

Written evidence presented to the APPG on Ending the Need for Foodbanks

Healthy Living Lab at Northumbria University

Northumbria University's [Healthy Living Lab](#) is one of the leading research groups in the UK focusing on issues relating to public health and food poverty in disadvantaged social groups and under-represented individuals and communities. Areas of focus include school and community breakfast clubs, school meals, holiday activity and food programmes and holiday hunger. The lab brings together over twenty academic colleagues that develop, inform and evaluate community and school-based interventions through delivery of applied research, training and consultancy. Expertise is drawn from across disciplines including psychology, sociology, nutritional science, computer sciences, public health and sport to research and address public health issues in a holistic way. The Lab works closely with the government, schools, charities and the catering industry to help bridge the gap between scientific research findings, policy and practice.

Our findings have made a difference at both a national and personal level and have shown the importance of programmes which support some of our most disadvantaged children, parents and communities. Research from the Healthy Living Lab has led to a national shift in school breakfast programmes and has directly influenced the development and expansion of the Department for Education's [Holiday Activities and Food programme](#) in England.

We recently conducted an NIHR funded pilot study which, following the Covid-19 lockdown, measured food insecurity in five wards in local authority area located in the North East of England to inform the future provision of food aid.

The research was undertaken in the local authority area of Redcar & Cleveland. Redcar & Cleveland has a population of 135,200 and covers 24,490 hectares of varied geography – a mixture of semi-urban deprived wards in the west, the seaside town of Redcar in the middle, rural villages in the east and the market town of Guisborough to the south. This unique geography presents a broad range of diverse and challenging elements, especially in terms of service provision. The borough also has significant social and economic issues which contribute to local health inequalities. However, the area also has significant community and physical assets. The research was undertaken in five socio-economically diverse wards in Redcar & Cleveland (Grangetown, Loftus, Guisborough, Belmont and Hutton),

The findings our research are summarised in this video:

<https://vimeo.com/728057774>

In response to your call for written submissions to the APPG on Ending the Need for Food Banks, we are pleased to share with you some of the findings of the qualitative study we conducted for the above study. We interviewed 14 participants who are involved in the developing, delivering, funding and referring people to food aid services in the five wards covered by the study. The aim of the qualitative study was to gather data on food aid provision and perceptions and similarities and

differences in food aid provision and food security risks in the five wards included in this study. We have included excerpts from our findings in response to the questions you have asked when asking for contributions to the APPG.

- [Effective crisis support](#)

Before organisations can even begin to provide effective support for those in need in their community, there are a number of factors that organisations need to consider in determining where to locate their services. Although they may be aware of or perceive that there is need for support, our findings suggest that the practicalities of opening and operating a foodbank are much more nuanced: the geography of the area played an important part in determining where to locate a foodbank, user's ability to get to it were equally important, as was the building itself. The location of referral organisations was also important, both in terms of food bank users' ability to obtain a referral and referral organisations' willingness to travel to foodbanks to collect and deliver food aid to people where this model of delivery was in place.

Geography and travel and buildings

Redcar & Cleveland covers a large geographic area with urban and rural areas, including small villages in outlying rural areas. Choosing a suitable location for services was heavily influenced by the geography of the area. People's ability to access public transport to get to foodbanks was another important factor. When a foodbank located in one part of the borough had to close, the foodbank provider tried to find an alternative location in a part of the borough that served as a transport hub, meaning more people would be able to access help. However, even if foodbanks were located on bus routes, the cost of bus fares was prohibitive. A participant told researchers of an instance where a person had walked 10 miles to access help. Another told us how they had asked the local bus company to provide free bus tickets to enable people to at least get home after visiting the foodbank. Regrettably, this request had been declined. As an alternative, foodbanks encouraged people to get lifts from family members or friends or foodbank staff/volunteers would ask a referral agency if they could deliver a food parcel to someone. However, researchers were told there was also a reluctance on behalf of referral agencies to travel too far to collect parcels for people. In addition, the ability of people to access referral agencies was also a factor that was taken into account when determining the location of a foodbank. A participant told researchers that a foodbank in a rural area had failed not only because people did not want or were unable to travel to it, but also because there were no referral agencies in the area. This was an important factor as people had to visit a referral agency to obtain a voucher before visiting the foodbank to collect food.

