



COMMUNITIES IN PERIL

FOOD INSECURITY AND THE COST- OF-LIVING CRISIS

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FOREWORD

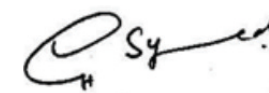
The rising cost of living is gravely impacting low-income families. People across the country are in survival mode - they cannot afford to purchase basic necessities, and children are going to school on an empty stomach. So they can afford to eat, elderly people are making the difficult decision to switch off their central heating to cut down on their energy bills. A new poll by Age UK found that **10% of over-60s in the UK are already cutting back on their spending** including the social care that they require or expect to do so in the coming months because they can't afford the cost. Communities are struggling to make ends meet and are feeling abandoned by the government. The government has taken some action to tackle the rise of energy bills by capping them annually at £2,500. However, it is estimated that **the price will continue to rise by 27%** on average over the next two years.

In the Autumn statement, Jeremy Hunt vowed to protect and support low-income families with cost-of-living payments. The government further announced benefits and pensions would rise in line with inflation. Meanwhile, vulnerable people would receive one-off payments to support them with increasing energy bills and there would be a rise in National Living wages. While the support promised by the government is welcome, financial institutions predict that there will be an **estimated 7% fall in living standards** over the next two years and leading Think Tank, Resolution Foundation has said that UK household incomes are likely to fall by around £2,000.

This winter, we witnessed a bleak picture of this crisis - many families across the country were battling to survive to make ends meet. Ahead of the Spring Budget, we encourage the Chancellor to prioritise the most vulnerable in our community and to ensure this crisis is being tackled.

At our Open Kitchens in London and Nottingham, we have been **addressing the issue of food insecurity since 2018**. Our service is a hub for local communities. It is not only a place where people can receive a hot meal seven days a week, but also a safe and welcoming space where they can find friendship and support. In the past year, we have witnessed a substantial increase in beneficiaries visiting our centre – and we have heard many distressing stories of families trying to survive the cost-of-living crisis. Visitors constantly stress the pressure they are facing - we hear heart breaking stories from individuals who don't know when their next meal will be or if they can afford their heating bills. Many of our beneficiaries have undiagnosed mental health conditions which have been exacerbated by their unstable living condition. **The Open Kitchen has become a lifeline for many throughout this crisis**. While online search results for food banks have skyrocketed by up to 250%, food banks themselves are feeling the pressure to meet the rising demand.

Muslim Hands is deeply concerned by the cost-of-living crisis and the heightened levels of food insecurity across our communities. Our Open Kitchen users are generally from low-income households worried about the coming year. While we welcome the restrictions that the government has placed on energy bills, more action is needed to help the most vulnerable in society that have turned to charities to support them in their time of need. That is why we are publishing this report to raise awareness of how the cost-of-living crisis and growing food insecurity is affecting our communities. We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to our charity partner Fareshare Midlands for their contribution to our research and the amazing work they do.



Syed Lakhte Hassanain, Chairman

COST OF LIVING

OF INDIVIDUAL HOUSEHOLDS

TWO YEARS OF A GLOBAL PANDEMIC HAS LEFT THE UK ECONOMY IN A DIRE STATE. IN 2020, THE NATIONAL GDP DECLINED BY 9.7%. FAST FORWARD THREE YEARS AND MANY OF US ARE GRAPPLING WITH THE DISASTROUS EFFECTS OF THE RISING COST OF LIVING.

The Food Foundation found that **7.3 million UK adults and 2.6 million children were facing food insecurity** in April 2022. While the Trussell Trust, has provided more than **2 million emergency food packages** annually since 2020.

High inflation continues to outstrip wages, and as taxes rise, there are families across Britain who cannot afford to eat every day. The hardest hit are low-income families - the Institute for Fiscal Studies estimated that the annual inflation rate **for the poorest 10% of households will be 10.9%** in April 2023. Whereas the wealthiest 10% of households had the lowest inflation rate, at 7.9%.

