

Report

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Rapid Review:

Foodbanks in Sheffield

Date: November 2013

Location: Sheffield



This short report provides a snapshot of issues faced by foodbanks and their users in Sheffield during Summer 2013. It is based on interviews with 10 foodbanks and 1 soup kitchen. The Third Sector Assembly in Sheffield brought partners together and this report was produced jointly by Voluntary Action Sheffield and Sheffield City Council Public Health Team with support from Manor and Castle Development Trust, Mark Gamsu and Involve Yorkshire & Humber. The Report was originally funded by the Yorkshire and Humber Public Health Observatory who are now part of the Public Health England Knowledge and Intelligence Team.

Key Findings:

- Use of foodbanks in Sheffield is growing and the rate of use has increased since benefit changes were introduced on 1st April 2013.
- Provision of food is important but the main driver is lack of income driven by low wages, unemployment, unfair access to the benefit system and poor performance by the benefit system.
- Foodbanks play an important role in reducing the isolation that poverty brings. Foodbanks that serve hot meals reported that people make friends through coming together to eat.

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Overview

This short report provides a snapshot of issues faced by foodbanks and their users in Sheffield during Summer 2013. It is based on interviews with 10 foodbanks and 1 soup kitchen. This report was produced jointly by Voluntary Action Sheffield and Sheffield City Council Public Health Team with support from Manor and Castle Development Trust, Mark Gamsu and Involve Yorkshire & Humber. The Report was originally funded by the Yorkshire and Humber Public Health Observatory who are now part of the Public Health England Knowledge and Intelligence Team.

Executive Summary

There has been a growth in foodbanks in Sheffield and demand continues to rise. Foodbanks in the city are provided predominantly by volunteers with a significant role being played by networks of Churches. While there is variation in practice and focus there is a strong and consistent value base that emphasises the importance of building non-judgmental relationships and recognises that foodbanks should not be a substitute for statutory provision.

Key findings

- Use of foodbanks in Sheffield is growing and the rate of use has increased since benefit changes were introduced on 1st April 2013.
- The city has a wide range of interventions focussed on ensuring access to food for the most vulnerable. There is currently limited coordination between these interventions.
- Provision of food is important but the main driver is lack of income driven by low wages, unemployment, unfair access to the benefit system and poor performance by the benefit system.
- Most of the people who use foodbanks are not there because they are trying to manipulate the system - they are in crisis - often because they lack the skills, social connections, knowledge and confidence to access the support they are entitled to.

- Foodbanks provide a strong connection with vulnerable people whose experience and needs are often not heard clearly enough by statutory services.
- Foodbanks play an important role in reducing the isolation that poverty brings. Foodbanks that serve hot meals reported that people make friends through coming together to eat.
- Foodbanks are run largely by volunteers who are concerned with providing a direct service. They lack the resources to engage in wider service planning.
- Infrastructure to capture information about need and utilisation is not well developed.
- Many foodbanks support service users through provision of ad hoc advice and information on benefits, welfare rights, healthy eating and wellbeing.

Key recommendations

- There are a wide range of interventions focussed on ensuring access to food for the most vulnerable - these could be co-ordinated better.
- Foodbanks and soup kitchens are an important resource within some of Sheffield's most deprived communities that could be supported to increase resilience and social capital, and develop better ways of delivering health outcomes.
- There is the potential for services (such as welfare rights) to be better integrated with foodbank provision to meet need.
- Foodbanks have a rich source of information, but volunteers / staff can be reluctant or unable to invest their limited time to share this intelligence. More pro-active relationship building with foodbanks could help address this.

Context

There are currently 16 foodbanks in Sheffield.

In section 1.7 of the Sheffield Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (2013) it notes that:

“Rising cost of living, static incomes, changes to benefits, underemployment and unemployment have meant increasing numbers of people in the UK have hit a crisis that forces them to go hungry. As the **Fairness Commission report** outlines, there are increasing numbers of people in Sheffield who are unable to access enough food or the right food to feed themselves and their families.

