



INGREDIENTS FOR ACTION:  
UNDERSTANDING AND  
RESPONDING TO FOOD POVERTY

# Ingredients for Action

## SUMMARY

One in 50 (2%) British adults say they used a food bank during 2016, according to research commissioned by Church Urban Fund.<sup>a</sup> 5% of adults surveyed reported that in the past year they had gone without meals as they were unable to afford food, and 13% said they had experienced anxiety or worry about being able to afford enough food for themselves and their family during 2016. The figures pose a strong challenge to the notion that growth in food banks has been supply led and, further, they demonstrate that the experience of food poverty is far more extensive than food bank use.

Addressing the macro level drivers of household food insecurity requires a concerted, urgent and sustained cross-sectoral response. Responsibility for taking action must be shared by all who have power to make a difference, including government, employers, and individuals: it cannot only be the work of charities, churches, faith groups and community organisations at a local level, vital though this is.

This report explores how the principles of being relational, encouraging participation, and seeking justice can help shape and inform our responses to food poverty both at a local level and in terms of our social structures and public policy.

*5% of adults surveyed reported that in the past year they had gone without meals as they were unable to afford food.*



# Introduction

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Food banks have become an increasingly familiar feature of life in contemporary Britain. According to research commissioned by Church Urban Fund (CUF), one in 50 (2%) British adults say they used a food bank during 2016. This amounts to nearly a million adults (0.95 million), some of whom will also be supporting children and other family members.

However, food poverty, or household food insecurity as it is also known, affects an even larger number of people, with 5% of adults surveyed reporting that in the past year they had gone without meals as they were unable to afford food, and 13% saying that they had experienced anxiety or worry about being able to afford enough food for themselves and their family during 2016.

Household food insecurity has been defined as:

‘the inability to acquire or consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so.’<sup>1</sup>

This report provides new quantitative data about the extent of this multi-faceted problem, as well as outlining some of the key causes of food poverty in Britain, exploring the principles that need to underpin our responses to this issue, and offering some case studies of projects that have put these principles into practice in innovative ways.

Importantly, the increasing prevalence of food poverty is not just about food. Households’ ability to secure accommodation, heating, electricity, clothing, transport, and leisure activities are no less threatened by a lack of financial resources, and indeed increases in homelessness and fuel poverty demonstrate that these are growing problems too.<sup>2,3</sup> Furthermore, food poverty sits within a complex web of inter-related economic, social, political and personal issues and experiences. So whilst individual experiences of benefit delays, ill health, unexpected expenses, or indebtedness can be the triggers that tip households into food poverty, resolving this issue requires the macro-level drivers affecting employment markets, wage levels, food prices and welfare reform to be addressed through committed cross-sectoral collaboration and endeavour.

<sup>a</sup> Except where specified otherwise, quantitative data presented in this report are based on polling commissioned by Church Urban Fund and conducted by ComRes. ComRes interviewed 2,048 British adults aged 18+ online between 4th and 5th January 2017. Data were weighted to be representative of all British adults aged 18+ by age, gender, region and socio-economic grade. Full data tables available at: [www.comresglobal.com](http://www.comresglobal.com)



*1 in 50 British adults say they used a food bank during 2016.*

# What's special about food?

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Spending on food is more elastic than other items of household expenditure such as rent, council tax, and utility bills, so it is often squeezed the most when money is tight. Whilst this may help families to avoid the threat of eviction or termination of essential services such as electricity, it has substantial consequences for the wellbeing of adults and children alike.

