

HUNGRY FOR MORE:

HOW CHURCHES CAN ADDRESS THE ROOT CAUSES OF FOOD POVERTY

The rising number of people turning to food banks to make ends meet has brought media and policy attention to the issue of food poverty – what are its underlying causes and what are the most appropriate responses? In many ways churches have been at the heart of this recent focus on food poverty, with hundreds setting up or supporting food banks, mobilising volunteers to give food to people in need.

Research conducted by Church Urban Fund sought to explore church-based responses to food poverty, looking in particular at the proportion of churches responding to this issue and the nature of those responses. This paper summarises the key findings of that research and offers a new framework for churches planning future responses to food poverty.

KEY FINDINGS

Our survey found that church-based responses to food poverty are currently focused on emergency activities, such as food banks, rather than work that seeks to address underlying causes:

- 81% of respondents indicated that their parish church supports a food bank in one or more ways, while just 30% of churches are running an organised activity to address one or more causes of food poverty.
- The majority (62%) of food banks have been running for less than two years – indicating the rapid growth of the food bank network in recent years.
- Specific gaps currently exist in church-based activities to tackle the causes of food poverty. For example, 67% of respondents say that the rising cost of living is a ‘major’ or ‘significant’ problem in their parish, but just 3% of churches are providing an organised response to that problem and just 24% are responding informally.

There may be several reasons for this: food banks are relatively cheap to set up, do not require specific professional expertise to deliver and they help to meet an immediate need. Churches may also feel unsure about how to address structural problems such as the rising cost of living, low income or benefit changes.

Yet while food banks help to support people in crisis situations, they do not tackle the underlying causes of those crises. Furthermore, for those who find themselves unable to buy food, visiting a food bank can be a humiliating experience that reminds them of their inability to make ends meet.

These survey results suggest that, if churches are to contribute to a long-term solution to food poverty, there is a need to rebalance church-based activity away from emergency crisis support and towards long-term work that tackles the underlying problems.

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METHODOLOGY

In April 2013, an online survey was sent to 3,000 Church of England incumbents (the members of clergy responsible for parishes). The survey was sent to incumbents to ensure that only one response was returned per parish. Of those invited to take part 466 did so, representing a response rate of 16%. The responding sample is skewed towards churches in urban areas with a medium level of income. Our results are therefore most helpful in giving an indication of the current activity of similarly located and resourced Anglican churches.

CHURCH-BASED RESPONSES TO FOOD POVERTY

A very high proportion of churches are currently responding to food poverty. More than four in five (81%) survey respondents indicated that their church supports a food bank in one or more ways: 75% collect food for food banks, 38% provide volunteers, 29% help to manage a food bank and 21% distribute vouchers.

More than half (54%) of these food banks are Trussell Trust franchises, 35% are non-branded and 12% are informally organised 'food cupboards'. The majority (62%) have been running for less than two years – indicating the rapid growth of the food bank network in recent years.

Most of these food banks provide additional services (see table). The most common additional services are signposting to other agencies (60%) and the provision of household items other than food (35%). Almost a quarter offer debt advice, but fewer than 10% provide employment advice or benefit advocacy.

However, comparatively few churches are attempting to tackle the causes of food poverty. Only three in ten (30%) respondents indicated that their parish churches run organised activities to address one or more causes of food poverty (causes listed in the chart opposite). Just two in ten (19%) run organised activities to address one or more of the five most commonly perceived causes of food poverty.

More churches are responding informally, when asked for help. Six in ten (63%) are providing an informal, ad-hoc response to at least one of the causes listed opposite. Just over half (54%) are doing the same to address one or more of the top five perceived causes of food poverty.

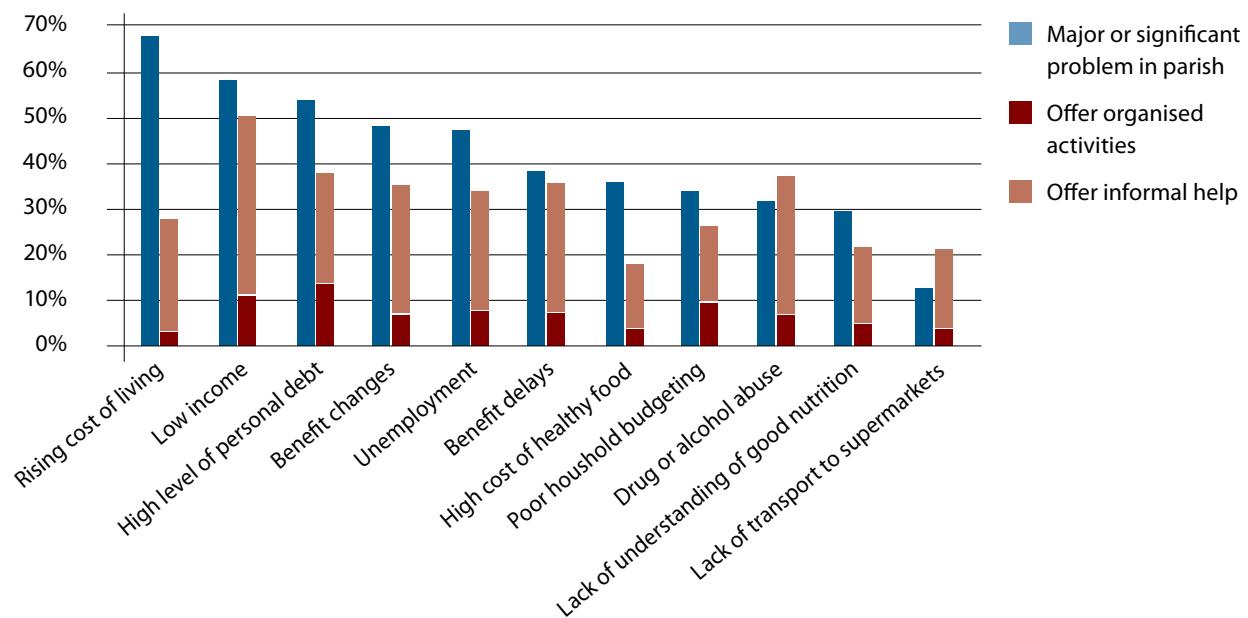
From our survey we know the percentage of respondents who recognise specific issues as 'major' or 'significant' in their parish. We also know the percentage of churches providing organised or informal activities to address those issues. By comparing the two, as in the chart opposite, we can give an indication of the current 'shortfalls' in church-based responses.

