability, it is also about access to it."

"These additional barriers limit the ability or option to a healthy diet, creating a reliance on low-cost processed food which can directly worsen existing disabilities through a poor diet."

"many individuals are living with financial instability, suggesting that even where income may sometimes meet essential costs, it is not sufficient to ensure regular food security."

"This points to the presence of hidden food insecurity, where significant need exists but is not reflected in foodbank usage."

"foodbank usage is not an adequate proxy for food insecurity among disabled people."

"For many Disabled people, food is not optional to health it's essential to managing their condition."

"Food should be a source of nourishment, dignity and enjoyment, yet for many Disabled people it has become a daily struggle defined by affordability and access."

"Government must move beyond consultation towards meaningful co-production with Disabled people in the design and delivery of all food policy."

"Disabled people are not just experiencing poverty they are being systematically prevented from maintaining their health."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WOMEN AND CARERS IN BRISTOL

WRITTEN SUBMISSION · BRISTOL WOMEN'S VOICE · IN-PERSON CONSULTATION,

7 MAY 2026 · UNKNOWN PARTICIPANTS

THE CHALLENGES

Bristol Women's Voice brought the Commission the one lens missing from most of the evidence: gender. In 2024 one in six women experienced food insecurity, against one in eight men. Women are more exposed because of low pay and greater caring responsibilities. In Bristol, 12% of carers experience moderate or severe food insecurity against a city average of 7.9%. Single parent households, overwhelmingly led by women, are at higher risk and more likely to be referred to food banks; 29% of them have smaller meals or skip meals entirely so their children can eat.

Its consultation on 7 May 2026 brought together charities and food organisations, a carers-led organisation, an academic from the University of Bristol and BWV staff. Stigma came first. A participant from the Somali community described the shame her community feels in using food banks they are entitled to, compounded by a reduction in advisers at food banks and community centres and by language barriers that take time and resources to overcome. Carers described food as the precondition of care itself – and described giving up their own share when there was not enough. The submission connects this to precarious, low-paid and gig work: 40% of people with care experience were food insecure in 2024, triple the rate of those without caring responsibilities.

"YOU HAVE TO EAT WELL TO WORK WELL."

**"IN SOME PARTS OF THE COMMUNITY, THE STIGMA SURROUNDING
FOOD BANKS IS SO STRONG. PEOPLE ARE OFTEN AFRAID."**

THE SUPPORT

What worked in Bristol was community-run and low on ceremony. The Easton community fridge, which brought people together and cut waste. Food clubs whose subscription model carries less shame than a parcel. Wellspring Settlement charges £1 a year to join and £3.50 for a weekly food box. Hillfields Community Garden's new community larder, open every Friday, free, with the option to donate what you can. Informal networks mattered too, particularly where something is traded rather than given: people are readier to ask when they can offer a crocheted top in return.

Digital tools were seen as a real but under-used opportunity. Participants used Olio and Too Good To Go, and named the obstacles: collection times, transport, and simple lack of awareness. The submission notes that 16% of food bank users have no internet access at all against the general population, that women are 14–22% more likely to face digital poverty than men, and that a quarter of carers did not use technologies because they did not know what was available, while one in eight could not afford to buy it.

WHAT A RIGHT TO FOOD SHOULD CONTAIN

Gender-sensitive responses that recognise how gender intersects with other structures of inequality. Action on the stigma and culture of shame around food banks, so that support can be used with confidence and dignity. Investment in community-driven provision fridges, larders, food clubs as indispensable rather than supplementary. Recognition of carers' particular exposure. And food education alongside more diverse food options, including for autistic women and children whose food preferences are specific and whose options are limited by cost and availability.

THE DIFFERENCE IT WOULD MAKE

Participants described food as both nourishing and healing the thing that makes caring and working possible at all. One recalled a parent whose alcoholism meant food was the first thing to go, a reminder that mental ill health and food insecurity travel together. The submission's argument is that food insecurity has to be read inside the broader economic inequalities' women face, or the remedy will miss most of them.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

BRISTOL WOMEN'S VOICE

"In some parts of the community, the stigma surrounding food banks is so strong. People are often afraid." "You have to eat well to work well."

"There are people who are going hunger because there are people with kids like myself, and their kids eat first then the family, and at the end of the day they don't have enough money."

"I feel like if there would be a community fridge in on literally every street, and if we could fill them up, that will save us time."

