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**Exploring the intersection between emergency food parcels and household dietary practices: A multi-method qualitative study of food banks in Portsmouth and the London Borough of Brent.**

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**Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**of the**

**University of London**

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**Department of Public Health, Environments and Society**

**Faculty of Public Health and Policy**

**LONDON SCHOOL OF HYGIENE & TROPICAL MEDICINE**

Funded by National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) School for Public Health Research (SPHR)

**Declaration of own work**

'I, Denise Karen Ndlovu, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis'.

*Signed on 16 June 2023*

A black rectangular redaction box covers the signature. Faint, light-colored scribbles are visible around the edges of the redaction, suggesting the original signature.

*Denise K Ndlovu*

## Abstract

**Background:** *Food insecurity in the UK is a long-standing public health crisis. As food aid has evolved and become progressively more embedded, research has focused on the drivers of food poverty, the political and social dilemmas posed by the food bank sector, and the lived experiences of food bank users. The diets of those on low and precarious incomes are increasingly characterised by the substantial and regular inclusion of donated and surplus foods. However, research on emergency food aid parcels themselves and how they are perceived and utilised by food bank users remains underdeveloped.*

**Aim:** *The aim of this thesis is to explore the intersections between the functioning and organisation of the food banking system, and individuals' use of emergency food parcels to determine the extent to which food banks integrate with household dietary practices and food preferences.*

**Methods:** *This study utilised a multi-method qualitative approach. Firstly, a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of eleven government and third-sector publications dating from 2013 to 2020 was conducted to determine how the role of food banks have been framed in the discourses of food poverty and hunger. This was combined with an ethnographic study of food banks in Portsmouth and the London Borough of Brent, for which remote and in-person interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 47 participants including food bank staff and volunteers (n = 23), long-term food bank users (n = 21) and public health practitioners (n = 3). These were supplemented by participant observations in seven food banks. Interview transcripts and fieldnotes were analysed thematically, using an iterative inductive process. A theoretical framework using Robert Stones Strong Structuration Theory, Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism and Amartya Sen's Capability Approach was developed to guide the interpretation of data.*

**Results:** *Discursively, food banks are positioned to operate as emergency food aid providers. At a wider conceptual level, the underpinning presentation of food banks as short-term or emergency food aid providers is contradicted by the long-term structural hardship and inequality that contextualises household experiences of food poverty. The positioning of food banks as a form of welfare, either as part of statutory systems or as a substitute system, contradicts the charitable emergency nature of food banking that exists in the UK. The discourses of food poverty and hunger are fraught with contradictions and inconsistencies that never quite bridge the material and system-level ambiguities around the role of food banks.*

*The ethnographic data highlights that the food bank system is characterised by reactivity and a lack of choice. Food bank users undergo a ritualistic process starting from the referral process, to being welcomed in by a volunteer who acts as a host, to obtaining a food parcel and engaging in an exchange*

*ceremony with other users to obtain appropriate food supplies. The food bank's limited autonomy in deciding the quantity, quality, and variety of food, negatively affects the user's ability to access food that aligns with their dietary preferences, health requirements, and living circumstances. As a result of this, food bank users experience constrained dietary choices and options, and engage in (mal)adaptive coping strategies, as they access multiple food banks and food aid providers, shopping around for different foodstuffs. In this way, the food parcel may be used to address both temporary and long-term food needs. Subsequently, food banks may function as components of the local food system while simultaneously acting as part of a peripheral or alternative food (aid) system.*

**Keywords:** *food banks, food security, dietary practices, qualitative, UK,*

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## Contents

ABSTRACT .....	3
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	5
CONTENTS.....	6
LIST OF FIGURES .....	10
LIST OF TABLES.....	11
ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS.....	11
COVID-19 IMPACT STATEMENT .....	12
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....	14
<b>1.1 Personal background and origins of the research project.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>1.2 The research problem .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>1.3 Approach to the current research .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>1.4 Thesis structure.....</b>	<b>17</b>
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	19
<b>2.1 Overview .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>2.2 Hidden hunger .....</b>	<b>19</b>
2.2.1 Food insecurity in high income countries .....	19
2.2.2 The neoliberal agenda.....	22
2.2.3 The inequality of neoliberalism.....	23
2.2.4 Food security as a social determinant of health .....	25
<b>2.3 Diet, inequality, and health.....</b>	<b>26</b>
2.3.1 The socioeconomic patterning of diet and household food provisioning.....	26
2.3.2 The neighbourhood food environment.....	28
<b>2.4 Food banks from a nutrition perspective .....</b>	<b>30</b>
2.4.1 The functioning of food banks .....	30
2.4.2 The nutritional content of food parcels .....	31
2.4.3 The dietary impact of food parcels and meeting dietary and health needs. ....	34
<b>2.5 Summary.....</b>	<b>35</b>
2.5.1 Research gaps.....	35

2.5.2 Research aim and questions.....	36
<b>CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL ORIENTATION AND METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>3.1 Overview .....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>3.2 Theoretical frameworks .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>3.3 Study context.....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>3.4 Study design .....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>3.5 Data collection and analysis.....</b>	<b>44</b>
3.5.1 Critical Discourse Analysis.....	44
3.5.2 Ethnography of food bank practices and utilisation of food parcels by food bank users .....	54
<b>3.6 Summary.....</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: THE ROLE OF FOOD BANKS IN THE UK: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS... 71</b>	
<b>4.1 Overview .....</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>4.2 Characterising food banks as emergency food aid providers.....</b>	<b>71</b>
4.2.1 Emergency use only .....	72
4.2.2 Providing food from a place of scarcity.....	73
4.2.3 The service provision of food banks and signs of a failing welfare system.....	73
<b>4.3 Reliance and responsibility .....</b>	<b>75</b>
4.3.1 Personal responsibility or a faulty system .....	76
4.3.2 Relying on food banks for food, help, charity, or welfare? .....	78
<b>4.4 Summary .....</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: THE FOOD BANK SUPPLY CHAIN..... 82</b>	
<b>5.1 Overview .....</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>5.2 A system built on donations. ....</b>	<b>83</b>
5.2.1 Donated food.....	83
5.2.2 Surplus food.....	86
5.2.3 Financial donations and buying food. ....	88
<b>5.3 The management of food.....</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>5.4 Packing the food parcel for distribution to food bank users. ....</b>	<b>93</b>
5.4.1 Using a food list. ....	93
5.4.2 The contents of a food parcel .....	94
5.4.3 The amount of food in a food parcel .....	96
5.4.4 How to make a food parcel. ....	98
<b>5.5 Summary .....</b>	<b>103</b>



<b>CHAPTER SIX: INSIDE THE FOOD BANK – USERS’ PERSPECTIVES ON THE FOOD BANK EXPERIENCE.....</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>6.1 Overview .....</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>6.2 The experiences of accessing food banks. ....</b>	<b>106</b>
6.2.1 Negotiating access to food bank services. ....	106
6.2.2 Ways of securing and collecting food parcels .....	107
6.2.3 A stigmatising process.....	108
<b>6.3 Food banks as social spaces .....</b>	<b>110</b>
6.3.1 Long term food bank use.....	111
6.3.2 Social spaces and practices .....	112
<b>6.4 Collecting the food parcel and consideration of the social determinants of health. ....</b>	<b>114</b>
6.4.1 Bounded choice: Accommodating dietary practices and food preferences.....	115
6.4.2 Food availability and the provision of alternative food items .....	118
6.4.3 The lived experience and resourcefulness of food bank users .....	120
6.4.4 The exchange ceremony.....	122
<b>6.5 Summary .....</b>	<b>123</b>
 <b>CHAPTER SEVEN: UTILISING THE FOOD PARCEL AND HOUSEHOLD FOOD PROVISIONING PRACTICES.....</b>	 <b>126</b>
<b>7.1 Overview .....</b>	<b>126</b>
<b>7.2 Constructing meals from the food parcel. ....</b>	<b>127</b>
7.2.1 Meal planning.....	127
7.2.2 Stocking up food.....	129
7.2.3 The materiality of food: the ways in which the food parcel dictates food preparation practices. ....	130
7.2.4 The dietary impact of using food parcels. ....	133
<b>7.3 The thrifty user: how food bank users combine the food parcel with other sources of food .....</b>	<b>136</b>
7.3.1 The varied use of a food parcel.....	136
7.3.2 The local food aid environment .....	138
7.3.3 Food retail environment .....	140
7.3.4 Social and familial networks .....	143
<b>7.4 Summary .....</b>	<b>144</b>
 <b>CHAPTER EIGHT: DISCUSSION .....</b>	 <b>147</b>
<b>8.1 Overview .....</b>	<b>147</b>
<b>8.2 Key findings .....</b>	<b>147</b>
<b>8.3 Synthesis and discussion of findings.....</b>	<b>152</b>
8.3.1 The (re)construction of emergency when describing food bank provision. ....	152
8.3.2 Power, agency, and adaptive capacity .....	153
8.3.3 Operationalising choice. ....	156
8.3.4 The role of food banks and which sector do they function in? .....	157

<b>CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>161</b>
<b>9.1 Contributions to the literature</b> .....	<b>161</b>
<b>9.2 Implications and recommendations for policy, practice, and research</b> .....	<b>162</b>
9.2.1 Research .....	162
9.2.2 Policy and practice.....	163
<b>9.3 Strengths and limitations</b> .....	<b>165</b>
9.3.1 Strengths .....	165
9.3.2 Limitations .....	165
<b>9.4 Reflexivity and positionality</b> .....	<b>167</b>
<b>9.5 Concluding remarks.</b> ....	<b>168</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>170</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b> .....	<b>193</b>
<b>Appendix 1: Recruitment email</b> .....	<b>193</b>
<b>Appendix 2: Recruitment poster</b> .....	<b>194</b>
<b>Appendix 3: Participant information sheet – food bank volunteers and managers</b> .....	<b>195</b>
<b>Appendix 4: Participant information sheet – food bank users</b> .....	<b>199</b>
<b>Appendix 5: Consent form – food bank volunteers, managers, and public health practitioners</b> .....	<b>201</b>
<b>Appendix 6: Consent form – food bank users</b> .....	<b>202</b>
<b>Appendix 7: Consent form – food bank users (witness)</b> .....	<b>203</b>
<b>Appendix 8: Interview guide – food banks volunteers and managers</b> .....	<b>204</b>
<b>Appendix 9: Interview guide – public health sample</b> .....	<b>206</b>
<b>Appendix 10: Interview guide – food bank users</b> .....	<b>208</b>
<b>Appendix 11: Research outputs</b> .....	<b>209</b>

## List of figures

Figure 1: Food poverty conceptual framework - the relationship between food security and food poverty (O'Connor, Farag and Baines, 2016).....	15
Figure 2: Risk of household food insecurity across England by household type and benefit claimants (Smith et al., 2018).....	20
Figure 3: Food insecurity scale based on the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FAO et al., 2018) .....	21
Figure 4: UNICEF Conceptual Framework on the Determinants of Maternal and Child Nutrition (UNICEF, 2021) .....	22
Figure 5: The social determinants of health (Dahlgren and Whitehead, 2007) .....	25
Figure 6: The number of 3-day emergency food parcels given to people in crisis since 2012 (The Trussell Trust, 2022a).....	28
<i>Figure 7: A theoretical framework for understanding the role of diet and nutrition in food banks and its implications on household diets (Source: author adapted from Stones' Strong Structuration Theory, Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism and Amartya Sen's Capability Approach) .....</i>	<i>39</i>
<i>Figure 8: The Stages of CDA – a general framework (Mullet, 2018) .....</i>	<i>45</i>
<i>Figure 9: Flow diagram of document selection process.....</i>	<i>46</i>
<i>Figure 10: A timeline of key events that occurred in the UK between 2012 – 2020. ....</i>	<i>52</i>
<i>Figure 11: A screengrab from NVivo showing initial codes.....</i>	<i>53</i>
<i>Figure 12: Portsmouth Ward Map (Portsmouth City Council, 2015b).....</i>	<i>55</i>
<i>Figure 13: Brent Ward Map (Brent Council, 2020) .....</i>	<i>56</i>
<i>Figure 14: An example of a thematic coding network for this study .....</i>	<i>67</i>
<i>Figure 15: An example of a food list for a large and small family used by one of the food banks in Portsmouth. ....</i>	<i>94</i>
<i>Figure 16: Food parcel in an independent food bank (Portsmouth) .....</i>	<i>95</i>
<i>Figure 17: Food parcel in a Trussell Trust food bank (Portsmouth) .....</i>	<i>95</i>
<i>Figure 18: Food parcel in an independent food bank (Brent) .....</i>	<i>96</i>
<i>Figure 19: Food parcel in an independent food bank (Brent) .....</i>	<i>96</i>
<i>Figure 20: Food parcel in an independent food bank (Brent) .....</i>	<i>96</i>
<i>Figure 21: Food parcel in an independent food bank (Brent) .....</i>	<i>96</i>
<i>Figure 22: Questions volunteers consider when packing the food parcel (Source: author's creation) .</i>	<i>98</i>
<i>Figure 23: The varying forms of food bank use (Source: author's creation) .....</i>	<i>137</i>
Figure 24: 'Emergency' synonyms used in the CDA and Ethnography to describe the food bank and food poverty experience.....	152
Figure 26: The systems in which food banks operate in (Source: author's creation).....	157

## List of tables

Table 1: Studies relating to the nutritional adequacy of food parcels in the UK.....	32
Table 2: Documents selected for the CDA. ....	48
<i>Table 3: Characteristics of participants from food banks in Portsmouth</i> .....	58
Table 4: Characteristics of participants from food banks in Brent .....	59
<i>Table 5: Food bank users participant descriptors</i> .....	60
<i>Table 6: Public Health sample</i> .....	62
<i>Table 6: The strategies that food bank users described using when using the commercial food retail environment.</i> .....	142

## Acronyms and abbreviations

UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America
UN	United Nations
NCDs	Non-communicable diseases
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
APPG	All-Party Parliamentary Group

## COVID-19 Impact Statement

Provide details on how disruption caused by COVID-19 has impacted the research.

Three major disruptions were caused to this research study by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Firstly, the initial scope of the PhD changed as a result of the pandemic. Initially, the PhD sought to investigate the nutrition-focused interventions and programmes (such as cooking classes, provision of recipe cards, budgeting courses) present within food banks. There is a lack of empirical research detailing the diet and nutrition services and guidelines in the UK, yet many food banks operate a number of services in relation to diet and nutrition as detailed on their websites.

However, as a result of the pandemic, these programmes were scrapped. The pandemic resulted in food banks closing down and many having to change their services to provide emergency food parcels only, with some even adopting home delivery services. This study would have added to the existing literature providing further detail in the development and implementation of nutrition services within food banks. It would have examined how food bank users access and interact with food bank services related to diet and nutrition and how households perceive and experience these programmes.

Secondly, formal training in critical discourse analysis (CDA) was disrupted. I was initially supposed to attend and partake in training course hosted by Surrey University. This course was postponed and initially re-scheduled to be online however this was no longer possible due to the course organiser falling ill.

Thirdly, data collection was disrupted and delayed by 6 months. Data collection was to commence upon receiving ethical approval, which was obtained in August 2020. However, initial recruitment proved difficult with food banks not answering phone calls or replying to emails. The main priority at that time was to support vulnerable households. The ethnographic portion of this PhD was then paused for 6 months between August 2020 to February 2021 when I resumed the ethnography remotely, after achieving contact with food banks from December 2020.

Additionally, recruitment of food bank users and subsequently interviewing food bank users were not possible remotely. Once remote data collection was complete (April 2021), I sought to recruit food bank users. I asked if the volunteers and managers could assist me in recruiting food bank users for this study. However, conducting interviews with food bank users would only be possible if it was in-person. At this time, lockdown measures were still in effect.

Lastly, as the sole researcher I conducted all the data collection and data analysis. Mainly working from home, this was an isolating experience.

Provide a summary of any decisions / actions taken to mitigate for any work or data collection/analyses that were prevented by COVID-19.

To mitigate the disruptions caused by the pandemic, I adapted my PhD to include COVID-19. Food banks were directly affected by the pandemic and by the time I conducted any data collection, the COVID ways of working had become a normal routinized process. Therefore, the PhD was adapted to understand the processes involved in putting together a food parcel and exploring the food supply chain. Additionally, the term food bank initially didn't include other food aid providers, but the pandemic resulted in them providing food aid parcels. Likewise, I spent some time speaking with other food aid and justice organisations as well as public health practitioners, which led me to submitting an amendment to the Ethics Committee to widen my participant pool to include public health practitioners as they had become increasingly involved in the distribution of food parcels during the pandemic.

I submitted an amendment to the Ethics Committee to conduct in-person data collection following the Roadmap out of Lockdown, to commence fieldwork no earlier than June 21 whereby all legal limits on social contact would be removed. The issue, however, that arose was the desired requirement from the Ethics Committee to have both vaccinations prior to conducting any fieldwork (May 2021). This request would have delayed the PhD by a further 3-months. I therefore responded to the request, seeking approval to conduct fieldwork on the condition of receiving my first dose which was to be due on the week of 8th of June 2021 for my age group (25 and over). Eventually ethical approval was obtained on the 15th of June 2021 to conduct in-person data collection after obtaining my first dose and submitting prove of my second dose to my supervisors.

In order to mitigate the lack of training in critical discourse analysis, I consulted with my supervisors on whether to continue with the CDA as I did not have the required skillset to carry out this methodology. However due to the uncertainty of ethnographic data collection, the decision was made to continue ahead with CDA. My training in CDA was subsequently self-taught using available resources including books, research papers and module/course syllabus and reading lists, with one of my supervisors who had experience and expertise in discourse analysis supervising me during this period.

## Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis presents a qualitative investigation into the extent to which food banks meet household dietary practices and food preferences. This was conducted using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of key food poverty policy documents and an ethnography of food banks and their users to explore the intersection between food bank practices and household dietary practices. For the purposes of this thesis, the term food bank refers to any place that distributes food parcels or bags to take away, as a primary or secondary service, to people in need, on a referral or non-referral basis.

The research that underpins this thesis came at a crucial time during the COVID-19 pandemic, which raised the profile of food banks and food aid in general. The COVID-19 pandemic greatly impacted food security and demonstrated the vulnerability and inadequacy of the commercial food system (Pautz and Dempsey, 2022; United Nations, 2023). An uncertain and volatile commercial food system has compromised household diets as a result of increasingly poor food access and availability, and financial insecurity (Ferreira Rodrigues *et al.*, 2021; Jimenez Rincon *et al.*, 2022). According to the Food Foundation, 4.7 million adults and 2.3 million children experienced food insecurity between August 2020 and January 2021 (Goudie and McIntyre, 2021). Against this backdrop, the provision of charitable emergency food aid, predominantly through food banks, has become a necessity for many low-income households (Mkandawire, 2005).

### 1.1 Personal background and origins of the research project

My professional training and area of expertise lies in nutrition and public health. Specifically, my interest stems from international food aid and humanitarianism. I first came across the term food poverty (the commonly used terminology for food insecurity in British academic literature) during my MSc at LSHTM. I was perplexed that in a high-income country such as the United Kingdom (UK), people were experiencing moderate and severe-food insecurity. This wasn't because food insecurity couldn't exist in the UK (as poverty and food security are intrinsically linked) but rather that the UK, which was providing food aid to low and middle-income countries, required food aid itself. It reminded me that food insecurity is not the result of a lack of food but rather a failure of governance and political will (Candel, 2014), something I came to understand and value during my MSc.

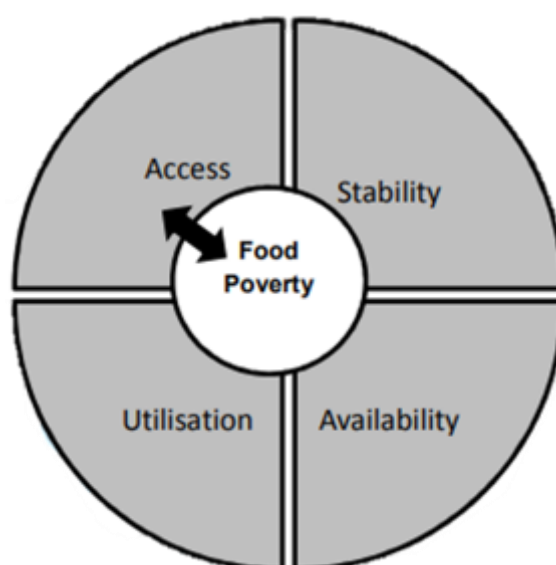
Fascinated by this phenomenon, for my MSc dissertation I conducted a stakeholder analysis to identify potential actors involved in improving the nutritional content of food parcels using qualitative research methods (semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions). The findings from this study demonstrated that whilst food banks had become increasingly conscious of the (lack of) nutritional value of food parcels, they were constrained due to limited structural capacity and inconsistent food supplies. A key finding from this study indicated that although it was possible to

improve the nutritional content of food parcels, this would be ineffective without first understanding how food parcels were created and how they were used by households.

Additionally, I was intrigued by the terminology used within the context of food poverty and food banking, such as food bank users being referred to as clients and guests, or the adoption of the term food poverty instead of food insecurity and how this translated into the role and functioning of food banks. I also recognised that the political landscape and economy was especially important in understanding how food banks formed and evolved, particularly their ability to adapt to the socio-political landscape and meet household food needs. I was therefore motivated to pursue this for my PhD research and contribute to the evidence-base from a nutrition perspective by focusing on how food parcels are constructed, distributed, and subsequently utilised by households.

## 1.2 The research problem

Household food security, a dimension of poverty, refers to “a state in which people, at all times, have the physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary practices and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO, 2003). In the UK, the term food poverty takes precedence over food insecurity as food poverty relates more broadly to the political and structural barriers that inhibit the acquisition of nutritionally adequate food in socially acceptable ways (Dowler and O’Connor, 2012; Caplan, 2016). As conceptualised by O’Connor, Farag and Baines (2016), food poverty is indirectly correlated with food access (see Figure 1). Within this thesis, I use the two terms (food poverty and household food insecurity) interchangeably.



*Figure 1: Food poverty conceptual framework - the relationship between food security and food poverty (O’Connor, Farag and Baines, 2016)*

Food is an important aspect of health with various social, economic and cultural aspects, including status, socialisation, culture and religion (Germov and Williams, 2008). Reduced financial resources



can lead to risk-averse food purchasing behaviours where households prioritise foods that are most filling, rather than purchasing nutritionally rich foods (Environmental Audit Committee, 2019b). As a result of this, low-income households are at an increased risk of malnutrition and nutrition-related chronic diseases (Marmot, 2005; Seligman, Laraia and Kushel, 2010; Dhurandhar, 2016). This became particularly salient during the pandemic when excess weight was a key risk factor for increased COVID-19 mortality and morbidity (FAO *et al.*, 2022).

In the UK, food aid is provided through a wide range of organisations such as community kitchens, community fridges and most commonly, food banks. Food banks have long been established in the UK (Williams and May, 2022), however, since 2013 the UK has witnessed an exponential growth in food banks as a result of an increase in food insecurity (see section 2.3.2).

Although literature identifying the underlying causes of food bank use is expanding, the nutritional and health implications of the long-term reliance on food parcels is underdeveloped. The organisation and practices of food banks varies across high-income countries. However, much of the evidence demonstrates that food banks have limited ability to provide nutritionally adequate and appropriate food as they are increasingly used for long-term food poverty relief, deviating from their intended short-term food relief (Oldroyd *et al.*, 2022).

### 1.3 Approach to the current research

This thesis follows on from earlier studies which seek to understand food insecurity at the community and household level (Harvey, 2016; Puddephatt *et al.*, 2020; Hardcastle and Caraher, 2021; Ipsos, 2022; Loopstra and Lambie-Mumford, 2023). Qualitative methodologies are important in generating understanding of complex issues such as diet and nutrition. Research on the perception and experience of food insecurity has typically been conducted using qualitative methods (Institute of Medicine, 2011), such as interviews, observations, focus groups and qualitative surveys using open-ended questions with food bank volunteers, staff, users, referral partners and local authority officers (Rombach *et al.*, 2018; Wainwright, Buckingham and Wainwright, 2018; Rizvi *et al.*, 2022).

This thesis explored the food banking system in the UK from a nutrition perspective. The aim of this thesis is to explore the intersections between the functioning and organisation of the food banking system, and individuals' use of emergency food parcels to determine the extent to which food banks integrate with household dietary practices and food preferences. Both UNICEF's Conceptual Framework on the Determinants of Maternal and Child Nutrition and O'Connor's food poverty conceptual framework (O'Connor, Farag and Baines, 2016; UNICEF, 2021) – were used to understand the multi-dimensional nature of food poverty and diet. This thesis used a qualitative methodological

approach. Specifically, the qualitative methods of CDA and ethnography were employed, integrating the two to explore the relationship between food bank use, poverty, and nutrition.

CDA studies visual, spoken and written language in its social context (Fairclough, 2013). Therefore, “as a medium for the social construction of meaning, discourse is never solely linguistic” (Fairclough *et al.*, 2004). Accordingly, CDA examines how social practice is constructed and mediated in discourse, allowing the researcher to critically investigate how social, economic, and political power and ideology is embedded. This thesis sought to understand the role of food banks in providing food within current food and political systems and discourses of food poverty and hunger. While discourse studies have been conducted on household food security and the framing of food banks in media, they have not focused on how the role of a food bank has been constructed and deployed in relation to their rapid expansion since 2013 with the introduction of Universal Credit.

Ethnography involves the researcher embedding and engaging themselves within the researched setting and community to understand the behaviours, norms, practices, interactions and context of a particular phenomenon or people (Ottrey, Jong and Porter, 2018). Accordingly, this thesis set out to explore the day-to-day experiences of food bank staff and volunteers in acquiring and distributing food, as well as the experiences of food bank users in using food parcels and incorporating them within their diets. It also sought to explore the challenges and opportunities to appropriately address dietary practices and food preferences.

This thesis therefore addresses knowledge gaps concerning the framing and practices of food banks and food bank users. It describes and characterises the functioning and appropriateness of food banks, the access and use of food banks as well as the utilisation of food parcels by food bank users. Lastly, it provides an understanding on the impact of receiving food aid on household food provisioning practices and coping strategies of food insecure households.

#### 1.4 Thesis structure

This thesis continues in **Chapter Two** presenting a review of the bodies of literature in which this thesis is situated. The chapter considers how poverty, neoliberalism and food insecurity in high-income countries are related. Particularly, the evolution of neoliberalism is examined, and its implications for inequality, providing a backdrop for the context in which food banks emerged. Building on this, the chapter then explores the determinants of diet inequality and discusses the nutritional differences between high- and low-income households. Finally, the chapter examines how food banks developed, their function and the implications of food aid on diet and health.

**Chapter Three** describes the methodological approach taken to address the research aim and questions in this thesis. The chapter explains the context, theoretical approach, and presents the

multi-methodological qualitative design used in this study which consist of a CDA and an ethnographic study of food banks and users in the South of England, specifically Portsmouth and the London Borough of Brent.

Following this, **Chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven** form the empirical results. These chapters discuss the main findings from the study and address the six research questions outlined in section 2.5.2.

**Chapter Four** presents the findings for the CDA in examining the role of food banks in providing food within the discourses of food poverty and hunger since the introduction of Universal Credit in 2013. The chapter examines the nature of food banks in relation to socio-political discourses of food poverty and hunger in the UK.

**Chapter Five** describes the food bank supply chain, presenting observational and interview data to highlight the processes involved in acquiring, managing (sorting and storing), and distributing food. The chapter draws attention to the wider functions of the food bank, demonstrating the decision-making processes that volunteers undertake, the impact of the pandemic on logistics, and the capacity for food banks to acquire and distribute food that is nutritionally balanced and appropriate to users.

**Chapter Six** describes the interactions that occur between volunteers and users when distributing and collecting food parcels. A discussion on the mechanisms that users employ to access the food bank, how volunteers accommodate the food parcel to users' dietary practices and food preferences follows. Alongside this, the social and pastoral role of food banks are highlighted.

**Chapter Seven** considers how food parcels are used at home. Firstly, the strategies users apply to manage and incorporate the food parcel within their diet are explored. Secondly, the ways in which users employ the food bank, alongside other food sources, within wider household food provisioning practices are examined, highlighting the adaptive capacity of food bank users to maximise their food resources.

**Chapter Eight** is the Discussion, which presents a summary of the findings according to the research questions and a discussion of the results, situating them within the literature and describing how the thesis contributed to the generation of new knowledge, both empirical and theoretical.

**Chapter Nine**, the Conclusion, presents the strengths and limitations of the study and identifies implications and recommendations for research, practice, and policy. The references and appendices can be found at the end of the thesis. The outputs for this thesis can be seen in Appendix 11.

## Chapter Two: Literature review

### 2.1 Overview

Despite being the 6<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world, food insecurity in the UK is a growing public health emergency (Connolly, 2019). It is therefore important that we explore the food banking system from a nutritional perspective and consider how the use of food parcels is incorporated within existing food and dietary practices.

The aim of this chapter is to examine the literature concerning food insecurity, neoliberalism and household diet and nutrition and I will draw upon various bodies of literature to do this. The chapter begins with a discussion of the contemporary context within which food (in)security and associated research is situated. The chapter then problematizes the concept of food insecurity by tracing the development of food insecurity in relation to neoliberalism. In the context of this thesis, the role of neoliberal economic and welfare policies is explored in relation to the rise of food insecurity, diet inequality, and charitable food aid.

I draw upon the disciplines of social policy (political economy in particular); food security and the social determinants of health to discuss the dynamic phenomena that is food insecurity in high-income countries. In providing a foundation for later discussions on household dietary practices, this chapter will then examine the determinants of diet associated with food insecurity, referring to public health nutrition literature. I focus in detail on inequality and diet and highlight the nature of food aid in the UK and draw upon British and international literature to present a thorough exposition on the relationship between nutrition, diet, food poverty and the rise of food banks. This chapter will conclude by stating the research aim and questions.

### 2.2 Hidden hunger

#### 2.2.1 Food insecurity in high income countries

In 2021, an estimated 828 million people experienced hunger worldwide and 3.1 billion people were unable to afford a healthy diet in 2020 (FAO *et al.*, 2022). Historically, food insecurity has been associated with low- and middle-income countries, however in high-income countries, including the UK, it is increasingly becoming a public health concern, synonymous with growing poverty and inequality (FAO, 2019). Smith *et al.*, (2018) combined data from the 2011 Census and 2017 data from Department for Work and Pensions to map the areas and populations at highest risk of household food insecurity. The study found that areas with the highest risk of food insecurity included cities in the north of England and parts of London (Figure 2).

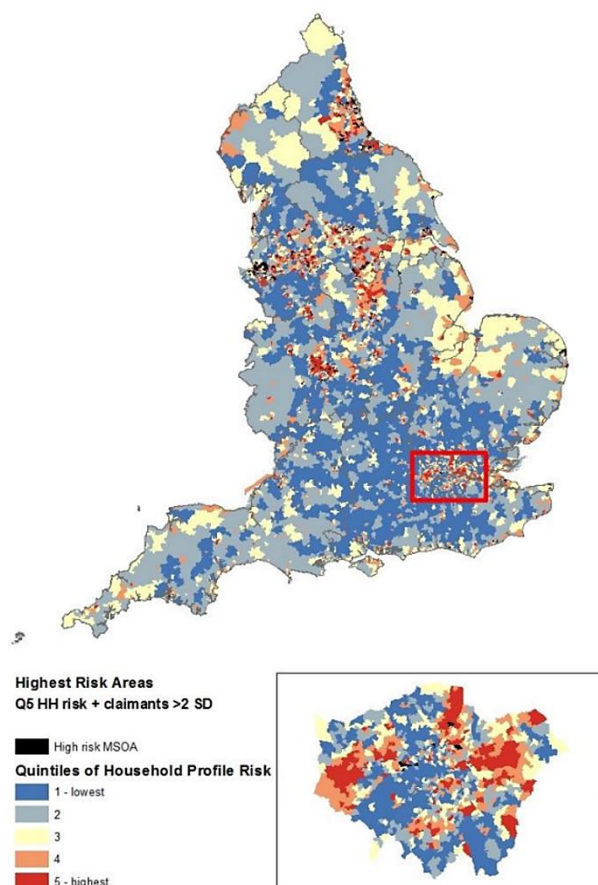


Figure 2: Risk of household food insecurity across England by household type and benefit claimants (Smith *et al.*, 2018)

This growth in poverty and inequality has led to the rapid rise and expansion of the voluntary food aid sector as low income households and other vulnerable groups are increasingly unable to afford or access adequate food (Loopstra and Tarasuk, 2013; Taylor-Robinson *et al.*, 2013).

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, household food insecurity consists of four dimensions (FAO, 2008):

1. *Food availability* refers to the availability of adequate quantities of food and relates to food supply.
2. *Food accessibility* in relation to physical and economic access,
3. *Utilisation*: Influenced by intra-household food allocation, feeding and care practices (including access to health care services and sanitation conditions) and dietary diversity which affects how the body uses macro and micro-nutrients provided by food and its effect on nutritional and health status.
4. *Stability*: Added by the Committee on World Food Security in 2012. Refers to inadequate sustainable access to food.

Experienced along a continuum, food insecurity broadly ranges from feelings of uncertainty and worry (mild food insecurity) to experiencing hunger (severe food insecurity) (Figure 3). It can either be chronic or transitory. Chronic food insecurity is described as when an individual or household is unable to meet their food needs for a prolonged period of time, whilst transitory food insecurity is related to short term economic shocks and fluctuations reducing a household's availability and access to food (FAO, 2003).

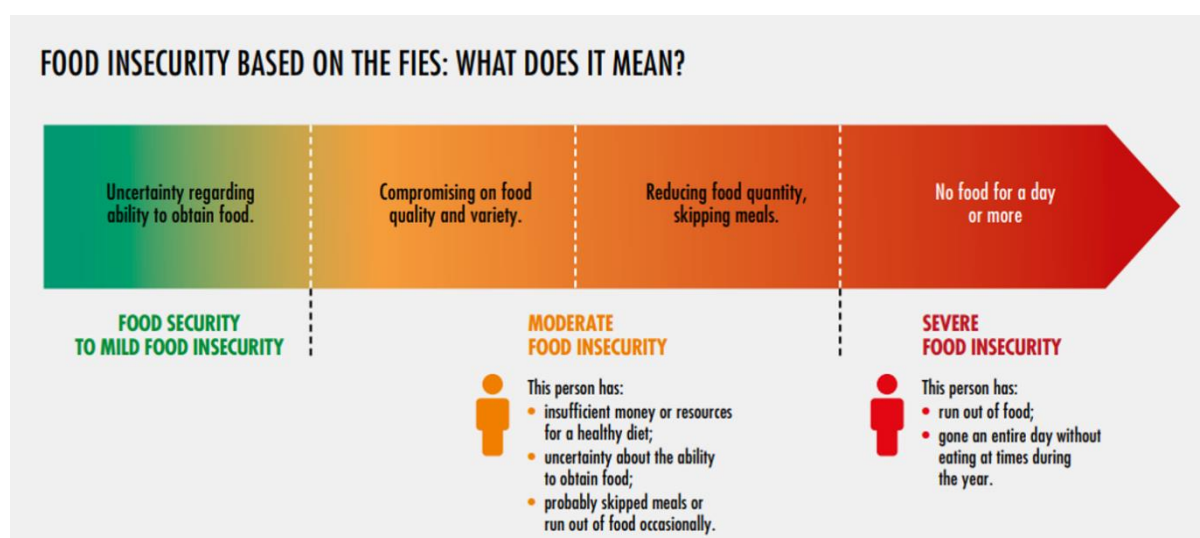


Figure 3: Food insecurity scale based on the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FAO et al., 2018)

In 1994, the UN noted hunger and food insecurity occurred due to an inadequate State response to achieving healthy diets rather than as a result of insufficient food availability (Da Silva, 2012). UNICEF's Conceptual Framework on the Determinants of Maternal and Child Nutrition (see Figure 4) portrays this depicting the 'enabling, underlying and immediate determinants of adequate nutrition' indicating that at the foundation of malnutrition and food insecurity is governance (UNICEF, 2021).

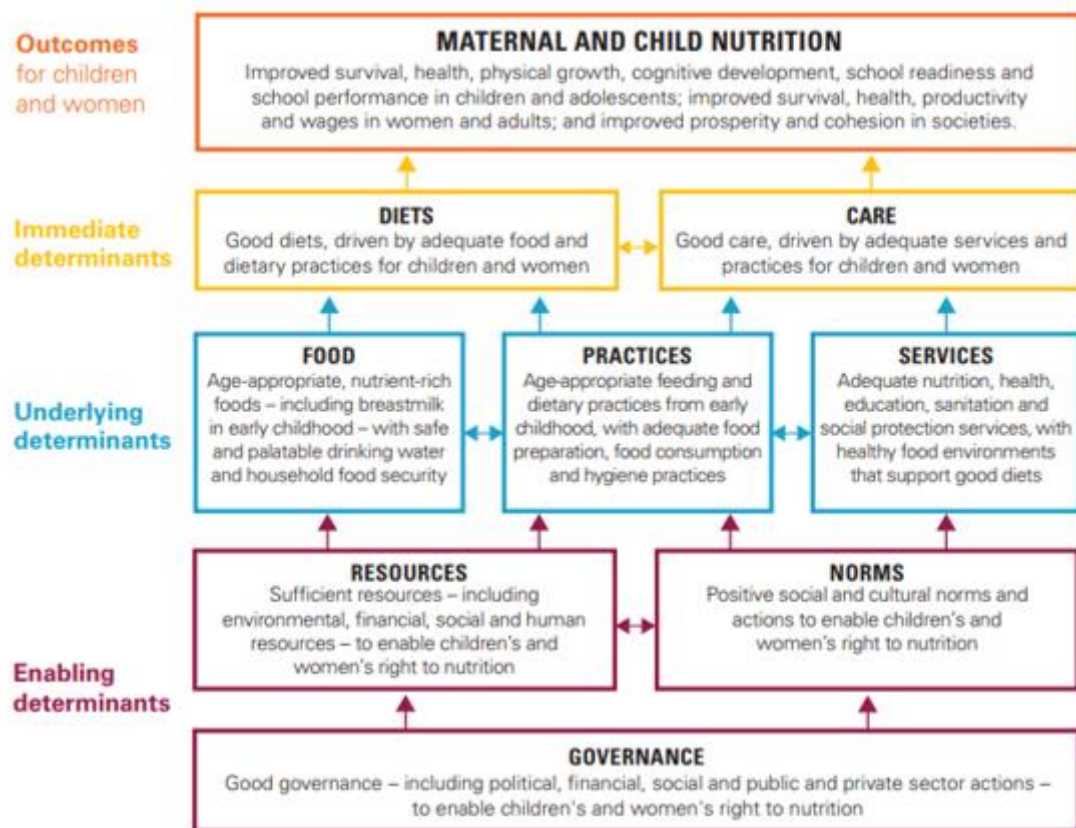


Figure 4: UNICEF Conceptual Framework on the Determinants of Maternal and Child Nutrition (UNICEF, 2021)

Specifically, the levels relevant for this thesis include immediate determinants (diets), underlying determinants and enabling determinants. Nutrition and health status are influenced by individual behaviours which are influenced by wider socioeconomic and physical conditions which are shaped by socio-political and economic structures (Bambra, 2016; Garthwaite and Bambra, 2017). It is therefore presumed that the rise in the number of households experiencing food insecurity is indicative of a fragmented society and a failing welfare system under neoliberal governance, with the erosion of structural State support (Piketty, 2014). As Alston (2018) states, ‘*poverty in the UK is a political choice,*’ enacted by neoliberal and austerity policies, which have further marginalized those on lower incomes.

### 2.2.2 The neoliberal agenda

Neoliberalism is a political and economic ideology that centres around three guiding principles: individualism, privatisation and deregulation (McGregor, 2001; Carlquist and Phelps, 2014). In the latter half of the twentieth century, neoliberalism emerged as an alternative to Keynesian economics which was facing challenges of high inflation, slow economic growth and increasing unemployment rates (Navarro, 2007). Popularised by economists Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek and adopted in the 1980s by Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in America as well as The World Bank



and International Monetary Fund in low- and middle-income countries, neoliberalism is an extension of classical liberalism (Metcalf, 2017).

The ideology of neoliberalism was developed by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*, which prioritized free markets and individualism as a way of producing economic growth through competition and innovation (Smith, 1776). However, unlike the ideology proposed by Smith which also emphasized the importance of social constructs, in modern neoliberalism societal issues such as health and social care are secondary to economic growth (Navarro, 2007; Wacquant, 2009). State control is reduced in favour of market freedom to advance and improve society (Navarro, 2007; Wacquant, 2009). This is because a free market facilitates choice, which is an expression of freedom, and to some degree it is this choice that has resulted in economic growth (Venugopal, 2015). This is evidenced by the strong observed association between the development of free market economics and economic prosperity with the growth of democracy and individual rights (Chauffour, 2011).

A prominent feature of neoliberal governance is the decline of the welfare state. Neoliberalism assumes that State involvement contradicts the optimal conditions required for market freedom due to increased public spending. With the neoliberal opposition of State intervention, it is therefore a given that the welfare state and any provision of welfare is kept at a minimum. Instead people should rely on themselves, with the State providing only a minimal safety net (Schram, 2018) as the marketization of the welfare state provides an incentive for greater personal responsibility for individuals to invest in the development of their own capital (Deeming, 2014; Spies-Butcher, 2014; Schram, 2018). As Margaret Thatcher famously proclaimed *“there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people and people must look to themselves first”* (Kaay, 1987).

Over the years however, neoliberalism has been critiqued for its uncritical and unregulated focus on the market which, in the long-term, promotes socioeconomic and health inequalities, further isolating those at the bottom of the economic scale (Chomsky, 1999; Navarro, 2007; Ostry, Loungani and Furceri, 2016). As Piketty highlights, markets that are completely free are more likely to generate capital accumulation for the wealthy at the expense of the poor rather than growth leading to a stagnant economy and increasing poverty and inequality (Piketty, 2014).

### 2.2.3 The inequality of neoliberalism

Due to its susceptibility to inequalities and social fragmentation, neoliberal governance marginalizes vulnerable groups - particularly those of a low income and thus the risk of poverty and poor health and nutritional outcomes increases (Navarro, 1998; Ostry, Loungani and Furceri, 2016). Findings from 84 qualitative interviews with policy makers in Belgium, France, Finland and the UK demonstrated how



neoliberal policies undermined the ability of the State to address the underlying determinants of social and health inequalities as it prohibited the '*redistribution of resources*' that would be required (Lynch, 2017).

Likewise, neoliberalism has neglected to recognize or address issues of social justice and human rights in accessing services and resources for optimal health and wellbeing (Mkandawire, 2005). In a 2018 report, the UK was found to be in breach of several human rights violations through their economic and social policies (UN Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, 2016). The report highlighted the increased risk of poverty due to the insufficiency of the National Living Wage and welfare reform measures. Although the National Living Wage was introduced and has risen to reflect the higher cost of living, the rate at which it rises does not meet the rate at which costs of living rises leading to real-terms declines in living standards for some (Linneker and Wills, 2016).

Similarly, Universal Credit has been detrimental to claimants and it has been argued that this is one of the main reasons for the rise in food poverty in the UK (Millar and Bennett, 2017). Universal Credit was introduced to replace six other benefits (child tax credit, income support, housing benefit, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, income-related Employment Support Allowance and working tax credit) with a single monthly payment (GOV.UK, 2019). In principle Universal Credit is seen as a promising concept and had cross-party support. However, in practice, concerns arose with regards to its delivery. The change in criteria for welfare entitlements and digitalisation of the welfare system has led to an erosion of universalism for certain population groups including low-income families, those with disabilities and migrants (Loopstra and Lalor, 2017). The digitalization of the welfare system was found to have impeded the human rights of the most vulnerable as many of these households had no internet access and had poor digital literacy. Only 47% of low-income households use broadband at home and 21% of the UK population do not have basic digital skills (Ofcom, 2017; Lloyds Bank UK, 2018). Claimants have also experienced reductions and delays in their payments of up to 5-8 weeks alongside the imposition of sanctions which has negatively impacted on household budgeting (Millar and Bennett, 2017). Additionally, the controversial two-child benefit system, where families with more than two children had their benefits reduced, was seen as a punishment for those who had or wanted larger families (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Tighter controls on the eligibility criteria for benefits has also resulted in those who were once eligible for benefits under the Legacy system no longer being eligible under Universal Credit (Bradshaw and Bennett, 2016). Vulnerable population groups have thus been put in precarious positions due to financial insecurity alongside increasing costs of living. In this way, neoliberal economic and welfare

policies have arguably created a society in which profit is put above people's needs and wellbeing, effectively widening health and social inequalities and leading to poverty (Chomsky, 1999).

#### 2.2.4 Food security as a social determinant of health

In 2008 the Commission on Social Determinants of Health stated that individual health behaviours are determined by structural, social, political and economic factors that greatly influence the conditions in which we grow, live and work and in turn affect our health and wellbeing (Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008). There are a multitude of these factors associated with the generation and maintenance of health inequalities, and therefore, in order to address them, these determinants have to be targeted. These social (or wider) determinants of health are depicted in Figure 5.

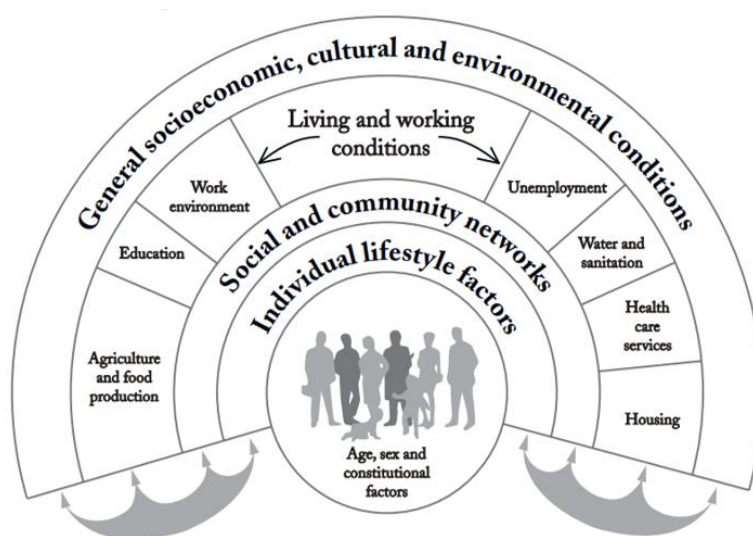


Figure 5: The social determinants of health (Dahlgren and Whitehead, 2007)

The structural level relates to the broader local and national policies which shape our socioeconomic, cultural and environmental conditions, whereas the societal level relates to the wider conditions in which we live and work (World Health Organization, 2019a). This includes education, working conditions, employment and socioeconomic status, water and sanitation, health care services, housing, agriculture and food production as well as social networks (Dahlgren and Whitehead, 2007). At the individual level this refers to age, sex, culture, and ethnicity. Additionally, behavioural factors such as diet, physical activity, smoking, and alcohol are also included.

Food security, specifically access to healthy nutritious food, is an important social determinant of health (Raphael, 2016). A multi-faceted issue, it is crucial to the development and prevention of NCDs such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, hypertension, obesity and cancers (World Health Organization, 2004). Limited or uncertain access and availability of food can lead to poor mental and physical health. Around 71% of mortality worldwide is attributable to NCDs (WHO and World Health Organization, 2018). Previously known as diseases of affluence, obesity and associated NCDs were

associated with greater income and economic development and hence increased food purchasing resulted in greater food consumption especially of food high in salt, sugar and fat which subsequently increased the likelihood of developing obesity (Novotny, 2005). Yet, low income households in high-income countries have high prevalence of NCDs, further widening income and health inequalities in those countries (Wagstaff, 2002; Lynch and Smith, 2005; Suhrcke *et al.*, 2006; World Health Organization, 2011; Bauer *et al.*, 2014; Niessen *et al.*, 2018). This is because, food insecurity in households is caused not only by financial insecurity, but also by intersections as illustrated in Figure 4. This can result in low-income households experiencing trade-offs between other basic needs, as they encounter shocks in food availability, access, and utilisation, thus affecting their food security and dietary health (Nord and Kantor, 2006; Jimenez Rincon *et al.*, 2022).

