

BEYOND BEANS: FOOD BANKS IN THE UK

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Food is an indispensable commodity, essential to survival, and yet more and more people in the UK are turning to food banks to get by. Food poverty is a rapidly growing problem that is thought to be affecting millions of people in the UK, often for reasons beyond their control—from poor health and domestic violence to debt, long-term unemployment, and access to benefits. Food banks have been criticised for tackling the symptoms of poverty rather than addressing the causes—but often they do more than supplying essential nutrition to those in crisis. Many are now aiming to offer all-round support to address the underlying problems that leave people unable to support themselves.

'Our problem is convincing funders that we're more than just food... it's never, ever one dimensional.'

Denise Bentley, Tower Hamlets Food Bank Manager

Food banks: the basics

Food banks operate within a spectrum of organisations that exist to help those without enough food to subsist. From soup kitchens through to organisations that campaign for a living wage, there are a

MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

Food banks entrench dependency

Food banks are an emergency service. Where people begin to become reliant on their services, steps are taken to help them address the root causes of the problem.

Food banks will serve anybody

The majority of food banks will only provide food to people who have been referred by front-line professionals such as doctors and social workers, who have identified that they are in acute need.

Food banks provide luxury food

Food banks rely on the kind donations of food from the community. Whilst some may choose to donate high-end products, the majority of food bank donations are non-perishable essentials.

great number of charities working to

tackle food poverty. Despite the roots of the US movement dating back to the late 1960s, the proliferation of food banks in the UK has mostly occurred over the past decade.²

The food bank model centres around the donation of food by individuals (and community groups such as schools and churches), which is stored and distributed directly to people in need. Speaking to NPC, the Trussell Trust, a social franchise with more than 380 food banks nationwide, emphasised that *'the real value [of food banks] comes in local partnerships, relationships and the provision of holistic support to people in crisis'*.

Food banks are intended as an emergency service, provided to those in need to tide them over in times of crisis—signposting users to other specialist bodies, particularly if the problems persist in the longer term. The Trussell Trust emphasise that users are not turned away from their service; rather, their system flags serial customers as being in need of further support.

90% of the 3,492 tonnes of food given out by The Trussell Trust in 2012/13 was donated directly by the public.¹

¹ The Trussell Trust (2013) *Biggest ever increase in UK food bank use*. Press release.

² Fell, M., Downing, E., and Kennedy, S. (2013) *Food Banks and Food Poverty*. Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

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Food poverty

What is food poverty?

Unlike fuel poverty, there is no official definition of food poverty in the UK, so we cannot be sure of the number of people that are affected. A recent report by Kellogg's defines households that have to spend more than 10% of their income on food as being in food poverty, putting the number of people affected in the UK at roughly 4.7 million.³ Broadly, food poverty refers to a situation in which, through a combination of rising food prices, stagnating incomes and stricter benefit restrictions, people find themselves unable to afford adequate food to survive. Speaking to NPC, Patrick Butler of the Guardian noted that, in the context of increasingly squeezed incomes, *'food is often the first thing to go'*. It is easier to buy less food, or poorer quality food, than it is to stop paying your rent or bills. In addition, food prices are rising faster than most other goods. Food prices in July 2013 had increased by 43.5% since 2005, compared to 25.8% for goods in general (fig. 1).⁴

Why is it a problem?

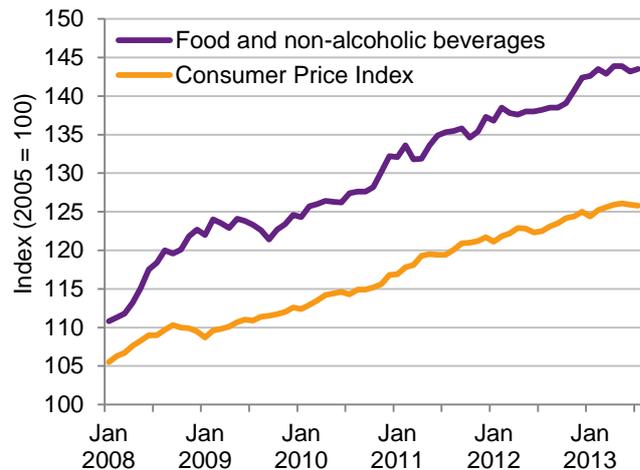
Food poverty hits the poorest households hardest. Whilst the richest 10% of households spent 8% of their income on food in 2011, the proportion of income spent by the poorest 10% was twice as large, at 16% (figure 2).