"I think in Bristol, they [community fridge] could be really useful, just like generally encouraging people to start them up and encourage people to donate and use them and break the stigma around food access."

"I've gone through moments in the past years when I had, like, five pounds in my bank account for maybe more than a week. And I just had to like, okay, I can afford the fruit and veggie bag from Too Good To Go, and that's what I'm going to eat."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL UK SUPPORTERS

SURVEY OF AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL UK SUPPORTERS • 823 PARTICIPANTS

OF WHICH 37 RESPONDENTS DESCRIBED DIRECT EXPERIENCE

THE CHALLENGES

Thirty-seven respondents to Amnesty International UK's survey described finding access to food difficult over the past year. Amnesty notes that the number reflects the profile of its supporter base rather than wider society, but the themes are unambiguous. Respondents framed food as a question of poverty, inequality and systemic insecurity, not of household management. Affordability was the most common barrier: the cost of the weekly shop rising while incomes did not, bulk buying impossible on limited money, fresh fruit and vegetables dearer than ultra-processed food, and quality and choice falling even as prices climbed.

Rural respondents described having no shop to go to. Disabled respondents described being unable to move between shops and being left with expensive home delivery or paying inflated convenience-store prices because they cannot reach a supermarket without a car. Carers described choosing between heat and food. Parents described going without so their children could eat.

"POVERTY AND HUNGER ARE VIOLENCE, THE SYSTEM IS SET UP TO KEEP YOU IN CRISIS NEVER IN SECURITY, BENEFITS AND WAGES ARE SO LOW THAT PEOPLE ARE CONSTANTLY TRYING TO MANAGE THE BASICS BUT NEVER ENOUGH TO HAVE A SAFETY NET."

THE SUPPORT

The most sustained testimony in this submission came from teachers. They described snack cupboards used daily, breakfast provided before every GCSE and A-Level exam, food parcels sent home, laundry facilities, electricity vouchers, school supplies and period products much of it funded from school budgets or staff pockets, and none of it sustainable. They described the effect of hunger on concentration, behaviour, attendance and sleep: children sleeping through afternoons, chronic absence, parents disengaging partly from fear of being judged. One described a pupil close to permanent exclusion for lashing out, until someone asked the right question and found he was eating one meal a day.

WHAT A RIGHT TO FOOD SHOULD CONTAIN

The most commonly described coping mechanism was skipping meals, including by people for whom that is medically dangerous. Where community support existed, respondents used it and named its limits: projects that had ended, food banks closed by the time a shift finishes, hot meals available through churches, food banks and warm spaces in some areas and not others. Others were borrowing – living permanently inside an overdraft to buy essentials, which respondents described as a vicious cycle rather than a solution.

THE DIFFERENCE IT WOULD MAKE

Respondents' answers point in one direction: incomes and social security adequate to cover the actual cost of food, prices that reflect something other than supermarket profit, and food support built for people who work shifts, cannot drive, live rurally, or manage a medical diet. The teachers' evidence adds a second: that where the state does not provide, schools are doing it out of their own budgets, and that this is not a system.

"HAVE YOU TRIED TO FOCUS WHEN HUNGRY? FOR SOME OF THESE CHILDREN THE LAST MEAL THEY HAD WAS THE FREE SCHOOL LUNCH THEY RECEIVED AT 12PM THE DAY BEFORE."

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL UK

"Poverty and Hunger are violence, the system is set up to keep you in crisis never in security, benefits and wages are so low that people are constantly trying to manage the basics but never enough to have a safety net."

"The cost of the food is making it difficult for us to be able to afford food for the month on our salaries however."

"We run out of money."

"The cost is rising so much, in summer 2025 I was £60 for food for the week, last week £110 for less, Tesco and Sainsbury's putting their profits before customers."

"Lack of choice and convenience, ever since 2020 I feel basic supermarkets and food staples have changed, the cost has gone up, the quality and choice has gone down drastically."

"I often work more than is actually good for my health in order to have enough for us because food is so expensive."

"I'm writing about my daughter who is on UC and can't make it through the month on the very low amount she gets. She is often too ill to get to the foodbank, but she has to get there in order to eat the last week of the month."

"Unhealthy processed food is cheaper and readily more available than healthier foods."

"We live in the county and there is no shops for us to be able to go into."

"There seems to be help in other areas of Scotland but not where I live."

"I am disabled and diabetic I cannot manage to go from shop to shop I am stuck with expensive home delivery."