Having access to enough food of sufficient nutritional value is vital for survival and health and is a pre-requisite to all other aspects of human wellbeing. Food sustains us for physical and mental work, whether at school, in employment, or in unpaid caring or other roles. Studies have found that children who did not eat enough food, or who did not eat sufficiently nutritionally balanced food, during the school summer holidays have poorer educational attainment when they return to school than their peers who had enough to eat.<sup>4</sup>

Making choices about food purchasing, preparation and consumption can be an important part of the way we exercise personal agency and forge or express our identities, both individually, and as part of families, households or cultural groups. Being unable to exercise choice with regard to food, because of severe income constraints or the need to rely on donated food that others have chosen, can leave individuals feeling disempowered and lacking in dignity.<sup>5</sup>

Relationships are often built, nurtured and maintained in the context of food consumption, whether in the form of family meals together, school lunches, having a friend over for tea, picnics, birthday parties, meals out, or other occasions.<sup>6</sup> Being unable to afford adequate food – or having worries about this – can therefore be a significant barrier to social and cultural participation. For example, our research found that one in 10 British adults (11%) said that during 2016 they had missed celebrating a special occasion (e.g. a birthday, anniversary, Christmas, other religious festivals) because they could not afford to (e.g. purchasing presents or celebratory food).



*Having access to enough food of sufficient nutritional value is vital for survival and health and is a pre-requisite to all other aspects of human wellbeing.*

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School holidays can be particularly difficult times for families with children for whom money is tight. During this time, the one million children who usually get free school meals do not receive these, placing an additional financial burden on their families to provide food. In addition, there are thought to be a further two million children affected by food poverty whose families are not eligible for free school meals.<sup>7</sup> Holiday hunger, as it is increasingly known, affects both children and their parents: a study conducted in 2015 found that one third of British parents had skipped a meal in the school holidays so that their children could eat.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the implications for health, holiday hunger also affects social participation, with families feeling unable to have their children's friends round, for example, because of being unable to provide food. Thus, what might for many families be a relatively affordable way for their children to pass some time enjoyably during the holiday period, can for others be a financial strain and something parents avoid.



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# The size of the problem

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Food poverty in the UK has increased since the 2008 financial crisis and has reached a level not seen since the introduction of the welfare state in the 1940s.<sup>9</sup> A number of indicators can be used to track its incidence and severity.

## Food bank use

Data about food bank usage are amongst the most widely cited in discussions about food poverty. The Trussell Trust's network of foodbanks is the largest in the UK. In 2016-2017 their foodbanks gave out 1,182,954 three-day emergency food supplies to people in crisis.<sup>10</sup> This figure provides a valuable indication that food poverty is a substantial and pressing problem, but since people can visit food banks more than once, it doesn't tell us how many unique households or individuals used them. Furthermore, it is much more difficult to ascertain how many people accessed independent or informal foodbanks, or those that are part of smaller networks: a recent study suggests that there are 651 of these, in addition to the 419 Trussell Trust food banks.<sup>11</sup>

To help address this gap, CUF's survey asked a representative sample of 2,048 members of the adult population of Britain about whether they had used a food bank during 2016: one in 50 (2%) said that they had. This amounts to approximately 955,000 adults across Britain.<sup>b</sup> This figure does not include children and other household members who may not have used the food bank themselves, but have received food from it: for example, children make up just over a third of beneficiaries of Trussell Trust food banks.<sup>12</sup>

## Missing meals and cutting down

Food bank usage, however, is not itself a satisfactory measure of food poverty. There are many reasons why individuals experiencing food poverty might choose not to use a food bank, and in any case, for most this would be a last resort, once a crisis point has been reached.<sup>13</sup> The UN's Food Insecurity Experience Scale identifies three levels of food insecurity: mild, moderate and severe. These are manifested in experiences ranging from worrying about ability to obtain food and compromising the quality and variety of food, to reducing quantities, skipping meals, and experiencing hunger. According to their data, 10.1% of the UK's adult population were experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity in 2014.<sup>14</sup>



<sup>b</sup> Note this figure is for Britain, and therefore excludes Northern Ireland, which is included in the Trussell Trust's UK data.

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Our own survey found that one in eight Britons (13%) had experienced anxiety or worry about being able to afford enough food for themselves and their family during the previous 12 months. Meanwhile 14% of people said they had cut down on the amount of fresh food (e.g. fruit and veg) they buy in order to save money. This is of particular concern in view of rising levels of obesity and the related health implications, and points to the need to assess the impacts of welfare reform and other policies that influence people's food purchasing capacity in a holistic way.

