

Reducing the need for foodbanks in County Durham



Introduction and Background

In recent years, foodbanks have become an increasingly common part of the voluntary sector landscape throughout the UK. It is estimated that there are over 2800 foodbanks in the UK at the current time, with the number of people using them steadily and, in some cases rapidly, increasing. The recent 'cost-of-living crisis' has seen more and more people needing to access emergency food support. **It is estimated that 3% of all people in the UK have accessed a foodbank in the last 12 months (Frances-Devine, 2024).**

As a result of the increase in foodbanks and foodbank usage, there has been more and more interest in them from politicians, policymakers, and researchers. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) began publishing data on foodbank usage in 2023 because of the increasing numbers. There is an All-Party Parliamentary Group on Ending the Need for Food Banks, established in 2020. The Trussell Trust, the largest provider of foodbanks in the UK, opened its first foodbank in 2000, and distributed emergency food parcels from 1699 locations across the UK in 2023/24 (Frances-Devine, 2024). A quick search of an academic database suggests that there have been over 150 publications on foodbanks in the UK over the last 12 years.

Durham Christian Partnership (DCP) work with the Trussell Trust to provide support for people experiencing food insecurity in the county. Following discussions with researchers in the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action (CSJCA) at Durham University, it was agreed to try and look at specific actions that could be taken locally to reduce the demand for foodbanks in County Durham. Members of the DCP Wellbeing Hub at Chester-le-Street got involved with the project, and worked together with DCP and the CSJCA, to develop and design a research project to seek the views of key professionals in County Durham. Three focus groups were held with workers involved in a range of policy areas to explore work that they were currently involved with, and barriers and challenges to extending or improving that work.

This short report is the outcome of that project. We would like to thank everyone who participated in the focus groups and who has contributed to the research in other ways. We have chosen not to include the names of people who attended the focus groups to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, and because we did not want to run the risk of missing somebody!

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The Current Situation

In the North East, the number of emergency food parcels distributed by the Trussell Trust has risen from 65,000 in 2017-2018 to over 150,000 last year.

Support for people experiencing food insecurity, poverty, or other forms of hardship is not a new phenomenon. Whilst the recent advent of foodbanks in the UK is often traced back to the year 2000, when the Trussell Trust opened their first outlet, or 1994 when Fareshare was established, there is a much longer history of community organisations providing support for people going hungry. **Food-based support can be traced back to at least Victorian times and the growth of foodbanks has often been called Dickensian.** Times of crisis, such as wars and prolonged periods of recession, unemployment, or strikes have also seen projects very similar to today's foodbanks emerge to support vulnerable community members. The provision of food parcels and communal eating during the miners' strike of 1984-5 is one example that many people in County Durham will be aware of.

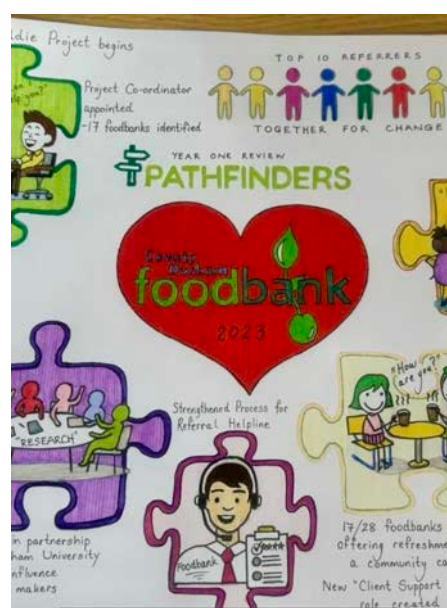
Foodbanks are also not specific or unique to the UK. They can be found in many other countries, including the USA, Canada, Italy, Germany, France, Australia, and New Zealand. In fact, the UK has sometimes been described as a 'latecomer' to the idea of foodbanks (Williams and May, 2022), and in other countries, such as the USA and Canada, foodbanks and other forms of community support are a central part of the welfare support for vulnerable people. **There are international and global organisations, such as the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) and the European Food Bank Federation (FEBA), supporting and co-ordinating the work of foodbanks and other forms of support and solidarity around food.**

Even if foodbanks are not necessarily a new development in the UK, the scale of their usage in recent years is unprecedented. **The Trussell Trust, the largest provider of foodbanks in the UK, distributed more than 3.1 million emergency food parcels in the year to March 2024 (Trussell Trust, 2024).** This was the highest number of parcels ever delivered by them, and nearly double the amount compared to five years previous. They estimate that around 650,000 people used a foodbank for the first time between April 2023 and March 2024.

