

Foodbanks are not normal

by
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FOODBANKS? 10 years or so ago, how many of us had heard of them? Or, to put it another way, if you'd been told 10 years ago that within 10 years more than 1 million food parcels would be given out each year in the UK, around 150,000 in Scotland, simply in order for people to feed themselves and their families, would you have believed that? How have foodbanks managed to become a normal part of everyday life for so many, and accepted as a fact by the rest of us? It's a classic example of 'normalisation'...

Normalisation is the process of things becoming, or being accepted as, normal. There's a gey where a highfalutin definition borrowed from many branches of science and the social sciences to describe how normalisation occurs, but one of the simplest explanations is that we become accustomed to certain situations, no matter how unpleasant, just by seeing, hearing, or being subjected to them more often. Think how successful 'Project Fear' was back in 2014 by constantly repeating the 'too wee, too poor, too stupid' mantra or consistently stating as incontrovertible fact that pensions wouldn't be paid in an independent Scotland, we wouldn't be allowed into the EU, we would be the only country in the world to not have a currency, and so on. We're still hearing the 'subsidy junkie' and 'we pay your bills' myths repeated ad infinitum and, especially in the rest of the UK, a lot of people believe this tripe! That's normalisation...

While we're on the subject of definitions, what about 'food poverty'? Food poverty is defined by NHS Scotland as "the inability to acquire or consume an adequate or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so". Article 25 of the United Nations (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights includes a reference to food – "Everyone has the right to

a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control." In 2016, a UN Economic and Social Council report criticised the UK Government, stating bluntly their concerns "about the lack of adequate measures adopted by the [UK Government] to address the increasing levels of food insecurity, malnutrition, including obesity, and the lack of adequate measures to reduce the reliance on food banks". Since that stark warning was issued, foodbank usage has continued to rise...

But, what exactly is a foodbank? What happens there, who runs them, and who is using them? It's amazing how terminology slips into everyday usage without people being fully aware of what it actually means. That's how Westminster politicians get away with soundbite politics – "Brexit means Brexit", "Take back control", "For the many, not the few" – they drop these catchphrases in at every available opportunity until enough of the public accept them as facts and start repeating them, believing them to be true – as stated previously, this is normalisation. And so, we appear to have reached a point where foodbanks are seen as normal, necessary, and something that should be provided. When David Mundell, the UK Government's Colonial Governor-General of Scotland, officially opened the Dumfries Foodbank in 2015 he vigorously denied that his Tory government's austerity and welfare policies were responsible for that foodbank's very existence and claimed that he didn't want to see foodbanks become an institution. Three years on, has anything changed?

Ken Linton is the manager at Dundee Foodbank, and told *iScot Magazine*: "Historically, some churches in Dundee would say they've been running foodbanks for years because they've always had that principle of supporting members of their congregation who've been struggling. So in that sense, society over the last 100 years has looked to the church for support and benefits. They looked after the poor, and they still operate foodbanks but they're independents. Dundee Foodbank started back in 2004 as the Discovery Food Programme. Two young guys, Euan Gurr and Alan Carr, who were members of the Full Gospel Church in Dundee, became aware of issues of poverty, loneliness and isolation in the Hilltown area, so they started operating the Discovery Food Programme out of their church premises to try and address these issues. Around the same time the Trussell Trust was operating similar programmes in England and, by 2009, contact had been made and in 2012 the Discovery Food Programme became an autonomous member of the Trussell Trust foodbank network as 'Dundee Foodbank'.

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Volunteers Angela and Bev prepare another food parcel
Photo credit - Gordon Craigie



The Wednesday afternoon team of volunteers with Dundee Foodbank manager Ken Linton. Photo credit - Gordon Craigie

"There are now 53 foodbanks in Scotland. Dundee is the only one that runs Monday to Friday from 9-5. All the others might have five-day opening, but not full days. We have four distribution centres here in Dundee plus a warehouse. Our entire operation only runs because of the efforts of our 120 volunteers, supported by our two staff members, in feeding over 8,000 people annually. We haven't finalised our figures for this year yet, but numbers seem to have plateaued. I would be shocked if we're higher than last year – that was nearly 8,600 (including 2,500 children) – and it was around 8,400 in 2016. There's 160 clients a week coming through this door. Last year we offered fuel vouchers too. We put fuel into 2,000 households in 4 months – but that was a full year's allocation! So many people caught between the heating and eating dilemma..."

