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# The ‘Perfect Storm’: Food Banks and Food Insecurity During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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In the UK, food banks and other forms of food aid have become a normalised support mechanism for those living at the sharp end of poverty. Drawing from accounts of those who have used, worked, and volunteered in two of England’s food banks during the Covid-19 pandemic, this article explores some of the key challenges that emerged for food aid during this unique period. In documenting these experiences, the paper concurs with previous work that has identified the expanding role of food banks in providing core welfare support, suggesting an increasingly extended welfare function of food aid. This has implications for understanding the effectiveness of welfare – and the appropriateness of our reliance on voluntary aid – in the post-pandemic period.

**Keywords:** Food banks; Covid-19; volunteers; welfare; poverty

## Introduction

Food banks and other forms of food aid have become a normalised support mechanism for those living at the sharp end of poverty (Beck and Gwilym, 2022), with a significant rise in their number since 2010 (Irvine *et al.*, 2022). Recent estimates suggest that there are over 2,500 food banks operating in the UK. Fourteen hundred food banks are run by the Trussell Trust, and 1,172 are independent (Irvine *et al.*, 2022). Despite protestations from some politicians that food bank usage increases can be attributed to ‘better promotion’, it is generally accepted that increased living costs, financial crises, and austerity measures, such as changes to the welfare benefits system, are the major causes of food insecurity (All-Party Parliamentary (APPG) Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty, 2014; Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2014; Loopstra *et al.*, 2015).

Although there has been a steady increase in food bank use from 2010, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) only started to measure food insecurity from April 2019, and the data was published in March 2021 for financial year 2019–2020 (pre-pandemic) under the annual Family Resources Survey (FRS) (DWP, 2021). The data shows that ‘14 per cent of the UK population or nine point three million people’ (IFAN, 2021) reported very low, low, or marginal household food security. Forty-three per cent of food insecure households were in receipt of Universal Credit (UC) (DWP, 2021) compared to 27 per cent in 2020/21 (DWP, 2022) and 31 per cent in 2021/22 (DWP, 2023). Goodwin (2022) attributes the reduction in food insecurity for those claiming UC in 2020/21 to the twenty pounds/week uplift. A report by Baumberg Geiger *et al.* (2021: 27) described the twenty pounds/week UC uplift as a ‘sticking plaster’ finding that the ‘overall level of benefits is insufficient for UC claimants to avoid food insecurity’. The removal of the uplift in October 2021 combined with rising food prices and the cost-of-living crisis have pushed more people into food insecurity and it is at the highest level since the pandemic (Food Foundation, 2022).

Loopstra *et al.* (2015) analysed data from the Trussell Trust and local authorities and concluded that ‘more food banks are opening in areas experiencing greater cuts in spending on local services and central welfare benefits and higher unemployment rates’ (Loopstra *et al.*, 2015: 2) and in areas where more people are experiencing higher rates of benefit sanctions and austerity.

From March 2020, the two authors volunteered on a weekly basis at different food banks in towns in England. Wood ceased volunteering upon leaving the UK in June 2020, whilst Pickering continued to volunteer in one of two food banks. We observed the challenges faced by volunteers and staff as they adapted to the increased demands brought about by the pandemic. We also witnessed a changing context for those who had traditionally used food banks and saw the emergence of new categories of users. New contours of precarity were evolving before us, indicating that the poverty net was not only deepening, but also widening. Perhaps the starkest observation though was that the food bank was increasingly framed as a core welfare service for those in need, rather than a stop-gap food aid provision. This new framing, cemented over more than a decade of austerity politics, was the epitome of the Big Society (Caplan, 2016) and, arguably, a depressing testament to the ‘successful failure’ (Ronson and Caraher 2015) of welfare reform. It was, the ‘spatial shifting of responsibility . . . away from public institutions failing to cope with rapidly diminishing budgets, and instead onto those communities already feeling the financial effects of austerity’ (Strong 2020: 211). These observations led Pickering to undertake research with those who worked, volunteered, and used food banks during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### This study

As part of her postgraduate taught research project, Pickering investigated the perceptions and experiences of the social and economic impact of Covid-19 on service users of food banks and how the voluntary sector responded in meeting the increased need for food. The study had three objectives:

1. To compare and contrast the experiences of two food banks and how they have managed during the pandemic by investigating both the extent to which they have been affected by, and how they have responded to the Covid-19 crisis.
2. To identify the effect of the economic and social impact of the Covid-19 crisis on service users of food banks during this period.
3. To explore the perceptions and experiences of those who volunteered at food banks during the pandemic.

