



Food Banks and Food Poverty

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Food banks (sometimes branded as “foodbanks”) provide food aid to people in acute need, often following referral by a health or social care professional, or other agency. In the UK, food banks are run by a range of volunteer-based organisations, redistributing food donated by consumers, retailers and the food industry. The largest network is co-ordinated by [The Trussell Trust](#) which has 400 food bank banks UK-wide. A [Church Action on Poverty report](#) (May 2013) estimated that over 500,000 people in the UK were reliant on food aid.

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. This increase has led the Trussell Trust to call for an inquiry into the causes of food poverty and the surge in food bank usage. A range of experts have also [warned in the British Medical Journal \(December 2013\)](#) that UK food poverty “has all the signs of a public health emergency that could go unrecognised until it is too late to take preventive action.” A new All Party Parliamentary Group on *Hunger and Food Poverty* (co-chaired by Rt.Hon.Frank Field MP and Laura Sandys MP) is now investigating “the root causes of hunger and food poverty” and the increase in British demand for food banks.

A variety of factors may have contributed to the growth in food bank usage. High global food prices have made food proportionately less affordable for low-income households in the UK whilst the recession saw unemployment increase significantly and earnings stagnate or decline. A number of significant changes to the benefits system have also been made including: the abolition of the Social Fund and the introduction of local welfare provision, the reassessment of incapacity benefit claimants, measures to control Housing Benefit expenditure and the introduction of a new benefits “conditionality and sanctions” regime. Many speculate that such welfare reforms are having the biggest impact on the growth of food banks but the Government maintains that there is “no robust evidence” to link the two.

Since September 2011, Jobcentre Plus has “signposted” people to food banks, but the Government does not officially track food bank usage. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs commissioned research in March 2013 to review evidence on the UK’s food provision and access. The [resultant report](#) (February 2014) highlighted that there is limited information on UK food aid provision and the reasons for it.

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1 Food banks

1.1 How do they work?

Food banks¹ exist to provide food aid to people who could otherwise not afford to feed themselves and their families (often as a result of a temporary financial crisis resulting from, for example, redundancy, eviction, benefits changes/delays, unexpectedly large bills, etc.). Although the concept has existed internationally for several decades (beginning in the US in the late 1960s²) it has only become more prevalent in the UK in the last decade.

A variety of models

Food banks operate to a variety of models and may be run by organisations such as charities, community groups and churches as well as private individuals.

The coordinating body of the UK's largest network of food banks is [The Trussell Trust](#).³ The Trust opened its first "foodbank" in Salisbury in 2000 and now operates as a social franchise, partnering with churches to provide food bank services to local communities. The Trust has found that this model works well in all regions, from Salisbury to the Welsh Valleys, and is not limited to affluent or urban areas. Most of the food which the Trust distributes is donated by consumers, largely through collections at schools, churches and supermarkets.

The Trust advertises a shopping list of the key items it needs. This includes non-perishable items such as sugar, soup, pasta, jam and tinned products such as rice pudding and tomatoes. Using non-perishable food enables the Trust to manage its stocks more flexibly and cope with large donations which may not be used immediately. Volunteers run operations on the ground by sorting, packing and distributing the food in nutritionally balanced parcels which are intended to last the recipient and their family for a minimum of three days. All recipients must be referred to Trussell Trust foodbanks by a frontline care professional and may only receive up to three consecutive referral vouchers to help avoid dependency (see section 1.2 for more information on referrals).

Some food banks are just run locally. For example, [East Lancs Food Bank](#) which has delivery services for those unable to get to a distribution point.

In the Commons debate on food banks in Scotland (December 2012), Russell Brown MP described a small-scale operation in Dumfriesshire:

I want quickly to mention the First Base Agency in Dumfriesshire, organised by a guy called Mark Frankland. ... He initially set up the agency to help and support individuals with drug and alcohol problems, and from the success of that he went on to work with veterans, providing them with support through a gardening scheme. ... Mark has also, very much under the radar, provided food parcels. He is not a recognised food bank of the kind that colleagues have described this morning and in other debates, but he has provided food parcels for a number of years to some of the most vulnerable individuals and families in the local area. Support through churches and local charities has

¹ The single word term "foodbanks" is also used, referring to food banks operated in partnership with [The Trussell Trust](#)

² Food Bank (Second Harvest Food Bank of Northwest NC), [The History of Food Banking](#), accessed 8 May 2013

³ The Trussell Trust, [UK Foodbanks](#), accessed 8 May 2013

enabled it all to happen. ... One of the parcels that he manages to provide lasts a family for about three days.⁴

Other sources of food aid

There are other charities which do not operate food banks but instead provide food to venues such as hostels, day centres, breakfast clubs or community cafés. [FareShare](#) and [FoodCycle](#) specialise in working with the food industry. FareShare is a charity which uses food that is otherwise to be wasted at the manufacturing end of the chain and gives it away to the homeless and the poor. Fareshare donors include Sainsbury's and Nestlé

[FoodCycle](#) (not a food bank) helps local communities to set up groups of volunteers to collect surplus produce locally and prepare meals in unused, professional kitchen spaces which are then served those in need in communities. Volunteers are encouraged to mainly set up arrangements with local supermarkets as well as seeking public donations.

While not the focus of this Note, it is also important to recognise that there is some government "food aid". Families who are receiving certain income-related benefits, can be eligible for free school meals. Those with children aged under 4 years on these benefits can also receive vouchers which enable them to purchase fresh and infant formula milk and fresh or frozen fruit and vegetables.⁵

The Deputy Prime Minister has announced free school meals for all infant school children in reception, year 1 and year 2 from September 2014. This follows a recommendation from the Department for Education's independent school food reviewers, Henry Dimbleby and John Vincent, in the School Food Plan, that the Government should extend entitlement to free school meals, particularly for primary school children.

At the same time, the Government will also extend free meals to disadvantaged students in further education and sixth form.⁶

Social supermarkets

A new "social supermarket" model is also emerging in the UK where those on low incomes can buy food at a greatly reduced price in a normal shop environment if they are in receipt of certain benefits and live in the area. This avoids the stigma of queuing for a food bank and the limited choice and is not designed as a short-term emergency measure. As such a large proportion of household income is spent on food (especially for those on low incomes) it also frees up more income for other everyday things.

The UK's first 'social supermarket' opened in Barnsley, South Yorkshire in December 2013 operated by [Community Shop](#) whose parent company is [Company Shop](#). Company shop's main business includes handling 'residual stock' for major brands and food manufacturers such as Heinz, Premier Foods and major retailers for the employees of major grocery retailers such as Tesco, Asda and Marks and Spencer. Community Shop is using the Yorkshire store as a pilot with a view to rolling out more stores in 2014.⁷ Prices are up to 70% below the Recommended Retail Price (RRP) and cooking and budget advice will also be offered.

⁴ [HC Deb 19 Dec 2012 c255WH](#)

⁵ See details of the Healthy Start initiative at www.healthystart.nhs.uk

⁶ [HC Deb 24 October 2013 WA 185](#)

⁷ Community Shop, [Welcome to Community Shop](#) as on 9 April 2014

1.2 Food bank referrals

To regulate access to their services and to assist data collection, Trussell Trust food banks and others, e.g. [The Food Bank Milton Keynes](#), partner with care/welfare professionals and organisations such as social workers, doctors, health visitors, Citizens Advice Bureau and Jobcentre Plus who can issue vouchers to people in acute need.

Although it appears that only a small percentage of overall foodbank referrals are via Jobcentres⁸, there has been considerable interest in the role of Jobcentre Plus in this regard.

The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) has said that “it is the policy for all Jobcentre Plus branches to signpost people to food banks where it is appropriate to do so”.⁹ DWP is keen to stress that it “signposts” people to food banks rather than operating a formal referral as part of its welfare service. For example, in answer to a Parliamentary Question from Stephen Timms in October 2013 asking how DWP defined signposting and referring in relation to food banks, Esther McVey responded:

DWP is only a signposting body that does not get involved in any decision to award a food parcel. The act of signposting to any local organisation including foodbanks is not a formal referral or endorsement on the part of the DWP. The operation of foodbanks is not the responsibility of this Department.¹⁰

However, DWP has acknowledged that there is internal guidance to staff on signposting to food banks and a recent Freedom of Information request reported in *The Guardian* revealed a 'high level process' to be observed by jobcentre staff for referring claimants who say that they are suffering hardship and need food.¹¹

The role of Jobcentre Plus in referring people to food banks was described by Mark Hoban, Minister of State for Employment at the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) as follows in December 2012:

DWP, through Jobcentre Plus, operates a foodbank referral service. This is a simple signposting process which builds on the Jobcentre Plus standard practice of holding, locally, the details of organisations to which we signpost claimants who tell us they are in financial difficulty. Jobcentre Plus will only signpost claimants when they can offer no more help.¹²

Jobcentre Plus has been “signposting” people to food banks nationally since September 2011. Circumstances where a Jobcentre might make a referral to a food bank could include:

- where a Crisis Loan or Short Term Benefit Advance had been refused;¹³

⁸ Trussell Trust press statement, *'DWP has broken agreement between Jobcentres and foodbanks' says Trussell Trust after yesterday's PMQs*, 5 September 2013

⁹ [HC Deb 14 October 2013 c490W](#)

¹⁰ [HC Deb 17 October 2013 c861W](#)

¹¹ [DWP advising jobcentres on sending claimants to food banks - documents Government insists charities form no part of welfare system and this is merely a 'signpost' but 'high level process' in place](#), *The Guardian* 11 March 2014

¹² [HC Deb 13 December 2012 c430W](#)

¹³ Crisis Loans were abolished from April 2013, along with Social Fund Community Care Grants, and funding has been transferred to local authorities in England and to the devolved administrations to enable them to provide such assistance in their areas as they see fit (see section 2.2 for more detail). However, DWP retains responsibility for providing support to people pending a payment of benefit, and a new system of “Short Term Benefit Advances” has been set up for this purpose.

