



Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Food Security, HC 622

Tuesday 22 November 2022

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Members present: Sir Robert Goodwill (Chair); Ian Byrne; Geraint Davies; Barry Gardiner; Dr Neil Hudson; Mrs Sheryll Murray ; Julian Sturdy.

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Witnesses

[I](#): Professor Michael Fakhri, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food.

[II](#): Lindsay Boswell, Chief Executive Officer, FareShare; Maria Marshall, Project Manager, Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN); and Anna Taylor, Executive Director, Food Foundation.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Independent Food Aid Network \(IFAN\)](#)
- [Food Foundation](#)



Examination of witness

Witness: Professor Michael Fakhri.

Chair: Welcome to the third evidence session for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee's investigation into food security. We are delighted to be joined, from Oregon on the west coast of the United States, by Professor Michael Fakhri who is the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food. You are very welcome, Michael. I understand you would like to make a short opening statement. I think we have advised a maximum of about five minutes. The floor is yours.

Professor Fakhri: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, everyone. I want to make a brief introduction to explain my role as the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food and the perspective I bring to our conversation today.

I am an independent expert, which is a voluntary position. My mandate is given to me by the Human Rights Council, so my job is to report to the Human Rights Council and to the General Assembly. That makes me the leading UN expert on all matters concerning hunger, famine and malnutrition from a human rights perspective. In my role I have spoken to Governments from all over the world, civil society, businesses, all in the context of the food crisis. I have been in this role since May 2020 and I have a unique position.

I have also met regularly and advised different UN organisations at the highest level and at the working level. I have briefed the Security Council, the Food and Agriculture Organisation, and of course met my regular duties with the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council. I have developed a good relationship with a large number of different organisations across the UN system and organisations like the World Trade Organisation.

To share with you the perspective I am bringing, today I will be relying mostly on my latest report, which I presented to the UN General Assembly, on the pandemic and the food crisis. It is my understanding that the resolution from the General Assembly is in process but it sounds like it will renew its request for me to stay focused on the food crisis and report back to them in one more year.

I wanted to make the brief introduction so that you had a sense of the perspective I am coming from. Thank you.

Q146 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. I suspect that many casual observers might think it is slightly incongruous that you are applying these measures to countries in Africa like Sudan and similarly to countries like the United Kingdom or the United States. You have advocated a right to food at a national level. Which advanced economies have implemented such a right and what lessons can be learned from that?



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Professor Fakhri: It is interesting that the right to food is gaining popularity. At the beginning of the pandemic people were reluctant to engage with the right to food because it creates a very specific set of obligations, but as the food crisis continued in the last year I saw the right to food being taken up by all types of countries, advanced economies and developing countries. First this is in international terms and then I can give you very specific instances.

In the latest statement from the last G20 meeting, which was held in Germany, they reaffirmed their commitment as the G20 to the right to food. This is the first time the G20 did so. Switzerland is a strong supporter; Germany, France and Spain have always been strong supporters of the right to food. Specifically I will give you three examples of advancing implementation of the right to food in the last several years.

The first and the closest one is in Scotland, the Good Food Nation Bill. I am happy to speak to that, and I gave a presentation to the Scottish Parliament on the Good Food Nation Bill. I argued that as right to food legislation it could have been a bit clearer on its requirement for the Government to rely on the right to food, but it is to all intents and purposes a right to food Bill. I found it very interesting that the Scottish Good Food Nation Bill was very specific. It mobilised the entire Government. It recognised that food is not just an issue traditionally that lands in the ministry of agriculture but that you need all ministries and the Government to think about it holistically.

Secondly, it is about the Government holding itself accountable, and every Government will do it differently. In Scotland they created an independent body to monitor the right to food. By making food a right, it also creates accountability between people and the Government. Ultimately human rights are about preserving and strengthening the relationship between Government and the people. I encourage you to look at Scotland as a starting example.

Q147 **Chair:** Is that a good sort of model to adopt or can you see that improvements or changes might make it better?

Professor Fakhri: It can be finessed for sure. Globally it was an inspiration to many Governments. Of course everyone has to adapt to their local conditions. There are two things that I would finesse. The language used is that they hold themselves accountable and they must implement the plan, but they say that they have to have regard to the right to food in the preparation of their food plan, and they have specifics of what their food plan means. Making sure that their food plan is specific is a good thing, but it should be more than regarding the right to food, it should be applying the right to food to make it a clear legal obligation. That slight ambiguity creates a debate: should we implement the right to food, is the right to food really a legal right? That is wasted energy—if you just make it a right you can get to business.



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The other thing is that the Government did not set very specific targets for themselves. They could have said, “This is what we want to achieve by this particular year” and that mobilises people in a particular way. These are some of the things in that. That being said, of course every Government in every country in every nation has its own context, so what works in Scotland will not necessarily work in France or Germany. The power of the Good Food Nation Bill, not just the specific legislation, is that it mobilised many different people in sectors in Scotland.

There is a follow-up on Scotland, but this takes me to the United States. The state of Maine, which is a relatively rural state, recently passed the right to food and food sovereignty in its their constitution. It is different from the Good Food Nation Bill in Scotland, which was very detailed and specific. In Maine it was a constitutional right and now they are figuring out how to implement it—what does that mean and what are they going to do? What I like about that example is that it mobilised different parts of the political bodies and communities in Maine that don’t necessarily get along. It is common for the right to food. As you probably know—and because I live in the US I can say this—in the US, politics is stuck between the two parties and nothing really gets done in moving significant policies forward. It is very frustrating from a human rights perspective, but this piece of legislation in Maine—a right to food in their constitution—brought together unlikely allies. People mobilised—politicians, social movements and civil societies—and they developed new alliances and new relationships around the right to food. That is my theory of change: that change comes from developing new relationships that were not already there.

Q148 **Chair:** Would that legislation in the state of Maine, or indeed in Scotland, lead to judicial reviews or legal challenges being made against Governments for not having sufficient level of benefits or not providing food in certain parts of the country, in food deserts where you cannot get access to fruit and vegetable shops, that sort of thing?

Professor Fakhri: It might. When I am not an independent expert for the UN I teach at the law school, and I used to be a litigator. I often tell people that if you have to sue and go to court, everyone has already lost. I think that right to food legislation changes the way the Government do their job and it changes their relationship with the people. There are different ways Governments can hold themselves accountable and people can hold Governments accountable. Going to court is but one, and I think it is the final step. It is expensive and time consuming.

There are a lot of different mechanisms that all Governments have of ensuring accountability. Will it lead to judicial review or lawsuits down the line? Probably at some point, but there are a lot of things that can happen before you get there. I would not think of it as the front end. Think of it more as administration, administrative bodies and organising the Government in a particular way.

Q149 **Chair:** We will try to make a bit of progress on this. Can we have concise



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answers and I will try to ask concise questions? The UK Government commissioned Henry Dimbleby to produce a report on food in the UK, and he said it would be very difficult to define exactly what the right to food is in a society with a developed welfare system. For example, some families manage to feed themselves perfectly well on the welfare they are given and others may not. Maybe somebody in the house smokes a pack of cigarettes a day, maybe they have a lot of credit that they have to support. In a country where you have a developed welfare system, is it more difficult to define?

Professor Fakhri: I don't think so at all. I will highlight the fact that hunger is on the rise in all countries now, developed or developing, with or without a social welfare system. Everyone is struggling in a food crisis. It is a global crisis that is affecting all countries regardless of the state of their economy. The fact that a country like the United Kingdom has a developed welfare system means that you are not starting from zero. You have mechanisms that can be advanced. Defining the right to food means that everyone is entitled to their food always being adequate, available and accessible.

People access food in two ways: through markets or through access to land and growing their own food. Markets are not working in many countries, including developed countries. Everyone is experiencing a cost of living crisis, inflation is high. Prices are not just high, they keep going up and down. For example, ensuring prices are stable for consumers and enough for local producers to make a fair living is part of the definition of the right to food at the markets. Ensuring that access to land is fair and that people are using the land in a way that increases biodiversity, meets labour regulations and ensures the rights of workers when they are hiring people are all part of the definition of the right to food.

Q150 **Chair:** Understood. Is it your intention to conduct a review of the right to food in the UK as part of your remit?

Professor Fakhri: Months ago, before I even scheduled this, I sent in a request to do a country visit to the United Kingdom and it is pending. I look forward to hearing from the British Government as to whether a visit is coming up.

Chair: Do come and look us up here in Parliament. I will pass on to my colleague Geraint Davies, who has a question.

Q151 **Geraint Davies:** I think we agree that people have the right to life and it seems to me to follow that people have the right to food as a necessary condition of that. In implementing that, what problems do Governments face with inflation and how should they manage high inflation to deliver the right to food?

Professor Fakhri: There are many different ways. First, internationally and then what Governments can do nationally. The challenge is that there is not an international plan that helps Governments co-ordinate and co-operate on the global food crisis, so Governments are stuck with that.



Several things are happening nationally. One is increased social benefits for people: things like making sure people with disabilities have access to food; that people's energy costs are reasonable; and that social security benefits make sure that people maintain an adequate standard of living. These are not specific to food but, to your point, these are interrelated, generally speaking.

The second thing is to ensure that prices are stable. For the longest time for decades—since the 1980s—many Governments have been shy about talking about stabilising prices and they have let people live at the mercy of fluctuating food prices. There are different mechanisms that people are thinking about more and more for stabilising prices. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the reason the price of grain skyrocketed was not necessarily a supply issue. The moment Russia invaded Ukraine there was still enough grain circulating in the market and there were not supply chain disruptions such as we experienced early in the pandemic. Grain prices skyrocketed because only four companies have a market share of between 75% to 90% of the grain trade. Corporations have a significant amount of power in markets and there is not much being done to hold corporations accountable. Food prices are at the mercy of speculation. Grain prices skyrocketed because commodity prices are not well regulated and are really determined by financial speculation. It is because traders were reacting in fear that prices skyrocketed. Governments have tools in place to stabilise prices.

