

Advice NI Social Policy Report

Turning the Tide

*The Growth of Food Banks
in Northern Ireland*

December 2013



Introduction

During the past year, the media has been awash with reports about the growth of food banks providing emergency assistance to increasing numbers of people across the UK. The debate has mainly been played out in UK-wide newspapers such as the Guardian¹, attracting considerably less Northern Ireland-specific attention. In October 2012, the Northern Ireland Assembly debated the issue and voted to ‘welcome the positive response’ of food banks to the needs of those affected by the economic downturn, while calling on the Minister for Social Development ‘to support and promote’ their work². Aside from this debate and a few articles in local papers³, the increasing reliance of people in Northern Ireland on emergency food has failed to fully enter into the public consciousness.

Food banks are mainly staffed by volunteers and their contribution should not be underestimated. They fulfil a vital role by supporting people who, for a number of reasons, find themselves without food in the cupboard for themselves and their families. Their work supporting those in need should be praised. However, their existence and growth in numbers raise the important question of why, in a supposedly affluent society, people are left to rely on food parcels or go hungry. In May 2013, a report by Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty responded by labelling food banks ‘a national disgrace’. Based on data collected by the Trussell Trust and their own research, they estimated that more than 500,000 people in the UK are reliant on emergency food. Of this number, up to half had visited a food bank due to having benefit payments delayed, reduced or withdrawn.⁴

This paper aims to explore these issues and provide a basis for further discussion of the growth of food banks in Northern Ireland. It begins by discussing the emerging impact of welfare reform in England and Wales and the rise in demand for support from food banks across the UK. Second, it outlines definitions of food poverty and situates them in the Northern Ireland context. Third, it examines the growth of food banks in Northern Ireland based on preliminary information gathered by Advice NI. Fourth, it looks at the growth of food banks in an international context, focusing on the lessons to be learned from the Canadian experience. Finally, it summarises the main themes emerging from the paper and suggests some discussion points for the way forward.

1. Food banks and Welfare Reform

As the Northern Ireland Assembly continues to debate the Welfare Reform Bill, the impact of the changes introduced in England and Wales is beginning to emerge. A report by Real Life Reform⁵ published in September 2013 marks the first phase in a longitudinal study which will trace the impact of welfare reform on households in the North of England over the next 18 months. Compiled after the introduction of the spare room subsidy (or 'bedroom tax') in April 2013 but before the roll out of Universal Credit in October 2013, the initial report found that people are already struggling to make ends meet. Many were attempting to cope with the changes by cutting back on food and fuel, with 60% of the households studied already spending less than £40 a week on food.

In July 2013, the Trussell Trust reported that their food banks had fed more than 150,000 people between 1st April and 30th June of this year. This is a 200% increase on the same period in the previous year. The sharp rise was linked to the benefit changes introduced in England and Wales from April onwards and the abolition of the discretionary social fund, leaving many local authorities unsure about where to refer clients in a crisis situation. Food banks had also encountered a significant number of people who were sanctioned for illogical reasons or due to administrative errors, and then had the decision overturned on appeal.⁶ During this time they were left with no financial support and had to turn to the food bank for help.

This evidence does not bode well for Northern Ireland, where the full impact of welfare reform is still to come. As highlighted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF)⁷, the move from Disability Living Allowance to Personal Independence Payment and the increased requirement on people with disabilities to seek work will have a greater impact on Northern Ireland than the rest of UK, due to the larger proportion of people with disabilities. 7% of working age people in Northern Ireland are out of work due to disability or sickness compared to 4% in Great Britain. The unemployment levels in NI have been consistently higher than the GB average for many years and approximately 23% of people in NI are claiming a key benefit, compared to 16% in GB. In addition, recent research commissioned by NICVA found that the full impact of welfare reform will remove £750m a year from the Northern Ireland economy and this financial loss per adult is significantly more than in any other part of the UK.⁸

Defining food poverty

'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' (Riches, 1997)

