
Food for thought

food bank provision in Newcastle

Newcastle Council for Voluntary Service

November 2012



Thanks

This report seeks to map the development and provision of food banks in Newcastle. Nationally food banks are a fast rising phenomenon. They are an indicator too of the difficulties families and individuals are facing as a consequence of the recession and falling incomes.

Newcastle CVS would like to thank all those who took the time to speak to us and who provided us with the information included in this report.

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Introduction

This report gives basic information about food banks in Newcastle upon Tyne and their services. It goes on to draw attention to some issues and areas for consideration which have arisen during the research.

The main objective was to map food banks across Newcastle. This involved documenting food bank contact details, opening times and any other available information such as the areas they cover.

However, food banks are difficult to locate. There is anecdotal evidence for very small food bank type provision in very local communities which may even be a couple of streets. Again there is anecdotal evidence for food bank provision based around regular religious activities, not just Christian.

There are other issues, for example some agencies hand out vouchers for clients to hand-in to shops so while they are not food banks as such their effect is very similar.

Context

These are difficult times. The coalition government is pursuing a number of austerity policies aimed at reducing the amount of government borrowing. The consequences of these policies include new and increasing restrictions on benefits, reduced government investment in jobs and a rapidly shrinking public sector.

In addition to these cuts the government is making major changes to the benefit system and to tax credit entitlements. These changes affect not only those without work but a large number of people in low paid work.

The corresponding move to more part-time working may partly alleviate the distress caused by these changes but the problem of low pay and no pay remains.

What do we mean by a ‘food bank’?

A food bank hands out parcels of food to those that need it with no charge to the recipient. In theory they don't serve hot food and they don't offer free gifts. In fact food banks are often part of a hot food operation and often they will hand out food to whoever asks for help.

Food banks operate in the following way:

Individuals, businesses and organisations donate food to a food bank.

Food banks collect at supermarkets where shoppers are given a list of items and asked to buy one or two for local people in need.

The collected food is sorted and stored. The food bank staff and volunteers sort the food by date and pack it into parcels ready to be given out.

People visit the food bank and receive the parcels. Some food banks have no or few restrictions on who can receive their parcels. Others ask for ID and evidence of need. Sometimes care professionals such as doctors, health visitors, social workers, and the Citizens Advice Bureau refer people to food banks.

At the food bank people receive their food parcel and often hot food and drink. Staff and volunteers may be available to talk with them and signpost them to agencies which can address longer-term problems.

Some agencies, such as the Trussell Trust, operate a voucher system. Here people take their voucher to a food bank and redeem it for a set amount of food.

Some food banks run a delivery service to take food parcels to clients who cannot get to the food bank e.g. because they are unwell, or because they live away from public transport.

Food banks in the UK

Food banks are a fast growing phenomenon in the UK. The Trussell Trust has more than 200 food banks on its list and reports that it opened two food banks a week in the last year (to September 2012). It plans to go on opening new food banks to meet an increasing need.

Food banks provide support for people in need and an increase in number can only indicate an increase in need. There are a number of reasons for this, from the difficult economic situation and changes to benefit rules to increased awareness that such services exist. With no sign of immediate improvement, the food bank or similar provision is set to become a familiar sight in local communities.

Where are Newcastle's food banks?

This research has found food banks to be clustered in the east and west of the city centre. They tend not to be positioned in residential areas or near the outskirts of Newcastle. This is partly because many are based at churches.

The food banks users travel to them rather than have a door step service. This can create problems – the food parcels tend to be rather heavy and for obvious reasons the food bank users do not usually have their own transport.

Food Bank providers

The research identified the following dedicated food banks in Newcastle.

- Children's Society, Brunswick Methodist Church
- Missionaries of Charity, Durham Street
- Newcastle East Food Bank, Elim Pentecostal Church, Heaton Road
- Newcastle YMCA
- St Andrew's Church, Newgate Street
- St Joseph's Asylum Project, Armstrong Road
- Storehouse, Tyneside Vineyard, City Road
- Walking With, Wallsend¹

Providers

Perhaps surprisingly Newcastle's food banks tend to be supplied not by local donations but by two national providers – The Trussell Trust and FareShare.

The Trussell Trust provides the largest number of food banks across the UK. It operates the Newcastle East Food Bank and is looking to open a Newcastle West Food Bank early in 2013.

FareShare collects food that is near to its sell-by date from retailers, and sells it onto food banks. FareShare is operated in the North East by The Cyrenians and supplies food for several food banks in Newcastle. The research found that FareShare services are praised by the food banks they sell to. Nevertheless at least one organisation has had to stop using their services because they no longer have the money to pay for them.

The Cyrenians are looking to expand FareShare. In October 2012 they won £15,000 from Santander bank's Social Enterprise Development Awards to hire new staff and help set up a scheme in Tees Valley.

Both the Trussell Trust and FareShare are Christian organisations supplying food banks that often operate from Christian churches.

Outside of the Trussell Trust and FareShare, food banks operate their own collections e.g. asking supermarkets if they can approach their customers to buy something extra for the food bank. The food bank staff approach customers entering the store and wait behind the checkout to collect the donation once the customer has paid.

