Communities and Culture Network+ Food Aid Call

Food Aid: Living with Food Insecurity

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Abstract

This scoping project was one of several commissioned through the Communities and Culture Network+ 'food aid' call. The primary aims were to capture narratives of food aid users and to place the experience of food aid into the wider socio-economic and political contexts which surround it. A conceptual map was developed on the basis of these interviews and a complementary process of literature and documentary scoping which sought to identify existing evidence of the phenomena of food aid in the UK. In particular, the scoping exercise highlighted background and foregrounded accounts of why the recipients were using the food aid resources and their personal stories of wider support and 'coping strategies'. The exercise facilitated discussions of the landscape of existing evidence and discourses in policy arenas around food security and social policy, and general public debate, including emergent terminologies, particularly in the context of the current economic climate.

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Executive Summary

This report presents the results of a short scoping project, of approximately 2 months' work, within the Communities and Culture Network+ 'food aid' funding stream, alongside parallel calls from the NEMODE and Sustainable Society Network+ programmes. Its general purpose was to contribute insight and experience of the rapidly emerging contemporary phenomenon of charitable food assistance in the UK, including some preliminary exploration of the experiences of individuals and communities.

There were two parts to the scoping exercise. The first involved a small number (5) of narrative interviews with recipients from three different food aid projects in the same northern English city. The second part of the work involved a literature and document scoping, complemented by discussions with key stakeholders about the political, economic and cultural framework of food aid.

Issues Raised by the Research

Conceptual Issues

- The terminology surrounding emergency food assistance is still evolving in the UK, although the phenomenon is not new. The recently adopted term 'food aid' encompasses a range of different types of assistance beyond the provision of food parcels. Particular organisational approaches appear to have shaped the 'food bank' vocabulary; and this term has come to mean initiatives which provide emergency parcels of food for people to take away, prepare and eat at home.
- The scoping exercise highlighted the importance of situating any research or discussion of food aid usage into the wider context of food poverty/insecurity. It also showed how difficult it is to interpret data on food aid usage (whether numbers of people, households, or food parcels) reliably, and that there are drawbacks to using them as a proxy for the extent and depth of the numbers, background circumstances and experiences of food poor people and households.
- The scoping exercise suggested that there probably are key current triggers to food aid usage (particularly in respect of problems over social security benefits, housing and low income) that can be identified. However, more systematic and extensive research is required to understand both the bigger picture of current food poverty/insecurity and of food aid usage and provision.

Policy Issues

- The scoping project indicates that policy levers with potential impact on triggers to food aid use extend across Whitehall and Parliamentary boundaries, and national-local scales.
- The fragmentary nature of the contexts of these levers across spheres of government seems to challenge possibilities for a comprehensive approach to addressing food poverty, and the need for food aid.

Empirical Issues

- The process of this scoping exercise raised some questions around the challenge of capturing these experiences of food poor households. Interviews can be traumatic for participants and issues of confidentiality and anonymity are paramount.

1. Introduction and Background

This report presents the results of a short scoping project of approximately two months' work within the Communities and Culture Network+ 'food aid' funding stream, alongside parallel calls from the NEMODE and Sustainable Society Network+ programmes. Its general purpose was to contribute insight and experience of the rapidly emerging contemporary phenomenon of charitable food assistance in the UK (often refereed to as 'food aid'), including some preliminary exploration of the experiences of individuals and communities.

The project fits into a wider programme of research on charitable food aid provision by a number of different UK funders and actors, including Defra (Fell et al, 2013; Lambie-Mumford et al, 2014), Food Standards Agency (2014), Oxfam UK (Brill et al, 2013), as well as the other projects funded under the Network+ schemes. In addition, there are at least two special issues of journals addressing the topic, under preparation (Caraher and Cavicchi, forthcoming; Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, forthcoming). In early 2014 a new All Party Parliamentary Group on *Hunger and Food Poverty* was launched by MPs Frank Field (Labour) and Laura Sandys (Conservative) which is to begin an inquiry into food and poverty.

These research calls reflect growing public and policy concern at the rising numbers of households apparently unable to sustain normal patterns of shopping and eating, who are seeking charitable food aid to help sustain household integrity and even, it seems, avoid destitution and/or extreme hunger. Charities, faith groups and bodies such as Citizens Advice Bureaux, have faced growing demands for immediate help with food, many of whom have met these requests either by direct help of parcel(s) of free food (take-home or on-site), or by giving a voucher which entitles people to up to a limited amount of food from a food distribution centre, commonly known as a food bank. Indeed, increasing numbers of professionals (including advice workers, social workers, clergy and (until recently) Job Seekers Plus officers) are reported as finding it necessary to distribute such vouchers. As we finalised this preliminary report, a call for national 'fasting' in solidarity with those who are hungry was launched (EndHungerFast[1]); the Archbishop of Westminster[2], and subsequently several senior Christian leaders presented direct challenges to the government over the immorality of rising hunger[3].

A report in June 2013 from Church Action on Poverty and Oxfam (Cooper and Dumpleton) specifically located this rising use of food banks as an extreme manifestation of 'food poverty'. Food poverty, which in the UK lacks consistent definition or agreed understanding by either government or people themselves, nevertheless probably has much in common with 'household food insecurity': 'the inability to acquire or consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so' (Dowler 2003, 151). There is some systematic, and an increasing amount of unsystematic, evidence that the conditions contributing to household food insecurity, and/or food poverty, in the UK are worsening, which is

[1] http://endhungerfast.co.uk/
[2] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/10639015/New-Cardinal-Vincent-Nichols-welfare-cuts-frankly-a-disgrace.html
[3] http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/27-bishops-slam-david-camerons-3164033

the backdrop to both rising demand for charitable food provision, and research into the causes and processes involved.

2. Research Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of the project was to begin to map relations within a local food aid provision landscape (in a northern English town) from the perspective of recipients or claimants, and to place these highly localised experiences within a wider political, economic and cultural framework.

There were two parts to the scoping exercise. The first involved a small number (5) of narrative interviews with recipients from three different food aid projects in the same city. The second part of the work was intended to involve a literature and document scoping, complemented by discussions with key stakeholders about the political, economic and cultural framework of food aid.

