

More than Food? Exploring the needs and views of those who come to foodbanks

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SUMMARY

Recent research by the Edinburgh Food Project (EFP) concludes that Foodbanks could play a pivotal role in helping their clients tackle the causes of their food poverty by providing access to expert advice and support services. The research aimed to assess client demand for services to assist with benefits, homelessness, health, debt and other problems. Analysis of in-depth interviews with 127 foodbank clients and 47 volunteers at EFP foodbanks in March 2018 demonstrated substantial unmet demand.

Researchers asked clients to explain the causes of their food crises and then prioritise the advice and support services they would most likely use to help with their problems. They also asked if clients were currently accessing such services and if they thought foodbanks were suitable places for these services. To complement clients' accounts, researchers also asked volunteers about their interactions with clients and which services clients were most interested in. Key findings included:

- The overwhelming majority of clients (88%) believe foodbanks are suitable places to host advice and support services; 59% of clients would be very likely or likely to travel further than normal to a foodbank to access such services
- More than half of clients (67 of 127) say they are not receiving expert help with their problems
- Low income and problems with benefits, homelessness, unemployment, and debt are the most likely triggers of clients' immediate food crises. These problems are most often caused by underlying issues with mental and physical health, benefits, families and relationships
- Client demand is strongest for mental health and benefits advice and support. Clients also prioritised help with utility bills, debt, housing and employment. Volunteers' accounts of their conversations with clients corroborated this profile of client demand
- When focused on debt and 'income maximisation' services, client demand is strongest for help with benefits, skills training, budgeting and debt but weaker for help with employment.

BACKGROUND

Increasing numbers of people in Scotland are using foodbanks, as in the rest of the UK.¹ Changes to benefits, notably Universal Credit, are prominent factors as observed by the National Audit Office² and The Trussell Trust³, which warns that demand for emergency food is outstripping supply.⁴

The Edinburgh Food Project manages eight Trussell Trust foodbanks in Edinburgh. Clients are referred by statutory agencies and social welfare organisations and pick up their food parcels at the foodbanks. Volunteers welcome clients, distribute food parcels and engage with clients to discuss their circumstances. If appropriate, they 'signpost' clients to external advice and support services.

Foodbank clients testify that debilitating, persistent problems – from benefits losses to debt problems, mental health conditions to homelessness – underpin their food poverty, leading researchers to question whether emergency food aid can meet clients' long-term needs in any meaningful way.⁵

EFP is therefore considering going beyond signposting to provide advice and support services within foodbanks. This 'More than Food' approach has been implemented in other Trussell Trust foodbanks and two EFP foodbanks currently host external advisers providing drop-in services. Evidence from EFP client

¹ The Trussell Trust – End of Year Stats <https://tinyurl.com/y6wzu5v9>

² National Audit Office – Rolling Out Universal Credit <https://tinyurl.com/yaofz6ke>

³ The Trussell Trust – Universal Credit and Foodbanks <https://tinyurl.com/y8cuusfg>

⁴ Third Force News - 2018 will be the busiest summer for foodbanks ever <https://tinyurl.com/ycpg7ors>

⁵ Loopstra & Lalor (The Trussell Trust, June 2017) – <https://tinyurl.com/y8h7kzbe>

records and a questionnaire completed by 190 clients in April 2017 indicated clients would likely use such services. EFP wished to rigorously evaluate client demand, in particular for debt counselling and help with 'income maximisation' (either from benefits or employment). In early 2018, EFP secured funding from the Scottish Government's Aspiring Communities Fund and commissioned three researchers to design and conduct the research in February and March, 2018.

METHODS

EFP wishes to provide services its clients actually need and would actually use rather than what EFP thinks they need. Adopting this client-centred approach, the researchers developed the study around structured interviews (with quantitative and qualitative questions). These hinged on questions asking clients to choose from lists which advice and support services they would most likely use. In this way, it improved on the client questionnaire EFP used in 2017, which listed services but did not ask clients to prioritise between them; clients often chose all the services, rendering the data of limited practical value. By asking clients to prioritise, the 2018 interview provided a focused picture of client demand. It concentrated on the following research questions.