"I am on a low income and have a disability, I have to pay inflated prices at local convenience stores as I cannot travel to the larger supermarkets (no car)."

"Low income due to being a carer sometimes I have to skip meals or fast for a day as I sometimes have to choose between heat or food or bills or food it's no big deal for me to skip a day's food it's just the way it is at least I have a roof over my head plenty don't."

"I prioritise feeding my child and ensuring she has enough cash for school lunch."

"Yes, I have a snack cupboard, and it is used frequently. Children come in at the start of the day and take fruit or cereal because they don't have food at home."

"We automatically check in with each student when they arrive and ask, "have you had breakfast?" - where the answer is no - the child is taken discretely out to have a bowl of cereal or toast (this supply is paid for by school)."

"We had a student who kept lashing out and hitting other students when angry. He was internally excluded several times for this behaviour and was nearing a p

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ATD FOURTH WORLD

WRITTEN SUBMISSION · PEER DISCUSSIONS WITH SEVERAL GROUPS OF EIGHT

TO TEN ACTIVISTS WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF LONG-TERM POVERTY · 90 PARTICIPANTS

THE CHALLENGES

ATD Fourth World is an anti-poverty human rights charity with more than sixty years' experience in the UK. Its submission draws on a series of discussions held with small peer groups of activists who have built a practice of reflecting together. Their account of food insecurity is about power, not nutrition. People know what healthy food is; they cannot afford it. Choice disappears first the saver beans instead of the ones that taste of something and with it the ordinary occasions that food carries: birthdays, holidays, anything marked. And the cost of eating is not only the cost of food: the oven, the electricity, the gas, the water, the repair when the oven breaks.

"IT'S NOT THAT WE DON'T KNOW HOW TO EAT HEALTHY. WE KNOW WHAT FOODS CAN MAKE YOU FEEL FULL. WE ALSO KNOW WHAT FOODS ARE HEALTHIER BUT WE JUST CAN'T AFFORD IT."

"JOY AND PERSONAL AGENCY ARE CENTRAL. WHEN YOU STRUGGLE TO AFFORD DAILY FOOD, WHAT ABOUT BIRTHDAYS? HOLIDAYS? SPECIAL OCCASIONS?"

THE SUPPORT

The group's evidence on food aid is the most detailed the Commission received. Some food banks and pantries charge. What you get depends entirely on your address. Lactose-free milk and halal meat are rarely available; allergies and the specific safe foods that autistic and ADHD adults and children rely on are rarely met. Soup kitchens feed one person for one meal on one day, which is no use to a family. Referrals are required, vouchers are rationed to one every four weeks, and nothing fresh comes in the bag. Mouldy produce and out-of-date tins were described not as isolated failures but as recurring and, as the submission points out, people who need food assistance cannot take their custom elsewhere. Then there is how it feels: being interviewed at the door, being given a number, doing all of it in public, being seen by someone you know. A food bank sited opposite a school, opening as the school day ends. Bible verses quoted while you wait. The submission is careful not to attack the organisations filling the gap but insists on naming the structures they sit inside. Free school meals, where they work, are valued but food runs out before the back of the queue, allergy arrangements leave children hungry, and secondary school means paying, with better meals for those who can pay more. One parent described a nursery serving juice to fee-paying children first and giving the funded children what was left. ATD Fourth World also raises an issue almost no one else did: parents using a food bank being judged as bad budgeters, food pantry visits logged by social services, cupboards and freezers inspected, and "neglect" written down.

WHAT A RIGHT TO FOOD SHOULD CONTAIN

A right to food that leaves behind digital surveillance and institutionalised charity, and moves instead toward structural equity, corporate accountability and recognition of human dignity. Adequate benefits, so that food banks are not required. An end to the lower minimum wage for 18–25-year-olds, who pay the same price for food as everyone else. Food aid that asks what people can eat. And a serious look at the digitalisation of food assistance Universal Credit, Healthy Start cards, cashless free school meals, Aspen cards which has fragmented provision, shifted the burden onto volunteers, excluded people without devices or connectivity, and handed financial and data management to private corporations. On accountability, ATD Fourth World offers a method as well as a demand: the Inclusive and Deliberative Elaboration and Evaluation of Policies process, developed with the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, which uses the Merging of Knowledge methodology to bring the vantage point of people in poverty into decisions and uncover policy blind spots.

