

Putting Food On The Table

Understanding Food Poverty: Exploring Food Bank Use In Lewisham



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Participants who attended the 'Food Banking in an Era of Austerity' workshop at the Community Development conference, 'Communities surviving, striving and thriving?', held at Goldsmiths in February 2014.

“There is a serious danger that without immediate action to address poverty in the UK, we could sleepwalk into a system similar to the US, whereby food banks are seen as part of the welfare state.

(Twycross, 2013)

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FOREWORD

When I joined Voluntary Action Lewisham in October 2012 I heard news that two 'food banks' were about to be set up in the Borough. Since then, community organisations in Lewisham have set up seven food bank distribution centres, and many other groups are providing other support to help people get a meal on the table. The number of people in need of food bank support in the borough increasing at an alarming rate.

This research came about from conversations I had initially with Dr Roger Green at Goldsmith's. In May 2013 we worked together at VAL's 'Call to Action' Conference to highlight the issue of food poverty, and to ask why, in our relatively affluent society, are we seeing people go hungry? Food poverty was again a focus at the conference led by Goldsmith's Department of Social, Therapeutic and Social Studies in February 2014 on community development – *Communities Surviving, Striving, Thriving?* where we heard stories of poverty and exclusion side by side with prosperity in our borough that shamed and enraged us.

This research by Goldsmith's is very welcome and timely. It raises challenging questions that we must address and solve together if we are to eliminate food insecurity and poverty from our locality. Community organisations are always in the forefront when people are in desperate need, and it is these groups who have acted immediately to this crisis. Attacking the causes of poverty in our borough will take concerted and deliberate effort, and I hope that this report will serve as a beginning to that work.

Tony Nickson

Director

Voluntary Action Lewisham

KEY FINDINGS and RECOMMENDATIONS

Key Findings

- 1) Food poverty is having a significant impact on the daily lives of many families living in Lewisham.
- 2) Food bank users and staff cited Coalition Government policies, particularly changes to the welfare benefits system, for creating the need for food banks.
- 3) Organisational ethos and the aims and objectives of the 3 food banks surveyed varied between being faith-based and community action?
- 4) Variations in the opening times and days the food banks operated.
- 5) No evidence of a co-ordinated response to food poverty across Lewisham.
- 6) Ethnicity of food bank users varied between the 3 food banks with not all of Lewishams communities being reached.
- 7) Referral pathways to the 3 food banks varied.
- 8) Food bank users cited the lack of income and difficulty in paying household bills.
- 9) Negative impact of changes in the welfare benefits on food bank users.
- 10) Food bank users heard about food banks from various sources.
- 11) Frequency of use of food banks varied across food bank users.
- 12) Varied views from food bank users as to the benefits of food banks.
- 13) No evidence that people felt stigmatised by attending a food bank.
- 14) Food bank staff seen as being helpful and sympathetic to the needs of food bank users.
- 15) Both food bank users and staff considered the food handed out as being on the whole both nutritious and offering a good selection.

Recommendations

- 1) A more coordinated approach across the borough by all the organisations involved in food banks and other food distribution points.
- 2) Users of all the food banks and other distribution points should be offered a 'professional' debt advice and support service and/or signposting to local agencies offering these services and other relevant services.
- 3) In Lewisham with its diverse multi-cultural, muti-faith communities, further research is needed into the differing types of foodbank organisations and models offered to ensure all communities are served.
- 4) A borough-wide discussion (a Food Summit?) of all key stakeholders, including food bank users, to discuss the question of food poverty and insecurity, and why people are increasing accessing food banks and other food distribution points.
- 5) The negative impact of the current Coalition Governments changes to a range of welfare benefits and its general austerity policies on many of Lewishams residents requires collective action at the local level.

INTRODUCTION

The Centre for Community Engagement Research, Department of Social, Therapeutic and Community Studies (STaCSs), Goldsmiths, University of London undertook this small scale local study to explore and understand the growing issues of food poverty and food banks in the London Borough of Lewisham.

There are three food banks and several distribution points currently operating in Lewisham, along with a number of other organisations that are not food banks but distribute food and provide meals in the borough (Camera, Kellaway and Licorish, 2013). There is mounting anecdotal evidence from the community about an exponential growth in the number of people experiencing hunger, financial hardship and accessing food banks in Lewisham and across the UK (Cooper, and Dumpleton, 2013).

The aim of this small scale qualitative study is to enable Voluntary Action Lewisham to gain a better sense of the experience and impact of food poverty in this part of South East London and to support their work with communities across Lewisham who are experiencing financial and related difficulties.

The study interviewed eleven people who used the three food banks in Lewisham and seven staff (managers and volunteers) who worked at these food banks. The researchers also attended and observed the food banks in operation.

The key aim of the study is to understand the relationship between the growth of food banks in the borough as a symptom of food poverty and the experience of food insecurity as a lived-experience. A scope

of the literature surrounding identified that the food bank model seeks to provide emergency relief from hunger and poverty, thus the model is dependent on the wider social welfare system.

With the UK social welfare system currently experiencing substantial financial retrenchment this leads to challenging questions about the growth of the food bank model and the future of such forms of community social action.

The sole responsibility for the content of this study lies with its authors. It does not necessarily reflect the views of Voluntary Action Lewisham. Voluntary Action Lewisham is not responsible for any use made of the information contained therein.

