



Ending the need for food banks: consultation on a draft national plan

The Scottish Government is seeking views on the Scottish Government's vision and approach to ending the need for food banks as a primary response to food insecurity. Includem supports the government's vision as we know the impact food insecurity and relying on food banks resulting from poverty has on the children, young people and families we support.

Below is includem's submission to the consultation, in which we have ensured that the voices and experiences of the children, young people and families are at the centre of our response.

Do you think that the approach outlined is consistent with the vision to end poverty and the need for food banks? Is there anything else you think should be included?

Includem welcomes the approach outlined in the Ending the Need for Foodbanks National Plan. It is consistent with the wishes and hopes of the children, young people and families that we support who tell us that food banks are not helpful in resolving the food insecurity that they experience.

In preparing this submission families told us that the stigma and judgement of using food banks often stops them from disclosing to services the extent of their food insecurity. Many do not access food bank even when they have significant need. This is for a variety of reasons. They tell us that the lack of choice means they can't meet the dietary needs of their families and undermines their dignity and value. The intermittent opening times of food banks means they are not always available when families need them or they need to travel some distance to access them, without the means to pay for transport. Some families have experienced negative consequences from statutory agencies like Social Work when they have accessed food banks. For others it was a matter of feeling judged, with one parent commenting:

"I did contact the food bank. I felt in there they were judging me. I wouldn't go back."

For these reasons, we think that the extent of food insecurity is vastly underestimated.

The families we spoke to all said that first and foremost they want the financial security to meet all their material needs, and this is not just about food insecurity. The rising cost of living means that they are making fundamental choices between rent, heating, clothes as well as food daily. Across all of our services we have seen an increase in families seeking financial support and accessing food banks since the £20 uplift of Universal Credit has stopped. The families we spoke to in formulating this response welcomed the commitment to improve wages, social security and money advice as a means to end the need for food banks and other impacts of poverty. As part of our recent Voices Report, one parent commented that the acceptance in society of food banks and low-income families having to struggle daily needed to be challenged.

“Just to increase the money for low paid families and to do away with food banks. It’s terrible to see families struggling.... I do wish that we could stop people struggling. It’s heart-breaking to see. People going to the bother of working and they still have to choose whether to eat or pay bills.”

Where it becomes necessary for families to seek additional financial support to meet their acute needs, the families includedem support consistently tell us that they want a cash first approach as it respects their rights and preserves their dignity. Where cash first comes in the form of vouchers families want the ability to choose where these vouchers are for. Includedem saw in the first lockdown that the issuing by some local authorities of vouchers for one particular store to cover free school meals was disadvantageous to some families. Not all families had one of these stores in their immediate area and there was significant cost and risk from covid exposure in travelling to these stores. Other families said that this store did not stock foods that met their cultural or religious needs. Choice is important to families - in the food they eat and the stores they access. A cash first approach is only rights respecting when it preserves their right to privacy and the distribution of vouchers felt stigmatising for some families. Overall, they would prefer cash grants to allow them full freedom of choice.

The families we support told us that if food banks need to exist, even if it is only as a last resort, then they need to be set up in such a way that allows choice, provides nutritious food, including perishables like milk and cheese and be run as community endeavours. One family described a service in Forth Valley where they have an allotment and access to other fresh ingredients, and access to the local high school where students use the fresh ingredients to cook meals for distribution by the food bank, both of which built employability skills and allowed opportunities for those who use the services to contribute.

They valued community food banks that operated as pantries where they could pay a nominal sum of money to get 10 items of their choice. This approach maintained their pride, allowed choice and reduced wastage. Many families we support tell us that much of the food they currently receive from food banks goes unused as it is not something their children can or will eat or they do not have the fuel or appliances to cook them.

One family commented *“there is only so much you can do with dried pasta and a tin of beans”*, while another said,

“I’m not ungrateful but it was the same all the time and I was like I’m supposed to feed my weans on tins of tatties, bags of pasta and I ended up saying just give this to someone who really needs it. I would just throw it out and waste it.”

What was also important to them was anonymity. Cash first gives them the anonymity they want. If they have to use food banks, they wanted services like includedem to be able to access food on their behalf and in a way in which their right to privacy is respected. Includedem workers have noted that families are significantly more willing to acknowledge their need and seek help from those services who do not ask for identifying information about the family. Families without their own car also value the support of organisations like includedem to pick things up for them, avoiding the cost of public transport and the limit to how much they can carry.

Do you think that the actions underway will help to reduce the need for food banks as a primary response to food insecurity?