A qualitative approach was adopted to investigate the ‘rich tapestry of people’s lives’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013: 24) through accounts and testimonies where interpretive meaning matters most (Have, 2004). Qualitative studies can also provide novel insights into so-called ‘hard to reach’ groups, capturing ‘voices’ that are otherwise unheard or socially marginalised (Braun and Clarke, 2013) particularly in a public and political discourse in which the lived experience of those in poverty seems to be absent.

The two sites where Pickering volunteered were selected, both of which were in an urban area in the East Midlands (summarised in Table 1). The first of these (Food Bank A) had been in operation as part of the Trussell Trust network for over a decade prior to the pandemic. The second (Food Bank B) was set up by a local political party during the pandemic and later became an independent charity. In keeping with Power *et al.* (2020), this project might best be described as ‘practitioner-researcher’ work, given that Pickering was volunteering at the sites prior to undertaking the research. Volunteering responsibilities included preparing food parcels, checking stock, and supporting food distribution. Later on in the timeframe of the research (June–September 2021) Pickering also engaged directly with clients. It is important to note here

Table 1. Food bank sites

	Food Bank A	Food Bank B
Model	Part of the Trussell Trust network	Independent food bank
Year established	2009	2020
Location	Located in a large church in a suburban area	Located on the local high street in a former shop
Number of sites	Operates numerous food bank satellite sites around the borough	One site only
Referral model	Operates on the typical referral Trussell Trust 'voucher' system pre-pandemic (referrals from schools, housing associations, Citizen's Advice, doctor's surgeries)	Operates on a self-referral basis
Food parcel statistics pre-pandemic	23 March to 23 June 2019: Number of vouchers used or number of food parcels: 1631 Adults: 2339 Children: 1502 Total people: 3841	N/A (Food bank established during the pandemic)
Food parcel statistics during the pandemic	23 March 2020 to 23 June 2020 <sup>1</sup> : Schools: 750 parcels Number of vouchers used or numbers of parcels: 3054 Adults: 4523 Children: 2816 Total people: 7339	23 March 2020 to 22 June 2020: Total Deliveries: 1753 Total People: 4901
Number of participants interviewed in the study	Staff: 3 Volunteers: 2 Service users: 2	Staff <sup>2</sup> : 3 Volunteers: 3 Service users: 2

<sup>1</sup>Note, this date range was selected as it is the period during which the first UK Covid-19 lockdown was in force. Restrictions eased in June 2020, with the introduction of social distancing measures on 23 June 2020.

<sup>2</sup>At the time of the study, there were no employed staff at Food Bank B so trustees were offered the opportunity to be interviewed in place of staff. For consistency, the trustees are referred to as 'staff' in this study.

that travel to any other food bank sites to expand the scope of the study was problematic due to Covid-19 lockdown restrictions. To volunteer during the first phase and during ethical approval applications, a letter issued by the food bank was carried by the volunteer so that any breach of police-enforced lockdowns could be explained.

As Table 1 details, there were other interesting reasons for engaging with the two sites, notably the variances in how long the food banks had been running, who operated them and the different referral models that were in operation. A detailed comparison is outside of the scope of this current paper, though some of our findings illustrate how the two food banks were different in their adaptation to the new realities brought about by the pandemic.

Food bank staff and volunteers were recruited through purposive non-probability sampling to ensure that rich data was produced (Braun and Clarke, 2013). For the recruitment of service users, convenience sampling was undertaken whereby participants were selected based on their willingness to engage in the interview process and their availability (Etikan *et al.*, 2016). Although bias is common with these types of sampling methods, the researcher aimed to maintain subjectivity and reflexivity (Etikan *et al.*, 2016) by reflecting on her own views and beliefs throughout the sampling process, further necessitated by the insider/outsider positionality perspectives that emerged from being both a volunteer and a researcher (Bukamal, 2022).