An IFAN survey carried out in February 2024, found that: **nearly 75% of independent foodbanks in the UK that responded saw demand for their services increase; 65% saw the level of food donations drop; and 98% were supporting people seeking help for the first time (IFAN, 2024).** There are also examples of universities, schools, and hospitals setting up foodbanks on their premises for staff and/or students (see, for example, Krasteva, 2022).

In the Northeast, the number of emergency food parcels distributed by the Trussell Trust has risen from 65,000 in 2017-2018 to over 150,000 last year (Trussell Trust, 2024).

The Trussell Trust, the largest provider of foodbanks in the UK, distributed more than 3.1 million emergency food parcels in the year to March 2024.



Research

Discussions about foodbanks can often provoke strong emotions. Many people are angry that, in a country as affluent and wealthy as the UK, people have to rely on them, even during times of crisis. **Research has highlighted that, despite the widespread usage of foodbanks, there is still often a stigma attached to accessing them, and people can feel uncomfortable asking for help, believing they risk losing their dignity in doing so (Garthwaite, 2016; McKay et al, 2022).** Divisions and tensions that exist in wider society around issues such as race, religion, and social class, and the extent to which someone is 'deserving' or not, can also be found in foodbanks (Beck and Hefin, 2020; Price et al, 2020; Power, 2022). There is also some concern about the role of 'big business' in supporting foodbanks, and the way that they benefit from surplus food being taken away and in-store donation points (Spring et al, 2022).

Alternatives

Foodbanks are not the only way that people experiencing hardship and food insecurity can be helped. In recent years, there has been a movement towards encouraging 'cash-first' responses to hardship, which prioritise income-based forms of local support. A 'cash-first' approach is advocated by IFAN, and it is central to the Scottish government's efforts to end the need for foodbanks in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2023).

Other groups have argued for a 'Rights, not Charity' approach (FIAN, 2023), which would ensure that food is consistently adequate, available, accessible and sustainable. This approach highlights how governments and the policies they pursue are not doing enough to tackle food shortages and to protect and fulfil the human right to food. In 2021, County Durham councillors overwhelmingly backed a motion to make Durham a 'Right to Food' county.

There are also alternative ways of providing food-based support locally. Many of these are based around supporting people in need, but there are also projects which look at different parts of the food system and seek to reduce food waste, or the impact of food production and consumption on the environment, and so on.

- The 'Bread and Butter Thing' model acts as an affordable food club where, for a small weekly payment, members of a local club can receive a bag of surplus food suitable for their household.
- Community pantries, such as the Your Local Pantry scheme, are low-cost shops where people can choose the food they want from whatever is in the shop when they go in. There are different models for pantries, and some include a small weekly membership fee.
- There are a number of 'pay as you feel' cafes where people are able to pay whatever they can for a meal in a community café. These are often combined with cookery skills training and/or a pay as you feel shop for surplus food.
- The emergence of 'warm' or 'welcome spaces' for people who are struggling to pay their heating bills or experiencing social isolation has seen a number of community projects opening their doors and offering food and drinks, often at reduced prices, as well as a place for people to meet and stay warm.
- Many local community organisations run different projects related to food. These sometimes include cookery classes, or take the form of events or activities based around different topics or issues, but which include the provision of food within them.

In summary, whilst foodbanks are an incredibly important part of the support available for people facing hardship and/or food insecurity, it would be better if people did not need to access them and if there were other forms of support available that prevented them reaching the point of needing emergency food parcels.