The study ran from spring 2013 to February 2014.

BACKGROUND

“Given that food is essential to life and is a social and cultural good, it is important that food is placed at the centre of social policy research and action”

(Riches 1999 cited in Lambie-Mumford, p.85, 2013)

There is an assumption in much UK public discourse that food banks are a symptom of food poverty and that the recent increase in both the number of food banks and food bank users, is symptomatic of an increasing prevalence of food poverty and food insecurity in the UK in the 21st Century.

In any understanding of food banks we need to address the relationship between the rise of food banks and the perception of rising food poverty. Although it is indisputable that the number of food banks and the number of food bank users is rising (Trussell Trust, 2013), we need to be clear about what this means in terms of food poverty.

Food banking is growing at a dramatic rate in London (London Assembly, 2013, p.3). According to the Trussell Trust, an organisation which franchises food banks to churches as faith-based social action, the need for food banks outstrips demand and is growing (Trussell Trust, 2013). Clearly one should apply a critical lens to research by an organisation whose stated aim is to open a food bank in every town (Lambie-Mumford, 2013), yet this does provide clear evidence that food banking is a growth industry in the UK (Eaton, 2013).

In examining the political economy of food banking in the UK we need to consider the development of the current dominant model of food

banks¹, it would seem there are a number of push and pull factors which have led to their development. It appears there are both supply and demand effects which have influenced the development of food banking in the UK in recent years.

Supply-side Social Action

On the supply side it seems that social action, particularly faith-based social action, is a significant driver in the development of the food-banking model. As Dinham has noted, under New Labour, faith groups and religious actors became increasingly involved in the provision of social welfare (Dinham, 2009). Yet as the socio-economic-political context shifted from Blairite communitarianism to Osbornian austerity and Cameron's Big Society we can see how food banking provides a model to continue social action, increase voluntarism, localism, and at least a partial filling of the void left by welfare retrenchment.

In 21st Century austerity Britain, there are winners and losers, strivers and skivers (Williams, 2013); in this context it is easy to understand how this form of charitable philanthropy could come to the fore. As the Trussell Trust's mission and Vision statement states:

We are a Christian organisation motivated by Jesus' teaching on poverty and injustice. We operate according to Christian principles of compassion, honesty, integrity, openness, kindness and care of all people, regardless of backgrounds or beliefs. We believe in turning faith into practical action, living out God's love for the poor... (<http://www.trusselltrust.org/mission-and-vision>)

From this analysis of supply-side factors on the development of food banking, it would almost be as striking if the political configuration of a

¹ See Lambie-Mumford 2013 for a useful explanation of the Trussell Trust's model of food bank and the underlying ethos.

Dickensian trope of 'the poor' did not lead to social action which has, at least a passing resemblance, to a Victorian mode of philanthropy whereby questions as to why people become poor were not asked.

Demand

The analysis of demand-factors identifies two quite distinct 'pulls' on demand for emergency food provision. These are referred to in research into food bank use commissioned by the Trussell Trust and Kelloggs, the food producer. Two issues they identify are 'rising food prices' and 'tough economic times' (Kellogg's, 2013).

Food Prices

The supranational agency tasked with monitoring global food prices is the *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*². Data from the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation shows a massive hike in global food prices from 2008 leading to the historic high of February 2011. Although global food prices have fallen slightly since 2011 they remain at an historically unprecedented high level (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2013).

The exact causes of the global food price crisis since 2008 are hotly debated. Amongst them crop diversion to biofuel, commodity speculation, weather shocks and oil prices (Headley & Fan, 2010). With the relevance of global food prices to the experience of food bank users in South East London, it is worth keeping in mind C. Wright Mills words about connecting '*the personal troubles of the milieu*' and '*the public issue of social structure*' (Mills, 1959). Global forces have significant sway over personal woes.

² <http://www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation/wfs-home/foodpricesindex/en/>

Macroeconomics

The other group of pull factors identified by The Trussell Trust and Kellogg's, are captured in the expression 'tough economic times' (Kellogg's, 2013). Much press exposure of food banking and food poverty in contemporary UK has alluded to the connection between national economic strife and the rise of food bank usage³, however some caution needs to be applied when placing this in a London context. If we take into account The Office for National Statistics' data on London's economics indicators versus the other UK regions (Office for National Statistics, 2013) it is clear that London has increased in growth, capacity and labour market activity since the 2008 financial crisis. Surely, we can therefore discount the direct effect of the economic downturn as a demand factor for the rise of food banks in London. In particular if we consider working-age unemployment, London has always had an unemployment rate higher than the national average, however since 2008 the gap between London's unemployment rate and the national rate has decreased to levels not seen in over a decade (London's Poverty Profile, 2012).

An Era of Austerity

An elementary understanding of economics would suppose that economic recession and increasing poverty go hand-in-hand. In the case of London, 'tough economic times' actually refers to the policies of austerity, which have been justified by politicians as a response to the financial crisis of 2008, and the subsequent economic stagnation to have gripped the rest of the country. The current 'Coalition Government' have set 'tough' targets for national debt reduction, in practice this has meant is a massive restructuring and retrenchment of social provision by the State in order to appear to be reducing the

³ See Mason (2012) for example

country's borrowing requirement. Thus it could be argued that it is welfare retrenchment itself and not the underlying economic instability that may be causing food poverty and the concomitant increase in food banks in London.