- where a change in circumstances had affected a person's entitlement to benefit, or reduced the amount they receive;
- where payment of benefit had been delayed (e.g. because a claim was still being assessed, or DWP was awaiting information to enable a decision on a claim).¹⁴

The original version of the Jobcentre Plus referral form included boxes to tick to indicate the reason for the referral. However, a report in *The Guardian* on 6 September 2013 said that the DWP had “unilaterally redesigned the food bank vouchers it issues to clients” – the three boxes on the previous form which had enabled JobCentre Plus “to indicate why they referred the person: because of benefit delay, benefit change, or refusal of crisis loan ... have been removed [from the new form]. The vouchers no longer tell the [Trussell] trust why the person has been referred”.¹⁵

Further information on when the change was made was provided in an answer to a written parliamentary question in October 2013:

Luciana Berger: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions pursuant to the answer of 10 October 2013, Official Report, column 405W, on food banks, if he will publish the updated guidance issued to Jobcentre Plus staff on signposting people to food banks. [172651]

Esther McVey: To reflect changes to Local Welfare Provision in April 2013, guidance was updated accordingly. It is not common practice in DWP to publish internal guidance.¹⁶

After the Prime Minister noted in September 2013 that the Government had introduced “the ability to say to people in Jobcentre Plus who needed help that they could go to a food bank”,¹⁷ the Trussell Trust issued a press release which quoted the Trust's Executive Chairman, Chris Mould, as saying: “We're delighted that David Cameron understands the importance of enabling Jobcentres to refer people in crisis to foodbanks but we are deeply concerned that some people within DWP are doing their best to block the agreement that makes this possible”.¹⁸

The Trust's press statement, which highlighted some of the possible consequences, continued:

‘The DWP entered into a partnership agreement with the Trussell Trust in 2011 which had been working reasonably well until recently but now there is real confusion within government about foodbanks and the agreement has been broken without consultation. We support the Prime Minister's position that Jobcentres should refer to foodbanks and are keen to meet with ministers as soon as possible to reinstate the agreement that allows this to happen.’

Yesterday David Cameron stated that enabling Jobcentres to refer to foodbanks was ‘the right thing’, and something that Labour refused to do because of bad publicity yet Trussell Trust foodbanks across the UK are reporting that since April 2013 Jobcentres have stopped using the agreed referral process. Some Jobcentres are not referring

¹⁴ *Pers.comm.* Jobcentre Plus, January 2012

¹⁵ “Welfare cuts: A tale of two food bank vouchers”, *Guardian*, 6 September 2013

¹⁶ [HC Deb 29 October 2013 c457W](#)

¹⁷ [HC Deb 4 September 2013 c311](#)

¹⁸ Trussell Trust, *'DWP has broken agreement between Jobcentres and Foodbanks' says Trussell Trust after yesterday's PMQs*, press statement, 5 September 2013, p1

people to foodbanks at all, others are sending people to foodbanks without a foodbank voucher and DWP have recently dropped the rule that Jobcentres must record the reason why a person needs the foodbank. This means that people are being sent by Jobcentres to foodbanks without an indication of the reason for the crisis so that The Trussell Trust cannot be sure that the need is genuine or keep track of the different reasons why people need emergency food.

Whilst David Cameron clearly sees the value in the partnership between foodbanks and Jobcentres, the DWP has decided to alter the referral agreement without discussing their decision with the Trussell Trust or considering the consequences for people in crisis or for foodbank volunteers.

Whilst referrals to foodbanks from Jobcentre Plus only represent a small percentage of overall foodbank referrals, The Trussell Trust is keen to make sure that all frontline agencies, including JCP [JobCentre Plus], are able to refer people in crisis to emergency food support using the proper referral processes. This helps to ensure that people are not forced to go hungry in the UK. The Trussell Trust is also keen to meet with ministers to discuss the problem of UK food poverty and ways to reduce numbers of people turning to foodbanks as a result of benefits problems.¹⁹

The *Guardian* article in September 2013 highlighted the Government's response: "The DWP says it hasn't broken any agreement - it has simply updated a form 'to reflect welfare changes introduced in April 2013, which mean that local authorities are now responsible for providing short term, emergency financial help to those who need it'.²⁰

In response to a parliamentary question on "which organisations his Department consulted in designing the New Food Bank Signposting Slip issued by Jobcentre Plus staff to clients; and when each was consulted", the DWP Minister Esther McVey said in a written answer on 7 November 2013: "The change made to our Signposting Slip was of a minor nature and therefore it was not deemed necessary to consult. The operation of food banks is not the responsibility of this Department".²¹

1.3 Numbers and usage

The main source of data regarding food bank usage and UK coverage is The Trussell Trust. The Government does not collect official statistics on the use of food banks, as explained by David Heath, then Minister of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in February 2013:

The provision of food aid ranges from small, local provision, through to regional and national schemes. The landscape is mostly community-led provision responding to local needs. As such, the Government does not believe it is possible to keep a record of the number of food banks, nor the potential number of people using them or other types of food aid, without placing unnecessary burdens on volunteers trying to help their communities.²²

In partnership with churches, The Trussell Trust operated over 345 food banks in the UK as of April 2013.²³ By October 2013, the number of food banks in the Trust's network had

¹⁹ As above, pp1–2

²⁰ "Welfare cuts: A tale of two food bank vouchers", *Guardian*, 6 September 2013

²¹ [HC Deb 7 November 2013 c274W](#)

²² [HC Deb 27 Feb 2013 c523W](#)

²³ The Trussell Trust, [Biggest ever increase in UK foodbank use](#), accessed 26 Apr 2013

increased to 400.²⁴ A *Guardian*-led project also mapped more than 60 others coordinated by other organisations or individuals.²⁵

Figure 1 overleaf shows the geographical distribution of Trussell Trust food banks in the UK. In 2012-13 Trussell Trust food bank use in Wales was estimated at 29,049,²⁶ and 14,318 in Scotland.²⁷ The Trust are able to provide local statistics on food bank use for MPs on request.

The Trussell Trust estimate that their food banks fed almost 350,000 people in 2012-2013. This compares to 128,000 in 2011-2012. A May 2013 report from Church Poverty in Action and Oxfam, *Walking the Breadline: The scandal of food poverty in 21st century Britain*, estimates that the total number of people currently reliant on food aid could be over 500,000 people when also accounting for the work of non-Trussell Trust affiliated organisations.²⁸

On 16 October 2013 the Trust released figures on usage of its food banks over the period April to September 2013. Over 350,000 people received emergency food from Trussell Trust foodbanks between April and September 2013, triple the number helped in the same period in 2012 and more than in the entire financial year 2012-13. Of those helped in six months from April to September 2013, 120,000 (35%) were children.²⁹

Over the six month period to September 2013, 65,177 people (19%) were referred to Trust foodbanks due to “benefit changes”, compared with almost 14,897 (14%) in same period in 2012. 117,442 people (35%) were referred due to “benefit delay”, compared with 35,597 (33%) in the same period in 2012.³⁰ However, it should be noted that the Trust (like the Citizen's Advice Bureau data) does not distinguish between first time and repeat referrals.³¹

²⁴ Trussell Trust press release, *Tripling in foodbank usage sparks Trussell Trust to call for an inquiry*, 16 October 2013, accessed 13 December 2013

²⁵ “Mapped: Food banks across the UK”, *Guardian*, 12 July 2012, accessed 27 March 2013

²⁶ “‘Cost of living crisis’ forcing more to use food banks”, *BBC News*, 12 February 2013

²⁷ “Scottish food bank requests more than double”, *BBC News*, 24 April 2013

²⁸ Cooper, N. and Dumbleton, S. *Walking the Breadline: The scandal of food poverty in 21st century Britain*, Church Action on Poverty and Oxfam, May 2013

²⁹ Trussell Trust press release, *Tripling in foodbank usage sparks Trussell Trust to call for an inquiry*, 16 October 2013, accessed 13 December 2013

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ University of Warwick and Food Ethics Council, Household Food Security in the UK: A Review of Food Aid, Final Report, February 2014, p.31

Figure 1: Trussell Trust food bank **distribution**, either in operation (green) or being set up (pink)



[Source: The Trussell Trust, April 2013]³²

Commenting on the figures, the Executive Chairman of The Trussell Trust, Chris Mould said:

Problems with welfare are not new, they have existed for years, but the reality is that when welfare provision breaks down, people go hungry. We're talking about mums not eating for days because they've been sanctioned for seemingly illogical reasons, or people leaving hospital after a major operation to find that their benefits have been stopped or delayed. It's not right that so many more people are now being referred to foodbanks due to problems with welfare, especially as much of this is preventable.

This is not about pointing fingers, it's about finding solutions. That's why we believe an inquiry is now essential.³³

However, a BBC report on the day of the publication of the Trussell Trust statistics quoted a DWP source as saying that there was "no robust evidence that welfare reforms are linked to the increase in use of foodbanks."³⁴ The BBC also reported a Government source as saying "The Trussell Trust itself says it is opening three new food banks every week, so it's not surprising more people are using them."³⁵

³² The Trussell Trust, *Find your nearest foodbank*, accessed 8 May 2013
³³ Trussell Trust press release, *Tripling in foodbank usage sparks Trussell Trust to call for an inquiry*, 16 October 2013
³⁴ BBC News, *Numbers relying on food banks triple in a year*, 16 October 2013
³⁵ Ibid.

