

Petitions Committee

Oral evidence: Child Food Poverty, HC 1112

Thursday 21 January 2021

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Watch the meeting: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asYW8-qF1-I>

Members present: Catherine McKinnell (Chair); Nick Fletcher; Jonathan Gullis; Mike Hill.

Questions 1-28

Witnesses

Anna Taylor, Executive Director, Food Foundation; Garry Lemon, Director of Policy, External Affairs and Research, The Trussell Trust; Lindsay Boswell, Chief Executive, FareShare; and Azmina Siddique, Policy and Research Manager, The Children's Society.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Anna Taylor, Garry Lemon, Lindsay Boswell and Azmina Siddique.

Q1 Chair: Thank you for joining us today. This is our first session looking at child food poverty, which has been prompted by a petition started by Marcus Rashford that calls on the Government to end child food poverty by implementing three recommendations of the national food strategy. The first is to expand free school meals to all under-16s where a parent or guardian is in receipt of universal credit or equivalent benefit; the second is to provide meals and activities during all holidays; and the third is to increase the value of Healthy Start vouchers to at least £4.25 a week, and to expand the scheme.

This is an issue that is of huge public interest, particularly during the Covid-19 outbreak, as has been demonstrated by the 1.1 million people who have signed Marcus's petition. Earlier this week I spoke to Marcus about his petition and his work on this issue; for those who are interested, a video of our discussion is available on our website. Marcus has made some hugely compelling arguments about the need for action on this issue.

We are holding this session today to explore some of the issues relating to child food poverty, the Government's approach to the issue and how best to support families during and beyond Covid-19, so that all children have fair access to food.

I give a warm welcome to our panel today. We very much look forward to hearing your views and input on this issue.

You all work for organisations that have direct contact with children and families experiencing food insecurity. Could you please start by introducing yourselves and telling us about your roles? Shall I start with you, Lindsay?

Lindsay Boswell: My name is Lindsay Boswell. I run a national food redistribution charity called FareShare. Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence today.

In normal times, FareShare exclusively deals in surplus food; we are tackling an environmental issue to be able to drive social value. We do that by supplying food to frontline community groups who we believe are among some of the real experts in identifying and connecting with those people who are most vulnerable in society.

We operate across the four nations of the UK. We operate at some considerable scale. We currently support 11,000 frontline charity community groups, 62% of which support children and families. At the moment—during the whole of 2020 and into 2021—we redistribute on average 2.2 million meals to those organisations every single week.

It is worth pointing out that food is not the solution to poverty but a means of connecting people to those within their local communities who



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can address the causes that sit behind somebody's vulnerability or problems. That is a phenomenal community asset, and is definitely a contributory factor, not just 365 across the year but in particular during the various holiday breaks, which is why the call for support for holiday programmes is such a fundamental part of this process. We support many, many of those programmes.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you. That was a very comprehensive response; I am sure that there is a lot to go into in what you have said. May I come next to you Garry Lemon, Director of Policy, External Affairs and Research at The Trussell Trust?

Garry Lemon: First, thank you for having us here and thank you to everybody who signed the petition so that we could have this discussion. I am representing The Trussell Trust. I represent a network of over 1,200 food bank centres right across the UK. Our strategic vision as an organisation is to end the need for food banks in the UK; we do not think it is right that anybody should need emergency food in order to get by. To give an idea of the scale of need, let me say that in the past full year alone we distributed 1.9 million emergency food parcels to households and families in financial crisis.

Q3 **Chair:** Thank you. I will come next to Azmina Siddique, Policy and Research Manager, The Children's Society.

Azmina Siddique: I echo everyone else's thanks for having us here today to give evidence on this really important topic. I am here from The Children's Society. We are a national children's society, a charity, as our name would suggest, and we work across the country to help young people and their families who are suffering from not just food poverty but abuse, neglect and exploitation. We have a very wide range of support and services. Our mission, as it has been for 140 years now, is to work towards a society that is built for all children. One thing I would be interested in speaking about a bit further today is families from low-income migrant backgrounds who are affected by the no recourse to public funds condition. They are families we work with very closely at The Children's Society and we know that they have been particularly affected by some of the issues we will be discussing today.

Q4 **Chair:** Last but not least, I will come to Anna Taylor, Executive Director, Food Foundation.

Anna Taylor: Good afternoon everybody and thank you for the invitation. I head up the team at the Food Foundation. We are a charity that works to ensure that our food system supports everybody to eat well, regardless of their income. We have been working on this issue of children's food poverty for a couple of years; we did an inquiry, which was published last year, for a cross-party parliamentary group, really investigating the challenges around children's food insecurity. So we do not work directly with people who are affected, but we have got a panel of 22 young food ambassadors who have lived experience of children's food poverty. We work closely with them and they give us a huge amount of insight as to the situation on the ground. Since Covid struck, we have done seven

surveys at a national level to understand people's experiences of food insecurity, so we have been quite involved in trying to inform the national response, to make sure it reaches those who need it.

- Q5 **Chair:** The question I was going to ask next—Anna, given what you have said, you could come in first here—is what do you see day to day, through your work, in terms of the scale of food poverty in England and how it affects families?

Anna Taylor: The very latest data we have, which was from a survey we conducted in September, showed that 14% of households with children were experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity. That amounts, if we extrapolate it up, to about 4 million people, including about 2.3 million children. That relates to the previous six months, so really to the period in which we have experienced the Covid pandemic. That is a higher level than previously; before the crisis it was about 2 to 3 percentage points lower, so it has gone up. We know that the situation was very, very bad in the first phase of lockdown but got better as that six-month period progressed.

