

## **Food banks and their use in Devon and the UK**

Report of the Chief Officer for Communities, Public Health, Environment and Prosperity

### **1. Introduction**

This report is intended to provide Members a short summary of the local and national context around food banks and how they operate; alongside a summary of recent academic and policy research around why people are referred to and utilise food banks today.

The causes behind people accessing food banks are various and complex, as are the wider causes of hunger and poverty. The Trussell Trust are the largest food bank network both in the UK and within Devon and their research and local experiences have significantly contributed to this report, given their expertise and leadership in this area.

### **2. Food bank use**

Food banks generally operate on a model of providing emergency supplies for a household able to sustain a three-day period only, following a referral from a third party. Whilst food banks operate in different ways, many do not support more than three referrals per household in a calendar year.

Most food banks rely on individual donations via a variety of sources including churches, schools and businesses though some have arrangements with local producers too. Organisations collect centrally in shops or businesses, often linked closely to appeals for particular stock as a result of demand or shortages. Many food banks are also able to provide essentials such as toiletries, sanitary products, nappies and pet food. For many food banks, religious festivals are often key times for donations given the link to schools and places of worship able to collect donations.

Donations are required to be collected and sorted by food banks, requiring both suitable transport, space and volunteers. The ability to store food and supplies appropriately and at scale is particularly important for larger food banks. Referrals come from a range of sources agreed by each food bank locally. These will range from doctors, social workers and teachers, to local charities. Each will follow an assessment of needs and in most cases includes the sharing of information and in many cases wider signposting for support and advice. Organisations like the Trussell Trust use the information collected to monitor local use and eligibility alongside the compilation of data around the reasons that people are using their service.

Over the last 12 months, the Trussell Trust alone provided a 1.6 million food parcels, a 19% increase on the previous year. The Trust has 427 Food banks in the UK, alongside 1200 distribution centres.

### **3. Food banks in Devon**

As across the UK, the network of Food banks in Devon is varied and constantly evolving to meet changes in demand and need. The Trussell Trust runs 18 of the major 30+ food banks in Devon based mainly within its market towns. However, alongside these are an array of both collection and distribution points some linking to a network of smaller, informal groups

and arrangements. Some rural churches for example informally collect and distribute parcels in their local community.

Exeter Food bank remains the largest in Devon distributing around two tonnes of food each week. Donations via supermarkets remain the key source of food and supplies, though a growing network of businesses and organisations, including DCC staff, is increasingly important to the charity. The food bank has over 200 volunteers. When shortages in particular foods are identified, there is agility in the response for donations of priority items usually prompted via social media. As a result, the charity rarely has to purchase specific items.

Young people in Exeter (participating in the National Citizenship Scheme) worked with Sainsburys to develop a simple flagging system to identify products for shoppers that were particularly needed by local foodbanks, which was adopted in its stores nationally. A number of DCC Members provided funding for a new vehicle for Exeter Foodbank to use to collect and distribute items. In addition, several Member Locality Fund grants have been provided to food banks across the County.

#### **4. When do people use Food banks?**

In recent years a range of evidence has been gathered around the reasons that people are using Food banks in the UK. These causes are often complex and the subject of political debate.

The recent "[State of Hunger](#)" report, commissioned by the Trussell Trust and conducted by Heriot-Watt University, provides independent research into hunger in the UK. It reveals the average weekly income of people at food banks is only around £50 after paying rent, and almost one in five have no money coming in at all in the month before being referred for emergency food. Groups more likely to access food banks are those with long term health conditions or disability, lone parents and families with three or more children. Significant and detrimental life events such as job loss or bereavement also play a significant factor in food bank referrals.

The report identifies three drivers that push people into hunger and poverty; these are problems with the benefits system; ill health and challenging life experiences; and a lack of local support. Problems with benefits highlighted by the research include a reduction in the value of benefit payments, being turned down for disability benefits, being sanctioned, and delays in payments including the initial five-week wait for Universal Credit.