At Education Questions on 9 September, the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, suggested that the pressures faced by families having recourse to food banks were “often the result of decisions that they have taken which mean they are not best able to manage their finances.”³⁶ The Minister was criticised by many for his remarks. The BBC reported Chris Mould of the Trussell Trust as responding-

The vast majority of people who come to food banks are there because they have no choice, they've got deep problems with their stagnating incomes.

We meet people day in and day out who've been going hungry to feed their children - and that's why Michael Gove's comments are not just insensitive, they're completely inappropriate.

Because to make the judgement that after a drop-in on a Friday morning that you know better than the 30,000 volunteers who give their time every week to this, and to the 18,500 different organisations across the country who hold vouchers for Trussell Trust food banks - it is really, really difficult to understand.³⁷

In April 2013 the Prime Minister stated that the “use of food banks had increased ten times under the last Labour Government”.³⁸ Channel 4's “[Fact Check](#)” blog (16 January 2013) discussed the use of these statistics (which Mr Cameron had quoted before) and observed the following:

Three things immediately become clear. Mr Cameron is absolutely right to say that the numbers of people being fed by food banks went up tenfold on Labour's watch. There were fewer than 3,000 users in 2005/06 and more than 40,000 by the end of 2009/10.

But we are talking about relatively low numbers, so putting things in terms of percentages makes the increase sound bigger.

Compare that with the rise after the coalition comes to power: from 40,898 in 2009/10 to 128,697 in 2011/12.

You could say that's only a threefold increase compared to a tenfold increase, but that would be a misleading way of describing the trend.

It would be more accurate to say that the number of people using food banks reached 40,000 after six years of Labour, then grew by an additional 90,000 in just two years of the coalition.³⁹

Figure 2 (below), showing Trussell Trust data since 2005/6, illustrates this trend. However, that only covers the period up to the end of the year 2012/13. As noted above, in the first six months of 2013/14, usage has already exceeded the total for the whole of 2012/13.

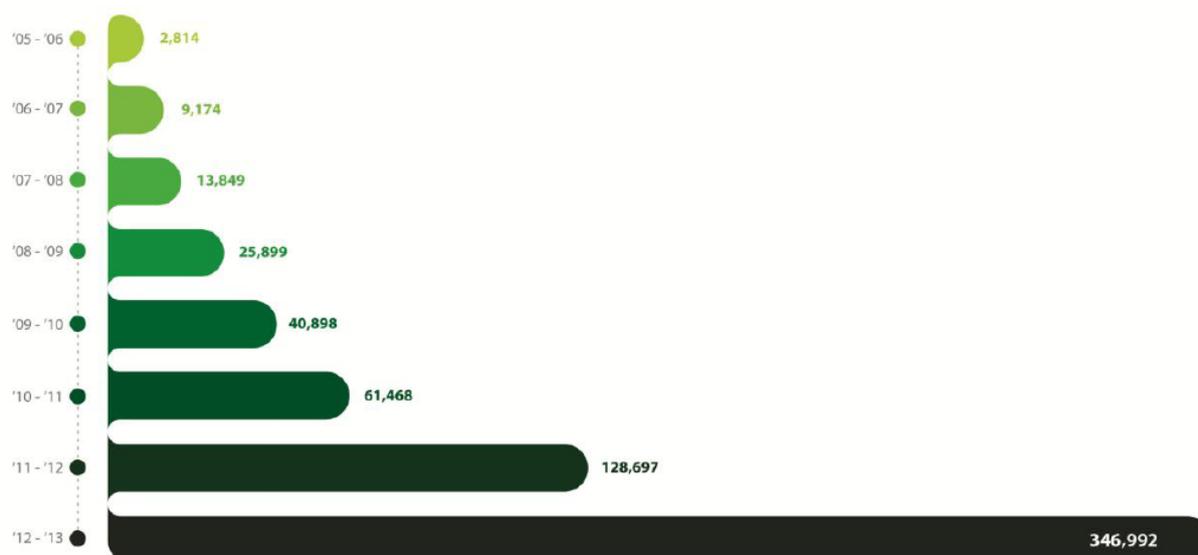
³⁶ [HC Deb 9 September 2013 c681](#)

³⁷ BBC News, “[Trussell Trust food bank charity criticises Michael Gove comment](#)”, 15 September 2013

³⁸ [HC Deb 23 January 2013 c312](#)

³⁹ “[Food banks: is Cameron on the money?](#)”, *Channel 4 News FactCheck*, 16 January 2013, accessed 2 May 2013

Figure 2: Trussell Trust food bank usage 2005/6-2012/13



[Source: [The Trussell Trust](#), April 2013]⁴⁰

The growth of food banks is not restricted to the UK; increases have also been reported in other countries (such as [Belgium](#),⁴¹ [Germany](#)⁴² and [France](#)⁴³) since 2008. Close to 900,000 people in Canada are reported to be helped by food banks every year.⁴⁴ Olivier de Schutter, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, has commented that:

[Food banks] ... represent the best and most up-to-date source of data on social marginalisation in our societies – and thus hold the key to understanding the nature of poverty in developed countries. Access to food is the perfect bellwether for broader socio-economic inequalities. Food insecurity hotspots generally correlate not only with poverty but also with a series of factors that marginalise people and narrow their options.⁴⁵

In recognition of the importance of this data, a [consortium](#) of more than 70 national charities and community groups has formed, coordinated by Just Fair focusing mainly on monitoring. The consortium:

... will focus on the key issues affecting people across England in the austerity era such as, child, food and fuel poverty, unemployment, homelessness and changes to the social security system. The Consortium will present its monitoring findings to MPs and Peers in Parliament before calling for change at the United Nations in 2015, when the UK's human rights record will be reviewed.⁴⁶

1.4 Government position on food banks

Cabinet Office Minister, Nick Hurd recently described food banks as "a magnificent response to difficult times". He acknowledged that their number was growing and the underlying issues

⁴⁰ The Trussell Trust, [Biggest ever increase in foodbank usage: 170% rise in numbers turning to foodbanks in the last 12 months](#), 24 April 2013

⁴¹ "121,000 people get help from Food Banks", *Expatica*, 18 March 2013

⁴² "Food for thought", *The German Times*, January 2009

⁴³ "Crisis sends French new poor flocking to food banks", *Expatica*, 27 January 2009

⁴⁴ Food Banks Canada, [About hunger in Canada](#), accessed 29 May 2013

⁴⁵ De Schutter, O., "Food banks can only plug the holes in social safety nets", *Guardian*, 27 February 2013

⁴⁶ Just Fair, [Consortium](#), accessed 9 April 2014

were complex. He said that the Government should place on the record its "recognition of the work being done to support them across the country in responding to need."⁴⁷

The Government does not provide (or intend to provide) support directly to food banks, as outlined by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Lord De Mauley) in April 2013:

The Government are not considering the provision of funding to support food banks. We do, however, recognise the good work of organisations that redistribute surplus food to help reduce food poverty, assist the homeless and provide access to nutritional meals for those who may otherwise struggle. In addition, most major retailers already have partnerships with redistribution charities. In 2012, Defra held a meeting with retailers and food distribution charities to explore the current barriers to redistribution and the Waste and Resources Action Programme has recently begun working with Fareshare and FoodCycle to deliver a trial to increase food distribution from retail stores.

Although not supported centrally, local authorities have the ability to fund food banks if they consider that this would benefit their local community.⁴⁸

However, at a December 2013 conference the Minister for Welfare Reform, Lord Freud is reported to have suggested that local authorities consider working with food banks as part of their local welfare assistance schemes.⁴⁹

Defra commissioned research on food aid in the UK

In March 2013, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) commissioned research "to review evidence on the landscape of food provision and access" and 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".⁵⁰

David Heath MP, Minister of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs provided further details on 23 April 2013, describing it as "a short research project assessing evidence already publically available on the provision of food aid in the UK." The findings of this research were expected to provide the foundation for improving Government, business and civil society's understanding of food aid, including identification of where there are evidence gaps which may need to be filled with further research.⁵¹ At the time the Government said that the conclusions of the work would be available on the Government's website in summer 2013.⁵²

The resultant report by the University of Warwick and Food Ethics Council was finally published in February 2014 after a lengthy "review and quality control process".⁵³ There had been speculation in the press that the report had been delivered to Defra in June 2013 which

⁴⁷ HC Deb 11 December 2013 c.229

⁴⁸ [HL Deb 22 April 2013 cWA373](#)

⁴⁹ "Welfare minister urges local councils to invest in food banks: Lord Freud accused of backing away from principle of welfare after saying local authorities should 'ramp up support in kind'", *Guardian*, 13 December 2013

⁵⁰ University of Warwick and Food Ethics Council, *Household Food Security in the UK: A Review of Food Aid*, 20 February 2014 and [HC Deb 23 April 2013 cc820-1W](#)

⁵¹ *Pers. comm.* Defra, Food Security and Sustainability team, 24 May 2013

⁵² [HC Deb 23 April 2013 cc820-1W](#)

⁵³ See for example HC Deb 12 December 2013 c308w

led to repeated calls in the House of Commons for the research to be published.⁵⁴ The report was eagerly anticipated with reported increases in food bank use generating much debate about the underlying causes and the role of the welfare system and reforms.

However, the resultant report [Household Food Security in the UK: A Review of Food Aid](#) (20 February 2014) raises more questions than it answers and highlights the gaps in data and lack of systematic monitoring in this area in the UK which are largely being filled by the Trussell Trust, despite many more community based projects offering food aid.

