



The challenges of local responses to food poverty in London:

a summary of seminar discussions and presentations

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This report is based on the proceedings of the Wellcome Trust funded event: **Exploring Local Authority responses to food poverty in London: a seminar on working with local stakeholders and food aid networks** (Friday 29th June 2018 at Mary Ward House Conference and Exhibition Centre, Tavistock Place).



Rationale

The tasks of identifying, measuring and responding to food poverty pose significant challenges for local authorities and local public health teams. Co-ordinating provision across sectors and professions with limited (or no) dedicated funding and working collaboratively with third sector organisations and primary care providers are just some of the complex undertakings this entails. Added to which, local resources and needs are varied and the food aid sector is rapidly expanding and diversifying. In June 2018, we held a stakeholder seminar for those working on food poverty in London – with a focus on the concerns and challenges raised by local public health teams.

Local authorities with greater rates of benefit sanctions and welfare spending cuts are experiencing greater rates of people seeking emergency food assistance (Loopstra et al., 2015). This assistance is largely delivered by food banks and other food aid projects, which are usually third sector organisations that give donated and surplus food to those in need. While community and third sector organisations provide an array of services to support those in need and ameliorate deprivation, food banks remain the dominant response to food poverty on the ground (Wells and Caraher, 2014). Food aid is generally not provided by or funded by the state. Only modest and sporadic amounts of funding are available from statutory funders to tackle food poverty. In fact, central government's ongoing retreat from welfare and reluctance to be the duty-bearer of responses to food insecurity has been widely observed and criticised (Lambie-Mumford, 2015). And yet, local authority and public health teams are tasked with responding to food poverty and its effects at the local level and collaborating with third sector organisations in order to achieve this – meaning that 'partnership' working has become a practical necessity. Increasingly, food poverty action plans (FPAPs) are the mechanism through which this is operationalised. These documents set out local crises and longer-term needs, describe appropriate responses and contain sets of agreements and processes. They are informed by data analysis and research, and are developed in collaboration with a range of local stakeholders including food aid providers, decision-makers in statutory agencies, academics, faith groups, charities, and local businesses (Sustain, 2016). Food Power (the main third sector organisation that supports and drives strategic response to food poverty) offers financial support for food poverty alliances / partnerships to evidence and evaluate the impact of their collaborations and to develop food poverty action plans and strategies. More recently, the organisation has started to offer further financial support for food poverty alliances to pursue strategic developments (see <https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpower/support/> for more details). It is the third sector, not the state that is driving and supporting strategic local responses to food poverty.

Currently, only a third of London councils have or are developing food poverty action plans. The Greater London Authority has now allocated funding for which local councils can apply in order to develop action plans, with support from Sustain (Sharpe et al., 2017). However, partnership working and implementing FPAPs are not without their challenges. Our seminar brought together stakeholders from London local authorities and London-based third sector food aid providers (including charities, community organisations, not-for-profits, social enterprises etc) to explore the current challenges to partnership working and some possible ways forward. This report gives a summary of the key issues raised in the presentations and discussions at the seminar. Specifically, **the practical challenges of working across sectors; the roll-out of Universal Credit (UC); and issues around food poverty measurement and data collection**. Summaries of these issues are provided in the sections that follow.

The practical challenges of working across sectors

Responding to food aid in the context of cuts and uncertainty

In the context of ongoing spending cuts for local services, reliance on third sector actors that operate outside formal health and social care systems is increasing (Roy et al., 2017). The workshop heard from two grassroots organisations that decided to act on food poverty issues within the last three to four years, as the effects of public spending cuts were becoming impossible to ignore at the community level. Participants discussed the importance of their work, evidence of success, and the evolution of their service provisions to a scale that required larger grants. These developments generate both challenges and opportunities. On the one hand they demonstrate the feasibility of community engagement models and the success of social capital and cohesion in the communities where they work. A new generation of social entrepreneurs are grappling with the need to manage funding, maintain accountability to grant making bodies, and develop longer term plans because there is no indication that the demand for their services is coming to an end. These developments have important implications for the charitable sector, and grassroots volunteers who started to deliver food aid as a short term initiative, and find themselves applying for longer term and larger sources of funds to continue plugging the gaps in statutory social safety nets. It also points to a growing need for a strong and up to date evidence base to keep pace with a diverse and vibrant food aid sector.

