



# Food Poverty and Charity in the UK: food banks, the food industry and the state

Pat Caplan – May 2020

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Visits were made to seven Trussell Trust food banks and three of these were visited regularly over the years. They are 'St. Nicholas' in north London and 'Riverside' and the 'West Wales food bank' in West Wales. I thank the managers, trustees, volunteers and clients for their time and information. I also learned much about living with poverty from my research at 'The Hub', a community centre in north London, and from the 'Riverside' Citizens' Advice Bureau in west Wales. I acknowledge gratefully the help of staff and participants there.

In addition, I also visited several independent operations more than once. In north London these included the Sufra Food Bank and Kitchen in Brent, and the Muswell Hill Soup Kitchen in Haringey, but it was Patch Food and Basics Bank in west Wales which forms another case study here. Many thanks to staff, volunteers and clients.

In the second phase of the research which focussed on the role of the food industry, I carried out observations and interviews at the former Transition Bro Gwaun café in west Wales and at various food wholesalers and supermarkets in west Wales. I am grateful to both managers and employees for their time and information.

There have been useful conversations with many colleagues working in the same area of research and I would particularly like thank Sabine Goodwin for reading the penultimate draft of this report and making helpful comments. Lionel Caplan has, as always, given much encouragement, assisted with the bibliography and commented on drafts, as well as joining me for a week on a food bank diet.

## Executive Summary

The first chapter gives some background to this report, including the aims of the research. There is a summary of changes in the benefit system over the last decade and their implications for the rate of poverty and food poverty. The chapter then discusses the response of the voluntary sector to this increasing crisis, particularly the growth of food banks. There are brief descriptions of both the Trussell Trust food bank franchise and those in the independent sector.

I then describe the methods adopted in this research, which was carried out between 2014 and 2019. These included interviews, questionnaires, participant observation and use of secondary sources, including material produced by the organisations concerned, academic literature and the national and local media. There is a consideration of the ethics of research including anonymity and confidentiality.

Chapter Two focuses on one of the two areas researched, a suburb in north London. It begins with a case study of The Hub, a community centre on a 'regenerating' council estate. Many of the Centre's users suffered from poverty, including food poverty. Their problems were not confined to food poverty but were exacerbated by housing issues, lack of employment and, in some cases, mental and physical health problems.

In the second half of this chapter, there is a description of the St. Nicholas Trussell Trust food bank which is located not far from the estate and is used by some of its residents. There are reflections from volunteers (including trustees, the manager and senior volunteers) and clients, as well as information about sources of food and cash donations.

Chapter Three moves to a very different location, west Wales, and begins with data from a Citizens' Advice bureau located there, which reveals the major problems of poverty in the area, exacerbated in many instances by unemployment and difficulties in accessing welfare benefits. This is followed by a case study of the Trussell Trust food bank (Riverside) based in the same small town.

Chapter Four continues with two more case studies of food banks elsewhere in west Wales. The first, the West Wales food bank, is affiliated to Trussell, the second, Patch Food and Basics Bank, is independent. Here the emphasis is on changes taking place in these organisations.

In Chapter Five the focus shifts to the food industry and the role it plays in supplying surplus food to the charitable sector, as well as facilitating donations to food banks in supermarkets. While giving its surplus away would appear to meet public environmental concerns as well as alleviating food poverty, it is argued that this solution is far from addressing the causes of such poverty. The case study of an affordable community cafe utilising food surplus reveals



that its apparent success with visitors is belied by the fact that it is shunned by many townspeople in case they are seen as 'poor', a stigmatised category.

The sixth and final chapter picks out themes from the foregoing, including stigma, dignity, agency and power, the sociality of food and its moral qualities. It also considers who benefits from the current situation, highlighting particularly the state, the food industry, the charitable volunteers and the clients. After a consideration of some of the criticisms of food banks, the report goes on to discuss some new trends in food aid, particularly those emanating from Scotland.

## Preamble: The context for this Report

In 2018, the UK had a visit from Philip Alston, the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights. His detailed report appeared the following year (UN 2019) and is summarised at the beginning of the document as follows:

Although the United Kingdom is the world's fifth largest economy, one fifth of its population (14 million people) live in poverty, and 1.5 million of them experienced destitution in 2017. Policies of austerity introduced in 2010 continue largely unabated, despite the tragic social consequences. Close to 40 per cent of children are predicted to be living in poverty by 2021. Food banks have proliferated; homelessness and rough sleeping have increased greatly; tens of thousands of poor families must live in accommodation far from their schools, jobs and community networks; life expectancy is falling for certain groups; and the legal aid system has been decimated.

The social safety net has been badly damaged by drastic cuts to local authorities' budgets, which have eliminated many social services, reduced policing services, closed libraries in record numbers, shrunk community and youth centres and sold off public spaces and buildings. The bottom line is that much of the glue that has held British society together since the Second World War has been deliberately removed and replaced with a harsh and uncaring ethos. A booming economy, high employment and a budget surplus have not reversed austerity, a policy pursued more as an ideological than an economic agenda.

Around the same time, the organisation Human Rights Watch ([www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)) conducted a similar scrutiny with results which were equally damning and differed little from those of Alston summarised above (Human Rights Watch 2019).

These two reports appeared as I was finishing five years of research on food poverty and food aid in the UK and appeared to confirm and contextualise many of my findings, as well as those of other academics and activists, many of whom had submitted evidence to the UN enquiry. I will be returning to these reports in my conclusion, but end this section with a quote from a client in a west Wales food bank:

'It's definitely not a world for the poor at the moment'

## Acronyms

- CAB: Citizens' Advice Bureau, now officially re-named Citizens' Advice
- ESA: Employment and Support Allowance
- FB: food bank
- FRS: Family Resources Survey
- IFAN: Independent Food Aid Network
- JSA: Jobseeker's Allowance
- PIP: Personal Independence Payment
- TTFB: Trussell Trust food bank
- UC Universal Credit

## Glossary

- Austerity: Real-term reductions to budgets of central and local government departments and governmental agencies, implemented by the post-2010 UK governments.
- 'Bedroom tax': A common term for the 'Removal of the Spare Room Subsidy', introduced in April 2013. The policy reduces Housing Benefit for claimants who are deemed to be under-occupying their social rented property.
- Destitution: People are destitute if they cannot afford to buy the absolute essentials that we all need to eat, stay warm and dry, and keep clean.
- Food bank: A venue where a free food parcel can be obtained. Also see 'referral agency', 'independent food bank' and 'voucher'.
- Independent food bank: A food bank not belonging to the Trussell Trust network.
- Key worker: A dedicated professional coordinating support for the user of a service, often someone who is vulnerable or in crisis.
- Referral agency: An agency or service making referrals to food banks. Examples include welfare or debt advice services, local authority Social Work, GPs, schools, health visitors, day centres for homeless people etc.
- Referring professional: someone who makes referrals to food banks
- Safeguarding: a term used in the United Kingdom and Ireland to denote measures to protect the health, well-being and human rights of individuals, especially children, young people and vulnerable adults
- Two-child limit: A limit on eligibility for Child Tax Credit or the Child Element under Universal Credit for the third or subsequent child born after 6 April 2017.
- Voucher: A paper or electronic document issued to a person in crisis by a referring professional: this is required to obtain a food parcel from most food banks. Vouchers contain some basic socio-demographic information about the person being referred and his/her household, as well as information about the reason(s) for not being able to afford to buy food. Also see 'referral agency'.

# Chapter 1. Encountering food poverty in the UK: Issues, background and methods

## Background

When I began this project, it was apparent that social inequality had been growing for a long time in the UK, which currently has the widest levels of inequality among the developed nations, apart from the USA<sup>1</sup>; it was also apparent that poverty was increasing. However, it was only in 2013 that I first became aware that food insecurity<sup>2</sup> was becoming a serious problem in the UK and that a number of food aid organisations had been set up and were increasing in numbers of branches and clients. Food insecurity was an issue I had previously encountered in earlier research in Tanzania and India, but I did wonder how it could be present in the UK, one of the richest countries in the world and one, furthermore, which had pioneered the welfare state in which I had grown up. I was soon to discover that tax and welfare changes during this period had been borne disproportionately by the poorest (see Portes et al. 2018).

In 2014 I therefore started a research project on food poverty in the UK, with the aim of understanding what was going on and why, and disseminating this information not only to an academic audience but more widely. It soon became clear that the issue of food poverty affected the whole country, from rural to urban, and included the devolved nations.

During the period preceding and during the research (2014-2018), significant changes took place in UK government policy which impinged upon the issue of food poverty<sup>3</sup>. A drastic programme of austerity was imposed by the Conservative government from 2010. The aim was to reduce social welfare spending by £10 billion by 2020.

There were cuts in social welfare and benefit levels, particularly after the Welfare Reform Bill 2012<sup>4</sup> and these continued during the period of the Coalition government (2010-2016) and the Tory governments from 2015 to the present. Currently at the time of writing (December 2019) the basic unemployment benefit is only £71.70 per week for those over 25 years and £56.80 for those between 16 and 24 years. Although people may also be in

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2018/sep/05/qa-how-unequal-is-britain-and-are-the-poor-getting-poorer>, Wilkinson and Pickett 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Defined by the FAO as follows: 'Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life' (FAO 2009:8). Food poverty and food insecurity have similar meanings.

<sup>3</sup> For a helpful summary see Sosenko et al pp. 650-61, also Portes et al 2018.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2010-to-2015-government-policy-welfare-reform/2010-to-2015-government-policy-welfare-reform>

receipt of other benefits such as for housing or disability, it is rarely enough to live on and is only approximately half of the state pension.

What have been the responses to this situation?

Firstly, many members of the public, partially as a result of reports in the national media, were unsympathetic. A report written a decade ago (2009) by the Rowntree Foundation showed that the public had a lower view of people's entitlements than previously, a trend which has continued.

However, some agencies, especially those connected with churches, responded by setting up food aid organisations, notably food banks whose workings are briefly outlined below. The food industry became increasingly involved in food aid, partly driven by the need to divest itself of its surplus and avoid the appearance of 'waste' and partly by its corporate social responsibility (CSR) aims.

### **The Trussell Trust ([www.trusselltrust.org](http://www.trusselltrust.org))**

The Trussell Trust began its food bank UK operations in 2000 and since that time, the number of its food banks<sup>5</sup> has grown rapidly, especially in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, and again after the Welfare Reform Act 2012. There are currently around 1,200 TT food banks<sup>6</sup> spread over the UK and in 2018-9 they distributed over 1.5 million food parcels to 290,000 unique households. As three of the case studies used here (numbers 2, 4, and 5) belong to Trussell it is important to understand how the system works.

- Trussell operates through a franchise, whereby a local group applies to set up a food bank with Trussell and pays £1500 for training, operating manual, ongoing support from the national staff team and the Area Manager, template website, data collection system, and annual audits and a quality assurance process (see <https://www.trusselltrust.org/get-involved/start-a-food-bank/>). Thereafter the food bank pays an annual fee for on-going services.
- Food banks collect food through donations given by individuals in supermarkets, or by schools, churches and other bodies. This has to be transported, sorted and stored by the volunteers, who also run a food bank session for clients once or twice weekly.
- *Whilst your [food parcel](#) is being prepared, you will be offered a warm drink and a biscuit. A volunteer will have an informal chat with you about your situation and, as*

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<sup>5</sup> Until recently Trussell used the term 'foodbank' but has recently dropped it and I do not use that term here. In the interests of space, I mostly use an acronym – TTFB.

<sup>6</sup> These are described as 'venues' by Trussell, since some of them are branches of a main food bank.

*appropriate, signpost you to further support.* (<https://www.trusselltrust.org/get-help/emergency-food/visiting-a-foodbank/>).

- Clients need to obtain a voucher before they can make a claim, which they get from a voucher holder such as the Citizens Advice Bureau, doctors, social services and other professionals who are aware of the client's circumstances. Clients can claim up to three times in six months and receive on each occasion three days' worth of food, tailored to the size of their household, although many food banks interpret this rule somewhat flexibly.
- Trussell regularly collects statistics from each food bank and issues a national six-monthly report, which is not only the main statistical source for food poverty in the UK, but also bears witness in the public domain to its continued increase.

On its website, the TT currently (November 2019) describes itself as follows:

Our aim is to end hunger and poverty in the UK. We support a nationwide network of food banks and together we provide emergency food and support to people locked in poverty, and campaign for change to end the need for food banks in the UK (<https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/>).

### **Independent food banks<sup>7</sup>**

At the same time as the TT franchise has been growing, so too has the number of independent food banks with some 800 currently in existence<sup>8</sup>. The majority of these started after 2010. Many of them are members of IFAN, the Independent Food Aid Network, or form part of its data collection project. Independent food banks have many similarities with those of Trussell, not least in being mainly volunteer-led, in the kind of clients they serve and in the sources of the food they supply, but there are often also important differences.

Like the TTFBs, the majority operate in churches and are run by faith groups. According to a survey by IFAN, 60% required referrals and vouchers for clients, but 40% did not. Independent food banks were less likely than TTFBs to limit the number of visits over a given time period, and they also tended to give out parcels with more than three days' worth of food. Like Trussell, many independent food banks offered other services. As the manager of an independent FB in north London explained:

We stayed outside the TT system because this lets us decide what's appropriate for each individual. So we help fewer people for longer periods, and we cover a smaller area,

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<sup>7</sup> IFAN – the Independent Food Aid Network – has carried out a survey of food banks operating independently. See Loopstra et al 2019.

<sup>8</sup> See IFAN <http://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/independent-food-banks-map>

basically this constituency. We do keep records but we don't ask people for intimate details of their lives.

Another independent FB manager, also in north London, said

We did look at TT but decided not to go with it because we wanted more flexibility. And we wanted to get up and running quickly. We give a generous bag [to clients] each time, depending on size of household, and we don't have vouchers. People can come up to five times, then we ask them to state in greater detail what their problems are but in many cases it's sheer low income and there is no hope of managing on it.

In addition to the food banks proper, several aid organisations I came across such as a housing charity would keep supplies of food to give to their clients when needed and some of this they got from neighbouring FBs.

The issue of independent food banks is explored further in chapter 4 with a detailed case study of Patch, an independent food bank in Wales.

## **Methods: how the research was conducted**

### **Investigating the field and the literature**

The first step was to see what information existed already. While at that time there was relatively little academic work available<sup>9</sup>, there were already many reports by organisations working in the area of poverty and these often included specific references to food poverty<sup>10</sup>. However, much of the existing research lacked the kind of ethnographic context which anthropologists demand: a locality and its social environment, as well as the voices of those involved, including not only clients of food banks, for example, but also organizers, volunteers, advocates and activists, as well as critics, and, of course, the state and its policies at both local and national levels. Hence my primary aim was a greater understanding of the situation and its players, rather than the accumulation of more statistics.

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<sup>9</sup> A notable exception is the work of Elizabeth Dowler who has been writing prolifically on the topic since the turn of the century (see e.g. Dowler 2002, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Brewer et al/ Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2011, Hanley/Joseph Rowntree 2009, Macinnes et al/Joseph Rowntree 2014, New Policy Institute (NPI) 2015, Church Action on Poverty 2010, Cooper and Dumbleton/Church Action on Poverty and Oxfam 2013, 2014, Oxfam 2014, Peachey et al/Barnardo's 2013, The Fabian Commission 2014 and 2015. The Trussell Trust has issued or commissioned many reports, some in collaboration with academics, see for example Loopstra and Lalor 2017, Sosenko et al 2019.

Over the five years of my project, much more data has emerged from the many studies conducted by social scientists, including social geographers, social policy academics, economists, sociologists and others<sup>11</sup>, not to mention yet more reports by organisations working in the poverty and food aid fields. In addition, both food aid organisations and those concerned with food more generally have either sprung up or expanded. Food is now a major academic and public interest topic. By the time I decided to draw a line under this research towards the end of 2019, at least for the moment, there was a veritable flood of material available, although it has to be added that the focus has been largely on food banks, with much less information available on soup kitchens and other forms of food aid.

I also looked at the national and local media, finding that some newspapers covered the issue of food poverty in depth and sympathetically, for example *The Guardian* which has highlighted aspects of food poverty and food aid in some detail. But others have echoed the government's dismissal of the problem and even castigated those suffering from food poverty as 'scroungers' (Wells and Caraher 2014).

As the research developed, I attended conferences on food poverty and related areas, establishing contact with colleagues and exchanging research findings.

## Fieldwork methods

On a number of occasions, I have been asked what a social anthropologist brings to the problems which are the subject of this report. My answer would be that anthropologists seek not only to do fine-grained ethnographic work but also to make links between micro and macro, between local and national, even global. It is through the process of listening to the voices of those involved in the issues concerned that we begin to get greater insight into the issues.

A variety of qualitative<sup>12</sup> anthropological techniques was used which included the following:

- The main anthropological method known as *participant observation*, visiting the venues where food aid was distributed regularly, observing what was happening and 'hanging out' with people there.
- Semi-structured interviews based on a series of questions (see Appendix 2). Over one hundred interviews were carried out in the two areas, and a further number at the national level
- Unstructured conversations, some fleeting, some in-depth

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<sup>11</sup> I would highlight particularly the books by Garthwaite 2016, Lambie-Mumford 2017 and Caraher and Furey 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Some use was also made of quantitative data drawn from the statistics kept by organisations researched and from the wealth of published material, which most recently includes Osenko et al 2019 and Loopstra et al 2019.



