

DIGITAL DIGEST



EVERY HUNGRY CHILD SHAMES US

By: Emma Lewell-Buck, MP, South Shields, elected in 2013

Before entering the House of Commons, Emma worked as a child protection social worker whilst serving as Councillor in South Tyneside and a Lead Member for adult social care.

Emma was born in South Shields and is the first woman to represent the Constituency in Parliament. She has been a Shadow Minister within the Communities and Local Government team and was the Shadow Minister for Children and Families in the Education Team. Emma was a founder member of an All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger which led to the establishment of the national charity Feeding Britain. Emma is a trustee of the charity which seeks to eradicate UK hunger.

Thirty years ago, the United Nations produced its Convention on the Rights of the Child. It was designed to protect refugee children from the worst ravages of war and famine. The British government signed and ratified it. However, while according to its terms we are committed to fighting for the rights of children around the globe, it is not applied to our very own families. There is no obligation for domestic law to take account of its rules when drafting new legislation.

During this awful crisis, children are suffering. My local food banks are running low on stock. Before the crisis began, UNICEF reckoned 2.5 million British children, about one in five, endure times when their parents cannot buy enough food for them. 10% of these children are classified as living in 'severe food insecurity', two and a half times the European average.

This is not unavoidable in the world's fifth largest economy. It has been a consistent political choice and it is a matter of enormous shame. We found £500 billion to bail out the banks. We continue to budget for more than £20 billion to be spent on Crossrail and even the refurbishment of the Palace of Westminster will be £4 billion. I'm not suggesting that any of these things is anything other than money well spent but would anybody say any one of them was more important than the essential needs of children?

If this crisis has proved one thing, it is that government can always find money to cope with an emergency and that is precisely what a lack of food is for every single hungry child.

We've seen the website for free school meals vouchers crash and laughably, those which can be successfully retrieved, can be redeemed at places like M&S and Waitrose. There's nothing wrong with those shops but to even consider that they fall in the price range of struggling families is risible. What's more, the Department for Education says it doesn't even know how many vouchers have actually been delivered to parents over the past month, and worse still, they have said the scheme will be suspended for half term and the summer holidays.

Charities are besieged by hungry people. I'm a trustee of Feeding Britain which aims to eliminate hunger in the UK. Staff and volunteers are working flat out to provide food for people who aren't getting enough. Again, in the fifth largest economy in the world, how can it be that charities are forced to do the job of government? There should not be a need for charities to fill hungry mouths in our country. Every meal delivered is a disgraceful stain on this government's record. Universal Credit is supposed to be the safety net for low income families but the payments are too small and the five-week wait is untenable for some.

In January, the debt charity StepChange warned that 10% of its clients admitted that they'd had no alternative but to go to a loan shark or other high-cost credit provider to make ends meet. In the midst of lockdown, I fear many more will be forced to take that treacherous and downward spiralling route today.

Were it not for the current crisis, I would have presented my School Breakfast Bill to Parliament last month. It calls for free and healthy breakfasts for schoolchildren in severely deprived areas. Surely such a pledge is the bare minimum we should be making to children who have been shown to underperform academically without proper nourishment as well as suffering more illness and emotional distress?

Only weeks ago, I asked Defra how many of the 1.5 million people in England in the Covid-19 shielding group were getting the promised weekly food parcel from government. The response was 290,000 – fewer than one in five. By the government's own logic, that's potentially another 1.25 million people going hungry.

Every Thursday, the nation goes to its doorstep to applaud the NHS for its astonishing efforts to keep us all safe. Every politician of every hue is keen to be seen and heard to support this pillar of the welfare state. How can it be that some of those very same people are not demanding the nation's children are afforded a similar level of respect for their lives, simply by making sure they have enough to eat?