Feeding Britain

The first 100 days

A first audit of the recommendations made by the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom

This is not an official publication of the House of Commons or the House of Lords. It has not been approved by either House or its Committees. All-Party Groups are informal groups of members of both Houses with a common interest in particular issues. The views expressed in this audit are those of MPs and Peers who served on the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom.
Introduction from Frank Field MP and Tim Thornton, The Bishop of Truro

Since we published the findings of our cross-party inquiry in *Feeding Britain*, we’ve been inundated with comments on how wide-ranging and complex our proposals are to eliminate hunger in this country.

But, truth be told, our evidence invited such a broad response. A lack of food, or money with which to buy it, is merely the tip of the iceberg which leads growing numbers of people in this country to go hungry.

The Inquiry found that delayed or suspended benefit payments, low or irregular wages and a loss of free school meals during the holidays were some of the most likely reasons as to why growing numbers of our fellow citizens need to use a food bank to stave off hunger.

But we were able to draw a more complete picture once we set these factors against the backdrop of longer term trends in the ability of poorer households to afford the basics – food, gas and electricity, and rent.

Here we were introduced to the chronic levels of debt, worryingly low household savings, and, in some cases, difficulties managing on a limited budget, which have made people vulnerable to hunger.

And so in the first 100 days since we published our findings, we have been working on two fronts to try and mount the beginnings of an effective fight back against hunger in this country.

The first has been to secure reforms at a national level which will help to ease some of the burden, at least, on household budgets so families are better able to afford food. We refer here to measures that would improve the administration of benefit claims, tackle the disproportionately high charges paid by poorer households for basic utilities and credit, and exert upward pressure on wages for low-paid workers.

Also, as part of this national effort, we have been pushing for changes to our food system to ensure much more surplus food of good quality, a large amount of which is turned into energy or thrown to landfill, is instead diverted to organisations helping our fellow citizens experiencing severe hardship.

Alongside this, we have been working at a local level to build on the most wonderful practice we’ve seen from schools, Churches and charitable organisations which work with children and adults experiencing hunger, to try and resolve some of the issues in their lives which have pushed them to crisis point. A key element of our early work here has been to support activities which provide a ‘hand-up’ to those in crisis, so that one instance of hunger and severe hardship needn’t repeat itself on two or three occasions, or more.

We have found in this audit of the 77 recommendations we made in *Feeding Britain* that more than one third (27) are being put into action, and we have published this document as a means of charting this early progress.

But we would also like to use this audit to lay down a challenge to the next government, and to renew the call we made in *Feeding Britain* to the heroic individuals working on the frontline with people experiencing hunger, and also to the private sector, to work together to ensure we are a hunger-free country by 2020.
Feeding Britain

1. We suggest the creation of a new national network called ‘Feeding Britain’, whose membership would be composed of the food bank movement and other providers of food assistance, the voluntary organisations redistributing fresh surplus food, the food industry, and representatives from each of the eight government departments whose policy affects the number of people at risk of hunger;

6. We believe our work and the recommendations that come from this report should be used as the basis of Feeding Britain’s developing agenda; and

7. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger and Food Poverty will call a meeting of all the interested parties to establish the pilot projects.

Members of the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into the United Kingdom have formed a core Executive Group to implement and campaign for the reforms outlined in Feeding Britain. It will hold its inaugural meeting as a national network in June 2015, with organisations from the voluntary, private and public sectors to be invited as a means of sharing best practice in the fight back against hunger.

2. As an initial step, we recommend that the Government provides support to facilitate the establishment of 12 pilot projects – one in each region of the United Kingdom – to draw together private, voluntary and public expertise to eliminate hunger. The facilitation of 12 pilot projects and the creation of a Board of Trustees to drive this programme will require a modest amount of money. These pilots will help test how best to achieve the Inquiry’s aims of a hunger-free United Kingdom.

Feeding Britain has established pilot projects in Birkenhead, Devon and Cornwall, South Shields, and Salisbury. Each pilot project is drawing together voluntary, private and public expertise to mount a coordinated fight back against hunger. The pilots have been established without the assistance of central government and will proceed without public funding.

3. We believe that, as the system is built up, Feeding Britain will need to develop a network of towns, cities, counties and regions that match food needs and resources in each town, city, county and region, with the ultimate aim of eliminating hunger. While Feeding Britain has the overall goal of a hunger-
free United Kingdom, this goal can only be achieved if its strategy is based up
from the local town to city and then to region. We believe that, as it develops,
it is crucial that this body develops a life of its own that is independent of
government and with the ability to rise above other sectorial interests

Each pilot project is to expand in 2015-16 once the first annual findings
have been assessed, and examples of best practice have been developed.