- Questionnaires
- Use of literature produced by the organisations such as newsletters and web pages
- Volunteering: I undertook volunteer training in food bank operations and later in 'sign-posting' and safeguarding. On several occasions I acted as volunteer for the tasks in hand, such as helping sort and date food in a food bank or collecting food outside a supermarket on collection days, helping prepare and clear up after community meals, assisting children in art and craft activities at a holiday lunch scheme and participating in a 'food challenge' by living for a week on a food bank parcel.
- As the research developed, some organisations were particularly helpful and invited me to events such as AGMs, parties for volunteers, and volunteer award ceremonies. Others asked me to give talks based on my research or asked questions about the work of other aid agencies.

## Case studies

Anthropologists often find that in-depth case studies, set in their social and historical context, enable insights which might not be obtained from larger scale studies. Early in the research I decided to focus on two contrasting areas of the UK about which I already had some knowledge. The first is a north London borough and the second an area of west Wales where I had previously conducted research, first on perceptions of food and health and later on the social effects of animal diseases<sup>13</sup>.

In each of the study areas, I was particularly interested in the food aid organisations, where several significant categories of people were identified: clients; volunteers, trustees and other office holders, and donors, whether individual or corporate. The specific case studies utilised have to be seen in a wider national context which includes the state and its policies.

In the case of each organisation, I had to obtain permission to conduct research and to assure the personnel that confidentiality would be respected and anonymity ensured in line with the ethical code of my professional body (the Association of Social Anthropologists<sup>14</sup>). In writing this report, I have not attributed quotations to individuals and have used pseudonyms for the majority of organisations at their request. These are the Hub Community Centre and the St. Nicholas TTFB in north London, the Riverside CAB and Riverside TTFB, the West Wales TTFB, all in west Wales. Two organisations chose to be named (Patch and the TBG café) and it was impossible to anonymise the national organisations. A draft of each of the case studies sections of this report was sent to the

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<sup>13</sup> See Caplan 1997, 2010 and 2012.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.theasa.org/ethics/guidelines.shtml>

organisations concerned so that they could give their comments before it was finalised. However, the views expressed in this Report are my own.

## **How the research developed**

Like most research projects, this too had a life of its own. In the first two years, 2014-16, the focus was on food aid organisations and their clients, volunteers and donors. These are discussed in Chapters 2 to 4 and include two case studies in north London and four in west Wales. One is a community centre, the other a Citizens' Advice Bureau, while the remaining four are food banks.

In the second phase, 2016-2017, the focus was on food surplus and its uses and the ways in which the food industry became increasingly involved in the food aid business. This is discussed in chapter 5. In the last phase of the research, 2017-8, while the problem of food poverty continued to grow, I became interested in the fact that some aid agencies had begun to do things differently and there had been a growth in activism and advocacy, matters which are considered in chapter 6.

Throughout the research, it became ever clearer that there were a number of factors which led to the increasing numbers of the food poor: these arose from the economic and political policies of the state and included austerity and cuts in social welfare as well as the rise of zero-hours contracts and the 'gig' economy. Food poverty is rarely a thing in itself but also involves issues of housing, debt, and mental and physical health.

## **Research for whom?**

One of my aims in writing this report has been to allow respondents their own voices as much as possible, since they are what have come to be called the 'experts by experience'. For this reason there are extensive quotations from organisation managers, clients, volunteers, and donors such as food industry managers and these are marked by italics.

The role of the anthropologist is to amplify these voices and suggest ways in which they may be contextualised or analysed. In this regard, not only are academic books, articles and lectures important but so are reports, blogs, articles and talks to lay audiences. All of this is part of 'giving back' to participants in the hope that the information may contribute to necessary social changes. It is for these participants that this report has been written – they, quite as much as my academic colleagues, constitute my audience. With this in mind I have avoided the use of academic jargon and too many references.

I asked leaders (trustees, managers, senior volunteers) in the organisations with which I worked what they would like to see coming out of this research. Among those mentioned were the following:

- influencing government policy
- having some good case studies
- giving an 'objective' appraisal of the situation
- providing some practical answers
- finding out how waste can be avoided

I return to these questions in the final chapter. My own aims were to understand the views of all players in this situation of food poverty: recipients of aid, volunteers in organisations like food banks (trustees, managers, volunteers), donors (including supermarkets and charitable food distribution organisations like Fareshare) and, through use of the media, that of state agencies. I wanted to see what relationships existed between them, as well as the nature of these relationships.

## Chapter 2. An urban area in north London

### Background

I chose a borough in north London which I knew well as one site of research, although its boundaries were not rigidly observed. This area often presented itself as 'leafy', with a number of wealthy suburbs, yet there were also pockets of extreme poverty, including the former council estates, many of which were in the process of 'regeneration' by private developers during the period of my research.

In 2015 and 2016, I regularly spent time in a community centre which I have called The Hub located on a 'regenerating' council estate here termed Northern Heights. I interviewed both staff and users, some of whom were also food bank clients. The community centre ran a cafe and also a holiday lunch club for children. The Hub forms the first Case Study and it was here that I had my first lessons on living with poverty in 21<sup>st</sup> century UK.



*Figure 1: Flats on Northern Heights before demolition*

## Case Study 1. The Hub: a community centre on a ‘regenerating’ council estate

### The area

The Northern Heights council estate was built in the 1960s with an estimated life span of 40 years. By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century some of the properties were in poor condition and had damp and other structural problems. This area was considered to be one of high deprivation, with a worsening Index of Multiple Deprivation<sup>15</sup>. Two of the borough’s LSOAs fell within the 10% of its most deprived areas and both included Northern Heights. The estate had a high proportion of people who were either unemployed and on benefits, or, if employed, were often on low wages. Average educational levels were low and so, according to the community workers at The Hub, were aspirations. Some residents had problems with substance abuse, and with mental and physical health. There was also a relatively high proportion of single parent families.

There are two community centres in Northern Heights: The Hub, which is a Borough Community Project, and the Churches’ Centre, which was set up and is funded by local churches. I have either interviewed or talked informally to organizers and users at both Centres but it is The Hub which forms my first case study.

### The Hub Community Centre

The Hub Centre was set up at the end of 2011 with a focus on youth and community. It is housed in a prefabricated building which contains a café, two large rooms, and kitchens. It was previously a residents’ club. The projects it runs have varied over time and have included the following:

- An informal advice centre for benefits, job mentoring and trying to get young people into work
- Support groups and classes for particular ethnic minorities (e.g. Somali, Albanian, Roma)

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<sup>15</sup> The English Indices of Deprivation measure relative levels of deprivation in 32,844 small areas or neighbourhoods, called Lower-layer Super Output Areas, in England. LSOAs have an average of roughly 1,500 residents and 650 households. See

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/835115/loD2019\\_Statistical\\_Release.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/835115/loD2019_Statistical_Release.pdf).

- Youth activities such as a nail bar for girls, a mobile skate park available for rental, and a basketball court: one aim of these activities is to help prevent knife crime.

One of the Hub leaders explained the community centre's raison d'être in 2015:

Q. What's your ethos, what's driving you?

A. Let's have a little bit of heaven somewhere, let's help people with their problems, find a better way of doing things, give some hope, some sense of a future. People come here for coffee, have a chat, volunteer, maybe we can mentor them into work. In December eight people got into work (he indicates a man sitting at a nearby table). Let them have a dream and help them to achieve it. For example, a woman wanted to set up an aerobics club – she just needed a set of steps, so we helped with that and she got going. I would like to see society caring about poverty, not castigating it. They [the public] used to care, now they do not. People who are poor or immigrants do not have rights.

Another youth worker explained as follows:

It [the estate] lost any provision for youth work, so the estate feels abandoned. That's why The Hub is so important. And then the football club also used to be [nearby] but it got moved... Many girls get pregnant, they want a baby, not a husband, something to love who will love them. They don't have big dreams here... There used to be two gangs on the estate and sometimes bigger gangs from outside would come in and scoop up the younger ones.

In addition, the Centre has a number of food-related activities:

- An informal food bank receiving supplies from the St. Nicholas TTFB (see Case Study 2) when it has a surplus; the Hub also gives out the vouchers which are needed by clients who want to access this food bank or any others
- A holiday lunch scheme for children
- A Community Kitchen on Fridays where anyone can eat a 3-course meal for £1.00
- A café serving lunch every day for £2.00
- A Christmas meal

I started going to the Hub Centre in early January 2015 and visited regularly for the rest of that year and the following one, sometimes to carry out interviews, and sometimes just to see what was happening and to have a meal or coffee. From 2017 my visits were more sporadic, as the research moved into a different phase.

People were helpful and friendly and open to the idea of the research. I carried out interviews with paid workers (leaders, chefs, café workers) and with a number of users, some of whom also volunteered in various capacities at the centre and a few of whom were also food bank clients. At the Hub, there is little division between staff, volunteers and users – many move between these roles on a regular basis.

In addition, I carried out some research during a half term at the ‘Holiday Lunch’ programme hosted by the Hub. This included serving two days as a volunteer and conducting interviews with its organizers. A number of its volunteers also filled in questionnaires.

In the course of doing this work, I learned a great deal about poverty, the benefits regime, housing and the regeneration programme on the Northern Heights estate. I came to see the residents as agents not victims, strategising to manage their difficult circumstances. Conversations at The Hub also revealed that residents at Northern Heights recognised the sociality of food, hence the importance of the Friday lunch at the Hub and the Christmas lunch for the whole community.

## **Learning about poverty**

Media reports during the period of research were often critical of users of food aid and benefits. Even government ministers accused such people of being ‘scroungers’, unable to plan their budgets or cook, and addicted to fast food. However, contrary to such reports, there was a high level of awareness on the part of respondents about how to manage low budgets, as well as how to prepare food, but the fact remained that many people simply did not have enough to live on because wages and benefits were so low.

One female interviewee who worked part-time at the Hub cafe explained in 2015 how difficult it was to get out of poverty:

As my child is five I get Job Seeker’s Allowance. The Job Centre policy is to get you working, but most people around here don’t have any qualifications. They [Job Centre] don’t tell you how to draft a cv, they don’t help you with computing. You have to queue up or sign up to use one of their computers. It was one of the Hub staff who helped me do a cv - I’d never had to do one before. The Job Centre had said I had to pay £200 to go on a course [to learn], but he helped me get funding from the Prince’s Trust [to do the course]. I would like there to be computers here [at the Hub] to help people apply for jobs and write cvs.

Some also spoke graphically about the pressures coming from the consumer society. Here’s a middle-aged grandmother heavily involved in supporting her children and grandchildren:

They (children) need more because of the computers and the like. In my day it was the tallyman<sup>16</sup> for clothes, but we [children] were happy with a skipping rope. Today they want I pads and things. If they don't have what others do, they feel excluded, lower class.

This was the kind of comment which I heard repeatedly from clients of food banks.

## **Problems with benefits**

Half of the interviewees at The Hub were drawing benefits and many complained about the difficulties caused by changes in the benefits regime. Under the further reform of the welfare system with the roll-out of Universal Credit<sup>17</sup>, many individuals and households found it impossible to manage their budgets, especially given the five-week minimum wait before benefits began to be paid<sup>18</sup>. Several had been sanctioned for what they saw as trivial matters, leaving them with no income for weeks on end. For example, a woman in her forties told me what had happened to her:

The problem developed after my husband deserted me and our three kids. Then my benefits were stopped because I had ticked the wrong box on the form. I am planning to go and see one of the Hub leaders here to get help with this and also get a FB voucher.

Users of The Hub were asked what they thought could be done to mitigate poverty. Some thought that the minimum wage was too low to make work an attractive proposition, even if it was available. Many also considered that benefits were too low to enable people to live at a decent level, and particularly to ride out any kind of crisis, as a middle-aged woman at the Hub explained:

Q. What do you think are the solutions to these problems?

The government should help people into work. I work 30 hours pw on minimum wages, and at the end of the week I may be only £10 better off than if I had signed on when I would get £73 per week. So there should be enough of a difference that people can see that it's worth working.

## **Housing and regeneration**

Northern Heights was one of several council estates in this borough which have in recent years been sold to property developers and are currently undergoing 'regeneration', the subject of much controversy. The regeneration has been taking place in five phases to be

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<sup>16</sup> Tallyman: this was a doorstep salesman who sold goods on credit.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit>.

<sup>18</sup> One of Trussell's current campaigns is 'Five weeks too long' <https://www.trusselltrust.org/five-weeks-too-long/>.



completed by 2019-20 and involves demolition of most of the existing housing stock and an intensification of density (rising from 400 to 600 dwellings), most of which was to be sold in the private sector.

At the time of my research, the 400+ households on the estate were divided into two categories: tenants considered 'secure' as they had held their tenancies since before 2001, and tenants who were insecure, as they were more recent arrivals. Most of the secure tenants were white working-class British whereas many of the insecure tenants were immigrants from a number of different areas outside the UK; one third of the residents did not speak English as their first language.

Whereas secure tenants had to be re-housed by the Council within the borough (although not necessarily on the regenerated estate itself), insecure tenants had often been offered replacement housing which was far from London in places such as Luton, Birmingham and Yorkshire. Refusal to accept such venues risked being branded as 'intentionally homeless' and receiving no further help from the Borough. For both categories of tenants, the re-development of the estate meant a loss of important support networks and facilities. Even those tenants who remained on the estate would have to pay higher rents for smaller properties, and few could afford to avail themselves of the shared equity schemes on offer. Inevitably, the regeneration scheme aroused much anxiety among residents and formed an important backdrop to the research.

There was a widespread feeling that the estate had long been very neglected by the Local Authority, and that many people were living in inadequate accommodation. A Hub worker who was a single parent told me: 'In our house I have a room, my sister has another and our children have the third. Our parent sleeps on the sofa'.

Housing problems too had been exacerbated by the Welfare Reform Act of 2012, as one of the Hub leaders explained:

The other big problem is that formerly people on housing benefit used to get it paid directly to the landlord, now it is given in cash [to the claimant], so rent money often gets spent [on other things] and arrears develop. Once someone is in arrears, they can't move [residence]. We had a woman who wanted to move [to a smaller flat] to avoid having to pay the bedroom tax; she found a smaller property but because she is one month in arrears with her rent, she can't move [there]. Furthermore, landlords are now less likely to take on people who are on benefits since the rent is no longer guaranteed. Basically this borough is depleting social housing.

Although the regeneration scheme was supposed to improve the housing stock, the current residents would not all benefit. While 600 units were being built, only 200 were for 'affordable' rent. One resident and Hub centre user summed up the situation as follows:

So many will become homeless... Even secure tenants only have to be re-housed within the borough [boundaries although not necessarily within the area]. They'll have to move their kids' schools. They've already taken away our school ... and they've increased the places at other schools nearby. They took away our community club and moved it [elsewhere]. The football club used to be near here – the tickets were cheap and free for kids. It was a cheap day out [but now it's been moved]. There used to be a park nearby, now we have to cross a main road to get to a park.

The manager of the Churches Centre explained as follows:

Secure tenants have the right to be re-housed here on the new estate. But the rents will be higher and the properties will be smaller. We don't yet know how the [housing] benefits cap will affect these people. They can also buy or part-buy through shared equity with a Housing Association which runs the affordable homes section. If they part-buy they won't pay any rent. Insecure tenants are the responsibility of the borough's Housing department. They may be re-housed either in the borough or outside of it.

This borough has very little public housing, because when [in the 1980s] Thatcher gave the right to buy, it lost 85% of its housing stock. And then councils were prevented from building more public stock.... But some of the stories going round about sending people to Hull (in Yorkshire) are exaggerated.

A community worker at The Hub was more critical:

Northern Heights regeneration? This is a misnomer. The Borough has sold the whole site to developers who are going to make a fortune, while the Borough will have to pay much higher rents for those council tenants who remain there<sup>19</sup>...But many people are going to lose their homes and this is true of all council estates in this Borough, which does not want poor people living here. There is a law case going on (elsewhere in the borough) to challenge the Borough's right to evict. If the tenants win it will have implications for Northern Heights too... It's social cleansing!

Residents of the estate spoke graphically of their concerns about what would happen, such as a cafe worker who knew she would have to move:

It will mean moving away. But I won't agree to go far – if they try to send me [far away] I will just stay put and they can demolish the house around me!

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<sup>19</sup> This would have been the case with Housing Benefit, which was paid by local councils, but not later when Universal Credit (including housing benefit) was rolled out as this came from the central government.

One of her colleagues in the café had already been moved:

I was offered a three- bed maisonette outside the borough and I moved there. It is not near but fortunately there is a bus that brings us back here so the children have been able to stay in the same schools [and she could keep her job].

For children and young people (and their parents) being able to stay at the same school was crucial. A thirteen-year old girl explained her feelings and her hopes:

We are going to have to move about 10 miles away, the only other option was even further away. I want to stay at my present school. My mother says she will start driving again. We do have a car although it doesn't work at present.

During my research I visited the show house when it opened on the site in 2016 and was impressed. I reported this back to the cafe workers who decided that they too would like to visit and attempted to do so, only to be turned back by the sales team: 'This house is not for the likes of you!'

