



Feeding the Gaps:

Food poverty and food surplus redistribution in Oxford

A community-led analysis

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1 Summary

When I've been asked what I'm working on, and I've explained that I'm researching food poverty in Oxford, many people have responded: "Food poverty? In Oxford?" It seems impossible to some people.

But it's very real.

Food poverty can be defined as the inability to obtain healthy, affordable food: "worse diet, worse access, worse health, higher percentage of income on food and less choice from a restricted range of foods. Above all food poverty is about less or almost no consumption of fruit & vegetables."¹

Food poverty can manifest as *hunger* – often a transient situation for someone in a moment of crisis. But it can also manifest – much more insidiously, and often as a chronic situation which endures - as poor nutrition. One of the people interviewed for this report referred to food poverty, very aptly, as "this modern malnutrition".

Food surplus is the other side of the coin we're considering in this report. Meeting the needs of people in food poverty through the redistribution of food surplus is an approach which tackles two problems in one fell swoop – helping to provide much-needed high quality food, and helping to divert surplus food from landfill, thereby bringing about both social and environmental sustainability benefits.²

Much is happening already in Oxford to redistribute food surplus to people in food poverty. This report is, in part, a celebration of the fantastic work being done in the city.

We learn that there are many different types of organisations providing food assistance, operating in every corner of the city. They work with many different kinds of people, and they provide food using a number of different models – some widely known, and some more unusual. They refer to the people who they provide food to with a wide array of different terms, from service-users, to clients, to members, to companions, to guests, to friends!

¹ D. Barling and T. Lang, *Food Policy: integrating health, environment and society*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

² A. Bisset, *Evaluation of the contribution of fresh food redistribution organisations to the environmental sustainability of food systems: A study of the Oxford Food Bank*, MSc Thesis, 2014.

Many organisations embed food provision – often in the form of cooked meals rather than food parcels – within other services. This embedded form of food provision is a more hidden form of food assistance than that carried out by foodbanks, the type of organisation predominantly reported in the media. This report presents a wider perspective on food assistance than just food parcels, and stresses the need to take into account the many other models at work in our communities in order to fully understand how food poverty manifests in our city.

In this report we see that food poverty is multi-factorial; it never has just one cause. We find the usual suspects here – benefits issues, low wages, rising food prices and food deserts, as well as poor self-management, poor cooking facilities, lack of exposure to fruit and veg, a lack of cooking skills, and a lack of the social and cultural dimensions that are so important to food.

Food plays many roles in the organisations that provide food assistance, beyond just filling bellies. Food is seen as extremely “powerful”, and is central in many organisations, even those providing services that ostensibly have nothing to do with food. Food creates community cohesion:

The top reason why people come – even above getting a free meal, is company. The second reason is hunger.

Food provision by organisations helps to encourage a healthy and positive eating culture amongst those who need it most, and helps people to gain new skills and confidence. It also serves the powerful dual roles, on the one hand, of reinforcing cultural identity, and on the other hand, of eroding perceived cultural or social barriers through the sharing of cooking and eating, and the opportunities to share conversation that comes along with it.

Food is described as a “motivator” too – an effective tool for hooking hard to reach people in to essential welfare services. In these ways, the indirect benefits of the provision of food in the organisations that we interviewed are actually getting deep into some of the systemic root causes that bring about food poverty.

This report also provides some surprising and significant findings that might inform best practice regarding the nitty-gritty of emergency food provision; the hows and the whys of assessing need, restricting or rationing access to emergency food, and the much discussed – in the media at least – question of abuse.

We find that the majority of the organisations interviewed find it much less necessary to formally assess need or to restrict or ration food provision than current public discourse would have us believe. And we find that the majority of the organisations interviewed simply do not see abuse or inappropriate use of their services. **These findings challenge commonly held assumptions that dominate so often in coverage of food assistance provision.**

Both stigma and respect bring about self-regulation. People are deterred from seeking out food when they do not really need it by shame as well as by concern that

others more needy should access the food. Interviewees reported that the vast majority of service-users can be trusted to act appropriately and respectfully, both in relation to staff and to other service users. The many organisations in Oxford operating without formal referral processes and without restrictions on food provision seem to be successful at creating cultures in which this kind of behaviour is the norm. This reported self-regulation challenges the core of the belief that food assistance creates dependency.

We should remind ourselves that those who hold these assumptions and raise these concerns often do not work in this sector. It is something worth celebrating that good, relationship-centred management practices can, in many instances, mean that organisations are able to dispense with forms of bureaucracy which are time-consuming and which can also generate stigma for the people concerned.

We are very fortunate in Oxford that the Oxford Food Bank distributes fresh food surplus to organisations working with people in food poverty. Other cities without this model of food surplus redistribution should note our findings on the many social and environmental impacts that this unique model has.

The organisations using fresh food surplus in their kitchens benefit tremendously – they benefit financially and also by being able to provide broader and more innovative services. It also means they can provide more meals to more people, and much healthier meals at that, helping to build skills and to model healthy diets. But one of the real gems in this report is the interviewees’ accounts of the enhanced quality of the meals that they can provide – through using food surplus:

The irony of asylum seekers eating asparagus and porcini mushrooms!

Another colourful section tells the story of how organisations cope with the “Ready, Steady, Cook!” style approach to catering that the use of food surplus necessitates. Some are disconcerted, but others revel in it:

It doesn’t faze the chefs. Anyone who’s cooked in the Iraqi army can cook with whatever arrives!

Passing on this improvisational style of cooking also has useful ripple effects for service-users, who learn tricks for conjuring up meals from the assortment of produce that they find on the discounted shelves of supermarkets.

We also hear about people’s emotional responses to receiving free, subsidised and ‘waste’ food. While some feel that there is a stigma attached to this, some organisations have been able to create a strong alternative narrative and community culture, lessening or banishing any negative feelings. Some groups, and especially the most vulnerable communities, embrace food surplus with a “waste not want not” attitude. A couple of groups use the green agenda very effectively – and accurately - to frame taking away surplus food as an act of environmental do-goodery, cutting through any potential stigma by creating a warm glow about reducing waste to landfill.

Towards the end of the report we identify gaps in current food assistance in the city – certain areas of deprivation, and also the following groups: people on low wages who cannot make it to many of the foodbanks during working hours, families with children over 5 who are no longer eligible to go to Children’s Centres, people transitioning out of services who suddenly have no institutional safety net, and asylum seekers and refugees, who are, as a group, at serious risk of destitution in the UK.

The report finishes by asking what next, with recommendations falling into two main categories. Firstly, Capacity Building: strengthening the network of organisations addressing food poverty in Oxford, and exploring ways that we could get more food surplus to more people in food poverty. Secondly, Culture Change: reframing our narratives about food waste to eliminate stigma, and building a positive and healthy food culture and food skills in our city. An array of possible next steps is laid out, to be explored and taken forward based on the views and experience of the people on the ground. It is the voices of some of these people that fill much of the rest of this report, and we thank them for their invaluable participation in putting it together.

Doireann Lalor
September 2014

2 Background

2.1 About this report

Feeding the Gaps is a community-led research project aiming to document the work being done to tackle food poverty and redistribute food surplus in Oxford, to identify successes and challenges, and to draw out potential future steps to build on this work.

Feeding the Gaps was initiated by CAG Oxfordshire, Abundance Oxford and DinnerTime. The project has received in-kind support from Oxford Food Bank and Good Food Oxford, and financial support from CAG Oxfordshire and from a County Councillor.

Over the summer of 2014 we interviewed 30 providers of food assistance in the city. This report summarises our findings.

Our hope is that this work will help to identify gaps in existing service provision, foster the sharing of good practice, and facilitate closer collaboration across the network of organisations working with those in food poverty, as well as within the wider network of community food organisations in Oxford.

Please note that this is not a political document, and that we have remained politically neutral throughout the interview and report-writing process. It is *practical* – rather than political – solutions to the enduring issues of food poverty and food waste that we are hoping to discover.

We used open questioning in the interviews – without preconceptions about what responses might come about - in order to allow the opinions and concerns of those interviewed to come to the fore. It is the voices of those interviewed that are reported here, rather than our own voices.

The release of this report is an act of handing our findings back to those who have been interviewed, as well as a way to provide a rare opportunity to amplify the voices of those who are working on the ground with people in food poverty in the city. Our hope is that – all together – we will agree on some next steps, find a way to resource them, and get cracking!³

2.2 Other work in Oxford on food poverty

Feeding the Gaps builds on work already carried out in Oxford on food poverty. Before it was restructured in 2013, the Oxfordshire Primary Care Trust initiated and supported a number of projects, including the Community Caterers' Network and

³ Many thanks to the members of the *Feeding the Gaps* Steering Group, who have given their time to this project in a voluntary capacity: Dot Tiwari, Peter Lefort, Lauren Dean and Audrey Versteegen. Thanks also to Annelise Bisset, Riki Therivel, Bernard Clarke and Nick Vernede for support with the interviews.

Oxfordshire Healthy Living Partnership. The Trust also carried out a mapping exercise on food poverty in Oxford, and released a *Food Poverty Mapping Tool* to share its learnings with other local authorities.

