

research

“We’re not a bottomless pit”: food banks’ capacity to sustainably meet increasing demand

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Based on research with 21 food banks across eight local authority areas in England, this article examines the sustainability of food banks in their attempts to balance demand and supply. Against a background of multiple deprivation and welfare reforms in the UK, food banks are becoming increasingly important for growing numbers of people. However, at a time when food banks’ ability to meet this increasing demand is close to capacity, this article examines how social purpose is a core element in food banks’ understanding of sustainability. With food banks having little control over the level of demand, and supply being increasingly close to capacity, if demand exceeds supply, sustainability will necessitate either denying demand or expanding supply.

key words food banks • sustainability • demand and supply • poverty

Introduction and argument

Based on research with managers¹ at 21 food banks across the East and West Midlands in England during late 2016 and 2017, this article examines the challenges that food banks face in meeting increasing levels of demand. Exploring the sustainability of food banks, it looks at both the benefits and constraints of being within the voluntary sector. While the food banks involved in the research were broadly meeting demand at the time of the research, it is important to realise that this cannot be guaranteed in the future. Food banks are not, as one respondent put it, “a bottomless pit”.

A key challenge facing food banks comes from persistently increasing demand, with food banks in the research identifying an increase of approximately 5% in 2016 compared with the previous year (Black Country Food Bank Network, 2016; Trussell Trust, 2017a). While this is a slower rate of growth than in previous years, meeting increasing demand in the future will necessitate food banks increasing their capacity to supply. Understanding the balance between supply and demand in welfare provision is nothing new (Salamon and Anheier, 1998; Fontaine, 2002; Reisman, 2004). However, while this has been typically applied to taxation and spending within state welfare, there is no reason why this cannot be applied to the voluntary sector and, specifically, food banks. Linking this to sustainability, it can be argued that should demand grow beyond the capacity of supply to meet that demand, food banks will be faced with the challenge of how to ration provision.

This article argues, first, that food bank sustainability is defined by the balance between the supply of resources and the level of demand; but second, that because

meeting demand is key to food banks' sense of social purpose, sustainability for them is also defined by their continuing ability to do so whatever the resource constraints.

The importance of this article is that it examines the capacity of food banks, as voluntary sector organisations (VSOs), to sustainably provide essential welfare to growing numbers of people. Furthermore, the article reflects on expectations placed on food banks and how increasing demand might challenge their ability to meet these expectations. Consequently, this article is not an examination of poverty or the reasons why people use food banks. Instead, it looks at the capacity of VSOs to sustainably meet people's need to use food banks.

To date, most food bank research, for important reasons, has examined the issue of demand. This locates food banks within debates about poverty, outcomes of government policy such as welfare reforms, and the economic impacts of the growing precariousness of work (Cooper et al, 2014; Tsilimpounidi et al, 2014; Loopstra et al, 2016). In this respect, existing literature does not specifically look at the operation of food banks, but rather the experiences of people using food banks and the political economy of their growth. This is an important issue given the rapid growth in food banks and the way in which they form an essential element of many people's welfare. Recognising this point, food bank managers in this research saw no sign of demand declining amidst the failings of the economy and mainstream welfare to meet the needs of a growing number of people. However, they also recognised the importance of understanding the risks that food banks face in sustainably meeting these people's needs.

Next, this article details the methodology used in the research before setting the context of increasing demand at food banks due, in part, to people's experiences of work, welfare reforms and economic challenges facing the areas covered by the research. Important to the article's argument, this identifies the challenges that food banks face in meeting increasing demand and the possibility of demand, at some point, exceeding supply. With this in mind, the article subsequently examines the concept of sustainability as a way to understand the balance between supply and demand. Critically, this includes looking at how definitions of organisational sustainability do not fully explain food bank managers' prioritisation of social purpose over organisational factors. The research findings consequently reflect on food bank managers' experiences as they seek to sustainably meet demand without turning people away.