According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), **89% of adults in Great Britain reported an increase in their cost of living** in August 2022. While a recent survey by Magic Breakfast, a charity campaigning against child hunger, found that there is an 81% rise in children going hungry.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has further exacerbated the crisis. Even one year after the war in Ukraine began, we are still witnessing the rise of food prices, skyrocketing energy prices, and soaring inflation. The cost of food prices has yet to return to pre-pandemic levels. Electricity and gas prices continue to rise rapidly. **Electricity prices in the UK went up by 65.5% and gas prices by 128.9%** in the 12 months leading up to November 2022, making fuel poverty; when a household cannot afford to heat their home to an appropriate temperature, one of the biggest issues of 2023.

In England, fuel poverty is measured using Low Income Low Energy Efficiency (LILEE.) Under this indicator, a household is considered to be fuel poor if they live in a property with a fuel poverty energy efficiency rating of band D or below. They may also be experiencing fuel poverty if they spend the required amount on heating their home and are

left with residual income below the official poverty line. The Chief Executive of National Energy Action (NEA), Adam Scorer, said that while the energy cap proposed by the government will provide much-needed respite, fuel poverty is expected to increase from **4.5 million households in 2021 to 6.7 million in 2022**.

Research conducted by NEA and the environmental group E3G found, on average **9,700 deaths each year are believed to be caused by fuel poverty** in the UK. Furthermore, in Nottingham North, in the East Midlands and Hounslow in London, households living in fuel poverty are already above the national average energy performance of **13.23%**. Nottingham North sits at a staggering **21.3%**, while in Hounslow it is **15.4%**.

As bills continue to pile up, families face the agonising decision of whether to pay for their energy bills or buy food. Mental health charities like Mind and the Samaritans have seen a rise in people calling their helpline. In July 2022 alone, Samaritans received **12,000 emotional support contacts mentioning finance or unemployment concerns**, and Mind's Infoline saw a **30% rise in finance-related calls** last year. Research done by Christians Against Poverty found that the number of people who have said they have attempted or considered suicide as a way out of their debt has risen from **28% to 36%**.

Meanwhile, children are witnessing first-hand the struggles and difficulties that their parents are shouldering, and the climate of fear and uncertainty is impacting their mental health. Action for Children found that **47% of children worry about their families not having enough money** to live comfortably. Currently, there are **3.9 million children living in poverty** in the UK.



In schools, teachers are reporting that the crisis has impacted the mental health of their students and their learning, as more and more children and young people attend school on an empty stomach. They have called on the government to provide urgent financial support to low-income families. Dr Mary Bousted, joint general secretary of the National Education Union, said,

“Teachers are already seeing the effects of rising poverty with children arriving at school hungry and unable to concentrate.”

During the pandemic, footballer Marcus Rashford, campaigned to ensure all children received free school meals. His campaign, which garnered support from the public and celebrities alike, highlighted the government's failures and shortcomings in tackling food insecurity in this country.

This Easter 2023, many councils across the country have decided to offer free school meal vouchers to combat this crisis. Many parents are relieved that this initiative is continuing, as they rely on free school meals to keep their children fed.

Food Insecurity is further exacerbating health inequalities among the general population. The Royal College of Physicians found that **over half of Brits feel their health has been negatively affected by the rising cost of living**. Of those affected by the crisis - 84% said it was due to increased heating costs, over three quarters (78%) attributed it to the rising cost of food, and 46% claimed it was down to an increase in transport costs. President of the Royal College of Physicians, Dr Andrew Goddard stated,

“The fact that one in two people are already experiencing worsening health should sound alarm bells, especially at a time when our health service is under more pressure than ever before.”

Statistics by the Office of National Statistics show that **75% of people aged 50-69 and 67% of over 70s are now using less fuel at home in response to rising living costs** compared to **57% of people aged 50-69 and 52% of over 70s** this April.

The Citizens Advice Bureau says the number of **people over 65 who have been referred to food**

banks has doubled in the last 12 months. Others are being forced out of retirement and back to work.

