Experiences from the Front Line

Food Banks and Risk: Conversations with food bank managers

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This research has also formed the basis for:

Iafrati, S. (2016): *The sustainability of food bank provision: What happens when demand outstrips supply?* **Journal of Poverty and Social Justice, 24(3) pp. 307-10**

Iafrati, S. (forthcoming in 2018): *'We're not a bottomless pit': Food banks' capacity to sustainably meet increasing demand*, **Voluntary sector Review**

Contents

Aims of the report

This report is based on research with 21 food bank managers in eight local authority areas across the East and West Midlands. The research examines the extent to which food bank provision is sustainable by looking at changes in demand and understanding these factors alongside the supply capacity of food banks. The central argument of this report is that for food banks to remain sustainable by being able to meet demand without rationing or denial, it is important to balance of demand and supply.

This report does not set out to explicitly examine reasons for food bank demand as this has been carried thoroughly in other sources, but instead examines the challenges food banks face in meeting this demand.

The aim is to report the research findings in an accessible manner that will identify challenges faced by food bank providers as well as making recommendations that will be useful for food banks and policy makers alike.

Framing this research, there is a clear conflict felt by many that food banks should be supported whilst at the same time recognising that the need for food banks is indicative of rising poverty that should be criticised.

I arrived at the food bank for my 10:30am interview with the project co-ordinator. Despite the clear blue sky, it was a bitterly cold day and I barely wanted to leave the warmth of my car long enough to walk across the car park. Already, there was a large queue developing for the food bank, which did not open until midday. The project co-ordinator had said no one was allowed to queue before this time; previously, people had started queueing as early as 7:30am. The need for food bank provision showed no sign of abating.

Executive Summary

This report details feedback from interviews with 21 food bank managers across eight local authority areas in the East and West Midlands, England. The aim of the interviews was to examine how close food banks are to working at full capacity and the challenges that this presented. In this context, full capacity is the maximum amount of food aid and/or people that could be served. The evidence from many food bank managers was that they are coming increasingly close to capacity.

Alongside this awareness of finite capacity was a recognition that demand was continuing to grow and that this growth was happening at a faster rate than capacity can be increased, though it is also important to recognise that in many places, there is no additional capacity. It was clear from many food bank managers that whilst growth in demand has no limits, the ability to meet this demand is finite. If demand exceeds supply, as was seen in some of the food banks, people's access to food banks will be limited and many people will be forced to access food aid at less formal outlets such as gurdwaras, mosques, soup kitchens and other similar providers. Both of these scenarios were already happening in certain areas.

This research is important because feedback from the food bank managers suggests that the voluntary sector is increasingly replacing rather than complementing statutory welfare. However, with limited resources being directed to the food banks, there appears to be a presumption that the voluntary sector can endlessly meet demand. It is important that this presumption is questioned as interviews with food bank managers reveals that this is not the case.

This research is also important because it comes at a time of further welfare reforms and a growth in precarious employment, which is likely to further fuel demand for food bank services. Significantly, this comes at a time when food banks' ability to meet this demand should be recognised as being finite. This raises the possibility of both increasing rationing/conditionality of food bank provision and/or greater numbers of people using less formal food aid such as available through gurdwaras, mosques, the Salvation Army, soup kitchens and other similar organisations.

The key findings are:

- It is unclear and not researched how much food banks can grow in their current format
- There exists a potential for geographical disparities of provision in terms of availability and access
- Partnerships with the private sector have been useful, but these are usually non-contractual and, as such, cannot always be guaranteed. This is a risk factor.
- Some smaller food banks can be isolated and there is limited sharing of good practice and resources; though where this does happen, it is very good.

- There is increased partnership working by larger food banks, which is facilitating increasing numbers of referrals, which is placing more stress on managing demand
- Cuts in statutory welfare provision and support is leading to increased food bank demand
- People's welfare needs extend beyond food alone – this creates more work for food banks to provide items such as clothing, fuel vouchers, furniture, and cookware as well as befriending and support for those at risk of marginalisation and exclusion
- Food banks are independent and autonomous voluntary sector organisations. Whilst this needs to be maintained, it is important to recognise ways in which they can be supported and ways in which they can inform policy development and implementation.
- There exists a range of risk factors for many food banks, such as reliance on external partners for resources and rooms, as well as increasing demand for increasingly comprehensive provision.
- Continued welfare reforms and economic factors, such as low paid and precarious work, are the major cause of food bank demand. Significantly, many people using food banks are employed. The experience and likelihood of poverty, access to benefits and need for food aid is not determined by being in employment.
- Consideration needs to be given to what happens if food bank demand exceeds supply. This could be rationing, limiting service provision or increasing demand placed on less formal food aid outlets. This should be considered before this point is reached.

1, Introduction

This research emerged from a joint piece of work with Citizens Advice Wolverhampton that examined the food bank provision in Wolverhampton. Many of those interviewed in that piece of work, who were working or volunteering at food banks, identified challenges of meeting food bank demand that has increased rapidly during recent years. Whilst this was not the originally expected outcome of the research, it raised questions about the extent to which food bank provision in contemporary Britain is sustainable in the long term.

To date, most food bank research has, for good reason, focused on why people use food banks and the extent to which their use reflects rising levels of poverty. Complementing this understanding of food bank demand, this research examined how this demand could be understood alongside supply factors of food bank operation. In this research, supply covered a variety of factors such as, though not exclusively, food, volunteers, funds, buildings as well as also looking at planning and partnership working. Consequently, this research focussed on the challenges, changes and risks associated with balancing these supply factors with demand.

The goal of this research was to have a clearer understanding of the often overlooked supply elements of food banks. Inherent was a belief that understanding food banks in terms of the overall balance between demand and supply was crucial to understanding the sustainability and development of food banks in Britain. At a time when large numbers of people rely on food banks to help meet fundamental elements of their welfare, their continued presence, whilst regrettable, remains essential.

A wide range of reasons have been identified for why people use food banks; benefit sanctions and delays, welfare reforms, zero hour working, low pay and debt feature heavily as major factors covered subsequently. Importantly, what is just as apparent is that these factors prompting food bank demand appear unlikely to change in the forthcoming years. The 2017 Autumn Budget continued an economic outlook of, at best, modest economic growth coupled with increased inflation and declining living standards for many. For those in the lowest income groups, the outlook appears most stark, with Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) analysis showing that they will lose the highest proportion of their income. Amidst such a challenging outlook, a reduced benefit cap and continued roll out of Universal Credit will take even more families into financial hardship. It is difficult to envisage a possibility of food bank demand declining.

This research identifies development and growth within food banks, though there should be no presumption that this will continue indefinitely. When asked about future plans, many food bank managers said their goal was to ‘go out of business’ because of ‘no longer being needed’, though none expected this to happen. It typified a contradiction of feelings by food bank managers. On one hand, there is recognition of how food banks are vital for the large numbers of people who are being failed by both welfare and the economy. Despite this, there is also an understanding that the presence of food banks is an indictment of

contemporary Britain and evidences the growing number of people being in extreme poverty. The personal contradiction for those working in food banks is that they are providing a service that they feel should not exist, yet they provide the service with compassion and warmth.