'Inability to access a nutritionally adequate diet and the related impacts on health, culture and social participation' (Friel and Conlon, 2004)

2. What is food poverty?

Unlike the government endorsed measure of fuel poverty⁹ there is no one accepted definition of food poverty. As illustrated by the definitions on the right¹⁰, it is a complex issue which goes beyond the matter of simply having 'enough' to eat¹¹. It may be caused by various and often inter-related factors such as low income, lack of transport to affordable shops, lack of knowledge about healthy eating or lack of skills to prepare healthy meals. It can also involve barriers such as a lack of access to cooking equipment or the inability to pay for electricity¹². It must be thought in terms of being able to access a 'nutritionally adequate' diet rather than simply the absence of hunger¹³

Rising food prices and low incomes are major factors which constrain food choices and leave some people going hungry. In March 2013, research by Kelloggs and the Centre for Economics and Business Research reported that the price of food and non-alcoholic beverages in the UK had risen by 28.2% between 2007 and 2012. The consumer price index (CPI), a measure of inflation which is used to calculate increases in wages and benefits, had risen by just 17.7%.¹⁴ This widening gap between prices and incomes leaves many struggling to purchase the foods which constitute a balanced diet, such as fruit and vegetables. Kelloggs and CEBR found that although expenditure on vegetables increased by 15.3% between 2007 and 2012, the volume consumed dropped by 8%. According to one supermarket price comparison website, the cost of some fruit and vegetables rose by more than 50% between 2011 and 2012.¹⁵

Research by Oxfam GB and Church Action on Poverty (May 2013)

- *Estimates that more than half a million people in the UK are dependent on food banks.*
- *Links the rise of food banks to unemployment, increasing underemployment, falling income and increases in the price of food and fuel.*
- *Finds that the most common reason for people requesting help from food banks is benefit cuts and delays.*
- *Highlights that the failure of National Minimum Wage and benefit levels to keep pace with inflation adds to the strain on low-income families.*

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation defines a household as in poverty 'if the income is less than 60% of the median UK household income for the year in question'. In the three years prior to 2009/2010, 22% of the population in Northern Ireland was considered to be living in poverty, higher than the average for Great Britain.¹⁶ Half of the 120,000 children living in poverty were in households with at least one working parent, highlighting the inadequacy of low wages and casual work to provide a decent standard of living. People are likely to see their food bill as more flexible than payments for gas, electricity or rent and will often pay these bills as a priority over going shopping for food. As the gap between income and the cost of living widens, this may lead to households running out of food before the next wage or benefit payment arrives.

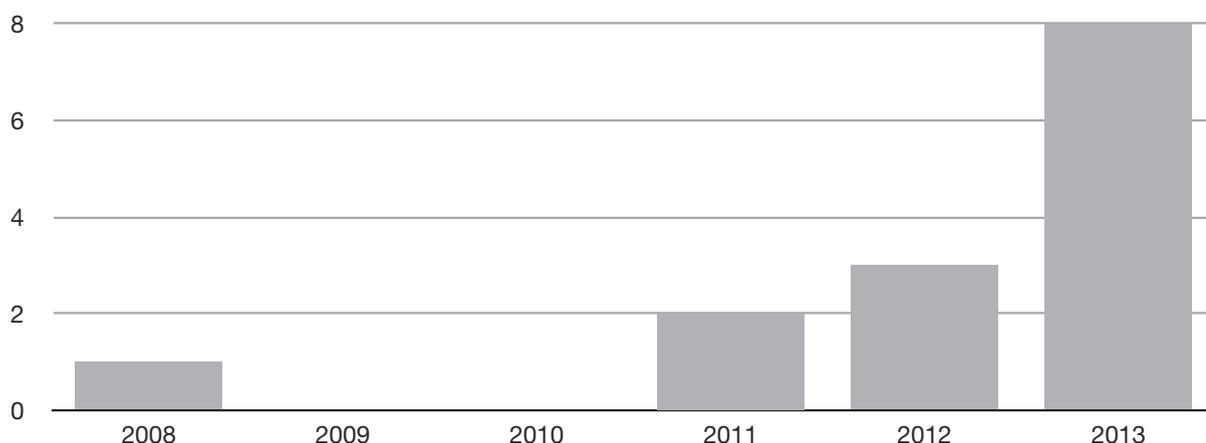
Kelloggs and the CEBR applied the measure for fuel poverty (spending more than 10% of household income on heating the home) to assess food poverty. They found that although no region of the UK spent an average of 10% or more of their household income on food, specific areas could be identified where this is the case. Overall, households in Northern Ireland came the closest of any UK region to spending 10% of their income on food with an average spend of 9.8%. Most shockingly, the report found that the average annual household food bill in

