



Food Banks in Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire

Research Report

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Executive Summary

Use of food banks in the UK has dramatically increased over the last decade. This research briefing outlines why people are turning to food banks, as well as the local and national government perspective on food banks. The research then examines the local perspective across Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire.

Introduction

Food banks¹ are initiatives that provide an emergency food intervention for those in need. This is usually in the form of a free food parcel containing a range of non-perishable grocery goods based on the household size of the recipient. The support offered by food banks is short-term, while users await further support from other statutory and non-statutory services. Food banks are run by a variety of organisations including faith groups, community service agencies, schools and community health centres, but almost all rely on donated food and volunteer labour to operate.

There is increasing evidence of a need for emergency food provision or ‘food aid’ in the UK indicating a growing problem. Research commissioned by the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and published in February 2014 found that need for food aid was increasing (Lambie-Mumford et al, 2014). ‘Food aid’ is a term used by the UK government to describe both charitable and state-supported projects that provide help to people on a short-term basis with food. This can be in the form of food parcels, food stamps or vouchers, onsite (e.g. soup kitchen) and home-based (e.g. ‘meals on wheels’) meal provision. Such projects aim to relieve symptoms of household or individual-level food insecurity and poverty (Lambie-Mumford et al, 2014).

Food bank use has been increasingly steadily since 2005. In the period April to September 2016 Trussell Trust foodbanks distributed 519,342 three day emergency food parcels to people in crisis (The Trussell Trust, 2016). Table 1 illustrates the growth in demand at The Trussell Trust foodbank network since 2011. Foodbank usage continues to rise; the number of food parcels distributed by the Trussell Trust increased from 3,000 in 2005/06, to 40,898 in 2009/10, and then to 1,109,309 in 2015/16.

Table 1. Number of 3 day emergency food parcels distributed by Trussell Trust

Area	2011–2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016
National	128697	346992	913138	1084604	1109309
South East	26604	44951	91974	99008	97216
South West	32282	59532	105521	106298	99586

UK data on food bank usage is incomplete. The government does not collect any official statistics on the use of food banks and Trussell Trust figures do not incorporate food distributed by independent, non-Trussell Trust affiliated food banks. Estimates of the number of foodbanks in operation vary. The Trussell Trust Foodbank network, the biggest organiser of foodbanks in Britain, has a network of 429 foodbanks UK wide. Research suggests a total of 800 food banks operating in the UK. This could mean in the region of 400 independent food banks not affiliated with The Trussell Trust network.

The emergence of food banks in the UK has been rapid, and the debate surrounding food banks has been characterised by uncertainties regarding the reasons for their proliferation and continued existence.

¹ The term ‘food bank’ refers to the broad category of food initiatives; ‘Foodbank’ is the registered name of the Trussell Trust emergency food initiative.

Food Banks

Food banks are initiatives that provide an emergency food intervention for those in need, often as a result of a temporary financial crisis (such as redundancy, eviction, benefits changes/delays, unexpected large bills etc.).

Although the concept of food banks has existed internationally for several decades, beginning in the US in the late 1960s, it is a relatively recent phenomenon in Britain. The Trussell Trust launched its first food bank in Salisbury, Wiltshire in 1999 before establishing its UK-wide network in 2004. The majority of food banks have been running since 2011 (Forsey, 2014).

Food banks are run by a variety of organisations including faith groups, community groups, charities, community service agencies, schools and community health centres. Broadly, food banks can be classified as independent or a member of The Trussell Trust Foodbank Network.

Typically, food parcels can only be obtained from a food bank with a referral voucher. Food banks collaborate with partner statutory and voluntary agencies (care/welfare professionals, social workers, doctors, health visitors, Citizens Advice Bureau, Jobcentre Plus, etc.) who issue a voucher to those people in acute need. The use of food vouchers enables food banks to monitor demand, and record information relating to primary and secondary reasons for referral as well as the composition of the clients household. Most recipients of food bank parcels may only receive up to three consecutive referral vouchers over a given time frame, usually six months. This is to help avoid client dependency and ensures the food bank retains their 'emergency' intervention status.

The Trussell Trust Foodbank Network

The Trussell Trust Foodbank Network is the UK's most high profile food bank. Established in 2004, it is a nationally coordinated network of community based emergency food franchises, with the objective of rolling out a local-focused, community-based approach. The Trussell Trust Foodbank model was set up to feed people in 'crisis' by providing an emergency food parcel containing a minimum of three days' food. Most of the food which the Trust distributes is donated by consumers, largely through collections at schools, churches and supermarkets. The Trust harnesses local (and often church based) volunteers and food donors.