THE DIFFERENCE IT WOULD MAKE

The submission's pilot project answers this better than an argument. A hotel in Surrey houses people seeking asylum with no access to any kitchen. ATD Fourth World now runs a fortnightly well-being morning in a centre with a large one, where the community cooks together; making pupusas has been the most popular activity. Restoring the connection to kitchen and home is the point. Food banks, the group's consensus holds, must only ever be a short-term emergency measure - not a permanent fixture compensating for the state's failure.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL UK

"Poverty and Hunger are violence, the system is set up to keep you in crisis never in security, benefits and wages are so low that people are constantly trying to manage the basics but never enough to have a safety net."

"The cost of the food is making it difficult for us to be able to afford food for the month on our salaries however."

"We run out of money."

"The cost is rising so much, in summer 2025 I was £60 for food for the week, last week £110 for less, Tesco and Sainsbury's putting their profits before customers."

"Lack of choice and convenience, ever since 2020 I feel basic supermarkets and food staples have changed, the cost has gone up, the quality and choice has gone down drastically."

"I often work more than is actually good for my health in order to have enough for us because food is so expensive."

"I'm writing about my daughter who is on UC and can't make it through the month on the very low amount she gets. She is often too ill to get to the foodbank, but she has to get there in order to eat the last week of the month."

"Unhealthy processed food is cheaper and readily more available than healthier foods."

"We live in the county and there is no shops for us to be able to go into."

"There seems to be help in other areas of Scotland but not where I live."

"I am disabled and diabetic I cannot manage to go from shop to shop I am stuck with expensive home delivery."

"I am on a low income and have a disability, I have to pay inflated prices at local convenience stores as I cannot travel to the larger supermarkets (no car)."

"Low income due to being a carer sometimes I have to skip meals or fast for a day as I sometimes have to choose between heat or food or bills or food it's no big deal for me to skip a day's food it's just the way it is at least I have a roof over my head plenty don't."

"I prioritise feeding my child and ensuring she has enough cash for school lunch."

"Yes, I have a snack cupboard, and it is used frequently. Children come in at the start of the day and take fruit or cereal because they don't have food at home."

"We automatically check in with each student when they arrive and ask, 'have you had breakfast?' - where the answer is no - the child is taken discretely out to have a bowl of cereal or toast (this supply is paid for by school)."

"We had a student who kept lashing out and hitting other students when angry. He was internally excluded several times for this behaviour and was nearing a permanent exclusion before anyone managed to ask the 'right question' and he finally told us that he was only eating one meal a day at that point and often his parents didn't even eat every day."

"I had to starve to make sure my son would have a meal."

"Skipping meals isn't ideal as I'm a diabetic, but at times I have no choice."

"By the time I finish work the foodbanks are already closed."

"We were able to access support via Love Local cards however this project is now finished and the help we had is now stopped."

"Having to borrow money - which means using my overdraft on a daily basis - is very hard. I'm ultimately using money that isn't mine to buy essentials. It causes no end of stress and worry."

**"JOY AND PERSONAL AGENCY ARE CENTRAL. WHEN YOU
STRUGGLE TO AFFORD DAILY FOOD, WHAT ABOUT BIRTHDAYS?
HOLIDAYS? SPECIAL OCCASIONS?"**

COMMON THREADS

WHAT RAN THROUGH EVERY SESSION, IN EVERY NATION

The sessions were held in different places with different groups, and the local detail differed sharply. The underlying account did not. Ten threads ran through all of them.

ONE: THIS IS AN INCOME CRISIS, NOT ONLY A FOOD CRISIS

Low pay, insecure hours, inadequate benefits, asylum support of £38 or £49 a week, and pensions that do not stretch. Food is the flexible item in a budget, so food is what gets cut. Every session concluded that no food policy works without adequate income.

TWO: WORK NO LONGER PROTECTS YOU

Nurses, health visitors, teachers, carers, support workers and food factory workers all described skipping meals, using pantries or relying on family. Two full-time wages in a household was not a guarantee of enough food.

THREE: FOOD WITHOUT FACILITIES IS NOT FOOD

A kettle in temporary accommodation, no fridge or cooker, a prepayment meter, a carer with fifteen minutes for a meal, no energy left to cook. Ingredients are useless without the means, the equipment and the time. "Food security means meals, not just ingredients."

