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EVALUATION: PILOT PROJECT

Advice and Food Banks – making a difference to people in food poverty

July 2015

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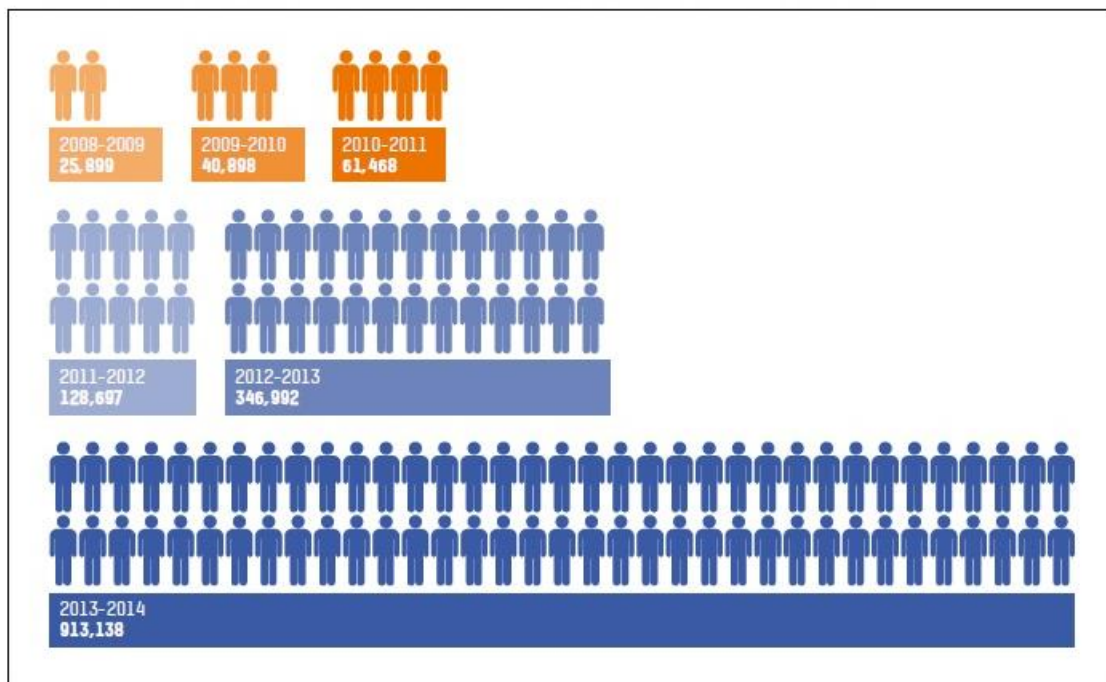
Executive Summary

- ✓ In the context of the burgeoning number of food banks operating in the UK and the expectation that need for these will continue to grow in the wake of austerity and welfare reform, including benefit sanctions, the advice worker intervention has the potential to support those experiencing acute income crises in managing their way back out of food poverty.
- ✓ Evaluating two of the four sites in which the pilot has been implemented to date, it is clear that the intervention has largely been positively received by both service users and food bank volunteers.
- ✓ Implementation has been particularly successful at the more established of the two sites, where a range of benefits have been reported by both volunteers and service users themselves.
- ✓ Although it is perhaps too early to measure improvement in service users' lives, perceived benefits include: saving money on bus travel for those who already do not have enough to buy food; reducing unnecessary travel for those who might find it difficult to do so (people with young children, those with physical or mental impairments); alleviating the stress of dealing with an acute income crisis; and moving households out of food poverty. All these benefits were reported by service users.
- ✓ Some teething problems were noted at the less established of the two sites, where there were complications relating to a turnover of volunteer staff and operational inconsistencies within the food bank itself. This was further complicated by the fact that the advice worker attends only one of the three sessions that the food bank is open to the public, and each one is staffed by a different team of volunteers. At the time of writing, good progress was being made in working through these.
- ✓ A number of recommendations are made regarding improvement in anticipation of rolling out the intervention at other food banks. These include:
 - Establishing greater clarity concerning the aims and objectives of the intervention.
 - Revision of the current training, both to include the aims and objectives and a greater emphasis on preparing food bank volunteers to undertake triage of immediate and urgent needs.
 - Allow sufficient lead-in time to enable:
 - advice workers to observe and orientate themselves in the work of the food bank;
 - relevant stakeholders to discuss shared expectations and objectives and identify how these can be best achieved via a joined-up process.
 - all volunteers involved in client liaison to undertake the training and meet the advice worker.
 - Consideration of the positioning advice workers within the food bank to facilitate a 'flow' of service users before leaving the building.
 - Extending the time that the advice worker is available for appointments before and after the food bank session.

1. Context

While the actual number of food banks operating in the UK is unknown, it is believed that over half are provided by the Trussell Trust, with more than 400 operating from 1,000 locations. The Trust reports that - in 2013-2014 – its' foodbanks distributed three-day emergency food parcels to 913,138 people; an increase of 566,146 on the previous year¹.

Fig.1.1 Numbers given 3 days' emergency food by Trussell Trust foodbanks²



There has been considerable speculation as to whether there is a causal relationship between the increasing numbers of people turning to food banks and austerity measures and welfare reform, including benefit sanctions³, prompting concern from the UK's Faculty of Public Health that 'the welfare system is increasingly failing to provide a robust last line of defence against hunger'⁴.

In 2014, a House of Commons briefing paper highlighted that, following the introduction of the JSA (Job Seekers Allowance) sanction regime in October 2012, DWP data revealed a 20 per cent increase

¹ Perry, J., Williams, M., Sefton and Haddad, M. (2014). *Emergency Use Only: Understanding and reducing the use of food banks in the UK*. <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/emergency-use-only-understanding-and-reducing-the-use-of-food-banks-in-the-uk-335731>.

² Source: Perry et al. 2014: 15.