Without formal structures, the collaborations and partnership working this entails – while often creative and responsive – can also be very challenging. Current responses to food poverty, in both local authority, third sector, and collaborative terms, are underscored by a systemic precarity that adds an additional layer of challenges. This is especially apparent in terms of funding. Not least because the various funding sources and schemes that support collaborations and partnerships tend to focus on start-ups and new projects rather than maintenance and continuing programmes that work. As a result, it is felt that replication of effort and loss of expertise and contacts is a regrettable outcome of precarious funding models that rely on an ongoing series of short-term projects and posts. Third sector organisations are continuously applying for various ‘pots’ of money to continue and develop their services.

At the same time, funding for local authority and NHS Trust projects and posts is limited. Staff working on food poverty and related issues are frequently working on short and fixed-term contracts, meaning that they have enough time to set up projects and networks but not to maintain them. Staff turnover, across sectors, makes it difficult to maintain effective working relationships. Against this backdrop of financial precarity, there are additional practical barriers to working together.

Barriers to working together effectively and proposed ways forward

Those working within third sector food aid organisations face a variety of pragmatic problems when attempting to work with local authorities and local NHS trusts. For those not in state employ the structure of local authority departments and responsibilities can be confusing, meaning that it is difficult to get through to the relevant person. More so given that there is often no ‘one person’ responsible for liaising with food aid organisations. Within local areas, staff from

public health and other departments can all be establishing contacts and collaborations with various food aid organisations without necessarily knowing what each other are doing, which is far from ideal for all concerned. Having dedicated, permanent, sustainably funded members of staff within each local authority who have the full-time job of monitoring and liaising with local food aid and other relevant third sector organisations would be an ideal means of addressing the problem, although ongoing funding cuts make this a practical near-impossibility. Workshop participants raised the importance of having visible local 'champions', which might serve to ensure that food security remained high on the agenda, and to encourage policy networks to coalesce and coordinate.

In the process of developing and implementing food poverty action plans with third sector organisations, local authority staff encounter a range of challenges. Not all food aid providers want to work collaboratively or have the volunteers (or paid staff) to spare to attend meetings and events. Added to which, community organisations can have aims and practices that do not align with public health goals and may even conflict with the ethos of local government. Rhetoric around 'big society' and civil society (DDCMS, 2018) initiatives implicitly assumes that different sectors share the same overall goals and can work seamlessly together. This is often not the case, and the hard work that both local authority and third sector staff undertake in their partnership working needs to be acknowledged, especially since there is no official guidance or training on this issue. A further challenge for local authorities and public health teams is the politically sensitive environment within which they operate. The run-up to local elections can often mean that work on food poverty action plans, urgent as they are, can be deprioritised and suspended for long periods. The outcome of local elections can have a significant impact on the capacity of local teams. Labour- and Conservative-led boroughs can have very different framings and priorities around this issue. As the number of food poverty action plans gradually increases, a key question is how effective they will be in leveraging new resources and maintaining policy momentum and keeping a wide range of stakeholders in dialogue around the multi-faceted food security issue.

In areas where local authority teams have relatively high capacity to work on food poverty and local third sector organisations are numerous and well-resourced, strategic collaborations and practices can be instituted across sectors to ensure that those in need are more likely to receive food aid. For example, local authority or NHS trust staff can act as gatekeepers – obtaining large batches of food aid 'referral vouchers' from local food banks and then distributing them amongst public and third sector staff that work with groups at risk of food poverty. Meaning that teachers, family support workers, children's centre staff and other frontline professionals have a ready supply of referrals as and when needed. Such practices also serve to foster effective communication and networks. Taking a more systematic approach, an increasing number of local authorities are providing referral hubs in an effort to prevent or mitigate poor health and wellbeing. These referral hubs serve as a single-point-of-contact service that aims to improve access to a variety of local housing, income, NHS, and psychosocial support for local populations by appropriately signposting to onward services. Camden and Islington's Public Health team is currently carrying out an evaluation of their local referral hubs to clarify the process by which they are delivered, the populations that they reach, and perceptions from referral hub staff and service users. Given NICE's 2016 recommendation for single-point-of-contact referral, the findings of this evaluation are likely to be highly influential in the development of local networks of care and welfare that help to address food poverty. One particular area that both third sector and local authority public health teams want to develop is their capacity to include healthcare professionals in their networks and improve communication. Research on this topic and dissemination of good practice, like that in Camden and Islington, are essential to inform new models of delivery and ensure equity within them.

