

Food banks in England's Small Towns in 2016 (2013 Survey Revisited)

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Introduction

This note summarizes the results of a survey designed to find out how many small country towns in England have food banks. The survey, which was sent to town clerks, is essentially a repeat of a similar survey conducted in 2013, the results of which were reported in the Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance (Morris 2014). The data gathered suggest that the number of food banks in small towns is growing. The implications of this for rural areas are not clear, but it is safe to infer that the long standing problems associated with rural disadvantage will be exacerbated by this trend.

Background

According to a note prepared by the House of Commons library (Downing *et al.* 2013), "*Food bank use has been increasing steadily since 2005. In the period April-September 2013 alone, over 350,000 people received food from Trussell Trust food banks – triple the number helped in the same period in 2012.*" In the year 2014-2015 The Trussell Trust gave out more than one million three-day food parcels, citing delays to benefit payments and low income as the two main reasons people gave for needing the Trust's help (Trussell Trust 2015). These headline figures have been criticised, however, for highlighting the number of vouchers issued, rather than the – lower – number of unique users (Smith 2015).

The Trust's statistics for 2014-2016 are summarized in the Appendix.

Concern has also been expressed about the Trust's statistics by Frank Field, MP, chair of the British All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Hunger, because, although it, "*... does the most valiant work ... it needs to always register the fact that it probably presents data for less than half of all the organisations helping to feed the hungry. And when it does present the facts it is crucial that the Trust recognises and spells out clearly the complications and intricacies that lay behind them.*" (Forsey 2016 p4).

The lack of clarity around facts adds to the contested nature of the debate. For example, John Glenn, the Conservative MP for Salisbury, notes:

"That the headline food parcels figure the Trussell Trust reports this year is broadly similar to last year shows there is still more

work to be done – but nonetheless this is welcome progress from the substantial increases we were seeing just two years ago. It is particularly welcome that the average number of referrals has fallen significantly this year.” (Glenn 2016).

Not surprisingly, others paint a different picture:

“Last week, the Trussell Trust released its latest statistics on food bank use. Yet again, the take-up of charity food aid has increased, with more than 1.1 million people, including 415,866 children, receiving emergency food supplies in the past year.” (Garthwaite 2016).

Overall, there is little in the way of definitive data about food bank use and food insecurity more generally. Consequently there has been much unavoidably ill-informed debate about, for example, whether the increased number of food banks is driving demand for food, or, alternatively, if the demand (need) for food is driving the increase in the growth in food bank numbers. Relatively recent research suggests that the latter cause is more likely, as, *“local authorities with greater rates of sanctions and austerity are experiencing greater rates of people seeking emergency food assistance.”*, whilst noting that there remains, *“... a clear need to develop better measures of food insecurity and the provision of emergency food that will capture the full extent of the problem in the UK.”* (Loopstra et al. 2015).

Nevertheless, the rate of growth in the number of food banks in as rich a country as the UK is an indicator of increasing poverty (financially comfortable people are hardly likely to go to the trouble of convincing a social worker, for example, to provide them with a food voucher, in order to queue for a box of basic foodstuffs). As Field’s APPG’s report notes, *“Aside from the number of people relying on food banks, the number of children arriving at school hungry is beginning to emerge as a most visible indicator of our nation’s vulnerability to hunger.”* (Forsey 2016 p18). It also notes that we do not know how many food banks there are in Britain (*ibid.* p18).

It was with this lack of knowledge in mind that, in 2013, in a survey¹ of town clerks, I asked, almost as an afterthought, *“Does your town have, is about to have, or has it ever had, a food bank?”* (Morris 2014 p78).

¹ The survey was primarily about the programmes introduced in the Rural White Paper of 2000 (DETR/MAFF 2000), and the extent to which they continued to be implemented.

The 2013 Survey

The questionnaire was distributed electronically to 588 clerks (199 eventually participated, a response rate of 33%) using the University of Bristol's BOS online survey tool². The data obtained (Figure 1) reveal that approximately 48% of the towns had, or were establishing, food banks, while approximately 36% of towns did not have a food bank. None of the towns had a food bank in 2003 or 2008.