The DWP have provided significant mitigation to these impacts (having reduced the wait period from six to five weeks) including providing advance payments to bridge the five-week waiting period. Advance payments allow claimants to borrow up to 100 per cent of the amount that they are entitled to in their first payment and most claimants who use advance payments take out 100 per cent of their entitlement. However, this money is a loan (albeit interest free), which must be repaid through automatic deductions from subsequent Universal Credit payments. Inevitably, deductions to subsequent payments sees some claimants fall into further hardships often for many months.

Although the body of evidence is growing, it is difficult to fully understand what is driving the steep rise in food bank use. There is good evidence to indicate that changes to the benefit system have played a significant part, along with low income and debt. However, it is also possible that food banks are meeting demand that existed before they arrived, which may have been met by other means. It is also possible that growing awareness is fuelling demand; for example, staff at Job Centres now signpost people to food banks. Several factors may be responsible for the overall increase.

Alongside personal impacts on claimants, a range of voluntary, community sector (including food banks) and statutory organisations are also placed under greater burden particularly those providing wider welfare and accommodation support.

## **5. Why are people referred to Food banks?**

Like many food banks and wider food charities, Trussell Trust are now seeking to address the underlying causes of hunger and poverty in the UK, rather than to simply develop a bigger and more resilient food bank network. There are many definitions of poverty both relative and absolute, though destitution or extreme poverty (those lacking the most vital essentials, including food) perhaps best describes people in society most likely to be the subject of a food bank referral. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation recently reported that “over 1.5 million people faced destitution in the UK at some point in 2017, 68% of whom were UK-born without ‘complex’ needs”. Increasingly food bank referrals are for those in work but with low-wages, or with little security around regular working patterns or hours in order to cover essential bills.

As described, people will be referred to food banks and use food banks for a range of reasons and the Trussell Trust are undertaking long term research to explore this as outlined within its recent *State of Hunger* report. Many contributors to this report outline food poverty and food insecurity being key challenges to understand and tackle, but overall poverty is recognised as the key issue that needs to be addressed... “We’ve thought a lot about the movement towards food poverty, fuel poverty, period poverty and other sorts of poverties, and we’re very clear that we would say its just poverty [...] If you say the problem is food poverty or hunger then the solution that that points to is to give people food. Whereas, if you say the problem is poverty, then the solution is obviously to give people income.”

## **6. Role of Local Government**

Although many Local Authorities have provided discretionary funding for food banks in their area since they started to open in the early 00’s, this is a very mixed picture, and this funding has reduced significantly in recent years. Recent guidance published from the Lawyers in Local Government (LLG) association outlined that the provision of food banks is not a Local Authority function or duty.

Most food banks remain independent charities and wish to remain so. Central government, notably DWP, do not identify food banks as part of the welfare system and do not consider the funding of food banks as appropriate use of public funds.

## **7. Conclusion**

For many people, the existence of food banks (often including those who run and volunteer within them) reflects a paradox within a modern and relatively affluent society.

Nevertheless, food banks have over the last twenty years, become a valuable and often vital addition to the lives of people and communities across Devon and the UK. Whilst users often experience stigma as a result of the circumstances that may prompt a food bank referral, most will receive a warm welcome alongside much needed supplies. Alongside this, many food banks will offer wider support and referrals to other local agencies and charities.

Communities and voluntary sector organisations in Devon, supported by millions of pounds of donations from individuals with thousands of hours in volunteer time, have developed a vibrant and flexible network of food banks. Time will tell how this will continue to respond to

evolving demands and how any root causes are addressed by successive societal, economic and political cycles.

Dr Virginia Pearson  
Chief Officer for Communities, Public Health, Environment and Prosperity

**Electoral Divisions: All**

Cabinet Member for Community, Public Health, Transportation and Environmental Services:  
Councillor Roger Croad

Local Government Act 1972: List of Background Papers

Contact for enquiries: Simon Kitchen

Room No: County Hall, Exeter. EX2 4QD

Tel No: 01392 383000

Background Paper	Date	File Ref.
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