

Sufra NW London

Submission to the Right to Food UK Commission

June 2026

Introduction and Local Context

Sufra NW London is a place-based charity in the London Borough of Brent that exists to prevent hunger, fight poverty and build community. Operating from the St. Raphael's Estate, we sit at the very epicentre of the UK's food insecurity, cost-of-living, and housing crises. The reality on our doorstep is stark: our immediate neighbourhood in Stonebridge (LSOA Brent 021B) is now officially the most deprived area in London, and falls within the top 1% most deprived nationally. Here, an alarming 82.5% of residents experience income deprivation.

Zooming out, the borough-wide picture confirms a widespread and systemic decline. Driven largely by the housing crisis, Brent is now ranked the worst area in England for 'Barriers to Housing and Services'. This manifests devastatingly for local families, with 58.7% of Brent's children now living in income-deprived households. Furthermore, poverty rates remain disproportionately high for the specific communities we serve, with Muslim households being three times more likely to experience persistent deep poverty than other groups.

To meet this escalating crisis, Sufra provided over 73,000 instances of support last year alone, ensuring over 16,000 people could access nutritious food. However, we recognise that simply handing out food parcels cannot solve systemic poverty. Guided by our 2030 Strategy, we are decisively transitioning our model from traditional emergency food aid to holistic, wrap-around support.

Drawing on our frontline operations, rigorous academic research into 'cash-first' models, and our commitment to community co-production and proximate leadership, we submit the following evidence to shape the Right to Food UK Action Plan.

The Case for a 'Cash-First' Statutory Safety Net

[Addressing Questions 1, 2, 5 & 10]

Our work demonstrates that charitable food aid is not a sustainable solution to food poverty. To evidence the need for a dignified alternative, Sufra partnered with the University of Liverpool for the SALIENT research project. This was the first Randomised Controlled Trial researching giving people the option to choose between receiving food parcels or supermarket payment cards to buy their own food.

Over 200 households enrolled – some of whom were randomised to the control group and received food parcels as normal; others to the intervention group and provided with the choice between parcels or supermarket vouchers of the same value. The study highlighted the following:

- **The Evidence of Choice:** The preliminary results demonstrated that 98.1% of our guests chose supermarket payment cards over pre-packed food parcels when given the option.
- **The Impact on Dignity, Health and Autonomy:** Supermarket vouchers enabled people to better meet their individual food and non-food needs – such as purchasing hygiene products, baby formula and nappies, which food banks struggle to supply consistently. Furthermore, this 'cash-first' approach increased food agency and the frequency of fresh fruit and vegetable consumption. Crucially, participants noted that providing vouchers reduced the stigma associated with emergency aid, whilst also restoring a sense of dignity by giving them the autonomy to shop for their own families in mainstream environments.
- **The Systemic Reality and the Welfare Safety Net:** However, the trial also highlighted the profound limits of *any* short-term emergency intervention. By the end of the six-week trial, roughly 60% of all participants remained food insecure, regardless of whether they received parcels or vouchers. This proves that while cash-first models are the most dignified emergency response, they cannot overcome a mainstream social security system that is no longer fit for purpose. In the midst of a compounding cost-of-living crisis, current benefit incomes fall drastically short of covering essential living costs. Emergency aid

is no substitute for a vastly improved welfare system that provides a genuinely effective safety net.

- **Qualitative Evidence on the Food Bank Experience:** Preliminary qualitative findings from the SALIENT trial confirm that charitable food parcels rarely reflect what guests prefer to eat, struggle to cater to religious or dietary requirements, and offer little dignity or choice. In qualitative interviews, guests frequently reported discomfort and embarrassment when having to queue for food, struggled to carry heavy bags home, and worried about the risks of consuming goods nearing their 'best before' dates

Recommendation for Government Duties

A Right to Food Law must legally mandate that local welfare assistance schemes – such as the DWP Crisis and Resilience Fund (CRF) – are permanently deployed as 'cash-first' systems. Furthermore, a Right to Food framework must ensure that statutory income support reflects the true cost of accessing a healthy, culturally appropriate diet. To achieve this, we strongly support campaigns such as the 'Essentials Guarantee' (led by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Trussell Trust), which seeks to enshrine in legislation:

1. A legal minimum (the 'Essentials Guarantee') in Universal Credit – the standard allowance would need to at least meet this amount, and deductions (such as debt repayments to government, or as a result of the benefit cap) would not be allowed to reduce support below that level
2. An independent process to regularly recommend the Essentials Guarantee level, based on the cost of essentials (such as food, utilities and vital household items) for the adults in a household (excluding rent and council tax).

