



RIGHT TO FOOD UK COMMISSION

A Roadmap to Delivering Food Security for All by 2035

Final Report of the UK Right to Food Commission

September 2026

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Foreword

The Right to Food Commission was created to gather evidence on the causes of, and solutions to, food insecurity and hunger in the UK. This report presents the findings from our work.

It is the story of people across the UK, told in their own words. It shows the reality of living with food insecurity, of having to choose between eating and heating, and of food becoming a secondary consideration after rent, bills and debt have been dealt with. These testimonies are supported by evidence from experts drawn from across civil society and academia, business, local authorities and government.

The Commission grew out of 10 years of work on the Right to Food campaign, led by Ian Byrne. Initially driven by voluntary food collections among football fans in Liverpool, it grew in response to the rising crisis in food insecurity and poverty. These food banks, and many others around the country, were set up to help ensure local families had something to eat, and councils began passing motions declaring that they supported becoming a Right to Food City.

It quickly became clear that charity and relying on volunteers, although vital, was only ever going to provide a sticking plaster to the reality of many millions of people across the UK, who were going hungry due to insufficient income. This report aims to bring together the voices of these people, alongside experts working on food insecurity across government, public and private sectors, to document the realities of food insecurity, examine the changes needed to address its root causes, and inform action towards the realisation of the Right to Food across the UK.

We have seen that the burden and impact of food insecurity is spread unevenly across the country from North to South, but it is clearly present in all four nations. It affects those living with disabilities and mental health issues, the elderly and people from ethnic minorities, and those living in rural areas the hardest. It is being felt by children going to school hungry and by parents skipping meals. It affects people's physical and mental well-being, and it is reducing both their quality and quantity of life.

A wide range of people with rich complementary experiences have shaped this report. The commitment from commissioners and all those who contributed serves as testament to the strength of feeling on this issue, and it has been my great privilege to act as Chair.

On behalf of everyone involved, I especially want to thank all the people who honestly and openly shared their lived experiences. At times it was heartbreaking to listen to the struggles people had to cope with every day. But it was also inspiring to hear how they put their families first and did so much for others in similar or worse situations than themselves.

I also want to thank everyone who shared their research and professional experience, and the hundreds of people who took the trouble to submit written evidence. Gathering this evidence has provided us with a window into a better world and helped us consider how we can deliver a Right to Food law that eliminates food insecurity.

I hope this report conveys the rich shared experience and commitment to making a difference we heard from around the country, in cities, towns and villages, across all parts of the UK. It was a common story, told with different local flavours that we must work hard to retain, so people can help shape the solutions that are delivered within their communities. Power to choose a dignified pathway out of food insecurity must rest with the people, not the politicians.

Ian Byrne has said many times, *"I don't want a top-down report that sits on a shelf and goes nowhere, I want a report that makes a difference, that addresses the key drivers of hunger and gives a clear roadmap as to what we are going to do about it."* I believe this report does that.



There is no lack of evidence of the extent of food insecurity, the impact it has, and the solutions that could eliminate it. This report presents this evidence and makes a compelling case for enshrining the Right to Food within our political and legal framework, while outlining what we stand to lose if we do not act now. We have a narrow window of opportunity to make a real difference to the lives of millions of people across the UK and reshape the future of food for generations to come. We must not miss our chance.

Barrie Margetts, Chair.

Executive Summary and Roadmap

Context

The evidence received by the Right to Food Commission paints a deeply worrying and at times heartbreaking picture of everyday life for many communities across the UK.

Acute food insecurity has reached crisis levels, affecting more than 14 million people in 2026 (as measured by Trussell Trust), a number which continues to rise.

In the hundreds of community sessions we ran, people up and down the country told the Commission that food insecurity cannot be understood as simply a food issue, caused by rising prices. It is part of a wider affordability crisis that will worsen without urgent state action. This sentiment was echoed by experts across government, civil society and academia.

Evidence gathering

The Commission was established to gather the evidence and to provide a roadmap to end hunger and food insecurity in the UK by 2035. Evidence to support the roadmap was gathered through:

- review of existing government policies and plans,
- review of published reports from NGOs and third sector organisations focused on food poverty,
- taking evidence from experts in the field,
- listening to people who are either currently living with food insecurity or who have in the past been food insecure, or who worked with groups trying to address and ameliorate the effects of food insecurity.
- consultation with people in work and living on social security.
- calling for submissions from interested parties.

Core findings of the report:

Affordability is the primary driver of food insecurity

The interaction between inadequate incomes, rising living costs, limited access to essential goods and services, and rising debt, is combining to undermine people's ability to access adequate food. We explore this more fully in Chapters 2, 3 and 4.

The true cost of UK food insecurity is hundreds of billions each year

The latest estimates of the total health-related hidden costs of the UK's dysfunctional food system amount to £298 billion per year, up by 10% since 2024 (Jackson 2026). This includes healthcare, social care, welfare spending, productivity losses and the human cost of chronic disease.

This is close to the entire annual NHS budget.

The cost of providing a healthy diet for the whole UK population would be approximately £51 billion per year, less than a quarter of that figure. The argument for action on food security is clear: inaction is crippling our economy.

But there are also hidden costs that are woven more deeply into the fabric of our society. Poor nutrition in infancy and childhood is linked to worse educational attainment, poorer mental health and greater chronic-disease risk in adulthood (Alves & Alves 2023).

Life expectancy in deprived areas, where food insecurity levels are among the highest, is also significantly lower than the national average. The gap in healthy life expectancy between the most and least deprived

areas of England is now around 19–20 years, widening to some 25 years for disabled people (ONS, 2025). (See Chapter 3 for a full breakdown of the current state of food insecurity and its impact)

Government inaction and a broken food system have created this crisis

Ensuring everyone can access sufficient affordable, healthy and culturally appropriate food is one of the most basic functions of government. This report outlines the legal national and international commitments the UK has made to doing so (see Chapter 5).

Yet the evidence heard by the Commission suggests that successive governments have failed to exercise this duty in significant respects. The UK's current state of food insecurity is the culmination of four decades of economic and social policy designed around deregulation and free-market based solutions. Market failures have been at the core of food inequalities in the world's sixth largest economy, and public authorities have been unable or unwilling to remedy the social and environmental costs derived from private gain. (Chapter 2, and Chapter 6, Section 8).

The institutions of the British state have systematically failed to prioritise the living standards of large sections of society. This cannot continue.

A secure food supply does not remove food insecurity

While we acknowledge the importance of national food security and the need to address the impact of climate change and other shocks on the UK food system's resilience, this will not put an end to hunger in the UK.

The evidence we gathered shows that food availability is not the main driver of household food insecurity. Ensuring national food security does not protect against household food insecurity. Poverty and a lack of affordability are the key drivers stopping to access the food currently available within the country. One in five people in the UK live in poverty, and they are among the most vulnerable to being food insecure (Francis-Devine 2026).

That is why, within this report and throughout our recommendations, the Commission focused on tackling household food insecurity rather than examining the drivers of and solutions to national food security.

We have the means to address the problem, but we must act now

Our evidence shows that food insecurity is devastating lives and imposing substantial direct and indirect costs on government. Investing in the programme set out in this roadmap will deliver significant returns by improving health and well-being while reducing the public costs of poor diets.

We are calling for urgent and far-reaching policy action to end food insecurity in less than a decade.

The Commission calls for:

- immediate investment to protect incomes and increase affordability;
- establishment of a legally enforceable Right to Food, with accountable national leadership alongside a legal duty and accountability in all four nations, regional mayors and local government. The Scottish Government to reintroduce/revive a Right to Food Bill in the current parliamentary session. The Welsh Senedd and the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly should use their devolved legislative powers to introduce a statutory Right to Food. The legally enforceable Right to Food be applied across all levels of governance and policy implementation and for those in power to decide how best to do it so that it is effective. Implementation will be closely scrutinised by campaigners who will be more than happy to help shape it
- creation of a funded ten-year programme to eliminate food insecurity by 2035.
- a model of household affordability governance be embedded at the heart of government.

The Commission argues that to effectively deliver a legally enforceable Right to Food, legislation must be embedded within a wider architecture of governance, one which enables across-the-board interventions on

all the interacting determinants of the cost of living and health of household finances, including income, debts, cost, and supply of everyday goods and services.

We recommend that an extensive rewiring of the state and the targeted regulation of markets over the coming decade is required to eliminate food insecurity in the UK. We call for both immediate actions to reduce food insecurity and a longer-term framework establishing the Right to Food as a legal duty on public bodies.

The Right to Food roadmap, outlined in this report, highlights actions that government can take at national, devolved nation and local government levels to immediately alleviate food insecurity, while addressing the longer-term structural and systems-level changes required to ensure no one goes to bed hungry in the sixth richest country in the world.

A summary of core messages from the Commission's community oral evidence

- *Food insecurity is as much about dignity as it is about food:*

People described undignified conditions for accessing food and a lack of choice or agency over food obtained from charities. They spoke of impossible choices when spending on food, heating, housing, transport, or healthcare. Support should promote dignity, choice and inclusion rather than reliance on charity.

- *Food insecurity is a problem of income and affordability not food availability:*

Participants consistently identified low pay in formal jobs, inadequate social security, insecure working conditions, debt, and rising food, fuel, and housing costs as the root causes of limited access to available food and of people going hungry. Healthy eating is often unaffordable, not unattainable.

- *Food insecurity reflects wider inequalities:*

Vulnerable groups such as disabled people, lone parents, migrants, ethnic minority communities, youth, the homeless, and people living in deprived areas are disproportionately affected by food insecurity. Participants repeatedly highlighted the role of structural barriers, stigma, discrimination and unequal access to services and healthy food.

- *The food system is propped up by waste and ultra processed foods:*

Contributors highlighted the contradiction of rising food insecurity alongside food waste, arguing that surplus food redistribution cannot replace adequate incomes or guarantee access to nutritious food with dignity. Expanded access (physically and economically) to unhealthy foods, including fast-food outlets and packaged foods, is a key factor shaping people's choices today.

- *The food system is shaped by the wider social environment:*

Access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food is influenced by income, housing, transport, health and social security. Witnesses argued that creating a fair food system requires tackling these interconnected drivers, rather than focusing policy initiatives solely on food provision. This includes limiting the power of big food corporations over small producers and their workers - too many of the people who provide food are food insecure.

- *Prevention and income adequacy are more effective than crisis response:*

Participants consistently supported cash-first approaches, fair wages, adequate social security, social protection floors, free school meals, and community-led provisions, such as community dinners and restaurants. The Commission heard that lasting solutions must address the root causes of poverty while ensuring everyone can access food with dignity. People stressed that current protections for the right to food are fragmented and governmental responsibilities unclear

- *Legal recognition of the right to food must be backed by clear action and accountability:*

Many stated that a Right to Food law should establish clear duties, strengthen cross-departmental collaboration, set minimum standards, and create robust accountability mechanisms for reducing food insecurity

The economic case for ending food insecurity

The Commission heard consistently that the only flexibility families have when budgeting is to reduce or alter food consumption patterns to skip meals or to increase consumption of cheaper, less healthy food against the rising costs of other essential outgoings.

Those in work and receiving benefits are having to rely on charity to make ends meet. The benefits system is not working to protect people, with debt to government often driving people into food insecurity. The cost of renting often exceeds family incomes, leaving little or nothing left for food or energy to prepare food.

Despite holding down multiple jobs and working long, insecure and irregular hours still leave many households with insufficient income to be able to afford a healthy diet. The pressure of working long hours leads many families to little time to prepare and eat healthy meals.

Evidence submitted to the Commission indicates that failing to address food insecurity is a significant economic drain on the country. Revised 2026 estimates place the annual direct and indirect costs of poor diet at nearly £298 billion, including more than £100 billion in healthcare, social care and welfare costs (Jackson 2026).

By comparison the investment needed to establish universal free school meals, universal holiday food provision, and to fund community kitchens and hubs is approximately an additional £6 billion to existing and committed government expenditure. Research undertaken by the Commission shows that for every £1 invested in free meals for low income families is equivalent to up to £2.38 of social value

This evidence supports treating food and health policy as economic policy and investing in a public-health approach to ending food insecurity. The Commission argues for economic policy being driven by well-being- considering how to protect and promote the well-being of the population and the most vulnerable.

Based on extensive citizen engagement, The Common Sense Policy Group have shown that a basic income is popular across all sectors of society and the country. Their work demonstrates that a basic income as an investment is at worst cost neutral and leads to improved individual and community well-being.

Ending food insecurity across the whole UK

Reports to the commission and community engagement sessions across the UK showed consistent drivers to food insecurity and highlighted the widely different responses that have and are being taken to address food insecurity. For example, school meal provision varies greatly both within England and between the devolved nations. This is particularly true for provision of school food for older children in high school/secondary schools and colleges.

Evidence presented to the commission highlighted the many challenges currently facing healthy nutritious food provision that is eaten by children across the UK. The Commission consistently heard how important universal free school meals are in helping both children and families. A universal approach was both popular and agreed as the fairest, most effective way to ensure the most vulnerable are reached without stigma and with dignity.

The burden of food insecurity falls overwhelming on those living in poverty and is exacerbated by where people live (for example, a north-south and urban-rural divide in the UK) and by disability and ethnicity (see Chapter 3).

Economic access to affordable healthy food is the key driver of food insecurity. Although the rising cost of food is not the only issue – it is an overarching affordability crisis – it does play a part. Per calorie, healthy foods cost nearly twice as much as unhealthy foods (see Chapters 2 and 6 for more on Ultra Processed

Foods), and the cost of healthy foods has risen more sharply than less healthy foods, making them increasingly less accessible.

Unless people have access to healthy nutritious food and the time and facilities to prepare that food, increasing our food supply will make minimal difference to levels of food insecurity. Political ideology and food industry lobbying heavily shape the UK government's fragmented policy responses to food insecurity, often favouring market-led approaches and voluntary measures over rights-based systemic interventions (James 2025). These corporations lobby hard and have the ear of government – in the current Government's first year, food industry meetings with ministers outnumbered those with NGOs by ten to one (Food Foundation, 2025b).

They also tend to emphasise the role of free markets, consumer choice and reformulation (removing certain ingredients and adding others) as ways to improve people's nutrition as opposed to price-based public health measures or government regulation and control that make healthy food more affordable.

Proven solutions based on evidence and human rights principles

In our evidence gathering, communities and trade unions both outlined the need to ensure that salaries are set at a level where people can afford the essentials and the conditions of work enable people income security. They also advocated for a cash first approach to alleviate short term emergencies that could throw them into food insecurity.

The Commission heard that interventions should be tailored to meet the needs of groups with additional vulnerabilities, including disabled groups, carers, older adults and people requiring social care support. Many people also highlighted the difficulties they and others face in navigating existing services.

The lesson is that design matters: provision must not only reach the most vulnerable, it must also ensure they are involved in the planning and assessment of community-based interventions.

There is evidence of certain approaches making a difference, such as ensuring children have access to healthy food at school or that people have access to community kitchens, diners and food pantries, and voluntary groups working together can make a difference. Guaranteeing the right to food can also offer localised benefits, including pride in place, revitalising high streets, or community cohesion. (See Chapter 7 for more detail).

However, currently these approaches are not systematically reaching those in greatest need and are too often driven by charity and volunteers, many of whom are themselves burn-out and overworked. The Commission believes that solutions need to be universal, comprehensive and publicly funded, and that government should be accountable for the delivery of these services and policy actions.

In the light of the evidence reviewed in this report, The Commission has determined that a Right to Food Law is the fairest and most effective approach to ensure that nobody in the UK is food insecure, no matter where they live or what their personal circumstances. It is also the most powerful way to ensure that the national Westminster government, alongside the devolved governments, delivers on its commitments and remains accountable to the public through parliamentary scrutiny.

Within government, food (and nutrition) policy is not currently controlled by a single entity. Responsibilities in England are spread across 16 different departments and bodies, with little coordination.

It is the Commission's recommendation that responsibility for food security should rest within the highest levels of government, delivered through the creation of a new cabinet minister position to address food insecurity, with oversight of a corresponding department.

It also our recommendation that, as part of the governance of the Right to Food legislation, a duty should be placed on existing bodies (such as the NHS and Office of Budget responsibility) to ensure a Right to Food lens on all their decision making, to help protect and promote household food security. This would ensure that across all government departments, the impact of any policy review should consider how that change will improve (or protect or mitigate) food security.

Accountability is essential and we therefore recommend the creation of an independent intergovernmental commission, led by an executive with powers across all government departments to report to parliament. Sensitive and specific data must be collected in a timely way to ensure all programmes aimed at addressing food insecurity can be assessed. The commission must be adequately funded to collect and report progress on the roadmap to end food insecurity by 2035 (see Chapter 9 for more detail on governance).

Roadmap to end household food insecurity by 2035

Based upon the evidence gathered, the Commission has set out four key foundational asks, built upon sixteen supporting pillars, to help deliver food security for all by 2035.

Foundation 1: A food system that is healthy for all

- Ensure wages and social security are sufficient to meet essential living costs
- Develop an affordability governance framework
- Deliver a fairer social security system that reflects the real cost of living: scrap Universal Credit five week wait and end sanctions and penalties process
- Affordable healthy food and provision of emergency cash support for people in crisis, while addressing the drivers that led them there

Foundation 2: A food system that is sustainable

- Provide universal free school meals and holiday food for all school aged child and young adults
- Ensure access to food in every community, via community kitchens and hubs
- Address barriers faced by vulnerable groups
- Create a government procurement that supports local food systems and builds local capacity

Foundation 3: A food system that is Devolved and Community-Centred

- Provide adequate funding to support local communities, third sector resilience and capacity
- Ensure that evidence drives action
- Protect dignity by providing support without stigma
- Use a cash first model for responsive emergency support

Foundation 4: A food system that is Accountable

- Enact a Right to Food framework legislation that includes a right to redress
- Instate a cabinet minister and department that coordinates action across government and is accountable to parliament
- Create an independent commission/regulatory body with wide representation including devolved, regional mayors, local government, lived experience groups, community and third sector representation
- Set mandatory targets and timelines, driven by evidence, to evaluate impact of policies on household food security

Food security for all by 2035

FOUR FOUNDATIONAL ASKS, SIXTEEN PILLARS FOR ACTION

A FOOD SYSTEM THAT IS HEALTHY FOR ALL	A FOOD SYSTEM THAT IS SUSTAINABLE	A FOOD SYSTEM THAT IS DEVOLVED AND COMMUNITY- CENTRED	A FOOD SYSTEM THAT IS ACCOUNTABLE
 Sufficient wages and social security	 Universal free school and holiday meals	 Adequate local and third-sector funding	 Right to Food legislation with redress
 Affordability governance framework	 Community kitchens and food hubs	 Evidence drives action	 Parliamentary accountability via coordinating minister/department
 Fairer social security system	 Address barriers for vulnerable groups	 Dignity without stigma	 Independent commission with wide representation
 Affordable access to healthy food	 Procurement supporting local food systems	 Responsive cash-first emergency support	 Mandatory evidence-led targets and timelines

A UK Right to Food Act

A UK Right to Food Act

Eight core recommendations from the evidence

Foundation — what the right is

1 Legal enforceability

Establish a legally enforceable Right to Food for everyone in the UK — a right people can rely on and, where necessary, enforce through the courts.

2 Substantive content

Define what the right means through the four A's: availability, accessibility, adequacy and sustainability — the framework used internationally to give it substance.

Duties & protections — what must happen in practice

3 Duties on authorities

Place duties on governments and public authorities to respect, protect and fulfil the right — the three core obligations in human rights law.

4 Prevent food insecurity

Ensure access to adequate food for anyone unable to secure it for themselves — a backstop against hardship.

5 Equality & non-discrimination

Address the specific barriers faced by groups disproportionately affected by food insecurity.

6 Protection from third parties

Guard against actions by businesses, landlords or others that undermine access to adequate food.

Delivery — making it real

7 Monitoring & accountability

Establish effective systems of monitoring and accountability, with genuine participation and access to justice, so failures can be identified and remedied.

8 Funding & capacity

Ensure implementation is backed by adequate funding and institutional capacity, so the right is properly resourced for delivery rather than existing on paper.

Based on evidence for a UK Right to Food Act

Timeline of recommendations of the Right to Food UK Commission

● Within Weeks

Immediate relief measures

- End the five-week wait for Universal Credit to prevent claimants falling into immediate income and food crisis; ensure "cash-first" support where required including to cover transport costs.
- Before the operation of sanctions assess affordability, deductions and implementation of the overall household benefit cap from precipitating claimants into situations of destitution.
- Reduce unnecessary referral requirements, gatekeeping and administrative barriers for emergency support. Ensure food support arrangements offer meaningful choice and respond to dietary, cultural, religious and medical needs. Ideally offer a cash first approach for addressing short terms crisis people face. Promote models that minimise stigma and maximise dignity, are trauma informed and include participation and community ownership.

Investing for the future

- Establish a public investment fund for community food initiatives providing affordable, nutritious, culturally appropriate food (including community kitchens and social supermarkets), which also considers how to address corporate social responsibility and discriminatory practices affecting the most vulnerable (such as minimum order thresholds for home delivery).
- Establish a strategy for addressing the current use of 'food surpluses', as part of a reassessment of overall food systems and resilience in the UK.
- Provide central investment through the Local Resilience Forums, for schools to upgrade kitchens, equipment and dining facilities ahead of expanding the universal provision of free school meals. Prepare to insource catering contracts and redesign the food offering.

Legislative and institutional foundations

- Draft and lay before Parliament a UK Right to Food Bill, incorporating the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) into domestic law, placing duties on governments and public authorities to respect, fulfil and protect the Right to Food for everyone in the UK, with routes for complaint, review, redress and legal remedy. Third parties whose actions undermine communities' access to affordable food should face penalties.
- Establish a new Cost of Living Unit based in the Office of the PM and Cabinet, headed by an accountable Minister invited to attend Cabinet, with functions including driving cross-departmental and inter-governmental coordination on food affordability and access, and with oversight of devolved and local authority compliance.
- Review the adequacy of the existing regulatory environment in relation to the rental and groceries market and evaluate the scope for implementing targeted price interventions, which protect the commercial viability of suppliers and workers in the food sector.
- Unfreeze local housing allowance set the levels linked to market rents to ensure that people have enough income remaining after they have paid their rent and bills to pay for food.
- Remove the benefit cap that limits the household access to food.
- Introduce a social tariff on energy for those on the lowest incomes including consideration for those with the highest energy costs (such as disabled people and their carers).

- Review the adequacy of the existing regulatory environment in relation to the groceries market and evaluate the scope for implementing targeted price interventions, which protect the commercial viability of suppliers and workers in the food sector.
- Review the role of all current regulatory bodies such as the Office of Budget Responsibility to assess how existing practice affects food security, and to develop mechanisms to ensure no actions exacerbate food insecurity.

Targeted action

- Work with local authorities and devolved bodies to develop strategies to tackle food insecurity in isolated, rural and economically-deprived areas.
 - Measurement of food poverty indicators should become part of the Joint Strategic Needs Assessments, to identify and provide support needed, including for at-risk demographics (disabled people, older people, refugees and asylum seekers).
 - Each local authority should appoint a senior lead for food security, such as the Director of Public Health. This person should be accountable to local scrutiny processes to ensure oversight and accountability across the whole authority.
-

● Within 6–24 Months

- Strengthen employment rights to tackle in-work poverty - establish collective bargaining structures, a single legal definition of "worker" and further remove political and bureaucratic constraints on trade union organising.
- Adopt an independently assessed ILO Social Protection Floor setting a minimum income for a decent standard of living.
- Review the adequacy of the existing regulatory environment in relation to the rental and groceries market and evaluate the scope for implementing targeted price interventions, which protect the commercial viability of suppliers and workers in the food sector.
- Unfreeze local housing allowance set the levels linked to market rents to ensure that people have enough income remaining after they have paid their rent and bills to pay for food.
- Remove the benefit cap that limits the household access to food.
- Introduce a social tariff on energy for those on the lowest incomes including consideration for those with the highest energy costs (such as disabled people and their carers).
- Roll out fully funded universal free school meals for all children in compulsory education (up to age 18), using auto-enrolment to remove bureaucratic barriers; end school food debt and related stigma.
- Give local authorities additional funding for universal holiday food provision, and ensure all temporary accommodation has basic white goods for food preparation.
- Explore the possibility of implementing a 'Right to Food' levy through the local planning framework, which requires major food retailers investing in specific areas, committing funds toward local community kitchens/pantries/restaurants.
- Recognise the social value associated with the production, distribution and preparation of good, affordable food in public procurement decisions at all levels.
- Embed cooking skills, nutrition, budgeting and food literacy across the curriculum, ensuring practical cooking education doesn't depend on families supplying ingredients.

- Conduct a thorough assessment of the resilience of supply chains to external shocks and impact on prices (including climate change, global conflict, and protectionist trade measures), and prepare contingency strategies (if necessary, through COBRA).

Next Steps on Institutions and Governance

- Enact a Right to Food law and bring statutory instruments into force that apply across the whole UK.
- Scottish Parliament to reintroduce/revive a Right to Food Bill in this new parliamentary session.
- Wales and Northern Ireland to use their devolved legislative powers to introduce a statutory Right to Food.
- Set mandatory targets (that can assess impact on the most vulnerable) and timelines for reducing emergency food insecurity, with penalties for missed or delayed achievement of targets.
- Institute an independent UK-wide Right to Food Commission, drawn from newly created participatory national and regional Right to Food Councils (as seen in Canada), to regularly assess and report on food insecurity, affordability, nutrition and inequality; to oversee the monitoring of food insecurity levels by consolidating existing measures into an overarching framework; and to enable co-production of policy with people who have lived experience of food insecurity (with appropriate remuneration).
- Explore how best to ensure that household costs do not outstrip growth in incomes and how to provide oversight and accountability on establishing and maintaining affordability. Any structure must be accountable to parliament and not be an arms-length body.
- Explore how best to reduce consumption of UPFs and the influence of the food industry lobby to support more healthy dietary patterns in children and adults.
- Establish an independent Social Security Commission with representation from all four UK nations, plus English regions, the charitable/voluntary sector and trade unions, with remit of determining the ILO-compliant Social Protection Floor.
- Develop a mechanism for ensuring that any policy response to climate change, or ambitions to build resilience are coordinated with and do not harm policy aimed at eliminating food insecurity.

● Within a Decade

- Review monitoring and legal compliance with the Right to Food Act; examine cases of public authority breaches and levy penalties where appropriate.
- Further develop strategy to meet mandatory targets of eliminating food insecurity entirely by 2035 and conduct ongoing risk assessments in relation to delivery challenges.
- Allow people to have access to effective complaints and redress mechanisms when their right to food is violated. The responsible Minister should be accountable to Parliament for monitoring progress and ensuring these mechanisms operate effectively

Introduction

The right to food is realised when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, always has physical and economic access to adequate food or the means for its procurement.

Food security is a technical and measurement concept: a condition that can be assessed and tracked. It says nothing about who is responsible for ensuring it, or what happens when it fails.

The right to food and food insecurity are closely related, and the fact that most low-income and vulnerable groups in the UK are food insecure reflects an inability to exercise their right to food, created not by a lack of agency, but a lack of political space. The current system does not merely fail to support the right to food; it actively suppresses it.

This report, created by the Right to Food Commission, aims to shine a light on the unacceptable nature of food insecurity in Britain, to map out potential solutions and to call on the UK Government, devolved administrations and politicians and policy makers in all UK jurisdictions, to tackle and end food insecurity in the UK.

Specifically, the commission set out to produce a roadmap for the implementation of a Right to Food law in the UK, the aim of which was to support a programme of work and actions to end hunger in the UK by 2035, with an interim objective of halving the number of people experiencing food insecurity by 2030.

The Right to Food Commission considered:

- The extent and nature of food insecurity across the UK
- The effects of malnutrition and food insecurity on public health outcomes in the UK
- The impact of current labour market conditions, welfare provision, and asylum/immigration policy as drivers of food insecurity
- The role of public policy frameworks in tackling food insecurity, and the potential for interventions by central government, devolved national and regional bodies, directly-elected Mayors and local authorities
- How to ensure ongoing support and investment for collective community-based food initiatives
- How best to legislate for an effective and enforceable statutory Right to Food.

The considerations above were framed around the five demands of the [Right to Food campaign](#):

- 1. Universal free school meals:** Free school meals for all children
- 2. Transparency on food costs in wages and benefits:** Government transparency on how food costs are used in wage and benefit calculations
- 3. Independent enforcement:** Creation of a regulatory body to ensure government accountability
- 4. Community kitchens:** Funding community dining and meal programmes
- 5. Ensured food security:** Integration of food security into all policy areas

How the commission worked:

The Commission has heard oral evidence from more than 660 people with lived experience of food insecurity, alongside input from practitioners, academics, civil society organisations, businesses, local authorities and policymakers from across the UK. In person sessions were held in urban and rural centres, both in the form of ‘expert/select committee type evidence sessions and community sessions with local people (see Table I.1).

We also held online sessions with people and organisations who had experienced or supported or represented people who currently or in the past experienced homelessness, disability, people with lived experience, human rights groups, and many more. Commissioners had numerous meetings and open sessions with trade union members and representative organisations across the country. The Commission held an MP briefing in parliament together with panel discussions with leading economists, food NGOs and charities and human rights groups.

Table I.1. UK Right to Food Commission Community Conversation Numbers

Community conversation	Numbers
Liverpool	70
Ashington	34
Newcastle	21
Grangemouth	22
Glasgow	75
Belfast	48
Aberdare	71
Cardiff	23
London	115
Birmingham	10
Homeless Link	25
Disability group	22
Survey	122
Total	661

The Commission also had an open call for written evidence. We received 125 written submissions from a wide range of organisations and individuals. These were particularly rich and helpful and as with all the evidence, their gathered key comments and observations have been used to help shape this report. The final draft has been reviewed by several different lived experience groups of people to ensure that the recommendations and roadmap reflect their reality and offer real practical implementable actions. A key outcome will be to ensure these lived experience voices will continue to play a vital role in shaping what comes next.

Finally, to make sure we develop a roadmap that addresses the fundamental challenges of implementation, we engaged with the FAO Right to Food team, the UN Special Rapporteurs on the Right to Food and other UN organisations, learning from their expertise and experience, particularly in terms of accountability,

monitoring and evaluation. We also looked to other countries, such as Mexico and Brazil, to learn from their practical experiences of enacting Right to Food laws and nutrition policies.

Structure of the report

There are 11 chapters in the report, with appendices and annexes providing evidence to support recommendations for the Right to Food UK law. Chapter 1 emphasises the lived experience evidence that has helped build this report, Chapter 2 explores the food systems that have created widespread food insecurity that affects around 14.1 million people across the UK. Chapter 3 builds on this, setting out the scale of problem, the impact it is having and how unequally it is distributed across the population. Chapter 4 explores the main drivers of the issue, namely inadequate incomes and a broken social security system. Chapters 5 and 6 explore the UK's current legal commitments and policies regarding the right to food. Chapter 7 presents examples of existing interventions through the life cycle and examines their impact, and potential to help support the UK to end hunger by 2035. Chapter 8 sets out innovative cost benefit analysis, demonstrating the economic benefit of establishing a right to food law. Chapter 9 looks at accountability and governance, Chapter 10 explores a framework to address affordability, and the report ends with Chapter 11, which suggests the potential content of a UK Right to Food Act, and sets out the Commission's Roadmap to its realisation.

Terms of Reference of the Right to Food Commission

The Right to Food Commission was jointly established by the [Right to Food Campaign](#), the [University of Westminster](#), [BFAWU](#), and the [Food and Work Network](#). The Commission was formally launched in Parliament on 17th November 2025.

The UK Right to Food Commission was Chaired by Barrie Margetts, Emeritus Professor at the University of Southampton with representatives across Trade Unions, local authorities, health, charities and universities.

UK Right to Food Commissioners

Chair:

Barrie Margetts, Emeritus Professor, University of Southampton

Vice Chairs:

Ian Byrne, Member of Parliament for Liverpool West Derby

Sarah Woolley, General Secretary, Bakers Food and Allied Workers Union

Commissioners:

Kemi Akinola, Deputy Leader Wandsworth Council

Angela Carriedo, Policy Sec WPHNA, Lecturer, Aston University, Consultant, Public Health Nutrition and Policy

Baroness Shami Chakrabarti, Barrister and Human Rights activist

Jen Clark, Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Director, Amnesty International

Alex Colás, Professor, Birkbeck College, University of London

Paul Doherty, Deputy Lord Mayor, Belfast City Council

Daniel Kebede, General Secretary, National Education Union

Regina Murphy Keith, Reader Global Public Health Nutrition, University of Westminster

SallyAnn Kelly, Former Chief Executive, Aberlour Children's Charity

Kevin Morgan, Professor, Cardiff University

Sharon Noonan-Gunning, Senior Lecturer Global Public Health Nutrition, University of Westminster

Ian Sinha, Professor & Respiratory Consultant, Alder Hey Children's Hospital Trust & University of Liverpool

Secretariat

Tommy Kane

Michael Calderbank

Acknowledgments

The work of the Commission has been funded by trade unions, the University of Westminster, Amnesty International and the World Public Health Nutrition Association. We are very grateful for that support. All Commissioners served in a personal capacity, were unpaid and acted in a voluntary capacity. Any views expressed here do not necessarily represent those of any organisation with which they may be associated.

We are particularly grateful to the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU) for covering the costs of General Secretary Sarah Woolley in her role as Deputy Chair of the Commission. Sarah's contribution, commitment and support have been invaluable to the Commission and its work.

Expert Link provided facilitation of a Lived Experience Advisory Group, and we are grateful for their support and for the time and commitment of advisory group members. The Commissioners would like to place particular thanks on record to all those with lived experience who contributed to community sessions and shared their experiences, knowledge and ideas. Their contributions helped shape the Commission's understanding of the issues and the solutions being considered.

The Commissioners would like to extend their sincere thanks to every individual, community group, youth organisation, campaigner, researcher, student, professional, trade unionist, academic, public servant and organisation who contributed to the work of the Commission.

We are particularly grateful to everyone who shared their experiences, knowledge, expertise and ideas, participated in community sessions, provided evidence, supported discussions and helped shape the Commission's work. Every contribution has helped strengthen our understanding of the challenges people face and has contributed to the development of the recommendations in this report.

We also thank all those who supported the Commission behind the scenes, including those who helped organise meetings and community sessions, facilitated conversations, gathered and analysed evidence, provided research and economic expertise, supported communications and editing, and helped bring people together from across the UK.

To everyone who gave their time, energy and commitment to this work: thank you. Your contribution has helped shape this Commission and this report.

Declarations of commissioners (additional to job roles described above)

Jen Clark is a volunteer Trustee of North Tyneside Citizens Advice.

Angela Carriedo is a member of the Executive Committee of the World Public Health Nutrition Association

SallyAnn Kelly is vice chair of Shelter and chair of Scottish Shelter and trustee of Ayrshire Cancer Support. Her private work involves working across the public sector, private and third sectors, but nothing that conflicts with the principles of the UK Commission

Barrie Margetts is a founder and co-chair of the Southampton Social Aid Group.

Reina Murphy-Keith is a member of the Executive Committee of the World Public Health Nutrition Association. RCN Fellow, Member of RCN Public Health Forum, Nursing Education Forum, Nursing Leaders Forum.

Sharon Noonona-Gunning is chair of the Right to Food London, co-chair of the London British Dietetic Association

Sarah Woolley is a TUC General Council member, GFTU President, Tax Justice UK Trustee, War on Want Trustee

1. Community Voices: Sharing Lived Experience to Help End Food Insecurity

“Tonight is not about gratitude. Tonight is about truth.” Community participant, Belfast.

The key evidence within this report has come from communities across the UK – from hundreds of people who are experiencing the reality of living with food insecurity in the sixth richest country in the world. Their testimony has directly helped to shape the Right to Food Commission’s conclusions, recommendations and roadmap for Government.

Between January and June 2026, the Right to Food Commission held community engagement sessions across Liverpool, Newcastle, Aberdare, Cardiff, Belfast, Glasgow, Grangemouth, Birmingham and London.

Involving more than 660 participants and designed to centre lived experience across all four nations, these community conversations, were augmented by an online survey of 122 participants and online sessions with Homeless Link and disability rights groups.

Community testimony across all sessions returned consistently to the same core issue, that the system is designed in ways that make failure predictable, and then individuals are blamed. The charity sector was described as having become a permanent substitute for social protection, a ‘hunger industrial complex’, with food banks embedded in the social security landscape against their original intent. (Garthwaite, 2026)

In one year, Trussell food banks distributed the equivalent of one parcel every eleven seconds, a 51% increase compared with five years ago (Just Fair, 2026). Of those using foodbanks, 56% of households accessed food banks only once, while 44% required repeated support. 79% rely on benefits as their primary income, and financial issues accounted for 41% of referrals (Coalville Foodbank, 2025).

“We don’t cope with the challenges, we endure.” Community participant, Tower Hamlets, London.

“What would happen if charities stopped? Death. Societal collapse. Crisis. This is the journey we are on.” Community participant, Scotland.

“We are not deprived communities, we are depleted.” Community leader, Cardiff.

Why are we trying to solve a problem about food? It’s a right to dignity.” Community participant, Newcastle/Ashington.

But Community evidence was not a catalogue of hardship, it also presented hope, sharing practical wisdom about what works.

Eighty-one per cent of Bread-and-Butter Thing members say food clubs help them access better food; 79% eat more fruit and vegetables; 73% skip meals less often; and 92% would buy more fresh produce if it were affordable and available locally (Harper and The Bread-and-Butter Thing, 2026).

Camden Giving (2026) found 109 food-related projects funded between 2021 and 2026, reaching approximately 89,860 beneficiaries in a single London borough, demonstrating both the scale of unmet need and the capacity of community-led, participatory approaches. Community members in every session were emphatic that dignity and choice must be built into any intervention, and that the most effective provision treats people as participants rather than recipients.

Belfast's community-led models, including the Carrick Greengrocers, the sliding-scale Larder East, pay-what-you-can shops and the Hollywood CoFarm, demonstrate that communities can feed themselves with dignity when supported.

Young people in Liverpool and Belfast asked only to be included in decisions affecting their lives; as youth participants in Belfast put it, '*We can help. Include us.*'

The Commission heard concerns that people experiencing food insecurity rarely have a meaningful role in shaping decisions. Most interventions remain designed and governed by public bodies, charities and professionals, with affected communities positioned primarily as recipients of support.

There were therefore repeated calls for greater involvement of people with lived experience in the design, delivery and evaluation of policy. This reflects the principle of 'Nothing About Us Without Us', which holds that those most affected should help shape the solutions. Consistent with this, Right to Food and food sovereignty approaches recognise people experiencing food insecurity not simply as beneficiaries, but as rights-holders with a legitimate role in governance and accountability.

1.1 Key themes emerging from community evidence

- *Dignity was a dominant theme*
 - Shame was heavily associated with food bank use
 - Referral systems interviews, and eligibility checks add layers of difficulty
 - Children avoid free school meals because of stigma
 - People feel judged when seeking help
 - Participants called for:
 - Universal provision
 - Choice and agency
 - Support that respects people's dignity
- *What are the greatest barriers faced?*
 - Vulnerability can vary and vulnerabilities can interact
 - Participants identified barriers including:
 - Physical access
 - Higher living costs
 - Dietary needs
 - Transport challenges
 - Immigration-related restrictions
- *Charity has become essential infrastructure, but cannot keep up*
 - Demand for food support is increasing
 - Donations and volunteer capacity are falling
 - Community organisations carry growing responsibility
 - Participants stated that:
 - Food aid should be emergency support, not a permanent feature of society
 - Cash first should be the default emergency response
- *Hunger is driven primarily by insufficient income and lack of affordability, not food shortages*
 - *Work no longer guarantees enough money for food*

- *Rising housing, energy and transport costs leave less money for food*
- *Food insecurity is increasingly affecting working households*
- *Access to food is about more than food*
 - Food security means meals, not just ingredients
 - People with no access to a cooker, fridge or adequate kitchen facilities cannot cook healthy meals
 - Temporary accommodation may only provide a kettle
 - High energy costs prevent people from cooking
 - Lack of time due to work and caring responsibilities
 - Food security means not relying on affordable ultra-processed foods to avoid being hungry

1.2 Building a Right to Food Law that delivers for communities

The primary asks made by community participants included:

- Adequate incomes and benefits
- Universal free school meals
- Affordable healthy food
- Community kitchens, food hubs and public diners
- The right to cook, eat and access nutritious food
- Stronger accountability for public bodies
- Access to culturally appropriate food
- A legal route to challenge failures
- Rights must be enforceable and properly resourced.

2. Food Insecurity and Inequality in Context: UK's Broken Food Systems

"It is a scandal that we have a food system where so many people cannot afford to eat, and there is so much food going to waste" Food Aid Network 2026

The current social, economic and political system is driven by corporate interests, safeguarded by the voluntary sector and fuelled by a low-waged, highly indebted and highly vulnerable population, currently accounting for 16% of UK households.

Several submissions also framed the UK food system itself as insecure. Between 40% and 50% of UK food is imported, with 69% of that from just ten countries, and it is controlled by 'a small number of powerful institutions' (The British Dietetic Association and Access to Social Justice, 2025). We import up to 78% of the UK's fruit and vegetables (Scheelbeek et al., 2020; UK Health Security Agency, 2023), leaving us heavily exposed whenever a shock occurs.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine were shocks that exposed the vulnerability of the UK's food system, and have been compounded by climate change, cyber threats and geopolitical risk. The Good Food Bill and many academics have argued for a more self-sufficient system, for the sake of both security and jobs.

2.1 Corporate influence on food and health and the growth of UPFs

The food system's failure is not an accident of the market; it is a predictable consequence of a system designed to optimise corporate returns rather than population nutrition. In the current Government's first year, food industry meetings with ministers outnumbered those with NGOs by ten to one (Food Foundation, 2025b)

Corporate power fuelling food insecurity.

"The government needs to tackle the large supermarket domination of the food landscape in the UK. Food insecurity and poverty have become normalised," Ryan Lynch, Tower Hamlets Food Poverty Network

The food system is not a neutral mechanism; it is shaped by large corporations whose commercial interests systematically favour cheap, high-margin, ultra-processed products over nutritious food. Eight corporations' control over 50% of the ultra-processed food (UPF) market, which grew at a 6.7% compound annual growth rate between 2018 and 2024, and which is forecast to grow at 8.4% per year. This is nearly three times global GDP growth, with shareholder returns rising from 3.4% to 14% of revenues between 1993 and 2019 (FFCC, 2024).

Corporate lobbying by the UPF industry has used the same 'playbook' as big tobacco to derail regulation to protect market share (BMJ 2025). These tactics include direct lobbying, infiltrating government agencies, litigation, generating favourable evidence, and manufacturing scientific doubt about the evidence of the harmful effects of consumption of a diet high in UPFs (Lane et al 2024). The commercial determinants of health have a significant impact on the health and well-being of children and young people Pitt et al 2024. Corporate interests have captured elements of food policy, with food-marketing targeting children normalised despite well-evidenced harmful effects on health (WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/protecting-children-from-harmful-marketing-practices>).

Ever-present ultra-processed foods (UPFs).

"Food is getting cheaper and healthier," Community participant, Tower Hamlets, London

Ultra-processed foods (UPF) now dominate the UK diet. Only 33% of adults and 12% of 11-to-18-year-olds eat the recommended five portions of fruit and vegetables per day (Murphy Keith, 2025b), and at least 56.6% of total adult dietary energy comes from UPFs, rising to 63.5% for children and 68.1% for adolescents (Rauber et al., 2019).

UPF consumption is itself socially patterned. Children from more disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds consistently consume greater proportions of UPFs across toddlerhood and middle childhood, with maternal education the strongest predictor, inequalities that emerge early and compound over time (Heuchan et al., 2025). UK adolescents from routine and manual occupational households derive 68.4% of their dietary energy from UPFs, compared with 63.8% among those from higher managerial and professional backgrounds. Those in northern England obtain 67.4% of their energy from UPFs, compared with 64.1% in the south (Chavez-Ugalde et al., 2024).

The pricing structure reinforces this: healthier foods cost over £10 per 1,000 kilocalories on average, while UPFs cost approximately £4.50 per 1,000 kilocalories, and the price of healthier foods rose by £1.76 per 1,000 kilocalories between 2021 and 2023, compared with a £0.76 rise for less healthy foods (Hoenink et al., 2024).

Health consequences of ultra-processed food (UPFs).

The health consequences of UPFs are severe and well-evidenced. UPFs are estimated to account for approximately 11% of cardiovascular deaths, 9% of type 2 diabetes cases and 12% of grouped mental disorders including depression and anxiety (UK Parliament, 2024).

The annual cost of diabetes in the UK is estimated at £36 billion. Reducing high UPF intake could save approximately £3 billion annually and reducing the attributable costs of cardiovascular and mental disorders could save a further £19 billion, a total potential saving of approximately £22 billion per year (UK Parliament, 2024).

Rising UPF consumption mirrors growth in the drugs used to treat its consequences, including painkillers, statins and anti-obesity drugs. The anti-obesity drug market is growing at 11.7% per year, creating a co-dependency that treats symptoms rather than food system causes (Murphy Keith, 2025c; Buse and McKee, 2024). We run the risk that prevention policies capable of changing food environments and enabling food security for all will be displaced by rapid, instant and costly pharmaceutical solutions. Additionally, if they aren't properly supervised, these drugs can also promote disordered eating patterns and deplete the body of lean mass and essential nutrients, while imposing costly out-of-pocket or healthcare expenses without ever addressing the root causes of obesity (Guglielmi 2025).

UPFs and school food.

In England, school meals have increasingly been taken over by third-party suppliers, providing roughly 60% to 70% of school meals through direct commercial contracts or outsourced local authority frameworks. (Bremner & Defeyter, 2022) A minority of schools in England hire their own kitchen staff, chefs and nutritionists to manage supply chains, cook from scratch and deliver meals independent of outside corporate or council contracts. In Wales and Scotland, the catering services are still controlled by local authorities giving greater opportunity to direct change toward healthy options.

The quality of food supplied through commercial contracts is frequently poor, not culturally appropriate, and falls short of nutritional requirements and fruit and vegetable recommendations. The context is stark: not only are children hungry, but the food they can access is contributing to childhood overweight and obesity, 28.7% of children aged 2 to 15 are overweight or living with obesity.

Mapping the accumulated evidence on UPFs outlined in this chapter onto the FAO's four pillars of the right to food (Termine, 2024) makes the scale of systemic failure concrete.

On availability: corporate consolidation and UPF market dominance have reshaped the UK food supply towards the production, distribution and promotion of highly processed food at the expense of diverse, nutritious food production (Wood et al., 2021).

On accessibility: the price gap between UPFs and nutritious food, combined with the geographic clustering of fast-food outlets in deprived areas and benefit levels that do not cover the cost of healthy eating, means that a nutritionally adequate diet is financially and physically inaccessible for millions. In January 2024, 8 million adults and 3 million children were living in food insecurity (Food Foundation, 2024).

