***Feeding Britain: a Strategy for zero hunger in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland***

**The Report and Evidence Review[[1]](#footnote-1) of the All Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom**

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Comments from **Professor Elizabeth Dowler**

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I am delighted to see the publication of the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry Report and Evidence Review on Hunger in the UK, the first cross-party report to address the issue of hunger and food poverty. The Review adds a considerable weight of authoritative evidence on the experience and drivers of hunger and food poverty in the UK today. The material provided from visits, submissions, hearings, witness statements and wide reading of published literature offers a strong evidence base from which society in general, and specific sectors and agencies, can proceed.

I note that the Report is based on consideration of addressing ‘hunger’ alone, as a matter of extreme urgency in a country ‘as rich as is Britain’(p8).

In particular, I welcome the clear, useful and practical solutions proposed to some of the current failings in **Social Security**, both in fundamental problematics and aspects of implementation. It is excellent that these failings have been recognised. Such acknowledgement is long overdue, and the remedies proposed are urgently needed.

There are a number of important proposals for **local authorities, utility companies and the financial sector**, to improve the structure and management of elements in their systems which currently have profound negative impacts on poorer households’ income and management strategies.

The deep disappointments come in the primary proposals which head the Report. The main thrust will be to enshrine an unaccountable charitable system as the instrument to address issues symptomatically that can only properly be dealt with by the state tackling the fundamental structural causes. The **creation of a new institution (‘Feeding Britain Network’) whose task is ‘tackling hunger’ through giving people ‘food waste’ is deeply questionable, on efficacy, democratic and social justice grounds**.

It is widely recognised that giving out food simply cannot meet fundamental failures of our welfare system nor address the reasons why people live in poverty. To bolt on a franchised, volunteer advice network (which presumably duplicates existing structures such as Citizens’ Advice Bureaux – unacknowledged here) and where no mechanism for accountability in terms of appropriateness or accuracy of advice is mentioned, is also disappointing.

I respect the generous hard work and good-will currently expended in offering such help, and salute the social solidarity it demonstrates. Nevertheless, expanding voluntary food distribution and advice networks will not solve the problem of food poverty, which appears to be growing through its manifestations of ‘hunger’ (harder to define systematically). The strong evidence cited by the report of stigma, distress and shame among those having to ask for food and other help, and the equally important needs of those with disabilities, special dietary needs or other conditions, are also ignored in the proposed response.

The proposal essentially uses one of society’s food problems (a food system which relies on surplus production – aka ‘waste’) to address another (people cannot afford to buy enough food because of inadequate or uncertain pay and/or social security benefits). Why should ‘food waste’ be the first and, indeed, main solution to ‘food poverty’, through a system which corporatizes food charity by co-opting the always willing food industry, charitable/ voluntary sectors and the churches? **There is no evidence from any country that has systemised using food waste to feed hungry people that it is effective, sustainable or fair.** The final indignity is to locate responsibility in local authorities, many of which are currently stretched financially to breaking point for reasons similar to those affecting food poor families – too little income (in this instance from central government), excessively high costs and too many competing demands.

Sadly, the report makes little mention of the growing networks of grassroot and community initiatives around food which encompass growing, sharing, cooking, local enterprise and community owned retail. These activities, some quite longstanding, have changed many people’s lives and demonstrably empowered households to find better ways of eating and to develop strategies of resilience to times of deep stress. Food banks and churches do not need to start initiatives to promote community and better eating practices – they are already going on, but not under the umbrella of ‘charitable gifts’.

People should be treated with dignity, as citizens, not labelled as deserving (or otherwise) recipients of offerings from church members, neighbours or food corporates. The Bishop in his introduction calls for widespread review of the fundamental values which underpin the welfare state: ‘that we show our values [as a society] by the way in which we behave and, especially, to those most in need’ (p5). Such a conversation and practical response is urgently needed **but we must not lose sight of justice: ‘food waste’ cannot and must not be seen as the solution to ‘food poverty’.**

1. Compiled and written by Andrew Forsey, Secretary to the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom [↑](#footnote-ref-1)