There is concern that foodbanks, which were originally intended to be a short-term solution for small numbers of people experiencing extreme hardship, are becoming an increasingly important part of our welfare state, and may be here to stay. Foodbank operators have managed to build excellent links with other local and national organisations, in order to help people at risk of going hungry. They have been, and continue to be, vital sources of support for people who are unable to buy food, for whatever reason.

There is, however, a strong argument that in a country as rich as the UK, and with a well-established welfare state, foodbanks should not be needed, and certainly not the extent that people rely on them at the present time.

The Project

In 2022, the CSJCA ran a series of workshops exploring innovative approaches in Participatory Action Research, funded by Research England Participatory Research funding. Following these workshops, discussions took place between workers from DCP and members of the CSJCA to explore opportunities to develop an action research project looking at foodbank usage in County Durham, and what could be done to end the need for foodbanks in the county. A further application within Durham University for funding from Research England Participatory Research funding to develop this research was successful, and ethical approval was provided by the Sociology Department at Durham University.

An initial meeting with members and service users of the DCP Wellbeing Hub at Evangel Church in Chester-le-Street was held in October 2023, to gauge interest in being involved with a project exploring what local policymakers could actively do to reduce the need for foodbanks. **Around 15 people attended, with broad agreement that a project sounded like a good idea and a high level of interest in being involved. An introductory workshop was held two weeks later where small group activities and discussions explored some of the drivers of demand for foodbanks in County Durham and the impact of the 'cost-of-living crisis' in the area. Two more workshops were held before the end of the year to identify key themes, and to discuss and agree topics including research questions to ask professionals, methods that should be used, who should be invited to the focus groups, and what roles people would be able to fulfil.**

A final workshop was held in January 2024, with a smaller group of participants, to finalise arrangements and to decide on final focus group themes. These themes were:

- **Health and Housing**
- **Voluntary Sector Projects**
- **Employment and Financial Insecurity**

A total of 15 professionals whose work involved tackling food insecurity in some way attended the three workshops which were held in February and March 2024. The workers came from local organisations including housing providers, advice services, Durham County Council and Durham Community Action. The focus groups were facilitated by members of the DCP Wellbeing Hub, supported by colleagues from Durham University and DCP. The focus groups were recorded and then professionally transcribed. They were initially analysed by one of the researchers at Durham University with themes, and the structure of this report, being discussed and agreed with the wider group at a meeting in April. **The final report was agreed by the whole group at a meeting in July 2024.**

Action Research

Action research has been described as 'a pragmatic co-creation of knowing with, not on or about, people' (Bradbury, 2015: 1).

This approach thus recognises the knowledge, expertise and experience that lies with, in this case, workers and volunteers who support foodbanks, people who used foodbanks at some point, and people who have experience of food insecurity.

Whilst there has been a lot of research undertaken about foodbanks in the UK in recent years, there has not been much action research around the topic, or much research focused on local issues that influence foodbank usage or local action that can be taken.

The Centre for Social Justice and Community Action at Durham University have a long history of carrying out participatory research with communities across the Northeast and further afield. Researchers in the Centre have a particular interest in the ethics of participatory research and involving participants in all stages of the research process.



Findings from the Project



Structural Issues

A number of different structural issues were identified and discussed during the focus groups. By structural, we mean things relating to wider society and the way that things are done or organised in society.

The Benefits system

'What I'll say is there's probably a direct correlation between welfare reform and the use of food banks.' (Professional)

It was clear that, in line with lots of other research that has been carried out about foodbank usage, issues with the benefits system played a major part. **It was noted that the cost of buying food, and other things such as fuel, clothes, rent or mortgages, and so on, had risen much more quickly than wages or benefits had in many cases.**

'What we've found with our service users is that as the cost of living has increased, their benefits haven't really increased at the same rate.' (Professional)

The difficulties in applying for benefits, which often put people off claiming for support that they are entitled to, was also mentioned, as was the Universal Credit payment cycle. **Universal Credit is paid once a month in an effort to replicate the payment of wages which is not always helpful for people budgeting on a low-income. It can also take around five weeks for the first payment to come through after putting a claim in, which again does not help if people do not have another form of income or savings.** The impact of the spare room subsidy – also known as the 'bedroom tax' – was also noted: when people fell into arrears as a result of this, they were unable to move – even to a smaller more appropriate home – until the arrears were cleared.