Q152 Geraint Davies: You will be familiar with Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen's famous analysis that said that famine is not caused by food shortages but by a combination of high prices alongside low wages. We can see in places like Britain that there are communities with very low wages alongside high prices, and we have a situation where one in four adults are now in food poverty. In responding to that, is it your view that what Governments should do to deliver the right to food is, first, underpin the lowest income through, for instance, universal credit, social security payments and, secondly, try to manage prices as best they can where there is abuse? For instance, there is profiteering by food manufacturers, retailers and people who operate container ships, but some of those are outside the control of national Governments.

Professor Fakhri: Indeed, and I will add that now people are talking about different price stabilising mechanisms and windfall taxes in the context of food. I agree with the word "profiteering". It is happening in the UK, Canada and the United States that a lot of corporations with significant market share are making excessive profits in these conditions.

Q153 Geraint Davies: What about underpinning the basic income of the poorest in our communities against inflation? Is it your view perhaps that given that the proportion of money spent by poor people on food is much higher than there should be a way of indexing food inflation to benefits so that they don't starve?



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Professor Fakhri: Yes, I agree. Being poor is expensive. It costs poor people a lot more money to eat because they can't buy large quantities and there is limited access to cooking at home.

Q154 **Geraint Davies:** Finally, on sharing inflationary pressures across the food supply chain, it has been suggested that some retailers are perhaps profiteering through and after the pandemic and some food manufacturers—I heard statistics yesterday from Barry Gardiner about Nestlé's profit going up 4 billion after the pandemic—and container shipping having enormous amounts of profiteering. Do you think that Governments should call this out and move in, and ensure that during such difficult times food manufacturers and retailers are not profiteering while people are starving?

Professor Fakhri: Yes.

Chair: That is the sort of answer we like to have in this Committee.

Q155 **Dr Hudson:** I want to come back to food inflation. Do you think that the current levels of food inflation that we are seeing have highlighted any particular areas of vulnerability in the global food system?

Professor Fakhri: Yes. I think the biggest area of vulnerability is the international trade regime. For the last 30 years the policy from many countries has been to treat food like a commodity like any other item and to rely on and depend on trade, whether on exporting, like Ukraine, or on importing food. I am not saying that all countries will be able to grow their own food and be entirely self-sufficient in those terms, but policies have been geared towards prioritising trade in food by any means necessary, and we have experienced this.

This is combined with the World Trade Organisation being at a standstill on food and agriculture for the last 25 years. Negotiations have not advanced in any way. In the last round of trade negotiations for the WTO in Geneva, food security was on the agenda, which was unique and welcome, but they got nowhere. It was just talk; at the most important moment they did nothing. It is being exposed to trade in those terms.

When I advise countries that will not be able to grow all the food they need to feed all their people, I tell them, "Fine, it is not binary, but do try to rely less on trade and support local producers who are committed to biodiversity and human rights". We can put it in that frame of agroecology. Supporting local producers is not just about making sure they feed everyone but it is about your relationship with your local environment—that is key—and establishing the local connections, so that consumers have options. They have multiple sources of food and one of them being local is a key feature.

Countries I have seen that have implemented right to food policies actively find ways of connecting local consumers to local producers through different mechanisms, financing, supporting different markets. I



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have seen this in Mexico and Argentina. In the pandemic, connecting consumers to local producers was a way to respond.

Q156 **Dr Hudson:** Thank you, that is helpful. You have said previously, and you have said again today, regarding potential drivers for food inflation, that you felt that price speculation in the commodity futures market was causing soaring food prices, rather than it being an issue of supply and demand. What is your evidence base for saying that?

Professor Fakhri: I am drawing from the report that I presented to the General Assembly and that draws from the academic literature and following markets, and then my own expertise of following trade and finance for the last 20 years. I can be very specific. One of the key elements is commodity legislation in the United States. When the United States deregulated commodity trading in 2000, that started creating the mischief that we have. The world did nothing really to respond substantively to regulating financial markets after what we experienced in 2008. It is no surprise that markets are amplifying problems rather than buffering the problems today.

Q157 **Dr Hudson:** If we come to the situation in Ukraine, I take your point that potentially when Russia invaded Ukraine there might have been some speculation on the food markets, but this has been going on for months and months. We are now genuinely facing an issue with supply getting out of that region and things like fertiliser being starved off as well. Surely it is more than speculation now. There is a critical issue of supply of raw materials, fertiliser and grain and oil and that side of things as well. It is compounded from that, surely?

Professor Fakhri: Yes, I agree that the issue of supply is becoming more acute now. I would separate that—of course there are links—from the issue of prices skyrocketing, creating inflation, not reflecting supply and demand as such. There is a disconnect between market prices and supply and demand, but to your question more specifically, now we have a supply issue. One day, the Black Sea grain agreement is working, the other day it is not, and there is the access to fertilisers. This highlights how the international system is broken structurally. The fact that the world, including the World Food Programme, which provides humanitarian relief, relied on one or two countries for all of their grain reveals an instability and a vulnerability. The fact that in Ukraine farming its food sector was dedicated to commodity markets and exporting and they were not supporting local producers to feed local people has exposed Ukraine to vulnerability.

I will add one more thing: just because there is a war doesn't mean markets don't work. I am speaking from experience; I am originally from Lebanon. Markets can still work in times of war and markets fall apart in times of peace. Markets can be stable and resilient to all sorts of shock.

I have one more thing to say on fertiliser. The problem with fertiliser is not just that it is concentrated, that a small number of companies and a



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small number of countries produce fertiliser, it is the fact that our food systems rely on chemical fertilisers in the first place. There is growing evidence that one can turn to agroecology and not have to depend on chemical fertilisers to this degree. That dependency is a problem politically and economically but also environmentally, so shifting away, transitioning from food systems that rely on chemical fertilisers is prudent politically, economically and environmentally.

Dr Hudson: I think it has come into sharp relief in the UK that we have a crisis with our fertiliser supply, but we must not forget the by-products from the fertiliser production, things like CO₂ that we need for the food and beverage sector. I am a veterinary surgeon, and we are very concerned as we need CO₂ for the slaughter process in poultry and pigs as well. It provides challenges and stresses to food security in a lot of different ways.

Chair: We need to make some progress.

Q158 **Barry Gardiner:** I will try to keep this brief, but it goes to the whole business of the evidence for being the primary driver of rising food prices. I want to make a distinction between profiteering for speculation, which you rightly highlighted, at the beginning of coming out of the pandemic, and the supply chain shock and also the war in Ukraine, and price gouging. If companies were simply reflecting the increase in their supply chain costs, they would not be making increased profits, but what we have seen with the three largest supermarket chains in the UK is that together they have made a 97% increase in profit over their pre-Covid situation. That comes from price gouging down the chain.

Can you elaborate for us how we should be setting out to analyse that? What research is there at the UN level on companies making those excess profits and how that drives the spiral of inflation? What intervention should Governments be making to stop the inflationary spiral that is coming from gouging?

Professor Fakhri: I agree on focusing on the price gouging at the supermarket consumer level. I am reluctant to speak in too much detail on what is happening in the UK because I have not directly engaged and studied the matter. Again, I would be happy to conduct a country visit and dig deeper. That said, I have read reports that this is a phenomenon, not just in the UK but in lots of countries. It is interesting that it is coming from the rich countries, Canada, US and the like.

To put it all together, there is price gouging, inflation, and the supply chain. It is again systemic understanding that highlights that you cannot address the issue just at this part of the system or that part. It has to be the entire Government thinking about the entire food system, combined with international factors at play. That is the challenge before any Government today.

Chair: We will now turn to Ian Byrne who represents one of the parts of



the country where this issue is most acute.

Q159 Ian Byrne: Michael, I am pleased to see you again and delighted to have you here. Your evidence has been superb so far. I want to touch on one element of what we are pushing for in the UK on the right to food. You said that states should be building on and not ending their pandemic measures for the right to food. I want to drill down on another thing you have said, "It is argued that the deepening level of food insecurity can only be addressed through more comprehensive measures that address existing structural deficiencies in free school meals and other measures aimed at alleviating poverty of food insecurity rather than piecemeal efforts of a temporary nature." For me, that screamed out universal free school meals, something I believe in passionately. Are those the lines you were thinking along?

Professor Fakhri: It is nice to see you today. Thank you. In my recommendation to the General Assembly, universal school meals were one of my top recommendations, and that serves multiple purposes. I am almost embarrassed to say that as the father of a young child I always thought school was just where you go to learn stuff or avoid your teachers, but what I discovered in the pandemic is that schools are the institutions that take care of our children and our community. They are institutions of care, so school kitchens are not just the cafeteria. School kitchens are the heart of the community and when you provide universal school meals you are feeding the community. What we saw in the pandemic is how quickly school kitchens adapted. Even if the school was closed, the school kitchen in my own community fed people with no questions asked. If you just rolled up, they gave you a meal.

What I have seen internationally is that when you feed children that increases families' socioeconomic stability, improves mental health, and reduces child labour, which is a big problem in all countries, I have to say. I wholeheartedly agree and I will add one more thing. If you connect schools to a procurement programme to local producers you are improving your food exponentially.

Q160 Ian Byrne: It is an investment. Do you have any examples of countries that have adopted the approach you have advocated?

Professor Fakhri: The most famous is Brazil and that was from a few years ago under a different Administration. That is the leading example of how it can work and it is being taken up in my community here in Oregon in the United States. I hear of situations in Canada. In fact, this Friday, I am presenting a keynote on procurement for school meals. It is taken up by the right to food office of the Food and Agriculture Organisation in Rome. This is gaining traction and popularity. Also it relies on local government, and the other thing I learned from the pandemic is the importance of supporting local government in these programmes.

Ian Byrne: Okay, thanks Michael—great evidence.