The London Assembly recently published its own research into food poverty in London (London Assembly, 2013). Although they conflate food poverty with food banking, they identify the top three reasons that people are referred to Trussell Trust food banks in London as:

1. Benefit delays 24%
2. Low income 21%
3. Unemployment 10%

(source: London Assembly, 2013, p. 9)

Let's consider these issues in reverse order; unemployment is discussed above. Although unemployment in the capital is entrenched, it is not historically or comparatively (compared to the regions) high but could account for some food bank use. Low income is a significant issue; if unemployment statistics do little to explain the rise in food poverty, then data on underemployment and low-pay most evidently do. Recent research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Collingwood, 2012) shows that unprecedentedly working poverty now outstrips non-working poverty. Thus it is highly perceivable that many working people are experiencing food poverty.

As well as massive welfare retrenchment, the UK 'Coalition Government' has introduced many changes to the welfare benefit system in England and Wales. For example, in just one week in April 2012 the 'Coalition Government' introduced a number of significant changes to the welfare system including:

1. The bedroom tax – reducing the amount of housing benefit available to many people experiencing poverty.
2. Reductions in Council Tax benefit
3. Scrapping Disability Living Allowance (DLA)
4. Benefit uprating (Reducing the value after inflation)
5. A welfare benefit cap (Wintour, 2013)

Whether there is a direct relationship between these significant changes to the benefit system and the experience of food poverty is yet to be assessed, however as both the London Assembly and The Trussell Trust cite benefit delays as the number one reason for people accessing food banks in London along with anecdotal evidence from Disabled People Against Cuts (<http://dpac.uk.net/category/welfare-reforms/>), the argument appears compelling.

However, even more disturbing than food banks being left to pick up the pieces of welfare retrenchment, there is some fear that food banks may be an outsourcing of welfare provision to the voluntary and faith sector. According to *The Guardian* Lambeth Council are investing in food banks in the borough in order to offset the end of the social fund (Butler, 2012).

Household food insecurity is now a fact of life for many people in Lewisham as in the rest of London and across the UK. This is supported by the recently published and much delayed report commissioned by the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) which shows that low incomes, unemployment, benefit delays and welfare reforms have triggered an increased demand for food banks by the UK's poorest families (Lambie-Mumford, Crossley, Jensen, Verbeke and Dowler, 2014a). This contradicts some 'Coalition Government' ministers' views including arguments there is no evidence of a link between welfare reform and food bank usage, that more people are using food

banks because there are more of them now, or that the food is free, its down to feckless parenting, household financial mismanagement, and poverty has nothing to do with it (Beattie and McTague, 2013, Monroe, 2013, Butler, 2014, Hyde, 2014).

FINDINGS

“No charges for men who took food from Iceland bins”

(Gentleman, 2014)

1. THE VOICES OF FOOD BANK USERS

1.1 Poverty and income

A consistent theme that emerged in the interviews with the 11 users of food banks were descriptions of lifestyles affected by poverty and inadequate benefits systems, low pay, all compounded by rising prices.

The following lone parent discussed her situation as follows:

“I have less money and I’ve got 4 kids....I am working part-time...but I am on benefits...”

Another lone parent explained how rising prices put pressure on her ability to cope:

“it just that the money gets tight and the bills get higher and higher and you can’t always make ends meet, and when you do you absolutely try your very best”

Even when respondents were ‘asset rich’ they struggled to deal with rising living costs:

“...what worries me most is the bills...just got a blooming bill for major works £3000 and 49 pounds 11 pence....it cost me more to keep me home”...(flat, ex-council property bought under Mrs. Thatcher’s ‘Right to Buy Scheme), (86 year old disabled woman).

Another respondent described how the benefits system made her living circumstances difficult to manage:

"I am on Job Seekers Allowance...but I am not like getting JSA like £71 pounds a week...but I am not getting that because I am having deductions so at the moment I am living on £90 every two weeks and that's before my rent, council tax or anything..."

The recent changes to Housing Benefit, described by many social commentators as the 'Bedroom Tax', was sometimes discussed in interviews, in this case by a single woman:

"...when people are forking out for the Bedroom Tax its leaving them with less money to spend and basically people just living on benefits its hard.."

Another complained about the way that a neighbour had been treated:

"I mean like all this Bedroom Tax...this is wrong...I know someone she's trying to move at the moment because of the bedroom Tax..."

The following described how the authorities had,

"...sanctioned my money...I have a 10 year old child...since the 20th December 2012.What happened was.. I had a medical appointment... I phoned in to cancel... they said 'that's fine...they'll send me a new one. What they did was stop my benefits even though the day they stopped my benefits was the same day that the doctor's surgery diagnosed that I have extreme joint pain. I've tried everything to get money. We are suffering living on £60 a week with my child"

Another user had a similar story:

“Even when you say you are sick the social doesn’t believe in you. I have been sanctioned in terms of my benefits. They have taken away my money and am in hardship”

1.2 Finding out about food banks and frequency of use

Food bank users were asked about how they found out about the food bank that they used. Their answers revealed a number of different processes. Word of mouth communication was common amongst this group of users:

A woman explained that she and her husband, *“...only came across this (FB) through word of mouth”*

Another woman had a similar experience: *“only came across this (FB) through word of mouth, and another: ...my friend told me about it and I’ve told other people about it as well...”*

Another user said that *“She found out about the FB through a neighbour and has become a regular”*

Sometimes other referral processes were at play, for example, a woman explained that, *“She found out about the FB through her daughter’s school, the school recognised that she needed help and referred her to the FB”*

There appeared to be variations in the use of the three food banks covered by the study. For a British, White couple they visited the food bank infrequently and only when in exceptional need:

"Only use them occasionally when money's tight...other than that rarely ever use them (man)...as and when....we try and manage with what we have got....when you have to its there and there for everyone and its really a great help..."

