

Bishop Martin Seeley writes...

Food has been in the news again, and distressingly so.

In a time of extended crisis, with the deepening impact on incomes and jobs, and rising pressures making it harder and harder for many, making sure people are fed becomes an absolute priority for any decent and just society.

Food and shelter, education and health care are basic needs, and a time of crisis makes us realise how fundamental they are – and how easily we can take them for granted.

Food has come to the forefront because of concern for children and families, but I am sure we will be responding to increased homelessness and needs for shelter as the pandemic continues.

We not only discover again how basic these needs are, but how fragile their provision is for so many people. Poverty is the reality for an increasing number of people, and professional footballer Marcus Rashford's free school meals campaign has brought that sharply into focus.

More than 20 years ago the Government of the day vowed to eradicate child poverty within a generation, yet during the years since child poverty has steadily increased, under different Governments, and in these times of COVID 19 it is becoming much worse for far more people.

And in Suffolk this comes on top of worsening trends in poverty and deprivation.

The Government is certainly right when it says that we need long term solutions to child poverty.

But long term solutions are long overdue, and we must urgently reverse this unrelenting trend.

And, right now, we need short term solutions because children are going hungry today.

Which is why I believe the Government is wrong to refuse free school meal vouchers during the half term holidays, and will be wrong to refuse them during the Christmas holidays.

We all find ourselves critical at times of positions Governments adopt, whether Conservative, labour, or coalitions. For me this is one of those times.

I have spent the last couple of weeks travelling around the county meeting groups of people – while we still can – to find out how they are.

These have been church people, clergy and lay people, and I start by asking them, where have they noticed God at work these past few months.

Someone in each group gets the ball rolling.

We haven't been doing much, they say, just collecting some food and handing it out to people who need it.

I push a little bit, and before they realise it, they are telling a story that rivals the Bible's feeding of the 5,000.

They have started something that has grown into a village or estate operation delivering food parcels far and wide to those who are struggling to feed themselves and their families.

Or they are producing meals and delivering them to people's homes.

Or running a "pop-up" shop where people come to – usually – a church and then fill it with their choice of food items from an array of foods donated by supermarkets and good neighbours making a difference.

Or right now they are putting food parcels together for families that schools have told the local church about to make sure they get something to eat.

I've visited pop-up shops and church halls turned into food-distribution centres, and seen the relief and gratitude on people's faces – both on the faces of those providing the food and those receiving it, because everyone knows we are all in this together.

But just think how much easier this would be if the Government had simply produced vouchers that a family could use as cash at the supermarket.

Even with free school meal vouchers pop-up shops and food pantries, other initiatives would still be needed to continue making a difference, but at least for the 19,000 school children in Suffolk entitled to free school meals, this would be assured.

Suffolk County Council has secured and provided a range of funding to relieve hunger and poverty across Suffolk, including £250,000 directly to food banks.

But the issue is still one of access, reaching the people who really need help, and that is where churches, schools and community groups – the people actually there in the community – are so crucial.

And so countless volunteers in churches and community groups across Suffolk are working generously and determinedly to ensure people are not hungry.

And vouchers are better for another reason, not just because they go to one group that really needs them.

Voucher schemes respect a person's dignity – you are simply join a supermarket queue with the shopping you have selected, and there is no sense that you are having a "handout" or having to swallow your pride by queueing up at a food bank or meal service.

We know that in the giving and receiving of food, meals, love and compassion through all this, God is at work, multiplying countless people's efforts, just like he did feeding the 5,000 with the loaves and fish.

But there are those in our communities who are going hungry because they are too embarrassed to ask for help. And frankly, they shouldn't have to.

And God knows that all these efforts are just scratching the surface, and if we are concerned about the world we live in, and the conditions that so many people find themselves, far greater change is needed.

One priest told me his church had handed out 4,000 meals, but he knew they were hardly touching the need on his estate.

We need the right immediate response from government – which includes meal vouchers in school holidays – and the churches, schools and community groups providing vital supplies directly to the host of people who need them.

And we need now a concerted and determined plan with people coming together to eradicate child poverty and all forms of poverty in our county and across the country.

And when that starts happening, we will know for sure that God is at work.