In addition, the researchers highlighted that they were not specifically asked to address the impact of public policies on social security in the UK and noted that as there were reforms in this area during their study it was often difficult to interpret some of the research results.⁵⁵

The nature of the study

The study was largely based on existing, published, empirical literature (Rapid Evidence Assessment - REA) which the researchers noted was "limited" in the UK so they drew largely on evidence from the United States, Canada and Germany. The study also 'mapped' small-scale food initiatives (via an internet search) and drew on an Expert Workshop, follow-up interviews and case studies. In the short timescale available they were unable to provide detailed quality control of the additional evidence but acknowledged its importance as a starting point for future research.

The research looked beyond food banks to food provided in other situations e.g. soup runs or Meals on Wheels

Key findings

The authors of the REA stopped short of ascribing the rise in food bank usage to particular factors, noting that there was "no systematic evidence on drivers of food aid use in the UK", but added that "available information suggests that factors which have impact on household incomes and financial capacity are important".

The report was clear that lack of evidence made it difficult to answer many of the questions posed by Defra. e.g. current trends and drivers in the use of different food aid and how the numbers turning to food aid might be reduced through other means of support (p.16). This rather limited bold reactions to the report from stakeholders. However, the [Child Poverty Action Group](#) (CPAG) stated that the report "suggests that there is significant need for food aid in Britain today".⁵⁶

The key findings are summarised below:

- "Beyond public information from 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 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 and research" (p.vi)

⁵⁴ Patrick Butler's blog, "[Food poverty: MPs call for 'delayed' food banks report to be published](#)", *The Guardian*, 28 November 2013

⁵⁵ University of Warwick and Food Ethics Council, [Household Food Security in the UK: A Review of Food Aid](#), 20 February 2014, Executive Summary, para v

⁵⁶ Child Poverty Action Group, [New government commissioned report admits genuine need for food aid in the UK](#), 20 February 2014

- Food aid has a limited impact on overall food security status even though it may provide immediate relief.
- 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.
- However, those providing food aid are consistently reporting an increase in demand and describe the critical driving factors as 'crises' particularly in household income often underpinned by on-going problems of low income, rising food (and other) costs and increasing indebtedness as well as short term issues such as delays in benefits payments.
- There is no systematic evidence on the impact of increased supply on the demand for food aid (p.xii)
- More evidence is required over strategies households are employing to try and manage experiences of food insecurity
- There is no effective monitoring of household food security in the UK (p.vii)
- Turning to food aid seems to be a strategy of last resort. Uptake of food aid tends to increase with the severity of household food security but the most food insecure households do not always turn to food aid. In Canada, reasons for not turning to food aid included: they did not feel that they were in extreme need, help would be inadequate, the experience was degrading or shameful or they had lack of access to or information about food aid provision.
- Qualitative research has shown that a number of strategies are being employed by households in attempts to cope with rising costs, including: cutting back on other household expenditure, reducing heat or electricity consumption, adjusting food patterns by bulk buying and throwing less food away as well as adults going without meals to feed their children.

Donated food and liability

The Government has held discussions with retailers and food redistribution charities regarding whether legislative barriers are preventing more surplus or donated food being distributed.

In the US, food donors and organisations that distribute donated food are protected from civil and criminal liability for any harm caused by that food by the [Good Samaritan Food Donation Act](#). No such law exists in the UK, although the level of donations to organisations such as FareShare (4,200 tonnes in the last year⁵⁷) suggests that this may not currently be a significant barrier to giving. Indeed, most major retailers already have partnerships with redistribution charities.⁵⁸

According to the [UK Food Labelling Regulations 1996](#) it would be an offence to “sell” food that is past its use by date. The word “sell” has an extended definition under the [Food Safety Act 1990](#) which includes “any other thing which is done with respect to food” and is likely to include food donation. According to the Defra [guidance](#):

⁵⁷ FareShare, [FareShare now feeds more people](#), accessed 15 May 2013

⁵⁸HC Deb 24 October 2013 WA 185

- It is not an offence to sell food after the 'best before' date relating to it, provided it still complies with the Food Safety Act 1990 and the General Food Regulations 2004. These make it an offence for a person to sell or supply food which does not meet food safety requirements, or which is not of the nature, substance or quality demanded by the consumer. This means that a retailer may commit an offence if the food deteriorates to the point where it may become unfit for human consumption. Even, if not unfit, an offence may be committed if the food is not of the quality expected by the consumer.
- It would also be an offence to give away food after its 'best before' date if the food has deteriorated so much that it did not meet these general provisions.⁵⁹

Food banks do need to ensure that they handle food appropriately in relation to food hygiene requirements, and are not exempt from such considerations just because they are doing charitable work. However, the degree to which food safety laws apply (e.g. in terms of registering as a food handling business) will depend on how often food is handled and the degree of organisation. To help charities, the Food Standards Agency has prepared some [draft guidance](#) on how food law applies to food provision in village halls and other community activities in England which was open to consultation until 21 May 2013. The consultation stated that the “basic underpinning principle remains that public health should be protected in a manner that is effective, proportionate and risk-based”.⁶⁰

A Parliamentary Answer on charitable food donations in July 2012 indicated that clarification of the legal position of food donors and distributing organisations was being considered:

Food: Charitable Donations

Kerry McCarthy: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs with reference to the answer of 1 May 2012, Official Report, column 1385W, on food: charitable donations, what the outcome was of her Department's (a) examination of barriers to food redistribution and (b) discussions with Lord Young of Graffham on removing civil and criminal liability from good faith food donors; [115973]

Jessica Morden: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will take steps to encourage large supermarkets to donate unwanted food to FareShare and similar organisations. [116419]

Mr Paice[holding answer 9 July 2012]: On 3 July, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs Spelman), and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, my noble Friend, Lord Taylor of Holbeach, hosted a roundtable discussion with major retailers and food redistribution charities. This explored the barriers to redistribution and considered an outline proposal from FareShare and FoodCycle that seeks to make redistribution easier for both charities and retailers. This proposal would build upon the partnerships most major retailers already have with redistribution charities.

DEFRA officials are working with the Food Standards Agency (FSA) to provide clarity on the existing legal situation for food donors. The FSA, which is responsible for food safety, advises that food passed on or supplied in this way

⁵⁹ Defra, [Guidance on the application of date labels to food](#), September 2011, p12

⁶⁰ FSA, [Draft guidance on how food law applies to food provision in village halls and to other community activities in England](#), 19 February 2013, accessed 15 May 2013

must meet EU food safety requirements in order to protect consumers and safeguard public health.⁶¹

WRAP food redistribution working group

In January 2013, the [Waste and Resources Action Programme \(WRAP\)](#) launched a food redistribution working group that has been tasked with developing a better understanding of the barriers to surplus food redistribution and the solutions to overcome those barriers. WRAP promotes resource efficiency and is government and public sector funded.

WRAP has been working with Fareshare and FoodCycle to trial increased food distribution from retail stores.⁶² The trials sought to identify the extent of food surpluses arising at retail stores, its suitability for redistribution and processes to enable surpluses to be redistributed to local communities where needed.

In March 2014, WRAP published the results of these trials in [The Food Connection Programme](#).⁶³ This is the UK's first piece of quantitative research on store-level surplus food redistribution. The report also included a set of guiding principles for surplus food redistribution and implementation guidance based on this work.⁶⁴

The research found that whilst the tonnages of surplus food available at store level are small in comparison to the whole supply chain, the volumes are sufficient to deliver real benefit to those who need it. The report also highlights that the barriers to rolling out redistribution from stores on a nationwide scale are still significant due to current capacity and resource limitations within both charity and retailer processes.

A [food donation checklist](#) based on this work is also available for use on the Institute of Grocery Distribution website to help organisations work out how best to redistribute food.⁶⁵

WRAP produced new estimates for waste in the food and drink supply chain in October 2013. These indicate that (based on 2011 figures) 4.3 Mt of the UK's 6.5Mt of grocery waste is food waste (mostly from the manufacturing side). Surplus food which is currently redistributed amounts to some 5,800t - a very small fraction.⁶⁶

1.5 Parliamentary debate

Since late 2012 there has been a spate of parliamentary debates on food poverty and food banks with the most recent being an Opposition Day debate on food banks in December 2013:

- [Food Poverty, Westminster Hall Debate, HC Deb 12 December 2012, c.96-121WH](#)
- [Food Banks \(Scotland\), Westminster Hall Debate, HC Deb 19 December 2012, c.239-262WH](#)
- [Food Banks \(Wales\), Westminster Hall Debate, HC Deb 12 February 2013, c.229-253WH](#)
- [Food Banks, Opposition Day Debate, HC Deb 18 December 2013 c.802-855](#)

⁶¹HC Deb 16 July 2012 c. 478W

⁶² HC Deb 24 October 2013 WA 185

⁶³ WRAP, *Insights and action identified for food redistribution*, 27 March 2014

⁶⁴ Keith Davies AM, Llanelli AM in call to increase surplus food donated by supermarkets, 22 November 2013

⁶⁵ IGD, [Waste prevention: product redistribution](#) page as on 8 April 2014

⁶⁶ WRAP, *Estimates of waste in the food and drink supply chain: Final report*, October 2013

These debates were mainly spurred by reported increases in numbers and usage of food banks.

