

National Federation of Women's Institutes-Wales

Report of the Food Poverty Debate held at the National Assembly for Wales on 13 March

NFWI-Wales Chair, Mair Stephens, welcomed stakeholders to the WI's Food Poverty Debate hosted by **Simon Thomas AM**. The aim of the event was to launch in Wales the next phase of the WI's Food Matters campaign, through which the WI hoped to start a national debate on the issue of food poverty. Over the coming months, WIs across England, Wales and the Islands would be hosting similar discussion events in their own communities to learn more about the problem of food poverty, discuss the issues and then take action in their local area.

Mair Stephens presented an overview of the WI stating that over the last 103 years, the WI had campaigned to empower and support women within society, exerting their individual and collective influence; brought a series of controversial issues into the public domain; and brought about many changes in legislation and government policy.



Mair Stephens introduced the Food Matters campaign that stemmed from a resolution passed in 2016 to 'avoid food waste and address food poverty'. For the food waste phase of the campaign, the WI had been pressing supermarkets to change some of their practices that cause food waste up and down the supply chain, and encouraging them to publish their own food waste statistics. Mair said that while the WI would rather see good food redistributed not wasted, it was clear that the redistribution of food waste

was not a solution to food poverty. She emphasised that redistribution did not, and never could, close the gaps that cause people to be affected by food poverty adding that there was a need for systemic long term solutions.

Hannah Blythyn AM, Minister for Environment, said that it was unacceptable that some people had to choose between buying food and heating their homes. She noted that poverty was a growing and complex issue and that the rising cost of living and stagnating wages were contributing to people struggling to buy good quality food.

In terms of the Welsh Government's response, the Minister noted that education played a crucial role in improving health and referred to the Welsh Government's commitment to develop a National Obesity Strategy. Discussing food waste, she said that 70% of UK food waste comes from households and emphasised that supermarket initiatives which encouraged over buying were not sustainable for families and the environment. The Minister noted the Welsh Government's support for the WI's Food Manifesto. She reported that the Welsh Government provided a core grant to Fareshare Cymru which had provided access to 5 million meals to date to vulnerable groups. WRAP Cymru also received grant funding. She said that family households could make savings of about £700 a year by making simple changes to their food buying habits and reducing waste. She noted that more and more Welsh based companies were signing up to the Courtauld 2025 commitments.



The Minister emphasised that the Welsh Government was committed to stamping out food waste and tackling food poverty. She reported that the Welsh Government was working in collaboration with the Welsh Food Poverty Alliance and had a target of halving food waste by 2025. To conclude, the Minister welcomed the WI's Food Matters campaign stating that women could lead the way to eliminate food poverty.

Katie Palmer, Sustainable Food Cities Co-ordinator for Food Cardiff and representing the **Wales Food Poverty Alliance**, began by stating that many of the challenges in addressing food poverty were around aspiration.

She spoke of the £1.5 million funded Welsh Government and WLGA funded School Enrichment Programme to provide children with meals during the holidays. She highlighted the need to optimise family income and increase the uptake of free school meals and Healthy Start vouchers. There was, she said, a need to look at more sustainable ways of people being able to access healthy and affordable food as well as being able to access skills such as cooking, budgeting and digital inclusion.

Katie Palmer expressed concern that it was not known how many people were living in food insecurity. She acknowledged that general questions were included in the Wales National Survey but stated that more research was needed. She said that the Welsh Government's Food and Drinks Action Plan presented a number of opportunities to get people excited about food.



In summary, Katie highlighted a need to address poor wages, optimise wages, ensure access to healthy and affordable food and to monitor the number of people living with the challenge of food insecurity.

Ann Jones, NFWI Vice-Chair and Chair of NFWI's Public Affairs Committee said that food shaped the world we live in describing food as 'part of the glue that holds together our communities' and a 'crucial part of our history and identity'. She said that food should be an experience that was shared with friends and family but that too many people experienced food as a struggle with people across the country having to decide whether to turn the heating on or have a decent meal.