Northern Ireland in 2012 was joint-highest with London at £3,201. This must be set in the context of the fact that the average gross household income in London is 36.6% higher than in NI. Furthermore, the report predicts that the average annual food bill in NI is set to increase by £389 over the next 5 years.¹⁷

3. The growth of food banks in Northern Ireland

Earlier this year, Advice NI member organisations reported seeing an increasing number of people who were seeking advice in a critical financial situation where there was no immediate support available from the social security or tax credit systems¹⁸. As a result, they asked Advice NI to compile a list of food banks and crisis providers such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul which they could use to locate sources of support in their area and facilitate closer links between such organisations and the advice sector. Through gathering this information, we found that the number of food banks in Northern Ireland had increased rapidly during the last year and the demand for their assistance has grown. The support available ranges from established charities and food banks operating on a highly organised model to small-scale projects which respond to need as required.

It is very difficult to calculate the exact number of organisations which are engaged in distributing emergency food and numbers of people which they are providing assistance to. Through carrying out our research it became clear there are a significant number of community organisations and churches who are providing food to those in need as and when it is required. Several of the organisations which we contacted did not want to be included in our resource, as they felt that they were already operating to full capacity. However, we made contact with 16 organisations across Northern Ireland who distribute emergency food and other goods on a regular basis and were happy to be included in the list for our members. 14 of these identify themselves specifically as 'food banks' although they may also be engaged in distributing other goods such as clothes, toiletries, furniture and children's toys.



Bar chart plotting number of food banks against year of opening

Based on these 14 food banks and their dates of opening, the chart illustrates that the number of food banks operating in Northern Ireland has grown rapidly during the past year. Although these organisations are providing an often crucial source of help to those in need, the increasing reliance on the charitable and voluntary sector to provide a safety net for people in financial difficulty is a cause of significant concern. This view was shared by many of the organisers and coordinators of the food banks which we made contact with.

9 of these food banks are linked to the Trussell Trust, an organisation which has helped to set up approximately 374 food banks across the UK to date. Their food banks, usually linked to a church or a community centre, are continuing to open around the UK at a rate of around 3 per week.¹⁹In exchange for a donation of £1500, the Trussell Trust provides groups with the training, resources and support necessary to set up a food bank. The food comes via donations and the food bank establishes partnerships with referral agencies such as doctor's surgeries and social services. The food bank distributes vouchers to these partners which they pass on when they encounter a client in need. The client presents the voucher at the food bank and receives three days of emergency food which can be requested on three consecutive occasions (3 x 3 days of food). Some food banks also run a delivery service for clients who are unable to pick up the food themselves.

Storehouse has been operating since 2008 and now distributes emergency food from two locations in the Belfast and North Down areas. They also provide items such as furniture and clothing, working on the basis of referrals from partnership organisations. Referral agencies are usually asked to provide a letter on headed paper which the client can present at one of Storehouse's drop-in sessions. This should specify what the client needs, such as emergency food, a warm coat, a piece of furniture etc. Clients can receive a maximum of 6 food parcels over a 6 month period. In addition to the food banks operating in connection with more established organisations, independent food banks have also been set up in the Belfast, Greater Belfast and Ballynahinch areas. This list cannot claim to be exhaustive, but merely offers a snapshot of the current situation which is evolving fast.