The Trussell Trust voucher referral system enables a system of short term support to be maintained and for the Trussell Trust it ensures that Foodbanks retain their 'emergency' intervention and to use it as a tool to hold agencies to account (Lambie-Mumford 2013: 76). Becoming a voucher holder is discretionary. Agencies are approached by food bank managers, or act proactively to obtain vouchers from managers. Service users are restricted to three food parcels in a six month period. Nationally, the data is collated and published enabling the Trust to engage in policy.

Since their inception, Trussell Trust Foodbanks have widened their support beyond food to help people in crisis break the cycle of poverty. The 'More than Food' programme is a national initiative to help Foodbanks develop into community hubs, providing people in need with emergency food and a range of advice, support and guidance in one location.

Independent Food Banks

The centrality of the Trussell Trust in food poverty discourse masks the number and significance of independent food banks. Independents are often ignored, undercounted or not represented in reviews of the food bank landscape. It has been estimated that there are approximately 400 independent food

banks operating across the UK (Maye et al, 2014) which is equivalent to the number of social-franchises in the Trussell Trust network.

Independent food banks operate to a variety of models and may be run by organisations including faith groups, community groups, charities, community service agencies, schools and community health centres. Most utilise a food bank referral system to regulate access to their services, establishing a network of support agencies who will distribute vouchers to those in need.

The data collected by independent food banks can vary greatly in its robustness and quality due to a number of factors, but it is a necessary component of understanding the scale of food insecurity and food poverty in areas not served by the Trussell Trust Network.

Where do Food Banks Open?

Food banks are more likely to open in local authority areas with higher unemployment rates. A percentage point increase in unemployment increases the likelihood of a food bank opening in the subsequent year by 1.08-fold (Loopstra et al., 2015).

Greater welfare cuts increased the likelihood of a food bank opening. Each 1 per cent cut in central government spending on welfare benefits in a local authority increased the odds of a food bank opening within 2 years by 1.6 fold. Similar magnitude cuts in local authority spending increased odds of a food bank opening in the next year by 1.07 fold (Loopstra et al., 2015).

Increasing Food Aid demand in the UK

Food aid and the subsequent rise in the number of food banks have been identified as an indicator of growing food poverty in Britain. Food poverty is defined by the Department of Health as ‘the inability to afford, or to have access to, food to make up a healthy diet’ (Department of Health, 2005). Two main issues are identified as key drivers of food poverty: ‘food prices and changing household incomes’ (Downing and Kennedy, 2014).

There is a ‘lack of systematic peer-reviewed research’ from the UK on the reasons why food aid demand has increased (Lambie-Mumford, et al., 2014). However, there are a number of issues and trends which can be recognised as possible contributory factors. The Trussell Trust is the only agency who rigorously records the reason for a client’s referral to a food bank. Figure 1 outlines the primary reasons for referral to a Trussell Trust Foodbank in 2015/16. The three primary reasons for referral in 2015/16 were benefit delay, low incomes, and benefit changes.

