

**WRITTEN SUBMISSION TO THE
UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON EXTREME POVERTY AND HUMAN
RIGHTS**

IN ADVANCE OF A COUNTRY VISIT TO THE UK IN NOVEMBER 2018

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This written submission responds to the UN Special Rapporteur's call for inputs from interested individuals and organisations in the UK working on issues related to poverty and human rights.

Background

I am an academic specialising in questions of behavioural public policy and my current research includes welfare politics and food poverty in the UK. I have also been a volunteer at a community food bank since 2015, which has afforded first hand observations of the nature and impact of food poverty in London. Since March 2018 I have been working with local government officials in Barnet to support the preparation of a Needs Assessment on food security.

The London Borough of Barnet is widely known as a leafy and affluent suburb. In reality it is a place of wide-ranging financial and social circumstances. Looking at the availability of food, for example, there is evidence of surplus, to the point of raising public health concerns around obesity, juxtaposed with evidence of hunger as food aid providers report increasing demand.

This has prompted the local authority to investigate the question of food insecurity, including through focus group discussions with frontline staff and charitable organisations, a total of 14 participants. I supported the design of three focus groups, and was responsible for moderation, data collection, transcription, and analysis of the data emerging. Further detail on methodology is on page 6. This report elaborates on themes that fit closely with the questions set out by the Special Rapporteur on the theme of austerity, in particular B9, B10 and B12.

It is hoped that the data will be made public in the near future as part of Barnet's public reporting on the Needs Assessment, and may also be published in the form of academic outputs. At present these research notes are submitted to the Special Rapporteur for the purposes of his visit and reporting, and are not for direct quotation.

Theme 1: Food poverty and food insecurity is widely accepted to exist, but there are few reliable statistics to accurately quantify the problem

Five of the nine local authority staff spoke about first hand experience with clients who were facing food poverty and food insecurity. In each case, food poverty was closely bound up with income poverty, and simply not having the resources to afford food:

People know social services are there, and the benefits are there. But still, for whatever reason, they're not able to manage their money at a level that they're then able to go and buy food. And they literally don't have any money. (FG1)

A strong degree of consensus emerged across and within all focus groups around the twin aspects of food poverty: not having enough food to eat, and it not being the right quality of food to ensure a balanced and healthy diet.

I would say a total lack of, or perhaps not having the right amount, quantity or type of foods available. That's how I would regard food poverty. (FG1)

They have nothing [in] their fridge. (FG2)

Some participants who work for Barnet had not had direct contact with people in food poverty, although they described crises such as eviction and cuts to income support that threatened their clients' ability to cope. This suggests that individuals may not always explicitly present with food insecurity or food poverty, although their circumstances are highly likely to indicate food insecurity.

There was considerable demand for a better grasp of food insecurity across Barnet, with local authority staff asking for clear definitions, and more efforts to monitor and measure the phenomenon across the borough:

I don't think we have the capacity to capture the actual problem and the statistics... food poverty is a hidden problem, but it exists in the community, on the streets. (FG1)

We don't know the actual number of people actually experiencing the food poverty. But I know, from personal experience, there are people out there just waiting for the next benefit payment to buy the good quality of food. (FG1)

At present, there is no systematic surveillance of food security in the UK. This makes it difficult to quantify and track the problem. This allows for the issue to be denied or dampened, but will not help identify where pockets of food insecurity are at their worst, and where services and policies to address food poverty are working best. Evidence and monitoring exercises currently rely on data from food aid providers, notably the Trussell Trust, or on new methodologies such as that put forward by Smith et al (Applied Geography, vol 91: 21-31, Feb 2018). Both are imperfect: the former tells us where

demand is, but may be biased depending on the coverage of food aid providers, and cannot tell us of the 'hidden hungry' who are unable or too embarrassed to attend a food bank. The latter is based on modelling assumptions that project risk profiles across areas. It cannot quantify the precise number of people who may need services and to what extent food insecurity affects their daily lives, although high level estimates suggest a population level risk of 4% in the UK. As new needs assessments, action plans, and a London-wide food strategy are launched, the need for careful data monitoring grows stronger while current systems remain inadequate.

Theme 2: Food insecurity often presents alongside problems coping with welfare reforms introduced as part of an austerity policy package

Given the nature of the focus group discussants, it was expected that food poverty issues would be linked to some wider crisis (requiring contact with a social worker) or benefits advice. This was confirmed by participants, who overwhelmingly agreed there was an association between recent changes to the welfare system, a shortage in financial resources, vulnerability around housing, as well as diminished ability to plan their household finances to cover all their commitments:

Because of the change in benefit and housing benefit and other benefits, they're struggling, they then face eviction, and we're having to get involved. And that also leads to them not having food, and we have to give food vouchers out, which wasn't something that we did up to a few years ago but now lots of people do have it. (FG1)

So housing benefit stops, well hopefully you prioritise paying your rent or other bills, you start to go hungry, so we see you at a food bank. Lots of government welfare initiatives, the benefit cap leads to lots and lots of people experiencing food poverty. The bedroom tax, the freezing of welfare, not raising it along with inflation... it's trying to help people in those problems to stop them escalating into homelessness or crisis. (FG3)

Universal Credit has messed up a lot of people. It's not only this borough, I used to work in Southwark. In Southwark, because people used to get their rent paid and then, you know, used to get their other benefits separately. So they always had a roof over their heads. (FG3)