## **Living with food poverty**

Although interviewees made use of help available such as food banks, the Holiday Lunch scheme, and the affordable café in The Hub, it was clear that a lot of assistance also came from nearby kin and neighbours. Most of the young women I interviewed were receiving help from kin, usually their mothers, especially in terms of accommodation and childcare, but also money and food. Neighbours too could be called upon. One woman said 'If you are stuck, you knock on someone's door. If they can help, they will. People don't forget that kind of help.' Clearly the regeneration scheme was likely to put an end to such neighbourliness as people were moved away.

While most of the people interviewed described themselves as 'poor', they demonstrated great resourcefulness in stretching their meagre resources to feed their families. Virtually all were aware of the best places to shop, often knowing prices down to the last penny. Here's one middle-aged woman with a part-time job on minimum wages living with her daughters and grandchildren talking about how she stretches her budget:

- Buy in bulk and put in freezer, I have a big freezer.
- Use the supermarket's own brands.
- Don't buy if it's expensive! Such as meat which has gone up a lot recently.
- Watch out for things which stay the same price but there's less in the pack, that's happening a lot.

- Don't rely much on late night shopping because I find the reductions are so small. It's only if you go in really late that you find big reductions.
- Look out for good value ready meals.

Counter to the oft-repeated assertion that most of the benefits claimants and food bank clients do not know how to cook<sup>20</sup>, all of the interviewees said that they did know how to cook, most having learned from parents or grandparents.

Q. How did you learn to cook?

A. Watching my mother, my grandparents, and then when I was teaching life skills to autistic adults, I learned some more.

Q. Do you have any tips for budgeting?

A. I disagree that you can't eat fresh food if you are on a low income. I go to the Coop after 4pm when they reduce the prices of the stuff which is near its sell-by date. I freeze a lot of stuff, especially meat and chicken, and especially when I spot a bargain...I can make a good meal for six people for £5-£6.00.

Some preferred to try and cook with fresh ingredients, preparing 'batches' which they put in the freezer, others bought ready-made food because it was cheap, palatable and children liked it, even though they often commented on the fact that it was not very healthy:

Some dishes it's cheaper to get a ready-made. For example, it's only £2.00 in Sainsburys for a family-sized shepherd's pie, you couldn't make it yourself for that. The meat alone would cost you £4.00. And fruit and veg are also expensive.

But stretching the food budget required planning, as a single parent with three children said:

I think in many cases it is lack of planning. For example I have a friend who buys a lot [of food] and lets the kids help themselves whenever they want so she often runs out. But I plan ahead and I also use left-overs. For instance, today we have some rice left over, so I am doing a stir-fry using bacon, eggs and the rice. Then I bought an apple strudel for £1.00 and it lasted for two days.

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<sup>20</sup> Most notoriously claimed in 2014 by the Tory peer Lady Jenkin: see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-30379431>.

One interviewee, a single man who did not live on the estate but used the Hub facilities, said he managed to eat well for £25 per week, but noted that it took a lot of effort:

Where I live (outside of the estate) there is a street stall which sells fruit and veg by the bucket – it is past its best, but I buy in large quantities and carry it home two miles in a rucksack. I can't afford to eat out or to eat meat, although I know a vegetarian diet is healthier. I have a freezer and do 'batch' cooking. I also order some things on-line as it is cheaper. And I eat a lot of lentils and chickpeas.

He went on to note that when his circumstances had been better, he sometimes used to eat out and also bought convenience food but now he could not afford to do that, commenting 'It gets boring doing all this careful planning. And it takes a lot of time.'

As has often been noted, food is the most elastic part of the budget, and most of the interviewees described going without food when there was little or no money, or it was needed to pay council tax, energy bills or other fixed costs. All complained about the regularly rising prices<sup>21</sup>, and about the fact that some supermarkets put their prices up at Christmas. All would make strenuous efforts to ensure that their children were fed. I asked a grandmother, who supported her single-parent daughter, how she coped:

Q. Have you ever cut down on food to make ends meet?

A. Yes, for ages, you feed the kids first and then you eat what's left over.

In response to my question 'Have you ever chosen between eating and heating?' another woman replied 'Yes, and I have stopped eating for days on end when there was a confusion about my benefits and I had nothing coming in.'

## **Using food banks**

Some residents had accessed food banks, either by visiting a formal food bank or by accepting help from the informal one at the Hub, and most were aware of their existence and knew people who had used them:

Q. What do you know about food banks?

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<sup>21</sup> Food prices have risen steadily in real terms since 2007.

A. Some people donate food, others take it. I know we run one out of here (The Hub) – I have helped unpack and sort it. I think one of the leaders phoned up some food banks and asked if they had any spare and they did.

Q. Would you consider using a food bank yourself?

A. Yes, we did take some stuff from here and that made things easier for us. I would use one if I had to - it's better than not having anything (Single mother with two children).

Another Hub centre user commented as follows:

The best thing about The Hub is the food bank. There are people who come here because they can't afford to buy food. Yes, there are food banks elsewhere, but people might feel embarrassed to go to such places, whereas here there are so many people, especially single parents, who are all in the same boat... (Single mother with two children).

Another single parent with one child who worked at the cafe told me that the Hub regularly received food from a food bank:

We put it in boxes and we take it to people we know are in need and who wouldn't come to ask because they would be too embarrassed.

But an older Hub user was reluctant to use a formal food bank:

I wouldn't go because of pride. [People like me] are afraid that others will say you are poncing<sup>22</sup>, or you are lower class. But I say if you are genuinely in need, then go for it.

Although the Centre usually had no problem obtaining food from the nearest food bank, the staff at The Hub had decided not to give it out for free on all occasions but rather to sell it for a very low price because they felt that this preserved people's dignity to a greater extent. The manager told me:

The St. Nicholas food bank often rings me up and says they have lots of food, but I am always selective in what I take. And often I prefer to put it on the shelves by the [café] counter and sell tins for 50p or 3 for £1.00, so we target our users.

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<sup>22</sup> Taking something for nothing.

During one interview I asked a staff member if the Hub would consider taking food from an organization like Fareshare (<https://fareshare.org.uk>)<sup>23</sup>, particularly for the Holiday Lunch scheme for children. He was reluctant because the centre wanted to be sure that they were serving food that people wanted to eat. We discussed the use of surplus food:

Manager: We struggle to use it –often what we are given [by the food bank] is not what people want to eat, so we usually sell it and use the money to buy the kinds of food people do want, for example, we had a huge donation of herbs and spices from Tesco. But no one round here had heard of most of them.

However, when the management changed halfway through my research, the Hub did start taking food from another surplus food organization, the Felix Project (<https://thefelixproject.org>).

In spite of the fact that food banks sometimes provided a mean of coping, not all clients praised them unreservedly. Here is a grandmother, who is a Hub user, a food bank client, and a volunteer in an independent food bank:

I had a change of status and lost my benefits for three months. I went to a TT food bank but I had not managed to get a voucher [beforehand]. I took a friend who also needed some food and the volunteer on duty said ‘Some people work for their money’, which we found insulting.

She went on to say that she now went to an independent food bank and also served there as a volunteer:

Here you don’t need vouchers. It’s humbling enough to have to go to a food bank so having to have a voucher is worse. [Furthermore] the food you get at a food bank is not that helpful. There are far too many biscuits [donated] yet we are always running out of sugar and coffee. You want to be able to make a meal... Here [at this independent food bank] clients get three days’ worth of food.

A Hub user who was a single parent with two children wished that food banks could be organized differently:

My father used to work for a Jewish organization. There they helped poor people in their

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<sup>23</sup> The issue of food surplus, the food industry and the organizations making use of food surplus is discussed below in chapter 5.

community with food vouchers which could be redeemed in many places so no one knew that they had received them for free. I think that's a good system, it prevents embarrassment.

## **The Holiday Lunch scheme**

During school holidays, the Hub hosted a lunch scheme for children whose families were on benefits but who would miss the free school dinners they normally received during term time. One of its founders explained how the programme worked:

The national organization provides a pack which tells you how to do things. I talked to one of the leaders at The Hub, whom I already knew, and we ran a pilot for 20 kids during Easter 2013. We were quite easily able to get volunteers in a church context, although not all of the ones we have now go to church.

Currently there are about 50 volunteers, and last week we used 27 of them. There is a core group of four of us which has preparatory meetings, and a debriefing afterwards.

Her co-founder explained why they got involved:

We knew that kids were not getting fed properly during the holidays. They wandered around the estate, even young kids, late at night. There was one boy who was always hungry and asking for food. Some of the kids get money from their parents to feed themselves but then it's always fast food. I see fast food being eaten everywhere and the kids say that they like to eat at McDonalds.

When I served as a volunteer for two days in 2015, there were 46 children on the first day who were not only eating lunch but spending time on the activities on offer such as board games, sport and crafts, helped by ten volunteers. During the debriefing session afterwards, it transpired that there had been more children than expected so the volunteers had not eaten. Additional food was to be ordered and cooked the next day, which was just as well since 51 children turned up. The scheme is very popular and some children asked for it to be run every weekend.

## **Summary**

Case Study 1 of The Hub reveals how people live with food poverty and how they deal with it through careful budgeting, cutting back on food quality and even meals if need be, by seeking the support of kin and neighbours, and using food banks if necessary. It shows clearly that food poverty is not an isolated factor in their lives, but is intimately connected to work, pay, housing, health and more.





*Figure 2: the store-room at St. Nicholas*

## **Case study 2: The Trussell Trust Food Bank at St. Nicholas: 'Effective inefficiency'**

There were four food banks in this borough when I started the research. Two belonged to the nationwide and expanding Trussell Trust and a further TTFB was added during the period of research. The other two food banks were independent. All were located in churches, many of which also supplied volunteers. Although I visited all the local food banks except the new one, one of these, a TTFB, was chosen as an in-depth case study with repeated visits and greater involvement. In many respects, St. Nicholas is a good example of a TTFB for many reasons, as will be seen, which is why I have written about it at some length while accounts of other case studies of TTFBs will be shorter and focus on differences.

### **History of St. Nicholas FB**

This food bank had been started in 2012 by a group from different churches already involved in a night shelter project for the homeless. In an interview in 2015, the founder explained the beginnings:

About 7 years ago, I saw something on tv news [about food poverty] ...So I suggested to my parish group that we do something [about it] and we investigated Trussell. We held an open meeting and had the London coordinator [of Trussell] address us. We had to pay £1500 to join and this was paid by various churches. We were quite nervous as this was an unknown thing... But Trussell gave us some kind of safeguard because of the

voucher system which meant that the clients had been screened by some kind of professional... so we got five churches each to put in some money... We got the TT manual which is very prescriptive but gives you lots of advice and guidelines, including on practical issues.

We started with one day a week – Sat. am. But the storage space [in the church hall] there is very small, so we use the garage at another of the churches for storage for most things. Then I had to find a storage manager – I bumped into someone I had known in the past and whom I knew was efficient and she agreed to take it on.

The job I did here, which is essentially project manager, is paid in many FBs. But I said I would be called coordinator and [only] for a year (although I ended up doing two years) and in any case we have a very good core group.

After you've paid your dues to TT you don't have to stay with them. We do deviate somewhat from the manual. We evolved the idea of emergency vouchers for people who are in need but don't have vouchers from elsewhere. But we explain the system to them and tell them that they have to go and get ordinary vouchers in future. Or we send them up to one of the local independent food banks which don't use vouchers. And we also pushed up the number of vouchers (from 3 in 6 months as laid down by Trussell) to 4 in 6 months.

We had to do a lot of preparation and it took two years to get it set up. We were very fortunate to find someone who is very skilled in IT - she looks after the voucher system and she is indispensable. Then we had a core group of Treasurer, IT person and myself, plus a store manager and a publicity person.

We are on a different level now, and after a year we decided to add a day [for the food bank to open]. On Tuesdays there are four volunteers and on Saturday there are six but the number of clients is extremely unpredictable. Each session has to have a team leader who makes any difficult decisions. ... We've had four or five people (clients) who've played the system but eventually they get caught by the excellent record-keeping of our IT person.

A number of different issues arise from the foregoing account. One is the importance of vouchers and record-keeping. The IT volunteer explained how this worked in an interview in 2015:

I input all the information into the system: every client, every voucher, area of borough, total numbers fed etc. Then I do monthly reports, and also annual ones. The TT can access these from our web system (which is not public). It takes me a few hours every week. [In this way] I can keep on top of how many vouchers people have had and ensure people are not exceeding their limits.

Another point to note is the strong connection with churches, which often act ecumenically. One church provides a building in which to hold the FB and another a storage area for food collected or donated but this system means major limitations on the FB's activities. The

facilities are generally used by many other groups, so the food bank has to be set up and cleared away each time it operates. Furthermore, like most FBs, it only has storage for long-life goods, not fresh food.

A third issue is the reliance on volunteers, many of whom come from the churches involved, although as the organisation develops it may also attract non-Christians. In this particular food bank there are no paid workers, but other FBs do have employees – usually a manager - if they are able to generate sufficient funds. Only one of the four TTFBs in this borough had a (part-time) paid manager supported by a wealthy evangelical church. However, the St. Nicholas food bank has the largest number of volunteers of any FB I visited, around 120 when I started the work and around 160 by 2018<sup>24</sup>.

A fourth point is the relationship with the Trussell Trust, which provides literature, guidance, quality control and a web page, as well as annual monitoring, albeit for an annual subscription. Although Trussell is a charity, when new food banks are set up its members have to seek charitable status for themselves, a process which in this case was carried out by the FBs' Trustees and members of the Core Group of volunteers.

St. Nicholas is governed by a Board of Trustees, with one coming from each of the contributing churches and a re-election at the Annual General Meeting. There is a volunteer Manager, and a Core Group of Trustees, which effectively functions as an executive committee and meets regularly. Each of its members has responsibility for a specific area of work. The large number of volunteers is split into eight groups, each of which manages a particular day in the month, eg the "Second Saturday" group. The group's scheduler puts together a team for each shift ensuring there is a leader who is a more experienced volunteer. Volunteers are kept in touch with developments via a regular newsletter.

In short, this FB bank is very professionally run and receives high praise in its reviews by Trussell. In 2018, its manager won an award for Outstanding Service to the Community from the Mayor of the Borough.

## **Clients and their reasons for visiting the food bank**

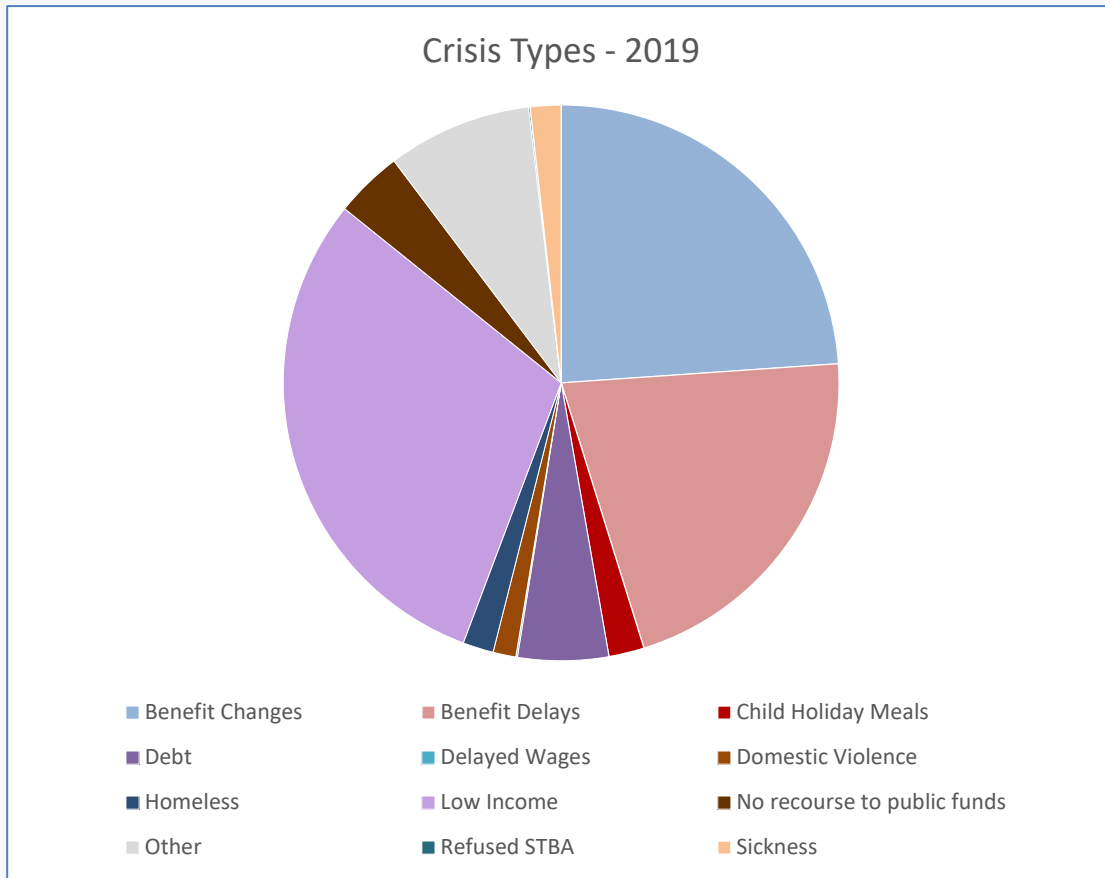
There were numerous reasons for people to visit food banks, but the main one was low income, whether from earnings or benefits. A report by St. Nicholas on types of crisis leading to a visit to the food bank for a single month in 2015 revealed that of the 62 vouchers handed in, 22 clients had problems with benefits, 14 had low incomes, 7 were unemployed, and the remainder noted on the vouchers was a mixture of debt, domestic violence, sickness and homelessness. Almost half of the clients were single people, while

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<sup>24</sup> It had risen to 190 by early 2020.

the remainder consisted of couples with or without children, and single parents. Clients came from a wide area to access the food bank, including from neighbouring boroughs.

