

The Trussell Trust's response to Demos 'British Aisles' report on food poverty



Summary response:

Trussell Trust Chairman Chris Mould has warned that 'cutting an emergency service in half will only make life worse for people in crisis' after think tank Demos made an extraordinary call to replace half of the UK's foodbanks with community supermarkets by 2020.

The report, which seeks to find solutions to UK food poverty, displays a misunderstanding of how foodbanks operate and also seriously misrepresents Trussell Trust figures and what they show.

The Trussell Trust agrees that we need to find ways to stop so many people facing food poverty, and welcomes Demos' interest in this area, but replacing foodbanks with community supermarkets is not the solution – it is illogical and a surprising suggestion from a leading think tank.

The Trussell Trust supports Demos' call for greater research into food poverty, solutions to chronic food insecurity and innovative thinking around reducing food waste. We're disappointed that in writing their report Demos did not speak to us to find out how our foodbanks operate, what our figures show or what we perceive the key drivers of foodbank use to be. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss Demos' report with them.

Read Demos' ['British Aisles'](#) report

Demos' call to half the number of foodbanks and replace them with community supermarkets

Demos press release states that:

The number of food banks in Britain should be cut in half by 2020 and replaced with sustainable solutions to food poverty...

It [the report] calls on the Government to set up a 'conversion fund' for food banks willing to adopt a community supermarket model, while ensuring at least the same number of people on low incomes are able to access affordable food.

These recommendations display a basic lack of understanding of the nature of hunger in the UK, and the needs of those accessing foodbanks. Trussell Trust foodbanks, like most independent foodbanks, are an emergency service for people in crisis who are facing hunger and **cannot afford food**. Whilst community supermarkets could provide a complementary service alongside foodbanks, they should not *replace* them, as suggested by Demos, because they are meeting a fundamentally different need. Community supermarkets where people pay for food, however cheaply, are not the right response to people in short term crisis who have no money and cannot afford to feed their children tonight. Put simply, if you do not have any money, a community shop is no use to you. 'Affordable food' is not affordable if you are at crisis point and facing hunger with no access to funds.

Instead of helping people on low incomes, cutting the number of foodbanks in half would dramatically reduce the availability of emergency food to people in crisis, causing thousands to face

hunger. The Trussell Trust believes that as long as there are people facing a hunger crisis in the UK, there should be a local foodbank available to help them.

Foodbanks *already* help people to break out of poverty, and seek to avoid building dependency on food aid

British Aisles states:

'...we suggest that, as an operating model, food banks are not best suited to providing longer-term support with a wider range of issues – the sort of support from which all of their users would benefit, and which the majority really need.'

The Trussell Trust agrees that there is scope to improve provision for people experiencing 'chronic' food poverty, but 'British Aisles' clearly underestimates the impact that many foodbanks are already having in helping people out of poverty longer term by providing additional services. Over 90% of Trussell Trust foodbanks already provide additional services including debt/financial support, welfare advice, and signposting to other local services who can help people get back on their feet.

Foodbanks seek to help people find routes out of poverty, rather than developing dependency on food aid, and are flexible in being able to tailor support to meet an individual's need in partnership with local organisations and agencies.

Demos' nine days help claim:

'British Aisles' claims that:

"The majority [of foodbanks] operate a referral scheme, with GPs, job centres and a limited list of other designated agencies able to issue clients with three single-use vouchers per year, each allowing three days of food. For the sake of clarity, that is nine days' worth of food out of 365"

The Trussell Trust's official guidance to foodbanks on how many times a person can be helped states:

'The Trussell Trust's foodbank model has been carefully designed to ensure that people are supported and helped out of their crisis and that foodbanks do not create cycles of dependency. A core feature of our model is the 'three voucher guideline' which allows referral agencies to issue up to three foodbank vouchers per crisis to a person without reference to the foodbank. If the client's crisis has not been resolved within this timeframe, the referral agency must contact the foodbank to explain the situation and discuss the possibility of issuing further vouchers to extend support. This enables the foodbank to be confident that the root cause of the problem is being addressed, which is in the best interest of the client. On the basis of this knowledge, the foodbank can agree to continue providing emergency food to support the client during their crisis, at the discretion of the foodbank manager.'

In addition, lists of agencies/organisations who can refer to foodbanks are comprehensive. More than 30,000 people nationwide, half of which are statutory agencies, refer people to The Trussell Trust's 420 foodbanks. To put this into a local context, over 150 local agencies, charities, schools, health workers, emergency services and organisations refer people to Salisbury foodbank alone.

Misquoted figures:

1. *“According to figures from the UK’s biggest food bank operator, the Trussell Trust, use of food banks increased by **38 per cent** between 2012/13 and 2013/14, with more than half of this increase due to new clients”*

This is simply bad reporting: the use of Trussell Trust foodbanks increased by 163 per cent between 2012/13 and 2013/14 financial years (not 38 per cent). Trussell Trust figures rose by 38 per cent between the first half of the 2013/14 financial year, and the first half of the 2014/15 financial year (ie April – Sept 2013 compared to April – Sept 2014). The Trussell Trust has never claimed to, and cannot, determine the number of ‘new clients’.

2. *“And yet the latest statistics from the Trussell Trust suggest that 50–60 per cent of those using food banks are doing so as a result of what might be termed ‘chronic’ food poverty”*

This statistic is the premise for much of Demos’ report, yet Trussell Trust data does not show how many people are in ‘chronic’ as opposed to ‘acute’ poverty. Our joint report ‘Emergency Use Only’ discussed chronic v acute poverty but also says that the two are ultimately linked. It says:

“Data from the Trussell Trust indicate that across the UK, 58% of food bank referrals are attributed to what might be described as an ‘acute’ crisis (benefit problems, unemployment, homelessness, sickness, etc); 23% are attributed to ‘low income’; a further 7% to ‘debt’ and 1% to ‘child holiday meals’; with the remaining 12% attributed to ‘other’... **although ongoing, chronic ‘low income’ is the main reason for referral for a significant minority, the majority of foodbank users had recently experienced one or more acute crises”**.

This clearly suggests that ‘chronic’ and ‘acute’ food poverty can’t be easily divided as causes, and are often linked. The claim by Demos that 6 out of 10 foodbank users are experiencing chronic food poverty cannot, and should not, be evidenced from Trussell Trust data. The Trussell Trust would, however, agree that chronic food poverty – whilst not measurable from foodbank data - is a problem that needs addressing in the UK.

In their report, Demos cite the 6 in 10 people in chronic poverty statistic as key evidence for halving the number of foodbanks. This does not stand up to scrutiny as the statistic itself is invalid, and furthermore, even if it is valid, halving the number of foodbanks as a consequence is illogical. If Exeter foodbank, for example, took Demos’ advice and transformed itself into a community supermarket, all those in Exeter who hit a short term crisis where they had no money for food would now need to pay for food surplus, rather than receiving free food and support from the foodbank.

Demos’ report does not account for the fact that converting foodbanks into community supermarkets would not service the needs of people in that community who cannot afford to buy any food, however cheap it is.

Conclusion

Demos’ report, whilst perhaps well-intentioned, is ill-informed and unworkable. If its recommendations were enacted, it would make life worse for the thousands of people in the UK today for whom the foodbank will be a lifeline.