The word that those advocating for elderly people often use is “neglect” – they feel that they are forgotten by the government. Currently, **2.1 million older people live in poverty**. They often suffer in silence- as they cannot get the necessary support they need, whether that be financial or treatment for a mental illness. Independent Age found that **20% of those over 55 in England with a diagnosed mental health condition hadn't received any support in the last five years**.

Meanwhile, people with disabilities are having to make decisions on whether to power essential medical equipment like wheelchairs and ventilators heat their homes. **66% of households where a person with disabilities resides have avoided turning on their heating**, while **43% have eaten lower quality food than usual**, compared to 25% of households where no persons with disabilities live. While the government has provided short-term relief to people with disabilities, including a one-off Disability Cost of Living Payment, it is insufficient, and longer-term solutions are certainly needed.

Ethnic minorities have also been disproportionately affected by the rise in the cost of living. Research undertaken by Trust for London found that one in four Black, Asian, and minority ethnic persons lives in poverty in London.

Analysis by New Economics Foundation (NEF) showed that **Black, Asian and other minority ethnic households will experience an average increase in the cost of living 1.6 times higher than their white counterparts**.

With the Holy month of Ramadan approaching, many Muslims are worried about how the rising food prices will impact them. With the costs of lentils, meat, and dates drastically rising, they are concerned whether they will be able to purchase the necessary products to start and break their fast. Last year, Islamic Relief found that half of the Muslim population in the UK struggled to feed themselves during Ramadan. The situation is predicted to be much worse than last year.

THE FACES

BEHIND THE CRISIS

The Nottingham and London Open Kitchens have seen a substantial increase in users visiting the centres. Before the crisis unfolded, our coordinator, Imran Khan and his team in Nottingham were able to provide two hot meals to each service user. However, in the last few months Imran has only been able to offer one hot meal.

When asked what he attributes the increased demand to, Imran stated,

"it is because of the cost of living. There is no doubt about it. We have seen an influx of vulnerable members of the community visiting the centre. Some even asked whether we could donate clothes, as they cannot purchase them on their current budget."

Many of those using the Open Kitchens' services are dealing with homelessness and the crisis has hit them hard. Crisis chief executive Matt Downie said in a statement that

"when the cost-of-living crisis is hitting households, it's deeply worrying that people are being forced from their homes, through no fault of their own, and plunged into instability, unable to afford somewhere to live."

New figures released by the Combined Homelessness and Information Network showed a **16% increase in rough sleeping** across London from April – June 2022.

More recently, research by the homeless charity Shelter, found that there are at least **271,000 people experiencing homelessness** in England, including more than **120,000 children**. The chief executive of Shelter, Polly Neate said in a statement,

"the new year should be a time of hope, but this isn't the case for the homeless people who are facing a truly bleak 2023."

The lowest income families will be spending more of their monthly income on rent, food, and energy in January, forcing many into debt or out of their homes. Grocery prices have **risen by a record 17.1% since last year**. Research firm Kantar found that households pay £811 a year more on grocery

bills than 12 months ago. According to the British Retail Consortium (BRC), shop price inflation rose to a new high of **8.4%** in February 2023, up from **8%** in January 2023. Milk prices soared by **37.2%**, eggs by **28.8%**, and bread by **19%**. At the Open Kitchens, we see how this crisis impacts people on a daily basis. Families and individuals are being pushed to breaking point and many of those who visit describe our services as a **"Godsend"** and **"an integral part of the community."**

Despite having supported other initiatives for a number of years, the growing scale of food insecurity in the UK prompted Muslim Hands to launch its first Open Kitchen in London in 2018. We opened our second Nottingham branch in December 2021. According to the Office of National Statistics, Clifton West, where the Open Kitchen is based, is one of the most deprived areas of Nottingham, where almost **40% of households are deprived**.

