

Conclusion: is foodbank Britain here to stay?

The writing of this book was motivated by the hundreds of people I met over the course of two years spent inside the foodbank as both a volunteer and a researcher. I wanted to make their voices heard above the political and media commotion that the growing use of emergency food aid has caused in Britain. ‘Emergency’ food provision suggests that there is a social safety net that will eventually take effect – but this has been called into question by the experiences presented in this book. We have seen how foodbank use is growing, due to static incomes, rising living costs, low pay, fuel poverty, debt and other complicated problems related to welfare reform. Added to that is the relentless ‘shirkers’ and ‘strivers’ dialogue that surrounds people on low incomes, eroding any last scraps of dignity they may have left. As a result of this, people at the sharp end are mostly existing, not living, and this unsurprisingly leads to stigma, shame and embarrassment for many who are desperately trying to make ends meet. This book has emphasised the realities and voices of people using the foodbank who are struggling to survive, but who are mostly refusing to give in.

But what does the future look like for foodbank Britain?

Are foodbanks here to stay?

Foodbanks would not need to exist if it weren’t for the harsh benefits sanctions, precarious, low-paid jobs, and administrative delays that leave families without money for weeks on end. The hundreds of people I met did not want to come to the foodbank. It was not something they planned to do because they didn’t fancy going to Tesco for their food shopping. It was a last resort,

a tipping point into a whole new realm of indignity. People came to the foodbank so they could spend their last few quid on fuel to avoid bringing their new-born baby into a house without any heating or electricity, like Gemma, whom we met in the Introduction. They came to the foodbank when they were waiting for their ESA appeal to be heard, but were too afraid of what could happen if they tried to claim other benefits, like Jamie. For others, like Malcolm and Naomi, the foodbank was a last resort when even the cheap, processed foods that people knew were bad for them had run out. People like Glen and Ellie were employed, but still found themselves asking for help from the foodbank.

It is crucial that foodbanks are not seen as an extension of the welfare state. The suggestion by Iain Duncan Smith that DWP advisers would be placed in foodbanks signified a very worrying shift in the relationship between the state and emergency food provision. Such a move would place unwanted and unnecessary levels of suspicion and surveillance on people using foodbanks, and suggest a permanence and inevitability that they are here to stay. The Trussell Trust responded to Duncan Smith's suggestions in a statement¹ saying that it was 'not aware of any pilots taking place in Trussell Trust foodbanks'. I asked it to clarify its position on this, and it told me:

No Trussell Trust foodbank would ever need to worry about being forced to have a DWP advisor in a foodbank, and no Trussell Trust foodbank would be encouraged to do anything that they felt might jeopardise the non-judgemental environment our foodbanks operate in. We have no plans to place DWP 'job advisers' in Trussell Trust foodbanks.

We met people in Chapter Four, like Jimmy, who were afraid to even claim for the benefits they were entitled to. How would Jimmy feel about seeing a Jobcentre adviser sitting in the foodbank? The pilot can perhaps be seen as a covert attempt by the government to reduce the number of people accessing foodbanks by increasing the levels of stigma and shame already

associated with coming to a foodbank that many people can experience.

American sociologist Janet Poppendieck² described foodbanks as a ‘moral safety valve’ which ‘reduce[s] the discomfort evoked by visible destitution in our midst by creating the illusion of effective action and offering us myriad ways of participating in it. It creates a culture of charity that normalizes destitution and legitimates personal generosity as a response to injustice, rather than encouraging systemic change’. While she is referring to emergency food provision in America, comparisons can be drawn within a UK context. Poppendieck has warned that charitable responses can become normalised and the inequality embedded in them risks becoming legitimated, as I have described in relation to the ongoing Tesco foodbank collections and the ubiquitous presence of food donation boxes in supermarkets. Charity is not offered to social equals, thus recipients remain separate from volunteers in terms of both status and expectations. ‘Social honour accrues to those who volunteer; stigma to those who are clients,’ Poppendieck argued. James Harrison, Associate Professor at the University of Warwick, asked:

Once every town in Britain has a foodbank, and there is institutionalised support for them from a myriad of agencies and corporations, will we really be able to find a way of making sure they are used less and less?³

I asked the Trussell Trust for its perspective on this, and it told me:

Foodbanks represent a community response to the problem of hunger that people have identified in their local areas. Foodbanks provide a mechanism for local people to provide effective support to people at the point of crisis and, as long as a need exists, it is good that communities can be part of a solution. Every day foodbanks see first-hand the positive impact of non-judgemental kindness combined with practical help. When you’re faced with a mum who is going to go hungry tonight, it’s important that there are

people who will give immediate support – and that's what foodbanks facilitate. This support needs to go hand in hand with wider pressure for policy changes that help the poorest, and improvements to welfare delivery in order to reduce the number of people needing foodbanks in future.