## 2.3 Diet, inequality, and health

### 2.3.1 The socioeconomic patterning of diet and household food provisioning

It has been widely documented that diet follows a social gradient as food choice, purchasing, food practices, diet quality and subsequently nutritional status vary depending on socioeconomic and neighbourhood deprivation (Inglis, Ball and Crawford, 2005; Dowler, 2008; Nettle, 2010; Pampel, Krueger and Denney, 2010; Alkerwi *et al.*, 2015).

Income is a significant predictor of diet quality and quantity and is a key factor in access to affordable and healthy food and as such, a low income can restrict choice and purchasing power (Muhammad *et al.*, 2017). The proportion of disposable income spent on food differs by socioeconomic groups (Venn *et al.*, 2018) and the food purchasing patterns of poor households are heavily influenced by the price of food. The price elasticity of demand measures the extent to which the quantity demanded changes in response to a change in price (Frewer, Risvik and Schifferstein, 2001; Ni Mhurchu *et al.*, 2013). Food is considered to be a necessity and thus relatively inelastic meaning that changes in price do not lead to changes in purchasing according to quantity, though individual items might be elastic especially premium items or high value items; or non-essential purchases (Andreyeva, Long and Brownell, 2010). For low income households, food is the most elastic part of their budget as much of their income is spent on food especially staple foods (Venn *et al.*, 2018). As a result of this, changes in food prices have the potential to influence food purchasing and diet quality (DEFRA, 2018).

Numerous studies have also highlighted systematic differences in the price of healthy food compared to unhealthy food. Healthy food is more expensive per calorie and per serving than unhealthy food (Rydén and Hagfors, 2011; Rao *et al.*, 2013; Jones *et al.*, 2014). For this reason, low-income households tend to consume low-cost diets which are higher in calories, more energy-dense and lower in nutrients. Such diets tend to consist of foods that are high in salt, sugar and fat such as takeaway foods, ready meals, confectionary and sugar sweetened beverages (Pechey *et al.*, 2013; Darmon and

Drewnowski, 2015; Wiggins *et al.*, 2015). As reported by the National Diet and Nutrition Survey 2008/2009 to 2016/2017 (with no further updates since), adults in lower income groups had poorer intakes of fruits and vegetables, Vitamin A, D, folate and fibre and an upward trend in the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages, indicating poor nutritional status for those on lower incomes (Public Health England, 2019). In a systematic review of 151 studies, food budgets of low income households were found to be inadequate in meeting the recommended optimal diet (Darmon and Drewnowski, 2015). Similarly, in a cross sectional study conducted in Denmark, food bank recipients who had become reliant on food parcels had poorer dietary intakes than their lower socioeconomic counterparts (Neter *et al.*, 2018). This highlights that lower socioeconomic status groups have a higher risk of being susceptible to the double burden of malnutrition (the coexistence of under and over nutrition).

Educational attainment also correlates with food choice and purchasing patterns with regards to nutritional knowledge and skills (Vlismas, Stavrinou and Panagiotakos, 2009; Alkerwi *et al.*, 2015). Higher educational levels are often associated with nutritional awareness, knowledge and skills such as the ability to understand nutritional information, such as food labels and nutritional guidelines, and food budgeting (Adler *et al.*, 1994; Heshmat *et al.*, 2016; Mills *et al.*, 2018). Finger *et al.*, (2013) observed that in a sample of 7124 adults from Germany, lower educational attainment levels was associated with poorer dietary behaviours such as increased consumption of foods that were higher in energy, sugar, salt, and fat and lower consumption of fruits and vegetables.

However, better nutritional knowledge does not always translate to healthier food choices and practices (Berg *et al.*, 2002). A Canadian study found no difference in cooking skills of food secure and food insecure households who were of a lower socioeconomic status (Huisken, Orr and Tarasuk, 2016). In a survey conducted by the Waste & Resources Action Programme, 90% of parents rated cooking as an important skill, however only 60% spent three or less hours cooking a month and only 24% of parents were confident in cooking using leftovers (WRAP, 2014).

Food is also an important symbol of power and status and hence if a person does not have the financial means to obtain food, they can be deemed powerless as a result of diminished purchasing power and choice (Goody, 1982; Counihan, 1999). This is especially pertinent for those who access charitable food aid. In addition, evidence suggests food banks often have insufficient food supplies to meet demand and that these supplies are often of poor nutritional quality. Data from the US National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey found that food pantry use was associated with obesity as 44% male and 52% female food bank users were classed as obese compared to 32% men and 35% women in the general population (Bell, Wilbur and Smith, 1998). Another US study suggests that long term food

pantry users were highly food insecure and were 1.7 times more likely to be severely obese (Kaiser and Cafer, 2018). Such examples highlight the increased risk of the food bank population in developing malnutrition and diet-related diseases or exacerbating existing health conditions. As evident, amidst growing demand to provide food relief, food bank users at the Edinburgh Food Project were found to be at risk of hunger due to insufficient food supply (Shukla, 2019).

### 2.3.2 The neighbourhood food environment

Individual behaviour is also hypothesised to be influenced by the neighbourhood food environment. The neighbourhood food environment is defined as “any opportunity to obtain food” and can include retail and fast-food outlets (Lake, 2018). Based on the type, density, and spatial proximity, the neighbourhood food environment can “influence individual food choice through the concept of food access” and food availability (Lake, Townshend and Burgoine, 2017; Lake, 2018). Dietary behaviours can therefore be inhibited or enabled by the neighbourhood food environment which in itself is influenced by socio-political factors which determine area-level socioeconomic status (Lake and Townshend, 2006; Pitt *et al.*, 2017; Stubbs, Scott and Duarte, 2018).

An increasingly common and normalised feature of the neighbourhood food environment is food aid provision, particularly through food banks (Wells and Caraher, 2014). As shown in Figure 6, the number of food parcels distributed by the Trussell Trust Network, the largest food bank provider in the UK, has risen in the past 7 years from 346, 992 in 2012-2013 to 2,173,158 in 2021-2022 (The Trussell Trust, 2022a).

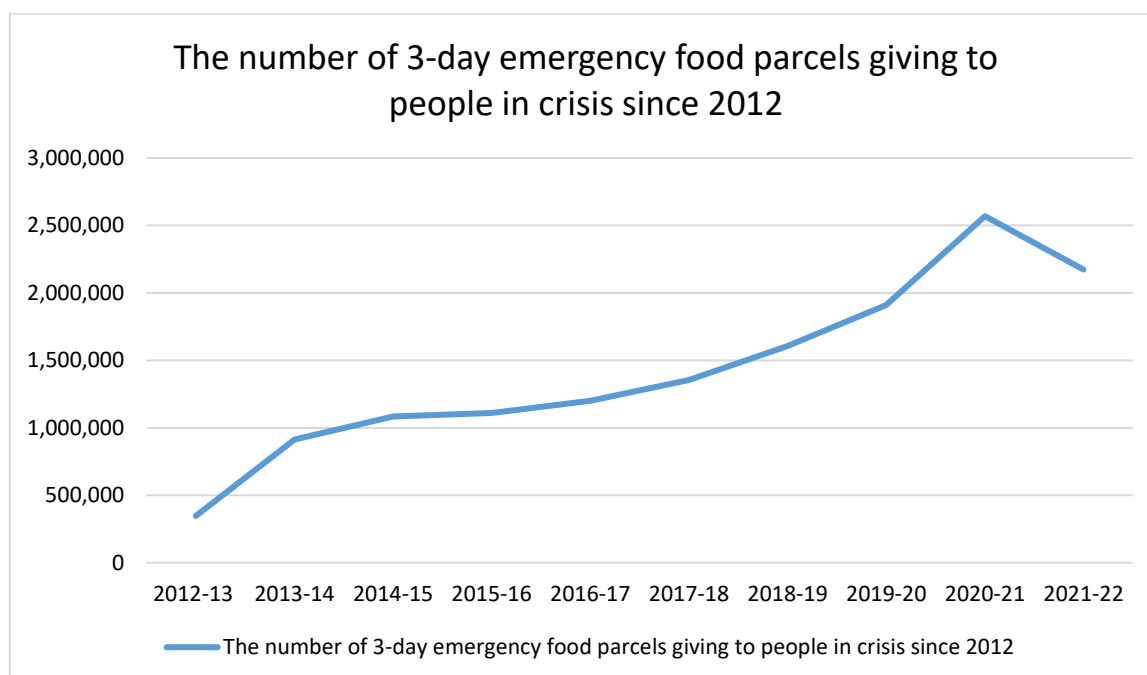


Figure 6: The number of 3-day emergency food parcels given to people in crisis since 2012 (The Trussell Trust, 2022a).

Classified as not-for-profit charitable organisations, food banks distribute emergency food provisions to those who suffer from hunger as a result of economic and social hardship (Riches, 2003; Loopstra, 2018). Economic constraints such as low income, precarious jobs, debt, homelessness, and benefit problems, have often been cited as the most common reason for households accessing food banks (Lambie-Mumford, 2013; Perry *et al.*, 2014; Garratt, 2017; Prayogo *et al.*, 2018; The Trussell Trust, 2022a).

Food banks, such as the Trussell Trust Network, The Dutch Food Bank, Food Bank Canada, and Feeding America Network, have long since existed in high income countries, and are reminiscent of the Dickensian period (Wells and Caraher, 2014). Some food banks operate on a 'front-line' model providing food directly to those who are hungry, others function through a 'warehouse' model, supplying food to intermediaries most commonly referred to as food pantries as well as soup kitchens and other front-line food providers (Loopstra, 2018). Such 'warehouse' models are dominant in the USA, whereas in the UK, food banks operate as 'front-line' providers. Food banks are amongst a broader set of emergency food aid providers including community kitchens, social supermarkets, food boxes, community fridges, and soup kitchens which aim to alleviate hunger to address food poverty and/or food waste (Loopstra, 2018).

Over 2,565 food banks are estimated to be currently operating within the UK (Independent Food Aid Network, 2022). This includes 1,393 food bank centres, both food banks and distribution centres within the Trussell Trust Network and 1,172 independent food banks (Independent Food Aid Network, 2022). However, the number of food banks is not systematically monitored, and nor are other food aid providers within the emergency food aid system. Therefore, the exact number of food banks operating in the UK is unknown especially as not all are registered charities. Also, there is a lack of research exploring how food banks operate and the varying typologies of food banks which exist in the UK.

People often use food banks as a last resort due to stigma, and once they have exhausted all other coping mechanisms such as asking friends and family for financial support or budgeting or restricting ones' food intake typically for their children (Perry *et al.*, 2014; Douglas *et al.*, 2015; Garthwaite, Collins and Bamba, 2015; Loopstra and Tarasuk, 2015; Caplan, 2016; Purdam, Garratt and Esmail, 2016; Thompson, Smith and Cummins, 2018; An *et al.*, 2019). On one hand, this is indicative of growing poverty, yet on the other hand, there is little evidence to determine if food bank use is transitory or chronic and the extent to which food insecurity is diminished.

International studies, have however highlighted a growing trend in the chronic use of food banks, with users becoming increasingly dependent on food banks for their long-term nutritional needs (Simmet

*et al.*, 2017a; Neter *et al.*, 2018; Rowland *et al.*, 2018; Wainwright, Buckingham and Wainwright, 2018). In a survey of 146 food pantry respondents in America, nearly two-thirds of the users reported that at least half of their monthly groceries were from the food pantry (Jackelen, 2013). Similarly, in a case study exploring food bank use in the UK, there was a high prevalence of repeated food bank use (Garratt, 2017) with households who had received six or more food parcels in a year, accounting for 25% of all food bank visits (Garratt, 2017).

## 2.4 Food banks from a nutrition perspective

As food banks become more prevalent, understanding the extent to which food banks meet dietary and nutritional needs and preferences is important. Food parcels within Trussell Trust food banks (the largest food bank network in the UK) are typically assembled according to a food allocation form which is to be completed by a food bank user (The Trussell Trust, 2018). These forms differ across food banks, but users complete the form indicating food from a standardised list, cooking facilities, dietary requirements, and toiletries. Depending on the food available, food preferences may be considered, however due to the ad-hoc nature of food supply, food banks are limited in their ability to meet specific dietary or health needs (Jackelen, 2013).

### 2.4.1 The functioning of food banks

Food banks often rely on food donations from the general public (Parker *et al.*, 2020; Wirral Foodbank, 2023). Food can be publicly donated via multiple avenues such as direct food donations, and through food retailers or other organisation collections (i.e., schools and churches) (Caraher and Furey, 2022). Less commonly, public donations of cash to food banks or food bank volunteers enable the purchase of food from supermarkets and local food retailers (Caraher and Furey, 2022). Donations also come via food surplus organisations and surplus food from food retailers and businesses (Caraher and Furey, 2022).

A shopping list provided by the food bank at food drives or in supermarket food collection bins is often used to guide donations (The Trussell Trust, 2018). Originally developed by the Trussell Trust Network, the guide is often adapted by other food banks as the basis of their own shopping list, and tailored to their users, needs and locality. Typically, the list consists of packaged long-life products food such as cereals, tinned goods, dried soup packets, pasta, rice, fruit juices and UHT milk (The Trussell Trust, 2018). Much of the donated food is non-perishable with limited donations of fresh produce due to an inability of food bank premises to store and meet food safety regulations (The Trussell Trust, 2018).

Food banks also obtain donations direct from commercial food retailers such as supermarkets and restaurants (Caraher and Furey, 2022). Food donated by this mechanism is often considered surplus food, or food close to or past its best-before, sell-by and use-by date. As the food banking system in

the UK has become more organised, formal partnerships have been established between food banks and food redistribution organisations (Caraher and Furey, 2022). Partnerships such as those between Asda, FareShare and The Trussell Trust have developed in an effort to alleviate both food poverty and food waste. Food redistribution organisations such as FareShare and The Felix Project also collect food from food suppliers such as Costco, Marks and Spencer and Hello Fresh and redistribute this surplus food to food banks as well other food aid providers (FareShare, 2022). Prior to re-distribution, quality checks are conducted to determine the quality of the food by for example, checking if food is past its use-by date and if there has been any cross contamination (The Felix Project, 2019). The food collected by these organisations is often fresh such as fruits and vegetables or chilled like ready meals, drinks, or salads, and can include meat, fish and dairy products and baked goods.

However, the seemingly altruistic re-distribution of commercial surplus food to food banks has been critiqued (Baglioni, De Pieri and Tallarico, 2017; Caraher, 2017; Caraher and Furey, 2017). On one hand, the redistribution of surplus food does help to address the growing issue of food waste and supports food banks by providing food that is of better nutritional value than non-perishable foods (FareShare, 2022). On the other hand, the redistribution of surplus food, as well as donated food, further entrenches food banks as an appropriate approach to addressing food poverty, absolving the State of its responsibility to address the root causes of food poverty and food waste (Garthwaite, 2019). It has been argued that the provision of surplus food further de-humanises those who are in crisis. The act of providing food that is considered 'waste' can be viewed as stripping people of their dignity and isolating them from obtaining food in socially acceptable ways (Garthwaite, 2019). Furthermore, the redistribution of surplus food by retailers, especially supermarkets, has been identified as a 'status play' to further corporate goals such as brand image and profits (Garthwaite, 2019). In the UK and US, Tesco, Asda, and Walmart have been criticised for their support of anti-hunger initiatives and food banks as whilst they support food banks through surplus food redistribution, their own employees have been reported to use food banks and other food aid services due to low wages and precarious employment contracts (Simon, 2014).

Ultimately, the food banking system is complex and consists of various organisations. Although there is a growing knowledge base to understand the drivers, users and organisational capacity of food banks, there is a significant research gap concerning the nutritional profile of food parcels and the dietary implications of food bank use.

#### 2.4.2 The nutritional content of food parcels

Food parcels are often largely energy dense and limited in their nutritional quality and variety (Loopstra and Lambie-Mumford, 2023). By their nature they cannot always accommodate individual health, dietary or cultural needs. Systematic reviews on the dietary quality of food parcels and food



pantry users found the dietary intake of food bank users were inadequate for meeting dietary recommendations especially micronutrient requirements and an inability to meet energy requirements (Bazerghi, McKay and Dunn, 2016; Simmet *et al.*, 2017a; An *et al.*, 2019; Oldroyd *et al.*, 2022).

In comparison, a typical food parcel in the UK is said to contain food that is adequate and contain 3-days' supply of food (The Trussell Trust, 2022b). As demonstrated in the Table 1 (below), five studies have investigated the nutritional adequacy of food parcels distributed by food banks in the UK (Sirona Health, 2014; Preston and Burley, 2015; Turnbull and Bhakta, 2016; Hughes and Prayogo, 2018; Fallaize *et al.*, 2020).

*Table 1: Studies relating to the nutritional adequacy of food parcels in the UK.*

<b>Author</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Results</b>
<b>Sirona Health (2014)</b>	“Officially” Nourished – Analysis of a Foodbank Parcel	1 food parcel from East Lothian Trussell Trust Food Bank was analysed using McCance and Widdowson’s Composition of Foods Integrated Dataset for food values was used to analyse the food parcels	The food parcel met the calorie intake for a healthy adult male and exceeded the recommended daily amounts for macronutrients. High levels of sugar
<b>Preston and Burley (2015)</b>	What’s in a food bag? Analysis of the content of food bags provided by the Bradford Metropolitan Food Bank	51 pre-packed food parcels from Bradford Metropolitan Food Bank were analysed using Windiets	Food parcels provided sufficient energy and macronutrients, meeting the needs of an average adult for three days. High levels of salt and sugars
<b>Turnbull and Bhakta (2016)</b>	Is UK emergency food nutritionally adequate? A critical evaluation of the nutritional content of UK food bank parcels	126 food parcels from two food banks in Bournemouth and Blandford were analysed using DietPlan7	Mean energy and % energy of macronutrient intake of the food parcels met the recommended daily intake values

<b>Hughes and Prayogo (2018)</b>	A Nutritional Analysis of the Trussell Trust Emergency Food Parcel	71 food parcels distributed in five Greater London Trussell Trust food banks were analysed using DietPlan7	Parcels met the nutritional requirements for healthy adults over three days for calories, macro, and micronutrients. High levels of sugar and salt, exceeding dietary recommendations. Low levels of Vitamin D, below the daily recommendations
<b>Fallaize et al (2020)</b>	Nutritional adequacy and content of food bank parcels in Oxfordshire, UK: a comparative analysis of independent and organisational provision	11 food parcels in 10 food banks from Oxfordshire were analysed using DietPlan7	Parcels provided energy and macro and micronutrient contents that significantly exceeded the daily recommended values. Vitamin D and Vitamin A levels were significantly lower than the dietary recommended values (DRVs)

In these analyses, food parcels exceeded the UK dietary recommendations (British Nutrition Foundation, 2021) for an adult over three days for energy/calories and macro and micronutrients. They also contained high levels of sugar and salt which exceeded dietary recommendations. Additionally, levels of Vitamin D were below the daily recommendations, as were the levels for Vitamin E and A. In other words, whilst food parcels were energy dense (providing adequate calories and macronutrient requirements), they were of poor diet quality which may lead to weight gain.

These studies assumed that (i) users did not take any food items from the 'help yourself' table or box that is on display in some food banks, (ii) that all the food in the food parcel was consumed over the course of three consecutive days and (iii) that users only ate the contents of the food parcel during the 3-day period. However, little is known about how food bank users incorporate food parcels within their diets and make meals, nor is there much evidence on how food banks are used as part of their household food provisioning practices. Turnbull and Bhakta (2016) found that when meals were constructed using contents from 126 food parcels from two food banks in Bournemouth and Blandford, meals were inadequate and of low diet quality. The constructed meals did not meet energy requirements and were lower than the mean intake of the low-income National Diet and Nutrition

Survey quintile for energy. Additionally, in comparison to the Eatwell Guide, the meals were deficient in milk and dairy foods as well as fruit and vegetables.

Food banks were originally designed to provide temporary emergency relief to alleviate hunger rather than meet the long-term nutritional needs of economically vulnerable people. Investigating the food acquisition process within food banks will be important in understanding the processes involved in packing a food parcel and how diet and nutrition are incorporated within the process.

#### 2.4.3 The dietary impact of food parcels and meeting dietary and health needs.

As mentioned in section 2.3.1, diet quality follows a social gradient with those of a lower income having poorer diets than those of a higher income. As such food poverty can have detrimental effects on one's mental and physical health (Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk, 2008; Duffy *et al.*, 2009; Maguire and Monsivais, 2015; Kaiser and Cafer, 2018; Barker *et al.*, 2019; French *et al.*, 2019). As food banks provide limited food choice and are constrained in the quantity and quality of food distributed, food bank users are vulnerable to malnutrition, predisposed by poor diets (Duffy *et al.*, 2009; Barker *et al.*, 2019; Lambie-Mumford, 2019). Research in many high-income countries including America, Canada, Australia, and European countries such as Denmark, have documented how food bank users are nutritionally vulnerable and at an increased risk of adverse health outcomes (Simmet *et al.*, 2017b, 2017a; Stroebele-Benschop, Simmet and Depa, 2017).

In contrast to this, the UK evidence base, although growing, is underdeveloped in terms of understanding the food practices of food banks, the dietary profile of food bank users, and the utilisation and incorporation of food parcels within existing diets (Douglas *et al.*, 2015; Garthwaite, Collins and Bamba, 2015; Purdam, Garratt and Esmail, 2016; Thompson, Smith and Cummins, 2018).

As part of a mixed-method study, Purdam, Garratt and Esmail (2016) conducted four case studies of food banks in the northwest of England. They identified that households highly valued and appreciated the food parcels they received, with some using the food parcel for acute needs, whilst for others the food bank was used as a top-up to balance other spending costs (Purdam, Garratt and Esmail, 2016). Expressions of appreciation and gratitude were found in several studies, with participants highlighting how the food bank provided access to essential basic food. Participants also noted the underlying inability for food banks to consistently meet all of their dietary practices and food preferences due to food supply constraints (Douglas *et al.*, 2015; Garthwaite, Collins and Bamba, 2015). Food bank users also reported negative health consequences, particularly digestive problems, after consuming food provided by the food bank (Garthwaite, Collins and Bamba (2015). In their qualitative study of food bank volunteers, organisers and users, Thompson et al (2018) found that there were barriers to managing food parcels, with households lacking access to adequate facilities to store and cook food

they received, thus negatively affecting their dietary practices. Through these studies we can understand that there is a myriad of factors that determine how a food parcel is utilised and incorporated into existing dietary practices, yet it is not fully understood if and how food banks accommodate for individual dietary and health needs.

Despite the fact that food banks originated as emergency food providers, they face growing pressures to sustain rising demand and to meet the food needs of their users in the long term (Wetherill *et al.*, 2018). As a result of this, food banks have become more nutritionally conscious with their provisions and services.

In the UK, the Trussell Trust Network engaged in a partnership with Waitrose to develop the Eat Well Spend Less programme to improve the budgeting and cookery skills of food bank users (The Trussell Trust, 2017). Internationally, efforts have been made to increase the supply of fresh produce, develop nutrition ranking and profiling systems, nutrition policies and provide nutrition education workshops, demonstrating how food banks can be instrumental to improving the diets of its users (Flynn, Reinert and Schiff, 2013; Handforth, Hennink and Schwartz, 2013; Seligman *et al.*, 2015; Rowland *et al.*, 2018; Mossenson *et al.*, 2023). Handforth, Hennink and Schwartz (2013) used nutrition profiling systems to determine the nutritional quality of distributed food, whilst nutrition policies were used to ask for donations of food that was of a higher nutritional value and deter donations of unhealthy food items particularly foods high in sugar. In a pilot study conducted by Seligman *et al.* (2015), diabetic food bank users were provided with diabetes-appropriate food and support resulting in an improvement in blood glucose levels. This is crucial as it demonstrates how food banks can be instrumental to improving the diets of its users, who due to poor economic circumstances are predisposed to poor quality diets and as a result may worsen existing health conditions or develop diet-related chronic diseases such as obesity and diabetes (Thompson, Smith and Cummins, 2018; Wetherill *et al.*, 2018).

## 2.5 Summary

### 2.5.1 Research gaps

While food banking was originally intended to be a solution to short-term food insecurity, food banks have rapidly expanded and diversified to providing social support alongside food and household provisions (Riches, 2011; Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti, 2020). Low socioeconomic status households are predisposed to poor dietary habits and intakes due to structural and individual financial constraints and are subsequently vulnerable to poor physical and mental health (Nettle, 2010). Food bank users are at a greater risk due to the inadequacy of food provisions to meet their nutritional needs beyond alleviating hunger, resulting in malnutrition and NCDs.

Multiple knowledge gaps were identified concerning the UK food banking system. These can be categorised into two groups, system-wide gaps, and food provision gaps.

### **System-wide gaps**

The review indicated that existing evidence concerning the UK food banking system is focused upon understanding the underlying causes of food bank use and demand. The system-wide gaps relate to the more limited understanding of organisational practices and nutritional capacity (to provide nutritionally balanced parcels meeting dietary practices and food preferences) of the food banking system in the UK. Whilst anecdotally, various food bank guidelines and practices are known, empirical research is needed to establish the various operating typologies of food banks, especially unpacking how food banks incorporate nutrition in their guidelines and practices. Additionally, while the operational practices of food banks are often alluded to, the broader food bank supply chain is rarely discussed, which may be crucial to understanding the capacity of the food bank system to address food poverty. A critical analysis of the acquisition and distribution of food within food banks would therefore provide an insight into determining how far the food bank supply chain influences the nutritional quality of what food banks provide.

### **Food provision gaps**

The nutritional practices of food banks have highlighted that whilst there is substantial literature in other high-income countries, most notably in North America, research within the UK is more limited. With regards to food provisioning, the nutritional appropriateness of food parcels is an area of underdeveloped research. It is not known whether food bank users access the food bank in isolation or acquire food from other retail and through social and family networks and how this shapes dietary practices. As such, we are unaware of the extent to which food banks mitigate food insecurity. Additionally, although numerous studies have highlighted the ability for food parcels to meet and exceed energy calorie requirements alongside other macro and micro-nutrients, such results cannot be extrapolated to assume that food bank users' diets are nutritionally adequate.

#### [2.5.2 Research aim and questions.](#)

Although there is some research on the nutritional adequacy of food parcels, more investigation is warranted to better understand how food parcels are constructed, how households use food banks, and the ability of food parcels to meet household and individual food needs.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the intersections between the functioning and organisation of the food banking system, and individuals' use of emergency food parcels to determine the extent to which

food banks integrate with household dietary practices and food preferences. To do this, several research questions have been formulated, as follows:

1. How has the role of food banks in providing 'emergency' food been framed in the discourses of food poverty and hunger in the UK since 2013?
2. How do food banks source, manage, and distribute food?
3. How do food banks incorporate dietary practices and food preferences within the distribution of emergency food parcels?
4. How do households' access and interact with food banks?
5. How do low-income households use food parcels within their existing dietary and food provisioning practices?
6. How do low-income households incorporate food banks as part of their livelihoods?
7. What impact did the COVID-19 pandemic have on the ability for food banks to meet users' food needs and what role did local authorities play in the distribution of emergency food parcels?

## Chapter Three: Theoretical Orientation and Methodology

### 3.1 Overview

This chapter begins with a discussion of the theoretical framework underpinning the study. Three sociological theories – Stones Strong Structuration Theory (Stones, 2005), Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969) and Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (Sen, 1985, 1993) – were synthesised to develop a conceptual model to help explain the relationship between structure and agency and situate the findings within the wider context as discussed further below in section 3.2. The findings of this study will then be synthesised using this theoretical framework to establish the extent to which food banks meet the food needs of households.

This study takes a qualitative approach to understand the ways in which food banks operate, how dietary practices and food preferences are taken into consideration, and how food parcels are utilised at home by food bank users and consists of two main components, conducted sequentially.

Firstly, a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of eleven Government and third-sector food bank reports was conducted. Using a general CDA analytical framework (Mullet, 2018) the aim was to deconstruct the discourses of food poverty and hunger since the introduction of Universal Credit in 2013 to understand the framing of food banks. The purpose of undertaking a CDA is to go beyond the analysis of language as a social practice and explore it in the context of inequalities, power, and ideology. In this context, it is used to understand how the role of food banks in providing access to food is conceptualised as well as to understand if and how the practice of food banks may establish and reinforce food poverty.

Secondly, an ethnographic study of food banks and food bank users in Brent and Portsmouth between February 2021 to October 2021. The objective was to firstly investigate how food is acquired and managed. Secondly, the objective was to determine the extent to which diet and nutrition are factored into food bank practices when constructing food parcels. Lastly, the aim was to explore households' utilisation of the food parcel within existing dietary practices. In total, 47 participants took part in this study. This consisted of 21 food bank users, 15 volunteers, eight food bank managers, and two public health professionals and food aid coordinator in Portsmouth City Council and the London Borough of Brent. Data were collected both remotely and in-person using interviews, and participant observations were conducted in seven food banks. Facilitated by a two-stage thematic analysis process, data collection ceased upon reaching theoretical data saturation (Green and Thorogood, 2018).

Finally, ethical considerations and procedures will be explored. I discuss the practicalities of doing research with vulnerable low-income groups as this study explored the lived experiences of those

using food banks. I will also discuss the importance and process of reflexivity as a researcher who identified as both an insider and outsider when conducting observations as a volunteer ethnographer.

### 3.2 Theoretical frameworks

Food poverty results from a combination of multiple risks, encompassing social, cultural, political, and economic factors. Therefore, it necessitates a theory that can accommodate these diverse dimensions. As such, I drew upon Stones' Strong Structuration Theory (Stones, 2005), Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969) and Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (Sen, 1985, 1993), as represented below (Figure 7). The theoretical framework informed the processes of interpreting the findings in order to gain a more comprehensive and wider understanding of the food practices of food banks and how they intersect with household food provisioning practices. In particular, the theoretical framework was used to examine the wider institutional and political context of food poverty and food banking structures. It focused on the symbolic interactions involved in accessing and using a food bank and considered how individuals perceived and possessed the capacity to address food poverty through food aid.

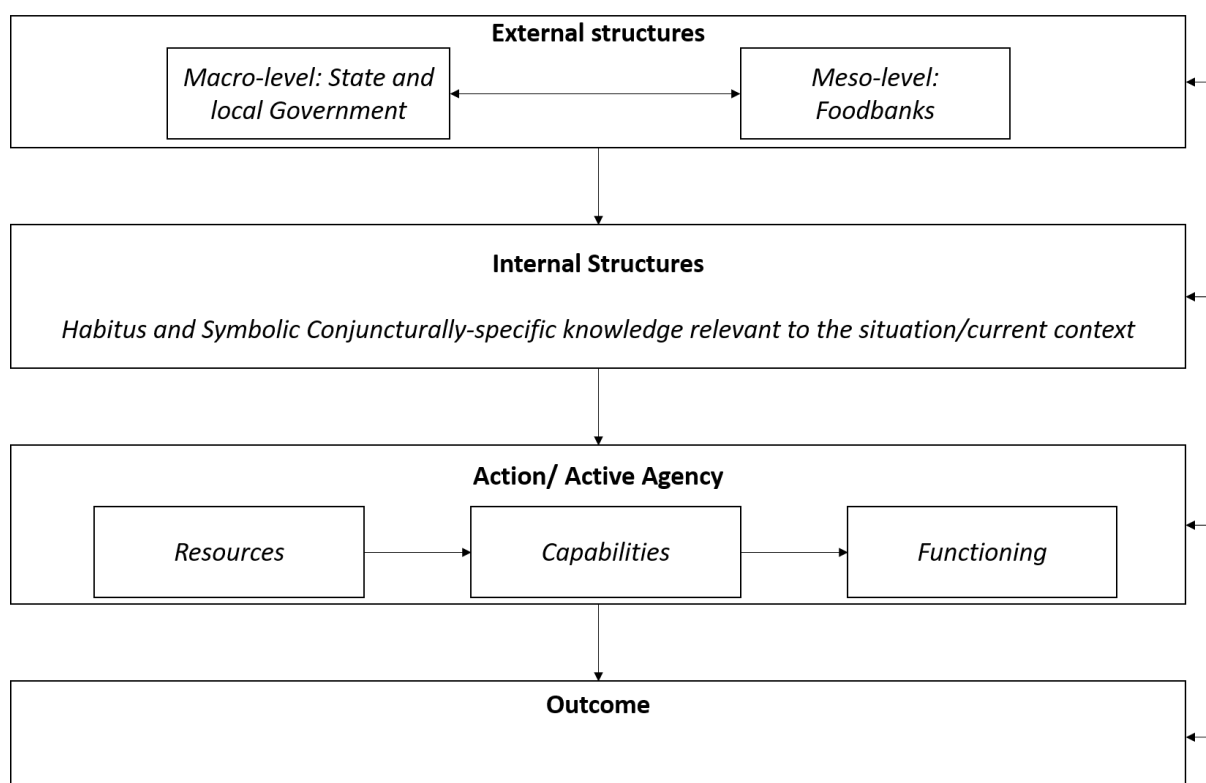


Figure 7: A theoretical framework for understanding the role of diet and nutrition in food banks and its implications on household diets (Source: author adapted from Stones' Strong Structuration Theory, Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism and Amartya Sen's Capability Approach)

Many of the assumptions underlying qualitative public health research stem from sociological theories and therefore are particularly useful in providing a theoretical framework for data collection, analysis and interpretation which can further be applied to wider settings and populations. Traditionally,



theories have either taken a micro/agency or macro/structure level perspective to explain society by either focusing on individual behaviour, motivation, identity and interactions between people or focusing on structures, institution, policies and power (Willis *et al.*, 2007). Over the years however, there has been a growing trend towards attempting to combine the macro and micro/ structure and agency paradigms to explain society, viewing structure and agency as interrelated entities (Bourdieu, 1984; Giddens, 1984; Ryan, 2005). This is particularly relevant in this study which is concerned with understanding the structures and functioning of food banks and the impact of using food parcels on household diets, given the socio-political landscape regarding food aid and poverty in the UK.

Delormier, Frohlich and Potvin (2009) suggests that food and eating should be studied as social practices – embedded in, and reproduced by, wider social structures. An example of social theory which may be useful in providing this perspective is Anthony Giddens’ structuration theory (Giddens, 1984). Emphasising the duality of structure, Giddens sought to explain society as a product of the bi-directional relationship between structure (macro-level social structures) and agency (micro-level human behaviour and interaction). Whilst this has provided novel insights and has been used to understand food choice, practices and provisioning (Slater *et al.*, 2012), it has been criticised for being overly abstract and philosophical with no methodological approach to practically apply in research. However, this led to conception of Stones’ Strong Structuration Theory which addresses the shortcomings of Giddens theory. Developed by Robert Stones, Strong Structuration Theory takes a more ontological quadripartite (four-part) analysis in describing the relationship between structure and agency, highlighting the aspect of social processes within time and place, offering four distinct components (Stones, 2005; Greenhalgh and Stones, 2010):

1. External structures include the structural and institutional properties and conditions that an individual exists. As depicted in Figure 7, the external structures consist of two levels. The macro-level which refers to Central and local government policies and structures which have led to food poverty whereas the meso-level refers to the food bank. Within the meso-level, food banks are influenced by the macro-level structures which affects their own internal structures and agency and the outcome of this affects individual behaviour and agency.
2. Internal structures refer to the individuals’ knowledge, norms, beliefs, and habits.
3. Active agency relates to purposeful or deliberate action and practice which for the purpose of this study relates to food bank practices as well as household dietary practices.
4. Outcomes can change or reinforce external and internal structures. Within this study this relates to the positive or negative implications of using food banks on their diet and nutrition.

For these reasons, the Strong Structuration Theory provides the basis for the theoretical framework of this study. However, it still lacks sufficient emphasis on how interactions between people and place impact behaviour and how personal capacity is enabled or inhibited by the social structures which exist. To rectify this, I also draw upon Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969), and the Capability Approach (Sen, 1985, 1993). For the purposes of this study, symbolic interactionism was used to provide a lens into how meanings of a food bank are constructed, specifically with regards to diet and nutrition, considering the stigma associated with food banks and other means of food assistance (Fong, Wright and Wimer, 2016). Likewise, the Capability Approach was employed to capture, from a practical perspective, what resources people have available to them and their capabilities in preparing and cooking meals. Note that, data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, while the interpretation of findings drew upon the theoretical framework.

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological theory developed by Herbert Blumer and first conceived by George Herbert Mead. Taking a micro perspective, symbolic interactionism explains society as a product of interactions between individuals, focusing on the meanings people gain from interacting with one another and thus shaping individual behaviour, as the development of an individual is viewed as a social process (Blumer, 1969). The theory is based on three assumptions, as follows:

1. Human beings act towards things based on the meanings assigned to them.
2. The meanings of such things derive from the social interactions that occur between individuals.
3. These meanings are not permanent and thus are modified through repeated interactions with others.

Symbolic interactionism has been widely used in social research including the sociology of food and anthropology of food. For example, in a study by Tarasuk and Eakin (2003), the theory of symbolic interactionism helped to identify the act of giving food as a symbolic gesture, particularly as a separation of food assistance to meeting the actual or perceived needs of clients. In this study it will be used to provide a lens into how individuals construct meanings of a food bank and its services especially considering the stigma associated with food banking and other means of food assistance as noted by Fong, Wright and Wimer (2016). Symbolic interactionism has been applied by Rogers-Dillon (1995) to understand the dynamics of welfare and the stigma associated with its use particularly in terms of how women on welfare manage their use of food stamps.

Additionally, Amartya Sen's Capability Approach was drawn upon to aid in the understanding of active agency focusing on three elements: resources, capabilities and functioning (Sen, 1993). Fundamental to the Capability Approach are the concepts of functionality and capacity, highlighting that people

should be seen as active agents in affecting change rather than idle recipients of assistance (Gombert *et al.*, 2017). In a study that focused on household food insecurity and coping strategies in the face of vulnerability in southern Ethiopia, there was a need to examine how structures determine gender and power relations (Duguma, 2015). Through the application of structuration theory, the study provided valuable insights into the root causes of food insecurity and the ability for women to cope with livelihood shocks. Furthermore, it highlighted the importance of investigating personal capacity in managing stressors and shocks and safeguarding household food security. This demonstrates how the capability approach can serve as a bridge between individual agency and societal structure. For the purposes of this study, the Capability Approach is used to examine the incorporation of food parcels within existing dietary practices and its impact on managing household food security. Additionally, it is used to understand the notion of perceived and actual capacity/agency and functionality from the provider and recipient perspective and what determines capacity.

### 3.3 Study context

This study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic affected an estimated 188 countries and is reported to have caused over 1.8 million deaths worldwide (Johns Hopkins University, 2020; World Health Organization, 2021). Governments issued guidelines on how to manage the spread of the virus, including social distancing and self-isolation measures resulting in restricted movement and closures of non-essential services (GOV.UK, 2020). The pandemic had widespread effects on global health, financial and food systems (Aday and Aday, 2020; Cullen, 2020; Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, 2020; GAIN, 2020; Power *et al.*, 2020; Cummins *et al.*, 2021). At an individual level, economically vulnerable households were forced into states of deprivation and precarity. Access to, and availability of, food was constrained leading to an increased reliance on food banks as vulnerability to food insecurity and malnutrition increased (Power *et al.*, 2020).

In the UK, the pandemic had an impact on food banks in a number of ways including closures and reduced service provision as listed below (Bulman, 2020; Greater London Authority, 2020; Capodistrias *et al.*, 2022):

1. Due to social distancing and shielding measures, food banks experienced a decline in the number of volunteers.
2. Some food banks moved towards a grab 'n' go system whereby food parcels would be given to food bank users typically from the front door or delivering food to the most vulnerable.
3. Food banks experienced a decline in the number of food donations.
4. As a result of panic-buying, food banks were unable to purchase food from supermarkets or had received insufficient surplus food provisions from supermarkets.

These events affected how data were collected. Firstly, the term food bank was revised to incorporate food aid providers that distributed food parcels, even though before the pandemic they did not provide food parcels as a primary or secondary service provision (see section 3.4). Secondly, data were collected remotely and in-person, in-line with social distancing measures.

### 3.4 Study design

This study builds upon related qualitative research aimed at understanding the experience and management of household food insecurity (Hamelin, Beaudry and Habicht, 2002; Kleve *et al.*, 2018). These studies have shown that managing food insecurity involves ensuring access to sufficient food both in the present and future, as well as dealing with the emotional and nutritional aspects that food-insecure households encounter when managing limited resources.

Rooted in sociology and anthropology, qualitative research aims to understand the social paradigms of environments, behaviours and processes (Durand and Chantler, 2014). Whilst quantitative research aims to be statistically representative to facilitate the generalisability of findings, qualitative research endeavours to reflect the experiences and perceptions of a range of participants by addressing the questions of why and how. Qualitative research is thus often associated with interpretivism rather than positivism. Interpretivism involves the study of society in its natural state as reality is subjective and produced by one's own interpretation and understanding (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Ryan, 2018). Thus, in order to understand human behaviour and decision making, 'verstehen' (empathetic understanding) needs to be achieved as there can be multiple meanings and reasonings to experiences and behaviours (Chowdhury, 2014). To achieve this, I assumed the role of a volunteer when conducting ethnography. This allowed me to engage in the discussion with an understanding of the day-to-day practicalities of operating a food bank.

This study utilises a qualitative approach comprising of:

1. A critical discourse analysis of eleven Government and third-sector food bank reports relating to food poverty and food insecurity published between 2013 – 2020 (since the introduction of Universal Credit)
2. An ethnography of food bank practices and household dietary practices. Participant observations and interviews were conducted with volunteers, food bank users, and public health professionals.

This combination of CDA and ethnography provided a robust and deeper understanding of how food banks and food aid is conceptualised and operationalised from a social policy, welfare, and nutrition perspective.

### 3.5 Data collection and analysis

#### 3.5.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

*“Language is so central to all social activities it is easy to take for granted.”* (Potter and Wetherell, 1987)

A CDA on the role of food banks was conducted. To date, only one discourse study has been carried out on the concept of household food security in England (Midgley, 2012). Findings suggested that policymakers utilised the distribution of food as a *‘ready-made solution’* that addresses the problem at hand. Thus, rather than questioning the reasons which had led to the emergence of food banks, the food bank response was maintained in place of State intervention (Midgley, 2012). Alongside this, two academic studies have been conducted on the framing of food banks using media analysis (Wells and Caraher, 2014; Strong, 2022). Theoretically, this project continues from these by examining the construction of food banks since their proliferation in 2013 as the CDA was conducted to determine ‘how food banks have been framed in the discourses of food poverty and hunger since the introduction of Universal Credit in 2013?’

Discourse analysis is a method used to study the use of spoken and/or written language to identify how meaning is created in different social characteristics and contexts (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 2001; van Dijk, 2008). In contrast to content analysis that seeks only to describe what is being said, discourse analysis is concerned with analysing the use of language based on the material itself and the social and historical context it arose from to identify its meanings (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; van Dijk, 2008; E Shaw and Bailey, 2009). Commonly used in qualitative research as well as in linguistics, sociology and psychology; discourse analysis is most useful when used in triangulating research findings as they provide a different perspective whilst also encompassing the social and cultural contexts in which the textual or visual communication may have arisen (E Shaw and Bailey, 2009). In the context of this project, it was utilized in conjunction with an ethnographic study on food bank practices in relation to diet and nutrition, and their relationship with existing household dietary practices.

Within the broader field of discourse analysis, there are multiple interdisciplinary approaches, including CDA. CDA treats language and its meanings as a form of social practice by focusing on social problem(s). Analysis of text (as sometimes visual and audible materials too), includes an examination of the development and reinforcement of power, dominance and inequality in society – as reflected and perpetuated through language (Wodak and Meyer, 2001; Fairclough, 2010). The method of CDA is not just concerned with analysing text, but analysing it critically – seeking to decipher the opaque interconnectedness of language and social processes (Wodak and Meyer, 2001).

As CDA is an interdisciplinary approach, there are various ways in which it can be conducted. This project adopts Norman Fairclough's Socio-Cultural Approach, which contains three dimensions, each with its own analytical processes (Fairclough, 2001, 2010):

1. The material either visual, verbal, or textual – analysed using text analysis.
2. The processes by means of which the material is produced and received by the public – analysed using processing analysis.
3. The social and historical context in which the text is situated in – analysed using social analysis.

As a way to capture these principles, a general analytical framework for CDA proposed by Mullet (2018) was used to critically analyse the documents selected (Figure 8).

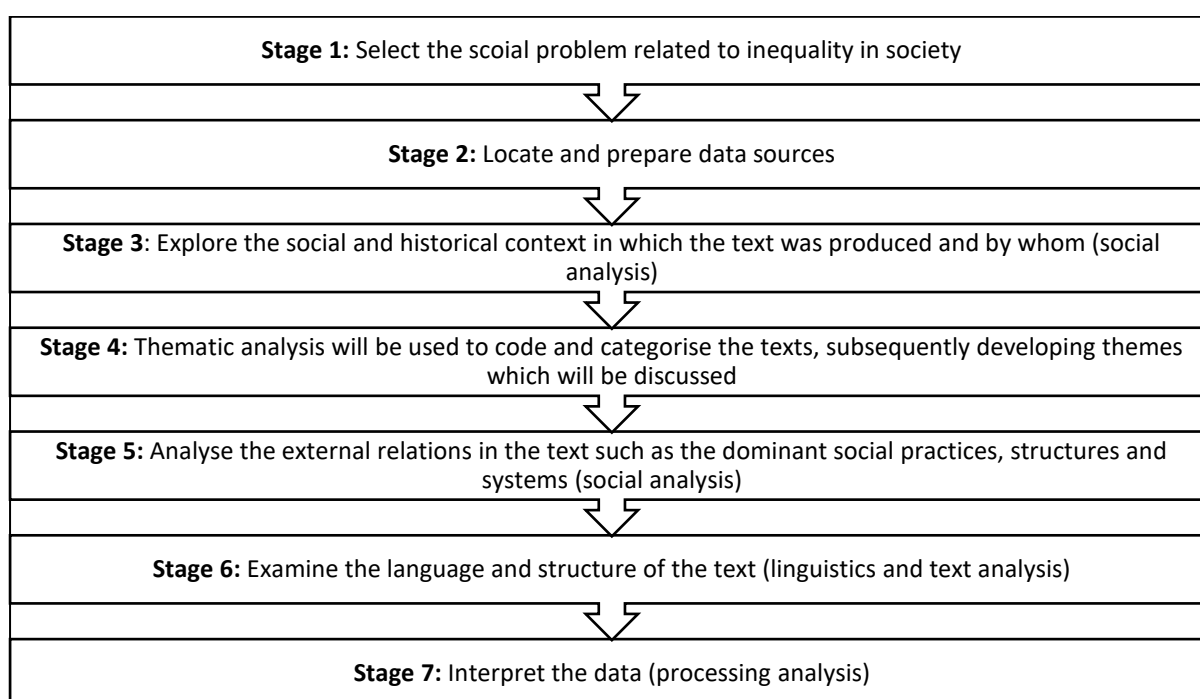


Figure 8: The Stages of CDA – a general framework (Mullet, 2018)

Analysis was an iterative process and consisted of line-by-line repeated close reading of texts for data familiarisation and a back-and-forth interplay with the stages of analysis. As Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) highlight, this back and forth interaction between the stages allows for a deeper immersion with the data (texts).