What do we mean when we say “moderate” and “severe” food insecurity? Well, there are three questions we ask people: have you had to skip meals because of lack of money or not being able to access the food you need? Have you gone hungry and not eaten for those same reasons? Or have you gone for a whole day without eating for those same reasons? That is a standard way of finding out about food insecurity. It is used in lots of different countries. It is used by the Food Standards Agency; it is a standardised approach. That gives you an idea of the scale of the problem. We know that households with children, ethnic minority households, households where someone has been shielding or with underlying health conditions, and households where there is somebody with a disability are even worse affected. That is a really significant risk factor for households' experience of food insecurity.

- Q6 **Chair:** Gosh. Would the other witnesses like to come in and answer the same question? Have you got something to add?

Garry Lemon: It is important, when talking about need, to define the term “food poverty”. It is important to remember that food poverty is just one symptom of a wider structural issue, which is simply put as “poverty”. We know this because we survey people referred to Trussell Trust food banks. The majority of households referred to us meet the definition of destitution, so it is not just food that they cannot afford—it is heating, it is lighting, it is clothing, it is toiletries. As Lindsay said at the beginning, ultimately, food is not the answer here.

To get to the point on the scale of need, it is also really important to understand that these issues did not just start with the pandemic. They have been growing for many years now. We have had years of stagnant wages, and frozen or cut working-age benefits, which includes universal credit. Last year, as I said, up to the start of the pandemic we distributed 1.9 million emergency food parcels. That was not with the significant

increase in the number of Trussell Trust food banks. When Covid hit, we saw a really sharp and instant increase in need. So just for the first six months of this financial year April-September, it was 1.2 million parcels, which is 47% higher than last year—a record need for our services. Families with children have been particularly hard hit: 470,000 of those food parcels went to children and 2,600 food parcels a day to children just from Trussell Trust food banks, so a really big increase in need from new people who have never needed a food bank. Just in the first few weeks of the pandemic, 100,000 new people who had never used a food bank before had to be referred to us to get emergency food packages because they were in financial crisis.

Q7 **Chair:** Have you got anything that you want to add to that, Lindsay?

Lindsay Boswell: When it comes to core empirical data, we very much look to the Food Foundation, Anna’s amazing organisation, for that. The anecdotal information we are getting back from many of those 11,000 organisations is that there is a subtlety to the situation. This is pandemic-specific, rather than broader than pandemic. I completely agree with Garry that this is a problem that existed pre-March last year. The subtlety is that they are finding that a disproportionate number of the people who are turning to them for support and help are from families where the breadwinners have been in low-employment insecure jobs, quite often linked to the hospitality sector. They were managing to make ends meet beforehand—just—but are now finding, because the employment market is fragile at that end of the spectrum and they fall outside of furlough schemes and such, that they cannot. That is where the disproportionate increase in numbers of families who have been turning to support have come from.

Q8 **Chair:** So people who have lost their employment or have just seen their income significantly reduced.

Lindsay Boswell: Or possibly have lost some of their employment, because actually their employment was a portfolio of jobs. The other contributing factor is that if they have lost the support mechanisms that enabled their children to be looked after while they worked, then they have had to stay at home. That is more of a comment principally aimed at the first lockdown.

Q9 **Chair:** Azmina, have you got something you want to add? There will be plenty of opportunity to come in if everything has been covered already.

Azmina Siddique: I will just add one small point. I very much agree with the point that this has to be seen in the broader context of poverty more generally. There are just two small things. One is that we surveyed some parents in September, when most schools had gone back, to see how they were coping with the cost of their child’s school food during the day. The thing that surprised us was that, although most of the parents whom we spoke to, including one on free school meals support, had never really had any contact with the social security system before, one in seven of those parents said that they had struggled to cover the cost of their child’s food



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during the school days. These are by no means new issues, but for many families this is the first time that this struggle has really hit them.

I echo the comment that Anna made about, in particular, families from BAME backgrounds struggling. Again, we have seen through our services that, of the many families we support who have the no recourse to public funds condition attached to their leave to remain, a disproportionate amount are BAME. They have been among the hardest hit. To echo what Lindsay was saying, there have been so many income shocks, job losses, that these families have no safety nets to turn to. The situation for many of them was dire before the pandemic. Many families are often stuck in cycles of destitution, but that has been made a lot worse. We are really seeing this affecting the children within these families who are actually often British. They were certainly born here and have known no other home, but they have been locked out and are feeling the impacts of this more than ever before.

Q10 **Chair:** Thank you. We know that this is not a new issue. You have mentioned that the Covid pandemic has really thrown an existing problem into relief, and it has created and multiplied the situation for many families. Why is it that Marcus Rashford's campaign has captured the public imagination in such a big way? The question is open to any of you.

Lindsay Boswell: If I may, I think it is a combination of a couple of things. The messaging has come from a very, very unusual location—a young man who is a footballer, aged 22 at the time that he started this. Then there is the authenticity of his story. Obviously, his celebrity has enabled him to have his story heard in the first place, but his authenticity alongside that is a factor. It is that combined with the circumstances of the pandemic where the majority, or a larger proportion of society, realised that, although this is tough on themselves, there are always people who are harder pressed than they are and therefore compassion, sympathy and understanding, as we have had to stop our busy lives, have increased and accelerated. Coming up with a coherent comprehensive response to this could be one of the fantastic outcomes that comes out of this dreadful situation.

Q11 **Chair:** Garry, did you want to come in there? Then I will bring you in, Anna, because I have another question for you.

Garry Lemon: Lindsay is absolutely right. Marcus Rashford is the right person with the right message at the right time. The only thing I would add is that, as well as the British public showing the absolute best of themselves in terms of wanting to look after each other, of wanting to protect the NHS and of the 1 million people who signed this petition because they cared so deeply about this, there is evidence of a wider shift in public opinion on issues around poverty. Just a couple of days ago, the National Centre for Social Research, for example, found for the first time that, since 2001, the public were as likely to say that benefits are too low as to say that they are too high, so it looks like this is not just about Marcus Rashford; there is a wider public desire for structural change.