In the Opposition Day Debate, Maria Eagle (Shadow Defra Minister) stated:⁶⁷

This debate is a vital opportunity for the House to acknowledge the rising reliance on food aid in our country. We ensured that it took place, because the Government were never likely to do so. They will not even publish their own—clearly damning—research into why the rise in food bank usage is so high. Since April, just one charity's network of food banks has helped half a million people, a third of whom were children. The reasons for that are clear: the rising cost of living, caused by rising prices that have outstripped falling and stagnant wages; the Government's unwillingness to stand up to vested interests in the energy and water companies; their unwillingness to take action on the lack of available hours for part-time workers, the rise of zero-hours contracts and poverty pay; incompetent welfare reforms and delays in making payments; and the bedroom tax.

MPs have also highlighted the experiences of food banks in their own constituencies, possible reasons for their growth, and the number of people in work turning to food banks. For example, in the debate on food banks in Scotland, Lindsay Roy stated:

Most recipients of food from food banks are working strivers, as well as people on benefits. They have had their pay cut or their hours reduced, while others have had their benefits slashed or delayed, which has placed tremendous pressure on families. Others face the same kind of personal challenge that many face when buying a new fridge or something else that compounds the difficulty of managing their expenses. Some have resorted to payday loans and are literally destitute.⁶⁸

Huw Irranca-Davies, Shadow Minister for Food and Farming, linked food poverty to benefits reforms and called for the Government to review their policy in this area:

... we ask the Government also to recognise that their own actions on benefits and tax reforms and their social and economic policies are not only failing to alleviate the problems but are worsening the situation. Think again, before it is too late.⁶⁹

However, it has been suggested that the issue has been picked up mainly for political ends, for example by Stephen Crabb, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales:

What the debate represents, as has been highlighted by some of my hon. Friends, is the latest stage in a political campaign by the Labour party to use the food bank movement as a vehicle for its political attack on some of the changes and challenges that we are facing as a coalition Government.⁷⁰

2 Increasing food bank usage: possible contributing factors

The Department of Health defines food poverty as “the inability to afford, or to have access to, food to make up a healthy diet”.⁷¹ The reported rise in the number and usage of food banks has been taken by some as an indicator of a rise in food poverty. For example, introducing a debate on the subject of food poverty in December 2012, Luciana Berger MP made the following statement:

⁶⁷ [HC Deb 18 December 2013 c.811](#)

⁶⁸ [HC Deb 19 Dec 2012 c243WH](#)

⁶⁹ [HC Deb 12 Dec 2012 c119-120WH](#)

⁷⁰ [HC Deb 12 Feb 2013 c250WH](#)

⁷¹ Department of Health, *Choosing a Better Diet: a food and health action plan*, 2005

The rising food poverty scandal is a national disgrace. I shall refer to two headline figures that I will talk about in more detail in a moment. Last year, the food redistributed by FareShare contributed to more than 8.6 million meals, and fed 36,500 people every day. The Trussell Trust, which operates a network of food banks throughout the country—I will speak about it in more detail in a moment—estimates that it will have fed 230,000 people in 2012-13.⁷²

Two issues are often cited as important drivers – food prices and changing household incomes. However, it is noteworthy that any contribution of benefit reforms to growth in food banks has been disputed by the Government. In a debate on costs of living in May 2013, Ed Davey MP (Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change) stated:

People who run food banks are doing an extremely good job and deserve credit for their work. However, it is completely wrong to suggest that there is a statistical link between the Government's benefit reforms and the provision of food banks. It is good that people are helping others. I hope the hon. Gentleman supports that.⁷³

These drivers are discussed in the following sections along with other possible contributing factors such as more effective promotion and increased visibility of food banks.

2.1 Food prices

World food prices have been subject to several spikes in the last five years and have shown a general increasing trend, as shown in **Figure 3**. The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation Price Index in March 2014 was at its highest level since May 2013.⁷⁴

These spikes are thought to be a result of a range of global factors including drought, rising demand from countries such as India and China, increased oil prices, currency fluctuations, and export restrictions (the latter resulting from Chinese policies to reduce grain stocks, population and economic growth in transitional economies, poor wheat harvests in 2006/7 and the growth of biofuels⁷⁵).

In the UK, all food groups have risen in price since 2007 (the start of the recession) with rises ranging from 24% to 55%. Food prices in the UK (including non-alcoholic drinks) rose by 11% in real terms between 2007 and 2013 taking the UK back to the late nineties in terms of the high cost of food relative to other goods. Food prices have had a strong effect on food shopping for low income households. Between 2007-2013 households in the lowest income group bought less butter, fruit, vegetables and soft drinks, but bought more pork, bacon and cheese.

Food prices rose 22%, in the UK between January 2007 and May 2013 while rising only 12% in Germany and 13% in France. Averaged across the EU food prices rose 17% over the same time period.⁷⁶

More detail on the factors underlying increases in world and UK food prices is available in the House of Commons Library Standard Note [Food Prices and Affordability](#) (11 October 2012).

⁷² [HC Deb 12 December 2012 c96WH](#)

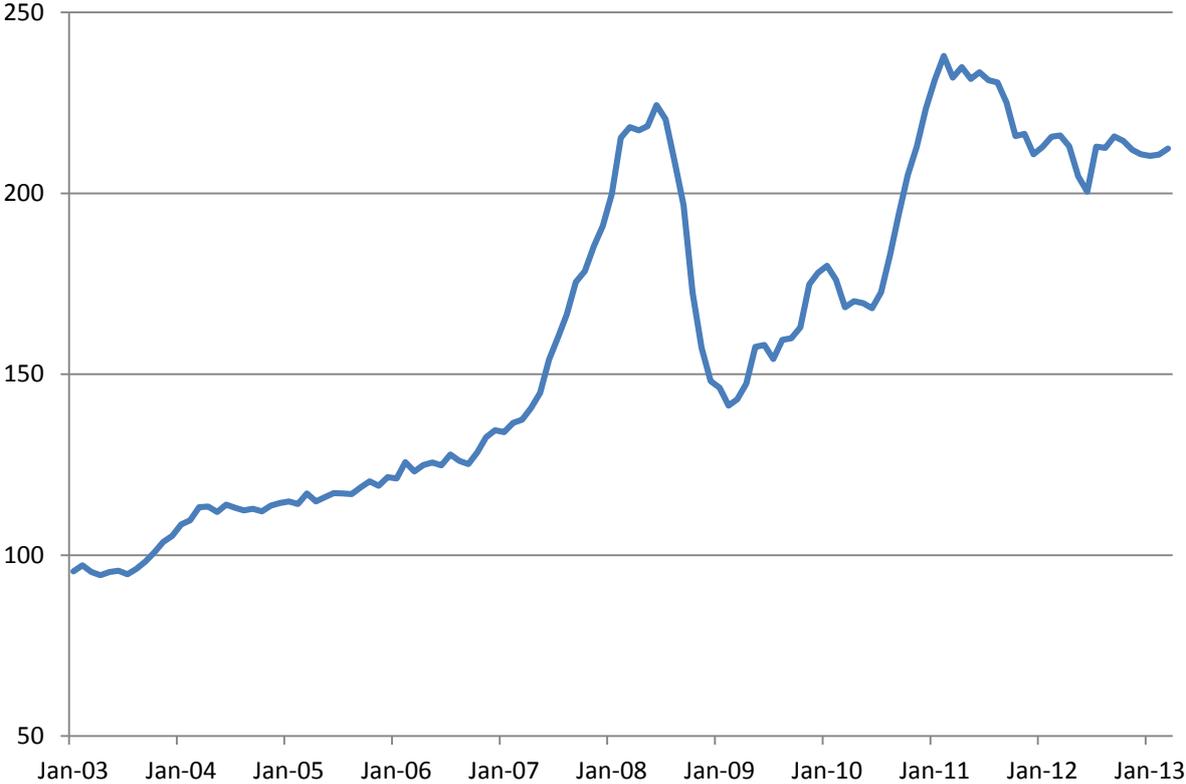
⁷³ [HC Deb 14 May 2013 c511](#)

⁷⁴ UN FAO, [FAO Food Price Index](#), 3 April 2014

⁷⁵ HM Government, [The 2007/08 Agricultural Price Spikes: Causes and Policy Implications](#), January 2010

⁷⁶ Defra, [Food Statistics Pocket book 2013](#), October 2013

Figure 3: FAO Food Price Index, a measure of the monthly change in international prices of a basket of food commodities (weighted by average export shares of meat, dairy, cereals, oils and fats and sugar, 2002-2004=100)



[Source: Food and Agriculture Organization, April 2013].⁷⁷

2.2 Unemployment, income and welfare

Unemployment remains high in the UK at 7.2% (November 2013 to January 2014) relative to the period prior to 2008 when the rate was around 5%, as shown in **Figure 4**.⁷⁸

Higher unemployment has led to increased numbers claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance, from around 800,000 people in March 2008 to just over 1.3 million people in October 2013.⁷⁹

The economic downturn has also had a significant impact on those in work. UK average weekly earnings increased by 1% in the period December 2012 to February 2013 as compared to the same period a year previously. This equates to an earnings cut in real terms as inflation (as measured by the Consumer Prices Index) was 2.8% from February 2012 to February 2013.⁸⁰