Research methodology

The research was based on semi-structured interviews with food bank managers to ensure context and focus for the interviews while not wanting to limit or guide the respondents' answers. Mindful of the research objectives, the questions focused on the managers' experiences of food bank capacity, planning, partnerships and sustainability. In particular, the questions gave the managers the opportunity to raise issues they felt important and recognised how the managers were predominantly driven by goals of addressing social justice and feeding people in need of food. The article therefore presents an understanding of food bank managers' experiences of change, development and sustainability over the past few years.

As part of the voluntary sector, food banks represent diverse organisations that, despite their variety, share a common theme of valuing the independence of decision

1 making. Recognising this diversity, the research was based on interviews with food
2 bank managers across the East and West Midlands in the UK. In total, 21 food banks
3 were included, covering eight local authority areas, in order to produce a breadth of
4 results that may be generalisable to food banks in other parts of the UK. The goal
5 of the research was to explore food banks' supply capacity and their sustainability
6 in order to complement existing studies on food bank demand. The research also
7 included two network events where food bank representatives met together to discuss
8 relevant issues, giving the participants the opportunity to share experiences. Over 60
9 people attended the two events, from food banks, local authorities and allied voluntary
10 sector organisations.

11 Food banks in the research were identified through various sources such as local
12 authority guides, suggestions from other food banks and having an internet presence.
13 Only a small number of food banks did not respond to the invitation to participate
14 in the research, one (not included in the 21) had recently closed but provided a
15 detailed written account of their activities, while another (also not included in the
16 21) would only be interviewed by people holding similar religious beliefs. Despite
17 this, the number represents a cross-section of food banks from different geographies,
18 faiths and non-religious organisations and with different socioeconomic client profiles.

19 The Trussell Trust, the largest network of food banks in the UK, has become their
20 public face in the media and produces valuable data measuring food bank demand.
21 However, of the 21 food banks in this research, only about a third are part of the
22 Trussell Trust. The remaining food banks work either independently or as part of
23 localised networks covering one or more local authority area. Thus, Trussell Trust
24 data produced from their food banks, which has been widely used within the media,
25 underestimates the full extent of food bank demand.

26 27 **Context**

28 29 *Increasing demand and sustainability*

30
31 Since the financial crisis in 2008, the Midlands in England has experienced slow
32 economic growth coupled with comparatively low wages (D'Arcy, 2016; Harari,
33 2016). In addition to poor regional economic performance, for many people the
34 experience of work has involved fractured and insecure employment (Shildrick et al,
35 2012; Pennycook et al, 2013; Pyper and Brown, 2016; Tinson et al, 2016). Looking at
36 the economic characteristics of the areas covered in this article, Indices of Multiple
37 Deprivation² for Birmingham and the Black Country³ range between 37.8 and
38 30.4 (with the exception of Dudley at 23), compared with a national score of 21.8.
39 Similarly in the East Midlands, Leicester and Nottingham have measures of 33.1
40 and 36.9 respectively (DCLG, 2015). This means that there are pronounced levels of
41 multiple deprivation in these areas. Furthermore, with growing numbers of families
42 with children accessing food banks (Black Country Food Bank Network, 2016; Trussell
43 Trust, 2017a), it is important to recognise that while 20.1% of under-16s are living
44 in low-income families nationally, the figure is much higher in the areas covered
45 by this research. In Birmingham and the Black Country, between 29.6% and 32.9%
46 of children live in low-income families, with the exception of Dudley at 23.1%. In
47 the East Midlands, Leicester and Nottingham have comparable rates at 28.8% and
48

1 34.4% respectively and have the highest local authority child poverty rates in the East
2 Midlands (Public Health England, 2014).

3 Other low-income indicators – such as benefit claimant count, children in workless
4 households, average workplace earnings, long-term unemployment and people not
5 in education, employment or training (NEET) (DfE, 2017; Nomisweb, 2017) – show
6 similarly high levels in Birmingham, the Black Country, Leicester and Nottingham.
7 Significantly, the data represent local authority averages, with poverty levels being even
8 higher in many neighbourhoods. The overall impact is a greater demand for welfare
9 at a time when welfare reforms since 2010 have led to financial losses for people
10 accessing benefits. Specifically, Birmingham, the Black Country (except Dudley),
11 Leicester and Nottingham are identified among the areas hardest hit from welfare
12 reforms (Beatty and Fothergill, 2014, 2016).

