

## **Written evidence submitted by Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) (FS0100)**

### **EFRA Committee's inquiry on Food Security**

(March 24, 2023)

The Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) appreciates this opportunity to submit this brief supplementary evidence, further to our oral evidence given to the committee in November 2022. The below is in response to points raised by Mark Spencer MP, Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries at the oral evidence session held on 24th January 2023.

#### **1. Food insecurity and affordability**

IFAN refutes Mark Spencer's assertion that the affordability of food is “a different discussion to food security.” The price of food and the level of income required to purchase it is fundamental to a person's food (in)security. The accepted definition for “food insecurity” used for analysis in the Family Resources Survey (FRS) is rooted in the financial situation of households and how that affects their access to food. Questions asked in the FRS are based on the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Household Food Security Survey Module that measures food insecurity in terms of the affordability of food.<sup>1</sup> The relevance of income to food insecurity is the very reason why the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) measures household food insecurity through the FRS.

#### **2. UK consumer power to drive down food costs**

The ability, as put forward by Mark Spencer, for UK consumers to be “savvy enough to continue to shop around and ensure the marketplace drives those costs down” has been compromised for a growing part of the population and is not a realistic solution to food insecurity. IFAN's latest survey of our member organisations found that 89% saw demand for their services increase, comparing December 2021/January 2022 with December 2022/January 2023.<sup>2</sup> In response to this survey, independent food banks reported on the growing number of employed people who were relying on their services. One food bank manager noted that: “We've seen a lot of cases of people who are on Universal Credit to top up a wage and as neither has risen, but their outgoings have, they cannot make ends meet.” Food banks also reported on public sector workers such

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2021-to-2022/family-resources-survey-background-information-and-methodology>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/data>

as teachers, ambulance and NHS staff having to rely on their services. The evidence shows that there are a growing number of people who are active participants in the UK's economic system yet have no power to influence the cost of essentials such as food through their choices in the marketplace, as they have been excluded from it.

### **3. Responsibility of the householder in addressing household food insecurity**

It is a common misconception that “education” on reducing food waste and preparing food is an appropriate solution to tackle the scale of household food insecurity in the UK. Evidence from recent cash first pilot schemes show that it is a false assumption that people living in food insecurity are not already equipped with these skills. An evaluation of Leeds City Council's Cash Grant Pilot programme (2022) showed how directly increasing incomes (rather than referring to a food bank) had an overwhelmingly positive impact on individuals' confidence in both managing their household finances and meeting their families' dietary requirements.<sup>3</sup> In 2021, Legendary Community Club in Lewisham, ran a cash first pilot with similar results. Families reported that “additional cash gave children the room to learn to budget, shop around, and cook new recipes themselves.”<sup>4</sup> Increased choice also led to reduced food waste, as food chosen was appropriate to meet household needs. The ability for households, regardless of if they access charitable food aid, has been compromised by the rising cost of living. In March 2023, data from the Food Foundation show that the “basic basket” of food as part of a reasonably costed, adequately nutritious diet now costs 20-25% more than it did in April 2022.<sup>5</sup>

### **4. Government support for charitable food aid / the redistribution of surplus to charitable food aid organisations**

IFAN does not believe that charitable food aid, in any form, is an adequate solution to food insecurity and therefore welcomes Mark Spencer's sentiment that, rather than redirecting food surplus to charity, the primary way of ensuring people can access food is through “retailers, direct to consumers.” IFAN agrees that the best way to challenge food insecurity is to “ensure that people facing that economic challenge no longer face it” through both DWP interventions and “making sure work pays”. However, some people are unable to work through no fault of their own. It is clear, both historically, and

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<sup>3</sup> Lipscombe, L. and Walker, C. (2022), An Evaluation of the Leeds City Council Cash Grant Pilot programme, <https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/11/Vantage-Point-Research-Leeds-Cash-First-evaluation.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Legendary Community Club (2022), Cash first: the LCC Pilot, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/19IApdIGXKm7t3HVcs76zYMxyKZwxp9J2/view>

<sup>5</sup> <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/news/food-prices-tracker-march-2023>

from most recent data released in the last month from IFAN, the Food Foundation, and the DWP (FRS) that incomes - either through benefit payments or wages - have not been high enough to lift people out of food insecurity. FRS data show that from April 2021 to March 2022, 31% of households on Universal Credit reported severe or moderate food insecurity, despite the £20 uplift being in effect for 6 months of that year. Furthermore, around 40% of people on Universal Credit are also in work.<sup>6</sup>

Further institutionalising surplus food redistribution and charitable food aid is not an effective solution to growing food insecurity. Unlike charitable food, income from wages and benefit payments has the potential to lift people out of poverty and food insecurity. But for this to be effective, urgent action needs to be taken to improve the level of income available through these channels.

## **5. Number of households in food poverty**

In this oral evidence session (24th January, 2023) Mark Spencer stated that the number of households in food poverty had reduced from the previous year leaving the UK in “a better place” on food insecurity. Recent evidence however, indicates that the number of people living in food insecurity is increasing, rather than decreasing. IFAN’s latest survey of its member organisations found that 89% saw demand for their services increase since the previous year, and 0% had seen a decrease in need.<sup>7</sup> Data from the FRS also show that 3% of UK households used a food bank in the 12 months up to March 2022.<sup>8</sup> The growing number of people turning to food banks represents just a fraction of wider food insecurity. FRS data also show that 86% of people who experienced severe food insecurity did not use a food bank.<sup>9</sup> With latest ONS data showing food inflation reaching 18%<sup>10</sup>, much more needs to be done to tackle food insecurity at the root through raising incomes to turn the tide “in the right direction.”

## **6. Government departmental responsibility on food insecurity**

IFAN agrees that hunger is a cross-departmental responsibility and urgent action needs to be taken across government to reduce food insecurity.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/universal-credit-statistics-29-april-2013-to-14-july-2022/universal-credit-statistics-29-april-2013-to-14-july-2022#:~:text=This%20is%20broadly%20unchanged%20compared,%25%20year%2Don%2Dyear.>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/data>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2021-to-2022/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2021-to-2022>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2021-to-2022>

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.foodfoundation.org.uk/news/food-prices-tracker-march-2023?mc\\_cid=936f70e51b&mc\\_eid=c6e7bb0ad1](https://www.foodfoundation.org.uk/news/food-prices-tracker-march-2023?mc_cid=936f70e51b&mc_eid=c6e7bb0ad1)

Food insecurity is being measured by the DWP through the FRS, which now also collects data on food bank use. As worrying as the data on food bank use is, levels of severe food insecurity is even higher. This challenge requires a strong cross-departmental response that looks to boost incomes, rather than allowing charitable food aid to continue to proliferate. There is a shared Governmental responsibility to meet Sustainable Development Goal 2: Zero Hunger and accountability for food insecurity and poverty cannot be left to sink between the gaps in departments.

**March 2023**