

**PE1571/H**

**Housing, Regeneration and Welfare Directorate**  
Social Justice and Regeneration Division

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Ned Sharratt  
Assistant Public Petition Clerk  
The Scottish Parliament

*By email*



Dear Ned,

## **CONSIDERATION OF PUBLIC PETITION PE1571 (FOOD BANK FUNDING)**

Thank you for your letter of 23 September to Ian Cox seeking the Scottish Government's views on Public Petition PE1571. I am replying as the lead official for this policy area. This letter sets out:

- Details of the Scottish Government's Emergency Food Action Plan and its current impact;
- the Scottish Government's views in relation to the two actions requested of us in the petition itself - to either use an estimated £145m underspend to help struggling food banks meet increasing demand or to raise tax by 1p to raise an estimated £256m to alleviate the pressure; and
- the Scottish Government's views in relation to the specific comments made by Mr Beattie regarding the administration of the Emergency Food Fund

### **Emergency Food Action Plan**

In April 2014 the Scottish Government announced £1 million to support work of emergency food providers as part of our Emergency Food Action Plan. The funding has been allocated in two halves:

- £500,000 for the charity FareShare to further develop its infrastructure in Scotland and increase capacity to take good quality surplus food from the food industry and provide it to charities and community groups supporting the most vulnerable; and
- £523,000 to support community-based food aid projects - the Emergency Food Fund.

This funding is making a real difference on the ground. In the first six months of this year Fareshare has distributed almost 500 tonnes of surplus food to over 300 local community groups across the country. Over 1 million meals have been prepared for an average of over 15,000 recipients each week. Fareshare estimates that on average the provision of surplus food saves each of its 'Charity Food Members' £13,000 per year. Using that estimation Fareshare has saved the third sector in Scotland around £2 million over the last six months alone.

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The Emergency Food Fund has enabled us to support a total of 26 projects in 17 local authority areas. Each of the projects seeks to respond to the immediate demands for emergency food aid and help to address the underlying causes of food poverty. Lead organisations include Citizen's Advice Bureau, food banks, co-ops and other projects run by faith based and community organisations. Actions range from increasing food provision, to promoting healthy eating, benefits and other advice and in some cases linking food providers across a local area. A list of all the projects funded is annexed to this letter.

## **Response to the proposed actions in Petition PE1571**

The Emergency Food Action Plan was created in recognition of the worrying increase in Foodbank usage across Scotland. We recognise that foodbanks are providing vital charitable support for people in crisis and are extremely grateful for the commitment and dedication shown by Foodbank volunteers. However, we are unable to support the measures set out by Mr Beattie in his petition.

Increasing income tax in order to pass additional funding to foodbanks would effectively bring foodbanks into the welfare state, something the Scottish Parliament Welfare Reform Committee and experts in this field have repeatedly cautioned against. Instead we are seeking to eradicate the need for foodbanks in the first place by focusing our efforts on tackling the poverty that forces people to use them. Our work here is wider-ranging and includes measures to mitigate the most harmful impacts of the UK Government's welfare cuts, help people into employment, build more affordable homes, improve children's' life chances and support community-led projects in disadvantaged areas across Scotland.

We are considering how we can best work with our partners to take a longer term approach to tackling food insecurity. To help us to do that, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioner's Rights has asked Martin Johnstone, Secretary of the Church of Scotland's Church and Society Council, to chair a short-life working group to identify the issues which push people into food poverty and make recommendations to Ministers on how they can be addressed.

The group had its first meeting on 19 October 2015. At that meeting there was both a recognition of the unacceptable scale of food poverty in Scotland and an absolute commitment to try to play our part in tackling it. The group agreed that some of its work will be very practical and have a relatively immediate impact, building on many examples of excellent community-based work that is already happening. Other elements will take time as we face up to the causes underlying the problems, including changes and cuts to the tax and benefits system, low paid work, benefits sanctions, benefits maladministration and lack of access to affordable high quality food. The group are clear that their discussions and recommendations must be grounded in reality so will ensure that they consult directly with people who are themselves struggling against food poverty throughout.

A number of further meetings of the group are planned in the coming months. The group's recommendations will then feed into the Scottish Government's Social Justice Action Plan, which will be published in the new year. This will set out the actions that the Scottish Government and its partners will take in the next Parliament and beyond to help tackle poverty and create fairer opportunities for all. The plan is also being informed by the Fairer Scotland discussion which is currently taking place across the country. We hope that foodbank providers and volunteers will take the opportunity to get involved in this discussion: details of how to do this can be found on the Fairer Scotland website: [www.fairer.scot](http://www.fairer.scot).

In terms of the use of 2014-15 underspend, it is important to note that underspends do not reflect a missed opportunity to spend more on public services. Our financial approach means we can manage budgets across more than one year and carry forward some spending into the next year where needed. We are therefore able to make sensible budgeting decisions that can reflect fluctuations in cost and demand across the spending review period and ensure there is no loss of spending power in Scotland.

The Deputy First Minister announced the provisional outturn for 2014-15 in June and this remains our position. The cash underspend for 2014-15 is being carried into the current financial year as planned to support the 2015-16 expenditure plans agreed by the Scottish Parliament in February. These plans include a number of actions to tackle poverty and inequality as outlined in the 2015-16 Programme for Government<sup>1</sup>.

### **Specific comments in relation to the Emergency Food Fund**

Finally, you asked for specific views on Mr Beattie's comments in relation to the administration of the Emergency Food Fund. Unfortunately, I am unable to provide detailed comments for two reasons:

- Firstly, the later than expected UK Spending Review publication means that we will not know what block grant will be available to Scottish Ministers and delivery partners until 25th November 2015. Therefore, Scottish Ministers will not be in a position to publish forward budget plans until the outcome of the Spending Review is known.
- Secondly, the Scottish Government's actions in this area will be informed by the work of the short-life working group I mentioned above so it would be premature to discuss a funding approach before the group has made its recommendations. I have however forwarded Mr Beattie's recommendations to Martin Johnstone for the group to consider.

I hope that this response helps to inform the Committee in its consideration of this petition. If any further information is required please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

**Rachael McKechnie**  
**Team Leader, Social Justice and Regeneration Division**

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0048/00484439.pdf>