Nationally there has been a 170% rise in numbers of people turning to foodbanks in the last 12 months and Sheffield is no different. The rise in foodbank usage is dramatic, but predates upcoming welfare reform which could see numbers increase”.

This report builds on the work of Sheffield’s Third Sector Assembly on **Food Poverty**. The purpose of this report is through capturing the views and opinions of providers to gain an insight into who is using foodbanks and why they are using them.

Why do people use Foodbanks?

A wide range of people use foodbanks. One of the messages that came across was that for many people having to go to a foodbank feels humiliating and shameful. Some of the characteristics mentioned frequently included:

- People with mental health problems, ‘mental anguish’ including grief
- People who do not understand how the system works - such as recently released prisoners
- Addiction to drugs and alcohol
- Social isolation: one foodbank was supporting 6 agoraphobic people who, according to the foodbank ‘won’t leave the house for a meeting but have to leave because they need to eat.’

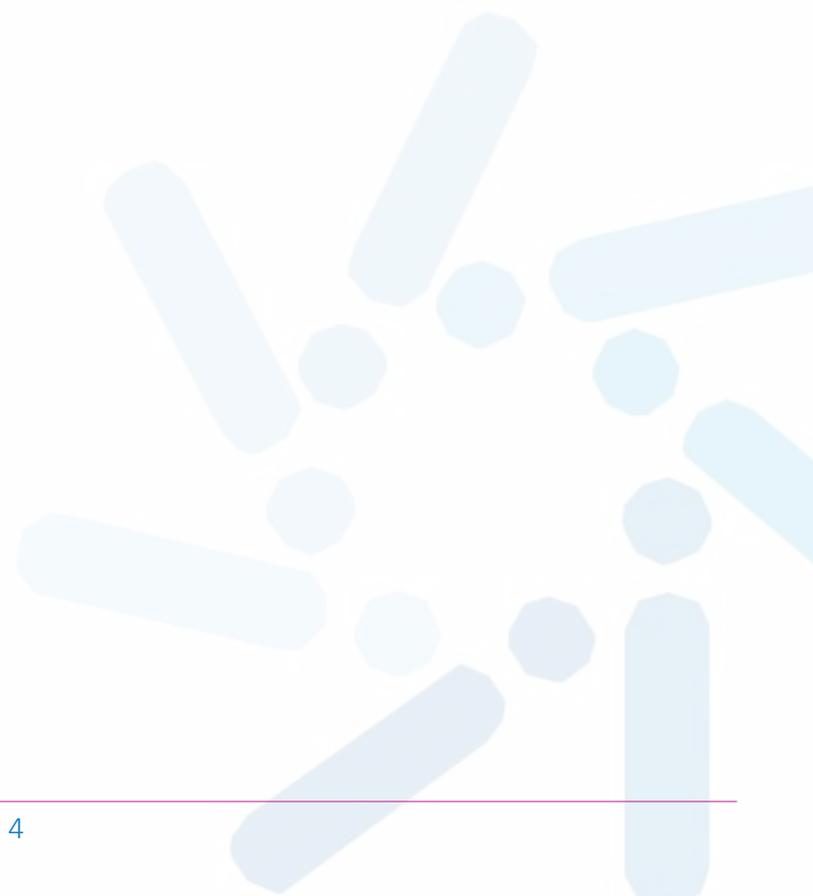
- Malnutrition
- People are just managing to cope on low incomes and then something unexpected happens that ‘tips the balance’ and they are no longer able to manage
- Benefit delays - it can take up to 9 weeks to sort out a delay. In some cases foodbank workers/ volunteers have tried to help people resolve outstanding benefit issues and found that they have had to spend up to 6 hours advocating over the phone
- Benefit sanctions - people who have been sanctioned and had their benefits stopped.

“I missed my bus and arrived 5 minutes late - the advisor said you have missed your slot and I got sanctioned for 12 weeks”

Sheffield foodbank user

“They (Job Centre Plus) sanction a client and then ring us up (the foodbank) to sort out the problem they have created”

Sheffield foodbank provider



A typical scenario...