On adequacy: with 56.8% of adult dietary energy from UPFs (Rauber et al., 2018), accounting for over 70% of daily sodium intake and 64% of free sugar intake (Bussa et al., 2025), the adequacy pillar is severely compromised at population level.

On stability: dependence on commodity monocultures in UPF supply chains creates long-term vulnerability and contributes to biodiversity loss and climate risk (Carriedo et al., 2026).

2.2 The food system is failing low-income households

“It’s very expensive to be poor. 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.” Community participant, Birmingham

Too many people in the UK cannot afford to eat. Food prices rose by more than 25% between 2021 and 2024 (ONS, 2024). Evidence shows that only 14% of food club users have sufficient income to afford a healthy diet at £7.48 per person per day, and 45% have less than £50 per month remaining after rent and energy bills (Harper and The Bread-and-Butter Thing, 2026).

The Eatwell Guide diet is expected to cost approximately £9 per person per day by 2025. For the lowest-income households with children, meeting that standard would consume 70% of disposable income (Food Foundation, 2025a). The poorest households spend under £40 per week on food, 17% of their income; the richest spend over £90 per week, or 4% of income (FFCC, 2024). This comparison of budget shares highlights the structural inequality that exists within what appears to be a functioning food market.

“Everything is structurally against working-class people being able to buy and cook decent nutritious food”, Community participant, Scotland

2.3 Food waste is not a solution

“When we collect food from supermarkets it has a very short shelf life. We end up taking their food waste for them, almost as if they think: these people will eat whatever we can give them,” Frontline worker, Homeless Link consultation, Bristol

The Commission received evidence that approximately 25% of food grown in the UK is wasted, equivalent to four to five million tonnes of edible food annually, while 14 million people cannot afford to eat adequately (Farron, 2025). The structural contradiction of a system that wastes a quarter of what it grows, while millions go hungry, cannot be resolved by redistributing waste to the poor. Systemic change is needed to address production priorities, pricing and the relationship between retail and community.

AI-driven supermarket efficiency is also actively reducing surplus food donations to redistribution charities such as Fare Share, undermining community organisations that have come to depend on them (Right to Food UK Commission, 2026a).

“Food parcels won’t feed a family.” Community participant, Scotland

2.4 Charity cannot substitute for income

“Thirty years of food banking has not reduced the prevalence of food insecurity, parcels are often nutritionally inadequate and culturally inappropriate, with a real “risk of institutionalising food aid.” Belfast Food Partnership evidence.

The Belfast Food Partnership has described food banks as a “successful failure”.

Trussell food banks alone distributed around 3 million emergency parcels per year for the last two years, with over a million of these going to children, and independent food banks, pantries, community fridges and social supermarkets are rapidly spreading around the country (Trussell, 2025). However generous and vital the donations, these bodies cannot resolve the problem they are responding to.

Charitable or voluntary aid cannot substitute for adequate incomes, effective social protection, or access to affordable healthy food, facilitated by the state. We need to reshape our social, commercial and food systems, which are currently driven by globalisation, deregulation and the corporatisation of the food system.

There is also a strong sense of shame associated with using these services.

"In some parts of the community, the stigma surrounding food banks is so strong. People are often afraid." participant, Bristol Women's Voice consultation

Northern Irish and Welsh evidence point to more dignified alternatives emerging at grassroots level, such as community-owned greengrocers, pay-what-you-can shops, co-far, demonstrating that *"communities can feed themselves with dignity when supported,"* provided these are backed by coordinated, long-term funding rather than left to survive project to project, since, as one Welsh participant warned, food security *"is not going to be solved with grants."*

"The charity sector is not the place to hold up this society. Volunteers are holding the UK up. There needs to be statutory provision." Community participant, Newcastle/Ashington

Section 7: Effective Interventions to Improve Lifelong Nutrition, explores alternatives to the traditional foodbank, that are state supported, rooted within communities and can be reframed to offer a stronger sense of ownership and, most importantly, choice.

2.5 The right to food is a systemic imperative

The total health-related costs of the UK's dysfunctional food system, including healthcare, social care, welfare spending, productivity losses and the human cost of chronic disease, amount to approximately £298 billion per year (Jackson, 2026). The cost of providing a healthy diet for the whole UK population would be approximately £51 billion per year. The cost of inaction is therefore substantially greater than the investment required to improve access to healthy food.

The Right to Food Campaign's five demands of universal free school meals; transparency on food costs in wages and benefits; independent enforcement through a dedicated regulatory body; community kitchens; and embedding food security across all policy, would address the systemic failures documented within this report.

A statutory right to food, enforceable by law and monitored against time-bound targets, is not a campaigning aspiration. It is the evidence-based conclusion of the material presented to the Right to Food Commission.

"Promises don't feed me." Community participant, Tower Hamlets, London

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

"Right to food is a lever to open other rights." Community participant, Tower Hamlets, London

2.6 Towards a fairer food system

Food policy across the UK is not consistent between England, Scotland Wales and Northern Ireland.

- Wales is currently developing a National Food Strategy (<https://www.gov.wales/national-food-strategy-wales-terms-reference-html>) taking a whole system farm to fork approach to connect local production, health and sustainability.
- Scotland's food policy centres on the Good Nation (Scotland) Act 2022.
- Northern Ireland's food policy is centred around the Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework, titled "*Food at the Heart of Our Society*," which launched its initial two-year Action Plan (2025–2027) to guide a whole-of-government approach to health, sustainability, and agriculture.

English food policy is a complex system shared across 16 different government departments, aiming to balance public health, farming standards, and environmental protection. A major failing to date has been the lack of coordination across the different departments involved. There is often a gap between what commitments are made in policy and what gets implemented.

This variation in policy is most evident in school-meal provision. In Wales, the full rollout of universal free school meals for all primary-school children was completed in 2024. In Scotland, free school lunches are provided to all children in Primary 1 to Primary 5; children in Primary 6 and Primary 7 also receive free meals if their household receives the Scottish Child Payment. In Northern Ireland, there is no universal free-school-meal provision for any age group but means-tested provision is available for qualifying families. In England, provision is universal in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2, and is means-tested for older children. In London, all state-funded primary schools receive universal provision; for other age groups, provision is means-tested.

The way school meals are provided also plays an important part in whether children eat the food offered. The causes of different rates of uptake in school meals across the UK is a concern and will need to be addressed before rolling out universal free school meals to ensure that every child gets access to, and eats, a healthy diet. Auto enrolment is critical to ensuring every child is reached.

The current fragmentation of English policy across at least sixteen government departments and public bodies, with no single entity responsible for food security cannot continue (Right to Food UK Commission, 2026a). A unified domestic food governance architecture, a dedicated minister with cross-departmental powers, or an independent intergovernmental commission, has been proposed as a governance solution, drawing on research across Birmingham, Newham, Barnet, Gateshead and Hartlepool that demonstrates the consequences of current fragmentation (SOAS, 2026). The Commission has proposed a cabinet level appointment answerable to parliament

Existing policies are also producing unintended feedback loops: Universal Credit generates a spike in hardship in the weeks immediately after a claim; Healthy Start loses reach among newly arrived and digitally excluded households; and

Internationally, examples of overarching interventions to tackle food insecurity are already being considered and implemented. Launched under Brazil's presidency in November 2024, a health-in-all-policies approach with a livelihoods focus, was suggested and endorsed by 700 participants from 66 countries at the World Public Health Nutrition Congress 2024 (Murphy Keith, 2025c). And the G20 Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty pledged to reach 500 million people with cash transfers, provide nutritious school meals for 150 million children and extend healthcare to 200 million more mothers and infants.

In the UK, we are falling short. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food's request for a UK country visit in 2022 remains unfulfilled; the ICESCR Optional Protocol has not been ratified; and the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recommended a comprehensive national strategy on the right to food with time-bound targets in March 2025, with no substantive UK response to date (UK ESCR Network, 2026; Just Fair, 2026). We explore this subject further in *Chapter 5: UK Legal and Policy Commitments to the Right to Food*.

“Need to shift responsibility back from individuals to public policy.” Community participant, Scotland

3. The Scale of the Problem: The Impact and Distribution of Food Insecurity in the UK

“What sort of country takes taxes off people and leaves them hungry?” Community participant, Wales.

“I have worked all my life, but I now need to use food banks. I have no benefits as I’m not entitled. I am on a low income, and I’m struggling to meet the cost of living,” Participant in One Can Trust submission

Food insecurity is a structural, income-driven feature of everyday life for more than 14 million people in the United Kingdom.

This chapter sets out the scale of the problem, looking at its distribution as well as its drivers. Supported by voices from the communities who are directly experiencing food insecurity, it measures the country against the target of ending hunger by 2030 under SDG 2 and the Global Nutrition Targets.

It highlights two key findings:

1. Food insecurity is fundamentally a symptom of inadequate, insecure and depleted incomes, deepened by debt, disability and an unequal food environment.
2. Our current response - a growing, exhausted infrastructure of charitable food aid, increasingly reliant on redistributing food waste - addresses only a fraction of the need and cannot, by design, resolve it.

As one Welsh participant succinctly put it, *“food security is not going to be solved with grants”*.

3.1 Understanding the scale of the problem

The UK is the sixth richest country on the planet, yet across all four nations, people are suffering from hunger.

The estimates for the number of food insecure differ by survey method (see box below for definitions), but what is clear from all available evidence, is that food insecurity is rising and it is affecting the health and well-being of vulnerable groups across the country.

The government’s own research has demonstrated that structural inequalities are limiting people’s lives, reducing health and early development outcomes and lowering life expectancy. Only 51.3% of children entitled to free school meals achieve a good level of development by the end of Reception, against the national baseline, and in 2022–2024, the gap in life expectancy between the most and least deprived areas stood at 10.4 years for men and 8.0 years for women (Gov.UK, 2026).

What people eat in the United Kingdom is not a matter of individual choice. It is the outcome of a food system shaped by income inequality, corporate market power, fragmented governance, unequal retail geography, and a welfare system that has not kept pace with the real cost of eating well.

Fewer than 1% of the UK population currently eats in line with the government’s own Eatwell Guide (Bridle et al., 2025; Hunter et al., 2025). The poorest fifth of households in the UK would need to spend

45% of their disposable income to do so. A standard missed by 99% of the population is not a measure of individual discipline; it is a measure of a food system that has not been built to deliver healthy diets equitably.

Throughout our evidence sessions, the Commission repeatedly heard that this food insecurity was an income and affordability problem, not a national food-supply problem, with stagnant earnings unable to cover essentials such as rising food prices (Hart Foodbank, 2025; RTF MPs Brief, 2026), which have increased by more than 25% between 2021 and 2024 (ONS, 2024).

“Food insecurity is an income issue, not just a food issue.” Community participant, Scotland

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Traditionally Food security was measured at national or community level but over recent times has also included the household level. National food security focuses on aggregate macro-level supply across an entire country, whereas household food security focuses on micro-level economic and physical access for individual families.

Comparing National vs. Household Food Security

Feature	 National Food Security	 Household Food Security
Focus	Macro-level supply & availability	Micro-level access & utilization
Key Drivers	Domestic production, net trade, reserves	Household income, local market prices, purchasing power
Failure Sign	National shortages, import blockades, depleted reserves	Individual hunger, skipping meals, using food banks
Scale	Country or regional aggregate	Individual family or dwelling unit

FAO define four pillars of food security: availability (is there enough food); access (can people obtain food); utilization (do people get the nutrition they need from the food they eat); stability (will food remain available and accessible over time). National food security does not necessarily assure household food security, Within the UK national supply is measured by DEFRA.

The current report focuses on the drivers of household food insecurity

	DWP (FRS)	Food Foundation Tracker	Trussell (Hunger in the UK)
Time window	Past 30 days	Past 30 days	Past 12 months
Questions	USDA 10-question scale; needs several "yes" answers to count	A few questions about severe experiences; one "yes" is enough	USDA 10-question scale; needs several "yes" answers
How it's collected	Face-to-face interview in a long survey about income and benefits	Online YouGov panel, filled in privately	General population survey
Who is counted	Individuals in food insecure households	Adults and children reported separately	Households × average size of food insecure households (10.3m adults + 3.8m children)
Period	April 2024 to March 2025	July 2026	2024
Number Food Insecure	6 million	6.5 m adults and 2.2million children	14.1 million

The Trussell's number is the biggest because it covers 12 months, not 30 days. Anyone who had a bad spell at any point in the year is counted. A 30-day snapshot only catches people struggling that month. Trussell multiplies the share of food insecure households by the average size of those households. Food insecure households have more children than average, so the total goes up.

The Food Foundation estimate is higher than DWP despite the same 30-day window because Its threshold is lower. A household counts if it says yes to just one question, such as eating smaller meals or being hungry but not eating because it couldn't afford or get food. On the DWP scale, a household needs several yes answers before it is classed as "low" food security. The FRS is face to face and the food security questions are part of a longer survey about incomes and benefits. And both these may lead to underreporting.

- DWP is the official, consistent baseline for long-term trends.
- The Food Foundation is the fastest-moving snapshot of how many people are struggling right now.
- Trussell shows how many people had any experience of food insecurity during a whole year.

The Commission has used the Trussell estimate, unless otherwise stated. It is likely that all measures under-report the problem. The Commission has called for a standardised approach across the UK

People are turning to food banks and other forms of food aid in growing numbers. The Trussell Trust distributed 3.1 million emergency food parcels in 2023/24, nearly double the number from five years prior.

“Worked all my life but still need a food bank.” Community participant, Liverpool

Yet these figures understate the problem: the DWP's Family Resources Survey shows most people experiencing severe food insecurity have never approached a food bank, and IFAN (2026) describes recorded food-bank use as "the tip of the iceberg."

Of the 61% of food-insecure people who did not turn to charitable food provision, for 17% it was because they were too embarrassed and for 12% it was due to fear of judgement (Trussell and IFAN, 2025). Our evidence suggests that these figures underestimate the true extent of the social stigma attached to using charity to relieve hunger. Stigma is a structural barrier as significant as price.

“It’s soul destroying going to the food bank as I should be able to feed the kids”., Community participant, Newcastle/Ashington

3.2 The impact of food insecurity on health, well-being and life expectancy

“GPs in poorer areas of the country have reported a resurgence of diseases such as rickets and scurvy caused largely by nutritional deficiencies,” Nurse, Newcastle.

The total health-related costs of the UK's dysfunctional food system, including healthcare, social care, welfare spending, productivity losses and the human cost of chronic disease, amount to approximately £298 billion per year, close to the entire annual NHS budget (Jackson, 2026). The cost of providing a healthy diet for the whole UK population would be approximately £51 billion per year, less than a quarter of that figure (FFCC, 2026). The economic argument for action is that inaction is catastrophically more expensive.

Food insecurity has severe, long lasting negative consequences for physical health, mental well-being and life expectancy. Inadequate access to nutritious food contributes directly to obesity, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, micronutrient deficiency and reduced quality of life, linking health outcomes to neighbourhood deprivation (NHS England, 2025; Gov.UK, 2026).

In 2022–2024, healthy life expectancy at birth in England was 60.9 years for men and 61.3 for women, still below pre-pandemic levels, and deprivation-related inequality in life expectancy has widened over the past decade (Gov.UK, 2026; RTF MPs Brief, 2026). The gap in healthy life expectancy between the most and least deprived areas of England is now around 19–20 years, widening to some 25 years for disabled people (ONS, 2025).

Birmingham City Council links food insecurity to cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and poorer mental health; the Belfast Food Partnership puts costs of the consequences of obesity in Northern Ireland at around £500 million a year and a spend of more than £1 million a day on diabetes complications, an amount projected to consume 17% of the region's health budget by 2035. (Belfast Food Partnership, 2026)

As communities reported in Belfast evidence submission stated, *"food is medicine."*

“If recovering from illness, cancer, etc., healthy food is important for recovery. Why is healthy food so expensive?” Community participant, Scotland

Because healthy, nutrient-dense food costs more than energy-dense processed alternatives, participants described relying on cheaper ultra-processed options despite understanding the health cost, accelerating

childhood obesity in deprived communities, especially as fast-food outlet density rises in low-income wards (Community participants, Liverpool, London, Wales, Right to Food 2026).

Participants also consistently linked food insecurity to psychological stress, anxiety, isolation and poor mental well-being, with embarrassment and stigma a major barrier to seeking support:

"People will choose hunger over going to a foodbank" (RTF witness-London, 2026).

"Hardship is managed through trust built over time, not through institutions that have not earned it" (RTF witness-Belfast, 2026).

The impact of poor diet on children

Children face particular risk: poor nutrition in infancy and childhood is linked to worse educational attainment, poorer mental health and greater chronic-disease risk in adulthood, and the Commission heard intense concern about holiday hunger and reliance on school-based food support. See *Chapter 7, Section 2: Free school meals: the clearest test of charity versus right* for more detail.

"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." Community evidence, Northeast England

According to the latest data, measured against Sustainable Development Goal 2 (Zero Hunger) and the Global Nutrition Targets (GNTs), the UK is off course to meet all targets for maternal, infant and young children's nutrition (Global Nutrition Report, 2026). There has been no progress in reducing anaemia, and there are no data on stunting. The height of five-year-olds in the UK has been falling since 2013, and children are also shorter than those in almost all other comparable countries (Food Foundation, 2024). Height is a strong indicator of general living conditions, including illness and infection, stress, poverty and sleep quality.

As Henry Dimbleby outlined in the National Food Strategy review in 2022, *"Children in the poorest areas of England are both fatter and significantly shorter than those in the richest areas at age 10 to 11. This is a big enough problem to have an impact at an international level."*

NHS data shows that around 700 children a year are admitted to hospital with malnutrition, rickets or scurvy in England. Dietary inequalities in children from poorer backgrounds are driving higher rates of problems including obesity, type 2 diabetes and dental decay (The King's Fund, 2025).

"School dinners are expensive ... At £3.60 a meal ... You can't expect a child to learn when their stomach is empty" Community evidence, Northeast England.

Not tackling food insecurity is directly damaging the prospects of future generations across the UK.

Hunger reduces a child's capacity to learn and develop. Food insecurity in childhood is linked to poorer academic, behavioural and emotional outcomes from infancy. (<https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/what-we-do/global-issues-hub/poverty-and-education-uk>). Evidence suggests that attainment gaps are shaped by free-school-meal status, ethnicity, gender and postcode. Currently, London is the only region guaranteeing every primary pupil a free school meal, and its free-school-meal eligibility has risen the fastest of any region (to 29.2%), while children in the rest of the UK rely on a means test. A child's access to a nutritious meal should never depend on where they live rather than on need.

Institutional care, patient centred health systems and food insecurity.

But it is not only children that are poorly served. Malnutrition remains a significant, under-recognised challenge in institutional care, hospitals, care homes, supported living and community care pathways.

Older people, people with disabilities or learning disabilities, and those in palliative or end-of-life care are particularly vulnerable.

Evidence from BAPEN (British Association for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition) and NICE (National Institute for Health Care Excellence) consistently shows disease-related malnutrition is associated with increased mortality, longer hospital stays, delayed recovery, poorer quality of life and higher healthcare costs, and national guidance emphasise routine nutritional screening, person-centred care planning and timely dietetic support.

Food in care settings is not solely a clinical matter. Evidence highlights the biological, social, cultural and relational roles of food in maintaining dignity and identity; people in institutional care may experience what has been described as 'symbolic malnutrition', where the social and emotional meanings of food are overlooked even when physiological needs are met.

Here the evidence identifies a striking gap between policy ambition and practice: a Hackney study submitted by City St George's, University of London found healthcare responses to food insecurity '*inconsistent, improvised and ethically complex*', with clinicians informally signposting to food aid or prescribing oral nutritional supplements, while the NHS leaned heavily on the voluntary sector and lacked any clear, resourced role.

The Disability Poverty Campaign Group and Birmingham City Council both call for food security to be embedded as a core outcome in NHS and social-care planning, including routine screening for food insecurity, positioning the NHS as an 'anchor institution' that identifies and responds to need before crisis. Murphy Keith's health and power framework (2021), which focused on strengthening community and individual voices in health systems, offers one model for the inclusive, intersectoral governance this life-course approach requires, from the first thousand days to the last. See *Chapter 6: Current UK Policy Approaches in Practice* for more information on public health and nutrition.

3.4 The unequal distribution of food insecurity

Food insecurity is not evenly distributed across the UK. It reflects entrenched socioeconomic and demographic and geographical divides.

Food insecurity due to location:

"The return bus fare from Aberdare to the local large supermarket is £9 for a 15-minute journey each way. That's money that could go on food," Community participant, Aberdare, Wales

The right to food is shaped by more than the presence of food in shops. It depends on whether people can physically reach food outlets, afford a healthy diet, obtain food of sufficient cultural and nutritional quality, and rely on a system that distributes nutrition fairly across society (Campanera et al, 2023). In the UK, these conditions are profoundly unequal.

Postcode matters enormously with rural households facing a "poverty premium" of higher prices and more expensive journeys to find affordable food, while poor urban neighbourhoods are often "food deserts". The Teesside University Nutrition Research Team (2026) found significant inequalities in access to healthy food environments disproportionately affecting northern England; social supermarkets in Middlesbrough rose from nine in 2021 to twenty-eight by April 2025, a symptom of unmet need, not a solution.

Where a person lives shapes what they eat, and the retail environment is not neutral. The balance of what is on offer is worst where people have the least money to absorb a poor nutritional choice. In Castlemilk, one of Scotland's most deprived neighbourhoods, healthy life expectancy is some seven years below the Glasgow average. Home to 14,000 people, it has no supermarket at all. Residents "*travel on the bus to a*

supermarket in another area and pay £10 to get a taxi home with all their shopping." Its community pantry, where members pay £2.50 for around £15 of goods, and which has queues over an hour before opening, must buy in much of its stock because there is no local shop to donate surplus (Castlemilk Housing and Human Rights Lived Experience Board, 2026).

Food deserts are not simply an absence of shops: they also reflect low income, limited transport, time poverty and the actual price of what is nearby (Bijlani et al., 2025). Online grocery expansion has opened some new routes, but access requires a digital connection, a fixed address, a working payment method and usually a minimum spend, conditions that older, rural, disabled and recently arrived households may not be able to meet.

For people with disabilities and mobility limitations, the lack of an accessible supermarket means low-cost ultra-processed food is frequently the only practical option. This is a structural barrier, not a personal choice (Nolan, 2026). The localisation of food strategies creates a postcode lottery, and the disappearance of welfare state support behind a webpage and an algorithm has created new barriers for marginalised populations without access to computers or smartphones (SOAS University of London, 2026).

Every area has its own story - the Northeast shows acute indebtedness, respondents in Wales reported the everyday arithmetic of going without, and in Northern Ireland rising household food costs are compounded by the highest fuel costs in the UK.

Food insecurity and poor diet are also shaped by the physical environments people live in. Public Health Wales found greater access to green space associated with lower childhood obesity, and higher fast-food outlet density with higher childhood obesity; fast-food density increased in every Welsh local authority between 2018 and 2023 despite the Welsh Obesity Strategy, clear evidence that planning controls are too weak.

Across the UK, a 2026 study spanning 2011 to 2024 found that fast-food outlet density rose 36% over thirteen years; more deprived areas carried higher fast-food density in every year measured, and the gap between the most and least deprived areas grew by 28% across the period, while supermarket growth was slower, at 17%, with no meaningful deprivation gradient (Boskovic, Burgoine and Hoenink, 2026).

Local authorities need stronger powers over unhealthy food-outlet density, balanced with protected green space and support for local growing. Belfast, Wales and London community sessions all shared examples of the positive impact having land to grow food has improved health and nutrition outcomes.

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 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."*

But Geographical proximity to food production does not guarantee food security: people can live in food-producing regions and still be poorly served by the food system, pointing to failures of distribution, affordability and access rather than simple scarcity (Blake, 2026). Farmers in Wales reported *"we cannot afford to eat our own produce"*.

"Rural Scotland has prices approximately 25% higher than in cities." Community participant, Scotland.

Food insecurity among disabled people:

“Disabled people are not just experiencing poverty, they are being systematically prevented from maintaining their health.” Community participant, Greater Manchester

Disabled people living in the UK are disproportionately affected by food insecurity. Trussell and IFAN (2025) reported that 27% of disabled people are food insecure, compared with 11% of non-disabled people, and this rises to 35% for those with a mental health condition and 43% for those with a learning disability. Overall, 74% of Trussell food bank users are disabled. Over 50% of adults with severe mental illness experience food insecurity, and over 60% of adults with severe mental illness who receive Universal Credit report food insecurity (Smith, 2026). This is not a personal problem; the system is failing them.

The Commission's disabled participants described a "poverty premium," where meeting basic mobility needs or a specialist diet demands extra expense, which is entirely ignored by benefit calculations, pushing people into permanent debt cycles (Food Foundation, 2023; Learning Disability Today, 2023; Scope UK, 2024). Disabled people need, on average, an additional £1,095 a month to reach the same standard of living as non-disabled households ("disability price tag," Scope, 2025).

The Disability Poverty Campaign Group (DPCG)'s submission reported 84% of respondents had said that difficulty affording food had harmed their physical or mental health, 55% skipped meals at least weekly, 90% faced barriers to accessing food at all, and 58% said disability-related costs reduced their food budget "a lot". Their conclusion – that disabled people are "*not just experiencing food poverty, they are being systematically prevented from maintaining their health*" (DPCG, 2026). And yet, even though a large majority of disabled respondents have reported skipping meals, only around a quarter have used a food bank, offering further evidence that need should be measured directly and locally, not inferred from charity throughput (DPCG, 2026).

“There are days where I can’t leave the house. Going shopping wipes, me out. The whole system is set up against decent food and then makes us feel guilty because of it.” Community participant, Newcastle/Ashington

Food insecurity among racial minorities.

UK household food insecurity data for 2021–22 show that insecurity reached 19% in households headed by someone Black, African, Caribbean or Black British, and 16% in Arab households, against 6% for White households (Power, 2023). These gaps are not entirely explained by income: racial discrimination operates on its own account, narrowing access to employment, health services, welfare and even charitable food (Power, 2023). Factors associated with food insecurity are also cumulative, a family may face low pay, high rent, poor transport, limited cooking space and high local food prices simultaneously (Stanley et al., 2025). Household size, the presence of children, income, employment status, ethnicity and area deprivation are all important predictors that act cumulatively.

“Asylum seekers are living on £49 per week. Food insecurity amongst asylum seekers is often overlooked; they may fear going out to seek food assistance,” Community participant, Aberdare, Wales, 2026

Structural racism also shapes the cultural adequacy of food provision. Food banks and pantries carry specific barriers for minority communities: English-only and online advertising, gatekeeping through referral from services that may themselves be out of reach, and food that frequently does not meet dietary requirements, such as a lack of halal options, heavy reliance on tinned goods, an absence of familiar staples, or insufficient regard for intolerances (Najmudin, 2026). Research across six schools in 2022–23 found that British Muslim schoolchildren were routinely left with inadequate options, with catering staff citing cost as the primary obstacle (Sattar et al., 2024). The lesson for any universal free school meals policy is direct: coverage without cultural fit is not genuinely universal.

"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." Community participant, Birmingham

Food insecurity due to gender or sexuality

Gender is another factor. The submission from the Bristol Women's Voice found one in six women were food insecure, compared with one in eight men, as were 12% of the city's unpaid carers, also overwhelmingly women, when compared with a local average of 7.9%.

"There are people going hungry because there are people with kids like me, and their kids eat first, then the family, and at the end of the day they don't have enough money." Carer, Bristol Women's Voice consultation

This supports the Food Foundation's finding that 29% of single-parent households skip or shrink meals so children can eat. Single parents, nine-in-ten of them women, carry a heavy share of the burden. One Parent Families Scotland found single-parent households were the family type most likely to be food insecure and that 36% of single-parent adults in Scotland worried about running out of food in 2023/24, while 15% ran out. This is several times the population-wide rates of 8% and 3%. Across the UK, the Food Foundation found 35% of single-parent households were food insecure, more than double the rate for two-adult families with children.

"Women absorb the shortfall through self-sacrifice; they are the parents skipping meals," One Parent Families Scotland, 2026.

34% of LGBTQIA+ people also experience food insecurity, compared with 15% of non-LGBTQIA+ people (Trussell and IFAN, 2025).

3.5 Failure to keep up with the rising cost of food

"We're not asking for luxury. We're asking for the basics, the right to feed our children without fear" (RTF witness-Belfast, 2026).

Food price had become the single most-cited food-related concern among UK consumers by mid-2024 (69%), unranked in the top ten as recently as April 2021 (FSA, 2024). By January 2026, 5% of adults had gone a full day without eating for want of money (Food Foundation, 2026).

The rise in food prices is having a disproportionate impact on those with a low income. The poorest 20% of households spend up to 14.3% of their total expenditure on food, compared to only 8.6% for the richest 20% of households (DEFRA, 2026).

And income affects the kinds of food bought. Healthier food costs more than twice as much per calorie than less healthy alternatives, so the poorest fifth of households with children would need to spend around 70% of disposable income to meet official healthy-eating guidance.

Food cost 38.6% more in November 2025 than in November 2020, a £100 weekly shop rising to £139. Annual food-price inflation peaked at 19.2% in March 2023, the highest rate in 45 years and among the highest in the G7 and has not returned to pre-2021 levels since (ONS, 2025a; ONS, 2025b; House of Commons Library, 2026a).

The trigger was fragile post-pandemic supply chains, then Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The two countries together account for around half of global sunflower-oil exports and a quarter to a third of global wheat exports. Supply-chain disruption and energy-market instability further accelerated food and fuel prices, with disabled people reporting higher energy needs and rural communities higher transport

costs (RTF Evidence-Northeast England, 2025; RTF Evidence-Belfast, 2026). UK farm fertiliser costs also rose from £1.5 billion in 2021 to £2 billion (DEFRA, 2025).

Inflation eased, then rose again: by December 2025, food and non-alcoholic beverage prices were rising at 4.5% a year, driven by higher labour costs, employer National Insurance changes, Extended Producer Responsibility packaging regulation and post-Brexit border costs (DEFRA, 2026; House of Commons Library, 2026a).

Climate change is adding further pressure, with £361 added to the average household food bill across 2022–23, domestic vegetable production down around 12% in 2023 after storms and flooding, and prices modelled to rise by a quarter to a third by 2050 (<https://green-alliance.org.uk/publication/uk-food-security-in-a-climate-changed-world/>). As One Parent Families Scotland warns, a Right to Food "*designed for today's prices, and not indexed to tomorrow's, will be overwhelmed within a decade.*"

The cost of food is only one part of the cost of living crisis affecting every household in the country, which is explored in more detail in the next chapter (*Chapter 10, Section 1: Evidence of affordability pressure*).

3.6 The impact of debt on food security

If income is the foundation of food security, debt is the trapdoor beneath it. Citizens Advice in Gateshead and Newcastle found that in a single year their clients owed over half a billion pounds (£571.8 million), an average of £8,497 each, across more than 214,000 individual debts; around a fifth (20.8%) was government-related, council tax was the single most common debt by number of clients, alongside benefit overpayments, tax-credit clawbacks and Universal Credit advances.

The five-week wait for a first Universal Credit payment forces advance "loans" recovered from benefits already below the cost of essentials; as Citizens Advice (2026) observes, many people "*are missing out on both [heating and eating], or in some cases, also lighting.*" Because water companies cannot cut off supply, ceasing to pay water bills becomes one of the few ways to free up money for food, and debt to the state becomes self-reinforcing.

4. Inadequate Incomes, Social Security and the Right to Food

"We are seeing more elderly clients asking for help and more working families, sometimes up to three jobs in the household are not covering outgoings ... our fastest-growing group of clients are those in low-paid jobs, especially those with children," food-aid providers cited by IFAN

*"It's outrageous that working full-time people must rely on food banks, stripping away your dignity",
Community participant, Tower Hamlets, London*

Food insecurity is an income and affordability problem, not a food availability problem. Across 300 hours of fieldwork in ninety organisations across six countries, Garthwaite (2026) found that inadequate income is a key driver of food insecurity. This concurs with the evidence that the Right to Food commission has reviewed.

Food is the "flexible" item in a squeezed budget, the first cut when rent, fuel and debt cannot be. One food service provider commented that *"rent eats first"* as food can be reduced or adjusted, where other household costs cannot (London CSO evidence session of the UK Right to Food Commission, July 2026).

In the majority of places around the country that the Commission visited, people repeatedly highlighted low pay, informal jobs, inadequate social security, insecure working conditions, debt, and rising food, fuel and housing costs as the root causes of limited access to available food and of people going hungry.

Work is no longer a reliable route out of poverty; in-work poverty has risen, concentrated among part-time and self-employed workers and low-paid sectors such as hospitality.

"Nurses ... work full time ... trying to feed their kids ... are burnt out, often eating ... pot noodles." Community participant, Northeast England

The basic rate of universal credit sits well below any independent estimate of essential costs, close to destitution levels (JRF, 2025a); nine in ten low-income households on Universal Credit report going without at least one essential, and an estimated £24.1 billion in benefits and social tariffs goes unclaimed each year.

Prices outran wages for twenty consecutive months between November 2021 and June 2023; real pay fell 2.6% at its worst point, and by April 2025 the typical full-time worker still earned 2% less in real terms than in 2008 (ONS, 2025c; House of Commons Library, 2025b). By February–April 2026, real pay growth had slowed to just 0.1% (ONS, 2026a).

The £20-per-week Universal Credit uplift, introduced in the pandemic, was removed in October 2021, cutting incomes for around six million households by over £1,000 a year just as food and energy prices began rising (DWP, 2024).

"To get UC and other benefits it is like you're begging, if you have a SEN child, no support," Community participant, Belfast.

Under the Universal Credit Act 2025, the health-related (LCWRA) element has been cut from £432.27 to £217.26 a month for most new claimants from April 2026, and frozen until 2029/30, around £2,700 a year less than the protected rate (House of Commons Library, 2026b). By FYE 2024 the poorest fifth of UK households had a median disposable income of £16,800, 4.9% lower in real terms than before the pandemic, and the gap between incomes and the cost of eating continues to widen (ONS, 2025d).

“It’s important to recognise that there is an interplay between food prices and incomes and food insecurity,” Peter Ritchie, Nourish Scotland, Glasgow evidence session, 2026

The UK does not face a shortage of food. Food is widely available, but many people cannot afford it.

‘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 have enough to build a safety net.’ Participant, Amnesty International UK Survey.

This chapter examines the relationship between incomes, social security and wages and food insecurity, focusing on the adequacy, accessibility and availability of income support and the implications for the right to food, building on the drivers of poverty and inadequate incomes already identified in Chapters 2 and 3 and feeding into the policy critique set out in *Chapter 6: Current UK Approaches in Practice*.

4.1 Social security and the right to food

“The overwhelming evidence base shows the biggest drivers of hunger in the UK are flaws in the design and delivery of social security; a lack of timely, joined-up community support; inaccessible, insecure or low-paid work; and more significant costs like housing and energy” (Trussell Trust, 2026).

A recurring theme throughout the Commission was the relationship between food insecurity and social security.

Baroness Ruth Lister noted that the concept of social security emphasises society's collective responsibility to prevent hardship, whereas framing support as welfare can reinforce the idea that food insecurity is an individual problem. (Lister, 2001). An unintended consequence of this is that food insecurity is viewed as a problem affecting specific groups, rather than evidence of broader shortcomings in the UK’s wages, living standards and social security.

She argued that social security should be understood as a cornerstone of social protection rather than simply a target for cuts, stating: *‘We must defend the social security system as something that’s of real value, of real importance, and not something that is only there to be cut.’*

Social security currently provides an essential source of income for around 24 million people in Great Britain, including 8.4 million Universal Credit claimants and 4 million Personal Independence Payment (PIP) recipients (Department for Work and Pensions, 2026a; 2026b).

The right to social security is recognised in Article 9 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN General Assembly, 1966).

The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) has described social security as essential for protecting people against loss of income associated with unemployment, sickness, disability, old age and caring responsibilities. It also identifies three core characteristics of a rights-compliant system: availability, meaning support must exist and provide protection against social and economic risks; adequacy, meaning payments must be sufficient to ensure an adequate standard of living; and accessibility, meaning people must be able to access support without unreasonable barriers (CESCR, 2008).

Below, we examine the evidence received by the Right to Food Commission in relation to these three core characteristics, alongside one additional principle, which we heard emphasised repeatedly: dignity. Witnesses stressed that social security should not only provide enough money to live on, it should also enable people to meet their needs without shame, stigma or loss of autonomy.

Adequacy:

International human rights standards state that social security payments should provide enough income to meet essential needs and support a life lived in dignity, and the International Labour Organisation's *Social Protection Floors Recommendation* calls on governments to establish minimum social security guarantees providing access to healthcare and basic income security throughout life (ILO, 2012).

The Commission heard evidence from social security claimants who struggle to make ends meet, being driven into debt, skipping meals and relying on the informal food system.

We also heard from civil society, civil servants and academics that the UK lacks a clearly defined social protection floor linking the rating and uprating of social security payments to the real cost of living. Amnesty International UK argues there is no existing consistent mechanism to ensure that payments reflect the costs of food, housing, energy, transport, childcare and disability-related needs (Amnesty International UK, 2025).

In 2025/26, the standard Universal Credit allowance for a single claimant aged 25 or over is £424.90 per month, Carer's Allowance is £86.45 per week, and PIP ranges from £30.30 to £298.45 per week depending on entitlement (Department for Work and Pensions, 2025). The Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimates that Universal Credit is £51 per week lower than a couple over 25 would need to make ends meet (Trussell and Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2026).

Many organisations supported the introduction of an Essentials Guarantee or a Minimum Income Standard approach that would provide an objective basis for determining benefit adequacy and uprating, though some witnesses cautioned that any such methodology must sit within a universal social protection floor rather than a single scheme, to avoid unintended discriminatory effects, while building on existing work in this area.

Discriminatory impact of social security inadequacy:

Food insecurity is not experienced equally as outlined in Chapter 3. Disabled people face additional costs associated with disability, including higher energy use, specialist equipment, transport costs, dietary requirements and care needs, which the Commission heard are often not fully reflected in social security provision.

Disability Rights UK highlighted that disabled people are significantly more likely to live in poverty than non-disabled people and face growing difficulty accessing affordable, suitable housing, with shortfalls between housing support and actual costs leaving less money available for food. As one contributor told the Commission: *'Government needs to cover the cost of social care. PIP's not enough to cover the cost of carers to come and cook and support people to eat.'*

Witnesses described women as the 'shock absorbers' of income inadequacy, often reducing their own food intake to protect children and other family members, while carers' organisations reported that many unpaid carers regularly skip meals so those they support can eat, and single parents are more vulnerable to financial shocks, having only one income. The Commission also heard that asylum support has fallen significantly in real terms.

'Current asylum support rates are too low to meet essential needs, especially during the rising cost of living crisis' (Action for Refugees in Lewisham, 2026).

Accessibility, digital exclusion and advice:

The Commission heard widespread concern that people struggle to access the support to which they are entitled, and that barriers to claiming are preventing large sums intended to reduce hardship from reaching those who need them. Policy in Practice estimates £24 billion in entitlements go unclaimed across the UK each year, and their work with local authorities to improve benefit take-up shows this can significantly reduce poverty and food insecurity without creating new entitlements (Policy in Practice, 2025).

Digitalisation was identified as a major barrier, since access increasingly depends on having a device, internet connection, digital skills and confidence. Homeless Link described how people experiencing homelessness are often digitally excluded: *‘Sometimes people experiencing homelessness are digitally challenged. Often people have “burner phones” and change their number or lose their phone every week. Can’t log into their UC system on a non-smart phone and often don’t know that they have had their UC sanctioned’.*

The Commission also heard that navigating the social security system often requires specialist support, and was concerned by evidence of growing ‘advice deserts’, where access depends on where people live rather than the level of need.

‘The incredibly complex systems that these claimants were expected to navigate deliberately obfuscated people’s rights.’ Submission from Feeding Liverpool

‘Providing the support to actually help people maximise their income in a really complicated system is really important.’ Community Participant, Grangemouth

Cardiff Council reported that advice services delivered through food bank settings generated more than £309,000 in additional income through successful benefit claims, while Greater Manchester Combined Authority highlighted substantial levels of unclaimed Pension Credit, Attendance Allowance and Healthy Start support, and Resolve Poverty highlighted the success of initiatives such as its Money Matters programme and Money Advice Referral Tools in helping professionals identify financial difficulties earlier.

The Commission also heard that access to welfare advice is increasingly linked to emergency food settings through Crisis and Resilience Funding. While food banks, pantries and community organisations often provide valued holistic support, people should not have to reach the point of needing emergency food aid before they can access income-maximisation advice, debt support or welfare rights assistance.

A preventative approach requires stronger routes into advice through universal, trusted and permanently funded services, schools, housing providers, health services and community organisations, rather than further institutionalising food banks as a system actor in access to support

Availability: the five-week wait and sanctions

International human rights standards require support to be available when needed, and delays, interruptions and reductions can undermine the purpose of social security. Deductions, amounts taken directly from a claimant’s payment to recover advance payments, overpayments and third-party arrears, are capped at 15% of the standard allowance but still affected 3.1 million households (46% of Universal Credit recipients) in August 2025, with average deductions of £52 per month (Department for Work and Pensions, 2025b).

While the reduction of the cap from 25% to 15% was welcomed, community members told the Commission how such deductions continue to affect the availability of food. The five-week wait for a first Universal Credit payment, arising because the benefit is assessed monthly and paid in arrears, was repeatedly identified as a key driver of food insecurity, a concern also raised by the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (2020).

‘When I lost my NHS job due to disability issues I had a 6-week period between universal credit / housing payments starting and my last work payment,’ Community Participant.

Dr Kayleigh Garthwaite identified *‘the five-week wait for Universal Credit, sanctions, benefit caps, and the bedroom tax’* as a common pathway into crisis, while Public and Commercial Services (PCS) Union reported that *‘claimants are regularly pushed into crisis during the five-week wait’*.

Witnesses argued that new claim advance payments do not resolve the problem, since they must be repaid through future deductions that reduce already inadequate incomes. Sanctions, including financial penalties removing up to 100% of the standard allowance for between 7 and 182 days, affected 5.9% of claimants subject to conditionality in November 2025, with 90% of adverse decisions arising from failure to attend or participate in a mandatory work coach interview (Department for Work and Pensions, 2026c).

The House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee has separately raised concerns about DWP failings in safeguarding claimants and families affected by sanctions, which it judged capable of creating material hardship (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 2024). As one participant put it: *‘In 2026 people are struggling to access food. Why? Because of benefit sanctions, unemployment, redundancy and elderly people without support.’ Community participant, Ashington*

Sarah Morton of PCS argued that *‘sanctions significantly contribute to worsening mental health and financial instability’*, and Samir Karnik-Hinks, Communities lead at Feeding Liverpool, questioned whether *‘calling Universal Credit a safety net when sanctions can take you below the minimum that you’re required to live on’* is anything other than farcical. The evidence suggests sanctions frequently reduce income below the level needed to access food while doing little to improve employment outcomes, and that a lack of procedural safeguards leaves claimants exposed to severe hardship without effective protection or redress.

Dignity, choice and respect:

Dignity emerged as a central concern throughout the evidence. One respondent called for *‘ending the humiliation from the government that comes with being poor in the UK’*, while another reflected services are: *‘Listening but not actually doing anything. When you challenge you get targeted. Have to fight for benefits.’* Witnesses repeatedly linked dignity to having enough money to meet their own needs rather than depending on food parcels or charity, and the Commission heard strong support for cash-first approaches that maximise choice, autonomy and dignity.

‘People just want to be able to be paid enough money to go and buy their own shopping and pay their own bills without having to pick up the phone and ring a charity.’ Community Participant, Right to Food evidence session

4.2 Income maximisation for the right to food: Making work pay

‘When people live in poverty, very often despite working long hours in multiple jobs, they cannot afford to heat their homes or cook fresh food’ (Castlemilk Housing Human Rights and Lived Experience Board, 2026).

Low pay and insecure work are major drivers of food insecurity in the UK. For a growing number of households, work no longer guarantees financial security or protection from hunger.

The Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU) reported that many food workers continue to experience financial hardship despite being employed, with members describing reliance on food banks, support from family and friends, skipping meals and buying cheaper, less nutritious food. The union’s 2025 *Food Insecurity and Cost of Living Report* found that *‘food insecurity is rife amongst food workers,*

as is the impact from wider cost of living pressures such as rising and unaffordable energy prices’, adding that levels of hardship recorded since 2021 have continued to worsen rather than improve (BFAWU, 2025).

“We are cold, sometimes hungry, I don’t wash clothes as much because of electric and water, I still don’t have enough for my rent.” Food worker, evidence to the Commission

“It makes you feel degraded when you work so hard for your wages and then struggle to buy food, decide whether to put heating on or sit under a duvet and a coat.” Food worker, evidence to the Commission

“Like, life shouldn’t be this hard. I earn a good wage and it should be enough to afford to eat and heat without worry but it’s not.” Food worker, evidence to the Commission

These experiences are not confined to the food sector. In 2023, one in five Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) employees were themselves claiming benefits because of low pay, while 11% had used a food bank in the previous year (PCS, 2023). USDAW similarly reported that many workers were changing shopping habits, skipping meals and struggling to afford food. As one retail worker told the union: ‘My wage covers my bills, but I don’t have money for food unless I can get overtime’

The Trades Union Congress told the Commission that ‘poor pay, insecure work and declining collective bargaining coverage have left too many working households unable to afford basic food security,’ (Trades Union Congress, 2026), while teaching unions NEU and NASUWT reported that teachers ‘have had a 23 per cent pay cut since 2010.’ (NEU and NASUWT, 2026).

These pressures have been intensified by austerity and the cost of living crisis, but their roots stretch further back. Over several decades, labour market policies have weakened collective bargaining and increased labour market insecurity, contributing to the growth of low-paid and insecure work. Trade unions argued that declining collective bargaining coverage has reduced workers’ ability to secure wages and conditions that protect them from poverty, and that historically, sector-wide agreements helped prevent employers competing through lower wages and poorer conditions.

Working conditions beyond wages also matter: collective workplace arrangements such as canteens, meal subsidies and protected break times can improve access to affordable, nutritious food, and worker well-being is closely linked to having sufficient time to eat during the working day.

Purchasing food in bulk from larger supermarkets may reduce costs, but this option is often unavailable to people without a car, a freezer or adequate kitchen facilities, and witnesses described juggling multiple jobs, irregular shift patterns and caring responsibilities that leave little time to shop for, prepare and cook healthy meals. Long working hours and commuting times can further reduce the time available for food preparation, while NHS staff surveys have found that many employees struggle to access nutritious, affordable food during the working day. The right to food therefore depends not only on income but also on time, working conditions and access to facilities.

Adequate social security remains an essential part of the right to food for working people. The Commission heard extensive evidence that shortcomings in the social security system continue to drive food insecurity for the 2.3 million Universal Credit claimants in work and around 20% of working-age PIP recipients in England and Wales who are employed (UK Parliament, 2025; Department for Work and Pensions, 2026d).