Universal Credit

The new integrated benefits system, Universal Credit, is due to be fully rolled out by the end of this parliament. A flagship reform, it is intended to simplify the benefit system by rolling six existing benefits together into one online-only system. The scheme is the latest, and the boldest, in a progression of policies designed to help unify and simplify benefits that have been instigated by both Labour and Conservative governments. At the 2015 general election, all three main parties were in principle in favour of Universal Credit (Timmins, 2016). In terms of implementation, the scheme has proved to be much more controversial and complex. It has been beset by a series of management and IT problems, and well publicised accounts of the system failing some of its most vulnerable recipients. A particular focus for critics has been the minimum 42-day wait for a first payment for new claimants and the ensuing rise in foodbank referral and evictions, as low-income households are left with no funds for months on end (Butler, 2017). The roll-out is having a considerable impact on those working on food poverty at the local level. The National Audit Office has questioned whether the original claims around Universal Credit offering value for money as a benefits delivery mechanism are still valid (National Audit Office, 2018).

Challenges for local responses to food poverty

Rates of food bank use in the UK are at an all-time high (Loopstra, 2018). The roll-out of Universal Credit (UC) is currently causing localised spikes in acute need for their services (The Trussell Trust, 2018). However, there is typically little capacity within food banks to deal with the increased demand, especially in terms of staffing and providing support with benefit and housing problems. There are a number of issues with the design and implementation of UC that are particularly problematic for those at risk of food poverty and those working to tackle it. Most notably, these include the 'transition period' in which claimants moving on to the benefit can go months without receiving any money at all and the fact that the benefit is paid monthly and in arrears (Millar and Bennett, 2017). In practice, this can mean that those on low incomes and with no savings can be plunged into housing, debt and domestic crises as a result of extended periods with no income (The Trussell Trust, 2018). It is during this period that interactions with food banks may become critical. For some this can mean receiving food aid for the first time. For others, it can mean that their need becomes more acute and the range and intensity of issues that they need food bank staff to assist them with increase. When dealing with UC administrative issues, having a place to use a telephone or a computer, access to Wi-Fi, help with form-filling and simply having someone to talk to become essential. When UC is being rolled-out in a particular area, local food banks can experience a sharp increase in demand for these essentials. Added to which, food bank volunteers are 'unofficially' tasked with advocating for claimants in such scenarios and, in many cases, may be simultaneously struggling with their own issues as UC claimants.

In this context, cross-sector working in local areas has become a strained necessity. Co-ordinated responses between local statutory agencies, food banks and other third sector organisations in areas where UC roll-out is imminent or underway are largely instigated and led by local public health teams and operationalised via 'call to action' events and multi-sector working groups. This is serving to increase contacts between food banks and benefit-related services such as welfare reform teams, income maximisation teams, and emergency support services. Effectively, local authorities and public health teams are being left to manage the risk of UC without the corresponding budgets and powers to effect

system-level changes and improvements. Added to which, a lack of information sharing and communication between the DWP, local authorities, and third sector organisations hinders co-ordinated local responses.

Increasing capacity and support

One area where this is very much apparent is that of Universal Support, about which there is a lack of information and understanding. Universal Support, as defined by the DWP, is a locally-administered support service which offers personal budgeting support (PBS) and assisted digital support (ADS). It is funded by grants from the DWP and local authorities are given funding to implement it based on a DWP calculation and evaluation of need. Local authorities can choose to deliver the support themselves or contract out to local partners, such as Citizens Advice. Each claimant is currently entitled to one session of PBS and ADS each, and each session lasts around two hours. The Jobcentre will signpost claimants onto the service but the local authority is in charge of delivery. Evidence from the Trussell Trust would suggest that Universal Support is not available as readily as promised by the DWP and is not reaching the people who need it most (for example, because Jobcentres may not be signposting people to this help) (The Trussell Trust, 2018). One of the key priorities of the Trussell Trust for 2018 is to help ensure Universal Support is being publicised and delivered and that local authorities can get the appropriate funding for it. The advance payment loans feature of UC is another aspect of the benefit that could be better publicised and, thereby, serve to lessen crises around transition on to the new system. It is also important to note that food banks are not the only food aid organisations responding to the acute need associated with UC. Schemes including social supermarkets, community pantries and holiday hunger programmes are also being implemented, often with the support of organisations like FareShare, to deal with rising levels of hunger. Increasing support and signposting to these services and schemes is crucial to help lessen the impact of UC-related hardship on vulnerable groups and households.