5. We believe that there is a key role in town and city joining together in a
regional approach and we would see these local networks having six main
functions:
  • Encourage the redistribution of fresh surplus food to food assistance providers
    and voluntary organisations working with people in food poverty, by matching
    supply with demand, so as to reduce dependence on donated food.
  • Co-ordinate food waste prevention by working through the supply chains of
    food retailers and manufacturers, and, for example, harvesting and donating
    farm crops rejected by retailers because of their appearance.
  • Encourage local action to meet local needs by using local knowledge and
    partnerships.
  • Function as centres of knowledge and excellence by implementing best
    practice food models and training local food entrepreneurs.
  • Foster the co-location of services in a reformed One Stop Shop/Food Bank
    Plus model, in which food assistance providers become an integral part of
    local hubs that help people out of hunger by addressing some of its root causes
    such as problem debt, addictions, access to benefits, and difficulty coping on a
    low income. In doing so, it will need to instigate cooperation between Trussell
    Trust food banks, independent food assistance providers, and other voluntary
    organisations.
  • Pilot and implement schemes to maximise the take-up of free school meals
    and tackle school holiday hunger.

Pilot projects in Birkenhead, Devon and Cornwall, and Salisbury have all
convened meetings with their local partners to ensure that pilots are
firmly rooted in the community.

Each pilot project is identifying key points in local supply chains from
which surplus food of good quality can be recycled to the hungry.

FareShare is about to open a new branch in Wirral which will enable it to
take local surplus produce, for example, from Tulip and Kellogg’s, and to
distribute this to voluntary organisations in Birkenhead.
The Devon and Cornwall pilot project is hoping to tap into the local fishing industry to redistribute fresh discards for use in cooking courses by local organisations.

A series of projects are set to begin in the Easter, Whitsun and Summer Holidays in Birkenhead and Salisbury to pilot effective responses to school holiday hunger.
Tackling immediate hunger

4. Horizontal cooperation is also required. We believe that Feeding Britain should be tasked with raising the level of knowledge and on the nature and sources of good food, and how best these supplies can be made ready for eating. Here, Feeding Britain must have the responsibility for fostering collaboration between food banks and other voluntary providers, Local Authorities, schools, food retailers and manufacturers, so as to build food policy around the often complex needs of individuals facing the long-term risk of hunger. Central, however, to this overall success is the local point of contact, whatever it is called. This might be ‘Food Bank Plus’, or something else; and

8. We very much support the Trussell Trust’s recent pilot of cooking courses and co-location of welfare benefits, debt advice and other services in its food banks. We saw the success of this during our visit to Salisbury, and in our evidence from Tower Hamlets. We recommend that these pilots be extended across the Trussell Trust network so as to tackle some of the more deep-seated causes of hunger, beyond the immediate crisis, and be adopted, wherever possible, by the network of independent food banks.

The Birkenhead pilot project is rolling out a ‘Food Bank Plus’ model, with the provision of welfare rights and advocacy, and debt advice, being offered alongside the charitable giving of food in Wirral Foodbank’s main distribution centres:

- Involve Northwest has agreed to send a representative to attend various food bank sessions in Birkenhead to help clients with benefits and debt issues.
- Wirral Citizens Advice Bureau has agreed to offer a representative to attend a food bank session in Birkenhead to help clients with issues such as debt, benefits and budgeting.
- Wirral Council’s Benefits Team has offered to visit one of Birkenhead’s food banks to see what help they might be able to offer.

A similar model is to be developed in each pilot project.

The Trussell Trust has agreed to roll out its “More Than Food” pilots across its network of food banks.
9. We recommend that Feeding Britain should be tasked with identifying areas of the country in which social supermarkets could feasibly make a real and positive difference to people’s living standards, and where feasible, to help the Local Authorities in these areas roll out this model.

The Executive Group visited the new Community Shop in West Norwood in January 2015.

Community Shop buys surplus food from manufacturers for 10p in the pound and sells it for 30p in the pound. Only people in receipt of means-tested benefits are able to buy their groceries from Community Shop, which operates on a membership scheme. Alongside this, it has an on-site café and runs group sessions designed to help individuals with the problems that have led them to be hungry. It provides a structured support programme to help individuals back into work, debt advice, and cooking courses in the on-site café. In order to buy their groceries from the shop, members must sign up to these sessions. Its shop, kitchen and mentoring staff are all paid at least a Living Wage.

Members of Feeding Britain are asking the Local Authority in their pilot area to secure premises for a new Community Shop or similar schemes. Premises have been identified and secured in Birkenhead. Non-government funding is being sought for these projects.
Emergency food assistance providers’ sources of food

10. We recommend that supermarkets begin experimenting in other ways to meet the need for fresh food. Tesco, for example, a pioneer in this field of combating hunger, adds 30% to any food given by its shoppers to food banks. The Inquiry would like to see Tesco experiment with using some of this subsidy to include the recycling of fresh food.

This recommendation has yet to be accepted. Feeding Britain is asking that some of the financial donation added by Tesco as a 30% supplement to national collections for the Trussell Trust be invested in vouchers for people using food banks, and, perhaps, other people at risk of hunger, which entitles them to free fruit and vegetables in their local supermarket.