2, Context

Over the last decade, many people in Britain has moved from not knowing about food banks to a situation where large numbers have either donated to or used food banks themselves. Statistics from the Trussell Trust, Britain's largest food bank franchise, evidence increasing in food bank demand to the point where Trussell Trust food banks now distribute over 1m food parcels each year (Jitendra et al, 2017). Worryingly, this is not the complete picture as there exists many food banks that are not Trussell Trust food banks and not contributing to these statistics. Recent estimates by the Independent Food Aid Network recognise approximately 2,000 food banks Britain, the majority of which are non-franchised. Added to this number is the significant and unrecorded food aid distributed by charities dealing with street homeless as well as through faith centres such as gurdwaras and mosques. The outcome is a position where food banks have grown beyond many people's expectations and are now providing essential welfare to increasing numbers of people.

However, this rapid growth in demand for food banks has come at a cost. Many of food banks have grown beyond expectations and faced challenges to maintain resources necessary to continue operating. This has included needing more volunteers, more food and organisational changes in capacity. The result has been an increase in awareness of the role of food banks and experiences of those using food banks (Beatty et al, 2015; Garthwaite, 2016a; 2016b; Garthwaite et al, 2015; Wells and Caraher, 2014).

With this in mind, food bank research to date has been characterised by a study of demand elements such as why people use food banks, the social policies that influence demand and the experiences of people using food banks. In doing so, this research complements current food banks debates characterised by a focus on factors driving demand and its link with poverty, welfare reforms (Batty et al, 2015; Loopstra et al, 2016; Etherington and Daguerre, 2015) and other economic imperatives (Bull and Harries, 2013; Cooper and Dumpleton, 2013; Cooper et al, 2014; Dowler and Lambie Mumford, 2014; 2015; Forsey and Mason, 2015; Peachey et al, 2013).

Currently, however, there is a notable lack of research examining the sustainability of provision and the challenges food banks experience in meeting this growing demand. As the research will show, food banks represent a responsive service that is, therefore, a hostage to fortune of changes in the economy of government policy.

The focus on demand factors driving food bank growth is important as they represent a proxy measure of poverty and highlight areas where policy interventions should support food banks to 'provide a robust last line of defence against hunger' (Ashton et al, 2014, cited in Loopstra et al 2015). The result has been a range of calls for governments to address the reasons leading to increased food bank demand (Downing et al, 2014; Lambie, 2011; Lambie-Mumford, 2013; Lambie-Mumford et al, 2014; Tsilimpounidi et al, 2014). Additionally, it is important to understand what support food banks require in order to continue providing this support.

Evidence suggests that food banks will experience continued growth in demand during the coming years and this may come in the form of delivering more welfare for more people and also a greater diversity of welfare needs that are being met solely concerning food. For many food bank managers, meeting demands placed upon them can be difficult, especially if they seek to diversify into other areas of welfare needed by their clients. For example, many people needing food aid are also struggling with debt, energy bills, and being able to afford clothes and furniture. This identifies a potential challenge for food bank managers of meeting increasing levels of welfare demand and complexity amidst welfare reforms. For this, and other reasons, understanding of change and risk within food banks is essential.

Part of the challenges faced by many food bank managers is the way in which the organisations have developed in organic and, frequently, unexpected ways. Many of the food banks grew from collectives of people, often within faith organisations, working in an informal and sometimes ad hoc manner to assist small numbers of people in need. From that point, many had not expected to grow in the size and manner that they have experienced, which has placed them in a new position of formalisation, importance and scale that has presented unforeseen challenges.

This is not to say that the food banks within this research are about to close, sustainability is more nuanced than merely operating or not operating, though some have been forced to introduce some element of rationing. It is instead about understanding the way in which food banks will continue to operate in the future in a sustainable manner and plan their evolution and development amidst growing demand. Significantly, the development of food banks to date shows them to be dynamic and rapidly changing organisations; there is nothing to suggest that this will cease. Considering these challenges, food bank managers might now in a position where they need to capitalise on new opportunities and ways of working if they are to be 'future proof'.

There is also a Midlands level of detail that needs to be recognised when identifying political and economic factors shaping demand for food banks. Importantly, economic growth across the UK has been uneven, with the West Midlands, for example, experiencing growth that has been defined as 'sluggish' and characterised by low wages and low skills (Harari, 2016; D'Arcy, 2016). Furthermore, the nature of economic differences and the low wage, low skill economy in parts of the Midlands has led to fractured and insecure patterns of

employment for many people (Tinson et al, 2016; Pennycook et al, 2013; Pyper and Brown, 2016; Shildrick et al, 2012). This partly explains how at a time when the national economy is growing, albeit modestly, there remain growing levels of poverty and food bank demand in many parts of the country.

However, as recognised earlier in the report, food bank demand is being driven by political factors as much as it is by economic determinants. Since 2010, there have been significant reforms to welfare provision that belies a political reassessment of the role of government and a perception of 'welfare dependency' keeping people in poverty (Loopstra et al, 2016; Perry et al, 2014; Downing et al, 2014; Garratt, 2016; Centre for Social Justice, 2007; 2014). The impact of changing experiences of work and benefits is that there are now almost one million people working on zero hours contracts or within the 'gig economy' where there is no guarantee of regular, stead income (ONS, 2017). For these people, food banks are an essential element of their welfare portfolio. In effect, the growth in food banks demonstrates that focusing on the quantity of those in employment fails to recognise the quality of employment, and equally as importantly, the relationship between income and inflation.

3, Methods

The research was financially supported by the British Academy and had a goal of further developing research findings from a project originally carried out in partnership with Citizens Advice Wolverhampton. In the original project, the research goal had been to examine the nature of food bank provision in Wolverhampton, which subsequently developed to an interest in food banks across the Black Country[1] as a whole. Whilst researching food bank provision, it became increasingly clear that all food banks were experiencing significant growth in demand and many, at times, struggle to meet this heightened level of demand. At this point, it became apparent that despite a growing body of research focusing on demand for food bank services, there was limited understanding of the challenges this places upon food bank managers. Without food banks' capacity to grow and meet this demand, people will be left without essential welfare. In this respect, the methodology is guided by a goal of understanding how the challenges and management of growth are understood by food bank managers as being key elements of their sustainability.

Understanding the perceptions of food bank managers regarding change, challenges and what makes food banks sustainable shaped the methodology of the research. As with many sections of the voluntary sector, food banks represent different and independent organisations that are diverse and varied with a common theme of being autonomous and

[1] The Black Country comprises the metropolitan boroughs of Dudley, Sandwell and Walsall as well as the city of Wolverhampton. It is located adjacent and to the west of Birmingham in the West Midlands.

valuing their independence of decision making. The research was not designed to be quantitative, though the number of food banks included was significant in that the responses were enough to demonstrate data saturation and a high degree of theoretical generalisability amongst the responses. As such, a series of themes were identified from the research that represent shared feelings and beliefs amongst food bank managers and have been used to shape the research findings below.