Employment

As well as discussions about the impact of the benefits system, challenges relating to work and employment also featured throughout the focus groups. **People involved with foodbanks and supporting those who accessed them noted that there had been a recent increase in the numbers of people in work accessing foodbank and needing support.**

'... even if people are in work, as rents are going up, as electric bills are going up, people still don't have enough money. Obviously, food prices are going up, and we're seeing a direct correlation with that.' (Professional)

The physical location of many jobs made it difficult for many people to get to and from work, and it was noted that many newer jobs in the area, such as the Amazon warehouse, call for flexible and often unsocial hours and are often '24-hour jobs', which can be difficult to get to on public transport.

Local Authority services

The ability of the local authority to support people in need was also mentioned. **Durham County Council had to make savings of approximately £224 million between 2010 and 2017, representing just under a third of their total budget (DCC, 2018).** At the current time, the council estimates that it will need to make a further £56 million in savings over the next four years, despite increases in council tax. **The council currently spends 47% of their total budget on social care (DCC, 2023).**



Geographical Issues

The geography and physical landscape of County Durham provided a number of challenges for both people on low-incomes and the organisations and services working to support them. **Difficulties accessing certain goods or services, often as a result of poor or unreliable public transport, or poor health or disability, was a recurring theme throughout the focus groups, and it was noted that people living in different parts of the county would experience different issues relating to this topic.** Accessing a foodbank in parts of County Durham may be much more difficult, for various reasons, than accessing a foodbank in Newcastle, or Sunderland, for example.

'So you're kind of super-rural, I guess, for transport, for food costs ... and if they haven't got their access routes, they're stuck with a shop with more expensive prices because of the rurality.' (Professional)

Access to good quality and/or low-cost food was something that was raised in all three focus groups. **Many people living in small, rural communities in the county will struggle to access larger supermarkets if they do not have their own transport. The higher cost of items in small local shops compared to larger, often 'out of town', supermarkets was noted.** Participants also highlighted that it is often much easier to get hot takeaway food in parts of County Durham than it can be to get good, nutritious, and healthy food.

Interestingly, the geographical issues relating to accessing food also applied to foodbanks and other food projects themselves in some cases, with **one participant in the focus groups highlighting that it was often a struggle for people with mobility issues, health issues, and/or poor transport connections to access foodbanks.** This participant struggled to get emergency food parcels home because of these issues. **The steep hills and spread-out nature of many villages in the county made this an issue that might be more severe in Durham than many other parts of the country.** Developing delivery services for food projects was one potential solution to some of these issues that was raised during the discussions.

'I have staff who have to get two or three buses, so they'll spend more time in the office. It can take them an hour and a half, two hours [to get to work].' (Professional)

Professionals involved with the focus groups also spoke of their challenges with getting 'out and about' in the county to visit different communities and to meet with people face-to-face. The COVID pandemic has obviously had a huge impact on how people work and how services are now delivered, but budget restrictions and increasing workloads and time pressures meant that people felt like they were spending more time in their offices and meeting people online more than previously. This echoes other academic work which has found that travelling times and/or difficult journeys can sometimes result in social workers subconsciously travelling less in their work (Disney et al, 2019).

All participants spoke of their difficulty accessing and keeping up to date with information relating to what was 'out there' in terms of support services for people experiencing food insecurity. The geography of the county means that many local projects or organisations will not be known to people working centrally, or covering a different geographical patch. Signposting people to services, and sharing of good practice, was therefore more difficult and less likely than it might be in other locations.



Local Poverty Levels

County Durham is ranked the 48th most deprived area in England (from 151 upper tier local authorities) with almost half of its residents living in the 30% most deprived areas. The county is the 26th most deprived for employment and the 42nd most deprived for income.