Q161 **Mrs Murray:** Can I turn to agroecology? You have advocated nations adopting agroecology farming methods. What are the main costs and benefits of such an approach?

Professor Fakhri: There are all these different terms that are out there these days, regenerative agriculture and so on. Agroecology is an agricultural practice that mimics ecological processes as much as possible and prioritises biodiversity and human rights. It does not separate how you treat the land from how you treat people, so it is very holistic. The farms and ecosystems in agroecology are about growing a diverse number of plants and animals in a very particular relationship so that by producing food we are enhancing biodiversity and people's rights.

The scientific question has been: will we be able to produce enough food to feed people by doing things this way? Following and tracking the research for the last 20 years on this issue and staying on top of things, the research keeps pointing to the answer being yes. The problem with hunger and malnutrition in the world is not a problem of production. In the last 60 years we have increased production of food by 300%. We have outpaced the growth of population, but malnutrition and hunger are still a problem. The problem is not production, it is about making food in a way that is better, and agroecology can do it. All the science is suggesting and pointing more and more that to the fact that it will be able to produce enough food—and good food—for people.

The challenge is the transition—shifting and moving from systems of monocropping, homogenous ecosystems, to these more biodiverse systems. I have outlined what countries can do to transition. It is about land use policy and about workers. Agroecology is very labour intensive. It is not anti-technology by any means, but ultimately you need more people working the land and you have to shift the training of workers, but that creates jobs. That is an opportunity if done right. There is the transition for workers and there is still the existing political economy of powerful corporations dominating food systems. I can continue with which countries are taking it up or I can stop there.

Q162 **Mrs Murray :** If you can answer this question with a very short answer. Given the increasing global population, is a shift to agroecology compatible with raising global food production?

Professor Fakhri: Yes.

Q163 **Chair:** Sri Lanka tried this with disastrous results, didn't it?

Professor Fakhri: Thank you for raising that example. If I may explain quickly what Sri Lanka did. Sri Lanka was experiencing a debt crisis and their farmers relied on the importation of inputs, especially fertilisers and to some degree pesticides. The Government decided, "Let's force everyone to shift to organic farming immediately". They did it too quickly, they did not engage with farmers locally and it was not participatory. They focused it on the narrow terms of organic farming as the problem



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they were trying to solve was reducing the dependency on fertilisers, not a holistic transformation of their local food system and ecology.

It shows that you have to have a human rights approach in shifting to organics that is participatory, transparent and has a right plan to transition so that you don't end up in that situation, and you have to think holistically.

Chair: Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt. Well, I did mean to interrupt, but back to you, Sheryll.

Q164 **Mrs Murray :** That is fine, Chairman. Finally, does the focus of the new farming payment scheme in England on payments to farmers for public goods, including soil health, align with agroecology farming methods?

Professor Fakhri: Unfortunately, I am not able to answer that question. I haven't looked specifically at the legislation, but if I visit I would be more than happy to provide a detailed answer.

Mrs Murray : Thank you very much. Thank you for being so honest.

Chair: I will now pass to Julian Sturdy who, like me, is a Yorkshire farmer.

Q165 **Julian Sturdy:** Thank you, Michael, for your contribution so far. It has been really interesting. Before I go on to the specific question I am going to ask, I will come back on something that Sheryll asked when you talked about the question of the ever-increasing global population and the shift to agroecology. Where do you feel new technology plays a role in this?

Professor Fakhri: As people in this room know, agriculture is always dependent on technology and has always innovated from the time humans invented agriculture as a practice. It is always about advancing and innovation. The question is what is the right type of technology, what is the appropriate technology that serves people's needs as opposed to people serving the technology. We are all slaves to our phone now. I am not sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing in technological advancement.

Agroecology is labour intensive, but then it becomes about what is the right technology and what is lacking in agroecology is significant investment by Governments to develop technology in a way that works hand in hand with farmers' needs. Agroecology is dependent on a close relationship between researchers and farmers, and many countries have those programmes—often they are called extension services. That is where you get the question of what kind of technological innovations we need. The local community and the local food producers will say, "This is what we need", but I have not seen enough of that. The countries that support agroecology financially are Switzerland, France and Germany. They support it locally and internationally, but the consensus is that there needs to be a lot more research in this area.



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Q166 **Julian Sturdy:** But you would support an investment in the science and tech that could drive it forward?

Professor Fakhri: Indeed. It would have to be producer-driven and focused on making sure that it meets people's human rights needs.

Q167 **Julian Sturdy:** Thank you. The Government here have recently published their food strategy. What do you feel that national food strategies need to do ultimately to be useful and workable?

Professor Fakhri: They need to be holistic in making sure that the whole Government is working along the same plan. Unfortunately, food has been fragmented across different Ministries in all Governments, so it needs to unify Governments and create a coherent and consistent approach from a Government perspective. It needs to be systemic and understand food as a system is not just about farms. It is all aspects, including hunting rights, fishing rights and pastoralism, so it needs to be systemic in that regard. There need to be mechanisms of accountability and participation. Consumers and producers need to have mechanisms of influencing policies and keeping them dynamic. There needs to be some sort of body in the Government that promotes it as a human right.

It is easy to get lost in it as a policy issue, a scientific issue or an economic issue. I think that if there is some sort of mechanism, body or individual that keeps everyone on track and reminds everyone that this is a human right and what that means as things change, that will keep things moving in the right direction.

Q168 **Chair:** In one of your earlier comments you talked about, particularly with developing countries, people's access to land to grow their own food. It is interesting that here in the UK that growing food in an allotment or a kitchen garden has become a very middle-class pastime whereas a couple of generations ago every working family that had a garden would be able to meet quite a lot of their own family's needs. Is it a global phenomenon that as societies become more advanced these skills have gone? The same might apply, I suspect, to cooking skills and using basic ingredients.

Professor Fakhri: Yes, I have wondered the same. I think the pandemic almost equalled those things. It reminded people of the importance of growing your own food, a little garden and cooking at home and that it is not just a hobby. It is a part of daily life, a way of connecting to the land, and I think in the pandemic cooking a meal was a way of bringing your family and community together. I think people in the pandemic, whether they were middle class or working class, whether they were in a rich country or a poor country, realised that cooking and growing food is part of being human and part of how we relate to each other and to the environment. I think that people have learned in the last few years that it is existential and it is part of our sense of dignity in the end, it is not just functional or aesthetic.

Q169 **Chair:** On nations' approach to this, are there any model strategies that



might be a good way to go or to follow? You mentioned Maine and Scotland. Are there other places that we could see from the UK perspective as a good example that we could follow?

Professor Fakhri: The Brazil model, when it was operational, is a good one to look at. Local food councils are a phenomenon in which there is a relationship between local community groups and local government. I know that local food councils are pretty dynamic in Canada, so that is a good place to look. It is interesting that France changed the name of their Ministry of Agriculture to the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Sovereignty. For the purposes of brevity, I will say that food sovereignty aligns with agroecology, so you can look at what that means in that shift. Ultimately, every country has very unique circumstances and other countries are helpful, but I think what is most important is that the conversation is had with local communities, local movements, food producers, consumers who are the most vulnerable. It is in that element and that relationship that needs to happen where every country determines success or failure.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed for your time, Michael. It has been fascinating to have a slightly more global perspective on what we have been doing in our own situation in the UK. You may be an early riser anyway, but thank you for getting up early to give evidence to the Committee.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lindsay Boswell, Maria Marshall and Anna Taylor.

Chair: I am pleased to welcome our second panel, slightly closer to home. I will ask you to introduce yourselves.

Anna Taylor: Good afternoon, everyone. I am Anna Taylor, Executive Director of the Food Foundation.

Lindsay Boswell: I am Lindsay Boswell. I am the Chief Executive of FareShare.

Maria Marshall: Maria Marshall. I am Project Manager with the Independent Food Aid Network.

Q170 **Chair:** You are very welcome. I will start by thanking you for everything you and your organisations do in these difficult times for families who are finding it hard to make ends meet. What decisions are households having to make, given rising food and energy prices in the UK? We hear a lot about eat or heat. How is that unfolding at the grassroots level?

Maria Marshall: Households at the moment are having to make heart-breaking decisions with the increased prices. We can see that with IFAN through the pressure that our members are under. For a bit of context, we are a network of independent food aid providers, including over 550 independent food banks across the UK.



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We have run several surveys of our members over the last six months and different organisations have responded to each survey. We are hearing through these different datasets a message that is clear and consistent, which is that the demand for charitable food aid is increasing and the ability for these food aid organisations to cope with that is significantly reduced.

On the decisions that households are having to make, if we are looking at the reason for use, the reason people are coming to the food bank, in all of the most recent surveys in the past six months the common reason has been the rising cost of living, followed by inadequate wages or the cut to universal credit last year. You mentioned heating or eating as an issue that people are facing. Increasingly we are finding that people are no longer able to do either and we can see the effect of this on the organisations in our survey that we published last week—95% of independent food banks that responded said that there has been an increase in need following the cut to universal credit last year and over 90% had helped people who had never needed the help of a food bank before. They were helping more people who needed more regular food supplies.

As this demand increased, 75% of responding organisations—and this is a very worrying thing—have been impacted by supply issues, with one in five having to reduce the size of the food parcels that they are handing out. In our October survey, this number was one in four organisations and this is before the winter sets in.

Q171 **Chair:** We will go into that in a minute. Anna, do you want to say something on that question?

Anna Taylor: Yes, I will add to Maria's perspective and give a bit of a national picture. We are not a frontline organisation. We do a lot in evidence compilation and presenting it to businesses and policymakers. Since the start of the pandemic we have been tracking food insecurity at the national level through surveys. We have done 11 rounds of data collection now and the very latest data, which was published in October, showed that in about 18% of households in the past month the adults had reported either skipping meals or going for a whole day without eating or going hungry and not eating because of not being able to afford or access food. That equates to about 9.7 million adults and 4 million children. Those levels have jumped, they have doubled since January of this year. We have been tracking regularly and we are seeing the graph rise incredibly fast.