- **What immediate problems lead clients to use the foodbank?** Clients were asked to choose the 'first and second reasons' why they were using the foodbank, from a list of 16 reasons.⁶
- **What are the underlying causes of clients' problems?** Clients were asked to explain in their own words what caused the problems leading to their foodbank use.
- **What is the duration and intensity of clients' food crises?** Clients were asked how often they had used a foodbank in the past six months and how often in total.
- **Are clients receiving professional help with their problems?** Clients were asked whether they were receiving help from agencies or charities, excluding help from family and friends.
- **Which advice and support services do clients want?** Clients were asked to choose their 1st, 2nd, and 3rd priorities from a wide-ranging list of 15 'Possible Foodbank Services'.⁷
- **Which debt and income maximisation services do clients want?** Clients were asked to choose their 1st, 2nd, and 3rd priorities from a focused list of 12 'Possible Foodbank Services'.
- **Would clients use such services at the foodbank?** Clients were asked if the foodbank was a suitable place to host such services and whether they would travel to use them.
- **What are the demographics of foodbank clients?** Clients were asked demographic details including age, gender, household composition and employment status. Researchers also captured demographic data of clients who collected food parcels but were not interviewed.⁸

Researchers interviewed foodbank volunteers to assess client demand from another perspective and complement clients' accounts. Volunteers were also presented with the 'Possible Foodbank Services' lists and asked which services clients mentioned the most to them. Researchers also asked volunteers how many clients expressed a need for help with debt counselling and income maximisation and conducted a focus group with volunteer team leaders to explore how to deliver services in foodbanks.

Researchers visited EFP foodbank sessions in late February 2018 to brief volunteers and conduct a pilot study. Noting that an Oxford University survey of Trussell Trust foodbank clients achieved a 70% participation rate by approaching clients as they collected food, researchers adopted a similar approach, enlisting volunteers to introduce researchers to clients. Researchers then explained the research to clients, obtained informed consent and proceeded with the interview at the foodbank.

⁶ The list was compiled from the reasons EFP uses on its referral forms and reasons that emerged from interviews with clients and volunteers during a pilot study.

⁷ The list was compiled from EFP's 2017 questionnaire – options ranging from Cooking Classes to Volunteering to Internet Access – and options that emerged from desk research on social organisations active in Edinburgh

⁸ This data was collected from client referral forms supplied by third-party organisations to EFP.

The pilot made clear that unpredictable client traffic and severe time and volunteer capacity constraints meant that convenience sampling was the most practical methodology. The goal was to interview two clients per foodbank session, a total of 128 clients, approximately one third of all clients that pass through EFP foodbanks in a typical month. Researchers successfully interviewed 127 clients, 72% of the those that they approached. They also consulted client referral forms (and emails) completed by third-party organisations in order to capture demographic data on a further 189 clients who were either not approached or who declined to be interviewed. This was done in order to assess the representativeness of the interview sample.

FINDINGS

Client Demographics

Of the 127 clients interviewed, 81 were male, 46 were female. Just over half were living alone and more than one third were single men. Single parents made up 10.2% of interviewees, families a further 14.2%, meaning that almost one quarter were providing food for at least one child. Ages spread from 17 to 73 and half of those interviewed were aged between 35 and 47. More than eight out of ten were unemployed, 84% were white. Three out of 10 were homeless and 56% of interviewees were or had been homeless at some point in their lives. The distribution of household types is illustrated below.

Household Type	Number of clients	% of interview sample
Single Adult, no children	65	51.2
Couple, no children	21	16.5
Single Parent	13	10.2
Family (2 adults, 1-2 children)	10	7.9
Large family (2+ adults, 3+ children)	8	6.3
3+ adults, no children	8	6.3
Children (aged under 18)	2	1.6
Total	127	100

When compared with data for all 316 foodbank clients who picked up food parcels, the distribution of household types within the interviewed sample indicated that the sample was statistically representative of the general population of foodbank clients.

What immediate problems lead clients to use the foodbank?

Low Income, Benefit Changes and Benefit Delays emerged as the most common triggers for peoples' food crises.⁹ Homelessness, Unemployment, Debt and Sickness/Ill-health were also frequently cited. Most notably, 49 of 127 clients (38.6%) chose either Benefit Changes or Benefit Delays as the first reason, indicating a strong association between problems with benefits and food bank use. In addition, it is probable that many clients who cited Low Income were referring to income from benefits because more than 80% of interviewees were from workless households. Consequently, the proportion of food crises linked to benefits issues is likely to be significantly higher than 38.6%.