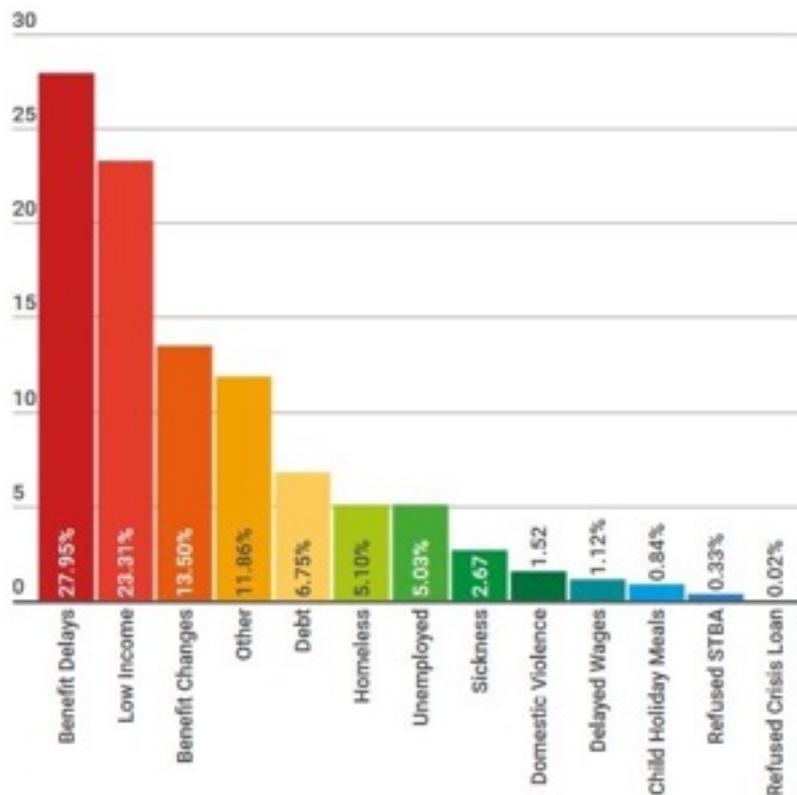


Figure 1. Primary Reasons for Referral to Trussell Trust Foodbank (2015-16)

A joint report from the Trussell Trust, the Church of England, and the charities Oxfam and Child Poverty Action Group found that food bank users were more likely to live in rented accommodation, be single adults or lone parents, be unemployed, and have experienced a “sanction,” where their unemployment benefits were cut for at least one month. The extent of the contribution that welfare reform and benefit changes have had on the growth in food banks has perhaps not been fully recognised by Government. Discussions on food bank use in the UK have previously placed focus on the range of causal factors which could have influenced the rise in food bank use, including money management skills. However, many organisations are citing the more rigorous conditionality regime and sanctions, reductions in the amount of financial support available through benefits, as well as benefit delays, as significant contributory factors. The Scottish Parliament Welfare Reform Committee (2014) identifies welfare reform (bedroom tax, DLA reassessment, benefit cap, localisation of council tax benefit) as one of the key factors that is fuelling the rise in demand for food aid.

The next section will consider a number of issues and trends which can be recognised as possible contributory factors to the rise in demand for food aid and subsequent rise in usage of food banks in the UK.

Food Prices

In the UK, all food groups have risen in price since 2007 with rises ranging from 24 per cent to 55 per cent. Food prices rose by 11 per cent in real terms between 2007 and 2013 taking the UK back to the late nineties in terms of the high cost of food relative to other goods. This has had an impact on food purchases for the lowest income group of households. Between 2017 and 2013 the lowest income group of households bought less fruit and vegetables, but bought more pork, bacon and cheese.

Malnutrition cases in English hospitals have tripled in the last ten years. Poor diet and lack of food accounted for a total of 17,166 hospital bed days in 2015-16, up from 6,704 in 2006-07. Where doctors have judged that undernourishment would have been a contributory factor in a patient admission, for example due to a fall or infection, the number rises significantly to 184,528 hospital bed days last year, a near-tripling on the figure of 65,048 in 2006-07.

Four out of five people who needed inpatient care because of malnutrition were admitted as emergencies, suggesting their health had deteriorated significantly in the days before they were admitted. General practitioners have raised concerns about patients seeking referrals to food banks (BMA, 2014). One survey of 522 GPs found that 16% had been asked for such referrals (Matthews-King, 2014).

Lack of Support Measures

The Defra commissioned research found that deprived households turned to food banks after exhausting various strategies aimed at resolving their personal difficulties. Food bank usage was a last resort, after other alternative support measures had been tried such as: discretionary spending cutbacks; turning to family and friends; and the utilisation of debt finance capacity (Lambie-Mumford, et al., 2014).

Crisis Loans were abolished in April 2013, along with Social Fund Community Care Grants, with funding transferred to local authorities in England to enable them to provide such assistance as they saw fit. However, the Department for Work and Pensions retains responsibility for providing support to people pending a payment of benefit, and a new system of Short Term Benefit Advances (STBA) has been set up for this purpose.

In DWP STBA Guidance for Benefit Centres² it is advised that staff do not signpost the claimant to local help and support until staff have considered whether benefit, an STBA, or any other DWP support is available to them. The aim of this guidance is to ensure that the claimant receives the support that is most appropriate in their circumstances. The maximum STBA is based on sixty per cent of a claimant's daily rate from the date of their request to their benefit week end date. Repayment is by deduction of equal amounts from future payments, with a normal maximum recovery period of twelve weeks.

Household Incomes

In the financial year ending 2015 (2014/15), the median household disposable income in the UK was £25,700. After taking account of inflation and changes in household structures over time, this figure is comparable to the pre-economic downturn level observed in 2007/08 (£25,400) (ONS, 2016).

