

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

16:30 to 18:20

23 February 2017

Present: Councillors Wright (chair), Maguire (vice chair) Bogelein, Coleshill, Davis, Fullman, Grahame, Herries (substitute for Malik) Manning, Packer and Peek

Also present: Councillor Vaughan Thomas (cabinet member for fairness and equality) Jo Mack (University of Bristol) and Hannah Worsley (Norwich Food Bank)

Apologies: Councillors Bradford, Haynes and Malik

1. Public questions / petitions

No public questions or petitions were received.

2. Declarations of interest

No declarations of interest were made.

3. Minutes

RESOLVED to agree the accuracy of the minutes of the meeting held on 26 January 2017

4. Scrutiny committee work programme 2016 -2017

Members were informed that work was being undertaken with the strategy manager on arranging a workshop on Co-operatives and the date for this would be after May 2017.

RESOLVED to note the scrutiny committee work programme 2016 – 2017

5. Food poverty

The vice chair presented the report and referred to slides at appendix A to the minutes. He said that there would be a two part approach to the topic of food poverty; understanding the causes and addressing these with solutions.

Jo Mack (University of Bristol) gave a presentation to members (appendix B to the minutes) outlining the national picture of food poverty. She highlighted that

eating was a social activity as well as a necessity and therefore food poverty was not only a health issue, it was also a social issue.

Councillor Vaughan Thomas (cabinet member for fairness and equality) addressed the committee. He said that the reasons for food poverty were complex. He had represented a wide range of people through his work as a welfare right officer but cuts to such services had meant that support for users had been taken away and not replaced.

The committee listened to some recordings of short interviews with foodbank users (a transcript of these recordings is at appendix C to the minutes). Hannah Worsley (Norwich Food Bank) said that there was no typical food bank user. The food bank saw a wide range of users from those on benefits to those who were in work but were still unable to make ends meet.

In response to a member's question, Hannah Worsley said that there were no GPs in Norwich that gave food vouchers but there were around 300 different agencies that distributed vouchers. The foodbank also received several phone calls a week asking for advice on access to food. She said that the guideline was that only three vouchers were issued to the same person in six months, however, more could be issued if the circumstances called for it. She added that the introduction of Universal Credit may make these circumstances more common.

Hannah Worsley explained that emergency boxes were provided to families for 72 hours before social services could assist. This timeline had been implemented in case a family could not access services over the weekend.

She said that a school holiday programme was being run with low income families invited to activities and a meal at schools during the school holidays. There were around ten centres with a different model being used at each to suit the local families.

The chair thanked Hannah Worsley for her contribution and she left the meeting.

In response to a member's question, Jo Mack said that schools had a role to play in ensuring that children were fed but it had to be in a non-stigmatising way.

A member said that studies had shown that with perceptions of food, cheapness was the main criteria but freshness, versatility, fat content and food poisoning concerns were not considered. Jo Mack added that strategies adopted to bring down the cost of food often meant that that cheapness was the only consideration.

In response to a member's question, the strategy manager said that Universal Credit had only been rolled out to a small group in Norwich which allowed the council to look at issues on a much smaller scale. A digital inclusion project was underway and this would help to support online claims and to improve digital skills to help users manage their claims online. Norwich City Council had a proactive approach to rent collection and tenancy support; as soon as the council was informed (as a landlord) by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) that a tenant was claiming Universal Credit, a money advisor would contact the tenant. This gave Norwich City Council tenants a better outcome

regarding Universal Credit. In June 2018 when Universal Credit was fully implemented, there would be significant changes to manage.

Jo Mack explained that Preston council had worked with other institutions in their area regarding procurement plans and identified that many services and products were coming into Preston for outside the area. They worked to bring some of these back into the local economy and had subsequently seen a decrease in poverty indicators. This showed that the effect of bringing more money into the local economy was a decrease in the price of local necessities.

She added that some areas of the country had been very successful with 'grow your own' initiatives but other areas had been less so. The outcome was very dependent on having enough time and ability to invest in the project. She suggested that this perhaps would therefore not be a priority regarding solutions to food poverty.