The latest figures for 2019 presented at the AGM revealed the following:



It can be seen that the proportion of problems due to benefit changes was high and, together with benefit delays, accounted for well over half of the types of crisis which brought people to the food bank.

As already mentioned, several users of The Hub who were interviewed between 2015 and 2016 had accessed the St. Nicholas food bank. People would occasionally comment that they would have preferred fresh fruit and vegetables to the tinned ones given out but recognized that the food banks had limitations on what they could collect. If clients received goods which they could not use, they would pass them on to others. Indeed, some spoke very positively:

I have been to St. Nicholas a couple of times and found the people there very friendly. Also I had food given to me at Christmas by this food bank.

Another respondent, a Support worker on low wages:

Q. Do you know about food banks?

Yes, some of my [own] clients use them... and I myself accessed it when I was very short of money.... the stuff they give you at the food bank is good quality and it lasts, it's the essentials. The people there are really nice and friendly at St. Nicholas, they talk to you, whereas one I went to one in a neighbouring borough, it's just in and out.

The first client above was a middle-class woman who had held a secure and well-paid job in the public sector. Her husband was also working so they and their three children lived comfortably. When he left her suddenly, she was deeply distressed and found herself unable to keep her job, although eventually she got another, but on a zero-hours contract. The husband only visited occasionally and did not give regular financial support. Eventually, she was classified as mentally ill and given a disability allowance benefit. However, she filled out a form incorrectly and her benefits were stopped. Her case illustrates the way in which individuals can move over a short period of time from a secure existence to a very precarious one through a combination of circumstances.

The second client quoted above had only a low-paid, part-time job as a support worker, so there had been times when she had herself visited the food bank. Low wages were a common problem with food bank clients, and Trussell's own statistics show that a significant proportion of their clients live in working households which do not earn enough to live on.

While many clients worry about the shame involved in going to a food bank, some deal with this by seeking to repay the food they have been given. In an interview with the Manager in 2016 she told me about one woman who received a food parcel and soon after got a job:

With her first pay package she brought back exactly the items she had taken and of which she had made a note. We also find that many clients offer to help. I had a couple of rather drunk guys in recently but they did offer to help and I asked them to do (date) stickering. And they helped an elderly female client carry her bags to the bus stop and put it on the bus for her. They even spoke to the bus driver! They were a bit rough but good hearted.

### **Donors: How the food bank obtains food**

St. Nicholas, like many food banks, obtained its food from a number of categories of donor:

- Individuals dropping in food directly
- Individuals putting food in supermarket collection baskets where there is a 'partnership' either with Trussell or with the food bank

- Organisations such as schools, churches and synagogues (also a mosque towards the end of my research) donating regularly or on special occasions (e.g. harvest festivals or Christmas)
- Corporate donations
- Buying food with cash donations received either from the public or from the TT partnership with Tesco<sup>25</sup>, which means that all TTFBs receive a ‘top-up’ in cash of 30% of the value of the food (as calculated by weight) (NB Tesco later reduced this amount to 20%). However, unlike the other food banks researched, St. Nicholas decided early on not to utilise TT’s partnership with Tesco in terms of having a collection basket in store or an outside collection twice a year.

All of the food has to be long-life: tins, jars, bottles and packets, and a list from the TT website is given in Appendix 1.

Food which arrives at the food bank has to be checked to ensure it is still within date, then it is sorted into categories and has a new clearly visible date sticker put on it by a volunteer before it is put into the store. The collection of food from supermarkets, its sorting and labelling, followed by its storage (‘warehousing’) requires considerable labour by the volunteers and in the case of St. Nicholas, one evening a week (with the FB closed) was dedicated to this, with extra days in the case of peak periods such as harvest and before Christmas.

### **What volunteers do**

Food banks require large amounts of volunteer labour: collecting donations, sorting and storing them, date-labelling, making up food parcels, greeting clients and checking their entitlement via vouchers, and attending training sessions and meetings. In essence, as a trustee told me, a food bank is a kind of business, although it is a very labour-intensive one. He told me that he wanted it to be run as efficiently as a business would be but recognised that this was not possible: ‘It’s a form of *effective* inefficiency’ he told me.

Most food banks only open for one or two, occasionally three days a week and normally only for a couple of hours. In the case of St. Nicholas it has one weekday and one weekend session. Several volunteers arrive early to ‘set up’ which means arranging tables and chairs cafe-style and checking the tea and coffee supplies. There are always several volunteers present during a food bank session, with one acting as greeter, another doing teas and coffees and a third making up food parcels. One person is team leader and deals with

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<sup>25</sup> Unlike the other food banks researched, St. Nicholas decided early on not to utilise TT’s partnership with Tesco in terms of having a collection basket in store or an outside collection twice a year. However, they did accept the cash top-up for food weighed in.

difficult problems or, if they cannot be solved on the spot, telephones the FB manager for advice.

When a client arrives and hands over his or her voucher, they are first welcomed and offered a hot drink at a table, then a food parcel is made up by another volunteer and signed for by the client. As can be imagined, a food parcel with three days' worth of food for a family, or even for an individual, is very heavy and clients might struggle if they do not have access to a vehicle, as many do not.

Some clients want to talk to a volunteer, others do not, as a volunteer explained in 2015:

There are extremes of people [ranging from those] who are so angry and bitter that it is difficult to talk to them, to others who are so grateful they burst into tears and hug and kiss you, so it's difficult being a greeter. Often these people live alone, so they come for company, they have a tea or coffee and feel slightly loved and cared for... But some of the volunteers don't talk to the customers – they stay in the back, pack bags, they don't want that interaction, they are afraid of upsetting the clients. The first couple of times I too found it difficult, but now two years on it is easier. I ask them neutral questions: 'Are you OK? How are the children?' rather than questions which spark floods (Volunteer and Team Leader).

Under TT rules clients are only allowed three food parcels in six months, although St. Nicholas has increased this to four parcels:

For me it's a good thing to have these boundaries because we don't know our clients – so the TT scheme of restricted rations is helpful. And the fact that the voucher holders are the ones who know them and vouch for them removes the responsibility from us. Our food bank used to be looser [more flexible] but we've tightened up now and I am one of those who sticks to the rules, so when someone comes in without a voucher, I tend to follow the rules (Volunteer, 2015).

As the philosophy of Trussell has evolved to include 'more than food', in 2018 St. Nicholas decided to ramp up this service and a 'sign-posting' training session was organized for team leaders. This meant that clients could be directed to other helping agencies in the Borough. Other training sessions included Safeguarding (see glossary) which was considered important given the number of vulnerable clients seen at the food bank.

## **The volunteer experience: motives for helping and explanations for food poverty**

The majority of volunteers at St Nicholas were middle-class, white and female but there was a fair sprinkling of male volunteers and a majority of males on the trustee board. The vast majority were recruited via their churches and many felt that volunteering was part of their Christian commitment<sup>26</sup>. As the Chair of Trustees told me in 2014:

This is such an appalling situation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we've got to do something. It's a Christian response as well to feed the hungry. It's an act of witness, it fulfils our obligations. I believe the kingdom of God is what you create down here.

Others shared his outrage like the volunteer who wrote on her questionnaire:

It is a scandal that in one of the richest countries of the Western world many citizens have to endure the shame and humility [humiliation] of going to a food bank.

In a series of interviews between 2014 and 2016, volunteers were asked why they volunteered and what they thought about food poverty. At St. Nicholas, as in other food banks, several comments recurred:

- Why is there a need for FBs? I see various reasons in the media reports: people have less disposable income, benefits are worth less, food prices are increasing, people feed their children first and there isn't enough left over, cooking skills are not being handed down, people are using pre-packaged food more and it is often of poor quality.
- Why has there been an increase in poverty? Unemployment, house prices, changes in benefits, wages and salaries not rising, small companies making low profits, not only food prices rising but other things too.
- How political do you want me to be? The reform of benefits has been very badly managed so I blame the government. And the prices have all gone up. But it's also the consumerist society which came in with Thatcher.

Even though some volunteers joined the FB with some degree of political awareness, or acquired it in the course of their work there, a decision had been made early on that the FB would not be activist, as a trustee explained:

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<sup>26</sup> Towards the end of the research, the volunteers became somewhat more diverse in background and some did not have any religious affiliation.



We decided not to do any political campaigning, not only because we are a charity<sup>27</sup> and part of the TT<sup>28</sup>, but also because that might have led to splits in the group – I suspect there is quite a diversity of views.

Later he told me ‘we don’t lobby politicians as a FB – we leave that to TT’. However, in 2016, the Chair of Trustees organised an afternoon seminar to which not only volunteers but people from other local agencies were also invited. There were two speakers (of whom I was one) and the discussion was lively.

Although it was stressed in the food bank movement that people working in food aid agencies were not there to judge the clients, perhaps inevitably some did so. They felt that clients needed to be ‘educated’ about budgeting, managing their income, cooking, and prioritising things which were important, like food:

There are some people who make me cross. For example, a woman came without a voucher, so she was invited to take stuff from the side<sup>29</sup>. She was grateful as she said she didn’t think there was help available. We gave her an emergency voucher. But she came back a second time and still had not got a voucher. She claimed it was her first time, but I had recognised her and saw that she had had her hair done elaborately, which is very expensive. We made her a Christmas hamper, but we did feel that she was lying and abusing the system and was not making any effort to get a voucher, so one day we refused to give her food for this reason (volunteer 2015).

This was a relatively rare occurrence and many volunteers spoke of the satisfaction their work gave them:

I always leave the FB feeling so grateful for what I have, it really grounds me. And I enjoy helping others. It’s not just about the food, it’s seeing them smile, look a bit happy...and talking to them is perhaps their only opportunity to talk to someone (volunteer 2015).

## Summary

The second case study, that of the St. Nicholas TTFB, shows how a complex food bank can work efficiently through its trustees, manager, volunteers and donors and serve much-

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<sup>27</sup> Under charity law, organisations are not supposed to be ‘political’. In fact, TT’s charitable status was reported to have been threatened in 2014 by a government minister (see <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/foodbank-charity-threatened-closure-government-3682914>).

<sup>28</sup> At that time TT was not a campaigning organisation, although it has changed somewhat in that regard, as discussed in the final part of this report.

<sup>29</sup> Fresh food or that which falls outside the usual categories is placed on the side and people can help themselves ‘at their own risk’ without the need for a voucher.

needed food to a large number of clients, as well as giving food to other needy organisations in the area (including The Hub). This food bank also seeks to go beyond serving food to include other ways of helping clients, such as through signposting. As with many food banks, there are bound to be limits to what it can do given that it lacks its own premises and has no storage facilities for fresh food. Another limitation it shares with many other food banks is that there are no paid staff and it is totally dependent on volunteers.

There was a diversity and complexity of views held by volunteers<sup>30</sup>, sometimes even by the same person. Some showed high levels of awareness of the reasons for food poverty, raising such issues as the role of the state, low wages, and low benefits. They criticised the negative role of the media and the increasing normalisation of food poverty. They saw clients who were desperate yet given little choice either by the social welfare system or the food banks. Many recognised that food banks were a form of sticking plaster and there was a need to solve underlying problems. Others felt that they were doing what they could and focused on their volunteer jobs.

What all volunteers, including trustees and manager, shared was a desire to ameliorate what they saw as an appalling situation and to work towards that end because, as many said:

When we first got involved, we thought that we wouldn't be needed for long, but now I can't see us closing for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>30</sup> In this respect, my findings are similar to those of the social geographers Cloke et al (2016), Williams et al (2016) and Garthwaite (2016).

## **Chapter 3. West Wales: food poverty and food banks in small towns and rural areas**

### **Background: poverty in Wales**

Wales has a devolved form of government, albeit more limited than that of Scotland. At the time of writing this report (2019), the ruling party was Labour, but in the recent past there was a coalition between Labour and Plaid Cymru. On average, the figures for poverty in Wales are higher than in most parts of the UK with ensuing food poverty (see Barnard 2018, Food Poverty Alliance Wales 2019). This is partly because many areas of previous industry, such as the south Wales valleys, have lost their mines and factories, and with them the main sources of employment.

The budget for Wales from the Westminster government is largely derived under the so-called Barnett formula (see Keep 2018), since Wales has few tax-raising powers. While the present and previous Welsh regimes have favoured progressive policies in terms of social welfare, the Welsh government simply does not have the funding to carry out all of its plans. As a result, it has opted to support the Third Sector – voluntary organisations set up to address the myriad problems in today's Wales such as lack of housing, jobs and transport but also including farming.

Unsurprisingly there has been a dramatic rise not only in the number of food banks (see Beck 2016, 2018) but also in other organisations dispensing food aid, such as community cafes and fridges, as well as various meal schemes.

In the area of south-west Wales on which I concentrated, there is high unemployment as the industries which sustained the once-prosperous small towns no longer exist. As one volunteer at a food bank remarked: 'This is a town of dolis'. I asked what that meant and she said a 'doli' is someone unemployed and drawing benefits ('the dole'). But poverty extends to the rural areas too, although it is often carefully hidden.

My research covered one county-wide TTFB (the West Wales food bank) with four branches and another TTFB (Riverside) across the county border. In addition I focused on an independent food bank, Patch, which also has four branches. Although I visited all of the branches of each organisation, I worked mainly with the headquarters of each.

In one of the (many) small and poor small towns in west Wales, I was also fortunate to gain access to the main voucher holder for the local food bank, the Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB), and learned a great deal about the area from its staff who painted a graphic picture of the problems which many local people had.

In this chapter, I use the CAB as case study 3, and the TTFB in the same town as Case Study 4.

### **Case Study 3: The Riverside Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB)**

In the first interview in 2015, the Manager explained how CAB works in this area:

We're the only source of independent advice. Our counsellors have to train for 2 years – it's like a solicitor. We do diagnostic interviews know as 'gateway' when people talk about their circumstances if they want to. If clients have come for food vouchers they would be the ones to raise this but generally the advisors are proactive and offer them [advice] if they think there is a need... A gateway interview generally takes about 15 minutes but a proper interview around 40.

We then went on to talk about the major problems which clients bring to CAB and which are often reasons for requesting a FB voucher. My first question was about council housing:

There is none in this county, it was all sold to housing associations which had to take on the responsibility to support people. But their support workers are not quality-assured to the same standard and they don't have licences from the FSA<sup>31</sup> for giving debt advice. So often people get poor advice and pay out money when they don't have to do so. In contrast, our interviews really strip back the circumstances to see if they are legally liable for all their debts. We have the only properly trained debt counsellors in this county.

Next, I asked about unemployment:

In this county it's supposedly quite low because the government uses the benefit stats, so as soon as someone is off benefit, they are supposed to be employed! But in actual fact there is considerable under-employment:

- People on short hours: for example, a lot of the Tesco workers who come in here are on the minimum 8-hour contract.
- People stuck in a first job with no progression.
- People who have been encouraged to start their own businesses, but many of them can't [succeed] so they get into debt or are just scratching a living.

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<sup>31</sup> The FSA was the Financial Services Authority but this was wound up in 2013. She probably meant the FCA, Financial Conduct Authority, which is the current body.

- Universal Credit [which was about to be rolled out] assumes they will be earning at least the minimum wage, but not all do so. And abolition of tax credits will be a disaster because many people are getting by on tax credits alone.

A large part of our first interview and my subsequent contacts with the CAB was about benefits:

The DWP (Department for Work and Pensions) has now taken away public-access phones in Job Centres – the phone points went. They claim people can still use the phones on the desks but clients don't think they can. The default position now is that everything is done online. People are supposed to use their mobile phones but in this area the reception is poor, mobiles are expensive to run, and libraries [where computers are available] are closing. This insistence on digital is going to cause huge problems.

At that time the major problem with benefits was sanctions. In 2016, one of the CAB staff provided me with a dozen (anonymised) case studies of some of her clients:

- Benefits sanctions 5
- Deductions from benefits 2
- Benefit delay 3
- Debt 1
- Homelessness 1

One report on sanctions read as follows:

Client has been sent here by the Job Centre. Client and her partner have been sanctioned because they didn't turn up to an appointment. They didn't turn up because they were involved in a car crash. They have a joint claim of Job Seekers' Allowance of £226 fortnightly. They last got paid 3 weeks ago and now haven't got anything else left in the bank. They have no savings. Client wishes to appeal against the decision.

In other cases too, clients had been sanctioned for missing a job centre appointment, often for perfectly valid reasons (e.g. a court appearance, because they had no money for the bus fare, because the letter summoning them did not arrive on time etc.)

