



Food, Diet and Obesity Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Food, diet and obesity

Thursday 2 May 2024

10.05 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Walmsley (The Chair); Baroness Boycott; Lord Brooke of Alverthorpe; Baroness Browning; The Earl of Caithness; Lord Colgrain; Baroness Goudie; Baroness Jenkin of Kennington; Lord Krebs; Lord McColl of Dulwich; Baroness Pitkeathley; Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick; Baroness Suttie.

Evidence Session No. 16

Heard in Public

Questions 226 - 244

Witnesses

[I](#): Kathleen Kerridge, Ambassador, Food Foundation; Penny Walters, Ambassador, Food Foundation; Dominic Watters, Ambassador, Food Foundation; Caroline Woollam, Ambassador, Food Foundation.

Examination of witnesses

Penny Walters, Kathleen Kerridge, Caroline Woollam and Dominic Watters.

Q226 **The Chair:** Good morning and welcome to this public meeting of the House of Lords Food, Diet and Obesity Committee. Today, we are holding the 16th evidence session of the committee's inquiry, exploring the role of food such as ultra-processed foods and foods high in fat, salt and sugar in a healthy diet and in tackling obesity. The committee will continue taking oral evidence in further meetings next week in order to inform its detailed report to be published later in the year.

We will be hearing today from two panels of members of public, sharing their lived experience in relation to food, diet and obesity. In our first panel, we are joined by four Food Foundation ambassadors: Caroline Woollam, Dominic Watters, Kathleen Kerridge and Penny Walters. You are all very welcome and we are looking forward to your evidence. I will ask you to introduce yourselves briefly the first time you speak. Please also let us know if you are asked a question that you do not wish to answer. We will respect that entirely, so please speak up if that is the case.

Today's meeting is being broadcast and a written transcript will be sent to all of you so that you can check it for accuracy before it is published. I refer to the list of members' interests, including my own, as published on the committee's website. They were also set out in the committee's first evidence session on 8 February.

Before we hear from our witnesses, I would like to repeat what I said at the start of the 7 March evidence session: that although it would be inconsistent with Lords committee procedure to compel our witnesses to do so, we will, for the sake of transparency, be giving all our witnesses the opportunity voluntarily to declare any interest that they deem relevant to the work of the inquiry the first time they speak. Our members, of course, will do the same when there is anything that is particularly relevant to this morning's meeting.

Could you please introduce yourselves and tell us why you decided to start campaigning on healthy and affordable food?

Penny Walters: I come from Newcastle upon Tyne. I have been through not being able to have healthy food as well as affordable food, so I decided it was time to put my actions into words and speak out to people who would listen and help the people who do not feel that they can speak out for themselves.

Kathleen Kerridge: I am from Portsmouth. I am a mum of four and a grandma of one. I started this about a decade ago now, when I found myself very much in food poverty and struggling to feed the kids and everything else on working benefits. Since then, I have used it as a jumping point to make my voice heard and try to get more awareness about the subject and for all the myriad reasons that can go into it. It is not just a single thing. That is where I am coming from.

Caroline Woollam: I am from Romiley in Stockport. I became a food ambassador and decided to come on this because I have recently realised how poor and how unhealthy school meals are, how little choice the children get, and how much you need to top up a child's free school meal account just so that they can be healthy and have the foods that they need. I just feel that we need to stand up and make everybody aware that this is a real thing that needs addressing.

The Chair: The committee takes that very seriously.

Dominic Watters: I am a single dad. My amazing daughter and I live in the most deprived blocks of our council estate. The shop on the estate only sells the lowest quality of processed food, making it a food desert in the garden of England.¹ I have used my voice to highlight, first, that the poor have been in a cost of living crisis long before the phrase was popularised.² Also, I have been able to provide insight into the daily realities of living in poverty to inform discussions around fuel and food insecurity on a national level. I have gone on to develop a concept and campaign, Food is Care, which speaks to the legal and duty obligations of local authorities and identifying gaps in those duties.

The Chair: Thank you. That is very helpful.

Q227 **Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick:** I am from Northern Ireland, but I am here in the House of Lords. I want to ask you about availability and how accessible the food is that you need for your families and children. If I could start with Kathleen, how available and accessible is healthy and nutritious food in your local area? Can you tell us about any particular challenges with availability and access and how it could be made more available and accessible?

Kathleen Kerridge: When it comes to food deserts and scarcity of foods, I am very fortunate because I live in an extremely multicultural area and take full advantage of the shops, markets and everything that seem to spring up, especially Turkish and Iranian markets. There is a lot of fresh produce. However, the price is very much an exclusion at times. You can look at four apples for £1.99, and £1.99 is a substantial amount of money for four pieces of fruit. Although I am in a situation where I can access the food, being able to afford the food is a different matter entirely. We have an Iceland, and you can pick up 40 frozen sausages for £2. Forty sausages will feed my four children for a lot longer than four apples, and it is the same price. It is difficult when you are in a food desert, but it is just as hard when you are surrounded by all the produce and not able to afford it or consume it. It is a bit of a sticky one where I am.

Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick: That is one of the challenges.

