

Marketplace for need



Hundreds of thousands of people in Britain today are hungry because they cannot afford to buy or cook themselves food. For this to be happening in the world's fifth-largest economy is nothing short of appalling.

The cross-party parliamentary inquiry into hunger, which we set up last year with Tim Thornton, the Bishop of Truro, to examine more closely the extent and causes of hunger in this country, found that up to 4 million people in Britain might only be one crisis away from being unable to feed themselves – be it because of an unexpected bill, the loss of their children's free school meals in the holidays, or a suspended or delayed benefit payment.

Britain's churches have responded in an extraordinary way to this vulnerability in their communities. The most visible manifestation of this heroic response has been their contribution to the rapid growth of Britain's food- bank movement, which has led to more than 900 banks around the country. They have helped people who rely on their emergency food parcels, as well as, for some, basic human compassion. Without it, many more hundreds of thousands would have been hungry.

Parliament's initial response to our report sadly took the form of futile political warfare. For while it is accepted that there has been a huge surge in the numbers of people turning to food banks, the reasons why are argued over. There has been an equally disappointing response from the Prime Minister when challenged about the increase in food poverty. Although Downing Street said it would consider the report's findings seriously when they were published in December 2014, David Cameron has twice refused to commission a public inquiry on the matter.

Our report, *Feeding Britain*, concluded that hunger on such a vast scale is not a sudden phenomenon

resulting from one government policy or another. It has arisen, in part, from the increasing costs of food, gas, electricity and housing, relative to household incomes, that have most disadvantaged Britain's poor. Some families, of course, could afford to feed their children were it not for the chaos that engulfs their lives. But overwhelming evidence suggests the problem for hungry families is a lack of money with which to buy food.

Two different responses are required to bolster both personal and financial resilience. There are ways in which the Government could, and should, alleviate the problem. Our findings suggest it could halve overnight the numbers of people relying on food banks if it were able to administer the correct benefit payments promptly for new claimants who are desperately short of money. It could also implement a "Yellow Card" warning in place of immediate financial sanctions for claimants deemed not to have fulfilled their duty of looking for work, and introduce a minimum tariff for all tax credit claimants to ensure their claims would no longer cease following a change of household circumstances. A further challenge is to ensure paid work always provides failsafe protection from hunger.

But those of us who served on the inquiry have also taken steps – which would not have been possible without the valuable help of organisations in the voluntary and private sectors – to begin more effectively countering hunger. This response has taken two forms.

The first is the development of a model that we have called Food Bank Plus. This seeks to build on the charitable giving of food which, thanks to churches up and down the country, has been a vital emergency response to hunger in our communities. Food Bank Plus combines this emergency food parcel with a range of on-the-spot support and advice to address the problems that have exposed an individual to hunger. The aim is to lift people free from hunger as soon as possible, and ensure a first visit to a local food bank need not precede an extended period of hunger.



As part of the Feeding Birkenhead campaign, which we set up to begin implementing the inquiry's findings at a local level, we have piloted a Food Bank Plus approach in one of the town's main food banks. Our early findings suggest that a third of people seen by an adviser – someone trained to help people with problems linked to benefits and debt – during their first visit to the food bank, no longer require further food parcels, because the adviser has resolved the issue that had left them penniless. Interventions like these will remain crucial, it seems, until the Government properly administers benefits to people on their uppers.

A further component of the Food Bank Plus model has emerged thanks to the entrepreneurialism of npower, one of Britain's major energy suppliers. It is piloting a scheme with Feeding Birkenhead whereby people experiencing severe hardship, and who cannot even afford the gas on their prepayment meter to cook the contents of their emergency food parcel, are given a fuel voucher. This entitles them to two weeks' worth of free gas and electricity (and, with it, some vital breathing space).