As a school governor, Ann had seen an increasing number of children going to school hungry and felt there was a need to tackle the stigma attached to free school meals and breakfast clubs. She highlighted that every town in her county, Ceredigion, had a food bank and referred to the lack of good quality jobs which led to increasing insecurity, and the poor public transport system that made it hard for some people to access good quality food. The

WI, she said, wanted everyone to be able to access a good and nutritious diet in a dignified way.



Ann Jones explained that WIs would be supported to organise discussions in their communities, working with stakeholders, to learn about the issue of food poverty as part of *the WI Great Food Debates II: Food Poverty*. The WI firmly believed that greater public engagement in this issue was key and that WIs had a big role to play in helping to promote public engagement with the challenges and opportunities we faced in securing sustainable food for all. Members would also be exploring both how they could help people who were in need in

their community and how they could help tackle the systemic problems behind food poverty. Members would also be encouraged to work with local organisations and groups and to write to their AM, MP and council.

Tony Graham, Director of Devolved Nations at The Trussell Trust shared the findings of the Joseph Rowntree Trust monitoring report 'Poverty in Wales 2018'. The level of poverty amongst couples and the disabled in Wales was the highest in the UK and some parts of the sector were described as being "in crisis". Tony Graham stated that many living in poverty were living in households where someone was working and the majority of child poverty was due to in-work poverty.

Tony Graham reported that there had been an incredible rise in demand for emergency food parcels since 2012. Ninety-six thousand emergency food parcels were handed out in Wales in 2016-17, a rise of 12% from 2015-16. The Trussell Trust continued to help food banks with front-line core agencies referring people to them. Tony Graham said that there was a need to get behind the causes of food poverty. He spoke of the More Than Food programme which involved food banks providing emergency food aid and enhanced support services through advisers located into food banks. The Trussell Trust, he said, would continue to advocate and speak on behalf of those who did not have a voice.



Tony spoke of the research which The Trussell Trust had commissioned Oxford University to undertake into food bank use. He mentioned that an All-Party Parliamentary Group on Foodbanks had been established and that there were conversations about setting up a cross party group in the Assembly.

The primary goal for The Trussell Trust was to work alongside churches and community groups. Tony shared the experiences of a young couple from Llanelli who had to decide whether to put food on the table or pay for fuel to visit their newborn baby in hospital. He quoted one food bank user who said on her first visit that it had been the "first humanity she'd experienced in years".

Dr Andrew Williams, Lecturer in Human Geography at Cardiff University began by exploring some of the causes of food insecurity and poverty. He noted that explanations of food poverty were 'politically contested' and was frequently explained as the result of an individual's inadequacies; whether an inability to budget effectively or lack of cooking skills. He highlighted in the UK several structural factors are producing 'vulnerability' for

households. These include a 22% rise in food prices, but 9% decline in average incomes, between 2007 and 2013; together with a 25% rise in domestic fuel bills (2010-2015) and 14% rise in average private sector rents (2011-17). He also noted that households have come under increasing pressure as a result of a growth in part-time, insecure and 'zero hours' work and the 'gig economy', and cuts to social welfare spending (with benefits increasing below the rate of inflation). He said that 900,000 disabled Job Seekers had been sanctioned since 2010. The National Audit Office (2018), he said, report that sanctions had directly



contributed to food poverty and cost twice as much as they save. He spoke of the threat of destitution describing the welfare state no longer as a meaningful safety but a 'perpetrator of injustice', citing evidence that Universal Credit had contributed to a 30% rise in the use of food banks.

partner more closely with low-pay employers such as Asda and Tesco. However, he highlighted that some food banks were under threat of closure due to the withdrawal of Communities First and noted concern on how this would impact on the third sector.

When assessing the role foodbanks might play in responding to food insecurity, Dr Andrew Williams highlighted the ethical dilemmas facing food banks, particularly the decision for the Trussell Trust to

In terms of solutions, Dr Andrew Williams said there was a need to focus on issues of austerity and low-pay employment. He questioned the introduction of a sugar tax on fizzy drinks and not on other drinks with high sugar content. He also referred to the Human Right to Food Campaign and stated that the UK had international obligations to secure the human right to adequate food and to set it out in domestic law.

Discussion

Following the opening statements by the panel members, a general discussion took place.

A former headteacher noted the stigma of free schools meals and the administration costs of running the scheme. She would like to see every child in Wales given a free school meal.