Caroline Woollam: I live in a really small town. We only have a handful of shops accessible to us. You find that it is cheaper to buy a bar of

¹ Note from witness: See <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/news/breadline-voices-food-desert-garden-england>

² Note from witness: See <https://x.com/vicderbyshire/status/1575982579815436288>

chocolate than it is to buy an apple. We would have to travel quite some miles to be able to get slightly cheaper, healthier foods. I am disabled, so that is not always an easy task in itself.

I am at a point where you can see people struggling. There is not enough. As I say, you have a handful of shops that you can actually buy from, but not enough of those have healthy options. You see that people are either getting to the point where they have malnutrition or they are completely obese and struggling. Double-processed foods are cheaper to buy than four apples.

Dominic Watters: To answer this question, I would first stress how food insecurity is not experienced in isolation. It is always coupled with other inequalities. One that is directly related in the first instance is fuel. My daughter and I have pay-as-you-go gas and electric. We are overcharged for the pay-as-you-go service.

There are these intersecting inequalities. I will briefly share a reflection. We live in the four most deprived blocks of our council estate, as I said, and I will be on my bus hearing neighbours talking about how they spend all day on the buses with their free bus pass to get to different supermarkets to get the best deals on microwave meals. We are on pay-as-you-go gas and electric, so we can see the amount it costs to cook from scratch. I am arguably a good cook; my daughter really likes my cooking. We can see that cooking fresh ingredients from scratch, such as boiling or frying chicken and cooking rice or pasta costs a lot more on your electric or gas than it does to cook a microwave meal. Neighbours and families who are often already disadvantaged are experiencing a lack of nutrition through the food that they are accessing.

The shop on our estate, as I have tried to underline, does not sell anything fresh. It is all the lowest quality of processed food, such as white bread. It can really impact on a family's well-being and ability to engage with broader society and services, as I have highlighted through my work locating the gaps in social work, professional frameworks and practice standards.

It can be like a full-time occupation where your time is not honoured in any way. You have to travel to get fresh food and ingredients. You are also up against the fact that the gas is on emergency. Then you are contacting the food bank and seeing how they can help you, and your cooker is from the local homeless charity. You are constantly fighting and it can feel like you are failing. I hope it is okay to be open and share in this way. You can feel hopeless in what you are able to achieve. I am trying to use this opportunity to stress how families feel like they do not know which way to turn and they feel like they are stranded.

Penny Walters: Availability is great. We have all the major supermarkets in Newcastle and you can get to them quite easily, but accessibility is down to money. A mam with two kids will go to Iceland, buy the sausages and chips and feed her kids that. The kids are not going to go to bed hungry. If you give them vegetables, they might not know

what they are or might not really like them, so it will go in the bin and you have just wasted your money.

Q228 **Baroness Jenkin of Kennington:** Kathleen, your children are grown up now. Are they still living with you?

Kathleen Kerridge: My youngest is at university now in Derby.

Baroness Jenkin of Kennington: So you only have one at home.

Kathleen Kerridge: Yes.

Baroness Jenkin of Kennington: Have you noticed a difference in availability, access to or cost over the 10 years? I think you said that you had been campaigning or involved for 10 years, when those adult children were younger.

Kathleen Kerridge: To be perfectly honest, it has become increasingly difficult. I was hoping that it would go the other way and things would ease, but, absolutely honestly, things are more difficult now.

Another thing that is often not mentioned when it comes to accessibility is that for a lot of people, especially at my socioeconomic level, driving is a luxury. We do not have cars. You are limited to where you can walk, you cannot afford the public transport, and then you are limited by what you can carry. So you cannot do a big food shop; that is out of the question. So you end up daily shopping. Especially over the last decade, with those daily shops, I have seen the cost of essential items like your pastas and your rices—the staples that hold your meals together and everything else gets added to—becoming astronomical compared to a decade ago. My wages are maybe £2 an hour more than they were a decade ago. It is very difficult. As I said, there are so many different things that go into it.

Q229 **Baroness Boycott:** That is so interesting. How much do you think you are penalised by not being able to buy in bulk?

Kathleen Kerridge: It is a lot. All the money-saving deals that you see tend to be buy two, get one free, or if you buy huge amounts or can get to the out-of-town supermarkets where they have the better deals. As I said, although I have great access to all the stuff, in reality, actually being able to buy it, consume it, take it home and eat it is very difficult.

Baroness Boycott: What percentage of your weekly income goes on food?

Kathleen Kerridge: It is about 80% of my weekly income.

Baroness Boycott: Wow.

Kathleen Kerridge: I work part time. I earn about £180 on an average week and will spend about £150 on food for myself, my husband, my daughter and my son-in-law—the four of us who are at home.

Caroline Woollam: You want to go out and do your weekly shop, but we tend to find that things go out of date really quickly. When you do a bulk shop, the dates do not last. You could buy a pack of sausages. Technically, you have to get the frozen ones just so they last longer, but the quality is absolutely disgusting. You bite into that and it is full of massive fatty chunks or bits of bread. That is not what sausages should contain. They should be way healthier and so much better. If you spend £4 on four sausages, the quality of those sausages is absolutely amazing. We cannot afford that.

Kathleen Kerridge: Ours are the 40 for £2.

Caroline Woollam: Yes, nobody on benefits can afford that. It is completely undoable. I drive, but it is about that accessibility. I would have to drive quite far in order to get a food shop, but then I have to do it two or three days at a time, which, being disabled, is not always easy. By the end of the week, I am in so much pain that it is not doable. You end up in that continuous rut of the same thing. You do not want to waste food, so it is tough.