Growing numbers of working households rely on income-related benefits because their wages are insufficient to provide an acceptable standard of living, and witnesses argued that public funds are increasingly being used to subsidise low-paying employers rather than address the causes of low income.

Making work pay must mean more than increasing employment levels: it requires wages that meet the cost of living, stronger worker protections, secure employment, effective collective bargaining and a social security system that provides genuine protection from poverty and hunger. The challenge for government is not simply to create jobs, but to ensure that work provides the income, security and dignity necessary for everyone to enjoy their right to food.

4.3 Debt, deductions and financial insecurity

Debt is both a consequence and a driver of food insecurity. Many households borrow to cover essential living costs, while deductions from already inadequate benefit payments can leave people without enough income to afford food. Witnesses described a cycle in which low incomes lead to borrowing, arrears and benefit advances, followed by deductions that prolong financial hardship.

One participant at an evidence session in Ashington observed that *‘the percentage of how much that is taken off your benefit are absolutely shocking’*, while participants in Cardiff highlighted the impact of debt recovery practices, calling for *‘a softer easier way that they can manage those debts’*. Evidence from Citizens Advice Gateshead and Newcastle showed that government-related debt, including council tax arrears and social security overpayments, accounted for over £119 million among clients seeking debt advice in 2025–26 (Citizens Advice Gateshead and Newcastle, 2026), and the Commission heard concerns that recovering debts through deductions can push households deeper into hardship where benefit levels are already insufficient to meet essential costs.

Many people described debt as part of everyday survival rather than the result of exceptional circumstances: one survey respondent reported having to *‘regularly go into overdraft to pay for meals and food’*, while another described borrowing from family members to support the food budget, *‘but unfortunately this then cascades into next month’s problem’*.

The Commission also heard concerns about increasing reliance on high-cost borrowing, buy-now-pay-later products and, in some communities, illegal lending, with participants in Scotland describing an *‘epidemic of illegal lending/loan sharks’*. Reducing food insecurity requires action not only on income adequacy but also on public debt and debt recovery arrangements, particularly where debts are owed to public bodies. Witnesses argued that deductions should never reduce incomes below the level required to meet essential living costs and pointed to work done by [Aberlour Childcare Trust](https://www.aberlour.org.uk/about-us/policy-and-influencing/public-debt) in Scotland as a positive example. This work highlighted the extent of debt owed to public bodies and the challenges being faced in paying money directly from benefits with examples of people living in perpetual destitution (<https://www.aberlour.org.uk/about-us/policy-and-influencing/public-debt>).

4.4 Crisis support and local welfare assistance

Local welfare assistance schemes, hardship funds and crisis support play a vital role in preventing immediate hunger and destitution when incomes are interrupted or insufficient. Evidence suggests that access to crisis support varies significantly depending on where people live, with witnesses describing a patchwork of local schemes with different eligibility criteria, provision and funding. One survey respondent explained that a social prescriber had referred them to the Household Support Fund, while others reported difficulties accessing support, including being told by their local council that *‘they didn’t have a fund like that’*.

Crisis support can be highly effective in preventing immediate hardship, but many contributors questioned whether emergency assistance is increasingly being used to compensate for weaknesses elsewhere in the social security system. One witness observed, *‘there is this state of perpetual crisis in the first place’*, and participants in Scotland argued that *‘temporary recommendations and short-term measures are insufficient’* and that *‘structural solutions are required’*.

The Commission heard evidence from local authorities across England that have taken different approaches to implementing the Government's new Crisis and Resilience Fund. While its emphasis on cash-first approaches and prevention was generally welcomed, there were concerns about the impact on the informal food aid system during the transition, and it is clear that local authorities are taking very different approaches to implementation, which will require national monitoring to ensure needs are being met. Despite the commitment to multi-year funding, there are concerns that, beyond the initial period ending in March 2027, it is not clear how crisis food needs will continue to be met and resourced (DWP, 2026e).

Conclusion

"We need an economy which prioritises health and well-being, not just economic output. People who aren't in work still have value." Community participant, Northeast England

Rising UK food insecurity is rooted in deliberate political and economic choices, not accidental fluctuations: austerity, welfare reform, cuts to local government funding, and widening inequality reflect a state model that prioritises macroeconomic growth over social justice, treating the safety net as a burden rather than a right (Jenkins et al., 2021).

Since the 2008 financial crisis, austerity's reduced public expenditure across welfare, local government and community services has been linked to increased poverty, causing greater demand for emergency food aid and worsening health inequality.

Participants described charities filling gaps once met by statutory provision (Sustain, 2015; Jenkins et al., 2021). Research links benefit sanctions, payment delays and Universal Credit's rigid administrative processes to greater reliance on food banks; the pandemic exposed and intensified these inequalities, with emergency measures becoming long-term by default (Thomas et al., 2022; Pautz & Dempsey, 2022; RTF MPs Brief, 2026).

"Food banks should not exist; the charity should not have to pick up the slack. The charity sector is not the place to hold up this society, it has failed. There needs to be statutory provision." Community participant, Northeast England

Public Health Outcomes Framework data showing 19.8% of children live in relative low-income families underlines the fact that the crisis is systemic, requiring a permanent shift from emergency response to structural solutions grounded in income adequacy and the full legislative realisation of a UK-wide Right to Food Framework Act (Gov.UK, 2026; RTF MPs Brief, 2026).

The evidence submitted to the Commission reframes the problem in three ways. First, the true scale is larger and less visible than headline figures suggest, and that most severely food-insecure people never use a food bank. Second, the burden is most heavily concentrated on people with vulnerabilities such as disabled people, alongside ethnic groups, carers, single parents and migrants (especially in the North and devolved nations). Third, the charitable response that has grown to fill the gap, however vital it may be, cannot close it and in some respects entrenches it.

The evidence presented to the Commission demonstrates that food insecurity is fundamentally an income issue. Inadequate social security, low pay, insecure work, debt and rising living costs all contribute to food insecurity, and these pressures are particularly acute for groups that face additional costs or barriers, including disabled people, carers, women, single parents, people seeking asylum, young people and older people.

A clear message emerged throughout the evidence is that emergency food aid can help prevent immediate harm, but it cannot substitute for adequate incomes. Realising the right to food requires social security and

employment policies that ensure everyone has sufficient income to meet their essential needs, access support when needed, and live with dignity, choice and security.

5. UK Legal and Policy Commitments to the Right to Food

Evidence submitted to the Right to Food Commission highlighted a recurring concern that food insecurity in the UK is increasingly treated as a matter of charity rather than rights. Act4Food argues that food insecurity is treated as ‘*a philanthropic issue*’, while the Food Ethics Council emphasises that a true right to food concerns government duty rather than charity.

This chapter examines the international, UK and devolved legal and policy frameworks relevant to the right to food. It assesses the extent to which existing arrangements meet the obligations arising from international human rights law, with particular attention to minimum standards, progressive realisation, accountability and access to remedy. The analysis draws on the legal mapping and literature review commissioned by Amnesty International UK and Just Fair and undertaken by Dr Clare James, alongside evidence submitted to the Commission (James, 2026).

5.1 The right to food in international human rights law

The right to food is widely recognised in international human rights law and in the constitutions and legal systems of many states. It has also been interpreted and enforced by constitutional and human rights courts (Knuth and Vidar, 2011).

The right was first recognised in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN General Assembly, 1948), which includes access to food as part of the right to an adequate standard of living. It was subsequently codified in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which recognises both the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger (UN General Assembly, 1966). The right is also reflected in other international treaties, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN General Assembly, 2006) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (UN General Assembly, 1979).

The right to food is interdependent with other human rights, including health, housing, social security, education and life, and access to adequate food is shaped by the wider social, economic and physical conditions in which people live (World Conference on Human Rights, 1993; CESCR, 2000; OHCHR and FAO, 2010; *R.R and Others v Hungary*, 2021; *Dudchenko v Russia*, 2017; *Nencheva and Others v Bulgaria*, 2023).

The Council of Europe increasingly recognises access to adequate food as both a prerequisite for, and component of, a range of rights protected under the European Social Charter, including the rights to health, protection from poverty and social exclusion, and the welfare of children (Committee of Ministers, 2025).

5.2 Article 11 ICESCR: Defining the right to adequate food

The framework described in this section should be considered to provide the benchmark against which evidence considered elsewhere in this report should be assessed. The key question is not if food is available, but whether the United Kingdom is meeting its obligations under international human rights law to respect, protect and fulfil the right to food for all.

Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) recognises both the right to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food, and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger (UN General Assembly, 1966). The UK has ratified the ICESCR and is therefore bound by these obligations under international law.

In 1999, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) adopted General Comment No. 12 (GC12), which remains the leading interpretation of the right to food. While General Comments are not legally binding, they provide authoritative guidance on the meaning of treaty rights and the steps states should take to implement them (CESCR, 1999).

Article 11's recognition of both the right to adequate food and the fundamental right to be free from hunger is significant. Freedom from hunger represents the minimum essential guarantee owed to everyone, while the broader right to adequate food extends beyond survival to encompass nutrition, accessibility, cultural appropriateness, sustainability and dignity.

According to GC12 (CESCR, 1999), the right to adequate food requires food to be:

- **Available:** food must be available through productive land, resources and functioning distribution systems.
- **Accessible:** everyone must be able to access food physically and economically without compromising other basic needs.
- **Adequate:** food must be nutritionally sufficient, safe and culturally appropriate.
- **Sustainable:** access must be secure over time without undermining future generations' ability to meet their needs.

The right therefore concerns not only food itself but the conditions through which people access it, including income, housing, transport, public services and local food environments. Several submissions emphasised that the right to food concerns not only access to food itself but also the broader enabling environment through which people obtain it. As the Food Ethics Council observed, *'the right to food is everything to do with food but not only to do with food.'*

5.3 Minimum core obligations and the case for a social minimum

CESCR's concept of minimum core obligations identifies the essential level of protection that must be guaranteed to everyone. In relation to the right to food, this includes ensuring freedom from hunger. The FAO defines hunger as the lowest level of food security, *'a painful sensation caused by not eating enough food'* and a grievous violation of the right to food. Persistent hunger or malnutrition is therefore a strong indication that a state is failing to meet its obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

The minimum core should be understood as a floor rather than a ceiling: it does not exhaust the state's obligation to progressively realise the full right.

A social minimum can therefore provide a practical benchmark for identifying the conditions below which no one should fall if they are to access adequate food with dignity. It should not be reduced to a calorie requirement, income threshold or fixed basket of goods. Rather, its content should be developed transparently and inclusively, with governments, experts, civil society and people with lived experience, and reviewed as social conditions change.

This approach also guards against the risk that minimum standards become permanent settlements rather than a platform for progressive realisation. A clearly defined social minimum can provide a benchmark for

monitoring government action, identifying retrogression and strengthening accountability, while remaining part of a broader obligation to progressively realise the right to food.

Evidence submitted to the Commission highlighted the importance of grounding social minimums in lived experience and ensuring that standards reflect dignity, choice and the practical conditions necessary to access food. Experts recommended that governments, civil society organisations and people with lived experience work together to identify the conditions below which no one should fall.

The current measures of poverty in the UK are explored in *Chapter 9: Building Governance for Accountability, Leadership and Delivery*. These measures do not meet the conditions of minimum standards as set out in international law. Any social minimum should be transparent, accountable, inclusive, and periodically reviewed to reflect changing social conditions and the obligation of progressive realisation.

Defining a social minimum provides a clear benchmark against which government actions can be assessed, strengthens accountability, supports monitoring and helps protect against unjustified retrogression. Most importantly, it translates the right to food from a broad legal commitment into practical standards capable of guiding policy and evaluating progress.

GC12 emphasises monitoring, participation, accountability and effective remedies as essential components of implementation (CESCR, 1999). Governments should monitor progress towards realisation of the right, identify barriers, and ensure that individuals have access to independent mechanisms capable of providing redress where violations occur.

GC12 also explains state responsibilities through three levels of obligation (CESCR, 1999). States must respect the right to food by refraining from actions that undermine people's access to food; protect the right by preventing third parties, including businesses, from interfering with access to food; and fulfil the right by taking positive steps to improve access to food and, where people cannot secure food for themselves, providing assistance directly.

These obligations provide a useful framework for assessing the adequacy of existing law and policy. They make clear that the right to food is not limited to emergency food provision or crisis support. Rather, it requires governments to create and maintain the economic, social and regulatory conditions necessary for people to feed themselves with dignity.

5.5 Principles for implementation: Universality, progressive realisation and non-retrogression

The right to food is governed by several broader principles that apply across economic, social and cultural rights. These principles provide important guidance on how states should interpret and implement their obligations.

Universality, non-discrimination and dignity:

A central feature of the right to food is its universality. As GC12 makes clear, the right belongs to every person by virtue of their inherent dignity and applies without discrimination (CESCR, 1999). While some individuals and groups may require additional protections or targeted measures to ensure equal enjoyment of the right, the underlying entitlement is universal. The right to food is therefore not a discretionary benefit or charitable provision, but a human right that states are required to respect, protect and fulfil.

Non-discrimination is an immediate obligation. Governments must identify and address barriers faced by groups who experience higher levels of food insecurity or a greater risk of hunger, including disabled people, children, older people, people experiencing homelessness, minoritised ethnic communities, people

seeking asylum and people living in poverty. Any steps taken to realise the right to food should not be discriminatory in implementation or outcome.

Human dignity underpins the right to food and explains why it extends beyond preventing starvation. The right requires that people are able to access adequate, nutritious, safe and culturally appropriate food in a manner consistent with dignity, autonomy and participation in society.

Progressive realisation and maximum available resources:

States are expected to realise the right to food progressively over time. This reflects the reality that implementation often requires resources, legislation and policy reform. However, progressive realisation does not permit inaction. States must take deliberate, concrete and targeted steps towards full implementation and must use the maximum of their available resources to achieve this objective. Decisions about spending and priorities should therefore be transparent and capable of scrutiny.

Non-retrogression:

States should not take backward steps that undermine enjoyment of the right to food unless they can provide strong justification. Any retrogressive measure should be temporary, necessary, proportionate and non-discriminatory. This principle is particularly important when assessing changes to social security, public services or other policies that affect people's ability to access food.

5.6 The FAO, Sustainable Development Goals and UK compliance with international obligations

The FAO has produced Voluntary Guidelines that provide non-binding guidance on implementing the right to food through laws, policies and institutions, emphasising participation, accountability, non-discrimination, transparency and dignity (FAO, 2005). SDG 2, while relevant to ending hunger, is a political commitment rather than a legally enforceable human rights obligation. The right to food therefore provides the stronger framework for assessing government duties and accountability (Food Foundation, no date; Agriculture Act 2020, s.19).

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has played a significant role in developing and promoting the right to food. While the FAO's concept of food security and the human right to food are closely related, they are not identical. Food security is generally understood as a policy objective concerned with ensuring that people have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food, whereas the right to food establishes legal obligations on governments and rights for individuals. (FAO, 2009; FAO, 2019). There is further analysis of the application of the FAO 'PANTHER' principles and guidance in Chapter 9

5.7 Incorporation of the right to food in UK law

The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) has made clear that realising the right to food requires more than policy commitments. GC12 encourages states to establish legal and institutional frameworks capable of delivering progressive realisation, including national strategies, clear targets, monitoring mechanisms, accountability arrangements and access to effective remedies (CESCR, 1999). As Just Fair notes, *'a human rights approach provides a universal, dignity-based framework that can counter exclusionary narratives and promote more cohesive communities'*. (<https://justfair.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/UK-ESCR-Network-joint-statement-Right-to-Food-UK-Commission-June-2026-2.pdf>).

International experience demonstrates that legal recognition is an important foundation, but effective implementation also depends on supporting legislation, institutions, monitoring processes and political

commitment. Some states, including Brazil, South Africa and Mexico, have domestically recognised the right to food constitutionally, while others, such as India, have developed protections through judicial interpretation.

In the UK, a range of models is available. The most comprehensive would be incorporation of ICESCR rights into domestic law, comparable to the approach taken by the Human Rights Act 1998. Alternatively, Parliament could legislate specifically for the right to food or adopt framework legislation establishing duties, objectives and accountability mechanisms. These approaches are not mutually exclusive and would need to be supported by policy measures and adequate resources to be effective.

CESCR places particular emphasis on framework legislation as a means of translating international obligations into domestic practice (CESCR, 1999). Such legislation should establish clear objectives, benchmarks, monitoring arrangements and accountability mechanisms, supported by a national strategy developed with the participation of rights holders and civil society.

Evidence submitted to the Commission suggested that incorporation should be accompanied by statutory duties requiring governments and public authorities to consider the right to food when exercising their functions. Submissions also highlighted the value of procedural mechanisms, including compatibility statements, reporting requirements and human rights impact assessments, to ensure that the implications of legislative, policy and spending decisions are considered systematically and that potential retrogressive impacts are identified before harm occurs. As Just Fair observed, such mechanisms can help shift systems *‘from crisis response toward prevention and accountability’*.

5.8 Existing domestic legal frameworks: Respect, protect, fulfil and access to Justice

The UK Government has long argued that it gives effect to the right to food through a range of existing legislation and policies. These frameworks span social security, planning, housing, education, public health, food safety and equality law. While they contribute to aspects of the right to food, they were not designed around a right to food framework and do not create a legally enforceable right to food. As a result, significant gaps remain in implementation, accountability and access to remedies.

The below topline analysis of the domestic legal framework is based on a more in-depth legal framework mapping by Dr Clare James. (James, 2026).

Respect:

The obligation to respect requires governments not to interfere with people's ability to access food. Social security legislation, including the Social Security Act 1998, the Social Security Administration Act 1992, the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2015 and the Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment frameworks, plays the most significant role in determining whether people can afford food. However, these provisions contain no requirement that social security support be sufficient to secure an adequate diet or an adequate standard of living. There is no legally defined minimum income floor linked to the cost of essentials and no requirement to assess major welfare reforms against the right to food.

Protect:

The obligation to protect requires governments to prevent third parties from undermining access to food, including corporations. The UK has relatively strong protections relating to food safety through the Food Safety Act 1990, retained General Food Law and food hygiene regulations. Competition law, planning policy and market regulation also influence food access through the work of bodies such as the Competition and Markets Authority and the Groceries Code Adjudicator. However, these frameworks focus primarily on consumer choice, market efficiency, safety and land use rather than ensuring access to affordable, nutritious food.

Evidence submitted to the Commission highlighted the importance of local food environments, planning decisions and public transport in shaping access to food (*See Chapter 3, Section 3: The unequal distribution of food insecurity*), yet these issues are rarely considered through an explicit right-to-food lens.

Fulfil:

The obligation to fulfil requires governments to take positive action to ensure access to food, including both facilitating access to food by strengthening people's ability to feed themselves and providing food directly in situations of last resort, where an individual's circumstances mean that they are unable to do so (such as when required to be in a state institution, due to health needs or an inability to access income).

A range of measures contribute to this objective, including school food standards, the Healthy Start scheme, Best Start Foods in Scotland, public health regulation, food security reporting under the Agriculture Act 2020 and housing standards such as the Decent Homes Standard (Agriculture Act 2020, s.19). These initiatives provide important support, particularly for children and vulnerable groups. However, they remain fragmented, are often subject to eligibility restrictions, and do not guarantee access to adequate food. Existing legislation does not establish minimum standards, require reductions in food insecurity or create a duty to ensure that everyone can access food with dignity.

Equality and non-discrimination:

The Equality Act 2010 provides important protections against discrimination, and, in Scotland and Wales, the socio-economic duty requires public bodies to consider socio-economic disadvantage in strategic decision-making. However, these frameworks do not create a positive obligation to secure access to food, and significant inequalities in food insecurity persist, particularly for disabled people and some minoritised ethnic communities.

The Human Rights Act 1998:

The Human Rights Act 1998 demonstrates how international human rights standards can be embedded within domestic decision-making, through duties on public authorities, ministerial statements of compatibility and parliamentary scrutiny. No equivalent framework exists for the rights contained in the ICESCR, including the right to food. Ministers are not required to assess legislation for its impact on the right to food, public authorities are not under a corresponding duty to comply with it, and Parliament does not routinely scrutinise legislation against ICESCR standards.

While severe food deprivation may occasionally engage rights protected under the Human Rights Act, such protection is indirect and generally confined to situations of extreme hardship. As a result, issues central to the right to food, including affordability, adequacy, dignity and chronic food insecurity, largely fall outside existing legal protections and accountability mechanisms.

Access to justice and redress:

Access to justice for violations of the right to food remains limited. Because the right has not been incorporated into domestic law, individuals cannot directly challenge failures to ensure access to adequate food. Judicial review can assess whether decisions have been made lawfully, but it generally cannot determine whether social security levels, food access or living standards are adequate. UK courts have traditionally been reluctant to rely on unincorporated treaties such as the ICESCR and have shown considerable deference in matters involving welfare policy and public spending.

The UK has also not ratified the Optional Protocol to the ICESCR or the Collective Complaints Protocol to the European Social Charter, further limiting access to remedies. Several submissions argued that existing mechanisms are poorly suited to addressing systemic issues such as food insecurity and called for stronger accountability arrangements capable of addressing structural failures rather than individual cases alone.

5.9 The right to food across the devolved nations

The devolved nations have adopted a range of legislative and policy measures relevant to the right to food, although none currently provides comprehensive legal protection.

Scotland has gone furthest in developing a rights-based approach. The Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022 establishes a framework of national and local food plans, reporting duties and oversight mechanisms, and recognises adequate food as a human rights issue (Scottish Parliament, 2022). Proposals for a standalone Right to Food Bill were ultimately overtaken by plans to incorporate a wider range of ICESCR rights through a Human Rights Bill. However, that legislation has been delayed and there is currently no enforceable right to food or dedicated route to remedy.

Scotland has also incorporated the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into domestic law, although it is too early to assess the impact on citizens. In addition, the Scottish Government has established statutory child poverty reduction targets and reporting requirements, providing an important mechanism for monitoring one of the key drivers of food insecurity. Nevertheless, many of the structural determinants of food insecurity, particularly social security policy, remain reserved to Westminster.

The duty to provide a right to food in Scotland was not adopted in legislation. The Good Food Nation oversight body, the Scottish Food Commission, is advisory and does not hold duties to make ministers accountable.

Scotland does have statutory child poverty targets, but concern has been voiced that these will not be met. Organisations in the third sector sought legal advice and were advised a judicial review to challenge Government on this issue could well succeed - this was followed up with communication to Scottish Government. Scottish Child poverty targets are currently being revised. In response to growing pressure The Scottish Justice Secretary has agreed to review the framework and metrics used to measure child poverty. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has spearheaded with six prominent campaign groups (CPAG, Save The Children Scotland, Aberlour Child Care Trust, The Poverty Alliance, One Parent Families Scotland, Trussell) this campaign and have argued that it is questionable that there is any immediate need to change the existing measures and set out why income must remain the core of the targets.

Although it is true that Scotland has devolved responsibilities and tax raising powers, criticism has been laid before the Scottish Government that they do not use the powers at their disposal.

The Welsh Government has committed to exploring incorporation of the ICESCR and has adopted a range of measures relevant to food access, including the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (Welsh Government, 2015), implementation of the socio-economic duty under the Equality Act 2010, universal primary free school meals and support through the Discretionary Assistance Fund. These measures contribute to poverty reduction, well-being and food access, but they do not create a legal right to food or corresponding duties on public authorities. The proposed Food (Wales) Bill would have established a more comprehensive framework but was not enacted.

In Northern Ireland, the Food Strategy Framework (2024) and accompanying Action Plan explicitly reference the right to food and commit to improving access to adequate and nutritious food (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, 2024). However, these remain policy commitments rather than legally enforceable obligations and do not provide individual rights or remedies.

Taken together, these developments demonstrate growing recognition of the right to food across the devolved nations and illustrate different routes towards implementation, including food strategies, well-being duties, human rights incorporation and poverty reduction frameworks. However, no UK jurisdiction currently combines legal incorporation, minimum standards, accountability mechanisms and effective remedies in a way that fully realises the right to food.

Several submissions highlighted the risk that differing approaches across the UK may lead to an increasingly uneven landscape of rights protection.

“Processes of progressive human rights protection ... may mean that England and Northern Ireland fall behind social rights protections and access to justice mechanisms available in other parts of the UK” (Boyle *et al.*, 2025).

Conclusion

The UK’s compliance with its right-to-food obligations is monitored through a range of international human rights mechanisms, including the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Universal Periodic Review process. Across multiple reporting cycles, these bodies have expressed concern about food insecurity, child poverty, malnutrition and the disproportionate impact of food insecurity on particular groups, including children and disabled people (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2017; Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2008, 2016; UN Human Rights Council, 2023).

UN treaty bodies have also repeatedly recommended that the UK strengthen domestic implementation of economic, social and cultural rights through stronger monitoring, accountability mechanisms and access to remedies. In its 2025 Concluding Observations, CESCR reiterated its recommendation that the UK incorporate the ICESCR into domestic law and adopt a comprehensive strategy to tackle food insecurity, improve nutrition and reduce reliance on food banks (CESCR, 2025).

The UK Government has consistently rejected the need for further incorporation, maintaining that existing legislation, policies and administrative arrangements provide sufficient human rights protections and effective remedies (UK Government, 2025; Flegg and Boyle, 2022). The UK has failed to establish a legal and policy framework capable of consistently securing the right to food for all.

Instead, its current approach remains fragmented and largely reliant on discretionary policies and voluntary measures, leaving significant gaps in protection, accountability and enforcement. This report therefore argues for a fundamental shift in approach: from a precarious and fragmented framework towards one that recognises the right to food as a legally protected right, supported by clear duties, stronger accountability mechanisms and effective routes to remedy. It explores how the UK can move beyond minimum provision towards a framework capable of progressively realising the right to food for everyone.

The UK’s approach has similarly tended to frame food security as a policy objective rather than a legally enforceable human right. While the Government has committed to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG progress reports continue to identify significant concerns relating to worsening poverty, food insecurity and obesity, indicating that important challenges remain (HM Government, 2019; Sachs *et al.*, 2026; Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2026).

Evidence submitted to the Commission supports the view that existing legal protections are failing; for example, Lavelle *et al.*’s submission states: *‘Food insecurity in the UK represents a significant failure to uphold the right to food.’*

The UK already possesses legislation and policies relevant to many dimensions of the right to food, including income support, food safety, nutrition, equality and food security. However, these measures operate as a fragmented collection of policies rather than a coherent framework for realising a legal right, with limited routes to accountability.

There is no overarching duty to realise the right to food, no agreed minimum standard, and limited accountability or remedies. A framework law, supported by robust monitoring and implementation mechanisms, could provide the structure necessary to move from discretionary provision towards

6. Current UK Policy Approaches in Practice

'Britain... has been on the wrong path... 40 years on the wrong path, a path that has damaged communities across the north' (Andy Burnham, 18 May 2026).

Evidence presented to the Commission suggests that our current path has damaged the health and well-being of communities across the UK.

As Chapter 2 established, the Right to Food requires governments not only to aid in times of need, but also to create and maintain the economic, social and regulatory conditions that enable people to feed themselves with dignity.

This chapter examines the extent to which existing UK policies fulfil those obligations by exploring the barriers, limitations and unintended consequences that may undermine their effectiveness. It traces the shift from traditional policy silos towards food systems and rights-based approaches, before examining the principal policy paradigms shaping current responses, including social security, charitable food aid, public health, behavioural and educational approaches, food systems and mission-oriented approaches.

While existing policies provide important forms of support, the Commission's evidence suggests that they remain fragmented and often focus on managing the consequences of food insecurity rather than its underlying causes.

Rather than make recommendations, this chapter explores how current policy approaches respond to and feed into food insecurity, what remains unaddressed, and the strengths, limitations and unintended consequences that follow. Drawing on evidence submitted to the Commission, it identifies key challenges and provides the analytical foundation for the Right to Food framework developed in the chapters that follow.

6.1 From policy silos to food systems and rights-based approaches

Prior to the 2000s, UK food policy was largely organised through separate policy silos, with responsibility divided between agriculture, public health, food safety, and welfare. Food-related issues were therefore addressed through sector-specific interventions rather than as interconnected challenges spanning health, poverty, inequality and the environment.

Efforts to address food insecurity traditionally focused on food production, national food security and nutritional deficiencies through food fortification and supplementation. Since the 1980s, universal social security provision has increasingly been supplemented by targeted and means-tested interventions, reflecting a broader shift towards more conditional forms of social protection (Lister, 2001).

While targeting can direct resources towards need, it also raises concerns about eligibility, uptake, stigma and adequacy of support. Since the 1990s, governments have increasingly emphasised individual choice through behavioural economics and educational approaches, using nudges, information campaigns and behaviour-change interventions to promote healthier diets.

At the same time, policy towards the food industry has largely relied on voluntarism and self-regulation, creating an asymmetry of responsibility whereby individuals are expected to change their behaviour while industry faces fewer obligations to improve the food environment (Lang and Rayner, 2012). While these approaches aim to support health, they can divert attention from the economic and social conditions that shape food choices and sustain inequalities.

Food systems thinking gained momentum during the 2010s through the Global Nutrition Targets, Nutrition for Growth campaign, Sustainable Development Goals, the climate emergency, Brexit, COVID-19 and the National Food Strategy (Dimbleby, 2021).

These developments highlighted the interconnections among environmental sustainability, food-system resilience, public health, and food security, while concerns about climate change, extreme weather, and supply-chain disruption renewed attention to national food security and resilience. This food systems approach presents food insecurity as the product of interconnected social, economic, environmental and health factors and is reflected in initiatives such as Sustainable Food Places, the Good Food Bill, Marmot Places and Camden's mission-oriented Food Strategy.

However, national food security and household food insecurity are often incorrectly conflated. A country may have adequate food supplies and resilient supply chains, while many households remain unable to access or afford adequate food. Similarly, despite the increasing adoption of systems approaches to challenges such as obesity, responsibility frequently remains focused on individuals and families rather than on the wider systems that shape food choices and health outcomes.

This reflects a broader tension within food policy, where systems-based analysis coexists with neoliberal assumptions that emphasise individual responsibility, consumer choice, and voluntary industry action, even when the drivers of food insecurity are social, economic, and structural.

Clear evidence suggests that hunger results not only from food shortages but also from poverty, inequality and lack of access to food. These limitations have contributed to growing interest in rights-based approaches, particularly the Right to Food and food sovereignty (Sampson et al., 2021).

In the UK, this is reflected in calls for a statutory Right to Food, the establishment of the Right to Food UK Commission, and proposals such as the Good Food Bill.

This chapter draws on Bacchi's *What's the Problem Represented to Be?* (WPR, 2009) to examine how different policy responses construct food insecurity, the assumptions underpinning these representations, what remains unaddressed, and the effects and unintended consequences that follow. The following sections examine how different understandings of food insecurity have shaped UK policy and the unintended consequences that arise from the way the problem is defined and addressed.

6.2 Local government

The English response to food insecurity combines a range of overlapping policy approaches operating at national, regional and local levels. These approaches reflect different understandings of the problem and have generated a diverse set of interventions. While each contributes something valuable, together they create a fragmented policy landscape rather than a coherent strategy to ensure access to adequate food.

Local authorities possess important levers to influence food environments, nutrition and some wider determinants of food insecurity (Table 1). These include planning powers, public health initiatives, food partnerships and community-based programmes. However, many interventions are voluntary, locally variable and focused on downstream factors such as food environments, access and individual behaviour, with limited opportunities for meaningful participation by people experiencing food insecurity.

Local initiatives, while important, are unlikely to eliminate food insecurity in the absence of coordinated national action on income adequacy, social security and inequality. There is also a risk that increasing reliance on local and community responses shifts responsibility away from government and obscures accountability for ensuring access to adequate food.

Table 6.1. Local Authority Policy Levers to Influence Food and Nutrition Security: Contributions, Delivery Arrangements, Participation, Limitations and Unintended Consequences

Policy lever	Contribution	Delivery, participation, limitations and unintended consequences
Local Plans restricting takeaways near schools	Can improve local food environments and reduce children's exposure to unhealthy food outlets.	Statutory planning power exercised through Local Plans. Public consultation is required, but people experiencing food insecurity rarely have a formal role in decision-making. Applies mainly to new developments and cannot address existing concentrations of outlets. Focuses on food environments rather than affordability and income.
Cumulative Impact Assessments	Allow consideration of the combined effects of multiple takeaway outlets on neighbourhood health and well-being.	Discretionary planning tool dependent on local authority priorities and planning policies. Community consultation may occur, but affected communities have limited influence over final decisions. Focuses on food environments rather than the economic drivers of food insecurity.
Healthier Catering Commitment	Encourages healthier food provision and engagement with local food businesses.	Usually voluntary and dependent on local authority support and business participation. Policy development is typically led by professionals and businesses rather than communities experiencing food insecurity. May improve food quality without improving affordability.
Restrictions on HFSS advertising	Can reduce exposure to unhealthy food marketing and support healthier choices.	Implemented at local authority discretion. Public engagement may occur, but community participation in decision-making is usually limited. Addresses marketing rather than affordability, income or access to food.
Right to Grow initiatives	Supports community food growing, food literacy, environmental sustainability and social participation.	Dependent on local authority support, community capacity and volunteer involvement. Often provides stronger opportunities for community participation and co-production than other approaches. Risks shifting responsibility for food access from public institutions to communities.
UNICEF Baby Friendly Initiative	Supports breastfeeding and improved early years nutrition.	Voluntary accreditation programme requiring local investment and workforce commitment. Parent engagement is encouraged, but governance remains professionally led. Important for infant health but does not address wider household food insecurity.
Living Wage Boroughs	One of the few local interventions that directly addresses income, a major driver of food insecurity.	Voluntary and dependent on political commitment and employer participation. Limited direct involvement of people experiencing food insecurity in design or governance. Local authorities have limited influence over wider labour markets and welfare policy.
Food Partnerships	Strengthen coordination, collaboration and local innovation across food systems.	Often funded through short-term grants and local authority support. May involve community groups and people with lived experience, but participation varies considerably between areas. Can improve coordination without clarifying accountability, leading to variation between places.

Policy lever	Contribution	Delivery, participation, limitations and unintended consequences
Joint Strategic Needs Assessments (JSNAs)	Provide a local evidence base on population health, inequalities, food insecurity and nutritional vulnerability.	Statutory requirement for local authorities and Integrated Care Systems. Community engagement may inform assessments, but participation in subsequent decision-making is often limited. Primarily identifies need rather than addressing it directly.

The following sections examine the principal approaches shaping UK food insecurity policy and their strengths, limitations and unintended consequences.

6.3 Safety-Net: Social security and food and nutrition protection

A fundamental response to food insecurity in the UK combines social security measures, which provide income support, with food and nutrition support programmes. This approach recognises that food insecurity is fundamentally linked to poverty, income adequacy and the wider social determinants of health.

Social security measures include Universal Credit, Pension Credit, PIP, ESA, Carer's Allowance and Attendance Allowance, alongside local social protection and crisis assistance schemes such as England's Crisis and Resilience Fund, Scotland's Scottish Welfare Fund, and Scottish Child payment, Wales's Discretionary Assistance Fund and Northern Ireland's Discretionary Support Scheme. Food and nutrition support programmes include Healthy Start, Free School Meals, breakfast clubs and the Holiday Activities and Food Programme.

Together, these interventions aim to protect households from hardship and improve nutritional outcomes. The underlying assumption is that food insecurity arises primarily from inadequate household resources and can be mitigated through means-tested and targeted support. The Commission broadly supported this perspective, consistently linking food insecurity to income adequacy, social protection and economic inequality. See chapter four for more details on this.

And yet, despite these measures, significant levels of food insecurity persist. For example, the Healthy Start scheme, which supported many families, struggled to reach all eligible households and has been halted in over 70% of local councils nationally. Similarly, Free School Meals, breakfast clubs and holiday food programmes make important contributions to children's nutrition and educational outcomes but remain targeted responses to hardship rather than solutions to food insecurity itself.

The Commission heard evidence from Wandsworth that automatic enrolment increased uptake of Free School Meals, demonstrating how programme design can improve access. Nevertheless, implementation barriers remain across the system. Delays and administrative complexity within Universal Credit have been associated with increased food bank use, while both Universal Credit and Healthy Start have been criticised for excluding some households experiencing hardship through eligibility rules and administrative requirements (Bijlani *et al.*, 2025; Barrett, Spires and Vogel, 2024).

6.4 Third sector and charitable food aid

Food banks, community pantries and social supermarkets, funded and run through the third sector, have become an established part of the UK's response to food insecurity. This approach assumes the immediate problem is a lack of food requiring rapid intervention. Its strength lies in providing practical support during crises, with many witnesses describing food aid providers as sources of compassion, social connection and assistance when no alternative support was available.

However, the Commission repeatedly heard that what was intended as emergency provision has become a long-term reality. Access often depends on local availability, referral systems, and charitable capacity rather than on rights or entitlements, creating significant variation in the nutritional quality, cultural appropriateness, and availability of support.

Contributors highlighted the emotional and psychosocial consequences of relying on food aid, including stigma, judgement and social exclusion. Some individuals described needing to visit multiple food banks and community food projects each week to secure food that was both nutritionally adequate and culturally appropriate, a practice often referred to as 'food bank surfing'. As one community organisation stated: *'Food aid alone is not an adequate or dignified solution to food insecurity.'*

The Commission also heard concerns about growing reliance on volunteers. Much of the current system depends on unpaid labour, charitable donations and short-term funding. While volunteers provide invaluable support, witnesses questioned the sustainability of a model that increasingly relies on goodwill to deliver functions once provided through public services. Responsibility for food insecurity shifts from government to charities, volunteers and local communities, normalising charitable responses to poverty while obscuring accountability.

Collectively, these consequences contribute to a postcode lottery in support, perpetuate food and nutrition inequalities, and can damage dignity, mental well-being and physical health. Systems-based research suggests that this transfer of responsibility can become self-reinforcing: community organisations fill gaps left by public services, reducing immediate hardship but also reducing pressure for structural reform. In this way, emergency responses become institutionalised while the underlying drivers of food insecurity remain unchanged (Bijlani *et al.*, 2025).

By contrast, community kitchens, food co-operatives and community food stores demonstrated approaches that emphasise dignity, participation and local decision-making. But while community involvement can strengthen responses to food insecurity, it does not remove the need for adequate public investment, workforce capacity and accountability.

6.5 Public health and nutrition

Witnesses described persistent food insecurity, poor diet quality, obesity, malnutrition and increasing reliance on emergency food provision.

The London Branch of the British Dietetic Association (BDA) highlighted policy failures were reflected in high levels of obesity, marked social gradients in health and growing pressures on NHS services. Contributors described a revolving door of care in which people repeatedly present with diet-related conditions, while older people, homeless populations, refugees and other vulnerable groups continue to experience nutritional insecurity that often remains invisible within existing systems.

Public Health Nutrition (PHN) plays an important role in supporting food and nutrition security across the life course. Through community-based services, it contributes to both nutritional well-being and social participation, helping reduce isolation and support mental and physical health. In the UK, responsibility for tackling food insecurity largely sits with local authority public health teams, often working alongside food partnerships and community organisations.

From a public health perspective, food insecurity is a major contributor to obesity, malnutrition, chronic disease, poor mental health and adverse pregnancy outcomes. This is reflected in policies such as Healthy Start, school food standards and Free School Meals. A key strength of this approach is that it has established food insecurity as a public health concern rather than solely a welfare issue.

However, contributors described a significant decline in public health nutrition services following austerity and reductions in local authority budgets, accompanied by growth in unpaid food work, widening variation in workforce capacity and increased reliance on the Third Sector. The London BDA highlighted the erosion of specialist public health nutrition capacity alongside the decline of services such as Meals on Wheels. As a result, PHN services increasingly focus on managing the consequences of food insecurity rather than preventing them.

The Commission also heard concerns that responsibility for food insecurity has increasingly shifted to food partnerships, commissioned providers and voluntary organisations. Of particular concern was the growing medicalisation of food insecurity, with healthcare services increasingly left to manage its consequences. Health professionals described regularly encountering malnutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, obesity, Type 2 diabetes, anxiety and poor mental health associated with inadequate access to food. Responses included food bank referrals, oral nutritional supplements and social prescribing, although increasing demand and limited resources were identified as significant challenges. Witnesses described these responses as often *'inconsistent, improvised and ethically complex'*. As one healthcare professional observed: *'We are all trying to support people within a system that does not adequately address the root causes of the problem. Food banks and social prescribing services are essential, but they should not be the long-term answer to food insecurity.'*

6.6 Individual responsibility and the limits of behaviour change

Behavioural approaches are among the most prominent responses to poor diet and food insecurity in the UK. Programmes such as Change4Life, Better Health, Healthy Families and school-based food education seek to improve diets through information, cooking skills, food literacy and behaviour change. These approaches assume that healthier outcomes can be achieved by increasing knowledge, confidence and individuals' capacity to make healthier choices.

While the Commission heard that food skills and confidence can improve resilience and support healthier diets in some circumstances, including among pregnant women experiencing food insecurity, the misconception that poor dietary outcomes reflect poor knowledge or a lack of willpower to *"cook healthily"* or *"make the right choices for family and kids"*, was not supported by the evidence given to this commission.

Contributors consistently argued that people experiencing hardship were often resourceful, creative and highly skilled at managing limited resources. The barriers they faced were more commonly inadequate income, rising food prices, stigma and constrained access to affordable, nutritious food.

Bags of Taste (2026) found that only 30% of the people they work with lack basic cooking skills, and that approximately 70% of those who do express interest in in-person cooking classes do not ultimately attend.

"People are making choices about heating or using the oven. During a food education session for parents, they said they can't do it, they haven't got a table, and they haven't got a bowl." Community participant, Liverpool

A 2024 study of low-income urban families showed parents are far from passive: they downgraded brands, hunted reduced-price items, timed large shops around school holidays and skipped their own meals to feed their children (Screti et al, 2024). Extreme budgeting strategies, such as buying discounted items, skipping meals, or feeding children first, have become normalised in low-income households (NPCM, 2026a).

People experiencing food poverty are not lacking agency or motivation. They are making active decisions about food and nutrition for themselves, but they are doing so within severe practical and financial constraints.

Framing food insecurity as a problem of choice or knowledge rather than one of poverty, inequality and limited options, risks shifting attention away from the structural conditions that shape food access and diets, instead placing responsibility on the individual, rather than the systems that constrain them.

6.7 Food systems and social determinants

Food systems approaches view food insecurity as the product of interconnected economic, social, environmental and health factors. Reflected in initiatives such as Sustainable Food Places, Marmot Places and the National Food Strategy, their key strength is recognising that food insecurity cannot be separated from income, housing, employment, education, transport, health or local food environments.

Marmot Places are a particularly important example of this approach. More than 50 local areas across England, Wales and Scotland have adopted the Marmot framework, which seeks to improve health by addressing its social determinants. Central to the model is proportionate universalism, whereby services are available to all but delivered at a scale and intensity proportionate to need, with the explicit aim of reducing inequalities in healthy life expectancy. The framework also includes action to tackle racism and discrimination and aligns closely with the Public Health Outcomes Framework's focus on reducing health inequalities.

Mission-oriented approaches, such as Camden's Food Mission and Newham's Food Strategy, seek to operationalise systems thinking by aligning action on food insecurity, health, sustainability and household income around shared goals and measurable outcomes. Their strength lies in translating systems analysis into coordinated action across public services, community organisations and residents.

However, systems approaches also reveal important limitations. Local authorities often lack the powers and resources needed to influence the underlying causes of food insecurity, including social security, employment conditions and national economic policy. The Commission also heard that systems approaches do not automatically translate into improved outcomes.

Despite widespread adoption of food partnerships, food poverty strategies and food justice initiatives, significant inequalities in food and nutrition persist. Evidence from the London BDA and the Red Ribbon Living Well project highlighted continuing nutritional vulnerabilities among people experiencing homelessness, undocumented migrants, people with no recourse to public funds, and those receiving palliative and end-of-life care. These groups are often not being properly identified, measured and understood by monitoring systems, even in areas where well-developed food strategies are in place.

Systems-based research has shown that even well-intentioned policies can fail if they don't work within the wider economic and institutional conditions. Improving coordination, measurement, or local action does not necessarily reduce food insecurity unless the wider feedback mechanisms that reinforce poverty and insecurity are also addressed (Bijlani *et al.*, 2025). Responsibility becomes increasingly devolved while accountability remains fragmented. Effective implementation requires clear governance, accountability and meaningful participation by those most affected by food insecurity.

6.8 UK's policy on UPFs and food marketing

The UK Government (particularly in England) has repeatedly failed to curb consumption of diets high in UPFs. Multiple attempts to regulate the food environment have emerged, including the levy on sugary drinks in 2017, the Childhood Obesity: A Plan of Action and its second chapter in 2018, the National Food

Strategy in 2020, various marketing restrictions on high-fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) foods since 2007, strengthened in 2022 through the Health and Care Act, and further promotion-and-placement regulations introduced in 2021 and 2025, among others.

However, none of these, other than the levy on sugary drinks, has been made statutory. Voluntary pledges have shown inadequate compliance, with voluntary sugar reduction failing to achieve its intended 20% reduction across most food categories (Public Health England, 2020), and more stringent proposals have faced extensive lobbying and blocking from UPF corporations, resulting in delay or dilution with very limited results.

For instance, the UK Government's introduction of a 9pm television watershed and a total ban on paid-for online advertising of HFSS products was repeatedly delayed by industry lobbying, only coming into force in January 2026 (Quinn, 2025). When it was finally enacted, a significant brand-advertising exemption substantially narrowed its scope (UK Legislation, 2025). Enforcement has similarly failed to keep pace with evolving tactics, including influencer marketing, algorithmic targeting, in-game advertising and branded content on social media (Tatlow-Golden and Garde, 2020).

There is no equivalent to Article 5.3 of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control for food, leaving policy advisory processes open to commercial capture without transparency or conflict-of-interest safeguards (Gilmore et al., 2023). There is also no statutory requirement to align benefit levels or the National Living Wage with the actual cost of meeting dietary adequacy, as defined by the Eatwell Guide (Right to Food UK Commission, 2026a).

"The government needs to outlaw hyper-processed foods and treat it as an addictive product, like a class C drug, as a public health matter." Ryan Lynch, Tower Hamlets Food Poverty Network

6.9 Existing policy measures: A patchwork response

While measures such as social security, nutrition programmes, public health interventions and charitable food aid provide important forms of support, they operate through different institutions, pursue different objectives and are guided by different assumptions about the causes of food insecurity. As a result, responsibility is dispersed across welfare systems, schools, healthcare providers, local authorities, charities and communities, with no single framework linking governance, accountability and implementation.

The Commission heard evidence that, under current UK policy, many interventions remain targeted, means-tested and focused on managing hardship once it occurs. Restrictive eligibility criteria, administrative complexity and reliance on discretionary support can create gaps in provision and undermine dignity. Similarly, although the UK has strengthened monitoring through measures such as the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) and the UK Food Security Report, improved measurement has not been matched by equivalent duties to respond when need is identified.