Citizens Advice Briefing on the 2012 Autumn Statement reported, 'already, advisers in our local bureaux are telling us that more clients are facing financial hardship and they are, for example, seeing more people needing food parcels'.

The 2012 Defra handbook shows that food affordability has fallen by over 20% in the last few years, for households in the lowest income decile (Lambie-Mumford, et al., 2014). This is because, a large proportion of low income households in the UK have been suffering both falling real wages and working age benefit payments.

Benefit Delays

The delayed payment of benefit remains a most common event triggering the need for help from a food bank (APPG, 2016; Trussell Trust, 2016). Over the past 12 months, more than 90,000 people waited more than three weeks for their unemployment benefit applications to be processed, while 242,000 waited more than two weeks, according to DWP figures obtained by Labour MP Frank Field.

² [DWP STBA Guidance for Benefit Centres](#)

The DWP's targets are to process 90% of jobseeker's allowance (JSA) claims, and 85% of employment and support allowance (ESA) claims, within 10 working days. It is close to meeting the former target and has surpassed the latter. But the implementation of Universal Credit (UC) will exacerbate this issue. The design of UC means anyone who moves onto it has to wait at least 42 days to receive payment.

In a study of UC claimants in 2015 more than 60 per cent of respondents reported that they had found it "very difficult" to pay rent, utilities and food bills during the 42-day period (CAB, 2016). A third had waited even longer for their claim to be processed, with one in 10 waiting at least 63 days.

Outside of referrals, research has indicated that the majority of claimants did not know there was food banks situated locally which they could access for food aid. The use of food banks is associated with deep stigma. Food bank users have expressed shame and embarrassment in using such services.

Benefit Conditionality and Sanctions

Conditionality and sanctions have been part of the Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) since its introduction in 1996 and for Employment Support Allowance (ESA) claimants in the Work Related Activity Group (WRAG) since October 2008. A revised sanctions regime for JSA came into effect from 22 October 2012, and a revised sanctions regime for ESA came into effect from 3 December 2012. Sanctions also exist in a number of other benefits. Under the new sanctions regime figures show an increase in the numbers of sanction decisions being made.

Figures published by DWP show that the number of Jobseeker's Allowance sanctions and disallowances increased from 279,480 in 2001 to 684,030 in 2010. Under the new JSA sanctions regime, introduced on 22nd October 2012 a total of 817,541 'adverse' sanction decisions were made in the period October 2012 to September 2013.

Child Poverty Action Group attributes the rise in benefit conditionality and sanctions as a direct cause of the rise in food bank demand (CPAG, 2013).

Benefit Freeze

From April 2016 government introduced a four-year freeze to certain working-age benefits. Certain elements of tax credits and Child Benefit will be frozen at their 2015/16 levels for four years between 2016/17 and 2019/20, whilst still protecting pensioners and benefits related to the extra costs of disability³.

Higher UK inflation, driven by the falling value of the pound, will play a significant part in the expected squeeze in living standards for benefits claimants. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies calculations, benefits are expected to take a 6 per cent hit with 11.5m families facing a squeeze of £390 a year, up from an earlier estimation of £360 a year. In the DWP's impact assessment it was identified that households towards the bottom of the income distribution are more likely to be affected with the average difference between pre-change entitlement approximately -£6 a week (DWP, 2015).

³ The main working-age rates of Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance and Housing Benefit; the work-related activity group component of Employment and Support Allowance. The basic, second adult, lone parent and 30 hour elements of Working Tax Credit (WTC) and the individual element of Child Tax Credit. The corresponding elements of Universal Credit. Child Benefit.