- Q12 **Chair:** Anna, you can come in here and say something on that, but I also want to ask you about the asks in Marcus's petition because they echo calls from the Food Foundation's children's future food inquiry in 2019 and reviews by other organisations as well. Can you talk to us not only about the timing and why Marcus has made such an impact but about how seriously the Government were taking the issue before Marcus's intervention?

Anna Taylor: Just to quickly build on the previous point before I move on to that, the other incredibly powerful thing about Marcus's personal story is that he has demonstrated through that how vital it is that we listen to people who have direct experience of these circumstances, and do not have it translated through the likes of me or others. Also, by virtue of the fact that Marcus was willing to tell his story, he gave permission, if you like, to others to tell their story and for them not to feel like it was a shameful experience for them. We have to remember that very many people who are in this circumstance feel ashamed to talk about it and we have to address that problem if we are really going to solve it, because it is only by really understanding people's circumstances that we can come up with the right mix of solutions.

We launched the children's future food inquiry in April 2019. At that time, we had a very good ongoing conversation with Minister Nadhim Zahawi, who was then the Minister for Families and Children in the Department for Education. We had a very constructive conversation about the sorts of measures that needed to be put in place and the DFE indeed wrote to schools about several aspects of the inquiry. So the conversation began really well, but then, because we had no-deal Brexit and the election—a whole series of things made it very difficult to progress the issue at the time.

However, I think the problem that we have experienced through the pandemic is the fact that there isn't really a home in Government to understand what is going on in terms of food insecurity on the ground and to gather the data, so that it can really inform Government policy across the different Departments that need to act. I think that remains a problem today. Some measures were put in place in the heat of the pandemic. The Food Vulnerability Taskforce, which one of the Ministers chaired, did a really important job, in terms of bringing together intelligence. However, there is no ongoing function, and I think that is a real weakness in our ability to get a proper Government response in place.

- Q13 **Chair:** To the other witnesses, what change have you seen in the Government's interest in these issues since Marcus started this campaign? Have you noticed any, Azmina?

Azmina Siddique: One of the very positive outcomes has been the extension of free school meals to children affected by NRPF. Actually, one of the broader calls that I know has been backed by Marcus Rashford has been to extend eligibility for free school meals. I should not be giving credit, because it hasn't been done yet; this is still very much in the works.



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However, the fact that these conversations are happening is encouraging and I hope that this momentum keeps on beyond whenever the end of the pandemic might be, because a lot of these changes, as I think has been echoed by everyone so far, have been needed for a long, long time.

So, one of the key measures has been expanding eligibility for free school meals, and removing that income threshold, which has been backed by the national food strategy. We have been calling for that, along with other colleagues in the sector, for a long time. And one of the really positive measures that has been brought about has been, I guess, a focus in public discourse on the need for this kind of support and the mechanisms by which families have to deal with it.

Never in a million years would we have imagined that we would be having genuine conversations about the need for, say, cash-first payments for families and the dignity that that can afford families, but we have seen them in the last few weeks. These are some positive steps that we are having in public discourse, and I do hope that this comes into Government.

The other thing that has been quite positive has been seeing Departments to some extent working together on this, across DFE and DWP. I think we would all agree that this is very much needed. Child food poverty is not a matter that, as Anna said, falls neatly within one Department or another. I guess that inter-governmental working is something that has been temporarily positive, but we would like to see it continue, because it is vital that it does—this is not just an issue for the pandemic.

Chair: Thank you. Unless anyone has got anything they want to add on that, I will bring in Nick Fletcher, who has some more questions to ask you.

Q14 **Nick Fletcher:** Thank you, Chair. Hello, panel; it is good to see you all today.

In the past few weeks, there have been some concerns about the quality of food available to families during this lockdown. Now, as we all know, much of what we see on social media is negative and it obviously spreads really, really fast. However, there have definitely been some issues there.

If any urgent changes are to be made to the Government's support, what would they be? I think, Azmina, that you have just come on to some of those issues, so maybe we could go to Garry and Lindsay on this one, please.

Garry Lemon: I think that probably my colleagues Anna and Lindsay could talk more about the contents of the food parcel. Speaking from a food bank charity's point of view, there is an issue of dignity here that needs to be addressed. We in the food bank network treat people with respect and dignity when we give a food parcel over, but ultimately that can never replace the dignity of having enough money in your own pocket to be able to put food on the table for your own children. I think that a lot of the anger from the public was about the fact that that food parcel took



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away agency from parents and therefore took away dignity. As Azmina spoke about, a cash-first approach, where parents and their children can choose food that they are going to eat and that they enjoy, would be preferable for us. That would be the main point from me on that.

Lindsay Boswell: Nick, as I think you know, the main work we do is on redistributing surplus. I am afraid that I am not an expert on the statutory provision side of food. I am aware that the Government guidelines are fairly comprehensive on the quality of what a food parcel should be. I also understand that there is the option, but it is at school level, although I think this is changing, as to whether that is a cash payment or a food parcel. We certainly think that the parents should be in the position of having a choice on that. But I am not really in a position or a place to understand what the systems failure was that resulted in that photograph. What I can tell you is that the vast, vast majority of food that we redistribute is fresh produce that comes directly from farmers.

Anna Taylor: It is a really important question. First, as you note, we have seen probably the really bad stuff on social media. Those food parcels were disgraceful—there is no other word for them—but there has been a huge amount of really good work and fantastic food parcels, which have been provided by very many schools and caterers. So we must not take away the impression that that is the norm. Also, very importantly, the Government spoke up extremely quickly and said that those parcels were not acceptable.