"(Name of place) never worked, there was no agencies up there, nobody would go to it, and it involved travelling and, you know" (P3)

Buildings

Once an appropriate, accessible location had been identified, finding a suitable building and a suitable location within a building for a foodbank were important factors in determining where to locate services. Researchers were told that a foodbank located in one part of the borough had closed when its location inside a non-church building was changed. People using the foodbank had to walk through a community café where other members of the community could see them. As a result, people stopped using the foodbank and the difficult decision to close it was made and an alternative venue was sought. However, it had not been possible to find a building in the same village, so another location had to be found. An alternative village had been chosen because it served as local a transport hub. However, it had not been possible to find a suitable building.

Instead, they took up the offer from a church in another village, and contrary to expectations, this location had worked. A number of foodbanks were located in church buildings or had started off in church buildings. In addition to being free of charge, this had a number of advantages, including a ready and willing supply of volunteers. However, in one ward, although the foodbank was operated by a number of Christian faith based churches, its location in a church hall was not because it was a church per se, but because the church hall was in the centre of town and was therefore easily accessible. As the church hall was used for other events, such as craft fairs, the church hall was regarded as a community hub.

“Yeah, I think the church really, the religious group, the Methodist church was always used for a lot of activities in XXXX (Name of area) anyway, which included, you know, just for people to go... harvest festival, different markets inside the hall, craft markets or whatever. So it had always been used, even prior to food bank days, as a hall that was used as a, like, community centre almost, a bit similar, and therefore when the, the food bank issues come up or the need for, to help people more, it, it seemed the, the right location” (P9)

A participant from a non-faith based foodbank organisation that had been established in response to the Covid pandemic was initially based in a former rectory but had to relocate when the building was being refurbished. Fortunately, a building in the community became available. This had several advantages including ease of access for people, but it also meant that a wider range of support could be provided from the new premises. In addition, when the organisation providing the foodbank service became a Community Interest Company, income from hiring out space for functions and other earned income was used to support the foodbank.

The role of food banks

We asked participants about the work that they do and how they do it. We identified six sub-themes including how people find out about the service and, where appropriate, how food aid users verifying their need to access food aid. Additional sub-themes included the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on referral routes to support, the number of times a person/family could receive help and support via a foodbank and the content of food parcels. However, it was apparent that the people visiting food banks received more than just food, and additional sub-themes identified in interviews related to the emotional support provided by organisations and sign-posting people to other sources of help. A final theme of community shops/eco shops/community groceries was also identified.

How people find out about foodbanks, verification of need and impact of Covid on referral routes

For church-based and foodbanks, regardless of whether they were part of a larger network or not, a more formal structures was in place whereby people were referred to the organisation by a third party who issued a voucher. One organisation had a network of more than 120 organisations that could refer people to them for support. However, if somebody visited the foodbank without a formal referral or voucher, they would be helped and supported, but may be asked to either obtain a voucher from a referral organisation or ask the jobcentre to call the foodbank to confirm that they had made a benefit claim. Alternatively, the foodbank might contact a referral organisation directly, such as their doctor, social worker, or the council’s housing department to verify the person’s situation.

When lockdown measures were first introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic, the way services delivered by established foodbanks changed. Volunteers provided phone-based support, people were able to self-refer themselves for help and food parcels were delivered to people's homes. However, because all services, including referral organisations were operating with very little or no face-to-face interaction with clients, one participant suggested that people who may have needed support slipped through the net and may not have been referred to a foodbank.