The six members of staff had been working at their respective food bank between twelve months to eleven years. There were a variety of hours worked per week with some working over the usual forty-hour week. The volunteers gave time at the food banks between one point five

hours to twelve hours per week. Three of the five volunteers interviewed did not work (unemployed or retired), one volunteer was self-employed, and one volunteer was employed full time.

Two of the four service users interviewed both confirmed they were retired as well as disabled (unable to work). One service user was employed full time and the other service user interviewed was self-employed. Five of the staff and volunteers were women, five were men, and one was non-binary. There were two male service users and two female service users interviewed. The overall ethnicity of the interview participants was White, one volunteer interviewed was Black/Black British, and another volunteer Asian/Asian British. Whilst unbalanced, this may reflect the Office of National Statistics (ONS) Census 2011 data for the borough, where around 92 per cent of people are identified as White.<sup>1</sup> Altogether, this article draws on the accounts of a relatively small number of participants, reflecting the difficulties of undertaking fieldwork in the pandemic.

This study obtained ethical approval from Staffordshire University Ethics Committee during a period when the pandemic was constraining fieldwork. Adjustments to the research design were made as guided by university staff to ensure that public health guidance was adhered to. The interviews were conducted between twenty-first of June 2021 and seventeenth of September 2021, following the easing of Covid-19 restrictions in the UK with the rule of six or two households indoors being applied.<sup>2</sup> As Food Bank A was a large site, the opportunity for participants to be interviewed face-to-face, adhering to social distance rules, was offered to expand inclusivity and uptake. Participants were provided with a participant information sheet to ensure informed consent was sought. The participant information sheets were adjusted for different groups of participants (staff and volunteers and service users) and for the different interview methods (face-to-face including details on health and safety measures related to Covid-19 and virtual interviews). The limitations of a postgraduate taught research project meant that no compensation was made available to participants.

Due to the nature and inherent limitations of these sampling methods and the small-scale nature of the study, no claims are made to generalisation. Rather, this study offers some unique qualitative insights into the lived experience of those involved in food banks during a particular moment of historical interest. The literature review conducted as part of this study looked at research on food banks and Covid-19 published between 2020–2021 and after inclusion criteria was applied, just four studies were eligible for consideration. More recent research has advanced our understanding of the effects of the pandemic on food banks and users, but there is still scope for more work that considers the qualitative perspectives of those who use, volunteer for, and staff food banks.

This paper now goes on to review two important aspects of this work drawing both on the accounts from the study and the wider literature. Firstly, we discuss how food banks adapted to the changing and unique circumstances of the pandemic. Secondly, we consider aspects of evidence that support an increasing consensus that food banks have become what former Prime Minister Gordon Brown referred to as the 'last line of defence against destitution' in place of social security (Brown, 2023).

### **Food banks in the time of the pandemic**

The Covid-19 pandemic presented unique challenges for food banks. Increased demand and supply problems were present, caused by the combination of new or increased need, panic buying in supermarkets and reduced donations (Caplan, 2020; Power *et al.*, 2020). These challenges demonstrated the fragility of a system designed to provide short-term support.

For those volunteering and working at the frontline of the two food banks discussed within this paper, these issues were acute. Teams had to adapt quickly to a changing context and increased demand:

... we had to go to a recorded message on the phone because we just couldn't manage [the demand]. We basically put word out to say we don't want people to bring us food because that's actually a real nightmare from a social distancing point of view, so give us money, and we'll buy in, ... but because the supermarkets didn't have the food ... for a few weeks [we were] literally chasing around trying to find stocks of food ... (Dennis, Staff, Food Bank A)

When things started shutting down and people's incomes were curtailed, or people were losing their jobs, the need that had already been there ... grew astronomically. So we went from giving people the odd tin of soup to whole food parcels ... at the height of the pandemic ... there was a point we were doing a couple of hundred food parcels a week easily. Those were the fifty-hour weeks for all of us and we were desperate for volunteers. (Emma, Staff, Food Bank B)

Like other Trussell Trust food banks, Food Bank A operated on a referral model from third-party agencies. During the pandemic it shifted to self-referral for the first time:

Self-referral ... went through the roof ... because the vast majority of [agencies] were working from home and not having face to face interaction with their clients, [they] weren't giving out vouchers at all]. (Brian, Staff, Food Bank A)