In terms of generalisability, the research identified a series of important themes. On a geographic level, it might be expected that the findings in this research can also be generalised to food banks operating in other urban locations within Britain. The context of changing welfare provision and experiences of work such as zero hour contracts is likely to be the same for other parts of the country. Similarly religious organisations providing food banks and the growth in numbers of people needing assistance remain common issues across the country.

Whilst this is an issue for elsewhere and is not addressed in this report, the research also touched on how the voluntary sector responded to changes in the political and economic context in which it operates. On one hand, many of the economic and political changes led to new opportunities for voluntary sector services. However, at the same time, limited funding has been a challenge for a voluntary sector increasingly expected to rely on philanthropy, public goodwill and new ways of working. Potentially, and bringing this back to the example of food banks, this may well require new ways of working and the development of new partnerships.

The research findings are based on semi-structured interviews with 21 food bank managers across eight local authority areas; all of the food banks are in urban locations. It was important for the research to be semi-structured to ensure context and focus for the interviews whilst not limiting the respondents' answers. This was important in order to recognise the subjective experiences of the food bank managers. In doing so, the research represented a valid understanding of change, development and sustainability that food bank managers have addressed during the last few years.

4, Findings

From the research, it has been possible to identify a series of key areas of risk for food bank managers that might inform the future development of food banks.

4.1, With a little help from my friends: the role of faith sector support

Despite being independent entities, the food banks were frequently connected to and reliant on support from established organisations, usually faith organisations. The faith organisations in this research predate the food banks and often already had moral and practical commitments towards helping those in need. For this research, this included food banks linked to Christian churches and mosques, though the research also recognised a growth in food aid delivered in a less formalised and unrecorded manner by, for example, gurdwaras. Many of the food banks could not operate to their current extent without the support of these religious organisations and worshippers.

With faith sector support, there was an emergence of 'super food banks' that were providing food and other welfare to 1,000 families and upwards in a year. At the same time, many of the smaller food bank managers were struggling to recruit volunteers and maintain resources. Food bank managers were seeing not only a growth in food bank demand, but also the emergence of larger providers increasingly dominating the 'market' and linked to faith organisations for support.

On a practical level, the faith support was tangible and included food from harvest festivals, worshippers' donations, and rooms at low or zero rent. Despite representing a risk factor that is examined later, the increased donations made at Harvest Festivals were essential for food banks, whilst the reduced rate and free rooms were vital for food banks that had low financial capital and provided non-monetary welfare. Additionally, the faith organisations contributed non-tangible support in terms of credibility, trust with external partners, and provenance. Essentially, the food banks gained credibility by being linked to established faith groups that were seen as being benign and having a core focus of voluntarism and philanthropy.

For churches and mosques, food bank managers recognised an expansion beyond core religious activities into welfare delivery and community support. Whilst, this link between faith groups and social welfare is far from new, the food bank managers had taken it to a new level for many organisations. However, it has to be noted that the relationship between food bank managers and faith groups was diverse. At some places, managers also had formal roles within the faith organisations, though in other food banks, the relationship was 'arm's length'; however, the relationship was almost always present and significant.

However, it was not the case that food bank managers were solely reliant on faith organisations for support. The role of private sector donations was also important for many

of the food banks, and whilst the Trussell Trust food banks had a gateway to established links with a major supermarket, many of the other food banks had links to other supermarkets that donated food on a regular basis.

In terms of partnership working and sustainability, most of the food bank managers appeared more willing to form partnerships with private businesses than with local authorities. In this respect, service level agreements (SLAs) offered by local authorities had been refused by food banks in two local authority areas despite the financial benefits. There was a feeling of concern from the managers of being contractually obliged to work in particular ways. This typified the independent nature of the food banks; whilst unable to influence the reasons for food bank demand, they were keen to retain autonomy over the ways in which they operated. With that in mind, the private sector was felt to offer a less conditional 'partnership' where they donated food and made no demands on the ways in which delivery was managed. However, in a number of instances, food deliveries were inconsistent in terms of amount or unpredictable in terms of content. Furthermore, some managers felt that support for collections at supermarkets had reduced recently, though the support continued to be seen as being vital and unconditional.

The relationship with the private sector was not, however, always seen as benign. There was awareness that some donating companies were operating zero hour contracts that were one of the main reasons for some people are using food banks. In one example, a food bank was given a financial donation from a collection amongst employees at a private business. At the same time, some people from this company were using the food bank.

In addition to developing partnerships, food bank managers were putting in place increasingly 'managerial' approaches to the co-ordination and delivery of their services as well as the relationship with service users. This was seen as an important element in food banks having credibility with service users and external partners. One food bank in particular had records in place that included details and photographs of all people using the service. This was used to record reasons for needing food aid, referrals to external agencies to address problems such as housing or substance abuse, and the number of times the person had used the food bank. This was used to enforce rules about the number of times a person could use the food banks and what to do if the service user did not follow through with referrals.

Not all food bank managers were as exacting as this particular food bank, though this was a clear element of this particular food bank's sustainability for two reasons. Firstly, the food bank manager was keen to ensure that those in most need were able to access food aid when needed. This meant ensuring that some people were not 'taking advantage' of the system. Secondly, the food bank manager identified a role to help people with their problems rather than hand out food aid on demand. This, the manager believed, made the food bank more sustainable by addressing reasons for demand as well as demand itself.

Importantly, this was not carried out in a harsh or uncaring manner, but instead with clear goals of helping people in their time of crisis.

The managerial approach that was increasingly common within particularly the larger food banks was a way by which they portrayed themselves as credible organisations that were sustainable. In this context, sustainability was underpinned through management structures and practices rather than being reliant on a central, lynchpin person's involvement.

In a number of instances, support also came from being part of a larger umbrella network, such as the Trussell Trust or other localised networks, which many food bank managers found useful. In addition to the food bank managers' responsibilities, the networks were seen as being important for collecting data, making links with external agencies, and giving advice on records and systems. This allowed the food bank managers to focus on maintaining links with the local communities and the agencies that distributed food bank vouchers. However, despite the franchised element of food banks within networks, the food bank managers retained a strong element of local identity, which was defined through neighbourhoods and communities that they covered. Whilst managers appreciated the support of the networks, they did not always see themselves as being an element of a larger organisation. Despite the presence of umbrella organisations and a franchise approach for a number of food banks, many of the food banks remained local organisations that were embedded within their localities. Links with other local voluntary sector organisations, schools, and those living within the neighbourhoods defined the food banks as being locally specific entities.

Regardless of networks in some areas, these networks did not always lead to sharing of best practice or forecasting future demand and the impact this might have on food banks. The future was a difficult issue as many of the food bank managers, when questioned, did not have a defined understanding or definition of what constituted 'best practice'. Instead, a concept of localism was more important, which itself was understood as the food bank being locally specific and shaped by the local patterns of demand, services, partners and even availability of buildings.