Clients may also have their benefits reduced, sometimes for reasons which are unclear to them, as in the following two cases:

Food voucher issued for 2 adults and 3 children.

Client 1 has 3 children under the age of 10. Client lives in housing association property with her children and partner. Client and her partner receive income-related ESA (Employment

Support Allowance), Child Benefit of £40 a month, Child Tax Credits of £150 a week, Housing Benefit (straight to her landlord) and Council Tax Reduction. She will be having deductions from her ESA for the next month: £33 for 4 weeks, followed by £16 for 1 week. Client is not sure what these deductions are for. Client has no savings and has 11p in her bank.

Client 2 has a loan from West Wales Credit Union. She has received a letter to say that the balance has gone up to £688.98 due to non-payment and court costs. If client doesn't pay fully within 48 hours of receiving the letter then the case will be passed to enforcement officers [i.e. bailiffs] and they will come and get money or goods from the property. Client has other debts: water £2000 and Gas £1400.

It was not surprising to hear from the manager that such vulnerable clients suffered from high anxiety:

There are people ending up with no money at all, which provokes huge anxiety. We had one woman who had a severe anxiety attack in the Job Centre in front of all the staff, and they had to call the ambulance. Even so they still turned down her claim. When she went to a Tribunal she had another anxiety attack and could not speak. Fortunately it [her appeal] was passed there

The CAB manager raised another issue of concern, namely the power imbalance between clients and staff:

Whilst I said that our aspiration was to create an organisation where a divide between clients and advisers is minimised, and that clients can have more ownership of the organisation and take part as volunteers, or train as staff. I ought to point out that in practice, it is not that straightforward and barriers exist... Therefore the situation remains that, in reality, the class and privilege divide between a particular volunteer or paid staff member and the client approaching us for a food voucher and going through the voucher process will invariably produce a 'them and us' situation, as the process requires some value-judgements; something we normally work to avoid.

CAB was the only organisation to raise this important issue and I return to it in the final chapter.

Another major concern of the CAB was what would happen when the new Universal Credit system was rolled out in the area:

Universal Credit has not had a big impact locally yet (2015), as it has not yet been rolled out to the majority of those it will eventually apply to. We do not think that its impact is

understood by those planning for service delivery, as the scale and nature of the changes will be sweeping.

This statement was only too prophetic as I was later to hear from many of the food bank managers in this area.

In the latest communication from the CAB in 2019, I heard the following:

We are still here, but it is a sad and difficult time. The county council cut our core funding to zero in April 2019 without written warning. We had been getting £55k per year to run the volunteer adviser generalist service for the county and topping this up with fundraising, town council donations etc, as it only covered about half the cost. We have already trimmed all the fat we can possibly trim and are facing some very stark choices now.

We will also see the level of funding we currently get from Welsh Government towards debt and benefits advice reduce by around £45k per annum from January and the funding [they do give] will be focused towards helping people in the greatest need who do not currently access us, so this is also going to be a big change.

## Summary

Research at Riverside CAB revealed a good deal about the poverty of the local area and the problems which their clients experienced, especially with welfare benefits<sup>32</sup>. However, it was also clear that the impact of austerity extended beyond clients to the national and local funding which affected the very running and future of the agency itself.

## Case Study 4. Riverside TT food bank: ‘desperate for more’

This food bank was started in 2009 by an evangelical church in whose premises it operated twice a week, and most of its volunteers came from the church. During the period of research there were two different managers: ‘Peter’, who worked one day a week up to 2017, and ‘Adrian’, a manager paid by the church for various jobs, which after Peter’s departure included running the food bank. They usually had another volunteer from the church to help on food bank days but this was a much smaller operation than St. Nicholas with only four regular volunteers.

Peter received some food donations from most of the churches and chapels in the town. He had also managed to set up bilateral arrangements with a number of local supermarkets to

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<sup>32</sup> The recent report commissioned by Trussell includes a brief section on CAB interviews and their findings are very similar to those mentioned here (see Sosenko et al 2019: 88).

collect their surplus, as well as food from donation baskets in Tesco stores and from twice-yearly collections outside this store. Like other food banks, this one had peaks and troughs of supplies: much more arrived during the harvest festival and Christmas seasons, but at other times of year, supplies would sometimes run low and the manager would regularly report shortages on its Facebook page, asking individual donors for particular supplies. Here is an example from 2016:

21 March 2016 at 13:00 · Thank you to all that have helped us over recent weeks in donating food. Unfortunately, we are still desperate for more. The need is great, in fact greater than we ever could have imagined and our shelves, for the first time, are virtually bare.

We are nearly 4 months away from our next three-day food collection at Tesco's, which is the mainstay for our supply, so to be this low is a big concern. We are here to provide for those who find themselves in crisis and we want to continue to do so. If you are able to share our plight with others [by] asking them if they would be able to help that would be very much appreciated

The only items we do not need are baked beans, tinned fish and tea. If you shop in Tesco please place these items in the collection bin just beyond the tills. If you shop elsewhere you can deliver to the foodbank/ Church any time of the week, although during the school holidays please phone us first to ensure there is someone available.

Early in my research I participated in the food bank's July collection outside Tesco. I recorded the following in my notebook:

On arrival outside Tesco, was met by the FB manager and deputy and given a green tabard with logos of Tesco and TT. There were 2 boards set up explaining the food collection, and 2 trolleys into which people put donations on their way out; apparently there was also a box in the shop which some people also used for donations.

My job was to give out the small leaflet which listed the foods required. 'Good morning/hello. We're collecting food for the Riverside food bank. Would you like a leaflet? If you feel like donating anything put it in the trolley on your way out.' However, saying all this to hordes of people rushing past was difficult. Some people got missed, especially when a lot of people were coming out of the same entrance with laden trolleys. Some said no (with or without thanks), a couple of people said 'I can't [even] feed myself' or 'I'm a single parent' (male). Women were more receptive than men, but not exclusively so. One man said 'I'm just here with my wife', another 'I only came in to use the loo'. One man said he was on holiday but involved with a food bank in Lancashire - he donated some dried milk, saying 'we're always short of that'. Quite a number of people said they already gave food through their church.



No one was abusive, and a lot of people gave donations, I estimated about one third. These were very varied, from a single tin to a whole bag of stuff, and a few gave money. Lots and lots of baked beans, even though they are not on the list, and we had a packet of carrots and another of potatoes, even though fresh foods are not on the list. A woman asked if we would like nappies and my colleague said to drop them in. After a while the manager started packing boxes and took them to the car.

A couple of times Tesco employees came to ask how we were doing. I asked the assistant manager whether the supermarket was likely to get press coverage. He said that the food bank took its own photos and often Tesco also took pictures as it was good publicity for them.

When other volunteers appeared at lunch time, I went back to the FB centre and asked if there was anything else I could do and was asked to go upstairs and do dating and sorting of food. This area is basically the attic of the building and it got very hot.

I worked for some time with another volunteer and we sorted into the categories and placed into green folding crates:

Tins: vegetables, pasta, soups, meat, fish, tinned tomatoes (lots of those), beans, fruit, puddings

Dry goods: pasta, breakfast cereals, sugar,

Jars: jam, pasta sauces

Cartons: fruit juice, milk (UHT)

Biscuits

I noticed that while most were at the cheaper end, some people had given quite expensive items, including 3 huge jars of coffee, and a few had taken care to look for healthier versions.

Each item then had to have its expiry date written on so it would be easily visible, which expiry dates are usually not. Tins were fairly easy as dates are usually on the bottom, but packets were very time-consuming – the dates are hidden away and very small. I did this from 13.15-16.00 by which time I was really tired. The boxes were heavy. It is incredibly inefficient because the donated food is a very mixed bag and each box contains many different categories of items. I worked out that the collecting today had involved 3 people every hour for 8 hours – 24 person hours, while the sorting and dating of only half of the first collection had involved 2 people for 2.5 hours – 5 hours. If that is repeated over 3 days it means approx 75 person hours for a collection over 3 days, and probably at least 10 hours for sorting and dating for each day - total 30 hours. In other words, leaving aside the preparation (leaflets, liaising with Tesco etc.) it's around 100 person hours. All the donated food has to be weighed and Tesco then increases the amount by 30% in cash.

The Manager had set up good links with the local press, so a few days later the following headline appeared in the newspaper: 'Food bank grateful for your donations'. Peter told me about the demand:

Last year (2013) we gave out 1300 food parcels of which roughly 300 might be returnees (that's the national average proportion). So that means we fed around one thousand people in a town of five thousand. Many get help from kin and neighbours, so this is a last resort. Many people do not want to come here – they feel that taking charity is stigmatizing. We try to explain that this isn't the case. But when we took food to a farming woman who had been referred by her neighbour, the former said 'No thanks, I can manage'.

Later his colleague Adrian told me, as had the CAB, that the major problem for clients is with benefits. This problem was only to intensify, as will be seen. But there were other problems too, as Adrian explained:

In our area the incomes are very low and there's a lack of work. The only jobs you can get are in care or the public sector. When I first came down here [to west Wales] you used to be able to get jobs in farming, but that's not the case anymore.

But lack of work was not the only problem, so too were low wages. In 2016 Peter wrote telling me that TT wanted to see fewer food parcels being handed out and more people in employment but he commented: 'They fail to realize that many that are employed are among the ones receiving food parcels'. On another occasion he told me that some of the workers at the food stores which supplied surplus food were themselves clients of the food bank: 'Only the managers are on fulltime contracts, the rest are on zero-hours contracts.'



*Figure 3: Volunteers collecting food outside supermarket*

By 2016, demand had increased further: 'We had a big increase in the number of clients by 35%, mostly due to benefit changes and delays': Fortunately, the number of their donors had also increased:

Our Facebook appeal produced a lot of food, we've had four tonnes since December, and some help from the West Wales food bank. We still have a relationship with Tesco, which benefits from this because all the food donated (in store) is extra food bought by customers. In the store here, two tonnes extra is bought by customers.

I had been asking Aldi to cooperate with us for ages but no response. Then I wrote a letter and suddenly the doors opened although they still don't allow us to do collections outside like Tesco. Of course it is good for the supermarkets. I take some of their waste away. Even so there is always far more which goes into their big bins at the back... So three times per week I go and collect whatever they have: bakery, fresh fruit and veg. then odd things like dented tins. I never know what I'm going to get – sometimes it's too much to put in the car.

## Clients

I did not carry out formal interviews with clients at this food bank, but I met several during the course of my visits. Here is a snapshot of three of them encountered on a single visit in 2017 taken from my notes:

Client 1 is a man who says he is 56. He has not received his benefits for 4 weeks because he has changed back and forth from Sickness Benefit to Job Seekers' Allowance. The problem he is having with benefits arises from two factors. One is the state of his health (back problems etc.) and failing his ESA (Employment and Support Allowance) test which he is now appealing against. The other is that he did not know that in order to continue with the ESA he has to take a doctor's note to the Job Centre, which he has now done. The client tells me he has a flat at the other end of town and the volunteer asks how he will move all this FB stuff. He says that he had borrowed his son's car, but in order to do that he had first to take a bus to the place where his son is in college (22 miles away), and then will have to do the same in reverse to return the car.

Client 2 is a woman who is about 30 and has obviously been here before. She asks for food for three adults, because her partner's brother is staying with them temporarily, sleeping on their sofa. She says he is homeless but 'we can't ask him to leave as he's family'. She tells us that she was recently in hospital for three months 'because of haemorrhaging' (later I learn that this was probably a drugs rehab). She also complains bitterly about companies which have been ripping them off: BT for example wants them to pay £1000 because it has rolled over their contract automatically, but they want to get out of it. 'So the bills are piling up and we are in debt. We need to pay off all the bills then we can manage. And my partner's brother hopes to get housing benefit soon'. The volunteer comments sympathetically 'things can really build up'.

Client 3 is another woman who comes in and produces a voucher. Adrian goes to get her food parcel and tells her she can take any bread plus four items from the crates of fresh food. She says she has come here by taxi as she lives about six miles away and that the taxi will come and collect her after 20 minutes. 'My daughter had a bit of money so she said 'Mum, take a taxi''. The manager asks why she is having problems and she says it is because she is changing benefits. She has now lost her child tax credit as her daughter is older and so they are trying to put her onto Personal Independence Payments (PIP), which means less money.

One factor which these three clients had in common was the transport problem, with no railway system in the area and very few buses. Even the volunteer who was present at all three interviews suffered in a similar way, telling me:

Transport is dire. When we first came here I used to try and come into the town on the bus from a village ten miles away. The earliest I could arrive was 11.45 and I had to leave by 3 pm to get the last bus.

### **Surplus food and the ‘giveaway’**

On Friday afternoons, there was a ‘give-away’ at the food bank when surplus food from local stores was handed out to anyone who asked for it. On these occasions the manager was careful to reserve some for people he knew were vulnerable and also to ration out particularly desirable kinds of food. Here is an extract from my notebook made in 2016:

When I return just after 4 pm, there are 9 people waiting in the street outside the food bank. I stand beside them. ‘Are you looking for the food bank?’ asks a middle-aged woman. The manager calls me in, and I see the room has been laid out with trestle tables on which are fresh fruit and vegetables: apples, potatoes, carrots, mange-tout, peppers, mushrooms, lettuce, stir fry.

The clients enter; by this time there is over a dozen of them, and more stragglers come in as well. By the end there must have been at least 20 people served. They are a very mixed group, about equal numbers of male and female, but a variety of ages. The manager encourages them to take what they want. One woman says loudly ‘Don’t think this is all for me - I am taking [food] for other people as well.’ The manager later says he is well aware of that. He knows many of them by name.

Then he dishes out the more valuable products of which he only has a few: mince, chicken, fish cakes, pizzas. He tells me later that he rations these strictly and does not put them out on the tables. One woman says to me ‘You haven’t got anything – go and get something’. I explain that I am there to help the manager. The last to come in is an elderly man using a walker. He has a terrible cough. The manager says he can’t cook because he can’t stand so he gives him snacks which he has put aside for him and I help him take a few light-weight vegetables and fruit which do not need to be cooked.

By 2017, Peter had moved to another part of the country, so Adrian was managing the food bank. There was now a twice weekly food distribution ‘give away’, as a result of three pick-ups a week from Aldi as well as the weekly Tesco donation. In addition, Riverside FB was helping some other local food charities in the town which provided free or very cheap meals.

At the time of my last visit in the summer of 2019 I was told that demand had skyrocketed after the roll-out of Universal credit in the area the previous December. In January 2020, the manager wrote to me as follows:

In 2019 we received 17,067kg in donations and gave out 19,321kg in 761 parcels to a total of 1801 people which is well up on previous years, 350 more people than our previous highest year of 2017.

If these figures are compared with those of the West Wales FB (see next chapter), which covered a wider area and had four branches, it will be seen that this single FB, mainly serving one town, collected a similar amount of food and had a similar number of clients.

## **Summary**

Riverside TTFB appeared to be a much smaller affair than St. Nicholas, with far fewer volunteers, but because it was located in a small and poor community, it served a much higher proportion of residents who came for food parcels. Because everyone living in this town was aware of its levels of poverty, the FB manager was able to issue successful appeals to the wider community to obtain food from a diversity of sources. In fact the total amount of food collected and given out, and the number of clients served, was only slightly less than those at St. Nicholas. While benefits problems were again dominant in reasons for visiting the FB, it was clear that there were other issues too, not least unemployment, health, housing and the very poor transport infrastructure. The last made it difficult for people living in rural areas outside the town to access the FB, yet many clients did come from such areas, indicating that rural poverty is also very significant.

## **Chapter 4. Two food banks making changes**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I consider two further FBs in west Wales, one affiliated to Trussell and the other independent. While they have many features in common with those already described, they also have some significant differences in their philosophy and activities. One such is in their attempts to blur the divide between givers and receivers, volunteers and clients.

### **Case study 5: The West Wales Trussell Trust Food Bank: from food bank to community cafe**

The West Wales TTFB HQ was located in the premises of an evangelical church in a fairly prosperous small town (pop. 2,500) in the centre of the county, while its branches were in other poorer towns in the south of the county with populations ranging from 7,500 to 11,000. It was the church which had initially funded the setting up of the FB and its affiliation to Trussell, although the FB subsequently became a separate entity when it registered as a charity.

My first visit was in 2014, when the FB was relatively new. There was a part-time (one day a week) manager paid for by the church and 20 volunteers, many of them from the same church and some of whom worked virtually fulltime. The FB was held once a week in a large and comfortable room with a coffee bar, while the donated food was stored in its basement.

At that stage, food was obtained both from donations and collections by churches, as well as from the local Tesco supermarket. I was told by volunteers ‘When we do the Tesco collections some people say to us ‘Isn’t it [food poverty] awful?’ while other shout ‘Bunch of scroungers’.

### **Food bank days and talking to clients**

In subsequent visits I was able to observe the FB in operation and to talk to the manager, volunteers and clients. I saw volunteers bringing in boxes of food collected from various sources, which at that time included Tesco, Morrisons, and Lidl, and taking them down to the basement storeroom, where they were sorted and dated. Everyone was delighted when enough money was finally raised to install a ‘dumb waiter’ so that the food could more easily be moved between floors. Sometimes I helped with date marking. I found that frequently food parcels were collected not only by clients but by their carers or key support workers, because of the poor public transport network. In some cases, individual food parcels were actually delivered to the homes of clients, something which did not usually happen in London.

