



# ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

## Food Poverty Scoping Exercise

‘Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of himself and his family, including food.’

Article 25, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

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The Belfast Food Network (BFN) is a founding member of the pioneering Sustainable Food Cities Network (SFC). SFC is an alliance of public, private, community and voluntary sector organisations that believe wholeheartedly in the power of food as a vehicle for driving positive change. Over 40 cities across the UK and Ireland have joined in the first year.

The rapidly growing BFN was established in March 2014 to work with partners to:

- Promote a greater appreciation of the role and importance of healthy and sustainable food – fresh, local, seasonal – amongst the public, policy-makers and institutions.
- Inspire key organisations to work individually and together to link initiatives around sustainable food to drive positive social, economic and environmental change.
- Develop a broad cross-sector partnership to involve public sector bodies, the community and voluntary sector and local businesses, which will work together to establish a successful Sustainable Food City in Belfast.

The Belfast Food Network commissioned this research with funding from the Public Health Agency. The research was carried out by Jenny McCurry, who also wrote the report, on behalf of Advice NI. We would like to thank Dr Elizabeth Mitchell, Institute of Public Health in Ireland, and the BFN Food Poverty Working Group (BFN/FPWG) for their involvement in the project. In addition, thanks are due to Kevin Higgins, Head of Policy, Advice NI, and Kerry Melville, Co-ordinator, BFN, for their contributions, and to Ignacio Fidalgo, BFN, for design of this report and the Executive Summary Infographic.



Advice NI is the umbrella organisation for the independent advice sector in Northern Ireland. Its mission is to develop an independent advice sector that provides the best possible advice to those who need it most. Advisers help people with over 250,000 enquiries per year, with the majority being social security and debt related. In 2013, Advice NI launched a report, '*Turning the Tide*', written by Jenny McCurry, which highlighted the rapid increase in the numbers of people seeking help from emergency food providers and called for action to address the root causes of hunger in NI.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Advice NI (2013) *Turning the Tide: The Growth of Food Banks in Northern Ireland*

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## Introduction

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Food can do much more than satisfy hunger. It plays a key role in improving health, tackling social exclusion, building community, creating jobs and promoting a sense of dignity and self-worth.

Food banks provide a much needed emergency response in crisis situations. However, the proliferation of food banks suggests that there is something fundamentally wrong with the systems we have in place to protect vulnerable people, and raises key questions about the kind of society that we want to live in.

***‘Food banks do good work, but they identify that there is a problem with the structures and systems in place to protect vulnerable people. We don’t want a society in which food banks are normal, because that is what has happened in America and Canada. People accept it as a normal part of welfare provision, but it shouldn’t exist at all.’***

(Research Participant)

The ‘Enough is Enough’ project aims to harness the expertise of health and social care professionals, city councillors, advice workers, food banks, community and faith

based organisations and strategic bodies across Belfast to collectively address the issue of food poverty. This scoping study lays the foundation for developing an action plan to tackle food poverty in Belfast in collaboration with the community, voluntary and statutory sectors.

In March 2015, over 80 people, representing food banks, churches, advice services, community organisations, statutory agencies and universities attended the *Enough is Enough* launch event in City Church, Belfast to examine the rising demand for emergency food across the city. The vibrant discussion established that this diverse group is united around a common goal: to ensure that all citizens of Belfast have access to a healthy and nutritious diet in socially acceptable ways.

The right to food was first laid out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. The Right to an Adequate Diet is also enshrined in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The UK has signed and ratified this covenant, obliging it *'to recognise the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing'*.

At the event, Pete Ritchie of Nourish Scotland challenged the delegates to imagine a world in which the right to education was viewed in the same way as the right to food. Would we stop children from going to school if their parents couldn't afford to pay? Would we set up 'education banks' where they could receive tutoring from volunteers in lieu of attending schools? This scenario would be considered outrageous in a developed, affluent country such as our own. The analogy highlights the staggering injustice that in a country where there is more than enough food for all, increasing numbers of people are in need of food parcels.



## Aims and Methods

### Aims



Collate available data on the use of food banks and other forms of food support in Belfast.



Explore the reasons behind the rising use of food banks and other forms of food support in Belfast.



Identify initiatives in Belfast that tackle food poverty including food banks, community gardens, meal clubs, allotments, budgeting and cooking classes



Identify gaps in current service provision and highlight opportunities for further development.



Provide the foundation for the development of a collaborative city wide response to food poverty.

### Methods



**100** people participated in our survey. Respondents included food bank users, co-ordinators, advice workers, community development officers and project managers.



**26** telephone interviews were carried out with key stakeholders, including city councillors and a GP, in order to explore the issues in more depth.



We received an additional written response from a city councillor.



**6** short face-to-face interviews with retired men at a Men's Shed project.

The research was carried out between mid-January and mid-March 2015.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Thank you to Women's Support Network who collected the responses from food bank clients on our behalf, and to the coordinator and members at Men's Shed in North Belfast (Rejuvenate Project).

## What is already known?

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### What is food poverty?

Food poverty can be defined as the *'inability to access a nutritionally adequate diet and the related impacts on health, culture and social participation'*.<sup>3</sup> It may be caused by various and often inter-related factors such as low income, lack of transport to affordable shops or lack of information and skills to prepare healthy meals. It can also involve barriers such as a lack of cooking equipment or fuel to prepare food. Tackling food poverty is not just about eradicating hunger, but ensuring that everyone is able to access a healthy diet.

The key driver of food poverty is the lack of money to purchase, cook and store the foods which make up a balanced diet.<sup>4</sup> Although education and skills development may have an important role to play, the wider structural causes of food poverty must be acknowledged if strategies to address it are to be properly effective.

