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# Food bank provision & welfare reform in the UK.

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This brief is focused on the impact of recent welfare reform in the UK on driving need for food bank provision. It is based on research conducted as part of a three-year study, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), into the growth of nationally co-ordinated or facilitated emergency food provision in the UK. As part of this wider study, fifty interviews were conducted with strategic staff and co-ordinators of local emergency food projects in South and West Yorkshire, the Cotswolds and the South West. This analysis is relevant to developing an understanding of the evolving boundaries of responsibility for welfare provision between state and civil society.

## Background

- Food banks in the UK are a particular form of philanthropic emergency food provision, providing parcels of food to people in need for them to take away, prepare and eat.
- The last few years have seen rising numbers of food bank projects established and emergency parcels being distributed across the UK. The Trussell Trust Foodbank Network is the largest and most high profile network of local food bank projects, but there are also a range of independent food banking initiatives.
- During this period, the UK coalition government – in a continuation of Labour policies – has introduced several welfare reforms, which include but are not limited to: caps on levels of entitlement, the ‘spare room subsidy’ being introduced to housing benefit, longer waiting periods between unemployment and benefit eligibility, and the establishment of local welfare assistance to replace the discretionary social fund.
- In 2012 UK Prime Minister David Cameron described food bank provision as emblematic of the ‘big society’, and in 2013 employment minister Lord David Freud argued that increased food bank use could be explained by supply of free food, rather than increased demand.
- Research commissioned by the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and published in February 2014 found that need for food aid was increasing, and that there was no evidence that the growth of food banks was supply-driven. Visiting food banks was found to be a strategy of last resort and based on reports by providers often precipitated by income ‘crises’ brought on by problems with or a loss of social security payments, low income and household debt.
- The role that welfare reform is playing in driving demand for food banks is an urgent question for policy-makers.

## Evidence

- The evidence presented here is based on qualitative data collected from Trussell Trust staff, local Trussell Trust Foodbank managers, managers of independent food banks associated with local networks and/or receiving food from FareShare (the surplus food redistribution charity) and one larger day project which serves hot meals and distributes food parcels (25 interviews in total).
- The research indicates that welfare reforms are impacting on need for food banks in two distinct ways: people are turning to food banks as a result of (i) changes to entitlements which are leaving them worse off and (ii) inadequate processes which leave them without an income.
- Food banks are responding and adapting to this growing demand. The Trussell Trust is streamlining procedures and rethinking scales of food storage and its provision to accommodate the future trajectory of need.

- In terms of the impact of welfare reform on demand, the abolition of the discretionary social fund and its replacement with short-term benefit advances and local welfare assistance (managed by local authorities) were seen by providers as particularly problematic. In particular, there appears to be considerable confusion as to what local people are entitled to and how it can be accessed. Some local authorities appear to be building in referrals to food banks as part of these schemes.
- Interviewees also highlighted the ways in which incomes were being reduced, making it harder for people to make ends meet. Reforms impacting on this include the cap to benefit payments and the 'spare room subsidy' change to housing benefit.
- The limitations of welfare processes and procedures were also found to be impacting on demand for food banks. Decision-making around sanctions was found to be particularly problematic from the perspective of food banks, where decisions were seen as unfair and/or arbitrary. Similarly, errors made in declaring people on Employment Support Allowance fit for work were also highlighted. More generally, ineffective administration of welfare payments was also seen to be an important driver of need, where people's payments are delayed or stopped and they are left with no or heavily reduced income.
- Recent changes to the length of time sanctions can run for were also seen by some project managers as problematic, given the implications for financial insecurity.
- The changing nature of demand has resulted in particular ways of working locally and the emergence in some areas of identifiable local food bank 'systems', where projects work together to co-ordinate geographical coverage of provision and share best practice.
- In Sheffield, for instance, the growth of food banks has led to the establishment of the Sheffield Food Bank Network, a loose collaboration between projects in the city. Through this network food banks work together to share knowledge and experience and co-ordinate responses to local policy initiatives, such as the review of the Sheffield Food Plan (currently under way) and the outcomes of the Sheffield Fairness Commission report.
- Nationally, the Trussell Trust is increasingly professionalised and is continually developing its processes and procedures and discussing the best logistical approaches to meeting increased demand.