#### *Stage 1: Select the discourse.*

CDA is a descriptive, interpretive and explanatory analytical approach that is problem-focused (Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 2001). In this study, the social problem in question is food banks within the context of food poverty and hunger in the UK.

*Stage 2: Locate and prepare data sources.*

Between December 2019 and July 2020, systematic searches were conducted through electronic searches including Google and websites of food aid and poverty organisations, institutions, and related government departments. These included Oxfam GB, The Trussell Trust Network, SPERI, Feeding Britain, Church Poverty Action Group, End Hunger UK, Public Health Scotland, DEFRA, House of Commons Library, NICE and Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Additional bibliography searches were also conducted to identify relevant documents.

Searches were conducted using the following search terms: food banks AND food poverty; food poverty AND hunger; food banks AND food security; food poverty; hunger; food insecurity; food security; household food insecurity AND hunger; food security AND Scotland; food poverty AND Wales; food security AND Wales; food poverty AND Northern Ireland; food security AND Northern Ireland. Only texts published in English language were included in the analysis. Figure 9 (below) illustrates the document selection process in a flow diagram.

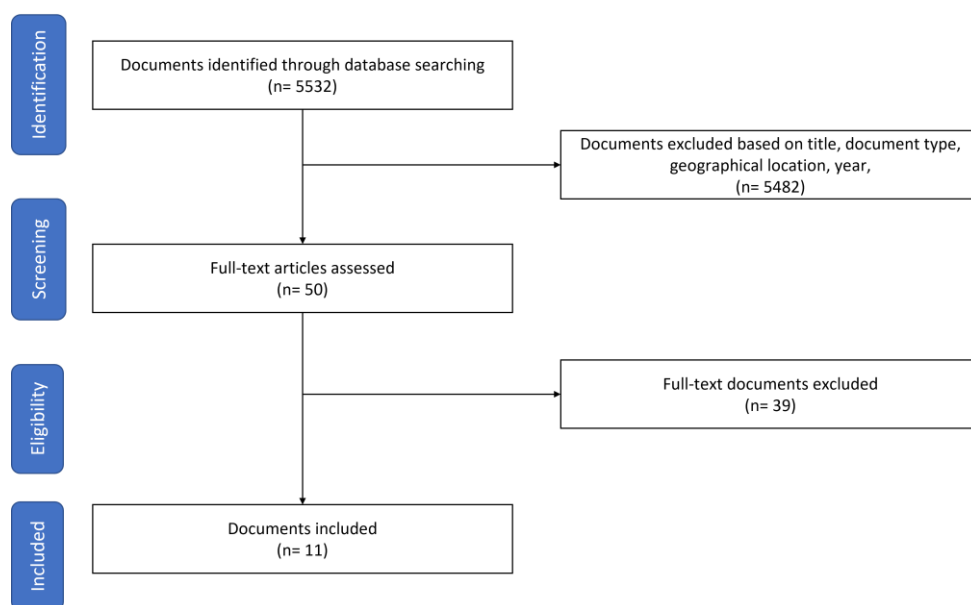


Figure 9: Flow diagram of document selection process

The search initially returned a total of 5532 texts. Screening was conducted in two phases. In phase I, documents were screened and excluded or included based on their title, document type, date, and geographical location. Documents were included if met the following inclusion criteria:

- Published in English
- From 2013 onwards
- Reported on the UK or devolved institutions as a whole.
- Focused on the role of food banks.

The search sought out food bank reports and omitted academic papers, blogs, newspaper articles, organisation mission statements, factsheets, and minutes. Fifty texts were purposively retained to undergo Phase II of screening.

Phase II consisted of a close reading of the summaries of the documents to determine if the document discussed food banks and their role in the UK.

Snowball sampling through bibliography and 'cited by' searches were employed to ensure that the most prominent documents which had contributed to the narratives surrounding food banking and food poverty in the UK were included in the analysis. This was determined using two considerations from Lene Hansen's textual selection matrix (Hansen, 2013). According to this matrix *'(1) the majority of the texts should be taken from the time under study (which in this study was between 2013 to 2020) and (2) the body of texts should include key texts that are frequently quoted and function as nodes within the intertextual web of debate'* (Hansen, 2013). The second consideration was determined by selecting texts that were most cited through bibliography searches and those that had garnered media coverage. In the literature review, two main actors were identified to provide the narrative surrounding food banks – third-sector organisations and independent inquiries by government bodies. As such, eleven texts met these criteria and were included in the analysis. Table 2 presents the texts selected for analysis. Within CDA and discourse analysis in general, there is no hard guideline as to the number of documents required for analysis, rather what is important is selecting documents that provide sufficient and in-depth texts that allow for a comprehensive discussion on the discourse(s) given the purpose and the design of the study.



Table 2: Documents selected for the CDA.

Author	Title	Short title for the purposes of the thesis	Description of document
<b>2013</b>			
Niall Copper and Sarah Dumpleton (Church Action on Poverty and Oxfam)  (Cooper and Dumpleton, 2013)	<a href="#">Walking the breadline: the scandal of food poverty in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain</a>	Walking the Breadline	20-page report. Focused on the phenomena of food poverty and the use of food banks as evidence of the State failing to ensure citizens have access to food – a basic human right. Food banks are warned to not replace the ‘normal’ safety net and hence recommendations are
<b>2014</b>			
All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Hunger and Food Poverty  (All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom, 2014)	<a href="#">Feeding Britain: A strategy for zero hunger in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. The report of the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom</a>	APPG Feeding Britain	56-page report. This report was developed through an inquiry set up the APPG concentrated on hunger over food insecurity. The report focused on the role of food banks as a buffer for households facing financial issues and needing access to food.
Niall Cooper, Sarah Purcell, and Ruth Jackson (Church Action on Poverty, Oxfam and The Trussell Trust)  (Cooper, Purcell and Jackson, 2014)	<a href="#">Below the breadline: the relentless rise of food poverty in Britain</a>	Below the Breadline	28-page report produced by the CAP, Oxfam, and TT. Focused on the issue of food poverty and that due to the failings of the social security provisions food banks have seen a significant increase as people don’t have enough money to live on. It should be a fundamental duty of the Government to protect its citizens from going hungry
All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom  (Forsey, 2014)	<a href="#">An Evidence Review for the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom</a>	Evidence Review for APPG	120-page report. The aim of this report was an evidence review of evidence submitted to the APPG on Hunger in the UK. It focused on three main themes: (1) understanding and examining the extent of food poverty and hunger in the country and its causes; (2) the logistical operations of food banks; and (3) ability for food banks to effectively and sustainability meet the immediate and long-term needs of households. A lot was uncovered here and provided

			interesting insight into the framing of food banks within the church and the ability of meeting needs
The Scottish Parliament Welfare Reform Committee  (The Scottish Parliament, 2014)	<a href="#">Food banks and Welfare reform</a>	Food banks and Welfare Reform	37-page report. The report argues that there is a clear and direct link between welfare reforms and the increase in the need and use of food banks. As such the UK government should no longer ignore the evidence and realise that its actions have led to people struggling to meet their basic needs for food. It emphasises the importance of food banks not becoming a permanent fixture within the welfare state provision
<b>2015</b>			
Fabian Commission on Food and Poverty  (The Fabian Commission on Food and Poverty, 2015)	<a href="#">Hungry for change</a>	Hungry for Change	A 48-page report that looks at the relationship between poverty and food in the UK. Highlights that the food system is unfair and that the 'big society' approach to household food security has not worked. It also talks about the Government taking its responsibility and doing its duty to protect, fulfil and respect the right to food for everyone. Talks a lot about sustainability and how the Government is key to ensuring this as the approach to reducing and ending household food insecurity will be a long-term approach
<b>2016</b>			
Independent Working Group on Food Poverty (Scottish Government)  (The Independent Working Group on Food Poverty, 2016)	<a href="#">Dignity: Ending Hunger Together in Scotland</a>	Dignity	42-page report that describes the use of food banks as an undignified experience that is not a long-term solution to hunger and that the biggest problem is not having enough money as everyone should have the right to good quality and nutritious food. Recommendations are focused on removing and reducing the need for food banks
<b>2017 2018 2019</b>			
House of Commons – Environmental Audit Committee	<a href="#">Sustainable Development Goals in the UK follow up: Hunger, malnutrition, and food insecurity in the UK</a>	SDG in the UK follow up	Report on the progress of the UK government in delivering the Sustainable Development Goals in the UK and overseas. It uses SDG2: Zero Hunger as a case study to review the Government's progress. Food insecurity is significant and growing issue in the UK. The report argues that issues of food insecurity, hunger,

(Environmental Audit Committee, 2019b)			malnutrition, and obesity should be considered in parallel with each other in the UK context as they are co-located and correlated. Examples of 'excellent' local initiatives working to reallocate the UK's surplus food and to tackle hunger are welcome. Food banks are discussed in the context of food security and hunger – food banks and similar organisations are referred to as food support services or initiatives (and also as Civil Society). It is recommended that the Government should appoint a minister with responsibility and accountability for combatting hunger and food insecurity within the UK and they should work with civil society to assess the scale of the problem and implement strategies
Human Rights Watch (Human Rights Watch, 2019)	<a href="#">Nothing Left in the Cupboards: Austerity, Welfare Cuts, and the Right to Food in the UK</a>	Nothing Left in the Cupboards	At 125 pages, this report focuses on how families were living on the breadline and identified areas where the government fell short in ensuring people's right to food. Highlights how the multiplication of food banks were indication of poverty/food insecurity, and the issue of food aid was beyond food banks
Philip Alston (United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights) (Alston, 2018)	<a href="#">Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights on his visit to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland</a>	Report of the Special Rapporteur	The Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights visited the UK and the report served to the Human Rights Council as a detailed account reporting the extent to which Government policies and programmes related to poverty are consistent with human rights obligations. At 21 pages the report found that despite the amounting evidence that Government policies since 2010 have negatively impacted people's lives the Government remains in denial. Additionally, it was witnessed that charities had stepped in to fill holes in government services. Government response to the report was mixed but ultimately, they forewent the opportunity to engage with people and address the real issues affecting poverty and refused to recognise the seriousness of the problem in the country
<b>2020</b>			
Select Committee on Food, Poverty, Health, and the Environment (House of Lords)	<a href="#">Hungry for change: fixing the failures in food</a>	Fixing the failures in food	At 193 pages, this report was released in the wake of COVID-19 to consider the links between inequality, public health, and food sustainability. It found that there were multiple barriers across the

<p>(Select Committee on Food Poverty Health and the Environment, 2020)</p>		<p>food system at all levels inhibiting people's access to not only enough food but also a healthy and sustainable diet and that the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities and issues. The report recommends that the Government should conduct detailed and routine monitoring of food insecurity. Additionally, a better understanding of the affordability of a healthy diet is needed, especially since individuals facing challenges in accessing food encounter difficulties in affording healthy food. The Government is urged not to rely on food aid to fill in the gaps of the welfare system</p>
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*Stage 3: Explore the background of each text.*

A thorough systematic review of the texts provided background information to help understand the sociocultural, political, and economic context in which the phenomena (in this instance, food banks) had developed.

The social and historical context in which the text was produced, and by whom, were analysed to allow for an examination of how discourses were situated within time and place (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004; Mullet, 2018). This involved mapping out the socio-historical context of each text by asking the text:

1. Who produced the text?
2. When was the text produced?
3. Why was the text produced?
4. What socio-economic and historical events and times are mentioned?
5. What other texts are mentioned?

Subsequently a timeline of key events was developed as depicted in the figure below (see Figure 10).

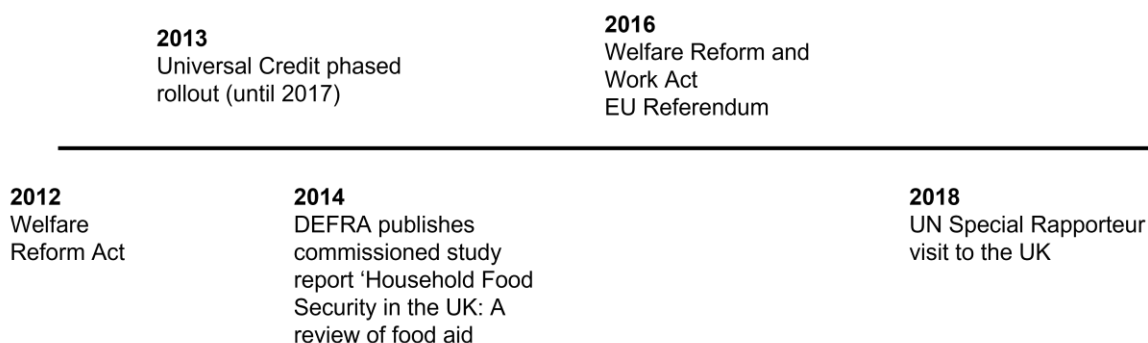


Figure 10: A timeline of key events that occurred in the UK between 2012 – 2020.

*Stage 4: Code texts and identify overarching themes.*

Thematic analysis was a deductive and inductive process, following the six-stages proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process was conducted firstly by hand, going through each hard copy, and noting down initial codes. Thereafter, NVivo-12 was used to help manage and organise the data, applying the codes manually into NVivo 12. I reviewed the line, phrase, sentence and paragraph segments from the texts, and text segments that were relevant to the research question were highlighted. Short-hand notes were written in the margins to highlight the keywords, phrases, and concepts. Initial coding of the content of the documents was based on pre-existing concepts identified from the literature review and these included: food banks as an emergency provision of food, causes of increasing food banks and the services provided by food bank. Texts were checked and rechecked with codes to organise ideas and determine the concepts that clustered together based on the

similarities, differences, and general patterns. Codes were then clustered into substantive categories (themes) indicating the prominent discourses related to the framing of food banks and their role.

Questions asked included:

1. How is the text similar or different from the preceding text?
2. What kind of ideas are mentioned?
3. Which actors are mentioned?

Twenty-six codes were initially identified (Figure 11). Through refinement, by revisiting the texts and identifying the relationship between the codes and eliminating codes that did not address the research question, seven categories were then organised into to three key themes as highlighted in Stage 7.

Nodes			
Name	Files	References	
causes of food banks		9	36
aid vs emergency vs charitable vs assistance		9	23
reliance		8	24
reliance vs need vs demand vs access vs use		9	16
thank you but		8	24
institutionalisation		7	20
ways into a food bank		8	13
as part of something bigger		7	14
a service		7	17
need		6	14
Trussell Trust		6	9
challenges of food banks		6	12
food quality		3	3
logistics		1	1
more than food		6	20
assumed responsibility		5	15
Government responsibility and duty		6	13
stigma and shame		5	11
emergency use only		5	17
community		4	13
dignity		2	2
other		4	5
symptom not a cause		3	5
devolved nations vs central government		2	2
the only means		1	1
last resort		2	4
emergency food banks		1	2
acute vs chronic		2	6
safety net food banks as welfare		1	2

Figure 11: A screengrab from NVivo showing initial codes.

*Stage 5: Analyse the external relations in the texts (interdiscursivity)*

When examining the social interactions and processes that controlled the production of the text and vice versa and how the text informed social practices, each text was examined for its language and interpreted in its context and external relations, including the positionality of the author and/or organisation. What was important was a consideration of the original purpose for producing the text, the context in which it was produced, and its intended audience.

*Stage 6: Analyse the internal relations in the texts.*

Text segments were examined for grammar, word choices, tone and constructions using linguistic and text analysis techniques. The analysis focused on the whole-text organisation, grammatical and semantic features, and linguistic devices such as metaphors, nouns, and verbs. These linguistic features were examined to establish how food banks were framed and by whom. The use of passive and active voices was examined, providing insight into the expression of perspectives. Analysis also focused on what was omitted in the text. Findings from the texts were then collated and analysed with interpretations organised around the dominant themes identified.

*Stage 7: Interpret the data.*

Findings from the previous stages were synthesised together and analysed, before being organised around the three key themes. These included (i) the characterisation of food banks as emergency food aid providers, (ii) the problem of reliance, and (iii) the institutionalisation of food banks from food aid to food welfare. Chapter Four provides a discussion of the findings.

### 3.5.2 Ethnography of food bank practices and utilisation of food parcels by food bank users

An ethnographic study of the food bank supply chain in two sites in the South of England and household utilisation of food parcels was conducted. A total of eight food banks were studied. Participants (a total of 47) were recruited and interviewed remotely or in-person from all of these food banks, and in-person observations were carried out in seven of these eight food banks. Due to time constraints no observations were conducted in the eighth food bank. Data collection occurred in two phases over an eight-month period after the CDA. Data were collected both remotely and in-person (in compliance with COVID-19 restrictions). Remote data collection occurred between February to May 2021 and face-to-face data collection occurred between July to October 2021. The extensive period of data collection enabled the development of rapport with participants and allowed for a thorough understanding of the food aid system and how each food bank operates (Garthwaite, Collins and Bamba, 2015; Lofland *et al.*, 2022).

#### 3.5.2.1 Setting

Urban areas in the North of England report high levels of deprivation and widening social and health inequalities compared to those in the South. As a result, much of the research conducted on food

banks has focused on populations in the North of England, except for London. Yet, evidence suggests hidden poverty in the richest cities in England exists, most of which are located in the South; with many experiencing severe economic constraints and unable to absorb the increasing costs of living (Buttle UK, 2016; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2016).

Therefore, this study took place in (i) Portsmouth and (ii) the London Borough of Brent. Data were collected from eight food banks (Portsmouth n=5: Brent n=3).

### Portsmouth

Portsmouth is a Liberal Democrat-held port city consisting of 14 wards (see Figure 12).



Figure 12: Portsmouth Ward Map (Portsmouth City Council, 2015b)

Portsmouth is located in the county of Hampshire, an area that continues to grow economically (Portsmouth City Council, 2023a) and is home to 208,100 people. Portsmouth is ranked 59<sup>th</sup> out of 326 local authorities determined by the average index of multiple deprivation (Portsmouth City Council, 2023a).

With regards to food poverty, Portsmouth City Council has been pro-active in addressing food poverty through various City Council initiatives such as the Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy and Portsmouth Economic and Regeneration Strategy (Portsmouth City Council, 2018, 2019). The Tackling



Poverty Strategy aimed to combat poverty by targeting six priority areas including poverty and health inequalities through collaborative partnerships between commercial, voluntary, community and government sectors (Portsmouth City Council, 2015a). It also sought to support and provide training to food banks and facilitate resources and build capacity as well as explore the integration of health and wellbeing components within food banks (Portsmouth City Council, 2015a). According to Trussell Trust data, 9,700 3-day emergency food parcels were distributed to residents in 2021 (Portsmouth Foodbank, 2023). Despite these efforts, food poverty persists. As of April 2023, nine food banks operate in Portsmouth, each with varying opening hours and food provisions alongside ten hot food aid providers, and nine food pantries (Portsmouth City Council, 2023b).

#### London Borough of Brent

Brent is a Labour-governed borough located in north-west London. It is characterised by a mixture of residential, industrial and commercial land and has 21 wards (see Figure 13) (Brent Council, 2023).

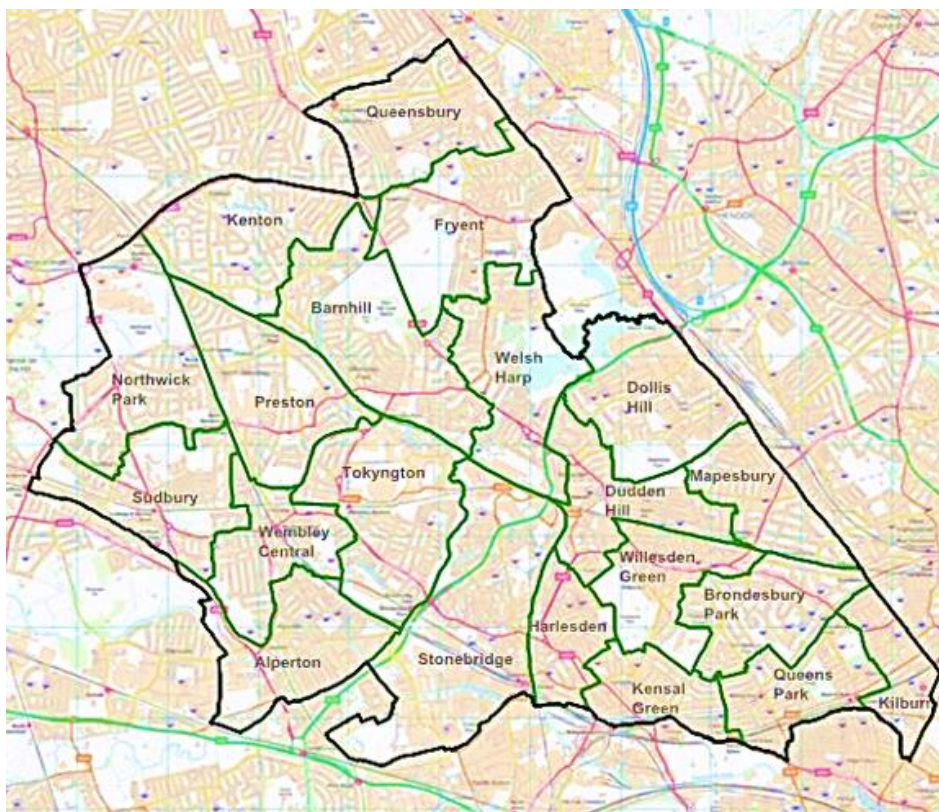


Figure 13: Brent Ward Map (Brent Council, 2020)

With a total population of 339 800, it is one of the most diverse boroughs in London with 16% of the population classified as White British, in comparison to Portsmouth where 25% of the population are non-White (Brent Council, 2023; Portsmouth City Council, 2023a). Brent has one of the highest proportions of people living in poverty in London (Trust for London, 2023b) with 36% of people living in poverty and an unemployment rate of 8.2% (Trust for London, 2023a). In 2017 a report on the use

of food banks in Brent, recommended various ways for the Council to address the growing use of food banks including raising awareness of food poverty (Resources & Public Realm Scrutiny Committee, 2017). Similarly, the Poverty Commission Report published in 2020 indicated that the Council should support and engage in building a sustainable future for food aid agencies including food banks and associated providers (Independent Poverty Commission, 2020). According to Trussell Trust data, in 2022, Brent Food Bank fed 15,000 people locally (Brent Foodbank, 2023). As of February 2022, 19 food banks currently operate in Brent alongside eight food aid providers (Sufra - NW London, 2022).

### *3.5.2.2 Sample*

To address the research questions relating to food bank and household dietary practices three participant groups were purposively sampled for this study: (i) food bank managers and volunteers, (ii) food bank users, and (iii) public health practitioners.

#### *Food bank managers and volunteers*

Due to the pandemic, formats and variations of existing food banks and other food aid outlet models emerged. As a result, the definition of a food bank has broadened. For the purposes of this study, a food bank refers to any place that distributes food parcels or bags, as a primary or secondary service, to people in need, on a referral or non-referral basis. At the time of data collection (February to October 2021), a total of 17 food banks operated in Brent and Portsmouth. Each food bank was approached to participate via email or telephone, typically communicating with the manager (see Appendix 1). Initial recruitment occurred remotely, during the third national lockdown in January 2021 (Brown and Kirk-Wade, 2021). Of the 17, seven were non-responders, and ten agreed to take part. Two subsequently dropped out, leaving eight food banks included in the study (Brent n=3; Portsmouth n=5). Five food banks from Portsmouth were included in this study:

1. A food pantry which was formerly a Trussell Trust food bank
2. A soup kitchen that distributed food parcels in addition to hot food as a result of the pandemic
3. Two Trussell Trust food banks
4. An independent food bank.

Three food banks from Brent were included in this study:

- A community kitchen which converted into an independent food bank due to the pandemic
- An independent food bank.
- An independent food bank that had a referral system in place. This food bank acted as the thematic lead on food aid for Brent Council with Brent Hubs. No observational data were collected from this food bank.

Using purposive (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015) and snowball sampling techniques (Parker, Scott and Geddes, 2019), the food bank manager, and a minimum of two to three volunteers from each food bank, were identified and approached for an interview. Participating food banks agreed to assist in the recruitment of volunteers by identifying and facilitating introductions with potential volunteers aimed at providing a wide range of perspectives and experiences related to the research questions (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). Presented in Table 3 and Table 4 are the characteristics of the volunteers and managers that participated in this study from Portsmouth and Brent respectively.

*Table 3: Characteristics of participants from food banks in Portsmouth*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Role</b>
<b>1. Siobhan</b>	Female. Manager of a Soup Kitchen that distributed hot food alongside a food bag to takeaway.
<b>2. James</b>	Male. Trussell Trust food bank manager.
<b>3. Gary</b>	Male. Trussell Trust food bank manager.
<b>4. Louise</b>	Female. Former Trussell Trust food bank manager.
<b>5. Leah</b>	Female. Independent food bank manager.
<b>6. Alan</b>	Male. Soup kitchen volunteer and kitchen coordinator.
<b>7. Morgan</b>	Male. Independent food bank volunteer.
<b>8. Kevin</b>	Male. Trussell Trust food bank volunteer.
<b>9. Tracey</b>	Female. Independent food bank volunteer.

*Table 4: Characteristics of participants from food banks in Brent*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Role</b>
<b>1. Adrian</b>	Male. Independent food bank volunteer.
<b>2. Leila</b>	Female. Independent food bank manager.
<b>3. Emma</b>	Female. Independent food bank (formerly Community Kitchen) manager.
<b>4. Sharon</b>	Female. Independent food bank (formerly Community Kitchen) volunteer and former food bank user.
<b>5. Ian</b>	Male. Independent food bank (formerly Community Kitchen) volunteer.
<b>6. Izzy</b>	Female. Independent food bank (formerly Community Kitchen) volunteer.
<b>7. Mable</b>	Female. Independent food bank (formerly Community Kitchen) volunteer.
<b>8. April</b>	Female. Independent food bank (formerly Community Kitchen) volunteer.
<b>9. Zara</b>	Female. Independent food bank (formerly Community Kitchen) volunteer.
<b>10. Monica</b>	Female. Independent food bank (formerly Community Kitchen) volunteer.
<b>11. Sabrina</b>	Female. Independent food bank (formerly Community Kitchen) volunteer.
<b>12. Jessie</b>	Female. Female. Independent food bank (formerly Community Kitchen) volunteer.

#### Food bank users

The second group of participants recruited were food bank users. Purposive and convenience sampling were used to identify and recruit a diverse group of food bank users along key axes of interest such as age, gender, ethnicity, occupation, religion, and family composition to account for a range of experiences and perspectives. Initial contact with users was made during fieldwork visits. Food bank users were recruited through a gatekeeper or by participants responding to a recruitment poster. With permission from the food bank, recruitment posters (see Appendix 2) were printed and distributed to food bank users, with those interested responding by email or telephone. Volunteers acted as gatekeepers, facilitating recruitment and introductions by distributing recruitment posters or purposively identifying food bank users who met the inclusion criteria. Participants were considered eligible if they were 18 years old and above, English-speaking and having used the food bank two times or more in the last 12 months. Table 5 describes the food bank users who participated in this study.

Table 5: Food bank users participant descriptors

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age group</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Household composition</b>	<b>Employment status</b>	<b>Income</b>
<b>Rebecca</b>	F	50-59	Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African	2-person household	Full time carer of son who has autism	Benefits
<b>Tanya</b>	F	50-59	Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African	1 person household	Retired	Pension
<b>Paige</b>	F	30-39	Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African	1 person household	Part-time	Benefits
<b>Simone</b>	F	50-59	Asian or Asian British	2-person household – Lives with her daughter	Unemployed	Benefits
<b>Jane</b>	F	40-49	White	3-person household- Single parent with two children	Full time	Benefits
<b>Maria</b>	F	30-39	Arab	4-person household – Single parent with three children	*	Benefits
<b>Sayyid</b>	M	50-59	Arab	2-person household	*	*
<b>Anwar</b>	M	50-59	Arab	2-person household	*	*
<b>Aya</b>	F	40-49	Arab	2-person household	*	*
<b>Morris</b>	M	60-69	Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African	1 person household	Retired	Pension
<b>Angelina</b>	F	40-49	Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African	1 person household	*	Benefits
<b>Kelly</b>	F	50-59	White	1 person household	Part time	Benefits
<b>Adam</b>	M	40-49	Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African	House in multiple occupation	Unemployed	Benefits

<b>Josh</b>	M	30-39	White	1 person household	Unemployed	Benefits
<b>Jasmine</b>	F	50-59	White	1 person household	Retired	Pension
<b>Taylor</b>	F	30-39	White	House in multiple occupation	Unemployed	Benefits
<b>Lila</b>	F	30-39	White	2 Single parent with one daughter	Part time	Benefits
<b>Lizzie</b>	F	50-59	White	1 Supported housing	Retired	Disability benefits
<b>Kyle</b>	M	40-49	White	HMO	Volunteer and pending job opportunity	Benefits
<b>Cassie</b>	F	20-29	Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African	2-person household – Single parent with one son	Student	Benefits
<b>Alex</b>	M	30-39	White	HMO	Unemployed	Benefits

*\*status unknown*

### Public health sample

The inclusion of public health practitioners was directed by preliminary conversations with local Councils during September to December 2020 when in-person data collection was not possible due to COVID-19 restrictions. Having identified that local authorities had become increasingly involved in the food aid landscape, I sought ethical approval from LSHTM Ethics to amend the project to include local authority officers and associated practitioners. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to identify public health practitioners whose role was linked to community health and food poverty within Brent Council and Portsmouth City Council. Individuals were identified via the Council website and through Council reports such as the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and Local Food Poverty Action Plans. Additionally, food bank managers would signpost relevant individuals to approach providing an email address to contact. Participants were recruited primarily via email, as well as by telephone using a publicly available number listed on the Council website. Table 6 details the public health professionals and food aid coordinator that participated in this study.

*Table 6: Public Health sample*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Role</b>
<b>1. Luke</b>	Male. Public Health Professional. Portsmouth
<b>2. Sarah</b>	Female. Independent food aid coordinator. Brent
<b>3. Sadie</b>	Female. Public Health Professional. Portsmouth

### 3.5.2.3 Ethnographic data collection

#### Interviews

Interviews are the most common method used in qualitative research. Conducted in various forms, interviews have become a key way of co-producing knowledge (Durand and Chantler, 2014; Filipe, Renedo and Marston, 2017). In-depth, semi-structured interviews (DeJonckheere and Vaughn, 2019) and focus group discussions (FGDs) were undertaken during fieldwork. Interview guides were piloted in three group workshop sessions with five Local Authority officers from Camden and Islington Council, two members of a food poverty justice organisation and three members of the general public.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, data collection comprised a mixture of in-person and remote interviews. Face-to-face interviews were conducted at the food bank premises either outside, in a designated meeting room, or a sectioned space within the open space in the food bank. All effort was taken to ensure that social distancing measures were upheld, this included where possible, allowing a 1 to 2-metre distance between myself and the participant, wearing of a face mask when indoors and opening a window or sitting close to a window. Remote interviews occurred via Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or telephone, according to the participant's preference. Interviews were conducted at home in a designated room with headphones to ensure privacy was maintained. In total, of the conducted

interviews with food bank volunteers/managers and public health practitioners, 20 were remotely conducted with 13 participants and 13 were in-person with 13 participants. In total, of the conducted interviews with food bank users, one was conducted remotely with one participant and 20 were in-person with 20 participants.

### **In-depth, semi-structured interviews**

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were the chosen method for conducting one-to-one interviews. A subset of these interviews were repeated. Guided by open-ended questions, semi-structured in-depth interviews take a conversational and flexible approach to interviewing to capturing an in-depth perspective and understanding of complex behaviours and experiences within wider contexts (Longhurst, 2009; Jamshed, 2014; DeJonckheere and Vaughn, 2019).

Two to three repeat in-depth interviews, typically lasting between 30 to 90 minutes, were conducted with seven food bank managers and one volunteer. These repeat interviews were conducted in order to firstly gain a detailed understanding of individual food bank practices, and secondly to accommodate for the busy schedules and workload of managers and volunteers caused by the pandemic.

Participants were sent a calendar invite, and for the interviews that were taking place over Zoom or Microsoft Teams, the video conference link and password was attached (Roberts, Pavlakis and Richards, 2021). Interviews were audio recorded using an encrypted Dictaphone or the built-in recording function on Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

An interview topic guide (see Appendix 8) was used to structure the interview and ensure a range of topics were explored. These topics included: the acquisition and distribution of food; the consideration of dietary practices and food preferences; and the impact of COVID-19 on food bank functions. The first interview explored the origin of the food bank, discussing how and why the food bank was formed, the different services that operate and what the day-to-day processes were within the food bank. Subsequent interviews focused on how the food parcel was packed, the impact of COVID-19 and other aspects of the food bank including procurement, distribution, and logistics. Lastly, the responsibility of feeding people and relationships with other food aid providers and the local authority were discussed.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with food bank users. Interviews took place in-person at food bank premises either outside or in a designated meeting room or private corner in the food bank if it was arranged as an open-plan space. Difficulty arose when interviews were



conducted outside due to the noise caused by passing cars, which occurred in two food banks. The interview guide covered a range of topics (see Appendix 10). These included: the users' journey into the food bank, how they access and interact within the food bank, how food parcels are incorporated into their existing diets, the impact of COVID-19, as well as discussion on their typical dietary practices, food shopping behaviour, and what impact receiving emergency food aid had on their diet.

Likewise, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with public health practitioners and associated practitioners. Typically lasting 45 – 60 minutes, interviews were audio recorded and conducted via Microsoft Teams and Zoom. The interview topic guide (see Appendix 9) focused on the relationship between local authorities and food banks and the responsibility of providing emergency food parcels, especially nutritionally adequate food parcels, whilst also considering the impact of COVID-19.

#### **Focus group discussions.**

FGDs are a form of interviewing that involve a group of people in order to understand their shared values, experiences and roles by focusing on group interaction (Richard *et al.*, 2021). Two in-person FGDs were conducted with volunteers in two Brent food banks. One FGD involved three volunteers and the other FGD involved five volunteers. Discussions occurred in the kitchen within the food bank around a table after the food bank set-up had been completed and before the food bank officially opened to users. The discussion lasted between 30 – 45 minutes and focused on understanding the role of each volunteer, the processes involved in the food bank, their interactions with food bank users, and the role of the food bank within the wider food aid landscape with other providers and the local council. FGDs were audio recorded on an encrypted Dictaphone and detailed fieldnotes were taken during and after the interview.

#### **Ethnographic participant observations as a food bank volunteer**

Participant observations involve direct observation of the phenomena in question and allows the researcher to gather data by actively participating in activities and conversing with participants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Participant observations were conducted in seven food banks (five in Portsmouth and two in Brent), totalling 39 hours.

I assumed the role of a “volunteer ethnographer” acting as a food bank volunteer while conducting ethnographic observations (Garthwaite, 2016c). As such, my identity as a researcher was known to food bank volunteers and users. By assuming the role of a “volunteer ethnographer,” I was able to observe and record the everyday experiences and practices of volunteers, providing a deeper understanding of the decision-making process that occurs in food banks and the subsequent impact this has on food bank users.

Prior to formal data collection, I visited each food bank on one occasion to introduce myself, the project and participate as a volunteer to build rapport and familiarity with volunteers. Formal volunteering and observations were carried out in 2021 between July – September in Brent and in October in Portsmouth. In Brent, a total of eleven observations were carried out in two food banks over six weeks. Similarly, a total of nine observations were carried out in five food banks in Portsmouth over ten days.

To provide contextual reference, photographs of the food bank premises and exemplar food parcels were taken. Permission to observe and photograph the food bank activities was gained in advance from the food bank manager. Observations were undertaken during operating hours and captured all major activities including set-up, deliveries, distribution, and clean-up. Day-to-day tasks were closely observed, following volunteers as they conducted their duties when handling, sorting, and storing food, as well as packing the food parcels imitating an assembly line. Detailed fieldnotes were taken before, during and after each food bank visit in written or audio format. Fieldnotes focused on the physical and social environment within the food bank including the practices, processes, spatial arrangement, and interactions.

Follow-up conversations were conducted with five volunteers and one food bank manager based on the processes observed. Typically, 30 to 60 minutes before the opening time and after volunteering duties were completed, ad-hoc semi structured interviews were undertaken. Interviews were digitally recorded, and detailed notes were taken during and immediately after. Interviews lasted between 15 to 60 minutes. A series of questions focusing on how food was sourced by the food bank, how it was handled when in the food bank, the different roles that volunteers assumed within the food bank, and how the needs of food bank users were considered. Fieldnotes were written up and subject to thematic analysis and integrated with interview transcripts to be treated as one large dataset.

#### *3.5.2.4 Ethnographic data analysis*

All interview and fieldnotes/observational data were transcribed, anonymised and imported into NVivo 12 software, a computer aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) package (Dhakal, 2022). Recordings were transcribed verbatim by an LSHTM-approved and recommended transcription service. Once transcription was completed for each file and returned via email, the transcripts were examined against the audio file to verify the transcripts. During write up, interview excerpts were redacted and anonymised to maintain confidentiality of the participant.

Thematic analysis was employed for data analysis and guided by Braun and Clarke's six stages of thematic analysis to analyse data in relation to its context through its identification of themes (or patterns) (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi, Turunen and Bondas, 2013). This study aimed to

identify and understand the meanings behind the experiences and perspectives of actors involved in a food bank and how institutional practices intersect with household food provisioning practices. As such, thematic analysis was deemed the most appropriate in capturing and reporting these findings in the dataset as compared to content analysis which is a more descriptive form of analysis. Compared to other analytical methods, thematic analysis is described as an 'independent and a reliable qualitative approach to analysis' and as such should be an acquired skill as it provides a skillset that will be useful in conducting other analytical methods (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi, Turunen and Bondas, 2013).

Analysis occurred in two stages: initial coding and focused coding. During initial coding stage, transcripts and fieldnotes were read and re-read and compared with each other to familiarise. Thereafter, any emerging ideas were listed and initial observations on the similarities and differences of emerging ideas were noted. This aided the process of identifying frequently used keywords as preliminary indicators of themes. Upon data completion, focused in-depth coding took place in a systematic manner, following the six analytical stages:

1. Data familiarisation: The researcher becomes familiar with the data by reading and re-reading. This also involves note-taking to identify key points and patterns and subsequently aid in developing potential codes.
2. Generating initial codes: Initial codes can be identified through interview topic guides as well as any repetitive themes arising from the data. This was an ongoing repetitive process to ensure no patterns were missed (see Figure 14).
3. Searching for themes: Themes relate to the broad description of what the data means.
4. Reviewing themes: Involves refining and reviewing the themes for any connections or duplicates.
5. Defining and naming themes: Identifying what aspects of data are being captured and the narrative of the data. Also identifying sub-themes within current themes and further consider the depth of themes.
6. Producing the report: The researcher should decide on themes that make provide meaningful contribution and insight to answering the research questions.

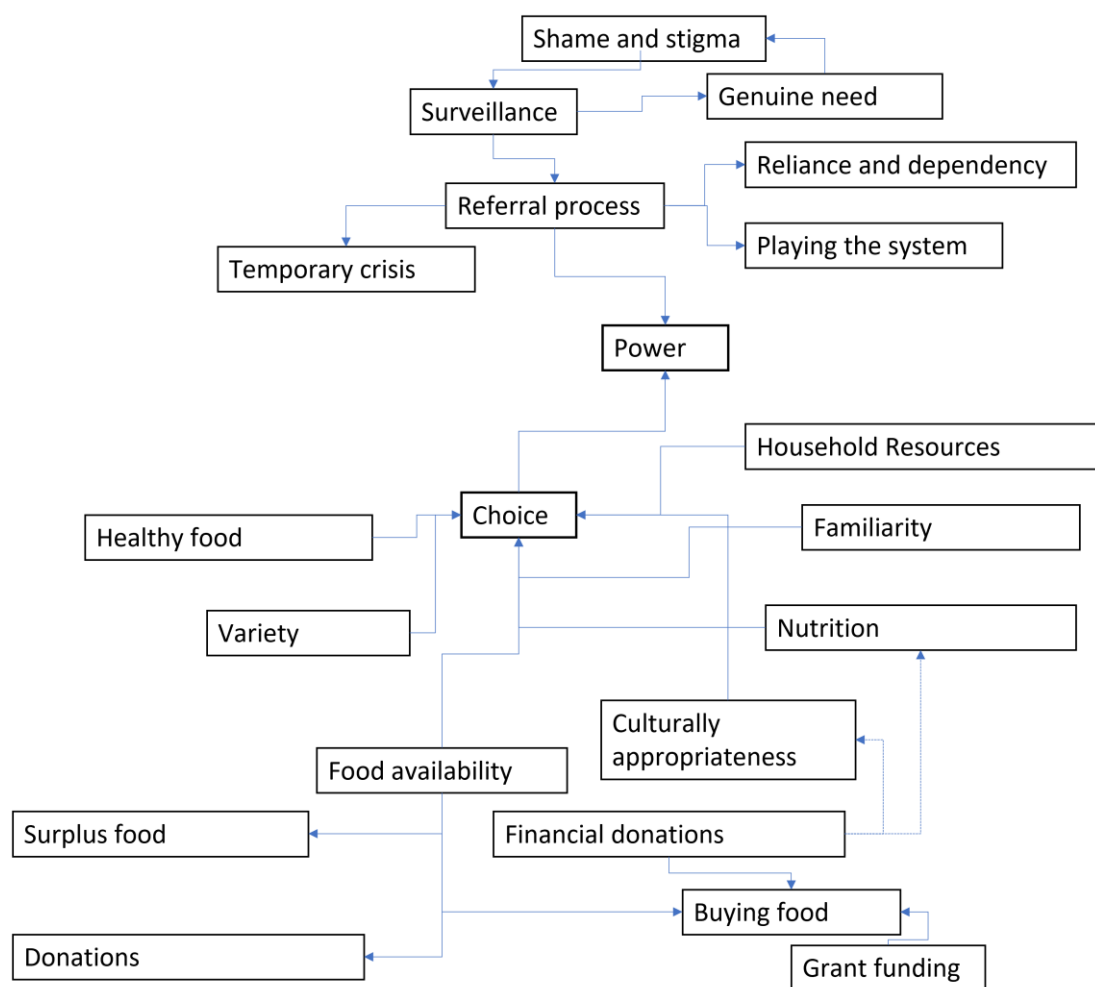


Figure 14: An example of a thematic coding network for this study

### 3.5.2.5 Data management

Although NVivo 12 is often viewed as an analysis tool, it is also a means of data management. King (2004) endorses it as an invaluable tool that can assist researchers in organising data during the process of analysis in order to establish a clear coding structure, carry out complex searches and aid in examining possible relationships between codes, themes, and sub-themes. Thus, NVivo 12 facilitated the analysis by helping to organise and manage the data.

An encrypted Dictaphone was used to record the interviews. All fieldnotes, transcripts, photographs, and audio recordings were stored in an encrypted and password-protected laptop to which I had sole access. Anonymised and pseudonymised extracts of data were only shared and discussed with my supervisors. Interview transcripts, audio recordings and descriptive information were kept in separate password-protected folders. Participants were assigned a study identification number using a random number generator and findings were reported using a pseudonym. Files were backed-up on my personal LSHTM OneDrive. Any identifiable data collected were stored securely and stored separately

from transcripts and recordings, with confidentiality being maintained in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018 and GDPR.

#### *3.5.2.6 Ethical issues*

##### **Ethics and informed consent**

Full ethical approval was obtained from LSHTM Ethics Committee (ID: 19175) and conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Participation was voluntary and secured by informed consent. All participants were provided with a participant information sheet (see Appendices 3 and 4) and consent form (see Appendices 5,6 and 7). Prior to each interview, participants were provided with a verbal explanation of the study, giving space for any questions to be addressed. Thereafter, audio recorded verbal and/or written informed consent were obtained. Clarity was provided on the consent process and voluntary participation was ensured with participants understanding that participation was not obligatory and that anonymity and confidentiality would be upheld. For food bank users whose first language was not English, a third party such as a friend or relative or a volunteer was present during the process of obtaining consent to help with any issues around understanding and consent. Where possible, every effort was made to ensure that the participant received an electronic copy of the signed consent via, shared via email or WhatsApp.

##### **Compensation**

The risks of reimbursing participants for taking part in research has been widely cited (Saleh *et al.*, 2020). Reimbursing or compensating participants is closely linked to ethical concerns, complex power dynamics and impact on participation (Nyangulu *et al.*, 2019). It is therefore advised that participants be 'reasonably reimbursed' for research costs and time spent (Nyangulu *et al.*, 2019). In line with NIHR Involve guidelines, participants were compensated for their time and expenses incurred during the research process as well as in appreciation for participation. Food bank managers and volunteers and public health practitioners were reimbursed £5 for taking part in the study, with compensation supplied as an Amazon Voucher or a money transfer using PayPal. Households were compensated with a £20 money transfer using the platform PayPal or an Amazon voucher. Households were compensated for their time and any costs associated with taking part in the interview. For example, incurred costs due to conducting the interview over the phone and using Wi-Fi/mobile data.

##### **Potential risks and sensitive information**

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of those using food banks, and such topics can evoke emotions around food poverty as a harmful, dehumanising experience (Sime, 2008; Patrick *et al.*, 2020). All efforts were made to ensure that participants were treated with respect and appropriate safeguarding measures were put in place. Fieldwork was conducted with a level of duty of care that avoided further marginalisation of those experiencing food poverty. For example, interviews with food

bank users were conducted at the food bank premises, under the guidance of the food bank manager. Although, I had initially sought to incorporate photo elicitation within this study, several food bank users expressed their discomfort in taking photographs of their meals or kitchen environment. Taking this into consideration, I decided to remove this component from the study. Lastly, each participant was given the opportunity to have someone else present during the interview. At the end of each interview, participants had the opportunity to reflect, retract any personal information shared and ask any questions. At the end of fieldwork, volunteers and managers expressed their thanks in providing an opportunity to critically reflect on their practices and decisions, indicating the value of the research process in understanding the food bank system as well as themselves as individuals and as an organisation.

A process of checking-in with my supervisors was established. This included setting up a WhatsApp group for myself and supervisors, sending a text message before and after each food bank visit. Monthly check-ins were also arranged to reflect upon the research process and discuss any challenges or findings.

#### *3.5.2.7 Reflexivity*

Data collection, analysis and write up were conducted by me, a female, Black-British African, cisgender person with a background in public health nutrition and of Christian faith.

An aspect of qualitative research that has become of significance is reflexivity and positionality. Positionality describes “both an individual’s world view and the position they adopt about a research task and its social and political context” (Darwin Holmes, 2020). Further to this, we as researchers are part of the social world in which we wish to investigate, hence our presence and viewpoints may influence the behaviour of the respondent and the environment (Finlay, 1998). This is because data collection, interpretation and analysis can be influenced by our values and beliefs as we can never be separate from them. As such, the process of reflexivity requires “sensitivity by the researcher to their cultural, political and social context because the individual’s ethics, personal identity, and social values as well as their competency, influence the research process” (Bourke, 2014; Bryman, 2016; Darwin Holmes, 2020). Subsequently, a reflexivity memo journal was kept. This allowed me to reflect upon my thoughts, ideas and experiences throughout this PhD and research process.

*“How can one produce discourses capable of guiding society toward a better alternative when one is the product of this society?”* (Alejandro, 2021). In this way, discourse analysis may function as a reflexive tool as it produces knowledge while simultaneously has the potential to reproduce social hierarchical patterns and inequalities. As a researcher, I sought to conduct the CDA inductively, with reporting of the findings grounded in the language present and situating the language within the

context in which it was reported and represented. As such, the data also reflect the 'darker side' of food banks (van der Horst, Pascucci and Bol, 2014) demonstrating the level of nuance and complexity within socio-political and historical discourses of food poverty.