FOUR: STIGMA KEEPS PEOPLE HUNGRY

Referrals, interviews, bank statements, named vans, queues, limits of three parcels in six months, children refusing free school meals. People described going without rather than being seen. Universal provision was proposed everywhere as the cure.

FIVE: CHARITY HAS BECOME INFRASTRUCTURE

Food aid is now a de facto public service run on donations, short-term grants and volunteers who often need help themselves as need rises and donations fall. Participants called this social infrastructure the state has disowned and asked for statutory provision instead.

SIX: ACCESS IS A POSTCODE LOTTERY

No supermarket in the estate or the village, a rural premium, £9 for the bus, unreliable deliveries, inaccessible shops and websites, services only in the mornings, provision that closes at weekends. Where you live decides what you eat.

SEVEN: CHOICE, CULTURE AND DIETARY NEEDS ARE TREATED AS LUXURIES

Halal, gluten-free, dairy-free, diabetic and sensory-specific diets all carry a premium and are rarely met by food aid. "No more beans." People asked for good food with memory food that reflects who they are not calories.

EIGHT: SKILLS AND EDUCATION HAVE BEEN LOST,

AND CANNOT BE TAUGHT INTO POVERTY

Cooking, budgeting, growing and food knowledge have thinned across generations squeezed for time. Every session wanted them restored in schools and communities and every session added that education without money changes nothing.

NINE: CORPORATE POWER SETS THE PRICE OF EATING

Supermarket dominance and profit, prices that differ between branches of the same chain, waste withheld while people go hungry, cheap ultra-processed food promoted hardest, and local produce sold far away and sold back at a premium.

TEN: WHAT PEOPLE WANT IS DIGNITY, AND THEY WANT IT IN LAW

Community kitchens, public diners, pantries, co-ops, growing space and universal school meals came up in every session with a duty on public bodies, a route to redress, and the resources to make it real. Rights without accountability, several warned, change nothing.

**"FOOD SHOULDN'T BE SOMETHING YOU DESPERATELY SEEK.
IT SHOULD BE SOMETHING YOU HAVE."**

THANK YOU

This booklet exists because several hundred people were willing to talk about something most of us are taught to hide. Some described skipping meals so their children could eat. Some described walking twenty thousand steps a day between free meals. Some described the moment they first walked into a food bank. None of that is easy to say out loud in a room of strangers, and the Commission is grateful to every person who did.

Thank you to the community members of Liverpool; to the people who came to Hirst Welfare in Ashington; to the health visitors, community café workers, teachers and residents of Aberdare and the Cynon Valley; to the students, lecturers and community organisers in Birmingham; to the young people in Belfast who told us exactly what school food is like; to everyone who contributed in Glasgow, Grangemouth and Dundee; to the community hubs, co-ops and growers of Harrow, Haringey, Tottenham and Tower Hamlets; to the members of the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People and the carers who joined them; to the day centres, drop-ins, soup kitchens and outreach teams working with people experiencing homelessness in Bristol, Manchester, Cornwall, London and the North East; to the BFAWU workplace representatives at Yarnfield; and to everyone who wrote to us through the online survey from England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and Cornwall.

Thank you to the organisations that opened their doors, made the introductions, laid on the tea and, in many cases, fed the room: the community hubs, pantries, larders, food banks, co-operatives, faith groups, unions, youth services, coalitions and local partnerships named throughout these chapters.

Many of them are running on short-term grants and goodwill while demand rises. They gave us their time anyway.

Thank you to the Commissioners and facilitators who travelled, listened and wrote it all down - including Barrie Margetts (Chair) Ian Byrne, Sarah Woolley, Angela Carriedo, Kemi Akinola, Regina Keith Murphy, Ian Sinha, Jen Clark, SallyAnn Kelly, Alex Colas, Paul Doherty, Kevin Morgan and Sharon Noonan-Gunning and to the academics and practitioners who led tables and sessions. Thank you to the University of Westminster, the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union and the Food and Work Network for supporting the Commission's work. Contributions in this booklet are not attributed. That was the promise made in every room, and it is kept here. But nothing in these pages is ours: every challenge, every criticism and every proposal came from someone who has lived it.

"WE ARE RELYING ON YOU TO FIX THE SYSTEM."

A survey respondent who has volunteered in food aid for years.
The Commission takes that as its instruction.



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**LISTENING TO PEOPLE'S VOICES.
TURNING LIVED EXPERIENCES INTO CHANGE.**