A cursory National Food Strategy lacks substance and joined up thinking on food insecurity

Sabine Goodwin coordinator

In early April 2022, members of the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) wrote to Rishi Sunak, the chancellor, and Boris Johnson, the prime minister, to express their “deep concern at the scale of suffering they were already witnessing” as well as their capacity “to prevent people from going hungry in the weeks and months to come.” Independent food banks were reaching breaking point. The Food Standards Agency reported that as many as one in six people had used a food bank or food charity in March 2022. And as the number of people being plunged into poverty increases yet further, independent food banks are struggling to cope as food and financial donations plummet. Food bank teams have found themselves dipping into charity reserves to source supplies so that no one is turned away.

One food bank manager said: “Every new request means stretching resources a bit further. We can’t say ‘no’ because for most we are the last resort, it feels like the buck stops with us. And next time, when someone else needs our help, we’ll stretch it a bit further again. But that’s just not sustainable. We all know that.”

And with morale at an all time low, exhausted food bank volunteers are asking how long they can keep their operations afloat and why they should be letting the government “off the hook.”

Rising food and energy prices have revealed starkly the fragility of food banks reliant on surplus food, the good will of volunteers, and public donations. Against the backdrop of a charitable food aid system creaking at the seams, the publication of a potentially robust, ambitious, and far-reaching food strategy for England was eagerly awaited.

The chancellor’s measures on the cost of living crisis have been welcomed as a step in the right direction. There was clear recognition of the need to tackle financial insecurity with cash first interventions, although the scale and nature of the UK’s long term poverty crisis was cast aside. The government still insists the best route out of poverty is work, yet many people can’t work due to sickness or disability, and our members are supporting more and more people who have jobs, but can’t pay their bills.

This disregard for the UK’s long term poverty crisis, and its impact, permeates the National Food Strategy. The chancellor’s recent package of measures is highlighted “as we learn to live with recent events and manage the impact of cost-of-living pressures” yet there is no reference to the escalating poverty that long pre-existed the pandemic. Increasing benefit payments in line with inflation is welcome, but overlooks the fact that people relying on the benefits system, which is replete with sanctions, caps, limits, and waiting times, have struggled to afford food for over a decade. What’s more, if social security payments and wages don’t match the rising cost of living then people are effectively affected by real term cuts.

This was an opportunity to develop a joined up approach to tackle the fact that whole swathes of our population can’t afford a healthy diet. There is no clear acknowledgement that food insecurity will have an impact on people’s physical and mental health. Tom Pollard’s recent report with IFAN and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation highlighted a ticking mental health time bomb.

After his independent review as part of the food strategy, Henry Dimbleby recognised that “Ideally, of course, the true cost of eating healthily should be calculated into benefits payments.” Yet the government’s white paper fails to take this on board. There’s no meaningful connection identified between ill health and the paltry sums on which people are expected to survive on if they are too unwell to work, disabled, unable to find work, or struggling to make ends meet while working.

There’s mention of Healthy Start vouchers, but no action plan to reduce the hurdles that families are having to go through to access these. Eligibility to free school meals is to be kept under review when this vital support needs to be made universal to eliminate stigma and ensure all children receive support regardless of their circumstances.

The National Food Strategy refers to the need for “a sufficient, qualified, and well paid workforce to support every food and drink business” yet doesn’t outline a plan to achieve this goal. Supermarket and food industry workers are regularly supported by independent food banks. It’s vital that employers pay a real living wage and guarantee job security. All too often interest in food poverty is limited to marketing and food bank support instead of preventing employees’ food insecurity.

Another glaring omission is the conflation of food waste and food poverty. The UK has inadvertently normalised the redistribution of surplus food as a feasible route to stocking food banks. However, “leftover” food for “left behind” people will neither address the underlying cause of a person’s need for charitable food aid nor reduce levels of surplus food.

The declared goal of the National Food Strategy is to “focus on longer term measures to support a resilient, healthier, and more sustainable food system that is affordable to all” yet no steps to impactfully reduce poverty levels are on the table. This plan could have laid out the foundations of a new food system
ensuring everyone is able to afford sufficient and nutritious food through adequate incomes. And as health inequalities grow at breakneck speed, we fear the cost of not dealing with this will be too great.

Competing interests: none declared.

Provenance and peer review: commissioned, not peer reviewed.

BMJ readers raised more than £60 000 on behalf of IFAN during the BMJ 2020-21 Annual Appeal. IFAN supports, connects, and advocates on behalf of a range of food aid providers including over 550 independent food banks. BMJ readers’ donations went directly to frontline member organisations and supported IFAN’s work to co-develop cash first referral leaflets in multiple local authorities across the UK.

3 Survey of members of the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) May 2022 https://uploads.strikinglycdn.com/files/67e54a44-3371-4112-a8af-8b06605e309f/IFAN%20independent%20food%20bank%20survey PRESSRELEASE_18.5.22_1.30pm.pdf?id=9904129
5 White M. Half hearted and half baked: the government’s new food strategy. BMJ 2022;377:o1520. doi: 10.1136/bmj.o1520. pmid: 35732300
6 Pollard T. Food bank use is a canary in the coal mine for mental health services. BMJ 2022;376:o759. doi: 10.1136/bmj.o759. pmid: 35318209