Kathleen Kerridge: The thing that always sticks in my mind is that, when things were really bad, I had to walk from shop to shop to try to find the cheapest thing I could. I got home and found out that we had run out of toothpaste, of all things, and I could not find a toothpaste for cheaper than £1.50. I only had £1.50 left and I walked Portsmouth trying to find a tube of £1 toothpaste.

Caroline Woollam: That is not how life should be.

Kathleen Kerridge: It is not a sustainable way of living your life. It is exhausting.

The Chair: It correlates exactly with what Dominic is saying about his neighbours overheard on the bus doing exactly the same thing.

Q230 **Lord Brooke of Alverthorpe:** Do any of you do online shopping so you can have it delivered free? What is your experience?

Penny Walters: For me, it is quite good, because I cannot carry shopping, and it is the way I have to do it. The thing that gets me more is the fact that, because I have dietary requirements, everything that I buy is more expensive than anything else. I pay nearly £3 for two litres of milk, where normally you buy two litres of milk and it is £1.

Q231 **Lord Colgrain:** Thank you all very much for coming to talk to us. I also live in Kent, Dominic, so I might start with you on this question, if I may. How affordable is healthy and nutritious food for your family, and what could help make it more affordable?

Dominic Watters: As I speak, I am currently missing a universal credit appointment. I have been under sanctions for two months and now my claim has been suspended. The amount that is awarded to already vulnerable families who are on welfare does not enable you to afford to

give your family a healthy diet. Thanks to the work of the Trussell Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, there is a study showing that the amount awarded to you on universal credit does not equate to the price rises in food. For anyone who says that there has been an increase in benefits, I can directly speak to that. There has not been in real terms.

I understand the reasons for this question and the two prior ones, but I politely suggest that there is a lack of understanding of the pain of living in poverty. Lived experience was mentioned in the intro. In my first book, which I am happy to say is now in Oxford University library, from the concept of lived experience I developed the idea of 'living experience',³ because these are not experiences that are of the past. It really needs to be underlined how these inequalities are very much of the present. They should not be compartmentalised into easy discussions where you can bring out your person with lived experience of this hardship or inequality and send them on their way. The idea of living experience stresses that.

I get asked on different platforms, both news and policy forums, "How are things for people in your world?" I would politely ask for that to be reflected on for a moment. It demonstrates a separation of worlds, which is an unhelpful approach. It suggests that what happens today here in the House of Lords does not have an impact on what happens in my council estate or in somewhere in the north-east, or in fact globally and internationally. I would just make that offering.

The Chair: It is one world, perhaps.

Dominic Watters: That would be a healthier and more inclusive approach.

Caroline Woollam: There is nothing available. Certain people have that availability, but not everybody does. I feel that it would be fair if everybody had the freedom to access the foods that we need to make our children healthy and give them a good lifestyle. If you do not eat properly in the morning or the afternoon, or if you are fasting and only eat one meal a day, you are tired the next day. If you do not drink enough that day, you are tired the next day. If you have not had enough of a meal that day, you are tired the next day. It has a massive impact, and each day rolls into the next.

I went into Morrisons, which had a basket with free fruit for children but you could only take one piece. That is understandable. There are so many children. Everybody needs that fruit. That is one supermarket trying to make a bit of a difference. If you then say, "We want that bag of apples", that bag of apples is £2 to £3. It is literally unaffordable.

Kathleen Kerridge: I am in a very fortunate position that I am a foodie. I cook. As I said earlier, I live in a multicultural, very heavily ethnic area, so a lot of my education has been about being fed from different

³ Note from witness: See Watters D, 'Social Distance in Social Work: COVID Capsule One', 2021, p5

countries, ethnicities and cultures, which really helps when it comes to healthy diets at the cheapest price point. But it was also a big leap going out of my own comfort zone and culture zone to go into these spaces where I am not necessarily welcomed. At first, it was a big "Oh, I'm going into the shop" kind of thing, but as the years have gone past and I have made friends in other communities and got speaking to other people and other mums from all over the world, you find that you are fighting for the same thing for your children, wherever you are shopping and wherever you are coming from, which is having access to the healthy, nutritious food that you need and want.

One of the biggest barriers comes down to money. I wish I could say, "It is this reason. It is this reason. It is this reason". A lot of it is simply that people cannot afford to buy the food they would like to feed their families.

Penny Walters: I was just about to say exactly the same thing. Not only is it money, but it is all the way along the line. The poor farmers that grow all this stuff do not get paid an awful lot for it. Then it goes off to the supermarket and the supermarket hikes the price up. Then it comes down to us consumers that cannot afford the hiked-up price. Everything is down to money.

Q232 **The Earl of Caithness:** Good morning. I am very grateful for you all coming in front of us today. Are families influenced at all by food marketing? When you are trying to buy nutritious food, do you find the labelling helpful, or do families not have time to read the labelling?

Penny Walters: I would not say that it is influenced by marketing. It is more the fact that you eat what you can afford. I have to read the labels on food all the time, and they can be a hard read when you have to scan through a full list of food just to find out if it has any dairy in it.