Durham County Council estimate that just over 112,000 residents (21.3%) live in absolute poverty, after housing costs are taken in consideration. This is roughly on par with the rate across the rest of the North East but is higher than the UK average of 18.9%.

The most recent data from 2021 suggests that over 35,000 households across the county are experiencing fuel poverty. This data was collected before the current cost-of-living crisis, including increased fuel costs, took hold, and so it is likely that actual levels of fuel poverty in the county are a lot higher. (DCC, 2024)

As we mention elsewhere in the report, the experiences of people experiencing poverty in the county will be different depending on their location, their support network, transport arrangements and accessibility of services.

Local Issues

Aside from the physical geography of County Durham, there were a number of other local issues specific to the area that had an impact on food insecurity. These included a number of housing related aspects.

'Durham's got one of the lowest local housing allowance rates in the North East. So that means straight away, that your housing benefit or universal credit is going to be less.' (Professional)

Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates are used to calculate Housing Benefit for tenants renting from private landlords, and a lower rate means that there is more likely to be a shortfall between the amount of Housing Benefit and the cost of rent, which has to be met by the tenant from other sources of income (GOV.UK, 2023). **This means that many people in Durham are likely to have to spend more of their income or benefits on housing costs than people in other parts of the country with higher LHA rates.**

County Durham also has a higher-than-average number of single person households, with approximately 34% of households being only one person. It also has the third highest number of one-person households overall, after Birmingham and Leeds (ONS, 2021). **This can cause problems for people on low and/or insecure incomes because there is only one income stream in the house and costs cannot be shared between two or more people.**

Recent research has also highlighted the 'studentification' of Durham city centre, with the rapid increase in the numbers of students attending the university driving house prices and rents up, and having an impact on both local residents looking to buy or rent, and the make-up of communities close to the city centre (Wilkinson and Greenhalgh, 2022). The university are mindful of the impact of students on the city and the surrounding area (DU, 2023).

Local authorities are able to support tenants with these shortfalls through Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs), but **the amount available for DHPs had been cut and then frozen in recent years despite rising costs, making this more difficult to do.** There was an increase in DHP payments to local authorities in 2024, but there are proposals to freeze them again in coming years. **Recent research into the impact of DHPs suggest that around 84% of people would have had to cut back on food spending without them. This rose to over 90% for disabled recipients (DWP, 2024).**

The close-knit nature of many of Durham's smaller communities often provided lots of people with support, as we will see in the next section, but aspects of these communities also posed a problem for some people. **The stigma that is still attached to accessing foodbanks meant that some people were unwilling to access them, especially in their local area, for fear of being recognised.**

'One of the things we do see, sometimes, is people go, not to the closest food bank, but the next one along, where they're not necessarily known.' (Professional)

Finally, on this topic, local food production and local food cultures were discussed during the focus groups. **It was noted that County Durham did not produce much food, in comparison with some other rural areas in the UK, and some participants felt that it also lacked a strong local food culture, or 'local specialities', again in comparison with other areas.**

'If you try to look for any local produce, from, you know ... there was very, very little coming through ... we've got one producer of... of local vegetables that goes to the farmer's markets and we've got very, very little else.' (Professional)

Individual Issues

Discussions during the focus groups also highlighted a range of individual issues and circumstances that could lead to hardship and food insecurity. **It was usually stressed during these discussions that addressing individual issues or challenges was never likely to be the solution to the demand on foodbanks, but it might help with some individuals and families.**

Many of the structural issues highlighted earlier related to financial issues, such as the increase in costs of food and fuel and wages and benefits not keeping pace with these increases. **It was also recognised that some individuals sometimes had trouble budgeting and allocating money to different aspects of life that might prevent them from going hungry.** Issues such as the breakdown of relationships, bereavement, having to move house, or unexpected illness or injuries were all highlighted as issues that affected people's ability to budget in the short-term, and possibly over a longer period. Issues surrounding moving costs and costs associated with starting new tenancies were mentioned as examples of changes in circumstances that could lead to financial insecurity. **The complexity of the benefits system makes it very difficult to know what you are entitled to, even for people with experience of the system, and never mind for someone who is not used to claiming and whose circumstances have just changed.** Illegal money lending and loan sharks were also identified as factors that can make people's ability to budget and cope even more difficult.