Finding the balance as a volunteer ethnographer was crucial when conducting fieldwork. As my identity as a researcher was disclosed to all volunteers and users (see section 9.4), how I managed my level of participation as a volunteer, while observing and recording data will was of great importance. My intention in assuming the role of a volunteer as I undertook ethnographic observations was to pursue empathetic involvement and build trust and rapport not solely based on the researcher's needs and objectives (Garthwaite 2016).

However, it was important to establish boundaries. As elaborated by Hill O'Connor and Baker (2017), the degree to which one is involved as a volunteer when conducting ethnographic observation is not determined by the researcher but rather the organisation "which may have specific demands that the researcher is encouraged to meet." Accordingly, I did not seek to take any level of responsibility nor create a level of familiarity that develops into dependency. Therefore, my involvement within the food bank as a volunteer ethnographer, was to work within the team, under the guidance and supervision of the manager or volunteer lead. This was exemplified during fieldwork when the food bank manager in a Trussell Trust food bank directed me to observe, but not advise, the support meetings users would engage in as they waited to receive their food parcel. Additionally, during my visit to a food bank in Portsmouth, the managers directed me to not record or write anything to minimise risk and maintain safeguarding measures.

### 3.6 Summary

The methodological approach of this study took a grounded approach to understanding the extent to which food banks meet household dietary practices and food preferences by examining the relationship between food bank practices and household food practices. By combining a CDA and an ethnographic study of food banks in Brent and Portsmouth this project provided a novel understanding of if and how food banks meet the food needs of those that they support.

Overall, 39 hours and 20 minutes of observational data were generated from seven food banks and a total of 35 hours and 36 minutes of interview data were generated from interviews with 21 food bank users, 15 volunteers, eight food bank managers, and two public health professionals and one food aid coordinator. Alongside this, 30 pages of fieldnotes were produced and 138 photos were captured. In the chapters that follow, the findings are discussed. Split into four narrative chapters, the findings trace the political and social discourses of food banks, before following the journey of food into and out of the food bank.

## Chapter Four: The role of food banks in the UK: a Critical Discourse Analysis

### 4.1 Overview

Existing research on food poverty and food banks (see Chapter 2) has seldom explored how they are defined and presented as a solution to food poverty in the prevailing discourse. How a problem is defined can play a role in the construction and reinforcement of values, practices and experiences (Tarasuk and Davis, 1996). Examining and challenging the dominant and normative discourse can create “alternative ways of thinking about and acting on poverty and inequality” (Marston, 2008). Food banks are highly contested, and the rhetoric surrounding their role remains contradictory. In the relationship between language and meaning, the rhetoric around food banks has contributed to the presentation of food insecure households ‘as part of the problem’ [of food poverty] (Strong, 2022) and food banks as a ‘normalised and routine feature of British food distribution system’ (Wells and Caraher, 2014). This chapter sets out to discursively analyse how the role of food banks in providing emergency food has been framed in the discourses of food poverty and food banking in the UK.

Using a general CDA analytical framework (Mullet, 2018) a deconstruction of the normative constituent discourses surrounding the role of food banks was undertaken (see section 3.5.1). To do this, eleven published Government and third sector documents were examined focusing on what was said, how it was said and by whom. The social and historical context in which the documents arose in were also examined, exposing the changing function of food banks, embedded ideologies and hierarchical structures and power imbalances inherent within food aid.

This chapter aims to explore the prevailing discourse on the definition and function of food banks. In doing so it will examine the conflicting narratives of emergency, reliance, and institutionalisation as they are discursively constructed. The analysis is framed in terms of assumptions, framings practices, and rhetorical positions.

### 4.2 Characterising food banks as emergency food aid providers

Repeatedly and consistently, food banks are described as emergency providers of food aid. This framing defines the role of food banks and, as a consequence, their operational scope, and the nature of their provision. This is articulated in two ways: (i) food banks are intended to be used for short periods of time and (ii) food banks can only provide a limited amount and range of food. The emergency framing of food is temporally distinct and isolated from the underlying long-term systemic drivers of food insecurity and is detached from debates on dependency.



#### 4.2.1 Emergency use only

Throughout the documents, an emergency framing is consistent. Linguistically textured through the use of synonyms including 'short-term' and 'temporary,' food banks are described as emergency providers, used for short periods of time and only for 'acute' 'need.'

"Trussell Trust food banks and some of their independent counterparts are designed to address short-term hunger and help people out of crisis. They have become the new shock absorbers in the lives of large numbers of poor and vulnerable citizens." (APPG Feeding Britain 2014, pg 19).

The depiction of food banks as 'shock absorbers' positions them as responding to accidents or unforeseen and sudden crises (related to hardship). This inherently depicts the experiences of food poverty as a short-term crisis requiring a short-term solution. Yet, food poverty and therefore food banking is the (unintended) outcome of policy decisions and existing persistent and structural inequalities (Smith and Wesselbaum, 2023). The representation of emergency, as it appears here, is depicted in response to these discursive contradictions.

Despite food bank users being characterised as being 'unable' or 'struggling' to buy food, there seems to be an assumption within these documents that the context or circumstance in which households access food banks is temporary as "the support they can offer is often time-limited and designed not to encourage long-term dependency" and as such food banks cannot "realistically be expected to cover the entire country, with a consistent food supply available in all outlets at all times." (Nothing Left in the Cupboards 2019, pg 26).

The discursive role of food banks, therefore, is as a source of temporary help which, at the same time, sets out to actively discourage 'long-term dependency.' This rhetorical insistence may be partly explained by the fact that the food bank system runs on voluntary labour and food supply mechanisms that are reliant on surplus (see section 2.4.1). As such, the provided support cannot be systematically and predictably sustained.

Rather, the 'emergency' help on offer in the form of limited access to food banks and their resources, typically a maximum of three visits over an extended period of time, is presented as a means that "allows these families to re-establish control over their finances and they are then able to work their way out of the crisis. Such instances, we believe, help explain the number of families who only seek one, two, or at most three, bags of food from a food bank" (APPG Feeding Britain 2014, pg 9). Accordingly, defining food banks as emergency food aid providers in discourse is a means of undermining the scale and permanence of the food insecurity crisis and negating the associated long-

term material demands. Yet the placement of limits on the amount of food provided in the food parcel and on the number of times a user is 'allowed' to access the food bank, potentially reduces the acknowledgement of poverty.

#### 4.2.2 Providing food from a place of scarcity.

Throughout the texts there is limited justification as to why food parcels tend to contain 2 to 3 days' worth of food and why, by implication, episodes of household food poverty crisis were thought to last for that period of time. Within the moral economy of scarcity, scarce resources are managed at a time when demand threatens to outstrip supply (Dhurandhar, 2016; May *et al.*, 2020). As such, the attachment of food banks to donations and surplus provision creates a state of dependency. As the Human Rights Watch (2019) stated, a food bank is a term used to "describe places that provide limited food and other basic supplies, which they have received as donations to people in acute need for free. This is emergency food aid." (Nothing Left in the Cupboards 2019, pg 7). Within this context, scarcity can relate to the various aspects of the food banking system including the volunteer labour, food supply and storage facilities. In which case, the implicit temporal framing of household food poverty crisis, portrayed as a matter of days, can be understood as an arbitrary term, and a means of curtailing demand.

Irrespective of whether a food bank provides food from a position of scarcity or abundance; food aid is a 'free' service innately reliant on the 'good will' of people to donate food and/or money and an unpredictable surplus food supply chain. As found in the APPG Feeding Britain (2014) there was "some concern amongst food banks and food assistance providers about an overreliance on donations; both in terms of the quality and variety of food supplied and the reliability of future supply." (APPG Feeding Britain 2014, pg 21). As food (poverty) is increasingly localised, the onus rests on the individual and the voluntary and charitable community providers. In a system that operates on precarious food supplies, charitable food banking is redefined as a 'permanent emergency' (Riches, 2018; Spring, Garthwaite and Fisher, 2022).

#### 4.2.3 The service provision of food banks and signs of a failing welfare system.

Food banking is, in essence, an "ad-hoc response" to poverty. It is not State-led or consistently funded and there is not legal right to access food aid. Over the last 20 years, the sector has become increasingly organised and corporatized, but it remains, in essence, a collection of fragmented and localised reactions to hardship. Despite this, food banking is consistently characterised as a "service", thus situating it in the broader established welfare landscape. This characterisation is also often explicitly contested and resisted in the texts:

“In the current situation, food banks and other food aid providers are responding to clear and pressing needs. In the short term they should work collaboratively to ensure dignity is maximised whilst delivering a reliable and effective service to the people who rely on them. But, as we have insisted throughout our report, they are not, and must not become, a long-term solution to hunger.” (Dignity 2016, pg 31)

Food banks, although functioning to feed those who do not have access to food, have repurposed themselves to function as informal extensions to the State, albeit in a constrained way. This reinforces the food bank as a primary response to food poverty, alluding to the development of a hunger-industrial complex (Fisher, 2018) that may be establishing itself in Britain driven by a ‘failure of exchange entitlements’ (Sen, 1976; Fisher, 2018). The assertion that food banks should not go beyond addressing the need for food whilst simultaneously calling for them to “deliver a reliable and effective service” due to their “comprehensive provision around the country” (APPG Feeding Britain 2014, pg 9), presents an interesting contradiction, as Human Rights Watch stated that food banks cannot “realistically be expected to cover the entire country, with a consistent food supply available in all outlets at all times” (Nothing Left in the Cupboards 2019, pg 26).

Describing food banks as a ‘service’ assumes their role as established and institutionalised long-term providers of food, as this extract suggests “those in need of food aid [need to be able to] access the appropriate service for them” (Food Banks and Welfare Reform 2014, pg 23). In healthcare settings, a service is considered to be person-centred and responsive to the needs and expressed preferences of individuals (Hummel and Ransco, 2019). The presence and expansion of food banks to offer timely food parcels is presented as an important provision in absence of Government intervention as food banks, described by the Fabian Society, have been “designed to treat acute household food insecurity” (Hungry for Change 2015, pg 10). This in turn positions food banks as part of the charity-welfare landscape becoming a safety-net that can provide help and support to meet household food needs. For this reason, the systemic framing of food banks as services allows the State to retreat from their responsibilities as they represent a welfare state annex that can “fill the gaps”. Quoted by the Environmental Audit Committee, Lindsay Boswell, the CEO of FareShare, describes food banks as “the bread and butter of the social care and social provision that takes place on our high street.” (SDG in the UK follow up 2016, pg 18).

This state of assumed or blurred responsibility is presented as inherently transitional and temporary based on the support offered by food banks which is restricted to a certain extent either in amount, quality, or time. As a form of “outsourcing of responsibility... Food banks and charitable food providers can only treat the symptoms, not eliminate the causes.” (Hungry for Change 2015, pg 9).

This may, however, depoliticise food poverty as defining the problem as food poverty and/or hunger and defining the solution as emergency food aid, diverts attention away from poverty and diminishes the wider socioeconomic issues resulting in increasing and repeated food bank use. The nuances present within the framing of food banks contribute heavily to the confusion of defining what a food bank is and what it provides. In this way food banks can be thought of as ‘successful failures’ “since they continue to grow,” (Hungry for Change 2020, pg 43) and failures because: “such initiatives distract from the underlying issues of food insecurity” (Hungry for Change 2020, pg 43).

Paradoxically, while “the necessity for food banks should be eliminated” (Welfare Reform Committee 2014, pg 5), they simultaneously function as a “vital lifeline” (Below the Breadline 2014, pg 22), “picking up the slack from those cuts” (Report of the Special Rapporteur 2019, pg 8). Mirroring the humanitarian response, food banks with their ‘army of volunteers’ are ‘shouldering this burden.’ The use of such combative and militaristic metaphors blurs the boundaries between charity and welfare and depicts the militarisation of food aid. This alludes to a broader objective that food banks are not merely addressing food poverty but fighting against food poverty. This framing differs considerably from the framing of food banks as providers of ‘charitable food.’ The perspective offered here presents food banks as a necessity, without which people would struggle to access food, especially considering the ‘failure’ of the welfare system in providing people with a safety net. The notion of ‘need’ is therefore of particular interest within the discourse of institutionalisation. Although it is stated repeatedly throughout the texts, few times is it ever defined.

### 4.3 Reliance and responsibility

The narrative of reliance can be traced throughout the texts from 2013 to 2020. Using an active voice, reliance is often personified, from the perspective of the individual or institution. However, ‘reliance’ is not defined in any context within the texts. According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, reliance is defined as a ‘state of depending on or trusting in something or someone’ or as ‘the State of needing or depending on something or someone in order to be able to do something’ (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2020). If this is how reliance is defined, then in the context of how it is used in these texts, it could be assumed that people ‘depend’ on food banks to obtain food. This notion of ‘dependence’ is explicitly stated in two texts: *Walking the Breadline* (2013) to indicate “the rising number of people who *depend* on emergency food aid” (pg 5) and the Report of the Special Rapporteur (2019) when the “the Special Rapporteur met with people who *depend* on food banks and charities for their next meal” (pg 4).

Whilst the portrayal of food banks as ‘emergency food aid providers’ is taken for granted, the texts frame reliance as an inappropriate and undesirable state. The characterisation and purpose of reliance

is two-fold and contradictory. On one hand reliance is equated as a symptom of structural drivers outside of the control of the individual, indicating perceived and apparent powerlessness. At the same time, the texts serve to direct attention towards individual choice and a lack of capacity as drivers of reliance. This framing serves to internalise the neoliberal discourse that insists on individualism, reemphasising the framing of food banks and food bank users as *'part of the problem'* (Swales *et al.*, 2020; de Souza, 2022).

#### 4.3.1 Personal responsibility or a faulty system

Reliance is often used interchangeably with 'depend,' 'use' and 'demand.' In the context of food poverty and hunger, 'demand' is often associated with the contested broader question as to whether supply or demand is driving the increase of food banks in the UK. If the increase of food banks is supply-led, then the presence of food banks providing 'free' food is driving demand, as it allows low income households to "maximise their economic opportunities" (House of Lords, 2013; Morris, 2013; The Scottish Parliament, 2014). However, if the increase in food banks is demand-led then this is reflective of an increase in poverty and food insecurity in the UK. In *Fixing the Failures in Food*, it is indicated that:

"Although the Government has not, until recently, collected routine data on food insecurity, the existence, and rising use of food banks provides a clear indication of the severity of the problem. Food aid organisations told us that reliance on food banks is increasing." (*Fixing the Failure in Food 2020*, pg 5)

On one hand, there is a negation of structural drivers by referencing individuals and choice as a means of holding them accountable for their decisions and actions. According to neoliberal ideology, the financial instability of low-income households is a result of their own choices (Pendenza and Lamattina, 2019). This arrangement (or reinforcement) of power and (in)capability diminishes the responsibility of the Government to address the economic structures that have led to the formation and proliferation of food banks, further widening inequality.

On the other hand, responsibility for addressing food poverty is shared between the individual and the Government. By vaguely referring to the structural drivers related to benefits, wages and cost of living, the use of food banks is presented as a form of reliance in the absence of State intervention. This discourse of reliance or 'demand' draws a line of causality between Government policy and food bank use as food banks are simply responding to a need encouraged by a failing structural system. The *Fixing the Failure in Food* (2020) and Human Rights Watch (2019) reports indicate this by 'urging' the Government to "take clear responsibility" and "re-think and replace" current policies and systems to ensure that 'people' do not go hungry as they hold the power to address food poverty:

“We are not the first to urge the Government to rethink and replace the current system of the five-week wait [for welfare benefits] but we have added our support to calls to urgently address the long-standing problems with Universal Credit, problems that place people in the vulnerable situation of not being able to afford enough food. The charitable sector is shouldering this burden and although it is providing vital support, the Government should not be relying on food aid to fill the gaps in the welfare system.” (Fixing the Failure in Food 2020, pg 5).

“The problem of escalating food poverty in the UK can be fixed. But it cannot be fixed without concerted effort by the government to take clear responsibility in developing solutions to the problem, to gather better data, and to muster the political will to revise or change the policies that have led to people going hungry and not being able to realize their right to food.” (Nothing Left in the Cupboards 2019, pg 9).

Since 2015, the Government has remained relatively silent on the issue of food poverty, but what commentary exists has tended not to address structural issues but instead promote the role of the individual and personal responsibility. Nonetheless, the voice of the Government is incorporated throughout the texts. Independent of the Government, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger and Food Poverty is a cross-party group of Members of Parliament which produced Feeding Britain, a prominent report that has helped shaped political and media discourses on food banks and food poverty since 2014.

The Fabian Commission (Hungry for Change, 2015) employs the words of former Prime Minister David Cameron to illustrate that as a society should not and cannot rely on food banks to combat household food insecurity:

“Critically, we need to recognise that food banks and charitable food providers are not solutions to household food insecurity, they are symptoms of society’s failure to ensure everybody is sustainably well-fed. The Prime Minister understands this, saying at a BBC Question Time event prior to the election *‘I don’t want anyone to have to rely on a food bank in our country. It’s important that they’re there. I don’t want anyone to have to rely on them.’*” (Hungry for Change 2015, pg 6)

By quoting Cameron, this has provided weight and credibility to the argument. Although spoken during election season, the words of the Prime Minister were used discursively to amplify the seriousness of the issue.

The positioning of reliance in terms of supply and demand has the effect of presenting food banking

as a consumerist and market-based problem rather than a social justice problem. Discursively, it provides a way of avoiding the emotive or human rights aspects of the issue and frames food banks as a service. Therefore, in the neoliberal ideal of unfettered market mechanisms, food banks would be left alone to manage and correct themselves as such services would be de-regulated by the Government as a means of reducing State influence. Similarly, the discussion of reliance on food banks as one that “fills the gaps in the welfare system” (Fixing the Failure in Food 2020, pg 5), would not involve State intervention as within the philosophy of neoliberalism, public spending, especially on welfare, is minimized in favour of localised community voluntarism.

#### 4.3.2 Relying on food banks for food, help, charity, or welfare?

There is a silence and vagueness as to what is the object of reliance. ‘People’ or the ‘Government’ are said to be reliant on food, help or charity and in some instances, welfare. People are said to be dependent on food either as a form of ‘emergency food aid’ or on ‘food banks and charities for their next meal.’ Such a framing therefore assumes that food banks provide food parcels for a short or temporary period when faced with crisis situations:

“Whilst the level of food poverty is worrying enough, what is of greater concern is the exponential growth in the numbers of people across the UK who are experiencing real hunger and hardship. Perhaps the most extreme manifestation of food poverty is the rising number of people who depend on emergency food aid.” (Walking the Breadline 2013, pg 5).

“The Special Rapporteur met with people who depend on food banks and charities for their next meal, who are sleeping on friends’ couches because they are homeless, who have sold sex for money or shelter; children who are growing up in poverty unsure of their future; young people who feel gangs are the only way out of destitution; and persons with disabilities who are being told they need to go back to work – against their doctor’s orders – or lose support.” (Report of the Special Rapporteur 2019, pg 4).

Interestingly, the APPG on Hunger and Food Poverty implies that food banks act as an ‘income buffer zone to families’:

“But, while food banks are operating as an income buffer zone to families experiencing sudden drops in their income, there is a second group of our fellow citizens who rely on their local food assistance provider who it is important to distinguish for it has helped shape our recommendations.” (APPG Feeding Britain 2014, pg 14).

This construction assumes (i) an added function of the food bank provide financial support and (ii) the assumed role of food banks to function as the welfare state, helping to offset living costs. This is

contradictory as food banks, as discussed in section 4.2, provide emergency or ‘temporary’ food, meaning that they cannot be a sustainable nor reliable source of provision on which to be ‘reliant’. As such they fail to provide the necessary safety net of welfare.

Notably, Hungry for Change (2015) argues that the Government should establish a socio-economic structure that ensures people “do not rely on charity” to feed themselves. By accepting food banks to be “part of the solution,” whether consciously or unconsciously, the Government neglects to address the structural factors that have led to food banks:

“The UK should have a social and economic structure that means people do not need to rely on charity to cater for themselves and their family. Those working in food banks are responding to a need from hungry people. But to accept food banks as part of the solution to household food insecurity is to ignore the reasons why people are hungry.” (Hungry for Change 2015, pg 23)

Note that reliance is on ‘charity,’ a similar notion expressed by the House of Lords report (2020). By identifying food as ‘charity,’ the authors side-step the notion of food as a basic human right. As stressed by Walking the Breadline, “the explosion in food poverty and the use of food banks is a national disgrace” that “undermines the UK’s commitment to ensuring that all its citizens have access to food – one of the most basic human rights” (Walking the Breadline, pg 3). The APPG on Hunger and Food Poverty also plainly states that ‘some individuals would, of course’ ‘gain free help’ from food banks as a way to manage their ‘food and housing budgets’:

“Some individuals would, of course, respond to this offer by swinging the lead to gain free help, as some undoubtedly do in respect to food banks, but many more would have used this free utility help to manage the growing pressure on their food and housing budgets” (APPG Feeding Britain, pg 9)

The framing of reliance on ‘charity’ implies that the food aid is free and accessible. Yet food banks function on a limited and conditional system that is at capacity and volunteer-led and with multiple gatekeepers. Accessing a food bank requires a series of negotiations from the households which can be a stigmatising and shameful process. Such a framing creates a clear misalignment to the nuances of food banks that are often overlooked, especially when considering the supply-led argument to food banks. Considering that the APPG on Hunger and Food Poverty has established itself as a champion for food banks and the Feeding Britain report has been prominent in food poverty literature in the UK, this tilts the power imbalance between food aid organisations (and food banks) and households, as the discourses of food banks are heavily shaped by them. Stating that “some individuals would, of



course, respond to this offer by swinging the lead,” indicates that people who use food banks take advantage of food banks for their own personal gain because of failing to manage their money or budget, subsequently placing the blame onto the individual and favours the supply-led argument. It therefore assumes that people may use the food bank as a way to help manage their budgets, effectively taking advantage of the services that are available to them to ‘maximise their economic choices:

“The Department for Work and Pensions have made it clear that they see no direct link between the increase in use of food banks in Scotland and welfare reform. They argue that the increase in use is “supply led growth” with individuals using food banks to maximise their “economic choices” (Food Banks as and Welfare Reform 2014, pg 1)

This market-based framing is widely used as Government ministers have continuously stated that the growth in food banks is supply-led; that due to the distribution of ‘free’ food, low-income households will ‘maximise their economic opportunities’ and therefore more food banks will continue to exist (House of Lords, 2013; Morris, 2013; The Scottish Parliament, 2014).

How reliance on food banks is framed greatly impacts who has responsibility on addressing this state of ‘reliance.’ If what people are ‘reliant’ on is ‘food,’ under the framing of rights, the responsibility is on the Government. However, if what people are reliant on is ‘charity,’ under the framing of neoliberalism, the responsibility is passed onto volunteers and charitable organisations, including food banks. Ultimately the discourse of reliance is complex and contradictory and in turn opposes the narrative of food banks providing ‘emergency food aid’ in immediate crises.

#### 4.4 Summary

At a wider conceptual level, the underpinning presentation of food banks as short-term or emergency food aid providers is contradicted by the long-term structural hardship and inequality that contextualises household experiences of food poverty. As confirmed by the texts, the existence of food banks over the years from 2013 to 2020 reflects a much broader issue than a lack of food.

The positioning of food banks as a form of welfare either as part of the system or a substitute to the system contradicts the charitable emergency nature of food banking that exists in the UK. The diversification of service provision that underpins the discourse of emergency demonstrates a perceived ability of food banks to meet and address household needs (Smith-Carrier, 2021). Many of the texts, however, emphasise the limited capacity of food banks to effectively respond to chronic issues and symptoms related to food poverty in a socially acceptable manner. Since 2013, the running narrative stands; food banks are time-and-resource-limited by ‘design.’

Characterised by a dependency on volunteers and donations, the texts indicate that food banks offer little to no sustainability or suitability in accessing food and maintaining adequate levels of food security. It is therefore possible that the 'emergency' and 'reliance' discourse could function as a deterrent from institutionalisation. The social justice/rights-based approach concentrates the framing of those who are 'reliant' as 'people' or 'citizens' this assumes that anyone can become reliant on food banks and that society as whole has become 'reliant' on food banks. The texts produced by institutions independent of the Government create an interesting contrast to these arguments. On one hand the responsibility is shared between the individual and the Government by vaguely alluding to the structural drivers that have led to a 'reliance' on food banks. On the other hand, there is a negation of structural drivers by referencing to individual responsibilities and choice as a means of holding them accountable for their decisions and actions.

Given the growing concern over the double burden of malnutrition in the UK with overweight and obesity increasing and micronutrient deficiencies and hunger, for food banks to be considered as a substitute or a feature to the welfare state they would have to go beyond alleviating the symptoms of households in food poverty to meeting the needs of people to achieve household food security. Yet, a discussion of food in relation to nutrition and health within the texts is notably absent.

## Chapter Five: The food bank supply chain

### 5.1 Overview

In this chapter, the food practices and organisational structure of food banks are examined. With their own idiosyncrasies, the growth of food banks in the UK has resulted in the gradual implementation of formalised procedures to manage demand, indicating a rise of managerialism in voluntary responses. This growth in formalisation has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as food banks have reacted to increasing demand by scaling up redistribution of donated and surplus food to food insecure households.

Previous research on the operation of food banks has centred around access and the logistics of food bank functioning: providing insight into the opening hours, patterns of usage by communities in need, and their categorisation within local food systems (Loopstra *et al.*, 2015; Lambie-Mumford, 2017; Loopstra, Lambie-Mumford and Fledderjohann, 2019; Thompson, Smith and Cummins, 2019). However, an in-depth analysis into the procurement and distribution of food and a consideration of diet and nutrition in this process has yet to be conducted. As explained in Chapter 1, the term food bank refers to any place that distributes food parcels or bags, as a primary or secondary service, to people in need, on a referral or non-referral basis.

Drawing on ethnographic data collected during this study, this chapter details the processes and organisation of the food bank supply chain and considers the impact the pandemic has had on it. It opens with a discussion of how food banks source food, demonstrating the inherent shortcomings of a system dependent upon donations and surplus food. It provides insight into how food banks purchase foods for distribution and how this can provide an opportunity for food banks to produce food parcels that are more accommodating to the general nutritional and circumstantial needs of the food bank users within the communities they support. The processes involved in sorting and storing food are described, highlighting the tensions between the operational procedures of food banks and the rhetoric surrounding emergency food aid. Attention will be drawn to the processes involved when volunteers pack food parcels and the nutritional implications and the complex power dynamics involved in the food banking system.

This chapter will address the following research questions:

1. How do food banks source, manage and distribute food?
2. To what extent do food banks incorporate dietary practices and/or food preferences within their services?

3. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the operational practices of food banks and their ability to meet the food needs of food insecure households?

## 5.2 A system built on donations.

As stated in the overview, food banks are charitable organisations that function on donated food and volunteer labour. As such, there are spatial, social, and economic dimensions to sourcing food, such as storage facilities, funding, the food aid network and coordination with food distributors and providers. Food is procured in a variety of ways from several sources. Methods of food procurement typically fell into three main categories: (1) public food donations, (2) surplus food donations and subscriptions, and (3) food banks purchasing food directly from suppliers and retailers. Each of these will be discussed in the subsections below, including details of the challenges and opportunities associated with each form of food supply.

### 5.2.1 Donated food

From observations and interviews with food bank staff in both Brent and Portsmouth, food donations were the most prominent form of procurement. For the most part food banks accepted any and all donations, in the form of public drop-offs, supermarket collection bins and donations from schools or individual donors.

The opening hours for the food banks in Brent and Portsmouth varied but typically they would open for one to three days per week and between the hours of 11 am to 6 pm. From my observations of the food banks, public drop-offs consisted of people donating food by dropping off food at the food bank during the opening hours. This also involved food banks donating food to other food banks. Prior to the pandemic, communication between food banks and other food aid providers was minimal, as food banks tended to work autonomously. Siobhan, the manager of a soup kitchen, described how, due to the pandemic, a more area-level coordinated response developed. This had allowed the providers in the area to become more connected and support each other in managing demands by signposting to other food banks in the area and sharing resources:

*“So, there’s quite a lot of [um] liaising with, with each other [food banks], supporting each other, which, again, it didn’t happen before the pandemic, it was very, we were just doing our own little thing in isolation and now, we are linked up more with other providers”* Siobhan  
(Soup Kitchen Manager)

Such collaborative efforts were reported to be essential in responding to the pandemic and addressing food insecurity by ensuring food providers could access enough food for their clientele (Power *et al.*, 2020; Sustain and London Food Link, 2020; Sustainable Food Places, 2021). Specifically, through a

coordinated response involving food aid providers and local Councils, and food aid networks were established, whereby resources were advertised and shared through WhatsApp group messages and monthly Zoom meetings. This allowed more food to be made available to providers, reducing the likelihood of food waste and misuse. Thereafter, collections and/or deliveries of food were organised between the providers for a volunteer to collect at a time that was convenient. This highlights the growth of food aid and the importance of communication within the food bank supply chain, as there are *“more groups and more different people doing things”* and as such, providers are *“keen to share resources”* when they receive *“too much of one thing”*, said Luke, a public health practitioner within Portsmouth City Council.

Donations were also received from individuals and schools during the annual Harvest Festival in October, with food banks utilising on this traditional event that signifies thanksgiving for the successful harvesting of crops (Woking Foodbank, 2021). In Portsmouth, I witnessed Christian-based food banks coordinating with schools in the local area to facilitate the collection and donation of food as part of the traditional harvest festival. Much like a food drive where groups of individuals or organisations stockpile and distribute food to those in need, volunteers explained to me that the process involved schools in the community collecting food to donate to neighbouring food banks and food charities. Pupils were encouraged to bring a tinned food item to school by a specific date, which would then be donated to the food bank. Once the school had collected the food items, they were then placed into carrier bags, ready to be delivered to the food bank. On one occasion, I observed a class of primary school children, accompanied by two teachers, dropping off bags of food at the food bank, bringing in one bag at a time.

Donations from supermarket collection bins involved people donating food they had purchased from the supermarket in a collection bin located at or near the entrance of the supermarket. These collection bins are often associated with the Trussell Trust Network and shoppers are encouraged to donate using a suggested donated food list (The Trussell Trust, 2022b). This food list was formulated in collaboration with nutritionists and lists the food items that are in a standard Trussell Trust food parcel, guiding people to donate accordingly (The Trussell Trust, 2022b). On the day of collection, volunteers would visit the supermarket to collect the food in the collection bin. Typically, a single volunteer would be responsible for transporting the donated food from the supermarket to the food bank, usually in their own vehicle.

Some food banks were able to rely on donations (food that was donated by the public and individual industry donors) to respond to demand. However, for some of the other food banks they were not able to *“get enough to be able to manage just on donations.”* This might explain why some food banks

have diversified to acquire food from other sources and have reduced reliance on direct donations. As such, a common concern within food banks is “*not necessarily about nutrition*” but ensuring an “*even spread of food across stock*”. Volunteers aim to provide food that is sufficient in terms of calories (but not nutrients) whilst also offering some form of variety and cultural appropriateness (see also section 5.4.3).

Another shortcoming of sourcing food primarily through donations is demonstrated in the tension between what is donated and what is needed. James, a Trussell Trust food bank manager, describes this tension below:

*“So, people give what they think we need. Sometimes, people don’t always give what they know we need. So, we have about half a ton of beans and half a ton of soup, and we’ve run out of, um, fruit, we’ve run of juice, and we’ve nearly run out of milk. So, therefore, fruit and fruit juice and milk is still an important part of the parcel that we give out, but people still give soup, and they still give beans. Because that’s what they think we need.” James (Trussell Trust food bank manager)*

Accordingly, people may donate what they *perceive* is needed by those accessing the food bank rather than what is actually required. Food that is considered ‘acceptable’ to donate is processed through various individual and organisational donors such as the general public and restaurants, who make assumptions as to what food is needed by food bank. While the Trussell Trust food list is accessible to users, donors do not always donate the recommended food items. This indicates a difference in perceptions of what is donated and what food banks need, resulting in an abundance of food that is not needed and an absence of food that is needed.

Consequently, volunteers inadvertently position themselves as gatekeepers when making decisions on what food to place in the food parcel (as discussed in section 5.4.3). This can have a significant role in shaping users’ dietary behaviours. However, this gatekeeping is constrained as the food distributed is based on what food is available, which in turn is controlled by external macro-level factors typically outside of volunteers’ own control or agency. An example of this is demonstrated by Tracey, a volunteer at an independent food bank, who described that some people at times donated food when clearing out their cupboards and shelves. This typically included food they did not want or sought to get rid of, and at times, this ‘second-hand’ food was out-of-date:

*“When people donate food, sometimes they can donate quite random things and it is quite interesting, people will donate stuff that is out of date. We think really, when they’ve done a clear out of their cupboards and they think, oh well this is out of date we’ll take it to the food*

*bank, it doesn't happen a lot, but you do get some of that"* Tracey (Independent food bank volunteer)

From the accounts above, people donating food may use the food banks as a way to reduce food waste, independent of any guidance from the food bank food item list. However, this has its own implications as out-of-date food that is donated to the food bank cannot be used in the food parcel and is subsequently disposed.

### 5.2.2 Surplus food

In comparison to donated food, obtaining food from surplus food providers allows for greater autonomy as to what food is sourced and stocked. The three major surplus food organisations within this study were City Harvest, FareShare and the Felix Project. These organisations 'rescue' fresh food that would otherwise be wasted and re-distribute to charities including food banks, and schools for households to collect and consume (City Harvest London, 2022; FareShare, 2022; The Felix Project, 2022).

The types and range of foods acquired is conditional on which surplus provider the food bank uses and what subscription plan the food bank was signed onto, which would typically be either a no-fee membership or a paid membership plan. A general no-fee plan consists of food banks receiving any type of surplus food for free; the food bank must make do with the provisions supplied. With a paid membership, a degree of choice is available as specific food items can be requested. Whilst this study did not set out to focus on the processes involved in recovering and redistributing surplus food, the differing models indicate a two-tier system in acquiring surplus food. Considering that this is within the context of food waste and food aid, the payment for 'quality' and 'choice' of surplus food presents a contradiction within the mantra of 'saving' food from becoming waste.

Surplus food membership schemes have advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, food banks were provided with a greater variety of food and the food bank had the opportunity to tailor the surplus food and request specific items for its clientele. On the other hand, the food bank was required to fulfil certain conditions to receive the food including food safety certification and environmental health registration as volunteers would be handling fresh produce. As Leah, an independent food bank manager stated, joining an organisation such as FareShare would *"require a little bit more coordination of getting donations from FareShare, and from business."* The more formalised and professionalised processes involved in procuring food within the context of charitable food aid shifts from the ad-hoc charitable food aid-model towards a *business* model, a notion further explored in section 5.3.

Restaurants and supermarkets also donated their surplus produce to food banks. As a way to minimise food waste, restaurants and supermarkets in the local area partnered with the food banks to organise deliveries or collections of leftover, unsold and uneaten 'safe to eat' food. During participant observation data collection, it was noted that provided foods were not staple foods or basic food items such as rice, pasta, tinned tomatoes and instead consisted of higher quality food items such as yogurt parfaits, jackfruits, and heirloom tomatoes. Such items would typically be incorporated within the food parcel or provided in the 'help yourself' boxes, as discussed in section 5.3. The quality of produce, however, differed for each food bank and with each delivery as during my visits to Brent and Portsmouth, some of the food was of poor quality and/or expiring. Whilst there were no formalised processes or guidelines for quality control, there were practical procedures that volunteers employed so as to ensure that the food provided was safe to eat and in good condition. This included checking the expiry date, softness, and colouring of fresh food. This was highlighted during one of my visits to a food bank in Brent; whereby another volunteer and I were tasked with removing the ears of the potatoes in order to make them more presentable.

Additionally, the surplus food that food banks received was described by a volunteer as *"food that people wouldn't normally buy if they weren't using the food bank."* This is because the food received would be of a higher nutritional quality or beyond the financial budget of the food bank user. Examples of such items included avocados, courgettes and sweet potatoes or branded items from higher-end supermarkets such as Waitrose and Marks and Spencer.

Volunteers did not differentiate between the brand or novelty of the food item and as such, these food items were incorporated with the other in-stock food items in stock and distributed within the food parcels. This is then compared with (i) the type of produce, (ii) the brand of the food item, and (iii) the price of the food item. As such, food banks take an active role in defining what food is considered acceptable. This is further exemplified when volunteers pack the food parcel based on *"how [they] would like to receive it."* This process therefore involves the volunteer placing themselves in the position of the user and packing the food parcel with food they would want to see in it if they were a food bank user. In this way, volunteers indirectly display traits of paternalism as they take an active role in deciding what food is considered acceptable thereby guiding people's food choices and preferences based on their own. Whether this form of paternalism is welcomed is unknown as it could also be regarded too burdensome to the volunteer. Yet, to some degree, volunteers and managers have to make these decisions based on the knowledge available to them and the food in stock. As explored in section 5.4.4, volunteers seek to accommodate the dietary practices of users, with some food needs taking precedence over others such as calorie density and familiarity with food.



### 5.2.3 Financial donations and buying food.

During the pandemic, people's ability to donate food was impacted as household incomes were reduced and food shortages arose (Bulman, 2020; BBC News, 2021). Consequently, donations were insufficient to meet the increased demand posed by greater numbers of people who were accessing food banks during the pandemic. In an effort to mitigate this, cash donations from individuals, church congregations, and commercial organisations became increasingly common and were used as a way to increase food bank stocks, with volunteers physically buying food from the shops and supermarkets. On one hand, the food banking system is, largely, not a consultative one with no formal way for users to tell the food bank what they want and need. Yet, the knowledge the volunteers have of their users (also referred to as guests or clients) through observing previous patterns, can be beneficial when navigating what food would be most suitable for their users. The use of financial donations, however, was not consistent or guaranteed, nor did it function as a primary mechanism to maintain supply in any of the food banks observed in this study. Instead, money was used in conjunction with other methods of sourcing food, or as an emergency option when stock was running low.

Buying food was facilitated using financial donations, allocated church budgets, and grant-funding from the local council. Additionally, as a result of COVID-19, food banks, for the first time, could access Central Government funding provided by the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs through the local government emergency support fund and the Food Charities Grant Fund (Bartholomew, 2020; DEFRA, 2020). This financial means provided opportunities for the food banks to act with greater flexibility in food sourcing as purchasing power was enhanced:

*"We buy a lot of our stock, but with sort of monetary donations, so you know, we apply for lots of kind of grants and funding, and we do a lot of fundraising, and so with that money we buy stock."* Sarah (Independent food bank coordinator)

Volunteers noted the difficulties that arose when applying for grant-funding from the local Council. There was frustration with how taxing the process of completing a grant application was, as Leila, an independent food bank manager, describes in the extract below. Despite being "*grassroots organisations*," food banks have to prove their deservingness to the local Council in order to obtain funding, as 'need' is measured by the demand and number of people receiving food parcels:

*"I haven't done a lot of grant proposals because it's just difficult. I still feel now that with some of the grant proposals, the grants that I've seen, people still don't understand what it means to be a grassroots organisation. Why am filling out all these things? I have a charity number, I*

*have my financial accounts, I have my year report. What more do you want from me?"* Leila  
(Independent food bank manager)

As Leila emphasises, applying for grant funding is a complex and time-consuming activity, that requires a specific skillset and knowledge that volunteers and staff coming from a range of backgrounds may not possess. The bureaucracy involved within the process arguably positions the food bank as part of the welfare landscape. Simply put, the processes of formalisation, managerialism, and professionalism with regards to their logistics and operationalisation ensure that food banks are embedded in the welfare landscape. Thus, a level of scrutiny on the capacity of the food bank becomes necessary in order to ensure that government funding and resources to food banks are allocated accordingly and adequately to help meet the needs of the communities they support.

### 5.3 The management of food

Despite differing models of food banking, the procedures within each were similar. The well-established processes involved in organising donated food were nearly always systematic.

In comparison to the initial depiction of food banks portrayed by the volunteers and managers interviewed, food banks *"started as a cupboard in a corridor in our church, feeding maybe ten people per week"* before expanding to provide *"more than just a token gesture"* of food. With an increase in demand, the 'token' response through the food shelf or cupboard has been scaled-up in a more organised and professionalised way. In turn, this has transformed and formalised food management within the food bank with the implementation of specific procedures to intentionally provide food that is fit-for-purpose for those experiencing food insecurity.

The processes presented below demonstrate how food banks handled, sorted, and stored food after it was acquired and before it was distributed as food parcels.

Across the eight food banks in this study, the spatial arrangement of the food bank was similar. Whilst distribution occurred in the main hall or outside, the sorting of food occurred in a separate room. Deliveries and collections were conducted at the back and sometimes outside the opening hours of the food bank. After the food was delivered, collected or dropped-off, the food was then sorted into separate food groups, listed below:

1. Pasta
2. Rice
3. Tinned fish
4. Tinned meat
5. Tinned soups

6. Tinned vegetables
7. Vegetarian options
8. Gluten-free options
9. Tinned fruit
10. Desserts i.e., rice pudding/ custard
11. Sweets

Volunteers would then check the best-before date for each product before grouping and placing similar food items together in large containers or crates. Due to a lack of storage, perishable food items, such as fresh items like meat, fruits, vegetables, eggs, and bread, would typically be distributed the same day as delivery or redistributed to other food banks that could accommodate the required storage conditions. Perishable food items were subsequently offered to people as an addition to their food parcel or alternatively people could help themselves to any produce that had been placed in the 'help yourself' box. If these perishable food items were expired, they were considered as waste and would subsequently be disposed or used as compost if the food bank had access to a community garden (as observed at two of the food banks).

In a Brent food bank, it was observed that not all perishable food items were distributed the same day they were donated or delivered. Instead, volunteers would select at random what items to put on display and place the remaining items, according to their expiry date, in the refrigerator to be distributed on a different food bank session. This gave other users visiting the food bank on a different day the opportunity to obtain perishable food items. This provides an insight into the decision-making process that volunteers and managers experience in order to ensure that the distribution of food is fair and equal. Simultaneously, it also displays the level of responsibility that volunteers and managers have undertaken with the formalisation of food banking procedures in an effort to ensure users' access to food.

Non-perishable food items that were past their best before date were put in a separate container designated for out-of-date food items, also known as the 'help yourself' box. It is important to note that this out-of-date box was subsequently labelled as 'help yourself' to make the food more acceptable for the user to take. As volunteers could not place these items in food parcels, in compliance with food safety laws (Food Standards Agency, 2020), they could offer them to people to help themselves to. Food bank users were then invited to take anything that was on display. Volunteers explicitly told people that the items in the box were past their best before date. Most of these food items included small packets of sweets and savoury snacks like yogurt, breakfast bars and crackers. Alongside these were other food items that would not normally be put in the food parcel

especially if there was a small number of a certain food item, for example bags of flour or pesto sauce. This is because the food bank managers and volunteers wanted to ensure that the food parcels were standardised, and food was fairly distributed as to avoid any confrontations between users on what food items they had obtained in their food parcel in comparison to others (see section 5.4.2).

After food was dated and sorted, food was then placed in a storage cupboard or warehouse. Perishable food items were sometimes stored in refrigerators and freezers; however, this was dependent upon the food bank having the appropriate space and facilities to accommodate refrigerated items. Out of the seven food banks observed, only one food bank had sufficient storage space to accommodate fresh food items, allowing them to stock up for subsequent food bank sessions. For those that did not have cold storage, fresh food was distributed the same day that it was donated or delivered.

Interestingly, as observed in the two Trussell Trust food banks visited in this study, before being stored, food was weighed as it came in and food parcels were weighed before being given out:

*“Um, it’s so that we can actually get a gauge on trends and how many, sort of, people we’re feeding. With what food, yeah, it’s a good question actually, um, I would, so, it’s easy just to say, oh that’s because we do a stock take. But that isn’t really the case at all. It’s, um, yeah, I think maybe it just adds another element to perhaps, sort of, like, to understand the impact that we’re having. So, we’ve got number of people fed and then weight of food given. Um, and I also know that an element to it as well is the fact that supermarkets, when they donate food, er, they always want to know what the weight is they donated. It’s not too much of a hassle these days because we’ve actually got an average weight of a parcel now. So, we’re not physically weighing those parcels, every single one.”* James (Trussell Trust Food Bank Manager)

As James indicates, the weighing of non-perishable food was conducted to determine the amount of food coming in and the amount of food going out in order to demonstrate increasing demand. By using the number and weight of food parcels being distributed as a proxy, this would provide an insight into how many people were being fed. A volunteer would input the data into a centralised computer database providing a numerical reference to the impact Trussell Trust food banks were having in addressing food insecurity in the UK. Due to the nature of perishable food provisioning in food banks, donations were more ad-hoc and had greater uncertainty in the amount and type donated. As such the provision of fruits and vegetables in these two Trussell Trust food banks was not considered a necessity and instead was secondary to providing non-perishable long-lasting food items including tinned fruits and vegetables.

This practice of weighing food was questioned by one of the volunteers. Kevin argued that the practice of weighing and having a 'stock take' made it seem like the food bank was a 'business' especially when compared to how at the beginning they were just giving out food from a cupboard. As such he questioned the purpose of the food bank, implying that it had gone beyond its initial remit:

*“When I first started, as I said, it was pretty much a church cupboard, and you gave food out. But then we got into the world of we had to weigh every piece of stock that comes in, and weigh every stock that goes out, have a stock take, and you think, honestly, why are we doing, do you want me to do this? What’s the purpose of all this? It’s all free and we’re giving it, we’re both taking it and giving it out, what’s that about? But as far as I understood it, it’s because the Trussell Trust wanted, obviously, to get figures, and accumulate figures, to give to whoever they need to give figures to, government presumably about how much they had in, and how much then went out. But it just became [...] like running a business.”* Kevin (Trussell Trust Food Bank Volunteer)

The formalisation of food banking demonstrated here offers an insight into the functioning of food banks through the lens of a business model. In their study investigating food banks in Spain and their impact on the supply chains they function in, González-Torre and Coque (2016) showcased a similar finding demonstrating how food banks adopt business management strategies with regards to the administration and logistics exhibited by food banks when managing food. As food banks adapt to the socio-political environment, their position within the existing food supply chain has resulted in the inclusion of more systematic and standardised operations and procedures.

By streamlining the processes involved in sourcing, storing, and distributing food, volunteers and managers are able to ensure effective resource management and manage demand, whilst also raising awareness of the growing issue of food poverty in the UK, indicated by the amount of food distributed in tonnes. Even so, the increasingly business-like functions and organisation of food banks may serve to minimise the issue of food poverty and food waste as they become a normalised professionalised response to food poverty. Subsequently, they are framed to act as substitutes to State governed welfare; a caution that was identified within the discourse analysis (see section 4.3) as food banks act to *'fill the gap'*. As such, the formalisation of food banks foretells their institutionalisation. An example of this was reported in a study by Williams and May (2022). In examining the genealogy of food banks in the UK, the study highlighted the partnerships between The Trussell Trust Network and American corporations such as Cisco, Aidmatrix and Bank of America and insinuating that by *'bringing in business solutions to problems of hunger,'* food banks have accelerated their own growth (Williams and May, 2022).

## 5.4 Packing the food parcel for distribution to food bank users.

### 5.4.1 Using a food list.

Apart from two food banks (one in Brent and the other in Portsmouth), food banks in this study pre-packed parcels prior to the food bank opening and distributing to users. Volunteers stated that they would make enough bags for the day using previous food bank sessions as a guide to determine how many people would be present and the type of parcels (single, couple, small or big family) needed. Four of the participating food banks in this study were non-referral and as such the number of people who would be attending the food bank session was unknown. The other four food banks (three in Portsmouth and one in Brent) had a referral process in place which provided a rough indication of how many people would be coming to collect their food parcels on that given day. During the session, volunteers would monitor the number of parcels being collected, packing any new bags as they ran low.