A participant from a foodbank that was part of a network of foodbanks explained that some time ago, the network to which their organisation belonged had developed an "e-referral" system. The aim of this system was to reduce administration and the need for a person to visit a referral organisation to receive a paper copy of a voucher. Instead, a person seeking help could receive an E-voucher by calling a referral organisation who would log the person's details in a central database. The nearest networked foodbank that a person could visit to collect a parcel of food received an electronic notification and the person would then be given a code to give to the volunteers in the foodbank. If the code was lost or forgotten, confirmation of the referral could be obtained by searching for the individual's name on the database. Prior to the pandemic, the system had not been widely used because foodbanks did not have the necessary digital infrastructure. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the parent charitable organisation provided foodbanks with tablets and free wifi to enable them to utilise the e-referral system. The new system had a number of advantages, and it was hoped that the free wi-fi would continue to be made available post-pandemic.

Independent organisations adopted a more informal approach to supporting vulnerable people. One organisation which was set up in response to the Covid-19 pandemic circulated a printed leaflet to houses within the community. The leaflet included a mobile telephone number for people to call, and volunteers took turns in answering calls seven days a week between 9 am and 6 pm. Food was stored in a central location and volunteers packed food parcels which were then collected by another volunteer and delivered to people at home. This organisation continues to operate and knowledge of the organisation's existence has spread largely by word of mouth in the community and amongst professionals, including GP surgeries, social prescribers and teachers who now contact the team of volunteers and ask for help for individuals.

Content of food parcels and number of times food parcels are supplied

Staff and/or volunteers working in foodbanks made up food parcels to ensure that the parcel contained a nutritionally balanced diet. Where possible, customers were given some choice in relation to the content of their food parcel, either because non-standard items of food had been donated and needed to be used or to accommodate dietary requirements. The amount of food provided in food parcels varied according to the number of people in the household. One participant explained that the requirements of one of their funders was to monitor service provision based on the number of meals provided rather than counting the number of items contained in food parcels.

Some foodbanks placed a limit on the number of times a person or family could be helped, whilst others did not set a limit and were happy to help a person/family as long as there was a need. Organisations that did set a limit on the number of times people could be helped explained that that this was because the foodbank was there to support people in crisis. One organisation for example, provided one parcel a week for three consecutive weeks in a 12-month period as this number of food parcels would provide a person/family with enough food whilst they waited for a benefits claim to be processed.

“you can access that three times, then that would get you through a six week wait in the benefit line.” (P9)

However, whilst there was a notional limit on the number of times a person could be helped, organisations adopted a very flexible approach, and many would provide extra help. However, they did not want people to become dependent on receiving food aid. If necessary, further verification would be sought to confirm that the need still existed, and this was done in consultation with referral organisations. However, in some instances, decisions had to be made to withdraw support from people, partly to reduce dependency and partly to ensure that limited resources could be shared.

Emotional support (Need alternative/additional quotes)

Whilst providing practical support in the form of food aid was the main objective of many of the organisations participants represented, it was clear that they also provided a great deal of emotional support to people who walked through the door. People visiting a foodbank for help were often very distraught. Foodbank volunteers tried to provide a safe space where people were given the time and space to just talk without being rushed or judged. As a result, people would ‘open up’ and tell their story.

“So it is a lot more than just food, you know, and for a lot of people, what makes me feel happy when I leave is... the fact that they’ve been able to sit and have somebody listen to them, when we’re able to do that. We’re, we’re still getting round it, you know, they’ll sit and, they’ll stand and chat at the door, or they’ll sit if we can let them sit down. They just want people to give them a bit of time, you know, the food is a brilliant help for them, but so is the, you know, the listening...”(P3)

Participants told researchers how they helped people in extreme circumstances, including for example people who had severe mental health problems:

“The number of people with mental health problems that come and tell us, you know, they talk to us about them, the men talk to us about them... there was a man I hadn't seen on the Saturday and I said to him 'oh we missed you yesterday', he said 'I know, I've been really down and depressed and it's the first time our lass said to me... get yourself out and get to that club because you need...', he said, 'and it was what I needed', he needed the banter of the men, you know...”(P15)

During the Covid-19 pandemic when lockdown measures were first in place, volunteers had not been able to provide this emotional support. When lockdown measures were eased and volunteers were able to engage with people on the doorstep of the foodbank premises, although welcome, this prevented them from building trust and rapport with people.