The Community Caterers' Network was a multi-stakeholder network, dissolved in 2011. One of its most significant accomplishments was the incubation of the Oxford Food Bank, which was founded in 2009. Oxford Healthy Living Partnership worked between 2008 and 2010 in Oxford's areas of multiple deprivation. It instigated community-led cookery classes and supported the setting up of a number of community cafes across the city. The Community Emergency Foodbank has been dispensing emergency food assistance since 2008.

More recently, in 2014 the Diocese of Oxford compiled a report entitled *999 Food*, analysing food assistance in the Thames Valley, the Oxford Food Bank submitted evidence on food assistance in Oxfordshire for the *All-Party Parliamentary Report on Hunger and Food Poverty*, and a research project was carried out in Oxford University's Environmental Change Institute using the Oxford Food Bank as a case-study to analyse the environmental sustainability impacts of fresh food surplus redistribution.

Since the restructuring of Primary Care Trusts, there has been no network in Oxford bringing together stakeholders from the different sectors working with people affected by food poverty.



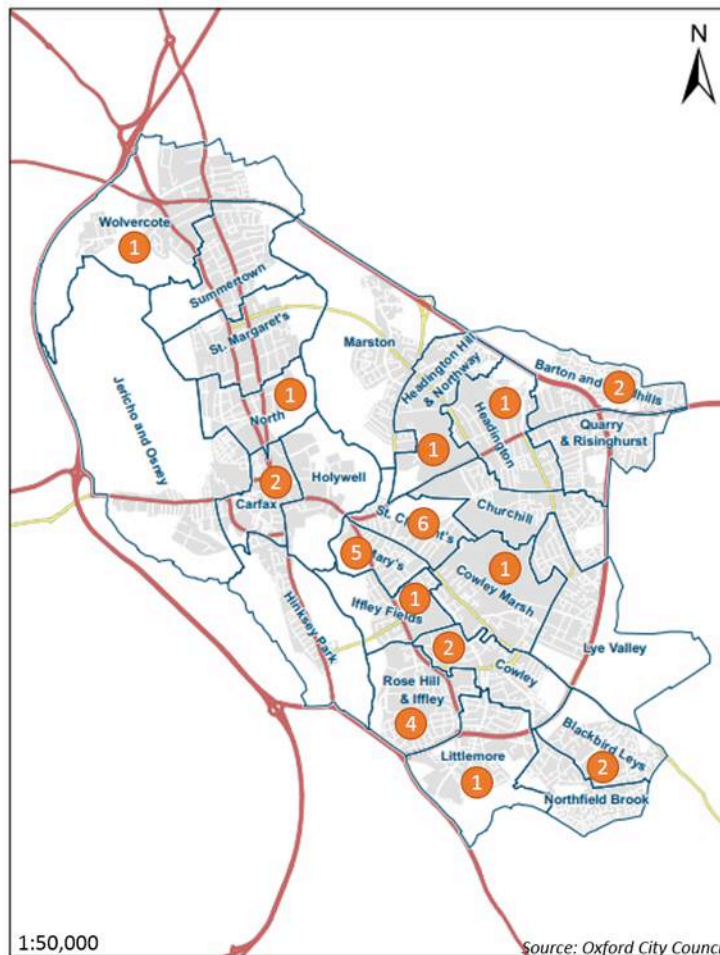
3 Our Findings

3.1 Who are the providers of food assistance in Oxford?

Oxford Food Bank collects fresh and high quality surplus food from wholesalers and retailers, and redistributes this to 45 organisations throughout Oxford and Oxfordshire working with people who require food assistance.⁴ For this report, we contacted the 41 organisations operating within the city bounds and interviewed 30 of them. We did not include organisations based elsewhere in the county. This report, therefore, represents voices from a significant number of the services working with those in food poverty in the city.

3.2 Where are these services located?

The organisations interviewed are spread throughout the city, as follows:

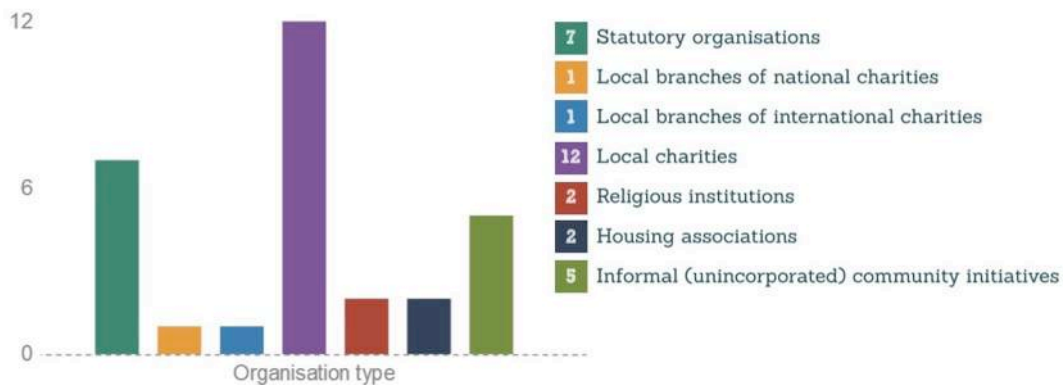


⁴ The Oxford Food Bank model is similar in many ways to the FareShare model, which distributes fresh food surplus to charities throughout the country. OFB is unique in that it is run entirely by volunteers, on a scale which is responsive to local needs. It is also unique in that it does not charge either its suppliers or its recipient charities for the food.

3.3 What kinds of organisations are they?

The organisations that we interviewed vary dramatically as regards legal structure, opening hours, staffing and funding, as well as the main challenges that they currently face. Here is an account of this variety:

3.3.1 Legal structure



3.3.2 Opening hours

The organisations interviewed range from services operating 24/7 (e.g.: residential services), to services operating Monday-Friday 9am-5pm (e.g.: day services), to services open just one or two days or evenings a week, through to services with as little as one hour a week (e.g.: food parcel pick-ups).

3.3.3 Staffing and funding

Some of the services are completely run by staff (23%), some are completely run by volunteers (20%), but the majority are run by a combination of staff and volunteers (57%). There is a similar range in funding – with some reasonably well funded, and some run on a shoe-string.

3.3.4 Other services provided

For 10% of these organisations, the focus is primarily on food provision; they provide emergency food assistance and also dispense recipes and information or training regarding food preparation. The remaining 90% of the organisations interviewed provide food within a range of other services, as appropriate to the community or user-group that they are serving. These include:

- Accommodation
- Vocational training and education
- Counselling, mentoring and coaching
- Support into employment and/or volunteering opportunities
- Signposting to other services
- Benefits support and advice

- Recreational, creative and cultural activities
- Access to books, computers, mobile phone charging points
- Toiletries, clothes, bedding
- Health and medical support
- Day trips and holidays
- A supportive environment, a community, a safe space

3.3.5 Main challenge

We asked these organisations what the main challenge is that they currently face. The majority responded that funding is their main challenge:

- Funding - general, 55%
- Funding - explicitly linked to local authority cuts, 9%

Budget cuts means we have less money. But the economic downturn has also lead to more demand for mental health services. So we're being asked to work more and more with fewer and fewer resources.

Other challenges identified included:

- Accessing/engaging people who need their services, 13.5%
- Adapting services to respond to changes in welfare provision, 4.5%
- Safeguarding, 4.5%
- Supporting people to move on from their services (e.g.: into housing, jobs, education, etc.), 4.5%
- The asylum process with the home office, 4.5%
- Getting and retaining enough volunteers, 4.5%

3.4 Do they provide parcels or meals?



Organisations either provide “parcels” of food to cook and eat at home, cooked meals or snacks to eat on the premises, or ingredients and/or facilities for self-catering. Some in fact provide a combination of two of these methods of food provision, as shown in the diagram above.

Those providing meals range from serving just one meal a week, to serving three meals a day, 7 days a week. Some, alongside their own food provision, also provide vouchers for parcels to be issued by emergency food services. The number of people fed by each organisation varies enormously as well – from just three meals per week to 1120 meals per week.

It is interesting to note that much of the current discourse about food assistance in the UK, as well as the attempts to quantify it - whether in the media, in research or in policy - focuses for the most part on *food parcels* and excludes other models of food provision. In Oxford we do have distributors of food parcels, but much of the “feeding” that is going on is actually happening via meals that are integrated into other services. And indeed many of the organisations currently giving out food parcels in Oxford are not actually “foodbanks”, but other services such as Children’s Centres.

Much of the support to people living in food poverty is *embedded into other services*, and so is hidden from common view. This report presents a wider perspective on food assistance, and proposes that we need to expand the frames of reference of the current debates on food poverty beyond the focus on food parcels. We need to take into account the many other models at work in our communities in order to understand fully the extent and also the nature of the food poverty in our city.

Lumbie-Mumford’s study *Household Food Security in the UK: A Review of Food Aid* draws attention to this as well. The researchers attempted to put together a “typology” of the kinds of food aid that occur in Britain. Their research was somewhat hampered though, as they found “little evidence [beyond] public information from national charities (such as the Trussell Trust Foodbank Network)”, and almost none which detailed the other forms of food assistance. They noted that “the food aid landscape appears to be both diverse and difficult to document”, because many of the “independent local initiatives in the UK” neither record what they do nor end up in the public eye.⁵ This report helps to redress this situation for Oxford by presenting and explicating all of the different types of food assistance that we find in the city.