Week 1	Change in personal circumstances results in recalculation of benefits
Week 1-2	Benefit delay - people survive with support from friends and family
Week 3-4	Turn to pay-day money lenders
Week 4-5	Now in desperate need, people contact support workers / foodbanks
Week 5	Foodbank staff contact the Job Centre to try to get benefits re-started
Week 13-16	Benefits are paid

Our research found it takes on average 9 weeks from first contact with Jobcentre Plus for benefit payments to be made.

While most people who use foodbanks use them for a fairly short period of time there are some who rely on them on a long-term basis such as destitute asylum seekers. Some foodbanks were concerned that the number of people who relied on foodbanks for longer periods of time was growing.

There is a possibly a correlation between this and the growth in the number of people who are long term unemployed in the city.¹ All foodbanks noted that they have seen an increase in demand from April 2013 as benefit changes started to be implemented.

One of the impressions we had was that the people who use foodbanks are often the most vulnerable - they appear at the foodbank because of their personal circumstances which are often compounded by their difficulty in understanding and accessing the social welfare system. It is this group of vulnerable people who struggle to 'manage the system' who appear to be most affected by sanctions rather than those who are purposefully 'playing the system'.

It is not possible to easily estimate the total number of people using foodbanks during the course of a year. However, the snapshot in the table below (using the lowest weekly figures) gives a total of just over 160 each week. Most foodbanks do not give food for more than 3 consecutive weeks. From this, the minimum usage figure is likely to be over 300 people a year with a maximum usage of almost 3,000. For comparison in August 2013 there were 2,805 long-term unemployed claimants of whom 420 were aged between 18 - 24. One fifth of Sheffield's households live in poverty.²

¹ Creative Sheffield - Claimant Count Update August 2013

² Making Sheffield Fairer - Sheffield Fairness Commission 2012

Snapshot of Usage - from 10 foodbanks visited at the end of July 2013

Foodbank	Approximate number of people who used them that week
The Rock	12 to 20
St Thomas	30+
Salvation Army	12 (capped)
Firth Park Food Bank	45
St Mary's	20 to 30
Fir Vale Food Bank	50 to 70
Grace	20 to 30
Jubilee	20 to 25
Gleadless	12 to 30
Mount Tabor	10

Who refers to foodbanks?

Foodbanks vary in terms of the organisations they work with. Most only take referrals from agencies where, for example, support workers make a decision about who to refer and completes a voucher / referral form giving details about the persons needs. A few do allow self referrals. Many are very concerned that their provision must not be perceived as a substitute for statutory provision - either as a mechanism

for saving money or to compensate for poor performance, delays or policy.

As a result, some foodbanks are reluctant to take referrals from statutory services which the foodbanks believe have a responsibility to support vulnerable people or that their statutory policy implementation has been the cause of the crisis e.g. Job Centre sanctions. Some foodbanks do not accept referrals from the Job Centre whereas others have arrangements in place and accept direct referrals.

Examples of referral agencies

Park Health Centre	NSPCC
Homeless and Travellers Team	Hospital
Mental Health Support Team	ASSIST
Age UK	GPs
Archer Project	Churches
Social Services	SOAR
MAST (Multi-Agency Support Teams)	Advice Centres

The Service

Most foodbanks provide food parcels which contain food for between one and three days. Most will usually provide these for a maximum of three weeks although a number sought to be more flexible or have changed to provide longer term support as the needs and reasons for people using foodbanks has changed. A number chose to open on a Friday in order to be able to help people over a weekend.

There is a consistently strong emphasis on creating an atmosphere in the foodbank that places an importance on respect for individuals, provides a safe space for conversations and one that is safe and respectful. In ensuring that services are provided with humility, this often includes providing hot drinks, cakes and in one case a meal.

Some foodbanks also provided an informal advocacy service - helping people to sort out benefit delays. However, other foodbanks felt that this sort of advocacy or referral was not their responsibility.

A number of foodbanks expressed concern at access to welfare rights advice. In one case a sessional service had been withdrawn due to cuts, while others noted that people in crisis would have to start queuing at 7am in order to stand a chance of being seen by their local CAB.

