

**Written comments received from general public for the London Assembly's  
Health and Environment Committee investigation into Food Poverty  
Responses received as of 14 December 2012**

## **Public comments**

### **1. 08/10/2012**

Am sure you're aware already, but just for completeness, relating to the issue of food poverty: in Southwark we have 2 key policies aimed to help people avoid food poverty.

- we are bringing in universal free healthy school meals for primary school pupils. It means that every child is guaranteed a healthy hot meal every day during term time, regardless of their families'

financial circumstances. We're bringing it in to help put money in people's pockets and tackle child obesity. We have rolled out to Reception and years 1-4 so far; we'll roll out to year 5 and 6 next September.

- we're halving the price people pay for meals on wheels. This service is provided to some of our most vulnerable residents, and the government's economic policies mean that older people are facing soaring living costs - so it's vital that they don't miss out for financial reasons. The council is subsidising the cost, to maintain quality.

Hope that's helpful

### **2. 15/10/2012**

Just a few points from Enfield

We have a food strategy - adopted 18 months ago - you can have a copy if you want

We are considering more initiatives including a social enterprise to use the allotments to grow and distribute food and to use the 'use by' food from the RDCentres of the major supermarket chains that are in our area to go to a food bank

WE have a very significant number of working poor in the Borough - one of the highest in London and this together with the impact of welfare reform may well create more problems

We have a grant from GLA to examine our proposal to develop major market gardening that will produce a local supply of jobs and salads. This may have a spin off of the non supermarket produce that gets composted but could be used - the wobbly - non standard produce - to distribute to local suppliers and food banks. It needs funding to develop the distribution hub as the unit costs for the main scheme are at the margins as the supermarkets force down the price. This aspect will be in the study

Come back if you want more info

### **3. 05/10/2012**

Thank for your email regarding the above. I would be interested in your findings since I am the Conservative representative on Camden's Welfare Reform Scrutiny Panel.

It would be useful to find out whether the benefits to which people are entitled are genuinely not enough or whether there are other circumstances such as having to service 'loan sharks' etc.

Yours sincerely,

### **4. 05/10/2012**

For one of the richest Country in the world to have so many residents living in food poverty says a lot about this government. On a daily basis I see people who don't know which way to turn and many parent's are going without in order that their children do not go to bed hungry if there is food available and money to purchase it that is. Residents who were already struggling are finding it tougher to make ends meet and when the new benefit and Council Tax Cap cuts take hold it will be dire for the many. We have one food bank that I am aware of which operates at St. Anselm's Church in Hayes but in order to access it residents have to get a voucher from Social Services etc before going there hence many go hungry on a daily basis. Many do not know this and I and my fellow Councillors are getting the word out as best we can. Our Women;s spokesperson asked if we could distribute vouchers as we are living within the communities we serve and often hear who is in the most need but were told no.

Does this Government not realise that people on benefits spend 99% if not all of this on rent, heating and food and there is seldom anything left for little comforts such as warm clothing etc. How they will cope under the next onslaught heaven knows. For residents on low income or Tax credits the situation is the same. It's no longer a battle between Heat and Eat but a battle to survive from one day to the next.

I see people young and old diving down waste bins looking for something to eat and not just those who rough sleep.

I understand why food banks operate on a voucher system because those most needy should have access and it is perceived that those who are most needy will raise their heads above the parapet but there are thousands starving out there who suffer in silence for many reasons.

I know of many parent's who are helping family members out with food parcels to keep the wolf from the door sadly that wolf is Government who knows little and cares less about those they were elected to serve.

5.

***What are the major risk factors for food poverty?***

**Response:** Beyond the obvious risk factors such as low income, which can be defined by the relative poverty indicators, there are hidden factors.

Many of my clients are entitled to Working Tax Credit, or would have been before changes to entitlement were made in April 2012. The risks of overpayment cause many to fear taking overtime which could have reduced food poverty. Changes to Working Tax Credit for couples has caused a significant fall in income, with many considering that work doesn't pay, especially where they simply cannot get more hours from their employer.

Other risk factors are the lack of choice in shops. Whilst parts of London have the benefit of street markets, and at least two supermarkets, other areas may be served by one supermarket only. Some supermarkets do not operate uniform prices UK wide, and many of the smaller units do not have the special offers to be found in larger units.

Transport is another issue in the risk of Food Poverty. Much of London is well served by public transport. However, even with the half price Oyster Discount, a £2.30 for a return journey becomes a major call on JSA at £71 per week, or £56.25 for the under 25s. If a person is not on a means tested benefit, the cost would be £4.60. This assumes a person can carry enough shopping to last a week. Most savings are made on multiple purchase or larger sized items, which as well as being bulky may not be affordable in one purchase.