3.5 What does food poverty look like in Oxford?

Food poverty can be defined as the inability to obtain healthy, affordable food: “worse diet, worse access, worse health, higher percentage of income on food and less choice from a restricted range of foods. Above all food poverty is about less or almost no consumption of fruit & vegetables.”⁶

We asked those interviewed whether they considered their service-users to be in food poverty, and if so, what this looked like. Here are some of their responses:

⁵ H. Lumbie-Mumford et al., *Household Food Security in the UK: A Review of Food Aid*, 2014, p. vi-viii.

⁶ Tim Lang, Professor of Food Policy at City University.

For some of our clients, the lunch we serve is the main meal or even the only meal they get that day.

Many families really need the basics – it's scary. That's why we started doing parcels for families in crisis.

Some of the kids are so hungry, they come up for three plates of pasta, and ask if they can take food home to their mums as well: it's not just the children who are hungry. The more I work in this area the more I worry about this modern malnutrition.

Often the hot meal we serve up at the Children's Centre is the only one they'll have that day.

Our members are people who can't afford to feed themselves, and especially to feed themselves healthily – that's the crucial part.

People have to decide whether to eat or heat [their houses]. [...] Some even bring the free food that they receive back to the foodbank, [reporting that] they have no money to pay for gas to cook it with.

Alarming, three of the organisations that we interviewed – all of them statutory organisations (Children's Centres and schools) reported that it was not just their service-users who they considered to be in food poverty, but also some of their staff:

Our lowest paid staff are going hungry as well.

The level of need is shocking; some of our staff would benefit and be grateful for food, but we don't allow it, because of professional boundaries.

This impression of food poverty in Oxford is consistent with its portrayal in recent national reports such as *Walking the Breadline: The Scandal of Food Poverty in 21st Century Britain*⁷, and *Household Food Security in the UK: A Review of Food Aid*.⁸

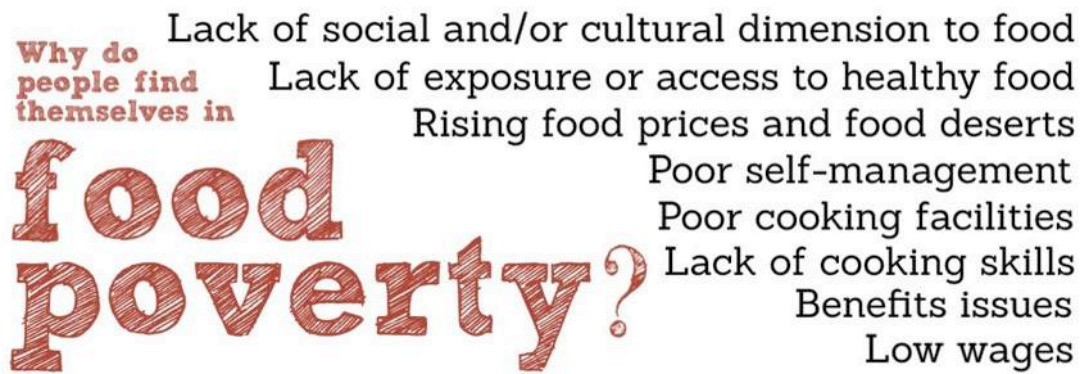


3.6 Why do people find themselves in food poverty?

We asked the organisations what they felt led their service-users to need food assistance. These are the factors they reported are contributing to their service-users' situations:

⁷ N. Cooper and S. Dumpleton, *Walking the Breadline: The Scandal of Food Poverty in 21st Century Britain*, 2013.

⁸ Lambie-Mumbleford, 2014.



3.6.1 Benefits issues

Recent changes to welfare services are having an impact:

People come because they have their benefits capped because they are a large family, or they've been affected by the bedroom tax, or had an unexpected expense or crisis.

Often we deal with people undergoing benefit sanctions, or awaiting benefits – there are no crisis loans anymore, so there's no safety net, and no transitional payments when people start work and go off benefits.

3.6.2 Low wages

Many people who are in work still struggle to feed themselves due to their low wages:

Some earn the bare minimum, so if there's a one-off unexpected expense, they are stuck.

Many families are on a very tight budget – even working families.

It's because of financial hardship, often with families who are in work.

People come because their incomes are so low; minimum wage is so low.

This is particularly a problem for larger families:

There's often not enough food to go around, [especially in] very big families.

Even the refugees who have found work often have many children and are on low incomes, so they are hungry!

3.6.3 Rising food prices and food deserts

People reported the rising price of food in general, and more specifically the lack of access to affordable food in some parts of the city, often the parts of the city which house people in food poverty:

Food prices are going up so quickly – are benefits and wages really keeping up?

There's evidence of higher food prices in lower income areas.

3.6.4 Lack of exposure or access to healthy food

A recurrent theme was the scarcity of nutritionally rich foods in service-users' diets:

Some have no idea how to afford healthy food on [a low income], and the concept of healthy eating can be difficult to understand/access.

They buy what they can, but there are high levels of childhood obesity - twice the county average - in Blackbird Leys, which is an indicator of poor diet.

At our Christmas meal, one of the kids couldn't identify a single vegetable on his plate.

Some were concerned with the impact of poor nutrition on behaviour and educational attainment:

Food poverty and poor nutrition are linked with poorer outcomes for children. They don't learn as well.

It's a proven fact that if a child doesn't have a full belly, they don't learn properly. [We see that] if they're well fed, they're in a better place mentally, and they won't go out and do something stupid – they play more happily, learn better, behave better.

3.6.5 Lack of cooking skills

Many reported that their service-users were not equipped with the skills, experience or mind-set required to ensure a healthy diet:

Lots of our families haven't [cooked] much [fruit and veg] before; they've never seen it before often.

This is sometimes correlated with mental health problems:

People with mental health problems often have poorer physical health and shorter life expectancy, largely because of diet and lifestyle [...]. Food involves planning, prioritising and confidence. Diet is the first thing to go out the window when people suffer from mental health problems. Either they lose their confidence to cook, plan etc., or some never had it in the first place.

3.6.6 Poor cooking facilities

Some are hampered from preparing good meals by their limited cooking facilities:

Lots of our [refugee and asylum seeker] members don't have cooking facilities.

Some of our [vulnerably housed] members have no hob or oven, just a microwave.

3.6.7 Poor self-management

Sometimes self-management and lack of life skills is also a factor:

Food poverty in the homeless population is about lack of prioritising, as well as about benefits sanctions. In our self-catering accommodation, some manage well, but many struggle to feed themselves well.

Our [homeless] members might choose to top up their mobile rather than get groceries.

3.6.8 Lack of social and cultural dimension to food

Some reported that in their service-users' home environments, food could sometimes be devoid of a social or cultural context:

The children learn social skills when they come here. At home often they have TV dinners, so children aren't aware of what it means to eat socially. Here we all sit down together.

The overall picture of food poverty that emerges is extremely complex. Very often, in an individual's story, a number of the factors outlined above are intertwined.



3.7 What is being done in response to food poverty?

Many of the organisations that we interviewed have adapted their services to respond to the prevalence of hunger and of poor nutrition that they are witnessing in their client-groups. Some, for example, have added food into existing services that did not previously provide food:

Now we're a one-stop shop for information, socialising, and food.

Others have adopted healthy eating policies throughout their services:

We stopped taking so many cakes, to avoid people filling up on them.

Others have adapted and escalated the food provision that they offer:

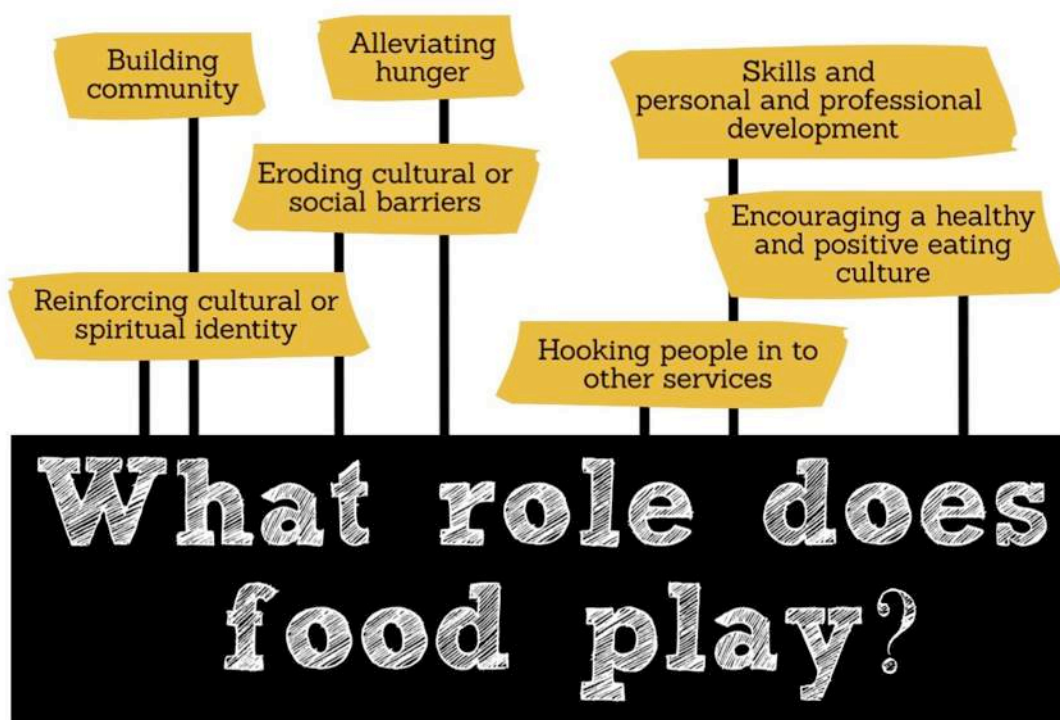
Two years ago, we binned the sugary muck that used to be served at the youth club, and started to make inroads into healthy eating. Now we provide a full-scale three course hot meal. Because of the level of food poverty and poor nutrition in the community, it had to grow into that – we had children crying because they were so hungry.