The director of neighbourhoods reported the following statistics to members for consideration:

- recent child poverty figures for the Eastern Region showed Norwich as the worst local authority area in Norfolk in terms of the levels of child poverty at 29% of all children
- In 2011, some 4,150 Norwich families were reliant on tax credits because they were in part-time employment – this included over 7,130 children
- The 2013 Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings show that median resident earnings for full-time workers in Norwich is 21 per cent lower than regional median earnings and 16 per cent lower than national median earnings

The chair thanked the speakers for their contributions to the meeting.

RESOLVED to ask all members of the scrutiny committee to send their initial thoughts on the main drivers of food poverty to the scrutiny liaison officer.

CHAIR

Food Poverty in Norwich

Philosophy underlying our Approach

Two dimensions to our attack:

- Dimension 1. Understanding and Addressing
- Dimension 2. Structural, Organisational, and Individual Aspects

Understanding and addressing food poverty in Norwich

	Understanding the Causes	Sustainable Response
Structural		
Organisational		
Individual		

This Session: Causes

- We need to try to focus on and identify the causes (the real causes): this will inform our responses
- We want to make sure that we understand the problem and then find and design the right solution (rather than have ready-made solutions that are looking for problems that they can solve)

In Summary:

We need to understand how the poverty drivers work if we are to respond to them

The evidence presented today fits with Forsey's ideas:

"The key underlying causes of hunger and food poverty in this country are to be found in the long-term erosion of poorer households' financial buffer, coupled, for some, with a diminished ability to cope on a low income" (Forsey sa page 25)

Ref: Forsey A. *sine anno*, An Evidence Review for the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom, London, *sine nomine*

Resource and Capacity are part of a *system*

Resources

Capacity

Outcomes

Norwich City Council
Food Poverty Inquiry

An overview

Joanna Mack

J.Mack@open.ac.uk

www.poverty.ac.uk

Food poverty is the inability to afford, or to have access to, food to make up a healthy diet.

