Food Banks in Southwark
February 2015

Introduction

A food bank is a charitable organisation which provides food to individuals unable to feed themselves or their families due to an acute financial crisis. Clients are referred to food banks by a range of professionals from statutory bodies or charities, and food is donated by members of the public, local communities, churches and businesses.

In recent years there has been a dramatic increase for the emergency support provided by food banks. In 2013-14, Trussell Trust Foodbanks distributed parcels to feed 913,138 people - an increase from 346,992 in 2012-13 and 128,697 in 2011-12. In Southwark, 4,509 individuals received help from Southwark Foodbank in 2013-14.

This report examines how food banks operate and their place in the wider voluntary and community sector (VCS) in Southwark. It also looks at reasons for the increase in demand for food banks and, in particular, the link to recent changes in the welfare benefits system and other sources of emergency support.

Contents

1. Background
2. How food banks operate
3. Welfare benefit reform and food bank demand
4. Southwark Foodbank
5. The introduction of Universal Credit
6. Alternative sources of crisis support
7. Beyond food banks
8. Conclusion

1. Background

The largest provider of food banks in the UK is the Trussell Trust, which operates 423 food banks nationally, including the Southwark Foodbank. In 2013-14, Trussell Trust Foodbanks distributed parcels to feed 913,138 people - an increase from 346,992 in 2012-13 and 128,697 in 2011-12. Southwark has been disproportionately affected; in 2013, the BBC reported that Southwark was the London borough relying most heavily on support from food banks.

Administration of food banks at a local level is provided by voluntary and community organisations (VCOS), including many churches, and is dependent on volunteers. The Trussell Trust estimates that around 30,000 people volunteered with a food bank in 2013-14.

2. How food banks operate

Food banks are intended as emergency provision for individuals in immediate, acute financial crisis with little or no money to provide food for themselves or their dependents. They are not intended as a long-term solution to a person’s problems.

To receive assistance, an individual must first be referred to the food bank. Referrals can be made by statutory bodies and voluntary organisations such as doctors, health visitors, social workers, advice centre staff, welfare officers, the police and probation officers. Clients are given a voucher which can be exchanged for a three day supply of food. There is usually a limit to the number of vouchers a person can receive in a given period. This approach is intended to minimise user dependence on the food bank.

Staff at food banks are trained to signpost individuals to other local VCOs, which are better equipped to provide them with advice and/or ongoing support. Most often this would involve referring them to a local independent advice provider who can tackle the source of the problem.

3. Welfare reform and food bank demand

Individuals referred to food banks are typically surviving on a low income and do not have the resources to cope with an unexpected financial crisis. This could be caused by redundancy, family breakdown, domestic abuse or another emergency such as an unexpected bill.

However, in November 2014, jointly-commissioned research by the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), The Church of England, Oxfam GB and the Trussell Trust found that the majority (between half and two-thirds) of people visiting a food bank had done so because of a loss of income linked to problems with welfare benefits.3

Benefits-related reasons for referral to food banks include:

- A severe shortage of income whilst waiting for benefits to be paid and lack of access to/awareness of Short Term Benefits Advances (STBAs)
- Income stopped or dramatically reduced by sanctions
- Income stopped or dramatically reduced due to problems with disability benefits
- Dramatic reduction in income through problems with tax credit payments

In 2013/14, the majority of clients referred to the Southwark Foodbank by Southwark Citizens Advice Bureaux needed assistance due to a loss of income caused by sanctions on benefits and delays caused by mandatory reconsideration of benefits.

4. Southwark Foodbank

Southwark Foodbank is part of the Trussell Trust network of food banks and is run by Pecan, a Southwark-based Christian charity providing advice, training and support to Southwark residents. Each week, food is collected from the public, supermarkets, local churches, local groups and schools. It is then distributed from

Pecan’s headquarters in Peckham as well as at the Kingswood Community Shop, City Hope Church in Bermondsey and Bermondsey Methodist Church. Clients are allowed to receive no more than three food parcels in any six month period.

The food bank employs three paid staff (equivalent to two full-time posts) and relies on volunteers. They work anything from a few hours each month to 5 days per week with up to 75 volunteers giving their time in a month with high demand. The three other distribution centres each have a core team of around five volunteers who help to administer the service. In addition, the service relies on a network of ‘informal volunteers’ who give time each week to organise food collections - for example, among church congregations or in their office. These people might not necessarily describe what they do as volunteering, but the food bank would not operate without their regular commitment.

In 2013-14, Southwark Foodbank provided food for 4,509 individuals (roughly 1.6% of the borough’s total population⁴). This number is expected to decrease slightly in 2014-15, however the number of food parcels given out is expected to remain roughly the same. In 2013-14, the greatest demand came from residents in Nunhead ward (10%), Peckham ward (8%) and Livesey ward (7%).

There is very little additional capacity in the service due to the physical limitations of the building from which it operates, and the amount of heavy lifting that volunteers and staff can reasonably be expected to carry out.

The majority of referrals to Southwark Foodbank come from statutory bodies. These include Jobcentre Plus, NHS mental health services, GPs, social services, My Southwark service points, and schools. Many individuals are also referred to the food bank from the VCS. Advice providers make up the bulk of these referrals (principally from Southwark Citizens Advice Bureaux and Blackfriars Advice Centre), but clients also come to the food bank through community groups such as children’s centres and housing association support groups.

The majority of clients currently visiting Southwark Foodbank do so because of a loss of income related to welfare benefits. Most commonly this is due to sanctions or delays in receiving benefit – for example when an individual is switched from one type of benefit to another. This reflects the findings of the Trussell Trust in its report into food bank use nationally.

