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# The right to food in the UK: Literature review

A companion guide



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# Setting the scene

## Food in the UK

Everyone should be able to afford and access healthy food. But in the UK, [over 14.1 million people experienced hunger and food insecurity last year](#), meaning they did not always have enough affordable, nutritious food.

In the UK, [some groups are more likely to struggle to get enough good food](#). These include disabled people, people on low incomes, children, single-parent families, people with insecure immigration status and some racialised minority communities. They might skip meals to afford other essentials or worry about food running out before payday. Even when food is available, it might not be healthy, nutritious, or suitable for their cultural or dietary needs.

[Hunger and poor nutrition can affect people's health, wellbeing and ability to take part in everyday life](#). Making sure everyone has access to good food would benefit people and communities across the UK.

These experiences show why the right to food matters: food is essential to people's health, dignity and everyday lives. Everyone has the right to eat well and live free from hunger.

You can read more about people's experiences of hunger and food insecurity in the UK in [Just Fair's submission to the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) – see pages 15 to 20.

## The right to food

The right to food is guaranteed in international law.<sup>[1]</sup> It's part of Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights ([ICESCR](#)) – the right to an adequate standard of living. The UK Government ratified ICESCR in 1976 and in doing so agreed to abide by the rights under it.

The right to food is about more than having enough food to survive. It means everyone should be able to eat well, in a way that supports their health, dignity and everyday life.

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[1] See chapter two of '[The Right to Food in the UK: A Literature Review](#)', specifically section 2.2

People should be able to:

- Eat enough food to stay healthy
- Afford a healthy diet without having to cut back on other essentials
- Physically access food in a way which is safe and without barriers, for example through nearby shops or reliable delivery options
- Eat food that suits their cultural, religious and dietary needs
- Have stable and sustainable access to food over time, not something that changes from week to week

Governments have a responsibility to plan, regulate and support the food system so that everyone can eat adequately and with dignity. This includes making sure policies across areas like social security, health, housing and food systems work together so that people are not pushed into hunger or poor diets because of gaps between services and policies.

The right to food is about more than hunger. Food should be:

- Available (for everyone, everywhere, over time)
- Accessible (physically and economically)
- Adequate (safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate)
- Sustainable (for both present and future generations, without harming people or the environment)



# Literature review on the right to food

Just Fair was commissioned by Amnesty International UK to complete a [literature review](#) on the right to food (the ‘review’). We asked Dr Clare James to lead on this review for us. This companion guide summarises the literature review.

The review looks at the right to food in international human rights law, and how it applies in the UK. It brings together evidence from academics, charities and campaign groups, governments, and the United Nations.

The review explains what the right to food is, and what “adequate food” is in practice. It explains how the right to food is recognised in international law, including in the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#). It then looks at what governments are expected to do to protect the right to food and prevent hunger, and what the UK Government is doing. The review examines how food law and policy currently work in the UK and makes recommendations for how governments across the UK could better protect the right to food through law, policy, monitoring and national planning frameworks.



# Charting the route to food justice

[The review](#) focuses on what legal and policy frameworks rooted in dignity might look like and argues that bringing the right to food into UK law is an essential step towards a just and fair future.

Just Fair has [set out five principles](#) to guide the laws, policies and programmes needed to make our rights real in practice. Together, these principles help show what is needed to build a fairer society where everyone can access their rights. They can help us think about what needs to change to make rights real in everyday life.

The five principles are:

## **Rights knowledge**

- People should know what their rights are and how they affect everyday life
- This includes understanding that food is a human right

## **Rights frameworks**

- Governments should create laws, policies and programmes that make rights real.
- This includes recognising rights in UK law

## **Rights resourcing**

- Governments should properly fund and support our rights
- This means properly funding the systems that support people to live dignified lives

## **Rights accountability**

- Governments and public bodies should be held accountable when rights are not met.
- This means monitoring food insecurity and hunger, making responsibilities clear, and learning from mistakes

## **Rights enjoyment**

- People should be able to enjoy their rights with dignity
- This means everyone being able to access healthy, affordable and appropriate food

This review focuses particularly on rights frameworks – the laws, policies and government responsibilities linked to the right to food. It does not cover all of the changes we would need to see to build a culture of human rights in the UK –

such as human rights education or routes to justice for people experiencing violations of their rights.

Making the right to food real would involve all five principles working together – from strong laws and accountability to public understanding of rights and access to support.

You can find out more about Just Fair’s five principles and how they apply to everyday life in [Five principles of everyday rights incorporation: A conversation with Just Fair’s Lived Experience Advisory Group](#) and on the [Everyday Rights Conversation](#) webpage.