The shielding of food bank volunteers along with the closure of food banks or the switch to delivery only services also had profound impacts on the supply side (Caplan, 2020). Graven *et al.* (2020) investigated the availability of food aid in Bradford and how services have responded to the Covid-19 pandemic. They found that the closure of social and community support services, combined with social distance measures and shielding requirements led to pressures on staffing and the availability of volunteers. Conversely, Food Bank A experienced an influx in volunteer support, combined with the ability to be agile and flexible enough to respond to new volunteers:

A lot of our normal volunteers had to go home and shield because they were of that age really, but at the same time, what happened is lots of people were furloughed ... we were overwhelmed with people offering to volunteer. [As we had to] operate in a socially distanced way, we had to limit the number of volunteers within the building ... (Dennis, Staff, Food Bank A)

Additionally, Food Bank A transitioned from food parcel collection to delivery:

Instead of people coming to the food bank to get food parcels, we were delivering them, and that's where the van team ... kicked in. However, the sheer amount of [parcels] ... the van team couldn't have done it ... so what we did was ... schools and businesses that closed took [them]. [For] example, a lot of the teachers from the local schools came and were volunteer drivers for me and so I had a rota of drivers on a weekly basis, who would come and deliver food parcels ... it became like a huge logistical operation getting these things out in the most efficient way possible. (Brian, Staff, Food Bank A)

There was a shift in who used food banks during the pandemic, with two discernible features. On the one hand, there was increased need amongst those already in poverty due to the exacerbation of existing social and economic inequalities (Power *et al.*, 2020). On the other, new needs emerged because of an increase in financial hardship. Although food insecurity was on the rise before the pandemic, more people became food insecure during the pandemic (Food Foundation, 2021) and food bank support was increasingly seen as a 'core welfare intervention' (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2020: 36). Global figures demonstrate the sharp rise in poverty with some estimates suggesting an

increase of between 119 million and 124 million global poor in 2020 (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2021).

The Trussell Trust produced several reports from the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, accurately predicting then what would become the significant rise in levels of destitution in the UK by the end of 2020 (Trussell Trust, 2020). In *State of Hunger: Year Two report* (Trussell Trust, 2021: 3), nearly everyone (95 per cent) using a food bank was defined as ‘destitute’: people unable to afford essentials and who have a very low or zero income. Furthermore, those that were at risk of falling into poverty or closest to the poverty line before the pandemic were more likely to be food insecure following the pandemic (Trussell Trust, 2021). The ‘most striking finding’ of the study was that almost half of people who used food banks owed money to the DWP in mid-2020, making the DWP the main creditor (Trussell Trust, 2021: 48). Covid-19 provided some respite in the form of relaxed contact with the DWP. As one participant in this study highlighted:

You get texts from [the DWP] and that normally freaks me out, because [it says] you must go on to your Universal Credit thing . . . I’ve nothing yet . . . so I keep thinking the sleeping giant will wake up soon . . . I had [a Job Centre adviser] . . . she was horrible, so it’s elevated my anxiety that I’ve got her now . . . I don’t think it’d be wise taking a job that ain’t gonna be good enough, because then I’ll just be coming here still getting the food bank, feeling like I do, feeling low. (Frank, Service User, Food Bank A)

In Northern Ireland, Furey *et al.* (2020)’s summary of results from polling for the Department for Communities found that one in twelve respondents experienced at least one food poverty symptom before the pandemic, which increased to one in five during the early lockdown period or during the past month. Jo, a member of staff at Food Bank B identified the link between pre-existing inequalities and Covid-19:

Covid is not the reason they’re needing food support. It’s pre-existing problems that have been exacerbated by Covid. (Jo, Staff, Food Bank B)

Simon’s view was:

I feel like, even if there was no pandemic, there would still be a rise in food bank users . . . the pandemic has highlighted the economic inequality between different classes . . . [and] the policies that we’ve had [from] this government and the coalition government has contributed to more people struggling. (Simon, Volunteer, Food Bank B)