As stock is continuously rotated with each delivery, food parcels were subsequently packed using the FIFO 'first in, first out' system. This process was incorporated to minimise food waste as food that was donated or purchased first was prioritised over food items that had recently been purchased or donated when packing the food parcels. In all seven food banks, I observed the food parcels being packed in a specific room, known as the "working cupboard" by Gary, a former Trussell Trust food bank manager:

*"[...] First in, first out kind of thing. So, we're, you have minimal waste. So, in those crates, each one will be marked what they've got. So, we would have segregated them down to vegetables, rice pudding and also have the date which we know, it makes it very easy for Adam, who's our volunteer, who looks after the dungeon, [...] actually put stuff on to another shelf so that we can then transfer stuff into our working cupboard. Yeah. [...] that's where, if we make enough bags, we take stock directly from the working cupboard. Although it is a reasonable size cupboard, you've only got to have, like my wife was making up two large families and one small family yesterday, and it depletes the stock incredibly. So, that covers having to be constantly restocked."* Gary (former Trussell Trust food bank manager)

This room was concealed from the users, separate to where food was stored and where the distribution of food parcels occurred during the food bank session. Food parcels were packed according to household size, following some variation of a guide commonly known as a food allocation form. The food allocation form was a list of food items that should be included in the food parcel. Figure 15 illustrates the different food forms for small and large households with three or more children.

The image shows two food allocation forms. The left form is titled 'Food Allocation Form 2020 Family small' and the right form is titled 'Food Allocation Form 2021 Family and 3+ Children'. Both forms have a header section for 'Volunteer', 'Voucher No.', and 'Date'. Below this is a table with columns for 'Item', 'Allocation', and 'Tick'. The items listed include Cereal, Juice, Milk UHT/powder, Beans / Spag/letti, Tomatoes, Soup, Vegetables, Meat, Fish, Fruit, Rice Pudding, Biscuits, Pasta/Rice, Tea or coffee, and Cooking sauce. There is also a section for 'Extras when available' which includes Toilet Rolls, Packet Rice Pasta, Snacks/Savoury Biscuits, Chocolate, and Misc. The right form has a similar table but includes 'Custard' and 'Tea/Coffee' in its 'Extras when available' section.

Figure 15: An example of a food list for a large and small family used by one of the food banks in Portsmouth.

As indicated in the photograph, the amount of each item that was to be included in each parcel changed according to the number of people in the household. Four different food parcel categories were identified, and these included: a single food parcel, a couple food parcel, small family food parcel and a large family food parcel.

Whilst it was common practice for most of the food banks to use a food allocation form to pack the food parcels, two out of the eight food banks in this study did not have a written food allocation form. Additionally, the food provisions within these two food banks had little to no provision of tinned food and was mostly surplus. On the food bank day, after seeing what food was available and its quantity, the food bank managers would verbally convey to the volunteers how much of each item would go into each bag. The aim when packing the food parcel was therefore to fairly distribute each food item to each food parcel and make them as standardised as possible. This was because, in the past, volunteers recounted how packing occurred at random and this would often lead to confrontations arising between the food bank users as they would see the difference in the food parcels that each person had obtained. The only exception that was made was for larger households, who were either given multiple standardised food parcels or provided with more food in their food parcel when packing.

#### 5.4.2 The contents of a food parcel

It is important to highlight there were differences between food banks in terms of the content of food parcels. The food banks in Portsmouth that participated in this study distributed food parcels predominantly containing non-perishable food as seen in Figure 16 and Figure 17.



Figure 16: Food parcel in an independent food bank (Portsmouth)



Figure 17: Food parcel in a Trussell Trust food bank (Portsmouth)

The only exception to this was an independent food bank that provided an additional fruit and vegetable bag that was packed with the food bank user when they would come and collect their food parcel (see section 6.4). As such, the provision of fruits and vegetables was often secondary to ensuring that people had enough non-perishable food staples in their cupboard. As Tracey, an independent food bank volunteer, indicated *“the perishable stuff we don’t do because it gets too complicated, there are storage issues, and this is supposed to be an emergency.”* When further asked how and what is constituted as food fit for an emergency, Tracey referred to the food list as a possible explanation:

*Researcher: That’s something else I wanted to ask you, in terms of what food you provide during an emergency, how do you determine that?*

*Tracey: [...] it's not my business or my job to do that, [...] I think they based their list, when we first started at [the food bank] the person who was running it came over [from another food bank] [and] got the Trussell Trust food list with the recommendations for what should be in the parcels and used that.*

Only one of the three food banks in Brent provided a food parcel containing traditional food parcel items such as tinned fruit, beans, pasta, UHT milk, and other dry shelf goods. The other two food banks distributed food parcels consisting mainly of perishable food items with a small amount of tinned food, as indicated by the photographs below (Figures 18, 19, 20 and 21). This provision was because of the delivery being the same day as the food bank session meaning that the food that came in was mostly given out on the same day.





Figure 18: Food parcel in an independent food bank (Brent)



Figure 19: Food parcel in an independent food bank (Brent)



Figure 20: Food parcel in an independent food bank (Brent)



Figure 21: Food parcel in an independent food bank (Brent)

A shared practice observed amongst the food banks was the prioritisation of short-dated food items over food items that were in stock and had a later best before date. Whilst food banks can ensure excess food is utilised, the redistribution of excess food by supermarkets to food banks and charities can further entrench food banks as appropriate long-term solutions to food poverty and food waste. This is because, volunteers were conscious to reduce any food waste and make use of the food that was available (Department for Environment Food and Rural, 2019; Garthwaite, 2019).

#### 5.4.3 The amount of food in a food parcel

The amount of food that each food parcel contained varied by food bank and from week to week. Food parcels were said to typically contain two to three days' worth of food. However, this was reliant upon food availability, as Gary highlights:

*"At least yeah. We're trying to give three days' worth of food. We, we're probably more generous than most food banks. In as much that, currently, we've got a good food stock. So, you know all the things that you need to put in there, so they've got a good spread. And that's a family who obviously haven't actually got singles, couples, a small family, and large family. So, they're basically the same things, but much greater quantities. We try, we know that when we give that out, there's a weight there, so 31.15 kilos. So, it should be for three days. It will probably do them at least four days."* Gary (former Trussell Trust food bank manager)

Louise, a former Trussell Trust food bank manager, provided some insight into where this two to three days' worth of food originated from. She stated that:

*“When the Trussell Trust, who we are affiliated to, set up their food banks, it was a, you claim for benefit, and it took three days to pay your benefit into your bank. Therefore, to get hold of your benefit, therefore that’s why we did a three-day food parcel. That’s where our three days came from but actually that doesn’t happen now.”* Louise (former Trussell Trust food bank manager)

This provides an explanation as to why food parcels are time-bound to contain 2-3 days' worth of food. Originally, the provision of food parcels was grounded in welfare benefits practice designed to provide relief to people as they waited for their benefits claim to be processed and paid into their account, which was typically 2-3 days. As discussed in section 4.2, food parcels were thus intended to be an emergency source of food, *'filling the gap'* whilst people waited for their benefits to be processed. As such, food banks have historically been used as a temporary bridge to cover the slow workings of the State and alleviate the periods of financial strain that people experience whilst waiting for welfare benefits to be paid. However, this has become an arbitrary guide over the years as the waiting time between claiming and receiving benefits is now 5-8 weeks. Assuming that the intention set out above was adopted within food bank practices, food parcels should therefore be amended to contain 5-8 weeks of food, equating to the 5-8 weeks waiting time.

Whilst it is possible to provide a weeks' supply of food or adjust the referral process within the food bank to account for the increased benefit waiting time, in practice there would be logistical challenges in providing food parcels for 5-8 weeks. Gary described this struggle in his account of how difficult it can be for food bank users to collect a 3-day food parcels as they may not have access to their own cars and may use public transport. This is especially difficult for single parents with more than one child:

*“But, also, I would, Trussell Trust said at the beginning of the first lockdown. You can, if you want to, give a week’s worth of food. Now, that is great, saying that, except most people come in and, if it’s a family, there’s too much, you, you know, even if they bring two children in with them. It’s a struggle for them to carry it. So, a week’s worth would be an impossibility. Not too many people that we serve have got their own cars. Some of them, they have a friend that’s got a car.”* Gary (former Trussell Trust food bank manager)

This illustrates the physical challenge of providing food parcels that contain more than 2-3 days' worth of food for certain groups of people. With the exception of one food bank in Brent, food parcels

typically contained, on average, 2-3 days' worth of food. The referral system for this food bank accounted for a 6-week wait in benefits and as such their food bank users were entitled to access six food parcels, each containing one weeks' worth of food over a period of six weeks:

*“The kind of reason we chose six emergency parcels in the beginning was because, and I’m not sure if this information is still up to date, but the waiting list for Universal Credit was pretty much six weeks as standard. So, there were lots of people that were losing their job, or abruptly coming to the end of their furlough, expecting it to be extended or expecting to go back to work, etc, and suddenly finding themselves without any income whatsoever. So [for] those six weeks, those six parcels are aiming to support people in those six weeks.”* Sarah (Independent food bank coordinator)

Sarah’s account also demonstrates the responsiveness of food banks in adapting to systematic barriers that food bank users may face. This however implies that food banks, although originally developed as emergency food providers, can function as an informal and sustained response to chronic poverty.

#### 5.4.4 How to make a food parcel.

As discussed in section 5.2, food banks possess little bargaining power in determining what food is acquired and subsequently distributed. As such, volunteers must be flexible when constructing a food parcel to balance competing health, nutritional and circumstantial needs. A failure to do so may contribute to “worsening health outcomes” (Cooksey Stowers *et al*, 2020). Based on observations across the seven food banks, Figure 22 was conceptualised to illustrate the various factors that volunteers consider when packing a food parcel. The process was iterative, with a constant state of feedback, as the volunteer would seek to balance various needs as they packed the food parcel.

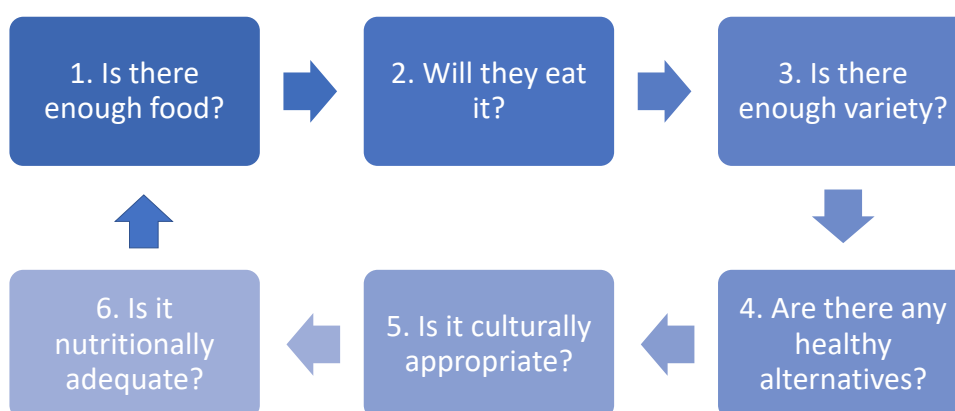


Figure 22: Questions volunteers consider when packing the food parcel (Source: author’s creation)

The first question that volunteers considered when constructing a food parcel is whether there is enough food in the food parcel. During visits, I spoke to the volunteers and managers at the food banks and noticed an emphasis on ensuring a sufficient quantity of food, above all other things. Whilst nutrition was something that they had considered and aspired towards, it was more crucial to provide users with food that would fill them up as *“who knows when their next meal would be,”* as one volunteer commented.

The next question that volunteers considered was whether people would eat the food that was provided. Food banks had to be practical in what they gave out, accommodating user’s cooking skills and living conditions. As one volunteer stated, *“a lot of our guests don’t cook or don’t have the proper cooking things [utensils] so some of the food that people give is not suitable for them like adding lentils and pulses to a stew. Meatballs, a lot is given and is [a] quick easy meal [for them] to make.”* Additionally, food banks had to keep alternative food parcels on hand for people who were homeless or did not have the appropriate or required cooking appliances. For example, Siobhan described how, due to a substantial proportion of their service users being from the homeless community, they *“always put in bananas”* as *“you don’t have to prepare [that] to eat it and its soft enough if you haven’t got any teeth.”* This highlights the importance of considering the physical and material barriers food bank users face when obtaining food parcels.

The provision of fruits and vegetables, compared to tinned foods, was not a priority in the Portsmouth food banks. This may be because food bank users in Portsmouth were considerably different to those accessing food banks in Brent. Gary stated that Portsmouth *“has a lot of homeless people”* and, as such, those who access the food bank may not have the necessary cooking resources and/or facilities to store or utilize the food (see section 7.2). What is important to note however is that whilst volunteers aim to accommodate for users’ dietary practices and food preferences to the best of their ability, the sourcing of food primarily from donations makes it difficult as *“it depends when they come in and what their requirement is”* as Louise suggested.

This was closely related to how familiar people were with certain food items. This was determined by the volunteers in their observations during the food banks session and monitoring of demand in terms of popularity of certain food items as well as the responses users gave when collecting their food parcel (see section 6.4). Familiarity and preference for specific foods often took precedence especially when considering the prevention of food being wasted as some people were not *“used to that variation.”*

There was a sense of duty around not wanting to waste any food by either ensuring food was distributed within its best before date and any excess food donations were redistributed to other food

banks and food aid organisations. This was especially important as seven out of the eight food banks acquired food from surplus food organisations (see section 5.2.2). The idea of minimised unwanted or wasted food was further characterised by providing people with they were used to or familiar with than exposing users to other lesser-known food items. Gary detailed this in his account by stating that it was “*safer*” to give people what they would typically eat as they were more likely to make use of the food, for example opting for a tin of tuna instead of a tin of pilchards:

*“If I was putting the parcel, the food parcel together, I would largely choose those things which are, I know are quite safe. Rather than venturing, even though that may not be the best from a diet point of view, rather than thinking, yeah, I’ll give them a tin of kidney beans, tin of chickpeas, you, you, you know? So, I, you know, I might dabble with those things and put one in, and hope that somebody in the family might like them, perhaps all of them might. But, um, it’s the same with meat. We get a lot of, like, processed pork, ham, tin, tins of process and, like, spam. Which is a left over from the second world war, you know? You know, when I was brought up, spam was part of your diet. I always try and put in there one of those items, but other tins of actual meat. Even if it’s meatballs. Even if it’s processed. Um, what do you call them hamburgers, you know? Not hamburgers, frankfurter type sausages. In a tin because I know lots of kids enjoy that kind of thing and I appease my conscience by thinking, well, there’s protein in there, you know? But, perhaps it’s, I don’t know, perhaps a tin of spam is better.”*

Gary (former Trussell Trust food bank manager)

Similarly, Leah described how she and her volunteers had to be “*willing to swap out*” certain food items in case it was not something that the food bank user had eaten before or come across. This usually occurred when the ‘guest’ asked for another food item or returned the food item as they were going through the food parcel during collection:

*“[...] so, tuna’s a pretty standard one that most people will eat. But mackerel or sardines is probably a little bit healthier. So, if we put them in the bags, we have to be willing to swap it out for the tuna, but it might be nice as a change to have sardines and mackerel and see if people will engage with that rather than just having tuna because we know that’s what people will eat. Sweet potato, yeah, I think it just baffled people.”* Leah (Independent food bank manager)

The experiences that Leah describes are not isolated; similar interactions were also reported to occur in other food banks. Gary, the former food bank manager, described how during a food bank session he had given out some soy milk to a ‘client’ and the next day it had been returned to him, as someone found the “*soy milk lying on the grass.*” This shows the complexity of providing variety and healthier

foods which may not be wanted by users. It also demonstrates that the practice of standardized food parcels is not fixed into food banking policy or practice as volunteers have to be flexible in what they provide.

Volunteers must also be sensitive to the capacities and resources of the users, such as their cooking skills. Subsequently, this intersects with the question of how varied the food items in the food parcel are, and whether there are opportunities to prepare and eat various types of meals. For example, at one of the Trussell Trust food banks I visited in Portsmouth, I shadowed a volunteer as she pre-packed some food parcels. She, like many of the other volunteers in the packing room, used the food allocation form to construct the food parcel. However, the volunteer used her discretion in swapping items if they were too similar to each other. For example, the volunteer opted to place a can of cream of chicken soup instead of a can of cream of tomato soup as she had already placed a can of tomatoes in the food parcel, explaining, *“you don’t want to give the same type of food. We want them to have variety so they could get other food in like if they got a tin of tuna, they can get a jacket [potato].”* This demonstrates how strategic volunteers can be when packing the food parcel as they anticipate the types of meals that users could prepare from the contents of the food parcel.

The provision of healthier food items was dependent upon available stock and at times was in direct conflict with providing more familiar food. Moreover, the food parcel also included confectionary items such as dessert and snacks, as Gary and Patricia stated:

*“So, there will be biscuits, which are hardly nutritious in there as well. And there will be chocolate in there, which is hardly nutritious. Really good for, for mental health, I think, as much. Couldn’t live without it.”* Gary (former Trussell Trust food bank manager)

*“So even the things we buy, we try and stick to things that are reasonable health wise. We don’t give sugar, although a lot of people ask for it and then, we’ve got tons of it as well, people give it to us I, if somebody asks, I do try and give it to them. But and we do give a sweet or a snacky food. But you know, I think that’s OK, everybody likes a packet of crisps now and then. You know, and even though we get tons of them, each bag only has a small amount in.”* Patricia (Independent food bank manager)

The above extracts show the awareness that volunteers have when putting certain food items in the food parcel that may be considered unhealthy. Patricia specifically emphasised that her food bank was not a food bank as *“food banks tend to be ambient [non-perishable] food”* and they *“never wanted to do that because that’s rubbish food.”* However, volunteers justified the choices they made about food

parcels by explaining that they were trying to provide food that they themselves would find acceptable.

Acceptability was determined by a range of factors including health, comfort, and the social aspects of eating. As such, there is an inconsistency in how people construct what is healthy or unhealthy as whilst confectionary products such as 'chocolate' were included in the food parcel, bags of sugar were not routinely given out. As indicated above, and as I observed during the food parcel packing process, volunteers would decant 500g – 1kg bags of sugar into clear food/sandwich bags and store them away, only to be distributed when requested by the food bank user as they collected their food parcel. This regulating of what food is considered healthy or unhealthy demonstrates the paternalistic nature of food banking and the complex decision-making processes volunteers encounter with regards to food choice, which may be at odds to what users want or need.

By positioning volunteers and food banks as caretakers of food aid, the responsibility of having to perform this role 'correctly' is inherently assumed. This is demonstrated by the need for volunteers to pack food parcels uniformly. This, however, raises a contradiction. On one hand, food banks create uniform food parcels out of fairness but simultaneously justify tailoring them to individual circumstances where possible. As volunteers consider the long-term impacts of the type of food provided to users and the probability of users incorporating food banks within their wider household provisioning increases, the function of the food bank moves away from emergency food aid provision and extends to partially influence users' food choice and dietary practices. Leah's excerpt below illustrates how food banks may indirectly position themselves as gatekeepers to the type of food people have access to:

*"And then when we give it out, we are just giving out two days' worth of fruit and vegetables so for a single person if you'd like, you know, two apples or, and, you know, two potatoes, or something like that but then that's very much up to the volunteer that's doing it and that conversation with that client. They get quite a lot of, yeah, the volunteer gets quite a lot of free rein on that decision. And how much we've got as well, if we're getting to Friday and there's not much left then we're not going to give four potatoes to a person on their own if there's only eight potatoes left."* Leah (Independent food bank manager)

Guided by the food list, the volunteer can also decide what food is included in the food parcel, which is eventually counterbalanced, by the conversations that occur between the volunteer and the 'client' when they access the food bank (see section 6.4). Nonetheless, the 'free rein' that volunteers express is yet again constrained by the amount of food available as the purpose is to feed everyone who

accesses the food bank. For example, if food is running low, concessions are made to accommodate for limited stock e.g., by rationing supplies.

*“To a certain extent we [the food bank] can only give out food that we receive”* and in turn, volunteers must negotiate between providing food parcels that meet the user’s nutritional and dietary practices or providing food parcels that contain enough food in terms of adequate calories. Considering that donations and deliveries of food are in constant flux, this is a *“difficult tension to balance”* and raises questions on the responsibility of food banks and food sovereignty.

## 5.5 Summary

The nature of the food banking system is reactive by default as food banks are constrained by factors outside of their control such as both changing demand and available supply. Although part of the wider local food supply chain, food banks also operate within their own internal network of food banks and charitable food aid providers. Food banks therefore serve as formalised food aid providers, indirectly influencing the public and political perception of their ability to address food poverty and, subsequently, food waste, as they provide long-term provision.

The processes involved in sourcing food are complex, drawing upon multiple sources, requiring advanced levels of communication and coordination to manage and acquire resources, all of which is dependent on volunteer labour. In line with findings from Loopstra, Lambie-Mumford and Fledderjohann (2019) the efficiency and effectiveness of food banks is hindered by two main problems. First, an unstable and inconsistent supply of food due to a reliance on donations and surplus; and second, limited agency in determining what food is acquired and subsequently distributed. This further recognises food banks as reactive. Subsequently, food banks for the most part can be viewed as *accepting* receivers as they accept any donations and process them according to their local needs and available storage capacity (Möller, 2021). The only form of food sourcing that guarantees greater autonomy is the direct acquisition of food by means of financial donations (which is also unreliable) and grant funding.

By contrast, while food banks may be limited in their ability to determine what food is acquired, they exhibit strong control over content of a food parcel. Dependent on food availability, food parcels can contain two to three days’ worth of food and are (where possible) packaged to meet to user needs and circumstances. However, efforts to professionalise and streamline the management of resources to adequately meet demand, can situate them as authoritative figures and gatekeepers to the dietary choices of food insecure households. Additionally, the operational practices within the food banks share some similarities with that of a commercial business which may unintentionally create dependency and lead to food banks becoming further embedded in the local welfare landscape.



Despite this, they still function under the guise of food aid. As such, food aid is restricted to addressing immediate food needs and to some extent addressing dietary, cultural and health needs based on supply.

The provision of food aid is shaped by volunteer assumptions and perceptions of recipients. This creates a tension between: (i) what food is donated or acquired through surplus and direct purchasing, (ii) what donated food is considered 'acceptable' and subsequently distributed by the food bank and (iii) what food bank users want and need in their food parcels. To alleviate this tension, volunteers have to consider a number of questions when packing the food parcel to accommodate for people's preferences, dietary and health requirements and living conditions. As such, food banks in this study constantly negotiate between providing *sufficient* food in terms of calories, nutritional variety, and familiarity. This, in turn, conditions the nutritional composition of food parcels based on the volunteer's judgment calls, highlighting the inherent authority involved in being a volunteer, serving to further perpetuate the existing inequalities between the *giving* volunteer and the *accepting* user (Poppendieck, 1999; Rombach, Kang and Bitsch, 2018; Caraher and Davison, 2019; Möller, 2021; Surman, Kelemen and Rumens, 2021).

Therefore, there is an inherent power imbalance between volunteers and food bank users. Food banks are increasingly governed by procedures and practices that deviate from the emergency food aid rhetoric demonstrated in the CDA (see section 4.2) which may drive institutionalisation. The formalisation and professionalism mirror that of a business model, with the controlled environment that exists within some food banks contributing to the structural marginalisation of those experiencing food poverty. The power dynamics, alluded to by the accounts of the volunteers above, are further explored in the following chapter that characterises the experience of food bank users when accessing the food bank and interacting within the food bank to obtain food parcels.

## Chapter Six: Inside the food bank – users’ perspectives on the food bank experience

### 6.1 Overview

This chapter sets out to describe and analyse the journey food bank users experience when collecting food parcels. Research concerning the use of food banks has predominantly focused on the reasons why people access food banks (Prayogo *et al.*, 2018; Reeves and Loopstra, 2021). However, there is a growing body of work exploring the lived experiences of food poverty and food banking in relation to social interaction, health, and nutrition (see section 2.4). The findings in this chapter aim to further contribute to this work and provide further insight into understanding what occurs inside a food bank and how this is experienced by users as well as volunteers.

This chapter specifically focuses on the research aim, *‘how do food insecure households’ access food banks and interact within food banks to meet their food needs’* and considers the impact of the pandemic on food parcel distribution. To examine this, the following research questions are explored:

1. How do food bank users access the food bank?
2. What activities do food bank users participate in within the food bank?
3. What impact did the COVID-19 pandemic have on food parcel distribution?
4. How do volunteers and food bank users interact with each other?
5. To what extent are the food needs of users accommodated when distributing food parcels?

Food bank volunteers and users operate within a bounded range of choices available to them within the food banking system. These will be explored in the context of the physical, material, and social structures that govern food banks and the underlying neoliberal characterisation of food poverty, as a lack of personal responsibility. In addition, this chapter will explore the use of the food bank as a mechanism of food relief as well as a communal and socialised space, considering the implications on the social identities of the food bank, volunteers, and users.

The stigma associated with accessing food banks will be examined, drawing particular attention to the conversations that take place between volunteers and users and how need is negotiated. Additionally, the injection of choice when collecting the food parcel will be explored through the lens of structure, agency, and capabilities. As mitigating the social determinants of health has become a routine part of food bank practice, this chapter will finally further examine the extent to which food banks can accommodate the food needs of users during the distribution of food parcels, drawing attention to the nuances in accommodating for need or preferences.

## 6.2 The experiences of accessing food banks.

The practical aspects of accessing and using a food bank were varied. Confined by the organisational structure and practices within each food bank, users have limited agency in their interactions. Nevertheless, food bank users did utilise multiple pathways to access and collect their food parcels as outlined below.

### 6.2.1 Negotiating access to food bank services.

Access to a food bank is first determined by formal or informal rules, as laid down by individual food banks or franchises. Food banks operate varied forms of referral and non-referral systems (Garratt, 2017; Prayogo *et al.*, 2018; Loopstra, Lambie-Mumford and Fledderjohann, 2019; Beck and Gwilym, 2022). In this study, four food banks did not have a referral process in place and instead operated with an open-door policy, meaning that anyone could enter and obtain a food parcel without a referral.

The remaining four food banks (three in Portsmouth and one in Brent) had a referral process, whereby a health or social care practitioner or agency assessed and referred individuals. The food bank user, upon entering the food bank, would present a paper voucher (known to volunteers in Trussell Trust food banks as the red voucher). Alternatively, as was seen emerging during the pandemic as a way to reduce physical contact, the user would present the referral text message they had received to the volunteer. The volunteer would then check their name on an online system or printed register to confirm their name, address, referral reason(s), number of people in household and confirm any dietary requirements. In one of the Trussell Trust food banks I observed in Portsmouth, food bank users who did not have a voucher or text message were still able to access the food bank. On such occasions, the volunteer would write up a voucher for them making sure to include necessary information such as name, reason for use and an indication of if this was their first time using the food bank. If the food bank user had exceeded the maximum number of times they could access the food bank, the volunteer would authorise the collection of another food parcel and refer the user to an advisor to identify what further support was needed:

*“So, if you need more, beyond, beyond the sixth, then you need to have what we call kind of a further assessment. Which is a little bit more of an in detailed discussion about your situation, with the aim of ensuring that you’re accessing all of the benefits that you’re entitled to, that you’ve made applications for... You know, are there any other benefits that you can get? Can you get Council tax relief? You know, what’s going on? You know, OK, is it this huge debt with your energy supplier? Right, let’s set up a plan to get you... so this is where Brent Hubs come into play. So, they’re doing that further assessment for us, so our advisors and their advisors... In which case, you know, there’s no dramas, we’ll authorise you for three more, or four*

*more. Or, and at that point you get authorised an amount more parcels, depending on your situation.” Sarah (Independent food bank coordinator)*

As explained by Sarah, a food bank coordinator, the rationale of speaking to an advisor after long term use of the food bank was to understand the underlying reason for continued use. As stated, the advisor would conduct an assessment to gauge the user’s situation and identify and direct to any support schemes such as income support, mental health service or baby bank that could alleviate hardship and reduce food bank use. This demonstrates how for some food banks the referral process has become an instrumental tool to ‘track’ use and to be used as an entry point for users to potentially access a wider range of interventions. However, as Sarah further recounts, whilst they identified themselves as an *“emergency provision...for people in crisis”* and had referred people to advisors to help with their situations, the number of food bank users was not decreasing as people didn’t *“know how to get out of their situation.”* This suggests that the experience of food poverty went beyond the lack of food and was instead indicative of broader poverty.

#### 6.2.2 Ways of securing and collecting food parcels

Although it was typical for the food bank user to access the food bank directly, if they were unable to visit the food bank and collect their food parcel, food banks were supportive in providing alternative means of access such as volunteers delivering the food parcel or coordinating with the food bank user to collect on a different day.

Food bank users were given the opportunity to coordinate with the manager and volunteers and have their food parcels delivered to their home, as observed during multiple home delivery walking visits while at one food bank in Brent. This was often limited to people who were shielding, had physical or developmental disabilities or caregiving responsibilities. Similarly, if a food bank user could not attend the food bank session on a particular date and time, users could organise collection on another day that was more suited to their availability. In one food bank in Brent, food was packed using the users’ own bag and the food that was to be distributed was often delivered by The Felix Project between the hours of 13:00 – 15:00 on the same day as the food bank session. If a user was unable to wait for the food to be delivered an arrangement was made for the user (whom they referred to as guests or clients) to leave their bag which would be packed by a volunteer ready for them to collect the following day. This did not seem to condition what was included in the food parcel, including perishable food and anything that needed refrigerating was refrigerated and placed in the parcel upon collection by the food bank user.

Additionally, users could notify the food bank manager and organise for relatives, friends (possibly a fellow food bank user) or their social worker to collect the parcel on their behalf. During a visit to a

Trussell Trust food bank in Portsmouth, I observed a case worker collecting a food parcel for his client, stating that his client was unable to attend the food bank session due to social anxiety. Similarly, in Brent, Morris, who was familiar with the food bank when it was a community kitchen, presented himself at the food bank as a proxy for his friends and children.

*“Because I have relatives. And friends who have children and they’re suffering. So, I’m using it for somebody else, yeah? Yeah, so. You know, I’m a pensioner. I have children and they can’t manage. They haven’t got the money to feed their family. And it’s, you know, it’s, it’s very tough on them. So, I go, and I come here and trying to get them to things and to give to them. To give, and their children, yeah? You know, I just go get it for them and give it to them. And they appreciate it. They say thank you very much and, and I goes home, you know, I goes home, and I goes for another, because it, it’s quite a lot of people in my area are living on food banks, yeah? It’s, it’s not a matter of responsibility. It’s a matter if people are suffering what can they do? Where can they go? If you have three, four, five kids you have to, you have to, you have to try and help them, and that’s what, and that’s what I do, yeah? If you’re a human being, you have to try and help these people. You know, I don’t need it, yeah, but I help the people who needs it, yeah? You know.”* Morris (food bank user)

From the extract above, Morris had nominated himself as someone who would obtain a food parcel on behalf of his friends and children in the area because they did not have enough money to buy food, or they were collecting at another food bank, alluding to the way that some food banks would access and maximise multiple food banks to acquire food. A further discussion of this is explored in section 7.3.

This process required an additional level of bureaucracy for the manager to communicate with the food bank user, organise a collection and notify other volunteers. However, the responsibility to ensure collection was not with the food bank, but the food bank user and the person collecting on their behalf. Notifying the food bank that someone other than the user would be collecting the food parcel was only required for the food banks that operated a referral system and was not a required process in food banks that didn’t have a referral system. This allowed the food bank to simply monitor whether the food bank user had collected their food parcel.

### 6.2.3 A stigmatising process

Despite the accommodations described in the section above, accessing a food bank was found to be a stigmatizing practice, associated with feelings of shame and embarrassment, a phenomena reported elsewhere (Garthwaite, 2016b; Purdam, Garratt and Esmail, 2016; Dempsey, 2020; Edwards, 2021). Josh, a food bank user, expressed how he felt like he was being watched when he went to the food

bank and expressed the negativity that was associated stating *“it’s kind of almost a bit pompous looking down like, oh he’s at the food bank, he can’t be worth much. And you see people’s looks. It’s almost you like you can read their thoughts. It’s like they see you there and then associate you with it. I don’t like that half of it, but you know, I try, try not to take any notice of it. Just go in and be there when I’m there.”*

By contrast, although some food bank users had experienced feelings of embarrassment when accessing the food bank for the first time, that slowly diminished with each subsequent visit as users became used to the process. This is evident in Jasmine’s account below, who described her 6-month experience of using the food bank. She described how she gradually became more comfortable using the food bank and how her perception of being judged reduced as she began to accept that the other food bank users were in a similar situation as herself. In this way, food bank users can find solidarity with other users resulting in an “imagined community.” An imagined community is socially constructed through an association of stereotypes or connection felt towards a body of people (Anderson, 1991; Jaeggi and Gurven, 2013). The symbolic meaning initially associated with accessing a food bank had subsequently changed as judgement was displaced by support and belonging:

*“I’m used to it now. I didn’t at first. I felt very, I don’t know. Didn’t feel good, yeah, I just felt, you know? As if you want to kind of hide away, you know, but I’m fine with it now. I think it was because when we came at first, we were, everyone was wearing masks. So, you didn’t actually recognise anyone. And then, I usually have a, a hat on, so all you could, all you could see is, is the, your eyes, really. But then I got used to coming and, so. I did feel shame, I don’t now. No, many more people like me, so you know. Yeah, I thought, they’re not here to judge. You know. They’re not here, they’re not judging.”* Jasmine (food bank user)

Similarly, when asked about how she felt about coming to the food bank, Amelia, a long-term food bank user, cited that *“there’s no shame. If you need help, you need help, isn’t it? I’m not ashamed to get help if I need it. No, if you’re in need and there’s people that can help you, why not accept the help?”* Amelia had been using the food bank as well as other food aid providers for the last two years because despite having a part-time job her income didn’t cover all her costs stating that *“realistically by the time you’ve paid all your bills and that, you’re lucky if you’ve got enough left to buy food and all that with.”*

Due to the stigmatizing nature of food banking, volunteers and managers made conscious attempts to reduce stigma by allowing people to be out of public view as they collected their food parcels. Food bank managers were conscious of avoiding any queues outside, where possible. As seen in one of the food banks in Brent, they installed a marquee for people to sit under and tables as to obscure the fact

that they were waiting for food parcels. Volunteers would also deliberately pack food in generic grocery bags or cotton bags as to portray the person had purchased food from more socially acceptable places of food retail. Food bank users were also observed transferring the food items into their own carrier bags or wheeled trolley bags.

Goffman (1963) defines stigma as ‘an attribute that is deeply discrediting’ and interprets stigma as follows:

“Whilst the stranger is present before us, evidence can arise of his possessing an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be and of a less desirable kind – in the extreme, a person who is quite thoroughly bad, dangerous, or weak. He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. such an attribute is a stigma, especially when its discrediting effect is very extensive; sometimes it is also called a failing, a shortcoming, a handicap.”

Therefore, the experiences noted by the food bank users in this study meet this definition and signify how food bank users are excluded from social acceptance, as their social identity becomes synonymous with the negative identity of receiving free food from a food bank. Subsequently, the extent to which a food bank can address food insecurity is hindered by their inability to function as a socially acceptable way to access food. Despite the shift in public discourse towards de-politicising food banks, the act of collecting charitable food is heavily stigmatised as it is widely perceived as the result of a lack of general individual capabilities or a failure in personal responsibility (de Souza, 2022). Within the neoliberal individualistic discourse which values “hard work, self-help, and reliance,” the act of seeking help by food bank users from food aid providers and the acceptance of free donated food is shamed upon (Larner, 2000; de Souza, 2022). This provides a possible reason as to why volunteers refer to food bank users as ‘clients’ or ‘guests’ and the shift towards providing food in a ‘dignified response’ as elaborated on in the discourse analysis (see section 4.2.2) to mitigate the negative social identity imposed on users accessing food banks.

### 6.3 Food banks as social spaces

Food banks operate not only as places of food provision but also as social spaces with their own set of social rituals and norms. Upon entering the food bank, users were welcomed in by a volunteer and would engage in conversations with the volunteers present or the other users before and after they receive their food parcels. With a decrease in public spending, public spaces such as libraries and community centres have reduced significantly (Mould, 2014; Loopstra *et al.*, 2015; Power *et al.*, 2020; Beck and Gwilym, 2022). As a result of this, food banks have become more embedded within the community; to support the community and to be supported by the community. As observed in this

study, food bank staff *“don’t just want to be somewhere you get food. [We] want to be community based.”* The communal space offered within food banks was thus identified to be an important aspect for both the volunteers and users, offering an opportunity to socialise. As Lizzie recounted, she and her daughter had *“made a lot of friends coming to these food banks”* after using the food bank for the past three years.

The welcoming rituals that volunteers performed and referring to food bank users as ‘clients’ or ‘guests,’ implicitly shifts the food bank from an emergency provider to a food service provider or community hub as volunteers assume the role of hosts and add a humanising element to what has historically been a stigmatising and dehumanising experience (Middleton *et al.*, 2018). Prior to the pandemic, socialising within the food bank was aided through the provision of teas, coffees and biscuits which allowed people to talk as they waited to collect their food parcels in a more calming atmosphere. As a result of the pandemic, this was greatly diminished as the majority of food banks were forced to close down. Upon reopening, service provision changed from a sit-down to a door-only service and/or delivery service, decreasing social contact between volunteers and users (Bulman, 2020; Greater London Authority, 2020). To mitigate this lack of interaction, a volunteer was typically tasked with talking to users as they waited to collect their food. This only occurred if enough volunteers were present during that session to have a lone volunteer step aside and assume the role of a host. Food bank users were approached by a volunteer, however conversations generally occurred with those who were open for small talk or familiar with the volunteer as they frequently attended the food bank. As social distancing measures were lifted, indoor provision resumed with food banks reinstating some form of socialisation by allowing people to sit down as they wait for their food parcels and converse with volunteers and other food bank users in attendance.

### 6.3.1 Long term food bank use

Based on the extract below, for a subset of food bank users, the food provided by food banks is ‘secondary’ to interacting and communing with others, especially for those who are known as the ‘regulars.’ As Siobhan, the soup kitchen manager, highlights, the use of the food bank by the regulars provides an alternative understanding to what a food bank is and what it can offer beyond the short-term provision of food:

*“There were a few regulars that would always come, and we seen them maybe once or twice and they’ve all said they used to come for the, for the company we just come for the community just to, you know, to have a chat, I’m not so bothered about the food, I’m all right. So, they aren’t bothered to come for the food. Food was secondary.”* Siobhan (Soup Kitchen manager)



The 'regulars' can be identified as people who access the food bank on a regular basis and use this as an opportunity to socialise. Food poverty is a multifaceted issue (British Dietetic Association, 2020) that can also impede the social lives and identity of food bank users, hence food banks not only meet the immediate need of food relief but also addresses social isolation.

On the other hand, there was reluctance by some of the volunteers and managers to endorse this characterisation of repeatedly using the food bank, as this was in direct conflict with the non-reliance and non-dependency ethos of food banks in this study and in the rhetoric of food banks as emergency food aid providers (see section 4.3):

*"Alongside the clients that came in with vouchers, we have what we called our food bank regulars, which actually feels like a term that's now redundant in a way because that's really not what we want to be doing, but they were people that just turned up for the tea and toast, and just to have some social interaction with people. Which was quite nice, but again we're not a community centre, we are a food bank and I think we slightly lost our identity with that kind of stuff."* James (Trussell Trust food bank manager)

As James states, this is not, supposedly, what food banks should be doing as food banks are intended to provide food relief on a temporary basis. However, the expansion of the food bank beyond its original scope is indicative of how users have become *"dependent on the (food aid) system"* to meet their food and social needs. This is portrayed from a *"hand out to a hand-up"* approach with the introduction of programmes aimed at transforming the food bank. This may have resulted in users staying longer at the food bank to access these services. As Surman, Kelemen and Rumens (2021) stated, users encounter the food bank experience as a *"transactional exchange in which the volunteer aims to compensate for the failings of the marketplace."*

### 6.3.2 Social spaces and practices

Another aspect of the food bank functioning as a social space was the provision of pastoral care. Volunteers would guide users to sit down in a café style area if the premises accommodated for such a space. Alternatively, volunteers would engage in individual conversations with the user as they collected their food parcel. Conversations were framed to assist the user by asking them questions concerning their circumstances and signpost them to the appropriate services that would potentially help resolve the issues that led them to using the food bank. Such interactions displayed the hospitable nature of volunteers by offering care and advice to the users aided by a welcoming and friendly environment in an effort to *"treat people properly"* as Josh, a food bank user for the past three years, stated:

*“I think they spend time with people, just to have a chat with them. See where they’re at. Like more individual level here, they like to pay special attention to everyone who comes in and out and sees where they are and makes sure they’re all right.”* Josh (Food bank user)

However, this *“special attention”* highlights the voluntary pastoral role volunteers have assumed, guided by the desire to build, a *“personal relationship”* as referred to by Siobhan. Beneath this caregiving persona, volunteers also indirectly portray themselves as authoritative figures by assessing and intervening in the users’ situations, for example, by prescribing advice or acting as an intermediary between them and external advice services in order address the underlying problems.

In turn, the user is constructed as somebody who needs care and guidance as they are unable to solve these issues on their own. This is especially the case in five of the seven food banks visited. These food banks were identified to provide *“more than food”* as they provided additional services beyond the food parcel, including financial advice, budgeting courses, and cooking classes. Given that this study was conducted during the lockdown period in 2021 as well as the early lifting of the lockdown between February – October, out of these three programmes, only the financial advice service was operating. Whilst this interaction is part of the food bank experience when collecting a food parcel, it is not a prerequisite for the user to engage in it and instead acts as an optional interaction that is offered to food bank users. As observed, it was to the users’ discretion how much they wanted to share with the volunteer, if at all. Additionally, participating in these conversations with the volunteers was independent of the user receiving their food parcel.

The provision of these services highlights the ability of food banks to go beyond relieving the symptoms of food poverty and instead begin to address the underlying causes and build the capabilities of users. As stated by Gary *“I’m not just there with a band aid to wrap over a wound”* and as emphasised by James, food banks should not provide things that *“promote the need for food banks”* and instead their aim and objective is to *“bring people away from relying on food banks.”* This ethos was further reinforced by the faith-based mandate present within most of the food banks in this study. Seven out of eight food banks in this study were faith-based, subsequently leading volunteers to feel a sense of *“social responsibility”* to feed people, widely citing Matthew 25:35-40 or referring to the words of Prophet Muhammad (an individual should not eat until they feed someone who is hungry). As explained by Siobhan:

*“...the reason we’re there is to support people in our parish, people, you know, in our community around us that, that need help whatever way we can. Um, so it just happens to be it’s about food, um, because that’s the need we’ve seen.”* Siobhan (Soup Kitchen Manager)

Indeed, there is a humanising element that some food banks have incorporated within their service provision framed by a religious ideology concerning social justice and poverty (Allen, 2016; Lee, Coulson and Hackett, 2021). This is apparent in the way volunteers seek to treat users with “*respect and with dignity*” and address their “*spiritual needs*” as well as their food needs.

Even though the incorporation of these conversations stem from wanting to support and respect users and build their resilience, the information exchanged during these conversations do pose questions regarding safeguarding and power dynamics and may perpetuate individualistic characterisations of poverty. Möller (2021) and Power and Small (2022) describe these interactions as ‘confessional’ and ‘diagnostic’ as the user is continuously assessed in order to prove themselves. In this study, this was illustrated by the verification of need volunteers conducted when the user presented their referral voucher in which they had to give their name which would then be checked on an online database as observed in a Trussell Trust food bank. As stated, engaging in a conversation with a volunteer was optional however failure to do so may result in the user and the ‘genuineness’ of their need for food being questioned:

*“If they’ve got a genuine need there shouldn’t be a problem talking to them if they’ve got nothing to hide. It’s when they’ve got things to hide that they then don’t want to join in and actually admit that the problem is them, not the system”* Louise (former food bank manager)

The ability for a volunteer to make such judgement calls contradicts the ‘dignified response’ food banks are moving towards and perpetuates a notion of a lack of personal responsibility. In this way, failure to engage in the conversation is perceived to confirm that “*the problem is them, not the system*” as Louise commented. Furthermore, it also indicates the inherent power imbalance that exists between volunteers and users, as the volunteer has the power to not only determine access but also provision. In line with findings from other studies (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017; Lee, Coulson and Hackett, 2021; Möller, 2021; Surman, Kelemen and Rumens, 2021; Beck and Gwilym, 2022), the provision of these services and the pastoral role that has been involuntarily embodied by the volunteers portrays the food bank as an adequate and sufficient alternative to a retreating welfare State.

#### 6.4 Collecting the food parcel and consideration of the social determinants of health.

Once access to the food bank had been secured and the food bank user had been welcomed into the food bank, the next step was to collect the food parcel. Food bank users would wait in a queue before receiving their food parcel from the volunteer at a desk. Volunteers made conscious efforts to tailor the pre-packed food parcel to user’s health and nutritional needs as well as their living conditions.

Upon receiving a food parcel, food bank users were asked two questions by a volunteer, typically in a friendly manner, which included:

1. Do you have any allergies or dietary requirements?
2. Do you have any cooking facilities?

As these questions required a level of participation from the user, this allowed some agency to be exercised as some decision-making was required. Subsequently, this ensures that food provisions are allocated appropriately, and needs are met.

However, this inquisitive and recurrent questioning is potentially an invasive practice as food bank users are expected to verbalise and disclose certain aspects of their personal condition and circumstances. Despite the pursuit of dignity and choice, it is the volunteer who instigates this line of questioning, almost probing the user to reciprocate in a way that is favourable to the volunteer. This is demonstrated when receiving a food parcel is often paired with a sense of gratitude and not wanting to take more than is needed as food bank users are 'dependent' on donated food. Cassie explains this in the extract below:

*"It's not the nicest thing, is it? To be in this position where you can't really help yourself or do things for yourself and you have to literally depend on other people donating food for you to get some food. It's not nice. It's not a nice feeling [but] you're also very, very grateful. You're grateful but it's, like, still not a very nice feeling."* Cassie (food bank user)

The despair and gratitude Cassie expressed is a shared sentiment amongst the other food bank users that were interviewed for this study. This is where the political discourses on personal responsibility have unintentionally been imposed as, the (in)ability to provide for oneself and having to depend on food aid indicates the users' capacity to cope and respond. As such the expression of choice by the food bank user is restricted, affirming their role as an 'obedient receiver' (Möller, 2021).

#### 6.4.1 Bounded choice: Accommodating dietary practices and food preferences.

As outlined in section 2.4, research on the nutritional profile of food parcels distributed by food banks in the UK is sparse (Sirona Health, 2014; Preston and Burley, 2015; Turnbull and Bhakta, 2016; Hughes and Prayogo, 2018; Fallaize *et al.*, 2020). However, as observed in this study, some deliberate actions have been taken by managers and volunteers to cater to food bank users' dietary and health needs as well as incorporate healthier items within the food parcel. For example, there has *"always [been] a consideration for nutrition"* through the use of food lists.