Others have added or enhanced a food education element to what they do, whether through providing informal diet and cookery advice, or through running structured courses about cooking healthy meals on a budget. One service has even started

running a community minibus to take people out of the “food desert” that they live in, and to the supermarket, so that they can save the valuable bus-fare.

3.8 What role does food play in the organisations, beyond filling bellies?

We asked what role food plays within the organisations. Of course, one major role in all of the organisations is to alleviate hunger, either through the provision of food parcels or free or subsidised meals. We asked if there were any indirect benefits stemming from the fact that they provide food. There were many. In fact the majority of the interviewees perceive food to be, in the words of one provider, “very socially important –[...] very powerful.”



3.8.1 Building community

Food provides service-users with an opportunity to feel part of a community:

The top reason why people come – even above getting a free meal, is company. The second reason is hunger.

The food opens up the opportunity for socialising, for respite from the difficulties of parenting, for an escape from the isolation of being a young mother.

It also encourages trusting relationships to be built between peers, and between service-users and staff:

Food plays a huge role here. [...] It's a good way of coming together as a group, a good opportunity to chat about important issues. This happens around the food. If it were just sandwiches, it wouldn't happen like that.

Food plays a central role. Everything happens around the cafeteria. If we know a user has a difficulty, then a meal offers the chance to have that discussion.

3.8.2 Hooking people in to other services

Food has been found, by many of the organisations interviewed, to be an excellent way to attract people in to get access to other services that are typically more difficult to engage people with. One organisation described food as “a motivator”.

The meals mean we can get users in and sitting down so we can better understand their needs.

If we provide food, the women will show up on time; if there's no food, they often aren't on time!

Food provision is an incentive for groups – if you offer food, they'll show up! It's almost a bribe, but it means they come along to access other important services and activities.

We use food through every bit of our work. Food is a means to an end, always. A free community meal is a great way to get out other services that you want to get out, that people wouldn't otherwise come for, like smoking cessation support.

3.8.3 Skills and personal and professional development

Many food-related skills are passed on to service-users through involving them in the preparation of meals:

Our service-users get involved with planning, shopping for and cooking lunch every day. So they learn those skills. [...] Sometimes they do take skills and new knowledge home – ready-meals are very prevalent [amongst people with mental health problems], so our work helps with this.

People learn to cook here. They adapt to produce they might not have otherwise purchased. Let's say someone usually buys instant mashed potato. But we get real potatoes delivered, so they have to learn to wash, peel, and prep real potatoes.

Food can also provide opportunities to share other skills:

We use food with the kids to teach and practice counting.

The food helps us to teach independent living skills.

The provision of food sometimes creates springboards into formal professional training:

We pay for food hygiene training for long-term members.

At our Asian lunches, the women get Level 2 Food Safety Qualifications. We also offer them first aid training, baking courses, IT classes, childcare and play-work courses.

Food provision also provides personal development opportunities, helping, for example, to build confidence and self-esteem:

Cooking a meal is a great activity to do together – it builds self-esteem and confidence. The meal is the centre of the day – the staff sit with service users, volunteers and students. It's a nice, social ritual – like in a family.

3.8.4 Encouraging a healthy and positive eating culture

Provision of food helps the organisations to model a healthy diet for service-users:

The meals they get here play a role not just in nourishing the kids, but also in educating them. Kids say they don't like this or that, but they give it a try here, and gain confidence in trying new things.

The links between diet and physical and mental health are key – it's good to be able to expose those with restricted diets (e.g.: diabetes) to more varied food.

It's not just about health – it's also about building positive social rituals and attitudes into the act of eating:

The kids and even the parents try things they've never had before, especially veg. They learn about new foods, and form social habits. It also gets them talking and sharing recipes.

3.8.5 Reinforcing cultural identity

Food can help to anchor people in their own cultural or religious context:

People come because they are in need – but also because the meals are tasty, and they get social and cultural stimulation.

We use chillies, plantains etc., which are important foods in many of our clients' cultures.

3.8.6 Eroding cultural or social barriers

But it is also an extremely effective means of breaking down perceived barriers between cultures:

It breaks down cultural barriers; for example people ask one another where Chinese leaves or passion fruit grow, and how you cook them. Working with food increases knowledge of the world and narrows the gaps between people. [...] And it works both ways – with foreigners wanting to know what to do with parsnips, or rhubarb! [...] This narrows the gap of understanding between different cultures and values.

We have a mix of nationalities cooking in the kitchen – so people develop their English by working alongside native speakers. This breaks down cultural barriers and also helps with English skills.

Food is the crux of our community cohesion work. We might have ten or fifteen nationalities in the room. Sitting down to a meal erodes barriers. Everyone just sits, eats and chats.

Eating together also helps to erode perceived power dynamics; people become peers around a table:

We eat around a big table after working together all day. Some eat in their rooms, but most sit at the table. And people talk. It's informal contact. And this is how relationships build and they share their issues – over meals. Older or more experienced [members] take others under their wing. Sitting together and eating is a powerful barrier eroder.

These indirect benefits are crucial, since many of them play a part in addressing the underlying structural causes of food poverty; something which food provision in and of itself - at best a stop-gap measure - could never do.



3.9 How do the organisations design their food distribution?

Let's now examine a little more closely the ways in these organisations provide food, and the differences between them. Let's look at their rationales behind whether or not they *charge for food*, how they *assess need*, whether they *restrict or ration food*, and whether they feel that their food provision is ever subject to *abuse*.

3.9.1 Free or subsidised?

All of the organisations providing food parcels provide them for free, as do some of those providing meals or refreshments. Their reasoning for doing so is that if they charged, this could exclude the most needy.

Some, on the other hand, *do* charge for meals, but subsidise them, often considerably. Some charge because this helps to cover the costs of extra ingredients that they have to buy, or the costs of overheads such as staffing or room rental. Others charge because they find that it makes users value the service more, and that they have more investment in the process. Some services leave out a donation jar, and leave it up to users' discretion – often finding that those who can pay do so generously.

A number of organisations that do charge for their meals also allow their users to contribute in other ways if they cannot afford the meal, for instance through volunteering. As one describes,

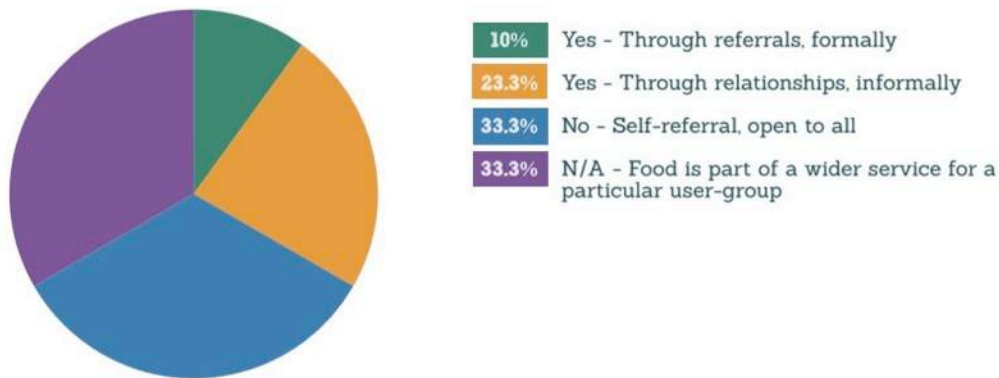
Price is not a barrier – if they have no money they can contribute in other ways.

3.9.2 Do they assess need?

The model of UK food assistance which is the most discussed, in the media as well as in policy, is one which includes a formal system for assessing need, involving external agencies that refer people to food assistance providers through “voucher” systems. This is the model used by the Trussell Trust, a national network of church-led emergency food providers.

Perhaps surprisingly, only 10% of the organisations that we interviewed work in this way. Those that do so receive referrals from agencies such as advice centres, churches, GPs, health workers, or Children’s Centres. The rationale for this is that these external services are seen to be best placed to know who needs the service; that it takes the onus of administering needs assessment off the food distributors; and that it leaves services less open to abuse – essentially this system is built to ensure that the food gets only to those who are in genuine need.

The following chart outlines responses to the question: “Do you assess need for your service, and if so how does this operate?”:



A third of the organisations provide food as part of a wider service for particular user-groups, and so their users – although they are in food poverty – are referred to these services primarily for another reason (e.g.: homelessness, mental health problems), so these organisations are not relevant to this discussion.