The experiences of a project in Dunbarton in Scotland which provided free school meals to all children in some of its most deprived areas were highlighted. Simon Thomas responded that it was important to involve the community in preparing a meal and to integrate the meal into the curriculum. It was noted that it could be incorporated into the themes outlined by Donaldson for the new curriculum. There was a need to destigmatise food and enable people to make their own choices and to explore how we treat and respect food and bring society together.



Steen the Chef said that produce was alien and people were far removed from food. Steen shared his experiences of delivering cooking sessions for young people in Bristol and Cardiff. He believed that all schools should have access to allotments and be educated on how to store and use vegetables. Ann Jones highlighted the involvement of the WI in the Gardening with Schools and Get Cooking projects. Katie Palmer noted that there was no

evidence of the best way forward in terms of policy. She mentioned that there was a UK Parliamentary Inquiry into Child Food Insecurity. She also stated that that was a cashless system in place in secondary schools across Cardiff, which was currently being rolled out in primary schools, and this ensured that pupils who received free school meals were not identified. Katie spoke of the need for a whole-school approach to address food poverty, working with dietitians, and noted her concern about loss of capacity and resources due to the removal of Communities First support. Katie mentioned the Food for Life Scheme, which was being considered as a pilot in Cardiff, as an example of a whole-school approach.

Tony Graham believed that the Scottish Parliament and their third sector were more aggressive in addressing these issues and that Wales could learn from other countries. He explained that in Scotland there was a single referral pathway. Under this pathway, when a person was referred to a third sector, it was ensured that they received the cash/benefits and food that they were entitled to.

Dr Andrew Williams felt that there should be investment in reinstating the social fund so that people received hardship payments instead of using the foodbank. He said that he was concerned that the social role of food was being lost and there was a need to celebrate eating together. Food is a statement of what and who we value. Rather than systems of food charity that ration and limit food to those considered deserving, he said all people should have the right to food.

Ben Lloyd from Oxfam Cymru asked about the impact of food insecurity on women. Tony Graham responded that The Trussell Trust did not keep gender records of people coming into food banks but there was evidence that single parents, often mothers, were facing the incredible challenges of food poverty. He referred to a NetMums survey that found that 1 in 5 mothers were missing a meal every day as they didn't have enough money to feed themselves.



Katie Palmer highlighted the work of the FSA on food security in Wales which was due to be published shortly.

Linda Grace from Jig-So Children's Centre based in Cardigan mentioned their 'Holiday Kitchen' pilot project which provided cooking and budgeting skills during school holidays to parents of children in receipt of free school meals. Linda Grace felt that it was important to map what organisations were doing to address food poverty.

Helen Nicholls, Community Dietetic Clinical Lead, Cardiff and Vale University Health Board highlighted the Nutritional Skills for Life accredited programme which supported third sector organisations to promote healthy eating and prevent malnutrition by incorporating food and nutrition skills into their work.

John Davies, President of NFU Cymru asked the panel to share their one wish to address food poverty. Dr Andrew Williams raised the neglected issue of rural food poverty, especially among farmers, and highlighted the need to address supermarket contracts with suppliers. He shared the experiences of a farmer in Cornwall who lost income when his cauliflowers were rejected by a supermarket for being 'too big' for the containers.

Tony Graham's wish was for a Poverty Minister with responsibility for addressing issues of poverty. He said that people facing food poverty should have an opportunity to speak to

political parties and expressed his frustration that the poverty portfolio had disappeared as well as the communities portfolio. He added that there was currently no point of focus and questioned who was driving the agenda.



Ann Jones said that her wish was that food banks were no longer needed. She said food banks were the sticking plaster to the issue.

Simon Thomas AM's wish was to see further improvements in the procurement system. He wanted to see the food procurement used in an anti-poverty way.

Katie Palmer's wish was for Food Insecurity to be measured and monitored to inform effective policy.

Closing the event, Mair Stephens thanked Simon Thomas AM for sponsoring the event, the speakers for their contributions, and the stakeholders for their attendance, comments and questions. She said that there was no one way of solving food poverty and emphasised the need to work together in collaboration for a common goal to reduce food poverty.