'when we think of who is addressing food insecurity, actually, it's every time someone even has a cup of tea, in a community centre, or shares food or touches base, in a way... Food insecurity is at its worst when it happens in isolation.' (Volunteer)

Social isolation and loneliness were also discussed and, again, it was felt that this might be an issue more relevant to County Durham than some other locations. The number of single adult households, the geographical make-up of the county and poor public transport provision, all meant that people might be much more likely to experience food insecurity if they did not have people they could turn to for help, either with everyday activities or in times of need.

Cooking skills and 'food familiarity' were also discussed during the focus groups. It was thought that some people would benefit from greater knowledge about different foods and how to prepare them and it was noted that there are some excellent local projects supporting this type of activity. **It was also acknowledged by some participants that the types of food products provided by some foodbanks make creative cooking difficult** – pasta and tins of tomatoes were both mentioned as items that were regularly found in emergency food parcels.

'In my head, it's more trying to make food, teach people what to use when they get stuff from the food bank. Because most of the time when I get stuff from the food bank, it's like tins of tomatoes.' (Volunteer)

Some people also discussed finding it difficult to stand and cook, or to move around the kitchen, for long periods of time, whilst others mentioned the difficulty in finding motivation to cook, or leave the house to get food, during periods of poor mental health. These examples highlight how health issues and disability can affect people's ability to prepare food as well as to access foodbanks or purchase food.

'... physically, I can't stand for an hour, two hours, whatever cooking in the kitchen. When I'm at home, I can't cook in my own kitchen because it's too painful.' (Volunteer)

Nationally, there have also been examples of people being unable to afford to cook food – the often-stated choice of 'eating or heating' becomes even more complex if food requires cooking.



A photograph showing a man in a grey sweater and glasses pointing at a yellow form held by another person. The form has a table with columns and rows. The background shows a room with tables and various supplies, possibly a community center or a workshop.

**Suggestions for
policymakers and
practitioners**

Infrastructure Support

Whilst carrying out this research, we learned of a great deal of work taking place around different aspects of food within the county, with a wide range of public and voluntary sector organisations involved in this work. Whilst there is a lot of work taking place on different aspects of the food system or landscape and/or being co-ordinated or led by different organisations, there is also work being done in different locations and with different services that relates to income and other forms of support, that can help to reduce the demand for foodbanks.

Durham Christian Partnership run 27 foodbanks across the county. Food Durham is County Durham's Food Partnership, raising awareness of the importance of food and how it relates to the economy, the environment, health and well-being, and issues of social justice. Durham Community Alliance facilitate the Community Growing and Food Network, bringing together like-minded organisations with projects or an interest related to growing and food. The local nature of many of these projects means that at present, there is no clear idea or shared understanding of the full range of community-based food projects or how they operate and so on.

We also heard of different forms of strategic work and more reactive support – through vouchers, grants, loans, and equipment and so on – that could help to reduce the number of people seeking support from foodbanks. Durham County Council have a Poverty Strategy and Action Plan and have established a Poverty Truth Commission to hear the perspectives of people with experience of poverty and hardship. Community Money Advice County Durham, Citizens Advice County Durham and numerous local housing providers and other community organisations provided support and advice around financial and benefit entitlement issues.

'I think... I think what I would like to see is actually a much more joined up approach.' (Professional)

Professionals attending the focus groups, and in follow-up conversations afterwards, highlighted the difficulties in keeping up to date with various developments and knowing what activities different projects were leading. As highlighted in the findings, some professionals acknowledged that they did not get out into local communities as much as they would like to, and others noted that some communities were more difficult and time-consuming to get to than others. The time pressures of professionals and the geography of Durham mean that robust infrastructure support is perhaps more important in this location than in many others across the country.

