



All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty in Britain

CPAG's response

June 2014

Child Poverty Action Group
94 White Lion Street
London N1 9PF

Introduction

1. Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) has worked for almost 50 years to prevent and relieve poverty among children and families in the UK. We have particular expertise in the functioning of the social security system through our welfare rights work. We regularly engage with low-income families through our policy research, documenting their experiences and views, and are currently providing frontline welfare rights advice to food bank users in London.
2. In CPAG's view, it is critically important to distinguish between food poverty and the more immediate question of rising food bank use. The former can be characterised as a chronic condition, whereas emergency food assistance, while it may be connected to longer-term pressures, is almost always triggered by a specific crisis. While solutions to each are likely to be complementary, they require separate analysis and distinct remedies.
3. Our submission consequently treats each of these issues in turn. Throughout, we draw on our own analysis of poverty and food poverty in the UK, and where appropriate, the voices of parents and young people we have met in the course of our research with direct experience of poverty, food poverty and hunger.

Food poverty

4. Food poverty is intimately connected with poverty *per se*. Low-income families tell us time and again that core costs such as housing and fuel are their priorities, as they seek to preserve their homes and access to vital utilities. As incomes become less adequate, spending on food is one of the few items that they can cut. As a result, families who are struggling financially often report compromising on food:

'My husband and I now eat cereal for dinner to try and avoid debt each month.' (Parent survey, 2012)

'If I go visit my mum, I always make sure I have a good meal there even if I am not hungry because that means when I get home, I don't need to eat – and then there's more food for my daughter.' (Parent, caring for disabled partner, interviewed London, April 2014)

5. Recent pressures on incomes are well-documented.¹ Real wages have been in decline or stagnant over the past five years, while at the same time benefits, which constitute an essential part of poorer families' incomes, have been cut significantly. Child benefit, for example, will have lost almost 15 per cent of its real value over the course of this Parliament as a result of uprating

¹ See, for example, A Adams, A Hood and P Levell, 'The squeeze on incomes' in the *IFS Green Budget 2014*, Institute for Fiscal Studies, February 2014

decisions. Table 1 shows the (in)adequacy of current incomes (earnings plus benefits) for a range of family types, expressed as a percentage of the minimum income standard.²

Table 1: Income adequacy as a percentage of minimum income standard budgets (excluding rent and childcare), 2014

	out of work	working 15 hours at NMW	working 21 hours at NMW	working 35 hours at NMW
Couple				
1 child	50	45	55	86
2 children	55	51	59	85
Lone parent				
1 child	54	61	99	118
2 children	58	64	93	107

Source: Data sources: CPAG Welfare benefits and tax credits handbook 2014/15, Minimum Income Standard 2014

6. At the same time that income from both earnings and benefits has been in decline, food prices have been rising above the headline rate of inflation. Analysis from the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows, for example, that between 2008 and 2013, the cost of food has increased by over 40 per cent, compared to a rise in CPI of 20 per cent in the same time period.³ It is no surprise, then, that low-income families report that food poverty and hunger have become more prevalent in recent years:

'For two days every month I wasn't eating food because I needed that money to pay my bedroom tax.'(Parent on ESA, interviewed Glasgow June 2013)

'How am I meant to find a job that covers £150 a week [for rent] plus childcare for three children? Then, plus money for me, then plus money for bills, gas, electricity, water, am I meant to be living, like, on what? Pasta and egg every day?' (Parent, focus group London, June 2014)

7. CPAG research shows that it is commonplace for parents to cut back on their own food consumption before they cut back on their children's.⁴ But clearly, pressure on incomes is increasingly leaving children hungry too. More than 85 per cent of teachers surveyed last year by CPAG and the NUT report that they had seen an increase in the number of children arriving at

² A Davies, D Hirsch and M Padley, *A minimum income standard for the UK in 2014*, JRF 2014

³ A Adams, A Hood and P Levell, 'The squeeze on incomes' in the *IFS Green Budget 2014*, Institute for Fiscal Studies, February 2014 section 6.4

⁴ See, for example, D Hirsch et al, *The cost of a child in the twenty-first century*, Child Poverty Action Group 2012

school hungry in recent years.⁵ A further survey found that 80% of teachers said pupils are lacking energy and concentration as a result of eating poorly and more than a quarter of teachers have had to bring food to school to help hungry pupils.⁶ Clearly, this not only affects children's wellbeing in the here and now, but their longer term educational and health prospects.