### Food and health

There are clear links between a healthy diet and the avoidance of premature mortality and life-limiting illnesses. A nutritionally adequate diet is crucial for health at all stages of the life cycle, but it is particularly important for pregnant women and young children. Poor nutrition in the early stages of life can increase susceptibility to ill-health in later years.<sup>5</sup>

### Policy Framework

There is no clear policy framework for tackling food poverty in Northern Ireland. However, *Making Life Better* is a 10 year public health strategic framework (2013 – 2023) aiming to improve the health and wellbeing of people in Northern Ireland. A key value underpinning the strategy is that *'all citizens should have the right to the highest attainable standard of health'*, as enshrined in the World Health Organisation (WHO) Constitution and in international and regional human rights treaties.<sup>6</sup> It adopts a 'whole system' approach to health as an issue which requires joined up working across departments. It also highlights the importance of forming local partnerships aiming to *'increase access to healthy foods and reduce the risk of*

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<sup>3</sup> Friel, S. and Conlon, C. (2004) *Summary of Food Poverty and Policy*, p. 1

<sup>4</sup> Dowler, L. (30.06.2014) *Submission to the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty in Britain*, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Dowler, L. (2003) 'Food and Poverty: Insights from the 'North'', *Development Policy Review*, vol. 21. pp. 569 - 580

<sup>6</sup> Such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, including General Comment No 15 (2013), Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, DHSSPSNI (June 2014) *Making Life Better: Outcome 18*, p. 37

*obesity and malnourishment in a way that promotes dignity, builds health and community and tackles inequalities at a local level for all ages'.<sup>7</sup>*

## **How is food poverty measured?**

Unlike the government-endorsed measure of fuel poverty,<sup>8</sup> there is no agreed way of measuring food poverty. The All-island Food Poverty Network is currently working to develop a measure of food poverty which could utilise routinely collected data to assess the extent of food poverty in Ireland, North and South.

## **Measuring food poverty in the Republic of Ireland**

A food poverty indicator has been developed based on the EU survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU SILC), carried out by the Central Statistics Office. The Department of Social Protection published research based on SILC data 2004–2010 which found that 10% of people in the Republic of Ireland (almost 450,000) were in food poverty.<sup>9</sup> Food poverty was identified by the presence of three key deprivation factors:

1. Can't afford a meal with meat or vegetarian equivalent every second day.
2. Can't afford a weekly roast dinner or vegetarian equivalent.
3. Missed a meal in the last 2 weeks due to lack of money.

## **Research on food poverty in Northern Ireland**

There is a limited amount of recent research on food poverty in Northern Ireland. Previous research has analysed the impact of changing retail geographies on access to food, with large supermarkets increasingly situated in out-of-town locations that require access to a car.<sup>10</sup> It has also highlighted disparities in the price of basic food items across different types of stores and locations, with large supermarkets tending to offer cheaper prices than local convenience stores.<sup>11</sup> Action research carried out by Footprints Women's Centre in 2004 found that few people in the area<sup>12</sup> had regular access to a car to carry out shopping and most relied on buses or taxis. For those who used public transport, 77% said that the

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<sup>7</sup> DHSSPSNI (June 2014) *Making Life Better: Outcome 18*, p. 111

<sup>8</sup> Fuel poverty has been defined as the need to spend more than 10% of household income on fuel in order to keep the house satisfactorily warm - DSDNI (March 2011) *Warmer Healthier Homes: A Fuel Poverty Strategy for NI*, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Carney, C and Maître, B (2012) 'Constructing a Food Poverty Indicator for Ireland using the Survey on Income and Living Conditions', Social Inclusion Technical Paper No. 3, Dublin: Department of Social Protection

<sup>10</sup> Furey et al. (2001) 'An investigation of the potential existence of 'food deserts' in rural and urban areas of Northern Ireland', *Agriculture and Human Values*, vol. 14, pp. 447 - 457; and Public Health Alliance of Ireland (2007) *Food Poverty: Fact or Fiction*

<sup>11</sup> Furey et al. (2002) 'An investigation into the availability and economic accessibility of food items in rural and urban areas of Northern Ireland', *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, vol. 26(4), p. 313 - 321

<sup>12</sup> The research was carried out in electoral wards of Poleglass, Twinbrook, Kilwee and Colin Glen which are in the top 25% of most deprived wards in Northern Ireland.

transport costs had a direct impact on the amount of fresh fruit and vegetables that they bought.<sup>13</sup>

In 2011, qualitative research explored the shopping and eating habits of four low-income household groups on the island of Ireland, North and South: lone parents; two-parent household families; single males and single older people. Several themes were common across all groups, as limited budgets dictated the need for a careful shopping strategy and the avoidance of possible waste. The focus was on buying food to satisfy hunger, or that children would be sure to eat, rather than experimenting with different recipes. This generally resulted in diets with a high proportion of processed and convenience foods, although the older age group reported purchasing more fresh food and preparing more home-cooked meals. Participants generally saw little cost benefit in preparing meals from scratch as convenience foods (such as frozen pizzas and burgers) were more affordable than fruit and vegetables.<sup>14</sup>

## Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion in Northern Ireland

Joseph Rowntree Foundation (March 2014)<sup>15</sup>



As highlighted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2012, the move from Disability Living Allowance to Personal Independence Payment and the increased requirement on people with disabilities to seek work will have a greater impact on NI than the rest of UK, due to the larger proportion of people with disabilities.<sup>16</sup>

In 2014, 27% of workers in Northern Ireland earned below the living wage, the highest proportion of any region of the UK.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Footprints Women's Centre (2004) *Refresh: Fresh Fruit and Vegetables for All*, Belfast, p. 11

<sup>14</sup> Safefood (2011) *Food on a Low Income: Four Households Tell Their Story*

<sup>15</sup> JRF (2014) Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion in Northern Ireland

<sup>16</sup> JRF (2012) Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion in Northern Ireland

<sup>17</sup> Markit (2014) *Living Wage Research for KPMG*, p. 7. - The Living Wage is currently calculated to be £9.15 per hour for London and £7.85 per hour for the rest of the UK.