The food bank also plays an important function in signposting individuals to a range of local organisations which can provide advice and long-term support. This is typically done in an informal setting, with the food bank worker talking to the client about their situation over a hot drink while their food order is prepared.

In Southwark, most food bank clients who are signposted are referred to local advice providers:

- Southwark Citizens Advice
- Blackfriars Advice Centre
- Cambridge House Law Centre

Other, specialist, organisations include:

- Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers
- Divine Rescue
- Christians against Poverty (debt counselling)
- St Mungo’s
- Salvation Army
- Crisis
- National Careers Service

⁴ Based on the Office for National Statistics Census 2011 population figure of 288,300
5. The introduction of Universal Credit

Although it is difficult to gauge the effect that the introduction of Universal Credit might have on the demand for food banks, it is possible to see the impact that recent welfare reforms have had on the service. In particular, the extension of sanctions on Jobseekers Allowance from one week to a minimum of four weeks, problems with assessments for Employment Support Allowance and delays in receiving decisions for new benefits claims are cited by the Trussell Trust as common reasons for the dramatic rise in food bank use.

Tougher sanctions also mean that those who experience administrative errors or are unable to navigate the system themselves (for example due to a lack of IT skills or access to independent advice) are in greater risk of financial hardship than previously. In many cases, it is the process of reform, rather than the reform itself, that causes the need for an individual to resort to a food bank.

Universal Credit is intended to provide continuity of income for the individual, but sanctions will be tougher. The process of transition to a new system could put those with few or no savings in a more vulnerable position should problems arise.

Food banks and local advice providers

Food banks already have a close working relationship with local advice providers, taking referrals from them and often referring clients on to them. The Trussell Trust makes several suggestions how food banks and advice providers could work to aid prevention and provide better support:

- Better resources for independent advice services allowing increased availability
- Increased links between advice services – if appropriate, some services could be co-located with emergency food aid provision
- The Trussell Trust and other agencies should be supported in their efforts to better signpost and provide support for food bank users and others in the community

6. Alternative sources of crisis support

Alternative sources of crisis support are available and could ease the demand for food banks. These include cash advances, goods and food. However, the systems to administer these grants have undergone considerable change since 2013.

Short-Term Benefits Advances were introduced in April 2013 and replaced Crisis Loans and interim payments. They are available to people claiming any contributory or means-tested benefit (including Universal Credit) who are in financial need due to delays in receiving their benefit or who are awaiting a decision on an award (if the decision maker believes that the claimant is likely to be entitled).

Local Welfare Assistance Schemes (LWAS) replaced Crisis Loans and Community Care Grants, which were part of the Social Fund run by Jobcentre Plus. Each borough is now responsible for its own provision. In Southwark, the Southwark Emergency Support Scheme (SESS) is administered by Community Action Southwark and Pecan. It provides goods such as furniture and appliances to Southwark residents who are in crisis and receiving certain benefits. Clients can also receive food from Southwark Foodbank through SESS.

Research by the Trussell Trust has highlighted a significant lack of awareness among food bank users of other sources of emergency support available to them. In compiling its report Emergency Use Only, it found that only half (or fewer) of the users it spoke to knew they might be eligible for help from the Local Welfare Assistance Scheme and very few of those who might qualify had been awarded Short-term Benefit Advances (STBAs).
7. Beyond food banks

Food banks are intended to provide emergency food provision for individuals in financial crisis. However, a study by Demos estimated that between 50% and 60% of food bank clients are experiencing ‘chronic’ food poverty⁵. Therefore there is increasing interest in creating local schemes that also tackle long-term food poverty as well as emergency provision. These models are sometimes referred to as ‘Food bank plus’ or ‘Community supermarkets’.

A nearby example of this is the Community Shop in West Norwood (Lambeth). This supermarket is stocked using surplus produce from food manufacturers and offers membership to up to 750 local residents who are on means-tested benefits. Membership lasts between 6 and 12 months during which time members are able to purchase discounted food on the condition that they participate in a personal development plan which might include training on interview technique or personal confidence⁶. Similar models also offer guidance on financial planning, cookery and nutrition classes and access to welfare advice. Capital Growth is a London-wide project aiming to increase cultivation in the city and supports many sites in Southwark, particularly at schools.⁷

8. Conclusion

Food banks provide an emergency service for individuals in financial crisis who are unable to feed themselves or their families. They would be unable to function without the volunteers who give their time to administer the service and the individuals, local businesses, schools and churches that donate food. In addition to practical help, food banks provide emotional support, signposting to advice and long-term services and therefore have an important role to play within the VCS.

In recent years there has not only been an increase in demand, but also a change in the function that food banks play in the community. The number of individuals receiving food from a food bank increased from 128,697 in 2011-12 to 913,138 in 2013-14. At the same time, the number and proportion of referrals arising out of problems relating to welfare benefit reform have increased so that they now account for between half and two-thirds of clients visiting food banks. Many clients are referred to the food bank directly from statutory bodies.

Southwark Foodbank (which was established by Pecan in 2009 as Peckham Foodbank) was set up to provide assistance in the case of a one-off financial crisis within a household which can badly affect those living on low incomes and with little or no savings. In 2015 it still provides this crucial support, but the majority of its clients come to it due to a loss of income related to a loss of benefits related to welfare reform.

A change in the sanctions policy of local Job Centres, as well as improved access to Short-term Benefits Advances in the case of delays, could have an immediate and significant impact on demand for food banks. However, there will remain a need - not only for emergency provision but also increased support for those in long-term food poverty.

If you have any questions about anything in this document, or want to discuss food banks in Southwark, please contact Rachel Clarkson, Senior Policy Officer at rachel@casouthwark.org.uk

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⁷ http://www.capitalgrowth.org/