The following respondent (female) used the food bank sparingly and was considering becoming more involved in the organisation:

"I haven't been there in weeks (the FB) I am going to be there next week, they want some volunteers so I was asking them about it"

Other users, however, appeared to becoming more dependent on food banks, as described in the following responses from a number of people:

"I am coming here like every week for two months... (Without the food bank) we would be suffering more. (The food bank) helps extremely..."

"This is my lifeline, I have been coming here for almost a year".

1.3 The benefits and drawbacks of food banks

Respondents were asked to comment upon what they perceived were the benefits of food banks that they used. Their responses revealed a wide range of views, often associated with personal and family needs, for example, a single Polish woman felt that the food bank she used:

"...just really helps because of the prices of the foods at the moment....I am on maternity now so my situation has changed.. I can spend my money somewhere else...I can send my son to football...because I have to pay for it as well...."

Similarly another woman said the following:

"it is a good service, really helps in terms of finance. If I am on my last £10 I can spend it on other necessary things and then go to the FB"

Another woman explained how,

"...it allows you to spread your money a bit more...I got 2 children...they need nappies, baby milk..."

A couple who were interviewed together pointed out how the food bank helped supplement their everyday expenditure on food:

"...[The food bank is] good in terms of what they provide...you can if you can do home cooking then what they provide is the essentials to be able to make up a meal really so its good from that point of view"

There were some interesting variations in how users judged the quality of food that they received. For example one respondent felt that she was appreciative of the service even though she received food that she would not normally have bought in 'normal' circumstances:

"...it's good, it is good, a lot of people are struggling at the moment, it's really bad so you know it is a help. Some people haven't got anything. Its like these shops like Lidl they do sell a lot of brand name stuff and a lot of cheap stuff as well...like their beans.."

Others appeared pleased with the quality of food:

"...you can pop in there (FB) and there got a lot of stuff...she said they went to Sainsbury's and people donated (food)"

And,

"I need this, this morning my daughter had tomato soup for breakfast... she had bread with it. You get a good selection of food here from places like Tesco and Marks and Spencer and local fruit – oranges"

Respondents were less likely to be critical of the service, but there were some negative comments. For example,

"The food could be better in terms of choices and the limited amount available. My family needs more"

And,

"Sometimes there is food left over that should be distributed".

"I wish some more shops would join in instead of throwing good food away"

Occasionally respondents were suspicious about the motivations of other users, as expressed in the following comment:

"I try not to go there very often (man)...it gives me the hump when I see people using it on a weekly basis they actually don't have to... see them going in there and then shopping up the High Street"

For another a system of queuing for the food was a drawback:

“There is only one negative, it is when I have to queue so long to be number one in the queue, sometimes I am queuing for hours before the doors open”.

1.4 Stigma and Social Cohesion

Respondents were asked if they felt that they might be stigmatised by their experiences of using the food bank. At least for those who volunteered to speak on this subject there were largely positive views about the impact of the food bank on theirs' and their families' sense of identity and self worth (others who did not participate in the study may have been more negative in this respect). As a male user put it:

“I don't like having to go there because I've always been an independent person, but they never make you feel uncomfortable...make you welcome...and that you are entitled to go there, because your struggling doesn't mean you cant go....you should go infact to get the help”

When asked if she felt stigmatised, one woman said:

“I don't care what people think” (she then described how some of her neighbours who were critical of her using the FB then came to her house to eat the very food that came from the FB).

For one older woman there was initial wariness about going to the food bank but this was assuaged by the kindness of staff:

“...in my mind I thought I can't go there (to the FB) you know poor people... in there they greet you like friends...I come here there lovely people...so grateful, hello .(her name) and all that....I don't know how I'd manage without them...”

This sense of friendliness and the contribution of food banks to aspects of social cohesion is reflected in other comments:

A one user explained that,

"its hard at the moment...you know...its there to help people...a lot of people do need the help at the moment...."

Another,

"This food bank is helping the community, helping other people that are going through problems"

This women reflected upon the work of a church-based food bank that she used:

"FBs are necessary. I will continue to use the FB until I get on my feet. This is a good project, shows how the church can help the community".

1.5 Why food banks?

During the interviews respondents were asked to explain why they thought that food banks had arisen and whether they foresaw a long term need for such organisations.

Most users felt that the situation that they and others found themselves in was the responsibility of the 'Coalition Government' in terms of reduced benefits, low pay and consequent dependency upon food banks.

A couple who were interviewed put it as follows:

"I do in some ways think it's the governments fault (woman)...the government have made it difficult (man)...its harder to get into work (both)..."

A user explained.

