

GENERAL SYNOD

Food Wastage

A note from the Secretary General

1. This motion identifies a number of concerns regarding the attitude to and use of food within contemporary UK society. It commends initiatives by retailers and others to address waste within the food supply chain and calls upon government to bring forward legislation to minimise food waste in this sector. Most importantly it asks church members to use food responsibly and reduce waste in their own homes.

Background

2. Waste of perfectly edible food occurs at all stages of the food chain from the point of harvest or production, through processing, packaging and distribution, to retailers, restaurants and our homes. Studies suggest that around 10 million tonnes of food are wasted annually in the UK, with a value of over £17 billion, 60% of which could be avoided. This waste also generates 20 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions, further contributing to climate change.¹
3. The vast majority of food waste occurs in the home (70%), and is equivalent to around one quarter of the food purchased. Food manufacturing and processing accounts for a further 17% of waste by weight, with a comparatively smaller proportion lost in the restaurant and food service sector (9%) and at point of sale (2%). Of the 7.3 million tonnes of food wasted in households each year, between 4.4 and 5.7 million tonnes is avoidable waste, some of which is recycled through composting, anaerobic digestion or incineration for energy generation. The majority of waste is disposed to landfill or via the sewers. Of the 300,000 tonnes of food wasted by retailers, 30,000 tonnes are estimated to be redistributed, with 5000 tonnes for human consumption.² This therefore means that reducing food waste is primarily a matter of personal responsibility.
4. Food poverty is defined as ‘the inability to obtain healthy affordable food.’³ Although there is no official measure of food poverty in the UK, a recent United Nations survey found that an estimated 8.4 million people in the UK were living in households reporting having insufficient food in 2014. 5.6% of people aged 15 or over in the UK reported struggling to get enough food to eat and a further 4.5% reported that, at least once, they went a full day without anything to eat.⁴ The growth in foodbanks is the most visible manifestation of food poverty in this country. In the year to the end of March 2017, The Trussell Trust’s Foodbank Network provided over 1,182,000 three-day emergency food supplies to people in crisis, an increase of around 73,000 compared to the previous year. 436,900 three-day food parcels went to children.⁵ It is estimated that these figures represent around 500,000 different people,⁶ but is likely to be an under

¹ WRAP, *Estimates of Food Surplus and Waste Arisings in the UK*, (2017), p1, 4.

<http://www.wrap.org.uk/content/estimates-food-surplus-and-waste-arisings-uk>

² *Ibid.*, p.1-5

³ Sustain, *What is food poverty?* https://www.sustainweb.org/foodaccess/what_is_food_poverty/

⁴ Anna Taylor and Rachel Loopstra, *Too Poor to Eat: Food insecurity in the UK* (Food Foundation, 2016)

www.foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/FoodInsecurityBriefing-May-2016-FINAL.pdf

⁵ The Trussell Trust, *UK foodbank use continues to rise* (2017) <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2017/04/25/uk-foodbank-use-continues-rise/>

⁶ *Too Poor to Eat*, p.6

estimate of those in need of emergency food assistance, because it does not include the many non-Trussell Trust foodbanks and because not everyone in severe food poverty will resort to using foodbanks. Since 2007, the cost of food has risen, driven by successive spikes in commodities, by 27%.⁷ In contrast, incomes have not increased by the same amount due to sluggish wage growth and the freeze/cuts in many working age benefits.⁸ Low-income households continue to spend a much higher proportion of their income on food – nearly a fifth of their total expenditure compared with less than a tenth for high-income households.⁹

Policy

5. It is important to note that there is not a direct relationship between solving the problem of food waste and addressing food poverty. Reducing food waste, important though that is, will not solve the structural causes of food poverty, which are related to the complex interaction of low paid and insecure employment, the rising cost of living, welfare reform, personal indebtedness, and the accessibility and availability of food. By far the largest group of people who access foodbanks do so as a last resort because they have insufficient income or because they have been affected by delays or changes in benefits, leaving them at crisis point with little or money to put food on the table.¹⁰ Foodbanks in areas where Universal Credit has been fully rolled out to all claimants have seen a 16.9% average increase in referrals for emergency food in the last year, more than double the national average increase of 6.6%.¹¹ Ensuring that clause (a) of the motion applies will require continued engagement by the Church and partner organisations with Government regarding access to better paid and more secure employment, fair and timely receipt of adequate benefits, and support for responsible credit and other measures to tackle the poverty premium, as well as coordinated local responses to food poverty.¹² The Church of England is already taking an active role, both locally and nationally, through its involvement in Feeding Britain¹³, the UK Food Poverty Alliance, and a myriad of local initiatives across the country.
6. Clause (d) of the motion proposes requesting Government to legislate to reduce food wastage by retailers. On the face of it this seems to be a very sensible request, following the lead taken by France and Denmark on implementing such legislation. The legislation introduced in France made it illegal for retailers above a certain size to destroy or send food to landfill. It also required them to establish relationships with redistributors of surplus food, and offer them suitable food. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA) Select Committee of the House of Commons completed an inquiry into food waste in England, published 30 April 2017. The report examined the need for legislation and concluded that rather than bringing forward formal legislation,