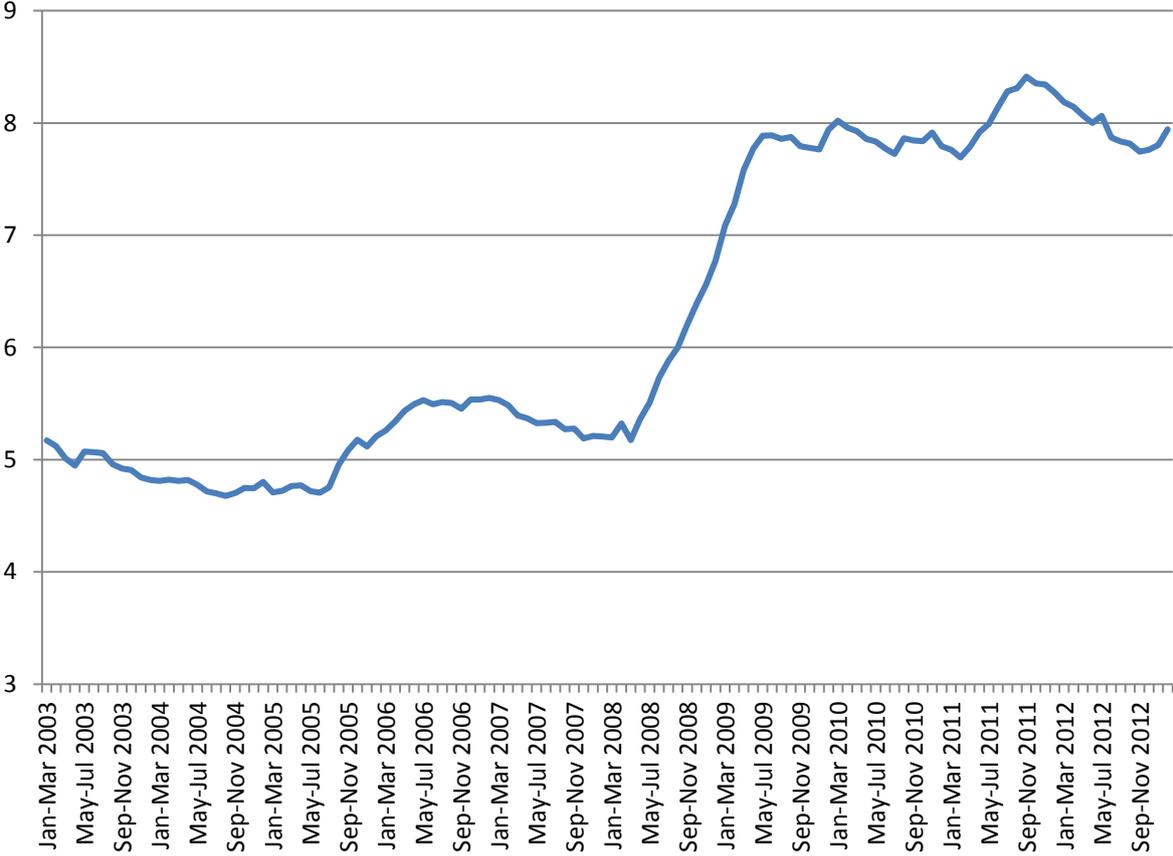
⁷⁷ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *FAO Food Price Index*, accessed 29 Apr 2013

⁷⁸ ONS, *Labour Market Statistics*, March 2014

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

Figure 4: UK unemployment rate (aged 16+) since 2003, seasonally adjusted, shown as a percentage of all economically active



[Source: Office for National Statistics, April 2013].⁸¹

Stagnant wages, coupled with relatively high inflation, led to what the former Bank of England Governor, Sir Mervyn King, described as the longest decline in the real value of take-home pay since the 1920s.⁸²In its report *Living Standards, Poverty and Inequality in the UK: 2012* published in June 2012, the Institute for Fiscal Studies forecast that median household income would continue to fall in real terms until 2013-14, and would still be lower in 2015-16 than it was in 2002-03- a situation which, if realised, would represent “the worst period for changes in median income since at least the early 1960s, and probably much earlier.”⁸³

The Resolution Foundation has drawn attention to the impact of changes on low to middle income households (which it defines as in-work households below median income, not including the poorest 10% of households and those deriving more than 20% of their gross income from means-tested social security benefits).For this group, comprising around 5.6 million households, the Resolution Foundation notes that the squeeze in real wages rates since 2008 follows a period (2003-2008) when real wages for many low to middle income workers were already stagnant or declining.

⁸¹ Office for National Statistics, *Labour Market Statistics*

⁸² *Speech given by the Speech given by Mervyn King, Governor of the Bank of England, at the Civic Centre, Newcastle, 25 January 2011*

⁸³ p2

While tax credits helped to prop up stagnating household incomes in the initial stages of the current downturn, the Foundation argues that with changes to tax credits since 2010 and other reductions to in-work benefits as a result of measures introduced by the current Government, the contribution of state support to family incomes has declined and will decline further. Already, it notes, many low to middle income families are under considerable financial strain, with just over half having no savings at all and two thirds having less than a month's income and savings. As a result, the Resolution Foundation argues that low to middle income families are "vulnerable to even small shocks such as an unexpectedly large bill" and that "major shocks such as illness or unemployment can be catastrophic."⁸⁴

The Trussell Trust estimated that around half the referrals to its food banks in 2012-13 were due to benefits issues (30% were as a result of "benefit delays", around 15% due to "benefit changes" and around 4% following refusal of a Social Fund Crisis Loan).

The Government's view is that part of the increase in the use of food banks is due to the decision to allow Jobcentre Plus advisers from September 2011 to "signpost" people needing additional help to food banks and other local organisations. At Work and Pensions Questions on 10 September 2012, the Secretary of State told the House:

When we came to office, I was told by the Department that despite the constant requests from a variety of people who provide food banks, in particular the Trussell Trust, to put their leaflets in jobcentres to advertise what they were doing, the last Government said no, because they did not want the embarrassment of their involvement. We immediately allowed them to do so, which is one reason for the increase in the number of people seeking food banks.⁸⁵

While increasing awareness of the existence of food banks may well be a factor in explaining recent growth in usage a point acknowledged by the Trussell Trust's UK food bank network manager⁸⁶—the role of Jobcentre Plus in this regard is difficult to quantify since it does not collate statistics on food bank referrals.⁸⁷In addition, Jobcentre Plus only started to signpost people nationally to foodbanks from September 2011, while demand for food banks had increased steadily over the previous three years.⁸⁸

Other developments in the benefits system which could potentially be linked to the growth in demand for food banks are discussed below.

Crisis Loans

Crisis Loans (CLs) were repayable awards from the DWP' Social Fund available to people faced with an unforeseen emergency or disaster which left them without funds and could be awarded regardless of whether the family was in receipt of any benefit. A CL would only be made if the applicant can show that they or their family would otherwise face "serious damage or serious risk to their health or safety".

In the five years to 2011, the number of Crisis Loans awarded almost tripled. No detailed analysis of the reasons for the increase in demand for Crisis Loans has been published, but Ministers in the current Government have attributed the increase to the introduction of

⁸⁴ Matthew Whittaker, *Squeezed Britain 2013*, Resolution Foundation, February 2013

⁸⁵ HC Deb 10 September 2012 c13

⁸⁶ See "[Foodbanks on the rise: The sign of a struggling nation](#)", *The Big Issue*, 9 January 2013

⁸⁷ HC Deb 13 December 2012 c430w

⁸⁸ See comments by Chris Mould, Chief Executive of the Trussell Trust, on the BBC Radio 4 programme *You and Yours*, 10 November 2011

telephone claims, rather than as an indicator of any increase in genuine need. In a Written Ministerial Statement the DWP Minister Steve Webb said:

... since the introduction of remote telephone applications in 2006, there has been an unjustifiable growth in the use of crisis loans. The number of awards made has increased from around 1 million to 2.7 million while spending has almost tripled, reaching £233 million in 2009-10. In the last 12 months alone, over 17,000 people received 10 or more crisis loans.⁸⁹

In response to this growth the Government changed the rules governing access to Crisis Loans, reducing the rate paid for living expenses from 75% of the benefits rate to 60% from April 2011, with a further reduction to 30% in April 2012. The number of repeat awards was also limited in April 2011 to three (for general living expenses) in a rolling 12-month period, and from July 2011 repeat awards for the same expense in a 12-month period were no longer allowed.⁹⁰As a result of the measures introduced, gross expenditure on Crisis Loans fell from £228.3 million in 2010-11 to £133.3 million in 2011-12.⁹¹

The discretionary Social Fund was abolished from April 2013, and funding made available to local authorities in England and to the devolved administrations to enable them to provide new local support. Further details are given later in this note.

Benefit conditionality and sanctions

Benefit claimants deemed not to be satisfying the conditions for entitlement to benefit may find that their benefit payment is temporarily suspended or reduced, or their claim “disallowed.” Conditionality for benefit claimants has increased in recent years (under the Labour Government and the present administration) and groups of claimants not previously expected to undertake activities in return for their benefit have found themselves subject to new requirements (e.g. lone parents, and incapacity benefit claimants). The expansion of conditionality to new groups, and stricter demands placed on existing claimant groups, have resulted in greater numbers receiving benefit sanctions. The increase in Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) claims since 2008 will also have resulted in additional sanctions.

Figures published by DWP on 15 May 2013 show that the number of Jobseeker’s Allowance sanctions and disallowances increased from 279,840 in 2001 to 684,030 in 2010, with the main increase happening after 2006. In 2011 the number of sanctions imposed fell back slightly to 668,000 but in the period January to October 2012 alone 680,180 sanctions were imposed.⁹²

Under the new JSA sanctions regime (introduced on 22nd October 2012), a total of 817,541 ‘adverse’ sanction decisions were made in the period October 2012-September 2013. For Employment and Support Allowance, 19,325 sanctions were imposed between December 2012 and September 2013, under the new ESS conditionality regime.⁹³

Commenting on the release of the previous statistics to June 2013, Tim Nichols, a spokesperson for the Child Poverty Action Group, said:

⁸⁹ [HC Deb 3 March 2011 cc45-46WMS](#)

⁹⁰ Department for Work and Pensions, [Crisis Loans – changes from April 2012](#), accessed 2 May 2013

⁹¹ Department for Work and Pensions, [Annual Report by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the Social Fund 2011/2012, July 2012](#)

⁹² DWP, [Ad-hoc analysis on the number of Jobseeker’s Allowance \(JSA\) sanctions and disallowances, where a decision has been made, in each month from 1st April 2000 to 21st October 2012 by Jobcentre Plus Group/District/Office and decision](#), 15 May 2013

⁹³ DWP, [Jobseeker’s Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance sanctions](#), 5 March 2014

The sanctions regime is an unfolding scandal that is doing tremendous damage to jobseekers and disabled people, even when they are trying to do the right thing.