13 While the level of poverty is above the national average in the areas covered by this
14 research, the experience is not unique to the Midlands. This reflects similar experiences
15 of poor economic growth, welfare reforms and precarious working in other parts of
16 the country. Another area of generalisability is the role of religious organisations in
17 providing food aid to growing numbers of people. This long-established charitable
18 role for the faith sector has grown in response to recession, welfare reforms and
19 austerity. Consequently, generalising this beyond food banks, many of the themes of
20 this article are relevant across the voluntary sector as it takes on increasing levels of
21 welfare provision amidst limited funding and heightened expectations.

22 The portrayal of food banks in films such as *I, Daniel Blake* and in the media is
23 supported by data from the food banks in the research showing that a third of food is
24 going to children (Black Country Food Bank Network, 2016; Trussell Trust, 2017a).
25 Also, the Trussell Trust, Britain's largest social franchise, is now distributing over 1.1
26 million food parcels per year (Trussell Trust, 2016, 2017a), although as mentioned
27 previously, this underestimates demand. In addition, a significant amount of food
28 aid is distributed in unmonitored ways through organisations such as The Salvation
29 Army, gurdwaras and mosques (McCabe et al, 2016; O'Toole and Braginskaia, 2016).
30 Furthermore, there are numerous semi-formal groups distributing food and other
31 welfare to people in need through ad-hoc outreach and pop-up services organised
32 through social media.

33 Against this backdrop, understanding food banks in contemporary welfare has
34 focused mainly on the growth in demand (Bull and Harries, 2013; Cooper and
35 Dumpleton, 2013; Peachey et al, 2013; Cooper et al, 2014; Dowler and Lambie-
36 Mumford, 2014, 2015; Forsey and Mason, 2015) and people's experiences of using
37 food banks (Garthwaite, 2016a). In the absence of practical assistance, it might
38 be presumed that the government views food banks as being able to cope with
39 demand and preferable to policy interventions that might reduce demand (Lambie,
40 2011; Lambie-Mumford, 2013; Downing et al, 2014; Lambie-Mumford et al, 2014;
41 Tsilimpounidi et al, 2014; Garthwaite, 2016b). However, food bank sustainability
42 and their capacity to meet demand cannot be taken for granted. With food banks
43 providing 'a robust last line of defence against hunger' (Ashton et al, 2014, cited in
44 Loopstra et al, 2015), their role is too important to too many people not to examine
45 the relationship between supply and demand.

46 At the heart of this article therefore lies the concept of sustainability as food bank
47 managers recognise the challenges presented by growing demand and finite capacity.
48 Importantly, however, the evidence reported in this article suggests that for the food

1 bank managers, sustainability includes a perception of the social purpose of feeding
2 all those presenting at food banks.

3 Despite food bank managers' primary concern being the social purpose of meeting
4 demand, literature relating to sustainability and the voluntary sector focuses instead
5 on 'organisational sustainability', characterised by the National Council for Voluntary
6 Organisations as being 'financially independent, celebrating volunteers, creating a
7 learning environment, [and] encouraging wider involvement of volunteers' (Taylor
8 and Donoghue, 2014). This typifies organisational sustainability as 'keep[ing] the
9 business going' (Wales, 2013) or 'survivability' (Paxton et al, 2005) and is framed
10 within resource management factors such as attracting volunteers (Ellis Paine, 2015).