11. We also recommend that other supermarkets follow this example through their collection arrangements with food banks, and reward the entrepreneurial skills of staff by allowing their stores a degree of flexibility so that they can imaginatively meet local needs.

There is some progress being made on this recommendation. For example, Waitrose and Sainsbury’s allow each of their stores to donate fresh surplus products that are in date to local charities. But Feeding Britain will be pushing for further progress on this front.

12. The Inquiry is asking the Government to consider whether a part of its entitlement from European structural funds to address poverty and deprivation might be better spent through the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived. We believe Feeding Britain should be financed from this source. We recommend that the Government reallocates some of its EU Structural Funds, to match fund with private charitable funds as well as local public health grants, and to allocate this to organisations that promote the equitable distribution of surplus food, and to finance other developments we suggest in Feeding Britain.

The Government announced in December 2014 that it plans to use its share of the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived to provide additional support for school breakfast clubs in England.
13. We believe it is indefensible that huge numbers of people are going hungry in a country which wastes such vast quantities of food that is fit for consumption. Whilst we acknowledge that a certain amount of food waste is unavoidable, and that not all surplus food can be redistributed, we urge the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) to set food retailers and manufacturers a target of doubling the proportion of surplus food they redistribute to food assistance providers and other voluntary organisations and to agree this target, and the timescale over which it will be achieved, with Feeding Britain. This would still only amount to using a mere 4% of usable food, yet if organisations that promote the equitable distribution of surplus food were given the resources to double their output, this very important target would save the voluntary sector £160 million over the next Parliament. We believe a long-term objective should be to minimise the amount of surplus food in this country, while ensuring that of this falling surplus progressively more is used by the third sector; and

14. We recommend that the food industry as a whole should set itself a target, built up from its constituent parts, of reducing the amount of food disposed of in landfill, and turned into compost or energy, by 100,000 tonnes each year by the end of the next Parliament. The body we suggest to drive this, as well as all other aspects of our reforms will be Feeding Britain.

These recommendation have yet to be accepted in full. While no specific target has been set, WRAP has confirmed that the redistribution of surplus edible food to those in need will be part of negotiating the new Courtauld 2025 Commitment on reducing waste. Feeding Britain will be pushing for this target to form a cornerstone commitment.

15. We also support the calls made by the House of Lords European Union Committee for the Government to introduce financial incentives in Britain so as to divert more fit-for-consumption surplus food from landfill and Anaerobic Digestion to voluntary organisations serving meals to people.

This recommendation has yet to be accepted. Feeding Britain is lobbying for reforms to Landfill Tax and the Anaerobic Digestion Loan Fund to help fund the redistribution of surplus food that is of good quality to organisations helping people facing severe hardship.
The role of Local Authorities and local models for the future

16. We believe that by encouraging the production and retail of locally grown food, Local Authorities can play a key role in addressing the lack of access to affordable food in deprived areas. Success in establishing local networks will require Local Authorities amongst other things having the willingness to work with local food organisations to free up land for food production, retail and storage, as and when resources are available.

Wirral Council’s Public Health department is in talks with the Lambeth Clinical Commissioning Group’s GP Food Co-Op, and is identifying plots of land in Birkenhead which could be used for food growing schemes.

17. As part of renegotiating the Barnett Formula, we recommend that the Government considers reintroducing a needs element to the funding settlement for Local Authorities, so as to enable them, amongst other things, to carry out the reforms outlined in this report.

The Department for Communities and Local Government said in response to this recommendation that the Local Authority Funding Settlement already recognises need through the way in which the fair starting point for the new system was established. They add that the emphasis has now shifted towards incentivising growth in business rates, allowing authorities to benefit from this, and that authorities facing the highest demand for services still receive substantially more funding per dwelling.
Gas, electricity and water

18. We recommend that the Government grants itself new legislative powers to instruct Ofgem to work with energy suppliers to establish a national minimum standard for fair energy prices for all prepayment energy customers; and

19. Similarly, we recommend that Ofgem should take an immediate step towards this objective by encouraging energy suppliers to bring their practice up to the best. They should fix their prepayment energy tariffs for two years, based on EDF Energy’s recent introduction of a fixed price prepayment tariff for all new and existing customers. As part of this offer, households should be given the power to switch suppliers in 24 hours with no termination fee.

Feeding Britain is currently collecting examples from each energy supplier of the services and tariffs it offers households relying on prepayment meters. The best practice will be collated and submitted to Ofgem in 2015 as a proposal for a national minimum standard.

20. We recommend that Ofgem reviews the impact the introduction of standing charges has had on energy bills for poorer households – particularly those relying on prepayment meters. We believe Ofgem should consider carefully the unintended consequences of standing charges, such as the accumulation of debt on prepayment meters.