However important these interventions are, our ultimate aim is to ensure as few as possible of our fellow citizens must rely on a food bank. So a second part of the strategy focuses on building up Britain's network of "social supermarkets" – an innovative new way of helping the poorest in society avoid hunger. When we visited Britain's first two social supermarkets, established and run by Community Shop, we were mesmerised by what we saw. Here's how it's done.

The social supermarkets rescue good food that would otherwise be wasted. They buy food euphemistically classed as "surplus" from supermarkets and their suppliers for 10p in the pound, and sell it on to customers for 30p in the pound. The food becomes "surplus" not because it has

deteriorated in quality, but because it might have been incorrectly labelled or the packaging is damaged.

For example, when we visited the West Norwood Community Shop in south London, there were perfectly good boxes of Maltesers. The chocolates themselves were as one would expect to buy from any supermarket. But here they were being sold at a third of their retail price because the closing date had passed for a competition on the packaging. Had there not been an arrangement with Community Shop, the food would more than likely have been wasted. There were similar reasons why a range of meat, dairy, bread, fruit and vegetables, and even flowers had been rejected by other retailers and were being sold in the social supermarket.

But social supermarkets are not a free-for-all. They are accessible only to people signed up as members, and membership is restricted to people struggling on low incomes and in receipt of means-tested benefits.

Once they've signed up, members have access to the social supermarket, where they receive a discount of two-thirds on their shopping, and also to an adjoining cafe area in which activities are laid on to help people sort out personal and financial problems. Rather than rely on the charity of others through parcels from a food bank – however vital that has been – people have more choice about what they eat, and are paying for the food themselves.

The difficulties people face are not just to do with the cost of food. For example, one man who had bought a whole chicken from the West Norwood Community Shop brought it back a few days later. The staff asked whether he was returning the chicken because it wasn't quite up to scratch. "No," said the gentleman, "I've never cooked a chicken before and so didn't know what to do with it". He was taken to the cafe, taught how to cook it, and was able to enjoy a communal meal.

Social supermarkets have the potential to nurture people's skills, confidence and employability while simultaneously relieving at least some of the pressure on their household budget, thereby reducing both the immediate and longer-term risk of having to go hungry. Members are enrolled on weekly group sessions covering budgeting and debt advice, cooking decent meals on a limited budget, and how to get and keep a job. Community Shop limits membership to six months. This controls demand for food while giving people the opportunity to address the problems that have made their lives an uphill struggle – not dissimilar to the Food Bank Plus model.

But if the social supermarket is to become a widespread secondary consumer market – one that immediately provides extra protection from hunger, while also propelling people back into the primary consumer market – then we need a longer-term debate about how best to equip and support people so they are in a better position to stave off hunger.

There are currently only two Community Shops in Britain. It can be very difficult to raise the required level of funding to establish one. Feeding Birkenhead has applied to the Big Lottery Fund for support, but if we are to establish social supermarkets as a national initiative, a major source of funding will be needed. We are visiting Germany later this year with the Bishop of Truro to see how Berlin's social supermarkets provide longer-term support for people in adverse circumstances.

A first move for Britain's social supermarkets could be to extend the membership period from six to 12 months, or at least ensure that those who reach six months, and are still vulnerable to hunger, can extend their membership on a rolling basis. This would steer individuals clear from having to rely on a food bank, and strengthen the case for rescuing more good food from landfill and energy conversion plants. The best estimates suggest that 400,000 tonnes of food goes to waste each year, and that only 2 per cent of this is currently rescued for human consumption.

A second front could be opened up by inviting local churches into the governance of social supermarkets. Their emergency food bank response will remain vital, and their embrace of Food Bank Plus has the potential to lift free from hunger many of our fellow citizens who have, for one reason or another, fallen below Britain's national minimum standard of living.

Some branches of the Catholic Church's Caritas Social Action Network have indicated they are interested in the work of social supermarkets, combining the offer of good-quality food with longer-term support to combat the root causes of hunger. It is a way for churches to go beyond food banks and work further upstream, to help and nurture individuals who might be at risk of sinking, rather than swimming, without their intervention.

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