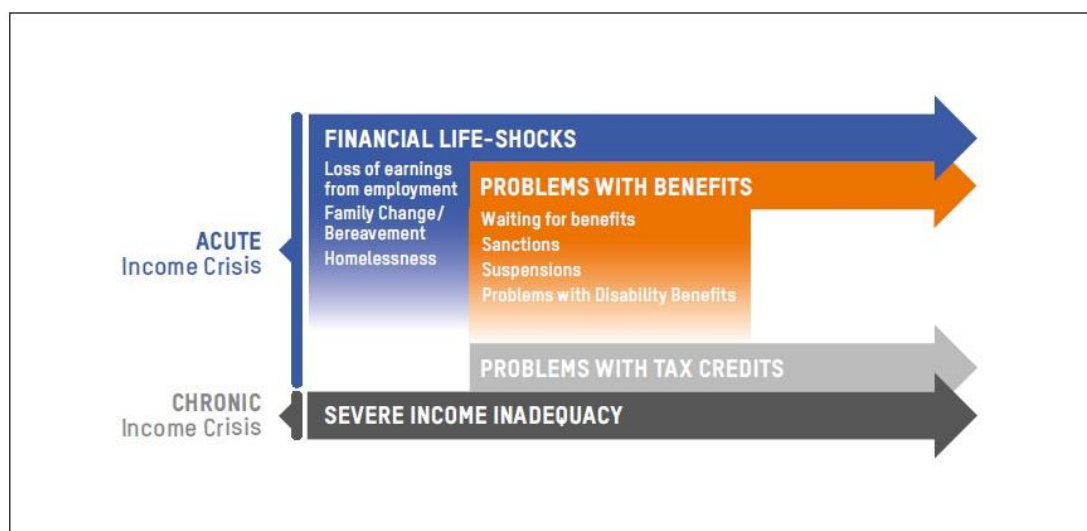
³ Loopstra, R., Reeves, A. Taylor-Robinson, D., Barr, B., McKee, M. and Stuckler, D. (2015.) Austerity, sanctions, and the rise of food banks in the UK. *British Medical Journal*; 350:h1775 doi: 10.1136/bmj.h1775

⁴ Ashton, JR., Middleton, J. and Lang, T. (2014). Open letter to Prime Minister David Cameron on food poverty in the UK. *Lancet*; 383:1631.

in the number of adverse decisions made in the first year of implementation⁵. Published seven months later, a joint report from the Trussell Trust, the Church of England, Oxfam and Child Poverty Action Group reported that individuals using food banks were more likely to live in rented accommodation, be single adults or lone parents, be unemployed, and have experienced a sanction, leading to a cut in benefits for at least one month⁶. The report authors highlight that most food bank users were facing an immediate, acute income crisis – either a complete loss of income or a very significant reduction in their income - which had left them at crisis point, with little or no money to buy food. Such crises could be prompted by:

a sudden loss of earnings, or a change in family circumstances such as bereavement or homelessness. However, for between half and two-thirds of the people included in this research, the immediate income crisis was linked to the operation of the benefits system (with problems including waiting for benefit payments, sanctions, or reduction in disability benefits) or tax credit payments... The acute crisis that led the people we interviewed to have to turn to food banks was set against a backdrop of complex, difficult lives. It was common for food bank users to have experienced ill-health, bereavement, relationship breakdown, substantial caring responsibilities or job loss⁷.

Fig. 1.2 Breakdown of acute income crisis⁸



It is in this context that the current pilot project – funded by the City Council - was implemented in four of Sheffield’s food banks, starting in April 2015; its aim being to help vulnerable food bank users who may be experiencing the types of acute income crises outlined above. Specifically, it seeks to work with clients to address their advice needs, including support in accessing their full benefit

⁵ Downing, E., & Kennedy, S. (2014). *Food Banks and Food Poverty*. House of Commons Library. Briefing paper SN06657

⁶ Perry et al. 2014.

⁷ Perry et al. 2014: 7.

⁸ Source: Perry et al. 2014: 25.

entitlement and dealing with benefit sanctions, as well as addressing the impact of other pressures such as debt, housing, employment and low pay.

Concomitantly, via training provided by Sheffield CAB to food bank volunteers, the project has the additional aim of building capacity within the food bank volunteer community by equipping them with the knowledge, skills and confidence required to undertake a thorough initial assessment of clients' social care needs. Such a process potentially empowers volunteers in identifying immediate and urgent needs which may or may not require external intervention, as well as providing an enhanced service to clients who may be more efficiently restored from situations of food poverty, stress and crisis.

2. Methods

An independent evaluation of the pilot project was commissioned by Sheffield CAB in June 2015. Because of time-constraints, reporting deadlines and staffing issues over the holiday period, evaluation work was undertaken at two of the four participating food banks; data was collected by the author over a three-week period at the beginning of July.

Data collection included:

- Orientation visits to meet the food bank co-ordinators, advice workers and volunteers and to observe each food bank in operation.
- Interviews with food bank co-ordinators.
- Interviews with the advice workers.
- Group interviews with volunteers at each food bank (two in the case of Food Bank 2) (n=8)
- Interviews with three service users.
- Time spent 'hanging out' at each food bank, including sitting in on meetings between volunteers and clients, informal chatting with clients and volunteers and helping prepare and distribute food parcels to clients.
- Attendance at meeting of CAB and Sheffield Food Bank Network.
- Attendance at a CAB training session with volunteers from Food Bank 1.

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, with a guarantee of anonymity/confidentiality given (acknowledging that this was not always possible in view of the small numbers involved). Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The following findings are presented as case studies, highlighting learning from the implementation of the intervention at different sites.

3. Case Studies

The selected sites were chosen because they represent different food bank providers, one being more established than the other, and with the advice worker intervention being embedded within different models of provision. Table 1 outlines key characteristics of each food bank during the data collection period.

Table 1. Participating food bank characteristics

	Food Bank 1	Food Bank 2
Location	IMD Rank – top 10% ⁹	IMD Rank – top 5%
Existing local advice provision	No	No
Organising body	Trussell Trust	Independent
Time since inception	Almost 3 yrs	9 months
Opening times	Friday, 12.30-2.30pm	Mon, Weds, Fri, 2-4pm
Advice worker attendance	Weekly	Weds only
Volunteer training delivered by CAB at time by end of data collection period	No	Yes

The co-ordinators at each site indicated that roughly similar numbers of clients visited their food bank each week, usually up to 30, occasionally more. The most significant difference between the two food banks is that Food Bank 1 (FB1) is approaching the end of its third financial year in September, while Food Bank 2 (FB2) has only been operating since October 2014 and just received charitable status.

Additionally, FB1 is affiliated to the Trussell Trust, while FB2 is independent. At least officially, FB1 limits the number of consecutive food parcels it will issue to an individual to three but, in practice, *“this went out the window a long time ago”* and a discretionary approach is applied.

