

September 2018

Visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Philip Alston, to the UK from 5 to 16 November 2018

Written submission

This briefing addresses four of the topics requested by the Special Rapporteur, namely welfare reforms, children's rights, measurement, and Brexit.

This submission has been written by Sustain, the UK's alliance for better food and farming. We represent around 100 national organisations working together for a healthy, fair, humane and sustainable food system, and work with hundreds more at regional and local level. Sustain runs the Food Power¹ and Right to Food alliance projects², and is one of the lead organisations for the national End Hunger UK campaign³. These are supporting a range of community and government mechanisms to tackle household food insecurity, as well as championing national legislation to secure measurement, funds and accountability for action.

Welfare reforms

Over recent years the UK has undertaken a significant review of its tax and welfare system. The majority of the changes to the welfare system were passed under the Welfare Reform Act 2012⁴ and the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016.⁵ These changes include the introduction of Universal Credit, a welfare payment cap, tougher sanctions, and a two-child limit for both the child tax credit and the child element of Universal Credit.

The UK's public deficit reached 2% of GDP (£40.7 billion) in the year ending March 2018⁶, but this figure does not reflect the economic cost of poverty which has been estimated at £78 billion per year.⁷ The latter represents approximately three times more than the estimated savings from welfare reforms.

We are increasingly concerned that the UK Government is not taking seriously its duty to protect, fulfil, and uphold the Right to Food and is introducing legislation and policy that are having a regressive effect. It would appear that some measures taken by the UK Government

¹ Food Power (2018) Food Power <https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpower/>

² Sustain (2018) Achieving Everyone's Right To Food [sustainweb.org/foodpoverty/righttofood/](https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpoverty/righttofood/)

³ End Hunger UK (2018) End Hunger UK <http://endhungeruk.org/>

⁴ H.M Government (2012) Welfare Reform Act 2012
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2012/5/contents>

⁵ H.M Government (2016) Welfare Reform Act 2016
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2016/5/contents>

⁶ ONS (2018) UK Government Debt and Deficit: March 2018
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/governmentpublicsectorandtaxes/publicspending/bulletins/ukgovernmentdebtanddeficitforeurostatmaast/march2018>

⁷ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2016) Counting the cost of UK poverty
<https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/counting-cost-uk-poverty>

The National Audit Office concluded in its report on the roll-out of Universal Credit that many people suffered hardship because of the way that Universal Credit works.¹⁶

Research conducted by the End Hunger UK Coalition with emergency food aid providers across the UK found that in areas where Universal Credit was rolled out there was a surge in demand for emergency food aid.¹⁷

“Every single client who has been put on Universal Credit has stated they are now in more debt than they were before... Most are in debt to family or friends and know that even when they do finally get paid, their payment won’t be enough to repay their debt.”

Emergency Food Aid Provider, as told to End Hunger UK

Since 2010, Local Authority (local government, local councils) budgets have faced continuous and extremely harsh budget cuts. Between 2018/19 and 2019/20 they will see their funding from central government cut by 2.7 billion. Overall, this represents a 54% reduction and means that almost half of local councils will no longer receive funding from central government’s national tax receipts.¹⁸ Local councils were previously unable to increase local taxes (Council Tax) without a local referendum; a constraint relaxed a little in 2017 to help pay for spiralling social care costs.

These cuts have had concrete effects on people in poverty as it has meant that a number of centres and services supported by local authorities, that previously helped individuals suffering from food insecurity, have now either reduced their service, handed them over to voluntary groups, or have disappeared completely due to budgetary difficulties.