Of the remaining groups, 23.3% assess need, but they do not require external referrals; they make decisions internally. These services consider that they are well placed to assess need themselves, given how closely they work with their clients:

We are giving advice to our clients, so we know their situation very well.

It’s not formally means tested. We are open to all users of Children’s Centre, who are all known by our staff. [Need is assessed] by discretion.

People are found through the pastoral work of the church. It’s not done through referrals per se. We don’t advertise explicitly as being an emergency food provider. It happens organically through relationships.

We give to anyone who asks. We know our families.

33.3% of the organisations that we interviewed open their services to everybody, and do not assess need at all. Those that operate in this way reported that there is an element of self-regulation to the system. Some consider that if someone goes to the lengths of asking for food, that is in itself a demonstration of need:

We make a point of not saying no. It's a very big thing to have to ask for food, and we make the assumption that if they can bring themselves to do it their need is genuine.

3.9.3 Do they ration food?

In the Trussell Trust model described above, organisations are also required to restrict food provision to a limited number of occasions in a given time period. The argument for restricting access is to discourage dependency:

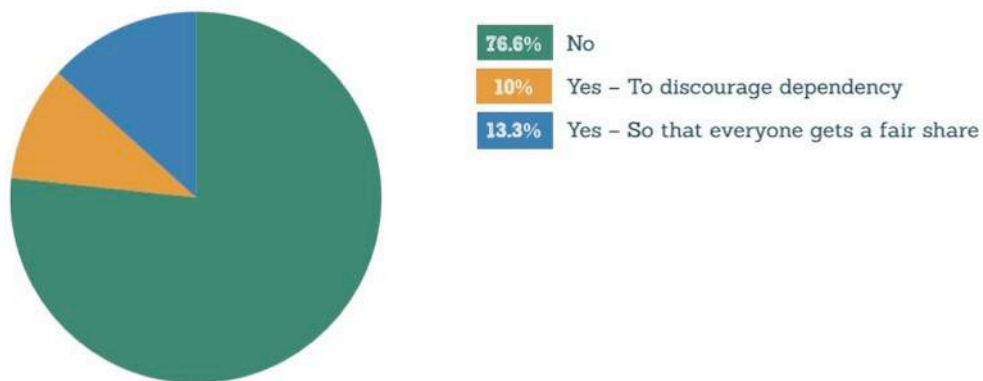
It's important to avoid people seeing foodbanks as an alternative to better budgeting.

Although none of the emergency food providers in Oxford are members of the Trussell Trust,⁹ one organisation interviewed follows their model closely, in that they require referrals and also restrict access to food assistance to three times per year.

Yes, we restrict it to 3 times a year, negotiable with referring agency where necessary. The purpose is to discourage dependency. We are here for emergencies.

The other two organisations in Oxford that require formal referrals do not restrict or ration food.

We asked all of the organisations interviewed whether they restricted access to the food that they provide, and if so, what was their rationale for doing so. Here are the responses:



10% of organisations do restrict access, in order to discourage dependency on their service. One organisation, for example, limits the number of days that people can attend their service:

⁹ Two of the foodbanks operating elsewhere in Oxfordshire are, however, members of the Trussell Trust.

Yes, people are restricted to coming 3 times a week, and people are encouraged to come for the whole day (9-3), not just for lunch, to demonstrate commitment to the project.

13.3% also restrict access, but do so primarily in order that everybody who comes along to that session or uses that service gets a “fair share”:

Yes, [we do restrict food] in order for everyone to get properly fed. If there's stuff left towards the end of the session, people can take more.

Sometimes we put stuff away to ration it, as some people hoard and we want to make sure everyone gets their share.

We ask for a donation if people want to take more, so as not to let anything go to waste.

Yes, the staff use discretion on this – we find the balance between not giving out hand-outs, but not throwing food away.

The organisations that do not restrict access to their food are in the majority at 76.6%. One of these argued that they do this because they consider three parcels a year not to meet the level of need that they are seeing:

Some people are referred to [a provider that restricts their provision] and go there, but there are restrictions! Sometimes three parcels a year is not enough, so we step in.

Some used similar arguments for not restricting access that we saw in the section above regarding assessment of need, stating that they find this to be an unnecessary process, given how well they know their service-users. Staff often use their own discretion in this matter:

We do not ration the fresh food, though we encourage people to take only as much as they need.

Interviewees also reported that users behave respectfully and exercise discretion:

No. We know the families very well. They are selective about what they take, only taking what they'll use.

We don't restrict or ration. This has never been an issue; the parents are very accepting and respectful of each other, and one of the reasons people are reluctant to accept food is that they think there are more deserving families.

One organisation has found an innovative system for encouraging the self-regulation of access to food parcels: including members themselves in the distribution process. They find this to be effective, and that it brings about a more dignified experience for their members than might be brought about by a traditional “foodbank” system:

We exercise control by having the members [themselves] play an active role in the food distribution. We use personal interaction rather than a one-size-fits-all model. The women can be quite sharp to anyone who seems overly greedy. Some other places have lockers with food and people show their vouchers. We feel that kind of system is

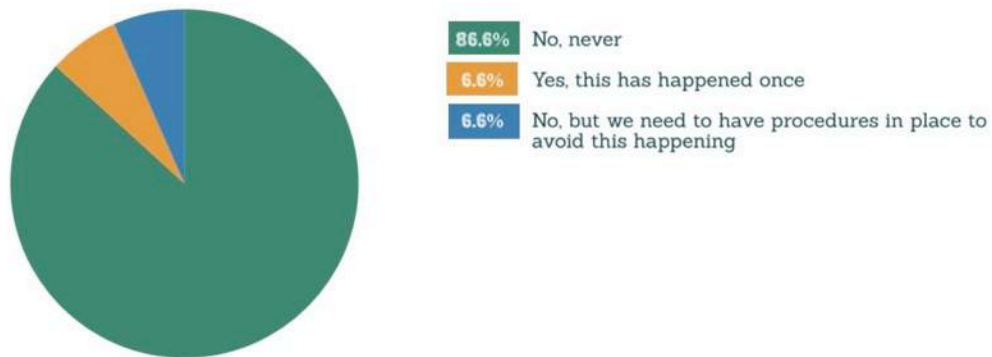
extremely patronising. Here we get people who wouldn't otherwise use foodbanks, because of the stigma.

In the services that do not restrict access, many organisations reported that users self-regulate appropriately – in some cases to the point that providers report having to encourage people to take *enough* food rather than to take less:

Very occasionally we have to limit the amounts requested – but usually it's the other way around, we actually have to encourage people to take what they need.

3.9.4 Is there any abuse?

We asked whether organisations felt that food was ever used or accessed inappropriately. These were the responses:



86.6% - a considerable majority – of organisations stated that this never happened. Many were very emphatic about this:

No, not even an inkling.

No, definitely not.

Absolutely not.

A handful of organisations (6.6%) stated that this had happened once in the past:

This happened once, with one individual – he took food and sold it – we have had no further issues since explaining to him that that isn't allowed.

One person started to take more than their fair share, but we raised our concerns with them and this stopped.

Another 6.6% - who work with some of the most vulnerable client groups - reported that they need to have systems in place to ensure that inappropriate use does not occur:

Yes, sometimes. We have to be very careful with people who are obsessive about taking as much as they can get their hands on and using it to feed birds or store at home for long periods of time and then share with others which makes them ill. We anticipate this, and make sure large amounts aren't taken away.

One organisation experienced some abuse in the past, but they changed their system as a result, and have had no further problems:

When the food was available for all there was abuse and inappropriate behaviour – now that it's restricted to regular users of the Children's Centre, [the people receiving assistance] are all known to staff. This is working very well.

This quote reinforces the arguments made by interviewees in the previous section, in which the organisations described systems where food provision is coherently embedded into wider services, and where staff/user relationships are strong. In those instances, food provision appears not to require formal rationing, and is not subject to abuse. This quote that we have just seen confirms the importance of this – when this organisation did not have these institutional safeguards in place, problems arose. But once they embedded the food into their own user-group that they knew well, they no longer had problems, and did not need to restrict access within that group.

3.10 What benefits do free deliveries of fresh food have on these organisations?

We asked the organisations whether the deliveries of fresh food that they receive from the Oxford Food Bank benefitted their organisations, and if so, in what way(s).

What benefits do free deliveries of fresh food have on the organisations?

1. Saving money
2. Providing more food
3. Providing healthier meals
4. Enhancing the variety and quality of meals
5. Increasing the breadth and creativity of services
6. Generating skills and effecting behaviour change
7. Providing food when it otherwise wouldn't be possible

3.10.1 Providing food when it otherwise wouldn't be possible

Some organisations provided other services but provided no food until they began to receive free deliveries from Oxford Food Bank (OFB):

We have no budget for food, so wouldn't be providing any without OFB.

We wouldn't provide food parcels if it weren't for OFB.

Some organisations were actually founded because of the opportunity presented by OFB to distribute fresh food:

Without OFB, we would not be making distributions within our community.