"I use this food bank once a week. The government (is to blame for my predicament), the prime minister and his decisions"

And another,

"The fact that we got no pay rise and the cost of living continues to rise explains why there are food banks...the government is to blame, they put a lot of money into other areas but not in helping poor people"

One woman firmly believed that the 'Coalition Government' was to blame. She noticed in the media report recently that there had been a three fold increase in food banks:

"The government cannot see that wages are not going up, but everything else is. There needs to be an increase in wages, more money available to poor people"

2. THE VIEWS OF FOOD BANK STAFF (MANAGERS AND VOLUNTEERS)

Seven staff were interviewed across the three food bank sites. The interviews revealed themes about the nature of the organisation, for example, how they differ from each other in their ethos and practice, the role of volunteering and the origins and purpose of food banks.

2.1 FOOD BANK A

2.1.1 Organisational ethos

This food bank is underpinned by a Christian ethos, informed by the Pentecostal Church. It is supported by the Esther Community Enterprise. When asked about the aim and objectives of the organisation responses were often couched in this ethos.

As one member of the food bank put it;

"This particular church has a vision about how we want to help people....we moved into this area which has a lot of need"

And,

"Being Christians we need to put God's love into action, we need to feed the soul as well as feeding the body"

2.1.2 Referral system and user backgrounds

The recipients were mostly African and Afro-Caribbean with some white people, and occasionally people from other religions. As one of the volunteers put it:

"...the organisation wants people of all faiths and no faith to be helped"

When asked how people were referred, she felt that it was mostly through word of mouth and some advertising. Another volunteer explained that:

“The service users first register with the organisation, providing details including address, family make up and general circumstances. It is funded through church resources and Lewisham Action. Recipients tend to be in the 25-35 range, mostly African and Afro-Caribbean reflecting the catchment area”

2.1.3 Food bank service

This food bank operated a queuing system. Users were asked to wait in a hall, given a number and then, individually entered another room where they selected up to three choices of food. The service is provided by a range of church based volunteers and a pastor. Volunteers said they wanted service users to not feel stigmatised:

“The aim of the FB is to help people in need, to provide a safe place to come to without feeling that they are being judged”.

Another volunteer agreed. She felt her organisation tried to make the service non-stigmatising and to make people feel at ease – *“anyone can find themselves in this situation”*

The food bank had a close relationship with a number of local supermarkets who provided most of the food:

“We get food from a number of supermarkets, initially by writing them a letter; the response is varied in terms of quantity and quality”

Another respondent, felt, like other food banks, that her organisation/church could be involved in other community action, other services, and came up with the interesting idea that they should be helping people to use less food, stop throwing away good food. When asked about the prospect of a voucher system being used she

was ambiguous, she didn't want people to be excluded, if that was the effect of the voucher system.

2.1.4 Why food banks?

There was a general consensus amongst respondents that economic and political contexts had contributed to the rise of food banks. One volunteer felt that food banks had arisen because,

"...the economy had gotten out of control, there was a lack of jobs, and everybody needs money to survive"

Another was quite assertive, critical about the 'Coalition Governments' policies that had led to food banks and felt that, unfortunately they would continue into the medium term because there were no alternatives. A volunteer explained that she felt that food banks were necessary for a number of reasons, because of low pay, unemployment, and inadequate benefits:

"We feel that the FB is a temporary stop gap and don't want people to be dependent on this sort of service".

Another volunteer echoed this notion of food banks as being temporary:

"It is only a temporary thing, it is important not to see it as permanent and to make people dependent".

2.1.5 FOOD BANK B

2.1.6 Organisational ethos

The Centre opened in October 2012 on the initiative of a local community activist who was concerned about people hunting in bins for food. This is an independent voluntary, community-based organisation that, unlike the other two food banks in this study, is not run by the Trussell Trust nor is it connected to a church. It also does not use food vouchers which are thought to be stigmatising and from the outside looks like a charity shop. The food bank is supported by the FareShare organisation.

This food bank seeks donations from the local community, and organise fund raising as a way of helping marginalised, local people. Food bank users are entitled to 10 items for £1 once per week. At first it open one day a week for 28 families but has now expanded to feeding close on upto 1000 people a month:

"...the concept behind the food bank is that we don't have to get hand outs... we can sell the produce here which gives us the money to buy the food... and we do a reading project and a community advice centre here"

The manager explained that they didn't want to use the Trussell Trust model:

"... we didn't want people to feel demonised by fact they were in food poverty.. the idea was to allow anybody who was brave enough to ask for food just to produce their ID, to come here if they live in Greenwich or Lewisham... and they can get a selection of food... they pay a pound so its not charity... that helps make it sustainable"

The organisation wanted to build upon the success of the food bank to develop new community projects to deal with social disadvantage:

"We are now going into gardening. The next big scheme next year will be using people's abandoned gardens to create them into allotments to build community food products. Instead to people being dependant on the food bank they can grow their own produce... it's a Canadian idea"

2.1.7 Referral system and service user backgrounds

There have been 307 recipients to date, coming from across South East London. Of these about 60% are lone parents, sometimes with many children, and often from Black and Minority Ethnic communities. About 20% are older people, nearly all white, about 20% are from new migrants, with English as a second language, Spanish and Polish predominate:

"...we get all nations come here, we get Afro-Caribbean's, we get Indians, we get Africans, we get Somalians, we get Spanish, we get Portuguese, we get every nation come in... even if they can't speak English we try as best as we can to help them."