The aims and objectives set out in the project's original case for support were:

Aim 1: To work with food assistance recipients to better understand their experience of the process of local food aid in the city and 'managing' with food insecurity and to highlight the key issues which are raised for future research and policy making.

Through the use of narrative ethnographic methods and participatory mapping techniques this part of the research sought to meet the following objectives:

> (1) To obtain narratives of a range of recipient experiences in order to understand their experience of support (including, related to and beyond, food aid provision).
>
> (2) To map recipients' wider food insecurity coping strategies and the place of food aid provision within them.
>
> (3) To explore how narrative methods may be utilised to empower the voice of food aid provision recipients and enlighten future research and policy agendas.

Aim 2: To locate food banks and other forms of charitable food assistance within their contemporary political, economic and cultural frameworks.

Through the use of secondary analysis techniques (literature reviewing, policy and documentary analyses), informal interviews and consultation with policy makers and other stakeholders, this part of the research sought to meet the following objectives:

> (1) To inform understanding of the terminology that has developed around the UK food aid provision landscape.
>
> (2) To explore key aspects of the policy context which surrounds the growth of food banks and other forms of assistance; in particular, to examine social policy shifts in approaches to welfare, the role of charity, and emerging household food security policy.

(3) To explore the role of the recent economic recession and current era of austerity on household food budgets. (However, it should be noted that current and recent research indicates that this is particularly hard to do.)

(4) To highlight key themes which are emerging in the growing food assistance evidence base relating to cultural dimensions within the sector; for instance the prominence of faith communities in initiating or managing the work.

(5) Attempt to map or visualise these wider frameworks and their relationship to food banks and food aid.

Given the somewhat experimental nature of this scoping exercise (and the fact that this phenomena is relatively new and the academic evidence base on food aid relatively small), as the project developed there was a slight shift in emphasis. In particular, it had been hoped that a map of food aid recipients' experiences could be produced through the process of participatory mapping exercises. Such a participatory approach proved problematic within the limits of time, and the narrative interviews themselves resulted in a limited amount of data on which to base such a map. As discussed in the findings section, methodologically the narrative interviews were challenging to carry out, since the highly sensitive nature of the topic and the range of difficult experiences the discussions necessarily touched on made systematic methods difficult. This experience raised questions on how best to navigate in-depth interviews in future research. The findings obtained for the first research aim therefore relate to the first and second objective; with methodological reflections offered towards the third objective.

In the process of meeting the second research aim, a very rapid literature and document scoping exercise was undertaken so as to set the political, economic and cultural contexts of food aid. Overall, the interviews provided background and foregrounded accounts of why the recipients were using food aid resources; and their personal stories of wider support and 'coping strategies'. These findings were well contextualised by the literature and document scoping, which enabled the landscape of existing evidence and discourses in policy arenas around food security and social policy, and general public debate to be discussed, including emergent terminologies, particularly in the context of the current economic climate.

3. Research Methods

This short, exploratory piece of work, was intended to build on recent work by the team for the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). In the event, the work was carried out both in a shifting policy scene (as documented below) and without being able to draw on the Defra funded work since the latter was published only on 20th February 2014 (and at very short notice). The report for Defra was subject to considerable detailed review; dealing with this in itself was time-consuming, and we are unable to reflect or comment on it at the time of writing. Nevertheless, since the research team had been working in this area on a number of projects relating to food poverty, food security and food aid provision for some time, we have been able to draw on this previous work, including literature review for reports and papers, as well as contacts

and more recent experiences of discussion with civil society activists and policy officers, and our own public speaking, attending meetings and writing.

Specifically, two work packages were undertaken: Recipient Narratives, and Literature Review and Document Analysis.

Recipient Narratives

We know from our own previous work and that by other researchers, that people's usage of food aid provision is likely to be part of a set of strategies to managing tight budgets and problematic resource constraint (Dowler et al, 2001; Dowler et al, 2011; Hossain et al, 2011; Kneafsey et al, 2013; Goode, 2012). A series of narrative interviews was undertaken (with five recipients). The number and range was of necessity very limited because of time constraints. All were from food projects in a northern English city, where one of the researchers has existing networks and research relationships with projects. Managers and other contacts acted as gatekeepers to find participants through opportunistic sampling. Despite the small number, participants were nonetheless recruited from a range of different project types (Trussell Trust foodbanks, independent food banks, other food aid projects). A range of recipient types was sought in terms of socio-economic circumstance and household size. The narrative interviews were recorded, with full permission of the participant, transcribed in full and analysed in terms of themes which emerged from the interviews: in particular, for the background and foregrounded accounts of why they were using the food aid resources, and the stories of support and 'coping strategies'. In addition, some of the challenges faced by a researcher (and participants where relevant) in exploring these often complex and sensitive, difficult issues, were extracted from the experience of carrying out the narrative interviews. The researchers had hoped to undertake participatory mapping techniques; generating visualisations of support networks, and returning to participants to discuss and develop these as 'personal network maps'. In practice, this was not possible due to a combination of time constraints and methodological challenges relating to discussing the intricacies and difficulties of participants' circumstances and complex strategies in the context of this method. However, the work undertaken offered some useful insights into how such investigation might be carried out, and possibilities and potential pitfalls highlighted.

Ethical permission to undertake the narrative interviews was obtained from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Warwick. All participants were offered a written statement of intent, and signed a consent form.

Literature Review and Document Analysis

A non-systematic review of key peer-reviewed literature; documenting web-based and other sources of data on food aid usage; and analysis of policy and other relevant documents was also undertaken to explore the wider political, economic and cultural frameworks which seem relevant to food assistance provision. These sources enabled the landscape of existing evidence and discourses in

policy arenas around food security and social policy, and general public debate to be discussed, including emergent terminologies, particularly in the context of the current economic climate. This provided the basis of some initial thoughts on the networks of political, economic and cultural frameworks. In addition, the limited amount of research on household level 'coping' or 'management' strategies in straitened times, was reviewed, to inform findings from the narrative interviews.