Recent developments such as the Good Food Bill (Sustain, 2026) in England, Scotland's Good Food Nation Act (Scottish Parliament, 2022), Wales's Well-being of Future Generations framework (Welsh Government, 2015) and proposed Food (Wales) Bill (Welsh Parliament, 2023), and Northern Ireland's Food Strategy Framework (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, 2024) represent attempts to move beyond this fragmentation by embedding food within broader frameworks for health, sustainability, well-being and inequality reduction. However, implementation remains uneven, and questions persist about resources, accountability and the extent to which commitments translate into action.

Consistent with systems-based research, the evidence suggests that many well-intentioned policies generate unintended consequences through their design, implementation and interaction with other parts of the system. These include the transfer of responsibility from government to communities, growing reliance

on charitable food aid, weakened trust in public institutions and the persistence of food insecurity despite extensive policy activity. The challenge is therefore not simply the absence of interventions, but the absence of a coherent framework that links governance, accountability, resources, and implementation. This is the gap that a Right to Food approach seeks to address.

6.10 Political ethics of care

The Commission's evidence strongly supported the principles underpinning a political ethic of care. Contributors consistently rejected explanations of food insecurity based on individual failure, instead emphasising dignity, interdependence, participation, solidarity and collective responsibility. Concerns about the normalisation of charitable food aid, reliance on unpaid volunteers, the growing role of schools and health services in addressing hunger, and the stigma associated with seeking support all reflected a belief that food insecurity represents a failure of care within social and political systems rather than a failure of individuals.

A political ethic of care, therefore, provides an important foundation for the Right to Food. It views well-being, dignity and human flourishing as collective responsibilities, and emphasises the role of the state in protecting public goods and reducing social harms (Tronto, 2013). Examples include New Zealand's Well-being Budget, Scotland's cash-first approaches, the Good Food Nation framework, and Brazil's Zero Hunger strategy. However, care can remain aspirational without governance, resources, workforce capacity, monitoring and public participation. In the UK, a politics of care suggests that the Right to Food should be embedded across social security, public health, planning, local economic development, and community well-being, translating care, dignity, and participation into enforceable public responsibilities.

Conclusion

Taken together, current UK food insecurity policy comprises a mixture of social security, charitable, public health, behavioural and systems-based approaches. While these interventions provide important support, they largely respond to the consequences of food insecurity rather than its underlying causes.

The Commission heard evidence of continued reliance on food aid, the growing medicalisation of food insecurity, unmet nutritional need among vulnerable groups, and persistent inequalities linked to low income, inadequate social security and wider structural disadvantage. These findings suggest that food insecurity is less a failure of individuals than a reflection of shortcomings in social protection, public policy and governance.

Across all policy approaches, the Commission identified recurring barriers to implementation, including fragmented responsibilities, restrictive eligibility criteria, administrative complexity and inadequate resources. Responsibility is frequently dispersed across multiple organisations, while accountability remains unclear when food insecurity persists. By contrast, a Right to Food approach locates responsibility within public institutions and reframes food insecurity as a preventable social harm rather than an inevitable consequence of poverty.

A Right to Food approach would seek to address not only food insecurity but also the current balance of power, participation and accountability, by ensuring that those most affected have a meaningful role in shaping the policies intended to support them. It would locate responsibility for managing food insecurity firmly within public institutions rather than individuals, charities or local services.

Existing or suggested examples of a rights-based approach include proposals for a statutory Right to Food framework advanced by the Right to Food Campaign and other civil society organisations, as well as existing international governance models such as Brazil's SISAN and CONSEA (see chapter 9: *Building governance for Leadership, Accountability and Delivery* for more detail).

In England, the Good Food Bill incorporates many principles associated with the right to food, including accountability, affordability, reducing food insecurity, ministerial duties, local food plans, monitoring, and independent oversight. However, it is framed primarily around food and nutrition security and sustainability, making it an important step towards a right to food approach rather than a substitute for legal recognition of the right to food itself.

Taken together, these examples illustrate the potential value of creating a Right to Food Law. Its principal strength is that it brings together poverty, nutrition, public health and food insecurity within a single framework, explicitly identifying state responsibility for addressing the social harms associated with food insecurity and linking monitoring to governance, duties and corrective action.

7. Effective Interventions to Improve Lifelong Nutrition

“Why do you have to cope? Why can’t we thrive?”, Community participant, Tower Hamlets, London

We have established that food insecurity in the UK is fundamentally a problem of inadequate and insecure income. This chapter asks what works to prevent and reduce malnutrition across the life course, from the first thousand days until the end of life and provides examples of solutions in practice.

Two key principles recur in the testimony: dignity and choice, and delivery *‘with communities rather than to them.’*

The evidence presented supports measures that raise and stabilise household income, with 'cash-first' support emerging as the most effective approach to addressing the root causes of hunger. Universal, non-stigmatising food provision including nutritious free school meals, holiday food support, social supermarkets (not based on waste food), community kitchens and allotments are also all essential, as a complement to adequate income rather than a substitute for it.

7.1 Infant feeding and maternal health

Good nutrition begins before birth, and the first thousand days are decisive for lifelong health. Maternal health needs investment, from prenatal support through pregnancy antenatal care and post-natal care and support, have all been eroded through reduced investment in the last twenty years.

The Healthy Start programme provides a pre-paid card to eligible low-income pregnant women and families with young children, to buy fruit, vegetables, milk and vitamins. Despite operating since 2006, uptake has been limited by low awareness, administrative barriers, stigma and restrictive eligibility criteria. Many submissions to the committee supported it and stressed the need to reinvest in these programmes.

The Becoming Breastfeeding Friendly toolkit, developed by Yale University, found substantial breastfeeding data and coordination gaps in England. Without a national infant feeding coordinator or breastfeeding committee, there is a lack of advocacy for breastfeeding programmes (Merritt et al., 2023).

Lack of support to breastfeed, work pressures and pain on breast feeding often result in mothers resorting to bottle feeding. Infant formula is expensive and the extra cost adds to the challenges of feeding families (Keith et al 2019 in Tower Hamlets and Kent in 2023; O Loughlin et al 2025). Researchers have also documented an *'infant-formula affordability crisis'* in the UK.

Peer support is the most effective intervention for exclusive breastfeeding to six months (Victora et al, 2016), and currently only around 1% of UK mothers are still breastfeeding at six months, underscoring the

need for more effective maternal and infant nutrition support through Healthy Start and similar programmes.

Interventions that put fresh-food purchasing power directly into the hands of low-income families with young children, such as the Alexandra Rose Charity's *Rose Vouchers for Early Years* which are redeemable for fruit and vegetables at local markets, was one example of how nutrition-sensitive support can be delivered early, with dignity, and embedded in the local food economy rather than routed through crisis channels.

7.2 Free school meals: the clearest test of charity versus right

No intervention illustrates the choice between charity and entitlement more clearly than the school meal, and none is better evidenced. As referenced above, school-meal provision varies greatly across the UK, both within England and between Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Universal school meals have been in place for primary schools in Wales since 2024. Research in Wales, conducted as part of Cardiff University's RISE project on reducing inequalities in school food environments across the four UK nations, revealed the challenging paradox that uptake was lowest in the areas of greatest deprivation (<https://decipher.uk.net/research/reducing-inequalities-in-school-food-environments-rise-supporting-provision-uptake-and-consumption-of-free-school-meals-in-primary-schools/>).

One Parent Families Scotland adds that pupils receiving free meals have been served smaller portions than those who pay, warning that '*a right to food must not become a duty to provide poor food to poor people*'. Respondents in Belfast regarded universal free school meals as essential to removing stigma.

In England, universal pilots in Newham and Durham found that primary pupils offered a free lunch made around two extra months' progress over two years, and evaluations of Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM) found a modest reduction in obesity and improved dietary quality.

School feeding is the largest social safety net in the world: around 466 million children are fed, and global funding roughly doubled from US\$43 billion in 2020 to US\$84 billion in 2024, with 99% coming from national budgets. The World Bank, once a critic, now treats school meals as a 'nutrition-sensitive social protection investment.'

History shows a consistent pattern. The Second World War changed policies entirely: in 1941, school meals were reframed as essential to every child's health and welfare, central funding rose to cover up to 95% of costs, and nutritional standards were introduced for the first time; by 1947, the government had assumed full responsibility for net costs. That universalism did not last, charges were introduced from 1949, and the retreat accelerated under the Thatcher government, when the 1980 Education Act made provision voluntary and the 1986 Social Security Act further restricted eligibility, removing compulsory nutritional standards and contributing to a documented decline in quality.

Whenever school meals have been treated as a universal entitlement tied to national welfare, coverage and quality have improved; whenever recast as a targeted, cost-controlled benefit, both have declined, the same tension identified globally, replaying within a single country across eighty years.

School food returned to serious political attention in the early 2000s: UIFSM was introduced for Reception to Year 2 in England from 2014; new School Food Standards followed in 2015; and eligibility was permanently extended to NRPF families in 2022. More recently the safety net has widened further: universal primary meals across London from 2023; extension of means-tested Free School Meals to all

Universal Credit households from September 2026 (over 500,000 additional children); and a national rollout of free breakfast clubs planned for every primary school by 2026–27.

Nearly 120 years after the 1906 Act first tied school meals to statute, England still has no single, universal, rights-based entitlement, only an accumulating patchwork of infant, means-tested, mayoral, NRPF, breakfast-club and holiday schemes, each with its own eligibility rules and funding stream. The 2026 Universal Credit expansion brings these tensions to a head.

Removing the £7,400 earnings cap so every child in a Universal Credit household qualifies is a genuine advance, raising claimant numbers from 3.4 million (2023/24) to an estimated 4.1 million by 2026/27, responding to earlier analysis showing the old threshold left 800,000–900,000 children in poverty without entitlement. But because Pupil Premium and Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) funding remain pegged to the old threshold, the link between 'gets a free meal' and 'triggers extra school funding and holiday support' is broken for newly eligible children, and researchers project a £310 million funding shortfall in 2026/27.

SEND pupils remain a particular access gap: one in four free-meal-eligible children in special schools do not take up their entitlement, compared with around one in eight in mainstream schools.

Provision also remains a postcode lottery, with a child's access still depending on where they live. And because HAF is tied to means-tested eligibility, universally fed children can lose all food support the moment term ends, producing a 'holiday-hunger' gap.

London is the only region in England offering universal primary meals. The city's universal scheme offers the clearest English evidence of impact: independent evaluation found 84% of parents said the policy helped household finances (significantly so for 52% on Universal Credit, against 31% not on Universal Credit), 60% could spend more on food at home, and a cost-benefit analysis found universal expansion would return £1.71 in core benefits for every £1 invested, or £99.5 billion in wider economic benefit over 2025–2045 (Impact on Urban Health, 2022; 2024).

International experience offers a consistent lesson, with Japan's Shokuiku (meaning food education) embedding meals in law and the curriculum, Brazil (PNAE) providing a legal right to food with 30% of funds ring-fenced for local family farms, Sweden providing a legal universal entitlement to school meals with a national quality framework and India providing a rights-based Mid-Day Meal scheme, feeding 120 million children annually. These international examples demonstrate that a legal entitlement rather than a post code dependant charity, is what sustains coverage and quality at scale.

Breakfast clubs also show halting progress: the Children's Well-being and Schools Act 2026 places a legal duty on every primary school to run one, yet only around 1,250 of more than 16,000 schools currently do, and per-pupil funding has already had to rise from 60p to £1 after schools withdrew. Beneath it all, national funding sits below the true cost of a hot, nutritious meal. School Food Matters calculates a shortfall of around 63p per meal, widening to £3.27 once inflation is accounted for, while in-house council catering, best placed to protect quality, is in decline.

Two conclusions follow. First, free school meals are a powerful intervention that should be simplified towards a single, universal, rights-based entitlement, with funding rates that meet the real cost of a nutritious meal and holiday provision that follows the child rather than an outdated threshold. Second, free school meals 'must not be seen in isolation': they are a vital mitigation, but they do not remove the wider issue of food insecurity at home due to inadequate incomes.

Based upon the evidence we received, the Commission has created the following recommendations: to enshrine a statutory right to a free, nutritious school meal for all children in state-funded education; ring-fence per-meal funding at the true cost of provision and invest in kitchen infrastructure, particularly in

SEND and higher-deprivation schools; close the remaining eligibility and registration gaps (NRPF families, early years, non-take-up) through auto-enrolment; and establish a national school food monitoring system alongside stronger pupil and parent voice in governance. Students and parents need to be involved in the school meals planning and policies to ensure culturally appropriate provision.

7.3 Income first: cash transfers and social security

Cash transfers have the largest and deepest evidence base of any anti-poverty programme, with more than a thousand studies worldwide, and at its root, food insecurity is an issue caused by lack of money.

The UK has run its own natural experiment: when Universal Credit was raised by £20 a week in 2020-21, food insecurity among claimants fell from 43% to 27%, while legacy-benefit claimants who did not receive the uplift saw no change, holding steady at around 31% (Loopstra et al., 2023). The researchers' conclusion was blunt: food insecurity *'would probably fall if the generosity of the social security system increased.'*

Real-world cash-first pilots confirm this finding and add the dimension the statistics cannot capture, but our evidence sessions do: dignity. The British Red Cross found that 93% of people receiving crisis cash said it improved their lives and 92% that it reduced stress and anxiety. The Scottish Child Payment is estimated to keep deprivation and food insecurity eight to nine percentage points lower than they would otherwise be. Campaigners continue to exert pressure on the Scottish Government for increases to be applied in line with the rising cost of living. At North Paddington Foodbank, 53% of households given cash alongside income-maximisation advice did not return for further support; a Leeds pilot found no evidence of misuse and a more dignified experience. The testimony of those who received the support is the most eloquent argument for it:

"It gives you the choice of where... You're not cap in hand... You've got the autonomy to choose what you need, rather than be grateful for things." cash-first trial participant, *Legendary Community Club*

As a solution, The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has proposed an Essentials Guarantee, recommending a legal floor ensuring Universal Credit never falls below the cost of essentials, set by an independent process. More discussion is needed about how this could be achieved, but first steps should be: ending the five-week wait; removing debt sanctions, the benefit cap and No Recourse to Public Funds; and helping people access the estimated £24.1 billion of unclaimed benefits and social tariffs by investing in local advice services.

Cash-first is not, however, 'cash only': crisis payments work best twinned with advice and wrap around support, and as one part of a wider settlement. This would also not address the working poor challenge and issues linked to disability. See chapter four for more details on this.

7.4 Cash transfers, vouchers and the dignity of choice

The distinction between cash, vouchers and in-kind support is not merely technical; it is about agency. The recent shift in England from the voucher-preferring Household Support Fund to the cash-first Crisis and Resilience Fund is, in effect, a decision to trust people to make their own choices, and the evidence supports it.

A review of nineteen studies, across ten countries, found cash transfers either had no impact, or a negative impact, on spending on alcohol and tobacco, dispelling the persistent myth that recipients misuse cash support (IFAN, 2026).

Alexandra Rose Charity, which offers vouchers redeemable for fruit and vegetables at local markets, argues that its model succeeds precisely because it is 'a mainstream, preventative intervention embedded in

the local food economy' rather than charitable aid, preserving dignity and choice while steering spending towards fresh produce. Whether through unrestricted cash or targeted fresh-food vouchers, support that respects agency works better and treats people better than the food parcel, which by its nature offers neither choice nor control.

7.5 Social supermarkets, pantries and community food provision

Community food provision occupies the space between the food bank and the supermarket, offering affordability with markedly more dignity. A foodbank is an emergency, charitable provider of food parcels to people facing a food crisis, typically requiring referral. Social supermarkets and food pantries offer affordable rather than free food, more choice, and are intended for more regular use.

Feeding Britain's network of affordable food clubs, social supermarkets and pantries saves members roughly £520 a year, and Comic Relief's partnership with Sainsbury's has supported nearly 600 food clubs reaching over 295,000 people, alongside 150,000 holiday-club places distributing a million meals.

In Northern Ireland, community-led models, community-owned greengrocers, sliding-scale pay-what-you-can shops and co-farming projects, demonstrate that, as the Belfast submission puts it, *'communities can feed themselves with dignity when supported.'* For young people, these settings can be transformative. Comic Relief's evidence presents the story of Inge, sixteen, who had been out of school, struggling with his health and often skipping meals at home, until a holiday club gave him a daily meal and a route back into education.

Where they form part of a dignified system rather than a substitute for income, such settings are lifelines: One Parent Families Scotland describes a mother of four who volunteers at and attends her local community kitchen, gaining *'skills, purpose and connection'*, and families for whom a community Christmas Day meal lifted the isolation and *'the guilt of being unable to afford a Christmas dinner for their children.'*

The evidence adds a crucial qualification, however, if community services depend on volunteers, charitable grants and redistributed surplus food, social supermarkets and pantries are still filling the same gap as food banks.

Our conversations were clear that redistributed waste food was not the solution. IFAN warns that scaling surplus redistribution risks entrenching a charitable response rather than resolving the need, and its members are candid that redistributed food is often unusable: 91% of food-aid workers report having to discard donations.

The goal, therefore, is not to expand community food provision indefinitely but to fund it coherently while designing out dependence, moving towards a future in which people use community food spaces *'because they want to, not because they have to.'* As the Wales synthesis warns, these initiatives 'cannot be solved with grants' alone; they require coordinated, cross-sector backing rather than precarious project-by-project funding. The resurgence of public diners in Dundee may be one solution of funding community led provision with dignity. These diners are a community food model, distinct from charitable food aid, offering an affordable, dignified sit-down meal open to all, without means-testing or referral.

7.6 Community kitchens, cooking skills and allotments

Community kitchens, cooking programmes and allotments add skills, fresh produce and social connection, and are frequently proposed as remedies for addressing low nutrient diets. The evidence challenges any assumption that cooking schemes are inherently effective (see *Chapter 6, Section 6: Individual responsibility and the limits of behaviour change* for more detail).

Bags of Taste, one of the UK's largest adult food-skills providers, finds only around 30% of the people it works with actually lack basic cooking skills; the barriers are economic, structural and psychological, this was supported by our evidence, with challenges including cooking fuels, storage and white goods like fridges and ovens. The 'risk of waste' of trying an unfamiliar recipe on a tight budget, high takeaway density, and the 'scarcity mindset' that poverty imposes are also an issue.

In-person classes tend to attract the already-capable and miss those in greatest need: around 70% of interested people never make it to a class. As the organisation observes, such classes are *'fantastic for social outcomes, but not very effective at changing what people eat at home.'*

But the organisation's mentored, at-home model, providing initial ingredients to remove the risk of waste, left 84% of participants eating more healthily a year later, saving around £876 a year. The lesson is that provision must reach the most vulnerable, and that skills interventions work only when they address the wider social determinants of health rather than assuming ignorance. Allotments carry their own frustration where people 'cannot eat their own produce' for want of land, infrastructure or secure tenure, an argument that supports protected growing space as part of the wider food-environment agenda.

Conclusion

No single measure will address all the challenges we currently face; however the evidence establishes a clear order of priority. The strongest, best-evidenced lever is income: a legal benefits floor that covers essentials, cash-first crisis support delivered with dignity and choice, and secure, fairly-paid work. Universal, non-stigmatising food provision, a simplified, rights-based free-school-meal entitlement, holiday food that follows the child, social supermarkets (not based on waste), community kitchens, allotments and NHS screening are essential across every life stage, but as complement, not substitute, and designed to reach those in greatest need.

See the next chapter for an innovative cost benefit analysis to support the interventions proposed by the UK Right to Food Commission.

8. Cost-Benefit Analysis of Evidence-Based Interventions and Government Spending Needed to Succeed

The Commission heard evidence, over many months, from hundreds of witnesses, that leads to one unavoidable conclusion: food insecurity in Britain is not a supply problem but a poverty and policy problem, and it is a problem the country is already paying for whether or not it chooses to fix it.

This chapter sets out the cost-benefit case for the package of interventions, built around the emerging findings of the Commission based on the evidence within this report, and drawing on the detailed programme-level costings, benefit-cost ratios (BCRs) and social-return-on-investment (SROI) figures produced for the Right to Food Programme Business Case (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a), the three supporting technical costing briefs (Right to Food Campaign, 2026b; 2026c; 2026d), and the wider health-economic evidence assembled by the Food, Farming & Countryside Commission (FFCC) and others (Jackson, 2024).

Read together, the evidence shows that Britain already spends far more managing the consequences of hunger and poor diet than it would cost to prevent them, and that the specific programme options costed for the Commission deliver strongly positive social value once properly weighted for who benefits, even where they fail a narrow, unweighted efficiency test (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a).

8.1 A UK Right to Food Act: The accountability foundation

The Commission's first intervention, a Right to Food law as set out in Chapter 8, is not itself a spending line, but it is the mechanism through which every other recommendation becomes durable, measurable and enforceable, and it therefore has to open any honest cost-benefit account of the wider programme.

Evidence sessions that included people with lived experience, frontline organisations, local authorities, academics, businesses and trade unions converged on the same diagnosis: the UK has recognised the right to food through international human rights commitments yet has no comprehensive domestic legal framework guaranteeing that right. Responsibility for food security is fragmented across multiple government departments, without a clear minimum national standard below which people should fall (UK Commission on the Right to Food, 2026), a fragmentation examined in detail in *Chapter 9: Building Governance for Accountability, Leadership and Delivery*.

The result, described repeatedly to the Commission, is inconsistent monitoring, weak accountability and a postcode lottery in provision. It is a picture directly confirmed by the programme-level evidence set out below, in which free school meal entitlement, holiday provision and even the practical cost of delivering a single meal vary markedly across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland simply as a function of where a child happens to live (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a; 2026b).

A Right to Food Act's economic value lies principally in what it prevents: duplicated administration, inconsistent targeting, and the fiscal drift that comes from incremental, ad hoc policymaking, evident for instance in free school meal income thresholds that were left unchanged for years while costs and need continued to rise (Right to Food Campaign, 2026b).

It would also create the legal and reporting infrastructure, minimum standards, transparent reporting and independent scrutiny, that a credible cost-benefit case for the wider programme ultimately depends on, since none of the benefit estimates set out in this chapter can be properly verified or held to account without consistent, comparable monitoring data across the four nations (UK Commission on the Right to Food, 2026; Right to Food Campaign, 2026f).

In Green Book terms, a Right to Food law functions as an enabling, near-zero-marginal-cost intervention that raises the realised value for money of every other line item costed below, by ensuring money committed to school meals, Healthy Start, holiday provision and community food infrastructure is tracked against outcomes rather than simply against inputs and spend (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a).

8.2 National targets and cost-benefit case: Halving food insecurity by 2030, eliminating it by 2035

The Commission is calling for a firm national timetable to halve food insecurity by 2030 and eliminate it by 2035. This is where the overall economic argument is best made in the round, because it forces a direct comparison between the costs of inaction and those of a coordinated programme of prevention.

Regarding the cost of inaction, the evidence is stark. Some 14.1 million people in the UK are food-insecure, including 3.8 million children). The FFCC's independent health-economic analysis puts the total health-related cost of the UK's dysfunctional food system at approximately £298 billion a year in 2026 (up from £268 billion in 2024), a figure that exceeds the entire NHS budget and is equivalent to more than 90 per cent of all government health spending (Jackson, 2026).

Of that total, £104 billion are direct costs, £66.8 billion in healthcare, £19.8 billion in social care and £17.8 billion in welfare support attributable to diet-related disease. This is closely consistent with the Commission's own briefing figure that around £92 billion of the cost of hunger and poor diet falls directly on public budgets through healthcare, social care and welfare (Jackson, 2026; UK Commission on the Right to Food, 2026).

The remaining £194 billion is indirect: £118.9 billion in lost productivity through long-term economic inactivity and early mortality, and a further £75.1 billion in ‘shadow costs’, a monetised estimate of human suffering and lost quality of life derived from Frontier Economics’ analysis of obesity and overweight for the Tony Blair Institute (Jackson, 2026).

Against this backdrop, the Commission’s proposed programme of prevention is, in fiscal terms, modest. It would cost an additional £6 billion a year on top of existing commitments, less than 0.5 per cent of total public spending, and is estimated to generate around £100 billion in wider economic and social benefit over twenty years, a figure the Programme Business Case decomposes more precisely into a PwC core benefit of £41.3 billion and a wider gross value added contribution of £58.2 billion, together approximately £99.5 billion (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a).

It is important to be precise about what this figure represents: it is total economic and social benefit, not Exchequer savings, and the underlying appraisal, conducted under the 2026 Green Book Five Case Model, discounts money flows at 3.5% and health benefits at 1.5%, applies mandatory two-sided optimism bias, and costs every meal at its true delivery cost rather than the lower government funding rate. The resulting ratios are therefore deliberately conservative rather than inflated (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a).

The FFCC’s parallel calculation reaches a structurally similar conclusion by a different route: meeting the government’s own Eatwell Guide for every household in the country would cost around £50.8 billion a year, a non-trivial sum, but one that is less than two-thirds of the direct health and social care costs of unhealthy eating and only around a fifth of the full £298 billion cost of the current food system (Jackson, 2026).

In both calculations, the country is not choosing between spending and not spending; it is choosing between spending on prevention or continuing to spend considerably more on the consequences of failure.

8.3 Universal free school meals for every school-aged child, aged 4–18, by 2030

Universal free school meals are the single largest and most thoroughly costed intervention in the evidence base, and the figures illustrate why the Commission frames value for money in terms of distributional weighting rather than in terms of narrow resource efficiency alone.

The basic cost of extending free lunches to every primary-aged child across the UK is approximately £1.4 billion a year, with a planning range of £1.3 billion to £1.5 billion; a more realistic full cost of delivery, which funds meals properly rather than relying on a hidden subsidy from schools and caterers, rises to approximately £1.79 billion, with a range of £1.55 billion to £2.03 billion. A universal primary breakfast offer would add a further £0.3 billion to £0.5 billion (Figure 4B.3) (Right to Food Campaign, 2026b).

Costing universal free school meals for every primary school child across the UK

Including optional 'add-ons'

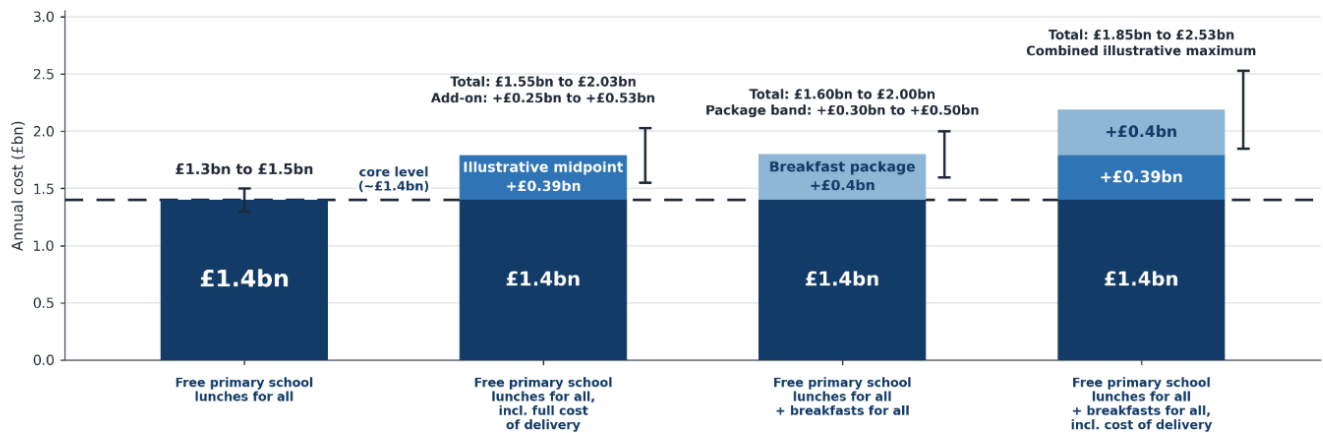
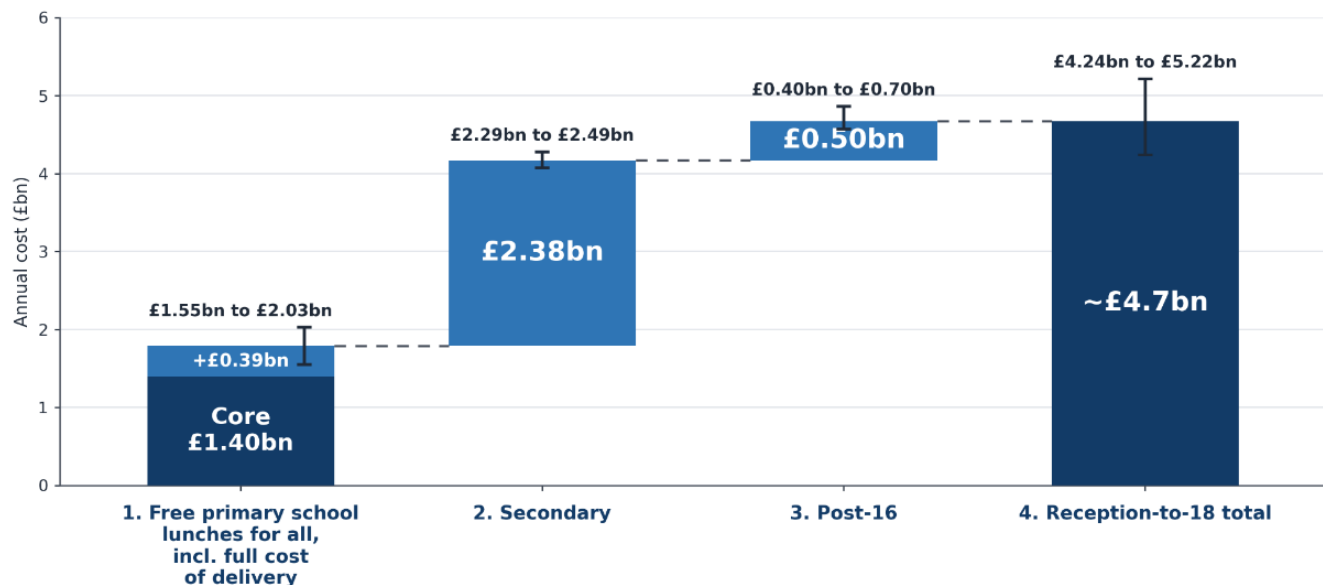


Figure 8.1. Costing universal free primary school meals across all UK nations, including breakfast and full-delivery-cost add-ons. Source: Right to Food Campaign, Technical Briefing 1 (2026b).

Extending universal provision to secondary and post-16 education, ages 11 to 18, adds a further £2.7 billion to £3.2 billion a year, taking the full Reception-to-18 headline to approximately £4.7 billion a year UK-wide, with a range of £4.2 billion to £5.2 billion (Figure 4B.4) (Right to Food Campaign, 2026c).

Costing universal free school meals for every young person in education up to age 18



Component error bars show each component's own low-to-high range, holding preceding components at their central values. The final error bar shows the full £4.24bn to £5.22bn combined scenario envelope. Primary carries the Document 1 full-cost uplift; secondary and post-16 are re-priced onto the same £3.15-£3.40 band. The band is sourced for a primary meal, so applying it to 11-18 is a planning assumption.

Figure 8.2. Costing universal free school meals for every young person in education up to age 18, showing the primary, secondary, post-16 and combined Reception-to-18 components. Source: Right to Food Campaign, Technical Briefing 2 (2026c).

The Programme Business Case models this differently, as the net new cost required to close the gap between current devolved provision and full entitlement, since Wales has already completed universal primary rollout, Scotland already covers P1 to P5, and England is extending eligibility to all Universal Credit households from September 2026.

On this basis, universal primary provision across the four nations carries an indicative net cost of £1.028 billion a year, and secondary provision to age 18 a further £1.599 billion, with the combined primary-plus-secondary net cost across all four nations at £2.627 billion (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a). Northern Ireland, which has no universal provision, means-tested eligibility only, and consequently the highest per-meal delivery cost in the UK at £4.28, represents the largest single coverage gap and the strongest case for four-nation equalisation rather than wholly new spending (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a).

On a conventional efficiency test, counting only measurable resource benefits, lifetime earnings, health, school attendance and parental productivity, against the true cost of meals, both the primary and secondary programmes fail: the unweighted core benefit-cost ratio sits at 0.44 to 0.59 (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a).

Applying the Green Book's figures changes the picture substantially. Using the 2026 Chapter 7 welfare weight of 2.76, derived from the ratio of national median equivalised income of £36,700 to the poorest-quintile median of £16,800 raised to an elasticity of 1.3, to the household cost of living transfer that free meals represent for low-income families lifts the weighted ratio to 1.76 to 2.38, **equivalent to £1.76 to £2.38 of social value for every £1 spent** (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a).

Sensitivity analysis shows that cost per meal is the largest single driver of this ratio: a 30 per cent change in delivery cost moves the England primary-weighted ratio from roughly 1.83 to 3.40. Household food savings and distributional weight move together and are the next most influential factors, shifting the ratio from roughly 1.84 to 2.92. The education and earnings assumptions have a modest effect, and the health assumption is negligible (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a).

The honest conclusion, and the one this chapter adopts, is that universal free school meals are best defended as an equity-driven, cost of living transfer with genuine but secondary efficiency benefits, not as a programme that pays for itself on resource grounds alone.

8.4 Strengthening wages, employment security and social security

The Commission's proposed interventions on wages and social security sit differently within this evidence base, because it is the intervention that witnesses identified most consistently as the root cause of food insecurity, as set out in detail in Chapter 4, yet it is the one for which the costed programme evidence has the least direct, quantified estimate. The Commission's strongest and most repeated message was that food insecurity is fundamentally an income problem, not a food-supply problem, and that families should not be told simply to budget better.

Meeting the government's own Eatwell nutrition guidance would cost many low-income households far more than they can realistically afford: the FFCC found that a genuinely healthy diet would raise average household food spending by more than half, and would almost double the food spending of the poorest income decile, in part because healthy, nutritious food costs roughly twice as much per calorie as unhealthy food (Jackson, 2024; UK Commission on the Right to Food, 2026).

This is the structural reason that people at our evidence sessions and the experts we consulted were keen to see cash-first interventions such as adequate social security, fair wages, secure employment and an Essentials Guarantee that ensures Universal Credit covers the true cost of essentials. These are the most effective prevention available, more effective in principle than any food-specific programme, because they address the income shortfall directly rather than compensating for it meal by meal.

The absence of a fully costed, programme-level estimate for wage and social security reform in the underlying evidence base is itself a significant finding for this chapter, not merely a gap to note in passing.

The £6 billion additional annual figure and the £100 billion twenty-year benefit estimates discussed above, provide a robust and conservative costing of the food-specific interventions the Commission has been able to model in detail, including the Right to Food Act, universal school meals, holiday provision and community food infrastructure. However, these figures should not be read as the full cost of realising the right to food (UK Commission on the Right to Food, 2026; Right to Food Campaign, 2026a).

Evidence showed clearly that a whole package of policy actions, income measures included, is required to ensure food security for all. A programme built solely from food-specific interventions, however well-designed, addresses the symptoms more completely than the cause.

8.5 Expanding healthy start, holiday food provision and early years nutrition

Holiday hunger is the most granularly costed element of this intervention and, on the Commission's own figures, produces the strongest value-for-money case of any single intervention examined.

The current Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme in England spends around £200 million a year reaching roughly 628,000 to 680,000 children, equivalent to approximately £286 per participating child, a figure that understates the realistic cost of delivery (Right to Food Campaign, 2026d).

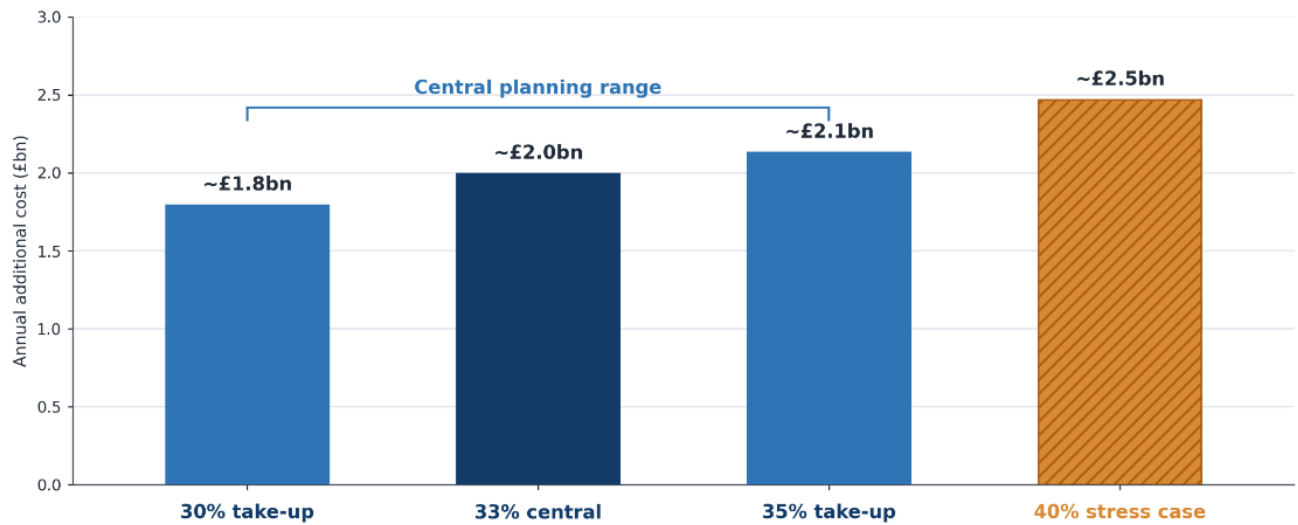
Using a more accurate combined activity-and-meal cost of £30 per participant-day (£25 for the activity or place and £5 for food), rather than the standard 24-day annual offer, gives a true participant cost of £720 per year (Right to Food Campaign, 2026d).

Expanding eligibility from Free School Meal (FSM) only to every child in a Universal Credit household in England adds approximately £360 million a year, taking total spend to £560 million. Universalising the programme to all primary-age children in England adds approximately £770 million on top of current commitment and extending it to all children aged 5 to 16 in England would cost approximately £1.71 billion.

Scaled UK-wide, a fully universal entitlement for all five to sixteen year-olds during school holidays carries a central planning estimate of approximately £2.0 billion a year, with a range of £1.8 billion to £2.1 billion at 30-35% take-up, reflecting the very limited existing provision of equivalent holiday programmes outside England (Figure 4B.5) (Right to Food Campaign, 2026d).

Costing a universal Holiday Activities and Food programme (UK-wide)

All scenarios use the minimum-equivalent 24-day annual offer.



Every case is a planning scenario; the ranges carry no probability weighting. The £30 participant-day figure combines £25 activity and £5 food.

Figure 8.3. Costing a universal Holiday Activities and Food programme UK-wide, at 30%, 33% (central) and 35% take-up, plus a 40% stress-test case. Source: Right to Food Campaign, Technical Briefing 3 (2026d).

The Programme Business Case models two narrower scopes for England alone: Scope A, covering all children in poverty, at a net cost of £158 million a year, and Scope B, universal provision for ages five to sixteen, at £581 million a year (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a).

Both post an unweighted core benefit-cost ratio of only 0.36, the weakest of any intervention on a narrow efficiency basis. Nevertheless, once the Green Book distributional weight is applied to the low-income household transfer, both scopes deliver a weighted ratio of 6.6, with a plausible range of 4.1 to 10.3, comfortably the strongest social return of any option costed for the Commission (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a). The combination of low incremental cost and a large, well-targeted transfer to the households who need it most explains this result.

Healthy Start and early years nutrition, including breastfeeding support, sit alongside holiday provision in the Commission's list of prevention-first interventions that witnesses consistently supported, though the underlying evidence base for this chapter does not yet contain an equivalent detailed costing for Healthy Start specifically. This is a further, more contained evidence gap that a follow-up costing exercise, modelled on the HAF methodology that has already been developed, could readily close (Right to Food Campaign, 2026d).

8.6 Dignified community food infrastructure: Kitchens, diners and advice hubs

The most ambitious and least certain intervention costed for the Commission is a UK-wide network of at-cost community restaurants combined with targeted staple-food price caps, intended to reach areas of highest food insecurity where school-based and holiday programmes cannot reach adults, older people and households without school-age children.

The Programme Business Case puts the net cost of this intervention at approximately £3.847 billion a year, with an indicative one-off capital cost of around £300 million for roughly 2,000 sites, modelled loosely on France's 2023 'panier anti-inflation' retailer-subsidy scheme and on Nordic community-dining benchmarks, since there is no direct UK precedent (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a).

The unweighted core benefit-cost ratio is 0.83, with a range of 0.61 to 1.13, meaning this is the only intervention that comes close to breaking even on a narrow efficiency basis before any distributional weighting is applied; once weighted, the ratio rises to approximately 9, with a wide range of 4.9 to 21.1 (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a).

The Programme Business Case is explicit that these figures should be read as order-of-magnitude estimates pending primary data collection and flags the retailer-subsidy mechanism as carrying material market and displacement risk that will require careful allocation between central funders and commercial partners (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a).

This intervention answers directly to what witnesses told the Commission about food banks. Emergency food aid saves lives in the moment, but witnesses were united in the view that it cannot become a permanent feature of Britain's welfare system, and that charity should never be allowed to replace rights.

Communities welcomed surplus food redistribution where genuinely needed but consistently argued that dignity requires choice and that nobody should be expected to accept whatever food happens to be available or otherwise destined for disposal. Community kitchens, public diners, community food hubs and local food partnerships were named repeatedly as the dignified alternative, offering nutritious, affordable and culturally appropriate food through provision that looks and feels like a normal part of community life rather than a mark of failure.

The economics of this intervention are the least mature in the evidence base, but the qualitative case for it, and its unusually strong weighted return relative to its unweighted one, both point toward the same conclusion: a modest pilot programme, generating the primary cost and take-up data the current estimates lack, would be a prudent next step before national commitment (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a).

8.7 Devolving powers and resources so communities can design local solutions

The Commission heard that no single national model could meet every community's needs, and the costed evidence bears this out sharply. Free school meal entitlement, and even the basic unit cost of delivering a meal, already differ substantially across the four nations: Wales has completed universal primary provision since September 2024, at effectively nil incremental cost going forward; Scotland provides universal coverage from P1 to P5, with expansion to P6 and P7 underway for children receiving the Scottish Child Payment; England is moving to extend eligibility to all Universal Credit households from September 2026, adding an estimated 500,000 to 620,000 children, but has not yet reached full universal coverage; and Northern Ireland retains means-tested provision only, with the highest per-meal delivery cost in the UK at £4.28 and, consequently, the largest coverage gap and the greatest need for new supplier capacity and kitchen capital (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a; 2026b).

The Holiday Activities and Food programme is currently an England-only scheme, with very limited equivalent provision anywhere else in the UK, meaning the UK-wide costings above necessarily rely on a planning assumption, a 1.19 England-to-UK population adjustment factor, rather than four separately observed national baselines (Right to Food Campaign, 2026d).

This uneven picture is precisely why the Programme Business Case frames its central, preferred option as four-nation equalisation rather than wholly new expenditure: much of the primary school meals cost is the

cost of bringing Scotland, England and Northern Ireland up to the standard Wales has already set, not of inventing a new entitlement from scratch (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a).

Devolved delivery through existing local-authority and academy catering frameworks is the fastest and lowest-risk route to expanding coverage, but low-coverage areas, in Northern Ireland especially, will require targeted capital investment in kitchens and catering capacity that a purely devolved funding settlement, without UK-wide minimum standards and ring-fenced capital, would be unlikely to deliver at pace (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a). Devolution of delivery therefore needs to sit alongside, not instead of, the UK Framework Act discussed above, so that flexibility in local design does not reproduce the current postcode lottery witnesses described.

8.8 Transparent UK monitoring and accountability

Unlike poverty, which is measured through the DWP's official Households Below Average Income statistics, there is no single, official, government-run measure of food insecurity in the UK (Right to Food Campaign, 2026f), a gap identified in Chapter 9's discussion of governance and monitoring.

Instead, the picture is assembled from a patchwork of partial sources: the ONS's periodic Opinions and Lifestyle Survey; the Food Standards Agency's quarterly Food and You 2 survey, covering England, Wales and Northern Ireland; DEFRA's Family Food Survey, which tracks expenditure rather than insecurity directly; the Trussell Trust's food parcel statistics and Hunger in the UK research; the Independent Food Aid Network's data on the more than 1,000 independent food banks outside the Trussell network; and the Food Foundation's Food Insecurity Tracker, which uses the internationally recognised Food Insecurity Experience Scale and is widely regarded as the most rigorous available measure, precisely because it is comparable to the official statistics used in the United States and Canada, both of which have adopted a single national measure that the UK has so far declined to introduce (Right to Food Campaign, 2026f).

This is not a peripheral, technical point; it has a direct bearing on the reliability of every cost-benefit figure in this chapter. The wide planning ranges attached to the HAF and community-restaurant costings, and the reliance on a population-based planning factor rather than an observed four-nation baseline for holiday provision, exist precisely because no consistent national monitoring system currently produces the underlying data a more precise costing would require (Right to Food Campaign, 2026d; 2026a). Introducing transparent, comparable UK-wide monitoring is essential (Right to Food Campaign, 2026f; Right to Food Campaign, 2026a).

8.9 Placing community voices at the heart of policy design and scrutiny

The final intervention is not separately costed, but it runs through each of the figures above. People with lived experience of food insecurity, including disabled people, lone parents, older people, migrants and refugees, people from ethnic minority communities, people experiencing homelessness, and those living in deprived or rural communities, described food insecurity as something considerably more than hunger. They spoke of anxiety, shame, isolation, loss of dignity, and impossible daily choices between food, heating, housing, transport and healthcare.

These impacts fall unevenly and deepen existing inequalities, and they are precisely the effects the Green Book's distributional weighting is designed to capture in the benefit-cost ratios discussed throughout this chapter, but which the unweighted core ratios, and any purely resource-based appraisal, would otherwise miss entirely (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a). Embedding lived experience in policy design and in ongoing scrutiny is therefore not a soft addition to an otherwise technical programme; it is the mechanism that keeps the economic case honest, by ensuring the assumptions behind take-up rates, delivery models

and targeting reflect how people actually experience the system rather than how it looks from a spreadsheet.

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, the evidence base supports a clear conclusion. On a narrow, unweighted efficiency test, every food-specific intervention costed for the Commission (universal primary free school meals, extension to age 18, holiday provision, and community dining with price caps) returns less than £1 of measurable resource benefit for every £1 spent, with core ratios ranging from 0.36 for holiday provision to 0.83 for community restaurants (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a). Read in isolation, that would be a weak case. But applying the UK Government's own Green Book methodology for weighting benefits that fall on low-income households transforms the picture, as Table 4B.1 summarises (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a).