Some of the most important food items in terms of nutritional value are increasing in price at the fastest rate. Fruit, for example, increased in price by 10.2% in the year between July 2012 and July 2013. The next largest increase was in vegetable prices, at 5.3%.⁵

Food poverty is not just a problem for those affected directly. As well as the great human cost, there is a wider economic cost to society. Olivier de Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food warns that *'the impact on healthcare in the next 15 to 20 years will be gigantic.'*⁶

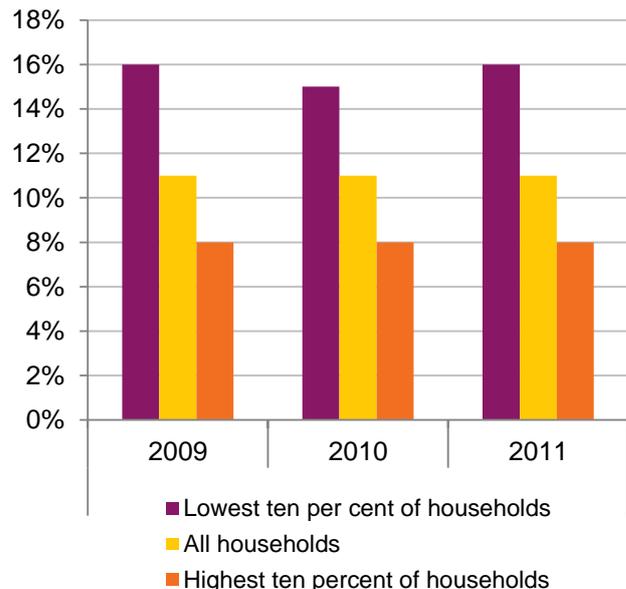
The root causes of food poverty are complex, and one common criticism of food banks is that they address the symptom, rather than these underlying problems. Some fear that food banks may become an entrenched mechanism to deal with society's most vulnerable, rather than short-term providers for those in crisis. In parts of Canada and the US, food banks have become so entrenched that some fear that they will hold back the progress of wider efforts to tackle food poverty's root causes, by removing the urgency for reform.⁷ Those that subscribe to this point of view may see the increasing scale and professionalisation of food banks and food poverty providers as a cause for concern. But, as Adrian Curtis from The

Figure 1: Food price and CPI inflation since 2008



Source: Office for National Statistics, Consumer Price Indices

Figure 2: Food spending as a proportion of income



Source: Office for National Statistics, Family Spending series

3 Kellogg's (2013) *Hard to swallow: The facts about food poverty*. The Centre for Economics and Business Research.

4 Office of National Statistics, *Statistical Bulletin: Consumer Price inflation July 2013*. Baseline is a whole year average for 2005.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Elgot, J. (2013) *Food Poverty: UN Special Rapporteur finds austerity, food banks and working poor in UK extremely worrying*. Huffington Post.

7 Butler, P. (2013) *Poverty: 50 ways to close a food bank*. The Guardian,

Trussell Trust explained, the complexity of the problems that lead people to seek help from food banks mean that these symptoms will need to be addressed for a long time. Whilst it is important to think about tackling the underlying drivers of growing food poverty in the UK, there is still a crucial place in the system for frontline providers such as food banks.

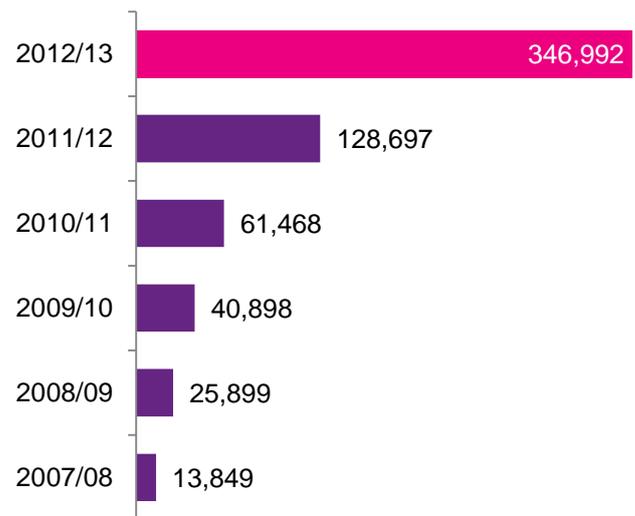
Recent trends

The rise of food banks

The number of food banks in the UK has risen dramatically in recent years. The Trussell Trust saw a 170% rise in food bank users between 2011/12 and 2012/13—an increase of 218,295 people (figure 3).⁸ However, care should be taken when interpreting this rise: it is unclear whether it reflects an increasing need for food banks, or whether the rise in users reflects large numbers of new food banks meeting an already existent, but previously unmet, demand.