On the kinds of trade-offs that Maria was talking about, we have also asked specific questions about the fuel and food challenge. We see that played out in people saying they are using fewer appliances for cooking—particularly those who are food insecure report that much more frequently—eating cold meals, washing dishes in cold water, even turning the fridge and freezer off for periods of time to save money. That is an interface between energy and food with a knock-on impact of safety and



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the quality of what people are eating. We also asked about whether people are buying less fruit and vegetables. We will come on to more healthy eating issues, but there are very marked drops in reported purchasing of fruit and vegetables among the households that are food insecure.

These are very real, practical, here and now, today. One of my colleagues spoke to a mother a couple of weeks ago who was deciding about cooking the children their evening meal or turning the broadband off. It was a trade-off between the energy of the broadband so they could do their homework or cooking a meal. It is very here and now; these are the decisions that families are making.

Q172 **Chair:** Lindsay, do you have a perspective on this?

Lindsay Boswell: The only thing I will add to the evidence you have had from my peers is that we are a B2B organisation. We supply charities and community groups, and 80% of them are telling us that they are seeing a doubling of demand and 73% of that demand is people who have never asked for help before. That is the only part of the equation that I think is useful for this part of the conversation.

Maria Marshall: Can I come in quickly on the point that Anna was talking about, food insecurity? I have talked about how our food banks are reaching the end of the road, their teams are completely exhausted, they are completely overstretched and it is becoming increasingly clear that they can't go on like this. But it is important to note that looking beyond the number of people using food banks, there is a wider food insecurity picture in the UK. Food Standards Agency data shows that from April to June 2021, 4% of people in England, Wales and Northern Ireland were using a food bank but 15% were reporting severe or moderate food insecurity. While IFAN's data on the use of food banks is really shocking, the actual food insecurity picture and the decisions that families are having to make is much broader than that.

Q173 **Chair:** Looking to next year, it is likely that inflation will start to unwind a little as the price shocks feed through the system, but it impacts poor families because they are facing 16.2% inflation on food as opposed to the basic rate of inflation and about 14% to 17% of their income goes on that. Do you expect with inflation coming off a little that the situation might improve?

Maria Marshall: While the picture that food banks are seeing at the moment is probably the worst that they have ever seen, much worse than at the start of the pandemic, there was a food insecurity crisis in this country before the pandemic. We know from DWP data, from the family resources survey, that the year before the pandemic even started 43% of households on universal credit were food insecure. It is exacerbating the problem. It is showing that food banks and charitable food aid is not the solution to the problem but also that the cost of living crisis is not the only reason why people are coming to food banks.



Chair: That leads on quite well to Neil Hudson's next question.

Q174 **Dr Hudson:** I will start with Maria. Are you confident that you can continue to meet demand while still providing healthy and nutritious food?

Maria Marshall: No, absolutely not. We are not even confident that we can reach demand with the quality of food that is not healthy and nutritious in most cases. In our most recent survey, 60% of the organisations responding said that if demand continues to increase, which it looks as if it will do, they will not be able to provide the support to everyone that needs it or they will have to reduce the size of the food banks.

Q175 **Dr Hudson:** Lindsay and Anna, do you concur with that?

Lindsay Boswell: We can't keep up with demand now. We have long waiting lists. I supply 9,500 frontline charities and community groups and I am not meeting the demand of any of those 9,500.

Q176 **Dr Hudson:** What issues does an increasing reliance on good to eat surplus food pose for you at FareShare?

Lindsay Boswell: We are a slightly odd organisation, in that our DNA is that we are an environmental organisation, so when there is uneconomic surplus we should make sure that that food does not go to waste. The technical phrase is we try to squeeze as much social goodness out of it as possible by getting it to where it can make the biggest difference. The key principle that we work to is we do not want to exacerbate or create a food aid system in the United Kingdom. We want to direct people who are vulnerable and need food to where there are services that address the causes of their problems. That is debt advice, dependency on alcohol, drugs and so on, leading through to homelessness.

The real power of the surplus food that we redistribute is showing individuals who need support, who have hunger as a symptom, that there is a local solution, local support. In many cases, even just identifying that there is love, care and compassion in their local community that can support them makes a fundamental difference to help them begin the steps to ask for help and to turn their lives around.

We have such huge quantities of good-quality surplus food. WRAP's own figures estimate that there is at least 2 million tonnes of good quality surplus food that is wasted at the farm gate. WWF reckon that that is massively underreported. Currently the vast majority of that food is either going to waste or is being turned into anaerobic digestion.

Q177 **Dr Hudson:** You will know, Lindsay, that our Committee was very strongly supportive of the schemes to help FareShare get some of that food from the farm gate and distribute it, and we have made recommendations to Government to continue that funding. This is your chance today to confirm to the Government and to the public how some



extra funding would help you do that. What would be the benefits of continuing with such schemes?

Lindsay Boswell: We have all the infrastructure in place and we can cope with a lot more food. We have the charities and the frontline community groups that are seeing and being swamped by demand. There is a very efficient, for the taxpayer, system and process in place. I don't want any more money. I would like farmers to find it cost neutral to be able to divert their surpluses into FareShare, and for FareShare to then be able to redistribute to the entirety of the food redistribution sector. For example, we supply none of your food banks with the level of demand that they would like at the moment. We would love to be able to supply a lot more fresh produce, British produce; £25 million diverted from the anaerobic digestion budget, which is under 3.5% of that budget, would generate 100 million meals over the next 12 months. I cannot think of a better time when such a left brain, right brain solution could be put into place than now.

Q178 **Dr Hudson:** That money would not necessarily be directed to you. It would be directed to help farmers distribute that and that side of things as well. That is a recommendation we could make to Government, that it is not a huge amount of money but it would make exponentially a vast amount of difference to people.

Lindsay Boswell: Absolutely, and it is no extra money, I would suggest. There is a tax break to put good-quality food into a biodigester. There is no tax break for a farmer to give that food to their local community that needs it and farmers are not a charity. I think this Committee and all Committees will know just how tough and tight it is in the farming community. £25 million diverted from the AD subsidy that currently exists—I am not suggesting additional taxpayer spending—would generate £100 million-worth of food and would not exacerbate the creation of a food aid system in the UK. It would be going to the frontline community groups that are a part, but only a part, of the essential support network to address the needs in our communities.

Maria Marshall: I appreciate the point about not wanting to bolster the system of charitable food aid, but I also want to touch on Lindsay's point about the infrastructure in place. We are seeing now, and with our data, that we do not have the infrastructure in charitable food aid to support people. I appreciate you asked about the impact on households, but I want to touch briefly on the impact on food bank teams and food bank volunteers as well. The impact on them is severe. They are reaching the end of the road, they are reaching breaking point. Last month we joined with the Trussell Trust and Feeding Britain to deliver a letter to the Prime Minister with this message that was signed by over 3,000 charitable food aid staff and volunteers.

I will quickly read a quote from one of our food bank managers. This is from Annie McCormack in the Broke Not Broken food bank in Perth and Kinross, who says, "Not only are we worried about our clients, but also



for our own volunteers and staff. They are witness to so much trauma and desperation and feeling the impact of their critical work. I am concerned that the third sector as a whole, who have filled these gaps for so long, is starting to crumble under the strain." When we talk about the infrastructure that is in place, I appreciated the point that Michael Fakhri made earlier that we already have the infrastructure in place for the cash- first approach. As a developed country, we have a social security system in place. People are coming to the food bank who are already receiving all the benefits they are entitled to and are already in work. Some people coming into the food bank have two or three jobs. Through wages, through social security, those systems and mechanisms are already in place to support people to afford food for themselves.

Q179 Geraint Davies: Anna, can I bring us back to the numbers? My understanding is that in 2010 there were 26,000 people who were using food banks. By 2021, last year, there were 2.6 million. That is a hundredfold increase. The latest figure you just mentioned was 18% of households had food insecurity, 9.7 million people. How many people are using food banks now? What is the change now versus last year?

Anna Taylor: I believe the latest Trussell Trust figures for the last six months are 1.3 million parcels, but as Maria knows better than me, that probably captures about half of the food banks, Trussell Trust and IFAN.

Maria Marshall: Even more with child and food aid organisations. There are thousands of those across the country as well.

Anna Taylor: Let's say it is something like double that, maybe 2.6 million or 3 million parcels, that kind of level, and then, as you say, if we have an equivalent time period, we have about 10.5 million adults in food insecurity. You can see that the number of people who end up going to food banks is significantly lower than those who are experiencing food insecurity to start with, so you have about a quarter of those people who are food insecure going to food banks. The two are very different numbers in that sense.

Q180 Geraint Davies: There is a much bigger number of people in some sense who need food banks than use them, but on top of that we have a situation where universal credit is going to go up by 10%, but we know food inflation is about 16%. In other words, there will be a cut, in some sense, in the real value of income to buy food. I know it is difficult to predict, but presumably that will mean that this winter things will get a lot worse than they have been.

Anna Taylor: We are expecting it to get much worse, and we are planning our next survey for January and already dreading the results. I think we are expecting it to continue to rise quite dramatically.

Q181 Geraint Davies: Maria, from what you were saying, is that your prediction as well? We have seen this huge escalation. The Government have said they will give 10% universal credit, but you mention 43% of



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people who are on universal credit are already going to food banks. Do you have any idea how many more will, given that they have not been given an uplift equivalent to the inflation in food?

Maria Marshall: It is absolutely worrying, and I will say with more people accessing food aid, measures such as increasing universal credit in line with inflation are going to reach a lot more people who are food insecure than through food-based solutions. It is really worrying, and we welcome the fact that benefits are going to be uprated in line with inflation, but these people must wait five months for that to come into effect. IFAN as an urgent measure will be calling for cash-first intervention, through benefits or one-off payments to low-income families through the winter, and that will reach the majority of people who are food insecure and are not coming to food banks and aid organisations.