3.10.2 Saving money

All of the organisations, except those that stated that without the OFB deliveries they would not be providing food, stated that they received financial benefit. Depending on how they use food, and also on their model, this benefit ranged from “small” to “considerable”. For many, the savings on food budget mean that money can be spent on other aspects of their service provision:

It's been a crutch throughout the years. At times when funding is harder and harder to get, and food prices are going up, not having to worry about food purchasing is vital for us. The money saved goes straight into staffing and activities.

The money we save on food gets diverted to other areas of spending and benefits the charity in other ways.

3.10.3 Providing more food

Various organisations reported that they had increased the *quantity* of food that they provide because of the free food deliveries:

We can get more food to more people.

It means we can provide one more meal a week.

We can provide one extra meal every day because of the OFB deliveries.

3.10.4 Increasing the breadth and creativity of services

Some reported that it helped them to expand the breadth of their services:

It helps us promote healthy eating, has helped us to expand the food-related parts of the curriculum; gives us another way in to the [health] messages we try to get across.

It has enabled us to widen the range of service.

Others stressed the opportunities it generates for experimentation and creativity:

We have kitchens that people can use, alone or in groups. They use the Oxford Food Bank donations and have a go.

It has made us much more innovative, much more creative, - both in the dishes and also in the services and activities they can provide - nothing is holding us back now. If, for example, the African Women's group says 'how about a community lunch?', I get them the gear, and they do it.

3.10.5 Providing healthier meals

Some reported that the use of free fresh food helps them to make their very small budgets for meals go further, and to ensure that these meals are of a higher nutritional standard than they otherwise would be:

We have 65p a head to feed everyone every day, including tea and coffee. This makes OFB totally vital for getting a good meal on their plates.

For our school meals, we're allowed to spend 85p a head. And when you think that a chicken breast costs £1 [...]. For the younger kids, we can give half a breast, but not for the older ones. So OFB really is an added bonus, both because it helps us to make a saving, and also because it helps us to provide a much better meal.

Many mentioned fruit and vegetables in particular, which would not be provided in such ample quantities without OFB:

Its partly through OFB that we have fresh fruit, salads - we never did before. People really do enjoy them.

We get lots of fresh fruit and veg, which are so expensive to buy.

It makes people so happy to get fresh fruit, especially strawberries, and fruit juice – the children love it! It was too expensive for us to buy fruit before.

It helps us offer higher quality food, both in terms of diversity and in terms of nutritional value. We wouldn't be able to buy as much fresh fruit in the quantity we get it from OFB.

Some explained that it had decreased their dependency on processed foods:

We use far fewer tins.

We don't like to use frozen stuff but sometimes we have to because it's more cost effective. If we get potatoes from OFB, it means we don't have to use oven chips – we make our own wedges, if we get beetroot we'll make a soup or puree, rather than using a sauce from a can. Much of the food that we used to get from [the County's school dinner provider] was frozen and/or reconstituted. Now we have much higher demand for school meals since opting out of that scheme and getting our own chef who cooks [meals from scratch].

3.10.6 Enhancing the variety and quality of meals

Many organisations stressed – with considerable glee – how much OFB deliveries enhance the variety and quality of the food that they provide:

It has enriched the variety of vegetables – we get some really odd veg!

It supplements our food with more interesting and exotic things that we wouldn't otherwise buy.

It broadens the range. The food is more interesting. The irony of asylum seekers eating asparagus and porcini mushrooms!

It's quirky and high quality. [We get] exotic and unknown fruits. Olives, Jerusalem artichokes, fantastic cheese, even duck eggs!

If they bring basil, we'll make pesto. Or if they bring rocket, we'll make rocket pesto. Tomatoes – tomato sauce. Bread - breadcrumbs. Eggs – homemade mayo. We get some incredible stuff – pine nuts, we got £120 worth of Parmesan once, which we froze in chunks. We get massive wheels of brie, which we stuff with thyme and rosemary and sit down and eat. Even if it's just cabbage, we'll do four different things with it. Today we made homemade pizzas, homemade bread, red pepper and baby tomato soup, a melon, pear, walnut and gorgonzola salad. Homemade coleslaw. [...] We've made an Indian rice dish from Rajasthan. Homemade naan breads, parathas. All cooked from scratch.

3.10.7 Generating skills and effecting behaviour change

One service was keen to stress that the impact that the high quality meal they provide on users' overall diets is, of course, limited:

It's just one meal a week, so [there's] probably no real impact on health.

But others see impact in the knock-on effects of providing these high quality meals, in terms of skills generation and changing people's long-term eating patterns by exposing them to new foods:

The challenge of the OFB food is there's more processing time, but [cooking from scratch is] a good skill to learn and the food's better.

We get really interesting stuff, like moolis, and people eat them, then ask me for the recipe and go and find them in the shops on the Cowley Road.

We may be modelling what a good diet is.

Changing diets by increasing access to fresh food is not an easy task, though, as one organisation describes:

Sometimes it aggravates them that things like that [i.e.: fresh fruit and veg] are brought to us. They ask: 'Why would we want that? Why don't they bring crisps?!'

But some organisations find their own solutions to this:

Unfortunately the kids don't eat that much veg. You have to sneak it into the meals, hide it.

Overall, the delivery of crates chock-full of fresh produce seems to have a wide range of benefits on the organisations, as well as on their service-users, who receive more interesting and healthy food as a result. One interviewee stated, simply but powerfully, that:

It has improved the quality of life considerably for our residents.



3.11 What is the response to the unexpectedness of the surplus food that is delivered?

Because OFB's supply comes from retailers and wholesalers, and because of the need for quick turn-around between collection from suppliers and delivery to charities, the items delivered are largely unknown to organisations before they arrive. There are different responses to what many of them described as the "Ready, Steady, Cook!" style of cooking that ensues from this. Some staff find it to be a real challenge:

The unpredictability is sometimes very difficult.

Others find that different members of staff or service-users respond in different ways:

It's like "Ready, Steady, Cook!"! With our young parents' group sometimes it's a challenge, but mostly it's fun.

Some cope very well, some struggle.

Some of these organisations have found ways to cope with this range of responses within the group:

They get to be creative with food, because we never know what's coming from OFB. It can make people nervous not knowing, but mostly it's exciting. We use a peer-support model to deal with this – matching one person with skills with one without skills, and this works great.

The majority of groups respond proactively and positively to this aspect of the experience of using OFB food, either because they have learned to do so, or because they are fortunate to have a member of staff or service-user who takes to this intuitively.

We cope with it very well. It's a source of joy and excitement!

It doesn't faze the chefs. Anyone who's cooked in the Iraqi army can cook with whatever arrives!

You can get stuck in a rut when you shop for stuff and plan. There's not much variety down at Tesco's. [...] The stuff from OFB makes cooking fun again, you're always thinking on your feet!

The response [from users] is generally very positive, it's part of the challenge.

For one organisation which started receiving OFB deliveries when it was already a mature organisation, it has completely changed the way they operate:

We love the weird fruit and veg that OFB bring – the fun and exotic things. We make a curry, for example, and anything can go in. We’ve scrapped the meal planning that we used to do – now we just improvise every day! [...] And we’ve transitioned to a fully vegetarian menu.

One newer organisation has designed this element in to their projects from the start:

For the Asian ladies who cook once a week – that’s part of the deal, they know they have to go with the flow. They know that rice, dhal and oil will be provided, but for the veg, anything could show up. It’s all part of the ethos of the project. There’s always great delight when the deliveries come, because staff never know what’s coming. It’s a bit “Ready, Steady, Cook”! It keeps us all on our toes.

Some recognise the positive knock-on effects that this kind of cooking can have in their service-users’ lives because cooking on a tight budget also often poses similar challenges:

Our volunteers [who are often in food poverty] don’t have the skills to cope with an unpredictable diet. Using the OFB food trains them up – now they can get bargains and discounted food and know how to approach cooking unexpected items from the bargain shelves.



3.12 What are people’s attitudes to receiving free or subsidised food?

We asked how people respond to receiving free or subsidised food. For many, it poses no problem; the users are grateful and/or happy to receive the food:

They’re very grateful and they tell us so.

It’s no problem.

But others are bothered by it:

There’s certainly stigma.

And this can be a considerable barrier for those in need to access emergency food:

Some parents don’t claim the free school meals they’re entitled to, because of the stigma.

There are quite a few people left out. They don’t want to admit they need help.

People are reluctant to ask for help because of pride, guilt etc.

Staff find strategies to make people who need the food assistance feel comfortable accepting it:

People are often embarrassed to ask. We let people volunteer their time so they can contribute in another way to get free food. It's about dignity.

Stigma does not seem to occur so much if the culture of an organisation is designed in such a way that it feels like a community:

They're very happy to accept it, we all know each other very well.

We create an atmosphere where it's a cultural community, so people don't feel like they're just taking, they're also contributing by being here, just not with money.

Other organisations that operate in venues that people go to anyway for other reasons find it easier for service users to overcome the stigma:

Because people come to the community centre for all sorts of reasons there is less embarrassment or stigma, and it is not so obvious that people are receiving food.



3.13 What are people's attitudes to receiving parcels or meals originating from food surplus?

Though none of the organisations actually hide the provenance of their food, some do not *explicitly advertise* the fact that the food that they dispense is sourced from OFB, and is therefore food surplus.

We're not hiding it, but we don't advertise that it's from OFB – people would feel uncomfortable.