Figures obtained from the Trussell Trust show that their Northern Ireland food banks fed 1538 people in the first three months of this financial year (April, May and June 2013).²⁰ Figures obtained by Advice NI also found that in June 2013, 3 food banks operating independently from the Trussell Trust model and Storehouse fed 160 people in total. Although these figures are not exhaustive and more extensive data gathering is required, they show that food banks are supporting significant numbers of people who require help for a wide range of reasons. In line with the evidence from the rest of UK, food bank coordinators reported that many of those visiting food banks had experienced benefit delays.

As one food bank coordinator explained:

"One of the main issues for people is the delay in benefits being processed, we find they are having to wait for a least 8 weeks plus before they receive any money."

A benefits adviser explained that the cost of phone calls to social security benefit offices were a significant issue for clients and in addition she often had to refer clients to food banks because their benefits had stopped due to administrative problems:

"When someone loses an appeal for ESA the notification is not immediately processed, so they cannot sign onto JSA or ESA as the claim is still live. It normally stops 4 to 5 weeks after and

sometimes they are not notified. They then make their fresh claim which can take 2 weeks plus to process, so during that time they might have no income at all. I have encountered people who have had their ESA appeal go ahead without notification. They get taken off ESA and their money stops without warning. They then have to sign on to JSA or ESA as a fresh claim which again can take time to process."

Low income, debt, sickness, homelessness, domestic violence and being turned down for a crisis loan were also given as reasons for requesting help. In addition, one food bank coordinator observed that some clients had mental health issues and addictions which could result in an inability to budget. A benefits adviser explained that she had also referred clients to food banks who had run out of money due to debts owed to payday loans companies and illegal lenders. A recent discussion paper by the Centre for Economic Empowerment at NICVA and Advice NI outlines the rise in reliance on payday loans and how the inability to pay back the loans at extremely high rates of interest can lead to a vicious circle of more borrowing and spiralling debt.²¹ Data collected by Christians Against Poverty and released in October 2013 showed that 68% of their clients who had taken out a payday loan were not asked about their outgoings and 19% were not asked if they had a job. The most reported reasons for taking out a payday loan were to pay the rent/mortgage, pay gas or electricity bills and to pay for food.²²

4. The International Context

The Right to an Adequate Diet is enshrined in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The UK has signed and ratified this covenant, obliging it *'to recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing'*.²³ Speaking at a conference in London earlier this year, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food expressed concern over the rise of food banks in the UK and highlighted the UK government's responsibility *'not to leave the poorest behind'*.²⁴

Although the growth of food banks in the UK is a relatively new phenomenon, food bank networks have been operating in North America for decades.²⁵ Food Banks Canada²⁶ is the national charitable organisation representing and supporting the food bank community across Canada. The membership and their respective agencies serve approximately 85% of people accessing essential food programs nationwide. They strive to meet the short-term need for food, and find long-term solutions to hunger in order to reduce the need for food banks and emergency food services in Canada. The network of over 500 food banks and 3,000 agencies help the hundreds of thousands of Canadians who, each month, come to food banks for help.

Food Banks Canada offer food to those who need it, but they also provide much more. Support includes community kitchens and gardens to help build social networks; education and training to help people get the skills they need to compete in the labour market; homeless shelters and supportive housing, child care programs and health care initiatives for vulnerable populations. Perhaps most importantly, the organisation shines a light on the unacceptable problem of hunger in Canada. More than 800,000 people go to food banks for help each and every month in Canada, and 37% of those helped are children. Food Banks Canada propose policies that will get at the root causes of hunger and poverty, and reduce the need for food banks.