Koltai *et al.* (2021) carried out a longitudinal study survey from April to July 2020 to investigate food insecurity during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study found that reporting an inability to eat healthy or nutritious food rose from 3.2 per cent in April to 16.3 per cent by July 2020, which was most pronounced for Asian respondents, the self-employed and respondents aged thirty-five to forty-four. Additionally, people who became unemployed experienced higher odds of being hungry but not eating, compared to those who are furloughed and the persistently employed. The authors concluded that the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) had helped to protect some from food insecurity, although it was not enough to mitigate the overall increase in food insecurity and access to affordable food. Mark, a service user at Food Bank B, had used Food Bank A before the Covid-19 pandemic, then found work before being furloughed and eventually dismissed during the pandemic as a catering assistant:

I actually used the food bank more . . . usually as with most people towards the end of the month . . . just before you get your next benefit. (Mark, Service User, Food Bank B)

Those presenting as a ‘new need’ included ‘new redundancies’ (Dennis, Staff, Food Bank A), people furloughed under the CJRS, and those who ‘were used to being in employment and didn’t know the system and new to benefits’ (Brian, Staff, Food Bank A). Those that were not eligible for furlough were accessing the food bank, sometimes for the first time:

I’m self-employed, but I haven’t been employed long enough . . . So obviously the lady who employs me mostly she didn’t have to pay me anything. And I didn’t qualify for any other help . . . It was a bit scary. (Jackie, Service User, Food Bank A)

Volunteers adjusted to seeing new service users from areas they perceived to be ‘well to do’ (Sally, Volunteer, Food Bank A). Emma highlighted the initial surprise expressed by volunteers:

. . . there were some eyebrows raised, I admit by some of our volunteers in the early part, because some of the houses we delivered to, they didn’t look like people that were in poverty . . . if you’re someone that’s always been secure, and reasonably wealthy, and you suddenly lose your job, your income might be harmed overnight . . . (Emma, Staff, Food Bank B)

Several participants cited extra costs incurred during the pandemic as a reason contributing to the increase in food insecurity:

I think there was the issue with having enough food for all day . . . if the school ran a breakfast club, you knew your children were being fed twice a day, and you only had to feed once. So all of a sudden, now you’re having to feed your children, the two extra meals, which is a huge burden, I think, on families . . . (Janine, Volunteer, Food Bank A)

Jo (Staff, Food Bank B) identified how schools, pre-pandemic, had tackled ‘hidden poverty’ by providing school dinners and breakfasts. Julia (Service User, Food Bank B) identified increased internet usage costs due to home schooling. The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) found that nearly nine in ten families ‘faced additional costs as a result of coronavirus, and were spending substantially more on food, electricity, and other essentials’ (CPAG 2020: 3). Food shopping had become more expensive, with increased usage of local convenience shops, notably priced higher than supermarkets. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that people with mental and physical health issues relied on local shops during the pandemic (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2020). Jo described how the lack of access to public transport is a problem that people living in poverty disproportionately face, relying on local and often more expensive amenities ‘. . . because that’s what’s in walking distance. And that obviously costs more. So they’re just stuck in this cycle’ (Jo, Staff, Food Bank B).

Cummins *et al.* (2020) examined the changes to the urban food retail system during the pandemic including the re-localisation of urban food retail, highlighting a shift to purchasing food at local food retailers, an increase in digital groceries which benefits more affluent households, and a change in how fast-food restaurants and takeaway businesses operated. Stockpiling and panic buying also created food supply shortages and increased food insecurity for those in low-income households:

. . . planning is a privilege of the financially secure. So those with the most who were incidentally, the most shielded from, the impacts [at] the start of the pandemic and the financial implications were those most likely to be stockpiling and hoarding and it was all the most affordable stuff . . . the bags of pasta . . . were the ones that were two pounds plus and for somebody that has got five to ten pounds to buy themselves food for the week, they’re [usually] relying on the twenty pence pasta. (Emma, Staff, Food Bank B)

Because leading up to it, there was nothing on the shelves – getting toilet paper, because people have hoarded it . . . it was easier to go to a smaller supermarket and pay a little bit more for it, then have the risk and be scared of catching anything going [to a big supermarket]. (Julia, Service User, Food Bank B)

This corresponds with previous research (Power *et al.*, 2020), which found that low-income households that depend on reduced cost items were unable to afford the more expensive items that were available due to stockpiling. Food supply shortage impacted food banks which relied on surplus stock donated from supermarkets and donations from individuals (Power *et al.*, 2020). The lack of food supply combined with the severe increase in demand from both the ‘old poor’ (Caplan, 2020) and ‘newly hungry’ (Butler, 2020) for food parcels created a ‘perfect storm’ for food banks.