Higher inflation – the benefits freeze

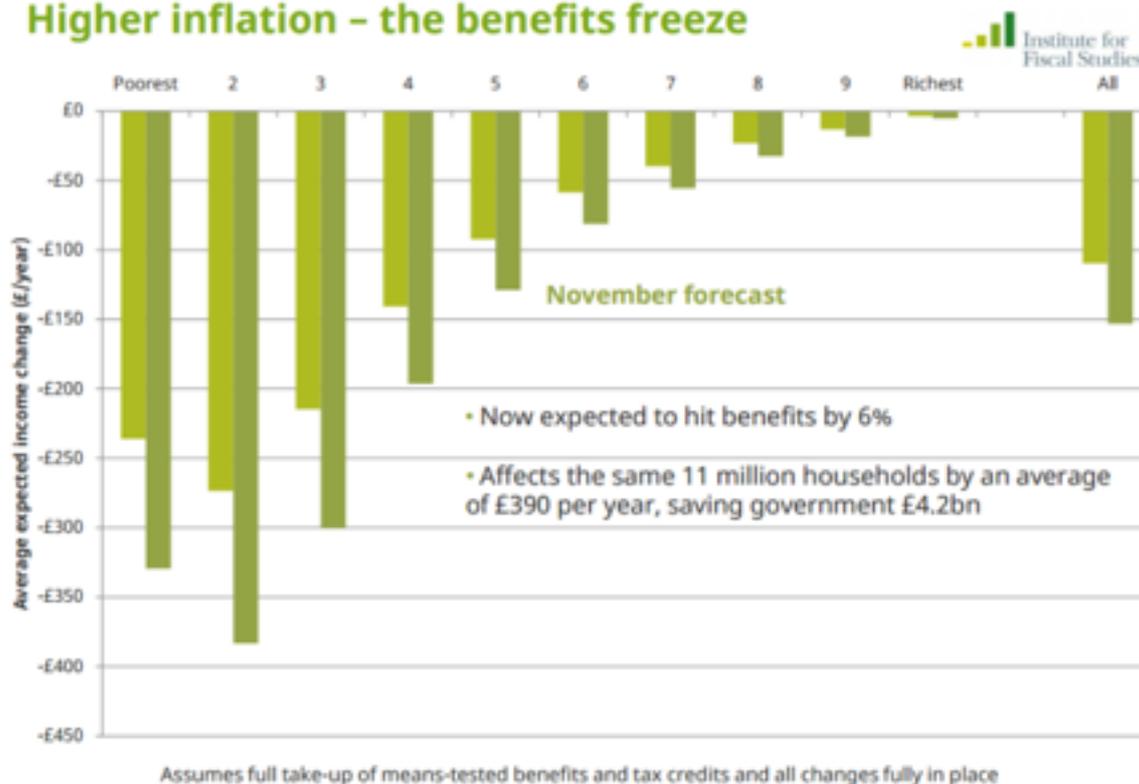


Figure 2. Higher Inflation and the Benefits Freeze (Source: IFS, 2016).

Government and Food Banks

This section provides an overview of the central and local government positions on food banks, examining national policy and the local context.

Central Government Position on Food Banks

The Government does not provide (or intend to provide) support directly to food banks, as outlined by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Lord De Mauley) in April 2013:

The Government are not considering the provision of funding to support food banks. We do, however, recognise the good work of organisations that redistribute surplus food to help reduce food poverty, assist the homeless and provide access to nutritional meals for those who may otherwise struggle. In addition, most major retailers already have partnerships with redistribution charities. In 2012, Defra held a meeting with retailers and food distribution charities to explore the current barriers to redistribution and the Waste and Resources Action Programme has recently begun working with Fareshare and FoodCycle to deliver a trial to increase food distribution from retail stores⁴.

This position is in line with other countries such as USA and Canada where food banks remain voluntary and extra-governmental organisations with no allocated government funding for their operations.

In a letter to the Scottish government, by then Minister for Employment Esther McVey, she wrote that there was "no robust evidence linking food bank usage to welfare reform." The Commons Environment and Rural Affairs Select Committee has since called on the government to start collecting statistically robust data on this austerity-era phenomenon, "We recommend that Defra commission further research into why more people are using food banks to provide an evidence base to inform and enhance policy responses."

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Hunger and Food Poverty was established in October 2013 by Frank Field MP and Laura Sandys MP to investigate the root causes of hunger and food poverty and the increase in British demand for food banks. APPGs are informal groups of members of both Houses with a common interest in particular issues.

Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and Food Banks

Damian Hinds, Minister for Employment, stated that 'Jobcentre Plus district managers have discretion to work with food banks in their areas where those food banks are willing to work with them' (HC, 2016). This is considered part of the wider remit for the Jobcentre Plus outreach programme working collaboratively with community-based organisations. Jobcentre Plus 'signpost people to food banks where it is appropriate to do so' (HC, 2013) and have been signposting since September 2011.

There are a number of circumstances in which a Jobcentre might make a client referral to a food bank. These include:

- Where a Short term Benefit Advance has been refused;
- Where a change in circumstances has affected a person's entitlement to benefit, or reduced the amount they receive;
- Where the payment of benefit has been delayed (e.g. because a claim was still being assessed).