## Analysis

- At a national level, food bank demand appears to be signalling the inadequacy of both social security provision and the processes through which it is delivered. Locally, there appear to be further causes for concern, with difficulties being experienced with local assistance schemes and reports that national funding for this provision will be cut from 2015.
- The relationship between welfare reform and food banks epitomises the evolving boundaries of responsibility for the prevention of poverty between state and civil society.
- There appear to be two likely lines of development in this regard. On the one hand, philanthropic food banking could become increasingly *part of* the welfare state, should local assistance schemes formalise referrals to food banks as part of their provision, and if practices become embedded and localised systems of formal and informal support develop. However, this depends upon the state taking responsibility, perhaps tacitly, for such provision locally in some form.
- On the other hand, food banks may remain distinct philanthropic initiatives but find themselves working *in the absence of* the state. This possibility is raised by the potential for the abolition of local welfare assistance schemes, continued reductions in social security entitlements, and failures to rectify inadequate procedures and processes.
- It is important that reviews are undertaken of: (i) the adequacy of reformed social security

income levels, as well as the level of the minimum wage; (ii) the fairness and effectiveness of social security processes, especially fitness assessments, sanctioning decisions and payment administration; and (iii) the adequacy, sustainability and accessibility of local welfare assistance.

## Conclusion

The research underpinning this Brief has highlighted the important impact welfare reform is having on demand for food banks in the UK today. It suggests that the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into hunger and food poverty should examine this issue closely, with a key emphasis on the fairness and adequacy of social protection. Welfare reform and the role it will leave for food banks should be examined by the Inquiry in terms of *responsibility* and be guided by the question of whose responsibility it is to protect people from hunger.

## Annex 1

Content analysis of the 25 interviews undertaken as part of this research shows that:

- 64 per cent of all respondents talked about the impact of welfare reform or welfare processes on demand.
- 83 per cent of food bank managers interviewed talked about the impact of welfare reform or welfare processes on demand.
- 50 per cent of food bank managers interviewed were concerned about the adequacy of local welfare assistance schemes in their area and the impact this would have on demand for food banks.
- 33 per cent of food bank managers interviewed were concerned that their projects may be incorporated within local welfare assistance schemes.
- 58 per cent of food bank managers interviewed were concerned about the impact that welfare reform was having on demand.
- 58 per cent of food bank managers interviewed were concerned about the impact that welfare processes (sanctioning decisions and length, delays in payment) were having on demand.

## Annex 2

Further reading:

Lambie, H. (2011) *The Trussell Trust Foodbank Network: Exploring the Growth of Foodbanks Across the UK*, SURGE (University of Coventry), available at [http://www.trusselltrust.org/resources/documents/Our%20work/Lambie-\(2011\)-The-Trussell-Trust-Foodbank-Network---Exploring-the-Growth-of-Foodbanks-Across-the-UK.pdf](http://www.trusselltrust.org/resources/documents/Our%20work/Lambie-(2011)-The-Trussell-Trust-Foodbank-Network---Exploring-the-Growth-of-Foodbanks-Across-the-UK.pdf)

Lambie-Mumford, H. (2013) “‘Every Town Should Have One’: Emergency Food Banking in the UK”, *Journal of Social Policy*, 429(1), 73-89.

Lambie-Mumford, H., D. Crossley, E. Jensen, M. Verbeke, E. Dowler (2014) *Household Food Security: A Review of Food Aid*, report to Defra, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/food-aid-research-report>



The  
University  
Of  
Sheffield.

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Research and writing by Hannah Lambie-Mumford  
([h.lambie-mumford@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:h.lambie-mumford@sheffield.ac.uk))

Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute  
Interdisciplinary Centre of the Social Sciences  
219 Portobello  
Sheffield S1 4DP

T: +44 (0)114 222 8346  
E: [speri@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:speri@sheffield.ac.uk)