Ideally, interviews with key stakeholders would have been useful to give a clear picture of the rather rapidly changing landscape, and at least one workshop to offer a forum for testing out ideas and findings. However, given the timing of the work (when a number of advocacy campaigns were gaining ground, as well parallel research mentioned above) and time and resources available, this was not possible.

4. Key findings

The scoping exercising resulted in findings in relation to five key themes: i) the terminology of 'food aid'; ii) the triggers to food aid use and other forms of support; iii) the broader experience of food poverty; iv) the policy context and political salience of food aid; v) the nature of 'evidence' when exploring food aid. A conceptual table, designed to map food aid use triggers, socio-economic and political context and policy levers is also presented in this section. It is hoped this table will offer a basis for further discussion around the issues it highlights, and subsequently enable a more definitive representation.

4.i) Terminology

The provision of food assistance (whether in the form of parcels of food, hot meals, soup and sandwiches, or subsidised cafes) is not a new practice in the UK; nevertheless, the current seemingly rapid growth of particular organisational models has led to a developing terminology. Discussion of this emergent terminology and its implication is overdue. The following reflections, based on our existing knowledge and experience, and from the literature and document scoping, are offered as a start, particularly addressing usage of 'food aid' and the vocabulary of 'food banks'. These are situated within a wider range of food assistance projects, which straddle the public, private and civil society sectors. Broader terminologies in relation to 'food security' and 'food poverty' are briefly discussed at the end of the section and in more detail below (in section 4.4).

The application of the term 'food aid' to the UK domestic context is relatively new. Defra employed the term to shape the recently commissioned piece of research undertaken by these authors on the so called 'food aid landscape' (Defra, 2013):

> ''Food aid' is here used as an umbrella term encompassing a range of large-scale and small local activities aiming to help people meet food needs, often on a short-term basis during crisis or immediate difficulty; more broadly they contribute to relieving symptoms of household or individual level food insecurity and poverty.' (see project summary, FCRN 2013).

This 'food aid' terminology has more recently been adopted in publications by NGOs and charities; two recent examples are 'Walking the Breadline' by Church Action on Poverty and Oxfam (Cooper and Dumpleton, 2013) and 'Hungry for More' from Church Urban Fund (Eckley, 2013). Having said this, the 'food aid' term is not used uniformly by any of these organisations. Whilst Defra's definition is expansive and designed to incorporate a range of assistance (broadly defined), Cooper and Dumpleton (2013: 3) (and Eckley (2013) who draws on their work) limit food aid to 'the use of food banks and receipt of food parcels'. Notably, there is currently little peer reviewed academic literature or research which employs or discusses the implications of this UK food aid terminology – such academic discussion would be useful as part of a future programme of research and publications. In the research for Defra mentioned above, the team drew on earlier work to elaborate a typology of 'food aid' as contribution to this discussion.

Particular types of assistance projects can be situated within the broader conceptualisation of food aid on which this scoping project draws. These projects can vary considerably, both in their activities and size, as well as their motivations. What they broadly have in common is seeking to help people with food in different ways; they include: provision of food vouchers which give access to free food parcels; 'soup runs' (i.e. mobile food provision, often of soup and bread); day centres and 'drop-in' centres (which offer various forms of food provision, free or subsidized, as part of wider support, which can be targeted at particular demographic or socio-economic groups); meal programmes; and community cafes (where food is often subsidized or provided at very low cost by use of volunteers as staff, often with minimal premise costs). With the exception of government-funded food vouchers such as through Health Start[4], the majority of this provision is run by charities (who may/may not have public or local authority funding or in kind support). It is important to acknowledge that the current high public profile of particular organisational models makes it seem as though this sort of provision is new. For instance, The Trussell Trust Foodbank network is often mentioned; which started around 2000, and has particularly grown in public presence and franchised reach in the last two or three years. However, food aid projects have long existed in the UK to help people access cheap or subsidized food, as earlier research such as McGlone et al (1999), Dowler and Evans (1999), Dowler and Caraher (2003), Caraher and Cowburn (2004), among others, shows (see also commentary in Lambie-Mumford, 2011).

The rise of the Trussell Trust Foodbank Network and its growing public and media profile has, as mentioned, probably sparked both a popular perception of the 'newness' of food assistance and a shaping of the vocabulary used to describe projects which provide parcels of food for people to take home, prepare and eat. The term 'foodbank' is registered to the Trussell Trust (Lambie-Mumford, 2011), nevertheless, the term 'food bank' has more generally come to encompass all projects which provide (parcels of) food to people in some kind of need (which can vary). In the US the term 'food pantry' is more often used to refer to the project where people pick up food parcels, and 'food bank' refers to a store/centre of food stuffs from which the pantries source the content of their parcels (Poppendieck, 1998); to some extent, in Canada the terms 'food bank' and 'food pantry' seem to be used interchangeably (e.g. Riches, 1997). Apart from the formal network of food bank projects in the UK run by The Trussell Trust, it is difficult to characterise different projects across the country which fit into the 'food bank' category beyond the provision of parcels of food. From our personal

[4] For more information see the Healthy Start website: http://www.healthystart.nhs.uk/ (accessed 21.01.14)

knowledge through encounter and discussion, and from such literature and web-based material we have seen, they clearly vary by:

- how people obtain access to them (whether users can self-refer or have to come through 'gate-keepers', and if the latter, how these systems work and are managed);
- how the project is managed (opening times, staffing, what else is on offer);
- what the parcels actually contain, who decides and on what criteria;
- how the food which is put into parcels is sourced (whether through individual donation, as The Trussell Trust was set up to do, or from retail or manufacturer donations via an organisation such as FareShare, or whether local volunteers collect from local shops).

It has been reported that recent rapid increase in demand both for new food banks, and for more food from existing banks to more people, have led to projects evolving new ways of sourcing, handling and managing throughput, and opening more often or for longer hours. Thus even had there been some kind of database of initiatives, it would have been difficult for those managing it to keep it up to date.