The co-ordinator at FB1 summarised their approach as: *“we don’t give handouts; we give hand-ups”*, the aim being to support clients in improving their lives and moving them out of food poverty, not only through the provision of food parcels, but in working with the wider community in providing a range of activities. These include fruit and vegetable growing at the site, along with cook and taste sessions. Combined, these activities might be aligned with an ‘assets’ based approach to community development. In contrast, FB2 appears to operate on the basis of providing food ‘aid’, with food parcels being issued both on an emergency basis without the requirement of a referral from another

⁹ Indices of Multiple Deprivation Rank by Lower Super Output Area 2010. Source: <https://maps.sheffield.gov.uk/LocalViewExt/Sites/IMD2010OverallRankGroups/>

agency or professional, and - seemingly - without limit. It was explained that a management decision had been taken to *“distribute parcels according to the length of need of the person”*.

The case studies which follow present quite different experiences of the advice worker intervention. These are contingent upon a number of factors, not least in terms of expectations of the food bank volunteers and how it was imagined that the intervention would enhance the work currently being undertaken within each of the food banks. Consequently, there are – I believe – valuable learning points which could be considered in rolling the programme out more effectively in the future.

3.1 Food Bank 1

Neither the food bank co-ordinator nor the volunteers who were interviewed for the purpose of the evaluation had anything but positive things to say about the integration of the advice worker intervention within their food bank service:

...we were all very pleased to hear that CAB was coming, and since she's been here, she's got more and more valuable to us.

I'm very positive about the results of having CAB on site and I can only see... I think she does an ace job talking to our folks... as far as I can see, it has been nothing but beneficial to us as a food bank. And I'm more convinced now than I have ever been at any time in the past - and I've not doubted in any circumstances that our services are needed - but I'm more convinced that the people who come to us are indeed in need.

The co-ordinator reported that even prior to the introduction of the advice worker intervention at the food bank he had encouraged his volunteers to refer clients to CAB:

I am challenging my people to be asking [clients who were receiving their third voucher to make sure] "are you on the right social service contacts, that you've got the best deal that you can do?" and the way that I'm encouraging my people is to refer them to CAB.

This was confirmed by the volunteers, one of whom spontaneously reported:

I must admit even prior to CAB being involved with us here, I used to send a lot clients down to London Road, to the CAB, because they cover a wide range of things, so it was the easiest way. If I had the answer I would give it them straight away but, if not, I'd direct them straight to CAB.

Attendance at a meeting of Sheffield Food Bank Network underlined that food bank volunteers feel uncomfortable about refusing people food packages and having to make decisions about perceived 'need'. It is perhaps the case that – at least in the case of FB1 – having an advice worker on site enables its volunteers to transfer responsibility for making that judgement to someone else. The advice worker acknowledged how difficult it is making such decisions, but reported having developed a 'three-strikes' policy in issuing food bank vouchers. This involved issuing three vouchers (each for one food parcel) purely on the basis of low income (other ongoing issues are treated differently). For those on low income, she offers appointments to look at reducing their outgoing; for example, by reducing deductions from benefit or by making a debt advice appointment. If they fail to attend these appointments she will not issue any more than the basic three vouchers.

3.1.1 Practicality

Given that this food bank is located in an area that has no existing advice provision, the volunteers indicated that having the advice worker on site is:

Fantastic, she's just next door... It's handy because they don't have to go traipsing off anywhere... I can't tell you how good it feels to be able to send them next door instead of having to go traipsing across the city; it's so much better.

This was elaborated on by the co-ordinator, who suggested that – in addition to its convenience - there were small, but direct material benefits for clients who usually did not have the money to spend on bus-fares in order to see an advice worker at a CAB office outside the area.

Benefit: Reduced travel costs

It's not only an effort, but it's costly because they've got to get from here to Heeley, or Woodseats or to any one of the other areas that we've got CAB. That's a bus-fare. If they've got a child with them, that's £1.20 each way. If they're using the food bank they're not gonna have £2.40; that's the first thing. The second thing is that if you go into a CAB store at London Road or Heeley or wherever, you wait, you see someone and you have an appointment booked and then you leave and you've got to come back. So for that one problem you've got to make four bus journeys, whereas here, they see someone... [that's] at least two bus journeys less to make as a result of CAB being here. Because they're on site, there's more of a chance of them saying "yes, I'll come", and indeed, the other day, one of our referrals actually dragged her friend in; she used the food bank, but her friend came direct to CAB, and it wasn't about [getting] a food voucher.

On her part, the advice worker acknowledged that bus-fares are "a real issue". Additionally, she pointed out that:

A lot of people who live in [the area] are not gonna leave there for weeks at a time and then the idea of coming down, I think people used to come down to Heeley when the advice centre was open there, but this is another step. I think when you're in that kind of state and you haven't got any food as well, that's what you're trying to sort out.

Consequently, she acknowledged:

There's quite a few people who manage to make it to the food bank who would struggle to a) make an appointment; and b) get to it.

One attempt to address the issue of improving the response rate for appointments has been to start

tacking appointments on to the beginning and the end of the session, which has worked a bit better in terms of people turning up (FB1, AW).

However, this has presented difficulties if the session has been particularly busy causing her to over-run:

I don't really know if I'm gonna finish at 2.30, it might run over, and then if I've told someone to come at 2.30 then that's not brilliant. And I can't really go earlier than 12 because there aren't food bank volunteers there. So I'm still trying to work out what to do about that.

Suggestion

A suggestion for improvement here might be that the space in which the food bank takes place could be open for at least one hour before and one hour after the food bank is officially open,

enabling the advice worker to see clients *with appointments* before and after the session, in addition to those dropping in during it.

3.1.2 Partnership working

The food bank co-ordinator indicated that he had initially been concerned that the advice worker would only issue food parcel vouchers – focussing on ‘handouts’, rather than ‘hand-ups’. However he was pleased to learn that while *“she does give out vouchers, she also gives out the advice service”*. This was confirmed by his volunteers, who asserted:

That’s not her purpose here. Her purpose here is to sort out any problems that they have with the system... just sending them through to get another voucher is not a good referral.