We play it down with some of our groups – we don't mention it overtly.

We don't advertise the fact that it's waste food. If we did, there'd be attitude problems. Even our staff are very reticent about taking home leftovers – people don't like to be given stuff for free, and they wouldn't like the idea of eating things that others have rejected.

It's interesting to note that this seems to stem mainly from the staff members' fears of people having attitude problems. Amongst users who know where the food

comes from, there have been a couple of instances of negative attitudes, but, in fact, very few:

Occasionally there are comments, but not as often as you'd expect.

One of our members was uncomfortable with the fact that it is surplus food. But when he saw the incredible meals we make out of it, he relaxed about it.

Generally, the attitudes from those who know where the food is from, and where this has been communicated well, are positive:

It's important how you pitch it. We have had no problems with people not wanting to eat stuff that others didn't want. We don't allow that into the conversation – people are too polite.

The kids who know it's from OFB love it. They meet the van and help to unload it. They see it as great to eat 'waste' food.

It's also interesting to note that the most positive and effusive responses to using surplus food came from the services working with asylum seekers and refugees, and with the homeless and vulnerably housed communities – who are arguably the most vulnerable recipients of OFB food:

No, people are very happy because it's fresh food.

It's a waste to throw stuff away – it's good food!

People think it's positive to be using up waste. It's not a big issue.

It's never a problem – they know about it and the reactions are very positive. When people see the quality of the meals, it breaks any stigma!

I've never heard anyone express any problems with that. People are almost proud to be eating it. If you've been on the street and have been homeless or really poor, you learn not to waste – why would you waste something that's perfectly good?!

Some organisations in which the surplus food is talked about openly and responded to well have discovered that this can be an excellent way to ensure that people experience less stigma when accessing free food:

There's no stigma attached to it the way we do it – we say 'It's perishable, take it so it doesn't go to waste! It's a no-brainer.'

3.14 Where are the gaps in provision?

We asked interviewees if they felt there were individuals or sections of the community who were in need of food assistance but who could not access their services. Particular groups which seem to be less well served in Oxford include the following:

Gaps in provision

1. People in areas of deprivation
2. Families with children over the age of 5
3. People in low-paying jobs
4. People transitioning out of services
5. Asylum Seekers and Refugees

3.14.1 People in areas of deprivation

Some organisations simply perceive that they cannot help all of the people who need it, that food poverty is rife in their area, and that their work is only scratching the surface. This is particularly noted in the parts of Oxford that are the most deprived:

People are still hungry. We'd love to do more. There simply aren't other places to get free meals on Rose Hill.

The location of emergency food providers can also be a barrier for people in some of these areas of deprivation:

We are discussing a more local outlet for Church donations to avoid awkward and costly travel to [emergency food providers in other parts of town].

3.14.2 Families with children over the age of 5

Many of those interviewed identified families with children over the age of 5 as being less well provided for, given that they are not eligible for support from Children's Centres:

We can only help families with children aged 0-5; but a lot of informal "feeding" goes on in the area, e.g.: primary age children queue up at school games club for a slice of toast.

3.14.3 People in low-paying jobs

We have seen that the lowest paid staff in some of the organisations interviewed were themselves in food poverty. Interviewees reported that other people on low incomes in Oxford are also struggling to provide themselves with adequate nutrition, and the opening hours of many emergency food providers can be a barrier to access for people in work:

Working parents are unable to get here during our opening hours.

Some of the newest services distributing food parcels have responded to these perceived gaps in provision, both to the issue of opening hours, and to the eligibility issue:

We're open to all, unlike a Children's Centre. And we're open until school run time to help working families. The housebound perhaps left out – we're going to start tackling that.

We cater for OAPS, young families, all ages.

3.14.4 People transitioning out of services

Some organisations identified the time when people move on from their services, for example when they leave supported residential services and move into private accommodation, as moments of particular vulnerability for people:

When they leave here they don't have the support system anymore. Lots can go wrong – providing emergency food assistance and reinforcing cooking skills is really needed at these kinds of junctures in people's lives.

3.14.5 Asylum seekers and refugees

The organisations providing food and other forms of assistance to asylum seekers and refugees all highlighted the fact that many members of their community are still in need of food assistance. They state, however, that they are working at capacity or that they do not have sufficient resources, so are unable to do more to meet this need:

We only serve a tiny fraction of the refugee population. People who live far away can't come, and people who are working. Some don't know about it. Women don't come! [...] And we only provide one meal a week – we're not rescuing anyone.

Sometimes we are closed and people bang on the door looking for food right then. Some people come for food that are unwell and it's a struggle to get here. We may also be too far away for some people to get to.

We have some clients from Oxfordshire, but our funding is only for Oxford. We want to expand it. [...] We don't have a building to store the food, and we don't have facilities to cook food, so we can't do more at the moment.

All of these services also highlighted the particular difficulties faced by asylum seekers and refugees that lead them into food poverty and – very often – into destitution:

Some asylum seekers are forced to rely on a kind of credit card system: if they are refused asylum, they don't get money but rather a voucher card that can only be used in certain shops. However those places are not necessarily the cheapest places to buy food. For instance they can be used in Tesco but not at market stalls. [...] Having access to allotments for asylum seekers and refugees would be good.

Our asylum system in this country is very harsh – it doesn't provide people with a safety net. Support payments for asylum seekers are extremely low. And when people transition from asylum seeker to refugee, they transition from asylum support to

benefits, but there's often a delay – so people end up in need of [emergency food assistance].

We have two failed asylum seekers [in our accommodation] who aren't allowed housing benefit – they can't go to the night shelter because that's connected to housing benefit. So they can't access emergency accommodation! There are many more in this situation. Those that not allowed to work or receive benefits become destitute or homeless. [...] How are we going to feed and house these people?

Yet it seems that asylum seekers and refugees are not using other food assistance services which would welcome them:

We never see any asylum seekers, although they are very welcome to come. It's a different market – but they could come!

Whether this is a signposting problem or a cultural one is not clear.



4 Conclusions – what more could be done?

The research for the *Feeding the Gaps* project shows that there are people in our city in food poverty, and that many of them are receiving food assistance through the incredible hard work of the organisations we interviewed, amongst others. These organisations receive invaluable support from the Oxford Food Bank, as well as from other partners. But our interviewees report that there is still unmet need for further food assistance in Oxford.

We asked those interviewed what they felt could be done to build upon the work already being done, or to fill gaps in current service provision.

Some of their responses focussed on the fact that their client-groups are seriously affected by decisions that are made “on high” by government or business, with interviewees keen to draw attention to the ways in which these decisions exacerbate food poverty. Particular examples included the urgency of “tackl[ing] benefit sanctions”, or the need to work towards ensuring that people are “paid a living wage”. Others wanted to see local and central government, and the retail and catering industry, taking more responsibility for the health and affordability of food:

We need more promotion of healthy eating. Subsidies on fruit and veg, VAT on the rubbish, and subsidies on good food so that it is priced competitively compared to the rubbish sold at Iceland.

We need tighter controls on processed food.

The supermarkets have a huge role to play – in what they market, what offers they put on..

We should have different regulation of supermarkets, providing more food that isn't processed [...]. Food that is genuinely good, satisfying, wholesome for people on low and middle incomes.

The rest of their responses are grouped under two broad headings – *Capacity Building* and *Culture Change* – each of which is further broken down into two distinct areas. In the sections below these four themes are opened up with discussion points and possible “next steps” that could be explored as ways to build on the findings of the report.

4.1 Capacity building

4.1.1 Strengthening the existing network of food poverty organisations

Sharing skills and resources across the network

We asked the organisations interviewed whether they had any needs that might be met either by another organisation in the network or by a joint fundraising effort. Here are their responses:

Things that groups need	Things that groups might be happy to share or donate to other groups
Storage space	An apple-press
Fridge	A chilled bike trailer
Freezer	Excess cooked cafe produce
Stick blender	Mental health awareness skills
Shelving unit	Cookery skills
Cooker	Occasional labour
Access to transport	An under-used kitchen
Access to a kitchen	
Volunteers	

Effective sharing of best-practice and resources across the network could make individual organisations stronger in themselves, as well as generating a strong network, which would no doubt prove useful in a number of ways. There was enthusiasm for this:

We're all working on this in a vacuum. Unless we find more ways to join up the dots – things are not going to work any better than they do now.

A more efficient, joined up network which becomes more than the sum of its parts might in itself be able to work towards filling some of the gaps in provision that we have identified (people in areas of deprivation, families with children over the age of 5, people in low-paying jobs, people transitioning out of services, and asylum seekers and refugees).

Possible next steps:

Facilitate follow-up conversations about how best to share existing skills and resources, and opportunities for improving infrastructure across the network.

Run a peer-led workshop for the chefs in organisations to share with one another what they have learned about how best to cook with unexpected ingredients.

Analyse the gaps identified in more depth, and consider options for expanding or replicating food assistance services to meet the needs of these five groups.

Better signposting

Some mentioned the need for a publicly visible informational resource to communicate the network better. One organisation remarked that

There is a lot of free or subsidised food out there if people know how to use it.

But it seems that not everyone in need is adequately informed:

There are still people who don't know about these services, who are in need.