11 However, within discussions of sustainability, there is some recognition that the
12 concept is somewhat nebulous and, most importantly, has different applications for
13 different settings (Low and Davenport, 2002; Lindsey, 2008; Harris and Young, 2010;
14 Macmillan, 2010). Consequently, in relation to food banks, a generic understanding
15 of organisational sustainability risks presenting a 'one-dimensional measure' of
16 sustainability that overlooks social capital, added value (Chapman et al, 2010) and
17 the primacy of meeting demand. The imperative of organisational sustainability
18 would be to increasingly ration supply, thereby placing the food bank in control of
19 the balance of demand and supply. However, the food bank managers were instead
20 oriented towards a social purpose that defined food bank success through efficacy
21 rather than organisational sustainability alone. In fact, an important finding of this
22 article is that the food bank managers were more focused on the social purpose of
23 food banks than organisational practicalities.

24 Some literature recognises the importance of the sustainability of social purpose
25 to VSOs by examining 'person-centredness', meeting social goals and satisfying the
26 needs of 'stakeholders' (Doherty et al, 2014; Manetti and Toccafondi, 2014; Rees
27 and Rose, 2015; Martin et al, 2016; Glennon et al, 2017). However, to date, these
28 elements of sustainability have only been applied to food banks to a limited extent
29 (Lambie-Mumford, 2013, 2015; Iafrazi, 2016), and even then, not always as part of
30 an explicit focus on sustainability.

31 32 *Challenges associated with meeting demand*

33
34 To understand the challenges that food banks face, it is useful to make informed
35 predictions about future demand based on changes in the factors currently driving
36 demand (Trussell Trust, 2016, 2017a; Jitendra et al, 2017). Approximately half of
37 food bank demand is caused by social security benefit delays and low income, with
38 benefit changes and debt also being major causes (Trussell Trust, 2016). Looking at
39 this in context, there was a rapid rise in food bank use after the 2008 financial crisis,
40 identifying a link between food banks and economic crisis. However, a decade later,
41 there remains significant and sustained food bank use that shows no sign of abating.
42 In fact, some of the largest increases came after 2010 when, rather than economic
43 crisis, there was significant politically driven change, redesigning the rules governing
44 access to benefits.

45 For many food bank managers in the research, the rapid growth in demand from
46 2010 took them by surprise and has allowed them little time to plan future service
47 provision. In contrast, since 2014, the rate of growth in food bank demand has slowed
48 slightly, to approximately 5% (Black Country Food Bank Network, 2016; Trussell

Trust, 2017a). Recognising factors driving food bank demand (Trussell Trust, 2016, 2017a; Jitendra et al, 2017), the slower increase in demand may be linked to national factors such as the effects of the financial crisis diminishing, and while the UK is still feeling the effects of austerity, there is modest economic growth nationally and a declining use of benefit sanctions since the start of 2014 (DWP, 2017).

Consequently, food bank demand is shaped not only by economic factors, but also by their interaction with political factors. The impact of welfare reforms, delays and sanctions were major reasons why people sought out the support of food banks (Downing et al, 2014; Perry et al, 2014; Garratt, 2016; Loopstra et al, 2016). Furthermore, evidence shows that almost one million people are currently working on zero-hour contracts (ONS, 2017) with no guarantee of regular income. With further welfare reforms in April 2017 and the roll-out of Universal Credit, the impact will mean that many of the poorest families currently relying on benefits will see a significant decline in their income (Hood and Waters, 2017), which may fuel food bank demand.

Having recognised the reasons for food bank use, coupled with an awareness of welfare and economic changes, it might be considered likely that food bank demand will continue to rise at least at the current rate. However, it cannot be ruled out that further economic factors, such as growing household debt (Brazier, 2017; Harari, 2017) will lead to even greater increases in food bank demand. With evidence suggesting this to be the case, it is important to consider food banks' ability to sustainably meet demand without denying provision. To fully consider food banks' ability to meet increasing demand, it is necessary to consider their capacity to supply. To date, there has been very little focus on the supply element of food banks, with writers and researchers choosing instead to look at the demand elements as a way to examine poverty and people's experience of welfare reforms. Such studies, referenced earlier in the article, have been invaluable, but without understanding their relationship to supply, it is impossible to understand whether food banks will continue to be such a comprehensive last line of defence against hunger.

