

Mr Andrew Forsey
Joint Secretary
All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty

Date: 23 June 2014

Dear Mr Forsey,

Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty in Britain

In April 2013, I published, on behalf of the London Assembly, a report on food poverty in London (*A Zero Hunger City; Tackling food poverty in London*). My report identified steps that should be taken by the GLA, London Food Board, London boroughs, schools and the voluntary and community sector to more robustly monitor food poverty in the capital and to develop a better quality response including effective signposting to other support structures for those vulnerable to food poverty; which we defined as existing where there is a lack of access to an affordable, healthy diet. Please find a copy of the report enclosed.

The report's main message was to highlight the seriousness of food poverty in the capital, with those charities providing emergency food aid seeing demand for their support growing and likely to grow further. The report also noted that while there has been a powerful community-based response to this crisis there is a lack of strategic coordination across the capital to support those efforts and tackle the underlying causes of food poverty.

While the report recognises that a vulnerability to food poverty is a complex economic and social phenomenon, interviews we conducted indicate that periods of acute food poverty are driven principally by sudden reductions in spending power. Vulnerable income streams – which can be affected by falling real incomes, benefit delays or changes, and unplanned for unemployment – can combine with pressures on expenditure – debt repayments and competing demands from bills and other necessary purchases – to push a household into sudden food poverty.

Low income

Low income families often have very limited or no resilience to increased or unexpected demands on their financial resources. Despite careful budgeting, families may simply not be able to afford to put money aside as savings. It is clear that for many on very low incomes, the household budget is barely sufficient for basic expenditure and simply won't stretch to cover additional occasional requirements or unexpected bills. There they are therefore vulnerable to food poverty.

The risk of food poverty becomes particularly acute at crisis points; times of unexpected expenditure, a big bill or an emergency need, and towards the end of the month when budgets are under pressure. People may have already 'traded down' to cheaper brands or foodstuffs; this leaves less scope to adapt to further declines in income or sudden additional expenditure.

Welfare Reform

Changes to welfare benefits, tax credits and income tax have a disproportionate impact on low-income families. These families use the welfare system more than others, and so lack savings to help them survive unexpected shortfalls. Some of the charities and organisations we consulted told us that the transition from old to new systems puts more people at risk of food poverty. Errors and delays will inevitably occur during a period of such significant change; for people on low incomes, these problems already intensify pressure on food budgets and potentially lead to cycles of debt.

Food deserts

Low consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables is an indicator of food poverty; although other factors contribute to people eating less healthy food, simply not having access to fruit and vegetables at reasonable prices is a problem for many. If these foods are hard to find in reasonable quantities at affordable prices, or if reaching outlets selling this food is costly or unreliable, a food desert exists. A number of boroughs and academic studies have identified areas of London that could be considered food deserts. A 2009 study of food deserts in Hackney showed that, while affordable healthy food was generally available, there were problems of access as well as there being an overabundance of fast food outlets. Islington Council has identified three pockets in the borough where people need to go more than 400m to access any food at all.

Assessing the scale of food poverty among children and older people

My report paid particular attention to hunger among children and older people. A number of surveys pointed to worrying levels of hunger among children. These surveys combined with individual evidence from schools, London boroughs and charities, present a truly worrying picture of child hunger in London; this impacts on their health, wellbeing and attainment levels.

Food poverty among older people was harder to identify than among children. A number of factors contribute to poor nutrition among older people living in the community, including low income, poor health and social isolation.

In response to a London Assembly survey:

- 64% of older people's organisations we surveyed told us older people had found it harder to afford enough healthy food; and
- 58% of organisations we surveyed stated that older people regularly struggled to buy affordable healthy food in local shops.

Malnutrition levels among older people are an indicator of food poverty. It is estimated nationally that malnutrition affects more than 10 per cent of older people aged 65 and over; this would represent an estimated 90,000 older people in Greater London. Over half the costs of addressing malnutrition are spent on people in this age group. Furthermore, an estimated 25 per cent of people aged 65 and over admitted to hospital in the UK and Republic of Ireland were found to be at risk of malnutrition (18% high risk, 7% medium risk). Although food poverty is not the only driver of older people's malnutrition, these figures serve to highlight the need for greater attention on this group.

My report made recommendations to different levels of government, as well as front-line organisations. The report recognized that the London Food Board is the right body to address the deficit at a pan-London level, in partnership with statutory and non-statutory agencies. However,

London boroughs, specifically their Health and Wellbeing Boards must lead the development of food poverty action plans and should where possible designate a food poverty link worker to effectively liaise with the food bank charities and other front-line organisations.

