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Household Food Security in the UK: A Review of Food Aid

Executive Summary

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Background to this Report

This report presents findings from a Rapid Evidence Assessment undertaken from February and March 2013. The aim of the research was to arrive at a better understanding of the 'food aid' landscape in the UK and the 'at risk' individuals who access such provision, as well as the means and drivers for seeking access. The research used a standardized methodology for a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) of existing published empirical literature. To supplement the REA, other evidence was obtained through a 'call for evidence', non-governmental sources and a small amount of rapid primary research. This non-REA evidence was used where it constituted the best available evidence, with its limitations explicitly acknowledged in the report. In the short timescale available, it was not feasible to subject all non-REA evidence to detailed examination of its methodological rigour and quality (such as that used by NICE in developing public health guidance). However, this evidence offers an important starting point for future research, given the limited nature of existing published empirical research on this topic in the UK and the short timescale for the research underpinning this report.

Background to the Research

This research comes at a crucial time, both for those involved in the provision of 'food aid' in the UK, and for the increasing number of households and individuals asking for help. The growth of The Trussell Trust Foodbank Network in particular has raised the profile of the problems to which such initiatives are emerging as a response. Policy makers, along with the media and the wider public, are now

engaging with some of the questions such initiatives raise, around contemporary experiences of household food insecurity, and the impact of the receipt of food assistance.

Aims and Parameters of the Research

The aim of the research was, through a Rapid Evidence Assessment of existing material, complemented by limited primary research, to come to a better understanding of the 'food aid' landscape in the UK and the 'at risk' individuals who access this provision, how they do so, and why. An important aspect of the review was to scope the UK evidence base; to highlight where existing evidence was present and identify any gaps which could be filled by further research. The research addresses key questions of who makes use of 'food aid' and why; what types of 'food aid' are available and whether there are trends in their use; the impact of 'food aid' provision on its recipients and local communities; and some of the key benefits and drawbacks of different types of 'food aid' provision.

'Food aid' was employed as an umbrella term encompassing a range of large-scale and small local activities aiming to help people meet food needs, often on a short-term basis during crisis or immediate difficulty; more broadly they contribute to relieving symptoms of household or individual-level food insecurity and poverty. The research elaborates a clear typology of such activities and explores their contribution to the issues concerned. From this typology, the kinds of food aid which were included in this research were: food banks; food provided as part of community care (for example 'Meals on Wheels'); food stamps or vouchers; building-based food provision (where food is prepared and eaten onsite); and non-building based provision (where food is taken away for consumption, for example a 'soup run').

The research was also framed by Defra's responsibilities for food security, with particular focus on household level experiences. Household food security is assured when members are confident of having economic and physical access to sufficient, acceptable food for a healthy life. This framing of food security, used for the purposes of this research, maintains a focus on both the supply and availability of food at affordable prices as well as on factors affecting demand such as the ability of

low-income households to afford food, household demographics, and local economic and social conditions.

In the light of much current interest in the topic, it should now be noted the research was not asked specifically to address the impact of public policies on social security in the UK. Systems of social security were undergoing reform during the period of the study, which sometimes made it difficult to interpret some of the research results reported by food aid providers and referral organisations.

Methods

The project drew on a range of different forms of evidence and involved five key areas of work. In the first phase a literature 'scoping' was undertaken; this was followed in the second phase by a systematic Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) based on papers which passed credibility assessment, enhanced by a wider review of relevant literature. In order to strengthen this evidence review, an expert workshop (with 19 participants) was held, and a select number of follow-up interviews (five) carried out to provide insight and on-going experience to supplement the written evidence base.

Two elements of primary research were carried out: a rapid, internet-based search for evidence of small-scale food aid initiatives (loosely termed a 'mapping' exercise) and several short empirical case studies of food aid projects. These case studies, taken from the UK and beyond, provided more nuanced insight into how different types of initiatives are working, drawing on experiences of providing food aid and practitioners' views of future prospects and possibilities (from interviews with eight project managers and three food aid recipients).