## Previous studies show:

### 2009

15% of NI households were at risk of food poverty (Institute of Public Health using data from the Living Costs and Food Survey).

### 2012

29% of people in NI have 'sometimes' or 'often' skimped on food so that others in the household would have enough to eat (Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey of Living Standards in NI, ESRC).

### 2013/14

7% of respondents reported that they had not eaten a substantial meal in the last fortnight due to a lack of money, while 1% stated that they had cut the size of a child's meal because they did not have enough money (NI Health Survey, first results, DHSSPS).

### 2014

The proportion of people in NI who said the cost of food was the most common barrier to eating healthily had increased from 11% in 2010 to 32% in 2014 (Food Standards Agency, Food and You survey).

## The Growth of Food Poverty in the UK

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**In May 2013, Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty reported:<sup>18</sup>**



More than 500,000 people in the UK are dependent on food banks.

- ↑ Unemployment
- ↑ Underemployment
- ↑ Price of food and fuel
- ↑ Benefit cuts and delays
- ↓ Income

The most common reason for requesting help from food banks in the UK is benefit cuts and delays.

**There are now over 420 Trussell Trust food banks in the UK. The total, including independent food banks, is likely to be much greater.**

**⤴ 900,000**

**People across the UK received food from a Trussell Trust food bank in 2013/14.**

More recently, it has been reported that:

- Over 900,000 people across the UK received food from a Trussell Trust food bank in 2013 /14.<sup>19</sup>
- In-depth qualitative research in England and Scotland has stressed the link between food bank use and failures in the benefits system, which now account for the majority of referrals to food banks.<sup>20</sup>
- Food poverty also has a disproportionately severe impact on women, as women provide the majority of childcare and tend to prioritise the dietary needs of their children over their own. Lone parents, 89% of whom are women, are twice as likely to be in poverty as two parent families.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Cooper, N. and Dumbleton, S. (May 2013) *Walking the Breadline: The Scandal of Food Poverty in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain*, Oxfam and Church Action Against Poverty

<sup>19</sup> Trussell Trust (16.04.2014) Press release: record numbers turn to food banks in NI: Life has got worse not better for poorest in 2013/2014

<sup>20</sup> Perry, J. et al. (2014) *Emergency use only: understanding and reducing the use of food banks in the UK*, CPAG, Church Action on Poverty, Oxfam GB and the Trussell Trust

<sup>21</sup> Cooper et al. (2014) *Below the Breadline: The Relentless Rise of Food Poverty in Britain*, Church Action on Poverty, Oxfam GB and the Trussell Trust, p. 8



## The Growth of Food Poverty in Belfast

### Food banks in Belfast

**9**  
banks  
currently  
in  
operation

- Trussell Trust (North Belfast)
- Trussell Trust (South Belfast)
- Trussell Trust (Dundonald, serving parts of East Belfast)
- North Belfast Advice Partnership
- Foodstore @ Cooke (South Belfast)
- Sustain (South Belfast)
- The Larder (East Belfast)
- Storehouse (Greater Belfast)
- Willowfield Parish Church (East Belfast)

**3** banks in  
development

- Falls Community Fellowship (West Belfast)
- Greater Shankill Methodist Circuit
- Greencastle Methodist Church

In 2015, there are at least nine food banks in Belfast, with three more in development. This compares with a total of eight in December 2013 and two in December 2011.<sup>22</sup> We define food banks as organisations which assemble and provide parcels of uncooked food on a *regular* basis.

<sup>22</sup> Advice NI (2013) Turning the Tide: The Growth of Food Banks in Northern Ireland

## Food parcel provision in Belfast

Our research identified 36 organisations in Belfast that are engaged in distributing parcels of uncooked food.<sup>23</sup> These include food banks and charities working in collaboration with food banks, as well as organisations distributing food parcels on an *ad hoc* basis or at particular times of the year.<sup>24</sup> Many advice centres also reported working with their local Salvation Army and St Vincent de Paul to provide support to clients in crisis, including fuel and food.

It is very difficult to assess the true scale of food support in Belfast, as many organisations do not collect data and food banks have different methods of data collection across different time periods. As a result, the total number of food parcels distributed across Belfast each year is likely to be considerably higher than the number distributed by food banks alone. In the absence of comprehensive data on food parcel provision, the figures in this report should be viewed as conservative estimates.

### How many people use food banks in Belfast?

**11,697**

**People in NI received three days' emergency food in 2013 – 2014 from Trussell Trust food banks.**  
(Trussell Trust press release 2014)

**↑ 489 %**

Over the previous year

Over **670** people fed by  
**Trussell Trust South Belfast** since October 2014

Over **2000** people fed by  
**Trussell Trust North Belfast** since July 2013

Over **1663** people fed by  
**Trussell Trust Dundonald** since April 2013

Over **4,338** people fed by  
**5 independent food banks** in 2014

<sup>23</sup> The figures for food bank use in Belfast were obtained directly from food bank coordinators. The figure for independent food bank provision in Belfast in 2014 is calculated by combining the totals provided by 5 independent food banks: Storehouse, The Larder, North Belfast Advice Partnership, Sustain and Foodstore at Cooke. The food banks providing parcels on a larger scale (Storehouse, the Larder, Sustain) gave figures for numbers of people fed, whereas NBAP and Foodstore at Cooke provided numbers of parcels. These parcels could have fed more than one person, therefore the total number of people fed is likely to be more than 4338. Willowfield Parish Church is also not included in this calculation, as they did not provide figures for 2014. They reported distributing approximately 260 food parcels since November 2009. This highlights the difficulty of providing accurate figures on food parcel provision. Our figure should be taken as at the lowest possible number, with the real figure likely to be much higher.