Includem believe that the actions underway and proposed will help to reduce food insecurity, however we think there are other things that need to be considered. The families includedem support

do not experience food insecurity in isolation. They experience poverty in all its forms and find the siloing of poverty into areas such as fuel poverty, period poverty, food insecurity to be unhelpful and minimising of their experiences. Includem believe that trying to tackle one impact of poverty without consideration of the wider structural issues will ultimately fail to address the root causes and make a difference to the families who need it most.

The families includem supports identified other barriers to food insecurity that are not addressed by these actions. Many of the families we support live in overcrowded houses. They describe one of the consequences of this being that the kitchens, fridge/freezers and storage units are too small for their needs. This means that they are not able to buy in bulk, and for some, they can't even do a full week's shop. Some of our families live in areas, like Castlemilk in Glasgow, where there are no supermarkets. They are not able to do large shops without paying for taxis to return home. Those in an overcrowded home or in areas that lack infrastructure rely on shopping frequently and often using local shops, meaning higher costs for both food and transport. One family were assisted to purchase a chest freezer to be able to buy in bulk but due to overcrowding the only place to keep it is in the hall, resulting in a fire hazard.

An includem worker said, *“after speaking to M today it led me to apply for funding to purchase her a cooker as only one ring works on the one she has and cash for a food shop. I applied for a cash grant from another charity, fingers crossed they approve this. Asking these questions allowed me to understand the severity of the poverty in this home and the support needed to ensure they have a meal every night for her and the kids.”*

Their homes are often poorly insulated and maintained. Many families we support have ongoing problems with damp and mould. All of this results in higher fuel costs. Other families do not have working cooking equipment like cookers and ovens meaning that they need to rely on high priced convenience meals. They do not know their rights in relation to repairs and rehousing and feel powerless to influence their situation positively.

In some areas food banks are only open on certain days or times. This means that families frequently need to go outwith their area with limited transport or relying on other agencies for help. The families we spoke to commented that if they have money for bus fare, then they would have money for food. While includem supports the commitment to end the use of food banks as the primary means to address food insecurity, we also acknowledge that for some time they will continue to be needed by children, young people and families. We stress the need to ensure that they remain available in local communities and at times families need them to prevent families being unable to get the help they need when they need it.

The families we support do not think that improving their financial situation would be sufficient to address their food insecurity and are calling for improved social housing availability and maintenance and free or cheaper public transport.

The families we spoke to tell us that they frequently must prioritise food over other needs. One mother described being criticised by Social Work for not purchasing her child educational material during the recent school closure, with the social worker suggesting that she was neglecting her child by not doing so.

“£25 is not enough to feed a family of five for a week or pay for broadband however you are forced to choose between them. This means choosing between feeding your kids or educating them. Then social work say you are neglecting your kids for not educating them, but you are always going to choose feeding them first.”

For the measures outlined in this plan to be successful they need to be implemented alongside other measures such as The Cost of the School Day, an increase in the school clothing grant and a review of thresholds for social security entitlement which accounts for the rapid rise in the cost of living. For example, one mother told us that she misses out on the school clothing allowance as her earnings are £50 a month over the limit.

“It is terrible what is happening, sometimes I wonder if I would be better not working. I think it is £50 a month that I earn that means that I miss out on the free meals and uniforms. I am £50 a week making sure they are on par with everyone else. I don’t want them to be the only ones taking in the packed lunch. I feel like working isn’t always best. I am paying full rent, I get a bit of a discount for council tax. I am using all my money every month.” Consideration needs to be given to a sliding scale of entitlement.

Another parent told us that the school clothing grant was only sufficient to buy shoes and some basic uniform. It did not cover the cost of coats, equipment and a school bag. *“Sometimes kids need clothes and shoes and they don’t think about that. They have to do with these things.”*

Young people tell us that they are singled out in school for wearing low-cost shoes and subject to bullying. One parent told us *“I think with school coming up as well, you get your clothing grant. My clothing grant paid for his trainers, and they say you shouldn’t pay that amount, but then if you don’t want them to be bullied, you do have to spend that. To buy five sets of uniforms, you can’t wash and dry all the clothes, but I would say that I have been alright. It is something they need to look at, they need a school bag, stationary, books, but it is all needing to come out of what I have. It doesn’t cover it.”* Parents do not feel they have a choice to purchase cheaper items and spending more on clothing means less for food.

Is there anything else that you think should be considered in the development of this plan?

Families we support consistently tell us that the social security system is confusing and difficult to navigate. It is not sufficient to consider ways of increasing the financial security without also considering ways to simplify the system. As one parent stated, *“overall, the system is confusing and payments are not always consistent meaning I can’t budget/ plan.”* Another parent stated *“Worrying about money and food has such a negative effect on mental health. I know people who have committed suicide over it. At times I have felt like jumping out the window.”*

