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Open letter to Prime Minister David Cameron on food poverty in the UK

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John R Ashton, John Middleton, Tim Lang, on behalf of 170 signatories

There is a worrying gap in health circumstances and outcomes between rich and poor people in the UK. Complex though the reasons for this inequality are, the reality is that many hardworking families in the UK are living in poverty and do not have enough income for a decent diet. UK food prices have risen by 12% in real terms since 2007, returning the cost of food relative to other goods to that in the 1990s.[1]

In the same period, UK workers have suffered a 7·6% fall in real wages.[2] It therefore seems likely that increasing numbers of people on low wages are not earning enough money to meet their most basic nutritional needs to maintain a healthy diet. We should not accept this situation in the UK, the world's sixth largest economy and the third largest in Europe.

We urge you to set up an independent working group to monitor nutrition and hunger in the UK. We also ask you to act on the findings of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger and Food Poverty's parliamentary inquiry, which will improve people's health when published.

We wish to draw attention to three specific issues. First, food poverty is increasing.[3] It is not just that more people are using food banks. Food banks are a symptom of a more extensive pressure for emergency food aid, which was summarised for your government in a report to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) released this year.[4]

Food bank numbers are an inadequate indicator of need, because many households only ask for emergency food help as a last resort. A huge amount of on-the-ground experience and Trussell Trust data, including the rise of food aid, suggests that the welfare system is increasingly failing to provide a robust last line of defence against hunger. More and more households, now including those in work, find themselves unable to afford a decent diet. Reliance on food aid should not be part of any modern, society-wide and evidence-based approach to public health policy.

Second, there is the underlying issue of food costs and prices. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) and DEFRA have shown that the rising costs of food during the past 6 years are proving increasingly hard for lower-income households to manage. The food industry is well aware of these problems; nevertheless, food is likely to continue to cost more in the future.

During the past 5 years, food has been one of the three top factors in price inflation, sufficient to worry even higher-income consumers. In a time of high fuel prices, this inflation has translated into families cutting back on fresh fruit and vegetables and buying cheap, sweet, fatty, salty, or processed foods that need little cooking. A vicious circle is set in motion, with poorer people having worse diets and contributing to the worrying rise in obesity, diabetes, and other dietary-related diseases.

The third issue is the problem of stagnant incomes and wages among the low paid. In real terms, according to the ONS, incomes have fallen in the first substantial manner since the 1960s.[5] The ONS calculates that UK workers have experienced a 7·6% fall in real wages during the past 6 years.[2] Increasing numbers of people on low wages are not earning enough money to meet their most basic nutritional needs.

Our concern is that this situation puts an overwhelming strain on household food budgets. An affordable, nutritious diet is a prerequisite for health. We view the rise of food poverty as an indication of the reversal of what was a long process of improvement in food availability and affordability since World War 2. The full situation is complex. Nonetheless, public debate about food poverty is sometimes too quick to blame the poor without understanding the pressures poorer families are under.

As public health professionals, our role is to improve the health and well being of the people we serve. The Chief Medical Officer for England has recently raised concerns about obesity becoming the norm. Our organisations and fellow health professionals are committed to helping the public and the food industry to take the healthier route. Failure to do so will come with immense costs to individuals, families, communities, employers, the National Health Service, and government.

Food poverty has never been acceptable in a modern UK. We urge you to act on the findings of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger and Food Poverty's inquiry that will improve people's health to make clear that this injustice is not acceptable now.

The UK Faculty of Public Health urges you to instigate an independent working group to monitor UK nutrition and hunger status. We are willing and ready to offer our professional expertise to support this group, and national efforts to alleviate food poverty and improve the nation's health.

We declare no competing interests.

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