

Right to Food Commission: Evidence from ATD Fourth World

Introduction: *ATD Fourth World is an anti-poverty, human rights charity with more than 60 years experience of tackling inequality and promoting social justice in the UK. Our Giving Poverty a Voice programme seeks out people experiencing the worst forms of long-term poverty and empowers and encourages them to engage and participate in their communities and to stand up and be heard on decisions that affect their lives.*

We are submitting evidence because our members with lived experience of poverty have a lot to say on almost every point in the Call for Evidence, particularly as formulated for the Community Voices survey.

*In addition, ATD Fourth World must highlight the **increased risk of social service interventions** when parents use a food bank and this is interpreted as evidence of “bad budgeting” and construed as a form of neglectful parenting. (This issue is included under point 7, below.)*

The quotations shared below come mainly from a series of discussions we held about the Call for Evidence with several small groups of 8 to 10 lived-experience activists who have built a practice of reflecting together in these peer groups. By analysing the questions through the lived experiences of our members, ATD Fourth World aims to challenge the structural failures of the welfare state. We would advocate for a Right to Food that leaves behind digital surveillance and institutionalised charity, moving instead toward structural equity, corporate accountability, and recognising human dignity.

1. Food insecurity in the UK - challenges

- *“If you don’t have food you might have no choice but to nick it. You might be forced into prostitution because of lack of food. Poverty is the degradation of people.”*

- *“It’s not that we don’t know how to eat healthy. We know what foods can make you feel full. We also know what foods are healthier—but we just can’t afford it.”*
- *“We should have a right to healthy food that meets our requirements”.*
- *“It’s about everyday rights—we should have adequate food*
- *“You’ve got no choice of foods to suit taste. For example, you can only afford Tesco Saver Baked Beans, not the Heinz beans that are tasty and more nutritious.”*

- *“Joy and personal agency are central. When you struggle to afford daily food, what about birthdays? Holidays? Special occasions?”*

- *“On Universal Credit, there’s just not enough money for food choice and healthy foods.”*
- *“It is not just the cost of the food itself that you need to think about. The costs of the oven, electricity and gas, water, repairs to the oven, can leave no money for food!”*
- *“Who can challenge supermarkets on the high prices of fresh, healthy foods? Also on the quality of cheap foods, which are often very bad.”*

2. Experiences of seeking support for food in the UK (food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens)

Some food banks or food pantries charge fees. The options available vary greatly depending on location. These options are often highly limited including food that is already spoiled. It is particularly difficult to afford appropriate food for children or adults with allergies or who need foods considered “safe” because of neuro-divergence (being on the autism spectrum or having ADHD, for example).

- *“You’re paying £15 to £25 for fruit and veg that are mouldy, bread that is hard as a rock, and tins that are past their sell-by date. For that money, you’d get better quality in a shop.”*

- *“What you get depends if you have the right address. In Rotherhithe, the food pantry gives as much fruit and veg as you want, plus 4 boxes of ready-cooked meals. But here in Southwark, they don’t even give you a voucher unless you’re homeless.”*
- *“Food banks never have items like lactose-free milk that you need if you’re allergic to lactose. And getting halal meat is hard too.”*
- *“Soup kitchens do have free meals, but you only get one meal for one person on one day of the week, so it’s no good for families.”*
- *“There’s no choice at food banks, so you often end up with foods that you don’t like or cannot eat.”*
- *“Choices at the food bank are unhealthy. In my area, you only get one food bank voucher every four weeks. It only covers things like pasta and soup tins that have a longer expiry date, nothing fresh.”*
- *“There’s restricted access to many food banks. For example, I don’t qualify because I have a small private pension even though it’s hard to get through to the end of the month.”*
- *“Food banks never ask what you want or what you can eat. You need a referral from a professional. It all leaves you with no choices.”*

Still worse, the experience of going to a food bank can feel shameful, paternalist, and dehumanising. And being seen to use one can entail stigma and bullying.

- *"I went to a food bank recently and it was very dehumanising. It's run by very nice people, all very well intentioned. But the poor guy I was with had to be interviewed. He had to be asked a question right when he came in the door. And then he had to have a number, literally a number, like he used to have in the Job Center. There were reasons for asking the questions. But you had to do it all in public. And then halfway through, one of his mates came in. He was embarrassed because he didn't want to be seen in the food bank."*

◦ *"In my town, the foodbank is located directly opposite the school. You dread going in there because your kids will get bullied for it. And they open at just the time when school breaks up, so you know people will see you."*

- *"You're waiting in long lines, and it's about how people treat you when you're standing in line."*
- *"The food bank here is run by a church. They quote the Bible at you when you're trying to get food, but I don't think that helps."*

Several ATD Fourth World experts by experience spoke about having received mouldy produce from food banks. Shockingly, these are not isolated incidents, but all too frequent occurrences. Yet though we can act aghast and wag our finger disappointedly at a food bank that dishes out perished perishables, we wonder: does the buck really stop with them? They are not the ones elected to protect our right to adequate food. In fact, they function as businesses in every way that matters. The problem is that those who require food assistance cannot treat them like a business. Theoretically, free-market capitalism should allow consumers to push bad business out of the ecosystem when they fail to meet expectations. But people experiencing food insecurity in the UK are not afforded the luxury of simply not using those services: they have no alternative.