<sup>24</sup> Some advice centres and other organisations (e.g. Surestart) receive a set number of parcels a week from their local food bank which they distribute directly to clients in need. Demand often exceeds this supply, therefore they need to make additional referrals directly to the food bank.

The number of people accessing food banks is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the total number experiencing food poverty. Food bank use is a visible manifestation of extreme food poverty, but many more households have difficulty in accessing an adequately nutritious diet. Our participants highlighted the increasing frequency with which people are presenting to front-line services at a crisis point where they cannot afford to buy food. Thus, initiatives to distribute emergency food have arisen as a response to the increased need observed within local communities.

As an expert on food poverty in the UK has emphasised:

*‘Growing demand may have contributed to more food aid being provided, but there is no systematic evidence that increased food aid provision is causing demand. All available evidence in both the UK and internationally points in the opposite direction, that there is more need and informal food aid providers have been trying to help.’*

Professor Elizabeth Dowler<sup>25</sup>

### **Some comments from food bank clients in Belfast**

Food bank clients were very appreciative of the help they had received and were generally positive about their experience of visiting a food bank.

*‘I visited a food bank four times as I had my brother staying with me and found it hard to support him and my child. They were very helpful and understanding of my situation and helped me in more ways than one.’*

However, there was also a sense of shame or embarrassment at being in a situation where they had to receive food parcels.

*‘I have visited a food bank twice due to experiencing poverty and hardship. Food poverty is a big problem in my area – if you keep the house warm, you might not be able to feed your family (especially with healthy food) at the same time.’*

*‘I feel embarrassed about having to receive food parcels. However, my food parcels were delivered so I didn’t have to physically see anyone.’*

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<sup>25</sup> Dowler, L. (30.06.2014) *Submission to the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty in Britain*, p. 5.

Advice workers stressed that clients rarely asked for a referral to a food bank. To the contrary, it usually took some 'digging around' before they would disclose that they could not feed themselves or their families. As one community worker explained:

*‘The other week I was with a mother of two kids and I asked her if she was eating. She said ‘I’m fine, I’m fine’ but I asked her again ‘Have you eaten?’ ‘It will be alright’, she said. And I know that she is struggling so I offered a voucher to her, and I said go there tomorrow night and get food at the food bank, but she wouldn’t take it and that is just one example’.*

### **Food bank referral mechanisms**

Most food banks use a referral system to ensure that clients are in genuine need and receiving help with the underlying causes of their need for emergency food. Trussell Trust food banks distribute vouchers to local organisations, such as GPs, social workers, charities and advice centres. When professionals identify a client in need, they give them a voucher to exchange for food. The Trussell Trust system limits each client to three consecutive food parcels, each containing three days' worth of emergency food.

Some independent food banks in Belfast have also adopted a referral system with vouchers distributed by partnership organisations, although the limitations vary on the number of parcels that can be received in a given period. Storehouse requires partnership organisations to provide a letter on headed paper specifying what the client needs, such as food, clothes or furniture. Clients can receive up to six food parcels in a six month period.

Food banks actively signpost clients to other organisations where they can receive further assistance, aiming to provide a service which is 'more than food'.

Several food bank co-ordinators highlighted that without a joined-up referral system, clients could be accessing multiple food banks without receiving support for underlying problems.

## Why do people in Belfast need food support?

We asked respondents to give the top reason why clients require food support (n=79).

### Why do people in Belfast need food support?

We asked respondents to give the top reason why clients require food support.



**Other** reasons included homelessness, isolation (particularly among older people), bereavement, mental and physical health problems, and difficulty with budgeting (often due to other factors such as addiction or learning disability).

Our research highlights that the reasons behind the need for food support may be multi-faceted and complex. Although data collection at food banks is an important way of measuring trends and identifying the key drivers of food bank use, a food bank co-ordinator acknowledged its limitations in terms of capturing the nuances of individual situations.

***‘We have to select one of the reasons but it could be a combination of things, for example losing a job because of ill-health - is it because of ill-health or is it because of losing your job?’***

However, there was a consensus among many of our participants that the individual crises which prompted food bank use were often a result of living on a persistently low income which was not enough to cover basic outgoings. Often people on low incomes prioritise the payment of other bills over food.<sup>26</sup>

A recent survey of clients carried out by Storehouse Belfast found that they had an average of just £2.88 per day to spend on food.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Dowler, L. (2003) ‘Food and Poverty: Insights from the ‘North’, Development Policy Review, vol. 21, p. 574

<sup>27</sup> Information obtained from Storehouse. They recently surveyed approximately 150 clients over a 2 month period.

A GP explained that any unexpected household costs could mean the difference between barely managing and running out of money for food:

*‘There was one lady who has two teenage children. She was moved to a house with oil-fired central heating and she didn't have enough cash to fill the tank with oil, so she was using electric heaters a lot. It was obviously very expensive and with two teenage children eating huge amounts, she was basically not eating at all. She was admitted to hospital and a large part of it was that she was just not eating.’*

A food bank co-ordinator explained that as well as experiencing increased demand from families during the school holidays, they also witnessed a rise around the beginning of the school year due to the additional costs incurred:

*‘Over the last two summers, the last week of August and first two weeks of September are very busy with people with young children. That's simply going back to school, buying shoes, schoolbags and uniforms. I know there are grants for things like uniforms but even buying all the wee extras such as lunchboxes, sports equipment and other things, quite often there's families coming for food’.*

Benefit delays, cuts and sanctions were also identified as key drivers of food bank use. Advice workers explained that delays in benefits could take months to resolve, which the provision of emergency food from a food bank could not cover. The Trussell Trust reported that low-income was the primary reason for accessing a food bank in GB prior to welfare reform. Since the reforms were implemented, benefit delays, cuts and sanctions have become the most common reason.<sup>28</sup> A Trussell Trust representative warned that we can expect to see a similar shift in Northern Ireland.