Ofgem has acknowledged the problems caused by standing charges building up over the summer months when households generally do not top up their gas meter. In response it has agreed to consider an industry-wide minimum standard for energy suppliers to help poorer households who build up debt on their prepayment meter through unpaid standing charges.

21. The Inquiry recommends that Ofgem set out how energy suppliers should go beyond meeting the minimum legislative criteria for the Warm Home Discount. We believe the Broader Group criteria should be extended automatically to cover all low-income working families.

The Department for Energy and Climate Change announced in January 2015 that it would extend the Broader Group criteria in 2015-16 to cover
all low-income families, regardless of their employment status, with children under the age of five or disabled children of any age.

22. We recommend that the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change considers implementing a standard set of rules for all energy suppliers involved with the delivery of the scheme, so a greater number of families in poverty are able to benefit.

The Department for Energy and Climate Change announced in January 2015 that it would implement a standard set of rules for all energy suppliers in 2015-16, so that nobody would be excluded on the grounds of which supplier they belong to.

23. We recommend that Ofwat audit each water supplier’s customer base to find how many low-income households would be better off on an unmeasured tariff, and direct that they should be transferred or have their bills capped at this level.

Ofwat has rejected this recommendation. It will instead encourage water suppliers to offer social tariffs to poorer customers who find they can no longer afford their bills after being put on a water meter.
High Cost Credit

24. The Inquiry endorses the findings of the Financial Conduct Authority’s investigation into continuous payment authority (CPA) schemes, which found some firms were automatically deducting arbitrary amounts of money from individuals’ accounts as a debt collection method. High-cost short-term lenders are now limited to two unsuccessful attempts to use a CPA to take a repayment and cannot use a CPA to take a part-payment. We recommend to the Financial Conduct Authority that it monitors closely the effectiveness of these new measures, report annually to Feeding Britain on its findings, consider how best to modify the sums that a lender can immediately withdraw from a borrower’s bank account, and to take further action, if necessary, to ensure vulnerable households are not left exposed to high-cost short-term lenders; and

26. The Inquiry welcomes the Government’s decision to cap the overall costs of high cost credit – and the introduction of the Financial Conduct Authority’s new rules on payday lending. We recommend that it monitors closely over the next 12 months the level and fairness of interest rates, as well as use its powers to restrict payday lending, and report its findings to Feeding Britain before considering whether a lower maximum interest rate in some circumstances might be necessary to protect vulnerable, low-income households.

Feeding Britain is asking the Financial Conduct Authority to review this practice throughout 2015 to ensure the industry is complying, and to see whether further measures might be necessary.

25. The Inquiry heard that some payday loan brokers pass on the bank details of people looking to take out a payday loan to a large number of other brokers and lenders, who may seek to extract fees, even if they have not supplied a loan. We recommend that the Financial Conduct Authority should require as soon as possible payday loan brokers to amend their privacy policies so as to protect poorer households from being exploited in this way.

The Financial Conduct Authority announced in January 2015 that it is to require as soon as possible payday loan brokers to amend their privacy policies. It has passed new regulations covering practices such as imposing charges that consumers often knew nothing about until they checked their bank account. Payday loan brokers cannot now request an individual’s bank details or take a payment from their account without their explicit consent first. Payday loan brokers will also have to include their legal name, not just their trading name, in all advertising and other
communications with customers, and state prominently in their adverts that they are a broker, not a lender.

27. We recommend that all credit union accounts be made eligible for the receipt of Universal Credit, so as to allow for and encourage their use among low-income households.

Feeding Britain is awaiting feedback on this recommendation from the Department for Work and Pensions.
Access to mobiles and the internet

28. We recommend that Ofcom better target relevant information on special offers and deals to new claimants of social security benefits as part of a reformed Claimant Commitment, so as to increase the effectiveness of a claimant’s search for work, and that it reports progress on this front within the next six months.

Ofcom will provide a consumers’ guide to the Department for Work and Pensions with advice on the best value phone deals, and tips on how to keep costs down, so this can be shared with benefit claimants. It is currently working on a debt advice guide which it will also share with Department.

The Department has confirmed that regional Jobcentre Plus networks have the freedom to offer this information alongside a Claimant Commitment. The pilot project in Birkenhead is in talks with Merseyside Jobcentre Plus about this recommendation.

29. We recommend that Ofwat, Ofgem, and Ofcom oblige all utility companies to transfer immediately all public telephone numbers from higher to standard regional or free rates.

Ofgem is reviewing the provision of telephone services by energy companies, including the use of higher-rate telephone numbers and the costs borne by households needing to call their supplier. Ofwat is encouraging all water companies not to use higher-rate telephone numbers.

30. We recommend also that the Financial Conduct Authority report within six months the progress it has made in abolishing the use of higher-rate telephone numbers in the financial services sector.