Research findings

Underpinning this article is the question of how food banks manage increasing demand and finite capacity. With this in mind, the findings consider challenges to supply and whether food banks, as VSOs, can continue working without entering into formal partnerships that would erode some of their autonomy. Significantly, for food bank managers in this research, autonomy and voluntary sector identity were important elements in defining their identity. With this article arguing that the balance between supply and demand defines sustainability, it proceeds by looking at challenges to supply capacity before reflecting on the challenges of meeting demand.

Food bank managers accepted that they might not always be able to meet demand, identifying a future where food banks may be forced to ration referral vouchers, with at least one food bank having already reached this position. Currently, the majority of food banks researched are using a voucher system whereby people visiting various welfare and advice agencies can receive a voucher to redeem at the food bank. For food banks using such a system, people cannot use the service without first receiving a voucher, thereby managing demand and ensuring that checks are made on people's need for food bank services. Most notably in one of the regions, a conscious decision

1 had been made within food banks not to use vouchers in order to avoid denying
2 food to anyone in need. This was far from a universal position, with some food banks
3 feeling that this made the food banks a hostage to fortune and allowed no method
4 of gauging genuine need. However, the food banks that did not use vouchers had
5 made a conscious decision to not engage with conditionality, which they viewed as
6 an increasingly prevalent element of contemporary welfare.

8 *Sustainability and challenges to supply*

10 Looking at current experiences of supply capacity, the food bank managers in the
11 research identified essential supply elements, which include food donations, money,
12 volunteers and buildings. Worryingly, over half of the managers identified at least some,
13 if not most, of these elements as being close to capacity. Furthermore, they recognised
14 that continued growth in demand will only be sustainably met through a growth in
15 these supply elements. Of the elements, most managers identified volunteers as being
16 least challenging in terms of capacity, with other elements of supply being either at
17 or close to the point of capacity. One food bank had put a halt on volunteer while
18 others spoke about the suitability of rooms available, and some identified cash flow as
19 being problematic. Many managers also spoke of the types of food available, typically
20 high-carbohydrate and low-protein food, while others identified regular shortages in
21 areas such as toiletries, sanitary items and nappies. These findings support the point
22 that challenges faced in sustaining VSOs go beyond income alone (Chapman, 2017).

23 Most of the food banks in the research benefited from collections in supermarkets as
24 well as food donations from supermarkets and financial donations from local businesses.
25 However, approximately a third of the food bank managers saw this as problematic
26 as it could not always be guaranteed and some felt that their relationship with the
27 private sector was both close to capacity and showing signs of fragility. Recognising
28 the finite nature of supply capacity, many managers felt that supermarkets were
29 donating less food and allowing fewer opportunities to collect.

30 In addition to support from private businesses, the managers identified the significant
31 role of faith organisations in supporting capacity. The majority of food banks in the
32 research are linked to faith organisations; mainly Christian and Muslim. However,
33 about a half of the managers thought that this too was an area where supply was
34 reaching capacity, for example in terms of contributions from the church/mosque
35 as well as collections from worshippers. A further area of giving within Christian
36 churches and many schools is Harvest Festival, where food contributions are made
37 in September that support many food banks until the following April. But food bank
38 managers felt that it helped during the winter but had little impact on food bank
39 demand spikes during school holidays at Easter and in the summer.

40 A further area of supply linked to faith organisations was in-kind donation of
41 offices, storage and distribution space to food banks, either free or at minimal cost.
42 Again, this was at capacity and about a half of the food bank managers viewed this
43 also as a fragile element of supply that could be revoked at any time if the church/
44 mosque needed the space for other projects. Furthermore, the food banks did not have
45 budgets for building maintenance, which may present future challenges. A picture of
46 food banks emerges that suggests they are increasingly close to their capacity of what
47 they can provide. Problematically, as the next subsection examines, this is coming at
48 a time when demand is continuing to grow.