Table 8.1. Summary of Programme-Level Cost-Benefit Estimates from the Right to Food Programme Business Case

Programme component	Net cost (£m/yr)	Core BCR	Weighted BCR / SROI	Notes
Universal Primary FSM (UK)	1,028	0.44–0.59	1.76–2.38	Four-nation equalisation
FSM to age 18 (UK secondary)	1,599	0.44–0.59	1.76–2.38	All pupils to 18 ≈ £2.6bn combined
HAF extension, Scope A / B (England)	158 / 581	0.36	6.6 (4.1–10.3)	Strongest weighted return
Community restaurants + staple price caps (UK)	~3,847	0.83 (0.61–1.13)	~9 (4.9–21.1)	Order-of-magnitude; no UK precedent

The programme as a whole, alongside the Right to Food Act, devolved delivery, and stronger monitoring, which give it a durable legal and evidential foundation, is estimated to cost approximately £6 billion a year in addition to existing commitments, while generating around £100 billion in economic and social benefit over twenty years (Right to Food Campaign, 2026a).

Set against a status quo in which food-related ill health already costs the country in the region of £298 billion a year, £92 billion of it landing directly on the public purse, the central conclusion of this chapter is the same one the Commission itself reached: Britain is already paying for hunger, through poorer health, lost learning, pressure on public services, lost productivity and avoidable human suffering, and the choice before Parliament is not whether to spend money on food insecurity, but whether to keep spending it on failure or begin spending it on prevention (Jackson, 2024).

The one substantial gap in this cost-benefit case, the absence of a fully costed wage and social security package, is also the one that witnesses identified as most fundamental; closing it should be the priority for the costing work that follows this report.

9. Building Governance for Accountability, Leadership and Delivery

Earlier chapters argued that enshrining the Right to Food in law provides a framework for shifting from crisis management towards prevention, accountability and addressing the structural causes of food

insecurity. Central to this approach is the principle that access to adequate food is a matter of entitlement and dignity rather than charity.

Chapter 5 outlined the international human rights obligations underpinning the Right to Food, including the state's duties to respect, protect and fulfil that right, alongside the principles of good governance that support implementation.

This chapter examines how these principles can be put into practice through governance arrangements that support the progressive realisation of the Right to Food in the UK. It focuses on the leadership, institutional structures, accountability mechanisms and participatory processes needed to support implementation, transparency, equity and effective oversight. We also explore what can be learnt from existing international examples, with a specific focus on food system governance in Brazil and Mexico.

A major challenge identified by the Commission is the current absence of a coherent food governance system. Food insecurity is shaped by decisions relating to social security, health, housing, education, employment and the food system, and compounded by the fragmented policy landscape, with no single institution responsible for ensuring access to adequate food. This fragmentation can weaken policy coherence, obscure accountability, hinder coordinated action and limit effective implementation.

Effective governance requires clear leadership, accountability and monitoring systems that support learning and corrective action. Below we examine how, together, these elements provide the foundation for translating the Right to Food from a legal commitment into practical change, and for the framework legislation proposals set out in Chapter 11.

9.1 An important note on the UK's changing policy landscape

Before moving into a deeper analysis of potential governance for the Right to Food, it is important to note that, since the commission has been established the policy landscape has begun to change: the two-child benefit limit has been removed, a change expected to lift around 450,000 children out of poverty by 2030 (IPPR, 2025); a Child Poverty Strategy was published in December 2025; and, most significantly for this chapter, from April 2026 a new Crisis and Resilience Fund of around £1 billion requires local authorities in England to default to 'cash-first' crisis payments, reversing guidance that had preferred shopping vouchers on the grounds that recipients could not be trusted with money.

Scotland's Cash-First: Towards Ending the Need for Food Banks plan (2023) was the first of its kind anywhere in the world. 332,000 more five to ten year old children are eligible to free school meals, as all families getting universal credit are eligible. While this is an improvement, Scotland still does not have universal free school meals for all school aged children. Delivering on promises to extend entitlement to free school meals is an important next step as is reviewing the Good Food Nation Act. Promises need to be converted into actions that deliver. Placing the right to food on a statutory footing, with a strong underlying governance framework is the necessary and obvious next step.

9.2 Governance, accountability and the right to food

A core challenge facing the UK is that food and nutrition policies, including those relating to food security, hunger and obesity, are currently delivered through a complex network of government departments, statutory services, local authorities and civil society organisations.

Responsibility is fragmented across government, making food policy difficult to coordinate and scrutinise and creating gaps in accountability. Food insecurity is shaped by decisions on welfare, health, housing, education and food policy, yet no single institution is responsible for ensuring that everyone can access adequate food.

In England alone, 16 government departments have been identified as having responsibilities affecting food policy. The redistribution of Public Health England's functions across multiple organisations in 2021 further illustrates the fragmented nature of food, nutrition and public health governance in England. This complexity can weaken policy coherence, obscure accountability and make coordinated action more difficult. Appendix 2 illustrates the range of policies relevant to food insecurity and the bodies responsible for them.

Drawing on the FAO's PANTHER principles (Participation, Accountability, Non-discrimination, Transparency, Human Dignity, Empowerment and the Rule of Law), the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food argues that accountability is not simply about measuring outcomes but about ensuring that governments can be scrutinised and held responsible for progress (Fakhri, 2025). Citizens and rights-holders must be able to participate in shaping, monitoring and evaluating policy.

The FAO's PANTHER framework provides overarching governance principles for the Right to Food, while tools such as OPERA (Outcomes, Policy Efforts, Resources and Assessment) offer approaches for assessing progress, resource allocation and government accountability. Together, these frameworks highlight the importance of linking outcomes to participation, resources and corrective action. They also recognise that food insecurity is not simply a problem of food supply, but a structural issue shaped by how power, resources and decision-making are organised across food systems.

9.3 Structures of accountability

Effective governance is a prerequisite for a society in which access to adequate food is recognised as a public responsibility rather than being left to voluntary action. Evidence from systems-based research suggests that current arrangements, can unintentionally shift responsibility for addressing food insecurity from government to communities, eroding trust in public institutions and increasing reliance on voluntary support.

While community initiatives play a vital role in preventing hunger, they cannot substitute for public responsibility. A rights-based approach, therefore, requires clear duties, adequate resources and institutional arrangements that connect national leadership with local delivery, ensuring that everyone can access adequate, nutritious and culturally appropriate food with dignity.

Civil Society, Trade Unions and Local Government

The role of civil society, trade unions and local governments in holding the government to account and enabling claimholders to overcome structural barriers in current systems is key to moving away from the status quo. International experience suggests that accountability depends not only on government institutions but also on meaningful participation by civil society and workers' representatives.

Effective implementation requires governance structures that enable participation, coordinate action and create accountability. The CONSEA/SISAN model used in Brazil is the most developed example we can draw upon, combining cross-government leadership with strong involvement from civil society and trade unions. CONSEA is unique because around two-thirds of its members come from civil society and one-third from government. Its membership includes farmers' organisations, indigenous groups, public health bodies, faith organisations, academics and trade unions. (Oxfam, 2012)

Other jurisdictions, including Mexico, Spain and Scotland, have developed varying forms of food governance institutions. Detailed case studies are provided in Appendix 1. In Scotland, organisations such as Nourish Scotland, the Scottish Food Coalition and the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) have promoted participatory approaches to food governance involving producers, academics, anti-poverty organisations and trade unions. However, these arrangements are generally advisory rather than statutory and lack the formal accountability, oversight and rights-based functions that distinguish Brazil's model.

In the UK, concerns about coordination and accountability have informed recent proposals. Tim Lang's proposal for Food Resilience Councils would bring together government, public health, industry, civil society and local communities to strengthen food system resilience, preparedness and accountability. Unlike CONSEA, the proposal is primarily focused on food resilience and emergency preparedness rather than the Right to Food, and it does not explicitly provide for trade union representation. However, lessons from Brazil suggest that formal participation by organised labour and civil society could strengthen democratic accountability, participation and oversight within any future UK food governance framework.

Role of Local Government and Civil Society in Food Insecurity

The Commission heard consistent concerns that the UK's food governance system is characterised by a postcode lottery of provision and a lack of policy coherence. Despite these challenges, evidence highlighted key levers available to local government to help address food insecurity through public health, planning, welfare support, and community development.

England's Joint Strategic Needs Assessments

In England, Joint Strategic Needs Assessments (JSNAs) provide a statutory mechanism for identifying local needs and inequalities and informing Health and Well-being Strategies, commissioning decisions and resource allocation. Incorporating food insecurity and malnutrition into JSNAs can help make food-related inequalities visible, inform local priorities and provide a basis for monitoring progress over time. As public documents, JSNAs also enable scrutiny by communities, councillors, researchers and civil society organisations. Within a Right to Food framework, they offer a practical mechanism for assessing whether local systems are responding effectively to food-related need. Similar needs assessment and planning systems operate across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Local Planning and Food Access

Local Plans provide a complementary lever. While they do not guarantee access to food, they can embed food and nutrition objectives within planning, regeneration and development policies. For example, they can support community food growing, protect local markets, improve transport access to food retailers, safeguard community facilities and influence the accessibility of food outlets. Together with Health and Well-being Strategies, these powers enable councils to address many of the wider determinants of food insecurity.

Civil Society and Food Partnerships

Civil society organisations have played an important role in supporting local responses to food insecurity. Through initiatives such as Sustainable Food Places, organisations including Sustain have helped local authorities develop food strategies, food partnerships and whole-system approaches that bring together councils, public health teams, community organisations, businesses and residents. These partnerships demonstrate how food insecurity can be addressed through cross-sector collaboration rather than emergency food aid alone.

However, food partnerships remain largely voluntary arrangements operating outside formal accountability structures. Their effectiveness often depends on local capacity and funding, resulting in significant variation between areas. Also, if corporations are involved, improving the accountability of private partners is key to keep credibility and real impact of their programmes beyond their corporate interests.

The Commission also heard that some community organisations are reluctant to engage in food partnerships due to concerns about governance and local authority funding decisions. While many of the foundations needed to tackle food insecurity already exist, they often rely on fragile and under-resourced arrangements. What is lacking is a coherent governance infrastructure, supported by clear duties, sustainable funding and robust accountability mechanisms.

A right to food approach would embed food and nutrition security within local needs assessments, plans and strategies, strengthening coordination between national and local government, health services and civil society while maintaining clear lines of responsibility and accountability.

9.4 Clear leadership, statutory accountability and cross-government coordination

The UK operated a Ministry of Food from 1939 to 1955, responsible for food distribution and national nutrition during and after the Second World War. More recently, governments have relied on cross-departmental committees, taskforces and policy groups to coordinate food-related issues, including the Childhood Obesity Plan, food security arrangements and the Ministerial Food Strategy Group.

The Localism Act 2011 and subsequent public health reforms shifted greater responsibility for responding to local needs to local authorities, while the transfer of public health functions from the NHS to local government positioned councils as key actors in addressing the wider determinants of health. Although local authorities do not have a specific statutory duty to tackle food insecurity, their responsibilities for improving population health and reducing health inequalities mean that food insecurity increasingly falls within the remit of local public health systems.

The Commission also gathered evidence on the commitment and creativity of volunteers, food banks, social supermarkets, holiday programmes and community food initiatives. While these efforts play a vital role in preventing hunger, growing reliance on voluntary provision raises important questions about the respective responsibilities of government, communities and civil society in delivering the Right to Food.

Evidence highlighted the importance of communities that care. Community organisations often provide more than food, offering social connection, dignity, practical support and trusted local relationships. These forms of solidarity are valuable community assets and can help people navigate periods of hardship. However, a caring community should complement, not replace, a caring state. Voluntary action can respond to immediate need, but it cannot address the structural drivers of food insecurity or guarantee the Right to Food for all. Lasting solutions require public institutions with the authority, resources and accountability to act.

9.5 Measuring what matters

The Commission repeatedly heard that food insecurity is fundamentally an income and poverty issue, as set out in Chapters 3 and 4. Monitoring the Right to Food, therefore, requires attention not only to food insecurity itself, but also to the economic, nutritional and social conditions that shape people's ability to access adequate food. It must also consider dimensions of dignity, agency, participation and trust that are often absent from conventional indicators.

Monitoring Progress and Building the Evidence Base

The UK already collects extensive information on poverty, food insecurity, nutrition and health (Appendix 3). The challenge is not the absence of data but bringing existing evidence together within a framework that links monitoring to governance, accountability and action.

International experience has demonstrated that the effectiveness of monitoring depends on how closely measurement is connected to governance, participation and accountability. While both the UK and Brazil use experience-based measures of food insecurity, how the data is implemented is very different.

Brazil's Escala Brasileira de Insegurança Alimentar (EBIA) is an experience-based measure of household food insecurity, that is broadly comparable to the UK's Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES), but it is embedded within institutions that review evidence, coordinate policy responses and monitor progress and managed by CONSEA/SISAN. By contrast, while the UK collects increasingly robust data on food

insecurity through FIES and other mechanisms such as the Family Resources Survey and the UK Food Security Report, these monitoring systems are not currently matched by equivalent duties to respond when need is identified.

The UK lacks an equivalent governance infrastructure linking monitoring, participation and implementation. The establishment of the Ministerial Food Strategy Group represents an important step towards cross-government coordination, and builds on the policy landscape reviewed in Chapter 6. However, unlike CONSEA and SISAN, it does not currently provide statutory duties, independent oversight or formal mechanisms through which people experiencing food insecurity can participate in decision-making. This distinction is illustrated in Table 7.1. and discussed further in *Chapter 9, Section 3: Structures of Accountability*.

Table 9.1. Governance and Accountability: UK FIES and Brazil EBIA

UK, Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES)	Brazil, Escala Brasileira de Insegurança Alimentar (EBIA)
Results are reported through the Family Resources Survey, the UK Food Security Report and other government statistics.	Results are integrated into SISAN, CONSEA (<i>Conselho Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional</i>) and national food and nutrition security plans.
Bodies such as the Ministerial Food Strategy Group may coordinate action across government, but no institution currently has a clear statutory responsibility to respond when food insecurity indicators worsen.	Governance institutions are expected to review evidence, coordinate responses, monitor progress and inform policy and budget decisions.
Measurement informs policy discussions, but links between monitoring, accountability and corrective action remain limited.	Measurement is formally linked to accountability, participation and implementation through governance structures that connect evidence to planning and policy action.
Participation by people experiencing food insecurity is generally consultative and varies between initiatives.	Civil society participation is embedded through CONSEA and related food security institutions, creating formal routes for scrutiny, participation and accountability.

Table 9.1 highlights that the challenge of food security is not simply about collecting data, but about ensuring that evidence informs decision-making and action.

Establishing a clear locus of responsibility was a recurring theme, whether through a dedicated Minister, a statutory Right to Food Council, a Right to Food Commission, or another mechanism to coordinate actions across government. Indicators can identify trends and inequalities, as well as rates of food insecurity and hunger, but they are only meaningful when linked to clear duties and processes for corrective action. Without institutions capable of responding to evidence, data collection risks becoming an exercise in observation rather than change.

Measuring Poverty

Poverty remains one of the strongest drivers of food insecurity, as documented in Chapter 1 and Chapter 6. Existing measures, including Household Below Average Income (HBAI), poverty after housing costs, material deprivation and persistent poverty, provide important information on household resources and living standards (see Appendices 4a and 4b). Scotland is the only UK nation with statutory poverty targets and annual reporting requirements, whereas England, Wales and Northern Ireland rely primarily on policy strategies rather than legal duties.

The choice of poverty measure is politically significant because different measures can produce different interpretations of the scale and nature of poverty. Relative poverty assesses incomes against prevailing

living standards, while absolute poverty measures progress against a fixed threshold. Other approaches, such as the Social Metrics Commission measure, incorporate housing costs, debt, childcare costs and assets to provide a broader assessment of living standards. Together, these measures help explain why food insecurity occurs and identify groups at greatest risk.

However, poverty indicators alone cannot tell us whether people can access an adequate, nutritious, and culturally appropriate diet, nor do they capture the wider social and psychological impacts of food insecurity. For this reason, a Right to Food framework requires that measures of poverty, food insecurity, and nutritional well-being be considered together.

Measuring Food Insecurity

Food security measurement in the UK operates at two levels: national food security, which focuses on food supply, resilience and agricultural productivity, and household food insecurity, which focuses on whether people can access and afford sufficient food. For many years, campaigners, academics and civil society organisations criticised the absence of an official measure of household food insecurity in the UK.

Following sustained campaigning by civil society organisations and MPs, including Emma Lewell-Buck, household food insecurity was incorporated into the Family Resources Survey in 2019, providing the first routine national measure of this issue. Civil society organisations and researchers have nevertheless continued to argue that policy places greater emphasis on national food security than on household experiences of food insecurity, despite the latter being central to debates about food banks, free school meals and the Right to Food.

In the UK, household food insecurity is primarily measured through the Family Resources Survey using the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES), which captures experiences ranging from anxiety about food access to meal skipping and hunger.

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Summary of Food insecurity methods used in UK

	DWP (FRS)	Food Foundation Tracker	Trussell (Hunger in the UK)
Time window	Past 30 days	Past 30 days	Past 12 months
Questions	USDA 10-question scale; needs several "yes" answers to count	A few questions about severe experiences; one "yes" is enough	USDA 10-question scale; needs several "yes" answers
How it's collected	Face-to-face interview in a long survey about income and benefits	Online YouGov panel, filled in privately	General population survey
Who is counted	Individuals in food insecure households	Adults and children reported separately	Households × average size of food insecure households (10.3m adults + 3.8m children)
Period	April 2024 to March 2025	July 2026	2024
Number Food Insecure	6 million	6.5 m adults and 2.2million children	14.1 million

Household food insecurity is primarily measured through the Family Resources Survey using the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES), which captures experiences ranging from anxiety about food access to meal skipping and hunger. This is based on a household survey of around 20,000 people and asks about food bank use in the last 12 months, as well as household food security in the past month.

The Food Foundation's Food Insecurity Tracker, which offers more frequent information on affordability pressures and trends in food insecurity, and by ONS reporting through the Family Resources Survey. Together, these sources provide valuable information on the prevalence and severity of food insecurity, but they remain dispersed across multiple systems and are not routinely linked to governance and accountability mechanisms.

Since 2023, the DWP has also reported food bank usage within its HBAI statistics. Additional evidence is provided by the Food Foundation's Food Insecurity Tracker, which offers more frequent information on affordability pressures and trends in food insecurity, and by ONS reporting through the Family Resources Survey. Together, these sources provide valuable information on the prevalence and severity of food insecurity, but they remain dispersed across multiple systems and are not routinely linked to governance and accountability mechanisms.

Measuring Nutritional Outcomes

Nutritional outcomes are monitored through the Public Health Outcomes Framework (PHOF), the National Child Measurement Programme, the National Diet and Nutrition Survey, and the Health Survey for England. PHOF is particularly important because it already functions as a public health accountability framework, enabling local authorities to monitor inequalities, benchmark performance and track progress over time (see Appendix 5 for its framework).

However, important gaps remain. England lacks a comprehensive national surveillance system for malnutrition risk. The UK has agreed to the targets set out in the Global Nutrition Targets and the Sustainable Development Goals to end hunger by 2030, but the UK is off track against most of these targets and does not collect data that would allow progress to be tracked effectively.

BAPEN (British Association for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition) has played a leading role in identifying and raising awareness of malnutrition through the Malnutrition Universal Screening Tool (MUST), which is widely used across hospitals, care homes and community services. While these data provide valuable insight into clinical malnutrition, they are not routinely integrated into a national monitoring framework and largely reflect people already in contact with health and care services.

As a result, some of the groups at greatest nutritional risk may remain poorly captured within existing datasets, including people experiencing homelessness, undocumented migrants, people with no recourse to public funds, unpaid carers, some disabled people, and those receiving palliative or end-of-life care. A Right to Food monitoring framework should therefore focus not only on identified service users but also on unmet need and populations that remain largely invisible within routine surveillance systems.

The Low-Income Diet and Nutrition Survey (LIDNS), conducted between 2003 and 2005, remains the only national survey specifically designed to assess the nutritional consequences of low income. No equivalent survey has been undertaken since. A future Right to Food framework should therefore consider both a successor to LIDNS and a more integrated national approach to malnutrition surveillance.

Measuring Dignity, Agency and Hidden Need

The Commission repeatedly heard that food insecurity is also about dignity, stigma, autonomy, choice, trust and participation. If access to food is achieved only through experiences of shame, dependency or exclusion from decision-making, important aspects of the right to food remain unrealised. A future monitoring framework should therefore combine statistical indicators with measures of lived experience.

Emerging tools such as the Food Insecurity Self-Stigma Scale (FISS) and the Food Support Experiences Scale (FSSES) demonstrate that dignity, stigma and experiences of food support can be measured alongside traditional food insecurity indicators. Monitoring should also assess agency and participation, including whether people can influence decisions that affect their food and nutritional security.

Taken together, existing poverty, food insecurity, nutrition and public health datasets provide substantial information, but each capture only part of the picture.

A Right to Food law should bring these sources together within a single monitoring system linked to governance, accountability and implementation. Progress depends on institutions having the capacity and resources to act on the evidence generated.

Consistent with lessons from Brazil and Mexico, responsibilities must be matched by resources if accountability is to be meaningful. Any future Right to Food law, as considered in Chapter 11, would therefore need to be accompanied by clear implementation plans, sustainable funding arrangements, mechanisms for public scrutiny and regular reporting on progress. The Good Food Bill and proposals for Food Resilience Councils offer potential mechanisms to support this approach through statutory targets, action plans, ministerial duties and independent oversight. While not creating a fully justiciable right to food, they could provide a governance framework that links measurement to implementation, accountability and corrective action.

9.6 Towards an integrated framework for the right to food

The evidence reviewed in this chapter suggests that the UK's greatest challenge is the absence of an integrated framework that links governance, accountability, monitoring, and implementation. Many of the building blocks already exist through the Family Resources Survey, the Public Health Outcomes Framework (PHOF), Healthy Start statistics, Free School Meal data, the National Child Measurement Programme and a growing body of local and community evidence.

Together, these provide proxy measures of food insecurity, nutrition, and health among vulnerable populations, but the UK no longer has a national survey equivalent to the Low-Income Diet and Nutrition Survey (LIDNS) that can systematically assess the nutritional consequences of poverty and food insecurity. The challenge is therefore to bring existing evidence and monitoring systems together within a coherent Right to Food law.

A future monitoring framework should combine statistical indicators with lived experience, capturing not only food insecurity and nutritional outcomes but also dignity, choice, participation, trust and institutional capacity. It should also identify groups who are underserved or missing from existing datasets. From a rights-based perspective, these dimensions are not supplementary to monitoring but central to it. If access to food is achieved only through experiences of stigma, dependency or exclusion from decision-making, then important aspects of the right to food remain unrealised.

The Commission heard widespread concern that access to food increasingly depends on charity, voluntary effort and where people live. While community organisations play a vital role in preventing hunger and supporting dignity, participation and social connection, they cannot substitute for public responsibility. A fair and functioning society requires everyone have access to adequate food, and that this right is supported by clear duties, adequate resources, and accountable institutions capable of responding to need. Evidence from systems-based research suggests that current arrangements can unintentionally shift responsibility from government to communities, weakening trust in public institutions and increasing reliance on voluntary support.

The Public Health Outcomes Framework provides one possible foundation for monitoring progress. Rather than creating entirely new structures, a right to food approach could build on existing data and accountability mechanisms while incorporating measures of food insecurity, nutrition, malnutrition, dignity, participation, trust and institutional capacity. The Commission also heard support for a statutory Right to Food Council, drawing inspiration from Brazil's CONSEA model, to coordinate implementation, oversee monitoring and provide a formal mechanism through which people with lived experience can participate in governance and policymaking.

International experience demonstrates that legal recognition alone is insufficient. Brazil's experience highlights the importance of institutions that coordinate action across government, support participation and connect national and local implementation, while Mexico illustrates the limitations of recognising the right to food without a sufficiently integrated governance and implementation framework. Any future UK Right to Food legislation, of the kind set out in Chapter 11, should therefore be accompanied by a national implementation strategy setting out responsibilities, timelines, funding arrangements, monitoring requirements and mechanisms for public scrutiny and corrective action.

Ultimately, measurement alone does not realise rights. Indicators are meaningful only when linked to duties, resources and accountability. Progress towards the right to food will depend on combining effective governance, meaningful participation, sustainable funding, robust monitoring and a clear implementation strategy within an integrated framework capable of ensuring that everyone can access adequate, nutritious and culturally appropriate food with dignity.

10. Building the Foundations for Food Security: Household Affordability framework

The evidence received by the Commission demonstrates that food insecurity is not simply a food issue, nor is it solely a consequence of rising food prices. Witnesses consistently described food insecurity as the result of a wider affordability crisis in which interaction between inadequate incomes, rising living costs,

limited access to essential goods and services, and debt combine to undermine people's ability to access adequate food.

Across the UK, the Commission repeatedly heard that food is often the first part of household spending to "flex" when budgets come under pressure. Unlike rent, energy bills, transport costs or debt repayments, spending on food can be reduced immediately, often at the expense of nutritional quality or quantity. As a result, pressures elsewhere in household budgets frequently translate directly into food insecurity.

This is significant from a rights-framed governance perspective. The right to food requires not only that food is available, but that it is economically accessible. People should be able to obtain adequate, nutritious and culturally appropriate food without sacrificing other basic needs. Yet the evidence received by the Commission suggests that many households are routinely forced to make precisely these trade-offs.

This chapter examines the evidence on rising living costs and their impact on the right to food. It explores how pressures relating to food, housing, energy and transport interact with low incomes and debt to drive food insecurity, before considering the wider structural factors that shape affordability and access to life's essentials. This chapter also considers how to approach the governance of affordability and why it is important that government does this to address food insecurity and the cost of living crisis more broadly.

10.1 Evidence of affordability pressure

Rising Food Prices and Nutritional Inequality

The rising cost of food emerged as one of the strongest themes throughout the inquiry. Although food inflation has fallen from the peak levels experienced during the cost of living crisis, witnesses consistently emphasised that prices remain substantially above pre-crisis levels. The Food Foundation reports that food prices increased by more than 30% between April 2022 and July 2026 with the reported price gap between healthy and unhealthy food having increased 27% between 2015 and 2025. (Food Foundation, 2026)

Community members experience reflected these figures, they described adapting their shopping habits around price rather than preference, nutritional value or dietary requirements. Many reported prioritising discounted food, reducing purchases of fresh produce, changing where they shop and relying increasingly on reduced-price items.

"Every purchase is determined by the cost, first course of action whilst shopping is to look for the reduced items. At times they are in poor condition, however half price is the determining factor." Community participant, Right to Food evidence

Several witnesses argued that healthy diets are becoming increasingly difficult to afford. Bags of Taste highlighted how low-income households are often structurally steered towards cheaper and less healthy options, observing that many of the lowest-cost snacks available are Ultra Processed Foods (UPFs), high in sugar, fat or salt (See Chapter 2, Section 2.1 and Chapter 6, Section 6.8, for more information on UPFs). Similar concerns were raised across evidence sessions, with participants questioning why healthier food choices frequently attract a premium when compared with ultra-processed alternatives.

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

The Commission heard concerns that this trend does not merely affect food quantity but also food quality. Witnesses described situations in which the food people consume is increasingly determined by what is affordable rather than what is healthy, culturally appropriate or required for specific dietary needs. This has important implications for the right to food, which encompasses access to adequate nutrition and not simply sufficient calories.

Housing Costs, Housing Insecurity and the Right to Food

Housing costs emerged as one of the strongest themes throughout the evidence received by the Commission. For many households, access to food is determined not by their gross income, but by what remains after housing costs have been paid.

Witnesses consistently described rent, council tax and other housing-related expenses reducing the resources available for food. Across the country, communities told the Commission that when household budgets come under pressure, food is often the only area where spending can be reduced.

"Rent eats first," (ATD Fourth World participant, 2026)

Under international human rights standards, housing costs should not compromise a person's ability to secure other basic necessities. (CESCR, 1991) Yet witnesses repeatedly described situations in which rising rents left insufficient money for food, heating, transport and other essentials.

"I struggled to feed myself while being on UC as the food budget was very limited. The rent pay took 70% of the budget." (Anonymous participant)

Evidence submitted by Shelter and Crisis argued that the shortage in supply of genuinely affordable housing has become a direct driver of food insecurity. Crisis evidence submission stressed that for people on the lowest incomes, the money available for food is often what remains after rent has been paid and argued that any meaningful strategy to realise the right to food must address housing affordability alongside food affordability. They highlighted that by November 2025 only 48% of private rents were fully covered by Local Housing Allowance (LHA), while just 2.5% of newly listed private rented properties in England were affordable within LHA rates. As rents have continued to rise, many households have been forced to meet growing shortfalls from already inadequate incomes.

Submitted evidence argued that the recent Renter's Rights Act will alleviate some financial burden on renters, including prohibiting 'bidding wars', placing a limit on how much rent can be offered or requested upfront and restricting rent increases to once a year. However, it does not tackle the present affordability of rents relative to income.

The consequences for food security are significant. In their recent report 'No Home to go to', Crisis and partners highlighted that almost half (48%) of private renters receiving Universal Credit had reduced spending on essentials such as food, transport and energy during the previous six months. Citizens Advice advisers also helped more than 6,600 private renters with housing benefit issues access food banks during 2025/26, a 79% increase compared with 2021/22. (Crisis 2026)

The Commission heard that food insecurity is not simply a consequence of low incomes, but also of policy decisions that allow housing costs to outpace the support available to meet them. Witnesses argued that frozen Local Housing Allowance rates, the household benefit cap and the Shared Accommodation Rate have contributed to situations where households are forced to divert money intended for food towards housing costs, increasing the risk of both homelessness and food insecurity.

Housing also affects the right to food in ways that extend beyond affordability. Witnesses repeatedly highlighted the impact of homelessness, temporary accommodation and poor housing conditions on people's ability to access, store and prepare food. Crisis submitted evidence showing that the end of March 2026, more than 177,000 children in England were living in temporary accommodation, reflecting continued growth in family homelessness. Shelter reported to the commission that that homelessness can remove the practical means through which people obtain adequate food, particularly where accommodation lacks appropriate cooking and storage facilities. (Garvie et al, 2023)

The Commission heard similar accounts from people with lived experience. Witnesses described temporary accommodation as restricting access to affordable and nutritious food, while others highlighted how inadequate kitchens, refrigeration and storage facilities force families to rely on more expensive convenience foods and takeaways.

"Don't have cooking facilities so survive on takeaways. Becomes costly." Community Participant, Right to Food evidence

These concerns were reinforced by Shelter's *Still Living in Limbo* research, which found that more than half (54%) of households living in temporary accommodation reported spending more on food after becoming homeless. The research concluded that the absence of cooking facilities and food storage often prevents households from preparing even basic meals from fresh ingredients, increasing reliance on more expensive and less nutritious alternatives. (Garvie et al, 2023)

Housing insecurity does not merely compete with food for a share of household income. It can actively increase food costs, reduce access to nutritious food and undermine people's ability to prepare meals safely and with dignity. The right to food cannot be fully realised if housing costs absorb an excessive proportion of household resources, or if homelessness prevents people from accessing the facilities required to store and prepare food.

The Commission heard a range of proposals aimed at improving housing affordability and reducing housing insecurity. These included uprating Local Housing Allowance to reflect local rental markets, reviewing the household benefit cap and Shared Accommodation Rate, increasing investment in social housing, reducing reliance on temporary accommodation and adopting a more housing-led approach to homelessness prevention. Crisis argued that settled, affordable housing should be viewed as the foundation upon which people are able to secure other essential rights, including the right to food.

An international comparative literature review submitted to the Commission suggested that countries combining substantial social housing sectors with rent regulation often experience lower housing-cost burdens, helping households retain more disposable income for food and other essentials. (Brooks, 2026)

However, witnesses stressed that housing affordability measures targeting rising costs are most effective when combined with interventions to ensure adequate housing supply (such as building social homes) and targeted support for households facing the greatest financial pressures (such as adequate housing benefits).

Disability Rights UK submitted evidence demonstrating the discriminatory impact of current state failure to address household unaffordability.

"Almost 20% of Disabled people rent privately (where high rents can consume a large proportion of household income) and argues that rising rents are making it increasingly difficult for Disabled people to access suitable housing." Disability Rights UK submission

Ultimately, the evidence suggests that food insecurity cannot be separated from the housing crisis. Rising rents, inadequate housing support, homelessness and unsuitable accommodation all reduce people's ability to access adequate food. Securing the right to food therefore requires action not only on incomes and food prices, but also on the affordability, availability and security of housing itself.

Energy Costs and the "Eat or Heat" Choice

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

Energy costs were another major driver of food insecurity identified by witnesses. The commission heard evidence about the impact of geopolitical crises on energy prices and household affordability.

In 2025, electricity prices were higher than those in all but three of the EU states. Following the start of the Ukraine war in October 2022, the government introduced an energy price guarantee which subsidised energy companies to provide energy below the price cap amount. This temporary measure aimed to reduce bills by an average of £1000 a year, but it has not been introduced again during the current energy crisis created by the Iran war. (Bolton, 2026)

Instead, the government has introduced a breathing space tax easement for VAT on electricity bills, which anticipates an average saving of £45 a year. However, since savings are linked to consumption, people experiencing food insecurity that may already be limiting their electricity use by turning off fridges or not using the oven will most likely save less. (Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, 2026)

In a parliamentary briefing document from 2026, it was stated that Household energy bills remain 18% above their July-September 2024 low, even after falling well short of the 2022-23 crisis peak, a reminder that "coming down from the peak" is not the same as being "affordable." ((Bolton, 2026)

"Doing my best but sometimes it is eat or heat." Participant at MPs briefing session

Access to food depends on more than the ability to purchase it. People also require the means to store, prepare and cook food safely. Witnesses described reducing use of cookers and ovens, avoiding foods requiring lengthy preparation and changing eating habits because of concerns about utility bills.

The Commission also heard from the Disability Rights UK, about the discriminatory impact of state failure to address the impact of energy costs of food security.

"Disabled people may be disproportionately affected because many impairments and health conditions require higher household energy use. Rising energy costs therefore have the potential to compound existing inequalities, reducing the resources available for food while simultaneously undermining the means through which food is prepared and consumed." Disability Rights UK submission

Water Costs

Water bills have risen sharply and unevenly across England and Wales. The average combined waste and water bill for 2026–27 stands at £639, a 5.3% increase on the previous year, itself following a 27% rise in 2025–26 (Ofwat, 2026). Because water and sewerage services are supplied by regional monopolies, no household can shop around to escape regional disparity, whatever the state of their own finances. Average prices for companies in England and Wales for the current year range from £535 (Northumbria Water) and £759 (Southern). (Discover Water, 2026). A submission from Common Wealth showed that in the financial year to 2024 28% of the average bill cost went to paying water company dividends and financing debt. (Common Wealth, 2026)

Water is rarely named as a driver of food insecurity in its own right, but the evidence heard by the Commission suggests it should be. Rising water bills form part of the same picture of inflexible costs as energy and housing, and for many households facing difficulty, water is, in practice, the first bill not to be paid. Unlike energy suppliers, water companies cannot disconnect a household's supply, a protection set out in the Water Industry Act 1999.

Where almost every other bill carries the threat of a more immediate consequence, water becomes the one place a household under pressure can stop paying without an instant or visible effect, freeing up money in the moment to put towards food. This is a rational response to an impossible set of choices, not a sign of irresponsibility, though the consequences are deferred rather than avoided: arrears accumulate, and may later lead to court action, benefit deductions or other debt recovery measures.

The scale of this is significant. Citizens Advice in Newcastle and Gateshead reported 18,246 clients presenting with water debt, at an average of £1,066 each, totalling £19.44 million, in data drawn from clients across England and Wales. Some who gave evidence to the Commission argued that water, as a basic necessity of life, should be provided free of charge.

Others described the relief of finding a way through arrears, once they knew to look for it. A Resolve Poverty participant told the Commission: *"We also found out we could get a reduced water cap and pay off the water debt we had"*. This is evidence that support exists, but that households in difficulty do not reliably know about it, or reach it, before debt has already built up.

Child Related Costs

Childcare and other child related costs crowd out food spending in the same way as rent and energy. Despite government contributions in some parts of the UK, single parents told the Commission that childcare responsibilities reduce their earning capacity directly, through unaffordable upfront costs, a lack of flexible work, and spikes in cost during school holidays (Citizens Advice Gateshead).

Community members told us even small school costs can tip a household into difficulty, for example cooking classes cost £1.50-£3.50, and unpaid costs like these and school meals can become a debt in themselves. As one respondent put it: *"I prioritise feeding my child and ensuring she has enough cash for school lunch."*

Transport, Geography and the Poverty Premium

The Commission heard extensive evidence that where people live shapes their access to affordable food (See Chapter 3, Section 3.4 for more detail). Many witnesses described living in communities with limited access to supermarkets and affordable food retailers. In such circumstances households often relied on smaller convenience stores that charged higher prices and offered a more limited range of fresh food. For others, travelling to lower-cost supermarkets introduced additional costs that effectively increased the price of food.

"Transport costs to large supermarkets is expensive. Return bus fare to go from Aberdare to local large supermarket is £9 for 15-minute journey each way." Community participant, Cardiff

Witnesses from Liverpool, Ashington and other communities highlighted how food deserts, poor transport links and uneven patterns of retail investment can restrict access to affordable food. Several organisations argued that these conditions create a "poverty premium", whereby households facing financial hardship are often required to pay more for essential goods simply because of where they live or because they lack access to private transport.

The poverty premium is a recognised in financial inclusion research, describing the tendency for lower-income households to pay more than higher-income households for equivalent essential goods and services, owing to restricted access to competitive markets, an inability to buy in bulk or pay by the most cost-effective method, and higher costs of credit. The evidence received by the Commission illustrates this phenomenon in relation to food access specifically.

The Commission heard that food affordability is therefore shaped not only by income and prices, but also by geography and transport infrastructure. These factors can create significant inequalities in access to affordable food despite living within the same national food system

Beyond Income: The Limits of Market Solutions

A consistent theme emerging from the evidence was that food insecurity cannot be solved through income measures alone.

Witnesses repeatedly stressed the importance of adequate wages and social security. However, many also questioned whether raising incomes by itself would be sufficient where housing, energy and food costs continue to rise.

Some argued that improvements in income are often quickly absorbed by increases in essential living costs, limiting their impact on people's ability to realise their right to food. This reflects what is sometimes called an absorption effect, when a rise in income is swallowed up before it reaches the part of the household budget it was meant to help, because the cost of non-negotiable essentials such as rent or energy have risen just as fast, or faster. Income-based interventions alone therefore have a structural limit on their effectiveness wherever the costs of non-negotiable essentials are also rising.

This reflects a broader concern that emerged throughout the inquiry regarding the role of markets in determining access to essentials, because food is the most vulnerable budget line for households. While food industry representatives argued that food prices largely reflect rising operating costs and narrow profit

margins, many other witnesses questioned whether market forces alone can be relied upon to ensure equitable access to food, housing, water and energy. Several participants argued that systems organised primarily around purchasing power inevitably reproduce inequalities in access to essential goods. Where access is determined primarily through markets, existing inequalities in income and wealth can become inequalities in nutrition, housing and health.

"Market forces do not guarantee access. They can drive up the costs of appropriate food, create inequalities within communities, and reinforce a false competition between communities." Quote submitted by anonymous participant linked to: <https://renecassin.org/category/right-to-food/>)

"The food system, built on the priority of profits, can become disconnected from the needs of people and the planet." Birmingham City Council submission

This commission's evidence points towards the role of market concentration in shaping affordability outcomes. Where markets for essential goods are concentrated among a small number of suppliers, and consumers have limited ability to switch provider or forgo purchase, prices and margins can be sustained above the level a more competitive market would produce. The Commission heard that this dynamic underpins both concerns about food industry pricing and proposals for cooperative and non-market alternatives, discussed further below.

The Commission also heard concerns that public policy often focuses on mitigating the consequences of these failures through reliance and funding of food banks, emergency crisis cash payments and charitable provision rather than grappling with the underlying drivers of insecurity. While emergency support was widely recognised as essential, many participants argued that charitable responses cannot substitute for systemic solutions.

Co-op Party evidence submitted to the Commission suggested that cooperative ownership and governance models may provide practical alternatives to over reliance on market structures that concentrate power and value within food supply chains. By enabling collective purchasing, shared infrastructure, stronger bargaining power and shorter supply chains, cooperative approaches were presented as one means of improving resilience, reducing costs and ensuring that food systems operate more effectively in the interests of both producers and consumers.

10.2 The four pillars of cost of living affordability supporting the right to food.

The Commission's evidence points towards four interconnected pillars that together help determine whether household costs are affordable enough to allow people to realise their right to food.



RIGHT TO FOOD UK COMMISSION

A Roadmap to Delivering Food Security for All by 2035

The Four Pillars of Cost of Living Affordability

Together, these pillars ensure people can meet their essential needs and live with dignity.



1. Adequate Incomes

Ensure people have enough income to meet their needs and live with dignity.

Wages and fair work
Social security and benefits
Pensions
Income adequacy and progression



2. Costs of the essentials

Make everyday essentials affordable and within reach.

Housing costs (rent/mortgage)
Food and healthy diet
Energy and utilities
Transport
Water and essential services



3. Sufficient & Accessible Supply

Ensure a reliable, safe and sustainable supply of essential goods and services, with good infrastructure and local access.

Housing supply
Food infrastructure and distribution
Transport infrastructure
Local access and services



4. Debt Protection

Protect people from excessive debt and financial hardship.

Fair and affordable credit
Protection from high-cost lending
Support with arrears and debt recovery
Financial inclusion

Cost of Living Indicators

These indicators measure the impact on an adequate standard of living and that are cross cutting all four pillars.



Housing Adequacy

Safe, secure, affordable and suitable housing.



Food Security

Nutritious, sufficient and culturally appropriate food.



Water Security

Safe, clean and reliable water.



Transport Security

Affordable, reliable and accessible transport.



Energy Security

Sufficient energy for food preparation, hygienic homes and warm homes



Child-related costs

Costs in and out of school, including childcare

Pillar One: Adequate Incomes

The first pillar is ensuring that people have sufficient income to meet their basic needs. This includes wages, social security, pensions and other sources of household income. Without adequate incomes, access to food becomes increasingly dependent upon charitable provision, borrowing or crisis support. The Commission heard repeatedly that many households simply do not have sufficient income to cover the combined costs of food, housing, transport, energy and other essentials. An adequate income floor is therefore a necessary condition for securing the right to food. However, income alone cannot guarantee food security.

Pillar Two: Affordable Cost of the Essentials

The second pillar is ensuring that essential goods and services remain affordable relative to household incomes. Food, housing, energy, transport and water are not discretionary purchases. They are prerequisites for participation in society and the enjoyment of other rights. Yet the Commission consistently heard evidence that the costs of these essentials are increasing faster than many household incomes.

This raises an important challenge for policymakers. Governments cannot focus solely on what enters household budgets while ignoring what leaves them. Prices do not increase for a single reason. Sometimes rising costs reflect genuine increases in the cost of production or supply. Sometimes they reflect geopolitical instability, climate-related shocks or wider economic pressures. At other times, market structure, market power and the absence of competition may allow prices to rise because consumers have little alternative but to pay.

The implication is not that governments should attempt to control all prices, rather that essential goods and services require a different policy approach from non-essential consumer goods. Where the affordability of essentials deteriorates significantly, governments may need to intervene to ensure the costs are managed through mechanisms such as housing support, social tariffs, affordability protections, transport subsidies, rent stabilisation measures or other forms of market regulation.

The underlying principle is simple: no essential good should become persistently unaffordable for the significant sections of the population who live in lower income households. Where there are warning signs of rising unaffordability, a governance structure focused on household affordability can act quickly to take stabilising actions across all four pillars.

Pillar Three: Sufficient and Accessible Supply

Affordability is shaped not only by income and price, but also by availability. A household may possess adequate income in theory but still struggle to access affordable food if they live in a food desert, lack access to transport or can only shop at high-cost local retailers. Similarly, households may receive adequate housing support but still struggle if sufficient affordable homes are not available.

This pillar therefore requires action to expand the availability of affordable housing, strengthen transport infrastructure, improve local food access, develop resilient supply chains and support forms of provision that place affordability and access alongside commercial objectives.

The Commission also heard evidence highlighting the potential role of cooperative, community-owned and non-market models in improving resilience, increasing supply and reducing costs.

Pillar Four: Protection from Debt and Financial Exclusion

The fourth pillar is protection from debt-driven deprivation. The Commission repeatedly heard how households become trapped in cycles where rising living costs lead to borrowing, arrears or deductions, while debt repayments then reduce the resources available for food and other essentials. A household may therefore appear to have sufficient income on paper while remaining unable to secure adequate food in practice.

Further risks such as financial exploitation, coercive control and financial exploitation can make household affordability unstable, particularly among disabled communities and older people, or for people who are experiencing homelessness, domestic abuse or mental ill health. These people require targeted policy to address these risks.

The right to food requires more than income support. It also requires safeguards against debt, deductions and financial practices that reduce disposable income to below the level required to meet basic needs. Debt repayment should never come at the expense of a person's ability to eat.

Affordability, Autonomy and the Limits of Choice

Where financial insecurity across the four pillars gives rise to food insecurity, the issue is not simply hardship, but a lack of choice. As residual income is eroded, people lose the ability to make genuine decisions on food.

Residual income is in effect, a choice metric. The money a household has left after meeting essential costs (housing, energy, water, child related costs, transport costs or paying down debt), is the money a person is genuinely free to spend according to their own priorities, including on food that meet their needs and preference, along with other things that will support their families health and well-being.

A person for whom "every purchase is determined by cost," or who must decide between "food and rent," is not exercising preference, they are absorbing a shock that residual income was meant to cushion. Below a certain floor, what looks like a choice is in practice the management of deprivation. On this basis, the four pillars protect the precondition on which personal choice depends.

This is reinforced by examining what each pillar protects individually:

- **Incomes:** Cash-based support, rather than vouchers or in-kind provision, is a pro-choice design principle, not an incidental detail. Cash allows a household to decide what matters most to its own circumstances; a voucher or food parcel decides on the household's behalf.

- **Costs:** Preventing food from becoming the household's only flexible budget line protects the range of choices available to a household, rather than narrowing it. The evidence above shows that, due to costs, some households have already lost the choice between healthy and unhealthy, cultural and generic, fresh and processed food.
- **Supply:** Local access and available variety impact choice. A household within reach of only one high-cost convenience store has no meaningful choice of where to shop; investment in supply expands the choice set rather than replacing it.
- **Debt:** Protection from coercive control and financial exploitation, discussed above in relation to Pillar Four, is explicitly a protection of autonomy. Where another person exercises control over a household's finances, personal choice has already been removed; safeguarding against this is one of the clearest ways in which the four-pillar model defends, rather than displaces, individual agency.

Markets can be an effective mechanism for enabling individual choice, and the four-pillar model is not a proposal to replace them. It is, instead, an argument for identifying and intervening at the specific points at which, due to market power, supply shortage, or income inadequacy, choice has already been removed from households. Restoring the conditions under which markets can function as mechanisms of genuine choice, rather than replacing markets altogether, is the purpose of governing affordability in this way.

Why cost of living affordability governance matters for health and well-being.