Despite the efforts of such organisations to address food poverty over the longer term, the number of Canadians using food banks is still rising and one group of volunteers has decided that enough is enough. Calling themselves 'Freedom 90', they campaign for adequate levels of wages and social security benefits so that demand for food banks declines and emergency food organisations eventually cease to exist. Many of them began volunteering in Canada's food banks more than 20 years ago when they viewed the service as a short-term measure, prompted by the onset of deep recession following a bust in the oil industry.²⁷ Having seen the problem of food poverty escalate and the demand for food banks and emergency meal services grow, they are calling for real action to address the root of the problem and make the existence of food banks unnecessary.²⁸

Nick Saul, CEO of Community Food Centres Canada, has been observing the growth of food banks in the UK with increasing unease.²⁹ Writing in the Guardian, he highlights that despite their origins in Canada as a short-term stopgap for helping those in need, they have quickly become institutionalised with little long-term effect on eradicating the causes of hunger and poverty. One comment in particular hits home:

"By making people think the problem is dealt with – the hungry fed – they let us and our governments off the hook for finding real economic and social policy-based solutions to this growing problem".

Graham Riches, a Canadian academic who has written widely on issues of food security and social policy, refers to food banks as 'the voluntary back-up to a public safety net which has fallen apart'.³⁰ His research found that although food banks went some way towards decreasing the level of food deprivation in the households studied, they did not stop people from going hungry. Crucially, he highlights that charity cannot provide a solution to the problem of food poverty other than in 'ad hoc and socially unacceptable' ways. Although the food banks aimed to treat their clients with dignity and refer them to services which can offer more long-term help, people still spoke of their 'shame and embarrassment' at having to visit a food bank for the first time.

As foodbanks become accepted as a voluntary arm of the social safety net, demand for their services is likely to increase beyond levels that it is possible for a voluntary organisation to meet. As Riches argues, food banks alone cannot solve the problem of food poverty, but they can play a part in advancing a political response. The need for strategic action in the UK has also been highlighted by Chris Mould, Executive Chairman of the Trussell Trust, who called for an official government inquiry into the reasons why people are forced to use food banks as a means of survival. Speaking on World Food Day (16th October 2013), he was supported by the director of Oxfam's UK Poverty Programme in pressing David Cameron to address the problem.³¹ As Northern Ireland prepares for the impact of changes to the social security system and the number of food banks continues to grow, the need for a political response to this issue is becoming more pressing than ever.

5. Discussion points for the way forward

The purpose of this Briefing Paper is to highlight the growing phenomenon of food banks in Northern Ireland. Advice NI believes that although food banks are providing an often crucial source of help to those in immediate need, the increasing reliance on the charitable and voluntary sector to provide food is a cause of significant concern. In the words of a food bank coordinator:

“There is a need for food banks, people do need help. Hoping it will go away won’t work. More and more people are struggling and need help”.

Discussion Points:

1. There should be quantitative and qualitative longitudinal research conducted to ascertain why people in Northern Ireland find themselves without sufficient food to feed themselves or their children;
2. There should be a co-ordinated effort made to ‘join-up’ voluntary sector services and statutory services with the food bank services to ensure that people who find themselves in immediate need of food have access to all other help they need to improve their situation;
3. Systemic issues that may contribute towards food poverty should be identified and addressed or mitigated (for example delays in the processing of social security benefits & tax credits, income adequacy for those on benefits and in low paid work);
4. Given the expected disproportionate impact of welfare reform in Northern Ireland, Advice NI believes that the NI Assembly should introduce a clause into the Welfare Reform Bill to place on a statutory footing the ‘right to independent advice’ for those who will be affected by the proposed changes;
5. There should be a consensus to address the root causes of food poverty, with a clear goal to ultimately reduce the numbers of people who find themselves in the position of having to turn to food banks for help; thereby ensuring that the food bank phenomenon is not institutionalised across Northern Ireland;

Advice NI would welcome the opportunity to engage with anyone who is interested in this matter. Together we can ‘turn the tide’.

Advice NI would like to thank all of the food bank coordinators and Advice NI member organisations who contributed their views to this paper. Their time and willingness to participate is greatly appreciated.

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