An example of this was a user who had requested fruits and vegetables in his food parcel. He had suffered a stroke and was experiencing great difficulty with incorporating fruits and vegetables within

his diet as these items in the supermarkets had increased in price. Subsequently, through coordinating with the food bank manager, his food parcel was designed to only contain fruits and vegetables as these would help in his recovery by improving nutrition. Similarly, Paige, a food bank user, explained how the provision of some iron-rich food such as red meat and spinach helped in her treatment of her anaemia which had developed as a result of not having enough money to buy certain foods after being furloughed during the pandemic:

*“I was anaemic at the beginning, so my focus was really, I was glad to get the mince because, you know, for the first time in my life I was anaemic, and I had to start concentrating on B12 etc. I think it’s stress and bad diet. Not having what you would normally have. So now I’m back on level pegging and I’m really pleased, you know”* Paige (food bank user)

Whilst these examples illustrate some capacity for adaptation in allowing some choice within a traditionally rigid food bank environment and ensuring users have, in some circumstance, a pathway to which they can obtain the right amount and type of food to meet their needs, there are limits. Food banks face structural constraints in meeting the nutritional and dietary practices of food bank users due to the food bank supply chain. As summarised in Chapter Five (see section 5.5.), volunteers are limited in their ability to tailor food parcels to specifically meet people’s needs as food supply is dependent upon food availability which is determined by donations and surplus food provisions. Thus, the provision of nutritionally adequate food becomes secondary to providing food that is enough and varied in order to keep food bank users sated as discussed in section 5.4.4 (see Figure 22).

This was recognised by Paige who started using the food bank during the pandemic. She stated that there *“there is no choice. Choice in terms of what we get. We just get the bag. Yeah, we get a bag that contains what they probably look at as being basic depending on whatever they get in.”* She continued stating *“the bag is kind of a balance of what you probably would need,”* an assumption that has been made using the food list and the standardisation of food parcels. An example of this is demonstrated by Josh’s account in his experience of using food banks. As a result of his allergies and multiple health issues, including digestive problems, Josh had to change his diet and become vegan. Josh described how the food banks he had visited in Portsmouth lacked food provisions that were vegan and as such had struggled to find a food bank that was suitable for him:

*“So yeah, I started using food banks. But I found, like being a vegan. No one really knew about veganism in the food bank. And a few workers there, in one or two helped out. But generally, these sort of mealtimes weren’t vegan, so that was tricky, and I was like living on just sort of loaves of bread and jam for ages. Because that’s all I could really get, and when I got my own*

*place, I started to stock up. I would sort of go to the food banks more than I should do.”* Josh (food bank user)

Additionally, in Brent, one of the food banks provided meat and fish on most weeks but since the food was predominantly acquired through donations, they had no halal options. This negatively impacted the food bank users as the majority only ate halal foods as Sayyid and Anwar explained *“in exceptional cases they provide some halal things. But almost of the time they don’t provide any halal. So, I don’t take it.”* Similarly, with Anwar, although his diet was not limited to halal, he found himself going to the shops as he stated, *“it’s not everything here, so we have to buy some.”*

By accommodating peoples’ needs, food banks have also inadvertently positioned themselves as nutritional gatekeepers over the diets of food bank users, especially for those who use food banks consistently or over a prolonged period of time, though this is constrained by what food is in stock at that present moment in time:

*“But I guess there’s an element of people think that food banks should give them what they want. But actually, food banks give them what they’ve got. Erm, we, we have in the past had people come in and we have a list that we work down and, there used to be occasions in the past we’d say, we’d do up a parcel and somebody would go through the parcel and say, I don’t eat that, I don’t eat that, I don’t eat that. So, we, we have had people say I only eat custard creams, I only eat Weetabix, I don’t eat, erm, prunes, I don’t eat salmon, and they’re expecting to get exactly what they want, but actually that’s not the idea of food banks. Yes, if you’ve got a medical reason that you’ve got a fish allergy or you’ve got a nut allergy. That’s different. Erm, but then I’ve never been in the position that I’ve needed to go and say, I need some food and, and to actually, I, I guess, to actually go and ask for food, to get a food parcel, get home and find that if you’ve got fussy children. You’ve got nothing in that food parcel that will feed them. It’s quite demoralising, I think.”* Louise (former Trussell Trust food bank manager)

The entitlement that is alluded to by Louise, indicates how food banks have become a substitute food system for the disenfranchised as food is inadvertently framed as a kind of proxy welfare that users are entitled to and should accommodate their needs and preferences. Yet, food parcels are not akin to receiving benefits. The charitable and voluntary nature of the food banking system means that food bank users are not ‘entitled’ to receive food parcels. As such volunteers have to establish and maintain boundaries with regards to what food bank users can access and how much. Volunteers commented on the challenges of managing the *“small proportion of users that are playing the system”* and taking advantage of the food that is available as they know *“it’s available.”* This resonates heavily with the

supply-led argument proposed by Government as to explain why food banks exist and continue to exist (see section 4.3.1).

#### 6.4.2 Food availability and the provision of alternative food items

Parallel to volunteers seeking to accommodate the needs of food bank users, food bank users were provided with the opportunity to return items and/or exchange items with alternatives, if available. As one of the food bank users explained, she would only take the food that she and her daughter would eat and return the other items as it was not suitable for their Hindu vegetarian diet:

*“We actually don’t eat garlic and onion as well. Because I’m actually Hindu, Hindu religion. So, it becomes difficult for like a precooked meal for us to get, even sometimes salads, they have, you know, onions or, or garlic. So, I try to be, like, careful, yeah. With that, with that. So, for me cooking fresh is the best for my food situation. So, we, we just, we just don’t take anything that we don’t eat. We, we just, we only take vegetarian stuff and then we’ll just usually take not cooked. So, I just, they offer garlic and onion but we, we just don’t take it. So, I will take, you know, potato or, or other veg or other fruit and, and we’ll just cook it that way or eat it fresh. But the precooked things, I, I check, I check ingredients and they just have ingredients and, like, onion and garlic and then I don’t take. For example, like, ingredients in some pasta sauces they have, but some of, some of them really, it’s just tomato or basil, like it’s fine. So, I just check the ingredients and I just don’t take. And the same is in the shops. And that’s why, you know, I sometimes have to go and look for pasta sauce, when I go in shops for a specific one that has no, not garlic or any. So not everything is suitable.” Taylor (food bank user)*

The encouragement by volunteers for food bank users to go through their bags and exchange items may be motivated by a need to provide users with food that is to be utilised and familiar, avoiding food waste (see section 6.4.4). A similar practice was also observed to occur organically amongst food bank users which could be described as an ‘exchange ceremony’ (see section 6.4.4). As Louise reveals, it’s better to give people what they will eat than to make them take food items that are healthier or that are not familiar to them:

*“I mean most things, most packets will say on them now, may contain nuts, so you just have to, when you’ve got a peanut allergy, or you’re a vegan and you don’t eat anything at all that is animal product it, it’s their choice as to whether they take that product. I can’t, well I, I could make them take it, but actually there’s not point. If they’re not going to eat it, I might as well keep it, give it to somebody who, who would use it.” Louise (former Trussell Trust food bank manager)*

By stating that she could “make them take it”, if she wanted to, Louise shows an awareness of the power that she had as a volunteer and manager. This demonstrates the power imbalance that can exist between volunteers and food bank user. In turn, this inadvertently serves to extend the discourse that differentiates the ‘poor’ as deserving and undeserving of help. As food poverty is framed as a concern for charities, food relief is characterised by gratitude and deservingness as there is an assumption for food bank users to “*take what you’re given, if you really need it*” and refrain from being selective with the food that has generously been made available to them.

Yet, Leah’s commentary indicates the nuances involved with being a recipient of food aid within the food banking system and the conflicting thoughts and emotions volunteers balance to accommodate for need and choice:

*“Yeah, that’s a difficult tension balance as well I suppose that we don’t want people to take things that they don’t want, especially because then we’re wasting resources and that’s not, we don’t want to waste any resources. Erm, but, but, yeah, it’s always going to be in my heart that I, people should have choice, we, and, erm, I mean, not, obviously not in COVID scenario but when I was in the food bank ten years ago you’d get people come in and it was a more of a shelf system and they could see, so they’d say, oh no, I don’t want those baked beans, I want the Heinz ones. So, you’d have to rummage, but you’d do it, but in your, in your head, you’re thinking a little bit like, hmm, hmm, it is that tension isn’t it about, well, I’m helping you. Erm, yeah, but then I, they deserve a choice, and they’re entitled to a choice and how we can give them that choice as best we can. It is tricky.”* Leah (Independent food bank manager)

Leah highlights the difficulty that is involved in providing food relief and ensuring that resources are offered and utilised efficiently and fairly. She also indicates that offering food bank users a choice, of which they are “*deserving and entitled*” to, is “*tricky*” as there’s a “*difference between someone having a dietary requirement and somebody having a dislike.*” Emergency food aid has not traditionally focused on accommodating need or choice, yet in practice, these two factors are often considered, alongside the maintenance of dignity for the user. Volunteers concluded that the repeated collection of food parcels, especially within independent food banks, was indicative of a shift in how food bank users were using the food bank, from emergency food aid to food poverty relief, despite knowing what they were doing was at a “*basic level.*”

There is, however, a difference between providing food as poverty relief and providing food that will be utilised. An example of this can be seen with ideas of food quality and its relevance to fresh produce. As previously mentioned in Chapter Two (see section 2.4.1), and as observed during food bank visits, perishable food items were often provided through surplus or donations. This meant that



not only did the type of produce change from week to week but so did the quality and quantity, making it difficult for food bank users to collect fresh food with their parcels or take additional items. Tanya demonstrates this in her account expressing how she would be using the bananas she had gotten from the food bank:

*“Because they’re so soft you have to use them straight away, more, or less, and I haven’t got time to make, I could make a sauce, I’m trying to cut back on all these things that you don’t use. Yeah, I don’t want to waste things.”* Tanya (food bank user)

Such examples provide potential reasons as to why food bank practices have shifted towards incorporating choice within their procedures for food bank users, a sentiment shared by researchers when discussing the right to food and putting dignity into practice (Food and Agriculture Organisation, 2007; Ziegler et al., 2011; Lambie-Mumford, 2014). A prime example of this can be seen within the ‘exchange ceremony’ in which food bank users participate in their own ritualistic form of swapping and sharing food to maintain some normalcy to their diets (see section 6.4.4).

#### 6.4.3 The lived experience and resourcefulness of food bank users

The social determinants of health can constrain personal dietary practices and trying to mitigate this has become part of the expansion of food bank service provision. For example, in one of the food banks, volunteers would provide food parcels that contained food that was easy to store as some users did not have access to a refrigerator. Alternatively, the food parcel would contain ready-to-eat food such as ready-made meals or tinned food such as Fray Bentos Pies, (a pie in a tin that can be baked in the oven).

It is important to consider that whilst food banks function as an alternative food system for food bank users, the food provided can only be utilised within users’ skills and resources. This is made more apparent when considering the components of the Capability Approach (Sen, 1985, 1993), which consider a persons’ resources, capabilities, and functioning (see section 3.2). Firstly, the use of food is contingent upon what resources the user has available to them including food, cooking appliances and utensils. As Tracey, a food bank volunteer explained *“even if you are offering the better stuff, not everybody that we see has got proper access to cook.”* The following extracts demonstrate this, highlighting the difficulty of considering what resources food bank users have available to them and how best to accommodate.

For Alex, it was a question of safety. He found himself being unable to store his food in the communal kitchen at his accommodation as he had previously experienced other residents taking his food,

leaving him with little to no food to eat. It was therefore important to provide him with food that had a long shelf life and did not require refrigeration:

*“Well, I’ll keep my food in my room then whatever I fancy eating or making, I’ll take, so I’ll take that down in a bag and then cook it up.”* Alex (food bank user)

Alternatively, Cassie who lived in a rented private flat with her son had access to a full functioning kitchen. However, she had recently survived a fire in the apartment she was still living in, expressing *“nothing’s been maintained”* but she had been provided with an old microwave by her neighbour so she could cook to some degree. Additionally, because she lived a fair distance away from the food bank and was a single parent, she struggled to carry the food parcels home and had to use a cab as she was unfamiliar with the area:

*“So, I come here. Because I live quite far from here. I can’t really walk, and I don’t know what buses come here, so normally, I get, like a cab. Which is not ideal because I really can’t afford the price. Like, I can’t, how am I going to, I can’t carry this. And I live so far, you know, that kind of thing”* Cassie (food bank user)

Evidently, accommodating people’s living conditions, shocks and life events is a difficult task for volunteers who find themselves having to adapt and respond to these conditions in order to provide some form of food relief and alleviate the stress of having to access food.

The second component of the capability approach is with regards to nutritional knowledge and cooking ability. Volunteers repeatedly indicated that food bank users were unfamiliar with food items that were healthier, such as sweet potatoes, sardines, aubergines, and meat-free products. This is suggestive of social difference between what food is provided by ‘middle-class’ donors and surplus providers as suggested by Caplan (2016), in comparison to what a stereotypical food bank user supposedly eats. Whilst this was demonstrated in this study, it was not the reality for everyone. This is because not every food bank user was ‘poor’ and many of the users indicated a liking and tendency towards cooking as well as knowledge on preparing food and its nutritional value. An example of this was reported by Rebecca, a food bank user, who explained how she was going to use the spinach, sweet potatoes, and pumpkin she had been given to make a meal:

*“If I get spinach, I’ll have spinach with, how can I say, with, you know the pumpkin which I cut. And you boil that with sweet potato. And if you have like the tin fish, yeah, you can use that and just add your own ingredients to it.”* Rebecca (food bank user)

The ability of the user to make use of the food parcel is therefore rooted in wider cultural, social, economic, and structural contexts which determines the users’ capabilities, skills, and knowledge. As

such the exercise of agency and choice is not only bound to these behaviours and attitudes but also to the adaptive behaviours and coping strategies they have assumed and acquired during these periods of 'crisis', which may limit the extent to which food resources can be converted into functional meals.

#### 6.4.4 The exchange ceremony

Throughout the food bank experience most of the interactions that food bank users had involved volunteers. However, one interaction that developed independently of the volunteers is the 'exchange ceremony.' The 'exchange ceremony,' as described by one of the volunteers, is a form of bartering that typically occurs after food bank users have collected their food parcels. This is an extension of the swapping practice that volunteers encourage food bank users to partake in upon receiving their food parcel. However, it is separate to routine food bank practice or monitoring by volunteers (see section 6.4.2). Additionally, this 'exchange ceremony' offers an opportunity to socialise with the other food bank users, as users would often converse with each other during this interaction. The 'exchange ceremony' occurred in five out of the seven food banks observed.

Having collected their food parcel, many food bank users left the premises, with the exception of a small group of individuals, usually consisting of those who already knew each other. This group stayed behind and congregated around a bench table or small plastic table outside, laying out any food items that they did not want. Those present would then peruse the table and users would engage in friendly conversations helping themselves to the item that they were interested in whilst other users were still collecting their food parcels. Alternatively, in a more informal way, users took their unwanted food items out of their bag and offered them to other food bank users as they were seated or as they walked around. This was usually conducted outside the food bank premises as to not disturb the other food bank users and as they collected their food parcels. Regardless of the format, certain items were frequently put out and this included bread.

When asked if she used all the food that she got in her food parcel, Paige explained that she tended to use all of it and what she didn't use she would swap with the other food bank users:

*"I use all of it, what I don't use, sometimes I swap with my colleague here, we swap sometimes but I give things to other people, and we exchange what we don't need, so that none of it is wasted. Because a lot of it is quite nice quality that I wouldn't, to be fair, be able to buy at the moment, so I don't waste any of it. Yes, very important, yeah. All of it is used as much as possible, everything. Yes, whatever we get, we use all of it."* Paige (food bank user)

Similarly, long term food bank users, Lila and Lizzie found that swapping food between themselves helped to avoid food that they did not like and allowed them to have food that was preferable. As Maria, another food bank user commented, if she couldn't swap the food with the other food bank users then she *"brought some things back"*, returning the food items to the volunteers. Following these exchanges, a volunteer would then collect any unexchanged unwanted food items to be used for another food parcel. Whilst this could be described as unwanted food, the use of any unexchanged food is an extension of how food moves around the food bank and the great care that volunteers take when handling food as it is *"re-homed with other people that might like them"*.

Given these interactions, the act of exchanging food could be viewed as a social process involving the sharing of food and offsetting unwanted food amongst food bank users. By obtaining food that would be better incorporated within their diet, this helps to maintain any existing dietary habits and practices as the food from the food bank is treated as a regular source of food. Although defined as an 'exchange ceremony,' food bank users who offer food to other food bank users do so without the intention or expectation of receiving food in return. This indicates a social as well as a physical exchange. Bagozzi (1975) states that the satisfaction of human need is driven by a need to engage in social and economic exchanges with other people and organisations. Therefore, under this notion, the exchange or sharing of food amongst food bank users could be perceived as a way of satisfying wider social needs within the food banking system. This further demonstrates food banks as social and relational places that foster exchanges of care facilitated by food, which essentially embodies the concept of 'more than food' (Goodman, 2016; Cloke, May and Williams, 2017) .

Despite the efforts of volunteers to accommodate the needs and preferences of each food bank user, food bank users participated in their own form of sharing food through an 'exchange ceremony'. This, illustrates that food bank users can partially regain a sense of control or agency over their access to food, maintain some form of their preferred diet and minimise food waste.

## 6.5 Summary

The food bank experience for the user is both streamlined and wide-ranging. The user goes through a ritualistic process starting with referral, to being welcomed in by a volunteer who acts as a host. Following this, the user can engage in social interaction with other users and volunteers before answering questions posed by the volunteer before, during and after they collect their parcel, providing insight into their life histories, likes and dislikes. Such interactions highlight the way in which the food bank has become a source of support and the extent to which volunteers can meet the food needs of users. Additionally, the agency exercised by users in engaging in their own form of food sharing with one another, helps maintain some form of normalcy within their diet.

The experience of accessing a food bank and collecting a food parcel can, however, be a stigmatising process. Due to the nature of these interactions, the continuous assessment that users undergo to demonstrate need, can result in volunteers making judgement calls, which in turn can impact user's experience. Thus, beneath the practice of food aid provision, there are undertones of monitoring and restriction which reinforce the social and political identities of those who access food banks as lacking of personal responsibility (Lawson and Elwood, 2014).

There are uneven power dynamics between volunteers and users. The volunteer can inadvertently assume an authoritative pastoral role whereas the user is portrayed as an 'obedient receiver' having to show gratitude (Edwards, 2021; Möller, 2021). The social identity of users is subsequently shaped by the organisational structure and practices of the food bank, that is embedded within two systems – the food system and the welfare system. As observed in Chapter Five, food banks operate within an existing food supply chain which in turn influences the practices related to accommodating nutritional, health and living conditions.

Within this chapter, the social and physical functioning of the food bank highlighted the involuntary mission creep that has driven food bank practices, expanding the food bank beyond food relief and towards poverty alleviation and personal resilience by building capacity. In turn, this duality echoes the ability of food banks to adapt and respond to the current socio-political context as well as a moral responsibility to address food poverty (Williams *et al.*, 2016). As such, the food bank is situated as an alternative welfare system for the disenfranchised, yet this does not reflect the charitable and emergency notions they were founded on and continue to function under. Despite this, given the psycho-social and economic dimensions that food banks can address, the provision of food and 'more than food', exemplified by the administration of personalised economic care plans, adds to their perceived responsibility of addressing food poverty.

However, the extent to which this can occur is over-ridden by the lack of agency that food banks possess due to their charitable nature and the institutional processes that govern the food supply chain. This lack of agency then affects the extent to which food bank users are involved and implicated in the process of sorting and allocating food as well as the level of agency that users can express within the food bank, resulting in the concept of bounded choice. A lack of autonomy in determining food supply with regards to the amount, quality, and type of food by the food bank, negatively impacts on the user's ability to obtain food that accommodates their diet and health needs and living conditions.

As such trying to mitigate the social determinants of health has become part of the food bank practice with a deliberate effort to inject some form of choice, although limited, within the food bank experience. Food bank users are encouraged to actively participate within the packing process of their

pre-packed food parcel. This, therefore, shifts the user from a passive recipient to an active agent. However, volunteers have to consider and interrogate the difference between providing food that is accommodating to the users' needs or providing food that is accommodating to the users' preferences as there are limitations to food availability.

The following chapter elaborates further on this as it seeks to examine the function of food banks within household food provisioning and explore how and to what extent food parcels can impact the dietary practices of food bank users.

## Chapter Seven: Utilising the food parcel and household food provisioning practices.

### 7.1 Overview

Emergency food parcels, offered by food banks, have become vital in helping low-income households with poor food access meet their basic food needs. Given the rising use of food banks in the UK, there has been increasing academic interest around the nutritional content and adequacy of food parcels (Sirona Health, 2014; Preston and Burley, 2015; Turnbull and Bhakta, 2016; Hughes and Prayogo, 2018; Fallaize *et al.*, 2020). As discussed in section 2.4.2, food parcels in these studies exceeded the recommended UK daily nutrient and energy guidelines for an adult; yet, when the researchers constructed 'typical' meal plans from the food items available in the food parcel, Turnbull and Bhakta (2016) found that they did not meet recommended energy requirements. It should be noted that meal plans only used food from parcels and no consideration was given as to how food parcels fit within typical existing dietary and provisioning practices and so unlikely to reflect actual practices. Further investigations are therefore warranted on how food bank users utilise emergency food parcels and how they are incorporated into existing dietary practices.

This chapter addresses that caveat by analysing how food parcels are used at home and incorporated into household food provisioning practices. The impact of COVID-19 is also explored, demonstrating its effect on users' access to food, either physically or financially. The chapter is split into two sections. The first section focuses on how the content of food parcels is turned into a meal, discussing the drivers that are associated with meal planning, preparation, and consumption and how food parcels are used within existing dietary and food provisioning practices. The second section focuses on how users maximise their local resources and use sources in the food environment (such as food aid providers, food retail environment and socio-familial networks) to supplement the food parcel in the context of wider coping strategies and household livelihoods. The concepts of thriftiness and adaptive capacity will also be explored, demonstrating the range of activities that users embark on to 'make do' and 'get by' by diversifying their household food provisioning practices (Werrett, 2021).

This chapter will therefore address the following research questions:

1. How do low-income households use food parcels within their existing dietary and food provisioning practices?
2. How do low-income households incorporate food banks as part of both their livelihoods and use of local resources, and how has this been affected by COVID-19?

## 7.2 Constructing meals from the food parcel.

Food provisioning practices based on food aid are, by necessity, a reactive and low agency undertaking. 'Making use' of the food parcel is a constrained process, determined by the contents of the food parcel. As discussed in Chapter 5 (see section 5.2 and 5.4), food supply within food banks is characterised by reactivity and 'making do' with what is acquired. By extension, this directly affects the contents of the food parcel and subsequently the ways in which users incorporate the food parcel into their diet. Operating in an opposite way to food shopping, which is a mainly predetermined activity that involves an element of choice, food bank users instead work reactively around the contents of the food parcel.

Much like how volunteers reported that they could only provide users with what had been donated or obtained through surplus (see section 5.4.3); the type of meals that the users could make was directly correlated with *"what they [the food bank] provide,"* as Sayyid, a long-term food bank user, reported. This, at times, resulted in a monotonous diet. Therefore, dietary flexibility and adaptability were desirable and necessary traits that food bank users needed to apply. As Kelly, a part-time worker, implied *"you can't plan [that] you're going to have this, [or] that. You never know what you're going to get."* In this sense, the culinary know-how of users encompasses more than just the ability to prepare food but to also plan meals and stock up.

### 7.2.1 Meal planning

Meal planning was a muted reactive practice that was exercised out of necessity. Once home, food bank users would lay out the contents of the food parcel, sort through it, and group possible food items that would go well together for a meal. Typically, when shopping in the retail food environment, meal planning is conducted before food items are purchased. However, for food bank users, meal planning was a reactive process that occurred after food had been obtained. This back-to-front meal planning experience required the user to have some ingenuity and adaptive capacity in order to utilise the contents of the food parcel through planning and managing food resources. Lizzie, a single mother and long-term food bank user of three years, explained how she would lay out all the contents of the food parcel once she got home and *"work out"* in her head the different meals that could be constructed with the food that she had received:

*"I get it all out, have a look and work out in my head a few meals of what we're going to do, and what we'll have."* Lizzie (food bank user)

Similarly, Sarah, a food bank coordinator for an independent food bank, experienced a similar account from a food bank user. The user described to her how she incorporated the food parcel within her diet



by laying out the food contents in the parcel, in order to provide a visualisation of the meals she could make:

*“There was a lady that collected this morning, and she was talking about her food parcel. And she was saying, [...] I sort of laid everything out from my food parcel, and I made a meal plan of everything. [...] not every guest is like that [...] not every guest has capacity to kind of, think like that, right. Like a lot of, the situations that our guests are in are like very all consuming, that a meal plan is just not on the agenda.”* Sarah (Independent food bank volunteer coordinator)

As Sarah highlighted, meal planning is a ‘consuming’ practice that requires time and attention. For some of the users, it can be deprioritised and negated by a variety of factors such as caring responsibilities, working hours, health problems and housing pressures as its “not on the agenda.” This labour and resource intensive practice requires a greater level of flexibility and creativity. However, for marginalised individuals, capacity may be reduced as their experience of poverty is multifaceted and compounded by competing needs.

Though food bank users are able to try out “different varieties of menus,” the type of meals made can become repetitive. This is especially the case when certain items, mainly tinned and dried food items, are repeatedly donated and subsequently supplied within the food parcel. Examples of these repetitive meals included soup with bread, pasta and meatballs and corned beef hash. As Jasmine explained:

*“...sometimes you get meat, but you don’t get a lot of [it], you always get beans and tomatoes. [...] it’s cans, beans, tomatoes, or soup, they put soup in, meatballs [...]. And tuna fish. [...] Tend to cook meatballs, but you can have it with pasta, you see, can’t you? It’s always the same. Meals [are] always the same, [I] just have beans and tomato, beans and tomatoes and meatball. Occasionally, you might get a tin of corned beef, but it’s not very often, you know.”* Jasmine (food bank user)

This dualism of predictability and uncertainty with food provisioning subsequently determined what meals were prepared. Simone, a long-term food bank user who lived with her daughter and received benefits, displayed her nutritional knowledge and creativity as she described how she was able to make baked courgettes with yogurt and other vegetables, serving that up with rice for a meal:

*“It’s a little bit of rice, a lot of vegetables. Stir fried vegetables, when they give, sometimes we get courgettes, so I put cornflour, yoghurt, courgette, all the vegetables and bake it. It’s so yummy. In cornflour and vegetables. Ginger, garlic and all the spices.”* Simone (food bank user)

The account by Simone is an example of the one-pot meals that many food bank users reported making. Also known by some as a “*bunga bunga*,” the preparation and cooking of these meals typically occurred in one pot resulting in a comforting and convenient meal:

*“We make use with [it], usually we get pasta and a tin of pasta sauce or tomato or something. I mean chopped tomatoes. I usually use that because my daughter likes pasta quite a lot, which is good, and so do I, and we usually have that and a bit of cheese. Sometimes I will make a, what I call a bunga bunga which is where I get a few things, like sometimes if I don’t have chopped tomatoes or a pasta sauce, if I have, like, say a tin of vegetable soup, I’d bung that in with pasta. Or sometimes I would mix a bit of golden syrup up with cornflakes or whatever cereal to make, like, a snack for my daughter. I’m quite creative with different things, I just think of these things and come up with it.”* Lila (food bank user)

While this did not require a lot of time, there was an element of creativity and attention to detail that was emphasised, as it was not merely putting different food items together in a pot. Nutritional know-how and some cooking skills were therefore necessary to strike a balance between different ingredients and seasonings to make a meal that was edible and flavourful. This provides a wider understanding of the bounded nutritional adequacy of the food parcel. Despite existing literature emphasising that food parcels are nutritionally adequate (Turnbull and Bhakta, 2016; Hughes and Prayogo, 2018; Fallaize *et al.*, 2020), the ability of the user to plan multiple and various meals needs to be accounted for. For some of the users it was making use of unfamiliar food items by searching for a recipe online or by remembering childhood dinner recipes. This was exemplified by Paige who told me how she had used the CRACKD liquid vegan egg substitute that she had been offered at the food bank the week before to bake an eggless cake. Although she had “*never used [it] before*” she “*looked up how to make a cake that doesn’t have eggs and it turned out very well.*”

### 7.2.2 Stocking up food

From food bank user accounts, the food parcel alone was often insufficient for the week and, as such, users found themselves using the food parcel “bit by bit” and deploying a range of compensatory strategies to supplement it. Centred around “stocking-up” on food, food bank users would ration, freeze, or bulk cook food to make the food parcel “*stretch*” for longer throughout the week.

Based on the extracts below, using the food bank did not fully alleviate their requirements or need to secure further food supplies, as their basic food requirements often went beyond the 2-3 days’ worth of food that was supplied in a typical food parcel. Jasmine, who was retired and living on her pension, said that the food parcel would last her from Wednesday to Friday, but she would then have to “*stretch it and then struggle [through] the weekend*”. Similarly, Rebecca, a full-time carer for her

autistic son, reported that she *“would keep the food and just use little as much as I can to last me for the week which was really handy.”*

Additionally, other food bank users recounted the different ways they would make limited supplies last by ‘stocking up’ or ‘saving’ food for another meal. As discussed in section 6.4, food bank users avoided wasting food. For those who cooked and had the infrastructure and personal resources in place, unused food, food that had been cooked or any leftovers, were portioned out and stored in the refrigerator or freezer to manage limited food resources. In Paige’s case she would divide up the food and freeze it:

*“Whatever I’m given I try to divide it up, freeze it and then make a use for it with something else that I’m given maybe the following week to make for example things like lasagne if I’m given a sauce. Rice and vegetables, stir fry.”* Paige (food bank user)

Similarly, Taylor described how even though she preferred the “fresh stuff,” she would still take some of the canned food to keep as back-up in case of an “emergency”:

*“I prefer the fresh stuff yeah...But I do take one or two just in case of sort of like emergency type, when, when I’m like unwell, to, to cook like something on time or something, I need a quick meal then it’s always good to keep something, you know, in your, in your cupboard. That sort of thing, yeah.”* Taylor (food bank user)

Taylor, in the above extract, exemplifies how food bank users categorise and rank the food items they receive in the food parcel, with each type of food serving its own purpose. Depending on which food bank the user had accessed, perishable and non-perishable food items provided different forms of relief. Fresh food items were desirable and preferred however, due to their short shelf-life they were often used up first or preserved in the freezer. Conversely, tinned food was sometimes preserved as a backup or just in case due to its long shelf-life. Tinned food therefore helped users prepare for anticipated future crises as these food items were ‘reserved’ or ‘re-branded’ as store cupboard essentials. This indicates a hierarchy in the contents of the food parcel as food bank users categorised and ranked the foods that they received, with some as premium and others as a back-up or ‘last resort.’ Whilst this displays foresight and the ability to crisis plan and manage, it does indicate the constant state of uncertainty in which users exist.

### 7.2.3 The materiality of food: the ways in which the food parcel dictates food preparation practices.

The materiality of food and the ‘stuff’ of food refers to the objects used to prepare, serve and consume food and the embodied actions involved in its preparation, storage and consumption (Steel and Zinn,

2017). This materiality of food was perceived and experienced differently by the food bank users in this study. Similar to findings generated by Douglas *et al* (2015) which investigated the experiences of food bank users in Northern Scotland, there were material components that determined the users' ability to turn the contents of the food parcel into edible meals. These included having access to a functioning kitchen and appropriate cooking appliances and utensils as well as access to herbs, spices, oils, and condiments. As Rebecca, a long-term food bank user, mentioned it was "*sad*" that the tinned food that she had been provided with did not have a ring pull as not everyone had access to a can opener. As other reports have indicated, food bank users are "requesting meals that do not need cooking or refrigerating" due to users finding themselves unable to cook because of a lack of financial and material resources (namely access to a kitchen and adequate food preparation and storage facilities) resulting in functional limitations (Phipps, 2022).

The home environment was a key determinant of what meals could be prepared and cooked; and constrains or enhances the extent to which users could benefit from the food parcel. Despite research demonstrating that food parcels are nutritionally adequate (Hughes and Prayogo, 2018; Fallaize *et al.*, 2020), the users' ability to utilise the food parcel and make meals can diminish their capability to meet nutritional requirements. Most users reported having access to a fully equipped and working kitchen. Alex mentioned how "*banging*" his kitchen was, as his HMO (House in Multiple Occupation) was "*fully equipped with pots and pans in there*" and that when he moved into his room, he was provided with "*two plates, two bowls, two knives, two forks, two of everything.*"

However, in contrast to this, Adam, who also lived in an HMO, found himself having to buy his own utensils as "*nobody else in the house had pots and pans*":

*"It's lucky I didn't actually spend all my money on food, because, had I done that, I wouldn't have been able to buy, even though they were second hand off a, a kind of auction, oh it was called Preloved. So, I, I did that, I got this little cheap set of pots and pans. I'm literally the only person in our HMO that uses the cupboards. The only thing they gave us was a plate, a bowl, a can opener, a knife and a fork and that was it yeah, that was it."* Adam (food bank user)

Adam's experience shows the material struggles that can be involved when preparing and cooking food, as some of the food bank users did not have the means to convert the contents of the food parcel into whole meals. Likewise, Kyle stated that since he lived alone after being homeless for four to five months, the flat that he currently lived in did not have a fully functioning kitchen and therefore he used the microwave to cook most of his meals:

*"I'm living alone. I've got a flat. Well, it doesn't have a proper kitchen. In, in terms of a cooker. I just have a microwave. I do everything [in] the microwave. Or I eat, you know raw. It's shite, terrible, yeah. Not good. And I'd love to be able to cook but you can do most things in the microwave if you, if you know how."* Kyle (food bank user)

Similarly, despite having access to a shared kitchen, Josh was unable to cook as he did not have his own set of pots, pans, or cutlery nor any access to them due to his housing arrangements:

*"I haven't cooked for a while now because the places I've been in. Because the, the last place was a shared kitchen. This, this place I'm in now, I don't have my own pots and pans and cutlery. So, I tend to just have sandwiches and things cold really."* Josh (food bank user)

He continued, describing his experience of having to resort to unconventional ways of preparing meals by using tea lights to cook his food:

*"When I first started out, because there was never any electric, it was like, there was loads of people in this house were trying to share the electric. And as soon as someone put £10 on. Everyone would just use everything as much as they can, and it, literally £10 would be gone in a few hours. And you'd be sat there in the dark all night. And I used to use tea light candles to cook with just a ring like six on the outside and one in the middle, seven tea lights, you can cook as good as you can on a Calor gas hob. It, you know, beans on toast, you can make in a couple of minutes on, if you've got enough candles. It was surprising. So, I was doing that a lot. And obviously using them for night-time to see, so yeah, I was, I was going to Poundland and buying like 100 for a quid, and they would do all my cooking, lighting, clothes drying and all sorts. Multi candle, yeah. I know it was probably cheaper, because you could, they'd last four hours, so you could light them, do your cooking, and blow them out. And like if you think, you know, how many five minutes fit in four hours, you could cook for months on just a few candles. And it probably works out a lot cheaper than cooking with gas."* Josh (food bank user)

In their attempts to prepare food, food bank users engage in what could be considered as 'socially unacceptable ways of cooking.' This was dictated by their access to cooking appliances and material resources. In a qualitative study on the lived experiences of food insecurity in the UK, food bank users also developed 'resourceful, experimental and collaborative cooking strategies' such as cooking with neighbours or swapping food (Moraes *et al.*, 2021). The relationship between food and class has long since been documented, with food being acknowledged as a marker of social differences and class status (Smith Maguire, 2016; Couninhan, Van Esterik and Julier, 2018). Although less explored and with inconsistent findings, the relationship between socioeconomic inequalities and food preparation

behaviours and methods may contribute to dietary health inequalities and food precarity. The economic and material status of the food bank user shapes the users' household food provisioning practices resulting in constraints on food acquisition, preparation, and cooking practices, identified in the Government Food Strategy (Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs, 2022; Francis-Devine, Malik and Danechi, 2023). As a result, practices such as those outlined by Josh and Kyle, where users are subjected to using tealights or the microwave to cook meals, become more common as making full use of the food parcel is constrained by the resources available to them.

Alternatively, while the above-described struggles, and subsequent adaptations, in preparing and cooking food may be perceived as socially unacceptable, the practices that some of the users adopt, demonstrate ingenuity in the face of difficult circumstances. This not only showcases the resilience of food bank users, but it also pushes back against the political rhetoric that those who access food banks are unable to budget, manage their resources, or cook (Walker, 2022). In this context, the idea of the lack of 'personal responsibility' can be challenged as in many cases the food bank user is able to maximise the resources available to them in order to mitigate the material challenges they face. Users exercise some form of agency by being creative and flexible in order to 'make do' with the food parcel and this shows the adaptive capacity of food bank users. Agency, in this sense, is fluid and transferable despite being restricted by material and structural resources. This adaptive capacity re-shapes the relationship between food bank users and food parcels, as agency is cultivated within a pre-determined provisioning of food that is then integrated within household food provisioning practices. This, in turn, reveals the extent to which food parcels can intersect with the food choices and practices of food bank users.

#### 7.2.4 The dietary impact of using food parcels.

Long-term food bank use can impact diet and food provisioning practices. Food bank users adapt, adjust, and compromise their diets and dietary practice when using the food parcel. These adjustments entail compromising on quality and type of food as well as eating less or less frequently or substituting certain food items for what has been provided in the food parcel. When asked the extent to which their diet had been changed by using the food parcels, food bank users stated that using the food parcel had changed what they would typically eat as the food parcel lacked fresh food, was not culturally appropriate or according to their taste and preference. Incorporating the food parcel into their diet was therefore something that food bank users had to adjust to even if it meant changing their diet.

#### 7.2.4.2 Variety of food

Many of the users cited a preference for fresh food items and a distaste for consuming tinned food. The provision of tinned food was perceived as “*not really good health wise,*” because freshness was equated with healthfulness and desirability. As such some food bank users selectively used the food bank. For example, Kyle used the food bank to obtain fruits and vegetables that he could then incorporate into his diet. While this may highlight his financial “*inability to obtain food*” as perishable food is often more expensive, it also indicates how food banks have become a community food resource functioning as an alternative peripheral food system for food insecure households. Thus, accessing or not accessing the food bank can play an important role on the dietary status and practices of food insecure households.

Similarly, the provision of mostly vegetarian food items by some of the food banks led to a change in the diets of some of the users. It is not fully understood why some food banks provided mainly vegetarian options; however, it may be due to who runs the food bank and its clientele. For example, one food bank in Brent provided halal and vegetarian food items as it was run by a Muslim organisation and by default the food provided had to align with the Islamic practices.

Users who had not previously adhered to a vegetarian diet or eaten vegetarian dishes had now found themselves doing so out of necessity and convenience:

*“I make mainly vegetarian meals. [But] It’s just that I, never sort of been vegetarian but at the end of the day there’s always changes with this lockdown. So, it’s nice to try different varieties of, you know food. Yeah, which is really good because I cook fresh food. I’m not used to junk food.”* Rebecca (food bank user)

In Rebecca’s case and much like the other food bank users in this study, the food bank provided access to food that she had been struggling to obtain due to the financial circumstances she was experiencing. However, the limited opportunity for choice with the contents of the food parcel means that food bank users, in a way, have to eat what they have been provided with despite the food being unsuitable for health and dietary practices:

*“I’ve got a few [conditions], arthritis, I’m on statins for cholesterol and I’ve just been diagnosed as diabetes two. So next week I’ve got to go for the eye, the screen, eye screening again. Yeah. Well, there’s a lot that I’m not supposed to eat but you have to eat what you’ve got”* Jasmine (food bank user)

Despite the food parcel containing food that Jasmine reported she could not eat because of her health condition; she still ate the contents of the food parcel as that was her main source of food. This co-

existed with a sense of perseverance and stoicism despite the lack of variety and healthy food provision that was tailored to user needs. In this regard, food bank users to a large extent become tolerant to the changes in their diet and accommodate out of necessity.

#### 7.2.4.1 Choice versus necessity

Despite the efforts made to cater to dietary preferences and inject some choice within the distribution process, the food parcel contents were still not suitable for many users. Josh described his disheartening experience with another food bank that he had accessed, stating how he *“had a problem with them”* after one of the volunteers said *“you’ll eat what you’re given”* in response to him asking if they had any vegan food. Over the course of their food bank use, users learned to strategize and make a series of trade-offs in order to obtain some form of food assistance. Cassie, a long-term food bank user and single mother of one, outlined that since using the food bank she had not been able to maintain eating her traditional foods, having to forfeit her traditional foods as it was beyond her financial means, such as the meat with the bones:

*“I can’t get the sort of, beef with the bones and stuff like that. I can’t get that anywhere. So, I’m, I don’t really, not really. I’ve got the, what’s it called? The, the maize meal. Yeah, I’ve got that, yeah, the sadza. I’ve got that, and I can, obviously, put some veg, whatever, but I don’t like that I can’t get that meat that we used to have. So, not really [...] I don’t know where to get it. They don’t sell it anywhere. And then if you’re going to buy it somewhere, like, a butcher’s, it’s extortionate. So, I don’t bother”* Cassie (food bank user)

However, this change in diet was often downplayed and masked by a sense of gratitude as users did not want to appear ungrateful for the food supplied. Participants were mindful not to be overly critical of the food banks and the food parcel they received (McKay, McKenzie and Lindberg, 2022). This can (re)create a position whereby users have to accept different food items due to a lack of choice (Douglas *et al.*, 2015; Booth *et al.*, 2018; Surman, Kelemen and Rumens, 2021). When conducting in-depth interviews with fourteen food bank recipients in Perth Australia, Booth *et al.*, (2018) found that most of the recipients were ‘grateful’ for the food yet ‘resigned’ to the poor quality and unmet preferences as they wanted healthy food that was of better quality and of a wider variety. This can be seen by Cassie when she later expressed that she *“never used to eat so many canned foods, but it was fine”*:

*“So, obviously, this [the food parcel] helps me quite a lot. I’d say my diet has changed because I never used to eat so many canned foods, but, tinned foods, but it’s fine. I don’t mind. Food is food.”* Cassie (food bank user)



Cassie's description of her constrained access to fresh food co-existed with indifference - "*food is food.*" This was made apparent when despite wanting more, the majority of the users shared a sentiment of not wanting to be seen as being "*greedy*" and so did not take more than needed or necessary. This may indicate a diminished sense of dignity from a capability perspective. The bounded transaction reiterates the apparent detachment between the 'giving' volunteers and the 'obedient' users of food aid within the food bank model (Liebow, 1995).

### 7.3 The thrifty user: how food bank users combine the food parcel with other sources of food

The food parcel allowed food bank users to worry less about accessing food, acting as a "*stop-gap*", that can be used to "*get yourself out of a little rut.*" Nonetheless, users noted that the food parcels were not a reliable or stable source of food based on quantity, quality, variety, or appropriateness.

Whilst the food parcel did provide food, especially with regards to cupboard staples, it did not provide 'certain' food items that met users' preferences, likes, and dislikes. As such, food bank users made use of the food bank as part of wider strategy of household food provisioning. The food bank was therefore just one of a variety of food sources that was used in a routinised and planned way. These other sources included the commercial food retail environment, other food aid providers and familial and social networks that provide money and/or food to support users. However, what was not clearly indicated was the order and priority of using the food parcel.

In that regard, the use of food banks can be understood as being integrated into a wider set of household food provisioning practices, whereby each user maximises the food access options that users have available to them. This demonstrates the thriftiness of food bank users. Thriftiness is a consumer identity that is associated with '*utility maximisation traits such as bargain hunting, value seeking and second-hand purchasing in order to get as much as possible for as little as possible*' (Gatersleben *et al.*, 2019). This interpretation offers an alternative narrative to the current literature that emphasises that food banks are used as a last resort, having exhausted other coping strategies.

#### 7.3.1 The varied use of a food parcel

The need for a food parcel was dependent on the degree of financial security that the user was experiencing. Subsequently, food bank use varied considerably and was portrayed as both episodic and habitual experience as obtaining a food parcel did not 'solve' food poverty or provide greater access to more conventional food sources. The food parcel was used to meet both temporary food needs and provide long-term food resources, as discussed below. Ways of using the food bank can,

therefore, be broadly categorised into three main approaches: top-up; selective use; and chronic use (see Figure 23).

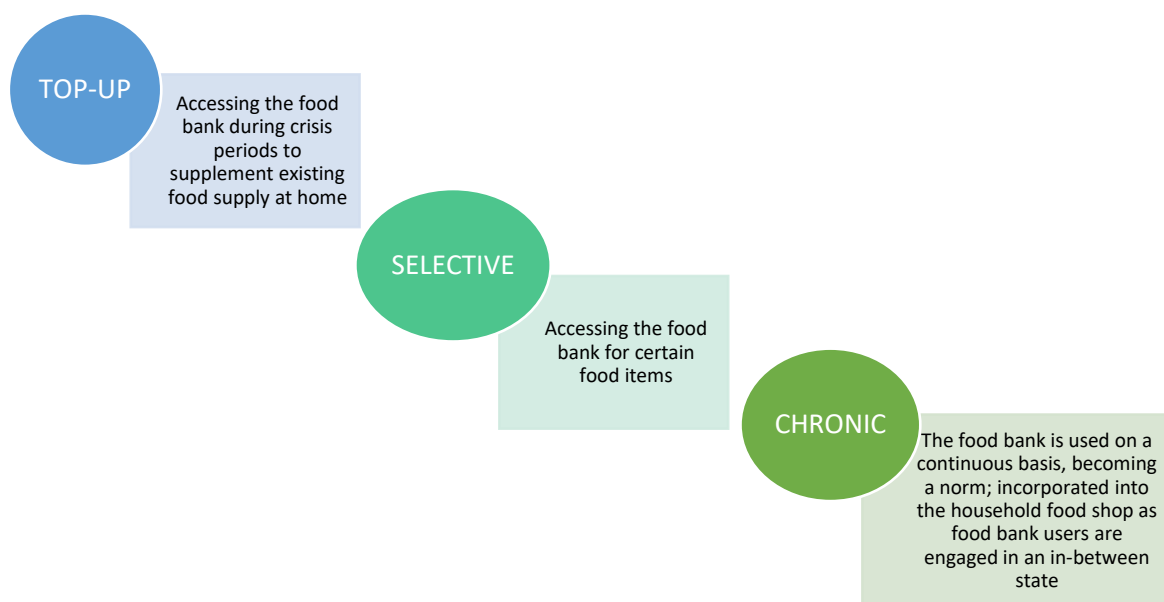


Figure 23: The varying forms of food bank use (Source: author's creation)

The figure above represents a visualisation of the varying forms of food bank use whereby users enter and exit this cyclical process based on their financial status and personal circumstances. Some users managed the food parcel as a top-up in order to supplement their existing food supply as described by Angelina below:

*“Well, I need the food because my, it’s to supplement my income, OK, food supply. I can’t manage on my own, so I come to the food bank to top up. Just adding to it. So, what I get, it’s not enough, yes, it’s not enough. I don’t have enough money to get so I come here for extras. Like if I get rice, yeah, I don’t have to buy rice next week or for about two weeks, I get a packet of rice yeah, I don’t have to buy rice, I can buy something else, so. That’s how it comes in handy. Yeah, if I get bread, I don’t have to buy bread again, so you get what you need.”*  
Angelina (food bank user)

As such, food bank users expressed how the food parcel “subsidised” food items they wanted or needed, allowing them to buy other foods by saving them money on basic food items (such as fruits, vegetables, and staples such as pasta and rice). As food banks typically provided non-perishable food, provisions of perishable fresh produce were limited. In reaction to this, users purchased these absent and inconsistently available perishable food items elsewhere. Often these purchased food items would include meat, a finding also reported in a qualitative study of users’ food choice and eating behaviours in Perth, Western Australia (Hardcastle and Caraher, 2021).

Parallel to this, other food bank users selectively collected the food parcel in order to access specific food items. This was exemplified by Kyle who was a recovering alcoholic and between jobs. He described that despite experiencing feelings of worry about obtaining food, he would stop collecting a food parcel if there was no provision of fresh fruits and vegetables, preferring to “do without.”