Additionally, the extent, and presence of communication varied across the food banks in the research. In some areas, there were established and formal communication networks on practical issues. In one area, this was facilitated and managed by a voluntary sector organisation that was not a food bank whilst in another area, this was a function of a local authority officer that had responsibility for working with the voluntary sector. In both cases, and recognising the role of communication networks in sustainability, the communication network operated most efficiently when there was an identified person at the centre that was managing the process.

In addition to the extent of communication varying across geographical areas, it also varied across the food banks. In two of the local authority areas, there was a strong culture of communication, whilst in other areas, communication was far more ad hoc. However, in some areas, food bank managers operated in relative isolation, and this was a situation with which they were happy to continue. One food bank in particular, located in a large urban area featuring significant levels of poverty, had never been in contact with any other food bank. There were two large and established food banks that were relatively close, though the initial food bank had not been in touch with either of these food banks. They felt happy to be working in isolation and saw no benefit to being in contact.

Interestingly, it was within areas where food bank managers had the weakest communication networks where food banks had struggled and were most likely to close and relaunch. This is not to imply a causal relationship between closure/relaunch and communication; there are many other variables that influence sustainability. However, this should not take anything away from the importance of communication networks and the benefits that ensue, such as sharing resources and information.

Despite an increasingly managerial approach, many food bank managers felt they were a hostage to fortune by virtue of demand being determined by factors external to their control. For many of the managers, issues such as welfare reform and precarious work were wrong, but they felt it was not their role to fight against such injustices. Evidencing this trend, one of the food banks on the original research list had ceased operating by the time the research fieldwork commenced. The food bank in question was notable by the fact that it was not linked to a religious organisation and was, instead, motivated by political goals of combatting hunger and actively campaigning against poverty. Whilst other food bank managers felt that the need for food banks was morally wrong, there was an explicit belief in this particular food bank that the coalition and current government's policies were to blame. In contrast, most food bank managers were averse to being seen as leading political or campaigning organisations. The particular food bank had, however, been a political organisation, had not worked easily with faith groups and had refused to engage in certain types of operations without being able to campaign. As if to underline how this impacted on sustainability, that food bank had now ceased operating and there were no other food banks that adopted a clear political role. Other food bank managers in this area spoke of this food bank's undoubted commitment but lack of sustainability.

4.2, Moving on: Food bank managers and change

Recognising organisational capacity within food banks, there was clear evidence that many of the larger food banks had grown, developed and formalised with time. Those interviewed spoke of how their management structures, engagement with partners and knowledge of their clients had developed with experience. This experience and the subsequent changes had resulted in the food banks being more able to cope with shocks

and change, though it also meant they were much larger than when they were established. Despite increased levels of demand, expectation and even reliance placed upon these larger food banks, they represented a model that was more sustainable because they had capacity to cope with change and a credibility and momentum to attract resources.

That said, many of the food bank managers spoke about how they had now begun to deliver a more comprehensive and diverse model of provision. The feeling of the managers was that the rate of increase in demand experienced from around 2010 onwards had placed them in a situation where they were surprised and 'taken off guard'. Whilst demand at many of the food banks was still increasing, it was not at the same rate as previously and their experience has led to the development of a more comprehensive offer. Examples of this more comprehensive offer included fuel vouchers, clothing, furniture, cookware and toys as well as café provision, befriending, hosting advice services and signposting.

With this more managerial and comprehensive approach, food bank managers were increasingly aware of their relationship with partners in a way that went beyond the distribution of vouchers to be given to those needing referrals. Representing a challenge to sustainability, many of the food bank managers spoke of the increasing number of referrals coming from statutory organisations that could no longer meet the welfare demands they were facing. Food bank managers felt that for these statutory organisations, the food banks were a safety valve where people could be directed to alleviate pressures placed on the statutory organisations facing cuts in capacity.

Many of the food bank managers viewed these increasing referrals from statutory organisations as a double edged sword. It bestowed on the food banks a level of legitimacy and trust that implied permanence and reliability, but it also brought with it an increase in demand that was at times challenging to meet. Additionally, it also raised questions in some food banks of whether closer links with statutory organisations would, in the eyes of clients, infer entitlement to food aid and locate the food banks as an extension of mainstream, statutory welfare. This was a key issue of sustainability for the food bank managers; they rightly wanted the food banks to be seen as established and legitimate, but they also wanted to maintain a clear vision of voluntarism and independence. This led to a position where the food bank managers in the research maintained a relationship with statutory service providers that was strong and robust whilst also maintaining a clear defined independence.

This raised the question of how much food banks can grow in their current model before they reach capacity, at which provision may have to be rationed or even denied. For different food bank managers, just as growth was shaped by locally specific factors, so the resources available also varied from one food bank to another. For example, one food bank manager commented that they had twenty volunteers, twice a week and had put a moratorium on recruiting more volunteers as they could not manage any more. However, the same food bank manager commented that whilst the amount of food coming in had

remained constant, the level of demand was increasing. For this food bank in particular, cuts in council provision had led to housing offices closing and merging to cover larger areas, which meant vouchers were being distributed across a wider area, including more areas of low income and unemployment. With this in mind, the potential for growing geographical disparities in food bank referrals and provision at a time when they are becoming an increasingly essential element of welfare for many people was a worrying trend.

Part of understanding the sustainability and risk for food banks is to understand the ethos of food bank managers. Whilst this is intangible and qualitative, it remains essential to understand how food bank managers are to be supported to take on new challenges that may lie ahead. Without understanding this ethos, many food bank managers will, at best, be reticent to enter into partnerships or to receive support. This is not to generalise food banks as all being the same, the variety of types, sizes, objectives, and ways of working are diverse and varied. However, it is important to recognise some broad common themes such as voluntarism, a sense of independence, and a clearly defined service. As such, food bank managers were not reticent to work in partnership, but the clearly defined nature of the service they provide meant they would not enter into partnerships that would change the way they operate.

Whilst this may initially appear to be a sign of intransigence or inflexibility, it instead reflected the way in which the food bank managers dealt with clients who had frequently been failed by both mainstream welfare and the economy. To, therefore, work too closely with these sectors and on their terms was seen as almost being being complicit. For this reason, and in terms of sustainability, the food bank managers were more likely to work in isolation or make links with other food banks to avoid changing the working practices and ethos of food banks.

5, What lies ahead: Recognising risk

A key element of sustainability was the way in which risk factors were, or were not, identified and addressed. The nature of food banks, in providing a responsive service that is influenced by external factors, which were beyond the control of food bank managers, made predicting and addressing these factors difficult. Some risk factors could not be predicted, such as closure of large companies or economic slumps. Further risk factors were recognised whilst not being clear about what risk they pose, such as Brexit. Other risk factors were clear and their impact was both identified and predicted, such as the impact of welfare reforms and changing experiences of work, such as zero hour contracts.

Below is a series of risk factors relating to food banks that were identified by food bank managers. Whilst the first risk factor is that posed by ongoing demand, the remaining risk factors can be understood in terms of internal and external factors. From this perspective, the internal risks relate to organisational factors and are those over which the food bank managers have some control. The second group of risk factors are external factors relating to policy and decisions that are not in the control of the food bank managers.