One client I met in 2015 sticks in my mind. She told me that as a single parent with 2- and 5-year old children, she lived with her parents, but her father had had a stroke which paralysed him on one side. He was cared for by herself and her mother, but the latter had poor health and had been in and out of hospital.

Q. Do you get an allowance for doing that?

A. No, he gets Disability Living Allowance. We have been offered carers but he is my father so I prefer to do it myself.

She herself had also been previously on Disability Allowance (or PIP – personal independence allowance) because of her own health problems, but after an Atos assessment<sup>33</sup> she was deemed ‘fit for work’. It was unclear how she could find work, given her caring responsibilities for her two-year old child and her father, as well as the lack of jobs in the area.

The worst was at Christmas when I had to go and ask for help to get presents for my children. I felt totally humiliated – I am their mother, I am supposed to provide these.

Q. But surely this problem was not of your making and you should not feel that way. It is a societal problem. Doesn't living in a society means that we all are responsible?

A. Yes, that's what my dad says.

This conversation illustrates the complex reasons why people might find themselves short of food and visiting a food bank. These include caring responsibilities, being denied benefits (deemed ‘fit for work’), and lack of employment opportunities. It also illustrates the powerful way in which shame is internalised because of inability of parents to give what they consider children should have.

Another client's story in 2017:

The manager introduced me to a young woman who had a small child with her, saying that she came in often. The woman confirmed that she was a service user and said she would like to talk to me. We did have a brief discussion about the stigma associated with use of food banks, and she mentioned the hostility with which some members of the public viewed them. It then transpired that her car had just failed its MOT, requiring around £600 worth of repairs, while her phone had just been ruined by a faulty plug (‘and I haven't finished paying

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<sup>33</sup> Atos is a company which carries out assessments for the UK government e.g. for disabled people. See <https://atos.net/en/>. It has been heavily criticised. See for example <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/dec/27/private-firms-500m-governments-fit-to-work-scheme>.



for it yet') ... It was clear that she needed to make some important phone calls (one of the volunteers had loaned her a phone).

For people living on very low incomes, such disasters as a car breakdown can be catastrophic and throw their meagre budgets, no matter how carefully managed, into chaos and often debt.

## **Managers and volunteers**

On my first visit in 2014 I asked why people came to the FB:

Volunteer (immediately). Benefits! But also homelessness and other problems. There are mental health issues, changes in circumstances, people drifting in and out of relationships, and lots of isolated people.

Q. What about poverty?

Manager. Yes! I went to one farm to take a food parcel and was really shocked [by what I saw]. Some jobs are only seasonal and the pay is low.

On the same occasion, here is what two of them said about their reasons for volunteering occasion:

Woman: It's from the heart, it's a contribution (she is a church member).

Man. It's good for me! Compassion. I learned a lot when I lived in India.

Some volunteers had themselves experienced problems with their benefits, as an older man explained in 2015:

The benefit system is very inefficient. I retired a few years ago and had a letter telling me to go and collect my pension. So I went, but they said 'Oh no, you get it paid monthly, not weekly'. How am I supposed to live for a month before I get it? I showed them the letter but it did not help. My wife is 62 so she is one of those people who has missed out<sup>34</sup>– she has to wait longer to get her state pension, and meanwhile she has a tiny [work] pension of £120 pm. It is not easy to manage.

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<sup>34</sup> Until 2011, women received their state pensions at the age of 60 but under the Pensions Act, 2011, women's State Pension age started to increase to 65 between April 2016 and November 2018 and is to be 66 by 2020.

I asked the manager about the extent to which she could be flexible and to what extent she felt the need to stick to the TT rules:

I prefer to do the latter because it protects both clients and volunteers. It's tried and tested over 18 years. If someone comes without a voucher we give them food only for a day and show them the list of voucher holders, of whom there are 60-70. However, not all of these voucher holders issue them regularly – some give more at Christmas [when the FB gave out hampers to clients referred by social services].

When Trussell asked her to set up another food bank branch in the area, she was happy to do so, making a total of four in the county. In effect, the headquarters became the main collecting point for food, which was then ferried out to the three other branches.



Figure 4: Poster for Fareshare Food Cloud produce

## Changes at the Food Bank

In 2017, the original manager had to leave the job because of ill-health in her family, and her place was taken by a woman who wanted to make changes. She re-organised both the volunteers and the Trustees:

I divided up the responsibilities between the 20 regular volunteers, each of whom does roughly one day a month: kitchen and cooking lunch, cafe and coffee, storeroom downstairs.

Later, she suggested that one or two Trustees should have special responsibility for each of the four branches in the county.

A second change was that, in addition to the food bank, there was a simple weekly meal (usually a thick soup and bread) served for a donation. The manager wanted this occasion to be for anyone, not only food bank clients, thereby reducing the ‘stigma’ of attending a food bank and making food consumption more social.

The third innovation was a strong attempt on the part of the manager to work with other local organizations and by 2018 it was networking with the Community Fridge, another innovation, which was located at the local Community Centre. The manager was enthusiastic: ‘We now have a joined-up system involving Fareshare (see chapter 5), food retailers and the Community Fridge. You might like to write about it and perhaps TT should be thinking about it as a model. TT is talking more about dignity and having more choice for clients.’

Some of the changes in this TTFB which took place during the period of my research were helped by the fact that the manager’s paid hours were more than doubled, thanks to a grant from Asda via the Trussell Trust<sup>35</sup>, thus giving her the time to plan and bring about such changes, and a paid deputy was also appointed.

By 2017, many FBs were obtaining fresh food through the Fareshare Food Cloud (discussed in Chapter 5) and were able to offer free bread, fruit and vegetable without a voucher to anyone who wanted them. In the case of the West Wales FB this included a number of Syrian refugee families who had been settled in the area, with each town sponsoring a family<sup>36</sup>.

There were other changes taking place. In 2017 I visited the new FB branch set up by the West Wales FB in a neighbouring small town which has seen better days. This food bank is located in a church and upstairs, it runs a café. The acting manager me that she herself was originally from the town and remembered how prosperous it used to be, with many small businesses and shops, as well as four major employers: port, woollen mill, steel factory and manufacturer of nuts and bolts. All have now closed. I asked her what kind of clients they got:

Young men on their own, like the one who was here just now. People who have problems with substance abuse. All sorts. There are people who have moved [or been moved?] from cities like Birmingham. That young man says he likes the peace and quiet here but he is lonely. Some people come to use the cafe because they are lonely and don’t see anyone

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<sup>35</sup> The Trussell Trust and Fareshare accepted a large grant from Asda. TTFBs were encouraged to apply for some of this funding and the West Wales FB was successful.

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/mar/30/welsh-citizens-call-to-resettle-more-syrian-refugees>.

except if they have carers night and morning. We don't have doorstep deliveries anymore and the postie doesn't knock.

A year later there was another innovation in the HQ which was the monthly presence of a 'Community Connector', a trained staffer or volunteer who could assist people with problems to access opportunities in their local community. Such people rotated their time between different organisations.

The West Wales FB continued to grow. By 2019 the number of volunteers had risen from the original 20 to 50 across the four branches. It also received more donations and served more clients: 1,833 from January to November and a further 1,798 during December, which was also the month of the Christmas Project.

Another new venture in the summer of 2019 was a pilot project to help with 'holiday hunger'. This was aimed at the families of children who received free lunches during term-time. The FB worked with two referral agencies (see glossary) and gave them a total of 100 bags of food weighing 11 kg each for them to distribute to needy families. The scheme was deemed a success and will be repeated, while in Easter 2020 there are plans to have a similar breakfast project:

This is a good way of using any surplus and means that food donated by the local community goes to those in need in the same community. It's also a good way of trying to anticipate needs.

In 2019 as the research was closing, I asked the manager what other changes had taken place in her FB:

We used to be recipients of vouchers and distributors of food parcels. Now we run a community cafe which serves as a meeting point. Yesterday which was our food bank day 59 people took Fareshare give-away [food] with many of them lining up at 11 am when we open and 30 of them had the soup lunch. It's free and they don't need vouchers. No one came in with a voucher. These people sit down and have a chat, such as an elderly woman I know.

Q. Does this fit with the way TT works?

A. The TT CEO definitely wants food banks to go. She has a long-term vision which is not being a food bank [but rather] finding out what the needs of society are and adapting ourselves accordingly.

The manager also told me about a further planned expansion of their food bank group:

We are being hosted by a church which came on board with our Christmas Project and we will begin to operate out of their premises in February 2020. This will become our main centre of operations in the north of the county and pioneer our 'Pick-Up-Point' scheme. The aim is to have key venues and individuals in communities throughout the county who can give out emergency food bags to those in food poverty or crisis. Those in need will be referred on to a Foodbank Centre and its teams for further support.

## Summary

This FB was run somewhat differently than St. Nicholas or Riverside, with an increasing emphasis on food not just as parcels to take away but as something to share in its café and during its weekly community meals. There was a determined effort to see eating as social and to bridge the gap between the manager and her volunteers, on the one hand, and the clients of the FB, on the other. Setting up community meals which cost participants little or nothing but enables social, as well as economical eating, does not differentiate between the food poor and others, or between givers (volunteers) and receivers (clients).

## Case Study 6. Patch (Pembrokeshire Action to Combat Hardship), an independent food and basics bank: helping and giving back

Patch is the third and final Welsh FB to be discussed. Patch is an independent food and basics bank whose headquarters are in the south of the county and it was the first such organisation to be set up in the area in 2008, some six years before the arrival of Trussell in 2014 in the form of the West Wales Food Bank.

There are similarities and differences between Patch and the two Welsh TTFBs just discussed. Like the latter, Patch uses a voucher system to establish who can be given food, but it usually gives out more food and for a longer period. Like other FBs, it is registered as a charity and has a board of trustees. Finally, like the West Wales FB, it has four branches including its headquarters.

However, there are important differences. First of all, Patch is not affiliated to any other organization such as Trussell. Secondly it has a full-time paid manager and a paid part-time deputy, as well as some 60 volunteers. Thirdly the HQ has its own premises, although as these are usually rented for a peppercorn rent, the organization may have to move when the property is required for other purposes by its owners<sup>37</sup>. Even so, it does mean that this organization has far more space at its disposal than the other TTFBs discussed earlier

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<sup>37</sup> Patch HQ moved twice during the period of my research.

which enables it to run a 'basics' bank giving out clothes and household goods, as well as offering room space to others such as the local CAB for client interviews. In the run up to Christmas it also has a large Toy Appeal. In addition, the charity has its own van and in 2017 it acquired a second-hand refrigerated van which would enable it to collect a wider range of food.

The background of the manager and volunteers is also rather different from those of other FBs discussed earlier. The manager, an ex-nurse, makes no bones about her own difficult history which includes mental health problems, while a number of the volunteers are working class and some are ex-clients. Furthermore, many are youngsters, a situation I did not find in many other FBs I visited<sup>38</sup>. Patch even had a teenage trustee!

Perhaps because the Patch branches are located in areas where many people depend on benefits, there is a high degree of openness about poverty. The atmosphere is rather different than in other FBs with much joking usually led by the manager. Here is an extract from notes taken on my first visit to the headquarters in 2015:

The building, which I shortly get a tour of, is a hive of activity. The first room has a reception desk but there are also other people doing things there and much coming and going. The second room has the food bank with a table on which are baskets for fruit and veg, only there aren't any there currently. Then I saw rooms containing clothes, bedding, children's toys, offices, and a small interview room which I used later to speak to a client.

The manager emphasized that it is important to give people nice things – goods that are not worth keeping are discarded and they have a salvage man who comes in and buys up the bags of textiles for £4.00 per bag 'so we get quite a bit each week'.

She explained their voucher system:

People come in with a voucher from e.g. CAB, which is our biggest referral agency. These are colour-coded by referral agency e.g. blue for health workers, green for churches, cream for key workers (see glossary). We ask their name and address and what they've had, if they drink tea or coffee and would prefer pasta or rice, do they have cooking facilities, have

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<sup>38</sup> A notable exception was the Sufra FB in north London which I visited several times see <https://www.sufra-nwlondon.org.uk>.

they got a tin opener, then we give them up to 2 weeks of food. Later she asks her deputy what the footfall today has been – ‘52 people have been given food’.

While the voucher system was not dissimilar to that of TTFBs, Patch was in a position to give out more food for a longer period if necessary. It also ran a second kind of voucher system organised under the term ‘Fill Your Boots’ by which donors could buy a cafe or restaurant voucher from Patch for a pound, which could be given to anyone needing help and exchanged at participating food outlets.

Food at Patch was donated by a number of supermarkets with which the manager had established bilateral relations, but from 2016, the Fareshare Food Cloud (discussed in Chapter 5) had been set up with Tesco and Patch also received surplus fresh food regularly from other local supermarkets. Food collections also came in from churches.

Patch is well known in the county and has links with county-level bodies and private industry, the numerous supermarkets which provide surplus food, and the press. In addition there are donations or sponsorships from local businesses and organisations. Patch and its manager are thus high profile in the area and there was rarely a visit when the latter did not mention a media appearance. In August 2017 the manager told me that she had recently been on ITV news and while I was writing this report, Patch was again featured on ITV news on 26<sup>th</sup> November 2019 and also radio 5 Live.

This was the first of many visits both to the Patch HQ and to its the branches. On each occasion it was difficult to keep up with all the happenings, with people coming and going, and phones ringing, which made completing conversations quite difficult as my notes from a visit in 2017 attest:

### **Visit to Patch: Extracts from notes taken in August 2017**

Arrive about 10.30 am. J is on reception sitting next to the manager who is having to answer the phone, as the deputy manager and chief volunteer have leave this week . The former has gone to Italy for a wedding. A young woman who I suspect has learning difficulties me a drink. I hear that someone from CAB is on the premises: she is seeing a client in a private room.

I see that Patch has now acquired a refrigerated van which will mean that more fresh food can be donated and collected. I also notice that the Patch tops, which had previously sported the logo of an oil company, have been replaced by that of a food wholesaler. The manager explains that companies usually only give ‘uniforms’ with logos for a limited period, as they need to generate more publicity with a ‘new’ charity.

The manager’s husband, who works here two days a week and does most of the pick-ups, arrives in the new van. He’s already been to Tesco and Aldi in Pembroke Dock today. He’s

managed to borrow a trolley, which helps with the unloading, then he goes off in the van, taking with him a cooler box in case there is any refrigerated stuff.

The manager constantly fields phone calls: a woman with three children needs a parcel: 'She's having a problem with child tax credits, we always have that issue at this time of year'. There's a request for a report on the work of a previous volunteer (I suspect this is from a school). The manager apologises for not having done it and says she will do it immediately.

The tenancy support officer for a housing association arrives to pick up food parcels for his clients and soon afterwards, one of his colleagues, who is the domestic violence support worker, also arrives for the same reason. The former asks the manager how she recruits volunteers as he knows a woman who would like to come. The latter replies that they get a taster day to see how they get on. I ask if it is explicit policy to try and turn clients into volunteers. She says it 'just happens'.

I finally managed to ask a few questions and began with fund-raising, learning that they have been (the local) Sainsbury's 'charity of the year' for a second year (which is the maximum). They also fundraise through websites like Virgin Giving ('it's cheaper than some of the others') and Easy Fundraising, where a small percentage of the cost of purchases from affiliated companies goes to charity. Both are flagged up on Patch's Facebook page. While volunteers had myriad jobs similar to those in other FBs, these also involved helping with fund-raising by a variety of means including, during the period of research, a sponsored climb of Snowdon and bungee-jumping off a local high bridge.

Later I learned that at last night's Trustees' meeting there were concerns expressed about the finances but the manager remained optimistic: 'We won't go bust'. When she eventually listed all her donors for me, I could see why!

## **Volunteers**

The manager described their volunteers: 'We're very proud because our volunteers are very diverse in terms of age, gender, sexual orientation, religion etc. We had to establish that to apply for the [county annual] volunteer award.' She invites me to come to the award ceremony: 'You can be part of Patch – we are an impressive sight with 50 or 60 of us in our black Patch tops. We win something most years'.

I attended two such award ceremonies and found that Patch volunteers won more often than any other voluntary group in the county. In 2019 winners included an 11 year-old girl who had already been volunteering for five years, and the Patch Youth Group. One of the male volunteers got highly commended for overcoming difficulties through volunteering, another male volunteer also got an award, while both the Senior Volunteer and the manager's husband got commended. 'Best of all was that our Under 25 Group got an



award.’ The winner of an unusual two awards in 2019 was the Senior Volunteer of whom the nomination (written by the manager) stated:

She used to be a Patch client, so she knows what it feels like and understands the clients. She also has compassion for other volunteers. It has been a high pleasure to see a huge change in her over five years.

Not surprising then to hear from another volunteer, who helped with fund-raising applications and governance matters, that Patch had turned many people’s lives around by building up their self-confidence and increasing their capacities. On a visit in June 2018, a young man came in to say he had been made the deputy restaurant manager at a local hotel, whereas formerly he had been a FB client. He said proudly ‘Tonight I will have four people working under me’ and there were immediate ribald jokes about this.