Experiences of food insecurity are not distributed evenly amongst the population. For example, 5% of people surveyed said that in the last twelve months they have gone without meals as they were unable to afford food. This rises to 7% amongst respondents from households with an annual income of £14,100 - £28,000, and to 10% amongst those with a household income of up to £14,000. These data pose a strong challenge to those who argue that growth in food banks has been supply led, driven by the growth of food bank provision itself, and demonstrates that the experience of food poverty is in fact far more extensive than food bank use.

The data outlined above reflect a reality that some will struggle to believe, but for others it will be all too familiar. Political events over the past two years have drawn attention to the prevalence of 'echo chambers' in our society, which can distort our perceptions about the extent, causes and consequences of social issues. These findings require us to acknowledge, confront and respond to a stark reality.



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# What are the underlying causes?

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Charities, churches and community groups are working hard to meet emergency and ongoing needs in relation to food poverty, but further preventative action is needed at a national level to effect longer term change. In order to know how best to respond, we need to understand the underlying causes of food poverty.



Amongst the causes of hunger in the UK identified by The All Party Parliamentary Group Enquiry (APPG) Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom report are:<sup>15</sup>

- **Benefit payment delays, changes and benefit sanctions** – delays can occur in processing new claims, or in transferring from one benefit to another, and sanctions can leave a household without any income for a period from 4 weeks up to 3 years. Data from the Trussell Trust show that, together, benefit delays and benefits changes were the reason for 43% of referrals to their food banks in 2016-2017.<sup>16</sup>
- **Low wages** – being in employment does not necessarily protect a household from food poverty. Low income is a major cause of hunger, and makes households more vulnerable to shocks such as unexpected expenses or fluctuation in income. For some, this is exacerbated by insecure employment conditions, and unpredictable shift patterns.
- **Costs of moving from welfare to work** – there are additional costs associated with starting a new job, having to wait a month after their benefits stop and work starts for wages to be paid can make it difficult for people to afford food during this period.
- **Changes to tax credits and Universal Credit** – given that low income families in Britain have an average of just £95 in savings and investments, the six-week wait for the first Universal Credit payment is proving very problematic, and has contributed to mental health issues, people falling into rent arrears or other debt, evictions and increased use of food banks.<sup>17,18</sup>
- **Pressure on household budgets** – the cost of food, fuel and housing has a disproportionate impact on low income households. In addition, the higher cost of gas and electricity on prepayment meters particularly disadvantages lower income families. These circumstances can make it difficult to save, meaning in turn that households are less able to deal with financial shocks and may end up using high cost credit when these occur.
- **School holidays** – during the holidays, many families struggle to get enough food, and food that is nutritionally balanced, for themselves and their children because of the additional costs involved in providing food (for those who would normally receive free school meals), and keeping children looked after and occupied.



# What needs to characterise our responses?

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The multi-faceted nature of food poverty means that a 'mixed economy' of responses is required. These range from the crisis interventions provided by food banks, through to community shops and social enterprises providing access to affordable, healthy food; projects that help people grow in confidence about cooking or budgeting; initiatives offering meals in a social setting; and work that addresses the triggers and causes of food poverty.

Here, we outline three principles which we believe need to underpin effective responses to food poverty, wherever they fall within this spectrum of different kinds of action.

## Being Relational

People are relational in nature: relationships are important for our mental and emotional wellbeing. For Christians, people's relational nature reflects the fact that they are made in the image of God, who is a relational being and seeks to relate to all people in a loving way. As such, the nature of relationships within the context of projects and services responding to this issue, and the value and dignity these relationships communicate to those affected by food poverty, really matters.

Food plays an important part in nurturing relationships, including within families. Taking this into consideration may look different in different contexts. Food banks enable people to take away food and prepare it in their own homes, and for some, this helps maintain a degree of normality for their families at a time of crisis. Many people experiencing food poverty, however, live alone. Projects that bring people together to eat at a community centre or church hall can therefore provide a much appreciated opportunity for people to socialise with others whilst also meeting a need for food. This is particularly the case where provision is not targeted to those experiencing poverty, but is open to all, and centres around an activity or interest. This can create a sense of community, and improve people's resilience by giving them opportunities to develop relationships of mutual support with others.<sup>19</sup>

This is not to imply that having to rely on charitable provision to meet one's basic needs for food is acceptable in contemporary Britain, or that initiatives such as these provide a long term or sufficient solution to food poverty. Rather they make an invaluable contribution to enabling people to cope, whilst pointing to the urgent need for collective and concerted action to tackle the causes of food poverty at a national level.