The recommendations made in the report were as follows:

At the pan-London level the London Food Board should take on strategic responsibility for addressing food poverty in London – aiming for a Zero Hunger City. This responsibility should be included in a new revised London Food Strategy and implementation plan. The Mayor should champion the working towards a Zero Hunger City, which he has now done through its inclusion in his *2020 Vision* and the Mayoral commitment that no child should go to school hungry.

For schools, I wanted to see that every school governing body should have a plan to identify and address hunger in schools throughout the school day and to support families in food poverty. This plan should include:

- engagement with the local borough's food poverty link worker;
- addressing hunger among children by ensuring availability of a free breakfast (through using Pupil Premium monies if necessary), and maximising registration and take-up among all children who are entitled to free school meals.
- using Pupil Premium monies to provide after-school cooking activities;

And finally, that the emergency food aid organisations should regularly analyse their client breakdown and proactively seek out groups that face barriers to accessing emergency food aid, including older people. Food aid organisations should identify ways to systematically triage service users and liaise with statutory authorities to ensure people can access support.

Following on from the report

Since the publication of this report the Mayor (as Mayor of London and on behalf of the London Food Board) and the London boroughs of Greenwich, Islington, Lambeth, Sutton and Waltham Forest have submitted formal responses to the report and its recommendations. The Mayor's formal response outlined both existing and new initiatives that aim to meet the objective to make London a Zero Hunger City by 2020. In August 2013, the GLA published *Child Hunger in London*, which presented research into child hunger and food poverty in the capital. The GLA and Plan Zheroes also launched the London Food Map, which lists organisations offering free or low cost food to those in need.

The boroughs' responses listed a number of existing and new initiatives aimed at addressing food poverty. These included taking up recommendations to develop food poverty action plans and designate or recruit food poverty link workers. The responses also focused on addressing food poverty among children and older people; which were the groups specifically identified as being "in need" in my report. The London Borough of Barnet also ensured the report and recommendations were on the agenda for its September 2013 meeting of the Health and Wellbeing Board. The London Borough of Sutton has appointed a food poverty project worker to coordinate the borough's response to food poverty and provide a link between the local authority and emergency food aid providers in the area.

I have continued to work towards the implementation of the report's recommendations and hold informal roundtable meetings to gather and disseminate good practice examples. I am delighted that the London Food Board reported pursuing a number of initiatives including developing the application process for the two School Food Plan flagship boroughs, funding for school gardens, social supermarkets, 'bounty bonds' and highlighting the difficulties facing community meals provision. The London Food Board also hopes to continue to highlight food poverty among older people. The charity Sustain is establishing a London borough food poverty engagement programme. This programme should be more fully established in 2014 and aims to facilitate information and good practice sharing between boroughs.

Local authorities in London also put forward a number of initiatives to work towards zero hunger at a borough level. The table below summarises these discussions. This should be considered a draft checklist only. It is hoped that these ideas will be incorporated into the London Food Board and Sustain/London Food Link's engagement work with boroughs.

Target age range	Potential actions
All ages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Estimating the scale of food poverty using others' primary research. • Producing a food poverty action plan. • Designating a borough officer as a link worker for organisations addressing food poverty including food banks. • Supporting fruit and vegetable stalls at street markets (e.g. reduced rent for pitches).
Pregnant women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting Healthy Start vouchers
School-age children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting healthy school meals and breakfast clubs. • Engaging with opted-out schools to encourage them to adopt school food standards (environmental health officers could assist with this).
Working age groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitating access to advice and other support for food banks clients (who are predominantly of working age).
Older people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protecting and developing community meals and lunch clubs • Joint-commissioning of meals on wheels services with other boroughs. • Integrating lunch clubs for older people into other services to assist with financial sustainability. • Piloting lunch club/community meal solutions with catering colleges, school or prison kitchens. • Piloting the 'Food Train' model of home deliveries for older people.¹

¹ Food Train provides a range of services for older people in Scotland including grocery shopping home deliveries, household support services and befriending.

In the year since the publication of the report, food bank visits in London has risen substantially, with the number of recorded visits more than doubling in the financial year 2013/14 compared to 2012/13. The below table shows the number of visits made to Trussell Trust food banks in London in each financial year since 2009/10. This clearly demonstrates the need for urgent action by policy makers to tackle the underlying causes of poverty so that hopefully next year we begin to see a fall and not a further rise in the number of food bank visits.

Table 1: Number of visits to food banks in London 2009-2013

	Adults	Children	Total
2009/10	170	238	408
2010/11	3690	2689	6379
2011/12	5889	4792	10681
2012/13	26164	18487	44651
2013/14	58315	37315	95639

Source: Trussell Trust

Thank you for providing us with the opportunity to feed into this inquiry.

Yours sincerely,



Fiona Twycross AM
Food Poverty Rapporteur
Economy Committee