Cost of living shocks and policy failures do more than squeeze household budgets. They drive food insecurity, which in turn harms physical and mental health and widens existing health inequalities. The cost of this poor health ultimately falls upon the UK's health and social care services, directly in the form of treatment costs, but also in lost productivity. The logic runs in one direction only: government cannot meaningfully close health inequalities without addressing food insecurity, and it cannot meaningfully address food insecurity without addressing the underlying failure to govern the affordability of the cost of living. Health inequality is not a separate policy problem sitting alongside affordability, it is one of its consequences, and one of the clearest reasons the ultimate cost of inaction is far higher than the cost of acting now.

10.3 Achieving household affordability to progress the Right to Food

The Commission heard evidence that many drivers of food insecurity have arisen not only from economic shocks, but from political choices that allowed affordability to deteriorate over time. Witnesses pointed to examples including freezes in Local Housing Allowance, Benefit Caps, the declining value of social security relative to living costs, rising housing costs and increasing reliance on food aid.

This suggests that governments should be judged not only on how their crisis responses shore up the national economy, but also on whether the cumulative effect of their decisions and interventions across all four pillars improves or worsens people's ability to afford the household essentials of life. The Commission therefore concludes that policy should coordinate timely and effective interventions across all four pillars, rather than focusing on any one pillar in isolation, to protect overall household affordability and prevent food insecurity.

Illustration of instability across pillars— for the right to food



This illustration demonstrates how instability in one pillar can affect household affordability, meaning food insecurity persists. There are examples here of shocks and pressures created by external events or policy decisions which create imbalance in household affordability.

So, a three percent wage uplift can be undermined if the cost of the weekly food shop rises inline or more than the additional income. Cost reductions such as a free school meal, may have little impact on overall household affordability, if the household is in a food desert. Additional supply in a rural area may not improve living standards where prices are inflated due to lack of local competition. Progress across all three examples can be eroded by lack of protection from system-based debt created by the five-week wait for Universal Credit.

Better governance of household affordability would enable government to act swiftly in response to an event, policy or crisis that destabilises affordability across essentials like housing, food, energy, water and transport. The government has many policy levers available, which could be used to stabilise household affordability across these pillars, as illustrated below.

Example Policy Levers for the four pillars of household affordability



1. Adequate Incomes

Objective

Ensure households can meet essential costs and maintain an adequate diet.

Policy levers

Social Protection Floor; Living Wage; benefit uprating linked to living costs; reform of deductions and sanctions; income guarantees; reduce insecure work, ending benefit cap.

Examples

State Pension Triple Lock; National Living Wage; Cost of Living Payments; reversign the two child limit.



2. Affordable Cost of the Essentials

Objective

Keep essential goods and services within reach of household incomes.

Policy levers

Rent regulation and stabilisation; Local Housing Allowance reform; energy social tariffs and price protections; transport subsidies and fare caps; healthy food subsidies; affordability monitoring and market interventions.

Examples

Energy Price Cap; Bus Fare Cap; Scottish rent freeze and rent controls; energy bill support schemes; social tariffs.



3. Sufficient and Accessible Supply

Objective

Ensure people can physically access affordable housing, food, transport, childcare and other essentials.

Policy levers

Social housing development; housing-led homelessness approaches; local food infrastructure; community food hubs; public procurement; food cooperatives; shorter supply chains; improved rural and coastal transport.

Examples

Affordable Homes Programmes; Local Food Partnerships; Community Ownership Fund; public procurement initiatives; Producer Organisation support schemes, supporting cooperatives.



4. Protection from Debt and Financial Exclusion

Objective

Prevent debt, deductions and financial exclusion from undermining access to food and essentials.

Policy levers

Limits on deductions; debt relief; fair public debt recovery; affordable repayment plans; debt advice; high-cost credit regulation; emergency grants.

Examples

Breathing Space Debt Respite Scheme; Benefit Deduction Caps; Council Tax Reduction Schemes; Credit Union support programmes; mortgage forbearance measures.

Whilst an Affordability Governance model should have duties to monitor affordability universally, the lived experience of household costs crises is not experienced in the same way by everyone. Some people will experience the fall of affordability earlier and with greater severity than others, including disabled people, single parents and people in low-income households. Affordability governance means monitoring and targeting policy levers to achieve household affordability, while mitigating to ensure that no group is unfairly disadvantaged.

Our objective cannot simply be to maintain the status quo in living standards or to prevent regression. An approach to Household Affordability Governance must have an overarching goal to improve living standards over time and ensure that everyone is progressively better able to meet their basic needs for food and other household essential needs.

The central question should therefore not simply be, ‘do people have the necessary residual income after other essential costs to secure adequate food and other essentials?’ It should be, ‘is this progressively improving over time?’

Policies such as austerity measures, which reduce people's ability to afford food, housing, energy or other essentials, should not be treated as isolated decisions, but as potential setbacks to people's basic rights. Political choices that destabilise household affordability, whether through reductions in income (e.g. social security cuts), or rising prices (e.g. direct taxation), must consider all alternative policy levers that could minimise the impact on household affordability, such as price regulation or debt relief measures.

From this perspective, food insecurity represents a failure of the State to organise cross-government action on household affordability. Addressing the drivers of food insecurity in a holistic and interconnected way would allow the UK to make sustained progress towards ensuring that everyone can live with dignity.

10.4 Towards a household affordability governance model

An affordability approach to governance places residual income at the centre of policymaking. The key test of policy becomes this: after meeting inflexible essential household costs, do households retain sufficient resources (residual income) to access adequate food and live with dignity and autonomy?

The UK government could draw on relevant learning from other states on the governance of household affordability. Though no single country offers a complete model, there are several with elements that provide precedent and opportunity to understand where similar models could be adopted comprehensively. For example, Australia has an independent Economic Inclusions Advisory Committee, which assesses whether income-support payments are adequate ahead of every Federal Budget, alongside a fair work commission that sets minimum wage. (Department of Social Services, Australia, 2026) Ireland has an Energy Affordability Taskforce to quickly respond to cost shocks. (Government of Ireland, Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment, 2025)) Canada has acknowledged the role of government in addressing household affordability in the Making Life Affordable for Canadians Act in 2026. However, the main measures in the act are tax easements, as opposed to a comprehensive infrastructure to monitor, report and address instability in household affordability. (Canada, Department of Finance, 2026)

However, these examples demonstrate a partial, fragmented or reactive view of a state role in managing stability in household affordability, as opposed to a proactive, coordinated governance infrastructure of the type that the commission believes necessary to address food insecurity in the UK.

Governments already maintain institutions designed to forecast, monitor and respond to inflation, public finances, economic growth and financial stability. The exchequer, HM treasury and the OBR addresses the same four drivers when it makes fiscal policy. They look at the national picture of income (tax receipts), costs (the budget and spending reviews), supply (through trade and industry) and debt (managing government borrowing) to ensure that the country can afford the programme of government and public services.

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The UK has experienced a ‘cost of living crisis’ for more than a decade and this is hardest felt by people with the lowest incomes. This is not just a failure of markets, growth and fiscal rules, it also a failure of proactive governance.

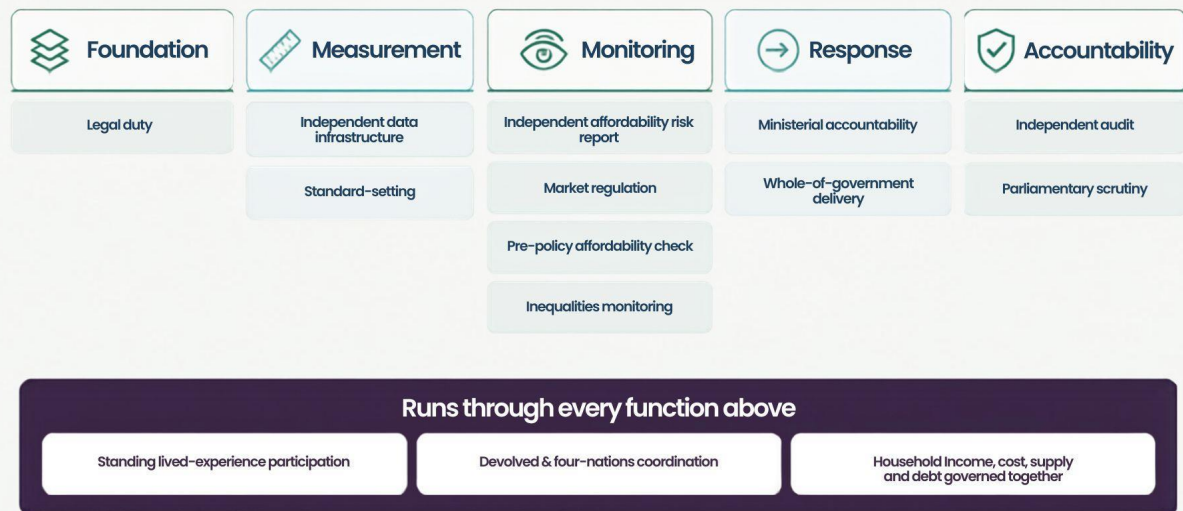
No single department currently has responsibility for understanding how these decisions interact to ensure household affordability. There are no reports back to parliament on the ability of households to make ends meet. There are no forecasts, strategy or 10-year plans for household affordability. Without changing this, no government can hope to sustainably address poverty and the cost of living squeeze felt across the UK.

The Commission therefore proposes a model of household affordability governance be embedded at the heart of government. Below we outline a pathway towards this and it sits within our four foundations of a Right to Food, which should be embedded in the prime minister’s 10-year plan.

Proposed Component/Functions of Affordability Governance

The commissioners have set out a vision of what would be required to rewire government towards household affordability governance as a means of ensuring food security. Moving to implement this idea would require more focused input from internal and external stakeholders, to determine how best to embed these functions into government structures and processes.

Components/ functions of affordability governance



Foundation

Legal duty: a statutory duty for government to monitor, secure and progressively realise household affordability, rather than its remaining a discretionary matter for multiple departments.

Measurement and standards

Independent data infrastructure: systems should be in place to continuously monitor and measure key indicators, including income, prices, poverty, food insecurity and debt, creating an evidence base that can inform household affordability governance.

Standard-setting: an independent body/bodies recommends what an adequate social protection and income floor is, based on real costs, and reviewed on a fixed cycle, which government must publicly accept, adjust or reject.

Monitoring and prevention

Independent risk monitoring: an office which continuously forecasts and reports on affordability risk, across all four pillars, to allow early interventions that prevent crises developing.

Inequalities monitoring: clearly defined government department with responsibility for assessing whether individual affordability shocks or risks could have disproportionate impacts on particular communities. No affordability shock should be assumed to affect all households equally.

Market regulation: oversight of all household related costs and markets for essential goods and services, so pricing power doesn't silently erode affordability.

Pre-policy affordability check: affordability impact assessment applied to individual new policy proposals before they proceed, to forecast how they could impact household affordability and residual income.

Response and delivery

Ministerial accountability: a Cabinet-level minister, backed by a dedicated delivery unit, who is required to respond to each risk statement by giving responsibility to named departments, along with concrete measures and timescales, and who oversees pre-policy affordability checks, and appears before select committees to answer for whether the response was adequate and delivered on time.

Whole-of-government delivery: departments, devolved administrations and local government are structurally required to contribute to governance and implement the response, with no single one able to claim affordability isn't their responsibility. Specific national, local and regional delivery strategies, each with a clear departmental owner, sit under this function as the mechanism through which that obligation is met

Accountability

Independent audit: checks must be made after the fact whether the response was delivered, whether it worked, and whether inequality narrowed.

Parliamentary scrutiny: a mandatory-response mechanism that closes the loop and feeds findings into the next monitoring cycle.

Cross-cutting principles

Standing lived experience participation: people affected by food insecurity have an ongoing role in standard-setting, monitoring and strategy, not a one-off evidence contribution.

Disaggregated, targeted response: monitoring and intervention is broken down by group and place, so disproportionate impact is visible and actionable, not averaged away.

Devolved and four-nations coordination: collaborative relationships developed with representation and compliance across devolved administrations, and strategic mayoral authorities.

All four pillars governed together: the integrating requirement underneath everything above must be that incomes, costs, supply and debt are treated as one system, with a single line of sight, not four separate silos that can quietly undermine each other.

A seat at the table

As the evidence in this report demonstrates, lived experience is a vital tool for governments seeking to understand not only whether households can afford the essentials but also what the drivers are when the answer is no, and how they can be addressed. An affordability governance model needs to establish regular ways for government to listen to people facing food insecurity, so that their experience can help inform decisions on which policy levers to pull and when. This should be embedded in the day-to-day management of household affordability, not treated as a one-off exercise.

10.5 Rewiring the state for affordability governance

National Government

To support the government in their considered deliberation of how to establish cost of living affordability governance and deliver on the right to food, the Commission has provided an illustration of the changes that we believe would make this possible at Westminster level. Further explanation of what we propose follows in the recommendations below.



Conclusion

The evidence received by the Commission suggests that food insecurity is not simply a failure of food policy. It is the outcome of a wider affordability system in which incomes, essential costs, supply and debt interact to determine whether people can secure an adequate diet.

The Commission's evidence indicates that policy responses focused on a single factor are unlikely to be sufficient. What matters is the resources that households retain after meeting the costs of life's essentials. Securing the right to food therefore requires governments to move beyond isolated interventions and towards a model of affordability governance that can monitor and respond to movements across all four pillars of household security.

The ultimate goal is not merely stability. It is the progressive realisation of the right to food and an adequate standard of living for all, while preventing regression that pushes people further into insecurity, poverty and hunger

11. Perspectives on the Content of a Right to Food Law

This chapter brings together the views of those who gave evidence, on what they believed should be included in a Right to Food Act.

While people with lived experience were more likely to describe the outcomes they wanted to see than the legal mechanisms required to achieve them, their evidence informed the values underpinning these recommendations. The diagram below, from Amnesty International UK's community voices submission, illustrates the guiding principles that communities advocated for in the evidence provided to the Commission.

What Communities Say a Right to Food Law Should Guarantee



Source: Amnesty International UK community voices submission to the Commission.

The detailed proposals set out in the sections below, emerging from analysis of the evidence received, draw primarily on input from organisations, practitioners, academics, public authorities and human rights experts. The Commission recognises that framework legislation is a longer-term reform that complements, rather than replaces, the more immediate policy measures recommended elsewhere in this report, including the governance and accountability proposals set out in Chapter 9 and Chapter 10. The sections below draw together the evidence received by the Commission and set out the core elements those who gave evidence felt should be included within a Framework Right to Food Act.

11.1 Recognition of the right to food in Law

The strongest theme emerging from the evidence was that those who gave evidence wanted a Right to Food Act to establish a legally enforceable Right to Food, applicable to everyone in the UK. Participants argued that access to food should be recognised as a matter of rights rather than charity, strengthening accountability and clarifying government responsibilities.

Community participants frequently described food as a fundamental human right. One participant stated: “Right to food is the right to exist.”

Those giving evidence told the Commission that a Right to Food Act should move beyond voluntary commitments and discretionary policy responses and establish legally enforceable obligations on government and public authorities. As Just Fair told the Commission: *“We need a legal right to food incorporated into UK law.”*

The evidence indicated strong support for legal recognition of both freedom from hunger and the right to adequate food, drawing on existing international human rights standards.

Several submissions felt that domestic legislation should give effect to existing international human rights obligations, building on the framework set out in Chapter 2. The Women’s Regional Consortium noted that *“the UK is a signatory to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which sets out the right to food in Article 11 through the right to an adequate standard of living and to freedom from hunger.”*

Those who gave evidence emphasised that the right to food is closely interconnected with other rights and policy areas, including health, housing, social security and education, and is a core component of an adequate standard of living.

While a small number of submissions and witnesses stated that priority should be given to recommending food-sensitive policies such as income adequacy and social security reform, as discussed in Chapter 4, and to improved public services, the Commission does not regard these approaches as competing priorities. The evidence suggests that legal incorporation provides a framework through which governments can be held accountable for ensuring that such measures are sustained, adequate and effective. A Right to Food law would not replace action on poverty and food insecurity; rather, it would help embed, sustain and protect those measures over time.

Those who gave evidence told the Commission that recognising the Right to Food in law was only the first step. Many further stressed the importance of defining the substantive content of the right and the duties necessary to ensure its realisation in practice.

11.2 The substantive content of the Right to Food law

Evidence supported a Right to Food Act that should clearly define what the Right to Food means in practice and establish standards against which government action and public policy can be assessed.

The Act should define the Right to Food, aligned with the principles of the UN definition of food security, availability, accessibility, adequacy and sustainability, and those of dignity, autonomy and choice, in line with the evidence collected and with the approach of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food.

Availability

The UK government has the mandate to ensure sufficient food is available through resilient and sustainable food systems capable of meeting present and future needs: *“To secure a resilient domestic supply of nutritious food produced in ways that support environmental sustainability, so that farmers and growers, businesses, investors and consumers can all cope better with shocks”* (Alexandra Rose Charity representative).

Accessibility

Food must be both physically and economically accessible. People should be able to obtain adequate food without being forced to sacrifice other essentials such as housing, energy, healthcare or education. Key issues highlighted throughout were the barriers arising from disability, geography, transport limitations and digital exclusion.

Meaningful access to food depends on the practical means necessary to obtain, store, prepare and consume food safely and with dignity. There is therefore a need to ensure a minimum income to afford the basic costs of living, such as housing, gas and transport. The Women's Regional Consortium stated: *"The right must not only be for food but to the means to store, prepare and cook food safely."*

Access to safe, sufficient and affordable water should be recognised as an essential component of the Right to Food. Belfast Food Partnership stated: *"The right to drinking water should be considered as part of the right to food."*

Adequacy

A Right to Food Act will define food as more than energy or calories, or basic subsistence, and recognise that food must support health, well-being and dignity. Citizens Advice Newcastle proposed that food should *"have sufficient nutritional value to support a balanced and healthy diet"* while meeting *"the person's religious and cultural requirements"* and *"the person's dietary requirements."*

Clear standards for determining what constitutes an adequate diet need to be redefined and made clear to the entire population. The Food Foundation's proposed Good Food Bill advocated an evidence-based Reference Diet to define what nutritious, affordable and sustainable eating looks like in practice. Others pointed out that this will vary for disabled people and those with health conditions.

Sustainability

Some who gave evidence felt that a Right to Food Act should recognise the needs of future generations and require food systems to operate in a sustainable manner. The UK ESCR Network stated that food must *"be accessible for both present and future generations."* Many linked sustainability to environmental protection, food system resilience and long-term food security.

Dignity, Autonomy and Choice

A theme throughout the evidence was that the Right to Food should be understood as more than protection from hunger. Communities repeatedly centred the need for the Right to Food to centre dignity, autonomy and meaningful choice, arguing that people should be able to access food in a way that respects their preferences, circumstances and independence. Others pointed to the cultural and social importance of food and its role in tackling isolation.

11.3 Duties on public authorities to respect, protect and fulfil the right to food

People told the Commission that the Right to Food Act should establish clear legal duties on governments and public authorities to ensure that the right to food is realised in practice, drawing on the respect, protect and fulfil framework set out in Chapter 5. Many stressed that legal recognition alone would be insufficient and that the Act should clearly identify who is responsible for delivering the right and what obligations those bodies should fulfil.

Evidence drove the message that the Act should make clear that ultimate responsibility for ensuring access to adequate food rests with the state.

Protecting existing access to food

Witnesses such as Just Fair and Nourish Scotland stated that a Right to Food Act must protect people through transparency and accountability measures that shield the right from government decisions that could undermine existing access, availability or quality of food.

Concerns were expressed about policy decisions relating to social security, public services and wider living costs that can weaken people's ability to access food. Just Fair stated: *"Public authorities will be required*

to estimate the impact of all government decisions that unnecessarily reduce existing access or limit access to food.” Just Fair representative.

“The Right to Food Act should prevent unjustified reductions in existing protections and require governments to demonstrate continued progress towards the realisation of the Right to Food over time.” Just Fair representative.

Duties on all levels of government and public authorities

The Commission heard from witnesses who wanted a Right to Food Act to establish responsibilities across all levels of government and public authorities, reflecting the wide range of decisions that affect people’s ability to access adequate food.

They stated that the UK Government should retain primary responsibility for establishing legal standards, providing resources, managing implementation and ensuring accountability, building on the coordination proposals set out in Chapter 9. Witnesses suggested this must be done by working with devolved government, strategic mayoral authorities and local authorities. At the same time, many emphasised that responsibility for implementing the right to food should remain with devolved administrations, in areas including health, education, agriculture and food policy. In Scotland and Wales, some argued that a Right to Food Act should be accompanied by greater devolved control over social security.

The right to food requires policy coherence. This means that combined and mayoral authorities should have a role in shaping it. Their responsibilities on transport, planning, public health, regeneration and economic development need to be clear, accountable and transparent. For instance, local authorities were frequently identified as key delivery partners responsible for identifying need, coordinating local responses and supporting community food infrastructure.

Sufra, a community and food hub based in London, stated: *“A Right to Food Law must legally compel every local authority to co-produce a cross-sector Food Strategy to tackle the structural drivers of food insecurity.”*

Evidence presented also identified that NHS bodies, public health agencies, schools and other public institutions are essential to the realisation of the Right to Food.

11.4 Duties to prevent food insecurity and ensure income adequacy

The Commission considered evidence proposing that a Right to Food Act should place a duty on the government to prevent food insecurity rather than simply respond to hunger once people have reached crisis point. Communities and witnesses were strong in their assertion that food insecurity is driven by poverty, inadequate incomes and wider policy decisions, as set out in Chapter 6, and felt that the legislation should address these underlying causes.

A theme within the evidence was that the majority wanted a Right to Food Act to require government to ensure that people have sufficient income to access adequate food with dignity. Citizens Advice Newcastle proposed that *“the standard allowance of Universal Credit, and the rates of Free School Meals and Healthy Start entitlement, are set at a level sufficient to secure adequate food.”* Similarly, the University of Sheffield proposed *“a duty to ensure adequate income, through social security and wages that meet the cost of living.”* The Women’s Regional Consortium stated that *“the right to food cannot exist without income adequacy.”*

Several submissions also highlighted proposals advanced by the Trussell Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation for an Essentials Guarantee, identifying this as an example of a social protection floor,

designed to ensure that the basic rate of Universal Credit is never set below the level required to afford the essentials of life, including food.

Witnesses further asserted that a Right to Food Act should require government to assess the impact of social security, wages, housing, energy, transport and childcare policies on people's ability to access food. Many emphasised that access to food is shaped by decisions made across government and that food insecurity should not be treated as a standalone policy issue.

They pushed for a Right to Food Act that should require the government to monitor food insecurity and identify circumstances in which inadequate incomes prevent individuals and households from accessing adequate food.

11.5 Duties to secure access to adequate food where individuals are unable to do so themselves

While evidence emphasised the importance of preventing food insecurity, people also told the Commission that a Right to Food Act should establish protections for situations in which people are unable to secure adequate food for themselves, including during crises, emergencies and in institutional settings.

A theme across submissions was that government should acknowledge that responsibility for the Right to Food sits with the Westminster government, and that it must acknowledge ultimate responsibility for ensuring access to food and should not rely on voluntary or charitable organisations to meet essential needs. Those who gave evidence overwhelmingly agreed that food waste distribution, food banks and emergency food aid cannot constitute a permanent solution to food insecurity and should not replace the state's responsibility to ensure access to adequate food. The Women's Regional Consortium stated: *"Emergency food support does not meaningfully fulfil the right to food."*

Many shared the view that a Right to Food Act should establish a minimum guarantee against hunger and severe food insecurity and require public authorities to take immediate action where individuals lack food or the resources required to obtain it. Community respondents participating in Amnesty International's engagement process proposed *"a duty to ensure nobody goes hungry"* and that *"government should be responsible for ensuring everyone can meet their basic food needs."*

Evidence also suggested that a Right to Food Act should establish a statutory duty on public authorities to ensure clear pathways through which individuals can obtain emergency statutory assistance when their access to food is at immediate risk.

Alongside emergency assistance, several witnesses set out the view that a Right to Food Act should require food resilience planning to ensure that food systems, public services and support arrangements can respond to economic shocks, public health emergencies, supply chain disruption and other crises. They stressed that emergency responses should be linked to longer-term measures addressing the underlying causes of food insecurity rather than becoming permanent substitutes for effective public policy.

Food Provision for Children

Children were among the groups most frequently identified as requiring specific protection. Witnesses told the Commission that a Right to Food Act should ensure children have reliable access to nutritious food in educational settings and prevent gaps in access during school holidays and other periods when children are unable to attend school. NASUWT stated that a Right to Food framework should *"extend free school meals to all children in primary schools."*

Food in Institutional Settings

Several community members and witnesses argued that a Right to Food Act should place clear duties on public authorities to provide adequate food where individuals are substantially dependent on state institutions for their food needs. Others emphasised that food provided in schools, hospitals, care homes, prisons, immigration detention facilities, asylum accommodation and other institutions should be nutritious, adequate and appropriate to individual requirements. Community members repeatedly reinforced that the right should be about access to healthy and nutritious food, not simply enough calories to survive.

11.6 Duties to promote equality and non-discrimination

Evidence received by the Commission highlighted the importance of ensuring that the Right to Food can be realised by everyone. Equality means treating everyone the same by giving them identical resources or opportunities, while equity means providing different levels of support based on the barriers they face, aiming to level the playing field.

Regarding equality, evidence suggested that protections under a Right to Food Act should be universal, applying to everyone, while participants recognised that there are equity issues, with some groups facing additional barriers to accessing adequate food and requiring targeted action.

Some also agreed that equal treatment alone would be insufficient to address the unequal ways in which food insecurity is experienced. They therefore told the Commission that a Right to Food Act should require public authorities to identify and act to address barriers experienced by groups facing disproportionate risks of food insecurity and take steps to prevent discriminatory outcomes.

The UK ESCR Network stated that *“a right to food in the UK would apply to all people in the UK, irrespective of any status or characteristic.”*

Witnesses frequently identified children, disabled people, older people, carers, migrants, asylum seekers, racialised communities, people experiencing homelessness, care leavers and survivors of domestic abuse as groups facing heightened risks of food insecurity. Many suggested that a Right to Food Act should require public authorities to assess the impact of decisions on these groups and take reasonable steps to address barriers to accessing adequate food. A participant at the Homeless Link-led evidence session stated: *“Foodbanks are useless if you are homeless, a lot of ambient food so can’t prepare food.”*

The Disability Poverty Campaign Group, run by Disability Rights UK, stated that legislation should *“embed the right to food in UK law, which would provide a clear, enforceable framework to address food poverty, including the disproportionate impact on disabled people.”*

Several organisations also stated that the Right to Food should apply irrespective of immigration status. AFRIL (Action for Refugees in Lewisham) stated: *“The law should also explicitly include support for all food insecure people and families, regardless of immigration status, if it is to make meaningful change.”*

As discussed in relation to adequacy, witnesses agreed that equality requires food provision and food-related services to accommodate cultural, religious, ethical, disability-related and medical dietary requirements.

11.7 Mechanisms for accountability, enforcement and access to justice

Those who gave evidence made the case that a Right to Food Act should contain mechanisms capable of holding governments and public authorities accountable where rights are not realised, complementing the governance architecture discussed in Chapter 9. Many told the Commission that legal recognition alone would be insufficient without routes through which individuals can challenge failures and seek remedies.

The UK ESCR Network stated that “*a legal duty provides clarity to duty-bearers based on established human rights principles and guarantees routes to redress for rights-holders.*” Similarly, those who gave evidence stressed that a Right to Food Act should create enforceable duties rather than simply expressing policy aspirations.

Many proposed the establishment of an independent body to oversee implementation of the Right to Food. Suggested models included a Food Ombudsman, a Right to Food Commissioner, a Right to Food Commission, or another form of independent regulatory authority. One Can Trust advocated: “*Independent enforcement, create a regulatory body to ensure government accountability.*”

Submissions addressing this generally agreed that such a body should be independent of government and capable of investigating failures, receiving complaints, scrutinising compliance with statutory duties and supporting accountability. They stated that individuals should have practical routes through which to challenge failures to realise their rights. Just Fair proposed “*the establishment of a complaints mechanism and supervision of the right in practice.*”

11.8 Measures to protect the right to food from interference by third parties

Witnesses called for a Right to Food Act that addresses not only the actions of public authorities but also the conduct of private actors whose decisions can affect people’s ability to access adequate food. Respondents told the Commission that food insecurity can be shaped by the actions of landlords, supermarkets, food manufacturers, employers, advertisers and other actors operating within the wider food system, the dynamics analysed in Chapter 2. They suggested that government should have a duty to protect people from third-party actions that undermine access to adequate food.

Food prices, food environments and commercial practices

Some who gave evidence stated that a Right to Food Act should require government to monitor food affordability and regulate commercial practices that affect access to healthy food. Concerns were raised about food affordability, housing costs, supermarket profits, unhealthy food promotion, advertising and the wider food environment. Witnesses told the Commission that a Right to Food Act should require government to monitor and address situations in which market conditions and commercial practices undermine people’s ability to access adequate food. The Bow Foodbank stated: “*The right to food law should ensure that supermarkets are not profiteering, seeing record profits while the cost of living crisis sends people deeper into food poverty.*” Manchester Food Board proposed that government should “*regulate the food environment through planning and procurement.*”

Consumer Information

Several community members and witnesses told the Commission that a Right to Food Act should support people’s ability to make informed decisions about food. They emphasised that meaningful choice depends upon access to clear, accessible and understandable information and that consumers should be protected from misleading or inadequate information about food products.

Sustainable Food Systems, Farming, Procurement and Labour Standards

Many, including submissions from the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union, maintained that a Right to Food Act should extend beyond food consumption and address the systems through which food is produced, distributed and supplied, and linked food security to resilient domestic production, support for farmers and growers, sustainable food systems and fair supply chains. Alexandra Rose Charity stated that a Right to Food law should seek “*to secure a resilient domestic supply of nutritious food produced in ways that support environmental sustainability, so that farmers and growers, businesses, investors and consumers can all cope better with shocks.*”

Several submissions also highlighted the role of public procurement in supporting fair and sustainable food systems. Birmingham City Council recommended that government “*strengthen public sector procurement laws, standards and guidance,*” and called for procurement systems that “*promote fair wages across food supply chains, combat modern slavery and reduce exploitation that contributes to food insecurity.*”

11.9 Monitoring, reporting and governance arrangements

The Commission heard strong support for a statutory governance framework capable of driving the progressive realisation of the Right to Food, building on the monitoring and accountability proposals set out in Chapter 9. The most developed proposals were advanced through the Food Foundation and Sustain’s proposed Good Food Bill, which called for statutory targets, action plans, ministerial duties and monitoring arrangements to support long-term action across the food system.

Many agreed that a Right to Food Act should require the development of a National Right to Food Strategy supported by measurable objectives, statutory targets and regular action plans.

The Commission also heard strong support for statutory monitoring and reporting requirements. Professor David Taylor-Robinson reinforced the need for “*clear targets and a monitoring framework.*” Similarly, the University of Southampton proposed “*annual reporting to Parliament.*”

Some who gave evidence suggested that governments should be accountable for measurable improvements in outcomes and should publish regular information on food insecurity and progress towards agreed objectives. Witnesses viewed the Right to Food as a continuing obligation requiring governments to take reasonable steps to improve access to food, reduce food insecurity and strengthen protections over time. Many therefore told the Commission that the Act should require governments and public authorities to demonstrate the progressive realisation of the Right to Food through their policies, decisions and actions, reflected in reviewed targets over time.

Community members also stated that people with lived experience should participate in the development, implementation and monitoring of the Right to Food.

11.10 Adequate funding and resourcing arrangements

Across the evidence base, there was broad agreement that legal duties and policy commitments can only be effective if governments provide sufficient and sustainable funding, staffing and institutional capacity to support their implementation.

One of the strongest themes across submissions was that duties must be accompanied by a requirement to ensure there are adequate resources. Citizens Advice Newcastle proposed support for informal food systems and wraparound services through “*a ring-fenced central grant.*” Volunteers on Wheels stated that there should be “*a statutory obligation upon central and local government authorities to appropriately fund the provision of food.*”

Witnesses, particularly those from local government and the NHS, frequently cautioned that legal duties without sustainable funding risk becoming ineffective. Legal duties should be supported by a duty to put in place adequate and longer-term funding arrangements.

Overall conclusion and recommendations

The evidence received by the Commission strongly supported the introduction of a Framework Right to Food Act. While witnesses differed on aspects of implementation, there was broad agreement that the legislation should establish a legally enforceable right, define its substantive content, impose duties on public authorities, strengthen accountability and address the structural causes of food insecurity.

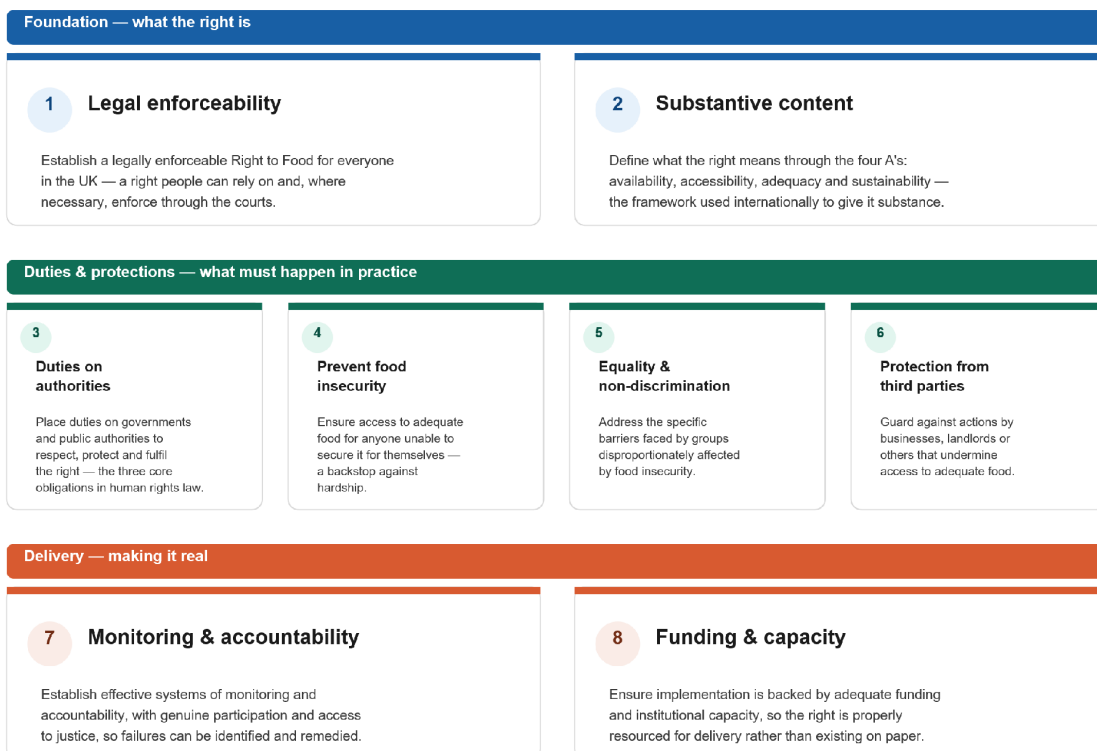
The Commission notes the significant contribution made by the Food Foundation and Sustain through the proposed Good Food Bill. Many of the governance, accountability and food-system measures recommended in this chapter build upon those proposals. However, while the Good Food Bill would strengthen the framework for improving the food system, a Right to Food Act would go further by establishing a legally enforceable human right and placing clear obligations on governments and public authorities to ensure that everyone can access adequate food.

The Commission therefore recommends that the UK Government develop a Framework Right to Food Act alongside the wider policy reforms set out in this report, drawing on the recognition, substantive content, duties, equality, accountability, third-party, governance and funding provisions set out in the sections above, and consistent with the governance architecture proposed in Chapter 9.

Across the evidence base, a consistent message emerged: access to adequate food should not depend on charity, luck or geography, but should be protected as a matter of rights, dignity and public responsibility.

A UK Right to Food Act

Eight core recommendations from the evidence



Based on evidence for a UK Right to Food Act

Illustrative framework for a Right to Food Act, developed by the Commission from the evidence received.

Food security for all by 2035

FOUR FOUNDATIONAL ASKS, SIXTEEN PILLARS FOR ACTION

A FOOD SYSTEM THAT IS HEALTHY FOR ALL	A FOOD SYSTEM THAT IS SUSTAINABLE	A FOOD SYSTEM THAT IS DEVOLVED AND COMMUNITY- CENTRED	A FOOD SYSTEM THAT IS ACCOUNTABLE
 Sufficient wages and social security	 Universal free school and holiday meals	 Adequate local and third-sector funding	 Right to Food legislation with redress
 Affordability governance framework	 Community kitchens and food hubs	 Evidence drives action	 Parliamentary accountability via coordinating minister/department
 Fairer social security system	 Address barriers for vulnerable groups	 Dignity without stigma	 Independent commission with wide representation
 Affordable access to healthy food	 Procurement supporting local food systems	 Responsive cash-first emergency support	 Mandatory evidence-led targets and timelines

To read a full outline of the Commission's foundations please refer to the Executive Summary.

Consolidated conclusions and recommendations from chapters

This section sets out the conclusions and recommendations, organised by chapter, reflecting the order in which the underlying evidence and analysis appear in the body of the report. The recommendations in the executive summary have been synthesised and consolidated from these chapter specific recommendations. These conclusions and recommendations draw together the report's own chapter-level conclusions and recommendations with the evidence gathered directly from communities across the UK, summarised in the Annexes, which independently reached the same core diagnosis and the same core asks. There were no conclusions and recommendations for Chapters 1, 2 or 3, as they set out the drivers, scale and impact of the issues.

Chapter 1: Community Voices:

This chapter sets out the importance placed on the voices of those with lived experience, and outlines the consolidated themes and asks drawn from their evidence, which have fed into this report.

Chapter 2: Food Systems in the Era of Food Poverty and Inequality

The chapter establishes the following facts:

- 14.1 million people are food insecure in the UK; food insecurity rose by 2.5 million people between 2022 and 2024, driven primarily by the cost of living crisis (Trussell and IFAN, 2025).
- 56.6% of adult dietary energy comes from ultra-processed foods; UPF consumption is socially patterned, and inequalities emerge early in life (Rauber et al., 2019; Heuchan et al., 2025).
- Commercial actors have deliberately structured the food environment to promote UPFs, delayed regulatory action and resisted accountability through corporate political activity (Gilmore et al., 2023; FFCC, 2024).
- Food policy is fragmented across at least sixteen government departments; policies designed to reduce food insecurity can perpetuate it through implementation failures and feedback loops (Bijlani et al., 2025; Right to Food UK Commission, 2026a).
- Community evidence is unambiguous: people want dignity, choice and systemic change, not charity, not waste food, and not stigma.

What people eat in the UK is the outcome of a food system shaped by income inequality, corporate market power, fragmented governance, unequal retail geography and a welfare system that has not kept pace with the real cost of eating well. Community evidence is unambiguous: people want dignity, choice and systemic change, not charity, waste food, or stigma.

Recommendations:

- Enshrine a statutory Right to Food: a legal duty on government to progressively realise access to adequate, nutritious, culturally appropriate food.
- Tie benefit levels to the actual cost of a healthy diet, through an Essentials Guarantee-style mechanism with an independent, regularly reviewed minimum.
- Create an independent Food Commission with statutory reporting to Parliament, modelled on the Committee on Climate Change.
- End the fragmentation of food policy across departments, through a dedicated food minister or a joint cross-departmental working group held to shared statutory targets.
- Regulate the commercial determinants of ultra-processed food dominance, including binding reformulation standards and a firewall against commercial capture of policy advice.

- Expand universal free school meals and Healthy Start, paired with mandatory cultural-adequacy standards.
- Fund community food infrastructure as permanent social infrastructure, not stopgap charity, at the true cost of delivery.
- Stop conflating surplus-food redistribution with solving food insecurity; treat it as only a short-term supplement.
- Build in accessibility, disability and cultural-adequacy standards for food aid, alongside uprating disability benefits to reflect real extra living costs.
- Mandate annual, disaggregated food insecurity measurement by income, geography, disability, ethnicity and household type.
- Institutionalise lived experience in policy design, through a standing citizen/lived experience panel with real authority over implementation.

Chapter 3: Scale of the Problem

The evidence submitted to the Commission reframes the scale of the problem in three ways: the true scale of food insecurity is larger and less visible than headline figures suggest, because most severely food-insecure people, and most food-insecure disabled people, never use a food bank; the burden is concentrated on disabled people above all, and on particular ethnic groups, carers, single parents, migrants and communities in the North and devolved nations; and the charitable response that has grown to fill the gap, however heroic, cannot close it and in some respects entrenches it.

- Food insecurity measurements must include more than measuring household food security and aid given, it needs to cover systematic issues that need to be measured at all levels
- Guarantee an income floor that covers the essentials, including food.
- Redesign the impoverishing features of Universal Credit, including the five-week wait, debt deductions and overpayments.
- Provide rights in the UK legal framework over charity as a solution to food

Chapter 4: Inadequate Incomes, Social Security and the Right to Food

Food insecurity is fundamentally an income issue. While food is widely available, many people do not have enough money to afford it consistently and with dignity. Emergency food aid can help prevent immediate harm, but it cannot substitute for adequate incomes.

Recommendations:

- Reform social security and employment policy so that everyone has sufficient income to meet essential needs, access support when needed, and live with dignity, choice and security.

Chapter 5: UK Legal and Policy Commitments to the Right to Food

The UK already possesses legislation and policies relevant to many dimensions of the right to food, but these measures operate as a fragmented collection of policies rather than a coherent framework for realising a legal right, with limited routes to accountability. There is no overarching duty to realise the right to food, no agreed minimum standard, and limited accountability or remedies.

Recommendations:

- Enact a framework law, supported by robust monitoring and implementation mechanisms, to move from discretionary provision towards progressive realisation of the right to food.

Chapter 6: Current UK Policy Approaches in Action

This chapter does not make separate recommendations; rather, it examines how different existing measures, from Universal Credit and disability benefits to local crisis support, Healthy Start and free school meals, map against the pillars of food security, informing the recommendations made elsewhere in this report, particularly in Chapters 3, 4 and 6.

Chapter 7: Effective Interventions to Improve Lifelong Nutrition

No single measure will address these challenges, but the evidence establishes a clear order of priority. The strongest, best-evidenced lever is income: a legal benefits floor that covers essentials, cash-first crisis support delivered with dignity and choice, and secure, fairly paid work. Universal, non-stigmatising food provision is essential across every life stage, but as a complement to income, not a substitute for it. The chapter explores the following existing interventions:

- Income first: cash transfers have the deepest evidence base of any anti-poverty measure; the £20 uplift cut claimant food insecurity 43%→27%; the Essentials Guarantee is the foundational reform (Loopstra et al., 2022; JRF, 2025; IFAN, 2026).
- Free school meals should become a single, universal, rights-based entitlement learnt from experience in Wales and Scotland. Strong evidence and now costed (~£1.4bn primary; ~£4.7bn to age 18; ~£2bn universal HAF), but the 2026 expansion breaks the FSM-funding link (~£310m shortfall) and leaves a postcode lottery and holiday-hunger gap (Commission costings; University of Lincoln, 2025).
- Fair wages (real Living Wage £13.45; £14.80 London) plus real Living Hours, and food-insecurity screening embedded in the NHS as an anchor institution, complete a life-course approach (Living Wage Foundation, 2025; City St George's, 2025; DPCG, 2026).
- Community and surplus-food provision should be funded coherently but designed out, not scaled up uncritically, 91% of food-aid workers discard unusable donations; the aim is dignity and choice (IFAN, 2026; Belfast Food Partnership, 2026).
- Cooking/skills schemes must reach the most vulnerable and address the social determinants of health: only ~30% of participants lack cooking skills, and at-home mentoring left 84% eating better (Bags of Taste, 2026).

Recommendations:

- Consolidate the policy shift already made (the removal of the two-child limit and the cash-first Crisis and Resilience Fund) rather than reopening it.
- Put income first: halt the five-week wait, debt sanctions, the benefit cap and No Recourse to Public Funds restrictions on food-related support.
- Redesign rather than expand charitable provision, funding community food provision while designing out dependence on surplus food and volunteers.
- Simplify free school meals into a single, universal, rights-based entitlement, funded at the true cost of a meal, with holiday support that follows the child.
- Make food a right, not a gift: embed the right to food in law and food-insecurity screening in the NHS, so responsibility rests with government.

Chapter 8: Cost-Benefit Analysis of Evidence-Based Interventions

Britain is already paying for hunger, through poorer health, lost learning, pressure on public services, lost productivity and avoidable human suffering. Food-related ill health already costs the country in the region of £298 billion a year, £92 billion of it landing directly on the public purse. The Commission's recommended programme, alongside a Right to Food Act, devolved delivery and stronger monitoring, is estimated to cost approximately £6 billion a year in addition to existing commitments, while generating around £100 billion in economic and social benefit over twenty years. The choice before Parliament is not whether to spend money on food insecurity, but whether to keep spending it on failure or begin spending it on prevention.

Recommendations:

- Commission a full costing of income-based measures (wages, social security and an Essentials Guarantee), extending the Programme Business Case methodology to the same Green Book format used for school meals and HAF.
- Fund primary data collection to convert the Holiday Activities and Food and community-restaurant cost estimates from order-of-magnitude to Full Business Case standard, through small-scale, time-limited pilots.
- Establish a single official UK food insecurity measure, built on the Food Insecurity Experience Scale, as part of the Framework Act, reported annually and broken down by nation.

Chapter 9: Building Governance for Accountability, Leadership and Delivery

Measurement alone does not realise rights. Indicators are meaningful only when linked to duties, resources and accountability. Progress towards the Right to Food will depend on combining effective governance, meaningful participation, sustainable funding, robust monitoring and a clear implementation strategy within an integrated framework.

Recommendations:

- Establish a clear governance structure for the Right to Food, with ministerial responsibility and oversight provided by an independent Right to Food Commission and a designated ministerial office accountable for implementation and progress.
- Embed a UK-wide Right to Food Monitoring Framework, within the Public Health Outcomes Framework and equivalent devolved frameworks or a new ministry department structure, including improved and new indicators on food insecurity, poverty, nutrition, dignity, participation and accountability.
- Establish an independent Right to Food governance body that embeds meaningful democratic participation, drawing on Brazil's CONSEA model, ensuring people experiencing food insecurity play a formal role in decision-making, monitoring and accountability.
- Match accountability with resources, ensuring that funding, workforce capacity, institutional capability and governance infrastructure are monitored alongside food and nutrition outcomes.
- Strengthen legal accountability for the Right to Food by ensuring new legislation, regulations and major policy decisions are assessed for compatibility with Right to Food obligations.
- Provide accessible mechanisms for redress, advocacy and legal challenge where public bodies fail to meet their obligations.