Although the foodbank network is heavily dependent on volunteers, like every charitable undertaking it also requires a steady stream of money. Currently, Dundee Foodbank is the grateful recipient of crucial funding from the Rank Foundation. In 2013, the Rank Foundation decided to focus their charitable efforts on individual cities to see if a coordinated approach would give greater benefits. They initially

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selected Hull, supporting 20 charities there, with Dundee coming onboard in 2015 and Plymouth joining this year. It's a rolling 5-year programme of support, so Hull's funding finished this year and Dundee's will end in 2020. A major priority for Ken is to find replacement funding for when Rank moves on. "We get donations from so many individuals and groups, as well as from shops, supermarkets, businesses, churches. We have partnerships with companies like Greggs, Lidl, Nando's, and many more. KFC give us their 'end of day stuff', food which has just been cooked but they can't sell the next day. There's nothing wrong with it, and they pack it in special containers and freeze it for us to collect. We're so busy it's not being kept for any length of time! It's good to have these mini-partnerships. We also have vets that provide us with pet food, and Mackays provides us with 60 jars of jam and marmalade every month. It's the same with equipment – recently the local BT call centre emailed us to say they'd raised a sum of money and asked, 'what do you need?'. We needed a commercial fridge to keep the Greggs' sandwiches fresh, so they bought us one. There's a massive amount of generosity around."

Every one of those 8,000+ clients that arrive on Ken's doorstep have been referred by another agency. In Dundee that includes organisations like Scottish Welfare Rights, Citizen's Advice Bureau, Maxwelltown Centre, Addiction, Cairn Centre, North Law Centre and many others. "Each of them will ask the client what their hardship or crisis is and why they need an emergency food parcel. They then pass us the client's name, address, postcode, age and family structure. People may be surprised by what exactly constitutes a food parcel. It's certainly not luxurious, it is for emergency use, designed to last for three days, and we are restricted in how many times we can help. It's not always easy – sometimes clients complain they've not been given enough,

Food Allocation Form		Single Person
Item	Allocation	Alternative
Cereal	1 small	4 individual packs
Soup (can/packet)	2 standard	
Beans/spaghetti in sauce	2 standard	
Tomatoes/pasta sauce	1 standard	
Vegetables	1 standard	
Meat	1 small	1 tinned Ready Meal
Tinned Ready Meal	1 standard	
Fish	1 small	
Fruit	1 standard	
Rice Pudding/Custard	1 standard	
Biscuits	3 packs	1 small pack
Sugar	1 DF pack	
Pasta/rice/noodles	500g	
Tea or Coffee	1 DF pack	
Longlife Milk	1 litre	1 pack powder

To be supplied if available (request on stock form)

Instant Meal	1 pkt
Jam	1 jar

To be supplied if available (prioritise for families)

Sauces	1 pkt
Chocolate	1 small
Juice	1 carton

DF pack of sugar = 200 - 300g
DF pack of coffee = 50 - 100g
DF pack of teabags = 40

Adjust accordingly when preparing a vegetarian parcel.

If replacing meat/fish with ready meals, please make sure that there is protein within the ready meal, rather than solely carbohydrates!

Picking lists guide the volunteers in assembling the food parcels

Food Allocation Form		Family with Children (2)
Item	Allocation	Alternative
Cereal	1 large	
Soup (can/packet)	4 standard	
Beans/spaghetti in sauce	4 standard	
Tomatoes/pasta sauce	4 standard	
Vegetables	4 standard	
Meat	3 small	2 tins Ready Meals
Tinned Ready Meal	3 standard	
Fish	4 small	2 tins Ready Meals
Fruit	2 standard	
Rice Pudding/Custard	2 standard	
Biscuits	1 large pkt	Med pkt + 3
Sugar	2 DF packs	1 kg
Pasta/Rice	1.5 kg	
Tea/Coffee	Regular box	
Juice	1 carton	
Milk UHT/powder	2 litres	1 packet powder

To be supplied if available (request on stock form)

Instant Meal	2 pkts
Instant Mash	1 pkt
Sponge Pudding	1 standard
Jam	1 jar

To be supplied if available

Snacks	1 pkt
Sauces	1 pkt
Chocolate/Snacks	1 large pkt

Adjust accordingly when preparing a vegetarian parcel.

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Exterior view of the Dundee Foodbank distribution centre in Stobswell. Photo credit - Gordon Craigie

and situations need to be defused! Our usual limit is to supply three parcels to a client in six months, but that is purely a guideline to me as the manager. I will always feed children in the household. Even if it's the 4th, 5th or 6th parcel, I will always feed a child.