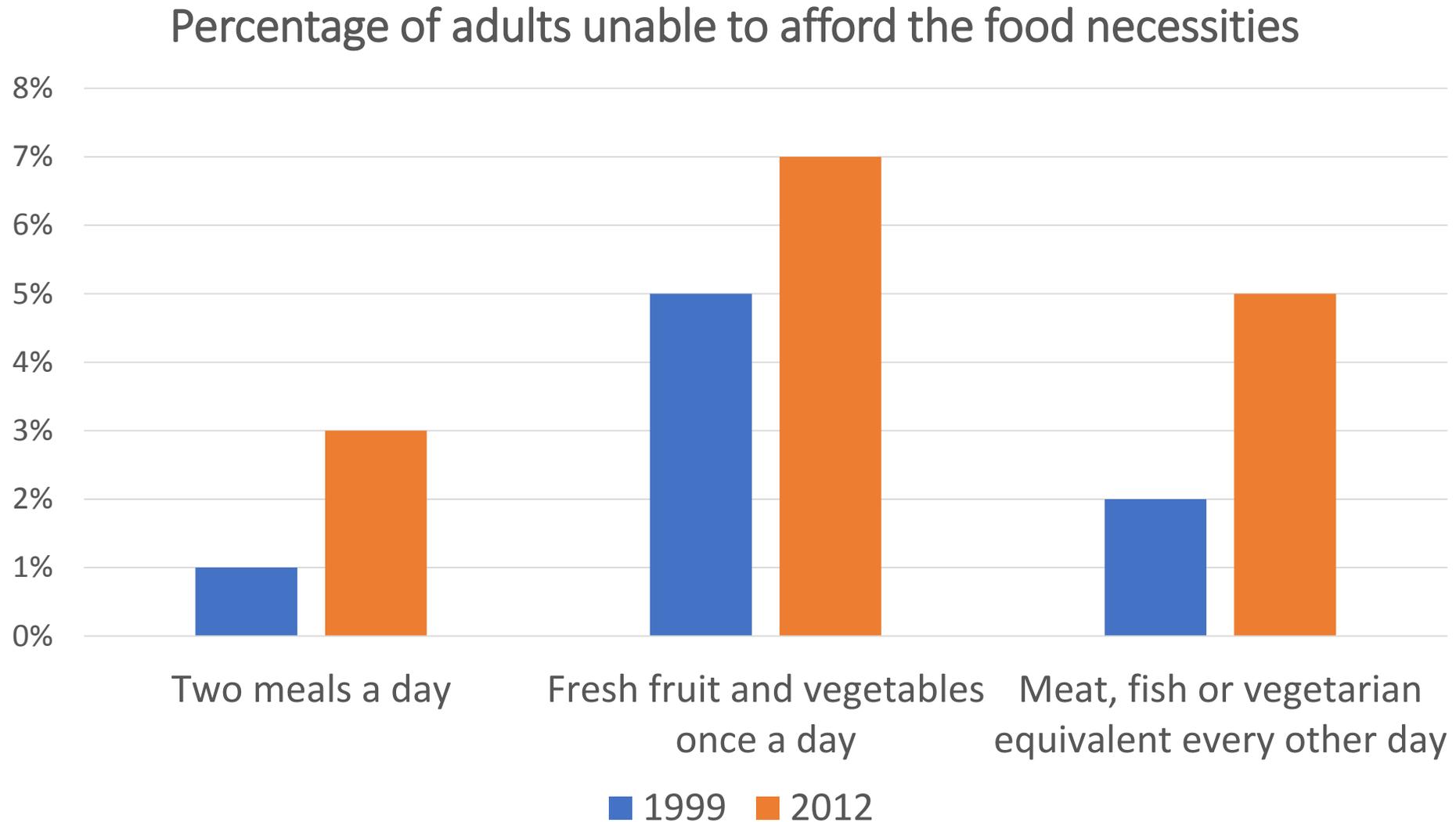
Department of Health, England

Minimum food standards

	Percentage thinking item is a necessity
Adults	
Two meals a day	91%
Fresh fruit and vegetables every day	83%
Meat, fish or vegetarian equivalent every other day	76%
