

Food Bank Questionnaire and Deep Dive Interviews

22 July 2021

Background

Food availability and quality is a wider determinant of health. Food banks provide a mechanism to feed people in poverty who would otherwise not have enough to eat. In the absence of detailed information on food banks in Cheshire East (CE), this piece of work was initiated to provide data which could inform a Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) on the topic.

Aim

To provide quantitative and qualitative data on the sustainability and connectivity of food banks providing targeted support to residents of CE of all ages.

Objectives

- To survey food banks in CE to understand their number, distribution and characteristics
- To interview food bank representatives in CE to understand their operation, changes in provision and sustainability of provision.

Definition of a food bank

There is no universally accepted definition of what a food bank is in England. In this project, the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) definition is used: “a venue which regularly gives out emergency food parcels at least once a week.”

Methods

An initial mapping exercise conducted by CESAP contacted a range of community food providers in CE and gathered contact details and information on the services provided. This mapping exercise took place in January 2021 and was used to generate a sampling frame of food banks in CE.

Quantitative data was collected using a desktop questionnaire. The questionnaire was online and was constructed using SurveyMonkey. This was distributed to food bank providers using snowball sampling. Questions asked about the characteristics of the foodbank, the services offered, funding, COVID-19 impacts, number of people supported, reasons for referral and demographics of users. The survey was distributed on the 29th April 2021 and open for responses until the 24th May 2021.

Qualitative data was collected using semi-structured interviews with food bank operators. Representatives from four foodbanks were interviewed, these were chosen as a purposive sample, based on geography and size of the food bank. Interviews were transcribed and text analysed using thematic analysis.

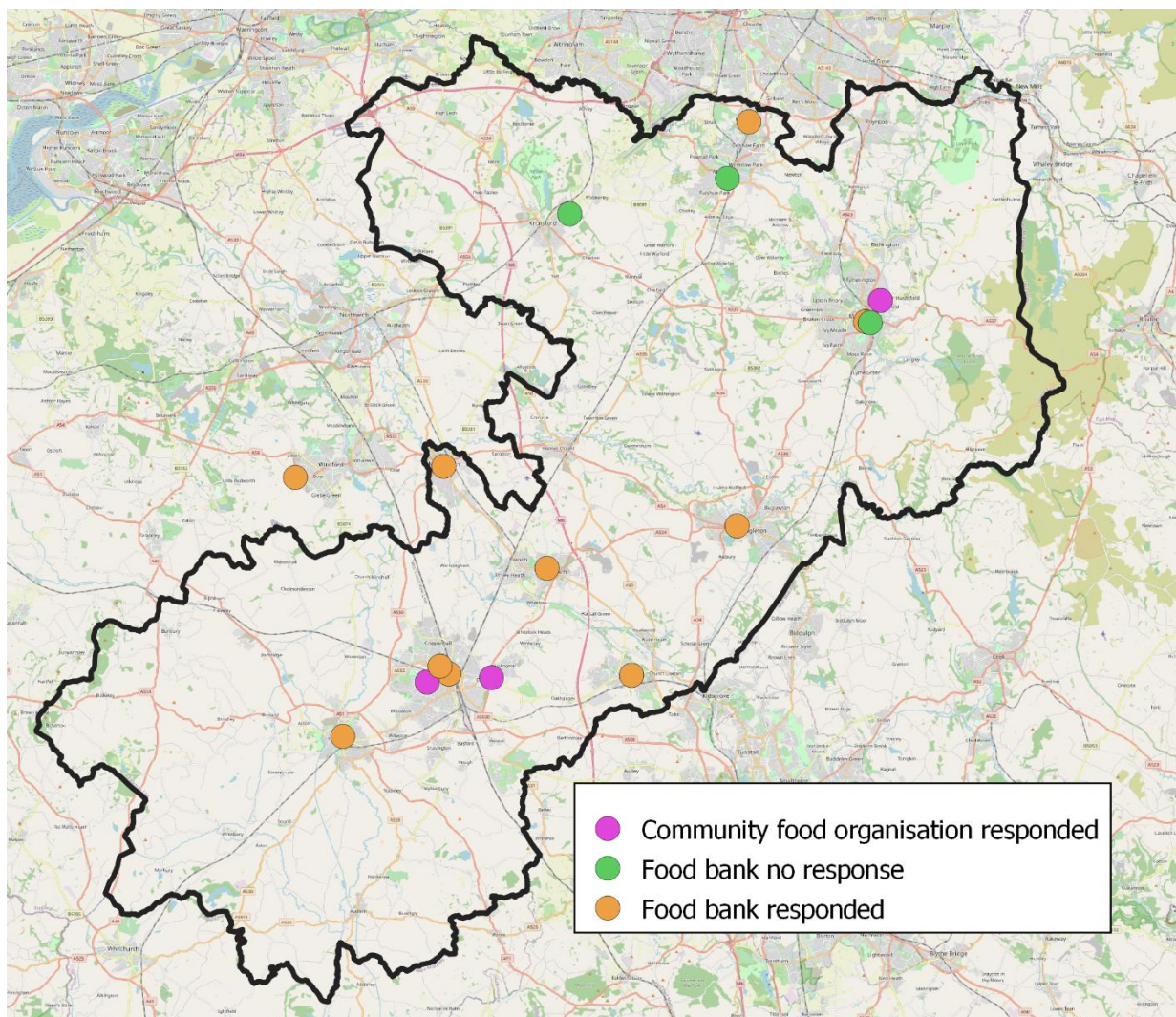
Cheshire East Social Action Partnership (CESAP) undertook data collection with service providers, with the work being co-ordinated with Cheshire East Council public health team.

