



## Hunger and malnutrition among older people: submission to APPG on Hunger Inquiry

October 2017

### Background

Feeding Britain is a national charity working to combat hunger, and its root causes, in the UK. We convene and support networks of local organisations working against hunger in 14 locations around the country. This submission highlights some of the key issues that we see in relation to hunger among older people, and some examples of interventions that we feel could contribute to reducing hunger and malnutrition among older citizens.

### Key issues

#### *Emergency food assistance*

Older people are underrepresented at food banks and traditional emergency food projects. On a positive note, this is likely in part to be because the relative stability of income from pensions means that older people are less subject to unexpected variation in income that may push them into food crises. Significant policy steps have also been taken in recent years to reduce the effects of pensioner poverty.

However, it is important that these successes do not mask the difficulties faced by many older people. Age UK report that 23% of over 60s (3 million people) have skipped meals to cut back on costs, and 42% of over 60s (5.8 million people) struggle to afford basic items such as food, gas and electricity.<sup>1</sup>

These statistics chime with the anecdotal evidence and concerns raised by staff and volunteers working in food banks and other emergency food projects in our Feeding Britain pilot areas, who are concerned that the relatively low numbers of older people requesting assistance does not necessarily equate to low levels of need. There are barriers which mean that older people who do need assistance are less likely to attend food banks, meaning that their vulnerability may go unnoticed. These include:

- Logistical factors such as mobility or a lack of transport, resulting in difficulties accessing a food bank and/or carrying bags of food home. This is a particular concern in rural areas.

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<sup>1</sup> "ICM Cut Backs Survey," 2009 in Later Life in the United Kingdom, Age UK (Via Malnutrition Task Force)

- Social stigma and pride making people reluctant to accept charitable help. While this is a factor for people from all age groups, it is particularly pronounced among older generations.
- Lack of awareness about financial and social support and how to access it, particularly for people with limited digital access.

### *Malnutrition*

Hunger among older people is not simply about not having enough food, but also about not getting adequate nutrition. As well as physical ailments, loss of appetite, or loss of enthusiasm for eating, is a big issue, particularly for those older people living alone and experiencing social isolation. Without the social activity or company around preparing and eating food, older people may become less likely to cook proper meals, or to have the motivation to eat.

At the same time, there are concerns that strong public health focus on anti-obesity messaging, results in some older people receiving inappropriate information. Public health guidance on food is dominated by anti-obesity messages, which are often counter-productive for older people who are not getting sufficient calories, and are discouraged from eating the high calorie foods they actually need.

Older people, and/or their carers, may be reluctant to include these foods in meals for fear of eating a diet perceived to be unhealthy. This is a particular concern given the lack of nutritional support provided to carers. Carers UK found that 60% of carers worry about the nutrition of the person they care for. One in six carers is looking after someone at real risk of malnutrition but do not have nutritional support of any kind.<sup>2</sup> There is a need for a greater official acceptance that malnutrition is a public health issue, alongside obesity, and more nuance in the messaging aimed at older people.

### *Reduction in wider support services*

The reduction in support services that can help older people to maintain an adequate and healthy diet, is a huge issue. Meals on wheels services have traditionally been on the frontline of supporting vulnerable older people, both through the food itself and the social interaction and reassurance of having a regular daily visit. The loss of these services in many local authority areas has a significant impact on older people. We have heard of some councils technically fulfilling their responsibilities by signposting older people to local takeaways or supermarket ready meals.

### *A hidden problem*

Hunger and malnutrition can be a hidden problem. Among all ages and groups, there is social stigma around hunger and people may be reluctant to seek help. However, this appears to be a particularly significant barrier among older people. Anecdotal evidence from those working with older people highlights examples of older people presenting a less urgent picture of their plight to carers or those visiting than might really be the case, because of pride, hospitality to visitors, or because of a reluctance to be seen as a burden. For example, we've heard of older people who would normally have the heating or lights off to save money, turning these on when they know that people are due to visit the house. One meals on wheels volunteer shared the example of an older man who would switch off the lights on his Christmas tree as soon as the team left the house, to save on electricity.

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<sup>2</sup> "Malnutrition and Caring: The Hidden Cost for Families," Carers UK, 2012 (Via Malnutrition Task Force)

### *Older carers*

While little specific data is available, we are also concerned about the specific additional risks for older people who are taking on caring responsibilities for family members, either spouses/other adult family members, or grandchildren. The additional financial stresses, combined with the existing vulnerabilities outlined above, likely put this group at additional risk of hunger and malnutrition. We also know that parents experiencing food insecurity are likely to skip meals or employ other detrimental coping mechanisms to ensure their children can eat. The likelihood is that this effect is equally if not more pronounced for older relatives looking after grandchildren.

Concerns have also been raised specifically about women, aged 55-70. While their relative youth does not immediately flag them as vulnerable, they are more likely to be taking on double caring responsibilities for children/grandchildren as well as elderly parents. The costs of doing so, and the reduced capacity for income if people are still working, places this group at particular risk.