5.1, A rising tide: Growing demand

A key risk that food banks faced was the level of demand, which was reported by many food bank managers to be continuing to grow, albeit not at the rate of increase seen a few years ago. Heightened numbers and steady increases have placed pressures on food bank managers to sustainably meet demand. Generally, the food bank managers felt that whilst having little influence over supply factors, they had even less control over factors driving demand. These factors were identified by food bank managers as including increasing numbers of people on zero hour contracts, working within the gig economy, and continuing high numbers of people in in-work poverty. This was important as one of the food banks taking part in the research had very low numbers of clients unemployed and using food banks because of welfare reforms or sanctions. Instead, they had mainly working people that were on low incomes and struggling financially.

With a risk of demand exceeding supply, managing demand varied, with some food bank managers rationing services whilst other food bank managers attempted to address personal demand factors such as substance abuse. In contrast, there were some food bank managers who placed no restrictions on service in a conscious rejection of what was seen as conditionality. However, most food bank managers identified the likely possibility of there being a future point at which increases in demand could pose a threat to being able to sustainably meet demand – for some food bank managers, this point has already arrived. This risk was more pronounced at certain points of the year, such as August, when school age children are not receiving free school meals as well as when food donations from harvest festival have been depleted, such as at Easter. This was a serious concern as food banks represent a final safety net, below which many people would be faced with stark

decisions. Ongoing increases in demand, which were predicted by many managers, would necessitate food bank managers introduce further conditionality or even cease to operate. However, many food bank managers stated that there was not a great deal of capacity remaining and it is evident that social and economic changes challenge this position. From this position, it is important for food bank managers and partners to consider developing contingency plans. Despite such concerns regarding capacity, all of the food bank managers reported increasing numbers of service users, though some managers had now put a limit on the number of referrals permitted from external organisations. This was in response to pressure on resources such as food, space, managerial time, and transport. This management of demand and supply across the year created further responsibility for the co-ordination of the food bank.

5.2, Looking inwards: Organisational challenges and opportunities

Looking at risk factors for food banks, there was also a number of specific localised risk factors that may or may not be shared with other food banks. Food bank provision and food bank management was not standardised in terms of the development, planning operation or understanding of their relationships with other sectors and organisations. With this in mind, generalisability was problematic when researching food banks beyond the common ground of providing food aid for people with a diverse range of social and economic need. This is significant because food banks, as an essential element of welfare for many people, had developed in less bureaucratic and less standardised ways than state welfare.

This was a strength of the food banks as it meant the locally specific nature of delivery resulted from a synthesis of local factors and agencies that varied from one place to another. This diversity was evident in the fact that some food banks were providing welfare predominantly for homeless people, others spoke about the impact of welfare reform, and one food bank manager spoke of how most of their clients were working but on low incomes and zero hour contracts. With this diversity of factors, being rooted in local communities was important. However, it also gave rise to a range of challenges and the potential presence of a 'postcode lottery' of service provision.

One element of these challenges was that the food banks featured risk factors that were specific to their particular food bank and that, as such, were not shared and could be difficult to manage. These risk factors were usually based on the continued availability of resources and included the following:

- Cheap office space provided on a goodwill basis from specific individuals within organisations possessing decision making authority, such as vicars. However, if that person was replaced, there was no guarantee of a continuity of decision making.

- Many food banks were reliant on continuing provision of community or church owned buildings at a time of economic austerity and limited financial ability to deal with building maintenance.
- Some food banks were reliant on the influence and vision of a particular individual. This was in contrast to the bureaucratic model of service delivery that characterises structures rather than individuals and made them vulnerable to this individual moving away or having a change in personal circumstance.
- There was a reliance on unpredictable sources of food such as harvest festivals and ad hoc contributions from private sector donations.

Aware of the challenges of meeting increasing demand and maintaining a sustainable model, the research recognised how the increased networking and credibility of food banks has fuelled increasing demand. Partly as a result of more marketing, media coverage and partner organisation signposting, more people were accessing food bank services. This is not to say that demand is any less deserving or in any way a reflection of what is needed, but it is recognition that people's awareness of and routes to food banks had become easier.

Added to this, many of the food bank managers had created effective and growing networks of referral agencies that were embedded in local communities and agencies working with those on the lowest incomes. For these agencies and for the clients, food banks have gained increasing credibility and trust over the last few years and had become a source of welfare when these people felt failed by both the welfare state and the economy.

Being non-standard was, in many ways, an important element of food banks and was a key strength. However, this also had the potential to create geographical disparities and gaps in terms of what was offered and available. Against this backdrop of changing demand, welfare reforms, local authority cuts and changing experiences of work, a key risk element for the food bank managers was not planning for risks. It was evident that food bank managers, by their very nature, offered a responsive model of welfare. This meant that the food bank managers did not have control or influence over the factors that was leading to increased demand. However, they did have some influence over the supply factors that were needed to meet this demand and, by definition, they had some ability to increase supply if they expected an imminent increase in demand. Despite this, the majority of food bank managers were not aware of the impact of changes such, for example, as the introduction of Universal Credit (which is now been shown to have an impact on food bank demand), or awareness of economic changes such as the increased number of people on zero hour contracts, working within the gig economy and experiencing in-work poverty.

In terms of meeting demand in a sustainable manner, future planning would allow the food bank managers to operate in an increasingly strategic manner. Whilst the concept of strategic working was not explicitly on the radar of some food bank managers, it is something that would allow them to work more effectively and become increasingly

influential. These are goals that food bank managers could adopt without changing their core ethos or methods of working, which have been seen to be core values of the food banks and many other areas of the voluntary sector. Mindful of the way food banks are developing, the research identified that many food bank managers were now offering more than just food, which also has risks for sustainability. A number of the food bank managers spoke of increased demand from service users for help and support beyond food alone. Some, though far from all, of the food bank managers had chosen to provide other elements of support such as fuel vouchers, clothing, furniture and children's toys. This took the food bank managers away from their core activity of providing food aid and instead placed them in a position of providing a more comprehensive portfolio of welfare support.

In terms of sustainability, there were different opinions between the food bank managers, with some recognising that those who needed food aid also needed other support. In contrast, others were concerned about the implications of offering even more support, which would require increased time and resources. Nevertheless, one of the reasons for food bank managers offering other areas of welfare was that many the food banks had moved beyond the initial period of rapid growth to a period of greater stability and were more able to review what they offered. However, this also meant more responsibilities for managers at food banks, who had taken on an increasingly essential role during the last few years. Despite this role, there was little in the way of formal training and support available for the food bank managers.

5.3, Shifting sands: Economic change and welfare reforms

Having looked at a range of risk factors experienced by the food bank managers in the research, it was important to recognise that many risk factors were beyond the control of food bank managers. As voluntary sector providers of welfare, rather than state welfare provision, it remained impossible for the food bank managers to address factors prompting demand for food banks.