Results

The mapping exercise identified 12 food banks (using the IFAN definition). It also identified a range of community food organisations which provided services such as: free hot food at a café, delivered prepared meals, cookery teaching, and subsidised food shopping.

Quantitative

The questionnaire was completed by 13 organisations; 9 of which met the IFAN food bank definition. The geographical distribution of these organisations, and the three food banks who didn't respond to the questionnaire, is shown in the map below.



The average duration of operation for these organisations was 7.5 years, with a range between 1 year and 15 years. Some of these organisations operated from multiple sites, with a central hub. While all food banks gave out food parcels (with some delivering during COVID-19), four

organisations ran drop-in cafés and one delivered ready meals. Many organisations had associations with churches.

Most food banks relied on local community donations of food and money, with some donations from businesses such as supermarkets. Four of the 13 food banks reported that their primary funding source was grants from CE Council, these grants were reported as secondary fundraising sources by three further food banks.

In the previous month, the 13 food banks reported distributing food to 3,228 people in CE. The average number of people was 269, with a range from 10 to 600. It was not possible to accurately calculate the quantity of food provided, as parcels were of different sizes and there was no way of consistently measuring. All food banks reported an increase in demand and the numbers requiring support during the COVID-19 pandemic, and also noted the challenges of staffing their services with older volunteers who needed to isolate.

In addition to the questionnaire results, the Trussell Trust publish data on a local authority basis and currently have 4 distribution centres serving CE. They reported distributing 4,396 parcels in financial year 2019/20, increasing 110% to 9,232 in financial year 2020/21.

There were a wide range of referring agencies and bodies, including Jobcentre Plus, Citizens Advice, CE Council service, housing associations, schools and general practitioners. Primary reasons for using the food bank were low income, delays in benefit claims (usually Universal Credit) and mental health issues. Several food banks did not collect data on the sex of service users, but of those that did, most found that 50% were female, with one site reporting 90% of users were male. Only eight of the 13 reported age data, and this related to the percentage of service users aged over 65. This varied from 0.75% to 70%, with the median percentage being 6%

Qualitative

A qualitative analysis of the “deep dive” interviews focused on the following key themes: reasons for people using food banks, the impact of COVID-19, collaboration between food banks, referrals to food banks and sustainability of food banks.