Local Government and Food Banks

Although the Central government position on food banks is clear, Lord De Mauley did clarify the option for local authorities by stating that:

‘Although not supported centrally, local authorities have the ability to fund food banks if they consider that this would benefit their local community’.

At a conference in 2013 Lord Freud, Minister for Welfare Reform, is reported to have suggested that local authorities consider working with food banks as part of their local welfare assistance schemes.

An investigation by Panorama⁵ in 2014 revealed that 140 councils were tackling food poverty by subsidising local food banks. Panorama reported that £2.9m of public money had been spent by

⁵

councils over a two year period to help feed people. In the same year Derbyshire County Council announced it would be investing £126,000 from its public health budget into food banks.

In Derbyshire there has been a significant rise in the number of food banks. Currently there are 22 food banks operating across the county. According to Cllr Dave Allen, Derbyshire County Council cabinet member for health and communities, more people are using food banks due to “the rising cost of living, static incomes, changes to benefits and unemployment.”

Local Authorities and Local Welfare Provision

The Social Fund was introduced in 1987 and consisted of discretionary and regulated payments, intended to provide assistance with costs not covered by benefit payments through both grants and loans ensuring the basic needs of people were met. Crisis loans were paid from the Social Fund by Jobcentre Plus to individuals and households experiencing short-term financial emergencies.

In the decade leading up to 2010-11, gross annual expenditure on Crisis Loans more than trebled from £65.3 million to £228.3 million. The number of applications almost trebled over the same period from 1.29 million in 2000-01 to 3.42 million in 2010-11. The number of awards increased from 930,000 in 2000-01 to 2.65 million in 2010-11.

As a result of measures to limit the rate paid (from 75% of the benefits rate to 60% from April 2011, with a further reduction to 30% in April 2012) and the number of crisis loan awards an individual/household could receive (three for general living expenses in a rolling 12 month period) the average Crisis Loan award decreased from £83 in 2010-11 to £64 in 2011-12 and £59 in 2012-13. Gross annual expenditure on Crisis Loans fell from £228.3 million in 2010-11 to £133.3 million in 2011-12 and again to £103.2 million in 2012-13 (DWP, Various).

Discretionary aspects of the Social Fund, Community Care Grants and Crisis loans for living expenses, were abolished from April 2013. The remainder of the discretionary Social Fund was devolved to Local Authorities in April 2013 through Local Welfare Assistance schemes.

The localisation of the Social Fund in 2013 saw the responsibility for meeting short-term unforeseen need transferred to upper tier local authorities. The devolved budget was set at 2005 levels and was passed over to local authorities on a ‘non ring-fenced’ basis, with no statutory duties attached. ‘There is no duty on local authorities regarding the exact nature of ‘local provision’; local authorities were free to implement their own support arrangements.

There has been a marked decline in the success rates for applicants since the Social Fund was devolved to local councils. In the last year of the Social Fund (2012-13), people who applied for a crisis loan (typically a £60 loan repayable through benefit payments) had an 80.6% chance of being successful. In 2013-14 the success rates for local welfare assistance were just under 58% (Guardian, 2014).

Evidence submitted to an All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom by Wirral Metropolitan Borough indicated that 45 per cent of its Local Welfare Assistance awards in 2013-14 were food related. It suggested further that if this funding were to cease, ‘we fear food bank referrals could increase.’

A number of local authorities, as part of their Local Welfare Provision schemes have provided funding to food banks. Trafford allocated £90,000 to the CAB food bank, and a further £16,439 was allocated to a ‘development fund’ for food bank provision. Redbridge, Rochdale and Somerset included food

banks as part of the local services to which they allocated funding. Other local authorities acted as a referral agent, issuing food bank vouchers or 'signposting' individuals to their local food bank.

The Local Perspective: Bedford Foodbank, Bedfordshire

Bedford Foodbank was founded in 2011 by Sarah Broughton. Sarah had previously been making Christmas food parcels for the elderly as part of a community group with All Nations Church Bedford when someone told her that people were hungry all year round which led her to starting the service. After visiting other food banks in the wider local area to see best practice with regards operation, the food bank joined the Trussell Trust. The food bank now has 6 distribution centres within the wider Bedford area: All Nations Church, Christ Church, St Mary's Church, Scott Hall, Salvation Army Bedford and Project 229. The food bank has developed and maintained strong and positive links with the wider community. Reliant on donations of food, this is a critical component of maintaining a food bank. In July 2017 the food bank was awarded the Bedfordshire Local Heroes Charity of the year award.

