

**Ending the need for food banks: consultation on a draft national plan
Free Church of Scotland Response**

Questions

1. 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? [Y/N/Don't Know] [Open comment]

Yes.

The Free Church of Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government's consultation on ending the need for food banks. Many members of the Free Church of Scotland are involved in practical care for our neighbours through a variety of mercy ministries including foodbanks. We are also involved in work with refugee and asylum seekers. We see this as an outworking of Jesus' command to love our neighbour as ourselves and we share the Scottish Government's concern to respond to food insecurity in Scotland and welcoming the focus on ways to recognise the dignity of those in poverty.

We believe the desire and principles underlying the Scottish Government approach are good. We share their deep concern and compassion for those in need. However, we believe that there are significant areas which are not covered in the draft national plan. One of the main weaknesses is that the approach taken by the plan is focused almost exclusively on the role of the state in combatting food inequality. A more holistic approach is needed that draws on all aspects of society. We believe the national plan should identify the importance of community in combatting poverty and the role of families.

The role of community is vital as often it is those in a local community that best recognise need and are able to take practical steps to help. The response of communities throughout the Covid-19 crisis has shown the way communities can come together and provide things like community fridges and blessings boxes to offer practical support. These initiatives help foster community spirit and local volunteers who respect and care for those around them. It also gives access to resources the government does not have as these projects often raise their own support through donations from the community.

One of the causes of poverty and food inequality is the breakdown of relationships and the lack of family support. We note in the "Targeting and equalities" section of the consultation document reference is made to lone parents etc. highlighting the role of relationship breakdown as a driver of food poverty. Proverbs 17:17 tells us "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity." It is vital that we work as a society to strengthen family bonds as the first port of call for support in crisis. Of course, in cases where the family cannot support someone, others in the community

or at a state level will need to intervene, but we would encourage the government to view family as the primary level of support before giving grants and other support.

Another area that is lacking in the plan is any support to help those in poverty to enter the workplace. We recognise that for some work is not an option but with the right support we believe that those currently accessing food banks etc. could be encouraged to find work. This would be a positive step in two ways. Firstly, it looks to create a long-term solution to food inequality by providing someone with a way out that would not constantly rely on grants. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it helps to restore someone's dignity that they are working and achieving something meaningful and, in the process, getting the resources they need to live. Proverbs 13:4 tells us "A sluggard's appetite is never filled, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied." We believe that work is a social good, which also directly benefits the person in need and so steps must be taken to help more people into work. This will need to include education and practical support as someone seeks a job, perhaps for the first time.

2. Do you think that the actions underway will help to reduce the need for food banks as a primary response to food insecurity? [Y/N/Don't Know]

Don't Know

3. Do you think that the suggestions for what more we plan to do will help to reduce the need for food banks as a primary response to food insecurity? [Y/N/Don't Know]

Don't Know

4. Is there anything else that you think should be done with the powers we have at a national or local level to reduce the need for food banks as a primary response to food insecurity? [Open comment]

While we welcome the approach that says food banks should not be the primary response to food insecurity we are also (as already stated in our answer to question one) not persuaded that Government support should be the primary response. More needs to be done to support and strengthen family relationships in our society as a source of holistic support. There is also a need for more work to be done to include local communities in the process and to help people get back into work, where possible. All of these, things would help restore dignity and respect to those currently accessing food banks.

We also believe work should be done to educate people in practical skills such as cooking to get the best value out of what they purchase. Often, when someone has no or little experience of cooking, they are forced to purchase ready meals etc. which are not as healthy and tend to be more expensive. A simple course in preparing meals in a cost-effective way could be hugely beneficial. Churches and other charities could

support this work and also provide mentoring, opportunities for volunteering and work placements

Finally, we believe it is vital that the Government looks towards a long-term solution to food inequality. This will probably cost more but will have greater longer-term benefits and restore greater dignity in helping people to move beyond needing support. One idea would be to hold case conferences for those who are experiencing poverty, where those providing different support to a family or individual could come together and seek to find the best solution for the particular family. A financial inclusion advisor is needed as part of this conference. Such a move to long term solutions must also include community involvement and churches would be more than willing to help. A case conference approach is far more difficult and complex than simply giving grants etc. but in the long run is more likely to succeed in helping people move out of poverty.

5. Do you have any views on how we intend to measure impact, and what would give you confidence that we are moving in the right direction? [Open comment]

It is never easy to measure the impact of a variety of measures but it is vital that we do so in order to determine which measures are having the greatest impact on society. We think it is vital that we monitor who is receiving support. We also think other metrics such as the number of people in work or the number of family breakdowns will help the Government take a more holistic approach to combatting food inequality.

6. Is there anything else that you think should be considered in the development of this plan? [Open comment]

We note there is a strong focus in the consultation document on a cash-first approach. We know that this has the advantage of restoring dignity to individuals who currently access food banks. In particular, it introduces choices in what people spend the money on, allows culturally appropriate food etc. However, it also has disadvantages that the Government must be aware of – there is no guarantee where someone will spend the money and so it is inherently risky. Food might not be recognised as the person's primary need. To combat this we believe it would be a better approach to focus on the use of food vouchers which also restore dignity but are restricted to purchasing food.

With rising energy costs, we also note that fuel poverty is likely to increasingly occur alongside food poverty and work must be done to help with this also – perhaps through energy vouchers.

We would also point out that one weakness of the current approach and the many new ideas to help people is that there is a concern the system could become overly complex. Complexity is already a massive barrier to people accessing support and so we must be careful to make it as easy as possible for people to access the right help at the right time.

The Government should also do more to recognise the vital contribution that many local charities already make in this area and where possible seek to work more in partnership with third-sector organisations and churches. This is vital as often people do not want to go to the state for help, but a church or other local organisation might be able to get them the support they need.

We also need to recognise some of the geographical and rural issues connected to food poverty. Sometimes people access local food banks, community fridges and blessings boxes because they do not have to pay the transport costs of getting to a larger shop. Can more be done to arrange food deliveries to rural areas to reduce these costs?

The Free Church of Scotland welcomes the work the Scottish Government are doing to end the need for food banks in our society. We join with the Scottish Government in seeking to show compassion to all those in need. However, we also believe more needs to be done to recognise the importance of family, community and work as part of the solution to food poverty. A focus on these areas will ultimately have a greater long-term impact and increase individual dignity and respect.