Beyond Food Banks: Dignified Access and Community Resilience

[Addressing Question 4]

Addressing food insecurity requires moving beyond the transactional distribution of food towards models that restore social capital, agency and financial stability.

- **Community Kitchens & Hubs:** Over our last two-year grant reporting period, Sufra served over 40,000 hot, three-course meals in our Community Kitchens. These kitchens do more than provide food; they act as vital social spaces that nurture community spirit, reduce isolation and foster a sense of belonging for marginalised groups. People who would otherwise never meet, come together and create community. We host a calendar of multicultural and multifaith celebrations in the space, and share knowledge and traditions fluidly between staff, volunteers and guests in the space, creating a welcoming and inclusive environment each night of the week.
- **The Community Wellbeing Service (CWS):** We have transitioned emergency aid into a permanent Community Wellbeing Service (CWS). Operating on a dignified membership model, a £4 weekly fee provides a subsidised shop, free hot meals and access to wrap-around advice. In its first commissioned year, the CWS supported 445 member households and facilitated 1,127 on-site partner interactions. This preventative, holistic approach actively builds resilience –16% of members said they could regularly save money at Baseline survey, whilst this rose to 45% 6 months later at their End of Membership survey (an increase of 181%). Similarly 20% of members at Baseline said they could afford food for their household's needs; this rose to 41% at End of Membership. (an increase of 105%).

Recommendation for Government Duties

A Right to Food Law must mandate that local authorities transition away from funding traditional, transactional food banks and instead provide the capacity support and investment needed to transition them into integrated, place-based community hubs.

Sufra published the 'Beyond the Food Bank Toolkit' to support organisations making this transition – it can be downloaded here: <https://www.sufra-nwlondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Beyond-the-Food-Bank-toolkit.pdf>

Case Study: Unlocking vital support for families through the CWS

Miss L, a single mother of two, is the full-time carer for her disabled daughter. Unable to work due to her caring responsibilities, she needed help navigating the complex benefits system to access vital financial support.

Through our Community Wellbeing Service, Miss L accessed our community shop, café and evening kitchen. Meanwhile, our advisors provided dedicated, one-to-one support to help Miss L successfully apply for Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and Carer's Allowance.

The family is now £150 a week better off, and Miss L feels supported as part of a community where she has developed new friendships. Beyond alleviating financial stress, her regular income empowers Miss L to secure the additional developmental support her daughter needs, giving the whole family a more stable and hopeful future.

Integrated Safety Nets: Embedding Advice in Local Communities

[Addressing Question 5]

Food insecurity is ultimately a symptom of systemic and structural failures in housing, debt and welfare. Food aid alone cannot resolve these underlying causes, meaning emergency food support must be co-located with holistic interventions to provide a genuine exit ramp from poverty.

- **Embedded Advice as a Safety Net:** Bringing advice to trusted community food settings removes access barriers and the stigma associated with seeking help. Last year, our Advice Services, OpenARMS programme and signposting services benefited 1,144 people. This not only secured significant additional income for our guests, it prevented evictions, regularised immigration status and resolved debt issues. As a result, guests were better able to manage their

money more effectively and afford life's essentials, whilst making them more aware of (and advocate for) their rights and responsibilities.

- By embedding professional advice where people already go, we transform emergency support into a gateway for long-term financial resilience.

Recommendation for Government Duties

A Right to Food Law must establish a statutory 'Minimum Advice & Support Standard' across all food aid settings. This would legally ensure that no individual receives emergency food without also being provided with co-located, professional casework to address the root causes of their poverty, such as housing, debt and welfare failures.

Case Study: From immediate crisis to long-term independence

When Mr V first came to Sufra in 2022 as an asylum seeker, he simply needed an Oyster card top-up to attend evening English classes. While he successfully gained refugee status in 2023, he faced the daunting challenge of navigating life in the UK. Compounding these hurdles, the severe trauma of war in his home country had left him with lasting impairments that restricted his mobility and daily life.

We provided wrap-around, person-centred support over several years. After initially helping him secure temporary accommodation, our team stepped in to help him apply for a Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and a Freedom Pass. Crucially, we adopted a trauma-informed approach, ensuring Mr V was given the time, space, and sensitivity required to tackle these complex applications at a pace he could manage.

In July 2025, Mr V was awarded the highest rate of PIP, enabling him to access a vehicle through the Motability scheme. This made him able to save much more money that he could put towards essential bills, such as food and utilities. Further, he was now able to go to the supermarket independently to buy the food he preferred and spend his money as he chose.