Sanctions are meant to have a positive effect on behaviour, so if the system was working their use would be falling as claimants develop positive relationships with Jobcentre and Work Programme advisers and do all the activities needed. Instead, the system has become an unhelpful bureaucratic nightmare, with Jobcentres setting targets to arbitrarily push up the numbers of people hit with a sanction.

Claimants are finding it increasingly confusing to understand what the sanctions regime expects of them, and many sanctions appear to happen when people are trying to do the right thing, but they just cannot find their way through the unhelpful and chaotic bureaucracy of Jobcentres and the Work Programme.

The result is demand on foodbanks surging from people whose claims are stopped for weeks, months and even years. Since June last year 120 disabled people have been banned from benefits for a fixed 3 year period, without a systematic safeguard of full case reviews before it reaches that point. Instead of helping people, many claimants are finding that Jobcentres are becoming like a Kafkaesque nightmare. The government should urgently investigate what the consequences are for the children and families of people being failed by this cruel regime.⁹⁴

Impact of incorrect sanctioning

A March 2014 report by Guy Miscampbell published by Policy Exchange, [Smarter Sanctions: Sorting out the system](#) highlights the scale of sanctions mistakes. It states that under the current regime as many as 68,000 people on Jobseeker's Allowance have their benefits taken away by mistake and face unnecessary hardship as a result. This is the number of sanction decisions subsequently appealed and overturned. The report also suggests that such financial penalties have contributed to the rise in the number of people using food banks.

The report states (p.10):

With some 874,000 adverse decisions being made between October 2012 and September 2013, and over 146,000 of them being successfully appealed or reconsidered it is clear that possibility of wrongly applied sanctions, and what their effects might be, is an important one. With some estimates suggesting that 43% of those referred to food banks are there due to benefit stoppage or being refused a crisis loan, there is not currently an adequate safety net for those who are wrongly sanctioned.

House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee report - January 2014

In January 2014, the Work and Pensions Committee published its report, [The role of Jobcentre Plus in the reformed welfare system](#), which considered, among other things, the link between sanctions and food aid.⁹⁵ The Committee drew on evidence from Church Action

⁹⁴ Child Poverty Action Group press release, [3-year benefit ban hits 120 disabled people under new sanctions regime](#), 6 November 2013

⁹⁵ HC 479, House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, [The role of Jobcentre Plus in the reformed welfare system](#), Session 2013–14, 28 January 2014, pp24–28

on Poverty, Oxfam and the Trussell Trust which highlighted sanctions as significant factor in the rise in food bank use. The Committee recommended that:

97. ...DWP take urgent steps to monitor the extent of financial hardship caused by benefit sanctions, including by collecting, collating and publishing data on the number of claimants "signposted" to food aid by Jobcentres and the reasons for claimants' need for assistance in these cases.

The [Government's response](#) to the report (3 April 2014) rejected the recommendation:

We continue to monitor sanctions policy on an on-going basis and collect customer feedback wherever appropriate as part of our evaluation of relevant DWP policies.

The sanctions system is designed to provide clear consequences for any failure to comply. Sanctions play a vital role in supporting the conditionality regime. They encourage claimants to comply with the requirements that are designed to help them move into or prepare for work. And we know that where sanctions are understood, they have a positive impact on claimant behaviour.

The use of food banks is not exclusive to benefit claimants and Jobcentres have no part in deciding whether support is provided. Jobcentres will continue to provide details of suitable local support services to all members of the public including food banks.

Employment and Support Allowance and Incapacity Benefit reassessment

Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) replaced incapacity benefits for new claims from October 2008. Starting from 2010, the remaining incapacity benefit claimants are being reassessed using the Work Capability Assessment (WCA) (taking forward plans set out by the previous Government). Reassessment is due to be completed by 2014. Around 1.5 million people are being reassessed. Those who satisfy the test will be "migrated" to Employment and Support Allowance, but estimates suggest that substantial numbers will be found "fit for work". Results so far from the reassessment of the remaining incapacity benefit claimants which started in October 2010 show 27% being found fit for work (227,000 out of the 841,000 reassessments completed so far).⁹⁶

In addition, from April 2012, for those Employment and Support Allowance claimants assessed as eligible for the "Work Related Activity Group", contributory ESA has only been payable for up to one year. Those still on benefit at that point may then claim income-based (i.e. means-tested) ESA, but they may not be entitled to any benefit if they or their partner has other income or capital above a certain level. The Government expects that around 700,000 people (including individuals migrated from IB following reassessment) will be affected by the time limit by 2015-16. Around 60% are expected to have some entitlement to income-related ESA, but around 280,000 will lose ESA completely – because, for example, they have other income or savings, or a working partner. Savings of around £1.2 billion a year are expected.⁹⁷

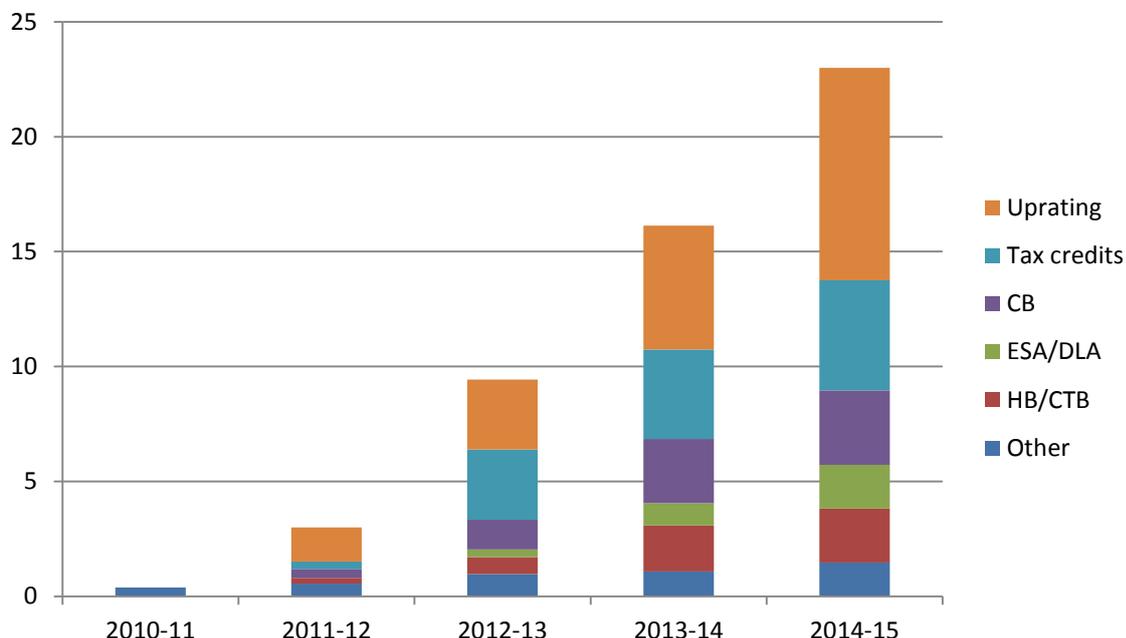
⁹⁶ DWP, *Employment and Support Allowance: Outcomes of Work Capability Assessments, Great Britain: Quarterly official statistics bulletin*, July 2013

⁹⁷ For further details see Library Standard Note, *Time limiting of contributory Employment and Support Allowance from 30 April 2012*

Other ongoing and future welfare reforms

Since it came to power, the current Government has announced a series of welfare reforms which are having and will have a significant impact on families reliant on benefits and tax credits. While the full impact of many of the changes will not be felt for some time, there may be a knock on effect on demand for the services of food banks. **Figure 5** shows the expected savings which will result from reforms affecting working age groups.⁹⁸

Figure 5: Expected annual savings from working age welfare reforms (£ billion a year)



[Source: HM Treasury Budget Red Books and Autumn Statements; 2010 Spending Review]

While many of the Government’s welfare reforms have been or are being introduced, the full impact of the overall package has not yet been felt. Total savings in 2012-13 amounted to just under £10 billion, but in 2013-14 this will increase to over £16 billion and by 2014-15 to over £23 billion.

In terms of savings, the biggest chunk (over £9 billion by 2014-15) is due to changes in benefit uprating (this includes both the switch to uprating benefits by reference to the Consumer Price Index (CPI), and the 1% uprating of working age benefits for three years announced in the 2012 Autumn Statement). The impact of these changes on families is difficult to gauge since no government since the 1960s has undertaken any official empirical study of benefit adequacy, but independent estimates of “Minimum Income Standards” suggest that current out-of-work benefit rates for people of working age are significantly lower than the amounts necessary for a minimum acceptable standard of living.⁹⁹

Reforms which could potentially have a more immediate impact on demand for food banks include:

- The package of tax credit changes introduced by the current Government aimed at “controlling the costs of tax credits” in order to “provide a fair and affordable platform

⁹⁸ Covers measures announced up to and including Budget 2013

⁹⁹ The rationale – such as there is – for current benefit rates is examined in part 2 of Library Research Paper 13/01, *Welfare Benefits Uprating Bill*

for the introduction of the Universal Credit". These are expected to yield savings of around £4.8 billion a year by 2014-15.