Signposting to other services and other non-food aid

Participants told researchers that they had good working relationships with organisations such as the Citizens Advice Bureau and kept in contact with them or referred people to them for additional support, an example of which included the provision of fuel cards. A successful application for Big Lottery funding meant that an advice worker had been employed by one organisation. The advice worker visited a number of foodbanks in Redcar & Cleveland and worked with people to support them in addressing the underlying reasons that resulted in them needing the services of a foodbank.

Additional practical help and support was available, particularly from foodbanks in the area covered by the study that were part of a nationwide network of foodbanks. These organisations could help people get free sim cards and had access to grant funding that was used to buy white goods. A local supermarket provided bedding and some soft furnishings which were stored in a central warehouse in Redcar & Cleveland:

“we look after a project called New Start, and New Start is when somebody might be moved say, domestic violence, and they have very little with them, they get somewhere to live. So we provide, at the moment, it’s all brand-new bedding and kitchen essentials for people, and we also have access to a, a grant that we can get, up to £150, and I have a really good contact – a gentleman that has a business and he sells reconditioned white goods with six months warranty, or he can get us new, new goods for under £150, yeah, it’s amazing.” (P3)

Community shops/eco shops/community groceries and community cafes

In addition to providing food parcels, emotional support and signposting people to other organisations for help and advice, some organisations set up or supported the establishment of shops where surplus donated food or food purchased from Fareshare was sold. Members paid a membership fee and then were able, depending on the approach adopted by the organisation, to either buy a fixed number of items or buy items to the value of a specified amount of money for £2.00 - £3.00. These shops were referred to as either eco shops, community shops or community groceries.

The term community shop tended to be used by participants more in relation to shops that were linked to foodbanks, where, once the immediate crisis had passed, foodbank clients were referred on to the community shop as a follow-on service from accessing food in a crisis. However, one organisation had been opened up its membership base to include to include anybody who was “struggling” (P3) rather than just people who had used the foodbank.

When the term eco-shop was used, this tended to be in the context of sustainability and reducing food waste. A participant suggested that “eco-shops” were quite “trendy” (P2) at the moment, and that a number of schools were using this approach to help vulnerable families.

A third term of “community grocery” was also used to describe a new iteration of the community shop model. A participant advised that a faith-based organisation that previously had no connection or link to the area had set up a community grocery store in a ward in Redcar & Cleveland ward that was out with the remit of this study. Unlike the community shop linked to the foodbank where membership was open to people who were struggling, membership of the community grocery was open to anybody in the community. This had been an unexpected development in the food aid landscape in the borough, and the motivation to make membership open to all was not clear:

It was considered that being able to choose items rather than being given a parcel of food was more socially acceptable and less stigmatising than using a foodbank:

“it’s fantastic how they do it because it’s not got a stigma attached to it. They’re desperately trying not to have it as a stigma attached to it...” (P2)

One organisation had set up a self-funding community café which was initially located in the same building as a foodbank, but in another part of the borough out with the wards included in our study. The café was open to members of the public, who, in addition to purchasing food and drink for themselves could pay for a meal or drink for somebody who was in need. When the community café

had first been opened, a system had been in place where tickets were pinned to a wall and a person could take a ticket to get a meal and/or a drink. However, the system was changed as it was felt that a small number of people were abusing the system, potentially preventing others from using it. The café was entirely self-funded, and it was thought that its location in the foodbank worked well. The large tables in the café promoted social interaction and by and large, it was not possible to distinguish people who were using the foodbank from paying customers. However, once bags of food were brought to the table, it was then possible to identify food bank customers:

“We were quite unique because we had the food bank running alongside a café that was open to the public and everybody said ‘how on earth does that work?’, I said ‘it just does’, because a lot of the paying customers don’t realise the clients until the bags appear at the end so it works quite well and the food bank clients don’t feel threatened by it and they quite enjoyed it, and it was quite an interesting set up – because of being in a church the tables were actually quite big ones so more people had to sit round and often they would get chatting and it was quite good but it, it seems to be working really well ...” (P3)

The effectiveness of alternatives to providing emergency food

We asked participants how they considered food aid should be delivered in the future. Participants considered that food banks should not be needed and should be closed and that underlying causes of food poverty should be addressed, people should be helped to ensure their income was maximised. In the meantime, until those issues were resolved, participants envisioned a greater role for community shops and suggested that food-aid provision across the borough could be more co-ordinated to prevent duplication.