In the short term, the actions that needed to be taken have been taken. However, the story around the quality of the parcels was one of several really big challenges on free school meals that have been highlighted in the past 12 months: we have had the issue of children getting a replacement when they are at home, and the vital importance of that meal for children who are on free school meals and those families in terms of their diets; and then we had what happens to those children in the holidays. We had a really good package announced by the Government in November for dealing with the holiday provision and also boosting Healthy Start over the coming 12 months, to the end of 2021.

What we have not really got into is the extent to which the pandemic has revealed some of these quite significant cracks in the current provision of free school meals. That is why we have supported the request for a review of free school meals, to look at some of these problems—they were there before the pandemic, but the pandemic has really shone a light on how many difficulties that is creating for these households. I think that now is the time to really start to look at what happens in the medium term and to make sure we have the right package in place, given that we know that disadvantaged children have suffered disproportionately as a result of the pandemic, for both educational and other reasons.

Q15 **Nick Fletcher:** Thank you for that. I have one question, which is slightly off topic, on that. You rightly discussed the dignity of families being able to provide for themselves. I know this is only a very small minority, but there was also a concern about the vouchers not being spent on what



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they should be spent on. Do you have any evidence of that? What are your thoughts on that? Azmina, you put your hand up, so let's hear from you.

Azmina Siddique: One of the things we spoke about a lot in the first tranche of the lockdown was vouchers and how they are used. We spoke to a lot of parents through our services and our partner services. We run a programme which helps councils and voluntary sector organisations deliver emergency financial support to families and individuals, so through those networks as well. Really, the main issue we kept finding was not parents misusing vouchers; it was parents not being able to get to the right shops where they were easily cash-in-able. Often, it was only at supermarkets you had to drive to and not at local shops. Or it was about parents not being able to use the online system.

We spoke to a lot of different providers and parents, and we did not hear about people abusing the system. What we did hear about were parents trying to adapt to a very difficult and quickly changing situation. The mechanisms of support were changing as well, and they were trying to keep up with how they were eligible and how they could feed their children. The voucher scheme was not perfect. It is better than not having that choice, but, as we have said, cash-first is always best, because it gives parents those options. We understand where vouchers have to be used, where it is better, but time and time again we have mainly heard about parents just trying to do the best they can for their children and provide during what has been a really difficult time.

Q16 **Nick Fletcher:** Thank you for that. The second part of the question was about the quality of the parcels and the way that was handled over a fortnight ago. Do you think that was just down to the exceptional circumstances of the lockdown and the way it came around very quickly, or Government Departments actually understanding the issues on the ground? Would you like to come in on that, Garry?

Garry Lemon: It is difficult for me to say. I am sort of removed from the conversation that happened between the organisation that provided the food parcel. The local authority or the Government were involved in that conversation. Clearly, that food parcel was not good enough. I know that the company has talked about measures to improve things in that particular school. What I can add is that I am really glad the Government came out straightaway and said that this was unacceptable and asked for action to be taken. I really do think that that is something that, perhaps through the investigation, as Anna has spoken about, we would be able to get into, so we can make sure something like that does not happen again, if we have to rely on free school meals to make sure that children can be fed.

Q17 **Chair:** Do you mind if I come in one minute? I was not sure if some of the other witnesses were more involved in those discussions, but what are your thoughts? Some of the parcels did seem to be the exception rather than the rule, but it opened up in the public's conscience the idea of being given food and having no choice. That was perhaps the thing that



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people found shocking, not just the quantity. Some of them were small, but even with the correct quantity the public realised there is no choice for those children. We all know how fussy children can be and if you want them to eat good food often you do need to buy the food that children will eat. I do not know if you had some thoughts on that, or does that just build on what you said already, Azmina?

Azmina Siddique: I think what Anna said, that there are organisations, caterers and schools who are doing a fantastic job, is worth saying. I would be wary of turning parents away from going to get support, thinking that they might get a meagre package. I echo what everyone else has said. Those particular pictures that were doing the rounds were disgraceful and no family should be having to get that. We have been involved in some conversations. It is very difficult to know what the full picture is and what is a representative picture. This is very much done on a local basis by different caterers, different schools, different local authorities. Everyone has unique organisations and arrangements on the ground as they are working. I think at the start of the year, as well, there was a bit of confusion about when the voucher scheme was starting, and some schools were filling that gap. That is no excuse for any substandard packages that parents got, but it is a changing situation.

I echo what everyone else said. It is heartening to see the reaction to make sure this does not happen again. Hopefully, as you say, it has cemented the view that parents need choice, so that where possible, if they are able to use the vouchers or have cash support, they are able to make that choice for their families. That is the best option there is.

Chair: Thank you. Sorry, Nick. I'll hand back to you.

Q18 **Nick Fletcher:** There are many Government schemes helping families access food, including free school meals, and Healthy Start vouchers. There is also a wider welfare system and the support that councils can offer vulnerable families. What are the gaps in the safety net that means that some children are still going hungry? My concern around this is that we were told by local councils that they could manage things and give more targeted supply, but I still see local councils providing blanket help. Occasionally, we have seen full vouchers on Facebook. Sometimes, we really need to get to the people who are falling through the gaps. How can you help and inform Government to ensure that we get to these people and that we get real targeted help, which is what we need? I can see Garry putting his hand up on that one.

Garry Lemon: In terms of wider support, it is important to acknowledge that there was significant help from Government. It did make a difference. It would have made a difference to millions of families. You are talking about things like the job retention scheme, the self-employment income support scheme and, crucially, the £20 uplift to universal credit, which will have targeted—if you want to talk about targeting—millions of families on the lowest incomes that needed it the most. Only 4% of people referred to our food banks during this crisis were furloughed. It really did protect the children of those families.