- *"I don't want to sound like I'm attacking food banks and the third sector for doing the necessary work of filling the violent gap in social security; but it's equally important to critically reflect on these practices and harmful structures they lie within."*

3. Experiences of the impact of free school meals

Although when free school meals work out, families are very glad to have them, there are also problems. Food often runs out. Arrangements for allergies may not be suitable. And in secondary school, all meals are charged for.

◦ *"At school, the students at the back of the queue get nothing because they don't make enough. It happens all the time. Or only part of the meal is left, so your kid gets only rice or only sauce."*

- *“At school, if your kid has an allergy, they’re sent out of the room when the allergen is served—but they go hungry. And then they’re rushed back into the room while the allergen is still in the air!”*
- *“They do free school meals in primary school, but when your kid goes to secondary school, even if you’re still on Universal Credit, you have to pay—and that’s just for the basic meal. The ones who can pay more get a better meal. And once because some kids were acting up, the teacher denied them food!”*
- *“In secondary school, you have to top up the card with money. My family was so skint that when I couldn’t pay for the school meal, all I ate would be a few rainbow sweets. There’s no nutrition in that. How can you function in lessons when you’re starving? So once my support teacher said to me, ‘You need lunch, do you have enough money?’ But she said that in front of the other students, which felt intimidating. Another teacher once bought me lunch from her own pocket.”*

One parent spoke about discrimination involving the refreshments made available in a nursery:

- *“At that time, my partner wasn’t working so our son was there on funding. The nursery was made aware that his place was being funded. There were other kids whose parents worked and paid. But the ones that were there on the funding were treated differently than the ones whose parents paid for them. The ones that were paying to be there were treated very well. They had whatever they wanted when they wanted. Whereas the funded ones were likely put to one side and made to wait till after the ones that have paid. If they had juice, the ones paying to go there were given the juice first and whatever was left was for the funded kids. My son thought that was the way it was supposed to be. That’s the mentality. But everyone should be treated the same.*

“So if one person gets juice, the other kids should get juice. You can’t just discriminate because one pays and one doesn’t.”

4. Experiences of the impact of community kitchens

- *“When you want to go to a food bank, it’s hard. There aren’t any at all near where I live. The one nearest to me is quite far and I don’t know the bus routes. So I’d need a lot of time to get there and back and I have to have the bus fare. There’s a community fridge I could go to, but I have serious allergies and I worry that there’s cross-contamination there because I don’t know how they store the food.”*
- *“At the Tesco’s One Stop, they have a food-sharing scheme, but they’re making you pay for food that is already almost off its date.”*

5. Experiences of the impact of social protection safety nets such as income support

- *“We shouldn’t need food banks but benefits are not enough.”*

6. Evidence on the importance of a living wage for all on the ability to feed individuals and families

- *"The minimum wage for 18-25 year olds is a problem. They get paid less than the over 25s but have to pay the same costs for food. The cost of food is phenomenal."*

7. The impact of policies that affect families' abilities to feed themselves and their communities including on the right to family life and social service interventions

There are negative professional judgements about parents who don't have enough food in the house. This has a knock-on effect on people's sense of their own parenting capacity.

◦ *"Some parents who would be allowed by social workers to bring their kids home from care take one look at the cost of living and rising food prices and they think, 'How can I afford to bring them home now?'"*

- *"Social services keep track of how many times you go to the food pantry and if they think it's too much, they come and take your kids."*
- *"Social services are always looking inside your cupboards and fridges and freezer to judge if you can keep your kids by seeing how much food you have. As a parent, you start second guessing yourself until you don't know if you're coming or going."*
- *"If you have 4 kids and only 3 packets of crisps, they'll write down 'neglect' because they think one of your kids won't get any crisps. Or if you're giving the kids cereal at dinner time, that's judged as neglect too. It's judged that you're not doing a good enough job. When I was a kid, social workers said I was getting starved by my parents but it wasn't true."*
- *"After your kid has been in foster care, the problem is that the foster families buy expensive brands with jacked up prices. My nephew now only wants branded foods like Cocoa Puffs that cost £3 or £4, when the cheap version is only £1 or £2. He'll point at the cheap one and say, 'I don't want it, that's not what I got in foster care', and so his mother feels like she's failing him."*

8. Evidence on concerning those most marginalised including homeless, unemployed and those living with ill health or disability

For people with disabilities in food poverty, access to food means having the affordability, physical access, equipment, energy, autonomy, and stability needed to eat safely and with dignity. It's not just the ability to buy calories, but also the conditions to live a healthy, independent life.