The Trussell Trust's 2015/16 mid-year statistics showed that foodbank use rose once again, this time by 3%.⁴ Although the growth was not as stark as that seen in previous years, it was still an increase. The implementation of Universal Credit and further planned cuts to the welfare budget are likely to send more people heading towards foodbanks in the coming years.

Will public support for food aid disappear?

In 2014/15, the public donated over 10,280 tonnes of food to Trussell Trust foodbanks across the UK. Despite this support, on more than one occasion I found the food cupboard in the foodbank to be almost bare. Tins of meat, fish, fruit, vegetables and bottles of juice are always the first to go. Beans and cereal were always in plentiful supply, but don't add up to a fully balanced nutritional diet on their own. The following from my field notes shows just how reliant foodbanks are on continual, ongoing public support:

Field notes

7 February 2014

We're starting to run out of food now despite the 300 boxes we received at Christmas time after the Tesco collection. There was no sugar at all today, very little pasta or rice, no meat, and only two tins of tuna left. There is supposed to be a collection at Asda over the weekend, so hopefully that will get us stocked up. Ronnie and I stacked some of the shelves with what remaining food we did have. We found some jars of pasta sauce, rice pudding, vegetables, chopped tomatoes, and biscuits hiding in the cupboard. Thankfully, someone donated a large bag of food this morning, and Ronnie and Belinda brought ten bottles of juice as they knew we had none left. They all went today.

Both the volunteers and people using the foodbank told me they were worried that public support might eventually ebb away. But, on a visit to the foodbank in November 2015, it seemed the opposite was happening:

Field notes

Friday 13 November 2015

I'd initially planned to call in to the foodbank to see how everybody was doing but it was a really busy day and I ended up staying for the full shift to help out. There have been more and more people coming through the doors lately, with a record number of people being fed in October. I noticed some loaves of bread and packets of teacakes were being put in people's food parcels and asked Angie where they'd come from. She told me how Warburton's had recently started donating 30 loaves of bread, packets of bread buns and teacakes each week, all in date, after volunteer Jane mentioned the foodbank to her relative who worked there. Twice a week, one of the volunteers from Billingham brings fruit and vegetables to Hebron that she collects from Marks & Spencer, the Co-op and other local stores. The collection box in the main Tesco in Stockton-on-Tees is bringing in at least an extra 250 kilograms of food every month, Angie said, showing me the numbers she had tallied up on her phone. It's always full to bursting. The local Barclays Bank, fire service, and recent Harvest festivals all brought in more donations recently. A newly established pub in the town donated £1200 after a fundraiser for the foodbank. To me, it shows all the signs of becoming a permanent arrangement.

Is there an alternative?

It is estimated that around 3.5 million tonnes of food are wasted every year in the UK before they even reach people's shopping baskets. About 10% is good enough to be eaten.⁵ Although the Trussell Trust foodbanks rely on food donated by the public, charities like FareShare and many independent foodbanks are increasingly relying on 'food waste', or 'surplus' food, as we saw in Chapter Two. In October 2015, Marks & Spencer announced it would be distributing thousands of tonnes of surplus food under a scheme that would use a social networking app to link

all 500 of its UK stores to local charities, including foodbanks.⁶ But foodbank experts Elizabeth Dowler and Hannah Lambie-Mumford have warned of the drawbacks of this:

The terminology of ‘food waste’ is negative and its usage deeply demeaning as a solution to those in need. The covert, tacit institutionalisation of charitable responses also runs the risk of contributing to these important issues and distinct dysfunctions in our food and socio-economic systems being sidelined and depoliticised, particularly through the rhetoric of solutions located in ‘proper use of resources’ at local levels. This enables both the state to retreat from responsibilities and food businesses to gain from improving corporate social responsibility and reduced landfill taxes. There is no real gain to those who are bearing the brunt of economic austerity in the UK today.⁷

