

Submission by the Food Ethics Council to the APPG on Ending the Need for Food Banks inquiry into *Cash or Food? Exploring effective responses to destitution*

Submitted 8th July 2022

Name: Dan Crossley

Organisation: Food Ethics Council

Address: Hub Kings Cross, 34b York Way, London, N1 9AB

Telephone number: 0333 012 4147

Email address: dan@foodethicscouncil.org

Respondent type: Charity (registered charity and company limited by guarantee)

Who we are

1. The Food Ethics Council is a registered charity whose mission is to accelerate the shift to fair food systems that respect people, animals and the planet. Our vision is of a world where it is easy to eat well and global hunger is a distant memory; where farmers and food producers make a decent living, animals are treated humanely, and the environment is respected.
2. We were founded in 1998 and are considered by stakeholders to be experts on fairness and sustainability in food and farming, and the leader on ethical food issues. For 24 years, we have provided an independent voice and expertise from our Council and networks (across civil society, business and government) to bring ethics to the centre of food systems. Our role is three-fold:
 - i. Firstly, we *nourish*: we provide a safe space for honest, meaningful dialogue and develop ethical frameworks to unpack contentious issues
 - ii. Secondly, we *challenge* the status quo and accepted ways of thinking
 - iii. Thirdly, we *inspire* and promote 'in the round' ethical approaches and share considered solutions.
3. The Food Ethics Council is an expert body consisting of 17 Council members, leaders in their fields, bringing extensive networks and a range of expertise, from academic research and ethics through to practical knowledge of farming, business and policy.

Overarching comments

4. At the Food Ethics Council, we strongly believe in addressing the root causes of hardship, hunger and social injustice – and in moving away from a 'sticking plaster' emergency food aid model, notwithstanding the amazing work that so many involved in emergency food aid are doing to fill the gaps left by government and others. In recent years, the UK has seen the increasing growth and institutionalisation of food banks and other forms of charitable food aid. This is morally reprehensible and must not be allowed to continue.
5. We believe that the starting point should always be robustly addressing the needs and challenges for people on very low incomes in accessing sufficient, sustainable and affordable food adequate to their health and wellbeing. Any discussion of food poverty should in our view start from the premise that food poverty is a condition of poverty and that inaction from government and some businesses enables the condition to persist.



6. We highlight the successful and important [Cashfirst](#) campaign from the Independent Food Aid Network: *“IFAN's mission is to see a UK without the need for charitable food aid and in which good food is accessible. This requires governments and local stakeholders working in partnership to prioritise a cash first approach to food insecurity.”*
7. We do acknowledge though that approaches to household food insecurity are a significant aspect of food and support systems across the UK and these cannot and should not be withdrawn in the short term. With that in mind then, it is of vital importance that services are designed and delivered with concepts of dignity, choice and kindness robustly built in, to embed appropriate, efficient and dignified approaches to household food insecurity.
8. By linking approaches to household food insecurity to a wider anti-poverty agenda, where income standards are being addressed, it is important to note that supporting initiatives such as universal free school meals, healthy start vouchers, breakfast clubs and holiday food meals are a crucial part of the jigsaw, particularly in the short to medium term.
9. #Cashfirst and other cash only approaches are only a part of the picture. People in poverty are not just suffering from a lack of funds (although this is a major and probably primary factor). There are growing problems of relative incomes, with low incomes as unfair reward for a fair day's work. People are often also lacking connections and places to participate, lessening or eliminating their ability to engage in their communities as citizens, able to play an active role in shaping the services and processes that affect them.
10. **The shifts we need** - In the Food Ethics Council's [Building Community Resilience guide](#), published in March 2022, we wrote:

“Food can be a catalyst for social change, with community food organisations playing a pivotal role. Good food can be used as a way to invest in local communities, rather than only feeding them. Whilst many organisations are very much dealing with emergency needs exacerbated by COVID-19, community food organisations can still shift the stories they tell. While a focus on ‘how many meals we’ve provided’ has its place, other data tells a bigger story. For instance, how many people have we connected with? How do people feel when they come together? ... By changing the story of spaces from nutritional to social, community food organisations can redefine and expand what they can achieve. To go beyond providing food, to strengthening connections and building a future together.”

The guide outlines a series of shifts that are needed in how we talk and write about household food insecurity, and in how services and initiatives are designed:



The shifts we need

REFRAMING FROM...	TO...
Consumers who can't afford food	Citizens participating in and shaping their food environment
Food as commodity	Food as social connector
Efficiency of supply	Relationship building
Tackling poverty	Empowering and connecting
Economic access	Resource access (including and beyond economic access) e.g. time, geography, knowledge
Charity	Exchange and reciprocity
Meeting a need (Needs-based approach)	Building capacity (Asset-based approach)
Top-down interventions	Community-driven initiatives with top-down resources and support

11. **The importance of food citizenship** - We highlight the role of the [food citizenship](#) model as a foundation for designing long term and ethical solutions to hunger, hardship and injustice. Food citizenship attests that people are not just consumers at the end of the food chain, but participants in the food system as a whole. It recognises that when people identify as citizens **and are treated as such**, their compassionate values build a shared sense of belonging and community which means they are more trusting, more inclined to join with others, and more likely to find the courage to act. Food Ethics Council released a report in 2019 titled [Harnessing the Power of Food Citizenship](#). This quote, from Council member Dee Woods, is as relevant today as when it was written:

“Food citizenship is much more than having the privilege to choose good food. It is about having individual and collective agency within a society where capitalism, social inequities, and a complex food web intersect. It demands of us a responsibility to be truly humanitarian, to be protectors of nature and to stand for real democracy and human rights. Our food citizenship places us as rights bearers at the heart of the right to food, to hold our government accountable to its duty to ensure all people are able to access culturally appropriate, healthy, sustainable and just food.”