- *"If you are street homeless, food banks are of no use because you don't have a tin opener or a stove to cook."*
- *"If you or your kids have allergies and food intolerances when you live in poverty, food which meets these needs is not affordable."*

- *“If you have a disability or additional needs, that can increase cost of food bills like when you’re diabetic and you have to watch your blood sugar.”*

11. What type of accountability mechanism would ensure the voices of those most impacted are collected and acted upon?

ATD Fourth World, working together with the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, has developed a process for the Inclusive and Deliberative Elaboration and Evaluation of Policies (IDEEP). Using the Merging of Knowledge methodology, this process harnesses the unique vantage point of people experiencing poverty in order to **improve decision quality by uncovering policy blind spots**. IDEEP rewires how decisions are made by using a model of active, free, informed and meaningful participation aligned with human rights expectations in order to ensure better outcomes with better legitimacy.

Additional remarks from ATD Fourth World

There are profound social, economic, and political meanings behind what — and how — we eat. From the global corporate takeover of local diets to the cold realities of the digital welfare state in the UK, conversations with experts by experience illuminate why food is never just about nutrition—it is a battleground for dignity.

Dignity in Action: a pilot project

A hotel in Surrey houses individuals and families seeking asylum. Isolated and lacking stimulating activities, they face intense daily pressures. On top of this, they are housed without access to any kitchen.

These people miss the basic human dignity of cooking their own meals.

In response, ATD Fourth World has hosted a fortnightly well-being morning in a centre with a large kitchen. While partner organisations like Barnardo’s offer vital administrative and navigation support, the community comes together to cook. One of the most popular and meaningful activities has been making pupusas together—restoring the connection to home, kitchen, and community that the hotel environment strips away.

Food Is a Lens to Reveal Power Dynamics

Food is inherently social. It connects us to home, helps pass down recipes across generations, and acts as a form of cultural resistance. However, looking at food through a socio-economic lens also highlights severe inequalities and changing landscapes of corporate power. Who drives our consumer society, and who gets a say in what our food-scapes look like?

The Institutionalisation of Food Aid

Poverty as a systemic failure manifest through food access across the UK and beyond. Among members of ATD Fourth World:

The core consensus is that food banks must only ever be a short-term emergency measure; yet they are increasingly treated as a permanent fixture compensating for the failure of the state to live up to the Beveridge Report's aspiration to ensure the abolition of want.

Digital Power and the Fragmented Welfare Landscape

It is worth noting the recent report on "Food poverty & digital power: The social realities of digitalising food assistance in England" by the UK Economic and Social Research Council.¹ This study examined how vulnerability has been fundamentally reshaped by the digitalisation of state welfare, including systems such as Universal Credit (UC), Healthy Start prepaid debit cards, cashless free school meals, and the Aspen cards used by people seeking asylum.

Key findings included:

- **The "Hub-ification" of Welfare:** Digital food assistance programs often try to bundle services—linking food support with budgeting advice or digital application aid. However, this has created an incredibly fragmented, unaccountable landscape of service provision.
- **Shifting the Burden:** Digitalisation has moved the need for human welfare support away from trained state officials and onto overstretched community networks and volunteers who are ill-equipped to handle comprehensive assistance.
- **The Digital Divide:** Applying for Universal Credit requires a device, stable internet access, and strong digital literacy. The state relies heavily on independent charities like Citizens Advice to guide applicants through these complex portals. Shockingly, clauses within these digital systems warn users that if an application is rejected, they may be barred from reapplying.
- **Part-Privatisation and Surveillance:** By shifting food security management to digital platforms, the Government has contracted massive private corporations like Mastercard, Amazon, and Palantir for financial and data management. This raises urgent concerns regarding the surveillance of low-income populations and the commercial exploitation of their personal data.

¹By Susanne Jaspars, Yasmin Houamed and Iris Lim of Digitalising Food Assistance, SOAS University of London Food Studies Centre, and UKRI. Available at:

https://digitalisingfood.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/SOAS_UK_DFA_WP2_2026.pdf.