⁷ Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, *Food Statistics Pocketbook 2016*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/food-statistics-pocketbook-2016>

⁸ *Too Poor to Eat*, p.7

⁹ Office for National Statistics, *Family spending in the UK: financial year ending March 2016* (2017) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/expenditure/bulletins/familyspendingintheuk/financialyearendingmarch2016>

¹⁰ Jane Perry et al, *Emergency Use Only: Understanding and reducing the use of food banks in the UK* (2014) <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/emergency-use-only-understanding-and-reducing-the-use-of-food-banks-in-the-uk-335731>

¹¹ The Trussell Trust, *UK foodbank use continues to rise*

¹² See, for example, Sustain's *Developing food poverty action plans* (November 2016), https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/food_poverty_action_plans-short_guide.pdf

¹³ The Bishop of Truro, for example, co-chaired the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the UK: <https://feedingbritain.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/food-poverty-feeding-britain-final-2.pdf>

the incoming Government should undertake an assessment of how it might further promote the redistribution of surplus food by additional fiscal measures.¹⁴ The EFRA Select Committee recommended that the Government encourage all food manufacturers and retailers to participate in the voluntary Courtauld Commitment¹⁵ to reduce food waste and packaging. The report also encouraged further small-scale financial support for organisations facilitating redistribution from the retail and food service sectors. It is unclear whether this proposed voluntary approach will be sufficient to encourage further retailers to develop proactive policies, without associated public demand for action.

7. Currently most foodbanks are only able to store and redistribute non-perishable items of food in tins and packets that do not need refrigeration. This limits the proportion of food waste or surplus food (over-orders or incorrect deliveries) that can be redistributed via foodbanks. In order to extend waste / surplus food redistribution by retailers and food service providers (clause b), alternative strategies need to be adopted. Some retailers have developed partnerships with organisations such as FareShare that redistributes surplus food to charities and community groups across the country that support vulnerable people. In 2016, 28.6 million meals were provided to vulnerable people through just 13,500 tonnes of redistributed food via FareShare.¹⁶ This is a complex undertaking but which pays benefits for the retailer and the recipient charities and significantly reduces waste. Other initiatives include Feedback, The Gleaning Network which seeks to redistribute fresh produce still in fields that is not required by retailers, the Real Junk Food Network and numerous local organisations working across many communities.

Personal Responsibility

8. Although the waste food produced by the retail, food manufacture and restaurant sectors is significant and important to reduce, it is dwarfed by food waste in the home. The call to personal responsibility is reflected in clauses (c) and (e) of the motion. So what can we all do to reduce food waste?
 - a) First and most important is to avoid buying food, particularly fresh food that is not really needed. For example, avoid 'buy one get one free' offers unless you can freeze, otherwise preserve or use immediately the additional food purchased.
 - b) Cook only what you need for the meal you are preparing or have a plan to use the leftovers in a future meal.
 - c) Know and apply the difference between 'use before' dates (which are about food safety) and 'best before' dates (food quality) and use common sense.
 - d) Recycle or compost food that really is waste, rather than putting it in the landfill bin.
 - e) Part of the waste stream is created by very high and limiting standards on size and shape for fruit and vegetables. Some retailers sell misshapen produce at a reduced

¹⁴ House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, *Food waste in England*, Eighth Report of Session 2016–17 p.22 <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/environment-food-and-rural-affairs-committee/inquiries/parliament-2015/food-waste-inquiry-16-17/>

¹⁵ WRAP, *The Courtauld Commitment*, <http://www.wrap.org.uk/content/what-is-courtauld>

¹⁶ <http://www.fareshare.org.uk/about-us/>

price, look for these items and ask the retailer to stock more (they taste just as good).

- f) Lots of places already have organisations that are working to use surplus food from retailers and the food service sector, and that would welcome additional volunteers. Find out who these organisations are and join in.
 - g) Make use of new initiatives such as Olio which is a free app connecting people with their neighbours and with local shops so surplus food and other items can be shared, not thrown away.¹⁷
 - h) Take a look at the Love Food Hate Waste website for more information, advice and recipes to reduce food wasted in the home.¹⁸
 - i) Join in with a national or local campaign about food waste and encourage friends and neighbours to talk about the issue.¹⁹
9. These recommendations are relatively simple, easy and cheap to apply. Synod members may wish to bear in mind these possibilities as they address the motion.

William Nye
Secretary General

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¹⁷ <https://olioex.com/>

¹⁸ <https://www.lovefoodhatewaste.com/>

¹⁹ For example: Tearfund Action, *Renew our Food* https://www.tearfund.org/about_you/action/food_waste_action/