This is not to imply that food bank managers are passive or unconcerned of such changes, quite the opposite. The food bank managers involved in the research had pronounced understandings of social justice and social equity expressed by a feeling that their ultimate goal is to no longer be needed. Balancing this challenging position of being a responsive service delivered by people with a strong drive of social justice, it might be considered important for food bank managers to be aware of external factors that lie ahead and may lead to increased demand.

Based on current trends and policy direction, and using feedback from food bank managers in the research, it can be expected that food bank demand is going to continue to increase. At best, this increase will remain at the current rate, but at worst there could be an increase in the rate of growth. Already, it has been identified in this report that much of this growth

is driven by external factors such as economic changes and also changes in welfare policy. Within these factors, approximately half of food bank demand is linked to the benefits system such as delays and sanctions in addition to low pay amongst those working but struggling with the cost of living (Trussell Trust, 2016). In addition, problems caused by benefit changes and poor work keeps people poor and in need of food banks. Evidence from food bank managers supports claims that levels of debt are currently rising, which may further drive food bank demand.

Attempting to identify factors driving demand, food bank managers in this research, supporting findings of the Trussell Trust, identified a range of factors that influence demand. It was felt by the managers that ongoing factors, such as welfare reforms, have been more pervasive and on-going than one-off factors such as recession. For many people using food banks, they experience the combined effects of economic change and welfare reforms, which partly ties in with Shildrick et al's (2012) view of people 'churning' between work and benefits and identifies a cohort of people in work and on benefits simultaneously. This supported a view that people using food banks have been fundamentally failed by both the economy and the welfare state.

Placing these economic and political factors into a framework, the interviews with food bank managers identified two specific time periods. The first period ran from the start of the recession in 2007 and continued until approximately 2013/14. This period of time saw rapid growth in demand for food bank services driven by a combination of economic change and welfare reforms. This also coincided with increasing levels of public awareness of food banks and increased media coverage regarding the way in which this represented growing levels of severe poverty. For many food bank managers in the research, this period of rapidly increasing demand was unexpected and put them in a position that had not been envisaged.

The second period, since 2013/14, has seen the rate of growth in food bank demand reduce to a point where food bank managers in this research identified annual growth as being below the rate seen during the first period. The reason for the slower increase in demand was linked to national factors such as the effects of recession diminishing, and whilst the country is still feeling the effects of austerity, there is modest economic growth and the use of benefit sanctions has declined – though this may well change with the introduction of Universal Credit. Consequently, food bank demand is determined by the cumulative nature of welfare reforms and economic change.

Recognising the combined impacts of welfare reforms and changing experiences of work, responses from food bank managers indicated that 'working' and 'receiving benefits' were not two distinct groups of people. The experiences of food bank managers was that many people are both working and also receiving benefits, which added to the view that people were being failed by both the economy and mainstream welfare.

The impact on food banks will be demand continuing to rise at the current rate and possibly increasing more rapidly in response to the changes identified above. If this is the case, and evidence suggests this to be the case, then it is important to consider food banks' ability to sustainably meet demand without denying or rationing services. The risk of not meeting demand is that many people will not only be failed by the economy and mainstream welfare, but also by a voluntary sector that represents a final residual level of welfare. Should this happen, it can only be presumed that more people will be forced to use less formal food aid such as gurdwaras, mosques, the Salvation Army and ad hoc food aid providers. Considering that food bank networks such as those in the Black Country estimate that one-third of their food is currently going to children, this might be understood as risking long term social problems.

An external risk therefore exists for food banks if there are continued increases in demand without there being increases in supply; the former seems inevitable whilst the latter currently seems difficult. The result could involve rationing, denial of provision or prioritising certain groups or individuals. For those food banks not currently operating a voucher system, this could be more challenging.

6, Keeping the plates spinning: Growing risks and challenges

Reflecting on the conversations with food bank managers, it is important to recognise that the majority of food bank managers were troubled by what they were witnessing, with growing numbers of people experiencing entrenched poverty and an inability to feed themselves and their children. In particular, the growing numbers of children fed through food bank donations was one of the most troubling aspects and one that may yet create a scarring effect well into the future. Also prevalent amongst the managers was a view that welfare reforms and the consequential demand placed on food banks would not address perceived issues of 'welfare dependency'. Instead, 'welfare dependency' was understood by the managers not as a moral failing, but rather as a position people are placed in when welfare and the economy fail to meet their needs.

As welfare providers, food bank managers recognised that they were unable to influence or control the level of demand for their services, which was determined elsewhere, and that they were hostages to fortune. It is this position that raised questions regarding the sustainability of food banks, and broadly, the sustainability of a model of welfare where increasing levels of welfare are delivered by charities, charitable giving and philanthropy in an unevidenced and unmonitored manner. This was important because there are now large numbers of people reliant on food banks with have little or no other options to meet fundamental welfare needs. If food banks reach a point of not being able to sustainably meet demand, then many people will find themselves facing difficult choices.

In terms of the risks and challenges that lie ahead for food banks, food bank managers in the research, generally, did not have clear strategies for how they were going to develop in the future. This was the case for both the challenges they may face from increasing demand as well as the extent of capacity that could be realised within their current format. Without understanding both of these trends, it was difficult to fully assess the sustainability of food banks.

Inherent in the process of predicting sustainability is being able to examine a wide range of policy and economic factors and being able to extrapolate the outcomes. Additionally, it is necessary to be able to calculate the potential capacity of supply donations from faith organisations, private sector businesses and also charitable giving from the general public. These are time consuming and challenging tasks that will require food bank managers to have additional support from outside the organisations. It is possibly unrealistic to expect food bank managers to work in their current format and so close to capacity and also find time and staffing to carry out this work. It could be the case that local authorities, universities or private businesses could take on responsibility for what is, essentially, an auditing role.

In this context, and already having mentioned that food bank managers did not have control over demand factors, only supply, then it can be assumed that development strategies would examine ways in which food banks can continue to develop. With this in mind, food banks have always been dynamic and adaptive organisations, and it is likely that this is going to continue to be the case. However, with many food banks being so close to capacity, the continuing process of change has taken on increasing importance. Consequently, the auditing of demand and supply needs to act as precursor to identifying development options for food banks, which may involve service level agreements, but similarly may also involve other areas of supply capacity development. The auditing and prediction of food bank demand may also lead to local authorities and politicians to further review the ways in which policies and policy implementation impact on poverty and subsequent food bank demand.

Despite the challenges that food bank managers currently face due to the growth in demand, which may well rise in the future beyond the current growth rate, none of the food bank managers felt that they would be ‘going out of business anytime soon’. Whilst this was a comment on the fact that they did not expect demand to disappear in the foreseeable future, it was also a statement of their continued commitment to delivering food aid within a voluntary sector format. It is also a statement that there is going to be continued commitment from those involved in long term support of food banks, such as faith organisations, businesses and charitable giving by the public. There is no doubt that food banks will remain operating, but there is a question to answer regarding whether they will be able to continue operating in a way that sustainably and comprehensively meets growing

levels of demand. It is important to remember that demand and supply are distinct phenomena and there is nothing to suggest that they will continue to grow in parallel.