In contrast, whilst Paige acknowledged that the food bank was treated as a “top-up,” she had been using the food bank twice every week and as part of her weekly shopping:

*“It’s classed as a top up rather than a weekly. But because of my particular circumstances, I come twice a week. If I never needed to, do you know what I mean? If I was earning any money, getting any money anywhere else, if I was signing on then I probably, well I don’t know I probably, well I do know, I wouldn’t come. But I look at it as being essential part of my weekly food.”* Paige (food bank user)

This demonstrates that food parcels can be embedded within routine household food provisioning practices as the crisis that some users experienced becomes chronic rather than acute. In this way, the food parcel has become a necessary long-term food resource saving the food bank users from “going without.”

### 7.3.2 The local food aid environment

Food banks are embedded within the broader food aid system. This was acknowledged by Leila, the food bank manager of an independent food bank in Brent. Leila denounced the rhetoric of dependency on an individual food bank and highlighted the potential dependency that users have developed on the food aid network, as a whole, but not necessarily individual food banks:

*“I don’t feel like anyone is super dependent on us or relying on us. So, it’s OK. Erm, but like I said if they can’t go to us for a week, they’ll just go somewhere else anyway.”* Leila (Independent food bank manager)

Users are not reliant to one food bank and instead have the ability to access and rely on a network of food aid providers, supported by the online directory of food aid providers that have emerged on the local Council websites as elaborated further below. Essentially, though there may not be dependency on individual food banks, there may well be a dependency on the network. Users, therefore, engage in a form of ‘food bank/food aid hopping.’ Similar to use of the food retail environment, users shop around different food aid providers for different foods, albeit constrained, with regards to variety, quantity, and quality the food aid provided.

The extract below exemplifies this as Lila describes how she would cook her dinners with foods and ingredients not found in the food parcel. Although the food parcel was the base or foundation of the

meal, other items were acquired from other food sources and used to supplement it. She described one dish that she cooked using bacon, carbonara or cheese sauce and frying it up in butter or oil, food items that were not typically provided in the food parcel:

*"I made something up one day and my friend told me it's actually an Irish recipe. Basically, I get a green or a white cabbage. I've tried it with red cabbage, but it was a bit different, it was a disaster. Just shred it and cook it up, fry it up in obviously butter, oil, whatever. I cut up and cook bacon, and I also get a cheese sauce or a carbonara sauce. And I even put in some potatoes, either fresh or tinned. Cut them little baby potatoes. Cut them up, put them in it and I calls it creamy bacon and cabbage. It's lovely."* Lila (food bank user)

The ability of the user to visit various food aid providers was facilitated by the provision of food aid throughout the week, more commonly known by volunteers as seven-day provision. This was available and accessible in Brent and Portsmouth, whereby those in need of food can access a place that provides hot or cold food every day of the week. As Rebecca stated, when one of the places she had been going to closed, the volunteers gave the users "a sheet where we can go to other places." Users were then able to manage and maximise food resources from various food aid providers. This allowed them to plan how they will use each food provider, with the food bank being used the most when resources were lowest. Individual food banks can therefore be considered as part of a wider food aid system, interconnected with other providers. They are listed on an online directory that was promoted during the pandemic. In Portsmouth the formation of the HIVE acted to provide people in the community with access to local services, and with the equivalent in Brent known through the Brent Food Aid Network and Brent Hubs. For some users, shopping around for food aid provision has become routinised. Josh demonstrates this in his "regular" use of the food bank and other food aid providers during the week. This "shopping around" helped him to stock up on the food that he needed as well as purchasing food from the "bargain bin" at the supermarket:

*"At the moment I use two food banks. But regularly I would use two. But yeah, I would say there's probably one, two, three, four, five, six, probably about seven places that I probably visit [...] Usually on a Friday here, and then I do Wednesday, Thursday at the other food bank. It's a shame they're all on like the three days, but I try and stock up in those three days to get enough for the rest of the week. And then like, you know, save the odd 20p here and there in case I need a loaf of bread from the bargain bin come like the sort of Tuesday when I'm running out. Just something to keep going."* Josh (food bank user)

Similarly, to mitigate the lack of ingredients she needed, Rebecca recounted how she would go to another food bank, to 'shop around' and obtain the herbs and spices that she needed to make her

food more flavourful. This was to support her son who had autism and would not eat food either because it was unseasoned, or not of a certain texture:

*"My son has autism disorder. And he won't eat. And what I do I normally come and get some bits and pieces and cook, you know, for him too...I go to other places where you can get a little food bank and they'll sort of give you, you know, little herbs, spices."* Rebecca (food bank user)

Additionally, Lila described her use of the food bank and the food pantry but indicated how she would soon be accessing a different service known as a Community Larder. Community Larders are pop-up food hubs that supply surplus food and often resemble food pantries in the sense that they are set up like a store (SOFEA, 2022):

*"Sometimes when because I've now gone over to Universal Credit. And sometimes when I'm getting really low, I need to use food bank. I also use the Food Pantry where I pay £4 for quite a bit of shopping. That's really helped me. But soon I'm going to try the Larder. I'm going to try that because I've heard that's better, a bit better than pantry but I don't know."* Lila (food bank user)

In these accounts, 'food bank/food aid hopping' is portrayed as a routinized and structured practice, systematically going to different places for different food and non-food items at specific times and days. As Siobhan observed, while volunteering at another church's community fridge, the same people that had accessed the soup kitchen on Sunday were also accessing the community fridge on Friday, stating *"we see the same clientele, we see the same guests there, as [those] that come to Sundays."*

In this regard, food aid extends beyond the provision of food parcels to users by single food banks, users instead access food aid from multiple food aid sources. Although food aid providers and food banks could be described as components of the local food system, they act as part of a peripheral or alternative food system as users 'shop around' for food. They operate by providing food insecure households access to food they would otherwise struggle to obtain. However, the non-financial cost of accessing these services is high, especially with regards to labour and time. Nevertheless, the ability to plan and execute this 'food shopping trip' arguably requires a high level of capacity on behalf of the user to map each provider, taking note of what food they provide, on what days and during what times. By doing so, this helps to optimise their 'journey' and highlights how embedded food aid can and has become within household food practices, access, and choice.

### 7.3.3 Food retail environment

In addition to being located within a wider food aid system, food banks also operate and overlap with the wider food retail environment. Accessing and utilising the commercial food environment allows

the user to supplement the parcel with food according to their needs, wants and preferences. After conducting an inventory of the contents of their food parcel, some users wrote a list of any additional items that they needed/wanted to get from the supermarket. The food bank/parcel was therefore used as a form of budgeting and poverty relief by *“plugging that gap in [the] fridge [or] in [the] cupboard.”* The food parcel provided users with the basics, allowing them to maximise their available income as described by Adam:

*“My main parts of my meals, my meats, and things like that, I’d go to the, the supermarket and buy. It [the food bank] just subsidises it basically.”* Adam (food bank user)

The extract below from Cassie, a student nurse, illustrates how she used the money from her Universal Credit to buy additional food items that she needed from the supermarket:

*“Obviously, if I need some other supplies, when I get a little bit of money or whatever, because I’m a student nurse, all I get is Universal Credit. So, when I get that money, obviously, it, like, goes to rent or everything else, and when I need something, I’m going to buy it, like, foodwise, you know. I’m not going to go without milk for example. There’s a lot of canned foods, tinned foods. That lasts a lot longer.”* Cassie (food bank user)

From Cassie’s experience we can infer that whilst food bank users can and do access the food retail environment, purchasing food, as and when required or wanted, requires some form of financial resources. Further to this, the act of engaging with the food retail environment can be seen as a desire to engage in a socially acceptable food practice, an aspect that was rarely associated with needing and accessing a food bank:

*“I just want to integrate and feel like a normal person. So, I will go to shops, just to feel part of the community.”* Josh (food bank user)

The need to feel *“normal”* and *“part of the community”* highlights the dehumanising and exclusionary effect that accessing a food bank can have on users and the impacts it has on their household food provisioning practices. As identified in this study, the pantry model *“takes away the stigma”* as people are provided with the opportunity to assume the role of a shopper and participate in the marketplace by paying for the food you receive (Poppendieck, 1999). During the course of data collection, two food banks had either transformed into a food pantry or were in the process of doing so. Whilst the remit of this study did not focus on food pantries specifically, observations of a single food pantry during this study showed that they also source from food surplus organisations. Whilst this has its drawbacks, it did provide ‘members’ greater access and choice to healthier and perishable food items. A similar

finding was demonstrated above (see 7.3.2) indicating how users utilise the local food aid environment within their household food provisioning practices.

Taking this together, this suggests that managing food poverty is a ‘full-time job’ that requires a high level of capacity to utilise and manage different streams of resources and this is highlighted in the systematic way users access the shops and supermarkets.

### 7.3.3.1 A systematic route to shopping for food

Users did not access shops and supermarkets in an unplanned way. Instead, approaches were systematic and intentional. Table 6 details the strategies that food bank users employed to increase the budget they had to spend on food, which determined what items would be bought. These strategies are grouped into four techniques together with illustrative quotes: reduced price run on certain days and times, buying reduced items, price comparison and stockpiling discounted food.

Table 7: The strategies that food bank users described using when using the commercial food retail environment.

Strategy	Description	Illustrative quote
<b>Reduced price run</b>	At certain times and days, food prices would be reduced or on special offer. The food bank user would then access that given shop at the specified time and day in order to obtain the items that had recently been reduced	<i>“There’s a few shops around my way. Sort of, like, Co-op and Spar. I know what you can get at a certain time, things get reduced. So, I go around my neighbourhood and do what I call a reduced-price run.” Lila (food bank user)</i>
<b>Checking the aisles and buying food that has been reduced in price.</b>	The food bank user would peruse around the supermarket and check for any designated reduced food items aisles or food items that had the yellow reduced-price stickers on them	<i>“I won’t spend loads, like it’ll be you know, I tend to go for the bargain bins and things.” Josh (food bank user)</i>
<b>Price comparisons</b>	Food bank users would compare the price of similar food items from different shops before purchasing	<i>“I’ll, go to the supermarket to buy it. Things like, oh, I like Sriracha sauce. They do a good one in the Co-op.” Kyle (food bank user)</i>
<b>Stockpiling discounted food</b>	If food was at a discounted or reduced price, the food bank user would calculate how much they could save by buying the item and stockpile, when necessary, by buying as much as they could within their budget	<i>“One day in, I think it was Asda, they were selling little tins of spaghetti and tomato sauce for 19p. I grabbed the equivalent of £2 worth because they don’t go out of date till the end of next year. So that</i>

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*helped" Lila (food bank user)*

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According to the users' description, the core consideration when obtaining food is maximising purchasing power by taking a targeted approach to food choice and acquisition. However, this can be a taxing and laborious process that requires prior knowledge, pre-planning, and time. As part of a hybrid food environment consisting of both commercial and charity-based sources, food bank users are better able to obtain food that is suitable and at the best price.

#### 7.3.4 Social and familial networks

Social networks that the food bank users have access to were shown to offer a way of obtaining food directly or indirectly by providing the means to obtain physical and financial access to food. Networks allowed information and food resources to be shared. In this way, for some people, regular food bank use decreases, but does not end. Rather, reliance on family and friends for assistance with food or financial support is sought instead.

Users and volunteers alluded to the communications that occurred amongst users in the food bank, when users exchange information with each other about other places that they could access food. Through word of mouth, Rebecca found out about the other places she could go and get food. She said that even though she tries to *"make do,"* she would *"try and see if I can find out if there's other places"* or she would be signposted to other places when her friends at the food bank *"would say, oh, there's a certain place go there and so on."*

Requiring some form of social cooperation and communication to establish familial links, this form of social interaction, alongside the exchange ceremony (see section 6.4.4), demonstrates the community and networks that food bank users have established within the food bank. Additionally, it demonstrates how users can utilise these networks to obtain additional food support. Parallel to this, some users reported borrowing money or being provided with food by family members in addition to using the food bank. Cassie and Alex illustrate this in the extracts below:

*"I would always find a way to help myself out, especially because I've got a, a son. I would, would I let my son starve? No way. I would do whatever I can to get food, money. Like, I'll get money from Mum, Dad, sister, brother, friends. Then pay back obviously but just borrow money, get some food, done."* Cassie (food bank user)

*"My mum came to drop me off some food a couple of weeks back."* Alex (food bank user)

As long-term food bank users, Kelly and Adam expressed sharing some of the contents of the food parcel with other family members or people who were reluctant to attend the food bank. Food bank



users can therefore also function as a point of entry for a wider a network by supporting others other users or people unable to obtain food. As they explained:

*"When my youngest son comes down, because he's on Universal, I help him out as well. I help him out with food and that when I can. When I go and get some, I always give him a few bits and pieces anyway. I sort of share out what I've got."* Kelly (food bank user)

*"So, what I'll do is I'll go into our kitchen, we've got a little shelf and we kind of put jars or bags of pasta or whatever, that we don't want, I don't want myself. I put it up there and somebody else in the house can take it. Because there's one or two people in there that don't actually come down to the food bank. And sometimes I've found myself realising that they're actually starving, they haven't eaten anything. And, and so, even though I think I'm cooking for two days, I'll end up giving them what would have been my food for the next day. Because I've known that they're, they're hungry."* Adam (food bank user)

This form of reciprocity, whereby (food) resources and support is informally shared between existing socio-familial relationships, can be seen as a strategy that supports others who experience food insecurity but do not access the food bank (Morton *et al.*, 2007; Laverty, 2019). Although accessing these familial networks provided the user an opportunity to obtain food, a degree of guilt was often expressed when using these close personal relationships as they had their own livelihoods:

*"This is all the things that I get, and I also get help from friends and people that are supporting. But obviously that's, you know, I've tried to do, take that as, at a minimum because I feel guilty. You know, because I just feel that, you know, work and, you know, people have to work at the end of the day to earn their living, so whatever they have."* Paige (food bank user)

It was unclear if this sense of guilt meant that users would rather use the food bank, a place that carries its own weight of stigma and shame of 'taking free food,' instead of asking friends or family for help. Within the context of personal responsibility, accessing the food bank or asking for help from familial networks can indicate a lack of personal responsibility and capacity in acquiring food independently by the user. To be seen accessing a food bank or asking for food assistance, is *"in our culture, with its stress on independence, is tantamount to an admission of failure"* (Poppendieck, 1999).

#### 7.4 Summary

The findings from this chapter add to the growing body of literature on the experiences of food bank users (Douglas *et al.*, 2015; Garthwaite, Collins and Bamba, 2015; Purdam, Garratt and Esmail, 2016; Thompson, Smith and Cummins, 2018; Moraes *et al.*, 2021). In exploring the long-term use of

emergency food and contextualising the perceived use of food parcels by food bank users, this chapter provides novel insights into the embedded nature of emergency food aid in the broader scope of household food provisioning practices.

Those experiencing food poverty are often thought to have limited agency due to structural barriers and limited material resources. However, as demonstrated here, they demonstrate adaptive capacity in sourcing, utilising, and maximising various resources in their acquisition of food. This necessitates a high level of capacity in planning and executing their food 'shop' and incorporating the food parcel within their diet and household food provisioning.

Food parcels provide varying degrees of relief to alleviate food poverty depending on the users' socioeconomic position. Although limited, agency is exercised and is borne out of necessity as a result of having to use a food parcel. Food bank users engage in bounded meal planning, having to plan meals after obtaining their food parcel. This often results in food bank users trying new recipes, bulk cooking and preparing one-pot meals. Such activities require creativity, time and culinary know-how as users are unaware of what food they might receive in the food parcel. The preparation of a meal is further affected by material inequalities relating to the availability of cooking appliances and utensils. Although this gives rise to 'risky' (both resourceful and dangerous) food preparation and cooking practices, users explore and employ innovative practices to cook and prepare their food according to their personal circumstances and living conditions.

Food bank users engage in multiple trade-offs and face numerous dilemmas when managing resources; both materially and financially to maximise food access. As a result of this, food bank users operate on a continuum of food bank and food parcel use. Although participants rarely reported stopping the use of food banks altogether, use typically reduced as personal circumstances improved and users had greater financial capital to buy food. It is important to note, however, that due to the timescale of this study, no follow-up was conducted with the food bank users.

The use of the food parcel and the food bank means that food aid within the food bank functions as a way to maintain food sufficiency and cope with food scarcity and hardship. As such, food parcels have become a regular source of food for food bank users, embedded within their existing diets. The use of a food parcel can therefore be viewed as a poverty mitigation technique, freeing up financial resources to spend on other 'valuable' goods. Within household food provisioning strategies, the food parcel is used both as a contingency and a supplement. The utilisation of an emergency food parcel is therefore a reactive and unpredictable experience that, at times, can be monotonous.

Food bank users engage in some form of crisis-induced food provisioning in order to maximise access to food. They display a range of food strategies to limit their vulnerability and protect basic food needs. This basic need for food goes beyond merely obtaining food. It encompasses accessing food that is desirable, healthy, and culturally appropriate. In doing this, food bank users develop and reinforce their adaptive capacity in order to meet these needs. Thriftiness, in this context, encompasses a broad range of activities centred around 'making do' and 'getting by' as well as resource maximisation. Food bank users sometimes stock-up and freeze food as a way to mitigate future crises and prevent food waste.

The long-term use of food banks is characterised by users obtaining a food parcel alongside the acquisition of other food from supermarkets, other food aid providers and socio-familial networks. The formalisation of food banking and their long-term use by food bank users, as identified in this study, positions the food bank both as a local resource and poverty relief, a mechanism exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The food bank acts as part of the local welfare and/or alternative food system alongside other food aid providers. As such, emergency food parcels, although incorporated within existing dietary practices and patterns, also impact existing household food provisioning practices as the food parcel becomes part of user's diet. Under these conditions, the term 'emergency food aid' needs to be revisited.

## Chapter Eight: Discussion

### 8.1 Overview

This chapter discusses how and to what extent the aims outlined at the start of this thesis have been addressed. In this chapter I summarise, synthesise, and integrate the key findings of this thesis. I place the findings from this work in the context of the literature and against the backdrop of the pandemic.

By using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in combination with an ethnographic approach, the thesis sought to explore the intersection between food bank practices and household dietary practices to determine the extent to which emergency food parcels meet household dietary practices and food preferences. A number of research questions were posed about the nature of food banking, the processes that govern the acquisition and distribution of food in food banks, how users interact with food banks and how they incorporate food parcels within their household food provisioning practices.

The main overarching themes that arose from this thesis are:

- I. the rhetoric and reality of food banks as emergency food providers.
- II. power, agency, and adaptive capacity.
- III. operationalising choice and dignity.
- IV. the role of food banks.

Whilst this thesis does not seek to generalise its findings to every food bank and every individual who uses a food bank, some of the findings may contribute to a broader understanding of the organisational practices of food banks and the experiences of food bank users related to diet and nutrition.

### 8.2 Key findings

#### **1. How has the role of food banks in providing emergency food been framed in the discourses of food poverty and hunger in the UK since 2013?**

While the identified discourses (emergency and reliance) were dominant in the texts, they were just two among many other varied and overlapping narratives. Characterised as charitable volunteer-led organisations, food banks distribute 'emergency' food to families and individuals in crisis. An analysis (Chapter 4) of the construction of the concept and meaning of 'emergency' revealed the shifting and contradictory narratives of what a food bank is and what it provides. Whilst food banks are positioned as 'emergency' providers of food, they are also positioned as a solution to a wider set of welfare problems beyond food poverty through their potential power to address wider problems. This in turn

has shaped the framing of food banks to position them as a pseudo-extension of the welfare state, going beyond food relief and into the ill-defined and contested territories of poverty relief. Although food provision and food aid are constantly referred to, a discussion in relation to nutrition and health within the texts is relatively absent. The texts also frame food banks within the narrative of reliance. As an inappropriate and undesired state, reliance is simultaneously portrayed as a symptom of structural drivers and as a consequence of individual choice. The perspective offered through the texts frame food banks as a necessity functioning as a substitute welfare system, temporary in their support. The multiple contradictions and tensions around the role of food banks in these discourses exist in material reciprocity to the uncertainties and ambiguities of food banking as experienced by frontline volunteers and service users.

## **2. How do food banks source, manage, and distribute food?**

In Chapter 5, I sought to investigate how food banks procure food and how user dietary practices and food preferences are accounted for. As the demand for food banks has increased in recent years, food banks have become increasingly professionalised, developing formalised and systematic processes which underpin the procurement, management and packing of food.

The sourcing, and procurement of food is a reactive process, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Processes involved multiple actors and mainly consisted of food donations and surplus food from supermarkets and charity food distributors, though the food received did not always meet the needs of their users. Accessing financial donations and/or grant funding meant food banks could exercise greater autonomy over their food supply chain as they could directly purchase food from wholesalers and were not reliant on intermediaries. These purchases could then be directly tailored to the needs of their users. Whilst some food banks were able to rely on both donations of food and money to meet service demand, there was sometimes a mismatch between what was donated by donors and what was needed by the food bank.

The management of food within the food bank has become formalised and professionalised with the processes developed to handle, sort and store food as a response to increasing need to manage demand. Food parcels often contain 2-3 days' worth of food and are pre-packed according to household size, using the first in first out (FIFO) system and food available. While food banks may be limited in their ability to influence food acquisition, they exhibit an increasing capacity to make decisions over the content of the food parcel.

## **3. How do food banks incorporate dietary practices and food preferences within the distribution of emergency food parcels?**

Chapter 4 indicated that food banks struggle to meet current demand for food relief. Meeting dietary practices and food preferences was, in the context of food aid provision, overwhelmingly operationalised by trying to provide users with choice. As discussed in Chapter 5, volunteers negotiate and make trade-offs such as providing food parcels that meet nutritional and dietary practices or providing food parcels that contain enough food in terms of adequate calories. As donations and deliveries of food are in constant flux, there was a *'difficult tension to balance'* in providing food that was sufficient in terms of calories (but not nutrients), variety, and familiarity especially when food banks were only ever able to provide users with *"what they've got."*

Volunteers actively sought to incorporate an element of choice in an otherwise passive encounter or order to meet dietary and health needs (see also Chapter 6). However, choice was i) contingent upon and constrained by what was available and ii) was primarily initiated and facilitated by the food bank volunteer. As a result, users often expressed gratitude when accepting their food parcels and felt uncomfortable taking more than their allotted food parcel. This reiterates the complex and uneven social contract underpinning the relationship between volunteers and users (Garthwaite, 2017).

The paternalistic nature of the food banks displayed unintentionally positioned the volunteer as caretakers of food aid and as bounded gatekeepers to users' dietary practices and food, albeit constrained. Whilst there has *"always [been] a consideration for nutrition,"* the variety of food available for distribution was limited. Although food banks (sometimes) purposefully insert choice within the distribution of food parcels, this is affected by what food is preferable and appropriate for food bank users. As such, users would also engage in their own form of food exchange after they had received their food parcel, to trade food and find options that better suited their dietary and health needs and reduced the likelihood of waste through unused or unwanted food.

#### **4. How do households' access and interact with food banks?**

Chapter 6 illustrates that food bank access was not experienced in the same way by all users. Access was conditional, prescriptive, and at times passive, with volunteers asking a series of questions related to the users' financial and social conditions. Confined to the organisational structures and operational practices within the food bank, the process of interacting and using the food bank exhibited traits of monitoring in some food banks. When interacting within the food bank, users simultaneously felt gratitude and shame. This, as a result, reproduced some embarrassment (see section 6.2.3). Shame, stigma and gratitude were therefore intrinsically associated with food bank use, supporting findings from previous studies (Lambie-Mumford, 2014; Perry *et al.*, 2014; Garthwaite, 2016b; Purdam, Garratt and Esmail, 2016).

Becoming embedded within the community, food banks function as a social space with their own social norms. Volunteers assume the role of hosts, welcoming users into the food bank, which prior to the pandemic consisted of offering tea and biscuits. As a result of this, for a subset of users, also known as the regulars, the food parcel was secondary to interacting and communing with other users. This, however, resulted in the repeated long-term use of the food bank, which contradicted the non-reliance and pro-emergency framing of food banks.

#### **5. How do low-income households use food parcels within their existing dietary and food provisioning practices?**

Contrary to existing literature (Hughes and Prayogo, 2018; Fallaize *et al.*, 2020), in this study, food bank users illustrated the inadequacy of the food parcel to last three days. Instead, food bank users found themselves using the food parcel “*bit by bit.*” Users employed numerous techniques to ‘*stock up*’ on food including rationing, freezing, ‘*saving*’ food for another meal, bulk cooking for the week and preserving certain items as store cupboard essentials. Despite food banks providing access to food through the food parcel, the ‘*stretching*’ of the food parcel alludes to a persistent state of precarity that exists for users, which is further exacerbated by the uncertain supply of food. However, this demonstrates a form of emergency preparedness and planning.

Food parcels, although incorporated within existing household food practices, also changed household food practices. Using the food bank influenced the diets of users by changing what they would typically eat especially with regards to fresh produce, culturally appropriate foods, and vegan items. As described in Chapter 7, users utilised the food bank as part of a wider network of coping strategies. Users compromised and adapted their diets and dietary practices when using and incorporating the food parcel. This involved compromising on the quality and type of food, eating less or less frequently, and substituting certain food items. Additionally, whilst the food parcel provided store-cupboard staples, such as tinned tomatoes, tuna, pasta, and rice, it did not always provide the desired food items that met users’ preferences such as meat. As a result, the food bank was used in combination with other food sources including the commercial food system, other food aid providers and familial and social networks that provide money and/or food support to users to meet these preferences.

#### **6. How do low-income households incorporate food banks as part of their livelihoods?**

Determined by users’ financial security, food bank usage varied. In conjunction with the other food aid providers, the food bank, for long-term users, became incorporated into wider food shopping routines. Though the food parcel provided food relief, it was also functioned as a tool for broader

poverty relief by allowing the re-allocation of the food budget to other pressing needs (such as energy costs). As household income increased, users were able to access other commercial sources of food alongside other food aid providers specifically the food pantry, community fridge and soup kitchen.

Food bank users engaged in 'food bank or food aid hopping,' shopping around for different items, thereby using the food bank as part of a broader commercial and non-commercial food system. This was supported by the availability of food aid seven days a week from various providers in Brent and Portsmouth and accessible through an online directory which grew in importance during the pandemic as food aid organisations worked together, alongside the local government.

Although volunteers considered the utility and appropriateness of the contents of the food parcel, it's lack of variety led food bank users to acquire food from elsewhere to fill gaps and obtain preferred foods. Indeed, the ability to utilise the food parcel or stock up on food or store food was contingent on several material factors (Douglas *et al.*, 2015; Barker *et al.*, 2019). These included having access to a fully equipped and functioning kitchen, utensils and appliances, spices, oils, and condiments and the culinary know-how to plan and prepare meals. Food bank users often prepared one-pot meals, also known as a "*bunga bunga*," by 'bunging' in different ingredients and spices to make the meal edible and flavourful or searching for recipes online for food items with which they were unfamiliar. Where a lack of access to these functional kitchen resources existed, food bank users engaged in 'socially undesirable' or unconventional food preparation methods such as cooking with tealights and using the microwave (see section 7.2.3). This however, also demonstrated the resourcefulness of users, showing ingenuity in fully using the food parcel within a range of constraints.

#### **7. What impact did the COVID-19 pandemic have on the ability for food banks to meet users' food needs and what role did local authorities play in the distribution of emergency food parcels?**

Prior to the pandemic, food banks often worked in silos. However, the pandemic demonstrated the need for a collaborative approach. Food aid providers developed a strategy for sharing resources which helped to reduce food waste and misuse. Additionally, the local authority assumed the role of coordinator to facilitate communication and redistribution. Specifically, through a coordinated response involving food aid providers and the local Council acting to facilitate communication; food aid networks were established. Through these networks, resources were advertised and shared through WhatsApp group messages and monthly Zoom meetings.

The pandemic also highlighted an opportunity for food banks to acquire food through monetary means. Financial donations and grant funding proved to be a mechanism by which food banks could



act proactively and acquire food that was more appropriate for their users. This resulted in a more predictable supply of food and allowed food banks to exercise 'choice.' However, this in itself can be perceived as an exercise of power or perceived control as food banks determine the food supply.

### 8.3 Synthesis and discussion of findings

Based on the data generated for this thesis, four overarching themes can be identified. These themes provide an understanding of the social and physical construction of food banks in theory and in practice. These are (i) the rhetoric and reality of food banks as emergency food providers (ii) power, agency, and adaptive capacity; (iii) operationalising choice and dignity and (iv) the role of food banks.

#### 8.3.1 The (re)construction of emergency when describing food bank provision.

Central to understanding the role of food banks is the prominent and persistent use of the term emergency and its various synonyms collated from the text analysed in the CDA and the interview transcripts (see Figure 24). Descriptions of and justifications for food banks are characterised by references to 'emergencies' (of food poverty) and the need to respond to them. The language of 'emergency' ran across both the accounts of food bank users, volunteers and the CDA of food banks (see Chapters 4,5,6 and 7).



Figure 24: 'Emergency' synonyms used in the CDA and Ethnography to describe the food bank and food poverty experience.

As a food provider of last resort, the multiple contradictory framings of food banks act to describe (i) the crisis and (ii) the support provided by the food bank. As discussed in Chapter 4, food banks, are positioned as 'emergency' food aid providers, and the language of short-term and 'unexpected crisis' continues to provide the dominant narrative for both food poverty and food bank services.

The language of emergency is used interchangeably to describe differing situations by different actors for different purposes, as follows. Food banks provide a myriad of positive functions, acting to alleviate food insecurity and helping to reduce food waste through distributing otherwise surplus food. They also act as a resourceful agent in poverty reduction by offsetting food costs and providing spaces of

care and welfare through providing “*safe and welcoming space*” to commune and socialise (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017). Food banks also act as temporary safety nets, designed to help their users address their food needs and reduce food poverty. Whilst they attempted to maintain their informal structure and ideology with the managers and volunteers, viewing the food bank as a time limited “*crisis response*,” food bank use is becoming an increasingly long-term and routinised part of food provisioning in low-income households. Food insecurity, as discussed in Chapter 7, was found to be a recurring experience that involved multiple strategies to facilitate food relief. The food parcel was used to address both temporary and long-term food needs as the food bank was utilised to varying degrees.

Subsequently, they have become increasingly formalised and routinised, a process accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. What may have started as short term ‘emergency’ provision designed to support an acute need (Bertmann *et al.*, 2021; Rizvi *et al.*, 2021), has become an embedded, formalised, and long-term service for chronic food insecurity. (Food) poverty is no longer an unexpected or uncommon occurrence. It is a widespread and long-term problem for those on low incomes. By extension, food banks can no longer be accurately or simplistically described as emergency food aid providers, a label which implies that short term and temporary support to address a food poverty ‘emergency’.

It is in this context that while the nature of food poverty and food banking has changed, the language has largely not. The discourse of emergency persists, even though it is now describing longer-term problems and an embedded service. As a result, the term ‘emergency’ has become rhetorical, losing its meaning.

### 8.3.2 Power, agency, and adaptive capacity

This study provides insights into the complex power dynamics that exist within the food banking system. These dynamics exist at all levels and between various actors and are conditioned by the capabilities and capacities of the food bank and their users. Agency, in this way, exists at an individual and community level; the degree of which determines participation and autonomy in the food system (Thompson, 2015; Clapp *et al.*, 2022). The quantity and quality of food parcels were limited by available food supply, storage infrastructure and capacity, as well as the decisions volunteers made when packing the food parcel to ensure that the food parcel would be utilised.

Food banks, as found in previous studies, depend on erratic and volatile food supplies that limit their ability to guarantee nutritional adequacy or meet specific dietary or health needs (Teron and Tarasuk, 1999; Tarasuk and Eakin, 2003, 2005; Caraher and Furey, 2017). As such, the food parcel was in this study found to be used for long-term (food) poverty alleviation as part of users’ existing household food provisioning practices for most of the food bank users. Findings from this study, therefore,

demonstrate a more nuanced usage of food parcels in comparison to existing literature (Sirona Health, 2014; Turnbull and Bhakta, 2016; Hughes and Prayogo, 2018; Fallaize *et al.*, 2020). In line with an ethnographic study of charitable food assistance in Southern Ontario (Tarasuk and Eakin, 2003), the giving and distribution of food has become a symbolic gesture as food parcels are insufficient to adequately meet people's food needs as food banks are increasingly used for longer periods of time.

### 8.3.2.1 The bounded agency of food banks

As we refer back to the theoretical framework used in this study (see Figure 7), in particular the formalisation of food banking practices, the findings from this study can be interpreted and understood through the lens of Giddens' 'duality of structure.' The food bank, a structure itself, becomes nested within a structure, thereby acting as a medium and outcome of social practice (Giddens, 1984). The ability of the food bank to function is mediated by the commercial food system and donors who provide material resources. The exercise of choice by the food bank and the food bank user is, in turn, made within the differing degrees of agency depending on the food supply.

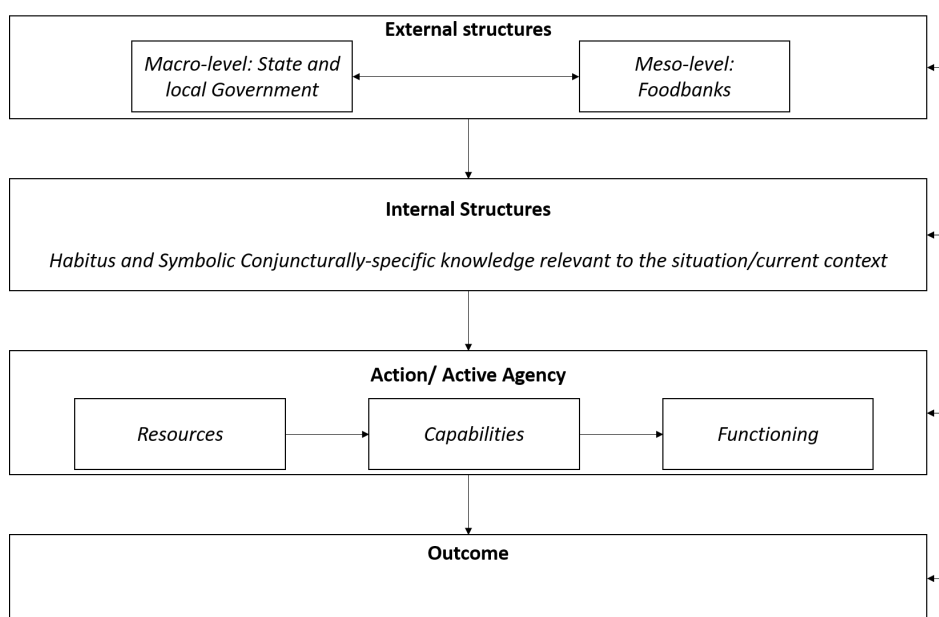


Figure 7: A theoretical framework for understanding the role of diet and nutrition in food banks and its implications on household diets (Source: author adapted from Stones' Strong Structuration Theory, Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism and Amartya Sen's Capability Approach)

Food banks operate within local and national food systems. The operating practices and structures of food banks means that they have restricted agency over what food is donated or obtained as surplus. This suggests that food banks are dependent on acquiring food from charitable donations and food surplus, which themselves are inconsistent. As demonstrated by the pandemic, the stockpiling of food by the public and just-in-time food supply, highlighted the fragility and inconsistency of the food supply chain (BBC News, 2020; Power *et al.*, 2020; Cummins *et al.*, 2021).

To ensure that all households who access the food bank are guaranteed some form of provision, the organisational practices of food banks are centred around preserving and managing limited and volatile food supplies and to ensure 'the need for food' is addressed with some consistency. Food bank users were expected to *"take what you're given"* and refrain from being selective. While this may be related to the inconsistent food supply and 'emergency' nature of food aid, it demonstrates the social rules that food bank users are expected to abide by when collecting their food parcel. As highlighted by Ellison and Fenger (2013) and Möller (2021), food bank users who were unwilling to participate in the questioning or conversations and divulge their personal socioeconomic circumstances concerning the reason for their visit to the food bank were at risk of becoming excluded and labelled as undeserving. This, in turn, reveals a hierarchical power imbalance between volunteers and users, as users are expected to conform.

#### *8.3.2.2 The bounded agency of food bank users*

Given that there is no statutory right to food aid, the experience of and access to the food bank was one that was mediated by the boundaries imposed by the food bank manager and volunteers such as the referral system in some of the food banks. Such boundaries have the potential to perpetuate stigma and hierarchical relations, reinforcing food bank users as recipients of aid and reimagining food aid as a gift (Caplan, 2016).

Food bank users were acutely aware of the limited control that food banks have over what food was available and subsequently distributed. This was also reflected in Douglas *et al* (2015), whereby a sense of disempowerment within the food bank users was produced. As such, *'making use'* of the food parcel was constrained, resulting in conformity and adaptability. Lived experiences of food poverty are – by definition - characterised by powerlessness and diminished agency. Managing to eat as well as possible whilst experiencing (food) poverty thereby requires a high level of capacity to plan and manage multiple resources.

The findings of this study illustrate how those experiencing food poverty exercise their limited agency and strategize. Throughout the food bank experience, food bank users demonstrated adaptive capacity to source, utilise and maximise food access and availability. Directed by the contents of the food parcel, users reactively 'work around' the food parcel when using the contents to make meals or store food. As such, the findings presented in this study do not always align with the political narrative that those on low incomes do not know how to cook or budget (Walker, 2022). Instead, this study offers an alternative perspective, demonstrating the thriftiness and adaptive capacity of food bank users or those living on low incomes.

Furthermore, food bank users plan and execute food shopping practices that incorporate the food parcel as either a primary or supplementary source of food. Contrary to Garthwaite's theory of food bank use as a linear process (Garthwaite, 2016a), the data generated here suggests that long-term food bank users make use of the food bank intermittently, as they experience food insecurity. Additionally, food bank use is embedded in a wider social and physical network of household food provisioning.

### 8.3.3 Operationalising choice.

The 'unidirectional provision of charity' (Parsell and Clarke, 2022) whereby the food bank user is reduced to a passive recipient of food aid is inherent within food aid. However, this study highlighted that where possible the health and nutritional needs of users were accounted for by offering users a choice, albeit a limited one. Food bank users partially lose their ability and capacity to exercise choice over food, both in terms of quantity and variety (Riches and Silvasti, 2014). Choice, for the food bank and users, can therefore be understood as restricted, whereby volunteers are limited by how much and what they can offer to users which adversely impacts the nutritional composition of food parcels.

#### *8.3.3.1 Choice in a charitable setting – a constrained practice*

Choice functioned as an aspiration within the food bank. Volunteers provided food bank users with an opportunity to adapt their food parcel and exchange the food in their food parcel upon collection from the available stock. This shifted the distribution and receipt of food parcels from a passive to an active process as the volunteer transferred the decision-making power back to the user.

Whilst dietary and health needs were sometimes catered for, dependent on food availability, accommodating for food preferences were less likely. Considering that food banks operate from a place of scarcity and precarity as discussed in section 5.2.1, their ability to tailor food parcels to the needs, wants and preferences of users becomes restricted. Their position within the food supply chain impedes the level of autonomy they can exercise. This subsequently affects the nutritional content of emergency food parcels, which are in turn affected by a myriad of social and material determinants at the household level. Furthermore, some food bank users did not have the material resources or cooking expertise to make use of some of the food received. Thus, the ability for users to benefit from food parcels is contingent on what other resources they have at their disposal.

Additionally, the exchange ceremony (see section 6.4.4) represented both a lack of choice as well as a source of choice. Food bank users can find solidarity with other food bank users by swapping and exchanging items in their parcel to create a food parcel that is more suitable to their diet. This also serves to reduce the likelihood of unused and unwanted food going to waste. The exchange ceremony can also be viewed as a 'liminal space of encounter' (Clope, May and Williams, 2017). As a liminal

space, the exchange ceremony provides users with social and material support as they manage their current state of poverty (see section 8.3.4.1). Thus, the exchange ceremony acts as a response to and a source of social need, as a sense of in-commonness establishes itself.

Ultimately, reactivity and a lack of choice becomes the default within the provision of the food parcel, further contributing to the marginalisation of those experiencing food insecurity.

#### 8.3.4 The role of food banks and which sector do they function in?

Whilst food banks can be described as charitable providers of food to those in need, food banks operate across a range of models and sectors. As found in this study, the operational practices of food banks differ because of diverse philosophies and models of food banking. As a result of this, food banks function in, and emulate various aspects of, multiple systems. These systems include the welfare state, the commercial food system, the food aid system, and the charitable faith-based system (see Figure 26). Food banks can therefore be identified as part of an adjacent food system of redistribution functioning as dynamic spaces, fluid with their food and social support.

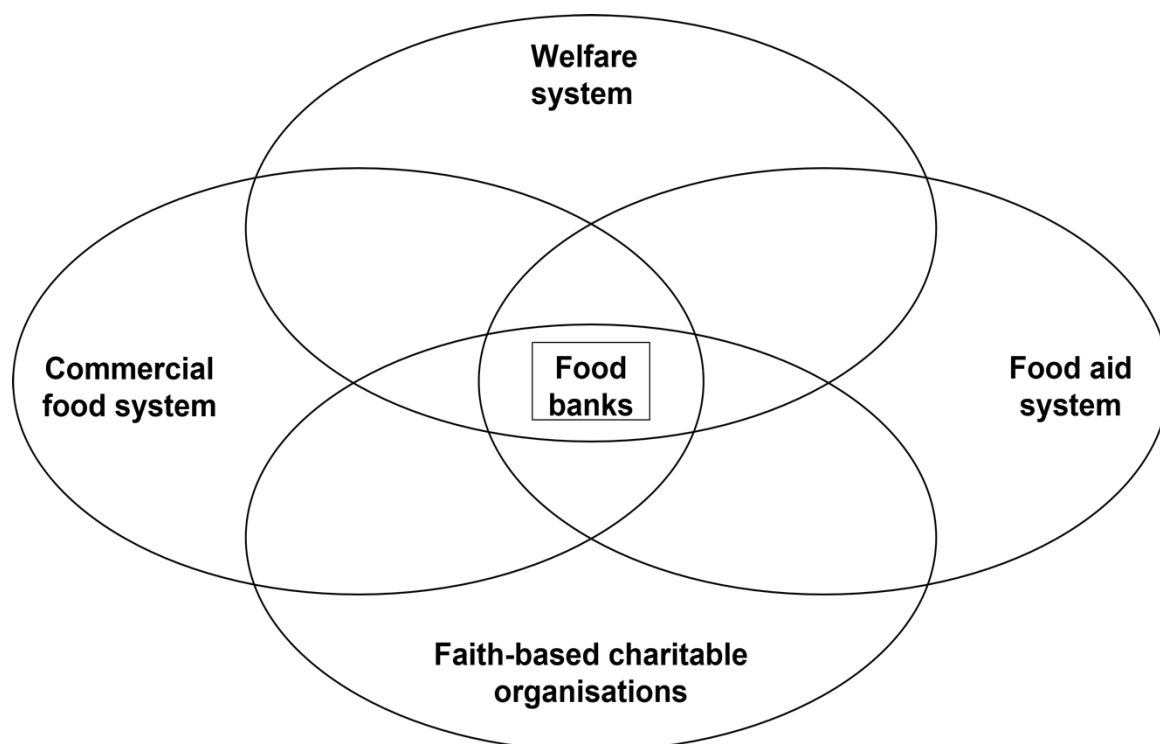


Figure 25: The systems in which food banks operate in (Source: author's creation)

Food banks have become increasingly formalised and corporatized. Aided by the pandemic, food banks have become frontline agencies, addressing people's lack of food. Despite seeking to balance supply and demand, food banks acts as a response to crisis, an income buffer and as a supplementary food provider.

### 8.3.4.1 Charitable food in the welfare system

#### 8.3.4.1.1 The shadow-welfare state

The institutionalisation of food banks can be partially explained in terms of supply and demand, which both predates and has then been exacerbated by the pandemic. As discovered throughout this study, food banks are, by necessity, reactive and adaptive to the socioeconomic and political landscape. Poppendieck (1999) argued that there is a correlation between the institutionalisation of food banking and State retreat. This is supported by findings from a narrative systematic review which demonstrated how UK austerity politics, an expression of neoliberalism, were consistently linked to food insecurity and food bank use (Jenkins *et al.*, 2021). An impasse between charitable action and state inaction or deniability of cause or responsibility has therefore been reached, with the Government detaching itself.

As a result of this, food banks have become firmly embedded within the local welfare landscape, acting as a shadow welfare state, moving beyond merely distributing food and addressing the wider socioeconomic hardships that draws individuals into crises. This was exemplified when, in an effort to “*try to make (the food parcel) quite varied,*” food bank users could request additional non-food items such as nappies, toiletries, and sanitary pads. As discussed in section 7.3, food banks also functioned to address poverty by providing budgeting support and signposting to other services that could help with their underlying problems including housing, benefits, and budget calculators. Food banks often had in-house debt advisors who ran advice clinics to help people with their finances. By addressing the root cause of their food bank use and need, this would reduce the number of occurrences at the food bank and reduce dependency and sustained use of the food bank.

Whilst food banks should be and are celebrated for their ability to ‘fill in the gap’ in place of Government retreat, they symbolise both the success of community-based charitable initiatives and the declining social safety net (Caraher and Furey, 2018; Furey and Caraher, 2018). The normative discourses also serve to frame food banks as an adequate and capable form of welfare provision. Simultaneously, a non-mutualistic system develops, reiterating that the ‘supply of food banks’ is driving demand, creating a falsehood that justifies State retreat.

#### 8.3.4.1.2 Food banks as spaces of care

Parallel to this, food banks have replaced previous communal spaces such as libraries and community centres becoming hubs of engagement and of leisurely use with an increase in access (Mould, 2014; Power *et al.*, 2020; Beck and Gwilym, 2022). Moreover, the exchange ceremony signifies the function of food banks as a liminal space of ‘social’ care.

Prior to the pandemic, social interaction within the food bank was facilitated through the provision of teas, coffees, and biscuits, producing a more calming and welcoming atmosphere. Upon entering the food bank volunteers would often engage in one-to-one conversations with users asking them questions concerning their socioeconomic circumstances and signposting them to the appropriate services that would help resolve the issues that led them to the food bank. This could be perceived as a form of encouraging food sovereignty by enhancing self-sufficiency (Blake, 2019; Sano, 2021) and an example of the hospitable nature of volunteers and the food banking system. However, it shows an interesting relational dynamic between volunteers and users. To destigmatise food aid and food banking, the creation of these spaces of 'care,' inadvertently positions food banks as intermediaries between users and external advice services. Contrastingly, although engaging in a conversation with a volunteer was optional, failure to do so led to the 'genuineness' of needing a food parcel being questioned as volunteers embodied the role of 'carers' (Surman, Kelemen and Rumens, 2021). This unintentionally reinforces neoliberal perceptions of a lack of budgeting skills and personal responsibility (Blake, 2019; Strong, 2022).

Faith-based organizations have increasingly become actors in the arenas of welfare and food aid landscapes. Of the eight food banks that participated (one of which was in the capacity as the Brent Hubs Food Poverty Lead) – seven of them were faith-based – two-Islamic food banks and five Christian food banks. Volunteers would often cite the Bible or Hadith on feeding the hungry stating that it was their "*social responsibility*." As facilitators of caregiving, volunteers expressed a moral and social underpinning as to why the food bank incorporated this form of caregiving within their provisions, portraying a pursuit of social justice (Allen, 2016). Volunteers stated that they sought to treat users with "*respect and with dignity*" and address their "*spiritual needs*" as well as their food needs. Subsequently, the end of food banks cannot be discussed without understanding why individual food banks were established.