Particular failings were highlighted with the operation of the tax credits system:

*‘Tax credits are causing a massive problem with food banks because of their aggressive policies regarding evidence and information associated with children. A lot of child tax credit has been stopped while they are seeking additional information, but these are benefits to provide clothing and food for children. They have to get food assistance while those issues are trying to get resolved. During the process of resolution you are talking months, not weeks or days, so we see some cases where we have repeat referrals to food banks.’*

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<sup>28</sup> Personal communication with the Trussell Trust

## What is changing in Belfast?

We asked survey respondents to identify any changes they observed in the numbers and types of people requiring food support (n = 72):

**65%** reported a steadily increasing demand for emergency food and referrals to food banks.

**7%** said that they could not establish trends due to a lack of data.

**12,5%** said that they had not seen any changes. Generally due to working with a specific client group or not having been in operation for a sufficient length of time.

**4%** said that they had seen a slight decrease in demand.

**Other** responses included an increasing need for food support among older women caring for grandchildren and encountering more people with debt issues.

### Increasing food bank referrals for working people

Participants identified an increasing need for food bank referrals among people in work, particularly among working families. Although the numbers of people claiming unemployment benefit have been decreasing,<sup>29</sup> the persistence of low wages and zero hour contracts were cited as reasons why many working families were still struggling to cope. On a low wage or insecure working hours, an unexpected cost can be enough to provoke a financial crisis. An advice worker explained:

*‘It just takes one thing to go wrong. We had two families here before Christmas and one of the mothers was working. Her car broke down so that ate her money up and she had no money left to fix the car, to get out to work, to earn money. She was in a vicious circle with no money for food’.*

<sup>29</sup> DETI (18.03.2015) Statistical Press Release, *Labour Market Statistics*: March 2015. It also points out that the number of people claiming unemployment benefit in NI (5.2% in February 2015) remains the highest of the 12 UK regions (the UK rate is 2.4%).

## Increasing need for food banks among families with young children

Several food banks reported feeding significant numbers of children.<sup>30</sup> A Surestart co-ordinator explained that demand for emergency food assistance was rising among families and was concerned that this could have a severely detrimental impact on infants' development.

*‘We are working with very young children. Sometimes you have a situation where people are bottle-feeding, they don’t have formula for infants and that’s a problem, it’s not provided by a food bank. And they have reduced all of those maternity grants, so I am really worried about very young children starting off nutritionally’.*



<sup>30</sup> The Trussell Trust food bank in Dundonald (serving parts of East Belfast) has fed approximately 826 adults and 837 children since opening in April 2014. The Larder food bank in East Belfast reported feeding 1386 adults and 784 children during 2014. The remainder of the food banks could not provide a breakdown of adults and children, but advice centres and Surestart co-ordinators reported increasing need for food bank referrals from families.

## Support for clients with long-term and complex needs

Our participants emphasised that food banks cannot provide adequate long-term support to clients with long-term and complex needs, such as the homeless, people with alcohol and drug addictions, asylum seekers and those who are destitute.<sup>31</sup>

Many Roma people experience acute poverty, including food poverty, which has particular impacts on their children's ability to access education. Ongoing work by Belfast City Council to support Roma families in Belfast was highlighted. A breakfast club has been established which provides for 25 – 30 children every day during the school term.

Advice centres reported the difficulties encountered by Roma and other EU migrants in accessing benefits to which they are entitled, including in-work benefits. They also reported that a number of EU migrants have been affected by the recent changes to the habitual residency rules, restricting the conditions under which they can access social security.

## Older people

It was observed that pensioners were not regular visitors to food banks. A substantial proportion of visits to food banks are linked to failures in the benefits system, but pension payments are regular and do not usually have gaps or delays. Social isolation and losing the motivation to cook (often due to the loss of a spouse) were cited as the most common reasons for the participation of this group in activities such as meal clubs and community gardens. One participant expressed the view that social isolation could be a barrier for pensioners who require help from a food bank. Through her work in the community, she has encountered people on low pensions, particularly women, who were struggling to afford sufficient quantities of food. This issue requires further exploration and more comprehensive data on the demographic characteristics of food bank clients would be desirable.

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<sup>31</sup> The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is currently carrying out research to define and measure the extent of destitution in the UK, see Fitzpatrick, S. (2015) *Destitution in the UK: An Interim Report*

## Other initiatives to tackle food poverty in Belfast

### Redistribution of 'surplus' fit for purpose food



Fareshare provides a wide variety of surplus food to charities which in turn provide free/low cost cooked meals.



Foodcloud facilitates the safe donation of surplus produce from food businesses to charities in their local area via an app to text message system.



SOS Bus NI also picks up surplus food from supermarkets and distributes it to various charities and refugee centres across Belfast.

**138**  
tonnes of surplus food  
distributed to make  
**330,000**  
meals  
in  
2013 -2014

Between August 2014  
and December 2014,  
**FoodCloud**  
redistributed 660kg of  
surplus food from  
businesses in the East  
Belfast area to  
charities – the  
equivalent of 1650  
meals for people in  
need.

### Windsor Women's Centre

**The 'Food for Thought' project run by Windsor Women's Centre, which is one of ten Community Food Initiatives funded by Safefood, comprises three elements:**

- **Grow** - a community garden is being developed by participants.
- **Share** - a multi-cultural cookery club provides the opportunity for food that has been grown to be cooked and enjoyed, and for exchanging ideas on health and actions for maximising limited resources.
- **Eat** - a breakfast club for crèche children, daily "Fruit Fix" for children and "Pot Luck" lunch for the elderly.