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I would also point to the Covid winter grant scheme that went to councils, which I think is what you are zeroing in on. It is very welcome in terms of being an important component of a wider safety net. The issue really is threefold for me. We have the fact that the incomes from benefits are not sufficient, that Government debt is pushing people into poverty, and that there is not enough of that local support. If I may, I will suggest three answers to those three issues. No. 1 the Government should lock in that £20 uplift to universal credit. If that does not happen, we could see a further 730,000 children being pushed into poverty, according to the Resolution Foundation. It is not some incredibly generous increase. It is, instead, redressing years of cuts that have preceded it.

Secondly, on the point about people repaying government debt, we ask for a fairer system. People are being given money with one hand by the Government with universal credit, but it is being taken away again through deductions too often. People who have taken out an advance to bridge the five-week wait are having that knocked off subsequent months' payments, which is leading them without enough.

Finally, we need to see this Covid winter grant scheme extended as well. To bring England in line with, say, Scotland and Wales, we would recommend that about £250 million a year should go to councils. Councils have a really important role to play here. I applaud councils up and down the country for playing their part in protecting people who are shielding. Through decent, proper local welfare assistance that is funded in the long term, councils can plan and put systems in place. If I have one criticism of that £170 million, it is that, at the moment, 80% of it is ring-fenced for food. You should give councils the flexibility to bring in systems so that you can link people back into their communities and start tackling some of the underlying reasons why people are in poverty—things such as debt advice, for example. That would be a huge help and would strengthen the safety net. As has been said, long term, we need to seize on this new consensus that we have seen growing. We have seen significant action from Government and we have seen concern from the public. We need cross-governmental action to ensure that we end the poverty that sits behind and underpins food poverty.

Lindsay Boswell: I agree with everything Garry has just said. He has given a very good articulation of the centralised support system. The quick point I want to make is: please do not forget in your deliberations and recommendations also to build in resilience for the local community groups, which provide a fundamental part that makes society and community cohesion really strong. Far too often, people think that the voluntary sector looks like big organisations—like the four of us on this panel today—but actually the real strength of the voluntary sector in the United Kingdom is those local community groups, which are known by the people who need the support. They play a fundamental part in this, alongside everything that Garry has identified.

Azmina Siddique: I just wanted to add something to what Garry said about local welfare assistance. We also agree on that £250 million number



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needed per year to level up the funding for crisis support in England with that in the other nations. Our research from before the pandemic showed that in the last 10 years funding for local welfare or similar crisis support had fallen by 55% since 2010 and that one in seven local authorities in England no longer have some form of local welfare support.

So the recent injections of cash, including the £170 million winter grant, were incredibly important and well received, but they need to be sustained. They have been used and operationalised quite successfully. We surveyed some local authorities in December on how they have been spending the money. Many had been using it to provide free school meal support—supermarket vouchers—for eligible pupils, but this was also being extended to young carers, children who had left care recently and some infants who had pupil premium eligibility. They were also using it to bolster existing local welfare assistance schemes to help families with other things aside from food, which is key, as you mentioned, Garry. So we are talking about utility bills and other financial support, and helping families who are fleeing domestic violence or who are in emergency accommodation. Another heartening thing we saw was that many local authorities that did not have a local welfare assistance scheme in place had used that grant to make a sort of temporary winter scheme that people could apply to. These have all been very positive outcomes, but this needs to be sustained. This funding is in place only until March, and we need to ensure that these safety nets are ensured and strengthened.

I would make one point of caution: it has been incredible having this support through these local mechanisms for families, and I understand that councils have been encouraged to provide that support, for example, throughout the February half-term, but going forward it is important for us not to conflate these two different mechanisms of support. Both are incredibly important, and they fulfil separate roles. Something such as free school meals, which is a continued, targeted form of support for children in the form of food support, can almost prevent a family from needing to access a local welfare assistance scheme, which is not only for food—it can be for other forms of support, and not just for families, but for individuals. Both are incredibly important, and going beyond this year we need to ensure that both are protected, so that we do not further create these holes in the safety net, as you mentioned.

The only other quick point I want to make is around gaps in the safety net. I wish to draw attention to low-income migrant families and their children who are affected by no recourse to public funds. They have not been able to access a lot of the support Garry talked about that had been introduced throughout the pandemic. We know that these families have been incredibly affected. They have had nowhere else to turn. Many of these parents are working in frontline jobs—we know this from our services—as NHS workers and in social care. They have had no choice but to work, because they cannot sign on for any form of welfare support. There has been a really encouraging move in giving those children this free school meal support, and that is one thing that is really important for us to continue beyond this pandemic, to make sure that they can access



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that means-tested free school meal support on a par with their peers, regardless of their parents' immigration status.

- Q19 **Nick Fletcher:** Thank you for that. I am conscious of time, Chair, so I will skip the next question and just quickly ask another. It is always easy to ask for more money and to talk about money, but, obviously, it is increasingly difficult to find, as we will probably see. My question is: is there anything else that the Government can do, support-wise, that is not money-orientated, as in the actual amount of cash in terms of vouchers or meals? Is there an education piece there? You gave me three fantastic points there, Garry, which I have written down. Is there anything else you can think of that is not the financial part of it?

Garry Lemon: I would make the point—just to carry on asking for money for one moment—that money that goes into the pockets of people at the bottom of the income scale gets spent. We have got to build back after this economic disaster, with people spending in local shops, which is what these people do. That can only help.

In terms of non-money support from Government, I would again stress the cross-governmental co-operation we saw. I was really impressed by the first tranche of funding for local welfare, for example, where lots of different Government Departments put aside barriers that have been in place, because of the crisis situation, and brought in really significant changes that I would not have expected to see—so better communication across Government and focus on income, rather than food, being the answer to poverty.