For all the volunteer staff, there is a strong emphasis on supporting clients to ask themselves:

“Is there anything that I can do to raise myself up?” Quite often it’s a case of “I’m down at this level and I’ll never get out of this. I’ll just stay there and don’t think about it”. But if we challenge them, with CAB’s help, I’m seeing people thinking about their lifestyle and seeing if they can make alterations.

That the advice worker intervention is compatible with the ethos underpinning the work of the food bank is important to the volunteers, and it is clear that the food bank and CAB are working toward offering a ‘joined-up’ service aimed at improving clients’ circumstances and their capacity to lift themselves out of food poverty. That this is possible has emerged from a process of ongoing dialogue between the advice worker and food bank volunteers. The advice worker reflected:

I do think that the shared understanding of what I am there for is still being built up – partly through talking about what they could refer on to me, and partly the issue about being a gate-keeper for who gets a voucher which I’m trying to get clear and simple.

Suggestion

To facilitate a joined-up approach, it is important that advice workers introducing the intervention to a food bank should also spend some orientation time with the host service, enabling them to see how the service operates and why, and to facilitate a dialogue about how the two services can best be integrated around clear, shared objectives. Indeed, the advice worker at FB1 noted that:

“I feel that, it would have been more sensible, in retrospect, to have just sat there for one week before I started to just see what happened, because I don’t think they knew very much about what I did, and I didn’t know much about what they did”.

3.1.3 Measuring ‘success’

Although the volunteers are aware that the service is confidential and that the advice worker is, therefore, unable to discuss cases with them, they acknowledged that on the odd occasion, she has

said “Yes, I’ve had some good referrals today and I’ve, I’m happy I’ve been able to help some of them”; beyond this, they were unlikely to know about the outcome of any support provided.

The advice worker herself acknowledged the challenges of assessing whether or not the intervention was successful in improving clients’ circumstances, suggesting that:

In a way, I suppose they measure it in terms of whether the person doesn’t come back, they see them in the street and they say “I’m not coming back anymore”. The way I would try, I would say to someone: “This is what should happen; if it doesn’t happen come back to me”, and they, I don’t know whether they come back, [if they don’t] I kind of half assume it has.

She gave the following example:

‘Success’ story: advice worker perspective (see Jamie’s story, p. 23-24)

“There was a guy who came, whose partner had walked out. He hadn’t got any money and he’d got two kids, so he came back to me maybe two, three times and it was virtually sorted out, but I said to him: “If the tax credits don’t get sorted in the next two weeks come back to me”. I gave him my number, and I kind of think that if he hadn’t got sorted he would have rung me because he’d come back to me already... I gave him the form and told him what to do, and told him some other things that he could be doing in the meantime. It was fairly easy stuff; it would be done within a couple of weeks. A lot of it is much more long term than that”.

When asked if he had seen any improvement in the lives of people using the advice worker intervention, the co-ordinator responded: “most emphatically, yes we have”, providing some examples, not all of which directly related to benefit.

‘Success’ stories: co-ordinator perspective

“There’s been two or three instances where AW’s been involved and the folks have been given a voucher and received help at the same time. I think there’s only been two instances where they’ve not had a voucher but received help so far... Another young fella who came in from ASSIST, he was helped to appeal against asylum failure. CAB helped him to begin the process of appeal, and we’ve not seen him since. That was in the very early days, 6 or 7 weeks ago.

“One young lady was actually referred to her doctor because she’s got a drink problem and a drugs problem. We told her this, but because she went to CAB as well, that was reinforced and she was told: “If you do this and talk to your doctor as well, you’ll have two or three little functions that are coming to help you together”. She did go to her doctor, she did come back the week after, but she’s not been back since and that was three weeks ago. So, something medical that AW was able to help with as well as something practical through CAB functions”

3.2 Food Bank 2

Food Bank 2 (FB2) was established in October 2014, meeting the needs of a large geographical area which is ranked in the top 5 per cent in the Indices of Multiple Deprivation. It is now the second provider of emergency food parcels within that postcode. As an independent food bank, FB2 does not have the kind of established administrative framework or institutional support structure that comes with affiliation to an ‘umbrella’ organisation, such as the Trussell Trust. Consequently, in addition to establishing the profile of the food bank with retailers, potential donators and within the wider food bank network in Sheffield, the organisers have been setting up the service from ‘scratch’, developing their own framework for distributing food to individuals experiencing food poverty, along with methods of delivery and systems of monitoring and administration. This has been complicated by the decision to make the service available to clients on *three* afternoons a week, each session being staffed by different teams of ‘volunteers’, some of whom are actually contributing time to the food bank as part of their paid employment for one of the agencies represented on its’ management board. Note that the advice worker **attends the Wednesday session only**.

At the time of data collection, the Friday session – which had consistently been the busiest over the previous month - was in a state of flux following a turnover of volunteer staff. The co-ordinator was in the process of replacing the team with a new intake of volunteers, and was training one individual (during the Wednesday session) to lead this team.

One of the principal challenges in evaluating the efficacy of the advice worker intervention at FB2 is the very newness of the food bank itself along with the fact that the service had, until recently, been run by three different teams, each with different approaches and agendas. Indeed, it was acknowledged:

Given that [FB is open] on three days, you have people that want to do their own thing rather than what’s supposed to be our model of practice.

In addition to concerns about sustainability, funding and a constant supply of donations, there are issues regarding consistency – for example in relation to how decisions are made about issuing food parcels - across the teams and the mechanisms in place to monitor the basis on which such decisions are made. Consequently, because they were aware of issues that needed resolving within the *food bank* service itself, some respondents tended to conflate this with the advice worker intervention when asked to comment on how well the latter was integrating with the existing work of the food bank. To some degree the issues are inseparable, and until issues are resolved concerning the operational consistency of the food bank – in addition to having a more stable volunteer base – properly embedding the advice worker intervention evenly across the days it is open to the public will remain a work in progress.

3.2.1 Partnership working: unclear aims and objectives

Under these circumstances, it was perhaps not surprising that volunteers reported varying levels of awareness regarding the advice worker intervention and, consequently, stronger criticisms were made of the intervention at FB2. Speaking to people who volunteered on those days when the advice worker was not present, there was the suggestion that one of the principal problems in incorporating the intervention within the work of the food bank has been the absence of:

...clear aims and objectives about how the food banks and the CAB were working together... I was really excited about getting the CAB worker and was then thinking "well where's this wonderful experience?" I think we're moving toward it now... But I don't think the AW had clear idea of what he was doing.