Analysis

Clients are referred to the food bank by one of 150 partner agencies (GP practices, Citizens Advice Bureau). The food bank has more than 85 volunteers and each year feeds more than 6000 people. In order to sustain the challenging nature of the food bank, the charity employs 2 part time staff and spends £13,000 per annum on staff salaries alongside hiring a warehouse for the cost of £9000 per annum.

As part of this research, Sarah Broughton was interviewed for her perspective on the operation of the food bank and the needs of the local communities it serves. Discussion with Sarah centred on the stigma surrounding food bank use in the UK, alongside the stigma she feels it attached to being a family in poverty. In her voluntary Project Manager role Sarah spends much of her time fundraising and building stakeholder engagement and relationships with other organisations. It is the success of building and maintaining these relationships that Sarah attributes to the success of the food bank. For example, they have previously hosted team-building days with BT and other organisations within the food bank warehouse.

Although part of the Trussell Trust, Bedford Foodbank operates with flexibility according to client needs. For example, many Trussell Trust Foodbanks no longer put sugar into food parcels and make it unavailable to clients. However, some Trussell Foodbanks make it available to clients at distribution centres should clients wish to take it and Bedford Foodbank follows this approach. Further to this, the food bank is flexible in its approach to clients who use it on a regular basis. While there are guidelines in place with regards to the number of parcels clients can receive over a certain period (5 parcels in a 12 month period), Bedford Foodbank is also flexible in their approach to this for clients who need further help.

Bedford Foodbank has built a strong relationship with Citizens Advice Bedford and local Housing Associations. This has led to representatives from these organisations being available to clients in the distribution centres should they require advice and guidance in the areas they cover. Although not every client has this need, this has been a provision which has been well received.

The Local Perspective: The MK Food Bank, Buckinghamshire

The MK Food Bank opened in 2004 as an independent food bank. Originally opening twice a week from the Christian Centre in Oldbrook Milton Keynes, the project began when Mark Sharratt (senior pastor of the Milton Keynes Christian Centre) began talking to professional bodies in the local area where it became apparent that an agency for the distribution of food was urgently needed. Initially run solely from volunteers, in April 2008 a Development grant from the Milton Keynes Community Foundations enabled the recruitment of a full-time project manager for a 3 year period. Sue Wall joined the food bank in 2008 as Project Manager and in Winter 2011 John Marshall joined the food bank as Warehouse Supervisor. In August 2012, Marshall became Project Manager.

Analysis:

Clients are referred to the food bank via a network of over 95 professional care referral agencies, including but not limited to Social Services, MK Council, Age Concern, British Red Cross, Probation Service, YMCA and various housing associations. The Food Bank delivers food to 12 distribution centres across Milton Keynes and the wider district. Like Bedford Foodbank, the MK Food Bank host team building days from their warehouse in Stacey Bushes Milton Keynes. The food bank regularly delivers food to other food banks in the surrounding districts if stock shortages are experienced. For example, following a fire at an Asda in Luton (one of Luton food banks biggest donors), shortages in stock was experienced by Luton, and stock was then transferred from MK to Luton. For The Food Bank MK, this collaborative nature is an importance aspect of their operation.

The food bank has a comprehensive web-based software programme which they use to monitor the issuing and redemption of vouchers. In 2015 the food bank distributed 10,870 food parcels to people in MK, and every year MK Food Bank deals with in excess of 4,000 paper emergency food vouchers. However, due to increasing need of the service, the paper-based system MK had was no longer fit for purpose and struggled to keep up with the demands of the charity. To solve this problem, the food bank worked alongside referral agencies to design a new online system and received funding to cover the initial 3 years worth of costs for the system. MK Community Foundation, Food Bank Project manager John Marshall, said;

“The e-voucher system has helped us create a clearer understanding of the needs of people who use our service and better informs the agencies issuing the vouchers. It has really improved people’s feedback and leads to better decision making all around. The e-voucher project has helped people to understand our system and ultimately reduced people’s dependencies on the Food Bank. There is now more emphasis on business tasks analysis, this made us look at how we manage areas like warehouse stock control. The result is a greater air of professionalism, a reflective attitude making us question why do we do things the way we do? And that has led to a more streamlined and efficient organisation!”

The Local Perspective: Luton Foodbank, Bedfordshire

Luton Foodbank was launched as an independent food bank in April 2013 and provides emergency food supplies to local people in crisis and poverty within the Luton area as poverty and unemployment increased. In the Luton area, local households have lower than average incomes which place Luton 63 out of 326 localities. Biscot, Dallow, Northwell, High Town and Farley are in the top 10% most deprived wards in the country.

