

## **Petitions Committee**

### **Catherine McKinnell MP and Marcus Rashford MBE conversation on child food poverty, 18 January 2021**

Catherine McKinnell MP:

I'm Catherine McKinnell. I'm the Chair of the Petitions Committee. I'm an MP in Newcastle. And I just wanted to say congratulations on your petition, because clearly, it's been very successful. And thank you for taking the time today as well to talk to us at the Petitions Committee. Because we're having our hearing from ministers and from experts in this field, it's really, really helpful to talk to you as the lead petitioner, and someone that takes a particular interest in this issue. And I have to say, I take a particular interest in this issue as well, being a Newcastle MP, and our region in the northeast has the highest proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals. So it's an important issue, I absolutely agree. So the power of petitions means that it does enable people to tell their story directly in Parliament, rather than always having to go through politicians. So really, this is for you, to talk to us, and I was hoping that you'd be able to tell us something about why you think this long-term plan to tackle child poverty is an issue that you've dedicated yourself to.

Marcus Rashford MBE:

For me, it's about... I've learned so much, like, about the issue over the last year or so. And the same points keep occurring to me from the families and, and the children themselves. And I can only go off that and my own experiences on why I think it needs to, it needs to change and, like, they're quite similar to what I was going for and, and what a lot of the children are going through now, and the parents are going through it, it's a similar situation. And in a lot of cases, it's even worse than the situation that I was in. So it's definitely something that I'm sure needs to... there needs to be some sort of change and we've already taken some steps in the right direction. But just because we've done that, it doesn't mean that we're at the finish line because you know, for me, we're still quite a distance from that. So the structure of it needs to, it needs to put the children in a position where they can progress their

own lives. I would use the phrase 'putting them on the starting blocks'. Because I feel that when I was younger, I started behind a lot of other children that was, you know, that wanted to become footballers, for example, which was my situation, whatever it is that kids aspire to be when they're older. And I believe that whichever area they're from, it shouldn't have an effect on, on, um, you know, the opportunities. And setting up this structure is the biggest thing that we can do for for children at the moment. So I think going forward, and I understand it's not going to be it's not everything's going to change at once, but I'm willing to take the steps in order for it to have the long-term effect that it needs to have.

Catherine McKinnell MP:

Well, I guess you've got good experience of those incremental steps that train you to get to where you need to be, so what would you like to see in terms of changes to the free school meals, because I know you've called for a review - a full review - of the system. And your petition, specifically asked for the Government to follow the National Food Strategy recommendations, and expand access. And I've seen recent... a study by the Child Poverty Action Group that says that two in five children living below the poverty line aren't actually even entitled to free school meals, because the threshold is so high at the moment or low if you like. What would you like to see change?

Marcus Rashford MBE:

I've got a few... The main point is that children and the families, they shouldn't be living to deadlines. I think they need assurances that when they fall, they're going to be, you know, they're going to have someone to lean on, they're going to be protected. And if worst comes to worst. So the review of the system, it needs to put them things in place. Like if the worst thing happens, for example, like Coronavirus, where does it leave these families? And it's left them with nothing, basically. And um, you know, when I started [the campaign], that's what I've seen. And that was, I always had a sort of a hunger and a desire to do it. But seeing the effects that it had during Coronavirus, it made me have to

speed things up. An I think that they should have been on top of that before anybody else, before anybody else was really in. And there should have been things in place from whenever they thought the virus was going to be serious enough for people to lose jobs and people's income to go down, schools to be shut, stuff like that. They should have had things in place to assure people that they're not going to hit rock bottom and have no help. Because too many people that I've spoke to and the families and their children, they hit that point and they've had to build themselves back up on their own. And for me, it's not, that's not fair. Because it's no fault of their own that the virus occurred. So using what's happened in the past year as an example, that's, where the system needs to be reviewed. Because like I said before, they need to be protected from these issues can occur so... There's a few other, there is the three points that we asked for, they gave us two, but what people don't recognise is that this... by not getting that extra, I think, close to £1.8 million, children are still, you know, not getting the meals that they need and it's just not... So it seems like we've taken steps forward but in my mind, we've you know, we've got a million miles to go still. And I think once they do review it they're gonna see for themselves really, and the more that they have closer contact to the people that they're helping, I think the more likely they are to make change because I'm not sure whether it's a, you know, a lack of understanding or maybe just people not knowing people that have been through the issue or and haven't enough feedback from the people that have gone through the issue. I don't know what it may be, but it needs to change because people aren't comfortable with speaking out about it. And that's why the system definitely needs to be changed, rarely. And yeah, just, I just want to give, the main thing for me is giving them hope, and assuring them that the Government are listening and they're trying to understand more and more, which for me, it was a step that they've not taken before in the past. So I was happy that they, you know, was willing to take that step, but now it's about the future now. Yeah, that's what needs to be, needs to be fixed.