Reaching the Most Marginalised: Systemic Failures in Asylum Provision

[Addressing Questions 7 & 8]

The Right to Food is currently being systematically denied to some of the UK's most vulnerable populations. The asylum system creates 'impossible situations' for individuals subject to No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). Prohibited from working, these individuals are housed in contingency accommodation (which can be hotels or military barracks) and forced to survive on minimal financial support – less than £10 per week if the accommodation is catered.

To evidence the reality of this system, Sufra partnered with the University of Hertfordshire and the SALIENT research programme to conduct a qualitative study with 22 asylum-seeking guests and 5 staff members.

The full report is available here: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20743928>

- **The Evidence of Inadequate Provision:** Hotel food provision is consistently characterised by rigid, inflexible mealtimes. If a parent needs to travel a considerable distance to get their child to school, they frequently miss breakfast with no alternative provision offered. Furthermore, hotel rooms offer zero food storage or cooking facilities, and strict rules against bringing in outside food are heavily enforced. The food provided is overwhelmingly processed, lacking fresh fruit or vegetables, and makes no concession for dietary preferences, medical restrictions, or the developmental needs of children. Guests described the food as "appalling" and "inedible".
- **The Severe Health Impact:** Participants reported devastating health consequences directly linked to this prolonged poor nutrition. This includes dental decay, high cholesterol, gastric issues, food poisoning and severe weight loss. The psychological toll of being unable to feed their own families also led to severe distress and depression, while the physical toll manifested in extreme ways, including undernourished children failing to develop fully and women experiencing early menopause.
- **The Burden on Charities:** Because hotel residents lack the facilities to cook, Sufra has had to adapt our food bank model to provide 'Easy Eat' parcels containing culturally appropriate items that require minimal or no preparation.

We integrate this emergency food aid with our OpenARMS programme, offering targeted welfare advice, ESOL classes, and social inclusion to mitigate the profound isolation our guests face. However, charities cannot be expected to continuously mitigate the failings and harms of statutory asylum provision.

Recommendation for Government Duties

The current model of asylum seeker food provision – built on inadequate catering and a total lack of agency – is an active driver of malnutrition and declining wellbeing. A Right to Food Law must mandate that vulnerable migrants are provided with systemic solutions that guarantee adequate dietary intake. The use of catered asylum hotels must be phased out rapidly; in the interim, the government must mandate and fund self-catering facilities or direct cash support for asylum seekers, allowing them the dignity and autonomy to purchase and prepare their own food.

Accountability, Co-Production and Radical Place Leadership

[Addressing Questions 10 & 12]

The Right to Food will only be realised when those experiencing poverty hold the power to design the solutions. Sufra operates a model of ‘proximate leadership’ to support this transition, which includes the following elements:

- **Fluid Community Model:** At Sufra, 13% of our volunteers are former service users, and 31% of our staff were once volunteers themselves. Every single member of our Board of Trustees and Senior Leadership Team is female, gender diverse, or from an ethnic minority background, mirroring the lived reality of the neighbourhood we serve.
- **Active Co-Production:** We place lived experience at our core through six active user-led steering groups that directly co-produce our services and strategic advocacy plans. This ensures our daily operations and long-term campaigns are designed by those most impacted.
- **Community-Led Accountability:** Through our strategic partnership with Citizens UK, we run community listening circles that empower guests to

become civic leaders capable of holding local politicians to account. Furthermore, we convene the Brent Food Aid Network (BFAN), uniting local grassroots organisations to collectively drive policy change.

- **Radical Place-Based Leadership:** We are embedding our frontline expertise directly into local government. Our Advice Manager is currently seconded to a pioneering 'Radical Place-Based Leadership' council pilot on the St Raphael's Estate to help reshape how statutory services are delivered on the ground and ensure residents are better supported.

Recommendation for Government Duties

A Right to Food Law must legally compel every local authority to co-produce a cross-sector Food Strategy to tackle the structural drivers of food insecurity. We are currently modelling this in Brent. Our Executive Director chairs the newly approved Brent Food Strategy (2026–2029), embedding grassroots insights directly into local government policy. A key mandate of this strategy is establishing a consistent 'Minimum Advice & Support Standard' across all food aid settings, ensuring no resident receives emergency food without also receiving a statutory intervention for the root cause of their crisis.

Crucially, the law must mandate that the delivery of these strategies is governed by a borough-wide Food Partnership and community-represented Food Action Working Groups (FAWGs), ensuring that people with lived experience maintain ongoing accountability over how local food policies are implemented

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