But there is a more positive side of food waste redistribution, such as the establishment of pay-what-you-can cafes. There are at least ten ‘waste not, want not’ cafes, such as the Real Junk Food Project in Leeds and Save the Date in London, which operate on the principle of using ‘intercepted food’ that would otherwise be thrown away by supermarkets, letting customers pay what they feel their meal is worth. The aim is not just to reduce food waste but also to act as a community hub, redistributing food to people in the area who need it most.⁸ But how far should this concept extend? Think-tank Demos called for the replacement of half of the UK’s foodbanks with community supermarkets by 2020.⁹ These shops offer low-income customers heavily discounted food for up to 12 months, and in return require them to sign up to a programme of social support and advice, from life skills to debt counselling. They are stocked with surplus products from food manufacturers, meaning that the items for sale range from Asda curry sauce to organic pigeon breast from Waitrose.¹⁰ However, a community shop would not have been any use to many of the people whom we have met throughout this book who were struggling to get by, sometimes with zero

income to feed themselves and their families. While community supermarkets might be able to provide a complementary service alongside foodbanks, they should not replace them. Food blogger and poverty campaigner Jack Monroe also opposed the idea, writing in the *Guardian*:

If you are in the queue at the food bank because you can't afford to buy simple basic groceries for yourself and your family, it doesn't matter where those groceries are that you can't afford to buy. Let's not fool ourselves that boxes of broken biscuits, or mushroom and pecorino tarts at £2.20 a slice, hold any of the answers to feeding the poorest and hungriest in Britain today.¹¹

There is a real danger that people can feel patronised by the fact that, in order to access the community shop, they have to sign up to life skills classes to be given advice by people who apparently know better than them, and can tell them how they should be living their lives. It implies a lack of trust and a stigmatising lack of understanding of how people are doing the best they can to get by on a low income. People are likely to be facing ongoing problems that are entirely unrelated to a personal skills deficiency – what if the problems they face are structural, such as having no money, or a lack of jobs in their area?

What needs to change?

Although the research for this book is drawn from one Trussell Trust foodbank in a particular place in North East England, emerging evidence on foodbank use from charitable organisations, frontline professionals, GPs, church leaders and academics paints a similar picture to the findings presented here.¹² The long-term consequences of increasingly relying on charity to address poverty cannot be ignored. Where provision is adequate and tailored to the needs of people using it, foodbanks can relieve some symptoms of this insecurity – *temporarily* – but there are many structural ‘solutions’ outstanding. Three important steps are needed to begin to effectively address rising

foodbank use in the UK: government intervention; avoiding stigmatisation of people living in poverty; and starting to listen to the voices of people using foodbanks.

Government intervention

Above all, the government needs to tackle the huge driving factors that send people heading towards a foodbank. As we have seen throughout this book, benefits sanctions, delays, errors, low pay and debt all send people through the foodbank doors. The Fabian Commission¹³ outlined a 14-point plan in its report on tackling food poverty and insecurity in the UK. I have chosen the ones that I think are most important, based on my time at the foodbank:

- a new cross-departmental minister with responsibility for eliminating household food insecurity in the UK;
- action to reduce acute household food insecurity caused by social security benefit sanctions, delays and errors;
- an inquiry to identify effective ways of removing poverty premiums for key living costs including food, utilities, housing, household appliances and transport;
- local authorities to establish food access plans that will address any physical barriers to affordable, nutritious food in their area;
- the government to proceed with raising the NLW to 60% of median wages.

If these steps were taken, the Commission believes, foodbanks and other forms of charitable food provision should become unnecessary by as early as 2020. That seems quite an ambitious target, and I don't believe foodbanks are going anywhere any time soon. I asked the Trussell Trust what it thought about the future for foodbanks in the UK, and it told me:

When we don't have any hunger, we won't need foodbanks. We would like to see a huge reduction in foodbank use, but we're also realistic enough to acknowledge that there will always be some people who fall through the net, and we want foodbanks to

be there for them. The commonly held perception of what a foodbank is, is also not necessarily in keeping with the reality of what many foodbanks are now offering on the ground. Churches and community groups already operating foodbanks are increasingly locating additional services and partnering with organisations like CAB to become ‘hubs’ where people in crisis can receive holistic support to help them break out of poverty. Better support at foodbanks must also be combined with increased pressure on politicians across parties, businesses and regulators to address the causes of poverty and hunger. Will we see another rise in foodbank use? We hope not, but it is difficult to predict the future, and this will be highly dependent on changes to policies and the economy, which can have a major impact on foodbank use.