The Financial Conduct Authority has proposed measures to abolish the use of higher-rate telephone numbers by money lenders, credit card companies and banks.
31. We recommend that the Cabinet Office reviews the progress made by public bodies in phasing out the use of higher-rate telephone numbers, and require any remaining adjustments, where necessary, to be made within six months.

**Feeding Britain is concerned that this recommendation has not yet been implemented.**
**Resilience – cooking, parenting and budgeting**

32. We recommend that the teaching of budgeting and parenting skills should be embedded on a statutory basis in the National Curriculum as the cornerstone of a reformed Personal, Social and Health and Education (PSHE) module.

The Department for Education issues non-statutory guidance on parenting skills, and financial literacy is taught in Citizenship classes on a statutory basis for Key Stages 3 and 4. Cooking is now compulsory in local authority maintained schools at Key Stage 3.

33. A large proportion of primary schools that submitted evidence to the Inquiry said they had witnessed children arriving at school hungry because their parents could not, or would not, wake them up to make them breakfast, or bring them to the school breakfast club. We recommend that schools should wherever possible refer chaotic families to their local Troubled Families project whose success can be measured in the number of families they have ‘turned round’ to being functioning in a normal way.

The Troubled Families Programme will accept direct referrals from schools from April 2015 in cases where children arrive to lessons hungry.

34. We believe the Government and the voluntary sector should consider whether there is an opportunity to provide information about available food skills training alongside Healthy Start vouchers.

Feeding Britain is asking the Department of Health whether this might be possible in the new Parliament.

35. The Inquiry received evidence suggesting that the opportunity for adults to undertake food skills training would be one way of boosting the resilience of people relying on food banks, and other forms of food assistance. We recommend such support be made available by members of Feeding Britain to all individuals relying for any length of time on emergency food assistance.

This support is being rolled out in each of Feeding Britain’s pilot projects. Love Food Hate Waste, for example, has offered to provide help in Birkenhead’s food banks on making small amounts of food go further,
through storage techniques, better use of leftovers, and knowledge of use-by dates.

36. We recommend that Local Authorities begin collecting information on whether landlords in receipt of Housing Benefit are providing basic cooking facilities for their tenants, with a view to making Housing Benefit receipt conditional on these facilities being provided, and to report their findings to Feeding Britain.

The Government has rejected this recommendation because of concerns it may inadvertently restrict the supply of available accommodation.
Hunger in schools

37. We welcome the introduction by the Department for Education of a free school meal eligibility checking system (ECS). We urge each Local Authority to use this tool to register automatically children of eligible parents for free school meals and for Feeding Britain to report on progress.

A handful of Local Authorities, such as Calderdale Council and Liverpool City Council, are now implementing this recommendation.

While Wirral Borough Council is developing the technology to automatically check eligibility for free school meals, it stressed that parents will still need to apply online. The pilot project in Birkenhead is keen for the Council automatically to register eligible children, without parents needing to apply, along the lines of Sunderland City Council’s ‘opt-out’ initiative cited in Feeding Britain.

38. We recommend that the Department for Education prioritises poor children from working families in any future expansion of the free school meals programme.

Feeding Britain has been told that this will be decided in the next Parliament.

39. We recommend that the Government begins costing the extension of free school meal provision during school holidays.

The Government has rejected this recommendation. It advised Feeding Britain that holiday hunger schemes should be kept completely separate from schools, or be heavily focused on education.
Our recommendations to the political parties

40. We recommend the establishment of a single Office for Living Standards within the Treasury to monitor pressures on low-income households’ budgets and for the Cabinet Office to co-ordinate effective responses from government. It should be tasked with reporting regularly to Parliament, and to Feeding Britain, on its monitoring of the implementation of the recommendations set out in this report. The Treasury should then commit to an annual Parliamentary debate on the level of progress made in this field.

The Treasury has told Feeding Britain that it actively monitors how households across the distribution are faring, including through its analysis into the wage rises for employees in continuous employment and the hollowing out of the labour market. It added that the Government publishes a distributional analysis at every fiscal event.

The Opposition has set out plans to reinstate the Food 2030 strategy and create a joined-up approach to tackling food bank dependency.
Low pay

41. We encourage the Government to continue to pursue policies which seek to raise the National Minimum Wage, increase take-up of the Living Wage, and to reduce the total amount of tax taken from low-paid workers.

The Low Pay Commission published its recommendation in February 2015 for an increase in the National Minimum Wage in 2015 to £6.70. The Government has decided to accept this recommendation and has announced further increases in the personal tax allowance.

42. We recommend that the Low Pay Commission be empowered to set reference minimum wage rates in each sector of the economy, leaving in place the National Minimum Wage, and for these powers to be used immediately to encourage higher minimum wage rates in sectors of the economy that can most easily afford them, such as finance and banking. These higher minimum wages should be set at the level of a Living Wage, and should apply to all directly employed, outsourced and agency staff performing functions within these sectors.