Q182 **Geraint Davies:** I want to ask about the profile of food bank users. Do you have any information on this? Some time ago, I know the Trussell Trust gave me some evidence to suggest that at the time two thirds of food bank users had disabilities. I assume as more people become impoverished the proportion of people with disabilities may go down, because they already have it, but what is the situation on the profile of people?

Anna Taylor: I can tell you about the profile of people who are food insecure. Maria would be better on the food bank users. There are definitely higher rates of those who are food insecure among households where there is a disabled adult or child.

Q183 **Geraint Davies:** Do you have numbers on that?

Anna Taylor: Five times higher, I think. I will confirm that in a follow-up, but I think the levels are five times higher. The other risk factor is having children; 25% of households with children reported food insecurity in the past month compared with 10% of households without children. That is a big difference, and that differential appears to be growing—the two lines are widening as time goes on. In other words, it is becoming a higher risk to have children. When you look at the breakdown within a household—so households who have one child, two children, three or more—you see food insecurity rise dramatically. It is a very steep gradient. The more children you have, the much more food insecure you will be.

Q184 **Geraint Davies:** The fact that people do not get child benefit for the third child, those families obviously are much more at risk than those who have one or two.

Anna Taylor: That is right, and of course you have the factors that are built into the benefit system that create a detriment to those families but also the increased costs that go with having children and the cost of childcare. It is a combination of both costs and income factors that make those households particularly at risk, which of course in turn means that



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things like free school meals can be an important protective factor for families with children.

Q185 **Chair:** Geraint, if I could interject, are we talking about single-parent families or families with two people there, or workless families, absent fathers who do not make a contribution to the household, for example?

Anna Taylor: Certainly lone-parent families are at higher risk of food insecurity, but for the data I was citing there those are all households, so households who have maybe one or two adult parents in the household. Being a lone parent and having children is of course more challenging. Many of them who are food insecure are in work, to your other point. I can give you the breakdown of the different employment scenarios and so forth.

Q186 **Geraint Davies:** As you have said, there are millions of people using food banks, but there are millions more who are in food insecurity, in particular those with children. What should the Government do? I know in Wales everyone is allowed to have free school meals. Is that something you want to see going forward?

Anna Taylor: Absolutely. We have been helping to co-ordinate a big coalition of charities who have been campaigning under the banner of Feed the Future for an extension of free school meals in England to all children from households on universal credit, recognising that, as you say, at the moment England is a bit of an outlier across the United Kingdom in having large numbers of children who are in poverty but do not qualify for free school meals. As you say, Wales is moving to universal, as is Scotland in primary school. In Northern Ireland, the threshold to be eligible for free school meals is earnings of £14,000, whereas in England it is £7,400. In England, we have the most exclusions from free school meals once children go into year 3 and they are no longer eligible.

Q187 **Geraint Davies:** We will go on to school meals at the end. I will finish. Maria, ignoring free school meals, is there anything else that should be done? What should the Government do for this escalating need that we are seeing, in food insecurity, as prices go up? Is there anything to be done, perhaps through benefits?

Maria Marshall: We need to see urgent cash-first measures to help people who are struggling to afford food. We all know that a charitable food aid approach does not work. For the past 12 years in this country there have been millions of food parcels distributed to people who cannot afford to buy food, and here we are in a situation where food insecurity continues to rise. That is not the answer to the problem. We know it does not reach all the people who are food insecure.

We touched a bit on the cohort of people we are seeing at the food bank, which reflects structural inequalities in our society. Our food banks are seeing more older people, more families; disabled people are



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overrepresented at food banks, people with no recourse to public funds. As I said before, what needs to be done is reflected in the fact that the social security system should be in place to support these people. Also, with more people in work, many of our food banks will be open at a time when somebody could pick up a food parcel before work or they will deliver it to somebody's house while they are on a shift, so I think that is an important example to bring up.

Q188 Geraint Davies: Finally, in the profile of people who are disabled or other groups, is there anything from the point of view of food supply that the Government should be doing, other than the overall point you made about the bulk coming through and then being targeted accordingly?

Lindsay Boswell: I do not have anything to add.

Q189 Mrs Murray : I will turn to healthy eating. Anna, I will start with you and then move to Lindsay and Maria, if you have anything to add but not repeat at the end. How important is it to consider quality as well as quantity when thinking about food security at the household level?

Anna Taylor: Vital. Food insecurity obviously has immediate impacts on what people are eating and can afford to eat, affecting both the quality and the quantity of what they eat, which inevitably has long-term impacts on their health.

Q190 Mrs Murray : Very often it is probably cheaper to buy fresh produce and cook a meal from scratch rather than buy a processed meal. Am I correct?

Anna Taylor: Partially. Let me give you the full picture. There is a fantastic visual in the national food strategy evidence pack that shows when you price per calorie all foods available within supermarkets you find that overall on average unhealthy calories are about three times cheaper than healthy calories, when you look across the distribution of all foods available.

Q191 Chair: That is the whole point of healthy food, is it not, that they do not have a lot of calories in them compared to the other foods?

Anna Taylor: Yes, absolutely but if you have pressure on your income and you are trying to fill up your kids you tend towards cheaper forms of calories. There is a bunch of other things you are going to think about. You do not want to waste food, so you are not going to try something that the kids might not like, because that is a high-risk strategy. Of course, combined with the fuel price effects in the data that I reported a little bit earlier, people are getting worried about cooking from scratch and increasingly not cooking from scratch because they are worried about turning on the oven or the gas or whatever.

Combined, these factors are putting a lot of pressure on the quality of what people eat. You have to think that cooking from scratch is now



becoming a bit of a risk factor for families, more than it was before. To cite a couple of very specific numbers, in our surveys we asked families if they have been buying less fruit and vegetables in the past month. In the food- insecure households, about half of them, 58% for fruit and 47% for vegetables, said they were buying less, compared with about 10% of food-secure households. That is a really big difference and you see this also in sales data. It is emerging, there are not huge amounts yet, but Nielsen has reported that sales of vegetables are down by 6% and sweets and snacks up by 4%. We are already going into this crisis with, frankly, diets that are contributing to the bulk of preventable ill health across the country. This is an accumulating problem that is putting immense pressure on the NHS.

If we are creating additional problems particularly for children now, those problems will accumulate. Children who become an unhealthy weight when they are young find it very difficult to lose that weight and get on to a good track as they get older. You set out these pathways for children when they are young. Saving money now with children is false economy in the sense that we are just creating costs elsewhere in the system, including through the anxiety and stress of parents. I called up one of our local food provision charities yesterday in preparation for this session and she said that anxiety will kill them before hunger or poverty does. It is this intense stress that families are under. Combined with the dietary factors and impacts on ill health you also have this immense stress that plays out in other sets of health problems, which then of course creates costs elsewhere in the system. I think we need to look at health not just in dietary terms but more broadly in the effects of food insecurity, which can be quite dramatic for families and children.

Q192 Ian Byrne: What you are saying is devastating, because we live with it in what we do in Liverpool. We have had to put packs together for people who cannot cook, so you are now getting food bank packages where they do not have the ability to cook. This narrative where we could all cook a healthy meal and it would be great, in a perfect world it would be fantastic, if someone could have the heating on and the gas cooker for four hours and create this wonderful feast of food, but it is just not happening. There are so many people now who cannot put the cooker on and what they are doing is to boil a pot noodle, because that is what we are giving people. You said, Anna, and I am delighted you said it, that this will have a huge impact on our country moving forward. If we do not tackle it now and do not start investing in our kids to make sure that they have food, and healthy food, the impact down the line for generations will be huge.

I think from a Government perspective, and I said this before, short termism, ideological thinking has to go out of the window. We have to look at what we see now on the ground. Maria, are you getting that with people who cannot cook?



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Maria Marshall: Absolutely. Food banks increasingly are giving out what they call no-cook food parcels, so people who cannot afford to heat that food can just use boiling water. That impacts the nutritious quality of food that is available to them. On cooking a meal from scratch being the cheaper option, it is just not possible for many people. People are coming to the food bank not through a lack of knowledge or because they cannot cook in that sense. It is because it is absolutely not an option.

If I can come in, Sheryll, about the nutritious quality of food that food aid organisations are able to provide, that is limited by the very nature of food aid. It is more expensive for food banks to store and distribute fresh food that might go off than it is for less nutritious ambient food, and as the cost of that increases it becomes harder for them to do so.

Food aid organisations and food banks are not food shops or supermarkets. They do not have those same resources and we do not need them to have, because we have food shops that are in the most part already in convenient places for people to go there, already open at convenient times of the day and they already offer healthy options. We need to give people the income so that they can shop at those themselves. With the food that is coming through food banks and through food organisations, despite the huge effort that they make to try to meet people's dietary requirements and cultural preferences, that is just not possible.

Q193 **Mrs Murray :** Lindsay, do you have anything to add?

Lindsay Boswell: The point I was making earlier to your colleague was the point around the vast quantities of fresh produce that is available. Most organisations that we supply are cooking centrally, so are using that food and those meals as a way of trying to create community and a way of bringing people together. Less than 20% of the organisations that we support are food banks. To Anna's point about the anxiety and other aspects around bad diet, poor diet and lack of food, and the stress on the health effect, by people coming together and by people eating together there are huge additional benefits that go with that as well.

The point that I was making earlier around the resource that is currently going to waste within our fields, it is not just looking at the tonnage and the amount of food. It is the value that that food has as a societal benefit.

Q194 **Mrs Murray :** If I could continue with Lindsay and then go to the ladies to add anything. What do we need to see in the health inequalities White Paper to tackle the issue of healthy eating across society?

Lindsay Boswell: I think a bit like the professor earlier on, when it is not my specialisation I will hold my hand up, but I suspect that Anna might have a bit more to bring from the Food Foundation's perspective.