Catherine McKinnell MP:

I mean, you said that, that obviously this has been a long-term issue, and really the situation with the pandemic has just highlighted what is

wrong with the system in terms of supporting children and families. And I think that's really an important point that you make that it's not just about free school meals, and it's not just about the pandemic. It's about creating a much broader safety net for children and families. What do you think we need to, like, put in place? What things - specific things - do you, would you hope that the Government would be looking at that would be able to achieve that?

Marcus Rashford MBE:

I think we need baselines. So if you make sure that, you know, for example, all children in the UK guaranteed like a meal a day, like guaranteed, it will take a lot of stress off the parents and the children, children, when you're a child, you don't think about it. So I remember when I was younger, I just used to play out all day, and then I'd go home, and if there was food there I'd eat it, if there wasn't, I'd go to sleep. You just get on with your day. But the long-term effects, like, you're missing out on a lot of vital stuff that they may or may not need in the future. But it's, it's for them to make that decision, so... I remember sometimes I used to, like just, I used to go fall asleep, like, in the mornings.

Catherine McKinnell MP:

Was that at home or at school?

Marcus Rashford MBE:

No, at school.

Catherine McKinnell MP:

Yeah. Because I think that's, that's one of the things you hear from teachers is that the children, if they've come without breakfast, they struggle to concentrate, it's really hard to concentrate at school.

Marcus Rashford MBE:

When you wake up for school, you know it's gonna be a long day already. And then to... Say I, say, for example, I wanted to be, I don't know, a lawyer or something. And I needed to get that education, I wouldn't have been able to do it. But like, for me, I didn't want to be that, so it's not that school was any less important to me, because I still wanted to do things like get all my GCSEs, be able to get a different job in case football failed, and stuff like that. But for other kids that might aspire to be that, it's impossible to learn and to develop in that type of environment. You know, if you're hungry, and you can't concentrate, or you've not got the right foods, it's difficult to, to go to school and learn for four or five hours. You know, it'll be difficult to do that as a 20 year old or a 25 year old, so for children to do it is even more difficult. So that's one thing, and we spoke about the review of the free school meal system. There's stuff like the supermarket vouchers, like a lot of the families can't actually use them, because they don't have any devices, you know, like printers or anything like that. So I've mentioned that to Boris before, and he's trying to find a way around it now. Yeah, we've mentioned that 1.7, yeah, 1.7 million that don't qualify for any help. I think you said that before as well, too.

Catherine McKinnell MP:

I guess it comes down to the, not just when they're in school, because obviously, at the moment with the pandemic, there are children at home. And so the situation is much more widespread and exaggerated and, in a sense, by the current situation, but even in normal times, the children can get their meal at school, but then in the holidays, and at the weekends even, they, you know, they might not get the food that they need. And so one of the other issues is sort of holiday clubs and things, and I know you've spoken about that in the past. Is that something that you've raised as part of this strategy?

Marcus Rashford MBE:

Not yet, because I feel that if we nail down these things first, then we can, you know, go into the holidays and stuff like that in a little bit more

detail, but for me, we need to get a baseline first. What a lot of the, like a reoccurrence of a topic from the families is stability, a lot of them don't have stability. And for me, the only way for them to get stability is for the, for the system to sort of benefit them, which it's not done for a long time. So once you, once you get that baseline, then we can move on to them little things that will give them that, you know, a little bit of additional help. But yeah, definitely, that's something that, that can be looked at as well, you know, possibly at a later stage. Because, like you said, that was similar to what it was like for me, you know, you have, you almost have less issues when you are in school, because you're getting the meals, and you know, at school, you're eating the right foods as well. So, yeah, you're sort of just ticking over, it becomes part of your day to have breakfast, have a little bite to eat at break time, and then lunchtime. I used to go to after-school clubs, so it became, it became part of my Monday to Friday, that was my routine, and I was managing to, to get a lot of my food from the school system. So that's where, that's what benefitted me quite a lot. And then it meant that my mum knew that I was eating there, and she only had to try and prepare for one meal. So yeah, it helped her out a lot as well. So that's, that's definitely a good point.

Catherine McKinnell MP:

But I guess as well, local teachers in schools here locally have said to me, how much they worry about their students during the holidays. And, you know, it's partly that they're not getting food or enough food, but also that they're not going on day trips, and they're not really, you know, they're not... they're not having as enriching a time as they should be, so that they then come back to school and they're behind their peers. So that's one of the big challenges I think we face in Newcastle as well. Because I think often, food poverty goes hand-in-hand with the other things that make life enjoyable and enriching, and bring you on educationally as well like books, like clothes.