This view was echoed by another volunteer who reflected:

It has struck me that the Citizen's Advice bit doesn't appear to have a clear objective, so it might have an objective of income maximisation: "let's make sure that people who are attending the food bank have got the maximum income that they can get". That would be an objective that the advice worker could work round and would then give a slightly broader remit, for instance, being in touch with other support workers to find out whether something has been explored. I'm not seeing that focus... if you have an objective... you can start deploying the most appropriate resources.

From speaking with the volunteers I was left with a sense of ambivalence concerning how the each of the relevant parties viewed the role of the advice worker. One indicated that there were guidelines regarding referring clients who had been coming to the food bank for eight weeks or more, while another suggested that the advice worker helped manage those circumstances when:

...people come without a referral at all, and so if AW's here on a Wednesday he can produce one if it's appropriate. I can push them over to him and he can make that judgement call.

Yet another volunteer reported that, having spoken with the advice worker, they understood:

That his remit is that if people are coming more than the usual number of times, he investigates to find out why they are short and finds out where it would be appropriate for them to turn for seeking the sort of benefits they're not getting, or the reasons why they're short.

3.2.1 Referrals

It was reported that the advice worker had requested that he had wanted things to be "slow for the first few weeks... to settle in", and it is perhaps the case that this time was utilised by the advice worker to develop a sense of how CAB could contribute to the work of the food bank. While it is possible that this was viewed as a kind of orientation period (as was suggested in the case of FB1), there was an expectation – by the food bank volunteers – that the advice worker would 'hit the ground running'. The timing of this evaluation was, consequently, considered unfortunate because it was felt to be too soon in view of the 'teething problems' encountered in finding the best method of working. It should be noted that – during the data collection period – much progress was reported in moving things forward, particularly in the context of the low number of referrals the advice worker had been receiving.

Despite being the day which experienced the lowest turnover of clients, the advice worker reported having been asked by the food bank co-ordinator to fit into the Wednesday session, leading to few referrals being made to the CAB service:

I'm only seeing Wednesday people, so we're not seeing the full catchment (FB2, AW).

One team leader also acknowledged that the intervention had been limited by the advice worker only being present at the Wednesday session. There was additional confusion – on the part of the advice worker, regarding how food parcels were issued. He was under the impression that clients could only attend on the day they had been set and that there was no way of moving to the Wednesday session. One of the volunteers attempted to provide clarification on this, but was subsequently contradicted by another volunteer who explained that they had attempted to 'assign' clients to particular sessions to ensure a more even spread across each day.

Both volunteers and the advice worker reported that measures were being developed to ensure that volunteer staff at the Monday and Friday food bank sessions are able to refer clients whom they believe would benefit from seeing the advice worker. There is a mechanism in place across all the participating food banks for volunteers to email/telephone CAB with details of a client, enabling an appointment to be made for them, either at the food bank or elsewhere. The advice worker elaborated on this indicating that he could contact the client by telephone to identify the problem before making an appointment. However, having spent some time chatting with clients, I became aware that many do not have access to a telephone, rendering this method of contact ineffective in such circumstances. My concerns were reinforced by the co-ordinator.

One of the team leaders also indicated that 48-hour, 'emergency' parcels could be issued to Monday and Friday clients in need of an advice worker referral to facilitate their return on the Wednesday, but asserted that rather than:

...dragging the client in another day... I think it would work better if we could have him Mondays and Friday.

Although it is not a realistic expectation given the need to deploy resources across the city's food banks, this view was echoed by other volunteers who worked on Mondays and/or Fridays, at least one of whom had only recently learned about the advice worker intervention. While expressing confidence in referring clients to the advice worker, one of the Monday volunteers acknowledged that they have no way of knowing what the outcome of that action would be:

It's a bit of a black-hole because I've never actually met AW. I do refer people when it seems appropriate – I've seen the guidelines about people coming over eight weeks, for example – I put a note on that client's file and I can ask them to ring AW or turn up on a Wednesday, but I have no idea what happens after that.

Having spoken with the advice worker, it would appear that the circumstances in which volunteers referred clients to him was also an area in which there was an absence of clarity. While the volunteer – above – mentioned guidelines regarding clients who had been attending for eight weeks or more, the advice worker was under the impression that – at present – volunteers tended to refer clients to him who were approaching the end of their food bank referral, which covers them for four food packages; he would then issue another, which would qualify them for a further four, at which point – he imagined - the volunteers might say: *“Go and see AW, he might award you another referral”*. This, he felt was too many – particularly in view of concerns regarding low stock. He suggested that:

I don't want to tread on anybody's toes, but I think... if they cut it to two [packages], we might find out what is wrong with somebody. I'm not saying they can't have another one, but cut 'em off after two and not four (FB1, AW).

Example: Poor referral process

As an example of the way in which this operated, I overheard discussions between the volunteer staff and the advice worker regarding one client who had – following a succession of sanctions - just received their seventeenth food parcel and had only just been referred to the advice worker. The client had just been told that they were to be moved onto fortnightly, rather than weekly, parcels, reportedly prompting them to respond: *"I may as well not live then"*. One of the volunteers was concerned that the client now posed a suicide risk. While the advice worker was going to look into what he could do to help the client, the current situation may have been averted had a referral been made to the advice worker sooner.

3.2.2 Moving forward

The food bank receives referrals from a diverse range of other agencies, including medical professionals, drug and alcohol support workers, social workers, probation workers, housing, schools, churches, children's organisations/charities, women's refuges etc. The advice worker expressed an interest in seeing clients who had been referred by representatives from these agencies, particularly those where the professional completing the document had failed to specify a reason for the referral. This might be listed as a sanction, benefit delay, debt, homelessness, ill-health etc. [see Appendix A]. He explained:

I want to get a picture of ones that aren't coming from an advice centre...The ones I think I need to see, and I'm only there for two hours, I'm tempted to go up early and go through the file and see what's on the referrals and say "I want to see that one", because if they come in from a support worker, I want to know what support they're getting. Are they supporting them, but not supporting them where I could support them? (FB1, AW)

During his next session at the food bank, the advice worker was observed going through the client files held by the food bank, marking them for his attention so that volunteers – particularly on Mondays and Fridays - would know to refer the client to him when they next attend the food bank. By the following session, he reported that he had managed to go through three-quarters of the files and volunteers at the Monday session acknowledged their awareness of this shift having taken place.