In some cases, there are additional impacts for children cared for during the holidays by older relatives. If carers are less physically able, children may have reduced opportunities for physical activities during the holidays, and grandparents may be less able to take the children to support that is available, such as holiday clubs where food is provided. This creates a barrier to valuable support for children and families at risk of hunger during the school holidays, with impacts not only for the child themselves, but also the knock on financial effect on the carers and family.

### *The financial cost of malnutrition*

The financial cost of treating malnutrition among older people is huge: the public health and social care costs of malnutrition in adults and children in England in 2011-2012 was estimated at £19.6 billion, equating to 15% of health and social care expenditure. Most of this expenditure was on healthcare, most for secondary healthcare for adults, predominantly for older adults.<sup>3</sup> The researchers who published this study point out that because of the numbers involved, even relatively modest savings can have huge financial benefits: a 1% cost saving on the overall expenditure would represent £196 million. We feel this presents a strong case for investing in measures to combat hunger and malnutrition among older people within the community, to prevent people from falling into desperate situations.

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<sup>3</sup> Marinos Elia (on behalf of the Malnutrition Action Group of BAPEN and the National Institute for Health Research Southampton Biomedical Research Centre), 'The cost of malnutrition in England and potential cost savings from nutritional interventions', 2015

## Suggested solutions

Based on our work with local groups around the UK, the following are some initiatives which we feel could contribute to combatting hunger and malnutrition among older people. Given the financial costs and potential cost savings, not to say the human and social imperative to act, we feel that there is a clear argument for investing in these types of community based solutions.

- Supporting a broad range of community based anti-hunger projects. Responses to hunger and malnutrition in older people need to recognise a broad range of community based solutions, alongside more widely known emergency food interventions such as food banks. In particular, initiatives which involve social eating and strengthen community linkages have great potential. In Feeding Britain pilot areas, examples include:
  - Community cafes offering pay as you feel prices or highly subsidised prices, for example Sarah's Flowers and Tea café in Barnsley. This café makes use of surplus food, and offers a daily lunch for £1, open to all. It offers a welcoming environment where people of all ages can have an affordable meal, and can also enjoy a social space, without the stigma of being perceived as a food poverty project.
  - Home Cooks Project in Lambeth, which connects local volunteers with an older person in their community. The volunteer cooks an additional portion of the home cooked meal they are preparing for their own family, and deliver it to the older person. Anecdotal evidence suggests that an older person is more likely to make the effort to eat if the meal has been prepared and offered to them by others.
  - Lunch clubs for older people, which provide a social space as well as food. Research conducted in Greenwich by a student dietician found that many clubs are limited in the number of days they can offer support because of limited funds and a reliance on volunteer staff.
  - Social eating spaces, such as the Souper Kitchen model piloted by Feeding Derbyshire, where community volunteers cook and serve meals prepared using surplus food, where people sit down and eat together.
  - Mobile delivery schemes to combat food poverty, which address mobility and transport barriers. Organisations within the Feeding Bristol network have piloted mobile food banks, and Feeding Derbyshire has trialled affordable food boxes for home delivery. There is also a useful model implemented by Hertfordshire Independent Living (HILS) where the meals on wheels service also delivers emergency food parcels from food banks to vulnerable families when needed, demonstrating the value that can be created where existing community assets are creatively combined.
- Learning from other anti-hunger interventions. There is learning from successfully tackling hunger among other groups that may be helpful, particularly from responses to holiday hunger. For example, our Feeding Britain pilot in Leicester, developed a new approach this summer which focused on adding a food offer to existing clubs running activities for children in deprived communities. One charity within the network took on the responsibility to source and prepare lunches (drawing heavily on donated good quality surplus ingredients), which were delivered to holiday clubs around the city which were successfully engaging vulnerable children but had previously been unable to offer food, because of a lack of funding, volunteers, skills or confidence in food handling. Similar models, where collaborative community initiatives add food into existing services for older people may be worth exploring.

- Greater nuance in public health messaging on nutrition. There is a need to ensure that guidance on the specific needs of older people is not lost within dominant anti-obesity messaging. It is important that older people, and carers, receive appropriate information to ensure their diets contain enough calories and nutrition, and, where necessary, combat the assumption that high calorie foods should be avoided.
- Supporting meals on wheels services. While we recognise that local authority budgets are under huge pressure, social enterprise models such as HILS can provide a sustainable solution for local authorities, which help to combat hunger and malnutrition, as well as providing reassurance and social interaction for vulnerable older people. There are also other exciting models where existing resources are combined to support older people, for example by using existing school kitchens and catering services to produce meals that can be distributed to older people.
- Support for digital access among older people to help them access the support available. With benefits and other support increasingly having to be accessed online, as well as information about the financial support and emergency help that is available, supporting digital access could help to reduce older people's vulnerability. Projects that can help older people get online (through training of community volunteers and providing equipment within existing projects reaching older people) could play a valuable role in reducing vulnerability to hunger and malnutrition.

To end on a positive note, we think it is important to recognise that older people have the potential to be a significant positive resource in the fight against hunger, malnutrition and obesity, and should not be seen solely as a burden. Older people often have skills in cooking, shopping on a budget and food growing, that could benefit others in the community. Projects which bring generations together around food, providing food as well as social interaction and skill sharing, have an important role to play.