A simple map in leaflet form could help organisations to get the word out about their own services, and also to signpost their service-users to other food providers in the network.

Possible next step:

Create a map of the existing food assistance services that are public-facing and open to all.

Celebrating our collective achievements and storytelling

Raising awareness about the need for food assistance in Oxford, and the work already being done to meet this need could help to engage the public, local authorities and potential funders with this issue. Celebrating and telling stories could also serve as a useful internal capacity building tool.

Possible next step:

Create opportunities to celebrate the work being done across the network, and tell the stories of struggles and achievements.

4.1.2 Getting more food surplus to more people in food poverty

Oxford Food Bank volunteers are the first to state that their work is only redistributing a fraction of the city's food surplus. There is still a lot of useable food surplus in and around our city. Food surplus redistribution to people in food poverty, in this context of abundant supply, seems to make more sense than a corporate or individual/community donation approach. Sources of useable food surplus include:

- Retailers and wholesalers (some of which is already collected by OFB)
- Catering surplus, including from functions and events
- Garden and hedgerow surplus
- Farm surplus

In addition to the environmental costs of food waste, given that we know that there are still people in food poverty, mobilisation of this surplus should be a priority. Amongst the approaches that could be explored:

Doing more of what we're already doing

Some interviewees thought that we should work to bring the two themes discussed in this report - food poverty and food surplus – together even more effectively.

We should be working to get more of this fresh stuff – this “waste” out there. There's so much of it! There must be a better way, than to send so much good food to landfill.

We need to work on this waste piece. Cutting down on waste. There's so much focus on people growing their own food, which is great. But we also need to learn to be more resourceful and more creative, using what's already out there!

We should build on the Oxford Food Bank model which, although it is very successful, it is only scratching the surface on both sides.

The work done by Oxford Food Bank since it was formed five years ago to intercept food before it goes to waste has been phenomenal in its achievements. But could Oxford Food Bank's model be expanded usefully to cope with more food surplus, and to meet more of the unmet food poverty needs?

Could OFB simply deliver more food to the organisations that it currently delivers to? When we asked if these organisations could take and distribute more food from OFB, only a handful said yes. The main reasons they gave for not being able to do more were lack of staff or volunteer capacity, and lack of space or cooking facilities, both of which are linked to funding.

Could OFB expand its services by adding more charities to its delivery rounds? OFB continues to add more groups to the roster whenever they discover new organisations that could use their food, but they consider that the large majority of eligible organisations are now being served.

So while there is scope to expand OFB, this is not unlimited. In fact OFB itself occasionally has surplus food that cannot be redistributed via existing channels. It is on the recipient end – finding more channels for distribution - rather than the supply end, that we find most of the limiting factors.¹⁰

Possible next step:

Explore the opportunities for expanding OFB.

Tailoring what is already being done to be more effective

Three other community-run initiatives were started in Oxford in the last few years with the explicit aim of helping both to reduce the amount of food that is wasted and to equip people with the skills needed to do so. They do this using fun, participatory approaches to reuse and skill-sharing. These initiatives are:

Abundance Oxford – salvages useable fruit and other foods from back-gardens and hedgerows, and runs skilling workshops to train people in how to preserve and use these foods.

¹⁰ Supporting the replication of its model *in other cities* is something of interest to OFB, and one example of this is in fact currently underway in Banbury.

DinnerTime – runs intimate pop-up community kitchen events across the city, that focus on informal sharing of the skills needed to turn household food surplus into delicious, nutritious meals.

Disco Soup – runs large-scale pop-up community cookery events in public places, cooking soup for hundreds of people over the course of a day from food that would otherwise have gone to waste.

These projects help to capture useable food surplus, and they also include tackling food poverty as part of their remit. The findings that we have uncovered through this research could help them to target their work more explicitly towards tackling food poverty.

In order to test the appetite for building collaborations with community groups like Abundance, DinnerTime and Disco Soup, we asked the interviewed organisations whether they would be keen to explore this. The majority were interested in these prospects, and were keen to continue exploring the idea.

Possible next step:

Explore potential partnerships between Abundance, DinnerTime and Disco Soup and the organisations interviewed for this report, and explore funding options that could facilitate these.

Doing new things

It seems unlikely that the existing organisations working with people in food poverty and the existing organisations working to banish food surplus from Oxford will be able to make more than a small dent in the available high quality food surplus in the city. There are other models working with food surplus in other cities that we could explore replicating in Oxford to complement our existing services. These could be tailored to help fill the gaps that have been identified in food assistance provision.

Possible next step:

Explore the feasibility of replicating other successful models for redistributing food surplus to those in food poverty. Consider, for example, food surplus cafes (e.g.: The Real Junk Food Project), gleaning (e.g.: The Gleaning Network), large-scale preserve-making projects (e.g. Rubies in the Rubble), and bicycle-powered redistribution of catering surplus (e.g.: Plan Zeroes).

4.2 Culture change

4.2.1 Changing attitudes to food surplus

In order to get more food surplus to more people in need more effectively, we not only need to work on putting in place infrastructure to do this, but also to work on shifting people's attitudes to food surplus. The research for this report suggests that stigma can be a factor preventing people in need from accessing food provision services, and that there is a mixed response to the notion of redistributing food surplus. It may be beneficial to find ways to reframe the narrative, so that more people consider it as rich and wholesome "surplus" rather than as "waste". Lessons could be learned from Abundance, DinnerTime and Disco Soup, as well as from some of the organisations that we interviewed for this report, who are exploring methods for framing surplus food in positive ways. Consider this quotation:

They're hungry. Not just the kids, but their parents too! So we've started giving out food for kids to take home – but we don't pitch it as a food parcel – we ask if they'd like to be part of a new green initiative, where we are preventing good food from going to landfill. It works very well – we almost beg them to take it – they're doing us a favour! If you pitch it that they're really helping the environment, who wouldn't sign up to that kind of scheme?! They come away not just with a full belly with a feel good factor too.

Possible next steps:

Run public events and campaigns focussed on changing attitudes to food surplus.

4.2.2 Building a healthy food culture and food-related skills

We saw earlier that the absence of valuable social and cultural dimensions to food is a contributing factor to food poverty. The work already being done by many of the organisations discussed in this report is helping to build a healthy and positive food culture for Oxford that celebrates food, ingredients, cooking and the enjoyment of eating together. We must build on this work.

We also saw evidence of the power of food – when it is appropriately mobilised - to build thriving and diverse communities and to generate skills.

And we saw that food even acts as a "motivator" for many of these organisations; that building food into other services and events that aren't in themselves explicitly food-related can be a very effective tool for engaging people with essential welfare services. This is certainly a lesson worth sharing.

Cooper and Dumbleton, in *Walking the Breadline*, state that although foodbanks "provide a vital emergency service to the people they support", they "do not address

the underlying structural causes for the growth of food poverty.¹¹ This is true, and very important to note. But we must add that the other kinds of food assistance that we have outlined in this report *are* helping to address some of the underlying causes of food poverty, and they do so by developing a healthy food culture and skills.



Tailoring the work of the city's community farms and gardens

A number of the projects interviewed incorporate food-growing as a part of their therapeutic and educational services:

We aim to give each member their own plot at the allotment – encouraging grow your own, growing their way out of poverty.

There are also a number of community gardens and farms in and around Oxford, such as **OxGrow** and **Hogacre Common**, **Cultivate**, and **Barrack's Lane Community Garden**. Their aims include educating the public about where food comes from and how to grow it, and encouraging people to get involved in growing food and sharing in the harvests.

These gardens and farms would be well-placed to target their work more explicitly towards tackling food poverty in the city, by developing more programmes tailored to the communities discussed in this report. This would help to democratise the opportunities for acquiring the skills and land required to “grow-your-own”. It would also open up new ways of accessing free, high quality food in exchange for fulfilling voluntary work.

In order to test the appetite for building collaborations with community groups like Cultivate, OxGrow and Hogacre Common, and Barrack's Lane, we asked the organisations that we interviewed whether they would be keen to explore the idea of taking their members to these sites. The majority of organisations interviewed were interested in this prospect, and were keen to continue exploring the idea.

Possible next step:

Explore potential partnerships between community farms and gardens and food poverty organisations, as well as options for funding these.

¹¹ Cooper and Dumbleton, p. 3.

Expanding the provision of cookery classes

Many of the organisations interviewed for this report have run cookery classes, often focussing on how to eat well on a budget. There is certainly scope – indeed there is great need – to run more courses like these throughout the city. Being able to cook simple, healthy food from fresh ingredients is one of the most powerful weapons we have to tackle food poverty.

Possible next step:

Mobilise the skills and experience already present in the network to run more classes on how to cook healthy meals on a budget, and explore funding options.



4.3 Closing comments

Food poverty and food waste are complex, long-term problems; ones that are already being addressed – perhaps not enough – at a national level and local level. But while hunger and food surplus exist, there is more that we could be doing. Any of the possible next steps outlined above could play a part in this effort to do more.

The best solutions promote a holistic, multicultural and celebratory food culture. And the best solutions are ones which, in the short term, fill bellies, but in the long term, create profound ripple effects that help to address the underlying causes of food poverty. Perhaps most importantly, the best solutions are ones that come from the ground up; driven by the people who know best what's needed.