### Food banks as core welfare provision

Food banks have been described as ‘successful failures’ that provide sticking plasters and act as ‘shunting yards’ for addressing poverty in neo-liberal economies (Ronson and Caraher, 2015). Despite being set up as temporary and emergency food measures, food banks too often become indefinite fixtures, substituting for government interventions on food poverty. Where government help retreats, access to non-governmental food aid increases. In the USA, for instance, participation in government funded food assistance programmes declined during periods of welfare reform designed to reduce food stamp usage. At the same time, those seeking help from community and non-profit soup kitchens rose substantially (Bernier and O’Brien, 2008). As the opening paragraphs of this paper demonstrated, food banks have increased at an astonishing rate: in 2000, there was only one food bank recorded in the UK (Wells and Caraher, 2014) with the first having been set up in 1998 in Newport (Beck and Gwilym, 2022). That emergency food aid has become a normalised supplemental provision for those on low incomes is not surprising. What is perhaps more striking is how food banks became what Fitzpatrick *et al.* (2020) described as a ‘core welfare support service’ during Covid-19. There are two reasons for this.

The first reason will resonate with those who recall the periods of lockdown as services reduced or retreated behind government-imposed restrictions. As a result of frontline services closing or moving from face-to-face to telephone or online, food banks became an important source of support for service users, extending their remit beyond the provision of food:

We did get quite a lot of people in complexes where wardens weren’t at work. And [residents] were just left. So I would ring patch managers up . . . we needed somebody to go in there and check that everybody was fine . . . safeguarding or even signposting people to different services . . . (Marcia, Staff, Food Bank A)

If they’ve got multiple debts in like multiple places . . . we would often signpost them to [Citizens Advice] now you have to do like a phone call to triage and then get called back . . . So it’s been really difficult for people . . . [as] they don’t understand the letters they’ve been given so they wouldn’t be able to explain to a CAB advisor over the phone what the letters mean. (Jo, Staff, Food Bank B)

Marcia commented that General Practitioner (GP) surgeries were a frequent referrer to the food bank as people’s first point of contact: ‘you know, if somebody is in a state and they aren’t eating [at] all . . . they would visit their doctor [because of] mental health issues’ (Marcia, Staff, Food Bank A). In this respect, food banks had been embedded in the welfare system for some time (Power *et al.*, 2020). Lockdown and attendant isolation had exacerbated service users’ mental health issues but without the usual sources of support in place:



Because of this anxiety disorder that I've got. Cos I have trouble with my neighbours and I have trouble with [seasonal affective disorder] . . . I think it's just being on my own . . . it just made things worse I think in a way. (Frank, Service User, Food Bank B)

Domestic abuse-related crimes increased each month from April to June 2020 (ONS, 2020) and Women's Aid found that over two-thirds of respondents who live with their abuser felt they had 'no one to turn to for help during lockdown' (Women's Aid, 2020: 9). The quotes from staff at the food banks show the vital support offered to people leaving their homes due to isolation affecting and worsening domestic violence:

People were leaving because of domestic violence, [not] able to live in the family unit because they were so closely isolated together. (Marcia, Staff, Food Bank A)

We have various people that we know, have left violent relationships . . . they've been building their lives up from having left with nothing. So it's not that much of a shock that after leaving, they're having a few months where they're coming up short. (Jo, Staff, Food Bank B)

The second, and more enduring reason, results from prolonged austerity measures that have led to the cumulative and sustained decline of the welfare architecture. As Bonvin *et al.* (2021: 96) note, the pandemic brought to light both the enduring structural inadequacies in welfare design and those that were 'more situational . . . echoing the specific circumstances of the pandemic'. At the apex of New Labour's tenure in government, neighbourhood-based systems of support and welfare were vast in their scale and scope. Examples abound: neighbourhood renewal schemes, Police Community Support Officers, Connexions youth services, and Sure Start centres were easily identifiable local state structures and agents. In the years of austerity that defined the social policy landscape from 2010 onwards, this architecture was stripped away with little in its wake. This presented what Strong (2020: 211) called the 'double-bind for impoverished communities' placing a greater responsibility on communities whilst at the same time shifting policy priorities elsewhere. Commentary on and criticism of New Labour's communitarian welfare agenda is outside of the scope of this paper (for further discussion see, for example, Cottam, 2019) but what cannot be disputed is that at the point when the pandemic destabilised social networks and support systems, the absence of neighbourhood level services contributed to a significant gap in need.