Closing foodbanks and addressing the underlying causes of food poverty

When asked about the future of food aid provision, participants said their ultimate objective was to close all food banks rather than opening new ones. However, it was suggested that this objective would not be achieved any time soon. Moreover, it was suggested that foodbanks had become such an established and institutionalised part of the food poverty landscape, it would be difficult to close them:

“But has it become so institutionalised now that it’s not possible to reverse that? And obviously the Trussell Trust and IFAN are doing a lot of work now around how do we, or how do they almost make themselves redundant but it, how realistic is that now? I don’t know” (P5)

A number of participants regretted that food poverty and food aid were necessary in what was one of the richest countries in the world and considered that the structural changes that had seen an increase in the number of food banks and need for food aid was politically motivated. It was further suggested that the basic, underlying cause of the need for food aid was that people simply did not have enough household income and that the resources spent on mitigating the effects of current government policy could be better used to add value to government policies. If action were not taken to address the underlying issue of people not having enough money to live, one participant suggested that food poverty and food insecurity would increase dramatically in the future:

Income maximisation and impact of introduction and removal of £20 per week Universal Credit uplift

In recognition that the people needed to visit foodbanks because they did not have enough money to live, one participant gave an example of practices adopted in another local authority area where all food aid providers were encouraged to refer users to the authority's welfare rights team to undergo a "financial resilience check". In addition to receiving debt advice, an assessment was made to ensure they were claiming and receiving all of the benefits they were entitled to. This had resulted in £millions of unclaimed benefits across the local authority area. One participant explained that their organisation had received lottery funding to employ a specialist member of staff for the next three years to provide benefits advice and guidance to food bank users.

Some participants told researchers that during the Covid-19 pandemic that demand for services from people who were known to food aid providers may have fallen because they had received an additional £20 per week/£80 per month uplift in their universal credit payment:

"But what was interesting was, we never saw a lot of our regulars during that lockdown, which was very surprising – they seemed to disappear. But now, 'cause I've obviously then realised they were getting the extra money with the universal credit, that's probably why." (P3)

The withdrawal of the additional £80 per month

uplift had had an immediate impact on the demand for food aid:

"You know, they predicted when the £20 universal credit money was removed it would start having a knock-on effect with food banks and its started – we've seen a, a sudden increase. Since they announced the, the money was going to be withdrawn, at first, I thought oh it's not happening, but suddenly this last couple of weeks, quite a... probably 2/3rds of our centres have got really busy."(P3)

It was further considered that people were already struggling to meet household bills and the anticipated rise in energy prices accompanied by rising food costs would see a further increase in demand for services:

Community shops

At a more practical level, some participants envisioned a greater role in the food aid landscape for community shops.

"...and maybe that is the way forward, from food banks changing to going into more of these membership shops, groups, that can provide food like this." (P3)

Another participant also said that they hoped to link eco-shops with credit unions, enabling people to access food through weekly membership fees, but they would also be able to start saving money:

"So what, what we're trying to do is ...something called a food savers programme ... which is coupling up food pantries, eco shops and things like that with credit unions and, and so, if people say, for example, pay £3 for their shopping, £2 of that will go to the fair share stuff and, and running the shop, and £1 of it will go into a, an account with the credit union for those people so that they're actually starting to save as well." (P1)

Co-ordinating food aid

It was suggested that a lot of food aid services were informally co-ordinated across the borough and food was shared between foodbanks. People who sought help were referred to other food aid providers as appropriate. However, it was hoped that organisations providing food aid across Redcar & Cleveland could work together to prevent duplication of services. One organisation was endeavouring to collate information that would show what type of provision was available in the area and where the gaps were.

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