The Nottingham Open Kitchen is one of many initiatives playing a pivotal role in supporting the most vulnerable in the community. The service is open to everyone. We help low-income families, refugees, rough sleepers and anyone else who needs us. Not only do we offer meals, but we offer friendship, support and a warm welcoming space to spend time in seven days a week. All the beneficiaries who visit the centre are on a first-name basis with our coordinator, Imran and they often consult him on matters related to housing, employment opportunities, and mental health services in the local area.

James, 52, visits the hub regularly. He has a heart condition and is asthmatic. His wife is the primary provider, as his health issues stop him from working full-time. Their current income will not suffice, and they often go hungry so they can pay the bills. The couple has seen their electricity and food bills go up, and as they are not entitled to any benefits, they are struggling to make ends meet on his wife's salary. Their home is freezing, but the rise in energy prices means they use extra blankets and wear jumpers, rather than turn the heating on.



James has been battling mental illness alone:

"This crisis, coupled with my health condition, has had a detrimental effect on my mental health. My arms are covered in scars, a reminder of the constant struggle I face. I haven't spoken to a mental health organisation – what can they do? The Open Kitchen not only provides us with a hot meal in our belly, but it offers us support. They listen to us and do not neglect or ignore us. The Open Kitchen is a lifeline to many, this is my main meal, and I won't be eating anything from now onwards. I often take snacks from here, and I will eat that tonight when I get hungry. Sometimes I am given porridge and will eat that during breakfast. I don't know if I would have coped without the Open Kitchen and Imran. They have helped me when I needed them the most."

James' story is a reminder of how vulnerable members of our society are suffering in silence – how many are developing mental health conditions without feeling heard or supported. Public services for mental health are underfunded and understaffed and specialist mental health charities are also struggling as they try to catch all those that are falling through the cracks. Welcoming spaces like the Open Kitchen are a lifeline for people like James who don't know where else to turn.

Another regular at the Kitchen, Kieran, 43, has been homeless for two years:

"I'm currently sofa-surfing while I look for a job. While people have been generous, they are struggling themselves. I have decided to volunteer with five local charities, and at the end of each volunteering shift, the charity will provide me with a hot-cooked meal. In that way,


I am giving something back to the charities, and I do not feel guilty about eating the meals they have provided. No grant is available, and the local council is not offering me support. My mental health is in a dire state – and the only reason I stay sane is because of volunteering. Life has been hard for me, but I am eternally grateful for the help of Imran and the rest of the charities around the region. They are supporting me and lots of other vulnerable people in the community."

Kieran highlights that, like so many people, while her situation was difficult before, this crisis has made it unbearable. She cannot afford the most basic essentials and relies completely on food bank donations. She says she wants to wake up one morning and be stress-free, yet she doesn't believe this will happen anytime soon.

Meanwhile, 23-year-old Charlie is proof that the cost-of-living crisis affects young and old alike:

"I come to the Open Kitchen anytime I am free, and I will eat the hot meal provided. Sometimes, I receive snacks and fruit, which is great. Sometimes, I will go hungry to save money and give it to my children. The Open Kitchen has saved my life and should provide more meals to the community. This crisis has harmed us all – and the government should prioritise the needy in the community."

Unfortunately, our teams hear stories like these on a daily basis. Nottingham City Council has declared a cost-of-living emergency. This declaration comes when it was discovered that some children were pretending to eat at school lunchtimes as their families were unable to purchase any food. In Nottingham, **44,689 children live in poverty**.



In London, more than 2.3 million people live below the poverty line, and 33% of adults have skipped meals, in order for their children to eat. The Muslim Hands Open Kitchen in Hounslow has witnessed a 25% rise in visitors in 2022. The total number of meals we distributed in Hounslow in the year 2022 was 129,627.

Manager, Eshan Choudary stresses the importance of being flexible in their response to the cost-of-living crisis. While the hot meals are the main staple of the kitchen, his team ensures that the service users also receive milk, sugar, coffee, beans, porridge, and, if requested, nappies, baby formula and baby clothes. Eshan says they aim to provide these items in the hope that the users can save money they would have otherwise spent on grocery shopping. The Open Kitchen also recognises how expensive grooming products are – so they distribute hygiene kits to the community. These kits include soap, deodorant, and shampoo.