Alongside this there are donations from concerned members of the public. Often these donations go beyond food to include clothing, baby equipment, and even furniture. The churches are active on this area too using their network to informally assist donors and focus donations.

¹ Though this provider is in North Tyneside, they are used by Newcastle residents.

In addition Storehouse is looking to start a food bank network in Newcastle to share experiences and resources such as a van.

It is reported that local authorities are investing in charity-run food banks to cope with a demand for help from families in crisis². However, the research found no evidence of financial or strategic involvement from the public sector in Newcastle, just referrals from the Housing Advice Centre (HAC).

Users

Food bank users come from across the city including affluent areas such as Gosforth. It is not just people on benefits using food banks; the food banks report increasing numbers of working people on low incomes accessing their services. The presence of people from affluent areas and of people in-work can be masked by presenting aggregated statistics.

The food banks report an increase in demand at the start of the summer holidays. This may be due to children who normally receive free school meals during term time being at home.

Given the reported scale of the problem (e.g. BBC news, 16 October 2012) the researcher was surprised not to find even more food banks in Newcastle. However, further research indicates that food needs in Newcastle are being met in other ways e.g. through religious organisations as part of their religious activities. The researcher has found evidence for existing food banks gearing up to meet additional demand and for new ones about to begin operations.

Other no cost facilities

In addition to food banks there are a number of other facilities in Newcastle providing food for no cost.

- Blandford Square – Hot drinks and sandwiches, Saturdays
- Peoples Kitchen, The Alison Centre - Hot meals and sandwiches and hot drinks: 4 sessions at Alison Centre plus 4 street outreach sessions
- Summerhill Square, West Road - Hot meals and sandwiches, Sundays
- The Cyrenians, Ron Eager House – Food and hot drinks: 5 projects in Newcastle, 1 in Gateshead
- Walter's Kitchen - Hot dogs, soup and pasta, St Andrew's Church (Thursday) and Blandford Square (Sunday)
- West End Refugee Service – Cash hand outs for food
- Edible Elswick, Elswick Community Garden – Free food sessions run by West End Women and Girls

² Patrick Butler, The Guardian, 21 August 2012.

Findings

There has been an increase in the number of families seeking help from food banks in Newcastle. This is clear from the presence of new and recently opened food banks across the city and the demand for their services.

The food banks report that they can hand out all that they can bring in. This indicates that the need for free food in Newcastle is widespread and increasing though for now at least it is not overwhelming.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that food banks are becoming part of the support system instead of a supplementary service to assist longer term solutions. That David Cameron has welcomed the work of food banks and their growing number shows that rather than relying on state benefits the needy are being increasingly provided for by the Big Society³. Taken together with current changes to benefits and discussions with food bank providers it is reasonable to conclude that this is an intended consequence.

On a more positive note, collaboration, and even co-location, between food banks and other services would improve the overall package of help for users. And the creation of a Newcastle Food Bank network can only help provision.

Finally and most importantly, the hard work of food bank volunteers and the generous donations of the public do have a huge impact on those affected. This is clear both from reported testimony and the fact that people keep coming back.

Conclusions

This study highlights the issue of poverty in Newcastle demonstrated by the need for food banks. Though not the subject of this report, it has also brought up the issue of 'rough sleeping' and provided anecdotal evidence of this as both endemic and persistent.

The study has produced evidence of both a need and an increasing need for food banks in Newcastle. It has also shown the demand for food kitchens and provided evidence of increased demand for them.

Clearly then getting enough food is a problem for families and individuals in Newcastle today.

Some of the main issues these conclusions raise are:

- The public sector's relationship with food banks as they increase in number – can the government afford not to fund them?

³ Amelia Gentleman, The Guardian, 18 July 2012.

- The issues of accessibility, such as those concerning faith-based free food and whether the services of food banks are accessible to all groups e.g. older people. In other words are food banks accessible to all of the people and to all of the communities who need their services?
- Raising awareness of poverty not only in Newcastle but throughout the UK - this will help to reduce stigma around food banks.
- Mutual aid - improving communication between food banks, referral agencies and other services to create networks and self-help support.
- Practical issues such as storage and distribution – are there sufficient secure premises available?

These factors will become more important as demand continues to rise.

What's next?

“Demand has been steadily increasing and the most common reason we have noticed at our food bank is either debt or benefit changes.” – Food bank coordinator, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2012.

Food is a basic need and the provision of even a small amount of food has a huge effect. While they do not deal with the long term underlying issues of hardship and poverty, food banks help people in a solid practical way at a time when they are both vulnerable and exposed to other risks.

In general food banks are religious initiatives or community-led projects which meet an important and necessary need. In so doing they have a positive social impact on the local community.

Unfortunately the need for food bank services has grown and, without specific government intervention, this seems set to grow. In fact the government seems intent on reducing its provision of resources to these very projects.

The view of the food banks themselves is clear: they are responding to increases in need; their role in local communities is becoming ever more important, and their work is vital for people in need.

This study has only just begun to scrape the surface. These issues warrant further exploration.

Appendix: Map of Newcastle Food Banks