8. The provision of free school meals (FSM) for low-income children is one policy intervention designed to address children's hunger and CPAG has welcomed the recent announcement to extend FSM to all key stage 1 pupils from September 2014. However, FSM do not address the problem of child hunger in its entirety: there are thirteen weeks of school holidays a year when children receive no supplement for example. Moreover, CPAG research has shown that many children continue to go hungry even when receiving FSM.

'I don't get a lot to eat; (I'm) always hungry after having dinner... As we don't get much food, that's why mummy still cooks us a meal at home but soon as we get home we eat lots while dinner is cooking.' (11 year old respondent to online survey, February 2012)

'The amount of money we get [for FSM] doesn't always let us get some food and a decent drink. Also, getting free school meals doesn't allow me to get any food at break time and sometimes I'm hungry at break and this is difficult.' (Secondary school age respondent to online survey, February 2012)

9. Research documents the high cost and often limited availability of healthy food in poorer neighbourhoods throughout the UK.⁷ A recent report by CPAG and the British Youth Council has also captured young people's views on the social gradient in healthy eating. When asked which policies were required to tackle child poverty, many respondents wanted to see the cost and availability of healthy food addressed:

'Regulate fast food outlets, they always seem to be in the poorer areas and we're not sure that's right.' *'And make healthier food cheaper, or at least cheaper than junk food.'* (Young people in focus group, Liverpool 2012)

And parents echo these concerns:

'Most of the time the fruit that I've got, my mum buys them, because I find it really hard to go out buy strawberry, grapes, bananas, pineapple, watermelons, things like that. I can't afford a certain amount of these luxuries for my children to eat five a day. So they say you have to eat more healthy? Right - but where's the money to go and do it?' (Parent, focus group London June 2014)

⁵ Survey of 1,478 teachers conducted by CPAG and that National Union of Teachers, September 2013

⁶ Survey of 4,000 teachers by NASUWT, April 2014

⁷ See, for example, the work of Professor Timothy Lang <http://www.city.ac.uk/people/academics/timothy-lang#profile=2>

10. Food poverty is sometimes depicted as the result of poor budgeting and dietary choices by low-income families but our research provides little support for these explanations. Time and again, parents illustrate to us the scrupulous control they have over their limited finances. In addition, we have found no evidence that food poverty results from a lack of knowledge about food or food preparation. Instead, the vast majority of parents are well aware of the food they and their children should be eating; the constraints they experience are financial rather than informational.

'If you look at the amount that this [healthy] food costs – like, I cook every day, I have to because this is the way I was brought up to. I'm not going to say I never buy the £2 lasagne from Iceland, because, yeah, I do - but because I have to'. (Parent, focus group, London June 2014)

11. Food poverty, then, is determined by diminishing incomes and rising costs, coupled with the practical challenges low-income families experience in simply accessing affordable and nutritious food. Tackling food poverty requires addressing the underlying determinants of poverty itself: improved wage levels, extended childcare to enable parents to work (more), and higher levels of children's benefits, would all go some way to improving families' incomes and enabling them to avoid the 'heating or eating' choices that are becoming increasingly commonplace, and are so shocking in an advanced economy such as the UK.

The rising use of food banks

12. In summer 2013 CPAG took the unusual step of deploying a welfare rights advisor in Tower Hamlets food bank to undertake an action research project assessing and addressing the increased demand for emergency food assistance. This section of our submission draws extensively on this experience. It does not, however, pre-empt findings from the more extensive research currently being conducted by CPAG, Church of England and Oxfam into the reasons for the use of food banks in the UK. This report will be available in the autumn and will provide additional evidence to the points raised here.⁸
13. In CPAG's experience, those using food banks are usually not just experiencing food poverty, but an acute lack of food. As our welfare rights advisor, who has seen 164 cases to date, put it:

'I've seen a client referred to the food bank because she fainted in the street from hunger; I saw one man who described his daily diet to me of an apple, two slices of bread and a cuppa soup; and another told me how he drank water with sugar in it for energy' (CPAG welfare rights adviser, June 2014)

⁸ CPAG, Church of England and Oxfam, *Emergency Use Only: Understanding and limiting the use of food banks in the UK*, forthcoming autumn 2014