Children	
Three meals a day	93%
Fresh fruit and vegetables at least once a day	96%
Meat, fish or vegetarian equivalent at least once a day	90%

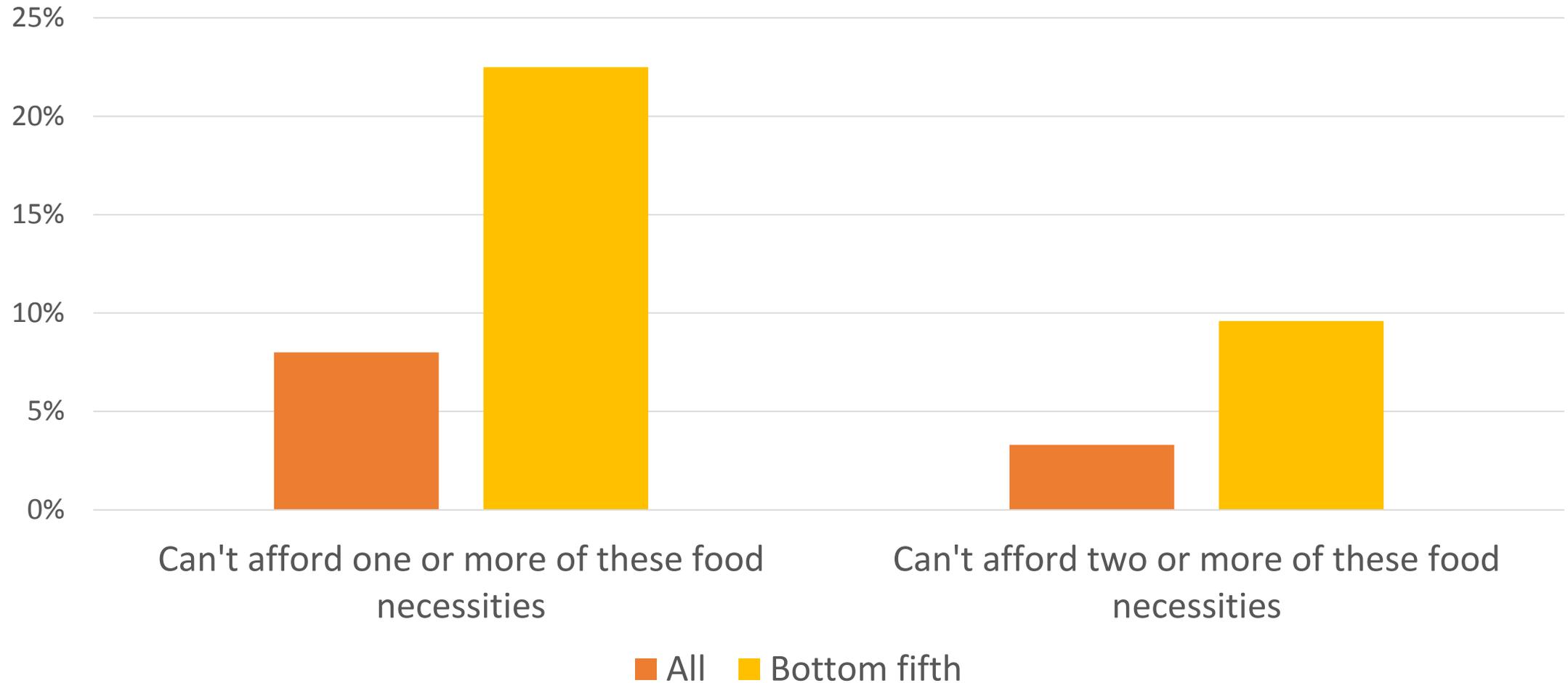
Source: Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK survey, 2012