Nick Fletcher: Thank you for that. I will hand back to you, Chair.

Chair: Very good, Nick. You managed to get a suggestion there that does not involve a spending commitment. That is very helpful.

Jonathan was going to come in and ask some questions. We have until 4.30 pm, so we do not have a huge amount of time. If we just try to make sure we do not go over what we have already done. This is a very rich session, so it would be good to be able to get through all the different topics we have got. Jonathan, are you there? Have you got some questions that you would like to ask?

- Q20 **Jonathan Gullis:** Thank you very much, Chair. Sorry for being slightly delayed—the wi-fi was playing up on me.

I have been fascinated by the conversation. I am going to go off-piste from the script slightly, with the limited time. I was a secondary school teacher in London and Birmingham. I was also a head of year. So I want to make it very clear from the beginning that I am fully supportive of free school meals during term time as they have been administered for decades. I do have reservations over the idea of free school meals into the holiday period as somehow being one way in which to solve a long-term problem.

Garry, I was really pleased to hear you mention the income side of it. I think that is ultimately where we need to target on all this. I completely



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agree. In Stoke-on-Trent, we earn £100 less per head than the average household in other parts of the UK, so I fully understand, agree and support the income. It links back into education.

If I throw out a couple of questions at the panel, one would be this. I am a Conservative, so this will not shock you, but I am going to ask about the role of the state versus the role of the individual. I believe in the idea that the individual has an important role to play and that the state should be involved to help those most in need. I am a Conservative one-nationer who believes that it is the responsibility of the state to help the most vulnerable in society, but one thing I do hate, to be quite honest with you, is universality. I have a real concern that when my daughter goes to primary school, she will be eligible for free school meals just because of her age, when actually as a parent I would be able to afford those free school meals myself. So I have a real problem that we have not done a proper means test. Azmina, I thought you made a good point earlier around the idea of how the eligibility criteria are looked at. I certainly fully support looking at them, because, as we know, you can get the free school meal entitlement. Your parent's income situation may change, but you will remain with the entitlement. Your parents could be in an eligible place where, maybe financially, they wouldn't need that support like they once did. So please say something around that.

I would also be really interested to hear about the holiday solution. Azmina, I heard you—I am sorry if others did as well—talk about the idea of free school meals into holidays. I am a big advocate and supporter of holiday clubs. They are a really positive step. Not only do you get the food support, but physical exercise, mental health wellbeing checks and safeguarding opportunities. How do we go bigger and better with that? It is something I am a big supporter of.

I will quickly add that, on cash-first, I am, I am sorry to say, nervous of that. That is not because I do not trust parents—I think that is a stigma and is not fair. My worry is, how do we ensure that the food bought is healthy and nutritious, particularly when we see major marketing from sugar and sweet treats? I am someone who is larger than I should be. I fall for the "buy three chocolate bars for a pound at the Asda checkout trap" every time. So how do we address that?

Finally—sorry, Chair—that links in with education. One of my biggest frustrations with food education at the moment is people not learning about the basics of food, in the sense of what is a carbohydrate? I did not realise, until I worked it out one day many moons ago, that there were such things as complex carbohydrates, which are better to have than just simple ones. I did not understand about how to try to do a food shop, even on a budget at university. I remember regularly just falling into the trap of thinking that the offers that were there were somehow better than perhaps just getting the store's own branded stuff. So how can we improve food education and, obviously, the teaching of those skills around cooking that will hopefully ultimately lead to better choices when it comes to buying food and how we prepare meals and store them long term? I appreciate that I have just thrown out loads of stuff there, but I am very happy to be put in my place or told otherwise. Lindsay, I saw



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your hand up, so I will go to you first.

- Q21 **Chair:** You have put a huge amount out there, Jonathan. I can see that Lindsay is itching to come in. And I will also just throw in there that you seem to be advocating for something along the lines of Sure Start, Jonathan, which did teach cooking and healthy eating. But anyway, Lindsay, I will bring you in.

Jonathan Gullis: Well done, Catherine. *[Laughter.]*

Lindsay Boswell: Jonathan, I'm not sure that I will address everything that you have just raised, but I would like to link a couple of those points. You started with questioning around the role of the state. I think there are some areas where the state has an absolute role. So, to go to your very final point, I think we need a complete systems review of our approach to food in the United Kingdom. You are talking to Henry Dimbleby later. He has done a lot of listening, with the support of Anna and her team, up and down the land, and I ask the Government to listen to the national food strategy.

I personally would like to see every single young person leave education knowing how to cook. It seems bizarre that we teach skills that are never used, and yet there is a skill that we need to deploy three times a day that has a major impact on our ability to feed our families efficiently when we are parents ourselves, but that is not taught. So that is a very big point; it is turning around an oil tanker. But I think it is something that the Government should be committed to.

On holiday provision, I will just quickly make a point on that and give way to my colleagues. We haven't talked yet about holiday provision on the activity club side. Like you, I am a major advocate of that. We support over 50,000 families and children every year. Indeed, that is how Marcus first got in touch with this whole issue, because we were providing food to a holiday programme, one very local to him in his community.

There is an opportunity, but it requires a piece of joined-up Government. In the United Kingdom, we waste a huge amount of food. It is seven times cheaper to redistribute surplus food than it is to buy food. The Government have committed—fantastically—a large amount of money this year to fund holiday clubs. We would love to make sure that taxpayers' money goes as far as possible, by making sure that as much of the food that is provided to those clubs—absolutely the most nutritional, high-value food, so, fresh produce, fresh fruit, fresh vegetables, dairy and protein—is provided from the surpluses that exist in our own food system. If that is not building back better in a post-Brexit Britain, I do not know what is.