# What needs to characterise our responses?



Giving dignity to those who experience food poverty also means acknowledging and bringing into the light some of the relationships that lie beneath our economic and social structures. For example, food bank users or recipients of benefits are often labelled as 'dependent' (or in still more derogatory terms as 'scroungers'), in implicit contrast to 'independent' others who are able to provide for themselves financially. The reality, of course, is that each of us are connected within a complex web of inter-dependencies, and even those who are financially comfortable will have depended on others for their education, access to employment, healthcare, development of skills, habits and knowledge and so on. The Fabian Society's *Hungry for Change* report helpfully outlines some of the interdependencies within the food production system, showing how pressure to reduce food prices can, paradoxically, keep wages depressed for those in low income jobs in this sector who may be experiencing or at risk of food poverty themselves.<sup>20</sup>

Relationships are also an important part of the way we learn, and it is arguably through interpersonal relationships that our sense of responsibility for one another's wellbeing, and our ability to understand the pressures and realities other people face are most effectively cultivated. Here, the tendency for people to mix socially with people of a similar

## CASE STUDY

### Fun, food and friendship: holiday activities in Middlesbrough

Feast of Fun is a partnership of local churches and community groups that are offering a range of holiday activities with the aim of providing free or low cost activities, including healthy snacks and packed lunches. It is a grassroots response, based in Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland, and offers support for the many families who struggle during the summer holidays: with the children at home throughout the week, and no free school meals, the weekly budget has to stretch further for food and there is little left for activities and treats.

The project started four years ago, and each year it grows and enjoys the support of new partners. This year they are working with the North York Moors Centre, taking families on trips to enjoy a range of outdoor activities. Parents and carers are involved in helping out with activities, and play an important part in making the project happen. They are also looking forward to welcoming a whole new generation of volunteers, older people through Faithfully Ageing Better who will sharing their time, skills and talents with the children and families to create a 'Feast of Fun across the Generations'.

This year they expect to work with over 800 children and their families in 20 communities, serving over 5,000 meals.

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socio-economic standing to themselves is highly problematic, and perhaps has a bearing on the way in which political decisions are made, and on the formation of public opinion.<sup>21</sup> For some volunteers, helping out with a food bank or similar project has given them insight into the experiences of people who are unable to afford enough food for themselves and their households. Reports such as *Feeding Britain* and *Hungry for Change* have done extensive work to communicate evidence about the experiences of people in food poverty to an audience that includes those in political power. But whilst there is some political will across all parties to address this problem, there remains an urgent need for action that improves the situation on the ground.

### Encouraging Participation

Enduring and navigating poverty requires a huge amount of personal resilience. As such, responses to food poverty need to recognise, affirm and where possible help increase the agency and strengths of the people they are seeking to assist.<sup>22</sup> This is sometimes referred to as an asset-based approach.<sup>23</sup> Again, this might take a wide variety of forms depending on the type of response and the individuals involved. For projects and services it may involve making the most of ‘micro-opportunities’, such as asking a food bank user about their household’s preferences for particular types of food, to help restore an element of dignity and choice in a situation where someone is likely to feel disempowered. Or it may involve building participation into the way that a project functions, such as by inviting people who may benefit from the food provision to get involved as volunteers or leaders themselves.

Another way of recognising people’s skills and agency is to involve them in helping others to learn. For example, the Cash Smart Credit Savvy programme, currently being piloted by CUF’s Just Finance Foundation, provides a structured way for people to share their own knowledge and experience about managing money, whilst also learning from others.