Rising food poverty



Source: *Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK survey, 2012; Poverty and Social Exclusion survey, 1999*

Percentage of adults with an inadequate diet



Source: *Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK survey, 2012*

Prioritising the children

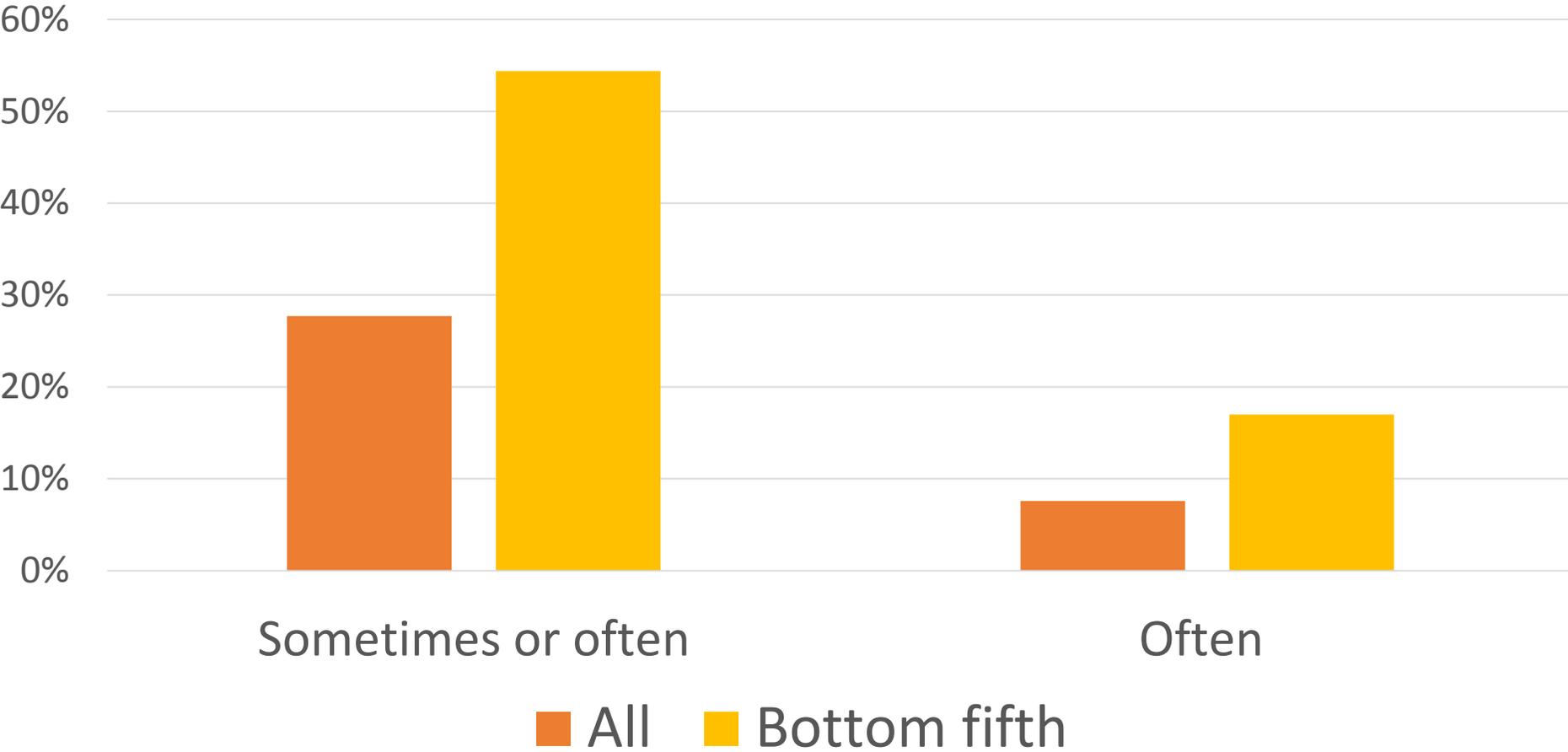
PSE



I only tend to eat one meal a day and that does me, cos I like to make sure I got for my children.

Jennie, single parent

Skimping on food so that others have enough to eat



Source: Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK survey, 2012

Food poverty today

- 3.5 million adults are not properly fed
- 0.5 million children are not properly fed
- Nearly one in five of the poorest have an inadequate diet
- Nearly one in ten have an extremely inadequate diet
- Over half of the poorest skimp on food sometimes or often

Poor diet - poor health

Poor diet contributes to nearly half of coronary heart disease and a third of cancers.

In all age groups, people living on a low income have higher rates of diet-related diseases than other people.

The Royal Colleges of Physicians of the United Kingdom

Unhealthy but cheap

Sometimes we eat the wrong thing – cos you go for what's cheap and that isn't always the healthy option.

Disabled couple

They say you should eat 5 a day, I am lucky if eat two a day I will admit it, because everything is so dear in the shops today.

Unemployed Male

It tends to end up being things I don't want to be eating and things I don't want my kids eating, but we have no choice really because it is cheaper'.

Lone Parent, Female

Cutting back among the poorest

Percentage of adults in bottom fifth of households who:	Often	Often or sometimes
Skimped on food so others would have enough to eat	17%	54%
Postponed visits to the dentist	25%	46%
Continued to wear worn out clothes/shoes	29%	67%
Gone without or cut back on social visits	49%	77%

Source: *Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK survey, 2012*

PSE

I just couldn't deal with all the stress from worrying about money, food on the table, heating, bills, I just couldn't do it.

Marc, young job seeker

Other factors: access to shops

Of those who do 'not always having the kind of food they wanted':

- 38% mention 'poor availability or quality in local shops'
- 33 % mention 'difficulty getting to the shops'

Lack of food = lack of money

Of those who sometimes or often do not have enough to eat:

98 % say this is down to not having enough money

The growth of low paid work



Cartoon: Pinterest

- 21% of employees are in low paid work – up from 13% in 1979
- 5.1 million employees are low paid

Low pay is taken as two-thirds of gross hourly median pay

Rising job insecurity and underemployment

- Over 3 million describe themselves as in insecure employment
- Nearly 1 million workers are on zero hours contracts
- 5 million workers are self-employed - a record high
- 8.5 million are part-time workers - a record high

TODAY

Most people in poverty are in work

Government support for the poor

- Rise in spending on means-tested in-work benefits
- Rise in spending on housing benefit
- Fall in value of out of work benefits from 20% of average earnings in 1979 to 11% in 2013

Overall spending on benefits has remained steady for last 40 years at around 12% of national income.

The 'austerity' cuts

50% of all cuts fall in two areas:

Local government

Benefits

Equality of SACRIFICE



From "PLUS" (the Organ of the N.C.L.C.)

Cartoon: Independent Labour Publications

The post-2010 tax/benefit reforms

The incomes of the poorest households with children:

- Dropped 6% between 2010 and 2015
- Will drop by around 10% between 2015 and 2019

Working-age social rented tenants are particularly hard hit.

Source: Institute for Fiscal Studies; Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield

More and tougher benefit sanctions

1.9 million

decisions to sanction claimants between
October 2012 and the end of 2015

The rise and rise of food banks



I was crying on the phone to them [the DWP] telling them I am pregnant. I don't want my baby coming home to a house with no gas or electric. We have laminated floor and it's so cold.
Gemma, food bank user

Over 1.1 million three-day emergency food supplies from Trussell Trust food banks in 2015/16

What can be done? Some ideas...