Meeting and managing demand

Aware of the link between supply and demand, at the same time that food banks are recognising that supply capacity is reaching its limits, stronger and more effective links with external organisations are leading to greater demand. In addition to links with private and faith sector partners, the majority of the managers identified how the food banks had developed stronger links with both local authorities and other VSOs. This included hosting advice organisations, signposting to other services and producing joint publicity materials. While the nature of this varied between food banks, it showed how food banks had become more strategic over time. This contributed to a belief among most food bank managers that food banks have become ‘credible’ welfare providers, addressing both the experiences and causes of hunger typified by the ‘food bank plus’ approach (Crisp et al, 2016).

While this has made the food banks more ‘credible’ organisations, a majority of food bank managers believed that it has led to increased demand through more referrals from organisations such as local authorities and advice agencies. From the interviews, it became apparent that the managers defined credibility as providing a service that was reliable, well planned and, significantly, able to fully meet demand. In other words, for the managers, being credible and sustainable meant maintaining a social purpose. However, this article questions how long food banks will be able to sustainably meet demand, especially if credibility is defined through sustainably meeting social purpose rather than solely through organisational factors. Underpinning credibility has been the development of rational managerial structures, including external engagement strategies, an element of forward planning and awareness of the needs of their clients.

As a result of more credibility and referrals, greater numbers of people are using the food banks and the food banks are increasingly aware of the breadth of people’s welfare needs. As such, food banks are now distributing more than food alone; this is the case in both the Trussell Trust (Jitendra et al, 2017; Trussell Trust, 2017b) and non-Trussell Trust food banks. Food bank managers spoke of diversifying, either formally or otherwise, to offer items such as clothing, fuel vouchers, toys and cookware alongside cafés and befriending services. However, an increasingly comprehensive service coupled with stronger external links is bringing further challenges for food banks based on their increased profile and growing numbers of referrals. In effect, food banks risk being victims of their own success.

With this increased profile has also come a redefined relationship with local authorities. As a ‘double-edged sword’, it has seen more support from paid officers and publicity materials while also leading to increased demand. For almost all of the food banks, cuts in local authority budgets have led to increasing referrals from statutory organisations struggling to cope with their own demand. Typifying this position, one food bank manager identified how fewer housing and social workers covering larger geographical areas with fewer resources were leading to more people being referred to food banks. Reflecting a sentiment shared by many managers, one food bank manager commented that their function had changed in the eyes of these officers from emergency food aid to being a place to routinely send people whose needs they could no longer meet. Supporting this position, many of the food bank managers felt that statutory organisations now see food banks not only as credible welfare providers, but also as a convenient safety valve where people can be directed to alleviate pressures placed on statutory provision. Significantly, the food bank managers

1 did not see this as being a cynical process and there was sympathy for local authority
2 officers experiencing funding cuts, but there remained a recognition that food banks
3 could not sustainably act as overspill agencies.

4 The managers interviewed saw the ability to continue to meet demand as central
5 to credibility and sustainability. The food banks could not be seen as sustainable and
6 successful if they operated in a way that only met a fraction of demand. But increased
7 credibility has created a dilemma. While welcoming the wider recognition of their
8 role of meeting people's needs in a sustainable manner and being a trusted last line
9 of defence against hunger, there was concern that becoming indistinguishable from
10 mainstream welfare provision could lead to a sense of entitlement from clients. This was
11 troubling for many food bank managers who actively defined the food banks within
12 a voluntary sector ethos of being distinct from both the market and statutory welfare.

13 It was against this background that food banks in two local authority areas, typifying
14 this theme, spoke of being offered and declining service-level agreements from local
15 authorities to provide food and support to particular numbers of people. While
16 income from the service-level agreements would significantly boost the food banks'
17 sustainability, there were concerns that it would damage their role as VSOs. Currently,
18 only two food banks have been offered service-level agreements, although this is
19 indicative of increasingly close links between larger food banks and local authorities
20 as characterised by dedicated officer support. Returning to the initial argument,
21 finite capacity and increasing demand are presenting challenges to food banks. Not
22 fully meeting demand and being in a position of rationing provision might enable
23 organisational sustainability, but it will negatively impact on the social purpose of
24 the food banks.