Anna Taylor: I am not certain that the health disparities White Paper is going ahead. If it is, great. I am not sure that it is.

Mrs Murray : The health inequalities White Paper.

Anna Taylor: Apologies. It was originally called the health disparities White Paper, so perhaps it has changed its name. On the sorts of things that we would like to see in it, there are two existing Government-funded programmes that are highly targeted towards children and have an ability to provide them with nutritious foods and provide that protective effect that we were talking about earlier when children are growing up. Free school meals is one of them. Healthy Start is an important scheme for pre-school children. That scheme provides vouchers for families with children under the age of four, who are on a very low income, both during pregnancy for their mum and then when the child is up to the age of four years. That scheme has proven to be important for helping to tip up consumption of fruit and vegetables, which provide important effects for when children are growing.

We would like to see that scheme invested in. At the moment, it is very small and there are lots of people who are eligible for it who do not get it. There are several good reasons for that. The voucher at the moment has not gone up with inflation, like other things have, so it has less purchasing power. Children at the age of four stop being eligible and many of those children are not yet in school and getting a free school meal, so there is a little gap in the age of children where they are not covered by either scheme. Extending that scheme to more children who are in poverty, making it for slightly older children as well, and thinking about the value of that voucher would be incredibly well-targeted resources with strong evidence behind them. We would like to see that thought about.

To your earlier question, we have a problem of the balance of prices in the system now, as it is much easier to eat badly if you have little money than it is to eat well, for a host of reasons, but price is an important part of that. Long-term, when we are thinking about food policy, we must think about the fiscal measures that will make that balance shift in a way that is more conducive to the long-term health of the population. Those are tough fiscal measures that need to be thought about.

Q195 **Mrs Murray :** Obviously healthy eating is not just restricted to people who are less well off. I think that is what I am trying to get from you—it is not just people in poverty. It is making sure that as a society we all eat healthily.

Finally, the Government have deferred restrictions on junk food price promotions and advertising due to the cost of living crisis. Do you support this move, the “buy one, get one free” promotion?

Anna Taylor: No. We would like to see the supermarkets doing “buy one, get one free” on staple foods, not on junk food. Some of the



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supermarkets said they were going to stick to the policy, Sainsbury's and Tesco in particular. Sainsbury's, I believe, has stuck to it, but Tesco has not. Of course we want to ensure that people can afford to eat, but let us focus those BOGOFs on staple foods. That makes a lot more sense.

It is very unclear why advertising is linked to the cost of living. At the end of the day, advertising restrictions are about helping parents with pester power and trying to make sure that children and young people are not bombarded with adverts for junk food. In my view, those regulations could be introduced immediately. All the groundwork has been done; the evidence base has been presented and is very clear. I do not think there is any reason to hesitate on those.

Q196 **Mrs Murray** : Before I go back to the Chair, Lindsay or Maria, do you have anything to add on healthy eating?

Lindsay Boswell: Only to endorse the last point that Anna made on the advertising side.

Maria Marshall: Choice is key, and where people do not have the choice, as Anna said, not just people coming to the food banks but on wider food insecurity, they reach for the options that are not healthy.

Q197 **Mrs Murray** : I am talking about healthy eating on a broad basis, not just restricted to people who tend to use your food banks. Do you have anything to add?

Maria Marshall: Nothing else.

Mrs Murray : Thank you very much.

Chair: I note that in the Members' tearoom all the chocolate is just where you are queuing up to pay, so we are as bad as anyone here in putting temptation in the way of Members of Parliament.

Barry Gardiner: But you all resisted, Chair?

Chair: I do like a Tunnock's, it has to be said.

Barry Gardiner: Six million people per week also.

Q198 **Geraint Davies:** A very small supplementary on the issue of fiscal measures. Would you be sympathetic, Anna, to a sugar tax, for example, on bulk purchases of sugar that are added to processed food that are adding to diabetes and perhaps using that money to support more healthy food for poorer households?

Anna Taylor: There is scope for reformulation taxes or taxes on manufacturers for using ingredients that we know are detrimental, such as sugar and salt, and in turn creating revenue to do some of this, subsidising healthier food for children. It seems to me like a very useful vein of policy thinking that should be developed. Of course, Henry



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Dimbleby laid it out in those terms in the national food strategy independent review.

Lindsay Boswell: On that point, all the evidence from the sugar tax around the reformulation and therefore the amount of sugar that was taken out of the processing system, we have as a result of inflation, a vicious war taking place at retail level. If those taxes were there and in place, the imperatives on the food system to reformulate are even greater now, and the evidence is there around the success of changing for major manufacturers, but own brand as well, the formulas to reduce price. The one thing that each retailer wants to do now is compete on price. I think in the cost of living crisis there is a clear and obvious imperative to look afresh in accelerated terms at those sorts of measures.

Q199 **Geraint Davies:** Wouldn't poor people say, "Oh, we cannot afford even to give the kids chocolate now"? I am just playing devil's advocate.

Lindsay Boswell: My comments were mainly at the food manufacturing sector around how they will work their socks off to reformulate to reduce the price by eliminating the sugar element, or whichever element it is. I think there needs to be some joined-up thinking.

Chair: It seems to work with carbonated drinks already.

Q200 **Barry Gardiner:** Unusually, it falls to me to try to salvage something for the Government here about the Government's food strategy. Maria, you at the Independent Food Aid Network said that it would do nothing to stem the growing number of people who are not able to choose and afford healthy and nutritious food due to a lack of income. Anna, you guys said pretty much the same thing. What are the food security issues that the strategy did manage, if any, to propose as effective measures to tackle?

Maria Marshall: From our perspective, the main driver of food insecurity is economic inequality and the fact that people cannot afford to buy food for themselves. Unfortunately, in the national food strategy they did not take this opportunity to address the income that is driving people to food banks in the first place.

Q201 **Barry Gardiner:** If you were making a recommendation, as this Committee must, to Government about what should be added to the food strategy, what would that recommendation be?

Maria Marshall: First, the strategy makes reference to the fact that there needs to be a qualified and well-paid workforce to support the food and drink industry in this country, but there is no reference to the fact that there are lots of people who work in the food industry who are being supported by independent food banks. If you have employers who profess to care about food poverty, they need to pay their employees and sub-contracted employees a real living wage, so we need emphasis on a real living wage and job security in the food and drink sector, and also



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bringing social security payments and wages in line with the cost of living.

Q202 **Barry Gardiner:** Anna, on the same theme, what recommendation would you make separate to the one that Maria has just given us?

Anna Taylor: What we were hoping to see in the food strategy was a piece of primary legislation that would help move us as a country towards some of the issues that came up in the earlier session; a clearer set of ambitions for what we expect from the food system in its environmental impact, and social and health impact; and how we would start to measure progress towards that. Something a bit like the kind of thing that Michael Fakhri would call an accountability framework, but something that sets out what we hope to achieve and how we are going to report progress to Parliament on achieving that.

That would allow us to put into one place the broad diversity of food issues that happen across different parts of Government. Often at the moment you have Departments at odds with one another, so there is incoherence with the policy process around food, where you might have DCMS being concerned about advertising and the arts and the creative industries, but the Department of Health and Social Care having a slightly different agenda around advertising, or DEFRA being concerned about the food industry and the growth of the food industry, but again that being at odds with the public health agenda.

Q203 **Barry Gardiner:** With respect, you are giving me an analysis, which I agree with. Give me a recommendation, or give me several recommendations, but give me a recommendation.

Anna Taylor: What we would like to see is a food Bill that sets out a set of targets for the food system and a process for monitoring them and reporting them to Parliament.

Q204 **Barry Gardiner:** That is helpful. DEFRA said that the food strategy had set out measures to ease the supply chain bottlenecks and to improve efficiency, "aiming to reduce pressures on the cost of food". Is it a surprise to you, that figure that I quoted in the earlier session, that the three largest supermarkets in this country, Tesco, Sainsbury's and Asda, increased their profits as against pre-Covid levels, by 97%?

Lindsay Boswell: My understanding is that one of the drivers of that—and I know this is recorded and I want it on record that I am not here as a defender or apologist for the food retail sector—is that pre-pandemic on average 30% of the calories that we consumed, particularly if we were in work, were consumed outside the home. Obviously with schools and hospitality closing, people not going to work and therefore not buying their lunch at a sandwich bar, 100% of our calories during the pandemic were being secured through the supermarkets. That must be a contributory factor to that enormous statistic.



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Q205 **Barry Gardiner:** It would be if one was comparing the financial year during the pandemic with the financial year pre-pandemic, but those figures do not. They compare the financial year post-pandemic, the current financial year, with the pre-pandemic level. While I wholly accept the rationale that you gave for those years—

Lindsay Boswell: I misunderstood you.

Barry Gardiner: —those statistics are not related to those years. My question still stands: given that the Government's food strategy aimed to reduce pressures on the cost of food, is it a surprise that the supermarkets have increased their profits by 97% and indeed if you look at the food manufacturers their profit level was £22.9 billion after the pandemic? Nestlé alone was £13.7 billion, more than £4 billion more than its pre-pandemic level.

Lindsay Boswell: The answer to your question must be yes. It is a surprise.

Chair: Particularly, Barry, as we have Lidl and ALDI in there disrupting the market and taking lower margins, we are told.

Q206 **Barry Gardiner:** You will recall that Professor Fakhri talked about price controls and the way in which the international speculation had affected the market. We talked about gouging with him, and I know you were listening to that. Do you think that one of the tools that the food strategy should have used to ease supply chain bottlenecks and improve efficiency might have been price controls, as Professor Fakhri suggested?

Chair: Are we in the "it's beyond my paygrade" area?

Lindsay Boswell: Chair, you literally took the sentence out of my mouth.

Chair: I have to say as a wheat producer if I was told I could only get a certain price on the domestic market I would be sending it to Hull and it could go on a ship. It is not always that straightforward, I suppose. We have the Groceries Code Adjudicator, of course.