Meals on wheels provision provides a valuable service to the elderly or people with disabilities, yet under half (48%) of local authorities still provide them, down from 66% in 2011.¹⁹ This drop has been tied to reduced local authority budgets. The Malnutrition Task Force reports that 1 in 10 older people in the UK are suffering from, or at risk of, malnourishment.²⁰ There is no single solution to reducing malnutrition among older people but some options include saving or reinstating meals on wheels, lunch clubs or other forms of shared meals, improving hospital food provision²¹, and positively influencing people’s eating habits. There is also an opportunity to use food provision to link isolated adults to other services and avert escalating health and social care costs through early intervention.²²

¹⁶ National Audit Office (2018) Rolling Out Universal Credit <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Rolling-out-Universal-Credit.pdf>

¹⁷ End Hunger UK (2018) Fix Universal Credit <http://endhungeruk.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Fix-Universal-Credit-a-report-from-End-Hunger-UK.pdf>

¹⁸ Local Government Association (2017) Council funding to be further cut in half over next two years - LGA warns <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/council-funding-be-further-cut-half-over-next-two-years-lga-warns>

¹⁹ Sustain (2018) Sustain submits evidence to the APPG on Hunger inquiry into older people https://www.sustainweb.org/news/oct17_appg_older_people/

²⁰ Ibid 18

²¹ Sustain (2018) Campaign for Better Hospital Food <https://www.sustainweb.org/hospitalfood/>

²² Sustain (2018) Supporting and enhancing meals on wheels provision https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpoverty/meals_on_wheels/

Children

The UK charity Child Poverty Action Group publishes an annual report called 'The Cost of a Child'. Their 2018 report found that families living on welfare now have only 40% of the amount of money they need to maintain a socially acceptable adequate standard of living.²³ Furthermore having a parent in work is not a guarantee that a child won't be in poverty as most children in poverty have at least one parent who is employed²⁴. The EHRC cumulative impact assessment of recent tax and welfare changes found that one and a half million more children will be pushed into poverty.²⁵

School meals are a key tool that can be used by government to tackle childhood food poverty and improve nutrition. Unfortunately, approximately one million children are set to miss out on their entitlement due to a recently introduced earnings threshold for eligibility under Universal Credit that restricts eligibility to families with net earnings below £7,400.²⁶ This new net earnings threshold means that families on very low incomes just above this threshold will have to find the resources to cover the additional cost of a lunchtime meal at a time when welfare payments are frozen, wages are stagnating, and living costs are rising.

The Families and Food in Hard Times project has been conducting research with children and their families in Portugal, the UK and Norway.²⁷ In the UK, it found that many children are already unable to receive free school meals due to their parents' immigration status or other eligibility requirements, despite being in need. Children whose parents have No Recourse to Public Funds have told researchers that they went hungry during lunchtime because they were not entitled to free school meals; one child in particular resorting to hiding in the library during meal times so as to not have to watch his class mates eat whilst he could not.²⁸

Free School Meals, if a child is eligible, can go some of the way to help children in food insecurity access nutritious food, unfortunately there is a lack of coordinated response to food access during the school holidays. Research has shown that many families are forced to cut back on either the quantity or the quality of food during the holidays due to the added cost of, for example, childcare, going down to part-time work and meal times.²⁹

Some schools, councils and communities have responded to the demand by setting up Holiday Clubs where they provide a combination of meals and activities to children in need and sometimes their parents as well. Earlier this year the *School Holidays (Meals and Activities) Bill (HC Bill 101)*³⁰ was put before the UK parliament with the aim of providing a framework for

²³ Child Poverty Action Group (2018) The Cost of A Child 2018

http://www.cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/CostofaChild2018_web.pdf

²⁴ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2018) Working families locked in poverty – time to right the wrong of in-work poverty <https://www.jrf.org.uk/press/working-families-still-locked-poverty-time-right-wrong-work-poverty>

²⁵ Equality and Human Rights Commission (2018) The cumulative impact of tax and welfare reforms <https://equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/cumulative-impact-tax-and-welfare-reforms>

²⁶ Sustain (2018) Response to consultation on eligibility for free school meals & early years pupil premium under Universal Credit https://www.sustainweb.org/resources/files/responses/Sustain_response_FreeSchoolMeals_UC.pdf

²⁷ Food In Hard Times (2018) About the Study <https://foodinhardtimes.org/about-the-study/>

²⁸ Ibid 27

²⁹ Sustain (2018) Ensuring Children's Access to Food 365 days a year https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpoverty/childrens_access_to_food/

³⁰ Rt Honourable Frank Field MP (2018) School Holidays (Meals and Activities) Bill (HC Bill 101) https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/2017-2019/0101/cbill_2017-20190101_en_2.htm

provision of food and activities during the holidays in England and Wales. The UK Government decided not to support this Bill, as it is their view that primary legislation is not their chosen method of resolving the issue of holiday hunger. Instead, they offered funding for pilots.³¹