Furthermore, the problematic nature of defining food aid or food assistance and characterising the different projects within the scope are to some extent mirrored by the contested nature of the wider experiences of many of the recipients of these initiatives, and particularly the difficulties both of defining, and having agreed indicators to demonstrate and monitor, experiences of 'food insecurity' or 'food poverty'. These concepts are further discussed in section 4.4, but it is useful to note here that they are contested in the UK, with different vocabularies being used in different spheres. For example, the government (in the form of Defra) has established responsibility for 'food insecurity' at the household level (Defra, 2006), but both Defra and the Food Standards Agency (FSA) informally in the past has used the language of 'food poverty'. Now, formally, the FSA has called for a Rapid Evidence Assessment to investigate whether 'food poverty' can be seen as a legitimate term for which indicators can be derived, or whether food inadequacy/food problems are simply further characteristics of 'poverty' which have hitherto been perhaps neglected in policy terms (FSA, 2014). Food aid organisations (such as The Trussell Trust), NGOs (Cooper and Dumpleton, 2013) and increasingly the media (e.g. Butler, 2013a) speak about 'food poverty'. For the purposes of this research, the notion of food poverty is employed, with the particular definition, incorporating FAO and Defra approaches to food security, adopted:

> 'The inability to acquire or consumer an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so' (Dowler 2003, 151).

As this discussion shows, the terminology which surrounds projects helping people meet their food needs is still relatively emergent and to some extent contested. The lack of theoretical engagement in the vocabulary adopted (particularly in the term 'food aid') hinders depth of discussion. It appears however, that the discourse of particular national level agents is shaping the vocabulary and thinking, particularly the Trussell Trust Foodbank Network.

4.2 Triggers to food aid use and other forms of support

The factors and circumstances driving increasing numbers of people to seek out and use food aid in the UK is of key interest to government (as demonstrated by the commissioning of research by Defra), NGOs and charities (such as Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty) and researchers (through calls and funding streams such as this one). The landscape of evidence on the use of food aid is continually shifting as reports are being published relatively frequently (most recently by the Scottish Government – see Sosenko et al, 2013). However, at the time of writing there is relatively little published academic work, and even less in peer reviewed journals (Lambie-Mumford, 2013, is a notable exception, but this paper mostly discussed organisational elements).

Such grey literature as is available seems mostly to focus on food bank provision, although this issue is addressed at various scales. Some local-level research is available from voluntary organisations such as Community Action Hampshire (McCarthy, 2012), Harrogate & Ripon Centres for Voluntary Service (HRCVS, 2013) and Coventry Citizen's Advice Bureau (2013). From our experience we also know of unpublished local-level research which has been completed, and it seems likely that there will be an almost exponential growth in similar, locally-focussed publications. Food aid charities themselves – notably the Trussell Trust – publish their own claims about the reasons for food bank uptake, based on the vouchers given to recipients (e.g. Trussell Trust, 2013). National scale reports on food aid use, such as those already cited by Church Action on Poverty (Cooper and Dumpleton 2013) and Church Urban Fund (Eckley 2013), use food bank usage as indicators of numbers of people in need, and also draw on food bank management experiences as well as (in the case of Church Action on Poverty) their own organization's independent work, to discuss drivers of need.

The systematic evidence base for why people go to food banks and other charitable food help is slim and emerging. The consistent claims from many NGOs, charities and food aid providers are that increasingly the main reasons for people going to food banks are immediate problems associated with social security benefits (delays in benefit receipt, errors and sanctions[5]) (e.g. Citizens Advice Bureaux, 2013), or income 'crises' (e.g. loss of hours, or of a job), and longer-term problems of low income (indebtedness, zero-hour contracts, low wages). The Trussell Trust data[6], collected through their own online operational data system, are much cited in the media and other reports; they identify triggers for needing food aid as including low income, 'benefit delay', 'benefit changes', delayed wages, domestic violence, sickness, unemployment, debt, refused crisis loans, homelessness and absence of free school meals during school holidays (Trussell Trust 2013). Such problems are of course coming on top of five-six years of rising food prices (Dowler et al, 2011; Defra, 2012) and other essential expenditure costs such as fuel and housing, and the economic austerity measures introduced by the Coalition Government from 2010 onwards (Hossain et al, 2011; WBG, 2010 & 2012). In addition, the experiences of living with the 'removal of spare room subsidy' (the so-called 'bedroom tax'[7]) which came into effect in April 2013 is informally said by providers to be part of the

[5] 'Sanctions' refers to situations where the payment of benefit is withheld because claimants do not meet conditions set. The majority come through JobSeekers Plus Centres, and can be for 4-26 weeks or longer. see: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/benefit-sanctions-ending-the-something-for-nothing-culture and http://www.adviceguide.org.uk/wales/benefits_w/benefits_benefits_in_work_or_looking_for_work_ew/benefits_for_people_looking_for_work.htm#h_jobseekers_allowance_and_sanctions

[6] See Trussell Trust website: http://www.trusselltrust.org/stats

[7] http://www.housing.org.uk/policy/welfare-reform/bedroom-tax/

narrative of an increasing number of food bank claimants. This linkage is, however, difficult to verify at present, and the claim is contested.[8]

It is difficult, however, to obtain consistent and reliable evidence on the association between 'problems associated with benefits or benefit payments' and people having to approach food banks as no systematic data source is available. The recent report to Defra reviewing use of food aid discusses this issue in more detail (Lambie-Mumford et al, 2014), although the evidence actually used in the report relates to data collected before the end of March 2013. Such evidence as is currently available is broad and information is collected differently by different organisations and pieces of research. To take two examples, the referral form used nationally by The Trussell Trust has two categories ('benefit delay', 'benefit change'); on the other hand, the Coventry-based CAB research (Coventry CAB 2013) incorporated five different benefit-related categories into their data collection (Benefit Delay; Benefit Sanction; Benefit Refusal; Benefit Shortfall; Debt recovery from benefit). Such examples could be multiplied. It is also the case that recent and ongoing changes to social security benefit entitlement, levels and implementation can make it difficult to interpret some of the data on benefits being reported.

Given the lack of a substantive evidence base, this scoping project set out to employ narrative research methods with a small number of food aid recipients to find out about their experiences.