Estimating food poverty, data and academic research

An overview of data collection, measurement and estimation

What academics, food aid organisations and public health teams **need** to know and what information they **can** collect do not always fit together well. A major challenge is accessing people and finding out more about their diet or broader capabilities to access sufficient and appropriate food. This is particularly problematic for vulnerable populations who are harder to reach both in terms of interventions and data collection.

A pertinent example of this problem can be seen in the disparity between the number of people eligible for Healthy Start and those who access it, with many more eligible than take it up. In addition, prior to the roll-out of universal free school meals for Key Stage 1, there was a drop-off between families eligible for Healthy Start and the uptake of free school

meals when starting school. Investigating the drivers for this mismatch at the local level and finding ways to communicate information about Healthy Start more effectively remain a challenge. Early years nutrition is a particular concern in this context. Food poverty can function as a barrier to both breast feeding and safe bottle feeding (Thompson et al., 2018, Oakley et al., 2013, Baby Feeding Law Group UK, 2018). There is an All-Party Parliamentary Group on Infant Feeding and the GLA actively wants to collect better data on diet, so there is an appetite, within government, for developing new approaches to addressing and researching early years diet in the context of deprivation.

In terms of the broader population, the risk of food poverty is rising (Smith et al., 2018), the number of food banks, the amount of people using them and the amount of food they give out is also rising (Loopstra, 2017, Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2017) – especially in London, with its housing problems, high cost of living, and precarious job market (Hall et al., 2013). In the UK, we do not have consistent data on the incidence of food poverty because, unlike Canada or the US, the UK does not routinely measure it (although some food insecurity modules have been included in various surveys).¹ Attempts to get legislation through Parliament introducing regular, national monitoring have yet to be successful. The North American models of food banking are characterised by: a) minimal welfare, b) third sector intervention, and c) established food poverty. Recent welfare reform in the UK is pushing us into this direction and, therefore, approaches and systems developed in these countries and others with recent problems of food insecurity can provide a lead on measuring and monitoring. The authors have collaborated with a range of public health teams (including Barnet, Guildford and Southwark) to tailor and apply flexible local-level risk estimations for food poverty based on the domains of household profiles and benefit claims (see Smith et al, 2018 for more details). We are currently working with a number of English public health teams to develop further local adaptations of this model. Other ongoing research seeks to integrate data on incomes, budget standards and more direct experiences of food insecurity (contact Wolf Ellis at Kings College London for more details on his work in this area wolf.ellis@kcl.ac.uk).

In the absence of local and national level data collection (as opposed to estimation) on food poverty, working with food banks and their data to track rates of foodbank use has become a proxy measure. A growing body of innovative work using Trussell Trust data has provided a wealth of evidence and insight on food banking, food poverty, and its drivers (see Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2017, Lambie-Mumford, 2013, Lambie, 2011, Jitendra et al., 2017 for examples). However, it is well recognised that the third sector franchise nature of food bank set-ups means that the opening and location of food banks is based on community resources and local social networks rather than objective measures of need or population characteristics. Barriers to accessing food banks include stigma, lack of awareness of local food banks, and the presence of a ‘gatekeeper’ who may either not refer or refuse to refer. Therefore, it is likely that there are far more people experiencing food poverty than there are using food banks. Research in Canada suggests that only around 20% of people who are in food poverty use food banks (Loopstra and Tarasuk, 2015), in which case estimating and measuring aspects of food poverty and its drivers at the local level is ever more important to devising and delivering appropriate responses. Added to which, not all food banks are Trussell Trust. London is home to a growing independent food aid sector. The proliferation of diverse, independent and community-led responses to food poverty mean that synthesising data and trends is particularly difficult in this sector. In the first instance, merely trying to identify all the existing food banks and other food aid outlets in a local area can be challenging. The ongoing work of IFAN (the Independent Food Aid Network) to collect this data has been a massive step forward (Independent Food Aid Network,

¹ See <https://enuf.org.uk/> for further resources and figures on household food insecurity.

2018, Goodwin, 2018). However, smaller and non-Trussell Trust food banks do not always have the capacity to collect data on their clients and services, and those that do certainly do not do so in a uniform manner.