Many experts and children's advocates, including the Children's Food Campaign coordinated by the Sustain alliance, recommend that free school meals be provided to all children so as to reduce the stigma that can be associated with them and to ensure that all children receive at least one nutritious meal every day.³² This can also make school meal provision more cost-effective and reduce the administrative burden. In our view, this provision of meals should also be extended to breakfast clubs, as well as meals and activities during the holidays, to ensure children are able to have access to good food 365 days a year, in a dignified manner³³.

Hunger in childhood can go on to have significant, well-documented long-term health consequences as well as negative consequences for academic achievement and mental wellbeing.³⁴ Food has an inherently social aspect. Being able to share meals with family and friends is considered to be an integral part of growing up. Unfortunately for many families in poverty this is simply not an option. Recent polling by the End Hunger UK campaign found that one in four parents are skipping meals so as to ensure that their children have enough food.³⁵ It's easy to understand how not partaking in the social aspect of food, as well as the stress connected to hunger, can have long-term effects on mental health, family relationships and child development.

"If there isn't enough food we'll get it and sometimes Mum will go hungry and starve and stuff. Even if it's not that much food for me and [my brother], it's enough that we've actually had something, whereas Mum hasn't, and it gets a bit to the point where we'll start feeling guilty because Mum hasn't had anything and we've had it."

Bryony, aged 13, coastal town in the south east of England as quoted by Food in Hard Times Project³⁶

Measurement

It is very difficult to assess the percentage of the population that is living in food insecurity as the UK Government does not measure household food insecurity on a national scale. Whilst

³¹ Sustain (2018) Government has pledged to launch targeted pilots to address holiday hunger https://www.sustainweb.org/news/jan18_government_pledges_holiday_hunger_pilots/

³² Sustain (2018) Free School Meals for All https://www.sustainweb.org/childrensfoodcampaign/free_school_meals/

³³ Nourish Scotland (2018) Dignity in Practice: Learning, tools, and guidance for community food providers <http://www.nourishscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Dignity-in-Practice-Full-Report-March-2018.pdf>

³⁴ Rebecca O'Connell; Julia Brannen, Abigail Knight (2018) Holiday Hunger Requires Radical Long Term Solutions <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2018/08/15/holiday-hunger-requires-radical-long-term-solutions/>

³⁵ Sustain (2018) 1 in 4 UK parents skipping meals due to lack of money https://www.sustainweb.org/news/jan18_calls_grow_for_government_food_insecurity_measurement/

³⁶ Rebecca O'Connell; Julia Brannen, Abigail Knight (2018) Holiday Hunger Requires Radical Long Term Solutions <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2018/08/15/holiday-hunger-requires-radical-long-term-solutions/>

there has been some progress made in the devolved nations, unfortunately Scotland and Northern Ireland use different measurement tools, making it difficult to compare them.³⁷

In October 2018, Emma Lewell Buck MP's Food Insecurity Bill will have its second reading in Parliament.³⁸ This Bill would make the U.K Government measure household food insecurity annually across all of the UK and to publish annual reports.

There are some efforts from civil society to understand the scale of household food insecurity and local responses, these include:

- Work by emergency food aid providers to count the number of food parcels they distribute.
- Work by academics such as Dr Dianna Smith (University of Southampton) and Dr Claire Thompson (London School of Hygiene of Tropical Medicine) who are developing a mapping system to monitor the extent of food insecurity at a local level.³⁹
- Third-sector assessments, such as the Beyond the Food Bank Report – an annual league table produced by Sustain that looks at the steps that London Councils are taking to reduce food poverty and score them accordingly⁴⁰; also assessment by the Food Foundation of the number of children living in UK households struggling to afford healthy food.⁴¹

However none of these steps can replace national household food insecurity measurement, they can only help shed some light on its local characteristics and on steps that are being taken to respond to it.