The resulting vacuum reframed aspects of the food bank response to emergent social needs, with social support being one of the most obvious ones, or what Strong refers to as the performance of 'novel forms of getting by' (2020: 217). In James' view, some service users used the food bank as an opportunity simply to meet other people:

. . . there was a guy that came- all he wanted was a couple of cans of Coke . . . it fulfilled a social need for him . . . that notion of the need was greater than simply the food . . . I think for the walk-ins clearly there was that social element for it, because the queue was remarkably good natured. And I thought almost it'd become a social circle really. (James, Volunteer, Food Bank B)

In line with the social practices of 'helping others', 'deploying coping strategies' and 'creating atmospheres' found in work by Lee *et al.* (2023a), Food Bank A focused on providing a sense of community and support to service users, through telephone befriending that 'increased quite a bit' during the pandemic (Dennis, Staff, Food Bank A), the provision of a community café to 'listen and maybe offer advice if possible' (Brian, Staff, Food Bank A), a 'job club . . . computer club and . . . literacy club so anything that would work towards getting people back into work' (Brian, Staff, Food Bank A) and the encouragement of volunteering:

... we've found most effective to help people become part of that community is to give them opportunities to volunteer... it just builds their confidence and everything else, but they kind of become part of the family... the core issue for people is that they don't have family or friends that are able to support them. (Dennis, Staff, Food Bank A)

Frank found this beneficial for his own self-worth:

I've done a lot of painting here... I said to [staff member], 'I know I can't repay you for what you've done', because in my mind it's beyond payment to me... he lifted me that much... how much joy I got from that food parcel... it just made me feel useful again... because, you know, being out of work I just felt useless. (Frank, Service User, Food Bank A)

As Garthwaite (2016: 133) found, the food bank was a 'lifeline' that allowed service users to 'get help from people who genuinely wanted to help [them]'. This dedication and motivation to help was present in this study, balancing what Lee *et al.* (2023b) found to be the tension of providing food in a less stigmatising way whilst also ending 'impersonal' food aid. The commitment took a personal toll for some:

It's been really tough, honestly. Like it's really hard... you can't just like stop doing it. Because people do need it. But it is also like exhausting... there are like several other [staff] that have stepped down because they're just like, I can't keep it up any longer... (Gemma, Staff, Food Bank B)

During the height of the pandemic, it was very stressful... we were getting the feel good feeling and doing something positive. There was lots of skill building and lots of wonderful things... The heart and soul of the [staff] and our key volunteers, it's never died. It's just at times, it's been harder than others. (Emma, Staff, Food Bank B)

Jo described feeling the weight of responsibility safeguarding services users, in the context of unavailable support services during the pandemic:

[there were] certain situations where I'd refer multiple times before anyone did anything... I'm just like 'how many flags have to be raised for you to do something?'... I have had situations where people have disclosed domestic violence to me... that's really what kind of wore me down. (Jo, Staff, Food Bank B)

The lack of support services and key referral agencies available during the pandemic resulted in new needs being addressed by food banks. Although there were issues around safeguarding, the food banks had developed their processes and strategies which professionalised their way of working including 'reorganisation [and] retraining' (Dennis, Staff, Food Bank A) and structures to enable 'planned activities' as a 'planned charity' (Emma, Staff, Food Bank B). Food banks have already expanded their provision to become, in many cases, the 'multibank' offering bedding, furnishings, and clothes (Brown, 2023) but this study, along with others, suggests a move towards increasing advice, guidance, referral, and safeguarding roles that reframe the food bank role to a more general and core welfare provision: 'providing the corporeal, material, and emotional resources necessary to provide subsistence to those "in need" at a time of austerity' (Strong, 2020: 212).