14. The vast majority of food bank users are referred to emergency food provision not simply because their incomes are low (as evidenced in the previous section), but because they have experienced a sudden shock to their incomes. CPAG's experience suggests that with very few exceptions, the proximate cause of food bank use is a benefit problem which results in incomes either reducing significantly or ceasing altogether. Clients are not simply poor, then, but destitute – unable to afford even the most basic necessities of life.
15. The benefit problems that food bank users experience are often connected to poor administration in the social security system. For example:
- Many clients have claimed benefits but there is a delay in either making a decision, or in making payment once a decision has been made. Cases of this type form a large proportion of the caseload dealt with by our Tower Hamlets welfare adviser;
 - When delays do occur, short term benefit advances (STBA) should bridge the gap between need and payment, but broader CPAG work has found that claimants are rarely informed of these;
 - Mandatory reconsideration of appeals against Employment Support Allowance (ESA) decisions is a common problem. The processing time for mandatory reconsideration – which must take place before an appeal is heard – is excessively long and claimants are not entitled to support in the meantime.
16. Beyond weak administration, recent changes to benefit rules also appear to be increasing demand for emergency food support. The more stringent sanctions regime introduced from last year is a significant driver of food bank use – an estimated third of clients seen in Tower Hamlets are subject to sanctions. Yet as CPAG has documented many times, the sanctions system is seriously flawed: claimants are often not aware of the obligations placed on them by the benefits system, are frequently subject to onerous and sometimes unreasonable conditions, and are regularly sanctioned without being informed of the decision.⁹ In addition, information on hardship payments – a potential source of income for those who have been sanctioned – does not appear to be given as a matter of course.
17. Finally, a further reason why claimants are being wrongly refused benefit or experiencing a long delay is the complex rules about benefits and both immigration status or European residence rules. CPAG are aware from calls to our advice line for advisers that this is an area where many struggle to understand the complicated rules.
18. Emergency food provision cannot, and should not, substitute for benefits provided by right. Perhaps one of the most striking features of CPAG's work in Tower Hamlets is how many people are experiencing hunger, stress and humiliation for entirely avoidable reasons. While benefit and wage levels are a key explanatory factor of food poverty writ large, our early evidence suggests it is poor benefit administration, alongside deliberate policy choices such as a tighter sanctions regime, which are largely at the root of the rising demand for food banks.

⁹ CPAG, *Independent review of JSA sanctions: CPAG's response to the call for information*, CPAG January 2014

19. We give the last word here to two parents we recently met who had been referred for emergency food assistance:

'For the first time, like when you're dependent as well, when you are not used to going and turning to anybody for help, it can be quite degrading'. (Parent, focus group London June 2014)

'And you feel like a failure as a mother when you have to go somewhere like that.' (Parent, focus group London June 2014)

Recommendations

20. Tackling food poverty requires tackling income adequacy. To this end, CPAG recommends the government:

- Take action on low pay, including an uplift to the national minimum wage, and the promotion of a living wage;
- Strengthen work incentives within the benefits system to ensure that any additional income gains that families accrue – from work or from other sources such as changes to the tax system – are not simply withdrawn as benefits are adjusted;
- Find a stable settlement for uprating working-age benefits to ensure that they keep their value against prices and earnings;
- Protect family incomes by restoring the full value of child benefit and child tax credit.

21. Early evidence suggests tackling food bank use requires significant improvements in the administration of benefits. CPAG recommends the government:

- Address problems with ESA medical certificate;
- Amend the rule which stipulates no payment of ESA when claimants are undergoing mandatory reconsideration;
- Where clients have failed to attend a medical, consider a lower level reduction of 25% of ESA for a one month period upon failure to attend. A claimant who contacts within that one month period should be permitted to rearrange their appointment in order to remain on ESA;
- Provide a route whereby STBA can be requested electronically by advice workers;
- Consider automatic consideration of STBA if a claim for a means tested benefit has not been decided after 10 days;
- Publish details of STBAs prominently in Jobcentres;
- Include a reference to STBA being available if a person is struggling in the standard script for benefit claims.

22. Given the number of clients using food banks who have been subject to a benefit sanction, CPAG recommends an urgent review of the sanctions regime. Specifically, we would like to see a system that:

- Assumes that hardship will exist if a claimant is sanctioned unless there is evidence to the contrary (which could include other income in addition to benefits, or living with parents), rather than placing the burden of proof on the claimant;
- Leaves JSA claimants with 10p a week so that their housing benefit is unaffected;
- Has the option of reduced period and length of sanctions;
- Introduces a quick mechanism for revising sanctions (e.g. guaranteed resolution within one week)
- Allows claimants more time before imposing the sanction in order to state their case.

For further information, please contact Moussa Haddad, Senior Policy and Research Officer, at mhaddad@cpag.org.uk or on 020 7812 5238 or Lindsay Judge, Senior Policy and Research Officer, at ljudge@cpag.org.uk or on 020 7812 5205

Child Poverty Action Group is a charity registered in England and Wales (registration number 294841) and in Scotland (registration number SC039339), and is a company limited by guarantee, registered in England (registration number 1993854). VAT number: 690 808117