In the breakfast and healthy fruit break clubs they cater to 47 children daily, 5 days a week. They also run a weekly lunch club for 20 elderly participants.

Source: Safefood (Jan 2015) Evaluation of year one of the Community Food Initiative Programme (2013-2015) and data from Windsor Women's Centre.

## Courses on nutrition/cooking skills/healthy eating on a budget

# 26

Our research identified 26 organisations in Belfast running courses on nutrition, cooking and healthy eating.



Often provided in conjunction with physical exercise programmes and other health promotion activities.

## Many run the Cook it!

Programme developed by the Public Health Agency.



People on low incomes can try new foods and take healthy dishes home to share with family and friends.

## Footprints Women's Centre

**Footprints Women's Centre has been providing a wide range of services to women in the Colin Neighbourhood for more than 20 years:**

- **275** women per year access Diet & Nutritional Health Programmes including cookery skills, budgeting, dietetic support, taster sessions and food safety.
- **1000** women and children a year access Food Poverty & Food Security programmes including the provision of meals, snacks, food growing programme, benefit checks and debt counselling.

## Flax Growing

Ligoniel Village Neighbourhood Partnership has land in community ownership and last year experimented with growing flax in collaboration with the Institute for Global Food Security at Queen's University. Ligoniel has polytunnels in community ownership and a polytunnel and community garden owned by Belfast City Council.

## Community gardens and allotments

Community gardens enable access to fresh food at low or no cost, as well as enabling participants to exercise, develop new skills and make new friends.

Community gardening projects work best when they are developed in collaboration *with* the local community rather than for them. **Local people** should be involved in the project from the very beginning.



# 14

Organisations in Belfast run or participate in community gardening projects.



**Belfast City Council** also runs 12 community gardens and 6 allotments

## GROW NI

**GROW NI currently runs one main project in North Belfast called Reaching Out – funded by the Big Lottery:**

- The main target group for the project is older people, but research and consultations have shown that potential participants want to work in a community of mixed ages. Therefore, 70% of the current group of participants are over 60 years and 30% are under.
- In addition to running the community garden, a range of activities are on offer, such as food demos, hands-on cooking sessions, foraging and cooking with foraged food and providing fresh vegetables which participants have grown.
- A participant (retired man) emphasised that he enjoys the social aspect of the project as well as the opportunity to take fresh vegetables home for cooking.

## Providing free cooked meals

19

Our research identified 19 churches, charities and homeless shelters in Belfast which regularly provide free cooked meals.



Many organisations provide meals to vulnerable groups on a routine or ad hoc basis. Total numbers are difficult to quantify.



Tackling **social exclusion** is also a key benefit.

## Homeplus

**Homeplus is a homeless charity which has an outreach project for the rough sleepers in Belfast 365 nights a year.**

- They also have a daily drop-in and advice centre for destitute migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers.
- They provide hot meals to 30 – 40 people daily and approximately 70 people on Fridays.

## Providing food at low-cost

Often provided through a community café, such as those run by Short Strand Community Forum and Footprints Women's Centre.

6

Organisations in Belfast provide low-cost cooked meals.

2

Organisations provide uncooked food at low-cost.

## Food sourcing trips

Women's Information NI runs regular food sourcing trips for women to purchase food in bulk and save on the costs of their shopping bill. A staff member explained:

*‘The trips are very popular as the women can fill their freezers with food that is a fraction of the price of the supermarket. Not all these women have regular access to supermarkets as they have no transport, so the shopper day is a real saving for them. More recently the evaluation from this activity reflects the necessity for families to take part as they are finding their budgets pushed to the limit.’*

## Initial Recommendations: The Way Forward

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### Where do we go from here?

*‘We should all stop being so polite about what is happening to people and make a lot more noise about the conditions that people are living in. The numbers using food banks is an outrage in what is an affluent country.’*  
(Research participant)

The purpose of this scoping study was to establish the current situation regarding food poverty in Belfast, based on available information. It lays the foundation for the next stage of the ‘Enough is Enough’ project, which aims to develop an action plan to tackle food poverty in collaboration with the community, voluntary and statutory sectors.

Several food bank co-ordinators expressed a desire for greater collaboration with other food banks and food-related projects in their local areas. They highlighted that without a joined-up referral system, clients could be accessing multiple food banks without receiving support for underlying problems. Although sharing data raises a number of concerns regarding data protection and confidentiality, this issue could be explored further.

Food banks actively signpost clients to other organisations where they can receive further assistance, aiming to provide a service which is ‘more than food’. A number of possibilities were highlighted for extending this approach, such as the provision of in-house advice services during food bank opening hours, running ‘Cook it!’ programmes and developing allotments. Participants suggested that courses should be funded over longer time periods (3 months rather than 6 weeks) to cement lasting change in cooking and eating habits. The Trussell Trust is already rolling out some new initiatives which aim to take its food banks beyond food parcel provision, such as financial advice, life skills, breakfast clubs and holiday meal clubs for schoolchildren.<sup>32</sup> Advice NI is currently working with the Trussell Trust on a pilot project to provide advice services at two of its food banks in NI.

Our participants emphasised that food banks cannot provide adequate long-term support to clients with long-term and complex needs, such as the homeless, people with alcohol and drug addictions, asylum seekers and those who are destitute. Support services for these and other vulnerable groups need to be properly funded and resourced.