A further development before the end of the data collection period has been an attempt, by the food bank co-ordinator, to set up a triage system. This involved relocating the advice worker to a more central location off the main entrance, setting up a waiting area outside the room and then diverting appropriate clients to the advice worker *before* seeing volunteer staff about their food parcel. This measure had been taken because *"people couldn't be bothered to wait to see AW after receiving their food parcel"*. It was reported, by both the co-ordinator and the advice worker, that this system appeared to work better.

While it was widely acknowledged, by volunteers, that it was too soon to assess the impact that the advice worker intervention has had on clients' lives, the co-ordinator did mention the case of one individual who was reported as saying:

"I've been seeing AW and it's sorted; it's really good". I think they felt really pleased that someone was bothering with them.

4. Training

4.1 Volunteer perceptions

At the time of data collection, of the two sites, only FB2 had received CAB training regarding the advice worker intervention¹⁰; this had taken place before the advice worker started to attend the Wednesday food bank session. Having spoken with one group of volunteers, I was left with a poor understanding of what had transpired in the session and how it related to the objectives outlined in the Big Lottery proposal; namely to equip volunteers with the knowledge, confidence and skills for undertaking client assessments based on ‘the triage empowerment model of identifying immediate and urgent needs’.

Members of one group of volunteers indicated that the training made them aware of the potential value of the intervention; for example:

...where CAB sits within it all and how it ties in with us, but also understanding what, how the system works with people that are sanctioned or claiming benefits, so it helped us a bit more with that.

...As I understand it, one of his skills is to make sure that that person is aware of and claiming anything else they're entitled to, so provides another safety net.

One even spoke of how it had encouraged them to think about how the food bank itself could be developed to provide a more enhanced service. However, other volunteers were more critical in their evaluation of the training received. For example, one individual expressed the view that it had been a generic “lecture” and not particularly appropriate for food bank volunteers. The following comments point toward a perceived lack of relevance:

Everyone I've spoken to said they found it interesting but they didn't find it particularly pertinent. I don't think it was what we needed at this stage.

Really, it was irrelevant mostly for the volunteers here... it involved reading lists of who gets what benefit. That was it.

I was horrified [by what other volunteers brought back].

The co-ordinator had expected that the training would prepare her volunteers to be able to undertake the kind of triage exercise that she had implemented during the last session which the advice worker had attended. This would give her confidence in knowing that:

...the people who are interviewing know how to triage. I'm often called and asked “What do we do here?” because they're not confident.

¹⁰ A first group of volunteers at FB1 were scheduled to receive the training on 30 July.

Volunteer suggestions

Some volunteers highlighted what they perceived to be the most important areas that the training ought to address in enabling them to provide better support to their clients. These included:

“I think what CAB ought to be thinking is there’s someone sitting in the food bank as an interviewer; what are the pertinent things that they should be asking a client? “Are you getting the Hardship Allowance? This is what it means and how you apply for it. Let me make you an appointment to see AW and let’s get that sorted””.

“What you would expect is what is called a Gateway Assessment, concentrating first and foremost on risk; to do a quick and dirty risk assessment of the client to be able to address where I next send that client. Is it just a food parcel or does it require more emergency action [as in the case of impending eviction]? You don’t need an overall knowledge of the benefits system in order to do that”.

4.2 Observation

I attended the training session delivered to volunteers at FB1 on 30 July. Although 12 people had indicated that they would be free on the agreed date, on the day, only four attended. Among these participants, feedback indicated that they found the session: *“interesting”, “illuminating”, “enlightening”,* but also *“I’ll need to study this [handout]”.*

The session – approximately two hours in duration – was densely packed with information and, because the content invited interaction from participants, the facilitator only managed to get through one of the three key areas that he had proposed to cover: Welfare benefits. This meant that the issues of Debt and Homelessness have had to be deferred to a second session, hopefully with a larger group of attendees.

Having sat in on some client interviews at both food banks, I concur with the with those FB2 volunteers who suggested that while the session had been interesting, they nonetheless questioned its’ pertinence to those of them who had direct contact with clients. Indeed, the level of information provided regarding the range of benefits available is unnecessary for individuals who have the task of assessing the urgency of a clients’ problem, the risk to the client (and others’) well-being, and what the consequences of delayed action might be.

In terms of the handouts, while the first page – which corresponds with the introductory part of the session – is very useful in setting the scene, the remainder is not particularly relevant to the task of volunteers have. The material is quite complex and perhaps a more relevant to guide to advice workers.

Given that, once established, advice workers are likely to become very busy, it is important that volunteers know how to refer clients appropriately, namely those who need to see the advice worker as a matter of urgency; for example, because there is a time-limit on responding to the issue, as in the case of an eviction notice or mandatory reconsiderations.

Suggestion

On reflection, the training may prove more useful if it focuses on the actual activities of volunteers who have direct contact with clients, either as front-of-house gatekeepers, or in completing the food parcel form. It is worth considering using either vignettes or role play as learning tools. Via either method, volunteers could present (or be presented with) various scenarios involving 'typical' cases, as well as other clients which present perhaps more complex problems, and explore how these cases could be appropriately responded to by referral to the on-site advice worker.

I also overheard the co-ordinator – who was absent during the session – later asking one of the attendees if she would be able to convert what she had learned from the session into a set of notes which each volunteer could have at their desk when dealing with a client. Although I don't think it would be possible to do that with the information delivered during the session I observed, it is perhaps worth drawing up a crib-sheet to be distributed at the training session. This could include a flowchart of potential scenarios, questions and actions which provide clear guidance for volunteers identifying clients who would benefit from an urgent referral to the advice worker.

5. Client Perspectives

Of course, the most important test of the efficacy of an intervention is the difference it has made to the lives of service users. While it was widely acknowledged - by both volunteers and advice workers at each of the food banks – that achieving a resolution to a client’s problems is often a long-term process and that many of their cases were ongoing, I did have the opportunity to speak with some clients, either opportunistically at the food bank, or by agreement over the telephone. While still immersed in difficult and challenging situations, they each spoke positively about their experience of the advice worker intervention. Here are their stories.