⁹ Low Income was given as a reason 34 times, Benefit Changes 33 times, Benefit Delays 32 times, Homelessness 27 times, Unemployment 24 times, Debt 22 times, and Sickness 22 times

What are the underlying causes of clients' problems?

When clients expanded on the underlying causes of their problems, thematic coding of this data showed that Benefits problems (with 58 references, 25% of all references)¹⁰, Mental Health, Physical Health, and Family and Relationship issues are the most common factors. Mental health was mentioned 35 times with 20 clients (16% of interviewees) saying they suffered from “depression” or got “depressed”. Anxiety was also common, frequently comorbid with depression. Family or Relationship Issues were mentioned 34 times, 15 of those related to relationship breakdown. Clients cited Physical Health problems 26 times, Financial issues 23 times and Employment issues 20 times.

What is the duration and intensity of clients' food crises?

More than half of interviewees (71 people, or 56.9%) had been using foodbanks for longer than six months, indicating entrenched or recurring issues with food poverty. The next largest group (21 people) were first-time foodbank users. Then came intensive recent users, 19 people who had used a foodbank for six months or less, more than three times¹¹. Eleven people had used a foodbank for six months or less, up to three times. Dividing clients into ‘new’ clients (6 months or less) and ‘entrenched’ clients, it emerged that single men were highly likely to be entrenched clients, with 71% experiencing food insecurity for more than six months. The substantial numbers of intensive recent users suggest that EFP foodbanks are having to extend their assistance beyond the model they are set up for – three emergency food parcels in a 6-month period. However, clients may also have accessed or be accessing non-EFP foodbanks as well as EFP foodbanks.

Are clients receiving professional help with their problems?

More than half of interviewees (67) were not receiving help with their underlying problems from a charity, Edinburgh Council or any other social support agency. For example, just three of the 20 clients with depression said they were receiving professional help with their mental health. Clients that were receiving help got it from three main sources: charities, Edinburgh Council and medical professionals.

Which advice and support services do clients want?

Mental health services are most in demand, selected by 61 clients, almost half of all interviewees. Sixteen of the 20 clients who cited depression as an underlying cause selected Mental Health. Clients also prioritised help with Benefits (50 clients), Electricity and Gas Bills (34), Debt (28), Housing (25) and Employment (23). Although Mental Health was most frequently selected, Benefits was the most urgent priority, with 30 clients (more than a quarter of interviewees) making it their first priority. Mental health (19), Housing (11) and Employment (11) services were also first priorities for many clients.

Small sample sizes made it difficult to make statistically significant observations about different household types and groups, although they tended to have similar priorities. For example, Mental Health services is the top priority for Single Adults, Single Men and the Homeless, and the second most urgent for Single Parents and Families. Help with Benefits was the top priority for Single Parents and Families, and third most urgent for Single Adults and the Homeless. Both new and entrenched clients wanted help with Benefits and Mental Health above all else.

Volunteers' reports corroborated the data from client interviews. Both volunteers and clients selected the same ‘Top 5’ services – Benefits, Electricity & Gas Bills, Debt, Mental Health, Housing – though not in the same order. Both selected Benefits advice and support as the most urgent priority and both gave Mental Health the highest number of second and third priority choices.

¹⁰ Clients' 58 references, 25% of the total, comprised mainly of complaints about inadequate benefits (13 references), benefits changes (12), Universal Credit (7) sanctions (7) and clerical errors (6).

¹¹ Six months is the benchmark as EFP policy states clients are entitled to 3 food parcels in any 6 month period.

Which debt and income maximisation services do clients want?

Skills Training and Budgeting advice are most in demand, selected by 43 and 41 clients respectively. Help with Benefits Eligibility (35), Benefits Appeals (34), Electricity & Gas Bills (30), Personal Debt (29) and Benefits Application (25) are also in high demand. Clients selected Benefits Appeals and Benefits Eligibility as the most urgent 'first' priorities, followed by Skills Training and Budgeting.

Many clients chose multiple benefits options or picked the most relevant one but said they needed all three.¹² When analysing the data, researchers re-aggregated these choices and did the same for Debt-related choices (Personal Debt, Council Tax and Rent/Mortgage Debt) and Employment-related choices. This revealed that clients prioritised help with income maximisation from benefits and debt issues but were less concerned with income maximisation from employment. On the other hand, the popularity of Skills Training indicates clients are concerned with increasing their capacity to work.