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<sup>32</sup> More information is available at: <http://www.trusselltrust.org/more-than-food>

There has never been a more pressing time to act on the issue of food poverty. With collaborative working and creative thinking, we can make access to good quality food a reality for everyone in our city. Based on the scoping study and our launch event, we present the following initial recommendations for Belfast and region-wide:



### **Rights-based approach to food poverty**

BFN/FPWG

The work of the Belfast Food Network Food Poverty Working Group (BFN/FPWG) should take a rights-based approach to inform development of the action plan. Dignity and empowerment of participants should be adopted as the key guiding principle.

#### **Region-wide**

Setting up an All-Party Group on Food Poverty at Stormont should be considered.



### **Addressing the structural causes of food poverty**

BFN/FPWG

The living wage should be promoted in Belfast.

#### **Region-wide**

The impact of welfare reform on the most vulnerable in our society should be mitigated. The right to independent advice should be protected as the advice sector plays a key role in assisting people in food poverty, through benefit checks, income maximisation and money and debt advice.

Failures in the administration of the benefits system, including tax credits, should be addressed as a matter of urgency.



### **Advocacy**

BFN/FPWG

Build advocacy capacity on food poverty in Belfast.

Continue to develop alliances/coalitions to jointly tackle food poverty.

#### **Region-wide**

A food poverty manifesto should be developed to allow all concerned parties to speak on the issue with one voice. This should include a 'food poverty info card' which can be given to NI Assembly election candidates in the run-up to 2016.



### **Widening the debate**

BFN/FPWG

Aim to involve politicians, trade unions, the agricultural sector and more health and social care professionals in the development of the action plan to tackle food poverty in Belfast.



### **Promoting availability of fresh, healthy food**

BFN/FPWG

Examples of best practice, both nationally and internationally (e.g. 2 for 1 fruit and veg voucher schemes, community shops, food co-operatives, expansion of local markets) should be collected and assessed based on their potential to be successful in Belfast.

Opportunities for food banks to provide more fresh food and to overcome barriers with supply and storage should be investigated.

#### **Region-wide**

Take up of free school meals should be encouraged and attempts should be made to address the stigma around them, potentially by making them free for all children.



## Data collection and measurement

### BFN/FPWG

The possibility of more comprehensive data collection and information sharing among food banks in Belfast should be explored. Referral agencies could also collect more robust data on clients in need of food banks.

### Region-wide

Our research supports the need for ongoing work to develop an agreed indicator of food poverty and provide robust quantitative data in order to measure it. The assessment and monitoring of food poverty as a policy issue should never lose sight of the devastating impact that it has on people.

We invite all concerned organisations and individuals to join us in trying to make healthy, nutritious food more accessible to everyone in Belfast!

## Feedback on the research from the launch event

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Our launch event involved presentations from Prof Jim Kitchen (Director of Sustainable NI), Dr Elizabeth Mitchell (Institute of Public Health in Ireland), Kevin Higgins (Head of Policy at Advice NI) and Jenny McCurry (Researcher at Advice NI). These were followed by a roundtable discussion and plenary session facilitated by Pete Ritchie from Nourish Scotland.

We received a lot of positive feedback on the usefulness of the research and the event for those who attended and participated. Some comments from participants:

- ***'The publication is a good starting point for talking about food poverty, an issue which has not been largely focused on until now in Northern Ireland'.***
- ***'The Executive Summary looks great and it is a practical document, something you can hold in your hand when you go to speak to someone about food poverty'.***
- ***'That was a great start today. Hopefully the momentum will keep going and we will see some real differences being made in people's lives. We have to build up and empower people to maintain and build self-respect. Well done'.***
- ***'I was pleased that words like dignified, best food available were being used and that there was the view that people (suffering from food poverty) should be participants in finding solutions.'***
- ***'I really got a lot from your speaker Peter from Edinburgh - some things we have been trying to articulate as we further develop our food related projects, were well explained and articulated by Peter.'***

We also received a number of comments on the scoping study's executive summary which we will incorporate into future work and an action plan to tackle food poverty.

- Emphasise the impact of food poverty on particular groups, e.g. women, children, older people, people with drug/alcohol addictions/young people and investigate demographics of repeat food bank users.
- Benchmarking: should compare Belfast with the wider NI/UK/international context.
- Emphasise wider context of poverty in NI and specific characteristics of NI.
- Approach food poverty from a rights-based perspective.
- Approach the issues with a sense of respect, dignity and empowerment for people in food poverty.
- Set the work within the context of the 2016 Year of Food in NI.

Executive summary, slides, audio recordings and video from the Enough is Enough conference 23 March 2015 available on the IPH website at <http://www.publichealth.ie/events>