A variety of systems of referral are used by the food bank:

"...we get referred from the refugee council, Social Services, Lewisham Council's website, Greenwich Council...from everywhere really."

A high proportion of the people who use the food bank are vulnerable in different ways. The organisation runs an Advice Centre which helps people sort out their benefits and problems with the 'Bedroom Tax'. In this respect it provides broader systems of support for individuals and communities:

“We want to feed more, help more people, feed all those who are hungry and mend all the hearts that are broken. We are worried about those who dependent on Jobseekers’ Allowance, we need to be involved in helping them and help them increase their self esteem, and help them find jobs.”

2.1.8 Food bank service

The food bank operates a drop-in system which is not dependent on referrals. As the manager put it:

“We want our FB to be informal, personal – we just want people to feel comfortable in using our services”

The food bank uses a number of processes to assess need. Users are met by volunteers who help with registration forms and verification of proof of ID and a recent letter that indicates that they are living in the London Borough of Lewisham or Greenwich boroughs. The forms also identify dietary needs, as one volunteer put it:

“On the registry forms there is a bit where you put if you have any strict diets, so like you’re a vegan or don’t eat no meat or anything, you can put down there, like if your vegan, you don’t eat certain thing.”

They commented further:

“Out there now you can’t really get certain things for a pound and basically the food bank has been a really help to most people who are struggling on benefits and all this and the food bank has been a really good help. Most of the clients that come in, we help them to the best of our ability but some of the times you get some of the customers who

come in and breakdown...we make everyone welcome, we don't judge or criticise anyone for coming in here."

A volunteer felt that there were many positives to their service:

"This has been one of the best things that they have done, because at the end of the day people are struggling to get food. Where can you go and get 10 items for 1 pound. People who's come her have said it's a real blessing, it's helped."

The following quote helps explain the way the service sought to meet the needs of vulnerable people by attending to the quality of food that they offered:

"This project is sustainable, it is long term. A lot of people who use our food bank are not sat at home drinking and smoking. A lot of people are not even on the national grid...they use candles. We have people who only have a kettle to cook instead of a microwave. So food is important that they choose the food they want so that there is no waste. They take the amount they need for a period of time, so there is no waste, it's a very good way of running the food bank. We don't give people sandwiches or junk food, we try to give people fresh food, fresh vegetables, they have rice and pasta... the staples. The idea is to try to see that people in our community are not going without."

2.1.9 Why food banks?

Managers and volunteers in this food bank were particularly critical of the role of the 'Coalition Governments' in creating the conditions that led to food banks:

“Those who are comfortable and well off often don’t care, then people are just left to fend for themselves. There is a lack of care, rehabilitation services”

One manager explained that it was her’s and the organisations view that:

“...dealing with poverty is essentially a political issue/project. It involves challenging these systems of injustice, not just tampering at the edges. It is about challenging government policies which are making people poorer, cutting welfare benefits and stigmatising people.”

In a similar vein this manager pointed out the range of policies that created problems for people who used the food bank:

“...people have been sanctioned increasingly with the ATOS scandal which is going on and pensioners, you know, your mum, your dad, your brother, your sister, suddenly get hit by huge utility bills...they pay the bill and then they have got no money to live... look in their cupboard...that will give you a clue...because many of us around forget to remember that members of our own family are in poverty because the perception we have of poverty is a media-led one and poverty affects all sorts of people even if they are working two jobs.”

Some of the causes were viewed to be structural, a problem of the free-market capitalist system:

“Part of the problem is that welfare to the low-paid is a tax payers’ subsidy to big business and when you start paying...for example Tesco’s. Last year £4.7 billion profits, their staff were paid £1.6 billion in

welfare payments, you could have still paid them more money and Tesco would have still made £3 billion profit"

The solution was seen as political:

"We have become preoccupied with both individually fighting our own battles and our own interests that we have forgotten that collectively we are the 99% and we do have the power to change it and that means getting out and voting, getting active in your community and standing up as a community and as an individual"

2.1.10 FOOD BANK C

2.1.11 Organisational Ethos

This food bank was established in the summer of 2012, after discussions between senior members of a church group and Lewisham Social Services who provided the information that there was an identifiable need in the area. The original committee was made up of a minister, a legal expert, a local authority contact, and a junior pastor. The Christian Centre is subsumed under iNet which is a group of 12 community churches formed as a charity but has its own separate accounts. It is part of the Trussell Trust nationwide network of food banks.

All the statistics about the clients are gleaned from referral forms and this is fed back to the Trussell Trust. All Trussell Trust food banks pay an annual fee to the central organisation, this food bank raises money from churches, individuals, Lewisham Council and the Tear Fund. The organisation chose to join the Trussell Trust network of food banks because it helped with the sustainability of funding and the credibility

of Trussell Trust in eyes of donators. The integrity of the volunteers and organisation is implied and controlled by Trussell Trust.

The manager of the food bank felt that this ethos and connection with the Trussell Trust:

“...translates into trust from donators in the food bank”.

She explained that the organisation was careful,

“...not to promote dependency - this is done by limiting donations and providing other support.”

The food bank depends on the generosity of the public who appear to be very trusting in the people who use the food bank, for this reason, the manager felt that the food bank needed to keep a high profile so that people donating don't tire of being approached.

