

Date: 12 February 2021

Subject: Greater Manchester - A City-region that Supports the 'Right to Food'

Report of: Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester, GM Portfolio Lead for Reform  
Elise Wilson, Leader of Stockport Council, GM Portfolio Lead for Economy

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## PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report outlines the 'Right to Food' campaign, a lobbying effort calling on central government to make access to food a legal right in the UK as part of the National Food Strategy. This report seeks agreement of Greater Manchester Combined Authority to show Greater Manchester wide support to the Right to Food pledge, recognising the far-reaching opportunities and benefits this would have for all residents.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Members of GMCA are asked to:

1. Endorse the call for the 'Right to Food' to be incorporated into the 'National Food Strategy' and in time enshrined in legislation, recognising that such a national reassurance could address wider issues in the welfare system and enable us to focus local efforts on upstream poverty prevention.
2. Co-sign a unified message from Greater Manchester in the form of a letter to the Independent Lead of the National Food Strategy commission to highlight this request.
3. Note the intention to develop the Greater Manchester 'No Child Should Go Hungry' campaign into a broader GM-wide ambition around tackling the root causes of poverty with an appropriate balance of targeted work and early intervention & prevention.

## CONTACT OFFICERS:

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## **The National Picture**

The National Food Strategy is an independent review commissioned by government intending to set out a vision and a plan for a better food system for England. It is the first such review in 75 years and is comprehensive in its approach to cover issues from 'field to fork', pulling together environmental, economic and social issues.

Whilst such a review is long overdue it also comes at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the stark socio-economic inequalities that exist across communities. The crisis of poverty and inequality manifest in many ways with food poverty perhaps being one of the most impactful and visible in terms of the immediate physical, mental and social strain it places on individuals and families.

A series of government U-turns in responding to food provision for children during the pandemic demonstrates the distant nature of Whitehall machinery, but queues outside foodbanks have not appeared merely as a result of the pandemic and its social wave of harm. Systemic failures in the welfare system over a considerable period of time and too much of a top-down approach have led to a crisis point where there is now a need for strong action.

The UK's food poverty rate is among the highest in Europe and despite being the sixth richest country in the world, millions are struggling to access the food they need. It is estimated that around 10 million people in the UK are living in food poverty, with BAME, disabled and older people worst affected. Many people struggling for food are employed as 72 per cent of children in poverty have at least one parent who works, according to the Child Poverty Action Group.

Marcus Rashford has modelled the epitome of public advocacy in recent months highlighting the plight of thousands of families trying to make ends meet during the pandemic and forcing the government to reassess its position on provision to Free School Meal eligible children outside of school term time. In addition, there has been the emergence of many other campaigns and alliances built to highlight and call for action in responding to food poverty and its causes.

The Right to Food campaign is led by Fans Supporting Foodbanks with the aim of making access to food a legal right in the UK. On 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2021 an Early Day Motion set before parliament had 56 signatures representing cross-party support and a petition for parliamentary debate on the issue had attracted over 41,000 signatures. The Right to Food campaign argues that it is the 10 million people in food poverty that should be central to the National Food Strategy and a right to food should be enshrined in law.

In January 2021 Liverpool City councillors voted on a motion agreeing to call for the right to food to be made a central feature of the Government's National Food Strategy, becoming the first city to back the right to food.

## **Greater Manchester Context**

Recent analysis suggests that over 4,500 additional children across GM have crossed a poverty threshold and become eligible for Free School Meals since the pandemic began. This is above and beyond the incremental rise in eligibility that would have been expected. DWP data also reports that the number of households in receipt of Universal Credit across Greater Manchester has increased from 149,638 in February 20 to 252,609 by August 2020, representing a 69%

increase. Amongst other recent statistical measures these are viewed as early warning signs of the social impact of COVID which is yet to show its full extent.

Within Greater Manchester we have been running a 'No Child Should Go Hungry' initiative since October 2020. A report to the December GMCA meeting outlined the use of funding from the GM Mayor's Charity to support three key components of this initiative over Christmas 2020 namely: 1) provision of 3,000 emergency food cards to respond to the immediate needs of children and young people as well as those not meeting government eligibility criteria; 2) targeted support for families directed through local VCSE organisations; and 3) helping people help each other through promotion of the 'Co-operate' digital platform, that seeks to connect local people to local causes.

The December GMCA report also outlined the need to develop a response to food poverty in a way that is cognisant of the ongoing humanitarian assistance required in the face of the pandemic, whilst at the same time starting to develop more medium and long term objectives and activity focussing on moving upstream of the issue of food insecurity and into the space of prevention.

### **Greater Manchester: The First City Region to Support the 'Right to Food'**

In January 2021 Liverpool City Council became the first council in England to vote in favour of a motion to support the Right to Food campaign and earlier last year a proposal was set out by Elaine Smith MSP for a Bill to incorporate the Human Right to Food into Scottish Law.

The Right to Food is in-keeping with the GM approach to ensure help is provided to those that need it most and builds on the recognition that there should be the right to education, health care, housing and other essential human rights.

It should be highlighted that no single 'right' should necessarily be viewed in isolation or without recognition of the variety of vital factors that come together to provide the basic foundations for anyone to participate fully and thrive in society. The right to food would contribute significantly to tackling poverty but it is not the solution in itself.

A right to food enshrined in law would however make it necessary for a range of public bodies to take action and responsibility to ensure everyone has access to essential foodstuffs. This could be far-reaching in its consequence and elicit wider measures such as improving people's incomes e.g. by requiring a Real Living Wage, providing reasonable limits to everyday costs such as utility and fuel bills, and ensuring access is available to good, nutritious food e.g. through free school meals and 'fit and fed' school holiday programmes.

If Government were to legislate to make access to food a legal right it would mean an end to many of the situations that lead people to poverty in the first place and hold Government accountable for ensuring citizens do not have to go hungry. It could act as a mechanism to help address many of the systemic issues that are apparent in the welfare system, for example the five-week wait for Universal Credit payment would have to go and there would need to be ongoing, sustained provision for children eligible for free school meals outside of term time.

Should the reassurance of the right to food be enshrined in law it would enable much more local action to be taken upstream in the space of prevention, rather than picking up the pieces. It

would mean we could put more resource locally into employment support, benefits advice, financial inclusion and debt advice services.

Supporting this ask of Government through a letter to Henry Dimbleby, Independent Lead of the National Food Strategy clearly comes at no financial cost to localities, it does however show a shared commitment in seeking to mitigate the social harm caused by COVID and demonstrates a strong example of how we could emerge from the pandemic as a much stronger and fairer society.

In light of this it is intended that the existing work to develop the 'No Child Should Go Hungry in Greater Manchester' is broadened into an ambition around tackling the root causes of poverty. In developing a programme proposal around this there will an emphasis be on the levers in our control locally to prevent and reduce poverty, seeking to ensure everyone has access to the financial resources they need to meet their basic needs.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Members of GMCA are asked to:**

1. Endorse the call for the 'Right to Food' to be incorporated into the 'National Food Strategy' and in time enshrined in legislation, recognising that such a national reassurance could address wider issues in the welfare system and enable us to focus local efforts on upstream poverty prevention.
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