Food banks in this sense, serve as a social response, filling the void, especially for the "regulars" who come to the food bank not only for the food but also for the company and social interaction. A welcoming atmosphere was provided as users were offered teas and coffees. As a result of this, food banks acted to facilitate social cohesion as evidenced by the regulars who accessed the food bank for the company not the food. Similarly, in a study using participatory action research, many of the food bank users in independent food banks had become regulars whereby obtaining a food parcel became 'secondary' to interacting and communing with others (Surman, Kelemen and Rumens 2021). Although this was beyond the 'emergency' and 'temporary' support that food banks were intended to provide, the reluctant yet conscious uptake of a welfare pastoral role by volunteers and expansion of



the food bank may have led users to become “*dependent on the (food aid) system*” to meet both their food and social needs.

#### *8.3.4.2 Food aid within the commercial food system - An adjacent food system.*

The boundary between the food aid system and the commercial food system is dissolving. Driven by the mechanism of regular donations, formalised provision of surplus food, and food bank promotions in supermarkets, food banks have become enmeshed within (as opposed to separate from) the wider commercial food system. Acting as a component of a peripheral or adjacent food system, food banks can and do provide access to food. Subsequently, they play an important role in the diets of low-income households. This has the potential to position them as charitable enterprises, becoming part of the anti-hunger industrial complex (Fisher, 2018).

Referring to the adapted theoretical framework used in this study (see Figure 7), food banks function both as a system and within a system. As such, they act as intermediaries by providing access to food. Whilst food banks offer food access and availability, the utilisation of the food parcel is determined by several social determinants including taste, preference, quality, and material resources.

Within this adjacent food system, food (aid) can be perceived as an individualised choice, rather than a basic entitlement. This locates food poverty as an individualised need, belonging to those labelled and living in food poverty. As such, the solution(s) to food poverty and hunger becomes an individual duty based on building self-reliance, thus exonerating the State of its moral and political duty.

Although it is widely asserted that food banks should not exist, the findings from this study have demonstrated that food banks are situated within welfare and commercial food systems. Indeed, food banks have moved beyond the short-term and acute emergency provision of food and increasingly becoming used as long-term food source for chronic food insecurity and food poverty.

## Chapter Nine: Conclusion

### 9.1 Contributions to the literature

This thesis contributes to the growing body of qualitative literature seeking to understand the functioning of the food banking system and the use of food parcels. The key contributions of this thesis can be split into three areas: the food bank supply chain, the emergence of an alternative food system, and the utilisation of food parcels.

This study has taken a first step in understanding the inner workings and logistical practices of food banks and their relationships with the wider supply chains that supports food banks. Through this thesis we have understood the limited extent to which food banks are able to meet household dietary practices and food preferences. In this way, the food bank system is supply, rather than need, driven, based on the nature of how food is sourced, the infrastructure of food bank premises to store and distribute food, and the volunteer labour force (Poppendieck, 1999).

Secondly, this study has demonstrated how food bank use has shifted from emergency food aid to long-term food provisioning, thus supporting the need for a 'six-dimensional food security framework' that considers agency (as emphasised in this study) and sustainability as integral components for achieving food security (Clapp *et al.*, 2022). The findings indicate the need to expand our conceptualisation of food poverty due to changing and expanding definitions of food aid and food banking given the socio-economic and political context. This thesis has also highlighted how food banks overlap with the commercial food system and could be considered as important actors within the local food system but who function with constrained agency. Adjacent to the commercial food system, food banks provide food access to those experiencing food insecurity. Additionally, evidence generated from this study has shown that emergency food parcels are incorporated into a broader range of household food provisioning practices rather than being used as a sole source of food.

Thirdly, food bank use is often based on conditionality (Prayogo *et al.*, 2018), yet in this thesis, food bank use was identified to be a persistent, and erratic experience. This may have occurred because of the pandemic which led to sustained hardship for some households. During the pandemic, the percentage of households experiencing food insecurity increased from 7.6% to 9% with 17% of respondents reporting to have skipped meals or reduced portions between April 2020 – March 2021 (Goudie and McIntyre, 2021). Nonetheless, the food bank experience is not homogenous and is often determined by the severity of household food insecurity/financial hardship.

This study has demonstrated the adaptive capacity of food bank users to manage the contents of the food parcel, especially in forming and engaging in the exchange ceremony, where food bank users interact with each to exchange food items. This thesis demonstrates that using a food bank is not

determined by the political rhetoric related to an inability to cook, the availability of free food or inability to budget (Morris, 2013; Walker, 2022), but rather structural financial challenges that affect the operationalisation of agency (Sosenko, Bramley and Bhattacharjee, 2022). Additionally, this study highlighted the material constraints in making use of the food parcel and the strategies that households employ to manage their experiences of food poverty, consistent with existing literature (Douglas *et al.*, 2015; Garthwaite, Collins and Bamba, 2015; Thompson, Smith and Cummins, 2018; Barker *et al.*, 2019).

## 9.2 Implications and recommendations for policy, practice, and research

### 9.2.1 Research

This research has highlighted four areas of further research related to food banks and household food insecurity, as well more broadly food aid distribution.

Firstly, this research did not investigate the referral process most food bank users experience when accessing the food bank; rather it was concerned with how food bank users negotiated access with the food bank and interacted within the food bank to obtain food. A key pathway into the food banking system is through referral agents, however, there is little research (Thompson, Smith and Cummins, 2018) on referral agents' perception of the food banking system. Further research is needed to explore how referral agents perceive and interact with food banks. Such studies will be useful in establishing if and how the food bank fits within the formal welfare landscape. This could be potentially achieved through a self-administered online survey. Alternatively, semi-structured interviews with referral agents within health and social care providers and institutions could be conducted.

Secondly, this research did not examine the broader use of food aid, focusing solely on food banks. It is acknowledged that, although similar at points, users require different needs depending on their health/dietary and living circumstances. Continued research into the ongoing use of food aid is therefore crucial to better understand the broader issues of food insecure households and their purchasing and eating patterns, especially with the probable rise of food pantries and community food shops (Company Shop Group, 2022; Topping, 2022; Your Local Pantry, 2022). Future research may benefit from using PhotoVoice (Wang and Burris, 1997) to capture and explore the use and impact of food insecurity on dietary practices and choices. As found in other qualitative studies using PhotoVoice, the participatory research method uses a participatory approach to sharing experiences using photos to describe individual accounts surrounding food insecurity (Al-Hamad, MacNevin and Daher-Nashif, 2022; Gahan, Farooqui and Leung, 2022; Lindow *et al.*, 2022).

Thirdly, dietary assessment was not collected as part of this research as this work was primarily concerned with exploring dietary practices and choices. Although descriptive data pertaining to households' previous weekly consumption and typical diet was obtained, future research could investigate the dietary status of food insecure households. In a survey that consisted of self-reported multiple 24-hour recalls with 112 food bank users, both men and women had poor nutritional intakes when in food crisis, with inadequate intakes of energy, protein, fibre and iron (Barker *et al.*, 2019). Considering that food bank users in this cross-sectional study experienced recurring food insecurity, longitudinal research should be undertaken to investigate the nutritional status of food bank users, and employ dietary assessment methods such as food frequency questionnaires, 7-day food diaries and 24-hour recalls (Bailey, 2021).

Finally, this thesis did not extensively examine the processes involved in food surplus redistribution organisations. However, the bridging of food surplus and food insecurity is ever present (Caplan, 2017; Caraher and Davison, 2019; Bradshaw, 2020) and this research has demonstrated the function of surplus food in providing perishable food items through subscription plans. Future research should investigate the surplus food supply chain, in particular the coordination between food aid providers and the distribution of surplus food to food aid providers.

### 9.2.2 Policy and practice

Throughout the discussion of the results, several recommendations for policy and practice arose. In recognising the dilemma and positionality of food banks, I have proposed various recommendations in two selected areas: the end to food banks and managing the normalisation of food banks.

Food banks have become an essential source of food access and availability. Certainly, the number and use of food banks has risen, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Irvine, Gorb and Francis-Devine, 2022; Pautz and Dempsey, 2022). In the simplest definition of food poverty, food banks succeed in providing food to people who do not have access to food. However, they do not (and cannot) address the underlying structural factors contributing to food poverty and food bank use as they are under-resourced and under-funded. Poppendieck's seven deadly "Ins" of emergency food reveal the shortcomings of the food bank system in successfully addressing food poverty: insufficiency (not enough food, relates to supply), inappropriateness (not the right food), nutritional inadequacy (not healthy or providing enough nutritional quality), instability (temporary and unpredictable food supply), inaccessibility (difficulty in locating and entering the food bank), inefficiency (operating a food bank incurs financial costs), indignity (associated stigma and not perceived as a socially acceptable form of accessing food) (Poppendieck, 1999).

The end to food banks therefore requires the establishment a food aid system accessible for those on low incomes. An example of this may be the expansion of food pantries. During fieldwork, one of the food banks that participated in this study was in the process of assessing whether it should transform into a food pantry. Food pantries may provide a more dignified approach to addressing food insecurity, allowing for more choice and variety of produce especially fresh produce including fruits, vegetables, and meat/fish. However, this may further increase socio-economic inequalities, stigmatising those on low incomes as they access 'other' food retail spaces. Furthermore, food pantries, although on the rise, are susceptible to the shortcomings of the food banking system, as they too are reliant on surplus food organisations (Thapa Karki, Bennett and Mishra, 2021).

Alternatively, empowering food banks to better manage how food is sourced, may improve the nutritional profile of food parcels, and help ensure that they are nutritionally adequate, culturally appropriate and accommodating to the users' living conditions. However, these recommendations have the potential of cementing food banks as an appropriate method of addressing food poverty and shift food banks away from being perceived and used as emergency food aid providers.

As found in this thesis, acquiring food through financial means ensured a higher probability of obtaining food that specifically addressed household food needs. Shifting towards financial donations or applying for local Government grant funding (with the support or guidance of local authorities), may result in food banks obtaining food that is more appropriate and of greater variety. Alternatively, food banks can encourage donors to donate food that is ready-to-eat or ready-to-use such as tins with ring pulls.

Additionally, food parcels were typically packed using the Trussell Trust food list, however, it may be more effective to use the Eatwell Guide as a guide when packing food parcel. Although this requires a consistent and reliable food supply and adequate storage facilities, it provides an opportunity to include fresh produce and a wider variety of food in the food parcel and can help empower food banks to guide donors and suppliers on what is needed.

Lastly, there were two consistent examples of best-practice exhibited by the food banks in their ability to meet users' needs which could be scaled-up across all food banks. These included:

1. The provision of a fruit and vegetable bag which was facilitated by the ability to organise and coordinate with the surplus food provider to deliver the same day the food bank is open if there is no cold storage available.
2. Offering of two types of food parcels – a cook and non-cook food parcel to accommodate for insufficient material resources.

### 9.3 Strengths and limitations

#### 9.3.1 Strengths

This thesis employed a multi-method qualitative approach. This accounted for the complexity of the food banking system and the complexity of food poverty and household food insecurity. By combining the CDA with participant observations, face-to-face and remote in-depth semi-structured interviews as well as focus group discussions, this allowed the collection of data from different contexts and various perspectives. Additionally, the findings from the CDA helped to generate questions that needed to be investigated during the observations and interviews.

The interviews provided situational insights providing a broader and deeper understanding of the day-to-day tasks and activities within the food bank as well as a deeper understanding of the food poverty experience, providing an insight into the situation of the food bank within that. The focus group discussions provided a rich discussion of the various roles and responsibilities that volunteers undertake within the food bank and the 'shared' experiences of users when collecting and using their food parcels and its impact on their diet. Interviews were supplemented with participant observations, undertaken as a volunteer, allowing for a more immersive understanding of the nuances of the meaning and function of a food bank and food aid in general.

The aim of this thesis was to not only listen to the experiences of volunteers and users but to also observe said experience and engage with it. I conducted the ethnography as a volunteer, and so I was embedded within the food banks. This allowed me to have access to talk directly with users and volunteers during the pandemic period. My identity was known to all participants (see section 3.5.2.7). This provided a high level of transparency and a degree of validity to be achieved. Interactions were more open and flexible, as an empathetic and respondent-led approach was adopted to ensure that participants felt comfortable and shared as much or as little as they wanted to.

Given the very nature of qualitative research, problems relating to bias can be an issue. Research involves multiple interpretations and judgements. Every attempt therefore was made to ensure validity as much as possible. For example, in order to process the complex and distressing narratives I encountered during the interviews, I kept a field journal and took voice memos after interviewing and observation. This proved helpful during analysis and writing up as I was able to place the narratives within their wider context.

#### 9.3.2 Limitations

As a cross-sectional qualitative study, this thesis was subject to certain limitations.

A level of selection bias exists in the CDA as I participated in the framing of food banks by selecting the documents analysed. Additionally, while care and consideration was taken in selecting the documents, using Lene Hansen's textual selection matrix (Hansen, 2013), by circumstance and positionality, the nature of the texts chosen omitted the voice of the UK Government even though they were heavily represented and quoted as evidence. Additionally, by the nature of the texts, the functioning of food banks was from the perspective of how Trussell Trust food banks operate, not the various food bank models that exist within the independent food banking sector. As such, I acknowledge that certain sectors/actors dominate and shape the discourse while others (like the Government) are notably somewhat silent and absent from the debate. Future research on this topic would benefit from a focused analysis of local and central Government documents and/or interviews with Government stakeholders to understand their position.

The use of multiple theoretical frameworks and theories was useful in understanding, linking, and clarifying the nuances in structure and agency at a local and household level. However a major criticism of the Capability Approach is that it is under-theorised, as it has been suggested that Sen did not specify which capabilities were of significance (Wells, 2012). This was exemplified in this study, as whilst food bank users illustrated their varied use of the food bank, there was no clear indication of which factor was of importance when incorporating the food parcel and converting the contents of the food parcel into meals with regards to utilisation, taste, and nutritional value for example. The theory of symbolic interactionism provided insight into the development or reinforcement of meanings or perceptions placed on food banks and food parcels. These were affected by the social interaction that occurred between and within volunteers and users as evident in section 6.3.2 and 6.4.4. However, the social context of the food bank was not fully captured in relation to how power, or rather choice and agency in this context were constructed, utilised and managed.

A major limitation in this cross-sectional qualitative study was that the data obtained were collected over a 9-month period of one year (2021), during a pandemic. It is likely that this was not a 'typical' year for the food banks and the food bank users in terms of food bank management and use. A longitudinal qualitative study over a period of several months or years in conjunction with a documentary analysis of existing data would have been useful if the data had been readily available. Alternatively, widening the participant pool to include former food bank users would have been beneficial as they seemed to also volunteer at the food bank after the crisis that had led them to accessing the food bank had subsided.

Extensive data were collected in this study whereby I interviewed 21 food bank users, 15 volunteers, eight food bank managers, and two public health professional and one food aid coordinator in

Portsmouth City Council and the London Borough of Brent. Interviews were supplemented with participant observations taking place in seven food banks. However, this study, as with all qualitative research, cannot be generalisable to every food bank and food bank user in Brent, Portsmouth, or the UK, especially given the context in which data collection was captured. As such, the accounts captured in this study are limited to these participants and contexts. Even though the findings might not be generalisable, they are potentially transferable in the sense that similar experiences were expressed across the participants.

Initially food bank users were invited to take photographs of their food parcel and meals. The initial photo elicitation method was subsequently omitted, even when portable cameras were offered, as during data collection food bank users expressed their discomfort with taking pictures of their food/meals and they also expressed that they did not have the time. This meant that a visual representation of the utilisation of the food parcel within users' diets was not captured, which would have garnered more insight into their food choices, food preparation practices and food culture.

Monetary compensation was provided to all participants with volunteers and public health practitioners receiving £5 Amazon voucher (or if directed by the participant, donated to the food bank of their choosing instead). Food bank users received £25 as compensation for their time and participation. These reimbursements may have affected the validity of the data collected as participants may have provided socially desirable replies.

#### 9.4 Reflexivity and positionality

Being a "neutral observer and value-free expert" (Charmaz, 2014) although ideal as a researcher, is rarely ever achieved as we cannot dissociate from the social world that we wish to study (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Darwin Holmes, 2020). My role as the researcher was to therefore be an active, responsive, and sensitive listener. Contrary to the differentiation between being an insider and an outsider, I agree with the viewpoint that the position of an insider or outsider is one that should be considered along a continuum, with the researcher "inhabiting multiple positions along that continuum at the same time" (Darwin Holmes, 2020). My social identities as a Black, educated, Zimbabwean-born, Christian female researcher positioned me as an insider and an outsider simultaneously as I was in a similar yet slightly different group to those participating in this study. There were a number of times where I debated on how much I should share as during the conversations and interviews I would have with volunteers and users I wanted to stay neutral as a researcher but there were elements that I could relate to being a Christian and being African. However, as the interview progressed, I felt it useful to disclose that social identity. This proved to be



helpful as a level of camaraderie and reciprocity was established as I could understand and relate to what they were speaking on.

Additionally, whilst I was an 'expert' in nutrition, as a nutritionist, and having conducted prior research on food banks, I was not an 'expert' as having participated with and within the food bank. Thus, I assumed the identity of a "naïve researcher" (Adams, 2021). As Crewe (2014) quoted, we as researchers are "the least important person there." From the beginning, the aim of this study was to explore the food banking system and how people interact with and within it and incorporate the food parcel within their existing dietary practices. As such each interview and conversation began with the following sentence "I've got some questions, but it's really more about your story. So, you feel free to tell me as much or as little as you want to tell me about your experience." The aim was not just to gather data but to understand people's experiences and perspectives, and I believe this open and flexible approach to data collection provided me access to those experiences and perspectives. This also translated to the process of data analysis which took a 'messy,' iterative and almost conversational approach which consisted of line-by-line reading of transcripts and close listening to the interviews.

I would also like to acknowledge my use of the terms food poverty and food insecurity. Throughout this thesis I have used the terms food poverty and food insecurity synonymously and in part, as a function of the literature that I am writing from. I do appreciate that there is some distinction in the use of these terms depending on what arguments are being made and for what audiences and throughout this thesis I have used these terms interchangeably. As indicated in the Introduction (see section 1.2), food poverty is often defined as "the inability to acquire or consume an adequate or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so" (Dowler and O'Connor, 2012). However, when examining the sufficiency of food parcels, I focused more on household food insecurity as I considered the four pillars of household food insecurity (access, availability, utilisation, and stability), beyond sufficient quantity. Although there is an emphasis on economic access with food poverty, household food insecurity is also related to economic access, and as noted by the Food Standards Agency, "household food insecurity is a consequence of wider poverty" (Pettifer and Patel, 2022).

### 9.5 Concluding remarks.

This thesis set out to offer a broader and critical approach to the understanding of the food bank system and the use of food parcels. This thesis drew upon two qualitative methods. Contemporary dominant narratives and counter narratives relating to the role of food banks were explored. The food bank serves as an indicator, a consequence, and a determinant of food poverty, changing its sense of

obligation based on need(s) and by circumstance rather than choice. Given these narratives, the role of food banks is ambiguous; a shifting yet constant concept that passively embeds food aid as a form of the shadow welfare state as food banks martyr themselves to meet the growing demand.

Food bank users typically are of lower socioeconomic status and often have poorer dietary behaviours than households of higher socioeconomic status. Consequently, poor diet quality when experiencing food crisis can lead to adverse nutritional outcomes, including the double burden of malnutrition (World Health Organization, 2019b). This thesis has demonstrated that while food parcels can contain two to three days' worth of food, this is compounded by food availability which then conditions the nutritional composition of food parcels. This in turn, hampers meal planning as food bank users engage in a number of trade-offs and compromises to compensate for the food parcel and a lack of choice or appropriateness.

Poppendieck was correct in their interpretation of food banks and the seven deadly "ins" (Poppendieck, 1999; McIntyre *et al.*, 2016). However, food banks have become an essential feature of British society. Based on the findings of this thesis – the question should not be 'are food banks here to stay?' but rather 'how should they function?' Food banks are now reluctantly compelled to simultaneously meet demand, address household food needs, and reduce reliance. The formalisation of food banking practices may encourage the normalisation of food aid, adding to the growing and persistent discourses surrounding the perceived ability of food banks to manage and meet demand. Yet the question of responsibility still persists. As Douglas, MacIver and Yuill (2020) state, the expectation for charitable food organisations to meet food needs is "problematic."

I conclude this thesis, with the words of Olivier De Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, who reiterates:

"The reliance on food banks is symptomatic of a broken social protection system and the failure of the State to meet its obligations to its people" (De Shutter, 2012)

Although, the Government has previously rejected the recommendation for a Minister of Hunger, stating, '*it is not helpful to appoint a Minister for a single issue*' (Environmental Audit Committee, 2019a), food security is a social determinant of health. Despite food banks providing access to food, food insecurity persists. The intersection of diet, income and health is mediated through multiple pathways including constrained dietary choices and options, and (mal) adaptive coping strategies. The voluntary food aid system alone, however, cannot address the causes of food poverty, only the symptoms albeit insufficiently.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Recruitment email

Dear (name),

My name is Denise Ndlovu, and I am a PhD student at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and am funded by the NIHR School Public Health Research. My research project aims to explore the nutritional practices of food banks and their intersection with household dietary practices. Additionally, my project aims to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on food banks and households. With COVID-19 exposing the fragility of the food system and food banks becoming the de-facto response to people accessing food, there is a need to better understand the extent to which food banks can meet the dietary practices of those that they support.

I am writing to invite (name of food bank) as one of the sites for this project. I'm doing a research project on the distribution of food parcels in Brent and Portsmouth. I am speaking to food bank volunteers, food bank users and public health professionals in the local council involved with tackling poverty and food poverty.

I plan to conduct one-to-one interviews with individuals involved in the provision of food parcels to understand how food banks operate and how people use them. I also aim to conduct interviews with households to understand their journey into the food bank and their use of food provisions within their diets and establish the role of food banks have as part of their livelihoods.

Be assured that participation is voluntary and any and all responses will be anonymised, and confidentiality will be upheld.

If you have any questions or need further clarification, please do not hesitate to contact me at [denise.ndlovu@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:denise.ndlovu@lshtm.ac.uk) or (phone number). Thank you for taking the time to read this and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Denise Ndlovu  
Research Degree Student  
Faculty of Public Health and Policy  
London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine  
15-17 Tavistock Place

Appendix 2: Recruitment poster

## Participants needed for research study on the use of food parcels

**Are you aged 18 years or older? Have you used a food parcel two times or more in the last 12 months?**

Take part in a 45 minute interview about your experiences of using food banks, how you interact with the food bank and how you use the food parcel.

**All participants will receive £25 Amazon gift card for their participation**

**To get involved, get in contact with Denise Ndlovu on [REDACTED] or email [REDACTED] [@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:[REDACTED]@lshtm.ac.uk)**

This research aims to explore the use of food parcels in food banks and other food aid providers and their impact on food poverty in the UK. It is funded by the NIHR School for Public Health Research and conducted by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine



## Appendix 3: Participant information sheet – food bank volunteers and managers

*This study has been approved by the LSHTM Ethics Committee*

**Project title:** Exploring the intersection between emergency food parcels and household dietary practices: A multi-method qualitative study of food banks in Portsmouth and the London Borough of Brent.

Hello, my name is Denise Ndlovu. I am a PhD student at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. I am inviting you to take part in my research project. Before you make your decision, it is important that you understand why this research is being done and what participation will involve. Please read this document carefully and discuss with others if you wish to do so. Feel free to contact me if you have questions or need further information at [denise.ndlovu@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:denise.ndlovu@lshtm.ac.uk) or call me on (phone number). Thank you for your time.

*What is the purpose of this study?*

My project aims to explore the relationship between food bank practices and household dietary practices. This project is being conducted to establish the extent to which food banks meet the food needs of those they support and understand the role of food banks have in the wider context of addressing food poverty and hunger in the UK. I wish to collect both visual and verbal data and conduct a series of one-to-one interviews with food bank users and volunteers.

*Why have I been chosen?*

Although we understand how food banks work, little is known from the perspective of the food bank user in terms of diet and nutrition especially from those residing in the southern parts of England. I want to understand how food banks develop and implement the nutritional services they have in place and consider the impact COVID-19 has had on the operational capacity of food banks. It is for this reason I have specifically sought to invite volunteers who are specifically involved in developing and providing such nutritional services.

*Do I have to take part?*

No, you don't have to take part. It is completely up to you to decide if you want to take part or not. Understand that taking part in this study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any point without giving a reason.

*What will I have to do if I take part?*

If you agree to take part in the study then I will arrangement a meeting with you, at your convenience, to talk discuss the research process and obtain verbal and/or written consent. This will be recorded, and a copy will be provided to you. Participating in this study will involve conducting a one-to-one interview lasting between 30 to 60 minutes long. The interview will involve discussions on the services within the food bank, establishing the factors that have led to the development of nutritional services, an exploration of how these services run and your perception on how users' access and interact with them. The interview will also include exploring if and how household dietary practices are taken into consideration. Interviews can be conducted via telephone or video call, which ever you are most comfortable with and will be audio-recorded. I will also take down some notes during the interviews. This project will also involve interviews with households who access the food bank. I will seek your help and guidance in identifying and approaching households who would be interested in speaking with me. In addition to the consent that I will obtain from the person being interviewed, I will also seek your approval in photographing the food parcel to understand their use of the food parcel.

*What will happen to the results of the project?*

Data collected will provide insight into how food banks incorporate nutrition within their practice and how they consider the food needs of households when providing food. This will help to expand knowledge and improve practice on addressing food poverty and hunger in the UK. Findings will be reported, using pseudonyms, for educational purposes in my dissertation, journal articles, reports, presentations, and exhibitions.

*What are the benefits and risks of taking part?*

Your participation will provide some key insight into understanding the development and implementation of food-related services within food banks and explore the ways in which households use these services especially at home. This will in turn help to inform food bank practices, highlighting any challenges and opportunities food banks have in supporting households who have limited access to food during times of crisis. In line with NIHR guidelines you will be reimbursed with a £5 money transfer or Amazon voucher for taking part in this project.

*Who has reviewed this study?*

This study has been reviewed and given a favourable opinion by the LSHTM Ethics Committee

*Who is organising and funding of this study?*

I am funded by the National Institute for Health Research School of Public Health Research.

*Contact for any questions or further information:*

I that this information sheet has been useful in letting you know what this study is about and helping you decide if you wish to take part or not. If you have any queries at all, do not hesitate to contact me at [denise.ndlovu@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:denise.ndlovu@lshtm.ac.uk) OR (phone number)

## Participant information sheet – food bank user

*This study has been approved by the LSHTM Ethics Committee*

**Project title:** Exploring the intersection between emergency food parcels and household dietary practices: A multi-method qualitative study of food banks in Portsmouth and the London Borough of Brent.

Hello, my name is Denise Ndlovu. I am a PhD student at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. I am inviting you to take part in my research project. Before you make your decision, it is important that you understand why this research is being done and what participation will involve. Please read this document carefully and discuss with others if you wish to do so. Feel free to contact me if you have questions or need further information at [denise.ndlovu@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:denise.ndlovu@lshtm.ac.uk) or call me on (phone number). Thank you for your time.

*What is the purpose of this study?*

My project aims to explore the relationship between food bank food practices and a household dietary practice. This project is being conducted to establish the extent to which food banks meet the food needs of those they support and understand the role of food banks have in the wider context of addressing food poverty and hunger in the UK. Additionally, this study will help to determine the impact COVID-19 has had on households in relation to their diets and food choices. I wish to collect both visual and verbal data and conduct a series of one-to-one interviews with food bank users and volunteers.

*Why have I been chosen?*

Although we understand how food banks work, little is known from the perspective of the food bank user in terms of diet and nutrition especially from those residing in the southern parts of England. I want to understand how households' access and interact with the food services within food banks and how it impacts on their dietary practices and choices. It is for this reason I have specifically sought to invite individuals who have used a food bank two times or more in the last 12 months.

*Do I have to take part?*

No, you don't have to take part. It is completely up to you to decide if you want to take part or not. Understand that taking part in this study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any point without giving a reason.

*What will I have to do if I take part?*

If you agree to take part in the study then I will arrangement a meeting with you, at your convenience, to talk discuss the research process and obtain verbal and/or written consent. This will be recorded, and a copy will be provided to you. Your participation in this project will include two activities. Firstly, you will partake in two in-depth interviews to discuss your journey into the food bank and your use of the food parcel as well explore how using a food bank has impact your life. Interviews can be conducted via telephone or video call, which ever you are most comfortable with. They will last between 45 to 90 minutes and will be audio-recorded, and I will take down some notes during the interview. The second activity will involve you taking photographs of your food parcel and the meals that you make and keeping a diary to write down your experience related to your food choices and practices over a 7-day period. If you consent to this undertaking this activity, you can use your own devices to take photographs or choose from a number of options to enable you to take photos. If you

do not consent to this portion of project, please be assured that you can still take part in the project and instead you will participate in four short interviews lasting 30 minutes each to recall your diet from the day before.

*What will happen to the results of the project?*

Data collected will provide insight into the incorporation of food parcels within household diets and the role of food banks within livelihoods. This will help to expand knowledge and improve practice on addressing food poverty and hunger in the UK. Findings will be reported, using pseudonyms, for educational purposes in my dissertation, journal articles, reports, presentations, and exhibitions.

*What are the benefits and risks of taking part?*

Your participation will provide some key insight into understanding the development and implementation of food-related services within food banks and explore the ways in which households use these services especially at home. This will in turn help to inform food bank practice, highlighting any challenges and opportunities for supporting households who have limited access to food during times of crisis. In line with NIHR guidelines you will be reimbursed with a £5 money transfer or Amazon voucher for taking part in this study. Additionally, you will be reimbursed for your time and any inconveniences and out-of-pocket expenses incurred by participating in this study and conducting interviews remotely. This payment will be made at the end of the second interview and at your choosing this will either be as a bank transfer or as a voucher and amount to £20. I do not anticipate any risks with taking part in this study, however if at any time during the interviews you feel distressed, the interview can be paused and re-start when you are comfortable. If you require any additional support, I will signpost you to relevant services to access for support.

*Will my taking part be kept confidential?*

All data that you provide will be anonymised and assigned a study identification number. When reporting data this will be done using a pseudonym. Only I will have access to data including identifiable information. Anonymised extracts of may be shared with my supervisors to discuss findings in more depth. All data will be stored securely in password-protected folder in an encrypted laptop. It will be destroyed within 10 years of the study finishing, in line with the General Data Protection Regulation and Data Protection Act 2018.

*Who has reviewed this study?*

This study has been reviewed and given a favourable opinion by the LSHTM Ethics Committee

*Who is organising and funding this study?*

I am funded by the National Institute for Health Research School of Public Health Research

*Contact for further information or questions:*

I hope that this information sheet has been useful in letting you know what this study is about and helping you decide if you wish to take part or not. If you have any queries at all, do not hesitate to contact me at [denise.ndlovu@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:denise.ndlovu@lshtm.ac.uk) or on (phone number).

## Appendix 4: Participant information sheet – food bank users

*This study has been approved by the LSHTM Ethics Committee*

**Project title:** Exploring the intersection between emergency food parcels and household dietary practices: A multi-method qualitative study of food banks in Portsmouth and the London Borough of Brent.

Hello, my name is Denise Ndlovu. I am a PhD student at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. I am inviting you to take part in my research project. Before you make your decision, it is important that you understand why this research is being done and what participation will involve. Please read this document carefully and discuss with others if you wish to do so. Feel free to contact me if you have questions or need further information at [denise.ndlovu@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:denise.ndlovu@lshtm.ac.uk) or call me on (phone number). Thank you for your time.

*What is the purpose of this study?*

My project aims to explore the relationship between the food bank food services and a households' diet. This project is being conducted to establish the extent to which food banks meet the food needs of those they support and understand the role of food banks have in the wider context of addressing food poverty and hunger in the UK. Additionally, this study will help to determine the impact COVID-19 has had on households in relation to their diets and food choices. I wish to collect both visual and verbal data and conduct a series of one-to-one interviews with food bank users and volunteers.

*Why have I been chosen?*

Although we understand how food banks work, little is known from the perspective of the food bank user in terms of diet and nutrition especially from those residing in the southern parts of England. I want to understand how households' access and interact with the food services within food banks and how it impacts on their dietary practices and choices. It is for this reason I have specifically sought to invite individuals who have used a food bank two times or more in the last 12 months.

*Do I have to take part?*

No, you don't have to take part. It is completely up to you to decide if you want to take part or not. Understand that taking part in this study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any point without giving a reason.

*What will I have to do if I take part?*

If you agree to take part in the study then I will arrangement a meeting with you, at your convenience, to talk discuss the research process and obtain verbal and/or written consent. This will be recorded, and a copy will be provided to you. Your participation in this project will include two activities. Firstly, you will partake in two in-depth interviews to discuss your journey into the food bank and your use of the food parcel as well explore how using a food bank has impact your life. Interviews can be conducted via telephone or video call, which ever you are most comfortable with. They will last between 45 to 90 minutes and will be audio-recorded, and I will take down some notes during the interview. The second activity will involve you taking photographs of your food parcel and the meals that you make and keeping a diary to write down your experience related to your food choices and practices over a 7-day period. If you consent to this undertaking this activity, you can use your own devices to take photographs or choose from a number of options to enable you to take photos. If you do not consent to this portion of project, please be assured that you can still take part in the project



and instead you will participate in four short interviews lasting 30 minutes each to recall your diet from the day before.

*What will happen to the results of the project?*

Data collected will provide insight into the incorporation of food parcels within household diets and the role of food banks within livelihoods. This will help to expand knowledge and improve practice on addressing food poverty and hunger in the UK. Findings will be reported, using pseudonyms, for educational purposes in my dissertation, journal articles, reports, presentations, and exhibitions.

*What are the benefits and risks of taking part?*

Your participation will provide some key insight into understanding the development and implementation of food-related services within food banks and explore the ways in which households use these services especially at home. This will in turn help to inform food bank practice, highlighting any challenges and opportunities for supporting households who have limited access to food during times of crisis. In line with NIHR guidelines you will be reimbursed with a £5 money transfer or Amazon voucher for taking part in this study. Additionally, you will be reimbursed for your time and any inconveniences and out-of-pocket expenses incurred by participating in this study and conducting interviews remotely. This payment will be made at the end of the second interview and at your choosing this will either be as a bank transfer or as a voucher and amount to £20. I do not anticipate any risks with taking part in this study, however if at any time during the interviews you feel distressed, the interview can be paused and re-start when you are comfortable. If you require any additional support, I will signpost you to relevant services to access for support.

*Will my taking part be kept confidential?*

All data that you provide will be anonymised and assigned a study identification number. When reporting data this will be done using a pseudonym. Only I will have access to data including identifiable information. Anonymised extracts of may be shared with my supervisors to discuss findings in more depth. All data will be stored securely in password-protected folder in an encrypted laptop. It will be destroyed within 10 years of the study finishing, in line with the General Data Protection Regulation and Data Protection Act 2018.

*Who has reviewed this study?*

This study has been reviewed and given a favourable opinion by the LSHTM Ethics Committee

*Who is organising and funding this study?*

I am funded by the National Institute for Health Research School of Public Health Research

*Contact for further information or questions:*

I hope that this information sheet has been useful in letting you know what this study is about and helping you decide if you wish to take part or not. If you have any queries at all, do not hesitate to contact me at [denise.ndlovu@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:denise.ndlovu@lshtm.ac.uk) or on (*phone number*).

## Appendix 5: Consent form – food bank volunteers, managers, and public health practitioners

*This study has been approved by the LSHTM Ethics Committee*

**Title of project:** Exploring the intersection between emergency food parcels and household dietary practices: A multi-method qualitative study of food banks in Portsmouth and the London Borough of Brent.

**Name of Researcher responsible for project:** Denise Ndlovu

Statement	Please initial each box
I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated 24/06/2020 for the above-named study.	
I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that my consent is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw this consent at any time without giving any reason.	
I consent to the recording of my interview(s) and understand that the recordings will be destroyed within ten years following transcription	
I understand that data gathered in this study will be stored anonymously and securely. And that such information will be handled in accordance to all applicable data protection legislation.	
I understand that any personal data gathered will be kept confidential and I will not be identifiable from this information in any publications.	
I understand that my pseudonymised research data will be archived in public data repository and that other authenticated researchers will have access to this data to be used in this study and beyond	
I agree to taking part in this study.	

I have read and fully understood what the study involves and consent to taking part in this study.

<i>Printed name of participant (CAPITALS)</i>	<i>Signature of participant</i>	<i>Date</i>

I confirm that I, as the responsible researcher, have explained the purpose of the study, the participant information sheet and addressed any queries pertaining the study with the participant and that consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

<i>Printed name of researcher (CAPITALS)</i>	<i>Signature of researcher</i>	<i>Date</i>

## Appendix 6: Consent form – food bank users

*This study has been approved by the LSHTM Ethics Committee*

**Title of project:** Exploring the intersection between emergency food parcels and household dietary practices: A multi-method qualitative study of food banks in Portsmouth and the London Borough of Brent.

**Name of Researcher responsible for project:** Denise Ndlovu

Statement	Please initial each box
I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated 22.07.21 for the above-named study.	
I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that my consent is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw this consent at any time without giving any reason.	
I consent to the recording of my interview(s) and understand that the recordings will be destroyed within ten years following transcription	
I understand that data gathered in this study will be stored anonymously and securely. And that such information will be handled in accordance to all applicable data protection legislation.	
I understand that any personal data gathered will be kept confidential and I will not be identifiable from this information in any publications.	
I understand the potential risks of participating and the support that will be available to me should I become distressed during the course of the study	
I understand that my pseudonymised research data will be archived in public data repository and that other authenticated researchers will have access to this data to be used in this study and beyond	
I agree to taking part in this study.	

I have read and fully understood what the study involves and consent to taking part in this study.

<i>Printed name of participant (CAPITALS)</i>	<i>Signature of participant</i>	<i>Date</i>

I confirm that I, as the responsible researcher, have explained the purpose of the study, the participant information sheet and addressed any queries pertaining the study with the participant and that consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

<i>Printed name of researcher (CAPITALS)</i>	<i>Signature of researcher</i>	<i>Date</i>

## Appendix 7: Consent form – food bank users (witness)

**Title of Project:** Exploring the intersection between emergency food parcels and household dietary practices: A multi-method qualitative study of food banks in Portsmouth and the London Borough of Brent.

**Name of Researcher responsible for project:** Denise Ndlovu

Statement	Please initial or thumbprint* each box
I confirm that I have read the participant information sheet dated 22.07.21 for the above-named study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have these answered satisfactorily.	
<b>OR</b> I have had the information explained to me by in a language that I understand. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have these answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my medical care or legal rights being affected.	
I understand that the interviews will be recorded and understand that these recorded will be destroyed within ten years. I give permission to be recorded during these interviews	
I understand that relevant sections of my data collected during the study may be looked at by authorised individuals, where it is relevant to my taking part in this research. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my data.	
I understand that any personal data about/from me will be kept confidential and I will not be identified from this information	
I understand that pseudonymised data about/from me will be archived in a public data repository and may be shared with other authorised researchers to be used in this study and beyond and that I will not be identifiable from this information	
I agree to take part in this study	

Printed name of participant	Signature of participant	Date

Printed name of impartial witness*	Signature of impartial witness*	Date

I confirm that I have explained the study information accurately in English and was understood to the best of my knowledge by, the participant and that he/she has freely given their consent to participate\* in the presence of the above-named impartial witness (where applicable).

Printed name of person obtaining consent	Signature of person obtaining consent	Date

[\*Only required if the participant is unable to read or write.]

## Appendix 8: Interview guide – food banks volunteers and managers

**Project title:** Exploring the intersection between emergency food parcels and household dietary practices: A multi-method qualitative study of food banks in Portsmouth and the London Borough of Brent.

### **Purpose of the interview**

*Depending on how this interview is conducted, this interview can last between 30 to 90 minutes long. The purpose of this interview is to gain an understanding of your experience as a volunteer within the food bank. As well as to understand how food banks operate in relation to diet and nutrition and the impact of the pandemic on service provision. This interview will be recorded, and I will be taking down some notes as we go along.*

### **Overview:**

1. Introduce yourself and tell me about how you got involved in the organisation.
2. Tell me about the organisation, how it started and how it operates.
3. What is your role within the organisation?
4. How did you get involved?
5. What changes have you seen/experienced since starting?
6. What 'need' are you addressing?
7. What support do you provide people with?
8. What type of people are you supporting?
9. What do you describe the people who access your organisation? And why?

### **The food in food banks:**

10. How do you build relationships with suppliers and donors for food?
11. What facilities do you have in terms of providing safe and adequate food?
12. How do you consider individual food needs and preferences?
13. How are the food parcels packaged?
14. Type of food do you provide?
15. How do you meet peoples' nutritional requirements?
16. How do you balance between providing what is available and meeting people's needs and their wants?

17. What difficulties have you experienced in providing food support?

**The impact of the pandemic:**

18. How has the pandemic impacted demand?

19. How has the pandemic impacted food supply?

20. How the pandemic impacted the way you run things?

21. What positive impact has the pandemic had on your organisation, if any?

**The concept of food aid and food poverty:**

22. What is a food bank?

23. What is the purpose of food aid provision?

24. Do you feel responsible for feeding people?

25. How do you relate to and work with other organisations and the Council?

26. What has shaped your organisational practice?

27. Food banks and food aid providers are often described as providing 'emergency' 'short-term' 'temporary' help, how is that reflected in how you practice? And how has the pandemic impacted this?

28. How do you think the voluntary nature of food banking and food aid in general impacts the scope of support you can provide?

29. What role do you think food banks and food aid currently have or should have in the future in society?

## Appendix 9: Interview guide – public health sample

**Project title:** Exploring the intersection between emergency food parcels and household dietary practices: A multi-method qualitative study of food banks in Portsmouth and the London Borough of Brent.

### **Purpose of the interview**

*The aim of this interview is to identify how local authorities are responding to household food insecurity pre- and post-Covid-19 as well explore the relationships between the local authority, food banks and other food aid providers in the area. Additionally, this interview will explore how diet, nutrition and health are considered when developing and implementing strategies such as distributing surplus food or providing emergency food parcels. This interview will last between 45 to 90 minutes long. It will be audio-recorded, and I will be taking down some notes as we go along.*

### **Local authority and household food security pre-Covid-19**

*These questions will be asked to provide some background knowledge on how, prior to Covid-19, public health practitioners were addressing household food insecurity.*

- Prior to Covid-19, in what ways was the Council addressing household food insecurity?
- How do these strategies or services fit within wider public health strategies, for example the food poverty plan or similar?
- To what extent is nutrition and diet considered when developing these strategies?
- To what extent have these strategies addressed household food insecurity?

### **The impact of COVID-19 on household food security from the local authority perspective**

*These questions will be asked to and consider the extent to which COVID-19 has impacted people's access, availability, and utilisation of food. Additionally, these questions will be asked to understand what measures have been put in place by public health practitioners to address household food insecurity.*

- Can you describe how COVID-19 has affected people's state of household food insecurity and their ability to acquire food, especially nutritious food?
- In what ways has COVID-19 impacted the ways in which you support dietary health within the community?
- In what ways has the Council dealt with and adapted to the pressures of COVID-19 in responding to household food insecurity?
- As a result of COVID-19, what strategies have you put in place to address household food insecurity?
- How do you factor in people's circumstances when developing and implementing these strategies?
- Can you describe the capacity in which you work within the Council in providing food aid?
- Can you describe the process of how you provide strategic and/or practical support in responding to household food insecurity?
- What do you think are or will be the short and long-term implications of these provisions in supporting people to access food and feed themselves?
- Do you provide additional provisions, apart from food?

- What challenges and opportunities has this support provided the Council and the community with?

**(If applicable to their role) The provision of surplus food and emergency food parcels**

*These questions will be asked to understand how local authorities provide emergency food parcels to households and examine the extent to which diet and nutrition is considered.*

- Can you describe the processes involved in designing, packaging, and distributing the food parcels?
- In what ways do you ensure that individual or household needs and preferences are accounted for?
- How do you characterise and/or prioritise people's household dietary practices, if at all?
- How do you negotiate with what is available in terms of service provision versus people's needs?
- How do you work with other providers in acquiring and distributing food?
- What challenges have you faced in sourcing and acquiring food?
- What tools have been developed and/or used to help ensure that nutrition is accounted for when packaging food parcels?

**Negotiating the local and community response to household food insecurity**

*These questions will be asked to understand how the local authority positions itself in relation to other food aid providers within the community especially food banks.*

- In what ways do you, as a team, work across the Council and with other public health teams?
- Can you describe the way in which you support community groups around food?
- In what capacity, if at all, do you communicate and work with food banks in the area?
- How do you see the role of food banks and other food aid providers in addressing household food insecurity, if at all?
- Whose responsibility is it to address household food insecurity?

**Exit**

Thank you for your time and sharing your experience of providing emergency food parcels. Is there something else you would like to add or something you would like to ask me?



## Appendix 10: Interview guide – food bank users

**Project title:** Exploring the intersection between emergency food parcels and household dietary practices: A multi-method qualitative study of food banks in Portsmouth and the London Borough of Brent.

### **Purpose of the interview**

*Thank you for taking your time to talk to me. This interview will be split into two parts. I have a few topics that I want to discuss with you, but this your interview so feel free to lead the conversation and speak about your journey of using a food bank. It should last between 45 minutes although it may be longer or shorter. I will be recording this interview and will be taking down some notes as well as we go along.*

### **Topic 1: Introduction and journey into the food bank**

1. So, to start off with could you, introduce yourself and how you came to use the food bank?  
How long and how often?
2. How often do you come here?
3. Why did you come here?
4. What other place do you get food from?

### **Topic 2: Food bank use and dietary changes**

1. How has using the food bank influenced your food choices, if at all?
2. Have you experienced any changes with your diet since using the food bank?
3. What impact has using the food bank had on you? Both positive and negative?
4. What type of meals do you prepare?
5. How did you use the parcel that you got last week?
6. How long does the food that you get from the food bank last?
7. What type of meals did you use to prepare before coming to the food bank?
8. Do you find that you use all the food in the bag or is there some leftover or is some of it thrown away?

### **Topic 3: The impact of the pandemic**

1. How has the pandemic impacted you? Financially, socially, mentally, and physically?
2. How has the pandemic impacted the ways that you get food?
3. Have you experienced any changes with your diet due to the pandemic?

### **Topic 4: The meaning of a food bank**

1. What was your perception of a food bank before using one?
2. How important is the food bank to you?
3. When you use the food bank, do you still worry about food?
4. In your own words, what is a food bank?

### **Exit**

Well, that's the end of our time. I just wanted to say thank you for taking your time and sharing your story with me. Is there something else you want to add or is there something you would like to ask me?

Thank you once again for your time.

## Appendix 11: Research outputs

**Conferences**

1. Exploring the food bank supply chain. 19<sup>th</sup> International Medical Geography Symposium. 19-24 June 2022. (Edinburgh, Scotland).
2. The physical and social construction of an emergency food parcel. RGS-IBG Annual International Conference: Geographies beyond recovery. 31 August 2022. (Newcastle, England).
3. Exploring the food bank supply chain. 18<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Urban Health. 24-27 October 2022 (Valencia, Spain).
4. The preparation of emergency food parcels: a qualitative study of food banks in Portsmouth and Brent (UK). Society for Social Medicine & Population Health 67th Annual Scientific meeting. 6-8 September 2023 (Newcastle, England).

<b>Chapter</b>	<b>Research paper</b>	<b>Status</b>
CDA	Deconstructing the role of food banks since 2013: a critical discourse analysis	TBC
Food bank supply chain	Exploring the food bank supply chain	TBC
	The preparation of emergency food parcels: a qualitative study of food banks in Portsmouth and Brent (UK)	<u>Abstract</u> published in a supplement of the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health
Inside the food bank	TBC	TBC
Utilising the food parcel and household food provisioning practices.	Incorporating food parcels within existing diets: an ethnographic study of long-term food bank users	TBC
	The food bank within household food provisioning practices	TBC