Chapter 10:

The evidence received by the Commission suggests that food insecurity is not simply a failure of food policy. It is the outcome of a wider affordability system in which incomes, essential costs, supply and debt interact to determine whether people can secure an adequate diet. Policy responses focused on a single

factor are unlikely to be sufficient. What matters is the resources that households retain after meeting the costs of life's essentials.

- The Commission therefore proposes a model of household affordability governance be embedded at the heart of government. Below we outline a pathway towards this and it sits within our four foundations of a Right to Food, which should be embedded in the prime minister's 10-year plan.

Chapter 11: Perspectives on the Content of a Right to Food Law

The evidence received by the Commission strongly supported the introduction of a Framework Right to Food Act. While witnesses differed on aspects of implementation, there was broad agreement that the legislation should establish a legally enforceable right, define its substantive content, impose duties on public authorities, strengthen accountability and address the structural causes of food insecurity. Access to adequate food should not depend on charity, luck or geography, but should be protected as a matter of rights, dignity and public responsibility.

- The UK Government should develop a Framework Right to Food Act, drawing on the recognition, substantive content, duties, equality, accountability, third-party and funding provisions set out in Chapter 8, and consistent with the governance architecture proposed in Chapter 9.

Alignment with Community Evidence (Annex 1 and 2)

The chapter-level conclusions and recommendations above are independently corroborated by direct community engagement across Wales, Belfast, Birmingham, Glasgow, Liverpool, London and North East England, consolidated in a UK-wide cross-regional synthesis and set out in full below, alongside the Commission's own emerging themes as briefed to Parliamentarians in July 2026.

Several consolidated asks recur across these regional processes, which map onto the Commission's recommendations: enshrine the right to food in law; move toward cash-first, adequate income support; make free school meals universal; fund community food infrastructure sustainably; design support around dignity, not conditionality; regulate food, energy and the local food environment; fix welfare bureaucracy; recognise lived experience and shared responsibility; address racism and exclusion in service design; and make food support genuinely healthy and culturally appropriate. The consistency between the report's own analysis and the independent, bottom-up evidence gathered directly from communities across all four nations of the UK, and the Commission's own interim briefing to Parliament, is, in the Commission's view, the strongest evidence that these recommendations are correctly targeted.

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Glossary of terms

Access / Accessibility. One of the pillars of food security: whether individuals and households have the physical, social and economic means to obtain adequate, appropriate food, including through purchasing power, entitlements and physical proximity to food outlets.

Accountability. The obligation of duty-bearers, governments, institutions and, increasingly, commercial actors, to be answerable for decisions and actions affecting food and nutrition outcomes, including through transparent processes, independent scrutiny and accessible routes of redress. In a rights-based approach, accountability is what distinguishes an enforceable entitlement from a policy aspiration.

Agency. The capacity of individuals or groups to make their own choices about what they eat and how food is produced, processed and distributed, and to participate in shaping food systems policy. Added as a dimension of food security by the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE) in 2020; agency requires governance structures that enable people to exercise real power over decisions affecting their food and nutrition, not merely the presence of choice on paper.

Anaemia. A condition in which the number or quality of red blood cells is insufficient to meet the body's physiological needs, most caused by iron deficiency. Anaemia in women of reproductive age (15–49) is one of the six Global Nutrition Targets; globally the indicator has moved in the wrong direction, rising from around 29% in 2012 to 30.7% in 2023.

Availability. One of the pillars of food security: whether a sufficient quantity and quality of food is physically present, through domestic production, stocks, imports or food aid, regardless of whether people can obtain it.

Benefit-cost ratio (BCR). A standard Green Book value-for-money measure comparing the monetised benefits of a policy option to its costs. A core BCR counts only measurable resource benefits (such as earnings, health and productivity); a weighted BCR additionally applies HM Treasury's distributional weighting to reflect the greater value of £1 of benefit reaching a low-income household. Cost-benefit estimates for the Commission's recommended interventions are set out in Chapter 4B.

Cash transfers. Direct payments of money to individuals or households, either unconditional or tied to specific conditions, intended to enable them to meet essential needs including food. Cash transfers have the deepest evidence base of any anti-poverty intervention and are consistently associated with greater dignity and choice than voucher or in-kind alternatives.

Civil society organisation (CSO). A non-governmental, not-for-profit organisation through which people organise to pursue shared interests in the public sphere, encompassing charities, campaign groups, faith organisations, trade unions and community groups.

Commercial determinants of health. The private-sector activities, strategies and practices, including marketing, lobbying, pricing, product formulation and supply-chain control, that affect health and nutrition outcomes, for good or ill. The World Health Organization identifies the commercial determinants of health as a growing driver of noncommunicable disease and diet-related inequity, alongside the more familiar social determinants.

Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR). The United Nations treaty body responsible for monitoring states' compliance with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, including through General Comments, periodic reporting and Concluding Observations.

Community conversations. Structured, facilitated discussions with people directly affected by food insecurity and malnutrition, used as a method of gathering evidence and centring lived experience in policy development, consistent with a rights-based approach's emphasis on participation and voice.

CONSEA. Brazil's National Council for Food and Nutrition Security (Conselho Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional), a governance body in which around two-thirds of members are drawn from civil society and one-third from government. CONSEA works alongside CAISAN (the Interministerial Chamber

for Food and Nutritional Security) within Brazil's National Food and Nutrition Security System (SISAN), and is discussed as an international governance comparator in Chapter 9.

Crisis and Resilience Fund (CRF). A fund, worth around £1 billion from April 2026, requiring local authorities in England to default to 'cash-first' crisis payments for households in financial hardship, replacing earlier guidance that had favoured vouchers.

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The UK government department responsible for welfare, pensions and child maintenance policy, including the administration of Universal Credit and other social security benefits central to household food security.

Disability. A physical, sensory, cognitive, developmental or mental health impairment that, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder a person's full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. Disabled people experience disproportionately high rates of food insecurity in the evidence reviewed for this report.

Distributional weighting. An HM Treasury Green Book technique that adjusts the value of a benefit according to the income of the household receiving it, so that benefits reaching low-income households are counted as worth more than the same monetary benefit reaching higher-income households. Applying distributional weighting substantially improves the value-for-money case for several of the interventions costed in Chapter 8, including universal free school meals and holiday food provision.

Eatwell Guide. The UK Government's official visual guide to a healthy, balanced diet, developed by Public Health England (now the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities) and used in this report as the benchmark against which the adequacy and affordability of diets are assessed. Evidence to the Commission found that fewer than 1% of the UK population currently eats in line with the Eatwell Guide, and that the poorest fifth of households would need to spend 45% of their disposable income to do so.

EBIA. The Escala Brasileira de Insegurança Alimentar (Brazilian Household Food Insecurity Measurement Scale), an experience-based measure of household food insecurity used in Brazil, broadly comparable to the UK's Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) but embedded within Brazil's wider food security governance institutions, as discussed in Chapter 9.

Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). A UK social security benefit providing income replacement and support for people whose ability to work is limited by illness or disability. It is referenced in this report among the social security measures, alongside Universal Credit, Pension Credit and PIP, intended to protect households from hardship and support food security.

Equality. Ensuring that everyone has the same access to opportunities and resources, treating people the same regardless of differing circumstances or need.

Equity. Ensuring fairness of outcome by recognising that people start from different positions of advantage or disadvantage, and allocating resources, support or opportunity accordingly. Distinguished from equality: identical treatment of people in unequal circumstances tends to reproduce, not resolve, inequity.

Essentials Guarantee. A proposed reform, developed by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, establishing a legal floor ensuring that the standard allowance of Universal Credit never falls below the cost of household essentials, set through an independent process and reviewed regularly. Cited in this report as a model for tying benefit levels to the actual cost of a healthy diet.

Exclusive breastfeeding. Feeding an infant only breast milk, with no other liquids or solids other than oral rehydration solution or medicines, for the first six months of life. One of the six Global Nutrition Targets; the global target rose from 50% to 60% of infants by 2030 in 2025, though only around 1% of UK infants are exclusively breastfed to six months.

FAO pillars of the right to food. The Food and Agriculture Organization's four-part framework, availability, accessibility, adequacy and stability, used in this report to assess the extent of systemic failure in the UK

food system. Related to, but distinct in emphasis from, the six-dimension Pillars of food security framework used elsewhere in this report. See also Pillars of food security.

Five-week wait. The period between a claimant's Universal Credit application and their first payment, arising because the benefit is assessed over a monthly period and paid in arrears. Repeatedly identified in evidence to the Commission as a key driver of debt, rent arrears and food insecurity, since new claim advance payments must be repaid through future deductions.

Food bank. An emergency, charitable provider of food parcels, typically requiring referral, to people facing a food crisis. Distinguished from social supermarkets and food pantries, which offer affordable rather than free food, more choice, and are intended for more regular use.

Food desert. An area where access to affordable, healthy food is severely restricted by a combination of low income, limited transport, time poverty and the absence of nearby retail options, rather than by the absence of food outlets alone. Evidence to the Commission emphasised that food deserts reflect structural barriers rather than personal choice.

Food insecurity. A situation in which people lack reliable access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs for an active, healthy life, for economic, social or other reasons. Distinguished from hunger, the physical sensation of food deprivation, and from malnutrition, its physiological consequence.

Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES). An experience-based survey measure of food insecurity, used alongside the UK Food Security Report to monitor levels of food insecurity. The Commission heard that improved measurement of this kind has not been matched by equivalent duties on government to respond when need is identified.

Food pantry. A membership-based community food provision model, typically charging a small fee for a larger basket of food than a food bank would provide, intended to offer more dignity, choice and regularity than emergency food aid.

Food sovereignty. The principle that people and communities have the right to shape their own food and agriculture systems, and to participate as rights-holders, rather than only as beneficiaries, in the governance of food and nutrition policy. Discussed in this report, alongside the Right to Food, as an alternative to primarily charitable or market-based responses to food insecurity.

General Comment No. 12 (GC12). The 1999 authoritative interpretation, issued by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, of the right to adequate food under Article 11 of the ICESCR, setting out the meaning of availability, accessibility, adequacy and sustainability and the obligations to respect, protect and fulfil the right.

Global Nutrition Targets (GNTs). Six targets adopted by the World Health Assembly in 2012 (Resolution 65.6) for achievement by 2025, covering stunting, wasting, low birthweight, anaemia in women of reproductive age, exclusive breastfeeding and childhood overweight, extended to 2030 with two more ambitious targets by WHA78 in 2025.

Good Food Bill. Proposed legislation for England incorporating many principles associated with the Right to Food, including accountability, affordability, ministerial duties, local food plans, monitoring and independent oversight. It is framed primarily around food and nutrition security, sustainability and government accountability, making it an important step towards, but not a substitute for, legal recognition of the Right to Food itself.

Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022. Scottish legislation requiring Scottish Ministers and specified public bodies to prepare and report on Good Food Nation Plans, setting out how food-related policy contributes to social, health, economic and environmental objectives. It is distinct from the food, farming and civil society sector's proposed UK-wide Good Food Bill and is discussed in Chapter 9 as an example of statutory food governance short of a full Right to Food framework.

Good governance. The exercise of authority in ways that are participatory, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective, efficient, equitable and inclusive, and that follow the rule of law. See also Governance.

Governance. The structures, processes, rules and institutions through which decisions are made and power is exercised, including who is included in decision-making and who is held accountable for its outcomes. See also Good governance.

Green Book. HM Treasury's guidance on how government should appraise and evaluate policies, programmes and projects, including the Five Case Model and the use of distributional weighting. The cost-benefit analysis in Chapter 8 is conducted in Green Book terms.

Health-in-all-policies. An approach to policymaking that considers the health and nutrition consequences of decisions across all government departments and sectors, not solely those with an explicit health remit, and that seeks to embed livelihoods and food security considerations across policy areas.

Health inequality. A measurable difference in health outcomes or access to healthcare between different population groups, which becomes a health inequity when the difference is avoidable, unfair and systematically related to social disadvantage.

Healthy Start. A UK scheme providing a pre-paid card to eligible low-income pregnant women and families with young children, to buy fruit, vegetables, milk and vitamins. Despite operating since 2006, uptake has been limited by low awareness, administrative barriers, stigma and restrictive eligibility criteria.

Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme. A government-funded programme providing food and enriching activities to children in England during school holidays, currently targeted mainly at children eligible for free school meals. Its costs and coverage, and the case for UK-wide universal extension, are examined in Chapter 8.

Human Rights Act 1998. UK legislation giving further effect to rights under the European Convention on Human Rights in domestic law, through duties on public authorities, ministerial statements of compatibility and parliamentary scrutiny. No equivalent framework currently exists for economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to food.

Hunger. The physical sensation and physiological experience of food deprivation. Distinguished from food insecurity, the underlying lack of reliable access to food, and from malnutrition, its physiological consequence.

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The 1966 UN treaty, ratified by the UK, that codifies the right to adequate food and the right to be free from hunger, alongside other economic, social and cultural rights.

Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA). A statutory process through which local authorities and NHS bodies in England assess the current and future health and care needs of their local population, informing local Health and Well-being Strategies, commissioning decisions and resource allocation. Chapter 9 discusses JSNAs as a practical mechanism for making food insecurity and malnutrition visible in local planning.

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Judicial review. A legal process by which UK courts assess whether a public authority's decision was made lawfully. It can address procedural failings but generally cannot determine whether social security levels, food access or living standards are substantively adequate.

Life expectancy. The average number of years a person is expected to live, based on current mortality rates. Distinguished from healthy life expectancy, which measures years lived in good health.

Low birthweight. A birthweight of under 2,500 grams, which both signals maternal nutritional status during pregnancy and predicts a child's future health and development. One of the six Global Nutrition Targets.

Malnutrition. A person's cellular imbalance between the supply of nutrients and energy and the body's demand for them, encompassing both undernutrition (stunting, wasting, underweight and micronutrient deficiencies) and overweight/obesity, which can and increasingly do coexist within the same population, community or household (the 'double burden of malnutrition').

Marmot Places. Local areas, more than 50 across England, Wales and Scotland at the time of this report, that have adopted the Marmot framework for reducing health inequalities by addressing the social determinants of health, applying the principle of proportionate universalism. See also Proportionate universalism.

Minimum core obligations. The essential level of protection of a right that a state must guarantee to everyone as an immediate obligation, providing a floor rather than a ceiling on the wider duty of progressive realisation.

Minimum Income Standard. A publicly developed benchmark of the income households need for an acceptable minimum standard of living, based on what members of the public think people need to be able to buy, updated regularly. Cited in this report, alongside the Essentials Guarantee, as a possible objective basis for determining and uprating benefit adequacy.

No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). An immigration status condition that prevents a person from accessing most mainstream welfare benefits and services, including Universal Credit and standard free school meals, leaving them reliant on separate, narrower routes of support.

Non-retrogression. The principle that states should not take backward steps that reduce enjoyment of a right, such as the right to food, unless they can demonstrate strong justification and that any such measure is temporary, necessary, proportionate and non-discriminatory.

Nothing About Us Without Us. A principle, drawn from disability rights movements, holding that people with lived experience of a problem should have a meaningful role in shaping, delivering and evaluating the policies intended to address it. Invoked in this report in relation to the design of food insecurity policy.

Obesity. A condition of excessive body fat accumulation that presents a risk to health, typically defined using body mass index (BMI) thresholds adjusted for age in children. See also Overweight.

OPERA framework. A monitoring and accountability tool assessing government performance on economic, social and cultural rights across Outcomes, Policy Efforts, Resources and Assessment, used in Chapter 9 alongside the FAO's PANTHER framework to assess Right to Food governance.

Overweight. A condition of body fat accumulation above what is considered healthy, but below the threshold for obesity. Childhood overweight is one of the six Global Nutrition Targets.

PANTHER framework. The FAO's framework of Participation, Accountability, Non-discrimination, Transparency, Human Dignity, Empowerment and the Rule of Law, setting out the governance principles that support the realisation of the Right to Food. It underpins the governance analysis in Chapter 9.

Personal Independence Payment (PIP). A UK social security benefit providing support with the extra costs of long-term ill health or disability. In evidence to the Commission, participants in an East London community discussion referred to PIP as 'Politically Imposed Poverty', reflecting concerns that its administration can itself contribute to hardship.

Pillars of food security. The dimensions against which food security is assessed: availability, access, utilisation and stability, the four dimensions established in the 1996 World Food Summit definition, to which the HLPE added agency and sustainability in 2020, producing the six-dimension framework used in this report. See also the individual entries for each dimension.

Political ethic of care. An approach to policy that treats well-being, dignity and human flourishing as collective responsibilities of the state, emphasising interdependence, participation, solidarity and the prevention of social harm, in contrast to explanations of food insecurity based on individual failure.

Power. The capacity to act, decide or influence outcomes. This report draws on Gaventa's (2006) framework of four expressions of power: power over (the capacity of dominant actors to control others' choices), power to

(the capacity created when those who hold power share resources, platforms and voice), power with (the collective agency that emerges when people organise together) and power within (the confidence and self-belief that allows people to recognise change is possible).

Progressive realisation. The principle that states are expected to achieve full realisation of economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to food, over time and using the maximum of their available resources, through deliberate, concrete and targeted steps rather than inaction.

Proportionate universalism. The principle, central to the Marmot approach to reducing health inequalities, that services should be available to everyone but delivered at a scale and intensity proportionate to need, so that those with greater need receive greater support. See also Marmot Places.

Public diners. A community food model, distinct from charitable food aid, offering an affordable, dignified sit-down meal open to all, without means-testing or referral.

Public health. The science and practice of protecting and improving the health of populations, as opposed to treating individual patients, through prevention, health promotion, surveillance and action on the wider determinants of health.

Reference Diet. An evidence-based definition of what a nutritious, affordable and sustainable diet looks like in practice, proposed by the Food Foundation as part of its Good Food Bill and discussed in Chapter 8 as a means of giving practical content to the adequacy element of a Right to Food Act.

Sanction (benefit sanction). A financial penalty reducing or removing a claimant's Universal Credit standard allowance, typically for a period of 7 to 182 days, imposed where a claimant is judged not to have met work-related requirements such as attending a mandatory work coach interview. Evidence to the Commission linked sanctions to increased hardship, debt and food insecurity, with limited evidence of improved employment outcomes.

SEN / SEND (special educational needs / and disabilities). A legal categorisation of children and young people who require additional or different educational provision because of a learning difficulty or disability, under the Children and Families Act 2014. Children with SEND face particular barriers to accessing free school meals and other nutrition support.

SISAN. Brazil's National Food and Nutrition Security System (Sistema Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional), which coordinates food and nutrition policy across national, state and municipal government and civil society, supported by CAISAN and CONSEA. SISAN is discussed as an international governance comparator in Chapter 9.

Social determinants of health. The non-medical conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age, including income, education, employment, housing and food environments, which shape health and nutrition outcomes and drive health inequalities.

Social minimum. A practical, transparently developed benchmark for the conditions below which no one should fall in order to access adequate food with dignity, distinct from a fixed calorie requirement, income threshold or basket of goods.

Social protection. Policies and programmes, including social security benefits, cash transfers and social insurance, designed to reduce poverty and vulnerability by helping people manage economic and social risks such as unemployment, disability, old age and loss of income.

Social supermarket. A membership-based retail model selling surplus or discounted food at a significantly reduced price to people on low incomes, offering more choice and dignity than a food parcel, though, where dependent on surplus and charitable funding, social supermarkets can still function as a form of charitable food aid rather than a substitute for adequate income.

Stability. One of the pillars of food security: whether a population, household or individual has access to adequate food at all times, without risk of losing access as a consequence of sudden shocks or cyclical events.

State obligations (respect, protect and fulfil). The three-part framework, set out in GC12, through which states must refrain from undermining access to food (respect), prevent third parties from interfering with it (protect), and take positive steps to secure it, including direct provision as a last resort (fulfil).

Structural racism. Patterns of disadvantage embedded within the policies, institutions and practices of society that produce and reproduce unequal outcomes along racial and ethnic lines, including in relation to food insecurity, independently of the intentions of individuals within those institutions.

Sure Start. A UK government programme launched in 1998–99 to provide integrated early years health, childcare, family support and education services in disadvantaged areas, later absorbed into the wider Children’s Centre network; funding and coverage were significantly reduced after 2010.

Sustainability. Added as a pillar of food security by the HLPE in 2020: the long-term capacity of food systems to provide food security and nutrition without compromising the economic, social and environmental bases that will generate food security and nutrition for future generations.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 17 global goals adopted by all UN member states in 2015, to be achieved by 2030; SDG 2 ('Zero Hunger') commits states to ending hunger, achieving food security and improved nutrition, and promoting sustainable agriculture.

Third Sector. Non-governmental, not-for-profit organisations, including food banks, community pantries and social supermarkets, that provide food and nutrition support outside statutory government provision. See also Civil society organisation (CSO).

Ultra-processed foods (UPF). Industrial formulations of food substances (oils, fats, sugars, starches, protein isolates) combined with additives, containing little or no intact whole food, as defined by the NOVA food classification system. UPF consumption has been linked to a range of chronic conditions and is disproportionately marketed to, and consumed by, low-income households.

Universal Credit. A UK means-tested working-age social security benefit, administered by the Department for Work and Pensions, that replaced six earlier benefits and tax credits. Delays and administrative complexity within Universal Credit have been associated with increased food bank use.

Utilisation. One of the pillars of food security: whether the body is able to make effective biological use of food consumed, which depends on adequate diet diversity, clean water, sanitation, healthcare and caring practices, not on food intake alone.

Published written evidence

1. Abri (RTF0001)
2. Act4Food (RTF0002)
3. Action for Refugees in Lewisham (RTF0003)
4. Alexandra Rose Charity (RTF0004)
5. Amnesty International UK: Community Insights Report (RTF0005)
6. Amnesty International UK with Just Fair and Dr Clare James (RTF0006)
7. Asylum Matters (RTF0007)
8. ATD 4th World (RTF0008)
9. Autonomy (RTF0009)
10. Back to 60 (RTF0010)
11. Bags of Taste (RTF0011)
12. Bakers Food and Allied Workers Union (RTF0012)
13. Belfast Food Partnership's Food Access Working Group (RTF0013)

14. Birmingham City Council (RTF0014)
15. Bow Foodbank (RTF0015)
16. Bristol Women's Voice (RTF0016)
17. British Dietetic Association (BDA) London Branch (RTF0017)
18. Cardiff Foodbank (RTF0018)
19. Carole Ewart (RTF0019)
20. Castlemilk Housing and Human Rights Lived Experience Board (RTF0020)
21. CEDAWinLAW (RTF0021)
22. Central England Law Centre (RTF0022)
23. Central England Law Centre and Public Law Project (RTF0023)
24. Church Action on Poverty (Pinch Points Collaboration) (RTF0024)
25. Church Action on Poverty (Your Local Pantry) (RTF0025)
26. Citizens Advice Gateshead (RTF0026)
27. Citizens Advice Newcastle (RTF0027)
28. City St George's, Uni of London (RTF0028)
29. Coalville Foodbank (RTF0029)
30. Comic Relief (RTF0030)
31. Community Centre Pueblito Paisa (RTF0031)
32. Community Garden Support (RTF0032)
33. Consumer Council for Northern Ireland (RTF0033)
34. CVS Cheshire East / Cheshire East Food Alliance (RTF0034)
35. Disability Poverty Campaign Group (RTF0035)
36. Early Years Food Coalition (RTF0036)
37. Equality Network (RTF0037)
38. ESCR Network (RTF0038)
39. Essex Community Food Network (RTF0039)
40. Esther Community Enterprise (RTF0040)
41. FareShare Cymru (RTF0041)
42. FEAST With Us (RTF0042)
43. Feeding Britain (RTF0043)
44. Food Ethics Council (RTF0044)
45. Food Foundation (RTF0045)
46. Gatehead Citizens Advice (RTF0046)
47. Give. Help. Share. (RTF0047)
48. Glasgow Centre for Population Health (RTF0048)
49. Greater Manchester Combined Authority (RTF0049)
50. Grow Lewisham (RTF0050)
51. Homerton Healthcare Trust (RTF0051)

52. Independent Food Aid Network (RTF0052)
53. Joseph Rowntree Foundation (RTF0053)
54. Just Fair (RTF0054)
55. Katie Boyle and Aidan Flegg (RTF0055)
56. King's College London (RTF0056)
57. Knowsley Council (RTF0057)
58. Lancaster District Food Justice Partnership (RTF0058)
59. Legendary Community Club (RTF0059)
60. Lewisham Food Justice Alliance (RTF0060)
61. Liverpool John Moores University (RTF0061)
62. London Borough of Camden (2025) (RTF0062)
63. London Borough of Camden (2026) (RTF0063)
64. Manchester Food Board (RTF0064)
65. NASUWT, The Teachers' Union (RTF0065)
66. National Education Union (NEU) (RTF0066)
67. New Laigh Kirk Kilmarnock Eco Congregation Committee (RTF0067)
68. NHS Dietitian (independent submission) (RTF0068)
69. Northern Ireland Community Groups (RTF0069)
70. Nourish Scotland (RTF0070)
71. Nourishing Northern Ireland (part of the Feeding Britain network) (RTF0071)
72. Obesity Action Scotland (RTF0072)
73. Obesity Health Alliance (RTF0073)
74. One Can Trust (RTF0074)
75. One Parent Families Scotland (RTF0075)
76. Quaker Social Action (RTF0076)
77. René Cassin (RTF0077)
78. Resolve Poverty (RTF0078)
79. Right To Food Lewisham (RTF0079)
80. Right to Grow Tower Hamlets (RTF0080)
81. School Food Matters (RTF0081)
82. Scottish Food Coalition (RTF0082)
83. SOAS Food Studies Centre (Digitalising Food Assistance) (RTF0083)
84. Sufra NW London (RTF0084)
85. Sustain (RTF0085)
86. Teesside University (RTF0086)
87. The Bread and Butter Thing (RTF0087)
88. The Felix Project (RTF0088)
89. The Food Foundation (RTF0089)

90. The Poverty Alliance (RTF0090)
91. The Scottish Pantry Network (RTF0091)
92. The Welcome Centre (RTF0092)
93. Torbay Council (RTF0093)
94. Trades Union Congress (TUC) (RTF0094)
95. Trussell (RTF0095)
96. Trussell (statement with other food organisations) (RTF0096)
97. UKHarvest (RTF0097)
98. University College London (RTF0098)
99. University of Aberdeen (RTF0099)
100. University of Birmingham (RTF0100)
101. University of Bristol Business School (RTF0101)
102. University of Chester (RTF0102)
103. University of Hertfordshire (RTF0103)
104. University of Nottingham (RTF0104)
105. University of Plymouth (RTF0105)
106. University of Sheffield (independent submission) (RTF0106)
107. University of Southampton (RTF0107)
108. University of Westminster (RTF0108)
109. Volunteers On Wheels and the Barnet Food Partnership (RTF0109)
110. Wandsworth Council Cost of Living Commission (RTF0110)
111. We Care Campaign and Women's Budget Group (RTF0111)
112. Welsh Parliament Equality and Social Justice Committee (RTF0112)
113. Women's Regional Consortium (Northern Ireland) (RTF0113)

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Appendices

These examples suggest that recognising the Right to Food in law is only one component of implementation. International experience shows that effective delivery depends on governance arrangements that provide clear leadership, coordination across government, meaningful public participation, monitoring and accountability. Brazil demonstrates the most comprehensive model, while Mexico, Spain and Scotland illustrate different approaches to strengthening participation and coordination within food systems.

Appendix 1: International Governance Case Studies

Case Study 1: Brazil's Right to Food Governance System

Brazil provides one of the most widely cited examples of Right to Food governance. Building on the *Zero Hunger (Fome Zero)* strategy launched in 2003 and the creation of the National Food and Nutrition Security

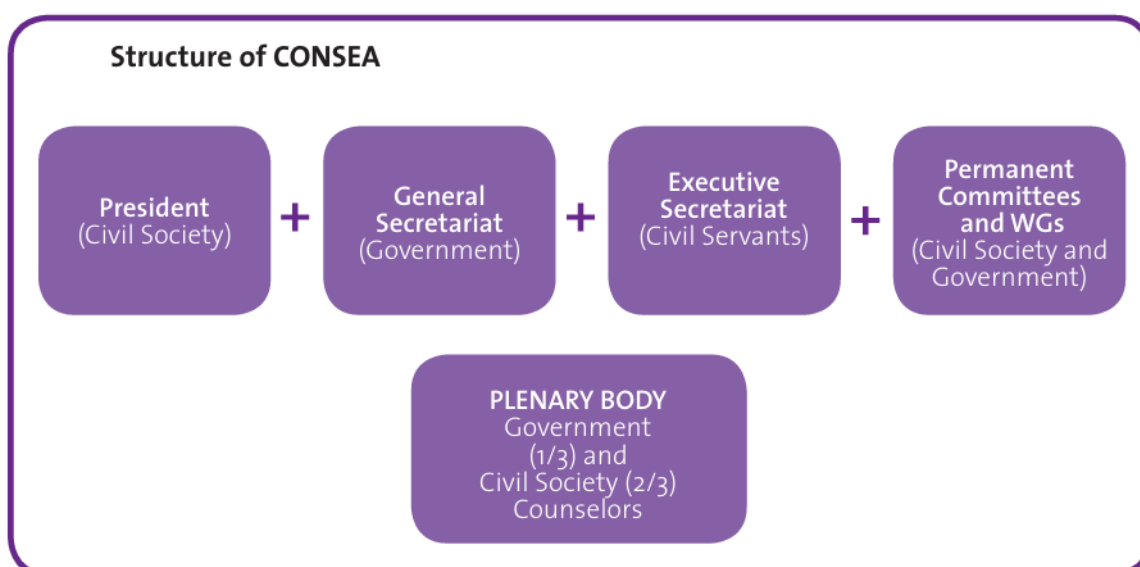
System (SISAN) in 2006, Brazil developed institutions that link monitoring, participation, accountability and implementation across national, state and municipal levels. Rather than treating food insecurity measurement as a stand-alone statistical exercise, the Brazilian model embeds evidence within governance structures responsible for coordinating action, reviewing progress and responding to identified needs.

Governance structure. At the heart of Brazil's system is SISAN (Sistema Nacional de Segurança Alimentare Nutricional), established to coordinate food and nutrition policy across government and civil society. SISAN is supported by two key institutions:

- CAISAN (the Interministerial Chamber for Food and Nutritional Security), which coordinates policy across government ministries.
- CONSEA (the National Council for Food and Nutrition Security), which provides participation, scrutiny and accountability.

CONSEA is distinctive because approximately two-thirds of its members are drawn from civil society and one-third from government. Members include farmers' organisations, indigenous groups, public health bodies, faith organisations, academics, community organisations and trade unions, including Brazil's largest trade union federation, the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT). This structure gives civil society a formal role in shaping, monitoring and scrutinising food and nutrition policy, rather than acting solely as a stakeholder or consultee.

Multi-level coordination. Brazil combines horizontal coordination across government ministries with vertical coordination between national, state and municipal levels. States and municipalities are encouraged to establish their own Food and Nutrition Security Councils, Conferences and Plans. These structures identify local priorities and food security challenges, create opportunities for citizen participation, and feed evidence and recommendations into state and national policymaking. Delegates from municipal and state conferences contribute directly to discussions that inform Brazil's National Food and Nutritional Security Plan (PLANSAN). As a result, participation, monitoring and accountability are embedded throughout the governance system rather than being concentrated at national level.



Source: Oxfam (2012).

Linking monitoring to accountability. Brazil's approach illustrates the importance of connecting measurement to governance. Household food insecurity is measured using the Escala Brasileira de

Insegurança Alimentar (EBIA), an experience-based measure that asks whether households have worried about food, reduced food quality, skipped meals or gone hungry. Unlike the UK, where food insecurity data are largely reported through statistical systems, EBIA is embedded within a wider governance framework. Results feed into SISAN, CONSEA, food security plans and government decision-making processes. Governance institutions are expected to review evidence, coordinate responses and monitor progress.

UK	Brazil
FIES measures food insecurity.	EBIA measures food insecurity.
Results reported through government statistics.	Results feed into SISAN, CONSEA and Food Security Plans.
No single institution is responsible for responding when food insecurity rises.	Governance institutions review evidence, coordinate responses and monitor progress.
Measurement largely separate from accountability.	Measurement linked to accountability and participation.

The key lesson is that monitoring becomes more powerful when linked to institutions capable of acting on the evidence.

Evidence-informed policy. Brazil has also used evidence to shape major food and nutrition programmes. For example, economic modelling and nutrition impact studies were used to justify and expand the National School Feeding Programme (PNAE), demonstrating benefits for both children's nutrition and the incomes of small-scale family farmers. In this way, evidence has informed policy design, resource allocation and implementation.

Lessons for the UK. Brazil demonstrates that implementing the Right to Food requires more than legal recognition or monitoring alone. Effective implementation depends upon:

- Clear institutional responsibility.
- Coordination across government departments and levels of government.
- Formal participation by civil society and people with lived experience.
- Monitoring systems linked to policy review and corrective action.
- National and local implementation plans supported by resources.
- Accountability mechanisms capable of responding when food insecurity rises.

For the UK, the principal lesson is that the challenge is not simply collecting more data. Rather, it is creating the governance infrastructure needed to connect monitoring, participation, implementation and accountability. Brazil's SISAN and CONSEA provide an example of how the Right to Food can be embedded within a broader framework of democratic governance and public accountability.

Case Study 2: Mexico's Right to Food Governance System

Mexico provides an important lesson in the implementation of the Right to Food. Unlike Brazil, which developed a comprehensive governance system linking participation, monitoring and accountability, Mexico first established the Right to Food through constitutional recognition and has subsequently sought to strengthen the institutions needed to deliver it in practice. Most recently, the General Law on Adequate and Sustainable Food was approved to operationalise the constitutional right through improved governance arrangements, coordination mechanisms and accountability structures. Mexico's experience demonstrates both the value of legal recognition and the challenges of translating rights into effective implementation.

From legal recognition to implementation. In 2011, Mexico amended its Constitution to recognise the right to nutritious, sufficient and quality food. This was a major milestone in the development of a rights-

based approach to food and nutrition security. However, experience over the following decade demonstrated that legal recognition alone was insufficient to guarantee implementation. Responsibilities remained dispersed across sectors, coordination was often fragmented, and progress depended heavily on political commitment and administrative capacity.

The recently adopted General Law on Adequate and Sustainable Food was developed in response to these challenges. The legislation seeks to strengthen coordination across government, establish clearer responsibilities and create mechanisms to support implementation, monitoring and accountability. In doing so, Mexico has recognised that the real challenge lies not in recognising the right, but in creating the governance infrastructure necessary to realise it in practice.

Monitoring, evidence and accountability. Mexico has also developed relatively sophisticated approaches to monitoring poverty, social deprivation and food access. Institutions such as the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL) have played an important role in generating evidence on poverty and food insecurity and evaluating the effectiveness of public programmes. However, the Mexican experience demonstrates that data and legal rights do not automatically lead to action. Evidence must be connected to institutions capable of responding to identified needs. Without clear implementation arrangements, monitoring can identify problems but not ensure that corrective action is taken. This contrasts with Brazil's more integrated approach, where monitoring systems are more directly linked to governance and participatory structures.

Governance challenges. Analysis of Mexico's Right to Food implementation highlights several recurring challenges:

- Political and administrative changes between governments.
- Fragmented institutional responsibilities.
- Difficulties coordinating action across sectors and levels of government.
- Limited resources for implementation.
- Uneven mechanisms for participation and accountability.

These challenges have meant that implementation has often depended on political priorities rather than on a stable governance framework. As a result, progress has sometimes been uneven despite constitutional protections.

Lessons for the UK. Mexico's experience provides a different lesson from Brazil. While Brazil demonstrates the value of integrated governance institutions such as SISAN and CONSEA, Mexico illustrates the limitations of legal recognition without equally robust implementation mechanisms. The key lesson is that a Right to Food framework requires clear institutional responsibilities, coordination across government, sustainable funding, effective monitoring systems, mechanisms for participation and accountability, and a long-term implementation strategy that can withstand political change. For the UK, Mexico highlights the importance of ensuring that any future Right to Food legislation is accompanied by a governance and implementation framework that translates legal commitments into practical action. Rights become meaningful not simply when they are recognised in law, but when institutions possess the authority, resources and accountability mechanisms necessary to deliver them.

Case Study 3: Spain's Food Policy Councils and Local Food Governance

Spain provides an important example of how food governance can be strengthened through local and city-level food councils, even in the absence of a single national Right to Food governance system comparable to Brazil's SISAN. Over the past decade, a number of Spanish cities have developed food councils, food strategies and participatory governance mechanisms designed to link food security, public health,

sustainability and democratic participation. These initiatives demonstrate how local government and civil society can work together to shape food systems and strengthen accountability.

Food councils and participatory governance. Many Spanish municipalities have established food policy councils or similar participatory structures bringing together local government, civil society organisations, food producers, academics, consumer groups and community organisations. Cities including Barcelona, Valencia, Zaragoza and Madrid have played important roles in developing local food strategies and governance arrangements. These councils typically act as advisory and coordinating bodies rather than decision-making authorities. Their functions include identifying local food system challenges; advising local government on food policy; supporting participation by citizens and community groups; coordinating activity across sectors; monitoring implementation of local food plans; and promoting more sustainable and equitable food systems. A defining feature of these councils is their emphasis on participatory governance, providing a structured mechanism for community organisations and citizens to contribute to food policymaking.

The Milan Urban Food Policy Pact. Spain has also been influenced by the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, an international agreement signed by many cities worldwide, including several Spanish municipalities. The Pact encourages cities to develop integrated food policies linking food security and nutrition, health, sustainability, social inclusion, local economic development and environmental resilience. Through this process, Spanish cities have increasingly recognised that food policy cannot be separated from housing, transport, climate, public health and social justice.

Local food strategies. Spanish food councils have often supported the development of local food strategies that move beyond emergency food aid towards broader food system transformation. Priorities commonly include improving access to healthy food; supporting local food producers; strengthening public procurement; reducing food poverty; encouraging sustainable diets; promoting food education; and increasing citizen participation. Unlike many traditional anti-poverty programmes, these strategies seek to integrate social, economic and environmental objectives within a single framework.

Strengths and limitations. The Spanish experience demonstrates the value of food councils as mechanisms for coordination, participation and local innovation. They can improve communication between government and civil society, help identify local priorities and create opportunities for democratic engagement in food policy. However, food councils generally operate with advisory rather than statutory powers. Their influence often depends on political support, available resources and the willingness of local government to act on recommendations. As a result, implementation can vary significantly across municipalities, and accountability mechanisms are often weaker than those in Brazil's national governance framework.

Lessons for the UK. Spain's experience highlights the potential value of local and regional Right to Food Councils as part of a wider governance infrastructure. Key lessons include the importance of participatory governance; the value of bringing together government, civil society, businesses and citizens around a shared food agenda; the role of local strategies in linking food policy to health, sustainability and social justice; the need for coordination across sectors and levels of government; and the limitations of advisory structures when they lack statutory powers, stable funding or clear accountability mechanisms. For the UK, Spain demonstrates how food councils can strengthen local participation and policy coordination. However, it also suggests that local partnerships are most effective when supported by a wider governance framework that links local action to national strategy, accountability and implementation. In this respect, Spain's food councils complement rather than replace the stronger national governance lessons provided by Brazil's SISA and CONSEA systems.

Taken together, these cases suggest that the effectiveness of a Right to Food framework depends not only on legal recognition or monitoring, but on the existence of governance institutions that connect evidence, participation, implementation and accountability.

Appendix 2: England's Fragmented Food Governance



Parsons (2020) illustrates how food governance in England is fragmented across multiple departments and levels of government. While food insecurity is shaped by decisions on welfare, health, housing, education and food policy, no single institution is accountable for ensuring access to adequate food, creating risks of weak coordination and diluted responsibility.

Appendix 3: Sources of Data Which Already Inform Right to Food Indicators

Domain	Data collection and source	PHOF domain / indicator
Breastfeeding from birth / first feed breastmilk	Maternity Services Data Set (MSDS), NHS England.	Health improvement C05a
Breastfeeding prevalence at 6 to 8 weeks	Collected by local government via children's public health services, primarily health visitor reviews, when infants are 6–8 weeks old, through OHID's Children's Public Health 0–5 Years National Reporting System.	Health improvement C05b
Diet, general	Health Survey for England (HSE).	—
Reception prevalence of overweight (including obesity)	National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP).	Health improvement C09a
Year 6 prevalence of overweight (including obesity)	National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP).	Health improvement C09b
Overweight (including obesity) prevalence in adults	Health Survey for England (HSE).	Health improvement C16
Adults meeting the '5-a-day' fruit and vegetable recommendation (new method)	Active Lives Survey.	Health improvement C15
Population meeting '5 a day' on a usual day, adults (old method)	Active Lives Survey.	Health improvement C15
Food insecurity	Family Resources Survey (FRS).	—
Poverty and income adequacy	Households Below Average Income (HBAI).	—
Healthy Start uptake	NHS Business Services Authority.	—
Free School Meal uptake	Department for Education.	—
Underweight children	National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP).	—
Underweight adults	BAPEN.	—

Appendix 4a: Poverty Indicators

Figure 7.1. UK's Key Indicators to Measure Poverty

- After Housing Costs (AHC) vs Before Housing Costs (BHC). The 'after housing costs' figure is considered more meaningful because housing costs vary enormously and are not discretionary, a family in London paying high rent has far less to live on than the headline income figure suggests. Child poverty rates are substantially higher on the AHC measure.
- Deep material poverty is a newer metric introduced in the 2025 Child Poverty Strategy. It measures whether households can actually afford a defined basket of essential goods and services, keeping the home warm, fresh fruit and vegetables every day, and age-appropriate toys. This moves beyond income and captures households that are poor in a concrete, lived sense. In 2023–24, two million children (14%) were in deep material poverty by this measure.
- Combined low income and material deprivation (used in the Child Poverty Act 2010, now repealed in England but retained in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017) tracks households that are both income-poor and unable to afford specific items. Scotland's statutory child poverty targets use four measures simultaneously: relative, absolute, combined low income and material deprivation, and persistent poverty.
- Persistent poverty counts those who have been in low income for three or more of the last four years. This captures the difference between a temporary dip in income and entrenched poverty, which has very different effects on life chances and health.

Appendix 4b: Additional Poverty and Food Insecurity Indicators

Figure 7.2. Additional Indicators Used Across the System to Measure Poverty

- Child poverty rate: relative and absolute, before and after housing costs, broken down by family type, ethnicity, disability and region.
- Free school meal (FSM) eligibility: used as a proxy for child poverty in schools; currently 25.7% of state school pupils (January 2025), the highest rate since records began.
- Food bank usage: the Trussell network distributed 2.89 million parcels in 2024/25; the Independent Food Aid Network counts 1,172 or more additional non-Trussell providers.
- Benefit take-up rates: the share of eligible households actually claiming benefits such as Universal Credit, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction; non-take-up is a major hidden driver of poverty.
- The two-child limit gap: the number of children in larger families pushed into or kept in poverty by the Universal Credit two-child cap (around 300,000 children directly attributed to this policy; now being reversed).
- In-work poverty: the share of people in employment but still below the poverty line; currently around 68% of children in poverty live in working families, up from around 40% in the 1990s.
- Destitution: the most severe end, tracked by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, covering people who cannot afford to buy food, keep clean or stay warm. JRF estimated 3.8 million people, including 1 million children, experienced destitution in 2023, a near-doubling since 2017.
- Regional variation: North West England and London had the lowest household food security (87%) in 2023–24; South West England the highest (93%).
- Attainment gap: FSM-eligible pupils achieving standard GCSE passes in English and Maths, 43.6% versus 72.3% for non-eligible pupils (2024), used as a proxy for intergenerational poverty.
- Healthy Start uptake: the government voucher scheme for pregnant women and families with young children on low incomes, used to measure access to nutritious food in the earliest years.



RIGHT TO FOOD UK COMMISSION

A Roadmap to Delivering Food Security for All by 2035

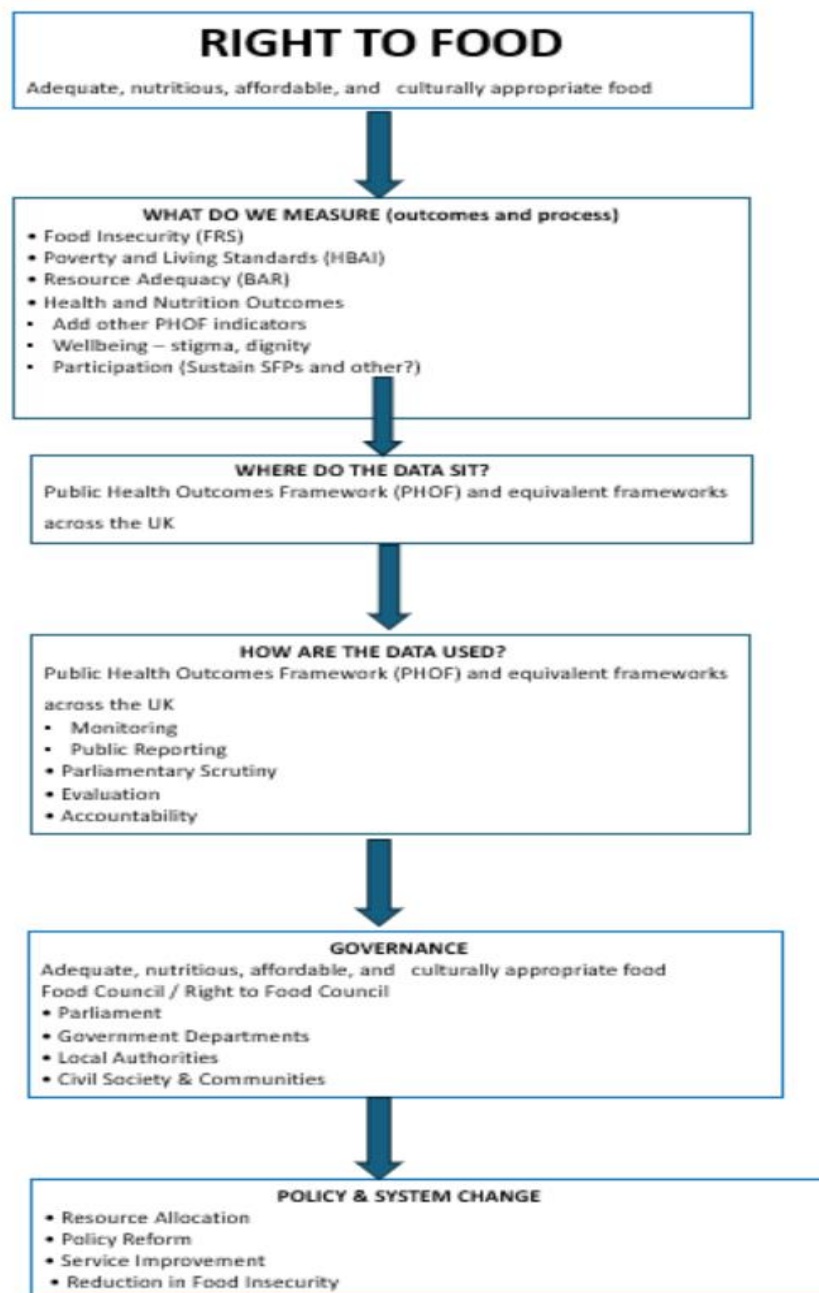
Appendix 5: The Public Health Outcomes Framework

The Public Health Outcomes Framework sets out four domains and associated indicators, available at: fingertips.phe.org.uk/profile/public-health-outcomes-framework.