One of the questions I asked the volunteers was about their motivation. It was striking how enthusiastic they were about the organisation and the extent to which they enjoyed being part of it. The word which recurred in most responses was ‘helping’ and it was clear that the volunteers felt that they were doing something positive. Some also spoke about reciprocity: they were ‘giving back’ either to Patch in return for earlier help or in more general terms to their local community.

Another question asked, as in all FBs, was about why volunteers thought people came to FBs. While some stated the obvious such as ‘no money/income, poverty, hard times’, others were more specific, mentioning benefits problems (delays, cuts, difficulties in access), job losses, homelessness, low wages, break up of relationships, and domestic abuse, all of which were circumstances beyond control. Only a minority of volunteers implied a degree of judgement around money management.

A final question posed was about the responsibility for the current state of affairs. Government was mentioned most frequently, others thought it belonged to ‘all of us’, it was ‘ours’, that of ‘communities’. While charities, the voluntary sector or retailers were mentioned as having some degree of responsibility, it was also placed firmly on the state and its policies, including both the Westminster and Welsh governments.

## **Clients**

In 2017 I interviewed a client whom I had already met in the reception area where she said loudly to all present ‘If it wasn’t for these people I don’t know what I would do. I wouldn’t be alive!’ In the interview room she began by telling me an all-too familiar story: she had lost her job after 20 years, then her flat as she couldn’t keep up the mortgage payments. She claimed benefits but was continually having them cut or stopped for various reasons, she

wasn't sure why. Although she eventually managed to get a council flat, recently she had received a demand to pay the 'bedroom tax' as the son who lived with her had turned 25.

Her interview highlighted the toll that such difficult circumstances can have on health:

I have had such a difficult time. I lost a lot of weight, so my clothes did not fit me anymore and I donated them here. I used to weigh 16 stone something, now I'm down to 8 stone. And I sometimes find it difficult to eat. I am under the doctor for that too. He is sending me for a chest x-ray. [I notice that she has a cough]. The last 6 months have been really difficult because they take off this and that. I am on the sick [claiming sickness benefit]. And I have my son living with me because he has developed seizures.

I asked her if she thought that poverty had increased:

Yes, the basic costs have gone up. Yesterday I got paid [my benefits] and today I have absolutely nothing – everything was already allocated. The job situation here is dire – another site [in this town] has just closed with the loss of 400 jobs, all those people are now looking for jobs. It's definitely not a world for the poor at the moment. Why am I like this? It's stress.

Q. So how do you manage with things like Christmas?

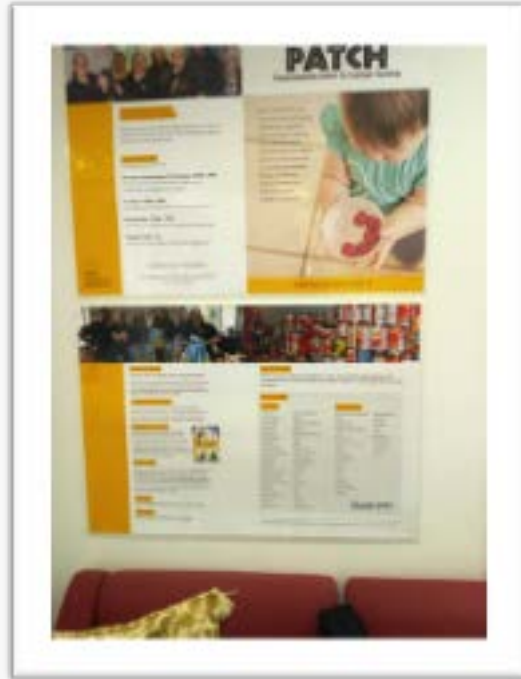
A. We had no Christmas dinner.

## Summary

While Patch has similarities with TTFBs, such as the use of vouchers, there are also important differences. The first is that Patch has a full-time paid manager to make contacts with government agencies, private companies, supermarkets and the media which has undoubtedly helped to build its bank balance and its profile. Furthermore, the manager is well plugged in to the food poverty conference circuit and I met her at such events several times.

The second factor is that Patch has its own premises, unlike any of the other FBs already discussed, and so is able to be much more ambitious in the scale of its activities.

Another difference between Patch and other FB case studies is that the gap between volunteers and clients is much narrower. In this respect it more closely resembles The Hub, where the roles of workers, volunteers and users are constantly shifting. The deputy is sometimes herself a client, while many other clients become volunteers, repaying, as they see it, the help they received. Food poverty thereby appears less embarrassing, just as it did on Northern Heights, because 'we're all in the same boat'.



*Figure 5: Patch Poster 2018*



*Figure 6: Patch branch committee meeting*

## Chapter 5. Food surplus and food poverty: the role of the food industry

Over the early period of my research there was increasing public concern about the ‘waste’ generated by supermarkets: fresh food which was approaching its ‘consume by’ date. There were several petitions in the press about such ‘waste’, urging supermarkets to cut their waste or to use the waste generated for useful purposes. Increasingly the last was viewed as meaning to feed the poor.

In this section I consider the increasing importance of so-called ‘surplus’ food from the food industry in providing supplies for FBs. When the latter were originally set up most of their supplies came from donations of goods bought by customers at supermarkets, or purchased and given via churches, synagogues, mosques, schools and other organisations. Such food is not ‘surplus’. But by the middle of my fieldwork, a lot more surplus food was coming from the FareShare Food Cloud, as will be seen.

### FareShare and the Food Cloud

I visited several organisations concerned with the collection and distribution or use of surplus food, including Fareshare<sup>39</sup>, WRAP (Waste and Resources Action Programme), the Skylight cafe run by Crisis, and the TBG cafe run by the Transition Bro Gwaun organisation which is discussed below. Early in my research I also visited the London headquarters of FareShare whose motto is ‘fighting hunger, tackling food waste’. In other words, it sees food poverty and the existence of surplus food as linked.

At the time I conducted my first interview there in early 2015, I was told that FareShare collected surplus food primarily from food suppliers and wholesalers and distributed this food to its member charities – homeless hostels, women’s shelters, pensioners’ luncheon clubs, FBs, etc. – through a UK-wide and growing network. Its aims were (and remain) to turn food waste into *food against hunger*. My interviewee told me:

We are effectively in competition with farmers who buy surplus food to feed pigs, and anaerobic digesters which produce energy and also get government grants. So it is not axiomatic that suppliers benefit from giving surplus to us – we are not necessarily the cheapest option for disposal of surplus. We use the WRAP waste hierarchy whereby surplus food should first go to feed humans, then animals, then produce energy.

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<sup>39</sup> Fareshare has also been studied by other academics. See Alexander and Smaje 2008.

I asked whether FareShare thought it was tackling problems or symptoms and was told that it is a charity and it doesn't enter into longer-term issues:

We think we have a model which works and could work more. We do think that we are helping the food industry to be more efficient; we shine a light into areas of waste which obliges them to think about why this waste is produced and to work on introducing efficiencies at manufacturing and distribution levels. Yes, I understand that this is not addressing reasons for poverty or reasons for food waste, but it is a model which fits current needs. We are a kind of niche and until you eliminate these problems, the surplus will be there. There is also a need to change the culture which supermarkets have inculcated – for example, that all fruit and veg should appear perfect and uniform.

By the time I carried out my second interview with FareShare at the end of 2016, things had changed. FareShare had expanded massively, taking on additional paid staff as well as volunteers. Much of the food now came from supermarkets, not just wholesalers:

We now have 20 regional centres across the UK, so we are much bigger than before. And we work with 3,000 people and feed many more people – some 200,000 weekly<sup>40</sup>.

Furthermore, FareShare had set up the Community Food Connection programme with Tesco using the Food Cloud app discussed below. As a result, charities supported by FareShare were accessing a lot more food much earlier. My FareShare interviewee noted that the charities which had been approved and monitored by the organization were benefitting considerably:

As they are all suffering from funding cuts, if they didn't have food through us, they might have to close. But as it is, they are not having to pay for the food they need, so they can divert their cash income to their other needs.

We went on to discuss the advantages of the new system and the FareShare interviewee told me:

Now each time Tesco supermarkets have a surplus, it can be diverted to FareShare, and suppliers are also proactively contacting us. This is all very beneficial. We do it in a cost-effective way both for us and the food industry. The aim is now to get rid of its still-edible surplus food left in store at the end of each day by giving to local charities which are approved and monitored by FareShare. Although this scheme requires logistical and staff

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<sup>40</sup> For further information see <https://fareshare.org.uk/annual-reports/>.

support from Tesco, the fact that it is dealing with a single organisation like FareShare helps to remove many of the risks to reputation and branding, given the need for quality assurance and consistency.

## **Supermarket managers and the Food Cloud**

I carried out interviews with several Tesco managers in west Wales in 2016 and 2017. The first manager explained to me the mechanics of the Food Cloud system:

The Food Cloud app was developed in Ireland [Eire] 2 years ago, set up by two fellow graduates who wanted to start a socially useful business. It worked well there with Tesco, so Food Cloud wanted to roll it out in the UK, but Tesco was the only supermarket which was willing to participate. Now it has great reach and for a company like Tesco, it's a great business. In the UK it was initially trialled in 14 stores with 50 charities participating. Then it was rolled out to 100 stores at the beginning of this year [2016], followed by another 1,000 stores of which this is one. By the end of 2017 we expect all Tesco stores, large or small, to be enrolled.

The manager was very enthusiastic about Tesco and its charitable activities:

Some people think Tesco is just out for itself, but you have to remember that the workers here are local people. We are more than a store, so we are keen to set up local relations. I don't want our charitable work to be just a PR exercise.

I came across equal enthusiasm from other store managers who, like food bank volunteers, expressed concern about food poverty and wanted to do something to alleviate it. Nonetheless, this scheme is undoubtedly also good for the company's CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) remit and is flagged up as such in the stores and on their website. At a WRAP conference in 2016, a Tesco representative stated that this scheme makes for improved staff morale, as well as better 'stories' for their CSR web pages.

I asked some of the FBs about the new system and found that the response had been positive. Here is how a volunteer in a Welsh TTFB had first explained the system to me in May 2016:

The new [FareShare] Food Cloud scheme works through texts [shows me some on her phone]. They [Tesco] say they have this or that, and I just reply Y or N. For example, see here: 'nine trays, bakery, non-food items, fruit and veg'. This comes after 8.30pm when Tesco clears its shelves, and it has to be collected by us the following day between 7 and 10am.

Her FB manager was also enthusiastic: '[Fareshare] Food Cloud has made a fantastic difference'. However, she went on to note: 'I must say, we are getting rather less than we used to do from some stores – it seems they have revised their procurement and so there is less going spare'. This is an obvious result of the system if pushed to its logical conclusion and it is precisely one of the aims of FareShare mentioned by my first interviewee.

In my interviews with supermarket managers from Aldi and the Coop in 2016, there was also considerable interest in the FareShare Food Cloud system, so more supermarket chains appeared likely to follow suit. Indeed Waitrose has subsequently set up a partnership with FareShare too. The waste organization WRAP itself considers that this is the way forward in dealing with the problem of food waste, as well as making a contribution to alleviating food poverty. Furthermore, during the years of my fieldwork, even more organisations collecting surplus food to donate to those in food poverty were set up, such as the Felix Project in London ([www.felixproject.org](http://www.felixproject.org)), while the Real Junk Food project (<https://trjp.com/>) expanded beyond 'pay-what-you-like' cafés into warehousing.

Yet, this situation is replete with contradictions. For example, while a Tesco supermarket manager in one Welsh town waxed enthusiastic about the FareShare Food Cloud scheme and about Tesco's numerous charitable activities, a food bank manager in another town told me: 'Yes, we benefit a lot from Tesco, but some of our clients are Tesco employees who cannot afford to buy enough good food because of low pay, given that they can only get part-time contracts'.

Another contradiction lies in the 'partnership' between Asda, Tesco and Fareshare of which mention has already been made in the discussion about Case Study 5 in the previous chapter. Asda, which pays very low wages to its staff, gave a large grant to Trussell and FareShare to enable more surplus food to be accessed by food aid charities, but IFAN was very critical of Trussell's acceptance of such a grant from 'Big Food'<sup>41</sup>.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that only a small proportion of the food poor go to FBs. For many, accepting charitable food donations is not necessarily a positive solution since they often feel embarrassment and shame if they are forced down this route. Scarcely surprising then that the setting up of an 'affordable' cafe utilising surplus food in one Welsh town did not prove a panacea for those suffering from food insecurity, as is seen in the next case study.

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<sup>41</sup> <https://uploads.strikinglycdn.com/files/e6b91c5e-8b21-4dd3-9e05-77f35448d089/IFAN%20Statement%20on%20ASDA,%20FareShare,%20Trussell%20Trust%20%20%20C2%A320%20million%20partnership.pdf>.

## Case study 7: A community café in West Wales: ‘too good to waste’

This café sought to recycle local surplus food – both fresh and long-life – and to serve good meals at affordable prices. In this, it succeeded very well. It was part of the wider Transition movement ([www.transitionnetwork.org](http://www.transitionnetwork.org)) which had earlier set up a large wind turbine to serve the local community. The café’s motto was ‘too good to waste’ (*rhy dda i’w wastraffu* in Welsh).

In the first interview I conducted at the café in 2014, I asked the manager about its rationale:

Climate change, cutting energy, cutting waste, building community resilience. Also employment, especially of young people. We offer work experience and paid employment, as well as taking on volunteers (around 20 presently).

The café’s main aims were thus primarily environmental, namely the prevention of food going to landfill, as well as developing ‘community sustainability and resilience’. Feeding poorer people was incidental. It experienced some local opposition since it got its food for free and thus could sell café meals more cheaply than other local commercial food outlets in the town.

By the following year (2015), operations had increased:

The amount of food we handle has gone up to 600 kg. We could get more, but we are not pushing at present because we lack the capacity. The nearby supermarket is now giving us stuff from their bakery but they remain nervous about giving more. We are also allowed to use their bio-digester<sup>42</sup>. If possible, we prefer to follow the WRAP waste hierarchy whereby surplus food should go first to humans, then animals and only then to other places.

However, the café was also seen by some residents as being primarily for poor people, and there were those who didn’t want to risk the stigma of eating there. One resident of the town told me: ‘I wouldn’t eat there. Don’t they serve left-overs? That’s how the local newspaper described the food at the café’. Research carried out by one of the café workers found the same thing:

Our footfall has not grown that much ... But more people are coming in for meals, rather than just a drink. Even so, we have an image problem – here, poverty is very stigmatized

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<sup>42</sup> A tank which digests organic material anaerobically (without air) and produces methane gas which can be used for cooking, lighting and heating etc.



and people who are seen coming in to the café are considered ‘poor’ ... I’ve heard people say ‘You can’t go in there; you’ll be seen as poor’.

This image problem highlights yet again the issue of stigma involved in receiving or eating food whose origins are charitable or the disposal of surplus.

In spite of doubts on the part of some local people, the cafe gained more customers and was highly recommended on social media platforms such as Trip Advisor. Sadly it closed in 2017 prior to its demolition to make way for a road widening scheme, although it retains a lively web presence<sup>43</sup>. The group which had run it moved into a new initiative: a Community Fridge<sup>44</sup>.

Recently I received some comments from one of the café’s /former trustees on how this new initiative was faring:

Interestingly the community fridge which our wonderful team of ‘foodie’ volunteers are now running, gets a more positive response from the general public than the café used to - less stigma seems to be attached... However, I think it’s still seen primarily as a poverty resource, and only secondarily as a way of reducing waste.



Figure 7: Too good to waste': Mural on wall of Transition Bro Gwaun cafe

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<sup>43</sup> <https://transitionbrogwaun.org.uk/transition-cafe/>.

<sup>44</sup> <https://transitionbrogwaun.org.uk/community-fridges/>.

## Chapter 6. Issues and questions arising

In this final chapter, I first attempt to pick out a number of themes from the preceding chapters and case studies and discuss the perceptions of various players involved in the situation of food poverty and food aid including members of the general public. Secondly I consider the benefits and disbenefits of the current situation to each player. Thirdly I make some observations around ways in which food aid can be organised somewhat differently to ensure that there is less stigma for clients and that they are involved in solutions. Finally I consider the extent to which some of these trends are beginning to be evident in the FBs with which I worked.

### Some themes and perceptions

Earlier in this report I asked what anthropological concepts might be utilised in the study of food poverty in the UK. Here I will mention just a few.

One concerns power differentials and who gets what and how. This can be analysed at levels varying from the FB to the state, from the micro to the macro. FBs are not joiners' or membership clubs – clients rarely have a voice (for example I found only one FB bank which asked its clients to complete a brief 'how did we do?' form), they are not trustees and in only a few FBs are they asked to become volunteers. There is thus a marked imbalance of power between givers and receivers.

The second is stigma. From the point of view of many clients, receiving food aid in the standard food parcel in return for a voucher is a stigmatised way of getting food. There is little choice of items and the type of food is limited. Having no choice is an important form of exclusion in the affluent society. Furthermore, too much food aid complies with Poppendieck's Seven Deadly 'Ins' of insufficiency, inappropriateness, inadequacy (nutritional), instability, inaccessibility, inefficiency, indignity and inequity (1998: 209-229).

The third concerns giving and receiving. Stigma comes from reciprocity– or rather lack of it. As a respondent in Chapter Two said, 'Poncing' (having something for nothing) is stigmatised and in many cases the shame is internalised. Without the ability to give back, taking from a food bank leads to a sense of debt, as well as failure.