Q207 **Barry Gardiner:** How does one stop price gouging by the supermarkets and by the supply chain that produces the goods on the shelf? There is clear evidence of price gouging.

Anna Taylor: One of the measures that we have had in place has been the Groceries Code Adjudicator for protecting producer prices. I think it has had some successes, but perhaps not had the extent of powers that it might have to be able to protect producers.

The other area that we touched on earlier, but was not considered in the food strategy, was how you think about this question of fiscal measures to rebalance prices within the system and create a better set of incentives for lower-price healthier foods and rebalancing healthy and



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unhealthy foods and using fiscal measures to do that. That is thinking about the role of price and how vital it is for ultimately determining people's choices in the supermarket, but that is a little bit different from what you are talking about.

Q208 Barry Gardiner: In the Second World War how did we treat those people who were operating the black market in sugar and butter? What did we do with them?

Lindsay Boswell: They were treated extremely harshly, but also in the Second World War through rationing and the weighting that the Ministry of Food put into place at that time there was effectively price control. The Government made, for example, milk much more attractive on a rationing voucher than butter, to encourage a healthier diet. You have three NGOs here. This is a big political, with a big "P", question.

Barry Gardiner: I am tempting you to stray too much.

Chair: In our next session we will be with academics who may well have thought about these things.

Lindsay Boswell: Yes. If you were calling Professor Tim Lang then you would have a very lively session on this subject, I suspect.

Q209 Barry Gardiner: What are the practical steps that the Government need to undertake to fulfil the strategic vision that was set out in the food strategy? You have given us two recommendations. What are the practical steps?

Anna Taylor: One very practical step sets out in the strategy to introduce what it calls a food data transparency partnership, which is about creating ultimately mandatory requirements on many of these big food companies to report sales-based metrics about what they are selling: the environmental footprint of what they are selling, the health profile of what they are selling, and food waste—those kinds of metrics. That to me feels like a very tangible, concrete and relatively easy step. In fact, many of the companies have welcomed that recommendation and said, "Please get on with it."

You would publish that data annually, you would inform and fertilise a conversation about whether the food industry is going in the direction it needs to go in, and you would also of course create an ecosystem around that data where campaigners can say, "But Asda, you have not moved in the right direction this year, but Sainsbury's have" or whatever it is. For me, that feels very practical and it is something the Government could get on with right now. I have not seen any progress on it since the summer when the paper was published, but there is no reason not to move ahead with that immediately.

Q210 Barry Gardiner: That is another very good recommendation for us. Anything further?



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Lindsay Boswell: Get serious on food waste. COP27 has just closed. We all know the phrase, “If food waste was a country it would be the third largest greenhouse gas emitter after China and the USA.” There are slow, tentative introductions of measurement post-farm gate, but most food waste is pre-farm gate. That has been put in the too difficult category. I do not think it is too difficult at all, and I have already done the joined-up thinking right at the very beginning with your colleague’s question around the social benefits that we can drive and reach out of diverting uneconomic surplus. Do not get me wrong, food is grown, made, manufactured, and distributed to be sold. It is a profitable commodity; it should be, but where it cannot be, let us not waste it.

Maria Marshall: I agree with your initial point about the fact that we need to get serious on food waste, and I appreciate the point you made earlier about the social value of food. It is a scandal that we have a food system where so many people cannot afford to eat and there is so much food that is going to waste. However, it is a mistake to try to use one of those problems, food waste, to try to solve the other one, food insecurity. If we do that, there is going to be no action taken on either of those problems. Separate them at the root. IFAN has supported the Plenty to Share campaign that has a lot of practical steps on how we can move towards that.

Lindsay Boswell: I entirely agree with my colleague. Nobody in FareShare suggests that the diversion of surplus food is a solution to poverty.

Q211 **Barry Gardiner:** Anna, you gave us two statistics about fruit and vegetables—the decline, I think, of about 52% and 46%. Is there any sign that the law of supply and demand has cut in here and now fruit is much cheaper because the demand is much less?

Anna Taylor: No. We are not seeing that.

Q212 **Barry Gardiner:** Why would that be?

Anna Taylor: For fruit in particular we also have impacts on supply, with farmers in the UK saying they are not putting crop in the ground because of the labour problems and the input costs and no guaranteed prices at the other end and they do not know what those prices will be like. There is an effect on production, but of course for things such as fruit—the vast majority of our fruit is imported; I think that 90% of the fruit that we eat in the UK comes from other countries—this is a UK demand issue against a global supply issue, and I do not think we have yet seen the effects of that flow through the system on any scale.

The sales data are only just starting to come through. We have not seen anything robust on sales reduction of fruit and vegetables. There is a lot of reported behaviour. People are saying that they are buying less fruit and vegetables, but we are not seeing it play out. There are some Nielsen statistics that I cited, but it is early days in seeing those effects.



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If I could go back to make one final point regarding your point about concrete actions and something that feels as if it has been an ongoing point of conversation with this Committee, which is about understanding where household food insecurity as a problem resides in Government to be solved. The then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions said a few months ago this was a DEFRA problem. DEFRA does not appear to have any of the levers to address this problem, and I think, if anything, it would be good if this Committee could make a clear recommendation around aligning. It does not need to be a dedicated Minister or anything grand like that, it just needs to be which Department is responsible for this.

Q213 **Barry Gardiner:** It is in the title—the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Anna Taylor: But DEFRA does not have any of the levers, and that is part of the bind that we are in, and this lack of accountability is a drag on progress.

Barry Gardiner: I agree. Thank you.

Q214 **Geraint Davies:** I mentioned a previous witness and the analysis of famine, people with not enough wages facing high prices, so the issue for the Government surely is how to keep down prices and hold up people's incomes. Barry Gardiner mentioned that there is excess profiteering among food retailers in particular. It seems that there is a case for windfall taxes, and meanwhile it was alluded to by Lindsay in essence that because the retailers were the sole consumers for farmers they are able to drive down the prices they pay to farmers because they did not have hospitality as an alternative market and profiteer and hold their prices. It must be the case that if they are making enormous amounts of money they could have offered lower prices to people who have very little money to buy the food. What is your recommendation? Presumably to do the analysis and then see if there is a case for a windfall tax or intervention?

Anna Taylor: At the very least I think the Department of Health and Social Care could be laying out a set of expectations of food retailers around promotions, recognising that we know that when people trade down in price that often means trading down in the health credentials of the food that they are buying.

Even before you get to a windfall tax, which might well be a fruitful line of enquiry, I think there is a lot that can be done that says, "We expect in certain categories of food, for example that children depend on, you make sure that the cheapest product in the range is the healthiest product in the range or you are targeting your loyalty points or your discount packages around fruit and vegetables", which we know are the things that are increasingly seen as a luxury item. Setting out those expectations feels like something the Department of Health and Social Care could do right away or with DEFRA in combination.



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Q215 **Geraint Davies:** Basically a holistic approach, so that you look at the impact on educational outcomes of food insecurity, the health outcomes, the life chance outcomes and therefore the overall public accounts, the amount of tax revenue expected, versus the amount of social cost you have to pay, and therefore have food at the centre of all those decisions, rather than some peripheral thing that is kicked into DEFRA's area and they cannot do anything about it?

Anna Taylor: Absolutely, yes.

Geraint Davies: Let alone the 6% increase in price inflation from Brexit, that the OBR tells us that we have.

Ian Byrne: A quick one, to reinforce what Anna was saying. It is one of my great frustrations, that we get the Secretary of State and it gets passed to another Department and I know that with the previous Chair it was a great frustration as well. I think that we are going to be really interested in the evidence session with the Secretary of State. She was the DWP Secretary of State who passed it to DEFRA, so now we have a position where we can push down on that, and I think that will certainly be one of the recommendations I will be making. Anna, I promise you that we will get accountability for this problem. Without it, we will never solve it at a Government level, because all they do is pass it down to other people, so that is something I promise you I will be pushing for.

Q216 **Chair:** Did the first UK food security report provide an accurate analysis of food security issues? Who is up for that one?

Anna Taylor: It was certainly comprehensive and there is no reason to doubt its accuracy. It is interesting that it felt like a very descriptive account and it did not reach any firm conclusions or advice or recommendations for consideration by Parliament. That feels to me that it limits its value from the perspective of being able to provide that touchpoint every two or three years, when Parliament would get an opportunity to say, "What is the situation of the nation's food security? What are the things we need to be worried about?" There is just this hugely comprehensive list of indicators and nothing that rises to the surface for pointing you in the right direction. I think its value could be improved, but it is a good account of the breadth of issues around food insecurity.

Q217 **Chair:** Do you think it would be better with more granularity on impacts on individual households rather than the overall UK situation?

Anna Taylor: There is a section on household food insecurity, which draws in a lot of the data. Again, it does not refer to who is responsible for dealing with that problem, and that is back to the same accountability problem. It is comprehensive in that sense.

Q218 **Barry Gardiner:** What impact has the whole package of measures in the Household Support Fund had on food security?



Maria Marshall: Can I first quickly come in on the food security report? I appreciate how that report made it clear that accessibility is not a major issue for a huge number of the population, even if you do not have access to a car. It is income that is the issue, and it talked about how the lowest incomes have been decreasing and the highest incomes have been increasing over the past three years. As Anna says, we need to see more accountability, because that responsibility at the moment is falling on child or food aid organisations.

We know that what works to reduce food insecurity is a cash-first approach. We know that cash-first works. Family Resources Survey data from April 2019 to March 2020 compared with April 2020 to March 2021 showed that there was a 16% drop in moderate to severe food insecurity for households on universal credit following that £20 a week uplift of universal credit made during the pandemic, which was ultimately cut last year in October. It is clear that the cash-first measures work, so more of a focus on that and more accountability.

Q219 **Chair:** That was to compensate families for not having free school meals, so when the schools opened again the free school meals resumed. That was part of the rationale behind that, wasn't it?