The research was undertaken within a short timescale of nine weeks and therefore provides a 'snapshot' of the evidence available. In light of the lack of UK-based evidence, the REA drew largely on research from other country-contexts, notably the United States, Canada and Germany. In using this resource, we acknowledge differences in histories and national social policy regimes and welfare systems, as well as the established acceptability of giving food help to households in need. There

was UK evidence within the wider literature review; this included some academic peer reviewed papers, as well as surveys carried out by national charities and data reported by food aid organisations themselves. The latter were subjected to informal assessment of their methodological rigour, as far as was possible in the time available. The findings which draw on evidence from the Expert Workshop and case studies are limited by the short time-scale under which these were done, but they provide valuable insights for understanding the emerging food aid landscape.

Key findings

The evidence collected spoke unevenly across the main areas of interest (see table below), and principally addressed questions relating to users of food aid and trends in provision (questions 1 and 2 below). Very little research is available to provide evidence or informed comment on the benefits and drawbacks of different types of food aid provision (question 3), or on alternative ways of addressing household food insecurity (question 4). The evidence also spoke unevenly across different food aid types, with an emphasis on food bank schemes (which give food parcels to households in established need). Much less systematic evidence was available about community outreach or building and non-building based provision.

Research Questions	Evidence Base	Evidence Gaps
1) How do people become food aid users in the UK; what is their journey through the food aid system; and what are the socio-economic implications for these individuals?	Three key themes emerged: the relationship between receipt of food aid and severity of household food insecurity; the place of food aid within broader strategies households employ when trying to manage experiences of household food insecurity; outcomes of food aid.	As anticipated, most of the existing academic literature related to experiences of other countries (in particular the United States and Canada).
2) What are the current trends in provision of food aid; what are the different models available; and what are the socio-economic drivers behind certain models emerging over others?	Evidence was available on general trends in food aid provision and the importance of socio-economic context, as well as dimensions such as operational diversity, peaks in uptake and gaps in provision.	Beyond public information from national charities (such as The Trussell Trust Foodbank Network) there is little evidence of a 'food aid system' as such within the UK, as has emerged in some other countries with a longer history of charitable or state provision. Independent local initiatives in the UK are currently hard to capture in data monitoring or research.
3) Reflecting on the analysis	Limited evidence was available	There is very little evaluative

from questions 1 and 2 and drawing on evidence from other countries, what are the benefits and drawbacks of different models of food aid provision in the UK?

to inform this question, but reflections can be drawn on the importance of other, non-food, support on offer; co-ordination between providers and other local agencies; the role of food system surpluses; and questions of vulnerability and inefficiency of food aid.

research available. Furthermore, given the highly localised nature of this provision, gaining insights into working practices across food aid providers is challenging.

4) How do the research findings inform household food security policy across the 'triangle of change' (Government, business and civil society) in the UK?

Reflecting on the findings, two key themes were identified in response to this question: how the research informs understandings of how households try to manage experiences of food insecurity; and key implications for those in the 'triangle of change' (business, government and civil society) looking to 'respond' to household food insecurity.

More evidence is required over strategies households are employing to try and manage experiences of food insecurity in the current UK economic and policy context. There is also no effective monitoring of household food security..

Headline findings from the research, drawn from across the evidence base, are presented below. In each case, the REA findings are clearly delineated. More detailed exploration of these themes and analysis can be found in the main report.

Research Question 1: Food Aid Users

The key finding on how people become food aid users in the UK is that households employ multiple strategies to try and cope with experiences of food insecurity, of which turning to food aid initiatives may only be one.

The REA research shows that whilst uptake of food aid increases with the severity of household food insecurity, the most food insecure households do not always turn to food aid. For instance, in Canada, reasons given for households not turning to formal food aid initiatives include: perceptions that they were not in extreme need or that the assistance would be insufficient or inadequate; that the experience was degrading or shameful; and lack of access to, or information about, food aid provision systems (see Loopstra and Tarasuk 2012; Engler-Stringer and Berenbaum 2007).

Furthermore, the evidence suggests that turning to food aid is a strategy of last resort. When households have exhausted all other strategies (cutting back and changing eating and shopping habits, juggling budgets, turning to family and friends)

and do finally turn to food aid, they will draw on as much assistance as possible (both food and non-food related support).