Kathleen Kerridge: I agree and disagree to an extent, because marketing and influence around food, especially for school-aged children, matters very much. Sending your kids to school with a healthy pasta salad, rice salad or turkey wrap, for example, will cause them to stand out from their peers somewhat. They do not want that. They want the brand and bright kids-marketed stuff in their lunchbox. Mine were always very upset with me that they did not get that. I would not buy it because of the price and the ingredients, and they absolutely hated school lunchtime as a result.

Marketing is very important. As adults, we do not realise just how important it is to children and how much it matters when you are young. You have very little that you can control and have choices over anyway, and then you do not fit in with your friends because you are not getting the fashionable food, shall we say. It sounds ridiculous even to say that, but it is fashionable food.

Caroline Woollam: We have lots of allergy sufferers in our family, so we have to read through what is in each product. If I was to get trail mix, I

would not be able to eat it because it would have nuts in it. They do not do it with maybe just raisins and seeds, so that is one side of it. If you go to a supermarket, like Asda, and buy its own brand, it is a bright white packet with a green stripe on it. That stands out. If you are sat in a room full of children and one child pulls out that cheaper product and all the other children have the branded product, that child will automatically be bullied, isolated, excluded. They will not be one of the cool kids. It has massive effects on these children.

Kathleen Kerridge: It matters.

Caroline Woollam: You should not have to single children out in order to feed them a decent item or product, whichever way you want to look at it. It makes a difference. Sometimes you have to buy that cheapest product, but you do not want your child to be bullied because they are eating that cheaper product, and you know that will happen. My daughter suffered three years of severe bullying because she was on packed lunches at the time and I had to buy the cheaper products. I am disabled so I could not work, but we still had to top her money up all the time. At the minute, the meals she receives are absolutely disgusting. Just going on the packaging side of the product and the product itself, it is something else.

Kathleen Kerridge: It really is.

Caroline Woollam: On top of that, if you have allergies, if you are allergic to milk or any form of dairy, that product is three times more expensive than the product that has the milk in it. If you are allergic to dairy, that non-dairy product, or the gluten-free product, is so much more expensive than the other products. You should not suffer because you have allergies. That is unfair in itself.

Q233 **Baroness Boycott:** Could you give us some more examples of what you call fashionable food products? That was really interesting. What do they want to see?

Kathleen Kerridge: With infant and primary-school age groups, you are generally looking at your Dairylea Lunchables, Snackers, Cheestrings.

Baroness Boycott: That is all Dairylea.

Kathleen Kerridge: Yes, in bright little boxes. You get your biscuits, your ham and maybe some Oreos or whatever. Cheestrings were a big one. Frubes were another. They are yoghurts in a tube. The pricing of them is astronomical, but it is what the popular kids have in their lunch boxes. Until you have sat there and decanted Smart Price ready salted crisps into Walkers packets and then literally stuck them back together at the top so your kid has a Walkers packet in their packed lunch, you do not realise the lengths parents will go to for their kids to fit in when you cannot afford it. The bullying is horrific.

Q234 **The Chair:** Penny and Caroline, you both said that there are certain foods that you cannot buy because of allergies. When you are looking at

the labels in the shops, are they big enough for you to read the things that would do you harm if you managed to eat them by mistake?

Caroline Woollam: They tend to be in bold, so it will say in bold writing "nuts", "milk", "soya". They will highlight those particular things, but you still need to pick that product up. I can spend 20 minutes stood at one tiny bit of shelf to see that something has nuts in it. I cannot risk picking up something that may have nuts in it. Yesterday we were walking down the street and they were cooking nuts on the street. That is so dangerous for me. I suppose it is a healthy snack for some people, but that in itself is so dangerous for me. You literally have to sit and read the label, so you are stood a long time just trying to see what is in what. It is still tiny writing, but it is in bold.

The Chair: Do you find that too, Penny?

Penny Walters: I do, yes. Most of the products you get that are what we call "free from" are all in one area. You have supermarket shelves all over the place, but you have maybe half a row of stuff that is what they class as "free from". Normally you will have your milk-free stuff and your wheat-free and it is two or three times the price.

The Chair: It certainly reduces your choice, by the sounds of it.

Penny Walters: It does, yes.

Q235 **Baroness Browning:** Good morning, everyone. Thank you all very much. A lot of what you have said already is quite eye-opening. Could you tell us a bit about your family's experience with having to provide nutritious food for babies and much younger children, those years immediately after a baby is born and you are starting to wean a child. What would make it easier and be more helpful for families to feed that age group, particularly bearing in mind that it is a time when you are very concentrated on health and giving the right food to those very small children? Caroline, I wonder if you would mind starting, because I think you have done this more recently.

Caroline Woollam: It was quite a while ago, but yes, I have. My niece was born recently, and that brought to light how much a tub of baby milk costs. I could not say exactly how many bottles you will make out of that milk. You can go down the breastfeeding side, but breastfeeding is not always a thing for some parents. Some parents will not be able to do it. It might not work, so you have no choice but to buy this baby milk in a tub that is £13, £14 or £15. There used to be milk tokens that you would be given that would allow you to get, say, two tubs of that baby milk for that week and that would be sufficient. That would be great. Now, that comes out of your own pocket. That is literally something else that you need to budget for.