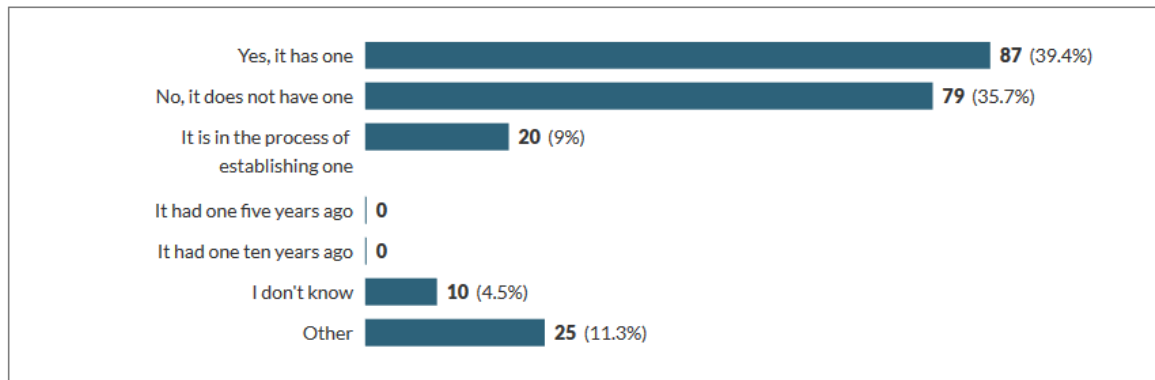


Figure 1
Data relating to food banks in England's Small Country Towns in 2013
(Morris 2014 p78)

Given the continuing debate, in late December, 2015, I again asked the clerks I originally surveyed for information about food banks in their towns³. The results of this survey, obtained between January and 31 March, 2016, are summarized below. Following this, the results are compared with those obtained from the 2013 survey.

The 2016 Survey

The questionnaire was distributed, as before, via BOS, and to the email addresses used for the 2013 survey. In the event only 418 were successfully sent, and, it is hoped, successfully delivered. Disappointingly, only 131 clerks completed the questionnaire (31% response rate). The results of the survey, obtained between January and March, 2016, are illustrated in Figure 2.

² <http://tinyurl.com/hgkqtfc>

³ I asked only one substantive question, "Does your town have a food bank? If not, is it about to have, or has it ever had, one?"

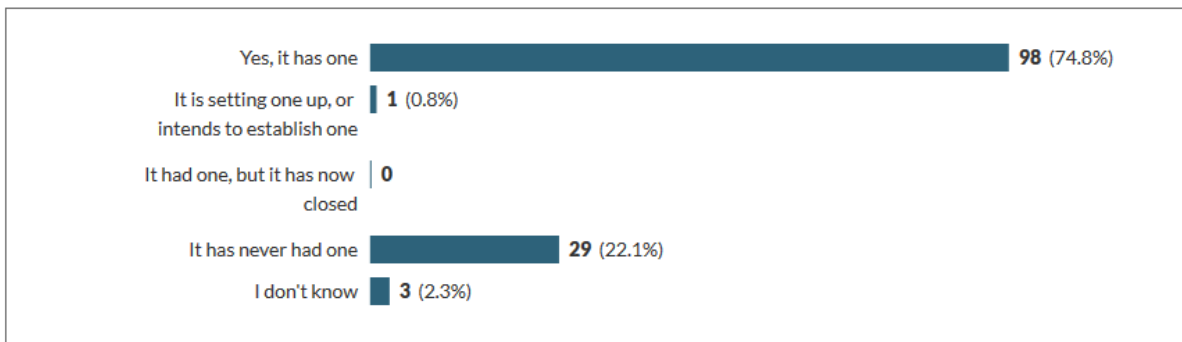


Figure 2

Data relating to food banks in England's Small Country Towns in early 2016

The Surveys – a brief comparison

The response rates are similar. Although perhaps relatively low given the topicality of the subject matter, there are reasons for this level of participation. When the non-responding clerks surveyed in 2013 were asked why they had not participated, their answers included, volume and pressure of work, a consequent lack of time, frequent requests to complete surveys (!), and no recollection of having received the questionnaire (Morris 2014 pp67-68).

It is safe to assume that these reasons still apply, and this may explain why only 34 of the 2013 survey respondents completed the 2016 survey⁴. It is also possible that the 2016 survey response rate was affected by the severe flooding that occurred in parts of northern Britain at the same time that the survey was distributed⁵.

Another possible explanation is that the clerks who responded to the first survey would see little point in responding to the second, unless the situation in their town had changed (e.g. if a food bank had closed). Using the same logic, towns in which food banks have been established since 2013 would be more likely to participate. However, in general, the reasons for non-participation are not known.

The combined data from the two surveys shows that a total of 184 towns out of the 293 towns that took part in the surveys have established, or are establishing, food banks.

According to the 2013 survey 107 towns had, or were establishing, food banks, while 70 towns did not have one. The 2016 results suggest that the gap between towns with and without food banks is closing: 99 towns have, or are establishing, food banks, while 29 do not have one.

