**Towards the manifestos: what’s the agenda for fixing poverty and tackling inequalities?**

**Helen Barnard Op-ed**

People in the UK, one of the richest countries in the world, are experiencing hunger at an astonishing rate. Our landmark research, Hunger in the UK, was published in June and indicated that one in seven people across the UK are going without or cutting back on food due to a lack of money. The onslaught of financial burdens that people have faced during the cost-of-living crisis, and coming so soon after the Covid-19 pandemic, has been relentless. However, this is only part of the problem that has led to poverty and hunger in this country.

At the Trussell Trust, we know that people are at food banks because their income simply does not cover the cost of the essential items they need. Our research indicates 70% of people who need to turn to a food bank are in receipt of Universal Credit and 86% of people referred to food banks in our network are considered to be destitute, meaning that it is currently not possible for them to afford the essentials we all need – including food and bills. This leads to families being faced with impossible decisions, for example a parent having to consider whether to put the heating on or to skip meals so their children can eat instead of them. This cannot continue.

The problem isn’t budgeting, families on low incomes know exactly where every penny goes. The problem is that that they simply don’t have enough money for essentials in the first place. People on the lowest incomes are desperately struggling to make ends meet, and it’s crucial that they are protected against further economic shocks.

Food banks provide short-term support to people in an emergency, they are not a lasting solution to hunger and poverty. The staff and volunteers in our network work tirelessly to ensure help continues to be available to people in need, but the current situation is not solving the underlying structural issues. The Trussell Trust’s vision is to end the need for food banks in the UK, if we are to achieve this then what we need is a social security system that is sufficient to meet people’s needs.

Research conducted in February 2023 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Trussell Trust, found that the average cost of a basket of essentials such as energy bills, food and basic hygiene products is £120 per week. This is £35 more than the basic rate of Universal Credit. With people’s incomes falling short by this much each week, it is unsurprising that around 90% of low-income households on Universal Credit are currently going without the essentials we all need to manage day to day.

This shortfall, which is forcing people to have to turn to food banks and other charitable support, is occurring because there is no objective assessment of the amount people need to get by. Without an established link between the cost of essentials and the rate that Universal Credit is set at, people will not receive the income they need to live with dignity. For too long people have been going without because social security payments are not based on a real reflection of life’s costs and are being pushed deeper into hardship as a result. Change is possible, but it must be focused on long-term solutions and tackle the systemic issues that push people into poverty.

We should all have the dignity of staying warm, fed and protected from poverty and we know with the right financial support, people would not be forced to experience hunger. That’s why we are calling on the UK Government to enshrine in law an ‘essentials guarantee’ , to make sure the basic rate of Universal Credit is based on an assessment of what people actually need and support cannot be pulled below this level. This includes establishing an independent process to determine the Essentials Guarantee level each year, based on the cost of basic essentials. Ensuring support always matches the reality of our day-to-day lives.  The evidence shows that investing in social security works, for example the temporary £20 weekly uplift to Universal Credit during the Covid-19 pandemic prevented tens of thousands of people from needing to use a food bank.

By pledging this, the UK government will be taking a crucial step towards ending the need for food banks, for good.

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