

SUBMISSION FROM BRITISH RED CROSS

Who we are

1. We help people in crisis, whoever and wherever they are. We are part of a global network that responds to conflicts, natural disasters and individual emergencies. We enable vulnerable people in the UK and abroad to prepare for and withstand emergencies in their own communities, and when the crisis is over we help them to recover and move on with their lives.
2. The British Red Cross is part of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which comprises:
 - > The International Committee of the Red Cross
 - > The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and
 - > 188 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies worldwide.
3. As a member of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the Red Cross is committed to, and bound by, its fundamental principles. These are: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality.

As an auxiliary to government in the UK, we help the emergency services and statutory authorities in any way we can to meet the needs of people affected by emergencies, big or small.

Introduction

The British Red Cross welcomes the opportunity to submit written evidence to the Welfare Reform Committee on the issue of food banks in Scotland, and would like to thank the committee for the invitation to participate in the roundtable discussion on this issue.

The Red Cross remains concerned about the humanitarian impact of food poverty in the United Kingdom. As an organisation which responds to crisis we are currently reviewing our strategic position and response to what we believe is an increasing level of food poverty in the UK.

The committee should know that the Red Cross is not an expert in this field and the direct initiatives we have undertaken in relation to operational activity to alleviate food poverty has been in partnership with Fareshare.

Our response to the call for evidence and indeed food poverty in the UK are shaped by one of our fundamental principles; humanity, which states the movement in its international and national capacity will endeavour to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found.

Background

Last year the Red Cross worked in partnership with Fareshare to provide volunteer support during one of the bi-annual Tesco Neighbourhood Food Collections events.

The Red Cross was becoming increasingly concerned about the humanitarian impact of food poverty on people living in the UK. We were keen to help to respond to this crisis, however remained acutely aware that at that time as an organisation we had limited knowledge of what response would be the most effective. Furthermore, we were aware that there were a number national and local organisations already working to address the problems around food poverty and wanted to assess whether there was an appropriate role we could play which would help and assist this response.

Our partnership with Fareshare allowed us to use our volunteer network to support a food drive which would be distributed to hundreds of UK charities to deliver food as part of their offer to beneficiaries.

The initiative took place on the 29, 30 November and 1 December 2013. Over these three days 550 Red Cross volunteers helped to collect 1,800 tonnes of food. This equates to 32,000 large supermarket trolley loads or most importantly 4.3 million meals. This food drive collected 17% more food than the previous collection in the summer which the Red Cross had not been involved in. This may be due to an increase in volunteer numbers, with 700 more volunteers for the winter collection.

There was also significant media interest in the food collection drive. This may be because the Red Cross is strongly associated with responding to crisis, and through our involvement there was an acknowledgement that food poverty is becoming an increasing problem in UK society.

In addition to this the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies also published a report last year which analysed the humanitarian impacts of the economic crisis in Europe.¹ This report carried out a mapping exercise across the 52 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Europe and Central Asia.

The report found that across Europe the economic crisis has had a profound affect since 2009 with the impact disproportionately hitting those who were already vulnerable, while also hitting new groups of people who had never been affected before. Increase in demand for food aid is one indicator which a number of national societies have witnessed.

The report contained several key findings, however those that are most relevant to this evidence gathering session include:

- > Concern that the humanitarian impact of the crisis is being felt well beyond any economic upturn.
- > The crisis has increased the number of people living in poverty.

¹ International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, *“Think differently: Humanitarian impacts of the economic crisis in Europe”* (2013), http://www.ifrc.org/PageFiles/134339/1260300-Economic%20crisis%20Report_EN_LR.pdf.

- > There is a significant number of “new poor” – ordinary working people who cannot cover all their basic costs at the end of the month, and who face the dilemma of buying food or pay their rent.

It is important to note that this is a report which covers 52 national societies and is not focussed on the UK. However, the findings demonstrate that the issues of food poverty in Scotland are an issue of concern in many countries in Europe, and indeed are of concern to the wider Red Cross and Red Crescent movement.

Committee questions

As previously stated, the Red Cross is not an expert in the area of food aid in the UK. Currently we provide destitution support to refugee and asylum seekers, however other than this specific group of people, we do not directly provide food aid in the UK.

The research undertaken by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies suggests that the increase in the use of food banks can be attributed to a number of factors including unemployment, insufficient wages and increasing prices. That said, the report indicates that the effects of the economic crisis is having an impact on people already on the margins of society with “more people getting poorer, the poor getting poorer and the ‘social distance’ to climb back into mainstream society has become farther”.

At present the Red Cross does not have any evidence to comment on whether there is a causal link or not between the increase in food bank use and welfare reform. However, we remain concerned about the increasing use of food aid and as an organisation we are continuing to assess whether there is a strategic contribution we can make to help alleviate this crisis.

As an organisation we are predominantly concerned with the humanitarian impact of increasing use of food banks. We believe access to food is a basic human need. In line with our international role and fundamental principles we believe that food, water and shelter are basic needs that prevent and alleviate suffering. The Red Cross is concerned that the economic crisis is impacting on people’s ability to feed themselves and their families. This has implications on health, mental health and wellbeing. As an emergency response organisation it is responding to this immediate crisis on access to food that we believe we may be able to add value, however, for us it is important that this remains a short term response.

Lessons from our international movement warn of the dangers of allowing food banks and food aid to become a permanent fixture in society. It is important that the root causes of increasing use of food banks and food aid are addressed. At present, the Red Cross is not in a position to identify the wide ranging factors which are impacting on access to food banks, however we would be willing to work in partnership with others to address the immediate problems in such a way which responds to those underlying causes. Indeed the International Federation report warned of the dangers of people becoming “passive recipients of help”. It is important that the root causes of increasing use of food banks and food aid are addressed.

We look forward to exploring these issues in more depth in the roundtable discussion.

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For additional information, please follow this link to a report titled – [Think Differently: Humanitarian impacts of the economic crisis in Europe](#)