⁴ All 34 had, or were establishing, food banks in 2013.

⁵ <http://tinyurl.com/jg3zy93>

Discussion

It is important to note that town councils are not generally responsible for food banks, which are more usually operated by the Trussell Trust, the Salvation Army, or local churches. Councils cannot, therefore, necessarily be expected to know if their town has a food bank⁶. It is not surprising, therefore, to find a more complicated picture than the data initially suggest. For example, a quick search of the internet, together with an analysis of comments submitted by clerks, revealed that in nine of the 29 towns without food banks (2016 survey) the councils, or local people, are involved as helpers and collectors for banks in nearby towns.

Of the remaining 20 towns, most are close to a centre with a food bank, and some even have distribution centres located in them.

Comments made by survey participants include:

- *"The community holds a Big Lunch event each year, and collects practical donations for the Trussell Trust, the foodbank based in the neighbouring city ..."*
- *"The different churches collect food weekly or monthly and it is taken 10 miles away to ..."*
- *"We have a deposit box which is regularly collected for the district food bank in ..."*
- *"This food bank, set up 11 years ago, serves most of the ... District, except [for name of towns] ... which have their own food banks."*
- *"[town's name] is part of the ... foodbank, it has around ten collection points, one distribution point, and four issuers of vouchers."*
- *"Sorry we have nothing to do with the foodbank so I don't know when last year it started. It is an annexe of one running in [town's name]."*
- *"This is a high volume operation serving a large area that is in great need."*

How is it that food banks have become ubiquitous so quickly; so accepted, if not acceptable? Indeed, are they here to stay in an era of low growth, globalization, and stagnating low pay for many workers, and policy shifts from social security to welfare?

The British government's attitude to food banks appears to be changing, albeit slowly. Until recently, there were firm denials that welfare policy changes and

⁶ The surveys were sent to towns clerks for pragmatic reasons - councils are permanent public bodies, and clerks' contact details are in the public domain.

increased recourse to food banks for emergency support were linked (Davey 2013; Patel 2015). In October, 2015, however, Iain Duncan-Smith, the then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, told the House of Commons' Work and Pensions Committee that, "*I am trialling at the moment a job adviser situating themselves in the food bank for the time that the food bank is open ...*" (Duncan-Smith 2015). Although by no means an explicit admission of a link, it is a change of stance. It is a possible admission that food banks are now, or likely to be, considered to be part of the welfare system (Butler 2015), and therefore here to stay (Garthwaite 2016).

The normalizing of food banks as an integral part of the welfare system represents a significant change. There are worrying implications in relation to health and wellbeing, for, as recent research into food bank use in an urban area has revealed, food bank users experience, "*... ill health, bereavement, relationship breakdown, substantial caring responsibilities or job loss...*" (Garthwaite *et al.* 2015).

In its conclusion, the British Parliament's APPG report on hunger states:

"... we cannot emphasise more strongly the need for immediate action on three fronts: to deliver continuity of income through the prompt processing and payment of benefits and tax credits; to enshrine paid work at the National Living Wage as a safeguard against hunger; and to guarantee all children at least one decent meal, and preferably more, every day, both during and outside term time." (Forsey 2016 p35).

This is a most revealing statement. The implication that children, in Britain, in 2016, are going hungry, harks back to the Victorian era. This report, together with those from the Trussell Trust, Oxfam (Perry *et al.* 2014) and The Fabian Society (Tait 2015), and the results of the two surveys discussed in this note, illustrate the scale of the problem. Although people in both urban and rural areas are affected, this research relates primarily to concern for the latter.

The Rural dimension

Many small towns are the main service centres for their surrounding rural areas. As is evident from the discussion above, food banks located within country towns provide distribution/delivery services to rural areas, as revealed by comments made by participants in the two surveys, and researchers such as Perry *et al.* (2014 p94). While this is all to the good, the longstanding problems of rural disadvantage mean that, "*... living in a rural area can compound [the] risk of household food insecurity.*" (Tait 2015 p29). This, coupled with the loss of the Commission for Rural Communities' policy and research expertise (Morris 2015), the cuts affecting the Department for Food and Rural Affairs (Howard 2015), and

difficulties around the expense and availability of genuinely affordable housing⁷, will only make life more difficult for the rural poor.

Given that low-income households are less likely to be able to afford to purchase and maintain a car, and squeezed budgets can make public transport inaccessible, people on low incomes are often least able to physically access nutritious food. It is frustrating that points such as these in relation to poverty, and to rural life, have continually to be made. In addition to the plethora of poverty and rural research papers and reports that have been produced since the end of the Second World War, the British birth cohort studies of the last 70 years have demonstrated that children born into disadvantage are likely to remain disadvantaged throughout life (Pearson 2016). The existence of so many food banks, notwithstanding the commitment and good will of the volunteers who run them, is a strong indicator of disadvantage.