A fourth is that of discourse. How are the food poor talked about and by whom? How do they talk about themselves? Using the idea of 'discourse' enables us to seek a more critical interrogation of what is often taken for granted – in effect what has become normalised. It enables us to ask why this situation has arisen and whether it could be changed. In the next section I consider some ways in which food poverty is perceived.

## **How food banks are viewed by members of the public**

The arguments around poverty and food poverty are largely determined by public perceptions, which, in many cases, involve a series of 'myths' which I frequently encountered in my research. One is that those suffering from food poverty are unable to manage their budgets, while the reality of the sheer impossibility of living on incomes as low as those derived from benefits or precarious employment is ignored or denied.

A second myth is that people who access FBs are 'scroungers', getting something for nothing. Neither my own research nor that of others would support this idea. Only a small proportion of the food insecure go to FBs and it is clear that for many who do it is a place of last resort. Small wonder that the proportion of food bank users who are single parents is relatively high, since the necessity to feed children is paramount and overcomes feelings of stigma.

A third myth which I will mention here is that FBs and other forms of food aid are dealing effectively with the problem of food poverty. It is also widely thought that if only more surplus food can be collected and distributed, the problem of food poverty will be solved. In fact the great majority of clients 'manage' by getting help from kin and neighbours, skipping meals, compromising on buying cheaper food, cutting down on heating and other expenses, incurring debt and so on.

A fourth myth is that austerity policies are an absolute necessity for the government to 'balance the books', a view which even many of the volunteers interviewed appear to have internalised. Behind this premise often lies the idea that social welfare benefits constitute the major part of all welfare spending, whereas in fact only one in fourteen pounds goes to benefits while the remainder is accounted for by health and education. This myth also takes little account of the many additional costs to the state arising from low pay and low benefits, such as poor mental and physical health and increases in child poverty, all of which carry considerable costs in their train, thereby running counter to the messages of austerity.

So why do these policies continue? Who benefits from them?

## **Food aid and its players – who benefits?**

In the case of the state, food aid appears to solve part of the problem of poverty and social welfare. It lets the government off the hook by shifting the responsibility of ensuring that all citizens are fed to other sectors, not only the food industry, but also the voluntary sector

The food industry benefits by being able to dispose of its surplus in a socially acceptable way: extra food is sold to enable donations in store, while surplus food is disposed of without the need to use other, possibly more expensive ways. This is also good for PR

(public relations) and CSR (corporate social responsibility), it improves the brand and satisfies customers concerned about waste.

What about the voluntary sector? Volunteering does of course bring its own rewards: the 'feel good' factor, fulfilling Christian duty, sociality, building capacity, learning new things, and prestige (especially through winning awards). Caraher and Furey (2018) have even termed volunteers 'secondary beneficiaries'.

A study by the Trussell Trust and IFAN in 2017 showed that volunteers' hours are worth over £30 million<sup>45</sup> per annum in labour. Yet FBs' 'business model' depends on the existence of surplus food and some would argue that links with food companies like Asda compromise any advocacy role. For this reason Caraher and Furey refer to FBs as 'successful failures': successful because they continue to expand and have captured the public imagination but failures because they do not address the underlying causes of food poverty (ibid p. 79).

While volunteers expend considerable energy and are usually highly compassionate, many also recognise that giving out food aid addresses symptoms, not causes, and they are themselves critical of the need for their existence. Nonetheless few food aid organisations are willing to challenge the premises on which current government policy is based and particularly to advocate for higher rates of benefit administered in a more humane way.

Regarding recipients of food aid, in the short term, clients do benefit, and its importance should not be discounted. Unless, however, this can be done in such a way as to minimise or reduce embarrassment and stigma, they pay a heavy price.

## **Closing the gap and doing things differently?**

In 2018 the CAB Manager raised an important issue in her organisation, namely the gap between her staff and their clients, the 'them and us' situation as she called it. This gap is not dissimilar to that between volunteers and clients at many FBs. Towards the end of my research it was becoming apparent that within the sector there had begun to be the search for greater dignity for clients and avoidance of stigma. Some of the work currently being done in Scotland (Scottish Government 2016) has pointed to other ways of managing food poverty such as Menu for Change<sup>46</sup>, and the Dignity and Truth Commission.

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<sup>45</sup> Volunteer hours were costed at the then National Living Wage rate of £7.50 per hour. Only 1 in 10 workers in the food aid sector is paid.

<sup>46</sup> Menu for Change is a partnership of Nourish Scotland, Oxfam Scotland, CPAG Scotland and the Poverty Alliance.

The four dignity principles are:

- Involvement in decision-making of people with direct experience ('experts by experience').
- Recognising the social value of food.
- Providing opportunities for all to contribute time and opinions.
- Leaving people with the power to choose.

This means asking staff, volunteers and others taking part how the food aid project supports people to have the following benefits:

- A sense of control
- Ability to take part
- Feeling nourished and supported
- Being involved in decision-making
- Being valued and able to contribute

Nourish Scotland gives examples of community actions which already go beyond the standard FB model, and include maintaining gardens for growing vegetables, providing community meals which are open to all, increasing the choice of affordable fruit and vegetables, providing vouchers for fresh food, and seeking to operate in places where people go regularly, rather than in separate spaces. In the second part of the report, Nourish suggests ways in which FBs may transition to different kinds of organisations which respect the principles above. To what extent then are such principles discernible in FBs in England and Wales?

## **Changes and developments over the last five years**

Over the years that I have been observing food aid organisations at both national and local level, some of them have changed and developed considerably. Examples include the following:

- Encouraging reflective sessions in which volunteers discuss the reasons for what they are doing and give their views on what could be done better.
- Encouraging and enabling clients to become volunteers, thereby 'paying back' what many see as their debts and also building their confidence and capacity.
- Asking clients ('experts by experience') for their opinion on the service given by the FB.
- Using volunteering as a training mechanism, especially for young people.
- Becoming more activist by campaigning around these issues.
- Networking with other organisations.

What unfortunately has not changed is the increase in demand for food aid, as poverty and inequality continue to grow in the UK. The situation today is that food poverty is not being alleviated by the state, the primary duty holder under international law, but rather by voluntary organisations which seek to address problems which are not of their making. While attempts to change food aid into something involving whole communities and not just the poor and destitute is very important, real change in this situation can only come about if people have enough money to acquire food in the normal way – by choosing and buying. This means ensuring that wages and benefits must be at a level to support individuals and families properly.

## Conclusion

I return to the responses in chapter 1 by many participants to my question about what they would like to see coming out of this research:

- influencing government policy
- having some good case studies
- giving an 'objective' appraisal of the situation
- providing some practical answers
- finding out how waste can be avoided

Can such research influence government policy? At present this does not seem very likely, given the huge amount of research which has been largely dismissed by governments since 2010. In the Preamble to this report, I referred to the conclusions of both the UN Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty in the UK and the research carried out by Human Rights Watch. Here I ask again whether these two reports help us to understand what is going on in relation to food poverty and food aid in the UK? In the light of my own research, as well as that of many others, I would suggest that they do, that the existence of high rates of poverty and destitution, with all their concomitant ills including food poverty, is not an unfortunate accident but the result of long-term policies which aim to change UK society in a fundamental way.

Does this report provide some good case studies? My aim has been to consider a variety of organisations connected with food aid and see not only how they handled the problem but why they made the choices they did. It shows a number of ways in which 'practical answers' can be given provided that there is a willingness to interrogate basic premises and seek to bring about fundamental changes in society which would do away with the existence of food poverty and FBs.

Does it show how waste can be avoided? Giving food surplus to the poor appears to provide a solution to food poverty and the problem of disposing of food surplus but this also

raises other questions including why there is a surplus in the first place and who benefits from its use for charity. This study suggests that it also fails to deal with the real problems of food poverty.

Is this an 'objective' report? As with much social science research, it is not always possible to give 'objective' appraisals because studying food leads to considerations of entitlement involving state and citizens, human rights, the workings of the market, concepts of morality and much more. It is difficult to be detached about food poverty and its ills and indeed, outrage about the current situation and its injustices is what has driven this research. It is my hope that by having greater understanding, change may come about.

What is needed, therefore, is a two-pronged approach, involving not only changes in food aid systems themselves, as discussed above, but also seeking changes in social policies with a coalition of poverty organisations, volunteers from food aid organisations and academics researching this field.

## Afterword: the Covid-19 crisis and its effects on food poverty

This text was completed in the new year 2020. While it was in press, everything changed because of the Covid-19 crisis, which arrived in the UK in February. The country was eventually in lockdown by March 23<sup>rd</sup> but prior to this there was unprecedented 'panic buying' at supermarkets with shelves rapidly emptying (Caplan 2020, blog: <http://sites.gold.ac.uk/food-poverty/> ).

Much of what I have described in the previous pages changed overnight:

- Several food banks lost many of their volunteers because they were aged over 70 and deemed 'vulnerable'.
- There was a huge increase in demand for food bank supplies from newly-laid off workers whose companies had been obliged to shut down – by the end of March a million people had applied for Universal Credit and the numbers continued to grow subsequently.
- Initially at least there was a big drop in donations to food banks: some reported a doubling of demand and a halving of supplies.
- Some food banks continued to operate but clients were simply given a pre-packed parcel when they entered the premises and left as rapidly as possible.
- As soon as they could recruit additional volunteers, many food banks moved to a delivery only system.

The crisis shone a harsh light on the inadequacies of the food aid sector<sup>47</sup>, despite the best efforts of the organisations concerned. It also brought into sharp relief the problems of the welfare system, with its very low rates of support and lengthy delays, despite the increase of £20 per week for Universal Credit claimants – the first in many years.

Here is a brief synopsis of what has happened in each of the case study organisations:

- The Hub Community Centre continued to function but in a much reduced way. It provided food parcels using produce from the Felix Fund, a food redistribution charity.
- St. Nicholas FB also continued to operate in spite of the loss of half of its volunteers because of their age. It initially adopted the food parcel collection method but was soon moving over to deliveries. They received more monetary donations than usual, including a couple of big ones, but found it difficult to buy food in large amounts

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<sup>47</sup> Several reports have been issued on this topic even as this publication was in press. See Sharpe et al 2020, Goodwin 2020, Loopstra 2020, Caplan 2020.



because of the limits on purchases which had by this time been imposed by supermarkets.

- Riverside Citizens' Advice closed its doors but offered telephone and online advice
- The Riverside FB continued to function but was moving to a delivery system. It had recruited more volunteers and also, after a low period just before the lockdown, found their supplies increased by food donations from many of the restaurants and cafes in the town which had had to close their doors.
- The West Wales FB continued to operate in all of its five centres using the guidelines suggested by the Trussell Trust. The number of clients doubled. It continued to receive food via the Fareshare Food Cloud system.
- Patch had closed two of its smaller centres but continued open in the remainder, seeking guidelines from IFAN (Independent Food Aid Network). It too had experienced a considerable increase in demand but was having problems buying sufficient food because of the supermarket 'rationing' system. The Manager contacted her local MP to ask him to raise a question about the position of food banks during the lockdown to try and alleviate such problems. She noted that the voucher system had become much more flexible.

The Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the fact that handing over the problem of food poverty and food aid to the voluntary sector in no way absolves the state from its own responsibility. As all food bank players told me many times, such organisations merely provide sticking plaster on the gaping wounds of social inequality and poverty, even destitution. Crisis or no crisis, other means need to be found to ensure that all citizens can eat properly.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1. Trussell Trust food parcel list and voucher

[\(https://www.trusselltrust.org/get-help/emergency-food/food-parcel/\)](https://www.trusselltrust.org/get-help/emergency-food/food-parcel/)

- Cereal
- Soup
- Pasta
- Rice
- Tinned tomatoes/ pasta sauce
- Lentils, beans and pulses
- Tinned meat
- Tinned vegetables
- Tea/coffee
- Tinned fruit
- Biscuits
- UHT milk
- Fruit juice
- Non-food items such as toiletries and hygiene products

 <b>FOOD VOUCHER</b>			<b>Food Bank Centre</b> Elm Christian Centre Dews Road, Salisbury SP2 7SN 01722 411224 info@trusselltrust.org Open: Monday to Friday 11 am-2 pm
<b>Please complete form in BLOCK CAPITALS</b>			<b>The Trussell Trust</b> Michael Community Centre St Michael's Road Salisbury SP2 9LE 01722 411246
Name:			Date:
Organisation:			
Telephone:			
Client first name:			Client surname:
Client's Address: (Please include Post Code)			No. Adults (in words)
			No. Child'n (u16) (in words)

## **Appendix 2.**

### **Questions for semi-structured interviews with clients of food banks**

1. Background: age, sex, household composition, educational level, occupation
2. Why they use food banks or other form of food aid and history of use
3. Why they think it is stigmatizing (if they do)
4. What kind of food they would like to eat but can't
5. What they think of the food they are given
6. How they manage food on a low food budget (tips)
7. What suggestions they have for improving the situation of people like themselves: in the food bank, in the wider society
8. What they would like to see research like this achieve

### **Questions for volunteers and trustees**

1. Background – age, gender, occupation
2. Any other volunteer activity?
3. Church membership
4. History of involvement with current project
5. Reasons for volunteering
6. Reasons why they think there is a need for e.g. food banks
7. How they see the future of food security in the UK, what is the reason food banks are necessary?
8. What are their main sources of information? (TV, radio, newspapers, church, other)
9. What they see as the main reasons for poverty
10. How they would like to see this addressed
11. What they would like to see this research achieving

## Appendix 3. Questionnaire for volunteers at Food Banks

Please note: you can either fill in this form **anonymously**, in which case you'll need to post it back to me or you can complete and return to me by email.

If you download and fill in by hand, please make sure it is legible!

You can take as much space as you like or use a separate sheet if you have lots to say

**Note: questions 1-4 should not be completed if you wish to remain anonymous**

1. Name
2. Address
3. Telephone numbers
4. Email
5. Please indicate your age group: 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60-69, 70-70, 80+
6. Are you male or female?
7. What is your occupation? (if retired, please give former occupation)
8. Do you belong to any church or other religious group?
9. Are you engaged in any other kind of voluntary work than helping in food bank? If so, please state what and for how long you've been doing it.
10. How long have you been a volunteer at this food bank?
11. What was your motivation in starting?
12. Please state what roles you play there and approximately how many hours per month
13. What are your reasons for continuing?
14. Why do you think that people become clients of the food bank?
15. How would you define food poverty?
16. Do you consider that food poverty is increasing in the UK? If so, why is that?
17. From where do you get most of your information on this topic? (e.g. newspapers, tv, web, word of mouth, professional networks)
18. In your opinion, what are some of the ways in which our society talks about food poverty?
19. What would be your own preferred ways of dealing with food poverty?
20. What information would you like to see coming out of this project?
21. Any other comments you would like to add?

***Thanks so much for your time!***

## Appendix 4. Letter to the Guardian signed by academic researchers and campaigners in March 2019

There have been robust criticisms of food aid from academic researchers and activists, as in the following letter published in the Guardian in March 2019 (De Schutter et al 2019):

We deeply oppose the further institutionalisation of charitable food banks in the UK. Over the last 35 years, the normalisation of food banking in the US and [Canada](#) has failed to solve entrenched food insecurity. However, food banking does benefit the reputations of Big Food and supermarket chains as good corporate citizens while distracting attention away from low wages paid to their workers. The emergency food bank parcel comes at a cost to recipients' humanity and dignity.

Charitable food aid is a sticking plaster on a gaping wound of systemic inequality in our societies. On both sides of the Atlantic, the elimination of food poverty demands social and economic justice. At the heart of this approach must be a guarantee of the human right to adequate food and nutrition: living wages, income security and a fit-for-purpose welfare system, not “leftover” food for “left behind” *people*.

De Schutter, Olivier, and 57 other UK, Canadian and US academics, 2019. Letter 'Food banks are no solution to poverty' *Guardian* 24/03/19

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- 2017. 'Gifts, entitlements, benefits and surplus: interrogating food poverty and food aid in the UK'. Fourth annual Mary Douglas Memorial Lecture, University of Oxford, 24<sup>th</sup> May 2017. <https://player.fm/series/anthropology/gifts-entitlements-benefits-and-surplus-interrogating-food-poverty-and-food-aid-in-the-uk>
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- Pat Caplan's Food Poverty UK blog: <https://sites.gold.ac.uk/food-poverty/>
- 'Food poverty and food aid in 21st century UK: a view from anthropology': LSE blogs: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/an-anthropological-perspective-on-food-poverty-in-uk/>
- 'Applying the rules of sociological research to tackling hunger in the UK', *End Hunger Campaign* August 30, 2017 <http://endhungeruk.org/applying-rules-sociological-research-tackling-hunger-uk/#more-173>
- 'Rural Food Poverty' on website of IFAN (Independent Food Aid Providers Network) <http://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/blog/emeritus-professor-pat-caplan-writes-on-rural-food-poverty-in-west-wales>
- 'Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), corporate donors and food banking in the UK' on website of IFAN [www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/blog/emeritus-professor-pat-caplan-goldsmiths-university-of-london](http://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/blog/emeritus-professor-pat-caplan-goldsmiths-university-of-london)
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