Irrespective of these changes, these recent figures highlight the extent of food poverty in the UK. They equally demonstrate another important role played by food banks: they *'represent the best and most up-to-date source of data on social marginalisation in our societies'*.⁹ Though the Trussell Trust oversees a large number of food banks, the scale of the problem is even larger than these figures suggest, given the extensive network of independent community food banks, and other food poverty charities that exists.

Figure 3: The numbers of people receiving at least three days emergency food aid from The Trussell Trust



Source: The Trussell Trust press release, April 2013, *'Biggest ever increase in UK food bank use'*

Figure 4: Voucher distribution by type of crisis for Trussell Trust food banks

Type of crisis	2012/13
Benefit delays	29.7%
Low income	18.5%
Benefit changes	14.7%
Debt	9.5%
Other	8.5%
Refused crisis loan	4.3%
Unemployed	4.3%
Homeless	4.2%
Domestic Violence	2.5%
Sickness	2.2%
Child holiday meals	1.0%
Delayed wages	0.8%

Source: The Trussell Trust press release, April 2013, *'Biggest ever increase in UK food bank use'*

The changing face of food bank users

Evidence in relation to food banks is by no means comprehensive, meaning that it is difficult to draw concrete conclusions regarding the drivers of increasing food bank usage. Currently, the most comprehensive evidence on the causes of increasing food bank usage comes from Trussell Trust data. As figure 4 shows, benefit delays made up the most significant proportion of the referrals to Trussell Trust food banks in 2012/13.

Some have noted the change in food bank clientele from traditional groups such as the homeless (now standing at only 4.2%) to problems relating to welfare. This is the evidence that underpins arguments for government culpability in escalating food poverty.

Currently, central government does not take an active role in supporting the work of food banks. With the abolition of parts of the Social Fund in April 2013, it falls to local authorities to make this decision—though no ring-fenced funding is provided. Jobcentre Plus visitors may also be signposted to food banks whilst looking for work.

⁸ The Trussell Trust (2013) *Biggest ever increase in UK food bank use*. Press release.

⁹ Olivier de Schutter (2013) *Food banks can only plug holes in social safety nets*. The Guardian.

Points of view

The role of government	
<p><i>'...there is no evidence of a causal link [between welfare reforms and rising demand for food banks].'</i></p> <p>Lord Freud, Under-Secretary of State, DWP ¹⁰</p>	<p><i>'...the inadequacies of the welfare safety net are now directly driving the growth of hunger and reliance on charitable food hand-outs.'</i></p> <p>Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty ¹¹</p>
Strengthening food banks vs. addressing the underlying causes of food poverty	
<p><i>'...volunteers and donors are not the answer to decades of policies that have limited people's access to fresh food. They cannot—and should not be asked to—solve the real problem, which is aching poverty.'</i></p> <p>Natalie Bennett, Green Party ¹²</p>	<p><i>'The reasons people come to us are very varied and complex. Every means-tested welfare system needs time to react to a crisis. There will always be food banks in communities.'</i></p> <p>Adrian Curtis, The Trussell Trust ¹³</p>
Supply vs. demand	
<p><i>'...food from a food bank—the supply—is a free good, and by definition there is an almost infinite demand for a free good.'</i></p> <p>Lord Freud, Under-Secretary of State, DWP ¹⁴</p>	<p><i>'Families do not use food banks because they like free food, they use them because they are desperate.'</i></p> <p>Jonny Butterworth, Director of Just Fair ¹⁵</p>
The role of business	
<p><i>'Charitable food banks, it turns out, are good for the corporate food donors who save on dumping fees and cultivate social capital.'</i></p> <p>Nick Saul, The Guardian ¹⁶</p>	<p><i>'We are proud to work with a number of fantastic partners who play a vital role in supporting our work with people in crisis.'</i></p> <p>The Trussell Trust ¹⁷</p>

Evolution in the role and scope of food banks

Different approaches to tackling food poverty

Increasingly, food banks are aiming to expand their scope beyond the provision of food—through necessity, and a desire to help those who come through their doors back onto their feet. The case study of Tower Hamlets Food Bank shows that food banks are uniquely placed to assess and address, at least in the first instance, some of the underlying problems that bring people through their doors.