Once you start weaning that baby, you have the likes of baby rusks and baby rice, with the amount of sugar and sucrose. Sucrose is given to a child in intensive care as pain relief. They say that there is no added sugar or there is no sugar in a product, but it is absolutely loaded with

sucrose. That is why a lot of babies go from being this tiny little dot—like my son, who was born at 20 weeks; he was minute—to going whoosh all of a sudden. I was breastfeeding at that point, but we had to introduce tubbed special milk because he was born so premature. That literally bulks the child out to a point where they would be classed as obese. If we got on the scales, the doctor would say, “Your child is obese”. What are we meant to feed those babies? There is no other option.

I used to find myself making peas and carrots with a little bit of meat and then blending it all up and putting that in the freezer. That is not cost-effective at this minute in time. You are literally struggling all the time. I listen to families who cannot afford the tubs of baby milk or the food to make these nice meals to be frozen and then defrosted for that baby as that baby is weaning. It is cheaper to access a box of rusk. In the long run, they last you a bit longer because you break them in half and mix them with a bit of the baby milk and feed them that. Again, that is where the sucrose comes into it. That is so bad for children, yet that is not advertised. You really have to do your work to realise what ingredients are in those baby products.

Baroness Browning: That must be a worrying time with a new baby.

Caroline Woollam: Yes, very much so. Once you get to that obesity side of it and you can see that your baby is putting on weight way too quickly, the health side of it comes in, because that baby cannot crawl because they are too big. As they grow, you have to try to make sure that they can exercise continuously to bring that weight back down. With the foods available at the price they are, it never goes like that.

Kathleen Kerridge: You are also put in a situation, especially at the cheaper end of baby foods, where the amount of sucrose is a lot higher and your child may well become obese. Then you have to put a school-aged child on a diet, and they are picked out by the school nurse in the weigh-ins and bullied again for that. The school weigh-in kicked off an eating disorder in two of my daughters. Both of them are bulimic, and it all started at school with that first visit to the school nurse when they were put on the scales. One of them was skinny as a rake, but she was weighed in front of her friends and lined up outside the thing.

There is a lot that goes on from the knock-on effect of what you give during infancy and those early years. If you are sending a child on their first day of school and they are obese, you have already marked them. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to claw that back.

Penny Walters: On the breastfeeding side of things, my daughter is four weeks away from having her first child. She has complex medical issues. She would like to breastfeed, but because of the medications she is on she has been told she cannot. She does not qualify for Healthy Start vouchers, but those are only £8 and something. The cheapest tub of formula you can get is just over £8 in one of the discount supermarkets. That is not going to last. Maybe it will last you two days. You have to look at how much supermarkets are charging for all these different formulas.

Dominic Watters: Thanks to the work of the Food Foundation, single-parent families have recently been found to be disproportionately represented—by nearly over a third—in food insecurity.⁴ To the question you asked the panel, my daughter cannot have dairy, so I always have to get her oat milk, which is significantly more expensive than your dairy alternative. Universal credit does not allow for that.

Single-parent families are often also on pay-as-you-go gas and electric, as I said, and sometimes feeling slighted by the world. The gas or electric can go out in the middle of the night. That means that whatever is in my freezer is normally no good by the morning, which wastes food. It is all right saying, “You need to budget”—there has been an undeserved narrative or approach to poor people that says, “You need to budget better”—but if you literally do not have it, no amount of budgeting can be done that would avoid that. I politely suggest that poor people are the best budgeters in the world and we do not waste food. If I can be so bold, it is actually wealthy people who have that luxury.

Q236 **Baroness Jenkin of Kennington:** The title of our committee, as you know, is Food, Diet and Obesity, in part because of this increase in the number of children who are experiencing obesity. You raised the issue of weighing in schools. We were away on a trip last week where we talked a lot about this. Would it be better not to weigh the children and identify the issue? Would it not be better to offer to help families who have children with an issue, as we saw, if they need the support?

Caroline Woollam: They do not offer any support. This is done in a school, but this could be done at the GP so that it is less embarrassing for a child. Then you are not singled out. You are not made to feel like rubbish.

Baroness Jenkin of Kennington: Are the children weighed in front of other children?

Caroline Woollam: Yes.

Kathleen Kerridge: In my daughter’s case, they were lined up in the corridor outside the room and taken in one by one, and a significant number of children came out with a letter in their hands.

Baroness Jenkin of Kennington: I think those letters have changed.

Kathleen Kerridge: That may have changed now, but it was the lining up and being weighed. None of mine wanted that done in the first place. They had no choice. There was no individual consent. They were forced into the situation where they were put on scales. As I said, one of them was skinny as a rake—I had to take in her uniforms at the time—and this experience still kicked off bulimia. My other daughter is on the heavier side, but she is nowhere near clinically obese. She really struggles with food, nutrition and everything else, because she thinks back to that time

⁴ Note from witness: See https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-03/Single%20Parents%20briefing_FINAL.pdf

of being weighed and being fat. She was in year 6. It was the end of junior school.

Baroness Jenkin of Kennington: The Government need data.

Kathleen Kerridge: It should be done at a GP level. It has no place in a school setting where other children can see and pick up on it and things can be noticed. Children overhear things. No matter how much you think they are not aware of what is going on, they are. Even if the letter is no longer given directly to the child, they will be aware of the fact that it will be sent home at some point. As I said, it is impossible, if not very difficult, to claw back any kind of positive reinforcement surrounding food, food enjoyment and nutrition. Food is such a huge part of our lives. To have this level of damage done at such a young age, disproportionately to girls, needs addressing. It is a matter for GPs and parents, not a school.