Other voluntary organisations partnered with the food banks to deliver their services. For example, in Food Bank A, Citizens Advice ran sessions at the food bank and a charitable furniture provider set up a satellite service in the food bank. Yet so much of what was offered was dependent

on the provision of volunteers, subject to flux and wane. The emergence of a cadre of volunteers during the pandemic has been well documented (Paine *et al.*, 2022; McCabe *et al.*, 2020) and was reflected in this study:

People that were being furloughed . . . had more chance to pursue their kind of interest or to do the volunteering they'd always wanted to do, but never had the chance to do. (Emma, Staff, Food Bank B)

British Gas drivers who were on furlough . . . would come in a fleet of bright blue vans and turn up outside here full of food every week. (Brian, Staff, Food Bank A)

A lot of our volunteers stepped back but we had so many people that were wanting to volunteer . . . in a . . . potentially . . . dangerous situation people were willing to help. (Marcia, Staff, Food Bank A)

The impact of the pandemic and its aftermath on volunteering is a mixed picture. This study, like many others, suggests an influx of temporary volunteers which enabled food banks to continue to operate during the pandemic. The wider picture though suggests a decline since 2018 in volunteering with recent figures indicating lower numbers of people raising money or taking part in sponsored events, organising, or helping to run activities, and campaigning on behalf of charities (Hill, 2023). Work by Dederichs (2022) found that 'volunteer rates dropped at least by a third in the United Kingdom during the first lockdown in 2020'. Speaking to the Guardian newspaper, the chief executive of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations observed that 'lifelong volunteers broke their habit during the pandemic and haven't yet got back to it' (Hill, 2023).

At the time of writing, the UK continues to grapple with the enduring cost of living crisis and continued rises in several social policy problem indicators. There is little evidence of emerging policy that could alter some of the challenges that food banks took the lead on addressing during the Covid-19 crisis. If anything, we are now witnessing the long tail of Covid-19 impacts as core services struggle to return to a semblance of normality and the wider social support architecture is simply not on any government (or opposition) priority list.

## Conclusion

Emergency food aid conjures up images in the popular imagination. For some, it might evoke homeless veterans queuing in the cold at an outdoor soup kitchen, a scene captured in countless films. For others, we might recall those distressing moments in the Ken Loach film *I Daniel Blake* when a woman, at the point of starvation, opens and eats a can of cold beans in the local food bank to avoid passing out. Such fictional accounts tell us a story of emergency help provided at the point when people are at their most desperate. Yet, our study concurs with several recent works that identify how food banks have moved from providing the most basic sustenance to a more disconcerting trend: that of the food bank as part of the maintenance architecture of the modern welfare state. Indeed, the accounts in this article support what Williams *et al.* (2016: 2311) predicted to be the case: food banks are, it seems, a 'permanent feature of the UK's welfare landscape . . . a new marker of UK social policy'.

The pandemic's unique circumstances undoubtedly accelerated this change. However, to contain this analysis within the confines of the pandemic denies that food banks continue to perform and probably extend vital services far beyond their initial remit, especially considering the ongoing economic and social fractures brought about by prolonged government economic challenges and decisions, welfare retreat and the decline of public services. More than a decade of

austerity politics coupled with a profound institutionalised mistrust of those in poverty has led to the wholesale hollowing out of welfare (Wood, 2024). In its place, we return to models more in keeping with those found before the emergence of the welfare state: charities and the voluntary sector as *the* core provision. In essence, the ‘retreating interventions’ of the state are increasingly the responsibility of individuals and communities (Strong, 2020).

This paper has highlighted some of the unique challenges faced by volunteers and providers during the Covid-19 pandemic, and underlined the incredible contributions they made to ensuring basic needs were met. We do not claim to generalise but can certainly speculate on the extent to which the themes present here apply across the now many hundreds of food banks in operation across the UK. This makes for sombre reading for if our response to destitution now rests only in the ebbs and flows of voluntary action, then inequality is likely to further entrench. It is therefore timely to consider whether positioning food banks as the ‘last line of defence’ (Brown, 2023) is an appropriate and desirable measure of progress in an advanced economy.

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## Notes

1 ONS Census 2011 data. Location not named here to ensure confidentiality.

2 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-response-spring-2021/covid-19-response-spring-2021-summary#step-4—not-before-21-june>.

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