The Department of Health defines food poverty as *"the inability to afford, or to have access to, food to make up a healthy diet."* Yet the foodstuffs which are cheaper, simpler to cook, and likely to last a longer period will tend to be higher in sugar, salt and fat. Fresh fruit and vegetables, whilst desirable in a diet, require storage and often the multiple use of fuel to prepare (for example; the boiling of potatoes on one ring, the boiling of another vegetable on another, the grilling of fish, the roasting of another dish)

This brings me to another risk factor. The cost of fuel and the availability of cooking equipment and storage space. It is not unusual for me to find homes without a functioning fridge, a cooker which is not fully functional, and saucepans without lids. Then there is the question of fuel poverty. There is little point in having perishable fresh or frozen foods when there are days with no electricity in the meter and so the items wont keep.

Combine one or more of these factors and there is a real risk of food poverty. This assumes there is no debt issues, drug or alcohol dependency, or health problems to be considered.

***What evidence is available about the health impact of food poverty?***

**Response:**

The obvious evidence is to be found in the number of applicants to food banks, number of children using breakfast clubs, and potentially numbers using free school meals. However, this would only show those who have turned to the schemes.

Crisis Loans for living expenses could give a useful indication, and these figures could be available from the Social Fund. Pay day lenders statistics could also give an indication if short term loans of less than £100 were considered.

Beyond this, most statistics will grossly underestimate the numbers of people in food poverty, as it isn't simply recorded like a debt to a creditor statistics, or a claimant count, or measured as an illness, therefore it remains widely under reported, no one but the individual suffers in food poverty, although its knock on effects may be widely felt.

***Does London need more foodbanks, and if so how can we increase the available resources?***

**Response:**

Clearly London does need more food banks, as it is an effective front line response. However, there needs to be an easier system of directing help. At present, for an appropriate agency to distribute vouchers there are negotiations to be made with individual food banks. A pan London food bank could have cost savings and efficiencies, operating a central data base to ensure that distribution was responsive.

It could be partially funded by the Localised Social Fund budgets given to Local Authorities from April 2013. This could cover the cost of logistics and venues, whilst the voluntary sector could concentrate on supply of food stuffs and the front line end of distribution.

***Are foodbanks a sustainable response to food poverty?***

**Response:**

No, not in the longer term. Food Banks have to provide tinned, packet and long life items which may not be the healthiest options. Additionally, provision will be patchy, and the postcode lottery that operates can only get worse. This will lead to influx of demand in some areas. There is the additional problem of hidden poverty. Affluent areas may not appear to be places that have pockets of need, but from front line experience the poverty can be more keenly felt as it is off radar from policy makers.

As a supplement to a sustainable, co-ordinated response to food poverty, foodbanks have a future. As a replacement to larger scale action, they will become victims of their own success.

***How does food poverty affect London schoolchildren?***

**Response:**

There is wide spread evidence that schoolchildren perform more highly, are better behaved, and reach their potential when they have had a nutritional breakfast.

1937 - an investigation by John Boyd Orr revealed that there was a link between low-income, malnutrition and under-achievement in schools. Various studies have confirmed this link more generally, but this was the first noted link.

Indeed free school meals for poorer families were introduced by the Liberal Government in 1906 and have existed in some form ever since.

In 1921 school milk was provided for poor children, extended in 1946 to all school children. This provision has been eroded through various economies in 1968, 1971, 1980 and 1996, but Welfare Foods Schemes still ensures free milk for infants whose parent receives Income Support or JSA.

***Should all schools be providing breakfasts, and if so how can this be delivered?***

**Response:**

This is a difficult question. Blanket state provision could be wasteful at a time of austerity, yet leaving the issue to charities could again mean patchy provision. It could be that joint working between the GLA perhaps providing the infrastructure with a charity providing the foodstuffs directly.

***What else can schools do to ensure children have access to healthy food?***

On a practical level, Schools could use their grounds to host farmers or fruit markets at a very reduced rent at weekends. This could be conditional on the stall holders charging reasonable prices in exchange. If the school could cover its costs, which would likely be cheaper than commercial or local authority street pitches, then the traders could pass on some of the savings in lower prices.

An alternative would be allotments, either on available land, through grow bags, or in partnership with an allotment site nearby. Children could be taught the cultivation of simple vegetables. This could be in partnership with a local charity, such as Thrive. Obviously this could have child protection issues, so would need further thought and discussion.

***Does London have food deserts, and what is the impact of these?***

**Response:**

Very definitely. There are areas with boutique shops and gentrified streets where the purchase of reasonably priced foods is impossible. There are other areas where high streets are little more than a few charity shops, a betting shop and an off license. Although public transport will quickly take a London resident to an area which does have range and choice, the repeat cost of a journey when offset against the purchase of lower priced top up staples and take advantage of special offers is uneconomic.

The impact is to have areas, particularly areas of high concentrations of poverty, or indeed affluent areas with invisible poverty without access to a range of healthy foods at reasonable prices.