25 26 **Discussion** 27

28 This article has, so far, reflected on how the balance between demand and supply
29 defines sustainability. However, in the context of food banks, sustainability goes
30 beyond organisational sustainability to also encompass food banks' ability to meet
31 the social purpose of feeding people in need. Consequently, it is possible to reflect on
32 the extent to which being a VSO presents both benefits and limits for sustainability
33 as well as how food banks might change in the future. To date, food banks have been
34 dynamic organisations that have changed significantly during the past decade. There
35 is no reason to presume that this dynamism will come to an end.

36 The offer of service-level agreements touched on understandings of autonomy and
37 a voluntary sector ethos of valuing the independence of decision making (Egdell and
38 Dutton, 2017). While recognising that concepts of independence and distinctiveness
39 play key roles in VSOs' identity (Macmillan, 2012), food banks currently operate
40 what may be termed an arm's-length model of partnership working. The food bank
41 managers in this research preferred this arm's-length model of working as they
42 identified themselves as supporting people who have been failed by statutory welfare
43 provision as well as the economy. In doing so, the managers recognised key failings
44 in both systems and were not so close to risk being 'guilty by association'. For these
45 managers, therefore, remaining distinct from businesses and government was important
46 in defining their voluntary sector identity.

47 However, while this ethos was important, the managers recognised potential
48 limitations at a time when demand is growing and supply is nearing capacity. There

1 was an implicit acknowledgement that future changes may be necessary and that
2 this may involve compromise on the issue of independence if they are to continue
3 sustainably meeting demand. This recognises that the voluntary sector cannot operate
4 as 'a bottomless pit' to meet increasing levels of need with little or no financial support.
5 From the interviews, it seems likely that the future for food banks may lie in increasing
6 partnership working, possibly with local government, although it may be that this
7 manifests itself in different ways than service-level agreements.

8 While the managers saw the offer of service-level agreements as significant, it was
9 also indicative of local authorities' need for partnerships with food banks and food
10 banks' need for support to continue meeting demand. At the same time, for food
11 banks, potential service limitations raise questions about the need for change within
12 food banks and the nature of this change. Fundamentally, the choice for many food
13 banks is a choice between either future service limitations to limit demand, or taking
14 money, such as service-level agreements, to increase supply. This may place food
15 bank managers in a position of choosing whether the benefits of meeting people's
16 needs in a sustainable manner outweigh the cost of conditionality associated with an
17 increasingly contractual relationship typified by service-level agreements.

18 This would represent a new role for food banks, characterised by more formal and
19 contractual working, which might reduce their ability to make autonomous decisions.
20 The challenge for food banks is how to retain their voluntary sector ethos while
21 still working in a contractual manner to deliver service-level agreements. This is not
22 without precedence – during the Labour governments of 1997–2010, significant
23 funding was allocated to VSOs to deliver services, including service-level agreements,
24 while retaining their independence and distinction (Ware and Todd, 2002; Roberts,
25 2007; Harris, 2010; Rees et al, 2012).

26 However, there was little evidence that food bank managers were explicitly planning
27 for a more sustainable future despite the increasingly rational model of food bank
28 delivery. While this position has risks when considering the demand that may lie
29 ahead, the managers feared that an increasingly contractual relationship with local
30 authorities would redefine the relationship between the food bank and the client,
31 from one of voluntarism and philanthropy to one of entitlement. Furthermore, there
32 was also a perceived risk that any move away from voluntarism could ultimately
33 affect their supply if it led to fewer donations and less public support. However, the
34 only way to sustainably meet increased demand will be through an expansion of the
35 supply side of food bank provision.

36 Consequently, for the food banks in this research, it might be that continued growth
37 and development comes through making changes to their voluntary sector ethos that
38 would represent a compromise to their working practices. However, it may be that
39 food banks have reached a point where contractual partnerships may be the only way
40 to provide a sustainable service that can meet future challenges. For the managers,
41 these challenges were defined in terms of external factors that prompt demand rather
42 than internal factors such as organisational limitations. Problematically, the food banks
43 currently have little control over these demand factors and it may be that they would
44 have greater influence on capacity to meet demand.

