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Heat or Eat: Food and Austerity in Rural England

Interim Report February 2015

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with Professor Elizabeth Dowler

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Introduction

This research project explores the theme of food and austerity through the lens of one of the most high profile, yet under-evidenced, phenomena in the current era of austerity: the decision to 'heat or eat'. In the context of rising costs of living, stagnating incomes and extensive reforms to the welfare state including social security, there is increased policy discussion about households having to make stark choices between 'heating and eating' (Hansard 2012; 2014).

The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) (2014, p 20) highlight that falling incomes and rising costs of living, including rising food prices, have meant that food is now over 20 per cent less affordable for those living in the lowest income decile in the UK compared to 2003. At the same time, there has been a high profile rise of food banks (charitable projects providing emergency parcels of food for people to take away, prepare and eat) (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler 2014). In 2013-14 the UK's largest network of charitable food banks distributed nearly one million food parcels representing a 610 per cent increase in provision since 2011-2012 (Trussell Trust no date). The growth of this provision has sparked a fierce political debate about its causes and the nature of hunger in the UK today, and prompted an All Party Parliamentary Inquiry (Food Poverty Inquiry 2014). Traditionally in the UK, approaches to ensuring everyone has access to healthy food have been left to the operation of efficient markets in retail and employment, appropriate consumer choice and a social welfare system which is meant to enable those lacking employment to be able to purchase food (Dowler *et al*, 2011). Whilst the Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty was an important step in signalling policy makers' engagement with these issues, in the context of evidence suggesting this approach has not succeeded, substantive policy responses are still to emerge (Lambie-Mumford forthcoming 2015).

Conversely, fuel poverty, driven by the interaction of low incomes, poor energy efficiency and high energy prices, has been an explicit policy concern since the 1990s. The severe social costs of fuel poverty are recognised by policy makers - for example, in 2009 the Chief Medical Officer Report found that for every £1 investment in keeping homes warm the NHS would see a saving of 42 pence (Marmot Review Team 2011) - and national fuel poverty reduction targets have been in place since 2001. The majority of support measures are funded through levies and obligations placed on energy companies, and some additional forms of financial support are provided through the benefits system. In addition to this the industry is regulated by the Office of Gas & Electricity Markets (OFGEM), and a number of other public sector departments and organisations are involved the delivery of policy support including Local Authorities and Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) (Snell and Thomson 2013). Specific measures that are currently in place to support fuel poor households include: the Warm Home Discount Scheme (WHDS), Cold Weather Payments (CWPs), and the Carbon Savings Communities Obligation (CSCO) element of the Energy Companies Obligation (ECO) (Snell and Thomson 2013).

As food and fuel poverty researchers, the increasing NGO and political reference to the 'heat or eat' issue (see Cooper *et al* 2014) led us to this collaborative project. We intend to explore these assertions and the lived experiences they are supposed to represent, especially in the current policy climate of austerity. Specifically our research is driven by three limitations in the existing knowledge base. First, is the striking lack of evidence despite the high profile rhetoric. The evidence base that exists is largely made up of single household case studies and small scale surveys conducted by NGOs - it is rarely the central focus of the research in which it appears. Second and closely related, is the common perception within existing debates that the driver of the 'heat or eat' phenomena is the relative flexibility of food and fuel costs compared to other household expenses. Whilst this may be the case, at present there is insufficient evidence to support this claim. Third, existing evidence pays little or no attention to spatial disparities

within such debates, largely ignoring the very different, and often more challenging circumstances faced by the rural poor, including disparate and more stretched public services, a limited and energy inefficient housing stock, and restricted access to cheaper forms of fuel such as mains gas. With support from National Energy Action and the Trussell Trust foodbank Network this project scrutinises the 'heat or eat' dilemma in a rural context, investigating the legitimacy and complexity of such claims, and critically assessing existing and potential policy responses.

Research Aims

This research is comprised of two main aims. The first aim is to assess whether the heat or eat dilemma discussed within policy debates is part of the lived experience of rural poverty in the current era of austerity. Specific objectives of this are to:

- determine whether low income rural householders have ever had to make choices between food and heating;
- understand how food and heating costs are prioritised in household budgeting decisions;
- ascertain whether the concept of heating or eating reflects lived experiences.

The second aim is to critically assess existing rural community-based and (local and national) policy support, and to identify the most appropriate policy responses for addressing the root causes of these experiences. Specific objectives are to:

- identify key rural areas with both high levels of fuel poverty and uptake of food banks where a more strategic response may be required;
- come to a better understanding of how community stakeholders are responding to these experiences locally and what the most effective policy responses do/should look like.

Research Design and Methodology

In meeting these aims the project involves two main phases of research: desk based research including a literature review, mapping and secondary analysis; and primary research using qualitative interview methods with households and providers of food and fuel poverty services.