It was notable that demand for income maximisation and debt-related services was evenly distributed between new and entrenched clients, indicating that the need for these services is consistent no matter how long people have been using foodbanks. Most household types saw a relatively even distribution of service choices with similar priorities emerging.

Volunteers echoed clients' preferences, reporting that clients expressed more interest in benefits- and debt-related services than in employment-related services. A substantial majority of volunteers (32 of 47) said income maximisation services would be very or fairly useful. Common comments were that clients expressed need for help, they struggle to navigate the benefits system and evidently have low income.

Would clients use such services at the foodbank?

When researchers asked clients if they thought the foodbank was a suitable place to provide such services, 112 clients (88%) said yes, including all 20 of the clients who said they suffered from depression. Clients most frequently commented that it made sense to combine food services with advice and support services. "That appeals to me instead of going to one building and half way across the city to another place," said one. Other common responses were that foodbanks were a logical venue for such services because clients were by definition in crisis and needed help or just someone to talk to, and that clients found foodbanks a positive, welcoming or friendly environment.

When asked if there was anything that would stop them from using services at foodbanks, 77% of the 98 clients who answered said nothing (equating to 59% of all interviewees). Privacy issues would stop 13% of clients, although many qualified their remarks by indicating they would be satisfied if there was a private space to talk to an advisor. Most clients said they would be very likely (31%) or likely (28%) to travel further than normal to access a foodbank that had advice and support services. A significant minority would be unlikely (17%) or very unlikely (11%) to travel further, with travel expenses, time constraints and mental and physical health barriers prominent among their reasons.

Volunteers offered suggestions about how to provide services, notably that low client traffic could not justify a specialised service so 'generalist' advisers would be the optimum solution. The focus group with volunteer team leaders concluded the same and identified drop-in services (rather than appointments) as the most practical and effective way to help people in immediate need.

These views were supported by external advisers from Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and employability support provider Apex Scotland who currently provide drop-in services at two EFP foodbanks. They believe this is the most appropriate and effective way of engaging foodbank clients. The CAB adviser reported being able to provide immediate practical help (e.g. a phone call) in more than 50% of cases, indicating the capacity for a drop-in service to provide immediate outcomes.

¹² Benefits services were disaggregated into Benefits Appeals, Benefits Applications and Benefits Eligibility, Employment services into Employment Application, Employment Rights and Employment Search.

CONCLUSIONS

Foodbanks traditionally address symptoms by providing emergency humanitarian aid. This research indicates strong demand for 'development aid' to build clients' capacity to better manage their circumstances and address the causes of their food poverty. It concludes the following:

- The substantial majority of EFP clients would welcome and use advice and support services provided at foodbanks, if necessary travelling further than normal to access such services
- Clients underlying problems are persistent and require more attention. Hence almost three quarters of clients are experiencing either an entrenched or recurring food crisis
- Clients urgently want and need help with mental health issues (often linked to other problems such as with relationships, addiction, unemployment, homelessness and debt)
- Clients urgently want and need help to maximise income from benefits. Clients identified benefits issues as both immediate triggers for their foodbank use and underlying causes.
- Clients also want help with debts, especially issues with energy bills
- More than half of clients report they are not currently receiving help with their problems from a social support agency, Edinburgh Council or a charity
- Generalist advisers providing drop-in services would be preferable because clients have multiple chronic problems, akin to medical patients with comorbid illnesses

Foodbanks could help meet the unmet demand identified by this research by providing access to expert advisers, thereby supplementing their humanitarian aid with development aid. Moreover, foodbank clients express strong support for locating such services at foodbanks.

There are recent positive precedents, notably the Food Crisis Prevention Project which deployed generalist CAB advisers at Edinburgh City Mission Basics Banks foodbanks between 2014 and 2017. In 2016, the project reported significant gains for 51 clients, including successful benefit appeals, securing illegally withheld wages and write-offs of energy debts. Significantly, it observed that "most clients' needs were met by the project" without recourse to other agencies, echoing the experience of the CAB adviser working at an EFP foodbank.

In the context of increasing levels of food poverty in Scotland, with the impacts of the rollout of Universal Credit and other benefit changes yet to be fully felt, foodbanks are necessarily discussing what services people need and want. This research provides evidence that supports exploring a model that provides more than food.