Eshan and his colleagues aim to make the hub a welcoming place for all,

“At the Open Kitchen, we ensure that our service users feel safe, physically and emotionally and we do everything in our power to help them in their time of need.”

His statement was echoed by Shazia, a volunteer at the Hounslow Open Kitchen, who has experience working in the mental health sector. Shazia has been deeply moved by the stories she has heard while working at the Kitchen,

“You have mothers that cannot provide milk for their children and you see beneficiaries that are stressed out, unable to afford to put the freezer or the heater on. It is gut wrenching to

see how this crisis has so gravely impacted our community.”

For her, the hub is a welcoming place for many, regardless of their ethnicity, religion or sexuality. It is a vital place for people to interact and connect, and a place where they can forget their worries. Shazia believes that the monthly mental health surgery in partnership with the NHS is essential – the surgery sessions enable the users

“to talk openly and frankly to trained mental health professionals in a safe space we have created for them. We have realised that many of our users are uncomfortable or do not know how to express their struggles or feelings—having mental health practitioners in our kitchen eliminates the barriers and the stigma.”

Shazia concludes on the importance of local services like these, **“it provides relief to a community that so desperately needs it.”**

Aaron, 35, frequently visits the OK Hounslow:

“This crisis has been hard for all of us – but personally, I am lucky the Open Kitchen is close enough to where I live. I often visit the Kitchen, have a cup of coffee and samosas, and take my freshly cooked hot meal home. Services such as these are a Godsend – and we need more of them in our communities.”

Ely, 31, worries about what this crisis might bring. He has been visiting the Open Kitchen often and noticed more people visiting the hub. He believes this is because:

“The food banks are the answer when the government does not have the answer,

and honestly, I feel like they have abandoned us. I feel alienated – I haven’t seen a doctor for nearly five years. The most vulnerable in the communities need urgent help, and urgent support should be offered to them.”

Anna, 58, emphasises how expensive everything is; **what she used to pay £10 for now costs £30.** She highlights that while the cost of living has risen drastically, the wages she has been earning have remained the same for the last four years. As a cleaner at a local school, she does not get paid enough and receives support from Universal Credit. She is currently working for four hours a day. Her health conditions and problems with her knee prevent her from working more hours. At first, she was ashamed to come to the Open Kitchen and feared the stigma around attending a food bank,

“Before coming here, I suffered from depression and constantly worried about the price of the food.” However, she believes that the centre has been a lifeline for her, “This place has eliminated some of the worries people in the community have been facing, including me.”

Speaking to beneficiaries at the Hounslow and Nottingham Kitchens has highlighted how the cost of living and food insecurity crisis has impacted the country’s most vulnerable. In the absence of adequate government support, they depend on donor-funded food banks and kitchens and as such, Muslim Hands’ Open Kitchens are doing all they can to tackle the food insecurity crisis head-on. However, as with so many similar initiatives, the support will only be available if people continue to give as they have done so generously in the past. Our Open Kitchen Coordinator, Imran, does not have high hopes of this situation improving or ending anytime soon.

“The Open Kitchen serves 110 meals per day, seven days a week. Sometimes, we run out of meals shortly before closing, and we end up giving pot noodles instead of hot meals. The beneficiaries are continuously highlighting they would not have had a meal all day if we did not provide one. We will see more people visiting our service in the coming months until the Government does something about this crisis.”

Announced in February 2023, Ofgem has decided to lower energy price cap to **£3,280** from 1 April 2023. Households face paying **£500 a year more for energy** from April, despite the fall in Ofgem’s price cap. The energy price cap will be cut by regulators Ofgem, meaning that the amount suppliers can charge per unit will drop. While the charge per unit will drop, household bills are set to rise across the country; however, there are no caps on customers’ overall energy bills, which will still rise or fall in line with their energy consumption. The current price cap is at **£4,279** a year; however, no one pays the total amount because of the government’s Energy Price Guarantee (EPG), which gives a discount on these rates to all households. With Government support ending, this increase will push more families into fuel poverty. The National Energy Action estimates that from April 2023, **8.4 million UK households will be in fuel poverty.**

Our Open Kitchen users expressed how this winter was brutal and bleak and hope there is no hardship this spring. However, there is no end in sight, and the most vulnerable in the community need urgent assistance from the Government.