Frank¹¹

While waiting for a food parcel, Frank was asked - opportunistically – about his experience of seeing the advice worker while at FB1. He had just seen her for the second time. Frank reported that he was currently unable able to work due to muscular-skeletal injury. The first dated back to last year, resulting in surgery with an anticipated 12 month recovery period; the second was more recent. The details provided by Frank are somewhat sketchy; however, he indicated that he had been passed as fit to work approximately eight months after his operation. This decision was based upon his capacity to make it to the hospital – via bus – for the appointment and his benefit had subsequently been stopped. Following this, he had incurred another injury which, he was told, also had a long recovery time. Frank expressed dismay as *“I need to get back to work”*. When asked about his experience of the advice worker service, **he emphatically asserted that the proximity of the advice worker within the food bank was extremely valuable, particularly in terms of his current physical impairments, as well as the savings in bus fares.** He reported that the advice worker had signposted him to solicitors which might be able to take on a case for negligence against the hospital that had misdiagnosed the original condition.

Speaking with the advice worker revealed a more complex picture. She explained that Frank had first come to see her well after both an adverse decision had been made on an ESA claim in respect of the initial injury and he had already submitted a new claim regarding the second. She had explained that:

“I thought it was likely that if he had got a reconsideration/appealed on the first claim I think it likely he would have won, but as he had already made a new claim there was no point in trying to get a late one accepted. What I was advising him about this week was that I think it is possible/likely that the DWP will turn down his new claim and I wanted to be sure that he knew what to do if they did – i.e. come back to me, do a mandatory reconsideration within one month, and I think he got that clear and hopefully will do so if that happened”.

Clearly there is a gap – in this instance – between what Frank remembered of his meetings with the advice worker (the reference to a medical negligence claim) and what she reports discussing with him. Importantly, she observed that *“clients don’t necessarily go to the food bank expecting to challenge their benefit”*; the pressing concern is food poverty and, for this reason may not always fully absorb what she says to them during an initial meeting.

¹¹ All names are pseudonyms.

Leanne

This young woman is pregnant and has a child of pre-school age whose father she is separated from. Leanne reported having problems with reading, in addition to suffering with anxiety, panic attacks and depression. She indicated that in addition to her midwife, she has a MAST¹² worker to help with parenting and getting to groups and classes.

Since the end of last year, Leanne has occupied a local authority property which, she says, she has struggled to decorate and furnish and has ended up at the food bank when *“I haven’t got enough money to pay for food”*. She currently owes over £2,000 in rent arrears. The arrears accrued after her Housing Benefit was stopped when – she believes – neighbours informed the housing department that no-one was living at the property based on the dearth of possessions visible from outside. As a result, the local authority is taking her to court to regain possession of the property. She reports that she receives letters regarding the rent arrears on a regular basis:

I do find it quite upsetting and it does my head in. I don’t need them sending out letters to me all the time when I already know. I am trying to get it sorted... I’m getting more worried about it and more panicky about it.

While her MAST worker has indicated that she can help with this problem, Leanne reports that it is only since she was referred to the CAB advice worker at the food bank that she feels any actual progress has been made. The advice worker has referred her to the Legal Services Team at Sheffield CAB, who have assigned her a case-worker to represent her in court, while the advice worker herself is helping her to deal with the housing department/DWP, including helping with completing claim forms and liaising over the phone. Of this support, she says:

[Legal Representative] is coming to court with me and with AW, she’s ringing ‘em up and doing stuff, so I can see they are doing stuff and they are trying to help me which, with the other people [MAST worker], they’d rather talk about it, but they don’t get anywhere and they don’t help so, to be honest, there ain’t no point in having them when they’re not helping me.

When asked if she has found it beneficial having the advice worker on site at the food bank, Leanne responded:

Yes, because I only live down the road, it’s easier for me to get to than town because I’ve got a child... and because I’ve got anxiety and panic attacks it is quite hard for me to go places as well.

While Leanne’s case is still in progress, the advice worker intervention has more immediate benefits for her:

1. It is more practical and accessible for someone who is pregnant, has a young child and suffers with anxiety, panic attacks and depression since it is both local and tied in with something that she is already doing: visiting a food bank.
2. Given her problems both with reading and with anxiety, the advice worker has both been able to put Leanne in touch with someone who will advocate for her at future court appearances, while

¹² Multi-Agency Support Team.

simultaneously alleviating the additional anxiety of completing claim forms and liaising with the housing department.

Jamie

Jamie is a single father of two children aged 3 and 6. His partner walked out on the family at the beginning of the year, at which time he was working. Jamie explained how he had had to give up his job in order to look after his youngest child. He reported that he had to make a new claim for tax credits, child benefit and income support and, consequently, had no money for a couple of weeks.

He was referred to FB1 by his health visitor soon after his partner had left and reported being asked – by the food bank volunteers - if he would like to see a Citizens' Advice worker during his first visit.

I said yeh 'cause I could do with help trying to fill the forms in for tax credits and that, so I went to see the citizens' advice while they were sorting out the paperwork for my food parcel.

Jamie reported having attempted to resolve his problems himself but:

I was at sixes and sevens. I tried, I contacted child tax credits and child benefit to get the forms that I needed to fill in, but they were taking ages for me to get a response off 'em, so when I went to see the food bank, the CAB helped me and gave me phone numbers to contact to try to rush my claim through.

He went on:

The form I filled in, it must've been wrong, so AW gave me a new tax credit form to fill in. Because she knew I had no money coming in at all, and obviously I've got two children, she gave me paperwork with some numbers to contact social services about a short-term loan or something like that. I didn't want to take a loan out because obviously I'd have to pay it back, but family were helping me out if I needed money for gas and electric. So she was advising me who to go and see and things to do really.

In Jamie's case, the advice worker was supporting him in sorting things out for himself, making sure he was in touch with the right people and had access to the correct forms. However, he points out that:

...every time I used to go to the food bank every Friday, she always used to pull me to one side and see how things were going, see if I'd heard from tax credits or income support, blah-di-blah. She always said to me "Any problems, if you can't wait 'til Friday at the food bank," she gave me her phone number to contact her. Yeh, she were very helpful. You couldn't have wished for a better person to help you really.

Although Jamie stated "I'm all sorted now", he also explained that he is currently living in a three-bedroomed property and is being charged bedroom tax as his children are the same sex and both aged under 10. Since he is only in receipt of income support, Jamie explained:

I'm only covering day-to-day living as it is. I'm still waiting for the council to pull their finger out and put me in a two-bedroom house.