The Matthew Tree Project is another innovative project, which runs local 'food stores' to distribute donated food that is collected and stored in city-wide 'hubs'. What makes this project special is its central emphasis on well-being. It offers training, care and support, as well as developing local food production networks, with a view to enabling people to live fulfilling and self-sufficient lives.

¹⁰ House of Lords debate on food banks, Tuesday, 2 July 2013, available in full at www.publications.parliament.uk

¹¹ Cooper, N, and Dumpleton, S. (2013) *Walking the breadline: The scandal of food poverty in 21st century Britain*. Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty.

¹² Bennet, Natalie, Green Party Conference speech, 13 September 2013.

¹³ NPC interview, 18 September 2013.

¹⁴ House of Lords debate on food banks, Tuesday, 2 July 2013, available in full at www.publications.parliament.uk

¹⁵ Elgot, J. (2013) *Food banks not linked with growing poverty, says millionaire Lord Freud*. Huffington Post.

¹⁶ Saul, N. (2013) *Food banks need to feed people's hope and purpose, not just their hunger*. The Guardian.

¹⁷ See www.trusselltrust.org/partners

Case study: Tower Hamlets Food Bank

Laura's housing benefits were suspended due to a change in her circumstances. Struggling to make ends meet, and unsure what to do, she was referred to Tower Hamlets Food Bank, which, after hearing about her problem during a visit, spoke to the council on her behalf. It became clear that an error had been made, which was promptly resolved. But crucially, as a result of Laura's case, the housing benefits manager was able to see the full extent of the food bank's work.

'[The council's] impression from the outside had been that we just gave food.'

Seeing the opportunity to resolve similar problems more efficiently, the housing benefits manager is now stationed every Friday at one of the charity's food bank centres in Poplar, to listen to food bank users' benefits concerns and authorise crisis grants to those in the greatest financial need.

Getting this kind of expertise inside food banks is a crucial aspect of expanding their scope to properly support those that rely on them for help. The charity is currently piloting a scheme by which welfare rights advisers from the Child Poverty Action Group are on hand to resolve any problems, and ensure that people are receiving the correct benefits. However, providing this service, currently funded by the Pears Foundation, is costly.

*'To get the skills that we need—that person has to be funded. We need to raise funds to expand our service... we currently haven't promoted some aspects of our service, because if we did we'd be swamped.'*¹⁸

Expanding food banks through corporate partnership

Businesses can support food banks in a variety of ways. Logistics companies offer help to administer food banks' complex operations, whilst supermarkets are becoming active in supplying surplus food and encouraging shoppers to buy much-needed items for food banks—often donating any profits to their food bank partners. However, some consider business involvement in food banks to be a dangerous trend that does not always have purely philanthropic motivations. The concern is that, even if philanthropically motivated, an increasingly business orientated approach to food banks can serve to entrench the system, without tackling the underlying problems of food poverty.¹⁹

The wider network of food poverty support

Food banks operate within a broad network of charities that are working to tackle food poverty. Like food banks, many are trying to support people with the problems related to food poverty—as well as simply relieving their hunger. Below are a few examples of different approaches to combatting food poverty.

- **FoodCycle** is a charity that uses surplus food, spare kitchen space and volunteers to provide meals for those at risk of food poverty and social isolation. Founder and CEO Kelvin Cheung says that *'it's all about support networks and personal interaction. We link everybody up together in a way that they wouldn't have been able to before. The main thing the guests value is the social interaction.'*
- **FareShare** is a nationwide food distribution network that aims to redistribute surplus food from the food industry to charities, focusing on fresh and perishable foods that are most difficult to provide for those in need. FareShare mainly supplies food to other charities that provide food on their premises, such as luncheon clubs, hostels and women's refuges.
- **Just Fair** is an organisation that campaigns and advocates for the economic, social and cultural rights movement in the UK. In June 2013, the Just Fair Consortium was launched. This is a group of more than 70 national charities and community organisations, campaigning for progress in food, fuel and child poverty, unemployment and homelessness, as well as calling for urgent improvement to our social care and social security systems.