Why people use food banks

A common understanding among participants was that food poverty is not a stand-alone factor in people’s lives – it is ‘poverty’ of many levels. Their experience was that people who approach the food bank have multiple complex needs which can cascade and lead to destitution. They reported that while some have lost jobs, face delays in accessing Universal Credit; others come from a growing number of people in work with very low incomes, with an unexpected bill or financial commitment leaving them without enough money to buy sufficient food, or making a choice between eating and heating their homes.

Within this setting, all food bank interviewed reported increasing demands to feed children. Although schools are a major referrer to these food banks, they reported confusion caused by Free School Meals (which is only open to children classified as Pupil Premium) and the Foodbank Voucher which is open to anyone facing food poverty. There did not appear to be a corresponding increase in demand from older people, something reflected in the quantitative questionnaire results.

A common feeling among participants was that there is still significant stigma and shame attached to people asking for help, particularly when it comes to food and people being able to feed their families. This stigma can be a barrier to people approaching a food bank for help, particularly for the first time. Participants from the food banks described the substantial efforts they make to help people retain their dignity and reduce the stigma associated with accessing their support.

Impact of COVID-19 on food bank usage

All participants reported that their food banks had a “huge” increase in demand due to COVID-19, with challenges in meeting this demand due to older volunteers self-isolating. Their experience was that this demand was linked with the economic consequences of lockdowns, with people losing jobs and earnings in furlough. They conveyed the way that this increase in demand has not been constant during the pandemic, but has fluctuated in tandem with the lockdown, compounded with the winter increase in fuel bills.

Collaboration between foodbanks

Of the four foodbanks which participated in this deep dive interview process, two were independent and two were associated with the Trussell Trust. Those which were associated with the Trussell Trust were able to access a range of resources and organisational support. However, both these and the independent food banks appeared to be networking well together and sharing resources. They reported ad hoc negotiation and balancing of supplies with food banks in other areas, helping to eliminate waste and even out excess supply or remedy shortages of particular food types.

Referrals to food banks

From discussions with participants, it was clear that while none of the food banks accept self-referrals, if someone turns up to the food bank in need, they will be given a food parcel to get them through that immediate crisis. The individual is then encouraged to have dialogue with a referring agency who can understand their personal circumstances and build support for them, give wider advice and guidance on housing, eligibility for benefits etc. The referring organisation will then issue a food voucher which can then be picked up from a food bank of choice. All food banks operate a booking system for appointments, so that food parcels can be collected safely.

The experience of some participants was that some people have learnt to navigate the system and have received referrals from multiple organisations so that they can have several food vouchers at once. This can be difficult to identify by each individual food bank and requires collaboration and cross-dialogue between food banks, particularly in making decisions locally about who the lead ‘referring’ organisation should be.

Participants related how greater understanding of geography and logistics is needed for some referring organisations as rural poverty and access to affordable transport can be an issue. For some people the next nearest food bank can be in another county e.g. Alsager Foodbank and Market Drayton in Shropshire, or for Bollington and Poynton, the nearest is Stockport.

There were described concentrations of demand in particular area, which did not necessarily align with the food banks nearest those requesting help. For example, requests for food bank support in Macclesfield appear on the radar of several food banks, including Hope Central (Handforth and North East Cheshire) and Mid Cheshire Foodbank. The reason why referrers are not referring local people in need directly to food organisations in Macclesfield is unknown, and leads to challenges in the delivery of support to these people.

Sustainability of current food bank operations

The experience of participants was that the majority of food banks in CE are funded by community fundraising events, but also through individual, personal, business donations e.g. supermarkets, which includes money and food. A smaller number of food banks have secured grant funding, for example from CE Council during the COVID-19 pandemic, but these organisations were not believed to be dependent on grants, but rather had tapped into these resources to meet increased COVID-19 demand in their area.

Conclusion

Previously, there was little available information on the number, distribution and usage of food banks in CE. This analysis provides crucial quantitative and qualitative data on food banks, which would be required for a future JSNA section on this topic. This information can then be combined with wider socio-economic data as part of the SOP and quality assurance steps that go into producing a JSNA section.