From these scoping interviews it appears that for this group of people there may have been two particular sets of reasons for food aid uptake. In the case of the two single men, they were highly vulnerable and their housing circumstances were precarious: one interviewee was homeless with no access to public funds; and the other was in temporary supported housing overcoming alcohol addiction. For the rest of the interviewees (all women, two of whom where living with children), who were all housed in social housing, financial difficulty as a result of changes to benefits (financial constraints precipitated by changes to housing benefit (in the form of the so called 'bedroom tax') and council tax benefit); and periods of time without income as a result of switches between Employment Support Allowance (ESA) to Job Seekers Allowance (JSA)) were of particular importance to their need for food assistance. Indebtedness also featured in the narratives of wider financial context for four of the interviewees (all except the roofless man).

Problems brought about by switches between types of benefits (notably moving from ESA to JSA) were key issues for two of the interviewees. Both of the women with children who were interviewed had had difficulty as a result of this particular switch. In one instance, difficulties as a result of sanctions and the six weeks between the final ESA payment and the first JSA payment had left the interviewee and her two young children without enough money for food:

> 'And because of my anxiety and depression I was always forgetting to get the sick notes in on time. So, obviously you'd have to go with no money if you forgot to get your sick note in. So, I had to go down there just to get a bit of food. And then I switched benefits- To income support. So then they left me for about six weeks with no money. […] But then, because of

[8] see, for example: http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/food-bank-users-triple-bedroom-2426532 and https://fullfact.org/factchecks/bedroom_tax_responsible_tripling_foodbank_use-29241

the changes as well, there's no, crisis loans or anything. So, I was literally left with no money at all.'

Interviewee 2, Food Bank

Changes to housing and council tax benefits were highlighted as problematic by each of the three interviewees who had a social housing tenancy. In the case of the two women undergoing switches between benefits these added financial pressures (both had increased council tax payments and were paying 'bedroom tax' on one room each) and they were both in rent arrears. The third interviewee was still living in a three bedroom house after her children had left home so was paying extra rent for two bedrooms and had also seen a rise in her council tax; at the time she was getting a discretionary housing payment and was waiting for a moving date to the one bedroom flat she had been offered to downsize to.

'I never asked for a full parcel in the very first beginning because me money was, you know, it was tiding us over, really. We didn't really have a lot of money concerns. Well the point where I were getting full housing benefit at the time before they brought the bedroom tax in, and things were more affordable sort of thing. But since they- they have brought the bedroom tax in, well, I'm having to pay more of my benefit out on the rent, and it's not left as much money for everything else, really.'

Interviewee 5, Day Centre (who is downsizing to a one bedroom flat)

In the wider discussions of financial circumstances had with interviewees each of the four people who were housed talked about how indebtedness was also heightening the financial pressures they were under. Rent arrears were issues for the mothers living with their children in social housing who recounted difficulties with the 'bedroom tax' (one had £695 rent arrears at the time of the interview and another between £500-600). Debt accrued as a result of overpayment of benefits was highlighted by two other interviewees. Both of the mothers who lived with their children spoke about heating/energy debt. One of the interviewees also owed money to local lenders for several loans that she had taken out in the past:

'First original one was 150 and then I paid that off, or nearly paid it off or something and then he's offered me another one. So I've took that. And then, all of a sudden you've got five accounts open, you know? You're paying off loads 'cause they just trick you into it. And then they say, "Oh yeah, you can have £100 loan today" but then you only end up with £30 in your hand because they're paying off the other loans that you've got before.'

Interviewee 2, Food Bank

It is worth noting here that one interviewee had a particularly large combination of the debts highlighted by this scoping exercise. She had rent arrears, had been contacted by the council about her tax payments (but did not disclose if she owed any money), was in debt with her energy provider and was making payments for several short term loans she had taken out from local lenders. In addition to getting a better understanding of how individual/ particular debt (for example rent arrears versus loan sharks) impacts on people's food security it also seems important from this example to come to a better understanding of how combinations of debts may be affecting these lived experiences.

So, two key sets of triggers highlighted by the narrative interviews were: where people are highly vulnerable with precarious housing circumstances; or experiencing financial difficulty as a result of changes to benefits which involved either a lack of income or increased outgoing as a result of changes to housing benefit and council tax benefit. Indebtedness was another key factor in peoples budgeting more generally, with interviewees struggling with rent and council tax arrears and short terms loans through loan sharks.

4.3 Narratives of other support and managing money

The second set of findings from the narrative interviews relates to interviewees stories of support and wider 'coping strategies'. The insights which can be drawn from the data collected related to two key aspects. In the first instance the ways in which the interviewees were drawing on other sources of support (notably other food projects and Healthy Start vouchers) came out clearly. In the second instance the ways in which interviewees were managing their money generally (and money for food in particular) and had adapted shopping and eating habits around their constrained budgets also came through the data.

Three of the five interviewees talked about having had help from other sources of charitable food provision (than the one they were being interviewed about) at some point in time - within the last approximately one year. The most acute example of this was in the case of the roofless man who was accessing the Day Centre visited. This man was accessing five different charitable projects in the city across the week, in such a way that he was able to obtain a breakfast, cooked lunch and evening soup/sandwiches every day at the time of the interview. Two of the female interviewees had both obtained food parcels from another food bank in the city within the last year; one of whom also referred to a charity event she called 'fill a bag for £1' which she had visited on a few occasions to get cheap tinned and other long life foods. One of the mothers that was interviewed also talked about the impact of the Healthy Start vouchers she receives for her young son and how they enabled her to buy the children fresh fruit and vegetables:

> 'So, with them, that's when I buy my fruit and veg. Once a month, I'll just get loads. I'll fill my fruit bowl up. Fill the fridge up and when it's gone, it's gone. That's it.'
>
> Interviewee 2, Food Bank

It is interesting to note that despite prompts in the interview, none of the interviewees talked about receiving help or support on a regular basis from family members or friends. This raises important questions about what formal and informal support with food may look like in the UK today.

Some other points to consider in this section are the other forms of non-food support that recipients may be accessing outside the food project as well as the other types of support they get from the project itself. In particular, where referrals have been made to food aid projects, the recipients may be receiving support from this referrer. For example one of the male interviewees, who was referred by the key worker at his temporary supported housing project, gets support from this worker on an on-going basis. Similarly, one of the female interviewees had previously been referred to another food bank by the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) and was receiving help from the CAB at that time with accessing a discretionary housing payment.