- Q22 **Jonathan Gullis:** Thank you so much for that; it is fascinating that it is seven times cheaper. Lindsay, I think that as MPs we have had invitations to visit your organisation, and I am very keen to take that offer up. I regularly attend the food banks in my area; I stay in touch with all of them to gauge what is happening on the ground. I have also done surgeries—privately, obviously, and not advertised—to make sure that we pick up the casework and reach out to those individuals.



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I will just put it on the record that I am a huge late convert to Hilary Cottam and “Radical Help”. I was told about it by a really good socialist friend of mine—Danny Flynn, and he won’t mind my saying that—who runs the YMCA here in Stoke. I am a convert, so if Danny and I can get on the same page, I don’t see why we can’t do something quite radical to shake things up and do something different.

Catherine, before I go to Garry, I will just quickly say that I know you said Sure Start, but I call them family hubs these days. I am sure you will appreciate that that is the ad line we take on that one.

Chair: Garry, did you want to come in there?

Garry Lemon: There are lots of really interesting questions there, Jonathan. To the biggie, about what should be the state’s responsibility, I think there is a big, important national conversation that we need to have about that.

I have worked at the Trussell Trust for about four years. We represent about 425 separate organisations and 1,200 food banks, and I think that, over those years, I have spoken to most of them. What we have done over those past four years is, together with the food bank network, agreed that we need to get to a place where nobody should need emergency food because they cannot afford it. That really is the clear message to us from those small community organisations.

There is an important conversation to be had about some of the wider supports. We undertook a piece of research—our flagship piece of research called “State of Hunger”—with Heriot-Watt university. It listed three key drivers that send people, and therefore children, into food banks. The biggie is income from benefits, hence my track today, but it is also unfortunate life events and then formal and informal support. What we are finding is that you see family breakdown, you get illness and you get disability. By the way, people with illnesses and disabilities are massively over-represented in food banks. The benefits system is not catching them.

But what is also important is that informal support. More people should come together—civil society, businesses, charities and Government—to talk about that informal support. It is important, but the very clear message from the food bank network is that it should be the state’s job to ensure that people are not going hungry because they cannot afford food. That is what the food bank network has said.

Q23 **Jonathan Gullis:** Garry, very quickly, one concern that I have with how we do things in Government is cliff edges. I do not understand why we do not have tapering systems in all kinds of things. I just feel that there are too many cliff edges. Are there particular cliff edges that you guys have come across that you think are a barrier to that support, and also obviously the income that the welfare state may play a part in?

Garry Lemon: Universal credit, if it were properly funded, should solve that problem. It is really important to remember that it is an in-work and an out-of-work benefit. If people’s money were not deducted to repay

advances and if the level was set at a decent level, you could move more people onto it and they would not have to worry about cliff edges. They could move into work. That was the vision of universal credit. We have never seen what the benefit could do if it were properly funded. It should be a poverty-fighting machine, but because of some structural issues with it, and because, crucially, it has been underfunded, it has never been able to live up to its potential.

Jonathan Gullis: Thank you.

Chair: Do you want to come in, Anna and Azmina?

Anna Taylor: I know that we are short of time, so I will be quick. You have raised some important fundamental questions. I want to pick up on just one aspect. You talked about some of the problems that we have in educating children around food. We have some good stuff in the curriculum, but it has not yet been properly rolled out across all schools.

You also talked about the problem of “buy one, get one free”—the kind of environment in which we are making food decisions that do not help us to eat well, and we see that in our children’s diets. Children are getting half of their calories from these foods that we call high fat, sugar and salt—foods that are not good for us to be eating in large quantities.

Those two things are the very reason why, actually, universal free school meals offer so much potential; it is setting in place a kind of culture in schools with the very youngest children around how to eat well. It is a culture around how to eat a nourishing meal together, developing those taste preferences that we know are set down in early childhood, and creating a culture around sitting down with your teachers and your friends for a good meal. That is a critical part of the education process that you have highlighted. We have not made the most of that opportunity yet—as much as we could. There is more to be done, but that creates a critical foundation for that agenda that you prescribe.

Jonathan Gullis: Anna, well done. You have swung that perfectly back on me. I will have to go away and have a think now about how you have put that on me. At Michaela, the school in Brent, all the children eat the same meal at a table and in a family setting. I am a huge advocate of that, but I had not considered how that is technically, therefore, a universal benefit for all, but is teaching those skills. You have made me go away and think harder now. Well done.

Chair: Good. Azmina?

Azmina Siddique: I was going to say that having universal free school meals normalises healthy eating, and a lot of research done by the University of Essex recently has been showing that this has had an impact on healthy weight for young people as well. Another point, which perhaps comes back to us having to look at eligibility for free school meals, is that we know that the current thresholds mean that many children—close to 1 million—are missing out. Universal infant school meals means that we



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catch those young people who would otherwise be living in poverty but not receiving that support. I do not know whether we have time to get into this, but I am happy to continue this conversation or to send some information on the income thresholds, because you mentioned cliff edges and eligibility. I am happy to share some information about that, because we have plenty of research on it.

Q24 Chair: I was going to come back on another thing, because it ties in with what we are not quite going to have time to cover now and does come back to Jonathan's point about universality. He mentioned that he is a big fan of sports clubs, out-of-school clubs and holiday camps. I guess it would be a question for Jonathan, but I would also like to hear what you think, because this is part of the three issues that Marcus Rashford would like to see addressed. This is not just about food; it is about the broader educational and sport input for children, in order to really combat that poverty, and whether that should be universal. Why should only certain children be able to attend a summer camp? Your best friend might not be eligible and so you would go to the sport camp and they would not, but you would only want to go if you could go with your friend. That is often how it works for children. I would just like some thoughts on whether that would be another way of combating Jonathan's reluctance on universalism. If we are going to roll out summer camps, they should be open to all children, so that they are inclusive. I would be interested to hear your views on that.