The Government has not taken up this recommendation, although the Opposition has pledged its support for such a strategy. Members of Feeding Britain have been campaigning for voluntary action from large employers and there have been some notable recent breakthroughs, such as Santander and some notable Premier League football clubs.

43. The Low Pay Commission should also be granted additional powers to work with those sectors of the economy in which the immediate implementation of a Living Wage could lead to the highest threat of unemployment, such as social care and retail, in order to draw up interim packages – including product discounts and incremental pay increases – so as to provide a ‘Roadmap to the Living Wage’ for each of these sectors; and

44. We also believe that in these sectors the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills should work with sector interests on a strategy to raise productivity and thereby enable the higher minimum wage, or Living Wage, to be implemented without a loss of jobs.
45. Alongside this, we recommend the Government leads by example through its pay and procurement policies so as to ensure all of its directly employed, outsourced and agency staff are paid at least a Living Wage.

The Cabinet Office has rejected this recommendation. While one or two Departments have signed up to this proposal, a cross-government initiative remains lacking. The Cabinet Office told Feeding Britain that creating a blanket requirement could be burdensome for small businesses, and that public contracts are awarded on the basis of value for money.

46. Likewise we recommend that Local Authorities, beyond and including paying their own employees a Living Wage, should use their procurement strategies to encourage local businesses to themselves become Living Wage employers.

Each Feeding Britain pilot project is asking its Local Authority to sign up to this initiative.
Benefit delays and administration

47. We recommend that the Department for Work and Pensions investigates the IT systems used in Jobcentre Plus and make necessary improvements to ensure all claims can be processed through one system which can be accessed on a single screen, so Jobcentre Plus staff are able to calculate and process entitlements within five working days.

The Department for Work and Pensions is testing improvements to claim processing times. Feeding Britain is asking the Department for further information on the methods being tested.

48. We recommend that the Department for Work and Pensions provides claimants with an email address to which personal documents can be scanned and sent, and if this is currently viewed as impossible, the Department should commission further work to overcome the barriers; and

The Government has rejected this recommendation. It doesn’t believe that email is a sufficiently secure medium for the transmission of sensitive personal data. However, it is considering alternative means of enabling claimants to submit personal information, for example, through secure web portals. Feeding Britain is to follow up this proposed development with the Department.

51. We believe the Government must urgently reform the benefits system so it is able to deliver payments quickly within five working days. We fully understand this will take time to achieve. But the Department for Work and Pensions must begin this process of reform by ensuring it has the data to measure the time between a claim being made and the claimant receiving their first payment.

The Department for Work and Pensions argues that the vast majority of time within the process is taken by pre-decision matters, such as awaiting additional evidence.

The Opposition has committed itself to resuming the collection and publication of data on how long people have to wait for their first benefit payment.
49 We recommend that emergency food assistance providers amend their referral categories to differentiate more clearly between the various benefit-related problems they encounter.

While the Inquiry encountered some evidence of this practice among independent food banks, in March 2015 the West Cheshire Food Bank became the first Trussell Trust food bank to publish data in this format. Feeding Britain understands that the Trussell Trust is set to expand this data collection method across its network.

50 We recommend that the Secretary of State for Health make it a part of a GPs role to provide evidence in relation to benefit claims, and make it unlawful for the National Health Service to charge for medical documents in connection with benefit claims.

The Government has confirmed that all patients will be able to access their medical records online for free from April 2015, but GPs will still be able to charge for hard copies of medical evidence, according to guidelines laid out by the British Medical Association.
Hardship Payments and Short-Term Benefit Advances

52. We recommend that the Department for Work and Pensions should simplify the application process for Hardship Payments and Short-Term Benefit Advances. Information on this emergency support, along with other emergency measures such as Discretionary Housing Payments, should be clearly publicised within Jobcentre Plus offices, and introduced into Jobcentre Plus advisers’ standard scripts for benefit claims. The Department should review its existing trigger mechanism that prompts staff to discuss support, and consider whether it could be improved – including by engaging in a dialogue with the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger and Food Poverty and voluntary sector representatives.

The Government has accepted this recommendation. It will provide more information to claimants about Short Term Benefit Advances online and in Job Centres. Staff guidance will also be updated and staff reminded of the process for considering a short-term benefit advance.

53. We urge the Department for Work and Pensions to examine the possibility of allowing advice workers to request automatically Short Term Benefit Advances electronically for their clients.

The Government has rejected this recommendation. It believes awards should be made on the basis of a discussion between the claimant and the Jobcentre Plus Decision Maker to consider the circumstances of the request, so an informed discretionary decision can be made about the claimant’s needs. It believes further that such a discussion needs to be had with the claimant and cannot be done online or with a third party.

54. We recommend that the Department for Work and Pensions should automatically consider paying Short Term Benefit Advance if a benefit claim has not been paid within five working days.

The Government has rejected this recommendation. It maintains that a Short Term Benefit Advance can be paid the day after it is first requested by the claimant.