## Detailed information on food banks in Belfast

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<b>Trussell Trust (North Belfast)</b> Tel: 07902099840 Web: <a href="http://www.northbelfast.foodbank.org.uk">www.northbelfast.foodbank.org.uk</a> Address: Ekenhead Halls, 19 North Circular Road, Belfast, BT15 5HB Email: <a href="mailto:info@northbelfast.foodbank.org.uk">info@northbelfast.foodbank.org.uk</a>	Provide 3 days' worth of emergency food to families or individuals in crisis. Referrals are through local partnership organisations which hold vouchers that clients can exchange for food.
<b>Trussell Trust (South Belfast)</b> Tel: 028 9023 8443 Web: <a href="http://www.southbelfast.foodbank.org.uk">www.southbelfast.foodbank.org.uk</a> Address: City Church Belfast, 12-24 University Avenue, Belfast, BT7 1GY Email: <a href="mailto:bruce@citychurchbelfast.org">bruce@citychurchbelfast.org</a>	Provide 3 days' worth of emergency food to families or individuals in crisis. Referrals are through local partnership organisations which hold vouchers that clients can exchange for food.
<b>Trussell Trust (Dundonald, serving parts of East Belfast)</b> Tel: 02895 435310 Web: <a href="http://www.dundonald.foodbank.org.uk">www.dundonald.foodbank.org.uk</a> Address: 971 Upper Newtownards Road, Dundonald, BT16 1RL Email: <a href="mailto:info@dundonald.foodbank.org.uk">info@dundonald.foodbank.org.uk</a>	Provide 3 days' worth of emergency food to families or individuals in crisis. Referrals are through local partnership organisations which hold vouchers that clients can exchange for food.
<b>North Belfast Advice Partnership</b> Tel: 02890 391225 Address: Ligoniel Improvement Association, Wolfhill Centre, 148 Ligoniel Road, Belfast, BT14 8DT Email: <a href="mailto:advice@ligonielvillage.com">advice@ligonielvillage.com</a>	Provide emergency food parcels for clients in immediate need outside of Trussell Trust food bank opening hours. Operate on a small scale to help clients in crisis who cannot wait until the Trussell Trust food bank opens.
<b>Foodstore @ Cooke (South Belfast)</b> Tel: 028 9064 2981 Web: <a href="http://www.cookecentenary.org.uk">www.cookecentenary.org.uk</a> Address: Cooke Centenary Presbyterian Church, 216 Ormeau Road, Belfast BT7 2FY Email: <a href="mailto:morris@cookecentenary.org.uk">morris@cookecentenary.org.uk</a>	Provide 3 days' worth of emergency food for families or individuals in difficulty. Referrals can be made through local partnership organisations (e.g. Women's Aid), by filling in a form on their website or calling them directly.
<b>Sustain (South Belfast)</b> Tel: 028 9064 9402 Web: <a href="http://www.newtownbredabaptist.com">www.newtownbredabaptist.com</a> Address: Newtownbreda Baptist Church, 43 Newtownbreda Road, Belfast, BT8 7BQ Email: <a href="mailto:sustain@newtownbredabaptist.com">sustain@newtownbredabaptist.com</a>	Provide food on a short term basis for people in difficult circumstances who live in the immediate area. A number of partnership organisations in the area hold vouchers which clients can exchange for food. They also run a freezer ministry which can supply frozen meals to people in need.
<b>The Larder Food Bank (East Belfast)</b> Tel: 028 9046 6431 Address: The Larder, St Christopher's Church, Mersey Street BT4 1EY Email: <a href="mailto:Adrian@boringwells.org">Adrian@boringwells.org</a>	Provide emergency food packages on a short term basis for people in difficult circumstances. Referrals can be made through East Belfast Mission, East Belfast Independent

	Advice Centre and St Vincent de Paul.
<b>Storehouse (Greater Belfast)</b> Tel: 028 9023 6333 Web: <a href="http://www.storehousebelfast.com">www.storehousebelfast.com</a> Address: 18 Castle Arcade, Belfast BT1 5DG Email: info@storehousebelfast.com	Provide emergency food packages for a set period of time (maximum of 6 over a 6 month period). Referrals can be made through a number of partnership organisations across Belfast. Organisations must provide a letter on headed paper which the client can present at one of Storehouse's drop-in sessions. This should specify what the client needs, such as emergency food, a warm coat, a piece of furniture etc.
<b>Willowfield Church Foodstore (East Belfast)</b> Tel: 028 9045 7654 Web: <a href="http://www.willowfieldchurch.co.uk">www.willowfieldchurch.co.uk</a> Address: 149 My Ladys Road Belfast, BT6 8FE Email: office@willowfieldchurch.co.uk	Provide food parcels to families and individuals in crisis. Clients must be living in the local area and preferably referred by Willowfield Parish Community Association (WPCA) staff member or local professional (e.g. GP, social worker). They also run a freezer ministry which provides frozen meals for people in difficulty.

We would like to thank the Public Health Agency for funding this research. We would also like to thank all of our participants, including the following organisations:

Advice NI	Gingerbread NI	The Salvation Army
Ardoyne Association	Greater Shankill Methodist Circuit	Saol Ur Surestart
Ark Housing	Greater Shankill Partnership	Smile SureStart
Barnardo's NI	GROW NI	Shortstrand Community Forum
Belfast Activity Centre	Greencastle Methodist Church	SOS Bus NI
Belfast City Council	Greenway Women's Group	Springfield Charitable Association
Belfast Islamic Centre	Homeplus NI	South Belfast food bank (Trussell Trust)
Bryson An Munia Tober	Home-Start South & East Belfast	South Belfast Partnership Board
Bryson Intercultural	L'Arche Belfast	South Belfast Roundtable
FoodCloud (BITCNI)	The Larder food bank	South Belfast Surestart
Christians Against Poverty	Ligoniel Healthy Living centre	Southcity Resource and Development Centre
Clanmil Housing Association	Ligoniel Improvement Association	Storehouse NI
Clan Mor Sure Start	Ligoniel Village Neighbourhood Partnership	Sustain Foodbank
Common Grounds Cafe	Mencap	Tar Isteach
Cooke Centenary Presbyterian Church	MindWise	WAVE Trauma Centre
Disability Action	New Lodge Duncairn Community Health Partnership	Willowfield Parish Community Association
Donegall Pass Community Forum	Neighbourhood Development Association	Women's Information NI
Dundonald food bank (Trussell Trust)	NIACRO	Windsor Women's Centre
Early Years - the organisation for young children	NICRAS	Women's Support Network
Early Years Project	North Belfast Advice Partnership	174 Trust
East Belfast Community Development Association	North Belfast food bank (Trussell Trust)	
East Belfast Mission	North Belfast Partnership Board	
East Belfast Independent Advice Centre	North Belfast Senior Citizens Forum	
Extern Falls Women's Centre	Quaker Cottage	
FareShare	Rejuvenate Project (Men's Shed)	
Footprints Women's Centre		

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