***What initiatives exist to ensure affordable, healthy food is available in every part of London?***

**Response:**

There are localised schemes such as food banks, community shops, community gardens which provide small scale provision. There are limited food co-ops in operation also. The difficulty is that these are patchy and often uncoordinated.

***What skills and information do people need to maintain a healthy diet?***

**Response:**

Surprisingly, many people do actually know the basis of maintaining a healthy diet. In my experience the problems will often stem from the following:

- Lack of equipment – steamers, cookers, fridges and freezers
- Apathy – many clients lack motivation to cook beyond basic meals.
- Lack of availability – many clients have limited budgets and therefore choose foods that are likely to be eaten by families, in quantities that reduce waste, and at prices they can afford.

It is rare that people do not know how to cook healthy meals, the challenge is to promote doing so.

***How can the mayor use strategic powers to help address food poverty?***

**Response:**

The simplest way would be to consider how to join up the agencies already in existence. This could be through direct funding to set up data bases that would improve capacity. For example; a main distribution depot to store donated food items centrally, with food banks then able to collect for their area.

Another possibility would be to create a co-op of gas and electricity customers. Lewisham Council is exploring this, with a view to using bulk consumer power to negotiate better prices. Any method to explore ways of reducing fuel costs would free up monies to cover other living costs.

Potentially, a method where surplus home grown fruits and vegetables could sold. Like a micro farmers market. The savings could be passed on and could be a springboard to small enterprise.

Any way of joining up the diffuse local stakeholders and encourage co-operation between them must surely be a priority.

## **6. 24/09/2012**

The e-mail asked for ideas, so here is one..

Could we not set up schemes in supermarkets where someone collects the buy one free items from shoppers who do not want them and redistributes? We are always taking a 'get one free' we don't want and then find we cannot use it.

## **7. 09/10/2012**

1. I have two suggestions - one is that every primary school be funded and supported to have a breakfast club - which is partly funded by mayor and part by the PTA.

2. That catering companies/sandwich bars/others who hold major events be allowed by some sort of disclaimer to donate food that is left over. At the Olympic - corporate events were not well attended and huge amounts of food were binned - staff were not even allowed to take any home. Similarly I know that the catering at Wentworth Golf course for the championships resulted in large amounts of unused food.

## **8. 28/09/2012**

I am fortunately, on a Local Government pension which I contributed to for over 40 years and not in 'food poverty', nor do I smoke or drink and own my house, with my wife, and we both manage well, however, when I see the Jeremy Kyle show, and the druggies, alcoholics, the work shy and sometimes, unfortunate people on hard times through no fault of their own, I wonder why the following is not a national programme:

1. instead of the absolute disgrace of the massive food mountains of 'out of date food' from the giant Supermarket Chains, all this food and drink (no alcohol) should be distributed, at the Supermarkets cost, to a series of National Food Centres, created from the thousands of empty factories, with the Local Council issuing a non rateable Rate, managed by existing local Charities, to distribute to those in 'food poverty'.

2. Those families who receive 'benefits' often go on providing TV's, fags, holidays drink and drugs, and not proper food and exercise for themselves and their kids, and as such, at least 50% of any benefits paid to those in need should be food coupons, exchangeable at the National Food Centres, for food, the same goes for Clothing

3. The disgraceful practice of BOGOF should be made illegal, it means often wasted food, left uneaten at home and goes in the waste bin. This system 'encourages' waste, unless there are large families with many kids, where it may possibly be eaten, but why not reduce the initial cost on one item of food in the first place!

Hope this helps in some small way, but I am sure there must be millions who feel in the same way as me.



## **9. 28/09/2012**

I writing to you regarding the food poverty in London. This has become a very serious issue for a lot of people. I work full time and still find it hard to make sure I can eat as the price of food has gone through the roof. At one time I found it value for money , now the most basic foods are much more expensive now. I would like to help in some way if I can .

Kind regards,

## **10. 29/10/2012**

It's true many people in London are facing hardships and some might go hungry especially as there are cuts in welfare benefits and food do cost a lot more these days.

Here are some strategies to improve the situation :- 1. The Govt should monitor inflationary prices for food and ensure super markets are not profiteering highly by hiking up food prices in the recession.

2. They should mobilize teams of food producers to find vacant lots to sow seeds and plant food all over London and the country, including green houses and food tunnels.

3. Britain should only welcome people who come here to contribute in any professional or economical ways. We should not have open doors for riff raffs, vagrants, criminals, economic refugees etc so that when you look around you, as we do now, we find London's becoming a dump for illegal immigrants.

Many are so obviously without jobs - who's housing and feeding them? Will they pose safety problems for Londoners later on? What should the immigration officers do about the problem with the influx of illegal immigrants?

4. Encourage house holders to plant fruit and veg in pots if they have no gardens.

5. Open up and allocate plots for organic farming and growing of food.

8. Start centres for community involvement with organising, growing and distributing /selling fresh produce.

Hope this helps.