1 **Conclusions**

2
3 In conclusion, this article began by recognising the importance of sustainability within
4 food banks; with sustainability being defined not only through organisational factors,
5 but also through social purpose. While this is largely happening at the current time,
6 there is a risk that demand may increase in the future, with many food bank managers
7 feeling that supply is near to capacity. The implications for food banks are that they
8 may face a situation of developing strategies to either increase supply or reduce the
9 extent to which they meet demand – with the latter having implications for their
10 social purpose. While the former may impact on the autonomy of food banks, the
11 latter will have more egregious outcomes for the food banks' clients.

12 Many of the food banks now find themselves in a position where the rate of growth
13 in food bank demand, while ongoing, has slowed sufficiently to allow space to plan
14 for the future and reflect on their relationships with other agencies. Food banks are
15 also now in a position to consider these links through developing partnerships based
16 on their position as increasingly rational and credible organisations. Furthermore,
17 food banks have a stronger relationship with their clients as they recognise the need
18 for an increasingly comprehensive range of services and signposting.

19 In this context, many food banks have developed away from informal crisis
20 intervention to provide well-organised, comprehensive and ongoing welfare for
21 increasing numbers of people. With this being the case, sustainability is becoming
22 more important for food banks as they provide increasingly comprehensive welfare
23 provision. However, continuing to deliver this level of welfare remains challenging for
24 many food banks and could become even more challenging in the future if demand
25 grows significantly.

26 In this situation, food banks offer a responsive service that has little influence over
27 the factors causing demand, such as economic and political factors or changes in
28 local government services. However, a contractual partnership arrangement, such as
29 service-level agreements or other funding initiatives, could enable food banks to have
30 formalised influence over the policy process as part of taking on new responsibilities.
31 Consequently, returning to the original question of the extent to which food banks
32 are sustainable, responses from the food bank managers in this research identify that
33 provision can be sustained for the time being now that the rate of increase in demand
34 has slowed, giving food banks an opportunity to reflect on developing ways of working
35 to effectively manage demand. However, the current position of sustainability should
36 not be taken for granted. With further welfare reforms taking effect from April 2017,
37 the roll-out of Universal Credit, growth in precarious working and the unknown
38 impact of Brexit, it is not inconceivable that food banks could again see significant
39 increases in demand and associated challenges.

40 Looking to the future, if food banks are to prioritise social purpose within their
41 sustainability, they will at some point need to reflect on their current structure as they
42 edge closer towards capacity. This research found that with fears regarding autonomy
43 and their role as VSOs, food banks remain in a position to reject the offer of service-
44 level agreements. However, as food bank demand continues to increase, future food
45 bank growth may entail compromise as the price paid for a model of sustainability that
46 has social purpose at its core. In terms of timing, it might be beneficial for discussions
47 regarding future direction to take place sooner rather than later while food banks
48 experience a period of moderate increases in demand and before a crisis point is

reached. As VSOs, a range of established possibilities exist. Food banks could consider developing as social enterprises to cross-subsidise food bank provision, they could develop contractual relations with local authorities that allow food banks influence over certain areas of local policy or it could be possible to consider established charity techniques of asking local people to set up monthly direct debits to support local food banks. As food banks continue to become more rational and efficient, as well as being supported by the Trussell Trust and other localised networks, it seems there is little to be gained by efficiency savings or merging to achieve economies of scale. As such, additional capacity might only be achieved by looking outside of the food banks. It can be concluded that a growing role for VSOs in the delivery of welfare, such as food aid, will ultimately necessitate comparable growth in capacity and, potentially, the ways in which that capacity is realised.

Notes

¹ While the job title ‘manager’ is used in this article, the food banks used a variety of titles, including coordinator.

² Indices of Multiple Deprivation scores are calculated by averaging super output area scores in each local authority area after they have been population-weighted. The data can also be viewed in a ranked format.

³ The Black Country refers to the four local authority areas to the west of Birmingham, comprising Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton.

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