However, continued commitment from food bank managers to providing food bank services does not mean that food bank managers can guarantee that they will always be able to fully meet all demand. In doing so, this raises questions about how rationing or conditionality could be brought into food bank delivery. Importantly, the role of conditionality was something that many of the food bank managers felt uncomfortable addressing, though there were some food bank managers already not just using vouchers but also operating a system of conditionality.

This conditionality, where present, was usually based on addressing issues that led to the person using the food bank. It is likely that for food banks using vouchers, this would happen by limiting the number of vouchers made available, with the voucher holding organisations being responsible for the rationing process. For those food banks not using vouchers, this created greater problems as they were less able to ration and more likely to be hostages to fortune to changes in demand. It would also be difficult for these food bank managers to ration or use vouchers as their ethos was based on a very active rejection of conditionality that they identified as being increasingly prevalent within mainstream welfare. In this context, their role as being a service for people failed by both welfare and by the economy was a key way of defining themselves both as voluntary sector organisations and also as a statement of their core values.

Within this process of identifying themselves as voluntary sector organisations, it is important to recognise that the food banks have developed to become increasingly rational and well managed organisations. The food banks in the research had clear managerial structures, were well planned and reliable, had established links with a range of external partners. Furthermore, the food bank managers were increasingly aware of their clients' needs and were providing a range of services associated with poverty and low income. In some respects, it could be argued that the food bank managers are increasingly providing a model of welfare that goes beyond food alone and as such increasingly constitutes an increasingly comprehensive model welfare provision. The importance of this is that it recognises how food banks are planning and changing in a credible manner with appropriate support from key partners. However, being rational and credible, as they are, does not mean that developing further supply capacity will be boundless.

It is partly through the food bank managers' increasingly credible ways of working that they have become a growing element in a mixed economy of welfare characterised by co-ordinated partnership working. Significantly, this has always been a role of the voluntary sector, but there have been some notable qualitative changes in this relationship as statutory provision has become increasingly conditional and local authorities have fewer resources. With welfare residualisation, austerity led cuts to reduced statutory budgets

there has been an expectation that food banks will take on an increasing role in providing welfare.

Food bank managers did not feel that this is because local authorities or other partners are 'taking advantage' of food banks, but more that statutory welfare can no longer meet people's needs and many local authorities have no option but to signpost people to food banks. This raised questions about the nature of the relationship within this mixed economy of welfare. Food bank managers in the research were keen to maintain independence and autonomy in terms of deciding how they operate; this was a key element of maintaining a clear vision and position as a voluntary sector organisation. In doing so, it distinguished them from statutory welfare and the private sector, whose problems they saw themselves as addressing. Furthermore, this role as a voluntary sector organisation was seen by the managers to give them an advantage in receiving charitable donations and other support that might be lost if they were too close to local authorities or business.

Despite this, the increasing role played by food banks is part of a pluralisation of welfare provision characterised by independent, geographically specific and, frequently, unconnected organisations delivering essential welfare. This meant that the extent and nature of coverage varied from one place to another. In some places, there was little or no coverage at certain times of the week. Furthermore, some areas offered fuel vouchers, and other areas offered clothing, whilst some areas were food only, which contributed to geographical variations of services.

This led to two main outcomes. First, there was an increased risk of what one councillor termed 'food bank tourism' as people travel increasing distances to access services at various locations. Whilst this was deemed by the councillor in question to be part of a trend of 'importing poverty', it highlighted a broader issue raised by food bank managers that some people were travelling further to access food aid. Already this has been seen with local authorities referring from wider geographical areas to particular food banks, which in effect increases food bank catchment areas. Secondly, food bank managers identified a risk of overspill demand from formal food banks, as they reached closer to capacity, or even beyond capacity as some of the food bank managers reported experiencing at times. When this happened people were either signposted to other services, often of a more soup kitchen format or were simply denied provision. It was presumed that it is the latter group fuel the growth in demand for food at places such as gurdwaras, where there was a reported increase in demand from non-Sikhs. In effect, a schism within food aid was emerging, with there being formal food banks providing bags of food to take away in addition to less formal level of food aid that often does not record numbers of visitors and provides immediate food, such as soup, sandwiches, hot meal, etc. It is likely that the second group, which appear to be experiencing more demand, will see the overspill if food banks reach capacity.

Amidst such concerns, the growth in demand for food banks, most managers saw this as being part of a broader context driven by welfare reforms. This was generally understood within a political framework defined by government narratives of 'welfare dependency'. However, food bank managers overwhelmingly believed that there was no evidence to suggest that people use food banks as a form of welfare dependency rather than choosing to work, this was especially true given that the concept of welfare dependency is implicitly linked to state welfare. In fact, food bank managers felt they provided the most residual aspect of welfare, where people need to queue for food and frequently receive vouchers from a third party. Amidst this provision, demand was continuing to grow and, just as importantly, it was also growing amongst people who were working and 'unable to make ends meet'.

As such, using the evidence of food bank managers to interrogate the concept of welfare dependency, one of the managers stated that poverty and the need for food does not disappear in two week and that poor people do not necessarily have control over their exit from poverty. Overall, if making welfare increasingly residual and conditional will drive people away from benefits and welfare generally and towards financial independence, then there is little evidence of this being the case amongst the growing numbers of people using food banks. From the experience of food bank managers, it was presumed that welfare residualisation was more informed by political rhetoric than by evidence.

Amidst the move towards welfare residualisation and a parallel growth in demand at food banks, some local authorities had sought to have support food bank managers through officer time dedicated towards co-ordination. These roles typically involved distribution of small amounts of funding, supporting food bank managers to co-ordinate provision times, and generally to offer advice. This represented a way in which partnership working can be developed to support food bank managers whilst still allowing food bank managers to retain autonomy over decision making.

In this respect, where the local authority support worked was where it allowed food bank managers to deliver their core activities even more effectively by supporting the food bank managers rather than working in a way that felt like they were taking over. This involved being aware of the food bank managers' needs and understanding the nature of the relationship between voluntary and statutory partners. Underpinning this was an understanding of the relative strengths of each partner and recognising how the roles can complement rather than compete or contradict one another. This has involved using action plans or being able to consensually agree roles. However, partnerships relationships, like food bank provision, varied across geographical areas and were, at times, ad hoc.

Ultimately however, returning to the report's focus on demand and supply, partnership working alone might not ultimately address sustainability. Whilst supporting food banks to have increased capacity and work more effectively was beneficial, it was seen in this research that working more effectively and with enhanced credibility can lead to increased

demand. As such, the goal of partnership working with food bank managers should have ultimate goals of reducing demand and/or increasing supply.

Understanding the sustainability of food banks and also recognising the consequence of unsustainability for people leads to a conclusion that preventing demand for food bank services would be better than addressing the problem. However, for the government in their role of making decisions regarding welfare reform, there is no cost consequence for people being failed by mainstream welfare and having to use food banks. In effect, what is being shown in this research is the gradual shift of welfare provision from the government to the voluntary sector without there being comparable handing over of responsibilities and resources.