The largest gap relates to the rising cost of living: 67% of respondents say that this is a 'major' or 'significant' problem in their parish, but just 3% of churches are running organised activities to address it and just 24% are responding informally when asked for help. Similarly, while 54% say the high level of personal debt is a real issue in their parish, 14% are providing an organised response and 24% are responding informally. Conversely, when it comes to drug or alcohol abuse or lack of transport to supermarkets, the number of churches providing a response is higher than the number of those which recognise them as major or significant issues in their area.

Additional services run by foodbanks

Signposting to other agencies	60%
Providing household items	35%
Debt advice	23%
Benefit advice	17%
Nutritional education	10%
Employment advice	9%
Benefit advocacy	8%
None of the above	5%

Percentage of churches offering organised activities or informal help to address problems identified as 'major' or 'significant' in their parish.



These survey results suggest that, if churches are to contribute to a long-term solution to food poverty, there is a need to rebalance church-based activity away from emergency crisis support and towards long-term work that tackles the underlying problems.

A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR RESPONDING TO FOOD POVERTY

In making this change, the framework devised by two international development experts, Corbett and Fikkert, can be a useful resource for churches. In their book, 'When Helping Hurts' (2009), they propose that all poverty-alleviation work falls into three categories: relief, rehabilitation, and development. Three case studies, explored in depth in the full-length report, show how these categories can act as a useful framework for churches seeking to respond to food poverty.

RELIEF is the urgent and temporary provision of emergency aid to reduce the immediate suffering caused by a crisis.

A key feature of relief work is the provider-receiver dynamic, where the provider gives assistance – often material – to the receiver, who is largely incapable of helping himself at that time.

Effective relief work needs to be seldom, immediate and temporary, provided only during the time that people are unable to help themselves.

E.g. Smethwick food bank: In January 2012, twelve local churches launched a food bank. Operating as a Trussell Trust franchise, this food bank uses a strict three-voucher policy to avoid creating dependency.

Local community worker, Gareth Brown, says: "The food bank is often the first step in helping a person find their feet again... The long-term impact of this work is minimal, as it does not tackle the root causes of poverty; however, it is still vital because without it the basic safety net does not exist for people in need."

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REHABILITATION starts as soon as the immediate crisis is over and seeks to restore people and their communities to the positive elements of their pre-crisis situation.

A key feature of rehabilitation is the dynamic of working with people, as they participate in their own recovery. This way of working breaks down the provider-receiver dynamic and helps to bring people alongside one another to seek solutions.

Effective rehabilitation work involves people at every step.

E.g. Middlesbrough food bank and debt advice centre:

Debt is one of the most common reasons for food bank referrals and so Middlesbrough food bank has developed a close working relationship with the debt charity Christians Against Poverty. CAP debt advisers promise to work with people until they are completely debt free, helping them to save small amounts of money and develop good budgeting practices for the future. "We offer a holistic support service that empowers [people] to live a life free from debt," says local debt adviser, Anne Young.

DEVELOPMENT is the process of ongoing change that moves all the people involved – the helper and the helped – closer to being in right relationship with themselves and others.

A key feature of development is that it is not done *to* people or *for* people, but *with* people.

Effective development is an empowering process in which all the people involved work together to become more of what God created them to be.

E.g. Credit Crunch Cookery Course: This is a basic cookery course where participants cook a simple two course meal to take home to their family. Whilst this course focuses on encouraging good nutrition, it also aims to tackle long-term problems such as low income. The new skills and relationships that people would gain and the increased confidence they would feel as a result of taking part in the course, would ultimately help people move into employment in the future and thereby increase their income.

Corbett and Fikkert's framework reminds us that while relief responses are necessary in certain crisis situations, they are not always appropriate. Importantly, it also reminds us that relief projects which inevitably maintain distinctions between 'helper' and 'helped' need to be balanced by work that helps to break down these distinctions.

The failure to determine which type of response is needed, Corbett and Fikkert argue, creates the potential for causing harm – both to the 'helper' and the 'helped'. This of course, does not mean that we should sit back and do nothing for fear of doing harm. It does however mean that we should take time to carefully reflect on the appropriate response to the problem we are trying to tackle. Does it call for a relief, rehabilitation or development type response?

Showing care and love for others is integral to the mission of the Church; it is therefore important to avoid inadvertently causing harm through well-intentioned projects that nonetheless disempower the very people we seek to help. If, as Corbett and Fikkert argue, the ultimate aim of a development project is to challenge both 'helper' and 'helped' to become more as God intended us to be, it is important to approach each project with sufficient humility to 'embrace our mutual brokenness'. The recognition that we are all in need of help, support and good relationships, provides a helpful foundation upon which to plan church-based poverty-alleviation work.