Addressing Structural and Relational Challenges in UK Food Banks

Executive Summary

Food banks in the UK have expanded rapidly since 2008 due to austerity policies, welfare cuts, and rising food insecurity, with 2,000 outlets nationwide. However, significant problems persist. Food bank users often experience stigma, shame, and feelings of indebtedness, exacerbated by hierarchical relationships between middle-class volunteers and recipients, and by eligibility systems that can be exclusionary or bureaucratic.

The food bank sector is fragmented, with competition and limited collaboration between Trussell Trust banks, independents and pantries, each offering different models. Some emphasize choice and dignity, while others prioritize more formal procedures and rationing. While these services provide essential relief, there is growing concern that the current system entrenches food poverty, fails to address root causes and risks normalising emergency food aid as a substitute for state welfare.

This policy brief aims to provide actionable recommendations to help food banks address these structural and relational problems and promote more dignified, effective support for those experiencing food insecurity.

Policy Recommendations

- Establish a 'client choice' model in at least two food banks per region, allowing users to select their own food items instead of receiving pre-packed parcels, through redesigning space to function like a shop; roll out mandatory training for volunteers to support users as they make their selections.

- Create a quarterly local forum where Trussel Trust, independent food banks and pantries can share referral data and coordinate opening hours, with a rotating coordinator organising and facilitating meetings, to ensure all local providers are invited and follow a pre-set agenda.

- Set up anonymous food bank user feedback system (paper or digital) to regularly collect and act on service users' experiences and suggestions, with a designated volunteer responsible for reviewing and reporting findings.

- Implement a volunteer training module focused on reducing stigma and promoting user dignity, including practical guidance for everyday interactions, using real-life scenarios and user testimonials.

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The traditional UK food parcel distribution services model leaves users feeling disempowered and stigmatized, as they are expected to accept whatever is provided and demonstrate gratitude, regardless of their personal or cultural needs. Pantries and independent food banks offer choice-based models, where users select their own food, help restore dignity and reduce feelings of shame and indebtedness among recipients. One pantry director noted that choice "takes that whole stigma of charity away from the whole process" and creates a sense of community and reciprocity. Piloting this model would directly address the persistent stigma and discomfort reported by food bank users, making support more respectful and user centered.

The UK food aid sector is highly fragmented, with over 2,000 food banks operating under different models and often competing for resources and legitimacy. This leads to duplicated services and gaps in provision, particularly in high need areas. Food bank director interviews reveal that despite symbolic boundaries there is a shared commitment to alleviating hunger and a recognition that better coordination would improve service for users. Establishing regular local forums would enable practical collaboration, reduce inefficiencies, and ensure more consistent, reliable support for people experiencing food insecurity, while also building mutual understanding and trust between different providers.

Stigma and the expectation of gratitude can prevent food bank users from voicing concerns or making suggestions, leaving many feeling disempowered and unable to influence the support they receive. Users are often reluctant to appear ungrateful, even when food does not meet their needs or preferences, and that this silence perpetuates negative experiences and limits service improvement. An anonymous feedback system, such as comment cards or digital surveys would provide a safe way for users to share their perspectives, highlight issues like bureaucratic barriers or lack of choice, and suggest improvements. Acting on feedback can help food banks create more responsive, inclusive services and demonstrate that user voices are valued in shaping food aid provision.

Volunteers are central to the food bank experience, but their interactions can unintentionally reinforce social distance, stigma, and power imbalances, especially when eligibility checks or rationing are involved. Training modules that address compassionate communication, unconscious bias, and practical strategies for supporting user dignity can help volunteers move beyond transactional exchanges to build genuine, respectful relationships. Evidence shows that when volunteers are equipped to recognise and challenge stigma, users feel more respected and welcome, and volunteers themselves become more reflective and effective in their roles. This approach would help foster a more inclusive and supportive food bank environment, directly addressing the relational challenges identified in both Trussell Trust and independent food banks.

Project Benefit

These recommendations would directly benefit food bank users, often people facing food insecurity, stigma, and bureaucratic barriers, by promoting dignity, choice, and more compassionate support. They would also support volunteers, who report discomfort with current practices, and food bank organisations, by fostering collaboration and improving service delivery across the fragmented sector

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Further Reading

Oncini, F. (2022).
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Surman, E., Kelemen, M. and Rumens, N. (2021).
https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026121991330.