## The right to food and food insecurity

[The review](#) shows that the right to food is recognised in international human rights law, including treaties that the UK has signed. This means that governments across the UK have a responsibility to take steps to help everyone in the UK access adequate food and live free from hunger.

The review shows that food insecurity is not inevitable. It is the result of decisions that the government has made about wages, social security, housing, health, immigration policy and the wider food system.[2]

This review shows that governments are not doing enough to make people’s right to food real in the UK. It argues that low wages, precarious work, and a social security system that does not provide enough money to meet basic needs leave some people unable to afford food. As a result, many people rely on food banks, community pantries, and other community food projects. It argues that people should not have to rely on charity to access enough food and live a dignified life.

You can read more about what the right to food means in international law on pages 8 to 32 of [the review](#).

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[2] See chapter three of ‘[The Right to Food in the UK: A Literature Review](#)’

# What the right to food could look like

[The review](#) sets out some steps governments across the UK could take to make the right to food a reality.

These include recognising the right to food in law across the UK and building national plans to make it real. The review highlights that other countries around the world have brought the right to food into national law.

In Brazil, legal recognition, national planning and coordinated action helped reduce hunger and improve food security. The right to food was recognised in the Brazilian Constitution in 2010. Before this, campaigners and politicians worked together to reform the country's food system, hold National Conferences on Food and Nutritional Security, and develop framework laws. These steps helped reduce the number of people experiencing hunger in Brazil significantly, from around 78 million people in 2003 to 8.7 million in 2023.

Recognising the right to food in law in the UK could lead to:

- Increased social security payments, so they cover the cost of food and other essentials
- Safer food standards and stronger regulations
- Better monitoring of hunger, food insecurity and nutrition
- School meal and community food programmes
- More joined-up food policy across areas like health, housing and social security
- Better access to healthy and affordable food in all communities

We could see improvements in people's health and wellbeing, in how food is produced, prepared and served, and how our food production impacts current and future generations. We could see:

- Fewer people relying on food banks
- Healthier diets, and fewer people getting sick from diet-related illnesses
- More affordable healthy food
- Stronger protections for people who cannot afford food
- Better long-term food security across the UK

[The review](#) argues that the UK's food system should support dignity, wellbeing, equality and human rights.

You can read recommendations for how we get there on pages 66 to 72.

## What the review says

[This review](#) shows that many people in the UK cannot afford a healthy diet because incomes and social security payments are too low while food and living costs continue to rise. This means many households regularly experience hunger and food insecurity and rely on emergency food support.

The review argues that this emergency food support, often provided by charities, is not a long-term solution. Community food projects can provide important support, especially during crises, but they should not replace government action.

The review finds that governments across the UK are not doing enough to make sure everyone can afford and access food with dignity. Food policy in the UK is fragmented, and the laws, government departments and policies that govern different parts of the food system do not always work together effectively.

Wider problems with the food system include:

- Incomes and social security payments are too low to meet rising living costs
- Access to healthy and affordable food is not equal across the UK or within communities
- More people are becoming sick due to diet-related illnesses
- The food system does not always protect the environment, or the rights and wellbeing of people who produce and prepare food

There are examples of good policy and planning – for example, [Scotland's Good Food Nation](#) – but stronger action is needed across the UK to make the right to food a reality for everyone.

You can read more about food law in the UK on pages 33 to 65 of [the review](#).

## What the review recommends

[The review](#) recommends that the right to food, and other rights under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, be brought into UK law. It also recommends that governments create laws, policies and national plans to help make these rights real in everyday life. This will include action across areas like health, housing, work, social security and food systems.

Urgent action is also needed to reduce hunger and food insecurity while these longer-term changes are developed. This includes moving away from crisis responses and emergency food aid, and building a food system that allows everyone to access adequate food with dignity. This could include:

- Making sure everyone can afford food and other essentials by increasing incomes and social security payments
- Improving access to healthy and affordable food in all communities, especially for people in temporary accommodation, people seeking asylum, and those experiencing homelessness
- Expanding free school meals to all primary school children across the UK and making sure these meals meet children's needs
- Developing a sustainable food action plan that responds to climate change and environmental damage and global crises, while respecting the rights of people working in the food system
- Making sure healthy food stays available and affordable for everyone over time

Overall, the review argues that everyone in the UK should be able to access adequate food with dignity, and that governments have a responsibility to help make this possible.

You can read the interim recommendations on pages 66 to 72 of [the review](#).





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