"There has been a change in the pattern of referrals over the last two years. Now the number one driver is low income. It always used to be benefit change. We've had two full-time nurses in here recently needing support. In-work poverty and low income simply has to be addressed, and that's right across Scotland. Universal Credit has not been running for a year yet, but the impact is there. The system looks like it induces a five or six-week delay after a change of circumstance. The total number of people receiving benefits across the city isn't going up, it's just that the benefits are changing name. We do have the 'Scottish flexibilities' – the ability to pay fortnightly, pay landlords direct etc. – but it's not enough. From what people have said to me, if Scotland were fully self-governing, and it doesn't matter who's doing the governing, we would look at changing the benefits system, the benefits structure, and so on. I know the SNP have done a lot by bringing elements of control into

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Ken checks the latest referral forms.
Photo credit - Gordon Craigie

Scotland, like the new Social Security Scotland agency and the Scottish flexibilities element of Universal Credit, so they've made inroads in that sense. But the longer Westminster holds onto the big pot then there's not going to be much change on that side of things."

What does the future hold for foodbanks, where the people working in them are, essentially, aiming to be redundant as soon as possible? "Trying to do yourself out of a job sounds good in one sense. My big concern would be, certainly here in Dundee, that we've fed more than 8000 people annually for the last two years plus this is looking like a third on the spin, so I can't see there being a closure in the next five years. For two years in a row well over a million food parcels have been supplied by Trussell Trust foodbanks throughout the UK and this year looks like returning the same sort of numbers, unfortunately. No matter what the government, UK or Scottish, brings in or what they decide to do in the future, it'll take at least five years to implement it and slowly change the system whatever way we do it. Whether we look at changing benefits, or where we give out smartcards which entitle clients to, say, £20 at any supermarket to purchase the food they actually want. We could build that into benefits – using technology to eliminate tobacco, alcohol, lottery tickets all that sort of stuff – solely to be spent on food. Personally, I think that's the way it should go. What I heard recently was reframing the issue as 'food security' – rather than talk about poverty, talk about how secure everybody in the city is that they can open up their cupboards and see enough food to feed them and their family. How do we start the dialogue, start the road map? We've got to start somewhere, and there has to be a timeline."

For the immediate future though, life for the foodbanks continues. One key

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Image courtesy of Dundee Foodbank

message to get out there may be that 'foodbanks aren't just for Christmas'. Ken explains, "We have huge donations throughout December which really keeps us going through to March – we'll have around 30 tons of food stored! Each year we then plan a physical presence in the superstores every month from March 1st, to supplement the other donations we receive. We do regular collections at the Ice Arena and, along with our colleagues from the *Taught by Muhammad* project, we also collect at the two football stadiums. Our difficult time is August when everyone's on holiday. Our numbers don't drop much though – our clients aren't on the beach in Torremolinos! We also need donations throughout June to stave off what we call 'holiday hunger', where school meals that families have been relying on have to be replaced. When the children are off school we've tried to address that by supplying cereals, and also for the October holidays. We've been very well supported on that by the people in Dundee.

"Clearly we're grateful for any donations we get but we're especially keen to receive things like tinned desserts, rice and custard. Also UHT (long-life) milk, toilet rolls, basic toiletries – it's not always obvious that we need to supply more than food. And cash always helps – somebody was in this week looking for Size 6 nappies, which we were able to go and buy. Then there's other things, like formula baby milk, which are massively expensive and we couldn't possibly keep in stock, but we can go and purchase if required. Without wanting to sound ungrateful, at present we don't need soup or beans or pasta..."

This story has focused on the Dundee Foodbank, but the issues surely resonate with every one of the other 52 foodbanks across Scotland in the Trussell Trust network, and the countless others operating independently. You can only admire the commitment of Ken Linton and his volunteers, and their contemporaries nationwide. But how did it come to this? Whatever way you look at it, Scotland is a rich country. Depending on the measurement you prefer, we could be anywhere between 6th and 14th in the world rankings as an independent country, but definitely rich. And how can the UK Government simply ignore UN criticisms of their austerity measures and continue with policies that force more and more people into poverty? Foodbanks demonstrate both the good and the bad in our society – it is good that we have people helping others less fortunate, but it is bad that foodbanks are a necessity for so many people. Scotland's aspirations for the future are all about taking our place in the world as a normal country. We will always have people experiencing difficult times, however temporary, and it's a credit to our society when others come together to help those in that situation. But having so many people reliant on foodbanks to simply feed themselves and their families is just not normal. Let's not allow foodbanks to be normalised.