Suggested ways forward

Presentations and subsequent discussions at the seminar generated a range of ideas about how to improve and enhance local knowledge about food poverty. One way of doing this is to facilitate data collection by community gatekeepers and health and social care professionals. Staff in schools, GP surgeries and children's centres can be asked to answer a short set of survey questions on food poverty and even food bank referrals by email on a regular basis. This basic and relatively low-cost form of monitoring can then feed into food poverty action plans. Barnet is currently working on a short set of questions for this very purpose. In addition, local authorities routinely run surveys that could be adapted to include some basic questions on diet quality and/or food insecurity/poverty. They could also include an opt-in for individuals to be followed-up for qualitative interviews if there are particular issues they want to discuss. Food poverty action plans and needs assessments are increasingly informed by qualitative data generated with key service providers and users that local public health teams are typically much better placed to collect (in terms of access and local knowledge) than academic researchers. For example, Barnet's forthcoming Food Security Needs Assessment involved collaboration between academic researchers and public health staff to gather insights from front line staff, and better understand how and if social workers, teachers, and welfare reform teams identify food poverty amongst their clients. Further, the Royal Borough of Greenwich's Food Poverty Needs Assessment utilised community gatekeepers to recruit food bank users for qualitative interviews (Nzuza and Duval, 2016) – which form part of an impressively comprehensive depiction of the complex and situated unfolding of food poverty at the local level.

In order to pursue tailored, complex and targeted measurement, collaborations are an effective approach. Academics interested in food poverty can contribute significant methodological expertise and resources to local data collection and analysis. However, collaborations between local authorities, public health teams and academics can be difficult to foster. Creating greater opportunities for local actors and academic researchers to meet – via seminars and stakeholder events – will strengthen intersections. In the longer term, this will lead to more collaborative funding applications for local authorities, food banks, other service providers and academics to undertake discrete data-driven projects in local areas and thereby build networks and develop new approaches. In working towards this, academic researchers can, for example, can help and facilitate BSc and MSc students to undertake dissertation projects with public health teams around related topics, thus forging new links and developing practical skills.

Summary

Current trends in policy, politics, and welfare mean that increased food bank use and food aid diversification are set to continue. This creates ongoing challenges to achieving the local cross-sector working and collaboration that are needed to respond to this expansion and encourage effective projects. Particular difficulties are posed by the practicalities of working across sectors; Universal Credit; and generating and working with food poverty-relevant data. Some key suggestions, examples of good practice, and possible ways forward emerged from discussions on these topics. Specifically:

- Local authority or NHS Trust staff in some areas act as gatekeepers – obtaining large batches of food aid ‘referral vouchers’ from local food banks and then distributing them amongst public and third sector staff that work with groups at risk of food poverty, meaning that key frontline professionals have a ready supply of referrals as and when needed.
- The development of single-point-of-contact referral hubs can offer a one-stop-shop service for onward community and third sector service referral (including food banks) and thereby increase contact with vital services for vulnerable members of the community.
- Greater awareness, signposting, uptake, funding, and campaigning for Universal Support services at the local level would help ease the burden of transition onto UC for vulnerable households and those at risk of food poverty (ideally in addition to more intrinsic changes to UC itself). The Trussell Trust is making this a key priority for 2018/9.
- Facilitating basic data collection among community gatekeepers and frontline professionals can feed into food poverty action plans and inform local networks.
- Local authority-run routine surveys could be adapted to include some basic questions on diet quality and/or food insecurity/poverty.
- Creating greater opportunities for local actors and academic researchers to meet – via seminars and stakeholder events – will strengthen intersections and, in the longer term, lead to more collaborative funding applications for bespoke data-driven projects.
- The stated need for greater structural support and resources for statutory / third sector intersections was a constant feature of discussions and presentations. Having dedicated, permanent, sustainably-funded members of staff within each local authority who have the full-time job of monitoring and liaising with local food aid and other key third sector organisations would be an ideal means of addressing this, although ongoing funding cuts make this a practical near-impossibility.

The suggestions and examples of good practice discussed in this report are deeply pragmatic in nature and concerned with developing practical responses to the challenges of work in and with the food aid sector. The authors want to stress that these concerns are underscored by a strong awareness that emergency food provision is not the most effective or dignified response to food poverty in particular and poverty more generally. The drivers and injustices of (food) poverty are described extensively and comprehensively elsewhere. This report focuses on highlighting the current challenges and issues as identified by food aid stakeholders, but this account must be situated within the broader political and social contexts in which food poverty occurs.

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