Lord Brooke of Alverthorpe: On the same subject, are you saying that you are not opposed in principle to the collection of the data? It is the way in which it is done.

Kathleen Kerridge: Yes. I agree that, at government level, you need some overview of how bad the obesity problem in this country is becoming, especially with the uptick in type-2 diabetes. There are so many obesity-related issues affecting this country, much as they are in the US and especially in Mexico, funnily enough. This has to be addressed. We need that dataset. However, it should come from health visitors, doctors and medical personnel. It has no place in a school setting. School is for education.

Q237 **Lord Brooke of Alverthorpe:** I am a Labour Peer with an interest in sugar, the reformulation of food, and school meals. Starting with Dominic, could you give us your child's experience of food at school and how it went? Baroness Boycott will follow up on this question too.

Q238 **Baroness Boycott:** This question has been answered a bit by some of you already. I was going to ask whether the food in school is healthy, looks attractive and is affordable, and how it can be made better. It is all those together.

Dominic Watters: Thanks for the opportunity to talk about this. My daughter has always been on free school meals. These conversations about free school meals and the discussions about upscaling or universalising are being dominated by people whose children are not on free school meals. I will use this question to demonstrate the importance of including living experience in formulating responses to policy.

Free school meals are not free. For my daughter, I get a text at least every other week, if not a couple of times a week, saying, "Dad, can you top up my thumb?" The amount awarded to each child is £3 a day. That has not changed since the fastest increase in the price of food in 45 years, which places schools in problematic positions, especially in the

canteen, if not more broadly. That just shows you that the £3 awarded that has not gone up in over a decade is one thing.

Secondly, there is shame and stigma attached to free school meals, and I would not really speak about it. I know heads of NGOs and professors in well-being who did not know what free school meals were until the work of Marcus Rashford. There now seems to be an increased focus in the media, which is welcome, but it seems to miss the point that if there is an upscaling or universalising of it, protection measures need to be put in for the most disadvantaged kids who are already on free school meals.

Another thing that this conversation misses is the holiday vouchers, the scheme that Marcus Rashford passionately campaigned for and was really welcomed by all parents on free school meals. The national recommended amount is £15 a week. During the school holidays, I should be getting £15 a week to spend on my daughter's food intake. That amount does not cover or reflect the increase in the price of food.

I would bring to your attention that there are many local authorities around the country, my local authority being one—I live in Kent, as I said—that only award you £10 a week.⁵ That is a third less than the recommended national amount. Why that is is a broader question. It cannot be the only local authority that is doing that. That means that the policies of local authorities that are championing this idea of food security and being in touch with people in disadvantaged local authority social housing or council estates are multiplying the food insecurity experienced often by single-parent families.

The free school meal vouchers need to be interrogated alongside the amount of free school meal that is awarded to the child each day. I suggest that there needs to be a targeted and informed discussion that continues from today to help families who are struggling at present.

The Chair: We were told last week in Blackpool that they were only funded to provide the holiday vouchers for a certain number of weeks during each holiday period.

Dominic Watters: That is correct.

The Chair: It did not cover the whole holiday period. What does your local authority do about that?

Dominic Watters: It does not cover the whole holiday period or weekends. Weekends, by the nature of a week, are included in a week. To stress, £10 a week is a third less than the national recommended amount. £10 a week works out at £1.71 a day. That is not enough to feed your child a healthy diet, and people in poverty, which I can speak to, lack access to fresh ingredients. We are overcharged for gas and electric to cook our ingredients and we lack access to fuel. It is a food and fuel desert in the garden of England.

⁵ Note from witness: See <https://www.kent.gov.uk/education-and-children/schools/free-school-meals>

Baroness Boycott: There was one thing you said that I did not quite understand. You said that your daughter might call you or text you and say, "I need to top up". Can you explain what exactly that is?

Dominic Watters: There is a mechanism called ParentPay. You can pay for holiday trips and days out that the school might organise, or uniforms.

Baroness Boycott: Is it connected to the lunch and the food?

Dominic Watters: Yes, 100%. It tops up her thumb phone, and it is her thumb that she uses to pay. This will not just be my daughter; this will be a shared experience. I am saying that the £3 amount that is awarded because she is on free school meals does not enable her to have a healthy lunch. I will get the text: "Can you top up my thumb?" I go on Parent Pay on my phone and then I have to add to the amount.

Baroness Boycott: For the £3, you are saying that on some days, or many days, she would end up getting an unhealthy lunch. Unless you pay a bit of top-up, she cannot access that healthy option at school.

Dominic Watters: Yes. That increases the options available to her.

Baroness Boycott: Is that your experience too, Caroline?

Caroline Woollam: I have a child in school on free school meals at the moment and I homeschool my son. If my son was in school, he would get free school meals. Because he is homeschooled, we get absolutely nothing. That is just for me as a parent to fund. You go with that.

My daughter is receiving about £2.60 a day, not £3 a day. She has always been quite a slim girl, but not very slim. For the £2.60 that she gets in a day, she will order a chicken wrap, which consists of three tiny pieces of chicken and a tiny bit of batter around it. There is no salad, no sauce, no nothing. She will message me daily to say, "Please can you top up my thumbprint so I can eat some more food?"