2.1.12 Referral system and service user backgrounds

The manager explained that they helped a variety of users, although the food bank did not get many British Asian clients. There is a mixture of long term social service users and people previously not related to any organisation - for example some doctors were referral agents.

She explained that she spends lots of time going out and contacting possible referrers and partners including schools, doctors, and other churches. This includes giving presentations.

A variety of people from different backgrounds use the centre:

“A whole range of people use the bank including those previously wealthy, for example self-employed people who have been unable to

work for a while and have reached the bottom of their savings. Other examples are people from the refugee centre and job centre”

The Trussell Trust have recently sent a memo to draw to attention to the fact that the majority of referrals are coming from the Job Centre, even though the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) denies this is a problem:

“The job centre can be very inconsistent in their referrals to the food bank and they use different monitoring criteria than Trussell Trust - which suggests they do not want the statistics produced of how many people on benefits are actually being given food vouchers”

The manager described how she sometimes contacts the organisation directly on the client's behalf. She also will contact referring organisations if clients use incorrect referral forms. These are signed by the referrers and their signatures are stored in a folder for comparison - there are close to a hundred referring signatures at the time of the interview.

2.1.13 Food bank service

The food bank is open on Wednesday and Friday, Friday being the busiest day. The organisation also provides food for the nearby Christian Tabernacle food bank. A large part of what the food bank does is signposting people to relevant groups that can help them. Care is taken to make sure that systems are in place to deliver a good service:

“...the food is weighed in and weighed out so nothing goes missing or is taken. When something goes out of date, it is weighed out and left in a

box by the door for clients to take. Also refreshments for volunteers are fund raised not taken from the food bank"

As with other food banks dietary needs are considered:

"...when someone comes into the food bank they fill out a form with dietary preferences and this is matched up to a 'Food Allocation Form' which goes through to the store room to be made up. These forms all come from Trussell Trust including the list of desired foods to collect from shops and put together by a dietician. Sometimes extras are given such as nappies, toiletries and chocolate when available. Data is also available on the weights of all food coming in from each source"

As with a number of respondents in this study, the manager spoke about the need to deliver a service that was sensitive and not stigmatising:

"When they first opened there were a lot of embarrassed, tearful, fearful, hysterical, self conscious people. There are screens up for people's privacy, since then people are less embarrassed as the idea of food banks has come into the public domain. Some people still get upset, mostly from worry"

2.1.14 Why food banks?

The manager felt that the project should only be short term - a five year project but worried that, already, food banks are being overstretched in dealing with need:

"Food banks depend entirely on the volunteer power and that can be quite overpowering and overwhelming. For example Lambeth and Peckham FB's are over subscribed and are open longer. There is not

that much communication between FB's. xxx believes the success of a FB comes from careful planning at the beginning"

She felt that some of the problems leading to food poverty could be avoided through help with personal development. Food banks, she felt, are also the product of problems of the welfare system, and she was worried that the introduction of universal credit as problematic as people won't be able to manage their money monthly. In addition some service users were particularly vulnerable:

"some people who do not have access to public funds, but they will be able to use the FB, but only for 3 weeks as others. These are people who have problems with the Home Office generally, 'over stayers' for example, although not refugees and asylum seekers."

CONCLUSION and RECOMMENDATIONS

*“Tins of beans collected at a food bank cannot be cooked at home
when the gas bill cannot be paid”*

(The Rev Paul Nicolson, 2013)

To say we live in an ‘Age of Austerity’ is an understatement. We have seen, and indeed are still experiencing, the global financial crisis that has left many governments across Europe with high levels of debt and budget deficits, that is considered unsustainable in the long term.

In the UK the current Conservative led ‘Coalition Government’ has opted for policies of substantial reductions in public services and deep cuts and restrictions to the social welfare budget that are adversely impacting on the most vulnerable members of UK society.

Recently published research by Lambie-Mumford (2014b) has highlighted the impact that the ‘Coalition Governments’ welfare reforms are having on the need for food banks in two distinct ways:

“people are turning to food banks as a result of (i) changes to entitlements which are leaving them worse off and (ii) inadequate processes which leave them without an income.”

(Lambie-Mumford, p.2, 2014b)

This situation is compounded by the fact that the ‘Coalition Government’ has rejected EU funding under the European Aid to the Most Deprived fund to help subsidise the costs of food banks (Watt, 2013).

At the local level this study appears to reflect the corrosive effects of these policies by highlighting a number of reasons why people in

Lewisham are accessing food banks. These include inadequate income, whether that be because of low wages or reducing welfare benefits, unemployment, rising prices of daily items, higher household fuel bills, coupled with stories of personal despair and helplessness. Put quite simply the limited evidence gathered from this study of food bank users and staff shows that some individuals, families and their children living in 21st century Lewisham are struggling to feed themselves.

The food banks in Lewisham do provide a form of social action, a lifeline, to address the immediate needs of people experiencing temporary food poverty but it could be argued, as some food bank staff interviewed in the study commented on, this does little to alleviate the conditions which gave rise to both the number of food banks and the number of people using them.