At a structural level too, people who have experienced, or are experiencing food poverty have an important part to play in educating others – including political decision makers – about the ways in which the implementation and impacts of policy decisions are playing out in local communities and in the lives of individuals and families across the country. For example, Thrive Together Birmingham, part of CUF’s Together Network, is helping organise a series of Poverty Truth Commission hearings, bringing key decision makers together with those living at the sharp end of poverty.

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# What needs to characterise our responses?

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## Seeking Justice

The question of justice, or fairness, is not one we can afford to ignore in relation to food poverty. Most obviously, working towards greater justice in relation to households' ability to access an adequate quantity and quality of food involves working for structural level change. This includes addressing specific issues, such as eliminating the six week wait for a first payment in the Universal Credit system, or ensuring that continuity of income for those receiving benefits is better protected at junctures where delays often occur.<sup>24</sup> Here, locally rooted organisations are playing a part by contributing to an evidence base about food poverty, whether through collecting and publicising data about numbers of people accessing their services, through helping researchers and media reporters access and share the stories of people experiencing food poverty, or by providing written or oral evidence to calls for evidence to inform policy making. For example, over 226 organisations and individuals submitted written evidence to the *APPG Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom*, the majority of whom were charities, churches or community groups.

Seeking structural level change for the longer term also involves asking bigger questions about how such a great divergence in economic wellbeing has both persisted and deepened, in contemporary Britain. Here much work remains to be done to unpack the barriers to greater social cohesion, social mobility, and social integration, and to effect the cultural and systemic changes that can help reduce or remove them.

It has been argued that short term responses to food poverty, particularly those led by churches, are contributing to or, by their existence, endorsing the reduction of statutory intervention to prevent poverty.<sup>25</sup> We would suggest instead that such provision – sadly – constitute much needed, 'in the meantime' responses.<sup>26</sup> Faith communities' visible presence in local communities means that they are often directly encountering people who are unable to afford enough food on a regular basis: in such contexts, waiting for policy and economic change is not an option, desirable though this may be.<sup>27</sup> Local action, therefore, can also be part of bringing about greater justice at a grassroots level, making a difference to people's lives in the context of economic structures that seem stacked against the life chances of certain groups and communities.

Crucially, responding to poverty at a local level in communities, and seeking change in political and economic structures are not mutually exclusive.



## CASE STUDY

### Getting support and getting involved: Katie's story

Katie (not her real name) had suffered domestic violence for four years. Things got so bad that she had to move out with her children. Having been put on an emergency housing list, she also had to take time off work due to stress. She tells her story:

'I couldn't claim benefits because I worked, but didn't earn enough to claim statutory sick pay, but I also couldn't get sick pay from my employer. I always made sure there was food for the girls, but ... for myself sometimes I wouldn't eat, but as a parent, you would always do that. I would go and buy fruit and veg when I got my tax credit money and try to stay on top of my bills. I'd pay all my bills, then I'd go shopping for the girls and get meat and things, I'd make sure there was a meal for every evening. But I would go in with the mind-set of making sure there was always two portions, never three. It never entered my head to count three. I'd have toast or some days nothing.'

Katie was signposted to a food bank at a local church. 'So I went there, visited them, who provided me with some food ... but also they would spend a good half an hour with me just making sure where I was at, what was going on, how they could help. Also they helped me get some furniture for the new property.'

A friend of Katie's volunteered at another church nearby. 'She was running a cookery course at the church, which was put on through the food bank, just making basic meals from scratch. She asked me to go along to help her, and help me get out, more than anything. It helped me to meet up with a few people. We were given a slow cooker as well, which I use all the time now. That was great for us, really helped with cooking on a budget. And especially with the depression, there were some days when I couldn't motivate myself, I didn't want to do anything. I only had to throw a load of stuff in there in the morning and the kids would be fed at night.'

Having got to know people at the food bank and slow cooker course, Katie started volunteering herself. 'So now I help volunteer there. Sometimes now, I'll still get some help from them if I've had a difficult week or, if I've had a lot of bills, or something's happened with my benefit. But now I volunteer there as well because I just think it's such an important thing, and knowing that you can just wake up one morning and everything can change. So I'm quite passionate about it really that people should understand.'