FARESHARE

COLLABORATION

ALONGSIDE OUR CHARITY PARTNER, FARESHARE MIDLANDS, WHO HAVE SUPPORTED OUR OPEN KITCHENS WITH FOOD SUPPLIES, WE CONDUCTED A COLLABORATIVE SURVEY ANALYSING HOW THE COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS HAS IMPACTED THE WIDER COMMUNITY. FARESHARE SHARED THE QUESTIONNAIRE WITH 14 BENEFICIARIES AND 32 MIDLANDS AND LONDON-BASED CHARITIES SUPPORTING LOCAL COMMUNITIES.

THOSE WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE SURVEY UNANIMOUSLY AGREED THAT THEY ARE STRUGGLING TO COPE WITH THIS CRISIS.

We asked: **How have you been coping so far with this cost-of-living crisis?** – and many responded that they found this situation difficult and had a hard time dealing with it:

“Not well. Everything is raised. Just trying to survive.”

“It’s been difficult coping with the same wages, yet bills, energy, food, diesel, etc., have increased.”

“I try not to waste food or energy, and I am trying to change my lifestyle.”

While the service users are trying to change their lifestyles to stay afloat – they are still worried about what this crisis might bring. One of the questions that the survey asked was: What is your biggest concern for this winter? **More than 50%** answered that their biggest concern was staying warm. Understandably, with energy bills at an all-time high, families are struggling to afford the costs associated with heating their homes. This sentiment was echoed by our Open Kitchen

users, who were all worried about whether they would be warm and safe in the cold season.

The survey also highlighted significant concerns around debt. A third of the participants fear they will either get into debt, go further into debt or that bailiffs will come knocking at their door. Richard Lane, Director of External Affairs at StepChange Debt Charity, said,

“The increase in the proportion of new clients with arrears on priority bills is worrying. Falling behind on essential bills is a stark manifestation of the cost-of-living crisis hitting people without financial resilience and savings to fall back on.”

Many respondents said they would “probably get into debt” or “may need to take out a loan to pay [debts]” and one individual stated they were anxious about their debt and bailiffs. Figures released in August 2022 showed that **3,405 families in the private rented sector in England were evicted by bailiffs** between April and June 2022 - **up 39%** from the previous quarter.



Many charities that support homeless people, refugees and single parents are also hit particularly hard by this crisis. One question we asked: Has your organisation seen an increase in the number of service users during October and November? - **93% have seen a rise in service users** and they suspect more will be visiting their organisations in the coming months. Many of the organisations themselves are struggling with the increasing demand. A charity in Finchley shared with us how people are queuing up for food banks,

“We have been trying to raise more funding to cope with whatever the current crisis may bring us. We have already had many more people needing our help, and this just increases all the time.”

While another charity in Leicester stated,

“New customers register every week, and we have increased the amount of food we order.”

As demand increases, so does the need for income. An organisation in Mansfield said they have

“put out a number of appeals to local people and business requesting supplies, as well as applying for lots of pots of funding to increase buying power.”

A charity in Birmingham is preparing to purchase more long-life items. As with Muslim Hands, each charity that participated in the survey is taking extra measures to ensure that the most vulnerable in the community are not going hungry. In concurrence with national studies on the disproportionate impact of the cost-of-living crisis on women, the organisations surveyed had noted a particular rise in the number of women visiting them.

CONCLUSION

In the past year, communities across Britain have been facing the detrimental impact of the cost-of-living crisis. The accumulative effects of the pandemic, Ukraine war and climate change has driven global inflation which has had a huge impact on many countries. In the UK, the rate of inflation is far outstripping wage growth and benefit increases. The situation has been exacerbated by the economic impacts of Brexit, a lack of spending on public services and high rent and house prices, making life more difficult for most families across the UK. For the vulnerable groups our Open Kitchens serve, the impact of the crisis has been nothing short of devastating.