Along with over 4.7 million people now in food poverty (Kellogg's, 2013) the numbers of people accessing food banks are increasing. Nationally the Trussell Trust, which runs over 400 food banks across the UK, has seen a 170% rise in people accessing Trussell Trust food banks in the past 12 months to a figure of nearly 350,000 people. (<http://www.trusselltrust.org/stats>). Whereas the Church Action on Poverty/Oxfam report estimated that 500,000 people in the UK were in receipt of food parcels (2013).

In Lewisham there is no current reliable estimate of the number of people accessing food banks in the borough. Camera, Kellaway and Licorish's study in June 2013 came up with a figure of over 1000 Lewisham residents. However this is no doubt a serious understatement as it would seem from our study that not all the food banks record users in the same way and paths of referral are numerous leading to possible attendance at a non-food bank distribution point. This might account

for the provision of meals by community organisations such as hostels, day centres and community cafes collectively referred to here as 'soup kitchens', which tend to go unrecorded.

Clearly UK 'Coalition Government' socio-economic policies of austerity and labour-market restructuring are a significant contributing factor to the increasing numbers of people accessing food banks in Lewisham and across London. Indeed a number of both food bank users and staff in this study commented on the politics and 'Coalition Government' policies underlying this growing social phenomenon.

Elsewhere in the UK, in Scotland, for example, the Scottish Government commissioned researchers at Heriot Watt University (Sosenko, Livingstone and Fitzpatrick, 2013) to undertake a scoping study aimed at providing an overview of the nature of food aid provision in Scotland. This study found that welfare reform, benefit delays, benefit sanctions and falling incomes were the main factors driving this increase in demand. Again these factors were echoed by many of the food bank users and staff interviewed in this Lewisham study.

This study along with the recently published London Assembly report *A Zero Hunger City* (2013), does not make pleasant reading for anyone concerned with the future of food poverty and food insecurity in Lewisham and across London with increasing energy prices and continuing benefit reforms, such as the 'Bedroom Tax', pushing more and more people into poverty. Indeed it is debatable whether a form of communal self-help producing a voluntary system of food banks led by the Trussell Trust, churches, other charities and assorted community groups designed to give temporary and emergency food aid to growing numbers of people can cope with what is rapidly becoming

both a local and national crisis and indeed a 'public health emergency'.

In Lewisham the authors of this study take the view that we need to tackle the root causes just as much as the problems. Why are people hungry in the first place? As Unwin has noted in her assessment of poverty in the UK, poverty and its consequences are not inevitable (2013). We would therefore wish to add our findings to some of the key issues highlighted by a previous primarily descriptive study of food banks in Lewisham (Camera, Kellaway and Licorish, 2013).

As Saul and Curtis have argued (2013), with reference to the rise of food banks in Canada, we need to consider whether the alternative 'community food centres' model is better placed than current food banks to meet the needs of citizens. If we create a situation whereby society thinks the problem has gone away because the hungry are seen to 'being fed' then it lets UK governments off the hook instead of forcing politicians and policy makers to find real solutions based on economic and social policies.

This study concludes that food banking and other forms of emergency food provision are therefore likely to be an increasing feature of Lewisham's and London's social landscape for the foreseeable future. The challenge is therefore to explore how local communities can collectively respond to begin to help people put food back on the table.

Recommendations

1) That a more coordinated approach and assessment across the borough by all the organisations involved in food banks and other food distribution points (such as soup kitchens) is needed to gain both a

'bigger picture' of what's happening across the borough and to find ways of responding collectively to this crisis.

2) Users of all the food banks should be offered a 'professional' debt advice and support service and/or signposting to local agencies offering these services thereby beginning to tackle and highlight some of the underlying reasons why individuals and families are experiencing food insecurity.

3) In Lewisham with its diverse multi-cultural community, further research is needed into the types and aims of current foodbank organisations. Many of these, as in other parts of the UK are operated by church affiliated groups. This may raise questions about fitness for purpose, particularly where some faiths may feel excluded from these services (Forest, 2014).

4) We believe that a borough-wide discussion (a Food Summit?) of all key stakeholders on the whole question of food insecurity, including most importantly people accessing food banks, and other food distribution points is needed.

5) The negative impact of the current Coalition Government's changes to a range of welfare benefits and its general austerity policies on many of Lewisham's residents requires collective action at the local level.

METHODOLOGY: HOW THE RESEARCH WAS UNDERTAKEN

This study used a qualitative approach which rather than seeking to develop testable hypotheses sought to explain the meaning of the social phenomena of food banks (Whittaker, 2009).

A mix of opportunistic and purposive sampling was used. Eleven semi-structured qualitative interviews were undertaken with a diverse group of people (users) accessing three food banks in the London Borough of Lewisham. In addition three managers and four volunteers working in these food banks were interviewed.

The interviews took place either at the food bank during the period the food was being distributed or outside in the street when food bank users were exiting the food bank.

Food bank staff and volunteers were asked to reflect on their experience of their roles within food banks in the London Borough of Lewisham.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically. In order to protect the identity of all participants their names are anonymised.

The researchers also attended and observed the food banks in operation.

It was also intended to interview professional referrers to food banks (for example, Job Centre staff, health staff, social workers and other local authority staff), however this proved to be problematic in terms of issues of access provided by employers.

The study was approved by Goldsmiths Ethics Committee and guided by the ethical frameworks described in *A guide to ethical principles and practice*, Centre for Social Justice and Community Action, University of Durham/National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (2013).

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