Analysis:

Luton Foodbank currently works with over 100 different referral agencies, and on average gives out 145 parcels per week. In the last year, the value of food parcels distributed had a total value of £85,000 with a breakdown as follows: 3600 adult food parcels at £15 each (£54,500), 1200 additional adult parcels at £7.40 each (£8,900), 2600 children's parcels at £8.25 each and 114 kettle packs costing £11.00 each (1,500). 33% of their users are classified as being in a short term crisis, 87% of users use the food bank once or twice before resolving their crisis. In literature given out by Luton Foodbank, they discuss the prevalence of poverty in the area and the link this has to government expenditure:

The government's reduction in welfare benefits and crisis loans of 28 billion pounds since 2013 has impacted low-income families. About 10,800 (22.4%) children under 16 in Luton live in poverty. This is one of the worse rates of child poverty in the East of England. More cuts in government expenditure make it uncertain that this will improve.

(Luton Foodbank)

The 2011 census shows the ethnic demographic of Luton to be as follows: White 54.66%, Asian or Asian British 30.00%, Black or Black British 9.80%, Mixed 4.08%, and other 1.47%. Data collect by Luton Food Bank on the ethnic breakdown of their clients is proportionately in line with the demographic of the 2011 census. This demonstrates that food poverty in Luton and the wider area is experienced proportionately by all ethnic backgrounds.

Trussell Trust vs. Independent Food Banks

Both independent and Trussell Trust food banks across Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire took part in this research. It was apparent from the discussion that there were both advantages and disadvantages to being an independent food bank or part of the Trussell Trust. These are shown below:

Trussell Trust Foodbank	
Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Full training given to new food bank opening- Foodbanks receive ongoing support from national staff team and regional development officer to ensure the smooth running of the foodbank- Help is received with regards to branding, PR advice and template press releases	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Definitive guidelines on how food banks should be operated

Independent Food Bank	
Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Flexibility in how the food bank is managed and run	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- When a food bank is first set up they may experience difficulties building partnerships and relationships with external stakeholders

Ultimately, the decision of whether a food bank joins the Trussell Trust or operates independently is for the individual food bank charity to make.

Conclusion

Food banks offer a short-term, emergency response to the problems of food insecurity and poverty. Despite operating outside of statutory welfare provision they are becoming an accepted palliative response to an issue they cannot solve (Cloke et al, 2016). The proliferation of food banks precludes meaningful action to address the structural causes of food insecurity and poverty.

The active engagement of public sector care and welfare professionals in the distribution of food bank vouchers and the provision of direct funding to food banks from local authorities through local community grants (Downing and Kennedy, 2013) has resulted in the increasing formalisation of food banks as a component part of the welfare state (Cloke et al, 2016). This entrenchment of food banks into the welfare state creates client and local authority dependency on their continued provision of emergency food parcels to those people in acute need.

There is an inherent vulnerability of food aid provision in being able to meet existing or rising demand, when dependent on charitable organisations, donations and volunteers.

Key Recommendations

From our analysis of the experiences of food banks operating in Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire, it is clear that tackling the reasons behind food bank users requires a sensitive and long-term approach.

1. The Government and its Departments should recognise and understand a link between the benefit system and food bank use.

Data recorded by the Trussell Trust shows the most common reasons for food banks use to be: benefits delays, low income and benefit changes. The link between the benefit system and increased food bank usage needs to be acknowledged.

2. The Government and its Departments should create and provide comprehensive operational guidelines for food banks.

When food banks open, in order to run effectively, they have to build and develop connections with external organisations. For some food banks, this process is easier than for others. The Government should produce comprehensive guidelines and advice to help new food banks so they can best meet the needs of their clients.

3. The Government and its Departments should improve access to appropriate advice and support.

Many of the clients who use food banks also require further support from independent advice services. Food banks should be supported by Government in their efforts to signpost and provide support for food bank users in other areas of need.

4. The Government and its Departments should ensure that the national living wage is above the poverty line

60% of Britons in poverty are working families, with low pay being identified as a trigger for in-work poverty. The poverty line, which is calculated as 60% of the median income, currently sits at £15,132 per annum for a lone parent with 2 children and £20,436 per annum for a couple with 2 children. The National Minimum Wage should be raised to ensure that no working family falls below the poverty line.