The **literature review** was conducted between October and December 2014. The following databases were used in the searches: ASSIA, Web of Science, Scopus, Science Direct, Sociological Abstracts, Social Sciences Citation Index, British Library, British Humanities Index, Google Scholar and Google. The search was restricted to the English language and developed countries from 1996 onwards. Key search terms were agreed by the research team: heat and eat; food poverty and fuel poverty; food insecurity and fuel poverty; poor and food and fuel; low income, food and fuel; austerity, food and fuel; austerity, heat and eat. Overall 29 academic articles were shortlisted although only 15 had a direct relevance to this research project. In addition 62 news articles, opinion pieces and other types of 'grey literature' were found using the same research terms in a google search.

The **GIS mapping** was conducted between October and December 2014 and aimed to identify overlaps and under laps between fuel poverty policy priority areas¹ and the presence of Trussell Trust foodbanks. By doing so, the focus was on mapping food and fuel poverty provision; rather than claiming to identify levels of food or fuel need.² The focus on food charity provision was

¹ As defined by the Department for Energy and Climate Change, and thus eligible for additional fuel poverty support measures

² For a discussion on the problems of using foodbank statistics to infer information about food poverty/insecurity see Lambie-Mumford and Dowler 2014.

deemed to be necessary at the outset of the research, in light of the absence of direct measures of food insecurity. The focus on fuel poverty priority areas was found to be more appropriate than data of direct measures of fuel poverty, as a result of our initial data exploration phase. Initially, fuel poverty rates (as published by DECC) were mapped by Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) and overlaid by the presence of food banks. However, using these data at such a small level produced abnormalities in the first map, including more households being defined as fuel poor than actual households in the LSOA. Given this, the decision was taken to map DECC fuel poverty priority areas specified through the Carbon Saving Communities Obligation (CSCO) of the Energy Companies' Obligation (ECO).

Draft maps were created in November 2014, however, on the 5th December 2015 these priority areas were redefined by DECC. The changes were made in recognition of the difficulties in providing support to fuel poor households in rural areas. As a result of these changes, all households situated in the 25 per cent most deprived rural LSOAs and 25 per cent most deprived LSOAs (as opposed to those living on certain low income benefits) are now eligible for subsidised or free energy efficiency measures. The final maps that have been created identify these newly defined areas. Foodbank data was obtained directly from the Trussell Trust. They included information on foodbank location including postcodes as well as relating to food received and given out and numbers of parcels distributed by each project.

One map of Greater London and one of each region in England was produced. These were used to identify the location of foodbanks and highlight rural areas eligible for CSCO support. Shapefiles for regions and LSOAs were obtained through the UK Data Service. Postcodes for foodbanks were obtained and converted to geocoordinates using GeoConvert available through the UK Data Service. Some foodbanks operated at more than one location within a city or town. If possible the postcode for the centre that carries out administration for the foodbank was used. In all cases the final plotted location did not significantly vary because of the scale used: a distance of even one or two kilometres is negligible when plotted on a regional map. Rural areas eligible for CSCO were obtained from DECC (2014) and matched to LSOA codes and plotted accordingly as a thematic map. Mapping was carried out in the R programming language and statistical environment using robust spatial analysis packages. The Source code used in producing the maps is available from <https://github.com/philmikejones/heateat>.

The final maps represent areas that DECC consider to be most in need of fuel poverty support (such as energy efficiency measures), and that also contain a food bank. Whilst the maps provide data on the presence of fuel poverty priority areas and food banks, they have also been used as a sampling device. Given the lack of comparable, direct, measures of *both* food and fuel poverty experiences we have taken these indicators to suggest increased vulnerability to food and fuel poverty given the presence of support mechanisms.

The **secondary analysis of food and fuel related data** is currently investigating whether there are relationships between food and fuel poverties in deprivation indicators (data from Understanding Society, Family Resources Survey, Living Costs and Food Survey). This phase involves the secondary analysis of consensual measures of food and fuel poverty (such as the presence of damp, ability to pay energy bills, having one hot meal per day) alongside energy and food expenditure and socio-economic and demographic variables.

The mapping phase enabled the selection of sites that were rural, fuel poverty priority areas and that contained foodbanks. **Primary data collection** began in February 2015 and methods include:

- Telephone interviews with local policy makers, practitioners or community groups involved in food or fuel poverty assistance in order to fully understand stakeholders' perceptions of the 'heat or eat' problem, whether (and if so how) it is being addressed in the County, and whether further support is required.
- Face-to-face in depth interviews with householders, sampled through local foodbanks. These interviews will draw on Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches and budgeting interview techniques (see May *et al* no date).
- Stakeholder/impact workshop with local policy makers, practitioners and community groups to discuss the implications of the findings and next steps.

Full ethical clearance for this phase of primary research was obtained on 27/11/2014 from the University of Sheffield. Site selection was based on two factors, firstly, to identify LSOAs which were fuel poverty priority areas and which had a foodbank and, as a secondary concern, with an eye on project capacity and finance, whether there were areas nearby to the research team which filled these criteria. Two food banks were identified in fuel poverty priority areas in Yorkshire and the Humber. However, following discussions with the Trussell Trust these sites were not pursued given capacity at the foodbanks to participate in the research. A second analysis of the regional maps led to the identification of four fuel poverty priority areas, each with a foodbank, in Cornwall. The maps showed a particularly high number of fuel poverty priority areas containing foodbanks in this part of England. Both the Trussell Trust and the foodbank managers in the County were receptive to involvement in the project, and fieldwork began on the 16th February 2015.