One participant highlighted the interaction between a lack of mental health support and changes in the welfare regime, which made it especially hard for a client she was offering benefits advice to:

When he [would] go to his [benefits] assessments, he would fail it. And then his mental health would prevent him from looking for work and doing the 30 hours to prove that he's looking for work. So, when he goes to his job coach and he said, 'oh no I can't look for work', he'd get sanctioned. And this kept happening to him over a long time. (FG2)

Specific cuts to local services may have directly or indirectly raised the level of need for support around food. One participant highlighted the ‘meals at home’ service that was recently cut by Barnet, which took away her sense of reassurance as a social worker that those households were getting at least one proper meal a day. Another participant linked cuts to local mental health and wider services with there now being a more challenging situation of finding statutory help and solutions for individuals in complex crises:

As cuts to things like social services, mental health services start to really take away some of the essential need that people have. You just meet more and more quite desperate individuals that you might not have met 5 years ago? Or if you had met them 5 years ago, you’d have been able to get them help from a statutory service. Right now it’s a real struggle. (FG3)

Theme 3: Food banks and food aid providers are well known to front line staff and are increasingly serving as the safety net to poor and vulnerable individuals

Discussions with local authority staff highlighted a well developed understanding of local food aid providers, and their referral processes for clients who may be in need of non-statutory support and who are given food bank vouchers. Two particular local food aid providers - the Colindale Food Bank and the Real Junk Food Project at Burnt Oak – were highlighted as positive initiatives that were having an impact in the community. More widely, participants knew of several charitable and faith-based organisations that included food in their community offer. The process of referral to food banks was described as “seamless” by those who had most experience of using it. All those who gave out the voucher spoke of the need to assess individuals on a case-by-case basis, with food bank vouchers seen as one of many options rather than a default. One participant reported having to prepare an internal business case for each food bank voucher, indicating they were not given away lightly.

Overall, the interactions between food aid providers and local authority services raises questions about the ‘institutionalisation’ of food banks in the provision of social safety nets, as the frontiers of the state are rolled back under an austerity agenda. Further, social worker participants mentioned changes to how they work. From the days when people would have the kind of relationship where they could call their social worker to seek advice on life decisions, the system now discourages more than three visits or contact sessions, staff feel a sense of pressure to ‘close a case’ as soon as possible, and to move on to their wider caseload. Pressures on staffing and resources at local government level clearly play a role in the extent to which the state-provided safety net can serve poor and vulnerable members of the community.

Indeed, the discussion with food aid providers (FG3) highlighted a large variety of initiatives already underway, with many food banks providing much more than food aid. Wider services included advice drop-ins to address clients’ problems with benefits, housing, debt, mental health, and wider

wellbeing including activity and sports. One organisation provided emergency homeless accommodation. One included tutoring support and help for the family. Another included a community garden and kitchen that hosted community nights, entirely volunteer-run to provide a shared meal and space to socialise. The same organisation also ran a refugee resettlement programme, largely for Syrian refugees settled in Brent. The wide range of community services run by these organisations, under the banner of 'food aid provision' was linked by one participant to the decrease in such services in recent years due to local authority budget cuts:

Lots of these food banks hope to re-establish communities when you know like community centres are no longer in operation, youth centres aren't available, etcetera. That's all good, but it doesn't deal with the problem at root. (FG3)

While many positive features of such community action were noted, other implications also arise. One front line staff observed, aware that she might be accused of being cynical, that as the food aid providers got better at what they did, the justification for the local authority to step back solidified too. It was another area they could hand over the responsibility to an alternative, capable actor. This again has implications for the redrawing of state-community lines of responsibility.

However, the growth in non-statutory food aid provision is laden with its own challenges. Charitable organisations are constantly searching for new sources of support, and rarely feel a sense of security in their own operations. One food aid provider reported having to spend thousands of pounds (GBP) in buying food to ensure that their weekly deliveries could be maintained to their client base of 300 families. The food bank, and even the food bank plus, approach is constrained in being able to reach out to people who may not be able to travel to them, such as older people, those who are reluctant to ask for help, and others who are simply not on the radar of other government services. Participants voiced concerns of a hidden group of food insecure people.

Food aid providers are largely powered by volunteers, and this may not make for a sustainable solution to poverty and vulnerability. One participant summed this up:

...there [should] be more support to community groups and organisations who are providing this support. Because they're all struggling. However long we've been in existence, I guarantee that [no food bank] is finding it easy to carry on a day to day basis, right? ... As much as they are able to just about manage, but they couldn't do that without the help of volunteers. And that's great but it shouldn't be like that. (FG3)

Notes on methodology

Three focus groups took place over May 2018, facilitated by Barnet Council. This qualitative research exercise aimed to explore the attitudes, awareness and views of three stakeholder groups. The first focus group brought together four front line staff in social work roles. The second focus group brought together five front line staff in a team that covered housing, employability and skills, and benefits advice services. The third focus group comprised of five representatives of local food aid providers. All participants were invited on a voluntary basis and provided informed consent to take part under the auspices of Barnet's information governance procedures.

Focus group data was transcribed and analysed in NVivo v11. Food poverty and food insecurity were not defined at the start of the session. This allowed for bottom-up definitions and perceptions to be elicited. In all three sessions, a shared understanding of food poverty was developed during the discussion. The analysis below refers to food poverty as having insufficient access to a nutritious and balanced diet. Food insecurity relates more broadly to the risk of having insufficient access to a nutritious and balanced diet.

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