- Housing Benefit rules from April 2013 to tackle "under-occupation" of social housing
- The impact of local Council Tax reduction schemes, which replaced Council Tax Benefit from April 2013
- The household benefit cap, which is being introduced in 2013-14

From October 2013, the Government's flagship Universal Credit (UC) began to replace means-tested benefits and tax credits for working age. The implications of Universal Credit for food banks are difficult to gauge. The Government believes that Universal Credit will provide a route out of poverty for individuals and families by streamlining and simplifying support, improving work incentives, and removing barriers to work. The Government is also using the opportunity afforded by Universal Credit to encourage families to take more responsibilities for their own finances.

The default position is that UC will be paid on a monthly basis, and as a single payment. The thinking behind this is that UC should mimic work and receipt of a salary, so that people are better prepared to cope with a move into work. However, some have argued that this will present a challenge for families not used to budgeting on a monthly basis, and that disruption or delay to payments could mean that families are left without any support. The Government has said that "payment exceptions" may be made in certain circumstances, and that targeted, personalised budgeting support will be available to claimants who might struggle to budget on a monthly basis. Plans for budgeting support and other local support services to be offered alongside Universal Credit are still being developed.

Another new benefit - [Personal Independence Payment](#) (PIP) - will have completely replaced Disability Living Allowance (DLA) for people of working age by 2018. PIP has already been introduced for new claims, but the timetable for reassessing the existing working-age DLA claimants for PIP has been pushed back so that the bulk of the reassessments will not now begin until October 2015, with the process to be completed by 2018. The Government estimates that by May 2018, 607,000 fewer people will receive PIP than would have got DLA under the existing rules.¹⁰⁰ This represents a reduction of 28% in the caseload by 2018.

The May 2013 report from Church Poverty in Action and Oxfam, [Walking the Breadline: The scandal of food poverty in 21st century Britain](#), calls for a number of initiatives including:¹⁰¹

- An inquiry by the House of Commons Work and Pensions Select Committee into any relationship between benefits changes and food poverty
- Regular publication by DWP of data on benefits delays, errors and sanctions
- Monitoring by DWP of effect of Universal Credit on food poverty
- Recording and monitoring of food bank referrals made by government agencies

¹⁰⁰ The total working-age PIP caseload is expected to be around 1,575,000 in May 2018. The corresponding estimate for May 2018 under the existing DLA rules is 2,182,000; see DWP, [Personal Independence Payment: Reassessment and Impacts](#), 13 December 2012

¹⁰¹ Cooper, N. and Dumpleton, S. [Walking the Breadline: The scandal of food poverty in 21st century Britain](#), Church Action on Poverty and Oxfam, May 2013

Food and the 'localisation' of the Social Fund

In April 2013, the [Welfare Reform Act 2012](#) resulted in the abolition of Crisis Loans (previously made by Department of Work and Pensions offices to people in acute need) and paved the way for the delivery of new local provision through local authorities and the devolved administrations, with budget made available to them to cover this. Further information can be found in the Library briefing on [Localisation of the Social Fund](#) (16 November 2012).

The Government has since announced that DWP funding for local welfare assistance schemes will cease after 2014-15 meaning that local authorities and the devolved administrations will have to fund such schemes (if they continue them) from their overall grant settlements. The Local Government Association has highlighted major concerns that the withdrawal of this funding may leave some areas unable to afford to help out families in crisis which could lead to short-term problems escalating.¹⁰²

The House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee's March 2014 report [Monitoring the Performance of the Department for Work and Pensions in 2012-13](#) highlighted that it was "essential" that the Government ensures that sufficient funding is available to local authorities to cover the costs of providing the localised welfare support schemes. The Committee recommended two options:¹⁰³

64.either DWP should continue to transfer funding to local authorities beyond April 2015, until it has a clear picture of the level of demand; or the local government settlement administered by the Department for Communities and Local Government should be increased by the full amount that would have been allocated for these elements of the discretionary Social Fund, and this sum should be ringfenced for local welfare schemes.

The following sections summarise the initial information available in early 2013 on the planned approaches of the devolved administrations and English local authorities. More recent information is given in an article from *The Guardian* on 27 November 2013, "[Will council crisis funds last the winter?](#)"

English local authorities

The [Centre for Responsible Credit](#) has produced a [report](#) which draws on a review of councils' published plans (including 25 English local authorities at the time of the report) and further survey/interview research. The report found that councils were tending to replicate the aims of the previous Social Fund arrangements (including helping those with urgent needs), at least for an initial period while information (such as on level of demand for these services) is collected. Most have also introduced conditions and restrictions such as requiring that other possible sources of assistance have been exhausted first and limiting people to two awards in a 12-month rolling period (e.g. [Leicestershire](#), [Birmingham](#), [North East Lincolnshire](#) and [Calderdale](#)). Proposed forms of support are varied, but often include low-value affordable loans and in-kind support of some kind. Some councils (e.g. [Southampton City Council](#)) will provide food vouchers, and others (e.g. [Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council](#)) are considering how they might link up with food banks in providing emergency

¹⁰² LGA Press Release, [Government should rethink scrapping of £347 million emergency welfare fund, councils urge](#), 24 February 2014

¹⁰³ HC 1153, paras 55-64

assistance.¹⁰⁴ [Hampshire County Council](#) has approved a “grant of up to £35,000 to food banks within Hampshire.”¹⁰⁵

[The Children’s Society](#) is currently collating information on councils’ local welfare plans gleaned through Freedom of Information requests. The results of this work are expected to be available by the end of May.¹⁰⁶

Scotland

On 21 October the Scottish Government announced that a new “[Scottish Welfare Fund](#)” would begin operations in April 2013.¹⁰⁷ The Fund is a national scheme, delivered through local authorities. It is intended as an interim scheme only, to last for a period of two years. Decisions on longer term arrangements will be taken following a review of the interim scheme. The intention is to set out the permanent scheme in legislation.

Funding will be split between “Crisis Grants” and “Community Care Grants”. Crisis Grants may be awarded “to meet expenses that have arisen as a result of an emergency or disaster in order to avoid serious damage or serious risk to the health or safety of the applicant or their family. “Community Care Grants will also have a similar role to their current Social Fund CCGs, namely “to enable independent living or continued independent living, preventing the need for institutional care.”

As to how assistance will be provided, a Scottish Government briefing states:

The scheme will pay out grants or assistance in kind (cash, fuel cards, food vouchers, travel warrants, loaded store card for e.g. white goods/furniture) only, but not loans. Local Authorities will have discretion on the type of support offered i.e. Local Authorities can offer assistance in kind rather than cash in order to meet the needs of the applicant and gain economies of scale from bulk purchasing or re-use schemes.

It also states:

Where possible, Local Authorities will work with applicants to identify any other support they may need or be entitled to and refer them to relevant services to help solve any underlying problems. This may include money advice or debt advice. Good links will need to be established with Jobcentre Plus to ensure continuity with other welfare provision.¹⁰⁸

It is not clear whether this will involve “signposting” people to foodbanks.

Wales

The Welsh Government has used the funding to establish the [Wales](#). According to the website of the Welsh Government the scheme will offer non-repayable grants and “in kind support”, but no details are given on the form the latter might take.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Gibbons, D., “[Local welfare provision, low-income households, and third sector financial services provision](#)”, Centre for Responsible Credit, March 2013

¹⁰⁵ Hampshire County Council, [Local Welfare Provision – Executive Decision Record \(Final\)](#), 22 February 2013

¹⁰⁶ *Pers. comm.*, The Children’s Society, 19 April 2013

¹⁰⁷ The Scottish Government, [Protecting Scotland’s poorest](#), 21 October 2012

¹⁰⁸ The Scottish Government, [Summary of arrangements for the Scottish Welfare Fund](#), accessed 29 April 2013

¹⁰⁹ Welsh Government, [Discretionary Assistance Fund for Wales](#), accessed 2 May 2013

Northern Ireland

A separate Welfare Reform Bill for Northern Ireland is currently in passage through the Northern Ireland Assembly. Once it is passed, according to their [online guidance](#):

Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans for household things and living costs will be replaced by a new type of help called Discretionary Support, offering loans which must be paid back and grants which do not have to be paid back.¹¹⁰

No reference is made to in-kind support or to food specifically.

2.3 Other factors in play

It is important to re-emphasise that data on number and usage of food banks are not collected by Government and, where available, are provided by organisations that operate food banks (such as The Trussell Trust). As such, reports of increased use of food banks may be including users who have previously been helped by unmonitored organisations and have shifted to ones with more rigorous or centralised data collection procedures.

It is also probable that as the profile of the food bank has increased, alongside improved support through social franchise systems such as that employed by The Trussell Trust, the process of setting up a food bank has become more available, easier and more attractive. This in itself could lead to increased numbers and potentially usage as a latent need is filled. The Defra commissioned research (see section 1.4 above) found no systematic evidence on the impact of increased supply on the demand for food aid.

A 2011 Coventry University study indicated that the success of the Trussell Trust franchise system has likely been due in part to its alignment with churches (of which there is a massive existing network across the country) and the provision of food banks as a faith-based action.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ NI Direct, [Changes to the Social Fund](#), accessed 2 May 2013

¹¹¹ Lambie, H., [“The Trussell Trust Foodbank Network: Exploring the Growth of Foodbanks Across the UK”](#), Coventry University, November 2011