Stop stigmatising people living in poverty

As we have seen on almost every single page of this book, there is a nasty rhetoric around people living in poverty that blames and shames them for being poor. Politicians, the mass media, poverty-porn TV shows and public opinion all fuel these ideas. But ‘misconceptions about the welfare state and the way it is abused are not just a matter of harmless misunderstanding’, as John Hills wrote in *Good times, bad times*. Branding people who use a foodbank, or any person living on a low income, as somehow different to the rest of ‘us’ is fundamentally problematic. Such language is dangerous, and negatively affects people who are experiencing the sharp end of austerity and need to turn to a foodbank, as we saw in Chapter Seven.

In May 2015, the Poverty Alliance relaunched its ‘Stick Your Labels’¹⁴ campaign, which challenges the stigma of poverty. The campaign aims to get political parties, public sector organisations, voluntary organisations and even private companies to sign up to a series of anti-stigma statements, breaking down myths of the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor. Such a campaign is definitely needed when it comes to thinking about who uses a foodbank

and why. This book has shown how we need to avoid labelling people as ‘undeserving’, or as scroungers. This includes people like Paul in Chapter Four, a long-term heroin addict who came to rely on the foodbank following a six-month sanction because he “couldn’t be arsed to go to his appointment”, but was living an extremely chaotic and precarious life. It’s difficult to know how to relay these stories without playing into the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ stigmatisation, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t talk about it.

Listen to people using foodbanks

We need to remember that behind every tin of food donated is a person with a reason for being there, and we need to listen to them. Edwina Currie patronisingly suggested that:

Kindly food bank operators rarely have the resources to visit recipients at home. One imagines they would get as incensed as I do at the well-fed dogs, the obligatory wide-screen TVs, the satellite dishes, the manicures and mobiles.¹⁵

Well, as a ‘kindly’ foodbank volunteer I *have* visited people in their homes. Were there people who used the foodbank who had big TVs, tattoos, smoked and had cars? Yes, of course there were. Sometimes these were signs left over from a previous life when their wages paid for their car or their 24-month contract on an iPhone 6. More often than not, I saw empty spaces where a TV once stood, inch-long greying roots on once-dyed hair and mobile phones so ancient that I recognised them from when I was a teenager. The only manicured nails I saw were my own. I saw well-fed dogs, but they didn’t incense me. What incensed me was hearing how people were getting by, day by day, trying to stave off their hunger pains by drinking endless cups of Value-range coffee.

Calling the problem ‘hunger’ can risk obscuring the structural factors that produce it – cuts to social security, access to employment, poor housing, oppressive debt – and enables charitable responses to dominate. But focusing on ‘emergency

food aid' itself becomes too political. It sparks disputes over whether there have been 1 million unique foodbank users, and continual denials from ministers about the role of austerity in the relentless growth of foodbanks. Questioning the need for foodbanks in the UK is both inaccurate and dangerous, and further fuels the artificial idea that those who don't have income for enough food, or rent, or gas and electricity, or a school uniform for the kids, are themselves to blame. More often than not, sanctions are the most commonly cited reason for foodbank referral, despite ministers' protestations. But the picture is wholly more complex than that. It's about insecure, low-paid work; the debts that build up because an ESA appeal is taking far too long. It's also the health problems, especially mental health problems, which make even getting up on a morning an almost insurmountable task. Further government cuts will target the most vulnerable in society, causing further destitution and hardship for many in the UK.

What we need to focus on is quite simple. We need to listen to the voices of people using the foodbank so that we can understand who uses them, why and what it feels like. Maybe then we can start to do something about it. How we express the collective shame that should be felt over the existence of emergency food aid will be key to the future of foodbanks in the UK. Just how much inequality are we willing to tolerate as a society? I've left the last words of the book to Naomi. Speaking ahead of the general election in 2015, she told me:

Well if they do what they say they're gonna do [bring Universal Credit in], they're gonna need more foodbanks. If it does go ahead and the Conservatives stay in, people aren't gonna be able to afford to donate all this food. They've forgotten about us ... it's just, I'd love to speak to Cameron ...

“What would you say?” I asked her.

I'd tell him straight, what I've just been saying to you. I'd tell him straight. They've forgot about all the poor ones.