Marcus Rashford MBE:

It leads on to so many other things. You know, I've tried to, like, books are a big thing for me, because I never read a book until I was about 18... 17 or 18 years old. What it done for me was, it allowed me to sort of self-teach. And it's something that I'd, I'd never, no-one had ever put a book in front of my face, basically. And it was never something to do when I was younger. Yeah, we did at school and stuff like that, but when you go home, it was just, it wasn't a thing for, like, in my household, and I know it weren't in some of my friends' households as well. So, yeah, so one thing will end up leading to another and hopefully I can manage to sort of connect these things together and create an environment where children have the correct resources around them to enable... to give them the best opportunity at whatever it is they want to do. And that's sort of my, that's my long-term picture really, the three things that you've mentioned there. The thing for the holidays, you know, the change of the system, and the books - they're three things that I think will give children the power and the knowledge to go on and achieve things that they might not see is possible at the time. I know that a lot of people in, where I grew up, they grew up thinking, like, accepting that this was their lives forever. And for me, it was... it's a little bit disheartening to see. I don't want the next generation of children to think that that's normal, to think like that, because I feel like people in other areas that aren't... maybe are a little bit more stable at home and, you know, they are having the things that we've discussed, they think the sky's the limit. And for me, all children should, should have that mindset. I think our job is to try and allow them to do that as the best way that we can. And all these things that I've, that I've got written down here are, they're only things that I've experienced and what the other families and children are going through now. The fact that it's so reoccurring is what makes me so sure that things need to change. Because if it was, like, I don't know, 500 different reasons why different families are struggling, then, you know, it can be, you can find yourself nit-picking a little bit, but the fact that so many families are saying the same things, it just... it raises a red flag to me and and I believe that if, sort of, the Government had the information that I have, and they'd spoke to the people that I've spoke to, from all different areas around the country, they would want to review it and change it themselves. So I just want to give them as much of that knowledge that I have, as I can really, then yeah, we'll take it, take it from there. But

definitely the biggest change that we can do right now is the change in the system. And yeah, just seeing how the Government want to do it, and get it as close to the, to the picture that the families need, as we can.

Catherine McKinnell MP:

Well, I know we can't keep you too long. So I just want to say thank you, because, and I know, you know, this is something that you're doing very much from the heart, but it really is, it is really powerful for someone to use the position that you have, and the standing that you have, to raise these issues on behalf of the families. And obviously, you have all of these petitioners behind you. And you know, we'll take the baton, and we'll do what we can within the Petitions Committee and within Parliament, to raise these issues as well. And it's just really, really helpful to get your insights and thoughts on it before we do that. And obviously, no doubt, we'll be handing the baton back for you to, to carry on as well. So thanks so much for your time today. And just thank you for all the work you're doing as well. And, I guess we've got to believe this is going to change things.

Marcus Rashford MBE:

I believe it will. I just keep that mindset really and just always be positive. Because I think, like throughout this last year, we've had so many setbacks, but because we've had, we've took steps in the right direction as well. Nobody speaks about their setbacks, but they're the things that sort of drive me to keep on, you know, doing what I'm doing. And until... I just want there to be a fair, a fair start at life for children that are in, you know, more difficult situations. And to be honest, I don't think it's a, it's a huge, a huge ask really, I think if they was in the position of some of these children, they would want the same thing. So I think it's just them seeing where the children are coming from and where the families are coming from. And I understand it's not, sometimes it's not as easy as that because, like for example, there's some, like, topics that have come up throughout this process that we've been on. And I have no experience or any knowledge about it. So like,

just because of the way I've been sort of brought up and you know what my mum always told me, if you don't know about something, you shouldn't, you shouldn't speak on it. And that was where I just got a little bit confused, really, when they, when they started speaking out about things that they didn't, they hadn't took the time to speak to the families, and have that understanding and relationship with them. So that was where I think once they started to get the information that... I've just been like the middleman basically, and once they've got the information, they started to make change. But I think they need to see that, even if I didn't do that, they should have been doing that anyway. So yeah, that's where hopefully we can get to where you don't need somebody in between all of it to form, like, a bridge, because that connection has to be strong. If they're the people that are making the decisions on the future of our country, then they must have a strong relationship and connection with, with as many people in your country as they can. So, I think once that's understood, then more changes will start to happen.

Catherine McKinnell MP:

I think you're so right, because quite often, you know, we talked about 1.7 million, and they're just numbers, they're big numbers, and they don't, they don't mean anything sometimes. Whereas real stories, real experiences, real life, and real testimony is what changes hearts and minds. And obviously, you've brought that very much to the public. So, I think that's what changes things. I think statistics and theories, you know, don't often make the impact that they should. So thank you so much. And we'll take it away. And obviously, I'm sure you'll keep an eye on what the Petitions Committee's doing, and we'll take evidence, and we'll get into all the numbers and the theories and all of that. But I think you just keep doing what you're doing, which is bringing the real life stories and how this can really make a difference in real people's lives, which I think is really what has the powerful... the power to change.

Marcus Rashford MBE:

Yeah. Okay, no problem.

Catherine McKinnell MP:

Thanks so much. It's lovely to meet you.

Marcus Rashford MBE:

Nice to meet you, as well. Bye.

Catherine McKinnell MP:

Thank you. Bye bye.