Brexit

Since the EU Referendum in 2016, Sustain has played a leading role in coordinating the third-sector response on Brexit issues relating to food, farming and fishing.⁴² There are many uncertainties, and we observe that Brexit is likely to exacerbate existing trends, rather than be the prime cause. However, with regards household food insecurity we are concerned that Brexit, particularly the possibility of the UK leaving the EU without a trade deal, may have the following impacts:

- A recent report by the Food Research Collaboration⁴³ expressed fears that the UK Government was planning to suspend food checks and regulations in the case of a 'no deal' Brexit, to deal with disruption to food supply. The researchers expressed dismay that consumers could not have faith in their food security or quality.

³⁷ Sustain, Food Foundation, University of Oxford (2016) Measuring household food insecurity in the UK and why we MUST do it

<https://www.sustainweb.org/resources/files/reports/MeasuringHouseholdFoodInsecurityintheUK.pdf>

³⁸ Rt Honourable Emma Lewell Buck MP (2017) Food Insecurity Bill 2017-19

<https://services.parliament.uk/bills/2017-19/foodinsecurity.html>

³⁹ Dianna Smith, Claire Thompson (2018) Identifying populations and areas at greatest risk of household food insecurity in England

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322266379_Identifying_populations_and_areas_at_greatest_risk_of_household_food_insecurity_in_England

⁴⁰ Sustain (2017) Beyond the Food Bank: London Food Poverty Profile 2017

https://www.sustainweb.org/publications/beyond_the_food_bank_2017/

⁴¹ Food Foundation (2018) Affordability of the UK's Eatwell Guide https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Affordability-of-the-Eatwell-Guide_Final_EMBARGOED-Version.pdf

⁴² Sustain (2018) Brexit: opportunities and threats for food, farming and fishing

<https://www.sustainweb.org/brexit/>

⁴³ Food Research Collaboration (2018) Feeding Britain: Food Security after Brexit

<http://foodresearch.org.uk/publications/feeding-britain-food-security-after-brexit/>

- In the same report, the Food Research Collaboration has also flagged that low-income consumers have already been affected by rising food prices, since GBP dropped in value following the EU Referendum.
- The Food Foundation, a Sustain member, released a report saying the consumption of healthy foods could tumble after Britain leaves the EU because of the “triple impact” of exchange rates, labour costs and tariffs that could increase the amount a family of four spends on fruit and vegetables by up to £158 annually.⁴⁴
- Sustain is concerned that future trade food deals could have an impact on the quality of our food. In particular, a trade deal with the USA could undermine UK efforts to reduce sugar consumption and import American levels of diet-related diseases alongside their produce. Processed foods, sugar and high fructose corn syrup are all high on the list of edible goods exported by the US and expected to feature in any future UK/US trade deal.⁴⁵ We have found figures that show obesity rates in the US of over 20% versus 12% in the UK. This would work against the UK Government’s plans to reduce obesity, including child obesity.
- The agricultural, food processing, hospitality and retail industries (together, the biggest employers in the UK) are heavily reliant on migrant workers coming from other parts of the EU. There has already been a drop in the number of workers coming to work in these sectors, and we are concerned that if this trend continues then it increase costs and force up food prices.
- The UK Government recently published its Agriculture Bill (the domestic legislation necessary to enable the UK to replace the functions of the Common Agricultural Policy), laying out proposals for new powers to manage the UK agriculture system. Sustain welcomed much in the Bill but expressed concerns that it could lead to a fall in food production as there is no requirement for farmers to actually farm while we leave the EU.⁴⁶ We were also disappointed that there was no link drawn between agriculture and the opportunity to tackle public health challenges – for example, the overuse of antibiotics in farming or boosting affordability and availability of healthy fruit and vegetables.

We would like our submission to be published on the website of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights

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⁴⁴ Food Foundation (2018) Farming for five a day <http://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Farming-for-five-a-day-final.pdf>

⁴⁵ U.S Department of Agriculture (2016) Infographic: U.S. Agricultural Exports, FY 2016 <https://www.fas.usda.gov/data/infographic-us-agricultural-exports-fy-2016>

⁴⁶ Sustain (2018) Sustain comments on Agriculture Bill details –update https://www.sustainweb.org/news/sep18_agriculturebill_first_reactions/