In terms of other (non-food) support provided at the food aid project, in each of the three projects covered by these interviews recipients talked about getting other kinds of help. One (who visited the Food Bank Church Centre) also volunteered, worshiped and socialised at the centre when the food bank wasn't running. Another (who visited the day centre) also socialised there and learned and practised English. A third (who also visited the day centre) socialised there and was doing a computer course. A fourth referred to the food bank as providing opportunities for people to talk and get informal support and the fifth interviewee's children did gardening at the church when she went to pick up her parcel.

> 'But it's not just for the food, it's for the, it's for the friendship thing as well, 'cause, one of my battles I've always had is, is loneliness. When I get lonely, I drink, so I made a conscious decision that I need, like I say, need to be around people that I can talk to and trust and work with, and this is the perfect thing for me 'cause it's, it's thirty seconds away from my door. I can come round any time I want, nobody will turn me away. So it's a win-win situation all the time for me.'
>
> Interviewee, Food bank and Church Centre

The interviews went into detail around how the respondents accessed food in an average week (at the time). In relation to these questions it was clear from the data that (apart from the roofless interviewee), the respondents shopped around quite extensively, mostly in discount stores or the city centre market. Each participant who was housed recounted how they shopped around and only one mentioned using mainstream large (non-local) supermarkets and then, in relation to deliberately following offers they had seen on the TV. One of the interviewees who lived with her children also described in some length her need to skip meals on a regular basis around the time of the interview:

> 'Oh, well, I'll be meal-skipping today. I was talking to my doctor this morning about it because I was putting the oxtail in a pot this morning. I was at the stage now where you're

> having to count the pieces of meat - how many pieces of meat there is so you will know whether or not it will stretch - and I was telling my doctor this morning I was counting it, and I even before I finished counting I just knew there's not going to be enough for all three of us. So today it will be mostly be toast for me today, for dinner, or just skipping dinner altogether if I'm really busy. So on an average week it can be up to four/five times [that I skip meals].'
>
> Interviewee 1, Food Bank

Some of the interviews also provided insight into how the food parcels were being situated within wider food experiences and budgetary planning. One interviewee, for example, talked about how she combines the food she receives from the food bank with the food she is able to buy herself:

> 'So I, I will buy a bag of meat on a Friday and I'll split it into bits and put that in the freezer. […] And then I'll mix and match other things that I get from the food bank with the meat. You know, like, so it's still a half decent meal.'
>
> Interviewee 2, Food Bank

For another, the way in which the food parcel was saving him money meant he could put more towards his preparations from the new flat he was moving into:

> 'But in the six months that, I've got there, I'm gonna have to start making plans on getting things together, you know, furniture-wise and things like this. So, which is, what everybody else has to do in life, which is a good thing. But the money I'm saving with the food bank, I can use towards something else.'
>
> Interviewee, Food Bank and Church Centre

In terms of situating food aid in the context of other forms of support and household budgeting strategies more generally, this scoping exercise found that from this small group of people, three out of five were or had previously drawn on other sources of support (notably other food projects and Health Start vouchers) and all (except the roofless man with no income) were going to some lengths to manage their money - adapted shopping and eating habits around their constrained budgets.

4.4 Food Poverty

The process of the scoping exercise also highlighted the importance of taking account of wider experiences of food poverty (or food insecurity), even when uptake of 'food aid' is the focus or immediate experience. The discourse surrounding food aid uptake is usually framed by notions of food or financial 'crisis', but this scoping project, which builds on other research by the authors, highlights the importance of wider experiences of constrained access to food, more generally.

In the UK the terminology around this wider experience is, like with the 'food aid' vocabulary, varied. As mentioned above, in policy spheres the terms 'food (in)security' (Defra, 2006) and 'food poverty' (FSA, 2014) are used; food and poverty charities increasingly use 'food poverty' (Trussell Trust, 2013; Cooper and Dumpleton, 2013). Both terms have been adopted and discussed in research in some detail in recent years (Dowler et al, 2001; Dowler, 2003; Lang et al, 2009; MacMillan and Dowler, 2013; Kneafsey et al, 2013; Dowler and O'Connor, 2013).

The definition of food poverty/insecurity adopted for this scoping exercise is: 'the inability to acquire or consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so' (Dowler, 2003, 151; see also Dowler and O'Connor, 2013). Such a definition highlights the importance of aspects of the experience including but also beyond (economic and physical) access to food, also highlighting the importance of the adequacy and quantity of food a person can access and the security of this access into the future. Furthermore, the notion of 'socially acceptable' ways of obtaining food is important too, and highlights the social justice element.

Food security has been systematically measured in the US and Canada for a number of years (Bickel et al, Health Canada) using validated methods for assessing levels of household food insecurity (as mild, moderate or acute). There is limited experience of using these methods in the UK (see Tingay et al, 2003, for an early attempt in one locality); the only national data comes from the Low Income Diet and Nutrition Survey, which included an adapted questionnaire from the US, and found that, in 2002-3, only 51% of low income households regularly 'had enough of the kinds of food they wanted to eat'. Nearly 40% worried their food would run out before money for more was obtained and nearly 20% said they regularly reduced or skipped meals because of lack of money (Holmes, 2007). In the past there has been strong resistance in government to suggestions that household food security could usefully be measured in such ways.

The importance of taking account of the wider experience of food poverty and insecurity was also indicated by the results from the narrative interviews. Longer-term difficulties over debt (some of which were from rent arrears, or benefit overpayment repayments, or so called 'payday lenders'), struggles with affordability of fuel bills, and longer-term low income were all key factors which had shaped interviewees' financial and budgetary constraints. This raises the ongoing question of how short-term people's circumstances are likely to be; the interviews suggest many are likely to have been struggling to feed themselves (and families) on a longer term basis before they turned to food aid.

