

FOOD EMERGENCY TO POVERTY PREVENTION: THE CHANGING FUNCTION OF LEICESTER FOOD BANKS

Summary

This policy brief explores the evolving social function of the food bank system in the city of Leicester, UK, its challenges and opportunities. Whilst the food bank network continues to support people in the provision of emergency food parcels, they increasingly support the prevention of poverty in different ways.

By poverty prevention, we refer to the wide range of functions that food banks are undertaking in relation to social welfare, including supporting the employability of food bank users. Recognising that there is a wider universe of food provision that lies beyond our research, we focus on the work carried out by the Leicester Food Partnership (LFP) - an informal arrangement between 22 food banks in Leicester.

Understanding the current strengths and limitations of the food bank system can help envisage areas of opportunity to alleviate poverty in the city, with relevance for the wider national system of food provision.

Introduction

In the context of reduced funding in the public sector, growth in the precarity of the labour market and the emergence of different crises (Davies et al. 2020), food banks have become increasingly important in shaping the welfare landscape (Lambie-Mumford, 2019).

In Leicester, whilst the number of food banks has been relatively small, their operations have become ever more important in recent years. Food banks are providing support to low and middle-income individuals. This support reveals that it is not only people on low wages or recipient of benefits who are affected by these issues, but also professional workers who are unable to cope with increased inflation or sudden unemployment.

In this regard, many food banks across the city have extended and deepened their role, moving from emergency food provision towards a much wider concern with the prevention and alleviation of poverty. It is with this objective in mind that the partnership was developed.

The partnership, originally known as the Emergency Food Partnership, brings together 22 food banks. Some food banks within the partnership have started to refer to themselves as 'food hubs' to reflect their wider social policy function in terms of poverty prevention and that they are not only concerned with emergency support. All the food banks within this partnership have retained their independence and operate in different ways, which reflects differences in capacity and resources.

Below we provide further information about the evolving social policy function of the partnership, the challenges it faces, and where the strengthening of collaborations is further needed.

Our findings are based on four sources of data - 24 semi-structured interviews with different stakeholders in the city involved in poverty prevention (including members of the partnership), a focus group with seven volunteers who are also food bank users, three visits to food banks, and the participation in two steering group meetings, which brought together different stakeholders for the development of a Food Health Needs Assessment for Leicester.

Key recommendations

- ⇒ To better understand the underlying economic and social issues that UK cities are facing and which may prevent the food bank network from creating lasting change.
- ⇒ Collaborations should be strengthened within the food bank system and with other sectors.
- ⇒ Collaborations should also be strengthened with the users of the food bank system.
- ⇒ Food banks should continue to cultivate a person-centred approach focused on dignity, respect and empowerment.
- ⇒ The extensive network of actors involved in food poverty in different UK cities reflect on strategic priorities.

A more detailed report of the issues discussed in this brief is available at: https://figshare.le.ac.uk/articles/report/From_the_food_emergency_to_poverty_prevention_the_changing_function_of_food_banks_in_Leicester/27304020/1?file=51718904.

The expanding social function of food banks

The Partnership helps people to alleviate the pressures of their immediate crisis. People visit food banks to receive different types of support, which includes getting access to emergency food parcels and other basic items such as toiletries, clothes, and house items (e.g., white goods, such as microwaves). People also visit food banks to receive advice on various issues such as welfare benefits.

Our conversations with users revealed that many people have had positive encounters and have felt supported by them. This seems particularly important at a time when the capacity of statutory organisations is constrained and there are fewer face-to-face interactions in front line services as a result of digitalisation and cuts.

Food bank users referred to how food banks became a lifeline for many people during the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, and while they recognised that this is a community-based support with limited resources, they mentioned feeling grateful for the support they had received:

"Their support is wonderful. They don't just, you know, give people food, they take an interest in the person; they listen to the person, and they try and find out.... If they recognise you need other support, they'll try to get this support from other foodbanks" (Food bank user).

With respect to the food banks' growing role in poverty prevention, education and training are perceived as necessary to address dependency problems (e.g., people depending on food banks for an extended period). This support is also perceived as needed to help people maximise their incomes and develop their confidence and autonomy (e.g., by (re)-joining the labour market). Larger, better resourced food banks offer

different types of training on site, including training on budgeting, cooking and English language skills, as a way to empower people and help them develop their skills set.

One participant commented: "We don't want people to depend on us.... So we keep telling them how they can improve themselves. Join an English class, we have English classes, maths classes, driving theory classes. So all the people who come for food, we divert them into a different area" (Food bank manager).

Despite the reality that food banks have become ever more important, their aspiration is that they will cease to exist in the medium to long-term, or at least significantly reduce their operations through the eventual abolition of need for such services.