At the time of the research there was no systematic peer-reviewed evidence from the UK on the reasons or immediate circumstances leading people to seek food aid (i.e. which could be included in the REA). However, national charities and food aid providers were reporting their own research and experiences, largely on usage of food banks. The factors identified by these organisations as important drivers leading people to seek food aid include both immediate problems which had led to sudden reduction in household income (two examples often cited by these organisations were job losses and problems associated with social security payments), and on-going, underpinning circumstances (such as continual low household income and indebtedness) which can no longer support purchase of sufficient food to meet household needs. There is both longstanding and recent UK evidence from peer reviewed research relating to experiences of food insecurity more broadly, that many food insecure households struggle to manage food needs, and adopt a variety of strategies to try and avoid having to ask for food help (for example Dowler et al 2001; Hitchman et al 2002; Dowler et al 2011; Goode 2012; Kneafsey et al 2013).

When the food provided and the means of distribution are adequate, food aid may provide immediate relief from the symptoms of food insecurity for household members. However, the evidence suggests that food aid has a limited impact on overall household food security status.

Research Question 2: Trends in Food Aid Provision

There are some key organisational models – for example The Trussell Trust Foodbank¹ – which have come to particular prominence in the UK in public knowledge and actual practice. However, on the basis of the REA and literature review, mapping and case study research undertaken the UK, the food aid landscape appears to be both diverse and difficult to document. In particular, there

¹ Note: ‘foodbank’ refers to The Trussell Trust franchise project, ‘food bank’ refers to the wider category of food aid projects.

are a number of independent initiatives, which offer different types of food aid, but their existence and extent of reach can be hard to capture. It is impossible at present to give an accurate estimate of the numbers of people fed by food aid providers in the UK, in total or on a regular basis (monthly or annually).

International evidence from the United States and Europe suggests that demand for food aid may peak at particular times. In the US one paper found demand for food aid tended to peak towards the end of any given month (Berner and O'Brien 2004), and a paper from Berlin, Germany, found that demand was higher there in general during winter months.

The REA evidence suggests that broader socio-economic shifts that have adverse impact on household food security are important pointers to understanding trends in the growth of food aid provision and its demand. Social policy contexts are different in the United States, Canada and other parts of Europe, so that drawing direct comparisons for the UK is difficult. A clear important pattern is that reductions in governmental food aid lead to increased uptake of non-governmental food aid, and that systematic government provided food assistance delivered measurable positive effects on household food security, while informal food assistance did not.

There is no systematic evidence on drivers of food aid use in the UK, but available information suggests that factors which have impact on household incomes and financial capacity are important. In terms of models of operation, the UK case study research revealed significant operational diversity both in terms of the range of existing food aid types and the varying ways in which food aid projects of the same type were run. There are many different patterns of food provision organization in the UK, which partly reflects different aims and/or levels of operation. Some highly structured systems run through franchise or networks, while others are managed more independently. Furthermore, some organisations running food aid projects were also running other food initiatives (such as community cafés, cook-and-eat clubs, purchase co-operatives) at the same time.

UK-based (non-REA) research, supported by findings from the project case studies, showed that other formal and informal (non-food) support was often provided by food aid organisations, who regarded this work as integral to their offering. This support included emotional help, other practical services and signposting to help elsewhere.

The wider literature review and expert workshop questioned the role of ‘surplus food redistribution’ as a key source of food for food aid initiatives (as opposed to corporate or individual/community donations). Some workshop participants raised concerns about the appropriateness of using ‘that which the supermarkets cannot sell’, notwithstanding any moral obligation to use food which would otherwise be put in landfill, to meet people’s needs, and also questioned the intertwining of corporate interests with help for those in need, particularly in terms of what was seen as the entrenchment of charity based provision.

Research Question 3: ‘Best Practice’ – benefits and drawbacks of different models of food aid provision in the UK

There is insufficient systematic evidence in the UK to establish models of best-practice, not least because aims and objectives vary between providers and systems. Nevertheless, a key finding from the case studies is that providers regard the non-food support they are able to offer through food aid provision systems or projects as a particularly important aspect of what they do.

Secondly, the case study evidence showed that co-ordination both between different food aid providers, and between food aid providers and other agencies, was seen as key to their functioning and success.