Two of the foodbanks interviewed do not provide a drop in - instead they use a team of drivers to deliver food to peoples homes.

Volunteers

We did not conduct an audit of the level of volunteering - however it is clear that the backbone of this service is provided by volunteers. For example, Grace Foodbank has 15 volunteers, as does Gleadless. From this quick audit alone it is clear that there are at least 100 volunteers involved in those foodbanks interviewed. A number also provide regular training to volunteers.

We were also given a number of examples where people who had benefited from the foodbank came back as volunteers.

Who supports foodbanks?

There is a strong emphasis on partnership working. Many foodbanks are supported by a wider network of organisations, churches feature very strongly; for example one is supported by 15 churches but other organisations such as schools, sports clubs and workplaces are also often involved. They have a very strong volunteer element with most reliant almost completely on active groups of volunteers. In addition a number of foodbanks have also developed active networks of organisations that provide support with fundraising and donations.

There is a wide variation in terms of practice and models for example:

- Some organisations fundraise and buy food
- Others have a range of supporters who provide funding and food
- Others rely on donations from the public or large supermarkets



Foodbanks in Sheffield

There is considerable variation in the way that foodbanks are run in Sheffield. One issue that did emerge was a consistent value base that places a great deal of emphasis on providing support to people who are vulnerable and in crisis - providing not just food but also an opportunity to talk to someone. It is important to note that these are all voluntary organisations and in a number of cases run completely by volunteers. It would not be appropriate to seek to impose a standardised approach across the city.

Keeping in touch with what is going on

There is wide variation in what information foodbanks collect about their clients. Some foodbanks are happy to share this information with the local authority while others are reluctant to do so. The scale and growth of foodbank provision in the city means that the information that foodbanks hold would be a useful indicator of need, impact of welfare reform and a measure that might help future commissioning of services such as welfare rights. However, many foodbanks lack the resources to gather data systematically and/or are unconvinced of the benefits of sharing intelligence.

In addition to quantitative data foodbanks have powerful information based on the individual stories they hear from people who use them. These stories provide an insight into personal need and into how statutory services are responding or not to need. This information could provide the Health and Wellbeing Board and commissioning agencies with valuable evidence to inform dialogue with agencies such as Job Centre Plus.

A trusted and stable relationship with foodbanks would improve commissioners' knowledge about need and would enable better targeting of key services such as welfare rights provision. In addition it would provide a useful measure of how services like Job Centre Plus are performing and whether this needs local challenge.

Wider support

This review focused on foodbanks and the story they tell. There are strong grounds to consider food poverty more widely - notably to understand how this provision fits into a wider range of food poverty provision that includes - Fareshare, ASSIST, Children's Centres and free school meal provision. All of these represent an additional in kind subsidy compensating for low income and lack of social welfare financial support.

Forward look

In addition to the roll out of Universal Credit and associated reforms there is likely to be an impact through changes in Housing Benefit eligibility for hostel provision which could lead to an increase in sofa surfing.



Case Studies

Salvation Army Duke Street

The Salvation Army has always given out food parcels. It provides a standard parcel which has enough food for 3 meals a day for 3 days. It does not rely on donations - but has a small budget that it uses. Demand has gone up and it can no longer purchase sufficient food to meet demand.

All clients are referred by other agencies - they offer access to programmes and pastoral care - although these are not compulsory. While they do not keep detailed information on who uses their service many have a history of addiction, mental illness and homelessness.

In addition to the foodbank they also run lunch clubs and a breakfast - they have noticed that they now get families with children attending this.

Firth Park Food Bank

The foodbank gets a lot of support from local shops. The foodbank does feel that it is sometimes used by Social Services as a way of filling gaps in provision or saving money.

[Story "My manager told me to refer this person to the foodbank to save Social Services funding"](#)

Volunteers at the foodbank are very committed and try to help with forms such as DLA registration and GP registration.

The foodbank does not keep comprehensive records.