It is with this objective in mind that they are supporting the integration of people into communities so that people help each other, with the view that this could reduce dependency on food banks. Food banks are supporting the integration of communities in various ways, including helping users to improve their language skills, by changing the perceptions of food bank users and facilitating the build up of community support:

"I think that we are getting better at doing more outreach as well in the community, building those networks and contacting businesses and getting their support. And changing that narrative in terms of how people might perceive food bank users. And most people are very receptive and want to help when we approach them and are more than happy to donate and give us free bits. So I think that there is a build-up of a bigger community that we are helping to facilitate as well" (Food bank manager).

Main challenges faced by food banks in delivering an evolving social policy function

The partnership faces different challenges in delivering its evolving social policy function. We identified five crucial challenges, which are briefly presented below:

Funding challenges: Participants discussed the importance of diversifying their funding sources whilst recognising that this is to some extent constrained by their fundraising capacities. They also discussed the issues they face in applying to competitive grants, which make it harder to raise enough funding to cover operational costs.

The well-being of their volunteers: There is growing concern in relation to the well-being of volunteers, some of whom are food bank users. This is because volunteers are having to deal with more complex needs due to the constrained capacity in many local services. This has left food banks having to deal with issues that in some cases they are underprepared for and underequipped to cope with.

Poverty prevention resources are limited: Despite experiencing a significant increase in demand in recent years, many food banks have not been able to match that growth with additional resources to increase their capacity for preventive work, such as having enough advisors and trained workers on site.

The constant state of emergency in Leicester: More than a decade of austerity, in addition to the changes and restrictions to the welfare system have eroded social outcomes. These have only worsened with recent crises, with further threats on the horizon. In the view of participants, this constant state of emergency can only be addressed through structural changes (e.g., changes to the welfare system) and changes at an individual level (e.g., lifestyle changes).

Food banks are seen as an additional emergency service: Unintentionally, food banks have become an additional emergency service in the city, which has altered people's expectations (both of food bank users and statutory organisations) of how much support they should provide.

Better co-ordination of the Food Partnership

Participants discussed how working together through the partnership has led to many positive benefits, including the sharing of resources and knowledge. However, three limitations regarding the current collaborative work within the partnership were identified:

There seems to be a lack of common understanding about the work carried out by the different food banks, in particular in relation to their preventive work. This could potentially restrict food banks in identifying ways in which they can collectively deliver education, training and awareness.

Despite working together there are still gaps in the city and areas where there is no offer of food bank services, or information is lacking.

Some actions and decisions taken by some food banks have unintended consequences and contributed to the problem of poverty and exclusion that the partnership is trying to solve, such as the exclusion of users from emergency support due to food banks' constrained resources.

There are ongoing conversations on further enhancing the partnership by pooling purchasing power and setting similar criteria across food banks. However, some members fear that subsuming themselves more into the partnership could lead to a loss of autonomy and decision-making.

The partnership has also strengthened its relationship with other sectors (private, public and the wider charity sector) in tackling food poverty. These collaborations have been mainly pursued independently rather than as a co-ordinated front and, in some instances, they have been insufficient to prevent poverty, revealing the need for a joined-up approach across sectors. Yet, these collaborations have given food banks a better pool of resources to support their communities.

Recommendations

A better understanding of the underlying issues that UK cities are facing which may prevent food banks from creating lasting change

How far the food bank system can mitigate the food emergency, without a substantial improvement in the underlying social and economic conditions facing cities, is a question for stakeholders involved in poverty prevention to consider and for longer term research, especially with new threats on the horizon such as the Government's welfare reform proposals.

Collaborations should be strengthened within food bank systems, across sectors and with the users of food banks

If there is to be greater co-ordination within food bank networks, the concerns of smaller food banks regarding loss of decision-making autonomy need to be addressed.

The development of a more joined-up approach at a city level, whereby different sectors work closely together to address poverty, is needed to truly tackle poverty.

Food banks could look at ways to build collaborations with users-volunteers at food banks as these might facilitate conversations on the issues facing the food bank system.

The extensive network of actors involved in food poverty in different UK cities could reflect on strategic priorities

We encourage food banks and other stakeholders involved in poverty reduction to reflect on the following three inter-related questions:

- 1) Is the objective simply to meet the need for food through the combination of emergency provision and poverty prevention?
- 2) Does there need to be more consideration of how cities might move to a situation where such measures are not needed?
- 3) Should the food bank system engage with the question of how to mitigate major stressors, such as housing needs?

References

1. Davies, JS., Bua, A., Cortina-Oriol, M., and Thomson, E. (2020) Why is austerity governable? A Gramscian urban regime analysis of Leicester, UK. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 42(1): pp 56-74.
2. Lambie-Mumford, H. (2019) The growth of food banks in Britain and what they mean for social policy. *Critical Social Policy*, 39 (1): pp 3-22.