7, Recommendations and conclusions

Throughout these recommendations, it is important to bear in mind that one of the key themes that regularly arose within the interviews was the concept of independence within food banks. Despite some food bank managers being part of local or national networks, they retained a strong sense of identity and independence. They were, in some places, supportive of other food banks and thought the work of other food banks was commendable, however, they saw themselves as independent entities rather than part of national or regional welfare provision. As such, there was a reticence to engage with anything that took them away from being independent and embedded in their area in a manner that was determined by themselves.

For this reason, the recommendations are based on how food bank managers can be supported to continue operating in their current model as independent, geographically specific and embedded within a particular model of voluntarism. The recommendations are not, therefore, about how food bank managers can be instructed to work better or for partner agencies to work in a way that infringes upon the food bank providers' sense of independence and identity.

This report started by asking whether food banks are sustainable. Despite the focus, deservedly so, on food banks as a measure of poverty and the examination of demand for food bank services, it is important to recognise what it means for food banks to remain sustainable. In the context of this report, sustainable is taken to mean the ability of food banks to meet demand without having to turn people away and/or ration services. It is essential to remember that for people using food bank services, they are accessing what can be considered a last resort of welfare and, consequently, being denied food bank services is deeply problematic.

This has been an important area of study as food banks provide, for many people, the final welfare safety net before making difficult decisions such as missing meals, going without

food to feed children, choosing heating or eating, or even deciding whether or not to shoplift. For these reasons, food banks are essential organisations. It is certainly true that they are indicative of a welfare system that is meeting fewer people's essential needs and they are also indicative of an economy that is increasingly characterised by precarious work and growing numbers of people on zero hour contracts or within the gig economy. For these reasons, many of the food bank managers had a stated goal of no longer being needed. However, whilst the food banks are indicative of broader economic and welfare inequalities, this should not take anything away from their importance to many people at the current time.

One of the earliest policy areas of the coalition government was welfare reform and since then there has been increased use of sanctions, introduction of Universal Credit, changes in disability benefits and an ongoing theme of benefit restrictions and denial. For many people that were 'just about managing' (Finch and Whittaker, 2016), this has been enough to create crises, manifesting in the need for food banks. At this time, there is a tacit assumption from government that voluntary sector organisations such as food banks will be able to cope with demand and are held up as positive examples of community based responses to meeting need rather than relying on the government. In what might have at one time been termed Big Society, this is presented as an alternative to welfare dependency, yet the response from food banks is that people are as dependent as ever. With this level of dependency, it is important for food banks to remain sustainable.

However, there is little statutory funding or support for food banks at this time of increased demand, partly because of government's disinclination to 'nationalise' such activities and partly because of local government's increasingly limited resources. This therefore raises questions about how food banks manage to sustain their activities as we see demand increase. Food bank managers in the research have seen demand rise, however, many of the food bank managers in this research saw their supply as being close to or even at the point of capacity. This begins to raise questions such as what happens if food banks reach capacity and have to start rationing services, as has already been seen in some places. It also begins to raise issues about how we can predict future demand and supply within food banks and plan accordingly.

Aware of such risks, it is possible to consider a number of outcomes that will happen if demand starts to exceed supply and food banks, by definition of not being able to meet demand, become less sustainable.

- Food bank managers might have to ration food supplies by prioritising either by geographic or thematic priorities
- Some food banks might struggle more than others, which would exacerbate the already present postcode differences
- There is more likelihood of health inequalities emerging due to children missing meals, homes not being heated, or adults not having a nutritional diet

- It is likely that this will be concentrated in the lowest income areas and will, therefore, exacerbate already present levels of spatial inequalities within towns and cities
- Levels of debt will increase as people either borrow money or not pay bills in order to find money for food – in terms of the former, it is important to remember that these are people likely to have some of the lowest credit ratings and access to affordable loans.
- Increased demand will pass to existing but less formal forms of food aid such as mosques, gurdwaras, the Salvation Army, 'pop-up' food providers and informal street homeless support organised through social media.

Unfortunately, this report paints a relatively challenging picture of increasingly residualised welfare and unquestioned assumptions that the voluntary sector will take up the slack. The unquestioned and unquantified assumption of the voluntary sector's capacity is deeply problematic. Whilst it might be uncomfortable to look too closely at where welfare is heading, it is not an option to bury heads in the sand. More research needs to be carried out looking at the capacity of food banks and, by definition, their limitations. It should not be assumed that this should be left to food banks and it is an area of support that could be useful to food bank managers without impinging on their autonomy. Finally, it must be remembered that food bank managers are dynamic and have constantly changed, with this in mind, food bank managers should be supported to identify their next steps; they are ultimately too important to too many people to be allowed to lose sustainability.

Based on the research with food banks managers, the report concludes by making the following recommendations:

Note: these recommendations are based on a belief that food banks are an indictment on statutory welfare that is, for political reasons, not meeting people's needs. Similarly, it is based on an assumption that government attitudes towards welfare and poverty and not likely to change in the immediate future.

Demand

- There should be a review of the impacts of welfare reforms on both working and non-working households
- There should be review and modifications of Universal Credit delivery to prevent placing increasing demand on food banks
- There should be greater understanding of local economic development and inclusive growth to prevent, where possible, geographical concentrations of precarious work and economic stagnation.
- There should be greater recognition of non-economic causes of demand, such as people's experiences of change and variety of welfare needs not being met in areas such as substance abuse and mental health support

Supply

- It is important to recognise the full extent of food aid provision currently in existence in order to understand its scale. This would include food banks currently operating as part of larger networks as well as less formal provision in places of worship and other outreach providers.
- One of the food banks in the research stated that 'we're not a bottomless pit'. This is important because there is no evidence regarding the capacity and potential for food banks to feed people. As such, it is important to audit and recognise the capacity of supply and opportunities
- On the subject of opportunities, it would also benefit food banks to be aware of food bank models in other places and other parts of the world to understand the variety of food aid models currently in operation, including subscription pantries, and identify model of development.
- Encourage greater support from private sector organisations. This goes beyond supermarket donations to include a range of services.
- Establishment of local direct debit subscriptions from people to their local food banks.

Support for food banks

- Ensure food bank managers maintain independence of food banks
- Support with co-ordinating times and locations of supply
- Food bank managers to play more role in informing policy making and implementation
- Auditing of potential changes in demand due to changes in work, economies, and welfare could be carried out by local authorities, universities, private sector
- Ensuring there is a food bank champion in each local authority to ensure food banks do not become normalised or overlooked
- Local authority officers having responsibility to work with food banks on areas such as publicity materials, co-ordinating provision, and even grant funding
- Sharing of best practice between food banks
- Understanding the social return of food banks and the social costs of failing to meet demand
- Supporting food banks with variety of risk elements identified in the report – room, transport, funding, food, management, etc.
- Challenges concepts of welfare dependency and 'blaming the poor for their poverty'

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