The work that these individuals and organisations are doing and developing represents a real opportunity to improve the situation regarding food insecurity and foodbank usage in County Durham. **Developing new arrangements to share information, pool resources, and replicate good practice initiatives might be helpful.** What form such arrangements might take should probably be discussed and decided by key stakeholders. More meetings, or emails to read and respond to, are not always helpful, but participants in the focus groups felt that **co-ordinating and sharing information about different work taking place in different parts of the county, and what services and support are available in different localities, is worth doing.**



Alternative Forms of Support

'there's all these little pockets of change...' (Volunteer)

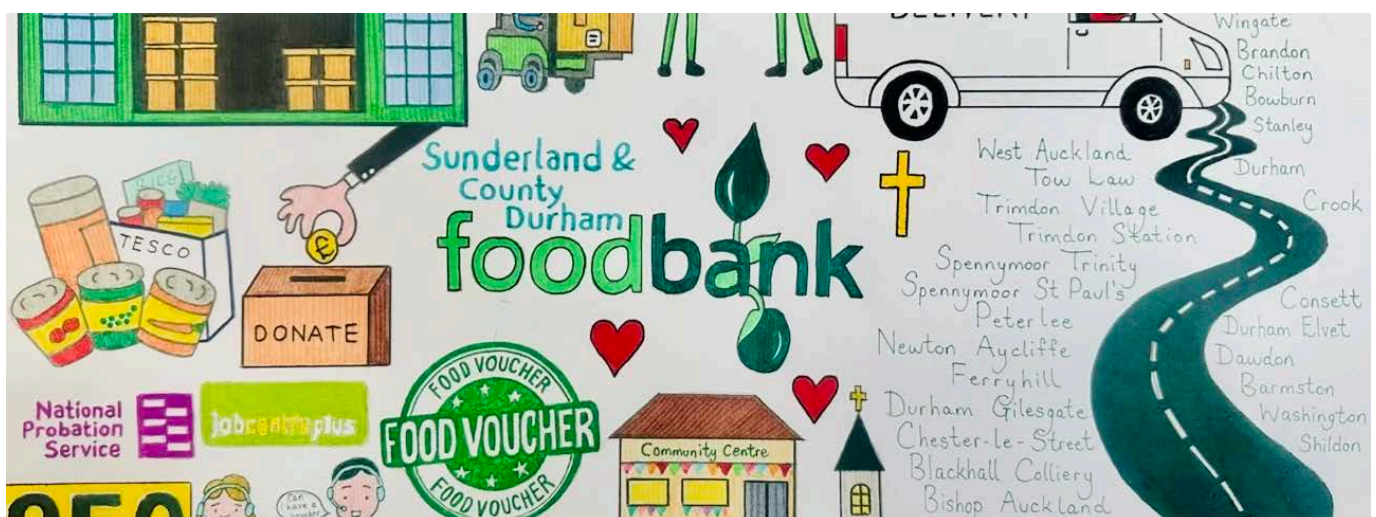
As we noted right at the start of this report, community-based organisations providing support, and food in particular, to people in need is not a new phenomenon, but the number of people relying on foodbanks is. **We have already acknowledged that whilst foodbanks are an incredibly important part of local support services for vulnerable people and families, they are perhaps not always the best or indeed the only way of providing that support. There are potential issues of stigma and loss of dignity surrounding foodbanks and they do not help to solve long-term issues of individual hardship or other issues relating to the production, purchase and consumption of food.** We also heard of a wide range of different ways of supporting people experiencing food insecurity, poverty or hardship that were potentially less stigmatising and more inclusive, and which could offer longer term solutions to some of the issues we have discussed in this report.

Despite the cost-of-living crisis, the number of emergency food parcels distributed in County Durham by the Trussell Trust in 2023-24 decreased by 28% - down from 20,804 in 2022-23 to 14,996 in 2023-24. DCP worked with referral centres in County Durham, such as GP surgeries, schools, and advice services, to make sure that people had access to more tailored support before they were referred to a food bank. DCP have moved a number of their foodbanks to community hub models with advice agencies present where people can access the support they need at the point of crisis whilst they collect their emergency food (Tickell, 2024). A recent survey of advice agencies across the county undertaken by DCP confirmed the success of this approach with an overwhelmingly supportive narrative from support workers. Despite this success, it was also acknowledged that for many, their situation 'still can't be significantly changed because of the social security system.'