The report shows the myriad of implications this crisis has on the mental, physical and emotional wellbeing of our service users, who were already struggling before the cost-of-living crisis. Meanwhile, the increase in demand for our services reflects the rising number of people who are now being pushed into food insecurity and fuel poverty. This is a problem echoed across the organisations and beneficiaries that collaborated with us on this publication and the responses to our survey corroborate the findings of the Independent Food Aid Network that,

“over 91 per cent of member organisations reported increased need for their services comparing November 2021 with November 2022.”

While the demand increases, the disposable income of the many generous people across the UK that support charities is decreasing. The Office for Budget Responsibility

“expects real post-tax household income to fall by 4.3% in 2022-23, the biggest fall since comparable records began in 1956.”

We welcome the support promised by Jeremy Hunt for low-income households and vulnerable people in the Autumn statement, but the response will need to be considerably upscaled to tackle the severity of the humanitarian crisis we are witnessing.

As stated previously, one of the major effects of the cost-of-living crisis is the increase in rates of food poverty in the UK. Food insecurity impacts all aspects of life, causing physical and emotional distress. Many Open Kitchen users already have underlying health conditions that this crisis has further aggravated.

However, while their health is suffering, the emotional anguish that this crisis is causing is just as worrying. All the beneficiaries we have spoken to identified that this crisis has impacted their mental state in some way. We often neglect the dire implication food poverty has on our mental well-being. Beneficiaries are constantly worried about their financial circumstances; they must decide whether to heat their home or purchase food. Making this continuous decision is taking a toll on their mental health. Yet, many have not considered seeking help from a professional, believing their current priority is to figure out how to survive day by day. At the Open Kitchen, we prioritise the mental well-being of the beneficiaries by offering in-house mental health services with trained professionals or by distributing information leaflets. While we aim to tackle the issue of food poverty, we recognise the problems associated with this crisis, and one of them is mental health.

A sense of hopelessness was a common theme among the service users we spoke to. Many of our patrons are sleeping rough and may be battling depression, anxiety, and substance abuse problems, all compounded by a lack of the security that shelter and regular access to food gives. They identify food banks as the protectors and lifelines of their community, a community they feel has been largely ignored by the government and other bodies. For them, places like the Open Kitchen offer spaces where they feel welcome and safe, as well as providing more material support.

With food prices rising drastically in the coming months, the most vulnerable in society will pay the heaviest price. Low-income households, rough sleepers, elderly people, people of ethnic minority backgrounds and people with disabilities are some of the groups that instead of receiving much-needed extra support, are being disproportionately negatively impacted by the crisis. Meanwhile, the number of people experiencing some form of poverty is growing. Food banks and other initiatives on the front line of tackling food insecurity will continue to struggle to catch the increasing number of people that are unable to meet their basic needs on their income or with government assistance. Behind all the statistics are real people who face daily struggles to survive, as our case studies and interviews have shown.

WE AT MUSLIM HANDS WOULD LIKE TO TAKE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE AMAZING WORK OF FOOD BANKS AND OTHER PROJECTS PROVIDING VITAL SUPPORT TO OUR COMMUNITIES DURING THE COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS AND TO STRESS THE IMPORTANCE OF A STRONG, UNIFIED, INTER-ORGANISATIONAL APPROACH TO THE COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS, STARTING WITH THE GOVERNMENT AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES.

THIS APPROACH SHOULD NOT ONLY RECOGNISE THE NEGATIVE IMPACT ON THE PHYSICAL WELLBEING OF THOSE MOST AFFECTED BY THE CRISIS, BUT THE MENTAL, SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS THEY FACE. AS SUCH, SUPPORT SHOULD BE MULTI-DIMENSIONAL AND HOLISTIC IN NATURE.



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