Appendix 6: From Indicators to Accountability

VISION To improve and protect the nation's health and wellbeing and improve the health of the poorest fastest Outcome measures Outcome 1) Increased healthy life expectancy, i.e. taking account of the health quality as well as the length of life Outcome 2) Reduced differences in life expectancy and healthy life expectancy between communities (through greater improvements in more disadvantaged communities) Alignment across the Health and Care System * Indicator shared with the NHS Outcomes Framework ** Complementary to indicators in the NHS Outcomes Framework † Indicator shared with the Adult Social Care Outcomes Framework †† Complementary to indicators in the Adult Social Care Outcomes Framework		Public Health Outcomes Framework 2016–2019 At a glance	
1 Improving the wider determinants of health Objective Improvements against wider factors which affect health and wellbeing and health inequalities Indicators 1.01 Children in low income families 1.02 School readiness 1.03 Pupil absence 1.04 First time entrants to the youth justice system 1.05 16-18 year olds not in education, employment or training 1.06 Adults with a learning disability / in contact with secondary mental health services who live in stable and appropriate accommodation* (ASCOF 1G and 1H) ** (NHSOF 2.5d) 1.07 Proportion of people in prison aged 18 or over who have a mental illness 1.08 Employment for those with long-term health conditions including adults with a learning disability or who are in contact with secondary mental health services* (NHSOF 2.2) †† (ASCOF 1E) ** (NHSOF 2.5f) †† (ASCOF 1F) 1.09 Sickness absence rate 1.10 Killed and seriously injured casualties on England's roads 1.11 Domestic abuse 1.12 Violent crime (including sexual violence) 1.13 Levels of offending and re-offending 1.14 The percentage of the population affected by noise 1.15 Statutory homelessness 1.16 Utilisation of outdoor space for exercise / health reasons 1.17 Fuel poverty 1.18 Social isolation † (ASCOF 1I)	2 Health improvement Objective People are helped to live healthy lifestyles, make healthy choices and reduce health inequalities Indicators 2.01 Low birth weight of term babies 2.02 Breastfeeding 2.03 Smoking status at time of delivery 2.04 Under 18 conceptions 2.05 Child development at 2 – 2 ½ years 2.06 Child excess weight in 4-5 and 10-11 year olds 2.07 Hospital admissions caused by unintentional and deliberate injuries for children and young people under 25 2.08 Emotional well-being of looked after children 2.09 Smoking prevalence – 15 year olds 2.10 Self-harm 2.11 Diet 2.12 Excess weight in adults 2.13 Proportion of physically active and inactive adults 2.14 Smoking prevalence – adults (over 18s) 2.15 Drug and alcohol treatment completion and drug misuse deaths 2.16 Adults with substance misuse treatment need who successfully engage in community-based structured treatment following release from prison 2.17 Estimated diagnosis rate for people with diabetes mellitus 2.18 Alcohol-related admissions to hospital 2.19 Cancer diagnosed at stage 1 and 2** (NHSOF 1.4v 1.4w) 2.20 National Screening Programmes 2.22 Take up of the NHS Health Check programme – by those eligible 2.23 Self-reported well-being 2.24 Injuries due to falls in people aged 65 and over	3 Health protection Objective The population's health is protected from major incidents and other threats, whilst reducing health inequalities Indicators 3.01 Fraction of mortality attributable to particulate air pollution 3.02 Chlamydia diagnoses (15-24 year olds) 3.03 Population vaccination coverage 3.04 People presenting with HIV at a late stage of infection 3.05 Treatment completion for TB 3.06 Public sector organisations with board approved sustainable development management plan 3.08 Antimicrobial Resistance	4 Healthcare public health and preventing premature mortality Objective Reduced numbers of people living with preventable ill health and people dying prematurely, whilst reducing the gap between communities Indicators 4.01 Infant mortality* (NHSOF 1.6g) 4.02 Proportion of five year old children free from dental decay** (NHSOF 3.7f) 4.03 Mortality rate from causes considered preventable** (NHSOF 1a) 4.04 Under 75 mortality rate from all cardiovascular diseases (including heart disease and stroke)* (NHSOF 1.1) 4.05 Under 75 mortality rate from cancer* (NHSOF 1.4) 4.06 Under 75 mortality rate from liver disease* (NHSOF 1.3) 4.07 Under 75 mortality rate from respiratory diseases* (NHSOF 1.2) 4.08 Mortality rate from a range of specified communicable diseases, including influenza 4.09 Excess under 75 mortality rate in adults with serious mental illness* (NHSOF 1.5g) 4.10 Suicide rate** (NHSOF 1.5a) 4.11 Emergency readmissions within 30 days of discharge from hospital* (NHSOF 3b) 4.12 Preventable sight loss 4.13 Health-related quality of life for older people 4.14 Hip fractures in people aged 65 and over 4.15 Excess winter deaths 4.16 Estimated diagnosis rate for people with dementia* (NHSOF 2.6)

Potential flow from indicators to accountability and governance.



Annex 1: Thematic analysis of regional voices

Regional thematic analyses of community evidence gathered by the Commission, and a UK-wide synthesis, summarising the direct testimony that underpins the findings and recommendations set out in the body of this report.

Annex 1: Emerging Themes from Oral Evidence, Briefing for Parliamentarians (July 2026)

This annex reproduces, in summary, the Commission's briefing to Parliamentarians on the emerging themes from its oral evidence, published in July 2026 as an interim update ahead of this full and final report. It is included here as a record of what the Commission told Parliament while its evidence gathering was still under way, and of how closely those emerging themes anticipated the findings and recommendations set out in the chapters above.

Executive Summary

The Commission heard from people with lived experience, frontline organisations, academics, businesses, local authorities, trade unions and civil society across the United Kingdom. Their message was remarkably consistent: millions of people are going hungry not because Britain lacks food, but because millions lack the income, security and protection needed to afford it. Parents skip meals so their children can eat, working people rely on food banks, older people choose between heating and eating, and disabled people face impossible additional costs such as for transport. Rising prices sharpen that injustice: in too many communities, food, rent, fuel, childcare and transport costs are outstripping incomes, and in rural areas limited competition and poor transport links can leave families paying more for the same basic staples.

The Commission's emerging conclusion: working families are hungry. The Right to Food must now be put into UK law. Universal Free School Meals should be delivered by 2030, alongside stronger, dignifying community food provision, adequate wages and social security for all, and a coordinated national strategy to eliminate food insecurity entirely by 2035. The whole package of policy actions is required to ensure food security for all.

Food, related ill health already costs the UK in the region of £298 billion a year, of which around £92 billion falls directly on public budgets through healthcare, social care and welfare support. The rest is paid through lost productivity, poorer health, reduced educational attainment and avoidable human suffering, while millions cannot afford the Government's own recommended healthy diet. The Commission's proposed programme would cost an additional approximately £6 billion each year on top of existing commitments, less than 0.5% of total public spending, and is estimated to generate around £100 billion in wider economic and social benefit over twenty years. That investment would deliver:

- Universal Free School Meals across the UK.
- Expanded holiday food provision.
- Dignified community food initiatives.
- Better children's health and educational outcomes.
- Reduced pressure on public services.
- Stronger local economies, and support for local food supply chains.
- Hundreds of pounds every year left in the pockets of families who need it most.

What the Commission Heard

In every evidence session, witnesses described food insecurity as far more than hunger: it is about both the quality and quantity of food. Healthy, nutritious food costs twice as much per calorie as unhealthy food, and food insecurity means anxiety, shame, isolation, loss of dignity and impossible choices between food, heating, housing, transport and healthcare. The impact falls hardest on disabled people, children (especially those with special educational needs), lone parents, older people, migrants and refugees, ethnic minority

communities, people experiencing homelessness, and those living in resource-depleted and rural communities. Food insecurity deepens existing inequalities and damages physical and mental health throughout people's lives, and families experiencing the loss of a job, a death in the family or homelessness are particularly vulnerable.

Food Banks Are Not the Answer

Emergency food aid saves lives and alleviates hunger provisionally, but it does not solve the medium and long-term uncertainty around the availability of nutritionally adequate, safe, acceptable and dignifying food in socially acceptable ways. Witnesses were united in the view that food banks cannot become a permanent feature of Britain's welfare system, and redistributed surplus food was raised as a particular challenge, since it is often poor quality and not culturally, nutritionally or age appropriate. Communities use surplus food redistribution and emergency provision as if it is often the only option, but it leaves them with impossible choices, and stigma and dignity were raised throughout the community sessions: people felt shame, guilt and stigma seeking food from food banks. Dignity means choice, and nobody should be expected to simply accept whatever food happens to be available or ready for disposal by major food retailers. A just food system allows people to choose nutritious, affordable and culturally appropriate food with dignity.

Charity should never replace rights.

Prevention Works Better Than Crisis

The Commission consistently heard support for a cash-first approach. Because food insecurity is caused primarily by inadequate incomes, witnesses argued that strengthening incomes is the most effective intervention, alongside a coordinated set of preventive measures that stop hunger before it starts rather than merely responding to it:

- Adequate social security.
- Fair wages and secure employment.
- An Essentials Guarantee.
- Healthy Start.
- Universal Free School Meals.
- Breastfeeding support.
- Community kitchens.
- Public diners.
- Community food hubs.
- Local food partnerships.

We Need to Strengthen Our Communities

The Commission heard that no single national model can meet every community's needs. UK leadership must therefore be matched by devolved powers, flexible local delivery, long-term funding and locally designed solutions. Communities themselves are best placed to understand local food insecurity and to develop responses rooted in dignity.

A Right Without Accountability Is Not a Right

The UK has recognised the right to food through international human rights commitments, yet there is no comprehensive domestic legal framework guaranteeing that right, and responsibility remains fragmented across multiple government departments. Witnesses described inconsistent monitoring, weak accountability,

postcode lotteries, and no clear minimum standard below which nobody should fall. A UK Right to Food Framework Act would:

- Establish legal duties.
- Create minimum national standards.
- Require transparent reporting.
- Strengthen independent scrutiny.
- Embed lived experience in decision-making.
- Ensure governments are accountable for ending food insecurity.

What Parliament Can Do Now

Parliament has an opportunity to deliver lasting change. The Commission's emerging recommendations to Parliament were:

- Introduce a UK Right to Food Framework Act.
- Commit to halving food insecurity by 2030 and eliminating it by 2035.
- Deliver Universal Free School Meals for every school-aged child (4 to 18 years of age) by 2030.
- Strengthen wages, employment security and social security so everyone can afford the essentials.
- Expand Healthy Start, holiday food provision and early years nutrition.
- Invest in dignified community food infrastructure, including kitchens, diners and advice hubs.
- Devolve powers and resources so communities, including young people, can design local solutions.
- Introduce transparent UK monitoring and accountability.
- Place lived experience at the heart of policy design and scrutiny.

Conclusion

The Commission's evidence left little room for doubt. Britain does not have a food shortage: it has a wealth distribution problem, an income shortfall caused by poorly paid jobs and a benefits system that in effect subsidises employers who pay low wages, and an accountability shortage. For too long Britain has accepted food insecurity and hunger as an unavoidable consequence of poverty. It is not. The right to food is not simply about preventing hunger; it is about guaranteeing dignity, protecting health, reducing inequality and ensuring every person can participate fully in society, by giving claim-holders the entitlement to the right to food. As the chapters above set out in full, this early briefing to Parliamentarians anticipated the Commission's final analysis and recommendations in every material respect.

Annex 2: Wales Thematic Analysis of Community Evidence

The Welsh evidence base combines public health research, local government strategy, third-sector reporting, community engagement session mapping and Right to Food Wales practitioner session notes. While the sources approach food insecurity from different perspectives, public health, local government, community organisations and food partnerships, they converge on the need to move beyond emergency responses towards systemic action.

Inadequate Incomes, Not Food Scarcity

Cardiff Foodbank and FareShare Cymru both frame food insecurity as a poverty problem, not a supply problem. FareShare Cymru reports 118 organisations on its waiting list in South Wales alone. Only 68% of Welsh workers are actually paid the real Living Wage despite strong employer engagement, and 76% of one-

income families on benefits still do not have enough money for food and other essentials, compounded by DWP inflexibility such as deductions for missed council tax payments.

"We don't need a right to food campaign, we need a right to cash campaign.", Right to Food Wales practitioner session

The Local Food Environment Shapes Health

Planning decisions and outlet density are directly linked to childhood obesity and health inequality. Public Health Wales found that, even after accounting for deprivation, greater access to green space was associated with lower childhood obesity, while higher fast-food outlet density was associated with higher childhood obesity, and fast-food outlet density increased in every Welsh local authority between 2018 and 2023 despite the Welsh Obesity Strategy. Practitioners also identified significant unused kitchen and land capacity across Wales that could be redirected toward feeding people.

"Major supermarkets 'wise-up' about food waste.", Right to Food Wales practitioner session

Community Partnerships Need Coordinated Support

Welsh strategies strongly recognise that community food initiatives can improve access to healthy food and strengthen communities, provided they are backed by coordinated policy support rather than left to operate alone. The poorest areas of Wales have the lowest uptake of free school meals, and in some areas contracted-out meals arrived cold and poorly prepared, putting families off using the scheme. Bringing people together to eat was repeatedly highlighted as a genuine strength of community food models, valued in itself and not only for the food provided.

"Small restaurants, small village, we take care of people, giving them dignity.", Right to Food Wales practitioner session

What the communities are asking for

- Enshrine the Right to Food in law, giving nutritious food a statutory footing so access does not depend on charitable provision.
- Raise and protect household incomes as the primary lever for reducing reliance on emergency food aid.
- Strengthen local authority planning controls on fast-food outlet density, balanced with protected green space.
- Fund community food partnerships coherently, moving from project-by-project funding to coordinated, cross-sector backing.
- Move toward cash-first support and a genuine real Living Wage, reflecting the recurring practitioner view that cash, not food itself, is what people need most.

Annex 3: Belfast Thematic Analysis of Community Evidence

The Belfast evidence base combines community and youth session notes from the Foodstock Education and Empowerment Centre (30 April 2026) with the Right to Food Conference plenary summary (30 April to 1 May 2026). Across both sources a consistent message emerges: food insecurity in Belfast is a problem of money, dignity and design, not of knowledge, motivation or food availability.

Money Is the Barrier, Not Motivation or Knowledge

Parents in the community sessions knew what their children should be eating; the barrier was affording it, including having to put items back on the shelf at the checkout, described as a source of humiliation rather than a knowledge gap. Once childcare, travel and the impact on benefits are factored in, parents who want to work, for purpose as much as money, find it simply does not make financial sense. Feeding a child with SEND or significant allergies costs more, yet this is rarely reflected in benefit calculations, forcing families to choose between cooking separately or paying more for the whole household. The conference identified rising food prices against stagnant incomes, high heating costs and debt, including illegal and paramilitary lending, as overlapping structural barriers, and stressed that food insecurity and food waste are separate problems that must not be conflated.

"I want to work but can't afford the childcare", community participant, Belfast engagement sessions, 2026

Dignity and Distrust of Institutions

A defining thread across Belfast is pride sitting alongside distrust: strong informal support networks are a source of real strength, but institutions are seen as slow, judgemental and disconnected from lived reality. Young people said hardship is managed through trust built over time within the community, not through institutions that have not earned it, and one participant had not told their own family they were using a food bank, meaning people wait longer before seeking help. The conference stressed that lived experience must drive the direction of solutions, not sit alongside it as anecdote. Social supermarkets were praised for dignity of choice, but conditionality such as mandatory budgeting workshops was seen as undermining that same dignity, with one speaker warning of a risk of becoming leftover food for leftover people.

"We don't need another report. We need people to listen to what we live every day", community participant, Belfast engagement sessions, 2026

School Food as the Case for Universal Provision

School food emerged from both the community sessions and the conference as the clearest, most immediate lever available, provided it is universal, adequately funded and designed without stigma. At £3.60 a meal, school dinners in Belfast are expensive and the quality does not justify the cost; if children are not eating what is on offer, the nutritional case collapses. Universal Free School Meals emerged as one of the most powerful tools to realise the right to food, removing stigma and levelling the playing field, while breakfast clubs were flagged as essential but currently absent in Northern Ireland. The conference argued cooking and growing should be a universal life skill, with food exploration replacing paternalistic food education, and that access to ingredients, including for Home Economics classes, should not depend on family income.

"You can't expect a child to learn when their stomach is empty", community participant, Belfast engagement sessions, 2026

What the communities are asking for

- Make Free School Meals universal in Northern Ireland: remove means-testing and stigma, and fund meals and breakfast clubs at a level that reflects what food actually costs.
- Design support around cash, not conditionality: favour cash and vouchers people can use with dignity over parcels, and remove mandatory workshops attached to support.

- Build solutions with communities, not for them: route funding and design through the informal networks and trusted local leaders communities already rely on.
- Legislate across departments, not in isolation: a UK-wide Right to Food Act with due-regard duties, human rights impact assessments and accountability mechanisms spanning every relevant department.

Annex 4: Birmingham Thematic Analysis of Community Evidence

The Birmingham community engagement workshop identified four themes: structural and economic drivers of food poverty; access, affordability and coping strategies; dignity, stigma and social exclusion; and health, healthy food and cultural appropriateness. Together they show how Birmingham communities understand the causes of food insecurity, how they navigate community food support, and what they feel is missing from current responses.

Structural and Economic Drivers of Food Poverty

Participants described food poverty as a direct consequence of low pay and insecure work: phrases such as low wages, no money and living wage is not a living wage recurred, with one person summing up that it is very expensive to be poor. Access to help also depends heavily on where people live and how well they can navigate the system: notes referred to a broken referral system, bureaucracy, patchy voluntary provision and a postcode lottery, leaving some households without effective support even when services exist nearby.

"It is very expensive to be poor", community participant, Birmingham engagement workshop, 2026

Access, Affordability and Coping Strategies

Subsidised and discounted food options, including affordable canteens and a food bank on campus, were described as vital and easier to use than formal referral-based services, but participants noted that support is not always reliable, pointing to empty food banks and gaps caused by limited stock or opening hours. When income and provision are inadequate, people adopt coping strategies ranging from skipping meals and living on noodles to picking food out of bins, with asylum seekers, some describing living on around £8 a week, and homeless people relying most on these precarious forms of access.

"Live on noodles", asylum seeker, Birmingham engagement workshop, 2026

Dignity, Stigma and Social Exclusion

Stigma around needing help came through strongly: one note stated that people don't want to be seen as poor, they don't want to stand in a queue, showing that the visibility of food bank queues can itself deter people from seeking support. Exclusion and racism also shaped food experiences, with participants describing a middle class mentality to ration everything and exclude some people, and explaining that fear of racism in areas such as Northfields keeps people from mingling with locals and engaging with services at all. Participants were clear that language matters, warning that technical or politicised terms, including around poverty and the tampon tax, can feel shaming or alienating.

"Middle class mentality to ration everything and exclude some people", community participant, Birmingham engagement workshop, 2026

Health, "Healthy Food" and Cultural Appropriateness

Some notes linked food insecurity directly to health risks, including references to health and safety and to birth defects, showing concern about the impact of inadequate diets on pregnancy and general health. Others questioned what healthy food actually means in practice and whether support on offer respects cultural norms, asking healthy meaning? and calling for food that is culturally acceptable, suggesting that standard nutritional advice or donated food may not match people's beliefs, tastes or religious requirements.

"Culturally acceptable", community participant, Birmingham engagement workshop, 2026

What the community are asking for

- Deliver fair pay and a real living wage: address inadequate income and insecure work directly, since being in work is no guarantee against food poverty.
- Fix referral systems and end the postcode lottery: simplify bureaucracy and standardise access so help does not depend on where someone lives.
- Design support around dignity, not visibility: move away from visible queues toward less exposing models of access.
- Address racism and exclusion in service design: recognise that fear of racism keeps people, particularly in areas like Northfields, from engaging with local services, and that asylum seekers face vulnerability.
- Use careful, non-stigmatising language: review how support is described and communicated, since politicised terms can put people off seeking help.
- Make food support genuinely healthy and culturally appropriate: ensure donated and subsidised food reflects people's beliefs, tastes and religious requirements, not just a generic standard of healthy.

Annex 5: Glasgow Thematic Analysis of Community Evidence

The Scotland sessions in Glasgow generated five themes: structural and economic drivers of food poverty; access and local food environments; community responses and organisational strain; dignity, mental health and hidden harms; and governance, rights and collective responsibility. Together they show that participants see food poverty in Glasgow as the product of broken public systems, high living costs, difficult local geographies, stretched community organisations and a lack of effective rights-based action.

Structural and Economic Drivers of Food Poverty

Participants pointed to a procurement system that does not function well, public duties around food that are not being met, and social security arrangements that leave people without an essentials guarantee, meaning many households depend on charitable food aid rather than predictable, adequate support. High housing costs and local rates, shop closures and retail moving out of town push everyday costs up, while wages and benefits were repeatedly described as too low to cover basic needs, alongside no money, no jobs and time poverty, meaning people lack not only resources but the time to shop, cook and take part in community food activities.

"We are Serfs", community participant, Glasgow engagement session, 2026

Access and Local Food Environments

Access to shops and services varies sharply across Scotland: people described living in areas without supermarkets or buses, where reaching basic food outlets means travelling long distances and paying for taxis, turning geography and transport into major drivers of food insecurity for low-income households, disabled people and those without cars. Participants also wanted a higher proportion of healthy options in local shops, noting that fruit and vegetables are significantly more expensive than other items, and called for reduced food waste, better composting, and public institutions such as hospitals and schools to serve food that reflects Scotland's Good Food Nation ambitions.

"living in areas without supermarkets, no buses, travelling long distances and paying for taxis", original codes, Glasgow session mapping, 2026

Community Responses and Organisational Strain

Despite structural challenges, participants described a wide range of community-led responses: community shops, food pantries providing power cards and cooking equipment, community gardens that teach growing and cooking, and local kitchens offering granny-style home food, alongside right to grow approaches to repurpose land and even food bank farms involving homeless people in growing food. At the same time, organisations delivering this are under intense pressure: food hubs are closing, some food clubs have waiting lists running into hundreds of people, high rents and limited space prevent expansion, and funding is insecure and often short-term, leaving charities feeling they are being asked to fill structural gaps created by state failures without commensurate support.

"We can do better", community participant, Glasgow engagement session, 2026

Dignity, Mental Health and Hidden Harms

Participants talked about parents, especially mothers, who regularly miss meals so their children can eat and who carry heavy guilt about this, and felt that being given low-quality food close to expiry does not respect dignity or offer a sustainable solution. People reported anxiety, panic attacks and other mental health problems when facing food shortages, alongside hidden hunger in which adults quietly go without food, and raised particular concern about the impact of food poverty on teenagers, who are often overlooked in policy, with social media and peer pressure adding further stress.

"parents, especially mothers, missing meals so children can eat", original codes, Glasgow session mapping, 2026

Governance, Rights and Collective Responsibility

Participants noted that legal right-to-food frameworks are emerging across the UK and wanted Scotland to translate these into concrete duties and actions, backed by education about rights, the ability to walk to affordable nutritious food, and enough time to participate in community life, with clear scepticism about purely rhetorical commitments. They argued responsibility for tackling food poverty must be shared across government, businesses and communities, criticised corporate approaches that rely on voluntary gestures and sponsorship rather than genuine investment, and called for UK, Scottish and local authorities to work together, for regulation of advertising and commercial practices, and for people with lived experience to be brought into decision-making and properly compensated for their contribution.

"We are fighting for Glasgow", community participant, Glasgow engagement session, 2026

What the communities are asking for

- Turn rights into statutory duties: legislate a right to food with clear duties, dedicated funding and independent monitoring, not a rhetorical commitment.
- Guarantee the essentials: essentials guarantee within social security, alongside real living wages and fair pay, so households are not structurally dependent on charitable food aid.
- Fix transport and local food access: address food deserts directly, including bus provision, shop closures and the cost of reaching food outlets, for low-income households, disabled people and those without cars.
- Fund community food infrastructure sustainably: move community shops, pantries, gardens and kitchens from short-term, insecure funding to sustained investment that matches rising demand.
- Treat food poverty as a mental health issue too: recognise the anxiety, guilt and hidden hunger it causes, particularly for mothers and teenagers, as a public health concern in its own right.
- Share responsibility across government, business and communities: end reliance on corporate voluntary gestures and sponsorship, introduce regulation and accountability, and pay people with lived experience properly for their contribution to decision-making.

Annex 6: Liverpool Thematic Analysis of Community Evidence

The Liverpool evidence base combines the FABIA Liverpool thematic analysis with sticky-note session mapping from the Liverpool community engagement workshop. Across the evidence, three consistent themes emerge: participants described food insecurity as inseparable from poverty and from how support is delivered, and were clear that emergency food aid, however well-run, cannot substitute for adequate income, dignity or a functioning safety net.

Working Poor, Structural Poverty and Gaps in Support

Participants directly challenged the idea that having a job protects against food insecurity, citing low wages, unstable margins and rising living costs, including among people working in Liverpool's own food industry. They described falling through eligibility thresholds, struggling to access appropriate help and feeling let down by decision-makers, particularly as single parents with nowhere left to go, while young people asked pointedly why London schools get free school meals when Liverpool's do not. Food insecurity was also described as extending beyond food itself to energy costs, lack of cooking facilities and food-preparation skill gaps, with food banks often supplying food that is difficult to incorporate into meals.

"Worked all my life, but still need a food bank", community participant, FABIA Liverpool analysis, Subtheme 2.1, 2026

Dignity, Stigma and the Quality of What's on Offer

Participants were clear that food poverty diminishes dignity through embarrassment, judgement and food that fails to meet basic nutritional or dietary needs, with one person describing being made to feel like a beggar despite being given food. Emergency food provision was described as often failing to provide fresh, nutritious, health-supporting food, being instead all processed tinned food, and food banks were viewed as necessary but insufficient temporary measures that communities should not have to permanently rely on.

"Everyone is a human being. We are human beings", community participant, FABIA Liverpool analysis, Subtheme 1.1, 2026

Community Power, Youth Voice and Long-Term Solutions

Rather than more emergency provision, participants pointed to what already works locally: community-led initiatives such as Homebaked Community Bakery in Anfield, local partnerships and collaborative city-wide networks, though funding remains hard to secure. They emphasised education, systemic awareness and youth participation as vital to sustainable change, with young people explicitly asking to be included in shaping solutions rather than just receiving them.

"We can help. Include us", young participant, age 16, Liverpool engagement workshop, 2026

What communities are asking for

- Fund and recognise grassroots organisations: move community kitchens, pantries and food-sharing networks from ad-hoc survival to properly and consistently funded infrastructure.
- Guarantee universal free school meals: match provision seen in other UK cities, removing the postcode inconsistency young people themselves flagged.
- Close the gaps for working and single-parent households: ensure people in work and single parents are not left with nowhere to turn when eligibility thresholds and temporary support run out.
- Build dignity and cultural appropriateness into food aid: move away from processed, unsuitable stock toward fresh, nutritious, dietary-appropriate provision delivered without stigma.

Annex 7: London Thematic Analysis of Community Evidence

The London evidence synthesises Right to Food community workshop notes and the FABIA workshop thematic analysis, spanning two borough workshop series in Tower Hamlets, Tottenham and Brixton. Sessions approached food insecurity from different angles, cost of living, dignity, housing and grassroots power, but converge on a shared conclusion: London's food insecurity is an income, housing and systems problem, and will not be solved by charity models alone.

Income, Cost of Living and a System That Doesn't Keep Up

Participants were consistent that food insecurity in London is a financial problem, not a food supply one: rising food and housing prices, a lack of employment, and incomes not in line with rising costs are forcing people to choose between food and essentials such as gas, with cooking itself repeatedly raised as unaffordable. Employment no longer guarantees food security, with low pay, cut working hours and soaring utility costs pushing working people and students into desperate compromises, while delays in welfare referrals, rigid eligibility thresholds and unclear information leave vulnerable families, single parents and disabled people with nowhere to turn. Families in temporary accommodation and asylum seekers housed in hotels were reported relying on biscuits on a food budget of £9 per person per week, without cooking appliances.

"It's outrageous that working full-time people have to rely on food bank, stripping away your dignity", community participant, London workshops, 2026

Dignity, Stigma and the Right to Choose

Both workshop series converged on dignity as the defining issue in how food support is delivered. Shame associated with accessing food banks prevents many people from seeking support at all, with residents describing choosing hunger over the humiliation of visiting a food bank in person or covering up to avoid stigma. Participants wanted systems built around dignity and choice rather than charity-based provision that hands out food that does not reflect their needs, calling for cultural, religious and dietary needs, including underrepresented Caribbean foods, to be met as standard, while hyper-gentrification in areas such as Brixton was described as pricing out cheap local markets and independent traders and fragmenting communities.

"People will choose hunger over going to foodbank", community participant, London workshops, 2026

Systemic Change, Community Power and Children's Futures

Rather than expanding emergency provision, both workshop series pointed toward structural change: participants advocated addressing poverty, welfare, food pricing and inequalities directly, framing the right to food as a foundation for other rights, and highlighted community growing, food co-operatives and social supermarkets as essential even as food banks face closures and volunteer shortages. Participants called for major supermarkets to be held legally and financially accountable for overproduction and food waste, with direct supply lines between farmers and schools, and were consistent in calling for universal free school meals across London regardless of where a child is from, with young people asking directly to be included in shaping solutions.

"Right to food is a lever to open other rights", community participant, London workshops 2026

What communities are asking for:

- Cap and regulate food and energy costs: bring healthy food and the energy needed to cook it within reach, including scrutiny of supermarket pricing.
- Fix the welfare bureaucracy: faster referrals and PIP and Universal Credit reform that reflects the real cost of food, not just headline rates.

- Fund dignity-first, culturally appropriate provision: shift investment toward social supermarkets and co-ops that offer choice, and ensure cultural and dietary needs are met as standard, not as an afterthought.
- Make free school meals universal and localise supply: universal provision for children, backed by direct farmer-to-school supply chains and community growing space.

Annex 8: North East England Thematic Analysis of Community Evidence

The North East England evidence draws on participatory sticky-note mapping and structured community discussion in Ashington and Newcastle. The original analysis identified six themes across thirty-eight codes, consolidated here into four; participants consistently reframed food insecurity as a structural and political issue, not an individual failing, naming a dense web of overlapping economic, geographic and institutional barriers.

Dignity, Stigma and the Politics of Blame

Participants reframed the Commission's own terms, insisting on food access as dignity rather than provision, and challenged economic metrics that fail to count well-being, arguing for an economy that prioritises health and well-being over economic output alone. Shame was named as a primary barrier to accessing support across all age groups, compounded by fear of referral to social services, with participants describing being blamed for not having access to food and noting that increased conditionality attached to benefits has deepened stigma and undermined the desire to reach out for help. There was also concern that hardship has become normalised, with people questioned for asking for help and a sense that society has been allowed to deteriorate.

"It isn't the right to food, it's the right to dignity", community participant, Ashington session, 2025

Economic Barriers and the Poverty Premium

No participant described their situation as caused by a single factor. Processed and unhealthy food remains cheaper and more accessible than fresh produce while wages and benefits fail to keep pace, and the Universal Credit transition was described as leaving people two to four weeks without money at all. A poverty premium recurred throughout: disability, dietary needs and caring responsibilities add invisible costs, on top of extortionate private rents and a recurring choice between heating and eating. Full-time employment was described as no longer a guarantee of food security, with nurses reported working full time and still relying on cheap pot noodles to feed their children, and new parents facing compounding pressures around infant feeding costs.

"Stop the choice of heating or eating, we need transformation of the system", community participant, Ashington/Newcastle sessions, 2025

Access, Infrastructure and the Limits of Charity

Rurality was named as a structural disadvantage, not a personal circumstance: some areas have no supermarkets at all, roads to reach them are busy and distant, and participants objected to supermarkets charging a rural premium on food grown in their own community. Portion sizes, packaging and online retail were described as designed for a default household, not for individuals, older people or the area's growing multicultural communities. Above all, participants were clear that the charity model is unsustainable: food banks should not exist, chronic funding precarity and high surplus-food licence costs, one participant cited a £1,400 FareShare licence fee, undermine organisations, and strict referral barriers together with a three-visits-in-six-months limit mean nutritionally poor food parcels cannot reliably reach those in need.

"The charity sector is not the place to hold up this society, it has failed. There needs to be statutory provision", community participant, Ashington/Newcastle sessions, 2025

Community Power and Groups Falling Through the Gaps

Participants named specific local models they valued and trusted, including the Bothy, Next Lane Community Pantry and Full Circle, for combining food with advice, skills and genuine community connection, while being equally clear that community cannot carry what government has walked away from. Loss of cooking and life skills was described as generational, and specific groups were named as falling through the gaps entirely: multicultural communities unable to access food that reflects their needs, homeless

people and ex-offenders, people affected by addiction and financial abuse, and unpaid carers and disabled people, including one participant caring for a family member with dementia who was told he did not qualify for support because he was not yet 65.

"Volunteers are holding the UK up, there needs to be statutory provision", community participant, Ashington/Newcastle sessions, 2025

What communities are asking for

- Universal free school meals: the most frequently named priority, ensuring every child has at least two healthy meals a day, removing stigma and covering school holidays.
- Cash-first, adequate income: fair wages and a stronger social security floor, recognising that people overwhelmingly make good decisions about how to spend their own money.
- Community infrastructure: more allotments, community kitchens, food hubs and social eating spaces, with better use of existing unused community kitchens.
- Dignified food support: pay-as-you-can and voucher models preferred over food parcels, removing referral barriers and the three-visit limit on food banks.
- Education and skills: home economics restored in schools, alongside cooking, growing and budgeting support such as air fryers and slow cookers with proper instruction.
- Regulate the food system: end rural premium pricing, remove VAT on food, stop supermarkets charging different prices by store size, and build direct farmer-to-community supply routes.
- Fix benefits: reform Universal Credit, end sanctions, and set Personal Independence Payment at a level that genuinely covers care and disability costs.
- Cheaper utilities: reduce the cost of energy in winter when it is needed most, so people can afford to use cooking appliances.

Annex 9: UK-Wide Cross-Regional Synthesis

This annex synthesises Annexes 1 to 7, seven independent regional engagement processes spanning Belfast, Birmingham, Glasgow, Liverpool, London, North East England and Wales, into collective, UK-wide themes and a unified set of community asks. Despite very different local contexts, formats and evidence sources, seven collective themes surface repeatedly across the UK. This synthesis does not replace the seven regional annexes, each of which retains its own detailed evidence, community voices and local asks; it sits above them, showing where the regions converge and what a UK-wide Right to Food response would need to address.

1. Income Is the Root Cause, Not Food Supply

Across all seven regions, the dominant and most consistent finding is that food insecurity is fundamentally about inadequate and insecure income, not a shortage of food, nutritional knowledge, or willingness to work. In Wales, only 68% of workers are paid the real Living Wage and 76% of one-income families on benefits still cannot afford food. In Liverpool, employment, including in the city's own food industry, was no guarantee against needing a food bank.

"We're not asking for luxury. We're asking for the basics, the right to feed our children without fear.", community participant, Belfast engagement session

2. Dignity, Stigma and Distrust of Institutions

Every region reported shame and stigma as active barriers to seeking support, alongside a deep distrust of institutions perceived as slow, judgemental or disconnected from lived experience. Communities consistently distinguished between being fed and being treated with dignity, and in Birmingham the visibility of food bank queues was itself enough to stop people seeking help.

"People will choose hunger over going to foodbank.", community participant, London engagement session

3. An Environment That Works Against People

Beyond income, several regions identified the physical and commercial environment itself as a driver of food insecurity: food deserts, transport barriers, fast-food outlet density, retail design failures, and unused local infrastructure that could be repurposed to help. In Wales, fast-food outlet density rose in every local authority between 2018 and 2023 while unused kitchens and land sat idle

."Supermarket shouldn't be allowed to charge a rural premium.", community participant, North East England engagement session

4. Community Power Works, But Runs on Exhaustion

Six of the seven regions described valued, trusted community food models, pantries, kitchens, canteens, growing schemes and co-operatives, as more dignified and responsive than emergency provision. Just as consistently, they described these same organisations as running on insecure funding, exhausted staff and volunteers, and rising demand.

"Volunteers are holding the UK up, there needs to be statutory provision.", community participant, North East England engagement session

5. Children and School Food as the Clearest Lever

Five of the seven regions raised children's food security as an urgent, tangible priority, and universal free school meals emerged repeatedly as the clearest single policy lever available, precisely because it removes means-testing, stigma, and inconsistency by postcode.

"You can't expect a child to learn when their stomach is empty.", community participant, Belfast engagement session

6. Rights, Governance and Shared Responsibility

Across the UK, participants expressed scepticism toward purely rhetorical commitments to a right to food, insisting instead on legal duties, dedicated funding, monitoring, and responsibility shared across government, business and communities, including proper recognition of people with lived experience in shaping the response.

"We don't need another report. We need people to listen to what we live every day.", community participant, Belfast engagement session

7. Cultural Appropriateness and What Counts as Healthy Food

A smaller but distinct thread, most fully developed in Birmingham but echoed in London and Belfast, questioned what healthy and appropriate food actually means in practice. Standard nutritional advice and donated food frequently fail to match people's cultural background, religious requirements or genuine dietary needs, and healthier food itself is often the most expensive option on the shelf.

"It's not only about staples, it's a broader scale of cultural foods.", community participant, London engagement session

What Communities Across the UK Are Asking For

Ten consolidated asks recur across the seven regional engagement processes:

- Enshrine the Right to Food in law: move from rhetorical commitment to statutory duties, dedicated funding and independent monitoring, so access to nutritious food does not depend on charitable provision (raised in Wales, Belfast, Glasgow).
- Move toward cash-first, adequate income support: prioritise real living wages, benefit adequacy and an essentials guarantee over food parcels and vouchers as the primary response to food insecurity (raised in Wales, North East England, Belfast, Glasgow, London, Birmingham).
- Make free school meals universal: remove means-testing, postcode inconsistency and stigma, and fund meals and breakfast provision at a level that reflects what food actually costs (raised in Belfast, Liverpool, London, North East England, Wales).
- Fund community food infrastructure sustainably: move community shops, pantries, kitchens, gardens and co-operatives from short-term, insecure funding to sustained, coordinated investment (raised in Wales, Liverpool, North East England, Glasgow, London).
- Design support around dignity, not conditionality: favour choice, cash and culturally appropriate provision over conditional parcels, and remove the stigma built into referral and eligibility systems (raised in Belfast, Liverpool, London, North East England, Birmingham).
- Regulate food, energy and the local food environment: address rural and poverty premiums, fast-food outlet density, energy costs tied to cooking, and retail design that fails low-income households (raised in Wales, London, North East England, Glasgow).
- Fix welfare bureaucracy: reduce referral delays, benefit transition gaps and inflexible processes that leave people without emergency support at short notice (raised in London, North East England, Liverpool, Glasgow, Birmingham).
- Recognise lived experience and shared responsibility: properly compensate people with lived experience for their contribution to decision-making, and hold government, business and communities jointly accountable (raised in Glasgow, Belfast).
- Address racism and exclusion in service design: take seriously that fear of racism keeps people from engaging with local services at all, and ensure food support is genuinely culturally appropriate rather than a generic standard of healthy (raised in Birmingham).

- Make food support genuinely healthy and culturally appropriate: ensure donated and subsidised food reflects people's beliefs, religious requirements and dietary needs, and that nutritional standards are defined with communities, not imposed on them (raised in Birmingham, London, Belfast).

"It isn't the right to food, it's the right to dignity.", UK-wide synthesis

Annex 2: Voices of the Right to Food UK Commission



Voices of the Right to Food UK Commission



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT 2026

Foreword

By members of 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.

Voices of the Right to Food UK 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

1. The challenges. What makes it hard to get enough good food where you live?
2. The support. What help exists, what have you used, and what is good or bad about it?
3. The law. What should a right to food contain?
4. 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, 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

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.

PLACE OR GROUP	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 Womens engagement session	48
Scotland	Sessions in Glasgos, 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	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

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.”

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.

“How can you expect people to do SATs if they haven't got a full belly?”

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.”

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, 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, INCLUDING STUDENTS AND 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: young people

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

“School vending machine is £1.20 for a bag of crisps but it used to be 80p.”

“We get food from the chippy on the way home from school.”

“We aren’t allowed out during lunch time. The teachers take food off you if they see you with it.”

- “It’s not fair that some people have to pay and some don’t have to.”
- “Not healthy at all. Not cooked enough sometimes there is pink chicken.”
- “Chips are rock hard, gravy is like water and pure clumpy.”
- “When the inspectors come in they only put out the good food for the inspectors.”
- “There is no menu food just grab and go.”
- “School cooking classes cost £1.50 to £3.50 and some people end up owing money if they haven’t paid before the class.”
- “I rely on the airfryer I can’t cook a meal.”
- “Single mums just have one income.”
- “There is an increase in prices for food but wages are staying the same. How can they expect people to pay for it?”
- “Youth centre used to cost £350 to provide one meal to all the kids. Now it costs £750.”
- “There are really full bins in school canteen loads of waste.”
- “We are expected to eat off cardboard plates with cardboard knives and forks. They don’t do fruit.”
- “Mums have to say no.”
- “They could focus on mystery shopping of the school food, not just rely on inspectors. They should also ask our opinion so that we can vote or have a meeting.”
- “Need more accessible schools for disabled kids.”
- “I have the right to afford nutritious meals. I have the right for school to provide healthy meals.”
- “A nutritious meal every day to fuel your body.”
- “I want to feel safe.”
- “The government should not put a price on water.”
- “Should not have a tax on basic needs. No inflation in prices. Make sure wages keep up.”

CHAPTER SIX

Scotland

GLASGOW, GRANGEMOUTH AND DUNDEE · 97 PARTICIPANTS

THE CHALLENGES

Scotland's sessions were recorded on flipcharts 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 flipcharts 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 · NORTH AND EAST 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 multifactorial,” one participant began: no transport, forms only online, post offices and banks closing, distribution centralised. A carer described a nonverbal 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 multifactorial... 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 bnbs 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 brought 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."

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

"Started a get to know your neighbour campaign where people help each other with meals, ingredients etc to spread the cost."

"Staple foods should be a basic human right."



“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.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The 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 · THE 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 an eat at the mosque and take plenty home but struggle to heat it. To 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.”

“Instead of getting handed a bag of pre selected food, it would be nice to treat foodbanks sort of like a ‘free’ shop... treating it like a shop lowers the stigma and makes it a more human experience.”

“There is a reduction of food donations (to our food bank) at the same time as the need is growing.”

“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.”

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.

“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.”

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.

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.”
- “They provide essential immediate support and act as a gateway to wider help... however, they are short-term solutions and cannot address underlying issues like poverty, debt, or insecure employment.”
- “Higher and more stable incomes, earlier intervention through trusted services like Family Hubs, clearer local pathways to support, and expansion of dignified food models...”

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.

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

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.

FROM THE SUBMISSION · DISABILITY POVERTY CAMPAIGN GROUP

“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.”

SCHOOLS HOLDING THE LINE

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.

“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.”

THE SUPPORT

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.

WHAT A RIGHT TO FOOD SHOULD CONTAIN

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.

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.”

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.

“Social services keep track of how many times you go to the food pantry and if they think it’s too much, they come and take your kids.”

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 · ATD FOURTH WORLD

“If you don’t have food you might have no choice but to nick it. You might be forced into prostitution because of lack of food. Poverty is the degradation of people.”

“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.”

“You’ve got no choice of foods to suit taste. For example, you can only afford Tesco Saver Baked Beans, not the Heinz beans that are tasty and more nutritious.”

“Joy and personal agency are central. When you struggle to afford daily food, what about birthdays? Holidays? Special occasions?”

“It is not just the cost of the food itself that you need to think about. The costs of the oven, electricity and gas, water, repairs to the oven, can leave no money for food!”

“Who can challenge supermarkets on the high prices of fresh, healthy foods? Also on the quality of cheap foods, which are often very bad.”

“You’re paying £15 to £25 for fruit and veg that are mouldy, bread that is hard as a rock, and tins that are past their sell-by date. For that money, you’d get better quality in a shop.”

“What you get depends if you have the right address. In Rotherhithe, the food pantry gives as much fruit and veg as you want, plus 4 boxes of ready-cooked meals. But here in Southwark, they don’t even give you a voucher unless you’re homeless.”

“Food banks never have items like lactose-free milk that you need if you’re allergic to lactose. And getting halal meat is hard too.”

“Soup kitchens do have free meals, but you only get one meal for one person on one day of the week, so it’s no good for families.”

“Food banks never ask what you want or what you can eat. You need a referral from a professional. It all leaves you with no choices.”

“I went to a food bank recently and it was very dehumanising. It’s run by very nice people, all very well intentioned. But the poor guy I was with had to be interviewed... And then he had to have a number, literally a number, like he used to have in the Job Center... But you had to do it all in public.”

“In my town, the foodbank is located directly opposite the school. You dread going in there because your kids will get bullied for it. And they open at just the time when school breaks up, so you know people will see you.”

“The food bank here is run by a church. They quote the Bible at you when you’re trying to get food, but I don’t think that helps.”

“At school, the students at the back of the queue get nothing because they don’t make enough. It happens all the time. Or only part of the meal is left, so your kid gets only rice or only sauce.”

“At school, if your kid has an allergy, they’re sent out of the room when the allergen is served—but they go hungry. And then they’re rushed back into the room while the allergen is still in the air!”

“In secondary school, you have to top up the card with money. My family was so skint that when I couldn’t pay for the school meal, all I ate would be a few rainbow sweets. There’s no nutrition in that. How can you function in lessons when you’re starving?”

“So if one person gets juice, the other kids should get juice. You can’t just discriminate because one pays and one doesn’t.”

“We shouldn’t need food banks but benefits are not enough.”

“The minimum wage for 18-25 year olds is a problem. They get paid less than the over 25s but have to pay the same costs for food. The cost of food is phenomenal.”

“Some parents who would be allowed by social workers to bring their kids home from care take one look at the cost of living and rising food prices and they think, ‘How can I afford to bring them home now?’”

“Social services keep track of how many times you go to the food pantry and if they think it’s too much, they come and take your kids.”

“Social services are always looking inside your cupboards and fridges and freezer to judge if you can keep your kids by seeing how much food you have. As a parent, you start second guessing yourself until you don’t know if you’re coming or going.”

“If you are street homeless, food banks are of no use because you don’t have a tin opener or a stove to cook.”

“If you or your kids have allergies and food intolerances when you live in poverty, food which meets these needs is not affordable.”

“These people miss the basic human dignity of cooking their own meals.”

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 need 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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