July 2014

**Nourish Scotland**

**Submission to All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty**

1. Nourish Scotland is a not for profit organisation working for a fairer and more sustainable food system in Scotland based on ecological farming methods and short supply chains.

Nourish Scotland welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to this inquiry

1. **To understand the extent and geographical spread of hunger and food poverty in this country**

From the research which we have commissioned, advised on, and read Nourish Scotland’s understanding is that:

1-2% of the UK population experienced acute food poverty last year and received some form of short-term emergency food aid

It is likely that at least the same number of people had similar experiences of foodlessness and hunger lasting one or more days but did not seek help from a food bank

A larger group of the population experiences chronic food poverty: not caused by a delay or sanction in their social security payments but because household income is not sufficient to buy adequate food for all household members once fixed costs such as rent, fuel and debt repayments are covered. People manage this by eating less; by mothers going without food one or two days a week so their children can eat, and so on. The burden of managing chronic food poverty and stretching food budgets falls disproportionately on women.

An even larger group of the population experiences food insecurity in the sense that they worry about being able to afford food at the end of the week or the end of the month.

All these groups of the population include people working for low wages as well as people whose main income is from social security payments.

However, all of these statements are assumptions and guesstimates and Nourish Scotland would like to see robust independent data collection, not on food bank usage but on household nutrition. (Measuring food bank usage as a proxy for measuring hunger and malnutrition is like measuring admissions to A&E as a proxy for measuring public health).

In 1936 John Boyd Orr published ‘Food, Health and Income’. He divided the population into six income groups and compared their food intake with an acceptable diet.

He concluded that the poorest 10% of the population had a diet which was deficient in every respect because despite spending 40% of their income on food they could not afford to eat adequately.

Nourish Scotland would welcome a similar hardheaded analysis of contemporary British diets on a scale from which similar conclusions could be drawn.

Our guess is that a similar proportion of the UK population is malnourished today, some because of an absolute shortage of nutrients, minerals and vitamins and some because of dietary imbalance, in particular too much sugar and too little fibre.

1. **To investigate the underlying causes of hunger and food poverty in this country**

Nourish Scotland agrees with the consensus that:

Food prices have risen well ahead of wages, especially since 2007. As with electricity costs, retail food prices went up sharply in 2007/8 when global commodity prices spiked but have dropped more slowly as global commodity prices have eased.

Although food is still cheap in historical terms, this is the first time since WWII that the UK has seen a real rise in the price of food.

Households are trying to adapt to this new circumstance at the same time as managing higher fuel bills, increased rents, loss of employment, static or falling wages – and often the family breakdowns precipitated by the multiple stresses in people’s lives.

Food is often the main squeezable item in the weekly budget after fixed costs.

On top of this, both welfare reforms and a vicious anti-poor discourse have created a ‘workhouse’ culture in the DWP which takes as read that many of the poor are ‘undeserving’ and regards punishment as good for the soul.

“My experience is that many benefit recipients welcome the jolt that the sanctions can give to them”

Neil Couling, DWP giving evidence to the Scottish Parliament Welfare Reform Committee

(This anti-poor discourse serves to distract from the rapid growth in income and wealth of the top 1% and 0.1% in British Society, driven at least in part by quantitative easing boosting the stock market)

**3 To identify the circumstances behind the rising number of people requiring emergency food assistance in this country**

Covered broadly above

1. **To understand the extent, nature and organisation of emergency food assistance schemes in this country**

This is not something which Nourish has specific data on but we would observe that:

Many non-Christian faith groups provide significant levels of food assistance, some of which prevents emergencies

Many low-income communities are characterized by informal arrangements for mutual food aid

1. **To discover the food choices and other forms of support available to clients when using emergency food assistance**

Nourish Scotland has no specific expertise in this area but we would caution against recommendations to ‘bolt on’ welfare rights advice etc. to food banks. Not only will this institutionalise food banks as has happened in other states such as Canada: it also replicates well-established systems such as citizens’ advice.

If these systems are not working well enough it would be better to improve them than to create a secondary and probably less consistent or effective system linked to food banks

**6 To investigate the source of emergency food assistance providers’ supplies – how much is supplied by consumers and institutions?**

The donations of food (and time) to food banks by individuals (many of whom are not affluent themselves) are a tribute to enduring social solidarity in Britain.

Nourish Scotland is keen to see a society with a variety of culturally valued ways of sharing food in communities. This contributes to community cohesion and social capital and is likely to improve nutrition.

Donations of food via food banks is problematic in that there is little opportunity for reciprocity, but we note the good work being done for example by Foodcycle where the emphasis on ‘hosts’ and ‘guests’ creates socially valued roles for all participants and opportunities for putting in as well as taking out.

Nourish is less impressed by the argument for taking surplus food from a wastogenic system of multiple retailing and redistributing this through charities.

Fundamentally, we do not believe that poor and disadvantaged people in Britain should be used to do the job of recycling surplus food, or that multiple retailers should be applauded for directing waste streams which they have created to charity rather than landfill.

1. **To consider the effectiveness of emergency food assistance in meeting immediate and long-term needs, and the possibility of these schemes becoming permanent features of the welfare state**

It is clear that emergency food aid schemes provide valued relief to many households. It is also likely that for every household who uses a food bank there are several more in equally dire circumstances who don’t – whether through not knowing the food bank is there or not being able to get to it or not wanting to be given handouts.