The underlying reasons for the growth in food bank numbers in rural England, and related problems around accessibility, are, as a literature search quickly reveals, under-researched topics. These need to be addressed, as does the recommendation by Loopstra *et al.* (p3), that, "*Rather than accept this situation, an alternative is to call for action on the root social and economic factors that trigger reliance on food banks.*"

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⁷ "... the housing market in rural areas is significantly different from elsewhere in England. Average house prices in rural areas are 22% or £43,490 higher in rural areas than in urban areas (excluding London). The workplace based median annual income is significantly lower in predominantly rural areas at £19,900 compared to £24,500 in predominantly urban areas." (CPRE 2015).

Appendix

The Trussell Trust's 2016 statistics illustrate that delayed benefit payments are the main reason for food bank use (Figure 3), this represents a slight fall compared with 2014-15, with low income growing in significance (Figure 4). Also cited were Sanctions imposed, "... on those receiving *Jobseekers Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance and Personal Independence Payments.*" (Trussell Trust 2016).

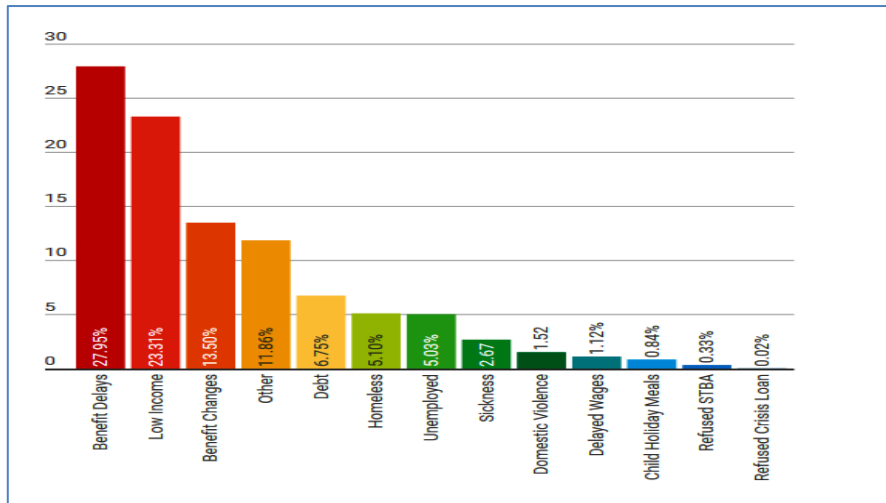


Figure 3
Primary Reasons for Referral to
Trussell Trust Food banks, 2015-16 (Trussell Trust 2016)

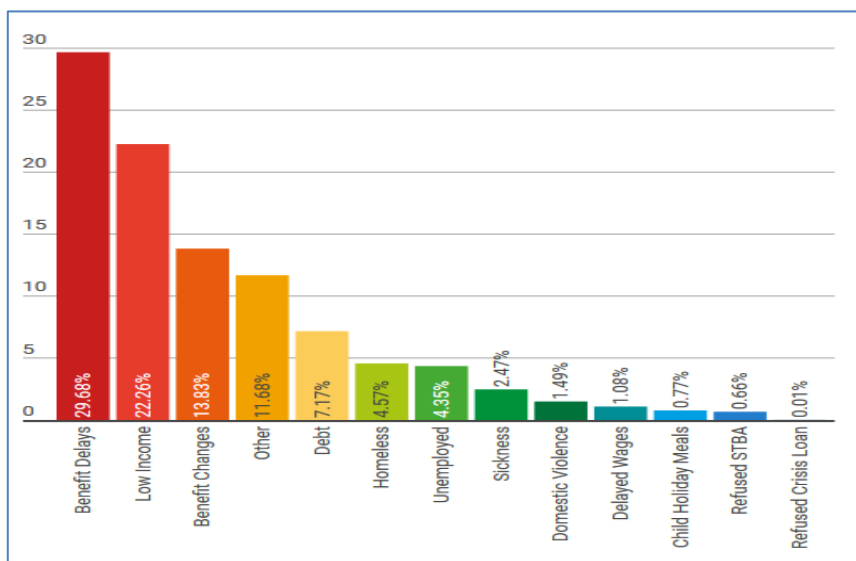


Figure 4
Primary Reasons for Referral to
Trussell Trust Food banks, 2014-15 (Trussell Trust 2016)

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