¹⁸ NPC interview with Denise Bentley, Tower Hamlets Food Bank Manager, 18 September 2013

¹⁹ Crossley, D. (2013) *Food businesses need a new response to the drastic rise in food poverty*. The Guardian

Changing the way we think about giving to food banks

FOOD

Food is the lifeblood of food banks and an indispensable commodity for the people referred to them. But there are a few things to consider when donating food:

- Keep in mind the nutritional value of the food you are donating.
- Food banks cannot always handle very large donations of food, as this may put a strain on their infrastructure.
- Remember that there is more to food banks than food alone.

Donors may also want to consider some of the approaches outlined below if they want to get involved.

SKILLS

Adrian Curtis at The Trussell Trust notes that donating skills is a way to help food banks that *'does not pop into people's minds as readily'*. Yet, given the expansion of food banks' scope, this is becoming increasingly important. There are a number of ways to help in this respect:

- **Businesses** can think about providing spare places in their training workshops for food bank volunteers, or providing logistical support.
- **Councils** can think about joined up working with food banks, which, as Tower Hamlets has shown, can be mutually beneficial
- **Individuals** can think about the things that they have to offer beyond food, time or money. Perhaps back office expertise, or training in counselling.

TIME

Food banks rely on volunteers to deliver their services. Whether they are casual volunteers who give their time at evenings and weekends, or core volunteers who run the centres, all are crucial to the survival of food banks. At many food banks, ex-clients keen to give back make up an important part of the volunteering team: working alongside other people in the community can be a big step towards recovery and employment.

There are also areas to give your time outside the food bank centre itself. Food banks manage large depots and warehouses and need back office staff such as volunteer coordinators to keep their service running.

MONEY

Running a food bank can be expensive. A food bank needs a property in which to house its centre, and a warehouse in which to store food. It also needs a group of core, full-time staff to properly handle the 'back-office' coordination of the system.

Most importantly, money can also facilitate the introduction of much-needed skills and expertise into food banks, to help people at their most vulnerable. Food bank services are evolving to fight dependency, avoid short-term fixes and help users back onto their feet. As Denise Bentley at Tower Hamlets Food Bank stressed, *'Once food banks are sustainable, they can think about helping people with the underlying causes of their crisis.'*

Suggested further reading on food banks:

Research

Church Urban Fund, *The Human Cost of Welfare Reform: Practical Recommendations for Church-based Responses*, www.cuf.org.uk/human-cost-welfare-reform

Cooper, N. and Dumpleton, S. (2013), *Walking the breadline: the scandal of food poverty in 21st century Britain*. Church Action on Poverty and Oxfam, <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/walking-the-breadline-the-scandal-of-food-poverty-in-21st-century-britain-292978>

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www.hannahlambie-mumford.co.uk/

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Royston, R. and Rodrigues, L. (2013) *Nowhere to turn? Changes to emergency support*. The Children's Society, www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/nowhere-to-turn-final.pdf

The Second Harvest Food Bank of Northwest NC, *The History of Food Banking*, www.hungernwnc.org/about-us/history%20of%20food%20banking.html

Blogs and Media

Patrick Butler's Cuts Blog, <http://www.theguardian.com/society/patrick-butler-cuts-blog>

A Girl Called Jack, <http://agirlcalledjack.com/>

TRANSFORMING THE CHARITY SECTOR

NPC occupies a unique position at the nexus between charities and funders, helping them achieve the greatest impact. We are driven by the values and mission of the charity sector, to which we bring the rigour, clarity and analysis needed to better achieve the outcomes we all seek. We also share the motivations and passion of funders, to which we bring our expertise, experience and track record of success.

Increasing the impact of charities: NPC exists to make charities and social enterprises more successful in achieving their missions. Through rigorous analysis, practical advice and innovative thinking, we make charities' money and energy go further, and help them to achieve the greatest impact.

Increasing the impact of funders: We share the passion funders have for helping charities and changing people's lives. We understand their motivations and their objectives, and we know that giving is more rewarding if it achieves the greatest impact it can.

Strengthening the partnership between charities and funders: Our mission is also to bring the two sides of the funding equation together, improving understanding and enhancing their combined impact.