Dee Woods

Co-founder Granville Community Kitchen and member of the Food Ethics Council

12. **Food surplus** - It is critical to note that many responses and solutions to household food insecurity seek to conflate the twin issues of people not having access to enough food to eat well, and retailers and hospitality having surplus food, with the distribution of the

latter to the former becoming embedded as an appropriate solution. We would challenge this strongly on a number of levels: relying on systems that encourage the use of waste and surplus food does not reduce the production of excess by our food system nor ultimately address the underlying socio-economic causes of household food insecurity. These solutions may contribute to the societal expectation that use of surplus food is only for those experiencing hardship when in fact, as we are all part of the food system, we all have a responsibility as citizens to normalise use of surplus food within all communities whilst also bringing pressure on retailers to create much less surplus, and campaigning for systemic changes in the food system that results in less food being wasted in the first place. Use of surplus food isn't the answer to food household food insecurity: the benefits of using it to feed people accrue primarily to the food industry whilst absolving responsibility of the government to address food insecurity and distracting from the systematic problem of food surplus and waste in the broader food chain.

13. **Entrenchment** - In 2013/4, Food Ethics Council, together with the University of Warwick, was commissioned by DEFRA to conduct a [Rapid Evidence Assessment](#) of the food aid landscape in the UK. It was known then that food aid had a short term role to play in addressing food insecurity, but on the whole, this lesson has not been learnt. It was also highlighted in that work with evidence from Canada that many in extreme poverty did not go to food banks (for a variety of reasons, including shame, lack of access, wrong kind of food). Similarly, the point that provision may not be able to meet rising demand has become ever more true, whilst noting that provision of food aid by organisations and individuals has become normalised, with, for example, food donation points in every supermarket, and food donation drives an accepted part of many civil society events. But the demand still grows, beginning to outstrip provision as a result of the cost of living crisis (as [noted by IFAN](#) in May 2022).
14. **Right to food** - One important aspect of taking a human rights approach is 'respect, protect and fulfil'. Under 'respect', the obligation requires no removal of social security entitlements without the provision of alternative means by which people could feed themselves; or action to induce unemployment in the public or private sectors. 'Protect' obligation requires measures by the State to ensure that enterprises or individuals do not deprive others of their access to adequate food; the State is primary duty-bearer but the involvement of multiple public and private sector actors is recognised, including particularly powerful non-State public actors (such as the World Trade Organisation and private transnational corporations). So a government which does not meet this obligation is knowingly allowing poverty in relation to food. 'Fulfil' includes provision, as a matter of last resort, of means to eat when all else has failed (e.g. Jobseekers Offices giving food bank vouchers)

Responses to individual questions

Q: From your experience and/or observation, what is the one policy change you would prioritise to end the need for food banks?

In the short term economic crisis we need to a further top-up to universal credit and benefits rising in line with inflation, plus many more companies signing up to the Real Living Wage. Primary focus should be on supporting incomes through proper wages and social security payments. We also need to reduce other costs of living (e.g. support for insulation and energy efficiency in homes). In the longer-term, we need the right to food enshrined in legislation, piloting and testing of Universal Basic Income schemes (or similar) as well as a shift to a food



citizenship mindset, where we together build community food resilience and everyone can participate in food systems with dignity.

The UK government needs to urgently learn lessons from what others are doing e.g. the Scottish government is increasing the Scottish Child Payment to £25 per child per week later this year, the Scottish Welfare Fund, universal free school meals and the Best Start Foods Grant (moving to a cash payment) are all useful measures, albeit not enough to help everyone weather the cost of living crisis.

Q. In a future society where food banks are no longer needed to provide emergency food, what are the values and attributes of food banks that you would want to see held onto by communities, and why?

We want to see values such as kindness, generosity of spirit, empowerment and reciprocity flourish, but with dignity to the fore, not the two- or even three- tier food system that is being allowed to develop (with 'haves' and 'have-nots').

Conclusion:

The institutionalising of food banks (and other related forms of food charity, corporate and otherwise) only helps Governments duck political choices. Alternatives to 'sticking plaster' food bank models are emerging. It is critical that Government – with others – urgently address underlying root causes of hunger, hardship and injustice. Only by government taking urgent action to address low incomes and the malfunctioning safety net can we eliminate the need for emergency food aid. We need to build long-term community food resilience together.

**Submitted by: Dan Crossley, Executive Director, Food Ethics Council on behalf of the Food Ethics Council
July 2022**