If she wants a drink, a yoghurt, an apple, an orange, or salad or sauce to go on that—literally anything—she has to pay extra. She will then ring me and say, "Mum, please can you put some money on so I can get an apple or a drink with my lunch?" I am sure that most of us in this room, when we have our lunch, dinner, or even breakfast, will have a drink. I look around and there are bottles of water on the table. These children are not even given a free glass of water to drink their meal with. You have to buy a bottle of water, at the cost of £2.50.

Baroness Boycott: Does the school not have a drinking fountain?

Caroline Woollam: No.

Baroness Boycott: Have you asked for one?

Caroline Woollam: Yes. I am in the midst of battling this with her school. I am very glad that she leaves this year. Honestly, the food that

she is given is shocking. Accessibility to the healthy side of it, just to have a bit of lettuce or a tiny slice of tomato on that wrap, will cost her another £1. That is not good. She literally went from being my sort of build to having a size 4 waist. The malnutrition that these kids are suffering is outrageous.

Lord Brooke of Alverthorpe: Are there any hot meals on offer?

Caroline Woollam: That is a hot option. She could have a portion of chips or wedges, which is a tiny tray that will consist of about six chips or six wedges. She looks at these and it is like, "What's the best option?" I asked her to send me some pictures of the school food that she was being served. She got told off badly not just by her head of year but by her headmaster for taking those pictures. These pictures are not allowed to be taken in school. That says it all. If you feel the need to hide this information from the parents, that is something else in itself. These kids should not have poor nutrition or be eating the wrong foods that cause the opposite end of obesity, because the options are not there and the stuff is not easily accessible.

Q239 **Baroness Boycott:** Do you know whether the food that goes to your children's school is supplied by a large national caterer or cooked?

Caroline Woollam: I think it is a caterer. I believe that at one point Jamie Oliver got involved with quite a few schools and really pushed the cooking from fresh side, which would be so much healthier for a child. That did quite well to start with. Now, if you look, a lot of schools use the caterers and have healthy food for a price. I must top my child's account up by about £150 a month. It is undoable. It is that headline all the time. You choose between your gas and electric or making sure that your child has had food.

Baroness Boycott: Why do you not go to packed lunches if you are topping up that much?

Caroline Woollam: You get the bullying because you cannot afford the products that all the other children are eating. That is why she suffered for three years of bullying: because she was on different foods.

Q240 **Baroness Suttie:** I am Scottish but also live in Kent. I am in Broadstairs on the Kent coast. Have you all experienced a difference between primary school and secondary school for your children and found the experience better at primary school than at secondary school.

Caroline Woollam: Yes. At secondary school they are still serving tiny portions that you would give a child who was literally in nursery.

Baroness Suttie: What you were describing with your daughter was at secondary school.

Caroline Woollam: Yes. She is in her last year of secondary school.

Baroness Suttie: Was her primary school a more positive experience for her?

Caroline Woollam: Yes. They would have a mid-morning snack at no cost to the parent. They would be given a piece of fruit, a pea snap or half a bagel. That would be classed as a free snack in primary school. None of that carries over to high school. At one point, they used to give children a free small bottle of milk. That was massively effective for these children. They need this calcium and this milk. When I was a child, we did not have this food available to us. My mum was so poorly that she could not keep up, and we relied on that bottle of milk, if I am honest, and on that school meal at dinner time. We really needed that. That all fizzles out. I am not sure whether they still receive a bottle of milk or whatever in primary school, but they definitely do not in high school.

Q241 **Baroness Browning:** We all can remember Jamie Oliver’s attempts to improve the nutrition of school meals and the pushback it got, particularly from some of the parents. In your experience and in your relationship with the schools, whether primary or secondary—parent-teacher associations, boards of governors, et cetera—are you lone voices, or collectively do you feel that what you have told us today is something that the broader body of parents would or should be concerned about?

Caroline Woollam: Yes, most definitely. People are scared to speak up. They will talk between themselves in a playground but not actually confront the headmaster or the board of governors. That is quite a daunting task for somebody that has never sat in that sort of atmosphere or dealt with that many people. I want to get a team together to all go in and say, “Let’s have a chat with the board of governors. Let’s all be realistic. Let’s get everything out in the open so that everybody is on the same page”. You have parents saying, “I can’t say that. I can’t do that. We’ll just carry on as it is. We’ll just try to get by”. That is literally what you do. You do that through primary school, but it gets that bit worse when you do it through secondary school.

Baroness Browning: Is that because they are worried about the school taking it out on the children if they are the parent who makes a complaint?

Caroline Woollam: Potentially, yes.

Dominic Watters: I hope this can be seen as an example of how the living experience of certain mechanisms can inform work moving forward. I recently made five policy recommendations on free school meals that were published by the International Public Policy Observatory⁶. I will share them with you briefly.

The first is that any upscaling or universalising of free school meals needs to include a targeted measure of additional support for kids who are currently eligible for free school meals, so the poorest in our society.

Secondly, the amount provided via free school meals needs to be reviewed urgently.

⁶ Note from witness: See <https://theippo.co.uk/food-poverty-policy-free-school-meal-provision/>

Thirdly, the holiday vouchers should be distributed nationally at the recommended amount of £15, not £10, or increased, because some local authorities have other mechanisms of support in place. I would politely invite you to consider that steps should be taken to ensure that local authorities follow this guidance.