Finally, the wider literature review highlighted two further important issues: the vulnerability of food aid provision in being able to meet existing or rising demand, when dependent on donations and volunteers; and the appropriateness and value of using volunteer energy and skills on this kind of activity (collecting, sorting and distributing food for people’s immediate needs).

Research Question 4: Household Food Security Policy Across the ‘Triangle of Change’ (Government, business and civil society)

There is considerable evidence in the international literature on effective monitoring of levels of household food insecurity and food aid trends, which contrasts with the paucity of similar literature in the UK. This lack also emerged in the expert

workshop. These sources emphasised the need to address both the immediate situations which lead people to seek food aid, and the underlying social and economic circumstances which are limiting access to food more generally. The current economic and policy context means increasing numbers of households are having to deal with changes in circumstances which are potentially having negative impact on their food security in the immediate (and possibly longer) term. Some see it as appropriate for local groups to meet short-term food needs through temporary, non-governmental provision, but the evidence from international food security research suggests this is likely to be of limited effectiveness (Daponte et al 2004; Yu et al; 2010; also Loopstra and Tarasuk 2012). A broader approach to sustaining food access, which takes account of longer-term and underlying dimensions to household food insecurity is needed.

The international literature evidence highlights that those looking to monitor and respond to household food insecurity in the UK, from across government (at different levels), business and civil society, should focus on the root causes of this insecurity, rather than on numbers claiming food aid, which are unreliable indicators of problems. The North American international literature also shows that growing complexity of large-scale non-governmental food aid systems, and their increasing social acceptance as an appropriate way to deal with problems of food access, contribute to de-politicising household level food insecurity (Poppendieck, 1998; Riches 2011).

Nevertheless, the international evidence also suggests that civil society, which is where most food aid providers are located, can have an important and constructive role to play in terms of advocacy and lobbying, and in giving a voice to those who experience household food insecurity (Poppendieck 1998; Riches 2002).

Conclusions of the research

The research has generated a number of useful insights at a critical time in an emergent food aid landscape in the UK. It has not been able to provide in-depth responses to all the research sub-questions². However, it has provided a rapid

² See Appendix A.4 of full project report.

picture of the diversity of work currently being done, in the UK and elsewhere; a detailed snapshot of the research evidence base available; and has enabled key reflections on trends and trajectories in food aid provision and outcomes.

Although there is a general lack of systematic UK evidence on the drivers of food aid use and trends in the UK, several key conclusions can be drawn from the research:

1. Those providing food aid, formally and informally, are consistently reporting an increase in demand, both in terms of new requests for help, and in terms of those who have been helped continuing to ask for food. Critical factors driving these actions are described (by many food aid providers) in terms of 'crises' in a range of circumstances, but particularly household income, and often underpinned by on-going problems of low income, rising food (and other) costs and increasing indebtedness. This growing demand may have contributed to more food aid being provided, through existing and new structures (both networked and independent). There is no systematic evidence on the impact of increased supply and hypotheses of its potential effects are not based on robust evidence.
2. Households employ multiple strategies for trying to deal with food insecurity; these may, or may not, include accessing temporary food aid. International evidence is that it is only after other main strategies have been employed (including changes to shopping and eating habits, cutting back on other outgoings, and turning to family and friends for help) that the most food insecure households may turn to food aid. Even then, there are many reasons why some households do not use food aid (Bhattatai et al 2005; Loopstra and Tarasuk 2012; Yu et al 2010; Aluwalia et al 1998; Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk 2009 among others). International research findings on household behaviour under financial pressure are a useful starting point for understanding in the UK.
3. The wider literature review and UK case study research suggests that where provision is adequate, appropriate and tailored to the needs of users, food aid may be able to relieve short-term symptoms of food insecurity (Poppendieck 1994). The literature also indicates that, whether short-term or more sustained, food aid does not address the underlying causes of household food insecurity.
4. The totality of the evidence consulted for this report indicates that those involved in food security policy and other responses – from across government, business and civil society – require an ongoing focus on both the short and long-term

causes of household food insecurity to achieve the best outcomes, even in the face of an increasingly high profile food aid landscape.