This relational, connected, slower pace of advice and support connected with food provision chimes with what we heard about other models during the focus groups. There exists a wide array of community projects and ideas - both within Durham and outside - which offered different ways of addressing similar issues found amongst people accessing foodbanks. **Eco-markets, community pantries, pay-as-you-feel-cafes, Fairshare schemes, cookery skills training, warm spaces, Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) sessions, grow-your-own projects and so on were all mentioned during our discussions as alternative models of supporting people that work slightly differently to foodbanks.**

Many of these projects emphasised more collective or community-based, and longer-term forms of support, rather than the more individual, and more short-term support, traditionally offered by some foodbanks. It should, however, be acknowledged that, as highlighted above, many foodbank operators do not just distribute food parcels, and many offer many other services and forms of support - both formal and informal - alongside these parcels. There are approximately 40 foodbanks in County Durham, many of these supported by The Trussell Trust and Durham Christian Partnership, which are both committed to reducing the demand for foodbanks. **Exploring the full potential of alternative or complementary models of support, before or in addition to foodbank provision, would make sense, given the resources that are currently put into foodbanks.**

It should also be noted that many of the alternative approaches outlined above can still be difficult to access for some people, due to mobility issues, or poor transport connections, amongst other things. For example, some of these models were member-only, and some were over-subscribed. **Making existing or new services more accessible, or mobile, through offering delivery options, for example, may see demand increase in the short-term, but it may also help people who are sometimes unable to access support when they might need it.**



Other Pieces of the Jigsaw

As highlighted throughout the report, we are aware that there is a lot of other work already taking place within County Durham on issues relating to food inequality and insecurity.

We have mentioned the number of small, voluntary sector projects that operate in different communities across the county, responding to and attempting to prevent food insecurity.

In addition to this local action, there is also a lot of strategic work taking place that aims to improve the situation. We therefore hope that this short report can act as one piece of a much larger jigsaw or mosaic of work taking place to improve food insecurity in County Durham.

Here we outline some of the other pieces that we discussed during the focus groups, or that we became aware of during further discussions.

- Durham Community Action and Food Durham, with support from Durham County Council are compiling a directory of community food projects across the county. This work, along with the compiling and sharing of other data sources, could prove really important in better understanding communities at risk of, or already experiencing, more instances of food insecurity. Using and sharing data that is already available as well as identifying data that could and should be collected will help in planning responses.
- Durham County Council and their partners have produced a Poverty Strategy and Action Plan to address poverty in the county, and have recently established a Poverty Truth Commission to gain the perspectives of people with experience of poverty. Addressing underlying causes will go a long way towards improving the situation in relation to foodbanks. This work could explore what a local 'cash-first' approach would look like in County Durham.
- Work taking place around public health priorities have strong links to food inequality and insecurity. Examples of areas of work that overlap with food insecurity include: school food provision; healthy weight programmes; social prescribing activities; and physical activity interventions.
- Environmental and climate-related issues also have relevance to discussions about food consumption and how to increase the supply and accessibility of good quality food to certain communities. There are a number of related concerns around food such as the amount of waste and the environmental impact of food production, and the reduction of 'food miles'.
- As well as local activities, there is a wide range of national and international work that is taking place to reduce the need for foodbanks, and/or to address the underlying causes. By way of example, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Ending the Need for Food Banks, have published a report called Cash or food? Exploring effective responses to destitution which echoes many of the issues that we have highlighted here.
- There may also be some pieces of the jigsaw that are currently missing. This was a small, time-limited research project that was not able to explore or include everything that is currently being done. Even with that caveat, it is likely that there are some areas or some organisations where more could be done to prevent food insecurity. Private sector businesses and Durham University might be good organisations to further include in future work around food insecurity.



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