The Opposition has committed itself to looking at the automatic consideration of advance payments if claims have not been paid after a certain period.
55. We recommend that the Department for Work and Pensions monitors closely the impact of changes designed to speed up Hardship Payments, and if necessary, consider further action to ensure a decision on Hardship Payments is made at the same point as a sanction decision.

Feeding Britain is to follow up on this recommendation with the Department for Work and Pensions.
Tax Credits

56. We recommend that Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and the Department for Work and Pensions both introduce and proceed with the continuous payment of a minimum tariff whilst a change of households circumstances is processed for tax credit and benefits, with adjustments being made later if necessary.

Feeding Britain is awaiting feedback on this recommendation from Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, however, the Department for Work and Pensions says that Universal Credit will put an end to such cliff edges.
Mandatory Reconsideration

57. We urge the Department for Work and Pensions to consider introducing a time limit for the Mandatory Reconsideration Period, as well as continuing the payment of Employment and Support Allowance, at the lower assessment rate if necessary, for the duration of claimants’ Mandatory Reconsideration period to avoid a sudden loss of income for claimants.

The Government has rejected this recommendation, however, it plans to introduce a clearance time target for all benefits starting with Employment and Support Allowance from April 2016. The Department for Work and Pensions will set a target and report internally on this measure during the coming year, to test it fully before commencing formal reporting from April 2016. The Department is currently looking at what form that target might take.

The Opposition has committed itself to introducing a time limit for the mandatory reconsideration process.

Feeding Britain remains concerned that 44,000 Mandatory Reconsiderations made in the year to October 2014 took longer than 30 days to process, and will remain in dialogue with the Government on this matter.
Benefit Sanctions

58. We strongly welcome the Government’s decision to accept in full the recommendations made by Matthew Oakley’s independent review into sanctions for claimants failing to take part in back to work schemes. We accordingly call on the Government to extend these measures to cover all Jobseeker’s Allowance claimants.

The Government informs Feeding Britain that the wider application of sanctions is being kept under review, and, as part of this, it is reviewing all claimant communications and sanctions process.

59. We recommend that the Government make clear in guidance that a sanction decision is only lawful if letters are sent, and can be proven to have been received, to the claimant explaining the reason that a sanction is being imposed, the period the sanction will apply for, and whether Hardship Payments may be granted, and if not, why not.

The Government informs Feeding Britain that it has identified improvements to letters to help claimants take the appropriate actions and understand the implications of non-compliance. Feeding Britain is asking the Government to provide further information on this matter.

60. We recommend that, in cases where sanctions are applied, the Department for Work and Pensions should require that claimants be immediately informed of their right to appeal the decision, and provided with the necessary documentation to do so.

The Government informs Feeding Britain that it expects Jobcentre Plus advisors to make claimants aware of their right to appeal before any sanction is imposed. Depending on the benefit and nature of the decision, such advice should be issued either in person, or by post.

61. We recommend that Jobcentre Plus staff should be able to exercise their own discretion as to whether a requirement was missed through error or circumstances beyond the claimant’s control, and should be able to recommend that sanctions are not implemented on these occasions.
The Government has rejected this recommendation. It believes there are a number of steps taken to ensure decisions are correct, and says that independent specialist decision makers consider each case as well as any evidence of food reason put forward by a claimant.

62. We believe claimants should be given a ‘Yellow Card’ warning with the chance to provide an explanation for a first offence, and perhaps be given additional requirements to meet, before a sanction is applied.

The Government agreed in response to the Oakley Review that a pilot for a new approach using warnings and non-financial sanctions following a first failure to comply with conditionality on the Work Programme is sensible. It says that any tests are likely to need new legislation to enable them to proceed. Feeding Britain is asking the Department for Work and Pensions whether it might proceed with this pilot as soon as possible.

The Opposition has committed itself to training Jobcentre Plus staff on identifying those claimants who could be exempted from sanctions under current guidance, such as those with mental health issues or caring responsibilities, or others affected by domestic violence.

63. We recommend that once a sanction has been applied, Jobcentre Plus should promptly advise the claimant to contact their Local Authority, or make contact themselves, to tell their opposite number of the claimant’s reduction of income and their right to continue to claim other benefits. In this way there should be no disruption to Housing Benefit payments and/or Council Tax support.

The Government has accepted this recommendation.
The Claimant Commitment

64. We recommend that the welfare contract be a genuine two-way contract between claimants and Jobcentre Plus, outlining a claimant’s duties as well as their rights. In making this a properly balanced exercise the new contract should make clear what sources of additional support claimants are entitled to, as a way of enhancing their chances of finding their work. It should be made clearer, for example, that help is available to cover travel expenses for job interviews or that it is possible in some circumstances to sign on by post or in a local library if claimants have difficulty in getting to their nearest Jobcentre Plus office.