Fourthly, universal credit should be increased in line with the rising prices of food, fuel and other daily costs. This measure will help parents to move their families out of absolute poverty.

Fifthly, policymakers should be encouraged to engage with living experience to develop and inform sustainable solutions that I hope we are achieving today. Thank you very much.

The Chair: That is what we are doing. Thank you, Dominic.

Caroline Woollam: This voucher, which is meant to be £15, is not available for us in the Stockport area. That has completely stopped now. In the holidays that have just been, we got nothing. I do not know whether it has continued for you guys, but in Stockport we do not get any of those holiday vouchers anymore.

Q242 **Lord Krebs:** I live in Oxford. Although it is often considered to be an affluent city, about a quarter of the children in Oxford live in poverty, so it is not as affluent as it may first appear. I want to thank you, first, because the evidence you have given us this morning is immensely compelling and important to us. Dominic talked at the beginning about two worlds. It is probably apparent to you that none of us on this side of the table lives in the world that you describe, so it is very important for us to hear from you.

Our job, in the end, is to make recommendations to the Government as to how they should change things for the better. Dominic has neatly kicked off by telling us his top five in relation to school meals. If you were on our side of the table writing the report and sending messages to the Government saying, "These are the things that you need to do to solve the problems", which you have so eloquently described to us, what would you write?

Penny Walters: Give people more money.

Lord Krebs: That is nice and simple.

Penny Walters: It is very simple. It is what you need. You need more money to buy more food.

Kathleen Kerridge: I would love to see Sure Start brought back, quite honestly. I raised my eldest children in the Sure Start era and had all those resources available to me and the educational aspect of it, so learning child nutrition and how to feed your child. It was a fantastic programme.

Also, I would like to see milk tokens. My grandson is nearly two, so he is no longer on infant formula, but the Healthy Start vouchers my daughter, who is on universal credit, got were not enough to buy his baby milk. We as her parents had to step in and buy his baby milk. After she had paid bills and rent, there was not enough left over for her to fill the cupboards and buy decent weaning foods, so that came down to us again.

Universal credit and the amount that single parents especially are being given needs to be looked at. It is not possible to live on if you do not have a family at your back that is able to pick up all those extra costs and expenses. Honestly, more than anything, it is Sure Start. Bring back those resources.

Q243 Baroness Jenkin of Kennington: Are you finding that the family hubs are working? I do not know whether you have access to them. They are the updated version of Sure Start.

Kathleen Kerridge: They are not as good. They do not offer as many resources.

Caroline Woollam: There is the embarrassment that comes with it.

Kathleen Kerridge: A lot of the family hubs, while not being derogatory to anyone in those situations, double up as food banks a lot of the time. Your peers and friends do not know whether you are going there for Sure Start or to pick up a food parcel, and you do not want people knowing that you go to food banks. It means that family hubs and the resources that you need are tainted in a way, because you are not going for a positive experience necessarily.

A lot of the enjoyment and resources that were on offer are no longer on offer in family hubs. Also, who can access them in the first place is very restricted. You have to fit into certain criteria to be able to use them. If you do not quite fit into a box, the help is not available for you.

The Chair: Caroline, what is your recommendation?

Caroline Woollam: I feel that everybody should be treated equally and have those options available. If you can sit down and eat a steak this evening, everybody else should be able to do that same thing. It is not a massive ask. Everybody should be treated the same. Everybody should have access to those healthy foods. Whether you are two days old or 102 years old, we all deserve to be treated equally. There should be no embarrassment. There should not be people starving or people who have malnutrition. Everybody should have that equal access to the foods that our bodies need for our children to grow up and be healthy and well, in order to progress well in life, get a decent job and move forward.

Dominic Watters: Community-focused sustainable solutions need to be adopted as an approach. I am the head of the welfare department at my local redeemed church. On the first Sunday of every month we get food donations. I work in close partnership with Canterbury food bank to achieve the UN sustainable development goals, but more in the sense of

what we can achieve here and now on the ground, so to speak. For any transformation of the food system to be in line with net zero objectives and to be just, it needs to be deeply informed by voices like the great people sitting next to me, and perhaps me.

Also, social work is a profession that is involved predominantly in supporting some of the most disadvantaged families living in poverty in our society. My work with the campaign that I have created, Food is Care, identifies that in their practice guidance and professional frameworks there is no mention of food or food insecurity. That is a gap that urgently needs addressing.

The Chair: That is very interesting. Thank you.

Q244 **Baroness Goudie:** I am sorry that I am not with you this morning in person. I have found everything fascinating. I want to ask a question about children being bullied if they do not have the right food, or the right this or that, which we all know about. Do the schools come in to assist children who are being bullied?

Caroline Woollam: Not at all. My child was bullied to another degree. The school was completely unhelpful. She was not happy. Every day there were tears.

On that note, that is a massive reason why I took my son, who has special needs, out of school. The care and the attention that needed to be there were not there from anybody, from teachers to the headmaster. The headmaster or headmistress will never spend time speaking to you because you have to go through the teacher and then the head of year. Then you will be sent to the panel. Then you may get to speak to the headmaster, who has the power to change that.

The Chair: I am afraid that we have to bring our session to an end now, but before I do that can I thank you all very much indeed for sharing so much with us this morning? It has been enormously important to our report and we will take a great deal of notice of it, I can assure you of that.