Anna Taylor: No, the £20 uplift was not about free school meals specifically. Free school meals were plugged eventually through the voucher schemes and then the Household Support Fund and it was for all households, not just households with children. It was much broader than that.

Q220 **Barry Gardiner:** Turning back to the Household Support Fund?

Lindsay Boswell: I admit that I know absolutely nothing about the Household Support Fund, so I am looking to others.

Maria Marshall: IFAN, alongside many other anti-poverty charities, is calling for a permanent Household Support Fund to the tune of £1 billion per year. End Furniture Poverty's report last year on crisis support available in local authorities showed that one in five people in England are living in an area with no local crisis support. We welcome the £1 billion made in the autumn statement for the Household Support Fund and the fact that crucially it is not ring-fenced to a certain cohort of people, where previously that has happened and has limited local authorities' ability to target support. Population needs vary from area to area, so that needs to be to the local authorities' discretion.

What is also concerning is that funding from the Household Support Fund has come with guidance that could further entrench charitable food aid, when we know that charitable food aid does not work to help people in the long term to reduce food insecurity. The guidance needs to be for this money to be distributed in a cash-first way and not in a way that is going to further entrench food aid. If there is a permanent Household Support Fund, which we would like to see, it needs to prioritise cash first, which is



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more dignified and effective, it needs to be accessible and simple with minimal barriers to access and support, and it needs to be well promoted. People need to know what support is available to them.

Barry Gardiner: That is a very comprehensive answer, and you even answered my follow-up question.

Chair: We will go on to free school meals with Ian, who has been campaigning on this for a long time.

Q221 **Ian Byrne:** Lindsay, I want to pass my thanks on to Ann and the magnificent team in Liverpool who do so much working with us to alleviate what is happening on the streets. I would like to give a shout-out to all the team, because they are absolutely tremendous.

For me, what we have discussed today—and your evidence has been brilliant across the board—is a systemic failure, completely, where we are now and what we are talking about and the numbers, and we are not even into the depths of winter yet, and we are all terrified of what that will bring. What we heard in the first part of the session, I would just like it on record, I will just outline, do you support the right to food?

Maria Marshall: Yes, I support the right to food and crucially, the right to food that sees the Government responsible for tackling food insecurity, not charitable food aid organisations and crucially puts increasing income at the heart of a right to food.

Lindsay Boswell: I agree with every single word of my colleague.

Anna Taylor: I agree.

Q222 **Ian Byrne:** That is for the record. We touched on free school meals before, but, Anna, does every child currently living in poverty have access to free school meals?

Anna Taylor: No. In England there are an estimated 800,000 children who are living in poverty but are not eligible for free school meals. The numbers vary across the United Kingdom, as I mentioned earlier, because of different levels of eligibility for free school meals across the devolved nations, but in England we are a bit of an outlier in having these very large numbers of children who do not qualify but are living in poverty.

Q223 **Ian Byrne:** For the future of our children, and indeed the nation because these are the next generation who are going to secure the future of the country, can we afford not to broaden the eligibility for free school meals?

Anna Taylor: No. A charity called the Impact on Urban Health, commissioned PwC to do a cost benefit analysis of free school meals. They looked at two scenarios. One is expanding free school meals to all children on universal credit and the second is expanding free school meals to all children, regardless of income. Under both scenarios you saw



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a really fantastic return on investment, and those returns are delivered through savings to parents and the fact that that money can then be spent on other things, whether it is more nutritious food at home or other things, but importantly improved educational outcomes and lifetime productivity, an earnings impact.

The NHS impacts start small, because when children are an unhealthy weight they do not tend to have a big impact on the NHS but those costs accumulate significantly as people get into later life. In fact, the model significantly underestimates those costs because PwC developed a 20-year model. Absolutely, you see a raft of benefits. At the very narrow definition of those benefits, it is £1 in, £1.38 out. That is for extending free school meals to all children on universal credit. If you go beyond that—

Ian Byrne: Universal free school meals?

Anna Taylor: —and then factor in the wider multiplier effects of supply chains, procurement and the economic impacts of doing more food procurement, you see a much higher level of return on investment.

Overall, it seems the arguments until now have been that to extend free school meals is unaffordable. It costs about £477 million, which would be an annual cost, to do that and that has been judged to be unaffordable. I think we have the evidence, which is in the language that Treasury understands, which is what are the returns this investment will bring? We see that delivering returns immediately in household savings and on into the long term in productivity, skills and the educational outcomes that result. It is a powerful body of evidence that speaks to the fact that we must think very seriously right now about reviewing those eligibility criteria, particularly in the context of the cost of living crisis.

Q224 **Chair:** Before we finish, Maria, we have a fantastic food bank in Scarborough run by the Church of England, the Rainbow Centre. Trish Kinsella who runs it is a saint. When I have been there I have asked why some people who rely on benefits and who are on low incomes do not need the food bank when others do. It seems very complex. They do debt counselling there sometimes, people have things on credit, or they have fallen into the hands of payday lenders, or in some cases they have a 20-cigarettes-a-day habit, or in other cases there are alcohol or drug problems.

If you were to look at the people who use the food banks, what are the social or other issues that we as a society need to address to ensure that people can live within their means? Is it that they have an expensive contract on their phone, or is it because they have an absent father who just is not paying the money or the child support agency or whatever they call it now is not working? What are the issues that drive some families to food banks when others get by?



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Maria Marshall: I will start by talking about the fact that we have only had food banks in this country for the past 12 years. Food banks emerged as a result of austerity policy and social security being completely decimated. 75% of independent food banks started operating over the past nine years, with over a third opening from 2012 to 2013. It is not that suddenly during this time there were all these behavioural problems and people suddenly needing to come to food banks. The problem is the lack of income.

I agree with the point that you are making—when people come to the food bank they have complex problems, and this is what food banks and food aid teams must deal with. Most of our food banks when they opened 10 or so years ago opened to an immediate need they saw in the community. People were in immediate crisis, and they thought they could help get them out of that. I do not think they could have ever imagined the situation that they find themselves in now, where they are not just helping people that are in short-term crisis, the boiler has broken, and so on. They are being relied on by people and the state to be there in the long term.

Q225 **Chair:** It was not just when their benefit cheque did not arrive and they had an issue; it is more regularly, unfortunately, that people run out of money.

Maria Marshall: I keep saying cash first. We need a cash-first approach. As well as that, for a cash-first process to work, you need to have a well-funded advice sector, so that people can get the support they need, and they are not having an automatic food bank referral, which means they pick up a food parcel, and then they are coming back the next week and the next week. They need that holistic support before a food bank referral that helps them get out of that situation.

Chair: That is very helpful. A final question from Geraint.

Q226 **Geraint Davies:** Two very quick questions on the healthy eating voucher. So we are clear, what you are recommending that we recommend is that the healthy eating voucher is inflated for the price inflation of food and, secondly, is provided to a much greater breadth of people who do not take it up. Is that right?

Anna Taylor: The healthy start voucher, yes.

Q227 **Geraint Davies:** Secondly, you are recommending—and tell me if other people agree—that the model in Wales where we have free school meals rolling out for everybody at lunchtime—we already have them at breakfast—should be extended right across England and the UK generally. Is that right?

Anna Taylor: Yes, ultimately that is exactly what we would like to see.



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Q228 **Geraint Davies:** Is that something that the other panellists would support, free school meals for everyone?

Maria Marshall: Absolutely, universal free school meals, yes.

Lindsay Boswell: Totally.

Q229 **Geraint Davies:** In addition to that, presumably you would advocate the uplift in particular in universal credit and other benefits, so it keeps pace with energy and food inflation, which is much higher than the overall level of inflation, to ensure that the standard of living of the poorest does not drop any further, but in fact increases to take more people out of food poverty and food banks?

Anna Taylor: Absolutely.

Maria Marshall: With free school meals, food is never the only problem. If somebody is struggling to afford food for their children to eat at school, they are also struggling to afford the other essentials that the family needs.

Chair: Barry has a final final question.

Q230 **Barry Gardiner:** I wanted to try to join up something that you were saying about a cash-first approach. I think it was Anna, who said earlier the food sector was not paying its people sufficiently above the living wage and I wanted to join that up with what we were saying about universal credit, because it seems to me that if a company is operating profitably it should be able to pay its workers enough to live on. The fact that they are not, but using universal credit as a way of ensuring that those workers can still come into work, is simply a way of using the rest of the taxpayers as a subsidy to their shareholders. When we talk about the failure of the structure here, when we talk about the failure of the system, it rather looks like we have a conveyor belt in our employment sector that is taking public money to subsidise the profits of companies that are not paying their workforce enough. Therefore, that cash-first approach that you were talking about goes right to the heart of this. If you pay the workforce a decent wage they can not only afford the food and so on, but it forces those companies to be genuinely profitable, maybe not pay quite as much to their shareholders but not be reliant on the rest of the taxpayers to bail them out.

Maria Marshall: I absolutely agree with that. It is completely unacceptable, it is completely immoral, that employers or the Government are relying on charitable food to stop people from essentially starving to allow them to feed themselves and their families. That is why when IFAN is calling for a cash-first approach, we mean that local immediate crisis support if you fall into financial crisis, but also these changes that would stop people from falling into that crisis in the first place—benefits and higher wages.



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Chair: Thank you. Barry, I guess if the Government were here they might have said that they keep increasing the national minimum wage and taking more people out of tax altogether.

Barry Gardiner: I welcome that increase, Robert, as you know, but I do not think it goes far enough. I really do welcome it, because I think it will make a difference, but maybe just not enough. There are still companies who are not stepping up to the mark when it comes to paying decent wages.

Chair: Before we turn this into a debating society, we will thank our three witnesses who have given very valuable evidence and again thank you for everything you do in helping some of the neediest families in difficult times. It is appreciated by the whole Committee. It is a cross-party agreement that the work that is being done in just about every community in the country is very valuable indeed. Thank you very much.