While the Government has rejected this recommendation, it informs Feeding Britain that assistance can be given in advance where it is necessary to enable a claimant to attend. The work coach making the award must decide whether to reimburse costs or make a payment in advance, with each case determined on an individual basis.

65. We recommend that, alongside this contract, a claimant should be provided with a leaflet produced by the voluntary sector or their Local Authority, listing the charges that the mobile phone companies have, hopefully, agreed and the claimant’s rights against rip-off utility charges.

The Government has allowed Jobcentre Plus the freedom to implement this recommendation.

66. We recommend that the Department for Work and Pensions should consider as part of the new welfare contract making upfront payments from the Flexible Support Fund to cover eligible claimants’ travel expenses, rather than in arrears, as we believe this could ease considerably the hardship faced by claimants looking for work.

The Government has confirmed that reimbursement is the preferred payment method for payments from the Flexible Support Fund, including for travel costs. However, payments can be made in advance where the claimant cannot afford to make up-front payments.

Feeding Britain is to ask the Department for Work and Pensions whether they could amend the guidance given to Jobcentre Plus staff, so as to
make clear that up-front payments can be made to claimants experiencing hardship.

67. We recommend the Department for Work and Pensions estimates how much additional expenditure would be incurred if the Flexible Support Fund were to be extended to cover the costs of travelling to routine fortnightly interviews at Jobcentre Plus, where claimants live more than a mile from their Jobcentre Plus office or have mobility problems and do not claim mobility allowances.

The Government has rejected this recommendation

68. We recommend that regional Jobcentre Plus offices be given the opportunity to attempt to negotiate discounted or free return journeys on public transport to Jobcentre Plus, from day one of a Jobseeker’s Allowance claim, and that Ministers look at making this concession part of any new negotiations on large taxpayer subsidies to bus and train operators.

Department for Work and Pensions Regional Offices are able to negotiate with Travel Operators on travel subsidies and can utilise the Jobcentre Plus Travel Discount Card to assist this. However, in practice, funding is not available to support wide scale travel to Jobcentres for normal attendance purposes (signing on), although attendance outside of normal attendance is fully reimbursed to claimants. A minimum of 13 weeks is applied before a claimant can apply as the Government believes offering concessions from day one would create funding difficulties for travel operators.

Local negotiations have secured support packages in some parts of London, Scotland, West Yorkshire, West Midlands and the North West. Members of Feeding Britain are to approach their regional Jobcentre Plus offices asking whether they might negotiate further concessions for people relying on public transport to look for work.

69. As an immediate step, we recommend that the Department for Work and Pensions should assess whether some claimants, particularly those in rural areas, or with caring responsibilities, could be given the right to sign on and
report regularly on job search activity without always having to travel to a Jobcentre Plus office. Our evidence suggested that some claimants face a round trip of 26 miles to their nearest office. Given the majority of Universal Credit claims will be handled online, we believe there is a case to explore whether some additional access points and Jobcentre Plus services could be co-located at venues such as Sure Start Children’s Centres or One Stop Shops, to help claimants ‘sign on’ without incurring additional travel costs by having to travel to Jobcentre Plus.

70. We recommend that the Department for Work and Pensions reviews the quality, repetition and appropriateness of its training courses, so that these courses are of value to claimants and help them into work.

71. We recommend that the Department for Work and Pensions considers the feasibility of courses being provided within Jobcentre Plus offices to develop claimants’ IT skills while they look for work, with volunteers taking a lead in transferring these skills.

72. We recommend that the Department for Work and Pensions reconsiders its decision to remove such a vast number of telephones from Jobcentre Plus offices, as we have received evidence suggesting that claimants are struggling to afford the cost of telephone calls they are required to make to apply for jobs.

73. We recommend that the Department for Work and Pensions immediately phases out the use and publicity of higher-rate telephone numbers for claimants wishing to speak to somebody about their benefit claim.

74. We recommend that the Department for Work and Pensions monitors the Jobcentre Plus network closely for any ‘pinch points’ emerging in parts of the country where access to computer facilities is inadequate to cater for the number of jobseekers.

Feeding Britain is to follow up these recommendation with the Department for Work and Pensions.
Crisis Loans and Local Welfare Assistance

75. The Inquiry understands that the Government recently consulted on the future of the Local Welfare Assistance fund from April 2015, and is considering whether to incorporate local welfare funding into the local government finance settlement. We recommend that the Government considers the potential impact of this decision on the level of – and eligibility for – financial support available to households who might face sudden crises in income, and to publish its findings.

76. We recommend that the Government continues to protect Local Welfare Assistance funding.

77. We similarly recommend that the Department for Communities and Local Government should monitor take-up rates for Local Welfare Assistance within each Local Authority and work with those where registration is uncharacteristically low. One way of doing this might be to issue a ‘best practice’ application form used by those Local Authorities with the highest rates of take-up.

Feeding Britain is to follow this up with the Department for Communities and Local Government