When asked if the advice worker's involvement had helped to alleviate some of the stress and anxiety that he would have been experiencing when he first visited the food bank, he responded:

Yeh, yeh, because, not just the Citizens' Advice worker, also, y'know, the people at the food bank, they were very helpful, as well, yeh, they were very helpful as well.

Between them, the food bank volunteers and the advice worker helped support Jamie and his children and provide much needed advice during a particularly stressful time in their lives, resulting in an improvement in their material circumstances. As a consequence he reported that he has not been back to the food bank for "quite a while".

Conclusions & Recommendations

The advice worker pilot intervention has been in place in participating food banks for approximately three months. While it is acknowledged that it is difficult to measure whether the advice provided to an individual has produced a positive outcome and that perhaps one of the best indicators of this can be assessed against non-return to the food bank, there is at least one example of this being the case. Here, a service user reported having been restored from food poverty - following an acute income crisis - with the combined support of the advice worker and food bank volunteers.

Embedding or integrating the advice worker service within the food bank is perceived as having immediate practical benefits. These include negating the necessity of travelling outside the area, which both reduces the need for people - who already do not have enough money to buy food - to find bus-fares and enables them to combine visiting an advice worker with an activity they are already doing – collecting a food parcel. There is additional value to those service users who have young children, and/or mental or physical impairments which would make travel more challenging.

Other benefits reported by both service users and volunteers include the alleviation of stress and worry wrought by acute income crises – either in deploying appropriate resources or providing advice to enable the client to resolve the problem themselves - particularly in those instances where other agencies are seen to be wanting, or where a service user has more complex support needs.


Evaluating two very different sites – both in terms of longevity and the models of provision into which the intervention has been introduced – has been insightful and produced valuable learning which - if responded to – is likely to strengthen future roll-out to other sites. From the complexity of these case studies I have distilled the following suggestions/recommendations for consideration:

1. It is essential that the intervention has **clear aims and objectives**; for example, regarding income maximisation; supporting service users into positions whereby they no longer need to use the food bank; empowering service users to manage their own problems; enabling food bank volunteers to identify the most vulnerable and to triage appropriately.
2. These **objectives should be used to inform the volunteer training** which, at present is not adequately tailored to preparing volunteers to undertake triage of immediate and urgent needs, an objective I understood was core to the initiative. Rather than providing detailed information about the benefit system, it is worth revising the training with a more practical and directly relevant focus, with handouts that will give volunteers greater confidence in knowing how to refer clients most in need.
3. **Sufficient lead-in time** is required to enable advice workers, food bank co-ordinators and volunteers to engage in a **dialogue regarding expectations and objectives** and to work toward **developing a joined-up approach**. This is particularly salient in relation to the advice worker issuing food bank referrals and for how long.
4. As part of this process, advice workers would benefit from **an orientation period** within the food bank, during which they simply observe what goes on, in particular how the client-facing work is conducted. This would enable the various stakeholders to identify best

practice for referring service users to the advice worker or, conversely, establishing terms by which food bank referrals are issued.

5. In order to maximise uptake of the advice worker service, it is important that all volunteers involved in client liaison have the **opportunity to meet the advice worker and have attended the training**. This is particularly important at those food banks which are open to the public on more than one day each week.
6. Notwithstanding the need to provide privacy to clients, it is worth considering the **positioning of the advice worker** within the food bank to ensure 'flow' of clients to the service.
7. Once established, the advice worker is likely to become very busy, both with issuing food bank referrals, and in giving advice. Acknowledging that additional costs may be incurred in terms of room hire, it is worth exploring the possibility of **extending the time that the advice worker is available** before and after the food bank is open to allow for pre-booked appointments.

Appendix: Food Bank Referral Forms

 <p>Food Voucher</p>	<h2>Food Bank 1</h2>	Foodbank Centre Address	Foodbank Centre Opening Times Monday: not open Tuesday: not open Wednesday: not open Thursday: not open Friday: 1230 pm - 230 pm Saturday: not open Sunday: not open
Please complete form in BLOCK CAPITALS			
Distributor Name:	Authorised Signatory:		
Distributor Organisation:	Jobcentre	Date:	
Telephone:	Client Surname:		
Client First Name:	No. Adults: (In words e.g. 'one')		
Client Address: (Please include Post Code)	No. Children: (Under 16, in words)		
Nature of crisis - please only tick one crisis type			
Benefit Changes:	Benefit Delays:	Is anyone in this household in paid employment	
Homeless:	Low Income:	Delayed Wages:	Yes
Sickness:	Child Holiday Meals:	Unemployed:	No
Ethnicity (please tick most appropriate box, one only)			
White:	Mixed:	Asian:	Chinese:
			Other:
Age Group (please tick most appropriate box, one only)			
16 - 24:	25 - 64:	Over 65:	
<small>This voucher has no monetary value, is not transferable and must be exchanged for emergency food within 3 working days of issue. To prevent fraud, details may be shared with neighbouring foodbanks. Data from this voucher will be stored on computer and anonymised extracts will be used for statistical analysis. The original voucher may also be retained.</small>			
Voucher Number			207-2561



Food Bank 2

REQUEST FOR EMERGENCY FOOD SUPPORT – Professionals should complete this form and sign the declaration at the end.

Client Details

First name :	Numbers in Household	
Family name: (surname)	Babies under 1 <input type="checkbox"/>	Babies 1-2 <input type="checkbox"/>
Home Address:	Infants 2-5 <input type="checkbox"/>	Children 6-16 <input type="checkbox"/>
Postcode:	Adults 16-59 <input type="checkbox"/>	Adults over 60 <input type="checkbox"/>
Tel :		

Cooking facilities available : Microwave Oven Hob None

Why do they need emergency food ?

- Debt
- Medical issue
- Refugee/Asylum seeker
- Homeless
- Not eligible for benefits
- Delay in wages
- Fleeing domestic violence
- School holidays
- Bereavement
- Unemployment
- Delay or change in benefits
- Other

REFERRAL PARTNER'S DETAILS

Name of person making referral :
Contact telephone number :
Name of Organisation :

By signing below you are confirming that, in your professional opinion, the client (and their family, if appropriate) would benefit from receiving emergency food support.

Signature _____ Date _____

Please give any other relevant or supportive information on the reverse.