Some food aid users are likely to be living with fairly long-term financial problems, arising from low waged work, and/or living in areas of multiple deprivation, where previous research shows that sourcing affordable food appropriate for a healthy life might also difficult (Dowler et al, 2001; Rex and Blair, 2003; Lloyd et al, 2011). Thus how households are managing contemporary drivers of food insecurity, and the particularities of the present circumstances, are important questions. As mentioned, there has been some research on the management of household budgets (including managing to eat well) in the contemporary context of recession (Hossain et al, 2011; Goode, 2012) and specifically on how households were responding to rising food prices in 2010, before UK Government austerity measures began (Dowler et al, 2011; Kneafsey el al, 2013), but this is not

extensive in reach. Hirsch and his colleagues continue to monitor the impact of wider economic issues on general household budgets including food budgets (Davies et al, 2010; Hirsch, 2013) although they do not look specifically at the consequences for household food security. Others are examining the impact of welfare reforms (e.g. Beatty and Fothergill, 2013) or austerity policies (e.g. Taylor-Gooby, 2011; Brewer and Joyce, 2011) but do not particularly address food. Rising costs of living, not least in increased food (Defra, 2013) and fuel (Hirsch, 2013) prices, and static or falling incomes from wages and/or social security have meant that for more and more households stark food insecurity is becoming the norm, however skillfully people budget, shop and prepare food.

4.5 Policy Context and Political Salience

The issue of food aid and the role of economic austerity policy, and changes to social security, has gained an increasingly high profile over the last 18 months or so. It has become a highly politicised issue, as media coverage of the rise in the number of food banks and people turning to them (e.g. Butler, 2012, 2013a,b[9]), and references to food banks in debates in both Houses of Parliament (Hansard, 2012, 2013a, b) show. There is urgent need for more detailed and considered examination of the nature and practice of this politicization, which has arguably become more pronounced over the last few months, than is possible in a rapid review such as this one. Neverthless, in this scoping exercise we have tried to begin by clarifying issues around roles of government departments (e.g. Defra, DWP), agencies (e.g. FSA) and Members of Parliament (e.g. through the APPG on Hunger and Food Poverty) in terms of responsibilities for defining and addressing 'food poverty' and 'food aid', and the parts being played by NGOs, Think Tanks and academics, as well, increasingly, by Local Authorities.

The Government has not yet developed policy responses to increased growth of food aid uptake through growing numbers of food banks in the UK, the political discourse is partly being shaped in response to growing media coverage, which increasingly includes Comment and editorials (Anon, 2014; Cohen 2013). Churches and other faith groups are increasingly involved in response and commentary. In recent months the Church of England (ArchBishops of York and Canterbury have recently made interventions[10]) and Roman Catholic church (Archbishop Nicholls, the new Cardinal) have spoken out and, as mentioned above, collaboration between a number of church leaders as part of the EndHungerFast initiative led to a letter in the Mirror[11] which received considerable media and other coverage. Church networks (for example Church Urban Fund; Church Action on Poverty), individual Dioceses and local networks, have also produced reports and media response.

Given the nature of food poverty/insecurity and the many experiences and issues which intersect with it, the policy context is complex and far reaching. Traditionally the problem of poorer people eating less well than richer (inequalities) and/or being less likely to eat sufficiently or appropriately for health (inequity) has been located within 'food policy' more generally as an issue for the market

[9] a more detailed examination of media coverage, including TV, radio, print and social media, is beyond the scope of this rapid review.
[10] http://www.archbishopofyork.org/articles.php/3012/archbishop-writes-about-food-poverty-and-bringing-hope-this-christmas ; http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/faith/article3957894.ece
[11] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-26261700

to address (in keeping prices low and people in work) along with consumers themselves (to budget, shop, cook and eat effectively) (Dowler et al 2011; Dowler and O'Connor, 2013). Responsibility for 'food security' – including at the individual and household level – is currently with Defra, although from about 2009 onwards they had a policy officer with responsibility for food poverty (see also the work of the Council for Food Policy Advisers and their 2nd report, CFPA, 2010). Throughout the first decade of the century the Food Standards Agency, in its Nutrition Division, had responsibility for addressing household level food poverty, and, again, in its early days, had an officer with specific responsibility for it. The Coalition Government moved the Nutrition Division from the FSA to the Department for Health and thence to Public Health England, where its responsibilties for food poverty are presently unclear (the Northern Ireland office is taking responsibility for the current research call, under the auspice of the All Ireland Obesity work). The Department of Work and Pensions has never had any role in looking at food and its associations with income (whether from work or social security); in the past and possibly the present, any issues over the sufficiency of income from either source have been referred to the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF, until 2003) and now Defra. DWP has no mandate to address food issues. In the devolved territories, Community Food and Health Scotland has long provided support for community level initiatives and raised the profile of food poverty[12] and recent rapid research has been published to help inform Scottish Government policy response (Sosenko et al, 2013). The Welsh Assembly Government hitherto relied on the FSA Wales work with local communities to tackle food poverty, but has recently seen debates and calls for more systematic and proactive work[13].

At a local level, Local Authorities are increasingly engaging with food poverty – whether through food/ food poverty strategies (e.g. Bristol, Sheffield and London) or diverting emergency loan funding to food banks (Maslen et al, 2013; GLA, 2013).

[12] http://www.communityfoodandhealth.org.uk/
[13] http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/dec/11/food-poverty-welsh-assembly-debate-health-emergency

Table 1: Food Aid Triggers, policy levers and contexts

Policy Context	Levers	Food Aid Triggers
	National Level	
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs: Food Security Assessment.	(1) Assessment of range of factors impacting on food security. (2) Potential for facilitation of cross-Whitehall working.	
Department for Work and Pensions: Benefit Administration (through Job Centre Plus) and Welfare Policy.	(1) Administrative issues: over payments; delays; difficulties moving between benefit types; lack of payment. (2) Changes to entitlements which result in an increase of outgoings (particularly Council Tax Benefit and Housing Benefit).	Low Income Problems with benefits
All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Hunger and Food Poverty	(1) Gather evidence on the factors affecting food aid uptake (including issues with social security reform/payments). (2) Explore wider factors impacting on food security in the UK (at individual, household and community levels).	
	Local Level	
Local Authorities	(1) Policy, implementation and administration of crisis loans. (2) Local food security/poverty strategies (encompassing access to food and community food security). (3) Provision for homeless or vulnerably housed (in temporary accommodation).	Low Income Housing

4.6 Nature of evidence for decision making

The experience of this scoping exercise has also raised some key questions around the nature of the evidence which is required for decision making in relation to the increasing uptake of 'food aid' and wider experiences of 'food poverty'. Given the paucity of such evidence at the current time in the UK, and the amount of research underway or about to be commissioned, methodological reflection in terms of the process of collecting this data and the kind of data required may be useful.