# How are churches responding?

Commenting on the growth of foodbanks in the UK, the *Feeding Britain* report noted that:

'...it is the churches through their membership who have brought forward this most extraordinary voluntary welfare development.'<sup>28</sup>

Food banks are not the only way in which churches are responding to food poverty, however. Indeed, we should not only look to projects that involve food to find initiatives that are making a difference: money skills training, debt advice, benefits advice and support in accessing employment are among the many ways in which churches are helping people to avoid or manage household food insecurity.

## Together Network

CUF's Together Network consists of 19 partnership organisations across England, which employ Development Workers whose role is to resource churches and community groups to make a positive difference in their local communities. The Together Network facilitates joint-working and the sharing of best practice, whilst also providing space for creativity and flexible, local responses. Across the country it has supported a variety of responses to food poverty. These have included: work in Nottingham to help food banks develop welfare rights support alongside the service they already provide; contributing written and oral evidence to food poverty inquiries drawing on extensive local engagement in specific areas; supporting holiday programmes that provide food, as well as fun activities and friendship; bringing local organisations together to collate evidence around the impacts of Universal Credit in Norfolk; coordinating a network of over 70 organisations involved in responding to food poverty in Lancashire; and helping launch *Feeding Liverpool*, an initiative which encourages collaboration on sharing best practice, campaigning for policy change, and raising public awareness, amongst those engaged with this issue in the city.

## CASE STUDY

### Making a difference together: Universal Credit in Norfolk

In April 2016, food banks and other agencies in Norfolk were separately reporting the detrimental effects of the roll out of Universal Credit on the people that they were working with through the services they were offering. There was no forum in which the agencies could come together to discuss the issues and to take action.

Imagine Norfolk Together, which is part of CUF's Together Network, invited the relevant groups and agencies to a meeting attended by 18 different organisations operating in the area who discussed the impact of Universal Credit, the change needed, and possible ways of bringing about that change. Through this cooperative working, the issue was brought to the local MP and a list collated showing the services available from different local organisations that can support those who are applying for Universal Credit. This meeting helped people impacted by the change to Universal Credit, supported those who provide services, and communicated the issues around Universal Credit to political leaders.



# Conclusions

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The extent of household food insecurity in the UK is deeply troubling, and the data presented in this report portray a stark reality that requires a concerted, urgent and sustained cross-sectoral response.

The figures pose a strong challenge to those who argue that growth in food banks has been supply led, driven by the growth of food bank provision itself. This research demonstrates that the experience of food poverty is far more extensive than food bank use, and provides for the first time an estimate of the number of adults using food banks in Britain.

Food poverty is not only a matter of hunger or poor nutrition, it also isolates and excludes people, making it difficult for them to participate socially, and causing considerable worry and anxiety.

Many charities, churches and community groups are working hard to try to support those experiencing food poverty, isolation and financial difficulties. Most of this work is done by volunteers and resourced by donations. However, the causes of food poverty include insecure employment conditions and low pay, housing costs, and food and utility prices, as well as benefits sanctions and delays, and caps to benefit payments. Addressing these drivers of food poverty requires wider involvement and commitment across the state and market sectors, as well as by civil society.

Responsibility for taking action on this issue is shared by all who have power to make a difference, including government, employers and individuals: it cannot only be the work of charities, churches, faith groups and community organisations at a local level, vital though these are.

Areas in which the government could make a difference to the lives of people experiencing food poverty include:

- further action to improve employment conditions and pay for those in low paid and insecure work.
- elimination of the six-week wait that is built into the Universal Credit system, which currently leaves people with no income while they await their first payment.
- require, and resource, local authorities to work with charities, churches and other faith groups to provide for families who would normally receive free school meals during the school holidays, as the Feeding Britain campaign proposes.

Whilst it is important to ensure that community-based responses to food poverty foster positive relationships, actively disrupt power imbalances by encouraging participation, and seek to bring about justice as well as respond to needs, if we are to see food poverty begin to fall in the UK, these principles must be brought to bear on the way we organise our social and economic affairs as a society too.



## AUTHORS

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