It is also likely that some people who use food banks do so not because there is no alternative but because the alternatives are worse (asking the neighbour again, or going back to a brother or sister who you’ve not paid back from last time) and that some people will use food banks so they can pay another bill instead. These are perfectly acceptable choices – and we should not be requiring people to be on the point of fainting with hunger before they can get food.

The more food bank provision is extended to provide greater coverage, the more bureaucracy is likely to be put in place to prevent perceived ‘misuse’; and the more risk that the current accepting and open culture of food banks degrades into a more proceduralised and managerial service – and the less ordinary citizens will be inclined to contribute.

There is a danger that we institutionalize food bank provision as has happened in Canada, which then inoculates the system against change. If we do not take steps now to avoid this, we are likely to drift down that path.

Professor Elaine Power of Queens University, Ontario described food banks as a sticking plaster on the gaping wound of poverty and gives this account[[1]](#endnote-1):

*Food banks emerged in Canada in the early 1980s as a stopgap, temporary measure to alleviate hunger during an economic downturn.*

*The good-hearted founders of food banks, who could not fathom that anyone would go hungry in a country as wealthy as Canada, expected that food banks would close their doors once the economy recovered.*

*Instead, 30 years on, they have become an institutionalised component of our social safety net.*

*In 2011, approximately 850,000 Canadians (2.5% of the population), received food from about 450 food banks.*

*Thirty-eight percent of food bank recipients were children.*

*Many Canadians participate regularly in activities to support food banks.*

*Food bank collection bins are ubiquitous in grocery stores and places of worship, such as churches and synagogues.*

*Special events, from music concerts to football games, feature donations to the food bank as an entrance fee.*

*Communities around the country hold food drives, with boy scouts, service clubs, and countless volunteers knocking on citizens' doors asking for donations to stock the food bank shelves.*

*Politicians exhort voters to donate to their local food banks and social workers regularly refer clients to supplement their social assistance benefits.*

*I doubt that well-intentioned food bank founders had any idea of what would result from their concern to feed hungry Canadians.*

*Yet, despite all this activity, approximately 8% of Can adian households were classified as having been hungry in 2007-08.*

*Only about 1 in 4 hungry Canadians ever even gets to the food bank.*

*There are likely to be a variety of reasons for this, including lack of a food bank close by, inability to choose the food one receives, and the humiliation of having to go to a food bank.*

*Some hungry Canadians decide to leave the food for others who they believe need it more than they do.*

*And even those who do go to the food bank are still hungry. Food banks run on donations and can only provide the food they have on hand*

Finally, food banks by their nature are likely to address acute food poverty rather than chronic food poverty.

**8 To examine the effectiveness and sustainability of our food model in providing universal access to healthy, affordable food in this country**

Our current food system privileges access to sugary, fatty, nutritionally dense foods and creates an obesogenic environment.

With (in Scotland) somewhere around 5% of the population having diabetes, and 20% being on statins, we are an unhealthy herd – and we need to move beyond the rhetoric of individual choice and ‘education’.

Fresh fruit and vegetables are relatively more expensive, with high mark-ups from the farm gate not least because of high volumes of wastage in a system which seeks to supply full shelves of perfect produce 24/7.

Primary producers have been squeezed to reduce farmgate prices, typically with negative consequences for animal welfare, biodiversity, soil and water quality, farm wages and nitrogen emissions of reactive nitrogen. They have been receiving less of the retail sale price, and more has been extracted from other actors in the supply chain.

While most people have in principle access to healthy food, almost no marketing effort is expended on encouraging people to buy this rather than highly processed food where more ‘value’ has been added.

88p will buy you 50 sausage rolls providing a full day’s calories (and 4 times a full day’s income of saturated fat) – or 3-4 apples (for which the farmer might get 20p).

Low-income households are spending on average 16% of their income (before housing costs) on food, against an average of 11% in the population. To be spending 50% more than the average but not to be able to enjoy good healthy food is to be shortchanged by the food system.

**9 To consider approaches to improving household food security in this country**

The starting point is to rethink food as a public good like housing, health and education where for over 60 years society has regarded these as universal rights and core areas of public policy discourse.

The neglect of food policy (‘leave it to Tesco’) has led to unacceptable ‘externalities’ for public health and for the environment.

We need to repurpose the food system so that its primary role is to feed everyone well. This will mean more of a mixed economy of food, more intervention by government in partnership with civil society and an alignment of health, environment, agriculture and fiscal policies.

India’s Food Security Act 2013 subsidises rice and other staples for 800 million people through a rights-based approach. The right to food – to affordable, nutritious, tasty and enjoyable food – is no more unachievable in a wealthy country like the UK than the right to housing, healthcare or education.

The first step is to believe that this is doable and worthwhile. If we had a system where people had to pay for primary education and we had half a million families who could not afford this not sending their children to school, we would not set up a national network for recycling textbooks and volunteer tutors working out of village halls. We would change the system.

**10 To make recommendations**

Happy to provide more detail on comments above. Look forward to seeing the recommendations

1. BBC News Scotland 28 April 2012 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)