Short-term

- Support benefit claimants to maximise and stabilise their incomes
- Map food access problems
- Consult with local communities

Longer-term

- Work with 'anchor' institutions to establish a social value procurement framework
- Work with local employers and unions on an employment charter
- Boost local food production and distribution

Foodbank user number 1

Hello, I'm from Norwich and I've had dealings with future projects since I think it was April this year, who've helped me out immensely and over Christmas they helped me out food wise, because I was financially embarrassed and I was very thankful for the food that helped me get through Christmas.

Foodbank user number 2 – what brings you to the foodbank today?

To get a food voucher because with all my rent that I have to pay out, I don't get enough for food this week.

How do you feel when you have to come to a foodbank?

I'm not bothered – I'd rather come here than go without.

Once you have received your parcel, how does that make you feel?

Happy, relieved.

Foodbank user number 3 – what brings you to the foodbank today?

Benefits basically - after Christmas I had to be sorting it all out.

A few benefit delays?

Yes.

And how do you feel when you have to come to the foodbank to get food for your family?

That's fine; I'd rather come down and get a food bank parcel than starve.

And once you've got your food bank parcel how does that feel?

I feel a lot better about it, I don't feel like we aren't going to eat or nothing like that

Foodbank user number 4 – you have used foodbank in the past, why did you have to use foodbank?

Because my relationship with my ex-partner has ended, and money, and circumstances changes with my benefits.

So you had no money coming in for a while?

No, I had to wait several weeks for my circumstances to update.

You've got two children haven't you?

Yes.

How did it feel to have to come and ask for a foodbank voucher?

Pretty nerve-racking to be fair. But if there weren't really a foodbank I'd have to try even harder to get family to come to me.

And that would have been difficult?

Yes.

Foodbank user number 5 – you’ve had to use foodbank in the past haven’t you – do you mind telling me why you had to?

I had to use foodbank because I was starting my new job at the time and I had to wait for the wages to go into my bank account after a long time, and it had to be set up, so I had to have a food parcel in between because I didn’t have enough food in the house and I had no money to buy what I needed.

Do you mind telling me how did that feel for you?

It felt demeaning, it was embarrassing, and I really didn’t like it.

What would you have done if food bank wasn’t there for you?

If foodbank wasn’t available to me, I’d have had either no food at all to last me enough until I get paid, or I’d have to relied on my family giving me hand-outs and I’d have been even more embarrassed about that.

Foodbank user number 6 – you’ve had to use foodbank before, can you tell me why?

Due to loss of employment, then having to go from JSA to ESA, delay in benefits therefore didn’t have no money to support myself on.

How did that feel having to ask for a food voucher?

Very embarrassing – because I’ve always worked and I’ve always earnt money, so I don’t really do hand-outs.

And what would you have done if foodbank hadn’t been around?

I don’t really know, I don’t really have no idea.

Foodbank user number 7 – you’ve had to use foodbank recently, would you mind telling me why you had to do that?

To help support the family really because I needed to use it to obviously survive, for me and my family.

What had happened?

Well I was getting low on money, and changes to circumstances with my job, change in benefits, just was unable to survive on the bare minimum, and was making myself into debt because of it.

And you’ve got children haven’t you?

Yes I’ve got two children, and that’s the most important thing.

How did it feel for you having to come and ask for a food parcel?

Well I've got to think of my family first, they've got to come first so I had to ask, I had no problems asking.

And what would you have done if foodbank wasn't available to you?

I'd have to borrow more money to get myself worse into debt in a situation like I'd been first put in.

Foodbank user number 8 – just recently you had to use foodbank, would you mind telling me why you had to?

We had to pay an unexpected bill, which basically put us out of pocket for food for my wife, me, and the children.

How many children have you got?

Three

So how did it feel to you to have to come and ask for a food parcel?

Kind of embarrassing, considering we sort of tried to resort ourselves onto our own money and equal it out between bills, and obviously food.

And what would you have done if foodbank hadn't been available to you?

If I had to, I suppose I'd have to go down a criminal background and probably start stealing and thieving to put food in my kids bellies, because that's basically what it's really all about, it's not about me and the wife it's about putting food in my kids bellies, and keeping a roof and their beds occupied with them.