St Marks Soup Run

The Soup Run used to run from September to May - but it now runs throughout the year. They give out food, bedding and clothing and provide a listening ear.

They have a good network of agencies they refer on to who include Citizens Advice Bureaux, SOAR and St Wilfred's. They do not keep detailed records about the people who use them.

Fir Vale Food Bank

This is what the Fir Vale Food Bank said to us.

"We are scandalized that local people search for discarded food in bins and go without food so their children can eat. We are scandalized that local people have to choose between eating and heating. We call for a wide coalition to help alleviate this need.

We invite people of means to donate food and finance. We invite local people experiencing food shortage to Fir Vale Food Bank every Thursday at St Cuthbert's Church, Fir Vale from 2.00-3.30pm.

Every year we distribute over 3,000 free food bags. Every week, around 60 individuals and families are helped. Social isolation is reduced by the weekly cafe, which offers a place of belonging.

We rely on faith groups, trades unions, schools, cubs and scouts, sporting groups, campaigning and commercial groups, as well as numerous individual donors.

We train our volunteers in food hygiene. The majority of our 14 volunteers are themselves also users of Fir Vale Foodbank.

We are working with a local allotment group to help users learn how to grow vegetables, using our church garden as a mini training allotment."





Jubilee Food Bank

Run their foodbank with a team of 15 volunteer drivers delivering directly to peoples' homes. They can respond quickly to need and provide up to 3 food parcels in a 3 week period.

Home delivery means that drivers are more likely to be aware of issues such as homes lacking a cooker or basic furniture and they can tailor food delivery to this.

They also provide a debt advice service and 'grub club' to teach people about healthy cooking.

St Thomas' Food Bank (Trussell Trust)

We spent the first year building the team and getting the model right and creating an environment where people will feel safe. This has to be about the person and building relationships – the food is often secondary and a result of other needs that we try to identify.

We try to get people talking e.g. they have to tell us what food they want. It gives them control, but also breaks down initial barriers. After 2-3 weeks people will talk about the real issues they have.

One person hadn't left the house in 6 months, wasn't paying any bills and had her phone and electricity cut off. After 4 visits she came in with a mountain of unopened letters. Volunteers are supporting her to go through them and make calls for her.

We used to only offer 2-3 food parcels but now the average is 6-7 with some having 14. Benefit delays and sanctions mean that circumstances take weeks to get sorted out.

Burngreave Foodbank at The Rock Christian Centre (Trussell Trust)

We provide short term crisis support and generally give 2-3 food parcels to people who are referred to our service from housing support workers, health visitors, advice centres and community organizations.

We try to refer people on to other support services when we identify a need we cannot deal with. We are not advice workers and think that it is better to signpost to services with appropriate expertise than to try to do everything ourselves. Often the organisation that refers the person to us is better placed to identify other support services that they need. However, access to services is a real issue and it is getting worse.

We are concerned that with the move to pay Housing Benefit monthly to individuals and not to landlords that people will see a large amount of money in their bank, spend it and then struggle to pay their rent.

About the Rapid Review

This rapid review was commissioned by Yorkshire and Humber Public Health Observatory (now Public Health England Knowledge and Intelligence Team). The Review was led by Professor Mark Gamsu and developed in partnership with Involve Yorkshire & Humber, Sheffield City Council Public Health Team and Voluntary Action Sheffield with the support of Manor and Castle Development Trust.

This Rapid Review is part of a small programme seeking to develop approaches that will help raise the profile of voluntary sector intelligence in local commissioning through processes such as the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment.

A report on the process itself will be produced later in 2013.

Review Team

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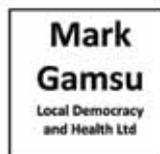
Debbie Matthews - Manor and Castle Development Trust

We would particularly like to thank the volunteers and workers from the foodbanks mentioned above who kindly gave up their time to be interviewed.

The Report was originally funded by the Yorkshire and Humber Public Health Observatory who are now part of the Public Health England Knowledge and Intelligence Team.



third sector **assembly**
Sheffield



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