Household level food poverty/insecurity experiences are not straightforward and usually the outcome of a wider complexity, which relates to a range of aspects in a person/family's life (health, income, wellbeing), and all attempts at developing indicators in the past have proved challenging. For instance, understanding budgeting practices, and making appropriate sense of them to interpret behaviours and/or give advice, is not straightforward, despite some claims to the contrary by community based practitioners (e.g. Dowler, 1998; Goode, 2012).

There are also methodological and ethical considerations given the sensitive nature of the topic which touches on so many aspects of people's lives. Simply asking people to summarise what may have been a distressing and complicated experience by ranking responses to a series of pre-determined categories does not provide robust evidence. Furthermore, there may be difficult personal stories which should not be provided, in however brief a form, to those whom users/ clients do not know and have no real reason to trust, other than their having provided a sympathetic ear.

5. Key issues raised by the research

This scoping exercise raised several key issues, particularly conceptual and policy related.

Conceptual Issues

- The terminology surrounding emergency food assistance is still evolving in the UK. The recently adopted term 'food aid' encompasses a range of different types of assistance beyond the provision of food parcels. Particular organisational approaches appear to have shaped in particular the food bank vocabulary and the term has come to mean projects which provide emergency parcels of food for people to take away, prepare and eat at home.
- This scoping exercise highlighted the importance of situating any research or discussion of food aid use into wider context of food poverty/insecurity. It is important to remember in relation to this that any figures relating to food aid use are just that – they necessarily cannot provide an account of all food insecure/food poor people and households.
- The scoping exercise suggests that there may be some key triggers to food aid use (particularly relating to problems with benefits, housing and low income). More systematic research is required, however.

Policy Issues

- This scoping project indicates that the policy levers which could impact on triggers to food aid use extend across Whitehall and Parliamentary boundaries and national-local scales.
- The fragmentary nature of the situation of these levers across these spheres of government may, however, make a comprehensive approach to overcoming food poverty and the need for food aid a challenge.

6. Next steps

In addition to the other scoping projects funded under the Communities and Culture Network+ , Nemode and Sustainable Society Network+ there is a growing range of other research published or forthcoming on areas relating to food aid in the UK. Research calls are due from the Food Standards Agency the National Institute of Health Research and Public Health England. Government authored reports such as that by Fell et al 2013 are also now available as is the Scottish Government research by Herriot-Watt University to provide an 'overview of food aid provision in Scotland' (Sosenko et al 2013). NGOs and charities are also active in evidence gathering on the topic and reports have been published by Church Action on Poverty and Oxfam, Church Urban Fund. Oxfam UK is also currently leading on in-depth qualitative research on food bank use.

We will be pursuing a research and publication agenda exploring some of the issues raised through this scoping exercise, including the conceptual and policy issues raised. A programme of work around household experiences of food poverty more widely has been initiated.

7. Dissemination and Impact

One key impact of this research has been to inform the on-going research by Oxfam, Church Action on Poverty and Child Poverty Action Group. Both authors are members of the steering group for this research and the experience and findings from the scoping exercise have fed into the shape and methodological approach of this work. Secondly, both authors are speaking at or engaged in discussion in Scotland (25th February, 2014: *Emergency food aid: a national learning exchange*, CFHS), at the launch of the APPG on *Hunger and Food Poverty* in London in April, and at exchange meetings between planners, health and social welfare professionals and academics in Bristol and the West Midlands, and as part of the Sustainable Food Cities network.

We hope to submit an article based on this work to the forthcoming Special Issue of the British Food Journal on food banks, and to present at the Social Policy Association annual conference, and the forthcoming British Sociological Association Food Study Group 2014 conference.

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Appendix: Project Vignettes

The following accounts of the projects visited by the interviewees have been anonymised to protect the identity of the participants.

The Food Bank

An independent local food bank, open one afternoon every week. Recipients are required to come along at 2pm and food parcels are handed out at 3pm. No one is required to get a referral and instead the project operates an open door policy and people can return on a regular basis if they need to. Recipients are encouraged to stay, to have tea, coffee, toast or cake and talk if they wish, but they can take a food bag and leave without going into details about their need for emergency food.

The food parcels contain set combinations of long life food items with each including: carbohydrates (rice or pasta); cereal; long life milk; tinned fish or meat; and tinned vegetables. Food parcels vary in size depending on how many people they need to feed (a single person or a family with several children). The parcels are designed to last for a few days at a maximum as for a single person the parcel contains one tin of each food type (with the amount increased depending on household size).

Food Bank and Church Centre

This church centre is open six days a week and its activities include a café, drop-in sessions, workshops and art and craft sessions, literacy and numeracy training and worship. The food bank which is run from the centre is a distribution point from a local Trussell Trust Foodbank. Recipients are referred and come to the foodbank to collect a parcel of food, the contents of which is in line with any Trussell Trust food parcel containing: cereal; soup (canned or packet); beans/spaghetti in sauce; tinned tomatoes/pasta sauce; tinned vegetables; tinned meat (or vegetarian options); tinned fish; tinned fruit; rice pudding; biscuits; sugar; pasta/rice/noodles; tea or coffee; juice; UHT/powdered milk; and extra treats such as sauces or chocolate – depending on what the Foodbank has available.

Day Centre

This centre support vulnerable people, many of whom are homeless or have accommodation they are struggling to manage. It is open every week day and runs workshops, literacy classes, cookery classes, computer classes, arts and crafts and gardening sessions at an allotment. The centre has a subsidised café and provides hot lunchtime meals for clients at a rate of £1.80 for two courses (there is a credit system for clients who cannot pay for the lunch or cafe). The centre does provide emergency food parcels for non-clients on a referral basis.