Jonathan Gullis: Sorry to come in, Chair, but I would just like to mention, on the record, the Hubb Foundation. I am being cheeky, putting in a plug in for my own area. It was set up by Carol Shanahan, the co-chair and co-owner of Port Vale football club. It does some really amazing stuff in this area. I am always happy for the Committee to see what it is doing and would love the witnesses to come up to hear from it. Adam Yates, a former professional footballer, is now leading it. It is a remarkable group and they do as much outreach work as possible. I think you have raised a really interesting point, Catherine, about those clubs. I make no secret of the fact, and I put it on the record again, that I was privileged to go to a private school. I was the first in my family to do so and I had everything that I could possibly want. I look back and regret probably not taking advantage of everything that I literally had. Sport and extra-curricular was just normalised. We are talking about that with the free school meals, but it was normal to have eight different clubs to go to on a Monday night if you wanted to, and you could choose what you wanted. Sadly, as you say, that is not the case in many state schools, even the ones I worked in.

Chair: Lindsay, did you want to come in on that?

Lindsay Boswell: No, it's okay.

Q25 Chair: Is it part of your thinking or are you focused only on the food aspect, rather than the holiday activities? You have mentioned the Covid winter grant scheme and the fact that councils can identify children and families most in need of food and other essentials. Obviously, the local



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authorities could have that role in identifying and supporting, and they have been the vehicle for supporting holiday activities and food programmes. It is good that that funding has now been put in place for 2021. Are you happy with that? It is something you support? I guess that fundamentally the question is: is it the best use of the money that is available? We know that there is not endless money, so we have to make sure that the money that is spent is used in the most effective way possible. Has anyone got any thoughts on that? We need to end, but my question to you is: what would be your No. 1 priority? It would be interesting to see whether people's were different. If somebody names their No. 1 priority, the next person should come up with a different one, so whoever goes last will have the hardest job. To distil this down: what would be your No. 1 ask of the Government? When we debate this in Parliament and put it to the Minister, what can we put to them? May I start with you, Anna, as you are unmuted?

Anna Taylor: Just to clarify, Catherine, are you talking about priorities that have already been supported or those in addition to what is already there?

Chair: No, I was asking about holiday activities. I was interested in your views, on whether that is good use of funding and on whether you would like to see it made on a permanent basis, because at the moment it is only ad hoc. The second question, which is to round up, is: what would be your No. 1 ask? So it may be part of what is already being asked, but what is the priority for you?

Anna Taylor: Certainly I am of the view that the holiday and activities fund, as we have got good experience through these pilots—providing this huge mix of activities alongside a really healthy meal is a great package and well worth the investment for that holiday period. I don't think it needs to be exclusive for children on free school meals. There is no reason why other children could not pay for that kind of provision and have that in place over the summer holidays, the long break, because we know it is so important to keep children stimulated and engaged, as well as well fed, over the summer.

In terms of what needs to happen next, I think it is important that we move on to the third of the asks in Marcus Rashford's petition, which is thinking about the children who are not at the moment eligible for free school meals but are living in poverty. That is estimated to be about 1.2 million children. We are hearing directly from them in our surveys and they are forced into eating very poor quality food when they are in those circumstances; so I think our attention should immediately move to them.

Chair: Thank you. Who would like to come next? Lindsay?

Lindsay Boswell: I totally agree with the point that Anna has made about the holiday provision and, linking that to the final comment, which is what I would like to see, I would like to see a long-term—beyond the life of any one Parliament—approach taken to the whole breadth of the conversation that we have had today. We are really pleased to see the emergency



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processes that have been put into place for 2021. We are really pleased that this evidence gathering is happening. What we would like to see is a long-term plan with long-term provision put into place.

Q26 **Chair:** Garry or Azmina, have you got some final comments?

Azmina Siddique: I will jump in to very much agree with Anna's point about expanding eligibility to free school meals so we make sure that the system we have in place actually serves all children in poverty who need them. To be a bit more specific, that means keeping the temporary extension to those affected by NRPF—making that permanent and also removing the income thresholds currently in order to receive it. I know this is kind of continuing what Jonathan was saying earlier, but currently family incomes need to be £7,400 or less a year in order to qualify for free school meals. That is incredibly low. We are missing a lot of children who might otherwise be eligible, but it also acts as a work disincentive and it may well mean that many families—we did some research with the University of York and the Child Poverty Action Group a few years ago that found that it could affect around 280,000 families—would be caught in a poverty trap of being worse off if they were earning more and lost free school meal support. There was a lot of reason for removing that and actually making all children whose parent or guardian is in receipt of universal credit eligible for free school meals.

Q27 **Chair:** So go to work and end up with less to eat and less food to put on the table.

Azmina Siddique: That was the whole point of universal credit.

Q28 **Chair:** Yes. Have you got some final comments, Garry?

Garry Lemon: If I could have one thing it would be locking in that uplift to universal credit. It has been a lifeline for people. If that uplift is taken away, the responsibility for looking after the families is going to fall to volunteers in food banks during a pandemic, and that is not right.

Chair: Okay, thank you. Can I say thank you very much to all of you. It has been a really rich session. There is a huge amount to take away and a lot to do, as well, so it has been really interesting. I have to say from my own perspective as an MP that in the north-east we have the highest number of children on free school meals. We have got the busiest food bank in the west end of Newcastle and I have got a FareShare depot in my constituency so I am a big supporter, personally, of all the work that you do. Thank you for that and for all the people you support and help at this time. I know as a constituency MP from my postbag what that means to local people at the moment. Thank you as well to Anna and Azmina for everything you are doing. We will take all this away and hopefully have our debate in Parliament and put these issues directly to the Government. So thank you.

We will move on to our next panel.