Interim Findings

At this point in the project we are able to report findings from the literature review. All other research is on-going, so findings are not yet available. The key findings and research gaps identified in the literature review are as follows:

Firstly, terminology within this research area is highly varied, discipline dependent and inconsistent. For example, within paediatrics focus is placed on children's calorific and nutritional intake, whereas within social policy emphasis is placed on food expenditure or consensual indicators such as 'having enough to eat'. Given this, there is no single understanding of what 'heat or eat' is referring to and arguably very little of the research manages to measure whether a conscious trade-off has been made - instead considering variations in energy and food expenditure or changes in nutritional intake during periods of cold. Several qualitative pieces make reference to households having to make trade-offs and choices between the two, however, without exception these are not the main focus of the research and are based on one or two cases. In addition to this, there is nothing to suggest in the existing literature that one commodity is being *entirely* sacrificed for the other. What is more evident are overall reductions in spending and consumption of food that correspond to increases in energy (prices or use). There is also some evidence to suggest the reverse effect when food prices increase.

Research gap: we need a clearer idea of what we mean by a 'heat or eat trade-off'.

Secondly, household energy and food prices have typically been described as relatively elastic outgoings that can be adjusted more simply than other costs such as rent or council tax.

However, a small body of evidence in the review suggests that householders' experiences of this so-called elasticity may be somewhat different to what the expenditure-based data utilised in the studies cited above, implies. Anderson *et al* (2012) found substantially different attitudes amongst their survey respondents when it came to making savings on food and energy, for example. Food cost savings were regarded by survey participants as being relatively straightforward (e.g. by switching brands and types of food) compared to making equivalent fuel savings (such as switching supplier) which were perceived as harder to make, and less immediate. Furthermore, there is an issue of how far some households with very low incomes even have elasticity. Recent research published by Defra highlighted most significant changes in the nutritional content of food purchases in the second lowest income decile (purchasing 9 per cent less energy content in 2012 compared with 2007 – against a 3 per cent change in the lowest income decile), pointing to a distinct lack of elasticity for the lowest income decile, highlighting that they have very little room for making cuts to/changing the nature of their food expenditure (Defra 2014). On the basis of these issues there are urgent questions about the adequacy of using expenditure data to capture the lived experiences of food and fuel poverty, the hard choices people have to make, and (especially in the case of switching fuel providers or payment methods) the structures which may provide barriers for them to do so.

Research gap: what is the most appropriate way to measure heat or eat trade-offs? Are proxies such as spending on food or fuel sufficient or should there be a focus on deliberate decision making?

Thirdly, how households pay for energy is essential to understanding claims around the impact of energy expenditure or usage. In the UK households typically have the choice of a monthly direct debit, standard credit (where bills are issued over a 3, 4, 6 or 10 month period), or by pre-payment meter, where households pay for energy before they use it. It is the immediacy (or lack thereof) that is key here, for example, Beatty *et al* find that 'equal [energy] instalment plans automatically smooth the cost of heating due to unseasonable weather over several payment periods' (2014: 292). In other words, for households that are able to pay by monthly direct debit, increased winter usage costs are typically absorbed by lower summer costs. However, this is not universal, with Beatty *et al* finding that the poorest older households are unable to smooth their spending, and are most vulnerable to having to make 'heat or eat' decisions (*ibid*). Where Beatty *et al*'s discussion stops short is that there is a well-documented association between low income households and the presence of pre-payment meters (PPMs) in the UK. PPMs are installed in homes for a number of reasons ranging from landlord or householder choice through to being installed as part of a debt management plan put in place by the energy company. It is PPM households that are presented with a direct, comparable, daily choice around energy and food expenditure and consumption. Energy costs for these households will not represent an automatic outgoing or bill that needs to be paid by a certain date. For PPM households there is an immediate choice to: go without energy completely; delay top ups; choose whether to top up by smaller amounts; ration energy knowing that there is an immediate financial effect; or to strictly monitor how much *money* is left on the PPM. Potentially this points to two different types of heat or eat trade-offs, those that are made over longer periods of time as energy bills increase and households gradually have less disposable income (chronic), and those that are immediate and made on a daily basis (acute).

Research gap: we need to understand more about the impact of energy billing periods on food expenditure, consumption or security.

Where we are & next steps

The literature review and mapping are now complete and the secondary data analysis is being finalised. Arrangements are in place for primary data collection to be undertaken in February and March 2015. The below table sets out the progress so far:

Research phases	Oct-Feb	Feb-June
<i>Phase 1: desk-based research</i>		
1. Literature Scoping	*	
2. Mapping	*	
3. Secondary analysis	*	
<i>Phase 2: primary research</i>		
4. Stakeholder interviews		*
5. Household interviews		*
6. Workshops		*

At the end of the project we will hold a stakeholder workshop with local policy makers, practitioners and community groups to discuss the implications of the findings and next steps. This will be a vital event in terms not only of disseminating the research findings but also for initiating pathways for the research to have genuine impact on policy and practice in areas of food and fuel poverty in Cornwall.

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